

Trust, disinformation, and digital media: Perceptions and expectations about news in a polarized environment

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Abstract

The transformation that the communicative environment has undergone in recent decades poses a challenge for the media in relation to their audiences, as trust is sensitive to social, economic, cultural, and technological changes. The aim of this research is to deepen the understanding of the reasons and factors that influence the loss of trust in the media by audiences who traditionally trusted news more (young people and adults aged 25-54), examining the relevance of disinformation and polarization in discrediting the media. Firstly, the state of the issue is reviewed from the theoretical point of view and the data provided, among others, such as the *Digital News Report* and several studies about the global loss of trust in other institutions, with special reference to the *Edelman Trust Barometer*. Secondly, the article adopts a qualitative methodology to investigate the motivations and expectations of citizens regarding the media. Specifically, three discussion groups were held in various Spanish cities. To ensure representativeness, sociodemographic diversity was considered, including gender, age, and educational level criteria, among others. Among the findings, it stands out that one of the main reasons for distrust towards the media is the perception that news is biased for political or economic reasons. The Covid-19 pandemic, which was rife with disinformation, has influenced attitudes towards the media and the way news is consumed. Once the pandemic was overcome, trust in the media decreased and participants sought alternative sources of information. However, some differences in perceptions and consumption habits are noted depending on age and educational level. Finally, the research indicates that distrust extends well beyond the media ecosystem, affecting all institutions.

Keywords

Trust; Credibility; Disinformation; Media; Polarization; Covid-19; Coronavirus; Pandemics; Reputation; Press; Television; Radio; Digital media; Focus groups; Audiences; Spain; *Digital News Report*; *Edelman Trust Barometer*.



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1. Introduction

Trust is a basic fact of social life (Luhmann, 1968), which represents an integral support for the members of a society (Hawley, 2012; Simmel, 1987). However, it is a fragile asset, since it entails risk and lack of certainty (Narbona; Pujol; Gregory, 2020), since, according to Han,

“trust is only possible in a middle state between knowing and not knowing. Trust means: despite not knowing in relation to the other, building a positive relationship with it” (Han, 2016, p. 91).

It is therefore a relational concept, determined as much by the expectations of the one who conveys it as by the actions of its receiver (Garusi; Splendore, 2023) and which, when applied beyond the original interpersonal context, functions as an “institutional economizer” (Rosanvallon, 2008), as it reduces the need for proof and verification of the goods and services that it provides.

Along the same lines, trust is also considered a basic component of the organizations’ so-called social license, a concept developed in the business world at the end of the 20th century by Jim Cooney (Bice; Brueckner; Pforr, 2017), although Morrison (2014) shrewdly suggested that it could be incorporated into any institution representing civil society, such as the media. The social license is not issued and is difficult to quantify and, consequently, to measure. However, going beyond the permits or licenses that are legally and politically necessary for the development of organizations’ business activities, social license complements them, as it represents citizens’ tacit approval of an organization (Morrison, 2014), without which it is difficult to survive in an environment of severe public scrutiny. Said social license is based on three factors –legitimacy, consent, and trust– which stem from what the organization does (Morrison, 2014) and not so much from what it is or claims to be. Therefore, trust appears to be a key element based, in addition, on the maintenance of active and two-way relationships with audiences (Morrison, 2014).

The cultural, economic, social, and technological changes experienced during the last two decades have led to a crisis of trust that affects a variety of institutions, including multinational companies, political parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), religious institutions, and media companies (Edelman, 2023; Pérez-Latre, 2022). In the public communication sphere, trust is one of the elements that shape the connection between citizens and the media (Coleman, 2012). To be exact, it is one of the factors that influence people’s relationship with news (Moran; Nechushtai, 2022) and thus may impact their news consumption (Fletcher; Park, 2017; Tsfaty; Ariely, 2014).

Since trust is an integral factor that relies on the activity developed by the media and the way they relate to society, the objective of this research is to delve into the reasons behind and factors that influence the current loss of trust. For this reason, we will delve into the perceptions of audiences that traditionally trusted the news more (young people and adults aged 25-54 years), examining the importance of disinformation when it comes to the discrediting of the media.

2. State of affairs**2.1. Trust in the media**

Media trust is a central topic in academic research, where it has generated extensive literature (Kohring; Matthes, 2007; Meyer, 1988; Otto; Köhler, 2018; Strömbäck *et al.*, 2020). As Jakobsson and Stiernstedt (2023) point out, three main arguments regarding the importance of trust in the media can be found in the scientific literature. First, this is significant as it regards the situation of media companies as well as media as an industry (Picard, 2018; Vanacker; Belmas, 2009). Moreover, trust in the media is essential for democracy, as it helps to have informed citizens with the capacity for political engagement (Delli-Carpini; Keeter, 1996; Uslaner, 2002). Finally, trust in the media is related to other forms of trust (or social, political, and institutional license) and to a broader existential discussion on ontological security (Giddens, 1991). However, Jakobsson and Stiernstedt (2023) argue that these normative beliefs about the importance of trust are not always consistent with and do not always correlate with empirical findings. Other authors such as Strömbäck *et al.* (2020) or Prochazka and Schweiger (2019) also point out that research on trust lacks conceptual (what trust is and the level at which it operates) and methodological (how to measure it) precision, where, in addition, the preponderance of unidimensional quantitative techniques leads to an incomplete understanding of this phenomenon (Engelke; Hase; Winterlin, 2019; Garusi; Splendore, 2023).

At the theoretical level, research on trust has been developed together with studies on credibility, since both are interrelated and multidimensional concepts that are sometimes used synonymously. Studies on credibility are deeply rooted in the Communication discipline: research on the credibility of sources (Hovland; Weiss, 1951), on the credibility of di-

fferent media (press, radio, television, and online media; **Kiousis**, 2001; **Shaw**, 1973; **Westley**; **Severin**, 1964), or on the measurable dimensions that make up credibility (**Gaziano**; **McGrath**, 1986; **Meyer**, 1998). As with trust, there is a lack of consensus on how to conceptualize it and a lack of clear measurement scales (**Hanimann et al.**, 2023). In any case, it should be noted that credibility is more objective, insofar as it is based on a series of traits or characteristics that, if fulfilled, confer credibility (and thus provide confidence). The veracity of the information disseminated, impartiality, the media's independence from external agents, and their commitment to defending the audience's interests are some of the predictor variables of media credibility, making media outlets that have these worthy of trust (**Lee**, 2010). In other words, trust is the effect it has on the audience as a result of the quality of the news product (**Medina**; **Etayo-Pérez**; **Serrano-Puche**, 2023), since it depends on news being created using the appropriate procedures to ensure that it corresponds with the reality of the events that have occurred (**Fawzi et al.**, 2021; **Hanitzsch**; **Van-Dalen**; **Steindl**, 2018).

In sum, trust deals with an attitudinal issue, resulting from a cognitive and relational process in which the person subjectively examines and evaluates the media system, the qualities of an information source (the type of media outlet, the brand, or a journalist), or the content of its messages (**Lucassen**; **Schraagen**, 2012; **Otto**; **Köhler**, 2018; **Strömbäck et al.**, 2020). Therefore, it is worth taking into account the political-cultural context in which this relationship develops and citizens' expectations when it comes to the media, as they affect their perceptions and attitudes toward media institutions (**Gil de Zúñiga et al.**, 2019; **Kohring**; **Matthes**, 2007; **Tsfati**; **Ariely**, 2014).

2.2. Trust in the face of the challenges of today's media and social landscape

The transformation of the communicative environment poses a challenge for traditional media, since the new ecosystem is characterized by, among other factors, a blurring of the classical boundaries of journalism (**Carlson**; **Lewis**, 2015), the hybridization between classical and digital media logics (**Chadwick**, 2013), and users' high level of choice (**Van-Aelst et al.**, 2017), leading to very diverse players battling to catch their attention (**Wu**, 2016).

Among these new media actors, partisan and alternative news sources run rampant, which specifically rely on attacking the traditional media, accusing them of being untrustworthy, as part of their editorial strategy (**Thorbjørnsrud**; **Figenschou**, 2022). Also populist political bodies carry out campaigns to discredit and delegitimize journalistic work (**Carlson**; **Robinson**; **Lewis**, 2021; **Van-Dalen**, 2021), which helps to increase skepticism toward the media (**Tsfati**, 2003), and even hostility (**Gunther et al.**, 2017). On a larger scale, all this fuels social polarization, both ideologically –increasing the gap between the ends of the political spectrum– and affectively, encouraging among citizens a feeling of animosity toward those who are not part of their reference social group (**Rodríguez-Virgili**; **Portilla-Manjón**; **Sierra-Iso**, 2022; **Serrano-Puche**, 2021).

In parallel, the rise of disinformation poses a challenge for the media, as it increases citizens' uncertainty about the trustworthiness of the content circulating in the public sphere, and this leads to both less trust in the media (**Vaccari**; **Chadwick**, 2020) and a high percentage of citizens –ranging from 70% to 80% depending on the country– who fear that fake news will be used as a weapon (**Edelman**, 2018, p. 16). Based on a survey in 10 European countries, **Hameleers**, **Brosius**, and **De-Vreese** (2022) conclude that those users who have a stronger perception of disinformation are more likely to consume news on social networks and alternative, nonconventional media. Other research shows that those who trust the media less are more susceptible to believing online disinformation (**Zimmermann**; **Kohring**, 2020), and conversely, citizens of countries with high levels of trust in the media and low levels of polarization and populist communication are more resilient to false information (**Humprecht**; **Esser**; **Van-Aelst**, 2020). Therefore, structural tensions in the media environment are related to the breakdown of trust in democratic institutions, which paves the way for disinformation to act as a disruptive element in the public sphere (**Bennet**; **Livingstone**, 2018).

This is clearly evidenced by phenomena such as the coronavirus crisis. In February 2020, The *World Health Organization* (*WHO*) already warned of the danger of an "infodemic," insofar as the overabundance of information about the topic, whether accurate and truthful or false or confusing, makes it difficult for people to find trustworthy sources (*World Health Organization*, 2020). In fact, in the first months of the pandemic, a large amount of fake news circulated, and not just related to health and science; numerous false political and governmental pieces of content were also spread (**Salaverría et al.**, 2020). This may explain why the consumption of traditional media increased during the months of the lockdown (**Casero-Ripollés**, 2020; **Masip et al.**, 2020; **Rodero**, 2020), as did the activity of fact-checking organizations during the first wave of coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) (**Dafonte-Gómez**; **Míguez-González**; **Martínez-Rolán**, 2022).

These challenges that face the media today are not unrelated to the growing distrust of other global social, economic, cultural, and technological actors, including governments. Since 2001, the consulting firm *Edelman* has put out its *Trust Barometer*, one of the most comprehensive and recognized endeavors to measure trust in these institutions, on an annual basis (**Edelman**, 2023, p. 2). From the beginning, the evolution of the data has shown growing gaps in the trust granted to the four most recognized social institutions: governments, companies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the media.

“ After the first stage of the pandemic, trust in the media has decreased, and citizens are looking for alternative sources of information ”

The 2008 financial crisis led to the breakdown of trust in the business world, followed by a decline in global trust in governments, while NGOs stood out as the most trusted institutions for 19 years. Other experts and international studies indicate the same thing and –to the long shadow of said financial crisis– add the perception of an unfair distribution of wealth, growing anxiety about an uncertain job future, and political corruption (Lagarde, 2018). The factors affecting the loss of trust in institutions are complex, though reports highlight two that seem to be interrelated in this progressive deterioration of trust: economic uncertainty and government corruption (Perry, 2021). Unsurprisingly, several international studies confirm the loss of trust in institutions and governments in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2022; Eurofound, 2022; Saad, 2023) and warn of the difficulty of enforcing accountability in environments with high political polarization (Martínez-Bravo; Sanz, 2023) while advocating restoring trust to achieve institutional legitimacy, which is key in building constructive and harmonious societies (Sapienza, 2021), particularly in developing countries (Khemani, 2020) and in post-Covid-19 environments.

Edelman's latest global report on trust focuses in particular on the phenomenon of polarization, which it considers to be both a cause and a consequence of global distrust. Specifically, Spain is listed as one of the four most polarized countries in the world, only surpassed by Argentina, Colombia, and the United States (Edelman, 2023, p. 57). According to the *Barometer*, extreme polarization is motivated by ideological division, the inability to generate consensus, and the lack of agreements aiming to address essential issues in these countries.

Edelman's historical index (2018; 2019a; 2019b; 2020a; 2020b; 2021a; 2021b; 2022; 2023) thus confirms the existence of a cycle of distrust centered around the media and governments. In a global environment characterized by polarization and, consequently, social division, citizens rely more on companies than on any other institution to overcome it. Thus, after the pandemic, only companies have improved in their index and seem to be the only institution deserving of trust, based on a positive rating of both their ethical behavior and their competence. NGOs, although ethical, were not considered competent. In contrast, governments and the media had negative ratings in both competence and ethics (Edelman, 2023, p. 26).

In fact, the report points to an alleged “battle” or fight for truth in the media as one of the reasons behind polarization (Edelman, 2023, p. 4). Citizens do not trust the media, especially social networks. The most recent findings indicate that journalists and government leaders are divisive rather than unifying social forces (Edelman, 2023, p. 21). In countries such as Spain, 53% of respondents –at the median of the study– think that the country is more divided than in the past (Edelman, 2023, p. 20). Although companies and NGOs are perceived as global forces that unify society in a group of countries, the report points out that, in Spain, only 49% of the population considers companies to be trustworthy, compared with the overall average of 62% in the rest of the countries in the study.

This year's data also indicate that, globally, 59% of citizens trust traditional media, whereas social networks receive a rating of 41% for trust (Edelman, 2023, p. 52). The data are in line with other European estimates that give a confidence index of 4 out of 10 to the media (Eurofound, 2022, p. 10). If we look at the specific data by country, Spain is the country with the fourth lowest level of trust in the media, with a percentage of 38%, two points lower than in the previous year's edition (Edelman, 2023, p. 44). At this point, it should be noted that Edelman considers a percentage below 49% to be distrust, whereas a score between 50-59% is considered neutral, and any institution that receives more than 60% of favorable ratings from respondents is considered trustworthy.

2.3. Trust in the media in Spain

With regard to Spain, other previous studies also show that generally Spanish citizens have a low level of trust in their media, not only because they are considered to be more a source of social division than of unity, as mentioned above (Eurofound, 2022; Edelman, 2023), but also because of their political and ideological bias (Baumgartner; Chaqués-Bonafont, 2015; Roses, 2012). At the same time, it seems that the media's credibility is not homogeneous but varies depending on a variety of sociodemographic variables. Thus, according to research by Roses and Fariás-Batlle (2012), for most Spaniards, television is the most credible form of media, but the most educated people believe that the type of media with the greatest credibility is the press. Also, based on telephone surveys of a sample of 1,200 individuals across Spain, Roses and Gómez-Calderón (2015) concluded that Spaniards trust the media across the board, although the most skeptical citizens tend to be middle-aged men, with a high level of education, living in large cities in the northern half of the country.

In contrast, other research shows that skepticism is higher among young people, those disinterested in current affairs, and those who prefer to use social networks for news, compared with those who receive news through traditional media, who have greater trust (Serrano-Puche, 2017; Vara-Miguel, 2018; 2020). Young Spaniards' distrust toward the media is also one of the findings of Pérez-Escoda and Pedrero-Esteban (2021). This distrust extends to politicians and social networks, although paradoxically, while admitting their misgivings about them, young people do not forgo massive consumption of them.

For its part, the *Digital News Report 2022* notes that trust in news has declined in almost half of the countries studied (46), reversing the growth experienced at the height of the pandemic. Out of the total country sample, 4 in 10 people (42%) say they trust most news most of the time (Newman et al., 2022).

In Spain, news users' loss of trust is worsening, and for the first time since 2015 (Table 1), the percentage of people who do not trust it (39%) is higher than that of people who generally trust it (32%; **Vara-Miguel et al.**, 2022).

Table 1. Trust in the news (2015-2022)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Survey base, <i>n</i> =	2,026	2,104	2,006	2,023	2,005	2,006	2,019	2,028
Trust	34.2%	42.9%	50.6%	44.5%	43.5%	36.4%	36.5%	32.5%
Neither agree nor disagree	32.6%	27.4%	25.2%	25.5%	25.3%	28.8%	28.7%	28.9%
Distrust	33.2%	29.7%	24.3%	30.1%	31.3%	34.8%	34.8%	38.6%

Source: *Digital News Report*, 2022

[Q6_2016] Next, we're going to ask you about your trust in the news. First, we ask you to what extent you trust the news as a whole in your country. We then ask you to what extent you trust the news you choose to consume. Indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements: "I think most news can be trusted most of the time."

In 2022, distrust was higher among younger users: More than half (51%) of those younger than 35 years did not trust the news, compared with 21% who did. The trend extended to older age groups, those who have traditionally been more trusting of the news (Table 2). Thus, among respondents between 45 and 54 years of age, trust was lower, and the majority did not trust the news (34%; **Vara-Miguel et al.**, 2022).

Table 2. Trust in news by age

	Total (<i>n</i> = 2,028)	18–24 years	25–34 years	35–44 years	45–54 years	55–64 years	65+ years
	32.5%	24.3%	19.4%	28.8%	30.3%	41.9%	41.6%
Agree (total/partial)	28.9%	27.9%	28.3%	32.2%	36.0%	23.5%	25.6%
Neither agree nor disagree	38.6%	47.9%	52.3%	39.0%	33.8%	34.6%	32.9%
Disagree (total/partial)	38,6%	47,9%	52,3%	39,0%	33,8%	34,6%	32,9%

Source: *Digital News Report*, 2022

[Q6_2016] Next, we're going to ask you about your trust in the news. First, we ask you to what extent you trust the news as a whole in your country. We then ask you to what extent you trust the news you choose to consume. Indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements: "I think most news can be trusted most of the time."

In addition, Spain continues to be one of the countries most concerned about disinformation (62%), although less so than in previous years. In 2018, when this question was first asked in the *Digital News Report*, 69% of respondents reported being alarmed by the spread of fake news (**Vara-Miguel et al.**, 2022).

The 2023 report confirms this trend: The percentage of Spaniards who declared that they generally do not trust the news reached 40%, with young people between 25 and 34 years of age being the most distrustful of the news (**Amoedo et al.**, 2023).

Concern about disinformation is one of the factors that affects attitudes toward the media, but other aspects also play a role. For example, users who consume news mainly from digital media tend to distrust news in general more than those who receive news through traditional media (**Rodríguez-Virgili; Sierra; Serrano-Puche**, 2022). Ideological inclination is also important as a trustworthiness variable, as **Moreno-Moreno** and **Sanjurjo-San-Martín** (2020) have shown, in the sense that the user's political orientation curbs or increases the consumption of some journalistic brands by mediating trust. Also based on the *Digital News Report*, these authors conclude that users who are politically right-leaning trust the brand less and, therefore, consumption is reduced. In contrast, users who consider themselves to be on the left of the ideological spectrum more loyally consume the media they trust the most (**Moreno-Moreno; Sanjurjo-San-Martín**, 2020).

Along the same lines, based on a representative survey of the Spanish population (*n* = 1,000), **Masip, Suau, and Ruiz-Caballero** (2020) point out that ideology plays a significant role in trust in the media and note a clear polarization in consumption, giving rise to media ecosystems differentiated according to ideology, which is typical of a polarized pluralistic media system such as the Spanish one (**Hallin; Mancini**, 2004; **Salaverría; Martínez-Costa**, 2023).

3. Objective, research questions, and methodology

Based on the state of affairs described above, the general objective of this article is to delve into the reasons behind and factors that influence the loss of trust in the media among the public that traditionally trusted the news the most according to the different studies reviewed: the group of young people and adults between 25 and 54 years of age. Specifically, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What are the reasons for the crisis of trust in the media, and of them, what weight does disinformation have?

RQ2: Is the level of trust in the media different when it comes to traditional media and digital media?

RQ3: What were the reasons for the decline in trust in the media after the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic?

To address these issues, the qualitative methodology of focus groups was used, which allowed us to answer the research questions, delving into the reasons behind perceptions and behaviors. In this way, it was possible to contextualize the quantitative data from previous studies.

One of the main reasons for distrust towards the media is the perception that they offer news that is biased due to their political or economic positioning

Socio-demographic diversity was sought for the focus groups, taking into account, among other criteria, sex, age, level of education, and ideological position. Thus, the sample included a balanced number of men and women, both young adults (25-40 years) and adults (41-54 years), and included both university and non-university participants.

A sample of 23 participants was recruited and divided into three focus groups. The sample was considered sufficient by the researchers, given that the focus groups' dynamics evaluate the participants' individual interactions and not their representativeness with respect to a population group. We collaborated with *CIES*, a company dedicated to market and opinion analysis. The first two focus groups were face-to-face and were held in Pamplona, Navarra, on October 6, 2021. The sample of subjects who participated in these two groups was heterogeneous in sex and age, but homogeneous in level of education: The first group included only participants with completed university studies, whereas the second group included people without completed university studies. This decision was made based on previous studies (*Sáda-ba; Salaverría, 2023; Corbu; Oprea; Frunzaru, 2021; Wang et al., 2020*) that had indicated that the level of education was a determining factor in attributing greater or lesser trust to the media and identifying disinformation actions. Finally, to broaden the geographic sample, the third group was held on October 7, 2021, via videoconference, with participants from Madrid and Barcelona. The sociodemographic profile of this third group was heterogeneous in all variables and acted as a control group.

To recruit participants, a questionnaire including the composition and filter variables presented in Table 3 was designed.

Table 3. Composition of the focus groups

	Total	Group 1 IDs 1, 3, 5-7, 10, and 23	Group 2 IDs 4, 13, 15-18, 20, and 22	Group 3 IDs 2, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 19, and 21
Number of participants	23	7	8	8
Age (years)				
25-40 (Y1)	7	1	2	4
41-54 (Y2)	16	6	6	4
Sex				
Male (M)	11	3	4	4
Female (F)	12	4	4	4
Education				
University (U)	13	1	8	4
No university (U)	10	6	0	4

The 90-minute discussion groups were moderated by a professional from *CIES*, who also prepared a qualitative preliminary report analyzing the responses obtained and grouping them thematically. The objectives of the study were explained, and participants' consent was requested for video and audio recording as a means of transcribing their speech and analyzing the results anonymously, assigning each participant an ID that corresponds with their profile. For the discussion, we used a script prepared by the research team that grouped the questions into four thematic blocks: (1) general news consumption before and after the declaration of the pandemic, (2) attitude toward disinformation, (3) type of sources, media, and experts to whom authority was attributed, and (4) actions and motivations for sharing content and/or reporting false content. A previous study with the same sample exclusively analyzed individuals' overconfidence or excessive confidence in their own abilities to detect the falseness of news content and, therefore, the perception of being somewhat immune to the threat of disinformation (*Martínez-Costa et al., 2022*). In this research, the results obtained in blocks 1–3 were taken into account, and the analysis focused on the reasons behind and factors that influence the loss of trust in the media.

4. Results

The qualitative study provided information relevant in identifying the reasons that lead citizens to distrust the media, with university-educated participants being the most critical. Among these motivations we can highlight the following:

4.1. Information saturation

The overabundance of news, of direct access to sources, and of media was seen as a factor that does not aid in trusting the media:

“We have become distrustful from having so much access to information” (ID 3).

Somehow it was felt that, when there was less media available, belief in their trustworthiness was greater:

“what you saw on a newscast was true” (ID 3).

Adult participants affirm that they distrust the media more after the pandemic, and the interests that move them

Distrust was also heightened because participants mentioned receiving contradictory news updates in the same day on digital media:

“You’re getting conflicting news all day long” (ID 1),

“We’ve gotten so much excessive disinformation that we’ve reached a point where I think we’ve all gotten fed up with all that excessive information and then realized that a lot of it was not real or was disinformation or the next day was totally contradictory, and we’ve said: enough” (ID 3).

In addition, they pointed out that the disinformation phenomenon affects the media and citizens alike:

“I have not felt deceived by the media, because they’ve received the same information, too” (ID 10),

“I think that, more than the media, politicians and international institutions knew much earlier and knew the consequences of the reach that this could have and haven’t warned us” (ID 7).

4.2. The pandemic experience

The Covid-19 pandemic has influenced the perception of the media and the way news is consumed. As noted in the quantitative studies reviewed above, media consumption and reliance on the media increased during the early stage of the pandemic. Consumption was higher among people who had more direct personal experiences and who turned to sources they deemed trustworthy:

“If it’s a scientist you’ve heard of before or who works in a hospital or on benchmark sites, it carries more credibility for you” (ID 7),

“If I’m looking up something, I try to find a more reliable or more medical article rather than just a headline” (ID 20).

Who told the story and how they told it also had a positive influence:

“In general, I think that how they have felt and how these people are when they tell you has a lot of influence (...) it depends on who tells you the same story, it depends on the each one’s experience” (ID 5),

“There are people who have been in the emergency room and have experienced the coronavirus firsthand and tell you in a way... ‘dramatic’ isn’t the word, but more affected and more... in a rawer way” (ID 7).

Additionally, the effect of oversaturation and disinterest in the news has increased:

“I think they have overwhelmed us too much already” (ID 10),

“At the beginning I used to seek out a lot of news and then I stopped seeking out news, that is, it overwhelmed me” (ID 7),

“I read the headlines, and generally I no longer get into the news story” (ID 16).

Meanwhile, once the first stage of the pandemic had passed, reliance on the media, especially television, had diminished, and participants were seeking alternative news sources:

“I trust the press headlines much less; I prefer to look for news that seems more truthful to me” (ID 20),

“before I did search out news, because I had the time, through television, and I’m sick of television because of the way it presents a topic; it’s overwhelmed me” (ID 14),

“Now it’s more difficult for me to believe anything they say” (ID 3),

“It has gotten worse, because if the level of truthfulness was already bad, now it is worse because the misconduct of many communication professionals combines with the foolishness of the masses (...)” (ID 22).

Other participants mentioned that they already had little trust in the media before the pandemic and that this had now been exacerbated:

“If there were few perspectives, I had little trust in it, well now less” (ID 18),

“It is more or less the same, it was not very high before, it is not very high now either, whenever I look at a news item I’ve searched out because I’m interested in fact-checking the accuracy a bit, I usually look at several sources” (ID 13).

In the aftermath of the pandemic, adult participants said they were more distrustful of the media and the interests that drive them:

“With this and with age, I have become more aware of things (...) I’ve seen that there are economic, political, social interests, movements... and I see that there are these interests and some say things one way, others another, and all of them are looking out for their own interests” (ID 10),

“I don’t know if the news about the pandemic has reached us correctly or what, but at home (...) the pandemic, the news, especially on television, has been called into question more, we knew they exaggerated, but now we believe that they lie more. They have used it to lose credibility” (ID 14).

However, others indicated that their level of trust was the same as before the pandemic because they understood that this was an exceptional situation:

“It’s something historic that has happened for the first time. I understand that one day they would say it’s white, it’s black (...) I understood it, I understood that there was so much contradiction, so my mindset has not changed, I still believe little” (ID 1).

One participant noted that after the pandemic he preferred to stay constantly informed and updated through digital media and, therefore, had stopped reading the printed press,

“Because it is true that, ever since, I haven’t trusted it, I prefer to stay constantly informed virtually” (ID12).

4.3. Lack of media neutrality

In all the focus groups, it was stated that the media have identifiable ideological biases and that they provide news that has been filtered through their political or economic lens, with this being one of the main reasons behind distrust:

“I don’t trust a single piece of news, no one and no source gives me absolute trustworthiness, none, because always... to begin with there are no neutral media outlets, I believe they do not exist, all media outlets and newspapers of all kinds have an ideology” (ID 22),

“I believe that news is manipulated based on the media outlet that publishes it, whether it is sympathetic or politically, or it is convenient for economic purposes” (ID 17),

“The media deceive us. The media are made up of people, people have interests, and the interests are dominated by money” (ID 6),

“For me, more than planning to deceive, it’s that they cover their mouths” (ID 10),

“I know that there are media outlets that lean one way and media that lean the other, so you have to look at those on one side, those on the other, and draw your conclusions” (ID 23).

Some participants went so far as to state outright that they assume that the media lies or manipulates:

“I start out with the assumption that the media can deceive, I mean, I don’t feel deceived, I know for a fact that they lie” (ID 6),

“It doesn’t matter which party, it’s the same thing, they always, always manipulate” (ID 22).

Also because they have been able to verify it by going to other sources:

“(I) have discovered many things that have been lies” (ID 10),

“They publish many things that are lies” (ID 7),

“You only have to look for the same news item and see different sources, and you see that the content is totally different” (ID 22).

In this regard, the type of traditional media that comes out worst is television: because

“They exaggerate things” (ID 14),

“They don’t tell the whole truth” (ID2).

This bias is also present in formal elements of the presentation of the news, such as headlines and graphics:

“I have noticed that, in a lot of news, both on television and in newspapers, they manipulate the graphics enormously, especially the tables, the percentages, they use it for their own benefit” (ID 13),

“The way in which they have given the news, which has already made you give in and read it, is a manipulation” (ID 1),

“Because we buy through our eyes too (...), because if the news is well written, with clearer print, you buy it sooner because we are visual and it comes to you that way” (ID 7).

However, for some participants, knowing the ideological position of a media outlet was not a problem:

“I think that almost all of us usually know where each newspaper or each radio station stands; then, if you set aside a little bit the political tinge they are going to give to a news item, in general they seem trustworthy to me, always knowing that, if they lean more toward one side or the other, they are going to focus it one way or another” (ID 20).

On the other hand, another participant stressed that we live in a polarized society:

“We read what we like to hear or what we like to see, it’s all so polarized that you feel comfortable in one echo chamber or the other, and we already know that it’s not all real” (ID 18).

In general, participants tended to trust the newspapers that they were used to reading regularly and that had the same ideological line as them more, and rejected those that did not align with their beliefs

“Where the news may be true or not, but many are biased and give opinion” (ID 2).

Even so, for groups without a university education, traditional media were more reliable despite these biases:

“If it’s from a relatively serious media outlet, it can be mainly trustworthy” (ID 6),

“Those that have been around for more years, who you have known for longer, give us more confidence” (ID 3),

“If it is a prestigious media outlet, it is more trustworthy” (ID 7),

“Regardless of the fact that in general they may have a tendency, I see that they argue... perhaps because they argue for what I want, maybe. But I have the impression that they argue in a much more logical way than many media outlets that systematically attack” (ID 6).

In contrast, they are more distrustful of digital media:

“It’s not the same if the news is being told by one person or one media outlet or another. When you open a digital newspaper, you already know which way it is going to lean, whether it is one, the other, or the media outlet, you already go in with the idea that there are certain opinions that you know are going to filter through the lens of one side or the other and you have to, with your ideology or whatever, bring them back to the center or I’ll keep it or I won’t keep it” (ID 7).

The belief that there are no non-ideologized media outlets also increases the need to fact-check the news consumed:

“When there is something that shocks me, first I’m going to fact-check it, I always fact-check, always, I have a complete lack of trust” (ID 22),

“When you are searching for news, you want them to speak with credibility, so you look for trustworthy, credible sources” (ID 19),

“I at least look, if it is a newspaper, I look at several newspapers, if it is on the radio, then on several radio shows” (ID 4),

“If I see a news item that interests me a lot, I look for it maybe eight times, I look at it eight times in different places to make sure that it is true or not true” (ID 1),

“The truth is that, when you hear a news item, if you are interested, you have to fact-check it using several media outlets, none will tell you the truth because each one will give you their opinion from their side and has their ideology” (ID 23).

There was a greater need to turn to supplementary sources when dealing with more specialized topics. For news about specific topics, the participants opted for specialized media:

“I prefer (to check) scientific articles directly taken from more specialized sites” (ID 3).

There was also an increase in the active search for news of particular interest:

“Now I look for, I’m referring to before, if something came up that interested me, I would read it, and now there are things that I look for, before I didn’t look for anything” (ID 15).

It should also be noted that distrust goes beyond the media ecosystem and affects all institutions. Specifically with regard to news about the Covid-19 pandemic, participants stated that they felt deceived by the government and international organizations:

“Politicians, the *WHO*, everyone, because they knew about this long before and they knew the consequences of the spread that this could have” (ID 7),

“(We are) quite aware that in the end we will never know the truth of everything” (ID 16).

4.4. Interest in engaging the audience

When faced with an overabundance of news and access channels, each media outlet must establish a strategy that allows it to grow its audience, in some cases with lower quality content or with news bait that entices people to click on it using eye-catching headlines. One participant stated that they felt deceived when they search for news and what appears are

“Trivial news items, news items that are not relevant” (ID 18).

There was a generalized belief that

“All the media and press are simply looking for news to draw people in” (ID 6),

“That they tend to be a bit more sensationalist perhaps, precisely so you fall into the trap, so to speak, and click on that news item” (ID 12).

One participant pointed out that the whole structure of media production and presentation of content is geared toward engaging the audience:

“In regard to how digital media is organized, there are newspapers that you start going through and it’s km after km after km to get more advertising in. The last half of all the newspapers you can avoid, the fake news is almost obligatory, it is filler, they have armies of gazetteers with computer interns filling in, filling in more news because that’s the way they work. You can believe a newspaper’s masthead and little else (...) I don’t trust anything you see in the second half of the paper” (ID 18).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this article was to examine the motivations and expectations of citizens with regard to the media, focusing on the reasons that influence the loss of trust in the media. We have taken Spain as a case study and, specifically, the age groups that have traditionally trusted the news the most, i.e., people between 25 and 54 years of age.

Throughout the article, it has been shown that lack of trust is a global phenomenon and that it is not exclusive to the media (Edelman, 2018; 2019a; 2020a; 2021a; 2022; 2023; Perry, 2021; Sapienza, 2021; Eurofound, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2022; Martínez-Bravo; Sanz, 2023; Saad, 2023). There is a global context of distrust toward traditional institutions, which are apparently incapable of proposing solutions to social problems. Moreover, polarization appears to be a sign of democratic deterioration (Edelman, 2023) and incubator of serious democratic problems (Khemani, 2020; Rizzi, 2023; Martínez-Bravo; Sanz, 2023). Thus, it is understood that, in response to the first research question (RQ1), disinformation does not appear to be the main factor of distrust in the media, since the participants of the study considered it to affect both the media and the citizens. They were more concerned about information overload, political polarization of the media, and the proliferation of news bait to suck the audience in. For this reason, they claimed to have a more active approach when it comes to searching out news, turning to a variety of sources to balance out a news item, which they believed was always biased according to not only ideological but also economic interests.

These perceptions about the lack of independence and polarization of the media in Spain are in line with the trend reported in the *Digital News Report 2022* (Newman et al., 2022) and with other research (Martínez-Costa et al., 2019; Eurofound, 2022; Martínez-Bravo; Sanz, 2023). The problem arises when the journalistic media's alignment with opposing groups is reflected in society, in terms of not only opinions but also feelings and attitudes. This increases the difference between the attachment to the social and media collective with which one sympathizes and the rejection of the one perceived to be a rival, giving rise to the formation of in-groups and out-groups. Moreover, polarization and disinformation feed back on each other in a vicious circle, which can affect trust in the news. On the one hand, disinformation widens both ideological and affective social gaps (Au; Ho; Chiu, 2021; Serrano-Puche, 2021). On the other hand, it is worth asking whether a growing social polarization may not in turn have an impact on perceptions of disinformation, either when the news is not aligned with one's ideological orientation (Bessi et al., 2016; Rao; Morstatter; Lerman, 2022) or when the news is negative and there are also ideological differences between central and regional governments, such that they end up hindering the accountability of public authorities (Martínez-Bravo; Sanz, 2023). Along these lines, the latest *Edelman Barometer* data also confirm that the most polarized countries have low levels of trust in the media and in governments (34% and 27%, respectively; Edelman, 2023, p. 19). This is a question that remains to be explored in future work.

Regarding the second research question (RQ2), about whether citizens trust traditional media or digital media more, there was no consensus among the participants.

“Distrust permeates the media ecosystem and affects all institutions”

There were those who preferred the latter's constant updating and those who only relied on the well-known brands, especially among non-university participants. However, television was seen as the least trustworthy type of traditional media, in clear contrast to studies from a decade ago that found this type of media to be the most trustworthy (Roses; Fariás-Batlle, 2012). It also emerged in the focus groups that audiences place more trust in expert sources and also in those who have had personal experience or strong emotional involvement in the story they tell. Therefore, this is a matter that depends on sociodemographic factors as well as on habits to satisfy diverse news needs and that give rise to “media repertoires” that articulate consumption practices embedded in daily routines (Hasebrink; Domeyer, 2012).

Finally, in relation to the last question directing this research (RQ3), it can be concluded that the pandemic changed most participants' perception of the media, increasing distrust, as also pointed out by quantitative studies (Newman et al., 2022; Vara-Miguel et al., 2022; Eurofound, 2022). In Spain, institutional trust indices for traditional media showed a negative evolution—even within margins considered as distrustful, since they were lower than 59%—from 2021, the year in which 42% of the population said they trusted them (Edelman, 2021a). In 2022, only 40% of citizens said they trusted the media (Edelman, 2022; Eurofound, 2022), and in 2023, only 38% of the population according to Edelman (2023) and 33% according to the *Digital News Report* considered them to be a trustworthy institution (Vara-Miguel et al., 2022; Amoedo et al., 2023).

This qualitative study sheds light on citizens' perceptions and expectations of news and media in a global context of a systemic decline in trust. However, this is a phenomenon that must continue to be studied using new methodological approaches and taking into account social changes.

Trust is an integrating factor based on the activity carried out by the media and the way they relate to society. However, citizens noticed that there was a “lack of information hygiene” (Edelman, 2021b) and that journalists and political leaders were “divisive social forces” (Edelman, 2023, p. 21). It seems, then, that there is a difference between what the media are or should be and what is perceived. If the media wish to regain social license and thus trust, it is worth remembering that trust

“is established and maintained through active relationships” (Morrison, 2014, p. 63)

with citizens, based on truthful and trustworthy news. Trust, in fact, is considered a fragile, intangible, and highly relational asset. First, you have to do and show what you really are, and not just say what you are. And although trust is not synonymous with reputation, since

“For participants without university studies, traditional media are more reliable than digital media”

“it does not imply recognition of excellence, nor does it carry with it the goal of recommendation” (Mora, 2020, p. 21), there is a certain relationship. It must not be forgotten that reputation includes a sum of intangibles among which we find “legitimacy, credibility, honesty, competence and quality” (Mora, 2020, p. 24).

Therefore, from the media companies' perspective, it is urgent to take measures to restore their credibility and reputation, such as recovering space and time for research and good compliance with journalistic standards, fostering a climate of innovation that promotes professional growth and avoids job insecurity (Pérez-Latre, 2022), and giving more prominence to audiences, promoting an “architecture of listening” (McNamara, 2016) in the company and a positive relationship to get to know them better.

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