

Trust | Essay Series

November 21, 2022

Reliable information is often seen as an essential first step in fostering trust in the institutions that guide democratic decision-making and promote collective action on areas of public concern, from COVID-19 to climate change. However, the path from “truth” to “trust” in institutions is not a straight one. For example, does variation in trust in institutions shape how susceptible people are to believing false information? Do intervening variables, like economic inequality or rigid social hierarchies, degrade trust even in the presence of reliable information? How have these dynamics shifted now that much political communication takes place online, where reliable information may be easily manipulated?

These questions have been at the center of recent work by the Media & Democracy Program at the Social Science Research Council. Last year, SSRC partnered with the [Economic and Social Science Research Council](#) of the UK to convene a two-day virtual, international workshop on “Trust in Democratic Institutions.”

Led by Will Jennings (University of Southampton, UK) and Shayla C. Nunnally (University of Tennessee, USA), the workshop brought together leading researchers from a wide range of disciplines focused on the study of trust following three main themes: 1) how trust and its consequences is understood in the social sciences, 2) what are possible approaches to the measurement and analysis of trust, and 3) how trust can be subject to manipulation through mis- and disinformation.

For the first theme of the workshop—understanding trust—participants explored the questions of whether trust matters to democratic governance. In other words, how does public trust enable or impede the effective functioning of governance? Additionally, within this core theme, participants wished to highlight the changing dynamics of trust between political elites and citizens. The trustworthiness of elites alongside challenging media landscapes are critical elements when it comes to the capability of citizens to understand and differentiate between trustworthy and untrustworthy behavior in our public institutions.

Within the second section of the workshop, participants deliberated on the methodologies of measuring trust. There was extensive discussion on the potential usefulness of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Participants discussed altering commonly

used quantitative methods, like surveys, to capture shifts in the dynamics of trust, and contextualizing them alongside qualitative and mixed-method tools, including interviews, ethnographies, socio-historical analysis, quantitative text analysis, and focus groups.

The third part of the workshop explored the manipulation of trust through misinformation and disinformation and potential interventions that could help restore public trust in democratic systems. Participants contextualized the rise of digital media alongside older media like television and talk radio, noting that false narratives can flourish on many different mediums, and stem from many different sources, from fringe conspiracy theorists to political elites. Participants further noted that psychological phenomena, such as negativity bias (the propensity to share bad news) and motivated reasoning (willingness to spread information that confirms prior biases) are factors that are exacerbated by the ease of sharing information on social media. The discussion further touched on how mis- and disinformation can flourish in complex and uncertain situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic. The difficulty in mounting successful vaccination campaigns during the COVID-19 crisis has shown that ensuring the public's trust in institutions is just as essential as the vaccines themselves. To integrate this perspective, this series also presents research funded by SSRC's Just Tech COVID-19 rapid response grants, investigating how trust in institutions in the U.S. and in Colombia affected the general public's willingness to get vaccinated.

Overall, this workshop pursued answers and solutions regarding the importance of trust within democracy in both theory and practice. Workshop participants agreed that tactics to increase citizens' understanding of the dynamics of institutions and misinformation, such as political education, media/digital literacy, and inoculation theory are key tools to utilize when distinguishing between trustworthy and untrustworthy actors and institutions. As distrust, disinformation, and disruption become incentivized in both online and offline information environments, it remains important for scholars to break down the various components of public trust within existing structures and understand their interactions.

This series has been curated by Molly Laas, program director for Media and Democracy, and Ava McLaughlin, former program/editorial assistant for MediaWell. Special thanks to Michael Miller, Gabriela Echegoyen Nava, Andrew Stafford, and Sofina Tanni, as well as to Will Jennings, Shayla C. Nunnally, and the Trust in Democratic Institutions Workshop Participants.

How Feeling Misinformation Shapes Politics

By Camille Burge-Hicks

Trust and Audience Behavior in the Hybrid Media System

By Karin Wahl-Jorgensen

Changing the Focus on Fighting Vaccine Hesitancy: From Correcting Misinformation to Building Trust in Official Information

By Juan Carlos Rodríguez-Raga, Laura Fernanda Cely, Wilson Forrero-Mesa and Juan José Corredor Ojeda