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Political Trust among Journalists: Comparative Evidence from 21 Countries

Thomas Hanitzsch and Rosa Berganza

Political scientists often argue that political trust is critical to democracy. Mishler and Rose (2001: 30), for instance, maintain that trust links ordinary citizens to the institutions that are supposed to represent them, ‘thereby enhancing both the legitimacy and the effectiveness of democratic government’. It comes as no surprise that this proposition has sparked a large array of research on political trust, from David Easton’s (1965) early study of political support to more recent endeavors to trace trust across various nations (e.g. the World Values Survey), and to attempts to identify the sources of trust (Campbell, 2004; Lühiste, 2006; Mishler and Rose, 2001). Empirical evidence suggests a rather pessimistic outlook for many of the established democracies, which show alarming signs of widespread public discontent with politics and cynicism about government (Norris, 1999a). Mair (2006: 6) notes that ‘[n]ever before in the history of postwar Europe have governments and their political leaders...been held in such low regard.’ In communication research, scholars are similarly concerned about the erosion of confidence in political institutions, a process that is seen as a ‘serious issue in public opinion’ (Moy et al., 1999: 137). Due to the constant decay of political trust, the media have been found to play a role considered to be mostly detrimental to democracy by many researchers. It is especially the persistent pattern of negativity in the news that has been identified as a key factor in the rise of political distrust, with television news being particularly destructive in this respect (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Moy et al., 1999; Patterson, 2000; Pfau and Moy, 1998). However, not all researchers agree with such views. Norris (2000), for instance, makes the argument that the media actually play a positive role in the process of building political trust, thus playing an important part in a ‘virtuous circle’ rather than a ‘vicious circle’. Overall, it seems that media may actually foster citizen involvement but only marginally contribute to cynicism (Newton, 1999; Dalton, 2004; Schmitt-Beck and Voltmer, 2007).
If political trust is so critical to democracy, if the news media play an important role in this process, and if there is a connection between journalists' attitudes and practices, then it is all the more important to shift our focus to journalists' attitudes towards political institutions. Few studies have attempted to explore this relationship in the European context (Brants et al., 2010; van Aelst et al., 2008; Van Dalen et al., 2011; Hanitzsch and Berganza, 2012). We argue that research should not stop at the investigation of content but take into consideration the attitudes and beliefs of journalists. This chapter therefore intends to close this gap and asks the following general research questions: 'How trusting are journalists of political institutions?'; 'What are the determinants of journalists' political trust on the societal level?'; and 'Do the journalists' trust levels correspond to the general public's political trust?' These questions have been explored within a larger cross-national survey project in which researchers in 21 countries collected data about 2,100 journalists working in 413 news organizations. A comparative analysis is especially valuable in this regard, for it allows for the tracking of differential developments in various cultural contexts and the identifying of the principal forces behind cross-national differences.

Political trust

Studies of trust in public institutions date back to David Easton's (1965) groundbreaking study on political support, as well as Robert D. Putnam's (1993) work on political trust and its relation to democracy. Putnam argues that the importance of trust is grounded in its reciprocal relationship with cooperation: 'The greater the level of trust within a community, the greater the likelihood of cooperation. And cooperation itself breeds trust.' (Putnam, 1993: 171). Theorists generally emphasize that trust is very much oriented towards the future: to trust means to hold some expectations about how another person will perform on some future occasion (Misztal, 1996).

Political trust is a specific form of institutional trust insofar as it refers to the general public's confidence in political institutions, including the government, parliament, and political parties. Institutional trust is the extent to which the people are confident that public institutions will perform in a satisfactory manner (Hudson, 2006). Trust is essentially a relational concept that involves individuals' judgments about the trustworthiness of institutions. 'These judgments', argues Grosskopf (2008), 'lead to corresponding expectations that institutions will produce agreeable outcomes in the future, which, in turn, influence the behavior and attitudes of individuals towards these institutions' (Grosskopf, 2008: 5). Because outcomes or intentions are not always fully known to the public, trust involves confidence in institutions under conditions of risk.

There is no consensus about the principal factors that account for differences in trust levels (Campbell, 2004). Two schools of thought have dominated the discussion so far: Cultural theories hypothesize that political trust is exogenous and an extension of social (or interpersonal) trust, learned early in life and, much later, projected onto public institutions (Hudson, 2006; Mishler and Rose, 2001). The more the people trust each other in a given society, the more they trust in political institutions (Lühiste, 2006). Institutional theories, on the other hand, argue that institutional trust is politically endogenous; it is seen as a consequence, not a cause, of political performance (Mishler and Rose, 2001). From this performance-based perspective, trust in institutions is rationally grounded: The more the people believe that political institutions function in a satisfactory manner, the higher their trust in these institutions (Lühiste, 2006). Among the aspects of political performance that were found to be most relevant to public trust are corruption and the general quality of democracy (Grosskopf, 2008; Kotzian, 2011; Kunioka and Woller, 1999; Slomczynski and Janicka, 2009). We added media freedom to this list (with reference to the Press Freedom Index set up by the Freedom House (http://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2014) in order to explore if there is any relationship between levels of political trust and levels of press freedom in societies studied. Journalists' perceptions of political institutions may be shaped by the degree of autonomy these institutions grant to the news media, which would suggest that journalists in countries with a restricted press have less trust in their political institutions than their colleagues who enjoy press freedom.

By and large, empirical evidence speaks in favor of an institutional explanation of trust in political institutions (Campbell, 2004; Gronke and Cook, 2007; Lühiste, 2006; Mishler and Rose, 2001; Newton, 2006). Political and economic performance, as well as the people's satisfaction with a country's performance, are the major and most commonly referred to sources of trust or distrust in political institutions (Grosskopf, 2008; McAllister, 1999; Miller and Listhaug, 1999).

Journalists and political trust

Throughout the Western world, political scientists have found strong evidence for a decline in public esteem for political institutions (Mair, 2006; Norris, 1999a; Torcal and Montero, 2006). These signs of eroding trust are commonly discussed in conjunction with alarming trends of widespread cynicism about politics, public disengagement from conventional politics and a depoliticization of policy making (Mair, 2002; Norris, 1999b).

Communication researchers prefer to speak of 'cynicism' instead of trust. Some scholars link negativity in the news to a 'spiral of cynicism' (Capella and Jamieson, 1997), a decrease in several forms of political participation and engagement (Bennett, 2008; Patterson, 1994), as well as cynicism and negative evaluations of political institutions (Moy and Pfau, 2000; Rozell, 1996).
While there is a massive amount of literature devoted to the understanding of the media's influence on political participation, political knowledge and evaluations, empirical evidence for the power of the media in this process is ambiguous. Several studies found trends of negativity and cynicism in the news media to be pervasive not only in the American context (Patterson, 2000; Pau and Moy, 1998), but also throughout Europe (Brandenburg, 2005; Lengauer and Vorhofer, 2010; Keppinger, 1998; Plasser et al., 2009; Salgado, 2008). However, European research on negativity appears to be more fragmented and less uniform in its conclusions, since it reflects a greater diversity of political communication systems and research theories (Lengauer et al., 2012). A number of studies have found negativity expressed by the news media to be a major factor in the decline of political trust (Moy et al., 1999), but van Dalen et al. (2011: 148) note that empirical evidence for a causal relationship is still 'far from conclusive.'

This chapter does not intend to make causal claims about the contribution of journalists to the erosion of political trust. We nonetheless think that it is important and worthwhile to look into the attitudinal elements of journalism and its professional ideology as a potential factor in the process. One potential source of influence could stem from the professional ideology of journalists acting as 'watchdogs' and as the ‘fourth estate’ of democracy (Deuze, 2005; Gans, 1979; Schramm, 1964), or even as adversaries of the government and politicians (Weaver et al., 2006). As relentless cross-examiners, watchdog journalists provide an independent and radical critique of society and its institutions, and they are skeptical of, or even hostile to, every assertion made by those who are in power (Fuller, 1996; McQuail, 2000). This idea has traveled well beyond the United States and found empirical manifestations in Europe (Preston and Metykova, 2009) and South America (Waisbord, 2000). The question, however, is whether the watchdog orientation of journalists has a positive or a negative effect on political trust. To the extent that watchdog journalism is about covering governmental misconduct and political excess, journalists may express less political trust in professional cultures that tend to be more critical and adversarial.

On a more general level, it does seem plausible to expect journalists to be less trusting in political institutions than the general public. Journalists often have privileged access to the world of politics; hence, they tend to be much better informed about issues of dysfunctional politics than members of the audience. At the same time, partly due to their above-average education levels, journalists may also have a more sophisticated understanding of politics, which can actually lead to higher levels of political trust among them.

Overall, we now have three contextual factors which have the potential to affect journalists' political trust: social trust, performance and journalistic ideology. Journalists may exhibit more political trust in societies that perform better on political and economic outcomes and in which people tend to trust each other more generally. Journalists may have less trust in political institutions, however, in professional cultures that place more emphasis on watchdog journalism and adversarialism.

### Methodology

**Samples:** The analysis reported in this article is based on 2,100 interviews with working journalists in 21 countries (Hanitzsch and Berganza, 2012). Sampling was carried out in two steps. We first selected 20 news organizations in each country following a stratified target sample. More specifically, news organizations in each country were purposively sampled to represent quality and popular media, as well as state and local media. Thus, in each country sample, there are ten national and 15 local journalists from quality daily newspapers; five national and five local journalists from popular daily newspapers; five national journalists from a quality weekly publication and five from a popular weekly publication; five each from a national news agency or wire service; five each from a national and a local public television station; 15 national and five local journalists from a privately owned television station; five each from a national and local public radio station; and five each from national and local privately owned radio station. Online newsrooms were omitted from the study, as the degree of their institutionalization still varied considerably across countries at the time the surveys were conducted. Popular print media outlets were identified by circulation size, and popular radio and broadcast programs were selected on the basis of audience share for their broadcasts. Quality news outlets were identified on the basis of their ability to influence the public agenda as determined by common agreement among journalists and scholars in each country. The research teams in each country tried to match the sampling frame for the media outlets, but researchers in a few countries had to use alternative sampling methods.

Wherever possible, we selected five journalists from each newsroom. Since the total sample size in each country was 100 respondents, this study does not claim to portray a representative picture of newspeople in the 21 nations. Rather, the various country samples were 'matched' in terms of their internal composition to allow for meaningful cross-country comparison. To this end, Hofstede (2001), for instance, suggests minimal samples sizes of at least 20, preferably 50, respondents per country.

In order to capture the various domains of news work we selected respondents from the traditional 'hard news' beats, as well as from other areas of coverage such as sports, travel and celebrities. Within news organizations, journalists were further stratified according to the extent of their editorial responsibilities. Ideally, one journalist was selected from the top echelon of the editorial hierarchy (e.g. chief editors and their deputies), one from the middle level of operational decision-makers (e.g. senior editors and desk heads), and three from the lowest level of the newsroom hierarchy (e.g.
reporters. The selection of journalists in each of these categories was based on random sampling.

**Questionnaire and Data Collection:** The research tools used in this study were collaboratively designed, with a fully standardized master questionnaire developed in English and then translated into the relevant languages. Translation usually involved an iterative translation and back-translation procedure or committees of bilingual experts in order to achieve the best possible approximation to the original master questionnaire. Data collection for the 21 countries took about 50 months and was completed in October 2011. Interviews were done by telephone in most countries. In Bulgaria, China, Egypt, Indonesia, and Mexico, at least some of the interviews were conducted personally for cultural reasons. In Pakistan and Turkey, journalists completed questionnaires on their own while a researcher was present. The enthusiasm of journalists and newsroom managers varied from case to case and country to country, sometimes substantially. From the 413 newsrooms that were initially chosen, 28 refused to cooperate and were subsequently replaced. In terms of the journalists, from the 2,100 journalists originally selected we had to substitute 266 interviewees, due to refusal to participate.

**Measures:** Our measures for political trust were designed along the lines of those used in international comparative surveys, most notably the European Social Survey (ESS) and the World Values Survey (WVS). In the interview, the question was introduced by the following sentence: 'Please tell me on a scale of 1 to 5 how much you personally trust each of the following institutions.' The respondents were then presented with a list of public institutions, including the parliament, political parties, the government, as well as politicians in general. A combined index measure for political trust, consisting of these four indicators, proved to be highly reliable (Cronbach's alpha = 0.81).

We obtained our measures of economic and political performance from publicly available sources. As an indicator for economic performance we used the 2008 Gross Domestic Product (GDP, at purchasing power parity per capita, International Monetary Fund (http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2008/02/weodata/index.aspx)). For the analysis of group differences, we employed the 2008 Gross Domestic Product (GDP, at purchasing power parity per capita, International Monetary Fund (http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2008/02/weodata/index.aspx)).

For political performance we used three measures: The Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy is based on the ratings of 60 indicators grouped into five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. Media freedom is annually measured and published as part of Freedom House's Press Freedom Index series. The index is based on ratings of 23 questions divided into three broad areas: legal, political and economic environments (Karlekar, 2003). Countries are classified as either 'free', 'partly free' or 'not free'. Transparency International finally contributed information of perceived levels of corruption. The Corruption Perceptions Index is compiled annually; its 2008 version contains information from 11 independent institutions.

Information about aggregate levels of social trust was obtained from the website of the WVS. The journalistic watchdog orientation was measured in the questionnaire on the basis of a five-point rating scale. We asked the journalists to indicate the extent to which they consider themselves as watchdogs of the government. The exact scores for each of these dimensions are documented in the Appendix.

**Journalists' political trust across nations**

Table 9.1 indicates that journalists have generally little trust in political parties and politicians. Overall mean scores of 2.19 and 2.23, on a scale that ranges between 1 and 5, clearly indicate a rather cynical attitude on the part of journalists towards political parties and politicians in general. These low levels of trust, however, do not apply to the same extent to the parliament and the government. In all investigated countries, journalists...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Western countries</th>
<th>Parliament</th>
<th>Political parties</th>
<th>Politicians in general</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Political trust (index)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>2.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued
are generally more trusting of these two institutions than of politicians and political parties. This pattern is remarkably consistent across the surveyed nations – with the exception of Turkey, where journalists have less trust in the parliament and the government. This finding correlates well with evidence from political science research, which shows that cross-national differences are significant at $p < .001$ for all investigated political institutions. The notably higher Eta$^2$ values indicate that cultural diversity looms especially large in the journalist's responses. We found less cross-national variation in the extent to which journalists trust in politicians and political parties. In other words, there is more cross-national disagreement with respect to trust in the parliament and the government than with regard to trust in politicians and political parties. Taken as a whole, country differences account for 19.6 percent of the variation in journalists' political trust, which is in any case a strong indication of substantive cross-national differences.

Journalists in Western countries generally exhibit higher trust levels than their colleagues in the non-Western world, but the pattern is a fairly uneven one. Political trust is highest among journalists in Switzerland and Germany, and it is lowest in Greece, Israel and the United States. Switzerland is often referred to as a showcase of the 'kind' and 'gentle' consensus democracy that usually breeds higher levels of democratic satisfaction (Lijphart, 1999: 293). Journalists in the United States, on the other hand, appear to have a fairly little trust in the parliament, and even less in the government. This finding resembles a pattern that has long been established in the US (Norris, 1999a). Notably, American journalists are the most strongly oriented towards a watchdog approach when compared to the other Western countries.

Journalists in developing countries and transitional societies exhibit substantially lower levels of political trust, but the pattern is mixed, too. Political trust tends to be higher in China, Egypt, Pakistan and Chile, while it is lowest in Turkey, Romania and Mexico. A potential source of this variation relates to the differential impact of contextual conditions. Journalists, just like the general public, may perceive the importance of the various aspects of a country's performance in different ways. Brazil, Bulgaria, Indonesia, Mexico, and Romania perform quite reasonably in terms of quality of democracy, but they tend to be weak on measures of corruption (see Appendix). There are, however, several cases that run counter to expected results. In Egypt, Pakistan, and partly also in Uganda, journalists seem to have a great deal of political trust despite their countries' weak performance on nearly all contextual indicators. Somewhat surprisingly, Chinese journalists have a lot of confidence in their political institutions. This finding correlates well with evidence from political science research, according to which the high trust levels are heavily based on positive evaluations of institutional performance (Yang and Tang, 2010).

For reasons of space we are unable to discuss the specific reasons for the higher or lower levels of journalists' political trust in the investigated countries. However, the data allows us to establish a few general patterns. We will discuss our results along the lines of the three explanations established above: social trust, performance and journalistic ideology.

Social trust is strongly related to journalists' levels of political trust. A comparison of journalists in high-trust and low-trust societies reveals a notable difference and a considerable effect of social trust on political trust among journalists. Journalists in high-trust societies have much more...
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confidence in political institutions than their colleagues in low-trust countries (M = 2.78; M = 2.36; t = 11.62; d.f. = 2075; p < .001; d = .52). Of all contextual factors analyzed, social trust has the strongest impact on journalists' trust levels. Figure 9.1 also shows a very strong relationship between social and political trust at the country level.

Evidence for the institutional performance approach is mixed. Political trust among journalists is higher in high-income societies (M = 2.65) than it is in middle- and low-income countries (M = 2.33; M = 2.44). The differences are significant, but the effect of GDP on trust is rather weak (F = 32.30; d.f. = 2; p < .001; \( \eta^2 = .03 \)). The effect of growth is also fairly weak, but reversed. Journalists' confidence in political institutions is higher in societies with weaker economic growth than in countries with stronger growth (M = 2.58; M = 2.38; t = -5.25; d.f. = 2075; p < .001; d = .23). It has to be noted, though, that there is an obvious interaction between GDP and growth. Societies with higher GDP generally tend to have smaller economic growth.

Results for the relationship between quality of democracy and trust indicate a non-linear effect. Journalists in full democracies (M = 2.72) are more trusting in politics than their colleagues working in flawed democracies and hybrid regimes (M = 2.25; M = 2.32). Newspeople in authoritarian regimes, however, appear to have the highest confidence in their political institutions (M = 3.05; F = 84.37; d.f. = 3; p < .001; \( \eta^2 = .11 \)). Regarding corruption, the relationship is more straightforward. Journalists have more political trust in less corrupt societies, and the effect of corruption on trust is of a considerable size (M = 2.71; M = 2.38; t = 9.25; d.f. = 2075; p < .001; d = .41). Figure 9.2 also points to a substantive relationship between trust and corruption. Finally, the results for press freedom strongly resemble the pattern we found for democracy. As expected, journalists in societies with a free press are more trusting in politics than their colleagues in partly free media systems (M = 2.68; M = 2.20). However, their colleagues working in media systems classified as 'not free' by Freedom House have the most political trust (M = 2.82; F = 107.50; d.f. = 2; p < .001; \( \eta^2 = .09 \)).

There was little support in the data for the strong influence of journalistic ideology on trust. In fact, journalists had more political trust in countries where the watchdog approach was strongly emphasized, while their colleagues operating in professional cultures that put less stress on a watchdog ideology were less confident in their political institutions (M = 2.57; M = 2.46; t = 2.96; d.f. = 2075; p < .01). The effect of journalistic ideology on trust was not substantive, however (d = .13).

Journalists' and the general public's political trust

In the previous section, we established that journalists are generally rather distrustful of political institutions, especially with respect to the politicians and political parties. The question now is how do journalists' levels of trust compare to the trust levels of the general public? In order to establish a
point of reference, we used data from the fourth (2005–2008) wave of the World Values Survey (WVS), in which 14 of the 21 countries covered by our study were included. For the purpose of comparison we omitted trust in politicians from the composite index of political trust, as this indicator was not measured in the WVS. The resulting measures turned out to be sufficiently consistent, with reliability analysis indicating a Cronbach's alpha of .78 for our own measure, and a value of .85 for the WVS index.

Table 9.2 shows mixed results for the various countries. There were no significant differences between journalists' and the general public's levels of political trust in Brazil, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, Spain, and the United States. In Australia, Chile, Germany and Switzerland, journalists actually exhibited higher trust levels than the general public—a result similar to the one found in the Dutch study (Brants et al., 2010). In the remaining countries, however, journalists seem to be more distrusting of political institutions than the general population. These differences are especially striking for Turkey, Indonesia and China. In these countries, journalists have considerably less political trust than the general public.

Can these results be seen as evidence for journalists driving, or not driving, public distrust and disaffection with politics? There is obviously no easy answer. At face value, the answer would be 'yes' for parts of the non-Western world. Journalists in these countries constitute an intellectual élite of people who might have an inbuilt inclination to be critical and suspicious of political elites. In addition, in a climate of deceptive and restrictive information policies of governments and state authorities, journalists may be generally distrustful of political institutions. At the same time, journalists in some countries have privileged access to information about political processes due to the nature of their work. They are usually the first to become aware of, or even take advantage of, political deficiencies and misconduct, but much of this might not be exposed to the public due to restrictions of press freedom and the interlocking of politics, the economy and the media.

The story, however, is obviously different for journalists in the western hemisphere. In these countries, journalists were in fact either more trusting of political institutions than the general population, or differences were not significant. This may cast some doubt on the belief that journalists, in their capacities as individuals, contribute to public distrust. As we pointed out earlier, this issue remains unresolved in literature, with empirical results not suggesting a consistent picture. It seems to us that the question of how the media contribute to growing levels of public distrust should be asked at the level of media routines. Perhaps, it is less the journalists' personal attitudes and beliefs that nourish public distrust, but the media logic that emphasizes negativity as a journalistic value. However, there are alternative explanations. Various studies have demonstrated that institutional trust is positively associated with education (Gronke and Cook, 2007; Hudson, 2006). Since journalists tend to be better educated than the average member of the population, they may have other, more subtle, perceptions of politics, while judgments of the wider public strongly depend on media content. But again, the issue of causality cannot be resolved by this essay. Addressing this question would require a different research design and analytical strategy.

Table 9.2: Journalists' and the general public's trust in political institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Journalists</th>
<th>General public</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
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<td>Germany</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
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<td>.48</td>
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<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Western</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
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<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
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<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
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<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: World Values Survey (www.worldvaluessurvey.org); ***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05.

Conclusions

This analysis has shown that journalists have indeed little trust in political parties and politicians, which points to a generally cynical attitude in journalists with regard to political actors. Low confidence in these political agents is a strikingly consistent phenomenon in all of the investigated societies. The journalists' levels of political trust vary considerably across nations, however. Such differences have also been found with respect to general publics (e.g. Kunioka and Woller, 1999; Mishler and Rose, 2001; Slomczynski and Janicka, 2009). Overall, it seems that journalists in Western nations exhibit somewhat higher political trust than their colleagues in the non-Western world.

We found notable evidence for contextual factors shaping journalists' political trust. Of all factors investigated, social trust had the strongest influence on journalists' trust levels. Hence, the cultural explanation of political trust holds, at least in this analysis. The institutional performance approach
Journalists were in fact either more trustful than the general population, or turn out to be less trusting in political institutions than the general public. Trust levels did not differ significantly. This does not necessarily mean that journalists’ personal attitudes do not contribute to public distrust. Since they tend to be well educated, they might have more subtle perceptions of politics yet still produce negative media coverage. This is especially likely in the context of a media logic that is obsessed with negative news. Similar or even greater distrust among the public may in fact be the grand effect of negativity in the media.

In non-Western countries, however, journalists indeed exhibited significantly less political trust than the general public. One of the reasons might be that journalists in these societies belong to a particular intellectual elite that often operates in a dishonest and restrictive communication environment of official politics. In addition, journalists have premium access to information about corruption, misgovernment and political nepotism, and they tend to understand political structures better than the overall population. Consequently, a country’s political performance may exhibit a much greater contribution to public distrust than journalists’ individual attitudes. Journalists’ lack of political trust might therefore partly act as a mediating factor in the development of public distrust.

Although we think this study has produced some important new insights, we also need to be modest about potential generalizations resulting from the study’s results. We have investigated a sizable number of countries, but our samples of journalists are neither large nor representative. This does not mean, however, that these samples were insignificant. By holding many crucial factors nearly constant (distributions of media types, ownership, national versus local media, and editorial ranks), the selection of journalists was extremely similar in terms of its internal composition. A second problem relates to the fact that journalists’ trust levels, just as other subjective measures used for this analysis, are based on personal evaluations of individuals who are not using an objective yardstick in order to make informed comparative judgments. High trust levels for some institutions may therefore only reflect the mere fact that even in a context of generally little trust, these institutions stand out in terms of their credibility – not across countries, but among the political institutions within the same country.

Furthermore, we believe that future research needs to address the relationship between journalists’ attitudes, media content and public trust more vigorously by establishing causal links between the multiple elements involved in the communication process: journalists, political actors, media content, and public opinion. This would require a more sophisticated research design that taps into the journalists’ attitudes, the extent of negativity their content exhibits, and the effects this negativity has on the audience’s trust in political institutions. And finally, the concept and true meaning of ‘political trust’ still deserves greater theoretical sophistication despite a long tradition of research. ‘Trust’ is a multifaceted concept that needs to be disentangled from related notions, such as ‘confidence’, ‘faith’, ‘distrust’, ‘mistrust’, ‘skepticism’ and ‘cynicism’ (Cook and Gronke, 2005).
4. The higher a country scores in the index, the better it performs in combating corruption; see http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2008. We considered a country score of .6 or less to indicate strong corruption.

6. See http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org. Question wording: 'What do you think about descriptions of people?' Scale: 1 = 'Most people are friendly' and 2 = 'Can’t be too careful.' For the analysis of group differences, a 'low-trust society' is one in which less than 30 percent of the respondents said that most people could be trusted.

7. Question wording: 'The following list describes some of the things the news media do, or try to do. Please tell me on a scale of 1 to 5, how important is each of these things in your work?' Scale: 1 = 'not important at all' to 5 = 'extremely important.' The threshold between a 'strong' and a 'weak' watchdog orientation was set to 4.0.

References


Making Sense of Press Freedom: A Comparison of Journalists' Perceptions of Press Freedom in Eastern Europe and East Asia

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With the global spread of democracy, values such as freedom, individuality and the rule of law have gained universal appeal. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press are at the heart of this set of values. Indeed, the free public exchange of ideas is regarded as a defining element of democracy that underpins the rationality of popular decision-making and the balance of power between government and society. However, freedom of the press remains one of the most vulnerable achievements in the new democracies that have emerged over the past quarter of a century, since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. While there is a broad body of literature that analyses how state and economic power infringe on the independence of the press (Freedom House, annual reports; Paletz and Jakubowicz 2003; Price et al. 2002; Willnat and Aw 2008), little is known about how the agents of press freedom, i.e. journalists, interpret press freedom and how this affects their professional practices.

This paper aims to find out how universal the understanding of press freedom is and to what extent it is shaped by culture-specific presumptions and historical experiences. The analyst is based on the assumption that press freedom is – as indeed is any other democratic norm – a social construct that emerges from collective negotiations over its meaning, institutional form and practice. Since different cultures enter these post-authoritarian debates from different vantage points and with different normative presumptions, the resulting media practices are likely to diverge in many respects from those found in the established democracies of the West. This study aims to understand how journalists in new democracies make sense of press freedom and how this might affect their day-to-day choices. In order to shed light on the epistemologies of press freedom and its practices, the views of journalists in two cultural contexts will be compared: Eastern...