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Trust-oriented affordances: A five-country study of news trustworthiness and its socio-technical articulations

Abstract

Research on trust has come to the forefront of communication studies. Beyond the dominant focus on informational trust, and its country-specific articulations, trustworthiness evaluations can relate to the materiality of news, and to its global manifestations. Especially in digital algorithmic environments, understanding news trustworthiness requires a holistic approach which combines informational and socio-technical aspects, while addressing both institutional and interpersonal trust. Drawing on 488 in-depth interviews with media consumers in Argentina, Finland, Israel, Japan, and the US, this paper investigates news (dis)trust from the lens of socio-materiality. The six trust-oriented affordances we identified – selectivity, interactivity, customization, searchability, information abundance, and immediacy – reveal important socio-technical commonalities that underlie news trust across countries. These affordances, moreover, point to an interplay of trust and self-agency. Taken together, the findings illuminate the lived experience of news trust as manifested across cultures and offer a broader understanding of trustworthiness within current media ecology.

Keywords

Trust, Affordances, Audience studies, Comparative research, In-depth interviews, News consumption.

Scholars have long underscored the significance of trust for understanding the socio-political realm (Nelson and Lewis, 2021; Tsfati and Ariely, 2014). Against the background of citizens' declining trust in journalism (Gronke and Cook, 2007; Ladd, 2011), trust-related research has been recently adjusted to the current digital environment (Bodó, 2021; Steedman et al., 2020) and expanded to include more sophisticated measurements (e.g., Prochazka and Schweiger, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020). This vast body of scholarship has moreover: (a) stressed the significance of information accuracy to the evaluation of news trustworthiness; (b) drawn upon quantitative cross-national surveys to demonstrate the cultural-specific factors of news trust; and (c) highlighted the desirable democratic value of trust in journalism, alongside the civic challenges presented by news distrust.

Positioned in relation to these trends, our study contributes to the existing literature on news trust in four main ways. First, by adopting a socio-technical lens that highlights both the technological and human components of media engagement (Das and Ytre-Arne, 2018;

Dogrue et al., 2020), we extend the premise of information accuracy as the default prism for understanding news trust. Second, we highlight socio-technical commonalities that underlie news trust across countries, thus supplementing the insights yielded by quantitative comparative examinations, which have tended to foreground cross-cultural differences (Elvestad et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2021). Third, our rich dataset of 488 in-depth interviews, conducted in five countries, captures the lived experience of audiences' trust in the news and challenges the normative binary thinking about trust and distrust. Fourth, we demonstrate how trust experiences are applied not only to external brokers of news, but also to the users' own ability to seek, filter, and evaluate news information.

This paper examines expressions of citizens' trust and distrust in the news media across five cultural contexts. By integrating literature on its individual and cultural levels, we demonstrate two important, yet under-studied, aspects of news trust: its relation to news platforms and their affordances; and their subsequent potential cross-country similarities. To unpack these aspects of news trust, we conducted 488 in-depth interviews with media consumers, collected in Argentina, Finland, Israel, Japan, and the US. By employing a socio-technical approach (Das and Ytre-Arne, 2018) to the study of news trust, our qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews highlights the interconnectedness of user agency and trust, and illuminates a set of trust-oriented affordances: from selectivity, interactivity, and content customization – which allow for trust in others, to searchability, information abundance, and immediacy – which facilitate trust in oneself. Our findings show how infrastructural awareness of news platforms and the various interpretations of their affordances (Evans et al., 2017) are weaved together into the fabric of audiences' everyday trustworthiness evaluations. We conclude by discussing the implications of the identified trust-oriented affordances for our understanding of the evaluation of information in the current digitized era.

Theoretical Framework

Audience (dis)trust in the news media

Trust is fundamental to audiences' selection, reception, and evaluation of news information (Schwarzenegger, 2020; Tsfati and Ariely, 2014). It steers both the quantity and quality of people's exposure to news (Strömbäck et al., 2020), potentially shaping their socio-political knowledge (Ognyanova, 2019). Research on trust has recently come to the forefront of an ample scholarly and public discourse that raises alarms over the dramatic deterioration in journalistic trust (Gronke and Cook, 2007; Ladd, 2011), along with related concerns about the growing spread of misinformation (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Rossini et al., 2020). This line of scholarship focuses on the identification of various factors and correlates of news trust and distrust (Nielsen et al., 2020; Tsfati and Ariely, 2014), including their individual and societal implications (Ladd, 2011; Ognyanova, 2019).

Alongside accumulating quantitative data, which shed important light on the potential catalysts and outcomes of news trustworthiness (Ognyanova, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020), a growing body of research approaches news trust from a qualitative standpoint, aiming to identify the subjective interpretations and negotiations that underlie public credibility judgments. Such studies show that news are evaluated as credible when perceived to provide accurate and unbiased information (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2019; Haider and Sundin, 2020; Nelson and Lewis, 2021), and point to audiences' expectation that journalists would provide an indexical representation of the world (Coleman et al., 2012; Karlsson and Clerwall, 2019).

A majority of this research revolves around the information delivered from the news media, measuring it through content-related criteria, most notably using notions of accuracy and objectivity (Ladd, 2011; Strömbäck et al., 2020). While this premise aligns with the democratic gravitas of journalism, alluding to its traditional adherence to facts (Zelizer, 2004), it disregards the profound and inextricable function of the socio-technical context in which

news information takes shape (Das and Ytre-Arne, 2018; Pasitselska, 2022; Usher, 2018). Following Moran and Nechushtai's (2021) call for more nuanced research of the infrastructural role of trust within journalism, in this paper we study audiences' trust in the news through the lens of socio-materiality, underscoring audiences' attitudes in relation to both news platforms and the broader socio-cultural context in which these are being used.

News (dis)trust from a socio-technical perspective

Beyond information, news consumption involves significant material aspects, which shape both the production and reception of journalism (Aharoni et al., 2021; Boczkowski et al., 2020; Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2020). Contextual characteristics of news environments – such as the quantity and variety of information they enable, and the technological modes through which it is consumed – are fundamental to users' perceptions and behaviors (Boczkowski, 2021; Thorson and Wells, 2016; Toff and Kalogeropoulos, 2020). For instance, digital mediascapes often generate the impression that current-events information is ubiquitous and attainable, and instill in users' expectation that important news will “find them” (Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl, 2019; Toff and Nielsen, 2018). Digital infrastructures may nonetheless encourage deliberate actions, such as active seeking, filtering, and curation of news (Haider and Sundin, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2018; Thorson and Wells, 2016). These technical conditions of digital environments, regardless of the specific content they provide, hold important ramifications to the management and assessment of trust (Bodó, 2021), and of news trust in particular.

Responding to this unique setting, recent studies allude to the socio-technical nature of trust, as an assemblage of human interpretations and technological structures (Steedman et al., 2020; Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021). Especially among young audiences, news trust has been found to be associated with an overt infrastructural awareness (Das and Ytre-Arne, 2018; Haider and Sundin, 2020): users engage with algorithms to filter and evaluate information

(Swart, 2021), and build on search interfaces and their ranking order to authenticate it (Antunovic et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018; Toff and Nilesen, 2018). Certain digital news sources (e.g., news apps, YouTube) were even found to be associated with users' confidence in their ability to filter misinformation (Schwarzenegger, 2020: 372). Still, online environments also engender some levels of suspicion (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2019). For instance, news encountered on social media have been consistently evaluated less trustworthy than those obtained through legacy media (Newman et al., 2019) – a trust gap that has been increasing since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Newman et al., 2021).

Such work calls for an attention to the ways in which audiences' infrastructural awareness figures into their critical assessments and trustworthiness evaluations. Especially in saturated digital environments, where information on current events is disseminated by professionals and nonprofessionals alike (Thorson and Wells, 2016), understanding news trust requires a holistic approach which combines informational and socio-technical manifestations (Boczkowski, 2021; Usher, 2018), while addressing both institutional and interpersonal trust (Bodó, 2021; Putnam, 1993; Uslaner, 2002). In this study we therefore employ the notion of technological affordances, an oft-cited concept in communication research. Defined as possibilities for action (Gibson, 1979), affordances connect people's perceptions of technologies with the material and cultural context in which they are being used (Evans et al., 2017). As such, they provide a conceptual framework that extends beyond people's content evaluations, to probe the potential ways in which trust-related possibilities and constraints are associated with the technological conditions of news consumption.

Cross-national scholarship on news (dis)trust

In addition to their potential materialistic aspects, peoples' trust evaluations are also shaped as part of their specific societal context, as well as their "cultures of news consumption" (Toff and Kalogeropoulos, 2020). The scholarship on news trust has traditionally focused on

countries in the Global North, and particularly on the US context (Tsfati and Ariely, 2014). However, recent studies have started paving the way to comparing citizens' media trust across different national contexts (Elvestad et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2021). Comparative surveys have documented considerable cross-national variation, ranging from countries that are high in news trust – such as Finland, Portugal, and Norway, to countries with relatively low public trust in the news – such as Hungary, France, and the UK (Elvestad et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2021; Tsfati and Ariely, 2014).

However, beyond these country-specific articulations, news trust may involve certain universal aspects. First, trust has been shown to be rooted in personality dispositions (Uslaner, 2002). Specifically, news trust correlates with citizens' political ideologies (Nielsen et al., 2020) and their levels of social and political trust (Putnam, 1993; Tsfati and Ariely, 2014). Additionally, trusting the news may also be age-related, as both technology use and news consumption have been shown to differ substantially **across generations** (Antunovic et al., 2018; **Boczkowski, 2021**; Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2020). These documented individual and intergenerational factors may give rise to within-countries variations of news trust, potentially overshadowing the impact of national structures.

Second, as discussed above, news trust and distrust do not necessarily involve content, but may revolve around its socio-technical context. Especially within digital media environments, a common context may involve some level of cross-cultural similarity (Matassi and Boczkowski, 2021). For example, Fletcher and Nielsen (2019) found no significant differences in the ways people from Germany, Spain, the UK, and the US evaluated news stories encountered on social media. Although they are embedded in different political and media systems, respondents from all four countries shared a skeptical attitude, leading the researchers to observe cross-country variation as “less salient than differences associated with attitudes to news, age, and interest” (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2019: 1759). Global commonalities

in relation to news platforms and their trustworthiness are even evident among populations who rarely engage with journalism. For instance, Toff and Nielsen (2018) found that news avoiders in both the US and the UK were equally concerned about their overloaded information environments, and were similar in their struggles around what to trust. Far from underscoring national differences, these studies illuminate the global challenges people face in determining the veracity of news, and their shared sense-making practices in digital spaces.

Informed by these cross-country commonalities, we posit that similar universal aspects should also occur in relation to people's trust in the news. In this study, we aim to complement the dominant scholarly attention to news contents and their cross-cultural differences with an examination of users' perceptions of journalistic platforms and their affordances, and the ways in which these underlie news trust across various cultural contexts and media systems. Employing a qualitative inductive approach, we thus ask: *What socio-technical aspects underlie audiences' trust and distrust in the news across national contexts?*

Method

To analyze the socio-technical manifestations of audiences' news trust and distrust we examined citizens' news trust perceptions in five cultural contexts. To this end, we utilized a rich corpus of 488 in-depth interviews with media consumers, collected in Argentina, Finland, Israel, Japan, and the US.¹ These countries allow for cultural variation, differing substantially in their general proportion of trust in journalism, with relatively high levels of news trust in Finland and Japan, and relatively low levels in Argentina and the US (Newman et al., 2021; World Values Survey, 2017-2020). However, these countries are also similar in some important aspects: they are all established democracies (Marshall et al., 2014), and share a relatively high rate of Internet access and social media usage (roughly 70% of the population in all countries use social media, see www.statista.com).

Within each country, interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling (Deacon et al. 1999), while aiming for variance in geographic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds. In contrast to previous studies (Coleman, 2012; Karlsson and Clerwall, 2019), our selection process did not specifically target people with considerably high or low trust attitudes, nor did it focus specifically on people with high or low interest in the news (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2019; Toff and Nielsen, 2018). Instead, we aimed to cover a wide range of news trust and distrust expressions, by citizens with diverse trust attitudes, and with both frequent and infrequent news consumption and technology use repertoires (for a similar procedure, see Schwarzenegger, 2020). Overall, the sample consisted of 55% women, and the average age was 42.9 years (for the specific distribution of gender and age in the sample see Table 1). It included a range of occupations and education levels, from engineers to artists, and from people with elementary education to professors.

[Insert Table 1]

Table 1. Gender and average age by country.

A shared interview guide was used across the five countries. It addressed three media consumption domains—news, entertainment, and technological devices—and focused on daily media consumption habits (e.g., ‘Which news item has caught your attention lately?’, ‘What do you use your cellphone for?’, etc.). News trust was not specifically covered in the protocol, yet it emerged as a prominent topic in the interviews. While this may have some drawbacks to the study of trust, the open nature of the interview protocol enabled us to go beyond cognitive facets, and to consider the socio-technical manifestations of news trust and distrust (Das and Ytre-Arne, 2018). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. After several rounds of initial analysis and team conversations, a shared qualitative coding scheme was developed and employed in each country, using the qualitative content analysis software

MAXQDA. This coding scheme included a section specifically devoted to attitudes of trust and distrust in the media.

For the purposes of this study, we extracted from the transcripts all references to trust and distrust in news and current affairs, in several stages. First, we focused on the coding categories that directly referred to news trust or distrust (e.g., perceptions of news as accurate, biased, or fake). Second, since news consumption in digital environments is weaved together with other forms of media (Thorson and Wells, 2016), we also considered mentions of trust and distrust in communication technologies (e.g., trust towards search engines, suspicion towards algorithms). Third, we conducted a lexical search of the words “trust”, “distrust”, “suspicion”, and their inflections in all five languages (e.g., in English we sought for the words: trust, distrust, trustworthy, trustworthiness, suspicion, and suspicious). We then analyzed the retrieved segments of news trust/distrust, by identifying descriptive concepts at first (e.g., trust in peers, user agency) and then building on our theoretical lens to integrate the emerging themes (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). This process yielded a classification of two dimensions of news trust within the broader context of daily media usage: “trust in others” and “personal agency in relation to trust.”

Findings: Trust in Different Actors and its Relation to Six Technological Affordances

The analysis revealed two main aspects of audiences’ trust in the news (see Figure 1). The first is trust in others. This involves allocating tasks of information filtering and verification to external agents, namely: journalists, acquaintances, and algorithms. The second type is a sense of personal agency in relation to trust, according to which consumers feel capable of filtering misinformation and extracting “the truth” from the abundance of news. Although these identified trust aspects involved some content considerations, they were often expressed in relation to the technological attributes of news, illuminating several trust-oriented affordances: from selectivity, interactivity, and content customization as facilitating trust in others – to

searchability, information abundance, and immediacy, which enable trust in oneself. As affordances may lead to opposite outcomes (Evans et al., 2017), our analysis accounts for the contradictory impressions that emerged around the socio-materiality of news.

[Insert Figure 1]

Figure 1. News trust dimensions and their trust-oriented affordances.

Trust in others

This category demonstrates the explicit preference of people to consume news conveyed by trusted agents. While relying on credible actors aligns with recognized expressions of news trust (Coleman et al., 2012; Karlsson and Clerwall, 2019), our analysis unveils the similarity between interviewees' trust in human and non-human actors. Specifically, three types of credible actors were illustrated: journalists, acquaintances, and algorithms, which were discussed in relation to the affordances of selectivity, interactivity, and customization, respectively. Reliance on one or more of these curating actors (Thorson and Wells, 2016) was shown in our interviews as motivating audiences to take news information at face value.

Selectivity: Trust in specific journalistic sources. Trust in institutionalized news sources was one of the focal points of citizen's discourse about credibility across all the studied countries. The perception of printed and online newspapers as trustworthy was more common among, yet not exclusive to, the older adults in our sample. Oftentimes, trust in this type of media was explained in terms of appreciation for editorial gatekeeping (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2019; Thorson and Wells, 2016). Beatriz (F, 73, US) from Miami, a retired journalist herself, connected her inclination to consume prominent newspapers to her faith in editors' honesty and skills: "I read the big ones, because the editor is the one who connects, the editor is the one who knows [...] [big newspapers] are not going to tell lies." Similarly, Eliav (M, 32, Israel),

an owner of a digital marketing company in Tel-Aviv, expressed his trust in newspapers and their editors:

When you read a newspaper then it is basically reading the news in the structure that the editor decided on. Like today, there were six pages on North Korea-USA [relations]. Why? Because the editor decided this was the most important thing that happened yesterday [...] So cool, it relieves me of [...] feeling that something is being sold to me [...] I trust the editor and I know that if he puts it in the newspaper then it probably matters.²

While these quotes express general trust in newspapers, most interviewees illustrated a more nuanced approach, relying on specific outlets. Some explained that they trust those newspapers which seem the most neutral or objective. Others explicitly preferred to consume news outlets which dovetail with their own political worldviews. The ability to consume content *selectively* was thus perceived as a condition for news trust. Following sources which were deemed trustworthy to begin with, enabled people to “turn off” their criticism and to obtain the news from a trusting mindset. As Naor (M, 32, Israel), an NGO worker, explained: “No website is objective, but I prefer to read [...] websites which I know in advance that have some kind of political framing that [...] I agree with. That I can read less critically.”

Interviewees were motivated to avoid outlets that were deemed untrustworthy, even when encountered incidentally (Mitchelstein et al., 2020). Such a pattern was demonstrated by software engineer Asaf (M, 27, Israel). Due to his distrust in Haaretz (a left-leaning daily broadsheet), Asaf tends to avoid articles from this outlet whenever these come across his Facebook feed:

If I’m hesitating [whether to open an article] [...] then with [Haaretz] there’s a greater chance of a ‘no’ [...] I relate less to the political views there and sometimes feel it’s a little exaggerated [...] so I take it with a grain of salt [...] If something is, in my opinion, less reliable, then I tend to spend less time [on it].

Alternatively, platforms affording selectivity could also evoke an opposite impression of distrust. Marta (F, 52, Argentina), a psychoanalyst from Buenos Aires, referred to the

selectivity enabled by social media, concluding that by using “only WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook you don’t find much about anything.” Alida (F, 34, US), a digital marketing agency owner from Chicago, raised concerns over a broader pattern of selective consumption, saying that: “even with the sources that I have tended to trust in the past, I think [...] we’re really only getting news sources from where we want to.” Marta and Alida both referred to the selectivity of news as blinding, describing it as “living inside a box” or as “going down the rabbit hole.” To them, the ability to consume content selectively impedes even information coming from the most trustworthy news sources.

Interactivity: Trust in engaged acquaintances. For some, content provided by peers and friends was deemed more reliable than information obtained directly from the news media. As Yoshitaka (M, 37, Japan), a civil society group worker in Tokyo put it: “I don’t really believe in the media [...] I’m more interested in what my trusted friends post on Facebook.”

Accordingly, *interactive* platforms, which enable social engagement around news stories via posts and comments (Evans et al., 2017; Usher, 2016), were deemed trustworthy by some interviewees. Instead of relying on professional gatekeepers, they valued the comments made by other users, who are perceived capable of “judging things based on their own standards.” Such a social curation (Villi, 2012) of news was considered credible according to a belief in the “wisdom of the crowd.” Yoshi (M, 51, Israel), an education programs developer, positively evaluated Facebook’s lack of editorial censorship. To him, Facebook represents “people from below,” thereby reflecting “the authentic public opinion.” Lucas (M, 30, Argentina), a lawyer, similarly admired how on Twitter “the news are broken down from all points of view,” making it a highly reliable source.

Far from being exclusive to social media, trust in peers and relatives also occurred in relation to legacy media. Accordingly, the interpretations of trusted acquaintances were highly appreciated, even to the extent of shifting one’s routine news consumption. This was the case

of Manga artist Norie (F, 57, Japan), once a habitual reader of the Yomiuri Shimbun (Japan's largest daily newspaper), who abandoned it immediately after her husband commented that it is "full of lies." This example illustrates the power dynamics of social networks (Hayashi et al., 2021), and their significance for news trust both online and offline (Ognyanova, 2019; Pasitselska, 2022).

However, interactivity was not always regarded in our interviews to be promoting news trust, but rather as lacking in accountability and factuality. Yuki (F, 48, Japan), a freelance publisher, noted that information on social media "is not carefully selected," which impedes news consumption. In Finland, Tapio (M, 74) concluded that in contrast to legacy media, which is factual and trustworthy, social media only comprise "people's impulsive, momentary opinions, who exaggerate and magnify everything."

Customization: Trust in algorithms. Alongside reliance on journalists and peers, a third type of trust focused on a non-human filtering in the form of algorithms (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2019; Thorson and Wells, 2016). As undergraduate student Jarno (M, 24, Finland) stated: "Algorithms have been good for me, I haven't come across any rubbish so far."

Continuing the logic of selective consumption, some interviewees appreciated the ability to *customize* content. Some felt that algorithmic social media content can be easily controlled by liking/following certain people, or by actively filtering or blocking others. Oftentimes, interviewees stressed a perceived ability to control one's information ecology within social media interfaces. Businessman Hirofumi (M, 48, Japan) talked about his attempts to curate his own Facebook feed: "I only friend people that I have a direct connection with, so I feel that the spread of social networks cannot go beyond the scope of my actual life." Raija, (F, 59, Finland), a history teacher, expressed a heightened awareness of who to follow on Twitter:

If someone shares some MV [a Finnish alt-right media site] content with me, I immediately block them. I don't want those messages to flow there in my feed. In a

way I've done a clean-up job there, that's the number one thing for me. So, I don't follow people who push that kind of stuff. And when such stuff comes into Twitter, even [if] I don't follow them, I block them.

Trust in personalized algorithms often coincided with users' attempts to create an environment prone for incidental news consumption (Mitchelstein et al., 2020). Specifically, some interviewees asserted that social media algorithms expose them to people from their political out-group, thereby more accurately informing them about civic events. In Israel, Yoshi (M, 51), who holds right-wing opinions, felt that Facebook allowed him to critically reflect on mainstream news information, through an unintentional access to both sides of the political map: "I read [...] whatever appears on my feed, but I do feel like [I get information] from both sides, that I have extreme leftists in my feed." Far from actively consuming content from opposing partisan media, interviewees who expressed trust in algorithms settled for the expectation that such content can potentially appear on their news feeds. This type of trust is therefore hinged upon a combination of people's beliefs about the information ecology (e.g., that opposing opinions are valuable) and their particular folk theories around algorithms (Toff and Nielsen, 2018; Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021).

Still, the same affordance of *customization* via algorithmic filtering was also perceived as distorted by being "biased to your circle of friends" (Ofer, M, 40, Israel), and thus constituting a "one-sided news source" (Pirjo, F30, Finland). Matan (M, 41), a startup CEO from central Israel, noted that he consistently "tried to add people who think differently" from him, only to discover that Facebook "lowers your exposure to them." Matan therefore concluded that "Facebook is not a good tool for news consumption" because "you don't receive information from it, you only receive reinforcement to your own thoughts."

Personal agency in relation to trust

In contrast to people's trust in particular sources, **we also found significant reliance on personal curation (Thorson and Wells, 2016), which was widespread in all five countries.** Accordingly,

many of our interviewees believed it is “up to them” to verify the news they consume. Koji (M, 65, Japan), a retiree, stressed the significance of being critical towards news information: “It’s important to [...] make your own judgments, to put your own filters on it [...] not to believe the news and information, but to be skeptical first.” Seppo (M, 30, Finland), a massage therapist, concluded that verifying news information is up to every news reader and listener: “no matter what platform the news is on [...] whether it is truthful and uses source criticism [...] All people have to think for themselves whether the news is really true.” This belief that credibility verifications are the audiences’ responsibility was commonly linked with expressions of general distrust in both legacy and social media. For instance, Frances (F, 68, US), a retired professor, strives to verify all news she encounters herself – a motivation which she explained to be rooted in her general media distrust:

I don’t trust any news source, truly! [...] I have to make up my own mind as to how valid the story is. [...] Even if it comes from several sources [...] it has happened that the same rumor or incorrect news has gone out to all the legitimate ones [...] So, I don’t trust anybody. I just read it and I have to make a decision on my own about whether it’s valid or not.

In a stark contrast to their generalized distrust in external information sources, a large portion of our interviewees expressed high confidence in their own news judgments, and in their ability to discern truth from falsity. They described themselves as critical readers, manifested trust in their own abilities to accurately “filter the news,” and stressed the importance of keeping “your mind on what’s true and what’s not.” This high certainty was anchored in interviewees’ education, in their vast experience as news consumers, and in their professional training: from working in a newspaper stand to having a practical journalistic background. Especially in the US, this high certainty was interestingly expressed through bodily metaphors, as interviewees were equating trustworthiness evaluations with senses like sight and smell: “I can like snuff out when something seems like bullshit to me” (Alida, F, 34); “reliable is kind of like, you know it when you see it” (Tyler, M, 20).

Participants' trust in their own abilities to filter information was moreover discussed in relation to different technological attributes of the news media. Particularly, respondents described how the affordances of searchability, immediacy, and information abundance enabled them to find, filter, and evaluate the news content they consume.

Searchability: Trust in oneself to find reliable news. First, interviewees marked searchability as key to obtaining credible news. Search engines, and Google search in particular, were perceived as enabling users to determine the veracity of news. In the US, the combination of confidence in one's abilities and in certain technological tools is evident in a quote by Elisa (F, 34), a senior policy analyst: "I think that I'm able to filter through some of the muck and find facts. And when I don't [...] I'm a perpetual Googler." Marisa (F, 59, Argentina), a housewife, also stressed the usefulness of Google search, especially when suspecting news information: "[it] is a fabulous invention that you can find whatever you can think of, whatever you have doubts about, you can find it through Google. And I love it." Likewise, tax lawyer Justin (M, 32, US) pointed to the usefulness of Google search for managing his own suspicions:

I always verify everything I read before I share it because [...] I feel like if it is a legitimate story or a real story, there will be enough people covering it, right? So, I may see something from someone that I might think or suspect, but then I'll google it.

In line with previous studies (Antunovic et al., 2018; Toff and Nilesen, 2018), the use of search engines has been particularly pronounced among younger users, who purposely scan online environments for trustworthy news. Intriguingly, searchability was the only affordance in our sample that was unanimously considered beneficial to gaining news trust. **Across all countries, we did not locate any expressions of distrust associated with searchability.**

Abundance: Trust in oneself to filter news information. Participants also extensively discussed the *abundance* of information (Boczkowski, 2021). Many interviewees from all five countries explicitly preferred media and platforms which enable large amounts of news content.

According to them, the ability to “pick and choose” news items, is what makes abundant information environments more trustworthy, even at the expense of some inaccuracies. This perception was evident in the words of product manager Gilad (M, 42, Israel), who reflected back to the late 1980s, when there was only one television channel in Israel:

[Today] you can read a lot more in order to choose. I mean, I think we have a lot of information. True, some of it is disinformation, but, within this blend [...] there are more filtering capabilities, compared to periods when Channel 1 was the single, or almost the single, media outlet [...] I have more tools today to get to this information.

Nevertheless, the large amount of available information in online news websites and social media could also come across as overloading. To Susana (F, 51, US), an import/export company administrator, “trying to discern what is really news and what is not, is difficult.” Marcos (M, 18, Argentina), a high-school student, similarly felt that “there is an excess” of information which prevents him from trusting the news he encounters. He therefore wished to have “a filter that separates what is true and what is research-based” from “opinion[s] or something that is not very well based on real facts.”

Immediacy: Trust in oneself to evaluate the production of news. The *immediacy* of news platforms was also discussed by some interviewees as an indicator of trustworthiness, or lack thereof. In Japan, there seemed to be a positive perception of Twitter and its immediacy, especially in the context of recurrent earthquake crises. For example, Norie (F, 57) discussed Twitter’s immediacy as enabling trust and concluded that “the later you get to news, the more suspicious it becomes.” This same appreciation was also documented in the turbulent context of Israel. Gilad (M, 42) employed immediacy to explain his trust in Channel 20, a right-leaning Israeli television channel. While this channel immediately reports on stone throwing and hate crimes, Gilad remarked that “in the mainstream news, you will only hear about [such instances] insanely late.”

Nevertheless, the affordance of immediacy was highly controversial in our interviews. While the speed of online news websites and apps was perceived to lead to accurate and “up-to-the minute news,” immediate news updates and notifications were often regarded with suspicion. In Finland, undergraduate student Edward (M, 24) observed that newspapers and tabloids that tend to be the fastest are usually the least reliable. Still, he ensures to follow these less accurate sources because “they are usually the fastest if something happens.” This trade-off between factuality and speed was also expressed in the words of librarian Fiona (F, 50, US). While recognizing that news from Twitter are “less reliable than anything else,” she confessed to using it regularly because: “things appear on Twitter first.” This tension seems to culminate during times of crisis, when the immediacy of breaking news is—if not associated with reliability—at least compensating for the lack of it.

Discussion: The Socio-Technical Affordances of News (Dis)Trust

Our interviews with media consumers in the five studied countries indicated two main dimensions of audiences’ trust in the news: consumers’ trust in human and non-human news providers, and conversely, their sense of personal agency in relation to trust, believing only a first-hand examination of news can ensure their trustworthiness. Alongside cross-national differences in levels of interpersonal, political, and media trust, as documented in previous survey-based research (Newman et al., 2021; Uslaner, 2002), our study points to the existence of six trust-oriented affordances across all five countries. The affordances of selectivity, interactivity, and customization were associated with trust in others, whereas personal agency aligned with the affordances of searchability, information abundance, and immediacy. While the affordance of immediacy was most prevalent in Japan, where interviewees discussed it in relation to the country’s reoccurring earthquake crises, the remaining five affordances were prominent in all studied countries. These findings extend beyond the common scholarly focus on the reliability of news content (Ladd, 2011; Strömbäck et al., 2020), to address a

combination of informational and socio-technical considerations in relation to audiences' news trust.

While trusting others connects with familiar notions of institutional and interpersonal trust (Uslaner, 2002), the role of user agency in news trust is a relatively new aspect in the literature. Trusting others was often accompanied in our study with a low sense of agency. Overwhelmed by the abundance of available news, many users felt incapable of verifying information, and preferred to rely instead on journalists, acquaintances, or on the algorithmic infrastructure itself. This type of trust can be seen as a form of naïve information assessment (Haider and Sundin, 2020; Schwarzenegger, 2020): a reliance on external sources aimed to gain information while minimizing the need for future verifications. Conversely, a strong sense of personal agency was found in our interviews to be more conflicting with news trust, and to express skeptical evaluations (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2019; Haider and Sundin, 2020).

This interplay of user agency and trust aligns with audiences' increasing involvement in authenticating information, especially in digital platforms (Tandoc et al., 2018). While some of our interviewees condemned any inaccuracy, others accepted that the news will comprise some levels of misinformation. Paradoxically, such misinformation was not always regarded to be harmful, but was rather seen as an opportunity: trusting their own literacy and critical judgment, people with a strong sense of agency regarded information errors and biases as informative of partisan opinions, or as indicative of a larger assemblage of information to choose and filter from. Our findings thus complicate the premise of information accuracy as the default expectation of news audiences (Coleman et al., 2012; Karlsson and Clerwall, 2019), and show that in contrast to previous studies (Dogruel et al., 2020; Steedman et al., 2020), users' sense of control and autonomy does not always lead to greater trust in information.

Audiences' disagreement around issues of information verification and control was also configured into the infrastructure of news, and the opportunities enabled by specific platforms.

In our study, trusting others was associated with technological affordances of selectivity, interactivity, and customization, which were reported to be more in line with a trusting mindset: they enable consumers to focus only on information received from credible sources, and to refrain from uncredible ones. The affordances of searchability, information abundance, and immediacy, on the other hand, seem to resonate more with a skeptical stance towards the news. They allow users to seek, filter, and compare suspicious news updates, and enable a greater sense of control of the obtained information. These different affordances, as well as the trust-related opportunities and constraints that they present, stress the significance of examining trust and distrust not only toward content, but also in relation to news-oriented technologies and platforms (Haider and Sundin, 2020; Moran and Nechushtai, 2021; Usher, 2018).

Adopting a socio-technical approach also allows for an extension of the normative assumptions around news trust. While trust is usually considered normatively desirable for democracy (Ladd, 2011; Putnam, 1993; Uslaner, 2002), juxtaposing it with algorithms illuminates some of the problematic aspects of this phenomenon (Dogruel et al., 2020; Gran et al., 2021; Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021). Trust in others—whether human or non-human—might equally motivate citizens to narrow the diversity of the news items they consume, potentially exposing them to documented biases and effects of selectivity, filter bubbles, and echo-chambers (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2021). Distrust in news was conversely manifested by our interviewees as motivating consumption of diverse partisan outlets and political perspectives, even those contradicting their own ideologies. This is not to deny the essential challenges that distrust presents for civic information acquisition (Ladd, 2011). Nevertheless, as demonstrated in our study, trust in an ever-expanding environment of news information can also have negative implications (see Tsfaty and Ariely, 2014, for a discussion of the role of skepticism in democracies).

The trust our interviewees expressed in the affordance of searchability is perhaps the most troubling. Although news recommendation engines, and Google search in particular, have been shown to control the visibility of news, while contributing to personalization and fragmentation (Dogruel et al., 2020; Nechushtai and Lewis, 2019), these biases were completely absent from our research, and were not raised even by our most aware and critical interviewees. While some scholars consider infrastructural awareness to be a cornerstone of media literacy today (Gran et al., 2021; Haider and Sundin, 2020; Swart, 2021), it is important to note that awareness does not necessarily equal criticism. In our study, such an awareness of the infrastructure of news was often accompanied by trust in oneself rather than with critical thinking.

Going beyond the documented cross-cultural differences in the levels of news trust (Elvestad et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2021), our study elucidates some important commonalities between countries. This observed cross-national similarity, however, is not restricted to news trust, but is rather a finding that cuts across comparative studies on communication, and especially on social media use (Matassi and Boczkowski, 2021; see also: Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2021; Mitchelstein et al., 2020; Toff and Nielsen, 2018). In a time when digital infrastructures and personalized feeds abound (Boczkowski, 2021; Das and Ytre-Arne, 2018), people in different parts of the world are facing increasingly similar challenges in relation to both the intensity and the plentitude of news. Global struggles around the trustworthiness of news might have been even further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented a vast volume of misinformation (also known as an “Infodemic”, Nielsen et al., 2020). Seeing credibility evaluations as a complex construct encompassing news content, technologies, and affordances can enhance the understanding of the lived experience of news trust from the eyes of media consumers. We hope this paper offers a productive step in this direction.

Notes

1. The interviews were conducted as part of a collaborative project that examined interpretations and affective attitudes toward news, entertainment, and technology across five national contexts. Further details about the project are removed for the purpose of anonymization.
2. The quotes included in this article were translated into English by the authors.

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