

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Explaining Journalists' Trust in Public Institutions Across 20 Countries: Media Freedom, Corruption, and Ownership Matter Most

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*Building on the assumption that journalists' attitudes toward public institutions can contribute to a decline in public trust, this article sets out to identify the driving forces behind journalists' confidence in public institutions. Based on interviews with 2000 journalists from 20 countries, variation in trust is modeled across the individual level of journalists, the organizational level of news media, and the societal level of countries. Our findings suggest that the principal determinants of journalists' trust emanate from a country's political performance, from state ownership in the media, and from the extent to which people tend to trust each other. Journalism culture and power distance, however, seem to have relatively little weight in the calculus of journalists' institutional trust.*

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Political scientists and communication researchers have long noted alarming signs of a continuing decline of trust in public institutions throughout the Western world (Mair, 2006; Moy, Pfau, & Kahlor, 1999; Norris, 1999; Torcal & Montero, 2006). Communication scholarship commonly relates the erosion of trust to unfavorable media coverage of public institutions and political actors. A persistent pattern of negativity in the news is held responsible for a "spiral of cynicism" (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), a decrease in political participation and engagement (Bennett, 2008; Patterson, 1994), as well as for cynicism and negative evaluations of political institutions (Moy & Pfau, 2000; Rozell, 1996). Such trends of negative coverage have been found in the United States and throughout Western Europe (Brandenberg, 2005; Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2012; Lengauer & Vorhofer, 2010; Kepplinger, 1998; Patterson, 1994; Salgado, 2008).

Studies on public trust and the role of the news media commonly focus on media content and effects of exposure to negative news. Journalists have only recently moved into the focus of attention (Brants, de Vreese, Möller, & van Praag, 2010; van Dalen,

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Albæk, & de Vreese, 2011). This omission must come as a surprise: Although Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue that journalists' survey responses may not fully reflect differences in their practices, there is considerable evidence for a close connection between journalists' attitudes and the way they do their work (Kepplinger, Brosius, & Staab, 1991; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Starck & Soloski, 1977). This article therefore rests on two critical causal assumptions: that journalists' attitudes toward public institutions influence the content they produce, and that media coverage on public institutions shapes public trust. If these assumptions hold true, we believe that it is critical to shift our attention to journalists as the producers of news. This is especially relevant as recent studies show that the relationship between politicians and journalists, once seen as symbiotic, has now turned into one of mutual mistrust (Berganza, van Dalen, & Chaparro, 2010; Brants et al., 2010; van Aelst et al., 2008).

While sociologists and political scientists have devoted much attention to the origins of public trust, we know fairly little about the factors that drive journalists' trust levels. In a comparative study of journalists in Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, and Spain, journalists' levels of cynicism were found to be related to factors emanating from the interaction between reporters and politicians (political pressure, role of spokespersons, and politicians' "media salacity"), as well as from the systemic context within which the media operate (van Dalen et al., 2011). These findings already indicate that the determinants of journalists' trust stem from multiple levels: from the individual level of journalists, the organizational level of news media, and the societal level of media systems. This has important consequences for the theoretical approach and our analytical strategy. For one, we need to conceptualize potential determinants of journalists' institutional trust in terms of a hierarchy of influences (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Consequently, it requires the multilevel nature of news production to be factored into our analytic models. Journalists are nested within news organizations, and news media operate within countries. By employing multilevel modeling as an analytical technique, this article is part of a growing empirical literature in the field that not only acknowledges the multilevel structure of communication phenomena, but also capitalizes on it (Hwang & Southwell, 2009; Park, Eveland, & Cudeck, 2008; Slater, Hayes, Reineke, Long, & Bettinghaus, 2009; Southwell, 2005). Ignoring the multilevel nature of influences can have serious inferential consequences, most notably in the form of deflated standard errors and, by implication, dubious tests of significance (Hox, 2002; Kreft & de Leeuw, 1998; Southwell, 2005).

The general research question that motivated this article therefore is: *What are the main determinants of journalists' institutional trust?* This question has been explored within a larger cross-national survey project in which researchers from 20 countries have collected data about 2000 journalists working in 394 news organizations.

### **Sources of institutional trust: Performance, interpersonal trust, media ownership, and journalistic culture**

Studies of institutional trust date back to David Easton's (1965) groundbreaking work on political support and started to thrive after Robert D. Putnam's

(1993) book "Making Democracy Work." Theorists generally emphasize that trust is very much oriented toward the future: To trust means to hold some expectations about how another person (or institution) will perform on some future occasion (Misztal, 1996). Institutional trust by definition refers to the extent to which people are confident that public institutions will perform in a satisfactory manner (Hudson, 2006). Since outcomes or intentions are not fully known to the public, trust involves confidence in institutions under conditions of risk (Lühiste, 2006).

There are many reasons why people—and journalists for that matter—trust or distrust in public institutions. A growing body of research has theorized and empirically investigated a fairly large number of factors that can impact on public trust levels. On the basis of an extensive literature review, we can identify four, partly rivaling explanations of journalists' trust in public institutions: performance, interpersonal trust, media ownership, and journalistic culture.

### **Performance**

Institutional theories of the origins of trust argue that public trust is politically endogenous; it is seen as a consequence, not a cause, of institutional performance (Mishler & Rose, 2001). In this performance-based perspective, trust in institutions is rationally grounded: The more the people believe that public institutions function in a satisfactory manner, the higher their trust in these institutions will be (Lühiste, 2006). The institutional approach holds that trust in public institutions is primarily influenced by political and economic performance, as well as people's satisfaction thereof (Campbell, 2004; Grosskopf, 2008; McAllister, 1999; Miller & Listhaug, 1999).

In this discourse, economic performance is considered a crucial source of trust, as citizens expect their government to "deliver the goods" (Grosskopf, 2008, p. 8). McAllister (1999) emphasizes that collective judgments have more weight in the popular economic calculus than individual attitudes. He found satisfaction with a country's economic performance to be the strongest and most consistent predictor of institutional trust. General political performance is believed to be another determinant of public trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Among the aspects of political performance that were found to be most relevant to public trust are corruption and the general quality of democracy (Grosskopf, 2008; Kunioka & Woller, 1999; Slomczynski & Janicka, 2009). We suggest adding media freedom to this list, as journalists' perceptions of public institutions may be shaped by the degree of autonomy these institutions grant to the news media. Mishler and Rose (2001) further draw a distinction between macroinstitutional and microinstitutional theories. The former approach emphasizes the aggregate performance of institutions, while the latter stresses individual evaluations of institutional performance that can vary across members of a society based on differences in socialization and social background, political, and economic experiences, or individual perceptions and evaluations.

### **Interpersonal trust**

Cultural theories hypothesize that institutional trust is exogenous and an extension of interpersonal trust. As such, it is learned early in life and, much later, projected onto public institutions (Hudson, 2006; Mishler & Rose, 2001). The more the people in a society trust each other the more they trust in public institutions (Lühiste, 2006). Of central importance to the culturalist perspective is therefore the link between interpersonal trust and institutional trust (Campbell, 2004). In a microcultural (or psychological) perspective, interpersonal trust can be seen as a major determinant of public trust at the individual level, while a macrocultural perspective views interpersonal trust as a contextual factor that affects individuals' public trust across levels of analysis.

Evidence from sociological and political science research clearly speaks in favor of an institutional explanation of trust in public institutions (Campbell, 2004; Mishler & Rose, 2001). The explanatory power of the cultural approach, on the other hand, seems to be relatively weak (Lühiste, 2006; Newton, 2006). Several studies even cast serious doubt on the linkage between interpersonal and institutional trust (Campbell, 2004; Gronke & Cook, 2007; Mishler & Rose, 2001). Newton (2006, p. 98) therefore argues that "[s]ocial trust is rooted in social conditions of everyday life, while political confidence is mainly a function of how well the political system is performing."

Journalists constitute a group of people that has privileged access to the media. We have reason to expect journalists' trust levels to be influenced by their country's political and economic performance. Most journalists frequently encounter public institutions as part of their work, and they are usually the first to become aware of institutional deficiencies and political-administrative misconduct. Furthermore, if the cultural explanation holds true, we predict journalists to be more trustful of public institutions when they are socialized in contexts where people tend to trust each other. Since the data used for this analysis do not carry information about journalists' interpersonal trust and evaluations of performance, we can only look at macroinstitutional and macrocultural explanation. This brings us to our first set of hypotheses:

**H1a:** Journalists are more trusting in societies that perform better in terms of political outcomes.

**H1b:** Journalists are more trusting in societies that perform better in terms of economic outcomes.

**H2:** Journalists are more trusting in societies with higher interpersonal trust.

### **Media ownership**

Journalists do not operate in a vacuum but within highly organized contexts, most notably the newsroom, and media organization. Especially ownership has long been established as a major, if not the most important factor that shapes news production at the organizational level (Donohue, Olien, & Tichenor, 1985; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2007; Zhu, Weaver, Lo, Chen, & Wu, 1997). Most relevant in this

respect is the distinction between three general types of ownership: private, public, and state ownership. In state-owned media organizations, governments tend to have a stronger grip on the editorial management. We expect journalists working for these news organizations to be less critical of the government and, hence, more trusting of public institutions. Journalists who work in privately owned media, on the other hand, may have less trust because in these media, market-driven, sensational, and confrontational news coverage is particularly thriving as a means to attract audiences (McManus, 1994).

### **Journalism culture**

A fourth potential explanation emanates from within the culture of journalism. We argue that a major driving force in this regard is power distance, here understood in terms of a journalist's or, on the aggregate level, journalism's position toward loci of power in society (Hanitzsch, 2007). High power distance is linked to a professional ideology of journalists acting as 'watchdogs' and the Fourth Estate of democracy (Deuze, 2005; Gans, 1979), or even as adversaries of the government and politicians (Weaver et al., 2007). As relentless crossexaminers, watchdog journalists provide an independent and radical critique of society and its institutions, and they are skeptical of, or even hostile to, assertions made by those who are in power (Fuller, 1996; McQuail, 2000). This idea has traveled well beyond the United States and found empirical manifestation in Europe (Preston & Metykova, 2009) and South America (Waisbord, 2000).

Watchdog and adversarial journalism in a given society exhibits a relatively large distance between journalists and power centres (e.g. government, political parties). High power distance is especially likely to evolve in societies with relatively low political parallelism, that is, the extent to which media systems reflect the major political cleavages in society (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Power distance can influence journalists' public trust on two levels: On the individual level, we expect journalists who exhibit greater power distance to be less trustful of public institutions. At the same time, however, we also assume journalists to have less institutional trust in professional cultures that generally tend to be more adversarial and critical. This leads us to our second set of hypotheses:

**H3a:** Journalists are more trusting when they work in state-owned media.

**H3b:** Journalists are less trusting when they work in private media.

**H4a:** Journalists are more trusting when they exhibit smaller power distance.

**H4b:** Journalists are more trusting in societies with smaller power distance.

## **Methodology**

### **Selection of countries, samples, and data collection**

The analysis reported in this article is based on 2000 interviews with working journalists in 20 countries.<sup>1</sup> The surveyed countries include Australia, Austria, Brazil,

**Table 1** Sampling Scheme

Type of Medium	Sublevel	National	Local	Total
Daily newspaper	Quality: citizen-oriented	2 (10)	3 (15)	5 (25)
	Popular: consumer-oriented	1 (5)	1 (5)	2 (10)
General interest weekly (magazine/newspaper)	Quality: citizen-oriented	1 (5)	–	1 (5)
	Popular: consumer-oriented	1 (5)	–	1 (5)
News agency		1 (5)	–	1 (5)
Television	State-owned/public	1 (5)	1 (5)	2 (10)
	Private	3 (15)	1 (5)	4 (20)
Radio	State-owned/public	1 (5)	1 (5)	2 (10)
	Private	1 (5)	1 (5)	2 (10)
Total		12 (60)	8 (40)	20 (100)

*Note:* Cell entries contain following information: number of news organizations (number of journalists).

Bulgaria, Chile, China, Egypt, Germany, Greece, Indonesia, Israel, Mexico, Pakistan, Romania, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, Uganda, and the United States. The selection of countries followed the configurative logic of a “most different systems design” (Przeworski & Teune, 1970) and therefore encompassed a broad range of culturally different national contexts. The final choice of countries cuts across all six inhabited continents, democratic, and authoritarian contexts, as well as developed and developing countries.

Within the 20 countries, sampling was carried out in two steps. We first selected 20 news organizations in every country following a common target sample (see Table 1). The choice of newsrooms was organized along clearly specified parameters: On the first level we distinguished between types of media, as well as between national and local/regional media. On a secondary level we stratified print media into quality (citizen-oriented) and popular (consumer-oriented) outlets,<sup>2</sup> and electronic media according to ownership into public, state-owned, or private channels. While the choice of popular print media was based on circulation, the quality outlets were selected according to their perceived agenda-setting power.<sup>3</sup> Online newsrooms were omitted from the study, as the degree of their institutionalization still varied considerably across countries. All national research teams invested a great deal of effort in order to match the overall sampling scheme and, at the same time, achieve a reasonable approximation to the diversity that exists within their countries.

Wherever possible, we selected five journalists in each newsroom. Since the total sample size in every country was 100 respondents, this study does not claim to portray a representative picture of news people in the 20 nations. Rather, the various country samples were “matched” in terms of their internal composition (see Table 1) to allow for meaningful cross-country comparison. To this end, Hofstede (2001), for instance, suggests minimal sample sizes of at least 20, preferably 50, respondents per country.

In order to capture the various domains of news work we selected respondents from the traditional "hard news" beats, as well as from other areas of coverage. Within news organizations, journalists were further stratified according to the extent of their editorial responsibility. Ideally, one journalist was selected from the top echelon of the editorial hierarchy (e.g. chief editors and their deputies), one from the middle level of operational decision-makers (e.g. senior editors and desk heads), and three from the lowest level of the newsroom hierarchy (e.g. reporters). The selection of journalists in each of these categories was based on random sampling.

The research tools used in this study were collaboratively designed in order to guarantee a maximum degree of intercultural validity. A fully standardized master questionnaire was first developed in English and then translated into the relevant languages. A relatively simple wording was used in order to reduce potential translation problems. Translation usually involved an iterative translation–backtranslation procedure or committees of bilingual experts in order to achieve the best possible approximation to the original master questionnaire.

The interviews were conducted between 2008 and 2011 by telephone and personal interviewing.<sup>4</sup> The enthusiasm of journalists and newsroom managers varied from case to case and country to country, sometimes substantially. From all 394 newsrooms that were chosen in the first place, 26 refused to cooperate and were subsequently replaced. On the level of the journalists, we had to substitute 246 interviewees from the altogether 2,000 journalists due to refusal.

### Measures

Our measure for institutional trust was designed along the lines of those used in international comparative surveys, most notably the *European Social Survey* and the *World Values Survey* (WVS). We presented to the respondents a list of public institutions that included the parliament, political parties, the government, the judiciary/the courts, the police, as well as politicians in general. The interviewed journalists were asked to indicate the extent to which they trust in these institutions on a 5-point rating scale. ("Please tell me on a scale of 1–5 how much you personally trust each of the following institutions.") The six indicators, each of which referring to a specific institution, were combined into an index measure of institutional trust that turned out to be highly reliable across the sample (Cronbach's alpha = .825).<sup>5</sup>

Information on political and economic performance was obtained from publicly available sources. For political performance we used three measures. The Economist Intelligence Unit's *Index of Democracy* is based on the ratings of 60 indicators grouped in five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture.<sup>6</sup> Media freedom is annually measured and published as part of Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press* series. The index is based on ratings of 23 questions divided into three broad areas: legal, political, and economic environments (Karlekar, 2003). Although not without limitations, the index is widely used in the field (Becker, Vlad, & Nusser, 2007). Since media freedom

was expected to highly correlate with the *Index of Democracy*, and in order to avoid multicollinearity problems, we used a dummy variant that was coded either 1 ("free") or 0 ("partly free" and "not free"). Data on corruption is based on the *Corruption Perceptions Index* compiled annually by Transparency International. The 2008 index used information from 13 sources originating from 11 independent institutions. The evaluation of the extent of corruption is done by country experts, nonresident, and residents, as well as resident business leaders.<sup>7</sup>

For economic performance we used two measures: Information on countries' gross domestic product (GDP, at purchasing power parity of countries per capita) was obtained from the International Monetary Fund. This information was also used to calculate the values for an additional variable, economic growth, indicated by the total growth in GDP of a country between 1998 and 2008 in percent of its 1998 value. Information about aggregate levels of interpersonal trust was obtained from the website of World Values Survey.<sup>8</sup>

Power distance was measured in the questionnaire on the basis of a 5-point rating scale. Journalists were asked to indicate the extent to which they consider themselves as watchdogs of the government. In addition, we entered professional experience, education, gender, and age as controls into our models, as several studies have found these variables to be associated with trust (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Hudson, 2006; Slomczynski & Janicka, 2009; van Dalen et al., 2011).

### Analysis

All hypotheses were tested by using multilevel modeling as analytical technique. A major advantage of this method over Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression is that analysts can allow intercepts and regression slopes to vary between groups (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992; Hox, 2002). Since there was only little variation in the regression slopes for individual-level predictors, we built a random-intercept model in which all coefficients were fixed. The intercepts, however, were allowed to vary, which means that the model takes into account that journalists' trust levels can be different across organizations and countries. As a first step, we estimated an empty or "null" model that did not carry any predictor. The empty model provided useful information about the variance components for the three levels of influence. In a second step, we built a random-intercept model that included all predictors. All models were estimated based on standardized data; hence, the resulting coefficients can be interpreted as standardized betas.

With only 20 countries investigated we realize that the number of highest-level units (i.e. countries) is relatively small, which can pose problems to multilevel modeling. The literature suggests that regression coefficients are most likely not affected. A simulation study of Maas and Hox (2005) indicated that even with a sample of 10 higher-level units, the estimates of the regression coefficients are sufficiently accurate. However, small samples can lead to biased estimates of higher-level standard errors (Hox, 2002; Kreft & de Leeuw, 1998). In order to reduce at least some of the potentially negative consequences of a small country sample, we



followed Snijders and Boskers (1999) recommendation to use Restricted Maximum Likelihood estimation throughout.

## Results

Table 2 presents a descriptive overview of country differences in journalists' institutional trust. As a very general pattern, trust tends to be higher in western countries than in nonwestern contexts, though there are several notable exceptions: Greece considerably deviates from the western cluster, while journalists in Chile, China, Egypt and Pakistan report somewhat higher trust levels than their colleagues working in other nonwestern contexts. Across all samples, Chinese journalists exhibit the highest trust in public institutions. The differences between countries were highly significant ( $F = 35.950$ ;  $df = 19$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

The empty model, which did not carry any predictor, indicated that variance components for the organizational and societal levels were all significant at  $p < .001$  (see Table 3). Based on the information provided for the variance components, we calculated Intraclass Correlation Coefficients (ICC) denominating the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that is 'accounted for' by each higher level. Results indicate that cross-national differences contribute 25.7% to the overall variance in journalists' institutional trust, while the organizational level accounts for 7.5%. The remaining 66.9% of the overall variation are contributed by the individual level of the journalists, which is not surprising given that the data originated from surveys.

In order to test our hypotheses and identify the key factors that explain variation in journalists' trust levels we estimated another model with all predictors included. As it turned out, H1a received mixed support. As expected, journalists are more trusting in countries that perform better in terms of media freedom and corruption. Contrary to our expectations, however, journalists have less trust in countries that score higher in terms of democracy. H1b had to be rejected as trust levels did not correspond to either indicator of economic performance. H2 was supported; journalists are indeed more trusting of public institutions in societies with higher interpersonal trust.

H3a was fully supported. Journalists working in state-owned media are indeed more trusting than their colleagues in private and public media. H3b, on the other hand, was rejected, as there was no significant relationship between trust levels and private ownership. The last two hypotheses were also not supported, although H4a only slightly missed the conventional threshold of significance. As expected, journalists do indeed seem to be more trusting when they exhibit smaller power distance ( $b = -.040$ ;  $p = .055$ ). At the aggregate level, however, the relationship appeared to be reversed. Journalists are in fact more trusting in societies with higher power distance ( $b = .109$ ;  $p = .062$ ). The model's explanatory power was fairly high, with 24.3% of variance explained at the individual level, 51.8% at the organizational level, and 86.6% at the societal level.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 2** Institutional Trust and Performance

	Institutional Trust Mean (SD)	Political Performance			Economic Performance		Interpersonal Trust % <sup>e</sup>	Power Distance Mean
		Freedom of the Press <sup>a</sup>	Index of Democracy <sup>b</sup>	Corruption Perceptions Index <sup>c</sup>	GDP <sup>d</sup>	GDP Growth %		
Australia	1.90 (.62)	21	9.09	8.70	38,224	52.2	46.1	3.07
Austria	2.06 (.50)	21	8.49	8.10	39,876	53.5	33.9	3.21
Brazil	1.33 (.56)	42	7.38	3.50	10,525	53.7	9.4	3.45
Bulgaria	1.21 (.89)	33	7.02	3.80	13,187	133.8	26.9	2.93
Chile	1.79 (.58)	30	7.89	6.90	14,599	61.5	12.6	2.80
China	2.34 (.66)	84	3.04	3.60	6,187	209.5	52.3	3.21
Egypt	1.90 (.91)	59	3.89	2.80	5,901	67.7	18.5	3.79
Germany	2.22 (.49)	16	8.82	7.90	35,728	48.9	36.8	3.33
Greece	1.56 (.67)	27	8.13	4.70	29,968	77.3	23.7	3.03
Indonesia	1.19 (.49)	54	6.34	2.60	3,985	79.0	42.5	3.20
Israel	1.71 (.62)	28	7.48	6.10	28,610	50.9	23.5	2.38
Mexico	1.03 (.80)	51	6.78	3.60	14,506	47.6	15.6	2.90
Pakistan	1.71 (.75)	66	4.46	2.50	2,690	62.9	30.8	3.11
Romania	1.13 (.80)	44	7.06	3.80	12,640	120.5	20.3	2.35
Russia	1.29 (.75)	78	4.48	2.10	16,040	154.0	26.2	2.56
Spain	1.91 (.59)	23	8.45	6.50	30,848	55.3	20.0	2.71
Switzerland	2.29 (.53)	13	9.15	9.00	41,471	43.5	53.9	2.77
Turkey	1.20 (.76)	51	5.69	4.60	13,108	75.0	4.9	3.35
Uganda	1.55 (.64)	53	5.03	2.60	1,158	86.9	7.6	3.43
USA	1.79 (.63)	17	8.22	7.30	46,901	47.2	39.3	3.39

<sup>a</sup>Freedom House, 2008, original scale retained: higher values indicate less press freedom.

<sup>b</sup>Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008.

<sup>c</sup>Transparency International, 2007.

<sup>d</sup>International Monetary Fund, PPP per capita, in int'l Dollars, 2008.

<sup>e</sup>World Values Survey, percentage of saying that others can be trusted, 1999–2007.

**Table 3** Predictors of Institutional Trust

	Empty Model			Random-intercept Model		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Intercept	-.004	.116	.971	-.397	.120	.007
Societal level						
Media freedom				.815	.217	.003
Democracy				-.317	.102	.010
Corruption				.362	.123	.013
GDP				-.165	.111	.162
GDP growth				.039	.053	.593
Interpersonal trust				.147	.058	.027
Power distance (aggregated)				.109	.053	.062
Organizational level						
State-ownership				.274	.075	.001
Private ownership				.039	.056	.485
Individual level						
Power distance				-.040	.020	.055
Professional experience				-.030	.049	.546
Age				.044	.049	.365
Education				-.002	.057	.977
Gender (female)				-.111	.042	.009
Random Effects						
		Var. comp.	<i>p</i>		Var. comp.	<i>p</i>
Societal level		.256	.000		.026	.000
Organizational level		.074	.000		.064	.000
Individual level		.666			.663	

## Discussion

The cross-national differences in journalists' trust levels reported in Table 2 point to a general pattern in which trust tends to be higher in western countries than in nonwestern contexts. This cross-national variation seems to reflect the differential performance of governments in terms of political and administrative outcomes. Journalists in western countries generally enjoy political freedom and civic liberties, and levels of corruption tend to be relatively low. However, this is only partly true for Greece where, according to data compiled by Transparency International, corruption continues to thrive despite fair progress in terms of democracy and media freedom. This might explain why Greek journalists reported relatively low levels of trust, which sets them clearly apart from their colleagues in the other western countries.

The pattern is somewhat mixed for the nonwestern contexts included in the study, even though trust levels tend to be lower in these countries. For one, this group

includes more or less developed nations, democratic societies and authoritarian regimes, as well as countries in transition (e.g. Bulgaria and Romania), each of which generating specific working environments for journalists. Under these circumstances, the various aspects of political and economic performance may have different weight in different countries. Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Romania, and – to some extent – Bulgaria and Turkey seem to perform quite reasonably in terms of quality of democracy, but they tend to be weak on measures of corruption and press freedom. We therefore believe that a differential view of the various aspects of political performance is in order. For journalists, corruption and limited media freedom are clearly more powerful and also more evident impediments to their work than the more abstract restrictions posed by a lack of democracy.

There are several notable exceptions within the group of nonwestern societies. While in most of these contexts, journalists exhibit substantially lower levels of public trust, this is not the case for Chile, China, and Egypt. Surprisingly, it is the Chinese journalists who exhibit the highest trust in public institutions across all investigated countries. While somewhat counterintuitive, this finding resonates with evidence from political science research. Yang and Tang (2010) demonstrated that the high levels of institutional trust in China are heavily based on evaluations of institutional performance. Indeed, results from the PEW Global Attitudes Project show that people in China are, of all the countries we investigated, most satisfied with their country's economic situation.<sup>10</sup> And – even more perplexingly – data from the World Values Survey indicate that they express an even higher satisfaction with the quality of “democracy” than people in Germany and the United States.

There are three explanations that may account for the relatively high trust levels of Chinese journalists: First, we believe that trust is tightly related to short-term changes in political and economic performance. People may be more trusting in public institutions when they become aware of positive changes, even if comparative indicators (such as GDP, Index of Democracy) still indicate a rather mediocre performance. Second, survey respondents have usually limited personal experience to make informed comparisons between the situation in their countries and other societies. And third, in an authoritarian context such as China, survey responses of journalists need to be treated with special care, as they might partly anticipate potentially negative consequences from providing honest answers to politically sensitive questions.

In Chile, too, journalists seem to have exceptionally high trust in public institutions compared with their colleagues working in other nonwestern contexts. We tend to think that these trust levels are mainly driven by the remarkable progress that Chile has made during the past years in terms of its political and economic performance, and also in fighting corruption. Another exception to the general pattern is Egypt, where journalists also reported somewhat higher trust levels despite their country's weak performance on nearly all indicators of political and economic performance. This finding certainly calls for further analysis.

Our multilevel analyses partly confirm this picture. We found substantial differences in journalists' trust levels across societies, while there was relatively little variation between news organizations within countries. Some of the principal driving forces behind the differential trust levels of journalists therefore seem to emanate from the societal level. And here it is political performance, and not economic performance, that profoundly shapes the extent to which journalists are trusting in public institutions.

Not all indicators of political performance point into the hypothesized direction, however. A media system free of government interference seems to be a major condition for journalists' high trust levels. This clearly makes sense, as imposing restrictions on the media's freedom and journalists' autonomy would most likely lead to a decline in institutional trust. Journalists may turn hostile toward the government and other public institutions when they become aware of political-administrative attempts to restrict their professional autonomy. Journalists are normally dealing with public institutions as part of their jobs, and they seem to be more suspicious of these institutions in societies where media freedom tends to be restricted.

Another major source of trust in public institutions is the extent to which a society successfully tackles public and private sector corruption. Journalists are more trusting of public institutions when their countries perform better in terms of corruption. This result is not at all surprising, and it might well be attributed to the often privileged position of journalists who are, by the very nature of their work, usually the first to become aware of political and administrative misconduct.

Although media freedom has been found to positively drive journalists' institutional trust, this is not necessarily true for the quality of democracy. In fact, the relationship is reversed; it suggests that journalists in more democratic contexts are less trusting than their counterparts in less democratic countries. This is probably the most puzzling finding of our analysis, and it is clearly an issue that deserves to be further investigated.

A careful inspection of the data reported in Table 2 reveals that in several countries, journalists have relatively high trust in public institutions despite low performance in terms of democracy. This was particularly the case not only for China, but also for Egypt and Pakistan. These three countries were, by the time the survey was conducted, the most authoritarian contexts included in the study. Reversely, journalists in a few other countries had comparatively little institutional trust in spite of their countries' decent democratic performance. This was true for Greece and Brazil, and to some extent also for Bulgaria, Mexico, and Romania. Among the western societies, Australia also somewhat stands out, with journalists' relatively mediocre trust despite the country's excellent democratic performance. All this seems to suggest that if democratic performance impinges on journalists' levels of institutional trust, its effect may depend on the relative weight given to the various aspects of political performance in a given society.

Two explanations come to mind for authoritarian contexts: Firstly, as noted above, journalists in these countries may not always be honest in their responses

due to political restrictions. Secondly, we suspect that people in these countries may have different perceptions of their governments' political performance than western institutions such as *The Economist* and its Economist Intelligence Unit. For new and transitional democracies (in our sample: Brazil, Bulgaria, Mexico, and Romania), we believe that the counterintuitive pattern is easier to explain. These countries have made remarkable progress in terms of overall democratic performance in a relatively short amount of time, but they still rank fairly low with respect to corruption. For western countries, there might exist an alternative explanation: Public trust is widely believed to be good for democracy, but for journalists, too much trust may actually work against traditional professional norms in journalism.

Contrary to several studies on public trust, which suggest a rather weak explanatory power of the cultural approach (Campbell, 2004; Lühiste, 2006; Newton, 2006), we found some evidence for the relevance of interpersonal trust, at least at the aggregate level. As far as journalists are concerned, our findings indicate that the cultural approach still contributes a notable explanation to the origins of institutional trust. Yet, as the effect size in Table 3 shows, interpersonal trust is a less powerful explanation than political performance. After all, it seems that at the societal level, the performance-based approach makes a stronger contribution to the explanation of journalists' institutional trust than the cultural approach.

As for the organizational level, we hypothesized that journalists are more trusting of public institutions when they work for state-owned media. This hypothesis was confirmed. State-ownership of media exhibited a fairly strong effect on institutional trust in the final model ( $b = .274$ ). We believe that in newsrooms that belong to state-owned media institutions, the government and politicians tend to have a much stronger grip on editorial decisions. This power can be exercised directly by banning information from being published or forcing journalists to focus on the "official" version of public events. Indirectly, state authorities are often in the position to dictate hiring decisions by placing "their" people in the higher echelons of the editorial hierarchy.

At the same time, however, we found no evidence for the assumption that journalists in private media have less institutional trust. Overall, we can conclude that the main factor that drives journalists' trust in public institutions at the organizational level is state-ownership, and including ownership in our model explained about two thirds of the variance across organizations. However, in order to qualify the total effect of ownership in the multilevel model we have to bear in mind that there was actually relatively little variance in journalists' institutional trust at the organizational level.

In addition, we expected journalists to be more trusting when they exhibit smaller power distance and when they work in social contexts characterized by relatively low power distance. At the individual level, there is at least some indication that this expectation may hold, although the relationship slightly missed the conventional threshold for significance. Journalists who tend to act as a watchdog may have an inbuilt sense of skepticism and distrust toward public institutions. Yet the

relationship between the two variables may run in both directions: Journalists who work closely with politicians and public institutions become aware of institutional deficiencies and political-administrative misconduct, turn cynical toward institutions, and consequently develop a greater power distance.

Furthermore, we noted that at the societal level, power distance seems to have a minor positive effect on journalists' trust levels, although the effect was not significant in a strict statistical sense. One explanation for this unexpected finding, we think, is that in societies where the professional culture of journalism strongly submits to the watchdog role, institutions may perform better in terms of political output precisely because they are aware of journalism's monitoring function. Hence, the culture of journalism might well contribute to higher trust levels as an effect of its very functioning. This clearly makes sense in the case of many western societies in which the watchdog role of the press is central to journalism's professional ideology. In any case, the relationship between journalists' trust and aggregate power distance seems to be an important area for future research.

## Conclusions

A major conclusion from this study is that the extent to which journalists are trusting of public institutions varies considerably across nations, though not so much between news organizations. Some of the principal factors that shape these trust levels emanate from the societal level: Journalists tend to trust more in public institutions if they work under conditions of relative media freedom, and they have more trust in contexts where corruption is less pervasive and where people generally tend to trust each other. Moreover, the relatively large cross-national variation in journalists' trust suggests that we need to look beyond the individual explanation. To the extent that national journalism cultures operate on the basis of values and beliefs that are widely shared by its members, it is also journalism as an institution that responds to a country's political performance and interpersonal trust. At the organizational level we found journalists to have more trust when they work in state-owned news organizations. Journalism culture and power distance, by way of contrast, seem to have relatively little weight in the calculus of journalists' institutional trust.

To what extent do these findings speak to the relationship between journalism, negative news, and public distrust? The answer is not an easy one. On the one hand, empirical evidence for a causal relationship between negative news and public distrust tends to be somewhat inconclusive (van Dalen et al., 2011). So far, a principal question remains unresolved: Is public distrust primarily driven by negative coverage, by a country's political-economic performance, or by a combination of both factors? Additional systematic research is clearly needed here. At the same time, there is empirical evidence in support of a causal link between journalists' attitudes and their practices (Kepplinger et al., 1991; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996). The question then remains, however, if negative news is primarily driven by cynical journalists, by negative political and economic outcomes, or by multiple causes combined.

Key to answering these questions is, we believe, public opinion and the way it is related to institutional performance, media coverage, and opinion formation. Researchers – especially those from Western countries – might have a peculiar understanding of positive political and economic performance of a given society, one that is not necessarily shared by the people who live in that particular country. Also, the relative weight given to the various individual aspects of performance may vary substantially across societies. For people in some countries, for instance, the fight against corruption might be more relevant and urgent than improvements in democratic quality. And what it means to live in a democracy or a “democratic society” might similarly be subject to differential evaluations. Short-term changes in political and economic outcomes may be more relevant to public assessment of a country's performance than general levels of performance. It is not unlikely that trust in public institutions can substantially drop as a result of worsening economic conditions despite the fact that a country is among the world's best economic performers. We therefore tend to think that subjective assessments of political and economic performance—both at the individual and the aggregate level—might be better predictors of public trust than objective measures of performance. Future studies should take this into account, which would also mean to intensify our efforts to gather comparative data on journalists' attitudes, media content, public trust, and public evaluations of performance.

Similarly, we have to realize that institutional trust does not necessarily constitute a neutral concept that is perceived invariably in different cultural contexts. By exploring journalists' trust on the basis of a single measure, one may argue that we run the risk of measuring different concepts in different cultures. We feel that such criticism is highly valid and should therefore become a focus of more systematic research. At the same time, however, the trust measure we used for this study has been widely applied in sociology and political science, and it has proved to be a useful way of investigating public trust. Another important problem, we believe, is related to the fact that journalists' public trust—or distrust—emanates from a rather complex interplay of political culture, subjective perceptions of performance, journalistic culture, and the actuality of the day. This makes it difficult to model causality on the basis of additive, independent effects. A major reason for this difficulty is, as Downey and Stanyer (2010) note, that the individual causes are not independent but interact. There are ways to deal with this problem in comparative research. One is *Qualitative Comparative Analysis* (QCA), an analytic technique that uses Boolean algebra to model different combinations of conditions that produce a specific outcome (Ragin, 1987). Such a design, however, would require a fundamental analytical shift from measurement and a focus on additive effects to calibration and modeling causal conditions, causal configurations, and causal complexity (Downey & Stanyer, 2010).



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## Notes

- 1 This study was funded by several institutions, including the German Research Foundation, Swiss National Science Foundation, Rothschild-Caesarea School of Communication at Tel Aviv University and School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Queensland.
- 2 The quality press (e.g. "serious" newspapers such as broadsheets and news magazines) usually addresses its audience primarily as citizens, while popular outlets (such as tabloids) target an audience of consumers.
- 3 In every country, there exists a tacit consensus among journalists and media scholars regarding the media that are considered to substantially shape the national political agenda. Hence, we selected those quality outlets which are commonly believed to have the greatest impact in this regard. For popular print media we selected the outlets with the highest circulation numbers. The selection of radio and TV stations was based on the ratings of their newscasts.
- 4 Turkey was the only case where journalists completed questionnaires on their own while a researcher was present.
- 5 Individual values for Cronbach's alpha: Australia: .793; Austria: .741; Brazil: .758; Bulgaria: .908; Chile: .650; China: .846; Egypt: .873; Germany: .737; Indonesia: .741; Israel: .701; Mexico: .861; Romania: .884; Russia: .868; Spain: .693; Switzerland: .742; Turkey: .765; Uganda: .624; United States: .765; Greece: .785; Pakistan: .784.
- 6 The higher a country scores in the index, the better it is believed to perform in terms of democracy; see <http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy%20Index%202008.pdf>.
- 7 The higher a country scores in the index, the better it performs in terms of corruption; see [http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2008](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2008).
- 8 See <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>. Year of data collection: Australia: 2005, Austria: 1999, Brazil: 2006, Bulgaria: 1999, Chile: 2006, China: 2007, Egypt: 2008, Germany: 2006, Greece: 1999, Indonesia: 2006, Israel: 2001, Mexico: 2005, Pakistan: 2001, Romania: 2005, Russia: 2006, Spain: 2007, Switzerland: 2007, Turkey: 2007, Uganda: 2001, USA: 2006.

9 The explained variance was calculated using a formula provided in Snijders and Bosker (1999, pp. 101–105).

10 See <http://pewglobal.org/>.

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