

This is the pre-print version of the paper:

Splendore, S., & Curini, L. (2020). Proximity Between Citizens and Journalists as a Determinant of Trust in the Media. An Application to Italy. *Journalism Studies*, 1–19.

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Proximity between citizens and journalists as a determinant of trust in the media. An application to Italy

This study presents an analysis of trust in types of media with an application to the Italian context. In particular, we focus on the role played by the ideological proximity between journalists' and citizens' political leanings while differentiating between traditional (press and TV) and new (internet and social networks) media. To do so, we assume, within the Hierarchy of Influences Model, that the individual level is increasingly influential in shaping news content. Then, we argue that because of the hybrid media system journalists' political leaning are more apparent than ever. In such new environment, citizens have clear(er) knowledge about journalists' main ideological leanings and that this becomes a crucial issue in affecting their attitude towards media in terms of trust, in particular the perception of citizens with respect to journalists' honesty and fairness. The spatial theory of voting backs such assumption. To test our hypotheses, we use an original survey on a representative sample of Italian journalists conducted within the Worlds of Journalism Study Network framework to infer journalists' distribution across a left to right ideological scale. We then contrast such data with data from the Eurobarometer survey to understand citizens' political leanings and their attitudes toward news media.

Keywords: Citizens, Ideological proximity, Journalists, Media trust

The issue of media trust has been a recurring topic of interest in the literature throughout the years. This is far from being a surprising result, given its substantial relevance. Level of trust in the media has been shown, for example, to lead to non-consumption (Gaziano 1988), as well as to shape the audience's selection of news media (Tsfati and Ariely 2014) and their political behavior (Durante and Knight 2012).

This study presents an analysis of trust in types of media with an application to the Italian context. Purposely, it does not present a highly granular study, which includes also single media items (see Newman et al. 2018, 2019). What is at stake here is analyzing media trust at the level of types of media, with specific attention to traditional media (i.e., press and TV) versus new media (i.e., internet and social networks).

Starting from and going beyond political trust (see Hanitzsch et al. 2018), self-ideological placement (Dugan 2014; Stroud 2008), institutional trust (Lee 2005) or journalistic performances (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Listhaug and Wiberg 1995) - which are usually regarded as paramount in terms of media trust – here we demonstrate the need to include the ideological proximity between journalists' and citizens' political leanings as a determinant of media trust

We assume that – within the Hierarchy of Influences Model – the *individual level* (Shoemaker and Reese 2014) is increasingly influential in shaping news content. This means that users obtain a more informed overview of journalists' positions from the content that they produce.

The resulting degree of ideological proximity (divergence) between one's own position and those expressed overall by journalists can then significantly affect the expressed level of trust towards the media.

In particular, we argue that this should matter for traditional media (PRESS and TV), which are regarded to be traditional providers of news. PRESS is in fact a news oriented medium. TV offers other content as well, but in Italy it is still the most used medium in terms of news consumption. The impact of the ideological relationship between journalists and citizens should be

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on the contrary largely irrelevant on those media (the new ones) where journalists play a far less relevant role as producers of information.

To test our hypotheses, we use an original survey on a representative sample of Italian journalists conducted within the Worlds of Journalism Study Network to infer journalists' distribution across a left to right ideological scale. We then contrast such data with data from mass survey to understand citizens' political leanings and their attitudes toward news media. By following this strategy, we explore the main determinants at the individual level of such trust by focusing in particular on a variable (the already mentioned ideological proximity) that links an endogenous aspect to media (the ideological position of journalists) with an exogenous one (the ideological position of citizens).

The selection of Italy as our case study is driven by several considerations: the fact that Italian journalism culture is highly politicized (Hallin and Mancini 2004), but also that Italian users still show some very traditional use consumption habits (Newman et al. 2018).

Our results show that ideological proximity between journalists and citizens in Italy has an impact on trust in the traditional media; it also overshadows individual-level attributes commonly employed in the literature, such as media use, political interest, and institutional trust. Robustness checks confirm our findings. Coherently with our expectation, moreover, the ideological relationship between journalists and citizens appears to be irrelevant for new media.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section discusses media trust. The second section discusses how the concept of ideological proximity applies to the relationship incurring between journalists and citizens with respect to media trust, especially in the networked (Reese and Shoemaker 2016) media environment. The third section presents a brief focus on Italy. Then the paper debates the data employed before it illustrates the main statistical results of our analysis applied to Italy. Finally, it discusses some implications of our findings.

1. Media trust: an overview

Media trust has been at the center of many studies for decades; the richness and diversity of the results depend also on the granularity of the measurement used. Media trust may be studied in regard to media systems, types of media, media ownership, media outlets or even journalists. The results obtained by studying media systems are different from those obtained on specific media outlets. Daniller and colleagues (2017) demonstrate that: “high levels of trust in one’s own sources of news comfortably exist alongside extremely negative views of the media.” (Daniller et al. 2017, 8).

This article deals with general media trust, which has many more implications than trust in a specific media organization. Media trust is related to social connectedness (Zhang and Chia 2006); it is linked to the use of media (Gaziano 1988), the perceptions of bias (Endersby and Ognianova 1997), as well as to shaping the audience’s selection of news media (Tsfati and Ariely 2014). As Nikky Usher (2018, 2) states, trust enables news media to set the public agenda; it influences media effects, and it is the factor that links journalists and audiences together. In other words, trust in the press implies more social consequences than trust in the *New York Times*.

Media trust is a complex concept based on experiences as well as future expectations. As one of the widely used definitions of *trust* runs, trust is: “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the other party.” (Mayer et. al. 1995, 712). This definition explains also why the broad term *trust* particularly

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concerns news media, because it is inherently linked to the credibility concept. As Kohring and Matthes (2007) note, scholars sometimes use the term ‘trust’, although drawing heavily on media credibility research. Kohring and Matthes (2007) present a sophisticated model to measure media trust, which includes trust in the selectivity of topics, in the selectivity of facts, in the accuracy of depictions and trust in journalistic assessment. This article derived part of its data from Eurobarometer (see method section). Eurobarometer, like the most popular international surveys (World Values Survey or European Social Survey) conducted to investigate reliability regarding media and other institutions, usually employs the broad expression *trust*. Also for this reason, we consider media trust not as a mere credibility component but rather as a consequence of what citizens regard as credible, accurate, fair, unbiased and balanced. In line with the discussion provided by Hanitzsch and colleagues (2018), we consider media trust as a form of trust endogenously linked to institutional performances (i.e. if journalists are fair and accurate, then a citizen trusts the media). Nevertheless, Hanitzsch and colleagues’ (2018) pinpoint another school of thought that dominates the discussion on media trust that depends on a *cultural approach*: media trust is considered to be exogenous; and according to such authors it is mainly an extension of social and political trust.

From our perspective, we consider media trust as involving both of such aspects (one endogenous to media and one exogenous one). Media trust depends on journalistic performance, on their fairness, honesty and professionalism. However, as Carlson highlights in regard to journalistic authority (2017), its evaluation – the possibility that people may or may not trust journalistic performances – is *relational* and *relative*. Accordingly, what should really matter is the “perception” of overall journalists’ fairness and honesty in affecting a citizen’s confidence in the media. As we argue below, this perception could be affected by ideological considerations.

2. Why ideological proximity should matter for explaining trust in media types

Our theoretical basis is the well-known spatial proximity model of voter utility (Downs 1957). This model is the cornerstone of voting behavior research (Adams et al. 2005). It predicts that voters derive the most (least) utility from the candidate or party closest to (farthest from) them on some ideological or policy continuum. The role of ideological proximity is however easily extendable to any *ego-alter* relationship showing the same expected theoretical pattern: an increase in the ideological distance between *ego* and *alter* has negative consequences on *ego* in several different respects. And indeed, ideological proximity has been shown to matter also beyond the electoral stage, to impact on very different issues: for example, the relative ideological distance between citizens and their cabinet affects several different types of behavior and attitudes (such as political participation; individual happiness; satisfaction with democracy: Author et al. 2015; and, most notably for the present work, political trust in institutions: Lipset and Schneider 1987).

This approach can be however extended to analyze how the ideological proximity between citizens and journalists matters in regard to citizens’ media trust at the media level. The impact of partisanship among journalists has been considered a possible determinant of media trust, although a precise link between journalists’ political beliefs and actual news coverage has not been convincingly established (Lee 2005). In his detailed book that adopts a historical perspective, Jonathan Ladd (2012) proves that media trust was higher when competition in American party politics and the media industry reached historic lows, but media trust dramatically decreased when competition later intensified. In his opening chapter, Ladd specifically states that: “As the media landscape has expanded, institutional (or mainstream) media outlets have come under increasing

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criticism from politicians, activists, and pundits. Sometimes these criticisms are transmitted by institutional news sources. Yet they also come through the newer, alternative media outlets. As a result, the trustworthiness of more professionalized forms of journalism is under steady assault” (Ladd 2012, 2). Ladd confirms that, in terms of trust, proximity is even more important than everyday professional performance.

Previous literature has also looked at the distance between journalists and the public: for example, Endersby and Ognianova (1997) test the relative placement of journalists to voters in a two-dimensional ideological space to investigate voters’ perceptions of reported news. Similarly, Tsfaty et al. (2006) show that people differ from the public in various perceptions regarding the role of journalism in society, and that the greater the gap between journalists and the public with respect to these perceptions, the greater is the level of distrust. The specific focus on the ideological distance between citizens and journalists *per se*, and its consequence for trust in the media system and types of media is however to our knowledge a novel contribution to the literature.

Several changes have made the focus on such specific issue increasingly relevant nowadays.

We assume that the *individual level* (Shoemaker and Reese 2014) is increasingly influential in shaping news content. Additionally, as Reese and Shoemaker (2016) explain, the boundaries of media have shifted with more citizen interaction and global connectivity, and this implies a more networked quality or hybridity in Chadwick’s terms (2013), than the older conceptual partitioning of media and audience. Journalists today have an increasing number of channels to present themselves, their views and work (van der Haak et al. 2012; Reese and Shoemaker 2016). In Shoemaker and Reese’s (2014) terms, the individual level is surely important in terms of news content production¹ and it is obviously more important, when journalists create their own content via personal social media. Moreover, “[p]eople now have unprecedented access and exposure to a much wider variety of news sources. This gives news consumers more choice, but also creates a more pressing need to filter credible information” (Fletcher and Park 2017, 1283). Journalists perform a public role that extends beyond the single product; they have personal (and new) channels through which they can express their ideas and opinions. Barberà et al. (2016), for example, define journalists’ uses of social media both as *personalization* and *editorialization*. In such new environment, we can assume that citizens have clear(er) knowledge about journalists’ main ideological leanings and that this becomes a crucial issue in affecting their attitude towards media in terms of trust.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that the emphasis on the ideological distance between citizens and journalists is *prima facie* irrelevant to journalists’ honesty, fairness, etc., given that journalists in the aggregate could present a non-centrist ideological viewpoint without thereby implying a greater probability of any bias in their articles.² Nevertheless, as discussed above, what can be important, in terms of media trust, is the perception of citizens, i.e., not a real bias in journalists’ behavior, but a perception of such bias based on ideological considerations (see Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2016 for a study linking the ideological distance between students and teachers in the perception of political bias at university).

This expectation is coherent with several theoretical approaches. Individuals with steady political position are more likely to perceive media coverage as biased against their beliefs. This effect is even stronger when they have well-founded reasons to think that journalists generally keep opinions and ideas far from themselves (see Ladd 2012). This mechanism is mainly explained by partisanship (Arpan and Raney 2003). By contrast, whenever journalists’ positions appear to be closer to citizens, also trust in media increases. As the findings in both the motivated reasoning literature and research on information processing suggest, when exposed to information that

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contradicts their views and opinions, people tend to examine such information more rigorously and to deprecate its source. Instead, like-minded information typically leads to positive source appraisal (Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005). Accordingly, when a citizen encounters views alien to his/her opinions, because they originate, for example, from a source “ideologically distant”, s/he can be motivated to maintain his/her preexisting beliefs, while perceiving such messages as biased (and therefore untrustworthy).³ Not surprisingly in this respect, journalists’ ideological preferences are considered among the main factors correlated with self-reported perception of media bias (Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005).

As stated in the introduction, however, our study aims to analyze trust at the media level by focusing on different media type. “Data on trust and media are most frequently related to (news) media in general. Less often different types of media like TV, or online become subject of surveys” (Bloebaum 2014, 37). Studies at the media level have been revitalized since the very first phase of the new media ecology, and therefore with the advent of technologies such as social media (e.g. Facebook or Twitter), blogs or sites devoted to video content like YouTube.

Tsfati and Cappella (2003) associated media distrust with non-mainstream news, where the distinction between mainstream and non-mainstream news sources was grounded in the differentiation between traditional media (TV, newspapers) and *new* media. Their results were explained *endogenously* in terms of professionalization (press and TV journalists were more professionalized and for this reason more trustworthy). Although the contemporary media environment is far more complex than the one analyzed by Tsfati and Cappella (2003), the distinction between *traditional* and *new* media still makes sense, especially regarding journalism. This is also true with respect to what has been discussed thus far.

In particular, we expect that the ideological proximity between citizens and journalists should matter first and foremost with respect to the latter type of media (traditional ones such as press and TV), rather than new media. The reason is straightforward: the ideological proximity between citizens and journalists should play a role in those media types directly related to news wherein journalists have a substantial monopoly in terms of information production. In such media (i.e., traditional media) wherein journalists can make a real difference in terms of the information produced, their ideological position vis-à-vis that of citizens should affect the trust attitudes registered by the latter ones, given that journalists can be considered as largely responsible for the overall (ideological) quality of the information provided in this context.

In other types of media where this monopoly is clearly undermined, as happens with the Internet or social media more specifically (see Tsfati and Cappella 2003; Bloebaum 2014), the impact of this variable should largely disappear. In such media contexts, in other words, wherein journalists are just one among many other sources of information, the ideological proximity (distance) between them and citizens will be largely irrelevant for the trust attitudes registered towards those same media.

The fact that the Internet and social media are linked to several different uses, which are not directly related to journalism and even less with the journalists’ political leaning, is a further factor supporting our expectation. As we have argued, in terms of media trust, what should matter is the “perception” of overall journalists’ fairness and honesty in affecting a citizen’s confidence in the media. As stated, this perception could be affected by ideological considerations.

Combining these theoretical expectations, we therefore hypothesize that:

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The Proximity Hypothesis (H1): The less the ideological proximity between a citizen and journalists, the lower the trust in media reported by the former. This relationship, however, should matter only for traditional media.

3. The Italian case

The Italian media system is particularly suited to studying media trust at the level of types of media by ideological proximity. The first reason is its overall features that are well synthesized by the so-called *Mediterranean model* (Hallin and Mancini 2004): a substantial lack of mass-circulation commercially oriented newspapers, a high level of political parallelism that signals the extent to which the media system reflects the major political divisions in society, a low development of journalistic professionalism, conflicts over the independence of journalists, the role of the State as owner.

The most recurrent feature of Italian journalism culture is that it has historically been linked to political power (Hallin and Mancini 2004), and the press is still decisive in determining frames of political facts. In Italy, news coverage focuses closely on politics and that coverage is highly opinionated (Cornia 2014, 54). Additionally in Italy the TV set is still the most common media device in Italian households, and the one most used to gather information (see Newman et al. 2018, 2019). The situation is therefore somewhat puzzling. Despite the changes in media offerings and the online new sources of information, television is still the main source of political information. Moreover, Italian journalists replicate online the level of political parallelism and the orientation to elite that traditionally characterized Italian journalists. As Bentivegna and Marchetti (2017) prove on analyzing more than 1,000 journalists' Twitter accounts, Italian journalists have: "little interest in amplifying the range of their sources through the reception of information produced by subjects not pertaining to the traditional elite" (Bentivegna and Marchetti 2017, 286). However, as Marchetti and Ceccobelli (2015) state, even if the overall discussion about politics and news in the hybrid media is very low, it is nevertheless able to influence the public agenda. In fact, Italian print media and television constantly cover the individual tweets or hashtags of a niche of citizens discussing politics on Twitter.

Both the 2018 and 2019 Digital news reports issued by the Reuters Institute (Newman et al. 2018, 2019) offer an analysis of the relation between citizens' political leanings and their trust in the media. In the case of Italy, the results are rather interesting: considering online platforms they regard the positioning of media outlets with respect to the positions of their readers. The Italian context is described as 'very polarized'. Although those data are granular, they still have some limitations: they may only intercept causes of trust related to heavy users of (specific) media. The limitation of heavy users explain also why in the 2018 Reuters top 14 list of the most trusted Italian media organization there are prevalently very established legacy media that have their core business in *traditional* media television and newspapers. On the contrary, according to Eurobarometer data, over the past 15 years skepticism towards the press among Italian citizens has been relentlessly increasing; therefore the overall level of trust is on average lower in Italy than in Europe. The Reuters Institute (Newman et al. 2018) states that trust in Italian media has declined over time, recording the worst percentage among Western-European countries with the exception of France and Greece.

There is a final reason for focusing on the Italian case: in several countries, political actors have started to create hostility toward journalists. President Donald Trump is such a case in the USA.⁴ The same applies in Italy: Silvio Berlusconi in past years, and most recently several leaders

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of the populist (and largest Italian) party Five Stars Movement as well as Matteo Salvini (the leader of the League), have repeatedly adopted a similar negative approach (Bobba and McDonnell 2015). As a result, we expect that in a context wherein media and journalists have become a politicized issue, the impact of ideological considerations on trust media should matter even more for citizens.

4. Method

The survey that we used to calculate Italian journalists' ideological leanings is based on a quota sample of Italian journalists, and it is part of the Worlds of Journalism Study. The Worlds of Journalism Study is a collaborative survey conducted in 2012–2016 to investigate the state of journalism and the professional views of journalists in 67 countries around the world, following the research design adopted in a pilot study (2007-2011) conducted in 21 countries. With regard to data collection, in Italy the overall sample was generated in two steps. First, a selection of news organizations was obtained through stratified proportional systematic sampling (in order adequately to reflect the structure of the media system). Second, within newsrooms, journalists were chosen randomly. The size of the journalistic population in Italy was calculated using the lists provided by the *Ordine dei Giornalisti* (OdG), the self-regulated Association of Journalists established by the law, to which all journalists must belong in order to see their profession publicly recognized. The size of the population was estimated around 15,850 working journalists. We then matched such lists with data from *Federazione Italiana Editori Giornali* (Italian Newspapers Publishers) and *Istituto Nazionale di Previdenza dei Giornalisti Italiani* (a separate insurance fund for journalists) to determine journalists' quotas for dailies, weeklies, monthlies and news agencies as well as quotas for gender and media segments (see the Supplementary Information file–Part 1, particularly Figure A1). The data collection lasted from February 2015 until July of the same year, and it was conducted through the CAWI system. The final sample reflected: a) the geographical variety of media in Italy; b) the outlet's position in its own market (i.e. the bigger the outlet in its field, the more respondents it will have); c) journalists' distribution according to media (press, TV, radio and online); d) male and female composition; e) journalists' positions within newsrooms (see the Supplementary Information file–Part 1, particularly, Figure A2 and Figure A3). In short our sample is composed by 396 interviews to working journalists.

The specific question about *ideological leaning* administered in the survey was the following one: “*In political matters, people talk of “the left”, “the right”, and the “center”. On a scale where 0 is left, 10 is right, and 5 is center, where would you place yourself?*”. Within the selected sample, that comprised 396 journalists, the response rate was more than 90%, a welcome result given the aim of the present research.

The second dataset used in the present paper is the Eurobarometer survey number 82.3. This survey was selected because it includes questions related to the ideological positions of Italian citizens as well as their trust in different media types (see below), while also roughly matching the time period of the above-discussed press survey (November 2014).

Between the two surveys we used there is therefore a small temporal discrepancy. Since ideological preferences, as well as attitudes (including media trust), are however relatively stable in the short-term (see Caprara and Vecchione 2018) we do not see any serious methodological challenge for the fact that part of the data (data related to journalists' ideology position in the construction of the independent variable PROXIMITY) were extracted (slightly) later than our dependent variable.

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Figure 1 contrasts the distribution of Italian citizens on the left to right ideological scale as it arises from the aforementioned Eurobarometer with the positions of Italian journalists (all the ideological measures have been standardized between 0 – extreme left - and 10 – extreme right). As can be seen, the distributions of journalists and citizens appears to be quite distinct from each other. This is also confirmed by employing formal statistical tests: the Kolmogorov-Smirnov equality-of-distributions test, for example, was rejected at the .00 significant level; while the mean-comparison-test showed that the means of the two distributions were statistically different at the 99% level.

Figure 1 here

Golder and Stramsky (2010) show that there are several ways to think about proximity between two items (such as citizens and journalists in the present case). Here, we focus on a ‘many-to-one’ proximity between the full set of citizens’ ideal points and a summary of ideological positions with respect to journalists. More in detail, we built our measure of ideological proximity (that we label PROXIMITY) as follows:

$$\text{PROXIMITY}_i = -|x_i - \bar{j}| \quad (1)$$

where x_i is the ideal point of respondent i along the left-right spectrum according to the Eurobarometer survey, while \bar{j} is the average position of Italian journalists on the same spectrum according to the press survey. In this sense, the higher is the value of PROXIMITY, the lower is the (ideological) distance between a citizen and the corresponding average journalists’ position.⁵ PROXIMITY is therefore a *relational measure* that links, with respect to trust in media, an endogenous aspect to media (the ideological position of journalists) with an exogenous one (the ideological position of citizens).

One possible criticism of our measurement of PROXIMITY is that we used actual self-placement of journalists to estimate \bar{j} rather than the perception of that by citizens. There are two reasons behind our choice. First, and prosaically, we do not possess data about how citizens perceive journalists. Such data are not gathered by the most established surveys, and they are methodologically challenging to collect. We recognize this as a possible limitation of this study and a suggestion for further developing *proximity* as an independent variable. Nevertheless, we identify journalists’ self-placement as the most reliable *proxy* for citizens’ perceptions of their ideological position.

Second, note that what seems to be *prima facie* a weakness of this study, in reality can be treated as a strength. By deriving a measure of x_i and \bar{j} from two unrelated sources, the present study presents in fact an important empirical advantage. According to the *Proximity Hypothesis*, we assume that the ideological distance between a citizen and journalists decreases the trust of the former in the press. Thus, one might argue that the reverse causal relationship is also possible. This problem (known as ‘rationalization’ or ‘projection’) has been shown to plague survey responses (Granberg and Brown, 1992). In particular, assimilation effects refer to shortening the perceived ideological distance between oneself and those one favors, while contrast effects refer to exaggerating the distance between oneself and those one does not support or like. Adopting a measure of the ideological position of journalists that is unrelated to the self-placement of citizens (and to their answer to the question about the trust in news media) allows us to neutralize this problem explicitly. Accordingly, we are not testing the impact on self-reported trust in news media of the ideological proximity between journalists and citizens because the latter measure arises from

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citizens' perceptions. Rather, we are capturing it in (1) by relying on a more "objective" estimation of the ideological position of journalists. A second advantage of our approach is that it makes it possible to locate journalists relative to the public at large on the same scale, contrary to several other papers that mainly locate media (rather than journalists) and only relative to one another and/or relative to politicians, rather than to the general public.

The dependent variables in our analysis are represented by the answers given by Italian respondents in the already discussed Eurobarometer survey to the following question: "*I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain media and institutions. For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it*". In this regard, we focused on four different media: the *written press*, *television*, the *Internet* and on-line social networks. As we explained above, *written press* and *television* are more commonly considered as traditional *journalistic venues*. Therefore, if trust in journalism regards the perception of fairness, honesty, balance and impartiality, when citizens perceive journalists as distant from their ideological position, it may become more difficult for them to trust media which are more identified with journalism, which have more resources, and which should be more professionalized and unbiased, such as, precisely, the written press and television. On the contrary, we should not expect to find this impact when focusing on new media.

We labelled our four dependent variables TRUST PRESS, TRUST TV, TRUST INTERNET and TRUST SNS. We codified both variables as a dummy, where 0=tend not to trust and 1= tend to trust. The highest percentage of trust was recorded by the Internet (58%), followed by the written press (56%), then television (49%) and social networks (44%). Our model controls for a number of socio-economic variables (*Gender*: 1 to man; 2 to woman; *Size community*: a dummy variable equals to 1 for respondents living in large urban area; *Age*: a variable recorded over 6 categories; *Social Class*: a variable that equals to 1 for lower middle class, 2 for middle class and 3 for upper middle class). Following Tsfati and Ariely (2014) we have added also a variable related to the political interests of citizens (*Political Interests*: the higher the value of such variable, the lower the political interest and involvement in political discussion). Since also political ideology and partisanship are usually regarded as important for media trust (Lee 2010) we included as well as a variable labeled *Ideological self-placement* that records the left-right position of the respondents according to Eurobarometer data. Media bias research in the US has in fact shown that the tendency to identify political bias is often asymmetric, with right-wing supporters more often reporting and perceiving media bias (Eveland and Shah 2003). As a consequence, rightist persons appear to distrust some media more than others (Lee 2005). Thus, introducing a citizen's ideology into the analysis potentially controls for his/her prior beliefs regarding the existence and extent of political bias in the press. Note that the estimated models do not present any problem of collinearity, despite the theoretical relationship between PROXIMITY and *Ideological self-placement*. Moreover, dropping *Ideological-self-placement* from the analysis does not affect any of the results reported below. We also take into account as a further control variable the extent to which people use a particular media type (see Kioussis 2001): a dummy variable that we label *Frequency of reading press, watching TV, using the Internet and Social network*, equals to 1 for those Italian citizens that are heavy press consumers (i.e., "every day or almost") and 0 otherwise. We added a variable labeled *Internet as political news* that is equal to 1 for those citizens that obtain most of their news on national political matters firstly from Internet or Social Networks, and 0 for those that obtain such news from other types of media. Following once again Tsfati and Cappella (2003), this variable is a way to control further the use of the Internet and Social Networks as a different form of political news not prevalently provided by journalists. Finally, following Hanitzsch et al. (2018), we

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acknowledge that media trust can be considered an extension of social and, in particular, political trust. As a result, we added two variables intended to capture a general trust in politics: *Trust in parties* and *Trust in parliament* (see the Supplementary Information file–Part 2, particularly, Table A4, for the wording and the coding of the questions included in the Eurobarometer with respect to both our dependent and independent variables, together with descriptive statistics).

5. Results

Table 1 reports the results of the different Logit models (given that our dependent variable is a dummy one) estimated. First, we consider models related to traditional media, i.e. TRUST PRESS and TRUST TV (Model 1 and 2). As can be seen, regardless of the set of control variables included in the analysis, PROXIMITY remains significant and with the expected positive sign with respect to both TRUST PRESS and TRUST TV.

Table 1 here

Moreover, its impact is substantial. As Figure 2 reports (upper panel), by moving from the lowest value of PROXIMITY in our sample (around -7) to the maximum one (around 0), the probability of trusting the written press increases considerably: from 36% to 63% according to Model 1 estimation; for a similar change, the increase in the probability of trusting television increases from 33% to 62% (see Figure 2, lower panel). This clearly provides a strong empirical corroboration for H1.⁶

Figure 2 here

Among the control variables, interestingly the coefficient for the *Ideological self-placement* variable 2 is always statistically insignificant. This result echoes results related to several research studies on television since Mediaset owner Silvio Berlusconi entered the political field (see among others Legnante and Sani 2001). Interestingly, the fact that PROXIMITY is significant although *Ideological self-placement* is controlled for, while this latter variable fails to be significant, may suggest that citizens' trust in media is more affected by the ideological distance separating them from journalists rather than by any ideological position of citizens *per se*.

With respect to the other control variables, the *Internet as political news* variable proves to have a strong and negative impact on TRUST PRESS, as expected. On the contrary, echoing the results reported in Hanitzsch et al. (2018), the more a person trusts the political system (the national parliament as well political parties), the more she tends also to trust media (both written press and television). In contrast to the most consolidated results, press and TV exposure appears not to boost either TRUST PRESS or TRUST TV. This result is particularly important, because it confirms our perspective about the high choice media environment (see Van Aelst et al. 2017) where citizens may be exposed even to media they do not trust. Finally, among the socio-economic variables, only age and (partly) social class appears to present a significant impact (respectively negative and positive) but only with respect to TRUST PRESS.

One possible criticism of our analysis is that, as already discussed, we focused our analysis on the ideological distance between journalists and citizens, rather than on the ideological distance between news outlets and citizens. Model 3, in this respect, replaces \bar{j} in (1) with the average position of the main Italian national newspapers. This last measure is taken from a survey

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conducted in February 2017 and run by the Italian pollster company SWG. In this survey, the respondents were asked to locate on a left-to-right scale ranging from 0 to 10 six Italian newspapers: *Corriere della Sera*, *Repubblica*, *La Stampa*, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano* and *Il Giornale*. We took the average positions of such newspapers and weighted them for the number of copies that they sold in February 2017 (source: <https://www.humanhighway.it/page/diffusionequotidiani.html>) to produce a new measure of PROXIMITY, which we labelled PROXIMITY (alt). As can be seen, also this new operationalization of the ideological proximity variable turns out to be significant and positive, exactly as happens with PROXIMITY in Model 1. However, to be stressed is that the magnitude of PROXIMITY (alt) is notably lower than that of PROXIMITY we present in Model 1. Both model selection criteria reported at the bottom of Table 1 (AIC and BIC) suggest that Model 1 is better able to fit the data than Model 3. We therefore consider this robustness check as confirming the relevance of our measure focusing on journalists', rather than news outlets.

In Models 4 and 5, on the other hand, we turn to the second half of our H1. As discussed above, we did not expect PROXIMITY to matter with respect to new media, given that in this latter case journalists play a far less relevant role as producers of information compared to the amount of information produced by other sources (including the information produced by other general users of new media: see Tsfaty and Cappella 2003; Bloebaum 2014). As a result, journalists cannot be considered as a relevant factor in explaining the trust attitudes of citizens towards such media, contrary to what happens with traditional media wherein journalists detain the de-facto substantial monopoly of the supply-side of information, and can therefore be considered responsible of its (ideological) quality.

This is exactly what we found. The trust reported by Italian citizens with respect to internet and on-line social networks in general does not seem to be affected by any ideological consideration linking citizens to journalists.

Conclusion

Given the importance of media trust in everyday citizens' lives and in the context of news consumption, this article has presented a new approach to studying media trust at the media level. Our proposal included an application to the Italian context. This analysis started from dissatisfaction with the determinants that are usually employed to explain media trust. We introduced as the variable ideological proximity between journalists and citizens. PROXIMITY captures the concept of media trust in its interplay between endogenous and exogenous factors. The effect of the PROXIMITY variable on TRUST PRESS and TRUST TV (i.e., traditional media) complements (and sometimes overshadows) traditional attributes employed in the literature, such as political interest, political trust while remaining robust to control for the self-ideological placement of the respondents as well as their media exposure, among others. On the other hand, with respect to new media (i.e., internet and social networks) PROXIMITY is not influential. It is a domain where they can acquire information not necessarily produced or driven by journalists, and therefore not affected by any ideological relationship between them (as users) and journalists.

The application to an interesting case like the Italian one traditionally characterized by a high level of political parallelism as well as, more recently, an increased negative coverage of media and journalists by several political actors, furnishes a further item of evidence on the broader consequences of the ideological position of journalists, especially when that position does not match that of citizens. Our results in fact attest to the significant impact of ideological proximity, a factor

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that so far has been mostly absent in the study of trust in media. In this respect, our conclusion is not in contradiction with the literature dealing with the hostile media perception (Gunther and Schmitt 2004), which shows that people perceive even neutral and evenhanded media as hostile to their position. On the contrary, it offers a potential explanation, based on ideological considerations, of why this could happen, rather than the simple self-ideological position.

Another interesting conclusion follows from our findings. Every time the ideological distributions of journalists and citizens largely diverge from each other in one context, the more we should expect less trust, *ceteris paribus*, in traditional media. This happens because under this situation (like in the Italian case here analyzed), this difference increases the number of citizens presenting a high value of PROXIMITY. Accordingly, given that the majority of citizens are traditionally clustered around the ideological center in most democracies, we can conclude that a “balanced” ideological distribution of journalists could *ceteris paribus* positively affect trust in the media. For example, according to Model 1 in Table 1, if the overall ideological position of journalists moved from its actual position according to our dataset (i.e., 3.55) to a more centrist one, such as 5.5 on the 0 to 10 left-right scale, TRUST PRESS would increase by more than 4 points.

Of course, in this scenario it is likely that sooner or later market competition could and should resolve this misalignment of preferences. As Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005, 18) put it, “competition forces newspapers to cater to the prejudices of their readers, and greater competition typically results in more aggressive catering to such prejudice as competitors strive to divide the market”. The same could happen for journalists as well. However, the fact that the ideological distribution of Italian journalists roughly the same distribution nowadays as recorded more than 20 years ago (see Patterson and Donsbach 1996) suggests that a far more complex dynamic is in operation.

Finally, the fact that ideology proximity between citizens and journalists influences mainly traditional media rather than new media has an important theoretical implication. Citizens appear to get news more and more from social media and the Internet (see Newsman et al. 2018, 2019). By doing that, they use different sources that are not exclusively journalistic ones. Our results suggest that the impact of PROXIMITY on trust towards traditional media may be considered as one of the determinant of this slowly shift from traditional to new media, at least in those countries where the (ideological) distance between citizens and journalists appear to be large.

Although we consider adding PROXIMITY as a determinant of media trust convincing, our application to the Italian context included at least two short-cuts. First, we compared the ideological position of citizens and journalists along one dimension. Although the left-right dimension is still considered in several contexts as the most important cognitive short-cut in structuring citizens’ understanding of the political world, a more complicated and (possibly) multi-dimensional space could be also appropriate in some contexts. For example, given the increasing importance of valence issues such as corruption or anti-establishment attitudes in the current political discourse (Author, 2017), it could be important to consider, in addition to the left-right scale, also the respective positions of both citizens and journalists on such valence issues to gain better understanding of their relative degree of proximity. Data unavailability prevents us from exploring that possibility in the Italian case. This, however, remains a future direction of research that should be investigated in greater details.

Similarly, it would be interesting to investigate the effect of ideological proximity on trust in the press within a comparative framework. Consider two countries, A and B, and a hypothetical citizen *i* that positions him/herself on a rightist position, and now imagine that the value of PROXIMITY for that citizen is higher in country A than in country B (but still different from 0).

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According to our hypothesis, we would expect a lower level of trust in the (traditional) media in country A than country B for that particular citizen. However, now imagine that the variance in country A of the ideological positions of journalists is zero, while in country B it is rather large. This would imply that in country B there is a higher probability of an overlap between the ideological position of citizen *i* and at least the ideological position of some journalists (i.e., in country B there is a higher probability of citizen *i* finding at least some journalists that share his/her rightist position). This fact, by itself, should potentially mitigate the impact of PROXIMITY on media trust, given the possibility for citizen *i* in country B to rely on a range of different journalists' ideological points of view. Since this study offers a perspective based on a single-case country, we cannot check for this possibility. Moreover the possibility to deal with a larger number of countries would enable us to check not only for the role played by, for example, different professional cultures (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), but also the impact of the relative level of politicization of media and journalists by political actors

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¹ Moreover, if we interpret the results of Author et al (2019) in light of the Hierarchy of Influences Model (Shoemaker and Reese 2016), we can state that the individual level is also closely intertwined with the organizational level. Author et al. (2019), in their comparative study, prove that reporters' political proximity to editors leads to a better salary and rank and a stronger perception of editorial autonomy among reporters. This result further supports our assumption of considering journalists' political leanings as proxies for the content that they produce also for the media that employ them.

² Note however that Patterson and Donsabach (1996) provide evidence that the partisan and ideological beliefs of journalists intrude on news decisions.

³ According to the "bias blind spot" theory, individuals are blind to their own biases, but they are aware of the potential biases of others (Pronin et al. 2002). This dynamic, as a result, causes individuals to think that journalists with a different ideological position from themselves are biased information processors, while like-minded journalists are perceived to be relatively unbiased. Consequently, individuals determine to what extent they can *trust* journalists and the information they provide by *assessing how similar* the journalists' ideological position are to their own (Stone 2011: 257).

⁴ The 2019 Reuters Institute Digital News Report (see Newman et al., 2019; 22) contains a graph that evaluates trust in the media according to American political leanings. Not surprisingly, from our perspective, liberals increase their confidence in news media, while media trust from conservatives decreases.

⁵ We estimated PROXIMITY by employing a linear rather than quadratic relationship, given that studies in psychology report that human minds are better able to deal with linear cues rather than non-linear ones (Singh 2014).

⁶ In a further robustness check, we replicated Model 1 and 2 of Table 1 by re-estimating PROXIMITY considering as \bar{J} in (1) not the ideological position of all journalists, but the ideological position of, respectively, press journalists only (with respect to TRUST PRESS) and television journalists only (with respect to TRUST TV). As can be seen in the Appendix, all our results remained intact.