

Trust and Audience Behavior in the Hybrid Media System

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The Covid-19 pandemic was a “critical moment” which sharpened already existing developments regarding public trust in the media and faults within these various media structures (Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). In particular, it dramatized the complicated relationship between traditional media and newer outlets, specifically social media platforms. For better and for worse, this growing dichotomy is showing us how the contemporary media ecology shapes trust in both media and broader socio-political institutions.

The pandemic saw a significant rise in media consumption, as audiences were faced by a “need for orientation” through an unprecedented crisis which was both severe in its impact and rapidly changing in its course (Van Aelst et al., 2021). The pandemic unfolded in a “hybrid media system,” characterized by the interaction between traditional and “new” media, including digital narratives and social media platforms (Chadwick, 2017). Specifically, while traditional media outlets provided much-needed news—which in some cases enhanced broader institutional trust—social media served as a platform for the rapid dissemination of both useful information and damaging misinformation. This points to the need for research on *trust* to investigate how the affordances of platforms and genres shape relations of trust, rather than treating “the media” as a coherent and unitary entity.

Research conducted during the pandemic suggests that traditional mainstream media—especially public service broadcasters—continued to be highly trusted by audience members. For example, among television audiences, daily government media briefings became ritualized, rendering the pandemic a media event both nationally and globally (Cushion et al., 2021; Groot Kormelink & Klein Gunnewiek, 2021; Mihelj, Kondor & Stetka, 2021). Such briefings enhanced trust in governments and their handling of the pandemic in countries where political trust levels were high prior to the pandemic, including South Korea, Denmark, and Norway (e.g., Christensen & Lægreid, 2020; Nielsen & Lindvall, 2021; Paek & Hove, 2021).

By contrast, in the UK, where trust in government was low before the pandemic and decreased further as a result of perceptions of poor handling of the crisis, media briefings

continued to serve as a useful means for communicating ever-changing lockdown rules, and compliance with the rules remained exceptionally high throughout the pandemic (Newton, 2020). While trust in the government was at a decline, a diary study of UK news audiences showed a heavy reliance on television news for trusted information (Cushion et al., 2021). Additionally, a survey study of German audiences demonstrated that consumption of news from public service broadcasters and other established media outlets appeared to strengthen social cohesion (Viehmann, Ziegele & Quiring, 2021).

These findings should be seen in the light of evidence that trust in news is correlated to interpersonal trust and political interest (e.g., Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). At the same time, the evidence regarding the relationship between trust in the press and political trust is more varied, with evidence suggesting that although the two are related, “countries with more media autonomy and journalistic professionalism evince a weaker relation between media trust and political trust” (Ariely, 2015, p. 351).

The daily media briefings were just one component of the pandemic’s status as an “unpredictable, open-ended, and exhausting media event with high potential for divisiveness and polarization” (Mihelj, Kondor & Stetka, 2021). Such divisiveness and polarization found fertile breeding ground on digital platforms, especially on social media. While social media served as an essential resource for receiving breaking news as well as overcoming personal isolation by maintaining online connections, they also gave rise to widespread misinformation. The presence and sharing of misinformation in the context of the pandemic lead to concerns about an “infodemic,” or a “a global epidemic of misinformation—spreading rapidly through social media platforms and other outlets” (Zaracostas, 2020, see also Bruns, Hurcombe & Harrington, 2021).

The dangers of misinformation spreading through social media are amplified by the difficulties of regulating social media platforms as dynamic and rapidly changing transnational actors in the media landscape (e.g, Rochefort, 2020). In response to political pressure, particularly from the European Union, high-profile, mainstream social media organizations such as Twitter and Facebook have taken some modest steps to stem the flow of problematic content, including moderating both hate speech and misinformation (Amaro, 2021). However, there is widespread agreement that these efforts only begin to scratch the surface.

Adding to these complications, we have seen the rise of “dark platforms,” digital platforms that are less regulated and moderated, and therefore can be used for hosting content and content creators that may not be tolerated by their more mainstream counterparts. (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021, p. 1321). “Dark platforms” such as 8kun and Gab have played a key role in the dissemination of conspiracy theories and mis- or disinformation about issues ranging

from the origins of the pandemic to the safety of vaccinations (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). These “dark platforms” constitute a parallel information ecosystem dominated by fringe political actors and low credibility sources. Their rise is linked to and coinciding with attacks designed to foster mistrust in societal institutions, including media and governments (Motta, Stecula, & Farhart, 2020). This is particularly important because evidence suggests that while the use of mainstream or alternative news sources is “associated with higher levels of trust in news [...] using social media as a main source of news is correlated with lower levels of trust in news” (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019, p. 3672). This suggests the need for a critical appraisal of the role of social media in shaping audience trust in news.

Overall, the evidence suggests that traditional media, including public service broadcasters and national newspapers, provided trusted information at a time of profound crisis. At the same time, by facilitating daily government briefings, broadcasters in many countries supported government efforts at managing the crisis. However, the role of social media in relation to trust complicates the picture: social media provides opportunities for rapid dissemination of both much-needed reliable news and damaging misinformation undermining trust in institutions.

The pandemic showed us how today’s hybrid media system generates novel complications that inform trust in broader societal institutions. It suggests the need for scholars across social scientific fields to recognize the importance of media in shaping relations of trust. This, in turn, highlights the need to pay attention to how the affordances of media platforms and genres—ranging from television and online news to social media—encourage or undermine trust in media, politics and other key institutions in society.