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WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO TRUST IN NEWS IN THE LONG RUN GLOBALLY?

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Introduction

Trust in news is an important issue both for media professionals and for scholars seeking to understand the role of news media in our societies.

Journalists and others in the news media have many reasons to care about trust, both as an intrinsically important part of their relationship with the public, and as a means to an end (e.g. selling subscriptions, justifying public funding). “Trust is the new currency for success”, as the World Association of News Media has put it.¹

Scholars interested in trust in news include media researchers specifically (Fawzi et al., 2021; Ladd, 2012), as well as social scientists considering the news media as part of broader comparative analysis (Norris, 2011). Researchers have documented that it matters to many in the industry, who both care about trust, and are concerned about losing it (Robinson, 2023; Toff et al., 2021a). They have also found that it is an important mediating factor influencing the individual-level consequences of engaging with the news (Ejaz et al., 2024; Skipworth, 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2022).

Both media professionals and scholars are keenly aware that trust in news has declined in recent years in many places (Fawzi et al., 2021; Fletcher et al., 2025; Newman et al., 2025). In some countries, individual politicians and political parties are now openly attacking the news media, painting them as untrustworthy on social media and elsewhere, and parts of the public express not merely a lack of trust, but active distrust. In a recent survey, more than half of respondents reported that they “very” or “quite often” come across media criticism, often from politicians, and often on social media (Newman et al., 2023).

While accentuated in recent years, it is also clear that there has been longer-term declines in trust in news going back decades in some intensely studied and well-documented individual countries – the most well-known example of this is probably the United States, where, according to Gallup, the percentage who say they trust the media has declined from around 70 % in the 1970s to a little over 30% in the 2020s.²

But neither the recent nor the longer-term declines are uniform across the world. In other countries, during the same period, trust in news has remained stable, or even increased. As a group of scholars argued in a landmark comparative and longitudinal study analysing data from 53 countries going up to 2014, “decline in media trust is not a universal trend” (Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

In this chapter, we build on this previous work and examine long-term global trends in trust in news by combining data from the World Values Survey/European Values Study (WVS/EVS) and the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (DNR) to expand the scope of analysis both in terms of countries covered and the time period under consideration. We examine datasets containing trust data from 115 countries,³ together accounting for about three-quarters of the world’s population (in large part due to the inclusion of China and India) and cover developments over nearly half a century, going beyond existing work in both space and time. Overall, we show that there is a clear, consistent, and general (though not universal) decline in trust in news across most of the countries covered, that trust has generally declined throughout the whole period covered, and that the decline has increased in the 2000s as digital media gradually displaced television as the most widely used source of news.

We rely on survey data because it is uniquely suited to document developments in overall trust in news at the societal level. Many other methods, including qualitative methods and experiments, are important in understanding what trust in news means, what engenders it, and what relation it has with other issues (whether behavioural, institutional, or societal). But with representative samples, surveys can document public sentiment at the population level, and questions fielded repeatedly across multiple waves and across countries enable analysis of developments over time and cross-country comparisons (see also Chapter 3 in this volume).

That makes surveys useful for understanding trust in news as fundamentally subjective and relational, and thus a phenomenon that, to be properly understood, has to be analysed on the basis of data on what different people think of the news. Content analysis, interviews with journalists, fieldwork in news organisations, and other methods can all contribute to our understanding of what journalists and media do and do not do to earn and retain trust. But given that trust is necessarily in the eye of the beholder, to document and understand trust, we have to consider how the public perceives the news – something surveys can help us do.

It is important to stress that this kind of general public trust in news is not a measure of trustworthiness, or an objective indicator of any other intrinsic property. As Onora O'Neill pointed out in her classic work, sometimes people trust individuals and institutions that are not, in fact, trustworthy. And sometimes they do not trust – or even distrust – those that they might, on closer inspection, see as trustworthy (or that journalists, scholars, or others think they ought to see as trustworthy) (O'Neill, 2002; see also Chapter 2 in this volume).

It is also important to stress that both what trust means and how people respond to survey questions about it are context-dependent. For present purposes, given the high number of very different countries included in the analysis, it is particularly important to note that comparative work in political science suggests that while people in more democratic countries may tend to answer questions about trust in a “positive” sense, as pertaining to whether they have confidence in the ethical and normative commitments of, in this case, the news media, people in authoritarian countries may tend to answer the question in a “negative” sense, as pertaining to whether the news media act predictably (Rivetti & Cavatorta, 2017). Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that respondents engage in both self-censorship and preference fabrication in surveys concerning trust in institutions perceived as aligned with authoritarian regimes (Tannenbergh, 2022), including news media directly controlled by the government (see also Chapter 5 in this volume).

But subjective as it is, whether well-founded or not, trust in news is, from the perspective of journalists and news media who face an often sceptical public, what sociologists call a “social fact”, famously defined as “manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control” (Durkheim et al., 1964). Whatever media professionals and media scholars think of how the news media are seen by members of the public, these public perceptions of trust are thus important in themselves, as part of the place the news media occupy as a social institution (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Nielsen, 2016; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). In people's relations with news, as in their relations with politics and much else, perception is a consequential part of reality.

Research questions

To advance our understanding of global, long-term trends in trust in news, we focus on two main research questions.

First, we extend previous work to include the decade from 2015 to 2025, a period which has seen an accelerated move towards a more digital, mobile, and platform-dominated high-choice media environment different in many ways from the low-choice media environment dominated by broadcast and print mass media, as well as active political attacks on the media in some countries, and a global pandemic that tested the capabilities of virtually all institutions in society. Informed by research suggesting that structural changes in the media

environment – in the period we cover, most notably perhaps the relative decline of television news and the growing importance of digital media – in themselves can influence trust in news (Fletcher et al., 2025), and that there has been an overall long-term decline in trust in many, but not all, institutions globally (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2022; Valgarðsson et al., 2025), we ask –

RQ1. What has happened to trust in news globally in the last 50 years?

Second, building on scholarship highlighting the importance of context (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) – especially domestic politics (Hanitzsch et al., 2018) – in influencing trust in news, as well as the concern expressed by many social scientists that we are living through a “democratic recession” (Bermeo, 2016) with many societies undergoing democratic backsliding or even active autocratisation (often accompanied by attacks on the news media by politicians and sometimes parts of the public, see also Chapter 12 in this volume), we ask –

RQ2a. Are the trends different in countries with different levels of media freedom?

RQ2b. Are the trends different in countries with changing levels of media freedom?

Our approach here is deliberately empirical and descriptive. We do not intend to offer any causal account, review existing work, or develop yet another theory. Instead, our focus is on offering a descriptive argument to expand our understanding of an aspect of the world that both media professionals and media scholars have reason to care about. Such descriptive analysis is, as even the most programmatic proponents of causal analysis recognise, an essential part of science and necessary to advance our understanding of the empirical world (Gerring, 2012). As King, Keohane, and Verba point out in their influential *methodenstreitschrift* known for its pronounced privileging of causal analysis, “it is hard to develop [causal] explanations before we know something about the world and what needs to be explained on the basis of what characteristics” (King et al., 1994). We believe this is especially important when it comes to areas like the media, where the objects of analysis evolve over time, and where opinions and narratives about what is going on often rush ahead of evidence. Precisely because trust in news is important, both for media professionals and for scholars working on media, it is important we have a contextually nuanced, up-to-date, and empirically grounded understanding of the phenomenon. Despite this, as one recent literature review on trust in news noted, although “communication researchers have comprehensively studied the correlates of trust in news media at the individual level, relatively little attention has been paid to the societal level” (Fawzi et al., 2021, p. 163). The aim of this chapter is to help rectify that.

Data

Our analysis is based on survey data from two sources: first, the World Values Survey (Haerpfer et al., 2024) combined with European Values Study (EVS, 2022) – together sometimes referred to as the Integrated Values Survey (IVS) – and, second, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2025).

The WVS/EVS has collected data on confidence in the press across eight waves from 1981 to 2022, and the DNR has collected data on trust in news every year from 2015 to 2025 across 11 waves. The WVS/EVS data covers 118 countries, while the DNR covers 48. Due to overlap, and after sub-regions within countries and countries with no trust data were removed, the combined dataset covers 115 countries over nearly half a century, from 1981 to 2025 (see Table A1 for a list of countries). The WVS/EVS dataset contains 632,711 valid responses and the DNR dataset 858,688. The combined number of responses included in the analysis is thus nearly 1.5 million. Our analysis of data on 115 countries over nearly 50 years compare to analysis of data on 53 countries over 40 years in the most ambitious previous study we are aware of (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; see also Müller, 2013).

The two datasets we rely on have usually fielded one main question to measure people's overall trust in news. Because of the theoretical and conceptual complexity of the issue at hand, some researchers field a range of different questions to get at different aspects of trust in news. Gaziano and McGrath's (1986) "news credibility scale", for example, suggests using no less than 12 items. It has been deployed in recent work utilising a subset of these, for example, an important study using five of the items to ask respondents whether the news media in Sweden are "fair", "unbiased", "tell the whole story", "accurate", and "separate fact and opinion" in their news coverage (Tsfati et al., 2023). Others have tried to develop new, multidimensional ways of getting at trust in news and its component parts (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Toff et al., 2021b). Researchers have also investigated variation in trust in news across different topics, documenting, for example, significantly lower trust in news about crime and immigration than about medicine and the economy (Tsfati et al., 2022). Similarly, many researchers have noted that which kinds of news media respondents are asked about – most commonly "the press" versus "television news" in the past, and more recently in the DNR "most news" versus for example "news found on social media" – often document different public perceptions of different parts of the news media environment (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Research shows, for example, that television news is usually more widely trusted than newspapers, perhaps in part due to reliance on the "realism heuristic" that audiovisual content is used to benefit from (Sundar, 2008). A few surveys also include questions about trust in individual news media brands, documenting great variation (Newman et al., 2025; Schulz et al.,

2020; Toff et al., 2021b). Furthermore, methodological analysis suggests that, in authoritarian countries, asking separate questions about media that are directly controlled by the government and those that are not (though often still faced with government sticks and carrots), tends to return significantly higher results for those explicitly aligned with the government (Tannenbergh, 2022). These different approaches all rely on including a range of different questions in the same survey on the basis of interest in variations in trust at the individual and aggregate level, on the one hand, and various levels of analysis on the other hand (news in general, news on specific topics, via specific media, from specific brands, in specific contexts, etc.).

There are clearly potential advantages to fielding a wider range of questions, both around different aspects of trust and related concepts like confidence, credibility, etc., as well as around different kinds of news media or even individual brands. But it is much more resource-intensive due to the costs involved in fielding surveys, and the need to be disciplined about questionnaire length limits how many other issues can be covered in the same survey. For example, the Swedish study mentioned above finds that “there were only minor differences in the results between the *News Credibility Scale* and a general single-item media trust measure” (Tsfati et al., 2023). Studies have also suggested that this is because while scholars may have theoretically and conceptually sound reasons for understanding trust in news as a multi-dimensional construct, the public tends to think about it in a unidimensional way (Daniller et al., 2017). We therefore consider the single-item measures used here reliable for our purposes, and the number of countries included ensures we can analyse variation across different contexts - but it is important to be very clear that this necessarily limits the granularity of the findings when it comes to, for example, trust in different topics or types of media, areas where we would welcome future large-scale longitudinal and comparative work.

The measures of trust in news deployed by the WVS/EVS and the DNR are different but related. The WVS/EVS survey asks respondents how much confidence they have in various institutions, including “the press”. Although the WVS/EVS question does not refer specifically to either “trust” or “the news”, it is frequently used as a measure of trust in news (Hanitzsch et al., 2018), and we do the same here. There are four response options: “A great deal”, “Quite a lot”, “Not very much”, and “None at all”, and respondents can also choose not to answer. The DNR survey asks respondents whether they “trust most news most of the time”, with responses recorded on five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”, with no “Don’t know” option. Below, we work with data from these two measures to be able to expand the scale and scope of the empirical analysis.

Analysis

The data has been analysed using a similar approach to one developed for the longitudinal analysis of political trust across multiple datasets, survey projects, and survey questions (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). This approach is based around harmonising the different measures of trust in news contained in the datasets before analysing them. We have done this by dichotomising the responses to different trust questions into (1) “Trust” and (0) “Lack of trust”. “A great deal” and “Quite a lot” responses from the WVS/EVS data were recoded as (1) “Trust”, and “Not very much” and “None at all” responses were recoded as (0) “Lack of trust”. Those who chose not to answer were excluded. “Strongly agree” and “Tend to agree” responses from the DNR were recoded as (1) “Trust” with “Neither agree nor disagree”, “Tend to disagree” and “Strongly disagree” recoded as (0) “Lack of trust”.

The datasets can then be analysed using linear multi-level modelling, where time (measured here using the year the survey was conducted) is used to predict trust, and a random intercept for country is added to account for the fact that individual respondents are nested within countries. It is also possible to pool the datasets and model the relationship between year and trust, where individual responses are nested in datasets, which are in turn nested in countries.

Changes in global trust levels

While it is a common assumption that there is a general trend of declining trust in news, systematic comparative analyses of whether that is actually the case remain scarce (with exceptions like Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Beginning with the WVS/EVS dataset, we find a decline over time, as year – which has been centred around zero to produce meaningful intercepts – has a small but statistically significant negative association with trust in news ($b = -.002$, $p < .001$) (see Table 4.1, Model 1). In other words, on average the proportion that trust the news has decreased by about 1 percentage point (pp) every 5 years from 1981 to 2022 – declining from around 49% in the 1980s to 39% in the 2020s in the countries covered. The United States, as an individual country example, sees a sharp decline from 50% in 1981 and ends at 23% in 2011 (the last WVS wave it was included in). In the period covered by the WVS/EVS dataset, the United States thus comes across as a more extreme example of a general trend.

The DNR data (Table 4.1, Model 2) shows a similar but slightly steeper downward trend ($b = .004$, $p < .001$). In this dataset, trust in news decreased by 2pp every 5 years from 2015 to 2025 – declining from 44% in 2015 to around 40% today in the countries covered. According to this data, in this period, trust in news in the United States is in fact basically stable – starting at 32% in 2015 and ending at 30% in 2025. In the period covered by the DNR

TABLE 4.1 Multi-level models showing the effect of year in different datasets where the dependent variable is trust in news

<i>Predictors</i>	<i>Model 1 WVS/EVS</i>			<i>Model 2 DNR</i>			<i>Model 3 Pooled</i>		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	.435	.014	<.001	.484	.015	<.001	.444	.012	<.001
Year	-.002	.000	<.001	-.004	.000	<.001	-.002	.000	<.001
Random Effects									
σ^2	.22			.23			.23		
τ_{00}	.02	Country		.01	Country		.01	Country:Dataset	
ICC	.09			.04			.08	Country	
N	115	Country		48	Country		115	Country	
Observations	632,711			858,668			1,491,379		
Marginal R ² / Conditional R ²	.002/.095			.001/.041			.003/.080		

Note: Bold indicates a statistically significant effect at $\alpha = .05$.

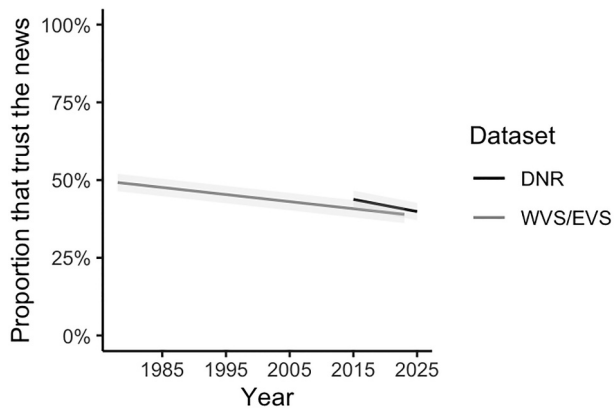


FIGURE 4.1 Predicted effect of time on trust in news in the DNR and WVS/EVS datasets.

dataset, the United States is thus more of an exception, with relatively stable (low) trust in news in a period characterised by (accelerating) general declines in many other countries.

Given the overall trends, it is no surprise that if we pool the datasets (while accounting for the fact that individual responses are nested in datasets which are in turn nested in countries) we also find a negative trend ($b = -.002$, $p < .001$) (Table 4.1, Model 3). To explore the extent to which this trend is

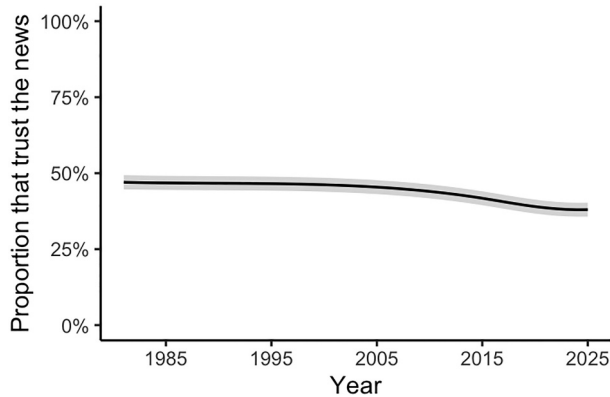


FIGURE 4.2 Trust in news over time in the pooled dataset.

non-linear we estimate a similar model with time as a B-spline with five degrees of freedom. When visualised, this model suggests a slight decline from 1981 onwards that seems to accelerate from around 2000, broadly around the time digital media began to be widely used for news (see Figure 4.2).

While it is not universal across countries, or evenly distributed over time, the data thus reveals that recent declines in trust seen in many places and documented in the DNR are part of a longer-term downward trend extending back to at least the 1980s. Importantly, and running contrary to the tendency to sometimes assume a past where most people trusted the news, even half a century ago, across the countries covered here, less than half the public said that they trusted the news, and the decline we document had begun before the internet became a mass medium. But it does seem to have accelerated as digital media become mainstream and various platforms (e.g. search engines, social media, video sites, and messaging applications) come to occupy dominant positions in the media environment. This structural media change may have influenced overall trust in news (Fletcher et al., 2025; see also Chapter 9 in this volume), and social media in particular has certainly enabled more public criticism of the media both from political actors and members of the public (Newman et al., 2023), even as political context and key events like the pandemic no doubt continue to be important too.

The results in Table 4.1 also highlight that while there has been a statistically significant decline in trust, differences between countries and datasets explain much more of the variance. Given how previous research has documented the importance of context and complicated the idea that there are universal trends in trust in news, it is not surprising that different countries show different trends that often depart from the average.

Figure 4.3 attempts to summarise this, by displaying the effect of time on trust in news in each country and dataset based on 140 separate OLS models

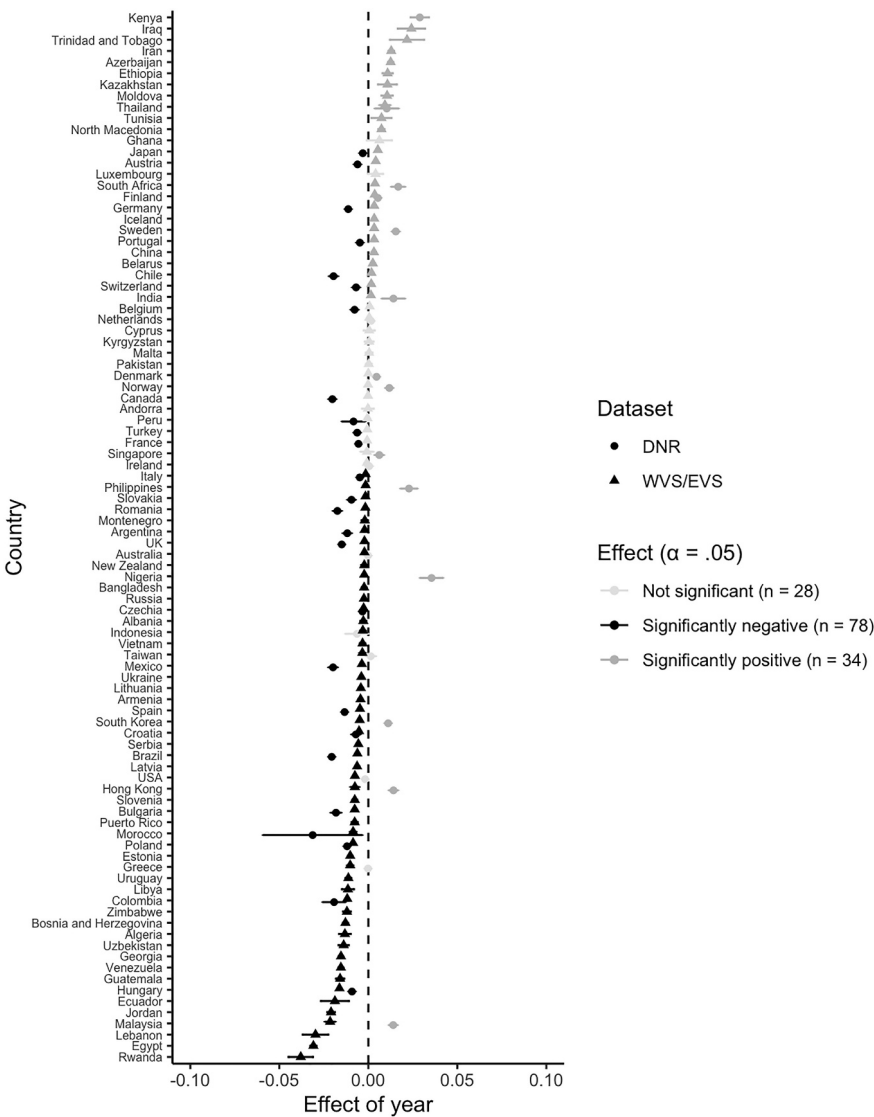


FIGURE 4.3 Predicted effect of time on trust in news in every country-dataset combination.

across 94 countries (some of the 115 countries in the two datasets only contain data from a single year, meaning it is not possible to study the effect of time). Limited space prevents us from going into detail, but it is clear that most countries have experienced a statistically significant decline in trust according to at least one of the datasets. A total of 78 of the country-datasets covered show a significant negative effect over time, whereas 34 have seen a positive effect over time. In the remaining 28 cases, the results are not statistically significant.

Although there are some consistent country patterns in the DNR and WVS/EVS datasets, there are also some differences. This is likely to be because they cover different time periods, and, given how most scholars stress the contextual character of trust in news and its relationship to domestic politics (with its vagaries), it is not clear why one should necessarily expect declines from the 1980s and 1990s to continue into the 2020s. The underlying surveys are also based on different methodologies. The WVS/EVS data is largely based on face-to-face interviews with nationally representative samples, whereas the DNR data comes from online surveys with nationally representative quotas.

There could also be inconsistencies due to the questions asked. The WVS/EVS question asks about confidence in “the press”, which although it can be used to refer to the news media and journalism as a whole, the term will be understood as newspaper and magazine journalism specifically by some (perhaps most) respondents. There is some evidence of this in the data. For example, if we look at Japan and the UK, we see quite different baseline levels of trust in each dataset. In Japan – which has one of the highest newspaper circulation rates in the world – the WVS/EVS data on confidence in the press is much higher than the DNR data on trust in news. In the UK, however, where partisan newspapers have very low levels of trust and the most trusted brands are broadcasters like the BBC (Newman et al., 2025), confidence in the press is considerably lower than trust in news (Figure 4.4). Differences here are not due to the time period and are unlikely to be caused by survey methodology, as it is possible to collect high-quality, nationally representative online survey data in both countries.

We now turn to RQ2a and RQ2b, which ask whether the trends in trust in news are different for countries with different or changing levels of press freedom. To place countries into different groups we use Freedom House’s (2017) data on freedom of the press, which was compiled annually from 1980 to 2016,

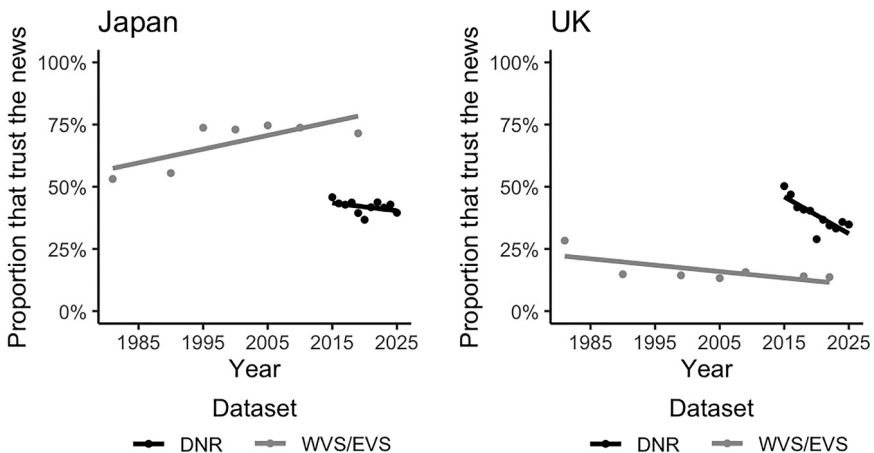


FIGURE 4.4 Confidence in the press and trust in news over time in Japan and the UK.

and thus allows us to cover much of the period studied. Freedom House scored countries based on their own assessment of the press freedom situation, and categorised them as “Free”, “Partly Free” or “Not Free”. For the purposes of RQ2a, we categorised a country as “Free” if Freedom House consistently classified it as “Free” in every year (n=27 countries), with the same approach for countries classed as “Not Free” (n=10). This leaves a substantial number of countries where the classification varied over time. For the purposes of RQ2b, countries were categorised as “Improving” (n=22) if there was evidence of an upward slope over time (after “Free” [3], “Partly Free” [2] and “Not Free” [1] were converted to numerical values) and there was a net increase of at least 1 from the first year in the data to the last. Countries were categorised as “Deteriorating” (n=26) if there was a downward slope and a net decrease of at least -1 in the Freedom House score. Countries were categorised as “Fluctuating” (n=28) if there was no substantial net change from the first to last year.⁴

When we add a term for press freedom group to the Model 3 and interact it with time (Model 4 in Table 4.2), we can estimate the trend for trust in news in each group based on the pooled DNR and WVS/EVS data.

TABLE 4.2 Multi-level model showing the effect of year in countries with different types of press freedom where the dependent variable is trust in news

<i>Predictors</i>	<i>Model 4 Pooled</i>		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	.455	.022	<.001
Year	-.003	.000	<.001
Press freedom (ref=Deteriorating)			
- Fluctuating	.002	.032	.950
- Free	-0.049	0.032	0.115
- Improving	-0.004	0.034	0.900
- Not Free	0.087	0.047	0.065
Year: Fluctuating	-0.002	0.000	<0.001
Year: Free	0.002	0.000	<0.001
Year: Improving	-0.003	0.000	<0.001
Year: Not Free	0.009	0.000	<0.001
Random Effects			
σ^2	0.23		
τ_{00} Country:Dataset	0.01		
τ_{00} Country	0.01		
ICC	0.07		
N_{Country}	113		
N_{Dataset}	2		
Observations	1,487,380		
Marginal R ² /Conditional R ²	0.009/0.077		

Note: Bold indicates a statistically significant effect at $\alpha = .05$.

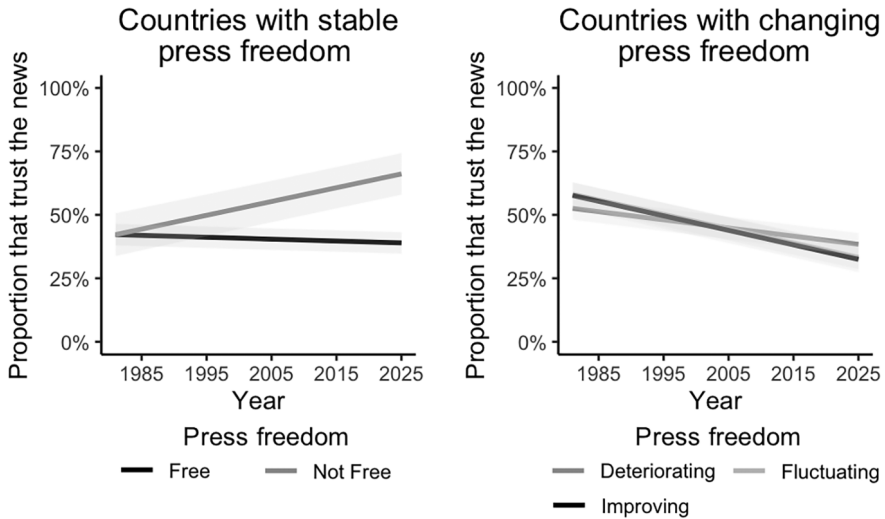


FIGURE 4.5 Predicted effect of time on trust in news by press freedom (pooled DNR and WVS/EVS data).

When we visualise this in the first panel in Figure 4.5 (RQ2a), where we compare consistently “Free” countries to those consistently “Not Free”, we see that trust in news in countries with no press freedom has actually risen since the 1980s (this is based entirely on WVS/EVS data, as there are no countries in the “Not Free” group in the DNR data). However, consistently “Free” countries have seen small declines in trust in news. In the second panel in Figure 4.5 (RQ2b), we see that in countries with “Deteriorating”, “Fluctuating”, or “Improving” press freedom, trust in the news has fallen. In other words, since the 1980s, only countries which consistently lack press freedom have seen increases in trust. (Our finding here is in line with earlier work by Müller, 2013.)

Discussion

In this chapter, we have analysed global long-term trends in trust in news based on survey data from 115 countries from 1981 to 2025. Extending previous work both in terms of the number of countries covered and the time period, we document that there clearly has been an overall decline in trust in news over time, starting in the 1980s, and accelerating from around 2000 as the internet and various digital platforms became mass media. A more detailed examination including other levels of analysis, including trust in news on different topics, via different media, or from different brands, may nuance the findings in important ways. But the overall results are clear.

This trend towards lower trust in news is aligned both with the experience of media professionals in many countries and with findings from social scientists documenting a similar overall decline in trust in some (but not all) political institutions over recent decades (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). The decline in trust predates the rise of the internet and the digital platforms that have come to dominate it, and unquestionably has many contributing causes, but it does seem to have accelerated as digital media became more mainstream. One possible reason for this could be that news does not appear as authoritative in a digital environment that affords active and often contentious debates, alternative voices, and where all sorts of content are presented equally by platforms (Fletcher et al., 2025). And if people living under authoritarian regimes in media environments that are not free are less likely to publicly voice their criticisms or embrace alternatives, the possible effects of the structural shift may play out differently in these contexts.

These clear, general trends notwithstanding, it is still true, as Thomas Hanitzsch and co-authors found in their important study (Hanitzsch et al., 2018), that there is no single universal trend. A significant minority of countries have not seen a decline in trust in news, and some even saw an increase. The United States, sometimes treated as if it were representative of wider developments, is an outlier here both in terms of how unusually high trust in news was in the last part of the 20th century, and in terms of how sharply it has declined since. Many other countries have, in a less dramatic but still significant fashion, moved from limited trust in news in the 20th century to somewhat lower levels in the 21st. Looking back over the last half-century, it is clear that situations where the majority of the public in a country trusted the news are the exceptions, not the rule.

Context seems to be a contributing factor to this variation. Building on existing work stressing the importance of domestic politics for trust in news, we have examined long-term global developments across countries consistently regarded by Freedom House as having free media, countries consistently rated “not Free”, as well as countries that have seen, respectively, a deteriorating, fluctuating, or improving media freedom situation over the period covered. Overall, we find a clear decline across all the countries with changing media freedom situation, a slight decline in the countries consistently rated free, and a significant increase in trust in news in countries rated “not Free”.

These findings raise a number of important questions for both media professionals and scholars to consider. The fact that trust in news has declined in free countries and countries with fluctuating levels of media freedom lends itself to at least two different interpretations.

The optimistic interpretation is that this reflects the development of a more *sceptical citizenry* (sometimes called “critical”), with more people less deferential to institutional authority, including that of the news media and the political institutions that tend to set the news agenda. As Pippa Norris (2022) has

argued in her comparative work on trust in public institutions, scepticism is normatively preferable to a credulous citizenry that overestimates the trustworthiness of fallible institutions. From this perspective, while certainly frustrating for journalists and others in the media, and sometimes likely to produce second-order effects that undermine how much people benefit from following the news, the decline is in itself primarily problematic in contexts where one believes that the news media, collectively, deserves more trust than the public has in it.

This, of course, points to the pessimistic interpretation, that the trends we document here reflect the development of a more *cynical citizenry*, with more people questioning institutional authority in ways that risk leaving them more isolated when acting in and making sense of the world, or more reliant on the alternative actors who seek to supplement or supplant legacy institutions. In this perspective too, much hinges on what one believes is the normatively and societally “appropriate” level of trust in news in general in a given society, and what one makes of those actors (whether individual news media brands, and/or online voices, politicians, or social movements) that those losing trust in “the news media” broadly in turn rely on.

While survey data can provide an empirical starting point, and can enable analysis of more differentiated patterns of “selective trust” (Toff et al., 2021b) as well as, for example, how aligned public trust and expert assessment of accuracy are at the brand level (Schulz et al., 2020), even such data, and the kind of analysis we present here, cannot fully answer these questions. They are partially about normative conceptions of citizenship and democracy that always need to balance both “positive” and “negative” components (Rosanvallon, 2008), and in part about the kinds of deeply contextual judgements Onora O’Neill has long stressed (O’Neill, 2002) as to whether one believes the news media in a specific context serves both society as a whole and specific communities in it in a way that makes the news media trustworthy.

These judgements all have a normative dimension where judgement will vary depending on perspective, just as they are relative and contingent on positionality – historically privileged groups long well represented in the news media and well catered for may see the issues very differently from the many groups who have few reasons to be sentimental about the past (Callison & Young, 2019; Richardson, 2020; Usher, 2021). Implicit and explicit claims about a supposed “Golden Age” always raise questions of “when” as well as “for what” and “for whom”. In this respect, at least, the trends we have documented here connect with other research in a potentially worrying way – while trust in representative political institutions has declined over time, as we have shown trust in news has, despite what is often claimed, there is no general downward trend with regard to political and social trust (Norris, 2022), and there has been no parallel long-term general decline in trust in other institutions such as the civil service or the police (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). Perhaps

what we are seeing is – at least for those actors most directly affected – a crisis of public trust in two of the institutions many scholars see as necessary parts of a well-functioning democracy, electoral politics and independent news media, two institutions where our societal disagreements and conflicts are often vigorously expressed, performed, and refracted, rather than an across-the-board crisis of trust in political institutions in general. That scenario is different from a general crisis, and problematic in its own, more specific, way.

These questions are as important for countries that may share a similar tendency towards declining trust in news, but have seen very different developments in terms of media freedom – improving in some, fluctuating elsewhere, and deteriorating elsewhere. Similarly, the clear and significant increase in trust in news in countries where the media are not free, according to Freedom House, lend themselves to different interpretations.

One interpretation is that parts of the public in these contexts essentially accept or acquiesce to the kinds of normative ideals for news media that Friedrich Siebert and co-authors during the Cold War characterised as “authoritarian” and/or “communist” (Siebert et al., 1984) or in their less full-throated versions, various views seeing the news media as part of the “developmental state”. Therefore, the public either acquiesces to or accepts the subordination of the news media to other institutions, including authoritarian rulers, especially if they think the regime is delivering economic growth and social services (Rose & Mishler, 2010).

Another interpretation is that people in stable autocracies tend to have a different conception of what they can realistically expect from news media that are not free, and that this is basically “priced in” to how they answer survey questions about trust, and that their answers reflect that they trust the news media to do what they expect them to do (but not more), potentially reducing the distance between expectations and reality that may loom larger in other contexts. A version of this advanced by political scientists researching trust in authoritarian contexts suggests that trust in such situations tends to take the form of “negative trust”, where people trust the news media to be predictable, and answer accordingly, even as the trust in question takes the form of trusting the news media to toe the government line rather than a more “positive trust” that news media actively represent certain ethical norms and values, such as independence from those in power (Rivetti & Cavatorta, 2017).

A third interpretation is, as mentioned above, that data documenting relatively high and stable levels of trust in news in authoritarian countries represent an “autocratic bias” in responses. Here, people are concerned about answering potentially sensitive questions – especially if they fear their responses might be divulged to the authorities – and engage in self-censorship by withholding judgement, or “preference falsification”, deliberately responding as they believe the authorities want them to, not as they privately would (Tannenbergh, 2022). All of these possible interpretations of how to make

sense of trust in news in authoritarian contexts can start from survey data and analysis like ours, but they clearly require more in-depth and qualitative analysis (inspirational examples include Roudakova, 2017).

In addition to raising normative questions that each of us have to wrestle with as citizens, our findings here thus also raise many empirical questions for scholars. We can ask consistently worded questions about trust over time and across countries, but how stable is the meaning of all this to respondents? Findings that hold for “the news” may vary by medium of distribution, and will likely vary by individual news brand. Even the effect of trust as a mediating variable may be contextual and contingent. There is plenty of work for both qualitative and quantitative research, for both historical and present-oriented work. We hope this chapter, in which we have examined long-term global trends in trust in news across 115 countries and almost half a century, can help provide a basis for this.

Appendix

Table A1 Countries included, press freedom, and number of waves

<i>Country</i>	<i>Press freedom</i>	<i>WVS/EVS waves</i>	<i>DNR waves</i>	<i>Pooled waves</i>
Albania	Improving	4	–	4
Algeria	Fluctuating	2	–	2
Andorra	Free	2	–	2
Argentina	Deteriorating	7	9	16
Armenia	Deteriorating	5	–	5
Australia	Free	5	11	16
Austria	Free	4	11	15
Azerbaijan	Not Free	3	–	3
Bangladesh	Fluctuating	3	–	3
Belarus	Deteriorating	6	–	6
Belgium	Free	4	10	14
Bolivia	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Improving	4	–	4
Brazil	Deteriorating	5	11	16
Bulgaria	Improving	6	8	14
Burkina Faso	Improving	1	–	1
Canada	Free	5	10	15
Chile	Fluctuating	6	9	15
China	Not Free	6	–	6
Colombia	Deteriorating	5	5	10
Croatia	Improving	4	9	13
Cyprus	Free	4	–	4
Czechia	Free	6	11	17

(Continued)

<i>Country</i>	<i>Press freedom</i>	<i>WVS/EVS waves</i>	<i>DNR waves</i>	<i>Pooled waves</i>
Denmark	Free	5	11	16
Dominican Republic	Deteriorating	1	–	1
Ecuador	Deteriorating	2	–	2
Egypt	Deteriorating	4	–	4
El Salvador	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Estonia	Fluctuating	6	–	6
Ethiopia	Fluctuating	2	–	2
Finland	Free	7	11	18
France	Free	6	11	17
Georgia	Fluctuating	5	–	5
Germany	Free	9	11	20
Ghana	Improving	2	–	2
Greece	Deteriorating	3	10	13
Guatemala	Fluctuating	2	–	2
Haiti	Improving	1	–	1
Hong Kong	Deteriorating	3	9	12
Hungary	Fluctuating	7	10	17
Iceland	Free	5	–	5
India	Deteriorating	6	5	11
Indonesia	Improving	3	5	8
Iran	Not Free	3	–	3
Iraq	Not Free	4	–	4
Ireland	Free	4	11	15
Italy	Deteriorating	6	11	17
Japan	Free	7	11	18
Jordan	Fluctuating	4	–	4
Kazakhstan	Deteriorating	2	–	2
Kenya	Improving	1	6	7
Kosovo	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Kuwait	Improving	1	–	1
Kyrgyzstan	Deteriorating	3	–	3
Latvia	Fluctuating	5	–	5
Lebanon	Improving	2	–	2
Libya	Fluctuating	2	–	2
Lithuania	Fluctuating	5	–	5
Luxembourg	Free	2	–	2
Macau SAR	–	1	–	1
Malaysia	Deteriorating	3	9	12
Maldives	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Mali	Improving	1	–	1
Malta	Free	4	–	4
Mexico	Deteriorating	7	9	16
Moldova	Fluctuating	4	–	4
Mongolia	Improving	1	–	1
Montenegro	Fluctuating	4	–	4
Morocco	Fluctuating	4	2	6
Myanmar	Not Free	1	–	1

(Continued)

<i>Country</i>	<i>Press freedom</i>	<i>WVS/EVS waves</i>	<i>DNR waves</i>	<i>Pooled waves</i>
Netherlands	Free	8	11	19
New Zealand	Free	4	–	4
Nicaragua	Improving	1	–	1
Nigeria	Fluctuating	5	5	10
North Macedonia	Deteriorating	4	–	4
Norway	Free	6	10	16
Pakistan	Deteriorating	4	–	4
Palestine	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Peru	Deteriorating	5	5	10
Philippines	Deteriorating	4	6	10
Poland	Improving	8	11	19
Portugal	Free	4	11	15
Puerto Rico	–	3	–	3
Qatar	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Romania	Improving	7	9	16
Russia	Deteriorating	7	–	7
Rwanda	Not Free	2	–	2
Saudi Arabia	Not Free	1	–	1
Serbia	Fluctuating	6	1	7
Singapore	Deteriorating	3	9	12
Slovakia	Improving	7	9	16
Slovenia	Improving	7	–	7
South Africa	Fluctuating	6	7	13
South Korea	Deteriorating	7	10	17
Spain	Free	9	11	20
Sweden	Free	8	10	18
Switzerland	Free	5	10	15
Taiwan	Improving	4	9	13
Tajikistan	Not Free	1	–	1
Tanzania	Improving	1	–	1
Thailand	Deteriorating	3	5	8
Trinidad and Tobago	Free	2	–	2
Tunisia	Improving	2	–	2
Turkey	Deteriorating	7	11	18
UK	Free	8	11	19
USA	Free	7	11	18
Uganda	Improving	1	–	1
Ukraine	Fluctuating	6	–	6
Uruguay	Free	4	–	4
Uzbekistan	Not Free	2	–	2
Venezuela	Deteriorating	3	–	3
Vietnam	Not Free	3	–	3
Yemen	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Zambia	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Zimbabwe	Fluctuating	3	–	3
Total		453	428	881

Notes

- 1 Nick Tjaardstra, *World Press Trends 2017: Trust is the New Currency for Success* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: WAN-IFRA, 2017), <https://wan-ifra.org/2017/10/world-press-trends-2017-trust-is-the-new-currency-for-success/>
- 2 <https://news.gallup.com/poll/651977/americans-trust-media-remains-trend-low.aspx>
- 3 We refer to “countries” throughout this chapter, but it should be acknowledged that a small number of these may more accurately be described as “regions” given that they are not universally recognised as countries (see Table A1).
- 4 Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia were consistently classified as “Partly Free”. However, because this is too few countries for a separate category in the analysis, they were classified as “Fluctuating”. Macau SER and Puerto Rico are included in the WVS/EVS dataset but were not classified by Freedom House, and are therefore excluded from this part of the analysis.

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