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Modes of Perception and Issues of Trust in the Media

Anja Wollenberg & Katharina Nötzold

Author information:

Anja Wollenberg (Dr. phil.) is head of research at MiCT, a Berlin-based media assistance organization with activities mostly in the Middle East and North Africa. Her research interests are focused on media pluralism, media structures, and the role of media in conflict and conflict prevention. She has published numerous studies on media development in Iraq and Libya pertaining to conflict issues such as polarization, hate speech, and media partisanship in these countries. Anja Wollenberg is a co-founder and shareholder of MiCT. She also teaches in the department of media studies at the University of Erfurt.

For more information: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4402-6320>

Email: wollenberg@mict-international.org

Katharina Nötzold (Dr. phil.) is Managing Editor of the Global Media Journal – German Edition. She has worked as RCUK-Research Fellow for Arab Media at the Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI) of the University of Westminster, UK. During that time, she also had been editor-in-chief of Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture. Her research interests are ethno-religious conflicts, nation-building, media and political transformation processes, media systems and communication cultures in the Middle East, and Islam in the media.

For more information: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7265-9854>

Email: Katharina.noetzold@fu-berlin.de

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The question of trust in media has gained even more significance worldwide during the past years as the COVID-19 pandemic tested the resilience to crises of media and audiences alike. Before the pandemic, the globally increased spread of disinformation as well as political polarization of publics already started challenging the role of media as reliable source of orientation. Often launched by powerful elites to influence elections and policy making, the proliferation of falsehoods has deeply altered the perception of media as a cornerstone of democracy on a global scale. The commercialisation of media which as a result also lead to increasing sensationalism and the lack of in-depth reporting have further impeded trust. Today's audiences, more than ever, depend on themselves – their media literacy, their analytical skills, their peers and counterparts – to make sense of the world around them. Accordingly, understanding the role of media in different contexts requires, more than ever, to study modes of media use and perception and how these change alongside the transformation of political culture and conduct. In the context of repressive regimes, excessive state control might produce distrust in media and foster the power of informal networks of information exchange. In post-authoritarian states, with the liberalization of media systems, media users are often overwhelmed by the sudden abundance of sources. Among the cacophony of voices emerging from transitions, individuals may feel sceptical of media and the journalistic profession. In conflict environments on the other hand, the negative assessment of media performance is driven by perceived instrumentalization of media by conflict parties. As these examples show, research on trust requires contextualization and needs to be connected to the study of media perception and social processes of sense-making. Understanding context in our view is key for overcoming deterministic and media centred approaches that are still common in the academic discourse and also in the field of media development.

For the study of trust and media perception we may hence ask: What are root causes of trust and distrust in media in different political contexts? How is media use shifted from one source to another with the change of political culture? What factors shape media perception across cultures and across political regimes? Are there commonalities or are they different? Given the common instrumentalization of media in conflict environments and the growing ubiquity of political media capture, we may also ask, whether unfettered trust in media is normatively desirable under any circumstances. Put differently: Isn't distrust a healthy response to propaganda and media manipulation? How is the concept of media literacy connected to trust or media scepticism? Do we need to be more sceptical rather than gullible?

Against the backdrop of these (and other) questions, the Forum Media and Development (fome) dedicated its 2021 annual symposium to the question of trust in media, namely the question how media perception is shaped differently by different political contexts and media structures across the globe. Fome is the German platform for international media development initiatives (fome.info), a network that includes 24 organizations working towards strengthening free and independent media in developing and transitioning countries. The 2021 fome-symposium ran under the

heading “Believe it or Not! Enquiries about TRUST in media (assistance)” and was organized by MiCT. The proceedings of the conference can be found online at <https://fome.info/symposium-2021-documentation>. Finally, this themed issue of the *Global Media Journal – German Edition* is curated as an extension of the conference and an effort to follow up upon some of the most pressing questions deriving from it. As such it is edited by MiCT (Anja Wollenberg) in collaboration with the *Global Media Journal – German Edition* (Katharina Nötzold).

About the contributions and contributors

Research on trust often lacks transparency regarding conceptual underpinnings. As a result, trust in media is commonly confused with affinity, sympathy or other concepts. In his article *Benjamin Toff* addresses one of the major shortcomings in the conceptualization of comparative trust research: the focus on average levels of trust in media as key measure. He argues that people normally are discerning in what source they choose to trust and that hence, rather than a focus on general trust, a focus on ‘selective trust’ – which is trust in specific brands – produces a much more refined and realistic picture of media perception. He concludes that declining levels of general trust at the country or media system level may “reflect growing selectivity in how publics evaluate news media in their countries (i.e., more polarized publics)” and thus indicate elements of increased media literacy.

In a next step, *Anke Fiedler & Anja Wollenberg* explore how violent intergroup conflict affects the ways people acquire, use, and perceive information. Data on media perception assembled from different fragile countries demonstrate how polarization and instrumentalization of media produce media scepticism among the general public, leading to increased fact-checking and cross-media use. Wollenberg & Fiedler show, how media users establish agency through individual and collective validation strategies, eclectic media diets, advanced critical media literacy and discursive sense-making with peers and family. The authors conclude that party media capture typical in conflict countries tend to produce a highly critical and media-savvy audience sceptical of the truthfulness of what is presented to them by local media.

With reference to the fome network and the mandate of its members, based on a series of qualitative interviews, *Ines Drefs* studied how practices in international media development are perceived and assessed by onsite actors and how these actors perceive and negotiate their scope of action. By applying categories and the concept of structuration theory in her analysis she focused on *knowledgeability* and *capability* of on-site actors and how these aspects were influenced or constrained by *rules* and *resources*. Structuration theory assumes that social practices are constantly shaped and re-shaped in an interplay of agency and structure. The theory provides theoretical concepts to investigate the power of ‘agents’ to influence structures in a social system, in this case the rules and practices commonly applied in international media development. Her findings suggest that the cultivation of long-

term relationships and a diversification of international funding allow on-site actors to strengthen their agency within international media development.

Focusing on media developments in Africa, *Nicole Stremmlau* critically explores undue assumptions about the almighty power of social media that are implied in academic and non-academic debates about the impact of hate speech and dis/misinformation in conflict contexts. In her view, a strong impact of hate speech on attitudes and behaviour of recipients is taken for granted while at the same time the very mechanisms that translate between media messages and violence, between online communication and offline action, are not examined. Instead, a simple stimulus-response model of communication is often silently implied. She argues that “much of the research on mass media, or radio and violence in Africa, has been driven by simplistic models of behaviour that attribute little or no agency to the communities or individuals involved and minimize the contexts, including the history, in which extreme violence took place.” Using Ethiopia as an example, she argues that the empirical evidence pertaining to a simple nexus between social media, online speech and offline violence, particularly in Africa, remains weak. Moreover, artificial intelligence – used by big social media companies and presented by them as a solution for combatting hate speech– is not fit for purpose in most circumstances in Africa and other parts of the world where English is not the main language.

The analysis of media perception in Russia reveals an entirely different picture. In her essay on state propaganda and its perception among audiences in Russia, *Anna Litvinenko* is asking why Russian media users believe what is presented to them as truth by state-controlled channels despite the availability of more credible sources (such as friends and family residing in Ukraine). One key strategy that is successfully disguising the de facto state monopoly on public opinion is the deliberate spread of contradicting and inconsistent narratives. The confusion resulting from that strategy is giving the impression of media pluralism. It also suggests that the political situation is complex and ambivalent, hard to read and all but simple. This fluid nature of non-consistent and contradicting propaganda makes it hard to counter. And easy to believe.

In her essay, *Marína Urbániková* compares drivers of increased media distrust in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In both countries she says, oligarchization and commercialization give rise to the belief that the media and the journalists act in the interest of political and economic actors rather than in the public interest. In addition, the rise of 'alternative' media spreading disinformation, hoaxes, and pro-Russian propaganda, together with increasing polarisation and constant attacks against media and journalists by the top political representatives, further stimulate and strengthen the public perception that journalists are biased and corrupt, and the media cannot be trusted. However, Urbániková concludes that trust in media in the Czech Republic is still higher than in Slovakia due to generally higher trust in public and state institutions including public service media, a lesser tendency of journalists to engage in activism and finally a more diversified and pluralistic media market.

Staying in the same geographic neighbourhood, *Gábor Polyák & Kata Horváth* analyse how the rapid changes in the Hungarian media market since 2010 have not been market-driven at all. On the contrary, this re-structuring of the Hungarian media market has been rather politically motivated by prime minister Viktor Orbán's vision of exercising power in an 'illiberal democracy', all of which can best be described as media and state capture. This has been going hand in hand with a politically driven polarization of Hungarian society, which also has its negative effect on trust in media. Polyák und Horváth recount numerous examples of Hungarian journalists who found themselves in a quandary every time their trusted media organisations changed ownership and became ever closer linked to Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz-Party having to start all over again in new media organisations – often with unreliable financing. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, audiences have low trust in journalists and the media system in general.

The list of countries with similar developments and issues of trust could surely be expanded and as the examples in this themed issue have shown they are not exclusively situated in the Global South. Yet all these observations point to the necessity of increased media literacy to make sense of (dis)information and in a further step to enable audiences to take informed political decisions as citizens.