

A Deliberative Democracy Framework for Analysing Trust in Journalists: An Application to Italy

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Abstract

In the current public sphere, the “deliberative model of democracy” may represent both the necessary benchmark and the best lens through which to view developments in the public debate. Democracy can never become really deliberative without the active participation of news media. The assumption of this article is that if news media are to disseminate knowledge, trust in them is crucial. This article examines an aspect neglected by studies on media trust: trust in journalists. It presents the results of a longitudinal survey carried out in May and September 2020 in Italy, right at the end of the first mass Covid-19 lockdown (Wave 1) and after the first pandemic summer (Wave 2), therefore a time when there was a great need for quality information. The main findings reveal that the use of social media decreases trust in journalists; furthermore, those who mainly rely on political institutions’ social media accounts for information place less trust in journalists than those who mainly rely on journalistic sources on those platforms. Instead, the use of traditional media (radio, television, newspapers) increases trust in journalists.

Keywords

deliberative democracy; information crisis; media trust; news consumption; trust in journalists

1. Introduction

An established, but often contested, academic tradition links news media and democracy by relying on the idea that the news is “the stuff which makes political action...possible” (Park, 1940, p. 678). Basically, according to this research strand, news media are meant to “aid citizens in becoming informed” (Holbert, 2005, p. 511) so that they can be “free and self-governing” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 12). This makes trust in news

media a pivotal factor at a societal and political level (Coleman, 2012; Van Dalen, 2020). Nevertheless, even when the link between news media and democracy is contested, especially because journalism studies tend to rely excessively on (Western) democratic frameworks, critics admit that journalism has been historically necessary for democracy, while it is more critical assuming that democracy is necessary for journalism (see Josephi, 2013; Zelizer, 2013).

We argue that, in the contemporary media environment, the “deliberative model of democracy” may be both the necessary benchmark and the best lens through which to view current developments of the public debate. The starting point of this article is that trust in journalists implies (is a proxy for) the trust that people have in the good quality of public debate and, consequently, in its deliberation-enhancement ability.

Our article deals with trust in Italian journalists with a particular focus on its relationship with media consumption choices. To remedy the deficiency of research on news media trust conducted using longitudinal data (see Fawzi et al., 2021), our analysis relies on an original panel survey administered to a representative sample of the Italian adult internet user population. Data collection started immediately after the lockdown due to the Covid-19 global pandemic, a period in which the need to be (well-)informed increased the public appetite for reliable news. Italy is a suitable case with regard to trust and deliberative democracy because it has traditionally recorded low levels of media trust (Newman et al., 2023), high levels of political parallelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and it also went through a severe “information crisis” during the Covid-19 pandemic (Lovari, 2020).

2. Why Deliberative Democracy?

What notoriously weakens the bond between journalism and democracy is the fact that there is no agreement on what is meant by “democracy,” and thus on what is normatively expected from journalism. Indeed, by identifying four models of democracy (procedural, competitive, participatory, and deliberative), Strömbäck (2005, p. 332) states that “what might be considered to be high quality news journalism from the perspective of one model of democracy might not be the same when taken from the perspective of another.”

The current public sphere is being severely affected by various threats, such as its fragmentation and polarisation (Van Aelst et al., 2017), institutional scepticism (Waisbord, 2018), and ideologically coherent “information cocoons” in which other voices are regarded as intrinsically untrustworthy (see Nguyen, 2020), to name just a few. In such an environment, the “deliberative model of democracy” may be both the necessary benchmark and the best lens through which to view current developments of the public debate.

Deliberative democracy implies that “when citizens or their representatives disagree morally, they should continue to reason together to reach mutually acceptable decisions” (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, p. 2) while no one has the right to dominate and coerce other participants (Strömbäck, 2005). Deliberation, in fact, can be defined as “mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern” (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2).

3. Deliberative Democracy and News Media

Deliberative discussions should take place among different actors, such as individual citizens, politicians, or citizens and their representatives, but democracy can never become really deliberative without the active participation of news media (Strömbäck, 2005). Indeed, by acting as *super partes*, it is journalism that should provide the arena necessary for deliberative discussions to successfully take place (Strömbäck, 2005). To achieve this goal, it is important for journalism to contribute to raising people's awareness of issues that are of public concern. It should act as a watchdog and preserve media independence and integrity from external influences of power (Gastil & Black, 2018). Clearly, these are more ideal types of journalism practices than feasible goals to achieve. However, the pivotal issue is to what extent external and partisan influences do undermine deliberative processes.

This issue may be addressed in different ways; this article faces it from the news media trust perspective: Its assumption is that for news media to disseminate common knowledge, trust in them is crucial (see Strömbäck et al., 2020). When news media cannot be trusted to deliver common knowledge, the idea of the public—understood as a collective entity possessing shared concerns—and, therefore, the preconditions of deliberation, fall apart (Coleman, 2012). Research has shown that distrust in the news media is related to the disruption of a shared reality by increasingly active news avoidance (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020) as well as polarisation (Van Dalen, 2020), and a marked preference for attitude-consistent news sources (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022).

We thus assume that trust in journalists implies (is a proxy for) the trust that people have in the good quality of public debate and, consequently, in its deliberative-enhancement ability. While we acknowledge that very high levels of trust may be problematic for a critical evaluation of information (see Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023; Usher, 2018), we maintain that journalists have to be trusted if they are to be able to set a minimally stable, common ground for public deliberation.

4. Trust in Journalists

Broadly speaking, 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). When people trust news media, they are taking a risk because they are not able, or it is too expensive, to verify the received information on their own (Coleman, 2012; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005).

The above-mentioned current worrisome trends in the public sphere are closely connected with issues of trust. Features of the contemporary media environment arguably represent the greatest challenges ever to 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; see also Zelizer et al., 2021). Moreover, while attempts to delegitimise journalism are nothing new, they are becoming increasingly frequent in online spaces (Waisbord, 2020); in particular, they have been routinely made by populist politicians, parties, and movements (see Carlson et al., 2021; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Therefore, news media trust in the contemporary media environment is particularly fragile (Strömbäck et al., 2020), so the ability of news media to enhance deliberation becomes even more important, but also more difficult to achieve.

Although news media trust has been extensively investigated, and some broad agreement has been reached (e.g., the importance of news media consumption choices as correlates), empirical findings regarding it are far from being coherent. Among other factors, the richness and diversity of the results depend also on the granularity of the measurement used (see Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020). In this regard, it can be argued that one important aspect of research on news media trust is the definition itself of news media, which in the literature ranges from news media in general to the content of media coverage, passing through several levels of granularity (Strömbäck et al., 2020). How news media trust at these different levels of analysis is related to each other remains unclear, however. For example, a person's high level of trust in their favourite news media outlet may be entirely compatible with a very low level of trust in news media in general.

In the body of research on news media trust, there are very few studies on trust in journalists (see Fawzi et al., 2021). Williams (2012) shows that trust in news reporters, trust in news institutions, and trust in news information are differently related to news media attention across different media: While trust in news reporters is significantly associated with newspaper attention, the same does not apply to television news.

Analysis of trust in journalists makes it possible to more accurately capture citizens' judgements regarding the ability of the professional system of journalism to (still) perform a service of public utility in enhancing deliberation (see Section 3). Delving into trust in a particular unknown group of people and not in an institution means investigating whether citizens recognise journalists as professionals who perform "distinct activities charged with certain normative and functional duties...to identify a news story as an account of something that happened somewhere" (Carlson, 2017, p. 100). In other words, a citizen may distrust news media in general because they are too profit-driven or include too much entertainment. They may also distrust a specific media outlet because it is too biased or slanted. But whether a citizen distrusts news media in general or a particular media outlet, if they distrust (also) journalists, this means that they doubt the capacity of the professional system to convey reliable information useful for building a decent public debate upon stable bases. Taking trust in journalists into consideration therefore means considering the basis of social capital (see Williams, 2012). Thus, (dis)trust in journalists is a crucial—yet understudied—phenomenon to be understood.

Times of crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic—in which higher stakes and uncertainty generated a cacophony of voices (Lovari, 2020)—constitute a privileged observatory from which to examine people's perceptions of the journalistic professional system (Nelson & Lewis, 2023). While sudden and acute crises typically make immediate information necessary, and while slowly evolving ones call instead for in-depth information (Westlund & Ghersetti, 2015), the Covid-19 pandemic constituted a distinctive scenario because it created the need for both (Van Aelst et al., 2021). Conditions of information uncertainty made the element of risk—which is constitutive of news media trust (Van Dalen, 2020)—more and more salient; several studies show that the strong impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on people's everyday lives increased the need and the search for trustworthy information (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2021; Vermeer et al., 2022). This leads to our first, descriptive research question:

RQ1: To what extent do citizens trust journalists during crisis times?

5. News Media Diets and Their Deliberative Implications

Especially in times of crisis, considering trust in journalists is not enough to gauge the strength of deliberative democracy. An equally important factor needs to be considered: which citizens' media consumption choices are associated with trust in journalists. The current high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017) provides both new opportunities and challenges.

Current research shows that exposure to mainstream news media (television, radio, and newspapers) is positively correlated with news media trust, whereas exposure to online news is negatively correlated with it, although the literature is inconsistent on the matter (see Fawzi et al., 2021). It has been extensively claimed that the lack of professional gatekeepers as well as the symmetry of communication fostered in online spaces has created fertile ground for the spread of conspiracy theories, as well as dis- and misinformation (see Theocharis et al., 2021; Xiao et al., 2021); and it is widely known that these phenomena are related to the decrease of trust in mainstream actors and institutions (Waisbord, 2018). However, it can be also argued that the closeness with journalists that social media and the internet make possible can increase trust in them (see Tucker et al., 2018), although this kind of trust may be ideologically driven (see Curini et al., 2023).

Contradictory results may be explained by the heterogeneity of information content and actors existing on the internet and social media, which hamper a straightforward understanding of which kind of information users actually consume online (Fawzi et al., 2021). For this reason, besides controlling for the frequency of use of different media types (i.e., offline-born newspapers, digital-born newspapers, radio, television, and social media), in our analysis, we also control for the main sources used in each of these different media types. This novel approach allows for a more granular understanding of the link between citizens' media diets (i.e., media use patterns) and trust in news media at different levels (see Strömbäck et al., 2020), such as that in journalists. That said, our second research question is:

RQ2: How do citizens' media diets—in terms of frequency and preferred sources—influence trust in journalists during crisis times?

6. Method

6.1. Samples

This study draws on an original panel survey self-administered with a computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) method to a representative sample of the Italian internet user population in the 18–74 age bracket. The survey was conducted by a commercial provider (SWG S.p.A), and the sample was derived from an opt-in online community directly managed by the same provider, with quotas for gender, age, education, employment situation, and region of residence. Survey participants were rewarded with non-monetary incentives.

A self-administered CAWI method (also known as web surveying) with panel respondents has some limitations that have been widely discussed in the literature: for example, self-selection of respondents and less precise representativeness (Pasek, 2015), reduced attention of respondents due to the setting, and the absence of an interviewer (Prior & Lupia, 2008).

However, web surveys with panel respondents have become very common in social science research because they have multiple advantages. For example, they are less expensive than other survey methods and, at the same time, it has been observed that they provide data whose quality, albeit lower than that of probabilistic samples, is not excessively far from that of “gold standard samples,” so that CAWI surveys can be useful tools for researchers in social sciences (Zack et al., 2019, pp. 225–226). Moreover, research has shown that self-administered CAWI surveys can reduce the effects of social desirability biases (Kreuter et al., 2008). This latter advantage is germane to the specific goal of this study since both trust in social and political institutions and a lack of it may be perceived as normatively desirable (see Nelson & Lewis, 2023; Smallpage et al., 2023).

Regarding Wave 1 (W1), fieldwork was conducted from 18 to 28 May 2020. From an initial sample of 1,923 individuals, after the implementation of a rigid protocol of data-cleaning aimed at excluding speeders and negligent respondents, 1,563 participants provided complete and valid data (response rate 34%). Wave 2 (W2) data were collected between 31 August and 13 September 2020, when information was gathered from 1,353 cases (with a very satisfactory retention rate of 86.6%; see Watson & Wooden, 2006). In Italy, those two timeframes correspond to periods when the need for quality information was very strong: the end of the first mass Covid-19 lockdown (W1) and the end of the first pandemic summer (W2). The broader research project with which this study is associated comprised also a Wave 3, which is not considered here given the specific goals and research design chosen.

6.2. Statistical Analysis

To address our research questions, descriptive and regression analyses were conducted. In regard to the regression analyses, first applied was an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model based on cross-sectional data (W1), to which were added a lagged (dependent variable measured at W2) and an autoregressive (controlling for the value of the dependent variable at W1) OLS regression model in order to assess more accurately the effect of citizens’ media diets on trust in journalists. The rationale here is that although cross-sectional and lagged models may aid understanding of how variables are related to each other, both may be biased when addressing causal inference. Autoregressive models help mitigate this bias (see Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Maxwell et al., 2011).

Considering the ordinal nature of the dependent variable, the most appropriate regression model would be the ordered logistic regression. Thus, the same analyses were conducted using ordered logistic regression models for robustness check. The results are consistent across models. For ease of interpretation, OLS models will be reported and discussed in what follows.

6.3. Dependent Variables

According to the model employed, the dependent variable is the level of trust in journalists found in W1 or W2. In both cases, the question asked was: “How much trust do you place in the following public institutions and actors?” The relevant item was “journalists.” Answer options were no trust at all, low trust, some trust, high trust, and complete trust.

6.4. Independent Variables

The same independent variables were added to all models (excluding, of course, the autoregressive models, in which the dependent variable at W1 was added to right-hand variables).

Regarding the frequency of use of the different media types, the question asked was: “In the last two months, how often have you used the following channels to inform yourself about political and public interest issues?” Among the displayed items, those that have specific relevance to the present study are: Offline-Born Newspapers, Digital-Born Newspapers, Radio, Television, and Social Media. For each media type, respondents could select from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*multiple times per day*).

As far as the use of particular sources is concerned, three different questions are asked as follows: “Thinking about television/newspaper/social media information, which of the following sources of information have you used most frequently in the last two months? Please select the source you consider most important.” A list of sources was provided separately for each of the media types considered.

As regards newspapers, the list included: *Il Corriere della Sera*/corriere.it, *La Repubblica*/repubblica.it, *La Stampa*/lastampa.it, *Il Sole 24 Ore*/ilsole24ore.com, *Il Giornale*/ilgiornale.it, *Libero*/liberoquotidiano.it, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*/ilfattoquotidiano.it, *Il Post*, and *Fanpage*. Considering a substantial strand of the extant literature (e.g., Galantino, 2017; Mazzoni et al., 2022), these categories were recoded as follows: *Il Corriere della Sera*/corriere.it, *La Repubblica*/repubblica.it, *La Stampa*/lastampa.it, and *Il Sole 24 Ore*/ilsole24ore.com were recoded into the category Mainstream Newspapers; *Il Giornale*/ilgiornale.it, *Libero*/liberoquotidiano.it, and *Il Fatto Quotidiano*/ilfattoquotidiano.it were recoded into the category Partisan Newspapers; while *Il Post* and *Fanpage* were recoded into the category Digital-Born Newspapers. Ownership was not considered a relevant variable with which to group these newspapers because—like most Italian newspapers—all of them are owned by private corporations and entrepreneurs, with the sole exception of *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 30% of whose shares are owned by the newspaper columnists themselves (see Colombo & Quassoli, 2022).

Regarding television, the options were: RAI newscasts, Mediaset newscasts, LA7 newscasts, Sky newscasts, RAI political talk shows, Mediaset political talk shows, LA7 political talk shows, Sky political talk shows, entertainment and information talk shows, and satirical and entertainment TV programmes. In this case, categories were created as follows: RAI newscasts and Mediaset newscasts were recoded into the category Mainstream Newscasts; LA7 newscasts and Sky newscasts were recoded into the category Alternative Newscasts; RAI political talk shows and Mediaset political talk shows were recoded into the category Mainstream Political Talk Shows; LA7 political talk shows and Sky political talk shows were recoded into the category Alternative Political Talk Shows; and entertainment and information talk shows and satirical and entertainment TV programmes were recoded into the category Infotainment. The reason for grouping together information programmes broadcast by RAI—a licence-fee-funded public broadcaster—and Mediaset—a commercial player—separately from those of LA7 and Sky—commercial players as well—is that the former two constitute the so-called “iron duopoly” (Ciaglia, 2013, p. 424; see also Cornia, 2016) which still dominates the television information market (Newman et al., 2023). Moreover, the Italian public service broadcaster RAI has traditionally been strongly affected by political and market influences (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009; Mazzoleni et al., 2011).

As regards the main sources of information on social media, the list included: journalists, news media, politicians or parties, social movements, institutions (e.g., ministries, municipality/mayor, region government, etc.), experts and scientists, political satire pages, YouTubers and Instagrammers with profiles dedicated to information, influencers with profiles not dedicated to information, and pages dedicated to identifying and exposing hoaxes and fake news. We then recoded journalists and news media into the category Journalism; politicians or parties and institutions into Political Institutions; and political satire pages and pages dedicated to identifying and exposing hoaxes and fake news into Watchdog, non-Institutional Pages.

Regarding the main sources for newspapers, television, and social media, in the list provided, there was also the category “I do not remember.” Although it is common practice to treat these answers as missing values (and we employed this strategy for the other variables considered in our models), the particular context of the research made it interesting to also consider those respondents who pay less attention or give less importance to the specific sources from which they inform themselves. We thus included “I do not remember” answers for these specific variables, labelling those respondents as Unattentive to Information Sources.

Some control variables that the literature has shown may be associated with trust in the media (see Dabbous et al., 2021; Fawzi et al., 2021; Lee, 2010) were included. In order to control for the verification habits of the respondents, a dichotomous variable considering whether in the last two months respondents had ever fact-checked information received via a messaging app was included (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*). Interest in politics and perceived influence on government decisions (as a proxy for external political efficacy) was also controlled for through a Likert item ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*). Political leaning was measured on the usual 11-point scale (0 = *left*, 10 = *right*). The questionnaire also offered the possibility to select the answers “I cannot position myself on this spectrum” and “I don’t know.” These answers were recoded as missing values. Trust in political institutions and trust in health institutions were also considered. The former was calculated through a factor analysis of four items arranged along a five-point scale (1 = *no trust at all* and 5 = *complete trust*): trust in the Italian government, trust in Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, trust in the President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella, and trust in the Italian parliament ($\alpha = 0.77$). The variable measuring trust in health institutions was a factor constituted by three items organised along the same five-point scale: trust in doctors and nurses, trust in experts and scientists, and trust in the World Health Organization ($\alpha = 0.77$).

As is common in news media trust research, models also included socio-demographic controls such as gender, age, education, employment situation, and monthly income. Considering the importance of the family situation during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Rump & Zwiener-Collins, 2021), marital status and the presence of school-age children in the household were also considered.

More information on survey design and quality, as well as on question-wording and descriptive statistics in relation to the main variables of the study is available in a dedicated section of the project website (<https://www.ipolhys.it/dashboards>), which features interactive data dashboards.

7. Results

The first descriptive result is that the level of trust Italians accord to journalists is quite low in both the periods considered (W1: $M = 2.29$ and $SE = 0.02$; W2: $M = 2.27$ and $SE = 0.03$).

On considering only respondents who answered the question about trust in journalists in both waves, it emerges that their level of trust decreases over time (see Figure 1). Although continuous and processual analysis is required to best track the evolution of social phenomena (see Ruspini, 2008), it can be conjectured here that the spectacularisation and politicisation of medical voices by (also) Italian journalists (see Lovari, 2020) generated growing distrust in the journalistic professional system.

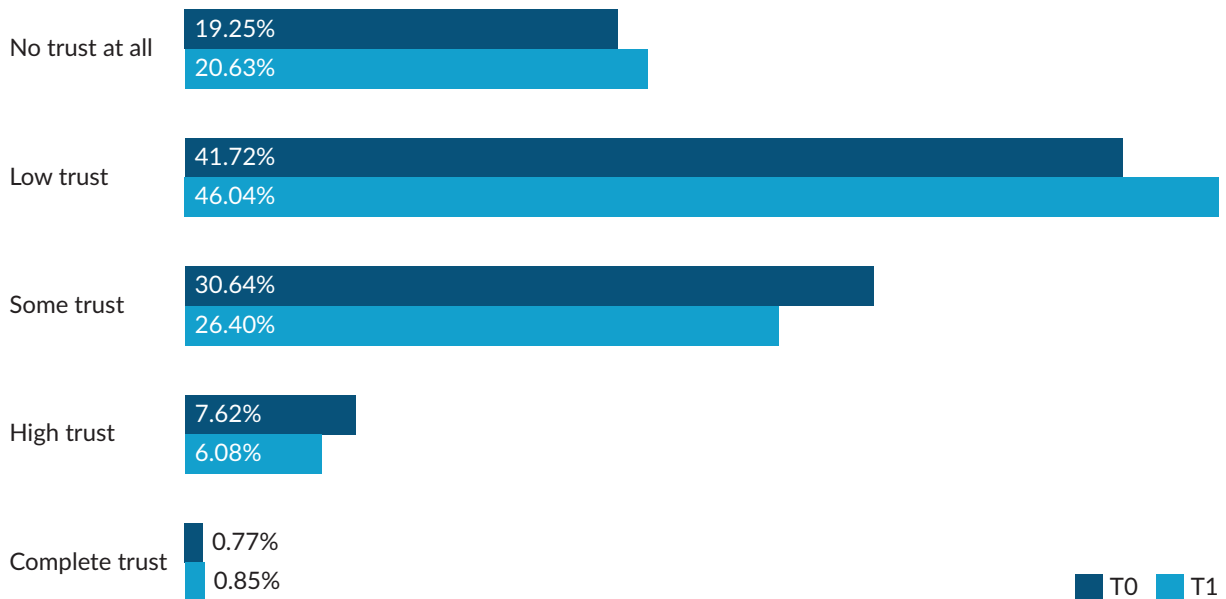


Figure 1. Trust in journalists at T0 and T1.

Regarding RQ2, as can be observed in Table 1, all three models (cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive) consistently show that those respondents who mainly rely on social media accounts of political institutions for information place less trust in journalists than those who mainly rely on journalistic sources on those platforms. There could be two complementary explanations as to why journalistic disintermediation on the part of political institutions negatively influences trust in journalists (see Section 8). The lagged and autoregressive models also highlight that unattentive social media users place less trust in journalists in comparison with those who mainly rely on the social media accounts of journalistic actors for information. Interestingly, the preferred sources of information in the traditional media are, with few exceptions, not significantly related to trust in journalists.

The cross-sectional and lagged models highlight that the frequency of traditional media use (offline-born newspapers, radio, and television) is positively associated with trust in journalists, while the frequency of social media use is negatively associated with it. The frequency of digital-born newspapers use is not significant. This result is consistent with the above-mentioned lower trust in journalists expressed by unattentive social media users, whom we regard as immersed with low cognitive effort in the always-on ambient media system constituted by social media (see Hermida, 2010). This provides support for concerns about the growing distrust in the mainstream media due to the high reliance on social media information sources, and it of course has strong implications for a deliberative democracy (see Section 8). It is important, however, to underline that since the latter results derive solely from cross-sectional and lagged models, they must be interpreted with greater caution because they cannot reveal the direction of the relationships.

Table 1. OLS models predicting trust in journalists.

Variables	Cross-sectional model Trust in journalists (W1)	Lagged model Trust in journalists (W2)	Autoregressive model Trust in journalists (W2)
Offline-born newspapers frequency	0.0742* (0.0290)	0.0732* (0.0334)	0.0259 (0.0282)
Digital-born newspapers frequency	0.00216 (0.0241)	-0.0160 (0.0270)	-0.0123 (0.0228)
Television frequency	0.0650* (0.0312)	0.0789* (0.0351)	0.0356 (0.0295)
Radio frequency	0.0504* (0.0208)	0.0555* (0.0234)	0.0251 (0.0197)
Social media frequency	-0.0509* (0.0211)	-0.0483* (0.0235)	-0.0254 (0.0198)
Main newspapers (Reference category: Mainstream newspapers)			
Partisan newspapers	-0.0611 (0.0725)	-0.00416 (0.0827)	0.0679 (0.0695)
Digital-born newspapers	0.0207 (0.0922)	0.172 (0.107)	0.182* (0.0894)
Unattentive to sources	-0.0508 (0.104)	0.0517 (0.121)	0.0625 (0.101)
Main television programmes (Reference category: Mainstream newscasts)			
Alternative newscasts	-0.000802 (0.0615)	-0.00803 (0.0691)	-0.000797 (0.0580)
Mainstream talk shows	0.279* (0.119)	0.143 (0.147)	0.0508 (0.124)
Alternative talk shows	0.0337 (0.127)	0.198 (0.146)	0.109 (0.124)
Infotainment	-0.142 (0.143)	-0.131 (0.163)	-0.0532 (0.137)
Unattentive to sources	-0.155 (0.116)	-0.118 (0.133)	-0.0487 (0.111)
Main social media source (Reference category: Journalism)			
Political institutions	-0.159* (0.0704)	-0.280*** (0.0790)	-0.165* (0.0668)
Experts and scientists	-0.165 (0.0903)	-0.190 (0.104)	-0.0713 (0.0875)
Watchdog, non-institutional pages	-0.257* (0.131)	-0.189 (0.146)	-0.0236 (0.123)
YouTubers and Instagrammers with profiles dedicated to information	0.256 (0.149)	-0.0357 (0.166)	-0.198 (0.139)
Social movements	-0.0771 (0.186)	-0.106 (0.222)	-0.0796 (0.186)
Influencers with profiles not dedicated to information	-0.338 (0.548)	-0.427 (0.579)	-0.247 (0.485)
Unattentive to sources	-0.133 (0.0925)	-0.310** (0.106)	-0.258** (0.0889)

Table 1. (Cont.) OLS models predicting trust in journalists.

Variables	Cross-sectional model Trust in journalists (W1)	Lagged model Trust in journalists (W2)	Autoregressive model Trust in journalists (W2)
Trust in political institutions	0.155*** (0.0372)	0.178*** (0.0426)	0.0972** (0.0361)
Trust in health institutions	0.346*** (0.0382)	0.161*** (0.0436)	-0.0354 (0.0384)
Fact-checking (1 = yes)	-0.269*** (0.0581)	-0.166* (0.0653)	-0.0566 (0.0552)
Political interest	-0.00503 (0.0401)	0.0254 (0.0457)	0.0299 (0.0384)
Political leaning	0.0365*** (0.0102)	0.00999 (0.0119)	-0.0102 (0.0101)
Perceived influence on government	-0.0565 (0.0316)	-0.0514 (0.0355)	-0.0124 (0.0299)
Gender (1 = female)	0.00207 (0.0565)	0.00239 (0.0641)	0.00488 (0.0538)
Age	0.0424 (0.0242)	0.00302 (0.0282)	-0.0288 (0.0237)
Unemployed (1 = yes)	-0.0721 (0.0603)	0.00107 (0.0680)	0.0359 (0.0572)
Education	-0.0156 (0.0417)	-0.0121 (0.0468)	-0.0174 (0.0393)
Marital status (Reference category: Celibate/nubile)			
Married	-0.0525 (0.0839)	-0.0623 (0.0963)	-0.0468 (0.0809)
Cohabiting	0.00601 (0.0909)	-0.00273 (0.106)	0.00516 (0.0885)
Widowed	-0.315 (0.193)	-0.453* (0.221)	-0.194 (0.186)
Separated	-0.147 (0.167)	-0.0812 (0.183)	-0.0357 (0.153)
Divorced	-0.117 (0.152)	-0.164 (0.169)	-0.0742 (0.142)
Children (1 = yes)	0.0169 (0.0667)	0.0615 (0.0755)	0.0621 (0.0635)
Income	-0.0267 (0.0142)	0.00827 (0.0162)	0.0270* (0.0137)
Trust in journalist (W1)			0.574*** (0.0329)
Constant	2.466*** (0.307)	2.059*** (0.361)	0.771* (0.312)
	Observations = 870 R ² = 0.255	Observations = 758 R ² = 0.185	Observations = 755 R ² = 0.429

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Some noteworthy results also emerge from the control variables. In particular, trust in political institutions is positively associated with trust in journalists (coefficients are significant in all three models). Hence, the link between trust in journalists and political institutions (see Hanitzsch et al., 2018) is maintained also at this level of analysis. This suggests that citizens still share an institutional view of journalists, overlapping the two concepts of journalists and news media institutions. Moreover, the cross-sectional and lagged models show that trust in health institutions is positively associated with trust in journalists, highlighting that the link between trust in journalists and institutions goes further than political institutions (see Gronke & Cook, 2007; Zelizer et al., 2021). Furthermore, from the cross-sectional and lagged models also emerges that those respondents most inclined to verify the information they obtain via messaging apps are those who show less trust in journalists. This result is not surprising because it is evidently linked to the tendency of people with low trust in journalists to see every piece of information they receive as inherently untrustworthy (see Garusi & Splendore, 2023; Nelson & Lewis, 2023).

8. Discussion and Conclusion

Considering the current rise of institutional scepticism and the fragmentation and polarisation of the public sphere, we started this article by claiming the necessity for deliberative democracy to arise. In this particular model of democracy, journalism plays a pivotal role in raising people's awareness of issues that are of public concern. It serves as a watchdog and preserves media independence and integrity from external influences (Gastil & Black, 2018), so trust in news media is a necessary precondition. The starting point of this article was precisely that trust in journalists implies (is a proxy for) the trust that people have in the good quality of public debate and, consequently, in its deliberative-enhancement ability.

Our article has focused on trust in Italian journalists by considering media consumption choices as its main predictors. The panel data were collected right at the end of the first mass lockdown (W1) and after the first pandemic summer (W2), and therefore in periods when there was a great need for trustworthy information.

First, the results highlight that trust in journalists is rather low among Italians in both the periods considered, matching results obtained at different levels of analysis (i.e., trust in news media in general and in specific media outlets; Newman et al., 2022, 2023). This seems to be in line with Sztompka's (1999) argument that manifestations of trust at different levels of analysis are not to be considered mutually independent. Further research should investigate how patterns of trust at different levels of analysis are related.

Furthermore, all the regression models employed show that trust in political institutions is positively associated with trust in journalists, and people who mainly rely on political institutions' social media accounts for information place less trust in journalists than those who mainly rely on journalistic sources on those platforms. Unlike previous studies based on cross-sectional data, the longitudinal data we used allows us to suggest that attitudes towards political institutions exert a causal effect on trust in journalists.

What these results indicate is that the deliberative potential in Italy is generally low. One of the reasons seems to be a general distrust in institutions, which extends to include information professionals. Moreover, the role played by political actors on social media influences trust in journalists. Indeed, it seems that when journalistic practices are effectively replaced by politicians and political institutions on social media, trust in journalists is eroded. These results complement those of previous analyses carried out in the Italian—and, more

generally, Mediterranean—context, which highlight that both news consumption (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and trust (Curini et al., 2023; Splendore & Curini, 2020) are often ideologically driven.

This may be very problematic because social media make political actors less and less dependent on news media to reach the public, enabling them to bypass the news media and avoid accountability challenges. But also, and even more critically, they provide channels for attacks on the news media. Indeed, social media have given political actors new and bigger platforms on which to express their criticism of the news media directly to the public. Hence it is necessary to take account of the fact that the relationship between journalists and politicians/political institutions is not always characterised by a reciprocal acknowledgement of legitimacy (see Van Dalen, 2021). In particular, modern populist communication strategies are characterised by an anti-elitism directed at the news media that aims to challenge their legitimacy (see Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019); and social media have certainly increased the resonance of their messages.

Moreover, this study contributes to the broad debate on social media information consumption. While some scholars were excited about the deliberative enhancement brought by social media, our results tend to dampen such enthusiasm. Indeed, it has been pointed out in the literature that unintentional exposure to news information made possible by social media is linked to positive outcomes, such as information seeking, better use of diverse news sources for information assessment, and civic engagement (see Xiao et al., 2021). However, while our results do not explicitly preclude these possibilities, they show that the high frequency of social media use for information and unattentive rather than journalism-based news consumption on these platforms are negatively associated with trust in journalists, thus undermining one of the bases for a well-functioning deliberative democracy. By contrast, the high frequency of traditional media use and trust in journalists are positively associated.

Many explanations for those results are possible, but we support the idea of so-called “epistemic democracy” (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1870). As Waisbord (2018, p. 1874) explains:

Whereas journalism served as a social connector across difference during the heyday of mass communication, digital news and information flows may connect communities of belief more than publics with fundamentally different notions of truth-telling. Truth as a common public effort is elusive when news organizations and social media connect like-minded communities.

Considering that people tend to use the peripheral route (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) when they encounter information on social media (see Pennycook et al., 2018; Van Dalen, 2020), the above quotation strikes us as providing a convincing explanation of the negative association between high and unattentive use of social media and low trust in journalists.

While our analysis was carried out in the distinctive context of the Covid-19 crisis in Italy, which generated a severe “information crisis” at national and regional levels (Lovari, 2020), our results may be indicative of the underlying relationship between media consumption and trust more generally. Indeed, a perceived information overload—which is not restricted to crisis situations—may produce cynical and distrustful attitudes (see Valeriani et al., 2021).

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, a possible shortcoming concerns the fact that we sought to capture trust in journalists by using a general single-item measure (see Kohring & Matthes, 2007). More in-depth questions about the perceived ability of journalists to enhance deliberation should be applied in future research. Also, in the formulation of the question about trust in journalists, the definition of “journalists” was not specified. This may have created a bias in the results due to the different concepts that categories of respondents had in mind when they talked about journalists (see Daniller et al., 2017). Finally, as media environments and patterns of news media use have become increasingly complex, relying on separate measures for the consumption of different media types may be considered outdated. Following Castro et al. (2022), future studies should employ more sophisticated analytical techniques to explore the combinatory use of different channels and sources and their relations with news media trust.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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