

## The Crisis of Traditional Media in the Digital Era: Causes of the Erosion of Trust

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### Introduction

Before the modern digital era, the relationship between citizens and the institutions that created and distributed information was based on a largely one-way model. People learned about the news and were exposed to different points of view through the press, radio, and television, but they had little opportunity to provide direct feedback. As a result, audiences placed their trust in a relatively small number of media outlets. One view is that this trust was based on a structural monopoly: audiences did not have the opportunity to access a wide range of sources, compare them, critically evaluate them, or reject some of them altogether. The emergence of the internet, followed by social media, dismantled this monopoly by significantly diversifying information sources. At the same time, it weakened the institutional filtering mechanisms that had helped maintain journalistic credibility. This trend is arguably one of the main reasons why traditional media has experienced a drastic decline in both popularity and public trust.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, social media influencers, podcasters, and independent commentators have attracted audiences that established media outlets - particularly among younger demographics - have struggled to reach. The resulting information disorder has been successfully exploited by various actors pursuing political and commercial agendas through increasingly sophisticated disinformation campaigns.

### Declining Trust in the Media: An International Trend

The decline in trust in the media as an institution on a global scale is confirmed by a range of indices and public opinion surveys, and the existence of this trend is now widely accepted.<sup>3</sup> Naturally, levels of trust

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<sup>2</sup> International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). (2025). *Reuters Digital Report 2025: Falling trust and the rise of alternative media ecosystems*. Accessible at: [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital\\_News-Report\\_2025.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital_News-Report_2025.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Happer, C. (2025, November). *What a decade of research reveals about why people don't trust media in the digital age*. The Conversation. Via link: <https://theconversation.com/what-a-decade-of-research-reveals-about-why-people-dont-trust-media-in-the-digital-age-264222>

vary significantly depending on geographical location, media type, and audience demographics. The annual report of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, which covers 48 countries across six continents, provides one of the longest and most comparable datasets available. According to the Institute's 2025 report, global trust in the news stands at around 40%. Although this figure has remained stable over the past three years, it still represents a historic low and reflects a long-term structural decline.<sup>4</sup> Regional differences are also evident. Trust in the media remains relatively high in Northern and Western European countries such as Finland and Portugal. By contrast, trust in traditional media is considerably lower in the United States, Argentina, and many countries in the Global South.<sup>5</sup> According to a 2024 study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), based on a survey of approximately 60,000 respondents across 30 member countries, the main drivers of declining trust in the media are increasing political polarization in media content and the spread of disinformation. These factors undermine trust not only in the media but also in public institutions more broadly.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the above, what other factors may be influencing the decline in trust in traditional media? Researchers have attempted to explain this phenomenon from various perspectives. One of the most common explanations is related to the transformation of the media economy. In particular, the virtual disappearance of traditional classified advertising,<sup>7</sup> declining revenues for newsrooms, and reduced resources for producing original, high-quality journalistic content have created conditions in which local coverage is discouraged, the likelihood of errors has increased, and audiences perceive a decline in quality. On the other hand, traditional media outlets have become dependent on digital platforms for distribution, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Google, and have become subject to algorithmic logic that prioritizes engagement over accuracy and sensationalism over nuance.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Newman, N., Ross Arguedas, A., Robertson, C. T., Nielsen, R. K., & Fletcher, R. (2025). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. Via link: [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital\\_News-Report\\_2025.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital_News-Report_2025.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Edelman Trust Barometer. (2024). Edelman Global Advisory. Via link: [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2024-02/2024%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2024-02/2024%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> OECD. (2024). Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results: Trust and information integrity. OECD Publishing. Via link: [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/07/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results\\_eeb36452/9a20554b-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/07/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results_eeb36452/9a20554b-en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> A small advertisement placed in a newspaper or a magazine, u to sell or buy something or to find or offer a job Cambridge Dictionary. Via link: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/classified-ad>

<sup>8</sup> OECD. (2024). OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results: Trust and information integrity. OECD Publishing. Via link: [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/07/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results\\_eeb36452/9a20554b-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/07/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results_eeb36452/9a20554b-en.pdf)

From a political perspective, the literature describes campaigns by populist movements across the ideological spectrum that seek to portray mainstream journalism as a tool of "corrupt elites." Such campaigns serve to reinforce distrust not only of the media but also of established institutions in general.<sup>9</sup> According to ongoing focus group research by the Glasgow University Media Group, audiences across all demographic groups perceive mainstream journalism as being connected to "a political system that ignores them." This perception is particularly strong among groups facing economic challenges.<sup>10</sup>

Psychological research studies add another perspective to the phenomenon of declining trust in traditional media. Cognitive science suggests that people assess the credibility of information through a combination of systematic evaluation and peripheral heuristics, such as visual presentation and familiarity with the source.<sup>11</sup> These heuristics, which are well-adapted to information-scarce environments, are relatively vulnerable in information-rich environments, where it is often difficult to distinguish between well-packaged disinformation and professional journalism. Ultimately, this confusion contributes to audience skepticism towards the media and undermines the credibility of quality journalism.

In the context of audience's media consumption, it is important to note that declining trust manifests itself differently among consumers of different age groups. Young people, especially those belonging to what demographers refer to as Generation Z, consume news in qualitatively different ways from older generations. Instead of relying primarily on publications, they process information through algorithm-driven feeds and recommendations from friends and peers.<sup>12</sup> They assess the credibility of information more through comparisons between multiple sources and social signals than through institutional authority. This shift does not necessarily mean that they are less discerning; some research suggests that intensive comparison of sources can be an effective verification strategy. Rather, it means that the mechanisms through which traditional media outlets built trust - such as authority, a long operating history, and professional accreditation, no longer function in the same way for this specific demographic.

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<sup>9</sup> Centre for Information, Technology, and Public Life (CITAP). (2023). Critical disinformation studies. University of North Carolina. Via link: <https://citap.unc.edu/research/critical-disinfo/>

<sup>10</sup> Happer, C. (2025, November). *What a decade of research reveals about why people don't trust media in the digital age*. The Conversation. Via link: <https://theconversation.com/what-a-decade-of-research-reveals-about-why-people-dont-trust-media-in-the-digital-age-264222>

<sup>11</sup> Paul, C., & Matthews, M. (2016). The Russian 'firehose of falsehood' propaganda model: Why it might work and options to counter it. RAND Corporation. Via link: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>

<sup>12</sup> Newman, N., Ross Arguedas, A., Robertson, C. T., Nielsen, R. K., & Fletcher, R. (2025). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. Via link: [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital\\_News-Report\\_2025.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital_News-Report_2025.pdf)

In addition to the above, according to a 2025 report by the Reuters Institute, 58% of respondents worldwide stated that they were not confident in their ability to distinguish truth from falsehood in the online information environment. This uncertainty surrounding information is an important finding in itself: it does not directly indicate a challenge to credibility, but it does point to a breakdown in the systems of verification and trust on which democratic societies rely for public debate.<sup>13</sup>

### **Social Media “Influencers” as Information Transmitters**

In the credibility vacuum caused by the decline in trust in traditional journalism, a new category of information actor has emerged: the social media influencer. As a cultural and economic phenomenon, the number of information products created by influencers has increased dramatically. According to the Reuters Institute (2025), 36% of respondents worldwide access news on a weekly basis via Facebook, 30% via YouTube, 19% via Instagram and WhatsApp, 16% via TikTok, and 12% via X.<sup>14</sup> A specific subcategory of influencers has attracted attention in this ecosystem: news influencers. These are social media influencers who regularly publish news on various public or political issues for a broad audience, without formal journalistic accreditation or institutional affiliation. A 2024 Pew Research Center study of American news influencers found that 63% of them are male, only 52% express any political orientation, and that the ideological distribution among them is slightly skewed to the right, except on TikTok, where left-wing influencers predominate.<sup>15</sup> The rise of influencers can also be attributed to the shortcomings of traditional journalism. A study of Black issues in the American Midwest found that distrust of mainstream media has created a strong preference for new media outlets that are perceived to share the community’s identity and interests. This distrust has developed over decades of coverage that Black communities have perceived as distorting their reality, ignoring their concerns, or harming their interests.<sup>16</sup> This finding is consistent across many marginalized communities around the world and complicates any simplistic narrative that portrays people’s attempts to move away from traditional media as a lack of media literacy.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. page: 22

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. page: 10

<sup>15</sup> Pew Research Center. (2024). *America’s news influencers*. Pew Research Center Journalism Project. [https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/11/PJ\\_2024.11.18\\_news-influencers\\_report.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/11/PJ_2024.11.18_news-influencers_report.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Brown, D. K. (2024). *Trust in U.S. media hit an all-time low in 2024: A new survey shows Black Midwesterners have found other trusted messengers of news*. The Conversation. Via link: <https://theconversation.com/trust-in-u-s-media-hit-an-all-time-low-in-2024-a-new-survey-shows-black-midwesterners-have-found-other-trusted-messengers-of-news-244471>

When discussing influencers, it is worth noting the paradox that arises in the context of trust between these individuals and their audiences. In particular, the 2025 Influencer Trust Index, which is based on a survey of more than 3,700 American consumers, shows that 58% have purchased various types of products as a result of influencer advertising, and 35% have purchased four to six types of products. However, only 5% fully trust influencer content, and overall trust in influencers is lower than trust in traditional advertising.<sup>17</sup> In addition, among young people, particularly members of Generation Z and millennials, trust in influencers decreased by five percentage points between 2023 and 2024, reversing the previous trend of steady growth. This decline is attributed to several factors: the spread of manipulated information generated by artificial intelligence, growing awareness of undisclosed commercial relationships, and the increasing number of influencers, which has weakened the authenticity signals that initially distinguished this format from traditional advertising.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the challenges related to trust, influencers continue to attract large audiences, serving as a kind of substitute for traditional media. However, the benefits of influencers are particularly evident in countries where media freedom is restricted. The Reuters Institute notes that in countries where independent journalism is suppressed and information disseminated by authoritarian regimes is propagandistic, the social media activity of influential individuals can create an environment for diverse forms of expression.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it is true that influencers compete with traditional media for audiences, but some of them also play a positive role in achieving the primary goal of trusted media outlets: providing audiences with accurate and comprehensive information.

### **Propaganda, Disinformation, and Deliberate Discrediting of the Media**

Propaganda and disinformation, one of the main objectives of which is to discredit democratic institutions, including the media, play a significant role in the breakdown of trust in traditional media. Their aim is often to leave target societies without a reliable and authoritative reference point within the

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<sup>17</sup> BBB National Programs / National Advertising Division. (2025). *The Influencer Trust Index: Consumer Insights 2025*. Via link:

[https://bbbprograms.org/getmedia/534acbf7-efdb-45aa-a40e-68394ff56f47/2025\\_InfluencerTrustIndex.pdf](https://bbbprograms.org/getmedia/534acbf7-efdb-45aa-a40e-68394ff56f47/2025_InfluencerTrustIndex.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Morning Consult. (2025). *The 2025 influencer marketing guide*. Morning Consult Pro. <https://intel.morningconsult.com/mc-content/analyst-reports/influencer-marketing-guide-2025>

<sup>19</sup> Newman, N., Ross Arguedas, A., Robertson, C. T., Nielsen, R. K., & Fletcher, R. (2025). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. Via link: [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital\\_News-Report\\_2025.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital_News-Report_2025.pdf)

vast flow of information. Academic research on propaganda and disinformation has become particularly relevant since 2016, when “fake news” emerged as a political category and Russian interference in the US presidential election was documented. Since then, an active discussion has developed around different types of false information and their proper conceptualization: disinformation refers to false or misleading information that is deliberately spread with the intention of misleading audiences, causing harm, or advancing political interests. It differs from misinformation (false information shared without malicious intent) and propaganda (which may or may not be factually false but is always strategically motivated). In practice, however, all three categories often overlap, and it remains difficult to fully distinguish between them empirically.

The current scholarly consensus, drawing on multiple disciplinary perspectives, argues that deliberate disinformation is not only an epistemological problem but also a structural threat to democracy. As Bliss and colleagues (2020) argue, the deliberate distortion of information undermines trust in “the fundamental fabric of democracy, in various sociopolitical institutions such as legitimate news sources, scholars, experts, and even fellow citizens.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the problem is not simply that people believe false information; rather, prolonged exposure to controversial, contradictory, and unreliable information weakens the willingness to engage in public discourse, which is one of the main foundations of a free society.

The most widely cited model of modern propaganda is the RAND Corporation’s firehose of falsehood<sup>21</sup> model, which was originally developed in 2016 to describe identified Russian propaganda techniques and has since been applied to a wider range of actors and contexts. The model describes a particular approach to the spread of disinformation, characterized by the multi-channel dissemination of large volumes of messages and a complete disregard for factual accuracy or even consistency. The model’s effectiveness is based on five psychological mechanisms identified in the social science literature. The first, information overload, forces audiences to rely on emotions rather than systematic evaluation, making them more susceptible to messages that fit familiar themes or evoke emotional responses. Second, the illusory truth effect, a major finding in cognitive psychology, demonstrates that repeated exposure to a message increases its perceived credibility, regardless of its accuracy. Third, peripheral cues, such as the visual

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<sup>20</sup> Bliss, N., Bradley, E., Garland, J., Menczer, F., Ruston, S. W., Starbird, K., & Wiggins, C. (2020). An agenda for disinformation research. *Computing Community Consortium*.  
<https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2012.08572>

<sup>21</sup> Paul, C., & Matthews, M. (2016). The Russian ‘firehose of falsehood’ propaganda model: Why it might work and options to counter it. RAND Corporation. Via link: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>

format of a news broadcast or the professional presentation of online materials, lead audiences to rely more on the surface features of information rather than its substantive evaluation. Fourth, social credibility refers to the perception that if many other people believe a particular claim, it must be true. Fifth, the sheer volume of high-intensity propaganda campaigns often exceeds the capacity of fact-checkers and objective media outlets, creating the impression that objective truth does not exist.<sup>22</sup> This, in turn, poses a challenge to trust in the media and any other institution.

This effect is compounded by the fact that another goal of disinformation is to polarize society and divide it into opposing sides. In this process, the media itself can also become polarized, which further negatively affects its credibility. A 2024 study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) confirms the systemic nature of this problem. Destructive trends, including media market concentration, audience fragmentation, disinformation, and a polarized information environment, are identified as factors that undermine the quality of journalism and access to information, directly affecting trust in both the media and public institutions. In addition, a small number of media owners, depending on their political views or interests, can influence an already fragmented information landscape, which, in turn, makes audiences more skeptical of media outlets.<sup>23</sup>

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Global studies on the erosion of trust in the media highlight several key findings regarding this challenge. First, the decline in trust in traditional media is structural rather than accidental: it reflects long-term changes in media economics, platform architecture, political polarization, and audience demographics. Research reports show that the algorithmic logic of digital platforms, incentives for sensationalism, and the economic crisis affecting traditional media have significantly weakened professional filters and degraded content quality. In this vacuum, news influencers have emerged as alternative sources of information for significant segments of the audience. In addition, sophisticated mechanisms of modern propaganda, inspired by Russia and similar authoritarian states, such as the “firehose of falsehood” model, deliberately exploit social polarization and cognitive biases in order to ultimately discredit the media.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> OECD. (2024). Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results: Trust and information integrity. OECD Publishing. Via link: [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/07/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results\\_eeb36452/9a20554b-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/07/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results_eeb36452/9a20554b-en.pdf)

At the same time, several important debates on this topic continue to exist within academic discourse. One concerns the issue of causality: does disinformation lead to a decline in trust, or, conversely, does pre-existing low trust create audiences that are more vulnerable to disinformation? According to some perspectives, distrust precedes the reception of disinformation and shapes information behavior, which is then easily exploited by disinformation campaigns for their own purposes. Therefore, the priority should not be limited to moderating media content but should also include addressing the institutional shortcomings that contribute to public distrust in the media.

There is also a difference of opinion regarding the normativity of trust in the media. Much of the research assumes that trust in mainstream journalism is inherently positive and desirable and that its decline is therefore problematic. However, some media scholars question this assumption. They point out that institutional failures, including the misrepresentation of marginalized communities and the alignment of powerful elites with official narratives, have given audiences rational reasons for distrust even before the emergence of social media. Accordingly, understanding the crisis of trust in a way that views institutional journalism as a solution rather than as part of the problem risks repeating the same mistakes that alienated audiences from traditional media in the first place.

The process of restoring trust in traditional media cannot be limited to superficial or technological interventions. According to various scholars, addressing this challenge requires an internal transformation of the media as a democratic institution, greater self-criticism, and the establishment of closer and more representative relationships with all groups of society.