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POLITICAL TRUST AND DISTRUST IN GOVERNANCE

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Edited by Christian Lahusen



‘This timely book offers insightful interdisciplinary explorations of trust and distrust in democratic governance. By drawing on the extensive empirical evidence and theoretic research carried out by the EnTrust project across seven European countries, the book addresses a rich spectrum of challenges to building and maintaining public trust. Of particular interest is the focus on the crucial but surprisingly under investigated topic of institutional trust.’

Maria Baghramian, *Full Professor of Philosophy, University College Dublin, and Horizon Europe ERA Chair AUA, Armenia, and Research Professor, University of Oslo, Norway*

‘Grounded in rigorous, multi-method comparative analysis across seven European countries, *Trust and Distrust in Governance* offers an indispensable roadmap for scholars and policymakers. Lahusen and colleagues illuminate how trust, distrust, and institutional trustworthiness unfold and intertwine, providing key insights for navigating today’s polycrisis and safeguarding the resilience of democratic governance.’

Martino Maggetti, *Full Professor of Political Science, Institute of Political Studies (IEP), University of Lausanne*

‘Trust (or the lack of it) is the missing link in understanding the challenges of contemporary democratic governance. Lahusen’s edited volume offers valuable insights of how trust and distrust work out at the individual and collective levels as well as an analysis of how institutions are attempting to address the impact of mistrust.’

Stella Ladi, *Professor of Public Policy, Panteion University and Queen Mary University of London*



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Political Trust and Distrust in Governance

This edited volume provides new, nuanced answers to questions concerning the complex nature of political trust and distrust, exploring the role they play within democratic governance and the implications that varying degrees of trust can have on relations between citizens and institutions.

In times of uncertainty and crisis, trust and distrust become a particularly important topic of public concern and scientific interest. Presenting findings from a research project spanning seven European countries, the book explores the meaning and role of institutional trust and distrust, analyses individual manifestations, enquires into arenas of trust formation and contestation, and discusses scenarios and implications. The authors present fresh theoretical and empirical insights by corroborating a co-presence of institutional trust and distrust and, crucially, propose a relational approach that considers the interplay between (dis)trusting citizens and institutions at the individual and collective level.

An important and original contribution to understandings of political trust, it will be an essential resource for scholars, researchers, and upper-level students of political sociology, political science, psychology, and media studies, with interests in understanding forms of political trust and distrust, and their conditions and implications.

Christian Lahusen is Professor of Sociology at the University of Siegen, Germany.

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6 The News Media as an Arena of Trust Contestation During the Pandemic

Hans-Jörg Trenz and Ulrike Zschache

Introduction

The study of political news is a promising endeavour to better understand the “making of” trust and distrust in democracy. The news media play a key role in building political (dis)trust by providing citizens with basic information about the performance of their representatives and by involving them in public opinion formation processes. In addition, the news media function as a marketplace of opinions through which the trustworthiness of government and its political representatives is contested by different actors in the public arena. Through news coverage, we can thus observe how judgements of trust and distrust, and the criteria of trustworthiness used to arrive at such judgements, are selectively highlighted and framed in ways that shape public opinion.

In this chapter we combine a view of the news media as the selective filter of information made available in the public sphere, with a view of the news media as an arena of intensified trust contestations during the Covid-19 pandemic. A global health crisis not only enhances the information needs of news audiences but also shatters established patterns of trust in both government and science (Trenz et al. 2021). Through our comparative analysis of news coverage during the pandemic, we are able to establish what type of information is collectively shared and applied by actors participating in mass-mediated debates in regard to the assessment of the trustworthiness of political institutions. For this type of assessment, we underline “trust contestations” as our unit of analysis defined as competing claims about the trustworthiness of particular actors and institutions. We ask how trust in political representatives and, in particular, in government and science is contested in the news and on social media and whether plural voice and balanced opinions on trust and distrust are given expression through the media, or whether selective biases contribute to the polarisation of opinion of either trust or distrust. The chapter is based on a comparative study of trust contestation in the news media and on social media in response to political news in seven European countries (Germany, Denmark, Italy, Poland, Greece, Serbia, and the Czech Republic) during the 2020–22 Covid-19 pandemic.

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The Role of Public Mediators of Trust

Trust in political institutions and democratic governance differs from trust in interpersonal relationships in that citizens can only partly draw on direct and immediate experience and have to rely largely on publicly available knowledge in order to arrive at trust decisions. Such mediated trust-building processes towards distant others are decisively facilitated by the mass media that provide information and convey opinions about whether a particular actor can be found trustworthy or not on the basis of specific evaluation criteria.

Political trust is often conceptualised as positive sentiments towards government, measured in terms of support for and satisfaction with the performance and output of public authorities (Easton 1965; Hetherington 1998). In democratic political theory, instead, the emphasis has been on the normative criteria on which citizens base their judgements to trust or distrust their government (Warren 1999; Offe 2000). In our research, we do not seek theoretical clarification of the utilitarian and normative foundations of trust but rather assume that this division also affects the way trust is contested, with different actors in public debates shifting between utilitarian and normative judgements. As such, the formation of trust in governance implies an evaluation of observable behaviour, for instance, of the government's general performance or specific actions, in light of instrumental, normative, or ethical expectations of the good life and personal and collective well-being (Levi and Stoker 2000). In addition to those in power and elected representatives, political trust also includes general confidence in the functioning of key political institutions, such as the judiciary, the administrative apparatus, and the polity as a whole (Zmerli 2014). As government increasingly relies on the knowledge and authority of experts, the trustworthiness of elected political representatives is linked in important ways to public trust in science (Baghrmian and Croce 2021). In our study of trust contestation during the Covid-19 pandemic, we thus focus, in particular, on the appearance of governmental executives and scientists in the news and expect them to gain prominence in relation to other relevant actors, such as opposition, civil society, or protest actors.

From a sociological point of view, this leaves open the question of the selective biases and filters that are being applied in the construction of the public knowledge about political trust (Trenz 2025). The news media and the specific content of news provided by them are not a mirror reflecting the political arena to allow for neutral and independent judgements of trust by bystanding audiences. Instead, the news media constitute a central arena of trust contestation that is constructed by journalism following its own rules and principles. In particular, this regards the specific selection decisions that journalists make when writing news stories addressing the trustworthiness of political representatives and institutions.

To explain journalistic practices of news selection and framing in relation to the contentious issue of the trustworthiness of political representatives and societal actors, we can draw on (1) the normative political theory of journalism and its function as a fourth power in democracy, and (2) the political economy of journalism and the market logics of news selection and framing. Both theories converge on the idea of a critical or negative bias in news that selectively highlights content that challenges rather than supports trust in public institutions and governance actors.

- 1 The critical control function of journalism: Journalism has historically emerged as one of the institutions of counter-democracy with a critical oversight function of government (Rosanvallon 2008; Christians et al. 2010). This includes an attitude of institutionalised distrust as part of the professional ethos of investigative journalism not only to keep critical distance to government but also to serve as a watchdog that barks in response to any abuse of power (Michailidou and Trenz 2021). As the fourth estate in a democracy, the free and independent press is expected to uncover the truth behind the facts and serve the public interest, which is necessary because those in power may misinform the public and act in their own interests (Schultz 1998). This attitude of institutionalised distrust can turn into categorical suspicion and lead to one-sided and generally negative news coverage. Such negativity bias, in turn, can feed public outrage and agitation and foster citizens' disenchantment with democratic politics (Esser and Neuberger 2019).
- 2 The economy of news making: In the market for public attention, the economic value of news as a product to be commercialised must be paired with the consumer or audience value of news, measured in terms of how particular information serves individual needs (Picard 2010). Such a market logic of the commercialisation of political news has a deep impact on the selection of information considered newsworthy and its framing as stories that are worthy of public attention. From the criteria of newsworthiness discussed in the literature (Lester 1980; Kepplinger 2008), we can deduce that news value is closely related to the attitude of institutionalised mistrust that shapes both journalistic practices and audience expectation in the news. The relevance and impact of a news story increases when there is reason to mistrust. Frequent references to conflict, human interest, and novelty/oddity frames further add to this selective salience of mistrust in political news stories. Particular market strategies to sell scandalous news stories are developed, especially by popular media, such as tabloids or private TV (Esser 1999). Overall, this has led to an increasing negativity in political news denoting anger, fear, disgust, and sadness, said to undermine the stability of democratic systems (Soroka 2014; Galpin and Trenz 2016), fundamentally shatter trust in political representatives (Brosius, van Elsas, and de Vreese 2020), and lead to an attitude of public cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson 1997).

In accounting for the changing role of the media in political trust building in the digital age, the more recent literature has focused on how some of the current developments in media performance have accelerated the global crisis of democracy by systematically enhancing public cynicism, polarisation, and radicalisation of opinion (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Esser and Neuberger 2019; Trezn 2023, 2025; Habermas 2022). The diffusion of online news and the dynamics of political debates on social media can erode trust in mainstream news media and in representative democracy. Especially user-driven debates in social media commenting forums in response to news are often made responsible for the radicalisation of opinion, the spread of conspiracies, and expressions of hate speech (Chen and Lu 2017; Gonçalves 2018). Existing research also suggests that users with low trust in traditional news media and established elites are not only more inclined to consume social media as alternative news sources but are also more likely to comment on online news than more trustful readers (e.g., Fletcher and Park 2017). This leads us to expect that ideologically driven and particularly distrusting voices are selectively amplified in the social media reception of news, thus enhancing biased views in news commenting online. Even if posted news articles provide a more nuanced picture, user-driven dynamics of news commenting may be characterised by a more categorical, generalised positioning towards trust or distrust of particular actors, or the functioning of the political system, science, and the established news media as such. By judging the trustworthiness of political representatives, experts, journalists, or other societal actors in biased ways, user commenting can then contribute to a polarisation and radicalisation of political views online. The media negativity bias would thus be transformed into cynical distrust, if trust contestation is no longer mediated but live-channelled through social media and carried forward by user-driven debates (Enli and Rosenberg 2018; Klein and Robison 2020). These dynamics may then feed back into news making processes of the established news media. In this regard, available research shows that trust-busting social media messages are often found newsworthy and therefore re-published by the traditional media, thus creating a downward spiral of distrust in democracy (Christensen, Lovett, and Curiel 2022).

Following the disruptive scenario, the informative and critical role of journalism in democracy would thus be challenged on both social media and in legacy media news coverage during the pandemic by generalised, fundamental distrust, and an overall negativity bias of judgements of trust in the news. However, instead of disseminating either informative, critical trust or generalised, cynical mistrust, news media also tended to over-communicate trust in the face of uncertainty during the pandemic in order to promote credulous trust in the problem-solving abilities of government and science (Norris 2022: 8). We know from media and communication studies that, even in times of normalcy, the news media favour government and political elites over opposition actors or voices from civil society (van Dalen 2012; Eberl, Boomgaarden, and Wagner 2017). An optimistic bias in news trust judgements can result from journalists'

ideological affinity or proximity to power and government (Entman 2007) but also from direct interference with press freedom, such as corruption and propaganda, while in extreme cases, it can be imposed by authoritarian governments.

From a comparative perspective, the literature on the differences between media systems that shape journalism and news making is inconclusive with regard to the role of trust communication, as levels of political trust have not been systematically analysed (Hallin and Mancini 2004). In our study, differences between countries emerge, thematised in terms of cultures of trust: Scandinavian countries (in our case selection, Denmark), and partly also Germany as a high trust culture, are distinguished by a relatively unitary media system, the professionalisation of journalism, and a strong role of public broadcasting (Andersson 2023). Mediterranean countries (in our case, Italy and Greece), instead, are low trust countries, with weakly institutionalised and semi-independent journalism, resulting in generally low levels of news consumption (Papathanassopoulos, Giannouli, and Archontaki 2023). In the newer member states and in Eastern Europe, where independent journalism developed only after 1990, this picture is more nuanced. Recent studies point to generally low levels of trust in government, paired with low levels of trust in the media that is clearly connected to governments' performance, and especially the authoritarian interventions into the independence of the media sphere (in our case, Serbia, Poland, and, somewhat less pronounced, Czechia) (Boshnakova and Dankova 2023; Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019; Pjesivac 2017).

While accounting for country differences in our study, we also focus on differences in trust contestation between different media outlets. A cross-media research design gains relevance in light of recent trends in the fragmentation and platformisation of the public sphere, with audiences increasingly closed in particular information worlds and opinion bubbles served by specific media (Fletcher and Nielsen 2017; Mancini 2017; Nelson and Lei 2018). To measure such possible fragmentation effects, we cover three professional newspapers in each country, which provide a wide reach and, by including both pro-governmental and oppositional newspapers, a diversity of opinion (cross-media comparison).¹ Our analysis further includes user comments on Facebook with the purpose of comparing trust contestation in the news with trust contestation on Facebook in response to the news (cross-platform comparison).

In comparative terms, we would thus expect differences between high and low trust countries in dynamics of trust contestation in response to the pandemic, as well as cross-media and cross-platform differences in the way the Covid-19 pandemic is discussed controversially in different arenas. When applied to the Covid-19 pandemic, we ask the following: (a) whether the news media across countries amplify generalised, or even cynical, distrust as manifested in the polarisation of political opinions, the mobilisation of extreme positions, and the spread of fake news that targets the trustworthiness of scientists, government, and political representatives; or (b) whether media coverage across countries during the pandemic supports critical (dis)trust, enabling informed

opinion-making and criticism; or finally, (c) whether news media across countries, as was claimed by some oppositional forces during the pandemic, were turned into the government's mouthpiece to propagate uninformed and acclamatory trust in science and government. In addition, we examine user-driven debates in response to news on Facebook and ask (d) whether a self-selection bias in the user comments in all countries applies to mainly distrustful citizens who are sceptical about the Covid-19 emergency measures.

Research Design

In our comparative research design, covering Denmark, Germany, Italy, Greece, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Serbia, we are able to systematically put to the test these assumptions about possible selection biases of trust contestation during the pandemic in the news, leading to either generalised distrust, critical trust, or uninformed trust of the public.

For the newspaper sampling, we used digital archives to identify relevant articles from print and/or online news sites through search words, namely "Covid" or "Corona" or "pandemic" and "trust" with all its semantic variations in the respective country language (e.g., "distrust", "mistrust", "trustful", and "trustworthy"). Sampling covered four pre-defined periods: March 2020 to April 2020, September 2020 to October 2020, December 2020 to January 2021, March 2021 to April 2021. In each country, we coded 800 statements of trust contestations as our unit of analysis (200 randomly selected from each of the four periods). The unit of analysis in this approach is trust contestation. Trust Contestation Analysis encompasses various approaches of content analysis in the field of contentious politics: actor claims-making analysis (Koopmans and Statham 2010; Statham and Trenz 2012; Cinalli et al. 2021), and discursive actor attribution analysis (Gerhards, Offerhaus, and Roose 2007). Similar to a claim, a discursive trust contestation is considered a speech act that establishes a social relationship between a trust giver and a trust receiver (target). In a trust contestation, the speaker can either be identical to the trust giver ("I trust the government") or can be an attributor of a trust relationship ("the people no longer trust the government"). Unlike a claim, a discursive trust contestation does not, however, necessarily point in the direction of "what is to be done" or "what should be done", nor does it require contestants to engage in collective action, to raise demands, or to use persuasion. A discursive trust contestation rather qualifies the social relationship from the perspective of the speaker (either the trust attributor or the trust giver): another person is found to be or not to be worthy of trust. Trust attribution, similar to attributing responsibility in terms of moral duty, accountability, blame, or shame, relies on assessing the performance of other actors and its consequences based on shared criteria of trustworthiness.

A trust contestation as the unit of analysis is in this sense operationalised as the reconstructed answer to the question: "Who expresses trust/mistrust in another actor/system for doing/not doing what, and based on what criteria of trustworthiness?"

The trust contestation can continue over one or several sentences, sometimes also throughout an entire text. Later statements by the same trust attributor/giver belong to the same trust contestation, as long as the trust receiver is also the same.

Sampling encompassed four pre-established periods: March 2020 to April 2020, September 2020 to October 2020, December 2020 to January 2021, March 2021 to April 2021. We expected governments, and the appropriateness of their lockdown measures, to be salient in the first period, anti-lockdown protests in the second period, and anti-vaccine protests and protests against state intervention in the third and fourth period. We coded 800 units of trust contestation (200 for each period) in each country, following random selection procedures to ensure that an equal number of articles across newspapers and weeks were selected for coding. In some countries (Poland, Italy, Greece), randomisation was only partly applied as for some periods, the total number of identified articles was needed to retrieve 200 units of trust contestation. In Serbia, the frequency of trust contestation was so low that the entire period from 1/3/2020 to 30/6/2021 was sampled (N = 817 trust contestations). Overall, the corpus of the newspaper analysis comprised 5617 coded trust contestations. For the Facebook analysis, we searched for “Trust”- and “Covid”-related news articles that were posted on the newspapers’ Facebook pages and then selected those posts with the highest number of trust contestation statements in the user commenting section.² Depending on the intensity of debates, for each country, we selected and coded between 250 and 269 user comments qualifying as a trust contestation (only main comments, not replies to comments) (total N = 1793).³

Coding was done by a team of trained researchers on the grounds of our standardised codebook, including 19 variables for the newspaper analysis and the Facebook analysis. As coding was mainly performed by teams and individual coders who received regular instructions from team leaders, we put reliability of the individual to the test, as well as that of the national team’s collective coding. Results of team coding were satisfactory, ranging from 97.55% for the identification of the form of trust contestation to 76.1% for the issue variable. The average score of all variables of the codebook was 86.2%. The results of individual coders’ tests were sometimes inferior and other times superior to the ones of team coding, yet in all cases, sufficient degrees of inter-coder reliability were guaranteed.

Trust Contestation in the News During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Comparative Findings from Seven European Countries

The news media are a representative arena of trust contestation. It relies on the work of journalists to represent the political field by selectively making visible the complex and ever-changing trust relationships among political actors, institutions, stakeholders, and constituencies for bystanding audiences. In most cases, such trust relationships are attributed by third actors: C states that A trusts or distrusts B. In our study, such attribution of a trust relationship applies to 77.6% of all coded trust contestations. Attributors are mostly journalists (37.2%) or scientists (31.9%), but frequently also political actors quoted in the

media, for instance, governmental actors (10.7%) or oppositional actors (4.6%). The attribution of trust can, but does not have to, be based on empirical observation of trust relationships. It can also be hypothetical, in the sense that third parties can explore possible trust relationships: people would trust the government if Even in the few instances that direct voice is given to political, economic, or social actors in the form of quotations expressing trust or distrust in others (e.g., “we, as the oppositional party, can no longer trust the government”), this voice is pre-selected by journalists. Trust through the media is thus mediated in the double sense that journalists chose which actors to make selectively salient and also attribute trusting or distrusting attitudes based on selected evidence.

Our own findings from news during the Covid-19 pandemic converge across countries, and when the question of trust is raised in an emergency, the focus is on the government of the day. Furthermore, the plural dimensions of political trust are reduced to the main and urgent question of how the government is handling the crisis (Figure 6.1).

In addition to the expected executive bias that gives high visibility to government as a target of trust contestation, we also find a trend across countries to target scientific experts as trustworthy objects in Covid-19 debates (Figures 6.1 and 6.2). This suggests a highly technocratic character of the Covid-19 debate, as opposed to a politicised debate that would highlight oppositional voices to government (e.g., opposition parties or protest actors). Politicisation of trust relationships, in terms of government-opposition divides, is almost absent in Covid-19 debates across countries. Additionally, citizens and a broad category of alternative actors are only occasionally targeted as objects of trust or distrust (Figure 6.1).

This technocratic character of the debate runs against established criteria of newsworthiness, such as conflict and contentiousness that would typically attract attention to opposing viewpoints. Instead, in times of executive-led

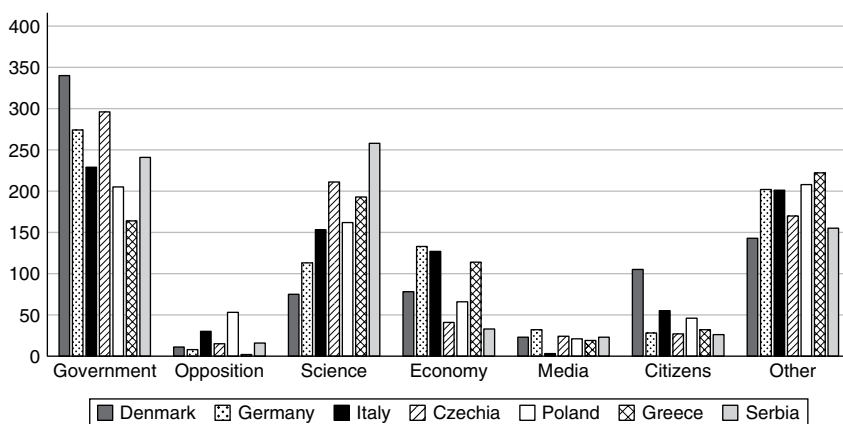


Figure 6.1 Trust receivers in newspaper coverage across countries, N = 5404

crisis-management, priority is given to relevance, influence, and success as journalistic criteria of newsworthiness (Eilders 2023). Conflict accentuation and sensationalism are avoided in debates about trust during the crisis, and debates are overall rather balanced, tending slightly towards critical distrust when targeting government (except in Italy) and towards trust, when targeting science (Figure 6.2). In comparison, oppositional actors, or critical actors, are barely addressed. Media coverage in times of crisis is not about political alternatives but mainly executive and expertise-informed crisis-management.

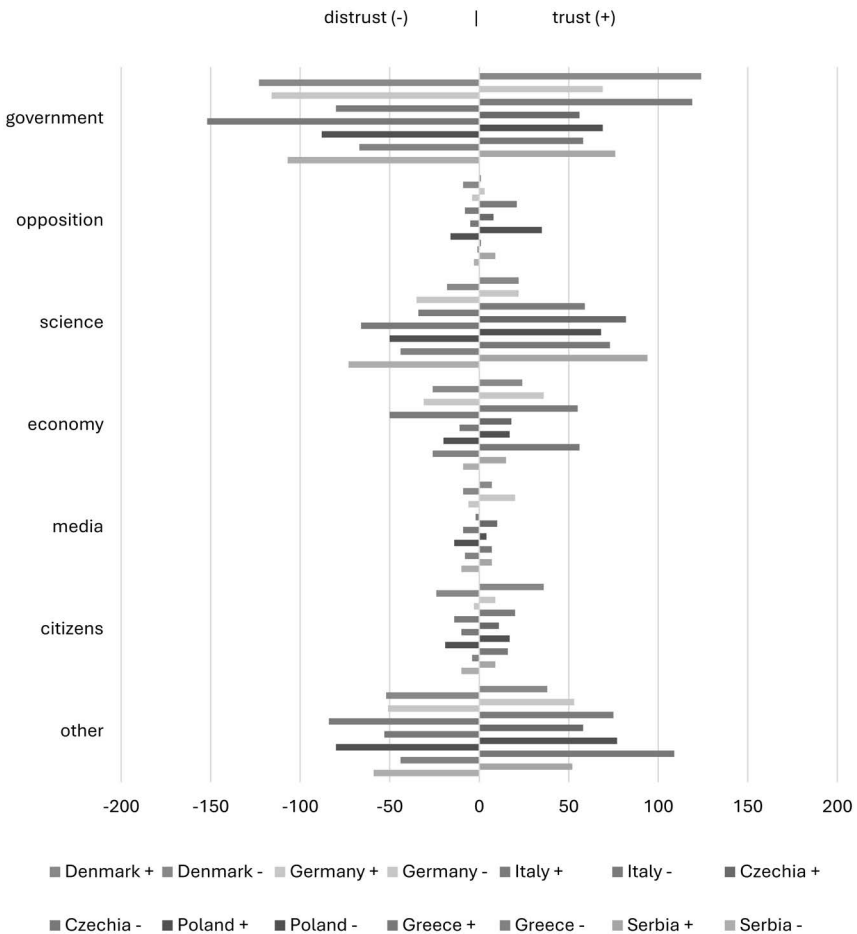


Figure 6.2 Number of trust and distrust statements with regard to different trust receivers, subsample, including clear, affirmative trust (+) and distrust (-) expressions (e.g., I trust the scientists, I distrust the media), normative and conditional expressions excluded, N = 3762

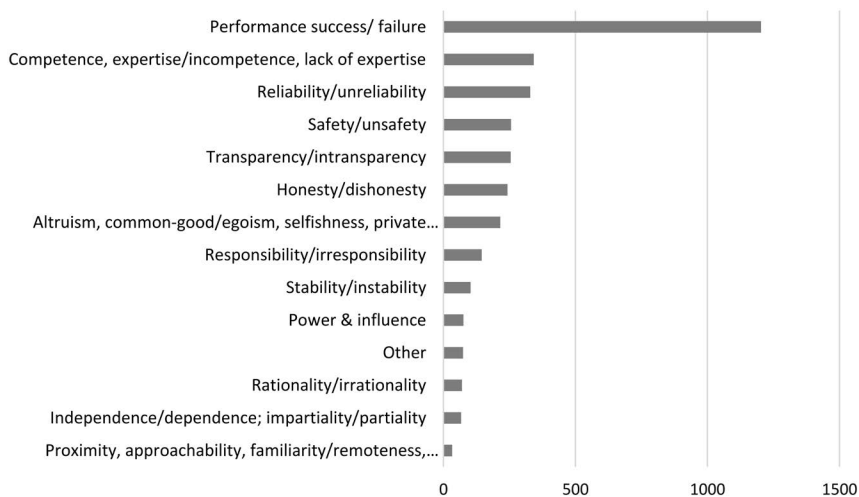


Figure 6.3 Salience of first criteria of un/trustworthiness expressed in trust contestations in Covid-19 news coverage across seven countries, N = 3411, un/trustworthiness criteria are aggregated to overriding semantic categories

An important aspect of mediated trust contestations is the reasons given for why targeted actors are found trustworthy or not. When amplified through the media, a statement of trust or distrust quoted in the news becomes an appeal for others to follow the same reasoning when it comes to trust- or distrust-specific actors. In our comparative content analysis, we address this aspect by considering the criteria of trustworthiness, as has been done in other chapters of this volume (see [Chapter 2](#) by Brojáč et al., [Chapter 4](#) by Theiss et al., [Chapter 5](#) by Fiket et al., and [Chapter 7](#) by Vespa and Besozzi). In this context, we distinguish between performance-based arguments (such as being efficient in problem-solving), compliance with normative expectations (such as being inclusive or fair), and personal traits of the trusted targets (such as being honest) ([Figure 6.3](#)). The emphasis on technocratic crisis-management in mediated trust contestations makes us anticipate that justifications of trustworthiness are strongly related to performance, capabilities, and effectiveness, and less on personal traits or normative virtues of political representatives and other key actors, as would be the case in a highly politicised debate.

As can be seen in [Figure 6.4](#), this is corroborated when looking at the main actor categories: government is dominantly trusted or distrusted based on performance, while scientific experts are judged based on both performance and problem-solving competence. Normative concerns in terms of compliance/non-compliance with rules of democratic procedures only play a secondary

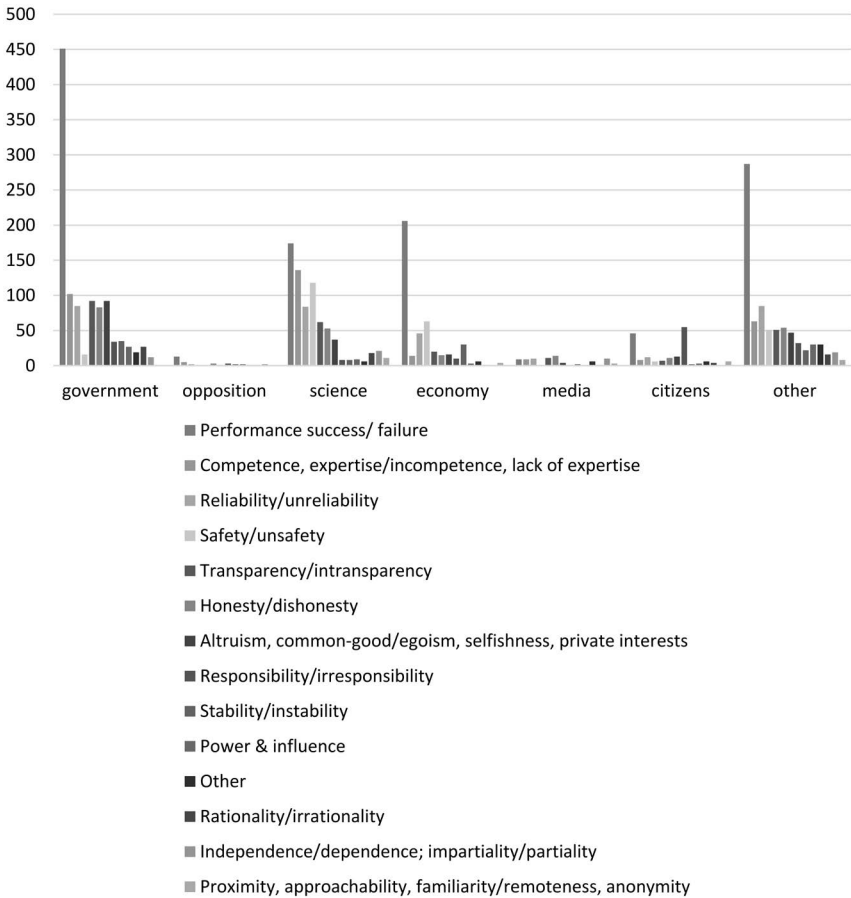


Figure 6.4 First criteria of un/trustworthiness expressed in trust contestations in Covid-19 news coverage across seven countries, differentiated according to different trust receivers, N = 3345

role. There may be disagreement in the evaluation of trustworthiness criteria (Figure 6.5), but it is not the case that trusting and distrusting voices rely on strictly different, or even incompatible criteria when assessing trustworthiness: for example, when supporters of government would mainly emphasise its competence and expertise, while critics would narrowly address the dominance of executive power and violations of civil liberties during lockdown. However, the relevance of trustworthiness criteria in justifying a position of trust or distrust varies for different trust receivers. Most evidently, for government, performance-based statements tend to be more often distrusting than trusting. For science, an overall confidence in its expertise and problem-solving capacities

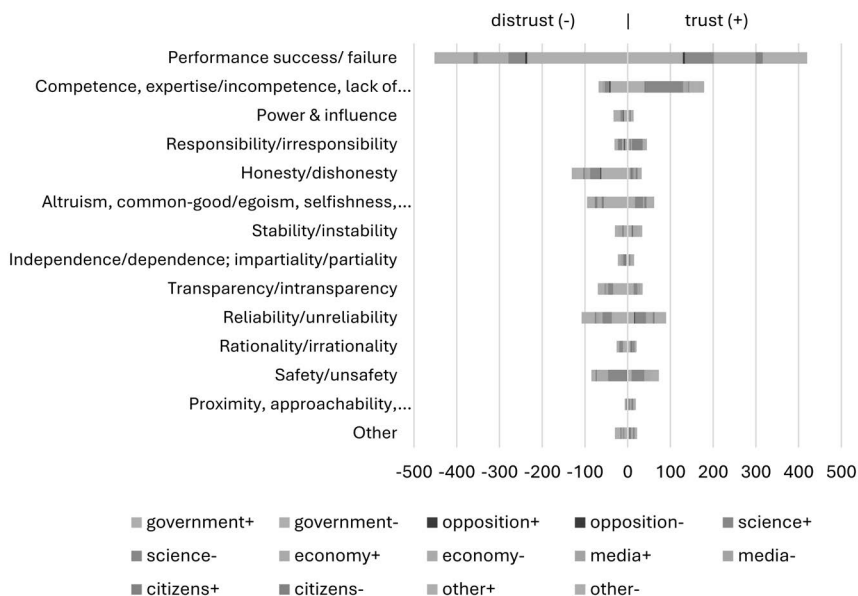


Figure 6.5 Usage of first un/trustworthiness criteria in clear, affirmative statements of trust or distrust (subsample of trust dichotomy) targeting different trust receivers in newspaper coverage across seven countries (N = 2251)

prevails. In those instances where personal traits were addressed, these were mainly used to express distrust of particular targets. For example, a repeated argument targeted dishonest and selfish governmental actors. This is in line with the expected negativity bias of news selection: instead of citing particular actors in the news for being honest, it is more likely that news stories will expose political representatives citing evidence for violations of expectations of honesty.

To measure potential polarising effects of trust contestation during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is not sufficient to focus solely on the targets of trust or distrust in the news; it is also necessary to explore whether debates on trust and distrust have different thematic focuses, i.e., if distrusting contributions express different concerns than those who trust. It is, for instance, possible that trusting statements mainly express satisfaction with the performative aspects of the pandemic, while distrusting statements raise concerns about democratic procedures. In [Figure 6.6](#), we can see that trusting and distrusting contributions tend to apply mostly the same un/trustworthiness criteria (yet sometimes with different weight) and address the same issues of common concern.

Our findings about the news media, as a forum of critical but not polarised debate about trustworthiness, are particularly relevant to re-evaluate the debate

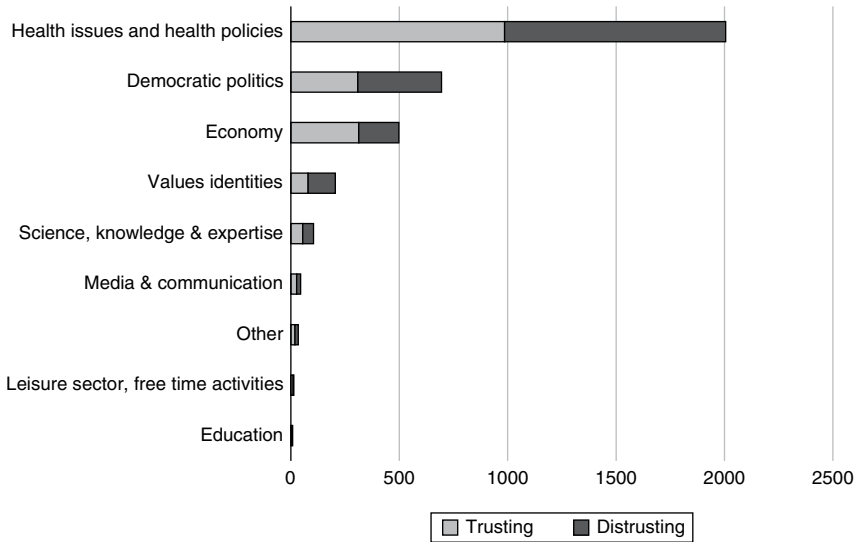


Figure 6.6 Main issues of trust contestations across newspapers from seven countries and their usage for clear trust or distrust positions (subsample of trust dichotomy), N = 3610

on the role of distrust in democracy: as regards mass-mediated and journalistically framed debates, expressions of distrust do not take place in a separate discursive space but draw on the same agenda of issues of concern for the political community, and to a large extent, on the same trustworthiness criteria. Some particularities can nevertheless be identified. Ethical and political norms, such as honesty and orientation towards the common good, are not prominent in the debate. However, when addressed, they are primarily targeted in statements expressing distrust and claiming a lack thereof. Overall, distrust is not detached from trust but connected to it through critical discourse that focuses on issues of common concern and shared evaluation criteria.

The absence of a strong bias towards either trusting or distrusting statements in thematic debates across the news media does not mean that individual articles or newspapers always present a balanced view of trust and distrust. Opinions in single articles in one newspaper, or between newspapers, might still strongly express opposing views, for instance, when journalists build stories either around trust or distrust, or when particular news outlets are either trusting or distrusting. We therefore measure whether news coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic is also balanced in the sense that trusting statements in one article are counterweighed by distrusting statements, and vice versa. For that purpose, we have selected all articles that contain more than one trust contestation and count whether articles are fully trusting (all statements expressing trust), mostly trusting (the majority

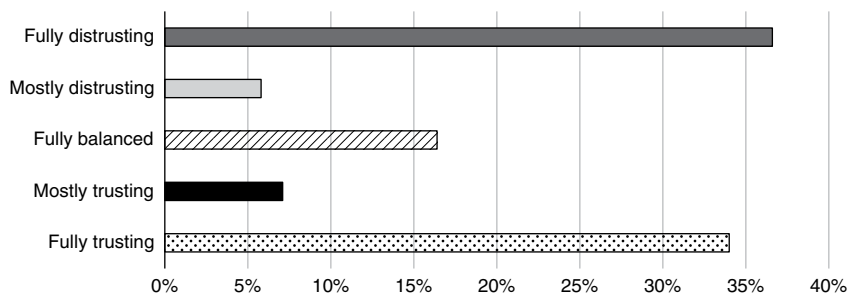


Figure 6.7 Distribution of trust and distrust statements within newspaper articles with several trust contestations across all countries (N = 929 articles, with a minimum of two trust contestations)

of statements expressing trust), balanced (exactly half of the statements trusting and the other half distrusting), mostly distrusting (the majority of statements expressing distrust), and finally, fully distrustful (all statements expressing distrust) (Figure 6.7). Maybe surprisingly, we find that there is a clear tendency of journalism to build news stories about either trust (34%) or distrust (36.6%), and not to balance opinions in one and the same article, as required by journalism quality standards. Only 16.4% of all articles are fully balanced and another 12.9% are mostly trusting or distrusting. This could be explained by the journalistic style of writing, which aims to present coherent news stories with clear messages to the reader. If the story is about how people distrust a particular government action, the journalist tends to stick to this storyline rather than changing the argument.

Finally, we were also interested in possible biases in trust contestations across newspapers. While we would expect that newspapers with different ideological stances take different positions in critical debates, we would call the news landscape polarised if newspapers take fundamentally opposing views on trust and distrust. This would be the case if, for example, one newspaper expresses full support with governmental Covid-19 measures and promotes credulous trust, and another newspaper expresses fundamental opposition through generalised, categorical distrust in government. As we can see in Figure 6.8, the media landscapes made up by professional journalism in the seven countries analysed do not show these strong signs of polarisation, even though clear differences in the positioning between newspapers persist. In most countries, these differences in opinion between the newspapers analysed remain within the range of critical debate of a plural public sphere (trust/distrust imbalance of less than 25%). Even in Serbia and Greece, where journalism is traditionally more partisan, newspapers are found to be only somewhat more polarised in the trust-related coverage of the pandemic. We did not find any newspaper that was dominantly distrustful, or even mobilising categorical or cynical distrust, during the pandemic.

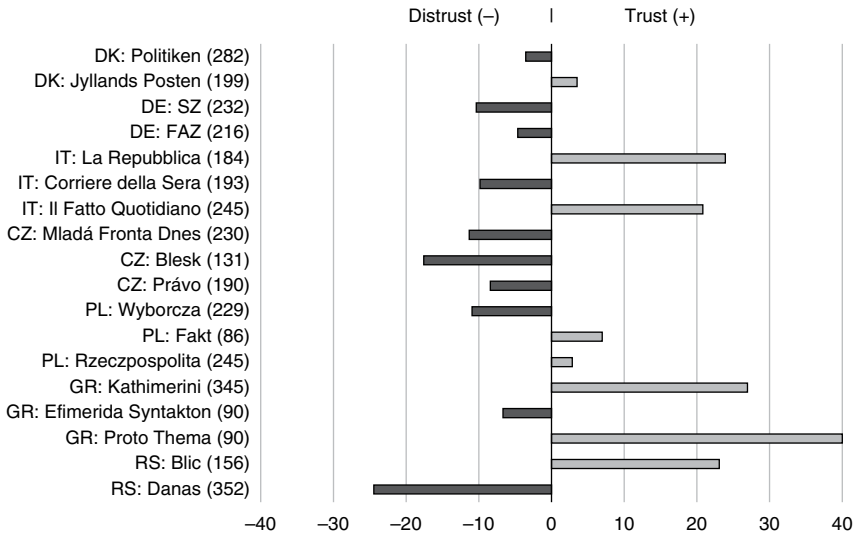


Figure 6.8 Trust-distrust balance of trust contestations across the different newspapers in % (subsample trust-distrust dichotomy, clear dis/trust expressions, total N = 3819, varying N for different newspapers, as listed in y-axis). The figure illustrates the relative extent in % to which trusting and distrusting statements prevailed over one another. For example, in the German newspaper, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, distrusting statements predominated over those expressing trust by 10%. Newspapers with a very low number of trust contestations were disregarded here (DK: *BT* (N = 42), DE: *Bild* (N = 12), PL: *Niezależna* (N = 17), RS: *Kurir* (N = 46))

Trust Contestation in Response to News on Facebook

Professional journalism provides information that citizens may take up to form their own critical opinion about the trustworthiness of political representatives and other socially relevant actors. However, only little is known about how precisely news readers express trust or distrust in response to news. In traditional print media formats, only selected readers' responses to news were available in the form of letters to the editor. This changed with the advent of digital media, when news articles could be posted online, inviting readers to give their feedback in commenting sections. As news is increasingly read online, such users' feedback in the form of online comments has gained relevance for understanding news reception. Readers' commenting sections on newspaper websites, and particularly on social media pages, have become a side arena of trust contestation in response to news. They might mobilise only a limited, and certainly not representative, number of news readers, but the comments they leave are also followed by larger audiences

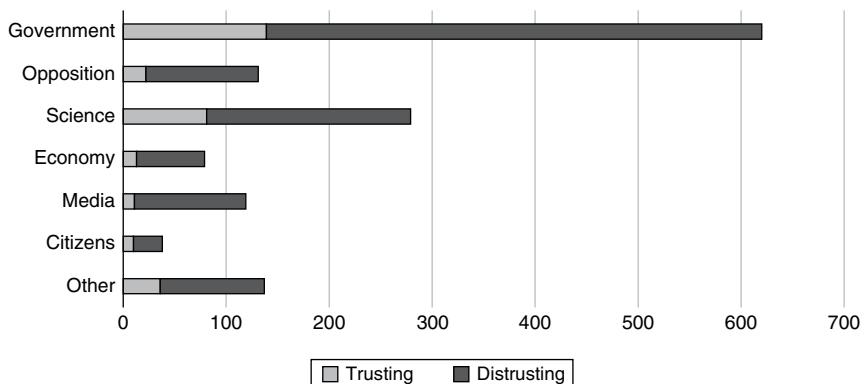


Figure 6.9 Trust receivers in user comments on Facebook and related trust/distrust positions (subsample trust degree dichotomy, only clear, affirmative dis-/trust statements, excluding appeals or conditional-prognostic statements), N = 1403

and thus create their own forms of publicity that impact public opinion (Galpin and Trenz 2019).

To account for these developments, we compare trust contestation in news articles with Facebook trust contestation in response to news. As we can see in Figure 6.9, there is a clear predominance of distrustful positions in user-driven debates on Facebook, even though expressions of trust are not completely absent. In the justification of distrust, a performance-based argumentation prevails in user comments (Table 6.1). Yet, in contrast to the news articles posted on Facebook, user comments in response to news much less often give reasons with reference to criteria of trustworthiness but have a strong emphasis on the perceived failure of performance of targeted actors during the pandemic (Figure 6.10). Thus, there is a certain correspondence in the user-driven debate targeting the same actors as in the posted news (government and science), assessing their performance, yet arriving at a negative judgement that reflects deeply rooted distrust. The lack of awareness of successful performance among substantial numbers of the commenting users points in the direction of political alienation and deeply ingrained distrust.

The observation that Facebook users make judgemental statements raises the question about the style of the debate within the comment sections. In this regard, it has been noticed that user commenting and interaction barely meet the quality standards of debate (Naab, Ruess, and Kuchler 2023). Reciprocity and rational exchange of arguments are impeded by the limited platform design and comment section structure. Many commenters are also provocative, disrespectful, and confrontational, treating users with different opinions as enemies, and not as equal interlocutors (Northrup et al. 2022). In order to analyse the style

Table 6.1 Salience of first un-/trustworthiness criteria, differentiated for posted news articles on newspapers' Facebook pages (N = 1024 justified trust statements in articles using trustworthiness criteria) and related user comments (N = 993 justified trust statements in comments using trustworthiness criteria)

<i>1st trustworthiness criteria FB</i>	<i>Criteria in posted news articles on FB (in %)</i>	<i>Criteria in user comments on FB (in %)</i>
Success of performance	27.1	6.7
Failure of performance	21.3	26.5
Honesty/dishonesty	11.2	15.1
Reliability/unreliability	8.5	8.6
Transparency/intransparency	7.1	2.2
Performance ambivalent	6.6	4.3
Competence, expertise/incompetence, lack of expertise	6.4	8.8
Safety/unsafety	4.1	4.3
Responsibility/irresponsibility	1.9	2
Power and influence	1.6	3
Altruistic, care, support, common good	1.6	0.3
Independence/dependence; impartiality/partiality	1.2	3
Selfish, egoistic, private interests	1.1	5
Rationality/irrationality	0	4.1
Other	0.5	5.9
Total (N)	1024	993

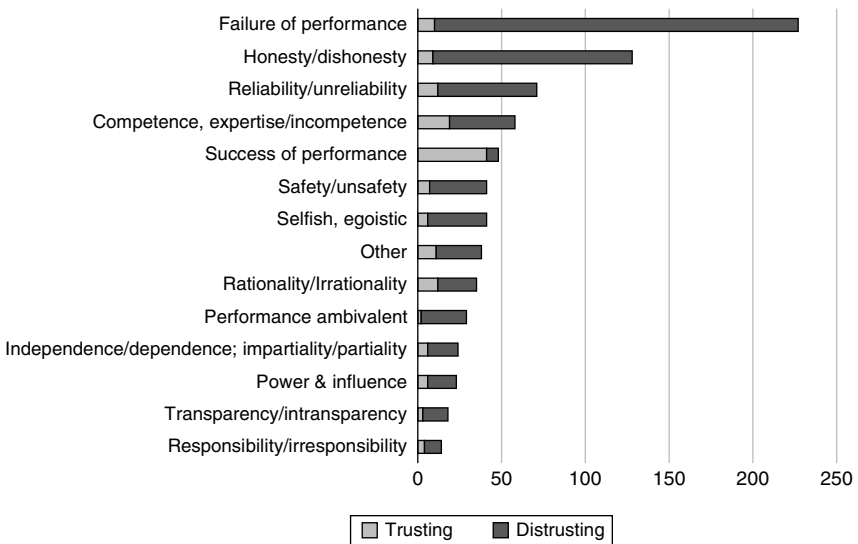


Figure 6.10 First criteria of un-/trustworthiness in trust contestations across Facebook user comments from seven countries and their usage for clear trust or distrust positions (subsample of trust dichotomy), N = 795

Table 6.2 Style/language per country in FB user comments (N = 1793 trust contestations)

<i>Style</i>	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Czechia</i>	<i>Poland</i>	<i>Greece</i>	<i>Serbia</i>	<i>Total</i>
Factual/ informative (%)	21.6	5.3	7.6	5.2	8.1	18.0	7.6	10.4
Opinionated (%)	68.0	79.5	50.4	72.1	54.6	22.8	72.5	60.2
Hate speech (%)	0.8	0.4	1.6	4.1	2.3	10.8	2.0	3.1
Parody/sarcasm (%)	9.6	14.8	14.4	7.4	23.8	46.8	16.3	18.9
Other (%)	0.0	0.0	26.0	11.2	11.2	1.6	1.6	7.4
Total (N)	250	263	250	269	260	250	251	1793

of user commenting, we further distinguished whether the coded trust contestations followed a factual/informative style (e.g., bringing in new data, referring to historical facts), an opinionated style (expressing personal opinion, referring to beliefs, values, normative or aesthetic judgements), hate speech (being disrespectful or hostile towards others), and parody/sarcasm (using ironic statements against others in a derogatory way) (see Table 6.2).

While it is not surprising that Facebook user comments are dominantly used to express opinions through personal judgements and emotions, it also needs to be noted that commenters overall tend to pay little attention to the more fact-based argumentation provided by the journalists. Facebook users thus often tend to ignore the content provided in the news articles to which they respond, where factual information played a key role to assess the performance and competence of political representatives (most prominently of government and scientific experts) to deal with the pandemic. Expressing strong opinion and emotions is a way for commenters to position themselves in debates about (dis-)trust, without this necessarily leading to an argumentative exchange about the trustworthiness of their targets. As we can see in Table 6.2, a considerable number of the users also employ parody and sarcasm in their comments. Since opinionated and sarcastic comments are widespread with regard to both trusting and distrusting statements (Table 6.3), our findings suggest a notable

Table 6.3 Style/language and related trust/distrust positions (trust dichotomy, N = 1453)

<i>Style/trust dichotomy</i>	<i>Trusting</i>	<i>Distrusting</i>	<i>Total</i>
Factual/informative (%)	13.6	9.4	10.3
Opinionated (%)	64.2	59.3	60.4
Hate speech (%)	2.8	3.3	3.2
Parody/sarcasm (%)	14.2	20.1	18.9
Other (%)	5.1	7.8	7.2
Total (N)	316	1137	1453

tendency of polarisation in the analysed user comments. What is more, there is a significant share of clearly distrustful-sarcastic trust contestations (15.8% of all coded trust contestations) indicating that user comments may indeed become a breeding ground for cynical distrust among the most disenchanting user groups.

Conclusions: Towards Enlightened Trust in the News Media?

Mediated trust contestation in the news and on social media during the pandemic put to the test the trustworthiness of government and science, focusing strongly on the problem-solving capacities of political representatives and experts. Science was portrayed predominantly as trustworthy in the analysed legacy newspapers, while government action has been subject to criticism in line with the watchdog-role of professional journalism. Generalised distrust in the news media, e.g., in the form of uninformed opinion or deep anger and hate (van Dyk 2022), was expressed neither towards science nor towards government. We also cannot confirm that government or science during the pandemic profited from credulous trust by the unconditional support of assenting bystanders. Despite the high salience of governmental executives and scientists as targets of trust in the news, expressions of trust and distrust towards them were relatively balanced across countries and newspapers.

Does this mean that the type of trust contestation that was mediated by professional journalism approached a scenario of critical (dis)trust in line with an enlightened vision of journalism? We are careful not to draw such a conclusion. The observation that the news neither supports credulous trust in government and science nor gives disproportionate prominence to cynical voices of distrust reflects a working routine of professional journalism and is not in itself a sufficient indicator that journalism is also critical. More qualitative case studies, especially on the role of journalists as opinion makers, would be needed here. The high visibility of scientists might be taken as an indicator for factual debates but could also point to the technocratic character of the debate in mainstream media. The presence of scientists alone should therefore not be misinterpreted as a sufficient condition for the critical, reflexive quality of the debate. The overall balanced picture is further tarnished by the limited pluralism of debate, the marginalisation of the opposition, and the strong executive bias in the news. Due to the strong technocratic focus on government actors and experts, performance- and expertise-based reasoning legacy news media provided little room for substantively critical discourse and a variety of voices and concerns.

In principle, technocratic newspaper debates and a low level of plurality can encourage dissenting views and more fundamental criticism to shift to social media as an alternative arena of enlightened trust building. In this regard, however, our findings of the Facebook commenting analysis are rather sobering.

Social media dynamics of opinion-making during the pandemic deviate from the ideal of enlightened trust in important ways. Facebook commenting tends towards generalised, if not cynical, distrust, where fact-based arguments count little, emotion-driven, and partly radical opinions, are given expression, and government and science and journalists, or the mainstream news sources, are predominantly distrusted and met with suspicion and disrespect.

This points to a new cleavage in trust contestation that is not only between countries or between newspapers with a different ideological stance but between mediated debates in the news and user-driven debates on social media. In debates mediated by professional journalism, the pandemic news sphere overall responded to the professional standards of journalism, providing information from trustworthy news sources, especially from scientists and experts in times of uncertainty. This means that central criteria of newsworthiness, such as conflict and contentiousness, do not necessarily coincide with criteria of trustworthiness in times of acute crisis. In response to the pandemic emergency, strongly confrontational, scandalising, and radical voices, which under normal circumstances would be found newsworthy, remained marginalised. Instead, the focus was on the executive and technocratic elites with direct access to pandemic crisis-management. To some extent, this can certainly be attributed to a “rally-round-the flag” effect that fosters support of government and reduces dissenting voices in the face of acute crisis and high uncertainty (Kritzinger et al. 2021). At the same time, professional journalism remained open to critical voices. In most countries, we also did not find substantial differences between newspapers of different ideological stances. Despite the observation that across countries news coverage by newspapers ideologically affiliated with government parties were somewhat more trusting than those supporting oppositional parties, partisan contestation mattered relatively little and levels of politicisation were low, as could also be seen in the low salience of opposition parties as targets of trust. In terms of persisting country and newspaper differences, the only outliers in our sample of analysed newspapers are the clearly pro-governmental newspaper, *Proto Thema* in Greece, and the divide between pro-governmental and oppositional newspapers in Serbia.

Contrary to the assumption of a disruptive public sphere that proactively contributes to the crisis of trust in democracy, we can therefore conclude that the traditional news media and professional journalism cannot be held accountable for spreading scepticism and generalised distrust in democratic government and science during the pandemic. The expectation that a negative bias would apply to the selection and framing of pandemic news, putting scepticism and distrust in science and government at the forefront, cannot be confirmed. Instead, an overall balanced, but still critical, opinion towards government, and a trusting attitude towards science, prevailed. The news media were thus neither the amplifier of generalised distrust nor the mouthpiece of government but by and large

upheld a culture of critical trust during the pandemic, in which the trustworthiness of government and science were critically scrutinised based on criteria of competence and performance. The very trustworthiness of the media and professional journalism might reside precisely in this ability to express and channel both trust and distrust in the promotion of critical debate. On Facebook, however, user-driven debates tended towards reverting the culture of critical trust into a culture of categorical, and partly cynical, distrust. To some extent, this finding is probably linked to self-selection processes of discontent, distrusting or partly even already-radicalised social media users, with a strong motivation to engage with online news (see Fletcher and Park 2017). In the absence of journalistic mediation, the selected users' responses certainly also reflect fear and uncertainty. The dominance of distrust can therefore, in part, be interpreted as a pandemic effect of debates driven by a highly selective and non-representative group of users on social media but not necessarily as a bubble effect of cynical citizens who became distrustful of democracy. In large part, the user-driven debates on Facebook remained linked to the news sphere and responded to inputs provided by professional journalists. At the same time, a notable number of user comments were clearly dissociated from the line of journalistic argumentation and used visibility on social media to promote their own conspiracy agenda and fuel distrust, while trusting user voices were also not absent but continued to be raised in user-driven debates on Facebook. In contrast to the strongly elite- and executive-centred mass-mediated perspective on trust contestations in the newspapers, social media provided an arena for non-elite actors and more critical voices. However, instead of opening a broader debate, this space was primarily used in a one-sided way to utter distrust. Overall, this points to the importance of journalistic mediation at high professional standards in democratic public spheres to allow for fact-based, reasoned judgement and truth orientation in public debates facing uncertainty against the risks of the proliferation of one-sided credulous trust and cynical distrust.

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Notes

- 1 For details about the types of newspapers selected, see our codebook and integrated report at <https://enrust-project.eu/files/2022/10/D4-1-EnTrust-Codebook-for-Media-Analysis.pdf> and <https://enrust-project.eu/files/2022/10/Trust-and-the-Media-integrated-report-WP4.pdf>

- 2 Article selection was conducted through CrowdTangle searches on newspaper public Facebook profiles.
- 3 The intensity of debate on Facebook varied strongly. Some articles provoked several thousand user comments, others only several hundred user comments. Overall, among the total number of user comments, only a few dealt with trust issues. For more details about sampling, see our Integrated Report on Trust and the Media, Ent-Trust 2022: <https://entrust-project.eu/files/2022/10/Trust-and-the-Media-integrated-report-WP4.pdf>.

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