

Does the Internet Erode Trust in Media? A Comparative Study in 46 Countries

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The crisis of trust in media often has been attributed to the development of the Internet. This article aimed to empirically examine the role of the Internet in eroding or strengthening trust in media. Taking an ecological perspective, this article studied how Internet development is shaping the informational context in which media trust is created. The data from the World Values Survey were adopted with 61,975 respondents in 46 countries. Multilevel analyses reported a couple of results. First, trust in media is increased in the Internet context, but is undermined by the individual use of the Internet. Second, the Internet creates a disembedding context in which the cultural approach to media trust is weakened, and the institutional approach is strengthened.

Keywords: Internet, media trust, context, comparative study

Trust in media is in crisis around the world. According to Gallup polls, the percentage of Americans who have trust in the media dropped from 72% in 1976 to 32% in 2016, falling to its lowest level in history (Swift, 2016). In Europe, according to "Trust in Media 2018" released by the European Broadcasting Union (2018), trust in the press and TV has been around 50% over the past five years in 33 European countries, and it is at an all-time low in the United Kingdom and most Southern European countries. Meanwhile, the Edelman Trust Barometer revealed that trust in traditional media decreased from 62% in 2012 to 57% in 2017 worldwide, showing the steepest decline compared with other types of media (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2017). Up to now, media has become the least trusted institution; a majority of the public shows distrust in media in 22 countries (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2018).

The crisis of trust in the media often has been related to the rise of the Internet. The rapid growth of the Internet has brought about changes in the media environment, raising concerns about the decline of trust

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in traditional mass media, especially newspapers and television (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Yamamoto, Lee, & Ran, 2016). Two opposite positions were introduced to explicate the relationship between the Internet and trust in the media. One sees the Internet as an alternative information source that competes with traditional mass media and erodes the credibility of media news (Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Jones, 2004; Tsfati, 2010; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014); the other sees the Internet as an informational threat to social order and highlights the role of traditional media in providing credible information (Bratich, 2004; Kiouisis, 2001; Park, 2005; Ruggiero & Winch, 2005).

This article aimed to investigate the role that the Internet plays in shaping media trust. Here, *media* refers to traditional mass media, specifically limited to newspaper and television, the two most frequently used mass-media types. From an ecological perspective, it studied how the development of the Internet has shaped and is shaping the informational context in which media trust is created. The data from the World Values Survey were adopted with 61,975 respondents in 46 countries.

Trust in Media

Trust can be generally defined as “the mutual confidence that no party to an exchange will exploit the other’s vulnerability” (Sabel, 1993, p. 1133). It is an essential ground for social order and a lubricant of social systems (Arrow, 1974; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). According to Luhmann (1979), trust is an important mechanism for complexity reduction in modern society. Given the uncertainties and risks embedded in trusting relationships, the trustor places trust in the trustee, expecting that the trustee can be relied on and that expected gains would exceed expected losses through interaction with the trustee (Rotter, 1967).

Trust in media is a major concern in communication research. Prior studies have revealed that audiences’ trust in media shapes their news selection and exposure patterns (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005; Williams, 2012), and those with low trust in traditional media are likely to seek alternative news sources (Elvestad, Phillips, & Feuerstein, 2017; Fletcher & Park, 2017; Tsfati, 2010). The decline in trust not only undermines the legitimacy and authority of media (Tsfati & Peri, 2006), but also shrinks audience size and impairs the profitability of media organizations (Kirchhoff, 2009). In modern democracy, meanwhile, citizens’ mistrust in media influences their trust in democracy, given that the public heavily depends on media to gain information about important public affairs and social issues (Jones, 2004; Ladd, 2005; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005).

Tsfati and Ariely (2014) drew two theoretical approaches of political trust to explore trust in the media: the cultural theory and the institutional theory. According to the cultural theory, political trust is derived from cultural values, which are learned and shared through longtime socialization (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1997). The cultural transmission helps build up interpersonal trust and facilitate social cooperation among people (Putnam, 1993). Lee (2010) argued that interpersonal trust can be projected onto political institutions and be extended into trust in media. Meanwhile, cultural change can weaken interpersonal trust and political trust. According to Inglehart (1997), for example, the cultural transition from materialistic values to postmaterialistic values has caused the crisis of political trust in Western developed countries. Likewise, Tsfati and Ariely (2014) reported a negative correlation between

the postmaterialistic culture and trust in the media. They explained that postmaterialistic values liberate people from the control of social institutions by calling for individual freedom and self-determination so as to enhance their criticism and suspicion of traditional mass media.

The institutional theory highlights the performance of political institutions in trust building (Mishler & Rose, 2001). It argues that people's trust depends on whether the institutions can meet their demands. Because mass media are usually seen as part of the political system, Tsftati and Ariely (2014) suggested that people are likely to extend their trust to media if they are satisfied with the performance of the political system (also see Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, 2001; Jones, 2004). Democracy is often used as an indicator to evaluate the performance of political institutions. Empirical studies showed that political trust is positively related to the degree to which a country is ruled democratically (Inglehart, 1999a; Levi, 1998; Uslaner, 2003).

According to Giddens (1990), the cultural approach and the institutional approach represent facework commitment and faceless commitment, which are two mechanisms of trust building. Facework commitment is developed through face-to-face interactions in everyday life. Faceless commitment refers to reliance on abstract social systems, which are used to reduce uncertainty and risk in a modern society with overwhelming complexity. Trust in media can be derived from both facework commitment and faceless commitment. On the one hand, as a generalized trust in others, interpersonal trust affects people's perception of media representatives' credibility, influencing their willingness to put trust in journalists (Lee, 2010). On the other hand, media play a heightened role in political life and are often regarded as part of political institutions (Tsftati & Ariely, 2014). Thus, political trust influences people's judgement of media's prestige and trustworthiness because they tend to adopt the same lens to view media and governments in a modern society (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999).

Prior studies have indicated that a variety of factors contribute to trust in the media. One line of research has reported that the process of credibility assessment is influenced by news sources, media contents, and media channels (Johnson & Kaye, 2010; Oyedeji, 2010; Wathen & Burkell, 2002). For example, some studies examined multiple dimensions of source credibility, such as trustworthiness, expertise, and fairness, which are closely related to credibility perceptions (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1959; Meyer, 1988; West, 1994). Others have showed that audiences' judgement of news credibility is significantly influenced by message quality (Slater & Rouner, 1996) and apparent reality assessments of message content (Austin & Dong, 1994). In addition, scholars also noted the influence of media channels on perceptions of news credibility (Bucy, 2003). Kioussis (2001) compared credibility perceptions across different media channels and found that newspapers were perceived to be most credible, followed by online news and television news. However, Johnson and Kaye (2004) reported that weblog users view weblogs as more credible than traditional media.

Another line of research focused on personal characteristics of the media audience, including political trust, interpersonal trust, political partisanship, ideological orientations, and demographics. While prior research has consistently revealed a positive effect of political trust on trust in the media (Jones, 2004; Lee, 2010), results are inconsistent regarding the role of interpersonal trust in shaping media trust (Lee, 2005). Furthermore, Lee (2010) found a mediating effect of political trust on the relationship between interpersonal trust and trust in the media. As to political partisanship and ideology, scholars

reported that Republican affiliation and conservatism are reliable predictors of mistrust in media (Glynn & Huges, 2014; Jones, 2004; Lee, 2005, 2010). In addition, while some studies have found that demographic variables, such as age and gender, are significantly related to trust in media (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Johnson & Kaye, 1998), such relationships are insignificant in others (Bennett et al., 2001; Jakob, 2010; Lee, 2010).

The Internet as a Medium

The decline of trust in the media is often concomitant with the wide adoption of the Internet. Viewing the Internet as a medium through which people receive information, two opposing theories were proposed to explain the relationship between the Internet and trust in media. One is the displacement theory, which highlights a competing relationship between the Internet and traditional news media (Tsfati, 2010). According to this theory, the dominant position of mass media is displaced by the Internet, which brings about alternative information to challenge media contents and leads to audience skepticism toward the media (Jakob, 2010; Tsfati, 2010; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

The other is the dependence theory, which highlights a complementary relationship in which audiences have to rely more on traditional media to process the huge amount of information brought by the Internet. On the Internet, a lack of journalistic norms and professional pressures leads to prevalence of misinformation and rumors, jeopardizing the credibility of online news (Johnson & Kaye, 2000). In addition, it is difficult to scrutinize the accuracy and truthfulness of online information because of the 24-hour news cycle, anonymity in online interactions, and the unregulated flow of enormous amounts of information (Tucher, 1997). Thus, the frequent use of the Internet increases people's trust in media for authoritative information (Poler Kovačič, Erjavec, & Štular, 2010; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006).

The Internet as a Context

The debate described earlier centers on the individual-level use of the Internet. Its impacts were studied through the analysis of the content accessed by users via the Internet. This approach is criticized by the school of media ecology, according to which, what is greatly changed by media technologies is not specific media content, but the overall social context in which media content is produced and delivered (Strate, 2008). It is of more importance to take a contextual perspective to study the impact of the Internet on media trust. In this article, therefore, the Internet is seen as a context in which trust in media is formed. Its contextual effects are illustrated by the degree to which the Internet changes the informational context.

The contextual change the Internet brings about refers to the shift of the mode of information distribution, from centralized, hierarchical, and one-way to decentralized, horizontal, and interactive (Lu & Yu, 2019). Trust in the media is formed in the old informational context and is likely to be displaced in the Internet context (Carey, 1998; Levinson, 1999).

H1: Trust in media is negatively related to the Internet context.

This article also examined the moderating effects of the Internet context. Prior studies have indicated that the cultural approach and the institutional approach are two key predictors of trust in media. According to Giddens (1990), the cultural approach and the institutional approach respectively correspond to facework commitment and faceless commitment. He further explained that the local context in which facework commitment is formed is collapsed by the “disembedding” function, which is to lift people’s social relations out of the immediacies of local contexts and stretch them into a broader range of time and space. In a modern society, meanwhile, trust is more likely to be developed through faceless commitment, referring to trust in abstract social systems. Undoubtedly, the Internet serves as an important tool of disembedding. Thus, the Internet creates a disembedding context in which facework commitment is inhibited, and faceless commitment is fostered.

H2: The relationship between the cultural approach and trust in media is weakened in the Internet context.

H3: The relationship between the institutional approach and trust in media is strengthened in the Internet context.

Method

Sample

The sample used in this study consists of two levels.

One is the individual level, on which the data were extracted from the sixth wave of the World Values Survey (WVS). The WVS is the largest transnational survey of human beliefs and values in the world. The sixth wave is the latest one, which was conducted between 2010 and 2014 and involved 85,000 respondents in 57 countries. The other is the country level, which used the data from the United Nations and the International Telecommunication Union. Two levels of data were pooled to construct the final sample, with 61,975 respondents in 46 countries. Table 1 shows the list of countries and the years of their surveys.

Table 1. The List of Countries and the Years of Their Surveys.

Country	Year of Survey	Country	Year of Survey
Japan	2010	Netherlands	2012
South Korea	2010	Nigeria	2012
Armenia	2011	Pakistan	2012
Azerbaijan	2011	Philippines	2012
Belarus	2011	Poland	2012
Estonia	2011	Rwanda	2012
Kazakhstan	2011	Singapore	2012
Kyrgyzstan	2011	Turkey	2012
New Zealand	2011	Zimbabwe	2012

Russia	2011	Argentina	2013
Slovenia	2011	China	2013
Ukraine	2011	Ecuador	2013
United States	2011	Germany	2013
Uruguay	2011	Iraq	2013
Uzbekistan	2011	Lebanon	2013
Australia	2012	South Africa	2013
Chile	2012	Thailand	2013
Colombia	2012	Tunisia	2013
Egypt	2012	Algeria	2014
Ghana	2012	Brazil	2014
India	2012	Georgia	2014
Malaysia	2012	Jordan	2014
Mexico	2012	Libya	2014

Measurement

According to Tsfati and Ariely (2014), two items in the WVS were used to measure *trust in media*. Respondents were asked, "I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence, or none at all?" Two organizations were mentioned—the press (V110) and television (V111). They were combined into a scale ($\alpha = .820$) to measure trust in media. Because of the transnational nature of the WVS, multiple group confirmatory factor analyses were run for this article to check the measurement equivalence of trust in media across different countries. The results show that partial metric equivalence holds across countries.

To measure the *cultural approach* of trust in media, this article adopted the materialist/postmaterialist index in the WVS. It is a composite index of 12 items (the higher the score, the more postmaterialist). According to Inglehart (1999b), the materialist orientation prioritizes economic growth, physical security, order, and stability, while the postmaterialist orientation highlights peace, freedom of speech, environmental protection, and tolerance.

Two items in the WVS were adopted to measure the *institutional approach* of trust in media. V114 asks, "How democratically is this country being governed today?" Responses were measured by a 10-point scale ranging from *not at all democratic* to *completely democratic*. V115 asks, "How much respect is there for individual human rights nowadays in this country?" Responses were categorized into four groups, from *a great deal of respect* to *no respect at all*. A scale was created by combining V114 and V115 to measure the institutional approach ($\alpha = .603$).

At the country level, the *Internet context* was defined by the development level of Internet infrastructure. In the broadest sense, Internet infrastructure refers to a broad range of communication and computing equipment, packaged and customized software, networks for data transmission, and the human support systems (Coleman & McLaughlin, 1998; Greenstein, 2005; Hindman, 2009). Specifically,

Stoycheff and Nisbet (2014) introduced three key indicators of the Internet infrastructure: availability of Internet hardware, community of Internet users, and information capacity. They are measured respectively by the percentage of households with a computer, the number of Internet users per 100 inhabitants, and bandwidth per Internet user. This study obtained the data about these indicators from the International Telecommunication Union and combined them into a composite index, measuring the degree to which the Internet has developed to affect social context.

In addition, this article controlled the Human Development Index (HDI) at the country level. It represents the overall level of development for a country by measuring its achievements in life expectancy, education, and income. Prior studies have revealed that Internet development is highly correlated to the HDI (see Nisbet, Stoycheff, & Pearce, 2012; Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2014). When the HDI is controlled, therefore, its confounding effect on trust in media can be eliminated.

Because the country-level variables are annually updated and the surveys in different countries were conducted in different years, for each country, this study adopted the data of the year when it was surveyed. This study also ran the diagnosis of multicollinearity. The condition indices showed that there was no significant multicollinearity problem. Meanwhile, some other variables were controlled at the individual level, including income (V239), gender (V240), age (V242), education (V248), and media exposure (daily newspapers V217 + TV news V219).

Analysis

Because the sampled respondents were nested in countries, hierarchical linear regression models (HLM) were appropriate for statistical analysis; they could be used to explore country-level effects and individual-level effects separately, and they could also be used to observe whether there were significant interactions between the two levels. To avoid potential multicollinearity, both the individual level variables (group mean) and the country level variables (grand mean) were centered. Table 2 shows the statistical description of all key variables.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics.

Variables	<i>N</i>	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Min, Max	Description
Trust in media	61,975	4.93 (1.59)	2, 8	8 being the highest level
Media exposure	61,975	7.87 (2.07)	2, 10	10 being the highest level
Cultural approach	61,975	1.97 (1.16)	0, 5	5 being most postmaterialistic
Institutional approach	61,975	12.17 (4.11)	2, 20	20 being most democratic
Internet use	61,975	2.79 (1.78)	1, 5	5 being daily and 1 being never
Income	61,975	4.90 (2.08)	1, 10	10 being the highest income
Sex	61,975	binary	0, 1	Male = 0 (49%), Female = 1 (51%)
Age	61,975	41.80 (16.50)	16, 98	Age
Education	61,975	5.83 (2.32)	1, 9	9 being the highest level
Internet context	46	0 (2.62)	-4.27, 7.62	The higher the score, the higher level of the Internet infrastructure
HDI	46	0.76 (0.12)	0.49, 0.93	0-1, the higher the score, the higher level of development

Four models were created in sequence for data analysis. The first was a null model (Model 0), which delineated the variance components of the two levels; this can be used as a baseline to be compared with subsequent models. The result of the chi-square test for the null model was significant ($p < .001$), confirming that part of the variance in media trust was caused by the country level. The intraclass correlation coefficient was 11.6%, meaning that 11.6% of the total variance in media trust could be explained by the country level. The second model was the random-coefficient regression model (Model 1), indicating the effects of individual-level variables on trust in media. The third model was the intercepts-as-outcomes model (Model 2), which indicated the effects of country-level variables on trust in media. The fourth model was the slopes-as-outcomes model (Model 3), which indicated the cross-level moderating effects. The R squares were 16.9% at the individual level and 17.2% at the country level (see Table 3).

Table 3. Linear Multilevel Regression on Trust in Media.

	Model 1 β (SE)	Model 2 β (SE)	Model 3 β (SE)
Intercept	4.778*** (.089)	4.778*** (.077)	4.778*** (.077)
Individual level			
Media exposure	0.086*** (.007)	0.086*** (.007)	0.086*** (.007)
Cultural approach	-0.027* (.012)	-0.027* (.012)	-0.027* (.011)
Institutional approach	0.067*** (.005)	0.067*** (.005)	0.067*** (.005)
Internet use	-0.031*** (.009)	-0.031*** (.009)	-0.031*** (.009)
Income	0.012 (.008)	0.012 (.008)	0.012 (.008)
Sex (female)	0.024 (.018)	0.024 (.018)	0.024 (.018)
Age	0.001 (.001)	0.001 (.001)	0.001 (.001)
Education	-0.025*** (.007)	-0.025*** (.007)	-0.025*** (.007)
Country level			
Internet context		0.117** (.040)	0.132** (.041)
HDI		-4.290*** (1.068)	-4.292*** (1.070)
Cross-level interaction			
Cultural \times Internet context			-0.011* (.004)
Institutional \times Internet context			0.003* (.001)
Variance in intercepts	0.291***	0.237***	0.236***
Variance in slopes			
Cultural approach	0.0055***	0.0055***	0.0048***
Institutional approach	0.0012***	0.0012***	0.0011***
-2 log likelihood	1.108	1.108	1.108

Note. Unstandardized coefficients; $N = 61,975$. Countries = 46.

$\wedge p < .1$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results

For main effects, trust in media is positively related to the Internet context ($\beta = 0.117, t = 2.959, p < .01$) and negatively related to the HDI ($\beta = -4.290, t = -4.017, p < .001$). Thus, H1 is rejected. The individual use of the Internet, meanwhile, is negatively related to trust in media ($\beta = -0.031, t = -3.429, p < .001$). In addition, the Internet context has significant moderating effects. It weakens the negative relationship between the cultural approach and trust in media ($\beta = -0.011, t = -2.629, p < .05$), and it strengthens the positive relationship between the institutional approach and trust in media ($\beta = 0.003, t = 2.306, p < .05$). Thus, H2 and H3 are supported.

Discussion

Rejecting H1, the statistical result provides evidence for the dependence theory. The development of the Internet creates a context of information overload, in which massive amounts of information, together with rumors and misinformation, increase people's sense of chaos and uncertainty (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Lash, 2002). In such a context, people have to rely more on media as part of social authorities to process huge and abundant information and restore order in life.

In contrast, this study reported that Internet use at the individual level is negatively related to trust in media; this supports the displacement theory, in which using the Internet sabotages the credibility of the information received from media. Media content is often interrogated and challenged by Internet users, who have access to alternative informational resources (Tsfati, 2010). Thus, the Internet context has two opposing effects: On the one hand, it creates a chaotic context in which trust in media is strengthened; on the other hand, it allows more and more users to go online. More people have access to the Internet, and more online information can be used to weaken trust in media.

In contrast to the affirmative effect of the Internet context, this study reported that trust in media is lower in countries with a higher HDI level. The HDI describes the degree to which people are materially emancipated. The high HDI sets people free from oppression and exploitation. People become individualized and do not have to attach themselves to any collective authority in search of economic benefits and material security (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Inglehart, 1990). As a result, they can break away from the dogmatic imperatives of social authorities, including tradition, religion, political institutions, and media.

In addition, this study reported a couple of significant cross-level moderating effects. In line with Giddens' (1990) argument, the results support H2 and H3 by empirically validating the disembedding function of the Internet and how it affects trust-building mechanisms. In a disembedding context, interpersonal relations through which the cultural approach operates have been displaced by abstract social systems through which the institutional approach operates. Thus, trust in media is more likely to be derived from the institutional approach than the cultural approach.

Conclusion

Taking an ecological perspective, this article studied how the development of the Internet shapes the informational context in which trust in the media is created. The findings jointly lead to a general conclusion that the Internet context highlights the institutional approach to media trust, which sees the media as part of social institutions. First, in the Internet context, trust in the media is more likely to be derived from people's reliance on the media as an institutional authority of information. However, the institutional role of the media is undermined by Internet use at the individual level. The Internet context underlines the importance of the media that audiences rely on to process information, but it generates more Internet users, whose individual use of the Internet erodes media trust. Second, in the Internet context, trust in the media is more likely to be derived from people's trust in the social system as a whole. The Internet creates a disembedding context in which the cultural approach to media trust is weakened, and the institutional approach is strengthened.

Conceptualizing the Internet as a context offers a couple of insights to the existing knowledge about social impacts of media technologies. On the one hand, the Internet as a context is grounded in the theory of media ecology, which focuses on historical analyses of media evolution and has been criticized for controversial and idiographic claims. This article is the first attempt to build up a quantitative evidentiary footing for the theory of media ecology. It creates a new methodological possibility for the future analysis of media ecology. Meanwhile, this methodological progress successfully links the macro-level analysis of traditional media ecology and the micro-level analysis of human perceptions. Theoretical arguments of media ecologists can be empirically tested over individual experiences of survey respondents.

In addition, this article provides an innovative perspective for studying the Internet and breaks through the monopoly of the traditional perspective that views the Internet as a medium through which users receive information. The findings from this perspective are quite different, if not totally opposite, from the traditional ones. They not only enhance our understanding of the Internet's social impacts, but also lead to further inquiry regarding the interactions between two perspectives as well as their joint effects.

Because this study adopted secondhand data, the WVS questionnaire design has a couple of limitations. One is the causality problem. Because of the cross-sectional design, it is difficult to determine the causal direction among variables. At the individual level, for example, it cannot be determined whether trust in the media is the cause or the result of the cultural approach and the institutional approach. At the country level, likewise, it cannot be concluded that the contextual differences brought by the Internet lead to changes in media trust. The other limitation is the measurement problem; trust in the media was operationalized as a single-dimensional construct without recognition of its multidimensionality. The measurement properties of trust in the media are limited to the summation of trust in press and television at the aggregate level; they are fairly broad in scope and fail to distinguish among multiple dimensions of this concept.

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