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Trust in Media and journalism credibility in the sea of misinformation¹

Abstract:

Public trust is a crucial factor in numerous social activities, including journalism. For journalists and news organizations, credibility serves as a prerequisite that allows for competitive distinction, public recognition, and social authority within the information market. Despite this, in recent years, there has been growing concern regarding the declining confidence in the news media. This trend also extends to other sectors of contemporary life, such as governments and companies, resulting in a crisis of institutional trust. This pervasive distrust adds to an intense atmosphere of disinformation, further undermining the consensual notions of truth and reliability, which are essential to information systems. In this article, we address the challenges associated with measuring trust in media and journalism, shed light on additional difficulties stemming from the post-truth era, and present insights into an ongoing proposal for measuring credibility in the Global South.

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Time to discredit

There is no social life without trust. Relationships need to be supported by reciprocity gestures, understandable attitudes, and credible speeches. People need to trust that banks will keep their money safe and be able to refund it quickly and in full. Citizens need to believe in the electoral system to participate in the process of choosing representatives. Parents need to believe that their children will be protected and educated in their schools. Friendship, marriage and business partnerships depend on trust to be forged. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that trust strengthens the social fabric. However, in recent decades, several authors have warned of the erosion of public trust and its negative consequences (Giddens, 1991).

It is a crisis that affects institutions, which spreads disbelief about the functioning of the State, the representativeness of political parties, the honesty of the church, corporations and the press. The institutional crisis erodes trust, corrupts and deteriorates the bonds that sustain these institutions, generating political uncertainties, social instabilities and legal insecurity, as well as apathy, confusion and collective paralysis (Bakir & Barlow, 2007; Masullo et al, 2019).

More recently, this crisis of institutional trust has been exacerbated by a devastating phenomenon: disinformation. Marwick & Lewis (2017), Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) and Unesco (2019) draw attention to the scope and unprecedented proportions of disinformation, whose capillarity, speed and influence interfere in practical life and destabilize social coexistence. For Poseti & Bontcheva (2020a; 2020b), we are experiencing an epidemic of misinformation - a disinfodemic -, with concrete consequences for the belief that it is possible to live in community.

In a post-truth atmosphere, new extremisms emerge, disinformation ecosystems emerge and historical values suffer rapid degradation, making the truth a disposable element for some social groups (Kakutani, 2018; Kaiser, 2019). School education, journalistic information, scientific knowledge, democracy, social justice, equality and other concepts are challenged in the face of reports that parasitize the truth, kidnap symbols and colonize the imaginary (Poseti & Mathews, 2018; O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019 ; Vallier, 2021). The vertiginous spread of fraudulent information and the poisoning of public debate are directly related to the expansion of social networks and platform life (Fisher, 2023). This scenario requires reorganizing ideas and defining priorities to face the calamity of informational disorder.

Corrosion and degradation

Psychologist Ken Rotenberg has a powerful metaphor about trust. For him, trust is like the dark matter in the universe. It's hard to spot, but it's there, filling space and surrounding planets and celestial bodies. Dark matter is mysterious and all-encompassing, and could be called the connective tissue of the universe. Confidence is also mysterious and challenges all those who are willing to study it. Trust is not everything, warns Rotenberg (2018), but it is a ubiquitous facet of modern life. It is essential, for example, for daily social interaction and for maintaining interpersonal relationships. Within the constellation of ideas surrounding trust are the notions of "social capital" and "reputation", for example. Trust is a process that is based on the commitment to reciprocity and the possibility of meeting other people's expectations (O'hara, 2004; Hawley, 2012). Trust fuels social exchanges and is also the result of a common social history between partners. That's why we need time to trust someone, and we only do it when there are stimuli or minimal information that help us attest to reliability.

A dynamic phenomenon, trust is based on a delicate balance, and it is necessary to act to renew it or even stop its erosion. Building trust is a slow, laborious, ongoing process. Mistrust, on the other hand, spreads more strongly and quickly in the face of failures or uncertainties. One example: in March 2023, Silicon Valley Bank – one of the largest in the United States – was liquidated by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, causing the second largest bank failure in American history. Fearing a domino effect, the US government publicly

announced that it would take measures to prevent further crashes, which would shake the financial system with worldwide repercussions. Can the failure of a single bank mortally wound a system as robust as that of the United States? Not necessarily. The biggest concern is with impacts to system reliability. Without the confidence of investors and other economic actors, the financial system cannot stand on its feet. After all, why would anyone leave their money in a bank that cannot protect it from theft or loss?

All socially constructed systems depend on robustness, functionality and public trust. Without it, they cannot survive. In practical life, we enter into agreements and contracts to increase the trust of our pacts. These documents are instruments that make clear the limits of our actions, and also determine our rights, for example. These documents act as a guarantee in addition to the trust we place in people. But there are situations in which contracts are signed symbolically, based on the expectation that people and institutions demonstrate their ability to deliver promised products and services (Blöbaum, 2016; 2021). This happens when a person chooses, among other existing ones, a means of communication to get information. The choice brings with it the positive expectation that the medium will publish true, complete and up-to-date news. People expect this news to bring cognitive stability and social tranquility, and therefore, attribute to journalism authority and legitimacy to provide these contents (Carlson, 2017; Otto & Köhler, 2018). But what happens when surveys point to the erosion of trust in the media?

Monitoring the problem

Although there have been studies on trust in the media for at least 70 years, interest in measuring the evolution of these perceptions has grown noticeably over the past three decades. In the United States, research by Gallup, Pew Research Center and American Press Institute stands out, and, on a global scale, one of the most constant monitoring activities is carried out by Edelman. In general, they are opinion polls that try to capture the moods of society from questions about greater or lesser trust in institutions. The methodologies used and the frequencies of realization are different, which limits comparisons and makes it difficult to determine an interval of coincidence of results. Despite this, the common sense prevails that trust curves are declining for several institutions, including the media.

In the field of journalism and the media, the proposals of Graziano & McGrath (1986), Meyer (1988) and Matthes & Kohring (2007) are famous, as well as the criticisms of Daniller et al (2017) and Prochazka & Schweiger (2018), which point to the need for improvements in research instruments in view of changes in environments and media consumption habits based on new technologies. There are even doubts whether what researchers call "media" is the same thing for the people who respond to the questionnaires. These questions may even weaken the studies currently being carried out, but the idea is not to blame the thermometer for the fever. We need to improve our ways of measuring temperature, as an increase in temperature is just the symptom of a larger malfunction.

A proposal from the Global South

The global problem of disinformation requires collective, coordinated and simultaneous efforts to mitigate the harmful effects that fraudulent news causes. Media literacy, fact checking and debunking misinformation are some of these actions. To weaken disinformation, it is also necessary to strengthen professional information ecosystems, such as the journalistic media, emphasizing their accuracy and ethical responsibility, and strengthening their credibility with the public. In this way, in 2022, we started a project in Brazil that aims to formulate indicators of journalistic credibility, which can be identified in news outlets of legacy media and independent media. The research lasts three years, is funded by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) and brings together researchers from five Brazilian public universities: Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), University of Brasília (UnB), Federal University of Pará (UFPA), São Paulo State University (Unesp) and Federal University of Sergipe (UFS).

This project arose from two main concerns: the urgency of creating instruments to combat disinformation and the need to offer solutions that meet the specific demands of countries in the Global South, such as Brazil.

Unlike other studies – which try to capture the perceptions and expectations of news consumers -, our research does not focus on trust in the media, but intends to present a model that can assign grades on the credibility of news outlets, based on service to a set of criteria. The Journalistic Credibility Index (ICJOR) will be based on quality criteria about the journalistic product – news coverage – and on criteria of production processes and management of the news organization. The research methodology provides for a literature review, analysis and monitoring of coverage, interviews with journalists and editors, analysis of editorial guidelines and other documents. Based on the multiple data collection, two protocols are being elaborated for the evaluation of the journalistic product and process. Criteria of editorial quality, ethics, transparency and accountability, and commitment to democratic principles, for example, are considered. The protocols are in the testing phase, and will later be integrated into an online platform that will allow access by news consumers. Initial survey results can be seen at <https://credibilidade.paginas.ufsc.br>

Disinformation and Credibility: insights

The Journalistic Credibility Index (ICJOR) is in the design phase, but initial studies already allow the team to point out some insights into the effects of disinformation on journalistic credibility.

- Credibility is considered a distinguishing factor in competitive settings and a desired intangible asset for journalists and news organizations. Marketing and self-affirmation strategies often resort to self-attribution of credibility;
- Credibility is the result of trust accumulated over time. It depends, then, on the fulfillment of several requirements, being, therefore, related to the satisfaction of individual or collective expectations. Credibility can be built, cultivated and, from continuous wear and tear, it can deteriorate. Concentrated efforts and well-defined strategies can contribute to partially restoring the credibility lost by journalists and the media;
- Credibility is a dynamic, multifactorial and highly volatile effect;
- Hawley (2012) consider that trust is formed by two complementary elements: expertise and honesty. Those with credibility are known for their ability to carry out a specific activity and for the moral condition that gives them valuable credentials;
- In journalistic practice, "expertise" and "honesty" can be translated as (1) ability to produce quality informative content and (2) proactive attitude of not allowing personal or group interests to distort the commitment to inform well;
- We consider that indexes such as ICJOR can meet the previous premise by valuing editorial quality - analyzing products such as news coverage - and journalistic honesty - evaluating routines and protocols concerned with the ethical responsibility to inform;
- Post-truth and the role of disinformation ecosystems disturb the notion of journalistic credibility, forged in the 20th century. Denialism and widespread disbelief accelerate the erosion of trust in previously influential institutions in society such as the media;
- The disorientation caused by misinformation contributes to the manipulation of consciences. People can come to trust disinformation ecosystems that emulate the language and aesthetics of responsible professional journalism, or that mimic its procedures and routines. This gap must be taken into account in research on trust and credibility;

- From the observation of other studies, it makes sense to state that credibility is an attribute of news organizations. When we talk about trust in journalists who produce news, we are talking about professional reputation. Trust and reputation are analogous but distinct ingredients that contribute to journalistic credibility;
- Reputation is a specific condition that helps build trust. Generally, the public trusts journalists because they are professionally competent and display a willingness to be truthful in their work. These journalists need, therefore, to have a good reputation, to appear authoritative in their reports, and it is desirable even if they are honest and have prestige or good fame;
- Platformized life recommendation systems also contribute to a chaotic circulation of information because they destabilize the conventional regimes for attributing expertise that previously praised journalism as an expert system;
- Studies on trust use expressions such as “too much trust” and “too little trust”, which suggests that there is a gradient or confidence interval. The expressions “most reliable journalist” or “least reliable source of information” also reinforce the idea not of a number per se, but of a range of occurrences. Indexes like the ICJOR need to feature sophisticated models with non-absolute weights and complementary markers;
- All professionals and organizations want to be considered fully trusted by their audiences. However, full reliability can bring collective and individual problems. After all, blindly believing in the news can lead to conformism and atrophy of the critical sense. It may be paradoxical, but mistrust is also healthy, as it can help people and communities to seek answers in more balanced belief systems. This consideration reinforces the idea that confidence gradients are adequate responses to the model we are building;
- Public opinion surveys point to declines in confidence, as they rely on historical series comparisons. There is no indication of an acceptable confidence range. There is no mention of what is the minimum measure of trust to guarantee the existence and survival of a journalistic medium, for example. We intuit that it is a safe interval that leads a person or group to renew the search for information in that means of communication and maintain that choice for a longer time.

Conclusion

These considerations are preliminary, but they already show how the territory of trust in the media and journalistic credibility has shifting and porous borders. Worse, these borders have been continually assaulted by troubling waves from the sea of misinformation.

Understanding the nature and functioning of a phenomenon that disorients, disintegrates and challenges historical collective belief systems is urgent and necessary. But these efforts need to be linked to other concerns, such as identifying ways to help restore public confidence in these systems.

Trust in the media can contribute to a common environment of beliefs, and to the sharing of important values for civility and social balance. It can also weaken post-truth and fraudulent news. Studying credibility and helping companies and journalists to increase their reliability are two steps to make journalism a safe haven in the stormy social life.

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