

Public Opinion and Institutional Trust in Europe: the contradictory role of the media in the digital age

Opinião Pública e Confiança Institucional na Europa: o papel contraditório dos media na era digital

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze the relationship between trust in the media—both traditional and digital—and trust in institutions. Using data from the 2016 Eurobarometer and statistical models such as Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA), Principal Component Analysis (PCA), and multilevel regression, the study examines how media trust and usage relate to institutional trust, controlling for sociodemographic variables. The findings confirm that trust in traditional media (print, radio, and television) is associated with higher levels of institutional trust. In contrast, trust in digital media (social networks sites and online platforms) shows a weaker and sometimes negative correlation. This dynamic may stem from the coexistence of credible journalism, disinformation, and echo chambers in a networked communication context, reflecting the complexities of a hybrid media system that can erode institutional trust. Recognizing the interplay between media types, the study underscores the importance of media literacy and regulatory frameworks for digital platforms to foster trust in democratic institutions.

Keywords

institutional trust, traditional media, digital media, multilevel models, media literacy

Resumo

O presente artigo tem como finalidade analisar a relação entre a confiança nos media – tradicionais e digitais – e a confiança nas instituições. Utilizando dados do Eurobarómetro de 2016, e através de modelos estatísticos como Análise de Correspondências Múltiplas (ACM), Análise de Componentes Principais (ACP) e regressão multinível, foram examinados os impactos do uso de media na confiança institucional, controlando variáveis sociodemográficas. Os resultados confirmam a hipótese de que a confiança nos media tradicionais (imprensa escrita, rádio e televisão) está positivamente associada a níveis mais elevados de confiança nas instituições. Por outro lado, a confiança nos media digitais (redes sociais e plataformas online) apresenta uma correlação significativamente mais fraca, e em alguns casos, negativa. Esta dinâmica pode resultar da coexistência de conteúdos jornalísticos credíveis, desinformação e câmaras de eco num contexto de comunicação em rede, refletindo as complexidades de um sistema mediático híbrido que pode corroer a confiança institucional. Reconhecendo a interação entre tipos de media, o presente estudo destaca a necessidade de promover a literacia mediática e de fortalecer a regulação das plataformas digitais para mitigar os impactos negativos na confiança institucional.

Palavras-chave

confiança institucional, media tradicionais, media digitais, modelos multinível, literacia mediática

1. Introduction

Institutional trust is a central concept in the social sciences and is widely studied due to its relevance to the social, political and economic stability of societies. Trust in institutions refers to the positive expectation that they will act transparently, effectively and in accordance with the values shared by a community (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). This trust, however, is not static and varies according to factors such as transparency, perceived effectiveness and integrity of institutions (Easton, 2017). With the advent of the digital age and the increasing fragmentation of information sources, new challenges have arisen for maintaining and building this trust, particularly due to the role the media plays in mediating it.

In recent decades, the traditional media, such as the press, radio and television, have been recognized as essential vehicles for transmitting information about the functioning of public institutions (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). Their role as gatekeepers of information (Lippmann, 1922; Cushion, 2009), by ensuring fact-checking and journalistic accuracy, is widely seen as a pillar in building trust in democratic institutions. However, the emergence of digital media, which are less regulated and often associated with the dissemination of disinformation, has challenged this paradigm, promoting a new information consumption environment that is often fragmented and polarized (Dubois et al., 2020).

In this context, this study aims to analyze the relationship between trust in the media - traditional and digital - and trust in public institutions. Although several stu-

dies point to a positive correlation between trust in traditional media and trust in institutions (Marozzi, 2015), more recent literature suggests that the proliferation of fake news and polarizing content is contributing to an erosion of institutional trust (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). It is therefore pertinent to investigate whether digital media consumption is in fact associated with lower levels of trust in institutions, and how traditional media can continue to play a role in maintaining it.

The relevance of this study becomes even more evident when considering the current media and political landscape in which the role of digital media has been widely debated, especially regarding its influence on public opinion and democratic stability (Grönlund & Setälä, 2012). This analysis seeks to sets out to explore the following research questions: (i) to what extent is trust in traditional media associated with higher levels of trust in institutions? (ii) How does digital media consumption, within a hybrid information environment, influence institutional trust?

The research presented here uses data from the 2016 Eurobarometer, which provides a representative sample of citizens from the 28 member states of the European Union. Using multivariate statistical analysis, such as multiple correspondence analysis (multiple correspondence analysis (MCA), principal component analysis (PCA) and multilevel regression), the aim was to quantify the relationship between trust in the media and in institutions, controlling for sociodemographic variables such as age and level of education.

The structure of this article is as follows: section 2 reviews the relevant literature on institutional trust and the role of the media in building it; section 3 describes the methodology used; section 4 presents the results of the data analysis; and section 5 discusses the implications of the results in the light of the existing literature, identifying directions for future research.

2. Contributions to the comprehension of institutional trust

Trust is a key analytical category in the social sciences, widely studied by various disciplines due to its importance in the formation of social relationships, cooperation and institutional stability. According to Lewis and Weigert (1985), trust can be defined as the positive expectation that individuals have about the actions of other social actors or institutions, in a context of uncertainty and vulnerability. This expectation allows interactions to take place without the need for constant monitoring, facilitating cooperation and social coexistence. According to Luhmann (1979), trust emerges as a mechanism for simplifying social complexity and is essential for decision-making in situations where direct control is not possible.

The literature on trust makes a fundamental distinction between interpersonal trust and institutional trust. On the one hand, interpersonal trust refers to relationships between individuals based on personal experience, reciprocity and emotional closeness (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). This form of trust is based on direct interactions and depends on factors such as reputation, prior knowledge and the perception of the other party's integrity and benevolence (Harder et al., 2017).

On the other hand, institutional trust is a more abstract type of trust, focused on systems and organizations that act on behalf of a collectivity. According to

Daskalopoulou (2019), institutional trust is essential for political legitimacy and social stability. This form of trust is based on the perception that institutions, such as the government, the judicial system, the media or other large-scale organizations, act in accordance with established norms and common values, and that they are competent in carrying out their functions (Hallin & Mancini, 2011).

Institutional trust can be understood as citizens' belief that social and political institutions function fairly, transparently and effectively, fulfilling their functions in accordance with society's expectations (Grönlund & Setälä, 2011). For Luhmann (1979), trust in institutions is a way of reducing the complexity of the social world. Institutions are seen as simplifying mechanisms, as they allow individuals to delegate responsibilities and feel secure about complying with social norms, even without continuously monitoring their functioning.

However, institutional trust is not a static phenomenon; it depends on contextual factors such as the perceived effectiveness of institutions, the transparency of their processes and the integrity of their representatives. According to Citrin and Stoker (2018), political crises, corruption scandals or the perception of institutional inefficiency can significantly undermine citizens' trust (Mancini, 2018), leading to political cynicism and social alienation. In a democracy, institutional trust is crucial, as it facilitates the acceptance of political decisions and compliance with norms, even when there are ideological disagreements between citizens and institutions (Geber et al., 2016).

Several studies have identified factors that influence trust in institutions, including perceptions of transparency, fairness and competence. Hudson (2006) argues that institutional trust is shaped by individuals' interactions with institutions, and the perception of corruption or mismanagement can quickly erode this trust. Jones (2018) point out that the integrity of institutions is essential for their credibility, and transparency and accountability are key factors in creating lasting trust.

At the same time, institutional trust varies between different population groups. According to Stickley et al. (2009), sociodemographic variables such as age, educational level and social class play an important role in determining levels of institutional trust. For example, younger or less educated citizens tend to show greater distrust towards institutions, possibly due to greater exposure to critical discourse or negative personal experiences with the institutional system (Kohring & Matthes, 2007).

2.1. The Role of the Media in Building Institutional Trust: a hybrid perspective

Media trust plays a central role in building institutional trust, as media serve as the primary communication channel between institutions and the public. Gunther and Lasorsa (1986) argue that media coverage influences public perceptions of institutional performance, amplifying both successes and failures. Thus, when media are perceived as impartial and credible, they tend to reinforce institutional trust (Cabelkova et al., 2015), whereas negative coverage focused on scandals can undermine public confidence in institutions.

Recent research has emphasized that media trust is not a homogeneous concept and can be analyzed at different levels (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). These authors propose three fundamental dimensions: trust in the media system (related to perceptions of

editorial independence and journalistic norms), trust in news organizations (focused on the credibility of specific outlets, such as newspapers and television channels), and trust in individual journalists (associated with the reputation and impartiality of media professionals). These distinctions are essential to understanding how different audiences assess media credibility, as an individual may trust a specific newspaper but remain skeptical of the media system as a whole due to perceived political or economic biases (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2016).

The digital transformation of media has further complicated this relationship, given that today's information ecosystem is characterized by increasing interdependence between traditional and digital media. The concept of Hybrid Media System (Chadwick, 2017) describes an environment in which traditional media integrate digital logics, using social networks to amplify their reach and engage with audiences, while digital media often redistribute content from newspapers and television channels. This interconnection challenges the idea that trust in media can be analyzed in binary terms, suggesting that its impact on institutional trust should be understood within a hybrid media system where information flows dynamically between journalists, politicians, citizens, and digital platforms.

In this context, the fragmentation of news consumption and the proliferation of disinformation pose significant challenges to institutional trust (Hwang, 2017; Dubois et al., 2020). Disinformation, defined by Wardle (2017) as the deliberate dissemination of false information, differs from misinformation, which results from the unintentional sharing of inaccurate content. The rapid spread of digital content, amplified by social media algorithms, makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between legitimate and fabricated information, negatively affecting public perceptions of media credibility (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Rahbarqazi & Mahmoudoghli, 2021).

Accordingly, Hanitzsch and Vos (2016) argue that media trust cannot be separated from trust in political institutions, as both are interconnected within a trust nexus. In polarized societies, media can be instrumentalized to reinforce specific political narratives, exacerbating distrust and contributing to the fragmentation of the public sphere (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). At the same time, literature suggests that different audiences trust media in distinct ways depending on their level of media literacy and exposure to diverse sources of information. Citizens who consume news from multiple sources—combining traditional and digital media—tend to develop a more critical and informed view of political institutions (Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Perceptions of media credibility are also influenced by political and cultural contexts. In consolidated democracies, media are often valued for their watchdog role, whereas in hybrid or authoritarian regimes, they are frequently seen as extensions of political power, undermining their credibility (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2016). Additionally, Hanitzsch et al. (2018) highlight that media do not operate solely within the political sphere but also play a role in everyday life, extending beyond their traditional function of informing citizens. This expansion of journalism into domains such as entertainment, consumption, and individual identity can shape how citizens perceive media trust and, consequently, institutional trust.

Thus, media trust cannot be reduced to a linear cause-and-effect equation. It is necessary to consider the interactions between different media forms and the mediation processes that shape public perceptions of institutions. Integrating the hybrid

media perspective and the distinctions between different levels of media trust allows for a more sophisticated analysis of the impact of media on institutional trust in the digital age. Institutional trust is a fundamental element for social and political stability, especially in democratic regimes (Arguedas et al., 2023). It depends on a combination of factors, such as the perceived transparency, integrity and effectiveness of institutions, as well as the way in which the media shape the public perception of these institutions. As digital media continue to gain importance (Silveirinha et al., 2022), the challenges of maintaining institutional trust become more complex, requiring greater attention to regulating disinformation and promoting quality journalism.

Adopting the hybrid perspective allows for a more refined understanding of the impact of the media on institutional trust. On the one hand, the credibility of traditional media continues to play a fundamental role, guaranteeing a level of journalistic rigor and a relatively stable information framework. On the other hand, digital media broaden access to information, but also create new challenges, such as the spread of disinformation and the formation of information bubbles (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). Trust in institutions is thus influenced not only by the type of media that citizens consume, but also by the interaction between different media forms and the mediation processes that take place within the hybrid system.

2.2. Trust in the Media and Institutional Trust: Relationships and Theoretical Challenges

Institutional trust is a core concept in the social sciences, particularly in the study of political dynamics and democratic governance. Confidence in political, judicial, or administrative institutions is regarded as a pillar of social stability and civic cohesion (Luhmann, 1979; Easton, 2017). At the same time, the media serve as key intermediaries between institutions and the public, shaping collective perceptions of institutional credibility. As a result, trust in the media becomes a crucial factor, influencing how society assesses and judges institutions (Cushion, 2009; Daniller et al., 2017).

2.3. Media Mediation and Perceptions of Institutional Trust

Institutional trust reflects the belief that institutions act competently, transparently, and in the public interest (Kolczynska et al., 2020). This perception of legitimacy is shaped by multiple factors, including institutional performance and how institutional actions are communicated to society. In this regard, the media play a central role as the primary source of information on institutional activities (Marca-Francés, 2019; Markov & Min, 2020).

Trust in the media directly affects institutional trust, as media coverage largely frames the public narrative surrounding institutions (Hudson, 2006). When newspapers and television networks provide balanced and fact-based reporting, they tend to reinforce institutional credibility among citizens (Daniller et al., 2017; Klein, 2020). However, the rise of digital media has introduced new challenges, particularly with the spread of misinformation and fake news (Dubois et al., 2020).

The dichotomy between traditional and digital media as opposing poles of credibility and disinformation oversimplifies contemporary media reality. In reality, both forms of media operate within a networked communication model, where content is produced, circulated, and reinterpreted across interconnected platforms and actors (Cardoso, 2006). Firstly, traditional media are not exempt from problematic journalistic practices. The phenomenon of tabloidization has led some traditional media outlets to adopt sensationalist and inaccurate strategies, contributing to a deterioration in the quality of information (Esser, 1999). Cases such as the phone hacking scandal in the UK, investigated by the Leveson Inquiry, as well as the use of churnalism and clickbait, demonstrate that practices that compromise journalistic credibility are not exclusive to the digital environment (Chadwick et al., 2018).

In this way, Chadwick, Vaccari and O'Loughlin (2018) show that certain traditional media, especially tabloids, play a role in spreading disinformation. Their study reveals that sensationalist content from these media outlets is often amplified and shared on social media without critical verification, contributing to the circulation of fake news. This evidence challenges the idea that disinformation is predominantly a digital media phenomenon.

Therefore, information consumption in the digital environment is not restricted to native digital sources. Data from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Newman et al., 2024) indicates that a large part of the public accesses news from traditional media through social networks and institutional websites, highlighting the interdependence between media systems. This dynamic underscores a core feature of the networked communication model (Cardoso, 2006): the circulation of information is no longer linear or institutionally bounded. It is shaped by the interactions between professional journalism, user-generated content, and algorithmic amplification. Thus, instead of a rigid separation, it is more appropriate to consider a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), where credibility and disinformation coexist in multiple formats and platforms.

2.4. The Role of Traditional Media in Institutional Trust

The credibility of traditional media, such as newspapers, radio and television, has been associated with higher levels of trust in public institutions. The existence of regulatory frameworks and the consolidated prestige of these media contribute to them being perceived as reliable sources of information (Lagares-Díez et al., 2022). In addition, investigative journalism and a commitment to impartiality reinforce transparency and information quality, positively influencing institutional trust.

Previous studies indicate that individuals who trust traditional media tend to have greater confidence in government, judicial and political institutions (Cabelkova et al., 2015). This correlation may derive from the rigorous fact-checking processes and balanced presentation of institutional information characteristic of this type of media (Akinola et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2023). However, traditional media are not a homogenous block, and different types of journalism can have different impacts on institutional trust.

In the print media, for example, there is a substantial difference between mainstream newspapers and the tabloid press. The former, such as *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*

and El País, are recognized for their commitment to impartiality, rigorous investigation and fact-checking (Lagares-Díez et al., 2022). They operate under demanding editorial standards and tend to offer balanced coverage of political and institutional affairs, which strengthens citizens' trust in institutions (Daniller et al., 2017).

Conversely, the tabloid press, such as The Sun, Daily Mail and Bild, favours a more emotional and dramatized style, often focused on scandals and polarizing narratives (Mancini, 2018). Despite its wide reach and influence on public opinion, this type of journalism can contribute to the erosion of institutional trust, especially when it adopts an overly critical tone or disseminates misinformation (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). The impact of this type of coverage depends on the framing of political events - while some tabloids reinforce the perception of corruption and ineffectiveness of institutions, others adopt a nationalist or populist stance, negatively influencing the public perception of the democratic system.

The differences in information quality are also reflected in the audiovisual media. Leading news channels such as BBC News or Deutsche Welle follow strict editorial standards and play a key role in promoting media literacy. In contrast, some sensationalist television networks, often associated with political or business groups, can shape institutional trust in a more polarized way (Hudson, 2006).

Indeed, although traditional media are often considered reliable sources of information, the internal diversity of this sector requires a more detailed analysis. The way in which each type of media frames institutions influences public trust and can strengthen or weaken the perception of their legitimacy and transparency.

By contrast, trust in digital media is often associated with lower levels of institutional trust. Social networks and other digital platforms allow information to circulate quickly, but without the traditional verification and accountability mechanisms present in conventional media. This lack of regulation, combined with the proliferation of disinformation, has contributed to the fragmentation of trust in digital media and, consequently, institutional trust (Uslaner, 2003; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019).

2.5. Digital media and the erosion of institutional trust

The digital media category encompasses a wide variety of platforms and formats that differ significantly in terms of the production and dissemination of information content. In order to understand their impact on institutional trust, a distinction must be made: 1st Online Social Networks (Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok), where the dissemination of information occurs in a decentralized manner and often without editorial control, favoring the rapid spread of rumors and disinformation (Dubois et al., 2020); 2nd Digitally Native News Platforms (HuffPost, BuzzFeed News), which operate exclusively in the digital environment, adopting more agile publishing models based on audience involvement, but not always following the same editorial standards as traditional media (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022); 3rd citizen journalism and alternative media, including blogs, independent YouTube channels and informative podcasts, which broaden the diversity of voices in public debate, but often without formal fact-checking processes (Hermida, 2012); and 4th news aggregators and search engines (Google News, Apple News), which organize and recommend content from different

sources based on algorithms, influencing the visibility of information and potentially reinforcing segmented consumption patterns (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021).

According to Dubois et al. (2020), trust in digital media is negatively correlated with institutional trust, since the presence of fake news and the polarizing nature of digital platforms undermine the credibility of both the media and the institutions they cover. The fragmentation of news consumption on digital platforms, where citizens can choose to consume only sources of information that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs, also contributes to this phenomenon (Verma et al., 2017).

The decentralized nature of digital media makes it difficult to impose journalistic quality standards, which increases distrust in the content made available on these platforms (Yale et al., 2015). This phenomenon has significant implications for trust in institutions, since the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories weakens the perception of institutional legitimacy and transparency.

Empirical studies corroborate the link between trust in traditional media and higher levels of institutional trust. Arlt et al. (2020) points out that trust in traditional media is strongly associated with greater trust in governments and democratic institutions, especially in countries with a long tradition of press freedom and media regulation. In contrast, digital media, due to their more volatile and less regulated nature, tend to be viewed with greater skepticism, which translates into lower levels of trust in institutions.

Fawzi and Mothes (2020). also points out that traditional media play the role of information gatekeepers, filtering and verifying news before it is released. This rigorous verification process strengthens public trust in both the media and institutions. However, with the growth of social networks and digital media, this gatekeeper role has been weakened, allowing false or misrepresented information to circulate freely, which has contributed to the erosion of institutional trust (Mossberger et al., 2008).

2.6. Challenges for institutional trust in the digital age

The growing use of digital media and digital social networks presents unprecedented challenges for building and maintaining institutional trust. Disinformation and fake news, amplified by social media, weaken citizens' trust in both the media and public institutions (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). The fragmented nature of digital news consumption, in which citizens can choose to consume only information that reinforces their beliefs, further exacerbates this problem, creating information bubbles that fuel distrust and polarization (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Prior, 2021). On the other hand, traditional media remain an important source of information for many citizens and, as such, play a crucial role in restoring trust in institutions. Daniller et al. (2017) point out that traditional media, due to their commitment to journalistic rigor and impartiality, remain fundamental to maintaining institutional trust. Based on the theoretical and empirical review, the following research hypothesis can be formulated:

H1 - Trust in traditional media is positively associated with institutional trust, while trust in digital media is negatively associated with institutional trust.

3. Method

3.1. Dataset and Participants

The data used in this study came from the Eurobarometer conducted in November 2016. This edition has the particularity of including and articulating thematic modules on media and institutional trust in the member states of the European Union. It relied on stratified probabilistic samples to ensure representativeness across countries (European Commission, 2020). Considering the 28 member states of the European Union at the time, i.e. including the United Kingdom, which has since left, we opted to use the weight w23 (Weight EU28), since it is the one that groups and weights the respective samples according to their population size. We selected the twenty-eight samples for each of the countries studied from a total of thirty-six initial samples. The sample consists of 26712 individuals. Just over half of the participants are women (51.8%), age ranged between 15 and 99 years, with an average age of around 48 years (SD = 18.8). On average, the respondents had been at school for 7.5 years (SD = 13.1). In occupational terms, the majority (86.0%) are employed.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Trust in the institutions

Trust in the institutions was assessed with these items: justice/legal system, police, public administration, political parties, reg/local public authorities, national government, national parliament, European Union and United Nations, each representing an institution (Daskalopoulou, 2019). They were categorical items with two categories, two categories (1 = do not trust and 2 = to trust). As they were categorical variables, a multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) was performed to submit the variables to a quantification allowing the calculation of the reliability. As the Cronbach Alpha suggested a reliable measure ($\alpha = .86$) a new quantitative and standardized variable was obtained. The factorial scores ranged from low trust to high trust.

3.2.2. Trust in media

The trust in media was measured by the items: written press, radio, television, internet, online social networks, using two categories (1 = tend not to trust) e (2 = tend to trust). To identify the structure that configures the trust in media, a multivariate analysis was conducted. As the items were categorical variables, an MCA was again performed. Like standard principal component analysis (PCA), MCA allows to identify the dimensions (components, in PCA) that explained the variance of all the input variables. Two dimensions were then selected and the discriminations measures for each variable can be seen in Table 1. Dimension 1 was linked to the trust in traditional media with very good reliability ($\alpha = .81$). Dimension 2 was related to trust with digital media with an adequate reliability ($\alpha = .73$, Kline, 2011).

Table 1.
Discrimination measures of the variables in the two dimensions

	Discrimination measures	
	Dimension 1	Dimension 2
Trust in written press	0.703	0.069
Trust in radio	0.709	0.121
Trust in television	0.682	0.097
Trust in internet	0.343	0.471
Trust in online social networks	0.246	0.563
Total	2.682	1.322
Inertia	0.536	.0264

Note. N = 26712. The highlighted results corresponded to the variables which discrimination measures were higher than the inertia (mean the discrimination measures).

Source: Eurobarometer (2016). Own calculations.

3.2.3. Media uses

Media uses was measured by the item's television, television via TV set, radio, written press, internet, online social networks. Items were answered on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (no access) to 7 (everyday/almost every day). A categorical principal component analyses (CatPCA) was used to implement a dimension reduction based on the ordinal input variables. CatPCA algorithm enables the definition of new composite and standardized variables, called dimensions (equivalent to components, in standard principal component analysis). CatPCA solution highlighted two dimensions that explained the media uses. The variables media use: television via internet, internet and online social networks showed high loadings in Dimension 1 (Table 2), thereby characterising uses in digital media with an adequate reliability ($\alpha = 0.72$). In turn, the variables media use; radio, written press and television had the highest loadings on Dimension 2, being associated to the use of traditional media. Nevertheless, the low reliability did not allow to compute a new composite variable. Consequently, the three original variables were used un separate.

Table 2.
Loadings of the variables in the two dimensions

	Loadings	
	Dimension 1	Dimension 2
Television	-.282	0.438
Television via Tv Set	0.710	-.119
Radio	0.365	.718
Written Press	0.331	.729
Internet	0.836	-.101
Online Social Networks	0.810	-.261

Note. N = 26712. The item television was not included in the final model because it had no variability. It showed a strong concentration (approximately at 90%) in the two categories of highest use.

Source: Eurobarometer (2016). Own calculations.

3.3. Control variables

Age and sex were used as control variables at the individual level. It is among the youngest and those aged over 50 that the actors with the highest levels of confidence are found (Hudson, 2006). Stickley et al. (2009) also argue that the lowest levels of trust are found in the 30 to 50 age group. With regard to sex, the differences that do exist are quite limited and restricted, as in the case of Western Europe, where men have higher levels of institutional trust (Sousa & Pinto-Martinho, 2022).

3.4. Data analysis

Descriptive analysis (mean and standard deviation) and correlations were first calculated. The data used in this study had a hierarchical structure as the individuals (level 1) were arranged in their countries (level 2). Although all the predictors were at level 1, it was considered adequate to use a multi-level method to account for the variance across countries. Prior testing research hypothesis with a linear mixed effects model, a baseline (null) model was tested to guarantee that the results sustained empirical support to go forward with multilevel modelling.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), reliabilities and bivariate correlations between the study variables are presented in Table 3. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), reliabilities and bivariate correlations between the study variables are presented in Table 3. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics,

reliability and correlations of the variables analysed. Trust in traditional media has an average of 1.55 (SD = 0.42), while trust in digital media has an average of 1.36 (SD = 0.43). Media use was measured in three types: radio use has an average of 5.63 (SD = 1.12), print media use an average of 4.80 (SD = 1.92) and digital media use an average of 4.54 (SD = 1.62). Trust in institutions has an average of 1.45 (SD = 0.26).

The correlations between the variables are significant ($p < 0.001$). Age was correlated with the use of digital media ($r = 0.63$). Trust in traditional media had a moderate correlation with trust in institutions ($r = 0.47$), while trust in digital media was positively correlated with positively with digital media use ($r = 0.17$).

Before testing the hypotheses, intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) values were calculated to determine the extent to which the dependent variable, institutional trust, varies among the different countries. The results revealed that 15.7% of the total variance in institutional trust was explained by the country level.

After accounting for sex and age (Level 1 control variables), the results showed that except for media use – radio ($p > .05$) (Table 4), the predictors used in the model showed a significant effect on trust in institutions ($p < .01$). Trust in traditional media ($\gamma = 0.40$, $p < .001$), and trust in digital media ($\gamma = 0.11$, $p < .001$) showed a positive effect on trust in institutions. These findings provided support for hypotheses 1. The media use – written press ($\gamma = 0.05$, $p < .001$), and media use – digital media ($\gamma = 0.02$, $p < .01$) also significantly increased the trust in institutions. Thus, media uses also had a positive effect on trust in institutions, validating the hypothesis 2. At level 1, the tested model explained 25.2% of the variation of trust in institutions, and the predictor trust in traditional media was the most important predictor (R^2 part = 16.1%).

Table 3.
Descriptive statistics, reliability, and correlation of the variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Sex ^(a)	0.48	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Age	48.3	18.8	-0.06*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Trust in traditional media ^(b)	1.55	0.42	0.04*	0.03*	(0.81)	-	-	-	-	-
Trust in digital media ^(b)	1.36	0.43	0.03*	-0.12*	0.33*	(0.73)	-	-	-	-
Media use – Radio	5.63	1.12	0.05*	-0.01*	0.13*	0.02*	0.33*	-	-	-
Media use – Written Press	4.80	1.92	0.07*	0.13*	0.18*	0.03*	0.09*	-	-	-
Media use – digital media	4.54	1.62	0.07*	0.63*	0.01	0.17*	0.14*	(0.72)	-	-
Institutional trust ^(b)	1.45	0.26	-0.02*	0.04*	0.47*	0.22*	0.10*	0.18*	0.12*	(0.86)

Note. N = 11493. Reliability is in parenthesis.

(a) Dummy variable: 0 – Female, 1 = Male.

(b) Standardized variables * p < ,05.

Source: Eurobarometer (2016). Own calculations.

Table 4.
Hierarchical linear regression results

	Trust in institutions			
	Coeff.	SE	95% CI	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
Intercept	.067	.071	-.082	.217
<i>Level 1 Control variables</i>				
Sex	-.018	.011	-.040	.003
Age	-.031**	.007	-.045	-.016
<i>Level 1 Independent variables</i>				
Trust in traditional media	.403**	.006	.391	.414
Trust in digital media	.112**	.006	.099	.124
Media use – radio	-.007	.006	-.019	.004
Media use – written Press	.054**	.006	.041	.066
Media use – digital media	.021*	.008	.006	.036
<i>Variance components</i>				
Level-1 variance	.705**			
Level-2 variance	.098**			
Pseudo-R ² level 1	.252			
Pseudo-R ² level 2	.387			
LR test ⁽¹⁾	26228.503			
Log-likelihood	58905.061			

Note: Level 1 N = 11493; Level 2 N = 20

⁽¹⁾ Reference: Null model

** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

Source: Eurobarometer (2016). Own calculations.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The empirical evidence produced confirms the hypothesis that trust in traditional media is positively associated with higher levels of trust in institutions, while trust in digital media shows a weaker and, in some cases, negative relationship. These findings corroborate existing literature that emphasizes the mediating role of media in shaping social and political attitudes (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021; Sousa & Pinto-Martinho,

2022), highlighting the impact of information fragmentation in the digital age on the perception of institutional legitimacy.

However, the results also reveal the complexity and hybridity of the current media ecosystem, where the boundaries between traditional and digital media are increasingly blurred. The interdependence between these communication modalities gives rise to a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), in which the dynamics of information production and circulation interact in a complex manner, shaping trust in institutions.

The strong association between trust in traditional media and institutional trust can be explained by the historical commitment of traditional media to fact-checking and the existence of editorial regulation, which contributes to the perception of institutional credibility and transparency (Marozzi, 2015; Cabelkova et al., 2015). In contrast, digital media, operating in a less regulated environment, amplify the spread of disinformation and the formation of “information bubbles,” exacerbating polarization and skepticism toward institutions (Dubois et al., 2020; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019).

Nevertheless, the dichotomy between traditional and digital media oversimplifies a more nuanced reality. The contemporary media system is characterized by a hybrid model in which traditional media integrate digital strategies, while digital media frequently repurpose content produced by traditional outlets. This interdependence challenges the binary perspective on media trust and suggests that its impact on institutional trust should be understood within a network of interconnections, where professional journalism, digital platforms, and audiences constantly interact (Chadwick, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Media hybridity is also evident in how individuals consume information. Many citizens use social media to access content from traditional media, while others rely on alternative digital sources to complement mainstream narratives. This phenomenon implies that the relationship between media consumption and institutional trust is mediated by factors such as media literacy, exposure to diverse sources, and individuals’ critical ability to assess conflicting information (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Melki et al., 2023).

The relevance of sociodemographic variables to institutional trust also stood out. Younger individuals, who prioritize digital media consumption, tend to exhibit lower levels of trust in institutions, a phenomenon explained by their greater exposure to critical and alternative discourses that challenge the dominant institutional narrative (Stickley et al., 2009). This effect reinforces the need to address media literacy as an essential strategy to mitigate the impact of disinformation and strengthen institutional trust.

In terms of policy implications, the results of this study suggest the need for policies that promote media education and the regulation of digital platforms to ensure higher standards of information quality (Sousa, Jerónimo & Pinto-Martinho, 2024). Implementing fact-checking mechanisms and increasing transparency in content distribution algorithms can mitigate the harmful effects of disinformation and improve the perception of institutional credibility (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019).

Despite the contributions of this study, some limitations must be acknowledged. The cross-sectional nature of the data prevents causal inferences between media consumption and institutional trust. Longitudinal studies would be necessary to analyze the evolution of this relationship over time. Furthermore, the internal diversity

of digital media requires a more granular analysis, distinguishing between specific platforms and their differentiated effects on institutional trust.

Another limitation concerns the reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce response biases and affect the accuracy of the results. The way respondents perceive and report their trust in media and institutions may be influenced by factors such as selective memory or the political and social context at the time of data collection. Future studies could adopt mixed methods, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative approaches to capture deeper nuances in the relationship between media and institutional trust.

Additionally, the sample used, based on the Eurobarometer, focuses exclusively on European Union member states, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other sociopolitical contexts. Comparative studies including countries outside Europe could offer a broader perspective on the impact of the media ecosystem on institutional trust, allowing for an assessment of structural differences between established democracies and hybrid regimes.

Finally, the rapid evolution of the media landscape cannot be ignored. The rise of new digital platforms and shifts in information consumption practices make it essential to continuously monitor how institutional trust adapts to technological and cultural transformations. Future research could examine the impact of emerging phenomena, such as artificial intelligence in news curation, on the construction of media and institutional trust.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the importance of traditional media in sustaining institutional trust and highlights the paradoxical role of digital media in an era of fragmented information. In a hybrid media system, institutional trust is not solely determined by the type of media consumed but by the interaction between different forms of communication. The challenge for contemporary democracies lies in striking a balance between freedom of expression, digital regulation, and quality journalism, ensuring that the digital age is not synonymous with institutional distrust. Ultimately, at the crossroads between information and disinformation, the future of institutional trust will depend on how societies and governments navigate the contradictory role of the media in the digital age.

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