

The Crisis of Digital Trust in the Asia-Pacific

Commentary

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Evidence of a crisis of institutional trust is pervasive and, contrary to theories around “Asian values” and Confucian “harmonious societies,” it characterizes nations of the Asia-Pacific region. The challenges of rebuilding trust are connected to better understanding this multidimensional concept, particularly as it manifests itself through digital media platforms. There are also considerable challenges facing attempts to govern digital platforms through existing laws and regulations. An important challenge—and opportunity—for communication researchers arises from the ways in which social media and digital platforms “crash merge” interpersonal and society-wide communications, in the context of regional differences and the changing political economy of digital media.

Keywords: trust, digital platforms, governance, algorithms, fake news

Evidence of a crisis in trust is pervasive. The global financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath exposed extensive wrongdoing by banks and financial institutions in many parts of the world. Moreover, the fact that many of these banks had to be bailed out with public funds to prevent the whole financial system from collapse reinforced the popular perception that the abuse of trust in the financial world was allowed to occur without consequences for most of those concerned. Evidence of the influence of wealthy political donors over political parties, examples of a “revolving door” between political leadership and careers in corporate and other lobby groups, and a perception that major political parties are run by self-perpetuating elites, all contribute to this populist groundswell, which is unlikely to disappear soon (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018).

Declining levels of voting in liberal democracies with voluntary voting pointed to a decline in belief toward the major political parties, which has manifested itself more recently in the rise of populist political parties, movements and leaders (Moffitt, 2016; Müller, 2016). Norris and Inglehart (2019) found that 25% of European voters voted for new populist parties in the 2010s, as compared with 10% in the 1990s, while the rise of leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States, election results such as the Brexit referendum, and the outcomes of the 2017 Italian elections indicate that such populism is now very much a part of the political mainstream. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) have associated the rise of populism to interconnectedness between growing distrust in the institutions of liberal democracy, which people drift

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away from as they feel that the system is “rigged” against them, and the historic de-alignment of voters away from traditional parties that were founded to represent their interests (e.g., social democratic parties and the working class), leaving the political space increasingly open to new “political entrepreneurs” of the populist right. Freiden (2018) associated populism with a backlash toward globalization that has accelerated in recent years, as those displaced by such developments have failed to be adequately compensated for the economic and social impacts of change, arising from failures of representation on the part of elected political representatives and established political parties.

Considerable empirical data exists to support claims of a crisis of trust toward major social institutions. In the United States, the Gallup Confidence in Institutions survey has documented the extent to which Americans trust particular institutions a “great deal” or “quite a lot”. What it identifies is a general decline in trust in U.S. institutions, with the notable exception of the military. It shows the sharpest decline in trust in Congress, but also consistent declining trust in churches and organized religion, banks, the presidency, and the media (Gallup, 2018). Summarizing Gallup surveys and other related data, the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy (2019) observed that “by virtually every measurement, Americans’ trust in the practices, intentions and outcomes of our institutions—especially in our government and our media—is steadily declining” (p. 17).

On an international scale, the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer has become the major framework for understanding the crisis in institutional trust that underpins concerns about the future of news (Edelman, 2019). Based on a survey of more than 33,000 respondents in 26 countries, and drawing a distinction between those in the top 25% of income and education levels (“elites” or the “informed public”) and the general population, the Edelman surveys have found evidence of significant distrust toward business, government, NGOs, and the media, particularly in the liberal democracies, and particularly among nonelite respondents. Edelman finds that government and the media are the least trusted institutions, that more people distrust than trust government and the media, and that more people distrust than trust government and the media in 16 of the 26 countries surveyed. Importantly, a consistent feature of the Edelman surveys, which have taken place since 2003, is that distrust among the general population is greater than that among elite decision makers, taken to be the top 25% of those surveyed, as noted above. Reviewing the global situation, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs concluded that “since the mid-1960s, public trust in government and political institutions has been decreasing in all of the advanced industrialized democracies. Although the pattern and the pace of the decrease are dissimilar across countries, the downward trend is ubiquitous” (Blind, 2007, p. 8).

An important dimension of this is distrust of the media. In the Gallup surveys, trust in newspapers fell from 39% in 1973 to 27% in 2017, and trust in television news from 36% in 1996 to 24% in 2017. Notably trust in news on the Internet is lower than trust in other media, being at 16% in 2017 (Gallup, 2018). Growing concentration of ownership, scandals such as the 2011 News of the World phone hacking scandal and the sense that journalists are themselves political “insiders” contribute to distrust of the media, tapped into by populist politicians such as Trump who accuse journalists and media outlets of peddling “fake news.” Although digital and social media were once looked to as providing salvation from the mainstream media, the crises emerging at Facebook and other digital media platforms suggest that these companies

are beset by many of the old problems that faced the media giants of the 20th century, as well as a set of new ones (Gillespie, 2017; Mosco, 2017; Napoli & Caplan, 2017).

Stephen Coleman has made the point that trust in news is integrally linked to trust in government and social institutions more generally (Coleman, 2012). This is for two reasons. First, and most obviously, citizens rely on news media to accurately provide information and expose them to a diverse range of opinions, enabling them to make decisions and choices and engage with political and civic culture based on the widest and most accurate range of information available. At a second, deeper level, trust in the media is about the sense that news producers and consumers have "shared expectations and values that constitute an ethically coherent and culturally convincing foundation for evaluating news performance" (Coleman, 2012, p. 36). With the news media in profound transition, as both audiences and advertisers migrate to digital platforms and as content is increasingly distributed through social media, trust in the media is increasingly bound up not only with questions of journalistic standards and professional ethics but also with questions around whether a common baseline continues to apply around what the public expects from the media.

With regard to the media, there was for many years the hope that social media would provide the tools with which to redress the failings of mainstream media. Bill Dutton pointed to the possibilities of a "Fifth Estate" of "self-selected, Internet-enabled, networked individuals" who could build horizontal, peer-to-peer communications that piggybacked off large-scale digital distribution platforms to challenge traditional, "Fourth Estate" conceptions of news media and journalism (Dutton, 2009, p. 4). Online initiatives such as Wikileaks offered "radical transparency" as an alternative to mainstream news media, with their filtering and gatekeeping of information and demonstrable closeness to official power sources, which could be part of a "global transparency movement" using the affordances of the Internet to make governments more open and accountable (Flew & Wilson, 2012).

That earlier optimism about social news has now faded, even if the number of people accessing news through social media has continued to grow. The largest digital platforms, such as Google and Facebook, have come to dominate digital advertising, which has accentuated the difficulties faced by mainstream news media in developing viable business models for journalism, and the digital platforms do not for the most part invest in the creation of news content (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2018; Cairncross, 2019). Although there has been the emergence of significant new online-only news providers, such as *HuffPost*, *Buzzfeed* and *Vice*, they operate with a fraction of the staff of traditional news outlets and have themselves been highly vulnerable to the actions of digital platforms, such as Facebook's 2018 changes to its News Feed algorithm. The wider digital news environment has been rocked in recent years by the circulation of "fake news," misinformation, and disinformation by politically motivated actors, as well as misuse of users' personal data and information microtargeting, as revealed by scandals such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; Flew, 2019). Surveys such as Edelman now find that social media is the least trusted news source, even among those who are primarily reliant on it. In both Europe and North America, trust in traditional media was almost twice that of social media, with 60% trust in traditional media in Europe in 2019 as compared with 34% for social media, and 65% trust for traditional media in North America in 2019 as compared with 34% for social media (Edelman, 2019, p. 19).

Trust, Governance, and Digital Media in the Asia-Pacific

Although the debates around the decline of trust and the rise of populism have been strongest in North America and Europe, they certainly resonate in the Asia-Pacific. Populist leaders have come to power in liberal democracies in the region, such as Rodrigo Duterte in The Philippines, while leaders in one-party states such as Xi Jinping in China have used populist strategies to mobilize the population around preferred goals (Yin & Flew, 2018). In both of these instances, anticorruption has been an important driver of leadership, and this was also the case with the return of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad as the prime minister in Malaysia, ousting the ruling UMNO coalition—which he had governed through from 1981 to 2003—on the basis of mounting political and economic scandals around one of his successors, Najib Razak.

A common perception, both in the West and among some Asian leaders, is that Asia is a “high trust” region. In the 1990s, political leaders such as Dr. Mahathir in Malaysia and Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore promulgated the notion of “Asian values,” claiming that as their societies were more communally based and family oriented, they were less in need of the “adversarial” checks and balances on institutional power found in theories of liberal democracy, which were derived from Western concepts of competitive individualism (Henders, 2010). Similar propositions have been made in China with regards to the rebirth of Confucianism as a state-approved ideology in the 21st century, as seen with calls to establish modern China as a “harmonious society” (Angle, 2012). The literature on social capital has consistently identified countries such as China, Japan, and Singapore as having above-average levels of interpersonal trust (Castiglione, van Deth, & Wolleb, 2005; Whiteley, 2015), and the Edelman surveys find the countries with the highest levels of trust in government, business, and the media include China, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and India (Edelman, 2019, pp. 6–9).

This discourse of “harmonious” Asia as a counterpoint to the “conflictual” West is largely ideological in its functions and effects, serving to reinforce the hegemony of rule by domestic political elites by delegitimizing popular protest about inequality and corruption. Observing large-scale street protests in Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and the Philippines, the Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat made the point that

while each movement has its own specific grievances and immediate cause, the movements in question are broadly critical of the representativeness and trustworthiness of their respective governments. The widespread erosion of credibility and public trust in conventional institutional politics, and the inability of the deeply entrenched and self-interested politicians to initiate reform were among the reasons that led to the “direct democracy” of the streets. What they are interested is the long game of changing fundamental social and political conditions in their respective nations. (Chua, 2017, p. 122)

The 2019 Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Fisher et al., 2019) identified concerns about trust in news in seven Asia-Pacific countries: Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and Taiwan. Trust in news was below 50% in all countries surveyed (Figure 1).

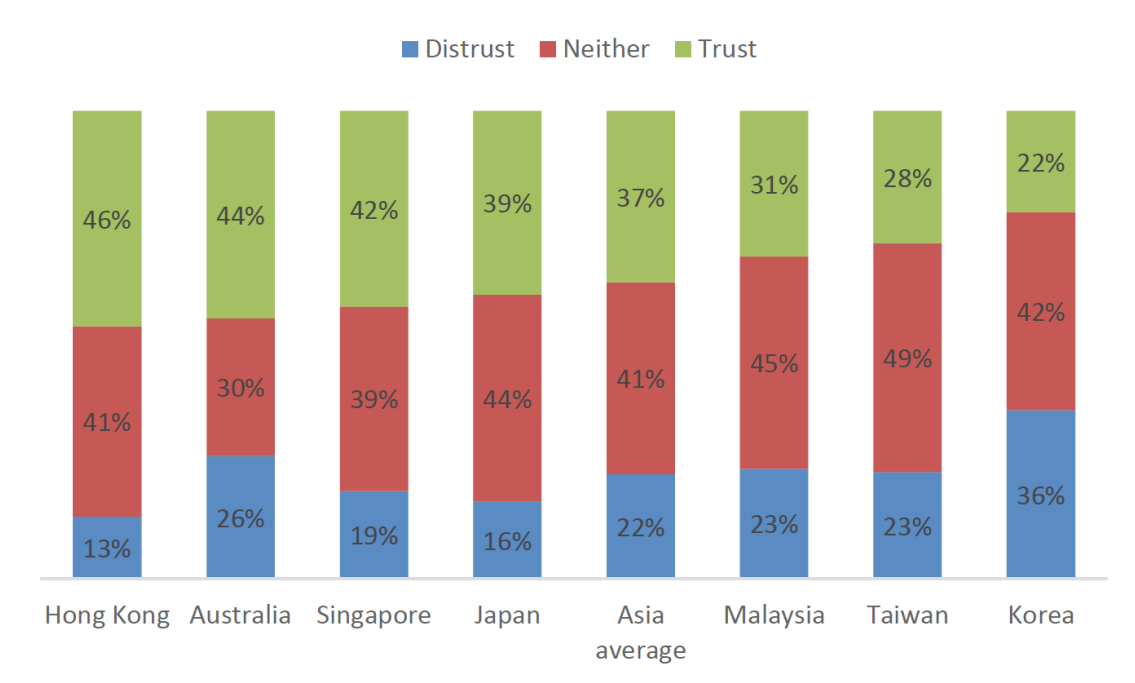


Figure 1. Trust in news—general—in seven Asia-Pacific nations.
Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2019).

In five of the seven countries surveyed, trust in the news that people primarily consumed was below 50%—Hong Kong and Australia being the two exceptions (see Figure 2).

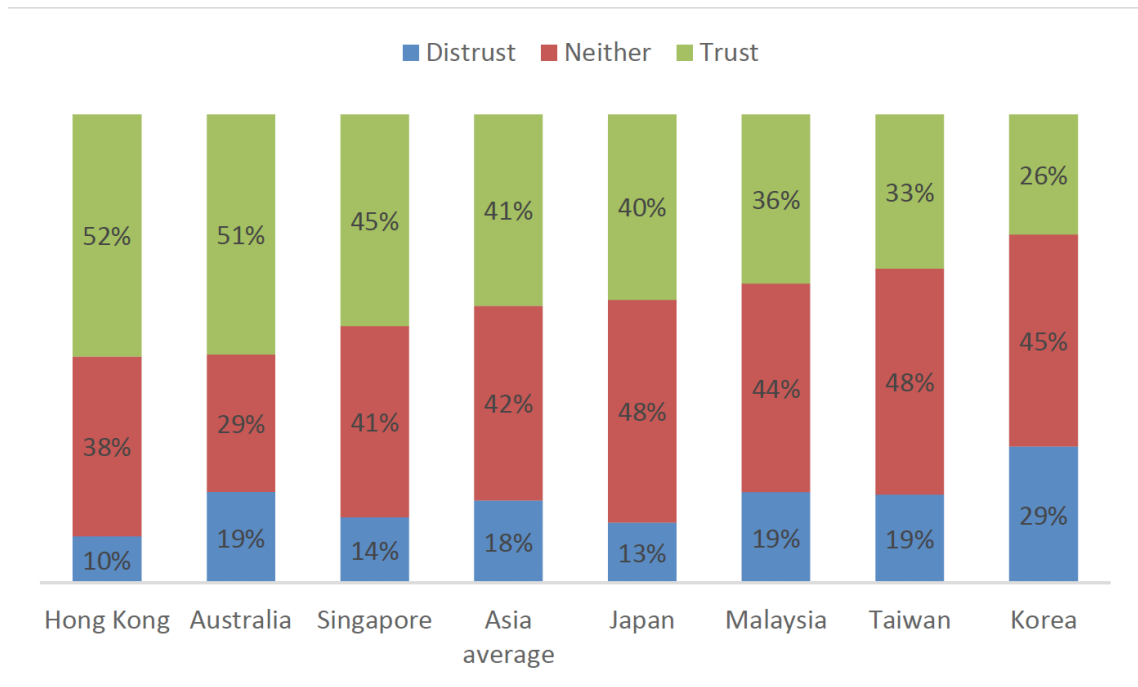


Figure 2. Trust in personal primary news sources in seven Asia-Pacific nations.
Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2019).

Concerns about “fake news” were high in all countries except Hong Kong, and trust in news on social media was 20% or lower in all countries except Hong Kong (see Figure 3).

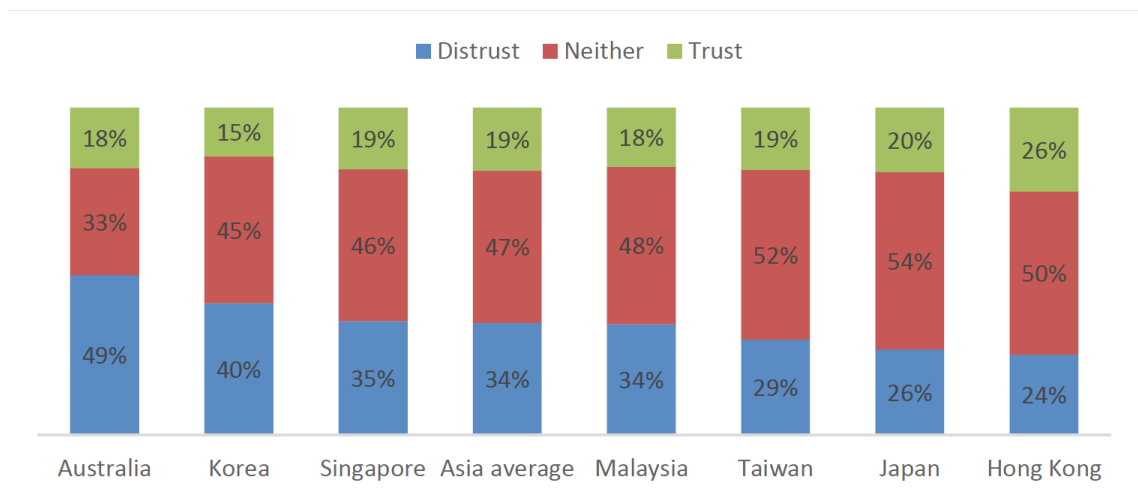


Figure 3. Trust in social media in seven Asia-Pacific nations.
Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2019).

The articles in this Special Section on Communication, Culture, and Governance in Asia of the *International Journal of Communication* address questions of trust in the Asia-Pacific, and its relationship to digital and social media, in various ways. Skoric and Zhang observed that there is a positive relationship between news media consumption and participatory behaviors, posing the question as to whether social media is positively associated with social capital, and hence with civic engagement around environmental issues in contemporary China. Lin extended debates about media trust into the realm of social media, observing a positive correlation between social media and civic engagement in Taiwan, and the cross-checking of claims made in other media by political activists associated with the "Umbrella Movement." Rohman and Ang posed the important question of whether the "small world" networks of trust and reciprocity that can arise among friends can serve to provide a buffer against online disinformation, in the context of religious conflict on the Indonesian island of Ambon.

Although some articles in this collection address trust issues about relations between individuals or individuals and authority figures, others address questions of trust at the level of digital platforms and online spaces. Soriano addressed whether "pisonets" are considered safe environments for poorer people seeking to access the Internet, finding that some place restrictions on the ability of school children to access such places. Hopkins evaluated the power of online "word-of-mouth" in online marketing in Malaysia, and the leading role played by "mombloggers" as social media influencers, more trusted than corporate advertising. Keane and Yu also addressed the centrality of online word-of-mouth in e-commerce in China and Taiwan, and its relationship to online shopping platforms such as Alibaba. Hong and Xu found that trust questions are central to the international expansion of digital platforms such as Alibaba, and how this has been a driver of new forms of platform regulation within China.

Addressing the Crisis of Trust

Trust is an integral component of complex societies with market economies and a highly developed division of labor, but it is also something that is hard to understand or to quantify. Niklas Luhmann (1979) made the point that "a complete absence of trust would prevent one even getting up in the morning" (p. 4). Onora O'Neill (2010) observed that

each of us and every profession and every institution needs trust. We need it because we have to be able to rely on others acting as they say that they will, and because we need others to accept that we will act as we say we will. (p. 1)

Pierre Rosunvallon (2008) has described trust as an institutional economizer that "eliminates the need for various procedures of verification and proof" (p. 4), and the Nobel Prize-winning economist Kenneth Arrow (2013) identified trust as an "invisible institution" that made economies work more effectively, but "it is not a commodity . . . if you have to buy it, you already have some doubts about what you've bought" (p. 23).

Trust presents a similar balancing act, in that it is simultaneously accepted yet questioned by autonomous and reasoning citizens. People are expected to trust in institutions, expertise, and in others in

their community, without guarantees that such trust is warranted, or that it will be reciprocated. This is the challenge of generalized trust, or trust in strangers, which has a paradoxical element to it:

A certain amount of distrust in strangers can be healthy in many circumstances. However, when people are unwilling to cooperate with those they do not know personally, this may prevent a great deal of productive social interactions from taking place . . . Generalized trust is not based on actual knowledge of each individual's likely trustworthiness so it must have other foundations. (Scrivens & Smith, 2013, p. 35)

Three elements are critical to managing this paradox. The first is that of accountability. At its simplest, accountability refers to "the process of being called 'to account' to some authority for one's actions" (Mulgan, 2000, p. 555). Such accountability has three features: (1) It is external, in that the account is given to a separate person or body to that being held accountable; (2) it involves social interaction and exchange, in that both entities accept the appropriateness of the capacity to judge and respond accordingly; and (3) it implies rights of authority, in that those calling for an account are asserting rights of superior authority over those who are accountable, including the rights to demand answers and to impose sanctions.

The second key element is that of transparency. The need for greater transparency as a resolution to problems of trust is often invoked. But in contrast to accountability, it has proven to be a difficult term around which to get an agreed definition. Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016) have defined transparency as "the perceived quality of intentionally shared information from a sender" (p. 1788). They have observed that the transparency of information provided by an individual or organization can be assessed on the basis of (1) disclosure in a timely manner; (2) clarity and comprehensibility, particularly for the non-specialist receiver; and (3) accuracy and reliability. With regard to the relationship of transparency and trust, it is proposed that

greater transparency from organizations (in the form of greater disclosure, clarity, and accuracy) will facilitate higher stakeholder trust in the organization . . . Information quality (i.e., disclosure, clarity, and accuracy) shapes these expectations. Disclosure, clarity, and accuracy also enable accountability, whereby the organization can be rewarded for trustworthy behavior and punished for untrustworthy behavior; these factors also contribute to trust judgments. (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016, p. 1797)

The third key element around trust is that of regulation or governance. At its simplest, regulation involves "the sustained and focused attempt to alter the behavior of others according to defined standards or purposes with the intention of producing a broadly intended outcome or outcomes" (Black, 2012, p. 1). Over the past 40 years, however, there has been a turn away from direct state regulation and toward governance models. The "turn to governance" involves a move from a state-centered approach whereby government agencies seek to manage market conduct in the public interest, toward more coregulatory approaches, where government agencies, non-government organizations, and corporations and their representative bodies engage in negotiation, delegation, and shared responsibility around identified policy goals (Schuppert, 2015). Accompanying the turn toward governance has been the rise of responsive regulation, where the enforcement of rules and the punishment of non-compliance sits at the apex of a series of possible

regulatory responses, most of which involve regulatory agencies actively working with the regulated businesses around the design and enforcement of rules and regulations (Ayres & Braithwaite, 1992).

The articles by Hong and Xu, and by Keane and Yu, identify the extent to which China has had to move beyond command-and-control regulations, characteristic of government approaches to traditional media in that country, toward more complex and coregulatory governance frameworks in its dealings with digital platforms such as Tencent and Alibaba. This has become particularly important as the global expansion of these digital platforms is promoted as part of a "digital China" that can compete directly with the Silicon Valley giants known as the FAMGA (Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Amazon). But this comes at a time when the self-regulatory approaches to governance that have been adopted by the digital platform giants are under profound pressure internationally. From privacy and security concerns to the misuse of personal data, and from the vexed issues surrounding content moderation to the extraction of advertising revenues from the traditional media whose content they remain reliant on, digital platform companies such as Google and Facebook find themselves under growing pressure from politicians and regulators in jurisdictions around the world (Flew, Martin & Suzor, 2019). Laws surrounding the removal of online hate speech in Germany, the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation and copyright directives, Singapore's Fake News Bill, and legislation in Australia that makes company executives personally liable for "online abhorrent content", are all manifestations of the "global techlash" that these digital platform companies have been facing in recent years.

It is inherently difficult for government agencies to apply external regulation to digital platforms. Digital platforms retain a fundamental difference from media companies in their primary reliance on user-created content to which they do not have an editorial function. They can only be accountable for most of the content on their sites after it is posted, whereas media companies have traditionally had editorial control in advance of publication or broadcast. They are also dealing with content on an unprecedented scale: A site such as YouTube has more than 300 hours of content uploaded per minute, and at least 350 million photos a day are uploaded to Facebook. At the same time, they have acquired media-like functions around the capacity to shape consumer access to online news, evaluate content for its suitability and potential audience, and rank, curate, arrange, and remove content on their sites. In an age where the distinctions between the online and the "off-line" are collapsing, and where online consumers view digital platforms as providers of media content, traditional media companies bear costs associated with regulatory compliance that do not apply to digital platforms, and the platform companies have moved beyond being pure intermediaries.

What Can Communication Researchers Bring to Questions of Digital Trust?

Much of the work facing digital platforms in the rebuilding of trust relates to their management of speech. As Tarleton Gillespie (2018) has observed, content moderation is at the core of what platform businesses do, and their rise has been associated with user demands for platforms and apps that assist with managing, curating, and ranking content. Yet when we review the academic literature on trust, it is other social science and humanities disciplines that predominate. There is, not surprisingly, a rich body of literature on trust in philosophy, particularly insofar as it constitutes a field of applied ethics. Trust is not an inherent virtue, as it is wise only to place one's trust in those who can be deemed to be trustworthy.

Within the field of trust studies more broadly, there is debate about whether trust is a corollary of the need for cooperation to achieve shared goals (i.e., I can trust person or Institution A to do Activity X), or whether it is a situated personal virtue that is inherently difficult to measure or quantify (Hardin, 2006). Trust is a foundational question in sociology, going back to the works of Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel, and in contemporary works by authors such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, it is connected to the management of risk in late modernity, where citizens are required both to trust and be skeptical of experts and authority figures (Beck, 2010; Giddens, 2010). Economists such as North (1990, 1994) and Williamson (2000) identify trust as an "informal institution," embedded in the values, beliefs, norms and culture of societies, that inform and shape but are not reducible to the formal laws and institutions that govern market transactions and economic life. In political science, as noted above, trust in political leaders and institutions is integrally tied to questions of legitimacy, and declining levels of political trust are linked to the rise of populism, as it refers to unaccountable elites and a lack of transparency in decision making in liberal-democratic political systems.

The articles in this Special Section of the *International Journal of Communication* demonstrate not only that communications scholarship has a key role to play in debates around trust and governance in the digital age but also the levels at which the concept of trust must be analyzed. Social media and digital platforms bring together—or, perhaps more accurately, crash merge—interpersonal communications and the interactions of individuals and groups with social and political institutions and systems in new ways, and that this can be a powerful mobilizing tool for social change. At the same time, they do so through digital platforms that have their own ownership structures, accumulation regimes, internal governance structures, and business models (Dijck, Poell, & de Wall, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). The Asia-Pacific has long been heavily networked with high levels of uptake of digital technologies, and the articles in this issue capture the relationship of digital media to the region's fast-changing political economy.

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