HOW TO UNDERSTAND TRUST IN NEWS MEDIA – A THEORETICAL MODEL

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Introduction

Trust in news media is critical in the everyday workings of a living democracy. However, several studies indicate that trust in news media in many countries is low or dwindling (Gallup, 2016; Ladd, 2011; Reuters, 2016) with severe societal risks as the ultimate consequence (e.g., Edelman, 2017; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Ladd, 2011; Quandt, 2012). Lowered trust in news media implies changes in patterns of news consumption, where increasing proportions of the public seek news from alternative, low-credibility, content channels, potentially leaving the population more vulnerable to online disinformation or fake news (Ladd, 2011; Quandt, 2012).

The consumption patterns and experiences of news has also changed dramatically with the diffusion of internet, social media and smartphones. For example, the proportion of people who reported to use social media as a source of news in 2016 was 46%, nearly double that of 2013 (Reuters, 2016). There exists only insufficient knowledge about how to understand and measure trust in this new and multifaceted media landscape. Trust is a complex concept, and numerous definitions can be found across disciplines within the humanistic, social, and technological sciences (Fisher, 2016).

Research objective

The objective of this paper is to develop a theoretical model for understanding the components and nature of trust in news media, and show how professionals can use this model to predict and evaluate trust.

The model is a modified version of Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman's (1995) well-known model of interpersonal trust in organizations. Their model was one of the first to conceptualize trust as a dynamic and multidimensional concept, dependent on characteristics of both the trustor (the person who trusts) and the trustee (the entity to be trusted) within a specific relationship or condition that varies in depth and strength over time. Trust is seen as particularly relevant for circumstances characterized by *perceived risk*; that is, trust is important in situations where something of value is seen as at stake (Mayer et al., 1995).

Applied to news media, the perceived risk is related to the relationship between the news consumer (trustor) and news media (the trustee). Perceived risks may for example relate to whether the news consumer perceives the news media to present an unbiased and comprehensive account of the world. We argue that trust in news media may be analyzed in terms of the three factors of perceived trustworthiness, described by Mayer et al (1995):

> (1) *Ability* - the extent to which the news media is perceived to have the needed skills and expertise, as well as being reputable and acclaimed.
> (2) *Benevolence* - the extent to which the news media is perceived as intending to do good, beyond what would be expected from an egocentric motive.
> (3) *Integrity* - the extent to which the news media is seen as adhering to an acceptable set of principles, in particular being independent, unbiased, and fair.

Due to significant changes in patterns of news consumption, trust needs to be understood relative to different types of news media users in a changing, multichannel, digital context (Brandtzaeg, 2010). As argued by Fisher (2016), we need to acknowledge and study how trust and trust antecedents vary across news organizations and different social contexts. In addition, this understanding should take into account today's digital context with an increasingly fragmented landscape of news media outlets, user groups, and media habits. The purpose of the proposed theoretical model is to adequately reflect citizen-diversity with factors determining specific "news media user types", and subsequently be able to examine user types as a moderating construct on trust and the trust antecedents.

Theoretical contribution

Figure 1 provides an overview of the proposed model, and how it expands and adapts the model of Mayer et al.'s (1995) to the context of news media. Through this adaptation, we hold that the model can adequately reflect the diversity among news media users. The upper part of the figure (darker) represents the three factors of perceived trustworthiness, while our theoretical contribution is represented in the lower part (lighter).
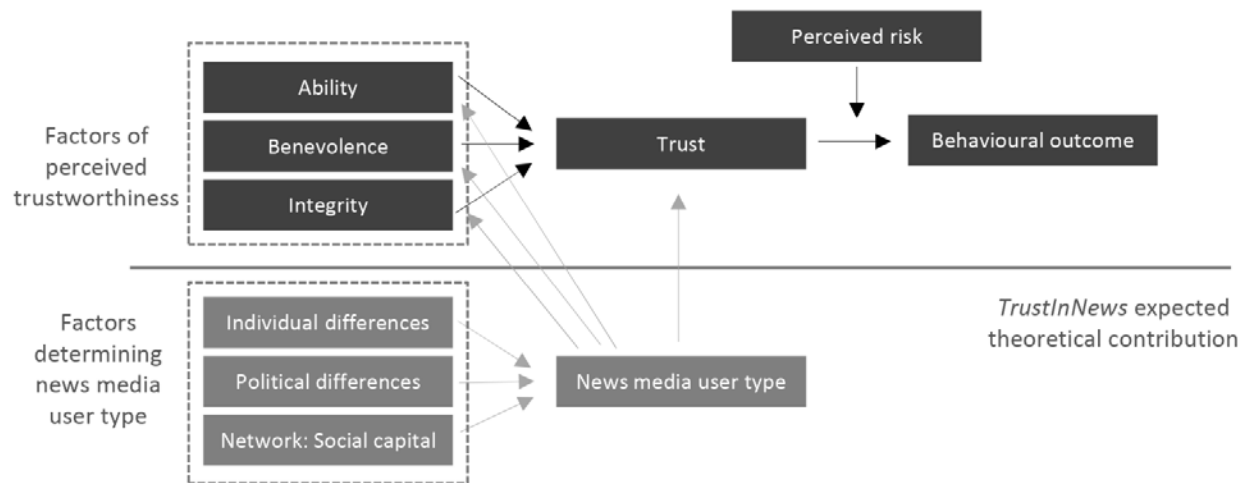
Perceived risk

Factors of perceived trustworthiness

Ability

Benevolence

Integrity

Trust

Behavioural outcome

Factors determining news media user type

Individual differences

Political differences

Network: Social capital

News media user type

TrustInNews expected theoretical contribution

Figure 1. Outline of the theoretical model

Through a typology of "news media user types", we address three different layers of factors that are likely to determine the type of news media user, particularly relevant for trust in news media:

(1) **Individual differences**, that is, varying inherent characteristics of the individual news consumer. Such individual differences include different levels of trust propensity or dispositional trust as a general tendency to trust others (Colquitt, Scott & LePine, 2007; Wrightsman, 1991). Notice that propensity to trust is also included in Mayer et al.'s (1995) model, yet we apply it here as part of our contribution to understand different types of news media user. Moreover, socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, education and urban versus rural may also predict different user types of news consumption, and in part explain the trust divide in news media.

(2) **Political differences** and trust as associated with political preferences (Lee, 2010). For example, in the US only 14% of Republicans, compared to 51% of Democrats, reported to have trust in the media in 2016 (Gallup, 2016). Also in other countries, there is a tendency that left/right party-preferences have consequences for trust in media. For example, Norwegian studies have shown that citizens who vote for right-wing parties to a lesser extent trust media to provide pluralistic and diverse public debates (Staksrud et al., 2014).

(3) **Network characteristics and social capital** (Cook, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Cook (2005) suggests that trust relations and networks represent a form of social capital that can be mobilized in support of general social cooperation in the society. Under other conditions, however, such networks may have negative effects on the degree of trust and may also create doubt concerning trust to news media. People that are part of such networks, for example particular Facebook groups, may therefore develop lower trust in news media.

Future research may also include cultural and societal factors (Fukuyama, 2014). Trust and development of trust differ between people from different national–societal cultures, particularly on generalized trust (Ferrin & Gillespie, 2010). Findings also suggest large differences between countries concering trust in news (Edelman, 2017). It is also an important to take into consideration how increasing globalization may affect trust. Several countries experience high levels of both labor immigration and refugees, with increasing differences among people with regard to national–societal cultural background.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mayer et al.'s (1995) model of trust that predicts trustworthiness in the context of organizations, is useful but insufficient for understanding trust in news media. Our theoretical model extends the model of Mayer et al. with factors that serve to distinguish different news media types. We predict news media type to have a moderating effect on the main determinants of trust in news media, as well as a direct effect on trust. Future research should focus on the development of reliable and valid measures of news media types and associated factors. In addition, future work needs to address the practical implications of different news media types on trust in news media.

Our model goes beyond the current approaches to the study of trust in news with basis in a typology of news media users, that takes into account individual and political differences, differences in social capital, as well as cultural and societal factors. The theoretical framework will help news organizations develop strategies for preventing distrust among the identified user groups.

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