MASARYK UNIVERSITY
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DOCTORAL THESIS

Brno 2026

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Trust in Media in the High-Choice Media Environment

Doctoral Thesis

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Brno 2026

I declare that I have written this thesis independently and that all cited resources have been listed in the references.

In Havířov, April 21, 2026

Lukáš Slavík

Poděkování

Rád bych na tomto místě poděkoval školiteli a kolegovi Jakubu Mackovi, bez jehož povzbuzení a impulsu bych doktorské studium v tomto oboru vůbec neabsolvoval. Oceňuji jeho nápady a ideje, které napomohly ke zformování mého dizertačního výzkumu, a jsem rád, že zde našly své zhmotnění. Díky také za tvůj přátelský přístup. Poděkování patří také konzultantce Maríně Urbánikové, její vstup do závěrečné fáze mého doktorského studia je těžké docenit. Oceňuji tvou promptnost, zevrubnost, preciznost a zároveň nedirektivnost, s jakou umíš poskytovat zpětnou vazbu. Děkuji také všem dalším spoluautorům a spoluautorkám, bez nichž by studie, na kterých dizertace stojí, vznikaly mnohem obtížněji. Díky, Lucie Čejková a Davide Lacko, za vaše kvalitní analýzy, ochotu a trpělivost, s jakou jste hledali a realizovali cesty, jak přimět data mluvit. Děkuji také vám, Honzo Šerku a Hynku Cíglere, za trpělivé a cenné metodologické konzultace i praktickou pomoc s některými dílčími analýzami. Dík patří dále přátelům a bývalým i současným „soudruhům ve zbrani“, bez nichž by doktorské studium dávalo daleko menší smysl. Díky za ty hromady humoru a poťouchlosti, za obohacující rozpravy bez konce, za společný cynismus i sdílení těžkostí. Díky, Štěpáne, Martino a Kláro. Díky i ostatnímu doktorandstvu za to, jak pečující atmosféru vytváříte. Nakonec patří obrovské díky mé milované Silvě, bez její podpory, ohleduplnosti a péče by doktorát prostě nebyl. Díky, že jsi tu byla nejen v dobrém, ale i ve zlém. Díky vám, rodiče, za zájem o to, co vlastně dělám. Díky i tobě, Toníčku, že jsi počkal na dokončení disertace, moc se na tebe těšíme.

Acknowledgments

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my supervisor and colleague, Jakub Macek, without whose encouragement and impulse I would not have completed my doctoral studies in this field. I deeply appreciate his ideas and insights. They helped shape my research and I

am glad they found their realization here. Thank you as well for your friendly approach. My thanks also go to my consultant, Marína Urbániková. The importance of her contribution during the final stage of my doctoral studies is difficult to overstate. I value your promptness, thoroughness, precision, and, at the same time, the non-directive way in which you are able to provide feedback. I would also like to thank all the other coauthors, without whom the studies on which this dissertation is based would have come about far more laboriously. Thank you, Lucie Čejková and David Lacko, for your high-quality analyses, your willingness to help, and the patience with which you sought and implemented the ways to make the data speak. I also thank you, Honza Šerek and Hynek Cígler, for your patient and valuable methodological consultations, as well as for your practical assistance with some of the partial analyses. Further thanks go to friends and former, as well as current, "comrades in arms", without whom doctoral studies would have made far less sense. Thank you for the heaps of humor and mischief, for stimulating endless discussions, for shared cynicism, and for sharing difficulties. Thank you, Štěpán, Martina, and Klára. Thanks as well to the rest of the doctoral community for creating such a caring atmosphere. Finally, my deepest thanks go to my beloved Silva. Without her support, consideration, and care, this doctorate would simply not have been possible. Thank you for being there not only in good times, but also in bad. Thank you, my parents, for taking an interest in what it is that I actually do. And thank you to you as well, Toníček, for waiting until the dissertation was finished. We are very much looking forward to you.

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Introduction

Over recent decades, the media landscape, audience preferences, and everyday media practices have changed substantially. Similarly, trust in media, the fundamental relationship that connects the media and their audiences, has also been undergoing turbulent development (Liu et al., 2026). Trust in media, currently understood as a relationship between the media and the public that is based upon expectations that media performance will satisfy individual and societal needs in accordance with democratic norms (Fawzi et al., 2021), is often perceived as one of the most essential conditions for the legitimacy and performance of media (Usher, 2020). This is a precondition for media content consumption (Liu et al., 2026), a facilitator of the effective attribution of news credibility (Mihelj et al., 2022), a factor that shapes media influence on behavior (Spiegelhalter, 2017), and an indicator of whether audience expectations are being met (Aharoni, 2025).

This dissertation, through three studies, aims to contribute to understanding the origins and nature of trust in news media, the reasons for its stability, and its role in the construction of news credibility in the contemporary high-choice media environment.

The expansion of media supply coincided with early concerns about shifts in the perceptions of different media types, for instance declining confidence in newspapers relative to television. Since these early studies in the 1950s (cf. Kohring & Matthes, 2007), many countries have documented a gradual and persistent decline in trust in media (Fletcher et al., 2025; Ladd, 2012; Newman et al., 2022, 2024; van Dalen, 2019). Explanations point both to external pressures, such as political attacks on the media, and to internal dynamics, including rising audience selectivity, fragmentation, and concerns about declining professional media performance standards (Ladd, 2012; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Smejkal et al., 2024). In response to these trends, recent scholarship has invested in greater conceptual clarity and

stronger theoretical grounding, which has led to important advances (Engelke et al., 2019; Fawzi et al., 2021; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Yet recent systematic evidence indicates that this effort remains unfinished (Aharoni, 2025; Liu et al., 2026). The persistent conceptual merging of trust in media, particularly with the related concept of credibility, and the dominance of conceptualizations that are centered on the normative level of media performance limit our ability to understand the contemporary relationship between the fragmented media landscape and audiences who construct individualized media repertoires and trust media through in-group-oriented media performance (Aharoni, 2025; Smejkal et al., 2024).

In a high-choice media environment, beyond mainstream media, alternative media have become widely available, and news can be circulated more easily than ever by political actors as well as ordinary users (Strömbäck et al., 2022; Thorson & Wells, 2016). Moreover, with the rise of the internet, and especially social network sites (SNS) (boyd & Ellison, 2007), media and non-media sources increasingly intertwine within the same information flows.

In this situation, loyalty to specific media is not taken for granted and trust in media has become a valuable resource that plays a role in whether a media outlet or type of media remains part of people's news repertoires (Schwarzenegger, 2020; Von Viehmann et al., 2020). Beyond long-term measurements that document declines in trust in media, recent systemic crises in Europe, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have produced evidence of fluctuations in trust in media in several countries (Adam et al., 2023; Knudsen et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2022). Yet, minimal attention has been paid (McLeod et al., 1994) to the reasons for stable trust in media despite crises, even though systematic research has identified a wide range of individual and systemic factors that are associated with trust in media (Fawzi et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2017; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

In current customized media and news consumption, which is conducted intensively through SNS, trust in media competes with trust in other actors, particularly individuals within people's social networks who act as news intermediaries (Strömbäck et al., 2022). The use of SNS for news consumption is long term and intensive—especially for young people, for whom it is the main news channel—yet it is also a space where concerns about encountering misinformation and disinformation are high (Newman et al., 2025). Assessing the credibility of news, which is crucial for forming opinions about public affairs, has therefore become more difficult (Lee et al., 2020). Existing evidence on how trust in media shapes the credibility assessments of news is limited and contradictory (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024). Even less is known about the interaction of trust in media with interpersonal trust in lay intermediaries in the shaping of news credibility, because most studies focus on other characteristics of the intermediaries, such as attitudinal agreement or social closeness (Kim, 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). As a result, the relative role of trust in media and interpersonal trust in shaping credibility in high choice environments remains an open question.

This dissertation addresses these gaps by presenting three coauthored studies. Study 1 responds to ongoing conceptual and measurement challenges by developing comprehensive theoretical foundations for an innovative concept of Normative-Cohesive Trust in Media and by validating its measurement across several representative samples of Czech adults. Study 2, also relying on several representative samples of Czech adults, takes the form of a case study and examines the stability of trust in a major Czech public service media outlet, Czech Television, during the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and assesses whether continuity in key socio-economic, media-related, and socio-political drivers explain this stability. Study 3 uses a customized experimental survey to investigate how trust in news

media, interpersonal trust in news intermediaries, and their interaction influence the perceived credibility of news content on Facebook.

Below, I detail each publication and specify my individual contribution to their production.

List of studies and author contributions

Study 1 (in submission): **Macek, J., & Slavík, L. (2026) Validation of Normative-Cohesive Trust in Media: Theory and measure for high-choice media environment.** ***Mass Communication and Society***.

I contributed 50 percent to this study. I played a key role in developing and extending the theoretical foundations of the original idea proposed by J. Macek. In cooperation with J. Macek, I shaped both the original and the revised versions of the theoretical framework. While I did not participate in the methodological and analytical work of the initial version, I independently produced the full methodological and analytical revision, which is considerably more robust than the original. In both versions, I made significant contributions to the formulation and writing of the Discussion section.

Study 2 (in press): **Slavík, L., Čejková, L., Macek, J., & Urbániková, M. (2026). Stable trust in chaotic times: An exploratory analysis of trust in public service media before and during polycrisis.** ***Mass Communication and Society*****.**

My overall contribution to this article is 55 percent. As the lead author, I coordinated the contributions of the coauthors throughout the writing process. I developed the original theoretical framing of the study's central idea, which was initially proposed by J. Macek. During the revision process, M. Urbániková authored a significant theoretical and analytical reframing. My contribution consisted of implementing the majority of these suggestions, part of this work is also attributable to M. Urbániková and J. Macek. Although most of the analysis and the writing of the findings section were conducted by L. Čejková, I selected the

variables used in the analysis in cooperation with J. Macek. I also authored the Discussion section. J. Macek and M. Urbániková further contributed by editing and revising the text to improve its quality and fluency during the revision process.

Study 3 (published): **Slavík, L., Lacko, D., & Macek, J. (2025). News credibility on Facebook: The role of media and intermediary trust and their interplay.** ***International Journal of Communication*****, 19(2025), 1058–1080.**

My contribution to this paper is 60 percent. I originated the study idea and designed the experimental setting, the data-collection strategy, and the analytical framework. I authored the theoretical section and the discussion. The data analysis was conducted by D. Lacko based on an analytical idea proposed by me, and he authored the methodology and results sections. J. Macek contributed through revisions of the manuscript and through editorial and advisory input.

Theoretical framework

Figurative prism

In accordance with the figurative dimension of the social constructivist theory of media (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp et al., 2018), the intersection of news media and the public that come into direct or indirect contact can be defined as a specific type of social figuration. This refers to a relatively bounded part of society in which individual and institutional actors are connected through a network of mutually interdependent relationships that are oriented around shared objects of interest (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). One of the shared objects of interest between news media and citizens is news, which is professionally produced and distributed information about public affairs (Schudson, 2003, 2018). The figuration that links media institutions and citizens can therefore be described as a figuration of news interdependence. The provision of news is widely regarded as the primary purpose of the news media and, conversely, individuals rely on news to orient their actions and to build their understanding of society and politics (Andersen et al., 2023).

No social figuration can exist without mutual interconnectedness through various relationships, such as relationships of power (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018). One of the fundamental relationships, not only within the media sphere, is the relationship of trust, which is a relationship based on the trustor's positive expectation that the trustee will meet these expectations (Jones, 2019). This relationship is always accompanied by vulnerability that arises from uncertainty about the trustee's actions and their outcomes (Simmel, 1964). In the case of trust in media, we speak about a relationship between the news media and the public that is based on expectations that media performance will satisfy individual and societal needs in accordance with democratic norms (Fawzi et al., 2021). The relationship of trust within the figuration of news interdependence is the primary object of interest in this dissertation, because trust in media is often perceived as one of the most

essential conditions for the legitimacy and performance of the media (Usher, 2020), as well as for the fulfillment of the numerous societal functions related to the production of news (van Dalen, 2019). As is evident, this dissertation adopts a conventional audience-oriented perspective that is focused on how trust is placed and how it operates from the viewpoint of media audiences, rather than on how media actors place trust in the public or how media institutions build the trust of the public (Aharoni, 2025).

The figuration of news interdependence is neither static nor isolated. In recent decades, substantial transformations have occurred in the technological dimensions of the media, in their economic operations, and in the behaviors and habits of the audiences themselves. Collectively, these shifts can be described as a transition from a low-choice media environment to a high-choice one (Strömbäck et al., 2022). Along with these changes, the trust relationship within the news media has also evolved. This dissertation contributes, first, to a better understanding of the contemporary nature of trust in media by introducing an innovative conceptualization and measurement that is tailored to the high-choice media environment. Second, it contributes to understanding the reasons for the stability of trust in media, which may explain why media outlets remain part of the changing media repertoires of contemporary media audiences. Finally, this dissertation enhances understanding of the role that trust in media plays in shaping the credibility of news in interaction with trust in nonprofessional news intermediaries.

The theoretical framework of this dissertation is structured to correspond to these three areas of interest. More generally, it consists of two interconnected bodies of literature. The first concerns the transformation of the media environment into a high-choice one, the related changes in media supply, and the evolving presence of nonjournalistic actors in the news consumption process. This body of literature also addresses the transformation of the audience's media and consumption practices, their selectivity of sources, and their active role

in the mediation of news. The second body of literature centers on the contemporary work on the origins, conceptualization, and measurement of trust in media, as well as the evolving nature of trust in media in contemporary customized media consumption. It also includes scholarship on the role of trust in media in the stability of media repertoires, and scholarship that concerns the interaction of trust in media with trust in lay intermediaries. Together, these bodies of literature provide an umbrella conceptual frame for the research aim of this diseeratation.

Origins and nature of trust in a high-choice media environment

The origins of scholarly interest in trust in media are connected to profound technological, market, and social changes over the past several decades that have gradually transformed the media environment from a relatively closed, low-choice system into one defined by abundance, personalization, and complex patterns of news circulation, which is known as the high-choice media environment (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2022; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). In this section, I focus particularly on the connection between the technological and market transformation of the media environment and the ways in which these developments have shaped contemporary knowledge about trust in media, as well as the limitations that persist in this regard.

A central element of this shift has been the expansion and diversification of media technologies. The spread of cable transmission increased the reliable mass use of television, while the development of high speed internet opened the way for web-based information sources and, later, SNS. The rise of wearable and smart devices further strengthened the personalization of media use (Medoff & Kaye, 2021; Prior, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2022) and contributed to what Hepp (2020) calls the media manifold, an environment characterized by a rich set of media technologies that are tightly interwoven with everyday life.

Parallel to these technological transformations, continuing liberalization and commercialization reshaped the media market. The number of news outlets increased significantly, their focus and content became more specialized, alternative news media gained visibility, and entertainment formats expanded (Atton, 2015; Ladd, 2012; Prior, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2022; Van Aelst et al., 2017). In Central and Eastern Europe, these developments accelerated, especially after the collapse of state socialist regimes, which enabled the region to undergo rapid liberalization and technological diversification (Vojtěchovská, 2017).

As a result, audiences can access an array of news media convergently across linear broadcasting, online news sites, aggregators, and SNS (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024). This means that news consumption no longer revolves around a small set of dominant media outlets with information consumed in a highly ritualized way through a limited number of media types.

Public opinion agencies have been responding to the expansion of media supply since the 1970s, when they began to longitudinally survey trust in media in order to provide information about how the public relates to the media as a whole, how media compare with other public institutions, and how trust in specific media types develops over time (Gallup Inc., 2007; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Newman et al., 2025; Ries, 2022). These surveys essentially use a single question to measure "how much people trust in media" (Ries, 2022), "which news sources (media types) do they trust the most" (European Parliament, 2022), how much "trust and confidence in the mass media" they have (Gallup Inc., 2007), which media type they "believe when (they) got conflicting news" (see Kohring & Matthes, 2007), or whether people "trust most of the news most of the time" (Newman et al., 2025). These surveys naturally did not and do not aspire to provide a clear conceptualization nor high measurement validity.

The concept of trust in media entered academic research in communication studies in the 1990s in response to the observed declines in trust reported by these surveys. Scholarly interest has intensified since the turn of the millennium (Liu et al., 2026). Academic studies have aimed to understand the changing relationship between the media and the public, while also contributing to improve the conceptualization and measurement of trust in media. At present, trust refers to a relationship that is grounded in expectations about an actor's performance and intentions (Engelke et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2026). According to the widely accepted definition by Fawzi et al. (2021), trust in media is the willingness of the trustor to be vulnerable to the media objects (as the trustee) based on the expectations of individually satisfactory performance and the adherence to the dominant norms and values associated with democratic media functions. This definition reflects the adaptation, within communication studies, of the general conceptualization of trust as an inherently risky relationship (Simmel, 1964), which stems from the trustor's limited control over the trustee and from the opacity of media expertise and operations. Trust in media objects can vary in its level of generality, from trust in the media overall, to trust in media types (e.g., radio, television), to trust in individual media outlets (or brands). Beyond media organizations, audiences may also place trust in the representatives of these organizations, such as journalists (Strömbäck et al., 2020).

The establishment of this prevailing definition is the result of a decades-long process of conceptual consolidation, during which research on trust in media repeatedly encountered difficulties that stemmed from the conceptual and measurement conflation of trust in media with the related construct of credibility (Fisher, 2016; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Liu et al., 2026). Credibility is a long-established concept in communication studies, deriving from early research on information persuasion and efforts to identify source characteristics that enhance persuasiveness (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Hovland et al., 1953; Meyer, 1988). It typically refers to attributed source expertise or trustworthiness, or to content believability (Engelke et

al., 2019; Liu et al., 2026). While the original focus was on the credibility of individual or media sources, the emergence of the high-choice media environment expanded the inquiry to the credibility of channels (e.g., television, newspapers, radio, the internet), and eventually, with the rise of online media, to the credibility of the content itself, namely news stories (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Metzger et al., 2003; Rosenthal, 1971; Sundar, 1999). Currently, trust and credibility are predominantly regarded as distinct concepts (Engelke et al., 2019; Fawzi et al., 2021; Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Efforts to improve the measurement of trust in media correspond to this development, aiming to overcome the limitations of using credibility measures (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Meyer, 1988; Yale et al., 2015) for assessing trust in media, as well as the shortcomings of single-item measures adopted from polling surveys. A key contribution was the development of the four-dimensional measurement by Kohring and Matthes (2007), which conceptualizes trust as being grounded in the assumption that media reduce the complexity of reality through their professional practices by selecting topics, facts, depictions, and journalistic assessments.

Although conceptualization of trust in media and its measurement has consolidated, the current situation remains far from ideal. Based on available research, several gaps can be identified that offer space for improvement in both the conceptualization and the measurement of trust in media. Below, I identify three such areas.

Knowledge gap

Even though the definition introduced by Fawzi is widely respected and frequently used, it remains relatively general (Aharoni, 2025; Garusi & Leonhardt, 2026) and leaves considerable room for interpretation regarding which “democratic values” underpin trust in media. Trust in media is therefore often defined more narrowly as a construct that refers to the expectations of objectivity, like factuality and impartiality, which guide media performance

(Aharoni, 2025; Newman et al., 2025; Schiffrin, 2019). Meeting these traditional professional expectations remains essential for the existence of trust, especially in situations that are difficult to grasp through individual experience (Strömbäck et al., 2022). However, this approach leaves aside another fundamental basis of trust in media (cf. Aharoni, 2025): the expectation that professional media performance includes representing and defending the collective identities of audiences. Both normative frameworks (McQuail, 2013; Schudson, 2003) and a growing body of qualitative and quantitative evidence (Coleman et al., 2012; Nelson & Lewis, 2023; Pasitselska, 2022; Smejkal et al., 2024) indicate that trust in media also rests on the degree to which the media construct or represent the recipients as members of various identity groups. In this sense, the media are expected to represent the world through the eyes of "us," that is through the lens of nationally, politically, gender, or otherwise defined in-groups (Coleman et al., 2012; Nelson & Lewis, 2023; Pasitselska, 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019). In the high-choice media environment, greater opportunities for source selectivity (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024) have long been associated with rising expectations for in-group oriented media performance, particularly regarding the political identities of the audiences (Ladd, 2012; Lycarião, 2018; Strömbäck et al., 2022). Conceptualizing and measuring trust in media in ways that, beyond the normative dimension, also capture this in-group-oriented dimension may therefore allow for a more accurate understanding of trust in the contemporary media environment.

A relatively general conceptualization of trust in media also creates space for difficulties in its operationalization (cf. Aharoni, 2025). Together with the persistent conflation of trust and credibility, this leads to an ongoing situation in which trust in media is measured partly or entirely through credibility measurement instruments (Liu et al., 2026; Mangold, 2023; Tsfati et al., 2023). The existing multidimensional measurement developed by Kohring and Matthes (2007) does conceptually link trust in media to expected professional

media performance, yet at the operational level it faces two limitations. One is that it measures the perceived characteristics of news coverage rather than the actions of media organizations. Instead of capturing the relationship between the trustor and the trustee, it evaluates the news content, making it closer to perceived credibility (cf. Slavík et al., 2025; Yale et al., 2015). Moreover, the measure is topic sensitive, meaning that it captures the perceptions of a specific news topic. One of the characteristic features of the high-choice media environment is the multiplicity of media objects and the differentiation of relationships toward them (Strömbäck et al., 2020, 2022). A key challenge for studying trust in media is therefore to measure trust in media without conflating it with trust in other objects or with related concepts.

Differentiation of trust across media objects has also become a subject of contemporary media research. Existing studies suggest that trust decreases as the media object becomes more general (Daniller et al., 2017; Gronke & Cook, 2007; Tsfati et al., 2023). Trust is fundamentally a relational property (Dimock, 2019); its nature is defined not only by its content but also by the object to which it is directed (Harrison McKnight & Chervany, 2001). In the contemporary media environment, members of the audiences construct their own individual media repertoires from the wide array of available media outlets (Andersen et al., 2021; Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012). In this sense, “the media” today often refers to an object situated between media overall and individual outlets. Although the relationship between media consumption and trust in media seems to not be straightforward (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005), trust in media and experience with them appear to be associated (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Current research, however, still focuses predominantly on general media, media types, and single outlets (Liu et al., 2026), and it does not sufficiently account for this dynamic of individualized media consumption and trust. A persistent challenge therefore lies in developing a measurement tool for trust in media that

directly reflects this dynamic of media consumption while also capturing population-level perceptions of trust in media (i.e., one that can be applied in population-wide surveys).

Building on the current state of knowledge, all three conceptual and measurement limitations of contemporary research on trust in media will be addressed in Study 1, which focuses on developing comprehensive theoretical foundations for an innovative concept of Normative–Cohesive Trust in Media (NCTM) and on validating its measurement..

While this section has primarily examined the evolution of understanding trust in media in relation to the technological and economic nature of the media environment, the following two sections will each, in their own way, address the connection between trust in media and the social dimension of functioning within the high-choice media environment, including the selectivity and customization of media and news consumption. We begin by discussing the interplay between trust in media and the logic of creating media repertoires, and, more specifically, the stability of trust and the stability of media consumption.

Reasons for persistent trust as a factor in the stability of media repertoires

One of the key ways in which actors in the media sphere operate is through their choice of media sources. Although members of the media audience are aware that there is a whole range of news media (i.e., media in general), limited resources, a wealth of media offerings, and diverse audience needs (Ruggiero, 2000), they primarily use or maintain relationships with only a certain segment of the news media (Napoli, 2011), which together form what are known as media repertoires. Media repertoires represent the patterned combinations of news sources on which individuals rely. These may draw, for example, from mainstream or alternative outlets, public service or commercial outlets, online or offline sources, and sources with different political leanings, such as conservative, liberal, pro-government, or anti-government ones (see Andersen et al., 2021; Berthelsen & Hameleers, 2021; Edgerly, 2015; Mourão et al., 2018; Tóth et al., 2022).

News media may appear in individual repertoires with varying levels of intensity, may be maintained or disappear, and may later reenter (Vulpius et al., 2023). Although there are indications that media repertoires can remain relatively stable over time (Andersen et al., 2021), the processes of acquiring, losing, and maintaining the presence of a media source in a repertoire are conditioned by numerous factors. These include the sociodemographic characteristics of the audiences, the influence of their social ties, the structuring of their everyday routines, changes in the structure and the individual value of media offerings, the configuration of their media preferences with respect to political beliefs, the importance of the news, and public events, such as elections or crises (Andersen et al., 2021; Mourão et al., 2018; Schwarzenegger, 2023; Vulpius et al., 2023).

Trust in media and trust in media outlets also play a significant role. Research shows that trust in mainstream media is positively associated with the presence of these media in repertoires (Andersen et al., 2021; Mourão et al., 2018). A lack of trust is connected to the displacement of mainstream media by alternative ones (Schwarzenegger, 2023). In the process of media selection, the long-term nature of trust in established media outlets also matters, because these outlets require less vigilance before being included in repertoires (Matsiola et al., 2025). The level of trust in media outlets is one of the main ways through which people organize media within their media repertoires and determine how they approach them in terms of necessary verification and in terms of the types of topics they seek in them (Schwarzenegger, 2020). Trust in media therefore shapes both the character and the stability of media repertoires. Indirectly, trust in media influences not only the market position of a given outlet but also contributes to potential society-wide consequences.

Including and maintaining a medium in repertoires is a sign of success in the competitive struggle for attention and personal relevance among media audiences (Andersen et al., 2021). At the same time, it influences the degree of fragmentation in media

consumption. The growth of the media supply and increasing selectivity have long raised concerns about audience fragmentation and its implications for the public sphere, which relies on at least some shared news sources (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Ladd, 2012; Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024). However, comparative studies show that fragmentation is not uniform across contexts; it varies depending on how it is defined and detected. Importantly, existing evidence demonstrates that media audiences overlap to a greater or lesser extent (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Karlsen et al., 2020; Tóth et al., 2022), which illustrates that even in high-choice environments, certain strong nodal points remain and play important roles within media repertoires.

Among the most important points are mainstream media, specifically legacy professional media. Public service media (PSM) play a notable role in this regard. As media that is created, funded, and controlled by the public for the public (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; UNESCO, 2008), they remain among the most widely consumed and most trusted media across many countries (Dahlgren, 2019; Deacon et al., 2024; Newman et al., 2022, 2024, 2025; Schulz et al., 2019; Tóth et al., 2022). Trust in PSM is moreover relatively stable in many countries, including the Czech Republic, even in the face of recent systemic crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine (Adam et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2020, 2021, 2022). Studying the reasons for the stability of trust in PSM may therefore indirectly provide valuable insights into how this type of media maintains its potential to remain a key element of media repertoires and to mitigate fragmentation among media audiences in the era of the high-choice media environment.

These reasons can be sought among the wide range of factors that are associated with trust in media in complex ways and that are documented by contemporary research (Fawzi et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2017; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). It shows that trust in media is shaped by both individual-level drivers and structural ones. Three groups of trust in media drivers are

commonly examined: socio-economic, socio-political, and media-related. Socio-political factors, including social and political trust, political interest, participation, and efficacy, are more consistently positively associated with trust, in contrast to negative associations with factors such as misanthropy, conspiratorial thinking, and political alienation. The effects of partisanship and ideological extremity remain ambiguous (Fawzi et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2017; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). From a structural perspective, trust in media tends to be lower in societies with higher human and economic development and stronger post materialist value orientations. Political polarization of society also tends to erode trust. Finally, the influence of democratic institutional performance displays mixed associations (Fawzi et al., 2021).

Media-related variables, such as perceived news quality and credibility, are positively associated with trust in media, in contrast to the negative association with perceptions of media bias, hostility, or journalistic misconduct (Fawzi et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2017). Media use and media literacy yield mixed results (Fawzi et al., 2021). From a structural perspective, media system political parallelism and commercialization tend to reduce trust in media, which corresponds with evidence that indicates that PSM in democratic settings typically enjoy higher levels of trust compared to state-controlled media in non-democratic regimes (Fawzi et al., 2021; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Although it is clear that trust in media plays a role in the formation of media repertoires, that the broader crisis context also matters, that PSM often play a key role in these repertoires, and that there exists a complex yet ambiguous body of evidence concerning the socio-economic, socio-political, and media-related drivers of trust in media, there remains a substantial gap in contemporary knowledge regarding the stability of trust in these media outlets.

Knowledge gap

Recent years, which are characterized by two partially overlapping multisystem crises, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, have stimulated the study of trust in media. Findings show that in some cases trust rose (Knudsen et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2022; Vozab et al., 2023) and in others it declined (Adam et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2022). There are also cases, especially PSM, where trust remained relatively stable.

A limitation of the current research is that it largely relies on research reports that only map whether shifts in trust in media occur (Newman et al., 2022; Von Viehmann et al., 2020), or whether it seeks to explain increases in trust primarily through the presence of a "rally round the flag" effect. This line of reasoning connects trust in media with political trust and political attitudes: increases in trust in media are conditioned by political trust (Adam et al., 2023; Knudsen et al., 2023), by populist attitudes, and, to some extent, by voting behavior (Adam et al., 2023). Declines in trust during crises are then explained by dissatisfaction with the media and political officials' performance, which can be called the "betrayal fatigue" effect (Cushion, 2022; McLeod et al., 1994; Melki & Kozman, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2020; Pasitselska, 2022; Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023).

Research that examines the reasons for stable trust in media is currently lacking. Although there are indications that during times of crisis a stable level of trust in media may not be linked to the stability of its underlying drivers (McLeod et al., 1994), whether a stable level of trust in media over time is also connected to a stable structure of socio-economic, media related, and socio-political drivers of trust in media remains outside the main focus of scholarly attention (Fawzi et al., 2021; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; McLeod et al., 2017; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Another limitation is the absence of a theoretical framework for explaining stable trust in media. The adaptation of Easton's (Curini et al., 2012; Easton, 1975) distinction between

diffuse and specific support for public institutions to the concept of trust in PSM offers the potential for explaining the nature of stable levels of trust in this type of media. Analogous to diffuse support, diffuse trust stems from an institution's long-term significance in the trustor's life and may therefore be characteristic of continuity in the underlying causes of trust in media. Specific trust, by contrast, draws on the extent to which immediate needs and expectations are met. Trust in media may then result from offsetting effects among the various drivers of trust.

Study 2 will therefore address both the limitations of the current research on trust in media by analyzing the reasons for stable trust in Czech PSM in order to determine whether the nature of this trust corresponds more closely to diffuse or specific trust. In doing so, it ultimately reveals a potential way through which PSM may preserve their attractiveness and remain part of media repertoires.

However, media repertoires are only one way in which the public acts to meaningfully limit the abundance of media offerings in the high-choice media environment. One of the paradigmatic tools through which the public can personalize their media and news consumption are SNS, where trust in media also plays an important role. Here, trust in media may function as a key facilitator for assessing the credibility of news. Yet, trust in media is not the only type of trust operating in this environment.

The following section therefore examines how trust functions within the SNS environment.

Layered trust and the construction of news credibility in currated flows of sns

The high-choice media environment is a paradoxical one. While audiences can now access and build relationships with news media outlets more directly and conveniently than ever (Duffy, 2020) they are equally likely to encounter news media and their news through curated feeds, shares, and references from other users (Strömbäck et al., 2022).

SNS, which is built on interconnected user profiles (boyd & Ellison, 2007), plays a central role in this development because it is, by its very nature, an environment with a high degree of choice for the sources of news. A significant portion of the population consumes news through SNS, and this share has been increasing at the expense of television, which is characterized by fixed broadcasting schedules and editorial journalistic control over the news agenda. The main drivers of this shift are young people (Newman et al., 2025). Within these platforms, news becomes embedded in curated flows that are created by a wide range of actors who continuously produce, filter, select, and frame content (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

At the centre of SNS are the users themselves. They engage in the first type of curation, which is termed "personal", by selecting sources and content according to their own preferences and tastes. "Journalistic curation", in turn, is carried out by news organizations and journalists who follow the logic of professional gatekeeping. High-profile public actors, such as politicians and commercial subjects, engage in "strategic curation" as they seek to advance their interests, often attempting to do so without the intermediation of news media. Given that maintaining connections with close contacts and friends is a highly important motivation for using SNS (Kemp, 2026), other ordinary users become key actors as well. Based on shared interests and social homophily, they produce "social curation". These users partially assume roles traditionally held by media professionals (Wallace, 2018) and they play a critical role in shaping how news is perceived by framing it with personal commentary (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018) and contextualisation (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Zúñiga et al., 2017).

Moreover, in the context of SNS, the sharing of news gives rise to a perceptual layering of the media and the SNS user sources involved in the dissemination process (Jang, 2021). This dynamic has potential implications for how audiences attribute credibility to the news that they consume in these environments (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024).

News credibility (i.e., the perception of its believability) is a crucial precondition for shaping public opinion and engagement (Keib & Wojdynski, 2019; Lee et al., 2020). Some scholars even view it as the primary goal of the media and a central element of their legitimacy (van Dalen, 2019). News credibility belongs to the broader category of message credibility, which also defines its key characteristics. One of these characteristics is that it arises from the attributes of the message itself. The literature highlights that credibility can be elicited by a well organized structure, the perception that a message is well written and interesting, the intensity and emotionality of the content, and many other features (see Metzger et al., 2003; Self & Roberts, 2019). It is therefore clear that evaluating news credibility is a complex operation that it has the character of "experience goods" (Lawrence & Napoli, 2023; Webster, 2014), which are commodities whose quality can only be evaluated after its consumption. However, scrutinizing each news item in detail is highly inefficient. It requires substantial time and effort (Mangold et al., 2022).

One way to make the attribution of news credibility more efficient is to evaluate it with regard to the characteristics of the source and the trust placed in that source (Sundar, 2008; Wallace, 2018; Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024). In the environment of SNS, however, two different types of sources not only coexist but also become layered (Jang, 2021; Kemp, 2026) with two types of trust, specifically the news media and individual news intermediaries (i.e., other users). Consequently, institutional trust (i.e., trust in the media) and interpersonal trust (i.e., trust in individual actors who mediate news) both come into play. These two forms of trust differ ontologically (Kwon, 2019). Institutional trust is characterized by expectations that impersonal expert norms and rules underlying media performance will be fulfilled. As discussed above, these often rest on the principles of objectivity (Aharoni, 2025; Newman et al., 2025; Schiffrin, 2019). Interpersonal trust, by contrast, is oriented toward more or less familiar individuals within one's social environment. It is grounded in assumptions about their

benevolence and integrity, and with expectations that the trustee will act in the trustor's interest with goodwill and adherence to moral norms (Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018).

Understanding how each of these forms of trust contribute to the construction of news credibility, and especially how they operate together or in contradiction, can shed light on the extent to which the news media maintain their role and authority in the high-choice media environment (Wallace, 2018), especially how effectively journalistic curation competes with social curation (Thorson & Wells, 2016) in the construction of news credibility. However, current research does not yet provide a clear answer regarding how this mechanism functions, and several gaps therefore remain to be addressed.

Knowledge gap

The first limitation of current research is that the mechanism of news credibility formation is still examined predominantly within the field of information persuasion, and it is evident that the credibility of a news message may be shaped by other types of credibility, namely the source and channel credibility (Ou & Ho, 2024). The role of trust in this context remains substantially underexplored.

The second limitation is that the current research provides only partial evidence to suggest that the news media and trust in them remain important. On the most widely used SNS, news outlets attract comparable, or even greater, attention than individual users and they represent one of the key sources that audiences rely upon to verify the truthfulness and accuracy of information with sources they generally trust (Newman et al., 2025). Moreover, general trust in media affects news credibility on Facebook (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024).

Other studies that examined SNS environments focus not on trust in media but on media credibility or reputation (Kim, 2015; Sterrett et al., 2019), or shift their attention from news credibility to broader forms of evaluation or perceived news trustworthiness (Kim, 2015; Ross Arguedas et al., 2024; Sterrett et al., 2019). These studies also capture the

influence of news intermediaries through constructs other than interpersonal trust, such as agreeable or disagreeable comments or the relational proximity of the content intermediary to the recipient (Kim, 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). Moreover, findings on the influence of intermediaries on news perception are contradictory. Some indicate that their role is important (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024; Sterrett et al., 2019), while others suggest that the news media play a more decisive role (Tandoc, 2019).

Thus, the question of how institutional trust in media and interpersonal trust interact, counteract, or substitute for one another in the construction of news credibility within the high-choice media environment remains open. Study 3 aims to fill these gaps in knowledge with an experimental study designed to evoke the Facebook environment.

Research aims

The main aim of this dissertation is to advance the understanding of trust in media as as the fundamental relationship in figuration of news interdependence within the contemporary high-choice media environment by enhancing its conceptual foundations and measurment, examining its stability under conditions of systemic crisis, and addressing its role in shaping news credibility amid the interplay between institutional and interpersonal sources of information.

Accordingly, this dissertation seeks to achieve the following objectives:

(1) Develop and validate a theoretically grounded measure of trust in media that captures both the normative expectations related to objective performance and cohesive, identity oriented expectations.

(2) Examine the stability of trust in PSM during periods of systemic crisis by analyzing the continuity of its socio-economic, media-related, and socio-political drivers of trust, and to find out whether trust in them has a more diffuse or specific character.

(3) Investigate how institutional trust in news media and interpersonal trust in news intermediaries shape news credibility in SNS environments characterized by curated flows.

Materials and methods

Data

Study 1 and Study 2 rely on data from three independent cross-sectional surveys (S1–S3; see Table 1) and are based on the secondary analyses of datasets that were originally collected as part of projects to examine the patterns of trust and distrust in professional and alternative media (S1, project Trust in Media in a Fragmented Media Environment: The Case of the Czech Republic), the public opinion polarization (S2, project Political Polarization in the Czech Republic: The Case of Multi-Party System), and the impact of systemic crises on media use and political attitudes (S3, project National Institute for Research on the Socioeconomic Impacts of Diseases and Systemic Risks (SYRI)) (Čejková et al., 2025). Each dataset represents adults in the Czech Republic (18+), who were sampled with quotas for gender, age, education, settlement size, and region. The surveys combined Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) with Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). Data collection was conducted by external polling agencies affiliated with the Association of Market and Public Opinion Research Agencies (SIMAR), which obliges member organizations to adhere to methodological and ethical standards consistent with the ICC/ESOMAR International Code. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to refuse answers or withdraw at any time. All procedures complied with Czech legislation, institutional guidelines, and the recommendations of the Masaryk University Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. EKV-2022-102; EKV-2020-123).

Study 3 relays a purposefully collected dataset of adult (18+) Facebook-using students from Masaryk University. Participants were recruited via leaflets, Facebook groups, and a call for participation distributed through the university's information system dashboard. The study was approved by the Masaryk University Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. EKV-2020-123). Informed consent was required for participation. Participants who completed the procedure were entered into a cash-prize draw (3 × 3,000 CZK ≈ 120 €; 83 × 1,000 CZK ≈ 40 €). The final sample consisted of 702 participants (Gender: 64.9% female, 0.7% nonbinary; Age: M = 22.44, SD = 3.42; Study program: 52.3% bachelor's, 43% master's, 3.8% doctoral, 0.9% lifelong learning).

Table 1

Description of Datasets

Survey	Collection	Context	*N*	*n* CAWI	*n* CAPI
S1	2019/2020 (December–February)	No confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Czech Republic; first case reported on 1 March 2020. Government officials did not consider the virus significant.	3,251	2,113	1,138
S2	2020 (November–December)	First wave of the COVID-19 pandemic peaks; restrictions imposed on mobility and services; schools operate in special mode.	3,763	2,445	1,318
S3	2022 (December)	Russia invades Ukraine on 24 February 2022; by late 2022, continued rocket attacks on Ukrainian cities and infrastructure follow a successful Ukrainian counter-offensive. High energy prices and inflation.	2,340	1,772	568

Procedures

The aim of Study 1 was to elaborate upon the theoretical foundations of an innovative measure of Normative-Cohesive Trust in Media (NCTM) and to validate its latent structure based on two first-order dimensions in order to offer a theoretically grounded instrument suitable for examining trust in media in the high-choice media environment. Using

exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and hierarchical McDonald's omega, we assessed factor structure, structural validity, and reliability. Correlation analysis, the Friedman test, and multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (MG-CFA) were employed to examine convergent and discriminant validity and measurement invariance.

Study 2 investigated the reasons for the stability of trust in media during a period of accumulated systemic crises using a case-study design. Through hierarchical regression analyses, we examined whether stable trust in the Czech public service medium, Czech Television, between 2019 and 2022 reflects continuity in its key drivers, or whether shifts in these drivers occur but counterbalance one another in ways that ultimately preserve overall trust levels.

Study 3 focused on identifying how trust in news media and trust in news intermediaries contribute to news credibility. This experimental study (2 × 3 between-subject design) employed a dynamically customized environment to simulate a Facebook Timeline to compare the perceived credibility of a news article from a trusted versus distrusted news outlet shared by high- vs. low-trusted „friends". The effects were examined with a two-way analysis of covariance (two-way ANCOVA) and two one-sided t-tests.

Discussion

The overarching aim of this dissertation was to advance the understanding of how trust in media operates as a relational mechanism of mutual interdependence that links media institutions and audiences, structures audience media repertoires, and functions as a tool for the increased simplicity and efficiency of news credibility evaluation in the contemporary high-choice media environment, within an environment characterized by a multiplicity of news sources and user choice.

Accordingly, this dissertation sought to advance the understanding of the nature of trust in news media and to overcome limitations in the current conceptualization and measurement of trust in media in the high choice media environment by integrating theoretical refinement with the validation of an innovative measurement. It further examined the stability of trust in media under conditions of systemic crisis and sought to uncover the mechanisms through which the stability of media repertoires among the media public may be maintained. The final objective was to explore the role of trust in media in shaping news credibility within the increasingly layered information flows on social network sites. Each of these objectives was addressed by one of the three studies, and their findings are discussed below.

The first objective of the dissertation was to help moves toward the theoretical integration and improved measurement of trust in media. In particular, it sought to reduce the persistent conceptual ambiguity that surrounds the concept (Liu et al., 2026) and the continued conflation of trust and credibility, because both limitations complicate the understanding of how and in what audiences place their trust within the contemporary, highly complex media landscape. As a consequence, they also hinder the understanding of the significance of declining general trust in media and of the factors that underlie this decline (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023).

Study 1 built on several existing studies (Macková et al., 2023, 2025; Slavík et al., 2025; Smejkal et al., 2024) and it was the first to provide a systematic theoretical elaboration and empirical validation for an innovative concept and measurement of Normative–Cohesive Trust in Media (NCTM). The study drew on established conceptualizations of trust in media (Fawzi et al., 2021; Kohring & Matthes, 2007), which it integrated and refined through the use of social system theory (Giddens, 1990; Luhmann, 1979). Trust in media is thus grounded in expectations for the reliability of professional standards that govern the media and their expertise in news production. This definition of trust in media allowed, with the support of two additional groups of theoretical resources, the identification of two core dimensions that constitute its nature. Drawing on normative media theory (Berkowitz, 1997; McQuail, 2013; McQuail & Deuze, 2020; Schudson, 2003; Westerståhl, 1983) the Normative Dimension of Trust in Media was defined as confidence that the news media will reliably act according to the normative professional standards formed by an ethos of objectivity. A combination of theoretical and empirical insights from the social constructivist approach to media and from social identity and social comparison theory (Andersen et al., 2023; Coleman et al., 2012; Festinger, 1954; Nelson & Lewis, 2023; Pasitselska, 2022; Tajfel, 1978; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019) then made it possible to define the Cohesive Dimension of Trust in Media as confidence that the news media will reliably stand for one's in-group identity (e.g., a nation, social class, church, movement, or subculture) and oppose relevant out-group identities. Subsequent analyses of the factor structure confirmed the theoretical assumption that the two dimensions are strongly interconnected while remaining analytically distinct, and that together they form a latent construct of trust in media.

This study thus contributed to addressing several gaps in the existing knowledge and the limitations in the conceptualization and measurement of trust in media. Integrating the synthetic conceptualization of trust in media proposed by Fawzi et al. (2021) into a more

robust framework of social system theory enabled a more precise theorization of trust and a stronger connection to existing literature on the normative foundations of media performance. In doing so, it helped overcome the limitations of the definitions of trust in media that rely on broad and abstract references such as “democratic functions”(cf. Fawzi et al., 2021; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Liu et al., 2026). Further, this approach allowed trust in media to be operationalized more precisely by grounding its definition in its core ontological attribute, namely the actions and performance of media institutions, rather than in attributed characteristics or even in the properties of the news content they produce. In this way, the study contributed to eliminating conceptual and measurement confusion between trust in media and related concepts, especially source credibility (Fisher, 2016; Liu et al., 2026; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019), news content (message) credibility, and perception (cf. Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Metzger et al., 2003; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Scholarship discusses rising expectations for in-group-oriented media performance, particularly regarding audiences’ political identities (Ladd, 2012; Lycarião, 2018; Strömbäck et al., 2022), which accompany greater opportunities for source selectivity (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024). This study, both theoretically and empirically, confirmed that the in-group-oriented Cohesive Dimension of Trust in Media lies at the core of trust in media itself. Moreover, the findings indicate that, although certain groups, such as the voters of populist parties, may attribute greater importance to this dimension (Smejkal et al., 2024), the cohesive dimension of trust in media is not only relevant to less politically pluralistic groups. Rather, it constitutes an important component of trust in media for the general population and it is not in contradiction with the Normative Dimension of Trust in Media. Measurement invariance analyses revealed that the two dimensions of trust in media combine to form Normative-Cohesive Trust in Media in the same way, regardless of gender, level of educational attainment, or age. This finding corresponds with the proposed theoretical conceptualization

of Normative-Cohesive Trust in Media, which assumes that it represents a long term and general characteristic of trust in media, rather than a maladaptive response to source abundance or political polarization (Ladd, 2012; Prior, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2022). The developed measurement thus not only incorporates a previously neglected dimension of trust in media (Aharoni, 2025), but also enables further examination of how media structures, media preferences, and political cleavages shape the nature of trust in media. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the character and functioning of trust in media in the high-choice media environment.

The proposed measurement of Normative Cohesive Trust in Media directly reflects the situation in which audiences in the high-choice media landscape differentiate their trust depending on how general or abstract the media object is toward which they are asked to express a trust relationship (Daniller et al., 2017; Gronke & Cook, 2007; Tsfati et al., 2023). It also accounts for the fact that audiences primarily maintain relationships with a relatively limited set of media sources through the construction of media repertoires (Andersen et al., 2021; Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012). The six-item Normative-Cohesive Trust in Media measure targets media that serve as individually important sources of news and information. This measurement approach makes it possible to assess trust in a media object that meaningfully corresponds to contemporary media consumption patterns and the conditions of the media environment. At the same time, despite its individualized orientation, it still allows for aggregation at the population level. The validated measurement thus enables research on trust in media to move beyond the prevailing focus on trust in media in general, on media types, and on single outlets (Liu et al., 2026). An analysis of the convergent validity of normative cohesive trust in media among Czech respondents confirmed the hierarchy of trust levels according to the degree of the abstraction of the media object (Daniller et al., 2017; Gronke & Cook, 2007; Tsfati et al., 2023). Normative-Cohesive Trust in (individually

important) Media was the highest, followed by trust in mainstream television stations and professional media in general. A key contribution of this study and of this dissertation is that the measure offers a tool to help identify the extent to which the long term decline in trust in media in general signals the decreasing relevance of this media object as a meaningful object for the attribution of trust within an increasingly complex media environment (cf. Suiter & Fletcher, 2020).

This dissertation also fulfilled its second research objective, namely to contribute to understanding the reasons for the stability of trust in media by examining the case of Czech Public Service Media (called Czech Television), and to offer a theoretical interpretation to uncover a potential mechanism through which trust in media may help preserve the attractiveness of media outlets and sustain their presence within media repertoires. This exploratory case study of Czech PSM, which, like most other PSM, exhibited stable levels of trust despite the recent crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine (Adam et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2020, 2021, 2022), made it possible to examine the operation of socio-economic, media-related, and socio-political correlates of trust in media identified in prior research (Fawzi et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2017; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

An analysis of the structure of these correlates in 2019, 2020, and 2022 suggested that a suitable explanation can be derived from adapting the concept of diffuse support for public institutions, which were originally developed in political science (Curini et al., 2012; Easton, 1975). The findings indicate that trust in PSM likely takes a diffuse form, which means that it is rooted in the general and relatively stable significance of this media organization in public life. This is reflected in the high degree of continuity observed over time in the effects of the socio-economic, media-related, and socio-political correlates of trust in Czech PSM. One indication of this diffuse character is the negligible association between trust in Czech PSM and socioeconomic variables, such as gender, age, education, life satisfaction, and income.

This suggests that trust in PSM was not conditioned by contextual socioeconomic needs, despite the fact that the recent polycrises disproportionately affected vulnerable groups in the Czech Republic (Eurofound, 2023) and raised concerns about deepening inequalities (Jungkunz, 2021). Trust in Czech Television thus remained broadly universal across the analyzed socio-economic groups.

A more detailed examination of the structure and correlates of trust further sheds light on the foundations of diffuse trust in Czech Television and, indirectly, on why Czech Television has long remained a stable and highly central component of media repertoires in the Czech Republic. By maintaining its position as the most widely watched and most trusted television outlet in the country (Newman et al., 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025), Czech Television also contributes to limiting the fragmentation of the media public. Diffuse trust in Czech PSM appears to be built and sustained through its functioning as a keystone media outlet, albeit in a modified form. Keystone media (Nielsen, 2015) are defined by two core characteristics: they provide essential and irreplaceable information, and they exert systemic influence on the media landscape. As such, they function as nodal points within the media system. The present case suggests that the keystone function does not necessarily have to rest primarily on a news-oriented role. Instead, it may be grounded in entertainment and educational functions, which broadens both the concept of keystone media and the understanding of diffuse trust. In turn, this perspective brings attention to a somewhat overlooked source of trust in media.

The systemic role of trust in Czech PSM may be suggested by the fact that, across the observed years, trust in Czech PSM is most strongly and positively associated with trust in other mainstream media. Although trust in other news media was treated as an explanatory variable in the analyzed models, it may be that Czech PSM function as a benchmark of quality and trust for other, especially commercial, media outlets. In this sense, trust in Czech Television may be recursively linked to trust in other media. Trust in Czech Television then

would play a systemic role in shaping trust across the broader media landscape (cf. Mehta, 2007). Available research provides indirect support for this interpretation, showing that trust in and exposure to PSM is positively associated with overall trust in media, as well as with the consumption of commercial media (EBU, 2022; Newman et al., 2023; Udris et al., 2024).

The marginal effect of the frequency of news consumption on trust in Czech Television suggests that education, entertainment, and local content production, as well as their situational adaptability (Donders, 2012, 2023; Horowitz & Leino, 2020; Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023, 2025), may play an overlooked yet important role in the construction of trust in PSM (Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023, 2025). During both crises, Czech PSM developed special archival channels and programs, as well as educational content for children, to mitigate the impacts of both events (Česká televize, 2023).

In a certain sense, the consistently negative effect of antipathy toward the European Union can be interpreted as a "negative" confirmation of the diffuse nature of trust in Czech PSM. Recent evidence (Macková et al., 2025) indicates that such antipathy is linked to perceptions among some viewers that Czech Television favors pro-European, pro-liberal, and pro-Western positions, and neglects national concerns. Czech Television thus appears to operate within the Czech media landscape as an outlet that embodies a dominant value-political orientation that is unacceptable to part of the population. For these groups, this makes the broadcaster untrustworthy and potentially unsuitable for continued inclusion in their media repertoires, or positions it primarily as a representative of value-political antagonism rather than as a trusted source of information. Long-term attacks by illiberal and populist-oriented political actors on the nature and functioning of PSM provide further partial evidence of the role of PSM as carriers of elementary value-political orientation (Newman et al., 2022, 2025; Smejkal et al., 2024).

Despite the high degree of stability in the effects of the three groups of predictors on the level of trust in PSM, certain changes in the reasons that underlie trust can be observed, suggesting that a small part of trust has a specific character. This means that it is grounded in the fulfillment of context-dependent, crisis-related public needs. The slight increase in the effect of the Cohesive Dimension of Trust in Media during the COVID 19 pandemic suggests that audiences placed trust in PSM because it contributed to the reproduction and construction of a shared sense of "we," thereby fulfilling a demand for social unity. This did not, however, result from the mediation or amplification of political actors' outputs, which is conventionally understood as a source of crisis-related trust in public institutions, the effect of which are typically referred to as "rally round the flag" (Knudsen et al., 2023; Westlund & Ghersetti, 2015). On the contrary, trust in political actors during the same period exhibited a slightly strengthened negative effect on trust in PSM. Rather than a quantitatively measurable increase in trust, what appears to have occurred was a more intense activation of trust in PSM as a shared symbolic space for the construction of unity. In essence, a form of the "rally round the flag" effect likely manifested itself in a qualitative manner — not through an overall increase in the level of trust in PSM or through stronger alignment with political trust, but through a shift in the meaning and function of trust during the crisis.

The third research objective was motivated by the effort to investigate how institutional trust in news media and interpersonal trust in news intermediaries shape news credibility on SNS environments that are characterized by curated flows.

The experimental study, which used a customized environment designed to evoke Facebook, revealed that the credibility of news consumed through this SNS is only very weakly influenced by trust in media as expert institutions. Interpersonal trust in intermediaries drawn from participants' social networks played no role at all. No effect was observed for either positive or negative interactions between the two forms of trust. Thus, the results of this

study are more closely aligned with studies that indicate that news credibility on Facebook is tied primarily to the media rather than to the intermediary (Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2020; Tandoc, 2019; Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024), as well as with findings that suggested that there is no difference in the perceived credibility of news from media compared to influencers, as shown in the context of Instagram (Zimmermann et al., 2023). At the same time, the present study arrives at conclusions that run counter to research that indicates the important (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024; Sterrett et al., 2019) or even decisive (Tandoc, 2019) role of intermediaries in the evaluation of or engagement with news in SNS environments.

Thus, neither form of trust incorporates the relatively demanding process of attributing news credibility in an environment characterized by high source choice easier and effective. Even in situations in which perceptual layering occurs (Jang, 2021), neither institutional trust in media nor interpersonal trust functions as an economizer (cf. Coleman et al., 2012; Rosanvallon, 2008), which is a mechanism that would increase efficiency and reduce the cognitive costs associated with arriving at a judgment of credibility. The findings therefore suggest that consumers of news on SNS environments construct news credibility primarily on the basis of the characteristics of the news content itself. From the perspective of effort and required resources, this represents a highly demanding process (Mangold et al., 2022).

The study (Slavík et al., 2025) offers two types of explanations for the empirical absence of the effects of both forms of trust on the attribution of news credibility in SNS environments. The first explanation can be described as “platform cynicism.” Whereas skepticism, according to Quiring et al. (2021) refers to a differentiated and critical stance, cynicism instead denotes an attitude that assumes general unreliability. It is precisely this generalized vigilance and the perception that sources and content encountered on SNS cannot be easily relied upon that may account for the observed findings. SNS are commonly associated with high levels of concern about encountering misinformation or disinformation

(Newman et al., 2025) and news consumed on SNS platforms has long been associated with low credibility (Newman et al., 2021). The mere presence of news on Facebook reduces the influence of source credibility on its approval (Jang, 2021). In addition, the mechanisms through which curated flows are generated on SNS are largely opaque to recipients, which fosters a general low trust for these environments (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019). As a result, the mechanism through which trust in a source might otherwise be transferred to the credibility of news content may be undermined by negative perceptions of how SNS function. In such contexts, recipients may perceive credibility judgments as something that must be made on a case-by-case basis for each individual news item.

The effectiveness of trust in a medium or in an intermediary may also be limited to the specific situations in which news is consumed only superficially and primarily to maintain a basic overview of public affairs. Duffy (2020) refers to such situations as “news snacking”. SNS environments are characterized by an abundance and diversity of content, in which news represents only one of many content types and typically receives limited attention (Andı, 2021; Boczkowski et al., 2018). It is therefore possible that the effect of trust in a medium or an intermediary becomes activated only in situations in which users do not engage with the news content itself but are exposed only to a headline or a preview image. In such cases, credibility cannot be formed through detailed engagement with the text. However, this situation was not addressed in the experiment, because participants were exposed not only to headlines or previews but also to the full news content.

This study indicates that, from the perspective of trust, journalistic curation and social curation are de facto similarly ineffective in the construction of news credibility. Although news intermediaries within SNS shape how news is perceived by framing it with personal commentary (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018) and contextualisation (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Zúñiga et al., 2017), trust in these actors does not appear to position them as

substitutes for media institutions or journalists in guaranteeing news credibility. From a more positive perspective, this pattern may reduce the risk of misattributing news credibility (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024), and it may strengthen audiences' information competencies (Nelson & Lewis, 2023). At the same time, however, one-by-one evaluations of credibility impose significant cognitive demands, which may render news consumption overwhelming and contribute to news avoidance and disengagement from public affairs (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020).

These explanations nevertheless require further empirical examination and point toward avenues for future research, as well as toward the limitations of the present study. The same applies to the remaining two studies included in this dissertation. The following section therefore addresses their limitations and outlines possible directions for further research on trust in media.

Limitations and directions for future research

All three studies conducted in this dissertation call for replication in other contexts and among populations beyond the Czech Republic.

Study 1 provided an innovative theoretical conceptualization and the validated measurement, Normative-Cohesive Trust in Media, which is designed to measure trust in media in the contemporary high-choice media environment, as characterized by individualized patterns of news media consumption (Schulz et al., 2019; Tóth et al., 2022). While the validated measurement is suitable for the population-wide measurement of trust in media, its full potential requires further validation and usage in national and media system contexts other than the Czech Republic, which is characterized by relatively low levels of media and political polarization (Tóth et al., 2022). Cross-national validation could yield valuable insights into the comparability and variability of the nature of trust in media across different contexts.

Moreover, while the existing validation focused primarily on trust in mainstream professional media, future research could incorporate open or closed questions to identify individually important media outlets, as was done in the Czech case, though it was not directly incorporated into the analyses. This would make it possible not only to examine the composition of trusted media sources, but also to compare the levels and structures of trust across differently configured media repertoires. Such comparisons could include, for example, differences between individuals who identify PSM as important news sources and those who do not, or between audiences who rely primarily on mainstream media and those reporting partisan or alternative outlets among their key sources.

Study 2 also calls for the further examination of the nature of trust in PSM and, where relevant, in commercial media across additional national and media system contexts. Particularly suitable cases for studying the robustness of stable trust in media are contexts characterized by stronger political parallelism in PSM, such as in Poland and in Hungary (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019). The diffuse keystone-like character of trust in PSM could also be exanimated in contexts where PSM do not occupy such a privileged or central position within the media landscape, like in the United States.

Study 3 likewise calls for replication on representative populations (i.e., using samples other than university students). It is possible that the absence of the effects of institutional trust in media and interpersonal trust in intermediaries on news credibility is partly attributable to the higher levels of media literacy typically found among more highly educated individuals (Yates et al., 2020), which may in turn foster stronger forms of what has been described as “platform cynicism”. In addition, incorporating a broader range of news topics would make it possible to examine whether the economizer function of trust in a medium or an intermediary may be more salient for topics perceived as more consequential. Finally, the increasing integration of generative artificial intelligence into journalistic practice (Newman

et al., 2025), as well as the growing circulation of AI-generated content within SNS environments, further increases the value of replicating the experiment under contemporary conditions. Replications that include news content produced or assisted by AI may reveal whether trust in media institutions or in intermediaries plays a stronger or weaker role in the attribution of news credibility in such cases.

All three studies also suggest improvements for measurement and research design.

Study 1 deliberately emphasized the relative simplicity of the Normative Cohesive Trust in Media measurement in order to facilitate its use in population-wide surveys. This design choice, however, necessarily limited the number of items within each dimension to a minimum, which places increased demands on the stability of the factor structure. Future research should therefore consider adding at least one carefully constructed item to each dimension.

In addition, Item 4, “For people like me, professional media can be trusted because they show the world as I think it really is,” requires refinement, because it exhibited cross loading from the intended cohesive dimension into the normative one. A formulation such as “People like me can trust these media because they show the world the way we see it” may better reflect the underlying identity-based mechanism of media performance and more clearly align with the theoretical logic of the cohesive dimension.

Because Study 2 is based on a secondary analysis of existing data, it is limited by its reliance on available measures and on cross sectional data. A more rigorous assessment of the keystone-like nature of diffuse trust in media require analyses across a greater number of time points, situated both in acute and less acute phases of crises, and should ideally be conducted through longitudinal designs with repeated measures. A key contribution of such future research could also benefit from including more direct measures, such as the intensity of

target media consumption, crisis-related concerns, evaluations of news and non-news content, ideological affiliation, perceived media bias, and media literacy.

Finally, future research that replicates Study 3 may benefit from less restrictive criteria for the nomination of real-life friends as news intermediaries in SNS environments. Relaxing requirements such as the recent sharing of news or the recent consumption of that shared news content, could increase the number of cases characterized by lower levels of interpersonal trust, thereby allowing a more sensitive examination of how interpersonal trust conditions the attribution of news credibility.

Declaration of interest statement

There are no competing interests to declare in relation to this cover chapter or the individual studies included in this dissertation.

Funding and declaration of AI use

The studies included in this dissertation were supported by the Czech Science Foundation as part of the Trust in Media in a Fragmented Media Environment: The Case of the Czech Republic project (Grant No. GA19-09103S) and the Political Polarization in the Czech Republic: The Case of a Multi-party System project (Grant No. GA19-24724S). This work was also supported by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic as part of the “Systemic Risk Institute”, National Recovery Plan (NPO) (Grant No. LX22NPO5101), and funded by the European Union–Next Generation EU (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, NPO: EXCELES).

I used Microsoft 365 Copilot with Enterprise Data Protection (version 2.20260407.54.0) for grammar corrections and minor style refinements. I carefully reviewed all suggestions from this service to ensure that the quality, accuracy, and meaning of the

original text are preserved. The text of this cover chapter underwent professional proofreading.

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Appendices

Study 1

Validation of Normative-Cohesive Trust in Media: Theory and measurement for high-choice media environment

Abstract

Several recent studies have relied on innovative measures of the normative and cohesive dimensions of trust in media. While these tools have been productively employed, their theoretical foundations and psychometric properties have so far been explicated to only a limited extent and primarily for the purposes of their specific use in individual empirical studies. This study systematically validates and theoretically elaborates Normative-Cohesive Trust in Media (NCTM) as a concept and measure for the current high-choice media environment. Building on the systemic theory of trust and contemporary relational conceptualizations of trust in media, NCTM conceptualizes trust as a latent construct that is comprised of two closely related but distinct dimensions: normative trust, which reflects confidence in professional journalistic standards grounded in objectivity; and cohesive trust, which captures expectations that media represent and defend one's in-group identity. Using three representative surveys of the adult Czech population, which were conducted in 2019, 2020, and 2022 (N = 9,354), this study examines the scale's factor structure (EFA, CFA); reliability (Hierarchical McDonald Omega); measurement invariance (MG-CFA); and convergent and discriminant validity (correlation analysis, Friedman test). The findings support a second-order model structure with good reliability and full measurement invariance across key sociodemographic groups.

Keywords: trust in media, credibility, validization, high-choice media, normative trust

Introduction

Trust in media is considered to be a crucial component of the media's economic viability (Vanacker & Belmas, 2009) and a key prerequisite for the legitimacy of news media and, ultimately, for the functioning of democratic society (Usher, 2020). The debate over how to theorize and operationalize trust in media has been long-standing, and it has gained renewed intensity in recent years (Aharoni, 2025; Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023; Y. Liu et al., 2026).

These efforts have yielded important outcomes: a consensus regarding the general notion of trust in media (Fawzi et al., 2021); the clarification of how trust in media differs from related concepts, such as credibility and distrust (Engelke et al., 2019); and the identification of the various possible referents of trust within the journalistic domain (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

This development has also involved multidimensional approaches to the measurement of trust in media (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Recently, a study by Smejkal et al. (2024) introduced an innovative conceptualization and measurement for trust in news media. Examining how political preferences condition trust in public service media, they found that the sympathizers of populist parties differ from the sympathizers of other parties in their emphasis on two dimensions of trust in media, which the study labels normative and cohesive. The former refers to trust in professionalism of objective journalism, the latter captures in-group identity affirmation.

One or both dimensions of this two-dimensional conceptualization and measurement of Normative-Cohesive Trust in Media (NCTM) have since been employed in other studies. These include research on audiences of Czech public service media (Macková et al., 2025), a study of trust in mainstream media among audiences of Czech alternative news media (Macková et al., 2023), and an experimental study of the perception of news credibility on Facebook (Slavík et al., 2025).

However, the study of Smejkal et al. (2024)—henceforth referred to as the original study—as well as the subsequent studies that employed NCTM provide only a limited theoretical elaboration of this conceptual and measurement tool and only partial validation of its scales. Moreover, while the original study acknowledged the one-dimensional, higher-order nature of trust in media (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019), it used the two dimensions separately and tested the NCTM measure only for this purpose. The central objective of the present study is therefore to explicate and further elaborate the theoretical foundations of NCTM as a latent construct, to provide a thorough validation of the NCTM measurement, and to provide an overview of the origins of the NCTM concept and measure.

We argue that the idea of the normative and cohesive dimensionality of trust and the survey measure introduced in the original study hold substantial potential to contribute to the renewed scholarly interest in trust in media in several important ways. In this study, we aim to advance this potential in three key respects.

Contemporary media landscapes offer numerous potential objects or actors toward which trust may be directed (Strömbäck et al., 2020). In a media environment characterized by high levels of choice and abundant sources, trust increasingly forms in relation to selected media rather than a monolithic category of "the media." Individuals develop personal media repertoires (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018), and trust in the media that people personally use tends to differ from trust in media in general (Daniller et al., 2017). Prevailing approaches to trust in media—often focused on general media, media types, or single outlets (Liu et al., 2026)—do not sufficiently account for this dynamic of individualized media consumption and trust. Accordingly, the present study seeks to validate NCTM as a conceptual and measurement tool designed for use within contemporary fragmented media landscapes and increasingly individualized patterns of news consumption.

Furthermore, recent advances have contributed to a desirable consolidation of the conceptualization of trust in media as a relational phenomenon between the trustee and the trustor (i.e., the media object), which is grounded in the audience's vulnerability because of the absence of first-hand experience and based on expectations tied to the performance of the media in accordance with individual needs and democratic norms (Fawzi et al., 2021). A key limitation, however, is that this and other general definitions of trust rather implicitly suggest what precisely constitutes these democratic norms. In attempts to overcome this ambiguity, researchers still frequently operationalize trust in media through indicators traditionally associated with credibility—such as accuracy, competence, and fairness. Yet credibility is a narrower and conceptually distinct construct from trust (Liu et al., 2026) and conflating the two obscures the unique relational nature of trust. This study therefore aims to validate NCTM as a conceptual framework and measurement tool that is grounded in the contemporary theorization of trust in media (Aharoni, 2025; Liu et al., 2026) while avoiding its conflation with adjacent constructs, such as credibility.

Finally, the conceptualizations and operationalizations of trust in media have long been grounded predominantly in the normative foundations of journalism. However, in high-choice media environments—where audiences increasingly select media that affirm their worldview (Strömbäck et al., 2022) —there is a growing call to define trust in media not only through normative expectations but also through expectations related to the media's identity-building functions. To date, this call has not been sufficiently addressed (Aharoni, 2025; Tóth et al., 2022). A further goal of this study is therefore to validate NCTM as a conceptual framework and measurement tool that also captures the identity-oriented nature of trust in media.

We address these gaps with three representative surveys of the adult Czech population conducted between 2019 and 2022, to validate the NCTM measurements through multiple

analyses to establish its factor structure, measurement invariance, and convergent and discriminant validities. In the next section, we expand the theoretical foundations of NCTM and situate its two dimensions within broader debates on the nature and measurement of trust in media.

NCTM theory

In the original study, the theoretical foundations of NCTM were only briefly sketched, and the original study primarily theorized the dimensionality of NCTM. Here, we extend that work by offering a broader theoretical elaboration of NCTM.

Trust in media is most commonly defined as a willingness to be vulnerable to media (objects) based on the expectation of individually satisfactory performance as well as accordance with dominant norms and values connected with democratic media functions (Fawzi et al., 2021). This general understanding recently articulated by influential integrative accounts (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Strömbäck et al., 2020) and widely accepted in current research (e.g., Garusi & Splendore, 2023; Holtrup et al., 2023; Mangold, 2023; Steindl et al., 2023; Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023) nevertheless do not prevent, in concrete applications, substantial heterogeneity in the conceptualizations and operationalizations. Many continue to rely on credibility items and scales, a practice long criticized because credibility and trust are conceptually distinct in both scope and substance (Fisher, 2016; Y. Liu et al., 2026). "Credibility" typically refers to attributed expertise or source trustworthiness and the believability of the content, whereas "trust" refers to expectations about a trustee's performance and intentions (Engelke et al., 2019). One reason for this conflation may be persistent ambiguity regarding what exactly constitutes the "democratic norms" that structure performance of the media.

Anchoring NCTM in the systemic theory of trust, whose key tenets were developed by sociologists Luhmann and Giddens (Giddens, 1990; Luhmann, 1979) and adapted to the

media domain by Kohring and Matthes (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), allows us to build on the prevailing definition of trust in media, orient it more explicitly toward its professional (journalistic) nature, and extend it in theoretically desirable ways toward identity oriented foundings (Aharoni, 2025).

The systemic theory of trust holds that life in modern societies is highly and increasingly complex. To keep everyday reality manageable, various social systems emerge to constrain possibilities and horizons at any given moment (Giddens, 1990; Luhmann, 1979). Among these, expert systems occupy a specific position. Expert systems are institutions endowed with specialized knowledge and skills that organize particular domains of social life (Giddens, 1990). The news media are an expert system, upon whose informational performance individuals and societies depend in many respects (Kohring & Matthes, 2007).

From this perspective, trust in media has a specific relationship between the trustor (the audience) and the trustee (the media) that inherently entails vulnerability (Simmel, 1964) that arises both from the trustor's limited control over the trustee and from the opacity of the media expertise and its operations. Adapting Giddens's notion of trust in expert systems (Giddens, 1990) to the media domain, trust in media can be understood as confidence in the reliability of professional standards for the media and in their expertise in news production (cf. Aharoni, 2025).

This conception of trust in media leads us to define the first dimension of NCTM, which we term the *Normative Dimension of Trust in Media (NDTM)*. NDTM rests on expectations that news organizations will comply with the normative rules for selecting, processing, and distributing news. Historically, the dominant understanding of these expert capacities is tied to the institutionalization of modern journalism throughout the 19th century (McQuail, 2013; McQuail & Deuze, 2020; Schudson, 2003), which results in normative regulations, professional morality, journalistic rules, and expectations for the roles of the

media (Berkowitz, 1997). Within the Western tradition, a core component of the expectations for the "proper" performance of the news media centers on objectivity—which is articulated as factuality and impartiality—as a crucial attribute, goal, ideal, and value of journalistic work and output. Symptomatically, objectivity as a quality of journalistic practice is expected to be achieved through "adherence to certain norms or standards" (Westerståhl, 1983, p. 403).

Although the meaning of journalistic objectivity varies over time and across media systems, an ethos of objectivity constitutes a substantial part of both individual and collective expectations regarding journalists' work, the performance of news media, and their legitimation (Garusi & Leonhardt, 2026; Knudsen et al., 2021; McQuail, 2013; Wien, 2005). This likely also explains why objectivity is embedded, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, in many measures of trust in media (and media credibility) (Liu et al., 2026). At the heart of NDTM lies a clearer delineation of dominant democratic media functions (Fawzi et al., 2021) because adherence to objective professionalism is widely understood to be a prerequisite for informed and active citizenship on which democratic order rests (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023). In this sense, we can define NDTM as confidence that news media will reliably act under normative professional standards formed by an ethos of objectivity. It is clear that NDTM finds common ground with Fawzi's definition, but it is more specific, which is important for proper operationalization.

However, normative professionalism, which is understood as adherence to impartial and factual performance, is not the only basis for trusting the news media. An equally important dimension, which we term the *Cohesive Dimension of Trust in Media (CDTM),* captures the identity-oriented facet of trust. In developing this dimension, we build upon three well-established theoretical strands in communication research.

Based on the social constructivist theory of trust, we suggest that, for trust in media, a crucial element is whether and how the media represent social reality and social groups

“through the eyes” of their audiences (Coleman et al., 2012; Nelson & Lewis, 2023; Pasitselska, 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019). In other words, people relate to media not only to be factually and impartially informed, but also to construct and confirm their identities, values, and political and cultural attitudes: through the media, they share classifications and interpretations of the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1991) and revive the feelings of belonging to diverse imagined communities (Anderson, 1991; McQuail & Deuze, 2020). At the same time, the media operate as inherently political institutions that articulate social and political consent and conflicting interests, discursively, symbolically, and ideologically (c.f. Carpentier, 2017; Hall, 1973; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Mouffe, 2005; Noelle-Neumann, 1993).

This is the point at which CDTM draws not only on social-constructivist arguments but also on the social-comparison theoretical framework and on social identity theory (Andersen et al., 2023; Festinger, 1954; Tajfel, 1978). Both perspectives suggest that the media play a crucial role in the processes of identity construction. According to social-comparison theory, people use the media as reservoirs for the representations of others, enabling them to compare themselves upward or downward. The media therefore function as important sources through which audiences negotiate the characteristics of their in-groups and, consequently, construct and reaffirm their in-group identities.

Social identity theory further suggests that identity construction requires negative differentiation from out-groups, which is enabled, among other mechanisms, by encounters with their mediated representations. Through such representations, the media provide audiences with resources to privilege their self-identity and to construct and recognize the boundaries between in-group and out-group identities. Recent evidence indicates that this in-group media performance influences media selection, media consumption (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019), media perception (Brown-Devlin et al., 2025; Geber, 2025; X. Liu & Li, 2025), and

media avoidance (Edgerly, 2022). A body of qualitative research (Coleman et al., 2012; Nelson & Lewis, 2023; Pasitselska, 2022) documents in-group-oriented expectations in the case of trust in media; however, apart from the original study, its quantitative operationalizations and measurements remain under-established (Aharoni, 2025). We also consider the NCTM concept to be fully consistent with Fawzi's definition of trust in media. In our view, it reflects the expectation that media should satisfy partial individual needs, and we regard the need to construct and group identities of individuals as one of the most fundamental of these needs.

Therefore, we define the CDTM as the confidence that the news media will reliably stand for one's in-group identity (e.g., a nation, social class, church, movement, or subculture) and oppose relevant out-group identities.

Importantly, although NCTM theorizes trust in media as a latent phenomenon made up of two highly interconnected, yet functionally and substantively distinct dimensions (i.e., NDTM and CDTM), they are not distinct as stand-alone attitudes. As the original study remarks, both dimensions of NCTM "form the complex attitude of trust in media only together and through interplay and […] trust in media involves both types of expectations" (Smejkal et al., 2024, p. 6). In other words, NCTM is a latent construct made up of two dimensions that can be considered separately but should ultimately be interpreted as integral components of the same overarching phenomenon. Accordingly, we conceptualize NCTM as confidence in the reliability of professional standards and expertise in news production, which is grounded in the media's adherence to an ethos of objectivity as well as confidence in the reliability of the media's role in maintaining one's in-group identity and countering out-groups.

The origin and development of NCTM

The NCTM construct and scale were originally developed in 2017 within the project CATCH-EyoU - Constructing Active Citizenship with European Youth: Policies, practices, challenges and solutions (CATCH-EyoU) (project ID 649538) to provide a brief, yet more reliable, alternative to the commonly used single-item indicators of trust in media (Engelke et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2026). The measure was designed to reflect increased media-environment fragmentation, audience selectivity, and the politicization of news use (Strömbäck et al., 2022).

The measure drew on Giddens's notion of trust in expert systems, which was also used in Kohring and Matthes's work (2007), and on qualitative interviews with media audiences conducted in the Czech Republic in 2016–17. The interviews indicated that trust rests not only on normative expectations but also on in-group-oriented expectations. Accordingly, NCTM comprised of the two above-outlined theoretical first-order dimensions: the cohesive one (originally called "affective") and the normative one (originally referred to as "reflexive"). The items included in the normative dimension were partly adapted from Kohring and Matthes (2007), but, in contrast to their scale to measure the content credibility of topic-specific news coverage, they were formulated to assess trust in news media as institutions (cf. Engelke et al., 2019; Slavík et al., 2025). To keep the measure survey feasible while allowing two-factor testing, the scale includes six items (three per dimension). For the exact wording, see Table 1. In a non-representative 2017 survey of young Czech adults (N = 415; ages 20–27), exploratory factor analysis suggested a dominant first factor (KMO = .89; 66.4% variance explained; $\alpha = .907$) (Macek & Macková, 2018), consistent with a higher-order structure.

Subsequent administration: Following the pilot, items were reframed to assess trust in professionally produced news media that respondents considered individually important

sources of news, better aligning the measure with a fragmented, selective media environment in which people create their own, more or less overlapping, media repertoires from a multitude of sources (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012; Tóth et al., 2022). The full six-item NCTM scale was fielded in three representative surveys of Czech adults (Dec 2019–Jan 2020; Nov–Dec 2020; Dec 2022).

The measure of NCTM

The measure of NCTM includes, as outlined above, three items to assess NDTM and three for CDTM. The resulting model respects the theoretical outline of NCTM and articulates trust in media as a second-order latent factor that consists of normative and cohesive trust as one of its dimensions.

The original study (Smejkal et al., 2024) employs the data, and the measurement of NCMT, from a representative survey conducted on the adult Czech population in December 2019 and January 2020. It assesses trust in the mainstream media (referring to it as "professional media") as it is considered by participants as individually important sources of news and information.

The original study tests a hypothesis that, for sympathizers of populist parties, normative and cohesive dimensions of trust in the individually important news media predict trust in public service media differently than for sympathizers of other political parties. Therefore, and in contrast to the theoretical logic of NCMT, the preliminary tests of the NCTM measure (Macek & Macková, 2018) and the prevailing consensus regarding the preference of assessing the multidimensional notions of trust in media as higher-order constructs (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020), the original study emphasizes the dimensionality of NCTM.

This use of NCTM, and the tests for its dimensions, proves to be productive for the objectives of the original study. Moreover, the original study clearly indicates that NCTM is

distinct from trust in a particular media brand (here Czech public service television), and it also concludes that "cohesive and normative trust were distinguishable from each other, although their inter-correlations were relatively high" which "corresponds to the theoretical assumption about the two-dimensional nature of trust in media, and about the complementarity of these two dimensions, where one dimension is not interchangeable with another" (Smejkal et al., 2024, pp. 11–12).

However, the original study does not test and validate the whole NCTM model, and neither do the other three published studies which use NCTM (Čejková & Macková, 2025; Macková et al., 2023; Slavík et al., 2025).

Table 1

Wording of NCTM Measure

Construct	Dimensions	Item	Wording of Questions and Items
Normative-Cohesive Trust in Media (NCTM)	Normative Dimension of Trust in Media (NDTM)		"Think, please, about the professional media you consider to be important news and information sources. How do you respond to the following statements?"
		1	"This professional media can be trusted because they work with verified information."
		2	"This professional media can be trusted because they focus on important facts and topics."
		3	"This professional media can be trusted because they are independent in their work."
	Cohesive Dimension of Trust in Media (CDTM)	4	"For people like me, this professional media can be trusted because they show the world as I think it really is."
		5	"This professional media can be trusted because they stand for political opinions that match what people like me think."
		6	"These professional media sources can be trusted because they oppose the interests and opinions that are not close to people like me."

Aims

This study aims to test and validate the NCTM measurement as a model to conceive of generalized institutional trust in media as a second-order latent factor that is comprised of two first-order dimensions (i.e., normative and cohesive). We draw on Classical Test Theory

(DeVellis & Thorpe, 2022) and evaluate: (1) initial item performance; (2) the factor structure through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to determine the expected number and nature of factors (Cabrera-Nguyen, 2010; Gaskin & Happell, 2014; Worthington & Whittaker, 2006; Yong & Pearce, 2013); and (3) structural validity and reliability by examining the fit of the factor model to the data (Cabrera-Nguyen, 2010; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Worthington & Whittaker, 2006; Yong & Pearce, 2013), using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), hierarchical McDonald's omega, and measurement invariance tests. Further, (4) we assess convergent and discriminant validity (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2022; Kline, 2016) with correlation analysis, the Friedman test, and multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (MG-CFA).

The assessment of convergent and discriminant validity requires the positioning of NCTM to related concepts.

Firstly, we assume that NCTM is positively associated with trust in other media objects—namely, trust in most professional media, trust in mainstream television stations, and trust in journalists. Likewise, we assume that NCTM is positively associated with trust in other public institutions as well as with interpersonal trust. As trust in certain media institutions or outlets, NCTM is linked with other (usually researched) more general or more specific forms of media-related trusts, such as trust in media in general or trust in journalists, though it constitutes a distinct attitude (see Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020). At the same time, as a form of institutional trust, NCTM should relate to trust in other public institutions whose legitimacy partially rests on public trust, such as political institutions (Jakobs, 2022; Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023), scientific institutions, and the healthcare system (Cologna et al., 2025; McKee et al., 2024; Wintterlin et al., 2022). Moreover, while scholarly debate continues over whether institutional trust derives from social (interpersonal) trust, or vice versa (Jakobs, 2022), substantial evidence shows that institutional trust is typically positively associated with interpersonal trust (Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

Secondly, we assume that the levels of NCTM (assessed as trust in the media considered by the participants as their individually important sources of news and information) are higher than levels of trust in more abstract media objects (i.e., mainstream television stations and with trust in most professional media). Several studies have shown that trust "in the media in general" tends to be lower than trust in "one's own media" (Daniller et al., 2017; Gronke & Cook, 2007; Tsfati et al., 2023). One explanation is the accessibility bias, meaning that "a collective referent such as 'the media' generally encourages more negative assessments because negatively-valenced information is typically more accessible than positive information" (Daniller et al., 2017, p. 2). This dynamic can also be derived from general theories of trust (Fawzi et al., 2021; Giddens, 1990): relying positively (trust) on a more abstract referent can be perceived as riskier because its identity and actions are less concrete and thus more ambiguous.

Thirdly, we assume that although news media evaluation is part of the process through which NCTM is formed, the two are not empirically identical phenomena. News media evaluation (NME) focuses on the extent to which media fulfill a variety of normative roles—from interpreting current events and providing high-quality reporting to representing diverse perspectives and supporting democratic civic engagement (Fawzi & Mothes, 2020). NCTM and NME are related but conceptually distinct. A central part of the process that constitutes a given level of trust involves existing expectations—typically referred to as media expectations—that define what audiences believe the media should be doing (Fawzi & Mothes, 2020). These expectations are then compared to perceived media performance—which is how well audiences perceive that the media currently fulfills these expected roles (Fawzi et al., 2021). Trust is therefore not exhausted by the evaluation of media performance; rather, it reflects the outcome of a broader process in which perceived performance plays only one component.

And, fourthly, we assume that NCTM is empirically distinct from News media literacy (NML). Although trust in media and news media literacy are both associated with news consumption and with citizens' knowledge of public affairs (Ashley et al., 2013; Geers et al., 2020; Strömbäck et al., 2020) — and both are closely related to the news media — they differ conceptually at the theoretical level. News media literacy, by contrast to trust in media, as defined above, refers to the extent to which audiences understand the conditions under which news is produced, enabling them to consume, evaluate, and, when relevant, produce news content more effectively (e.g., in the context of citizen journalism) (Ashley et al., 2013).

Materials and methods

Data and participants

This study employs data from three independent cross-sectional surveys (S1–S3; see Table 2) collected in projects that investigated trust in professional and alternative media (S1, Trust in Media in a Fragmented Media Environment: The Case of the Czech Republic; project ID GA19-09103S), political polarization (S2, Political Polarization in the Czech Republic: The Case of a Multi-party System, project ID GA19-24724S), and the impact of systemic crises on media use and political attitudes (S3, National Institute for Research on the Socioeconomic Impacts of Diseases and Systemic Risks; project ID LX22NPO5101) (Čejková et al., 2025).

Each dataset represents adults in the Czech Republic (18+) who were sampled with quotas for gender, age, education, size of residence, and region. The surveys combined Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) with Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). Data collection was performed by external polling agencies affiliated with the Association of Market and Public Opinion Research Agencies (SIMAR), which obliges member organizations to follow methodological and ethical standards consistent with the ICC/ESOMAR International Code. Participants were informed about the purpose of the

research and their right to decline answers or withdraw at any point. The study complied with Czech legislation, institutional guidelines, and the recommendations of the Research Ethics Committee of Masaryk University (Approval No. EKV-2022-102).

Table 2

Description of Datasets

Survey	Collection	Context of Data Collection	N	n CAWI	n CAPI
S1	2019/2020 (December–February)	No confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Czech Republic; first case reported on 1 March 2020. Government officials did not consider the virus significant.	3,251	2,113	1,138
S2	2020 (November–December)	First wave of the COVID-19 pandemic peaks; restrictions imposed on mobility and services; schools operate in special mode.	3,763	2,445	1,318
S3	2022 (December)	Russia invades Ukraine on 24 February 2022; by late 2022, continued rocket attacks on Ukrainian cities and infrastructure follow a successful Ukrainian counter-offensive. High energy prices and inflation, continuing war migration to the Czech Republic.	2,340	1,772	568

For the analyses of initial item performance, the examination of factor structure through EFA, and the assessment of structural validity and reliability, including measurement-invariance testing (see also Table A2 in the Appendix), we used datasets S1 and S3. The discriminant-validity analysis used dataset S2 (i.e., the comparison between NCTM and NME) and dataset S3 (i.e., the comparison of the similarity between the NCTM and NML). For convergent-validity analyses we used dataset S3.

Measures

For variable descriptives see Table A1 in the Appendix.

NCTM

The wording of the NCTM measure slightly varies across the S1, S2, and S3 datasets. Full-item wording, with the changes across these surveys shown with highlighted text, is provided in Table A2 in the Appendix. In S1 and S2 the question wording and the statements explicitly refer to trust in "professional media considered by respondents to be their important sources of news and information,"; in S3 the questions and statements do not include the adjective "professional." To ensure consistent validity, the analyses in all three surveys include only individuals who listed at least one professional media outlet among their key sources of news and information. For details of this procedure see the Appendix.

Independent Variables

As independent variables we use NME, NML, trust in most of the media, trust in mainstream television stations, trust in journalists, trust in state and government institutions, trust in science, trust in the health system, and social trust. For invariance analysis, we use gender, age, education, and the usage of social network sites (SNS). For detailed descriptions of the measurements, see the Appendix.

Results

Initial items performance

We first examined whether the NCTM items exhibited an acceptable level of variability: whether all of the item means were centered around the midpoint of the scale (3); whether their standard deviations approximated 1; and whether respondents used the full scale range (1–5) (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2022). We also assessed item skewness and kurtosis (±1). All items met these criteria in both years (see Table 3).

Next, we evaluated the adequacy of the items' discriminative properties. We examined corrected item–total correlations to determine whether the association between each item and

the total score of its corresponding subscale reached the recommended threshold of $r > .30$ (Clark & Watson, 1995; Haynes et al., 1995; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). We further inspected whether any item reduced internal consistency (e.g., "Cronbach's alpha if item deleted," ideally > .70 and < .90; Streiner, 2003) and whether inter-item correlations fell within the desirable range and direction (average $r = .30–.50$; Clark & Watson, 1995) (see Table 4). As shown in Tables 3 and 4, the items satisfied these criteria with one exception: the average inter-item correlation exceeded .50 in S1 as well as in S3 ($r_{S1} = .54$, $r_{S3} = .66$). This pattern primarily reflects stronger intercorrelations between Item 1 and the items representing the NDTM. Although such elevated correlations may suggest redundancy and could imply that Item 1 should be removed, we contend that doing so would be counterproductive. Conceptually, this item does not overlap with the subsequent two items, and its removal would even slightly reduce internal consistency. Therefore, we retain Item 1 in the scale.

Factor structure

In analyzing the factor structure of the trust models with exploratory factor analysis (EFA; principal axis factoring), we used randomly selected subsamples of S1 and S3 for approximately one half of the respondents who identified mainstream professional news media as one of their important sources of news and information ($n_{S1} = 1{,}315$, $n_{S3} = 1{,}024$). This approach ensured that the subsequent confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) would not be compromised by overfitting, which may inflate model fit indices and parameter estimates (Cabrera-Nguyen, 2010; Fokkema & Greiff, 2017). We applied an oblimin rotation because correlations between factors were expected.

Table 3

Initial Item Performance Measures

Survey	Item	N	Missing	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Used Range	Corrected Item-Total r	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
S1	Item 1	2631	0	3.85	0.84	-.71	.80	1–5	.69	.87	.85
	Item 2			3.86	0.83	-.58	.47		.72		.85
	Item 3			3.65	0.91	-.45	.15		.71		.85
	Item 4			3.70	0.87	-.49	.27		.72		.85
	Item 5			3.32	0.93	-.25	.08		.64		.86
	Item 6			3.25	0.94	-.24	.07		.60		.87
S3	Item 1	2043	33	3.43	0.95	-.42	.06	1–5	.81	.92	.90
	Item 2	2052	24	3.48	0.94	-.49	.19		.82		.90
	Item 3	2026	50	3.25	1.00	-.31	-.08		.79		.91
	Item 4	2051	25	3.28	0.95	-.50	-.01		.77		.91
	Item 5	2035	41	3.08	0.94	-.32	.04		.74		.91
	Item 6	2021	55	3.10	0.91	-.29	.14		.72		.91

Table 4
NCTM Inter-item Correlation Matrix

Survey		Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5	Item 6
S1	Item 1	—					
	Item 2	.787	—				
	Item 3	.705	.695	—			
	Item 4	.586	.602	.595	—		
	Item 5	.364	.411	.422	.557	—	
	Item 6	.325	.359	.406	.514	.785	—
S3	Item 1	—					
	Item 2	.795	—				
	Item 3	.740	.755	—			
	Item 4	.689	.686	.656	—		
	Item 5	.583	.596	.591	.666	—	
	Item 6	.611	.590	.598	.586	.722	—

Note. All correlations were significant at the $p < .01$ level.

Bartlett's test of sphericity and KMO values indicated that the data were suitable for factor analysis ($\chi^2_{S1}(15) = 4481.28$, .80; $\chi^2_{S3}(15) = 4352.38$, .89). For both samples, the EFA results revealed a borderline specification of the factor structure for trust. In S1, the scree plot and parallel analysis suggested that two factors should be retained; however, the second factor's eigenvalue was only marginally above 1 for the real data (1.17) and for the simulated data (1.04). The NDTM factor accounted for 41% of the variance, and the CDTM factor explained 29%, with a moderate correlation between the factors (.48). Given the borderline nature of the two-factor solution, we also tested a one-factor model, which accounted for 52% of the total variance.

For S3, the scree plot indicated that only one factor should be retained, because the second factor's eigenvalue fell below 1 (.64), which explained only 0.65% of the variance, and did not surpass the randomness threshold indicated by parallel analysis (i.e., the simulated second factor eigenvalue was 1.06). In the two-factor solution, the NDTM factor explained 50% of the variance and the CDTM factor 25%, with a moderate correlation between the two dimensions (.69).

Overall, these analyses (see Table 5) indicate that: (1) the classification into two-factor solution is not very robust; (2) Item 4 exhibits relatively weak cross-loadings on both factors (Goretzko et al., 2021); (3) the one-factor solution yields relatively low loadings for some items (e.g., Items 5 and 6) and explains less total variance than the two-factor solution; and (4) the factors are moderately correlated.

We interpret this ambiguity as stemming from the presence of first-order factors that are strongly saturated by a second-order latent factor (which contributes to the unclear number of factors), as well as from possible residual correlations among several items.

Table 5

Pattern Coefficients of NCTM and Its Dimensions

Item	S1			S3		
	Two Factors		One Factor (NCTM)	Two Factors		One Factor (NCTM)
	NDTM	CDTM		NDTM	CDTM	
Item 1	**.90**	-.09	.75	**.90**	-.01	.86
Item 2	**.86**	-.01	.78	**.94**	-.06	.85
Item 3	**.74**	.10	.78	**.81**	.04	.83
Item 4	**.53**	.33	.78	**.63**	.23	.82
Item 5	.03	**.87**	.64	-.01	**1.00**	.76
Item 6	-.03	**.89**	.60	.30	**.52**	.72

Therefore, for a more robust test, we used CFA to examine the fit of the theoretical models. The analysis was conducted on randomly selected subsamples (n_{S1} = 1,357, n_{S3} = 1,052).

We estimated several factor models with the Weighted Least Squares Mean and Variance Adjusted (WLSMV) estimator, because the data were ordinal. In line with theoretical expectations, we assumed that NCTM represents a latent second-order construct composed of two interconnected first-order dimensions. Nevertheless, we also tested whether alternative first-order structures (i.e., unidimensional, two independent factors, or two correlated factors) would provide a better fit.

Because the second-order model includes only two first-order dimensions, we constrained the loadings of the second-order factor to be equal to avoid issues of model under-identification (Chen et al., 2012; Kline, 2011). Models 1–3 demonstrated poorer performance relative to Models 5 and 6 (see Table 6).

Based on the modification indices for Models 1–3, we allowed two of the highest residual covariances in Models 5 and 6—between Items 1 and 2 within the NDTM, and between Items 5 and 6 within the CDTM—because these item pairs share a focus on evaluating the "internal" editorial and journalistic performance of the media (e.g., gatekeeping, framing, agenda-setting, and standing for in-group identity and its defence through the work of the media). By contrast, Items 3 and 4 pertain to more abstract, systemic evaluations of media performance (e.g., independence and accuracy of representations).

When evaluating the adequacy of the models based on goodness-of-fit measures (i.e., CFI, SRMR, and RMSEA), it is necessary in our case to focus primarily on the relative performance of the models, rather than on strict adherence to absolute cutoff criteria. Several considerations motivate this approach. First, CFI tends to be inflated and RMSEA underestimated in larger samples ($N > 500$) when estimators for ordinal data are used (Xia & Yang, 2019). Second, RMSEA is known to be upwardly biased in models with a small number of degrees of freedom (< 10) (Kenny et al., 2015).

A comparison of the models (see Table 6) shows that Model 5 (i.e., correlated first-order factors without a latent higher-order factor) and Model 6 (i.e., a second-order latent factor model) exhibit almost identical fit indices and perform best overall. When adopting the conventional (complementary) perspective on goodness-of-fit indices, it is evident that both models, unlike the alternative specifications, demonstrate good fit according to CFI ($> .97$), SRMR ($< .05$), and RMSEA ($< .08$) (cf. Cangur & Ercan, 2015), with one exception (in dataset S3, RMSEA exceeded the commonly referenced cutoff criterion). We address this in

the Discussion section. Standardized factor loadings reach desirable levels (> .50; Hair, 2019), ranging from .63 to .96 (see Figure 1), consistent with recommended thresholds (cf. Heene et al., 2011; Leguina, 2015).

Although Models 5 and 6 are technically equivalent (Brown, 2015), Model 6 aligns more closely with the theoretical assumptions. In the second-order specification, the correlation between the first-order factors is not freely estimated but is instead accounted for in the higher-order latent construct. This replaces an empirical correlation with a theoretically grounded structural pathway, providing a more parsimonious and interpretable model.

Because Model 6 is more consistent with the theoretical assumptions underlying the measurement structure, we consider it the most appropriate representation of NCTM. We therefore conclude that NCTM can be conceptualized as a latent phenomenon represented by two second-order dimensions (NDTM and CDTM; see Figure 1). As expected, the NDTM and CDTM exhibit strong associations (trust: $r_{S1} = .80$, $r_{S3} = .90$). In contrast to Model 5, where these correlations are freely estimated, Model 6 implies them through the product of the standardized loadings of the second-order factor (i.e., .89 × .89 in S1 and .96 × .96 in S3).

Reliability and invariance of measurement

To assess the reliability of the NCTM scales, we examined McDonald's omega coefficients, which—unlike Cronbach's alpha—do not assume tau-equivalence (i.e., equal factor loadings). Because our construct is hierarchical, we used hierarchical model-based omega coefficients calculated for Model 6, which are not biased by the assumption of unidimensionality (Reise, 2012; Watkins, 2017). The coefficients were computed from the hierarchical CFA model using the compRelSEM function in R, with estimates derived from the model-implied covariance matrix. The results were consistent across the S1 and S3 datasets (see Table 7).

Table 6

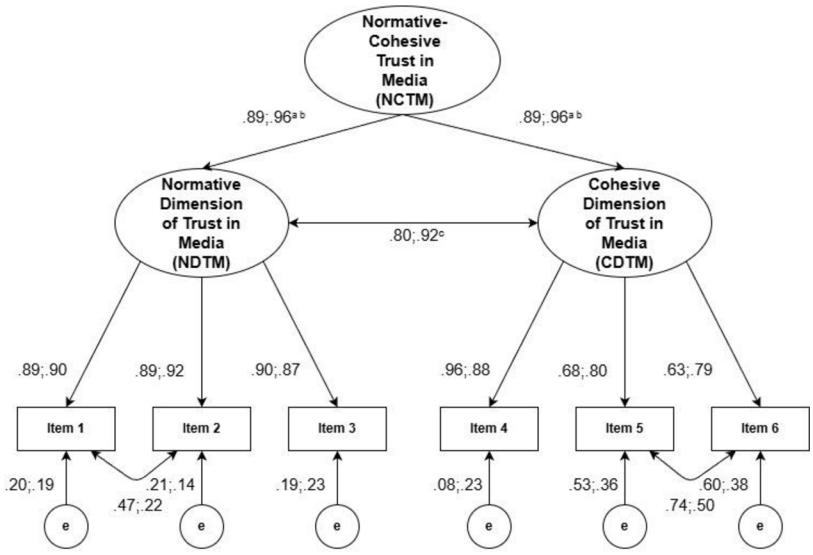
The CFA Models of NCTM

Model	Model Structure	Survey	χ^2 (df)	p	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
1	Unidimensional	S1	1914,85 (9)	<0.001	0.93	0.16	0.40
		S2	865.42 (9)	<0.001	0.96	0.06	0.31
2	Two independent factors	S1	4959.93 (9)	<0.001	0.81	0.36	0.64
		S2	9870.51 (9)	<0.001	0.56	0.36	1.05
3	Two intercorrelated factors	S1	1379,14 (8)	<0.001	0.95	0.09	0.36
		S2	437.90 (8)	<0.001	0.98	0.04	0.23
5	Two intercorrelated factors with residual covariances	S1	51,71 (6)	<0.001	1.00	0.01	0.08
		S2	97.55 (6)	<0.001	1.00	0.02	0.12
6	Second-order model, two intercorrelated factors with residual covariances	S1	51,71 (6)	<0.001	1.00	0.01	0.08
		S2	97.55 (6)	<0.001	1.00	0.02	0.12

Note. Model fit indices (e.g., χ^2, CFI, SRMR, RMSEA) are reported in their scaled form, as computed using the WLSMV estimator. Scaled values account for categorical data to provide more robust estimates compared to conventional maximum likelihood methods.

Figure 1

NCTM CFA Factor Structure



Note. The loading values are presented in the format S1; S2. All loadings are standardized.
[a] Corresponds to Model 6.
[b] Loadings constrained to be equal.
[c] Corresponds to Model 5.

The total score demonstrated very good construct reliability (ω_{S1} = .85; ω_{S3} = .91). The second-order factor (NCTM) accounted for a substantial proportion of the reliable variance in the total scores ($\omega_{h\ S1;\ S2}$ > .70), indicating that the scale primarily reflects a latent construct of trust. The NDTM subscale exhibited good composite reliability ($\omega_{s\ S1;\ S2}$ > .80), and a meaningfully large portion of reliable variance was attributable only to this subscale ($\omega_{hs\ S1;\ S2}$ > .30). The CDTM showed acceptable composite reliability ($\omega_{s\ S1;\ S2}$ > .60). In S1, the proportion of reliable variance attributable only to the CDTM was meaningfully large; in S2 it approached this level ($\omega_{hs\ S1}$ = .30; $\omega_{hs\ S2}$ = .28).

Taken together, the ω and ω_s coefficients indicate a good level of construct reliability (interpreted similarly to Cronbach's alpha coefficients; Watkins, 2017), demonstrating that the NCTM is reliable. The second-order factor explains a substantial proportion of the variance (ω_h > .70), suggesting unidimensionality, but at the same time, both NDTM and CDTM (with the exception of CDTM in S3) retain meaningfully unique proportions of variance (ω_{hs} > .30). This suggests that the normative and cohesive dimensions may also be perceived as independent constructs, although strongly integrated into a broader latent construct of NCTM (Li & Savalei, 2025).

Table 7
Hierarchical McDonald Omega Estimates for NCTM Composite Scores

Construct	ω/ ω_s		ω_h/ ω_{hs}	
	S1	S3	S1	S3
NCTM	.85	.91	.75	.87
NDTM	.86	.88	.56	.38
CDTM	.67	.78	.30	.28

Note. Omega total (ω) indicates the proportion of total variance that is attributable to all common factors (i.e., second-order + both dimensions of trust); omega total subscale (ω_s): the proportion of reliable variance in a subscale score due to both second-order factors and the subscale factor; omega hierarchical (ω_h): the proportion of reliable variance in the total score explained exclusively by the second second-order factor (e.g., trust in media); omega hierarchical subscale (ω_{hs}): the proportion of reliable variance in a subscale score attributable only to the subscale-specific factor, after controlling for the general factor.

To ensure that the proposed models are stable across key sociodemographic, political, and media-related variables, we tested the best-fitting model (i.e., Model 6) for measurement invariance with respect to gender, age, educational attainment, and use of SNS. The analysis (see Table A3 in the Appendix) indicates that the factor structure is satisfactorily invariant at the configural, metric, and scalar levels. All models exhibit good (see thresholds above) or fair fit as assessed by CFI ($\geq$ .96) and SRMR ($\leq$ .06) (Hooper et al., 2008; Hu & Bentler, 1999), and a threshold of RMSEA ($\leq$ .08) (Bollen & Long, 1993) was exceeded in several cases; however, see the explanation above regarding the reliability of the absolute values of these indicators for the ordinal data.

A more substantial finding is that higher-order invariance models (i.e., metric and scalar) showed substantial stability and did not exceed acceptable levels of deterioration: ΔCFI $\leq$ –.02 for metric and –.10 for scalar models; ΔRMSEA = .03 for metric and .01 for scalar models (Rutkowski & Svetina, 2014); ΔSRMR $\leq$ .030 for metric and $\leq$ .015 for scalar models (Chen, 2007).

Convergent and discriminant validity

We tested the convergent validity of NCTM using Pearson correlations with conceptually related constructs. The NCTM measure exhibited fair positive correlations (Allen, 2017) with trust in the most professional media and with trust in journalists, and weak positive correlations with trust in mainstream television stations, government institutions, the healthcare system, and interpersonal trust (see Table 8). These findings confirm a positive association for NCTM with trust in other media objects, trust in other public institutions, and with interpersonal trust.

To examine whether NCTM behaves as theoretically expected in relation to other forms of trust in media, we conducted an additional test positioned at the intersection of convergent and discriminant validation.

Table 8

Correlation Matrix of NCTM and Other Types of Trust

Variable	n	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. NCTM	2016	3.27	0.81	—						
2. Trust in most media	2311	2.71	1.08	.47	—					
3. Trust in mainstream TV stations	2175	2.99	0.79	.25	.46	—				
4. Trust in journalists	2318	2.49	1.02	.44	.70	.40	—			
5.Trust in state and government institutions	2313	2.30	1.11	.39	.57	.29	.60	—		
6. Trust in the healthcare system	2326	3.41	1.03	.32	.45	.27	.42	.38	—	
7. Trust in contemporary science	2311	3.51	1.01	.32	.36	.20	.37	.40	.44	—
8. Social trust	2327	2.71	1.04	.26	.32	.16	.36	.37	.35	.29

Note. All correlations were significant at the $p < .001$ level.

To evaluate whether levels of trust in media indeed vary across these types of referents, we employed a Friedman test, because all dependent variables were measured on an ordinal five-point scale and assessed repeatedly within respondents. The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in trust across the three media types, $\chi^2(2, N = 1{,}895) = 329.27$, $p < .001$, with a very small effect size (Kendall's W = .087) (Cohen, 2009). Mean ranks indicated that trust was lowest for professional media in general (mean rank = 1.73),

higher for mainstream television stations (mean rank = 1.99), and highest for individually important media (mean rank = 2.28).

To identify pairwise differences, we conducted post hoc Wilcoxon signed-rank tests with Bonferroni correction ($\alpha = .017$). All pairwise comparisons were statistically significant: trust in mainstream television stations was higher than trust in professional media in general ($Z = -10.62$, $p < .001$); trust in individually important media was higher than trust in mainstream television stations ($Z = -10.71$, $p < .001$); and trust in individually important media was substantially higher than trust in professional media in general ($Z = -20.48$, $p < .001$).

These results reveal a clear and consistent hierarchy for trust in media, with the highest trust directed toward media sources perceived as individually important, and the lowest toward more abstract media categories. Thus, our findings confirm the assumption that the level of NCTM are higher than the levels of trust in more abstract media objects.

We also examined the discriminant validity of the NCTM scale. Discriminant validity is assessed by comparing the conceptual proximity of two constructs with the aim of demonstrating that a construct presumed to be substantively distinct is not too strongly associated with the focal measure (Kline, 2016). For this purpose, we selected two constructs in order to rule out substantive equivalence with NCTM. The first was a news media evaluation (NME), and the second was news media literacy (NML).

To test the discriminant validity of NCTM, we estimated (a) a two-factor model in which each set of items loaded exclusively on its theoretically corresponding latent construct, and (b) a one-factor model in which all items were constrained to load on a single latent factor by fixing the correlation between the two latent variables to 1.0. The one-factor model is a nested (more restrictive) version of the two-factor specification, differing only in this single constraint. Because the models are nested, their relative fit can be assessed using a chi-square

difference test with one degree of freedom. A significant deterioration indicated by the chi-square difference test—and by declines in model fit indices—in the constrained (one-factor) model suggests that the two constructs cannot be treated as identical, thereby supporting discriminant validity (see Hayes, 2005).

In the case of NME and NML, we estimated two hierarchically nested CFA models with WLSMV to account for the ordinal nature of the indicators. In the unconstrained two-factor model, NCTM (with the same structure as in Model 6) and NME (five-item loading on one latent factor), and in subsequent analysis NML (seven-item loading on one latent factor), were freely correlated. In contrast, the constrained model fixed the correlation between NCTM and the respective comparison construct to 1.0, effectively treating all items as indicators of a single latent factor.

In both cases (see Table 9), the unconstrained model showed a substantially better fit than the constrained alternative, and the chi-square difference tests confirmed a large and statistically significant deterioration in model fit when the latent correlation was fixed to unity (NME: scaled $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 1477.90$, $p < .001$; NML: scaled $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 1511.70$, $p < .001$). In the unconstrained models, the estimated latent correlation between NCTM and NMPE was fair ($r = .54$), whereas the correlation between NCTM and NML was negligible ($r = .05$) (Allen, 2017), and both were well below the commonly used thresholds for discriminant-validity concerns (.75–.90) (Cheung et al., 2024). The relative changes in fit indices further corroborate that NCTM and NMP/NML represent empirically distinct constructs.

Table 9
NTCTM Discriminant Validity Tests

Construct	Latent *r* with NCTM	Fit Measures[a]	Single-Factor Model[a]	Two-Factor Model[a]	Improvement in Fit from Single to Two-Factor Model (χ^2 diff. test and Δ of fit measures) [a]
		χ^2 (df)[b]	10057.69 (41)	4120.17 (40)	1477.9 (1)
NMP	.54	CFI	.869	.947	.078
		SRMR	.134	.091	-.043

		RMSEA	.276	.178	-.098
		χ^2 (df)[b]	10878.76 (62)	686.59 (61)	1511.7 (1)
NML	.05	CFI	.786	.988	.212
		SRMR	.285	.050	-.235
		RMSEA	.109	.073	-.036

[a] Model fit indices (e.g., χ^2, CFI, RMSEA) are reported in their scaled form, as computed using the WLSMV estimator. Scaled values account for categorical data to provide more robust estimates compared to conventional maximum likelihood methods.
[b] All values are significant at the $p < .001$ level.

Discussion

This study elaborated upon the theoretical foundations of the Normative-Cohesive Trust in Media (NCTM) measurement introduced by Smejkal et al. (2024) and subsequently applied in later research (Macková et al., 2023, 2025; Slavík et al., 2025), and provides validation. The theorization of NCTM as a latent construct of trust in media composed of two closely related yet distinct dimensions was supported empirically through a series of analyses conducted on three representative samples of the adult Czech population collected in 2019, 2020, and 2022.

A set of confirmatory factor analyses demonstrated that the latent NCTM construct—comprising of Normative Dimension of Trust in Media (NDTM), which is defined as confidence that news media will reliably act according to normative professional journalistic standards rooted in an ethos of objectivity, and Cohesive Dimension of Trust in Media (CDTM), which is defined as confidence that the news media will reliably uphold one's in-group identity—provides a superior solution compared to a unidimensional specification or a model with two independent factors. Although a two-correlated-factors specification performed equally well in technical terms, subsequent analyses confirmed that the higher-order factor and its two dimensions exhibit good reliability. While the second-order factor explains a substantial share of variance (especially in NDTM), both NDTM and CDTM retain meaningful unique variance that enables their use as separate measures.

The measurement also demonstrated full measurement invariance across gender, age, education, and usage of SNS. NCTM also demonstrated convergent validity, because it was

positively associated with generalized trust in most of the media and with trust in mainstream television stations. Finally, NCTM demonstrated discriminant validity because it was proved to be empirically distinct from news media evaluation, which represents part of the process through which NCTM is formed, and from news media literacy.

This study also responds to the recent calls for theory-based assessments of trust in media (Fawzi et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2026; Strömbäck et al., 2020). NCTM builds on existing theorizations (Fawzi et al., 2021; Kohring & Matthes, 2007) and extends them by grounding trust in media in systemic theory (Giddens, 1990; Luhmann, 1979). This enables the conceptualization of trust in media as trust in a specific expert system that reduces the excessive complexity of everyday life. This emphasis can help to overcome the limits of the definitions of trust in media, drawing on broad characteristics, such as "democratic functions" (cf. Fawzi et al., 2021; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Liu et al., 2026). Moreover, NCTM further extends the existing theorizations through the elaboration of its normative and cohesive dimensions, which builds on normative media theory, socially constructivist perspectives, social identity and social comparison theory, and which explicitly involves the acknowledgement that trust in media does built on audience expectations as linked both with journalistic objectivity and identity oriented needs for representation. The dimensionality of NCTM represents two manifestations of journalistic professionalism while also addressing individual audience needs (cf. Fawzi et al., 2021). This theoretical framework not only facilitates a clearer operationalization but also helps eliminate the conceptual and measurement confusion that often leads scholars to conflate trust in media with related concepts, especially credibility (Fisher, 2016; Liu et al., 2026; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). Our approach avoids defining or measuring trust in media institutions through features of news content or coverage (cf. Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020), so it does not drift toward the concepts of source or content credibility (Metzger et al., 2003).

We also believe that by defining and validating NCTM, we have contributed to the integration of identity-oriented trust in media into the broader concept of general trust in media. Qualitative evidence repeatedly shows that audiences rely on the media to represent and defend their group identities (Coleman et al., 2012; Nelson & Lewis, 2023; Pasitselska, 2022), yet this dimension has still not been incorporated into the general conceptualizations of media (Aharoni, 2025). Our findings indicate that although certain groups, such as voters of populist parties, may attribute greater importance to this dimension, which was already demonstrated (Smejkal et al., 2024), CDTM is not only relevant to less politically pluralistic groups. This study shows that CDTM is an important component of trust for the general population, and that, with NDTM, it forms a single phenomenon.

The results also show that the two dimensions are closely related. They represent two tightly connected, yet still distinct, expressions of a general expectation of journalistic professionalism. Trust that is based on the representation of "us" and "our world" is therefore accompanied by trust in impartial, independent, and fact-based journalistic work. At first glance, this dynamic may appear paradoxical, although it is only seemingly so. When we, for illustration, focus on how audiences perceive news outputs, it becomes clear that almost any form of highly objective news reporting simultaneously offers space for interpretation through lens-group identities, which are implicitly or explicitly represented within that reporting. At the same time, even highly in-group oriented (e.g., partisan) news content in many cases contains some degree of factuality, independence, or impartiality.

Analyses based on two cross-sectional representative samples also show that this dynamic likely reflects a changing societal context. The year 2022 followed the end of the COVID-19 pandemic but brought another series of major shocks, including the onset and continuation of the war in Ukraine. These developments deepened feelings of insecurity, both informational and material. It is evident that the cumulative impact of these crises was

accompanied by a shift in how people perceived NCTM. The construct became somewhat more homogeneous. The association between NDTM and CDTM strengthened, correlations increased both within each dimension and, even more notably, across them, and internal consistency rose. As a result, the reliable variance of the individual dimensions decreased, which indicates a reduced ability to use the two dimensions independently and the stronger reliability of the higher-order latent construct.

We consider that this development was expected. Trust is measured as a relational attitude that does not remain static. In times of crisis, there is a tendency toward what is often described as the "rally 'round the flag" effect, a pattern in which trust in public institutions increases because they possess the resources to address crises and because they symbolize and reinforce unity in the face of a threat (de León et al., 2022; Knudsen et al., 2021; Westlund & Ghersetti, 2015). This effect may not be only quantitative (i.e., a general rise in the level of trust), but also qualitative (i.e., a shift in its character) (McLeod et al., 1994; Slavík et al., in press). We argue that in 2022 the trust that the media would adhere to the principle of objectivity in news production became more closely interwoven with the trust that the media would also represent and defend the identities of the audiences.

One possible mechanism behind this shift may have been an intensification or broadening of the prevailing concept of "we." The sense of group belonging may have expanded from partial or narrowly defined identities toward a more universal understanding of one's identity, like that of a citizen threatened by declining living standards. The government of the Czech Republic emphasized the shared Czech identity and solidarity with Ukraine during this period, which further supported this tendency (Úřad vlády České republiky, 2022). Mutuality and solidarity in the broader societal context also increased (STEM, 2025). The media could have reproduced and reflected this framing both intentionally, for instance through a focus on shared exposure to risks and suffering or

through coverage of policies aimed at mitigating the effects of the crisis, and unintentionally, through routine reporting. Under these circumstances, objectively oriented news production may have come to be interpreted more strongly as performance oriented to represent "us." These developments placed pressure on the latent construct and its two dimensions. This pressure likely contributed to a tendency toward greater unidimensionality, which was reflected in a somewhat weaker RMSEA and a slight decrease in the reliable variance of CDTM below the threshold for independent use. Despite these shifts, the structure of NCTM remains acceptable even in such an exceptional context. At the same time, the internal dynamics observed here highlight the need for further research on the structure and behavior of NCTM.

The solid validity and reliability of the NCTM measurement contribute, in our view, to addressing how trust in media can be studied within a high-choice media environment, where individuals increasingly select specific media sources (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2022). Measuring trust in media that serve as individually important sources of news and information corresponds more accurately to contemporary conditions, in which it is largely unrealistic for audiences to have meaningful experience with media "in general." Instead, audiences create their own media repertoires (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018). Despite this individualized orientation, the NCTM measure still allows for population-level aggregation. Our findings also demonstrate that trust in these personally relevant media is associated with other forms of institutional trust and tends to be higher than generalized trust in media. We expect this gap to be even more pronounced in media environments that are more fragmented than the Czech one (Tóth et al., 2022). In such contexts, the measurement approach presented here may serve as a more valid complement to, or even an alternative to, generalized measures of trust in media. Comparing trust in both types of media objects over time may help identify the extent to which the "crisis of trust in media" (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023)

is driven by a decline in the relevance or representativeness of media in general as an object to which individuals assign trust.

Despite the strengths outlined above, our analyses also revealed several limitations and opportunities for improving the current form of the NCTM measurement. In both the 2020 and 2022 samples, the EFA indicated a substantial cross-loading of Item 4, "For people like me, this professional media can be trusted because they show the world as I think it really is," which belongs to the CDTM dimension but loaded noticeably onto NDTM. Although the subsequent CFA confirmed that the two dimensions remain acceptably distinct despite their close association, rephrasing this item could further improve measurement performance. A formulation such as "People like me can trust these media because they show the world the way we see it" may better reflect the underlying identity-based mechanism and reduce the conceptual overlap with normative objectivity expectations.

The development of the NCTM instrument has been guided from the outset by the goal of maximum simplicity because we believe that the high level of complexity reduces its practical usability (cf. Kohring & Matthes, 2007). However, including only three items in each dimension creates constraints for CFA model specification, decreases model stability, increases the demands placed on validity testing, and leaves limited room for adjusting the composition of dimensions when needed. Further instrument development is therefore needed to add at least one well-constructed item to each dimension.

Despite these limitations, we believe that the NCTM is an acceptably valid instrument for measuring trust in media in the contemporary high-choice media environment with fragmenting audiences (Schulz et al., 2019; Tóth et al., 2022). Our intention from the outset was to construct a tool that could be used across different contexts. We therefore encourage its application in countries other than the Czech Republic, which is characterized by relatively

low levels of media and political polarization (Tóth et al., 2022). Cross-contextual use requires careful translation.

Our measures are intentionally non-specific regarding media outlets that are considered to be trusted, but NDTM has been successfully used for these purposes (Slavík et al., 2025), and we believe that the entire NCTM instrument can be applied in the same way. However, researchers may also include open or closed questions about specific media outlets that are important to respondents, as presented in both versions used in the Czech context (see Appendix). This addition makes it possible to gain a more detailed understanding of the levels and dynamics of trust within or across specific media and social environments.

Such information enables, for example, comparisons between individuals who identify public service media among their important news sources and those who do not. It also allows comparisons between people who mainly rely on mainstream media and those who report partisan or alternative outlets among their key sources. These comparisons may reveal how trust varies across different audience segments and how the structure of media repertoires shapes the development of trust in media.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Czech Science Foundation as part of the Trust in Media in a Fragmented Media Environment: The Case of the Czech Republic project (Grant No. GA19-09103S) and the Political Polarization in the Czech Republic: The Case of a Multi-party System project (Grant No. GA19-24724S). This work was also supported by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic as part of the “Systemic Risk Institute”, National Recovery Plan (NPO) (Grant No. LX22NPO5101), and funded by the European Union–Next Generation EU (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, NPO: EXCELES).

We used Microsoft 365 Copilot with Enterprise Data Protection (version 2.20260331.51.0) for grammar corrections and minor style refinements. We carefully reviewed all suggestions from this service to ensure that the quality, accuracy, and meaning of the original text are preserved, the text was then professionally proofread.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Supplementary materials

Table A1

Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), Percentages, and McDonald's Omegas (ω) of All Study Variables

	S1 (2019/2020)			S2 (2020)			S3 (2022)		
	M (SD)	%	ω	M (SD)	%	ω	M (SD)	%	ω
NCTM	3.11 (0.78)		.91	3.51 (0.76)		.89	3.27 (0.81)		.92
Age					25.5% 18-34			25% 18-34	
					36.0% 35-54			35.9% 35-54	
					38.5% 55+			39.1% 55+	
Gender					51.0% female			51.5% female	
					49.0% male			48.5% male	
Education					11.7% elementary			11.9% elementary	
					34.9% high school without graduation			33.8% high school without graduation	
					34.4% high school with graduation			34.6% high school with graduation	
					19.0% university			19.7% university	
Using of OSN					72% yes				
					28% no				
NMPE	3.18 (0.77)		.70						
NML							4.03 (0.69)		
Trust in most media							2.79 (1.28)		
Trust in mainstream TV stations							2.99 (0.79)		.83
Trust in journalists							2.49 (1.02)		
Trust in science							3.51 (1.01)		
Trust in state and government institutions							2.30 (1.11)		

Trust in health system	3.41 (1.03)
Social trust	2.71 (1.04)

Ensuring NCTM sample consistency across S1–S3

While in S1 and S2 both the question wording and the statements were explicitly focused on professional media, this was not the case for S3 (see Table A2 below). In all three studies, however, respondents also indicated which media outlets they considered to be among their important (professional) sources of news and information. This made it possible to ensure that the sample in all three cases consisted only of individuals who listed at least one professional media outlet among their key sources of news and information.

This was achieved in the following way. In S1 respondents had the opportunity to indicate up to three important sources of news and information in an open-ended question. These responses were subsequently coded according to the "Typology of Domestic News Websites" developed by the Independent Journalism Foundation (Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky, 2018). Respondents who listed only "anti-system websites" or "opinion dailies" as their important sources—i.e., who did not include any outlets that fall within the remaining media landscape, meaning professional media—were removed from the sample.

In S2 and S3, respondents selected from a list of professional and alternative media the outlets they considered important sources of news and information. Based on this question, and using the same logic as in the previous cases, only those respondents who indicated at least one professional media outlet were retained in the sample.

The wording of used measures

NCTM

Table A2

Diferences Betwen Wording of NCTM between S1, S2, and S3

	S1 (2019)	S2 (2020)	S3 (2022)
Question	Consider the professional media you find an important source of news and information for you. Now we would like to know whether you consider them trustworthy and why. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?		Consider **the media** you find an important source of news and information for you. Now we would like to know. **To what extent do you trust them, and why.** How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Item 1	These professional media can be trusted because they are independent in their work.		
Item 2	These professional media can be trusted because they focus on important facts and important topics.	Same as in S1	
Item 3	These professional media can be trusted because they work with verified information.		
Item 4	For people like me, this professional media can be trusted because they show the world as I think it really is.		Same as in S1
Item 5	These professional media can be trusted because they stand for political opinions that match what people like me think.		
Item 6	This professional media sources can be trusted because they oppose the interests and opinions that are not close to people like me.		

News Media Literacy

A short 8-item version (Geers et al., 2020) of the original 15-item scale (Ashley et al., 2013) was used. It was measured by asking the statement, e.g. "News media choose news items that attract as many people as possible" (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

Normative media performance evaluation (NMPE)

Respondents evaluate their perceptions of actual media performance on five statements "Czech media make a strong effort to look at political issues from different points of view."; "Czech media are influenced by political elites."; "Czech media often defend or promote a particular political party."; "Czech media report impartially.";" Rather than appealing to emotions, Czech media work with arguments." (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree was inverted in the case of the second and third statements).

Trust in most of the media

It was measured by asking the statement, "I consider most professional media (television, online news, radio, or print) to be trustworthy sources of news and information" (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

Trust in mainstream TV stations

Respondents evaluate how they trust in each from four mainstream TV stations broadcasting main news, by the which were the public service broadcaster Česká televize and the commercial stations Prima TV, CNN Prima News, and Nova TV (Štětka, 2025). In each case they answer the question "Are you familiar with the following media? And if so, how trustworthy do you consider them to be?" (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely untrustworthy to 5 = absolutely trustworthy).

Trust in jounalists

It was measured by asking the statement, “Journalists can be trusted” (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

Trust in state and government institutions

It was measured by asking the statement, “Journalists can be trusted” (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

Trust in science

It was measured by asking the statement, “Current science can be trusted” (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

Trust in health system

It was measured by asking the statement, “The healthcare system can be trusted.” (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

Gender

Respondents selected whether they identified as male (1) or female (2).

Age

Respondents’ age was indicated in six categories (18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–64 years old, and 65 and older). For the analysis, the variable was recoded into 18–34, 35–45, and 55+ years.

Education

Respondents selected highest level of education attained: elementary education, high school without graduation, high school with graduation, or university. For the analysis, education was recoded into three categories: primary education (elementary school and secondary school without graduation), secondary education (high-school graduation), and university education.

Usage of online social networks

It was measured by asking the statement, “Do you use any online social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, or Telegram?” (1 = yes; 2 = no).

Table A3

Invariance Analyses for Model 6

Variable	Survey	Invariance	χ^2 (df)[a]	CFI[a]	RMSEA (90% CI)[a]	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)	ΔCFI	ΔRMSEA	ΔSRMR	Invariance test result
Gender	S1	Configural	111.49 (12)	.998	.079 (.066–.093)	. 014					
		Metric	65.66 (18)	.999	.045 (.033–.056)	. 015	9.90 (6)	.001	-.034	.001	Fully passed
		Scalar	63.54 (42)	1.000	.020 (.008–.028)	. 015	24.22 (24)	.001	-.025	-	Fully passed
	S3	Configural	183.05 (12)	.996	.120 (.105–.136)	.015					
		Metric	177.98 (18)	.996	.095 (.082–.108)	.019	56.58 (6)	-	-.025	.004	Fully passed
		Scalar	115.68 (42)	.998	.042 (.033–.051)	.019	39.65 (24)	.002	-.053	-	Fully passed
Age	S1	Configural	99.60 (18)	.998	.071 (.058–.085)	.016					
		Metric	195.82 (30)	.997	.079 (.069–.090)	.027	95.56 (12)	−.001	.008	.011	Fully passed
		Scalar	467.53 (78)	.992	.075 (.068–.082)	.039	307.56 (48)	−.005	−.004	.012	Fully passed
	S3	Configural	164.58 (18)	.997	.111 (.096–.127)	.015					

		Metric	188.01 (30)	.997	.089 (.077–.102)	.022	73.71 (12)	-	-.022	.007	Fully passed
		Scalar	314.90 (78)	.995	.068 (.060–.076)	.027	192.48 (48)	-.002	-.021	.005	Fully passed
Education	S1	Configural	127.33 (18)	.998	.083 (.069–.096)	.016					
		Metric	128.72 (30)	.998	.061 (.050–.072)	.023	49.35 (12)	-	-.022	.007	Fully passed
		Scalar	204.48 (78)	.998	.043 (.036–.050)	.024	109.86 (48)	-	-.018	.001	Fully passed
	S3	Configural	177.35 (18)	.996	.116 (.101–.132)	.015					
		Metric	173.66 (30)	.997	.085 (.073–.098)	.020	56.21 (12)	.001	–.031	.005	Fully passed
		Scalar	176.74 (78)	.998	.044 (.035–.052)	.022	87.11 (48)	.001	–.041	.002	Fully passed
Using of OSN	S1	Configural	114.87 (12)	.998	.080 (.067–.094)	.015					
		Metric	116.22 (18)	.998	.064 (.053–.075)	.019	38.23 (6)	-	-.016	.004	Fully passed
		Scalar	313.56 (42)	.994	.070 (.062–.077)	.025	207.57 (24)	-.004	.006	.006	Fully passed
	S3	Configural	153.32 (12)	.997	.112 (.096–.128)	.013					
		Metric	99.60 (18)	.998	.069 (.056–.083)	.015	19.17 (6)	.001	-.043	.002	Fully passed
		Scalar	131.52 (42)	.998	.048 (.038–.057)	.016	72.86 (24)	-	-.021	.001	Fully passed

[a] Model fit indices (χ^2, CFI, RMSEA) are reported in their scaled form, as computed using the WLSMV estimator. Scaled values account for categorical data, providing more robust estimates compared to conventional maximum likelihood methods

Additional questions on individually important media outlets

Which professional media outlets are an important source of news and information for you? Please list up to three such media outlets. (We are asking about specific television or radio stations and specific online servers, newspapers, and magazines.)

(1) _____

(2) _____

(3) _____

Which media are an important source of news and information for you? Please select all that are important to you from the following list:

☐ TV Nova (tn.nova.cz)

☐ TV Prima nebo CNN Prima News (cnn.iprima.cz)

☐TV Barrandov (barrandov.tv/moje-zpravy.cz)

☐ Seznam zprávy (seznamzpravy.cz) / Televize Seznam

☐ Česká televize (ct24.ceskatelevize.cz)

☐ Český rozhlas (irozhlas.cz, radiozurnal.rozhlas.cz)

☐ Česká tisková kancelář (ceskenoviny.cz)

☐ Rádio Impuls, Frekvence 1, Evropa 2 (alespoň jedno z nich)

☐ MF Dnes (iDnes.cz)

☐ Lidové noviny (lidovky.cz)

☐ Hospodářské noviny (ihned.cz)

☐ Právo

☐ Deník (denik.cz)

☐ Metro (metro.cz)

☐ Novinky.cz

☐ Aktuálně.cz

☐ E15.cz

☐ Info.cz

☐ Tiscali (tiscali.cz)

☐ Reflex (reflex.cz)

☐ Respekt (respekt.cz)

☐ Euro.cz (euro.cz)

 Fórum 24 (forum24.cz) Týdeník Fórum

 Blesk, Super.cz, Aha, Extra.cz and similar media and their online versions (at least one of them)

 Deník N (denikn.cz)

 Echo24 (echo24.cz)

 A2larm nebo Deník Referendum (alespoň jedno z nich)

 Naše pravda

 Parlamentní listy

 Internet media as CZ24 News, AC24, Aeronet, Protiproud, Pravý prostor, Svobodný vysílač, Otevři svou mysl, První zprávy nebo Středoevropan (at least one of them)

 Other, please specify: _____

 None

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Study 2

Stable trust in chaotic times: An exploratory analysis of trust in public service media before and during polycrisis

Abstract

A body of research has explored trust in the media, yet the reasons behind its stability in times of crisis remain unclear. This study examines whether stable trust in public service media (PSM) reflects continuity in the selected drivers of the trust or whether crises alter these effects, with some factors enhancing trust and others diminishing it, effectively balancing each other out. Drawing on three representative cross-sectional surveys from the Czech Republic (2019, 2020, and 2022), we analyze how socio-economic, media-related, and socio-political correlates of trust in Czech Television—the national PSM—evolved before and during overlapping crises, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Despite considerable turbulence, the effects of individual variables remained largely stable. This suggests that trust in PSM may be diffuse in nature—anchored both in long-term experience and perceived public value. The findings contribute to the understanding of trust in PSM under conditions of societal disruption.

Keywords: COVID-19, War in Ukraine, trust in media, public service media, Czech Television

Introduction

Public trust is crucial for the media to effectively serve their informational, watchdog, and social roles (Usher, 2020; Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024). Trust in media becomes especially critical during crises, when reliable information is vital for human health and social cohesion (Klemm et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2014; Melki & Kozman, 2021). During the recent polycrisis (Henig & Knight, 2023) of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, which seriously impacted Europe, media trust fluctuated, both upwards (Knudsen et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2022) and downwards (Adam et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2022). In some cases, it remained relatively stable (Von Viehmann et al., 2020), particularly with public service media (PSM) (Newman et al., 2022). Previous research shows that trust in media is associated with various individual correlates, which can be grouped into three types: socio-economic, media-related, and socio-political (Fawzi et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2017; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). It remains unclear whether the stable levels of trust during the polycrisis stem from stable drivers. This study seeks to contribute to theories of media trust by examining whether stability in public trust in PSM during periods of polycrisis reflects continuity in its key correlates or whether shifts in these correlates occur but offset one another in ways that ultimately preserve the overall trust levels.

To explore this question, we adapt Easton's (1975) distinction between diffuse and specific support for public institutions. Whereas the diffuse form of trust is rooted in the general, relatively stable significance of the institution in public life, the specific form of trust is based on the fulfilment of context-dependent, crisis-related public needs. A potential shift in the effect of media trust correlates may indirectly indicate the kind of trust that prevails for PSM during the polycrisis. In the first scenario, stable trust would imply a consistent weight for the correlates of trust in PSM, whereas the second would suggest relative volatility. The volatility of the effect of media trust, which underlies specific trust in media, may stem from

two crisis-related dynamics: the *"rally 'round the flag"* effect (de León et al., 2022; Knudsen et al., 2021; Westlund & Ghersetti, 2015) and the *"betrayal-fatigue"* effect (Cushion et al., 2022; McLeod et al., 1994; Melki & Kozman, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2020; Pasitselska, 2022; Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023). The former, which is typical at the onset of a crisis, links media trust to news consumption, the mobilization of institutional trust, and social cohesion. The latter reflects fatigue from the crisis news coverage, dissatisfaction with the media and the political officials performance, and a shift of trust to personal networks.

To explore the potential changes in the underlying drivers of stable trust in the media during a polycrisis, we conducted a case study in in the Czech Republic, a mid-sized country located in the Central and Eastern European region, and examine the audiences of its public service media, Czech Television, whose trust levels remained stable throughout this period. Public service media are legally mandated to provide independent, balanced programming that serves the public interest rather than commercial or governmental agendas (UNESCO, 2008). In Czechia, they are funded through license fees that citizens and legal entities are required by law to pay directly. We employ three cross-sectional, representative surveys of the Czech population that were conducted at three time points—pre-crisis (late 2019), during the COVID-19 pandemic (end of 2020), and during the war in Ukraine (end of 2022)—and we investigate whether, and in what ways, the effect of selected correlates of trust in Czech Television changed across these periods. Theoretically, our interest lies in understanding the drivers of stable media trust during crises. Empirically, however, the use of cross-sectional data limits us to examining correlates rather than establishing causal relationships. We calculate regression models for each of the three data sets, with trust in Czech Television as a dependent variable. Independent variables comprise of the individual socio-economic, media-related, and socio-political correlates.

Our results indicate that trust in Czech Television has a diffused character (Easton, 1975): the observed stability of the trust across the polycrisis is linked to the relatively stable effect of Czech PSM trust correlates. Our exploratory findings suggest a possible path for conceptualizing and measuring diffuse trust in PSM. However, this needs to be validated through longitudinal data and non-proxy variables.

The polycrisis and the role of the media

Recent years can be characterized, particularly in the Central and Eastern European context, as a period of polycrisis, which is defined by the interconnection and/or overlap of multiple systemic crises (Henig & Knight, 2023; Lawrence et al., 2024: 2). The COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 to May 2023) and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (since February 2022) affected European societies in two main ways. First, there were specific consequences for each crisis, such as health risks, economic and social constraints, and war migration. Second, their converging effects included the amplification of the economic insecurity of the pandemic-related supply chain breakdowns by war-induced energy and commodity insecurity, which ultimately led to increasing inflation and threatened the standard of living of a large part of the population (Borger, 2022; UNHCR, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023).

The crises-related insecurities and disruptions emphasized the role of the news media. During crises, the perceived importance of the news media, including PSM, often increases (Jung & Moro, 2014; Lin et al., 2014; Lowrey, 2004; Melki & Kozman, 2021). However, the ability to inform citizens effectively, to maintain a manageable level of complexity in individuals' lives, and to provide a shared view of reality depends largely on the level of trust in the media (Coleman, 2012; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck, 2005). Also, this is where news media can eventually even take part in negative effects of crises. In the recent polycrisis, information uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic in some Central European

countries was linked to media and political skepticism, a pattern that was subsequently reproduced and amplified during the war in Ukraine (Wenzel, 2025). Trust in media, on which their ability to fulfill their crisis functions depends, is linked to a whole range of factors.

Trust in media and its correlates

Trust is a relationship where a trustor holds positive expectations about the reliability and the correctness of a trustee's performance (Fawzi et al., 2021). In communication studies, trust is commonly assessed at three levels: trust in the media system, trust in specific media outlets, and trust in journalists (Strömbäck et al., 2020). While often used interchangeably with credibility (Fisher, 2016), trust is distinct. Credibility refers to the perceived accuracy, believability, and the truthfulness of the news content. In contrast, trust in media is a future-oriented relationship based on positive expectations for the reliability and correctness of media performance (Engelke, 2019; Fawzi et al., 2021; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; van Dalen, 2019).

Existing research suggests that individual and structural factors shape trust in media. At the individual level, these can be categorized into three main types of correlates: socio-economic, socio-political, and media-related. Socio-economic characteristics—including gender, age, education, income, ethnicity, and religiosity—show mixed associations with media trust (Fawzi et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2017). Among socio-political correlates, positive associations have been found with social trust, trust in political institutions, political interest, participation, and political efficacy. In contrast, negative associations emerge with misanthropy, conspiratorial thinking, and alienation from political institutions. Partisanship and political extremity display more ambiguous patterns of association (Fawzi et al., 2021; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Media-related correlates—such as media use, exposure, and media literacy—tend to show inconclusive associations with media trust (Fawzi et al., 2021). However, hostile media perceptions, media bias, and media misconduct are associated negatively, whereas news quality and credibility are linked positively to trust in media (Fawzi et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2017).

At the structural level, in the societal domain, trust in media is often negatively associated with levels of human and economic development as well as with the prevalence of post-materialist values (Fawzi et al., 2021). In the area of political-system characteristics, the level of political polarization negatively impacts media trust. Moreover, the performance of democratic institutions demonstrates mixed associations with media trust (Fawzi et al., 2021).

Finally, media system characteristics—including the degree of political parallelism and media commercialization—are generally associated with lower trust (Fawzi et al., 2021). Moreover, PSM in democratic contexts tend to enjoy higher levels of trust, whereas state-owned media in non-democratic regimes are typically associated with lower trust (Fawzi et al., 2021; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

However, little is known about whether the correlates associated with media trust remain stable or whether their relative importance changes under crisis conditions.

Trust in media in a polycrisis: Diffuse or specific?

Both recent crises—the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine—offer opportunities to gain insights into audiences' attitudes toward news media. During the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, trust in media increased globally (Newman et al., 2020, 2021), although this trend partially reversed by 2022 (Newman et al., 2022). However, in some countries this pattern differed. In Norway trust rose significantly after the pandemic's outbreak and remained elevated for two years (Knudsen et al., 2023). Conversely, Switzerland

experienced a decline in trust in both mainstream (e.g., newspapers, commercial TV stations) and digital media within the first two months of the pandemic (Adam et al., 2023). Germany, meanwhile, saw relatively stable trust levels in mainstream media during the early months of the pandemic (Von Viehmann et al., 2020).

According to Reuters Digital News Reports, from 2018 to 2022, PSM across various countries remained largely unaffected by crisis-related fluctuations in trust (Adam et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2020, 2021, 2022). However, while these studies analyze trends in trust levels over time, they do not delve into the underlying causes, which may not be static.

Two explanations may account for the stable levels of public trust in media: either the drivers of trust in media remain stable, or major societal and political shifts alter their effects, with some boosting and others undermining trust, ultimately balancing each other out. We theorize these explanations with Easton's (1975) classic distinction between diffuse and specific support for public institutions. Diffuse support is deep, long-term loyalty to the political system itself. It reflects trust, legitimacy, and attachment that persist even when specific outcomes are disappointing. Specific support refers to approval based on short-term performance. It depends on whether people believe political leaders, institutions, or policies are delivering the desired outcomes. We draw on Easton's distinction (Curini et al., 2012; Easton, 1975) and argue that trust in media, like trust in other institutions, can be understood as a form of public support that takes either a diffuse or a specific form. First, diffuse trust stems from an institution's long-term significance in the trustor's life, including their experiences with the related symbols, ritual functions, and socialization processes. Applying this logic to PSM, if trust in PSM is largely diffuse, the stability of its level during crises likely reflects the continuity of the underlying causes, because short-term shocks may have only a limited effect on them.

Specific trust, by contrast, depends on meeting immediate needs and expectations, making it conditional and volatile (Easton, 1975). If public trust in PSM is primarily specific, the stability of its level during crises may result from offsetting effects among trust drivers. Negative evaluations in some areas could be counterbalanced by positive assessments in others. Prior research shows that drivers for trust can shift during crises even when overall levels remain stable (McLeod et al., 1994). The context of the recent polycrisis provides ample reason to assume that the effect of socio-political and media-related correlates on trust in PSM may also have evolved.

The drivers of trust in PSM in the polycrisis

When thinking about possible directions for the changes of the drivers of trust in PSM in the polycrisis, two distinct phenomena may be at play. The first is the "rally 'round the flag" phenomenon, which was adapted recently to media studies (Knudsen et al., 2023; Westlund & Ghersetti, 2015) from political science (Baker & Oneal, 2001; Hetherington & Nelson, 2003; Mueller, 1973), and which suggests that crises at their beginning foster unity around political actors and public institutions, including media, by maintaining resources, providing scarce and valuable information, and symbolizing societal cohesion that leads to increased trust (Aassve et al., 2024; Lövenmark et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2020; Viehmann et al., 2022; Yu & Liu, 2023). In contrast, the "betrayal-fatigue" phenomenon suggests that prolonged crises can erode trust because media and political institutions fail to deliver solutions or restore ontological security (Aassve et al., 2024; Johansson et al., 2021), and fail to meet the expectations of professionalism (Cushion et al., 2022; McLeod et al., 1994; Motal, 2022; Pasitselska, 2022; Toff & Nielsen, 2018; Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023).

To theorize how crises may alter the relative influence of socio-political and media-related drivers that shape trust in PSM, we build on the limited evidence for crisis-related

shifts in PSM trust (Adam et al., 2023; Macková et al., 2025; Motal, 2022; Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023) and complement it with studies on trust in professional mainstream media. This approach is warranted because PSM is frequently viewed as the core representatives for the mainstream media, and overall trust in mainstream outlets often derives from trust in PSM themselves (Sehl, 2020; Sehl et al., 2022; Tsfati et al., 2023). We begin with socio-political drivers and then turn to media-related ones, using the selected variables to consider whether a "rally 'round the flag" or a subsequent "betrayal-fatigue" dynamic is likely to appear, while acknowledging that some may exhibit only one of these patterns.

In the socio-political domain, two scenarios are plausible. The effect of interpersonal trust on trust in PSM may strengthen, because crisis coverage often highlights community cohesion and collective solidarity (Dinesen & Jæger, 2013). Alternatively, the relationship may weaken or even turn negative if institutions, including the media, fail to meet public expectations for addressing the crisis, leading individuals to rely more heavily on personal networks (Aassve et al., 2024).

Similarly, the effects of political interest and trust in politicians on trust in PSM may strengthen, because political leaders play a central role in shaping crisis narratives and responses (Boin et al., 2021; Kestilä-Kekkonen et al., 2022), and the media often report on, and at times collaborate, in these efforts (Hallin et al., 2023; Motal, 2022; Udris et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2023). Alternatively, as a crisis unfolds and political actors become increasingly discredited in the public eye, these effects may weaken or even turn negative (Flinders, 2021). Next, political antagonization can have a positive effect on trust in media because the media may satisfy "rally 'round the flag" expectations by emphasizing strong dichotomies, portraying some people as "heroes" and others as "villains" during the COVID-19 pandemic or framing the war in Ukraine through narratives of threat and protection, including the coverage of Ukrainian refugees (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022; Phillips et al., 2023). Such

coverage may be received positively, consistent with a “rally ’round the flag” dynamic, thereby increasing the salience of political antagonization in shaping trust in PSM. Alternatively, a “betrayal-fatigue” dynamic may emerge, reducing the public appetite for antagonistic framing and consequently diminishing the effect of political antagonization on trust in PSM. Finally, antipathy toward the European Union may also influence trust in PSM. Because EU policy measures played a central role in managing the polycrisis (European Council, 2024, 2025) and because they were widely reported by PSM[1], trust in these media may depend both on how audiences evaluate this coverage regarding their broader attitudes toward the EU. In the Czech context, segments of the public perceive PSM as biased with pro-European, pro-liberal, and pro-Western positions, and as insufficiently representing Czech national concerns (Macková et al., 2025; Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023). In a “rally ’round the flag” setting, EU-supportive coverage could strengthen the impact of EU antipathy on trust in PSM.

Media-related drivers may show similar variability. The association between trust in PSM and news consumption may strengthen as crises increase the demand for reliable information. However, this relationship may also weaken or even turn negative when intensive news exposure induces stress and leads individuals to adjust their consumption habits or distance themselves from news content (De Bruin et al., 2021; Melki & Kozman, 2021; Schranz et al., 2018). Also, during a polycrisis, the relationship between trust in PSM and trust in other media may shift. In such situations, media often adopt a cooperative role (Hallin et al., 2023; Motal, 2022) and help integrate the public around shared symbols and

[1] Czech television news routinely reported on the EU-level coordination of measures and policies; the procurement and approval of medicines; arrangements for cross-border movement; the use of COVID-19 certificates to confirm a negative test or immunity; the allocation of recovery and aid funds; and efforts to counter disinformation. In the context of the war in Ukraine, coverage focused on the implementation of economic sanctions against the Russian Federation; assistance provided to refugees; and measures to ensure the energy security of EU member states.

interests (McLeod et al., 2017). This crisis-driven performance may alter how trust in PSM relates to two specific dimensions of trust in professional media—cohesive and normative—of which PSM are a central component (Smejkal et al., 2024). Cohesive trust refers to the confidence that professional media represent and defends the interests of individuals as members of collective identities, such as the nation, local communities, or the public, thereby reinforcing group cohesion (Smejkal et al., 2024). During a "rally 'round the flag" phase, trust in PSM may therefore be positively associated with cohesive trust in other professional media. Normative trust, by contrast, rests on expectations that professional media adhere to the principles of objectivity, impartiality, and independence. However, cooperative and crisis-integrative roles may be perceived by audiences as compromising this professional ethos (Wien, 2005). Consequently, the association between normative trust in other media and trust in PSM may weaken or even turn negative.

Materials and methods

The context: Public service television in the Czech Republic

To examine whether stable trust in media during periods of crisis reflects continuity in its key drivers or whether shifts in these drivers occur but offset one another in ways that ultimately preserve overall trust levels, we focus on public service media, which function as islands of trust in European societies (Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023). Public service media, defined as media created, funded, and controlled by the public for the public (UNESCO, 2008), play a crucial role in dual European media systems. Their purpose is not profit but to provide non-partisan, independent news, education, and entertainment for society as a whole and all its parts (EBU, 2012). PSM were among the most used information sources during the pandemic (Mihelj et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2021) and they are valued for their societal functions in crises (Hasebrink, 2023; Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023).

In this context, we focus on Czech Television, the Czech PSM. Despite the serious impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine on Czech society (Kaniok, 2023; UNHCR, 2023), trust in Czech Television has remained stable over the years (Newman et al., 2020, 2021, 2022). This organization ranked as the most trusted media in the country (Štětka & Hájek, 2021) and among the most trusted in Europe (Česká televize, 2022). Unlike PSM in Poland, Hungary, or Slovakia, it maintains editorial independence similar to older European democracies (Połońska & Beckett, 2019).

Data

To explore and explain the notably stable level of media trust, we draw on data from three cross-sectional surveys (S1–S3) that were conducted before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent war in Ukraine (see Table 1). The study relies on a secondary analysis of datasets that were originally collected within projects that examined trust and distrust in professional and alternative media (S1, project ID GA19-09103S) the polarization of public opinion (S1, project ID GA19-24724S), and the effects of crises on media consumption and political attitudes (S3, project ID LX22NPO5101) (Čejková et al., 2025).

Each sample represents Czech adults (18+), with quotas for gender, age, education, settlement size, and region. The surveys combined Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) and Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). Data collection was conducted by external polling organizations affiliated with the Association of Market and Public Opinion Research Agencies (SIMAR), which obliges them to adhere to methodological and ethical standards in accordance with the ICC/ESOMAR International Code. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and their right to skip questions or withdraw. The research was conducted in accordance with Czech laws, rules, and the recommendations of the Research Ethics Committee at Masaryk University (Approval Nr.

EKV-2022-102).

Table 1

Description of Datasets

Survey	Collection	Context	*N*	*n* CAWI	*n* CAPI	*N* analyzed[a]
S1	2019/2020 (December–February)	No confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Czech Republic; first case reported on 1 March 2020. Government officials did not consider the virus significant.	3,251	2,113	1,138	2,692
S2	2020 (November–December)	First wave of the COVID-19 pandemic peaks; restrictions imposed on mobility and services; schools operate in special mode.	3,763	2,445	1,318	3,133
S3	2022 (December)	Russia invades Ukraine on 24 February 2022; by late 2022, continued rocket attacks on Ukrainian cities and infrastructure follow a successful Ukrainian counter-offensive. High energy prices and inflation.	2,340	1,772	568	1,896

[a] *N* analyzed is the number of cases entered in regression analyses after outlier treatment and listwise deletion.

Measures

Although the selection of variables for the analysis was partially constrained by their availability in datasets S1–S3, they were chosen to represent the three types of correlates for media trust as identified in the literature (Fawzi et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2017; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) and as relevant in crisis context. For variable descriptives and full item wordings, see the Appendix.

Dependent variable

Trust in Czech Television was measured by asking the question, "Are you familiar with the

following media? And if so, how trustworthy do you consider them to be?" "Czech Television" was among the included items (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely untrustworthy to 5 = absolutely trustworthy).

Independent variables

Socio-economic variables

Age: participants' age was indicated in six categories (18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–64 years old, and 65 and older).

Gender: participants selected whether they identified as male (1) or female (2).

Education: participants selected highest level of education attained: elementary education, high school without graduation, high school with graduation, or university.

Income sufficiency was measured by asking the statement, "The income of the household I live in covers all its needs" (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

Life satisfaction was measured by asking the statement "How satisfied are you overall with the life you lead?*"* (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely unsatisfied to 5 = absolutely satisfied).

Media-related variables

Trust in most media is linked to audiences' trust in professional news media because they share similar professional logic (Holt et al., 2019). It was measured by asking the statement, "I consider most professional media (television, online news, radio, or print) to be trustworthy sources of news and information" (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

News consumption was measured by asking the statement, "How often do you usually watch TV news, listen to the news on the radio, read the news in the newspaper, or follow the news via online social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.? Whether it is news about society,

politics, celebrities, sports, or even culture" (6-point scale: 1 = never to 6 = multiple times during the day).

Trust in journalists as representatives of media-expert systems and their "access points" (Giddens, 1990) was measured by asking the statement, "Journalists can be trusted" (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

Cohesive dimension of trust in professional media refers to the belief that professional media will serve and protect the in-group identity (i.e., enable the existence of imagined communities and related collective identities and stand for their interests; Smejkal et al., 2024). Participants indicated this evaluation in relation to their important sources of news and information. It was measured by asking the statement,[2] e.g. "These professional media can be trusted because they stand for political opinions that match what people like me think" (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

Normative dimension trust in professional media (Smejkal et al., 2024) refers to the belief that professional media will perform in accordance with normative ethos and the standard of objectivity, impartiality, and independence (Wien, 2005). Participants indicated this evaluation in relation to their important sources of news and information. It was measured by asking the statement, e.g. "These professional media can be trusted because they work with verified information" (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

Socio-political variables

Trust in most people was measured by asking the statement, "Most people can be trusted" (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

[2] For the exact wording of all of the multi-item measures, see the Measures Wording section in the Appendix.

Trust in politicians was measured by asking the statement, "Politicians can be trusted" (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

Political interest was measured by asking the statement, "How interested would you say you are in politics?" (10-point scale, 1 = lowest interest in politics to 10 = highest interest).

Antipathy towards the EU was measured by asking the statement, "Life in the Czech Republic would be better if the European Union did not exist" (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

Political antagonization refers to the perception of social and political actors and media institutions as illegitimate and dangerous (Hrbková et al., 2024). It was measured by asking the statement, e.g., "People whose opinions on important issues are opposite to mine can be dangerous for society" (5-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree).

Procedure

To answer the research question, we performed three hierarchical regression models (i.e., one for S1, one for S2, and one for S3). Separate hierarchical regression allows us to evaluate the explanatory power and strength of variables and also of the model within its specific dataset and to observe model fit differences across the three time points.

Prior to the data analysis, we examined all of the variables and checked the statistical assumptions (see Tables A1–A4 and Figures A1–A3 in the Appendix). We checked the mean differences across variables for S1, S2, and S3 (see Table A5 and A6 in the Appendix). Independent variables—(1) socio-economic, (2) media-related, and (3) socio-political—were added in blocks. We did not detect significant multicollinearity issues; correlations, VIF, and tolerance statistics were within acceptable levels (De Vaus, 2002). Minor deviations from normality and homoscedasticity were acceptable due to the large sample sizes, but we

removed several outliers (i.e., 35 cases in S1, 55 in S2, 56 in S3). Following a listwise deletion of missing values, final sample sizes were N_{S1} = 2,692, N_{S2} = 3,133, N_{S3} = 1,896. Analyses were performed in R and SPSS (ver. 30).

Results

A comparison of the means showed no statistically significant difference in trust in Czech Television between the time points (M_{S1} = 3.42, SD_{S1} = 1.13; M_{S2} = 3.46, SD_{S2} = 1.13; M_{S3} = 3.45, SD_{S3} = 1.17), $F(2, 5592.085) = 1.307$, $p = .271$. Accordingly, we confirmed a consistent and relatively high level of trust across the pre-crisis period, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and the invasion of Ukraine. Figure 1 below and Table A7 in the Appendix summarize the results of the three hierarchical regressions and reveal which statistically significant correlates contributed to the level of trust each year and whether their weight changed over time. Given that most variables were measured on five-point or higher scales, we distinguish statistically significant correlates by their substantive magnitude: those with effects of $\beta \geq .100$ are treated as main correlates, while those with effects below this threshold are considered additional (cf. Mickelberg et al., 2024).

In the pre-crisis period (S1), all media-related variables were statistically significant positive correlates of trust in Czech Television. Among them, the main ones were trust in most media ($\beta = .299$, $p < .001$), trust in journalists ($\beta = .184$, $p < .001$), and the normative dimension of trust in professional media ($\beta = .127$, $p < .001$). Additional positive correlates ($\beta < .100$) included the cohesive dimension of trust in professional media ($\beta = .087$, $p < .001$), news consumption ($\beta = .039$, $p = .016$), and gender as part of the socio-economic variables ($\beta = .044$, $p = .004$). In contrast, antipathy towards the EU ($\beta = -.208$, $p < .001$), age ($\beta = -.135$ $p < .001$) and political interest ($\beta = -.110$, $p < .001$) were the main negative correlates of trust in Czech Television.

In the second period, which was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic (S2), all media-related variables were again statistically significant for the main positive correlates of trust in Czech Television. These included trust in most media ($\beta = .226$, $p < .001$), the normative dimension of trust in professional media ($\beta = .218$, $p < .001$), the cohesive dimension of trust in professional media ($\beta = .147$, $p < .001$) and trust in journalists ($\beta = .109$, $p < .001$). An additional association was found for two socio-economic variables, namely gender ($\beta = .052$, $p < .001$) and education ($\beta = .042$, $p = .003$), as well as for one media-related variable, news consumption ($\beta = .042$, $p = .004$). In contrast, antipathy towards the EU was the only main negative association with trust in Czech Television ($\beta = -.199$, $p < .001$). Among the additional negative correlates were all other socio-political variables, along with one socio-economic variable: trust in politicians ($\beta = -.086$, $p < .001$), political interest ($\beta = -.089$, $p < .001$), and trust in most people ($\beta = -.078$, $p < .001$), and age ($\beta = -.067$, $p < .001$).

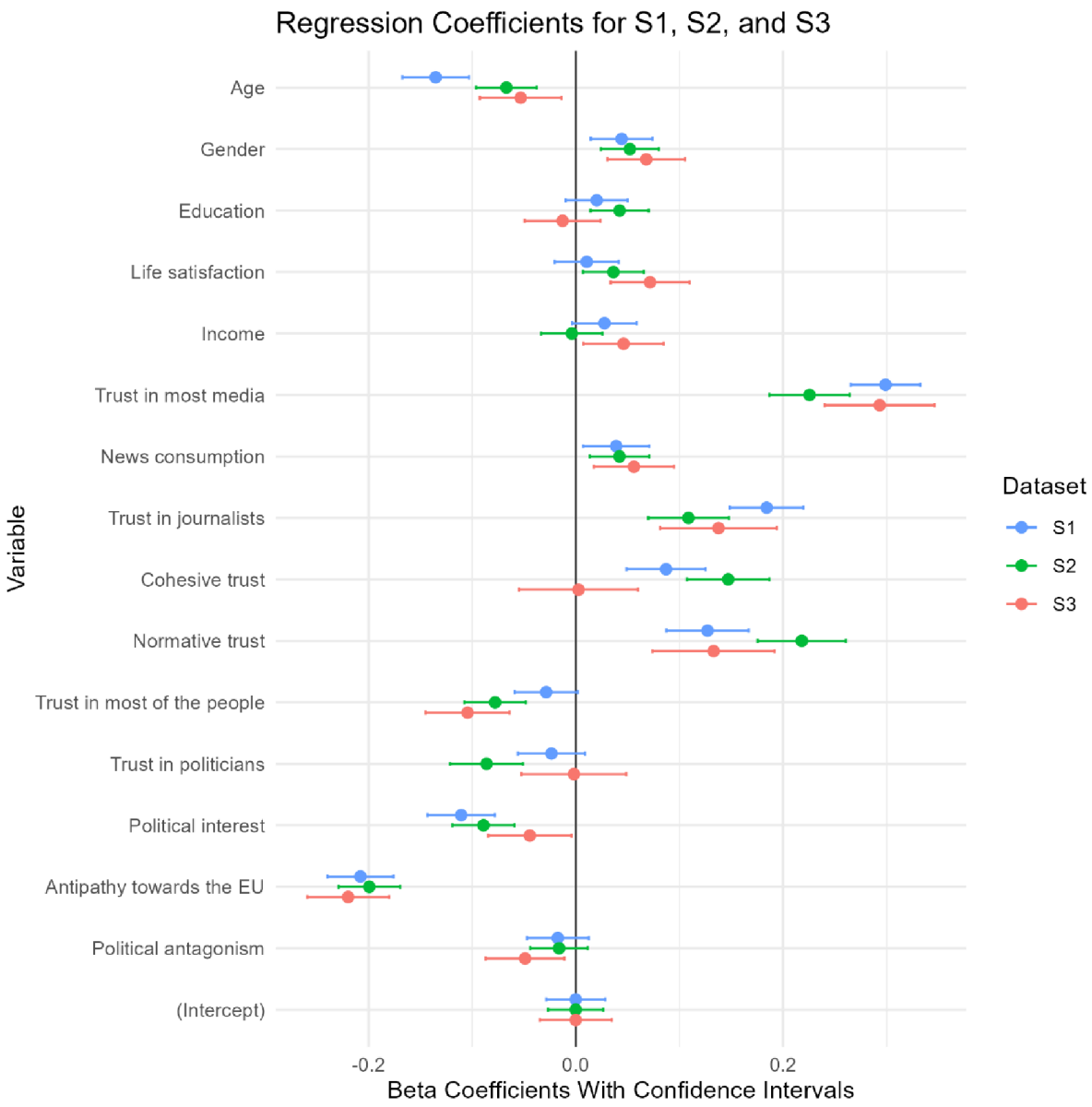
Finally, in the third period, which was marked by the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (S3), the same variables—except for the cohesive dimension of trust in professional media—were the main positive correlates of trust in Czech Television as in the 2020 (pre-crisis) model: trust in most media ($\beta = .293$, $p < .001$), trust in journalists ($\beta = .138$, $p < .001$), and the normative dimension of trust in professional media ($\beta = .133$, $p < .001$). Additional positive correlates included gender ($\beta = .068$, $p < .001$), life satisfaction ($\beta = .072$, $p < .001$), news consumption ($\beta = .056$, $p = .005$), and income ($\beta = .046$, $p = .020$). As in the previous two time points (S1 and S2), antipathy towards the EU ($\beta = -.220$, $p < .001$) was the main negative correlate of trust in Czech Television. It was joined by trust in most of the people ($\beta = -.104$, $p < .001$). Additional negative correlates included political interest ($\beta = -.044$, $p = .031$), political antagonism ($\beta = -.049$, $p = .012$), and age ($\beta = -.053$, $p = .008$).

In all three models, media-related variables resulted in the highest R^2 change ($\Delta R^2_{S1} = .312$, $\Delta R^2_{S2} = .312$, $\Delta R^2_{S3} = .284$), meaning that the media-related variables were more

important than the socio-economic and socio-political variables in predicting trust in Czech Television.

Figure 1

Visualization of Regression Coefficients with Only Significant Predictors Displayed (S1, S2, S3).



Discussion

This exploratory case study examined the drivers that underlie stable trust in Czech

Television, focusing on associations with socio-economic, media-related, and socio-political correlates before and during the polycrisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. While existing research highlights fluctuations in media trust during a crisis (Adam et al., 2023; Knudsen et al., 2023), this study addressed a gap in the understanding of the drivers that contribute to its stability.

Our findings suggest that the effects of the correlates of public trust in Czech Television across three cross sectional surveys exhibited only minor changes and maintained a high level of stability. Trust in Czech Television is strongly associated with trust in most media, trust in journalists, and trust in adherence to the normative standards of professional media work. Conversely, trust in Czech Television is negatively associated with antipathy toward the EU. In contrast, the effect of news consumption frequency over time is only marginal. Political interest also becomes marginal during crises. Moreover, trust in Czech Television shows only slight or negligible effects for socio-economic correlates, such as gender, education level, life satisfaction, and income sufficiency. The stability of trust correlates in Czech Television, despite the polycrisis, suggests that trust in Czech Television, and likely in other PSM as key legacy institutions, predominantly has the character of diffuse trust, which is grounded in the audiences' long-term experience with these institutions and their perceived societal value (Easton, 1975), which is the main implication of our study. We propose a more detailed explanation and outline a possible pathway for conceptualizing this diffuse trust in PSM through the unique multifaceted functions of this kind of media.

We suggest interpreting diffuse trust in Czech Television through the notion of a *keystone media outlet*. Keystone media have two defining characteristics: they provide essential, irreplaceable information and they exert systemic influence on the media landscape. Such outlets are considered nodal points within the media system (Nielsen, 2015).

The systemic significance of Czech Television within the national media landscape may be indicated by the presence of a "nexus of trust" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018), whereby trust in Czech Television is closely intertwined with trust in other mainstream media outlets. While our model conceptualizes this trust as influenced by other media-related trusts, the relationship may also be recursive. Czech Television may function as a "guardian of trust" (Mehta, 2007), setting benchmarks for trust in professional media more broadly through relevant, high-quality, and less commercialized content. Moreover, PSM operate under stricter regulations and are overseen by specialized oversight bodies, a governance structure whose existence the public perceives as an additional reason to place higher trust in Czech Television (Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023, 2025). This aligns with research that shows that trust in PSM and exposure to its news content is positively associated with overall media trust, and that PSM consumption is also positively associated with the consumption of commercial media (EBU, 2022; Newman et al., 2023; Udris et al., 2024).

Furthermore, we propose expanding the keystone media concept beyond the informative function to include PSM's roles in education, entertainment, and local content production, and their situational adaptability (Donders, 2012, 2023; Horowitz & Leino, 2020; Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023, 2025). While PSM is widely recognized as a key producer of quality news (Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023; Van Aelst et al., 2021), our findings show that news consumption has only a marginal effect on trust in Czech Television. This may suggest that non-news content, highly appreciated and expected by the public (Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023, 2025), may be one of the sources of the diffuse trust in PSM.

The case of Czech Television illustrates how trust may be fostered through the situational adaptability of non-news programming. Non-news content makes up over three-quarters of ČT1's schedule and it is largely locally produced (Týmová, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Czech Television launched an archive-based channel ČT3 for older

viewers to reduce their social isolation and fear, and it began the channel ČT Edu to support the education of domestic audiences and later Ukrainian child refugees (Česká televize, 2023). These initiatives highlight the role of PSM in providing adaptive, diverse programming that goes beyond potentially polarizing news and helps to maintain normalcy during crisis disruption and embed the brand in everyday life. That such trust, once established, may have a general character is supported by our finding that the associations between trust in Czech Television and the selected socio-economic variables were negligible.

However, the keystone function associated with diffuse trust is not without limitations. Trust in Czech Television was consistently negatively affected by antipathy toward the European Union. Recent evidence (Macková et al., 2025) indicates that such antipathy is linked to perceptions among some viewers that Czech Television favors pro-European, pro-liberal, and pro-Western positions, and neglects national concerns. For this part of the public, the media appears politicized and biased, which distances them from its keystone role as anchored in localized, non-news programming.

While our data suggest that trust in Czech Television is predominantly diffuse in character, they also indicate the presence of certain elements of specific trust based on the crisis related volatility of the drivers. The slight increase in the effect of cohesive trust in mainstream media during the COVID-19 pandemic may signal a modest "rally 'round the flag" dynamic. In addition, the growing negative effect of interpersonal trust on the trust in Czech Television between crises may indicate that disappointed individuals substitute declining media trust with greater reliance on social trust. This pattern aligns with recent evidence that shows that social and political trust can diverge in the face of shared threats, with negative perceptions of crisis management reducing political trust that turns individuals toward informal networks when institutions disappoint (Aassve et al., 2024). Further examination of this dynamic is essential, because the interplay between interpersonal and

institutional trust plays a critical role in managing crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Stefaniak et al., 2022).

Naturally, this study is not without limitations that warrant further investigation. It relies on a secondary analysis of existing data and it is constrained by both the range of available variables and the selection of time points. Incorporating additional and non-proxy variables would allow for a more rigorous test of the plausibility of diffuse trust in PSM and the applicability of the keystone media performance explanation. Specifically, capturing the level of the consumption of the examined medium and the level crisis-related concerns, and an evaluation of both its news and non-news content, could more robustly indicate the origins of trust in relation to crisis-driven phenomena of "rally 'round the flag" and "betrayal fatigue." The political conditionality of these phenomena could be better assessed by including measures of individual ideological affiliation and the perceptions of media bias. Finally, incorporating media literacy would enable control over the extent to which crisis-related trust is shaped by the ability to understand media operations.

Longitudinal designs with repeated measures across multiple time points then could address the constraints of the cross-sectional data, particularly when gathered only during later stages of a crisis. Future studies should examine whether similar patterns of media trust drivers apply to commercial media. Replicating this study in contexts with stronger political parallelism of PSM (e.g., Poland, Hungary; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019) could reveal whether crisis-related trust is more politically conditioned. Likewise, examining countries where public service media are not in a dominant position (e.g., the United States) could test whether diffuse, keystone-like trust can emerge in less expected environments. Such efforts would help further confirm the nature of trust in PSM as a form of diffuse trust that is rooted in keystone media functions.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Czech Science Foundation as part of the Trust in Media in a Fragmented Media Environment: The Case of the Czech Republic project (Grant No. GA19-09103S) and the Political polarization in the Czech Republic: The case of a multi-party system project (Grant No. GA19-24724S). This work was also supported by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic as part of the "Systemic Risk Institute", National Recovery Plan (NPO) (Grant No. LX22NPO5101), and funded by the European Union–Next Generation EU (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, NPO: EXCELES).

We used Microsoft 365 Copilot with Enterprise Data Protection (version 20251208.59.2) for grammar corrections and minor style refinements. We carefully reviewed all suggestions from this service to ensure the quality, accuracy, and meaning of the original text are preserved, the text was then professionally proofread.

We would like to thank the reviewers for their valuable feedback, which has contributed to improving the manuscript.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Supplementary materials

Measures wording

Cohesive dimension of trust in professional media: "For people like me, these professional media can be trusted because they show the world as it really is[3]"; "These professional media can be trusted because they stand for political opinions that match what people like me think"; "These professional media can be trusted because they oppose the interests and opinions that are not close to people like me".

Normative dimension trust in professional media: "These professional media can be trusted because they work with verified information[3]"; "These professional media can be trusted because they focus on important facts and topics"; "These professional media can be trusted because they are independent in their work".

Political antagonism: "People whose opinions on important issues are opposite to mine can be dangerous for society;" "Politicians whose opinions on important issues are opposite to mine should not be in politics;" "It is not worth following media that have different opinions on important issues than I do;" "It is not worth being friends with or talking to someone who has opinions that are opposite to mine on important issues".

[3] In S3, a slightly different wording was used (the word *"professional"* was omitted from all items, because only professional media was listed).

Table A1

Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), Percentages, and McDonald's Omegas (ω) of All Study Variables

	S1 (2019/2020)			S2 (2020)			S3 (2022)		
	M (SD)	%	ω	M (SD)	%	ω	M (SD)	%	ω
Trust in Czech Television	3.42 (1.13)			3.46 (1.13)			3.45 (1.17)		
Age		9.0% 18-24			9.1% 18-24			9.4% 18-24	
		16.5% 25-34			16.1% 25-34			15.6% 25-34	
		20.0% 35-44			20.1% 35-44			18.3% 35-44	
		16.0% 45-54			16.3% 45-54			17.6% 45-54	
		15.6% 55-64			15.9% 55-64			15.4% 55-64	
		22.9% 65+			22.5% 65+			23.6% 65+	
Gender		51.0% female			51.5% female			51.5% female	
		49.0% male			48.5% male			48.5% male	
Education		11.7% elementary			10.7% elementary			11.9% elementary	
		34.9% high school without graduation			35.1% high school without graduation			33.8% high school without graduation	
		34.4% high school with graduation			34.7% high school with graduation			34.6% high school with graduation	
		19.0% university			19.5% university			19.7% university	
Life satisfaction	3.59 (0.93)			3.80 (0.91)			3.66 (1.05)		
Income	3.41 (1.12)			3.61 (1.17)			3.35 (1.16)		
Trust in most media	3.06 (0.94)			2.92 (1.03)			2.79 (1.28)		
News consumption frequency	4.66 (1.32)			5.06 (1.15)			4.66 (1.40)		
Trust in journalists	2.71 (1.04)			2.57 (0.99)			2.55 (1.19)		
Cohesive trust	3.35 (0.83)		0.824	3.01 (0.79)		0.837	3.16 (0.82)		0.854
Normative trust	3.68 (0.85)		0.836	3.22 (0.90)		0.906	3.40 (0.89)		0.908
Trust in most of the people	2.99 (1.02)			3.02 (1.08)			2.75 (1.14)		
Trust in politicians	2.32 (1.05)			2.21 (0.96)			2.04 (1.19)		
Political interest	4.89 (2.75)			5.13 (2.73)			5.50 (2.79)		

Antipathy towards the EU	3.00 (1.30)		3.09 (1.31)		2.89 (1.31)	
Political antagonism	2.63 (0.87)	0.773	2.74 (0.90)	0.815	2.79 (0.84)	0.804

Table A2

Correlations of All Study Variables – S1

	Trust in Czech Television	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.
1. Age	−.207***														
2. Gender	.111***	−.174***													
3. Education	.067***	.036*	−.069***												
4. Life satisfaction	.100***	.006	−.005	.164***											
5. Income	.131**	−.072***	−.049**	.179***	.316***										
6. Trust in most media	.479***	−.043*	.042*	.006	.086***	.087***									
7. News consumption frequency	.070***	.302***	−.087***	.095***	.057**	.068***	.136***								
8. Trust in journalists	.386***	−.090***	.024	.065***	.063***	.071***	.356***	.069***							
9. Cohesive trust	.302***	.087***	.007	.014	.048**	.052**	.304***	.142***	.183***						
10. Normative trust	.376***	.015	.007	.092***	.105***	.124***	.336***	.193***	.261***	.636***					
11. Trust in most of the people	.069***	.139***	−.063***	.036*	.170***	.092***	.200***	.039*	.123***	.048**	.083***				
12. Trust in politicians	.144***	−.031	.016	−.003	.061***	.052**	.179***	.006	.446***	.087***	.084***	.133***			
13. Political interest	−.079***	.256***	−.265***	.165***	.065***	.119***	.01	.351***	.043*	.073***	.131***	.100***	.074***		
14. Antipathy towards the EU	−.362***	.169***	.007	−.170***	−.177***	−.183***	−.222***	−.058**	−.293***	−.063***	−.196***	−.127***	−.164***	−.104***	
15. Political antagonism	−.080***	.072***	−.031	−.105***	−.124***	−.081***	−.073***	−.081***	−.176***	.106***	−.072***	−.057**	−.145***	−.026	.140***

Note. Two-tailed correlation coefficients are displayed. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Table A3

Correlations of All Study Variables – S2

	Trust in Czech Television	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.
1. Age	−.166***														
2. Gender	.100***	−.187***													
3. Education	.100***	.01	.005												
4. Life satisfaction	.113***	−.003	.014	.123***											
5. Income	.095***	−.033*	−.093***	.190***	.381***										
6. Trust in most media	.438**	−.071***	.016	.032	.132***	.108***									
7. News consumption frequency	.083**	.167***	−.077***	.166***	.077***	.095***	.070***								
8. Trust in journalists	.350***	−.065***	.003	.033*	.106***	.077***	.628***	.016							
9. Cohesive trust	.417***	−.016	.012	−.006	.102***	.057***	.409***	.065***	.345***						
10. Normative trust	.502***	−.132***	.049**	.061***	.115***	.105***	.470***	.097***	.376***	.719***					
11. Trust in most of the people	.043**	.168***	−.056***	.032	.219***	.121***	.298***	.025	.311***	.142***	.113***				
12. Trust in politicians	.161***	−.015	.003	−.009	.104***	.088***	.513***	.009	.584***	.233***	.200***	.324***			
13. Political interest	−.03	.227***	−.258***	.163***	.066***	.142***	.057***	.324***	.082***	.032	.043**	.091***	.133***		
14. Antipathy towards the EU	−.370***	.156***	.022	−.205***	−.114***	−.158***	−.266***	−.095***	−.237***	−.192***	−.310***	−.070***	−.124***	−.111***	
15. Political antagonism	−.139***	.080***	−.057***	−.132***	−.077***	−.097***	−.014	−.111***	.047**	.071***	−.112***	.036*	.054**	−.001	.190***

Note. Two-tailed correlation coefficients are displayed. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Table A4

Correlations of All Study Variables – S3

	Trust in Czech Television	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.
1. Age	−.145***														
2. Gender	.076***	−.243***													
3. Education	.033	.146***	−.091***												
4. Life satisfaction	.093***	.054**	−.023	.124***											
5. Income	.172***	−.024	−.111***	.136***	.325***										
6. Trust in most media	.476***	−.051*	.009	.014	.107***	.137***									
7. News consumption frequency	.148***	.225***	−.150***	.154***	.022	.090***	.145***								
8. Trust in journalists	.432***	−.066**	.017	.008	.109***	.144***	.675***	.091***							
9. Cohesive trust	.286***	.115***	−.037	.014	.126***	.118***	.376***	.131***	.351***						
10. Normative trust	.363***	.014	.000	.036	.112***	.156***	.434***	.174***	.351**	.769***					
11. Trust in most of the people	.106***	.181***	−.090***	.103***	.266***	.164***	.344***	.109***	.351**	.260***	.212***				
12. Trust in politicians	.341***	−.082***	.007	.006	.128***	.171***	.611***	.034	.351**	.261***	.283***	.393***			
13. Political interest	−.04	.270***	−.275***	.174***	.031	.089***	−.005	.407***	.351**	.103***	.105***	.113***	−.02		
14. Antipathy towards the EU	−.425***	.119***	.03	−.149***	−.091***	−.211***	−.359***	−.128***	.351**	−.197***	−.257***	−.147***	−.326***	−.037	
15. Political antagonism	−.135***	.063**	−.051*	−.111***	−.141***	−.126***	−.079***	−.080***	.351**	.057**	−.032	−.067**	−.054**	.038	.190***

Note. Two-tailed correlation coefficients are displayed. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Figure A1

Correlations – S1

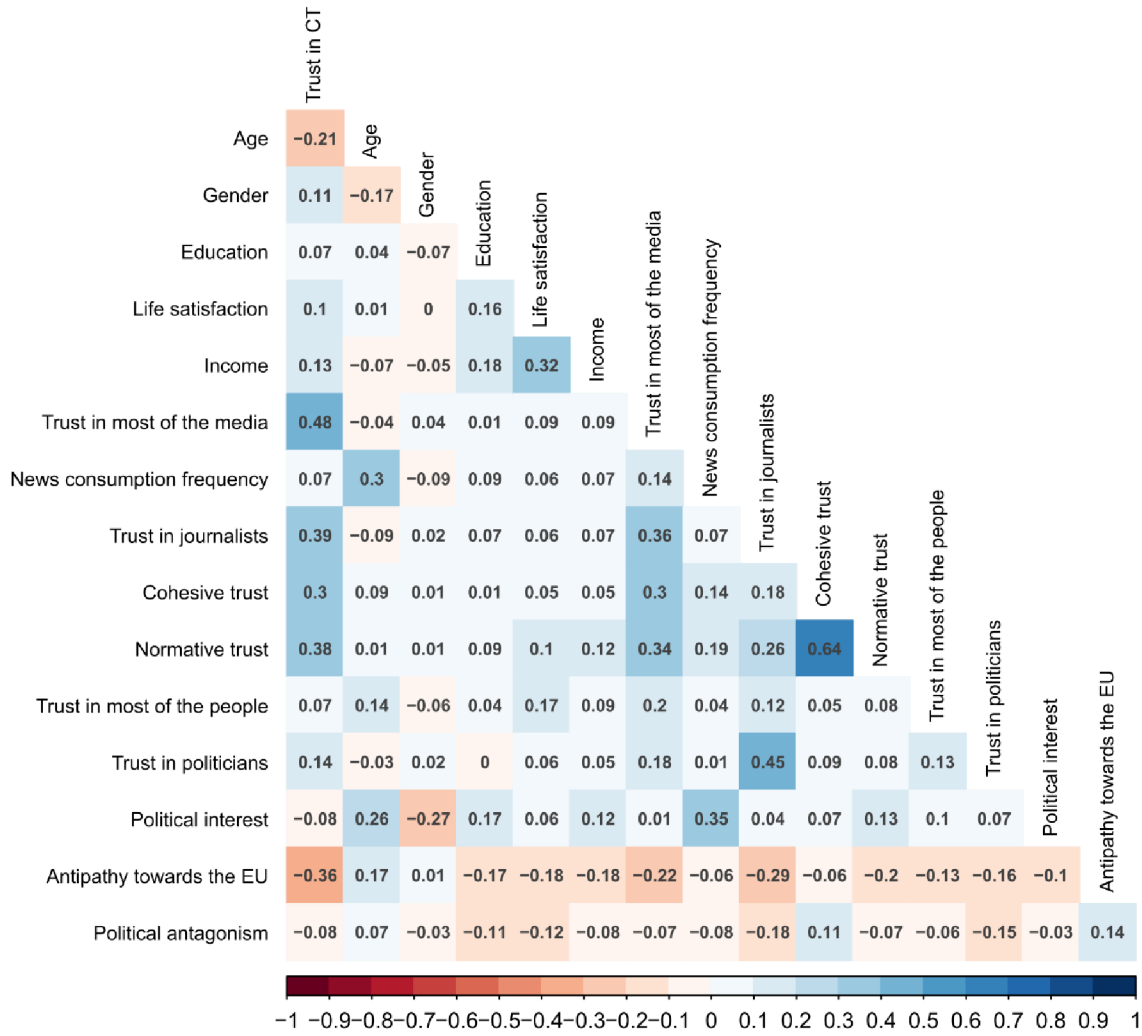


Figure A2

Correlations – S2

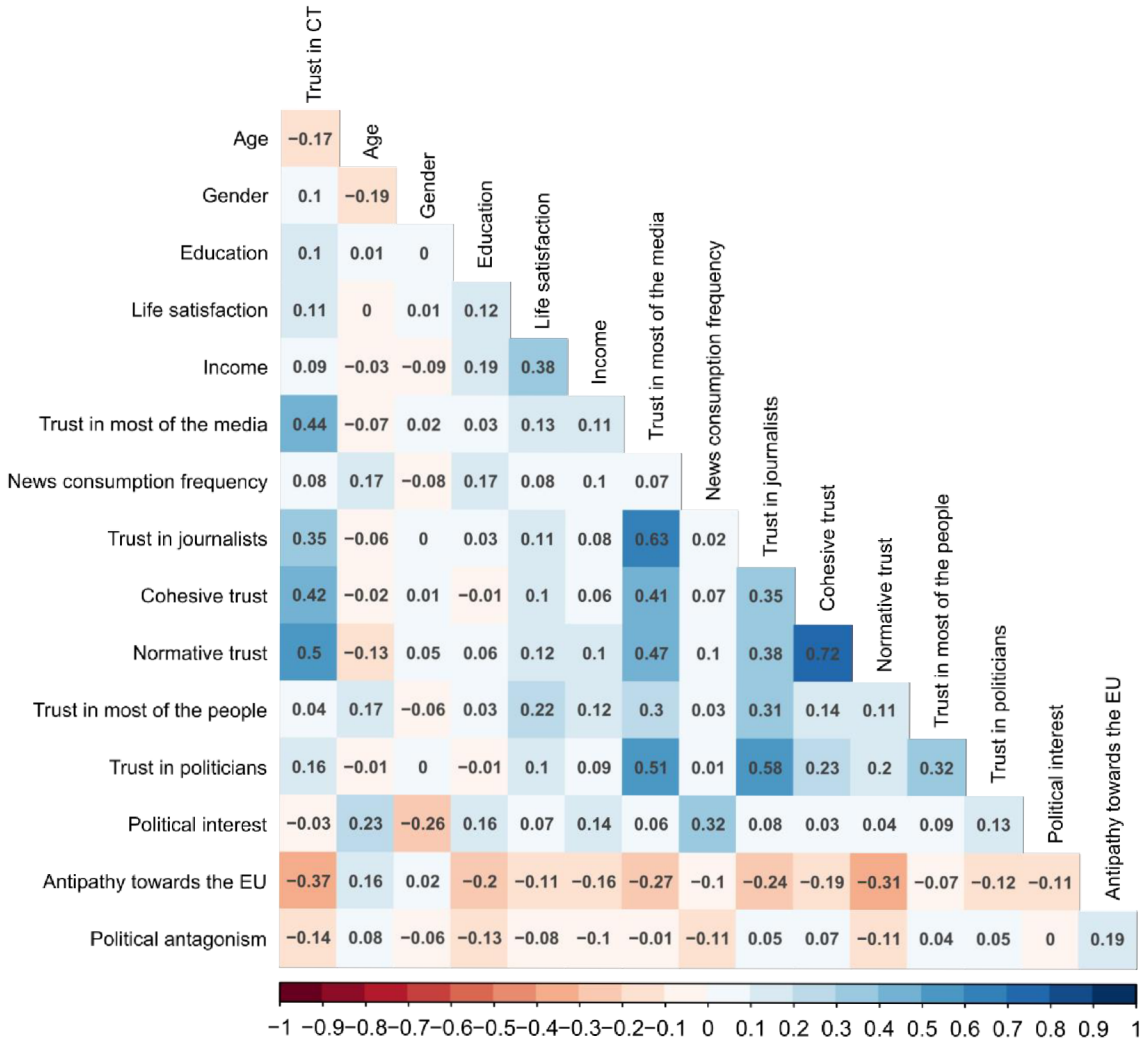


Figure A3

Correlations – S3

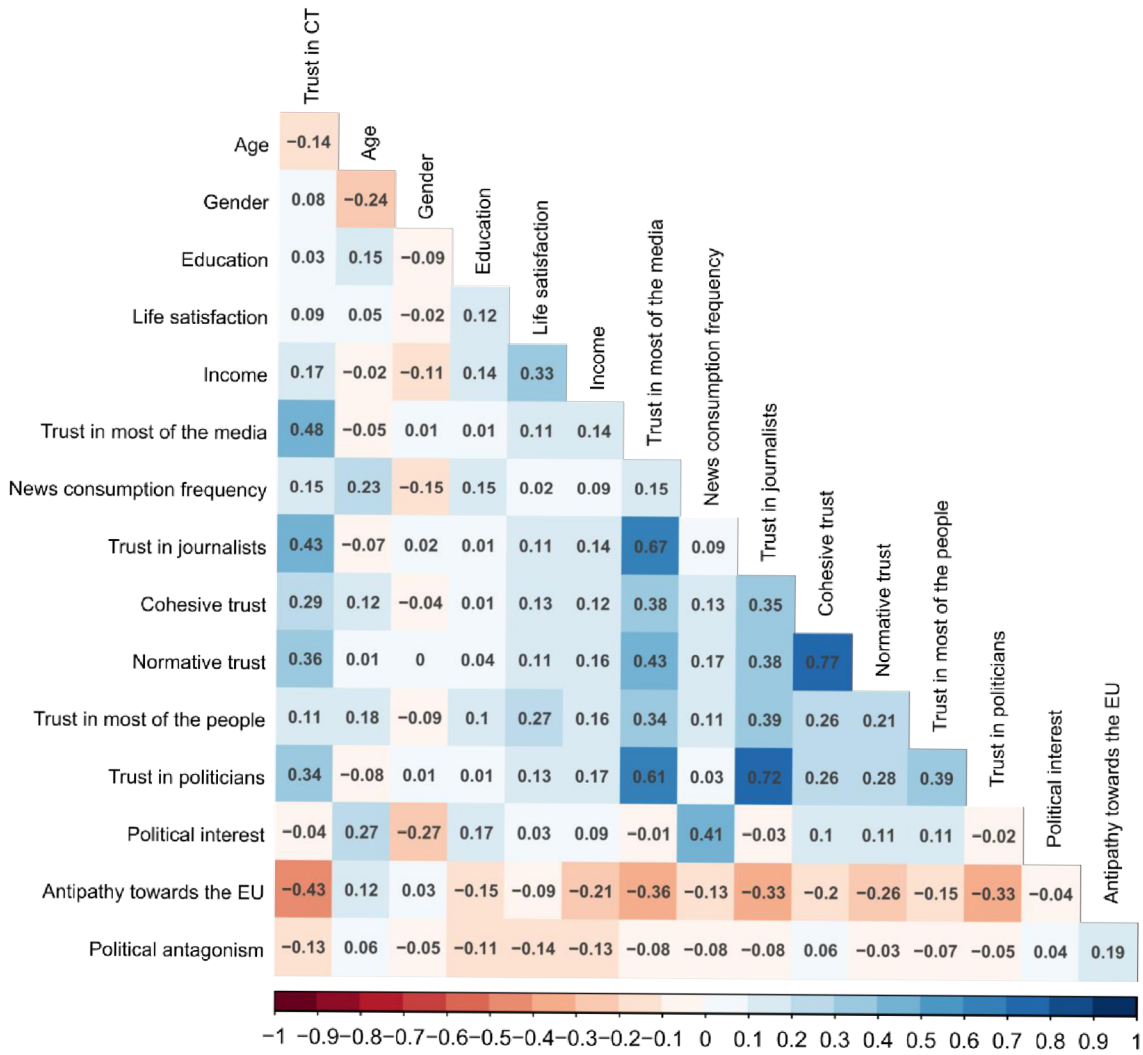


Table A5

Mean Differences Across S1, S2, and S3 of All Variables

	F	df_1	df_2	*p*	η2
Czech Television trust	1.307	2	5592.085	0.271	
Life satisfaction	49.056	2	5597.675	<.001	.010
Income	41.236	2	5550.342	<.001	.009
Trust in most media	79.488	2	5523.457	<.001	.017
News consumption	121.571	2	5413.901	<.001	.024
Trust in journalists	34.372	2	5589.36	<.001	.008
Cohesive trust	146.876	2	5258.173	<.001	.032
Normative trust	238.126	2	5287.506	<.001	.049
Trust in most of the people	69.815	2	5664.707	<.001	.015
Trust in politicians	75.643	2	5587.678	<.001	.017
Political interest	40.022	2	5625.905	<.001	.009
Antipathy towards the EU	15.423	2	5376.455	<.001	.004
Political antagonism	25.839	2	5683.682	<.001	.005

Note. Welch *F* is reported. If *F* test is significant, η2 is reported and multiple comparisons based on Bonferroni test are reported in Table A6.

Table A6

Independent Variables Post-Hoc Tests (Bonferroni)

Life satisfaction						
(I) dataset	(J) dataset	Mean Difference (I−J)	Std. Error	*p*	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
S1	S2	−0.206	0.022	<.001	−0.26	−0.15
	S3	−0.035	0.025	.508	−0.1	0.03
S2	S1	0.206	0.022	<.001	0.15	0.26
	S3	0.171	0.024	<.001	0.11	0.23
S3	S1	0.035	0.025	.508	−0.03	0.1
	S2	−0.171	0.024	<.001	−0.23	−0.11
Income						
(I) dataset	(J) dataset	Mean Difference (I−J)	Std. Error	*p*	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
S1	S2	−0.196	0.028	<.001	−0.26	−0.13
	S3	0.06	0.032	.179	−0.02	0.14
S2	S1	0.196	0.028	<.001	0.13	0.26
	S3	0.256	0.031	<.001	0.18	0.33
S3	S1	−0.06	0.032	.179	−0.14	0.02
	S2	−0.256	0.031	<.001	−0.33	−0.18
Trust in most media						
(I) dataset	(J) dataset	Mean Difference (I−J)	Std. Error	*p*	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
S1	S2	0.145	0.025	<.001	0.09	0.2
	S3	0.353	0.028	<.001	0.29	0.42
S2	S1	−0.145	0.025	<.001	−0.2	−0.09
	S3	0.208	0.027	<.001	0.14	0.27
S3	S1	−0.353	0.028	<.001	−0.42	−0.29
	S2	−0.208	0.027	<.001	−0.27	−0.14
News consumption frequency						
(I) dataset	(J) dataset	Mean Difference (I−J)	Std. Error	*p*	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
S1	S2	−0.409	0.031	<.001	−0.48	−0.34
	S3	−0.002	0.035	1	−0.09	0.08
S2	S1	0.409	0.031	<.001	0.34	0.48
	S3	0.407	0.034	<.001	0.33	0.49
S3	S1	0.002	0.035	1	−0.08	0.09
	S2	−0.407	0.034	<.001	−0.49	−0.33

The table continues on the next page.

Trust in journalists						
(I) dataset	(J) dataset	Mean Difference (I−J)	Std. Error	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
S1	S2	0.145	0.025	<.001	0.09	0.2
	S3	0.225	0.028	<.001	0.16	0.29
S2	S1	−0.145	0.025	<.001	−0.2	−0.09
	S3	0.080	0.027	.009	0.02	0.14
S3	S1	−0.225	0.028	<.001	−0.29	−0.16
	S2	−0.080	0.027	.009	−0.14	−0.02

Cohesive trust						
(I) dataset	(J) dataset	Mean Difference (I−J)	Std. Error	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
S1	S2	0.33565	0.01961	<.001	0.2887	0.3826
	S3	0.18348	0.02276	<.001	0.129	0.238
S2	S1	−0.33565	0.01961	<.001	−0.3826	−0.2887
	S3	−0.15217	0.02228	<.001	−0.2055	−0.0988
S3	S1	−0.18348	0.02276	<.001	−0.238	−0.129
	S2	0.15217	0.02228	<.001	0.0988	0.2055

Normative trust						
(I) dataset	(J) dataset	Mean Difference (I−J)	Std. Error	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
S1	S2	0.45711	0.0212	<.001	0.4063	0.5079
	S3	0.27914	0.02461	<.001	0.2202	0.3381
S2	S1	−0.45711	0.0212	<.001	−0.5079	−0.4063
	S3	−0.17796	0.02408	<.001	−0.2356	−0.1203
S3	S1	−0.27914	0.02461	<.001	−0.3381	−0.2202
	S2	0.17796	0.02408	<.001	0.1203	0.2356

Trust in most of the people						
(I) dataset	(J) dataset	Mean Difference (I−J)	Std. Error	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
S1	S2	−0.026	0.026	.9	−0.09	0.03
	S3	0.282	0.029	<.001	0.21	0.35
S2	S1	0.026	0.026	.9	−0.03	0.09
	S3	0.309	0.028	<.001	0.24	0.38
S3	S1	−0.282	0.029	<.001	−0.35	−0.21
	S2	−0.309	0.028	<.001	−0.38	−0.24

The table continues on the next page.

Trust in politicians						
(I) dataset	(J) dataset	Mean Difference (I−J)	Std. Error	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
S1	S2	0.107	0.024	<.001	0.05	0.17
	S3	0.338	0.027	<.001	0.27	0.4
S2	S1	−0.107	0.024	<.001	−0.17	−0.05
	S3	0.231	0.027	<.001	0.17	0.29
S3	S1	−0.338	0.027	<.001	−0.4	−0.27
	S2	−0.231	0.027	<.001	−0.29	−0.17

Political interest						
(I) dataset	(J) dataset	Mean Difference (I−J)	Std. Error	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
S1	S2	−0.298	0.066	<.001	−0.46	−0.14
	S3	−0.670	0.075	<.001	−0.85	−0.49
S2	S1	0.298	0.066	<.001	0.14	0.46
	S3	−0.371	0.072	<.001	−0.54	−0.20
S3	S1	0.670	0.075	<.001	0.49	0.85
	S2	0.371	0.072	<.001	0.20	0.54

Antipathy towards the EU						
(I) dataset	(J) dataset	Mean Difference (I−J)	Std. Error	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
S1	S2	−0.09187	0.03257	.014	−0.1698	−0.0139
	S3	0.10462	0.0366	.013	0.017	0.1923
S2	S1	0.09187	0.03257	.014	0.0139	0.1698
	S3	0.19650	0.03545	<.001	0.1116	0.2814
S3	S1	−0.10462	0.0366	.013	−0.1923	−0.017
	S2	−0.19650	0.03545	<.001	−0.2814	−0.1116

Political antagonism						
(I) dataset	(J) dataset	Mean Difference (I−J)	Std. Error	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
S1	S2	−0.10904	0.02117	<.001	−0.1597	−0.0584
	S3	−0.16030	0.02393	<.001	−0.2176	−0.103
S2	S1	0.10904	0.02117	<.001	0.0584	0.1597
	S3	−0.05125	0.02327	.083	−0.107	0.0045
S3	S1	0.16030	0.02393	<.001	0.103	0.2176
	S2	0.05125	0.02327	.083	−0.0045	0.107

Table A7

Hierarchical Regressions

	S1 (2019/2020)						S2 (2020)						S3 (2022)					
	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*
Socio-economic variables																		
Age	−.208	<.001	−.187	<.001	−.135	<.001	−.177	<.001	−.123	<.001	−.067	<.001	−.135	<.001	−.112	<.001	−.053	.008
Gender	.083	<.001	.060	<.001	.044	.004	.069	<.001	.059	<.001	.052	<.001	.076	.001	.071	<.001	.068	<.001
Education	.046	.015	.037	.019	.020	.184	.084	<.001	.070	<.001	.042	.003	.023	.308	.006	.741	−.013	.495
Life satisfaction	.067	<.001	.024	.138	.011	.501	.093	<.001	.026	.091	.036	.015	.085	<.001	.056	.005	.072	<.001
Income	.087	<.001	.035	.034	.028	.080	.037	.051	−.004	.785	−.004	.801	.174	<.001	.062	.002	.046	.020
Media-related variables																		
Trust in most media			.320	<.001	.299	<.001			.215	<.001	.226	<.001			.337	<.001	.293	<.001
News consumption			.016	.323	.039	.016			.035	.017	.042	.004			.046	.020	.056	.005
Trust in journalists			.212	<.001	.184	<.001			.063	<.001	.109	<.001			.147	<.001	.138	<.001
Cohesive trust			.075	<.001	.087	<.001			.130	<.001	.147	<.001			−.013	.672	.003	.927
Normative trust			.145	<.001	.127	<.001			.279	<.001	.218	<.001			.153	<.001	.133	<.001
Socio-political variables																		
Trust in most of the people					−.028	.065					−.078	<.001					−.104	<.001
Trust in politicians					−.023	.155					−.086	<.001					−.002	.947
Political interest					−.110	<.001					−.089	<.001					−.044	.031
Antipathy towards the EU					−.208	<.001					−.199	<.001					−.220	<.001
Political antagonism					−.017	.257					−.016	.257					−.049	.012
Adjusted R^2	.077		.388		.430		.063		.374		.424		.072		.355		.406	
ΔR^2			.312		.043				.312		.051				.284		.052	

Note. Overall model statistics are S1: $F_1(5, 2686) = 45.717$, $p < .001$; $F_2(10, 2681) = 171.652$, $p < .001$; $F_3(15, 2676) = 136.400$, $p < .001$; S2: $F_1(5, 1327) = 43.019$, $p < .001$; $F_2(10, 3122) = 188.501$, $p < .001$; $F_3(15, 3117) = 155.014$, $p < .001$; S3: $F_1(5, 1890) = 30.394$, $p < .001$; $F_2(10, 1885) = 105.138$, $p < .001$; $F_3(15, 1880) = 87.278$, $p < .001$. Gender was coded as 1 = *male*, 2 = *female*.

Study 3

News credibility on Facebook: The role of media and intermediary trust and their interplay

Abstract

On social network sites, news media have lost their dominance as news sources, as individual actors (family members, friends) play the role of news intermediaries. Since determining a news source and its trustworthiness is central to attributing news credibility, the distinction between institutional and individual news sources is crucial for audience members. Current research offers only partial and conflicting conclusions about the influence of source trust on news credibility. This experimental study (N = 702 2 × 3 between-subjects design) uses a customized environment simulating a Facebook Timeline to examine whether and how institutional trust in news media and interpersonal trust in news intermediaries contribute to news credibility. Using two-way analysis of covariance and two one-sided t-tests, we found only a small effect of media trust, while interpersonal trust and its combination with news media trust showed no effect. We discuss the implications of news consumption mechanisms on social network sites and their impact on informedness.

Keywords: news credibility, media trust, interpersonal trust, Facebook, experiment, ANCOVA

Introduction

The functioning of democratic societies depends on credible news, which guides citizens' actions (Ryfe, 2019) and maintains a shared sense of reality (Coleman, 2012). News credibility is established through interaction with content (Vanacker & Belmas, 2009) but is also linked to trust in news sources (van Dalen, 2019), which reduces the need to scrutinize each news piece (Rosanvallon, 2008; van Dalen, 2019).

Today, news sources include media outlets, digital intermediaries (e.g., news aggregators and social media algorithms), and human intermediaries, such as friends, family, and influencers (Foster, 2012; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021; Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024).

For news audiences on social network sites (SNS), particularly Facebook (Newman et al., 2021), media institutions (e.g., news outlets) are accompanied by individual intermediaries ("friends"). This decentralizes the gatekeeping process (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Wallace, 2018), making news more social (Wallace, 2018). Individual intermediaries share news with "friends," often framing it with personal opinions (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018) thereby contributing to its curation and contextualization (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018; Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). These intermediaries partially assume roles traditionally held by media professionals, shaping curated news flows (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

Since identifying the source is key to assessing news source trustworthiness and thus news credibility (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021; Sundar, 2008), the "layered" perceptual situation (Jang, 2021), created by the simultaneous presence of media outlets and intermediaries during reposting, can complicate source attribution (Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2020).

Existing studies indicate a positive influence of general trust in the media on Facebook news credibility (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024). Other research presents conflicting evidence regarding the effect of trust in news media, while the intermediary effect remains unclear,

having been examined through factors such as the (dis)agreement of other Facebook users' comments or the social proximity of an "FB friend" (Kim, 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2020). The important role of trust in intermediaries on SNS news, however, has recently been identified (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024). Sterrett et al. (2019) examine the effect of trust in both the news medium and the individual (public figure) intermediary, showing that the latter positively influences news credibility—a finding that contrasts with the evidence provided by Tandoc (2019).

We build on the aforementioned studies and enhance the investigation by exploring the main and interactive effects of trust in both the news media outlet and the intermediary, acknowledging these as distinct types of trust. Consequently, we avoid relying on indirect measures of the relationship to the intermediary, such as social proximity. Furthermore, participants were exposed to actual media outlets and intermediary individuals, enabling us to address conflicting evidence regarding the interplay between media and intermediary trust/credibility in shaping news credibility.

Consequently, this experimental study aims to determine whether and how the credibility of news consumed on Facebook is influenced by institutional trust (trust in the media outlet), interpersonal trust (trust in the person sharing the news), and their combination.

News credibility and institutional trust in news media

Credibility influences behavior (Hu & Sundar, 2010), opinion formation (Metzger, 2007), and news engagement (Keib & Wojdynski, 2019), making it central to understanding information persuasion. Source credibility is often defined as (a consequence of) source expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953); message (content) credibility is most often conceptualized as believability, namely truthfulness or accuracy, meaning the reliability and verifiability of the information (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Fawzi et al., 2021; Meyer, 1988; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019). In the online environment, the perceived range and

depth of information referred to as the "coverage" aspect of credibility also proved to be important (Metzger, 2007). We focus on these two dimensions of credibility.

Evaluating news credibility on a case-by-case basis is inefficient and demanding (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019), so audiences often rely on trust in media as professional organizations responsible for producing and disseminating news (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024). Media trust is currently (Engelke, Hase, & Wintterlin, 2019; Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020) understood as a relationship to news media stemming from one's expectations regarding the reliability and correctness of media performance. Here reliability and correctness refer to the dominant professional norms of objectivity (factuality and impartiality) and independence (Knudsen, Dahlberg, Iversen, Johannesson, & Nygaard, 2021; Wien, 2005). Due to the inherent opacity of news media, media trust is always based on "knowing and not knowing" (Simmel, 1964)—it is inherently risky and places the trustor in a vulnerable position relative to the trustee (Fawzi et al., 2021).

While often conflated, credibility and trust are distinct. While credibility is an attributed feature and its evaluation refers to a present or past state, trust refers to the expectation of (someone) performance. Trust is rooted in the awareness of someone's intention or action. Therefore, trust is more appropriately placed in individuals (e.g., journalists) or institutions (e.g., media organizations or specific outlets). By contrast, news content is evaluated based on its credibility (Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Importantly, in a high-choice media environment, people tend to have specific news media repertoires—they do not consume (Tóth, Mihelj, Štětka, & Kondor, 2022) and trust all media equally (Daniller, Allen, Tallevi, & Mutz, 2017). Trust in news outlets functions as an "institutional economizer," simplifying credibility evaluations by reducing the need to assess each piece of news individually (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023). Perceiving media in general—or a specific media outlet—as trustworthy is positively associated with the

perceived credibility of news (Kang, Bae, Zhang, & Sundar, 2011; Primig, 2022; Tandoc, 2019; Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024), the quality of Facebook posts featuring news articles (Kümpel & Unkel, 2020), and their credibility (Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2020).

However, focusing on distrust in a media outlet is equally important because distrust is a functional counterpart to trust in the economizer function (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023; Luhmann, 1979). Distrust simplifies media navigation by guiding decisions to avoid, limit consumption, find alternative sources, or treat them as unreliable (Garusi & Splendore, 2023; Schwarzenegger, 2020; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). Thus, distrust is increasingly recognized as an active negative attitude toward the media, not merely the absence of trust. The discussion centers on whether distrust in media is simply a negation of trust or a distinct construct based on different antecedents and outcomes (Engelke et al., 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Since this study works with mainstream professional media that share the basic normative performance assumptions (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019), we define media distrust as a negative counterpart of trust in media. It is a relationship based on the perceived nonfulfillment of expectations regarding objectivity (factuality and impartiality) and independence of a news media outlet. While the lack of news content credibility may cause distrust in the media (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019), the reverse effect has not been directly examined. However, evidence suggests that media distrust triggers a need to verify news content or reject it entirely (Ahmed, 2023; Nelson & Lewis, 2023). This likely results in a loss of news credibility.

We expect that news credibility is primarily linked (through the main effect) to trust and distrust in news media, and so:

H1: There will be a positive effect of the most trusted news media outlet and a simultaneous negative effect of the most distrusted media outlet on news content credibility.

News credibility and trust in individual intermediaries

Audiences' attitudes toward news are influenced by their social connections, who act as gatekeepers and "individual economizers" by sharing and recontextualizing news on SNS (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Hermida, Fletcher, Korrell, & Logan, 2011). The relationship between news credibility and interpersonal trust remains unclear, despite interpersonal trust being foundational to more general forms of trust (in expert systems and people in general; Sztompka, 1999) and critical for social and economic development (Kwon, 2019). Interpersonal trust is rooted in familiarity with specific individuals in our social network (Newton & Zmerli, 2011). Therefore, it is also called particular (social) trust, contrasting with generalized trust, which reflects positive expectations toward most people (Shabahang, Aruguete, & Shim, 2021). Media (outlets) trust, in contrast, refers to formal organizations and their expert knowledge and practices (Giddens, 1990; Kwon, 2019). Finally, opinion leadership stems from an individual's perceived knowledge of a topic, alongside their influence on opinions or attitudes (Jungnickel, 2018).

Interpersonal trust is a relationship drawing on the expectation of the trustee's benevolence (acting in the trustor's interest with goodwill) and integrity (adherence to moral norms such as honesty and virtue; Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018). Other dimensions, such as competence (the ability and power to act in the expected way) and predictivity or concern (empathy, tolerance, and care), are also discussed in the literature (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; McKnight & Chervany, 2001). This study focuses on benevolence and integrity as core aspects of interpersonal trust (Potter, 2019) as the competence dimension aligns more closely with expertise, which is inherent to institutional trust and opinion leadership.

News intermediaries can influence perceived news content credibility (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021). Sterrett et al. (2019) concluded that trust in individual news intermediaries is

a stronger predictor of trust in news content than trust in media. Tandoc, Huang, Duffy, Ling, and Kim (2020) argued that trust in an individual's SNS "friends" increases trust in shared news content.

Platforms like Facebook help to cultivate both strong and weak preexisting ties, typically grounded in trust and social and psychological homogeneity (Cargnino & Neubaum, 2019; Grabner-Kräuter & Bitter, 2015; Lönnqvist & Itkonen, 2016; Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2017). We do not expect that individuals commonly maintain Facebook friendships characterized by distrust, as interpersonal trust is crucial for forming ties here (Gashi & Knautz, 2016). Thus, we expect that interpersonal trust in FB "friends" exists on a continuum, ranging from high to low levels.

Consequently, we hypothesize that the credibility of news content is connected primarily (through the main effect) with news intermediary trust:

H2: There will be a positive effect of a highly trusted intermediary on news content credibility, whereas a low-trusted intermediary will have a simultaneous negative effect.

News credibility and diffusion of trusts

In online environments, content recirculation complicates authorship attribution and thus challenges the evaluation of news credibility, where source identity is crucial (Sundar & Nass, 2001). Content sharing and reframing on SNS (Burgess, Marwick, & Poell, 2018) further obscures credibility assessment through authorship layering. The mechanism of interplay between news outlet trust and intermediary trust remains unclear in terms of its impact on credibility evaluation.

Drawing on trust theory and limited empirical evidence, we identify two combined effects of these two forms of trust (Metzger & Flanagin, 2015; Simon, 2019).

According to the system theory of trust (Giddens, 1990; Luhmann, 1979), institutional and interpersonal trust are ontologically distinct yet functionally interconnected, particularly in the context of layered authorship.

Both types of trust reduce uncertainty, complexity, and the need for personal case-by-case verification, functioning as two distinct "economizers" (Coleman, Morrison, & Anthony, 2012). Institutional trust, though largely impersonal ("faceless"), includes a personalized facet ("facework") influenced by interactions with specific representatives of expert systems—"access points" like individual journalists. These access points provide tangible representations of abstract systems, shaping trust positively or negatively (Giddens, 1990).

In layered authorship situations, news credibility is influenced both institutionally, through media outlet visibility, and socially, through trusted "friends" as access points to news media. These friends affect credibility via their perceived benevolence and moral integrity. This interplay of institutional and interpersonal trust produces two types of mutual effects, each with two variations.

First there is the *amplification effect*. Although Sterrett et al. (2019) found no interaction between the two types of trust regarding perceived content credibility, from a theoretical perspective, it makes sense to examine the impact of both positive and negative congruence of trust. We hypothesize a mutually reinforcing (interaction) effect between both types of trust, and a symmetric situation for distrust and low trust:

H3: News content credibility will be highest for the most trusted news media outlet, mediated by a highly trusted intermediary.

H4: News content credibility will be lowest for the most distrusted news media outlet, mediated by a low-trusted intermediary.

Second, there is the *substitution effect*. It occurs when institutional and interpersonal trust are incongruent, that is, when distrust in a media outlet contrasts with high interpersonal

trust, and vice versa. Low trust or distrust in a media outlet may lead individuals to seek alternative news sources (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010) or rely on SNS news intermediaries (Coleman et al., 2012). Thus, we assume that the two types of trust substitute each other in two ways.

On the one hand, low intermediary trust can be substituted by high news media outlet trust (*media substitution*). A friend who fails to meet expectations of interpersonal trust can be substituted by a reliable institution that employs processes that reduce individual failures (Luhmann, 1979). As Oeldorf-Hirsch and DeVoss (2020) suggest (under high involvement), the news content retains the same level of trust whether it comes from a friend perceived as close or distant, as long as it comes from a trusted medium.

On the other hand, distrust in news media outlets can be substituted by increased intermediary trust (*personal substitution*). A media outlet may fail to function properly due to dysfunctional or nontransparent expert processes, but trusted individuals can "guarantee" credibility, as Nelson and Lewis (2023) suggest. Sterrett et al. (2019) found that trust in an intermediary nullifies the effect of trust in the media, while Oeldorf-Hirsch and DeVoss (2020) concluded that news content from a distrusted outlet shared by a close friend has higher credibility than content from a trusted outlet shared by a distant friend.

We formulated hypotheses for both trust substitution effects:

H5: The credibility of news content from a most trusted news media outlet mediated by a low-trusted intermediary will not significantly differ from the credibility of news content from a most trusted news media outlet.

H6: The credibility of news content from the most distrusted news media outlet mediated by a high-trusted intermediary will not significantly differ from news content from the most trusted news media outlet.

Methods

Sample

Data were collected from September 13 to October 31, 2021, through an online 2 × 3 between-subjects quasi-experimental survey (MacLin, 2020) using Qualtrics. The sample consisted of adult (18+) students from Masaryk University in Czechia who were Facebook users—the most popular social network for news consumption in Czechia and worldwide (Newman et al., 2021). Students were recruited via leaflets, Facebook groups, and a call for participation on the university's information system dashboard. The study was approved by the Masaryk University Research Ethics Committee (approval number EKV-2020-123). Informed consent was required for participation. Participants who completed the procedure were entered into a cash prize draw (3 × 3000 CZK ≈ 120€; 83 × 1000 CZK ≈ 40€). The sample consists of 702 participants (Gender: 64.9% female, 0.7% nonbinary; Age: M = 22.44 SD = 3.42; Study program: 52.3% bachelor, 43% master, 3.8% doctoral, and 0.9% lifelong learning).

Procedure

First, participants answered sociodemographic questions and provided information about their Facebook usage to meet inclusion criteria.

Since the experiment tests differences in the credibility of news content based on the source (trusted vs. distrusted news outlet) and the intermediary (high- vs. low-trusted), it was necessary to identify which media outlets each participant perceived as trusted or distrusted and the names of their high- and low-trusted Facebook friends.

Each participant indicated whether anyone among their Facebook "friends" (or users they followed) shared or made news available to them, and whether they clicked on any of these articles. If so, participants listed up to five of these Facebook usernames. Then, each intermediary was evaluated on a measure of interpersonal trust (see Measures

section). The scale values were automatically recoded as high (score >3), moderate (score = 3), and low (score <3) by a background script. The script also compared scale values to identify and assign the most trusted and least trusted intermediary name for each participant.

Participants then answered questions about some of the control variables.

Next, they selected up to two news outlets they considered personally important from a list of 22 Czech professional mainstream media outlets (Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky, 2018)[4] and evaluated each on measure of trust in news media. Then, from the same list, they indicated up to two outlets they avoided as sources of news and information (different from those selected as trusted) and evaluated each on the measure of distrust in news media. A script compared the trust scores and assigned the most trusted outlet to each participant. Similarly, the distrust scores were compared to assign the most distrusted outlet.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental groups: (1) Trusted media outlet + no intermediary (M+Int0); (2) Distrusted media outlet + no intermediary (M−Int0); (3) Trusted media outlet + high-trusted intermediary (M+Int+); (4) Trusted media outlet + low-trusted intermediary (M+Int−); (5) Distrusted media outlet + high-trusted intermediary (M−Int+); (6) Distrusted media outlet + low-trusted intermediary (M−Int−).

Participants in groups 1 and 2 (no intermediary) were shown a screen simulating a Facebook Timeline, with one news article posted by their trusted or distrusted media outlet (see Figure A1 in the Appendix for a description of customized and constant elements).

Participants in the groups with intermediaries (3, 4, 5, and 6) evaluated high-/low-trusted intermediaries on their opinion leadership and competence.

To improve internal validity, participants were asked to write down any characteristic that best described the intermediary.

[4] The channels of television stations that produce TV and Web news were added.

Next, they were shown a screen simulating a Facebook Timeline, with one news article from their most trusted or most distrusted media outlet shared by the high-/low-trusted intermediary (see Figure A2 in the Appendix for a description of customized and constant elements).

All participants were instructed before displaying the news post: "Please look at this Facebook news post and click 'Next' to open the post and view the actual news article, stripped of unnecessary graphical components for technical reasons."

Subsequently, participants were shown the news article (see Figure A3 in the Appendix). Originally published by the Czech public service television's news portal, the article was customized—the header corresponds to the participant's dis/trusted media outlet. It reported on a planned health campaign to reduce cardiovascular disease mortality and was signed by a nonexistent journalist. To improve internal validity, the topic was chosen for its general relevance and non-polarizing nature. After reading the article, participants evaluated its credibility and relevance on relative scales.

Measures

Manipulation Variables

Trust and distrust in news media: measures (Smejkal, Macek, Slavík, & Šerek, 2024) draw on participants' evaluations of news media outlet un/reliability in terms of normative professionalism: objectivity, that is, factuality, impartiality, and independence. Trust was assessed for up to two news media outlets considered by participants as important sources of news and information, while distrust was assessed for up to two news media outlets avoided as such sources. The answers employ a 5-point scale ranging from "absolutely disagree" (5) to "absolutely agree" (1) as well as the following scales. Both 3-item measures evince composite reliability (trust in media $\omega = .899$; distrust in media $\omega = .724$) and average variance extracted (*AVE*; trust in media *AVE*: .747; distrust in media *AVE*: .467). The wording adaptation illustration of all measures is presented in the Appendix (see Table A2).

Trust in news intermediaries: a measure of trusting beliefs in technological agents (Vance, Elie-Dit-Cosaque, & Straub, 2008) was adapted to assess trust in individual trustees, focusing on the dimensions of benevolence, integrity, and competence. It has been used for the same purpose (Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018). We used only benevolence and integrity items (see above), considering the measure as a latent second-order factor (see Whang & Im, 2018). The measure evinces satisfactory composite reliability (benevolence ω = .889; integrity ω = .911) and AVEs (benevolence *AVE*: .728; integrity *AVE*: .719) for first-order factors as well as second-order one (ω = .877).

Dependent Variables

News article credibility: we used an adapted measure of trust in media (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), which aligns with the broader concept of content credibility by focusing on perceptions of news coverage. The accuracy of depictions dimension reflects information believability, while the selectivity of topics and the selectivity of fact dimensions address the perceived range and depth of information. This measure overcomes theoretical and validity deficiencies in adjective-based approaches (see Kohring, 2004; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & Mccann, 2003; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). The selectivity of topics dimension was excluded as inapplicable. During adaptation, the wording of one question and items was adjusted to better focus on news article content. The validation study supported the use of a single second-order latent factor (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) verified the hierarchical factor structure, satisfactory composite reliability (ω = .817), *AVE*, and measurement invariance (configural, metric, scalar). Further details on psychometric properties are provided in the Appendix.

Control Variables

The propensity to trust: measure (Frazier, Johnson, & Fainshmidt, 2013) was used to control for the general tendency to trust others, which may influence media trust (Jackob, 2012). The measure evinces composite reliability (ω = .874 for 4 items) and *AVE* (.634).

Relevance of the news known to impact credibility evaluations (Chung, 2017), was controlled for in the analysis. The measure evinces composite reliability (ω = .837 for 3 items) and *AVE* (.633).

Intermediaries' opinion leadership: can amplify the effect of media trust on willingness to consume news from this source (Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015); therefore, this effect was controlled for. The measure enables the assessment of opinion leadership in relation to a specific individual (Jungnickel, 2018). A third item was added to address a reliability issue. The measure evinces composite reliability (ω = .845 for 3 items) and *AVE* (.652).

Intermediaries' competence: was assessed using an adapted measure to evaluate their influence in the context of Facebook news sharing. The competence dimension items of McKnight, Choudhury, and Kacmar's (2002) trusting beliefs measure were used. The wording was adjusted to measure the competence of a specific individual. The measure evinces composite reliability (ω = .866 for 4 items) and *AVE* (.620).

Analysis

The factor structures of all scales were verified with CFAs (see Table A1 in the Appendix). In addition, composite reliability was verified using McDonald's omega, which, unlike Cronbach's alpha, does not require the assumption of tau-equivalence (Hayes & Coutts, 2020). The average variance extracted was also verified (Cheung, Cooper-Thomas, Lau, & Wang, 2024). Furthermore, measurement invariance of the News Article Credibility scale across experimental conditions (i.e., trusted vs. distrusted medium and intermediary vs. non-

intermediary conditions) via a set of subsequently restricted multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (MG-CFA) was also verified. The criteria proposed for configural models (Hu & Bentler, 1999) and for metric and scalar invariance (Chen, 2007) were used.

The differences between experimental conditions were verified using a two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), with media outlet (trusted vs. distrusted) and intermediary (none, high-trusted, and low-trusted) as between-subjects factors (i.e., 2 × 3 design) and with three covariates (propensity to trust, news relevance, and intermediaries' competence). Intermediaries' opinion leadership was not used because of its lack of association with the outcome (see Table A3 in the Appendix). Since sample sizes of experimental conditions were highly unbalanced[5], we used Type III to estimate sums of squares (i.e., partial sums of squares). Before the main analysis, assumptions of ANCOVA were tested.

Given that our sample is strongly skewed toward young women, who in some countries tend to consume less news (see Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020), the main analysis (H1–H4) was repeated with gender as a covariate as a robustness check. This is reported in the Appendix.

The last two hypotheses (H5 and H6) were verified via equivalence tests: two one-sided t-tests (TOST; Lakens, 2017). Given prior evidence (Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2020) indicating a very small effect size ($d = -0.16$), we specified upper (ΔU) and lower (ΔL) equivalence bounds based on the smallest effect size of interest (Lakens, Scheel, & Isager, 2018) to $d = -.20$ and $d = .20$, which is equivalent to weak effect size.

All analyses were done in R (v4.1.2), packages car (v3.0–12), rstatix (v.0.7.0), sjstats (v0.18.1), TOSTER (v0.4.1), emmeans (v1.7.2), lavaan (v0.6–9), and semTools (v0.5–5).

[5] See Discusion section.

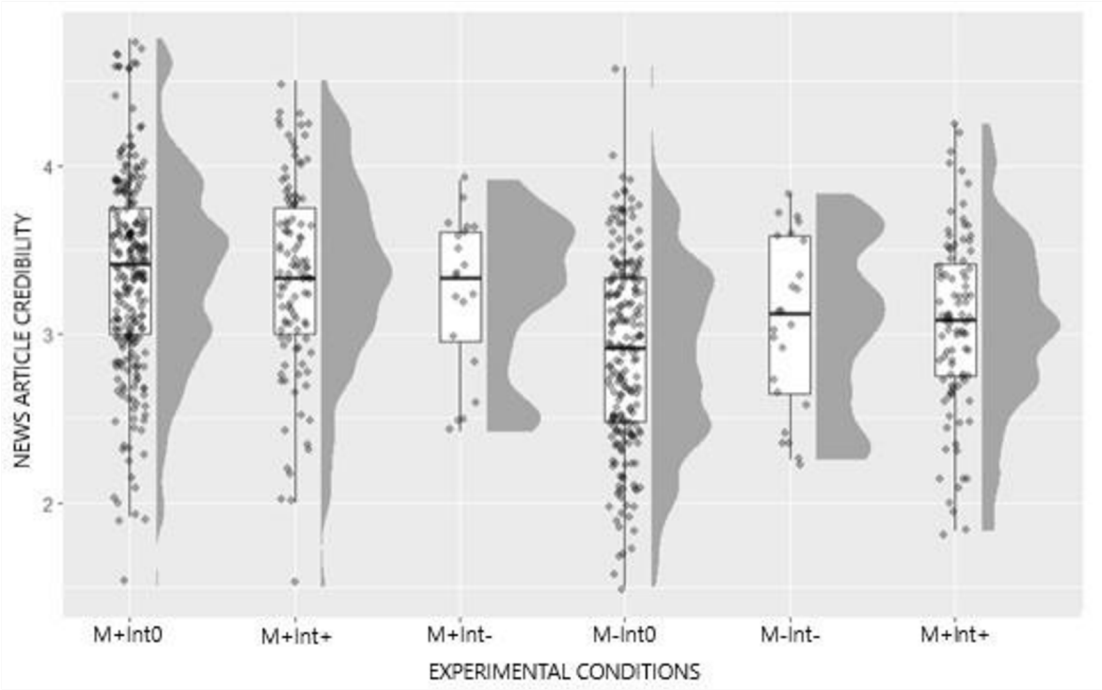
Results

We found that participants in trusted media conditions perceived slightly higher news credibility than those in distrusted media conditions. The high-trusted intermediary also showed higher credibility than the low-trusted one in trusted media outlet conditions (but surprisingly, the opposite difference was found for distrusted media conditions). The complete descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and News Article Credibility Mean Difference Across Experimental Conditions

Condition	*N*	*M* [95% *CI*]	*SD*
M+Int+	105	3.345 [3.233, 3.457]	0.577
M+Int−	20	3.250 [3.031, 3.469]	0.467
M+Int0	246	3.357 [3.284, 3.430]	0.583
M−Int+	93	3.047 [2.938, 3.156]	0.529
M−Int−	24	3.059 [2.842, 3.276]	0.515
M−Int0	208	2.881 [2.804, 2.958]	0.563

Figure 1
Box plots and distributions visualized via rain cloud plots

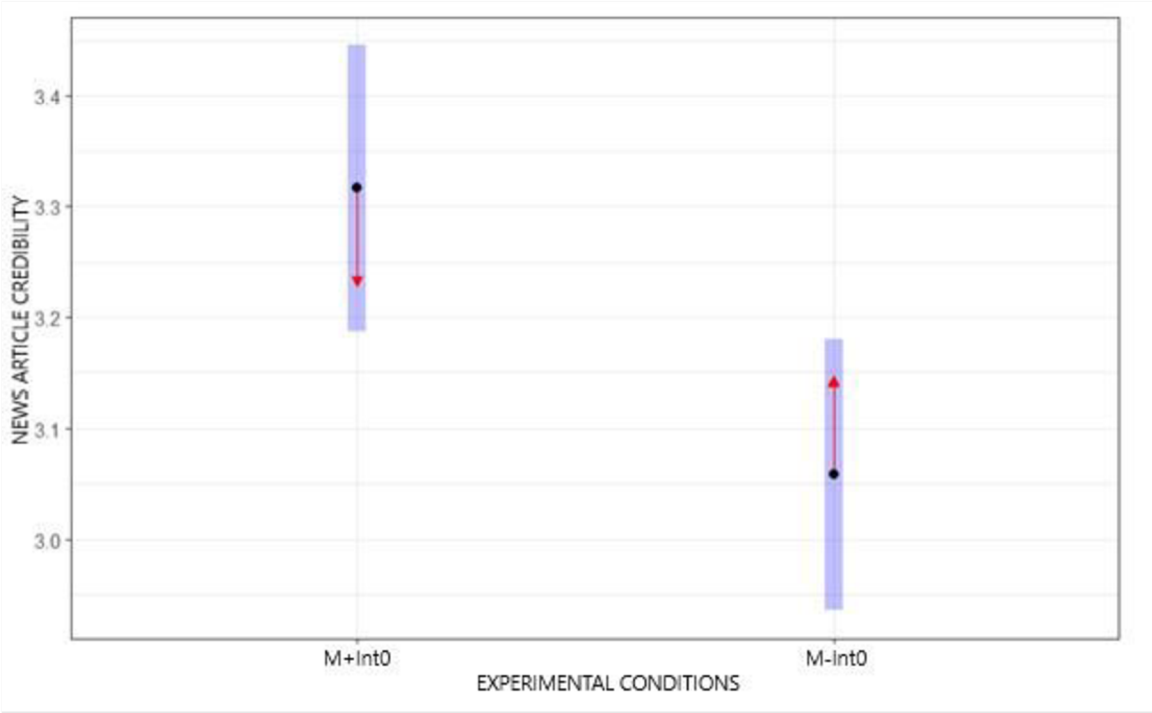


The two-way ANCOVA was applied to analyze whether these differences are statistically significant. Before the main analysis, the assumptions of ANCOVA were verified and met (see Table A3 in the Appendix), so no robust or nonparametric approach was necessary.

We analyzed the main effects of the media outlet and intermediary, as well as their interaction, on the News Article Credibility measure, controlling for propensity to trust, news relevance, and intermediaries' competence. The main effect of the media outlet was statistically significant with a small effect size, $F(1, 235) = 12.495$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .044$. Since this factor contains two groups, post hoc tests are not needed. Participants in the trusted media outlet condition (*EMM* = 3.32 [95% *CI*: 3.19, 3.45], *SE* = .066) reported higher perceived credibility than their counterparts in the distrusted media outlet condition (*EMM* = 3.06 [5% *CI*: 2.94, 3.18], *SE* = .062; see Figure 2). The H1 was therefore supported.

Figure 2

Difference between trusted and distrusted media conditions



The main effect of the intermediary was not statistically significant, $F(1, 235) = 0.019$, $p = .891$, $\omega^2 = -.004$. No differences in high-trusted and low-trusted intermediary conditions were identified; the H2 was therefore not supported.

The media outlet and intermediary interaction effect was also not statistically significant; $F(1, 235) = 0.017$, $p = .897$, $\omega^2 = -.004$. Therefore, H3 and H4 were not supported.

Finally, the differences between M+Int– and M+Int0 and M–Int+ and M+Int0 were verified via TOST. For the difference between M+Int– and M+Int0, the traditional t-test was insignificant, $t(23.97) = 0.987$, $p = .333$. TOST for lower bound was significant, $t(23.97) = 1.93$, $p = .032$, but for upper bound insignificant, $t(23.97) = 0.040$, $p = .516$. Since the results of traditional null hypothesis significance testing (NHST) and TOST are inconclusive, H5 was not supported. For the difference between M–Int+ and M+Int0, the traditional t-test was significant, $t(180.29) = 4.680$, $p < .001$. TOST for lower bound was significant, $t(180.29) = 6.36$, $p < .001$, but for upper bound insignificant, $t(180.29) = 3.00$, $p = .998$. Consequently, we

cannot conclude that both groups are equivalent. Yet NHST suggested a statistically significant difference between them. Thus, H6 was not supported either.

Discussion

Our experimental study of Facebook news consumers contributes to the ongoing debate on how trust in news media and trust in individual news intermediaries influence perceptions of news credibility. In the context of SNS "layered" perceptual situations (Jang, 2021)—where institutional sources (e.g., news outlets) and individual sources (e.g., other SNS users) merge into a unified phenomenological-perceptual framework—represent credibility attribution, a critical aspect of news consumption.

In line with Oeldorf-Hirsch and DeVoss (2020), we found that news from trusted outlets is perceived as more credible than from distrusted ones, although the effect size is surprisingly small. Consistent with Tandoc (2019), our findings also show that institutional trust has a greater impact on news credibility than interpersonal trust, while trust in intermediaries does not influence perceived credibility. We observed no main effect of trust in intermediaries, nor its amplification or substitution effect on the relationship between (dis)trust in news outlets and credibility. This contradicts findings suggesting a parallel or even dominant intermediary effect (Sterrett et al., 2019; Tandoc, 2019). Conversely, our findings align with those of Zimmermann, Klee, and Kaspar (2023) regarding Instagram, where no difference was found in the perceived credibility of news from media outlets compared to influencers. In our case, neither institutional nor interpersonal trust functions as an effective economizer of news credibility attribution in the SNS environment. Zimmermann et al. (2023) attribute their findings to potential low internal validity because of the use of fictitious sources, whereas we relied on participants' actual sources. Therefore, we propose different explanations.

The first one lies in the specifics of news consumption on SNS. Attention to the news source may intensify in certain situations, such as during "news snacking" (Duffy, 2020)—a quick, fragmentary engagement with news where only the headline, media outlet, or intermediary cues inform perceptions of news credibility. As a result, differences in news credibility based on trust in media outlets or intermediaries may become more pronounced when recipients cannot evaluate credibility through the news content itself. Conversely, SNS often serve as a supplementary news source that receives limited attention (Andı, 2021). This reduced focus may weaken awareness of the news source and its trustworthiness. Future research should test this explanation using the systematic-heuristic perception model.

The second explanation may lie in perceptions of the SNS environment. News consumed on SNS platforms has long been associated with low credibility (Newman et al., 2021). The mere presence of news on Facebook reduces the influence of source credibility on its approval (Jang, 2021). Default skepticism toward this environment may lead users to assess news credibility primarily based on content characteristics when possible. Our findings suggest that the lack of an economizing function of institutional or interpersonal trust in shaping news credibility on Facebook may indicate that content characteristics play a more significant role than expected (see Ou & Ho, 2024; Zimmermann et al., 2023). This phenomenon has mixed implications. On the positive side, it may reduce the risk of misattributing credibility (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024), and strengthen audiences' information competencies (Nelson & Lewis, 2023). Ultimately, sharing news on Facebook may then increase trust in media (Turcotte et al., 2015). However, one-by-one evaluations of credibility can impose significant cognitive burdens, potentially leading to news avoidance and disengagement from public affairs (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). This underscores the need to seek ways to foster a productive role for institutional and interpersonal trust in attributing news credibility.

This potential platform skepticism may have a theoretical implication for interpersonal trust. Unlike Sterrett's et al.'s (2019) study of public figures, our study of "common Facebook friends"—where interpersonal trust would seemingly be more relevant because of familiarity—found no effect on content perception. This raises the question of whether Sterrett's findings could not have been influenced by opinion leadership intervention, which was controlled for in our case. It is worth investigating the extent to which the concept of interpersonal trust applies to the informational influence of "high-profile" individuals, and why it appears ineffective in contexts involving "common SNS friends." This is particularly relevant given that SNS users indicate that they turn to trusted contacts when they do not trust the media (Nelson & Lewis, 2023).

The third explanation pertains to the set of limitations of our study. Since our participants were university students, the findings may be specific to this nonrepresentative sample. Younger individuals and those with higher education levels (as in our sample) are more likely to trust professional media (Fawzi et al., 2021; Mangold, Bachl, & Prochazka, 2022) and report higher levels of media literacy (Yates et al., 2020). This may account for both the observed, albeit weak, effect of trust in media and the "reluctance to transfer" interpersonal trust to news credibility. Replication with a more representative population is therefore welcome. Our study prioritized maximizing internal validity by involving participants' actual institutional and individual news sources. However, this methodological strength also imposes limitations. First, the nomination criteria for a news intermediary (a real person and recent exposure to mediated content) may have contributed to unequal saturation across experimental groups. Additionally, homophily and the strength of social ties on SNS (Liu, Rau, & Wendler, 2015) may have limited the availability of low-trusted intermediaries. Both factors could significantly reduce the statistical power needed to detect the typically small effects in experimental research (Ou & Ho, 2024). Future studies should consider using

less restrictive criteria for intermediary nomination. Finally, friend-mediated news may not have been perceived as authentic despite our efforts. Shared news often originates from alternative sources and is typically thematically or politically shaped (Zúñiga et al., 2017). Additionally, the topic of a news story—particularly health-related topics—can amplify the effect of source credibility on news credibility. Conversely, audiences' familiarity with a topic can increase skepticism toward SNS news (Ou & Ho, 2024). Replicating our study with thematically diverse news stories would help control for the potential impact of the health topic and allow for a deeper exploration of the mechanisms behind news credibility attribution across different topics.

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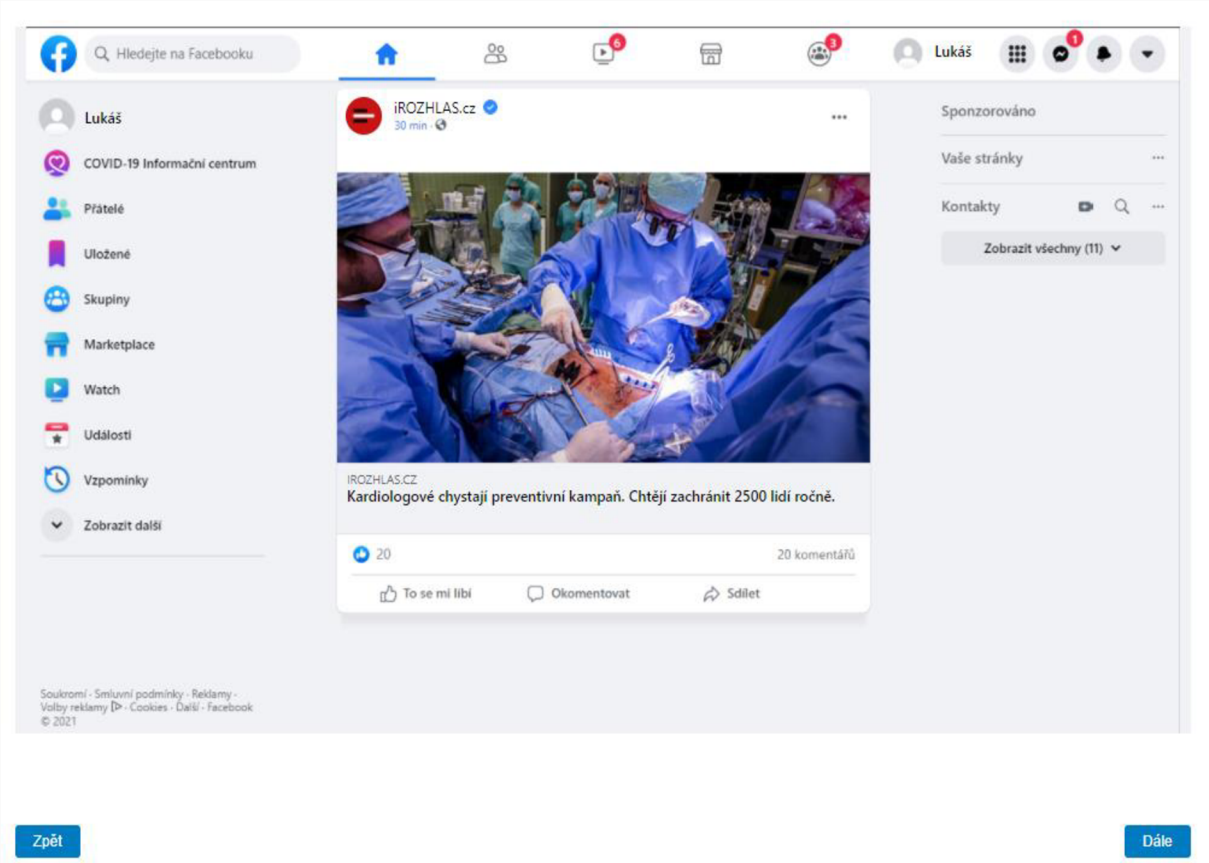
Supplementary materials

Experimental Stimuli

Figure A1

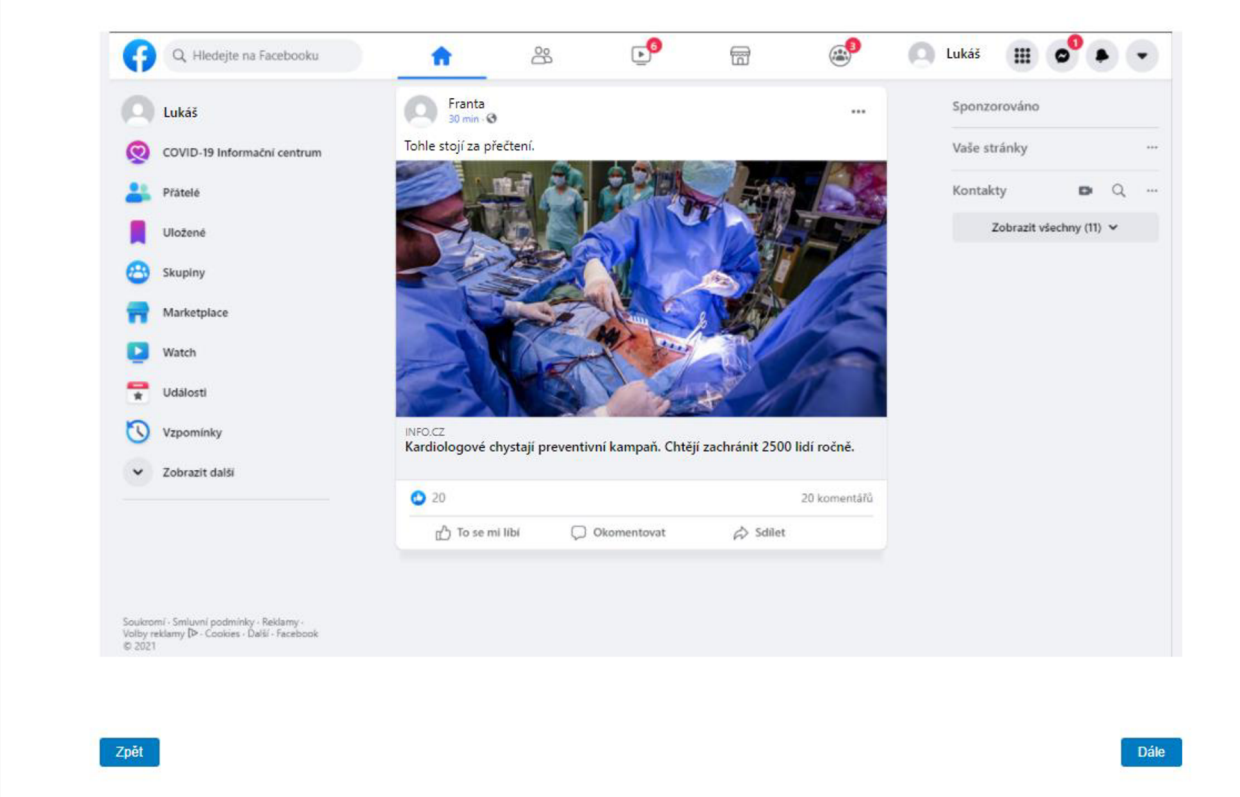
Screen evoking Facebook Timeline with one news post of dis/trusted news media outlet



Dynamically customized (based on inputs of participants) elements: The outlet's profile picture, profile name and website title under the picture of the posted news article, user name. Constant elements: the time of publication of the post (30 min), the number of likes (20), the number at comments (20), the picture and the title of the post.

Figure A2

Screen evoking Facebook Timeline with news post of dis/trusted news media outlet intermediated by high-/low-trusted Facebook friend



The timeline was customized in similar way as for participants in groups 1 and 2, only with several changes: there was the default profile photo of intermediary. High-/low-trusted friend profile name was customised. The post also included "call to attention": the "This is worth reading" line appearing above the shared news article.

Figure A3

News article of dis/trusted media outlet

INFO.CZ TÉMATA ▾ AUTOŘI • EU • PRÁVO ▾ PODCASTY ▾ VIDEO ▾ NEWSLETTERY ▾ E-SHOP •

Kardiologové chystají preventivní kampaň. Chtějí zachránit 2500 lidí ročně

Foto archiv

Do deseti let chtějí kardiologové v Česku snížit o pět procent počet úmrtí na srdeční choroby. Cíl si kladou navzdory očekávání, že nemocných bude v populaci přibývat. Důraz budou klást na prevenci, která by měla části pacientů pomoci.

Za posledních deset let dramaticky přibylo lidí, kteří zemřeli na srdeční selhání. Oproti začátku minulého desetiletí je v současnosti jejich počet o 60 procent vyšší. Zároveň ovšem téměř stejným poměrem poklesl počet úmrtí na akutní infarkt.

„Díky moderní medicíně prodlužujeme pacientův život. Ale pak se můžou dostat

Measures

Psychometric Properties of News Article Credibility scale

The hierarchical factor structure was confirmed for the first- and second-order latent factor. The CFA yielded satisfactory fit indices, $\chi^2(51) = 157.515$, $p < .001$, *CFI* = .963, *TLI* = .953, *RMSEA* = .058 [90% *CI*: .048, .068], *SRMR* = .037. All factor loadings statistically significant and higher than .500 (except for item 4). The first-order factors were highly correlated (*r* between .724 and .788).

The scale demonstrated sufficient composite reliability (F1: Selectivity of Facts ω = .801; F2: Accuracy of Depiction ω = .703; F3: Journalistic Assessment ω = .807) as well as average variances extracted (F1: Selectivity of Facts AVE = .519; F2: Accuracy of Depiction AVE = .375; F3: Journalistic Assessment AVE = .523). The second-order factor also showed satisfactory composite reliability (ω = .817).

Measurement invariance across trusted/distrusted medium and intermediary conditions was also verified. For trusted/distrusted medium conditions, MG-CFA showed sufficient fit indices for configural level, (*CFI* = .957 *TLI* = .944, *RMSEA* = .060, *SRMR* = .044), metric (Δ*CFI* = .001, Δ*TLI* = –.004, Δ*RMSEA* = –.002, Δ*SRMR* = .008), and scalar (Δ*CFI* = .003, Δ*TLI* = –.001, Δ*RMSEA* = –.001, Δ*SRMR* = .002) measurement invariance. Similarly, for intermediary/non- intermediary conditions: configural (*CFI* = .958, *TLI* = .946, *RMSEA* = .062, *SRMR* = .044), metric (Δ*CFI* < .001, Δ*TLI* = -.007, Δ*RMSEA* = –.004, Δ*SRMR* = .009), and scalar (Δ*CFI* = –.001, Δ*TLI* = –.004, Δ*RMSEA* = -.003, Δ*SRMR* = .001) invariances were confirmed.

Table A1

Confirmatory Factor Analyses for Manipulation and Control Variables Scales

Scale	x^2(df), p	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR	CFI	TLI
Trust in news media	Just-identified model (0 degrees of freedom)				
Distrust in news media	Just-identified model (0 degrees of freedom)				
Trust in news intermediaries	30.21 (13), p = .004	.048 [.026, .070]	.014	.995	.991
Propensity to Trust	0.89 (2), p = .642	.000 [.000, .067]	.004	1.000	1.003
Relevance of the news	Just-identified model (0 degrees of freedom)				
Intermediaries' opinion leadership	Just-identified model (0 degrees of freedom)				
Intermediaries' competence	0.05 (2), p = .976	.000 [.000, .000]	.002	1.000	1.014

Table A2

The Measures of Manipulate, Dependent and Control Variables

Measure	Item	English translation of Adapted wording[3]	Original English wording
Trust in News Media[1]	Question	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding [NEWS MEDIA OUTLET]?	
	1	"This media can be trusted because it works with verified information."	"These professional media can be trusted because they work with verified information."
	2	"These professional media can be trusted because they focus on important facts and topics."	Complete list of items in Smejkal et al. (2024)
	3	"These professional media can be trusted because they are independent in their work."	
Distrust in News Media[1]	Question	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding [NEWS MEDIA OUTLET]?	
	1	"This media can't be trusted because it works with unverified information."	"These professional media can't be trusted because they work with unverified information." (adapted measure of trust in media from Smejkal et al., 2024).
	2–3	A similar adaptation pattern.	Analogous wording as in the case of trust in news media measure.
Trust in News Intermediaries[2]	Question	Please indicate how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding individuals	

Measure	Item	English translation of Adapted wording[3]	Original English wording
		who make you see media news articles on your Facebook timeline	
	1	"I believe that [THE NAME OF INTERMEDIARY] would act in my best interest."	"I believe that LegalAdvice.com would act in my best interest."
	2–7	A similar adaptation pattern.	Complete list of items in Vance et al. (2008)
News Article Credibility[1]	Question	Please evaluate the article you have just read. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	
	1	"The essential points are included in the article."	"The essential points are included."
	2–12	A similar adaptation pattern.	Complete list of items in Kohring & Matthes (2007)
Propensity to Trust[2]	Question	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	
	1		"I usually trust people until they give me a reason not to trust them."
	2–4		Complete list of items in Frazier et al. (2013)
Relevance of the news[2]	Question	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	
	1	"The issue in this article is important to me."	"This issue is important to me."
	2–3	A similar adaptation pattern.	Complete list of items in Chung (2017)
Intermediaries' opinion leadership[2]	Question	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	

Measure	Item	English translation of Adapted wording[3]	Original English wording
	1	"[THE NAME OF THE HIGH-/LOW-TRUSTED INTERMEDIARY] is well informed about politics and current events."	"This person is well informed about politics and current events."
	2	"[…] is honest about politics and current events."	"This person is honest about politics and current events."
	3	"[…] is a person worth to listen to when he/she expresses his/her views on politics and current events."	"In a discussion of climate change, would you be most likely to . . . (1 = convince your friends of your ideas; 5 = listen to your friends' ideas)."
Intermediaries' competence[2]	Question	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	
	1	"[THE NAME OF THE HIGH-/LOW-TRUSTED INTERMEDIARY] knows how to share news on Facebook in a way that lets others be highly informed about what's going on."	"LegalAdvice.com is competent and effective in providing legal advice."
	2–4	A similar adaptation pattern.	Complete list of items in McKnight's et al. (2002)

Note 1. 5-point scale "absolutely agree" to "absolutely disagree."
Note 2. 5-point scale "absolutely disagree" to "absolutely agree."
Note 3. The adapted questions are formulated in Czech and seek for validity in the Czech language context.

Results

Table A3

ANCOVA Assumptions Test Report

Assumption	Test	Result
Homogeneity of variances	Levene's test	$F(3, 695) = 0.0653$, $p = .660$ (no violation)
	Bartlett's test	$K(5) = 5.769$, $p = .330$ (no violation)
Univariate outliers	Cooks' distance	Three highly influential values were removed
	Box-Plot (1.5x*IQR* rule)	Two outliers removed
Normality of residuals	Shapiro-Wilk test	$W = 0.996$, $p = .116$ (no violation)
	Inspection of Q-Q plot	Normally distributed data (no violation)
Independence of errors	Durbin-Watson test	$D\text{-}W = 1.979$, $p = .824$ (no violation)
Relationship between covariates and dependent variable	Pearson correlation	Association with intermediary opinion leadership was insignificant ($r_s = .05$, $p = .44$). Hence, this covariate was not involved in the analysis. The rest covariates showed significant associations (r_s between .10 and .24).
Homogeneity of regression slopes	Covariate – dependent variable interaction	None of interaction was statistically significant (no violation).

Robustness check with gender as a covariate

In our sample, men and women did not statistically differ in the outcome variable, as indicated by the Welch t-test, $t(487.51) = -1.390$, $p = .165$, $d = -0.111$. The inclusion of gender as a covariate in the ANCOVA did not alter the results in any way. Gender (women, men, other) was not associated with the outcome, $F(2, 233) = 1.027$, $p = .360$, $\omega^2 < .001$. The main effect of media outlet remained statistically significant with small effect size, $F(1, 233)$

= 12.735, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .046$, while main effect of intermediary, $F(1, 233) = 0.001$, $p = .974$, $\omega^2 = -.004$, as well as interaction effect, $F(1, 233) < 0.001$, $p = .996$, $\omega^2 = -.004$, remained statistically insignificant.