

The Multidimensionality of Trust: Assessing Finnish Audiences' Views on the Trustworthiness of Digital News

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Abstract:

Finland provides an interesting case study on trust in the media in the digital era. The country is known to exhibit the greatest levels of trust in the political establishment and the government, as well as the media. In the Finnish “digital welfare state,” the news is an inseparable part of the mechanism, producing a high level of social trust within the welfare state system, and Finland features the highest level of media freedom and literacy in Europe.

This multimethod study examines different understandings of trust by studying in what ways Finnish audiences experience trust in news, especially when consuming news on digital platforms, and what factors explain trust in different news sources. Our basic premise is that trust can be understood in three ways: as dispositions of individual actors, as the social organization and the relationship between different social nodes and the system, and as a constantly negotiated property of social relations. We apply this three-dimensional framework in two sets of audience survey research data (2019, 2020) and reflect the findings with a focus group and expert interviews as well as with two similar surveys a decade prior.

Our results depict relatively high levels of trust in the media in Finland and surprisingly little change in audiences' perceptions of trustworthiness compared to the earlier surveys. The most defining characteristic of Finnish audiences is critical trust. Audiences are aware of the impacts of digitization, especially the dangers of social media bubbles and disinformation. They also recognize market-driven imperatives of journalism yet appreciate legacy news media in its different digital forms. Our study indicates that a balance between skepticism and reliance on news outlets can exist in audiences' perceptions of the trustworthiness of digital news.

Keywords:

Trust, news media, social media, digitization, Finland

1. Introduction

In recent years, trust has become a key theme of academic and applied communication research. Studies have tackled audiences and news; the phenomenon of “fake news” has elicited a significant amount of academic research attention, as well as numerous international policy analyses, and several projects have also focused on particular aspects of technologies, media, and trust. Many studies, including the Reuters Digital News Reports (e.g., Newman et al. 2019, 2020), have suggested that the erosion of trust in the media is a trend in most societies. While some comparative efforts (Tsfati and Ariely 2014; Hanitzsch et al. 2018) have questioned this conclusion, most studies have still been primarily concerned with the disintegration of trust in the media.

Finland provides an interesting case study on trust in the media. According to a study based on Reuters Institute Digital News Report data, trust in the news is highest in Finland (Fletcher and Park 2017). The Finnish mass media market is small, amounting to approximately €3.8 billion in sales in 2018 (OSF 2019), with some 5.5 million potential audience members. Most media content is in Finnish, a language unique to the Nordic region, but content is also produced in the other official language of the country, Swedish. Some outlets also cater to the Sámi-speaking minority, as well as to other language minorities. Finnish media markets, ranging from newspapers to telecommunications, are highly concentrated. The public service broadcaster Yle (the Finnish Broadcasting Company) has a strong presence in not only television broadcasting but also the production of online and mobile news services (e.g., Grönlund 2016; Newman et al. 2020).

Finland is also a highly digital society. In the 1990s, the country was a front-runner in shaping information society policies; it gained notice for its technological development and global competitiveness, especially in the mobile communications sector (Castells and Himanen 2002). The rise of digital commercial innovations was coupled with the ideal of the “digital welfare state” (cf. Ala-Fossi et al. 2019): for example, Finland was among the first nations to make affordable broadband access a legal right (Nieminen 2013). What is more, Finns are among the most frequent users of the internet in the European Union. In international comparisons, Finland ranks as a top nation in terms of both press freedom (Reporters Without Borders 2020) and media literacy (Lessenski 2019). A comparative study on national factors impacting resilience to online disinformation has suggested that Northern European countries, including Finland, fare well in this respect due to a relatively stable political environment, low societal polarization, a high number of online users, relatively low exposure to disinformation, and the strength of the national media system (Humprecht et al. 2020).

Emotions at Stake: Authority of the Media and Trust of the Audience, a multimethod, interdisciplinary project of the University of Helsinki (2019–20), examines how Finnish audiences view the power of traditional news media and social media, along with their trust in these news sources. This article focuses on findings on audiences’ multiple, even contradictory *experiences of trust in digital news*—that is, news distributed on proprietary digital platforms of legacy news organizations as well as on social media. Our starting point is the working hypothesis that *the more complex the (news) media landscape, the more complex the experiences of trust*. In this article, we examine digital news through a

framework of three distinct dimensions of trust in the media that are derived from earlier research, and given the significant changes in the production and consumption of news in the past decade (e.g., Broersma and Eldridge 2019), we also reflect our findings against two Finnish survey studies completed a decade ago (Karppinen et al. 2010; Matikainen 2009), with the following questions:

RQ1: How do Finnish audiences experience the power of the news media as an institution in a digital news environment, and what level of trust do they have in the digital news media?

RQ2: How does the digital environment impact trust in specific aspects of journalism?

RQ3: How do audiences' demographic characteristics and other dispositional traits factor into trust in digital news?

Our multimethod project consists of four parts. First, a general survey on trust in news media was conducted in May 2019. This questionnaire was based on the two questionnaires mentioned above—one on legacy media (Karppinen et al. 2010) and one on social media (Matikainen 2009). Taloustutkimus, an independent full-service market research company, collected the data between May 23, 2019, and May 31, 2019, from 1,053 respondents.¹ A subsequent survey focused on the most important information and news sources during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was conducted beginning May 11,

¹ The results were weighted to represent the population of mainland Finland aged between eighteen and seventy-nine according to age, gender, and place of residence. The margin of error varied between 0.9 percent and 3.2 percent, depending on the specific result.

2019.² For the third component of our research material, we conducted four audience focus group interviews and twelve expert theme interviews with educators, journalists, and policymakers in fall 2019 and spring 2020. The interviews were designed to function as commentaries illustrating, deepening, and even challenging key survey findings. Finally, to highlight public debates on trust and the media in Finland, we collected a total of 116 news stories and related social media commentary published in November and December 2019 that broadly focused on the role of the media in Finnish society.

In this article, we first discuss our framework of the multidimensionality of trust and then focus specifically on what the survey results reveal about audiences' multiple experiences regarding trust in relation to digital news, with the focus on the two surveys. In the discussion section, we shed further light on the quantitative study with relevant reflections from the focus groups, expert interviews, and media analysis. In conclusion, we highlight the country-specific features of our findings, as well as more general takeaways in terms of the multiple dimensions of trust in digital news.

2. Framework: The Multidimensionality of Trust

Trust is a widely researched concept within the social sciences. Yet concepts in studies on trust—and in research on trust and the media—are not set and uniform. *Trust* is often used interchangeably with *credibility* and *reliability*, and *mistrust* and *distrust* are likewise also often used synonymously (for an account of the different understandings,

² The results were weighted to represent the population of mainland Finland aged between eighteen and seventy-nine according to age, gender, and place of residence. The margin of error varied between 0.8 percent and 2.9 percent, depending on the specific result.

see, e.g., Fisher et al. 2020). Even so, most studies posit that trust is founded both in rational reasoning and emotional experiences (Warren 1999). In this research, we adhere to this notion of trust being both cognitive and affective. Our core umbrella concept is *trust* as a general sentiment, and its opposite is referred to as *distrust*. We also use the term *reliability* when discussing specific news outlets or social media platforms.

Our aims of addressing this multitude of approaches to trust and documenting audiences' multiple experiences of trust led us to design a broad framework to not only inform the systematic data collection and analysis but also allow for different, even contradictory, perspectives to emerge. Based on theorizations and empirical analyses of trust within political science and communication studies, we identified three broad dimensions of trust (e.g., Nootens 2018): (1) the social organization as a whole and the relationship between distinct social nodes and the system; (2) the constantly negotiated property of social relations; and (3) the dispositions of individual actors. These dimensions are operationalized as three—sometimes overlapping and sometimes even contradictory—characteristics of trust in news media: (1) trust in the media as an institution; (2) the perceived reliability of specific outlets, journalists, or other content creators; and (3) trust or distrust experienced due to factors pertaining to, and influencing, an individual's experiences of trust (e.g., demographic variables, as well as personal experiences, attitudes, and values).

Institutional or generalized trust

In terms of institutional, or *generalized*, trust (e.g., Prochazka and Schweiger 2019),

research has shown that while audiences' feelings and experiences of trust may vary regarding individual media outlets, they often have a certain, relatively static opinion about the media and its power as an institution. Studies have found that media trust is associated with confidence in democracy and political institutions or political trust (e.g., Coleman 2012; Tsfati and Ariely 2014). The erosion of media trust has been shown to be connected with a decline of confidence in political institutions (Bennett et al. 1999). A similar pattern has been detected in societies that have undergone political transition, such as in the post-Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Hanitzsch et al. 2018). While questions regarding causality remain, the most dramatic decline in trust in the press has been observed in the United States, alongside other Anglo-Saxon countries with low trust levels such as Australia (Hanitzsch et al. 2018).

A decline in institutional trust is not necessarily accompanied by a decline in social trust—in other words, the way people trust one another (Newton 2006). General interpersonal trust has been found to be positively associated with trust in media (Tsfati and Ariely 2014, 770). The proliferation of user-generated content, the ever-increasing prominence of social media in audiences' media diets, and the generally ubiquitous consumption of news in digital formats have all prompted debates on how these phenomena are changing the power dynamics of news production and the consumption of legacy media (Broersma and Eldridge 2019; Napoli and Caplan 2017). Researchers have argued that the ease of social media use offers easy access to content but also a false sense of community and support—and that social media thus exploits societal vulnerabilities and advances the corrosion of social trust (Zuboff 2019, 383–384).

Nevertheless, while the participatory possibilities of digitization have been widely discussed, research indicates that audiences still tend to see themselves as *recipients* of news (Suau et al. 2019). Similarly, social media is viewed distinctively differently than legacy news media: generalized trust does not extend to social media platforms and apps. One reason is that people use social media for a variety of purposes, including entertainment. Audiences may seek sources that they do not trust on social media simply for exposure to alternative views and trending debates (Ardèvol-Abreu and de Zúñiga 2017). This gap in generalized trust between legacy and social media creates challenges for digital news journalism: while legacy outlets participate in digital platforms, they are vulnerable to so-called *content confusion* (Einstein 2016). It may not be clear to audiences what is institutional journalism, what is user-generated opinion, and what is paid promotional content.

Trust in news and sources in the digital era has also been challenged by so-called *fake news* and disinformation. The impact of this phenomenon has been studied widely. For instance, studies by the Reuters Institute and Eurobarometer surveys suggest that false content online is indeed a concern for audiences, although less so in Northern Europe than elsewhere in the world (Eurobarometer 2018; Newman et al. 2020). False news may not be as powerful as feared: some research has suggested that it is most often consumed by audiences whose existing worldview it supports (Guess et al. 2016).

For the framework of our study, the dimension of institutional trust prompted us to assess the power of legacy media in creating trust—and, in particular, the impact of social media—in two respects: (1) comparisons between the situation a decade ago (Karppinen et al. 2010; Matikainen 2009) and the situation in 2019, given the prominence of social media today; and (2) trust in the context of a major national and international crisis, the coronavirus pandemic.

Specified trust

The way audience members assess specific content or news outlets, or even individual journalists and other content creators, sometimes complements and sometimes contradicts institutional trust in the media (Prochazka and Schweiger 2019). The seminal study by Kohring and Matthes (2007) posited that this dimension of trust is constructed from trust in the journalistic choice of the topic, the relevance and truthfulness of the content, and the expertise and trustworthiness of the journalistic assessments. Digitization clearly challenges some aspects of this understanding of trust. Experiences of trust also depend on technological solutions—for instance, distribution platforms—as well as the devices on which individuals access news. When access modes and consumption habits change, the perceptions of the trustworthiness of news can also change (Dunaway et al. 2018; Ottosen and Krumsvik 2012).

For our study, this dimension highlights the importance of individual news sources and informs our examination of these sources. It also, however, points to possible trends

regarding disinformation, as well as other potential developments impacting audiences' experiences of trust in digital journalism.

Trust as an individual disposition

Trust in the media does not depend exclusively on the media as an institution or on specific journalistic products. Rather, several factors impact the experiences of individuals (and groups) regarding trust in the media, including digital news (Livio and Cohen 2018). It is no surprise that individuals' political views influence what sources, topics, and views they find trustworthy. For instance, a survey of eight European countries has illustrated that populist worldviews correlate with perceptions of media untrustworthiness and dissatisfaction with news on the economy, migration, and crime (Pew 2018), and another study on populist attitudes and news consumption has noted that populist attitudes also correlate with less news consumption (Stier et al. 2020).

Equally unsurprisingly, age influences news consumption, especially in terms of use of mobile technology to access news (Westerlund 2015) and in terms of using social media as a news source (Boczkowski et al. 2018). As a study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2019) has illustrated, young people's news consumption is influenced by their specific life situations and individual interests, as well as specific apps for accessing news. Societal news is less important than individual knowledge needs.

All in all, one's own experiences are a significant factor in how trust in the media or in a specific news story is experienced. One experience of untrustworthiness may also multiply and lead to a more general feeling of distrust toward the media (Livio and Cohen 2018; Knight Foundation 2018). From this vantage point, then, the affective quality of trust is especially pertinent.

In our research design, this dimension is featured in our examination of demographic differences. It also highlights the role of the media and digital news in interactions and trust between people.

3. Empirical Survey Analyses: Contradictory Trends

Examining trust in digital news in Finland through the multidimensional framework reveals a variety of results and insights, some of them contradictory. One basic finding was unambiguous: according to our survey of 2019, legacy media websites and their mobile applications were the most important sources of news for Finns. At the same time, the surveys as well as the focus group and expert interviews all highlighted various challenges of digitization and the problems that emerge especially with news and journalism distributed on social media. The following depicts these key issues of trust in digital news regarding generalized trust, trust in specific news outlets, and trust as a personal trait of audiences.

Wavering trust in the media as an institution

The idea that the news media is a powerful societal institution appears to be widely shared by Finnish audiences. In the survey, 89 percent of respondents agreed with the statement “The media has great influence on people’s opinions,” while 67 percent agreed that “The media has great influence on major political decisions” (see figure 1). These findings imply that the media is generally perceived as an influential political institution, but even more so as an agent or a mechanism that shapes citizens’ attitudes and values.

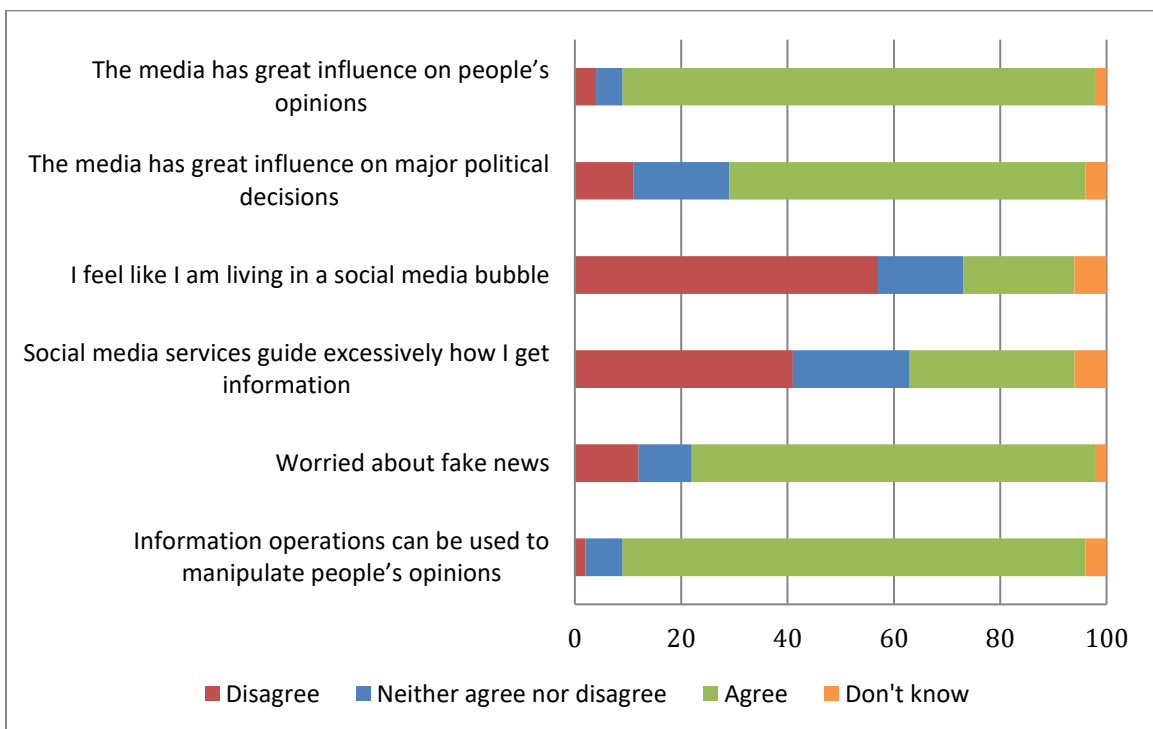


Figure 1. Respondents’ opinions of media power, social media, and fake news (%).

Concerns about the polarizing effects of media use have typically been associated with online environments, and particularly with social media. Social media platforms have often been criticized for confining users to networks of like-minded people that filter out news and information that does not correspond with their preexisting views (e.g., Pariser 2012; Spohr 2017). While these claims have been contested by studies indicating that most users are, in fact, exposed to a relatively wide range of information sources in the course of their online networking and news consumption (e.g., Dubois and Blank 2018; Bruns 2019), the critical notion of (media-induced) “bubbles” has become part of the public debate. Reflecting these debates, no less than 21 percent of the survey respondents agreed with the claim that “I feel like I am living in a social media bubble,” and an even larger share, 31 percent, agreed that “Social media services excessively guide how I get information” (figure 1). The issue was also raised in the focus group discussions, where the widely shared belief in the ideological power of the media was closely associated with a critical awareness regarding the limited range of views disseminated by any individual media outlet. Interestingly, however, some focus group participants used the term “bubbles” to allude to the narrowing effect of traditional media outlets rather than social media. This echoes the scholarly arguments pointing out that people’s news sources tend to be more diverse online than offline (Fletcher 2020).

Given these widespread reservations and concerns about the contemporary media environment, it is hardly surprising that the themes of power and influence tend to provoke a critical attitude among audiences toward the media as an institution. According to 42 percent of the respondents, the media has “too much power,” whereas 49 percent

deemed it to have “the right amount of power,” and only 2 percent opted for “too little power.” Trust that the media as an institution properly functions in serving important societal needs and collective goals appears to be wavering, giving rise to a widespread sense that the media wields too much power in society and related criticism.

While media-induced bubbles were by no means a marginal concern among the respondents, this issue paled in comparison to fake news and disinformation. Being “worried about fake news” was a personal sentiment recognized by 76 percent of the respondents, and 87 percent agreed that “Information operations can be used to manipulate people’s opinions.”

Together, these findings indicate that, although claims about the harmful effects of online news consumption have been questioned and the relationship between social media and polarization remains contested (e.g., Bail et al. 2018; Dubois and Blank 2018), the very notions of bubbles, fake news, and disinformation have been rather successfully popularized. They have also become, to some extent, accepted among audiences as valid descriptions of their online experiences of digital news.

Trust as a relationship with journalism

In addition to entertaining a general sense of the media as an institution that wields major influence over the public knowledge environment, audiences form personal understandings about the reliability of available information sources in their interactions with these sources. In this respect, digital online environments have become increasingly

crucial sites for building trust in the news. When asked to identify their three most important news sources, 69 percent of respondents opted for the online sites and mobile apps of major news outlets. This option was followed by television (61 percent), radio (40 percent), and print newspaper (33 percent). Conversely, only 25 percent of the respondents considered social media services among their top three most important news sources, while the figure was 8 percent for instant messaging apps.

Use of certain media corresponds only partly with trust in those services. When the respondents were asked to assess the reliability of various news sources, the three major national news organizations —Yle (public service media), MTV (commercial television channel), and *Helsingin Sanomat* (newspaper)—received the highest evaluations. Between 73 percent and 87 percent of respondents perceived them as either highly or somewhat reliable. In contrast, the two most popular tabloid newspapers, *Ilta-lehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat*, were perceived as reliable by only 20 percent and 22 percent of respondents, respectively. Almost no respondents considered social media services, such as YouTube (6 percent), Twitter (4 percent), Facebook (3 percent), and Instagram (2 percent), to be reliable as news sources, and Facebook was clearly viewed as the most unreliable platform. Various chat forums did not fare any better: only 3 percent of respondents found them to be reliable news sources. The reliability of social media as a news source has declined over the past ten years, except for Twitter, for which reliability has slightly increased (figure 2).

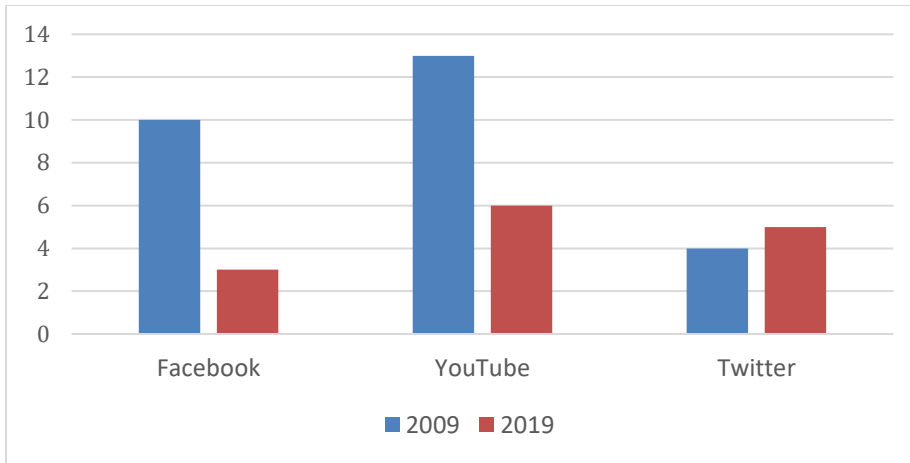


Figure 2. Selected social media services as reliable news sources in 2009 and 2019 (%).

The growth of social media use and the simultaneous erosion of trust in such platforms mean that people increasingly perceive themselves as navigating among information sources and environments upon which they cannot rely. The greater distrust of social media could be caused by familiarity with social media, since users are more familiar with the algorithms and methods of affecting users. In addition, many scandals, especially Cambridge Analytica, have weakened the reliability of social media as a news source.

Contemporary digital media seem to pose significant challenges to news audiences. As figure 3 depicts, almost three out of four respondents (74 percent) agreed that “Assessing the reliability of news has become increasingly difficult in the online environment.” The respondents referred to the individual journalist or organization behind the news as among the most important factors involved in this assessment. Almost all respondents (88 percent) agreed that “The reliability of online material is first and foremost determined by its producer or author.” In this respect, 78 percent maintained that “Legacy news outlets’

online services are the go-to sources for reliable news.” Moreover, while 21 percent acknowledged that “The online environment had negatively affected the respondent’s own trust in the legacy media,” 41 percent disagreed with this proposition.

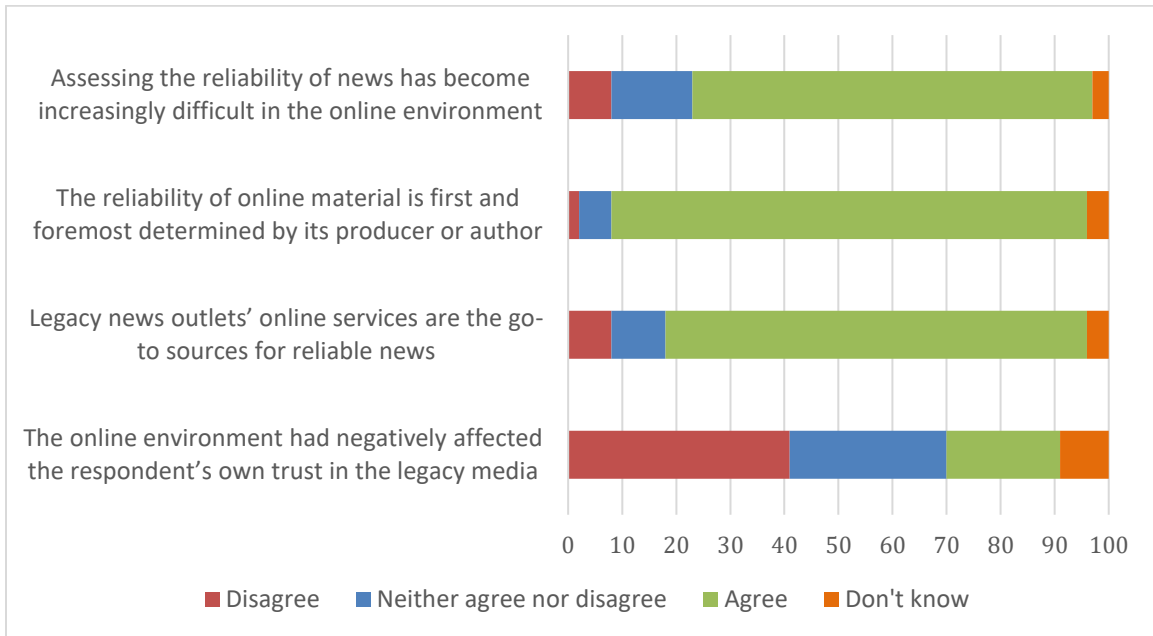


Figure 3. Respondents’ opinions on the reliability of digital media and web content (%).

For the majority of respondents, the established position of the media outlet is a factor that reinforces rather than erodes trust. The locality (68 percent), domesticity (57 percent), and familiarity (54 percent) of the source or provider were among other factors widely perceived to enhance the reliability of online news.

Whereas established institutions were generally seen as reliable sources in the online environment, the respondents held their fellow online users in much lower esteem. Only

22 percent of the respondents considered recommendations by others as increasing their trust in the news. Even fewer respondents (15 percent) acknowledged trusting the same online content and services as their friends. With little trust in the assessments and recommendations of their friends and peers, most online users appear to see themselves as being largely on their own when trying to assess the reliability of news and information.

The context of COVID-19 has only reinforced these tendencies. Our survey from April 2020 shows that the pandemic not only produced great trust in health-care providers and other experts but also significantly intensified the credibility of legacy media. In addition, the crisis notably deepened the trust gap between legacy and social media. Trust in the news media was strong, with roughly 60 percent of respondents generally finding the news media reliable. Individual legacy news media outlets garnered even more positive assessments. For instance, the public broadcaster Yle was considered fairly or very reliable by some 90 percent of respondents. News media also fared well in other survey areas. Approximately 80 percent of respondents felt that news media had explained how to act during the exceptional circumstances caused by the coronavirus pandemic and helped them to understand it.

News media websites and mobile applications were the most important source of news (80 percent of respondents), but news media present on social media, as well as discussions on social media, constituted an important news source only for approximately 20 percent of respondents. Thirteen percent stated that conversations about the

coronavirus on the internet and social media were fairly or very important to them. Respondents had encountered incorrect information fairly rarely; roughly one-fifth had encountered incorrect information on various social media services, with the highest figure (37 percent) found for discussion forums.

Compared to the COVID-19 experiences of some countries, Finland has fared well in terms of trust. As an example, the amount of false information that the survey respondents reported having encountered on different digital platforms was significantly less than, for instance, the amount in Spain, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States (figure 4). Even if this finding reflects only the assessments of the audience members themselves—and not verifiably false information online—their experiences can impact their sense of trust in the media.

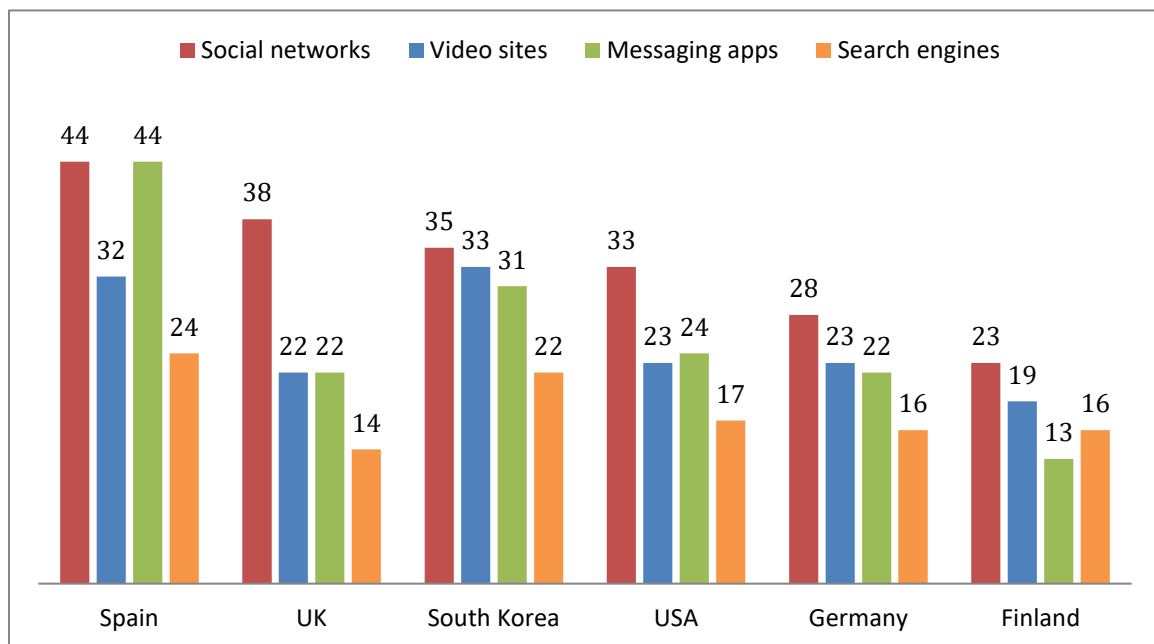


Figure 4. Proportion of individuals who say that they have seen “a lot” or “a great deal” of false or misleading information about the coronavirus on each platform in the last week (%). Sources: for Finland, our survey of 2020; Nielsen et al. (2020).

Trust as a personal trait of media users and audiences

On the whole, Finnish audiences continue to express high trust in the most prestigious national news media brands, with public service media topping the list. They also clearly separate so-called quality media from tabloid newspapers and social media in terms of their reliability as news sources. This finding implies that the general perception of trustworthy news depends on the content being professionally produced by an individual or organization acting in good faith. Whereas legacy news organizations are trusted to uphold public principles regarding accurate reporting, “clickbait” news sites and social media platforms provide no such guarantees.

Nevertheless, the survey also hinted at emerging differences between societal groups in terms of their online media experiences. Not unexpectedly, the importance of social media as a news source appeared to be notably higher among younger groups than in the overall population. Those under thirty-five years old named social media applications as among the top three news sources more often than they listed television or radio. Even so, young people also continue to access the news through more traditional channels.

Television and even radio were identified as among the top three most important news sources by a larger share of young respondents under thirty-five years old than were

video sites such as YouTube or instant messaging apps. Young respondents also expressed trust in legacy media organizations as reliable online sources of news as often as older respondents.

Being familiar with the networked nature of news consumption, the young also seem to rely more strongly on other users when assessing the news. Those under thirty years old were much more likely than older respondents to agree with the following statements: “I trust the same online contents as my friends and acquaintances”; “Recommendations from other users increase trust”; “I trust in a familiar online source or community”; and “Readers’ photos and videos increase trustworthiness.” Although the young were just as likely as older groups to express concern about the spread of fake news and misinformation online, their everyday practices of social consumption of news tend to strengthen their reliance on others. However, the experience of living in a social media bubble and excessive social media influence in terms of exposure to information were significantly more widely shared by younger respondents than by those over thirty years old.

4. Discussion: Elements of Trust and Distrust

Our research points to audience understandings and experiences of trust in news in the digital era that are not only multidimensional but also somewhat contradictory, as echoed in the focus groups and stakeholder interviews, as well as in media and social media debates: generalized trust seems uncorrelated with specific perceptions of the

trustworthiness of individual outlets and a strong awareness of one's own digital media literacy skills.

Diminishing trust in the media as an institution may be a global trend (Newman et al. 2020), but it does not manifest itself similarly in all contexts. The most surprising finding of our survey study is that Finnish audiences' trust in legacy media has not significantly declined over the past decade. This is the case even though the news media has seen major changes in terms of further ownership concentration and, as elsewhere, digital developments and the increasing use of social media. Furthermore, the rise of populism has been among the main political developments in Finland, as it has been in many parts of the world. To be sure, the Nordic countries generally fare well in terms of trust in the media, but, for instance, in 2020, Denmark witnessed a notable decline in trust—11 percentage points year on year (Newman et al. 2020, 67)—and in the United Kingdom, overall trust in the media has fallen by 20 percentage points since 2015 (Newman et al. 2020, 62).

One element of generalized trust in the media stands out in our findings. The power of—and the distrust in—social media as an institution, vis-à-vis legacy media, is evident and has grown notably in the past decade in Finland. Social media was a central theme not only in our surveys from 2019 and 2020 but also in our interviews with journalists, media educators, and other stakeholders, and this theme has also arisen in public discussions in the media about trust and reliability. The consensus, also documented in other contexts

(e.g., Broersma and Eldridge 2019), is that while social media platforms are untrustworthy, they also significantly impact media and journalism.

As almost one-third of our survey respondents noted in 2019, social media significantly impacts their access to information. However, in Finland, distrust in social media content and fears of viral disinformation match distrust in the motivations that guide the media—that is, market-driven imperatives, which are heightened in the highly competitive digital environment. Finns are not alone in this respect: similar observations were reported in a comparative study of audiences in nine countries (Newman and Fletcher 2017, 22–23). Still, while Finland may exhibit higher levels of generalized trust in media, Finns are more cautious than Europeans on average when it comes to social media—and the decline of that trust has been evident for several years (figure 5).

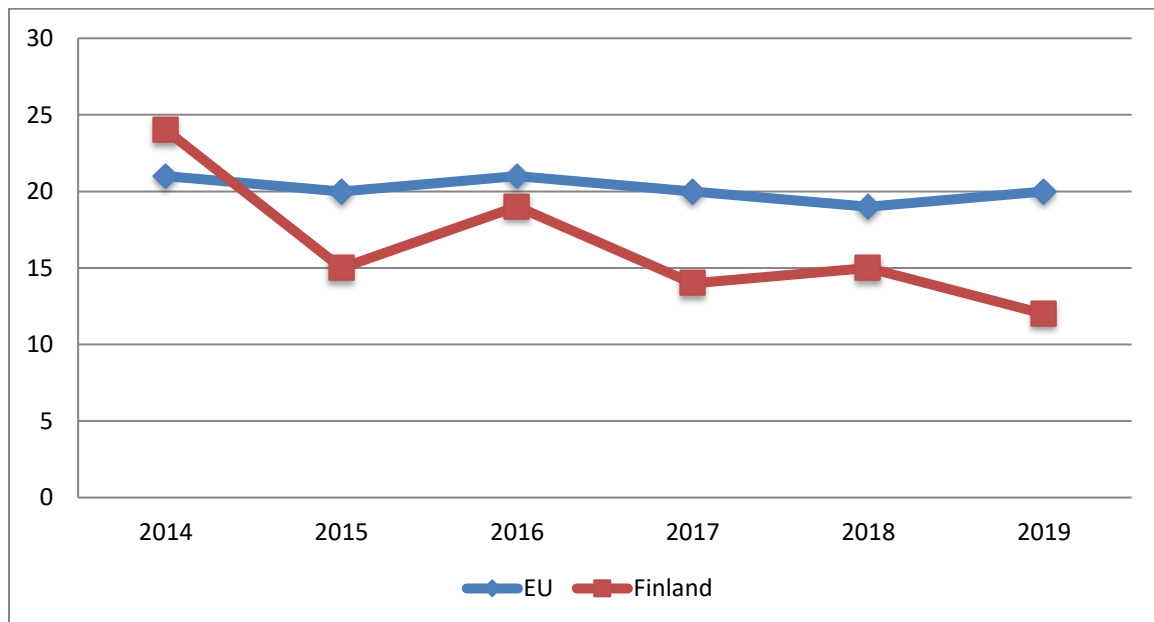


Figure 5. Percentage of people who tend to trust social media: the European Union average and Finland, 2014–19. Source: European Broadcasting Union Media Intelligence Service—Trust in Media 2020 (Eurobarometer 2018; European Broadcasting Union 2020b).

This skepticism about the aims and motivations of the media relates to the second challenge regarding trust in the media in Finland, which pertains to the reliability of journalism. Generally, audiences do not consider the media to be effective in labeling and distinguishing among different types of content—and a similar vein of discourse also emerged from the expert interviews. Several interlinked reasons are behind this phenomenon, all related to the digitization of news. This *content confusion* (cf. Einstein 2016) is partly due to the blending of a diverse range of content online, especially on social media. Content from journalistic organizations competes with promotional and user-generated content for audience attention (e.g., Amazeen 2020). Yet this phenomenon is equally due to the multiple roles that journalists may play in communicating on news sites as well as social media platforms. The results of our 2019 survey strongly point to audiences' view that the media and journalists have the power to influence them. Similarly, the focus group participants and expert interviewees pointed to the trend of journalists taking the positions of opinionated commentators and columnists on not only their own news outlets but also social media. The recommendation of a recent Australian study on trust and trust building (Fisher et al. 2020) also resonates in the case of Finland:

news brands and reporters should be cautious about engaging on social media as a strategy for improving trust (Fisher et al. 2020, 15).

Interestingly, a core element of trust in the relationship between journalism and its audiences is, at least in Finland, based on a conventional and traditional understanding of journalistic principles. This finding echoes those of a multicountry comparative study on the impact of news on societal participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2018): for journalism, audiences hold expectations such as accuracy and relevance of news, and they also expect journalists to act as a societal watchdog. In this light, it is no wonder that, according to the Reuters Digital News Report, during spring 2020 not only consumption of news but also appreciation of legacy media and journalism increased in many countries (Newman et al. 2020). In particular, public service broadcasters have fared well (European Broadcasting Union 2020a), and, as our 2020 survey showed, exceptionally well in Finland. However, while the importance of digital platforms also grew in most countries during the spring of the pandemic, this was not the case for Finland.

Both the above elements of trust—understanding of the current digital news market logic and knowledge of core journalistic principles—were present among the key themes found within all parts of our project, regardless of the demographics of the survey respondents or interviewees. They can, at least partly, be understood as due to the high media literacy level in Finland (Lessenski 2019). The last element of trust emerging from our study is the relationship to other audience members. Unsurprisingly, political leanings have some

impact on experiences of trust. Additionally, for younger audiences, social media discussions and multiple—even contradictory—views are part and parcel of the digital news experience. Peer recommendations and the experience of authenticity, along with an individual’s personal point of view, deepen and widen the news content of legacy media platforms. In general, however, audiences in Finland tend to be critical of not only market-driven media and clickbait journalism but also each other. They are wary regarding other audience members’ ability to distinguish disinformation from reliable information, gossip from truth, and opinion from fact. This so-called *third-person perception* (e.g., Tsfaty and Cohen 2012) is not a new or unique phenomenon, but it is curious in a situation where audiences seem relatively homogenous in their assessments of trust in the media.

5. Conclusion: Trusting, but Critical

The increased interest in studying trust in the media in recent years is both unsurprising and essential, given the major changes not only in national and international political landscapes, digital technology, and media markets but also in our changing epistemological relationship to knowledge and expertise (e.g., McNair 2018; Davies 2019). The understanding of trust is central to our times: trust in other people and institutions is a central factor in promoting social cohesion and democratic practices, and, at the same time, the observed decline in trust in the media is often a reflection of broader distrust and divisions in society (Coleman 2012; Hanitzsch et al. 2018; Preoteasa 2020). Many recent studies have sought to contribute to solving the challenges posed by the

spread of misinformation,³ and research has begun to inform efforts to build and strengthen trust in the media and journalism (e.g., Fisher et al. 2020; Henke et al. 2019; Kalsnes and Krumsvik 2019).

A major finding pertaining to our first, second, and third research questions on generalized trust, trust in journalism, and the dispositions of audiences is a cause for optimism: while Finnish audiences are critical of the media’s functioning in general and point out problems with mainstream journalism and, especially, with social media platforms, they still trust legacy media outlets’ own digital platforms, as well as recognize and respect conventional news values. Although attitudes and experiences regarding social media platforms may differ, especially based on age, this result pertains to Finnish audiences regardless of demographic variables. The increasing role of digital platforms as points of access to news—a major change over the past decade—has not altered expectations regarding news. What has shifted is attitudes toward social media, arguably largely due to public discussions and digital media literacy efforts embedded in early education (Salomaa and Mertala 2019).

How has Finland managed to resist a major decline in trust in the media even as audiences have developed critical attitudes and resilience against false information online? Due to the contextual factors impacting trust, practical takeaways from our study may not be directly transferable. Moreover, international comparisons are not

³ For a variety of recent examples, see, for example, *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* (<https://misinfoview.hks.harvard.edu/>) and the special issue of the *International Journal of Press/Politics*, “Digital Threats to Democracy: Comparative Lessons and Possible Remedies” (Miller and Vaccari 2020).

systematically built into the research design: to observe longitudinal developments, our initial survey questions adopted many questions from earlier Finnish surveys, while the COVID-19 survey replicated select questions from a multicountry study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Nielsen et al. 2020). Nevertheless, we can reflect on several themes in our findings and conclude that due to the combination of a robust media system entailing independent journalism, a long-term commitment to media education in educational policies, and a comparatively homogenous and consensus-oriented society, Finland fares better regarding trust in the media and journalism than many other countries.

We propose that the three-dimensional understanding of trust may be needed for both potential public policy interventions and the strategic development of news organizations. Our findings indicate that audience perceptions of trust may initially seem to clash but that the contradictory sentiments about legacy and social media reflect the complexities of the digital media landscape. They indicate that trust in the media as an institution in the digital era is still very much dependent on the quality of legacy journalism and that the role of social media as a platform for digital news, while prominent in people's everyday lives, does not elicit trust in the media or social cohesion.

The single most defining characteristic of Finnish audiences is that they are trusting, yet simultaneously critical, toward legacy and social media. In terms of functioning democratic systems, research has shown that complete trust is not needed; some level of criticism and questioning is part of the constant negotiation of trust relationships in

society (e.g., Nootens 2018). Indeed, our study seems to indicate that a fine balance between skepticism and reliance on news outlets can exist. The coronavirus crisis arguably stress-tested this balance when, as also noted by our expert interviewees, insufficient facts and the ever-changing nature of information challenged some journalistic practices. Media literacy, and specifically the understanding of journalistic principles and processes, may have created the high levels of trust in Finland. Indeed, a multicountry study on public beliefs about falsehoods in the news (Koc-Michalska et al. 2020) concluded that democracies can tolerate some disinformation and distrust in the media, and a recent multicountry study on COVID-19 information dissemination (Hameleers et al. 2020) has suggested that audiences need to believe in the good intentions of the communicator, even if audience members perceive a lack of factual knowledge.

At the same time, one could argue that the balance of critical literacy and trust is a fine one. As Nic Newman, senior research associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, noted in an interview (Preoteasa 2020), based on the Reuters Institute's extensive studies on digital news and its audiences around the world, media literacy can help but may also enhance skepticism. While perhaps not an alarming tendency, distrust between people as news audience members is a real phenomenon in Finland. This sense of one's own literacy but fear that others are not equally skilled navigators in the complex digital media landscape emerged from the quantitative and qualitative parts of our study and has also been documented by another survey in 2020 (Finnish Newspaper Association 2020).

We propose that, in the digital era, the balance in critical trust in the media may be best achieved by supporting a strong and open media system and digital media education (see also Lessenski 2019)—but achieving this goal also requires openness on the part of news organizations (see also Newman and Fletcher 2017, 11–12). Critical literacy not only is a task for schools but also can be supported by editorial transparency, fact-checking projects, and other journalistic processes (Fleming and Karadjov 2020). Hopefully, that critical trust in the media and digital news can also support critical trust in other institutions and, ultimately, in other people as digital news consumers and citizens.

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Competing Interests Statement

The corresponding author (MH) confirms on behalf of all authors that there have been no involvements that might raise the question of bias in the work reported or in the conclusions, implications, or opinions stated.

Contributions

Janne Matikainen, Johanna Jääsaari, and Minna Horowitz contributed to the design and implementation of the research, with Markus Ojala co-designing the survey of spring

2020. Minna Horowitz, Markus Ojala, Janne Matikainen, and Johanna Jääsaari contributed to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

Data Accessibility Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author (MH), upon reasonable request.

Figure Titles

Figure 1. Respondents' opinions of media power, social media, and fake news (%).

Figure 2. Selected social media services as reliable news sources in 2009 and 2019 (%).

Figure 3. Respondents' opinions on the reliability of digital media and web content (%).

Figure 4. Proportion of individuals who say that they have seen “a lot” or “a great deal” of false or misleading information about the coronavirus on each platform in the last week (%). Sources: for Finland, our survey of 2020; Nielsen et al. (2020).

Figure 5. Percentage of people who tend to trust social media: the European Union average and Finland, 2014–19. Source: European Broadcasting Union Media Intelligence

Service—Trust in Media 2020 (Eurobarometer 2018; European Broadcasting Union 2020b).

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