

Integrated Report on Trust and the Media

Deliverable 4.2

EnTrust: Enlightened Trust: An Examination of Trust and Distrust in Governance – Conditions, Effects and Remedies

WP4: The role of the media in trust/distrust building: Information or polarisation?

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Introduction: Trust in the Media and Trust Through the Media

Hans-Jörg Trenz

Political journalism and the news media function as the principal mediator of trust relationships in democracy (Otto and Köhler 2018). More specifically, the mass media provide information that is relevant for a) assessing critically the trustworthiness of political representatives in light of their output and performance, and b) engaging citizens themselves in trust building activities among each other and vis-à-vis government (McNair 2000). As a mediator of trust relationships in democracy, political journalism and the news media, however, need to be trusted themselves, and their products in the form of political news need to be found trustworthy. In this report, we therefore distinguish between trust in the media and mechanisms of trust building through the media. To measure trust in the media and in media content and information, we rely on secondary data in the form of opinion surveys conducted internationally and nationally. We collect several trust indicators that allow us to a) measure changing levels of trust in media and its products over time, and b) trust in media during the Covid-19 pandemic. To measure mechanisms of trust building through the media, we rely on original data gathered through a standardised comparative content analysis of trust contestation during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a mechanism of trust building, we introduce the term mediated trust contestation in the form of actor statements through the media that either support or challenge trust in states and representative government, in science or in markets. We also collect evidence to understand how media themselves are trusted and media content and opinion is found trustworthy, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Political trust through the media and trust in the media are commonly understood as two separate phenomena. Media are, on the one hand, conceived as an instrument of political trust building. It is through the media that trustful citizens are formed, educated and socialised as members of a political community. On the other hand, media are also an object of trust. Media institutions and journalism can be perceived as trustful to different degrees, and the degree people trust media and its products has important consequences for democracy and the legitimacy of government. In contemporary trust contestations through legacy and digital media, it becomes increasingly necessary to understand how these two levels of trust are interrelated. On social media platforms, for instance, trust in government, or trust in science, is often fundamentally challenged by small communities of users who can have wide resonance. At the same time, social media platforms themselves are mistrusted, and users perceive them as alienating places. Our study on trust contestation during the pandemic will provide evidence for these interlinkages by confronting content provided by journalism in the form of news with user comments and responses on social media. We will also be able to measure the extent to which the work of media and journalism is distrusted, and how distrusting voices target, at the same time, established political institutions, discredit particular actors or even the whole democratic system.

To account for this complex relationship of trust in and through the media, EnTrust WP4 research tasks are divided into three parts. We will first measure changing levels of *trust in the media* through conventional opinion surveys. The analysis covers three dimensions: 1) A cross-national comparison comprising data from seven countries (Germany, Italy, Denmark, Poland, Czech Republic, Greece and Serbia) beyond a European context; 2) a cross media comparison comprising different types of media outlets and journalism products; and 3) a time comparison comprising a ten-year period

(2010-2020/21), with special attention to changing levels of trust in the media during the pandemic. In Part 2 of this report, we turn to contestation of *trust through the media*, developing an original tool of comparative media content analysis of the main news outlets representative of national public spheres during the pandemic, with reference to public contestations of trust in representative government, science and the market. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many individuals faced uncertainty by turning to news to access information, evaluate risk and find orientation. We analyse social media user responsiveness to trust contestations in the news on Facebook. Finally, in Part 3 of the report, we turn from trust contestation to possibilities of trust building, adding expert opinion of media practitioners engaged in the quality of news projects.

PART 1: TRUST IN THE MEDIA

1. Trust in the Media: Changing Levels of Trust in Journalism and News

The following report on trust in the media is based on desk research about changing trust levels in journalism and news sources (i.e., mainstream newspapers, social media and alternative journalism platforms) in the selected countries. We use available international (Special Eurobarometer; Reuters Digital News Report and EBU Market Insights Trust in Media) and national surveys over a ten-year period to assemble and analyse indicators and findings for changing media-trust relations. We thus cover a period, commonly characterised as a dooming crisis of journalism and news media, and that allows us to put special emphasis on the impact of disruptive events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the spread of disinformation and so-called fake news through digital and social media. Do disruptive media and the public sphere (Bennet and Pfetsch 2019) undermine trust in media and democracy?

In the following, we analyse long-term trends of trust in media to group our seven countries in a comparative European perspective. In the annex of this report, we collect country-specific findings on media consumption and changing patterns of trust and distrust in different types of media during the pandemic.

Comparative findings¹

1) Europe divided into high trust, medium trust and low trust countries

There is a neat division of European countries in terms of attitudes of trust towards media and journalism. The share of trusting and distrusting populations is relatively stable over time, and countries can be grouped as high trust (Denmark), medium trust (Germany and Czech Republic) and low trust (Greece). Poland and Italy are polarised countries with relatively large segments of trusting and distrusting populations seemingly opposing each other (Figure 1.1).² This confirms one of the main insights of EnTrust that trust and mistrust, in particular actors and institutions, are meaningfully related to each other in the functioning of modern society and democracy. Differences in attitudes of trust towards the media cannot only be explained across countries, but in divisions of populations internally. The ratio of high trusting and low trusting segments of the population varies from country to country, as in the cases of Denmark (high levels of trust correlating with low levels of distrust), and Poland and Italy (high levels of both trusting and distrusting segments of the population). Instead of looking at the extremes, we might also wish to understand further the attitudes of the largest share of the population in both countries, who are both trusting and distrusting, thus develop quite differentiated and flexible attitudes towards the media. To avoid the generic use of 'trust in media' it is therefore necessary to analyse differentiated trust in different types of media.

2) Levels of (dis)trust in media institutions do not allow us to draw conclusions on levels of support of democracy

For a further interpretation of these findings, more qualitative analysis of the meaning of (dis)trust for particular segments of the population will become necessary. In the case of trust in journalism,

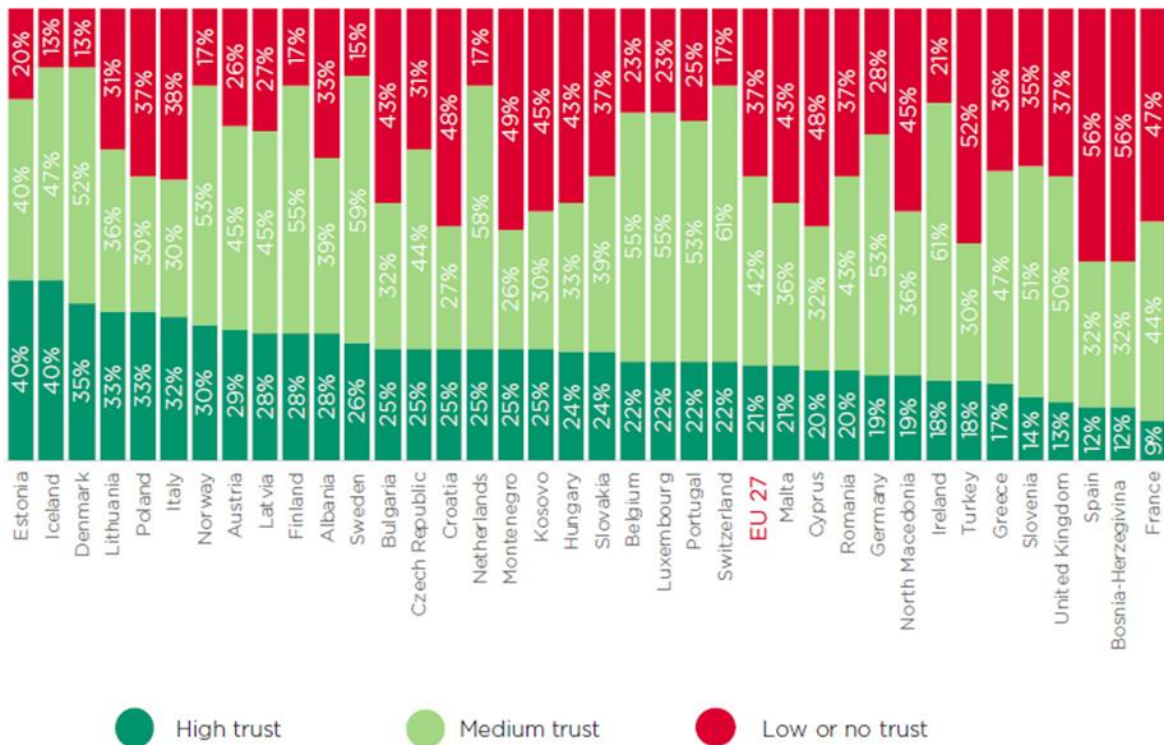
¹ More detailed data about the single countries involved in this study can be found in Annex 1 to this report.

² Comparative data for Serbia are not available.

low trusting segments of the audience might have developed high critical capacities to interpret media performance and content (Trenz 2022). Such ‘critical public’ would be different from other segments of the population, who have developed generic attitudes of distrust towards the political system and democracy. From the aggregated survey data, we should therefore not conclude on general support and quality of democracy in particular countries.

Figure 1.1: Trust in Media (aggregated) per country

TRUST IN MEDIA (% of population, 2021)



Source: EBU (2021). Market Insights: Trust in Media, based on Eurobarometer data

Eurobarometer data allow us to correlate patterns of trust in media institutions with trust in government and other institutions of representative democracy. Trust levels in media correlate with trust in national government, as measured by Eurobarometer (Figure 1.2). Countries with high segments of the populations distrusting journalism and news media also do not trust their own government, yet might trust other public administrations, health authorities, or the EU. However, we also find correlations with the economic situations of media institutions and working conditions of journalism, which tend to be critical in countries with low levels of trust (such as Greece or Italy). Levels of trust, therefore, are not just ‘cultural’, but at least partly also related to the performance of journalism and its critical evaluation by audiences. In relative terms as well, legacy media are on average more trusted than state and governmental institutions. They do not stand out as being particularly targeted by distrusting citizens. According to EBU (2021), the most trusted news brand in all countries under analysis is the public broadcasting news channel, which points to the lasting role of public news formats as a reliable source of journalism. Especially in times of uncertainty, like during the pandemic, people tended to turn to public broadcasting news formats to get trusted news and information (Trenz et al. 2021).

In conclusion, we find diffuse patterns of support and a tendency of individuals to distinguish between more or less trustworthy institutions of democracy within one country (government, expert bodies) and across countries (e.g., low trust in national media and government, but high trust in the EU). The thesis of a generic loss of trust in democracy does not hold.

Figure 1.2: Trust in media compared to trust in other political institutions across countries

QA6b How much trust do you have in certain institutions? For each of the following institutions, do you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it?
(% - TEND TO TRUST)

		Health and medical staff in (OUR COUNTRY)	The army	The police	Regional or local public authorities	The United Nations	Justice, the (NATIONALITY) legal system	NATO	The European Union	Public administration in (OUR COUNTRY)	The (NATIONALITY) Government	The (NATIONALITY) Parliament	Political parties
EU27		80	74	69	55	52	52	49	49	49	36	35	21
BE		96	88	75	58	65	58	70	56	51	41	44	18
BG		62	52	51	44	39	23	33	53	38	23	15	14
CZ		92	89	77	60	57	59	71	48	48	19	15	11
DK		96	90	92	76	82	90	86	62	77	65	62	43
DE		88	71	80	73	54	69	54	48	65	54	55	37
EE		87	87	89	59	70	76	79	64	65	53	43	18
IE		90	87	78	59	74	71	68	74	63	49	46	26
EL		80	80	56	34	35	50	26	37	24	28	27	12
ES		87	74	74	42	51	45	41	52	42	20	16	7
FR		89	83	69	64	44	50	36	39	58	31	31	12
HR		69	61	50	29	48	21	43	51	29	22	22	12
IT		70	68	66	35	44	41	43	44	27	26	27	16
CY		75	63	51	41	26	40	16	39	30	26	21	9
LV		66	72	62	48	62	39	63	61	27	23	21	7
LT		63	78	71	42	72	43	77	70	40	44	27	15
LU		87	80	84	76	59	78	58	55	83	72	68	31
HU		59	59	65	63	56	51	54	59	60	39	38	24
MT		85	71	58	57	65	35	55	64	57	49	46	25
NL		97	90	92	72	72	85	75	61	70	68	68	52
AT		80	71	74	70	37	72	32	41	66	38	44	32
PL		59	61	40	49	52	31	51	50	38	26	22	18
PT		95	87	79	52	85	42	72	78	41	38	40	15
RO		53	64	56	38	54	47	49	58	37	29	26	16
SI		69	62	51	36	46	28	38	55	28	19	15	7
SK		70	65	45	47	48	28	42	50	45	24	23	12
FI		93	96	91	67	69	80	55	50	71	63	65	34
SE		92	85	88	69	74	78	60	58	70	62	69	39

1st MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED ITEM

2nd MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED ITEM

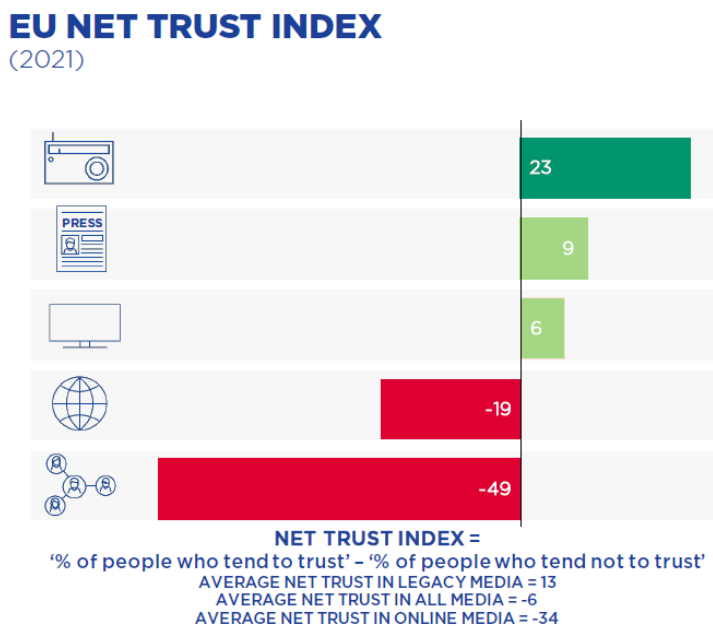
3rd MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED ITEM

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 94, February-March 2021.

3) High (and rising) levels of trust in legacy media and low (and shrinking) levels of trust in digital and social media

Generalised statements such as ‘trust in media and journalism is in decline’ are misleading. (Dis)trust in media is not generic towards all types of media, but people know how to distinguish between more or less trustworthy types of media. Radio is the most trusted media in all countries analysed, followed by television (Figure 1.3). The written press also enjoys relatively high levels of trust compared to alternative media and the Internet, which ranks lowest. Social media platforms are highly mistrusted, in particular. This latter pattern is confirmed by audience and user studies, with some scholars even speaking of fear and anxiety symptoms of social media users (Freiling *et al.*, 2021; Wiederhold, 2020). Trust levels in different types of media are relatively stable when compared over the last ten years. In all countries under investigation, trust in the Internet, and especially in social networking media, has not only been comparatively low, but is also further declining, reflecting concern with fake news and disruptive social media effects, whereas trust in legacy media, especially in the written press, is stable or even increased during the pandemic (Figure 1.4). Notable exceptions to this trend are Poland, Serbia and Greece, where legacy media such as television and press are most mistrusted, and people tend to rely more on the Internet and social media as news sources. We might suspect that mistrust of legacy media in these countries is related to levels of state control of these media. EBU (2021) indeed find that trust in news media in one country goes along with press freedom, with Serbia, Poland and Greece ranking lowest and Denmark ranking highest. It should also be noticed that (dis) trust in legacy media and (dis)trust in online and social media are not a zero-sum game. Populations in Serbia, Poland and Greece are rather distinguished by high levels of distrust directed towards all types of media in their countries. If people have very low levels of trust in legacy media, they do not necessarily trust social media or online platforms as alternative news sources, but would tend to be equally distrustful towards their products, only at a slightly lower level than towards legacy media.

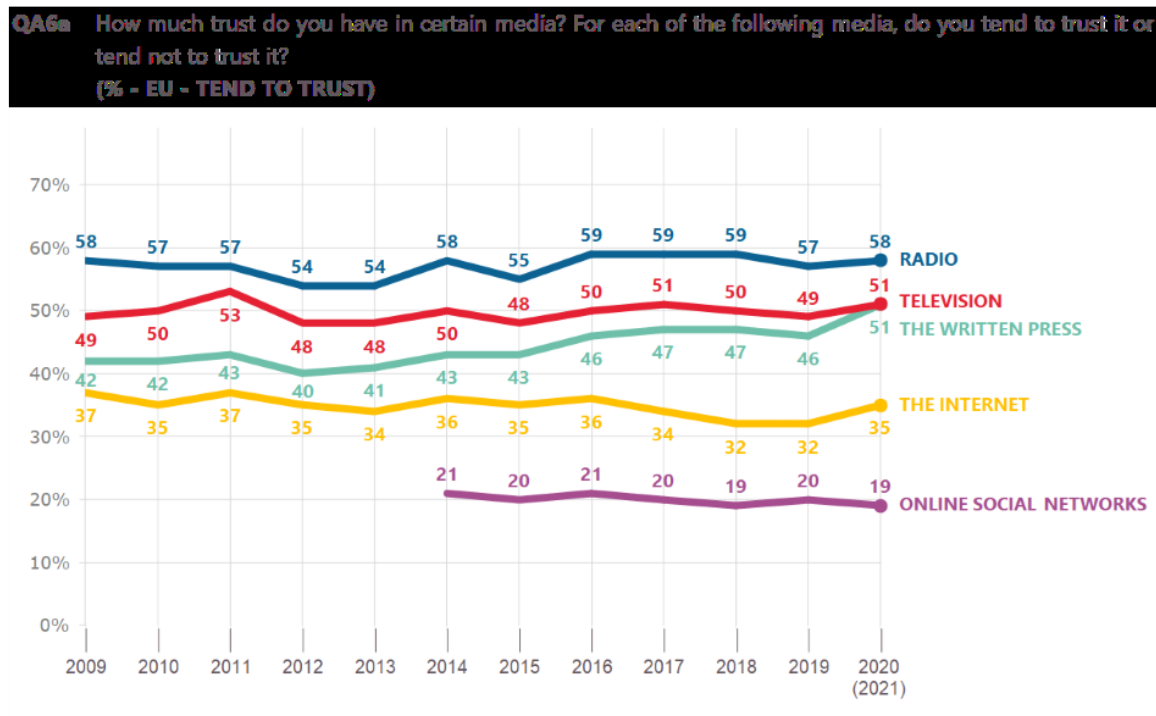
Figure 1.3: Trust in different types of media aggregated EU



Note: Survey results at EU level represent a weighted average across the 27 EU Member States, applying official population figures provided by EUROSTAT.

Source: EBU report

Figure 1.4: Trust in different types of media across time



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 94: Media use in the European Union, February-March 2021

4) Trust and mistrust in public broadcasting institutions is linked to journalism performance

Public broadcasting institutions as a proxy for professional and independent journalism scores as the most trusted news brand in Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark and Italy (Reuters News Report, and country reports). The great majority of the population in these countries relies on public broadcasters for credible information. In Poland, public broadcasting has lost credibility, but is still listed among the most trusted news brands. Only in Greece and Serbia has trust in public broadcasting institutions been seriously undermined. These differences between the countries can be explained by the performance of public broadcasting institutions. Underperformance, as in the case of Greece where public broadcasting was dismantled during the economic crisis, or governmental control and infringements of the independence of public broadcasting, as in the case of Serbia and Poland, led to a withdrawal of trust by the audience. Mistrust in news institutions is thus politically motivated as a corrective to perceived malfunctions of democracy, whereas regular functioning of broadcasters, in accordance with their mandate to provide unbiased and reliable news, is rewarded with trust by the audience.

5) Groups of (dis)trusting media users are hierarchically ranked and not polarised along clear cleavage lines

Media use and consumption remains relatively concentrated, with a large majority of the population consuming few and trusted news products, while only minorities exclusively consume niche or ‘alternative’ media products. Audience segments neither disperse into closed bubbles nor polarise along clearcut cleavage lines that divide the entire population into two different camps. This tendency of media concentration traditionally applies to newspaper and broadcasting markets but can

also be found in equal measure on mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook. On Facebook, relatively few monopolised news organisations (generally the major offline news brands of the country) provide information for the great majority of users. By ranking the most followed news sites on Facebook through CrowdTangle, we find that a ‘winner takes all’ logic applies. Facebook users most typically follow their preferred newspaper or TV station on Facebook, and only a minority follows so-called ‘alternative news sites’ that are often held accountable for the spread of disinformation or conspiracy theories. This means that the monopoly of professional journalism, as main news providers, remains untouched. News providers, which are generally found trustworthy and credible, are resourceful organisations specialised in professional news-making. In addition, we find a plethora of other news sites on social media, many of them short-lived alternative media, generally mistrusted by large audiences and frequented only by minorities of news readers. In audience and user studies, it would be interesting to explore how users draw a line between different online news sites, how they often use trusted and non-trusted news sources, learn to distinguish between different news formats, and make their consumption choices accordingly. Distrusted news source, for instance, might have an entertainment value for segments of the audience, which would explain the spread of ‘fake news stories’ without necessarily having an impact on trust in government or democracy.

Trust in media and news is also found to correlate with education and age, with higher educated individuals trusting most newspapers and being most distrustful of online and social media. Younger people, in general, have significantly higher levels of trust in the Internet and in social media. Trust of younger people in the Internet and in social media might at least partly reflect higher levels of media literacy and competences to use the Internet and social media (Eurobarometer 94). According to Pew Research Center data for the American population, high levels of political engagement do not spread mistrust in media, but rather make people trust the news and journalism.³ From the US, we also know that distrusting media users are mainly supporters of the Republican party, and that the partisan gap between trusting liberals and distrusting conservatives is widening.⁴ In Europe, data on partisan affiliation of trustful and distrusting news readers, and their different levels of political engagement, is scarce. We can expect that campaigns against the media and ‘fake news’ run by populist parties partly resonate with their adherents. Anti-media attitudes are significantly more widespread among news readers with populist views in eight European countries (among Germany, Denmark and Italy, in our sample), who feel unrepresented in media coverage.⁵ Contrary to what is generally believed, this does not necessarily lead to strong polarisation between trusting and mistrusting parts of the population. Selective evidence from the US presidential elections and from Covid-19 contestations in Europe rather points to the possibility that such anti-media campaigns run by populist leaders have a marginalising and radicalising effect on the already mistrusting populations (Koliska *et al.*, 2020; Melki *et al.*, 2021). As a critical note to the interpretation of survey data, it should also be taken into account that the population of mistrusting media users might actually be much more heterogeneous, including, for instance, a group of simply ‘critical’, but in no way radical citizens.

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/04/26/10-political-engagement-knowledge-and-the-midterms/>

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/30/partisan-divides-in-media-trust-widen-driven-by-a-decline-among-republicans/>

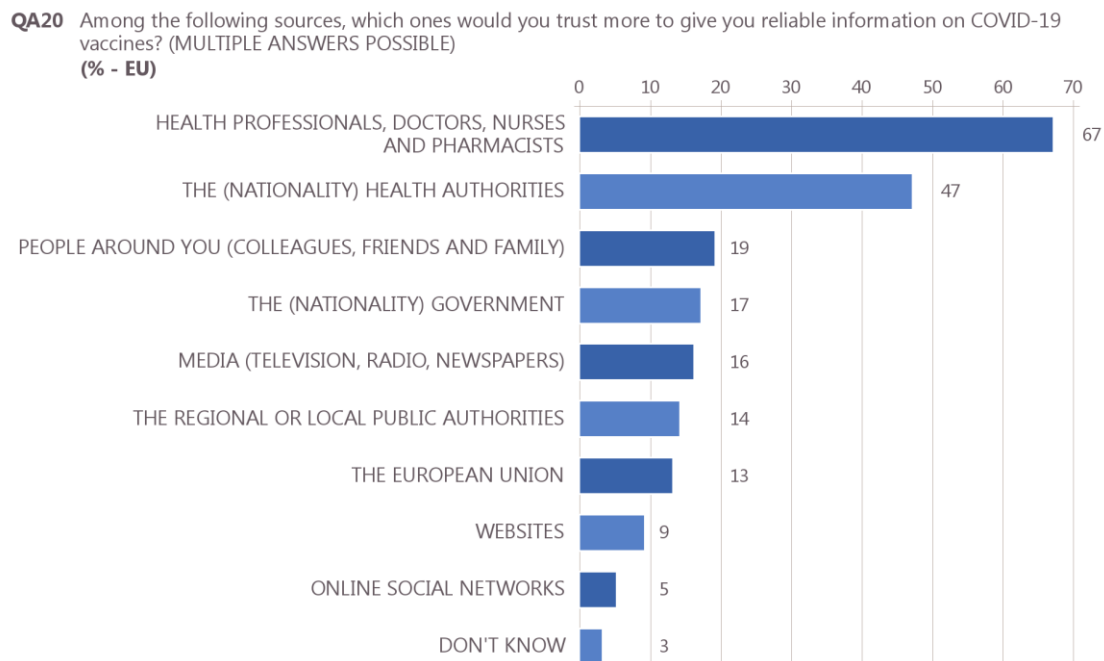
⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2018/05/14/in-western-europe-public-attitudes-toward-news-media-more-divided-by-populist-views-than-left-right-ideology/>

6) The Covid-19 pandemic accounts for a reversal in the decline of trust in news

The most important comparative finding is that the Covid-19 pandemic accounts for a reversal in the decline of trust in news. In all countries under analysis, trust in media and news organisations steadily declined over the last decade, but slightly recovered in 2020 and 2021. For the majority of people in all countries investigated, the pandemic was a moment to search for reliable information on trusted news sites. The information given by professional journalism news sites were not only the ones most frequently accessed by citizens, but were also the ones that were found most credible and useful to find orientation during the pandemic. At the same time, there was a high awareness of the risks of misinformation. Respondents increasingly express concerns about false and misleading information, which they report encountering regularly online, reacting to these concerns by adapting their news readings habits. New indicators, such as concerns about false and misleading information, were also introduced in the Eurobarometer opinion polls in the way that comparable data about the awareness of fake news is available and can be assessed.

According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (ibid.), the most trusted news sources in all countries during the pandemic are public broadcasting and independent and professional journalism news outlets. There is thus a clear correlation between trusted news sources and information value/quality of news. The information value of news provided by independent and professional journalism is a clear indicator of trust. In addition, while trust in newspapers and public broadcasting has grown over the last years, possibly as an effect of the uncertainty of the pandemic and the fake news challenge, trust in social media and alternative news sources has at the same time decreased. According to Reuters News Report, this means that ‘the *trust gap* between the news in general and that found in aggregated environments has grown, with audiences seemingly placing a greater premium on accurate and reliable news sources’ (p. 9).

Figure 1.5: Trusted Information and News Sources during the Covid-19 pandemic



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 94: The EU and the Coronavirus Pandemic

These latter findings are also corroborated by Eurobarometer, which included a specific question about reliable information sources during the pandemic, confirming highest trust levels in expert bodies, but also in legacy media, in sharp contrast to distrusted online sources and social media (Figure 1.5).

7) Patterns of news consumption during the Covid-19 pandemic confirm a process of upgrading of professional journalism

Patterns of news consumption during the Covid-19 pandemic largely confirm this process of an upgrading of journalism. News consumption in six Western countries went up especially during the first weeks of the lockdown, with people turning primarily to unbiased news sources from news organisations, governments or health organisations (Nielsen et al. 2020). News was accessed from various platforms at the same time, with online sources (including social media) and television as the most popular ways of getting news (ibid). In Germany, one study reported that 97% of all Germans used at least one mainstream professional news source (TV, radio, print) a week, and 82% in addition read news from non-professional sources such as social media sites. The smallest share, only 12%, used so-called alternative media, which are most likely to contain disinformation or ‘fake news’ (Frischlich et al. 2020). This already indicates that the risk of exposure to disinformation was reduced. Only a small minority of news readers used primarily, and almost nobody used exclusively non-professional and manipulative news sources. These country-specific findings about news consumption are in line with Eurobarometer surveys for the same period, which show that trust in professional journalism news products was highest and rising, whereas trust in social media and online media was lowest and shrinking (see above). Still, many respondents in national surveys reported that they regularly encountered COVID-19 related distorted information and assisted in spreading conspiracies through social media (36% in Germany according to Frischlich et al. 2020, and 62% in Greece during the first Corona year 2020, which dropped, however, to 50% in 2021 (see Greek country report below). We can assume that the confrontation with fake news online had also obverse effects on the sense of increasing the public’s awareness of the risk of misinformation.

By ranking social media news providers during the pandemic in terms of followers on Facebook, legacy media and news sites run by professional journalism, in particular, rank highest in terms of audience attention in all seven countries analysed. Using CrowdTangle ranking of main news sites in terms of followers, we find broadsheet newspapers and TV Facebook sites, which provide a selection of links to open-access news articles to be followed with much more intensity on Facebook than so-called alternative news sites. In the case of Germany, for instance, the most followed news sites on Facebook are Bild, followed by 2,560,000, with Der Spiegel at 2,186,000, Die Welt at 1,140,000, Zeitonline at 882,000, Sueddeutsche at 793,000, Stern at 751,000 and FAZnet at 564,000. So-called alternative news sites,⁶ often seen as responsible for the spread to ‘alternative’ or ‘fake’ news, rank lowest in terms of numbers of followers in all seven countries analysed. In the case of Germany, for instance, they reach out to 225,000 (Freie Medien), 129,000 (JungeFreiheit), 66,000 (Tichys Einblick) followers. The gap between legacy media of mainstream journalism and so-called alternative news sites on Facebook is considerable in some countries (Germany), but less pronounced in others (Poland, Serbia and Greece). In low-trust countries, alternative news sites can

⁶ Alternative news sites are defined as sites that are built as online news portals that offer alternatives to legacy media or offer critical views of news media. They thus try to cover different topics or open different views on topics. Alternative news sites are often independently owned, offering daily news services, but not covering the whole range of issues and focusing instead on particular topics (such as vaccines). This news is typically not written by professional journalists, but can be authored by activists, campaigners or simply be of unknown origin (e.g., trolls).

gain followers, even though they are not necessarily more trusted than legacy news sites. To sum up, news distribution and consumption on social media follows mass media logics, with some selected news sites ⁷(the great majority of them run by mainstream news organisations, such as flagship newspapers of public broadcasting) focusing the attention of national audiences and various newcomers on non-professional or alternative journalism struggling for attention. While the former are firmly established as ‘mass media’, the latter can, at best, claim some ‘niche media’ status. In most countries, the number of followers of the most salient alternative online news sites remains considerably below the number of followers of mainstream newspapers on Facebook sites.

⁷ For details, see the country reports in Appendix 1.

PART 2: TRUST THROUGH THE MEDIA

2. Trust through the Media

2.1 Introduction: Trust in representative government, science and the economy during the Covid-19 pandemic

As a second and main research task, EnTrust WP4 analyses how trust in representative government, science and the market is contested through the media. Can media coverage during the pandemic, regarding the performance of governance (representative and economic) and of scientific facts, lead to informed opinion-making and criticism? Or is media coverage during the pandemic conducive to the polarisation of political opinions, the mobilisation of extreme positions and the spread of fake news that targets the trustworthiness of scientists, government and political representatives? We ask: Who is (dis)trusted by whom regarding which issues of concern and based on what principles during the pandemic? We approach these questions through a qualitative content analysis of major news outlet in combination with an analysis of selected user comments on news on Facebook in our seven partner countries. We systematically explore by whom trust was contested during the pandemic, and who was mainly targeted as an object to be trusted or distrusted. We further investigate what the main issues of concern that give rise to trust contestation are and on the basis of what principles particular actors and institutions are trusted or distrusted. In the following, we first introduce our measurement in the form of discursive trust contestation, and justify our sample choice of newspapers and newspapers' Facebook commenting sites. We then detail the application of our coding schemes by a seven-country team of coders, and report the results of our reliability tests. For the purpose of this report, we proceed with a descriptive analysis of the main variables that measure trust contestation during the pandemic in the news and on Facebook from a comparative perspective. This leaves out further correlation analysis and tests for future publications for which this report provides the raw material.

2.2 Methodological consideration

The Concept of Discursive Trust Contestation

Discursive Trust Contestation Analysis (DTCA) (Trenz/Zschache 2022) comprises several approaches of content analysis in the area of contentious politics: actor claims-making analysis (Cinalli et al 2021; Statham/Trenz 2012, Koopmans/Statham 2010) and discursive actor attribution analysis (Gerhards/Offerhaus/Roose 2007). Similar to a claim, a discursive trust contestation is perceived as a speech act that establishes a social relationship between a trust giver and a trust receiver. The speaker in a trust contestation can be identical with the trust giver ("I trust the government"), or it can be an attributor of a trust relationship ("the people no longer trust government"). Unlike a claim, a discursive trust contestation, however, does not necessarily point in the direction of 'what is to be done' or 'what should be done'. A discursive trust contestation rather qualifies the social relationship from the perspective of the speaker (either the trust attributor or the trust giver): another person is claimed to be, or not to be, worthy of being trusted. Similar to discursive actor attribution analysis, DTCA sees trust attribution as a contingent social process that highlights specific elements of those relationships and gives reasons/sets the conditions for being trusted/non trusted. Like attributing responsibility in the sense of moral duty, accountability, blame or shame, attributing trust relies on the assessment of other actors' performance and its consequences.

The approach of DTCA aims at a standardised content analysis focusing on public interpretation processes in which actors assess the importance/role of trust in social relationships and/or other

actors' trustworthiness. The unit of analysis in this approach is trust contestation. Trust contestation is the reconstructed answer to the question: "Who expresses to trust/mistrust another actor/system for doing/not doing what, and based on what criteria of trustworthiness." The element of trust contestation consists of the confirmation/support (trust) or in the violation/brokenness (mistrust) of a criteria of (un)trustworthiness, which is attributed to an addressee (the trustee, trusted). Trust contestation, in this sense, is a unilateral relationship between a trust giver and a trust receiver. It is not relevant whether the trust receiver (the person/institution trusted/mistrusted) responds or actually receives the message. The criteria of (un)trustworthiness evoked by the sender of the message as a basis of his/her judgement are not necessarily shared by the receiver, nor do they necessarily bind trust giver and receiver together in a social relationship. The criteria of (un)trustworthiness that forms the basis of the judgement are only attributed to or hold valid from the perspective of the sender (or the attributor of a trust relationship, e.g. journalist). The question whether receiver or any other actor shares or contests them is not pertinent in DTCA.

A trust contestation is the assessment of the quality of a relationship between two actors/institutions in their role as trust giver and trust receiver. This assessment can be done either by the trust giver herself ('I trust'), or by a third person in their role as a trust attributor. A trust contestation can thus take the form of an individual statement (I trust/do not trust), an appeal (we trust/can trust/should trust, cannot trust....), or an ascription (I observe how others do trust/do not trust, e.g., 'a politician states that people have lost trust in government'). The trust contestation can continue over one or several sentences, sometimes also throughout an entire text. Later statements by the same trust attributor/giver belong to the same trust contestation as long as the trust receiver is also the same. This implies also to later statements that do not contain explicit references to trust, but can specify the issue or the principle of trustworthiness.

Actors in a trust relationship can be individual, collective or a system. The receiving actor/collective/system is the passive part; the attributor/giver is the active part: A targets B as being/not being trustworthy. Or A maintains that B does/does not find C trustworthy. Assessing the trustworthiness of the other actor means using some criteria of worth, which are claimed as being valid or applying to a particular actor, but which again can be contested by others. What is contested is not the criteria of worth, but the way it applies to other actors. The attribution of trust might be related to having been successful in doing something for the profit of all, having been successful in avoiding failure or harm, or being seen as competent for doing something. It might relate to what the actor has already done (diagnostic), or to what the actor is expected to do in the future (prognostic). The actor is found to be trustworthy based on the assessment of their previous performance (a diagnosis of what the actors were doing), or based on the prediction of their likely future behaviour (a prognosis of how the actor will perform). A trust contestation can further be individual (I do not trust) or collective (we do not trust/shall not trust).

Sampling

We used newspaper archives that allowed us to select content from printed and/or online news sites through search words. We compiled lists with the 10 most popular news sites in each country. From this list, three traditional journalism news sites were selected accounting for diversity of opinion (pro-governmental and oppositional news sites) according to the country ranking.⁸ As the most comprehensive search word, we used 'Covid' or 'Corona' or 'pandemic' and 'trust' with all its semantic varieties (e.g. including 'distrust', 'mistrust', 'trustful', 'trustworthy', etc.). This combination

⁸ For details of the sampling procedure chosen for each country, see Annex 2

of Covid- related search words with trust allowed us to meaningfully restrict the huge amount of pandemic- related news coverage. One downside of this sampling strategy is that our sampling strategy did not further consider country specific linguistic variances in trust contestation. Instead of stating 'I do not trust', an actor might state, for instance, 'I am not confident that'. 'I do not believe/expect'. In all countries analysed, the articles that made explicit mention of 'trust' were in fact only a small fraction of the entire Covid-19 coverage. This does not imply that trust contestation was absent in the majority of news articles. It can only not be assessed with our standardised instrument of analysis, and would require different (qualitative) research strategies.

Sampling encompassed four pre-established periods: March 2020 – April 2020, September 2020 – October 2020, December 2020 – January 2021, March 2021 – April 2021. We would expect governments, and the appropriateness of their lockdown measures to be salient in the first period, anti-lockdown protests in the second period, anti-vaccine protests in the third and anti-Pharma protests in the fourth. In countries with low frequency of trust contestation, the entire period from 1/3/2020-30/6/2021 was sampled encompassing a random selection of all four periods. Where possible (with the exception of Italy and Serbia) teams documented the total number of articles per month and newspaper. The entire output is saved in the form of news articles in PDF or text format, or search lists with hyperlinks (depending on the functionality of the archive used).

We coded 800 units of trust contestation (200 for each period). Random selection procedures were agreed on with each team, based on the sampling results, to ensure that an equal number of articles across newspapers and weeks were selected for coding (See Annex 2).

The distribution of articles was measured across months (not time periods) for the entire sampling period to allow for the construction of issue cycles.⁹ These issue cycles, apart from the common low frequency of articles in the summer months of 2020, do not show significant variations across time or country. The debate was not in peaks, but guaranteed a high attention over time.

The last stage entailed collecting user comments, which requires manual sampling from Facebook. For the user commenting analysis, we disregarded the time periods. Due to the high selectivity of articles that are posted on Facebook, a sampling of Facebook posts from our sample of coded articles was not possible. We conducted instead an alternative search of 'Covid' and 'Trust' related news articles that were posted on Facebook, and selected those posts that displayed the highest degrees of trust contestations in the commenting section. Depending on the intensity of debates on Facebook (some articles displayed 10,000+ user comments, others only several hundred), a newspaper specific threshold was set for the minimum of comments that had to appear in the first 200 user comments. In total, each team coded a minimum of 250 comments and a maximum of 25 comments per post. We coded the main comments, not the replies to comments.

Intercoder-reliability

DTCA assumes that numerical data derived from standardised qualitative text analysis can be treated as an indicator of trust contestation. An essential element for proving this assumption is the reliability of the coding process. Similar to other methods of standardised content analysis, such as claims-making analysis, the method of discursive trust claims-making is unsuitable for a single researcher project. Text coding, as it has been conducted in our project, is, by default, teamwork and requires principal investigators to engage in team building and strategy development for coder

⁹ Apart from Serbia and Italy, which for reasons of the organisation of the newspaper archives only reported absolute numbers for the four periods analysed.

training. This means that coding decisions are taken based on argumentative exchanges and interpretative processes in a team of coders. The method of standardised content analysis, therefore, is never purely quantitative, as is often assumed in the literature (Neuendorf, 2002; Krippendorff, 2004), but engages a team of researchers in a collective interpretation process. Existing reliability tests are often sub-optimal in the sense that they consider individual coding choices and not the outcomes of collective interpretation processes. In EnTrust WP4 implementation, we consider inter-coder reliability as a process that requires several measures and interventions to control the results of our collective interpretation process.

To ensure intercoder-reliability, we intensively trained the coders. Coder-training was done in different phases as a process of learning through coding practices and engaging with media material. A task force of experienced PIs was set up to draft the codebook and agree on the variables. A two-day workshop in September 2021 introduced the codebook to senior and junior coders of each team. Subsequently, the PIs took charge of team coder training in their national languages. To conclude the training, an online workshop was run in October 2021 by WP4 leaders with all 18 coders present. For our analysis, seven countries' news coverage was analysed by individual country teams, consisting of two to three coders. All coding was done by native speakers with a good background knowledge of political culture, law and politics and, at least a general understanding of the topics under investigation. The coding process was supervised by the PIs and the WP coordinators, who were responsible for developing and pretesting the codebooks, and for training and for giving feedback to individual researchers before, during and after the coding.

As regards the validity and reliability of coding, it is essential to remember that coding in DTCA projects can build on the strength of teamwork for interpretative text analysis. In that sense, comparative claims-making analysis has to adhere to measures of 'inter-team reliability' which, in a multilingual setting, is a highly artificial exercise given that most coders do not code in their native language. Thus, such tests, and also the coding instructions, need to resort to a common language – usually English. The results of tests are thus frequently suboptimal, as they depend on the degree of English fluency of the teams and their coders, and also on the intimate, near native-speaker familiarity with the cultural and linguistic specificities of the respective English-speaking country. Since our coding instructions were given in English, too, such tests, nonetheless, help not only in creating a common basis, but also as a test of how well our instructions have been understood. It is to be assumed, then, that coders will be more accurate in their native language because of their higher intuitive knowledge of the language, and how it is used in the respective social and political context.

Thus, on the one hand, it is important to establish a common understanding of DTCA across teams, even though it is necessarily compromised by the fact that the common language will not be the native language of most coders. It is, on the other hand, also important to establish the reliability and validity of coding in the respective native language. Against this backdrop, tests should ideally be conducted at both levels. We therefore decided to test reliability across teams in English, as well as in the teams' native languages.

Measurements of intercoder reliability had to be slightly adapted to the specifics of the project. We followed general textbook recommendations to include 10 percent of the coded material in the test (80 units of analysis), but divided the test into three elements: 1) Intercoder reliability of identification of coding units, 2) inter-team reliability of selected English news articles (40 units), 2) Intercoder reliability of selected articles in national languages (40 units).

To avoid the pitfalls of rigid statistical tests of reliability, the results for all three tests were calculated on percentage agreement.¹⁰ This is a standard test that has been used especially in claims-making projects (e.g. the EUROPUB and the TransSOL project). In line with previous projects (Cinalli et al. 2021), we assessed coders' test responses not only as random choices, but also in terms of the validity of the response provided. Validity considerations became necessary in the identification of the coding unit (Test 1), which is not random, but needs to be qualified as correct (i.e., following the coding rules) or incorrect (violating coding rules). To assess the validity of claims coding, we compared reliability scores of national teams with scores from the team of instructors. This allowed for a systematic validity check of results through the template of instructors' team coding. In fact, experts' templates can be used to identify 'valid responses' among the variety of responses delivered by national teams, and thus adjust the results of the test coding beyond the simple statistical variation of coders' coding choices. However, ensuring the validity and reliability of coding practices is not limited to standard tests, but requires continuous efforts that stretch over the whole coding process.

All reliability tests were conducted after completion of the teams' training and after each coder had accumulated various hours of coding practice. In our case, material for the tests was selected by the coordination team, and sent out to the national teams for individual coding. Reliability results were then discussed at another face-to-face meeting among team leaders only. The purpose was to identify possible systematic errors, which were re-checked afterwards by the teams individually. Reliability of coding could further be ensured through team supervision and systematic cross-checking of coding practices and results. In our case, all teams had regular meetings for discussion of the coding, also involving work package leaders via remote video meetings. In that way, continuous training was ensured. Due to the low number of units coded in total (n= 800 units per national team), re-checking and the correction of coding was possible without major resource losses.

The results are reported below:

1) Coding-unit identification score

Our first test includes the coding-unit identification score, i.e., the question whether coders identify the same unit of analysis (a discursive trust contestation in text). This latter aspect is largely disregarded in existing studies, even though the identification of the coding unit (e.g., a claim or a DTC) seem, in many cases, to be rather problematic. For our test, we asked one selected coder from each team to identify all relevant coding units in 15 randomly selected news articles from different British and US news sources. The results were first counted as a number of corresponding hits, i.e., the number of coders who have identified one unit. Secondly, we assessed each coding unit identified in the test by the team of PIs in terms of validity of the response, replacing the absolute number of hits for the coding unit with the number of valid responses, e.g., only if a coder had identified a coding unit, but this identification was found to be an invalid response (e.g., if a coding unit was

¹⁰ The standard measure in standardised quantitative content analysis is Krippendorff's Alpha, which has, however, rarely been used in hybrid quantitative and qualitative approaches such as claims-making analysis, from which our DTCA is derived. Due to the combination of qualitative and quantitative elements, statistical measures seem slightly problematic. One problem is that such tests are particularly inadequate for variables with long lists of values or subcategories because of the low probability that every single subcategory will be coded. Reliability for such 'rare phenomena' has generally proven to be difficult to establish: Krippendorff's Alpha is particularly sensitive in such instances, thereby providing very low scores of reliability even if the number of mistakes is extremely small (see: De Swert, 2012 for a more detailed discussion). In claims-making projects, standard tests – such as Krippendorff's Alpha – can therefore be run meaningfully only at an aggregate level, i.e., with regard to broader categories with higher numbers of cases (Cinalli et al. 2021). In addition, the practice of interpretative text analysis of different values is often not categorically exclusive because the interpretation of the text would allow for different responses. Such responses would be valid in the sense that experts could agree on the margins of interpretation. They would also be valid in the sense of 'decoding practices' by particular audience segments, even though coding would become unreliable, according to standard tests.

found valid and identified by five coders, we counted five valid correspondences, if the coding unit was found invalid, but identified five 5 users, we counted the number of three valid responses). The latter yields a sufficient result of 0.76 in terms of percentage of valid responses.

2) Inter-team coder reliability score for each variable

Secondly, we asked teams to fully code a selection of 40 coding units taken from English news articles running through all interpretative variables of the codebook. For the purpose of test results for Issue 1 and Issue 2, principles of trustworthiness 1 and 2 were aggregated. Results of team coding are overall satisfactory, ranging from 97.55% for the identification of the form of trust contestation to 76.1% for the issue variable. The average score of all variables of the codebook is 86.2%.

3) Inter-coder reliability score

Thirdly, we asked individual coders in each country's team to code 40 coding units randomly selected from the sample of national newspaper articles. As expected, the results of individual coders in the third test were mixed, sometimes inferior and other times superior to the ones of team coding in the second test, yet in all cases, sufficient degrees of inter-coder reliability were guaranteed. All teams performed well (between 97.6 % and 82.3% in the Italian case, 91% and 65.3% in the Serbian case, between 100% and 53% in the Danish case, between 95% and 67.5% in the Czech case, between 93.8% and 78.8% in the Greek case, between 95.3% and 74.4% in the Polish case, and between 100% and 75.83% in the German case). Critical variables with lower scores across teams were identified in the actor type, issue and principles variables, both with a high number of values that make deviations in the choices among coders more likely. In some countries, slightly lower scores beyond the acceptable threshold of 67% for these variables were found. All team leaders were asked to intensify training and supervise coding practices of these three variables. The third individual coders' tests were also important as a corrective instrument to establish differences between individual coding practices and work on a common understanding within the single teams. We did not repeat tests for the Facebook commenting analysis as the coding was done by the same team of experienced coders, and variables largely overlapped.

2.3 Trust contestation during the pandemic

This report is meant to introduce trust contestation during the Covid pandemic onto the European landscape. Through frequency calculations and simple cross tabulations of key variables, the general lines of debate are drawn along several comparative dimensions: country comparison, comparison of news sources, comparison of different trust receivers (government, science and pharma industry). The report will not systematically check for covariations and regressions between selected variables, which is open for further analysis by consortium members, to be decided in the EnTrust dissemination and publication plans.

The global health crisis was paired with a surplus of global information about the dimensions of crisis (Trenz et al. 2021). While social spaces were closed down, people were at the same time bombarded with international news. For many, the existential experience of social isolation was paired with excesses of news media consumption. By confronting the surplus of negative news about the pandemic, our relationship with news values also changed. For many news readers, the question of the quality and trustworthiness of news was raised as a question of survival. It was raised in everyday situations, for instance, by asking whether we can trust the information that was shared on social media, or whether the media experts, who interpret and translate this information for us, were credible.

In the following, we refer to ‘trust relationships’ or ‘trust contestation’ as terms that can include both positive (trusting) and negative (distrusting) cases. Trust contestations occur regularly across the period. By making the choice to sample only text with explicit references to trust and its grammatical derivatives, our study only covers the peak of contestations. We will not be able to delve into country specific debates whenever trust in government, science or the economy is discussed in a broader meaning context.

Our random sample includes news articles (61.8%) and opinion articles (26%) and a broad category of other articles (mainly interviews) (12.3%). This varies between country and types of newspapers, but the overall trend in the distribution of types of articles is confirmed for all cases. What is immediately evident is the relatively large number of opinion articles (more than one quarter of all articles) indicating that trust contestations are often part of a meta-discourse giving space to more interpretative statements by journalists or other authors.

By looking at the form variable, we find that trust contestations in 77.6% of all cases in all countries are attributed, i.e., are not replicated in the news in the form of direct contestation among opponents, or an appeal for trust/distrust, but, instead, are reported by third actors (Table 2.1). This varies between 68.1% in Czech Republic and 86.9% in Germany. Country differences in terms of different journalistic styles of more personalised or more anonymised news coverage seem to matter little in the distribution of the form variable. We can talk of a double mediating filter of trust contestation that applies to all countries, first by the media, including selected statements by political actors into the news and, secondly, by the selected speakers (directly or indirectly quoted) who chose to highlight particular trust relationships in their statements. This can be interpreted as an attempt to objectify trust relationships: instead of ‘I do not trust the vaccine’ (direct individual statement) or ‘we should not trust the vaccine’ (appeal), the newspapers would rather state ‘the people do not trust the vaccine’ (factual statement) or ‘the people would trust the vaccine if....’ (diagnostic statement). Ascribed trust relationships are further objectified in the sense that trusting and distrusting statements are almost balanced, with slight differences in the tendency between countries (see our discussion of degrees of trust and distrust below) (see Table 2.3). Newspaper coverage is thus predominantly about the ascription, observation and/or explanation of trust relationships of others, and only in a minority of cases allows for direct individual judgements (around 9.1% in all countries), or makes appeals to trust or distrust (equally around 9.9%). (For country differences, see Table 2.2).

In the minority of cases of individual judgements about trust (direct trust giver – trust receiver relationship), we find a clear dominance of positive trust statements. When trust givers are quoted directly in the media, they mostly express trustful relationships (see Table 2.1).¹¹ Direct statements of distrust are less common in the media.

¹¹ For this analysis, only cases of direct trust or distrust expressions have been taken into account, while normative, conditional-prognostic, ambivalent or unclear statements have been excluded.

Table 2.1 Form of trust relationship * trust degree dichotomy * Country

Country	form of trust relationship	trusting	distrusting	Total (N)
Denmark	Individual judgement	67.3%	32.7%	52
	Appeal	100.0%	0.0%	2
	Ascription/observation/explanation	46.7%	53.3%	458
	No trust relationship	76.9%	23.1%	13
	Total	49.7%	50.3%	525
Germany	Individual judgement	73.3%	26.7%	30
	Ascription/observation/explanation	44.3%	55.7%	429
	No trust relationship	100.0%	0.0%	1
	Total	46.3%	53.7%	460
Italy	Individual judgement	82.4%	17.6%	85
	Ascription/observation/explanation	52.0%	48.0%	537
	Total	56.1%	43.9%	622
Czechia	Individual judgement	61.5%	38.5%	117
	Ascription/observation/explanation	39.4%	60.6%	434
	Total	44.1%	55.9%	551
Poland	Individual judgement	61.2%	38.8%	49
	Appeal	100.0%	0.0%	1
	Ascription/observation/explanation	48.8%	51.2%	527
	No trust relationship	100.0%	0.0%	1
	Total	50.0%	50.0%	578
Greece	Individual judgement	82.6%	17.4%	69
	Appeal	100.0%	0.0%	2
	Ascription/observation/explanation	58.9%	41.1%	450
	No trust relationship	33.3%	66.7%	6
	Total	61.9%	38.1%	527
Serbia	Individual judgement	65.0%	35.0%	80
	Appeal	100.0%	0.0%	2
	Ascription/observation/explanation	45.9%	54.1%	458
	No trust relationship	12.5%	87.5%	16
	Total	47.8%	52.2%	556
Total	Individual judgement	70.1%	29.9%	482
	Appeal	100.0%	0.0%	7
	Ascription/observation/explanation	48.2%	51.8%	3293
	No trust relationship	43.2%	56.8%	37
	Total	51.0%	49.0%	3819

2.2 Form of trust relationship

country	Individual judgement	Appeal	Ascription/observation/ explanation	No trust relationship	Total (N)
Denmark	7.0%	7.4%	82.1%	3.5%	800
Germany	4.3%	6.9%	86.9%	2.0%	800
Italy	11.3%	11.0%	77.3%	0.4%	799
Czechia	14.8%	9.0%	68.1%	8.1%	800
Poland	6.9%	5.6%	83.1%	4.4%	801
Greece	9.4%	13.0%	73.0%	4.6%	800
Serbia	10.2%	10.2%	72.8%	6.9%	817
Total	9,10% (N=511)	9% (N=506)	77.6% (N=4360)	4.3% (N=240)	100% (N=5617)

Looking in detail at the type of trust attributions, we can distinguish between ‘observed trust relationships’, ‘desirable trust relationships’ and ‘possible trust relationships’ (see Table 2.3). 75.5% are factual statements about trust describing observed trust relationships of others. This is frequently done in reporting survey results. Only 2.2% of all trust attributions are normative, calling for trust or mistrust of particular categories of actors, thus making reference to desirable trust relationships (frequently in the form of appeals). 15.6% of all trust attributions instead are conditional or diagnostic statements resulting from a prognosis about possible trust relationships. It follows that the news media mainly observe existing trust relationships that are attributed to particular actors. The newspapers remain mostly factual in their description of existing trust relationships, occasionally pointing out possible directions or causalities in the development of trust relationships, and rarely engage in normative debates about desirable trust relationships. Taking a closer look at the small percentage of appeals for trust or distrust (9% of all trust contestations) (Figure 2.2), we find that these are predominantly calls for trust. Among those actors that should be trusted, science is most frequently mentioned (32.7%), followed by governments (17%) and citizens (12.8%). Only an insignificant number of all trust contestations make an appeal to mistrust’s particular targets, but the number of cases is too small to be able to identify patterns across country cases and countries. Newspaper debates across countries are thus overall supportive, and do not engage in mistrust campaigns against particular targets.

Table 2.3: Degree of (dis)trust in actor attributions

	Denmark	Germany	Italy	Czechia	Poland	Greece	Serbia	Total
DESCRIPTIVE: Are trusting	29.9%	23.0%	30.6%	27.7%	33.6%	38.0%	30.6%	30.4%
DESCRIPTIVE: Are increasingly trusting	2.6%	4.3%	14.6%	3.7%	5.0%	7.4%	4.7%	6%
DESCRIPTIVE: Are decreasingly trusting	15.0%	10.9%	16.5%	9.9%	9.9%	8.6%	15.8%	12.4%
DESCRIPTIVE: Are mistrusting	22.0%	23.5%	25.2%	38.3%	30.6%	23.1%	25.9%	26.7%
NORMATIVE: Should be trusting	0.6%	2.2%	2.1%	0.2%	4.1%	1.9%	2.5%	2%
NORMATIVE: Should not trust	0.2%	0.3%	0.2%	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.2%	0.2%

CONDITIONAL/PROGNOSTIC: Increasing trust	7.8%	5.6%	3.9%	4.4%	2.7%	7.9%	5.7%	5.4%
CONDITIONAL/PROGNOSTIC: Decreasing trust	11.7%	6.6%	3.2%	6.6%	6.2%	4.6%	3.7%	6.2%
CONDITIONAL/PROGNOSTIC: Stabilising/balancing/ calm- ing/securing trust	3.2%	13.8%	1.3%	1.7%	1.8%	3.9%	1.0%	4%
Degree of trust unspecified or open	7.0%	9.8%	2.4%	7.5%	5.9%	4.3%	9.9%	6.7%
Total (N)	658	695	618	545	666	584	595	4361

Table 2.4 Trust giver: actor type * Country

Actor type	Denmark	Germany	Italy	Czechia	Poland	Greece	Serbia	Total
Not applicable/unspecified	2.8%	4.1%	0.0%	3.6%	5.2%	6.5%	8.1%	4.3%
IND - Journalist/author of article	1.3%	0.1%	1.3%	0.1%	1.0%	0.3%	1.6%	0.8%
IND - Head of state/government	0.8%	3.1%	1.1%	5.5%	1.2%	5.0%	2.2%	2.7%
IND - Politician belonging to gov- ernment	1.0%	1.9%	6.6%	2.1%	1.6%	1.0%	1.5%	2.2%
IND - Politician belonging to oppo- sition	1.5%	0.5%	1.3%	3.0%	0.7%	1.8%	1.1%	1.4%
IND - Citizen	3.9%	0.6%	2.1%	1.6%	0.7%	2.3%	1.2%	1.8%
IND - Protester	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
IND - Scientist/ doctor/ expert/gov- ernmental expert or adviser	0.5%	0.6%	1.4%	2.1%	1.1%	1.5%	2.0%	1.3%
IND - Trade union representative	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%
IND - Spokesperson of an NGO/so- cial movement	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.5%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
IND - Judge/lawyer	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
IND - Business person	1.0%	1.9%	1.0%	1.3%	1.0%	0.4%	0.1%	0.9%
IND - Church representative	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
IND - Celebrity	0.3%	0.0%	1.6%	1.1%	0.5%	0.5%	2.1%	0.9%
IND - writer	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.6%	0.1%
IND - representative of police/ army / security authorities	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
IND - sports person	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
IND - medical staff (nurse, medics, therapist)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%
IND - artist, representative of cul- tural organisation/institution	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%
IND - pupil, student	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
IND - head/representative of public administration	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
IND - Other	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%

COL - Newspaper/media organisation	0.4%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - The government	6.9%	7.4%	3.4%	2.3%	3.7%	2.5%	2.2%	4.0%
COL - Subgovernment	0.1%	0.9%	0.9%	0.5%	0.9%	0.1%	0.1%	0.5%
COL - Political party in government	1.8%	1.0%	3.5%	0.1%	0.5%	0.1%	0.0%	1.0%
COL - Political party in opposition	1.8%	1.1%	0.9%	0.6%	0.5%	2.1%	0.2%	1.0%
COL - Group of citizens, communities, neighbourhood, etc.	7.9%	1.0%	6.8%	1.8%	2.6%	5.6%	0.0%	3.6%
COL - Anti-vaccination groups	0.0%	1.1%	0.4%	0.1%	0.7%	0.3%	0.2%	0.4%
COL - The people (as a whole)	52.0%	39.1%	33.2%	48.6%	40.4%	44.4%	60.2%	45.5%
COL - The majority of the people (only if explicitly mentioned as such)	1.9%	5.5%	6.0%	4.9%	10.1%	2.8%	2.6%	4.8%
COL - The minority of the people (only if explicitly mentioned as such)	0.5%	3.4%	8.9%	4.4%	10.5%	0.9%	2.2%	4.4%
COL - Voters or a group of voters	0.9%	2.1%	0.5%	1.9%	1.1%	0.8%	0.5%	1.1%
COL - Group of protesters	1.5%	1.3%	0.1%	0.5%	0.2%	0.1%	0.0%	0.5%
COL - Doctors/medical associations	0.4%	0.5%	0.6%	1.6%	0.0%	0.4%	1.7%	0.7%
COL - Group of scientists/experts/governmental experts	1.3%	0.0%	2.1%	1.6%	0.1%	0.6%	0.5%	0.9%
COL - Trade union	0.4%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.4%	0.1%	0.2%
COL - Social movement/NGO	0.4%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - Business/private enterprise	1.4%	5.1%	8.4%	2.9%	2.5%	4.8%	1.0%	3.7%
COL - Church organisation	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - Public administration	1.3%	0.3%	0.4%	0.6%	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%
COL - Consumers, customers, clients	0.0%	6.4%	1.1%	0.6%	2.1%	3.4%	0.2%	2.0%
COL - Employer	0.5%	1.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.6%	0.3%	0.0%	0.4%
COL - Employees	0.1%	1.0%	0.0%	0.1%	1.2%	0.0%	0.2%	0.4%
COL - (politicians in) parliament or second chamber	0.3%	1.3%	0.5%	0.3%	0.1%	0.3%	0.1%	0.4%
COL - family (members)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%
COL - fire fighters	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
COL - police, army, security authorities	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
COL - athletes, sportsmen, soccer players	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - pupils, students, young people	0.1%	0.3%	0.5%	0.3%	0.6%	2.3%	1.8%	0.8%
COL - patients	0.1%	0.8%	0.0%	0.8%	0.1%	0.3%	0.5%	0.4%
COL - teachers, educational institutions (preschools, schools, universities)	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
COL - parents	0.4%	0.3%	0.1%	0.5%	0.2%	0.1%	0.4%	0.3%

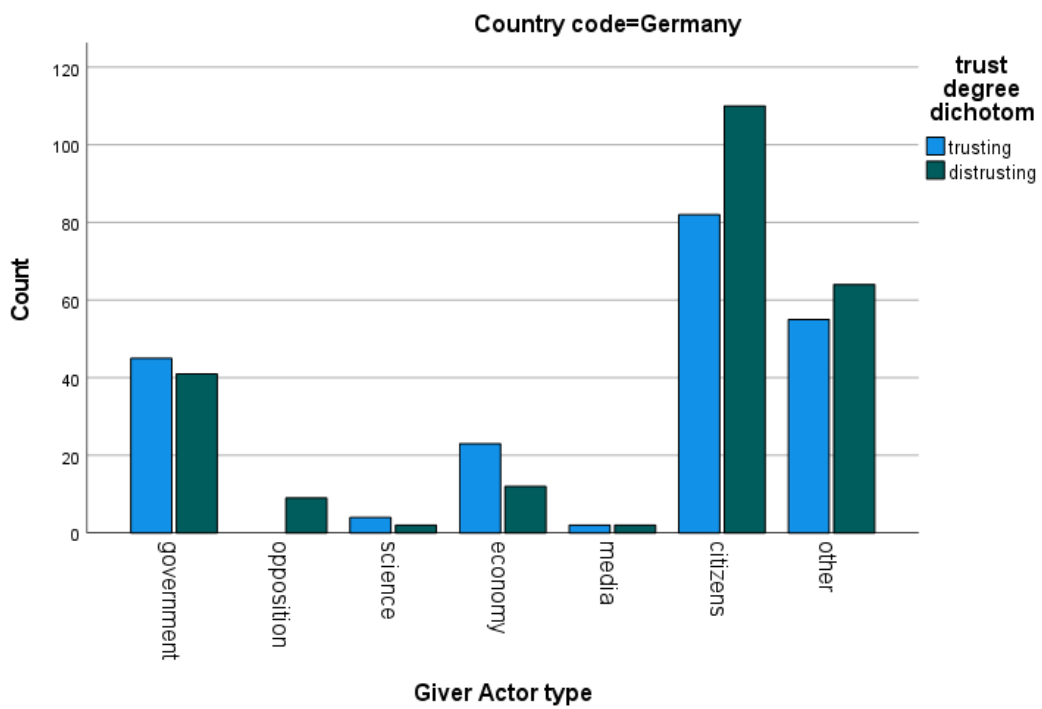
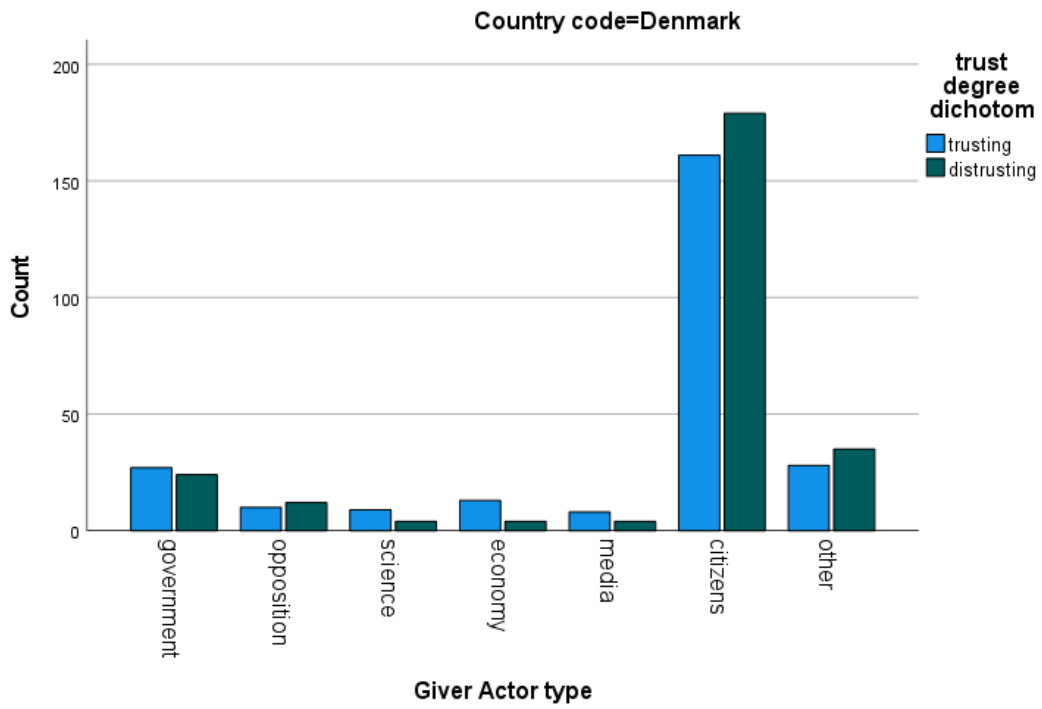
COL - artists, representatives of cultural organisations/institutions	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - medical & care staff (nurses, para/medics, care workers)	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - Other	0.5%	1.9%	0.0%	1.1%	3.0%	0.8%	1.7%	1.3%
SYS - Democracy	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
SYS - The media	0.4%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
SYS - A country	1.1%	0.1%	2.3%	1.1%	0.4%	0.9%	1.3%	1.0%
SYS - The state	1.0%	0.8%	0.8%	0.0%	0.2%	1.6%	0.1%	0.6%
SYS - Politics (in general)	0.4%	0.1%	0.8%	0.0%	0.1%	0.6%	0.1%	0.3%
SYS - The judiciary/the law	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
SYS - The market/ the economy	0.9%	1.3%	0.5%	0.0%	0.1%	4.4%	0.1%	1.0%
SYS - Other	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Total (N)	800	800	799	800	801	800	817	5617

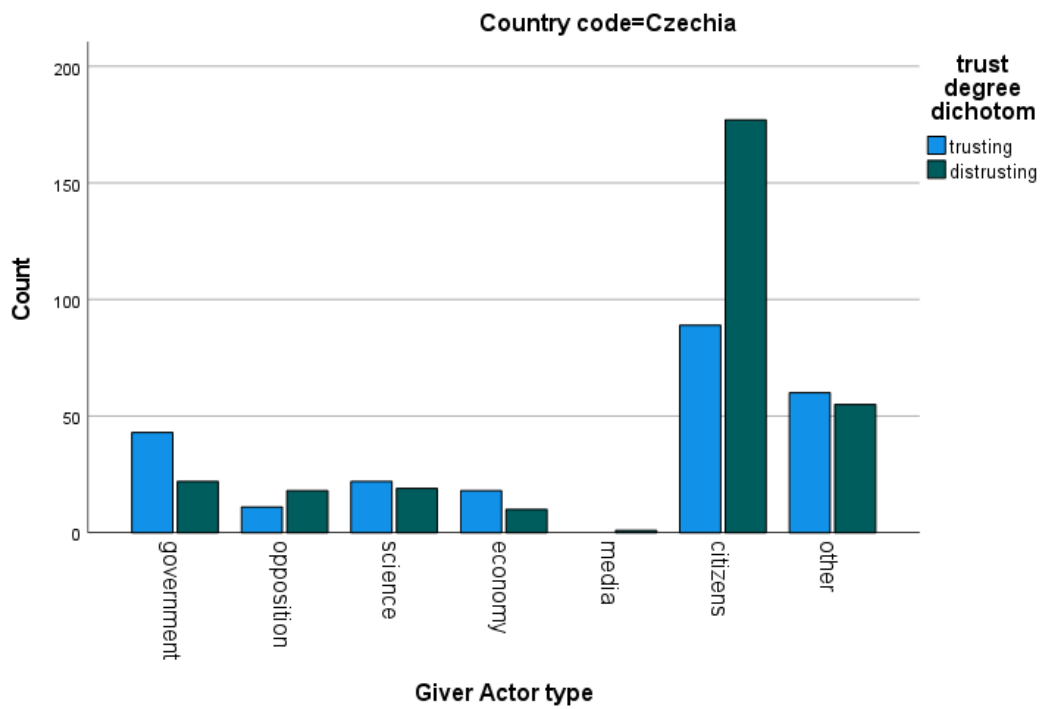
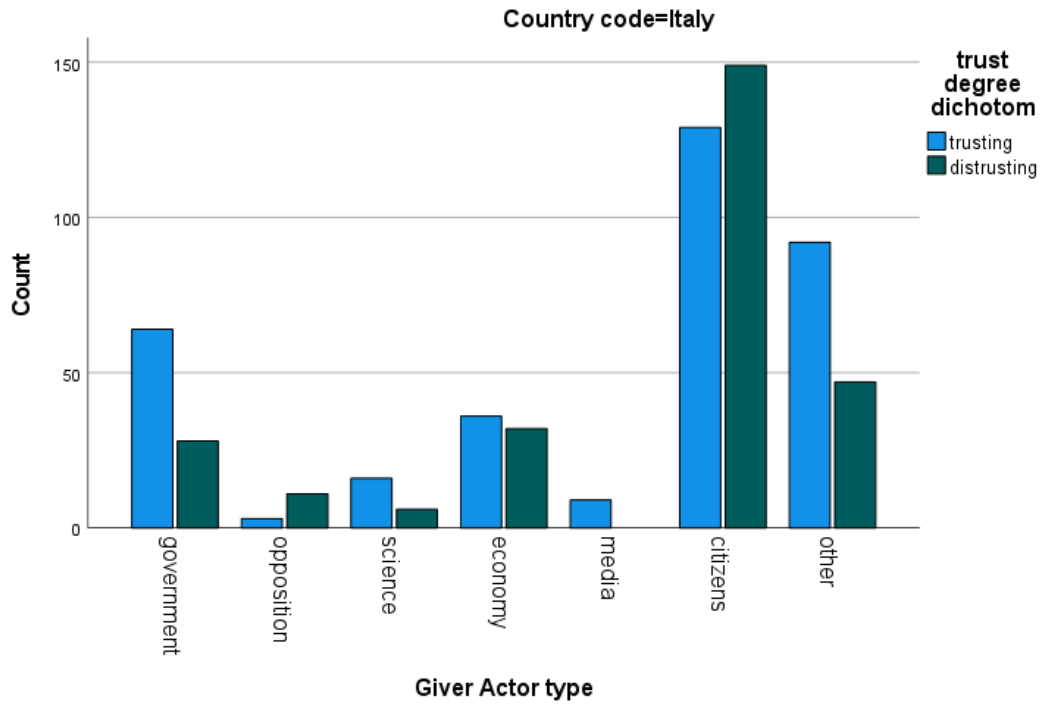
Table 2.5 Giver Actor type * trust degree dichotomy * Country

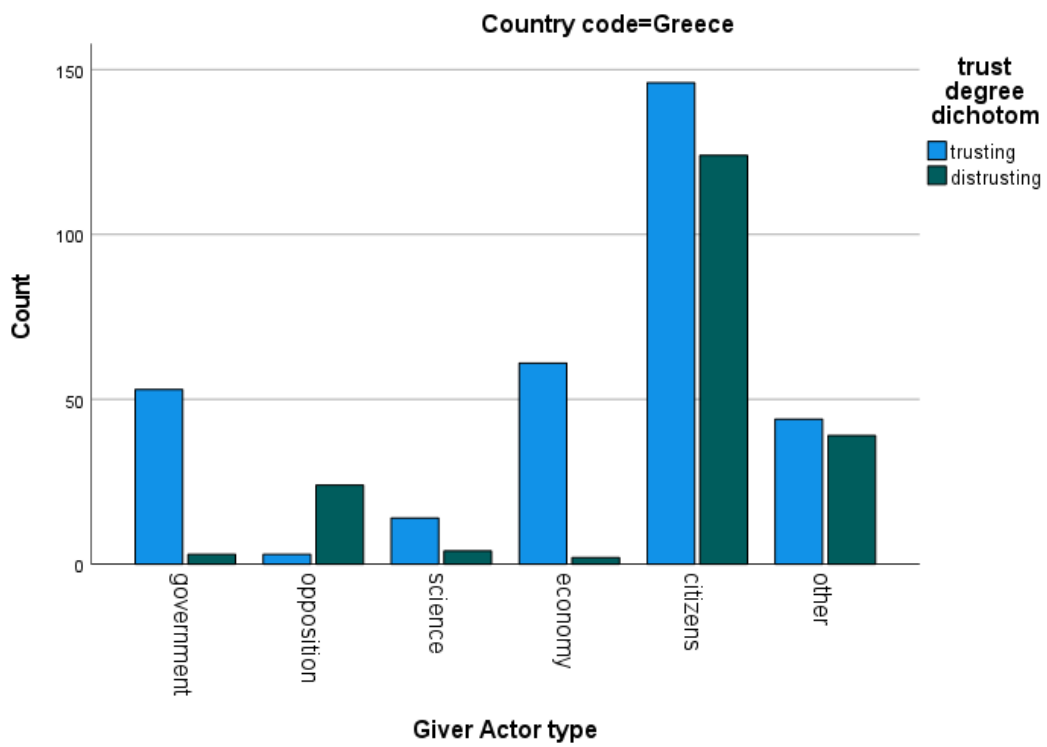
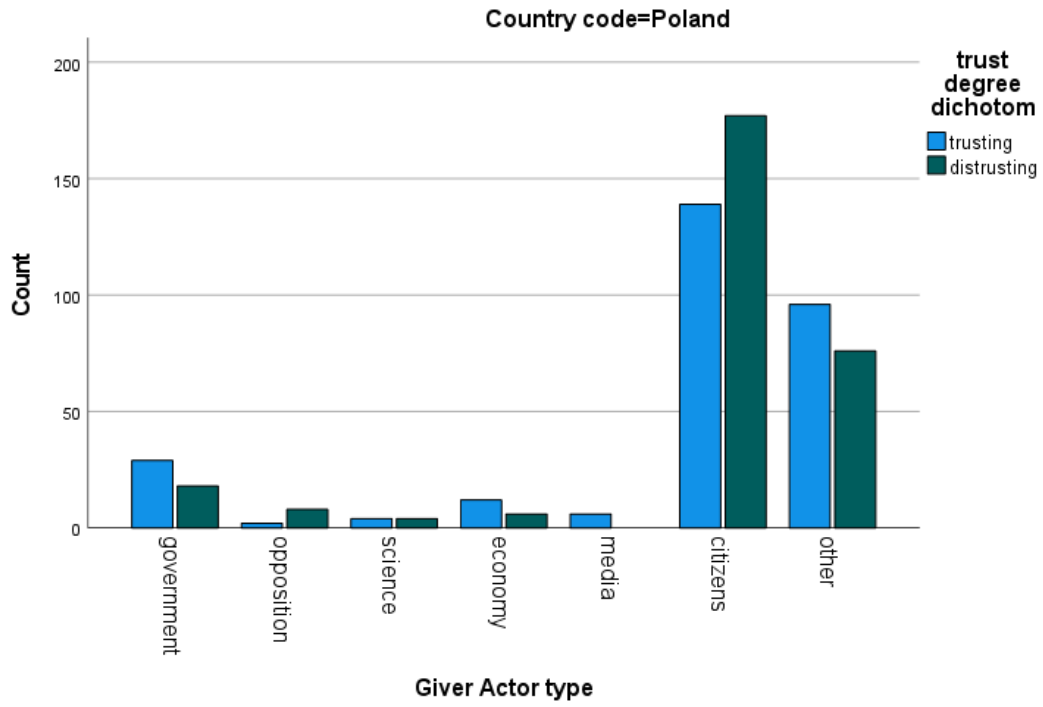
Country	trust giver	trusting	distrusting	Total (N)
Denmark	government	52.9%	47.1%	51
	opposition	45.5%	54.5%	22
	science	69.2%	30.8%	13
	economy	76.5%	23.5%	17
	media	66.7%	33.3%	12
	citizens	47.4%	52.6%	340
	other	44.4%	55.6%	63
	Total	49.4%	50.6%	518
Germany	government	52.3%	47.7%	86
	opposition	0.0%	100.0%	9
	science	66.7%	33.3%	6
	economy	65.7%	34.3%	35
	media	50.0%	50.0%	4
	citizens	42.7%	57.3%	192
	other	46.2%	53.8%	119
	Total	46.8%	53.2%	451
Italy	government	69.6%	30.4%	92
	opposition	21.4%	78.6%	14
	science	72.7%	27.3%	22
	economy	52.9%	47.1%	68
	media	100.0%	0.0%	9
	citizens	46.4%	53.6%	278
	other	66.2%	33.8%	139
	Total	56.1%	43.9%	622

Czechia	government	66.2%	33.8%	65
	opposition	37.9%	62.1%	29
	science	53.7%	46.3%	41
	economy	64.3%	35.7%	28
	media	0.0%	100.0%	1
	citizens	33.5%	66.5%	266
	other	52.2%	47.8%	115
	Total	44.6%	55.4%	545
Poland	government	61.7%	38.3%	47
	opposition	20.0%	80.0%	10
	science	50.0%	50.0%	8
	economy	66.7%	33.3%	18
	media	100.0%	0.0%	6
	citizens	44.0%	56.0%	316
	other	55.8%	44.2%	172
	Total	49.9%	50.1%	577
Greece	government	94.6%	5.4%	56
	opposition	11.1%	88.9%	27
	science	77.8%	22.2%	18
	economy	96.8%	3.2%	63
	citizens	54.1%	45.9%	270
	other	53.0%	47.0%	83
	Total	62.1%	37.9%	517
Serbia	government	72.1%	27.9%	43
	opposition	18.2%	81.8%	11
	science	67.9%	32.1%	28
	economy	71.4%	28.6%	7
	media	50.0%	50.0%	12
	citizens	40.2%	59.8%	341
	other	66.3%	33.7%	92
	Total	48.9%	51.1%	534
Total	government	66.4%	33.6%	440
	opposition	25.4%	74.6%	122
	science	64.7%	35.3%	136
	economy	71.2%	28.8%	236
	media	70.5%	29.5%	44
	citizens	44.1%	55.9%	2003
	other	55.7%	44.3%	783
	Total	1929	1835	3764
		51.2%	48.8%	100%

Figure 2.1: Trusting and distrusting main actor categories







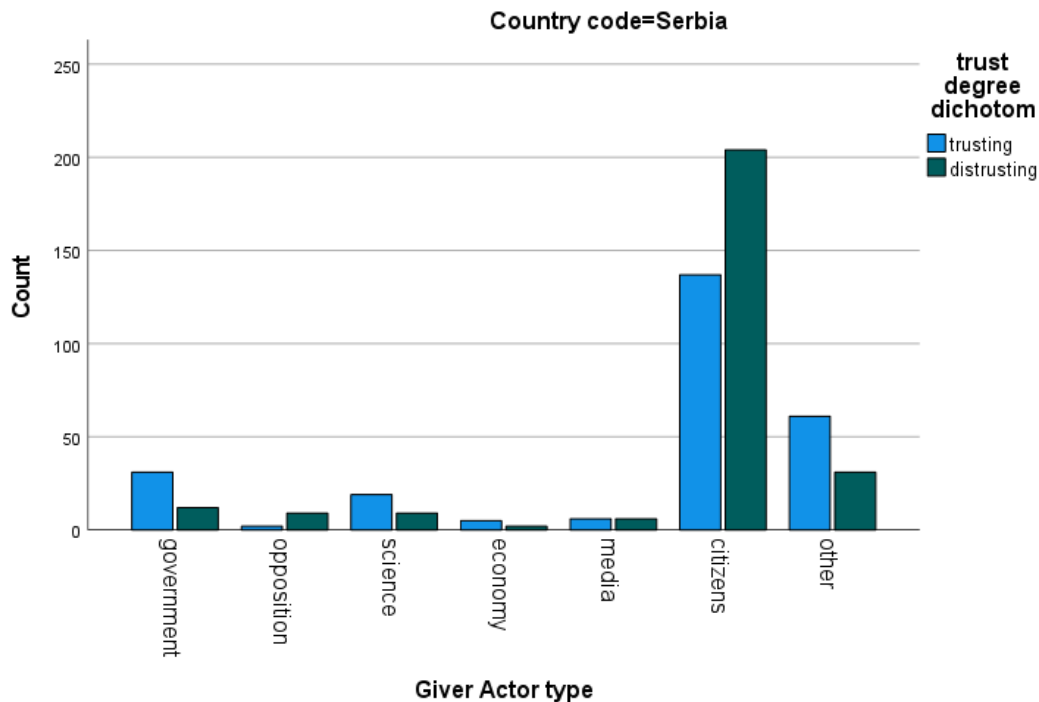


Table 2.4 gives an overview of the diversity of actors in the role as trust givers. It is striking that almost half of those trusting and distrusting actors are made up of the people or citizens of their respective country (45.5%). These appear in trust attributions but only rarely in individual statements or appeals. It is thus recognised that people are the most important trust givers in democracy, yet outside of election campaigns, their role remains unspecific, and they are mainly referred to as a generic category and not in their specific role (e.g., as voters). The people also remain anonymous and are not given direct voice. Generic statements about the people prevail over individual statements of citizens. We can thus conclude that a key dimension of media news coverage during the pandemic is about observing how people trust. Observers of people’s trust are mainly journalists (35.6%), scientists (30.4) and politicians (19.1%). In the case of journalists and scientists as attributors of people’s trust, this is done with frequent references to opinion surveys. People’s trust thus becomes an objectified category that is made measurable. As the second highest category among the trust givers, we find again the people, this time specified as a majority (4.8%) and minority (4.4%).¹² In these cases, as well, trust relationships are frequently supported by survey results. Governments as trust givers appear in 4% of all cases, for instance, in a reverse relationship of the government trusting the people in compliance with the Corona emergency measures.

The frequent use of opinion surveys in the news confirms an early insight from Bourdieu and others that public opinion measurements are not only a scientific tool to monitor public attitudes, but an instrument to intervene and shape public debates. In our particular case, trust relationships become objectifiable through surveys, and can be used for comparative measurements to identify trends, or to assess the performance of key actors in the pandemic. An important role during the pandemic is played by comparative assessments looking at how a country performs in relation to others. International comparisons of surveys and statistics were a common practice found in public and media debates during the pandemic, for instance, in the way the efficiency of measures by foreign governments was measured, or infection rates of different countries were compared (Trenz et al. 2021).

¹² The values ‘majority’ or ‘minority’ of the people were only coded when explicitly addressed as such in the news article.

In the next step, we group trust givers into aggregated categories, and focus only on descriptive expressions of trust and distrust (Table 2.5 and Figure 2.1). In the overall distribution, we find a slight majority of trusting (51.2) over mistrusting actors (48.8). News coverage thus tends to be balanced and no negativity bias applies in trust contestation in the sense that distrusting actors are given a higher salience in the news. The aggregated group of people/citizens as the trust giver with highest frequency tend to build a distrusting relationship in 55.9% of all cases. Country differences matter, with the most distrusting people/citizens to be found in the Czech Republic (66.5%), whereas in Greece, the number of distrusting citizens (45.9%) is considerably lower than the average (Figure 2.1). All the other actor categories appear in the media mainly in their role as trust supporters, among them government (66.4%), economic actors (71.2%), science (64.7%), and media actors and journalists (70.5%). Not surprisingly, actors of the opposition rather express distrust in about three quarters of their statements.

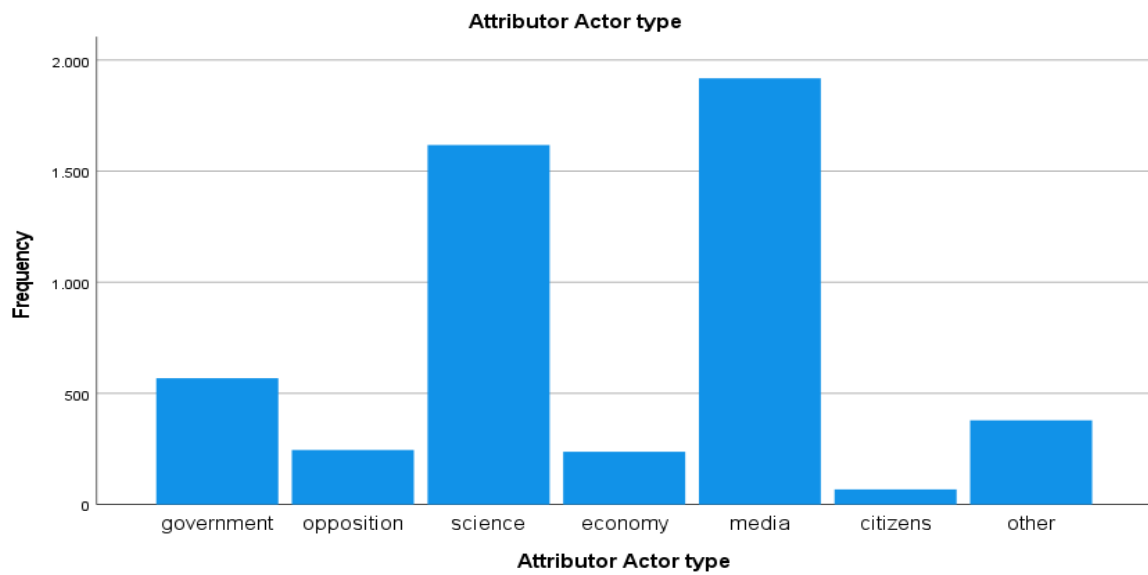
Table 2.6 Trust attributor/observer of trust relations: actor type * Country

	Denmark	Germany	Italy	Czechia	Poland	Greece	Serbia	Total
Not applicable/unspecified	7.6%	4.5%	12.9%	16.0%	9.6%	9.8%	12.4%	10.4%
IND - Journalist/author of article	39.4%	51.1%	31.5%	21.1%	21.7%	40.4%	27.9%	33.3%
IND - Head of state/government	1.1%	2.3%	1.3%	3.3%	0.9%	13.5%	2.4%	3.5%
IND - Politician belonging to government	2.5%	8.9%	9.1%	7.3%	3.4%	7.8%	3.7%	6.1%
IND - Politician belonging to opposition	4.0%	2.0%	0.6%	8.5%	4.9%	4.1%	4.5%	4.1%
IND - Citizen	2.1%	0.4%	1.0%	0.8%	0.9%	0.9%	1.3%	1.1%
IND - Scientist/ doctor/ expert/governmental expert or adviser	20.8%	8.5%	7.0%	14.5%	21.5%	6.3%	21.5%	14.3%
IND - Trade union representative	1.8%	0.1%	0.0%	0.3%	0.7%	0.0%	0.5%	0.5%
IND - Spokesperson of an NGO/social movement	1.1%	0.4%	0.3%	2.1%	0.6%	0.3%	2.8%	1.1%
IND - Judge/lawyer	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.4%	0.1%	0.4%	0.0%	0.2%
IND - Business person	3.6%	6.4%	2.5%	2.6%	3.7%	4.8%	1.0%	3.5%
IND - Church representative	0.5%	0.3%	0.8%	0.1%	0.2%	0.6%	0.1%	0.4%
IND - Celebrity	1.0%	0.1%	2.0%	1.3%	1.9%	0.0%	1.1%	1.1%
IND - Representative of IGO (e.g. UN)	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
IND - writer	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%
IND - head/representative of educational institution, library, museum	0.1%	0.1%	0.3%	0.3%	0.1%	0.0%	0.2%	0.2%
IND - representative of police/army / security authorities	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
IND - sports person	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
IND - medical staff (nurse, medics, therapist)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
IND - artist, representative of cultural organisation/institution	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
IND - diplomat or other state representative	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
IND - civil society activist, volunteer	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.2%	0.1%

IND - fire fighter	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%
IND - Other	0.1%	0.1%	1.0%	0.0%	1.9%	0.9%	4.2%	1.2%
COL - Newspaper/media organisation	0.9%	0.9%	0.3%	1.6%	0.5%	0.5%	1.3%	0.9%
COL - The government	0.6%	0.6%	0.1%	0.8%	0.0%	0.6%	0.6%	0.5%
COL - Subgovernment	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
COL - Political party in government	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%
COL - Political party in opposition	0.3%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.4%	0.6%	0.3%
COL - Group of citizens, communities, neighbourhood, etc.	0.1%	0.0%	0.4%	0.3%	0.1%	0.3%	0.0%	0.2%
COL – Anti-vaccination groups	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
COL – Doctors/medical associations	0.8%	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.2%
COL – Group of scientists/experts/governmental experts	10.6%	10.1%	28.5%	13.4%	25.8%	3.6%	8.0%	14.3%
COL – Trade union	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
COL – Social movement/NGO	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	1.0%	0.1%	0.6%	3.1%	0.7%
COL – Court	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
COL – Business/private enterprise	0.4%	0.9%	0.3%	0.6%	0.2%	2.5%	0.1%	0.7%
COL – Public administration	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%	0.3%	0.1%	0.3%
COL – (politicians in) parliament or second chamber	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
COL – pupils, students, young people	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%
COL – Other	0.1%	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	1.3%	1.3%	0.4%
Total	800	800	799	800	801	800	817	5617

Statements about trust in most cases are not direct in the form of a trust giver and trust receiver relationship (9.1%) but attributed (77.6%). Trust givers, like for instance the people or the voters, must therefore be analysed in relation to those actors who introduce them and attribute a trust relationship. Those trust attributors can be journalists (38.1%), or other speakers directly or indirectly quoted in the news (Table 2.6 and Figure 2.3). If journalists do not attribute trust relationships by themselves, they can make other trust attributors selectively salient, for instance, by quoting their statements or claims in the news. Such trust attributions by other types of actors can therefore serve as an indicator for media attention filters. In other words, trust attributors are sources used by journalists to build their stories. In Covid-19 news stories, these sources are predominantly scientists (32.1%). Political actors (government=11.3% and opposition=4.9%) follow as a distant runner up. This reflects the attempt of journalists to objectify the debate by relying on credible sources and abstaining from partisan contestation. Journalists also rarely include the subjective voice of citizens as trust attributors, and also do not favour private actors such as the economy (4.7%).

Figure 2.3: Trust Attributor Actor Type



This objectifying trend in Covid-19 news coverage also applies to the observation of how the people trust during the pandemic. ‘The people’ in the news appear mainly as part of an attributed trust relationship that is reactive to the performance of particular protagonists, and that do trust or do not trust depending on what other actors do: ‘the government is accused to undermining the trust of the people in democracy’, ‘decisions by the government need to be transparent so that people can trust the vaccines’. An important element of news stories during the pandemic is observations by others of how the people trust or do not trust, normative claims that they should trust or not trust, or conditions that make them trust or not trust. Trust attributors not only draw the attention on particular actor categories such as trusting or not trusting, they also relate these attributed trusting attitudes to specific issues of concerns. Trust attributions are thus used by journalists or political actors to draw the attention to specific issues such as concerns that ‘the people’ care (and make them trust or distrust). Among these issues that claim to be of concern for the people, we find, in particular are vaccines and health issues (68% of all cases). The people are instead only rarely connected to the wide range of democratic concerns expressed during the pandemic (14.6% of all cases). Journalists and other media protagonists appear in the news as caretakers of people’s health, not as defenders of their democratic rights.

Turning now to the reception site of trust contestations in the media, we find a large variety of actors that can be targeted as being trusted or distrusted (Table 2.7 and Figure 2.2). Expressions of trust can be personalised, like the charisma or the antipathy of particular political leaders, or it can be directed against representative institutions identified as collective interest representatives, such as political parties, government and opposition, trade unions, or civil society organisations and finally, at the most abstract level, it can be expressed as trust in the political system, such as state or democracy. In regular political contestation, we would expect that partial interests prevail and trust is mainly directed against single politicians and their representatives. This is also how the system of accountability and control works in a democracy. Expressions of (dis)trust in the system would be more exceptional, often indicating a crisis mode of democracy, whenever the system’s qualities are at stake.

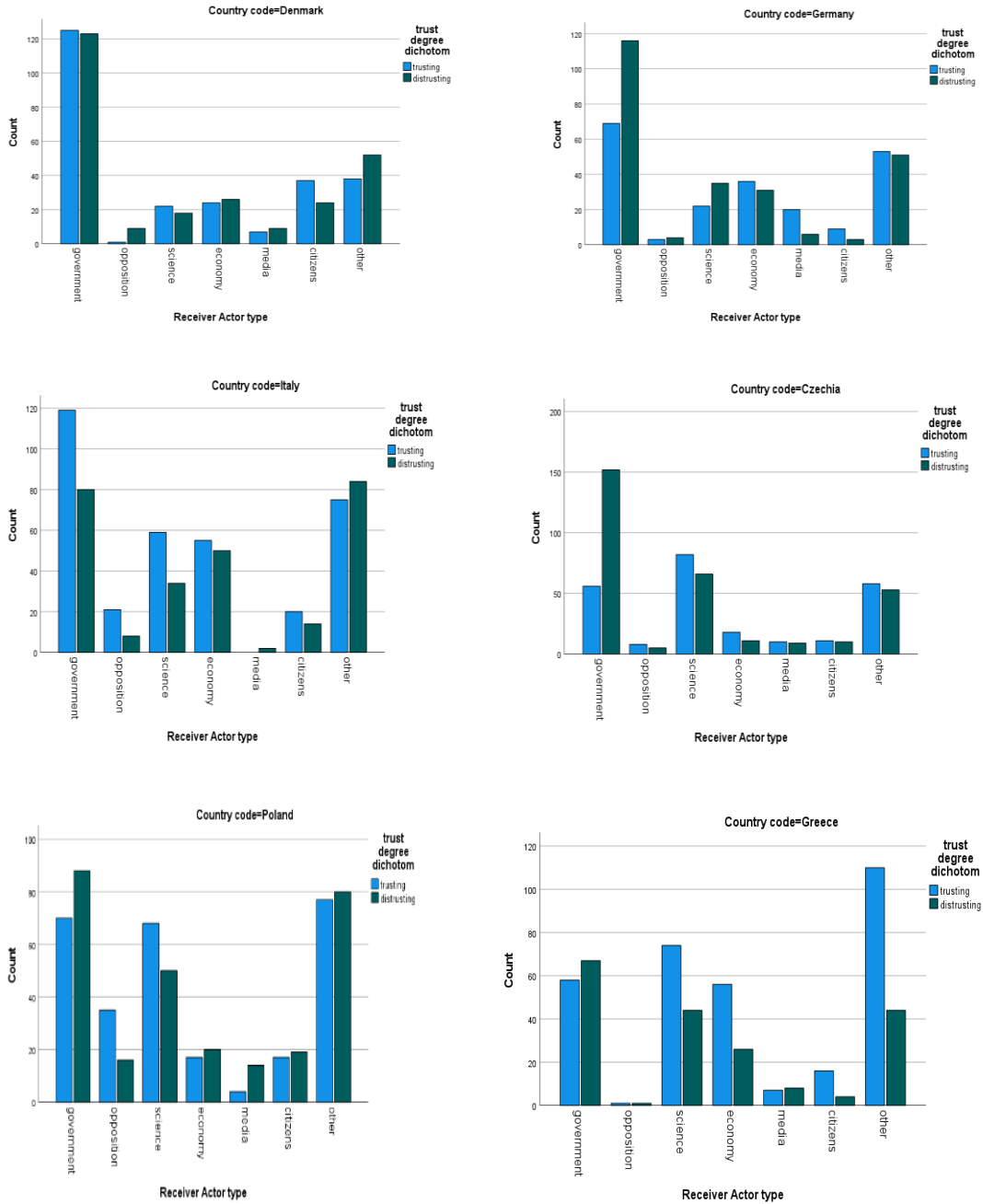
Table 2.7: Trust receiver of trust relations: actor type * Country

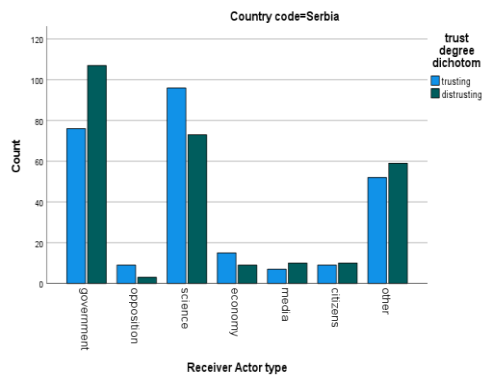
Trust receiver (actor type)	Denmark	Germany	Italy	Czechia	Poland	Greece	Serbia	Total
Not applicable/unspecified	3.1%	1.3%	0.1%	2.0%	5.0%	6.8%	8.0%	3.8%
IND - Journalist/author of article	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
IND - Head of state/government	2.9%	5.4%	8.0%	5.4%	5.7%	2.1%	5.0%	4.9%
IND - Politician belonging to government	1.5%	3.9%	9.6%	5.0%	4.7%	2.8%	1.2%	4.1%
IND - Politician belonging to opposition	0.8%	0.5%	2.9%	0.4%	5.6%	0.1%	0.9%	1.6%
IND - Citizen	0.6%	0.1%	0.3%	0.6%	0.2%	0.5%	0.1%	0.4%
IND - Scientist/doctor/ expert/governmental expert or adviser	0.8%	0.5%	0.9%	2.4%	1.6%	2.0%	3.2%	1.6%
IND - Spokesperson of an NGO/social movement	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
IND - Judge/lawyer	0.0%	0.1%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
IND - Business person	0.3%	1.1%	0.0%	0.4%	0.1%	0.4%	0.2%	0.4%
IND - Church representative	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.2%	0.1%
IND - Celebrity	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.9%	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%
IND - Representative of IGO (e.g. UN)	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
IND - representative of police/ army / security authorities	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
IND - sports person	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
IND - medical staff (nurse, medics, therapist.)	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
IND - civil society activist, volunteer	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
IND - fire fighter	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%
IND - head/representative of public administration	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%
IND - Other	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.3%	0.1%	0.1%
COL - Newspaper/media organisation	0.8%	2.5%	0.1%	1.3%	0.5%	0.5%	0.7%	0.9%
COL - The government	37.5%	22.9%	10.0%	25.6%	14.2%	15.0%	22.2%	21.1%
COL - Subgovernment	0.5%	2.8%	2.6%	0.8%	0.5%	0.1%	1.0%	1.2%
COL - Political party in government	0.6%	2.1%	1.0%	1.0%	0.9%	0.6%	1.1%	1.1%
COL - Political party in opposition	0.6%	0.5%	0.9%	1.5%	1.0%	0.1%	1.1%	0.8%
COL - Group of citizens, communities, neighbourhood, etc.	3.8%	0.3%	2.3%	0.1%	0.7%	0.8%	0.0%	1.1%
COL - Anti-vaccination groups	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.4%	0.1%
COL - The people (as a whole)	8.6%	3.1%	4.4%	2.6%	4.7%	2.6%	3.1%	4.2%
COL - The majority of the people (only if explicitly mentioned as such)	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%

COL - The minority of the people (only if explicitly mentioned as such)	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
COL - Voters or a group of voters	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
COL - Group of protesters	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - Doctors/medical associations	2.1%	1.6%	1.8%	6.5%	3.6%	2.8%	10.5%	4.1%
COL - Group of scientists/experts/governmental experts	2.5%	2.9%	3.8%	3.0%	2.9%	6.0%	5.6%	3.8%
COL - Trade union	0.0%	0.4%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - Social movement/NGO	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.3%	0.1%	0.5%	0.0%	0.2%
COL - Court	0.0%	0.3%	0.4%	0.0%	0.5%	0.4%	0.0%	0.2%
COL - Business/private enterprise	6.9%	11.8%	6.1%	2.9%	6.9%	6.5%	3.5%	6.4%
COL - Church organisation	0.5%	0.3%	0.1%	0.1%	0.9%	0.5%	0.1%	0.4%
COL - Public administration	1.8%	1.5%	3.1%	2.8%	4.7%	1.4%	0.7%	2.3%
COL - Consumers, customers, clients	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	0.4%	0.2%	0.1%	0.0%	0.2%
COL - Employer	0.1%	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.9%	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%
COL - Employees	0.6%	1.8%	0.0%	0.5%	0.9%	0.3%	0.1%	0.6%
COL - (politicians in) parliament or second chamber	0.1%	0.5%	0.6%	0.4%	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%	0.3%
COL - family (members)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - fire fighters	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
COL - police, army, security authorities	0.1%	0.3%	0.3%	0.9%	0.2%	0.6%	0.5%	0.4%
COL - athletes, sportsmen, soccer players	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - pupils, students, young people	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%	0.1%
COL - patients	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - teachers, educational institutions (preschools, schools, universities)	0.6%	0.1%	0.8%	0.3%	0.2%	0.6%	0.2%	0.4%
COL - parents	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - artists, representatives of cultural organisations/institutions	0.0%	0.3%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - medical and care staff (nurses, para/medics, care workers)	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
COL - IGO (e.g. UN)	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.4%	0.1%
COL - Other	1.5%	1.8%	0.4%	1.5%	1.4%	0.5%	1.0%	1.1%
SYS - Democracy	4.1%	2.0%	0.6%	0.9%	0.5%	0.4%	0.7%	1.3%
SYS - The media	1.9%	1.5%	0.3%	1.4%	2.1%	1.9%	2.0%	1.6%
SYS - A country	1.0%	1.3%	3.1%	1.4%	0.9%	5.0%	2.2%	2.1%
SYS - The state	3.3%	3.8%	2.8%	4.0%	5.5%	12.3%	7.7%	5.6%
SYS - Politics (in general)	2.1%	3.4%	6.9%	1.0%	3.2%	2.4%	2.3%	3.0%

SYS - Science (& technology) (in general)	4.0%	9.1%	12.8%	14.5%	12.1%	13.4%	12.2%	11.2%
SYS - The judiciary/the law	0.0%	0.1%	0.4%	0.1%	0.5%	0.3%	0.0%	0.2%
SYS - The market/ the economy	2.6%	3.8%	9.8%	1.9%	1.2%	7.4%	0.2%	3.8%
SYS - Other	0.8%	1.4%	1.9%	3.9%	1.1%	0.9%	0.5%	1.5%
Total	800	800	799	800	801	800	817	5617

Figure. 2.2: Trust receivers: main actor categories



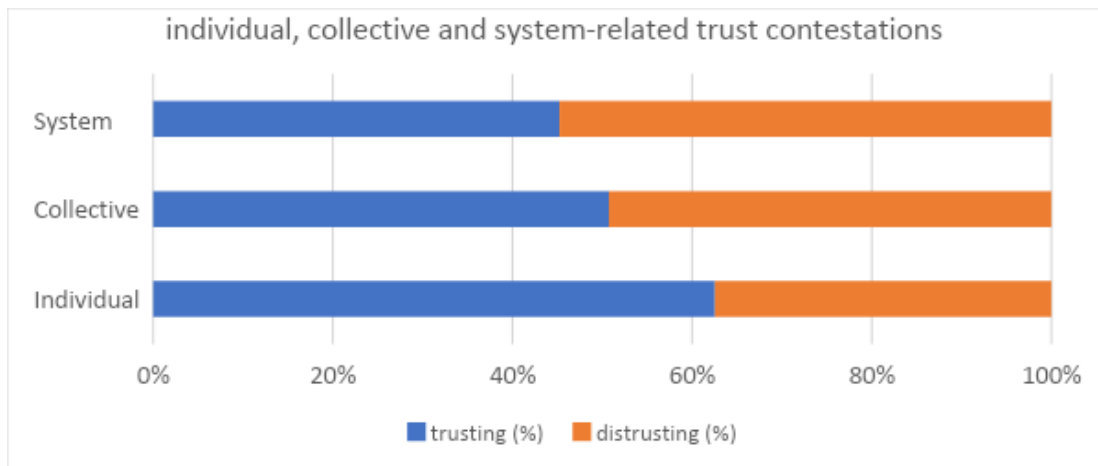


During the pandemic, trust contestations can be said to be impersonalised. Only heads of state or governments, followed by individual politicians belonging to government (but not the opposition) and, in some countries, individual scientific experts gain some prominence. This is somehow surprising as we would expect the media to build up more personalised trust relationships and to rely on the prominence of particular actors as being trusted by the people. Instead of individual politicians or independent persons (13.9%), mediated trust contestations are rather about how collective actors and institutions (52.6%) or the system (30.3%) are trusted. The pandemic thus partly impersonalised trust relationships, and focused the attention on institutional and system trust. This might underline the exceptional moment of the pandemic, where trust in democracy, in the system or in science was called into question, which went beyond the more personalised trustee relationships in regular representative politics.

Among the more diffuse and rather anonymous trust receivers, there is a focus of the debate on the government as a collective actor (21.1%), on science in general (11.2%), business/private enterprises (6.4%) and the state (5.6%). In light of the high salience of health as an issue of trust contestation, we would expect a higher salience of science here as an object of trust contestation. This is the case in 7.6 % of all trust contestations, thus significantly lower than government. Trust is thus still filtered through government which is held responsible for health policies. What comes maybe as a surprise is the absence of opposition parties and actors as objects of trust contestation. We interpret this as an effect of the emergency situation that kept partisan contestation low since emergency measures in all countries analysed were supported by large coalitions of political parties. The marginalisation of the anti-Covid opposition is thus reflected in the media. Media does not selectively highlight the anti-Covid opposition. 31.3% of all trust contestations target the system, among them most dominantly, science. Trust contestation did not question the system in terms of democracy or the state but allowed for a fundamental debate about the role of science.

Despite this anonymity of Covid-19 related trust contestations, we can observe that individualisation, when it occurs, contributes to trust: the more a trust receiver is individualised, the more it is trusted, the more it is anonymised, the more likely are expressions of distrust (Table 2.7 and Figure 2.4). The lowest degree of trust is found at system level, for instance, individual politicians like in the mentioning of heads of state rather tend to be trusted (54% trusting), while trust in government is lower (37.9%) and trust in politics is the lowest (25%). In the case of scientists, individual experts are trusted in 79.2% of all cases, collective groups of scientific experts are trusted in 59.3% of cases, and science at system level is trusted in 43.3% cases.

Figure 2.4: Individual, collective and system-related trust contestations



Regrouping this very diverse set of trust receivers into aggregated categories, we confront expressions of trust and distrust (Table 2.8).¹³ Overall, there is a relatively balanced relationship between expressions of trust and distrust across countries and actor categories. No actor is fully trusted, but also no actor is wholly distrusted. The news media thus tend to balance expressions of trust with expressions of distrust and avoid a biased news coverage that overwhelmingly supports or undermines trust in particular actor categories.

Government is the main target of trust contestations in all countries (34.7%). Not surprisingly, given the critical role of journalism as a watchdog of democracy, government tends to be somewhat more distrusted with the exception of Denmark and Italy.¹⁴ We do not expect this negative switch in tone with government to be an effect of the pandemic as critique in government, and expressing distrustful attitudes is considered to be a general pattern in political contestation. In any case, in no country is there an overwhelmingly negative tone towards representative government, and news media overall balance expressions of distrust with expressions of trust.

Apart from government, science and experts are a frequent target of trust contestation in all countries (19.7%). In most countries, except for Germany, science is rather trusted, but still there is considerable room for actors expressing distrust in science. Science-trust contestation is most salient in Serbia, Greece and Poland. In Germany, apart from being predominantly distrusting, science trust contestations are also less frequent. In all countries analysed, science and expertise, however, are objects of controversial debates. It is not the case, therefore, that the media uncritically relied on scientific expertise, nor abstained from reporting dissenting voices. Distrust in science was regularly expressed in the mainstream media in all countries analysed, and not only channelled through ‘alternative or social media’. The personalisation of single scientists and experts as an effect of mediated debates about the pandemic is visible to some degree but does not overall seem to impact the balance of trust and distrust. Especially when science is turned into a target of trust, what counts is

¹³ For this purpose, we only look at direct trust and direct distrust expressions excluding all normative (desirable) or conditional trust expression.

¹⁴ By looking at the more refined values of trust, we can see that trust in government in Denmark and Italy is mainly expressed in descriptive form (is trusting). In the case of Denmark, high levels of trust in government correspond with opinion surveys of Denmark as a high-trust country. In the case of Italy, there is a discrepancy between our findings and traditional interpretations of Italy as a low-trust country. As Italy was hit particularly hard during the pandemic, the Draghi government was successful in building a coalition of trust that expressed itself in a mainly supportive way in the mainstream media. The emergency of the Covid-crisis thus created a unique moment of national unity where all political parties expressed themselves in support of the government and its harsh lockdown measures. Surveys confirm this moment of trust in government during the pandemic.

rather generalised perceptions of the way science performs as an institution or system, and not the individual performance of experts.

The economy is the third most frequent target of trust contestations during the pandemic (10.5%) and in some countries, closely follows science, or as in the case of Italy, even outnumbers it. As in the case of science, trust attitudes towards the economy are dominantly positive in all countries, except for Denmark and Poland, where a slightly distrustful attitude prevails. The pandemic thus did not extinguish the hope in economic performance and recovery and despite the imminent threats to economic development, trust in the economy prevails. This might be explained by the reassuring messages sent out by journalists and governments during the pandemic to calm down fears of economic regression. Nevertheless, as in the case of science, all newspapers regularly allowed for the expression for a voice of dissent that distrusted the economy, markets or business actors and their capacities to cope with the pandemic.

In this context, it is also interesting to notice the invisibility of opposition parties in Covid-19 related trust contestations in the media. There is a strong imbalance between government and opposition in Covid-19 related trust contestations in the sense that opposition parties or representatives rarely appear neither as trust givers nor as trust receivers in the media. The invisibility of the opposition is partly explained by the grand coalitions that support Covid-19 emergency measures in countries like Germany, Denmark and Italy, or by the strong governmental majorities than dominate the media, as in the case of Poland and Serbia. This marginalisation of the opposition holds, however, especially for the anti-lockdown opposition and the anti-vaxxers, which are hardly mentioned in the mainstream media, as targets of trust. Neither do they appear with any significant frequency as trust givers or attributors. Trust and mistrust are thus given expression in contestations by mainstream political actors, and not actors at the margin of the political spectrum.

Table 2.8 Receiver Actor type * trust degree dichotomy * Country (subsampling trust dichotomy; N=3769)

Country	trust receiver	trusting	distrusting	Total (N)	Total (%)
Denmark	government	49.2%	47.1%	248	48.2
	opposition	0.4%	3.4%	10	1.9
	science	8.7%	6.9%	40	7.8
	economy	9.4%	10.0%	50	9.7
	media	2.8%	3.4%	16	3.1
	citizens	14.6%	9.2%	61	11.8
	other	15.0%	19.9%	90	17.5
	Total (N)	254	261	515	100%
Germany	government	32.5%	47.2%	185	40.4
	opposition	1.4%	1.6%	7	1.5
	science	10.4%	14.2%	57	12.4
	economy	17.0%	12.6%	67	14.6
	media	9.4%	2.4%	26	5.7
	citizens	4.2%	1.2%	12	2.6
	other	25.0%	20.7%	104	22.7
	Total (N)	212	246	458	100%

Italy	government	34.1%	29.4%	199	32.0
	opposition	6.0%	2.9%	29	4.7
	science	16.9%	12.5%	93	15.0
	economy	15.8%	18.4%	105	16.9
	media	0.0%	0.7%	2	0.3
	citizens	5.7%	5.1%	34	5.5
	other	21.5%	30.9%	159	25.6
	Total (N)	349	272	621	100%
Czechia	government	23.0%	49.7%	208	37.9
	opposition	3.3%	1.6%	13	2.4
	science	33.7%	21.6%	148	27.0
	economy	7.4%	3.6%	29	5.3
	media	4.1%	2.9%	19	3.5
	citizens	4.5%	3.3%	21	3.8
	other	23.9%	17.3%	111	20.2
	Total (N)	243	306	549	100%
Poland	government	24.3%	30.7%	158	27.5
	opposition	12.2%	5.6%	51	8.9
	science	23.6%	17.4%	118	20.5
	economy	5.9%	7.0%	37	6.4
	media	1.4%	4.9%	18	3.1
	citizens	5.9%	6.6%	36	6.3
	other	26.7%	27.9%	157	27.3
	Total (N)	288	287	575	100%
Greece	government	18.0%	34.5%	125	24.2
	opposition	0.3%	0.5%	2	0.4
	science	23.0%	22.7%	118	22.9
	economy	17.4%	13.4%	82	15.9
	media	2.2%	4.1%	15	2.9
	citizens	5.0%	2.1%	20	3.9
	other	34.2%	22.7%	154	29.8
	Total (N)	322	194	516	100%
Serbia	government	28.8%	39.5%	183	34.2
	opposition	3.4%	1.1%	12	2.2
	science	36.4%	26.9%	169	31.6
	economy	5.7%	3.3%	24	4.5
	media	2.7%	3.7%	17	3.2
	citizens	3.4%	3.7%	19	3.6
	other	19.7%	21.8%	111	20.7
	Total (N)	264	271	535	100%
Total	government	29.7%	39.9%	1306	34.7
	opposition	4.0%	2.5%	124	3.3
	science	21.9%	17.4%	743	19.7
	economy	11.4%	9.4%	394	10.5
	media	2.8%	3.2%	113	3.0
	citizens	6.2%	4.6%	203	5.4
	other	24.0%	23.0%	886	23.5
	Total (N) = 100%	1932	1837	3769	100%

Turning back from the aggregated categories of direct expressions of trust and distrust to the more refined values (Table 2.9 and Figure 2.5), we can distinguish descriptive trust relationships (are trusting/not trusting), directions of trust (increasing and decreasing), desirable trust relationships (should or should not trust) and conditional trust relationship (would increasingly/decreasingly/re-main trusting if...). The debate in all countries clearly focuses around descriptive categories in terms of a qualification of observed trust relationships (either trusting or distrusting). In all countries, the debate further identifies an observed loss or decline in trust, and discusses the possibility of an immanent loss of trust as a possible effect of the pandemic (either already diagnosed or expected). There is thus an element of drama in the debate in the sense that trust relationships are not seen as stable, but that trust is possibly undermined or threatened. This diagnosis or fear of a loss of trust during the pandemic applies mainly to government. In the case of science and the economy, a loss of trust is only observed in Denmark, while all the other countries display a more balanced relationship in their observations of increases and decreases in trust. In the case of trust in the media, cases of increasing or decreasing trust are too low to report. In some countries, we find a broad category of ‘other’ actors who find mentioning as trust receivers, comprising a broad variety of less visible actors, such as, consumers, employees, students, minority groups. Even though the aggregated cases seem high, the single cases would be too low to allow for refined analysis. Cases of normative (should/should not be trusting) or conditional (trusting, if...) trust relationships are equally low in all countries analysed, and do not show a clear direction. The debate in the media is rarely about trust and its normative requirements or conditional factors, but trust remains rather an attribute that is used to qualify actor relationships.

Table 2.9: Degree of trust/distrust per trust receivers and country

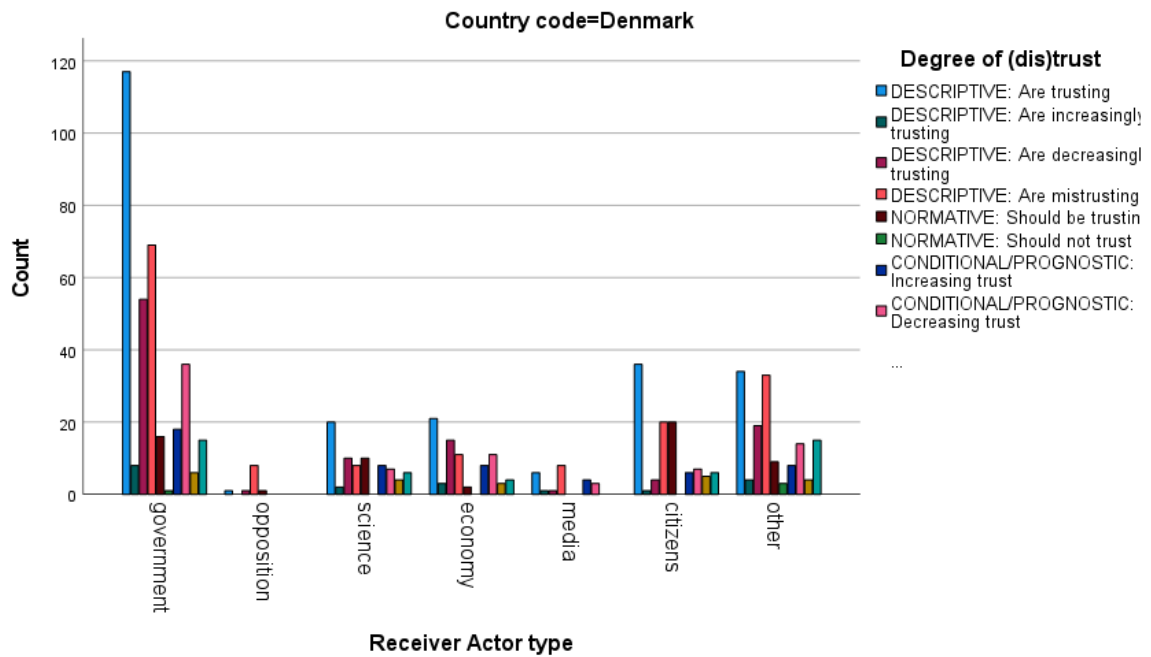
	trust receiver	DESCRIPTIVE: Are trusting	DESCRIPTIVE: Are increasingly trusting	DESCRIPTIVE: Are decreasingly trusting	DESCRIPTIVE: Are mistrusting	NORMATIVE: Should be trusting	NORMATIVE: Should not trust	CONDITIONAL/PROGNOSTIC: Increasing trust	CONDITIONAL/PROGNOSTIC: Decreasing trust	CONDITIONAL/PROGNOSTIC: Stabilizing/ balancing/ calming/ securing trust	Degree of trust unspecified or open	Total
Denmark	government	34.4%	2.4%	15.9%	20.3%	4.7%	0.3%	5.3%	10.6%	1.8%	4.4%	340
	opposition	9.1%	0.0%	9.1%	72.7%	9.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	11
	science	26.7%	2.7%	13.3%	10.7%	13.3%	0.0%	10.7%	9.3%	5.3%	8.0%	75
	economy	26.9%	3.8%	19.2%	14.1%	2.6%	0.0%	10.3%	14.1%	3.8%	5.1%	78
	media	26.1%	4.3%	4.3%	34.8%	0.0%	0.0%	17.4%	13.0%	0.0%	0.0%	23
	citizens	34.3%	1.0%	3.8%	19.0%	19.0%	0.0%	5.7%	6.7%	4.8%	5.7%	105
	other	23.8%	2.8%	13.3%	23.1%	6.3%	2.1%	5.6%	9.8%	2.8%	10.5%	143
	Total	235	19	104	157	58	4	52	78	22	46	775
	30.3%	2.5%	13.4%	20.3%	7.5%	0.5%	6.7%	10.1%	2.8%	5.9%	100%	

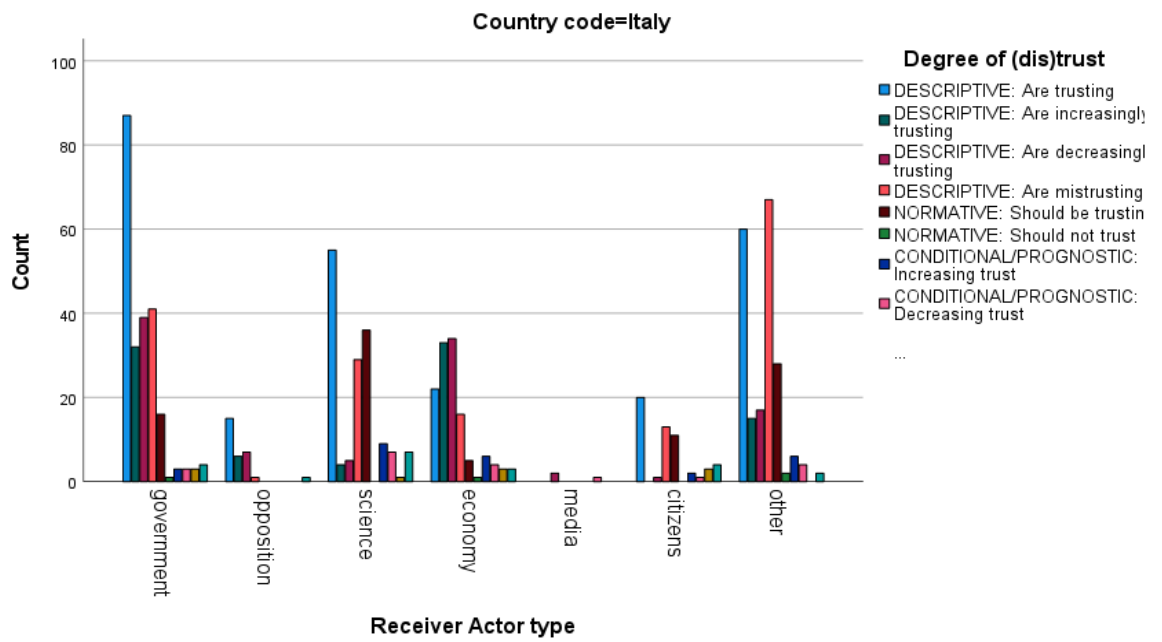
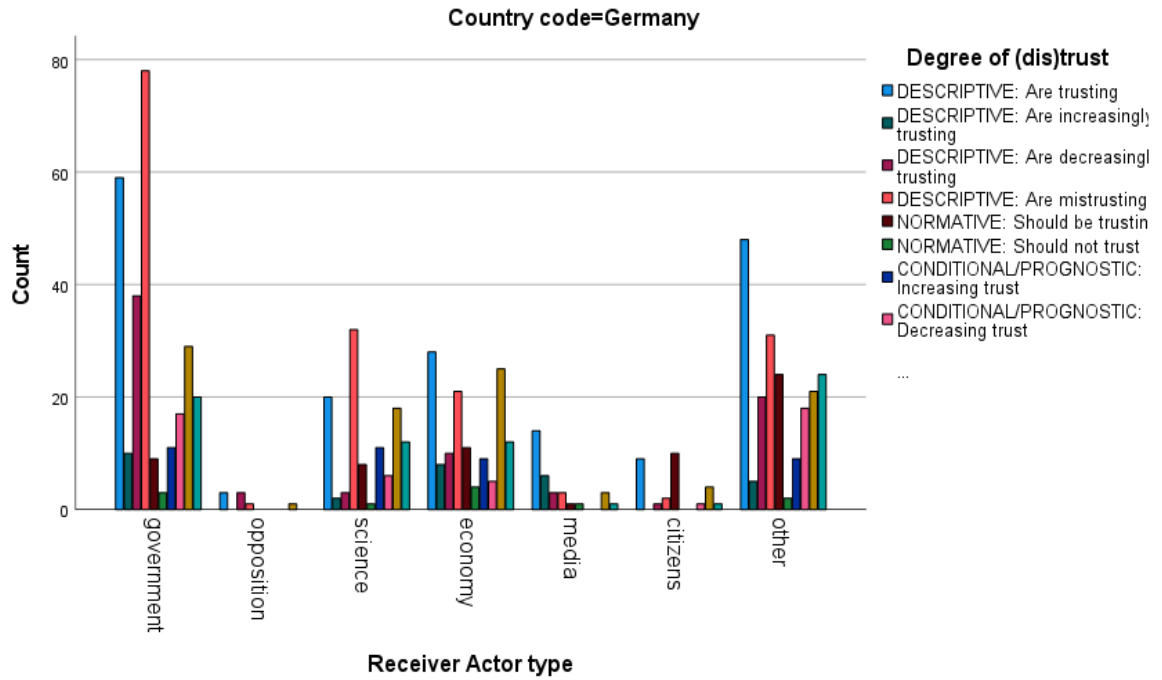
Germany	government	21.5%	3.6%	13.9%	28.5%	3.3%	1.1%	4.0%	6.2%	10.6%	7.3%	274
	opposition	37.5%	0.0%	37.5%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	8
	science	17.7%	1.8%	2.7%	28.3%	7.1%	0.9%	9.7%	5.3%	15.9%	10.6%	113
	economy	21.1%	6.0%	7.5%	15.8%	8.3%	3.0%	6.8%	3.8%	18.8%	9.0%	133
	media	43.8%	18.8%	9.4%	9.4%	3.1%	3.1%	0.0%	0.0%	9.4%	3.1%	32
	citizens	32.1%	0.0%	3.6%	7.1%	35.7%	0.0%	0.0%	3.6%	14.3%	3.6%	28
	other	23.8%	2.5%	9.9%	15.3%	11.9%	1.0%	4.5%	8.9%	10.4%	11.9%	202
	Total	181	31	78	168	63	11	40	47	101	70	790
		22.9%	3.9%	9.9%	21.3%	8.0%	1.4%	5.1%	5.9%	12.8%	8.9%	100%
Italy	government	38.0%	14.0%	17.0%	17.9%	7.0%	0.4%	1.3%	1.3%	1.3%	1.7%	229
	opposition	50.0%	20.0%	23.3%	3.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.3%	30
	science	35.9%	2.6%	3.3%	19.0%	23.5%	0.0%	5.9%	4.6%	0.7%	4.6%	153
	economy	17.3%	26.0%	26.8%	12.6%	3.9%	0.8%	4.7%	3.1%	2.4%	2.4%	127
	media	0.0%	0.0%	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	3
	citizens	36.4%	0.0%	1.8%	23.6%	20.0%	0.0%	3.6%	1.8%	5.5%	7.3%	55
	other	29.9%	7.5%	8.5%	33.3%	13.9%	1.0%	3.0%	2.0%	0.0%	1.0%	201
	Total	259	90	105	167	96	4	26	20	10	21	798
		32.5%	11.3%	13.2%	20.9%	12.0%	0.5%	3.3%	2.5%	1.3%	2.6%	100%
Czechia	government	17.9%	1.0%	12.2%	39.2%	2.7%	0.7%	3.4%	4.7%	2.0%	16.2%	296
	opposition	53.3%	0.0%	13.3%	20.0%	13.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	15
	science	37.0%	1.9%	3.3%	28.0%	11.4%	0.0%	4.7%	4.3%	0.5%	9.0%	211
	economy	29.3%	14.6%	0.0%	26.8%	7.3%	0.0%	2.4%	9.8%	2.4%	7.3%	41
	media	41.7%	0.0%	16.7%	20.8%	0.0%	8.3%	0.0%	8.3%	0.0%	4.2%	24
	citizens	37.0%	3.7%	3.7%	33.3%	18.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.7%	27
	other	30.6%	3.5%	5.3%	25.9%	10.6%	4.7%	2.4%	4.7%	1.8%	10.6%	170
	Total	223	20	59	247	60	12	25	37	11	90	784
		28.4%	2.6%	7.5%	31.5%	7.7%	1.5%	3.2%	4.7%	1.4%	11.5%	100%

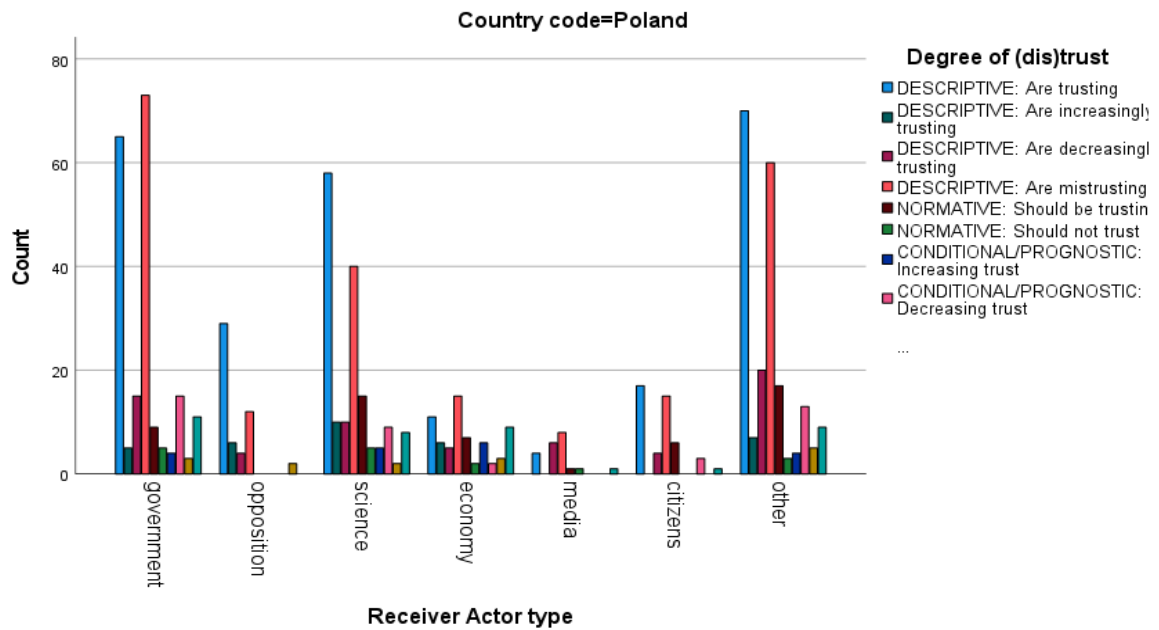
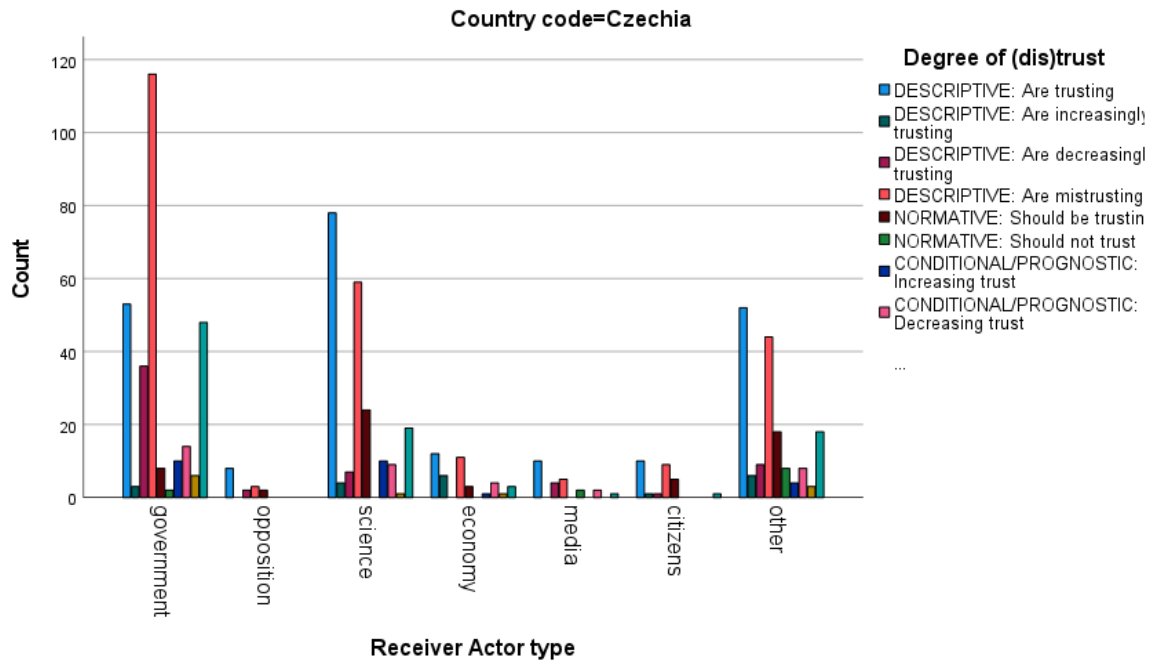
Poland	government	31.7%	2.4%	7.3%	35.6%	4.4%	2.4%	2.0%	7.3%	1.5%	5.4%	205
	opposition	54.7%	11.3%	7.5%	22.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.8%	0.0%	53
	science	35.8%	6.2%	6.2%	24.7%	9.3%	3.1%	3.1%	5.6%	1.2%	4.9%	162
	economy	16.7%	9.1%	7.6%	22.7%	10.6%	3.0%	9.1%	3.0%	4.5%	13.6%	66
	media	19.0%	0.0%	28.6%	38.1%	4.8%	4.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.8%	21
	citizens	37.0%	0.0%	8.7%	32.6%	13.0%	0.0%	0.0%	6.5%	0.0%	2.2%	46
	other	33.7%	3.4%	9.6%	28.8%	8.2%	1.4%	1.9%	6.3%	2.4%	4.3%	208
	Total	254	34	64	223	55	16	19	42	15	39	761
	33.4%	4.5%	8.4%	29.3%	7.2%	2.1%	2.5%	5.5%	2.0%	5.1%	100%	
Greece	government	30.5%	4.9%	7.3%	33.5%	6.1%	1.2%	6.1%	3.0%	3.7%	3.7%	164
	opposition	50.0%	0.0%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2
	science	34.2%	4.1%	6.2%	16.6%	16.6%	5.2%	6.2%	5.7%	3.1%	2.1%	193
	economy	41.2%	7.9%	12.3%	10.5%	7.9%	0.0%	9.6%	4.4%	4.4%	1.8%	114
	media	15.8%	21.1%	5.3%	36.8%	5.3%	0.0%	15.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	19
	citizens	46.9%	3.1%	0.0%	12.5%	21.9%	0.0%	6.3%	0.0%	6.3%	3.1%	32
	other	42.3%	7.2%	3.2%	16.7%	13.1%	0.5%	6.8%	3.6%	4.1%	2.7%	222
	Total	276	46	47	147	88	13	53	29	28	19	746
	37.0%	6.2%	6.3%	19.7%	11.8%	1.7%	7.1%	3.9%	3.8%	2.5%	100%	
Serbia	government	27.0%	4.6%	18.7%	25.7%	7.1%	1.2%	3.7%	3.7%	0.8%	7.5%	241
	opposition	56.3%	0.0%	0.0%	18.8%	0.0%	0.0%	6.3%	0.0%	0.0%	18.8%	16
	science	32.6%	4.7%	11.2%	17.1%	14.7%	0.8%	7.0%	2.3%	0.4%	9.3%	258
	economy	42.4%	3.0%	9.1%	18.2%	9.1%	0.0%	6.1%	3.0%	3.0%	6.1%	33
	media	26.1%	4.3%	13.0%	30.4%	0.0%	4.3%	8.7%	0.0%	0.0%	13.0%	23
	citizens	30.8%	3.8%	0.0%	38.5%	19.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%	26
	other	31.0%	2.6%	10.3%	27.7%	10.3%	2.6%	3.2%	4.5%	1.3%	6.5%	155
	Total	234	30	96	175	79	10	37	23	6	62	752
	31.1%	4.0%	12.8%	23.3%	10.5%	1.3%	4.9%	3.1%	0.8%	8.2%	100%	

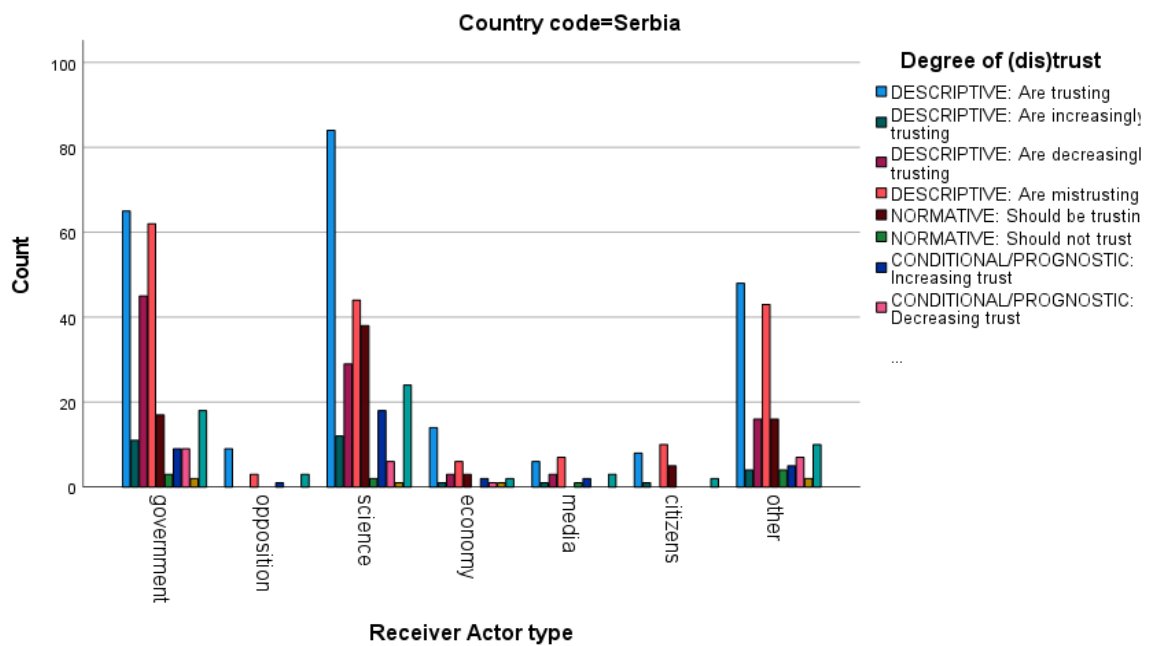
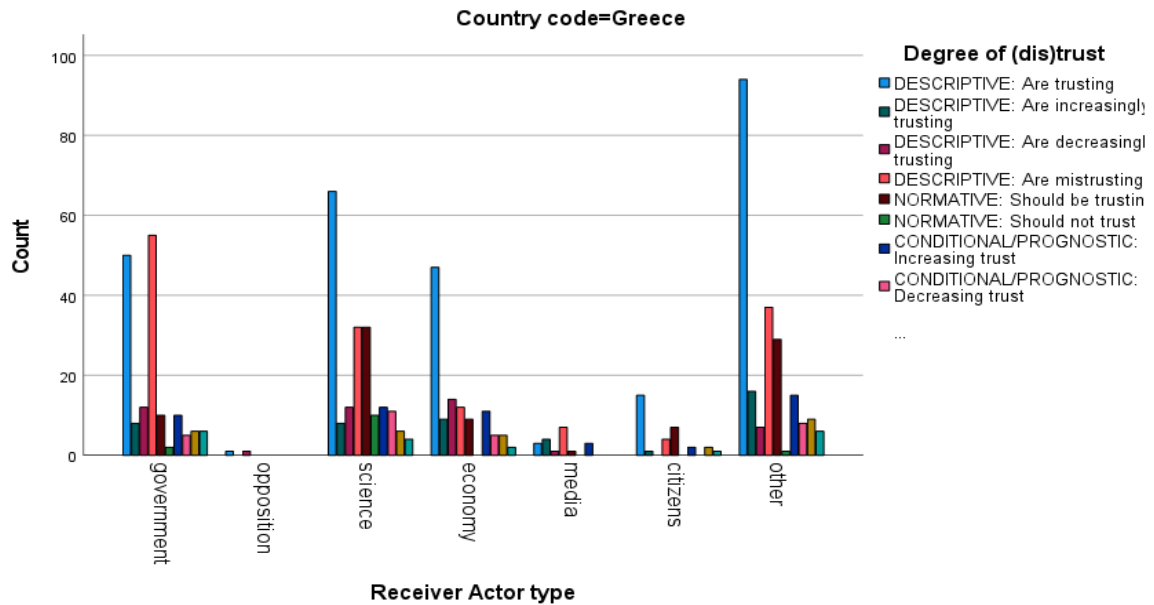
Total	government	28.4%	4.4%	13.7%	28.2%	4.9%	1.0%	3.7%	5.7%	3.1%	7.0%	1749	
	opposition	48.9%	8.9%	13.3%	20.7%	2.2%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	2.2%	3.0%	135	
	science	32.7%	3.6%	6.5%	20.9%	14.0%	1.5%	6.3%	4.7%	2.8%	6.9%	1165	
	economy	26.2%	11.1%	13.7%	15.5%	6.8%	1.2%	7.3%	5.4%	6.9%	5.9%	592	
	media	29.7%	8.3%	13.8%	26.2%	2.1%	3.4%	6.2%	4.1%	2.1%	4.1%	145	
	citizens	36.1%	1.3%	3.4%	22.9%	20.1%	0.0%	3.1%	3.8%	4.4%	5.0%	319	
	other	31.2%	4.4%	8.3%	24.2%	10.8%	1.8%	3.9%	5.5%	3.4%	6.5%	1301	
	Total		1662	270	553	1284	499	70	252	276	193	347	5406
			30.7%	5.0%	10.2%	23.8%	9.2%	1.3%	4.7%	5.1%	3.6%	6.4%	100%

Figure 2.5: Degrees of Trust/Distrust









An interesting perspective opens when looking at the geographical scope of trust relationships (Tables 2.10-13). We can investigate whether trust relations are primarily national-domestic, or whether they have a transnational dimension. In a purely national-domestic trust contestation, all actors involved (attributors, givers and receivers) are domestic actors. A transnational trust contestation is made up of different combinations of EU, other European or international actors. It can, for instance, be supranational EU if the European Parliament distrusts the European Commission or if it can measure vertical or horizontal degrees of Europeanisation, for instance, if a domestic party actor distrusts the EU (vertical, bottom-up), or if the French distrust the Germans (horizontal) (see Koopmans and Statham 2010). It can finally be other European, for instance when involving

Russia, or international, for instance, when involving actors in the US in the trust contestation.¹⁵ We already mentioned that those who trust in the media are predominantly citizens and/or the people in all countries analysed. We can now see in Table 2.10 that these trusting or distrusting citizens are primarily domestic. There is, however, also some degree of attention to trust contestations in other countries. Newspapers observed with some regularity how the citizens/people in other countries trusted during the pandemic. Overall, media pay attention to Covid-19 as a global pandemic that affects the citizens of the world, and do not sharply distinguish between an EU space of affectedness. The geographical scope of attention of foreign trust contestations has, however, a European focus with slightly more attention paid to neighbouring countries than to the US or China. Such a European (the EU) focus is more pronounced in newspapers in the north of Europe than in the south. The news make the EU dimension of trusting citizens salient, but with larger variations between countries (with the lowest in Greece (2.2%) and Italy (2.4%) and the highest in Czech Republic (7.2%) and Poland (8%). These differences of higher attention in the north might be explained by the cycle of the pandemic, with other countries paying attention to Italy in the early stage of the pandemic (spring 2020). The news media focus on the perspective of citizens in neighbouring countries, but less so on EU citizens as a distinct category. Besides the EU, there is attention paid to citizens in the world, with large variations between countries, some focusing more on the US (Denmark at 3.3%) and others on other countries in the world (Germany at 5.7%), or other countries in Europe outside the EU (2.5% in Czech Republic) or humanity as a whole (Denmark at 5.1%). Across the other categories of trust givers in the news, we find almost exclusively domestic actors (Tables 2.10 and 2.11).

Even though we do not have comparative figures of levels of transnationalisation of other types of debate in the media, we can conclude that the way the pandemic triggered degrees of transnationalisation or internationalisation of trust contestations remains limited. Despite the heightened attention on the global dimension of the pandemic in the news (with regular coverage of China, US or Brazil, for instance), this type of foreign news coverage was only in some instances related to debates about trust. Trust contestations, therefore, remain a domain of domestic politics (54.5% of all cases), and appear with much less frequency in news coverage of foreign (non-EU) countries (2.3%) and in EU member states (5.5%), national-outside Europe (2.3%) and transnational-domestic (1.4%). The supranational level of trust contestation (EU-EU) is almost absent (0.9%). Horizontal trust relationships between EU countries are highlighted in the case of Germany (9.9%), Czech Republic (8.4%), Poland (6.2%) and Serbia (5%). Vertical trust relationships within the EU (EU-national or national EU) are almost absent (1.2 percent in total), indicating that EU institutions were not a significant target of trust relationships (Table 2.10).

¹⁵ For the specific case of Serbia as a non-EU country in our sample, we qualified Serbia as other European from the perspective of all EU member state cases, and as domestic in the case of Serbian newspaper codings.

Table 2.10: Trust giver origin, Trust receiver origin – per Country

		TRUST RECEIVER								
country	TRUST GIVER	Not applicable/unspecified	Domestic	National (EU)	National (other European)	US	National (outside Europe)	Transnational/international/global	EU	Total
Denmark	Not applicable/unspecified	34	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	36
		4.30%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	4.50%
	Domestic	17	499	3	2	0	1	12	2	536
		2.10%	62.40%	0.40%	0.30%	0.00%	0.10%	1.50%	0.30%	67.00%
	National (EU)	1	0	48	8	4	0	3	2	66
		0.10%	0.00%	6.00%	1.00%	0.50%	0.00%	0.40%	0.30%	8.30%
	National (other European)	0	0	2	8	0	0	1	0	11
		0.00%	0.00%	0.30%	1.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.00%	1.40%
	US	3	0	0	0	33	2	0	1	39
		0.40%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	4.10%	0.30%	0.00%	0.10%	4.90%
	National (outside Europe)	0	1	0	3	0	25	2	0	31
		0.00%	0.10%	0.00%	0.40%	0.00%	3.10%	0.30%	0.00%	3.90%
	Transnational/international/global	8	4	1	0	4	2	40	1	60
		1.00%	0.50%	0.10%	0.00%	0.50%	0.30%	5.00%	0.10%	7.50%
EU	5	1	0	3	1	0	2	9	21	
	0.60%	0.10%	0.00%	0.40%	0.10%	0.00%	0.30%	1.10%	2.60%	
Total	68	506	54	24	42	31	60	15	800	
	8.50%	63.20%	6.80%	3.00%	5.30%	3.90%	7.50%	1.90%	100%	
Germany	Not applicable/unspecified	61	18	1	0	3	2	5	2	92
		7.60%	2.30%	0.10%	0.00%	0.40%	0.30%	0.60%	0.30%	11.50%
	Domestic	57	326	3	2	1	9	14	2	414
		7.10%	40.80%	0.40%	0.30%	0.10%	1.10%	1.80%	0.30%	51.70%
	National (EU)	7	4	79	1	0	1	4	12	108
		0.90%	0.50%	9.90%	0.10%	0.00%	0.10%	0.50%	1.50%	13.50%
	National (other European)	2	0	0	10	0	4	1	0	17
		0.30%	0.00%	0.00%	1.30%	0.00%	0.50%	0.10%	0.00%	2.10%
	US	8	1	0	1	30	3	1	0	44
		1.00%	0.10%	0.00%	0.10%	3.80%	0.40%	0.10%	0.00%	5.50%
	National (outside Europe)	7	1	0	0	1	47	3	0	59
		0.90%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	5.90%	0.40%	0.00%	7.40%
	Transnational/international/global	6	7	4	3	1	3	20	6	50
		0.80%	0.90%	0.50%	0.40%	0.10%	0.40%	2.50%	0.80%	6.30%
EU	3	1	2	1	0	2	2	5	16	
	0.40%	0.10%	0.30%	0.10%	0.00%	0.30%	0.30%	0.60%	2.00%	
Total	151	358	89	18	36	71	50	27	800	
	18.90%	44.80%	11.10%	2.30%	4.50%	8.90%	6.30%	3.40%	100%	
Italy	Not applicable/unspecified	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
		0.00%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%
	Domestic	79	549	1	1	0	4	16	17	667
		9.90%	68.70%	0.10%	0.10%	0.00%	0.50%	2.00%	2.10%	83.50%
	National (EU)	5	4	16	0	0	0	2	10	37
		0.60%	0.50%	2.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.30%	1.30%	4.60%
	National (other European)	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	3
		0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.40%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.40%
	US	1	0	0	0	8	0	0	1	10
		0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	1.30%
	National (outside Europe)	4	0	0	0	1	7	1	0	13
		0.50%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.90%	0.10%	0.00%	1.60%
	Transnational/international/global	14	9	3	0	2	0	20	3	51
		1.80%	1.10%	0.40%	0.00%	0.30%	0.00%	2.50%	0.40%	6.40%
EU	1	5	0	0	1	0	0	10	17	
	0.10%	0.60%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	1.30%	2.10%	
Total	104	568	20	4	12	11	39	41	799	
	13.00%	71.10%	2.50%	0.50%	1.50%	1.40%	4.90%	5.10%	100%	

Czechia	Not applicable/un-specified	61	7	2	3	1	13	3	1	91
		7.60%	0.90%	0.30%	0.40%	0.10%	1.60%	0.40%	0.10%	11.40%
	Domestic	97	362	8	8	0	11	2	4	492
		12.10%	45.30%	1.00%	1.00%	0.00%	1.40%	0.30%	0.50%	61.50%
	National (EU)	10	4	67	3	0	3	2	2	91
		1.30%	0.50%	8.40%	0.40%	0.00%	0.40%	0.30%	0.30%	11.40%
	National (other European)	5	1	3	20	0	2	0	0	31
		0.60%	0.10%	0.40%	2.50%	0.00%	0.30%	0.00%	0.00%	3.90%
	US	13	2	0	0	24	3	0	0	42
		1.60%	0.30%	0.00%	0.00%	3.00%	0.40%	0.00%	0.00%	5.30%
	National (outside Europe)	9	0	1	2	1	25	0	0	38
		1.10%	0.00%	0.10%	0.30%	0.10%	3.10%	0.00%	0.00%	4.80%
Transnational/international/global	1	1	0	0	1	2	1	0	6	
	0.10%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.30%	0.10%	0.00%	0.80%	
EU	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	4	9	
	0.50%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.50%	1.10%	
Total	200	377	81	36	28	59	8	11	800	
	25.00%	47.10%	10.10%	4.50%	3.50%	7.40%	1.00%	1.40%	100%	
Poland	Not applicable/un-specified	71	5	2	1	1	1	2	1	84
		8.90%	0.60%	0.20%	0.10%	0.10%	0.10%	0.20%	0.10%	10.50%
	Domestic	85	430	3	0	5	0	6	7	536
		10.60%	53.70%	0.40%	0.00%	0.60%	0.00%	0.70%	0.90%	66.90%
	National (EU)	17	1	50	2	0	0	1	8	79
		2.10%	0.10%	6.20%	0.20%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	1.00%	9.90%
	National (other European)	8	1	0	7	0	0	2	1	19
		1.00%	0.10%	0.00%	0.90%	0.00%	0.00%	0.20%	0.10%	2.40%
	US	9	0	0	0	11	0	1	0	21
		1.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.40%	0.00%	0.10%	0.00%	2.60%
	National (outside Europe)	5	0	0	0	0	14	0	0	19
		0.60%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.70%	0.00%	0.00%	2.40%
Transnational/international/global	14	4	0	0	0	1	18	1	38	
	1.70%	0.50%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	2.20%	0.10%	4.70%	
EU	0	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	5	
	0.00%	0.20%	0.10%	0.20%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.60%	
Total	209	443	56	12	17	16	30	18	801	
	26.10%	55.30%	7.00%	1.50%	2.10%	2.00%	3.70%	2.20%	100%	
Greece	Not applicable/un-specified	69	34	0	0	0	0	0	0	103
		8.60%	4.30%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	12.90%
	Domestic	63	442	3	3	0	1	7	6	525
		7.90%	55.30%	0.40%	0.40%	0.00%	0.10%	0.90%	0.80%	65.60%
	National (EU)	12	3	8	1	0	0	1	2	27
		1.50%	0.40%	1.00%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.30%	3.40%
	National (other European)	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	4
		0.30%	0.10%	0.00%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.50%
	US	3	3	0	1	3	0	0	0	10
		0.40%	0.40%	0.00%	0.10%	0.40%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.30%
	National (outside Europe)	2	6	0	0	0	1	0	0	9
		0.30%	0.80%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	1.10%
Transnational/international/global	17	52	0	2	0	4	11	7	93	
	2.10%	6.50%	0.00%	0.30%	0.00%	0.50%	1.40%	0.90%	11.60%	
EU	1	9	0	5	0	0	0	14	29	
	0.10%	1.10%	0.00%	0.60%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.80%	3.60%	
Total	169	550	11	13	3	6	19	29	800	
	21.10%	68.80%	1.40%	1.60%	0.40%	0.80%	2.40%	3.60%	100%	

Serbia	Not applicable/un-specified	63	12	0	2	2	2	0	0	81
		7.70%	1.40%	0.00%	0.20%	0.20%	0.20%	0.00%	0.00%	9.90%
	Domestic	93	451	2	5	2	6	7	5	571
		11.40%	55.20%	0.20%	0.60%	0.20%	0.70%	0.90%	0.60%	69.90%
	National (EU)	8	2	41	0	2	1	1	0	55
		1.00%	0.20%	5.00%	0.00%	0.20%	0.10%	0.10%	0.00%	6.70%
	National (other European)	2	3	0	13	0	3	1	0	22
		0.20%	0.40%	0.00%	1.60%	0.00%	0.40%	0.10%	0.00%	2.70%
	US	7	0	0	0	15	1	0	0	23
		0.90%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.80%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	2.80%
	National (outside Europe)	4	2	0	0	0	12	1	1	20
		0.50%	0.20%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.50%	0.10%	0.10%	2.40%
	Transnational/international/global	12	0	0	2	2	3	17	0	36
		1.50%	0.00%	0.00%	0.20%	0.20%	0.40%	2.10%	0.00%	4.40%
EU	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	6	9	
	0.00%	0.20%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.70%	1.10%	
Total	189	472	44	22	23	28	27	12	817	
	23.10%	57.80%	5.40%	2.70%	2.80%	3.40%	3.30%	1.50%	100%	
Total	Not applicable/un-specified	359	78	5	6	7	19	10	4	488
		6.40%	1.40%	0.10%	0.10%	0.10%	0.30%	0.20%	0.10%	8.70%
	Domestic	491	3059	23	21	8	32	64	43	3741
		8.70%	54.50%	0.40%	0.40%	0.10%	0.60%	1.10%	0.80%	66.60%
	National (EU)	60	18	309	15	6	5	14	36	463
		1.10%	0.30%	5.50%	0.30%	0.10%	0.10%	0.20%	0.60%	8.20%
	National (other European)	19	6	5	62	0	9	5	1	107
		0.30%	0.10%	0.10%	1.10%	0.00%	0.20%	0.10%	0.00%	1.90%
	US	44	6	0	2	124	9	2	2	189
		0.80%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	2.20%	0.20%	0.00%	0.00%	3.40%
	National (outside Europe)	31	10	1	5	3	131	7	1	189
		0.60%	0.20%	0.00%	0.10%	0.10%	2.30%	0.10%	0.00%	3.40%
	Transnational/international/global	72	77	8	7	10	15	127	18	334
		1.30%	1.40%	0.10%	0.10%	0.20%	0.30%	2.30%	0.30%	5.90%
EU	14	20	4	11	3	2	4	48	106	
	0.20%	0.40%	0.10%	0.20%	0.10%	0.00%	0.10%	0.90%	1.90%	
Total	1090	3274	355	129	161	222	233	153	5617	
	19.40%	58.30%	6.30%	2.30%	2.90%	4.00%	4.10%	2.70%	100%	

Table 2.11: Trust giver & geographic origin combined * per country

TRUST GIVER with geog. origin	Denmark	Germany	Italy	Czechia	Poland	Greece	Serbia	Total
domestic government	8.8%	6.4%	14.2%	6.5%	5.3%	8.3%	4.3%	7.8%
government national EU states	0.1%	4.1%	0.4%	2.8%	1.1%	0.6%	0.9%	1.4%
governm. nat. other Europ. states	0.5%	0.4%	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.5%	0.3%
US government	0.4%	1.6%	0.0%	0.6%	0.6%	0.0%	0.4%	0.5%
govern. nation. states outside Eur.	0.7%	1.3%	0.0%	0.6%	0.3%	0.4%	0.0%	0.4%
governm. transnat./internat/global	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
government EU-level	0.4%	0.7%	0.1%	0.4%	0.4%	0.6%	0.1%	0.4%
domestic opposition	3.0%	0.4%	2.1%	3.5%	1.0%	4.3%	1.5%	2.3%
opposition national EU states	0.4%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.2%
US opposition	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.6%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%
opposit.nation. states outside Eur.	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
opposition EU-level	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
domestic science	1.3%	0.6%	2.9%	4.0%	1.0%	1.7%	3.9%	2.2%
science national EU states	0.3%	0.1%	0.4%	0.3%	0.1%	0.4%	0.0%	0.2%
science nation. other Europ. states	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
US science	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
science national outside Europe	0.3%	0.1%	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
science transnat./internat./global	0.3%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.1%	0.3%	0.5%	0.3%
science EU-level	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
domestic economy	2.2%	5.7%	7.6%	3.7%	2.9%	2.0%	1.1%	3.7%
economy national EU states	0.0%	0.3%	0.4%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
economy nation other Europ states	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
US economy	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	0.2%
economy national outside Europe	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
economy transnat./internat./global	1.0%	2.0%	1.4%	0.1%	0.6%	5.9%	0.1%	1.6%
economy EU-level	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
domestic media	1.8%	0.3%	1.1%	0.0%	1.3%	0.3%	1.5%	0.9%
media national EU states	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	15.0%
media national other Europ. states	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
media national outside Europe	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	15.0%
media transnat./internat./global	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
domestic citizens	46.5%	31.1%	39.8%	40.6%	39.7%	49.2%	52.9%	42.9%
citizens national EU states	6.9%	6.3%	2.4%	7.2%	8.0%	2.2%	5.4%	5.5%
citizens nation. other Europ. states	0.8%	1.3%	0.4%	2.5%	2.0%	0.3%	1.4%	1.3%
US citizens	3.3%	2.4%	0.8%	2.5%	1.3%	0.6%	2.7%	1.9%
citizens national outside Europe	2.8%	5.7%	1.0%	3.1%	1.7%	0.6%	2.2%	2.4%
citizens transnat./internat./global	5.1%	1.3%	3.3%	0.4%	3.8%	5.0%	3.8%	3.3%
citizens EU-level	2.0%	1.4%	0.4%	0.8%	0.0%	2.6%	1.1%	1.2%
domestic other	6.4%	14.2%	15.8%	11.2%	23.5%	9.5%	12.3%	13.3%
other national EU states	0.9%	3.4%	1.1%	2.4%	1.7%	0.6%	0.8%	1.5%
other nation other European states	0.1%	0.3%	0.0%	1.1%	0.4%	0.1%	1.1%	0.4%
other US	1.3%	1.3%	0.4%	1.6%	0.8%	0.1%	0.0%	0.8%
other national outside Europe	0.4%	0.9%	0.3%	1.4%	0.6%	0.3%	0.3%	0.6%
other transnat/international/global	1.2%	3.1%	1.3%	0.3%	0.8%	2.2%	0.4%	1.3%
other EU-level	0.4%	0.1%	1.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.7%	0.0%	0.4%
Total (100%)	763	702	798	707	715	697	737	5119

Table 2.12: trust receiver & geographic origin combined * per country

TRUST RECEIVER with geog. origin	Denmark	Germany	Italy	Czechia	Poland	Greece	Serbia	Total
domestic government	31.8%	21.6%	31.1%	32.1%	25.4%	23.1%	28.8%	27.8%
government national EU states	5.3%	7.9%	0.6%	6.8%	4.1%	1.1%	3.3%	4.1%
governm nation other Europ states	2.1%	1.1%	0.3%	1.7%	0.8%	0.2%	1.4%	1.1%
US government	1.9%	2.0%	0.1%	1.7%	0.2%	0.0%	1.3%	1.0%
governm nation states outside Eur	2.5%	6.5%	0.6%	5.0%	1.5%	0.0%	1.1%	2.4%
governm transnat/internat/global	1.5%	0.6%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	1.1%	0.6%
government EU-level	1.1%	1.1%	0.1%	0.7%	1.0%	0.8%	0.3%	0.7%
domestic opposition	0.7%	0.3%	4.2%	2.0%	8.5%	0.3%	2.2%	2.5%
opposition national EU states	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%
opposition nation other Eur states	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
US opposition	0.7%	0.6%	0.1%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%
opposit. nation states outside Eur	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
domestic science	4.7%	2.9%	7.3%	7.8%	7.4%	13.5%	21.5%	9.2%
science national EU states	0.1%	0.5%	0.0%	2.2%	1.2%	0.3%	1.1%	0.7%
science nation other Europ states	0.3%	0.2%	0.0%	2.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.4%
US science	0.3%	0.5%	0.1%	0.7%	0.7%	0.2%	0.8%	0.4%
science national outside Europe	0.4%	0.6%	0.6%	2.7%	0.2%	0.0%	0.6%	0.7%
science transnat/internat/global	1.0%	0.5%	0.4%	0.0%	0.8%	0.2%	1.0%	0.6%
science EU-level	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	0.5%	0.2%	2.2%	0.0%	0.5%
domestic economy	6.0%	8.9%	11.4%	3.5%	5.4%	13.0%	1.6%	7.2%
economy national EU states	0.1%	0.8%	0.7%	0.5%	1.2%	0.0%	0.5%	0.5%
economy nation other Europ states	0.3%	0.6%	0.0%	0.2%	0.3%	1.4%	1.3%	0.6%
US economy	0.5%	0.3%	0.7%	0.2%	0.7%	0.2%	0.3%	0.4%
economy national outside Europe	0.1%	1.8%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.6%	0.8%	0.5%
economy transnat/internat/global	2.7%	5.2%	3.5%	0.8%	1.7%	1.1%	0.3%	2.3%
economy EU-level	0.1%	0.8%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%	0.3%
domestic media	2.5%	3.2%	0.4%	3.0%	1.2%	2.9%	3.3%	2.3%
media national EU states	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
media nation other Europ states	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.1%
US media	0.1%	0.2%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
media national outside Europe	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
media transnat/internat/global	0.5%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.2%	0.2%
domestic citizens	12.2%	2.0%	7.2%	2.2%	5.6%	4.6%	3.0%	5.4%
citizens national EU states	0.5%	1.4%	0.4%	0.5%	0.3%	0.0%	0.6%	0.6%
citizens nation other Europ states	0.1%	0.2%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
US citizens	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
citizens national outside Europe	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.5%	0.3%	0.0%	0.2%	0.2%
citizens transnat/internat/global	0.7%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.7%	0.2%	0.2%	0.3%
citizens EU-level	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
domestic other	11.2%	16.2%	20.1%	12.4%	21.3%	29.8%	14.6%	17.8%
other national EU states	1.1%	3.1%	1.2%	3.2%	2.0%	0.3%	1.1%	1.7%
other nation other European states	0.5%	0.3%	0.3%	1.5%	0.5%	0.2%	0.6%	0.6%
other US	1.9%	2.0%	0.6%	1.7%	1.2%	0.2%	1.3%	1.3%
other national outside Europe	1.2%	1.4%	0.4%	1.3%	0.7%	0.3%	1.8%	1.0%
other transnat/international/global	1.8%	1.2%	1.4%	0.3%	1.2%	1.4%	1.6%	1.3%
other EU-level	0.8%	2.3%	4.3%	0.5%	1.9%	1.3%	1.4%	1.8%
Total (100%)	730	649	695	599	591	631	628	4523

Turning now to the actors who are trusted in news coverage (hence, the trust receivers) (Table 2.12), we find similar degrees of transnationalisation, but with a different actor focus. While citizens, or the people as trust receivers, are almost exclusively national, the debate on who is (to be) trusted focuses mainly on governments. Within this category, trust relationships to government from other EU member states are built, in a rather broad range, from 0.6% in Italy to 7.9% in Germany. Other member states' governments are not categorically mistrusted. What rather comes to the attention is that there is sometimes a reverse relationship of trust in national government and distrust in other EU member states' governments, as in the case of Germany and Denmark, or distrust in one's own government and trust in other member state governments, as in the cases of Greece, Serbia and Poland.¹⁶ Otherwise, the news media of different countries pay varying degrees of attention to foreign governments, with the lowest degree of transnationalisation in Greece (0.4%) and Italy (1.1%), and the highest in Germany (10.2%), Czech Republic (8.6%) and Denmark (8%). As in the case of trust givers, the global dimensions of the pandemic are highlighted without a particularly strong focus on Europe and the EU. Some attention to international actors as trust receivers was also given in the economic realm, especially in Germany (5.2%) and Czech Republic (3.5%). In all the other cases, trust receivers are predominantly domestic.

Overall, we might conclude that the pandemic was, as expected, discussed as a global event that directed attention away from Europe. There was, however, no distinct EU space of trust contestation, but shifting attention to other countries, among them, the US, Russia or China or international pharmaceutical companies. The EU as an object of trust contestation has, overall, a lower visibility than the US. The highest visibility of the EU as a target of trust was found in Italy, Greece and Germany and the lowest in Serbia and Denmark. When the EU is addressed as an object of trust, trust contestations are hardly ever personalised (e.g., targeting an individual EU politician), but the EU or Commission appear mainly in generic terms as a receiver of trust. This is different from EU member states or foreign country actors, who are mainly personalised, like Macron, Johnson or Trump. Our cases are too small to qualify trust relationship between foreign actors in terms of trust and distrust. A clear pattern only appears in the case of the US (Trump) where expressions of mistrust prevail.

On the basis of what principles are our main actors' categories trusted or distrusted? An attribution of (dis)trust can (but does not need to) be justified by reference to generalised principles about the trustworthiness of a particular object. Trustworthiness is admittedly a fuzzy concept that is grounded in the fuzzy language used by trust givers to argue why trust towards a particular object is warranted or unwarranted (Sztompka 2000) (Potter, 2002). As such, it resembles a justification for (dis)trust when taking into consideration particular circumstances, past experiences, future expectations, cultural patterns or rational calculations (Levi, 2019). Principles of trustworthiness allow for abstraction pointing beyond the particular situation in which trust is given (or not). As such, they indicate particular cultures of trust and distrust on the basis of which people can make either rational calculations, expect beneficial consequences, or apply moral standards (Sztompka 2000: 7). Accordingly, our coding comprises all statements, in which trust attributors or trust givers relate to generalised principles that explain in abstract terms *why* they (mis)trust a particular object. Our variable 'principle of trustworthiness' applies to trust giver-receiver relationships: what makes the trust receiver trustworthy from the perspective of the trust giver. This applies to 62% of all cases of trust contestations (Table 2.13). We distinguish prognostic judgements based on future expecta-

¹⁶ Note that cases in some countries are relatively low.

tions, diagnostic judgements based on past and present performance, judgements based on personal traits of the object of trust (such as being an expert or being responsible), and finally non-personal features of the system, such as transparency or rationality.

Performance based judgements of trustworthiness are based on past or expected output/results of individual, collective and system trust receivers (e.g., 'We cannot trust Boris Johnson based on his handling of the crisis). Individual, collective traits/character typically apply to individual and collective trust receivers, but not to systems. Institutional/ system design features typically apply to system trust receivers.

In general terms, trust is most frequently attributed based on a diagnostic or prognostic assessment of performance (Table 2.13). Political representatives are (dis)trusted based on what they did in the past, or assumed to do in the future. Secondly, political actors are (dis)trusted based on their expertise. Among the personal traits of a political representative that account for trust are not only expertise and competences, but also honesty and reliability, to a lesser degree, attributes of power. Among the system traits that account for trust or distrust ascription, only safety/unsafety and reliability/unreliability are worthy of mentioning.

Table 2.13 Principles of un/trustworthiness - 1st principle (all countries)

Principles of un/trustworthiness	Frequency in %
Not applicable/unspecified	39.3
DIAGN - Success of past performance	5.7
DIAGN - Failure of past performance	7.5
DIAGN - Ambivalent	0.4
PROG - Success of expected performance	5.6
PROG - Failure of expected performance	1.9
PROG - Ambivalent	0.4
TRAIT - Competence, expertise/incompetence, lack of expertise	6.1
TRAIT - Power & influence	1.3
TRAIT - Powerlessness, non-influential	0.2
TRAIT - responsibility/irresponsibility	2.6
TRAIT - honesty/dishonesty	3.5
TRAIT - altruistic, care, support, common good	1.6
TRAIT - selfish, egoistic, private interests	2.3
TRAIT - stability/instability	1.1
TRAIT - independence/dependence, impartiality/partiality	0.7
TRAIT - transparency/intransparency	3.5
TRAIT - reliability/unreliability	3.9
TRAIT - rationality/irrationality	0.9
TRAIT - safety/unsafety	2.2
TRAIT - proximity, approachability, familiarity/remoteness, anonymity	0.5
TRAIT - other	0.4
SYS - honesty/dishonesty	0.8
SYS - transparency/intransparency	1.1
SYS - rationality/irrationality	0.4
SYS - stability/instability	0.8

SYS - safety/unsafety	2.3
SYS - independence/dependence, impartiality/partiality	0.5
SYS - reliability/unreliability	2
SYS - other	0.9
Total (N)	5617

Table 2.14 shows the most important attribute for trust for each country and main actor (government, science and economy). We only look at descriptive statements of trust or distrust (are trusting-are distrusting) and name the main principle that accounts for a trust relationship to the three most-mentioned categories of actors.¹⁷ Government is in all countries trusted or distrusted, based on past performance. Only in Poland, competence of government plays a role as a main trust principle. In Poland and Serbia, aspects of selfishness, dishonest behaviour and corruption account for statements of distrust in government. It is not surprising that government performance played such an important role in crisis management during the pandemic. Normative principles relating to the democratic performance of government are not referred to as principles of trustworthiness. This indicates that, in times of crisis, technocratic decision-making prevailed over the democratic process. In the case of science, all countries converge around expertise and competence, often also in relation to the past performance of science as the main principle of trustworthiness. Trust in science is put into question with regard to the observed failure of past performance, or concerns about the unsafety or unreliability of the scientific outcomes, especially vaccines. In the case of the economy, trust givers are future looking, and trust economic actors based on expected performance in Denmark, Germany, Italy and the Czech Republic. In Greece and Serbia, past performance matters for the building of trust relationships with economic actors. Distrust, instead, is explained by the failure of past performance and, in the case of Poland and Serbia, by cases of past corruption.

¹⁷ All other actors had to be disregarded due to low number of cases. Also a ranking of different principles of trustworthiness that apply to particular actors was not possible for the low number of cases.

Table 2.14: Main principles for trusting or distrusting across actors

	Denmark		Germany		Italy		Czechia		Poland		Greece		Serbia	
	trusting	distrusting	trusting	distrusting	trusting	distrusting	trusting	distrusting	trusting	distrusting	trusting	distrusting	trusting	distrusting
G O V E R N M E N T	success of past performance (30.2%)	failure of past performance (41.1%)	success of past performance (37.5%)	failure of past performance (41.1%)	success of past performance (36.4%)	failure of past performance (48.4%)	success of past performance (35.7%)	failure of past performance (30.9%)	competence/ expertise (23.8%)	failure of past performance (22%); selfish/ egoistic/ private interest (22%)	success of past performance (47.5%)	failure of past performance (70.2%)	success of past performance (30%)	dishonesty (26.3%)
S C I E N C E	success of past performance (33.3%)	failure of past performance (36.4%)	competence/ expertise (56.3%)	unsafety (27.8%)	competence/ expertise (45.3%)	unsafety (42.9%)	success of expected performance (29.3%)	unsafety (41.7%)	competence/ expertise (25%)	unsafety (23.3%)	competence/ expertise (39%)	failure of past performance (32.4%)	success of past performance (29.4%)	unreliability (17.9%)
E C O N O M Y	success of expected performance (50%)	failure of past performance (50%)	success of expected performance (29.2%)	failure of past performance (44.8%)	success of expected performance (52.4%)	failure of past performance (27.3%)	success of expected performance (70%)	unsafety (57.1%)	safety (25%)	selfish/ egoistic/ private interest (33.3%)	success of past performance (46.8%)	failure of past performance (27.8%), unsafety (27.8%)	success of past performance (50%)	failure of past performance (25%), selfish/ egoistic/ private interest (25%), dishonesty (25%)

From the perspective of trusting actors, we can focus on the main category of citizens as trust givers in all countries, and name the main principle that is used by citizens to build trust relationships (Table 2.15). It turns out that citizens are not deviating from the mean distribution of the frequency of principles that are used for trust attribution. Just like other actors, citizens are, in the majority of cases, performance oriented and mainly build trust based on past experiences with actors. Only in the case of Italy and Poland is trust mainly built on judgements of competence/expertise of the respective actors. In Serbia, dishonesty is highlighted by citizens as the most important criteria of distrust.

Table 2.15: Trusting and distrusting citizens: main issues of concern

country	Trust giver = citizens	Principles of trustworthiness
Denmark	trusting	success of past performance (27.3%)
	distrusting	failure of past performance (43.2%)
Germany	trusting	success of past performance (32.7%)
	distrusting	failure of past performance (37.4%)
Italy	trusting	competence/ expertise (20.4%)
	distrusting	failure of past performance (22%)
Czechia	trusting	success of expected performance (25.9%)
	distrusting	failure of past performance (35.9%)
Poland	trusting	competence/ expertise (15%)
	distrusting	failure of past performance (50%)
Greece	trusting	success of past performance (46.5%)
	distrusting	failure of past performance (46.9%)
Serbia	trusting	success of past performance (31.6%)
	distrusting	dishonesty (20.6%)

Overall, among the attributes that account for (dis)trust, a rational calculation prevails based on available information. In the majority of cases, trust is not a spontaneous emotional response. This holds in particular for political actors and institutions who are held accountable, based on performance or personal integrity. These findings are partly explained also by the principled issues of trust contestation: In all countries, health-related issues are clearly more salient than issues related to democratic or representative politics (Table 2.16). We can expect that trust-building, in relation to health issues, requires more factual information to arrive at a judgement about trust. This is not a ‘post-factual’ way of trusting, where political representatives are mainly trusted based on personal traits such as power and influence or charisma (on the contrary, personal traits such as power and influence rather give rise to distrust), but a trust judgement that requires regular recurrence to ‘facts’, as illustrated by the following example: “I can only (dis)trust vaccines based on the available information about their effects.” This assumption of a factual (and not postfactual) trust attribution is further backed by the observation that competence and expertise as personal traits, in the great majority of cases, is used for building a positive trust relationship, and only in a minority of cases serves as an argument to deny trust.

Table 2.16 Issue 1 aggregated * trust degree dichotomy * Country

country	Issue 1 aggreg.	trusting	distrusting	Total
Denmark	ECONOMY	12.7%	10.5%	11.6%
	HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES	67.3%	52.3%	59.7%
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS	11.6%	30.2%	21.0%
	VALUES IDENTITIES	4.8%	2.7%	3.7%
	SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE	1.6%	0.8%	1.2%
	MEDIA & COMMUNICATION	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%
	EDUCATION	0.4%	0.8%	0.6%
	OTHER	0.4%	1.6%	1.0%
	Total (N)	251	258	509
Germany	ECONOMY	19.7%	17.4%	18.5%
	HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES	49.8%	55.5%	52.8%
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS	11.7%	17.4%	14.8%
	VALUES IDENTITIES	4.2%	4.0%	4.1%
	SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE	1.4%	2.0%	1.7%
	MEDIA & COMMUNICATION	9.4%	1.6%	5.2%
	LEISURE SECTOR, free time activities	2.8%	1.2%	2.0%
	EDUCATION	0.5%	0.0%	0.2%
	OTHER	0.5%	0.8%	0.7%
	Total (N)	213	247	460
Italy	ECONOMY	20.4%	20.8%	20.6%
	HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES	44.7%	39.6%	42.4%
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS	22.6%	22.7%	22.7%
	VALUES IDENTITIES	4.4%	12.7%	8.1%
	SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE	6.0%	3.1%	4.7%
	MEDIA & COMMUNICATION	0.0%	0.4%	0.2%
	LEISURE SECTOR, free time activities	0.3%	0.4%	0.3%
	EDUCATION	0.3%	0.0%	0.2%
	OTHER	1.3%	0.4%	0.9%
	Total (N)	318	260	578
Czechia	ECONOMY	13.7%	3.4%	7.7%
	HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES	73.0%	82.9%	78.8%
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS	10.9%	11.7%	11.4%
	VALUES IDENTITIES	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%
	SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE	1.4%	1.0%	1.2%
	MEDIA & COMMUNICATION	0.5%	0.3%	0.4%
	LEISURE SECTOR, free time activities	0.5%	0.0%	0.2%
	OTHER	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%
	Total (N)	211	298	509
Poland	ECONOMY	9.3%	8.3%	8.8%
	HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES	46.6%	46.9%	46.8%
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS	34.4%	31.0%	32.7%
	VALUES IDENTITIES	5.0%	6.5%	5.8%
	SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE	3.6%	4.7%	4.1%
	MEDIA & COMMUNICATION	0.0%	1.1%	0.5%
	LEISURE SECTOR, free time activities	0.4%	0.0%	0.2%
	OTHER	0.7%	1.4%	1.1%
	Total (N)	279	277	556

Greece	ECONOMY	35.6%	11.7%	26.3%
	HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES	46.0%	55.3%	49.6%
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS	9.7%	21.8%	14.4%
	VALUES IDENTITIES	2.6%	7.1%	4.3%
	SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE	2.3%	1.5%	2.0%
	MEDIA & COMMUNICATION	0.3%	0.5%	0.4%
	LEISURE SECTOR, free time activities	0.3%	0.0%	0.2%
	EDUCATION	0.0%	0.5%	0.2%
	OTHER	3.2%	1.5%	2.6%
	Total (N)	309	197	506
Serbia	ECONOMY	5.2%	1.9%	3.4%
	HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES	63.8%	58.7%	61.0%
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS	15.3%	15.6%	15.5%
	VALUES IDENTITIES	10.0%	15.6%	13.1%
	SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE	3.9%	5.9%	5.0%
	MEDIA & COMMUNICATION	0.9%	1.9%	1.4%
	EDUCATION	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%
	OTHER	0.4%	0.0%	0.2%
	Total (N)	229	269	498
Total	ECONOMY	17.5%	10.2%	13.9%
	HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES	54.6%	56.4%	55.5%
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS	17.1%	21.4%	19.2%
	VALUES IDENTITIES	4.4%	6.9%	5.7%
	SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE	3.0%	2.8%	2.9%
	MEDIA & COMMUNICATION	1.5%	1.0%	1.2%
	LEISURE SECTOR, free time activities	0.6%	0.2%	0.4%
	EDUCATION	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%
	OTHER	1.0%	0.8%	0.9%
	Total (N)	1810	1806	3616

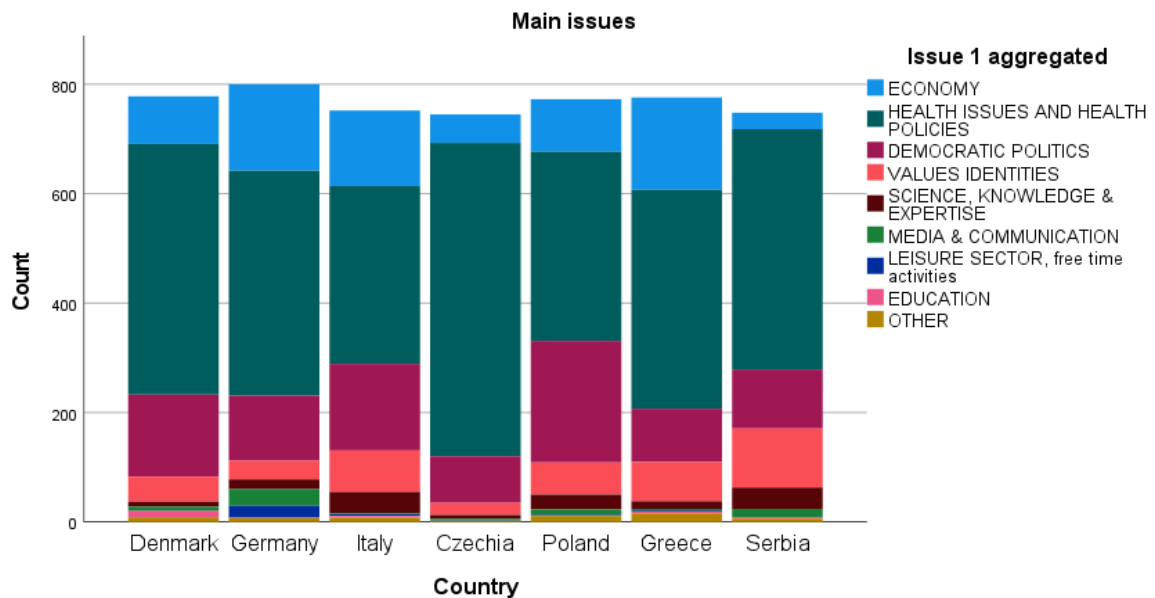
Issues that were raised as an element of trust contestation can be considered as an indicator for public concern expressed during the pandemic. Broadly speaking, we can distinguish between economic concerns, health-related concerns and concerns relating to the democratic process, such as accountability of government and restrictions of individual rights. In absolute terms, 13.6% of all issues related to economic concerns, 55.0% related to health and 17.5% related to democratic processes and values and identities (7.8%) (Table 2.17 and Figure 2.6). As expected, the pandemic raised issues related to health concerns in all countries. This includes in particular the capacities of the health system and the security of vaccines. Trust and distrust contestations in relation to health-related issues are relatively balanced across all countries with the highest frequency in Czechia. In second place, but with considerably lower frequency compared to health issues, the pandemic raised concerns with democratic procedures, but in no country did these become the key issue in trust contestation. Democratic concerns were expressed at the highest frequency in Poland, followed by Italy and Denmark. Trust in the democratic process was also not considerably shattered, despite the concerns expressed with lockdown measures. More critical voices that expressed concerns with democracy were found in Denmark, Germany and Czech Republic. Economic concerns are expressed at an even slightly lower frequency in the news with regard to issues such as economic growth, financial aid and employment. Economic issues became most salient in Greece, Germany and Italy, where concerns about economic growth were highest. In one group of countries (DK, Germany, Italy and Poland), economic concerns are discussed in a balanced way, in the second

group of countries, negative trust attributions prevail in the discussion of economic issues (Greece, Czechia and Serbia). For all the other issue fields, we find similar patterns of balanced trust relationships, but the overall cases are too low to be able to highlight particular cases.

Table 2.17 Issue 1 aggregated * Country

Issue 1 aggregated	Denmark	Germany	Italy	Czechia	Poland	Greece	Serbia	Total
ECONOMY	11.2%	19.8%	18.4%	7.0%	12.4%	21.8%	4.0%	13.6%
HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES	58.9%	51.4%	43.2%	76.9%	44.8%	51.5%	58.7%	55.0%
DEMOCRATIC POLITICS	19.3%	14.9%	21.0%	11.4%	28.7%	12.5%	14.4%	17.5%
VALUES IDENTITIES	5.9%	4.3%	10.1%	3.0%	7.6%	9.3%	14.4%	7.8%
SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE	1.2%	2.3%	5.2%	0.9%	3.5%	1.8%	5.2%	2.8%
MEDIA & COMMUNICATION	1.0%	3.8%	0.3%	0.4%	1.3%	0.4%	2.0%	1.3%
LEISURE SECTOR, free time activities	0.0%	2.8%	0.4%	0.1%	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.6%
EDUCATION	1.4%	0.1%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%
OTHER	1.2%	0.9%	1.1%	0.3%	1.4%	2.1%	0.8%	1.1%
Total (N)	778	800	752	745	773	776	748	5372

Figure 2.6 Main Issues

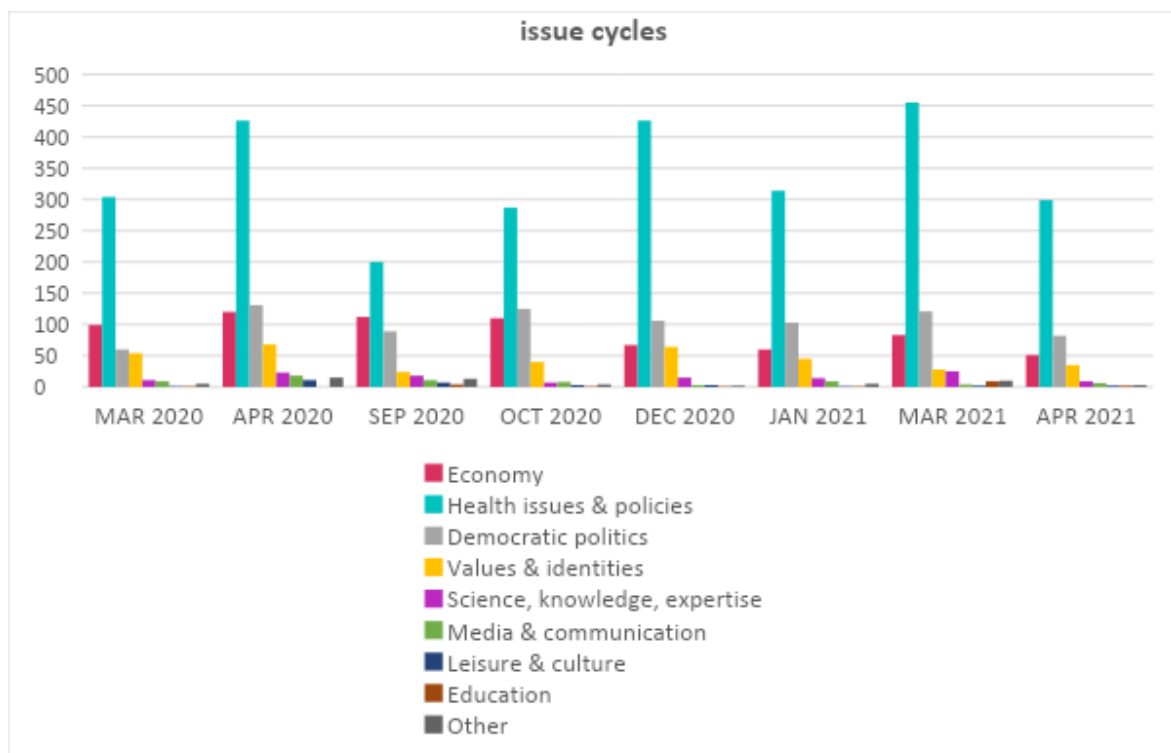


We can thus conclude that in all countries and with regard to all issues, we find controversial debates with a plurality of both trusting and distrusting voices. News coverage is thus relatively balanced and does not privilege particular positions in the debate, such as ant- or pro-vaccines, or governmental supporters and opponents. Especially with regard to the emphasis on health-related issues, we find a focus on contestations of trust as a key component of public controversies during the pandemic. The main trust receiver on health-related issues remains the government, followed by science. Especially in Denmark and Germany, expectations about health were directed at government, and only to a minor degree at scientists. Scientific expertise was thus overall clearly considered as relevant, but science did not replace government as a trust holder. Even with regard to the unsurprisingly most controversial emergency and lockdown measures, we find a supportive debate dominantly expressing trust in government in Italy, Denmark and Serbia (in descending or-

der). In the remaining countries though, distrust towards government clearly prevails when emergency and lockdown measures are discussed in the news. In the case of vaccines as the second most controversial issue, debates in the news are instead much more moderate, with a focus on science actors as trust receivers, with the exception of Denmark, where government actors prevail also in the debates about vaccines. Scientists are predominantly trusted in vaccination debates in Italy and distrusted in Germany. In all the other countries, the debate is more balanced. It should be noted here that in the context of vaccination debates, expressions of distrust in science do not embrace a categorical anti-vaccination position, but more frequently include debates on the efficiency, reliability and safety of vaccines. As we already saw with regard to the main contestants of trust (Table 2.5 and Figure 2.1), anti-vaccination groups and protesters only marginally appeared on the news with trust-related statements in all countries.

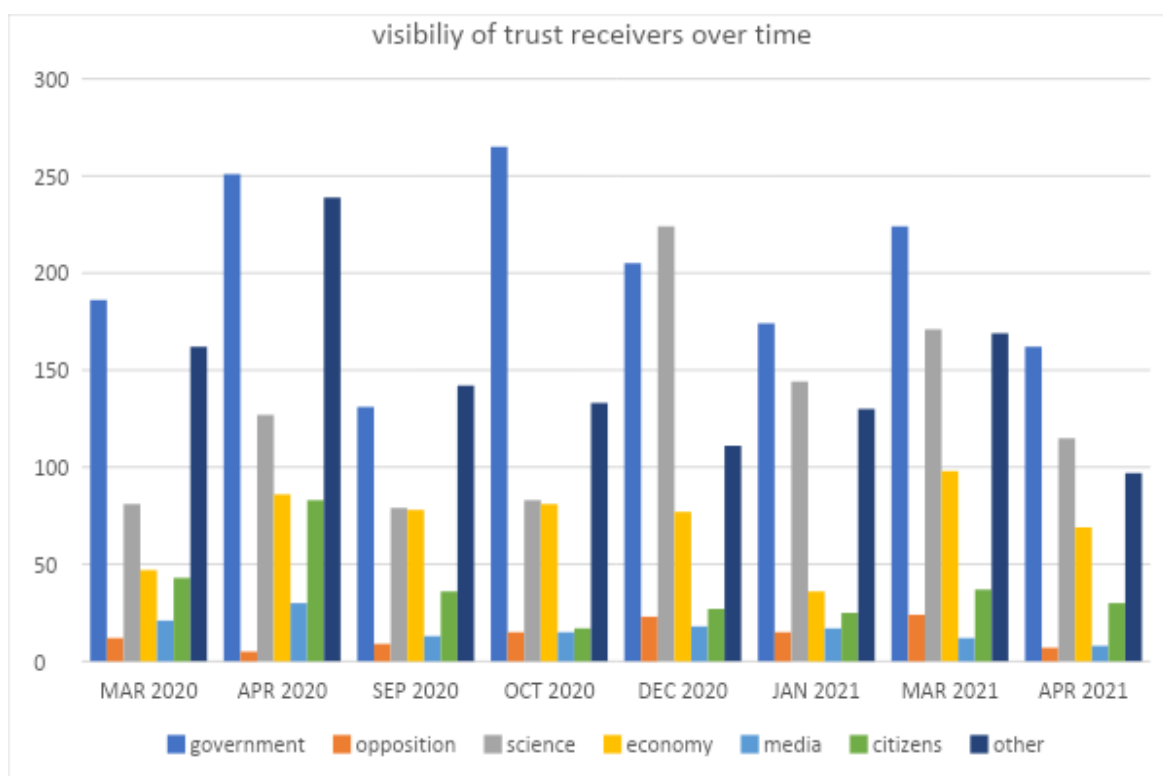
The frequency of issues is relatively equally distributed over time (see Figure 2.7). The main concerns related to health issues, democratic politics and the economy were discussed in all three time periods analysed, but with a higher salience of health-related issues at the very beginning of the pandemic (the situation in hospitals and Corona emergency measures), at the beginning of the vaccination period (December 2020 and January 2021) and at the height of the vaccination campaign in March 2021, relating to the alleged health risks of Astra Zeneca. Concerns with democratic politics were expressed in April 2020 when governments implemented harsh lockdown measures leading to a contestation of civic rights, in October 2020, and in February and March 2021 when these measures were reintroduced. The economy was the focus of attention at the very beginning of the pandemic with concerns expressed for local business and employment that suffered from lockdown (e.g., home office measures) and public aid and emergency interventions by national governments. The economy was again the focus of attention shortly after the summer of 2020, discussing the EU recovery plans. In later months, the economy was less visible as a likely effect of the Next-Generation EU plan and other recovery measures that calmed down the markets, secured employment and facilitated economic growth.

Figure 2.7 Issue cycles



In terms of the visibility of actors, the government remained the most salient object of trust contestation, followed by science throughout the entire period (see Figure 2.8). Notably, there was no moment for the opposition to replace government as an object of trust. There was a slight increase in the opposition parties as a trust receiver in late 2020 and again in March 2021, but it was still significantly below the level of governments. Scientists became highly salient as trust receivers for the first time in April 2020, when they gave their opinion about the efficiency of wearing masks and lockdown measures. Trust in science became most salient in December 2020, when the first vaccines were introduced, surpassing even government in terms of visibility. This prominence of science also continues over the first months of 2021. Citizens as objects of trust were most salient at the beginning of the pandemic, in discussing whether they would be obeying the lockdown measures, or whether tougher controls would be necessary.

Figure 2.8 *Visibility of trust receivers over time*



Party affiliation is not made salient when judging the trustworthiness of particular actors, nor is it mentioned as an attribute of actors who challenge trust in the media. The frequency of party mentioning is below 7% in all cases, except for Italy, where in 19% of all cases of trust receivers, party affiliation is mentioned. This indicates that ideological polarisation only plays a minor role in trust contestation. Neither moderate parties nor populist-extremist parties are selectively made salient. In particular, opposition parties become invisible, while governmental actors mainly appear in their executive role as members of the government, and not as a political party. As a general pattern, we find prevalent expressions of trust with reference to party mentioning. This regards mainly moderate parties of government and opposition. Extremist parties of the left and right are almost invisible, and are thus never trusted nor distrusted in the news; because of the low level of cases, we abstain from further analysis.

Where are anti-vaxxers? Is trust in science and government undermined by the anti-vax movements successfully occupying the media agenda? Strikingly absent in our sample are the antivaxxers, both

as contestants of trust in science and political representatives and as trust receivers. In none of our countries analysed did newspapers offer a forum for anti-vaccination campaigns. Also, other forms of protest did not play a role. The pandemic in the news is a moment of representative politics and expertise, not of protest. This does not mean that vaccines were not debated. On the contrary, health policies, and in particular the security and efficiency of vaccines were among the most hotly debated topics in the newspapers, and it is also correctly diagnosed that a large percentage of people do not trust, or decreasingly trust vaccines. At the same time, the opinion prevails that people should trust the vaccines, with only a minority expressing caution. The diagnosis thus shifts between trust and distrust in vaccines (with slightly higher percentage of trust), but distrust is merely diagnosed and not supported.

Finally, some minor country differences with regard to the role of experts as trust receivers meets the eye. Expertise and competence as a principle of trustworthiness is more common in Italy, Greece and Serbia. Does this reflect a crisis of trust in representatives, as we know if from survey data and does this lead to substitute trust relationships? The post-democracy argument states that science becomes a kind of substitute to elected representatives. The post-truth argument states that science becomes the target of enhanced contestation by populists. Our study neither supports the post-democracy nor the post-truth arguments on the role of science. Newspapers are not the place for a populist contestation of science. High trust in science and experts is also not a substitute to trust in political representatives. This holds also for countries like Italy or Greece that rank lowest in terms of high levels of distrust in elected representatives. Trust in science does not become a substitute to trust in government, political parties and parliament in these countries, but overall remains balanced with other forms of trust contestation. Trust in science and trust in elected representatives are therefore not exclusive or substitutive but continue to support each other.

Is news coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic balanced in the sense that trusting statements in one article are counterweighed by distrusting statements and vice versa? In the following, we only look at articles that contain more than one trust contestation, and count whether articles are fully trusting (all statements expressing trust), mostly trusting (the majority of statements expressing trust), balanced (exactly half of the statements trusting and the other half distrusting), mostly distrusting (the majority of statements expressing distrust) and finally, fully distrustful (all statements expressing distrust) (Table 2.18). Maybe surprisingly, we find that there is a clear tendency of journalism to build news stories either about trust (34%) or distrust (36.6%), and not to balance opinions, as required by journalism quality standards. Only 16.4% of all articles are fully balanced and another 12.9% are mostly trusting or distrusting. This might be explained by the journalistic style of writing to present coherent news stories with clear messages to the reader. If statements of trust or distrust are found relevant, they are rather backed by similar statements with the same tendency instead of switching direction in the argumentation.

Table 2.18: Trust tendency within articles with several trust contestations

Trust tendency within articles with several trust contestations	Share in %
fully trusting	34.0%
mostly trusting	7.1%
fully balanced	16.4%
mostly distrusting	5.8%
fully distrusting	36.6%
total number of articles with several trust contestations	929

The lack of diversity of opinion about trust in one article does not, however, imply that newspapers overall are imbalanced in the sense of being either distrustful or trustful. To measure these newspaper differences, we build a trust imbalance index per newspaper to analyse the share of articles that are either fully trusting (100) or fully distrustful (-100) or in between (Table 2.19, Figure 2.10 and 2.11). We would not necessarily expect that newspapers are fully balanced, but rather expect a slight tendency to be distrustful, based on two assumptions: first, a negativity bias that applies to political news and critical (and thus more distrustful) attitude, and secondly, the watchdog function of political journalism. What comes to the attention are both country and newspaper differences: the most balanced news coverage is found in Denmark, with all newspapers approaching a neutral position. In Germany, both newspapers (the third newspaper Bild has a low number of cases) tend towards negative (i.e., distrustful) statements, with little or no differences among them. In Italy, there are large differences between la Repubblica and Il Fatto Quotidiano, with a clear positive bias on the one hand, and Il Corriere della Sera, which is slightly negative, on the other. In the case of Czechia, instead a clear negative bias applies to all major news outlets, which are rather critical and tend towards the selection of distrustful statements. In Poland, this picture is more balanced, with a moderate distrust bias for Wyborcza and a trust bias for the other. In Greece, two of the three newspapers have a strong trust bias, and one is more balanced, leaning towards the negative. In Serbia, newspapers are polarised, with Blic and Curir tending strongly towards trust, and Danas being explicitly negative. In conclusion, newspaper differences account for diversity of opinions as much as article diversity. We do not find country cases that are strongly positioned in the promotion of either trust or distrust. Also, among the newspapers analysed, only three (Niezależna in Poland, Proto Thema in Greece and Kurir in Serbia) are clearly biased, and in all the three cases, this regards a positive bias that expresses trust in local government, science, economy and democracy.

Figure 2.9: Distribution of trust and distrust statements within articles with more than one trust contestation, across all countries (N=929 articles, subsample with a minimum of 2 trust contestations within an article)

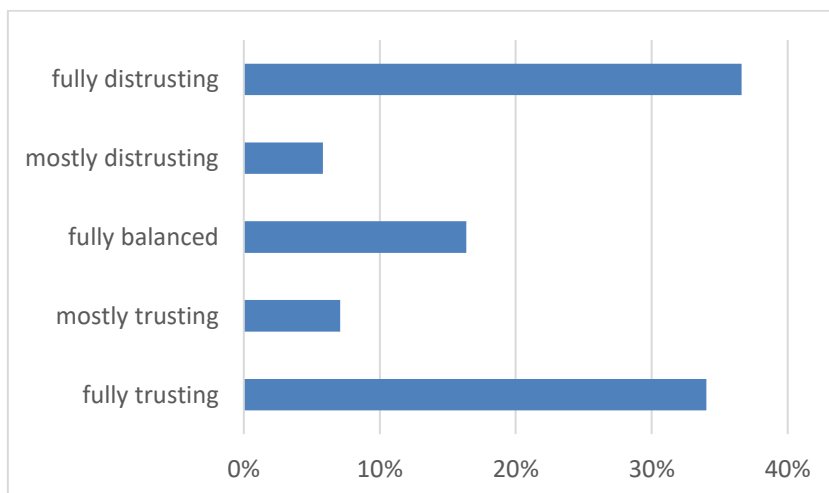


Table 2.19 Trust and distrust across the different newspapers (subsample trust distrust dichotomy, clear dis/trust expressions, N = 3819)

Country		trusting	distrusting	trust balance	Total (100%)
Denmark	Politiken	48.6%	51.4%	-2.8%	284
	Jyllands Posten	51.8%	48.2%	3.6%	199
	B.T.	47.6%	52.4%	-4.8%	42
Germany	Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)	44.8%	55.2%	-10.4%	232
	Frankfurter Allgemeine (FAZ)	47.7%	52.3%	-4.6%	216
	Bild	50,0%	50,0%	0,0%	12
Italy	La Repubblica	62,0%	38,0%	24,0%	184
	Corriere della Sera	45.1%	54.9%	-9.8%	193
	Il Fatto Quotidiano	60.4%	39.6%	20.8%	245
Czechia	Mladá Fronta Dnes (printed)	39.5%	60.5%	-21,0%	86
	iDnes.cz (online)	47.2%	52.8%	-5.6%	144
	Blesk (printed)	52.4%	47.6%	4.8%	21
	Blesk.cz (online)	39.1%	60.9%	-21.8%	110
	Právo (printed)	49.4%	50.6%	-1.2%	81
	Novinky.cz (online)	43.1%	56.9%	-13.8%	109
Poland	Wyborcza	44.8%	55.2%	-10.4%	230
	Niezależna	82.4%	17.6%	64.8%	17
	Fakt	53.5%	46.5%	7,0%	86
	Rzeczpospolita	51.4%	48.6%	2.8%	245
Greece	Kathimerini	63.7%	36.3%	27.4%	347
	EfSyn - Efimerida Syntakton	46.7%	53.3%	-6.6%	90
	Proto Thema	70,0%	30,0%	40,0%	90
Serbia	Blic	61.8%	38.2%	23.6%	157
	Danas	37.8%	62.2%	-24.4%	352
	Kurir	76.6%	23.4%	53.2%	47
Total		51.0%	49.0%	2.0%	3819

Figure 2.10: Trust and distrust across the different newspapers – trust balance (subsample trust distrust dichotomy, clear dis/trust expressions, N = 3819)

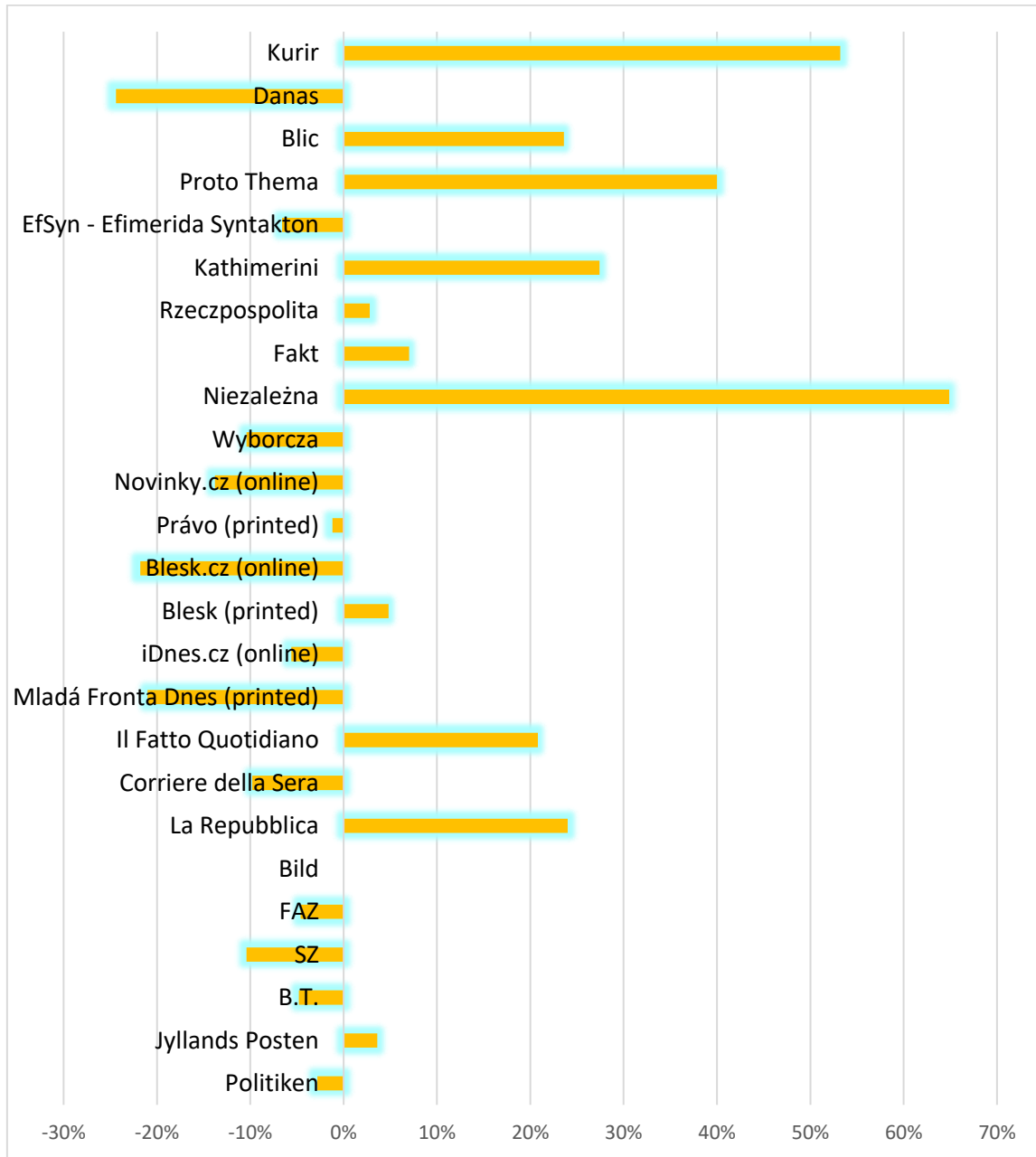
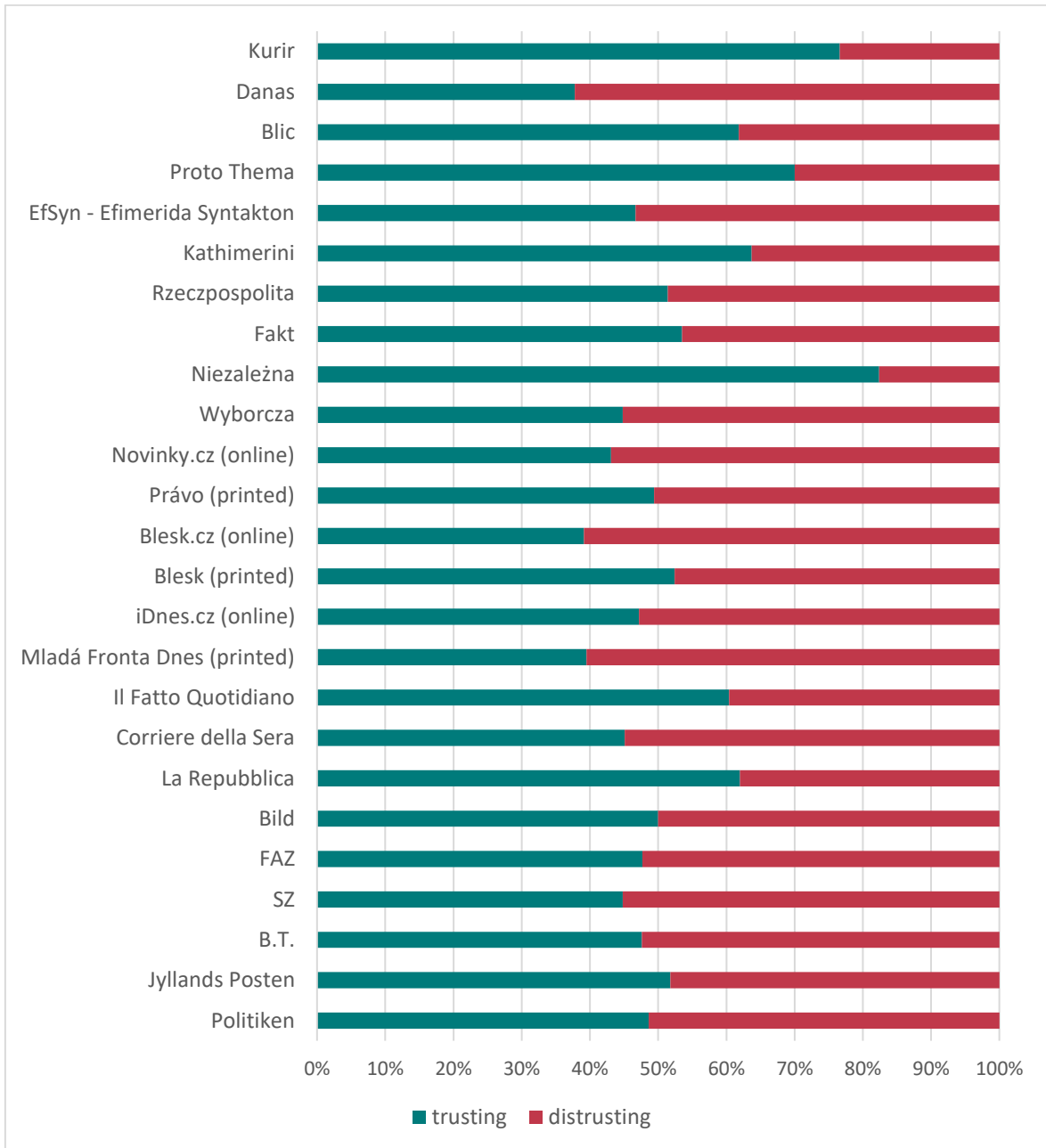


Figure 2.11: Trust and distrust across the different newspapers (subsample trust distrust dichotomy, clear dis/trust expressions, N = 3819)



2.4 Social media trust contestation during the pandemic

In this part, we turn to trust contestation by selected newsreaders who comment on Covid-19-related news on Facebook. We account for the fact, as evidenced in our overview on media consumption patterns (Part 2.3 of the report), that an increasing number of people in all countries analysed turn to social media to get their daily news. As shown in experimental studies, such shared news through Facebook is found to be less credible by the audience and thus contributes to a long-term decrease in trust (Karlsen and Arlberg 2021). We hypothesise that this erosion of trust is further amplified by the users who comment on news through social media, and that a self-selection mechanism applies to user commenting of mainly distrustful citizens who are sceptical of Covid-emergency measures, science and democracy. We will thus be able to respond to the question of how Facebook users raise issues of political trust when engaging with news.

First of all, it needs to be noted that Facebook user commenting is not autonomous. In other words, it is not a closed forum of debate detached from the agenda of news and the frames provided by journalism. In fact, Facebook comments, in the majority of cases (with the exception of Greece), are responsive to the main news article (Table 2.20). When Facebook users raise issues of trust, they do not do so spontaneously, but in response to statements made by journalists or other actors quoted in the main news article. In the majority of cases, a position is taken by the Facebook user that is responsive, i.e. it is provoked by statements of political representatives, journalists, scientists and/or other actors who appear in the news. Facebook commenters, however, mainly take a negative stance by finding reasons to disapprove of what is said in the news and by positioning themselves in opposition to it. Only in Denmark do supportive comments prevail. Facebook commenters are thus primarily motivated to express their dissent when they decide to raise voice in social media political debates.

Table 2.20 Form of comment * Country

Form of trust contestation	Denmark	Germany	Italy	Czechia	Poland	Greece	Serbia	Total
contestation of (dis)trust at-tributor/giver statement in main news article (direct or indirect response) support-ive	46.4%	21.7%	10.8%	13.4%	21.2%	14.4%	17.9%	20.7%
contestation of (dis)trust at-tributor/giver statement in main news article (direct or indirect response) opposing	32.4%	62.7%	53.6%	10.4%	36.2%	15.6%	20.3%	33.0%
contestation of (dis)trust at-tributor/giver statement in main news article (direct or indirect response) neu-tral/unclear	4.4%	10.6%	6.4%	34.2%	15.0%	1.6%	21.1%	13.6%
contestation of other actors' statement in main news arti-cle (direct or indirect re-sponse) supportive	0.0%	0.0%	3.2%	0.4%	0.0%	0.4%	2.4%	0.9%
contestation of other actors' statement in main news arti-cle (direct or indirect re-sponse) opposing	0.4%	0.0%	10.4%	3.3%	1.9%	3.2%	19.9%	5.5%

contestation of other actors' statement in main news article (direct or indirect response) neutral/unclear	0.0%	0.0%	2.4%	15.2%	0.0%	0.0%	6.4%	3.5%
independent trust contestation	16.4%	4.9%	8.8%	23.0%	22.7%	64.8%	8.8%	21.2%
other	0.0%	0.0%	4.4%	0.0%	3.1%	0.0%	3.2%	1.5%
Total (N)	250	263	250	269	260	250	251	1793

A commenter on social media typically targets a particular actor who makes a statement in the news. Those who are most frequently targeted in user comments are scientists, followed by the media (journalists) and politicians belonging to the government or, to a lesser extent, the opposition (Table 2.21). These groups are most relevant in all countries, but their order of salience changes. In the majority of cases, this target actor is not identical to the actor who is trusted or distrusted. For instance, a user is critical of a journalist who claims that people should trust the vaccines. Trust or distrust is thus predominantly an indirect attribution, and not built up as a direct personal relationship. Further, there is a tendency to anonymise trust relationships (such as 'science' or 'the vaccines'), as opposed to supporting or campaigning against specific actors.

Table 2.21 Target Actor type * Country

Target Actor type	Denmark	Germany	Italy	Czechia	Poland	Greece	Serbia	Total
government	0.5%	29.2%	29.5%	4.8%	29.6%	18.4%	6.4%	17.1%
opposition	14.4%	0.0%	3.8%	9.6%	13.1%	39.1%	5.0%	9.4%
science	45.2%	24.8%	40.0%	16.3%	32.5%	26.4%	61.4%	35.9%
economy	0.0%	1.2%	0.0%	7.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%
media	39.9%	44.8%	5.7%	49.8%	2.4%	5.7%	23.6%	26.8%
citizens	0.0%	0.0%	8.1%	10.5%	11.7%	0.0%	0.0%	4.5%
other	0.0%	0.0%	12.9%	1.4%	10.7%	10.3%	3.6%	5.0%
Total (N)	208	250	210	209	206	87	220	1390

The trust receiver is defined as the actor who is trusted or distrusted by the commenter. For instance, in the previous example of a user who targets a journalist's claim that people should trust the vaccines, this user expresses her own distrust in the vaccine (science as a trust receiver). The most salient trust receiver across our country cases is the government, followed by science. There are, however, significant country differences, with the opposition being more visible than the government in Greece, and science being most visible in Italy and Czechia. What is also evident is that the opposition overall gains in visibility in user comments. Oppositional parties were found to be marginalised in the news where governmental representatives dominated Covid-19 debates. This higher salience of the opposition in user comments, however, does not correlate with higher levels of trust. Trust in the opposition is, on average, even lower than trust in government (16.8% trusting the opposition versus 22.4% trusting the government). Oppositional actors are thus not so much brought in as alternative actors to be trusted than as targets of distrust (see Table 2.23). In Denmark, economic actors are also frequently mentioned as a trust receiver in Facebook comments. Overall, this shows that user-commenters do not run targeted campaigns in support or opposition of selected actors, but rather shift attention in line with the shifting agenda of media debates. Their attention, however, is directed towards their governments and political representatives who are held more accountable than scientists, experts or journalists. Trust contestation on social media is

thus embedded in the representative system of democracy, and addresses the responsibility of government and elected officials with regard to science and the economy.

There is an overall tendency of Facebook users to express distrust in comments with regard to all actor categories (Tables 2.22 and 2.23). There are mainly zero sum games and no positive sum game in the way users trust. For instance, if the government is strongly distrusted, as in the cases of Greece and Czechia, the opposition parties are even more strongly distrusted. Only a minority of 29.2% in the case of science, and 22.2% in the case of government, express trust. Facebook commenting pages of newspapers are thus indeed used by readers to express their discontent with Covid-19 related politics, irrespectively of the type of actor. They are also the place where opposition against government and science is mobilised. This holds, in particular, for debates on the controversial lockdown measures and vaccines, where users dissented strongly against the news. The tonality of the news, which for both issue fields was found to be very balanced, and in some countries even supportive, is thus reversed. User-commenters raise a sceptical voice that is absent in the news, and rather identify with the anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown movement than with their political representatives.

Table 2.22 Receiver Actor type * Country code Cross tabulation

Receiver Actor type	Denmark	Germany	Italy	Czechia	Poland	Greece	Serbia	Total
government	58.7%	48.7%	26.8%	39.6%	68.3%	25.2%	36.9%	43.9%
opposition	8.5%	0.0%	4.1%	10.1%	8.4%	34.0%	1.7%	9.5%
science	1.2%	13.3%	37.7%	43.7%	4.0%	15.1%	26.2%	20.1%
economy	19.8%	6.5%	2.7%	0.4%	0.4%	1.7%	3.9%	5.1%
media	1.6%	20.5%	9.5%	2.2%	2.8%	2.1%	18.9%	8.2%
citizens	0.0%	0.4%	12.7%	0.0%	5.6%	5.5%	1.7%	3.5%
other	10.1%	10.6%	6.4%	4.1%	10.4%	16.4%	10.7%	9.8%
Total (N)	247	263	220	268	249	238	233	1718

Table 2.23 Receiver Actor type * dichotomy trust degree * Country code Cross tabulation

country	trust receiver	trusting	distrusting	Total (N)
Denmark	government	45.2%	54.8%	135
	opposition	5.0%	95.0%	20
	science	66.7%	33.3%	3
	economy	17.0%	83.0%	47
	media	0.0%	100.0%	4
	other	40.9%	59.1%	22
	Total	35.1%	64.9%	231
Germany	government	4.5%	95.5%	112
	science	39.1%	60.9%	23
	economy	23.1%	76.9%	13
	media	12.2%	87.8%	41
	citizens	0.0%	100.0%	1
	other	4.5%	95.5%	22
	Total	10.8%	89.2%	212

Italy	government	25.8%	74.2%	31
	opposition	0.0%	100.0%	4
	science	13.3%	86.7%	60
	economy	0.0%	100.0%	6
	media	0.0%	100.0%	18
	citizens	7.1%	92.9%	14
	other	41.7%	58.3%	12
	Total	15.2%	84.8%	145
Czechia	government	4.3%	95.7%	93
	opposition	0.0%	100.0%	17
	science	35.8%	64.2%	106
	economy	0.0%	100.0%	1
	media	0.0%	100.0%	6
	other	25.0%	75.0%	8
	Total	19.0%	81.0%	231
Poland	government	21.9%	78.1%	114
	opposition	26.7%	73.3%	15
	science	12.5%	87.5%	8
	media	0.0%	100.0%	7
	citizens	40.0%	60.0%	10
	other	58.8%	41.2%	17
	Total	25.7%	74.3%	171
Greece	government	29.3%	70.7%	58
	opposition	22.5%	77.5%	71
	science	21.2%	78.8%	33
	economy	25.0%	75.0%	4
	media	0.0%	100.0%	5
	citizens	33.3%	66.7%	9
	other	8.3%	91.7%	36
	Total	21.8%	78.2%	216
Serbia	government	24.7%	75.3%	77
	opposition	25.0%	75.0%	4
	science	34.8%	65.2%	46
	economy	12.5%	87.5%	8
	media	15.8%	84.2%	38
	citizens	50.0%	50.0%	4
	other	30.0%	70.0%	20
	Total	25.9%	74.1%	197
Total	government	22.4%	77.6%	620
	opposition	16.8%	83.2%	131
	science	29.0%	71.0%	279
	economy	16.5%	83.5%	79
	media	9.2%	90.8%	119
	citizens	26.3%	73.7%	38
	other	26.3%	73.7%	137
	Total	22.2%	77.8%	1403

Despite the overall balanced news coverage on Covid-19 related topics, and the almost complete absence of anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown protesters in the news, these fields are strongly present on the Facebook commenting pages. The minority voice in legacy media becomes the absolute majority in Facebook comments. Facebook commenters also express the strongest distrust of democratic politics and procedures. They do this, however, not in a way of dismissing governmental re-

sponsibility and strengthening instead anti-system parties, but rather as an expression of fundamental distrust against established government that claims responsibility back. Expressions of trust in the vaccines, or in governmental lockdown measures, are also not completely absent or marginalised, but, depending on the country, are expressed as a minority position, with the strongest support for health (Corona emergency measures) expressed in Denmark and Poland (around 50%), and the lowest (6%) in Italy (Table 2.24).

Table 2.24 Relation between 1st issue and trust/distrust dichotomy in each country

	1st issue	trusting	distrusting	Total in N
Denmark	HEALTH - Vaccine	18.6%	81.4%	70
	HEALTH - Corona emergency measures	49.6%	50.4%	133
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS GENERAL	5.9%	94.1%	17
	DEM - Control of government	0.0%	100.0%	3
	VAL&ID - The role of trust	0.0%	100.0%	1
	SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE general	0.0%	100.0%	1
	Other	0.0%	100.0%	4
	Total	34.9%	65.1%	229
Germany	HEALTH - Vaccine	18.0%	82.0%	50
	HEALTH - Corona emergency measures	10.3%	89.7%	78
	HEALTH - Tracing apps	0.0%	100.0%	5
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS GENERAL	0.0%	100.0%	20
	DEM - Elections	0.0%	100.0%	1
	DEM - Law/legal process	0.0%	100.0%	1
	SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE general	6.3%	93.8%	16
	MEDIA & COMMUNICATION	13.2%	86.8%	38
Total	11.0%	89.0%	209	
Italy	ECON - Employment	0.0%	100.0%	1
	ECON - Financial aids	0.0%	100.0%	2
	HEALTH - Vaccine	14.0%	86.0%	100
	HEALTH - Quarantine	100.0%	0.0%	1
	HEALTH - Corona emergency measures	5.9%	94.1%	17
	DEM - Elections	0.0%	100.0%	1
	DEM - Consultations/participation	0.0%	100.0%	1
	DEM - Control of government	44.4%	55.6%	9
	VAL&ID - The role of trust	0.0%	100.0%	25
	SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE general	100.0%	0.0%	1
	Other	0.0%	100.0%	5
Total	12.9%	87.1%	163	
Czechia	HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES GENERAL	9.1%	90.9%	33
	HEALTH - Vaccine	24.8%	75.2%	105
	HEALTH - Hospitals	100.0%	0.0%	1
	HEALTH - Corona emergency measures	0.0%	100.0%	45
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS GENERAL	0.0%	100.0%	1
	DEM - Control of government	0.0%	100.0%	2
Total	16.0%	84.0%	187	

Poland	ECON - Financial aids	100.0%	0.0%	1
	HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES GENERAL	40.0%	60.0%	5
	HEALTH - Vaccine	5.9%	94.1%	17
	HEALTH - Hospitals	0.0%	100.0%	1
	HEALTH - Corona emergency measures	52.4%	47.6%	21
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS GENERAL	21.9%	78.1%	32
	DEM - Elections	11.1%	88.9%	18
	DEM - Consultations/participation	0.0%	100.0%	1
	DEM - Control of government	0.0%	100.0%	15
	DEM - Corruption	100.0%	0.0%	2
	VALUES IDENTITIES GENERAL	6.7%	93.3%	15
	VAL&ID - The role of trust	50.0%	50.0%	18
	SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE general	0.0%	100.0%	1
	Other	0.0%	100.0%	14
	Total	22.4%	77.6%	161
Greece	ECONOMY GENERAL	42.9%	57.1%	7
	ECON - Growth	18.8%	81.3%	16
	HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES GENERAL	0.0%	100.0%	35
	HEALTH - Vaccine	23.5%	76.5%	34
	HEALTH - Hospitals	14.3%	85.7%	7
	HEALTH - Corona emergency measures	24.5%	75.5%	53
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS GENERAL	66.7%	33.3%	3
	DEM - Elections	16.7%	83.3%	6
	DEM - Control of government	0.0%	100.0%	1
	DEM - Corruption	20.0%	80.0%	5
	VALUES IDENTITIES GENERAL	0.0%	100.0%	1
	VAL&ID - The role of trust	26.4%	73.6%	53
	Other	33.3%	66.7%	3
Total	21.0%	79.0%	224	
Serbia	HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES GENERAL	22.9%	77.1%	35
	HEALTH - Vaccine	17.6%	82.4%	17
	HEALTH - Corona emergency measures	35.3%	64.7%	17
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS GENERAL	50.0%	50.0%	4
	DEM - Elections	50.0%	50.0%	2
	DEM - Consultations/participation	28.6%	71.4%	7
	DEM - Corruption	33.3%	66.7%	6
	VALUES IDENTITIES GENERAL	16.7%	83.3%	6
	VAL&ID - The role of trust	25.4%	74.6%	67
	SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE general	60.0%	40.0%	5
	Other	18.9%	81.1%	37
Total	25.6%	74.4%	203	
Total	ECONOMY GENERAL	42.9%	57.1%	7
	ECON - Employment	0.0%	100.0%	1
	ECON - Financial aids	33.3%	66.7%	3
	ECON - Growth	18.8%	81.3%	16
	HEALTH ISSUES AND HEALTH POLICIES GENERAL	12.0%	88.0%	108
	HEALTH - Vaccine	18.8%	81.2%	393
	HEALTH - Hospitals	22.2%	77.8%	9
	HEALTH - Quarantine	100%	0%	1
	HEALTH - Corona emergency measures	28.8%	71.2%	364
	HEALTH - Tracing apps	0.0%	100.0%	5
	DEMOCRATIC POLITICS GENERAL	15.6%	84.4%	77
	DEM - Elections	14.3%	85.7%	28
	DEM - Consultations/participation	22.2%	77.8%	9
	DEM - Control of government	13.3%	86.7%	30
	DEM - Law/legal process	0.0%	100.0%	1

DEM - Corruption	38.5%	61.5%	13
VALUES IDENTITIES GENERAL	9.1%	90.9%	22
VAL&ID - The role of trust	24.4%	75.6%	164
SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE general	20.8%	79.2%	24
MEDIA & COMMUNICATION	13.2%	86.8%	38
Other	12.7%	87.3%	63
Total	N=289	N=1087	N=1376
	21.0%	79.0%	100%

The style of commenting on Facebook is predominantly argumentative, meaning that user-commenters engage with arguments in the main article and express their own opinions or value preferences with regard to the issues at stake (Table 2.25). The primary function of commenting in response to news consists of expressions of spontaneous, personal opinions about what is written in the news (Larsson 2018), a finding that was to be expected. There is, however, a minority of commenters who engage primarily in fact-based comments, i.e., bringing additional facts into the debate, often by reference to statistical data or scientific evidence. Those are the more informed readers who consult additional sources, or investigate facts beyond the information provided in the primary source of the newspapers. In many cases, such factual interventions in the commenting section of Facebook are meant to turn the user debate into one that is more fact-based and serious, correcting the perceived ‘wrong opinions’ of others. In other cases, such comments can also be used to bring in so-called alternative facts, for instance from studies that show the negative effects of vaccines. There is a last relatively frequent (in Greece even majoritarian) category of ironic or sarcastic user reactions. Such users often copy a style of political sarcasm used as a rhetorical tool of criticism in political discourse (Musolff 2022). The sarcasm is often turned against political representatives, journalists, scientists or other users/citizens to express hidden distrust. In almost 80% of all cases, such sarcastic comments are, in fact, distrusting towards their targets. The fear that social media would be a forum for the expression of hate speech and inflammatory speech could instead not be substantiated in our case. Comments to be classified as hate speech remain exceptional, reflecting also the more recent efforts by page owners and the Facebook company to regulate debates by deleting such content and banning the users.

Table 2.25 Style/language per Country

style	Denmark	Germany	Italy	Czechia	Poland	Greece	Serbia	Total
factual/informative	21.6%	5.3%	7.6%	5.2%	8.1%	18.0%	7.6%	10.4%
argumentative	68.0%	79.5%	50.4%	72.1%	54.6%	22.8%	72.5%	60.2%
hate speech	0.8%	0.4%	1.6%	4.1%	2.3%	10.8%	2.0%	3.1%
parody/sarcasm	9.6%	14.8%	14.4%	7.4%	23.8%	46.8%	16.3%	18.9%
other	0.0%	0.0%	26.0%	11.2%	11.2%	1.6%	1.6%	7.4%
Total (N)	250	263	250	269	260	250	251	1793

The main trend of user-commenting as a form of opinion-based argumentative exchange is also reflected in the main principles user-commenters recur to for the justification of their arguments. In contrast to predominantly diagnostic argumentation in the main news, user commenters more frequently refer to values to ground their arguments. The main tone of the debate still remains diagnostic, with an emphasis on past performance as a reference to judgements about trust; yet moral standards, such as honesty/dishonesty and selfishness versus common-good orientations of trust receivers, are frequent references for the formation of opinions of the user-commenters (see

Table 2.26). Such value references in user opinions are predominantly meant to undermine trust, not to support it. The minority of trusting comments is predominantly based on diagnostic statements of observed performance, not on values. Commenters also frequently question the competence of political representatives or scientists, yet not so much by reference to facts or scientific evidence, but as an expression of personal opinion and judgement. The widespread idea of the incompetence of actors, institutions or even scientists is thus less based on observed failures or malfunctions than on weak insinuations. Even the claim of a failure of past performance, in the majority of cases, is not supported by facts, but suggested based on subjective opinion or judgement of values. These findings need, however, to be qualified with regard to the specifics of the Facebook newspaper sample. As can be seen in the distribution of principles of trustworthiness discussed in the articles themselves (Table 2.13 above), the selected news articles on Facebook are clearly more opinionated than the total of articles appearing in the news. This is easily explained by the selection criteria applied by the newspaper editors to post articles on Facebook. They will give preference to controversial opinion articles and not publish, for instance, mere fact-based agency news. The focus of users on opinion and value-driven debates on Facebook is thus partially in response to the raw material of news that passes the online selection filter.

Table 2.26 Trustworthiness principles in main article and FB user comment across the entire sample (all countries) in percent (%)

	principles main article	principles comment
DIAGN - Success of past performance	16.9	5.0
DIAGN - Failure of past performance	20.6	24.6
DIAGN - Ambivalent	4.5	1.4
PROG - Success of expected performance	10.2	1.7
PROG - Failure of expected performance	0.7	1.9
PROG - Ambivalent	2.1	2.9
Competence, expertise/incompetence, lack of expertise	6.4	8.8
Power & influence	1.6	3.0
Powerlessness, non-influential	0	0.4
Responsibility/irresponsibility	1.9	2.0
Honesty/dishonesty	11.2	15.1
Altruistic, care, support, common good	1.6	0.3
Selfish, egoistic, private interests	1.1	5.0
Stability/instability	0.5	0.5
Independence/dependence; impartiality/partiality	1.2	3.0
Transparency/intransparency	7.1	2.2
Reliability/unreliability	8.5	8.6
Rationality/irrationality	0	4.1
Safety/unsafety	4.1	4.3
Openness	0	0.1
Closeness	0	0.1
Other	0	4.8
Total (N)	1024	993

2.5 Conclusion

In this study, we have focused on the case of the Covid-19 pandemic to critically test the role of the media in the building of trust and distrust in government, science and the economy. In all countries analysed, the pandemic was a moment of intensified contestation in which the trustworthiness of government, science and the economy (e.g., the pharma industry) was challenged. This contestation of trust was primarily channelled through the media (legacy and social), through which citizens sought information and participated in public life. We raised the question of whether the news media opened a forum for the formation of 'enlightened trust', informing the citizens about facts and critically putting to the test the trustworthiness of political representatives and scientists, or whether the news media could be held accountable for the polarisation of political opinions, the mobilisation of extreme positions and the spread of fake news that targets the trustworthiness of scientists, government and political representatives.

The short answer to this question concludes that legacy media, and in particular public broadcasting, remained the main and most trusted sources of information in most countries analysed (except for Serbia and Poland) during the pandemic, accounting for a relatively balanced coverage in which expressions of trust and distrust in government and science were reasoned and equilibrated. In no country analysed did news media give high salience to extremist positions or polarised opinions, as for instance by "anti-vaxxers" or conspiracy theorists. This picture, however, is reversed when analysing user-driven trust contestation in response to news on Facebook. It is here that selected citizens express their discontent and question the trustworthiness of government and science, often in sharp opposition to the official health policies.

From a comparative perspective, trust contestations in the news overall follow similar patterns. We did not find significant country differences in the way trust of our four main groups of actors (government/opposition, science, economy and media) were contested. In all countries analysed, the pandemic gave high salience to the executive as a trust receiver, not the governmental opposition. In all countries analysed, the news media further gave high salience to science and experts as trust receivers. Trust in the news was overall found to be highly balanced. In none of the countries was there a strong bias towards distrusting statements of actors during the pandemic, and in no case, was the news merely used as an arena to promote uncritical trust in government, science or other key actors. This corresponds, by and large, to an informative, and at the same time critical role of the media. Most importantly, the news media were not the arena for anti-lockdown or anti-vaccination groups to gain salience. On the contrary, these protesters were largely absent as trust contestants in the news. The debate thus remained within the institutional-representative arena of politics and established science, and excluded the voice of radical groups. In the same vein, the debate focused primarily on collective and institutional actors, and was not personalised. In those instances of personalised debates, we could observe an increase in trust. An alternative arena of trust contestation instead was opened-up on newspaper Facebook pages. Here, the excluded voices from the news media found expression in predominantly undermining trust in government and science, and openly campaigning with anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination statements.

This main finding is in line with public opinion surveys during the pandemic (see Part 1) which confirm that the Covid-19 pandemic was not a moment of polarisation, but rather strengthened trust in government, science and the media. Radical anti-government and anti-science positions gained salience, but not necessarily support. They were spread not by legacy media but remained confined to social media and online news spaces. At the same time, the great majority of the population in all countries analysed still primarily trust traditional news organisations, such as public broadcasting and distrust social media and alternative news sources. During the pandemic, this gap between

trust in legacy news and distrust in new media even widened. This fact reopens the door for professional journalism to become engaged once again in the key role of creators of 'enlightened trust' in democracy.

Our case study of mediated trust contestation during the pandemic is restricted in the sense that our comparative media analysis only selected explicit references to trust in the news. This disregards the (probably more frequent) cases of questioning the trustworthiness of political actors through other rhetorical styles and concepts within the universe of public legitimacy debates. As a matter of fact, we might suspect that trust references in political debates follow linguistic and cultural particularities. The word 'trust' in the English language is considered, for instance, a rather strong expression to qualify the relationship with others, and political contestants might prefer a less explicit language, like, for instance 'I do not believe that this government has the capacity to master the crisis'. Despite this highly selective filter, we found a substantial debate on trust during the pandemic in all countries.

Another limitation is that our comparative analysis of social media trust contestation had to rely on a restricted data set of selected news articles that were shared by the major news organisations of the respective countries on Facebook. This disregards other forms of trust contestation on social media that might be more prominent and effective, and where polarisation effects are thus even more pronounced. Due to sampling restrictions and the unsuitability of the CrowdTangle research tool provided by Facebook for our research purposes,¹⁸ we were not able to apply rankings in terms of visibility and impact of the selected news articles. In equal measure, as the number of articles that are posted by newspapers on Facebook remains highly selective, our research strategy did not allow us to select the already-coded newspaper articles for our Facebook commenting analysis. The Facebook news sites remain, nevertheless, influential in the sense that the articles posted reach out to mass audiences of users who liked the pages. In most cases, this number of potential reads of news on Facebook exceeds the number of people who subscribe to the printed newspaper editions. Even though only a small percentage of these users engage in commenting and sharing, the data obtained from each news article is substantive. The practice of contesting trust in political representatives and science on Facebook news sites involves several hundred users who, on average, comment on each news post. This group of active trust contestants on social media is predominantly critical with a strong tendency towards distrust, but it is not, as is sometimes assumed, a uniform group of users with the sole intention of undermining trust in democracy. A plurality of voices is allowed, and diverging opinions are mostly not treated with disrespect or marginalisation.

Ultimately, and despite the fact that our data, through the application of statistical methods of data analysis, claim for representativeness of larger populations and countries, our research remains explorative in various respects. First of all, we operate throughout our study with small sample sizes based on the limited number of news articles with explicit trust references. The sample sizes could not be easily increased as the raw material in the form of articles that actually contested trust remained limited. The assumption that these articles can be considered as most significant can be questioned, as the use of the term 'trust' and related wordings varies across our countries' languages. Instead of pointing to enhanced degrees of political contestation, 'trust' can sometimes be used as a scientific or technical term that is mainly referred to by experts (e.g., when making reference to opinion surveys). This limitation in our sample size might, however, be given another explanation: that trust contestations during the pandemic became salient, but not dominant. The salience of trust in the media is mainly linked to popular discontent, and would thus be an indicator

¹⁸ CrowdTangle only allows for limited text search restricted to the content of main posts, but not of linked articles. All search functions related to 'Covid' and 'trust' did not, therefore, yield sufficient results.

of a crisis of the legitimacy of the political system. In this last sense, the relatively low visibility of trust contestations during the pandemic might simply point to the fact that democracy, despite all the restrictive measures taken by governments, was not fundamentally shattered.

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PART 3: AWARENESS OF FAKE NEWS AND COUNTER-STRATEGIES – COUNTRY REPORTS

Awareness of Fake News and Counter-strategies in the Czech Republic

Lucie Čejková and Alena Macková

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, the Czech media system has consolidated based on strong public service media, multiple commercial television and radio broadcasters, and several dominant publishing houses providing news. But recently, the Czech media environment has witnessed several intertwined shifts that have changed some of its key characteristics.

First, there is the shift towards digitalisation. In the last decade, online media has become an integral part of the Czech audiences' media routines. Most of the online news is provided by mainstream news brands that are linked to broadcasting and print media (Štětka, 2020). Also, the market is partly served by smaller online news and opinion outlets, partly by online political tabloids represented typically by *Parlamentní listy* [Parliamentary Letters], and partly by online disinformation media (Štětka et al., 2020).

Second, there is a shift in ownership. Several key media were taken over by domestic owners (previous owners were mostly Germans) explicitly linked to political and economic interests, and evidence demonstrates increasing levels of media ownership concentration (Kotišová & Waschková Císařová, 2021). These ownership changes have induced a critique of the oligarchisation and politicisation of the media, and have triggered fears about their independence (Štětka & Hájek, 2021). On the other hand, these transitions have resulted in the expansion of the smaller online news and opinion outlets that were launched typically by editors who left the dominant media (cf. Štětka et al., 2021). However, even the most successful of these outlets (e.g., DVTV, Forum 24, Echo 24) are still accessed by fewer than 10% of the users, and the majority of these media are unknown to the general population (Štětka 2019, 2020). Additionally, the ownership changes were paralleled by the rise of populist and illiberal politics (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018), leading to "increasing politicisation and more explicit partisanship of the Czech news media" (Štětka, 2019). Despite these fears of a negative impact on audiences and their attitudes, Fletcher et al. (2020) and Tóth et al. (2022) note that Czech audiences are, in comparison to other countries, not as fragmented and/or polarised.

Third, an ecosystem of online outlets, that can be referred to as disinformation media (Štětka et al., 2021) or anti-system and conspiracy websites, has evolved. These mainly comprise far-right, nationalist, pro-Russian, and Russia-funded media. According to Štětka et al. (2021), around 20-23% of Czechs consumed at least one of these media in 2018-20.

As already indicated in Part 1 of this report, trust in the media in Czechia is at an average level compared to other EU member states, with 25% of the population displaying high trust and 31% low or no trust in the media (see Figure 1). Trust in the independent PSM (i.e., Czech Television, Czech Radio, the Czech News Agency) stays high (i.e., more than half of the population trusts PSM), and it remains the most trusted media type (Štětka, 2020). Additionally, CT is the most-watched television outlet and the most important news source in the country. Besides public broadcasters, according to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, the most trusted media are local and re-

gional newspapers (trusted by 60% or more participants). They were followed by traditional newspapers (e.g., *Hospodářské noviny*, *Mladá fronta DNES*), online news sites (*iDnes.cz*, *Seznam.cz*, *Aktualne.cz*, *Novinky.cz*) and a commercial TV station (TV Prima) with trust levels at between 50 and 59%. The least trusted sources were tabloids. Overall, trust in news in 2020/2021 was 33% and 36%, respectively. Trust in social media for news was very low (16% and 17%, respectively).

Concerning the long-term trend in trust in media, the overall picture strongly depends on measures of trust in media or in media type. While the data from Reuters Institute Digital News Report shows a decline in trust in previous years (especially in the case of online media), the Eurobarometer shows a diverse picture in terms of media type (Fig. 1), indicating a decrease in trust in TV, and especially in the Internet and social networking sites, which had accelerated over the last three years, with that trend continuing during the pandemic period (though the use of the Internet and social networking sites increased; see Macková et al., 2021). Compared to this, research of the CVVM showed a constant decrease in trust in all types of media (Fig. 2 and 3) – with the exception of the slight and temporary increase in trust in some media at the very beginning of the pandemic. However, the trends in overall trust in the news during the pandemic period were rather inconclusive.

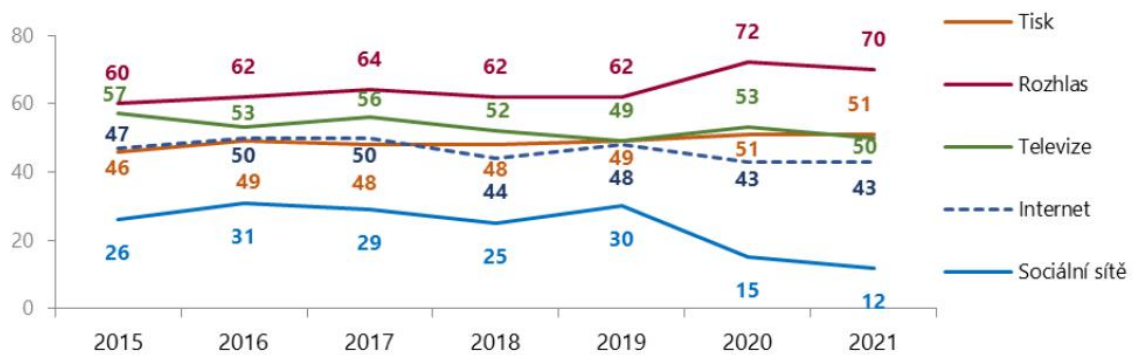


Figure 1: Trust in media types. Source: Standard Eurobarometer (Winter 2021–2022). Note: Trust in print, radio, television, internet, and SNS (from above).

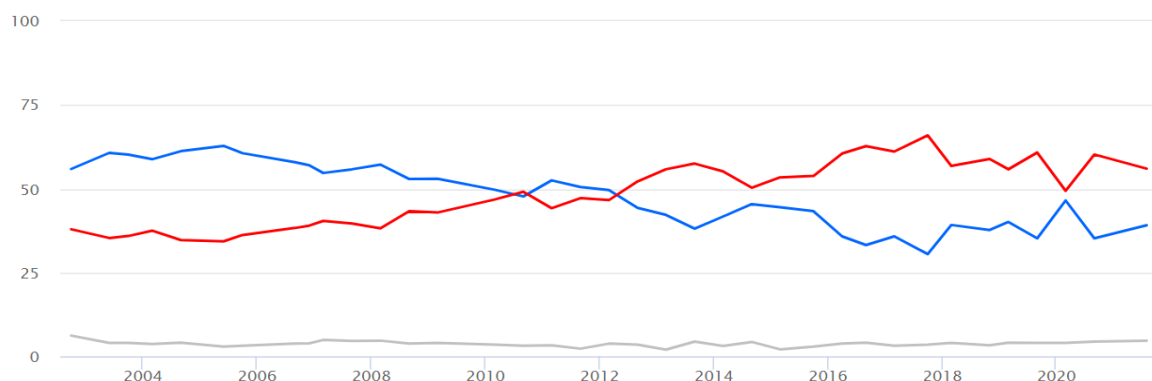


Figure 2: Trust in press. Source: CVVM. Note: blue = trust, red = distrust, grey = don't know.

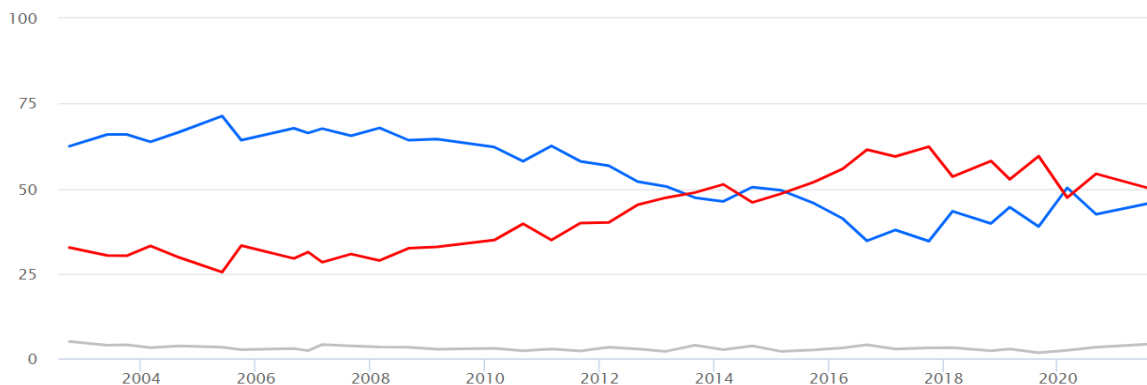


Figure 3: Trust in television. Source: CVVM.
 Note: blue = trust, red = distrust, grey = don't know.

Compared to trust in media, the trend was more vigorous in the case of political trust. According to the Eurobarometer, trust in government dropped during the first year of the pandemic from 40% to 19%, and only 15% trusted Parliament (Fig. 4). Currently, after the national election in 2021, and after the dramatic decline in political trust during the pandemic, trust increased (45% of citizens trust the government, and 35% trust Parliament), and in 2021, the level of political trust was highest in last nine years (since 2013)—showing significant support for the governing parties. Moreover, trust in the European Union has been constantly though slightly growing over the last years (50% of citizens trust the EU). In general, political trust had been declining since the second half of the '90s. The most stable pattern and a higher level of trust are linked to local politics and political actors (mayors). On the contrary, the level of trust in the president, the government, or the Chamber of Deputies is less stable, and strongly linked to actual political situations or the politicians themselves (Figures 5 and 6).

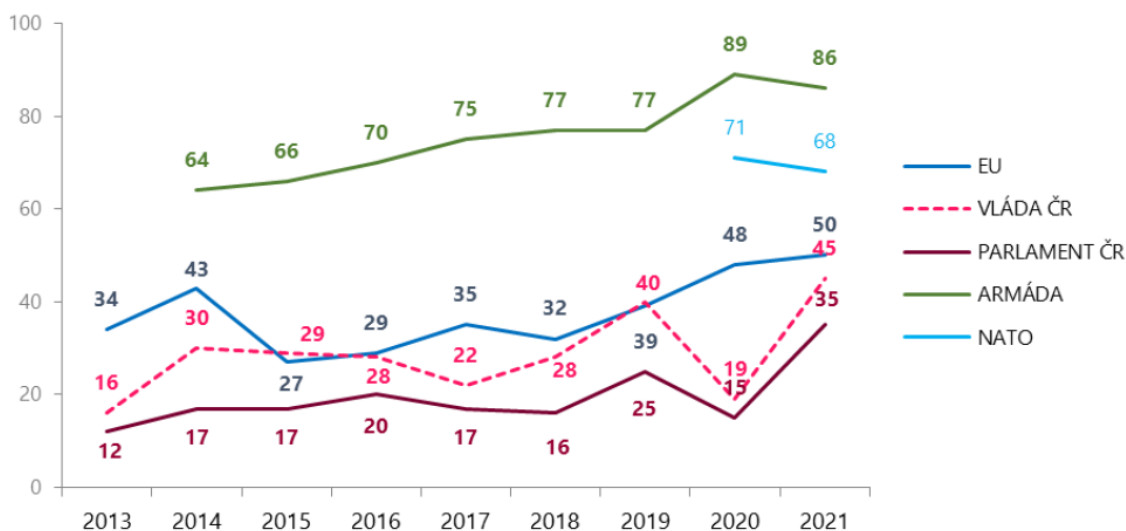


Figure 4: Political trust. Source: Eurobarometer.
 Note: Trust in EU, Government, Parliament, army, NATO (from above).

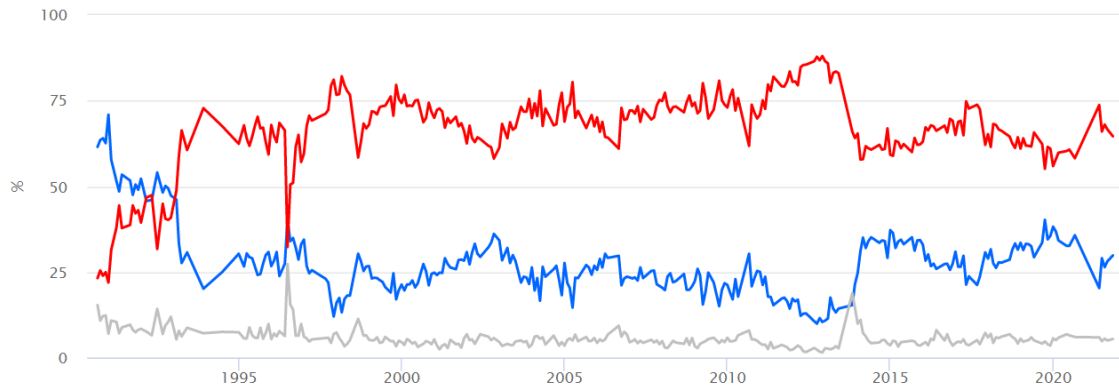


Figure 5: Trust in Chamber of Deputies, Source: CVVM.
 Note: blue = trust, red = distrust, grey = don't know.

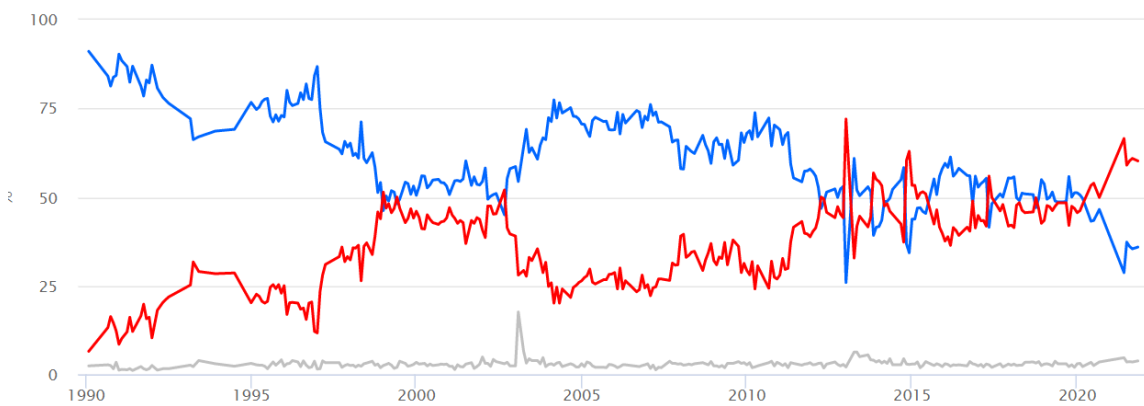


Figure 6: Trust in the president, Source: CVVM.
 Note: blue = trust, red = distrust, grey = don't know.

2. Groups of respondents and their identification of the problem of disinformation

In the category of **public broadcasting**, we interviewed a journalist from Czech Radio (Český rozhlas), working on a fact-checking project of Czech Radio called Ověřovna [loosely translated as the Verification Room]. Our second respondent works in Czech Television (Česká televize) as an anchor and head journalist for the programme Reportéři ČT [Reporters CT] (see Table 1 below).

Both respondents differed in how they defined the addressed phenomena, especially regarding the precision of the definition that they could provide. One of them¹⁹ was brief and specific in their definition, describing disinformation as a deliberately shared piece of false information. The respondent also distinguished between disinformation and misinformation, with the latter being a piece of false information spread by someone who is unaware that the information is false.

¹⁹ One of the respondents asked for stricter anonymisation, so the parts of the report about public broadcasting respondents are written without a clear identification of the originator of the statement.

The other respondent spoke more vaguely about disinformation, propaganda and conspiracy, and did not differentiate among the terms. The following statement was close to a definition: "Disinformation sometimes tries to give the impression that it is scientific, but at other times, it simply gives the impression that it is the hidden truth" (Interview_CZ_5).

The respondent focused more on the effects of these phenomena. For example, the respondent said that disinformation impacts people in a way parallel to that described by George Orwell in his novel, 1984. As such, disinformation leads to "some kind of fanaticism," with undisclosed destructive effects on people's psyche, as well as brainwashing, intensified mainly by "modern technologies" such as SNS" (Interview_CZ_5). The respondent also described that people affected by disinformation have no interest in democratic thought exchange and/or the rational processing of information, which, as a consequence, has a negative impact that undermines consensus in society.

Similar variance appeared in the definitions of the studied phenomena in both interviews with journalists from **professional media** (Deník N and Seznam Zprávy) (see Table 1 below).

The first journalist defined disinformation by the goal it aims to fulfil, and also by the usual channels through which it is communicated: "Disinformation, I believe, is outright false news that is shared with the purpose of confusing people. That means it is shared with the motivation to do something harmful" (Interview_CZ_7). He added that disinformation is disseminated with the harmful aim of deceiving. From his point of view, it is mainly shared by people who do not know the originator of the disinformation. People receive it usually via Facebook or e-mail, in both cases sent "from a friend of a friend" (Interview_CZ_7). He also believes that the sheer volume of information makes it more complicated to distinguish disinformation.

The second journalist said he does not have any particular definition of fake news in mind. He described the current phenomena more generally, mainly using the reasons he believes are behind the spread of false information. The main problem, from his perspective, is that there is too much information, making it easier to share "things that are false, misleading, or somewhat manipulated" (Interview_CZ_4). According to the respondent, these "things" also do not follow general journalistic rules of verification, which means they can be fabricated and spread more quickly.

In the category of **non-profit, independent journalism projects**, we spoke with a journalist from Médiář, and with the founder, director, and a reporter of the independent journalistic project HlídacíPes [translated as The Watchdog] (see Table 1 below). Both depicted disinformation and related phenomena in a similar way.

Jakub Jetmar (Médiář) defined disinformation as follows:

I think it is something that has been around as long as the media have been around because unverified messages have always been, naturally, part of them. Or even propaganda, which I would connect the closest with what we understand today as disinformation. That means it is some deliberately shared information that is either not true at all, or is substantially misleading (Interview_CZ_8).

Nowadays, disinformation is more prominent due to SNS, information and communication technologies, and the Internet, as they multiplied the channels to deliver information. In Czechia, the term disinformation is too often used as an umbrella term, and Jetmar thinks it frequently also connotes connections to Russia, especially before the pandemic.

When describing disinformation, Ondřej Neumann (HlídacíPes) said: "The word disinformation is too kind a word, I think. To me, it is simply lies or rubbish" (Interview_CZ_6). According to the re-

spondent, disinformation, lies, and propaganda have existed for centuries, even for millennia. However, the current crises of coronavirus and the war in Ukraine have shifted more attention to such phenomena—maybe even too much, from the respondent's perspective. He identified disinformation mostly in connection to influence operations by China and Russia.

Both respondents from **civil society and NGOs** (Rekonstrukce státu and Transitions), described disinformation as a piece of information that is harmful. Nevertheless, Miroslav Crha from Rekonstrukce státu pointed out that it is too complicated to deliver a conclusive definition, of service to all actors tackling disinformation. He distinguished between civil society that does not need as precise a definition of disinformation as the state, which has to create a definition based on strict criteria, usually connected to further sanctions. Consequentially, he believes that the state definition of disinformation should be "based on direct harm to public interest, while the definition of disinformation in civil society can work more with the narrative" (Interview_CZ_3) of particular disinformation.

In the project where Jaroslav Valůch works (Transitions), the problem is identified more generally as "false information" (Interview_CZ_1). During the workshops delivered to older people, who are the target group of the project, he usually makes further distinctions according to the purpose of the originator of the false information. First, he uses misinformation to describe "some messy information which sometimes all of us contribute to, including journalists" (Interview_CZ_1). In addition, such information might be shared or produced in a hurry, thus left with some mistakes or unverified parts. Yet, the intention is not to harm or deliberately share a lie.

This is typical for the second category, which he names disinformation – a piece of information created to mislead someone and/or harm someone. The originator, or sharer, is aware that the piece of information is false, yet still decides to share it.

We contacted Markéta Chumchalová (PR division of the Regional Office of the South Moravian Region) and Markéta Gregorová (member of the European Parliament from the Czech Pirate Party, a member of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation) as the respondents for the category of **local and national government and EU-level projects**. Chumchalová described disinformation more generally, using the possible channels of its spread. She notes that disinformation, conspiracy, and similar false or biased information often spreads via SNS. She believes that disinformation and/or false information exist to such a large degree nowadays that they constitutes an "unlimited source" (Interview_CZ_10).

Markéta Gregorová spoke about disinformation in connection with its long history. She believes that disinformation and information have always co-existed. Thus, disinformation will always be there as long as we exchange information. However, the information environment has changed with the Internet and SNS, and disinformation has more space to spread. At the same time, she does not feel that disinformation can be eradicated entirely. The complete elimination of disinformation would impose a substantial restriction on the freedom of speech, seen as unacceptable.

Table 1: Groups of Respondents and Their Activities Related to the Topic of the Report

Public broadcasting media	
Jana Magdoňová	Czech Radio
Ověřovna [Verification room]: a project aimed at verifying information. Started initially before the last parliamentary election in Czechia (autumn, 2021), now verifying mostly information about the Ukrainian war. Jana Magdoňová is a journalist on the project.	
Marek Wollner	Czech Television
Reportéři ČT [Reporters CT]: a weekly news and opinion journalism programme with primarily investigative work concerning political, economic, and societal topics. Reports and investigative projects about the originators of disinformation were among the previously covered topics. Marek Wollner is an anchor and a chief editor.	
Professional journalism	
Lukáš Werner	Deník N
Deník N: a daily, published both online and in printed form. Articles require a subscription to be unlocked. Previously did some fact-checking work and covered the topic of disinformation. Lukáš Werner is the assistant editor.	
Tomáš Svoboda	Seznam Zprávy
Seznam Zprávy: an online news platform. Before the pandemic, a series of workshops about disinformation aimed at older people was organised by Seznam Zprávy. Tomáš Svoboda is a regional journalist.	
Non-profit, independent journalism projects	
Jakub Jetmar	Médiář
Médiář: an online news platform covering media and marketing. The platform also publishes texts about disinformation, fact-checking, or SNS regulation. Jakub Jetmar is a journalist.	
Ondřej Neumann	HlídacíPes
HlídacíPes: an online journalism project publishing original findings and investigative and analytical work to expose actions harmful to the public interest. Previously it has mapped Chinese and Russian influence in Czechia. Ondřej Neumann is the founder, director, and reporter.	
Civil society and NGOs	
Miroslav Crha	Rekonstrukce státu
Rekonstrukce státu [Reconstruction of the state]: an organisation aimed at creating policy for good state administration and watchdogging democratic principles. Current projects focus on supporting media independence and diversity, freedom of speech online, and strategic communication of the state. Miroslav Crha is an analyst and a lawyer.	
Jaroslav Valůch	Transitions
Media Education Programme: a part of activities of Transitions, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) focused on journalism training and media education for the public. The media education programme targets older people. Jaroslav Valůch is a manager and lecturer of the programme.	
Local and national government and EU level projects	
Markéta Chumchalová	Regional Office of the South Moravian Region
PR division of the Regional Office of the South Moravian Region: a body creating public relations and public communication campaigns. Some of them addressed disinformation, especially during the pandemic. Markéta Chumchalová is part of the PR division team.	
Markéta Gregorová	European Parliament
Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation: a committee focused on disinformation, among other topics. Markéta Gregorová is a member of the committee and a member of the European Parliament from the Czech Pirate Party.	

3. Trust in news and journalism

Both journalists of **public broadcasting** media (PBM) described disinformation as a problem for their work. One of them said that public service media are under constant attack and pressure due to disinformation. The other depicted the problem of disinformation and its relationship to trust in journalism and democracy in a more sceptical, even hopeless way. According to the respondent, disinformation causes problems with reaching consensus: “Disinformation is a tool aimed at destroying democracy. [...] It is a different type of mind-control, and it is the kind of mind-control destined to establish some authoritarian or other regimes” (Interview_CZ_5).

However, the effect is also mutual. People who have been failed and marginalised by state policies, and who do not feel protected by the state, be it because of poverty or debt, might prefer disinformation as it attacks democracy. At the same time, according to the respondent, disinformation strives for dissolution of trust, both in democracy and journalism, mainly attacking the news outlets that do not side with the originator of disinformation (e.g., disinformers present Russia and China as good countries, but mainstream media present them as a threat, and thus should be ostracised).

For both respondents from PBM, SNS are seen as a tool to spread disinformation. One of them believes it is primarily due to the direct interaction via SNS, which helps originators and sharers of disinformation create a feeling of mutuality and community that mainstream mass media do not provide. According to the other journalist from PBM, SNS use algorithms that filter out people who previously shared something manipulative. These people are classified as those who might be more susceptible to baseless claims and messages, and as a consequence, algorithms select higher numbers of manipulative political messages for them. The respondent also thinks that people do not feel the need to admit they are wrong if the disinformation they believe is proven wrong. They always find people on SNS that agree with them and support them with the same opinion: “The whole network of platforms somehow protects us from it [accepting that we might be wrong], and in this way, it does not allow us to learn from our mistakes and even induces more need for disinformation” (Interview_CZ_5).

Both respondents see trust in PBM as essential for democracy. One of them believes that trust in the public service media is a sign of healthy democracy. At the same time, distrust means that people are influenced by disinformation that attacks PBM, or PBM do not perform well. The other respondent thinks that people who do not trust PBM, or media in general, surround themselves with a group of like-minded people, who see journalists as culprits of conspiracy. As a result, journalists cannot reach them.

According to both respondents, people affected by false information might come from different backgrounds, having various ages and levels of education. Their need to seek disinformation might be the result of a personal frustration or failure.

Both respondents from the **professional media** expressed their worries about the connection between disinformation, trust in journalism, and democracy. Disinformation might influence political decisions (e.g., towards migrants) or even elections. If people do not trust the current political system, or feel despair or frustration about it, the reality of the situation might be too complicated for them:

People have an enormous amount of information to choose from, and I believe it does not work in the way that these people somewhat randomly gather around this different information. [...] They are seeking something that relates to their values, their opinions—and, of course, they find it. (Interview_CZ_7)

Seeking disinformation is thus also seen as a reaction to this personal situation. However, it might result in distrust in everything. So, in conclusion, disinformation, distrust in the news, and distrust in democracy are seen as interrelated.

According to the respondent, the current overwhelming amount of available information and knowledge, partially delivered to people via SNS and the Internet, shows that people still have a great deal to learn in terms of dealing with the amount of information. Consequently, people might start feeling distrust in the news because they cannot navigate through the overwhelming amount of information.

According to the second journalist, disinformation spreads faster than news because it is easy to fabricate, since it does not adhere to professional journalistic standards and usually looks "sexier" (Interview_CZ_4) than the real news. Concurrently, people who do not have much time to read the news, or who have much experience with the news (e.g., older people or young people from rural areas) are considered vulnerable to disinformation. He believes that such people usually follow news shared by their friends or family, or simply believe anything they come across on the Internet.

Both journalists from **independent journalism projects** depicted disinformation, trust in news, and trust in democracy as interrelated phenomena. According to one of them, disinformation narratives position journalists side to side with so-called corrupt elites, who are seen as "the others", and are thus distrusted:

They are building some kind of image of their authenticity, which I think is strengthened by the fact that the articles are written differently from how they were taught at journalism school. It is just nothing special, really. It is as if a friend told you such-and-such at the pub. And I think that to some people who have this typical institutional distrust, it appeals more, and does these disinformation websites credit. (Interview_CZ_8)

However, he also thinks that the problem is on the side of journalism. Most influential news outlets serve their economic interests and the interests of their owners--in many cases oligarchs (Daniel Křetínský, Andrej Babiš, Penta Group), so they follow the oligarchs' agendas (e.g., fossil fuels' lobby, developers' lobby). As a result, they overlook topics seen as necessary by some groups in society.

Another problem, according to the respondent, is the way SNS work. They have power over the spread of information by controlling algorithms, while at the same time having a "very ambivalent approach towards disinformation" (Interview_CZ_8). Disinformers work with this possible space, and they make it more appealing by violating journalistic rules and writing in a more informal and personal style. This is seen as attractive for people who despise the formal diction of institutional and official communication.

When fabricating disinformation, disinformers make use of current affairs that are still unfolding, or those events that might be a sensitive topic to some people. Disinformers spin such topics or frame them in an unfair or vulgar way, and then spread and create distrust in so-called elites, including the mainstream media.

Ondřej Neumann (HlídacíPes) identified politicians as part of the problem. Some of them personally own news outlets (Andrej Babiš), but others, according to the respondent, also spread manipulative content (Andrej Babiš, Miloš Zeman). Like the second journalist, he also identified the problem with the economy of newsrooms; however, in his case, he finds news funded by advertising in general problematic. Such a model does not allow payment for qualified journalists and investigative teams, but encourages fast information publishing, often without verification. This sometimes leads to journalists making mistakes, inadvertently causing disinformation spread. Nevertheless, he does

not believe that disinformation necessarily affects people's trust in journalism. From his viewpoint, people who cannot distinguish between quality news and disinformation do not follow quality news anyway.

Yet, he believes there is a group who distrust journalism, but not as a reaction to disinformation. This is seen as problematic by the respondent. According to him, when some people do not trust the journalistic tenet of "seeking truth and critical writing with the public interest in mind" ([Interview_CZ_6]), it negatively affects journalism's role of being a foundation for democracy.

We also spoke to respondents from **civil society and NGOs**. The respondent from Rekonstrukce státu considers the relationship between disinformation, trust in journalism, and trust in democracy as interrelated – similar to most of the previously-mentioned respondents. He believes that people who do not trust the establishment and politics also distrust journalism, and disinformation creates the impression of uncertainty about the truth, which also negatively affects trust in journalism. He describes the problem as based on low levels of media literacy because audience members cannot evaluate the quality of their news sources. The government is identified as the actor who should act to improve media literacy. At the same time, providers of SNS are seen as part of the problem, as they use algorithms to promote controversial content to gain more attention from their users. Nevertheless, he thinks that distrust in the news might also be beneficial if it can provide constructive critique, but may also be detrimental when it leads to the feeling of powerlessness and restrains people from participating in democratic processes.

Jaroslav Valůch (Transitions) shared his position at length on trust in news. He explained that in the group his project addresses (i.e., older people), distrust in one's own abilities, society, and democratic institutions might be related to distrust in journalism. However, he pointed out that we still do not have enough data to support this assumption:

It is a kind of abuse of one's feelings of insecurity and frustration about the current state of the world--the world, in general, but especially the world mediated by the media. It is what we see as the baseline: the concern, the discontent, the important needs that are not being satisfied, and the frustration that leads to the situation of people trusting the traditional institutions gradually less, including the traditional media. Consequentially, they are more prone to the activities of disinformers who intentionally and very effectively address these feelings. (Interview_CZ_1)

Yet, media literacy projects might not automatically lead to higher trust in news, as people with high levels of media literacy might feel doubt about every news source. What is certain is that distrust in news and trust in disinformation affects close relationships among older people (who are the target group of his project) and their relatives. Concurrently, a lack of trust in journalism creates an opportunity for self-reflection by journalists.

In studies partially authored by his organisation and mentioned during the interview, it is shown that people have a desire for quality journalism but feel like there is none. Search engines and SNS create the impression in older people that there is nothing to trust. According to the respondent from the NGO, they often have limited abilities to distinguish quality sources from dubious ones, and thus remain confused by the amount of information "out there" (Interview_CZ_1).

When disinformation appears, it might effectively target their feelings of uncertainty, frustration, and fear. Conversely, some people bear such strong emotions, or feel like they cannot trust traditional institutions, including traditional media, and disinformation might target such vulnerabilities. According to the respondent, it is thus very alluring to trust sources of disinformation when they adhere to one's own worldview or feelings.

The representatives of **local and national government and EU-level projects** also point out the role of SNS. Markéta Chumchalová (PR division of the Regional Office of the South Moravian Region) believes that SNS play a crucial role in amplifying disinformation, which negatively affects trust in journalists. She feels like people who trust disinformation are almost impossible to address with quality journalistic work, which she believes most journalists try to provide. Distrust in journalism then strengthens distrust in information, in general--and, as a result, also distrust in democratic institutions.

From the recent crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, or the war in Ukraine, she points out that disinformation gets worse as soon as the first wave of solidarity fades. She believes that critique of journalistic work could be beneficial if it is constructive: "They do not say 'I do not like that you chose this source for this and that reason,' but they rather say, 'Everything you do is wrong and you all lie'" (Interview_CZ_10).

The second representative said destabilising efforts against trust in institutions and information are interrelated. Some disinformation explicitly aims at attacking democracy as a system, while others affect societies and individual lives (e.g., dubious esoteric advice during Covid-19 that could harm one's health). Disinformation can also contribute to the polarisation of society and decisions on important political topics, such as migration. The problem is enforced by the ownership of Czech media, as most of the mainstream news outlets are owned by wealthy and influential people. According to the respondent, it further complicates arguments against distrust in the news when there is such ownership. What "makes it easier" (Interview_CZ_9) for disinformation is the situation where some journalists working in oligarchs' news outlets do not adhere to journalistic standards.

Generally, Markéta Gregorová (member of the European Parliament from Czech Pirate Party, member of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation) believes that journalism is one of the pillars of democracy and, as such, needs to be trusted, as well as democratic institutions. However, distrust in the news might be beneficial when it creates space for journalistic projects funded by their audiences, which has already happened in Czechia (an independent journalistic project called Voxpot is mentioned, as an example).

4. Originators of disinformation

Respondents from **PBM** identified multiple sources of disinformation. The first source is the profiles of people who were initially against anti-Covid measures, and who are now discussing geopolitical issues and addressing the war in Ukraine. According to one respondent, disinformation websites might be another source, but no fixed list of them has yet been created. Both respondents also mention the problem of SNS that permit disinformation to spread through their algorithm settings. One of the journalists also recalled a "Czechoslovak rarity" (Interview_CZ_5) – chain e-mails sent mainly among older people. Sharers of disinformation, in general, are seen as people who have discovered that they can gain popularity if they share something controversial. According to the respondent, manipulative content was also shared and possibly produced by ANO, the previous governing party.

A journalist from Czech **professional media** described originators of disinformation as a small group of people, as most people usually only share the content that has been created by someone else. Like previous actors from public service media, he sees that SNS are being used to spread disinformation. This was further enforced by the pandemic when disinformation profiles gained profit via Facebook (e.g., accounts and pages have changed their profile picture to bank account numbers

and asked people for money). Thus, he believes that most originators produce disinformation for profit. He said that the portion of people affected by disinformation is not significant in number. Still, he thinks it needs to be watched so disinformers do not gain more influence. He also expressed his impression that some proportion of disinformation is backed up by Russia, and maybe some other authoritarian regimes.

Lukáš Werner (Deník N) said that the typical sources of disinformation are various websites that pretend to be news, SNS accounts, and e-mails. However, he does not think it is always possible to track the originator. Also, politicians who share manipulated, partially true news are seen as part of the problem, making the whole territory "hazy" (Interview_CZ_4). According to Werner, disinformation operations might be backed by pro-Kremlin opinions and anti-vaccination groups or initiatives, sometimes even represented by conspiratorial scientists, experts or doctors.

Jakub Jetmar, respondents in the category of **non-profit, independent journalism projects** identified disinformation websites, Facebook groups, and "shady" (Interview_CZ_8) Telegram groups as the spaces where disinformation is spread. The last one was mentioned as the least possible to reach by any counter activity. Additionally, he once again highlighted that algorithms of SNS are a significant part of the problem, as they spread and promote "garbage" (Interview_CZ_8) to gain attention for their own economic gains. Considering actors that might be backing disinformation, the respondent expressed his fear of Russian propaganda. However, he feels like it is becoming less supported by the Czech people after Russia invaded Ukraine.

Ondřej Neumann (HlídacíPes) used the word "project" to describe various sources responsible for spreading disinformation located in "the grey zone of journalism" (Interview_CZ_6). He lists "pseudo information" (Interview_CZ_6) media and websites, and social networking sites among the spaces that allow disinformation to be shared. These might create the opportunities for originators of disinformation, but also for those who do not personally create disinformation. Yet, according to the respondent, some people share disinformation completely wilfully because they are in favour of the pro-Russian and pro-Chinese narrative that is present in it. Consequently, he identified Russia and China as possible backers of disinformation in Czechia. Nevertheless, he insists that the reach of disinformation should not be overestimated. He mentioned anti-vaccination disinformation as an example; the anti-vaccination groups might be loud, but regardless of this, about 60 percent of people are vaccinated.

The respondent from the **civil society and NGOs category** thinks that the originators of disinformation were initially more visible. For example, anyone could reach disinformation websites. This changed when a group of prominent websites, usually accused of spreading disinformation, was banned in the Czech Republic after Russia invaded Ukraine (see CZ NIC, 2022, for more detail).

Nowadays, he sees that disinformers are moving to SNS and into more hidden spaces of encrypted instant messaging apps. The latter two mentioned are depicted as predominant spaces to spread disinformation by the respondent, and he also added that algorithms are to blame for the situation. He added that Russia might be the backer of an unidentified proportion of disinformation in Czechia.

Another respondent in the category of civil society and NGOs, referenced various studies that his organisation used, or co-authored, when he defined the originators and sharers of disinformation. Thus, he distinguished among sharers who might not be aware of spreading false information as they genuinely believe what they share. This is about five to ten percent of Czech people. The other group identified by the respondent, the originators of disinformation, are only hundredths of a percent of people in Czechia. Yet, they became more prominent during Covid-19, especially on Facebook.

Among the originators of disinformation, the representative from the NGO category differentiates the following groups: preachers, who use disinformation as a tool to share "their truth" (Interview_CZ_1) with ideological motives, without any proven connection to any particular backing; Kremlin bots, that are people in personal financial crisis, directly paid by Russia to produce disinformation; traders who use disinformation to gain profit from advertising, with the monetary income as their primary motivation to spread disinformation (this is identified as the group that grew during the pandemic); and finally, esoteric websites and healers, spreading disinformation for spiritual reasons while often simultaneously being connected to e-shops selling esoteric products, however dubious, for profit.

The respondent also spoke about various tools used to spread disinformation. Besides disinformation websites, he noted that personal Facebook accounts grew as the space to share disinformation, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. Previously, it was primarily websites and pages with hidden names and unidentified authors. In recent months, disinformers have become more public personas, even famous, to those who trust in disinformation. With their own identities promoted on Facebook, they often gain financial profit from spreading disinformation by asking people to send money to their bank accounts to support them in sharing the "truth." Additionally, chain e-mails were identified by Jaroslav Valůch as another such tool to spread disinformation, especially when addressing older people who do not use SNS as much as adults or younger generations.

Markéta Chumchalová (PR division of the Regional Office of the South Moravian Region) from the **local and national government and EU-level projects** category believes that those who share disinformation are feeling frustrated over something else, so they compensate for it by sharing false news, gaining reactions from similar people, mostly on SNS. It allows them to achieve the success that they may lack somewhere else in their lives. In general, she describes SNS, especially Facebook, as the spaces where disinformation is shared. Facebook groups were mentioned among those who help to spread disinformation, as they are often closed and comprised of people who mutually support and reinforce each other's opinions. Besides, they might even operate as a group in the so-called offline reality outside Facebook, as they might organise a protest, for example.

The second respondent in this category distinguishes between ideological spreaders of disinformation who genuinely trust what they share, or they use disinformation to address some topics on their agenda, and those who share disinformation for profit, thus trying to achieve as much attention as possible using clickbait headlines, sensation, and emotional messages. As the spaces where disinformation is shared, she identified disinformation websites or disinformation media, SNS, and chain e-mail communication. She also mentioned that algorithms on Facebook aggregate people who previously shared doubtful information, making it easier to form closed groups that disinformers might abuse. Considering various age groups, Markéta Gregorová said that younger audiences usually encounter disinformation via TikTok, WhatsApp, and similar apps. Adult people might find disinformation on Facebook and older people in their e-mail communication.

Furthermore, unlike other respondents, academic workplaces were mentioned as a space to share disinformation and influence research projects, researchers, and interns. These activities are primarily associated with Chinese influence by the respondent. She depicts China as the actor who uses disinformation to create an image of itself as a good business partner to get more investment opportunities in Czechia. Consequently, China's strategy is more targeted than Russia's strategy, which is based on creating information chaos, the impression that there is nobody to trust, and overloading people with immense amounts of information, often intentionally contradictory. She also notes that these countries are not the only actors who back disinformation in Czechia, but they are the most prominent ones.

5. Effects of the pandemic

The Risks

Among the effects of the pandemic, the respondents identified both risks and opportunities. As to **the risks**, both respondents from **PBM** expressed that the pandemic had profound effects on trust in journalism, and other kinds of trust, such as trust in experts and institutions. One of them even described the situation as a "brutal" (Interview_CZ_5) decrease in trust, and both highlighted that disinformation grew in number and had reached more people than previously. Simultaneously, media—often unwillingly—became part of the disinformation campaigns, as they sometimes forwarded false or unverified information, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, in times of initial uncertainty.

One of the journalists explained that disinformation during the pandemic attempted to create distrust both in media and institutions, while at the same time, PBM audiences hit record high numbers. However, the media made their mistakes: creating a confusing mixture of facts and opinions, and overloading people with information, which might have resulted in distrust in information, in general. The situation became even worse, as the government had, from the respondent's perspective, a very confusing communication that made it even more difficult for journalists to deliver any clear message to people. Furthermore, the respondent said worryingly that it was the first time when the general public, to a large extent, questioned scientific knowledge.

Another respondent identified the problem of trust in journalism, politicians, and experts during the pandemic as very interrelated. Journalists were seen by some as those who sided with politicians and experts, trying to put forward measures unacceptable to them. Thus, trust in all of these actors was linked, one to the other. The respondent recalled that the problem might have been intensified as some politicians, experts and media who spread campaign messages, e.g., for vaccinations, and presented them as a measure to end the pandemic. Yet, it did not happen and the pandemic is still around, leaving some people distrustful and uncertain.

Similar to respondents from PBM, the growth of disinformation and trust in disinformation during the pandemic was also mentioned by a journalist from the **professional media**. Concurrently, journalism and news became less trusted. This was described as interrelated with decreasing trust in experts, science, and the government during the pandemic.

According to the journalist, the uncertain situation produced moments when journalists published information that experts later proved wrong, highlighting the epistemic uncertainty of the pandemic era and the constantly changing nature of available knowledge on the pandemic. He believes that this is simply the way scientific knowledge is generated, as it always requires room for development, but also noted that media audiences do not always understand this process. Thus, some people lost trust both in journalists and scientists, as journalists informed about measures or research developments that were later renounced by scientists. He also admitted that there is a dilemma of giving space in the news to different opinions, as it is seen as a basic rule of journalism, while sometimes, it might not be beneficial as it creates situations where some scientists are later proven entirely wrong, or accused of being intentionally misleading. In sum, the respondent did not see the pandemic as an opportunity to rebuild trust in journalism. It was complicated for journalists to cover the pandemic without making mistakes and, consequently, their journalistic work was sometimes seen as inadequate by some, giving them more reason to distrust journalism and news.

The other journalist from the professional media described the blending issue of distrust in journalism, experts, and the government in a similar manner. He depicted the beginning of the pandemic

as an informational environment full of chaos. Again, it was partially seen as a result of ineffective communication from the government, but also resulted from the development of scientific and expert knowledge. Consequently, journalists were also confused about the situation, and people were left in chaos, leading to distrust.

According to the respondent, the pandemic has also highlighted the problem that had already existed—that is, people usually choose what they want to trust, follow positions that match their own worldview, and sometimes even distort the information they receive so it somehow marries up with their situation and opinion. Nevertheless, the origin of this deepening problem was identified mainly in the so-called celebrities and dubious experts that were allowed to speak on the news only to make the reporting more attractive, even though their opinion was marginal, or simply sensational.

The issues with respondents being allowed to speak in the media and the decreasing trust in news, institutions, and experts were also voiced by the respondents from the **non-profit, independent journalism projects** category. Jakub Jetmar (Médiář) described the effect of the pandemic on trust in journalism as “fatal” (Interview_CZ_8) as even disinformation websites were sometimes right in their critique of mainstream journalists because, in the uncertain situation, journalists made mistakes and allowed doubtful experts to express their opinions in the reporting. However, he also believes that some news outlets performed better than others, especially when using good and personified communication of trustworthy scientific knowledge. Daniel Stach, from Czech Television, the data journalists’ section from Czech Radio, and Petr Koubský from Deník N, were listed as examples.

The journalist from Mediář sees connections between trust in journalism and trust in traditional institutions, as well. He said that trust in institutions had plummeted during the pandemic and was further weakened by the chaotic communication of state actors. It resulted in less trust in journalism, too, and generally in information. Journalists were part of the problem, as they could not distinguish relevant voices, tending to allow everyone to speak. In addition, he once again highlighted that the problem was the economic interest of the media. Some news followed a format described by the respondent as “blogsite-like” (Interview_CZ_8). Hence, it was more likable and attractive to people, but did not work correctly with the provided information—which further intensified distrust in the news.

Ondřej Neumann (HlídacíPes) was critical of journalistic work during the pandemic as a whole. The media, according to him, were not able to find any “rational” (Interview_CZ_6) way to report during the pandemic. Without any critical reflection, they followed scientists, experts, and the government, and anything other than the mainstream voice was labelled as an outsider’s voice, as it did not fit the general narrative. For example, people who did not want to accept all anti-Covid measures, and who tried to critically reflect on them, were ousted. This opened more space for dubious media projects and disinformation that gave space to those rejected by mainstream media. It is seen as a failure of journalistic work by the respondent. Additionally, he criticised mainstream media for scaring the public.

In connection to trust in journalism, he believes that it was weakened because of the uncritical stance of the media, which reported unverified approaches and measures that were later proven ineffective. He mentioned lockdowns and vaccination as examples of measures that did not make Covid disappear, as some of the media initially promised.

Miroslav Crha from Rekonstrukce státu, a respondent for the category of **civil society and NGOs**, said that it was the problematic communication of the state actors during the pandemic that made

the situation extremely complicated. Some politicians tried to use the topic for their personal political gain, and as a topic of political competition, while at the same time adopting measures that the courts later cancelled as unlawful. This created a basis for distrust in politicians, creating more space for disinformation against the state. Furthermore, disinformation about Covid-19 was communicated more by individuals and anti-Covid celebrities, often spreading false news, but nevertheless seen as sources of information by some people. This threatened trust in journalists and trust in institutions, as they were both attacked by the spreaders of disinformation.

Jaroslav Valůch (Transition) described the effect of the pandemic on trust in journalism as generally negative. While the first wave of the pandemic was, from his perspective, handled well, people were united, the government delivered good crisis communication, and disinformers were paralysed by the new situation, it did not last long. With every new pandemic wave, more disinformation and dubious experts appeared, with some invited to speak on the news. Additionally, journalists did not find a suitable way to inform the public about disinformation, and fact-checking, and verification activities were more of an ad hoc nature. During the prolonged pandemic, state communication also failed, which left space for disinformation wide open. He also described a new group of disinformers who appeared for the first time during the pandemic, mainly operating on social networking sites with their personal profiles for financial profit. It was another challenge for the news, science, and experts.

Among the respondents from **local and national government and EU-level projects**, Markéta Chumchalová (PR division of the Regional Office of the South Moravian Region) expressed her worries about the profound deepening of distrust in media during the pandemic. Like other respondents, she described the work of the media as somewhat overwhelming due to the extensive coverage of the pandemic, sometimes with the mistake of discussing the topics with experts without proper knowledge or expertise. However, she was less critical of it, defending the journalistic work as "the task to inform about current and important matters" (Interview_CZ_10), with Covid-19 being such an important matter during the pandemic.

According to the respondent, trust in doctors, politicians, institutions, and journalists were negatively affected during the pandemic. People did not appreciate the work and expertise of those who deserve such trust, such as qualified doctors. Nevertheless, she also admitted that some experts were "making it worse" (Interview_CZ_10) for those working correctly when such people spread doubtful theories about Covid-19. She was also among those respondents who highlighted the dilemma of journalists giving space to various opinions, but sometimes having to draw the line between those who are allowed to speak and those who are denied.

Markéta Gregorová (member of the European Parliament from Czech Pirate Party, member of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation) differed from the rest of the respondents in her evaluation of the pandemic, describing it as a topic similar to any other. Still, the context was made worse by the uncertainty of the situation. She also sides with those respondents who described the chaos caused by the government during the pandemic, which further complicated the work of journalists. When the news was about to inform about the new measures adopted by the government, journalists struggled to make the situation more comprehensible. The respondent believes that people did not understand that it was mainly due to the problematic communication of the government, not the journalistic coverage.

She also noticed that disinformation grew in number during the pandemic. She distinguishes among three groups that followed their interests in such disinformation: Russia, which tried to divide society even more by spreading false information and by critiquing the government, yet sometimes it

was based on real mistakes by the state; China, which spread narratives about the illness not originating from the country and trying to improve its image by donating materials, such as masks, that were later paid for; and spreaders of disinformation for financial profit, selling non-existing solutions and esoteric products.

To sum up, the respondents identified the following risks that emerged during the pandemic:

- a general decrease of trust in journalism, experts, and institutions, resulting mostly from the issues mentioned in the next points;
- growth of disinformation, both in their numbers and their impact;
- journalists not having enough awareness of the topic, partially because of the novelty of the situation, which had a further negative impact on the quality and trustworthiness of news content;
- journalists giving space in the news to various experts, or inviting respondents without proper expertise on particular topics, but also inviting experts who were later proven wrong, or who represented peripheral positions outside of current scientific consensus;
- confusing governmental communication, including imposing measures that lacked intelligibility.

The Opportunities

Some respondents also identified various **opportunities** that arose from the specific situation of the coronavirus pandemic. For example, both respondents from **PBM** identified several of them. One of the journalists highlighted that media content producers started to pay more attention to the selection of their respondents, and they learned how to choose those who are truly competent for the discussed topic. Yet, the approach of various media outlets was different, and the possibility to improve thus only applied to some media. The more quality ones were careful about their sources, while those seeking attention invited respondents without a proper professional background, but with strong opinions, often only to create a sensation. Additionally, some media sought clicks and engagement of online users by writing biased or decontextualised and shocking headlines, which the respondent criticised.

When speaking of possible opportunities, the other respondent from PBM distinguished between two groups of people: One group was depicted as those against vaccination, against Covid-19 measures, with undebatable opinions since they were unwilling to listen to any other position. Again, this situation was primarily linked multiple times to users' behaviour on SNS. At the same time, there was another group of "less radical" (Interview_CZ_5) people who were described as those who were, thanks to the pandemic, more open to listening to journalists. For example, they were against vaccination initially, but after experiencing severe Covid-19 symptoms, they understood that journalists were right in promoting vaccination.

Lukáš Werner from **professional media** (Deník N) also shared some optimism about the opportunities for journalists during the pandemic. He believes that some people can simply tell the difference between high-quality and low-quality news and journalists, and it so happened in the case of the pandemic. The new situation thus only highlighted such differentiation, and people followed high-quality news more, while those who had "different" (Interview_CZ_4) worldviews sought other sources of information to traditional news.

Additionally, Jaroslav Valůch (Transitions), a respondent from the **civil society and NGOs** group, believes that the pandemic allowed reflection on the current issues and a re-establishment of some trust. For example, journalists realised that only relevant scientists and voices should be invited to

speak, and scientists possibly learned that their communication with the media had to improve. Finally, it offered some potential to build trust among older people, as they were seen by the respondent as less vulnerable to Covid-19 disinformation due to more frequent contact with their doctors, and a careful approach to health issues.

Markéta Chumchalová (PR division of the Regional Office of the South Moravian Region) from **local and national government and EU-level projects** depicted the beginning of the pandemic as an opportunity for the media and for society, in general, to unite and help. However, when there was no end to the pandemic in sight, people gradually became angrier, more anxious and apathetic about information, and started to doubt the news much more. She became very sceptical about the possibility of building trust in the context of the pandemic in the end, as she experienced growing anger, especially on social networking sites. Yet, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to reflect on how information is provided to people and how to deliver information in a more accessible way.

Markéta Gregorová (member of the European Parliament from Czech Pirate Party, member of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation) addressed the possible opportunities only briefly. Generally, she mentioned that the pandemic provided an opportunity for society to at least notice the issue of disinformation and realise that it is an existing problem.

In brief, the following opportunities were mentioned by the respondents:

- journalists reflecting on their work, especially paying closer attention to the selection of respondents;
- people watching high-quality news more;
- possibility to unite society, especially at the beginning of the pandemic;
- the general public being more aware of what disinformation is.

6. Counter-strategies

Fact-checking and media literacy projects have mainly emerged in the Czech Republic in recent years, and both activities are conducted primarily by non-governmental organisations. Today, there are various fact-checking projects without a specific thematic focus (e.g., Manipulátoři, Hoax, Czech Elves, StopFake), but also projects that fact-check only particular topics (e.g., Demagog.cz focused on fact-checking political debates and speeches by politicians).

Hitherto, education in media literacy does not have its fixed place and systematic approach in the institutional education of children and young people in the Czech Republic. Yet, several non-governmental projects aim to fulfil this role and provide workshops and materials for teachers (e.g., One World in Schools programme by People in Need, Fakescape, Zvolši.info). Additionally, there are also non-governmental organisations that engage in media literacy education and address other groups of the general public, such as older people (e.g., Transitions, Elpida).

Recently, the state has joined the efforts to fight disinformation, too. The current Czech government has created a new position of commissioner for media and disinformation. In the context of the war in Ukraine, the government has also launched a website debunking the most common false news about the conflict (Braňme Česko, 2022). In 2017, the Ministry of the Interior established the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats, which aims to counter hybrid threats, including disinformation and propaganda (Ministry of the Interior, 2022). It publishes reports and analyses of disinformation and propaganda activities in the Czech Republic.

The respondents interviewed for this report mentioned some of these projects. They also voiced various ways and different actors that should be active against disinformation. Hence, the following part is structured topically to highlight the most often mentioned actors and activities that should be carried out to combat disinformation. The last two sub-sections include special cases of counter strategies during the pandemic, and also voices of those who raised concerns about counter activities against disinformation.

The State

According to the respondents, the state should be active on various fronts against disinformation. First, it should produce well-tailored legislation and processes to act against disinformation and those who spread it. For example, according to one journalist from **PBM**, the state should both establish much-needed legislation against disinformation and motivate the police to act more against disinformation. Lukáš Werner (Deník N), a **professional journalist**, suggested that state actors establish key points to adhere to when prosecuting disinformers. Various respondents, Werner included, also noted that the above-mentioned banning of some pro-Russian disinformation websites after Russia invaded Ukraine was disputable and lacked proper argumentation and discussion, which should be avoided in the future.

Another topic linked to the state's role in the combat against disinformation was the strategic communication of state actors. For example, Miroslav Crha (Rekonstrukce státu) from the **civil society and NGOs** group of respondents saw the high-quality strategic communication of the state as playing a "crucial" (Interview_CZ_3) part in counter strategies against disinformation.

Markéta Chumchalová (PR division of the Regional Office of the South Moravian Region) from **local and national government and EU-level projects** suggested that public and trusted personas could communicate essential topics. Hence, the personas would seem closer to ordinary people, and the communication could be more effective. Another respondent from the same group, Markéta Gregorová (member of the European Parliament from Czech Pirate Party, member of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation), said that politicians, in general, could also help in to combat disinformation by sharing verified information. It could further improve the trust in government, and in politics, as well.

Additionally, Jakub Jetmar (Médiář) from the **non-profit, independent journalism projects** warned that state activities should not result in situations where people who trust disinformation are labelled as "dumb" (Interview_CZ_8). Instead, they should be listened to and engaged with.

This is also connected to the third aspect of state action mentioned by some respondents—education. The role of education as a counter strategy is described in more detail below. However, some respondents explicitly articulated that the state should be the one initiating education to improve media literacy.

Some respondents also highlighted the role of the EU as an inspiration for the state. For instance, they mentioned efforts to intervene in the problem of disinformation as a good pathway to follow in member states.

Education

Education was seen as another effective strategy to counter disinformation. While some respondents explicitly mentioned that the state should be responsible for media literacy programmes, others were more general about education and its role. The respondents who mentioned education also added that much more should be done in the Czech Republic. For example, Miroslav Crha (Rekonstrukce státu) from the **civil society and NGOs** group of respondents said that improved and coordinated media literacy programmes should be provided, initiated mainly by the state.

Other respondents spoke about media literacy and media education regarding groups it should address. For instance, **professional journalists** Tomáš Svoboda (Seznam Zprávy) and Lukáš Werner (Deník N) suggested that media literacy programmes should be aimed primarily at educating young people, mostly at school. Other respondents, such as Jaroslav Valůch from the **NGO Transitions** and Markéta Gregorová (member of the European Parliament from Czech Pirate Party, member of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation), a member of the **local and national government and EU-level projects** group of respondents, highlighted that media literacy should be considered a society-wide problem by the state, and that education should be tailored as such. Markéta Gregorová also added that she considers various fact-checking and media education programmes as another way to engage people more in civic participation. Besides other benefits, such programmes and projects give people a more factual basis when they evaluate their elected representatives.

Jaroslav Valůch, on the other hand, warned about the possible downside of media literacy programmes. Sometimes, the pressure on people from media literacy programmes to fact-check everything might even create more distrust in information. He suggests that media education should focus more on building trust, based mostly on personal contact (e.g., media education organisations visiting regions and talking to people, instead of delivering massive global campaigns against disinformation).

Journalists

Multiple respondents mentioned that journalists also have the power to fight against disinformation. Some respondents described that high-quality journalism covering a wide variety of topics could be among the counter strategies. For example, according to Jakub Jetmar (Médiář) from the **non-profit, independent journalism projects** category, media should offer people topics that would enforce audiences' trust in news. The respondent generally described some people and their issues as underrepresented. He said it is no surprise that such people lose their trust in mainstream journalism.

Similar arguments were voiced by Ondřej Neumann (HlídacíPes), who suggested that quality journalism might be the best way to combat disinformation. He believes that serious, trustworthy, and verified information can attract people without the need for yellow press language and sensational reporting. Thus, media should focus on such reporting, do their regular job properly, and build long-term relationships with their audience. In sum, he insists that "the best way to combat disinformation is to publish true, relevant information, and give people a choice to follow various political opinions" (Interview_CZ_6).

Jaroslav Valůch (Transitions) from the **civil society and NGOs** group of respondents was also among those mentioned above who believe that media should pay more attention to topics that are usually overlooked, but that are still relevant to many people, such as poverty. Another way would be

to have diverse media representing various political opinions on diverse topics. However, he was concerned with journalism, as such. He described that more journalistic transparency should become part of the counter-strategy against disinformation. For example, journalists could attend public discussions and show how they work in some special contexts, thus explaining their everyday job. This does not mean engaging in "journalistic populism", but instead becoming reflexive and open about their work, and willing to listen to people without seeing them as "the mass out there" (Interview_CZ_1). According to Valůch, this would establish mutual trust among journalists and their audiences.

Miroslav Crha (Rekonstrukce státu), another respondent from the civil society and NGOs group, suggested that journalism should be subjected to a systematic evaluation. He believes it is necessary to create a well-arranged media rating, with objectively measurable qualities of quality news publishing (e.g., public information about journalists, publishers, owners, transparent corrections of past mistakes). Concurrently, websites that do not follow such measures, such as disinformation websites, would be cut off from financial sources, e.g., their advertising income.

Regarding debunking disinformation and covering it as a topic of news, both respondents from **PBM** warned that journalists should be careful when choosing what disinformation to cover, and how to report it, because it can shift more attention to the disinformation itself. However, the key might be in providing rich context, carefully selecting the headlines of fact-checking articles, and giving the audience enough information, so the disinformation is entirely eradicated. Lukáš Werner (Deník N) from the **professional media** group of respondents also insisted that the media should be active in revealing false information while simultaneously avoiding making mistakes and publishing unverified information.

Platforms and SNS Providers

Some respondents emphasised that platforms and SNS providers should be much more active in their combative role against disinformation. Tomáš Svoboda (Seznam Zprávy), a respondent from **professional journalism**, mentioned that their active participation, as part of a systematic approach against disinformation, is needed. For example, SNS should filter out disinformation—but at the same time, they should not violate the freedom of speech. He suggested that SNS could connect with a group of independent fact-checkers who would control flagged posts. SNS providers would then have to adjust algorithms to stop spreading such false information when proven wrong.

Jakub Jetmar from the **non-profit, independent journalism project** Médiář voiced concerns over the economic model of such providers. He believes that platforms, as well as news aggregates, should be involved in the regulation and debate about the public interest because nowadays, they usually only follow their own economic interest.

The need for more public control of SNS and platforms was mentioned by Miroslav Crha (Rekonstrukce státu) from the **civil society and NGOs** group of respondents, as well. According to Crha, SNS and platforms should be more transparent about their regulations and moderations of content, as it is apparent that their self-regulation is not enough. Options for users should also be extended. Users should be able to control more what they see, so they can, for example, sort the posts on their Facebook walls according to timestamp, and not in the order selected by algorithms. Additionally, users should be able to choose what personal information they provide to the recommendation algorithms.

Fact-Checking Initiatives, Project and Websites

Multiple respondents identified fact-checking initiatives, projects, and websites as beneficial in combating disinformation. For example, a journalist from PBM highlighted that such projects are good at combating disinformation because they do not violate freedom of speech, like state or institutional projects do. Another respondent from a non-profit, independent journalism project added that fact-checking websites are beneficial as they provide an online archive of fact-checked false information.

Markéta Gregorová (member of the European Parliament from Czech Pirate Party, member of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation), a member of the **local and national government and EU- level projects** group of respondents, praised fact-checking initiatives as beneficial and necessary. While they cannot reach all people, these initiatives still offer a place to go for those who want to find relevant information, and for those interested in verified information.

In addition, she believes that it is vital to address and correct misinformation. She maintains that publishing verified and accurate information with rich context and relevant explanations is a reasonable way to combat disinformation. However, it would be even better if the actors attacked by disinformation manage to be the first to set the agenda, not only react to disinformation.

Similarly, almost all respondents concluded that fact-checking projects and initiatives have only a limited impact. Even if they might be effective, it is only to some extent, and society's resilience against disinformation should be built more complexly. For instance, Tomáš Svoboda (Seznam Zprávy) from **professional media** perceives fact-checking as a long-term solution that cannot react promptly to new disinformation. Additionally, people who follow disinformation probably perceive fact-checking activities as an unwanted involvement from educated people who are part of the "them" group. This might result in a more profound division between those people and the rest of society.

Another respondent from professional media, Lukáš Werner (Deník N), shared his own experience with fact-checking. He realised that fact-checking is very time-consuming and requires a great deal of effort, which is problematic as more pieces of false information are fabricated than it is possible to fact-check.

In addition, he thinks that addressing and correcting disinformation might provide more attention to such false news, and believes that it is a valid argument against publishing their verification. Anyway, he has his own set of measures that might set the limit for selecting such disinformation verification as a topic for journalists: when it is widely spread anyway; when it affects current affairs (e.g., Ukrainian migrants nowadays); and when it is spread or connected to a public authority, such as a high-profile politician.

Adversely, when asked about the possibility that fact-checking further promotes disinformation to more people, Tomáš Svoboda from Seznam Zprávy, the second respondent from professional media, promptly denied such a possibility. He believes that fact-checking has a positive effect, as disinformation usually spreads outside mainstream media (e.g., on social networking sites or via e-mails), so he is not afraid of any amplifying effect.

Counter-strategies during the pandemic

When speaking of counter strategies against disinformation, some respondents specifically addressed applying such strategies during the coronavirus pandemic. Markéta Chumchalová (PR division of the Regional Office of the South Moravian Region) from **local and national government and EU-level projects** shared that her PR division team debunked disinformation during the pandemic. They cooperated with experts and doctors to communicate the verified information, but their efforts were ineffective anyway. People saw them as part of the establishment that imposed unwanted anti-Covid measures on them, and did not accept the verified information at all. As frustrating as it is, she believes that trying to inform people about verified information, again and again, is probably still necessary.

Tomáš Svoboda (Seznam Zprávy) from **professional media** described fact-checking during the pandemic as very difficult for journalists, pointing out again that there were far too many different and often contradictory voices. Nevertheless, he believes that journalists should follow the scientific consensus as a counter strategy in such situations:

If you have twenty epidemiologists and nineteen of them are saying that the twentieth is completely off the mark, and is spreading disinformation, you should have a warning light in your head as a journalist that signals that these nineteen epidemiologists are probably not making this up. (Interview_CZ_7)

Problematic aspects of counter-strategies

While most of the respondents mentioned at least some possible counter strategies, some were sceptical about the majority of actions against disinformation, and highlighted problematic aspects that such efforts might bring about. This is not to say that all counter strategies are seen as purely unproblematic--many respondents admitted that counter strategies have to be conducted carefully, so as not to violate freedom of expression. However, some respondents were more uncompromising in their critique.

One respondent from **PBM** described most measures elicited by the state or the EU as unsuitable and ineffective, as the line between banning and censorship is too thin, and it could harm the democratic principles of such institutions. Simultaneously, the respondent insisted that in society, some groups had formed whose members had their own fixed opinions, impossible to overturn by such counter disinformation activities.

Analogous concerns were raised by Ondřej Neumann (HlídacíPes) from the **non-profit, independent journalism projects** category. Generally, he does not believe that the EU or state activities can be effective, nor does he support the EU-backed projects and organisations of "disinformation fighters" (Interview_CZ_6). If it were up to him, he would relocate the money initially given to initiatives against disinformation to support diverse media projects instead, as he believes that a diverse media landscape is the best solution.

7. Conclusion

The high awareness of the problem of disinformation and fake news was apparent in all our respondents. They also used the term "disinformation" much more than "fake news" to describe the

current phenomenon. SNS, instant messaging apps, chain e-mails, and disinformation websites were often listed as responsible for spreading disinformation.

There seems to be a consensus among the respondents that trust in journalism is gradually decreasing. This phenomenon is seen as intertwined with decreasing trust in government and democracy. At the same time, disinformation has been on the rise.

According to the respondents, the pandemic accelerated this process and deepened the already existing problem of lack of trust in traditional institutions. Consequentially, the effect of the pandemic was combined — respondents described the situation as chaotic and full of informational disorder, as journalists, experts, and the government were all confused by the novel situation. Many deduced that trust in journalism, institutions, and science was decreasing, exacerbated by further disinformation spread.

How does Czechia perform in the European context? It is difficult to tell from the interviews with the journalists and experts we approached. For example, Jaroslav Valůch (Transitions) mentioned Finland as the country that is better at fighting disinformation and providing media literacy education, but immediately added that the reason is probably that people in Finland are more likely to be satisfied with the state, thus having more trust in general. Similarly, Ondřej Neumann listed Scandinavian states among the examples of countries with an excellent and diverse spectrum of media. Some respondents also described Baltic states as good examples, as they are close to Russia and Belarus, and have more experience with disinformation. Lithuania was highlighted as exceptionally effective, having a state body investigating disinformation. Additionally, Great Britain was also mentioned multiple times as exemplary in state communication, and as a country with recent experience with combatting disinformation, mainly because of Brexit. From the countries outside Europe, Taiwan was mentioned by some respondents as a successful example. With China nearby, it has established a state body for disinformation debunking and effective communication of verified messages. Apart from Taiwan, Canada was another non-European country praised for having a good policy (e.g., legislation dealing with manipulation before elections).

The journalist Tomáš Svoboda described Czechia as part of the "bumper" (Interview_CZ_7) countries in Europe located between the East and West. For this reason, much of the information in the Czech public debate oscillates between various positions, resulting in less consensus. According to the respondent, Czech people have less experience with independent media due to the previous communist regime. Consequentially, they perform worse in media evaluation, as they have less experience with different journalistic work than people from western countries.

Our respondents also delineated many challenges that lie ahead. The most prevalent were:

- improving strategic communication of the state to limit the space for disinformation, and strengthening trust in institutions,
- learning from the past failures in communication to prepare for future crises,
- building complex education programmes to improve the resilience of the Czech people against disinformation,
- fighting disinformation in encompassing ways (i.e., include all crucial actors, like journalists, politicians, the general public, etc. and all essential aspects and dimensions, like journalism, freedom of speech, psychological aspects of sharing disinformation, etc.) but without violating democratic principles, such as the freedom of expression, and without stigmatising those who trust in disinformation, to avoid further divisions within society,
- tailoring suitable control over platforms and SNS providers and their algorithms,
- being aware that spreaders of disinformation might start using fake fact-checking and false education programmes to further promote their agenda.

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Journalism and the Struggle for the Best Version of the ‘Truth’ in News information – Insights from Denmark

Anne Brus

1. Introduction

In this introductory part of our report, we present our method. We will also give an expanded presentation of the Danish media landscape. As part of this, we will outline an overview of the development in trust in news and journalism compared to other important areas of the Danish democracy, such as the representative government, science, and experts. Finally, we will put a spotlight on trust in journalism and media during the pandemic.

Interviews

Our empirical basis for writing this report is qualitative interviews with seven professional journalists and three researchers. The interviews were conducted in February and March 2022. Seven of the interviews took place online via zoom. Three interviews were face to face. All interviews have been recorded and transcribed.

The first group of respondents work as readers’ or viewers’ editors. Their work is to handle complaints from the audience. Two of the journalists are from the two Danish public media, the independent state-owned institution DR, and the stated owned limited company, TV2. The public service journalists define their positions as ‘news ombudsmen’²⁰ but their official title is ‘viewing audience’ editors. The last respondent in this group is the readers’ editor at Politiken, a moderate left-wing newspaper. The second group of respondents are researching in journalism and fact checking. Two of them are responsible for the Danish Reuter reports. The third researcher has just received funding for a fact-checking research project. The last group of respondents are affiliated to tjekdet.dk. It is the only fact-checking milieu in Denmark²¹, and has existed since 2016. Tjekdet.dk has recently been granted government funding. Two of the journalists are working as fact checking journalists. One is the executive chairman of tjekdet.dk. We have also interviewed a digital NGO journalist from one of the big environmental movements in Denmark.

Interview overview:

- Bjarne Schilling: Politiken
- Nathalie Damsgaard Frisch: tjekdet.dk
- Thomas Hedin: tjekdet.dk
- Lisbeth Knudsen: tjekdet.dk
- Lars Bennike: TV2
- Jesper Termansen: DR
- Mette Bengtsson: Copenhagen University

²⁰ The ‘news ombudsman’ is a protected title.

²¹ The Danish public service program, ‘Detektor’, is also working with fact checking journalism. We have contacted them three times, but they have not turned back on our request. Here in September 22, DR has announced that they will close the program

- Mads Kæmsgaard Eberholst: Roskilde University
- Mark Ørsten: Roskilde University
- Thomas Helsborg: the Danish society for Nature Conversation

In order to describe the Danish media landscape, we have consulted both Danish and international statistical indicators of trust in journalism. We have translated the Danish graphs into English with a reference to where it is taken from.

The Danish Media landscape

The Danish media landscape is part of a Nordic media welfare system that is governed by values e.g., social equality, consensus seeking and editorial freedom (Syvertsen et.al., 2014). The landscape can also be described as 'hybrid', meaning that it is dominated by two types of actors, the publicly owned public service television companies, and the private daily newspapers, some of which are owned by funds, while others are commercially owned (Burkal et.al., 2021). Black-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer (2021) suggest that the Danish media landscape is more 'hybrid' than digitalised because the Danes are still loyal to offline public service-platforms.

The Danish Ministry of Culture is responsible for governing the media. In recent years, there have been some changes in the political view of how Denmark ought to regulate and support the media. This has led to a more politicised media landscape, and the so-called arm's length principle between the media and the political system has been challenged (Kristensen & Black-Ørsten, 2021). 'The principle of keeping an arm's length' means that the politicians ought to abstain from governing the cultural licenses in detail. The thought behind the principle is to differentiate the executive, the judging, and the legislating power to control and avoid abuse of power. The politicised media landscape can be illustrated with the latest political initiatives in Danish media policy. With the Law of Media Subsidy from 2014, the former financial support model based on distribution subsidies, is replaced with a production subsidy model. There has also been a move from license fee to taxation. Further, the Media agreement from 2018 has increased the support to private news media, mainly digital online media, at the expense of support to the public service news media. The present social democratic government removed the 20% reduction for the public service media, DR, when they took charge in 2020. Some channels were closed before the decision to reverse the reduction and have not been reopened.

In Denmark, there is a high degree of social trust in media, including radio and television (Kalnes et.al., 2021). Journalism and journalists are considered to operate at high professional standards, cultivated for most journalists through their journalist education that combines theory, practise, and academic skills. In this respect, journalists consider objectivity as an important ideal in their work, as well as weighing autonomy from the political or market agenda (Skovsgaard et.al., 2018). Other values are the thought of being the watchdog of society and democracy, and serving the public's interests (Skovsgaard et.al., 2018). In the interviews, a few of the respondents also mentioned the press complaints commission and the guiding rules for good and ethically based journalism as important brands for trustworthiness and legitimate news. According to Black-Ørsten, the ethical codex has contributed to the positive development of a better media self-image and to self-recognition in relation to what news information is. It has also influenced the Danes in their overall trust in the media.

According to the graph below (Fig. 1), the most trusted news media segment in Denmark is TV, 67 % mention TV as their first, second or third media (Kulturministeriet, 2021:21). It is followed in order by radio (51 %), national newspapers (47 %), and the online platforms of the national newspapers (44 %):

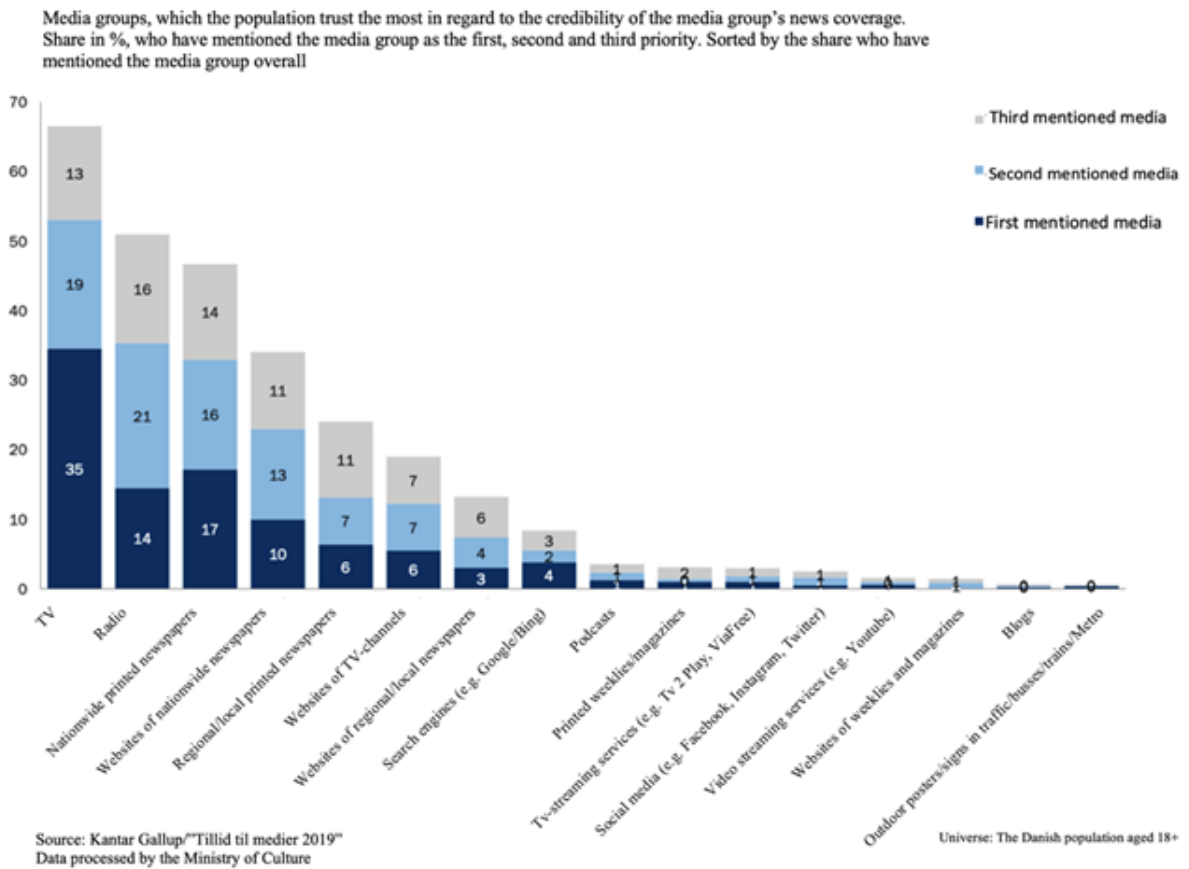


Figure 1: Trust in media 2019, source: Danish Ministry of Culture, 2021, p. 21

The results are confirmed by other surveys, both in Denmark (Schrøder et.al., 2020; 2021) and on European (EBU, 2021) and global levels (Newman et.al., 2021). If the results are weighed against what source the Danish citizens prefer to get their news from - whether they watch, read, or listen to the news - there is a coherence between what news the citizens trust the most, and what they prefer to watch, read, or listen to. For example, if they prefer to watch the TV news, then they have most trust in TV news coverage, and so forth (Kulturministeriet, 2021:22). This causality between media consumption preferences and trust in news media is confirmed by our respondents. People trust their preferred news source more than they trust other news sources. **Another interesting observation is the very low trust rate in social media (3%).** In Schrøder et al. (2021:15), the trust percentage is higher (13%), but the question is also asked in a different way and is directed towards 'trust in the news that the reader consumes', while in Figure 5 shown above, the question is 'most trusted in relation to the trustworthiness of the media outlet's news coverage'. Irrespective, the level of trust in social media is low, and is probably affected by critical public debates about social media as a trustworthy news source (Schröder et al., 2021).

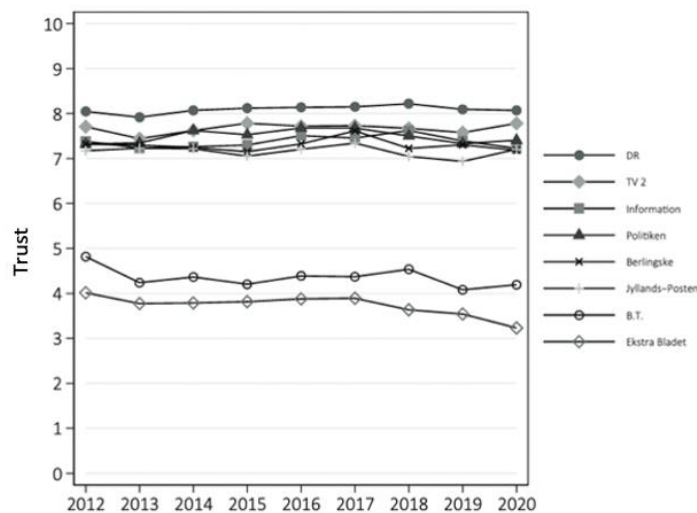
According to Neff & Pickard (2021), well-funded and institutionally secure public media, such as DR News and TV2 News, engage the citizens in democracy and they also serve the public interest rather

than commercial interests. They also suggest that there is a “*virtuous circle in which economic, public media, and democratic health reinforce each other*” (Neff & Pickard, 2021:20). Although Denmark is categorised as a country with less public funding than for example Germany, it is still positioned relatively high on the Economist Intelligence Unit’s (EIU) Democracy Index because of its well-functioning institutionally secure public media policy. In addition, the high trust level of media in Denmark can be explained by a **high awareness of the importance of media literacy** – a statement that Kalnes et al. (2021) confirm through data in the Reuters Institute reports.

From 2000 up to 2020, trust in journalists remains at a relatively stable level but below the general trust in news and the press (Andersen et.al., 2021). There is some fluctuation in the level of trust over the years, but over time the annual changes of trust are equalised. The low trust level in journalists depends on whether the citizens agree or disagree with the opinion that is imparted, and whether they support the values and interpretations the journalists provide.

Further, the graph “Trust in specific news media over time” (Andersen et al., 2021:134) shows that **the trust levels of public service media and written press remain relatively high and stable over the entire period**, whilst the tabloid media, BT and Ekstra Bladet are garner relatively low trust, and in the case of the lowest ranked tabloid, Ekstra Bladet, the trust level has further fallen. This is explained by the commercialisation of journalism that has had a negative influence on the trust in media (Andersen et al., 2021). On the one hand, the news media must generate a profit, while on the other, the news media must take its role as a ‘watch dog’ of democracy seriously (Andersen et al., 2021).

Trust in specific news media over time



Note: Indicates weighted average responses on a scale from 0 (very untrustworthy) to 10 (very trustworthy) to the question: “How trustworthy or untrustworthy do you think the following news media are?” “DR” is index with TV-Avisen on DR1, Nyhedsudsendelser on DR2, Radioavisen on DR, P3 Nyhederne, Tekst-TV from DR and dr.dk. ”TV 2” is index with Nyhederne on TV 2, TV 2 News, Tekst-TV from TV 2 and tv2.dk. For the remaining news media, the respondents have been asked to relate to the news media as a whole.

Source: DR Medieforskning

Figure 2: Trust in specific news media over time, source: DR Medieforskning 2020

The high trust level is also interesting because there have been important changes in the way citizens access the news. For example, the Ministry of Culture describes the development in the media

landscape in Denmark as a “period of rapid changes” (Black-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2021). One dimension of the problematisation is that the consumption of media news over the last decade has undergone a digitalisation process. In addition, the use of smart phones (71% of readers according to Schröder et al., 2021) have changed readers’ platforms for reading the news (Kalnes et al, 2021).

In the extract of the dataset below²² from the latest ‘Trust in news media worldwide 2021’, the Net Trust index²³ from 2009 to 2021 also gives a clear indication that **the Danish population trust the different media segments more than the average EU countries; similarly, distrust in social networks is much higher than average in the EU.** Looking back over the years, TV, radio, and the written press have a much higher score in Denmark than in the EU. The only deviation from this picture is the Danes’ trust to the Internet, which before 2013 was much higher than the EU-average. Since then, this trust has decreased and is currently a little below the EU average.

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021
Net Trust Index: Radio												
EU Average	23	22	22	16	17	25	19	25	25	25	21	23
Denmark	49	46	49	50	50	55	57	60	69	65	62	74
Net Trust Index: TV												
EU Average	3	5	11	1	0	5	1	4	6	4	2	6
Denmark	36	35	38	28	32	39	49	46	58	53	54	68
Net Trust Index: Written press												
EU Average	-10	-10	-8	-14	-12	-6	-7	-2	0	1	-1	9
Denmark	5	-6	3	-4	8	9	22	20	36	33	24	54
Net Trust Index: Trust in the Internet												
EU Average	-4	-6	-2	-9	-12	-8	-10	-12	-17	-21	-23	-19
Denmark	17	21	32	19	13	-2	0	-9	-16	-24	-23	-22
Net Trust Index: Social Networks												
EU Average						-33	-35	-38	-42	-44	-45	-49
Denmark						-40	-36	-46	-48	-55	-57	-72

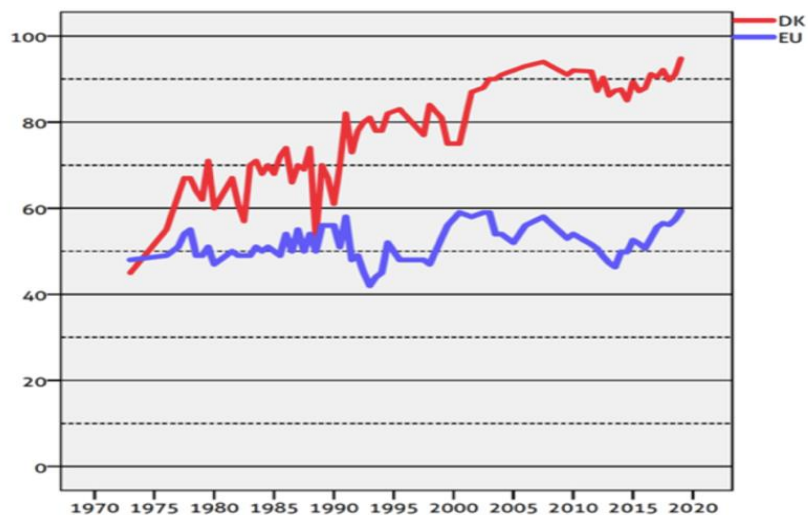
Figure 3: Trust in news media worldwide 2021, source: EBU 2021

Despite the increasing economic and social differences and different crises (for example the Covid-19 pandemic), **there is high trust in the news in Denmark, in representative government, in science, and in experts** (Krogsholm et al., 2021). We can also see that **the Danes are more satisfied with democracy than other EU citizens** (Krogsholm et al. 2021:4).

²² https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/Publications/MIS/login_only/market_insights/EBU-MIS-Trust_in_Media_2021.pdf Author of this report is responsible for transferring data from the figures made by EBU to the figure made by the author where only the Danish numbers are available (see the numbers in the material ‘Trust in media 2021 dataset’ under the section ‘Other material on trust in media’)

²³ The net trust index shows the level of trust and is a result of the difference between the percentage of the population who tend to trust and tend not to trust without including the ‘don’t know answers’.

Citizens' satisfaction with democracy as a whole 1971-2019



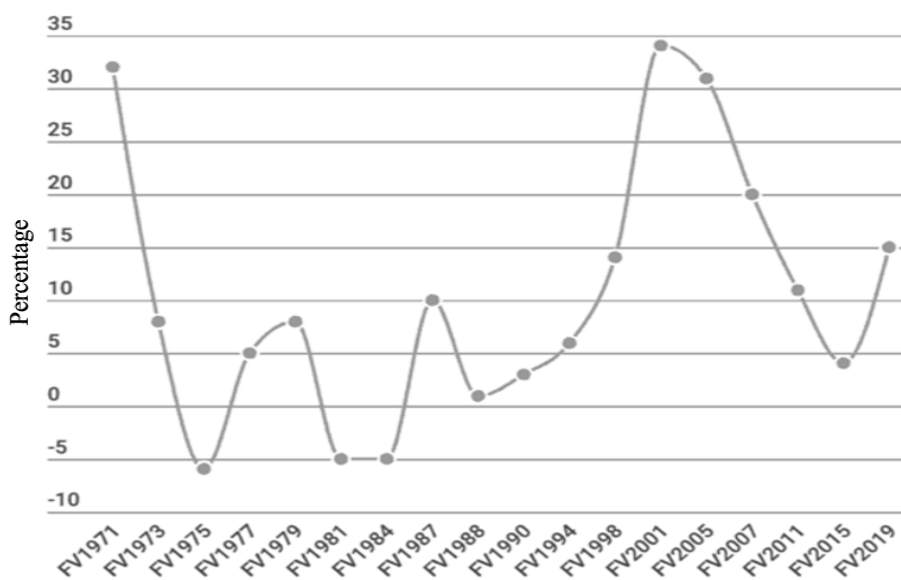
Source: Eurobarometeret, various years

Figure 4: Citizens' satisfaction with democracy between 1971-2019, source: Eurobarometers, various years, Krogsholm et al. 2021:4

In addition, Danish citizens' satisfaction with democracy increased to reach a level of above 95% in 2020. It is worth mentioning that this is in comparison with an EU average of 60% (Krogsholm et al. 2021:4).

The overall satisfaction with democracy is shackled by the **trust in politicians that decreased** from 2002 to 2015. But the negative curve is broken in connection with the Danish Parliament elections in 2015 and 2019 (Krogsholm et.al., 2021:7):

Citizens' trust in politicians in general 1971-2019



Source: Altinget.dk - <https://www.alinget.dk/praktik/artikel/efter-15-aars-nedtur-vaelgerne-har-faaet-mere-tillid-til-politikkerne>

Figure 5: Citizens trust in politicians between 1971-2019, source: Altinget.dk, Krogsholm et.al., 2021:7

Andersen et al. (2021) point out that low trust in media might lead citizens to move to ‘alternative’ media sources, but **misinformation, disinformation, and fake news are not markedly affecting the Danes’ trust in the news and journalism in Denmark**. For example, Denmark, with its 40%, comes after all other countries when it comes to concerns about what is true or fake (Schrøder et al., 2021:16). Only Germany, at 37%, is less concerned. Spain is at the top with 67% (Schrøder et al., 2021:16). Especially during the pandemic, the Danes regarded activists or activist groups (30%) as the main source of fake news about Covid-19 (Schrøder et al., 2021:17).

Regarding age differences in the **validation of the trustworthiness of posts on the Internet, photos, and online news**, the table “Have you checked the credibility of these posts, pictures, or news online?” (NYT, 2021) shows that people with a higher education (30%) are slightly more likely to validate what they meet on the Internet. Furthermore, people from the age of 16 to 34 years (35-36%) are much more likely to validate the trustworthiness of posts, pictures, and online news than people from 35-54 years (24%) and 55–74 (12-18%). It is also interesting to note that 65% of the 65–74-year-old people claim that they have not encountered misinformation online, while this is only the case for 25% of the 16–24-year-old group:

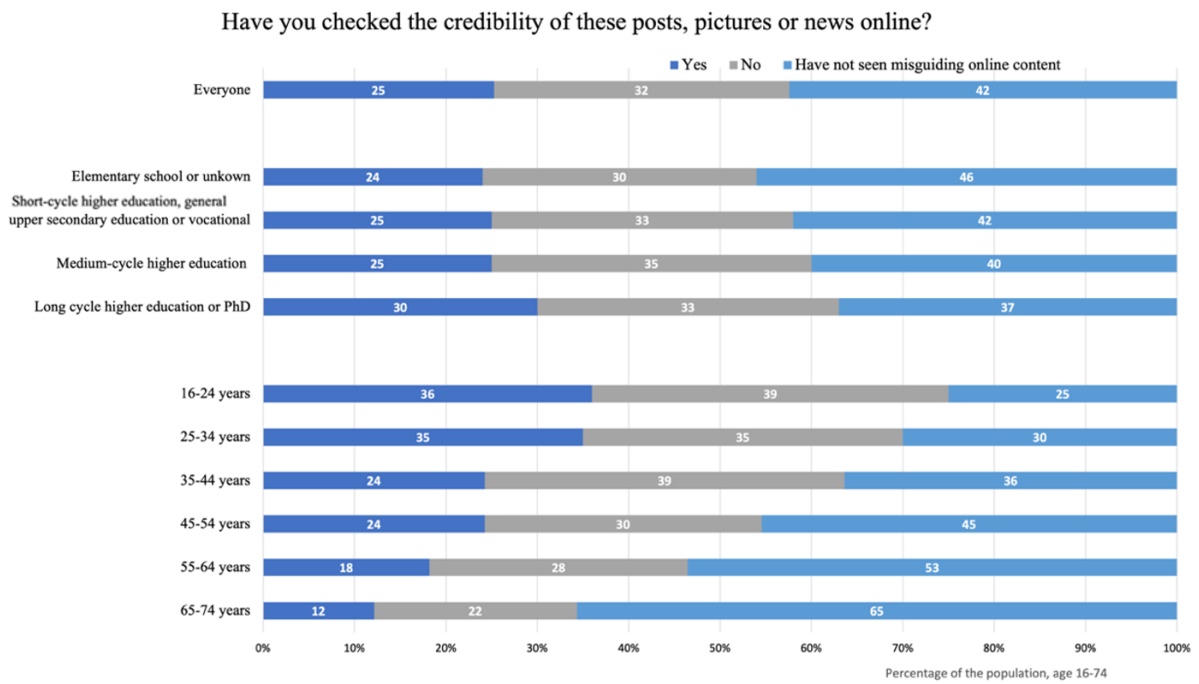


Figure 6: Checking credibility of online sources, source: NYT, 2021

In line with countries as Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands, 10 % of the Danes are mainly concerned with disinformation from foreign governments (Newman et.al., 2020:19).

Proportion that say they are most concerned about false or misleading information from each of the following – all markets

40% politicians
More in USA, Brazil, Philippines, South Africa
14% activists
More in Hong Kong, Norway, Czech Republic
13% journalists
More in Greece, South Korea, Croatia, USA
13% ordinary people
More in Japan, Taiwan, South Korea
10% foreign governments
More in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands

Question: Which of the following, if any, are you most concerned about online?
False or misleading information from... Base: Total sample = 80155

Table 1: concerns about disinformation from different areas, source: Newman et al., 2020:19

The Danish Reuters report from 2021 suggests that **34 % of the media users have experienced misinformation about Covid-19** (Schröder et al., 2021). Another study (Johansen et al, 2022) indicates that there has been **an increase in misinformation on the social media platform, Twitter**, during the first period of the pandemic. The social media actors are divided into two groups. **One group spreads misinformation; the other not only rejects but also ridicules the misinformers**. In addition, the spread of misinformation is outnumbering the share of those who reject misinformation over time (Johansen et al, 2022:4). It is worth noticing that only 5 % of all tweets in the study can be categorised as misinformation.

Another study finds that **only 3% of the identified conspiracy posts on Facebook are false** (Bengtsson et al., 2022). The effect of public posts on Facebook is low, and there is a tendency that private profiles and other social media, such as Twitter, have a greater impact on the spread of conspiracy theories. The table below shows 10 public accounts used for the spread of high-impact fake news (Bengtsson et al., 2022:20):

Public accounts with the highest effect on the spread of conspiratorial information		
Name	Type of account	Effect Index
Konspiration DK	facebook_page	5.7
Tisvildeleje hele året	facebook_page	2.1
The Danish Defence League	facebook_page	1.5
Staten passer på dig.	facebook_page	1.4
Christian Nørremark	twitter_account	0.5
Sur-Mand	twitter_account	0.4
(Private person)	facebook_page	0.3
(Private person)	facebook_page	0.2
(Private person)	facebook_page	0.2
(Private person)	facebook_page	0.2

Table 2: public accounts used for spreading disinformation, adapted from Bengtsson et al., 2022:20

An interesting observation is also that **experts and fact checking journalists sometimes spread misinformation when they evaluate different claims from public profiles or groups**. Even though the group “Spørg en læge om coronavirus”²⁴ had as its primary purpose to debunk misinformation about Covid-19, it inadvertently spread misinformation (Bengtsson et al., 2022:21):

Network graph of the spread of misleading and false information

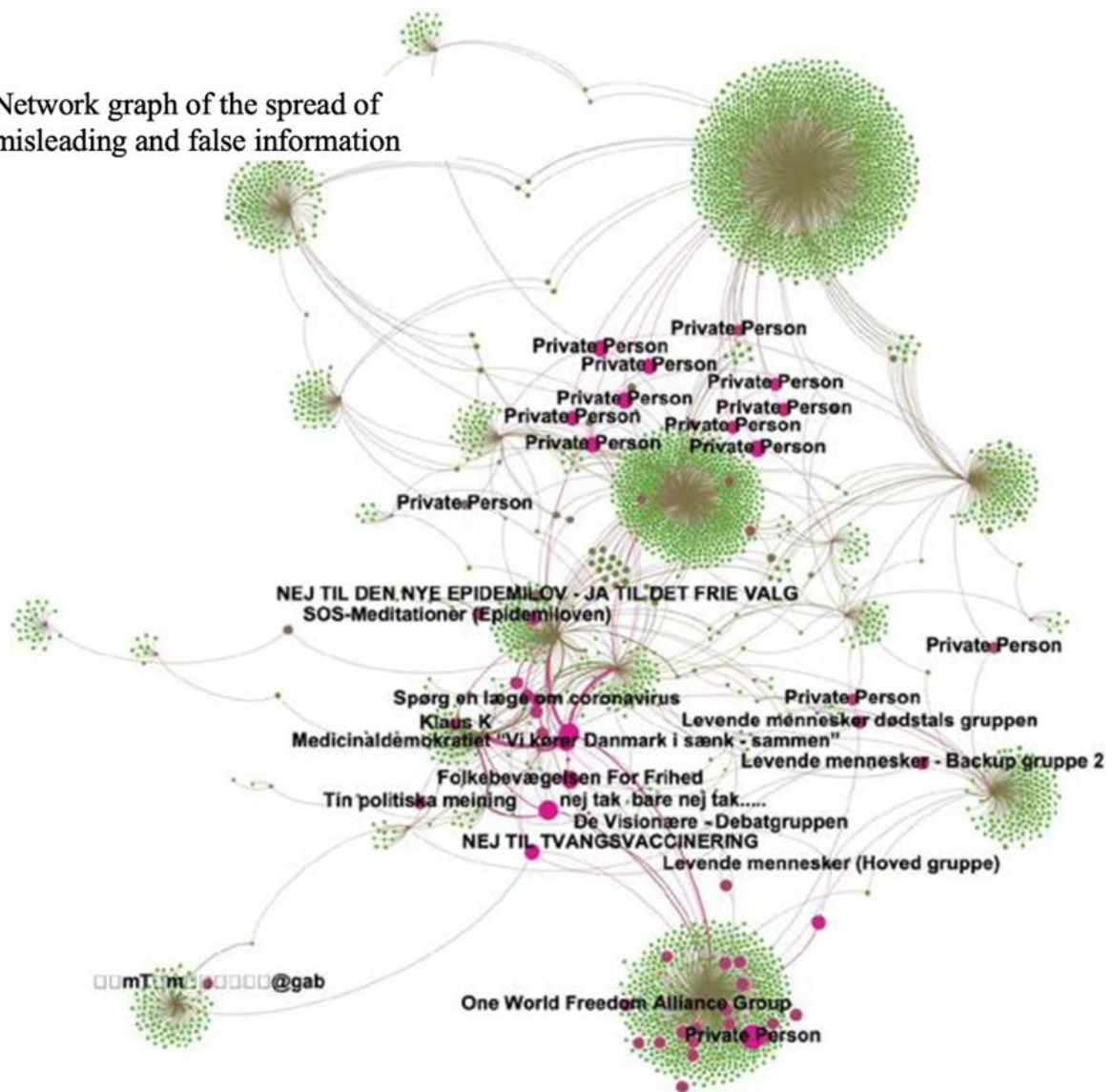


Figure 7: spread of misinformation, source: Bengtsson et al., 2022:21

Like many other countries, and despite the overall satisfaction with the Danish media, Denmark has experienced some negative reactions towards the established media. **New alternative media has arisen, but the share of audience is still very low**. For example, we can see that alternative news-sites, in general, do not figure among the most visited Danish information online sites. The most popular ‘alternative news site’, “Dagens.dk”, is only used weekly by 4% of the population, and it is only the 100th most popular webpage in Denmark in April 2021 (Black-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2021:117):

²⁴ In English: ‘Ask a doctor about the corona virus’.

Media	Ranking among Danish websites based on traffic (SimilarWeb, April 21)	Traffic from social media (share of total traffic in %) (SimilarWeb, April 21)	Facebook followers (10.04.21)
Den korte avis	521	21.20%	48672
24nyt.dk	3653	49.05%	(DPV00:37826)
NewSpeek.info	n/a	n/a	13207
Document.dk	n/a	n/a	---
Folkets Avis	n/a	n/a	9405
Konfront	n/a	n/a	4580
Netavisen Pio	1168	36.12%	14215
Solidaritet	n/a	n/a	4801
180 grader	n/a	n/a	25863
Indblik	1085	63.73%	7385
Respons	n/a	n/a	3838
Dagens.dk	100	41.30%	200089
Zetland	1393	25.33%	84352
Verdens bedste nyheder	n/a	n/a	49170
POV.international	4084	30.68%	57622
Journalista	n/a	n/a	8869
Føljeton	n/a	n/a	23042

Table 3: Use of alternative news media April 2021, adapted from: Black-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2021:11

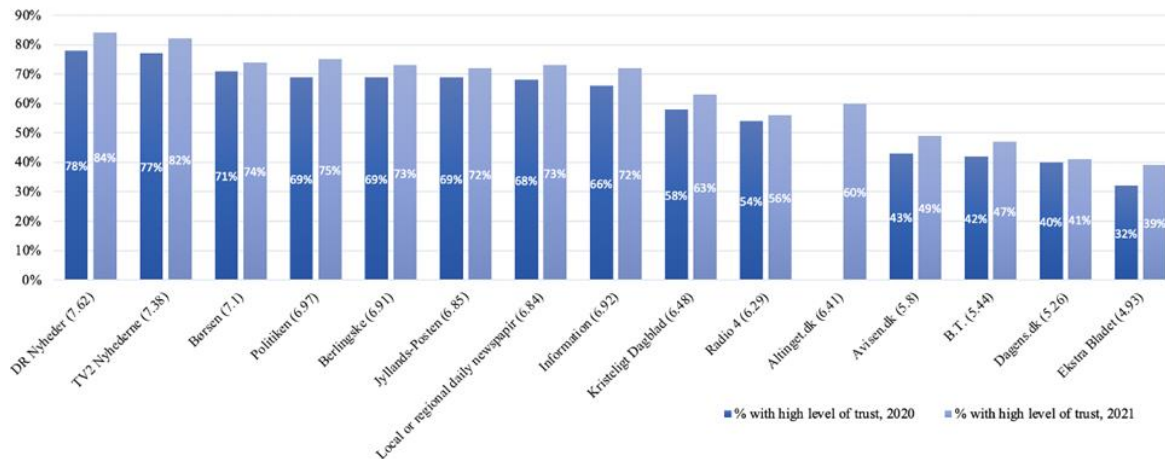
According to a survey conducted just after Denmark was locked down during the pandemic, on 11 March 2020 (Hede et.al., 2020), **the Danes' trust in news and journalism, as well as in government, the authorities, and politicians, is historically high.** This is confirmed by another survey that shows that during Covid-19, most Danes had more confidence in the authorities and the experts than before the pandemic (Jacobsen et.al., 2021).

According to the extraction dataset from EBU (2021)²⁵ shown earlier in this report, **the trustworthiness in already trusted Danish media increased during the pandemic.** For example, the Trust Index shows that trust in radio increased from 62 % to 74 % within two years (from 2019 to 2021). But the increase in the trustworthiness of radio did not increase its use as a news source, which both in 2020 and 2021 is 33% of the Danish audience share (Schrøder et. al, 2021). From 2019 to 2021, trust in television has increased from 54% to 68%. Most interesting, however, is the considerable increase in the trustworthiness of the written press that went up from 24% to 54% during that two-year period (EBU, 2021).

Also interesting is the fact that the pandemic increased the trust in news in general (Schrøder et al. 2021:12). For example, trust in the two public service news brands, DR News and TV2 News, grew 5-6%. Similarly, the tabloid press (especially Ekstra Bladet, 32% to 39%) also experienced an increase in perceived trustworthiness:

²⁵ See note 3

Trust in the Danish newsbrands 2020 and 2021



Q6: How trustworthy would you say news from the following organizations are? (Pick values between 0-10, the graph shows the mean value for the brandnames in 2021, percentage indicates answers between 6-10). Altinget is new in 2021 and is therefore not featured in the bar for 2020.

Figure 8: Trust in Danish news brands 2020-21, source: Schrøder et al. 2021:12

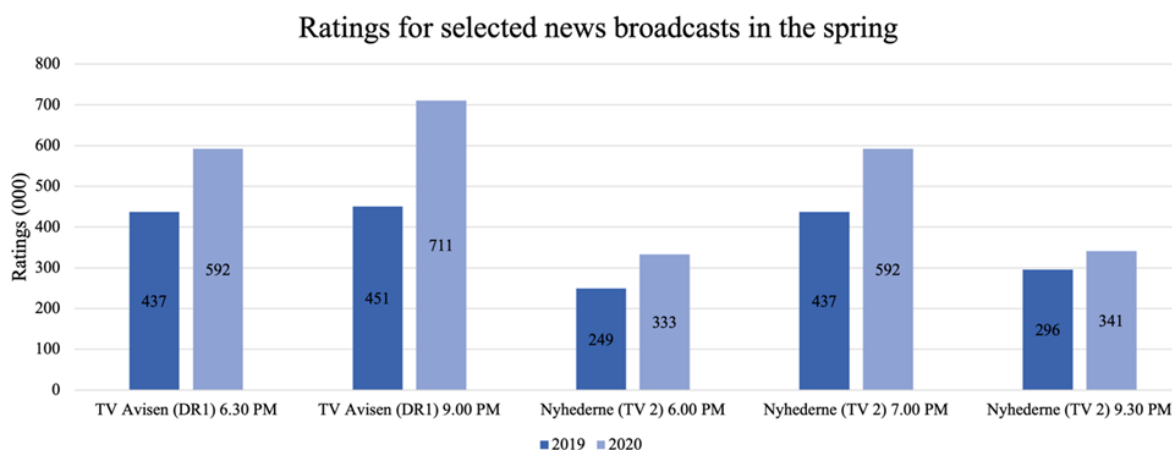
All in all, the **Danish news has gained a notable trust increase** of 13% (59% in 2021) compared to 2020, when 46% of the Danish population had trust in the news overall (Newman et.al. 2020:67; Newman et.al., 2021:75):



Figure 9: development of trust between 2020 and 2021, source: (Newman et.al. 2020:67; 2021:75)

Further, it is possible to register an increase in the consumption of the TV News, in particular, but also in news media, overall (Newman et.al., 2021:11). The survey concludes **that in the beginning of 2020, Covid-19 led to an overall trust boost**, not only regarding TV news, but regarding all news brands in Denmark. At the end of 2020, the news boost had receded back to normal. What we cannot say definitively, of course, is whether this increase in trust in TV news as a source to get information is directly caused by the specific information about Covid-19 health risks/vaccines that the TV News covered during that period.

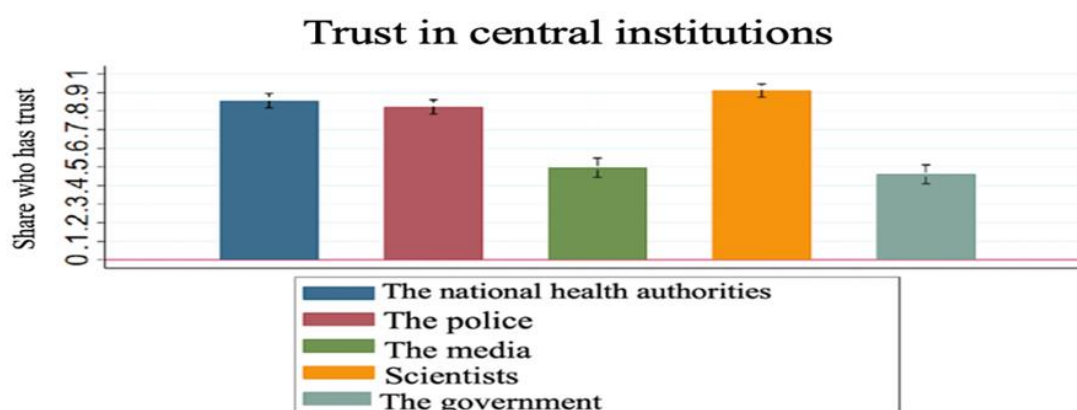
A more detailed figure “Ratings for selected news broadcasts in the spring” shows an increase in the number of Danish broadcast viewers during spring, 2019 and spring, 2020. For example, the ‘TV Avisen 21’ almost doubled its audience from around 400,000 to over 700,000; something that is presumably connected to the many press conferences our respondents talk about (DR Medieforskning, 2020:22):



Target group: 3+ years, periode: 13/3 - 11/5 2019 & 12/3 - 11/5 2020. Source: Kantar Seer-Undersøgelsen, Data: Live + VOSDAL

Figure 10: Ratings for selected news broadcasts in the spring 2019, 2020; source: DR Medieforskning, 2020:22

The Danes' exceptionally high trust in the news media needs to be interpreted, however, in relation to the generally high levels of trust in democratic institutions and state authorities. According to the Danish Hope-project²⁶, **the Danes have had an overall trust in important welfare institutions such as the national health authorities, the police, scientists, and the government.** The scientists, the health authorities, and the police are even more trusted than the media and the government (Nielsen et.al., 2022:17):



Note: n=511. The first four bars from the left show the share, who has responded "very much" or "to some extent" to the question: "How much do you trust the following institutions in regard to the corona-crisis?" However, trust in government shows the share, who has responded 7-10 to the question: "Give your assessment on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that you do not have any trust in the government and 10 means you have complete trust in the government". The vertical lines show the statistical uncertainty (95% confidence interval)

Figure 11: Trust in central institutions, source: Nielsen et.al., 2022:17

Yet, if we look at people's evaluation of the government during the two Covid-19 years, 80% of people are supportive of the restrictions at the beginning of lockdown, but this level of support falls off to 54% in September 2021. Further, there is a sharp increase in the number of people who find the lockdown policies too extreme, from 17% in April 2020 to 33% in 2021²⁷:

²⁶ HOPE stands for How Democracies Cope with COVID 19

²⁷ <https://hope-project.dk/dashboard/>

Summing up, trust in news information, journalism, and democracy is relatively high in Denmark compared to other EU countries. During the first period of the pandemic, the level of trust increased.

2. Problem identification

In this section, we will describe how our respondents define misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. Further, we will consider whether there are differences in the respondents' problem identification.

We have identified minor disagreements between the respondents that are related to the concepts of 'fake news' and 'disinformation' in use, but agreement exists on the identification of the problem. To start with, the largest group of respondents **describe fake news as an ongoing debate about spreading 'false' news. They call attention to fake news as an old phenomenon that has changed because of the emergence of social media**²⁸.

In former times, one would sit over a beer at a bar and discuss the world situation and make theories about the world, but now there is a gigantic platform where people can spread their speculations, in theory, to the whole world... It is [laughing] a democratic step in the right direction; it is also a fantastic platform for people to spread misinformation (Bjarne Schilling).

In continuation of this, a few of the respondents refer to the election for president in the US in 2016, where Donald Trump used the term "fake news" to cast journalists, who did not agree with him, in a bad light:

It is as if it [fake news] is understood as something new in the public conversation, but it is not like that because that is what all journalism is about. It is to separate the sheep from the goats. And to sort out both conscious and unconscious misinformation. So, what to say about the media industry: there was hopefully nothing new in the phenomenon that someone could come up with lying or embellishing the truth. The new thing was that people with a powerful position in society ... [for example, the American president, Donald Trump] but also people placed elsewhere in positions and in political life [were consciously misinforming people]. So, I think it was a shock, a mixture of shock and a wave of laughter that the journalistic community experienced at the time. I think it was Trump's press secretary who introduced the concept of alternative truths ... (Bjarne Schilling)

Further, they underline that the 'new' focus on fake news has put journalism as a discipline **under pressure**. Fake news is 'false' news that threatens authoritative and trustworthy news. Fake news flourishes in the *echo chambers* that people create on social medias where their own opinions get reflected and reinforced. The problem is that there is a **risk of creating political polarisation**.

In relation to the question of how to define fake news and misinformation challenges, Bennike raises concerns regarding the politicians increasing use of social media and political trust. It is an issue that has been discussed in research, for example, in relation to politicians' use of the term 'fake news' (Kalnes et al. 2021). Bennike describes most of the politicians' news information on social media as spin, not as fake news. Spin is more likely to be a one-source story, and will usually not be characterised as fake news, but **sometimes spin trespasses the limit and can tend to become fake news**. Bennike refers to a famous news situation in Denmark where a former Minister

²⁸ It is something that is confirmed in academic literature as well. See for example Kalnes et al. (2021)

for Integration, Inger Støjberg, produced a narrative about ‘child-brides’. Bennike describes her way of promoting the asylum seekers as ‘child brides’ in the press and on social media as fake news²⁹:

Inger Støjberg. I mean, this is fake news. Inger Støjberg has always staged a narrative, which was about “child brides”. In my opinion, the whole state trial case and the state trial decision is not about ‘child brides’ at all. It is about illegal administration. And there I think, we can talk about fake news, and I think she’s been good at staging a different narrative to her followers on social media. Or trying to stage her narrative as if it was the legal essence of the case (Lars Bennike).

Another problem is that **people do not distinguish between bad journalism and fake news**. People are too focused on incorrect news. But with all the news information that is produced today, it is difficult for journalists to write an article that thoroughly describes a case. There will always be 200 experts out in the ‘real’ world that know more than the journalists. In line with this perspective, **the users’ lack of media literacy can be a problem**.

The tjekdet.dk representatives describe their role as public democratic debate facilitators, typically in relation to the political debate. According to the journalists, **there is a need to nuance and correct widely circulated claims that have been put forward in the public debate**. But they see a problem in how their fact-checked journalism is met by researchers; one group of researchers denies that there is misinformation in Denmark; another group is turning it into an even greater problem than the fact checkers think it is. Another problem is **the risk of marginalising the ones that disagree with the scientific facts represented in fact-checked journalism**. In addition, the tjekdet.dk journalists are critical of fake news as a concept that can describe problematic news information. According to the fact checkers, **there are different levels of problematic news information depending on the sender’s intention to spread the news, as well as the level of falseness, that plays an important role in the definition**: There is misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. Misinformation is a claim that the sender shares with others without being aware of the ‘wrongness’ in the news and without having a purpose to hurt others. Disinformation is when the sender shares false information with the intention of spreading wrong news to destabilise a debate or a society. Disinformation is also when a state shares propaganda news to secure its power over its people. Disinformation takes place on different levels of society, both on the micro level and on the governmental level, for example, the intentional manipulation of information by Russian troll factories. Malinformation is defined as hate speech or harassment. It is false information or information that may not be wrong but is shared with the intention of harming others.

The problem definition from this group of respondents is in line with the EU report about information disorder (Wardle & Derekshan, 2017). The tjekdet.dk representatives are thus following the suggestions recommended by an expert group set up by the EU, as well as many other scholars who find the term fake news misleading and over-politicised. The representatives from tjekdet.dk have an underlying foundation rooted in science in their approach to the ‘fake news problem’, assuming that it is always possible to **find an objective and true information about a given statement**.

This is something that Mette Bengtsson, from the last group of respondents, criticises. For her, it is problematic that journalists and journalism base their trustworthiness on an objectivity norm:

Some fact-checking journalists think of journalism and science as very solid authoritarian entities... It is not that I take up a radical social constructive perspective on this, but if one is

²⁹ The political order was to separate asylum seekers that were either young fiancées or married couples, and where one or both were under 18 years old. In 2021, Støjberg was sentenced to two months’ imprisonment because of violation of the ministerial accountability Law.

known with social constructivism, then we know that the world, and especially when it comes to the social, political, and economic aspects of it, is produced through language, as well ... Fact-checkers are also trying to build up an ethos or authority, for example, by their membership of the international fact-checking society. But it is, to some extent, a construction, as well and an attempt to build institutional authority (Mette Bengtsson).

Fact-checkers are not objective truth-tellers, but an integrated part of the process of truth, as she argues in her Carlsberg Young Researcher project description. Bengtsson's point is that:

... quite often, it is not possible for fact-checkers to determine whether an actor's information is true or false; consequently, they invent a range of middle categories labelled 'half true', 'half false', etc. Seen from a rhetorical perspective, this is because, often, the factual claims that we discuss in political debates are not easily determined. Sometimes, it is a complicated matter, and we do not simply know enough yet or have enough evidence to make a strong argument. Sometimes, the facts checked are propositions about the future and, therefore, with build-in uncertainties. Sometimes it has to do with language and very different framings and understandings of reality. I hope that a rhetorical way of understanding political debate and argumentation can help sort out the many various speech acts that are now being fact-checked, and that a typology and suggestions for ways of handling these very different kinds of speech acts can help improve the fact-checking practice. I want to understand the fact-checking practice better and find ways to improve it for fact-checkers (Mette Bengtsson).

To a certain degree, Bengtsson is backed up by Bennike: *I don't believe in neutral journalism. But I believe in professional journalism that shows the pro and cons in a case, and where the basic facts are in order.* Bennikes' point is that it is possible, to some extent, to agree upon what is true and false. Still, he is not consistent in this view during the interview. The same can be said about Termansen. On the one hand, he is critical of what he calls the "so-called trust seeking news":

I think it is a democratic problem if the news media creates some form of coherent consensus about what is right and wrong. It is positive that we have some crazy stories sometimes, also when they turn things upside down, because it contributes to our trustworthiness (Jesper Termansen).

On the other hand, Termansen agrees with the tjekdet.dk representatives on the different levels of intentionality:

It [fake news] is news that is constructed as fake, real fake news. That is, things that have not taken place, that are being planted for the purpose of manipulating someone... Misinformation is a completely different concept, and it is more difficult to handle and define ... Well, there is deliberate misinformation; it is what is called 'cherry picking' [selective reading and use of information]. But, to me personally, misinformation presupposes some degree of continuing intention to deliberately manipulate people into a wrong or twisted perception of a phenomenon (Jesper Termansen).

To sum up, the tjekdet.dk representatives are avoiding fake news as a concept and use misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation to describe the levels of the actors' intentions. Other respondents only refer to the concepts they are being asked to define, fake news and misinformation. Still, some of the respondents talk about misinformation and disinformation in the interviews. It shows that our respondents are familiar with the academic discussions and have informed views. A minor difference in the problem of definitions might often result from their different involvement in fact-checking practises and other related tasks. For example, the editors' role is to

secure the editorial quality and to estimate if the government conditions are respected in their newspaper or the public media they represent. In their job, they meet citizens who actively complain about news while the tjecket.dk respondents are active in finding claims in the public debate in response to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Bengtsson brings up a discussion about news journalism and the underlying condition of objectivity as a norm for truth finding. According to Bengtsson, journalism must dissociate itself from the 'true' and 'false' norm because there is no objective truth in the world.

3. Trust in news and journalism

In this section, we will examine if disinformation and fake news affect trust in journalism. In addition, we will present what causal relationships and mechanism our respondents are identifying to explain the emergence and the salience of 'fake news'. In addition, we will examine whether our respondents see distrust in news and journalism as beneficial or detrimental to democracy.

Our respondents underline that there is an overall trust in journalism and news in Denmark, especially the high trust in public service news media, highlighted as something that supports democratic dialogue and strengthens Danish democracy. It is therefore seen as a democratic problem when people mistrust news and journalism, and start believing that journalists provide misinformation, or a story angle in favour of the journalist's own political opinion, as a respondent says. **It is the journalists' assignment and duty to verify and qualify information; to deliver as good and accurate news as possible; to have the will of being self-critical and to reconsider the angle of the news information.** With reference to this, the discussion about trustworthy journalism and objective news is brought up again. It is not a matter of creating one hundred per cent objective news. In a democracy, the most important thing is that the users of the news can **take their own positions and be critical** with the news media. This is seen as having a positive effect on democracy:

... because [professional journalism] is the basic supply to democracy. It is a mainstay of our democracy that we are enlightened citizens who, on an enlightened basis, can take a stand in democracy. And if our news media, the professional news media, as I allow myself to call them, if they get so weakened and we do not believe in them, then that's a big problem for democracy (Lisbeth Knudsen).

In line with this, some respondents emphasise the importance of media literacy and the effect it has on their use of traditional media. The respondents see a connection between **low media literacy**, and people who live outside the bigger cities with low levels of education. People in this group have not necessarily got a tradition of using the professional news media, and may not trust them, either. This again impacts their use of social media. They will usually act in a rather unreflective way, for example, when they share news information without thinking of the potential consequences it may have on other people. **Low media literacy is thus seen as a major risk when exposed to fake news.**

With the above perspectives in mind, all the respondents underline that it is a great problem if journalists and journalism are mistrusted. Regarding distrust in journalism and news and the possible beneficial and detrimental effect it can have on democracy, the respondents mostly comment on **distrust as a benefit, that is, keeping themselves motivated in their job** or something that sometimes makes them defend or change their practise or ensure transparency. Many of the respondents also refer to 'fake stories' that made it into the news because of 'failures' of fact-checking by the journalists or unreliable sources. Such cases are seen as highly detrimental to trust in journalism and journalists:

But all institutions and all human beings make mistakes. The important thing is how we handle the mistakes. And in connection with this, all media institutions have gone through a development where they have become more conscious of what kind of instrumental tool they need to avoid and handle the mistakes afterwards. For example, the [viewers' and readers'] editors³⁰ (Mark Black-Ørsten).

Some of the respondents also see a causal relationship between a small group of people who have **a feeling of being overlooked** and the rise of alternative media that makes them feel empowered:

There are some people out there who feel they are marginalised and who feel that ... the media does not see them, does not hear them and their way of seeing the world. It is again a dilemma we have because what is said and written in the media must, of course, be based on facts, but it also does not help that you do not hear those who disagree... They are overlooked and start to completely lose confidence, and then some of those, what are they called, alternative media ... arise. It is often [in these situations] where misinformation comes out ... [For example] an alternative media such as Danmarks Frie Fjernsyn (DFF)³¹ ... has arisen because there is a large group of people ... who believe that they are not seen and heard in the established media image (Nathalie Damsgaard Frisch).

To sum up, all the respondents agree that the emergence of fake news has affected trust in journalism in a negative way, but the effect of disinformation on trust in general is small. Rather, as some of the respondents' underline, the emergence of fake news and misinformation has been a wakeup call for journalists. Their point is that journalism has always been working with fact checking, but the latest focus on fake news has set off a constructive discussion about both social media and news media. The discussion has forced people to adopt a more critical and mature approach to social media, and it has reactivated a discussion about what the news media can and should do in challenging times.

4. Originators of disinformation and misinformation

Section four focuses on disinformation and, according to our different groups of respondents, who is made responsible for the spread of disinformation. How salient are those who spreaders fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and who supports them?

The editors do not meet disinformation in their work directly. Termanen refers to his "*pen pals*" those who use fake news or misinformation as insults. They are the people who write to him daily to complain about news or sources they claim are fake news or biased. Or they find that a report omits information on purpose:

Then, there is the use of misinformation as a term of abuse. I see a lot of this in my work... People who write to me about news that they call misinformation or fake news... (Jesper Termanen).

The editors have only heard about disinformation from the media itself or researchers. As examples, they come up with anti-immigrant groups, anti-vaccine groups, and 5G networks, etc.

The fact checkers meet the spreaders of disinformation in their work, so they are obviously more precise in their description of the group. According to them, the spreaders of disinformation consist

³⁰ There are three in Denmark. All three participate as respondents in this report

³¹ Translated from Danish: Denmark's free television. In a press release from April 2022, they describe themselves as a media that has undergone a change from being a television of resistance to a constructive television

of a small group of people that experience being overlooked; **they feel marginalised from others, but they also have a case**; something that they strongly believe in. They are “activists”, so to speak:

There are some who feel overlooked ... some who may have had some real and reasonably fair concerns about such things as vaccines and the management of coronavirus, and then they may have felt that they were neglected ... They may have been called crazy and those with tinfoil hats³² and whatever else, and then there may have been some degree of radicalisation... It is my view that they feel neglected and marginalised perhaps, as well (Nathalie Damsgaard Frisch).

The spreaders of disinformation are also described as **a small group of people that has been through a process of radicalisation. They go along the path of being concerned, sharing these concerns with others, and feeling neglected by society for so doing. They are different to the spreaders of malinformation, who aim to deliberately harm others.**

An interesting observation is that the representatives from tjekdet.dk tend to see an increase in disinformation, misinformation and malinformation, while the researchers are a little more cautious about talking the problem up:

So again, if we take the traditional news media first ... it is very difficult to find pronounced misinformation, it is difficult to find fake news in the Danish news media [Ørsten gives examples from the Reuters report] ... But where one encounters the most misinformation, it's on social media. Then I have some colleagues [Ørsten refers to Bengtsson et al. 2022] who have conducted an analysis together with Tjekdet.dk about the same thing, and they also find some misinformation, but in reality, very, very little. So even though they [tjekdet.dk] have been ... scraping the social media to find as much as there might be, there is not very much (Mark Black-Ørsten).

Further, some of the respondents expand their criticism to also include **journalists themselves and the way they practice journalism and use sources in their work** or as Knudsen says: “**We are all guilty of spreading misinformation if we uncritically post or forward something**”. Knudsen says that they often have this discussion on tjekdet.dk. But she defends the exposure risk with the argument that they will usually only fact check news that has been shared many times on social media.

Further, it is sometimes **difficult to distinguish between facts and opinions**, as the respondent from the environment organisation says:

In my work in the Danish Society of Nature Conservation, it's [misinformation is] fragments of something true, or it can be a partly true conclusion. So, for e.g., some sub-studies or something, which are 'true', but then they are linked to other contexts, where they become misleading in some way. And it's kind of harder because when you look, at least on social media, we [the Danish Society of Nature Conservation] kind of argue and say: “Well, that's simply not right [laughs slightly], it's not how we understand it”, and then they send just a link to something [an article], where it [the argument] stands in black and white, well, this is how it is, this and that. But it is the bigger picture, the whole context, where it becomes true (...) it is at this point we [the Danish Society of Nature Conservation] think it is wrong (Thomas Helsingborg).

³² A description used to describe conspiracy theorist or one with paranoid delusions. Also, a reference to the movie, *Signs*, a 2002 American science fiction horror film written and directed by M. Night Shyamalan

The NGO continues to reflect on the ‘misinformation’ that he meets in his work. On the one hand, it is difficult to navigate on social media because people cherry-pick the academic information that confirms their statement. On the other hand, he himself brings up a dilemma. He works for an interest organisation that has special interests in spreading information that confirms the organisation’s own agendas. The point is that trustworthiness becomes a question of whom and what the receiver of the news information trusts the most. The journalists themselves are cherry picking, as well, when they work in an interest organisation. There is a risk of creating “*myths of fake news*”, as Termansen points out.

Another respondent mentions that **think tanks³³ can affect trust in journalism in a negative way**. He gives an example of the independent, liberal, free market think tank, CEPOS (Centre for Political Studies, based in Copenhagen) that are prettifying their messages on the back of what they call research. But they merely conduct contract- or mission-oriented and not independent research that is peer reviewed before being published:

You and I know that this is not how research works, but many people do not think about this, right? This is somehow far more damaging than all the strange stories we hear about, i.e., the traditional false information (Mads Kæmsgaard Eberholst).

A third example of journalists’ involuntary involvement in contributing to ‘fake news’ is a well-known episode in Danish politics. In 2012, the then liberal Prime Minister in Denmark, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, was overthrown as his party’s chairman by journalists even before a decision was made. The whole situation was relayed live on public television, and throughout the day, journalists reported that they had trusted sources that could confirm the dethronement. But Rasmussen was not dethroned from his position as his party’s chairman. The respondent’s point with this example is that journalists make “*mistakes*”. The ‘mistakes’ are at risk of being received as ‘fake news’ by the user of news information. It is something that is confirmed in the interview with some of the respondents:

When we ask people: ‘When did you last come across fake news?’; then they will answer that it was when a journalist wrote something wrong. This is very often what people perceive as being fake (Mads Kæmsgaard Eberholst).

Another point is raised by Schilling. As he sees it, journalists face a dilemma when they are obliged to take up theories raised by people that look at the reality in different way to most other people. Journalists walk a tightrope between fairness to the people who disinform, and being critical of spreaders of disinformation:

*So, I certainly think that we in the established media are involved in a difficult balancing act because you can say, we must at no time be perceived as a rubber stamp for the authorities and for a completely free and uncritical platform for the authorities. On the other hand, we must also, as I said, must not fall for the one with... Well, yes, we must present, we must reflect reality. The reality is that there are some people who have one theory, another theory of vaccinations. Therefore, we must represent them with the same weight. It would, in my opinion, be deceptive to the readers and not live up to our task. So, we must of course describe e.g., *Men in Black*³⁴ and the others as the phenomenon it is. We must loyally and fairly present their views, but of course we must be as critical of them as we are of the authorities, and we*

³³ It is a discussion that is raised in the Danish WP 3 EnTrust report on social movements, but in a different way. Here is a link to the Danish report: [https://komm.ku.dk/forskning/cts/entrust/DK_WP3 - Social_movements.pdf](https://komm.ku.dk/forskning/cts/entrust/DK_WP3_-_Social_movements.pdf)

³⁴ An anti-authority protest movement that protested against the corona restrictions several times during the pandemic

must ... Sometimes there has been a slight tendency to make fun of them and such. But we must take them seriously (Bjarne Schilling).

Summing up, the spread of disinformation and misinformation in Denmark is relatively contained. The originators and spreaders of disinformation are described as a marginalised group of activists that has a strong belief in a specific case. These are distinguished from the equally low numbers of people who malinform, i.e., intentionally invent and spread false news.

5. Effects of the pandemic

This section will focus on journalism and the effects of the pandemic. We will examine whether there have been any trust changes in journalism. Has trust been undermined or strengthened? How is trust in journalism/news related to trust in science and experts and representative government? Is the pandemic seen as an opportunity for rebuilding trust in journalism and news?

Many of our respondents refer to the results presented in the introduction and see **a strengthened trust in journalism** in the context of the pandemic. The pandemic has been an opportunity to rebuild trust. They mention the development as **a return to the traditional media and the media's classical function of being people's watch dog**. During the pandemic, people needed valid and true news information (Trenz et al. 2021). From an overall perspective, the media did a good job in explaining the new disease, and they created interesting insight stories on the subject, as well.

However, some of the respondents also bring nuances into the overall trust picture. They divide trust during the pandemic into three phases. The first lockdown was a period of "public information to the citizens" (Lisbeth Knudsen) where the media communicated basic knowledge about the virus and instructions about what to do. Some media withdrew their paywall on some of the Corona news articles, which according to some respondents contributed to an increase in trust in the media, in general. Other respondents comment on the many press conferences that the government conducted under very restricted circumstances, where the media was merely informed and there was little scope for raising critical questions. On the one hand, this was a national crisis, and first and foremost, people wanted safety and community spirit, to which the media contributed. People were insecure about the whole situation and looked for trustworthy information, especially news updates from the public service television, DR. The trust in DR TV news is a picture that is confirmed by the surveys already presented in the introductory part of this report. On the other hand, the journalists behaved in a rather unprofessional way by covering information from the government without a 'filter'. This is because the journalists were acting as the authorities' mouthpiece, as one respondent describes the first phase of the pandemic, and because some of the questions were *not genial* (Bjarne Schilling), as another respondent says in an ironical tone.

In the second phase, during the summer 2020, things went back to 'normal'. People returned to their regular use of media and developed a more critical attitude towards journalism and the quality of Corona news, as only a few journalists had shown an interest in the consequences of the lockdown.

The third phase is the pandemic's most polarised period. This period was a challenge for journalists and journalism in general, both in relation to trust, but also in terms of the sheer amount of communication. Tjernansen describes this as the **political phase**:

Then came the political phase, where at least in parts of the population, there was resentment over a regime that had gone too far in governing society and another wing, at the same time,

that was just as militant [as the resentment wing]. [This wing] was angry at the first militant wing who they perceived as going too lightly on the health risk, so it became a choice between, should we have an open society, or should we have a more governed society... It was maybe the most polarised phase we had all together (Jesper Termansen).

The aggressive and more politicised tone is also experienced by the tjekdet.dk journalists. Especially during the pandemic, they were accused of being the authorities' extended arm. They experienced harsh tones from people who mistrust the authorities; a couple of times, the journalists were exposed to death threats because of their journalist work.

They describe what they have experienced as **people's extreme use of facts and their interpretation of scientific research. It has changed the aim of their fact-checking work.** The false information is more **harmful** than before the pandemic:

People were playing amateur virologist ... on a level that we had never seen earlier in tjekdet.dk's lifetime. Also, the aggressive atmosphere became larger than before. ... But then, the claims came from everywhere, and the democratic debate was at risk of resting on the wrong foundation... The claims came from all sorts of places ... and had perhaps an even larger harmful effect! ... Originally, tjekdet.dk's mission was to take decision makers and those in power at their word and examine their claims. But we have adjusted our mission. Now, we take anyone at their word because everybody can put something in circulation [on a social media], which can reach enormous numbers of people. That is, an artist with 15,000 followers who says something wrong about the climate ... the information can gain attention just as much as a politician can, perhaps even more (Thomas Hedin).

In connection with this, tjekdet.dk was accused of spreading propaganda and supporting the governments' 'narrative' about Corona, especially when their work supported the official statements such as Frisch's remarks when asked to give an example of how the pandemic has changed trust in journalism:

[Hmm ... long break] Yes, [laughs], we have a lot of examples of this! So, our own articles are a lot like ... Because it is what there is evidence for. [Our own articles] lean on something, the health authorities have announced. So, we have some readers who are happy; being able to find out what is up and down. And then, we have some readers who think we are doing propaganda, right! We have, that is, I almost think that all the Corona stories ... have substantiated the official narrative.

[Interviewer]: Can you be a bit more specific?

For example, there was a pamphlet in circulation that a Corona sceptical restriction resistance group had made. And they had made it with a layout, so it looked like something that came from The National Board of Health. They had chosen the same font and stuff like that, and then there was a whole lot of wrong stuff in it. Then, [after fact checking] we published an article. We got a positive, very positive response from people who had seen it [the pamphlet] flourish and were worried because it [the pamphlet] was about vaccines for children and young people. So, there were many who were worried and were like, now I must stop vaccinating my child ... And then, at the same time, we got direct threats from people who thought we should be shot in the neck, and I do not know what, right! So, it [the discussion about vaccines] totally divides the waters (Nathalie Damsgaard Frisch).

In relation to the aggressive and politicised tone, many of our respondents see **a connection between the above-described uncritical trust in information news in the first phase of the pandemic, and the scientific expertise** presented by the media during the two-year health crisis. For example, Black-Ørsten refers to a white book about the Corona crisis, where it is described how the term ‘following the advice from the authorities’ was a problematic formulation because the authorities did not recommend a lockdown:

In Denmark, the communication to the people was very political ... because Mette Frederiksen [the Danish Prime Minister] used some rhetorical tricks, that were not fair. They have also been outed a bit in the first book (Mark Black-Ørsten).

Black-Ørsten also points to some of the political scandals in Denmark during Covid-19, for example, the Mink Scandal³⁵. He sees these scandals as “*challenges towards our democracy and democratic*” principles. He cites a researcher without mentioning her/his name. The person in question has described the Danish debate as “*fast and with force*”. The point is, according to Black-Ørsten, that the Danish health authorities are politically governed. It means that **the arm’s length principle between the authorities and the politicians is threatened**:

Then you can clearly see that there has been a very unhealthy culture and an unhealthy way of going to our health authorities and the mention of Kaare Mølbak³⁶ and his role in the process has shown that there has been a very big focus on showing political action, and certainly not the same focus on making sure that the action was kept within the bounds of the law. And that is highly problematic ... so there is a much larger mix of politics and knowledge in Denmark than there is in e.g., Norway and Sweden. And I think that in principle, it is bad, but also bad if you must have trust, and if you must make sure that the knowledge is based on the health authorities. And you could say that the health authorities did not agree that we should lock down Denmark at the time we did it. It was a purely political decision (Mark Black-Ørsten).

Others show attention to the **trustworthiness of science in general**. It is seen as positive that the pandemic has shown that science is not a key to true or false answers. Science cannot predict the future and scientists disagree, but it can help people with knowledge to make decisions on an informed basis. On the negative site, the pandemic has had consequences for people who had different views and were not supportive of lockdown policies, the restrictions and vaccine recommendations:

Then, there is an anti-science movement in the USA, which also moves to the conspiracy groups that exist in Denmark. It is a counter-acting movement against the experts that have power and influence to be cited in the media. I see Men in Black³⁷ as a protest against the government, the media and the experts. They think the same and go in the same direction ... that is, of course, what politicians do when they push the experts in front of them. They get the legitimacy that comes from the experts. But the experts need to be aware of the political contagion the other way around. That they are used in relation to a political legitimation. It can trigger anti-science if you see the elite plotting together against the people; that was what Trump used massively in his campaigns to say that science and the power elite and the

³⁵ The government decided to destroy all the minks in Denmark because the minks were suspected of being super spreaders, but maybe the government did not have the legal authority to take such an excessive decision. Afterwards, the Danish Parliament appointed a commission to investigate the authorities and the Ministers’ involvement and acts in the decision

³⁶ Kaare Mølbak was the professional director of the Danish Serum Institute. He played a leading role in the decision of destroying all the minks in Denmark

³⁷ An anti-authority protest movement that protested against the Corona restrictions several times during the Pandemic

media have plotted together. So, there is a danger in, if, what to say if the experts are used too often (Lisbeth Knudsen).

All in all, the pandemic has had a positive impact on trust in journalism, as well as on trust in experts, and the government has increased, especially in the first phase where people turned towards public service media; this was something that affected trust in journalism negatively, as well, especially for the *tjekdet.dk* journalists who were blamed for being representatives of the government. However, for some of the respondents, the positive development has been undermined in the third phase that became more aggressive, more politicised, and more polarised.

6. Counter-strategies against disinformation and misinformation

So far, we have presented an overall picture of Denmark as a highly trusted country, both with reference to media and to democracy, in general. In Section 4, we have also pointed out that disinformation in traditional Danish media is very low, and that most of the disinformation is posted on social media, mainly on Twitter and Facebook. To give the disinformation and misinformation combat in Denmark space, this section will present the Danish fact-checking media, *tjekdet.dk* and their strategies towards disinformation, as well as misinformation. What are their objectives, design, and scope? Further, we will give notice to other media's fact-checking practises.

We have observed some smaller disagreements in relation to our respondents' reflection on fact checking. Not surprisingly, the *tjekdet.dk* representatives see fact checking as an important initiative towards disinformation, but most of the respondents are also critical towards the ability to create more trustworthy news information through a false promise of what one of the respondents calls a *black and white construction* (Mads Kæmsgaard Eberholst) of news information. While disinformation only represents a few per cent of all news information, we will also cover the misinformation combat in traditional news media, as well. The editors' role as media ombudsmen is not an initiative against disinformation. Their work as media 'watch dogs' can rather be understood as a safeguard of news value and quality of information, both on television and in the newspapers.

The first media in Denmark that was committed to fact checking journalism is a DR public service programme, called *Detektor*. The programme has been broadcast as a radio programme on P1 and as a television programme at DR2. It suggests that the two programmes are intended for a relatively narrow target group. As already mentioned in the introduction, *Detektor* did not respond to our request and is therefore not represented in our interviews. *Detektor* started in 2011 as a radio programme, and then continued as a TV programme. It turned back to a radio programme in 2019. On the programme's website, the objective is described as a weekly programme that confronts "*politicians, the media, and other people of power with errors and false claims in the public debate*"³⁸. In its present form, the programme invites the investigated person or media (if they agree to be interviewed) onto the programme and confronts them with what the editors find is an undocumented claim. They bring the fact checking story even though the person denies being interviewed. Some of our respondents refer to the programme and say it was and maybe still is a high-profile consumed programme:

... and then it [Detektor] supports the idea that it is important that journalism must be given an in-depth examination; precisely because we as users do not have the opportunity to do it. Yes, of course, some have expert knowledge in all sorts of strange fields, who know what is true, but if ... you don't, then it is worth nothing. So, it helps to substantiate the narrative of

³⁸ <https://www.dr.dk/lyd/p1/detektor-radio>

what kind of journalism deserves to be trusted. You do that by checking, what is right, and then get the error corrected (Mads Kæmsgaard Eberholst).

Eberholst also mentions that the fact-checking programme brings in **science as a judge**. Eberholst has had a media expert role in the TV version of Detector. In these situations, he was supposed to give science a number between 0 to 10. He finds it problematic because science is not a black and white construction of information. Using fact checking in such a minimalistic format in a programme is very difficult.

Tjekdet.dk is the other fact-checking media in Denmark. According to the tjekdet.dk's website, their *"... goal is to qualify the public debate and strengthen the democratic dialogue by ensuring that both aspects are as informed as possible – free of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news"*³⁹. It is a political independent and non-profit media owned by the association, *"TjekDet – National Portal to fight against Fake News"*. The organisation consists of a chief editor, five journalists, and two researchers, who are working with fact checking daily, especially on social media. In this connection, tjekdet.dk cooperates with Facebook and Instagram as the social media's *third part fact checker*. They have the authority to place a note on a post that contains a link to their fact checker article so that other users are made aware of the possibility that the post contains misleading or false information. Except for drawing attention to disinformation and misinformation and what the media calls *information nuances*, tjekdet.dk is also involved in different public awareness initiatives⁴⁰ and in the development of information and materials for teachers⁴¹. Further, the website has a site of knowledge with analyses, reports, and research about misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech⁴². The tjekdet.dk is a member of the International Fact-Checking Network, (IFCN)⁴³ and they are working with the standards the network requires.

The tjekdet.dk representatives see their project as a contribution to overall 'checks and balance' between journalism and the journalists and the media world, in general. Instead of denying a mistake, it is confidence-building that the media recognise its mistakes. *Just look at the statistics on our website... You can see how many media we have checked over the years. We help to keep an eye on each other, and I think this raises the quality of journalism*, as Hedin remarks. It is important that the public debate can rely on facts. Frisch is more specific in her reflection on how fact checking can raise trust in journalism. She mentions two points. The first relates to their documentation. It is made in a way that makes it possible for everyone to copy their *work of art*, as she describes it. Further, she hopes that the project will **raise people's awareness of the quality in news**. Scientists must not only be able to refer to their research, but also know where they get their knowledge from. The last representative, Lisbeth Knudsen, talks about their working methods. She underlines that they are mostly concerned with verifying news information that is widely shared:

... maybe 5000 or 10,000 or more. And we work with international standards that are far stronger than the Complaints Commission and the Media responsibility Law, and it makes of course, the work with fact checking more difficult because we use three independent experts (Lisbeth Knudsen).

As mentioned already, many of the other respondents bring into the discussion some **critical points about fact-checking journalism**. Bengtsson has criticised the underlining understanding of a solid

³⁹ <https://www.tjekdet.dk/om-os>

⁴⁰ <https://www.tjekdet.dk/artikel/hvem-staar-bag-og-hvad-gaar-det-ud-paa>

⁴¹ <https://www.tjekdet.dk/artikel/laerervejledning-og-information-om-materialet>

⁴² <https://www.tjekdet.dk/forskning>

⁴³ <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/>

journalism as a matter of finding the truest version of reality. In addition, tjekdet.dk is seen as a niche media that reaches out to a few readers.

The controversy about a truer truth in news information is also mentioned by the editors. For example, Termansen is clear about his view on fact checking:

... and if there's something I have a problem with, it's when people say we need to deliver the truth, because I do not mean that there is any truth in journalism. This is also why I am very critical of the fact-checking programmes because I believe that they are based on an often exaggerated and false premise that one can ... determine what is right, as if it is a piece of mathematics. What is the result in the end. And you often cannot determine it (Jesper Termansen).

In connection with this, it is important to mention that the tjekdet.dk's representatives are aware of the critique raised by the researchers and the other respondents. Their argument against the critic is that they seek consensus. It is rare to find consensus in science, and therefore the journalists search for the nuances in the argumentation instead. Often, the journalists are forced to differ between "a claim and a stance" (Nathalie Damsgaard Frisch). The journalist does not go into detail about the difference between the two concepts, but her remark falls at a point in the interview where the interviewer asks the journalist how the journalist fact-checks subjects that are related to humanity science:

It is very difficult, but I think often for us it's just about getting as close to the right version of the truth as possible. And make sure that if we ask some researchers, then we must trust what they say, because they probably know a lot about it; and then not just ask one, but then we ask two or three, or as many as are needed until we feel that we have a proper picture of things. It is difficult (Nathalie Damsgaard Frisch).

If the subject implies the grey zone, they will publish the article as an insight article instead of a fact checking article, or decide not to publish the article, at all.

The editors' work is part of the media's internal complaints board. Politiken was the first media in Denmark with an ombudsman in 2001. This was followed up by DR in 2004, and TV2 in 2008. They describe themselves as independent media watch dogs, whose aim is to investigate **journalists' possible misinformation**. The editors from the two public service media are determined by Law to ensure a critical eye on journalism and ethical issues. The editors receive claims and critique from the media audience and their function is to forward the accusation of misinformation to the relevant journalists. Maybe therefore, Schilling describes the role as editor as being a *postman*. The editors do not have the power to decide anything. Sometimes, their work can be a reminder to the journalists of the ethical principles they work under. The editor in DR mentions a **complaint system**⁴⁴, too. If people are not satisfied with the case handling, the editor writes a recommendation and conclusion of the complaints to the Director General in DR. It is then up to her/him to take a decision on whether she agrees or not. Sometimes, the editors work under what Black-Ørsten calls *difficult conditions*. The underlying internal critic of other journalists' work is not necessarily met with open arms, either from colleagues or the management. Black-Ørstens' point is that the effect of the editors' work can be questioned because there are no consequences for the journalists who have been accused of misinformation. Regarding the external part of the editors' work, the challenge is to **meet the audience' frustrations and gain their trust in return**. Bennike calls attention

⁴⁴ This is a link to an overview of the complaints: <https://www.dr.dk/etik-og-rettelser/brugernes-redaktoer/ankesagsindeks>

to a special part of the audience that reacts to societal incidents, for example, the pandemic or the war in Ukraine:

I sometimes say that my function is a seismograph for the level of nervousness that is in the population [laughs easily]. I can see that even now, because of the war in Ukraine. I have received 200 emails this weekend about EVERYTHING. Normally, after a weekend, there might be 60... It is simply a seismograph for how the psychological mood in the population is ... Sometimes, it is just a little thing they complain about... It can be a little tiring let's just say it as it is. But as a starting point, it's because they have some expectations that what they see is okay. It should preferably be the way they want it. But the basis [the quality in news information] must be right (Lars Bennike).

The editors from DR and TV2 send the results of their inquiries to the governing body. All the reports are published on their websites⁴⁵.

In addition to the above-mentioned initiatives, there have been several initiatives to combat disinformation and misinformation and improve the citizens' **media literacy** in other arenas (Lasse Lindkilde & Jesper Rasmussen, 2022). For example, there is a special focus on disinformation in primary and lower secondary schools, upper secondary school, and in the vocational educations. In line with these initiatives, the public service television DR has a programme for children and young people called "Ultrasnyd"⁴⁶ and Politiken is publishing "Børneavisen"⁴⁷, a special newspaper for children.

It is also worth mentioning that a few of our respondents have mentioned the Norwegian fact-checking media, faktisk.no, as the most successful and well-functioning fact-checking media in the Nordic countries. Faktisk.no is a cooperation between the Norwegian news media and has a very high number of users. It has also been highlighted because it is backed by all the largest news organisations in Norway. One of our respondents mentions that this is the reason why faktisk.no has a better chance of changing media institutions from the inside.

To sum up, the fact-checking milieu in Denmark is small. Although some of the respondents highlight Detektor as a fact-checking media, it is difficult to determine the role and the programme's strategy towards disinformation and misinformation. It is rather a public service programme that is dedicated to fact checking journalism. Tjekdet.dk's strategy towards disinformation has changed because of the pandemic and now involves everyone on social media who reaches out to a large audience. The media serves as a public awareness raising organ, too. The ombudsmen's strategy against misinformation is determined by Law. It has taken some time to institutionalise the strategy, but the initiative seems to have been taken up positively by some of dissatisfied citizens.

7. Conclusion

So far, we have outlined how Denmark understands and handles problematic news information. In this last section, we will conclude how Denmark is performing in a European context and describe what main challenges our respondents believe lie ahead.

In academic literature, Denmark is described as part of the Nordic media welfare system that values social equality, editorial freedom, and compromise seeking, with a well-functioning public service.

⁴⁵ <https://www.dr.dk/etik-og-rettelser/brugernes-redaktoer/halvaarsrapporter> and <https://sr.tv2.dk/beretninger/>

⁴⁶ Ultra-'snyd' means ultra-cheat in English <https://www.dr.dk/skole/dansk/mellemtrin/tema/bliver-du-ultra-snydt>

⁴⁷ https://borneavisen.dk/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI3c7yhaXm9wIVilxRCh1MHwZ6EAAAYASAAEgKcPPD_BwE

From an overall perspective, the Danish people have trust in the welfare system and its institutions. There is also a **high level of trust in journalism**, something that became even clearer during the first period of the pandemic when people returned to the two public service institutions who guaranteed reliable news information. It places Denmark as one of the most trusting countries in Europe, both regarding news and journalism, as well as in other important parts of Danish democracy.

Although the main news problem in Denmark is misinformation, the Covid-19 crisis brought some nuances into this overall picture of trust. In the first phase, the Danish people's reaction to the crisis was an ever-increasing trust in news media. In the second phase, the level of trust returned to pre-Covid-19 levels. But especially during the third phase of the pandemic, some negative reactions to news and journalism arose. Before the pandemic, the fact-checking work was mainly targeting misinformation from decisions-makers, but during the pandemic, the fact-checking work changed to **embrace everyone who reached a huge audience on the Internet**. For example, misinformation claims in English or German were shared to a large Danish audience. As one of the journalists says, it was as if a **culture of spreading lies arose. The misinformers resorted to an extreme use of facts and their interpretation of scientific knowledge were sometimes exaggerated**, something that had never been witnessed in Denmark prior to the pandemic. It was also hard to differentiate between the misinformers' lies and their motivation for spreading an untruth. It led to **fluid boundaries between misinformation and disinformation**.

Regarding the main challenges ahead, the complexity of the problem is reflected in the respondents' different answers. One respondent mentions **the Danish Public Information Act**. The act states that any correspondence between ministries and agencies must henceforth be withheld from the public if a minister has – or will have – a need for civil service's advisory assistance. This should ensure that politicians and civil servants have peace of mind and full confidentiality around political processes. But in the media, the law has been criticised for muzzling journalists who work as the media's 'watch dogs.' Currently, many politicians are too fond of one-way communication on social media. They post half-truths on social media, and afterwards refuse to be interviewed by the press. Clearly, politicians' communication needs to be transparent, and fact based.

Although **funding** is not a new problem, some of the respondents see it as the biggest challenge ahead. Denmark is a small country, and the news media will never be able to fund the media through advertising, etc. One solution could be to convince the Danes about the necessity to **pay for quality news**. One respondent mentions **people's news consumption habits** as a challenge that is at risk of creating a polarising effect between the younger and older generations. Young people get their news on social medias and have not been raised to pay for it. Therefore, there is room to rethink a new business model and new technological platforms that support people's news consumption in a way that requires payment at affordable prices. Another issue in relation to funding is the local and regional news media. Because of a lack of income, **they are at risk of dying out**. Their function is to keep an eye on local and regional politics, and their loss would create a democratic problem--namely, having no media to watch over the shoulder of local power.

According to other respondents, **social inequality** is a challenge ahead. The point is that some people have a feeling of being overlooked, yet not being heard; they see themselves as outsiders to the power elite in Denmark, for example, experts, politicians, and the media. They are not participating in any of the democratic elections in Denmark and they get their news on free social media. The respondent's point is that this group does not participate in all the important democratic processes that keep Denmark together as a society, feelings of disenfranchisement lead to polarisation.

Then there is the regulation of social media. Social media platforms operate in a common European market and not only in Denmark, and the market is also agitated for viable and profitable news

business models. Danes are increasingly no longer willing to pay for their news, but it is also recognised that these are clearly European challenges that Denmark, as a small country, cannot confront alone. One respondent mentions that combating misinformation and disinformation must be through **monitoring claims that are lies, deliberately spread to hurt people or a country,**

At the date of interview, politicians were in the middle of negotiating a new media agreement. In connection with this, a respondent recommends that politicians look at what kind of future public service they want instead of the usual 'cut-price' practice. Maybe it would need funding at first, but the Danish people need to be educated to handle future challenges. According to the respondent, the pandemic has shown that people trust the Danish public service media. Therefore, it is important to invest in **developing it** for the future, as well as **raising Danish people's media literacy levels.**

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Disinformation and Counter-strategies in Challenging Times – The German case

Ulrike Zschache

1. Introduction

Germany has a very varied and dynamic media landscape, including a well-established public broadcasting service (with national and regional branches), private broadcasting, nation-wide quality newspapers, daily regional and local (subscription) newspapers, tabloids and digital media (online-formats of the various media organisations, or independent ones). Basically, Germany's media landscape is strongly shaped by the country's federal structure and regional diversity. In fact, the country's media structure and media policy are significantly influenced by the 16 federal states. In particular, the 16 single federal states have primacy in the field of public broadcasting, and nation-wide regulations are based on inter-state broadcasting agreements. Moreover, Germany has a long tradition of periodic press, and with its many mid-size and larger towns and cities, a large number of newspapers have emerged across the country. In contrast to public broadcasting, the press sector is commercially organised and regulated only to a minimum. Hence, while public broadcasting is largely financed by broadcasting fees, newspapers are, in most cases, dependent on revenues from subscriptions and advertising. Similar to the situation in many other countries, the German newspaper landscape has been characterised by a substantial concentration of media markets over the past decades. While there is still a high diversity of press outlets, ownership figures show that a large share of the print market is controlled by only a handful of large media companies (Röper 2020). Against the backdrop of harsh competition over advertising clients, enhanced digitalisation and changing media consumption patterns, it has become particularly difficult for local and regional newspapers to adapt or survive. According to media researchers, newspapers continue to be important sources of information and political opinion formation (see e.g., Beck 2018: 175). Currently, however, there are clear signs that digitalisation has led to substantial changes in news consumption behaviours, and in the ways in which the public informs itself and forms a political opinion. In the age of digitalisation, information and news are disseminated through many different channels, including a variety of websites and social media accounts at different levels of quality and integrity. For many people, and particularly the younger generation, social media like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube (but increasingly also TikTok) have become a major, if not the main source for news consumption (Köhler 2020: 14). Against this backdrop, researchers observe a considerable differentiation of the public and a growing heterogenisation of specialised audiences with particularistic interests and perceptions (ibid.) In this regard, scholars shift particular attention to "platformisation" as a core component of digitalisation, and argue that the current transformation constitutes a "third, digital structural change" of the public sphere (Eisenegger 2021: 17; also, Jarren 2021). Yet, in media and communication studies, it is still controversially debated as to what extent the domestic public sphere is increasingly transformed into differentiated public spheres. Moreover, further research is needed to better understand if and how disintegrating effects of digitalisation and "platformisation" affect the functioning of the public sphere for political information and opinion formation in today's mass mediated democracy (e.g., Rau/Stier 2019).

Yet, what has become clear in recent years is the change in the structure of communication and information sources and senders. The pre-digital age was aptly characterised by Luhmann's renowned observation: "What we know about our society, indeed about the world we live in, we know through the mass media" (Luhmann 1996: 9). However, in times of digitalisation and the liberalisation of access to means of communication, the dissemination of news and information is no longer confined to established mass media organisations and professional journalists as the gate keepers of public information flows. Instead, publishing news content online and on social media platforms has become possible for a broad range of very different actors, be they journalists or not. In consequence, digitally available news content does not necessarily meet professional criteria of objectivity and reliability. In fact, media scholars underscore that this trend has led to the blending of facts with subjective opinions, as well as the dissemination of mere assumptions, unverified rumours, disinformation and conspiracy stories, which eventually contribute to media scepticism and the erosion of media trust. In this regard, the media researcher Tanja Köhler (2020: 14) emphasises that "disinformation is usually not (immediately) recognisable as such, which increases mistrust in the credibility and quality of sources, as well as media scepticism. These losses of credibility and trust are also felt by established media. They express themselves in accusations of gaps, lying press and fake news, or in a blanket criticism of the 'mainstream media', the 'system press' and the 'state radio'."

When looking at survey findings, a general decrease in media trust can, however, not be observed in Germany. In fact, the share of people in Germany trusting mass media has remained stable over the past decade, or has even somewhat increased. At the same time, there is a part of society that distrusts the mass media. This group of distrustful people has also remained rather stable during the past decade. Media trust in Germany is thus characterised by the consolidation of a cleavage between the trusting and distrusting parts of the population. When it comes to the distribution of these two categories, there is some variance between the different surveys (also depending on the exact wording of questions/answers, and the scales). The "long-term survey media trust" by the Institute for Media Studies at the University of Mainz, for instance, indicates that the trustful part of the population nowadays forms the majority, while the distrustful part is heavily outnumbered (see Figure 1). In the Eurobarometer Surveys (Standard Eurobarometer 76; 78; 80; 82; 84; 86; 88; 90; 92; 94; 96, 2011 – 2021/22), the contrast between the share of those who "tend to trust" and those who "tend not to trust" is not as strongly pronounced; nevertheless, the trustful respondents are clearly in the majority (see Figures 2 and 3).

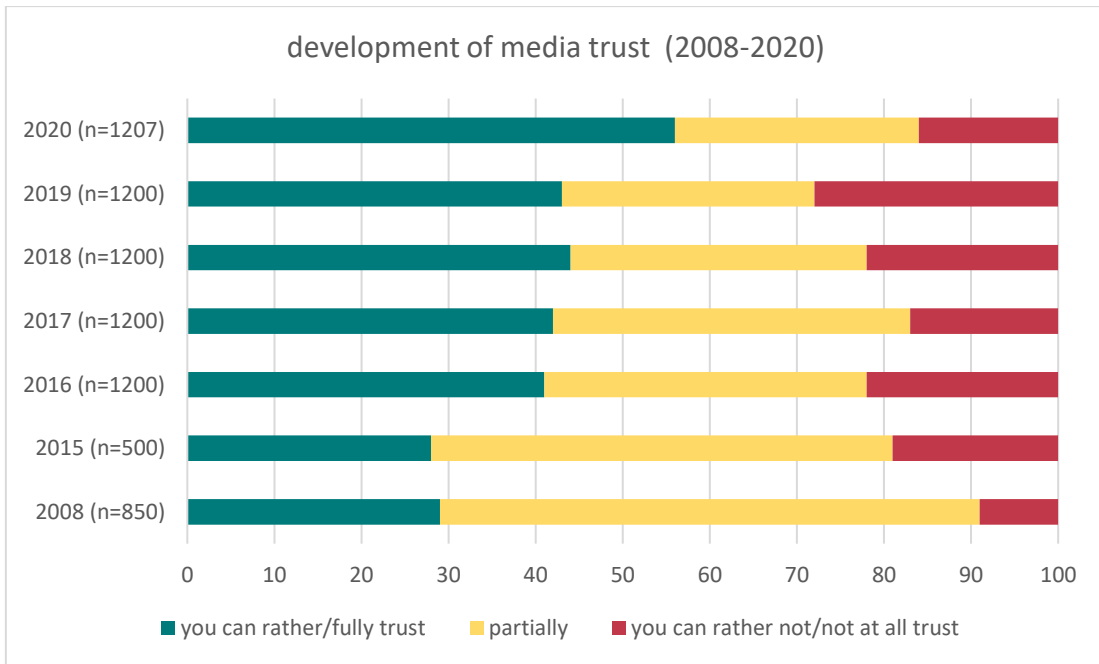


Figure 1: development of media trust 2008-2020, adopted from the “Long-term Survey Media trust” by the University of Mainz, question “When it comes to truly important issues, such as environmental problems, health risks or political scandals: How much can one trust the media?” Source: Institut für Publizistik der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz 2020, <https://medienvertrauen.uni-mainz.de/forschungsergebnisse-der-welle-2020-3>

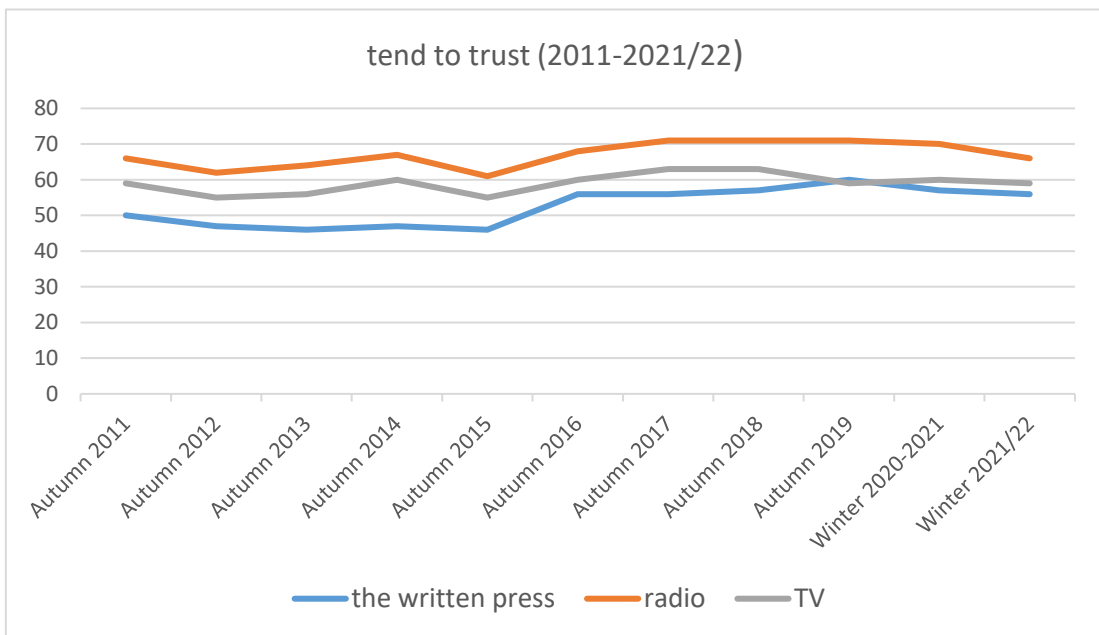


Figure 2: “tend to trust” over time, based on Standard Eurobarometer 2011 – 2021/22, QA6a.1 “How much trust do you have in certain media? For each of the following media, do you tend to trust it, or tend not to trust it? - The written press / Radio / Television (%)”

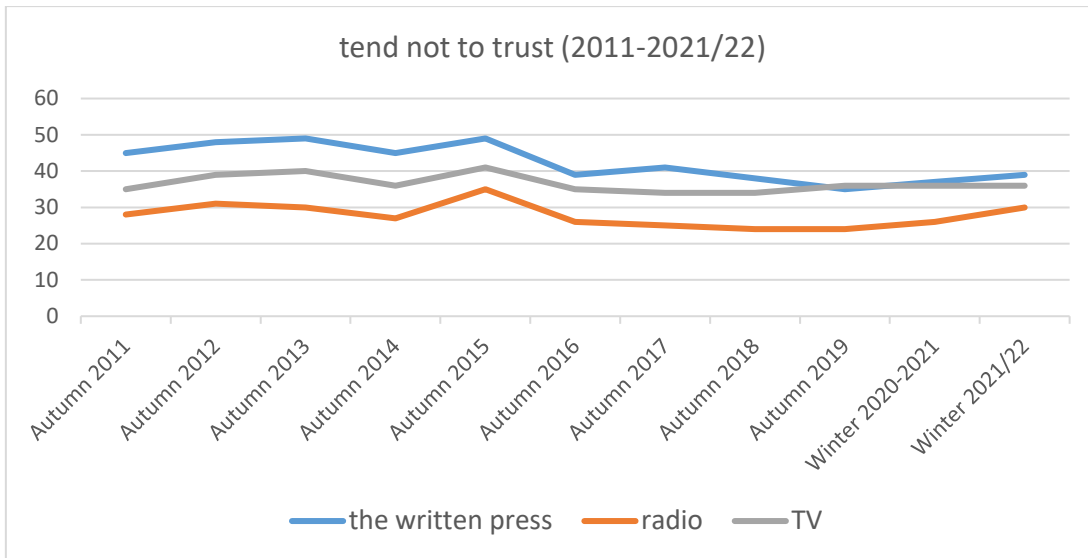


Figure 3, “tend not to trust” over time, based on Standard Eurobarometer 2011 – 2021/22, QA6a.1 “How much trust do you have in certain media? For each of the following media, do you tend to trust it, or tend not to trust it? - The written press / Radio / Television (%)”

Overall, surveys indicate that those who trust the mass media, or have at least a bedrock of media trust, form the majority in society, while clear distrust of mass media is expressed only by a minority. The pattern of a cleavage between trusting and distrusting parts of society also applies to other core institutions. As regards trust in the German national government, the divide in society is even more pronounced. According to the latest Eurobarometer Survey of Winter 2021/22 (Standard Eurobarometer 96, Public opinion in the European Union), there were almost as many respondents who tend not to trust the national government as those who trust (48% tend to trust; 44% tend not to trust). In comparison, science and research enjoy relatively high trust, particularly in recent years. Nevertheless, there is a minor section of the population that distrusts “mainstream” science and experts (Wissenschaftsbarometer 2021) (see Figure 4).

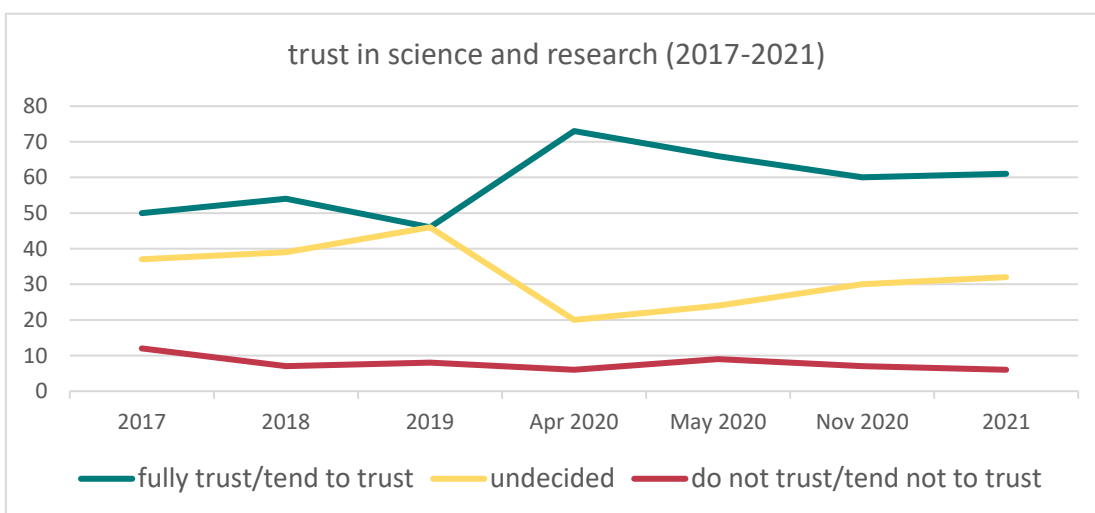


Figure 4: Trust in science and research 2017-2021, adopted from “Wissenschaftsbarometer 2021”, Q: “How much do you trust science and research?”, (Wissenschaftsbarometer, Wissenschaft im Dialog, Leaflet 2021, page 11)

In order to investigate the development of media trust and the phenomenon of distrust in Germany more profoundly, and to elucidate counter-strategies of different experts concerned with tackling disinformation, we conducted expert interviews with journalists from various backgrounds, civil society actors, as well as representatives of governmental institutions, specialised in monitoring and curbing disinformation. The following table provides an overview of our interview partners.⁴⁸ In the following text, references to original statements are, however, anonymised, because some of the respondents preferred not to be directly quoted. Given the limited number of interviews, anonymisation was applied to all respondents to protect single individuals.

Table 1: interviewed experts and their affiliations

Public broadcasting media	
Patrick Gensing	ARD Tagesschau Faktenfinder
<p>“Fact finder” of the “Daily News” website of the Consortium of public broadcasters in Germany: a unit of journalists aimed at checking/verifying information. At the time of interview, Patrick Gensing was head of the fact-finding unit of the online section “tagesschau.de”.</p> <p>https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder</p>	
Vanessa Valkovic	Südwestrundfunk SWR3 Faktencheck
<p>Fact checking unit of the South-West public service broadcaster: unit of journalists aimed at checking/verifying information. Vanessa Valkovic is multimedia journalist at SWR3 Faktencheck.</p> <p>https://www.swr3.de/aktuell/fake-news-check</p>	
Janina Lückoff	Bayrischer Rundfunk BR24 #Faktenfuchs
<p>Fact checking unit of the Bavarian public service broadcaster: unit of journalists aimed at checking/verifying information. Janina Lückoff is journalist at BR24 #Faktenfuchs.</p> <p>https://www.br.de/nachrichten/faktenfuchs-faktencheck,QzSlzI3</p>	
Joscha Weber	Deutsche Welle Faktencheck
<p>Fact checking unit of Deutsche Welle, the German foreign public service broadcaster (member of the Consortium of public broadcasters in Germany, ARD): unit of journalists aimed at checking/verifying information with an international scope; Joscha Weber is head of fact-checking at Deutsche Welle.</p> <p>https://www.dw.com/de/faktencheck/t-56578552</p>	
Press agencies	
Jan Russezki	Agence France-Presse AFP Faktencheck (German unit)
<p>French Press Agency Fact checking unit: unit of journalists checking/verifying information. Fact-checking in France since 2017, in Germany since 2020. Jan Russezki is journalist of the German-speaking unit at AFP fact-checking.</p> <p>https://faktencheck.afp.com/list</p>	
Newspapers	
Martina Schories	Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ), development unit, data and investigative research
<p>Journalists of the of the SZ development unit are engaged in data and investigative research. A major data research project was the investigation about the radicalisation of communication on Telegram during the Covid-19 pandemic, called “#hassmessen”. Martina Schories is a former data journalist at Süddeutsche, and was involved in the “#hassmessen” data research.</p> <p>https://www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/artikel/politik/radikalisierung-in-der-corona-krise-e742536/?reduced=true</p>	

⁴⁸ I would like to thank Stephanie Schneider who contributed to conducting interviews in Germany.

Non-profit, independent journalism projects

Sarah Thust

Correctiv Faktencheck (Correctiv gGmbH)

Correctiv is an independent, non-profit newsroom with a specific fact-checking unit. Correctiv Faktencheck is a unit of journalists checking information since 2017. Sarah Thust is journalist at Correctiv Faktencheck.

<https://correctiv.org/faktencheck>

Thomas Laschyk

Volksverpetzer (VVP gUG)

Volksverpetzer is an “Anti-Fake-news-Blog” by a non-profit project that mainly works on a voluntary basis. Its purpose is checking/verifying information, yet dissimilarly from journalistic fact-checking teams, it has a more political approach, takes a political stance and often uses humour and satire to debunk fake news. Volksverpetzer started its work in 2014 at the regional level (Augsburg) and has existed in its current form since 2018. Thomas Laschyk is founder and leader of Volksverpetzer.

<https://www.volksverpetzer.de>

Civil society organisations

Kristin Marosi

Codetekt e.V.

Codetekt is a non-profit association aimed at developing strategies for detecting and curbing disinformation, and empowering citizens. Its main instrument is the online platform codetekt.org that allows interested citizens to join the online community of volunteers (co-detectives) who actively engage in checking the trustworthiness of doubtful online news and information. Kristin Marosi is part of the leading team at Codetekt e.V.

<https://codetekt.org>

Juliane von Reppert-Bismarck Lie Detectors

Lie Detectors is a news literacy organisation with a European approach. A core activity of the project is to prepare and organise classroom sessions by journalists with the aim of raising awareness about disinformation and promoting news and digital literacy among pupils and teachers (with a current main focus on Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium and Luxembourg). Awareness raising about the importance of news literacy in educational curricula and related advocacy are also important activities of the project. Juliane von Reppert-Bismarck is the founder and leader of Lie Detectors.

<https://lie-detectors.org>

national government units

Hanna Katharina Müller

Federal Ministry of the Interior, unit H III 4 “Political governance models and hybrid threats”

The ministerial unit “Political governance models and hybrid threats” belongs to the section: “Well-fortified democracy, political education and prevention”; it aims to monitor, analyse, evaluate and -if need be - debunk disinformation that may pose a risk to the government, society or democracy. A special focus in this regard is on authoritarian governments and non-state actors, their ideologies and impact on public opinion and political policy-making in Germany (and Europe). The unit contributes to a task force on disinformation, coordinating all related activities on behalf of the entire national government. Hanna Katharina Müller is the leader of the unit H III 4.

Simon Kreye

Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Steering Group Strategic Communication

The Steering Group Strategic Communication at the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs is geared to monitor, analyse and evaluate disinformation and propaganda by foreign states that may pose a threat to German policy making and security. A further task is strategic positive communication about the German government and the country addressing mainly foreign target groups. Moreover, the unit contributes to fostering media literacy and resilience-building with the help of local actors in a range of partner countries worldwide (e.g., the Baltic states and the western Balkans). Simon Kreye is leader of the Steering Group Strategic Communication at the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

2. Problem identification

Among the interviewed experts, there is clear consensus that a distinction must be made between disinformation and misinformation.⁴⁹ While the latter refers to the unintentional dissemination of incorrect information, disinformation (in German “Desinformation”) denotes the intentional spreading of targeted false or misleading information⁵⁰, and is regarded as a deliberate attempt to confuse, manipulate and deceive the public while promoting a specific “alternative” narrative in order to achieve one’s own or group-specific (political or economic) interests or gain an advantage, to erode the public’s trust or fuel distrust, fear and anger and cause public damage. The underlying motivations or intentions can be manifold and may include, among others, the aim to manipulate the outcome of democratic elections or democratic opinion and will formation in a broader sense, erode societal cohesion and cause social divide and polarisation, commercial (profit) motives (e.g., by using scandalisation to attract high numbers of users on one’s website or social media page, and thus increase advertising revenues) or indeed hybrid warfare.

While the meaning of “disinformation” widely overlaps with the term “fake news”, the consulted experts largely agree that they reject using “fake news” for two main reasons.⁵¹ On the one hand, they argue that the term “fake news” has become highly politicised and also misused by populist, typically far-right political actors and groups (most prominently Donald Trump) to accuse legacy media of false reporting and manipulation and to defame true, but inconvenient information. On the other hand, “fake news” is considered too vague and dazzling, and to some extent an inappropriate concept to describe the problem (see also Sangerlaub 2020). In fact, disinformation is only partly based on completely and overtly false information. Very often, there is some true essence, but the information is lacking context, or is embedded in a misleading or wrong context which changes the information’s meaning or message substantially (see also Boberg et al. 2020). Indeed, in contrast to “fake news” and fictitious conspiracy narratives, one of the key mechanisms of disinformation is that it works as an instrument of subtle manipulation that “is more suitable for the masses, i.e. which is not quite so abstruse and not quite so clearly marked as information that is completely made up out of thin air, but which has been kept so vague or prepared in such a way that it can also be suitable for the masses and can unsettle them” (Interview_DE_9).

With regard to the phenomenon they are dealing with, our interviewed experts state that disinformation is clearly the focal point of their attention. Nevertheless, there are some nuances depending on the field of action. Institutional representatives explain that they are also dealing with “propaganda”, which in their understanding is not misleading information about others, but an instrument

⁴⁹ Even if this distinction is not so well known and/or widespread in German everyday language use, compared to its usage in English.

⁵⁰ Information is not only text-based information, but also includes pictures, audio or audio-visual material. It may be spread in public arenas, but also in closed social media groups, in private chat (groups), at local public events, or during personal interaction.

⁵¹ The term “fake news” is particularly rejected by interviewees with a professional journalistic or political background. In a few instances, interviewed experts (like a civil society actor) used “fake news” as a synonym of disinformation or a related expression, because “fake news” seems more common and connectable in the everyday parlance of readers/users. According to the literature (e.g., Primbs 2018), the recoding of the term “fake news” into a fighting term of the far-right has not been as successful in Germany as it has in the U.S. In Germany, it is still used as a colloquial term to describe false or confusing information by alternative media sources. As Primbs (2018: 116) notes “In Germany, this reinterpretation of the term has also been attempted by the right, but it has not succeeded - at least this seems to be proven by surveys. In this country, fake news still means ‘misleading information in the guise of news’.” Hence, in contrast to the literality of the term “fake news”, this expression is typically used as a more general concept to refer to a variety of false or misleading information that may also include misleading quotations or interpretations of statistics, decontextualised quotes or misleading inciting prejudices (Primbs 2018: 117).

to improve one's image by stretching the edges of truthfulness a little. Moreover, the regionally anchored public broadcasting fact-checking units have a broader approach, and often deal with various kinds of claims and rumours from everyday life that their users or other citizens find irritating, or would like to understand better, but they do not necessarily have to be wrong (e.g., if sun blockers may cause cancer, if vaccinated people are contagious).

Looking at the development of disinformation, experts underline that the dissemination and exchange of false and distorted information is nothing completely new and has existed for a long time, often linked to contentious issues, conflict and power struggles (see also Turcilo/Obrenovic 2020). However, in the recent past, a substantial change has occurred with the digitalisation of communication, and particularly the use of social media and private messaging services like WhatsApp or Telegram. What in former times had been mostly confined to particular groups and constituencies has now become much more visible and influential for the broader masses of people on social media platforms, in messengers and on alternative media sites. In that sense, the dynamics of disinformation in Germany follow a similar trend to that in other contemporary societies: "What is different is the speed, scale and massive proliferation and consumption of false information disseminated on dominant digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Information unvetted by conventional news organizations has gained wide presence in widely popular platforms and is easily accessible." (Waisbord 2018: 1867). The new potentials of digital communication, the Internet and social media have been particularly exploited during times of conflict and crisis, where different populist or radical actors and groups in society have sought to undermine and fight official policies. The spread of politicised disinformation became particularly salient in the U.S., most evidently since the 2016 elections and the Trump presidency. But in the meantime, it has increased more and more in Europe, as well (e.g., in the context of Brexit in the UK). In Germany, the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015/16 was one of the earlier occasions that gave momentum to a rise in politicised disinformation and the strategic manipulation of public discourse. Its effect on society and public debate, however, is considered relatively moderate as most citizens had little direct experience with refugees and asylum seekers, were barely affected by the policies, and were thus less motivated to engage with the issue. Another salient issue that triggered disinformation over the previous years was climate change, and the responsibility of humans for the current climate crisis. Yet, following scholars in the field, Germany has been less affected by the spread of disinformation than other countries (Bayer 2021; Hegelich/Thieltges 2019). For instance, the 2017 German parliamentary elections have been little disturbed by disinformation and manipulation, which is explained by the proactive public awareness raising, and other preventive measures of the established political actors and institutions that made the population better prepared and less vulnerable to disinformation campaigns (Bayer et al. 2019). Disinformation has been mainly used "to generate confusion, and to support extremist political opinion. This type of communication has a ritual function rather than an informative one. Its primary purpose is to represent and reinforce identities, and it is closer to political propaganda than to conscious misleading with regards to facts" (Bayer 2021: 2).

At the same time, it is widely acknowledged that the enhanced spread of disinformation by means of digital communication has contributed to a considerable polarisation in society between the radicalised small minority of those rejecting legitimate facts and adhering to conspiracy echo chambers, and the majority of society. In this respect, one of the journalists states:

In my observation, these networks have expanded considerably; they are more powerful, a parallel public sphere has formed that has largely disconnected itself from the general public, who only use it when they find media reports that fit into their own narrative. And I can see quite clearly that there is a polarisation, a fragmentation of public discourse. And that there are also quite a number of people who are lost and who can no longer be reached. To be honest, I don't know whether that has always been the case. To a certain extent, I'm sure. [...] but digital communication is new, the way we live it now. And the problems and risks are obvious, of course, that the possibilities of manipulation through the new technologies, through the extremely fast consumption of news, through the social networks whose algorithms reward emotionality above all, these risks are obvious and relatively new. And that's why, in my opinion, there's little point in looking now [...] at the fact that there was already propaganda in the past and so on. That's all true, but the framework conditions have changed completely. Radically. (Interview DE_4)

And another one explains:

What I have observed over the course of this intensification and polarisation of society is that people increasingly believe that their own truth is the only valid one. And with that, they clash with the person opposite them, who in turn believes that this is the only valid truth. And this kind of confrontation through belief and mistrust, that is, on the one hand, the belief in one's own narratives and sources, and mistrust of everything else that they encounter, that is one of the core problems why we observe and everyone feels this division (Interview_DE_12).

The experts interviewed for this study unanimously agree that the Covid-19 pandemic was an important driver of a massive surge of disinformation in this country, too. The pandemic's ramifications on the whole of society, and the related emergency measures, together with the high levels of uncertainty and anxiety about the new virus made larger groups of society, including less politicised people, more vulnerable for targeted disinformation and the incitement of fear, anger and distrust. As one respondent states:

The pandemic had a very big effect, [...] the pandemic was extremely advantageous for this filter bubble because it was something that was absolutely unavoidable for many people, [...] when we're all sitting at home, when we all have to worry about our jobs, about our health, about our relatives, et cetera, et cetera. And there are a lot of fears and insecurities that can be exploited. And this filter bubble was also able to get extremely involved and also politicise many people who were previously rather apolitical, and then also mobilise a lot and incite and generate anger from the rather esoteric corner, the extreme right-wing scene (Interview_DE_3).

Similarly, another respondent argues:

With respect to the crises in particular, there were always individual spurts. And the Corona pandemic was, I think, the biggest push, so that a lot of news or dubious news sites were created and a lot was shared on Facebook (Interview_DE_8).

Moreover, while previous critical occasions, such as national elections, have been shaped to a larger extent by foreign disinformation sources and their domestic supporters, the pandemic enhanced the emergence and activity of domestic players (see also section 4 below), so that disinformation has become an "organic part of domestic political communication, as well" (Bayer 2021: 1).

Another recent trend of the past two to three years is the migration of the community of spreaders of disinformation from Facebook or YouTube to other platforms, such as Telegram and alternative video platforms. This needs to be read as a clear effect of stricter national regulation⁵² and enhanced self-regulation and anti-disinformation policies of the large social media platforms like Facebook. Experts are concerned that this may lead to a reinforcement of selective exposure effects in ideological echo chambers, a narrowing down of reality perceptions and a growing inability to get in contact with and learn about facts and legitimate, evidence-based narratives from established mass media, science and politics.

In these closed groups,

[...] they are only paired with like-minded people. And there, fake news, disinformation, lies are not even recognised as such, and they lose the ability to critically question them and, on the contrary, become downright allergic to true news, to true facts that do not fit into their narrative and are then reflexively rejected. And that promotes radicalisation to an extreme, and actually through the hatred that is also stirred up there, because individuals are always highlighted who are then supposed to stand symbolically for evil in the respective narrative, who are then also belittled with lies and with insults. This also increases hatred and the potential for violence and conflict in everyday life because people forget how to compromise, admit mistakes, communicate and revise their opinions (Interview_DE_3).

With regard to the conflicting, incompatible perceptions of reality, some experts argue that the “dynamics have definitely increased, and we are already, to some extent, in a post-factual social discourse that has been fuelled by many actors in recent years. And the result can be seen in the fact that many people now perceive that society seems more divided than it perhaps was a few years ago” (Interview_DE_12). At the same time, experts underline that the community of conspiracy and disinformation believers is a loud yet small minority. Thus, it would be inappropriate to speak about a division of society, as such. Instead, what we observe is a radicalisation by which certain groups have drifted further away from the rest of society.

3. Trust in news and journalism

The spread of disinformation affects trust in journalism in nuanced ways and to varying degrees. Experts agree that there is a growing divide between members of filter bubbles, categorically distrusting the established media, and the majority of society who has basic trust in professional journalism and quality mass media. Within those groups of society that already distrust established media and dominantly consume alternative media, an increased radicalisation and alienation has been observed. At the core of the problem are people who are not sceptical of mass media on the grounds of reasonable arguments, or a healthy vigilant attitude. Instead, among these groups, a fundamental, fanatical distrust and rejection of mass media (particularly with regard to public broadcasting) has taken hold that tends to make its followers inaccessible to professional journalism. As one journalist explains: “I think there is a majority in this country that does not say that all [news] [...] is 100 per cent true. [...]. But they do understand that there is professional journalism that tries to present reality as realistically as possible. That falls apart a lot. I think this polarisation is actually the new thing, that there is such a hard, such a fanatical criticism of the media, which

⁵² See https://www.bmj.de/DE/Themen/FokusThemen/NetzDG/NetzDG_node.html

has really already lifted itself into its own ideology” (Interview_DE_4). In fact, in Germany the fighting term “lying press” (“Lügenpresse”) has again become popular among right-wing protestors since late 2014 to categorically accuse the media of false reporting, disguising information and manipulating society, similar to the way Donald Trump and the far right in the U.S. have been using “fake news” to defame legacy media (see also Beiler/Kiesler 2018)⁵³. Over the past decade, aggression against journalists, insults and hate speech have increased, while in most recent times, journalists have also experienced more direct violence while doing their job (e.g., while conducting interviews, or reporting at demonstrations).

In contrast to the cementation of fundamental media distrust among a minority of people, the increased spread of disinformation in the public sphere has more subtle effects among the majority within society. Overall, large parts of the country still trust the established mass media, especially the independent, non-commercial public broadcasting and the leading quality newspapers.⁵⁴ Yet, experts are concerned that the strategic, repeated and concerted dissemination of disinformation and the defamation campaigns against the established mass media are starting to make people from the mainstream of society insecure about the reliability and truthfulness of news reporting, and recognise its potential to step-by-step diminish their trust in formerly trusted media outlets. The oft-repeated targeted spread of the same false narratives and accusations claiming that established mass media hide relevant information, lie and deceive the public (on behalf of the government or other elites) undermines their credibility, and fuels uncertainties and more scepticism towards professional journalism and news coverage in parts of the population. One journalist explains:

One disinformation strategy is to attack established media and reputable media, and to portray them as untrustworthy, as faulty, as incomplete. And sure, that doesn't reach everyone. But if you hear that again and again and again, then at some point, it settles in your head and you are then more sceptical and then move further and further away. [...]. And it is, of course, very, very difficult to convince them again and to give them the feeling and to show them that we are trustworthy (Interview_DE_8).

A related problem is that targeted disinformation campaigns take up single mistakes or inaccuracies of specific media outlets – and politicians, brand them as deliberate lies or manipulation attempts, and inflate them in such way that they appear as a huge and fundamental problem. What is more, disinformation campaigns do not only make generalised claims about the media outlet, or the politicians at stake, but also about the media and politics as such, suggesting that all the mass media and politicians or the government are untrustworthy. The same respondent states:

Mistakes are pointed out again and again, or reports are invented [...]. Of course, this is detrimental because these individual cases are always made very, very big, and are shared on many different channels, which can create the impression that this is an everyday problem. [...] It is not only the individual cases that are then made big, but also a generalisation that is then made about "the media". [...], everything is then lumped together. [...] Of course, this [disinformation] leads to a loss of trust in state institutions and the state and the media, and so on (Interview_DE_8).

⁵³ The term “lying press” (“Lügenpresse”) has already been used by the German National Socialist Party during the 1930 and the Nazi regime to defame the press and destroy public trust (Koliska/Assmann 2021). In 2014, it was taken-up again by the Pegida movement, and subsequently used by various anti-democratic right-wing movements.

⁵⁴ This has been confirmed by recent surveys, for instance “Glaubwürdigkeit der Medien 2020” (infratest dimap, 2020) and “Langzeitstudie Medienvertrauen”, (Institut für Publizistik Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 2020).

Another key mechanism of targeted disinformation is the populist stirring up of discontent against the elites. Messages promote black-and-white thinking patterns, and are often structured in a way that enemy images are created, such as "we little citizens and those up there," thus referring to politicians, the government, or the media in a very sweeping way. In this context, disinformation campaigns claim to elucidate the public and bring the truth about those elites to light.

Overall, these mechanisms appear to work particularly for such kinds of disinformation that is less evidently made-up, has some fact-based elements and sounds relatively reasonable and potentially true. Indeed, in order to gain credibility and influence false claims, alleged disclosures and accusations are substantiated with many arguments and supposed facts that often sound quite realistic at first, and require a certain effort to be checked. Two of the interviewed journalists underline, for instance:

Even more dangerous are the messages that sound even more realistic. They are alarming, but in such a way that one does not recognise at first glance that it is somehow a false report. And I do believe that [...] especially public or mainstream media, as it is often called, that they are always being attacked to some extent, and then [these false reports] also lead to a greater mistrust. [...] And I believe that trust in the media is also influenced by the fact that this leaves a mark on people. Even if you don't believe every false report, the danger is definitely there (Interview_DE_9).

They obviously sound very logical and very, very factual to some people, and this naturally leads to the question, okay, why haven't I read anything about this, why aren't politicians talking about it, and so on. And then a feeling of a reporting gap is constructed, so to speak. And that harms, of course, [...] because then the impression is strengthened once again that either nothing is being reported, or it is being reported incorrectly by politics and the media (Interview_DE_8).

According to the journalists and fact-checkers, the effectiveness of disinformation and defamation campaigns varies considerably between different groups in society. While education in general is seen as one factor that can make people less vulnerable, media literacy and particularly knowledge and experience in the use of digital media are considered the most important conditions for people to critically encounter and recognise disinformation. In the words of one respondent:

I see in younger people that they have more of an understanding of what is possible in the social media, that there are many, many things circulating there that are fake, as they say. And that they control themselves more because they interact much more with each other. That is of course a very important corrective, that they correspond with each other more often and are perhaps made aware of something. That doesn't have to be universally valid, but at least in principle there are people [...] who grew up in the analogue age, where a daily newspaper was still a daily newspaper, and where everything that was printed there was, so to speak, set like this. They look at some pages on the Internet [...] and think, that looks reasonable. Then it must be correct. But nowadays, it's so easy to create a false impression or manipulate pictures and things like that; they are sometimes overwhelmed by the flood of information 24/7 on the Internet. [...] They are also often lonely people who spend a lot of time alone in front of the computer (Interview_DE_4).

Other interviewed experts underline that it is equally important to strengthen digital news literacy among young people as they search for information almost exclusively on (often peer-group specific) digital media and consume news and information typically alone without being accompanied by parents or experienced readers that may give guidance to help distinguish between professional news journalism and opinions, entertainment, manipulation or propaganda.

Another respondent shares the observation that

[...] the lower the school-leaving certificate, the less time there is on the educational pathways to impart media news competence [...] And on the other hand [...] many in this age range, let's say around 50, [...] so to speak, the generation that didn't grow up with the Internet, we see quite often that they sometimes don't have this access to know that everyone can put information on the Internet, what is possible in terms of technology, how influential news can really be (Interview_DE_11).

In this respect, experts underscore the importance of educating people to be cautious and to critically question online and social media content. One journalist also expresses astonishment that those who strongly distrust the established media are often simultaneously very uncritical and trustful of alternative media.

Not only interviewed journalists, but also the representatives from state institutions and civil society, are concerned about the implications of a lack of, or eroding, trust in professional journalism and mass media for democracy and society as such. While there is a strong consensus that a healthy degree of scepticism, vigilance and mistrust, as well as justified criticism of journalism, is important and needed as both a corrective in a democratic society⁵⁵, a lack of basic trust in news and professional journalism, and decided distrust in mass media, are seen as a serious problem.

Experts are particularly worried about how to reach out to those that already fundamentally distrust established media, and how to (re-)integrate them in a joint public discourse and democratic opinion formation. Core to the problem is that those who are already strongly alienated from the centre of society would by default presuppose that the media, together with state representatives, science and other parts of the so-called establishment are, in principle, always lying and deceiving. As one journalist says:

When there is a basic attitude of suspecting that the reporting is deliberately false, of course, this makes it incredibly difficult to convey information if the basic attitude is that a journalist is trying to exploit something, or to pursue some kind of plan. If there is such a basic attitude of distrust, which I believe is often promoted by false reports or fake news or disinformation campaigns, it naturally makes it difficult to find any access at all. And especially in the case of public service broadcasting, the task of informing is of course part of it, and one wants to reach and inform many people with it. And I think that naturally makes the work more difficult when there is such a basic distrust (Interview_DE_9).

⁵⁵ What is more, fact-checkers also underline that it is indeed part of their mission to raise awareness and educate the citizens to be critical, independent and reflective media consumers. As one of the journalists states: "In fact, that's exactly what we teach: 'Don't believe everything right away, look twice, don't share right away,' and many other skills on how to take a close look at media. In this respect, distrust is formulated positively; we rather call it scepticism or caution, or, as I said, the second glance, an important virtue in order not to immediately fall into these traps" (Interview_DE_12).

And another one explains:

When people ask critical, objective questions about our work, when they criticise us, that is of course perfectly fine. That is definitely part of the discourse. But [...] what irritates me very much and gives me a lot to think about is the malice that we are accused of. That we deliberately want to manipulate, that we are a propaganda department [...] and that we are all just lining up to lie to people. And I see how many colleagues really do work very hard and put a lot of effort into research (Interview_DE_4).

What makes such categorical distrust a fundamental problem is the lack of openness to and the denial of facts and arguments contradicting one's own views, and the enshrined unsubstantiated doubt about everything: *"Because then, if I say that nothing is true anyway, and I don't even bother to look at what might be substantiated and what is serious reporting, then I can somehow choose what my reality is"* (Interview_DE_4). This notion relates to the post-truth debate where it is argued that public communication in the post-factual era is marked by categorical relativism and the denial of objective facts and where truth as a principle of debate has been replaced by personal belief and an appeal to emotion (McIntyre 2018: 5; Zackariasson 2018: 1). Yet, in line with recent research in media and communication studies (e.g., Michailidou/Trenz 2021; Waisbord 2018: 1867), the journalists and fact-checkers interviewed on behalf of our study underscore that the phenomenon of fact-denial and post-truth attitudes is, from their observation, confined to a clearly limited circle of radicalised groups in society, while the largest share of society is still interested in objective facts and fact-based journalism.

Having said this, experts also emphasise that the issue should not be underrated. Particular attention is shifted to the fact that media distrust is not seldom related with distrust in the government, the state, science and democracy, as such. The notion of the "lying press" is typically part of a more encompassing ideology, considering the established media, and particularly the public service broadcasting, as part of a larger conspiracy plan of the so-called elites (see also, for instance, Koliska/Assmann 2021: 2733; Richter/Salheiser 2021). In addition, it is argued that the erosion of media trust can also make less radicalised, but still unsettled people, more vulnerable to be drawn deeper into the spiral of conspiracy narratives. In this respect, one respondent argues, for instance:

I think the lack of trust in news and journalism makes people more prone to believe other things that are not necessarily fact-based. And I think the distrust of news also makes people more susceptible to believing that there is some big plan behind something [...] and the media are somehow, mainstream media are a cog in that wheel and then contribute to that [...]. And I believe that such a distrust of the media and journalism makes people more susceptible to believing such news (interview_DE_8).

At the same time, experts are well aware of the risks for democracy and society that an erosion of basic trust in professional journalism and mass media within larger parts of the population may have. So far, Germany has been well prepared to prevent noteworthy influence of disinformation campaigns on democratic elections (preventive measures have been taken, for instance, in the context of the national elections, 2017 and 2021). Nevertheless, journalists and fact-checkers underscore that growing uncertainty about media credibility, reliable sources and a weakening of trust in news media coverage in wider groups of society can have serious implications for democracy. An erosion of basic trust in quality media among wider parts of the population would, in particular, impair the functioning of the mass-mediated public sphere as the space where reliable information about democratic processes, political issues and potential solutions, policy makers and other public

actors is provided, and fact-based arguments and opinions are exchanged as the basis for democratic opinion and will formation (see also Turcilo/Obrenovic 2020).

Reflecting on the impact of lacking trust, one journalist specifies that

[...] journalism is there to provide information and to provide education and, of course, to be a basis to form an opinion. [...] Journalism is also there to provide perspectives that would otherwise not be available, and to give society a broader and more diverse view. And of course, it's important for people to realise that a democracy doesn't just consist of its bubble and its social milieu, I would say, but is very diverse. And democracy is also about majorities, majority decisions and so on. Of course, this helps us to understand such processes and to somehow be able to put ourselves in other perspectives. And disinformation, or a lack of trust, is naturally a problem in this case, simply because different decisions are made, for example, in elections. If you suddenly no longer trust the reports, trust the perspectives, of course, then you make different decisions, which can then become a problem, also for the person making the decision (Interview_DE_8).

At the same time, journalists underscore that the fomenting of uncertainty about reliable information and trustworthy information sources can have direct implications on individual decisions and behaviour in everyday-life contexts. To illustrate the issue, a respondent explains:

"The best current example is probably the Corona pandemic. This group, for example, of vaccination sceptics [...] is not that big in terms of the population. But it is a very, very loud group and a group that very strongly influences this discourse about, for example, [...] the benefits and [...] disadvantages of vaccination [...]. Of course, this helps to steer the debate and then also leads to a distorted image in people who are not at all sure how they stand on this and then also to an action accordingly, which can then also become relevant in terms of health" (Interview_DE_8).

While media distrust has grown and been cemented in a minority of the German population, an opposing trend can be observed in the majority of society. In line with studies showing an increase in media credibility (Infratest dimap 2020) and media trust (Jackob et al. 2020), journalists and fact-checkers state a growing interest in and appreciation of sound, fact-based journalism, fact-checking and data journalism.⁵⁶ This is also corroborated by polls on media usage, indicating a rise in the consumption of already highly-trusted PSB TV-programmes and premium online news in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Infratest dimap 2020; Deloitte 2021). In times of increased uncertainty, many people search for reliable information and develop a renewed appreciation of legitimate quality news sources (see also Trenz et al. 2021). While the pandemic, with its new anxieties and challenges, was an important driver (see Section 5 below), scholarly literature from pre-Covid times suggests that this trend is also related to a changed information behaviour in the context of a surge of disinformation campaigns. Waisbord (2018: 1867), for instance, argues that "certain brands of journalism around the world are more careful with facts than ever (Glasser 2016). Globally, the upsurge of quality investigative journalism (Schiffrin 2014), data journalism, and the fact-checking movement (Graves 2016) indicate growing interest in news that carefully document reality."

⁵⁶ A trend, which clearly refutes the notion of a "post-truth" era.

Overall, what we observe in Germany (similar to many other countries) is a growing polarisation in society between a minority that distrusts the established mass media (above all, public service broadcasting) and a majority that trusts them (in particular, public service broadcasting and quality newspapers), and acknowledges the value of professional quality journalism (see also EB Media & News Survey July 2022).

4. Originators of disinformation

When it comes to the originators of disinformation in Germany, the interviewed experts concerned with fact-checking and tackling disinformation explain that there is a relatively small number of rather professionalised actors who spread disinformation with a wide reach (see also Sangerlaub 2020: 11; Hegelich/Thieltges 2019). Their motivations can be varied, but political, economic and self-marketing/attention-seeking motives rank highly. Among the most visible originators are political activists, movement entrepreneurs, business entrepreneurs, publishers and journalists (some of whom used to work for established “mainstream” media) earning money from the disinformation business, and some artists. With regard to political motives, disinformation is used as a strategy by a broad range of political actors and movements from various backgrounds, depending on the specific political agenda to be promoted and the issues and conflicts around which they mobilise. However, right-wing actors are most salient, and particularly those belonging to the far-right party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), or those who are close to it, are considered to be the most successful in spreading political disinformation in Germany in recent years. The prominent actors are described as the guiding figures and opinion leaders for their followers and communities, who subsequently circulate false or misleading information variously, thus multiplying their reach and visibility. Indeed, anti-democratic movements and ideological communities, such as the so-called “lateral thinking” (“Querdenker”) movement and Pegida, are organised in large numbers of smaller, often regionally-rooted social media or Messenger groups. While the individual groups and actors behind them achieve only a limited reach, they are all sharing the same false narratives and misleading messages, thus enhancing their visibility. Before this backdrop, fact-checkers underscore that the spread of disinformation is, to some extent, rather opaque and confusing, making it sometimes impossible to clearly trace it back to its originators. In addition, to domestic originators, foreign sources of disinformation play a relevant role. These can be either authoritarian, anti-democratic states (like Russia, China) and their troll farms, or foreign political movements or entrepreneurs (like the QAnon movement) aiming to circulate propaganda, infuse false or misleading information and eventually influence domestic political, social and economic processes and outcomes or, more generally, fuel distrust in established procedures and institutions.⁵⁷ According to the interviewed experts, domestic and foreign sources of disinformation are often also interlinked with each other, and sometimes it is difficult to identify which source was the first to circulate false reports. Some of the manipulative content has, for instance, been first disseminated by foreign agents (e.g., the Russian TV channel RT or the U.S. American QAnon movement), but has then been picked up, adapted and pro-actively disseminated by domestic sympathisers.

A further striking observation of fact-checkers is that different issue-specific waves of disinformation, to a remarkable extent, are spread within the same social media communities and, as it seems, often by the very same spreaders. This observation resonates with media research about the spread of disinformation in Germany in times of the Covid-19 pandemic, corroborating showing

⁵⁷ Not surprisingly, propaganda and disinformation from foreign sources and anti-democratic states are the main focus of government representatives specialised in monitoring and tackling disinformation.

that right-wing alternative online news media tend to merge different narratives of the far right, e.g., about the so-called refugee crisis, climate change denial, state of emergency and worst-case scenarios and the new Corona virus, fitting them into one overriding conspiracy narrative (Boberg et al. 2020; Welker 2021).

Disinformation is disseminated across a broad variety of communication channels, including social media and video platforms, messengers, alternative news websites or blogs, but also through more classic communication channels like TV, radio, print outlets, flyers or by public oral presentations. Overall, the situation is described as very dynamic and rapidly changing. For a longer time, Facebook and WhatsApp used to be among the most dominant channels, while YouTube is described as one of the popular video platforms, from where disinformation videos have been widely shared in WhatsApp chat groups or similar. In the context of enhanced political regulation, particularly the so-called domestic Network Enforcement Act of 2017 and its 2021 revision (BMJ 2021), and self-regulation of the social media businesses, the spread of disinformation has moved to more unregulated and closed communication spaces, above all Telegram⁵⁸, and a growing number of alternative news sites, online blogs and alternative video platforms.⁵⁹

5. Effects of the pandemic

As touched on in the previous sections, the pandemic was an important driver for the upsurge in the spread of disinformation in Germany over the past three years, and has had a considerable impact on trust in journalism. Most strikingly, the pandemic has contributed to an enhanced cleavage between a majority of society that trusts professional journalism and the mass media and a minority that fundamentally distrusts established mass media and journalism, and in this distrustful attitude has lately been alienated from the “mainstream” of society in more radical ways. For those who trust the media and journalism, their trust is surely not unconditional and blind. However, according to the interviewed experts and recent empirical research (e.g., Infratest dimap 2020; Jakobs et al. 2021; EB Media & News Survey 2022) there is a clear majority of people in Germany who have a basic trust in quality news media and think that journalism in Germany, and particularly public service broadcasting and the leading quality press, are committed to the principles of truthfulness and objectivity. Particularly in the earlier stages of the pandemic and the related new anxieties and uncertainties, the awareness about the need for reliable news and professional trustworthy journalism increased, and existing trust in quality news and quality journalistic media has been further enhanced. Interviewed journalists and fact-checkers argue that the pandemic provided momentum to revitalise trust in professional news journalism (even if this is not the direct purpose of their work). In order to meet the citizens’ search for reliable, trustworthy information, and to counterpose the flooding of the public sphere with irritating, misleading or false information from unreliable sources, journalists bolstered their pure fact-based reporting and transparency in news journalism, on the one hand, while several editorial teams and civil society actors expanded existing or newly set-up new fact-checking and awareness-raising initiatives, on the other hand. In this regard, a journalist explains:

⁵⁸ Telegram was able to take advantage of the fact that it is a private messenger service which is not subject to the Network Enforcement Act. According to the interviewed experts, also Tic-Toc has been increasingly used for the spread of disinformation.

⁵⁹ There are a number of studies that have analysed, in more detail, right-wing alternative news sites, providing clear evidence about the recent growth and dynamics in this field (e.g., Puschmann et al. 2016; Schweiger 2017; Bachl 2018; Heft et al. 2019; Frischlich et al. 2020; Boberg et al. 2020)

I believe that the pandemic has once again shown many people how important the information provided by the public broadcasters is. I emphasise, for many people, not for everyone. Many people, I believe, appreciate exactly this kind of reporting, which is thoroughly researched, which ideally [...] has no political bias and which is [...] also based on a broad social consensus, namely that we need several independent media in Germany. [...] On the one hand, it is an increase in trust in a [...] sector of society that, I believe, appreciates being informed about current developments, discourses, new measures in the context of the pandemic. [...] Positive signals are definitely increased reach. [...] Information on the pandemic, scientifically based information has been received very, very strongly and is still being received. [...] That is a positive signal for us, that information that enlightens, for example, also fact checks that show on the grounds of transparent research paths how we arrived at certain results on circulating questions. These were elements that were in great demand. That's why I believe that this demand also implicitly shows that society is looking for something like this, that even or perhaps especially in the post-factual age, many people are again looking for and need facts and information (Interview_DE_12).

Similarly, another journalist states:

I believe that the founding of many fact-checking editorial offices, or the expansion of fact-checking editorial offices, may have contributed to this. [...] I could imagine that this has definitely contributed to more trust being placed in the media again, or that simply correcting individual stories or individual allegations has had an effect. [...] Of course, problems have also arisen because we are all experiencing a pandemic for the first time, both science, politics and the media. Of course, there is also reporting that changes again and again. The information that is correct today can be wrong again in two months. [...] Many media and many colleagues have done a very, very good job and have also explained a lot of basics and how all the processes work. Many also explained how the media work. Of course, that was done before. But through this transparency and this explanation, trust can of course also be strengthened. [...] We already noticed in the pandemic that many more people learned to deal with sources [...] And we can already see that there is simply, I think, a bit more scepticism, that a lot of things are being put right. That could perhaps be seen as a positive development from the pandemic and its handling (Interview_DE_8).

In contrast to the trusting part of society, distrust of those who were already rather distrustful of established mass media, and largely sought for information on alternative news media sites seems to have grown during the pandemic. While available survey data indicates that there was no increase in the numbers of people clearly distrusting the media (e.g., Long-term Survey Media Trust by the University of Mainz 2021), there are signs suggesting that a radicalisation within the group of distrustful citizens took place during the pandemic. As interviewed experts report, established media have increasingly been confronted with insults, hate speech and accusations of being notorious liars, dependent transmitters of government statements, and part of an elitist conspiracy circle preparing a hidden agenda, while they have also experienced physical violence. This is particularly experienced by journalists from public service broadcasting, who have been confrontation with verbal and physical aggression:

There is another section of the population [...] that is very critical of the Corona measures, the government and also the mass media. I would almost go so far as to say that the pandemic has even further distanced this section of the population from the public media. There is absolute pure distrust, which has also been expressed at demonstrations, sometimes even with

the use of violence or, in any case, with insults. [...] On the one hand, it is an increase in trust in a [...] sector of society [...] that, I believe, appreciates being informed [...]. And at the same time, this other part, where – due to the alleged dissemination of only the government line [...], a dissolution of the boundary [...] between politics and journalism [...] -- the whole complex is despised and distrusted. Thus, these two developments can be observed in Germany. But some things are still in flux. The pandemic is still not completely over, and there are also patterns of behaviour that can change again (Interview_DE_12).

What journalists and fact-checkers also describe is an enhanced withdrawal into ideological world views and conspiracy narratives that made a certain group of people inapproachable regarding information on pandemic-related issues deviating from their own beliefs. According to one of the interviewed journalists, the basic problem is indeed that “there are parts of society that are no longer open to accepting new facts, new information, if they contradict their own view of the world” (Interview_DE_12). Another one explains “You could also see during Corona, for example, this discussion about children and the danger for children, the risks for children, how people can become quite radicalised. And no longer want to perceive new findings” (Interview_DE_4).

In comparison with the small minority of citizens who fundamentally distrust the established media, there is a considerable number of citizens, according to the experts, who became more critical towards mass media reporting and generally unsettled during the pandemic. The interviewed journalists and fact-checkers strongly agree that the pandemic has brought about a particularly difficult challenge for media coverage and its recipients (as it has for scientists and policymakers) because of the novelty of the virus, the immense lack of knowledge and the rapidly changing and partly contradictory facts and findings about Covid-19, in addition to suitable measures against its spread. This situation led to media reporting that often had to withdraw and revise earlier statements, while the complex, unclear, highly dynamic evidence base, as well as the fact that most journalists lacked specialised knowledge in life sciences, caused mistakes, inaccuracies or misinterpretations. This problem had been amplified by targeted disinformation and defamation campaigns that framed such mistakes as a deliberate strategy of the media to hide information, deceive and manipulate the public. According to the journalists and fact-checkers, this whole situation led to increased uncertainties among parts of society.

One of the journalists underscores that “the biggest challenge about the Corona pandemic was actually that the situation was changing all the time. Constantly. And that findings and knowledge that were considered correct just a few weeks or months prior, and that were also plausible and certain, were no longer necessarily true in the next wave. And that was actually the amazing thing about this Corona pandemic” (Interview_DE_4).

Another respondent shifts attention to the effects of the new challenges and uncertainties within those parts of society that developed doubts during the pandemic but are distinct from the radical minority that categorically distrusts the mass media:

There is [...] this group that is simply unsettled by disinformation because they cannot recognise and classify it. [...]. They are also worried. Well, this pandemic is of course also something that is new for everyone, and everyone is somehow affected. That is, politics, science, the media, every single citizen [...] first had to learn what it is all about. And there is simply a lot of uncertainty at play and answers are being sought. And of course, the answers that science gives are never or rarely simple. That means you really have to engage with it. And that is also a challenge that journalism has faced, or still faces, because a large part of the journalists

are not specialists in virology, for example. And disinformation, of course, also takes advantage of that because they give supposedly simple answers. Of course, it is easier to say that the pandemic does not exist or that the virus is not that dangerous [...]. And the facts are often more complicated and difficult [...]. And yes, this uncertainty, I think, also plays a role for many people, which is probably why many more people suddenly reacted to disinformation during the pandemic (Interview_DE_5).

Yet another journalist explains:

I believe that mistakes have been made by many media outlets because the pandemic has simply given rise to an area of interest [...] where a great deal of science journalism has inevitably been done, which many journalists do not have a clear view of. [...] Many went to journalism schools, others, for example, studied political science [...] And science journalism was previously rather a small section [...], a small subject area, which then suddenly became the largest, and then suddenly everyone reported on it. I think that cooperation with science has improved a lot, but of course mistakes have also been made (Interview_DE_8).

On a more critical note, one interviewed fact-checker of a civil society organisation argues that apparently many people have become more critical of established media because they perceive media coverage about pandemic-related issues to some extent as rather one-sided and uniform. In their interaction with users, the organisation gained the impression that “as far as disinformation and misinformation are concerned, the public media, or actually large media houses, mainstream media [...] above all, are said not to report in a diverse way, to report in a very one-sided way. And that, of course, reduces the trustworthiness of these media in particular. Yes, that can definitely be seen, and that's why alternative media are also very strongly consumed. [...] I do believe that curiously enough, the broader population still consumes [...] the ‘Tagesschau’, but has become more critical” (Interview_DE_11)⁶⁰.

⁶⁰ On this very argument, journalists themselves argue that news coverage is, of course, selective, but that this selection follows the principles of relevance and legitimacy. While particularly public service broadcasting, but also professional journalism as such, is required to provide an unbiased, balanced picture, this would not imply that extreme minority views or already falsified or unproven information need to be covered, as well. In this respect, one of the journalists states: “Whether you depict a false balance and say that we have a totally crude position here and we have a rational, factually based position and simply place them next to each other and say that the truth will lie somewhere in the middle. Or whether you name it clearly. So I think you also have to have the courage to say what is nonsense [...], what is not coherent and for what there is no evidence. That's where the famous discussion about neutrality comes in. I don't believe that one can be neutral in the face of conspiracy legends and lies, but rather one must clearly state that these claims are not true. That makes you vulnerable, of course. But otherwise, if you just put that as a legitimate position next to totally well-founded positions and just depict it, then you make it very easy for disinformation to spread” (Interview_DE_4). (The debate of a “false balance” in public service broadcasting is indeed very topical, also beyond Germany. See for instance the debate about the BBC coverage on Brexit, e.g., Dittert 2022). Following media content analysis (e.g., Quandt et al. 2020; Degen 2021; Leidecker-Sandmann et al. 2022), the first phase of media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic, when anxieties and uncertainties were particularly pronounced, was characterised by a strong focus on government representatives and virologists, while scientists from other disciplines, politicians of the opposition, or other voices, were only rarely represented. Likewise, in times of extreme crisis management, reporting was centred on information transmission, while there was comparably little space for interpretation, contextualisation and critique. However, at later stages of the pandemic, especially when infection figures went down, interpretation, contextualisation and critique returned into media reporting about the pandemic. According to the media studies (ibid.), media coverage became indeed more multifaceted and inclusive of a variety of perspectives and (party) political positions. Moreover, the study of Leidecker-Sandmann et al. 2022 comes to the result that media reporting about Covid-19 covered a higher diversity of experts than media coverage of earlier pandemics, and was less centred on only a few specific scientists. In addition, their study finds that the selection of scientists was strongly guided by the principle of high scientific expertise and that, compared to previous pandemics, media coverage on the Corona pandemic gave more voice to acknowledged, reputable scientific experts.

For the journalists and fact-checkers, citizens who have been unsettled by the uncertainties of the pandemic and disinformation campaigns against established mass media are a very important target audience because they still appear approachable for fact-based journalism, and it is still an open question if their trust in established mass media will grow or further erode. On this argument, one journalist explains:

I think it depends on how well the disinformation catches. [...] In the worst case, serious journalism is seen as part of the conspiracy, like 'they are not reporting on it' or 'they are controlled'. [...] But it can also have the opposite effect, namely that those who are unsettled and also specifically look for statements other than those of the alternative media – i.e., those who are prepared to look at 'what is behind this' or 'is there still something to it' or 'are there also other reports on it' – perhaps come to a different conclusion. They might end up with the serious media and traditional journalism. [...] If they get the answers and are willing to deal with it, this could have the effect of strengthening trust in journalism (Interview_DE_5).

Looking at the latest developments since the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine in February 2022, interviewed experts perceive that the pandemic has been widely replaced by this new topic on alternative media sites and social media accounts spreading disinformation. Indeed, it is striking for them to observe that, in various instances, the very same websites, platform accounts or messenger channels - and hence the same spreaders of disinformation - have changed their issue focus from the Covid-19 pandemic to war propaganda (e.g., formerly “lateral thinkers” became Putin supporters). One journalist, for instance, explains: “It is quite interesting - we are currently researching this in more detail – it turns out that many, many platforms that actually belong to the ‘lateral thinkers’ movement are now sharing pro-Putin content. In other words, some of the accounts have not changed at all, but the content is now spilling over. So, before it was the ‘concerned mothers’ who shared disinformation about vaccination, about child vaccination, who are now spreading pro-Putin content. Sometimes it's not entirely clear whether some of them are troll accounts. But a part of the movement is also simply very close to this pro-Russian stance” (Interview_DE_5). At the same time, fact-checkers have the (yet preliminary) impression that the circle of people spreading and consuming disinformation has shrunk to radical, mostly right-wing communities, which partly have become even more radicalised, while a larger share of the people who had been unsettled during the pandemic are barely concerned with war-related conspiracy narratives, propaganda and “alternative” facts.

The basic pattern characterising trust in the mass media and professional journalism in recent times can be observed in similar ways also with regard to latest trends for trust in science and expertise. Both empirical studies (e.g., Wissenschaftsbarometer 2021; Peritia 2022) and the insights provided by the interviewed experts provide a clear picture of how German society is divided between a distrusting minority and a majority trusting science and scientists (with trust in science being even higher than media trust). Trust in science and scientists has been high and even grown during the pandemic, and a strong majority is in support of evidence-based policymaking, while at the same time, there is a significant part of society who is undecided – and apparently unsettled by the confusing and rapidly changing data basis and competing (dis)information on Covid-19, and a small minority who clearly distrusts science and research (Wissenschaftsbarometer 2020; 2021). According to our interviewees’ observations and experiences, the pandemic has substantially strengthened the public’s interest in and appreciation of sound evidence-based information and scientific facts, and has helped science journalism to grow from a marginal niche sector to an important field of media coverage. The media organisations, on their behalf, responded to this demand not only with the above-mentioned extensive provision of fact-centred news, but also with various formats

offering low-threshold science education and explaining basics and principals of empirical research (also Degen 2021: 126). In this context, journalists also responded to a certain degree of irritation, incomprehension and mistrust among the population about the fact that scientific findings about the Covid-19 virus were often withdrawn and revised after a short while. In contrast to the majority with a solid bedrock of trust in science, or at least an openness towards scientific facts, there is a minority in society distrusting facts, scientific evidence and established scientists and believing in “alternative” facts and conspiracy narratives that appeared to be further cemented and radicalised in their views during the pandemic. According to the perceptions and experiences of the consulted experts in this study, there is indeed a community of categorical opponents of the “mainstream” of society that lumps “mainstream” mass media, scientists and the government together within the same conspiracy narrative, and appears as inapproachable for fact-based journalism and recognised scientific expertise. In this context, one of the fact-checkers argues that trust in journalism and trust in science “often go hand in hand. Those groups who spread distrust towards reputable media, also spread general distrusts towards science. I believe this is hardly separable. Because serious scientists usually use those public platforms in the public service media [...] of course, in order to reach a larger audience, and also in order to use media of broad reach and high trust. And the conspiracy myths, which of course must be very simple enemy images, also mixed things up more and more. Thus, for them it was one and the same enemy image. There was science and the media and the government and politics, in general, were one and the same enemy image” (Interview_DE_3).

6. Counter-strategies

In Germany, there is a variety of actors taking action to combat disinformation, ranging from the state to mass media organisations, civil society organisations and scientists to social network owners. For the **German government**, tackling disinformation is a cross-cutting activity that has received growing attention in recent years. At the federal level, various ministries and public authorities are engaged in curbing disinformation and its effects within and outside the country. In terms of legal regulation, state intervention confines itself to acting against hate crime, criminal disinformation and other criminal content, including insult, defamation, depiction of threat and violence, incitement of the people or public incitement to commit criminal acts, while not infringing freedom of speech and the freedom of the press (hence, lies as such are not a crime). An important legal instrument in this regard is the “Network Enforcement Law” that was adopted in 2017 and further developed with its 2021 reform (BMJ 2021). This law has the purpose to improve law enforcement in social networks. It obliges social network providers to facilitate and deal with user complaints about illegal content in a swift and encompassing way, investigate claims and complaints, and delete or block criminal content within 24 hours.

Furthermore, the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Federal Ministry of Defence and the Federal Ministry of the Interior, together with its subordinated authorities (like the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Federal Office for Information Security) are engaged in monitoring and analysing disinformation that may pose a hybrid threat and have a relevance to security policy, such as (war) propaganda, manipulation of public opinion and other ways of direct or indirect illegitimate interference by foreign states (being the specific focus of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), or foreign or domestic non-state actors, as well as cyber-attacks and espionage. During the Covid-19 pandemic, monitoring and screening Covid-19 related disinformation also became an important task within the Federal Ministry of Health. Apart from monitoring, these federal

ministries are also countering security-relevant disinformation by raising awareness about disinformation and building resilience within the entire government and the political sphere, the economy and society. In the past few years, proactive public communication, information and other outreach activities to sensitise the public about disinformation have been markedly reinforced. Moreover, debunking and correcting disinformation takes place in those serious instances when disinformation poses a clear threat to government action and public security, or if it implies a risk of severely interfering with public opinion. Indeed, an explicit addressing and debunking of disinformation is applied very restrictively. What is more common is strategic government communication that uses monitoring to identify issues of concern and proactively offers its own positive narratives and information on the theme without mentioning related circulating disinformation (thus preventing further attention to it). While monitoring, screening, analysis and evaluation are subject to regular exchange and cooperation between the different ministries (supported by a task force of the Ministry of the Interior), public communication and information activities are more clearly organised according to divided responsibilities. In line with their subject areas, strategic communication of the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for instance, addresses target groups abroad, whereas communication by the Federal Ministry of the Interior is typically geared towards domestic targets. In addition to the different ministries, the Press and Information Office of the federal government is responsible for providing general information about disinformation and counterstrategies, as well as government information for the population about imminent risks due to current targeted disinformation campaigns (Bundesregierung 2022a). In its endeavour to counter hybrid threat, the state also cooperates variously with international partners. In particular, the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs participates in joint programmes and alliances, either bilaterally, or in the context of the EU (e.g., in the context of the European Action Plan against Disinformation), G7 or NATO (Bundesregierung 2022b).

A focus on prevention and resilience building is applied by the support schemes of the Federal Ministries of the Interior and of Family Affairs, promoting projects geared to encounter disinformation, hate speech and misanthropic behaviour by fostering media and news literacy, sensitise about disinformation and conspiracy narratives and develop prevention strategies against anti-democratic conduct (Bundesregierung 2022c).⁶¹ In addition, the German Ministry of Science set up a scheme to promote in-depth research about the spread of disinformation and viable remedies in the previous year.

As said above, state regulation of disinformation on online platforms and in social networks is confined to crime acts, while disinformation, as such, is not prohibited or punished by law. This is where self-regulation of **social network and platform owners** comes in. Initial steps towards self-regulation have been taken, particularly by META with its fact-checking programme that was first established in 2016 and has been operating in Germany since 2017. This project involves cooperation with various independent fact-checking teams of news agencies and media organisations that fact-check and verify content on Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp marked as dubious by its users. In Germany, the programme is supported by the independent, non-profit newsroom, Correctiv (since 2017) and the news agencies dpa (since 2019) and AFP (since 2020). The main purpose of the programme, besides deleting illegal content, is to reduce the reach of content that fact-checkers have identified as false or misleading, while also offering check-/verification-related and evidence-based information. False or misleading content is marked with a label indicating the form and gravity of the disinformation, and this is linked to the full fact-checking article. Moreover, a warning about

⁶¹ In comparison, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs cooperates with local partners in other countries in order to promote media literacy and resilience-building projects (Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020).

the negative fact-checking result is sent to users who have already shared, or still seek to share, content identified as disinformation, including again the link to the detailed fact-checking report.

In German **journalism**, combatting disinformation started to be a more targeted activity with the development of specialised fact-checking units (since around 2017) following the US election campaign of Donald Trump, and in the context of the 2017 Federal elections in Germany). Among the pioneers in this field were, for instance, the non-profit independent newsroom, Correctiv (**Correctiv Faktencheck**), the Bavarian public service broadcasting (**BR24 #Faktenfuchs**), the South-Western public service broadcasting (**SWR3 Faktencheck**) and the Consortium of public broadcasters in Germany (**ARD Faktenfinder**). Other media organisations started to establish fact-checking units in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, **Deutsche Welle** (the German international public service broadcaster) and the German section of the French news agency, **Agence France-Presse**.⁶² In comparison to the usual approach in journalistic investigations, fact-checking refers to checking and verifying presumed false or misleading information, or of issues that involve considerable doubt and uncertainty among the public. In other words, journalistic fact-checkers investigate themes and content that appear doubtful, irritating, unclear and/or potentially wrong and, at the same time, are sufficiently relevant for investigation (e.g., in terms of reach, impact, harmfulness) (see also Stern 2020). Accordingly, the overriding aim of journalistic fact-checking projects is to verify factual claims, reveal disinformation, shed light on the underlying mechanisms and strategies, and provide related objective, reliable information and answers on issues that are shaped by widespread uncertainty and fear, and thus, ultimately to contribute to both awareness raising and an informed and independent political opinion and will formation of citizens. Moreover, the interviewed fact-checkers explain that, in comparison to daily news coverage, their fact-checking usually covers a broader subject area that is not confined to typical (political) news subjects, but also takes up other relevant issues associated with disinformation and public unsettlement. Regarding the spectrum of themes, there are some differences between the various fact-checking initiatives. While the fact-checking of the news agency, AFP, the ARD fact finder, DW and Correctiv tend to be more strongly linked to disinformation and factual claims relating to political, economic or societal issues, the fact-checking work of the regionally-rooted public service broadcasters apply a broader thematic approach, and are also regularly oriented towards their users' uncertainties, concerns and questions of everyday life, for instance, if certain ingredients of cosmetics are harmful to health. One journalist of the SWR3 fact-checking team explains:

We always look very closely at who our target group is, who the people are who listen to us, who read us, and what interests them, what unsettles them? [...]. Hence, the topics we deal with are always very, very close, if possible, to what somehow moves people in their everyday lives. That's why we don't just deal with the classic political topics, which we also do, but we also deal with topics from everyday life. [...] It is very important to us that we explain these topics and their background in a way that somebody who hasn't heard a lot about it yet is able to understand it. Therefore, we also try to be as close as possible to people's everyday lives and as close as possible to what moves our user groups in terms of political topics (Vanessa Valkovic, SWR3).

Overall, fact-checkers refer to various sources that identify relevant themes and topics for fact-checking. Basically, they all apply a mixed approach including proactive monitoring of social network communication ("Social listening") and the trending of issues in the (digital) public sphere (for

⁶² Other fact-checking units of German media organisations are, for instance, [ZDFheuteCheck](#), [MDR Faktencheck](#), [dpa Faktencheck](#). Of relevance to the German speaking countries are also the fact checking sections of the [Austrian Press Agency](#), [Profil](#), and the civil society organisation [Mimikama](#).

instances, in Google searches), on the one hand, and user comments and requests for clarification, on the other. For Correctiv, AFP and dpa, additional input about doubtful and potentially false or misleading content is provided by Facebook in the context of META's fact-checking cooperation project. Fact-checkers use the same, or similar, methods and tools to check and verify information in its various forms (e.g., videos, pictures, statements, alleged quotes, statistics, etc.). In order to check factual claims, statements, narratives and their context, fact-checkers employ classic procedures of journalistic investigation and consult the original sources, including scientific studies, statistics, expert opinion, original documents, information from official authorities and statements of directly involved actors, such as witnesses or concerned parties. At the same time, fact-checking makes use of a range of software tools and other techniques geared to verify the authenticity, truthfulness, and origin of digital content. One journalist, for instance, states "The federal election [...] was new for us in that the disinformation was then very personalised. That suddenly the focus was on the people in the election campaign, that false quotes were planted on them. That people were deliberately denigrated, and no longer, as in the pandemic, was the topic the subject of misinformation. And now, in recent times, it is of course issues around the Ukraine war. There we also encounter a lot of propagandistic material. [...] There, it's also about the difficulties; we deal more with verification, so to speak. What normally we have classic fact checks, where we investigate topics and claims, we are now also much more involved with image and video verification to determine 'Did it take place where it is claimed?', 'Is that the building that was allegedly destroyed there?' and so forth" (Interview_DE_5).

Some of the fact-checking units are even involved in the development of innovative verification tools. One of the pioneers, in this regard, is the Deutsche Welle (DW), which has contributed to various verification tools in the context of different research and innovation projects.⁶³ A useful overview of key verification tools has, for instance, been published by BR24 Faktenfuchs under the URL: <https://start.me/p/xbk65R/verifikations-toolkit-br24-faktenfuchs>.

An important principle of fact-checking is to be as transparent as possible, in particular by providing references to the sources used, and linking fact-checking articles to original sources and further information, where possible, with the purpose of enhancing credibility and trust, on the one hand, and imparting media literacy and verification skills among recipients, on the other. While there are minor differences in terms of the extensivity of referencing and linking, the following statement by one of the journalists seems illustrative of all other fact-checking projects consulted for this study:

We show how we get to the information. In journalism, if you look at it critically, there are far too many articles where the sources are not clearly named, even though these are actually basic rules of journalism. And we try to make it very clear, for instance, through hyperlinks, [...] further information in the text and also by explaining how we came across an aspect within the research, to make it clear how we work. In this way, we want to create trust. We are comprehensible, verifiable, for example, similar to how science functions. And that makes us plausible. At least that's our approach (Interview_DE_12).

Text-based online articles are the main format where fact-checkers present their investigation results, since they are the most suitable way to account for the complexities of the issues, to specifically link to sources and further information and to expand arguments and explanations. In addition, fact-checks are provided, for instance, in video format (e.g., SWR3⁶⁴, BR24, Deutsche Welle),

⁶³ <https://innovation.dw.com/outcomes>

⁶⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/c/faktencheck/videos>, last updated in February 2022

podcasts (e.g., ARD⁶⁵) or newsletters (e.g., Correctiv). Typically, social media networks are used to reach out to target groups and attract attention to the fact-checking websites. Moreover, some of the fact-checking teams (e.g., of the news agency AFP or the independent newsroom Correctiv) cooperate with news portals or platforms of broad reach (like MSN, Firefox Pocket) to further enhance their public visibility.

Some differences between the fact-checking units can be found with regard to the geographic scope. Very basically, the scope ranges from a dominantly global approach (Deutsche Welle) to an approach where considerable attention is also dedicated to regional issues in Germany (regional public service broadcaster, like BR24 Faktenfuchs and SWR3 Faktencheck). Overall, fact-checkers usually take up issues of significant relevance for public debates and/or opinion formation in Germany. Yet, these issues do not necessarily have to be domestic issues or disinformation campaigns. German fact-checking teams also deal with disinformation about or from other countries, provided it has considerable relevance for and/or impact on domestic public discourse.⁶⁶ Deutsche Welle, in contrast, follows per se a more international approach. Being the German international broadcaster and offering its services to target groups worldwide and in 32 languages, the fact checking unit of Deutsche Welle checks information of global relevance, or that is of relevance for a specific target group in any of the target countries or regions of the world. The other fact-checkers target recipients in Germany (AFP also those in Austria and Switzerland), while their work is, in many instances, also of relevance for other German-speaking countries (particularly where more universal issues are addressed, e.g., vaccines, climate change, etc.). Fact checking by the regional public service broadcasters is more closely targeted towards their regional audiences.

In addition to fact-checking units that belong to media organisations, there are also a number of **civil society organisations** that are committed to combatting disinformation in Germany. One of the outstanding projects is the “anti-fake news blog” of the non-profit organisation, **Volksverpetzer**. Among the civil society initiatives, Volksverpetzer is the project with the largest overlaps with the aforementioned journalistic fact-checking teams. Similar to the independent non-profit newsroom Correctiv, Volksverpetzer is non-commercial and geared towards goals of public interest, such as promoting an open and resilient democratic society. Yet, unlike Correctiv, its work is largely based on the commitment of a community of volunteers, with only a very small core team of paid staff. Similar to the other fact-checking teams, Volksverpetzer aims to uncover disinformation, reveal the underlying mechanisms and strategies, and raise awareness among the public. However, while the journalistic fact-checking teams are strongly committed to providing objective, factual, evidence-based information, and being as neutral as possible, Volksverpetzer follows an explicitly different approach. To a large extent, their articles and contributions express a clear opinion and take a stand on a topic. Moreover, their fact-checks and investigations are often permeated with emotionalisation, wit, irony and satire to attract attention in social media debates, as well as keeping up with the methods of successful disinformation campaigns. In this sense, they underline on their website that at Voksverpetzer, they “try to debunk the narratives of extremists and conspiracy ideologues, sometimes emotionally, sometimes satirically, sometimes factually. We are a supplement to the classical enlightenment, an attempt to reach many through wit and emotion, who otherwise would not get to see the facts because of the algorithms of social media. [...] We try to

⁶⁵ <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/podcast>

⁶⁶ This also depends on capacities. In terms of checking information from abroad, the fact-checking teams belonging to the German public service broadcaster and the press agencies can benefit from the advantage of having a world-wide network of foreign correspondents who can provide support. It should also be mentioned that some of the fact-checking projects have started to publish some of their fact checks in English for a broader audience (e.g., Correctiv, <https://correctiv.org/en/investigations-2>)

deliver more than just dry fact checks [...] to expose the narratives and claims of extremists and conspiracy ideologues, and how they use social media to manipulate your opinion with framing and lies” (Volksverpetzer 2022).

Furthermore, there are other civil society initiatives in Germany that engage in combatting disinformation. These initiatives stand out because they place key priority on raising awareness, building resilience and educating citizens about media and news literacy, and critical thinking.⁶⁷ For this purpose, these projects have a strongly participatory, community-based approach that puts emphasis on the involvement of citizens in the entire monitoring, screening and fact-checking process. Among the forerunners and most salient civil society initiatives in Germany, are the non-profit association **codetekt** e.V. and the transnational non-profit organisation **Lie Detectors**. The original idea behind the non-profit volunteer association **codetekt** was developed in the context of the hackathon **WirVsVirus**⁶⁸; and hence, the association was founded against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. Aimed at developing strategies to identify and curb disinformation, **codetekt** has created a community platform **codetekt.org** that, on the one hand, allows every user to submit requests for information that appear suspicious or unreliable to be checked. On the other hand, and comprising the core of the project, the **codetekt** platform offers interested users the opportunity to join an online community of amateur “detectives” and to actively engage in checking cases of dubious information themselves. This participation-based, learning-by-doing empowerment approach is strongly geared to improving investigative skills and media literacy, and raising awareness about disinformation strategies and mechanisms of individual participants. Based on a multi-stage evaluation and peer review process, checked articles and online content is made available in an online archive in order to make the evaluation process transparent for a broader audience, and curb the spread of disinformation. Inspired by online games, “co-detectives” are guided through the checking procedure of a “case” by a catalogue of questions that allow them to evaluate the reliability and credibility of information. As one of the core members explains “I don't have to do it on my own, but I get asked questions: ‘Okay, go to the page. Take a look at the imprint. Who's in there? Google him. Does he have financial and political interests? What are the sources? Are there different sources? Are there quotes? Who makes them? And is the person an expert, expert in the field? Are the quotes taken out of context?’ And checking images, of course, also involves a huge spectrum [of tools], with Google Reverse Image Search, for example” (Kristin Marosi, **codetekt**). Given that these amateur detectives usually do not have the knowledge and/or resources to conduct a proper fact-check, the main purpose of the investigation task is conceptualised as “trust checking” (**codetekt** 2022), geared at evaluating the credibility and trustworthiness of online information on the basis of core journalistic quality criteria. Moreover, what is currently prepared is a “trust checking kit”, including a handbook, presentations and other helpful material, that can be used in education to introduce pupils to the topic of disinformation, and teach them how to use the **codetekt** platform.

Another education-oriented, participatory approach is applied by the transnational independent non-profit organisation **Lie Detectors** that currently operates mainly in Germany, Austria, Belgium, Switzerland and Luxembourg, but is planning to target further European countries (e.g., Poland) and has a European-wide reach with its advocacy work. Founded in 2018, **Lie Detectors** developed a concept to teach media and news literacy to pupils (10-15 years), to raise their awareness about disinformation mechanisms, and promote skills for identifying and assessing disinformation, as well

⁶⁷ Education and empowerment are to some extent also part of journalistic fact-checking initiatives (e.g., SRW, see for instance, <https://www.swr.de/unternehmen/medienkompetenz/unterrichtseinheit-fakefinder-100.html>; <https://swrfakefinder.de>; Correctiv, see for instance <https://reporterfabrik.org>; <https://crowdnewsroom.org>)

⁶⁸ <https://wirvsvirus.org>

as assessing the credibility and reliability of digital information in general. Based on the cooperation of a large network of professional journalists, Lie Detectors offers free-of-charge interactive classroom sessions to schools of different educational tracks that are taught first-hand by specifically trained professional journalists. During these lessons, pupils are provided with basic knowledge about the various forms of disinformation, the political background to the phenomenon and the principles of professional journalism and news coverage, and have the possibility of gaining an authentic account of the journalists' working routines. Moreover, the pupils are acquainted with different methods and strategies for checking disinformation, and receive preparatory and follow-up material to deepen their knowledge and skills. Beyond educating children, the organisation is engaged in sensitising teachers to the functioning and risks of digital media, and offers workshops and mentorships with journalists to improve digital literacy among teachers. Moreover, Lie Detectors advocates for the systematic inclusion of media and news literacy in the curricula of educational sciences and training and in school curricula across Europe. To this purpose, Lie Detectors also contributes to various expert committees, such as, for instance, the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News that provides recommendations to the European Commission and the Commission Expert Group on Tackling Disinformation and Promoting Digital Literacy Through Education and Training in the context of the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027).⁶⁹

Strikingly, educating citizens in media and news literacy in the digital age is one of the aspects that almost all interviewed journalists draw attention to. According to their experience, digital media and news literacy is a key component when it comes to curbing the spread and effects of disinformation, and enhancing citizen resilience. At the same time, fact-checkers observe a considerable deficit in society in this regard, and underscore that much more should be done by the formal and informal education system and policy-makers to promote these basic competences. Similar to Lie Detectors' aims, several of the fact-checkers strongly recommend that media and news literacy should be more systematically included in school curricula and informal political education. This claim is also supported by a recent study about media literacy showing that there are indeed larger deficits across the German population in terms of news literacy and the skills to recognise disinformation (Meißner et al. 2021).

The various fact-checking projects and initiatives against the spread of disinformation were affected by the most recent crisis, hence first the pandemic and then the war in Ukraine, in different ways. As described above, some of them started their work in reaction to the pandemic and the surge in the spread of disinformation. Those experts, who had already been active before the pandemic, did not witness substantial changes in their work. What changed with the pandemic was most evidently the increased interest of citizens in fact-checks, and also their growing readiness to read and make themselves familiar with detailed, evidence-based, science-related forms of information. What also changed were the themes fact-checkers have to deal with, and the manipulation strategies and ways in which disinformation is constructed. Hence, while still some years ago, disinformation was more easily recognisable because it consisted of evidently false facts, in relation to the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, it is now more strongly disguised in half-truths, inaccurate assignments or contextualisation, while there is also an increase in right-wing and antisemitic conspiracy narratives that cannot easily be proven wrong by only correcting individual factual claims, but that, due to their complexity, need more profound explanations and provision of contextual knowledge. Finally, several journalists emphasise that the most recent crises shifted additional attention to the importance of making knowledge gaps transparent and describing not only what is

⁶⁹ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>

known, but also what is not (yet) known (e.g., either because solid scientific evidence is still lacking, or because journalists do not have access to war zones) in order to secure credibility.

Among our respondents, there is consensus that fact-checking needs to be sensitive about the risk of further contributing to the spread of disinformation and drawing attention to it in wider circles of the population. It is a common practice to thoroughly evaluate the public relevance and potential implications of each factual claim at stake. Typically, fact checkers abstain from publishing about disinformation if its spread remains within the core ideological community and filter bubble. If, however, disinformation has already spread beyond the core community, and is more widely circulated in society, fact checkers address and encounter these false or misleading claims and narratives. Apart from that, there are some variances in the fact-checkers' approach to balancing transparency and their information and clarification mandate, on the one hand, and disinformation containment, on the other. Fact-checkers taking part in the Facebook fact-checking programme, for instance, link all fact checks to the original Facebook post identified as disinformation. Here, the strategy to prevent a further spread of disinformation entails labelling the respective post with the fact-checking rating (e.g., false, manipulated, partly wrong, missing context), while further sharing attempts are combined with a warning. Other fact-checkers abstain from linking back to the original post, or article, etc., to prevent a further sharing across social networks. Nevertheless, in order to be transparent, they provide screenshots or link to an archived version of online content to prevent its dissemination. As one interviewee explains:

Every day is a balancing act, do we touch the issue or not. [...] we look at how viral a piece of content is, if a certain narrative, a false claim, a fake piece of content was only spread on a very, very small scale, if it hardly reached any people. Then that is more of a reason for us not to go on it and not to unintentionally help this account or content to get even more traffic. Conversely, we often go for more viral content that has already spread without us, where we don't contribute significantly to its further spread. Point one. Point two, we take great care that we do not contribute to the spread of disinformation, even through links. That means we tend to use screenshots, we use archived versions of Tweets, Facebook posts or other things to prevent exactly that (Interview_DE_12).

Despite the different technical solutions, journalists have to make sound decisions based on professional considerations and the way in which they perceive their journalistic role and mandate. Due to the complexity of the issues at stake, as well as the different target audiences, these considerations require conscious reflections. One of the journalists, for instance, emphasises that in their department they

[...] have discussions about this time and again [...]. My core argument is actually always, education about disinformation is not disinformation. And I definitely trust our audience to make this distinction. That's why I think it's really important to deal with the question sensitively and to weigh it up [...]. But fundamentally we have a completely different role [...] one reports on [an issue] and does so in a detached manner, with all the basic journalistic rules, and therefore this must also apply to dealing with disinformation. If you approach disinformation in a fact-based, informative and neutral way, then that must also be possible (Interview_DE_12).

7. Conclusions

Overall, combating disinformation has received growing attention in the past five years in Germany, and resources have been pooled to implement counter measures more effectively. With its independent fee-funded public service broadcasting, Germany is particularly well prepared because it avails of a large network of broadcasting stations and editorial offices that work on behalf of a public information mandate. Being independent from the commercial imperative to seek profit, the public service broadcasting has considerable leeway for experiment and innovation and fact-checking units that operate beyond the demands of daily news coverage. In this respect, it is not surprising that some of the most active and salient fact-checking teams belong to the public service broadcasters (ARD Faktenfinder, SWR3 Faktencheck, BR24 Faktenfuchs, MDR Faktencheck, Deutsche Welle). A similar argument applies to the fact-checking unit of the French Press Agency. With a legal status that somewhat resembles German public service broadcasting, and substantial funding from the French state, AFP is also relatively independent from direct market pressures, and has more room for manoeuvre for fact-checking investigations beyond the daily news coverage routines. In this context, it is also striking to observe that fact-checking and combatting disinformation is furthermore done by independent, non-profit media and civil society organisations that are committed to societal goals, such as fostering a democratic and resilient society. In comparison, commercial media organisations, be they the press or private broadcasting, do not seem to be engaged in systematic, specialised fact-checking units or projects.⁷⁰ Even if some steps have been taken in this direction (e.g., the data and investigation project of Süddeutsche Zeitung, as well as single fact-check articles), it seems more difficult for commercial, profit-oriented media organisations to provide or pool resources for fact-checking units working on top of the daily news business.

With regard to future development, the experts identify a number of major challenges that are, however, not specific to the German context, but appear relevant for contemporary digitalised societies, more generally.

First of all, it is assumed that the complexity and speed of information flows and exchange on the Internet and in social media networks will further increase, making it more challenging to maintain an overview and keep track of disinformation. What is more, experts expect that technological progress, and particularly the use of artificial intelligence, will make it more difficult to identify and verify false content, such as deep fakes, and to distinguish between authentic-reliable and fake information. While fact checkers hope that technological development will simultaneously lead to adequately sophisticated verification tools for keeping up with advanced disinformation technologies, they shift particular emphasis on the need to improve media and news literacy among the population, and to strengthen awareness raising about disinformation strategies and methods. Enhancing digital media and news literacy of citizens is regarded all the more important because the Internet is becoming increasingly dominant for societal debates and political opinion and will formation. Several of the journalists argue that democracy cannot be taken for granted, but requires continuous effort and support. This also implies preparing society for a democracy that is no longer confined to the analogous world, but takes place widely in digital settings, and the challenge of increased digital disinformation is one element to it.

As regards the role and influence of professional journalism, journalists assume that quality media will be confronted with a heightened competition over public attention, and potentially new technical barriers and dependencies to gain visibility in the digitalised public sphere. In their view, online

⁷⁰ While, of course, checking facts is a core task in all quality news journalism.

platforms and social media networks are likely to gain more power and influence, with potentially negative implications for the role of quality journalism for public debate and democratic opinion and will formation. In particular, algorithms and artificial intelligence will probably be used more extensively to provide tailored, individualised information and news to audiences, thus contributing to the enhanced fragmentation of the public sphere. At the same time, online platforms and social media networks might become so central in a digitalised society that traditional mass media could become dependent on them in order to remain visible. In addition, the future could bring about an increased competition between professional journalism and those actors who spread disinformation across online platforms and social media networks, and strategically seek to undermine the credibility of quality media and democratic institutions, as such. Even if they do not reach the majority of society, journalists see the risk that already unsettled groups of the populations could be pushed further apart and become unapproachable for professional journalism and democratic public discourse. Against this backdrop, several journalists underline that major efforts should be made to approach and remain in dialogue with all citizens, and in particular with those who turned to alternative media, to prevent a societal divide.

Furthermore, keeping the right balance between an open, liberal society and the need to take action against harmful disinformation is considered one of the core challenges. Both institutional representatives and journalists underscore the importance of maintaining society's openness to a pluralistic culture of debate, tolerating different perspectives and opinions, and avoiding any overregulation in the direction of censorship, or state intervention claiming to decide what is right and wrong. The ban of Russia Today by German and European authorities is mentioned as an exemplary case showing how difficult recalibrating this balance is, and that a sound societal debate needs to be led about how a liberal, pluralistic society should deal with targeted disinformation and propaganda by authoritarian states, particularly if they may influence domestic political processes and governance.

Finally, systematically promoting news and digital literacy is considered a crucial task that needs urgent action. Empowering citizens to understand the mechanisms of news media, and enabling them to encounter digital information in an informed and critical way is regarded as a core condition to making the population resilient against disinformation, and strengthening democratic opinion and will formation. This preventive, empowerment approach is seen as particularly important because checking, debunking and correcting false or distorted facts can only ever be possible for an "excerpt" of the digital media reality, with its manifold and dynamically-changing platforms, channels and forms of manifestations.

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Disinformation and Counter-strategies in Greece

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1. Introduction

Generally, in Greece, media are characterised by excess supply since there are more media outlets than a small market can sustain (Papathanassopoulos 2021). The media landscape in Greece is characterised by low percentages of trust in mainstream media, journalists and news, low readership, high use of social media to access information, high concentration of media ownership, close ties of mass media with politicians and/or political parties, as well as a politically polarised press. It is noteworthy that Greeks show increased percentages of distrust both in government and the media compared to the total European sample over the last ten years (see Part 1 of the WO4 report). We need to underline the critical conditions affecting the levels of trust. During the last ten years, Greece has been under an economic adjustment programme (also known as the third bailout package), agreed on a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in May 2010 between Greece with its creditors the European Commission (EC), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Central Bank (ECB). The debt crisis evolved into a full-blown recession, and the political and social impact of the harsh austerity measures, privatisations and labour market reforms introduced with the first and the subsequent MoUs caused significant political ruptures and social upheaval. Under those conditions, the debt crisis and the tough austerity measures, including the reduction in welfare support, emerged as causal parameters for decreasing trust and increasing misinformation.

Eurobarometer is covering, among others, attitudes towards trust towards institutions and the media. As regards the case of Greece, the impact of the debt crisis is obvious in light of the level of trust towards the political system. The surge of distrust towards the Greek political and media system remained at the highest level during the whole decade.

In 2010, 76% of Greek citizens tended not to trust the Greek government (EU27: 67%), the Greek Parliament (EL: 73% - EU27: 62%), as well as the political parties (EL: 93% - EU27: 80%), a value that is the highest among all member states. Concerning distrust, the same trends are observed towards the media, registering the highest scores for distrust (2010) in television (EL: 78% - EU27: 45%), the Press (EL: 71% - EU27: 52%) and radio (EL: 61% - EU27: 35%). Regarding the Internet, 41% tend not to trust it. In 2014, Greeks trusted the army (71%) and the police (59%) more than any other institutions, while distrust percentages towards political parties, national government and the Parliament are similar to those of 2010. Regarding media, distrust rose to 79% for television (EU28: 45%), 67% for the print press (EU28: 49%) and 59% for radio (EU28: 33%). On the contrary, Greeks tended to trust the Internet more than all other Europeans, at 46% (EU28: 36%) and social media at 46% (EU28: 54%). In 2017, the picture vis-à-vis trust did not change: Greeks expressed very low levels of trust showing the highest distrust percentages towards political parties (EL: 94%, EU28: 77%), the Greek government (EL: 88%, EU28: 59%) and the Greek Parliament (EL: 86%, EU28: 58%), whereas the army (EL: 77%, EU28: 73%) and the police (EL: 67%, EU28: 72%) continued to enjoy public confidence. In 2017, distrust also remained high for the Greek media, as was the case in 2014. Greeks continue to be more trustful of the Internet, and tended to trust it more than the average European (EL: 42%, EU28: 34%), although distrust in social media was higher in comparison to European percentages (EL: 53%, EU28: 62%). In 2020-2021 distrust towards political parties rose to 88%

(EU28:75%), distrust in government climbed to 71% (EU: 60%) and Parliament, 73% (EU: 60%). Trust towards the press increased to 43% (EU28: 51%), towards radio, 49% (EU28:58%), television, 25% (EU28: 51%), the Internet (54%) (EU28: 54%) and online social networks, 33% (EU28: 19%).

What is interesting is that –although trust is at a very low level– trust in science and the experts increased during the pandemic. The special Eurobarometer (EB) for Covid-19 conducted in 2021 shows that the most trusted sources of information on Covid-19 health risks/vaccines during the pandemic were health professionals and health authorities, while the level of trust in the media, websites and online social networks remained very low. What is interesting is that this special EB demonstrates higher levels of trust for the European Union and the Government compared with previous data. Therefore, in Global’s monitor survey of 2020⁷¹, only 11.3% of Greeks reported trust in journalists, while 83% reported trust in science.

According to the Eurobarometer’s data collections from the last decade (2011-2021), two paradoxes are depicted concerning the media landscape in Greece. The first paradox relates to the press. The deep crisis in the print media in Greece is a well-known phenomenon of the Greek press system. The circulation of all Sunday print editions during a typical week in 2018 was down by 75%, compared to a typical week ten years prior (Newman et al., p. 82). Although those trends worsened during the pandemic, the press as a medium is more trusted compared to television. It is interesting though that trust has increased by 14 percentage points from 2019 to 2020-2021. The most trusted media are newspapers with large audiences (*Kathimerini*, *To Vima*, *Ta Nea*, *Proto Thema* and *Efimerida ton Syntakton*). Regional and local newspapers are also among the most trusted media. The second paradox relates to television. Television audiences increased during the pandemic, while private broadcasters remained the most frequently accessed sources of news in Greece. But despite this trend, trust in television is one of the lowest percentages compared to all other media. Greeks tend to use a medium that they do not trust. Websites and social media are the most frequently accessed sources of news, and enjoy higher percentages of trust compared to all other media.

The two surveys of Reuters Institute⁷² (2020 and 2021) reveal that media remain widely distrusted by Greek citizens. Trust in news in Greece is consistently one of the lowest as per the Reuters study. According to the respective data, 28% of Greeks admit that they do not trust the news at all. In 2021, trust in news increased by four percentage points in Greece. Furthermore, one third of the respondents (30% in 2020 and 33% in 2021) stated that they solely trust news that comes from particular, frequently-used news sources – while we find that trust in news in social media decreased by nine percentage points in 2021. Furthermore, online media (including social media) are the most widely used sources of news in Greece (92% in 2020 and 89% in 2021). More than two-thirds (69%) of Greeks get informed via social media, a much higher share than most countries in the sample. TV is the third source of news (67% for 2020 and 2021), while the press has further declined as a source of news in Greece. In 2020, only 24% selected print newspapers as a source of news, while in 2021 print as a source of news decreased by two percentage points (22%). The most used offline media are mainly private broadcasters (while the ERT public broadcaster is positioned in fourth place) and newspapers with broad readerships, such as *Kathimerini* (also the most trusted media). The most used online media are mainly online news sites and only secondly, online versions of print newspapers (such as *Proto Thema* and *Kathimerini*).

In 2021, trust in news increased by four percentage points in Greece. Apart from the press, as mentioned above, the most trusted media are bulletin news of private broadcasters (*Alpha*, *Ant1*, *Star*

⁷¹ Global Monitor 2020: Covid-19. <https://wellcome.org/reports/wellcome-global-monitor-covid-19/2020>

⁷² Reuters Institute. *Digital News report 2020 and 2021*.

and Skai), online news sites (in.gr and news247). The press as a medium is more trusted compared to television. It is interesting, however, that trust in the press increased by 14 percentage points from 2019 to 2020-2021 (Eurobarometer). The DiaNEOsis⁷³ survey, which took place in April 2020, one month from the implementation of the first lockdown, detected the first clues regarding the views and perceptions of Greek citizens at the beginning of the unfolding crisis. According to the results, the different segments of media seemed to enjoy higher levels of trust in April 2020 (television +12,7%, radio +8,1%, the written press +5,4%) than they did in January 2018, apart from the Internet, which became less trusted in April 2020 (-6,3%). Those trends of reinforcement of trust during the pandemic did not reverse the low percentages of trust in the media.

2. Problem identification

Starting with the definition of disinformation/fake news, among our interviewees, there is a useful distinction between fake news, misinformation and disinformation. Some of our informants oppose the use of the term 'fake news', prioritising the term 'misinformation': "We need to avoid the use of fake news as the scientific community does. The term has been used by politicians and people who attacked mainstream media" (EU Fact-checking Observatory).

In the same vein, interviewees make a critical distinction between disinformation and misinformation. Misinformation is false information that is spread, regardless of intent to mislead. In other words, misinformation is identified with the non-intentional use of false information that can also have harmful effects, whereas disinformation is perceived as the intentional use of false information. So, while disinformation is the intentional spreading of misinformation, or deliberately misleading or biased information, misinformation does not include intention, and therefore is a term that describes wrong or false information.

Another interesting aspect is one-sided information that lies behind the way the media tend to present events. At the expense of objectivity and thorough examination of the facts, the media select and emphasise only those aspects that go hand in hand with specific targets. Under those circumstances, disinformation is related to propaganda. Another interviewee (Public Broadcasting 1) coming from public broadcasting perceives disinformation as part of the propaganda process. The journalist denies the distinction between misinformation and disinformation, claiming that there is research-based news including all the views on a subject. From his point of view, disinformation refers to the kind of news that has not accomplished its role, as it does not include all the views on a subject. The interviewee underlines the need to find out the narratives that lie behind disinformation. That being so, the interviewee mentions an interesting example of how the neo-Nazi party, Golden Dawn, made up a story connecting immigrants, racism and hate speech, and spread it on the mainstream and online media. Such types of information and views could not be overthrown as citizens did not have the possibility to cross check them in order to reveal what lies behind (Public Broadcasting 1).

Our interviewees converge in their problem definition around three characteristics. The first is the historical depth of the phenomenon; the second is the critical distinction between conscious/unconscious, intended/non-intended aspects of the phenomenon; the third is the relation between disinformation and the digitalisation of information.

Regarding the first point, all interviewees, and predominantly the most experienced of them, emphasised the historical depth of the phenomenon. As one interviewee argued: "Fake news is an old

⁷³ <https://www.dianeosis.org/2020/04/stin-epoxi-tis-pandimias/>, accessed on 08/05/2022.

phenomenon strictly related to the lack of cross-checking of journalistic sources” (Alternative media 1). Our informants claim that misinformation is a phenomenon that has occurred throughout the 20th century, and especially during the wars; the example of Hitler’s propaganda that pioneered fake news can be considered as the historical backdrop of this phenomenon.

According to our interviewees, this backdrop is related to two different practices associated either with political or economic interests. A journalist, who works in an alternative media project, states that fake news has existed in Greek political life since the ‘80s (Alternative Media 2). Another journalist from the alternative media domain, with broad experience in conventional media, gives an example to prove that misinformation is an older phenomenon, as well as a means for some to make money:

Misinformation is nothing new. When they wanted to push stock in the stock market, they used to give a very good price; they would create a story, as they called it – I’ve lived through this – they would create a story that Mr. X would buy the company with this project, and so on and so forth; then they pass this story to two or three parrots -as we used to say - and the stock would become a rocket. Some people would make money and then a few months later, it was forgotten (Alternative Media 2).

Another interviewee from public broadcasting argues that we could see fake news even 30 years ago, when political actors and parties circulated information through non-papers to provide coverage to political leaders and political decisions. As our interviewee says, at that time, journalists were not aware of this practice, and therefore tended to reproduce fake news circulated by political elites that were the main and privileged sources of information at that period (Public Broadcasting 2).

As regards the second point, the distinction between intentional and non-intentional false information, most of our interviewees upheld such a distinction between misinformation which is perceived as a non-intentional use of false information, and disinformation that is recognised as an intentional use of false information. Disinformation, though, is the deliberate attempt to mislead the public for some benefit, while misinformation is the unintentionally misleading information.

First of all, unconscious aspects of misinformation are related to the strong interconnections of the political and economic sphere with the media (Public Broadcasting 2). Moreover, misinformation is also related to stereotypes and biases. According to our interviewee from public broadcasting, biased information is produced inadvertently as journalists attempt to convey an ideological view to the public (Public Broadcasting 2). Furthermore, the unconscious aspect of misinformation is related to the mass use of social media from people that are not familiarised with them interpreting them wrongly, thus reproducing their content unwittingly (Fact-checking Initiatives 2).

Unlike misinformation, disinformation is related to the intentional use and spread of fake news in a bottom-up or top-down way. In the bottom-up way, conspiratorial texts, hypotheses, or scenarios are published as if they were real news. In the top-down way, those who possess political or economic power might use fake news to downgrade or upgrade events, views, or scenarios into real events/views/scenarios:

Fake news is everywhere... At all levels there is fake news, at all levels there is an attempt to influence the public sphere and to proselytise certain journalists who are possibly more susceptible. I have also been a victim of fake news, mainly because I was in a hurry, because of stupidity, and I hadn’t cross-checked what I read, let’s say, in the Guardian. I take it somewhat for granted because it was published in a credible medium. It’s not even that anymore, even that is questionable (Professionals 2).

Finally, regarding the third point, misinformation that was mentioned by our informants is related to the digital intrusion in public life. The competitiveness in the media field for click-baits, the abundance of information and the excess supply of digital media outlets have reinforced the need for eye-catching and fascinating information that will attract the user attention. In this case, eye-catching information is synonymous with misinformation:

We have to get the fancy news out not even cross-checked, which I am not even interested in as long as I present it to the public so that many people can see it and be impressed (Fact-checking initiatives 2).

The transition to the digital age, the rise and the intensive use of social media have raised new challenges for the spread of information, on the one hand, and the journalism profession on the other. First, the plethora of sources, the volume of information, and the possibility of citizens becoming producers of news (producers and users of news) create new possibilities for the spread of the information. Second, the challenges of the digital environment, such as plagiarism on news websites, robot journalism and fake news are transforming the profession of journalism. Both processes profoundly affect the misinformation, as well as the trust/distrust phenomena, and help us to think that the rise of misinformation is mainly connected to the Internet.

The role played by digital media is a point that will be further developed in the next section.

3. Trust in news and journalism

The Greek populace is seen as one of the most vulnerable to misinformation and fake news. According to the Media Literacy Index 2021, created by the European Policies Initiative (EuPI) of the Open Society Institute – Sofia that assesses the resilience potential to fake news in 35 European countries using indicators for media freedom, education and trust in people, Greece lies near the bottom of the ranking, in 27th place among 35 countries, and is included in the 4th worst of the five ranked groups, alongside Turkey and some other Balkan countries. A large percentage of people in these countries have low potential to deal with the effects of fake news and misinformation, mainly due to underperformance in media freedom and education.

Reuters Research (Digital News Report), conducted from mid-January to early February 2020 (just before lockdown), is research that deals with misinformation on the Internet. Findings show that 63% of Greek Internet users are concerned about misinformation on the Internet, a percentage higher than the average of the 40 countries in the sample. According to this research, the factors that favour a lack of resistance to misinformation in Greece are: low trust in the media; high usage of social media for information; low viewing of public television and the spread of populism in society. Greek Internet users are mainly concerned about misinformation spread by the government, political parties, or politicians (43%), journalists and/or news organisations (29%). Concerns about misinformation by journalists and the media are much higher than the average of the sample in 40 countries (13%). Only 10% state that misinformation is produced by ordinary people, and 8% believe that misinformation is produced by foreign governments and politicians. Respondents over the age of 65 are more concerned about the misinformation they encounter in online media (43%) than about the misinformation they encounter on social media (26%), in contrast to younger people. This difference is not due to a lower percentage of social media usage by the elderly in our sample, which consists exclusively of Internet users; almost all respondents, regardless of age, are users of at least one social medium. Despite the lack of trust in the news, a very high percentage (83%) of Greeks believe that independent journalism is extremely or very important for the proper functioning of society, a percentage much higher than the average of 40 countries (66%).

Therefore, the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis was accompanied by the explosion of disinformation and fake news on the virus, Covid-19, particularly on social media. The results of the survey conducted by the Journalism Lab of Aristotle University in Thessalonica during the incipient period of emergency measures demonstrated that the majority of the respondents (62%) were influenced by fake news, while the corresponding percentage dropped to 50% in April 2020. The Prorata survey, which took place during the second lockdown (from 5 to 10 May 2021), shows important data on misinformation and fake news. According to the findings of this survey, 4 out of 10 respondents stated that at least half of Internet-based information to which they are exposed, on a daily basis, is either false or misleading, while they estimate that the main source of misinformation is private interests and large media groups. Furthermore, a large majority of respondents thinks that the media in Greece are not objective enough, and that television broadcasters do not criticise decisions taken by the Greek government enough.

We will address the first question concerning how disinformation and fake news affect trust in journalism and democracy. Let us start with the question of traditional media. One of our informants, who is one of the most experienced Greek journalists, underlines that traditional media could reduce the effect of misinformation on trust as traditional media are able to function like editorial machines, reinforcing the cross-checking and thus bolstering the credibility of news. By the term editorial machine, our interviewee describes the capacity of a media organisation to employ well-trained and experienced editors, with a well-informed telephone directory, well connected with politicians and experts, who have access to notable and credible sources. In that direction, a traditional media outlet, such as a newspaper, could not be comparable to a news site which could not rely on a well-structured corpus of journalists covering different sectors of the reportages. As our interviewee underlines, these editorial machines were hit during the debt crisis; at that time, the circulation numbers dropped dramatically, the salaries decreased, experienced journalists left the newspapers, and advertising was reduced. Therefore, Greek media do not utilise specialised departments which is a factor leading to mistrust. *Kathimerini*, for example, is a newspaper with a broad readership which enjoys high levels of trust (see the introduction). As our interviewee states, *Kathimerini* is divided into several sections, each of which has several well-specialised editors. Therefore, as our interviewee states, the use of well specialised editors could be a solution to the distrust problem, but this is not always the rule.

Therefore, for many of our interviewees, disinformation is strictly connected to the rise of social media. As an experienced journalist claims, there a great deal of anger on social media. Social media is an arena where anger is released, and for that reason, social media could amplify distrust (Alternative Media 1).

Our respondents highlight several causal mechanisms that explain the emergence and salience of the issues of misinformation and distrust towards media. The most important aspect is related to the intrusion of digital media into the public sphere. This interplay between the transition to the digital age and the rise of misinformation has three interesting aspects.

The first is the reinforcement of competition in the media field. The explosion of the Internet contributed to the creation of a plethora of information websites and the transformation of citizens into amateur reporters (Fact-checking Initiative 2). In this environment, anyone, not just journalists and/or news media, could publish, curate, aggregate, reshape, repurpose and define “news”. The same mechanisms are also emphasised in the literature. Some authors indicate that the first-hand reporting of events as they occur and instant assessment of the newsworthiness of events combined with Web 2 massive use for ongoing discussions constructs an ambient news environment (Van Aelst et al., 2015; Hermida, 2010; Bruns, 2010). The claim that the blending of information, of discursive possibility and of social networking (Bruns & Burgess, 2012) seems to be a determining

factor in the role played by the Internet, either as free services to drive traffic to their news pieces, or as tools for newsgathering, which is also addressed in the literature (Malik & Pfeffer, 2016; Newman, 2009 & 2011; Lasorsa et al., 2012; Hermida, 2013).

The above led to the second aspect of the relationship between misinformation and social media, more specifically, and suggests that online networking offers the potential to blur the boundaries between professional journalism and citizen engagement in news production and sharing. The information does not follow the mainstream way of the old media, when a professional journalist member of a journalism association followed a specific professional trajectory in the publishing of credible news (Fact-checking Initiative 2). This presupposes that established media and journalists would be willing to move away from their traditional gatekeeping role towards gate watching, news moderating and facilitating (Jarvis, 2006; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). In the above sense, the traditional journalistic practice of relying almost entirely on elite sources to get credible information (Gans, 1979), an established form of gatekeeping, has been greatly challenged. Websites and social media have been widely exploited by media outlets and journalists alike. Scholars have used some interesting concepts to describe joint forms of online information creation and content production (Jarvis, 2006). The term “networked 4th estate” (Benkler, 2011) points to the combined action of professional journalists, citizens and social movements to form a decentralised democratic discourse, a “networked journalism” (Jarvis, 2006) that blends collaborative and collective action into “participatory journalism” (Hermida, 2012).

The third critical aspect of the relationship between misinformation and digital media is the blurring of boundaries in the use of sources that led to the overabundance of information flows in conjunction with the economic gain created by click-bait. For many of our interviewees the abundance of information is a critical parameter leading to misinformation. As one interviewee states: ‘I believe that over-information leads to misinformation. Suddenly, there is a huge amount of information that has not been evaluated by the professionals, who can distinguish if this information is true, what is the source, how credible the information is’ (Government representative). The same is mentioned by other interviewees, as well, who also maintain that fake news and propaganda entered the arena of information production in this way. The role played by journalists is crucial as a counterbalance to misinformation and distrust. Gatekeeping and cross-checking as core journalistic roles in an era of abundant online information is defended by our respondents on the basis of fundamental journalistic norms, particularly that of non-partisanship and accountability--and vice versa. As Reuters proudly states: “Our reputation for accuracy and freedom from bias rests on the credibility of our sourcing” (online Handbook of Journalism n.d., ch. The Essentials of Reuters sourcing). If journalism aims to defend public interest, it should be able to act as independently as possible, trying to avoid biases and staying impartial, sticking to verified facts and credible and transparent verification methods, being accurate and refraining from taking sides on issues of public controversy, including politics.

Apart from these causalities related to digital journalism, there are two other mechanisms mentioned that are thought to be responsible for the spread of misinformation.

Firstly, there are the economic causes. An informant states that there is a part of society that has abandoned traditional media because people did not want to pay for it. If they do not pay, then they do not trust them. The journalist’s explanation relies on the debt crisis in Greece, which led the consumers to stop buying newspapers because of the reduction in their salaries. The journalist reports that already in 2012, he posed the question ‘whether people don’t want to pay because they don’t trust media or people don’t trust the media because they don’t pay for the information’. However, the decrease in salaries meant that many citizens opted for free information via private

TV and the Internet instead of paying for news. He concludes: 'I believe that in Greece, a whole generation has grown up without paying for the information they read' (Alternative Media 1).

Secondly, causal mechanisms of distrust are related to the media and journalistic performance, the principles of the journalism profession, and the role that journalists should play in public life. There are two very strong conceptions of citizenship that severely affect trust in journalism in Greece.

The first conception is the role played by journalists during critical periods of political life. We especially refer to the role played by the media and journalists during the debt crisis in Greece between 2010-2019. The watchdog role of journalism had been severely blunted during such critical periods when information and journalists were expected to play a critical surveillance role. Journalists did not manage to present facts, to give answers, to prevent people from being affected by the consequences of the upcoming debt crisis. Generally speaking, media in Greece are characterised by their lack of a strong journalism culture, a disadvantage reinforced during the debt crisis. Our interviewees state that during the debt crisis, journalists did not respond to the problems of the period: 'We understood that something didn't work well due to the questions posed by our colleagues from foreign media. How could people trust journalists? We woke up in the morning and the country had signed a memorandum. Isn't it the media's fault? Obviously, the media are to blame. Do you want me to remind you earlier? Do you remember the history of the stock market? I was a political reporter at that time, and every evening we had a briefing with a top official of the government about the stock market. And then the stock market crashed. People were destroyed; how then can they believe us?' (Public Broadcasting 2).

The second aspect of conceptions of citizenship relate to the fact that they consider journalists as part of the political and economic elite. Citizens do not trust journalists that are working in the mainstream media because they believe that they are neither independent from the interests of the elite, nor impervious to political or economic influences. This belief in journalists lack of from powerholders is strongly related to what is called interplay (in Greek 'diaploki') between media owners and political power centres. The above fits well to the "closed information systems" or "elite discourse networks" perspectives (Lewis et al., 2005; Davis, 2007) suggesting that policy elites (politicians, officials and journalists) form networks that are relatively shielded from the wider public (Davis, 2010, p.110). This sort of corrupted role played by journalists turns citizens to social media as a medium perceived to be pure and resistant to pressures. Because citizens do not trust mainstream media, they turn to alternative sources of information. Therefore, mainstream media are composed of professional journalists who are more credible than those working for online news sites and blogs. The fact that distrust is expressed towards mainstream media orientates citizens to trust digital media more, which makes them more vulnerable to misinformation.

Finally, as for the question of whether distrust could be a beneficiary parameter for democracy, some of our interviewees agreed that it is healthy for citizens to criticise what they read in news, as it could be useful and creative. As one informant states: 'Journalists are not experts; we ask things, and it is healthy that citizens criticise those questions. How this could be done in a creative way, I cannot say; there are things, there are examples of citizen journalism, so yes, I think there is a field of healthy criticism' (Fact-checking Initiative 1).

4. Originators of disinformation

Who is to blame for the spread of disinformation?

A part of the literature concentrated on disinformation focuses on the identity of its creators. Although it is crucial to identify the originators of disinformation, this is not an easy task. What the research has traced is the motivation behind disinformation in order to be able to combat it. Kalsnes (2018) separates the originators and their motives into three categories: political, financial and social. Political motivation is usually connected with political propaganda that political actors produce in order to either influence the public, or harm their political opponents. This tactic is also used in interstate relationships with the aim of manipulating specific events, like elections in another country, or a war. Financial motivation is more recent, and has risen with the increase in social media usage. This type of motivation can also be characterised as a 'click bait' technique; its goal is to stimulate public interest with fake, illusive but attractive news in order to gain as many clicks as possible, and thus increase advertising revenues. Finally, social motivation refers to attracting attention, or building status; sharing manipulative fake news is a common practice among people who want to attract an audience and become influencers of a certain community by entertaining and/or provoking (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Recent research (Marwick & Lewis, 2017) examines this type of disinformation in far-right communities that uses sexist and/or racist content to provoke 'lulz'.

The abovementioned aspects of intentional disinformation are also reported by our interviewees, but according to them, the originators of disinformation are not always traceable, especially when it concerns intentional disinformation. In unintentional disinformation, originators are easily traced because they are usually refuted, and in some cases, they are forced to make corrective statements. For our respondents, the identity of the originators of intentional disinformation often remains unknown, or at least their precise identification cannot be traced. However, they draw a distinction between specific profiles of originators depending on the thematic scope of fake news. They refer to fake news with a political motivation and specific targets from the political personnel of a country, or even political parties and countries. Experts at tracing fake news argue that on a political level, it is very common to find fake news or disinformation regarding the governing party/ies, and usually this type of information comes from, or is diffused from the opposition and its supporting media. Disinformation and/or fake news are also common in international relations between countries, especially during crisis periods. The recent invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces is an example of this type of misinformation that has monopolised fact-checking initiatives over the past months. According to the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO, 2022), "Ukraine-related disinformation is the biggest disinformation phenomenon ever recorder by EDMO's monthly briefs".

Starting with the simplest, somebody discrediting somebody else, so they can start spreading false rumours - which can be on a personal level, but then, of course, it can be intensified a lot on the political level and/or on the state level. We are now seeing the situation with Ukraine, where fake news can come from both sides (EU Fact-checking Observatory).

Also, experts in fact-checking, as well as professional journalists, acknowledge that a part of intentional disinformation in Greece comes from the matrix of far-right groups with specific anti-immigration, anti-system, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, racist, and mostly conspiratorial discourse. This type of disinformation does not have originators known by name, but is channelled through specific blogs, webpages and social media accounts that are connected with each other. In other words, it is a well-recognised type of information that is reproduced by specific sources (web-pages, blogs, social media accounts) from anonymised authors and originators:

With the pandemic vaccines and chips, with immigration, the far-right organisations are winning the game; they are sprouting up on the Internet (Alternative Media 2).

There are clusters. Well, there are communicating vessels, i.e., pages that communicate with each other, which reproduce specific web pages, which reproduce...so it opens up like this (Fact-checking Initiative 1).

The financial aspect of disinformation does not concern our interviewees to the same degree as the political and social aspects of motivation, perhaps because they consider it less harmful or a consequence of the salience of social media in news reports. They refer to 'click bait' news, but only to describe the new landscape in the mass media, the increased competition and the need of media owners to gain profit. They recognise that the competition between media to publish or broadcast the news first, caused the "light version of disinformation, the mistakes" (Fact-checking Initiative 2). Many media organisations and journalists, either on-line or off-line, did not follow verification procedures and their journalistic code of ethics under the pressure of competition, and for the sake of money, resulting in 'fancy' but unverified news and disinformation.

The salience of actors in the disinformation arena

Concerning their salience, there are two different aspects that we have to examine. First, the identity of the actors. As was previously mentioned, the precise identity of these actors remains blurred, but if we examine the motivation, we can see that political actors are the most important and salient ones in the disinformation arena. And these actors have the means to spread fake news and disinformation, thus increasing their saliency. For example, in the case of the war in Ukraine, the bulk of fake news is coming from Russian media; we can identify a powerful country behind disinformation.

The second aspect of salience is the dynamics of disinformation and their diffusion. The general type of intentional disinformation and fake news with conspiratorial components was marginalised in previous decades in Greece. But in the past years, with the rise of the extreme right in Greece, and during the past two pandemic years, fake news and conspiracy theories have increased dramatically. Some of the interviewees also argue that the economic crisis in Greece was the stepping stone for the diffusion of conspiracy theories regarding special interests and specific groups that have profited from the crisis. A characteristic example of the diffusion of fake news regarding the economic crisis in Greece was the case of Artemis Sorras, a controversial figure who is imprisoned on charges of forming, joining and directing a criminal organisation, sentenced to three years in prison for repeatedly spreading fake news regarding the payment of the Greek debt. As experts in fact checking note: "Sorras was considered insignificant, but he managed to establish 120 offices all over Greece...and deceive many citizens...but people lost fortunes because they believed that Sorras would pay off the debt with the 600 billion he claimed to have" (Fact-checking Initiative 2).

During this period, the extreme right in Greece also gained high visibility and the racist, anti-system and anti-immigration discourse prevailed at least in online media. This type of discourse was also fuelled by Golden Dawn, the extreme right-wing party that managed to elect MPs into the Greek parliament during that period. In addition, the refugee crisis was also fertile ground for fake news regarding the number of immigrants that had entered the country, or the measures that the government had implemented in order to accommodate them. As is mentioned in the EDMO monthly brief (EDMO, 2021), one of the most common and popular fake news stories in 2021 in Greece, apart from the pandemic, was that "immigrants are receiving the amount of 450 euros every

month". But, as all interviewees agree, the phenomenon of disinformation and fake news was magnified in the extreme during the pandemic, and impacted society. According to Lamprou et al. (2021, p. 435), indicative enough is that "41% of the cases busted by 'Ellinika Hoaxes' belong to the top 500 most visited websites in Greece".

5. Effects of the pandemic

Trust in journalism during the pandemic

All respondents agree that the pandemic was a crucial point for journalism because they had to handle a new phenomenon and cover a health crisis for which they had little to no information. It was also important that they had to focus solely on the pandemic and learn about terms and facts that required scientific knowledge. But they all admit that trust in journalism had already been very low in the decades preceding the pandemic, and a large part of the public was opposed to what is called 'systemic media and systemic discourse' (Alternative Media 2). The distrust in mainstream media alienated the public and also made them sceptical and reserved regarding the information they were receiving. Therefore, the pandemic did not dramatically change the public's trust in the media, but further contributed to existing mistrust:

So, when the uncertainty of a condition like a pandemic came along, then I think it went to extreme distrust (Professionals 1).

I think that essentially the pandemic came and consolidated a rift that had been looming for the last one or two decades (Alternative Media 2).

Three factors related to information management, and a more political one related to the government's handling of information, contributing to the strengthening of distrust. First, the fact that the news about the pandemic was often contradictory. For example, some advocated the use of masks in enclosed spaces, while others argued that their use would not make a significant contribution to reducing the contagious nature of the virus. There were also numerous contradictory opinions regarding many other measures that the governments around the world had to implement:

It helped to increase distrust because they might just say things and then change. And not that anyone was lying, just that the circumstances and the facts were changing (Professionals 1).

Second, the news regarding the pandemic monopolised the newsfeed for months, and this fact intensified the general belief of suspicion, scepticism and ambiguity concerning the pandemic and the vaccination. There was also the belief that we cannot trust the media because they are hiding something from us. And, third, many of the distrusting audience complained about the way the media covered the pandemic, since only arguments about vaccine efficacy and the diaspora of the virus were displayed, without presenting any other view:

I think that distrust has increased, that is, I think that to a large extent there is a feeling among citizens that 'they have hidden things from us' or 'they are terrorising us' or 'they aren't telling us the truth' or 'they aren't showing other viewpoints' (Fact-checking Initiative 1).

Finally, another issue concerning political management has to do with the way the Greek government financially supported the mainstream media during the pandemic. This was an issue that polarised public discourse and caused political debate between the government and the opposition, with accusations regarding the criteria the government used in order to finance certain media and

not others. As a result of this dispute, many people considered that the financial support towards media had not only political criteria, as the opposition claimed, but also a manipulative motivation; they thought that the government wanted to control the information regarding the pandemic and the vaccination:

But I think that what was also a problem for many people was Petsas' list, so I think that it didn't help much there. But I would say that it also mattered more for people who were against traditional media anyway. In general, I think the combination of the pandemic and the pre-existing distrust made it all the more pronounced, but didn't actually change it (Professionals 1).

Trust in media, science, and government: a complicated relationship

During the pandemic, the mass media -traditional and social- played an important role in the exchange of information between medical experts and the government, and the citizens played a role that was crucial, especially during the first phase after the outbreak of COVID-19, as well as during the lockdowns. Experts were the mediators of information about the pandemic, although the media and the journalists –even medical and healthcare journalists– were not sufficiently prepared to communicate and disseminate this specialised information to the public. The situation became even more complicated because scientific information delivered to the public via specialised journalists was passing through a political filter and, more specifically, a governmental one that gave the impression that science and expert knowledge are instrumentalised, with the media playing an intervening role in facilitating this process:

They had medical journalists; all the mass media had medical journalists... But only very few of them were qualified to understand what the doctor was saying. Then the truth is –remember the first period of the pandemic– that it was very confusing for the media to report the health issues with the political issues... (Public Broadcasting 2).

The perception of instrumentalisation and politicisation in the public exchange of information on the one hand, as well as the lack of objectivity and certainty, and the changing nature of scientific knowledge that are aspects of the 'ethos of science' (Merton) undermined public trust in the epistemic community. Citizens could not comprehend the changing nature of scientific knowledge, and therefore the changing views of the experts in the publicly expressed viewpoints were considered to be the results of political, governmental influence and/or economic interests. In the eyes of the citizens, experts equated with government. According to some of our interviewees, this chain of citizen perceptions, mechanisms of science and processes of policy making that undermined trust and created conditions of distrust was partly reversed through the charismatic personalities of scientists, who managed to inspire confidence in those who were distrustful vis-à-vis the scientific community and its relationship with the media and the political elite:

I have people around me who don't even watch television, and they were waiting for Tsiodras –the communication revelation was Tsiodras–. But you see, even though Tsiodras managed to do his job up to a point, then he couldn't, because the health crisis got mixed up with the political agenda (Public Broadcasting 2).

Trust in medical experts in a way was undermined from the political elite and the government that antagonised the medical experts who were gaining citizen trust:

...about Tsiodras, for example, we were learning, searching, asking, and watching him. We began to trust him. And suddenly this trust, for reasons that were never explained publicly, shifted to a group of experts and even to doctors outside the group... (Alternative Media 2).

The fact that the medical experts almost en bloc supported the policy of mass immunisation and vaccination, having agreed that receiving a COVID-19 vaccine was the best protection against the pandemic, left no room to deal with citizen hesitancy vis-à-vis the vaccines which is a broader problem and a challenge that goes beyond the pandemic:

...we are a country which has had scepticism about vaccines. Not the only one, I mean, again I don't think it's just a Greek phenomenon, but again I think it was a more fertile ground because I think we are a country where there is a suspicion around vaccination anyway (Professionals 1).

Pre-existing vaccine hesitancy undermined trust in medical experts who favouritised vaccination. However, misinformation fuels vaccine hesitancy, whereas too much and not well classified information – what is called infodemics – have also has a negative effect on citizen trust.

Our informants also raised some other rather minor aspects of the issue of trust in experts, media and politics that are related to the fact that some medical experts used the mass media to gain popularity, while the media also focused on those experts who were more available to publicly express their views, and more popular to the mass public:

“It's obvious to me that people had to talk to experts, either on TV, in the newspapers, or whatever, especially on a subject that no one else could talk about. So, the problem was when ... they (the media) gave airtime to people who really didn't know what they were talking about, and started to talk like authorities. Beyond that, the fact that there are some people who I think wanted to make a career as TV stars, even if they were doctors, I don't think that was a good thing” (Professionals 1).

Rebuilding trust during the pandemic: an illusive expectation?

Generally speaking, the pandemic has helped to rebuild trust in the news. According to the Digital News Report 2021 drafted by the Reuters Institute, in the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic crisis, trust has grown on average by six per cent, bringing the level of trust back to those of 2018. However, the picture is very diverse among the different countries. In Greece, trust increased by four percentage points during the first period of the pandemic, but remains well behind many other countries (Digital News Report 2021, p. 82-83). Our informants consider this situation as an opportunity, albeit a lost one, attributing responsibility for this both to the journalists themselves (for not reacting to the dissemination of unscientific views by the media) and to the national scientific authorities for not acting against practices such as those followed by the media: “They were given a second chance with the pandemic to gain back their lost credibility. That opportunity was lost. This is the problem--that Greeks don't trust the media...” (Fact-checking initiative 2). They explain exactly what is was meant by ‘lost opportunity’: Although the mainstream media acted as information transmission belts from the international organisations, such as the World Health Organisation and the domestic institutions like the National Public Health Organisation to the public, in almost all of these cases--the media, as well as in many local and fringe media--the anti-scientific views of the anti-vaccinators found enough space to be expressed, mostly without refutation and/or counter argument. In the name of viewership, readership and media popularity, credibility was sacrificed: “I'm from Thessaloniki, sorry - we have local channels misinforming from morning till night about

the pandemic. We have radio stations that misinform about the pandemic from morning till night. Has any National Broadcasting Council intervened? Has any journalists' association come out to talk about these media? Did any other journalists come out to point out the problem?" (Fact-checking initiative 2).

6. Counter-strategies

Who should take action to combat disinformation?

Our informants agree that processes of fact-checking, as well as the existence of organised departments of documentation that promote the systematisation of "hunting" for non-true stories, the debunking of fake news and the verification of factual information are rather marginal in the Greek Mass Media landscape:

No, I am telling you clearly. It (i.e., fact-checking) doesn't exist (Professionals 2).

No, there is not (fact-checking). If it is done, it is done on a case-by-case basis, occasionally, there is no such thing (as fact-checking) (Government Representative).

Public broadcasting tried to set up a pilot programme, but I don't think we had much support (Public Broadcasting 1).

However, all informants believe that action should be taken to combat disinformation and debunk fake news, because "the problem is huge compared to the rest of Europe" (Fact-checking Initiative 1). Some of the interviewees think that the EU "can play a role" (Professionals 2) in fighting fake news "from above" (the European level) to below (the national level), although the informant does not consider this dimension to be crucial compared to other dimensions/factors. According to him/her, it is not crucial, not because the EU cannot deal with such problems, but because it must deal with the challenges and threats to democracy related to illiberalisation and the abuse of the rule of law in countries like Hungary, Poland and Slovenia.

Professionals from the private media landscape highlighted the depth that the problems of disinformation caused, emphasising the importance of education, especially the role of universities that train journalists and have an impact on the cognitive capacity of the citizens, and the evolution of their critical thinking which is an issue directly linked with the quality of information:

For me it (i.e., disinformation) is a long-term problem. In Greece, I believe it is a deep one. For me, the only solution is education (Professionals 1).

This is presented as a two-way process of learning, related both to the public that must learn to think critically, as well as to the journalists themselves, who must cross-check their sources because this is perceived as the only way that fact-checking can be promoted:

Fact-checking can be conducted only by cross-checking different sources (Professionals 1).

Fact-checkers, however, believe that cooperating with the state in certain areas of information exchange –without violating personal data– could contribute to combatting disinformation and help to explain that they were available for collaboration with state institutions, such as the Ministry of Health during the pandemic to promote the message against the tsunami of misinformation and fake news about the pandemic. As was explained, even though they wanted to help the Ministry of Health, the state and public institutions pro bono, "to help their work, not to help ours", their offer was ignored despite the plea of the World Health Organisation asking for contributions from fact-

checking organisations to ‘immunise’ the public and public opinion against fake news and disinformation:

The World Health Organisation saw the existence of these groups as a shield or a life-line - to some extent if you like - against the tsunami of misinformation, and said: ‘We ask for your assistance’. Something that in Greece was accompanied by the suspicion: ‘Who are you? Who is behind you?’ (Fact-checking Initiative 2).

It is important to point out that apart from the state and the state institutions’ suspicions towards the fact-checkers, there were also rational/critical citizen, such as the journalists’ trade union, that –according to our informants, participated in a well-known fact-checking initiative in Greece: “ESIEA (i.e., the Journalists’ Union of the Athens Daily Newspapers) showed complete ignorance of their tools and their means of working” (Fact-checking Initiative 2). Some newspapers also viewed fact-checking initiatives with suspicion, or even disdain, considering them to be “whitewashing the government”, or initiatives of “censorship”.

The fight against disinformation: state-regulation or self-regulation?

Our informants, irrespective of their professional status, are in favour of self-regulation for combatting fake news and disinformation. It is considered to be a virtue of skilled professionals to check their sources so that “nothing should be published unless it has been checked a thousand times” (Professionals 1). However, the high speed of information nowadays, and the competition of the traditional media with social media, make this cross-checking of news and sources of information a difficult task. This is a point recognised by the fact-checking initiatives, as well as the time-consuming component of fact-checking which, in their view, acts as a deterrent to adopting a structured and organised fact-checking procedure. Despite the aspect of competition, professionals in traditional media -both private and public- as well as in alternative media, place great importance on the validity of the information, facts, or news stories they transmit to the public:

In other words, the issue of speed comes in, and who gave it first, how fast can we give it, and no one checks. I take my share in all of this because it is also a matter of personal struggle for each of us (Professionals 2).

Because I learned it from the editors of the newspapers I worked for, they checked the news themselves, especially the big ones (Public Broadcasting 2).

Although some of our informants discuss the dimension of a top-down logic in terms of information quality control, such a process can easily become manipulative, and is therefore rejected:

You come from the top and try to limit; it's a rather unpleasant thing, as well (Professionals 2).

Those of our informants who have a role in the decision-making processes and/or observe the issue from the perspective of public policies, highlight the role of media enterprises that, despite the financial costs, should invest in the field of information quality, documentation (according to Der Spiegel’s documentation) and the prevention of disinformation.

Journalists from the public media who have been in leading positions have a more centralised model in mind in terms of how to ensure the validity of information and avoid disinformation:

I think it's very lonely and very centralised to be in charge of an entire media institution. It has to be centralised; running a newspaper is a centralised thing (Public Broadcasting 2).

Considering that fact-checking and ensuring validity belong to the typical responsibilities of an editor-in-chief, our informants, who had taken on such a role, mentioned the importance of intersubjective trust as a counterbalance to their centralised style of media management. From the perception of our informants, trust is an alternative tool of dealing with uncertainty regarding the validity of information; intersubjective trust (i.e., trust between the editor-in-chief and journalists in leading positions) limits uncertainty and, therefore, the risk of disinformation which is more likely to occur in the context of a non-centralised style of management in the media institutions.

I had a lot of trust in the people I had chosen to be the directors (of the station) (Public Broadcasting 2).

After a period, once trust had been established, an interviewee admitted that there was no longer control from above, but a process of being informed by the media executives and the most influential journalists whom she/he trusted in terms of what would be broadcast by a radio/TV channel.

The fact-checking projects and their audience before and during the pandemic

There is only a very limited number of fact-checking projects in Greece. The most well-known is named Ellinika Hoaxes (EH, website <https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/financing-indepence/>), a non-governmental organisation, established in 2013, which is a partner of the Facebook platform in the field of fact-checking through the 3PFC (third-party fact-checkers) programme. EH is also certified by the IFCN (International Fact-Checking Network). Since April 2019, EH have been fact-checking images, videos, and articles on Facebook as part of the social network's fact-checking initiative. This work is funded by Facebook. EH does not accept political advertising from political parties, or political personnel. Concerning its methodology, EH uses fact-checking strategies linked with crowdsourcing strategies in collaboration with Facebook (Lamprou et al. 2021). It investigates news stories circulating on the Greek Internet, highlighting those that are non-true proposed by the crowd. In a further step, professional fact-checkers take action identifying suspicious material, analysing initial sources, conducting audio-visual research, examining scientific knowledge and communicating with other fact-checking groups (ibid., p. 425). It has participated in the EDMO (European Digital media Observatory) network, contributing to the fact-checking of articles related to the COVID-19 expansion of disinformation ([https://edmo-staging.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Eighth_Fact checking_Report_Mar_2022_V.pdf](https://edmo-staging.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Eighth_Fact_checking_Report_Mar_2022_V.pdf)).

Apart from Greek-domestic fact checking projects, international services, such as AFP, are of relevance. The AFP launched its digital fact-checking service in 2017 in France, and has grown into a global news verification organisation, with journalists in 80 countries around the world, who monitor digital content in the language of each country. AFP is part of Facebook's third-party fact-checking programme. Content that has been assessed as false by fact-checkers is downgraded in the news feed. In May 2021, AFP launched a digital verification in Greece and Cyprus (<https://factcheck-greek.afp.com/epalitheysi-sto-afp>).

Opinions about the profiling and attitudes of citizens who are vulnerable to fake news are divided among our informants. Fact-checkers agree that there are closed communities, small in terms of their size, that share certain attitudes and beliefs: they are against immigrants, Islamophobic, and anti-Semitic. They participate in international networks that became more pronounced during the pandemic in the context of the so-called anti-vaccination movement. However, interviewees from

the alternative media landscape point out that communities you would not expect are in fact vulnerable to fake news stories. Lower trust in Media is linked to fake news:

... people who have distanced themselves from the media a long time ago” are prone to fake news. “Their culture has been shaped by the private media of the past thirty years ... (Alternative Media 1).

With the outbreak of the pandemic, a flood of fake news and disinformation rose to the political surface. Coronavirious disinformation spread quickly. In the beginning of the pandemic, it seemed that fake news about Covid-19 would dominate other forms of disinformation, which did not happen as the fake news of all kinds found a way to “coexist”: exposure to false information vis-à-vis the pandemic is based on pre-existing drivers (psychological, emotional, attitudinal) that create availability for fake news irrespective of their content (Ecker et al., 2022).

... all this about the anti-vaccination movement ... is stepping on other fake news (Fact-checking Initiative 1).

What was different during the pandemic was that the anti-vaccination movement produced its own protagonists, who not only mobilised the anti-vaccinators, but had a voice regarding treatment of the disease for those who contracted Covid-19 (Fact-checking Initiative 1).

Our informants who participated in fact-checking initiatives highlighted the difficulties they faced to prevent the dissemination of fake news to the public that often goes unnoticed by the public and the media: “In simple words, it is not enough for non-true stories to be refuted, but it is also extremely important that this refutation has to be communicated properly in the public sphere” (Lamprou et al., 2021, p. 435).

For the dissemination and communication of the refuted false stories, our informants suggest a practice which is quite common abroad, and has to do with a WhatsApp service that was launched to fight fake news. However, WhatsApp has been blamed for spreading inaccurate information that has played a role in amplifying violence (e.g., in India).

7. Conclusion

The media landscape in Greece is a miniature of the problems facing the country: polarisation, radicalisation, overlapping crises, and the interplay of media, economic and political power are the most critical issues reflected in almost every sphere of Greece’s public life. As long as media ownership remain concentrated “in the hands of a few media magnates” (Papathanassopoulos 2022) , the media market in Greece remained blocked and, therefore, not well equipped to address the challenges of the times. This scenario not only affects media’s diversity and pluralism, but also the quality of liberal democracy since modern democracy, in a very essential way, depends on media pluralism, transparency, and the division of power (Dahl 2017), a withdrawal of which poses a real threat to the quality of democracy. The concentration of ownership in a “horizontal” and/or “vertical” way, as well as “cross-ownership of media” are problems commonly found in several European countries, mostly as an outcome of the opening of the (media) markets in the post-cold war era, and during the acceleration of globalisation (Duve 2003). In countries like Greece, where the interplay of economic, media and political power has solid roots, the old pathology of concentration of media power and ownership in a few hands is even more complex and difficult to deal with.

The traditional media are experiencing a deep crisis of trust, with a vast majority of citizens distrusting them and turning to the Internet and social media, which are becoming the main sources of information. This is not a particular expression of the Greek media; traditional media everywhere are in decline as audiences are moving online. Greece is affected by this trend even more so because of the financial crisis and the tough economic policies implemented by the Greek governments as a result of the Economic Adjustment Programmes the country adopted after the outbreak of the debt crisis. The harshness of austerity measures and the ambiguity of the recovering effects of bailout programmes on the Greek economy increased citizens' distrust towards the government and the political institutions. In the midst of the financial crisis, trust in mass media and journalism sank dramatically, whilst the recovery of media trust during the pandemic remained below the European average. The same as in Serbia, but different from other European countries, in Greece, trust in traditional media is very low whilst trust is much higher in social media; the coexistence of low a relationship in the traditional media with significantly higher trust in social media in Greece –an issue that has been analysed above– is an opportunity to speculate on the relationship between trust in general and trust in social media. Could trust be created “by connections in social media?” (Håkansson & Witmer 2015). An intuitively negative response is not confirmed by the literature, which offers a more differentiated view on this issue (ibid.)

Our informants are rather pessimistic about the perspectives of recovery of trust in media and journalism. They consider that distrust is deeply rooted in socio-political structures and the functioning of democracy, whilst rebuilding trust can only be done slowly and with policies related to improving education –mostly public education, but also of the journalists–, improving the remuneration of journalists, and consolidating the independence of the media sector vis-à-vis political and economic power:

I would very much like the schools to start the turnaround, which is if we create responsible citizens, then everything will be different at all levels. And fake news will have no room to flourish. But it's very theoretical, I get it. Well, as long as journalists are so poorly paid, the standard of journalism in Greece will remain low and the Greek media will remain hysterical; I don't think the situation will improve (Professionals 2).

This thing with education, for example, is it's not just about how journalism is conducted from the point of view of the journalist or the editors, the media, the managers or whoever. It's very much, much more to me, about the audience. That is, the audience learning to demand and not swallow everything they read either in a friend's status, or on Facebook, or from every influencer on Instagram, or in a Tweet, or in an article. That is, to teach the audience itself to think a little more critically (Professionals 1).

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Composition of the sample:

- Alternative media 1
- Alternative media 2
- EU Fact-checking Observatory
- Fact-checking initiative 1
- Fact-checking initiative 2
- Government representative
- Professionals 1
- Professionals 2
- Public broadcasting 1
- Public broadcasting 2

Disinformation, Fake News and Counter-strategies in Italy

Luca Carrieri

1. Introduction

According to Eurobarometer 95.1, the most used media for informing Italian citizens was television in 2021. Almost 90% of Italians used it every day or almost every day, with 7.2% using it at least once a week. On a daily basis, media consumers in Italy also use the Internet (17.2%) and the written press (16.6%), while 33.3% use the Internet and 39.7%, the written press. Finally, in last place is the radio, with only 7.7% of regular users and more than half of respondents never using it (54.6%).

Italy has shown an interesting trend concerning the levels of social and political trust towards the media. According to the cross-national research conducted by Eurobarometer 95.1 n 2021, television was the most trusted media for information in Italy. This finding is interesting as it shows the enduring nature of public trust towards an old media source in Italy. The surveys shows that 55.9% of Italians trust television, while 39.5% do not, and only 4.6% do not know how to assess the level of trust in this media. In other words, trust in television is relatively important in Italy, being higher than trust in other media sources. Moreover, Italians' trust towards TV outweighs the European average (51%).

Apart from television, the written press and the radio are trusted by the majority of the Italian population, at 51.8% and 50.2%, respectively. This pattern has notably reversed concerning the new media, which have been much more distrusted in comparison to the older media. In fact, 45% of the Italians trust the Internet, which is a slightly higher share than those distrusting it (41.9%). Instead, the number of those trusting social media is much lower, with only 27.3% of the population expressing confidence in this media outlet, and a large majority of Italian citizens distrusting it (57.3%). In short, trust in legacy media (radio, TV and the written press) remains important, while the new media have sparked more controversial and negative judgements among the Italian population.

According to Operating Eurovision and Euroradio (EBU) dataset (EBU-MIS Trust in Media 2021), over an observed period of 12 years (2009-2021), Italy experienced a generalised growth in net media trust. Media trust measures the difference between those expressing both trust and distrust in a particular source. By taking as the reference category from 2009, it is worth noting that the net trust in television has completely reversed over time. In fact, in 2009, the net trust towards television was strongly negative (-21), while it became strongly positive in 2021 (+17), reaching the maximum level of net trust across the entire period. A similar trend occurred concerning the written press, which epitomised a pattern of increasing net trust, switching from a very negative rate in 2009 (-16) to a positive one (+10). The pattern is more complex regarding the new media. The Internet has become more trusted among the population throughout this period, though it is comparatively less trusted than other media sources. As for social media, these have been largely distrusted by Italian citizens, with the net level of trust at a steady negative rate, and substantially worsening over time. This confirms previous results of our analysis, with the traditional media being much more trusted as compared to the newer ones.

As for the most trusted sources of information during the pandemic, the Covid-19 Special Eurobarometer provides interesting results. The majority of Italian citizens have trust in health authorities

(54.5%) or health professionals (doctors, nurses, etc.; 60.1%). Therefore, the specialised experts were the favourite sources of information among Italian citizens on the vaccine. Vice versa, other sources of information have been less trusted by Italians. For instance, the online social networks were poorly trusted, with only 5.8% mentioning this as a trusted source of information. Similarly, websites were mentioned only by 8.4% of the respondents in the Eurobarometer survey as a trusted information source on the vaccine. These findings show the lack of trust towards the new or alternative media sources among Italian citizens who have not developed positive orientations towards these information outlets.

According to CENSIS (Centre of Studies for Social Investments) 2021 report (The Media after the Pandemic), the outbreak of the pandemic and the subsequent phase of social restrictions led the Italian citizens to increasingly devote attention to scientific, medical and technological news. Interest in these kinds of topics has been traditionally weak among Italian citizens (though this was not a specific characteristic of this country), but it has gradually increased, given the presence of a large number of epidemiologists and virologists on television. The desire to get more information on Covid-19 is reflected in the growing interest in scientific, medical and technological news, which rose from 27.7% of the population in 2019 to 33.4% in 2021 (+ 5.7%) The opinion on the presence of experts and medical doctors in the media is positive for over half of Italians (54.2%) because these were necessary to obtain information on the correct behaviours to adopt (15.5%), or because these were useful for understanding what was happening (38.7%).

According to above-mentioned CENSIS report, the information during the pandemic has not only generated confusion and fuelled fear, but another negative and very dangerous effect of the coronavirus communicative hype was the uncontrolled proliferation of fake news. In some cases, this was also conveyed by political actors. Sometimes it was obviously false news, increasing social alarm, spreading the belief that the measures they were taking were not the right ones, pushing citizens to adopt self-injurious behaviours. The undisputed realm of fake news has been on the Internet, where it is easier for uncontrolled, unreliable and self-produced news to circulate. There are 29 million Italians (57.0% of the total) who, during the emergency, found news on the web and social media that, subsequently, turned out to be false or wrong about origins, modalities contagion levels, symptoms, distancing measures or treatments related to Covid-19.

This report is based on interviews with journalists and media experts-practitioners working in Italy. We interviewed: public broadcasters, professional journalists, people working in alternative media projects (members of fact checking organisations), two members of civil society and NGOs working at independent organisations, and an expert of national and EU projects. The interviews were conducted from March to June, 2022. These interviewees wished their identity to remain anonymous. We are thankful to all of them for contributing their time to our project, and for sharing their opinions with us.

2. Problem identification

Disinformation and fake news are considered as historical phenomena, although they have taken on greater significance in conjunction with some more recent events, which we might call triggers. The different groups of respondents generally agree on some main aspects of the concepts investigated. Firstly, the respondents emphasise that it is too complex to provide a universally accepted definition of disinformation and fake news, and that for this reason, the two terms are sometimes mistakenly confused with each other in common usage. However, some peculiar characteristics of these two phenomena emerged, concerning the different contents, the presence of intentionality

in the disseminator, the purpose of dissemination and the possibility of objectively verifying the veracity of information. The respondents converge on the distinction between disinformation and fake news concerning the content that is disseminated. In the first case, the information is altered in various ways, but can be partially corrected, whereas in the second case, the information is totally false. As stated by the representatives of alternative media project, wanting to give a general definition, disinformation:

...in current usage is everything to do with information that is not fully correct [Int_IV 1],

which, in turn, generate pollution of an information ecosystem [Int_IT 5]. Fake news, on the other hand, is defined by a representative of an alternative media project as:

the news items that are 100 per cent false and have no component of reality or truth [Int_IT 2].

The concept of disinformation is broader than fake news in that it has within it different nuances that consider, in addition to content, the intentionality in the dissemination of a given piece of information. In particular, the categories of respondents belonging to civil society or NGOs, and national broadcasters, indicate the presence of certain distinctions between the types of disinformation. In fact, disinformation can be divided into three main sub-categories, considering in particular the intentionality of the disseminator. According to int-_IT09, the sub-category 'disinformation' is the intentional dissemination of incorrect or distorted information, the motivation for which may be to gain an advantage or create harm. 'Misinformation', on the other hand, is the dissemination of misinformation narratives without awareness of their misleading nature, and thus without intentionality in those who share them. Finally, 'malinformation' consists of the dissemination of true but de-contextualised, inaccurate or ambiguously presented information for the purpose of causing harm. The different components of intentionality included in these sub-categories of disinformation introduce the problem of subjectivity within the communication, and thus the reliability of the source. The subjectivity of the disseminator of information is often used as a pretext to point to information such as fake news, when it simply does not reflect a particular point of view. It is also for this reason that more than a majority of the respondents state that it is preferable to avoid or limit the use of the term fake news because it is often misused in the public debate to generally refer to even minor inaccuracies in the news, or different opinions on the same topic. As a representative of an alternative media project put it:

The term fake news is slippery in that it is frequently exploited where there are different opinions on the same subject. It is an unclear term and has no precise classification [Int_IT 2].

A representative of a national broadcaster states:

The distortion of information may result from the point of view of the person promulgating the news, which may differ from another, or from the reliability of the source of the information itself. Fake news is often equated with information that does not represent our opinion. The definition is often trivialised, with little depth [Int_IT 6].

With regard to fake news, the two professional journalists interviewed also emphasise another element to be considered in order to distinguish it from disinformation. In fact, compared to disinformation, fake news is a smaller group of news whose falsity is objectively verifiable, and therefore refutable. For this reason, it is easier to deal with fake news than with the disinformation ecosystem, which, as mentioned earlier, can take on different nuances. However, all the respondents agree that the term is frequently equated with disinformation without taking into account the different facets of this concept. As the national government expert interviewed also points out, the

European Commission has reiterated in its code of good practice against disinformation that the falsity of information must be verifiable, according to the very definition of the term fake news. As the EC states:

Fake news is part of disinformation, i.e., it is news that can be defined as false after making an objective assessment. Causing harms is its purpose, such as undermining social cohesion, trust in institutions, science, etc., by generating a benefit or profit for the spreader [Int_IT 9].

Disinformation and fake news, therefore, are considered a complex communication problem, and are presented not only nationally, but also internationally. Although the possibility of manipulating news or falsifying it has always been present throughout history, the discussants identified certain trigger events that would amplify and aggravate these phenomena. The first is certainly the advent of the Internet, for several reasons. Indeed, the web has multiplied the channels of communication, and thus the sources of information. It has also increased the ability to share and circulate any information more quickly with a much wider audience. The speed of communication and the ability of each user to share or re-share a piece of news, without first validating the source of the information, has created veritable bubbles of fake news and misinformation. Given the volume of news, it has also become more complex to verify the sources, so that a part of the information is accepted per se, and only a small part verified. As a result, information has lost its quality, exposing users to more disinformation and fake news narratives on a daily basis. In this context, a fundamental role has been played by the algorithmic logics of social media platforms whose business model is based on the so-called attention economy [Int_IT 9] that monetises the multitude of news on the net. Another reason behind the phenomenon of disinformation is the lack of awareness about network dynamics and skills on correct information. Particularly in Italy, as stated by a civil society representative and NGO interviewed:

Currently there is a big problem of misinformation due to the fact that people inform themselves through television mainly without researching alternative sources; on the web, they do not know their way around as they do not know reliable sites or search engines. They inform themselves through their contacts. Therefore, they do not know how to deconstruct fake news [Int_IT 4].

The reason for the growth of disinformation is also the user's inability to critically approach information found both through digital channels and traditional media. Moreover, according to all respondents, there is a serious problem of media and data literacy in Italy. For this reason, the problem is educational in nature, and makes it necessary to introduce state regulations and teachings on the correct information to combat these growing phenomena. Moreover, it should not be overlooked that in the pursuit of this war on news, by the traditional media, to keep up with the speed of online platforms, they have often echoed the misinformation present online. According to one representative of a national broadcaster:

Disinformation often finds a foothold in the traditional media, both when opinions are expressed on the web, in print and in the television context. When we talk about the disinformation ecosystem, we therefore take into account all the actors with different professional backgrounds and roles, who contribute to creating a polluted information environment [Int_IT 5].

According to a professional journalist interviewed, a cultural change lies at the root of the swirling increase in disinformation and fake news:

The problem, however, is not misinformation as much as the post-truth climate, i.e., the fact that it is not the reality of the facts that matters; the important thing is to represent one's own interests, prejudices, ideas, values [Int_IT 8].

The danger of spreading disinformation is another theme on which the opinions of the interviewees converge, outlining different types of consequences. Exposure to contaminated information can, in fact, condition individuals' choices, for example, by reinforcing their prejudices and thus generate social problems. These dynamics can have different degrees of danger, as reported by an alternative media project manager:

The problem of disinformation is present in Western European countries, and in other parts of the world with a different degree of criticality. In some parts of the world, the dissemination of certain false news, such as an attack on a minority, can have serious repercussions, such as violence, riots, killing and destruction. In Italy, on the other hand, it is a problem for issues such as public health in the case of the vaccination campaign, but the consequences are clearly less devastating [Int_IT 1].

In Europe, the European Commission emphasises in its Digital Strategy that "disinformation can undermine the solidity of democracies, polarise debates, and endanger the health, safety and environment of European citizens". In accordance with this definition, respondents agree that disinformation and fake news are capable of influencing public opinion and political debate with concrete effects. The example given by some respondents [Int_IT 1; Int_IT 2] is the impact of the politicisation of the vaccination issue during the Covid-19 pandemic, which affected the relative vaccination campaign's adherence rates in different countries. Also, with regard to the political debate, a professional journalist interviewed [Int_IT 8] stated that while in authoritarian regimes disinformation is functional to support state propaganda, in democracies the danger is that disinformation becomes a tool to attract or gain support. The presence of disinformation narratives may, for some groups or individuals with opinions that differ from those of the majority, represent a more satisfying alternative. Underlying this dynamic, as one national government expert states, we find:

...the psychological mechanism of validating information at an individual level, which confirms one's own prejudices on a given subject. This makes it easier to accept pseudo-truths that reinforce one's own beliefs than to engage in dialectical discourse with others, thus feeding a circle of disinformation [Int_IT 9].

For these reasons, despite the fact that disinformation narratives and fake news affect all individuals transversally, one must consider a strong psychological component that these concepts imply. Indeed, they can generate a sense of inclusion and adherence in those individuals who do not feel represented by public institutions [Int_IT 1]. There is also a greater propensity to spread among those subjects who refuse constructive dialogue and confrontation with the opinions of others [Int_IT 9], since they tend to remain isolated in so-called echo chambers. Finally, the presence of disinformation and fake news can intensify in correspondence with trigger events that disproportionately increase the number and sources of news in circulation. The two main recent examples reported by respondents are the Covid-19 pandemic (discussed in Section 5) and the Russian-Ukrainian war. As these events of exceptional magnitude catalyse public attention, traditional and non-traditional media increase the speed and number of daily news stories at the expense of source quality and public trust. In this case, the complexity of the information system becomes excessive and out of control, generating what has been called infodemia.

To sum up, the different groups of respondents tend to agree in framing the phenomena of disinformation and fake news. However, they prefer not to use the term fake news, as this generates

confusion in an already highly complex environment, risking being challenged by political opponents. Respondents' views on identifying the problem in Italy are also similar. They recognise the role of digital platforms in amplifying the impact of disinformation, and the lack of public intervention in adopting media and data education practices.

3. Trust in news and journalism

Eurobarometer 94 (2021) found that there is no clear trend of distrust or trust in the media in Italy. As mentioned in the introduction, the so-called legacy media have experienced positive growth and relative stability in trust on the part of citizens over time. In particular, data from 2021 show that 55.9% of Italian citizens trust television, 51.8%, the written press and 50.2%, radio. A professional journalist interviewed [Int_IT 8] specified that trust in television would register especially high rates among an older target group. In contrast, trust in new media is lower with regard to both the Internet (45%) and social media (27.3%). With regards to the sources that enjoy a higher level of trust from the public, the respondents are in agreement with the data of Eurobarometer 94 (2021). In particular, trust is placed in major print and online newspapers, television, but also in independent news agencies. Only one respondent [Int_IT 6] also counts polls among the sources catalysing citizens' trust, despite the possibility of sampling biases. As regards the conditions for trust in the news, the respondents point to the following factors: The information must be clear, comprehensible and give a simple reading of a complex problem [Int_IT 3], be close to the pre-established opinions of the target audience addressed by the communication channel, and have a factual and explanatory approach [Int_IT 5]. In fact, according to the interviewees, part of Italian citizens still trusts those types and methods of journalism that they believe are based on principles of transparency, verifiability and accuracy in the search for sources. With regard to mainstream communication channels, the opinions of those interviewed converge on the presence of a climate of general mistrust. In particular, citizens perceive it as a poor-quality information system, in which partial, false or unverified news is also present. Therefore, disinformation and fake news are partly linked to a problem of mistrust towards journalism. Indeed, citizens have the feeling that the various media sources are to some extent "partisan", and this makes them more sceptical on the possibility of finding correct information. Indeed, major newspapers are often associated with precise ideologies of thought, whereas this characteristic is not present in other media, such as news agencies, which are therefore considered more impartial and independent [Int_IT 2]. As one professional journalist put it:

In Italy, there is no publisher untied by the consensus and resources of some organization, so the independence of the press is very poor in terms of quality, and does not provide a good service to democracy. Unfortunately, the big newspapers and television stations suffer from these mechanisms and lose credibility [Int_IT 8].

With the growth of fact-checking projects that have made it possible in some cases to prove the partial inaccuracy of certain news or sources, even if they were spread by the legacy media, this distrust has been reinforced to some extent. As reported by a professional journalist interviewed:

Misinformation influences trust in journalism because where a piece of news turns out to be false, people will be more likely to doubt the source in the future [Int_IT 7].

While one respondent from the civil society and NGOs' group states that:

The same problem (of mistrust) is still there now with regard to newspapers. People tend not to trust, and as soon as an error occurs, they are not willing to accept it but to think how much

rot there is behind it. The problem is that both information and journalists have lost credibility
[Int_IT .2]

Respondents say that these phenomena of disinformation and fake news are not the only reason for the growth of a feeling of distrust, but that the problem is more complex. At the root of the decline in trust in journalism there would in fact be a co-responsibility of all communication actors, who with their modes of action have contributed to degrading and polluting the entire communication system. Journalism has in fact taken part in the progressive increase in the amount of information, the multiplication of sources and the growth in the speed of dissemination, partly giving up the quality of its research work in favour of the diktats of the new information formats. As one interviewee from a national broadcaster put it:

The error sometimes lies with newspapers that do not delve as deeply as they should into issues, data, and avoid complicating narratives to adhere to the format of information such as the estimated reading time on articles [Int_IT 6].

Another interviewee [Int_IT 3] belonging to the civil society and NGOs' group also pointed out that in Italy, despite this climate of general distrust in journalism, there are phenomena of excessive trust placed in certain charismatic public figures of various kinds. Therefore, 'phenomena of cult of certain personalities have emerged that, together with the lack of professionalism in the way journalism is done in Italy, have dictated the growth of distrust in journalism. Disinformation and fake news alone have not affected trust in journalism, but it is also the way journalism has been done that has undermined it' [Int_EN 3]. A professional journalist [Int_IT 8] also points out that it is necessary to trace the mistrust in journalism to a general decline in citizens' trust in how well the institutions that represent them do their work. Thus, there is a relationship between a lack of trust in journalism and democracy that, according to the interviewees, is ambiguous. On the one hand, distrust in journalism can be highly detrimental to democracy for a number of reasons:

- If citizens do not trust official communication channels, they will turn to alternative channels, which may disseminate less correct, false or manipulated information, and on the basis of which they may make incorrect choices.
- Lack of trust in the institutional information systems can trigger in citizens a sense of distrust in democratic institutions and exclusion, diminishing the political participation that contributes to a well-functioning democracy.
- The use of poor quality alternative sources can damage public debate by generating ideological polarisation and exacerbating social conflicts, undermining the foundations of democracy.

Or, on the other hand, distrust can generate benefits for democracy:

- Lack of trust in official sources can induce a greater critical sense in citizens, leading them to reflect on the matrix of information. He/she will therefore be more careful about verifying the correctness and reliability of the sources of the information he/she comes into contact with, without passively accepting it as true.
- Being aware of the potential presence of misinformation narratives in journalism can retrospectively induce the citizen to think about, and thoroughly verify, a news story before disseminating it [Int_IT 7]. This will, in turn, generate an improvement in the entire information ecosystem and democracy.
- A certain degree of distrust in journalism may push citizens to diversify the sources from which they draw information, reducing the redundancy of the points of view they come into contact with [Int_IT 6].

- Placing less trust in traditional media, knowing that it is possible for them to spread disinformation narratives, means accepting the fallibility of each media channel as 'natural'; also, being aware of the constant presence of a certain degree of uncertainty in each piece of information [Int_IT 5], and avoiding trusting 'absolute' pseudo-truths.
- The presence of a diversity of reliable sources of communication, in addition to journalism, is useful for democracy, where there is a greater diversity of information, among which everyone can find points of contact with their own opinion [Int_IT 3] and feel better represented.

Clearly these benefits are linked to the possibility that alternative sources of information are of high quality, representing an asset for the information system as a whole, and for democracy [Int_IT 1]. At the same time, this distrust in journalism is justified by the attitudes that part of it, as mentioned earlier, has been adopted over time, and has undermined its credibility in the eyes of citizens. The deterioration of this public service, therefore, affects the quality of democracy in Italy. This is also confirmed by an exponent of an Italian national broadcaster:

The Italian media have not done much to deserve the trust of the citizens and, overall, this is a problem for democracy. However (this problem) is induced by the quality and attitudes of the media themselves, so if the media system does not work, democracy will not work either. So, trust in journalism is only useful if the media system works properly [Int_EN 5].

In addition, as the national government expert interviewed states:

Trust in the media (of any kind) that follow deontological, behavioural codes in disseminating verified information, is a benefit to democracy because if citizens have access to information that is not false, they will be able to inform themselves correctly, and take a certain point of view. This will enable them to exercise their rights and freedom in a conscious and responsible manner [Int_IT 9].

In conclusion, the experts see a positive relationship between high-quality journalism and trust in the information system. In fact, there is no clear tendency to indicate a total distrust or trust in the journalistic information system, but there are elements of appreciation on the part of citizens, and some elements of depreciation. The phenomena of disinformation and fake news contribute to the lack of trustworthiness of journalism, but the causes are also due to the logic and methods adopted by the sector. The quality of each source in the information ecosystem is the guarantee of a good democracy, as it represents a real public service for the citizen. On the contrary, a journalistic system with little credibility is detrimental as it threatens the citizens constitutional right of access to correct information, on the basis of which they can develop their own opinion and base their choices [Int_IT 9]. The effort of journalism to recover its identity and function in the eyes of citizens can generate an overall improvement in the quality of democracy in Italy.

4. Sources of disinformation

When identifying those responsible for the spread of disinformation, all the different groups of respondents agree that it is difficult to converge on a single source. The reason is that, as mentioned in Section 2, disinformation is a highly complex and multi-causal phenomenon. Furthermore, as a representative of an alternative media project states: "the disseminators of disinformation vary according to the different topics of disinformation and the media channels used" [Int_IT 2]. In any case, the respondents identified a number of salient actors that contribute most to fuelling these dynamics and possible motivations:

Political representatives

Political actors can feed or spread disinformation in order to influence public opinion, steer electoral consensus by promoting their own agenda, discredit political opponents and gain greater visibility. There is, thus, a definite manipulative intent against trust in the whole category of public institutions. During the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy, respondents agree in attributing responsibility for the dissemination of disinformation and false news to certain political representatives. The communication methods of political representatives, often based on over-simplifications or manipulations of complex issues, are also often orchestrated by agencies in charge of 'constructing' the news to facilitate a certain opinion on a specific issue [Int_IT 4]. The lack of media literacy on the part of citizens, and the poor quality as watchdogs of public media, makes it easier for these distorted narratives to spread and be accepted by some citizens. Thus, there is a lack of responsibility in disseminating information on the part of political and other actors alike:

There are some systems that have an interest in spreading false news and disinformation. Others only spread disinformation because of a lack of care in sources, without responsibility for what is claimed. This is true for the category of politicians, journalists and scientists, as each-- for electoral consensus, audience or fame-- redirects the water to his own mill [Int_IT 8].

In addition, the charisma of a political leader can generate overconfidence on the part of some individuals, who assume that these narratives are validated realities without first verifying them or confronting different opinions. In some cases, as reported by a representative of civil society and NGOs:

...politicians rely on their charisma to guarantee the veracity of the information they disseminate [Int_IT 3].

Public service media

In the same way as for the category of political representatives, information professionals can intentionally disseminate disinformation content, for instance, to dominate the war on news over their competitors by politicising certain issues in the public debate. In this case, the aim is to gain an ever-larger share of the audience, even at the expense of the quality of the public service offered to citizens. Prominent examples here were the vaccination campaign in Italy and the Russian-Ukrainian war. As one professional journalist interviewed reports:

The public (media) service has a party-led supervisory committee, which then lobbies. There are (information) systems that have an interest in spreading false news and disinformation [Int_IT 8].

The public service media would therefore be motivated for editorial reasons [Int_IT 5], economic profits from increasing their visibility in disseminating certain disinformation content, especially in connection with events that involve and attract public attention. However, 'in doing so, they are becoming information polluters themselves by producing disinformation' [Int_IT 3], ruining the reputation of journalism in the eyes of the public, and creating harm to the entire community. In other cases, the dissemination of disinformation by the public media may be 'unintentional' and due to a poor quality of work in sourcing and verifying sources. In addition, a concomitant cause could be the inability to keep up with new techniques and technologies that allow news to be manipulated or falsified, and thus to discern sources. In this case, therefore, it would be a lack of skills, as a representative of civil society and NGOs states:

...despite the fact that there are many journalists or fact-checkers who are very knowledgeable and work seriously on sources, mainstream journalism is not competent and up-to-date enough [Int_IT 4].

Social media and (dis)influencers

As emerged in Section 2, the advent of social media was one of the main events that triggered the amplification of disinformation. Among the main sources of this phenomenon, one cannot therefore fail to grant a prominent role to social platforms and their algorithmic logic. The dissemination of any kind of news on the new media responds to a 'booster' dynamic, i.e., the acceleration of the sharing of information - often unverified - in an instantaneous manner. Overexposure and the rapid consumption of information are at the basis of the business models of these social platforms, since the use of content on the network is monetised. The possibility that information is offered to a much larger audience of users [Int_IT 2], at a much closer distance in time and in a more immediate manner than in legacy media, is one of the main characteristics of social channels. The multiplication of information and sources can generate, as mentioned, a real infodemic in which it is complex to discern the veracity of news. Some social media, therefore have tried to take counter measures to stem a rampant phenomenon that, as we mentioned in Section 3, can have more or less serious effects on public debate and democracies. However, one of the main problems of social platforms is that of monitoring the circulation of information on the net without running the risk of censoring different opinions, or blocking quality information. As one professional journalist interviewed reports:

Scientific dissemination itself can be reported and blocked by users. The risk, therefore, is that of blocking good information in order to block disinformation, which in any case spreads to other platforms. This generates the idea that there is censorship, whereas the network should be free with the only constraint being the punishability of the limits of the law. Instead, mechanisms like Twitter's are useful; before sharing an article, it asks you if you want to read it without forcing you to do so [Int_IT 8].

On social media, moreover, there are certain users who have more 'influence' than others in fueling these dynamics of disinformation. These super-influencers can be celebrities, such as influencers, political leaders, doctors or scientists, or channels or communities that have a large following and represent specific interests and the opinions of a certain target group. These disinfluencers exploit, in some cases, the presence of much conflicting information or the non-genuineness of the public debate as a real instrument of opposition to traditional institutions [Int_IT 3]. An example is the Novax groups, conspiracy communities, but also propaganda support groups of political leaders, or individual doctors and scientists, at odds with public institutions, who polluted the information system at a time of great public tension such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Speakers, therefore, also include individuals who have, according to a representative of an alternative media project, two main profiles. In fact, they can be:

...the pseudo-experts i.e., those who have a real or vaunted title to make certain claims at a given time, as in the case of virologists during the Covid-19 pandemic. Then there are the super-spreaders, i.e., those who have a large personal following as in the case of political leaders or celebrities who, embracing disinformation narratives, spread them to a very large group [Int_IT 1].

Again, influencers may intentionally spread a certain piece of information for personal profit, or even just to increase their own visibility [Int_IT 2]; or they may feed these phenomena unknowingly due to a lack of expertise or care in verifying sources.

When respondents were asked to try to identify which channels or media strategies are used to reach audiences, their opinions converged in pointing to the responsibility of social media, which compared to legacy media, allow a much more direct and faster relationship with the audience, and are easily accessible for individual users and reach larger audiences [Int_IT 1; Int_IT 2]. Furthermore, social networks do not imply cognitive engagement on the part of the user, even though they constantly expose the user to a multitude of different disinformation narratives [Int_IT 2]. In this context, however, traditional media can play a role in further amplifying the phenomenon by exploiting the emotional engagement that those news stories have generated in users on the platforms. As an exponent of civil society and NGOs explains:

Mainly the channels are social networks. The problem is that sometimes news is reported on television without verifying the correctness of the information. There is a lack of research work on correct information sources [Int_IT 4].

Despite the fact that all actors in the information ecosystem use social media channels to spread disinformation and fake news, respondents were also asked whether domestic non-governmental groups (such as Novax or other protest groups) could use digital platforms as a tool to destabilise trust in official science and public representatives. Several interviewees [Int_IT 1; Int_IT 2; Int_IT 3; Int_IT 4; Int_IT 5] pointed out that there were many examples of the use of social media (e.g., Telegram groups, Facebook, Instagram) by these groups in order to attract and group those individuals who do not find a place in public representation. The objective is, thus, to intercept and enlist a section of the population that is hesitant, wary or confused by the myriad uncertain information circulating. Social media, in this case, serve to spread news, bring together and mobilise these users to discredit the so-called dominant powers, hence also science and political institutions. By advancing their own vision of science and government, these groups help to pollute the broader information ecosystem with disinformation narratives specifically constructed to support it.

Finally, there are also specific channels and sites other than social media that regularly package ad hoc disinformation narratives for different purposes, such as boycotting democratic debate, exacerbating ideological polarisation on a given issue, or undermining trust in experts [Int_IT 9]. To summarise, therefore, there is no single, but multiple sources of disinformation and these can spread through both legacy and new media. The main perpetrators identified by the respondents include political representatives, traditional public media and social media. All these actors in the information ecosystem, in each case, exploit social platforms and their strategies of 'monetising' user attention in the dissemination of disinformation. The underlying reasons are predominantly related to ideological or personal profit motives.

5. Effects of the pandemic

All interviewees stated that the Covid-19 pandemic had several effects on the spread of disinformation and fake news. Firstly, the health crisis generated a mono-thematic convergence compared to the previous dispersion of disinformation and fake news narratives (e.g., on topics such as immigration or climate change) [Int_IT 1; Int_IT 3]. The information also concerned topics that are usu-

ally not very common in public debate, such as medicine and science, which use a specific vocabulary that is difficult for most to understand. Scientific communication has to simplify very complex topics to make them accessible to its audience, otherwise a risk of generating misinterpretations arises that can flow into fake news and disinformation. The representative of a national broadcaster interviewed stated that:

...the pandemic had a huge impact because there was more (public) outreach since there was science involved, which is difficult to communicate. The themes of science made the subject complex. Secondly, they are issues that affect us more closely than the political debate, the fear was that we would be victims, and the need was to take a stand on the issue, for example, to decide whether to be vaccinated or not. There was then an error in communication on the part of the scientific community, which supported contradictory opinions, while there was a need to empower the user by admitting that there were no certainties [Int_IT 6].

With the pandemic, the information ecosystem was also enriched with a new prominence of scientific experts as speakers in the new media. The media landscape, however, has become so crowded that it has generated a cacophony of voices from different sources, which has exacerbated the citizen's sense of distrust in the media, institutions and experts. In this sense, as the representative of a national broadcaster interviewed put it:

With the pandemic, the distrust of another large part of the population towards those who should and should have provided reliable information intensified. Part of the scientific community provided contradictory information, and part of the political institutions declared the limits of their competence by pointing out the uncertainty of the information available. And this has contributed to reducing trust in these institutions [Int_IT 5].

Or again, as reported by a professional journalist interviewed:

The pandemic presented two elements that make communication difficult: extreme complexity, given the topics involved, and interdisciplinary expertise. It was a mistake not to communicate uncertainty on these issues, but to present them as certain news. For the public, this created dissonance and distrust. It created a climate very conducive to fake news because uncertainty was poorly governed by public institutions, prompting people to seek it elsewhere [Int_IT 8].

In this context of profound uncertainty, therefore, another element of great importance for the explanation of the spread of disinformation has emerged, namely the emotional component. As stated by the civil society representatives and NGOs interviewed:

(The pandemic) shed light on the psychological dynamics underlying the spread of disinformation, which represented an alternative truth at a time when traditional certainties had broken down, filling a kind of vacuum [Int_IT 3].

Or even:

The pandemic generated a surge of fake news because there was almost no knowledge on the subject, even by experts. This created fertile ground, not least because some information appealed to the emotional, irrational human component of fear of death, of loss. All this was amplified by a situation of absence of data culture or data literacy, whereby the inability to interpret drove misinformation [Int_IT 4].

The pandemic has also generated an increased focus on the use of data to support information within the public discourse (think, for instance, of the daily bulletins of the Civil Protection in Italy, or of the contagion curves) in a situation of previous lack of both media and data literacy in Italy

[Int_IT 3; Int_IT 4]. The individual, therefore, pervasively exposed to often conflicting scientific and statistical news, has become an unwitting potential vector of disinformation and fake news. This sense of disorientation has been accompanied, as we remember, by a substantial inability to respond both to public institutions and to science and journalism. However, when the different groups of respondents were asked to try to reconstruct how the pandemic had possibly changed trust in journalism, the answers were different. Some respondents [Int_IT 2; Int_IT 3; Int_IT 4] stated that journalism has suffered a decline in public trust. It fell victim to misinformation during the pandemic as it failed to guarantee the quality of public service it offers to citizens. In fact, the head of an alternative media project reported that:

...the pandemic generated an infodemic, i.e., the dissemination of many different news items at the same time, to the detriment of the quality of information. This generated an information chaos and the spread of disinformation that sent the media world into a tailspin and undermined readers' confidence [Int_IT 2].

The uncertainty of traditional sources in reporting the news about the pandemic fuelled the feeling that they were not completely truthful and reliable, bringing citizens closer to alternative sources that were often of inferior quality. In addition, confusion between journalism and disseminators would also have occurred during this infodemic in the public debate, further pushing down levels of trust in this channel of information. In some cases, then, the ideological siding of some major newspapers was even more evident, as they often took opposing positions on the same subject, generating a feeling of distrust in a public service conditioned by economic and political interests.

Some respondents [Int_IT 5; Int_IT 7] stated that the pandemic was an opportunity for journalism to reconnect and regain the trust of citizens. Indeed, during the crisis, the importance of knowing what one is talking about, of having data, information, reliable documents on which quality journalism must be based, emerged. In fact, this transparency generates a climate of trust in correct and verified information provided through official sources. In addition, it emerged how the role of journalism is fundamental in guaranteeing citizens access to information through a democratisation of data (making these more available and transparent, Int_IT 5), and helping them to understand complex phenomena in real time. Consequently, the pandemic has restored public trust in the kind of official sources that are considered reliable and accurate, based on empirical evidence.

Some respondents [Int_IT 8; Int_IT 9] stated that the pandemic did not substantially change trust in journalism, which remained unchanged.

Respondents were then asked about the relationship between the level of trust in journalism and the level of trust in science and experts. As the representative of a national broadcaster interviewed put it:

During the pandemic, a combination was created whereby the media needed the expert,s and vice versa, both for audience. However, because some experts had contradictory positions, a short circuit occurred, which is why distrust was generated in both categories [Int_IT 5].

The interviewees converge on the idea that the levels of trust in these two categories are directly related, in a similar way to trust in public institutions. Indeed, during the pandemic, journalism reflected the contradictory positions and sudden changes within the expert community and political institutions, generating a growing distrust towards all these actors (journalism, experts and political institutions). The result, as one interviewee from civil society and NGOs put it, was that:

This has generated mistrust in science, on the one hand, and in the political class on the other, thus in general in those who make decisions that affect the citizen [Int_IT 3].

In summary, there is a possibility of a virtuous circle between trust in science, experts and political institutions with correct information conveyed by news channels. If, on the contrary, journalism becomes the mouthpiece of experts or politicians, reporting their opinions without checking the reliability of the data and studies on which their information is based, we end up falling into the phenomenon of spreading disinformation and fake news, as we saw during the pandemic.

6. Counter-strategies

As far as strategies to counter disinformation are concerned, the presence of government regulation is considered the most important intervention. In fact, according to the respondents, the government must tackle the deep roots of disinformation by providing citizens with all the tools to consciously approach the news on the various information channels. Currently in Italy, as mentioned above, respondents point to a serious lack of media and data literacy in the population, to be filled through education on correct information. To assist public intervention, which to date has been declared quite deficient in Italy, various fact-checking, or media and data literacy projects, independent of the public actor, have taken shape. Table 1 below summarises the projects against disinformation reported by the interviewees for the Italian case. For each project, the objectives and scope (local, national, European or international), the target audience and the main strategies adopted will be described.

Tab.1 Summary of the main anti-misinformation projects in Italy

Project Name	Target	Channels	Scope	Target
Open the Box	Secondary and secondary school teachers and educators	Meetings online and in schools	National	These courses are aimed at increasing media and data literacy to counter misinformation. The basics of fact-checking are explained in a simple way to provide useful tools to increase citizens' awareness of correct information by checking the accuracy of sources.
Digital Knowledge. Digital Civic Education in the library	Employees of civic libraries, school teachers, employees of museums or cultural centres	Meetings in municipal libraries	Regional/national	The aim is to strengthen the impact of libraries on information, media and data literacy. Through digital civic education, the aim is also to strengthen user awareness. Thanks to the presence of expert lecturers in the field, such as digital journalists, social community managers, digital education experts, the aim is to provide interdisciplinary knowledge in order to offer different tools to counter misinformation.
Italian Digital Media Observatory (IDMO)	General public, secondary school teachers and students	Website, podcast, video and blog	National	The main focus is on analysing and countering misinformation by monitoring network and social media activities. Another aim is to study the impact of fake news on societies to disseminate positive practices in the use of digital media. They also aim to promote media literacy activities to spread awareness among users.
Facta	Generalist audience	Website, social channels, podcast, weekly newsletter and meetings in schools	National	Fact-checking to report false news and misinformation (inaccurate, decontextualised news, modified images, or videos)

Political Scoreboard	Public with interests in politics	Website and social channels	National	Fact checking and analysis of political news, helping readers to understand what drives the dynamics of politics through numbers and facts
Doctor, is it true that...? Covid-19 and the questions we ask ourselves every day.	Generalist audience, that want to be informed but do not have much time.	Book and social channels	National	This popular science text aims to counter the misinformation generated during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was created as a tool to counter medical disinformation via the Instagram platform. It deconstructs and explains in a simple way the main fake news or medical-scientific misinformation about the pandemic. The aim is thus to stimulate critical thinking and provide tools for citizens to avoid misrepresenting knowledge in the media.
The numbers of the pandemic (SKY Tg 24)	Target group with a medium to high level of education and a high interest in correct information.	Television programme	National	The objective of this programme is to rebuild trust in television and counteract disinformation through the use of data on which to base accurate information. Through accuracy and transparency in the use of data, an attempt is made to provide the public with the tools to verify the reliability of information and sources independently.
The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)	Organisations, online platforms	Website, advocacy, organisational training	European/World	This project aims to connect the community of academics and fact-checkers to counter the phenomenon of disinformation. The goal is the monitoring of the fact-checking field, also to contribute to the quality of public discourse and provide support to institutions. A Code of Principles to counter disinformation was also created.

Some respondents [Int_IT 1; Int_IT 2] state that in general, fact-checking projects operate as control systems of the information ecosystem with the aim of ensuring good quality information. Rather than eliminating misinformation, these projects aim to identify these types of narrative and deconstruct them through pointing out sources. Consequently, the impact of these projects can also influence the citizen's level of trust in the media, showing that information must be verifiable and of quality. The user in some cases, as with the Facta project, can also report news that might be misinformation to the platform and ask for verification. The aim of all these projects, at different levels, however, is to raise awareness among public institutions and educators on practices to counter disinformation and fake news. Respondents were then asked to express their opinion on whether these activities to counter disinformation would actually raise awareness of false information. Some respondents [Int_IT 1; Int_IT 4; Int_IT 7] answered that they do not perceive this risk since all these projects and initiatives are aimed precisely at countering and deconstructing these narratives of disinformation and fake news. Other respondents [Int_IT 2; Int_IT 3; Int_IT 5; Int_IT 8] noted the presence of this risk of generating more attention towards fake news. Therefore, as suggested by a representative of civil society and NGOs:

The solution would be to select only certain news items, eliminating the more residual and less important ones. Otherwise, there is a risk of creating 'on-call' journalism based on user demand, which ends up feeding and giving oxygen to many conspiracy theories [Int_IT 3].

Therefore, it is necessary to avoid bringing marginal news to attention in order to prevent the possible spread of misinformation. To do so, it is necessary for all actors in the information ecosystem to take an attitude of awareness and responsibility when emphasising to misleading news, taking

care not to generate amplification. To effectively combat fake news and misinformation, respondents were also asked to indicate best practices in Italy and other countries. The main results were:

- Pay attention to the information in the public debate and, if necessary, check its correctness [Int_IT 1, Int_IT 4].
- Value quality journalism that accurately indicates and verifies its sources, and clearly and simply exposes the content of the news, making it accessible to all [Int_IT 4; Int_IT 1; Int_IT 8].
- Promote training on media, information and data literacy to educate people in their use of the media [Int_IT 4], as both disseminators and receivers of information.

To summarise, currently to counter disinformation in Italy, many initiatives are of a non-governmental nature although they are supported by public institutions. However, Italy has set up the first Digital Media Observatory (IDMO) to monitor these phenomena and improve the overall pollution of the information system. Compared to other countries, however, some interviewees [Int_IT 1; Int_IT 2] point out a lower presence of fact-checking projects as compared to other European countries (e.g., France, Spain and the United Kingdom) and outside Europe (e.g., the United States), so this type of journalism is still underdeveloped and unexplored. Other good practices in the field of digital education, very much still lacking, are the introduction of news literacy and critical-thinking education, which has been in the Finnish school system since 2016 [Int_IT 5]. In the UK, similar educational projects have been initiated, such as The Student View project, which was implemented by a non-profit organisation that brings journalists into high schools with the aim of helping students develop their competence as prosumers and disseminators of information.

7. Conclusions

Overall, our expert respondents agree on a definition of the problems of disinformation and fake news. They have distinguished between the two phenomena, concerning the differentiated way this content is disseminated. As for disinformation, it entails an information that is altered in various ways, but it can be partially corrected. As for fake news, the information is entirely false. Respondents have also specified that the notion of disinformation is much broader than fake news. It has to do with the intentionality of the dissemination, and it may encompass other phenomena (misinformation and malinformation). They have expressed caution on the use of fake news as this notion may prompt confusion in an already highly complex context. They all recognize the problematic role of digital platforms in enhancing the impact of disinformation, coupled with the need for state interventionism (perceived as generally lacking) to implement measures to improve the media literacy in Italy are areas where respondents are in agreement.

As mentioned in the introduction, Italian citizens continue to trust legacy media, such as television, over the last decade. Our respondents confirm this trend described in Eurobarometer data. In particular, according to interviewees, citizens maintain trust in a kind of journalism inspired by principles of transparency and the verifiability of sources. However, Italian citizens have often distrusted journalism as they perceive the presence of high levels of misinformation. Moreover, this distrust towards journalism is often related to the perceived partisanship of the media, which has made it less reliable according to the interviewees (this seems to be a specific feature of the Italian case compared to other domestic contexts). As for the relationship between the lack of trust in journalism and democratic trust, the interviewees have identified a certain complexity. On the one hand, distrust in journalism may be detrimental for the democratic system, as citizens' trust in alternative media sources may foster the dissemination of misinformation, leading them to make incorrect

choices. Moreover, the use of alternative sources may decrease the quality of the public debate, sparking off ideological polarisation and undermining social cohesion.

On the other hand, according to the respondents, the mistrust towards journalism may enhance a critical sense among citizens, leading them to check the reliability of the information, rather than passively accepting it as true. Citizens may also become more likely to widen their sources of information and develop more awareness of degrees of uncertainty in each piece of information. In brief, a higher diversity in sources of information and a more pro-active attitude among users could improve the quality of democracy. Finally, respondents have also suggested that journalism has generated its own credibility downfall in the eyes of citizens, undermining democracy in Italy. Thus, to enhance the democratic processes in the country, journalism should increase trust among the population.

As for the main disinformation agents, the respondents have agreed that there is no single source responsible for spreading disinformation. They have identified several perpetrators: political representatives, traditional public media, and social media. However, the majority of these actors have exploited social platforms to capitalise user attention, and to successfully spread disinformation. Their underlying reasons are predominantly related to political and economic purposes.

All the interviewees agree on the decisive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the spread of disinformation and fake news. In the first place, the health crisis has generated a mono-thematic convergence compared to the previous dispersion of disinformation and fake news narratives, with some new topics becoming paramount (such as medicine and science). Moreover, scientific experts have become important actors in the information ecosystem after the outbreak of the pandemic. However, this crowding of expert communication has also generated confusion with parts of the population, exacerbating the citizen distrust towards the media and experts. In particular, the growing focus on the data and the contrasting views and interpretation within the experts' community increased this disorientation within the public. In light of this uncertainty, the interviewees did not reach an agreement on whether public trust in journalism has suffered a decline or not, though they have linked the trust in journalism and the level of trust in science and experts.

As far as strategies to counter disinformation, the respondents unanimously call for more government regulation and interventionism. They identified a lack of media literacy, with citizens requiring the skills and tools to correctly approach the news and information sources. Many fact-checking organisations have proliferated in Italy, though these have been mainly committed to raising awareness among public institutions and educators on practices to counter disinformation and fake news. To counter fake news and disinformation, respondents have indicated several kinds of best practices (checking the correctness of the information, promoting training on media literacy to educate a reflective use of the media among both disseminators and receivers of information, etc.). Some interviewees have pointed out a lower presence of fact-checking projects in Italy compared to other countries. In particular, Italy is lagging behind on the initiatives aimed at improving media literacy in schools.

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Distrust in Media and Struggling with Disinformation in Hostile Circumstances – Insights from Poland

Sebastian Sosnowski, Aleksandra Polak, Wojciech Gędek and Maria Theiss

1. Introduction

The Internet, including social media and television, are the main sources of news in Poland, as they are used by 87% and 75% of population, respectively. There is a growing trend in using the Internet as an information source, whereas a percentage of Polish people watching television has decreased by 6 pp over the last five years (Reuters, 2022).

The most watched or read TV, radio or print sources are: TVN news (50% of Poles watching at least weekly) owned by Warner Bros company, RMF FM radio (44%) owned by Bauer Media Group, Polsat News (34%) and TVP news (public broadcaster) watched by 31%. *Gazeta Wyborcza* read by 22% is the most popular print newspaper. Onet.pl (55%) and wp.pl (48%) are the most popular online media sites (Reuters, 2020).

Poland is a country with low levels of social and political trust, which applies also to the media. According to Reuters (2020), and in contrast to the other countries analysed in our sample, the level of trust in the media has decreased in Poland, reaching 45% in 2020. In Polish pooling centre reports in 2020, 32% of people declared trust in the media, in comparison with the figure of 29% for 2022 (CBOS, 2022). This is consistent with low levels of trust in public institutions, in general. In 2022, the declared percentages of Poles expressed trust in the following: the president, 43%; the government, 32%; Parliament, 23%; political parties, 18%; local governments, 63%; the EU, 55%. Even though the latter two are among the most trusted institutions in Poland, the overall trend in recent years has seen a decline in trust in all institutions (CBOS, *ibid*). Thus, it is not surprising that the most trusted media sources are those which focus on entertainment (RMF Radio and Radio Zet, with levels of trust at 72% and 69%, respectively), and those which, in general, are perceived as less politicised than the biggest outlets, namely the local newspapers (66% of people trust them) (Reuters 2020).

A country-specific feature in Poland is its very high level of political polarisation of media sources and media political independence, a salient topic of public discourse, nowadays. In 2019, 7% of right-wing Law and Justice supporters, and 40% of supporters of liberal Civic Platform reported that commercial TVN television is their main source of information, whereas the Polish national channel TVP news, was 43% and 2%, accordingly (CBOS, 2019). The assessment of the national channel and TVN television, perceived as rival media, shows how supporters of right-wing Law and Justice and liberal Civic Platforms are distrustful of the opposition's media sources. According to CBOS (2022), 86% of Law and Justice voters positively evaluate the national TVP channel, in comparison with 2% of Civic Platform voters. TVN channel (Warner Bros own it, and it was previously owned by ITI, a Polish holding maintained by right-wing supporters and led by post-communist secret service agents (e.g. *Polskie Radio 24*, 2021) was perceived as good by 34% of Law and Justice voters and 88% of Civic Platform voters.

Political cleavages spill over into the media, and are mirrored in public discourse in Poland. In particular, since 2015 when Law and Justice won the parliamentary election, public media have become labelled by the ruling party as “national” and a political institution of the National Media Council (Rada Mediów Narodowych) was created in 2016. Simultaneously, broadcasters and newspapers perceived as more opposition-leaning were casually labelled by Law and Justice supporters as “Polish-language media” to underline that, although they publish in Polish, they in fact represent foreign, in particular German, interests. High politicisation of the TVP public channel, and in particular, its everyday evening news, resulted in a growing conviction, even among Law and Justice voters, that TVP is leaning towards political propaganda. Thus, its reported reliability decreased from 80% in 2015 to 50% in 2022 (CBOS 2022a). The loss of independence of public channels thus clearly correlates with the loss of trust in media, even by government supporters.

This report is based on ten interviews with journalists and media experts-practitioners working in Poland. We interviewed: public channels’ employees, professional journalists, non-profit/independent journalists, civil society-based journalists/activists involved in local, national and EU projects (two persons for each category). The interviews were carried out from March to May 2022, directly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and these circumstances made up a significant part of our discussion. A few of our interviewees requested that their identities be revealed in the report, whereas others preferred to remain anonymous. We are thankful to all of them for contributing their time to our project and sharing their opinions with us.

2. Problem identification

Disinformation, and to a lesser extent fake news, were perceived by our interviewees as relevant contemporary problems in public communication. Our discussion partners were also unanimous in defining core features and differences between both these phenomena.

First, they emphasised the differences in the scope of fake news and disinformation. They agreed that disinformation is a broader, more nuanced and complex phenomenon, whereas fake news is a unit of information that can be verified straightforwardly, and is thus easier to deal with than disinformation. This distinction was mentioned by several respondents. For instance, Filip Szulik-Szarecki, the head of *Wojownicy Klawiatury* (Keyboard Warriors), a non-profit civil society project aimed at fighting disinformation, explained these distinctions in the following way:

Disinformation may consist of bringing up some of the true facts but only partially, showing them as one-sided, so as to create a misleading impression or a misleading feeling about a situation or a false analogy. (...) Fake news, on the other hand, is a very specific thing: creating an untruth or manipulating the truth and introducing false elements. The goal is the same as disinformation, but the issue is narrower (Int_PL 3).

Adam Majchrzak from *Demagog* (Demagogue), a civil society fact-checking organisation also emphasised the breadth of disinformation, the fact that it is a process, and it is meant to have a broader societal impact:

It is often assumed that disinformation is just false information or partly false information. But it is a much broader process because, apart from using false information, whether intentionally or not, it is also a process of influencing social attitudes, behaviour. (...) Fake news itself is a certain unit (...) and disinformation is an ongoing process. It consists of many such messages; smaller units like fake news or other misleading messages (Int_PL 6).

Moreover, Dominika Sitnicka, a journalist from OKO.press, an independent journalist project, argued that “false narratives” are one type of disinformation:

Fake news is information that can be verified, and is very black and white; it is either this or that. There is another type of disinformation and I would call false narratives. (...) these are narratives that are based a little on half-truths, on certain interpretations, and their aim is to convince the public and change its opinion, to support certain attitudes, to force public opinion to evaluate certain phenomena in a different way (Int_PL 4).

Second, according to our interviewees, both disinformation and fake news are meant to provoke strong sentiments. “Each of them may be harmful, each of them is different, each of them has one common denominator, namely the emotions that they convey,” our interlocutor underlines (Int_PL 7). In a similar fashion, journalist, Dominika Sitnicka, stresses that “what matters more to people than facts, is whether someone speaks in a certain way which is particularly convincing and appeals to some emotions which they also have inside them, not necessarily good and uplifting ones, but even negative ones, like anger, wrath, feeling hurt” (Int_PL 4).

Third, our discussion partners emphasised that disinformation it is a highly context-dependent process, which makes it an oft-used tool for evoking and stirring strong emotions. A high-rank employee from the governmental agency explained that “the characteristics of the target groups depend very much on the subject matter”, and because of that, the context is the key issue when it comes to disinformation. Various societal groups feel emotionally affected by different issues and news, and therefore disinformation targets people uniquely with tailored messages:

(N)ot everyone will be affected by (the topic of the) Volhynia (massacre), just as not everyone will be affected by the fact that the AstraZeneca vaccine has some negative effects on women of a particular age. (...) (A) different message is addressed to young mothers, a different message is addressed to an inhabitant of a medium-sized town in the Lublin region, and yet another is addressed to a young inhabitant of Warsaw (Int_PL 7).

Accordingly, manipulation was seen as a key ingredient of disinformation and fake news by our discussion partners. For instance, they explained that “false information is sometimes not entirely false, but lacks context - we often come across such content that, for example, uses a real video or photo, but is described differently than it actually was” (Int_PL 8). Such an example is given by Dominika Sitnicka from OKO.press: the journalist referred to a photo widely described as the police beating someone in Bialystok (a city in Poland). Yet, after verification, it turned out to be a picture of the municipal police in Serbia identifying a citizen (Int_PL 4).

Specific ways of framing the issues and placing them in a given context, or presenting them out of the context, is exactly part of the aforementioned strategies of creating entire narratives to convince the public of certain interpretations of events. Such a strategy focuses more on shaping the narrative rather than misstatements themselves. Our interviewee provided the following example which refers to the rule of law dispute between the Polish government and the European Union institutions:

A legal example of this is the way in which the governing party talks about the trials that are taking place against the Polish government in the Court of Justice of the European Union, because this is such a narrative. It cannot be said here that they let some single untruth into the public space, but they present their own interpretation, using various examples taken out of context, and interpreting individual phenomena in such a strong way (Int_PL 4).

A journalist from a large professional media outlet distinguished between organised and non-organised disinformation, based on who is the agent of disinformation. Non-organised disinformation are actions taken by actors who want to manipulate or obscure the truth or destroy trust in institutions via irrelevant and unsubstantial ways. Non-organised disinformation, on the contrary, means that actors spread disinformation on their own, or in little groups, as opposed to strategic groups. Organised disinformation is conducted by strategic agents who are supported by organised institutions such as countries, associations, business actors, companies (Int_PL 1).

Another distinction by our respondent from an international press agency is the one made between disinformation and misinformation. According to him, disinformation is aimed at misleading a person or a group of people, and is created by people (or bot factories) who do it on purpose to gain some kind of financial, social or political advantage. Misinformation, on the other hand, is misleading information that is distributed by people unintentionally, i.e. by people who do not know that they are distributing false information (Int_PL 8).

Interestingly, some of our interviewees perceived fake news as neither a helpful nor useful concept or analytical category. A fact-checker from an international press agency told us that they and their colleagues avoid using the term fake news as it has been seized by politicians and used in their rhetoric against opponents or media:

The term “fake news” can be used by, for example, politicians in the context of discrediting the other side’s opinion. Like Donald Trump once said he wouldn’t answer a question from a CNN journalist, and called him a representative of the “fake news station”. That concept can be used in exactly that way and we generally don’t use it for that reason (Int_PL 8).

The executive from the governmental agency noted that responding exclusively to fake news would be relatively uncomplicated because there would be facts which could be indisputably refuted. Regrettably, the reality of disinformation is much more intricate:

Frankly speaking, I would prefer everything (we have to work with) to be “fake news”, because, paradoxically, it is easy to verify. (...) However, when we have a very undefined matter, that is, when this rephrasing really takes place in clusters of various kinds of rumours, then we already have a problem (...) an opinion, a question or a thesis is much more difficult to deal with, so we have to react to such matters in a soft manner (Int_PL 7).

An editor and journalist of an online media outlet told us that while both fake news and disinformation are significant problems, there is a phenomenon – present in the context of both the pandemic and war in Ukraine – that is much more dangerous: an infodemic. The interviewee defines it as “blurring, diluting, watering down or falsely objectifying, falsely nuancing problems or issues that ‘on’t need so much blurring”. An infodemic is “the whole ecosystem that undermines trust and builds a false objectivity” (Int_PL 9). The case of false objectivity would be “presenting both sides of an argument”, which translated into a TV talk show would approximate the following: two invited guests, such as a scientist and a celebrity with no medical or scientific knowledge (representing the other side), to discuss how safe COVID-19 vaccines are. This was an example given by two respondents (Int_PL 4, Int_PL 9). An example of false nuancing would be a message that “Russia attacked Ukraine, but maybe it was really afraid that NATO would attack Russia” or “well, Putin entered Ukraine, but Ukraine was a weak country, and in fact it’s always been a part of Russia” (Int_PL 9).

To compare, the following definition of an infodemic is given by the World Health Organisation (WHO 2022). While it refers to disease outbreaks, it could be applied to other events as well:

An infodemic is too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response. An infodemic can intensify or lengthen outbreaks when people are unsure about what they need to do to protect their health and the health of people around them. With growing digitisation – an expansion of social media and Internet use – information can spread more rapidly. This can help to more quickly fill information voids, but can also amplify harmful messages (WHO, 2022).

An information void is mentioned by one of our respondents in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. For this interviewee, disinformation consists of a lack of available, reliable information sources: “During the pandemic, journalists had to rely on information from the government, from the Ministry of Health, as it was the only source of data. The Ministry of Health’s announcements were restricted, and didn’t bring any information except numbers. And from numbers we couldn’t get any bigger picture of the pandemic situation, or risks in Poland” (Int_PL 2). “An information void also occurred during the refugee humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, where because of the emergency state, journalists weren’t allowed to access the border zone, nor gain any information on the actual situation there” (Int_PL 2). In such situations, restricting access to information is disinformation.

To sum up the theme of issue understanding, the interviews show that regardless of the respondents’ fields of work, they share a similar understanding of the phenomena of fake news and disinformation. They believe that fake news (or, as some interviewees prefer, false information) is an issue that is narrow and easier to deal with, as it is based on the true-false paradigm. Disinformation (or even its more complex and intricate form that is an infodemic) is a much more complex and far-reaching issue. It is difficult, or even virtually impossible, to fact-check or refute narratives, clusters of gossip, more nuanced and sophisticated theories or allegedly objective discussions and opinions.

3. Trust in news and journalism

As mentioned in the introduction, according to Reuters (2022) 42% of Poles trust news. This gives Poland the 18th rank among 46 countries surveyed for the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2022. There is a 14-percentage-points decline in trust in news compared to 2015 (56%). Only 19% of Polish respondents perceive the media as free from undue political influence, while only 20% of respondents think the media is free from undue business influence. According to the Reuters’ report, there are “stark differences between trust in independent media compared to the state-controlled public broadcaster TVP, which has twice as many people distrusting (49%) than trusting it (24%)” (Ibid.: 95). This is in contrast to other countries in our study (except Serbia) where trust in public broadcasting is strongest, and was stable during the pandemic. Radio channels RMF FM and Radio Zet, and TV channel TVN, achieved the highest brand trust scores in 2022.

There has been a consensus among our interviewees who work as journalists that their profession is perceived with little respect and little trust. Indeed, in the 2022 ranking of the most respected professions, journalism stands as one of the least respected lines of work (24th position out of 34 professions) (SW Research, 2022). Our discussion partners pointed to the following explanations of the low trust in media and journalists:

- 1) Low level of public trust. In Poland, like in many Central and Eastern European countries, there is a low level of public trust in general, and an especially low level of trust in the political class, which translates into low levels of trust in journalists, as well (Int_PL 4).

2) People do not believe in journalistic independence. One of our interviewees argued that “there is always the suggestion that the journalist works for someone, and that he or she is at someone else’s service” (Int_PL 4). While it was usually suggested that journalists are involved in politics, our respondents noted that it is rather business than politicians that might influence private media: “It is quite naive that in Poland more is talked about the journalists’ involvement in some political interests and less about their entanglement in the interests of large corporations, which is more obvious in the case of the media that prosper through advertising and various collaborations” (Int_PL 4). Another interviewee emphasised that since “the fourth power is capitalism, not the media”, it is business that has a very strong impact on the media: “You won’t write about certain things (...) because there is simply one television station that is public, so they can’t criticise what the state does. Then there is another one which is private, but in principle you can’t criticise the owner, either. The third is private, American. You can criticise certain things, but you are also dependent” (Int_PL 9).

3) Journalists lower their standards to respond quickly to disinformation (i.e. write a quick Tweet rather than a well-researched article): “Then (when they write something on Twitter in a hurry) someone catches them out on a stupid mistake and discredits them. Although journalists might be right in the principles, they will be discredited because of something written in a rush of emotions” (Int_PL 1).

4) Collapse of journalism as a profession. Our interviewees argued that “Now everyone can be a journalist” (Int_PL 5). Thus, they emphasised that given the multiplication of forms of communication, when everyone uploading videos online may be “like a journalist”, work ethics are no longer obeyed. This, in turn, diminishes trust in journalism. In a similar fashion, our discussion partners emphasised that there has been a massive expansion of media which are lifestyle-oriented, or which focus only on reproducing messages they receive from external sources. These outlets are not even authors of the content, but distributors. Often, there is neither thorough control of this kind of content, nor fact-checking, before releasing the information (Int_PL 6).

More broadly, one of the topics relevant in terms of trust in the media was, according to our discussion partners, the rise of “alternative” media and non-professional journalism. It was argued that, on the one hand, there is an effect from the lack of trust in traditional media. Yet, on the other hand, “alternative” media further erode trust in the news: “People who don’t trust journalists will look first for alternative media, that is, those media whose guiding slogan is that you won’t see this on TV. These alternative media are created by people who don’t have that journalistic experience, for whom objectivity is not the most important thing” (Int_PL 7). “Today a journalist is anyone who publishes videos or “lives” online. And this became apparent during the pandemic with anti-vaccination movements when many “independent” news sites were created (...) Many people believed them and got fooled. (...) People get information from such sites, treating professional media as biased, lying, dependent on corporations, oligarchs, businessmen, the government... I don’t know about the scale, but there are groups that stopped believing “mainstream media” and switched to “independent media” (Int_PL 2).

5) Social media content is more accessible than professional media. According to our interviewees, nowadays people are more likely to trust celebrities, influencers, people they follow on Instagram than journalists. Social media are free, while professional outlets are often protected by a paywall. A story or a video on a social media platform does not require the time and focus needed to read an article: “On Instagram, there are stories, there is a person who you can see and who is talking to you; that kind of contact feels closer and more personal” (Int_PL 7).

6) Anti-intellectualism and anti-elitism. Some of our discussion partners emphasised that in Poland, a populist, anti-elitist shift has a negative impact on trust in professional media. This is how a journalist expressed it: “I have the impression that there is an aversion to elites, and journalists are still perceived a bit as an elite, even though they are not a financial elite. There is definitely some such anti-intellectualism” (Int_PL 4).

Another important trust-related issue discussed by our interviewees was the fact that the media in Poland are strongly identity-based due to the substantial political polarisation that spills over into the media. Dominika Sitnicka, a journalist from OKO.press, an independent journalism project, explained that:

For those people who read the liberal press or the left-wing press, right-wing journalists are not only unreliable, but even harmful, they are almost enemies. And vice versa, for right-wingers; all media and journalists that are not on the right side of the spectrum are spies and agents. (...) These are not the times when there are people (journalists) who unite different political options. I have the impression that this is disappearing and that even those people who work in, let's say, liberal media, but they get along well with right-wing politicians, they are not respected on the right anymore, that there is a strong pressure to be on one side or the other (Int_PL 4).

This was confirmed by Filip Szulik-Szarecki, the head of Wojownicy Klawiatury (Keyboard Warriors), a non-profit civil society project aimed at fighting disinformation, who noted that trust in the specific media in Poland depends on political preferences. He underlined that for some people, TVN (a private TV with foreign capital) is a very unreliable source and for others, it's TVP (public TV) that is extremely unreliable. When people have certain political views, they can feel that one TV channel is absolutely right and the other is absolutely wrong, without any nuance (Int_PL 3). Piotr Stanisławski from Crazy Nauka, an independent popular science project, also discussed the severe polarisation of Polish society:

We have no common thread of understanding, not to mention moral or ethical authorities. (...) Media are clearly divided and this makes establishing some sort of common contact even more difficult. This polarisation in Poland is already strong, and still increasing (Int_PL 10).

Partially as a consequence of polarisation, our respondents also mentioned the issue of information bubbles which make us blind to the arguments of the other side:

Bubbles mean that you have confidence in your journalists and zero confidence in those other journalists. (...) We sort of live in these bubbles and sometimes even in the best of faith, we can have such a blind spot to the arguments of the other side (Int_PL 9).

I think everyone starts to stew in their own juice. We fall into information bubbles and Facebook does not help; on the contrary, it puts us further into the bubbles (Int_PL 2).

Our interviewees were unanimous that decreasing trust in the media has a negative impact on democracy. Yet, according to them, decreasing trust in some media can also be in some politicians' interest. Those politicians often work to delegitimise certain outlets, so that if an investigative journalist discovers some unlawful practice or scandals among the politicians, many readers will simply assume in advance that this news is lies, slander, because this information came from “traitors to the fatherland” (Int_PL 4). This is how it was explained:

When we stop trusting the media and experts, we lose any point of reference and attachment. If we stop trusting the big media, which exercise a control function, and are the fourth power, we lose access to quality materials and investigations that can show us various pathologies

of power. So, this has a negative effect on democracy. Disinformation negatively affects our trust in the media, but also our trust in various other institutions that play a control function, e.g. lowering confidence in NATO, or saying that the European Union is not democratic (Int_PL 3).

In a similar fashion, others emphasised:

Without the fourth power, there is no democracy. There have to be media that control the institutions. If citizens think this control is insufficient, or they do not trust journalists, who is going to do this? Without reliable media, there is no democracy. People need to get information from somewhere. There must not be only public institutions or political parties' outlets (Int_PL 5).

What makes a democracy is free media, free courts, the possibility to vote in elections. So, low trust in journalism undermines the country we live in, and unfortunately disturbs our democracy, in the sense that it is damaging that, for example, politicians create their own media and they don't need journalists or media to report something objectively (Int_PL 8).

4. Originators of disinformation

All our interviewees agreed that disinformation was present in the Polish media sphere long before the COVID pandemic. Yet, according to them, March 2020 brought about a significant increase in disinformation. Since then, disinformation in public debate has become more apparent and continues to be reinforced by a sequence of events – first, the COVID pandemic, next, the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border (especially from the perspective of local media) and eventually, escalation of the Russian invasion in Ukraine since February 2022. This is how one of our interviewees described this process:

The (misinformation) phenomenon had been evolving at an earlier stage (before the pandemic) because social media started to be used on a wider scale. Later, there were minor epidemic crises, such as the Zika virus in South America, or Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Then, even on a smaller scale, it was possible to observe that the Internet influences the creation of social attitudes (Int_PL 6).

When asked about originators of disinformation, our interviewees were reluctant to answer, and emphasised that they only reveal their subjective points of view. Nonetheless, they pointed out the following triggers of disinformation in Poland:

External actors as a source of disinformation

Our interviewees often pointed to the threat of external actors spreading disinformation in Poland. In this context, actors connected to the Russian Federation were perceived as potentially most harmful. Some interviewees expressed their opinion that Poland is one of the crucial EU countries where Russian disinformation actions take place, due to the close geographical distance and lack of a coherent strategy for tackling the disinformation from external agents by public institutions:

During the war (in Ukraine), we might be strongly attacked (with disinformation) by Russians. I can imagine that among all European Union countries, Poland is endangered the most with their mass influence. We have no tradition of separating organisations supporting other countries [from influence on the receivers] (Int_PL 1).

However, Russian disinformation actions, according to our discussion partners, rarely take the shape of direct interventions in the Polish media sphere. Most commonly, it is just a source or an impulse (Int_PL 3), for example triggered by official pro-Russian media, such as RT or Sputnik. Noticeably, these media have been banned from broadcasting in Poland after February 2022, due to “safety and defence issues” (KRRiT, 2022). Messages appearing in pro-Russian media, then, are reproduced and shared via the Internet, and especially on social media (by Polish-language accounts). Our interviewees emphasised that thus people who do not follow pro-Russian media become “transmitters” (Int_PL 3) of disinformation when they share the content on social media. This operation mode was described by Robert Reczkowski as a “chain of disinformation and propaganda” and was seen as the element of a broader “ecosystem” (Reczkowski, 2020).

Our interviewees explained that the purpose of external interference is to create unrest and inner polarisation among European societies. The nature of such messages is non-verifiable and emotional, lacking informative character, appealing to one’s affects and inner stereotypes. This leads to a change in social behaviours, lowering the level of social trust. Such practice is especially dangerous for local multi-cultural communities because of its it can undermine mutual relations, as highlighted in one interview:

I think we have an army of Putin fake news people (in Poland). They take advantage of the situation and circulate information to antagonise us. I live in a place where Belarussians and Ukrainians have already lived for many years and have been co-creating our society. The moment Lukashenko got involved (in the invasion in Ukraine), we became antagonised. Do you think these are bottom-up behaviours? I don’t think so; it is a planned action. And it’s meant to antagonise Poles and people from Belarus - someone wants that to happen (Int_PL 5).

Another example of Russian disinformation referred to vaccines, especially AstraZeneca and Sputnik. The former was an object of severe critique after alleged deaths caused by this vaccine. The latter was praised for its efficiency and its creators who allegedly responded quickly to the pandemic situation. Our interviewee referred to research proving it was a Sputnik’s marketing strategy, meant to undermine trust in other vaccines and aimed at promoting Russia-produced vaccines on the EU market.

Two of our interviewees noticed that exactly the same Internet sources that had been spreading disinformation about the COVID pandemic and vaccines, started sharing anti-Ukrainian narratives referring to difficult experiences in Polish-Ukrainian history (WWII) or to the financial problem that refugees will become for Poland after the escalation of the Russian invasion in Ukraine. These observations are consistent with information provided by various Polish media, including fact-checking ones.

Non-governmental internal actors as the sources of disinformation

In Poland, anti-vaccination movements were widely active during the COVID-19 pandemic. They originated from already existing anti-vaccine groups. Over time, they became strongly opposed to the restrictions associated with the pandemic and the COVID vaccinations. They used conspiracy theory narratives, mainly about the planning of the pandemic by global powers and corporations. Primarily, they spread these narratives through social media (Hugo-Bader 2022). Our interviewees described them as rather small groups, whose effectiveness lies in reaching the undecided or uninformed people, and taking advantage of the polarisation of society. Moreover, as mentioned by one of our respondents, anti-vaccination activists in Poland often spread fake news circulated by Russian special services:

Antivaccination groups often catch up with the narrative that is created and distributed by Russian disinformation services. And those services capture and boost pre-existing trends very well (Int_PL 10).

Our interviewees also pointed out domestic politicians who use disinformation in their rhetoric. During the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation focused on issues of vaccines and the vaccination process. Such action was perceived by our interviewees as a part of a cynical political game focused on winning over voters. The words of some MPs from the Confederation Party and the governing Law and Justice Party undermining the effectiveness of vaccination were quoted as examples. What is important, such activities added nothing new to the misinformative discourse, drawing mainly on false information already in circulation by Russian propagandist agents, or domestic anti-vaccination groups.

According to the DigitalPoland Foundation, around 40% of people use alternative media as a valid source of information (DigitalPoland Foundation, 2022). Yet, alternative media, as has already been mentioned, are another example of disinformation sources in Poland. They often describe themselves as 'independent' and 'objective'. Benefitting from low trust in the media and providing false information, they mainly want to gain attention.

Government and public media as sources of disinformation

Interviewees from the private media were critical of the public television broadcaster (TVP). TVP was strongly associated with the governing coalition, led by the Law and Justice Party. Politicisation of public media was one of the reasons for the great and constant decrease in Poland's position in the Press Freedom Index since 2015 (RFS, 2022) This is consistent with the opinions of one of our interviewees:

Public television is the most intensive, influential and the strongest source of disinformation in this country (...) That's so obvious that I forgot to mention it before (Int_PL 1).

In the opinion of traditional media employees, the public media is not up to standard and is engaging in a polarising role. On the other hand, some of them stressed that also private TV stations are involved in disinformation, understood as an intentional adoption of the perspective of certain political parties:

I would define disinformation in traditional media throughout their programme line. Two different TV stations or newspapers report the same situation, showing different realities. It is disinformation, but not fake news (Int_PL 5).

Limiting access to the information is another example of disinformation done by government and public institutions (described before as the "informational void"). This trend is described by one of the interviewees as centralisation, meaning that the government tries to run information policy on a central level, withholding information whenever convenient. Such action has been compared to the behaviour of authoritarian regimes, for example, communist Poland before 1989, as highlighted by one of our informants:

Q: What do you understand by the term "disinformation"?

A: Centralisation. Very often the government takes over the information policy in specific cases. For example, during the pandemic - we were unable to contact the sanitary services. For the first few weeks it was possible; we could contact the sanitary authorities and ask at

source. And it stopped when the (Health) Ministry took over informing about the pandemic situation (Int_PL 2).

The social media

Social media were seen as playing a central role in the disinformation process. Our respondents perceived them as a kind of uncensored agora, where anyone can proclaim views of their choice in the name of freely understood freedom of speech:

So, they also know how to avoid the guidelines of social networking sites, which, under the guise of protecting freedom of speech, unfortunately very often tolerate these types of harmful narrative. And if you ask me about fake news, they also use it less often, and if they do, it is in a rather sophisticated way, and most often they take certain materials out of context, giving them a pseudo-scientific tone, or a pseudo-factual tone (Int_PL 8).

It was underlined that social media platforms create the right conditions for the spread of disinformation: lack of top-down control of published content, enabling rapid sharing of content, unclear community terms and conditions. In this sense, social media users are initiators, on the one hand, and tools of disinformation on the other. Simultaneously, our interviewees identified it as largely the social responsibility of the owners of digital corporations to create rules to stop the spread of disinformation. However, as they resist making such changes, public institutions should launch a legislative processes over digital corporations to force the desired regulations. We were told that:

Social media is a wonderful tool to spread disinformation and fake news, and platforms do not do enough to prevent it. Once upon a time, groups of people who believed in conspiracy theories were limited to small discussion forums, not gathered in large communities. Now Facebook groups, Twitter or TikTok are great platforms to spread various conspiratorial theories that obviously have little to do with reality. This is a gigantic problem because social media can't cope with it at all (Int_PL 3).

To sum up the theme of disinformation sources and mechanisms, it was emphasised that disinformation originated both within and outside the media. Propagandist services of the Russian Federation are perceived as the main external threat for the Polish info-sphere. As to internal originators, they are groups spreading disinformation (e.g. antivaccination movements), or groups benefitting from this phenomenon (e.g. politicians, alternative media). As aforementioned, a Poland-specific phenomenon is the government perceived as one of the agents contributing to disinformation by centralising the control over media content, and creating “informational voids”. In all mentioned cases, the rationale for spreading disinformation is actor- and context-dependent. Yet, the common thread is sustaining or extending actors’ power, both in strictly political and economic terms.

5. The effects of the pandemic

Our interviewees agree that the impact of the pandemic on trust in journalism in Poland has changed gradually. At the beginning of the pandemic’s outbreak, the mainstream media and the government shared a common understanding of what needed to be done – e.g., lockdowns were seen as necessary by journalists, by government officials and the general public alike (Int_PL 1, Int_PL 2). At that point, the traditional media were generally seen as trustworthy on the issue:

I remember that in May, 2020, the big news was that a child's cold toes are a symptom of Covid infection. However, I think many people tried to verify social media sensationalism on traditional media, especially about new restrictions or recommendations. This is undoubtedly an enhancement for the media position. And the media themselves have learned a lot. For instance, they value those journalists who write sensibly about science (Int_PL 10).

This state of affairs was facilitated by the fact that policy journalism (focused on the Polish health care system), previously neglected, became more important among journalists. That, in itself, is seen as a positive sign by one of our interview partners – in his opinion, focusing on health care finally made apparent the crucial role of health professionals in Polish society (Int_PL 1). However, the pandemic did not have an immediate impact on trust towards journalists; fake news was still circulated on social media. The misinforming content did not resonate in the wider public debate at first, but it contributed to the emergence of a more general “information chaos” (Int_PL 6). The existing means of communication proved to be inefficient. Because the government, scientists, and the media did not have precise answers on the numerous questions regarding the pandemic at its start, citizens turned to alternative sources – including fake news – to lessen the feelings of uncertainty and anxiety (Int_PL 1, Int_PL 9). In the age of social media, the reluctance to provide immediate answers undermined the role of journalists in shaping public opinion.

Several of our discussion partners asserted that disinformation efforts during the latter parts of the pandemic focused primarily on polarising society by extensive use of conspiracy theories (Int_PL 3, Int_PL 4, Int_PL 5, Int_PL 6, Int_PL 7). They were disseminated successfully, mainly through social media and YouTube, showcasing the decreased impact of the traditional media in shaping public opinion during emergencies (Int_PL 4). One of the earliest and most prominent stories featured Bill Gates as an advocate of total state control over citizens’ lives (Int_PL 7). Other narratives focused on exploiting practical concerns of citizens, raising the issue of safety of COVID-19 vaccines and spreading misleading advice on how not to get infected (Int_PL 7, Int_PL 10).

However, conspiracy theories were not only present on social media. Some traditional media hosted numerous “skeptics” (e.g., celebrities) countering established expert knowledge. The main justification behind it was the need to preserve “impartiality” in the face of increasing polarisation (Int_PL 9). Consequently, according to one of our interviewees, giving voice equally to experts and “skeptics” undermined the general trust during the pandemic through the promotion of “false objectivity”, i.e., argument to moderation (Int_PL 9).

As pointed out by the representatives of the civil society we talked to, the means of disinformation (such as fake news and conspiracy theories) had predated the outbreak of the pandemic, but the sheer intensity of the event made their use significantly more effective over time (Int_PL 3, Int_PL 6). Most interviewees agree that the pandemic was a unique event, as disinformation directly affected almost the entire population. Meanwhile, the foreign state-owned outlets, such as Russia Today, used the opportunity, with great success, in their disinformation campaigns (Int_PL 3, Int_PL 10):

Different narratives dominated in different parts of the world. Sometimes the same media, such as Russia Today and Sputnik, published different fake, disinforming news in different countries on their sites in different language variants. In some countries, there was talk of secret Chinese laboratories and an artificially grown virus there, and in Arab countries, for example, the same Sputnik was saying that the pandemic was the fault of NATO. Before Covid, such misinforming conspiracy theories were much less intense (Int_PL 3).

During the pandemic waves that followed the initial outbreak, the relationship between the government and journalists soured. The deep political polarisation in the media landscape in Poland

predates the pandemic, as the state has tried to extend its control over the private media (Newman et al., 2021), which has undermined the relationship between journalists and policymakers ever since. More general distrust towards the government allowed the disinformation to spread faster, and made anti-pandemic policies harder to justify in the eyes of journalists:

There was a lack of trust in the centre of power (in the governing politicians) which had to make decisions during the pandemic, and had to communicate them. And the fact that this centre of power – just like in the Polish case – the trust in it was strongly, strongly undermined by various events from earlier years... This also made all these communications suspicious, not only for people who fell into bubbles of conspiracy theories about Covid (...), but also among those people who would even like and support the introduction of some restrictions (...) (Int_PL 4).

According to one of our respondents, the government not only failed to properly communicate its intentions and decisions to the general public during the pandemic, but also did not establish a proper working relationship with the media (Int_PL 1). Consequently, most of our interviewees became disillusioned with the state of public health policymaking during the pandemic. For our interlocutors, the lack of transparency was one of the most important issues. The government made any independent verification of the data it provided on the spread of the virus difficult (Int_PL 2). The quality of the data provided was poor, as well, undermining the trust between journalists and the government (“the government didn’t give us any reasons to believe these numbers” Int_PL 1). Even so, by controlling the state institutions, journalists contributed not only to increasing the government’s transparency, but also to scientific inquiries on the pandemic:

The Ministry of Digitalisation prepared data about COVID deaths that we had been asking for. And there was a bizarre situation. One of the public research institutions asked us journalists to share this data. An academic institution co-working with the government. Situations of academics having to ask journalists for important information should have never happened. And as a result, the Ministry of Health started to publish official data daily (Int_PL 1).

The relationship between the scientific community and the media was more ambiguous. For a brief period of time, public health experts featured prominently in the mass media:

Well, actually during the pandemic, ...it was not in all the media, of course, but that expert voice was somehow heard, appreciated. Expert, but also the voice of the people on the front line. Those were the moments. It was actually kind of extraordinary. (...) Two years have passed and what? And these experts simply disappear from the media completely. And yet, health care is a really gigantic social problem. Underfunding, some problems in prevention and so on. So, these experts disappeared (...) this expert voice, which comes at the time of danger, simply does not stay in these media (Int_PL 9).

With this increased presence, experts were able to influence the public perception of the pandemic (Int_PL 7). Unfortunately, the temporality of the close collaboration between academia and the media in Poland indicates that the pandemic may have been a wasted opportunity to build trust.

At the same time, our respondents underlined the fact that some self-proclaimed experts were one of the most important vessels of disinformation on social media (Int_PL 5, Int_PL 8). Although traditional media gave voice to established academics and governmental experts, social media were a domain of alternative “experts”, sometimes non-medical academics (Int_PL 8), who were spreading unverified and misleading opinions on the pandemic. For many, these fake experts were more credible. In the opinion of one of our interviewees, the increasing popularity of alternative sources of expertise was caused by the complex nature of the pandemic itself. As the established scientists

were operating under deep uncertainty, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, their messaging was hindered by the complicated nature of the advanced medical research (Int_PL 4).

The disinformation and conspiracy theories on the vaccines were the last parts of the process that started at the onset of the pandemic (Int_PL 7), but were probably also the most intensive (Int_PL 1). The topic is especially relevant as the campaign has ultimately led to rather disappointing results; only around 60% of the population received at least one dose of the vaccine (Mathieu et al., 2021). Our discussion partners were divided on the assessment of the role of disinformation in sabotaging the vaccination campaign against COVID-19. According to one of our discussion partners, disinformation relating to vaccines targeted an enormous number of people and was combined with an intense involvement of foreign (Russian) state actors (Int_PL 10). However, another interviewee, who took part in countering disinformation at the state level, concludes that disinformation was not a decisive factor behind the comparatively low vaccination rates in Poland. Disinformation efforts became more effective after the initial enthusiasm towards vaccines cooled down:

Only when a whole group of people, who were willing to be vaccinated, swarmed through the vaccination centres, did disinformation appear in Poland. It is therefore a gross misrepresentation to say that disinformation was a decisive factor in why the Poles did not choose to be vaccinated. This is a very big misunderstanding, because until June last year (2021), there was very little disinformation on vaccines. (...) However, when this enthusiasm naturally cooled down, and people stopped discussing the topic of vaccinations, this gave way to typical disinformation activities, i.e. (talking about) some kind of post-vaccination reactions, selective analysis of data from other countries or, in general, spreading some unbelievable stories from other countries (Int_PL 8).

In short, according to our respondents, the pandemic had an uneven impact on trust towards journalists, public authorities and the media. The problem of the pandemic disinformation became more pronounced in the later stages of the outbreak. Alternative media sources and self-proclaimed “experts” challenged the dominant narratives mainly through social media sites, but some were given the platform in traditional media, too. The disinformation process was significantly boosted by the existing distrust between the media and the government, which culminated in a lack of communication during the emergency. Our discussion partners also emphasise that foreign state actors, particularly Russia, were involved in spreading disinformation. All of the above contributed to an emergence of information chaos. Nonetheless, the media played an important role in controlling the government’s actions and by demanding more transparency (i.e., data-sharing).

6. Counter-strategies

In discussing the strategies to combat disinformation, the fact-checking practices turned out to be the most salient issue. Yet, according to research conducted by DigitalPoland Foundation, only 22% of Polish respondents have heard about fact-checking organisations, whilst as few as 5% of them have used fact-checking sites to confirm information about current events, compared to 40% using “alternative sources” (DigitalPoland Foundation, 2022).

Some of our interviewees were critical with regard to the limited use of such fact-checking projects as running portals which verify information, giving explanations and assessing whether something is true or false. In their opinion, such a strategy can be applied only to small and specific pieces of disinformation, such as a particular fake news article. Yet, much fake news nowadays has spread at high velocity, and appeals to the receivers’ emotions through catchy titles - “there is a much greater

chance that someone will click on it than an article that says “No, vaccines do not lead to death” (Int_PL 3), which means that fact-checking is always a belated practice.

The other weakness of fact-checking strategies is, according to several of our respondents, the social media-induced change in the way people consume information. It was emphasised that nowadays, people only scroll through social media to obtain needed information, and retrieve only what seems interesting for them. Thus, fact-checking projects which are established with the aim of verifying information have a very weakened strategy when fighting for the receivers’ attention. This is how this process was explained:

The first reaction of the media, but also of democratic organisations, was that if there is false information in our world, then we need to create tools that will show which are false. A lot of resources were also spent on that. Google did these whole programmes where they subsidised these kinds of projects. And there was a kind of positivist belief, a very enlightened belief that we will create these tools, we will create these portals. But the truth is, with all due respect to all this work, normal people just like or dislike scrolling on Facebook, but they're not going to check, they're not going to go to some portal to see if it's, you know, true or false (Int_PL 9).

Despite that, interviewees perceived Internet monitoring focused on identifying malicious content and researching online trends as an important and helpful practice. Aggregated data of potentially harmful content enables fact-checkers to assess the topic areas vulnerable to disinformation, and adopt preventive actions. By doing so, they try to respond to disinformation before it is widely spread, to limit its social and economic cost.

In addition to fact-checking projects, our interviewees recommended various approaches to tackling the influence of disinformation on society. They referred, i.a., to the following issues:

Journalistic ethics

Many of our interviewees, in particular those who work in the news companies, argued that the COVID-19 pandemic was a crash test for journalists and the standard of their work ethics. They also told us that they were affected by the unprecedented situation which consisted of limiting the information by the Chinese government, and the lack of scientific knowledge about the coronavirus at the initial stage of the pandemic, and then the “information buzz” with regard to coronavirus. They strongly emphasised the importance of keeping a high standard of journalistic ethics which they find crucial when facing the problem of disinformation.

This standard consists of:

- Being cautious towards sources of information. Journalists working in traditional media emphasised the importance of using only officially verified information and avoiding quoting posts published on social media. In case verification is not possible, for example during the war in Ukraine, it is important to present the source of the information to the audience.
- Including the perspective of reliable experts and scientists. This appeal has become particularly relevant during the pandemic because of the sheer volume of unverified information of a medical and scientific nature. Taking a scientific perspective helps when facing conflicting information.
- Transparency of journalistic work, including fact-checking processes. Interviewees noted the important role of openness with their audiences, especially about what they have not

been able to establish, or people that denied comment on certain issues. By doing so, journalists are able to show the work they have done on a story, as argued in the following manner: “In journalism, there are two important things. First is showing the information and explaining what it means. And second – is showing backstage, how we work and how we proceed with the information” (Int_PL 1).

The presence of social media

Despite many of our interviewees being strongly critical of social media and their trustworthiness, some of them perceived it as an important field of anti-disinformation activities, and highlighted the need for professional journalists to get involved in sharing their work online. Advantages of social media platforms are: possible large audience reach, easy content sharing and direct debunking. The presence of journalists on social media also allows them to build a community, mainly by interacting with followers:

We can build a community around the truth. Why can one build a community around trousers and we can't build it about journalism, and professional skills? Such a community is a good watchdog (Int_PL 1).

The importance of journalists' social media presence also lies in being open to discussion and accepting criticism. Furthermore, they were negative about referring to someone as an "Internet troll". In their view, personal incentives are often misused towards people with a different worldview, and that disallows further discussion, deepening information bubbles:

I sometimes interact with them and, from time to time, I argue with them with positive results. That convinces me that not all of them are trolls. (...) I'm very careful about using that label - we sometimes call these troll accounts when they aren't that at all (Int_PL 1).

Government's role and legal regulations

Our interviewees expect government and public institutions to interfere in the domain of information spread on the Internet, especially on social media. The salient issue raised during the interviews was the need for regulation on digital platforms at the European Union level. Fact-checkers expect algorithms used by the biggest social media platforms to become more transparent. In their opinion, the current shape of these algorithms enhances misinformation. New solutions should contribute to curbing disinformation and to bursting information bubbles.

Another important issue is the taxation of digital companies making a profit from content posted there by professional media. For many people in Poland, social media is the place to look for current information by following professional journalists or media outlets' profiles on social media (Digital-Poland Foundation, 2022). Journalists expect money from such tax to be redistributed fairly among media in Poland, both public and private:

I got used to not being able to count on the government. But there are some things they might do to improve trust in the media. The first is providing a tax for digital corporations and money redistribution to media broadcasters and publishers. Facebook, Twitter and other platforms that can't live without us and that take our money (Int_PL 1).

Interviewees also perceive some governmental actions as discriminatory towards certain media, opposing and criticising governing parties' policies. As the Law and Justice party has an influence

on decisions of state-owned companies, most advertisements coming from them have been published in media of pro-governmental orientation. Their withdrawal from the media opposing the government entailed a large financial loss (Kowalski, 2020).

The next challenge for government and public institutions in Poland is to rebuild reliable public broadcasting companies. The most criticised was the Polish Television (TVP), especially the news channel (TVP Info). Yet, the situation in Polish Radio (PR) after 2015 has deteriorated which is noticeable by a tremendous decrease in audience reach since then. This happened due to the political influence on public media. As an example of professionally functioning public broadcasters, interviewees mentioned the BBC, Deutsche Welle and Polish Radio before 2015.

Some interviewees were familiar with special fact-checking projects organised by public institutions. Those examples are: the FakeHunter project run by the Polish Press Agency (PAP) and #WłączWeryfikację (#VerificationOn) run by Research and Academic Computer Network (NASK), which is a research institute working on issues of digital society. These projects were praised for their reliability, independency and quick response to queries.

Education

Another important issue that should be solved by public institutions is media literacy education for citizens of different age groups. There are two main groups that such action should be targeted to: the young and elderly people, as those two groups are perceived as the most vulnerable. Young people are raised surrounded by digital media. Yet, their defensive skills of combating disinformation are not supported in a proper way through education. The elderly are mostly in danger of being influenced by disinformation in alternative media or spread via text messages (DigitalPoland Foundation, 2022).

Beyond awareness of disinformation, education projects should be focused on critical media competencies. “The vaccine to disinformation” (Int_PL 10) should be a “wider, critical approach to the news and narratives” (Int_PL 9). What is dangerous is not only fake information, but also the persistent process of spreading misinformative narrations using the same tools for different topics (health policy, migration, etc.). According to our respondents, recognising the mechanisms of misinformation is a crucial part of combating it, as it allows Internet users to distinguish patterns of disinformation, also in other areas.

Other solutions

Interviewees also mentioned other important issues for combating disinformation:

- Building a knowledge base. As core misinformation actions are unchanging, some interviewees praised initiatives for building a knowledge base through documentary work on disinformation.
- Improving the financial state of media companies. The financial situation of Polish media changed rapidly after 2008, due to the world economic crisis and the dynamic growth of the Internet and online media outlets. Low journalists’ salaries translate to lower media standards, fostering disinformation.
- Importance of audience engagement. Journalists and fact-checkers described their work as hearing what their audience wants to know, and then responding to those needs. It became vital during the pandemic when people were writing or calling with their questions on

safety measures, or the current pandemic situation. This specific public-led communication process was assessed as a great opportunity to rebuild trust in the media and professional journalism.

7. Conclusion

Two intertwined phenomena discussed with our interviewees are particularly relevant for the Polish media landscape. The first one is the low and declining level of trust in the media. As was emphasised, there are numerous reasons for that. Among them are issues such as: generally low social and political trust in Poland; journalism and media being perceived as highly politicised; the growing trend of social media usage, perceived as faster, cheaper, more reader-friendly and more interesting than high-quality journalism. Apart from these factors, a growing anti-elitism typical of right-wing populism was mentioned as a distinct trait of the Polish case that further deteriorates trust in independent media.

The second issue was the ever-growing threat and presence of disinformation in the Polish media. Our interviewees emphasised that it takes both a non-organised form in social media, as well as organised forms. The latter are perceived to be caused i.a. by foreign actors, related to the Russian Federation. They have been found to spread disinformation both during the pandemic and Russian aggression on Ukraine since February 2022, whilst in many instances, the exact same disinformation sources were identified. Yet, as some of our discussion partners underlined, the changes in the modus operandi of national broadcasting are ever closer to spreading disinformation, and providing only government-friendly content, muting information about many important issues.

Both issues were found to be detrimental to democracy in Poland, and reversing this negative trend was perceived as one of the main future challenges. For that reason, the interviewees provided numerous constructive suggestions with regard to counter-strategies. These entail higher standards of transparent information about fact sources, educational campaigns, including citizens in content-creation and in verifying, as well as fact-checking, measures. The EU is perceived as one of the crucial instances which can significantly contribute to restoring trust in the media, and curbing disinformation. This can be done, i.a., through EU regulations of digital platforms, including better taxation policies and educational campaigns.

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Awareness of Fake News and Counter-strategies in Serbia

Jelisaveta Vukelić and Dalibor Petrović

1. Introduction

Serbia has around 2,600 different media that inform its 6.8 million citizens. About two thirds of Serbian citizens rely on television and the radio to obtain relevant political and socio-economic information. The Internet is becoming popular, with 81% of Serbian citizens having access to the Internet. However, it is still used less than television for obtaining information.

Over the observed decade (2000-2011), the Internet was the most trusted source of information in Serbia, while trust in television has varied over the years. The observed trend regarding trust in the radio is negative, while the written press has predominantly been the least trusted source of information in Serbia. Finally, trust in social networks has been measured since 2014, and is in decline.

The main reason for relatively high trust in the Internet as a news source compared to legacy media in Serbia is a result of widespread perception that legacy media are under strict governmental control, which can also be concluded from the respondents' answers in this report.

2. Not all information is created equal: Problem identification

Fake news is a term that has come to mean different things to different people. Fake news can be defined as news stories that are false: the story itself is partly or completely fabricated, without verifiable facts, sources or quotes to support it. Sometimes, these stories may be a piece of political propaganda that is intentionally designed to mislead the reader, or may be designed as "clickbait" written for economic incentives. Some fake news may have a nugget of truth, but may also lack contextual details, or be taken completely out of context. It may also include some verifiable facts or sources, but these are written using deliberately inflammatory language that omits important details, or may be heavily biased. Fake news is seen in the literature as purposefully crafted, sensational, emotionally charged, misleading or totally fabricated information that mimics the form of mainstream news. In recent years, social media have led to the proliferation of various forms of fake news, partly because it is easily shared online (for more details: Zimards & McLeod, 2020).

Fake news exists within a larger ecosystem of misinformation and disinformation. For instance, there is misinformation that could be understood as false or inaccurate information that is mistakenly or inadvertently created and spread, without the intent to mislead or deceive. On the other hand, disinformation is considered to be deliberately misleading or biased information, manipulated narrative or facts, synonymous with propaganda. Disinformation is false information that is deliberately created and spread "in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth". The spread of both disinformation and misinformation can have a range of consequences, such as threatening democracies, polarising debates, and putting citizens' health, security and environment at risk.

The phenomena of disinformation and similar concepts are elusive concepts defined in manifold ways in the literature. However, despite different definitions, there is a certain level of convergence on a practical level, making it possible to settle on a comprehensive working definition, suitable for

different actors dealing with this phenomenon. According to the European Commission (2021), disinformation can be defined as “verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm”.

How is the phenomenon of disinformation/fake news identified by experts respondents in Serbia? Different groups of respondents (journalists, government, civil society) rely on a shared understanding of the phenomenon, which is largely in line with the definitions found in the literature. For instance, among journalists in Serbia, the term “fake news” has been comprehensively discussed. Our respondents-journalists see this concept as a “buzz” word that is losing its popularity since it is not clearly defined and is inherently paradoxical - an oxymoron. In journalism, news is associated with information that is correct, cross-checked and truthful, and therefore cannot be fake; the vast majority of respondents-journalists adhere to this belief. Therefore, they prefer to use the terms disinformation/misinformation as more accurate and more comprehensive than the “buzz-word” fake news:

[...] there is a belief that the very term fake news is wrong, because, by definition, news is information that is accurate, verified, timely, up-to-date, etc., and then fake news would be a kind of impossible connection, an oxymoron [...] In English, it is easier to make a certain kind of distinction: e.g. disinformation, misinformation, no information, fake news, etc. Unfortunately, we don't have that many nuances in the Serbian language, such finesse for distinguishing something that would be an accidental mistake, an omission and something that was intentionally sent misinformation, something that is malicious misinformation. So, it seems to me that we have some buzz words - fake news. Everyone defines it as they see fit, but I think that if we use the terms disinformation and misinformation, it is more accurate. I see misinformation as something broader than fake news, so it can include inaccurate information that is intentionally placed, that which is accidentally placed, or placed by predatory tabloids when dealing with their political or ideological dissidents (Interview, FM Tragač).

Moreover, the term fake news is seen as problematic because it narrows down the space for defining the manipulations we see in the public space:

Fake news can only be one of the variants of manipulation in the public space... There are a lot of organisations and media that deal with fact checking; they have created a lot of typologies of manipulations and disinformation that we see in the public space, regardless of whether it is in the media or on social networks.... In order for something to be called disinformation, there must be some clear intention to disavow or deceive the public, or anyone who receives the information. There is something in our typologies called misinformation, and that is when some inaccurate content - whether it is a mistake, whether it is simply a careless transfer of information that is inaccurate - is placed without a clear intention to deceive the audience. On the other hand, disinformation is something what is simply not true and which is placed with a clear intention to deceive the public. There are many forms of these manipulations and we are almost constantly seeing new mechanisms in which information is manipulated. What somehow seems to us to be an increasingly common case in public space is that the so-called manipulation of facts, that is when the true facts are put in such a false or inaccurate context that they eventually become complete disinformation, and it seems to me that it is the most common form of disinformation that we can see in the media, on social networks, and in the statements of political actors. This form of manipulation is so much more dangerous because it is not easy to recognise (Interview, Istinomer).

Among journalists and civic organisations working on the fact-checking project, the precise definitions of the similar yet different terms are more elaborate and nuanced in comparison to the other actors (journalists and representatives of government institutions). The organisations specialised in the field of fact-checking have elaborate methodologies and techniques to discern different types of inaccurate information:

We work according to a methodology that captures all sorts of media manipulations and distinguishes between fake news, misinformation, disinformation, manipulation of facts, conspiracy theory, pseudoscience, etc. We differentiate between whether a piece of content was actually a mistake or intentionally placed in the media. A particularly common form of media manipulation in our country is the manipulation of facts. They are produced by journalists or media organisations, but they are often part of the narrative used by politicians and decision-makers, and then the media just follow that narrative and pass it on to their readers (Interview, Raskrinkavanje).

For other journalists, the aforementioned distinctions and nuances are not as important since they believe that “[...] the goal of all subtypes of fake news is [...] to mislead someone for someone else’s interest [...] It is mostly propaganda” (Interview, N1).

For more seasoned journalists, fake news is not something new in the qualitative sense; there has always been both purposeful and unintentional mistakes in reporting. However, within social media, unchecked information becomes viral and spreads much faster than before. Therefore, it is a serious issue and in this particular context, the development of digital literacy is becoming increasingly important.

Finally, in their work with regards to disinformation, representatives of government institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture, are governed by the relevant documents and definitions created by relevant institutions of the European Union, Council of Europe, UNESCO, etc. Those documents give a nuanced approach to different forms of misinformation. The government representative that was interviewed expressed a negative stance on the utilisation of the term fake news, which is often misinterpreted and misused:

The notion of fake news is often misinterpreted and falsely linked to the press, but I see this term as more appropriate for the digital environment and social networks that spread misinformation in a way that makes user content go viral (Interview, Ministry of Culture).

3. “In media, we don't trust”: Trust in news and journalism

Creation and the spread of various sorts of disinformation by different actors through various channels in the public space is regarded in the literature as ‘information pollution’ that negatively affects both journalism and democracy. The detrimental effect of disinformation on trust in media and democracy in Serbia is recognised by all interviewees:

Distrust of the media is the killer of any democratic system. If you have unqualified citizens because they are uninformed, then you have a problem (RTS).

The respondents believe that it is paramount that the media are trustworthy and that people trust the media because of the corrective role that they (should) play in modern democratic society. The media are seen as the prime source of information for citizens and an essential part of a democratic society (Interview, Ministry of Culture). Besides sharing information, the role of the media is to encourage critical thinking, to educate citizens, to explain the context in which information itself is

created and transmitted, to act as a watch-dog, and to encourage citizens to hold their governments accountable (Interview, Istinomer).

The respondents suggest that distrust in the Serbian media is closely related to generally low trust in state institutions (this opinion is also supported by the public polls) (see for example: Drndarević & Protić, 2020), which creates potential instability and further increases the likelihood of a democratic deficit:

Since trust in the institutions is low and the media report the statements of the public officials, then it all comes down to the fact that currently in Serbia, there is a large group of people who abstain from politics and are cynical with the prevailing attitude: "they are all the same", which significantly threatens democracy (Interview, CRTA).

In addition to distrust in institutions and related democratic deficit in Serbia, respondents recognise a negative impact of the information bubble/echo chamber (and the related spread of misinformation through them) on democratic processes. Namely, citizens choose which media to trust most often on the basis of initial overlap between the views presented on those media and their political or ideological preferences (Interview, FN Tragač). The narrowing down of information sources makes it easier for citizens to navigate the complex world of information, but further contributes to strengthening misconceptions and spreading misinformation:

After all, even if I wanted to check all the information that came to me, it would be technically impossible because I would not do anything in my life other than fact checking, so there must be some initial trust. A special problem is that a lie can be created in a second, and the analysis of that lie can take weeks, and that is the so-called Brandolini effect... However, I would say that if I continuously catch a media in a lie, I would stop following it. But then it remains an enigma to me how people continue to buy tabloids whose predictions never came true (FN Tragač).

With regards to the echo-chamber effect, the respondents note that while citizens express general distrust in the media, they are also prone to uncritically trusting a couple of sources that are close to their personal, ideological and/or political views. However, even though people believe what they want to believe, "if you prepare valid and high-quality content for them, they will consume valid and high-quality content. If you prepare accurate news for them, they will consume accurate news. And herein lies the responsibility of journalism as a profession "(Interview, RADIO BGD):

What poses a great danger to democracy in the context of Serbia is that the media scene is extremely divided (e.g. between N1 and Pink). These are two parallel realities and the divide goes to such an extent that even for me, as someone who creates for one of these informative programmes, the question arises: "Wait, where is the line here, where is the truth, where is the reality in which we really live, is it this or that, or is it actually the place where these two mix?". And that is actually the confusion in which citizens find themselves, and that is why it is much easier for them to go to one pole and trust it blindly (Interview, N1).

The spread of disinformation and fake news has a negative effect on trust in journalism as a profession, so journalists have an extremely difficult task to preserve their integrity and their professional ethics. Journalism used to be a respected profession, "people proudly said that they were journalists, which assumed great knowledge and competence" (Interview, CLIO). The impression of the respondents is that journalism as a profession has lost its credibility. There is a widespread belief that all journalists and all media are lying. "However, that could not be further from the truth, since there are many journalists in Serbia who risk their security and their privacy and even their lives for very little money in order to report on topics of public importance. Unfortunately, the

image of journalists and the media is created on the basis of what is the worst on the media scene in Serbia" (Interview, FN Tragač). The situation is further complicated by the fact that professional associations do not do their job properly, i.e. the profession does not have enough strength to "separate the grain from the chaff" (N1) within its ranks. However, such tendencies are present all over the world, and journalism must find a way to regain trust, and to show that it contributes to the public good (Interview, FN Tragač).

The development of citizens' critical attitude towards the information they receive through the media is recognised as a potentially positive aspect of distrust in the media, as opposed to dogmatic trust in media content (Interview, CLIO; Interview, N1). Certainly, one of the preconditions for democracy is suspicion and criticism, but not to the extent that it leads to indefinite research and verification in order to obtain some basic information, because then the situation becomes the very opposite of what democracy should be. Democracy itself implies the professionalism and integrity of journalists with fact-checked information so that the industry can regain the public's trust (Interview, CLIO):

If one extreme represents a complete trust in the media, a citizen who believes everything he reads in the newspapers or sees on television, and the other extreme, I would say equally dangerous, would be a cynical citizen who no longer believes in anything, who thinks that he is above the situation and that he has seen through the hidden intentions of both the media and politicians. This cynical position is a fertile ground for the development of various conspiracy theories. The solution is development of media literacy, not to slip into either of these two extremes, but to cultivate a kind of healthy suspicion (FN Tragač).

In addition to the development of critical awareness, as one of the positive consequences of distrust in the media, one group of respondents singled out the development of citizen journalism. Citizen journalism is seen as a step towards greater civil liberty, especially in countries with authoritarian regimes (Interview, ISTINOMER). Similarly, in smaller towns and municipalities in Serbia, where media freedom is almost completely restricted due to the strong influence of local politicians and power holders over the media and journalists, citizen journalism can play an important role (Interview, N1). However, it should be borne in mind that citizen journalism usually lacks the process of information verification. As a consequence, a cacophony of information can occur, with a great deal of room for all sorts of manipulation and spread of misinformation (Interview, ISTINOMER).

Finally, as another positive consequence, and at the same time countermeasure to the spread of misinformation, both around the world and in Serbia, the emergence of fact-checking organisations is recognised by respondents (Interview, Raskrinkavanje).

If we compare trust in the media, according to the respondents, people should have more trust in traditional media because they have more developed mechanisms for verification of information (locally and internationally). Although the respondents agree that digital media have brought great changes to the media landscape, there are different interpretations of their impact on the spread of misinformation.

On the one hand, some respondents see digital media as the primary source of disinformation, and citizens who turn to them as passive and backward-thinking:

Some people give up getting information through traditional media because they have lost trust, so they become passive, practically living as they did in the 19th century, on the level of rumours that spreads through social media (Interview, CLIO).

On the other hand, some respondents attribute the turn of citizens to digital sources to the fact that: "...traditional media have betrayed their users. Instead of working for the public good, the media took on the role of representatives of various political and financial interests. Citizens feel this betrayal, so they turn to alternative channels of information, primarily social media. However, the sources they turn to are absolutely unverified, without any control. On the other hand, traditional media do little to regain the trust of their audience, thus creating a widening gap between media on one side and their audience on the other" (Interview, Istinomer).

Given the growing influence of new media, traditional media, in an effort to become hybrid, have fallen into the model of social networks:

Due to the demand that traditional media follow the dynamics of social networks, where new content is constantly appearing, there is not enough time to check the information in detail. This information overproduction is one of the phenomena associated with the loss of trust in the media. The reputation of traditional media is damaged (N1).

Respondents conclude that weakening trust in the media is a significant problem for democracy. For some, it is understood as a "boomerang effect" that politics has created. The desire to control public discourse by controlling the media has, as a consequence, undermined trust in both the media and institutions. The mechanism is quite complex, and distrust in the media is part of that broader picture of changes in media landscape and democracy in the digital age.

Respondents also conclude that mistrust can have some positive effects in the long run. The flood of misinformation can influence citizens to turn to credible sources that offer detailed analyses and clarification of the causes and consequences of certain events. It is possible that in time, a small number of media outlets that work in this way will stand out, and citizens will turn to them.

4. Originators of disinformation

Respondents have recognised different originators and interest behind the creation of disinformation. As originators of disinformation in Serbia and their primary motives, the respondents have mentioned the following:

- Public officials and politicians (propaganda)
- Tabloids (propaganda and clickbait) and mainstream media (propaganda)
- Anonymous websites (financial gain through clicks, Google AdSense advertising)
- Facebook groups (mainly far-right groups)
- Viral content created by individuals on social media platforms
- Online journalists (copy-pasting from unchecked sources, bad translation, misinterpretation of context)

According to the Fact-checking organisations, civil society actors and the representatives of alternative media, the major source of disinformation in Serbia is public officials. Fact checking organisation Istinomer marked the vast majority of statements given by the Serbian president and government officials as disinformation.

Disinformation is created by the politicians and public officials on the top and then spreads down to the lower ranked officials, then onto the pro-regime media and tabloids:

Manipulative statements of political actors are uncritically transmitted in the pro-regime media, and in this way an extremely large corpus of manipulative media content is generated. This trend has been present for years (Interview, Istinomer).

The tabloids are connected with government officials. Authorities are allowing a great deal of this false news to spread. In most cases, it suits them, that is, it is in line with what they want to create from public opinion. Tabloids are one of the tools, and government representatives are the biggest source of false news (Interview, N1).

In other words, “the originators of fake-news are public officials, pro-regime media, led by the tabloids which further advance disinformation and propaganda” (Interview, N1). “The perpetrators are journalists, and the commissioners are political and economic actors and those who inform journalists” (Interview, CLIO). Perseverance is seen as especially important in spreading propaganda and disinformation, i.e. long-term placement of certain information, which creates a reference group that accepts it, spreads it further and finally establishes it as truth (Interview, CLIO). “Certain media are unequivocally engaged in propaganda - it is their job; they are propagandists, and they do not even try to hide it” (Interview, Press Council). In return, pro-regime media and tabloids receive significant funds from the budget of the Republic of Serbia (Interview, Raskrinkavanje).

The views expressed by the respondents are in line with the findings of research on misinformation practices in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Dzebo, 2020) conducted in 2020, by which time almost all misinformation websites were pro-governmental. This, on the one hand, means that it is easier to conduct business for those who favour the government, but also, on the other, that the coverage in favour of the ruling party is rewarded in the form of public money for “media projects of public importance” (Dzebo, 2020: 3). In other words, it can be concluded that there is a state/party capture of the media, with clientelist networks between public officials and media strengthened through the financing mechanisms (public money) (see more in: Kleut, 2021).

On the website of the fact-checking organisation “FN Tragač”, there is a regularly updated list of the 15 most prolific media sources of misinformation spread. These are mostly tabloids that have their own online platforms (Intervju, FN Tragač).

Top 15 sources of Manipulation: (retrieved from <https://fakenews.rs> on 29/04/2022)

1. Alo
2. Informer
3. Kurir
4. Srbija danas
5. Espresso
6. Srpski telegraf
7. Blic
8. Večernje novosti
9. Telegraf
10. Srbin info
11. B92
12. Pink
13. Pravda
14. Mondo
15. Objektiv

The research conducted by the civic organisation, CRTA, has shown that Evening News (“Dnevnik”) is somewhat biased in their reporting, more so if something important is happening (Interview, CRTA). They do not use lies, their sources can be checked, but their interpretation is troublesome (Interview, FN Tragač). However, very popular morning programmes serve to spread propaganda, misinformation, and various kinds of deception:

Morning programmes are the most toxic (Interview, CRTA).

Although the political agenda and propaganda of the ruling party is behind much disinformation and biased reporting on mainstream (pro-regime) media, it does not mean that there is no disinformation in the oppositional media. However, those media are significantly more professional in their work (Interview, CRTA).

Besides tabloids and pro-regime mainstream media, the respondents see Facebook (especially Facebook groups) as a source of disinformation. Facebook is also seen as an important channel of spread for various forms of misinformation, fake news and hate speech. An example is the “Stop Migrants, Stop Censorship” Facebook group, with more than 300,000 members. Its backbone are far right organisations with whom the page is affiliated: “I believe that even if the administrators of the group, with the best of intentions, aimed to remove all inaccurate content, they would not be able to do so because of its sheer volume ” (Interview, FN Tragač). Unfortunately, according to the opinion of the respondent from the fact checking organisation Tragač, Facebook does not sanction these groups enough, not because it supports freedom of speech and wants to leave space to discuss topics that are of interest, but rather because it overlooks those groups that mobilise large numbers of users on Facebook (Interview, FN TRAGAČ).

Another possible reason for creating and spreading fake news is financial gain. Clickbait websites are mentioned by the respondents, but as significantly less important creators of disinformation in Serbia: “We have little of that, our market is too small” (Interview, Raskrinkavanje). Phantom sites appear from time to time, spread misinformation and count on being able to make money on clicks and through Google AdSense. An example is the website “What's New”, which existed for only a few months and published daily false news about the deaths of celebrities. That site managed to gain visibility and a relatively large audience by cooperating with various Facebook pages. Those few months of existence were enough for the website creators to earn some money through Google AdSense (Interview, FN Tragač).

Apart from monetary reasons and political gain, part of this misinformation emerges due to the inherent characteristics of online journalism and the malpractice of “copy-pasting” from unchecked websites: “A journalist who works on a portal and who has to publish 20 or 30 articles per day, is not able to check all the information. Here, the truth is secondary, while productivity is primary – to be as productive as possible, and to provoke as many clicks as possible” (Interview, FN Tragač). The analysis conducted by FN Tragač shows that very often, online journalists are inexperienced and are not fluent enough in English to be able to translate certain content in the right way, or to understand the context of events they report on.

Finally, one of the originators of disinformation in Serbia is individual sources such as blogs. The inaccurate blog content sometimes goes viral, leading to the spread of false news and conspiracy theories. Under pressure to constantly create new content, traditional media sometimes uncritically take over this content and spread it further, thus galvanising their negative impact (Interview, Press Council). However, according to the respondents, this source of misinformation is significantly less important compared to misinformation and propaganda spread by the coalition of ruling structures and their media, which have a great impact on public opinion in Serbia.

5. “Infodemics”: Effects of the pandemic

During “regular” times, most people can afford being on an “information diet”, abstaining from media content for longer periods of time. However, during times of crisis, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, easy access to timely and high-quality information becomes paramount: “Experience shows that in the times of crisis, people return to traditional media. These are moments when traditional media gain incredible readership and viewership... I have talked to colleagues from the Guardian, the BBC, the New York Times, and they have all had the same experience” (Interview, RTS).

It could also be argued that the “tsunami” effect has occurred, meaning that all media outlets gain more audience, but as we shall see, only the alternative media in Serbia have managed to maintain the increased interest and trust. This rather unexpected occurrence can be explained by the fact that one segment of the audience, in search of valid information in times of crisis, “discovered” alternative media, and in some way understood the value of that information, which contributed to the continued consummation of information from those media outlets. In addition, a general lack of trust in mainstream media contributed to the popularity of alternative sources of information.

In the context of the pandemic, the media acted as a key intermediary between public authorities, experts and citizens. During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and especially during the lockdown, citizens received most information from the media. Besides being the primary source of information, traditional media, but also the Internet, became sources of education and guidance for citizens. However, the traditional media in Serbia did not use the opportunity that emerged during the pandemic to restore the dwindling trust. The pandemic required the media to be even more professional and to employ even greater degrees of information verification. However, this did not happen (Interview, CLIO).

Respondents believe that the pandemic only had a temporary effect on the increase of trust in traditional media: “As soon as the initial wave of the pandemic passed, things returned to normal, so there has been no long-term effect on trust in traditional media” (Interview, FN Tragač). Instead of regaining citizens’ trust, traditional media fell prey to the transmission of unverified information that circulated on social media, as well as to propaganda by the ruling party. Simply put, it was a missed opportunity.

According to most of our respondents, public officials played a significant role in spreading misinformation regarding the corona virus, due to their poor levels of communication with the public at that critical time. At the beginning of the disease outbreak, public officials and some epidemiologists denied the severity of the threat, describing the new virus as “the funniest in history” and “simply an ordinary flu”. However, very quickly, a state of emergency was declared followed by gloomy predictions of the President Aleksandar Vučić that “we will not have enough cemeteries to bury the dead”. In just one month, the government had drastically changed its attitude towards the virus, eventually imposing an extremely strict lockdown, leaving the public in a state of shock.

Although representatives of the relevant medical institutions were instructed to pass the epidemic exclusively to the Crisis Team (not to the press), a substantial number appeared in pro-governmental tabloids. The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) discovered that the government had lied to the public about the numbers of infected and deceased from COVID-19. The reason was the 2020 elections which could not be held as planned. During the two years of the pandemic, officials made many contradictory statements, and the whole situation was further complicated by the fact that the pandemic was used for political purposes:

“Information about the pandemic was adjusted in accordance with political interests, which led to distrust in institutions, distrust in experts, and distrust in the media. The result is that citizens have lost confidence in official sources and turned to alternative channels” (Interview, Istinomer).

The COVID-19 pandemic created an “information chaos” or “infodemics” – a dramatic increase in the circulation of various kinds of disinformation worldwide, Serbia being no exception. The most prominent was pseudo-scientific information and conspiracy theories (see, for example: Turčilo, 2021). The pandemic brought to a new level the manipulation of public opinion and the spread of misinformation throughout the world (Interview, Istinomer). The reason for this was, in part, that “...it is easier to manipulate someone who who fears for their life” (Interview, Ministarstvo kulture), “when people are isolated” (Interview, CRTA) and when “everyone is facing something dangerous and unknown to them, and who are in need of information” (Interview, N1). Scientists and experts needed time to come out with reliable data and appropriate recommendations. This vacuum opened up space for the proliferation of all sorts of inaccurate information based on conspiracy theories and pseudo-science. Pseudoscientific quick “solutions”, advice and recipes were spread fast via Facebook Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp, and similar apps, and sometimes even appeared in the mainstream media (Turčilo, 2021: 43). Through these channels, the so-called first-hand information was spread: “I know someone who works in a Clinical Centre, or I know someone from the ruling party, or I know someone from the Crisis Team, so here is some information hidden from the public” (Interview, FN Tragač).

Most of the conspiracy theories and pandemic-related misinformation that circulated in Serbia were not created in the domestic public space, but came from abroad (international and regional sources). Thus, the circulation of misinformation is present all over the world, and then adapted to a certain local context with an accompanying narrative (Interview, Istinomer).

Tabloids in Serbia played a significant role in spreading various misinformation during the pandemic (Interview, N1). Although, in general, they were in line with what the state representatives proclaimed, such as respect for COVID-19 measures, vaccinations, etc., they could not resist some media manipulations (e.g. spreading anti-vaccination positions) on which they could profit (Interview, Raskrinkavanje).

In addition to government representatives and tabloids, respondents pointed out that disinformation about the corona virus often came from certain right-wing groups and online movements, both internationally and locally (Interview, Istinomer). However, what the respondents suggest is that in Serbia, the state and the government in conjunction with the tabloids were a much stronger generator of disinformation regarding the pandemic than heterogeneous factors on social networks. In this regard, the responsibility lies much more with the representatives of official institutions who should provide credible information and consistent messages, thus building trust with citizens who then have no need to look for alternative sources of information on obscure webpages and various completely unverified and unreliable sources on social networks (Interview, Istinomer).

When it comes to the potential positive effects of the pandemic, respondents see them primarily as creating a broader movement that advocates the importance of both media literacy and scientific literacy. However, the level of media and scientific literacy of the Serbian population is assessed by respondents as very low: “I think that the pandemic made things worse, but it also exposed them - it showed where we stand with regards to the media and digital literacy” (Interview, Raskrinkavanje). In this regard, the expectations of the respondents are not overly optimistic:

During the pandemic, people were willing to believe anything, and at the end of the day, the biggest consequence is that no one trusts in anything anymore (Interview, Raskrinkavanje).

6. Counter-strategies

The only way to fight disinformation is education (Interview, CRTA).

As the main strategies against the spread of disinformation in traditional and new media, the respondents have mentioned the following: introduction/continuation of civil society fact-checking projects; introduction/continuation of civil society media literacy projects and initiatives; introduction of media literacy curricula in formal education; creation/continuation of state supported media literacy programmes; workshops and trainings for different stakeholders (journalists, young people, educators, etc.); creation and dissemination of high-quality literature on the topic. As will be demonstrated, no significant differences were found in proposed approaches to combat disinformation between different groups of respondents (journalists, the government, civil society). The only slight difference was in the perception of the role that the state should play in the process:

An important countermeasure is the development of media and digital literacy through formal and informal education. And not only for citizens, but also for those who create media content, so that the communication between the two could be better. In addition, it would reduce mistrust and scepticism towards the media, on the one hand, but also reduce the negative influence of disinformation, stereotypes and prejudices on the general public, on the other, and help to develop a healthy critical attitude towards media content (Interview, Ministry of Culture).

The respondents believe that all relevant stakeholders (government [national/EU], economy, civil society, education, journalist) should engage in combating disinformation. Given the context of an autocratic regime, and considerably reduced freedom of speech in Serbia, the respondents (especially journalists and representatives of the fact-checking organisations) express reluctance towards the state regulation of the Internet. Although this media should be regulated to some extent, there is a considerable risk of over-regulation by the state and further restrictions to the freedom of speech. It should be noted that within the context of the state capture of the traditional media in Serbia, the Internet is one of the rare media channels where the influence of the state is rather limited.

The general aim of fact-checking projects is to recognise manipulation in the media in order to enable the public to resist it. Given the significant proliferation of unverified information circulating on the public space, on the one hand, and the relatively low level of media literacy in Serbia, the investigative and educational work of fact-checking organisations is considered as tremendously important by the respondents, especially in crisis situations such is the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact-checking organisations in Serbia are mostly focused on the local context and regional affairs, but cooperate with European and international organisations.

The respondents believe that the development of media literacy is important for all citizens, but especially for young people – the so-called “digital generations”. Therefore, they are the primary target audience of the media literacy programmes (workshops, educational programmes, campaigns, etc.):

Young people do not particularly follow or trust traditional media. However, they trust forums, influencers, and other information gathered from social media. They also trust Viber groups, where peer to peer influence is strong. In that sense, they believe in a great deal of unverified sources and information. In the workshops with young people, we saw that most often they consume five media with the same ownership structure, and do not know that their information centre is the same. They don't recognise when a news item was copy-pasted and

just Google translated. They do not understand what is connected with what, how search engines work and what information bubbles are (Interview, Ministry of Culture).

The list of the most relevant fact-checking organisations in Serbia, and the links to their websites and online campaigns/reports/projects where such counter strategies are developed, is outlined below:

1. Istinomer

Istinomer is a fact-checking programme initiated by the non-profit organisation CRTA. Istinomer engages in the evaluation of statements by public officials and politicians, as well as through the analysis of important social and economic issues. Since July 2020, Istinomer has been the official partner of Facebook for Serbia in combating misinformation on this social network. Istinomer checks content on a daily basis and scans for fake news and information in the Serbian language that is published on Facebook. Istinomer is run by a team of journalists, who collect and build a database of statements of public figures, analyse and compare those statements, evaluate them according to the criteria of truthfulness, consistency and fulfilment of promises. Every assessment given by a journalist is additionally checked by another journalist, journalist-editor and editor of Istinomer. In certain situations, Istinomer launches initiatives seeking responsibility for the publicly spoken word in Serbia. Istinomer cooperates with regional networks that conduct fact-checking programmes of social networks, considering that this information circulates regionally (similar languages).

Relevant links:

<https://www.istinomer.rs>

<https://crt.rs>

<https://www.istinomer.rs/facebook-provere/>

<https://www.istinomer.rs/izjava/>

2. Fake News tragač (Fake News Tracker)

Fake News tragač is a fact-checking project created with the intention of fighting disinformation in the media that publish content in the Serbian language. Fake News Tragač is the result of the “De-bunking Disinformation” project implemented by the Novi Sad School of Journalism (Novosadska novinarska škola) in cooperation with the media development organisation, Transitions Online from Prague. The Novi Sad School of Journalism is a civil society organisation that deals with the development and professionalisation of the media sphere in Serbia and its wider region.

The Fake News tragač website contains analyses of misinformation published in domestic and foreign media (when the topic is related to Serbia). In addition to the analysis, an online course "Deconstruct Yourself" is available on the site, which serves as a guide and offers tools for detailed deconstruction of the news that act as potential misinformation. Citizens can report suspicious news via a feedback form available on the "Report Fake News" webpage.

In addition to the above, Fake News tragač organises training for journalists, journalism students, educators and students. In addition, they cooperate with foreign institutions. They will soon launch a project with Minecraft, a gamification project on the topic of media literacy and the fight against misinformation, whose primary users will be young people. In addition, an installation is planned for the summer 2022 in Novi Sad, which will last a month, a combination of a maze in public space

and an escape room where people will overcome certain obstacles based on fact-checking techniques. The focus of their work is in Serbia, but they cooperate with similar regional organisations.

Relevant links:

<https://fakenews.rs>
<https://fakenews.rs/category/dekonstruisite-sami-kurs/>
<https://fakenews.rs/category/fake-news/>
<https://fakenews.rs/prijavi-laznu-vest/>
<https://fakenews.rs/category/studije/>
<https://novinarska-skola.org.rs/sr/>

3. Raskrinkavanje

Raskrinkavanje is a project of the KRIK portal, which has been dealing with exposing crime and corruption for several years. Raskrinkavanje engages in debunking false and unverified news, as well as various forms of violations of rules of the journalistic profession, which should ensure independent, objective and true delivery of information to the Serbian public. They also monitor which media are the most frequent recipients of state aid (budget funding) and how this affects their work. They have developed a methodology to fight against fake news together with colleagues from the Raskrinkavanje.ba portal from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and journalists from other countries in the region have also joined the project (Raskrinkavanje.me from Montenegro, Razkrinkavanje from Slovenia, Fake News Tragač from Novi Sad and Faktograf from Croatia). Together with these organisations, they have founded a regional network of media that detect fake news - SEE Check.

Relevant links:

<https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/index.php>
<https://www.krik.rs>
<https://seecheck.org>
<https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/RaskrikavanjeMethodology.pdf>
<https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/analize.php>
<https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/lista.php>

Finally, it should be noted that fact checking changed somewhat during the pandemic. As respondents noticed, this crisis emphasised the need for developing a synchronised global strategy to combat the world-wide circulation of disinformation. Moreover, in the pandemic context, fact checking became even more important since it enabled audiences to objectively view the situation in order to formulate an adequate response, and to protect themselves.

7. Conclusion

Distrust in the media and journalism is a part of a syndrome of general distrust in institutions that is emblematic of present-day Serbian society.

Given the European context, the specificity of Serbia is that, in relation to Western countries, where misinformation is generated mostly on social networks and anonymous websites, the mainstream Serbian media generates most of the misinformation.

Public authorities, together with the media under their control, create propaganda material aimed at shaping public opinion. In the process, a large number of different forms of misinformation are created. In other words, it is a joint venture of state captured media and public officials/ ruling party, where the interest of media lies in state funding and the interest of the ruling party is to create a political climate and public opinion that will preserve its power. The majority of media simply follows the imposed narrative because they are too weak to resist. Besides strong financial control over legacy media and tabloids, officials of the ruling political party and Government often manifest very hostile behaviour against independent media and their journalists. This observation can be found in a recent European Commission Accession Report on Serbia: “However, verbal attacks against journalists by high-level officials continued, and cases of threats and violence remain a concern. Most media associations withdrew from the group on the safety of journalists in March 2021, citing hate speech and smear campaigns against journalists and civil society representatives, including by the head of the ruling party caucus in Parliament. These verbal attacks in Parliament took place even after a code of conduct was adopted in December 2020. The overall environment for exercising freedom of expression without hindrance still needs to be further strengthened in practice” (EC, 2021, p.5).

The result of all these processes is the spread of disinformation and a marked decline in trust in media, especially traditional media.

In comparison to other EU countries, in Serbia the mechanisms and systems that prevent the spread of fake news and disinformation are significantly less developed (Interview, CLIO). Only a few independent media that are under immense pressure from the powerholders, keep their professional integrity and ask difficult questions, showing alternative views and perspectives (Interview, N1).

The respondents see the Ukraine crisis as one of the greatest challenges for journalism in Serbia, given the ambiguous position of Serbia regarding this armed conflict.

Apart from this external threat, there are significant internal obstacles for effective dealing with the spread of disinformation in the media. The first and most important is the lack of trust in traditional media that are in the service of political interests, acting as propagandists, instead of being independent and unbiased. This is part of a larger syndrome of rising autocracy (stabilitocracy) and state/media capture in Serbia.

Another internal challenge stressed by the respondents is the undeveloped media literacy that should be enhanced through various programmes – both state-sponsored (public education) and organised by civil society institutions (trainings, campaigns, etc.).

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<https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2022/02/25/media-censorship-in-serbia-under-president-vucic/>

List of respondents

1. Public broadcasting (2 interviews)	
Radio televizija Srbije (RTS) - Serbia's public broadcaster	N1 – exclusive CNN news channel associate
2. Professional journalism (2 interviews)	
Journalist from Radio Beograd –Radio broadcasting company	Journalist from Press Council (Savet za štampu) – press self-regulatory body
3. Non-profit, independent journalism projects (2 interviews)	
Fake News Tragač – fact-checking project	Istinomer – fact-checking project
4. Civil society and NGOs (2 interviews)	
CRTA – civil society organisation	Clio – publishing house
5. Local and national government and EU level projects (2 interviews)	
Raskrinkavanje – fact-checking project	Ministry of Culture and Information

Awareness of Fake News and Counter-strategies: Some Concluding Remarks

Hans-Jörg Trenz

1. Introduction

Our EnTrust WP4 report has thus far shed light on two different aspects of the relationship between trust and the media. In Part 1, and in line with Task 4.1: Identification and ranking of main (dis)trust mediators, we have collected comparative insights from existing opinion polls (European and national) regarding how people find different types of media organisations and journalism trustworthy (trust in the media). Comparing survey data over a ten-year period, we found that trust in the media is generally declining, but that there are, nevertheless, huge country differences between low trusting (Greece and Serbia) and high trusting countries (Denmark and German) and, in particular, sectoral differences between different types of media (low and rapidly declining trust in online and social media, but relatively stable trust in public broadcasting and broadsheet newspapers). We also found that this general trend of a slow decline in trust was reversed during the Covid-19 pandemic, with rising levels of trust, especially in public broadcasting and journalism. In Part 2 of the report, and in line with Task 4.2: Dynamics of public trust contestation, we designed a research tool for the standardised content analysis of the news media as an arena of trust contestation (trust through the media). Our comparative analysis showed that expressions of trust and distrust in different types of trust receivers (government, science and the economy) were relatively balanced in Covid-19 related news coverage. While disinformation, conspiracies and categorical expressions of distrust against science and government became marginalised in the news media, they nevertheless gained in salience in Facebook news commenting forums.

In this part of the report, and in line with Task 4.3: Awareness of fake news and counter-strategies, we focus on particular types of trust contestation that are conducive to polarisation: fake news and the extent to which disinformation is created and strategically launched as an instrument to create distrust in political representatives and democracy, expertise and science. As in the previous studies, we put particular emphasis on the pandemic, but also considered long-term and country-specific developments in the salience of disinformation and the role of media. Through ten in-depth interviews per country with journalists, and public authorities involved in fact-checking projects at local, national and European level, we traced the originators of fake news in public debates, the conditions for their spread and their resonance in public debates. All interviews were conducted during the period January to May, 2022. The common interview guideline was built with a focus on the experiences of the pandemic, and invited respondents to reflect on the magnitude of the problem of disinformation and successful counter-strategies. With the war in Ukraine, a different agenda was set that certainly impacted on the responses of our experts, even though the interview schedule was not adapted to this new situation. Based on these expert opinions, we compared good practices to combat fake news and to deal with ethical questions of the trustworthiness of information. Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed by national teams.

The information and findings of WP4 Task 4.3 are gathered in national reports prepared by each beneficiary. They were used by the WP coordinator to collect good practices of 'enlightened trust' building and measures to control fake news with constructive recommendations for journalists,

public communication managers and social media providers. These good practices and recommendations are collected in the manual *Communicating evidence-based policy and building trust in science and government*. The following summarises some of the main findings from the national report.

2. Identification of the problem of disinformation

The challenge of misinformation and ‘fake news’ is a shared horizon of our expert respondents, who despite different country contexts, apply similar problem-definitions and rely on shared data to confine the problem and define counter-strategies. Context-bound problem definitions or explanatory frameworks that could reflect national particularities of the post-truth challenge seem to matter little. Instead, a common understanding of the ‘nature of the challenge’ is developed, which travels across country and context. The definitions and problem identifications provided by the experts are largely in line with, or even derive from, the scientific literature. Our respondents are informed experts, well informed about the scientific debates, make frequent cross-references and exchange the latest insights and definitions among themselves, critically testing out their suitability for field work. They also frequently relate to relevant documents and definitions provided by international institutions, such as the European Union, Council of Europe, or UNESCO. There is thus an international epistemic community that shares similar content as a common reference point for national and local action.

Our respondents further speak as media experts with often detailed knowledge about media infrastructure and functioning. They are well-versed on scholarly knowledge from media studies about media selection biases or media effects. Academic knowledge and practitioner knowledge thus partly overlap.

Civil society and government experts help to contextualise the problem of disinformation from an interdisciplinary and transnational-European perspective. Many would emphasise the historical dimension of the so-called ‘fake news phenomenon’, on the one hand, pointing out the continuity of misinformation as part of media history, but, on the other hand, still dramatising by pointing at recent increases and new dynamics of the spread of fake news as related to digital news formats, the abolition of the filters of news selection by professional journalists, and the multiplication of producers of news (user-generated news).

The term ‘fake news’ is not used by experts, and is often even rejected: On the one hand, they argue that the term “fake news” has become highly politicised, and is also misused by populists, typically far-right political actors and groups (most prominently, Donald Trump, but also many examples of political actors in their local and national contexts) to accuse legacy media of false reporting and manipulation, and to defame true, but inconvenient information. On the other hand, “fake news” is considered too vague and dazzling and, to some extent, inappropriate a concept to describe the problem.

Many respondents also point to the subtle and often not objectifiable way disinformation works. As such, it is often not explicit as a story that is clear fantasy, but becomes an element of framing in the news, or emotional language that questions established truth in more subtle ways. The peril of disinformation lies in the way ‘alternative facts’ are often combined with the stirring of strong emotions that evoke feelings of existential threat, or deep crisis.

Despite this long-term perspective and contextualisation of the problem, experts would not call the so-called ‘fake news phenomenon’ a hype, but agree on the urgency and novelty of the phenomenon as a substantial threat to democracy. The novelty is seen in the intentional use of disinformation as a strategy of political mobilisation by particular groups of actors, who deliberately deviate from the truth. For that purpose, a distinction is drawn by most of our respondents between misinformation (non-intentional) and disinformation (intentional). By upholding such a distinction, they can follow different strategies of ascribing responsibility, the first relating to media malfunctions (e.g. selection biases of news), the latter to personal ascriptions of responsibility by identifying and also naming the ‘enemies of democracy’. Among those ‘enemies’, frequent mention is made of external actors (such as Russia), but also internal, such as populist leaders and parties.

Underlying the problem definition of ‘disinformation is sometimes the belief in the possibility of objectivity of news in the sense that a neat line of distinction can be drawn between propaganda and news. The objectivity of news is often seen as a question of political will. Journalists can ponder all views and disclose facts, if they only show sufficient efforts and apply the rules and ethical standards of proper journalistic work. The same holds for political actors who are accused of deliberately cheating and manipulating. Our experts interviewed thus see themselves as change agents who fight for ethical rules and quality journalism. In this role, they do not consider more structural or system definitions of the ‘post-truth age, as linked to new epistemic uncertainty or complexity. Journalists and other disseminators of disinformation are not ‘victimised’ as working under ‘system constraints’, or idealised as conducting a lost battle for the (impossible) truth. The disseminators of post-truth are seen as perpetrators whose misbehaviour can and should be corrected.

3. Trust in news and journalism

Experts across country also agree in their perceptions of (dis)trust, pointing to various symptoms of a general decline in trust in news and journalism in their countries and in Europe, which they see as causally related to the spread of disinformation. The loss of trust in the news is seen as causally related to the loss of trust in government and science. It is also seen as a major symptom of a crisis of democracy: if people no longer trust in news and journalism, they will also lose trust in democracy.

The reasons for this loss of trust are mainly ascribed to media-external factors, and not to internal malfunctions of the media. As media professionals, experts often express concern about disinformation campaigns that are targeted to undermine trust in the media and in the work of professional journalism. Apart from such external manipulators, social media platforms are also to blame for undercutting trust in journalism, since their algorithms select alternative news over professional news.

The contestation of trust is held accountable for the polarisation of society. Trusting and distrusting citizens are thus seen as fundamentally opposed treating each other as enemies. Such an antagonistic perspective of trust and distrust leaves little room for reflection about the potential benefits of distrust for democracy. The idea that distrust can be beneficial, therefore, remains hypothetical. Several respondents, especially from civil society, but less so from established journalism, acknowledge that distrust in the news might also be beneficial if it can provide constructive critique, but is detrimental when it leads to the feeling of powerlessness and restrains people from participating in democratic processes. In such a way, the fact that distrust can be beneficial against dogmatic trust and truth, and can help protesters to develop a critical mindset, is still generally held as valid, but does not apply to the concrete case of anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown protests. Under

the current condition of media polarisation, most experts categorically deny the possibility of beneficial effects of distrust, and point instead to their diagnosis of the cementation of fundamental distrust of parts of the population as a symptom of radicalisation and post-democracy.

While disseminators of disinformation and conspiracies are treated as transgressors, their followers are often seen as victims. It is pointed out that some groups, especially young and elderly people, are more vulnerable to the exposure of disinformation, and therefore in need of protection. This paternalistic attitude of the experts excludes the possibility of treating them as equals in the debate, or paying respect to their arguments

In countries with high risk of fake news exposure, such as Serbia and Greece, there is agreement among the respondents that the salience of the problem is related mainly to the malfunctioning of traditional media. As a matter of fact, in both countries, trust in legacy media and public broadcasting is found to be lowest. There is thus a direct relationship between the performance of legacy media and the loss of trust. Unregulated and purely market-driven media spaces create the conditions for the salience of fake news. In Greece, legacy media and public broadcasting are accused of doing nothing against disinformation; in Serbia, government controlled public broadcaster is even accused of being the main promoter of disinformation. In Poland, as well, infringement on the independence of news, partly by government and partly by powerful economic interests, have reportedly undermined trust in the media.

4. Originators of fake news

In the identification of the originators of fake news in their countries, the experts interviewed build on different causalities;

- 1) SNS and algorithms
- 2) External manipulators, such as Russian trolls
- 3) Journalists
- 4) Audiences and their personal needs
- 5) Audiences and their bad news habits

What is interesting is how causalities are built around these different explanatory factors, and how one causality is used to exclude another. Ascriptions of responsibility shift between news producers and audiences. For instance, when algorithms and manipulators explain fake news, journalists are exculpated. When fake news is explained by audience preferences for sensationalism and entertainment, the algorithms are put into perspective.

Nevertheless, there is a tendency to exculpate journalism as originators of disinformation. Many of the experts operate within the media system, and emphasise the good work of brave journalists that, even so, is insufficient to combat the fake news avalanche. Most experts further tend to be critical of government, and point out how misinformation often originates in government and with power holders, either as an instrument of foreign policy and state propaganda (as in the case of Russia) or, as an instrument of domestic politics, especially in Serbia, where the government is recognised as a major source of misinformation.

5. Effects of the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine are seen as a breaking point in the post-truth debate. On the one hand, they have carried disinformation and conspiracies to the extreme, and have radicalised substantial parts of the population. On the other hand, they are seen as a chance to restore trust in journalism and the media.

It is generally acknowledged that disinformation was present before the pandemic; still, there is a chain of events, not only related to the pandemic, but also to the war with Russia, that changed the quantity and quality of disinformation. The idea of the pandemic as an infodemic assumes a double meaning here: On the one hand, experts point out the possibility of negative effects emanating from an overflow of facts and information indicates the existence of an infodemic. On the other hand, the various originators of disinformation are made responsible for the infodemic, those who exploit the epistemic uncertainty during the pandemic for their own purposes. Thus, there is general agreement about the presence of fake news as a problem during the pandemic, but not about who the originators of fake news are. Often this question of who generates fake news becomes, in itself, answered through rumour or false information. The originators are seen as externals, 'out of control', 'unknown', and 'anonymous forces'. In other words, there is a general lack of knowledge about the origins and potential effects of disinformation during the pandemic.

The expert opinion of trust being challenged during the pandemic is also partly contradicted by the results of the opinion polls reported in Part 1, which show that trust levels in news and journalism were generally on the rise during the pandemic. Experts nevertheless saw the pandemic as a lost opportunity to rebuild trust in the media, and they blame the news organisations and, in particular, public broadcasting, for not seizing the moment. Even in such a critical moment, news media remained sensationalist and reported conspiracies and disinformation for economic gain, without acting in the common good. A commercial interest perspective thus prevailed instead of a common good orientation during the pandemic.

6. Counter-strategies

Our national reports provide a useful list of counter measures taken by civil society, media and government during the pandemic to combat disinformation. Part of this information has been used by EnTrust to provide a manual for communicating evidence-based policy and trust building in science and government. In this summary, we therefore only point out the difficult balance between self-regulation and state responsibilities. Despite the different solutions found in various countries, experts from various background agree on the limits of self-regulation, which have proven insufficient over the last years to protect media users from the potential harm of disinformation. Instead, there is a need for state regulation and hard law to bring unregulated media markets under control. This includes the need for national legislation, such as Germany's Network Enforcement Act, and the expansion of EU law, or even the creation of supranational control bodies as the only effective tool to combat a multifaceted and international phenomenon. The failure or insufficiencies of existing countermeasures is thus explained with their limited reach. Local action always needs to be coupled with global enforcement for efficiently combatting world-wide circulation of disinformation.

Counter measures do not only depend on economic will, but also on resources. In countries like Greece and Serbia, our informants report the most difficulties when attempting to implement efficient counter measures. There is partially a lack of political will, but even more so, a lack of available

infrastructure and resources that could be used to combat disinformation. Countries with an economically deprived media system and with a dismantled public broadcasting are thus not only the most vulnerable to exposure to disinformation, they are also the least likely to take counter measures, even though there is a general problem awareness in these countries, which, as a consequence, contributes to the further erosion of trust in journalism.

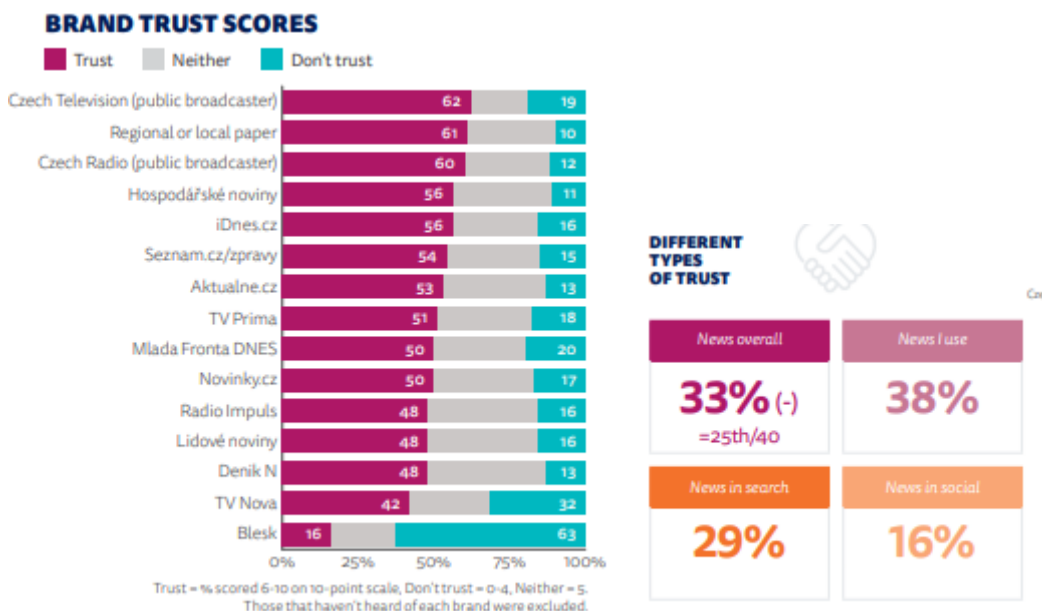
In parts, states sought collaboration with social media platforms and companies. Promoting self-regulation contributed to the implementation of some counter measures by social media platforms, such as the fact-checking mechanism implemented by Facebook during the pandemic. In broader terms, the self-regulation approach was, however, only modestly successful indicating that self-regulation has rather failed as an adequate means of solution. Moreover, some steps have been taken towards co-regulation enabling governments to request the removal of false or harmful content from online platforms and to implement a user-friendly internal complaint handling system. Yet, such short-term measures are rather geared to tackle the symptoms but not the core of the problem. In the end, combatting disinformation requires long-term planning and investment, such as efforts to increase the general level of a population's media literacy. As representatives of civil society and media, experts see here their own responsibility to collaborate with state authorities in education and awareness raising. Overall, there is tentative optimism regarding the instrumentality of short-term and long-term measures. Disinformation, after all, is not seen as a natural disaster, but prevention is possible through concerted action by state, media and civil society.

ANNEX 1 – Country specific background information

Czech Republic

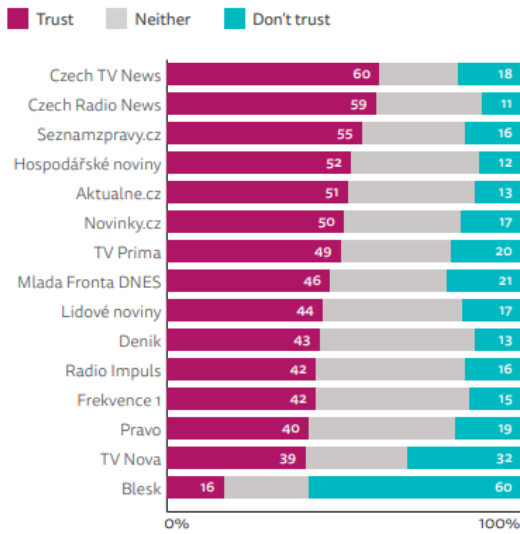
1) Which were the most trusted media for information in 2020/2021?

According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, the most trusted media in 2020 were public broadcasters (Czech Television and Czech Radio) and local and regional newspapers (trusted by 60% or more participants). They were followed by traditional newspapers (e.g., Hospodářské noviny, Mladá fronta DNES), online news sites (iDnes.cz, Seznam.cz, Aktualne.cz, Novinky.cz) and a commercial TV station (TV Prima), with trust rates between 50-59%. The least trusted sources were tabloids (Blesk). There were only negligible changes in this overall pattern in 2021. Both public broadcasters remained the most trusted (around 60%; regional and local newspapers were not included in 2021), while the tabloid remained the least trusted. Overall, trust in news in 2020/2021 was 33% and 36%, respectively. Trust in social media for news was very low (16% and 17%, respectively).

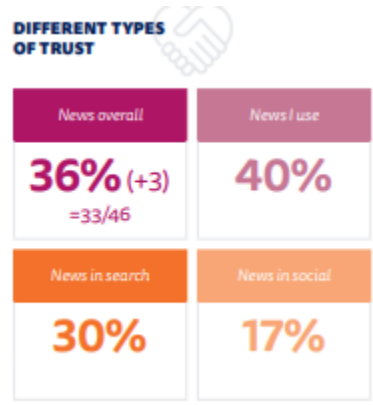


Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020

BRAND TRUST SCORES



Trust = % scored 6-10 on 10-point scale. Don't trust = 0-4, Neither = 5. Those that haven't heard of each brand were excluded. Only the above brands were included in the survey so should not be treated as a list of the most trusted brands.



Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021

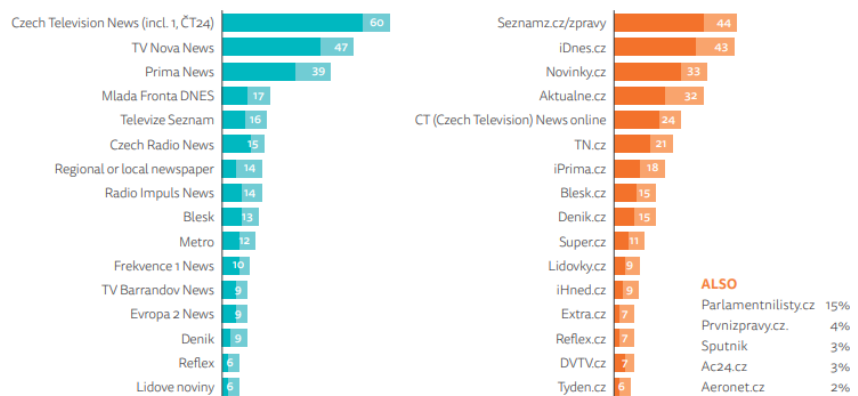
2) Which were the most used media for information in 2020/2021?

Based on the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, the most used offline sources of news in 2020 were TV stations, namely public service medium Czech Television (used weekly by 60% of people), followed by two commercial stations, TV Nova (47%) and TV Prima (39%). All types of newspapers (including tabloids) and radio were used significantly less (< 20%). A considerable number of people also used large online news sites (e.g., Seznam.cz – 44%, iDnes.cz – 43%, Novinky.cz – 33%, Aktualne.cz – 32%). The pattern remained very similar in 2021, preserving the leading position of Czech Television and other TV stations, supplemented by a new news TV station, CNN Prima News. Similarly, there were no changes among the leading online news sites.

WEEKLY REACH OFFLINE AND ONLINE

TOP BRANDS % Weekly usage

- Weekly use TV, radio & print
- More than 3 days per week TV, radio & print
- Weekly use online brands
- More than 3 days per week online brands

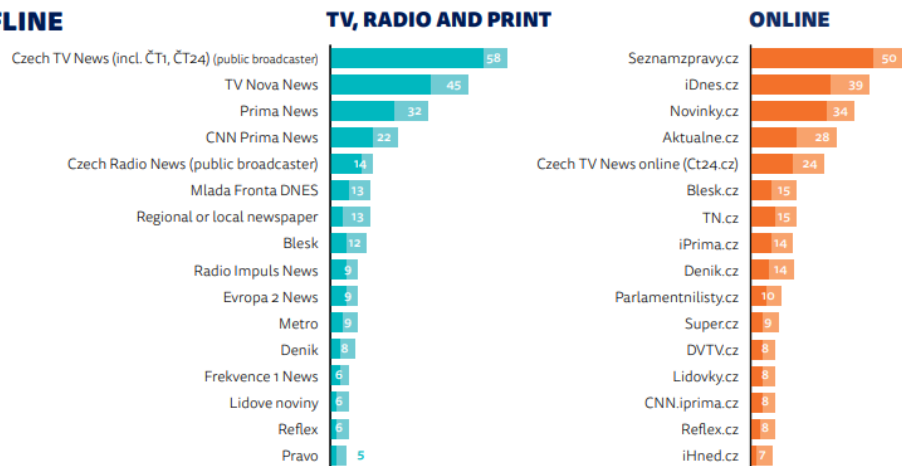


Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020

WEEKLY REACH OFFLINE AND ONLINE

TOP BRANDS

% Weekly usage



Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021

Looking at the different types of media, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report shows that TV was used for news by 76% of Czechs in 2020 and 74% in 2021, the Internet (with no further specifications, including social media) by 88% and 87%, respectively, social media as such by 49% and 50%, respectively, radio by 31% and 27%, respectively, and print by 24% and 19%, respectively.

The leading position of TV stations and online news sites, as the main sources of news in 2020, was confirmed by a study conducted by Masaryk University (Macková et al., 2021). Specifically, 76% of the adult population indicated following news on TV, with 67% on online news sites. Only 36% indicated radio and 22% printed newspapers; 34% indicated social networks as a source of news.

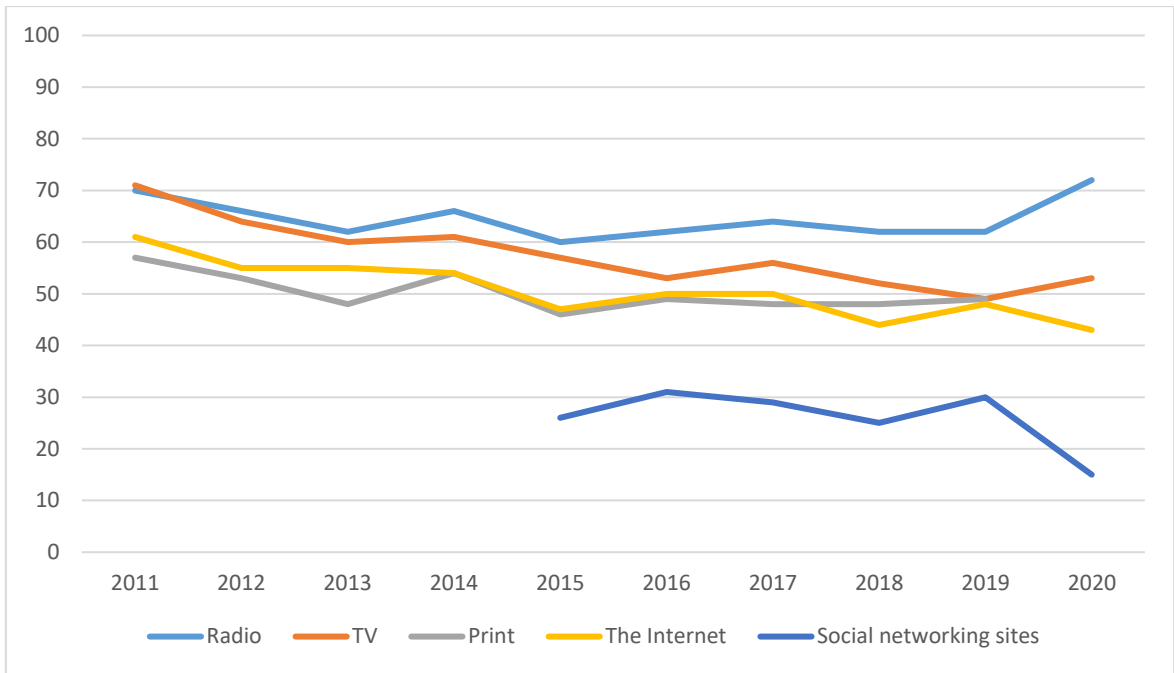
3) How are different trust levels distributed over different segments of media (print, radio, TV, social media, etc.)?

The Standard Eurobarometer 94 (winter 2020-2021) showed that radio was the most trusted segment of media (72%) in Czechia, while the Internet (43%) and specifically online social networks (15%) were the least trusted. Research by the CVVM (2022), focusing on trust in three segments of the media, confirmed that radio was the most trusted segment in 2021 (52%), while trust in television (46%) and print (39%) was lower.

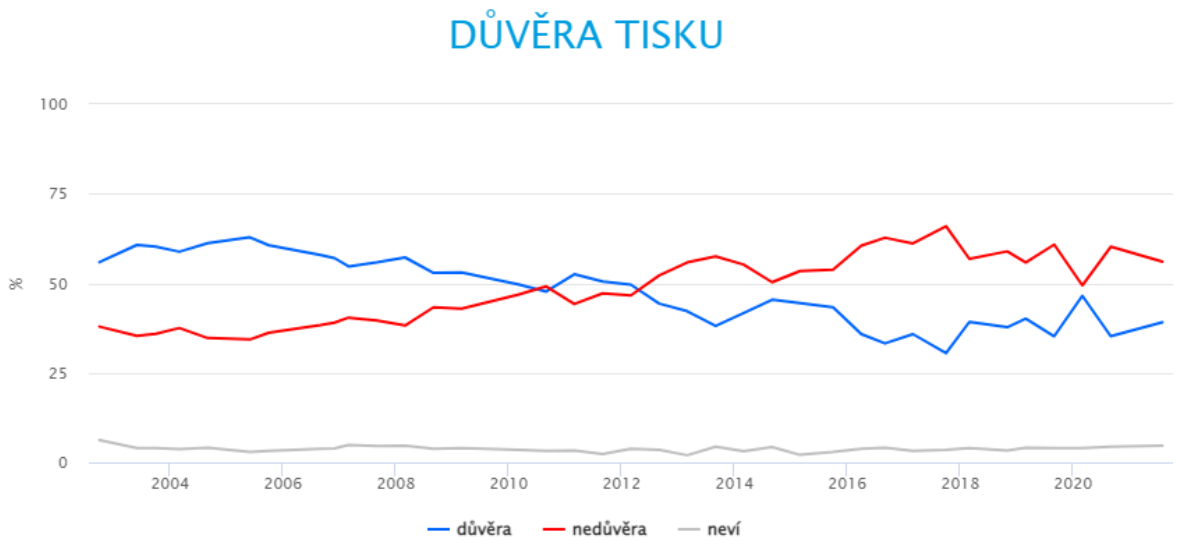
4) What trends in the development of trust emerge over the last 10 years?

Data from Eurobarometer showed that trust in radio has remained relatively high (above 60%) and stable over the last 10 years. Trust in TV, the level of which was similar to trust in radio at the beginning of the period, decreased to some degree, and the difference between both types of trust widened. Also, trust in the Internet seemed to have decreased over the period, whereas trust in print was rather stable (around 50%) for most of the time. Trust in social networking sites was clearly the lowest, and even decreased in 2020.

The research of the CVVM (2022) showed a constant decrease in trust in all types of media studied, that is, print, television and radio.

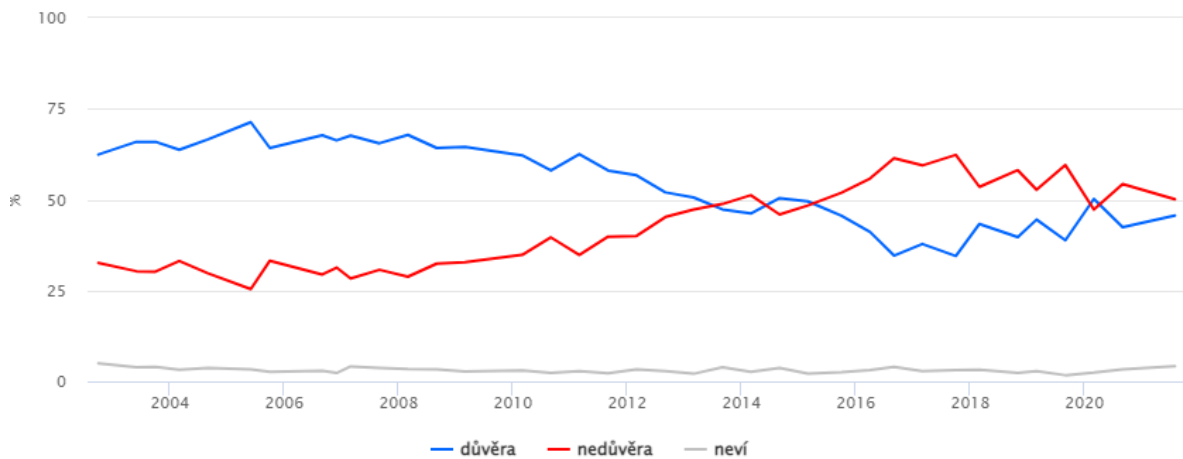


Source data: Standard Eurobarometer (76-94)



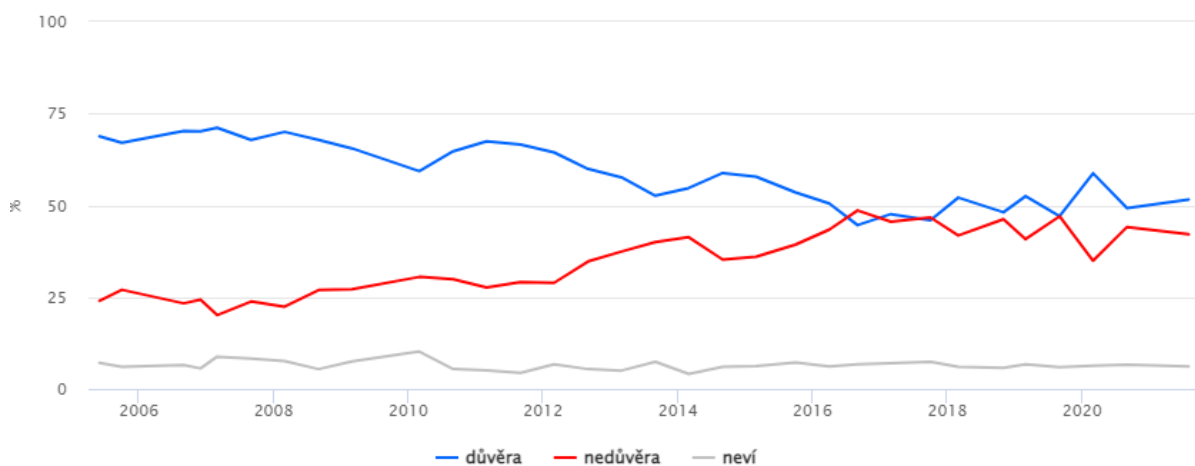
Source: CVVM (2022). Note: The figure shows **trust in print**. Blue = trust. Red = distrust. Grey = don't know.

DŮVĚRA TELEVIZI



Source: CVVM (2022). Note: The figure shows **trust in TV**. Blue = trust. Red = distrust. Grey = don't know.

DŮVĚRA RÁDIU



Source: CVVM (2022). Note: The figure shows **trust in radio**. Blue = trust. Red = distrust. Grey = don't know.

5) Can you observe significant increases in levels of trust/distrust in different segments of media during the pandemic?

The research of the CVVM (2022) suggested the same pattern for print, TV, and radio. According to this pattern, trust in these media segments increased at the very beginning of the pandemic (March 2020), but later regressed to their initial levels, as shown by data from September 2010 and August 2021 (see above). The Eurobarometer data corroborated the increase of trust in radio and TV between 2019 and 2020 (i.e., after the onset of the pandemic). At the same time, these data suggest decreases in trust in the Internet, and particularly in social networking sites between 2019 and 2020 (see above).

The trends in overall trust in news were rather inconclusive: the Reuters Institute Digital News Report showed no change in overall trust in news from 2019 to 2020, and a slight increase from 2020 to 2021 (from 33% to 36%). On the other hand, the study by Masaryk University (Macková et al., 2021), comparing data from winter 2019-2020 (i.e., shortly before the pandemic) and autumn, 2020, showed a slight decrease in levels of trust in journalists and professional media.

6) Which are the most trusted sources of information on Covid-19 health risks/vaccines?

The Flash Eurobarometer 494 suggested that the most trusted sources of information on Covid-19 vaccines in Czechia were health professionals, doctors, nurses, and pharmacists (trusted by 63% of people), followed by national health authorities (43%). Trust in the EU (16%), people around (16%), national government (10%), media (8%), local authorities (7%), or websites (6%) as information sources was considerably lower. The lowest trust was in online social networks (3%).

The results of the WHO (2021) report were consistent with these findings: health workers, researchers, and public health offices were the most trusted sources of information on Covid-19. Czech Television was trusted more as a source of information on Covid-19 than other television stations, and Czech Radio was trusted more than other radio stations. The least trusted sources of Covid-related information were social media, celebrities and social media influencers.

In the survey by STEM (2021), the most trusted sources of information on Covid-19 were doctors and nurses from hospitals treating Covid-19 (74%), family and close friends (74%), doctors from universities and epidemiologists (72%), and general practitioners (70%). Public broadcasters (Czech Television and Czech Radio) were trusted as sources of information on Covid-19 by 55% of people, but 18% indicated that they lost their trust in the information from these media outlets at the beginning of the pandemic. Less trusted sources were independent organisations focused on fact-checking (34%), friends' posts on social networks (32%), government (29%), and alternative media and blogs (17%).

According to the National Pandemic Alarm (2021) research, TV (62%) is the most frequently mentioned source of information on Covid-19 vaccines among Czechs. Other sources are online news sites (43%), social networking sites (34%), Ministry of Health official webpage (27%), family (25%), radio (23%), personal profiles of scientists, politicians, influencers etc. on social networking sites (21%), friends (20%), general practitioners (20%) or newspapers and journals (19%).

7) Was there an increase in demand for quality news and trusted news sources during the pandemic?

The most trusted news sources in Czechia are public service broadcasters, Czech Television and Czech Radio. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, the weekly use of Czech Television increased slightly from 56% in 2019 to 60% in 2020, and 58% in 2021. The use of Czech Radio did not change (15% in 2019 and 2020, 14% in 2021), although radio is the most trusted media segment in Czechia (see above).

The most trusted online news sites are iDnes.cz, Aktualne.cz, Seznam.cz, and Novinky.cz. As can be seen from the table, the weekly use of all four news sites increased from 2019 to 2020. No such trend appeared between 2020 and 2021 (two news sites were used less, one site more, and one without any considerable change).

(% weekly usage)	2019	2020	2021
<i>iDnes.cz</i>	37	43	39
<i>Aktualne.cz</i>	29	32	28
<i>Seznam.cz</i>	38	44	50
<i>Novinky.cz</i>	30	33	34

Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019-2021

8) What is the audience share of so-called ‘alternative news’ in your country? Has the risk of exposure to disinformation and fake news increased or decreased during the pandemic? Does this affect particular segments of the population?

According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, the biggest alternative news website in Czechia, Parlamentnilisty.cz had the same weekly usage in 2019 and 2020 (15%), and a somewhat smaller usage in 2021 (10%). Other bigger alternative news websites (Prvnizpravy.cz, Sputnik, Ac24.cz, Aeronet.cz) had practically unchanged usage between 2019 and 2020 (ranging from 2 to 5% per site). All these media can be understood as rather untrustworthy based on expert ratings (Parlamentnilisty.cz being in the fourth category out of six; Sputnik, Ac24.cz, and Aeronet.cz being in the sixth, the least trustworthy category; Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky, 2021).

The analysis by Štětka et al. (2021), employing data from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018-2020, split the Czech media audience into four groups based on their use of quality versus alternative (disinfo) news websites over the past week. As can be seen from the table, the number of readers of alternative media did not increase with the onset of the pandemic. Further analyses by Štětka et al. suggested that there were no age differences between high-quality and alternative media readers (although the group reading both types of media was somewhat older than other groups). Analysis of gender differences showed a considerably smaller proportion of women among users of alternative media. Surprisingly, the political self-identification of the readers of alternative media was left-wing rather than right-wing.

Table 1 Breakdown of respondents into readership categories by year ([Table view](#))

Category of news websites readers	2018	2019	2020
a-reader (at least 1 quality news websites; no disinfo news)	1017 (50%)	902 (45%)	992 (49%)
alt-reader (at least 1 disinfo news website; no quality news)	99 (5%)	113 (6%)	105 (5%)
mix-reader (at least 1 quality AND 1 disinfo news)	365 (18%)	319 (16%)	303 (15%)
other (no quality OR disinfo news websites)	539 (27%)	689 (34%)	606 (30%)
total	2020	2023	2006

Source: Štětka et al. (2021)

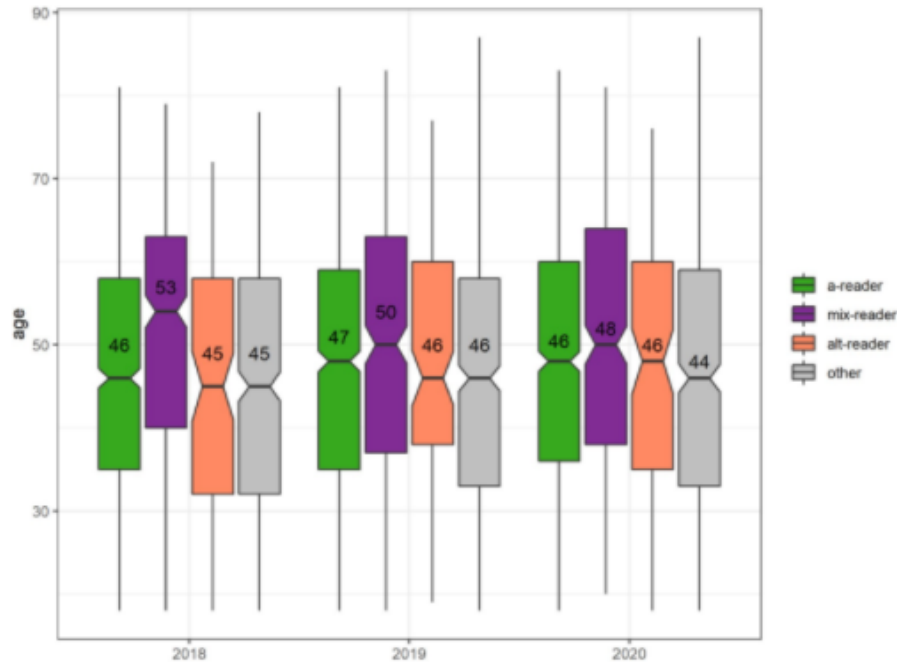


Figure 1 Age distribution by year and readership category. Note: The figure shows standard box-plots (the box indicates the interquartile range, i.e. where the middle 50 percent fall within the age distribution, and the whiskers reach to the minimum and maximum for each category). The horizontal lines represent medians, the values of which are also printed above them. The indent or notch around each median shows its confidence interval (wider for categories with smaller N). For the number of respondents (N) for each boxplot, see Table 1.

Source: Štětka et al. (2021)



Figure 2 Percentage of women by category in time. Note: There are no missing values for gender in the data sets, hence the remainder to 100 percent are male readers.

Source: Štětka et al. (2021)

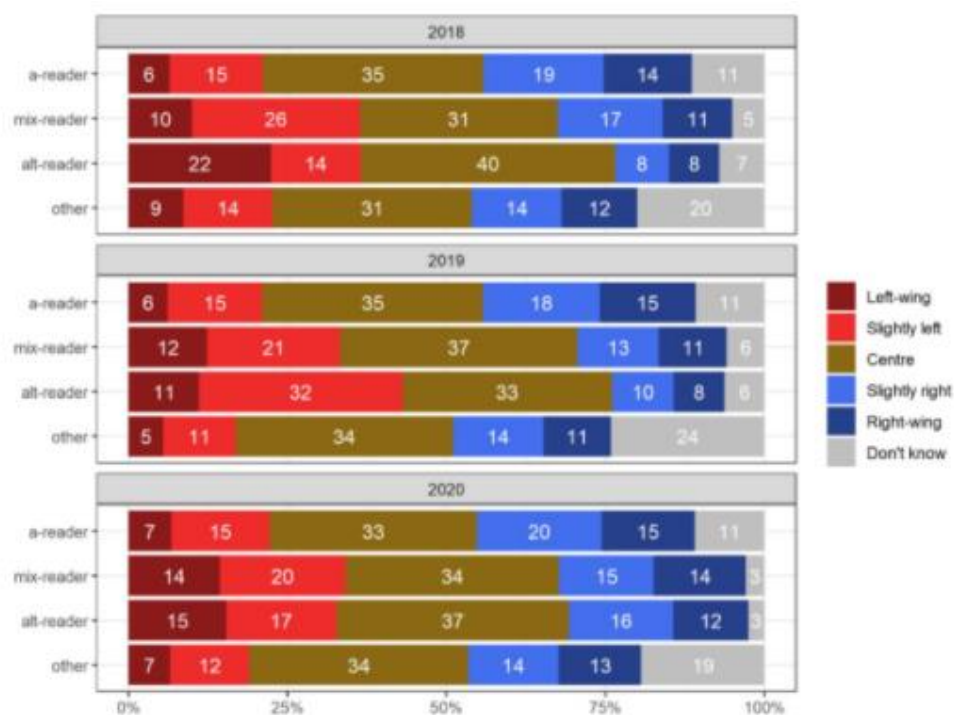


Figure 3 Political self-identification on left-right dimension by year and readership category (in percent).
Source: Štětka et al. (2021)

The survey research by STEM (2021), focusing on the population of Czech Internet users, suggested that alternative media and blogs are trusted as sources of information on Covid-19 by 17 % of this population. The most trusted disinformation concerns the belief that the government (41%) or hospitals (36%) deliberately exaggerated the risks or the severity of the pandemic. More extreme disinformation (e.g., about microchips) is trusted by about 10%. At the same time, there are only small differences between sociodemographic groups in their trust in disinformation according to this research.

9) Any other relevant country specific patterns/data you wish to point out?

According to the CVVM survey (2020), 53% of people claim that they deliberately limit the amount of information received on Covid-19. However, it is questionable whether this can be understood as a trend that is strengthening over time. The comparison of data from May 2020 to April 2021 (CVVM, 2021) shows no permanent decrease in the tendency to follow news on Covid-19, and its fluctuations seem to be influenced mostly by the current severity of the pandemic.

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Denmark⁷⁴

1) Which were the most trusted media for information in 2020/2021?

The Danish media landscape for information is dominated by two types of actors. The publicly owned public service television companies and the private daily newspapers, some owned by investment entities, others are commercially owned (Rasmus Burkal, Ida Willig & Mark Black-Ørsten (2021). In Denmark, there is an overall trust in news. Only a small group of people (2%) say that they strongly disagree when asked if they trust news most of the time. Compared to other European countries, the ‘trust news most of the time’ score in 2021 (59%) is the third highest score measured in Europe, only overtaken by Finland and Portugal (Figure 2)⁷⁵. As follows, both the main public broadcaster, DR News, and the other public broadcaster, TV2 News, and many of the most popular broadsheets have a high degree of trust scores, as well. In 2020 (Figure 1)⁷⁶, the trust score for DR is 78%, and 77% for TV2 news, followed by the two printed newspapers, the moderate right-wing broadsheet, Børsen (71%) and the moderate left-wing broadsheet, Politiken (74%). Compared to 2020, DR news has maintained its lead as the most trusted broadcast (84%) and once again, closely followed by the TV2 News (82%). What is more interesting, compared to 2020, is the development in how trusted the two broadcast brands are. The DR news has increased its trust percentage by 6%, from 78% to 84%, and the TV2 news by 5%, from 77% to 82%. Politiken is now the most-trusted broadsheet (75%), and Børsen, the second, most-trusted broadsheet (74%).

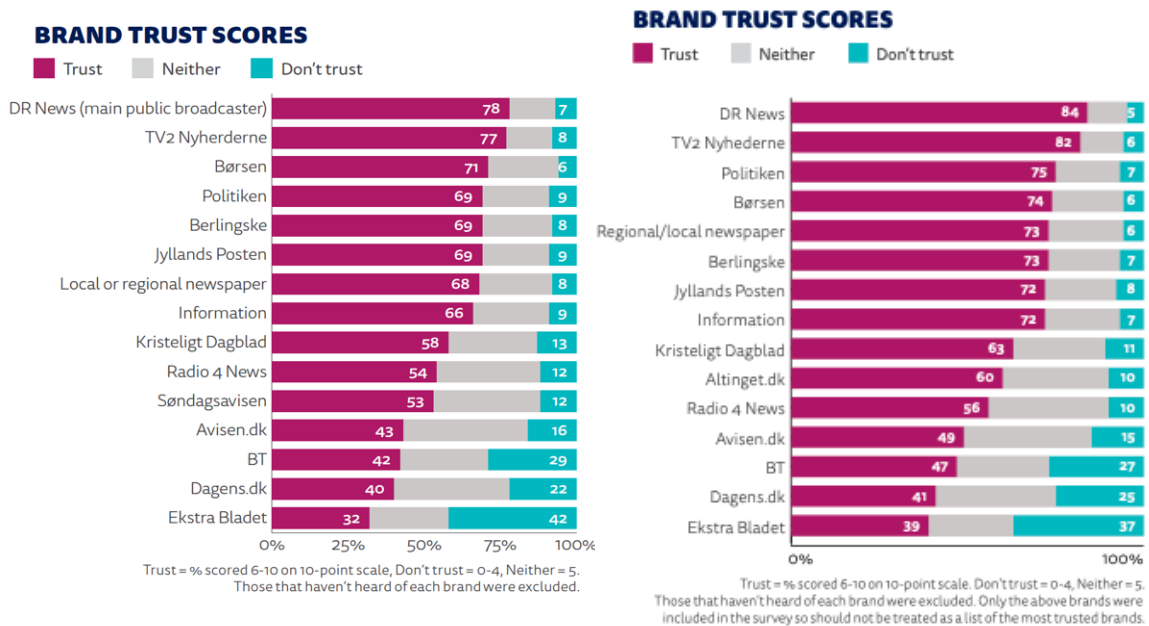


Figure 1: 2020⁷⁷. Source: The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020: 67

Figure 2: 2021⁷⁸. Source: The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021: 74

⁷⁴ The questionnaire is answered with available sources and with both Danish and international references. There are some overlapping sources, like, for example, the Reuters’ reports, which are published with an expanded analysis in Danish. Because of this, we have chosen to illustrate the questionnaire with figures in both languages, Danish and English. Sometimes, the figures have different expressions, but they will build on the same content of analysis.

⁷⁵ https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf, p. 19.

⁷⁶ https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf, p. 18.

⁷⁷ https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf

⁷⁸ https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf

2) Which were the most used media for information in 2020/2021?

In 2021, the traditional news media still solidly held the attention of its audience (Mark Black-Ørsten & Eva Mayerhöffer, 2021). The most used media follows the pattern of trusting the news most of the time, as was mentioned above. In 2020, DR News has 59% of the weekly reach online and off, and TV2 News, 54%. In 2021, DR News has increased by 1% to 60% of the weekly reach online and off. TV2 News has increased their share by 5% to 59%. It is also worth noting that in 2020/2021, both broadcast media are used more in their flow format than on their online platforms, even though there is an increase in the online use of these two media, from 35% to 40% weekly usage for DR News online, and 29% to 37% for TV2 News online. Interestingly, the least trusted online tabloid media, Ekstra Bladet⁷⁹, was the third most used online media during 2020/2021 (Figure 3 & Figure 4). It may be ascribable to the tabloid papers' presence on Facebook, the most used social media platform for news seeking⁸⁰ (in 2020, 37%). The tabloid paper, Ekstra Bladet, is the primary news source for 27% of readers. It is important to be aware that the usage of social media is different from other media types because they are controlled by algorithms. Using social media as a news source can be about reading a headline, or clicking on a link that continues to the news media' website (Schröder et.al., 2021). For example, Schröder et.al. (2020) point out that only 13% of the Danes see social media as their primary news source.

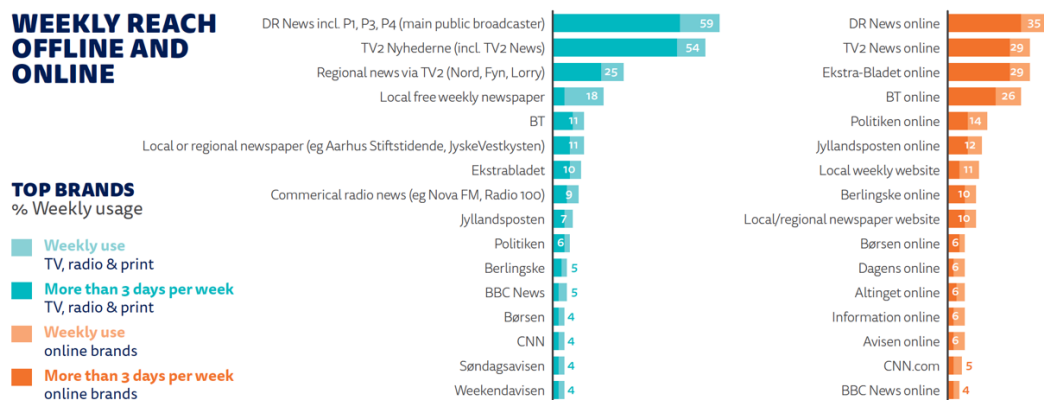


Figure 3: 2020⁸¹. Source: The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020: 67

⁷⁹ https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf

https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf

⁸⁰ Black-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer (2021:112/113)

⁸¹ https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf

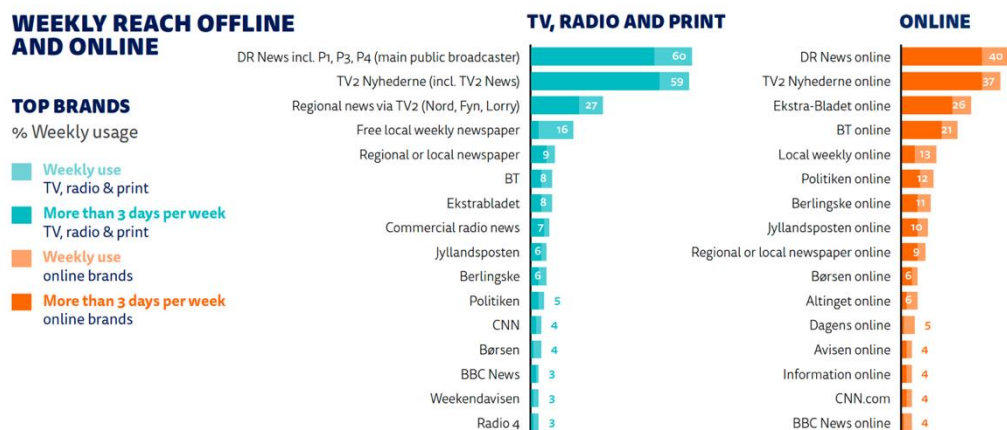


Figure 4: 2021⁸². Source: The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021: 74

3) How are different trust levels distributed over different segments of media (print, radio, TV, social media, etc.)?

Based on a survey conducted in 2019⁸³, the most trusted media segment in Denmark is TV (in all, 67% mention TV as their first, second or third media). It is followed, in order, by Radio (51%), national newspapers (47%), and the online platforms of the national newspapers (44%). The numbers ought to be taken with caution because they count all mentioned media without distinguishing between the range of numbers in which they are mentioned. However, the results are confirmed by other surveys, both in Denmark (Kim Schröder, Mark Black-Ørsten & Mads Kæmsgaard Eberholst 2020; 2021) and on European⁸⁴ and global levels⁸⁵. If the results are weighed against what media the Danish citizens prefer to get their news through; if they watch, read, or listen to news, there is a coherence between what news the citizens trust the most and what they prefer to watch, read, or listen to. For example, if they prefer to watch the news, then 55% of them have most trust in the news coverage on television, and so forth⁸⁶. Another interesting observation is that social media is just trusted by a few, in all 3%. In Schröder et.al. (2021:15), the trust percentage is higher (13%), but the question is also asked in a different way and is directed towards ‘trust in the news that the reader consumes’ while in Figure 6 (Kulturministeriet, 2021) below: “Media groups which the population trust the most in regard to the creditability of the media groups’ news coverage”, the question is ‘most trusted in relation to the trustworthiness of the media’s news cover’. Independent on the source, the level of trust to social media is low, and is probably affected by critical public debates about social media as a trustworthy news source (Schröder et al., 2021).

⁸² https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf

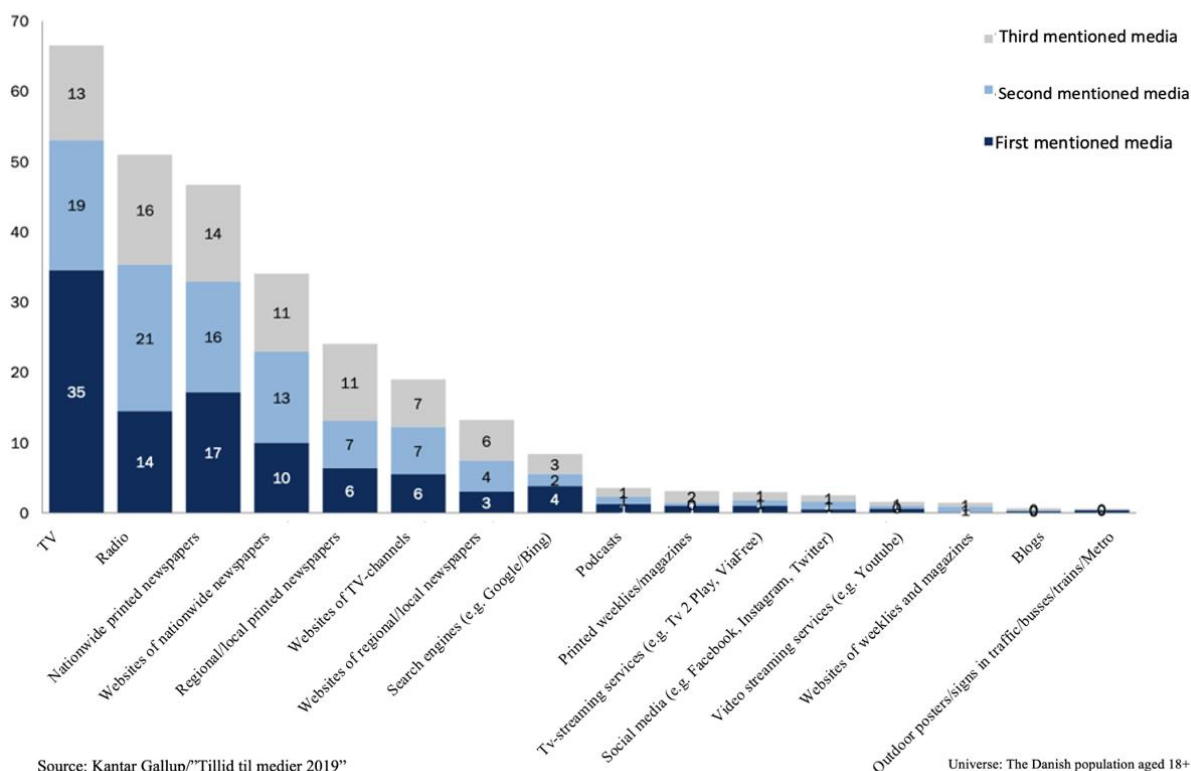
⁸³ https://mediernesudvikling.kum.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/dokumenter/medier/Mediernes_udvikling/2020/Specialrapporter/Medietillid_fake_news_og_fakta-tjek/Fake_news_og_tillid_til_medier_Endelig.pdf, p. 21.

⁸⁴ https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/Publications/MIS/login_only/market_insights/EBU-MIS-Trust_in_Media_2021.pdf

⁸⁵ https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf_p.19

⁸⁶ https://mediernesudvikling.kum.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/dokumenter/medier/Mediernes_udvikling/2020/Specialrapporter/Medietillid_fake_news_og_fakta-tjek/Fake_news_og_tillid_til_medier_Endelig.pdf, p. 22.

Media groups, which the population trust the most in regard to the credibility of the media group's news coverage. Share in %, who have mentioned the media group as the first, second and third priority. Sorted by the share who have mentioned the media group overall



Source: Kantar Gallup/"Tillid til medier 2019"
Data processed by the Ministry of Culture

Universe: The Danish population aged 18+

Figure 6. Source: Kulturministeriet, 2021:21. Trust in the trustworthiness of different media groups' coverage of the news

4) What are the trends of the development of trust over the last 10 years?

From an overall perspective, the development of trust over the last 10 years has been stable and without new trendsetting. In Denmark, there is a high trust to news media. According to Figure 7, "Trust in the press, the news, and journalists over time" (Andersen, Kim, Dalen, van Arjen, Hopmann, Morten Skovsgaard & Albæk, Erik, 2021), trust in journalists from 2000 up to 2020 remains on a relatively stable level, but below the general trust in news and the press. Still, there are some differences in the level of trust from year to year. According to Andersen et al. (2021), there is no direct answer to the fluctuations and as they notice, over time the different levels of trust are equalised. The relatively low trust level of journalists is explained by the work they are doing that mostly depends on whether the citizens agree or disagree on the information that is imparted; whether they agree with the values, opinions, and interests the journalists provide.

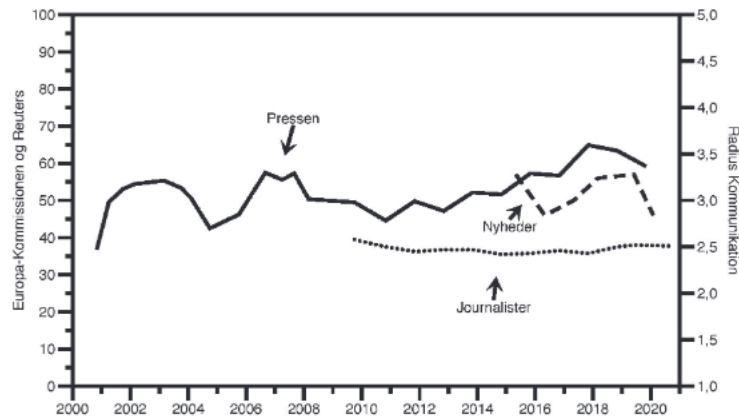
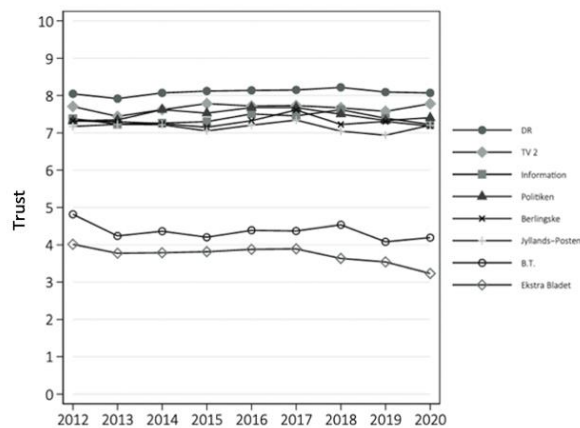


Figure 7. Source: Andersen et.al, 2021: 34. Trust in the press, news, and journalists over time. Note: For the Eurobarometer data, the solid line shows just how many people tend to trust the press, from the Reuters' data, the dotted line shows how big a share of people agree that they can trust most news most of the time, and for the Radius Communication data, the dashed line shows the average trust. Sources: European Commission, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and Radius Communication.

Further, Figure 8 shows that the trust levels of public service media and written press remain relatively high and stable over the entire period, whilst the tabloid media, BT and Ekstra Bladet are afforded relatively low levels of trust, and in the case of the lowest ranged tabloid, Ekstra Bladet, the trust level has even marginally fallen. This is explained by the commercialisation of journalism that has a negative influence on trust in media (Andersen et.al., 2021).

Trust in specific news media over time



Note: Indicates weighted average responses on a scale from 0 (very untrustworthy) to 10 (very trustworthy) to the question: "How trustworthy or untrustworthy do you think the following news media are?" "DR" is index with TV-Avisen on DR1, Nyhedsudsendelser on DR2, Radioavisen on DR, P3 Nyhederne, Tekst-TV from DR and dr.dk. "TV 2" is index with Nyhederne on TV 2, TV 2 News, Tekst-TV from TV 2 and tv2.dk. For the remaining news media, the respondents have been asked to relate to the news media as a whole.

Source: DR Medieforskning

Figure 8. Source: Andersen et.al. 2021:134. Trust in specific news media over time

In Table 1 below from the latest 'Trust in news media worldwide 2021'⁸⁷, the Net Trust index⁸⁸ from 2009 to 2021 also gives a clear indication that the Danish population trust the different media segments more than EU countries in general, as well as distrusting social media, which is much lower than average in the EU⁸⁹. Looking back over the years, both TV, radio, and the written press have a much higher score in Denmark than in the EU. The only deviation from this picture is the Danes' trust of the Internet from 2009 to 2013, which was much higher than the EU average. But since 2014, trust in the Internet has decreased and is now a little below the EU average.

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021
Net Trust Index: Radio												
EU Average	23	22	22	16	17	25	19	25	25	25	21	23
Denmark	49	46	49	50	50	55	57	60	69	65	62	74
Net Trust Index: TV												
EU Average	3	5	11	1	0	5	1	4	6	4	2	6
Denmark	36	35	38	28	32	39	49	46	58	53	54	68
Net Trust Index: Written press												
EU Average	-10	-10	-8	-14	-12	-6	-7	-2	0	1	-1	9
Denmark	5	-6	3	-4	8	9	22	20	36	33	24	54
Net Trust Index: Trust in the Internet												
EU Average	-4	-6	-2	-9	-12	-8	-10	-12	-17	-21	-23	-19
Denmark	17	21	32	19	13	-2	0	-9	-16	-24	-23	-22
Net Trust Index: Social Networks												
					EU Average	-33	-35	-38	-42	-44	-45	-49
					Denmark	-40	-36	-46	-48	-55	-57	-72

Table 1. Source: EBU. Trust in news media worldwide, 2021. Net trust Index to different media segments over time

As such, the high trust level is interesting because there have been some changes in how to reach the news. For example, the consumption of media news in the last 10 years has undergone a digitalisation process, as well as the use of smart phones (71% according to Schröder et al., 2021) that have changed the readers platform for reading the news (Bente Kalnes; Kajsa Falasca, and Aske Kammer, 2021). In line with this observation, the high trust level of media in Denmark can be explained by a high awareness of the importance of media literacy – a statement that Kalnes et al. (2021) find is confirmed by the Reuter Institute reports' data. Another explanation suggested by Timothy Neff and Victor Pickard (2021) is that well-funded and institutionally secure public media, such as DR News and TV2 News, engage the citizens in democracy and as follows, they also serve public interests rather than commercial interests. Neff & Pickard (2021:20) also suggest that there is a *virtuous circle in which economic, public media, and democratic health reinforce each other*.

5) Can you observe significant increases in levels of trust/distrust in different segments of media during the pandemic?

According to Table 1 (see above), trust in already trusted Danish media increased during the pandemic. For example, the Trust Index shows that trust in the radio has increased from 62% to 74% over a two-year period, from 2019 to 2021. But the increase in the trustworthiness of the radio has not impacted on the news consumption of the radio that both in 2020 and 2021 was at 33% (Schröder et al, 2021). From 2019 to 2021, trust to television increased from 54% to 68%. Most

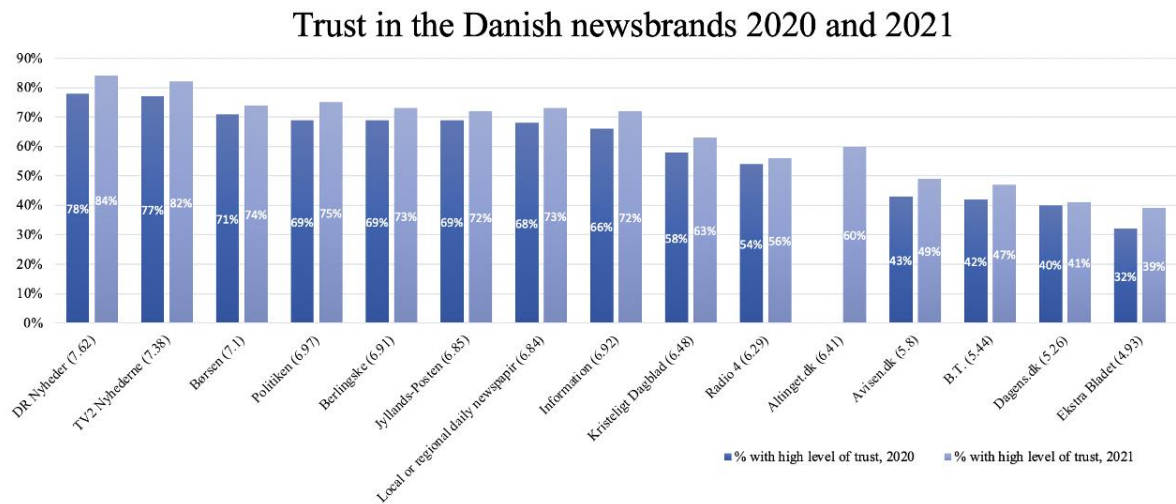
⁸⁷ https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/Publications/MIS/login_only/market_insights/EBU-MIS-Trust_in_Media_2021.pdf

⁸⁸ The net trust index shows the level of trust and is a result of the difference between the percentage of the population who tend to trust and tend not to trust without including the 'don't know the answer'.

⁸⁹ <https://www.horizont.net/news/media/33/Trust-in-Media-Studie-der-EBU--323478.pdf>

interesting is the reading of the written press that has increased its Net Trust index from 24% to 54% during the two-year period.

Interesting also is that the pandemic has increased trust in news in all media types (see Figure 9 below). For example, the two public service news brands, DR News and TV2 News, grew BY 5-6%⁹⁰. But also, the tabloid press (especially Ekstra Bladet, 32% to 39%) and the written press has experienced an increase of trust.



Q6: How trustworthy would you say news from the following organizations are? (Pick values between 0-10, the graph shows the mean value for the brandnames in 2021, percentage indicates answers between 6-10). Altinget is new in 2021 and is therefore not featured in the bar for 2020.

Figure 9. Source: Schrøder et.al. 2021:12. Trust in Danish news brands: 2020 and 2021

All in all, news has gained a notable trust increase by 13% compared to 2020 where 46% of the population had trust in news overall (see Figures 10 and 11 below). The high increase in trust during the pandemic is also underlined by the drop of 11 per cent of trust in the news overall in 2020⁹¹.

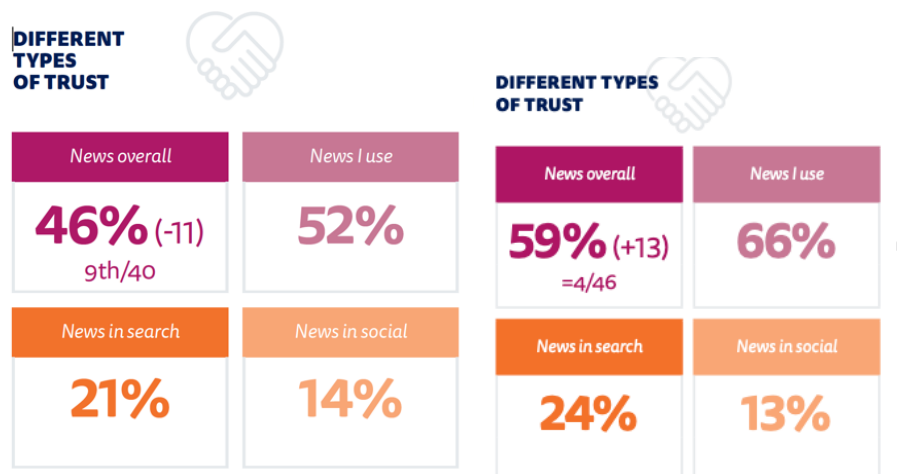


Figure 10: 2020. Source: The Reuters Institute Digital News Reports 2020:67

Figure 11: 2021. Source: The Reuters Institute Digital News Reports 2021:74

⁹⁰ The percentages are worked out by the Reuter Institute report 2021, see p. 75

⁹¹ https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf

6) Which are the most trusted sources of information on Covid-19 health risks/vaccines?

We have not been able to find any questionnaire that have asked the question about the most trusted sources of information on Covid-19 health risks/vaccines directly, but as mentioned many times, it is possible to register an increase of use in especially TV News (see Figure 12 for the development of TV News below⁹²), but also in news media overall. In this background, the Reuter Institute Report from 2021 (polling was conducted in January 2021) concludes that COVID-19 in the beginning of 2020 led to an overall trust boost, not only in TV news, but also in all news brands of news in Denmark. At the end of 2020, the news boost tended to be back to more normal levels. But we cannot say whether the increase in trusting TV news as a source to get information is directly caused by the specific information on Covid-19 health risks/vaccines that the TV News passed on.

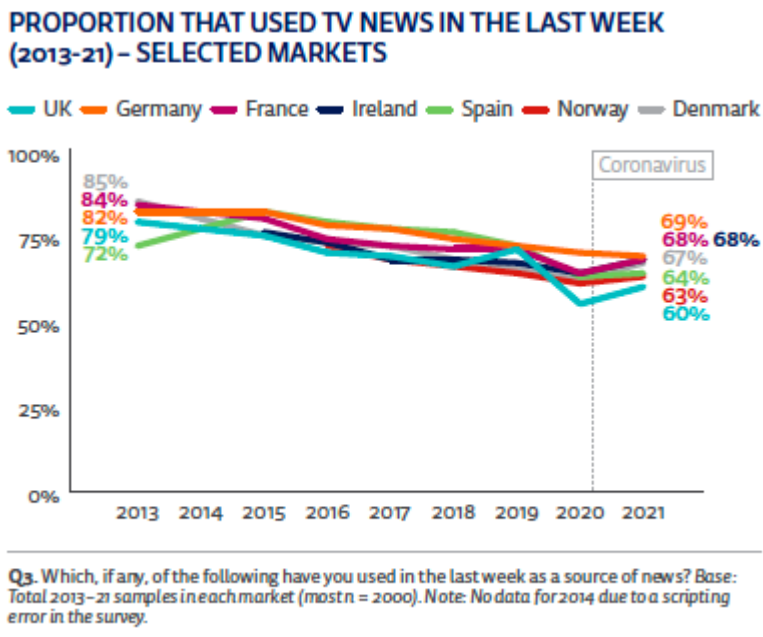
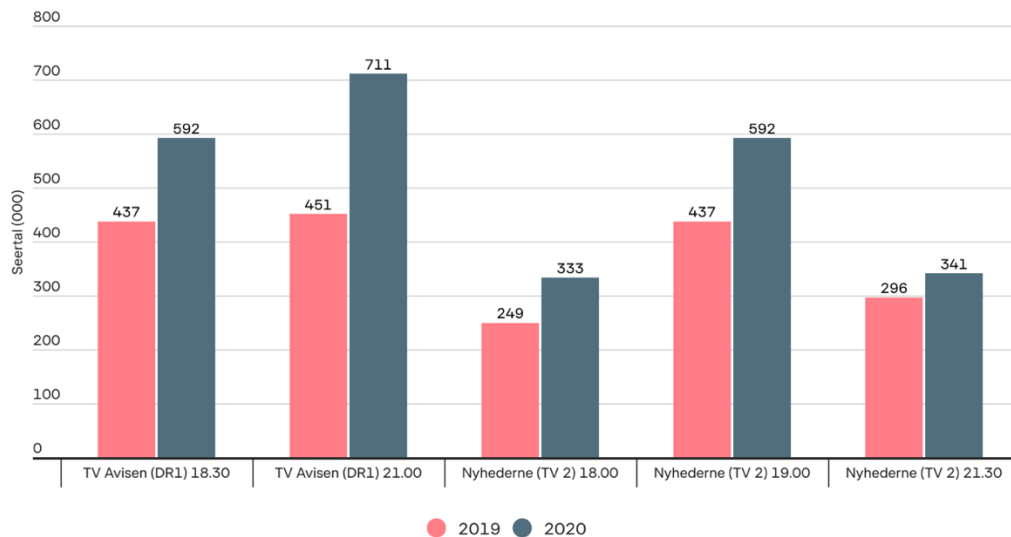


Figure 12. Source: The Reuter Institute Report 2021: 11

A more detailed picture presented by Figure 13⁹³ shows the increase in the number of broadcast viewers during spring 2019 and spring 2020. For example, the 'TV Avisen 21' increased its audience from around 400,000 to 700,000. But then again, it does not say anything about trusting a specific source.

⁹² P. 11

⁹³ DR Medieforskning, Medieudviklingen 2020. DR (<https://dr.dk/medieforskning>).

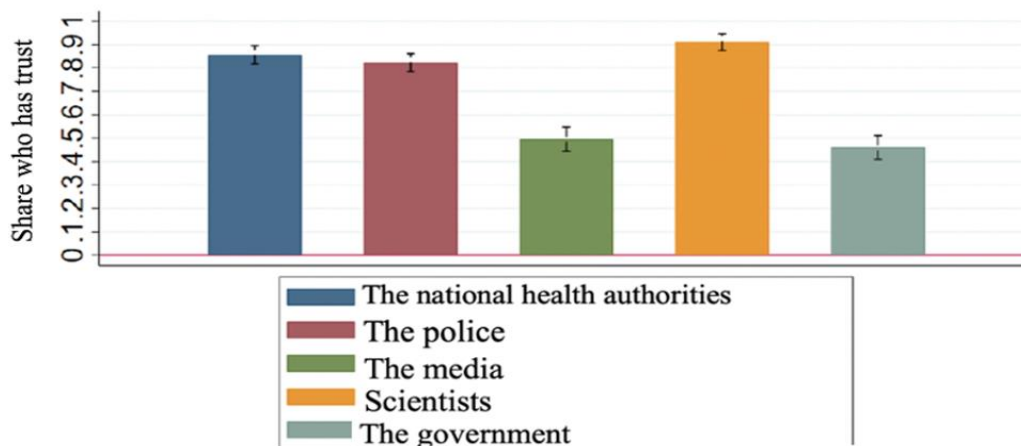


Målgruppe: 3+ år, Periode: 12/3 - 11/5 2019 & 12/3 - 11/5 2020, Kilde: Kantar Seer-Undersøgelsen, Data: Live + VOSDAL
 Tallene for TV 2 er uden eventuelle samsendinger med TV 2 NEWS

Figure 13. Source: DR Medieforskning. *Medieudviklingen 2020*. Average number of viewers of TV-news broadcasts, spring 2019 and 2020

The Danish Hope-project⁹⁴ has asked the Danes how much they trust some of the central institutions in relation to the Corona crisis. Although the question is not directly related to sources of information, it says something about the trust levels in the institutions that have been involved and been used as information sources at the many press conferences that the government has held to inform the citizens about the Corona situation. From Figure 14 “Trust in central institutions”, we can see that there is high trust in scientists, the health authorities, and the police while there is lesser trust in the media and the government:

Trust in central institutions



Note: n=511. The first four bars from the left show the share, who has responded “very much” or “to some extent” to the question: “How much do you trust the following institutions in regard to the corona-crisis?” However, trust in government shows the share, who has responded 7-10 to the question: “Give your assessment on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that you do not have any trust in the government and 10 means you have complete trust in the government”. The vertical lines show the statistical uncertainty (95% confidence interval)

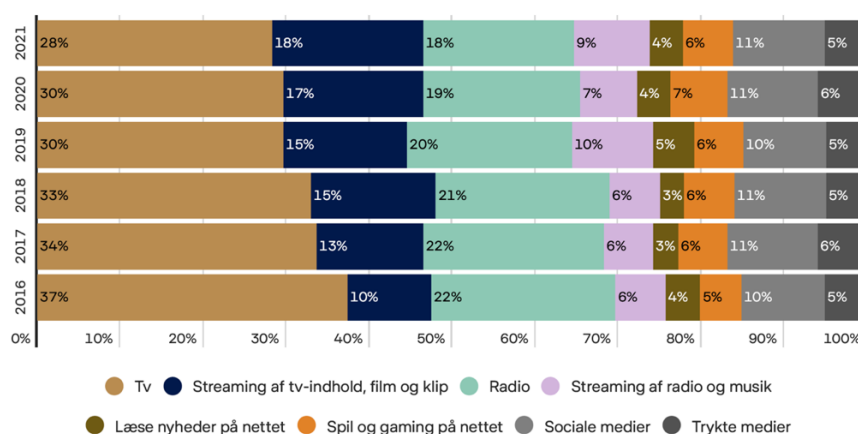
Figure 14. Source: *How Democracies Cope with COVID 19. The Danish Hope Project (Nielsen et.al., 2022:17)*

⁹⁴ HOPE stands for How Democracies Cope with COVID 19

7) Has there been an increasing demand for quality news and trusted news sources during the pandemic? (Indicators: E.g., increase of audience share of selected news sources, country specific opinion polls).

From an overall perspective, and according to Figure 15 below, the pandemic is a *bracket in the Danish media history* (Dennis Christensen & Henrik Gregor Knudsen, 2022⁹⁵). The Danes spent almost the same hours on different media segments, both in 2020 and 2021. From this perspective, it is difficult to conclude that the pandemic has caused an increased in demand for quality news.

Fordeling af danskernes mediebrug



Målgruppe: 15-75 år, Kilde: DR Medieforskning. Estimatet er baseret på en række forskellige kilder, heriblandt de officielle markedsmålinger på radio og tv, men også en række spørgeskemaundersøgelser, hvor tidsforbruget ikke måles direkte, men opgøres på baggrund af respondenternes besvarelser.

Figure 15. Source: Christensen & Knudsen, 2022:5. Distribution of the Danes' media use

However, time spent on different media platforms cannot say anything about trust directly. If we look at other research sources, for example, the Danish version of the Reuter report (Schrøder et al. 2021), they come to another conclusion. First, it is therefore important to underline that the Reuter reports are asking about trust, both to media in general and to specific media brands. It means that the DR media survey and the Reuter survey cannot be compared to each other. Thus, according to Schrøder et al. (2021) and based on numbers from the brand trust score, the Danes have increased their consumption of trustworthy news brands, such as the two broadcast TV, DR1 news and TV2 News media during the pandemic. On this basis, the Reuter 2021 report concludes that especially the demand for quality news from the public news service has increased, with an increase of 5-6 per cent, but also that the tabloid press, and other broadsheets brand has had growing demand. If we take both surveys into account, it could be stated that the increase in the use of media news is more a matter of a need for information because of a world-wide crisis, than a demand for quality news. According to Table 2 below, the only group of audience that deviates from this overall perspective, is the young people between 18-24 years, who have increased their search for direct information from the established news media to 40%, an increase of 8% points.

⁹⁵ <https://www.dr.dk/om-dr/fakta-om-dr/dr-i-2021/rapport-fra-dr-medieforskning-er-klar-saadan-var-medieudviklingen-2021>, p. 5

	Total	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	65+
Gik direkte til en nyhedshjemmeside eller app	51%	40%	49%	65%	55%	54%	46%
Brugte en nyhedssamler (aggregator) som samler nyhedslinks	8%	11%	10%	7%	9%	7%	4%
Brugte sociale medier og faldt over nyhederne på den måde	30%	42%	34%	33%	28%	28%	25%
Jeg modtog et nyhedsbrev på e-mail	14%	3%	5%	11%	13%	17%	26%
Modtog en nyhedsmelding på min mobil/tablet	15%	15%	12%	13%	13%	15%	20%
Brugte en søgetjeneste: søgte en bestemt nyhedshjemmeside eller skrev et søgeord for en bestemt nyhedshistorie	21%	28%	28%	22%	16%	17%	18%
Alle former for brandstyrede veje til nyheder	61%	56%	62%	75%	61%	60%	56%
Alle former for algoritmestyrede veje til nyheder	40%	52%	47%	42%	38%	37%	32%

Table 2. Source: Schrøder et al., 2021:43: How to get the news – age differences

8) What is the audience share of so-called ‘alternative news’ in your country? Is the risk of exposure to disinformation and fake news increasing or decreasing during the pandemic? Does this affect particular segments of the populations? (e.g., young people, people with a particular religious or political affiliation)

Andersen et.al. (2021) point out that low trust in media might lead citizens to move to ‘alternative media sources’. It seems not to be the case in Denmark. But as we have pointed out so far that there is a high trust level in media and media news in Denmark. In general, the Danes are not that worried about being subjected to disinformation, misinformation, and fake news (Schrøder et al., 2021). Still, Figure 16 shows that there is concern about the risk of being subjected to fake news online while 37% of the Danes say that they are concerned about being able to differentiate between news and fake news on the Internet.

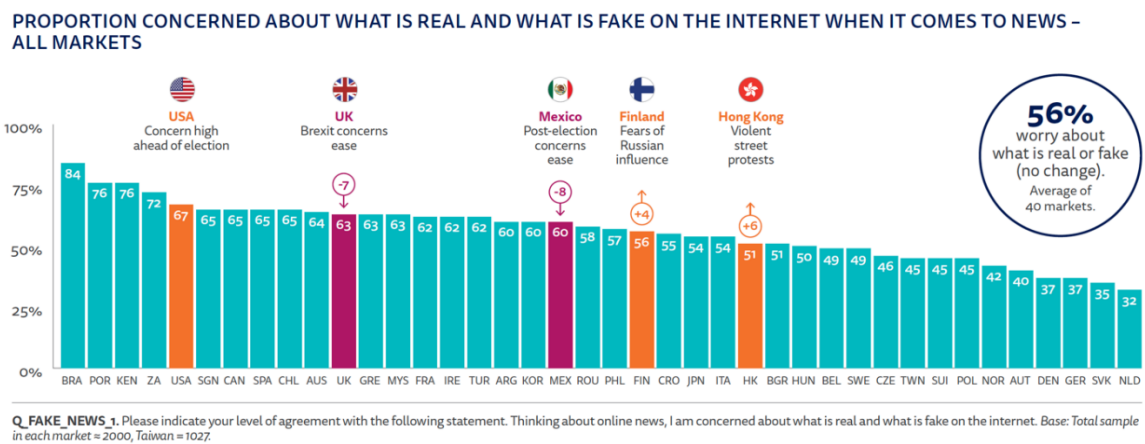


Figure 16. Source: Newman et al., 2020:19: Proportion about what is real and what is fake on the Internet when it comes to all markets

Further, Figure 17 (below) shows that the concern is mostly directed towards foreign governments.

PROPORTION THAT SAY THEY ARE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT FALSE OR MISLEADING INFORMATION FROM EACH OF THE FOLLOWING – ALL MARKETS



Q. FAKE_NEWS_2020b. Which of the following, if any, are you most concerned about online? False or misleading information from... Base: Total sample = 80155.

Figure 17. Source: Newman et al., 2020:19: Proportion that say they are most concerned about false or misleading information from each of the following – all markets

Regarding the audience share of ‘alternative news’ in Denmark, it is very low. The most popular ‘alternative news site’ “Den Korte Avis” was only used weekly by 4% of the population and it was the 100th most popular webpage in Denmark in April 2021 (see Black-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2021:117). The Danish Reuter report 2021 find that 34% of the media users have experienced misinformation about Covid-19 (Schröder et al., 2021). But a white paper about misinformation and conspiracy theories during COVID-19 find that only 3% of identified conspiracy posts on Facebook, according to fast checkers, are false (Mette Bengtsson, Anna Schjøtt Hansen, Jannie Møller Hartley, Jakob Bæk Kristensen, Eva Mayerhöffer, & Tim Ramsland, 2022). We do not have data that examine whether the pandemic has caused an increase or decrease in the risk of being exposed to disinformation, misinformation, or fake news, but according to Bengtson et al. (2022), the effect of public posts on Facebook is low, and there is a tendency that private profiles and other social media such as Twitter have a greater impact on the spread of conspiracy theories. Further, the subject of COVID-19 is not among the ten most effectful accounts. Below Table 3 “Public accounts with the highest effects on the spread of conspiratorial information” shows the 10 most effectful public accounts:

Public accounts with the highest effect on the spread of conspiratorial information		
Name	Type of account	Effect Index
Konspiration DK	Facebook_page	5.7
Tisvildeleje hele året	Facebook_page	2.1
The Danish Defense League	Facebook_page	1.5
Staten passer på dig.	Facebook_page	1.4
Christian Nørremark	Twitter_account	0.5
Sur-Mand	Twitter_account	0.4
(Private person)	Facebook_page	0.3
(Private person)	Facebook_page	0.2
(Private person)	Facebook_page	0.2
(Private person)	Facebook_page	0.2

Table 3: Public accounts with the highest effects on the spread of conspiratorial information (adapted from Bengtson et al., 2022:20)

An interesting observation illustrated by Figure 18 is also that experts and fact-checking journalists sometimes spread misinformation when they evaluate different claims from public profiles or groups.

Network graph of the spread of misleading and false information

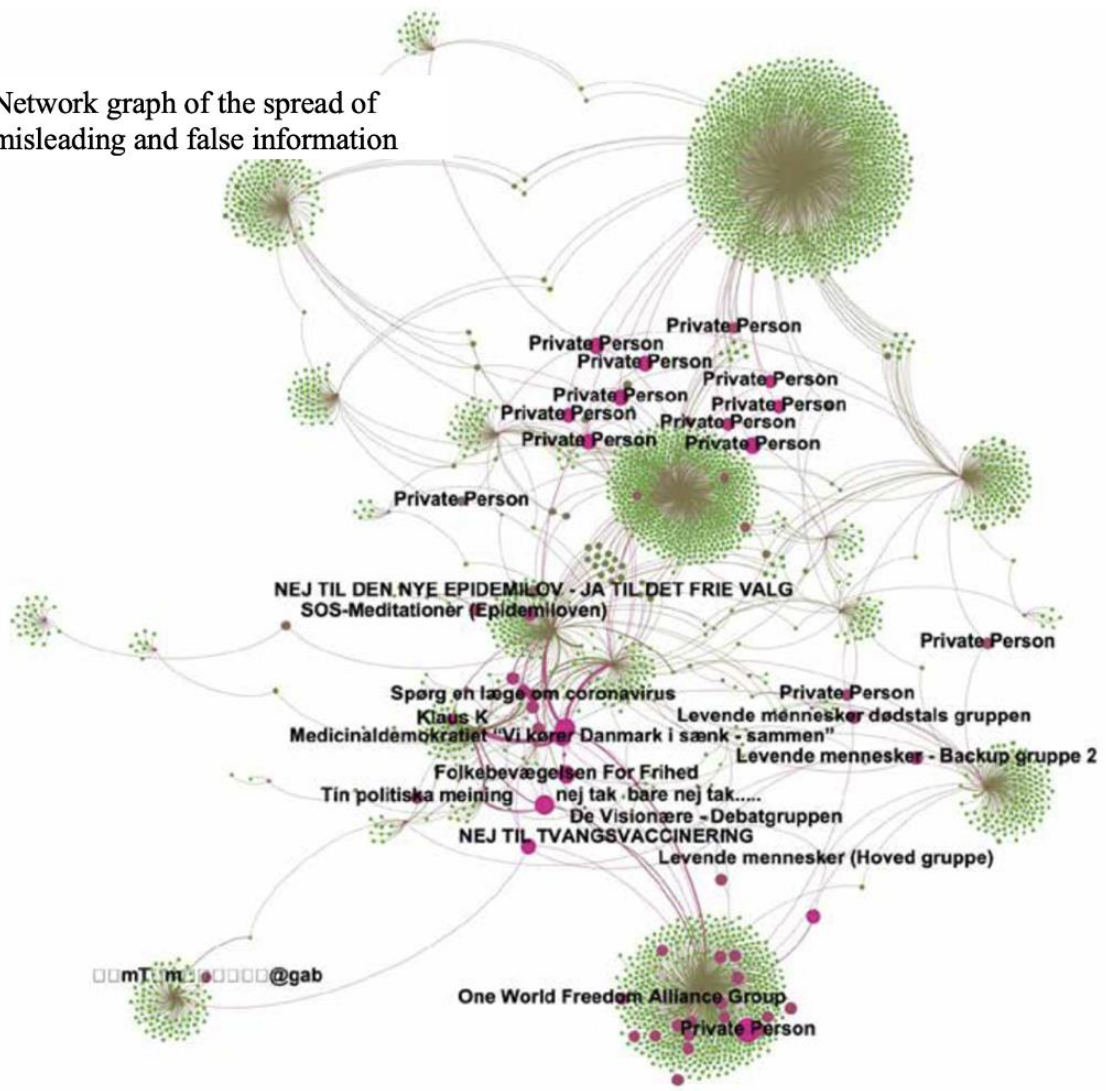


Figure 18. Source: Bengtson et al., 2022:21. Network graph of the spread of misleading and false information

Furthermore, Table 4 (below) shows that alternative news-sites in general do not figure among the most visited Danish information online sites.

Media	Ranking among Danish websites based on traffic (SimilarWeb, April 21)	Traffic from social media (share of total traffic in %) (SimilarWeb, April 21)	Facebook followers (10.04.21)
Den korte avis	521	21.20%	48672
24nyt.dk	3653	49.05%	(DPV00:37826)
NewSpeek.info	n/a	n/a	13207
Document.dk	n/a	n/a	---
Folkets Avis	n/a	n/a	9405
Konfront	n/a	n/a	4580
Netavisen Pio	1168	36.12%	14215
Solidaritet	n/a	n/a	4801
180 grader	n/a	n/a	25863
Indblik	1085	63.73%	7385
Respons	n/a	n/a	3838
Dagens.dk	100	41.30%	200089
Zetland	1393	25.33%	84352
Verdens bedste nyheder	n/a	n/a	49170
POV.international	4084	30.68%	57622
Journalista	n/a	n/a	8869
Føljeton	n/a	n/a	23042

Table 4. Source: Black-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2021:117. Use of alternative news media.

Figure 19 Shows that people with higher education (30%) are slightly more likely to validate the trustworthiness of post, pictures, and news online. Furthermore, people from the age 16-34 years (35-36%) are much more likely to validate the trustworthiness of posts, pictures, and news online than people from the age 35-54 years (24%) and 55-74-year-olds (12-18%). It is also interesting to notice that 65% of the 65-74-year-old people claim that they have not encountered misinformation online, while this is only the case for 25% of the 16-24-year-olds⁹⁶.

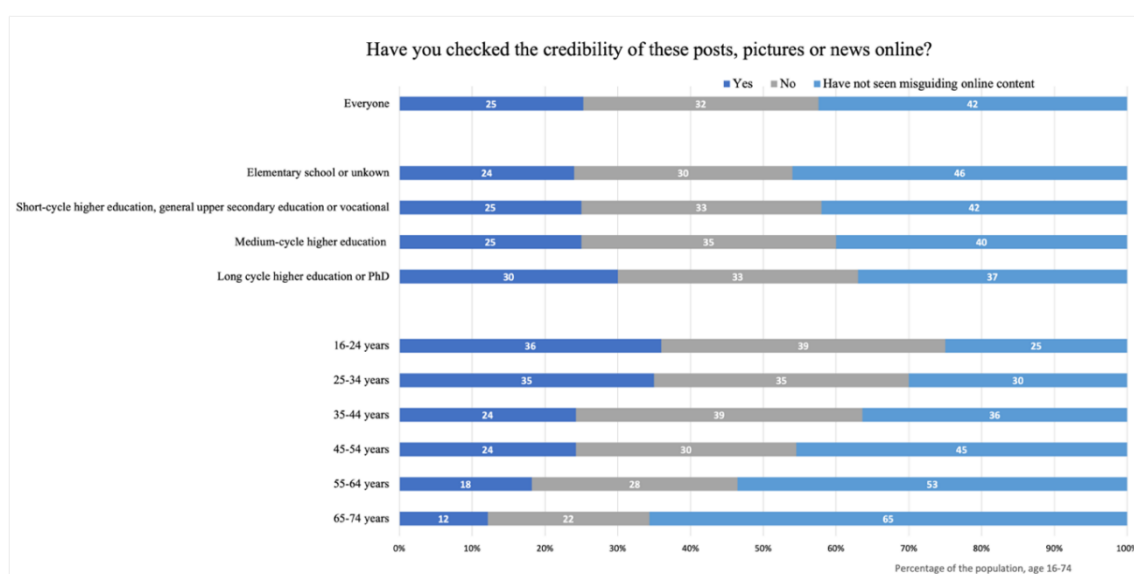


Figure 19. Source: NYT. Danmarks statistik. IT-anvendelse i befolkningen 2021. Have you checked the credibility of these posts, pictures, or news online?

⁹⁶From NYT. Danmarks statistik. IT-anvendelse i befolkningen 2021 <https://www.dst.dk/Site/Dst/Udgivelser/nyt/GetPdf.aspx?cid=47030>

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Germany

1) Which were the most trusted media for information in 2020/2021?

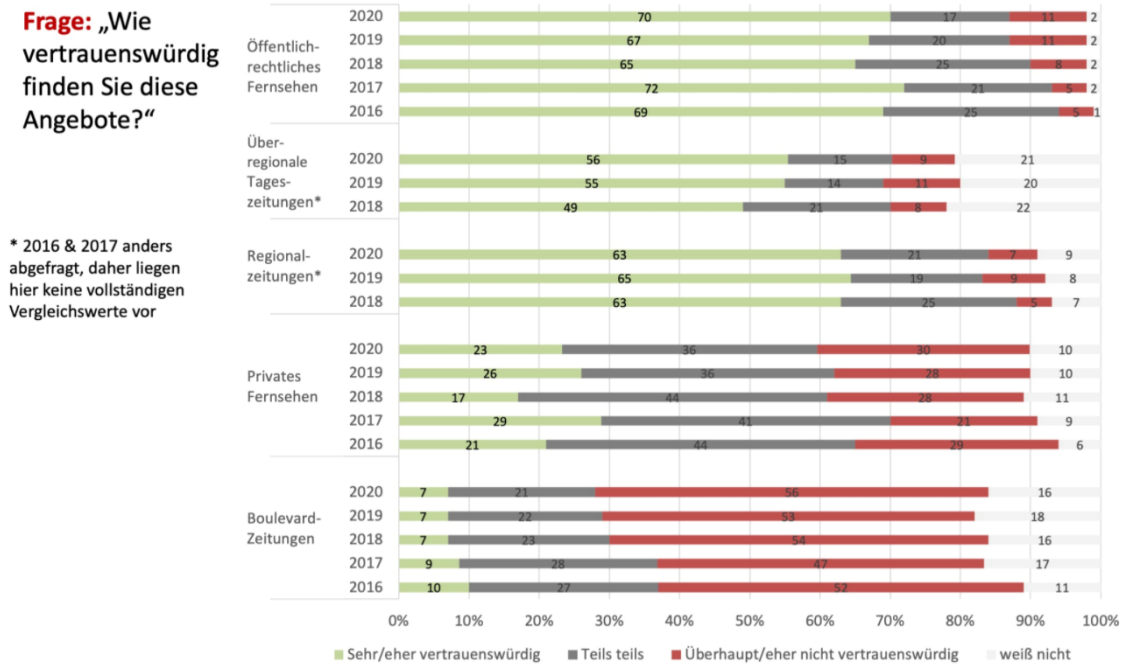
In Germany, the most trusted media are Radio- and TV-Stations run by public service broadcasters (PSBs). A survey run at the end of 2020 showed that 81% of respondents found PSB radio stations (“öffentlich-rechtliche Radiosender”) most trustworthy (Infratest Dimap, 2020; see Figure 1). Estimates for PSB TV-Stations (“öffentlich-rechtliche Fernsehsender”) range from 70% (Institut für Publizistik der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 2020; see Figure 2) to 79% (Infratest Dimap, 2020). This finding is consistent with the most trusted news brands: “ARD Tagesschau” (trusted by 70%) and “ZDF Heute” (trusted by 68%) are both television news services produced by the two major PSB-networks ARD and ZDF (Hölig and Hasebrink, 2021; see Figure 3).⁹⁷



Figure 1: Trustworthiness of single media types 2020. Source: Infratest Dimap, Glaubwürdigkeit der Medien 2020

⁹⁷ Only the mentioned brands were covered by the survey. Therefore, the ranking cannot be treated as a definite list of the most trusted German media brands.

VERTRAUEN IN MEDIENGATTUNGEN (2016-2020)



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Figure 2: Trust in media genres. Source: Institut für Publizistik der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 2020

Brand trust scores

Germany

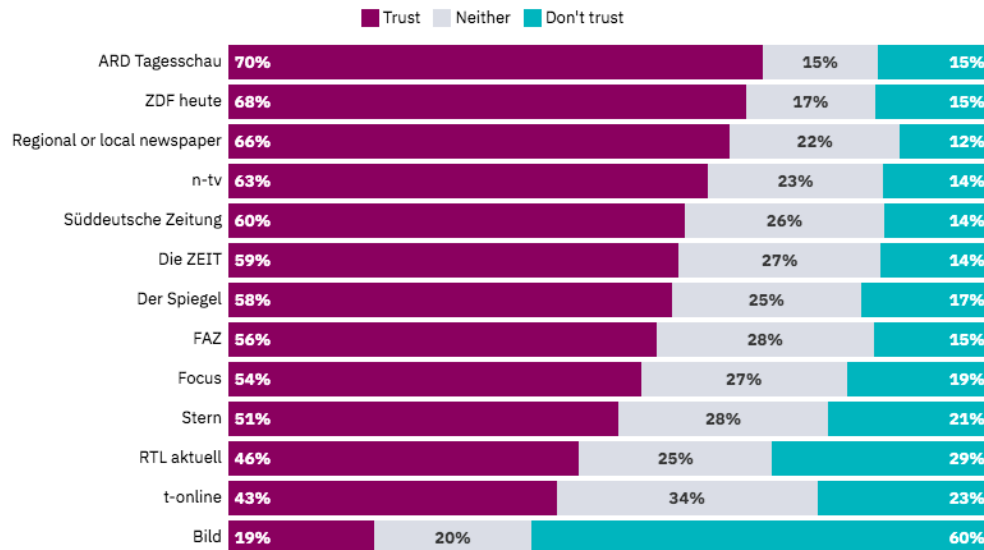
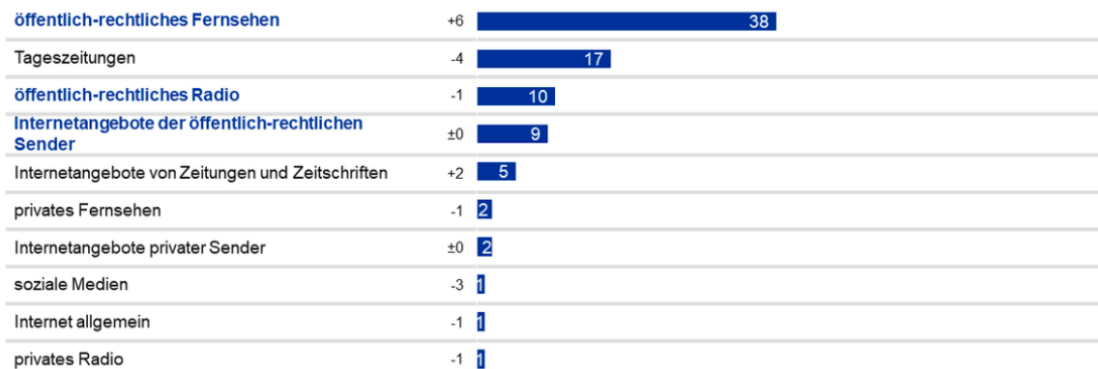


Figure 3: Brand Trust Scores. Source: Hölig & Hasebrink, 2021 (Reuters Digital News Report)

2) Which were the most used media for information in 2020/2021?

According to the most recent Infratest Dimap (2020) survey, the most-used media source for information about the political situation were PSB-run TV-Stations. 37% of respondents used them as their major information source. Daily newspapers came a distant second (17% of respondents), followed by PSB-run radio stations (10% of respondents) (Infratest Dimap, 2020; see Figure 4).

Glaubwürdigkeit der Medien 2020
Hauptinformationsquellen zum politischen Geschehen



Sie nutzen also verschiedene Quellen, um sich über das politische Geschehen zu informieren. Aus welchem der genannten Medien beziehen Sie hauptsächlich Ihre Informationen über das politische Geschehen?

Grundgesamtheit: Wahlberechtigte in Deutschland
Werte in Prozent / Veränderungen in Prozentpunkten zu November 2019
Fehlende Werte zu 100 Prozent: Andere Medien / weiß nicht / alle gleichermaßen / keine Angabe

infratest dimap

Figure 4: Major political information source. Source: Infratest Dimap, 2020. Note: The figures shows that public service TV ranks highest as a source of political information, followed by newspapers, the public service radio and public service websites, while private TV and radio, social media and Internet as such are barely used as sources to inform oneself about political news.

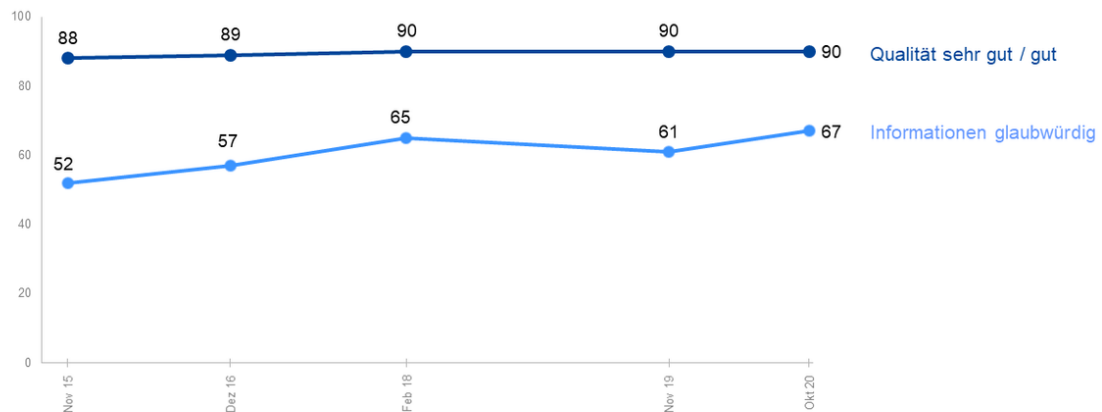
3) How are different trust levels distributed over different segments of media (print, radio, TV, social media, etc.)?

As Figures 1-3 above show, PSB-run radio and TV is the most trusted (trusted by 68-81%), followed by daily print newspapers (trusted by 53-74%). Interestingly, regional newspapers seem to be more trusted than national daily newspapers (63 versus 56 %; see Figure 2). Online portals run by PSB stations rank third, with 63% of respondents deeming them as trustworthy. This is considerably more compared to online portals offered by newspapers and magazines, which are only trusted by 45% and hence rank similarly to private radio stations (44%; see Figure 1). Private TV stations are trusted considerably less: the estimates rank between 23% and 29%, comparable to their online portals (see Figures 1 and 2). A notable exception seems to be the privately-owned 24-hour news TV channel n-tv, which is trusted by 63 % of respondents (Figure 3). The least trusted are social media and the boulevard press (5-7%; see Figures 1 and 2).

4) What have the trends of the development of trust been over the last 10 years?

As both Figures 5 and 6 (below) show, there has been an overall upward trend in the perceived trustworthiness of the media within the last five to ten years. In 2015, only 28% of respondents found that they could overall and/or completely trust the media, while 52% found the information credible. These figures have steadily risen to 56% and 67%, respectively. At the same time, there is also evidence for an increased polarisation, at least up to the beginning of the pandemic: Between 2008 and 2019, the percentage of people who stated they did not trust the media rose from 9% to 28%. However, in 2020, this number fell to 16% (see Figure 6). This coincides with the development of the percentage of people who believe that the German population is being systematically lied to by the media ("Lügenpresse" or "lying press"). While this lay between 13% and 19% in previous years, it decreased to 11% in 2020 (Institut für Publizistik der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 2020).

Glaubwürdigkeit der Medien 2020
Medienangebot in Deutschland: Qualität und Glaubwürdigkeit



In Deutschland gibt es viele und unterschiedliche Medienangebote: Zeitungen und Zeitschriften, Radio und Fernsehen sowie Internet. Halten Sie das Informationsangebot der Medien bei uns alles in allem für sehr gut, gut, schlecht oder sehr schlecht? Halten Sie die Informationen in den deutschen Medien alles in allem für glaubwürdig oder für nicht glaubwürdig?

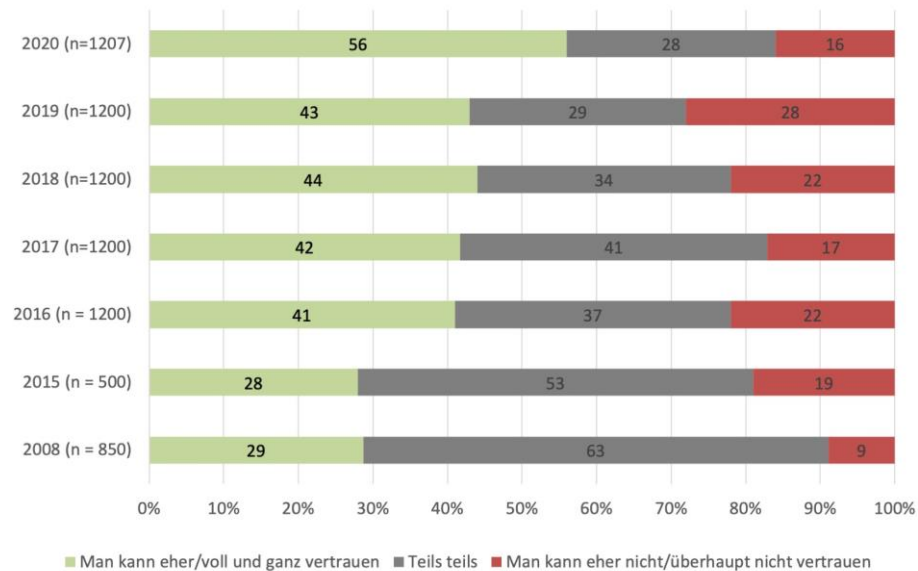
Grundgesamtheit: Wahlberechtigte in Deutschland
Werte in Prozent
Fehlende Werte zu 100 Prozent: Qualität ist (sehr) schlecht / nicht glaubwürdig / weiß nicht / keine Angabe



Figure 5: Trustworthiness of the overall media offered in Germany. Source: Infratest Dimap, 2020.
Note: dark blue line: very good/good quality; light blue line: information is credible

ENTWICKLUNG DES MEDIENVERTRAUENS (2008-2020)

Frage: „Wie ist das, wenn es um wirklich wichtige Dinge geht – etwa Umweltprobleme, Gesundheitsgefahren, politische Skandale. Wie sehr kann man da den Medien vertrauen?“



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Figure 6: When it comes to truly important issues such as environmental problems, health risks or political scandals: How much can one trust the media? Source: Institut für Publizistik der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 2020. Note: green: “you can rather/fully trust”, grey “partially”, red: “you can rather not/not at all trust”

5) Did you observe significant increases of trust/distrust in different segments of media during the pandemic?

The findings of the long-term study “Medienvertrauen” imply that the corona-pandemic initially increased the population’s need for information and orientation, which in turn led to an increased trust in the media (Institut für Publizistik der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 2020). There are, however, differences between media segments. According to Infratest Dimap (2021), trust in privately-owned 24-hour TV-station ‘n-tv’ increased the most during the pandemic. Trust in PSB media have also risen, by between three and five percentage points for TV-stations and three percentage points for radio stations (see Figures 1 and 2). PSB-run online portals have also benefitted from a trust increase of four percentage points (see Figure 1). Trust levels for other media segments, such as social media and the boulevard press have, however, remained largely stable, while the findings for private TV stations in general are conflicting. Overall, it seems that media segments, which were already trusted in previous years, gained the most additional trust during the pandemic, with n-tv’s interest rates flagged as a special case.

6) Which are the most trusted sources of information on Covid-19 health risks/vaccines?

When it comes to the most trusted sources of information on Covid-19 in Germany, data show that Germans mostly trust scientists, health authorities, the government and their doctors, while journalists are less regarded as important information sources (see Figure 7, source: European Union June 2020).

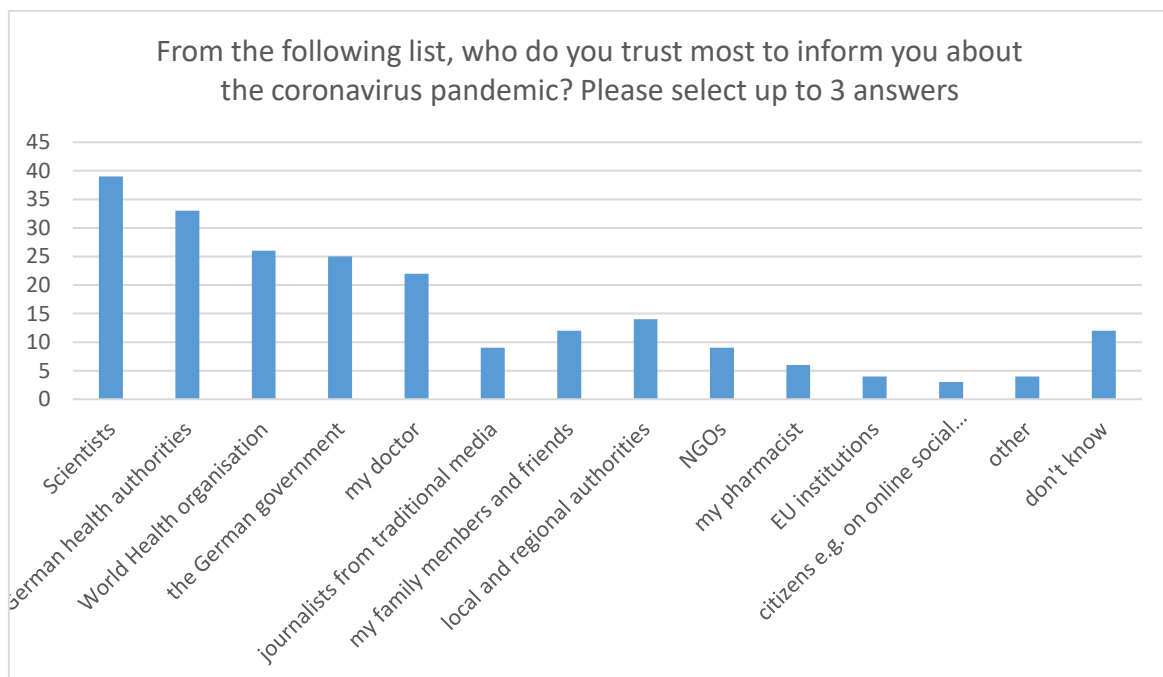
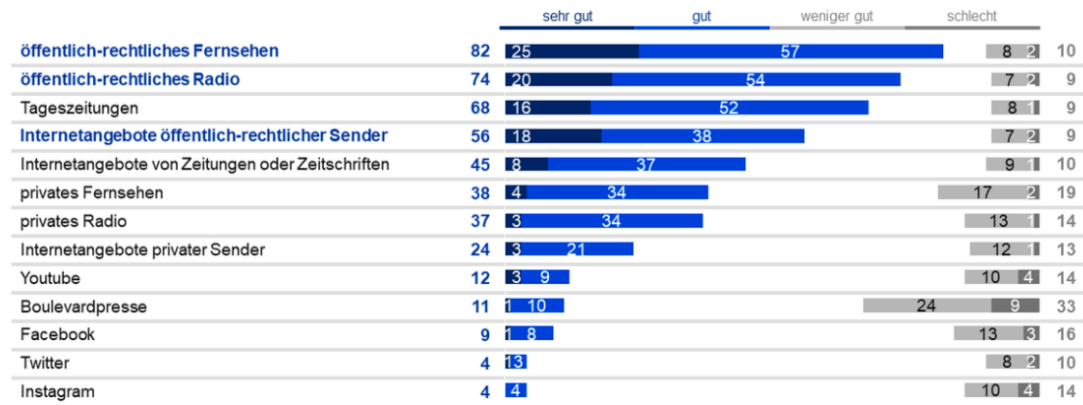


Figure 7: most trusted information sources on Covid 19 in Germany in %, up to three answers possible, adapted from European Union “Uncertainty/EU/Hope. Public Opinion in times of Covid-19, June 2020, p. 48

However, this finding does not yet imply that mass media, as such, are not considered important and trusted sources of information. In fact, mass media are an important arena, giving voice to the most trustworthy actors, such as scientists or government representatives. As Figure 8 shows, there are, however, differences between different types of mass media. Most strikingly, PSB-run TV stations were the most trusted information sources for topics related to Covid-19: 82% of respondents

classified their corona-related reporting as “very good” or “good”. PSB-run radio stations came second and daily newspapers came third, with their coverage being rated as “(very) good” by 74% and 68%, respectively.

Glaubwürdigkeit der Medien 2020
Bewertung der Corona-Berichterstattung



Bitte denken Sie nun an die Berichterstattung zur Corona-Pandemie. Ich nenne Ihnen nun nochmal einige Medien. Sagen Sie mir bitte jeweils, ob Sie die Berichterstattung zu Corona in diesen Medien als sehr gut, gut, schlecht oder sehr schlecht beurteilen. Falls Sie ein Medium nicht nutzen oder nicht beurteilen können, geben Sie das bitte an.

Grundgesamtheit: Wahlberechtigte in Deutschland
Werte in Prozent
Fehlende Werte zu 100 Prozent: Nutze ich nicht / kann ich nicht beurteilen / weiß nicht / keine Angabe



Figure 8: Evaluation of the Corona-coverage. Source: Infratest Dimap, 2020

7) Has there been an **increasing** demand for quality news and trusted news sources during the pandemic? (indicators: E.g. increase of audience share of selected news sources, country specific opinion polls)

Mediennutzung im New Normal

Nach dem Peak während des Lockdown ist die Mediennutzung wieder spürbar zurückgegangen – allerdings längst nicht bei allen Angeboten

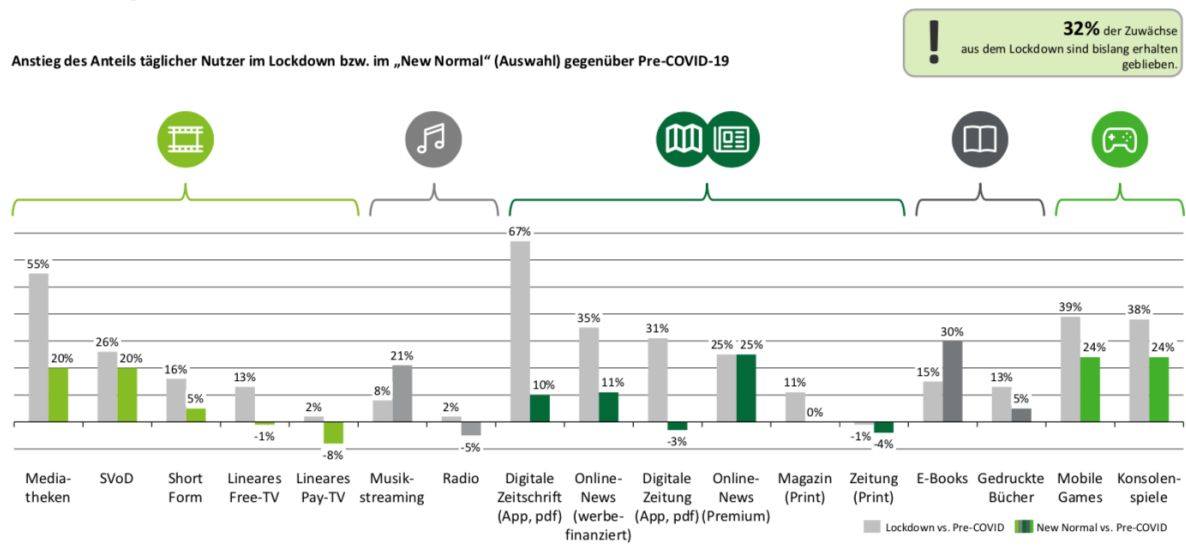


Figure 9: Media Usage in the “new normal”. Source: Deloitte (2021)

According to a study by Deloitte (2021), the first lockdown in March 2020 led to a high increase in news media overall. Demand for digital magazines (+67% of share of daily users compared to pre-Covid levels), online media libraries (+55%) and advertising-financed online-news (+35%) rose the most during this time (see grey bars in Figure 9 above). However, as of June 2020 – when the lockdown had eased while the pandemic was still a major media topic – only premium online-news

maintained the 25% increase of daily users they had gained during the lockdown. Deloitte also reports that a larger share of people was then willing to pay for access to such news portals. Meanwhile, the demand for other formats largely returned to pre-Covid levels.

By November 2020, when Germany's second (initially only partial) lockdown had started, the share of people using PSB TV-stations as their main information source increased the most, by 6 percentage points, compared to November 2019 (Infratest Dimap, 2020; see also Figure 4). The share of those primarily using online news portals run by newspapers or magazines also rose by 2 percentage points.

Overall, the data show that demand for premium online news and already highly-trusted PSB TV-programmes rose more than the demand for other types of media, especially during later stages of the pandemic.

8) What is the audience share of so-called 'alternative news' in your country? Did the risk of exposure to disinformation and fake news increase or decrease during the pandemic? Did this affect particular segments of the populations? (e.g., young people, people with a particular religious or political affiliation)

The share of people regularly using specified alternative media sites, such as "Junge Freiheit" or "Epoch Times", ranged between 1 and 4% of the population in November 2020 (Hölig and Hasebrink, 2020). However, when asked about their media use at the beginning of the pandemic, between 12% (Frischlich et al., 2020) and 52% (Viehmann et al., 2020) of respondents stated that they used alternative media in order to keep themselves informed, so it seemed that their audience initially increased in parallel with the overall increase in media demand.

Users of alternative news media were also more likely to report exposure to distorted news regarding Covid-19 than non-users (Frischlich et al., 2020). However, usage of such media decreased strongly during the course of the pandemic: by the end of July 2020, usage intensity decreased by 23.7% when compared to the beginning of the pandemic – much more than for any other kind of media (Stegers, 2021; see Figure 10 below). Furthermore, big social media platforms, such as Facebook, increasingly limited the spread of disinformation during the course of the pandemic, leading to its spread on less regulated websites and messenger-services instead. This meant that the risk of exposure decreased as the pandemic progressed, except for people explicitly seeking alternative news and/or being in contact with others who spread disinformation on a personal level. This means two groups of people were most likely to be exposed: Those from the "Querdenker" ("lateral thinkers") scene, who strongly criticised governmental responses to Covid, and mainstream media coverage, as well as people who were generally mistrusting of mainstream media. The former are characterised by an over-average education with a large share of self-employed people and a sympathy for esotericism (Reichard, 2021). The latter typically have low formal qualifications, high economic anxiety and a high preference for political extremes, such as the AfD ("alternative for Germany") (Institut für Publizistik der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 2019). Both groups are more likely to believe in and support conspiracy theories (Institut für Publizistik der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 2019; Reichard, 2021).

Abbildung 4
Entwicklung der Informationsnutzung in der Corona-Krise – drei Monate im Krisenverlauf Mitte April bis Ende Juli 2020

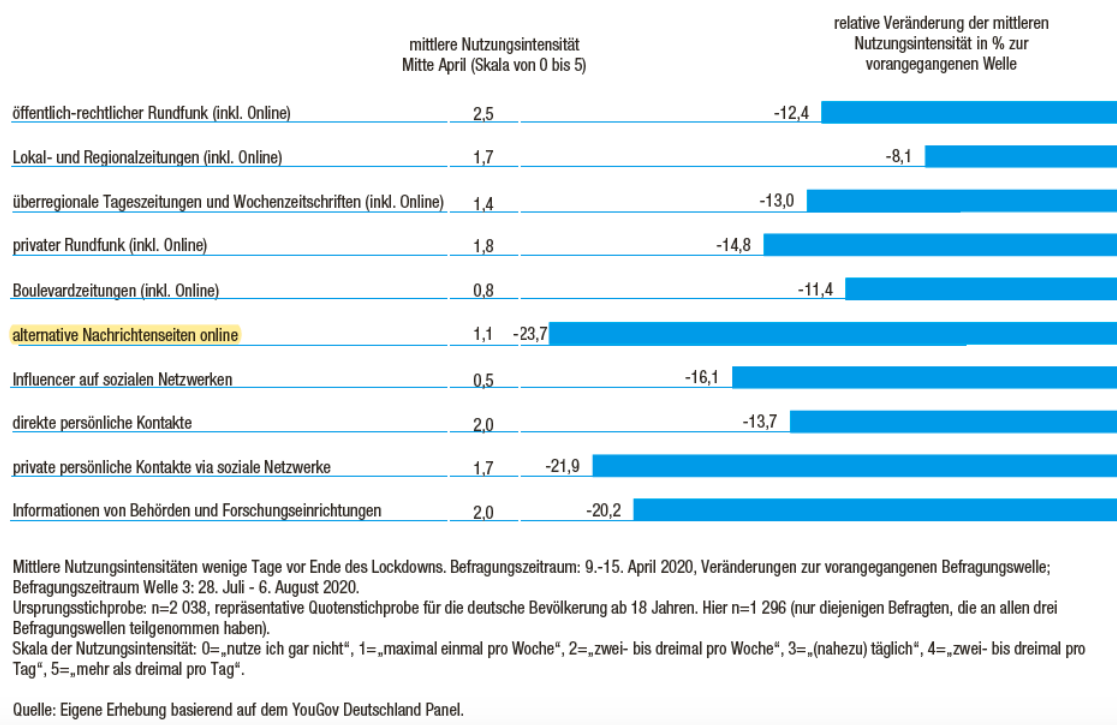


Figure 10: Development of information usage during the Corona-crisis. Source: Stegers, 2021

9) Any other relevant country specific patterns/data you wish to point out?

Germany was characterised by a comparatively high overall agreement in the governmental Corona-measures: 84% of German respondents found them appropriate, compared to an EU-average of 73% (Europäische Kommission, 2021). While during the course of the pandemic more and more people found the Corona-measures hard to bear (Europäische Kommission, 2021), the overall high level of agreement is likely to correlate with a higher overall trust in the mainstream media.

At the same time, critics from the political right felt underrepresented by mainstream news coverage, arguing that news providers were insufficiently critical of lockdown measures, and lacked impartiality. Furthermore, mainstream media had been accused of giving insufficient coverage to the former East Germany (Hölig and Hasebrink, 2020), which is also characterised by a higher share of supporters for the far-right party, AfD.

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Greece

The two surveys of Reuters Institute (2020 and 2021) reveal that media remain widely distrusted by Greeks. Trust in news in Greece is consistently one of the lowest in Reuters study. According to data from Reuters, 28% say they do not trust the news overall. In 2021, trust in news increased by four percentage points in Greece. Furthermore, a third (30% in 2020 and 33% in 2021) state that they trust the news they use themselves – while we find that trust in news in social media decreased by nine percentage points in 2021. The most trusted media are newspapers with large audiences (Kathimerini, To Vima, Ta Nea, Proto Thema and Efimerida twv Syntaktwn), bulletin news of private broadcasters (Alpha, Ant1, Star and Skai), online news sites (in.gr and news247). Many of the popular sources, such as SKAI News and Newsbomb, are also the least trusted (33% and 26%, respectively). Regional and local newspapers are also among the most trusted media. In general, private television and daily papers engender most trust.

1) Which were the most trusted media for information in 2020/2021(%)?

Trusted Media	2020	2021
Dikaiologitika.gr (online)	62	62
Kathimerini (newspaper)	62	60
Alpha News (Private broadcaster)	59	56
Ant1 News (Private broadcaster)	58	55
Real News (newspaper)	58	54
Regional or Local Newspaper	57	58
To Vima (newspaper)	56	57 (TA NEA)
In.gr (online)	56	56
ERT news (public Broadcaster)	55	58
News 247.gr (online)	54	53
Efimerida twv Syntaktwn (newspaper)	54	52
Star News (private broadcaster)	53	50
Proto Thema (newspaper)	52	48
Skai News (private broadcaster)	51	48
News bomb.gr (online)	48	47

Source: Reuters Institute. Digital News report 2020 and 2021

Different types of trust	2020	2021
News overall	28	32
News I use	30	33
News in search	32	35
News in social	31	22

Source: Reuters Institute. Digital News report 2020 and 2021

2) Which were the most used media for information in 2020/2021(%)?

Sources of News %	2020	2021
Online (incl. social media)	92	89
TV	67	67
Print	24	22
Social Media	71	69

Source: Reuters Institute. Digital News report 2020 and 2021

Used Media Offline % Weekly usage	2020	2021	Used Media Online	2020	2021
Skai News (private broadcaster, incl.radio)	55	51	News bomb.gr (online)	34	33
Ant1 News (Private broadcaster)	49	43	Dikaiologitika.gr (online)	30	31
Alpha News (Private broadcaster)	45	40	In.gr (online)	27	27
ERT news (public Broadcaster) (incl.ERT3 & ERA1)	36	38	News 247.gr (online)	27	26
Mega (private broadcaster)	-	34	Protothema online	26	26
Star News (private broadcaster)	35	34	Kathimerini online	25	24
Open News	30	32	Newsit.gr	23	22
Kathimerini	17	17	CNN Greece online	21	22
Real news (print &radio)	18	17	Skai online	24	20
Proto Thema (newspaper)	15	15	Newsbeast.gr	20	19
Regional or Local Newspaper	18	15	lefimerida.gr	17	19
To Vima (newspaper)	13	14	Mixanitouxrou.gr	19	18
Ta NEA (newspaper)	13	12	Zougla.gr	19	18
BBC news	11	11	Lifo.gr	18	18
CNN	10	10	Capital.gr	16	17
Efimerida twv syntaktwn	9	7	Naftemporiki online	16	16

Source: Reuters Institute. Digital News report 2020 and 2021

According to the two surveys of Reuters Institute (2020 and 2021), online media (including social media) are the most widely used sources of news in Greece (92% in 2020 and 89% in 2021). More than two-thirds (69%) of Greeks get their news online via social media, a much higher share than most countries in the sample. TV is the third source of news (67% for 2020 and 2021), while print has further declined as a source of news in Greece. In 2020, only 24% declare that the print is used as a source of news, while in 2021, print as a source of news decreased by two percentage points (22%). The most used offline media are mainly private broadcasters (while the ERT public broadcaster positioned in fourth place) and large audience newspapers, such as Kathimerini (also the most trusted media). The most used online media are mainly online news sites and secondly, the online versions of printed newspapers (such as Proto Thema and Kathimerini).

- 3) How are different trust levels distributed over different segments of media (print, radio, TV, social media, etc.) (%)? &
- 4) How much trust do you have in certain media? For each of the following media, do you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it? (%)

	Aut. 2011	Aut. 2012	Aut. 2013	Aut. 2014	Aut. 2015	Aut. 2016	Aut. 2017	Aut. 2018	Aut. 2019	Aut. 2020- 21
The written press										
Tend to trust	28	20	23	31	32	35	33	27	29	43
Tend not to trust	70	77	74	67	65	63	64	70	68	54
Don't know	2	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	3
Radio										
Tend to trust	36	28	32	40	37	42	44	33	35	49
Tend not to trust	61	70	65	59	61	57	53	64	62	49
Don't know	3	2	3	1	2	1	3	3	3	2
Television										
Tend to trust	22	15	15	21	20	23	22	18	22	25
Tend not to trust	77	84	84	79	80	77	78	82	78	74
Don't know	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Internet										
Tend to trust	42	41	38	46	43	46	42	42	42	54
Tend not to trust	38	43	46	38	42	36	40	46	44	39
Don't know	20	16	16	16	15	18	18	12	14	7

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 76-94

According to the table from 10 years of Eurobarometer research (2011-2021), two paradoxes are depicted. The first paradox relates to the press. The deep crisis in the print market in Greece is shown in Question 2. The circulation of all Sunday newspapers during a typical week in 2018 is down by 75%, compared to a typical week ten years ago (Newman et al., p.82). Despite those trends worsened during the pandemic, the press is more trusted as a medium compared to the television. It is interesting, though, that trust increased by 14 percentage points from 2019 to 2020-2021. The second paradox relates to television. As we explain in Question 7, television audiences increased during the pandemic while private broadcasters remained the most frequently accessed sources of news in Greece (see Question 2). But despite this trend, trust in television is one of the lowest percentages compared to all the other media. Greeks tend to use a medium that they do not trust. Websites and social media are the most frequently accessed sources of news which enjoy higher percentages of trust compared to all other media.

Media trust index (%)

	Aut. 2014	Aut. 2015	Aut. 2016	Aut. 2017	Aut. 2018	Aut. 2019	Aut. 2020- 21
High trust	16	15	16	14	11	14	17
Medium trust	35	36	37	38	36	32	47
Low or no trust	49	49	47	48	53	54	36

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 82-94

5) Did you observe significant increases in trust/distrust in different segments of media during the pandemic?

How much trust do you have in certain institutions? (%)

The written press	Jan. 2018	Apr. 2020
Tend to trust	28.4	33.8
Radio		
Tend to trust	48.3	56.4
Television		
Tend to trust	19,2	32
Internet		
Tend to trust	52.8	46.5
Social Media		
Tend to trust	25.8	26.9

Source: Dianeosis. *The age of the pandemic. April 2020*

How much trust do you have in media during the current period? (%)

	March – April 2020
Trust entirely	0
Tend to trust	11
Rather trust	46
No trust at all	43

Source: Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

How frequently do you use one of the following media for your information during the period of emergency measures? (%)

	Every day	3-4 times per week	1-2 times per week	Almost never	Never	Don't know
Social Media	57	15	9	9	10	1
Blogs	25	16	17	21	21	1
News websites	63	20	10	4	3	0
News in local channels	4	6	10	27	52	1
News in national channels	31	18	15	15	21	0
Radio news	13	10	14	24	39	0
The written press	4	2	8	19	66	1

Source: Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

The DiaNEOsis survey, which took place in April 2020, one month after the implementation of the first lockdown, when the first clues regarding the views and perceptions of Greek citizens at the beginning of an unfolding crisis were detected. According to the results, the different segments of media seemed to enjoy higher levels of trust in April 2020 (television +12.7%, radio +8.1%, written press +5.4%) than they did in January 2018, except for the Internet which became less trusted in April 2020 (-63%). However, the results of the survey conducted by the *Faculty of Communication and Media Studies* at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens during the first month of the quarantine period, depicted the mistrust of Greeks towards media since 43% of respondents stated that they did not trust the media at all, while 46% and 11% of them declared that they rather

trust and tend to trust media, respectively. Moreover, online media (63%) and social media (57%) were the daily-used sources for information in Greece during the incipient period of emergency measures. Only 31% of respondents declared the daily use of national channels as a source for their information, whereas the majority of survey participants seemed to reject the written press for their information (66% never used and 19% almost never), as well as the news derived from local channels (52% never watched and 27% almost never).

How much do you trust the media cited (whether you use them or not) (%)

May 2021	Social Media	Internet (incl. social media)	Tv	Radio	Printed press
Trust entirely	4	6	4	7	8
Tend to trust	24	49	33	49	41
Rather trust	43	38	32	35	36
No trust at all	71	7	31	8	14
NA	1	0	0	1	1

Source: Prorata. *New and Traditional Media. Attitudes and Perceptions. Mai 2021.*

The Prorata survey, which took place in May 2021, six months after the implementation of the second lockdown, detected distrust towards media since 71% stated that they rather trust and they do not trust at all social media, 63% television, 50% printed newspapers, 43% radio and 45% Internet (incl. social media).

6) Which are the most trusted sources of information on Covid-19 health risks/vaccines?

Among the following sources, which ones would you trust more to give you reliable information on COVID-19 vaccines? (%)

	May 2021
The European Union	28
The government	22
The health authorities	43
The regional or local authorities	7
Health professionals	65
Media	8
Websites	10
Online social networks	9
People around you	10
Don't know	11

Source: Flash Eurobarometer 494

The special Eurobarometer for Covid-19 in 2021 shows that the most trusted sources of information on Covid-19 health risks/vaccines during the pandemic are health professionals and health authorities. The level of trust in the media, websites and online social networks remain very low. What is interesting is that we can depict higher levels of trust for the European Union and the Government.

7) Has there been an increasing demand for quality news and trusted news sources during the pandemic? (Indicators: e.g., increase of audience share of selected news sources, country specific opinion polls)

Newspaper circulation between the two lock downs

<i>Printed</i>	<i>A Lockdown</i>	<i>B Lockdown</i>	<i>Change</i>
<i>Daily Newspapers (morning)</i>	<i>5,882</i>	<i>6,397</i>	<i>-8,2%</i>
<i>Daily Newspapers (afternoon)</i>	<i>29,725</i>	<i>27,705</i>	<i>-6,9%</i>
<i>Sunday Newspapers</i>	<i>113,310</i>	<i>102,000</i>	<i>-9%</i>

Source: EIHEA. Association of owners of daily newspapers

The Coronavirus crisis has increased news consumption for mainstream media. Television news and online sources have seen significant upticks. During the pandemic, more people identified online media (including social media) as their main source of news (see Reuters 2020 and 2021-Question 2) in percentages that increased when compared to other European countries (92% and 89%, respectively). More research from the Journalism and Mass Media Department at Aristotle University, Thessaloniki on the relationship between the public and the news media with regard to news coverage (before and during two periods during the coronavirus crisis) show that the time the public spent following the news during the first period of the pandemic (March-April 2020) increased significantly over the pre-crisis times, with time falling during the second period (April 2021). In the same research, the most popular news media for news were news websites (66%) and television (57%). Furthermore, when it comes to the printed press, we depict that consumption of printed newspapers has fallen. According to Reuters Institute in 2016, 31% declare, as their main source of news, printed media, while the percentages decreased significantly in 2020 (24%) and even more so in 2021 (22%). According to data from the Association of Daily Newspaper, circulation of printed media decreased between the two lockdowns, with the daily, weekly and Sunday press proving to be the victims of the pandemic. Having significantly lost their power in terms of circulation, in 2019, the newspapers sold a total of 46,776,501 copies, i.e., 7,431,607 fewer than in 2018. On the other hand, according to Nielsen Measurement, one out of two Greeks watched TV between 9.00 and 11.00 at night during the first quarantine period. Data depict an increase in viewership by 22 minutes, on average, during the first lockdown period i.e., from the last week of February to May 2020 (source: Nielsen in the Annual Year Book). Viewership during those hours recorded up to 79%. The average viewing time during the quarantine period reached 7.7 hours per day in women over 55, and 6.6 hours per day in men over 55. A large increase was recorded in children aged 4 - 17 years, as the viewing from 2.46 hours reached 2.6 hours per day. During the second lockdown period, television viewing dropped to 5 hours and 55 minutes, on average. The public service broadcaster's news bulletin showed modest increases in ratings, while there was a strong push towards digital with the establishment of a public service web platform, ERTflix, which includes news, but is primarily used for entertainment programmes.

8) What is the audience share of so-called ‘alternative news’ in your country? Did the risk of exposure to disinformation and fake news increase or decrease during the pandemic? Did this affect particular segments of the populations (e.g., young people, people with a particular religious or political affiliations)?

Have you been influenced by any fake news?

	March 2020	April 2020
Yes	62	50
No	38	50

Source: *Information and the COVID-19*. Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Department of Journalism and Media, Peace Journalism Lab.

The outbreak of the coronavirus crisis was accompanied by an explosion of disinformation and fake news about the virus, particularly on social media. The results of the survey conducted by the Peace Journalism Lab of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki during the incipient period of emergency measures demonstrated that the majority of respondents (62%) were influenced by fake news, while the corresponding percentage dropped to 50% in April 2020.

	May 2021
How many Internet-based information consumed on a daily basis do you consider as misleading, or as fake news?	18% state All/almost all/ most of them 61% state Half of them/some of them/few of them
Do you think that the media in our country offer objective information?	33% state Yes most of them/Yes some of them 66% state Yes, few of them/Rare
In your opinion, do television channels criticise in a satisfactory way actions of the Greek Government?	31% state definitely yes and probably yes 67% state definitely no and probably no
Who are responsible for the creation and the dispersion of fake news in Greece	47% organised mechanisms that serve private interests 33% Media groups 26% SYRIZA (Official opposition) 26% Journalists 25% The government of ND 15% Citizens like me 8% Governments of other countries

Source: *Prorata. New and Traditional Media. Attitudes and Perceptions. May 2021*.

The Prorata survey, which took place during the second lockdown 5-10 May 2021, shows important data about misinformation and fake news. According to the findings of the survey, 4 out of 10 respondents state that at least half of the Internet-based information to which they are exposed on a daily basis, is either false or misleading, while they estimate that the main source of misinformation is private interests and large media groups. Furthermore, the large majority of respondents think that media in Greece are not objective enough, and that television broadcasters do not criticise decisions of the Greek Government enough.

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Italy

1) Which were the most trusted media for information in 2020/2021?

According to the cross-national research presented in the Eurobarometer 95 in 2021, **television** was the most trusted media for information in Italy. This conclusion is interesting as it shows the resiliency of public trust towards an old medium in Italy. The surveys shows that 55.9% of Italians trusted television, while 39.5% did not, and only 4.6% did not know how to assess the level of trust in this medium. In other words, trust in television is relatively important in Italy, being higher than the trust shown in other media sources, though also the radio and written press were trusted by the majority of the population (see below). On the other hand, the Italian trust towards TV outweighed the European average, with (51%) of European population putting their trust in this medium.

	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Tend to trust	572	55.91	55.91
Tend not to trust	404	39.49	95.41
Don't know	47	4.59	100.00
Total	1023	100.00	

Table 1. Trust in Television. Source: Eurobarometer 95.1

2) Which were the most used media for information in 2020/2021?

According to a survey conducted by Eurobarometer, the most-used medium for informing the Italian citizens was television (Table 2). Almost 90% of Italian citizens used it every day or almost every day, with 7.2% of the citizens using it at least once a week. On the contrary, less than 1% of the population did not use television at all. Therefore, the television is both the most trusted and most used medium in Italy. On a daily basis, media consumers in Italy also use the **Internet** (17.2%) and **written press** (16.6%) while 33.3% (the Internet) and 39.7% (the written press) never use these media for getting information. Finally, in last place is the **radio**, with only 7.7% of regular users and more than half of respondents never using it (54.6%).

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Everyday/ Almost everyday	912	89.15	89.15
Two or three times a week	74	7.23	96.38
About once a week	12	1.17	97.56
Two or three times a month	8	0.78	98.34
Less often	11	1.08	99.41
Never	6	0.59	100.00
Total	1023	100.00	

Table 2 Use of Television (via the TV Set). Source: Eurobarometer 95.1

3) How are different trust levels distributed over different segments of media (print, radio, TV, social media, etc.)?

As presented in Table 3, the Italian context shows a mixed scenario in terms of the observed distrust/trust. In general, all the so-called legacy media have benefitted from a majoritarian level of support among the Italian population. Apart from the aforementioned television outlet, the written press and the radio are trusted by the majority of the Italian population, by 51.8% and 50.2%, respectively. This pattern has notably reversed concerning the new media, which have been much more distrusted in comparison to the older media. In fact, 45% of the sample has trusted the Internet, though the share of those trusting it is slightly higher than those distrusting it (41.9%). Instead, the number of those trusting social media is much lower, with only 27.3% of the population expressing confidence in this media outlet, and a large majority of Italian citizens distrusting it (57.3%). In short, trust in legacy media (radio, TV and written press) remains important, while the new media have sparked more controversial and negative judgements among the Italian population.

TRUST IN MEDIA: WRITTEN PRESS	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Tend to trust	530	51.81	51.81
Tend not to trust	436	42.62	94.43
Don't know	57	5.57	100.00
Total	1023	100.00	
TRUST IN MEDIA: RADIO	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Tend to trust	513	50.15	50.15
Tend not to trust	407	39.78	89.93
Don't know	103	10.07	100.00
Total	1023	100.00	
TRUST IN MEDIA: INTERNET	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Tend to trust	460	44.97	44.97
Tend not to trust	429	41.94	86.90
Don't know (SPONTANEOUS)	134	13.10	100.00
Total	1023	100.00	
TRUST IN MEDIA: ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Tend to trust	279	27.27	27.27
Tend not to trust	586	57.28	84.56
Don't know (SPONTANEOUS)	158	15.44	100.00
Total	1023	100.00	

Table 3: Trust in Media: Written Press, Radio, Internet, Online Social Media. Source: Eurobarometer 95.1

4) What are the trends in the development of trust over the last 10 years?

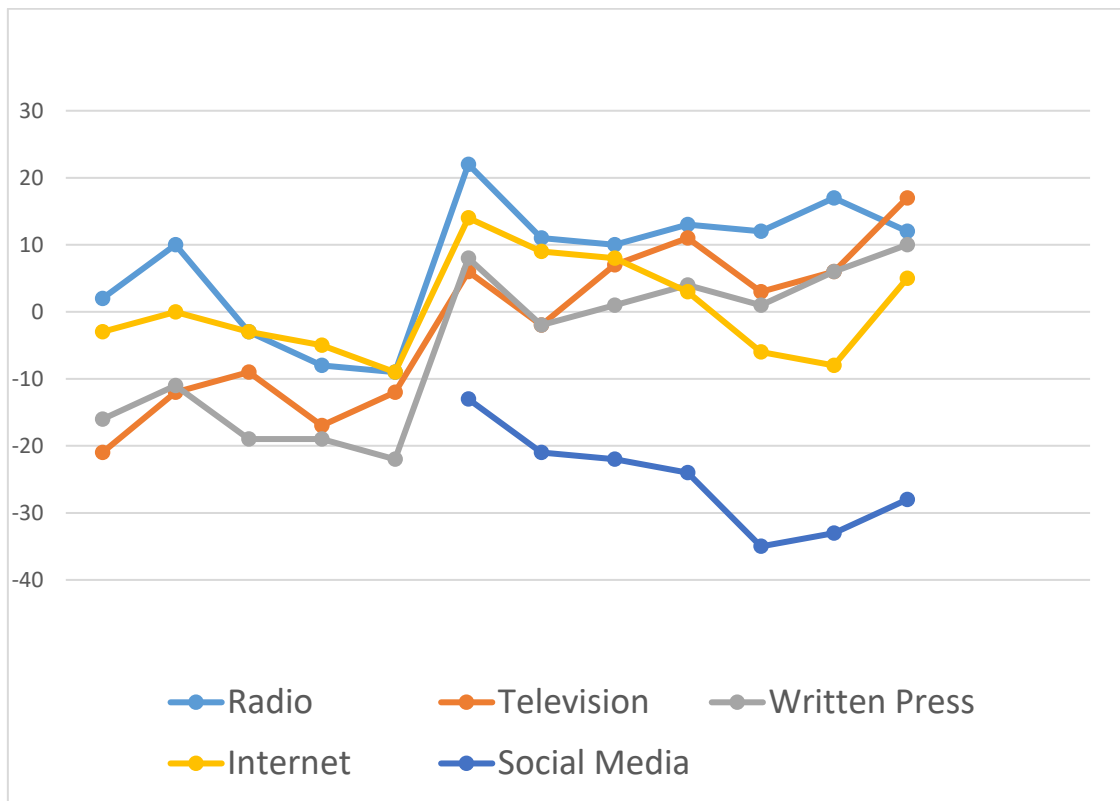


Figure 2: Net Trust in Media in Italy (2009-2021). Source: Operating Eurovision and Euroradio 2021 (EDU)

As can be inferred from the data presented in Figure 1, over the observed period of 10 years, Italy had experienced a generalised growth in net media trust. The media trust measures the difference between those expressing trust in a particular source, and those expressing distrust. By taking as the reference category the year 2009, it is noteworthy that net trust in television has completely reversed over time. In fact, in 2009, the net trust towards television was strongly negative (-21), while it became strongly positive in 2021 (+17), reaching maximum levels of net trust during that entire period. A similar trend occurred concerning the written press, which epitomised a pattern of increasing net trust, switching from a very negative rate in 2009 (-16) to a positive one (+10). Trust in radio has been generally less controversial among Italian citizens during the timespan observed, though it had also undergone a positive trajectory in the growth of net trust. In brief, the traditional media have spurred positive responses among citizens, who have probably reassessed the benefits related to the information consumption through these mainstream sources. The pattern is more complex regarding the new media. The Internet has become more trusted among the population throughout this period, though it is comparatively less trusted than other media sources. As for the social media, these have been largely distrusted by the Italian citizens, with the net level of trust being steadily negative and substantially worsening over time. This confirms previous results of our analysis, with the traditional media being much more trusted in comparison to the new ones, even if the Internet has also become a more trusted information source over time.

5) Which are the most trusted sources of information on Covid-19 health risks/vaccines? (Check Covid-19 special Eurobarometer!)

As for the trusted sources of information during the vaccination period, the Covid-19 Special Eurobarometer provides us with interesting results. The majority of Italian citizens trusted health authorities (54.5%) or health professionals (doctors, nurses, etc., 60.1%). Therefore, the specialised

experts were the favourite sources of information among the Italian citizens on the vaccine. Vice versa, other sources of information were residually trusted by the Italians citizens.

As for the media, the online social networks were poorly trusted, with only 5.8% mentioning this as a trusted source of information. Similarly, websites were mentioned only by 8.4% of the respondents in the Eurobarometer survey as a trusted information source on the vaccine. These findings corroborate the previous parts of this report, showing the lack of trust towards the new or alternative media sources among Italian citizens, who have not developed positive orientations towards these information outlets. As for the traditional media, they have been measured as a unique item (television, radio and newspapers), recording a substantially higher level of trust among the Italians as compared to the new media. Indeed, 16.9% of Italians have expressed their confidence towards television, radio and newspapers. Nonetheless, as this was an aggregate measure, the percentage is relatively modest, with citizens substantially relying on other (specialised) sources.

TRUST VACCINE INFO SOURCE: ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Not mentioned	964	94.23	94.23
Online social networks	59	5.77	100.00
Total	1023	100.00	

TRUST VACCINE INFO SOURCE: WEBSITES	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Not mentioned	937	91.59	91.59
Websites	86	8.41	100.00
Total	1023	100.00	

TRUST VACCINE INFO SOURCE: MEDIA	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Not mentioned	850	83.09	83.09
Media (television, radio, newspapers)	173	16.91	100.00
Total	1023	100.00	

Table 4: Trust in Vaccine Information Sources: Television, Written Press, Radio, online social media, websites. Source: Eurobarometer 95.1

6) Has there been an increasing demand for quality news and trusted news sources during the pandemic? (Indicators: e.g., increase of audience share of selected news sources, country specific opinion polls).

According to CENSIS (Centre of Studies for Social Investments), the outbreak of the pandemic and the subsequent phase of social restrictions led the Italian citizens to increasingly rely on “institutional information sources”. In particular, 60.1% of the Italian citizen relied on television news broadcasting throughout the entire period. The television news has always held the top position as the most used and relied on source during this period, remaining the most privileged source among the oldest cohort of the population (65-80 years old, with 73.2% of users), slightly decreasing in age (67.7% of those between 45 and 64 years old, 50.8% among those between 30 and 44 years old; 42.3% among the youngest). Television news has increased its audience by 2.9%.

More importantly, the Italian citizens have increasingly devoted attention to scientific, medical and technological news. The interest in these kinds of topics has been traditionally weak among Italian citizens, but it has gradually increased, given the presence of a large number of epidemiologists and virologists on television (Table 5). The desire to get more information on Covid-19 is reflected in the growing interest in scientific, medical and technological news, which went from a preference of 27.7% of the population in 2019, to 33.4% in 2021 (+ 5.7%) (Table 6). The opinion on the presence of experts (from various medical fields) on the media scene is positive for over half of the Italians (54.2%): these were necessary to obtain information on the correct behaviors to adopt (15.5%) or because these were useful for understanding what was happening (38.7%).

	2019	2021	Diff. % 2019-2021
Politica nazionale	42,4	39,7	-2,7
Scienza, medicina, tecnologia	27,7	33,4	5,7
Stili di vita, viaggi, cucina	28,0	28,5	0,5
Cronaca nera	26,1	27,9	1,8
Sport	29,4	26,3	-3,1
Cultura e spettacoli	26,7	24,8	-1,9
Cronaca rosa e gossip	18,2	18,2	0,0
Economia	15,3	15,8	0,5
Politica estera	10,5	10,6	0,1

Fonte: indagini Censis, 2019-2021

Table 5: More Interesting News Topics, 2019-2021 in %. Source: CENSIS 2021 (Centre of Studies for Social Investments)

These results show us the higher propensity and demands among the Italian population to obtain high quality information, with the citizens paying more attention towards “technical experts” within the media debate.

7) What is the audience share of so-called ‘alternative news’ in your country? Did the risk of exposure to disinformation and fake news increase or decrease during the pandemic? Did this affect particular segments of the populations? (e.g., young people, people with a particular religious or political affiliation)

According to CENSIS, the information during the pandemic not only generated confusion and fueled fear, but another negative and very dangerous effect of coronavirus communicative bulimia was the uncontrolled proliferation of fake news. In some cases, this was also conveyed by political personalities. Sometimes it was obviously false news, increasing social alarm, spreading the belief that the measures they were taking were not the right ones, pushing to adopt self-injurious behaviours. The undisputed realm of fake news was the Internet, where it is easier for the perpetrators to circulate and share such uncontrolled, unreliable, self-produced news. There are 29 million Italians (57.0% of the total) who, during the emergency, found news on the web and social media that, subsequently, turned out to be false or wrong about origins, modalities contagion, symptoms, distancing measures or treatments related to Covid-19 (Table 6).

“During the health emergency pandemic related to Covid-19, did you happen to get information on the web and social networks that later turned out to be false / wrong?”	18-34 years old	35-64 years old	More than 65 years old	All
Yes	63.8%	66.3%	37.6%	57%
No	36.2%	33.7%	62.4%	43 %
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 6. Source: CENSIS 2021 (Centre of Studies for Social Investments)

We can observe that those who were most exposed to the fake news were those between 35 and 65 years old, although this is a broad age cohort, encompassing several generations. The younger cluster also displayed a marked exposure to fake news. Instead, the older cluster was less affected by this phenomenon of disinformation, probably being less prone to relying on alternative media (social networks and the Internet) to obtain information. Therefore, there is a generational divide on the exposure to fake news, with the older population being less exposed to this disinformation process.

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Poland

1) Which were the most trusted media for information in 2020/2021?

In 2021, the most trusted media channels in Poland were as presented in Table 1 below: 1) RMF FM radio (68% interviewees reported to be trustworthy), 2) TVN news (64% trustworthy), 3) Polsat news (64% trustworthy), 4) Radio Zet (62% trustworthy), 5) Onet.pl (61% trustworthy) (Digital news report 2021: 95) It needs to be underlined that none of them are public channels, and the most trusted one is a highly commercial radio channel.

Most used sources of information		Most trusted sources of information	
	% of Poles using the source at least weekly		% of Poles trusting
Onet.pl ¹	50%	RMF FM radio ⁵	68%
TVN news ² (including TVN 24)	49%	TVN news ²	64%
Wp.pl ³	39%	Polsat news ⁴	64%
Polsat news ⁴	38%	Radio Zet ⁶	62%
RMF FM radio ⁵	38%	Onet.pl ¹	61%

Table 1. Top five most used and most trusted media brands in Poland in 2020. Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2021, p. 94

¹ Internet media platform, owned by Axel Springer

² Commercial television channel, owned by Discovery and since 2022 – Warner Bros

³ Internet media platform, owned by a Polish company

⁴ Commercial television channel, owned by Polish company

⁵ Commercial radio channel, owned by Bauer Media company

⁶ Commercial radio channel, owned by a Polish company

The assessment of which specific media and channels may be recognised as trustworthy runs parallel to political cleavages in Poland. The national channel (TVP) and the TVN television, perceived as rival media, show how supporters of right-wing Law and Justice and liberal Civic Platform are distrustful of the opposition's media sources. According to CBOS (2022), 86% of Law and Justice voters positively evaluate the national TVP channel, in comparison with 2% of Civic Platform voters. On the contrary, TVN channel (Warner Bros own it, and it was previously owned by ITI, a Polish holding maintained by right-wing supporters and led by post-communist secret service agents) was perceived as good by 34% of Law and Justice voters and 88% of Civic Platform voters.

	The public television channel TVP	TVN commercial television perceived as opposition to government
	Positive evaluation of the channel	
Law and Justice voters (right-wing)	86%	34%
Civic Platform voters (liberal)	2%	88%

Table 2. Political and media polarisation in Poland. Source: CBOS 2022

According to the national pooling institution (CBOS 2020) out of the three channels whose positions were evaluated, the most positively evaluated TV channel was Polsat news (71% interviewees reported their positive assessment), TVN news was positively assessed by 63% and national TV channel – by 56%. In the latest case, the negative evaluation of national TV channel grew from 12% in 2009 to 32% in 2019. (CBOS 2019a).

2) Which were the most used media for information in 2020/2021?

The most used sources of information in 2021 in Poland were, in the case of TV, radio and print media: 1) TVN news (49% of interviewees reported at least weekly use of the channel), 2) TV channel, Polsat news (38%), 3) radio channel, RMF FM (38%), 4) national TV channel TVP News (26%), 5) radio channel, Radio Zet (25%), 5) daily newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza (17%). In case of online media, the most frequently used were the following information sites: 1) onet.pl (50%) (owned by a Polish company but is a part of Axel Springer), 2) wp.pl (39%) (owned by a Polish media company), 3) tvn 24.pl (36%), 4) interia.pl (30%), 5) Gazeta Wyborcza.pl (20%) (Digital news report 2021: 95). Table 1 above shows the total ranking of the most frequently used five media sources.

As already noted, the high level of political polarisation is also present in news usage in Poland. In 2019, 7% of right-wing Law and Justice supporters, and 40% of supporters of liberal Civic Platform reported that commercial TVN television is their main source of information, whereas the Polish national channel, TVP news, was 43% and 2%, accordingly (CBOS, 2019).

3) How are different trust levels distributed over different segments of media (print, radio, TV, social media, etc.)?

In 2021, 48% of Poles reported overall trust in the news. The remaining independent media in Poland tended to score better on trust, while public national broadcaster, TVP, was more distrusted (46%) than trusted (36%) (Reuters 2021:95).

As presented in Table 3, according to Eurobarometer, 33% of Poles report high trust in the media, which was one of the highest scores in Europe (Eurobarometer 2021: 39)

11% of Poles reported that they tend to trust the written media, 52% of Poles reported that they tend to trust radio; in the case of television, 46%, and 54% reported that they tend to trust the Internet, whilst 44% said they trust online social networks.

It needs to be underlined that trust in the Internet and social networks gives Poland the 1st rank in Europe, whereas the trust level in printed media is one of the lowest scores in Europe (EBU 2021: 9).

	Trust level ("tend to trust" in %)		Trust change (win 20/21: aut 19) (in % points)	
	Poland	EU 27	Poland	EU 27
The media in general	33	21	+5	+2
Radio	52	58	-2	+1
Television	46	51	-4	+2
The Internet	54	35	+6	+3
Online social networks	44	19	+9	-1

Table 3: Trust in different segments of media and its dynamic in Poland against the EU benchmark. Source: Eurobarometer 2021

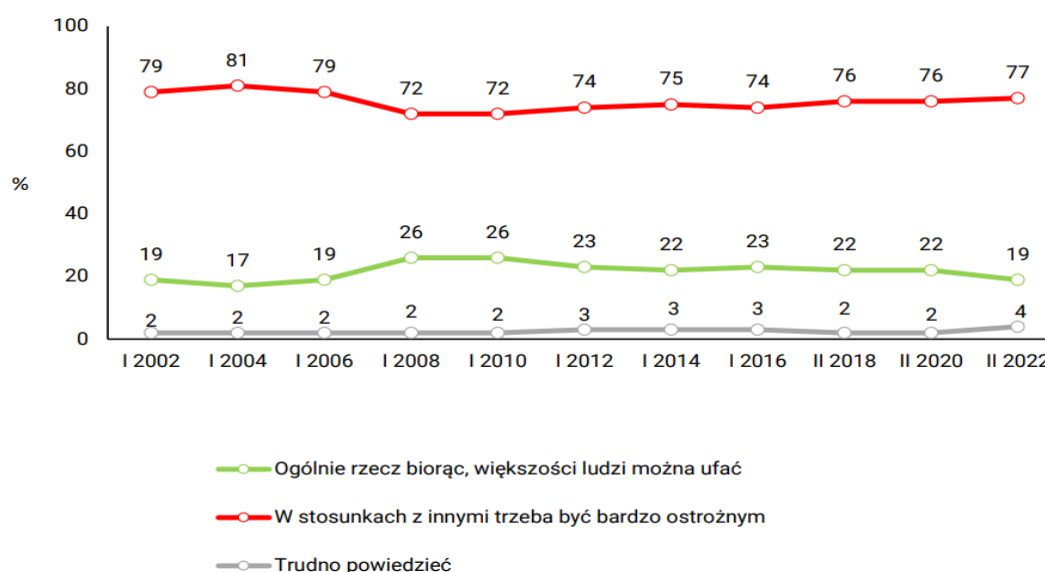
According to the EBU report (2021), low trust in press in Poland runs parallel to low press freedom index (EBU 2021: 17), whereas low levels of trust in the national news run parallel to the widely shared opinion that they provide little diversity of opinion in Poland (EBU 2021: 23).

According to the national survey conducted by the Polish Economic Institute in December 2020 (Grzeszak, 2021), on a 10-point scale, the level of trust in different media sources was as follows:

radio: 5.65; print daily newspapers: 5.12; print weekly journals 5.02; television: 4.57; the social media: 4.50 (ibid.:24)

4) What have the trends of the development of trust been over the last 10 years?

General social trust in Poland was increasing between 2002 and 2008 – there was a rise of people holding an opinion that most people can be trusted – from 19% to 26%, and a drop in the share of those claiming that overall, one should never be too cautious – from 79% to 72%. Between 2008 and 2016, these levels were stable, and since 2016, we can observe a growth of distrust (in the case of the opinion “one should never be too cautious” from 74% in 2016 to 76% in 2020, whilst in the case of the opinion “most people can be trusted”, there was a decline from 23% in 2016 to 22% in 2020). (CBOS 2020) Updated data about social trust dynamics is presented in Picture 1 below.



Picture 1. Social trust dynamics in Poland. Percentage of Poles who agree that most people can be trusted (in green) and saying that “one should never be too cautious” (in red). Green: “In general, most people can be trusted”; red: “in relations with others, one needs to be very cautious”; grey “difficult to say”. Source: CBOS 2022

According to Eurobarometer (2021:39) trust in media in Poland is not only one of the highest in Europe, but also slightly increasing - by 2 points from 2020, up to 33% of Poles reporting high trust in media (Eurobarometer 2021: 39) (See: Table 3). Yet, according to the national pooling institution, between 2020 and 2022, the share of Poles generally trusting media dropped from 32% to 29% (while the level of those distrusting – 55% remained stable) (CBOS 2022:10). No earlier measurements of trust in media had been made by CBOS.

When compared to 2019, in 2021, the following changes in the levels of trust in specific media sources were reported in Poland (Eurobarometer 2019):

- trust to radio: decreased by 2 points,
- trust to television: decreased by 4 points,
- trust to internet: increased by 6 points,
- trust to online social networks: increased by 9 points.

5) Did you observe significant increase in trust/distrust in different segments of media during the pandemic?

As pointed above, according to Eurobarometer (2021), during the pandemic, there was a significant increase in trust in the Internet and social media in Poland. In both cases, Poland was far above the

EU-average (what applies to the level of trust and the dynamics of its increase). The growth by 6 points (compared to 3 points for the whole EU) is high, and the growth of trust in online social networks (9 points compared to a 1-point decrease in average in the EU) is exceptional. Yet, due to the scarcity of sources presenting data on trust change to specific sources of information, we need to be cautious when interpreting these mentioned data.

6) Which are the most trusted sources of information on Covid/19 health risks/vaccines? (Check Covid-19 special Eurobarometer)

When answering the question: “Among the following sources, which ones would you trust most to give you reliable information on Covid-19 vaccines?”, Poles pointed to the following information sources (Eurobarometer: 2021a):

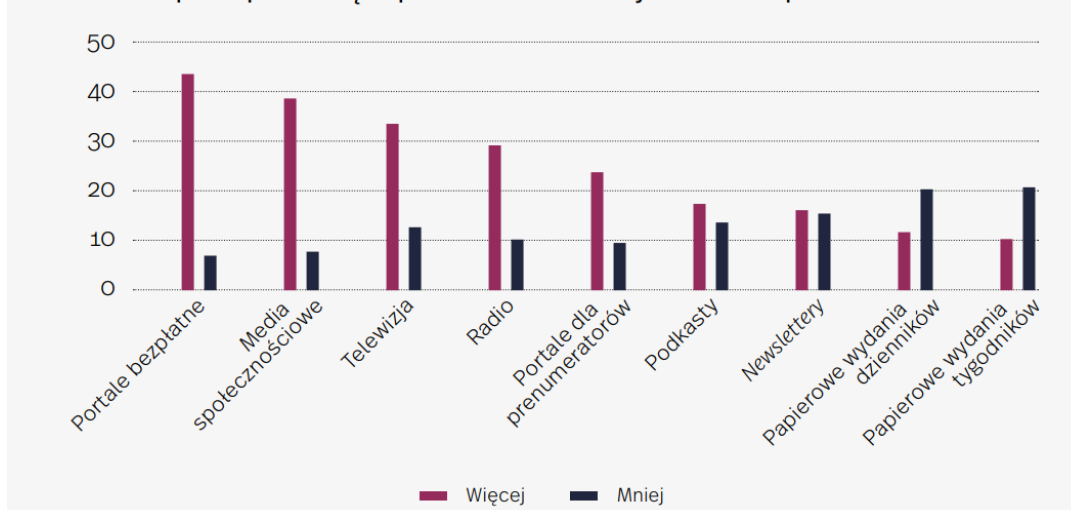
- health professionals: 42% (which is the lowest rank of trust in this source of information on COVID in the EU),
- people around me 26%,
- national authorities 24% (which is also the lowest rank of trust in this source of information on COVID in the EU),
- websites 16% (which is the highest rank of trust in this source of information on COVID in the EU),
- television 13%,
- online social media 10%,
- national government 11%,
- the regional authorities 7%.

Interestingly, a significant share of Poles regard media, in general, as a part of the pandemic problem. 43% agree with the statement that “pharmaceutical lobbyists and media worldwide deliberately over-emphasise the threat of Covid-19”. (CBOS 2020a)

7) Was there an increase in demand for quality news and trusted news sources during the pandemic? (Indicators: e.g., increase of audience share of selected news sources, country specific opinion polls)

An indirect measure of the increasing demand for quality news and trusted news sources may be a higher share of Poles paying for access to Internet content – from 11% in 2019 to 19% in 2020 (CBOS 2021).

Wykres 10. Procent respondentów deklarujących, że zdobywają mniej lub więcej wiadomości niż przed pandemią za pośrednictwem różnych środków przekazu



Picture 2. Percentage of Polish interviewees declaring they acquire more (in red) or less (in black) information from listed media sources after the pandemic than before. On the graph, from left side, following media sources listed: free Internet portals; social media; television; radio; pay-wall Internet sources; podcasts; newsletters; daily news in print; weekly journals in print. Source: Grzeszak, 2021, p. 20

Also, the Polish Economic Institute's (Grzeszak, 2021) survey on change in media use in Poland during the pandemic suggests that there has been an increase in demand for quality news and sources, yet, it was outweighed by the increasing demand for free and lower-quality media sources. When interviewees were asked which media sources they use more than before the pandemic, their responses pointed to: free Internet news sites (43% of interviewees), social media (39%), television (33%), radio (29%), pay-wall portals (23%), whereas in the case of printed newspapers and journals, 20% reported less usage than before the pandemic (Grzeszak, 2021: 20).

8) What is the audience share of so-called 'alternative news' in your country? Did the risk of exposure to disinformation and fake news increase or decrease during the pandemic? Does this affect particular segments of the population (e.g., young people, people with a particular religious or political affiliation)?

When assessing the audience share of "alternative news" in Poland, indirect measures can be used. 36% of Poles report that they read press on the Internet. This is the habit of 63% of people with a higher education. 61% of interviewees report reading news on online websites, which is the typical practice of 91% of people with a higher education level. In case of watching the content produced by other users, 28% of Poles confirm using this information source, and this is a habit reported by 70% of people aged 18-24. (CBOS 2021).

Precise information about using alternative sites is difficult to report, due to a lack of data and the presence of both right-wing and left-wing alternative websites used by different social groups (CBOS 2021).

Detailed information on the risk of misinformation in the field of public health, including Covid-19, shows that 30% of Poles maintain that the pandemic had been previously planned, and a share of people holding this view is particularly high among youth (aged 18-34), those living in rural areas, and especially those with lower levels of education (44% with primary-level education compared to 12% with higher education levels who maintain the pandemic was planned) (Digital Poland Foundation 2022: 22).

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Serbia

1) Which were the most trusted media for information in 2020/2021?

According to the cross-national research conducted by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU 2021⁹⁸, 8) in 2021, **the Internet**⁹⁹ was the most trusted media for information in Serbia (which was also the case in Greece, Hungary, Poland). However, this conclusion should be taken with caution since it would be more precise to say that the Internet is the least distrusted media in Serbia. For instance, 35% of the Serbian population trust the Internet as a source of information, while 41% do not show trust, and almost one quarter of the population (24%) do not know how to assess the level of trust in this medium (EBU 2021, 41). In other words, even trust in the Internet is low in Serbia (Net Trust Index¹⁰⁰ is -6), however, it is still higher than the trust in the rest of the media (EBU 2021, 40)¹⁰¹.

On the other hand, while on the European average (27 of 37 countries covered) social networks are the least trusted, in Serbia, the least trusted media is the **written press** (EBU 2021, 8). In Serbia, 64% of citizens do not trust this medium, less than one third (29%) have a certain level of trust, while 7% did not know how to answer the question. Therefore, the net trust in written press is -35, which is, by the EBU standards, categorised as “no trust” (EBU 2021, 37).

2) Which were the most used media for information in 2020/2021?

According to the survey conducted (on a nationally representative sample) during the summer of 2020, the most important media for informing the citizens of Serbia was television (Figure 1). This is also confirmed by several other surveys¹⁰². Only 20% of Serbian citizens never really use **television** for acquiring information, while 38.4% use it every day. On a daily basis, media consumers in Serbia also use the **Internet** (17.2%) and **written press** (16.6%) while 33.3% (the Internet) and 39.7% (written press) never use these media for getting information. Finally, in last place is the **radio** with only 7.7% of regular users and more than half of those who never use it (54.6%).

⁹⁸ European Broadcasting Union (EBU) (2021) Market Insights Trust in Media 2021, Public Version, EBU Media Intelligence Service.

⁹⁹ According to the EBU 2021, **radio** is the most trusted medium in Europe, scoring highest in 24 of 37 countries.

¹⁰⁰ The Net Trust Index has been developed by the EBU Media Intelligence Service to obtain an idea of the level of trust each country's citizens have in the different types of media. The Net Trust Index is defined as the difference between the percentage of the population who answered 'tend to trust' and 'tend not to trust' to the survey question, not taking into account 'do not know' replies. The index can range from a minimum value of -100 to a maximum value of +100.

¹⁰¹ The internet receives negative Net Trust values in 30 of 37 countries (81%). Net Trust is positive in seven countries, mainly located in Eastern Europe, with highest Net Trust values observed in Poland, Greece and Hungary (EBU 2021, 40).

¹⁰² https://crta.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Crta_istrazivanje_Stavovi-gradjana-Srbije-o-ucescu-u-demokratskim-procesima-2020.-godine.pdf

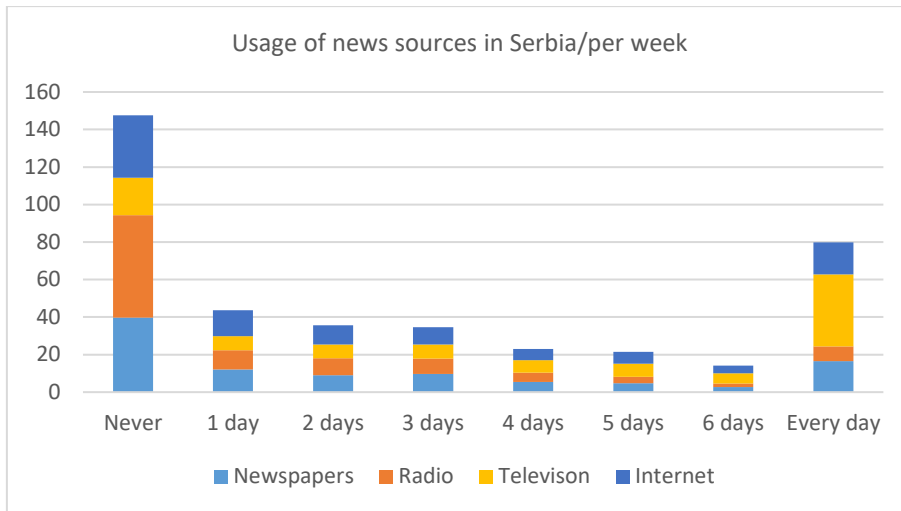


Figure 1. Usage of news sources in Serbia/per week. Source: Petrović and Bešić (2021)¹⁰³

Another survey conducted in November 2020 by CRTA¹⁰⁴ (Figure 2) shows that most Serbian citizens use television and radio as a news source (65%), followed by the Internet (48%), social media (43%) and written press (26%).

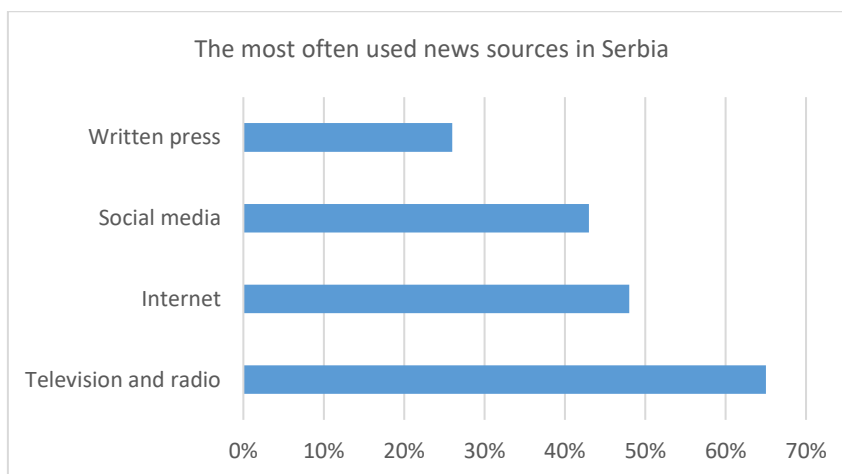


Figure 2. The most often used news sources in Serbia. Source: CRTA 2021

3) How are different trust levels distributed over different segments of media (print, radio, TV, social media, etc.)?

According to the EBU 2021 data, the trust levels over different segments of media in Serbia are distributed as presented in Figure 3.

¹⁰³ Petrović, Dalibor and Miloš Bešić (2021) Distrusted News: News Consumption During COVID-19 in Serbia. Proceedings of 15. Serbian Political Studies Association Annual Conference 2021 (in press). <http://www.upns.rs/sites/default/files/2021-12/SPSA%202021%20Conference%20Programme%20final%20list%20of%20presentations.pdf>

¹⁰⁴https://crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Crta_istrazivanje_Stavovi-gradjana-Srbije-o-ucescu-u-demokratskim-procesima-2020.-godine.pdf

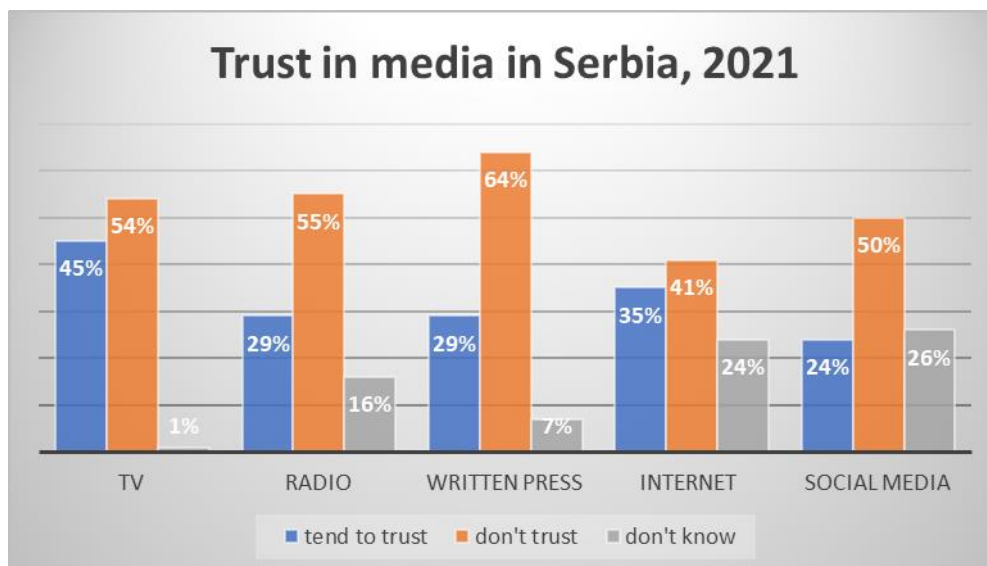


Figure 3. Trust in media in Serbia, 2021. Source: EBU 2021

As presented in Figure 3, distrust prevails in the case of all media. The highest observed distrust is in the so-called legacy media: written press (64% of respondents do not trust this media), followed by radio (55%) and television (54%). In comparison to the rest of Europe¹⁰⁵, trust in legacy media (radio, TV and written press) is lowest in Mediterranean and South-eastern Europe (Serbia being one of them) (EBU 2021, 15). New media – the Internet (41%) and social media (50%) - are less distrusted in comparison to the older media.

If we take into consideration the flip side of the coin - the levels of trust in media - we can conclude that in relative terms, TV is the most trusted (45%) by Serbian citizens, followed by the Internet (35%), radio (29%), written press (29%) and the social media (24%).

Table 1 summarises the Net Trust Index (Net Trust Index = ‘Tend to trust’ – ‘Tend not to trust’) for the different media. As presented in the table, Serbian citizens have the highest (yet the total sum is negative) trust in the Internet, followed by TV.

Within the scope of the EBU research project, Net Trust Index is classified in four categories: high trust (Net Trust Index higher than 10); Medium trust (Net Trust Index between 0 and 10); Low trust (Net Trust Index between -1 and -10); No trust (Net Trust Index below -10). According to this criterion, the population in Serbia has low trust in TV and the Internet, and no trust at all in radio, social media and written press.

Media segment	TV	Radio	Written Press	Internet	Social Media
NT Index	-9	-26	-35	-6	-24

Table 1 EBU Net Trust Index

4) What have the trends of the development of trust been over the last 10 years?

As can be concluded from the data presented in Figure 4, over the observed period of 10 years, the Internet was the most trusted source of information in Serbia (with the positive Net Trust for the majority of time).

¹⁰⁵ Measured as the average of Net Trust indices for radio, TV, and the written press, legacy media are trusted in 26 of the 37 countries (70%).

Trust in the TV has varied over the years – with a record low (Net Trust Index -18) in 2015 and a record high (Net Trust Index -1) in 2014. The observed trend regarding the trust in radio is negative (from the highest point in 2013 (NTI -10) to the lowest point in 2021 (NTI -26)). Written Press has been constantly the least trusted source of information in Serbia, with the record minimum (NTI -41) observed in 2017. Finally, trust in social networks has been measured since 2014 and it is in decline. Trust in social networks is somewhere in between the other media – with minimal levels recorded in the last few years (NTI -24)

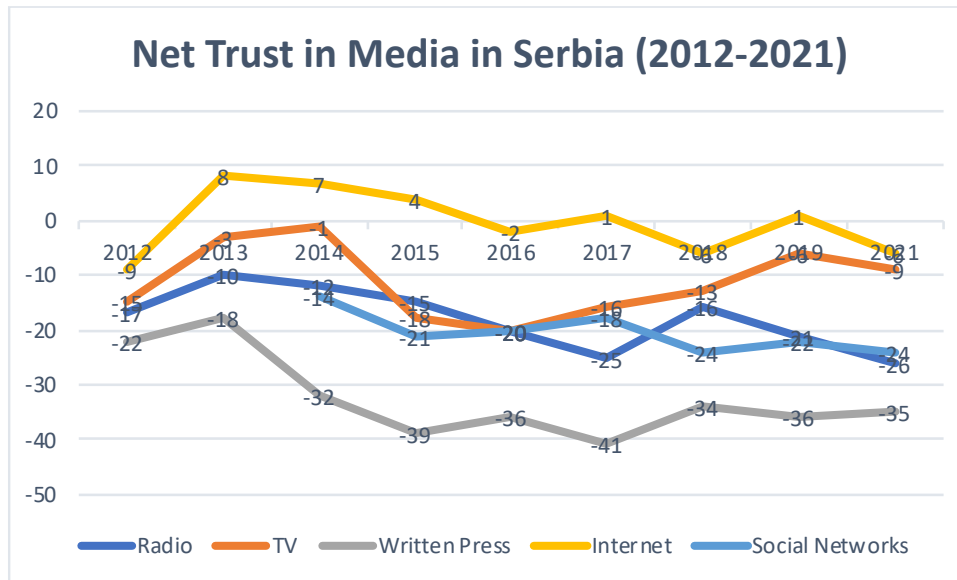


Figure 4. Net Trust in Media in Serbia (2012-2021). Source: <https://www.ebu.ch/resources?publication-Type=research> (accessed 20/12/2021)

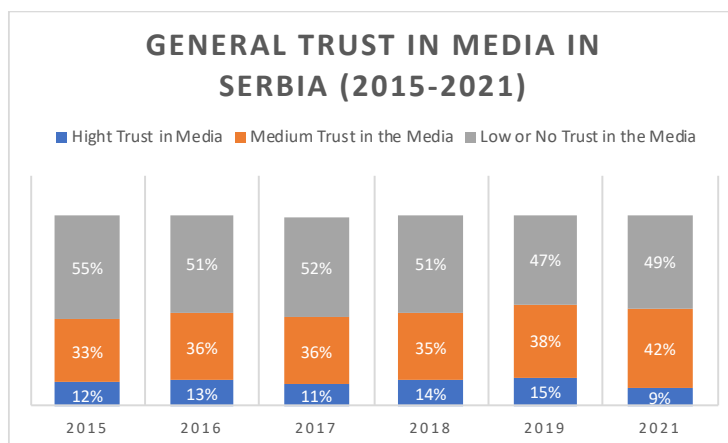


Figure 5. General Trust in Media in Serbia (2015-2021). Source: <https://www.ebu.ch/resources?publication-Type=research> (accessed 20/12/2021)

Figure 5 depicts a more or less stable picture of general trust levels in media in Serbia over the period 2015-2021, for which EBU data are available. However, it should be noted that compared to the (pre-COVID) year, 2019¹⁰⁶, the data from 2021 suggest a slight decline in the levels of trust in media (from 15% in 2019 to 9% in 2021), and a slight rise in distrust in media (from 47% to 49%).

¹⁰⁶ It should be taken into consideration that the COVID-19 disease was not an important issue in Serbia before February 2020.

The change in the levels of trust cannot be fully attributed to the impact of the pandemic, but this factor should be taken into consideration.

5) Did/could you observe significant increases of trust/distrust in different segments of media during the pandemic?

If we take a look at the latest available data on trust in the media (according to Net Trust Index), we can conclude that there was a slight decline in trust in all media in 2021 compared to 2019 (Figure 4). However, it can be also noticed that there is a closing gap between the Internet and television, the two media which the citizens of Serbia have trusted the most. During 2021, the Internet recorded the lowest level of trust since 2012, while trust in television had been steadily growing since 2016 (while trust in other media stagnated or even declined). If this trend is to continue, it is possible that television will be the most trusted media (or the least distrusted media to put it more correctly) for the first time in the last decade.¹⁰⁷ This could be a direct consequence of the pandemic as is further elaborated in the answer to question 7.

When it comes to the other three media, trust in them remains at a very low level or declines even more. Social networks continue to lose their audiences' trust, which is a trend that had been going on since 2016, reaching in 2021 the lowest net trust index ever (-24).

6) Which are the most trusted sources of information on Covid/19 health risks/vaccines? (Check Covid-19 special Eurobarometer!)

The CESID research found that Serbian citizens believe that they were informed about the COVID-19 disease. Every other respondent (53%) expressed this opinion. When we add another 36% of respondents who declared that they were fully informed about the topic, we see that a total of 89% of citizens think they accessed (sufficient) information about COVID-19. Only 6% of respondents say they were not informed, while 5% did not answer the question (CESID 2020,16¹⁰⁸).

According to the available research data (CESID 2021, 89¹⁰⁹) the citizens of Serbia mostly trusted the information from the TV (30%) regarding the good and bad sides and potential risks of vaccines against COVID-19. Around 10% of respondents declared that they gathered most of the information about vaccines from social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), and another 9% from the official websites of health institutions. Around 1% of respondents consulted the written media, and approximately the same share of the population gathered the information from the radio. In this research, possible answers were also: personal contacts (18% of respondents mostly trusted this particular source of information), medical authorities and science (12% trusted this source the most). Finally, 19% of respondents could not answer the question related to the most trusted sources of information regarding the vaccination. What is most concerning, given the data on sources of information about vaccines, is that almost one third of Serbian citizens had more trust in their personal contacts and social media than in the official sources of information and the media that are more likely to be fact-checked.

¹⁰⁷ It is important not to confuse the Net Trust Index with relative levels of trust in media. If we take into consideration that the levels of trust in media television are already the most trusted media (45%) by Serbian citizens, followed by the Internet (35%), radio (29%), written press (29%) and the social media (24%).

¹⁰⁸ CESID (2020) Građani i mediji: konzumacija, navike i medijska pismenost (II ciklus), Beograd: CESID.

¹⁰⁹ CESID (2021) Građani i mediji: izveštaj iz istraživanja javnog mnjenja (III ciklus), Beograd: CESID.

7) Has there been an increasing demand for quality news and trusted news sources during the pandemic? (Indicators: e.g., increase of audience share of selected news sources, country specific opinion polls).

According to the COVID-19 Special Eurobarometer 93.1 (2020)¹¹⁰, the first source of information for Serbian citizens during the outbreak of the pandemic was television (60%), followed by websites (21%), online social networks (14%), the written press (2%) and the radio (1%) (and other (2%)).

Based on Valicon's research¹¹¹(conducted during June 2020) 40% of Serbian citizens were mostly (30%) or completely (10%) satisfied with the media reporting on Covid-19. On the other hand, 26% of them were completely dissatisfied, with 28% more who were partially dissatisfied. This research also showed that television and web portals were the main source of information about Covid-19.

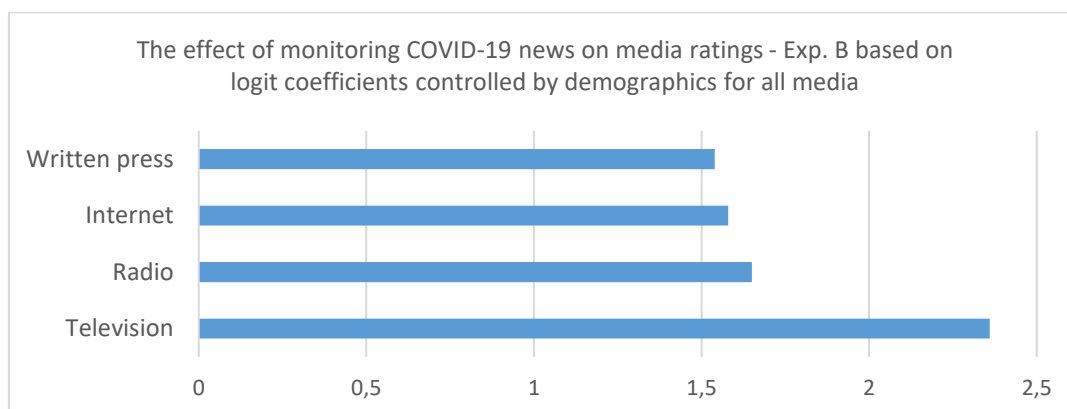


Figure 6. The effect of monitoring COVID-19 news on media ratings - Exp. B based on logit coefficients controlled by demographics for all media. Source: Petrović and Bešić (2021)¹¹²

Research conducted by Petrović and Bešić (2021) indicated that those who were interested in Covid-19 news were 2.4 times more likely to use television for being informed compared to other media (Figure 6). On the other hand, there was no significant difference in using other media for gathering information about Covid-19.

Based on this, and data presented in answer 5, we can assume that the pandemic helped television to regain some of its viewers, who turned to television in an attempt to find credible information in rather chaotic times. The survey conducted by CRTA confirming that television was the most used media for getting news in time of the pandemic, also showed that radio television of Serbia (RTS) which is the public broadcaster, is the most popular television station in Serbia (Figure 7).

¹¹⁰ The data are available here: https://search.gesis.org/research_data/ZA7649 (accessed 20/12/2021)

¹¹¹<https://www.valicon.net/2020/07/gradani-srbije-nemaju-poverenje-u-zvanicne-informacije-u-vezi-sa-korona-virusom/>

¹¹² Petrović, Dalibor and Miloš Bešić (2021) Distrusted News: News Consumption During COVID-19 in Serbia. Proceedings of 15. Serbian Political Studies Association Annual Conference 2021 (in press). <http://www.upns.rs/sites/default/files/2021-12/SPSA%202021%20Conference%20Programme%20final%20list%20of%20presentations.pdf>

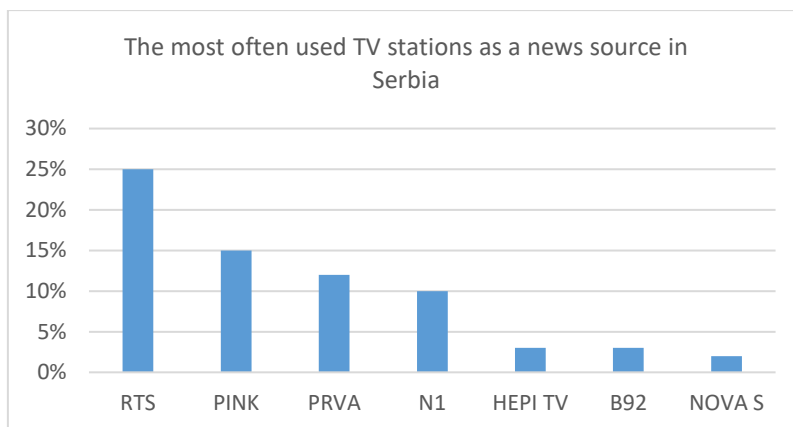


Figure 7. The most often used TV stations as a news source in Serbia. Source: CRTA 2021

8. What is the audience share of so-called ‘alternative news’ in your country? Did the risk of exposure to disinformation and fake news increase or decrease during the pandemic? Does this affect particular segments of the populations (e.g., young people, people with a particular religious or political affiliation)?

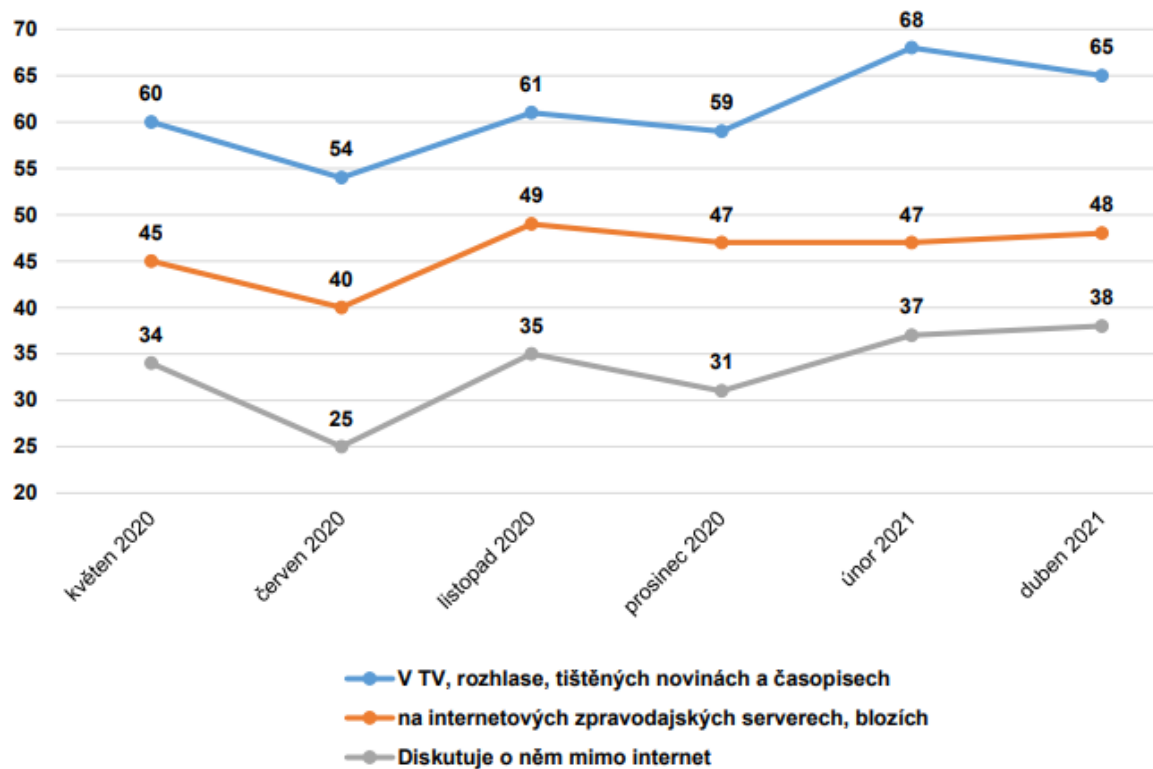
If we consider the Serbian alternative Internet portals, (those that are not connected to well-known media outlets) as a source of alternative news, then we can assume that just a small number of people in Serbia regularly use these sources for getting information (around 5%).¹¹³

In the analysis of the prevalence of COVID-19 disinformation,¹¹⁴ the database extracted from Serbian media platforms, which was fact-checked over the course of about nine months, was analysed for content, frequency, scope and patterns of manipulation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact-checking platform, Raskrikavanje rated 96 and FNT 105 media outlets. The dominant actors in both datasets were mainstream media outlets, such as *Informer*, *Alo*, *Srpski Telegraf*, *Kurir* and *Večernje Novosti*, alongside the portals *Srbija danas* and *Espresso*. These media outlets, which feature prominently in other fact-checker samples as well, reached the widest readership in Serbia and beyond, significantly shaping public opinion. The same tabloids often defend and adjust their reporting to reflect the policies and view-points of Serbia’s ruling party, frequently receiving money from the budget through project co-financing programmes. These facts combined point to a conclusion that tax-payers in Serbia indirectly finance the production of the disinformation that targets both them and a wider regional audience.

¹¹³ <https://centarzamedije.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/informisanje-u-digitalnom-okruzenju-2020.pdf>

¹¹⁴ https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/disinformation_covid-19_march_2021.pdf

Graf 3: Vývoj sledování dění kolem koronaviru (v %) srovnání



Source: CVVM (2021).

Note: The figure shows **following events related to Covid-19 (%)**. Time points are May 2020, June 2020, November 2020, December 2020, February 2021, and April 2021. Blue = TV, radio, printed newspapers, and journals. Red = online news sites and blogs. Grey = discussing offline.

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ANNEX 2: Sampling procedures of quantitative newspaper analysis for each country

Czech Republic

1) The newspapers within the Czech sampling process were chosen based on two criteria. We selected the newspapers with the highest readership, and we aimed to have one pro-governmental newspaper, one opposition newspaper, and one tabloid. We selected the following newspapers

- Mladá Fronta Dnes – broadsheet with the highest readership in Czechia in 2020 (rather pro-governmental)
- Právo – broadsheet with one of the highest readership in Czechia in 2020 (rather opposition)
- Blesk – tabloid with the highest readership in Czechia in 2020

Moreover, we included the online mutations of each newspaper: iDnes.cz (for Mladá Fronta Dnes), Novinky.cz (for Právo), Blesk.cz (for Blesk). Inclusion of online versions of the newspapers enabled us to increase our sample size because more articles are published online.

2) We used [Anopress](#) to search for the articles. Anopress is a database of the most relevant Czech media. It contains all articles published both online and in printed versions.

We used the following search words string: (*covid OR koronavirus OR pandemie*) AND (*důvěra OR nedůvěra OR důvěřovat OR nedůvěřovat OR důvěryhodný OR nedůvěryhodný OR důvěřivý OR nedůvěřivý OR věřit OR nevěřit*).

3) The sampling periods did not deviate from the preestablished periods. The sampling periods were as follows:

- March 2020 – April 2020
- September 2020 – October 2020
- December 2020 – January 2021
- March 2021 – April 2021

4) After searching for all articles from selected newspapers within the given period, we downloaded all articles as an .xlsx file. Afterwards, we randomly reordered the articles within each period using the functions `RANDBETWEEN` and `RANK`. The coders then coded the randomly reordered articles one by one until they reached the desired number of 200 analytical units per period.

Denmark

1. A short justification of the choice of newspapers and print and Facebook differences in the choice of news sites.

We have chosen the three Danish newspapers: Politiken (moderate left), Jyllandsposten (moderate right), and BT (moderate right tabloid¹¹⁵). The three newspapers are the most read newspaper in their genre and category.

Newspaper	Followers	Page's Likes	Total Interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares
Politiken	288.678	292.253	4.176.766	1.800.000	1.320.000	173.500
Jyllands posten	204.152	212.683	3.297.109	1.080.000	1.260.000	129.300
BT	486.835	441.905	12.123.013	4.140.000	4.220.000	604.000

2. The types of archives used and the combination of search words in your language

Copenhagen University has an agreement with a Media Intelligence company called Infomedia. Infomedia gives access to Denmark's biggest media archive with newspaper articles from 1990 and up to date. We have used the following search words: 'tillid' (trust) 'mistillid' (mistrust), 'corona' and 'covid'. The search included all possible conjugations of the words and also included words which had the search words as a prefix, a suffix or a part of a compound word (e.g. coronavirus or tillidsbaseret)

3. Your exact periods of sampling (in case you deviated from the preestablished periods)

We followed the periods of sampling as proposed

4. The random selection procedure of articles applied

In total, 948 articles with trust contestations were sampled during the period. The articles were randomized, and where then coded until reaching the required 800 trust contestations. In the final document two codes were faulty and we thus included two new codes from the sampled articles since we did not use the entire sampling set.

¹¹⁵ Stig Hjarvard: Den politiske presse. En analyse af danske avisers politiske orientering, *Journalistica*, nr 5, 2007

Germany

1. A short justification of the choice of newspapers and print and Facebook differences in the choice of news sites.

We have selected the three German newspapers Süddeutsche Zeitung (quality newspaper, moderate left), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (quality newspaper, conservative/moderate right), and BILD (moderate right tabloid). The three newspapers are the newspaper of national reach with the highest sold circulation in Germany, with BILD ranking first (Statista 2022). When it comes to the Facebook pages of these newspapers, a similar picture can be drawn. On Facebook, BILD has clearly the highest number of followers (over 2,5 Million), while the other two newspapers still belong to the national newspapers with the highest number of followers, however, the figures are considerable lower compared to BILD (Süddeutsche has almost 800 000 and FAZ about 585 000).¹¹⁶

2. The types of archives used and the combination of search words in your language

We used licenced archives of the respective newspapers (Süddeutsche, FAZ) as well as LexisNexis (BILD). For identifying relevant articles, we used the following search word combination and Boolean operators to crasp the full range of grammatical variety and usages of the semantic core (corona* OR covid* OR pandemie*) AND (vertrau* OR misstrau*). That means, the search comprised all possible conjugations and also terms having the search words as a prefix, a suffix or a part of a compound word.

3. Your exact periods of sampling (in case you deviated from the preestablished periods

We followed the periods of sampling as proposed, i.e., March-April 2020, September-October 2020, December 2020- January 2021; March-April 2021.

4. The random selection procedure of articles applied

In total, 1775 articles across the four pre-defined periods were sampled. Their occurrence was relatively balanced with a somewhat higher number of articles matching our search in the first sampling period (March-April 2020, after the start of the pandemic). All articles were listed separately according to their sampling period and then randomised within their groups (hence, March-April 2020, September-October 2020, December 2020- January 2021; March-April 2021). After this randomisation, articles where coded until reaching the required 200 trust contestations per period (800 overall).

¹¹⁶ Among the daily national newspapers, only the right-wing WELT has more followers on Facebook (about 115 000 follower).

Greece

1. A short justification of your choice of newspapers and print/Facebook differences in the choice of news sites, where relevant.

The print newspapers selected for the Greek coding process are *To Proto Thema*, *Kathimerini*, *Efimerida ton Syntakton*. All three newspapers have broad readerships. To Proto Thema is a Sunday tabloid of center-right political orientation. Kathimerini is a Sunday and daily broadsheet edition of liberal conservative political orientation. Efimerida ton Syntakton is a daily tabloid of left/center-left political orientation. As for the Facebook posts except from the posts of the three newspapers, we coded also the posts of the most visited Facebook posts of the most popular news sites such as CNN Greece, News 24/7, In.gr, Real.gr, News.it.

Newspaper	Followers	Page's Likes	Total Interactions*	Likes	Comments	Shares
Efimerida ton Syntakton	161.252	161.154	186,274	106,798	12,327	9,863
Kathimerini	284.315	282.582	229,407	92,462	56,414	9,784
To Proto Thema	489.597	435.481	1,572,750	649,348	293,893	57,613

2. The type of archives used and the combination of search words in your language

We used the digital archives of the above newspapers.

The words used for the selection on covid articles/posts for all covid periods are: covid, πανδημία, κορονοϊός, κορωνοϊός, κοροναϊός.

The words used for trust-distrust are: εμπιστοσύνη, δυσπιστία, εμπιστεύομαι, δυσπιστώ, εμπιστευ- (-ομαι, εσαι, εται, όμαστε, εστε, ονται), δυσπιστ- (ω, εις, ει, ούμε ,είτε, ούν).

3. Your exact periods of sampling (in case you deviated from our preestablished periods)

We followed the periods of sampling as proposed. We had to code 20 more coding units from the last period (March-April 2021). As the other three sampling periods were exhaustingly coded without reaching the target of 800 coding units, we added articles from the last period as there were sufficient relevant articles. The deviation in that case was little and though statistically appropriate.

4. The random selection procedure of articles applied

For each period except for the last, we used the whole sample in order to obtain the necessary number of trust contestations. For the last period where there was a larger number of trust contestations, we applied a simple random sample for selecting the necessary number of contestations.

PERIODS_SAMPLING	YEAR	KATHIMERINI	EFIMERIDA SYNTAKTWN	PROTO THEMA
MARCH-APRIL	2020	242 articles 135 trust contestations 177 articles/ 135 trust contestations	50 arti- cles/38 trust contestations 29 arti- cles/26 trust contestations	31 articles/25 trust contestations 23 articles/ 36 trust contestations
SEPTEMBER-October	2020	211 articles/100 trust contestations	71 arti- cles/46 trust contestations	40 articles/30 trust contestations
DECEMBER-JANUARY	2020- 2021	237 articles/128 trust contestations	63 arti- cles/53 trust contestations	55 articles/30 trust contestations
MARCH-APRIL	2021			

Italy

1) A short justification of your choice of newspapers and print/Facebook differences in the choice of news sites, where relevant

The newspapers within the Italian sampling process were chosen based on two criteria. We selected the newspapers with the highest readership, and we aimed to have one pro-governmental newspaper, one opposition newspaper. We selected the following newspapers

- La Repubblica – broadsheet with one of highest readership in Italy in last 2020 (rather pro-governmental)
- Corriere della Sera – broadsheet with one of the highest readership in Italy 2020 (rather pro-governmental)
- Il Fatto Quotidiano – broadsheet with the highest readership in Italy in 2020 (rather opposition)

Moreover, we included the online mutations of each newspaper, which allowed us to increase our sample size because more articles are published online.

2) The type of archives used and the combination of search words in your language.

We used the digital archives of the above newspapers.

We used the following search words string: (*Covid* or *Coronavirus* or *pandemia*) AND (sfiducia, fiducia, sfiduciati, fiduciosi, fidare, fido, fidano, fidiamo, fidate, diffidano, diffidare, diffidiamo, diffidate, diffido).

3) Your exact periods of sampling (in case you deviated from our preestablished periods)

The sampling periods did not deviate from the preestablished periods. The sampling periods were as follows:

- March 2020 – April 2020
- September 2020 – October 2020
- December 2020 – January 2021
- March 2021 – April 2021

4) The random selection procedure of articles applied

After searching for all articles from selected newspapers within the given period, we downloaded all articles as word and PDF files. For each period except for the last, we used the whole sample in order to obtain the necessary number of trust contestations.

Poland

1. A short justification of your choice of newspapers and print/Facebook differences in the choice of news sites, where relevant.

Gazeta Wyborcza is the biggest daily opinion-making newspaper in Poland. It is opposing the government with liberal profile. Page Followers on Facebook: 778 745; sell score in 2022: 52 058 (3rd daily newspaper)

Fakt is the biggest daily newspaper in Poland. It is a tabloid. Page Followers on Facebook: 1 360 972; sell score in 2022: 150 943 (1st daily newspaper)

Niezależna is a wide-spread far-right news site. It is an example of alternative media source. Page Followers on Facebook: 236 617

Rzeczpospolita is the second biggest daily opinion-making newspaper in Poland. It has a centrist profile.

Page Followers on Facebook: 156 667; sell score in 2022: 33 905 (4th daily newspaper)

The same news sites were used in coding Facebook comments.

2. The type of archives used and the combination of search words in your language

During our search we looked through:

- Gazeta Wyborcza and Rzeczpospolita archives. These search engines had the option of choosing the time period we were interested in.

- Google Advanced to search through Niezależna and Fakt sites. Search engines on these sites don't have the option to limit the time period. Choosing Google Advanced enabled us to stick to the established time periods. The disadvantage of this searching method is unknowing of the Google algorithm and the logic of the way results were presented to us. In every case we got about 14 pages of results (approximately 140 results). Many of results were repeating after looking through few pages.

Word combination used in Polish language: (COVID, koronawirus, pandemia) + (-ufa-, -ufn-) *These are the root words from which zaufanie/trust, nieufność/distrust and other familiar words (nouns, adjectives and verbs) derive.*

3. Your exact periods of sampling (in case you deviated from our preestablished periods)

We didn't deviate from pre-established periods.

4. The random selection procedure of articles applied

We coded every article that fulfilled the criteria of the study. In every period cycle we retrieved app. 250 trust contestations, meaning we did not have to apply random selection procedure and our sample consisted of every article in the population.

Serbia

- 1) A short justification of your choice of newspapers and print/Facebook differences in the choice of news sites, where relevant.

The newspapers in Serbia are selected on the basis of their market share and popularity on Facebook. In addition, and due to a polarized nature of public communication, we have used the criteria pro-government and opposition newspaper. We have included

- Blic, second most popular print daily in Serbia, with almost a million followers (972,371) on Facebook.
- Kurir, fourth most read print daily in Serbia, and second most popular print media on Facebook.
- Danas, the least read print daily, is the only representative of opposition orientation in the daily print market (for the selected period)

	Market share (Media Ownership Monitor)	Internet users reach (research done using Digital News Report methodology)	Nielsen (reach)	Alexa ranking	Gemius audience (Average daily users)	Editorial policy	Pro-government vs. Opposition	Page likes on FB	Total interactions on FB	news format (text or video)	paywall/subscription (yes, no)
source	https://serbia.mom-rsf.org/en/media/	https://centarzaamedije.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/informisanje-u-digitalnom-okruzenju-2020.pdf	not publicly available	https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/RS	(proprietary data)						
Newspaper market											
Infomer	17.42	NA	10.1	/	195,353	tabloid	Pro-government	107,121	18,381	text	no
Blic	16.21	32%	10.9	7	915,130	tabloid	Pro-government	972,371	555,68	text	no
Večernje novosti	13.42	5%	8.5	49	427,373	semi-tabloid	Pro-government	397,773	500,306	text	no
Kurir	12.43	16%	9.4	8	752,000	tabloid	Pro-government	842,837	126,28	text	no
Politika	7.44	NA	4.5	/	35,441	broadsheet	Pro-government	120,886	99,89	text	no
Alo	3.7	NA	6.3	/	512,551	tabloid	Pro-government	427,332	189,893	text	no
Srpski telegraf	2	NA	4.6	/	225,299	tabloid	Pro-government	88,68	30,442	text	no
Danas	0.8	12%	3.3	47	220,542	broadsheet	Opposition	124,812	371,624	text	no

2) The type of archives used and the combination of search words in your language

Serbian team has used the database of print news purchased from the press clipping agency Ebart. To search the database, we have used Boolean phrase with a total of 24 combinations:

- poverenje, nepoverenje, verujem, veruje, verujemo, veruju AND korona, virus, covid, kovid

In total we had 623 news items.

3) Your exact periods of sampling (in case you deviated from our preestablished periods)

We used the entire universe, i.e. all the news items with the mentioned keywords for the period March 2020 - June 2021.

4) The random selection procedure of articles applied

No random selection was necessary.