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Advancing a qualitative turn in news media trust research

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Abstract

The contemporary media environment represents the greatest challenge ever to journalism's legitimacy. Surveys conducted in different parts of the world highlight a decline in trust in news media. Due to the numerous changes in the news media environment, different investigative tools are required to grasp the mechanisms underlying news media trust from those adopted so far. This article provides a review of existing media trust research and argues that it is necessary to investigate news media trust (also) from a qualitative perspective because today *understanding* media trust is as crucial as measuring it.

KEYWORDS
audience, credibility, episodes method, journalism, public expectations, qualitative turn, trust

1 | INTRODUCTION

The hybridisation (Chadwick, 2013), porosity (Carlson & Lewis, 2015), and technological saturation (Harambam et al., 2018) of the contemporary media environment are arguably the greatest challenges ever for news media and news media trust because "like never before, news media today face competition for people's attention from a myriad of other sources of information" (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 140). Some of those sources, especially those that embrace a *populist* stance,[1] try also to systematically delegitimize journalism (see Carlson, Lewis, & Robinson, 2021). Indeed, public attacks on the news media have become a dominant feature of the current wave of populist politicians, parties, and movements (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Panievsky, 2021; Van Dalen, 2021). Moreover, this derogatory rhetoric foments trolling, cyberbullying, and threats to journalists, which may further undermine trust in news media (Panievsky, 2022; see also Waisbord, 2022).

In this article, we emphasize 'news media trust' as a relational concept determined by both the trustee (news media and journalists) and the trustor (audience/citizens). News media trust can be defined as "the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5).

In the contemporary media environment, research shows that distrust in the news media is related to the disruption of a shared reality by growing polarization (Van Dalen, 2020), active news avoidance (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020), and an increasing shift to alternative[2] and hyper-partisan sources of information[3] (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022; Van Aelst et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018). For these and other reasons, in the contemporary high-choice media environment (see Van Aelst et al., 2017) it is of increasing importance that (established) news media convey information that people can trust and can behave accordingly (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Van Dalen, 2020).

While claims that news media trust is generally collapsing are exaggerated (Hanitzsch et al., 2018), it is clear that it is at least fragile (Strömbäck et al., 2020); and that it is put at risk by the changing media environment and attacks on journalism's reputation. Moreover, since 2020 several global events (like the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine) have shown that the role of news media and, consequently, news media trust are crucial in providing indispensable information to the public.

This climate has led to a recent rapid increase in research on news media trust which provides new and valuable insights about the role of news media in society (see Engelke et al., 2019; Fawzi et al., 2021). However, it has also exacerbated the fragmentation of the field, both by magnifying deficiencies already present and posing new challenges (see Strömbäck et al., 2020; Van Dalen, 2020). The above-outlined properties of the contemporary news media environment make it more complicated than ever to conduct research that empirically analyzes and measures news media trust. News can assume hybrid forms that are very different from the media landscape only 10 years ago. News stories also spread in new and different contexts where it is difficult to identify their source, or they are constantly contested or commented on by a plethora of people that contribute to adding buzz to news items, and obfuscating their contours (see Carlson & Lewis, 2015). As a result, the current state of scholarship around trust in journalism has been defined as "broken" (Usher, 2018, p. 564).

In this article we argue that, in light of the contemporary media environment, we must employ new research approaches and methodologies to grasp the mechanisms underlying news media trust. Since the extant knowledge about trust in news media has been mainly shaped by focusing on an audience's self-reported propensity towards generalized or particularized trust (Moran & Nechushtai, 2022), this article maintains that it is necessary to investigate news media trust also from a qualitative point of view, delving into both its cognitive and emotional dimension. This endeavour is valuable in itself, but it is also beneficial for designing subsequent *survey* research that can adopt new questions with which to investigate news media trust. We assume that today *understanding* media trust is as crucial as measuring it. Consequently, claims for a radical audience turn (Swart et al., 2022) go hand in hand with the need to detail also users' conceptions and experiences of trust.

The following section outlines the concepts of trust and news media trust. The article then examines the various factors that have been documented to influence news media trust, as well as the factors that are influenced by it. Subsequently, we identify the various measurements of news media trust mainly adopted to date. On this basis, we address the merits of a qualitative turn in news media trust research. There follows a methodological proposal and a concluding section in which we outline possible directions for future empirical research.

2 | WHAT IS (NEWS MEDIA) TRUST?

Trust has been one of the most recurrent topics within the social sciences, and particularly in sociology. Trust is important because it is an essential feeling in human interactions (Quandt, 2012; Uslaner, 2002) that reduces social complexity by generalizing expectations about future behaviour (Luhmann, 1979) and fuels cooperation and engagement: where a greater level of trust within a community exists, the likelihood of cooperation is higher as well (see

Putnam, 1993, p. 171). Trust concerns expectations based on past experiences that induce a trustor to be vulnerable to the actions of a trustee, a person as well as an institution (Warren, 1999). Although the trustor expects that interactions will lead to gains rather than losses (Gambetta, 1988; Warren, 1999), past experiences do not entirely determine what will happen in the future, or they are not sufficiently informative to predict future attitudes and behaviours. Hence, trust also entails risks, uncertainty, disappointing outcomes, and thus negative emotions. This uncertainty makes the credibility of the trustee an indicator—a paramount heuristic—with which to grasp the extent to which people trust the trustee (Strömbäck et al., 2020).

It should be noted that the terms 'trust' and 'credibility' often overlap and are used interchangeably, leading to overall confusion in the communication literature (Fawzi et al., 2021). Trust research has a long tradition in disciplines such as sociology, political science, and psychology. By contrast, communication scholars have generally considered related concepts such as media credibility. Media credibility encapsulates the criteria that people use to evaluate their trust in media (Kohring, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Nevertheless, news media trust is different from mere credibility because, while the latter is regarded as an attribute of the source or of the medium (Kiousis, 2001), the former is evaluated by scholars in terms of relationships between audience/citizens, on the one hand, and media practitioners, media outlets, and media coverage on the other (Gunther, 1992). In other words, credibility is something that news media have; trust is something that people may place in news media. Trust is a relational concept, and it is determined by both the trustee and by the trustor (Fisher et al., 2021; Van Dalen, 2020).

Trust has been efficaciously termed an *institutional economizer* (Rosanvallon, 2008) which "eliminates the need for various procedures of verification and proof" (4). Trust is particularly important for what are called *experience goods*—among which are also news—because their value and quality can only be ascertained by actually using them (Nielsen, 2020). Trust is a concept suitable for interpreting relations between voters and candidates, citizens and journalists; relationships that are based on expectations, on the one hand, and premises and actions on the other. The increasingly mediatized contemporary political communication ecology (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999) determines that news media trust is paramount from a political sociology perspective as well. Trust in institutions—which include politics—is intertwined with trust in news media; and the level of trust that people may have in these institutions depends also on their trust in news media (see Ariely, 2015; Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

Journalism has traditionally intended "to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 12). As Schranz et al. (2018) state, news media form part of the indispensable information and communications infrastructure of a modern society. Without individuals or institutions that can be trusted to inform citizens about current affairs, "the task of informing ourselves would become so laborious and unwieldy that public knowledge would be mainly confined to narrow and parochial experience" (Coleman, 2012, p. 36).

With specific regard to news media, trust entails "the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5). People take risks when they decide to trust the media because they are not able, or it is too expensive, to verify news content on their own (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). As Coleman (2012) argues, since not everyone can be everywhere— although digital media may have somewhat altered this condition (Strömbäck et al., 2020)—people need to be able to rely upon mediated accounts without having to check and recheck every single news item that is given to them.

3 | PREDICTORS AND IMPLICATIONS OF NEWS MEDIA TRUST

Recent changes in the news media environment have further enriched research on news media trust; nevertheless, trust, its causes, and its consequences are often blurred, overlapped, and take into account a plethora of muddled factors (Mayer et al., 1995; Strömbäck et al., 2020). The categorization of correlates as either predictors or consequences of media trust in empirical studies is often based on theoretical assumptions rather than on empirical findings, because trust research relies mostly on cross-sectional data (Fawzi et al., 2021).

Scholars investigating the implications of news media (dis)trust have tried to isolate its behavioural consequences, at both the individual and the societal level. One of its most investigated, but also contested, consequences concerns positive association with news media use (e.g. Kiousis, 2001; Rimmer & Weaver, 1987; Tsfati & Peri, 2006; Yamamoto et al., 2016), although results depend on the granularity of the measurement (Fawzi et al., 2021).[4] Moreover, studies have found that individuals with low media trust are more willing to vote in line with their party identification (Ladd, 2012) and are significantly more likely to engage in online news participation than are individuals with moderate trust (Fletcher & Park, 2017).

The literature has also established a variety of factors that account for differences in institutional trust—and in media trust by extension. Research results show that trust in news media is not a phenomenon that is exclusive to particular social groups based on sociodemographic characteristics (Fawzi et al., 2021): two main schools of thought dominate the debate, and they propose an institutional versus a cultural explanation (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Van Dalen, 2020). The former argues that news media trust is endogenous and depends on actual institutional performances. In short, accurate news content creates higher levels of trust; by contrast, misleading or inaccurate news increases distrust. In this respect, research shows how "cynical stories, game-framed news, as well as horserace coverage and tabloid coverage created antipathy toward the press" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 6). In contrast, the cultural explanation interprets news media trust as an exogenous factor that does not necessarily reflect institutional performances, but rather is a consequence of broad cultural values in society. In this regard, several studies have found a correlation between media trust and interpersonal trust. Media trust has also been found to be strongly related to trust in other public institutions, so much so that Hanitzsch et al. (2018) assert that media trust is bound up in an inescapable relationship with political trust that can prove to be a downward spiral of trust in some contexts or an upward spiral in others.

Splendore and Curini (2020) consider media trust to involve both such aspects (one endogenous to media and one exogenous to them). Indeed, news media trust depends on journalistic performance, but its evaluation is relational and relative. Hence, what should really matter is the *perception* of journalists' overall performances in affecting citizens' trust in the media. By focusing on the Italian case, Splendore and Curini (ibid.) demonstrate that this perception is strongly affected by ideological considerations: the less the ideological proximity between a citizen and journalists, the lower the trust in news media reported by the former. In this sense, ideological proximity captures the concept of news media trust in its interplay between endogenous and exogenous factors.

4 | NEWS MEDIA TRUST MEASUREMENTS

There is a complex debate about how to measure news media trust properly. The more basic differentiation is between generalized and particularized trust. Generalized trust refers to the trust that people may have in news media as a whole, while particularized trust refers to the trust they may have in a particular media type (television, radio, the Internet) or in a specific media outlet (*The New York Times*, *El Pais* or *Clarin*). Media trust can also be addressed towards journalists and news content themselves (see Strömbäck et al., 2020). Quantitative analyses often rely on single-item measures of trust, which simply ask about the degree of trust in news media (Knudsen et al., 2021; Van Dalen, 2020). Rather unclear in such studies is what exactly is measured and how it can be interpreted (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Van Dalen, 2020).

This differentiation from the scholarly point of view, however, reveals a growing number of pitfalls and overlaps that concern: (1) the ability of users to distinguish between generalized and particularized levels of trust; and (2) with the actual disentanglement of those levels in the complexity of daily information flows. For example, if a user confidently uses the contents of the Twitch channel of a traditional news media outlet, where the anchor is a hybrid figure, who is that user trusting? The media brand? The platform? The Internet? Or again: if a user follows with attention and trust a Twitter account of a journalist who makes explicit his/her belonging to a specific newspaper, who is that user trusting?

In the contemporary media environment, even further scrutiny is required. Considerable efforts have been made to develop and validate multi-dimension scales with which to measure news media trust. In this regard, although researchers having been attempting to convincingly devise such scales for several decades and numerous instruments have been developed, questions about underlying factor structure and construct validity still persist. Extant research suggests that news media trust may have one, two, three, or even four underlying factors (Abdulla et al., 2004; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Meyer, 1988).

From a theoretical standpoint, the results reported by Yale et al. (2015) and Prochazka and Schweiger (2019) support the idea that, although analytical distinctions may be drawn between news balance, honesty, and currency as well as between selectivity of topics and selectivity of facts, "the current path in trust and credibility research to find underlying factor structures of the concepts might be partly misleading" (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019, p. 40). The difficulties of consistently measuring and grasping underlying factor structures of news media trust can be read as further proof that news media trust research should not focus only on audience's content evaluations.

5 | A PLEA FOR A QUALITATIVE TURN

Despite the abundant and ever-growing literature on news media trust, "Research addressing news audiences still tends to talk more *about* audiences than *with* audiences" (Swart et al., 2022, p. 8—emphasis in the original). Since survey research can tell us a great deal about what people do (and think they do), but much less about what it means to them (Toff & Nielsen, 2018), we argue in this article that it is necessary to investigate media trust (also) from a qualitative point of view. A qualitative turn does not intend to question the value of surveys for measuring news media trust, but rather their accuracy in grasping people's news preferences and appreciation of journalism, as well as the emotional aspects that arise when they interact with journalism. Indeed, user experiences and practices, when studied from a qualitative standpoint, appear to be much more complex, layered, and even paradoxical than can be revealed by quantitative measures (Costera Meijer, 2020). News media trust is a complex construct that involves both the cognitive and emotional dimensions (Palmer, 2019), and it is therefore challenging to capture.

The survey-based research design is part of a long research tradition that has been developed in news media trust research having in mind a highly different information environment (Brosius, Hameleers & van der Meer, 2022). In the contemporary high-choice media environments (see Van Aelst et al., 2017), the concepts of journalism, news media, journalists, and even news are polysemic, and each of them may refer to many—partly overlapping—different facets (Strömbäck et al., 2020) (see the examples outlined above concerning news media's Twitch or Twitter channels). This is a situation radically different from when, in earlier low-choice media environments, people were likely to think about similar things when responding to questions about trust (ibid.). It undoubtedly severely challenges the comparability of different survey responses. For example, Daniller et al. (2017) suggest that over 60% of the decline in Americans' trust in 'the press' can be explained by shifts in which media users are thinking about when responding to questions related to media trust. The proliferation of news media sources in the contemporary media environment may have indeed increased the accessibility bias in the kind of media that most easily come to people's minds when answering generic questions about trust. This is a clear example of the fact that "Even when the survey wording for an item remains constant, the meaning of answers to a survey question can still change" (ibid., p. 82). Although Daniller et al. (ibid.) developed a valid wording approach to avoid this problem, qualitative methods are better equipped to grasp people's understanding of the news media environment. For example, given the increasingly atypical nature of newsmaking, a qualitative approach allows the audience to express what they *feel* to be journalism (Broersma, 2019). Indeed, Deuze and Witschge (2018) argue that journalism is now a dynamic and dispersed practice that increasingly takes place and shape elsewhere from traditional institutions. The extent to which the audience's perceptions of traditional and peripheral journalistic actors differ indicates where they demarcate the boundaries (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022). A qualitative approach also makes possible to intercept respondents' ideas about historically slippery concepts such as 'mainstream outlets versus alternative outlets' and 'hard news versus soft news' that a survey approach takes for granted.

Moreover, the aforementioned technological, social, and cultural changes may have affected the audience's expectations in regard to the news media; current expectations may be completely different from those held in the past (Van Dalen, 2020). One criticism of the reliance in audience research on quantitative methods is that they inadvertently limit the opportunity for alternative expectations to emerge freely while overly relying on old—sometimes outdated—categories (Banjac, 2022).

Furthermore, what people say they think about news media is also shaped by the broader metajournalistic discourse (see Carlson, 2016) in which they are immersed (Carlson, 2017, 2020; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). It is the task of qualitative research to intercept and disentangle the complexity of these discourses and understand their origin.

Besides the intrinsic limitations of quantitative measures, they are often interpreted as if the audience's approach to and perceptions of journalism are direct reactions to how journalism is produced and presented to the audience (Nelson, 2021). In this framework, trust in news media can be restored by promoting certain professional practices (e.g. fact-checking or detached observation) that are assumed to ensure professional credibility (Schmidt et al., 2019). This means underestimating the complex and dynamic relationships between audiences and newsmakers that underpin news media trust (Moran & Nechushtai, 2022). Hence, rather than assuming 'trust' as a well-defined and unproblematic term, there is more need than ever to talk to the audience to understand what this term actually means for them. In other words, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the narratives through which people give meaning to the lived experience of journalism. This clearly requires a qualitative focus on what people bring to the news and not only on what news brings to them (Nelson & Lewis, 2021).

Given their ability to portray social phenomena as processual and contingent and to render their complexity in depth, various qualitative methods may be suitable, depending on the context and the people considered (e.g. different kinds of interviews and focus groups)[5]; creative methods in such an understudied research area are also poised to offer important contributions (see Costera Meijer, 2016).

6 | SOME INSIGHTS FROM EMPIRICAL (QUALITATIVE) STUDIES

Although trust in the news media has been studied from a variety of perspectives, rarely has a qualitative, bottom-up approach been advanced by scholarship dealing with the topic, which has to date largely relied on quantitative methods (Engelke et al., 2019). A pioneering work in this regard is that of Coleman, Anthony, and Morrison (2012). By employing a constructivist approach in the UK context, they discovered that distrust in the news entails also a refusal to collude with stereotyped depictions conveyed by news media, which implies a disengagement from a certain vocabulary for constructing social meaning. Relying on the *folk theories* framework and focusing on the US context, Wilner et al. (2021) found that while their focus group participants "articulated a desire for active journalists to provide evidence for the larger truths in a story, they also seem to seek a more passive approach, as they perceived a story as biased if it contained facts or context they perceived as unnecessary" (12). In short, they described a kind of journalism that seems impossible to achieve but that gains meaning when seen from the interviewees' perspectives (see also Nelson & Lewis, 2021). Recently, adopting several qualitative research methods, Bozdağ and Koçer (2022) have found that, in the highly polarized context of Turkey, evaluating political news can sometimes be more an assessment of the political position of the source than an assessment of the accuracy of the news content: in sum, people believe in "what feels closer to them" (p. 173). The authors define as "skeptical inertia" the process whereby their interviewees "settle into a position of passivity when it comes to evaluating the accuracy of questionable content by relying on a perspective that is similar to their own existing worldview and political leanings" (p. 170).

Because "the sustainability of any social practice depends to a large measure on how it feels to participate in it" (Coleman, 2013, p. 4), it is of vital importance to investigate "how things feel" (Hochschild, 2016, p. 135). Several research studies show that news media trust requires an approach that is more emotion-oriented: emotions may inform general attitudes toward journalism and responses to anti-media rhetoric (see Palmer, 2019). A qualitative

approach makes it possible to capture in-depth emotional nuances elicited when people interact with news media (ibid.). These may also involve preconceived perspectives about how news is likely to affect people emotionally *before* even engaging with any actual news (Toff & Nielsen, 2022).

Resorting to the *deep story* framework, Palmer (2019) interviewed ordinary people who were named in mainstream news stories in the US, investigating among other things how they felt about interacting with journalists. The results highlighted that interviewees felt corralled, exploited, and bullied by "a powerful entity that was supposed to look out for citizens, but instead tried to deny its power while often taking advantage of them" (p. 338–339). Moreover, Swart and Broersma (2022) employed a user-centric and a practice-based approach to determine how young Dutch adults deal with the complexity of trust in digital environments. Relying on two rounds of interviews, they found that contrary to normative ideals of trust as a conscious, deliberate process, in deciding what to trust, the interviewees also relied on tacit knowledge and affective and intuitive considerations (such as gut feelings).

Finally, a qualitative approach to the analysis of news media trust provides important insights not only into why people (dis)trust certain news media more than others, but also into what it means for them to (dis)trust news media. For example, for people socialized in the oppressive and controlling Communist regimes, according to Sztompka (1999), trusting the State and all the institutions connected with it—news media included—was considered "naïve" and "stupid".[6] Hence, (dis)trusting news media may assume different meanings in different social, political, or cultural contexts. A study conducted by Pjesivac et al. (2016) showed that even in the 2010s in Serbia relying on the news media was mainly experienced as conferring confidence and hope rather than trust. This finding complements Luhmann's (1988) assertion that "If you do not consider alternatives, you are in a situation of confidence. If you choose one action in preference to others in spite of the possibility of being disappointed by the action of others, you define the situation as one of trust (p. 97)". Indeed, interviewees were found to shift the responsibility for producing trustworthy messages from news media to themselves, from trustees to trustors, "ultimately changing the conditions of risk necessary for the modern conceptualization of trust" (Pjesivac et al., 2016, p. 347).

The generational persistence of cultural values may explain why the participants in this study, regardless of their age, shared similar views on trust, even decades after the fall of Communism: the researchers "felt as if the parents were speaking from their children's mouths" (ibid., p. 345). Moreover, this qualitative study has made it possible to demonstrate that confidence and trust in news media can sometimes exist together as a result of contingent and complex socio-political circumstances.

In the above-mentioned study by Swart and Broersma (2021), the authors found that the increased speed of news cycles and the abundance of news, together with a broader discourse on disinformation and misinformation, made their young Dutch interviewees experience a lack of efficacy in evaluating the news, which created the belief that they could never fully trust any particular source. Similarly, a sense of helplessness contributes to the 'skeptical inertia' identified by Bozdağ and Koçer (see above) as people face an information overload within the polarized media environment in Turkey.

The study by Aharoni et al. (2022) focuses on the dynamics of (dis)trust among experts, journalists, and the audience through a case study on an inaccurate exit poll aired on a leading Israeli television channel. The results help to understand that trust extends beyond the common scholarly focus on the reliability of journalistic contents because it also regards essential faith in the ritual signified of national exit polls through their joint consumption.

All things considered, knowledge about news media trust should be concerned with how the audience makes sense of the news from everyday relationships that build and sustain collective projects, and not only with quantified aspects of news reception (see Carey, 1992; Zelizer et al., 2021).

7 | METHODOLOGICAL SUGGESTIONS

A recurrent shortcoming of most analyses of news media trust is that they do not directly investigate people's willingness to take a risk when relying on the news. Indeed, most researchers who deal with trust/distrust actually focus

on trustworthiness/untrustworthiness (Engelke et al., 2019). Trust/distrust involves an individual making him/herself purposely vulnerable to another individual, group, or institution while trustworthiness/untrustworthiness concerns the attributes of the entity that is to be trusted (Fisher et al., 2021; Levi & Stoker, 2000).

While we agree with Hanitzsch et al. (2018, p. 5) that news media trust is the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content, we consider *vulnerable* to be the key word; a pivotal aspect of trust that has too often been neglected. A fruitful avenue for future analysis of news media trust should make the element of risk of assessments of information under conditions of uncertainty more central (see Van Dalen, 2020); taking also the emotional aspects of this process into consideration.

It is for these reasons, among others, that we direct attention to a specific research method sometimes used in sociology, political science, and psychology, but largely ignored in journalism studies: the 'episodes method'. This method relies mainly on individual, in-depth, and semi-structured interviews asking participants to describe concrete episodes in which complex, potentially abstract, concepts—such as journalism—have played a role in their lives. As Palmer (2019) argues:

> directly questioning people about their views on the news media can elicit vague responses and rote recitation of familiar anti-media scripts. The episodes approach explores citizens' attitudes and folk theories about the press more indirectly, and at the same time elicits responses grounded in the particulars of citizens' lives (p. 33).

As stated above, Palmer (2019) employed this method to interview ordinary people who were named in mainstream news stories in the US, asking them to describe the events leading up to their contact with reporters, how they experienced the interview process, how they felt about the way they were represented in the final product, and any repercussions they dealt with as a result.

As an approach that is applicable to a larger number of people, we propose that researchers focus on specific *incidents* in which respondents have had to make themselves vulnerable to the news. For example, interviewees can be asked to recall the process that led them to inform themselves from news media about an issue of public concern that they considered important. 'Important' is a vague term, but the request must be intentionally vague because the aim is to leave interviewees free to choose what they themselves consider relevant. In particular, questions can be asked about why they felt the need to inform themselves at that time, what they expected from the news, through which channels they informed themselves, and why. Also, the focus can be put on negative incidents so that information can also be acquired about people's understanding of how journalism works. In this case, the interviewer should invite the respondents to reflect on a case where news media have failed to meet their expectations, investigating what happened, why, in their opinion, news media went wrong, and how this influenced their future news media consumption choices.

Although to the best of our knowledge no study has implemented the episodes method in this way, it potentially makes both the cognitive and emotional aspects related to the (un)willingness to trust information at a time of need emerge very clearly and in detail. Also, it presumably helps in the thorny task of disentangling at what levels (dis)trust develops—for example, towards news media in general, particular news outlets or journalists, etc. –, for what reasons, and with what distinctions and interactions between those levels.

8 | QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON NEWS MEDIA TRUST BEYOND TRADITIONAL BOUNDARIES

In addition to the prevalence of quantitative methods in news media research, until now, the focus has been on people in general, without paying much attention to the many differences among them. It is, therefore, necessary to emphasize that the approach proposed here can and should be employed to go beyond generalized, traditional, and normative definitions of the public by considering often overlooked actors.

Even if quantitative research shows that trust in news media is not a phenomenon that is exclusive to particular social groups (see Fawzi et al., 2021), journalism scholars have tended to privilege audiences that are of interest to the news industry, thus overlooking people with a lower socio-economic status, especially at the intersection of other social categories like race and gender (Swart et al., 2022). Since individual expectations also depend on what affects a person personally and his/her lived experiences, Banjac (2022) advocates employing an intersectional perspective to understand audiences' diverse expectations. From journalists' point of view, taking different expectations into account could help, for example, close the gender gap in news avoidance and encourage young people to consume news-related contents (Loosen et al., 2020).

Employing qualitative methods to design quantitative research is desirable[7] (even if a mixed-method approach may have some drawbacks, see Loosen & Schmidt, 2016). Information and data driven by qualitative research may inform a questionnaire better able to grasp the different facets of news media trust within an evolving media environment; the questionnaire should be constructed starting from the concepts and ideas to which people resort when speaking about the news. Essentially, a qualitative approach may inform structured answers to fundamental questions to news media trust such as:

- What is journalism for you?
- What do you understand by the expression 'news media'?
- What are your expectations about journalism?
- What does the expression 'consuming information' mean for you?
- What does the expression 'trusting news media' mean for you?
- What are the main factors that induce you to trust a particular news media outlet/journalist?
- Suppose you saw or heard conflicting or different reports on the same event from different actors/media outlets/ media types (provide a list of actors/media outlets/media types), which of these versions would you be most likely to believe? (see Van Dalen, 2020)
- How willing are you to trust a source that (provide a list of different actions)

Moreover, since trust in news media is also a question of how people *feel* about the success or failure of news media in meeting their expectations (Coleman, Anthony, & Morrison, 2012; Palmer, 2019), qualitative research can help to structure answers that intercept the most emotional aspects that arise when citizens interact with news media:

- How do you feel when news media (do not) meet your expectations?
- How do you feel about journalism/journalists?
- How does relying on news media for information make you feel?
- How do you feel about the coverage of (provide a list of topics)?

In conclusion, a qualitative turn might serve, improve, and update research tools useful for measuring news media trust in a media environment that is undoubtedly undergoing radical change.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

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ENDNOTES

[1] According to Mudde's (2004) definition, populism is "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people. Populism, so defined, has two opposites: elitism and pluralism" (p. 543; italics in the original).

[2] Following Holt et al. (2019), alternative news media are here conceptualized as "proclaimed and/or (self)-proclaimed corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system" (p. 862). Inherent in such a definition is thus a critique of the mainstream news media for not living up to its own standards (Ihlebæk et al., 2022).

[3] Research has shown that if the fragmentation in news consumption is high, people are more likely to be exclusively confronted with false information (see Humprecht et al., 2020).

[4] For a detailed review of the relation between media trust and media use, see Strömbäck et al. (2020).

[5] An in-between alternative could be qualitatively analyzing open-ended survey answers (see Brosius, Hameleers & van der Meer, 2022). Although this methodological strategy makes possible to reach more respondents than qualitative interviews, the high cost of analyzing excerpts only allows applying this strategy to a limited number of questions.

[6] Even though there were obvious national varieties across the Communist regime (DDR was not the same as Hungary, Poland was not the same as Czechoslovakia, etc.), there were also fundamental, underlying commonalities, which are related to what Sztompka (1999) calls 'bloc culture'. The erosion of trust in the State and its institutions was precisely component and consequence of the bloc culture (ibid.).

[7] At the beginning of this article, we mentioned that today understanding media trust is as crucial as measuring it. Indeed, while advocating a qualitative turn in research on news media trust we also recognize that quantitative analyses make it possible to assess direct levels of congruence between different respondents' answers and to estimate the distribution of a certain phenomenon in the broader population (see Engelke et al., 2019).

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