

The Role of Media Consumption in Building Trust in the Romanian Mass Media

Cristian BRANCU¹

Oana TURCU²

Abstract

In the past decades, concerns have been raised regarding the ways in which mass media influenced the public confidence in democracy. The roots of media trust in the new democracies from Central and Eastern Europe are poorly understood, even though a significant body of research in western democracies proves that media trust is dependent on distinct media-system, political and cultural aspects relevant to the country particularities. This paper examines whether levels of trust in various traditional (television, radio, written press) and alternative (Internet and online social networks) media are different along social lines and depend on media consumption patterns in post-communist Romania. The study is based on statistical analyses of public opinion surveys. According to the findings, there is a high correlation between mass media trust and media consumption.

Keywords: mass media, social network, media consumption, traditional and alternative media.

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1. Introduction

Declining public trust in media is a cause for concern in many societies around the world (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). In modern democracies, trust in the media is an essential element of political communication, with people's perceptions of the political sphere most often mediated and influenced by information provided through the mass media (Tsfati et al., 2014). Erosion of trust in the media therefore has important consequences for democracy, potentially undermining citizens' confidence in the fairness of political processes (Tsfati et al., 2005).

Beyond its inference on the functioning of democracy, trust in media has substantial economic and persuasive effects. The credibility of a media organization influences the size of its audience, the amount of advertising it runs and therefore its market value, and at the same time affects the size of the persuasive effects that organization has on the public. The causes of declining trust in media lie in certain characteristics of the media system as well as in political and cultural factors specific

¹ Cristian Brancu, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, brancucristian22@stud.ase.ro

² Oana Turcu, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, turcuoana22@stud.ase.ro

to the national context in which media operate. Most studies on media credibility come from the US and use as explanatory variables several factors specific to the US context (Tsfati et al., 2005).

This raises serious questions about the extrapolation of the findings and the transferability of the results of those studies to other cultural and political spaces. Few international comparative analyses use a narrow concept of trust in the press, not distinguishing between different types of media that might have different sources of credibility (Tsfati et al., 2015). Trust in print media is only one ingredient, perhaps not the most important one, of the media menu consumed by the public expanding, diversifying and fragmenting media space of the contemporary world.

Attempting to overcome the limitations in the literature outlined above, this study aims to contribute to the media trust debate in two ways. First, the paper examines public trust in several types of traditional (television, radio, print) and alternative (Internet and online social networks) media. We distinguish between traditional and alternative media based on the assumption that when people do not trust traditional channels, they are less exposed to them and seek alternative sources of information. The online environment can offer such alternatives. Second, focusing on the case of Romania, the study tests the extent to which explanatory models developed in the context of Western democracies can be applied to new democracies in Europe, societies where the grim legacy of communist-era restrictions on freedom of expression, censorship, and control of the press by the party-state may persist. In summary, the main purpose of this paper is to examine whether individuals' trust in different types of media in Romania is differentiated according to people's consumption patterns. Subsequently, the study contextualizes the evolution of Romanians' trust in traditional and alternative media in the post-communist period.

The rest of the paper is structured in six parts. In the first section we define media trust within the broader framework of public perceptions of media and outline the psychological mechanisms that influence the formation and reinforcement of media perceptions. The second section focuses on examining the theoretical framework on the relationships between trust and media consumption and formulating empirically two testable hypotheses derived from these theories. The third section presents the empirical data, in particular the Eurobarometer opinion polls, and the methods of analysis used. The fourth section structures the results of the study on two levels: contextualizing the dynamics of Romanians' trust in different types of media and testing the hypotheses through an analysis of the factors influencing trust. The fifth section discusses in detail the interdependencies between media consumption patterns and trust in two dominant channels in the Romanian media landscape: television and the Internet. The conclusions summarize the main contributions of the paper and their practical, theoretical, and normative implications.

2. Formulation of the statistical hypotheses

A few media analyses show that there is an interdependence between exposure to media content and people's trust in the media (Strömbäck et al., 2020). In the literature, two trends can be distinguished regarding the relationship between media consumption and institutional trust. On the one hand, 'media malaise' theories argue that the cynical way in which the media present news about politics erodes trust in institutions and civic participation (Zhang and Chia, 2006). However, this thesis has little support in empirical analyses of media trust (Hoppman et al, 2015).

Given the definition of media trust adopted above, and assuming that the public is rational, exposure to untrustworthy news sources makes no sense (Vraga et al., 2012). On the other hand, the 'virtuous circle' thesis proposed by Norris (2000) argues that people who are more politically active and trust public institutions consume more news provided by the media, which further strengthens their political engagement and trust in the media. In addition, frequent exposure to news increases trust in the media, as a large part of the message of news channels is that the media is trustworthy (Turcote et al., 2015).

Thus, according to the virtuous circle thesis, news consumption generates more trust in the media which in turn influences consumption patterns. It is quite possible, however, that repeated exposure to a particular news channel increases trust only in that channel and not in other media. Therefore, we formulate Hypothesis 1 of the virtuous circle: Individuals who consume content provided by certain media more frequently tend to trust those media more than those who consume information provided by those sources less frequently. The link between trust and media consumption can also be explained by the process of selective exposure to information sources.

If individuals have a choice between several sources of information, they will choose to expose themselves to sources they trust and avoid those they do not trust. For example, those who despise journalists and perceive news in traditional media as inaccurate, biased, or only following sensationalism and the interests of media trusts, should seek alternatives to these news channels in order to get accurate information (Johnson and Kaye, 2004). The online environment could offer such an alternative. It is therefore to be expected that those who are skeptical about the accuracy of traditional media information will seek alternative sources of information (Chan and Fang, 2007). We therefore formulate Hypothesis 2 on the negative relationship between trust in traditional media and consumption of information in alternative media: Individuals who use alternative media more frequently (Internet and online social networks) tend to have less trust in traditional media (TV, radio and print).

3. Methodology

This paper aims to contextualize the dynamics of public trust in the media in Romania and to examine the relationship between trust, politicization and media consumption. For this purpose, we used data collected through opinion polls from

the Eurobarometer series, funded by the European Commission. The main advantage of these surveys is that data are collected systematically, at regular intervals, using a standardized methodology and nationally representative samples, with about 1000 respondents in each EU member state. In addition, the questionnaires used include sets of questions asked annually, allowing diachronic analysis of the phenomena studied. In this paper, the evolution of public trust in the media is analyzed using the Eurobarometer data series, available from 2001 to 2021.

Since the variable of interest is dummy (1=traditional, 0= alternative), we will run a binomial regression model with Media as a dependent variable.

The binomial regression model could be written as:

$$\text{Log} \left(\frac{y}{1-y} \right) = \alpha_0 + \sum_{i=1}^n \alpha_i x_i + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

where

- y = dependent variable
- x_i = independent variables
- α_0 = intercept
- α_i = parameter coefficients
- ε = error term

In the binomial logistic regression models we also included a number of control variables: gender (1=male, 0=female), age (in years completed), residence (1=rural, 2=small urban, 3=large urban), self-perceived social class (1=working class, 2=lower middle class, 3=middle class, 4=upper middle class, 5=upper class), level of satisfaction with own life (1=not at all satisfied, 2=not very satisfied, 3=fairly satisfied, 4=very satisfied). We also controlled for the effect of some attitudinal-value variables on the political sphere: interest in politics (1=not at all, 2=low, 3=medium, 4=very high), self-perceived political efficacy (1=very low, 2=low, 3=medium, 4=very high) and level of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Romania (1=not at all satisfied, 2=not too satisfied, 3=fairly satisfied, 4=very satisfied). In order to disentangle the effect of trust in political parties from the effect of other international institutions/organizations on trust in the media, we also included in the logistic regression models the trust Romanians have in the United Nations (1=tend to trust, 0=other response options). Since the UN is an entity rather absent from the political discourse and from the Romanian public sphere in general, trust in this organization can also be seen as a proxy for generalized trust, i.e. the tendency to be a more trusting person regardless of the object on which trust is projected.

4. Results

The second part of the results test's hypotheses about predictors of public trust in the media (Table 1). We entered the same set of variables in a series of binomial logistic regressions to explain public trust in each type of media: television, radio, print, Internet and online social networks. The regression coefficients in Table 1 show that trust in parties and media are closely related: respondents who trust

political parties tend to have more trust in traditional media (TV, radio and print), and those who do not trust parties tend to have less trust in traditional media. Media consumption generates more trust in the media which, in turn, stimulates more media consumption, thus confirming the virtuous circle hypothesis (Hypothesis 1). It should be noted that more frequent exposure to a particular type of media increases trust only in that type of media and not in others. In addition, respondents who consume more traditional media seem to have less trust in online media and conversely, those who use alternative media more often tend to have less trust in traditional channels. Although this trend is noticeable in the analysis of the data in Table 1, it only reaches statistical significance in two situations. Those who expose themselves more often to television tend to trust online social networks less, and those who use the Internet and online social networks more frequently tend to trust print media less. Therefore, the hypothesis on the negative relationship between trust in traditional media and consumption of alternative media (Hypothesis 2) is only partially confirmed.

Table 1. Public trust predictors in traditional and alternative media.

Predictors	Traditional media			Alternative media	
	TV	Radio	Newspaper	Internet	Social Media
TV consumption	.311**	.129*	.059	-0.13	-0.205
Radio/Newspaper consumption	0.105*	.162**	.231***	-0.031	-0.039
Internet/ Social network	-0.119	-0.034	-.111*	.421***	.389***
Gender	-.213**	-.208**	-.118*	.398***	.431***
Age	.089*	0.012	0.107	0.012	0.006
Residence (rural = reference)					
Small urban	-0.41	-.328***	-.346***	-.508***	-.603***
Big urban	-0.011	-.222**	-.317***	-0.041	-0.162
Social status	-.301***	.269**	-.143*	-0.061	-0.078
Constant	-3.005	-0.189	-3.042	-2.678	-3.123
Change in -2log likelihood	179.069***	139.889***	239.098***	279.041**	287.056***
Pearson R_square	0.321	0.412	0.379	0.324	0.329

Note: Data represent the coefficients of the (B) binomial regression model. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Source: Author's own analysis based on Eurobarometer 96.2 data

The control variables reveal some interesting patterns which we will briefly present. Men tend to trust print media less and online social networks more than women. Age has no significant effect except for television. However, in additional analyses not presented here, age had opposite effects on trust in traditional and alternative media when media consumption was not included in the equation. Older people tended to have more trust in television, print and to some extent radio, but at the same time tended not to trust alternative media.

Younger people trusted the internet and social media more and trusted traditional media less than older people. However, with the introduction of media consumption variables in statistical models, the effect of age becomes insignificant. This suggests that the effect of age on media trust is mediated by the different consumption patterns of young and old. Those living in small cities tend to be more distrustful of radio, print media, the Internet and online social networks compared to those in rural areas, while there are only statistically significant differences between residents of large cities and those living in villages in terms of trust in print media. Those who perceive themselves as belonging to the lower social classes tend to have more trust in traditional media compared to those who place themselves in the upper social classes. Those who are satisfied with their own lives, those who are more interested in politics and those who are satisfied with the way democracy works in Romania tend to have more trust in the print media. On the other hand, respondents who feel that their voice matters in Romania (political effectiveness) trust television more. Those who trust the UN (used here as a variable that approximates generalized trust) tend to have more trust in both traditional and alternative media.

5. Discussions

The likelihood of trusting television increases with the frequency of individuals' exposure to TV content, thus confirming the virtuous circle hypothesis (Hypothesis 1). This relationship holds for both trusting and distrusting parties. However, those who do not trust the parties exceed the 0.5 probability threshold of trusting TV (dashed horizontal line) only if they watch TV daily or almost daily. On the other hand, those who trust parties pass the 0.5 probability threshold even if they only watch TV 2-3 times a month. In this case, individuals seem to extrapolate their trust in parties to TV, even if they rarely watch TV. Several studies find that identification with a party provides strong benchmarks in guiding people's attitudes and behavior. In the case of the partisans in our sample, trust in parties seems to provide them with sufficient clues for assessing the credibility of television, even when their personal experience gained through direct exposure to TV channels is minimal. Partisanship has a much smaller effect when influencing perceptions of trust in alternative media (Internet and online social networks).

Those who use the Internet or online social networks more often tend to trust these media more, which confirms Hypothesis 1 of the virtuous circle also for alternative media. Analysis of the data in Table 1 shows that the use of online sources does not statistically significantly erode trust in TV and radio but only in print media,

which only partially confirms Hypothesis 2. In general, the use of a particular medium tends to strengthen trust in that medium and affects trust in other media less. Moreover, the effect of using online media on trust in the Internet is about 10 percentage points (0.1 on a scale of 0 to 1) higher than the effect of TV viewing on trust in TV. In conclusion, the interdependence between consumption and trust is stronger for alternative media, while the interdependence between bias and trust is stronger for traditional media.

6. Conclusions

Taking as a starting point the literature with regard to trust in media, this study aimed to answer the question: how has trust in media evolved in Romania?

To answer this question, our data show a decline in public trust in the media between 2008 and 2010. Until the onset of the financial crisis, the press was one of the few institutions Romanians trusted throughout the post-communist period. For years, the media ranked third, after the church and the army, in the top of trust in different public institutions and organizations. The economic crisis period of 2008-2010 saw a dramatic erosion of media credibility. But the causes of this phenomenon are not only the lack of financial resources and the deprofessionalisation of the media following the collapse of the media market. At the same time, there has been a growing public perception that the media are deeply flawed and increasingly dependent on the political sphere. Dependence on funding from politically controlled money has encouraged the media to become instruments of partisan propaganda and, even more, to become directly involved in the elections from overtly partisan positions. As the media became active combatants in the political struggle, certain news channels became the target of virulent rhetorical attacks from opposing political elites, further polarizing public perceptions of the media and undermining trust. These developments confirm that trust in the media is formed in a social and political context and is closely linked to public perceptions of other institutions. The erosion of the credibility of traditional media in Romania is therefore part of a wider syndrome of declining public trust in political institutions during the economic crisis. It is also a consequence of the increased politicization of the media system in Romania, manifested also by the extension of divisions and conflict lines from the political domain into the media space.

The results also make several theoretical contributions on the study of media trust. First, the notion of political parallelism within the Mediterranean model of media implies close links between the media system and the political system. However, our data show that the politicization of different types of media is uneven, being more pronounced in the case of traditional media (television and print media in particular) which are more easily controlled by political actors, compared to alternative media (Internet and online social networks). Second, the results of this study confirm the virtuous circle theory: consumption of content provided by certain channels is associated with greater trust in those channels and conversely, more trust generates more consumption. Third, contrary to studies on the relationship between skepticism towards traditional media and higher consumption of online media, in

Romania citizens who do not trust traditional media do not necessarily use alternative media more frequently.

Thus, consumption of one type of media does not tend to significantly erode Romanians' trust in other types of media. These results contradict findings from studies showing that in the US, those who listen to political radio broadcasts tend to have less trust in mainstream news channels. Our results suggest that not exposure to certain media itself erodes trust in other media. Rather, negative messages conveyed by some media against others tend to undermine public trust. In Romania, declining trust in media is more a symptom of a broader decline in institutional trust and not necessarily a consequence of increased consumption of alternative media.

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