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Article

# Trust in Public Relations in the Age of Mistrusted Media: A European Perspective

Ángeles Moreno <sup>1,\*</sup>, Ralph Tench <sup>2</sup>  and Piet Verhoeven <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Group of Advanced Studies in Communication, Department of Communication and Sociology, Faculty of Communication, University Rey Juan Carlos, 28943 Fuenlabrada, Spain

<sup>2</sup> Department of Communication, Leeds Business School, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds LS1 3HB, UK; r.tench@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

<sup>3</sup> Department of Corporate Communication, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam, 1012 WX Amsterdam, The Netherlands; p.verhoeven@uva.nl

\* Correspondence: mariaangeles.moreno@urjc.es; Tel.: +34-91-4887278

**Abstract:** One of the core problems of misinformation and post-trust societies is, indeed, trust in communications. The undermining of the credibility of media as the backbone of democratic societies is becoming a serious problem that affects democracy, business and all kinds of public institutions and organizations in society(ies). This paper explores perceptions of trust in key stakeholders involved in communication on behalf of organizations. Findings are considered at the professional (macro), departmental (meso) and individual (micro) level as well as considering the trusted role of non-specialist communicators for organizations including internal and external spokespeople. Data were collected from an online survey of 2883 respondents from 46 countries across Europe. Key findings were at the *macro* level that: antagonism between management communication professionals and journalists remains. The lowest trust in the profession is felt to be by the general public. At the *meso* level, top executives are perceived to trust the department the most followed by journalists in second place. External experts such as professors and consultants are perceived to be the most trusted by the general public. Finally, at the *micro* level individuals are more trusted than organizations or departments and the communication profession more widely.

**Keywords:** post-trust; disinformation; trust; media credibility; gatekeepers; management communication; strategic communication; public relations; journalism



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## 1. Introduction

Today we live in a complex and ambiguous world, within which the public are losing confidence in all kinds of institutions and in the role mass media plays as the “backbone of democratic societies”. The new social media landscape holds the public in a state of continuing uncertainty, because the parameters that allowed them to evaluate the reception and scope of traditional news media have been eroded [1] (pp. 94–95). In many countries, trust in the mass media and journalism has been declining [2–4]. If trustworthiness in the context of media means the belief that the source provides information honestly, without the purpose of manipulation [5], then the trustworthiness of news media is a subject that has relevance in contemporary society and is open to significant debate. The undermining of the credibility of media as the backbone of democratic societies is becoming a serious problem that affects democracy [2], business and all kinds of public institutions and organizations in society(ies).

According to the latest Eurobarometer from November 2018, 39 per cent of citizens in the European Union show little or no confidence in the media, while only one in five (19 per cent) has high confidence [6]. Both values were lower than in previous surveys. This loss of trust might also be true for other communicators, especially those who communicate on behalf of companies and other types of organizations. This is a key challenge

for the communication industry, as communicators need to be trusted by the people they work for, e.g., top executives and (internal) clients [7–9], but they are also dependent on the trust of the public with whom they interact to reach their goals and the gatekeepers that bring them to their final audiences—journalists, bloggers, influencers. Today diverse and competing media channels have the critical role of helping publics to obtain organization-related information and fostering trust between the public and business and other organizations [10].

Trust is critical to the functioning of our society at all levels and is especially central to the practice of public relations [11], yet the topic has not been researched comprehensively so far in our field. Trust has been largely researched in sociological, economic and organization theory [12]. In this paper, we will approach trust in the PR/communication field from a cross-disciplinary approach where the perspectives of New Institutionalism (NI), Organization–Public Relations (OPR) and a European sociological application of Luhmann’s theory to public relations are mainly focused. This paper explores perceptions of trust in key stakeholders involved in communication on behalf of organizations. Findings are considered at the professional (macro), departmental (meso) and individual (micro) level as well as investigating the trusted role of non-specialist communicators for organizations including internal and external spokespeople.

The main objective and purpose of this study is twofold: first to explore the perception of trust in public relations/communication in Europe across the different levels applied in New Institutionalism theories—macro (the profession), meso (the department) and micro (the individual practitioner). Second, to explore the concrete efforts to build organizational trust as a key task of communication functions in Europe. This main objective has been broken down into three overarching research questions driven from the following literature review

## 2. Literature Review

As underlined by Li’s [13] editorial for the launch issue of the Journal of Trust Research, there are academic observations of a persistent lack of consensus about trust [14,15]. Following Lane [12] trust is a social phenomenon to be studied at interpersonal, interorganizational and systemic levels. Most conceptions of personal trust share three basic assumptions: that there will be a degree of interdependence between trustor and trustee; that trust provides a way to cope with risk and uncertainty in exchange relationships and the expectation that there will not be an abuse of the vulnerability resulting from the acceptance of risk in the relationship. Trust is also something to be given or placed, it may be placed in a person (micro), an organization (meso), and the broader structures that affect roles and organizations, etc., (macro) such as codes of conduct, industry bodies, relevant law and broader societal norms [14]. Nevertheless, theories began to diverge in their identification of the foundation of trust or the social bases on which such expectations must be established. These expectations are related to the model of human nature or social interactions underlying theories. Divergences may also arise from the object of trust and the context in which the relationship is situated. Those divergences have translated to multidimensional concepts and typologies of trust as the dyad cognitive/affective which is very common in interpersonal trust studies [16], or the multidimensional models based on the context of expectations (i.e., fiduciary/competence), which are very common in interorganizational trust studies.

Based on the main divergences, Lane [12] underlines three approaches from economics and social sciences. First, the approach of *calculative trust*, based on the conception of rational human beings that can take utilitarian decisions calculating the cost and benefits of expectations in a relationship. Coleman [17] and other authors in this perspective have been criticized for an ideologized view of the rational behavior. Second, the *value or norm-based trust* approach, where the concept of solidarity and collectivity is placed at the center of human life. Shared values and norms allow economic actors to support each other where they share a community of trust. Fukuyama [18] is the recognized representative of this

perspective, with the concept of the family as the basic social structure in US society and his argument that the level of trust of a country as the cultural factor for wellbeing and competitiveness of a nation. Additionally, third, the approach of *common cognitions* as the basis for trust. Common cognitions are defined as the rules that constitute the nature of reality and the frames through which meaning is made. These frames are embodied in expectations about social order in general and about the specific interactions with others. The most extended and insightful theoretical analysis of trust has been put forward by Luhmann [12] (p. 12). From his functionalist perspective, Luhmann bring complexity like a fundamental ontologic problem defined as a number of possibilities inherent in the construction of a system. Where trust is present, possibilities for action and experience increases, bringing more complexity to the social system but also multiplying the number of possibilities to be reconciliated with its structure. Thus, trust for a sociologist is the most effective way of reducing complexity. European public relations scholars have argued for the application of Luhmann's theory to the field of public relations to place the role of the communication function at the core of organizational and social trust and underlining the public relations role of increasing trust among different social systems (see p. 7).

### 2.1. Trust in the PR/Communication Professional Field

Public trust in professions can be understood as the degree to which the public believes that professions will act serving and protecting the public's interest. Although this view is controversial when the public disagree about what is perceived to be in the public interest [19]. Today, many professions are untrusted by the general population, with a decline for those in business related professions including communicators [20,21].

Public trust in public relations practice is strongly related with the concepts of profession and professionalization itself. The construct of professionalization refers to the process—undertaken either by an organization or an entire industry—of attaining a sufficient level of quality and practice which is representative of excellence in a profession [22]. Although there have been numerous attempts to outline the parameters of professionalization in public relations, none have resulted in true consensus among practitioners [23]. Yet, as public relations theory and practice has developed at different rates around the world, a broad understanding has been reached about the benefits associated with professionalization, including respect, prestige, and a positive public image [24].

As public relations theory is rooted in different disciplinary fields, like mass communication, interpersonal/speech communication, (social) psychology, economics, sociology, and in different schools of thought [25], scholarship in public relations has conceptualized the professionalized occupation from diverse viewpoints including functionalist, structuralist and rhetorical perspectives to serve the public interest. For instance, public relations as a field of practice has been explained as the provider of mutually beneficial and good organizational relations [26–29]; social dialog, i.e., [30–34]; postmodern activism [35] or social legitimation, i.e., [36,37].

However, despite public relations scholarship conceptualizations and the attempts of the industry to be trustworthy [38], its intervention has often been understood as attempts to manipulate the public sphere, i.e., [39–41]. The professional label itself is discredited in Europe, affecting negatively the communicator's reputation and the credibility of their activities [42]. Thus, as there is a gap between scholar conceptualization and public perception, public distrust for the PR profession can be attributed to a deficit of knowledge or a lack of factual information [43] about the goals and principles of the profession.

No previous research has approached the relationship between trust and communication/public relations from a comprehensive view that implies the diverse levels of institutionalism so far. The new institutionalism theory understands institutions as normative and regulative elements that provide stability and meaning to social life [44,45]. Institutional analysis can be approached from the macro, the meso and the micro level. The micro level analysis is mostly concerned with individual and group actions and the meso and macro levels connect the communication function with the organization and

with broader societal systems. Following this approach, this paper aims to explore trust in the communication/PR practice from the macro level of the profession through the meso level of the organizational functions of communication to the micro level of the individual practitioner. Indeed, previous research indicates that trust differs between different levels and stakeholders. Research in organizational trust in the business field, for instance, has shown that there is a gap between the levels of trust in a particular business and trust in the institution of business [46]. We want to test if different levels of trust can be also be found in the communication/public relations field.

At the personal level, trust can be understood as a factor for effectiveness in the managerial organizational setting. Trust is a key predictor of group accomplishment and behavior as it is essential for motivation, information sharing; managers' commitment and efficient problem-solving by reducing uncertainty, i.e., [47]. More positively, trust is linked to the social relations within which business transactions are embedded. Thus, trust exists as a result of frequent interactions and previous trusting relationships [48]. High interpersonal trust helps actors re-address power asymmetries, leading to high levels of interorganizational commitment [49]. This means that the more frequent our interpersonal relations with internal and external stakeholders, the more trust can be activated. For instance, in the organization, chief communication officers (CCO's) who have direct access to the chief executive officer (CEO) should be able to establish more trust relations with him/her than individuals who face barriers to access leadership positions, such as female practitioners [50]. This effect of interpersonal experience has also been explained in the relation between journalists and PR practitioners through two levels of status. The first is the social normative level, where a competitive relationship is evidenced. The second is the functional level, where task-oriented situations need a sense of cooperation between individuals [51]. Journalists' personal experience with public relations clearly matters. PR professionals who journalists have worked with are better evaluated than the PR profession as a whole, i.e., [8,52].

Thus, a broader approach at the macro, meso and micro levels may allow a deeper understanding of the perception of trust in the field, and at the same time, those levels can be seen completely differently from the diverse interest groups and contexts. Organization-related information is delivered today through a broad range of diverse channels. Mediated content is seen as a means towards the ultimate goal of creating and sustaining relationships [11]. In this process, communication departments also try to establish cooperative relationships with gatekeepers to ultimately enhance their relationship with their selected audiences and stakeholders. Communication success depends on the trust of both internal and external publics, who the organization can reach either directly or through identified gatekeepers.

Regarding internal stakeholders, trust can be seen as a mix of interpersonal and group interactions, based on the expectations that an organization will be honest, meet commitments and will not take advantage of others [11]. This approach introduces the concepts of influence, mutual control and vulnerability [53] and the assumption of risk in stakeholders' relationships [54]. Business research focuses on the importance of interpersonal trust relationships for organizational effectiveness. Specially under conditions of uncertainty and complexity, effective coordinated actions are only possible where there is mutual trust. A considerable amount of managerial work is accomplished through interpersonal interactions and the nature of the interpersonal relationships between managers and peers have cognitive and affective dimensions that can determine effectiveness [16].

Research from interorganizational relations also brings useful ideas through the dualism of vulnerability and power, including two dimensions of trust—based on goodwill the other on competence, i.e., [47,55]. It is assumed that horizontal relationships may involve trust and cooperation and vertical relationships power and compliance [56]. Combining predictability and goodwill approaches can move towards a communicative conceptualization of trust, as a process of sense-making [57]. Thus, trust is critical to the perception of public relations departments as organizational sense-makers [58] and to the practice's



primary purpose of establishing and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders of the organization.

Today the vast majority of top-level European communication managers report directly to the CEO and hold divisional influence, meaning that organizational leaders trust what communication departments recommend. Intraorganizational vertical and horizontal relationships are a key factor for the accomplishment of communication work [58].

Regarding external stakeholders, previous research states that the general population is critical about the communication/PR field, but not as much as they are about journalists as traditional gatekeepers [8]. The constructivist process of mediated content between PR and news media has been researched in public relations from the agenda building and framing perspectives, i.e., [59,60].

Public relations intervenes in the process of public communication—mediating experience in the knowledge societies—by producing information prior to its publication as media realities [61], but journalists have traditionally viewed PR practitioners negatively for their role as advocates, or because of a lack of transparency and ethics [62]. Criticism has also been explained by traditional rivalry and status inequality between the two, i.e., [51,63]. Nevertheless, more recent studies have found shared values and an improvement of the relationship between the two professions, i.e., [55,64,65].

On the other hand, organizations can now directly target a broad spectrum of publics online, in a way that was not possible previously through the news media. This Internet-based communication landscape has also brought new gatekeepers to the public information processes. As Bentele and Nothaft [66] state, in the virtual public sphere an organization can no longer rely on being the only one who has access to publics. A new kind of equality has emerged between communicative roles as public relations practitioners try to manage the interplay with bloggers and influencers in the construction of information, but there is no evidence of conflictual rivalry between these two groups so far [67].

## 2.2. Building Organizational Trust

Apart from the trust that the field of communication/PR can get for itself at the three different levels, building and maintaining trust for organizations is one of the more important tasks for PR/communication departments and consultancies. Research about trust in public relations has mainly been described in Organizational–Public-Relations (OPR) scholarship. As the practice becomes more focused on the contribution of building and maintaining mutually beneficial relations to help corporate goals, trust has been understood as a factor for achieving successful relationships with internal and external stakeholders [29,68–72]. OPR has been defined from diverse perspectives, viewing it objectively or subjectively and interpreting OPR from its antecedents or its consequences. Trust has been placed in the center of the subjective experience when OPR is described as the degree that the organization and its public trust, agree on, commit and feel favorably toward each other [68]. From the diverse research focus, trust has been measured and conceptualized threefold as an outcome, and as an antecedent or a mediating factor [7].

Nevertheless, one of the gaps identified in the OPR research is concretely the use of trust as a key measurement of OPR. On the one hand, researchers assume that trust must always exist between organizations and their publics, even though distrust has also been found as a valid OPR quality measurement distinct from trust [73]. On the other hand, researchers have failed to separate interpersonal and inter-organizational trust and between internal and external publics in diverse contexts. The extended review and the proposal of Cheng [74] of a new theory of Contingent Organizational Public Relations introduces the dynamic of the actual relationship as opposed to an idealistic normative view, thus allowing us to attend to the particular context of relationships. From this contingent perspective, trust is constructed differently in diverse environments. Thus, we also believe that diverse types of organization and geographical contexts should be considered in empirical research. It is relevant to acknowledge that other studies on corporate values also suggest that the highest score or being the best is not always advantageous. Luoma-aho's study [75] on the

public sector in Finland demonstrated that holding a higher reputation is not always the best strategy. In contrast to private sector goals, the public sector faces resource restrictions that make it preferable to focus on a neutral reputation, to avoid the public having (too) high expectations which are difficult to meet.

From a European sociological perspective, the responsibility of generating trust for society could be placed on the public relations function, as has been conceptualized by Holmström [76,77], based on Luhmann's theory. For Luhmann the whole social order is based on structures of expectations. Trust reduces complexity by ensuring that the social system is based on mutual expectations about the future of behavior that would guide actors' actions [78]. Thus, organizations are evaluated on nothing but the communication of their decisions [79] and have to be constantly prepared for trust checks [74]. Today, in the uncertain 21st century, public relations can be conceptualized in this context as a response to the contemporary uncertainties through its role of increasing trust among different social systems as conceived by Luhmann [80–82]. Yet, achieving this important role implies specific challenges for communication departments. We are going to focus on the active subjects, the main goals and the main challenges to build trust for organizations.

Firstly, we want to know who the most trusted communicators on behalf of the organization are (subjects) from the perspective of communicator/PR practitioners. Communication and PR professionals are not the only people speaking on behalf of organizations. More than ever one key role of communication departments is to enable other people inside and to identify and select endorsers (supporters) outside the organization to speak on its behalf [58]. The so-called "European educational role" [83] is increasing its importance as communication management should be more a supporter for all levels of the organization than a subsystem where communication is only performed by professionals [84].

Formal representatives, such as CEOs and board members or marketing and salespeople, as well as other employees and members of the organization, play a role as well, whether they are coached by practitioners or not. External experts in the field, customers, fans and supporters, and even activists with overlapping interests can also endorse the organization. Knowing about different advocates and choosing or supporting them carefully is an important part of strategic communication.

Literature suggests that professional organizational communicators such as marketing and PR people engender low public trust [11,85]. On the contrary, there is an increasing importance of other internal non-professional-communication supporter roles who rate significantly higher than CEOs. This makes employees—who are seen "as a person like me"—important channels and ambassadors for spreading messages about the organization [86,87]. Moreover, employees with competence in specific knowledge and channels are new potent corporate influencers [87]. Based on this understanding, enabling diverse internal publics, instead of relying only on leaders, is becoming an important task for communication departments [58].

On the other hand, outside the organization, with the virtual public sphere, organizations can no longer rely on having exclusive access to publics. Wright and Hinson [88] argued that social media provides a means for organizations to act transparently and perceived that accuracy, credibility, honesty, trust and truth telling were enhanced through social media use. Yet trust in the Internet is a hot issue in interpersonal and organizational relationships [88] and trust influences how stakeholders rationalize information in social media [89]. Based on the same principle of trusting "a person like me" social media channels have been argued to be more credible than traditional media because of its authenticity. People value having more sources of information and believe that the public is primarily responsible for dissemination of information [87]. Thus, the most credible sources for audiences are knowledgeable friends, family and colleagues (36%) whereas bloggers, forums and online communities show low credibility [85].

Secondly, we address the main goals and challenges for building organizational trust. Previous research has identified a gap between the communication function of enhancing trust for the organization and doing it for the whole profession or for concrete

organizational leaders [42]. Nevertheless, the current situation of social distrust in business, media and all kinds of institutions make it important today to build trust from a broader perspective and not only focused in the meso level of organizations.

After the last big global financial and economic crisis, which has been perceived as a crisis of trust, communication management needed to strive to gain stakeholders' trust not only at the meso-level of companies, but on different levels [90]. Along with the benefit of relationships in OPR scholarship, literature has currently operationalized trust as an independent variable to achieve reputation [91] and multiple organizational and business goals, i.e., [47,92]. This complexity of the relationship between trust and other outflows suggest that building trust through communication can be difficult and present diverse challenges.

Although organizational trust has been operationalized more as an independent than dependent variable, the literature identifies some key antecedents of trustworthiness as: organizational openness and transparency [93–95]; dialogue [96]; corporate citizenship [97]; and credibility, reliability and benevolence [11]. Summarizing, communication needs to be based on knowledge, and it should be transparent and ethical, too.

Contrary to the thinking of one of the most prominent contemporary philosophers Byung-Chul Han [98] who states that transparency undermines real trust in today's world, corporate transparency has been assumed and embraced as a must to have for all kinds of organizations. Corporate transparency can be evaluated through diverse factors and dimensions [11,97], but neither trust nor transparency are easy in practice [99–101]. Today there is an increasing gap between what organizations deliver and the public expectation for companies to communicate about management behaviors and about the people who lead organizations [85,102]. Previous research also suggests that European organizations are not prepared to face hypermodern demands of transparency [103].

From the review of the literature, we propose the following hypotheses to address the original research questions for the study about trust in communication/PR. All questions are measured against national context as well as the organizational type where the respondent worked:

RQ1: What is the perceived trust of European PR/communication professionals at the professional, departmental, and personal performance levels by diverse key stakeholders?

- **Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *Perceived trust varies in communication/PR and is higher for the individual (micro) level than for the departmental (meso) and profession (macro) level.*
- **Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *Perceived trust is diverse from different stakeholders: the perceived trust of internal stakeholders, influencers and bloggers in the PR/communication profession is higher than the perceived trust of the general public and journalists.*

RQ2: Who are the most trusted communicators by hierarchical level and gender on behalf of the organization as perceived by communication professionals?

- **Hypothesis 3 (H3).** *Practitioners on higher hierarchical levels report a higher level of personal trust than those on lower levels.*
- **Hypothesis 4 (H4).** *Male practitioners report higher levels of personal trust than female counterparts.*

RQ3: What are the most important goals and hurdles for building and maintaining trust in European organizations?

- **Hypothesis 5 (H5).** *Enhancing trust in organizations is a more important goal than enhancing trust in leaders or the overall sector.*
- **Hypothesis 6 (H6).** *Transparency is the main challenge for building trust for organizations.*

### 3. Materials and Methods

To answer the research questions and test the hypotheses, six questions about trust were asked in the European Communication Monitor (ECM) 2019. The ECM is an annual survey among PR and communication professionals in Europe.



### 3.1. Procedure and Sample

The online survey is an English language survey and was pre-tested with 67 communication professionals in 20 European countries. Amendments were made where appropriate and the final questionnaire was on the ECM website for five weeks in February/March 2019. A large number of professionals throughout Europe were invited with personal e-mails based on a database provided by the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD). Additional invitations were sent via national research collaborators and professional associations. In total, 2883 respondents completed the survey. Answers from participants who could not clearly be identified as part of the population were deleted from the dataset. This strict selection of respondents is a distinct feature of the ECM and sets it apart from many studies which are based on snowball sampling or which include students, academics and people outside of the focused profession or region. The evaluation is then based on 2689 fully completed replies by communication professionals in Europe. The sample consists of respondents that are communication leaders: 39.3 per cent hold a top hierarchical position as head of communication in an organization or as chief executive officer of a communication consultancy; 28.3 per cent are unit leaders or in charge of a single discipline in a communication department. In total, 67.8 per cent of the respondents have more than ten years of experience in communication management. The average age is 42.5 years (SD = 10.62). Overall, 56.8 per cent of all respondents are female and a vast majority (95.9 per cent) in the sample has an academic degree. More than two thirds hold a graduate degree or a doctorate. Seventy per cent of the respondents work in communication departments in organizations (joint stock companies, 19.9 per cent; private companies, 23.1 per cent; government-owned, public sector, political organizations, 16.6 per cent; non-profit organizations, associations, 10.8 per cent), while 29.6 per cent are communication consultants working freelance or for agencies. In total, 60.3 per cent of the respondents report to work at a communication department that is aligned to the (top) management of the organization. Overall, 26.2 per cent of the departments is strongly aligned, and 13.5 per cent is weakly aligned to the management of the organization.

Communication professionals from 46 European countries participated in the survey. Most respondents (31.4 per cent) are based in Southern Europe (countries like Italy, Spain, Serbia, Croatia), followed by Western Europe (29.0 per cent; countries like Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, France), Northern Europe (22.6 per cent; countries like the United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, Norway), and Eastern Europe (16.9 per cent; countries like Poland, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania).

### 3.2. Questions, Variables and Analysis

Based on literature about trust in the communication profession (see theoretical discussion in the literature review), six questions were asked in the survey about (1) the perceived trust in the communication profession in general, (2) communication departments in organizations, (3) the communication person, (4) other communicators in the organization, (5) the perceived relevance of building trust for organizations and (6) challenges of trust building communication. All questions used a five-point Likert scale, from strong distrust to strong trust. In the first three questions respondents were asked to assess trust in the profession, departments, member of the general public, journalists, influencers and bloggers and top executives in charge of leading the organization. In the question about personal trust internal clients and colleagues and co-workers were added. In the fourth question respondents were asked to assess the trust of the general public in communication and public practitioners themselves and the following six other communicators: Marketing and sales representatives of the organization, leaders of the organization (CEOs, board members, top executives), other employees/members of the organization, external experts in the field (e.g., professors (academics), consultants), external supporters/fans or customers/clients of my organization and activists and other external organizations with their own agenda. Question five asked respondents to assess (not relevant to very relevant) three relevant goals for building trust for their organization: (1) Enhance trust in

leaders of my organization, (2) enhance trust in my organization and/or its brands, and (3) enhance trust in our market, business or sector of society. The sixth and last question asked respondents to assess three challenges of trust-building communication that they face in their organization, from never to always challenging: Being transparent (telling what you know and disclosing contexts), being ethical (adhering to moral and normative expectations), and being knowledgeable (based on facts and focused on problem-solving).

The six questions supplied several dependent variables on trust. Independent variables were individual demographics of the respondents, organizations and departments they work in and country of residence. SPSS was used for data analysis. For all questions, an ANOVA was performed on the dependent variable and the 22 countries with enough respondents ( $n > 48$ ), and the type of organizations respondents work in to test hypotheses. If necessary, additional t-tests were performed to test specific hypothesized differences.

To test the overall hypothesis about the level of trust on the personal level compared to departmental and professional level, first three trust indexes were created: (1) professional trust, (2) organizational trust and (3) personal trust. The answers to the items of the respective questions were summed and divided by the number of items. Subsequently two paired sample t-tests were performed with the pairs; personal trust and professional trust; and personal trust and departmental trust.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Trust in the Profession

RQ1: What is the perceived trust of European PR/communication professionals at the professional, departmental, and personal performance levels by diverse key stakeholders?

Answering hypothesis 1, the findings demonstrate that practitioners experience low trustworthiness in the profession. On a five-point scale strategic communication professionals perceive trust in their profession to be the highest among top executives of organizations ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) followed by influencers and bloggers ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) and journalists ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ). Professionals think the general public trust the PR/communications profession the least ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ). Hypothesis 2, which stated that the perceived trust in the public relations/communications profession was higher among influencers and bloggers than it was among journalists, is confirmed,  $t(-9.728)$ ,  $p = <0.000$ , 95% CI  $[-0.24, -0.16]$ . An analysis of variance (ANOVA) shows that there are significant differences in the trust levels between different European countries (see Table 1) with trust higher in Northern and Western Europe than Southern and Eastern Europe. Between different kinds of organizations (joint stock companies, private companies, governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and consultancies) significant differences are found for trust by top executives and the general public, not for influencers/bloggers and journalists (see Table 2).

**Table 1.** Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of country and trust in the profession by four groups (between groups).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Top executives	71.503	21	3.405	3.248	<0.000
Total	2437.238	2319			
Influencers/bloggers	70.28	21	3.347	3.050	<0.000
Total	2516.936	2251			
Journalists	89.594	21	4.266	3.745	<0.000
Total	2,761,271	2366			
General public	88.662	21	4.222	4.131	<0.000
Total	2437.238	2319			

**Table 2.** Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of type of organization and trust in the profession by four groups (between groups).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Top executives	16.044	4	4.011	3.842	<0.004
Total	2737.542	2611			
Influencers/bloggers	6.899	4	1.725	1.548	0.186
Total	2792.858	2504			
Journalists	10.451	4	2.613	2.274	0.059
Total	3029.412	2632			
General public	26.1	4	6.525	6.238	<0.000
Total	2723.771	2583			

#### 4.2. Trust in Communication Departments

PR/communications professionals were asked for their perceived trust in communication departments/agencies by those interest groups that are critical for their success. The perceived trust of the stakeholders they work for: the publics and people who use the media; channels and events of the organization; journalists with whom they interact; influencers and bloggers with whom they interact; and top executives and internal clients for whom the departments work. On a five-point scale top executives score best ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 0.861$ ), journalists rank second ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 0.834$ ), followed by influencers and bloggers ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 0.928$ ) and the general public ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 0.891$ ). The perceived trust in communication departments is highest among the top executives and lowest among the publics that use the communication channels and messages. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) shows that there are significant differences in the trust levels between different European countries (see Table 3) and between different types of organizations (joint stock companies, private companies, governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and consultancies) (see Table 4).

**Table 3.** Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of country and trust in the communication department by four groups (between groups).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Top executives	53.733	21	2.559	3.472	<0.000
Total	1773.229	2354			
Influencers/bloggers	29.124	21	1.387	1.613	<0.039
Total	1688.32	1951			
Journalists	50.499	21	2.405	2.895	<0.000
Total	1952.667	2311			
Publics	39.62	21	1.887	2.39	<0.000
Total	1859.256	2326			

**Table 4.** Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of type of organization and trust in communication departments by four groups (between groups).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Top executives	19.277	4	4.819	6.562	<0.000
Total	1938.961	2618			
Influencers/bloggers	19.34	4	4.835	5.668	<0.000

**Table 4.** *Cont.*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	<i>p</i>
Total	1879.863		2185		
Journalists	10.52	4	2.63	3.165	0.013
Total	2147.642	2576			
Publics	35.507	4	8.877	11.351	<0.000
Total	2056.341	2588			

#### 4.3. Personal Trust

RQ2: Who are the most trusted communicators by hierarchical level and gender on behalf of the organization as perceived by communication professionals?

Respondents were asked for the perceived trust in them on the individual level by those who are critical for their success. Communication professionals depend on the trust of journalists, bloggers, influencers, internal clients, organizational leaders, and the peers they work with/for. On a five-point scale colleagues and co-workers score highest ( $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = 0.700$ ), followed by the top leader of the organization ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 0.824$ ), internal clients ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 0.759$ ), journalists ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.792$ ) and publics they have direct contact with ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.793$ ), and influencers ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 0.833$ ). An analysis of variance (ANOVA) shows that there are significant differences in the personal trust levels between different European countries, except for influencers/bloggers (see Table 5). Perceived personal trust levels between different types of organizations (joint stock companies, private companies, governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and consultancies) differ significantly for all groups except journalists (see Table 6). Professionals on higher hierarchical levels report a significant higher level of perceived personal trust with all stakeholders, except with influencers/bloggers (see Table 7). Hypothesis 3 is therefore partly confirmed (practitioners at higher levels have higher trust than those at lower levels). Hypotheses 4 stated that male practitioners report a higher level of personal trust than their female counterparts. This hypothesis is not confirmed, the results show the opposite: Female practitioners report the same levels of trust with internal stakeholders and higher levels of perceived personal trust for external stakeholders, respectively for publics and people they talk to directly,  $t(2563) = 4.135$ ,  $p < 0.000$ , 95% CI [0.069, 0.092], journalists,  $t(2224) = 3.575$ ,  $p < 0.000$ , 95% CI [0.053, 0.181] and influencers/bloggers,  $t(1876) = 4.942$ ,  $p < 0.000$ , 95% CI [0.113, 0.261].

**Table 5.** Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of country and personal trust in by six groups (between groups).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	<i>p</i>
Publics and people I talk to directly	25.263	21	1.203	1.928	0.007
Total	1451.294	2307			
Journalists I work with	37.32	21	1.777	2.864	<0.000
Total	1352.708	2141			
Influencers/bloggers I work with	17.17	21	0.818	1.156	0.282
Total	1216.544	1716			
(Internal) clients	38.862	21	1.851	3.264	<0.000
Total	1347.792	2330			
The top leader in my department/agency	41.138	21	1.959	2.873	<0.000
Total	1618.023	2334			
Colleagues and co-workers	40.412	21	1.924	3.953	<0.000
Total	1196.514	2396			

**Table 6.** Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of type of organization and personal trust in by six groups (between groups).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Publics and people I talk to directly	10.158	4	2.54	4.058	0.003
Total	1615.333	2569			
Journalists I work with	1.459	4	0.365	0.581	0.677
Total	1505.942	2398			
Influencers/bloggers I work with	10.436	4	2.609	3.781	<0.005
Total	1336.804	1926			
(Internal) clients	25.056	4	6.264	11.05	<0.000
Total	1491.008	2590			
The top leader in my department/agency	22.318	4	5.58	8.316	<0.000
Total	1763.385	2599			
Colleagues and co-workers	6.635	4	1.659	3.396	0.009
Total	1305.878	2664			

**Table 7.** Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of hierarchical position and personal trust in by six groups (between groups).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Publics and people I talk to directly	6.296	2	3.148	5.208	0.006
Total	1461.895	2410			
Journalists I work with	14.936	2	7.468	12.512	<0.000
Total	1358.458	2253			
Influencers/bloggers I work with	0.047	2	0.024	0.035	0.965
Total	1213.502	1807			
(Internal) clients I'm working for	15.092	2	7.546	13.704	<0.000
Total	1352.562	2431			
The top leader in my department/agency	42.398	2	21.199	33.921	<0.000
Total	1562.908	2435			
Colleagues and co-workers in my department/agency	13.869	2	6.934	15.231	<0.000
Total	1,149,361	2496			

#### 4.4. Trust in Other Communicators

In addition to communication professionals, there are many others who can speak on behalf of an organization, such as top managers, marketing professionals, all other employees, external experts and/or customers or clients. PR/communication professionals were asked to assess how much they think the general public in their country trusts the other communicators from their organization. Professionals think, on a five point scale, that external experts in the field (e.g., professors, consultants) are trusted the most by the general public ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 0.852$ ), followed by the leaders of their organization (CEOs, board members, top executives) ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 0.929$ ), external supporters/fans or customers/clients of my organization ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 0.834$ ), other employees/members of my organization ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 0.841$ ), themselves as communication and public relations practitioners of my organization ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 0.878$ ), marketing and sales representatives of my organization ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 0.964$ ) and activists and other external organizations with their own agenda are thought to be trusted the least ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 0.979$ ). An analysis of variance shows that there are significant differences between the different European countries (see Table 8) and between types of organizations but not for leaders of the organization, other employees and activists (see Table 9).



**Table 8.** Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of country and trust in other communicators (between groups).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
PR practitioners	28.383	21	1.352	1.773	0.016
Total	1741.139	2268			
Marketing and sales representatives	64.1	21	3.052	3.356	<0.000
Total	2107.974	2268			
Leaders of my organization (CEOs, board members, top executives)	40.364	21	1.922	2.222	<0.001
Total	1984.448	2268			
Other employees/members	34.08	21	1.623	2.311	<0.001
Total	1612.046	2268			
External experts (e.g., professors, consultants)	39.483	21	1.88	2.573	<0.000
Total	1681.462	2268			
External supporters/fans or customers/clients of my organization	36.324	21	1.73	2.514	<0.000
Total	1,582,271	2268			
Activists and other external organizations with their own agenda	72.414	21	3.448	3.688	<0.000
Total	2173.319	2268			

**Table 9.** Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of type of organization and trust on other communicators (between groups).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
PR practitioners	11.68	4	2.92	3.807	0.004
Total	1945.162	2525			
Marketing and sales representatives	29.71	4	7.428	8.075	<0.000
Total	2348.475	2525			
Leaders of my organization (CEOs, board members, top executives)	5.231	4	1.308	1.518	0.194
Total	2177.239	2525			
Other employees/members of my organization	0.273	4	0.068	0.096	0.984
Total	1784.499	2525			
External experts in the field (e.g., professors, consultants)	7.3	4	1.825	2.523	0.039
Total	1830.953	2525			
External supporters/fans or customers/clients of my organization	9.377	4	2.344	3.382	0.009
Total	1756.858	2525			
Activists and other external organizations with their own agenda	2.658	4	0.665	0.694	0.596
Total	2418.206	2525			

#### 4.5. Building Trust for Organizations and Its Challenges

RQ3: What are the most important goals and hurdles for building and maintaining trust in European organizations?

Building trust for organizations is one of the most important tasks for PR/communication professionals. Respondents were asked to assess the relevance of three goals in trust enhancement: enhancing trust in the leaders of the organization; enhancing trust in the organization and its brands as an entity; and enhancing trust in the market, the business or the sector of society the organization is operating in. Communication professionals think enhancing trust in the organization ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 0.814$ ) and the broader context of the organization ( $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 0.942$ ) more important than enhancing trust in the leaders of the organization ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 1.048$ ). These results partly confirm hypothesis 5, that stated that building trust in the organization was considered a more important goal than enhancing trust in the leaders. Not expected was that enhancing trust in the sector is also perceived as more important than enhancing trust in the leaders of the organization. An analysis of variance shows that there are no significant differences between European

countries about the goal of enhancing trust in the sector. Significant differences were found on the other two goals (see Table 10). The same results were found for the differences between organizational types (see Table 11).

**Table 10.** Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of country and relevance of enhancing trust (between groups).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Enhance trust in leaders of the organization	51.229	21	2.439	2.26	0.001
Total	2639.2	2419			
Enhance trust in the organization and/or its brands	37.196	21	1.771	2.741	<0.000
Total	1587	2419			
Enhance trust in market, business or sector of society	27.429	21	1.306	1.494	0.069
Total	2123.555	2419			

**Table 11.** Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of type of organization and relevance of enhancing trust (between groups).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Enhance trust in leaders of the organization	24.2	4	6.05	5.551	0.000
Total	2949.537	2688			
Enhance trust in the organization and/or its brands	7.987	4	1.997	3.024	0.017
Total	1780.209	2688			
Enhance trust in our market, business or sector of society	4.049	4	1.012	1.141	0.335
Total	2384.335	2688			

Building trust through communication can be difficult. Previous research shows that communication needs to be based on knowledge, and it should be transparent and ethical, too. Professionals were asked how challenging it is to meet these criteria in communication. Being transparent (hypothesis 6) in communication, telling what you know and disclosing context, is seen as the most important challenge by communication professionals ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.206$  on a five-point scale). Being knowledgeable, based on facts and focused on problem-solving ranks second ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.278$ ), and being ethical, and adhering to moral and normative expectations is considered the most easy challenge to address ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 1.352$ ). An analysis of variance on country shows that there are significant different thoughts about this across Europe (see Table 12) and in different kind of organizations (see Table 13).

**Table 12.** Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of country and challenges of trust building communication (between groups).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Being transparent	154.644	21	7.364	5.248	<0.000
Total	3519.266	2419			
Being ethical	450.91	21	21.472	12.96	<0.000
Total	4423.998	2419			
Being knowledgeable	315.015	21	15.001	9.872	<0.000
Total	3958.81	2419			

**Table 13.** Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of organization type and challenges of trust building communication (between groups).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Being transparent	34.701	4	8.675	6.013	<0.000
Total	3907.182	2688			
Being ethical	79,539	4	19.885	11.039	<0.000
Total	4914.321	2688			
Being knowledgeable	37.158	4	9.29	5.724	<0.000
Total	4,392,858	2688			

#### 4.6. Different Trust-Levels Compared

Trust in the communication professional as a person ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) is perceived as being higher than trust in the communication departments ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ) and in the communication professional in general ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ). These differences are significant; personal trust versus departmental trust,  $t(1661) = 22.043$ ,  $p = < 0.000$ , 95% CI [0.276, 0.330] and personal trust versus trust in the profession,  $t(1641) = 54.634$ ,  $p = < 0.000$ , 95% CI [0.949, 1.019].

## 5. Discussion

This paper has presented discussions on the findings about trust from practitioners' perceptions at a macro (the profession), meso (the departmental) and micro (the individual) level. Contextualized in literature debates about trust in the communication profession, six questions were asked about (1) the perceived trust in the communication profession in general, (2) communication departments in organizations, (3) the communication person, (4) other communicators in the organization, (5) the perceived relevance of building trust for organizations, and, finally, (6) challenges of trust building communication. When considering how practitioners perceive trust in their profession (macro level) the hypothesis (H2) that internal stakeholders, influencers and bloggers are perceived to trust the public relations/communications profession more than journalists was confirmed. This supports some of the cynicism discussed in the literature and reaffirms that the modest antagonism between the communication profession and journalists still remains. This is in line with early and more recent literature about the relationship between the two professions [51,52,63–65].

At the meso level of departments, there are some positive reinforcements for departments and some worrying findings. On the upside top executives are perceived to trust the department the most followed by journalists in second place. The lowest trust is felt to be by the publics that use the communication channels and messages. This finding resonates with the skepticism of the public often found in the literature [91]. At the micro individual level of personal trust, respondents were asked about how they are trusted by the individuals they have direct relations with such as journalists, bloggers, influencers, internal clients, organizational leaders and the peers they work with and for. The results

were skewed towards trust from internal stakeholders starting at the top with the internal organizational leaders, next by internal clients, then externally with journalists followed by publics they are directly in contact with and finally influencers. This seems logical in the context of the literature saying that frequent interactions and previous trusting relationships lead to higher trust levels [48,49].

There are grade or level influences on the trust perceptions with those in higher hierarchical (H3) positions reporting significantly higher levels of personal trust with all stakeholders, with the exception of bloggers and influencers. Perhaps more positively, the gender differences predicted from the literature discussions were not confirmed (H4). Female practitioners report the same levels of trust with internal stakeholders and higher levels of perceived personal trust for external stakeholders. The additional area of interest and focus away from the professional communicators themselves was to explore how others are perceived to be trusted by the general public who communicate on behalf of organizations. This category includes representatives such as the top internal managers, marketing colleagues, other employers within the organization, external experts and then customers or clients. Coming out clearly as the most trusted from the communication professionals' perspective were external experts in the relevant field, such as professors or consultants followed by the leaders of the organization, with activist and other external organizations with their own agenda felt to be the least trusted. This fits with the literature saying that experts and 'a person like me' (H4) are most trusted by audiences [11,80].

Building trust (H5) for organizations is an important core task for PR/communication professionals, and the results support that building trust is considered more important than enhancing trust in the leaders of the organization. Being transparent (H6) in communication and telling what you know and disclosing context, is seen as the most important challenge by communication professionals. On who to trust, significant differences were found with individual practitioners rating themselves more highly trusted than the organization or department they represent and certainly over the profession more generally. This raises areas for future research and exploration that look more deeply at how the interactions and communication of the individual the organization and the practice as a whole are perceived, understood and trusted.

## 6. Conclusions

The levels of trust in the individual practitioners themselves are perceived to be higher than trust in the organization's department and in the communication profession more generally. Results suggest that the more frequent interpersonal relations we have with internal and external stakeholders, the more trust can be activated.

This paper has approached for the first time the relationship between trust and communication/public relations from a comprehensive view that implies the diverse levels of institutionalism. Following the approach of new institutionalism applied to communication management, most of the research about trust has been approached from a meso-level perspective. The meso-level is above the individual and below the general societal system and allows studying organizations and communication functions from a deeper perspective. In that level, research provides rational arguments about the benefits and recommendations for the construction and maintenance of trust. Differentially, this paper brings a view of the complete spectrum that identifies where the main issues about trust in public relations and communication can be located. The results support new institutionalism's understanding of institutions as normative and regulative elements that provide stability and meaning to social life. Macro levels should connect the communication function with the organization and with broader societal systems. A complete institutionalized perspective brings new focus for the public relations and communications profession(s) and show the elephant in the room regarding the role of professional associations and practitioner bodies in facilitating the connections between societal systems.

Important challenges also emerge in the perception of trust of diverse roles communicating on behalf of organizations in a context of declining trust in mass media, journalism,

business and institutions. This is a key challenge for the communication industry, as communicators need to be trusted by the people they work for, but they are also dependent on the trust of the public with whom they interact to reach their goals and the gatekeepers that bring them to their final audiences—journalists, bloggers, influencers. Moreover, this lack of trust is also a key challenge for post-trust societies with an increasing proliferation of fake news and strategically planned misinformation. As Bentele and Seidenglanz [61] state: “The construction of public communication involves the production of information by public relations prior to their publication on the one hand, the selection and construction processes which create media realities on the other hand. As mediated information is usually not directly or immediately verifiable, trust—particularly public trust—appears to gain more relevance in such societies than it does in others. For the same reason, individual political and economic actors as well as corporate agents (organizations) increasingly rely on the attribution of (public) trust (p. 49)”. The authors of this paper expect to have taken a step forward following Valentini’s suggestion [81]: “( . . . ) it is hoped that the results encourage the scientific community to embrace the involvement of peripheral actors to support the advancement of public relations research in general and, more specifically, in relation to trust in new, broader and more pertinent territories” (p. 16).

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