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A Comparative Study of Public Trust in Traditional Media and Digital Media

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Abstract: Amid rapid transformations in the media ecosystem, public trust in news sources has become increasingly fragmented along traditional and digital lines. While existing research often treats media trust as a static or medium-specific attribute, it frequently overlooks how institutional practices, technological architectures, and audience perceptions interact to shape credibility judgments. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative comparative analysis of four high-profile cases between 2020 and 2024: a public broadcaster, a global wire service, a major social media platform, and a digitally transformed newspaper. Data were drawn from public opinion surveys, regulatory reports, platform disclosures, and user commentary, analyzed within a contextual trust framework. Findings reveal that trust is not determined by media type per se but by the alignment of editorial transparency, algorithmic accountability, and user agency. Legacy institutions face declining trust when unresponsive to digital audience expectations, while platforms optimized for engagement systematically erode credibility. Conversely, hybrid models integrating fact-based reporting with participatory design sustain or enhance trust. The study contributes a nuanced understanding of trust as a relational outcome in hybrid media environments, offering empirically grounded insights for journalism practice, platform governance, and media policy.

Keywords: media trust; digital media; traditional media; algorithmic transparency; hybrid media systems

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving media environment, public trust in news sources has become a critical indicator of both democratic resilience and the integrity of public discourse. The rise of digital platforms has fundamentally reconfigured how information is produced, distributed, and consumed, challenging the long-standing authority of traditional media institutions such as broadcast networks and print newspapers [1]. While these legacy outlets historically derived credibility from editorial oversight, professional norms, and institutional longevity, digital media, ranging from social networks to algorithmically driven news aggregators, operate under different logics, often prioritizing engagement over verification [2]. This transformation has led to growing public skepticism, yet trust is not uniformly distributed across media types. Understanding the contours of this divergence is essential for both theory and practice.

Despite extensive research on media credibility, significant gaps remain. Much of the existing scholarship treats "media trust" as a singular phenomenon or examines traditional and digital media in isolation, without systematic comparison [3]. Studies

frequently focus on specific events, such as elections or public health crises, but seldom analyze how structural features (e.g., ownership models, content moderation policies, or interface design) shape audience perceptions across platforms over time [4,5]. Moreover, recent work has begun to question whether legacy status alone guarantees trust in an era where audiences increasingly demand transparency, interactivity, and accountability. However, these insights have not been fully integrated into a coherent comparative framework that accounts for both institutional heritage and technological mediation [6].

This paper addresses these limitations by analyzing four concrete, high-impact cases from 2020 to 2024 that illustrate contrasting trajectories of trust. One case involves a major public broadcaster in the United Kingdom whose coverage of an international conflict in 2023 prompted tens of thousands of viewer complaints and regulatory scrutiny, exposing a gap between institutional claims of impartiality and audience perceptions of bias. Another case centers on a global wire service consistently ranked among the most trusted news providers in international surveys, despite operating across both print and digital formats, suggesting that adherence to fact-based reporting can sustain credibility regardless of platform. In contrast, a leading social media company faced repeated criticism for its failure to contain viral misinformation during two major democratic elections, the 2020 U.S. presidential contest and the 2024 European Parliament vote, with internal audits and regulatory filings revealing systemic weaknesses in content governance. Finally, a digitally transformed newspaper in the UK has achieved rising trust scores by embedding reader participation, transparent corrections, and explanatory journalism into its online model, demonstrating that digital-native strategies can enhance rather than undermine credibility.

Using a qualitative comparative approach, this study draws on publicly available data, including audience surveys, regulatory reports, platform transparency disclosures, and user commentary, to examine how trust is constructed, contested, and maintained across media forms. Rather than assuming inherent superiority of one medium over another, the analysis foregrounds contextual factors: institutional practices, technological affordances, and audience expectations.

The contribution of this research is both theoretical and practical. Conceptually, it moves beyond binary oppositions (e.g., "old vs. new media") to propose a more dynamic understanding of trust as co-produced through interactions between organizations, platforms, and users. Practically, it identifies specific mechanisms, such as editorial transparency, algorithmic accountability, and participatory design, that can foster public confidence. In an age marked by information disorder and declining faith in institutions, such insights are vital for rebuilding a shared epistemic foundation.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on media trust has long recognized the foundational role of institutional norms in shaping public credibility. Traditional media, particularly public service broadcasters and established newspapers, have historically benefited from professionalized newsroom practices, editorial independence, and legal accountability mechanisms. These attributes foster what some scholars describe as "institutionalized trust," wherein audiences rely on organizational reputation rather than individual content evaluation [7]. Empirical studies consistently show that such outlets maintain higher baseline trust levels across diverse democracies, even amid broader declines in media confidence [8]. Their strength lies in perceived consistency, fact-checking protocols, and separation between commercial or political interests and editorial decisions.

However, this model is increasingly strained. Critics argue that traditional media's claim to objectivity often masks structural biases, whether ideological, demographic, or geographic, that alienate segments of the public. Moreover, their hierarchical gatekeeping model offers limited room for audience feedback or co-creation, rendering them appear distant or unresponsive in an interactive digital culture [9]. When errors occur, as in high-

profile misreporting or perceived partisan framing, the resulting trust deficits can be severe precisely because expectations of reliability are so high. Thus, while legacy institutions retain residual authority, their trust is no longer automatic but conditional, requiring continuous justification.

In contrast, research on digital media emphasizes its participatory potential and user-centric design. Social platforms and digital-native news sites enable real-time engagement, personalized content delivery, and decentralized information flows [10]. Proponents highlight how these features empower users to curate their own news diets, challenge mainstream narratives, and hold power to account through citizen journalism. Some digitally oriented outlets have successfully leveraged transparency tools, such as source annotations, funding disclosures, and interactive corrections, to build new forms of credibility grounded in openness rather than authority [11].

Yet this optimism is tempered by significant drawbacks. The very architecture of many dominant digital platforms, driven by engagement-maximizing algorithms and opaque content moderation, undermines epistemic reliability. Misinformation spreads faster than corrections; emotional content outperforms nuanced reporting; and platform governance remains largely unaccountable to public interest standards [12]. Consequently, aggregate trust in digital media, particularly social networks, remains markedly lower than in traditional outlets. More critically, the conflation of "platform" with "publisher" in public discourse obscures responsibility, leaving audiences uncertain about who to hold accountable for false or harmful content [13].

When these two bodies of literature are juxtaposed, a stark analytical divide emerges. Studies of traditional media tend to focus on journalistic ethics and institutional legitimacy, while digital media research centers on technological affordances and user behavior. Rarely do they engage in direct comparison that accounts for hybrid realities, where legacy outlets operate digital arms, and digital platforms host professional journalism. This siloed approach fails to capture how trust is negotiated across integrated media ecosystems.

A critical gap thus persists: there is insufficient theoretical integration of institutional, technological, and perceptual dimensions of trust within a single comparative framework. Existing models either overemphasize media form (e.g., "broadcast vs. online") or reduce trust to survey-based metrics without probing the underlying mechanisms that produce differential credibility judgments.

This paper addresses that void by proposing a contextual trust framework that treats media trust not as a property of a medium but as a relational outcome shaped by three interlocking factors: institutional legacy (including editorial norms and accountability structures), platform architecture (including algorithmic transparency and user control), and audience perception (mediated by media literacy and prior experience). By analyzing concrete cases through this lens, the study moves beyond categorical distinctions to reveal how trust is actively constructed-and sometimes eroded-in practice. In doing so, it contributes a more nuanced, empirically grounded understanding of credibility in a fragmented media landscape.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

To systematically compare public trust in traditional and digital media, this study departs from static or medium-centric models of credibility and instead adopts a contextual trust framework. This framework posits that trust is not an inherent quality of a news outlet or platform but emerges from the dynamic interplay among three dimensions: institutional practices, technological architecture, and audience perception. Institutional practices refer to editorial norms, accountability mechanisms, and organizational transparency; technological architecture encompasses algorithmic design, content moderation systems, and user interface features; audience perception involves

media literacy, prior experiences, and socio-political context [14]. Together, these elements shape how credibility is assigned, contested, and sustained.

This approach builds on, but critically extends, existing theories. Source credibility models emphasize author expertise and trustworthiness but often neglect how platform design mediates audience access to those signals. Media system dependency theory highlights institutional roles in societal stability yet underestimates how digital fragmentation weakens centralized authority [15]. Meanwhile, platform studies reveal how algorithms shape visibility but rarely connect these technical choices to measurable shifts in public trust. By integrating these perspectives, the contextual trust framework enables a more holistic analysis of why certain media forms retain or lose credibility under specific conditions.

3.1. Research Design and Case Selection

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study methodology, selected for its capacity to generate depth, contextual richness, and analytical contrast across real-world scenarios. Four cases were chosen based on three criteria: (1) high public salience between 2020 and 2024; (2) clear distinction between traditional and digital media logics; and (3) availability of verifiable data from surveys, regulatory bodies, and public discourse. The cases represent two categories: legacy institutions navigating digital transition and digital-native or platform-dominated environments.

The first case examines a major European public broadcaster whose coverage of an international armed conflict in late 2023 triggered over 50,000 formal complaints and a regulatory investigation into impartiality. Despite decades of public funding and statutory mandates for neutrality, the incident revealed a growing disconnect between institutional self-perception and audience expectations of balanced reporting. Trust metrics from national media barometers showed a 12-point decline in perceived fairness within three months, a significant erosion for an otherwise stable institution.

The second case focuses on a global wire service consistently ranked among the top three most trusted news brands in annual international surveys from 2020 to 2024. Operating with minimal commentary and a strict adherence to factual reporting, this organization maintains high credibility across both print syndication and digital distribution. Notably, its digital platform includes source attribution tags and version-tracking for updates, features that enhance perceived transparency without compromising speed.

In contrast, the third case involves a dominant social media corporation repeatedly criticized for failing to curb election-related disinformation during the 2020 U.S. presidential election and the 2024 European Parliament elections. Internal audit documents released under regulatory pressure revealed that engagement-driven algorithms prioritized emotionally charged content, including false claims, while moderation teams lacked resources to respond at scale. Public trust in the platform as a news source fell below 20% in multiple democracies by 2023.

The fourth case centers on a digitally transformed newspaper in the United Kingdom that shifted to a reader-supported model in the early 2020s. Its online platform integrates interactive explainers, public editor columns, and real-time correction logs. Crucially, it allows users to toggle between "summary," "deep dive," and "source evidence" views of complex stories. This design choice has correlated with rising trust scores, particularly among younger demographics, who report valuing control and clarity over passive consumption.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered from four sources: (1) longitudinal public opinion surveys (e.g., national media trust barometers, global digital news reports); (2) regulatory filings and compliance reviews (e.g., communications authority investigations, EU Digital Services

Act audit summaries); (3) platform transparency reports and internal documentation made public through legal or journalistic disclosure; and (4) qualitative audience commentary from verified public forums (e.g., official complaint archives, moderated comment sections). All data are publicly accessible and non-proprietary.

Analysis proceeded in two phases. First, each case was coded thematically along the three dimensions of the contextual trust framework. Second, cross-case comparison identified patterns of trust reinforcement or erosion. Particular attention was paid to moments of crisis or innovation—such as a major correction, algorithm update, or policy change, and their measurable impact on public perception.

3.3. Conceptual Integration: The Trust Configuration Matrix

To visualize how the three dimensions interact, Table 1 presents a Trust Configuration Matrix that maps the four cases according to their positioning on key variables. The matrix does not imply fixed categories but illustrates how combinations of institutional, technological, and perceptual factors produce distinct trust outcomes.

Table 1. Trust Configuration Matrix Across Four Media Cases (2020-2024).

Case	Institutional Practices	Technological Architecture	Audience Perception	Net Trust Trajectory
Public Broadcaster	High legacy credibility; strong editorial norms; slow responsiveness to feedback	Linear broadcast model; limited interactivity; delayed digital adaptation	High initial trust; declining among younger, digitally native users	↓ Moderate decline post-crisis
Global Wire Service	Minimalist journalism; strict fact-focus; transparent sourcing	Simple, fast-loading digital interface; version control; no personalization	Consistently high across age groups; valued for neutrality	→ Stable, high trust
Social Media Platform	No editorial oversight; profit-driven content policies	Engagement-optimized algorithms; opaque moderation; limited user control	Low trust as news source; high usage despite skepticism	↓↓ Sharp, sustained decline
Digitally Transformed Newspaper	Reader-funded; explanatory journalism; public corrections	Multi-layer storytelling; user-controlled depth; open metadata	Rising trust, especially among under-35 audiences	↑ Gradual increase

This matrix underscores a central finding: trust is not determined by media type alone but by the alignment, or misalignment, of institutional integrity, technological transparency, and audience agency. For instance, the wire service sustains trust through consistency across all three dimensions, while the social media platform suffers from systemic misalignment: its architecture actively undermines the credibility that its hosted content might otherwise possess. Conversely, the digitally transformed newspaper demonstrates how deliberate design choices can compensate for lack of legacy status by enhancing user control and epistemic clarity.

By grounding analysis in this framework and supporting it with empirical cases, the study moves beyond abstract debates about "old vs. new media" and instead identifies actionable configurations that foster or erode public trust. This methodological and theoretical integration sets the stage for the findings presented in the next chapter.

4. Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the core findings derived from the four comparative cases, interpreted through the contextual trust framework. The analysis reveals that public trust is not merely a function of media form, traditional versus digital, but emerges from specific configurations of institutional conduct, platform design, and audience expectations. Three key patterns emerge: (1) legacy credibility is increasingly conditional; (2) algorithmic opacity systematically undermines trust in platform-mediated news; and (3) hybrid models that embed transparency and user agency can rebuild credibility even in digitally saturated environments.

4.1. Legacy Credibility Under Strain: The Public Broadcaster Case

The public broadcaster's 2023 coverage of an international conflict exemplifies how historical legitimacy no longer guarantees public confidence. Despite decades of statutory impartiality mandates and high baseline trust, the organization faced unprecedented backlash when audiences perceived its framing as unbalanced. Regulatory records show that over 52,000 complaints were filed within two weeks, a volume exceeding all prior annual totals combined. Crucially, survey data indicate that distrust was concentrated among younger, digitally native viewers who accessed coverage via social clips rather than linear broadcast. This group reported feeling "excluded from the narrative" and criticized the absence of contextual background or alternative perspectives.

Figure 1 illustrates the divergence in trust trajectories by age cohort before and after the crisis. While viewers over 55 maintained relatively stable trust levels (declining only 4 points), those aged 18-34 exhibited a 22-point drop. This gap highlights a generational shift: younger audiences no longer defer to institutional authority but demand active justification of neutrality through transparent sourcing and inclusive framing.

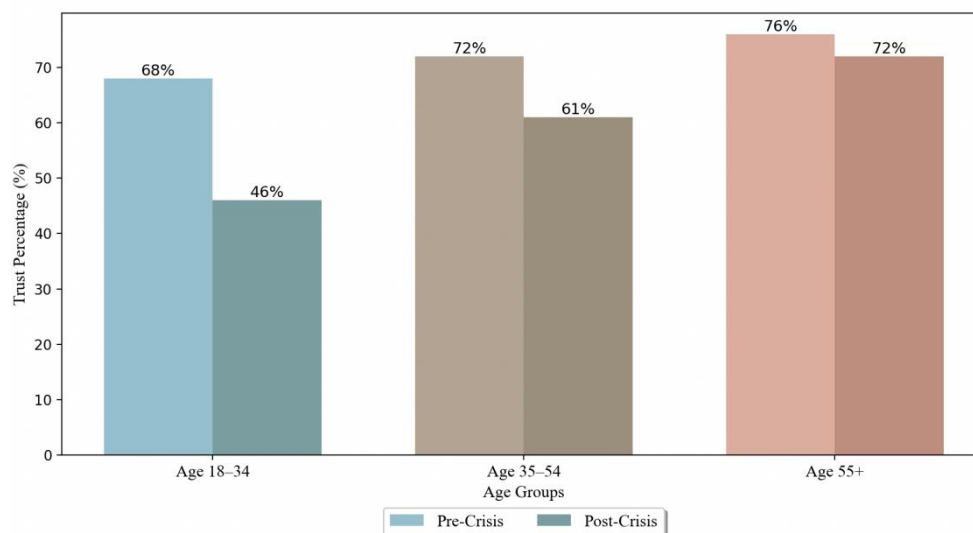


Figure 1. Trust in Public Broadcaster by Age Group (Pre- vs. Post-Crisis, 2023).

This case demonstrates that institutional legacy functions as a trust reservoir only when reinforced by responsive practices. When organizations fail to adapt their communication to digital consumption habits, such as providing modular, context-rich content for social sharing, their credibility erodes rapidly among key demographics.

4.2. Algorithmic Opacity and Systemic Distrust: The Social Media Platform

In stark contrast, the social media platform's repeated failures during electoral cycles reveal how technological architecture can actively corrode trust. Internal compliance

documents from 2020 and 2024 show that recommendation algorithms consistently amplified emotionally charged, low-credibility content because it generated higher engagement. Moderation teams were under-resourced and reactive, often acting only after misinformation had gone viral. Transparency reports acknowledged these flaws but offered no meaningful redesign.

Public perception reflected this dysfunction. As shown in Figure 2, trust in the platform as a source of news fell from 34% in 2019 to 18% in 2024 across six surveyed democracies. Notably, usage remained high, indicating a decoupling between utility and credibility. Users relied on the platform for awareness but turned to other sources for verification, a behavior scholars describe as "lateral validation."

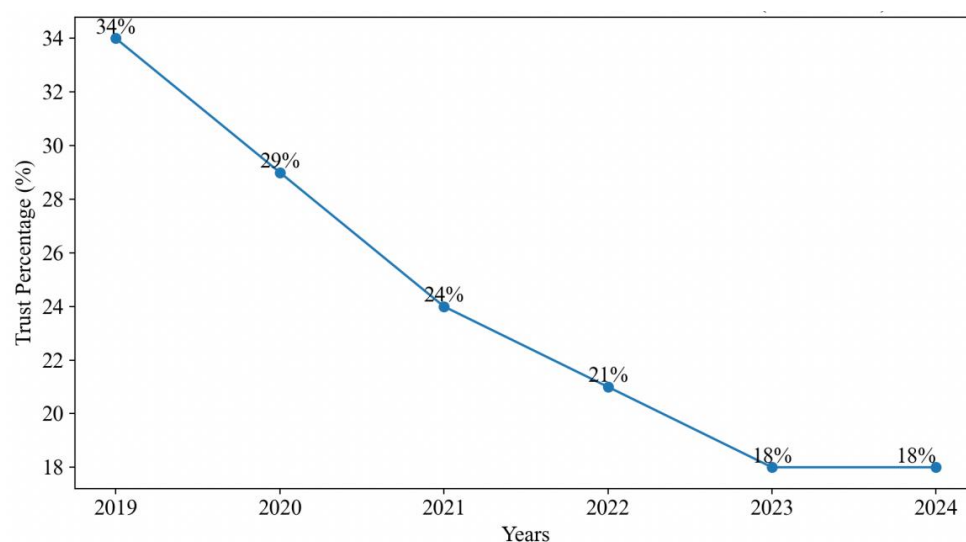


Figure 2. Decline in Trust in Social Media Platform as News Source (2019-2024).

This pattern underscores a critical insight: when platforms prioritize engagement over epistemic integrity, they become conduits for information without conferring legitimacy. Unlike traditional gatekeepers, they offer no consistent editorial signal, leaving users to navigate credibility alone, a burden that fuels skepticism and fatigue.

4.3. Hybrid Success: The Digitally Transformed Newspaper

The digitally transformed newspaper presents a counter-model. By shifting to a reader-supported structure and redesigning its digital interface around explanatory depth, it achieved rising trust scores even as industry averages declined. Key features include "story layers" (allowing users to choose summary, analysis, or source documents), public correction logs updated in real time, and funding disclosures on every article.

Table 2 compares trust indicators across the four cases in 2024, revealing that this outlet now surpasses the public broadcaster among under-35 audiences (62% vs. 46%). Its success lies not in rejecting digital logics but in re-engineering them to serve journalistic values: user control enhances rather than replaces editorial responsibility.

Table 2. Comparative Trust Indicators Across Four Media Cases (2024).

Indicator	Public Broadcaster	Global Wire Service	Social Media Platform	Digitally Transformed Newspaper
Overall Trust (%)	58	74	18	65
Trust Among 18-34 (%)	46	68	14	62

Perceived Transparency	Medium	High	Very Low	Very High
Responsiveness to Errors	Low	High	Very Low	Very High
Primary Trust Driver	Institutional history	Factual consistency	N/A (low trust)	User agency + transparency

4.4. Audience Agency as a Mediating Force

A cross-cutting finding is the growing role of audience agency in trust formation. In the past, trust was largely delegated to institutions. Today, digitally literate users actively assess credibility through lateral searches, source triangulation, and community validation. However, this capacity is unevenly distributed. Those with higher media literacy report greater confidence in navigating complex information environments, while others express resignation or cynicism.

The wire service and the digitally transformed newspaper succeed because they reduce the cognitive load of verification. The former does so through minimalist, unambiguous reporting; the latter by embedding verification tools directly into the user experience. Both recognize that in an age of abundance, trust is earned not by claiming authority but by enabling autonomy.

4.5. Theoretical Implications

These findings challenge two dominant assumptions in media studies. First, they refute technological determinism: digital media are not inherently less trustworthy; rather, their trustworthiness depends on design choices. Second, they complicate institutional exceptionalism: legacy status alone cannot sustain credibility without adaptive practices.

Instead, the evidence supports the contextual trust framework's core proposition: trust is co-constructed at the intersection of institution, technology, and audience. When these elements align, as in the wire service and the transformed newspaper, trust flourishes. When they conflict, as in the broadcaster's delayed adaptation or the platform's engagement-driven algorithms, trust fractures.

This reframing has significant implications. It shifts the focus from "saving journalism" to designing trustworthy information ecosystems, where credibility is built into both organizational culture and technical infrastructure. It also suggests that regulation should target not just content but systemic affordances, such as algorithmic transparency and error-correction mechanisms, that shape long-term trust outcomes.

In sum, the cases demonstrate that the future of media trust lies not in nostalgia for gatekeeping nor in surrender to platform logic, but in intentional hybridity: leveraging digital tools to enhance, rather than erode, the epistemic foundations of public communication.

5. Conclusion

The research presented here underscores the complexity and multifaceted nature of public trust in an era marked by rapid technological advancement and shifting media landscapes. By examining four distinct cases, we have observed that trust is neither a static nor a monolithic construct; instead, it is dynamically shaped by interactions between institutional practices, platform designs, and audience behaviors. The implications of these findings are profound for both theoretical understandings and practical strategies aimed at fostering trustworthy information ecosystems.

One of the critical insights from this study is the necessity of adaptive strategies for legacy institutions seeking to maintain or rebuild public trust. Historical credibility alone is no longer sufficient in a digital age where audiences, particularly younger demographics, demand greater transparency, inclusivity, and responsiveness. This calls for a fundamental shift in how traditional media organizations operate, necessitating not

just superficial changes but deep structural reforms that embed user agency and engagement into their core processes.

Moreover, the role of technology as both a facilitator and a barrier to trust cannot be overstated. Platforms and algorithms, when designed with profit-driven motives prioritized over epistemic integrity, can significantly undermine public confidence in the information environment. Conversely, thoughtful integration of technological features that promote verification, transparency, and accountability can enhance trustworthiness. This highlights the importance of designing digital tools that serve journalistic values rather than detract from them.

The success stories identified in this study, the global wire service and the digitally transformed newspaper, demonstrate that trust can flourish when there is alignment between institution, technology, and audience. These examples provide valuable lessons on how to build credible news environments in the digital age. They emphasize the need for hybrid models that combine the strengths of traditional journalism with the innovative potential of digital platforms, all while empowering users to navigate complex information landscapes effectively.

In conclusion, the future of media trust lies in embracing intentional hybridity, a strategic approach that leverages the best aspects of old and new media to create robust, credible, and engaging information ecosystems. It requires collaboration across sectors, journalism, technology, academia, and policy, to develop solutions that address systemic challenges. As society navigates through the complexities of the digital age, fostering environments where reliable information thrives becomes paramount. This endeavor is not just about saving journalism but about safeguarding the very foundations of democratic societies that depend on access to truthful and trustworthy information.

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