

# European Policy Brief

## ■ *Building Trust and Distrust in the Media: The Role of Disinformation and Media Freedom*

### The media's role in (dis)trust-building in challenging times

Social media provide a space to express opinions, obtain news, and contest political and societal developments, thus complementing traditional media (radio, TV and press) and impacting on established forms of news-making and consumption. They offer a place for open deliberation that meets citizens' demand for public participation. But de facto, they also create a platform to polarise, spread mis- or disinformation, and attack individuals and institutions. At the same time, traditional media are in a process of transformation at the level of readership, corporate models and journalistic practices. In this new media context, targeted disinformation has increasingly been spread, thus unsettling populations and fueling distrust in political representatives and democracy, expertise and science. Disinformation and conspiracies gained particular salience on social media platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic, where so-called 'alternative news' and 'alternative facts' were amplified.

Such a development has motivated the EnTrust project to dedicate attention to the role of the media in the formation and contestation of trust in governance during times of crises.

The EnTrust project, devoted to studying trust and distrust in governance from various perspectives, has dedicated a part of its research to expanding our understanding of the chang-

ing role of journalism on trust mediation between political governance, scientific expertise, and citizens, and the impact of digital media technologies. The research shed light on the conditions under which media coverage of governance performance and scientific facts can lead to either informed opinion-making or the polarisation of political opinions questioning the trustworthiness of scientists, government and political representatives. The insights were obtained through a comparative media analysis of news coverage during the Covid-19 pandemic, an additional analysis of user comments on the newspapers' Facebook sites, and in-depth interviews with stakeholders involved in fact-checking or anti-disinformation initiatives. Research was conducted in seven European countries (Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Serbia), and generated a range of interesting findings that were presented and discussed at an expert roundtable debate that was composed of representatives of civil society organisations, the Council of Europe, and the European Commission.

The scientific report of the EnTrust project and the expert roundtable debate have informed the identification of a number of key problems and policy recommendations that are at the centre of this Policy Brief.

### ***#1: Prevent online disinformation and enforce the respect of human rights on online platforms***

The scrutiny of the harmful effects of unregulated social media has become the more important considering that more and more citizens seek news via social media, providing free and direct access to information. In addition, in some European countries, people turn to social media as a result of low or decreasing trust in public service media. To tackle online disinformation, EU policy-makers have taken steps towards a co-regulatory regime, but civil society organisations and media experts have argued that current instruments are not sufficient.

The revised Code of Practice on Disinformation (the Code) provides an important instrument to address online disinformation, but it must ensure strong enforcement and monitoring of commitments, preferably as a co-regulatory mechanism under the Digital Services Act (DSA). One significant aspect relates to transparency as regards targeted (political) advertisement. Users should be aware that the information they see is subject to algorithms and funding sources (who pays for the content they see). Another essential aspect relates to content moderation, which should take a human rights-based approach, and ensure that freedom of expression is respected as regards users and whoever is addressed by users.

Additionally, it should be considered that disinformation is not bias free. Civil society organisations stress that discriminatory disinformation (for example, gender-based disinformation) is common in the social media landscape. The discriminatory effects for the social and political participation of affected groups should be recognised in legislative instruments that regulate both the digital

and physical sphere.

In the context of disinformation on social media, it is crucial to draw attention to the recent advancements concerning the EU AI Act. Legislators have reached a consensus on a preliminary edition of the Act, which will now undergo negotiations with the Council of the European Union and EU member states. As AI technology continues to evolve, experts and civil society consistently emphasise the imperative to uphold fundamental rights in the application of AI, regardless of the user. There are also concerns about the potential detrimental effects of AI systems on marginalised groups, exacerbating systemic issues and inequalities.

There is a general agreement that new legislative instruments need to be integrated into existing legal frameworks in a harmonised way. A multi-stakeholder approach, including journalists, civil society organisations and academics, ensures that different concerns are considered in the drafting of legislation. Especially in such a fast-developing environment as the digital world, the implementation and relevance of legislation must be continuously monitored to ensure accountability.

### ***#2: Promote and fund educational programmes aimed at building media literacy***

Educational policies directed at media literacy (the ability to critically understand and evaluate information obtained via different sources) are important to better face the issues posed by disinformation and propaganda on online platforms and in media outlets. The empowerment of and awareness raising among citizens to apply a certain degree of distrust when engaging with media reports can curb the spread of disinformation. Citizens should develop best practices of media

usage and skills to navigate the digital news space.

The training of young people is especially important given their diverse and dynamic online activities. Teachers must be adequately qualified to transfer media literacy skills to their students. Media literacy training can be embedded in the curriculum, or be provided at dedicated school events. Links can be established with other schools that have successfully implemented media literacy training. Likewise, schools can benefit from the expertise of journalists, IT specialists, and other professional groups.

National and local authorities should promote and fund educational programmes aimed at the enhancement of media literacy, in line with Article 33a of the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive. Expertise can be found in civil society organisations (e.g., Lie Detectors), or European academic networks (e.g., the European Digital Media Observatory) that have developed training for teachers and pupils on detecting disinformation, and fact checking. The project 'Free to Speak - Safe to Learn - Democratic Schools for All' of the Council of Europe is another example of how such training can be supported at the European level.

### ***#3: Make media ownership transparent and ensure (access to) independent news reporting***

In several EU member states, we witness the misuse and capture of the media for the agendas of political actors and the vested interests of business magnates. It is therefore important to understand how companies are structured, and how funding impacts media content, not only to provide citizens with impartial news reporting, but also to (re)build trust in democracy.

Legislative instruments, such as the proposed European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) or the European Democracy Action Plan, aim at revealing conflicts of interest and monopolies, and at strengthening editorial independence in the European media landscape, but there are concerns among civil society organisations and journalists that the measures will not be sufficient to meet demands on media freedom and pluralism, as stipulated in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

EU member states should adhere to and implement the European standards on public service media by strengthening 'the rules and mechanisms to enhance the independent governance and editorial independence' (EU Rule of Law Report 2022) of such entities. Media ownership needs to be transparent, and the mechanisms that are in place must meet European standards on the independence of the media regulatory authority, as emphasised in the recommendations of the Rule of Law Report 2022.

Civil society organisations and journalists urge that a legal framework is in place to ensure that freedom of expression is safeguarded in both private and public news media companies. To address situations of media capture and concentration, the EU and Member States should scale up their funding support of activities that promote independent and unbiased news reporting, such as investigative journalism or fact-checking projects, or other ventures that contribute to media pluralism, taking into account the recommendation CM/Rec (2022)4 on the promotion of a favourable environment for quality journalism in the digital age by the Council of Europe.

Funding should further ensure the affordability and dissemination of unbiased news through different channels. Quality journalism is a public good, and it must be preserved to provide citizens with evidence-based and trustworthy information.

#### **#4: Ensure the protection and safety of journalists**

Besides the threats to media apparatus and quality journalism, there is also an expanding threat to journalists themselves. They increasingly experience defamation, hate speech, violence, and surveillance perpetuated by state and non-state actors with anti-democratic sentiments. This happens both in physical and digital spaces, which emphasises again the need for a human rights-based approach to content moderation, as mentioned in recommendation #1. In 2022, the [Safety of Journalists Platform](#), run by the Council of Europe, registered double as many alerts as in 2019, involving 12 more countries. This trend not only threatens the safety of journalists, but also the quality of journalistic work, as it leads to self-imposed censorship. The misuse of legislation to intimidate and prosecute critical opinions jeopardises journalistic freedoms and violates fundamental rights.

In light of the ongoing developments concerning the EMFA, there are growing [concerns](#) that the Council is embarking on a perilous path towards legitimising objectionable forms of surveillance aimed at journalists and their sources. Of particular concern is France's stance, which has advocated for an exception to the general ban on deploying spyware against journalists, thereby risking the interpretation of spyware as a legitimate investigative tool.

Civil society organisations and journalists emphasised the importance of legislation to protect journalists and their work in physical and virtual spaces. Safeguards should be given to journalists in respect to their safety, adhering to [European standards on the protection of journalists](#).

The EMFA should reinforce the protection of sources and whistle-blowers by implementing the Council of Europe's recommendation

[CM/Rec\(2016\)4](#) on the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists and other media actors. The Council of the EU and the European Parliament must ensure that the final text of the [proposed Directive and Recommendation](#) is effective in preventing strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), not least to counteract any unintended outcomes of regulatory law.

The 2022 rule of law report recommends in favour of some EU member states that fair, transparent and non-discriminatory procedures should apply for granting operating licences to media outlets. In addition, journalists should have a legal right to information from public authorities, and be granted access to government documents, adhering at all times to [European standards](#). Through their actions, governments should signal that a critical evaluation of political decisions and informed distrust are highly valued in a democratic society.

#### **Research background: supportive evidence**

The policy recommendations presented above are rooted in evidence generated through the EnTrust research. In particular, the recommendations build on the findings from our standardised content analysis of a representative sample of 800 trust contestations published in articles from three different newspapers in each of the seven countries and within four predefined periods (March 2020 – April 2020, September 2020 – October 2020, December 2020 – January 2021, March 2021 – April 2021), and of 250 trust-related user comments per country on the newspapers' Facebook pages. These studies informed us about the degree of trust in particular providers of information (government, science and the media) during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the extent to which this trust is contested

in the public sphere. Additionally, 10 in-depth interviews per country with journalists, public authorities and civil society actors (hereinafter ‘experts’) involved in fact-checking or anti-disinformation projects were conducted in order to identify the originators of disinformation, the conditions for their spread, and their resonance in public debates, and in order to ascertain successful counter-strategies to curb and prevent the share of disinformation, and enhance citizens’ resilience.

## Key findings

### *# Trust in information providers*

Our research findings confirm that media play an important role as arenas of trust formation and contestation of trust in political institutions, science and experts, albeit with considerable differences according to the type of media outlet involved. On the one hand, our media content analysis reveals that the majority of mainstream newspapers express a balanced view of reasoned trust or distrust through factual statements, and journalists do not give high salience to extremist positions or polarised opinions. Judgements about the trustworthiness of particular actors regularly recur to factual argumentation. Competence and expertise are decisive in the attribution of trust in political actors and scientists. Differences emerge when comparing more in detail the seven countries that were part of our analysis (e.g., trust in government in times of the pandemic is high in Italy, while distrust in government is more salient in Germany, Czechia and Poland), but traditional platforms of news coverage (here: particularly legacy media) play a constructive role in a critical debate that balances trust and distrust in governance, science and expertise.

On the other hand, our Facebook user

comments’ analysis demonstrates that social media users express themselves mainly in critical opposition to the news, and in a predominantly distrustful way towards established information providers. The picture, however, is more nuanced because a substantive number of users are also supportive in their comments of the claims in the news by government, science or others. What is noteworthy is the different pattern of reasoning within social media comments. In contrast to the predominantly factual argumentation in professional journalism, user comments more frequently refer to values in order to support their statements, which are primarily meant to undermine trust in government and science, and not to support it. While social media are thus more inclusive, as they provide room for media users and citizens to raise their voice in the public sphere, the format of social media does not appear to be a suitable space for a balanced and reasoned discussion about trust and distrust in governance. This structural deficiency has to do with the fact that social media were never established for dialogical deliberations, but as a space for commercial interests and their promotional aims.

Our media content analysis thus shows that different media differ substantially in the way they contribute to trust-building in democratic societies. Critical news reporting should be a reference point for all media, meaning that traditional media and professional journalism are more reliable than social media, as the former engage in critical news reporting and discussion, thus promoting a balanced approach of enlightened or sceptical trust, while the latter favour a less balanced and more polarised arena of public opinion formation. These general observations, however, need to be qualified in two respects. Following our data, we see that legacy media in some

countries (particularly Denmark and Germany) are more strongly committed to enlightened trust, while these media exhibit a more unbalanced and polarised approach in other countries (Greece, Serbia, and Poland). In regard to social media, the commenting by citizens is somewhat less strongly unbalanced in Denmark, but very strongly biased and deeply anchored in a distrustful opinion climate in the other six analysed countries.

These findings corroborate the need to limit the negative impact of social media in regard to disinformation and polarisation (recommendation #1), but also the need to assist independent media and critical journalism (recommendation #3). Further evidence supporting these recommendations is provided by the analysis of available survey data presented in the EnTrust report.

These findings highlight that parts of the population tend to distrust the traditional media with their more balanced and substantiated news coverage practices, while at the same time trusting the social media with their more biased patterns of information and opinion spreading. The analysis further shows that differences between countries prevail, thus indicating that action is required more urgently in some countries than in others. In regard to trust in media and journalism as main providers of information during the pandemic, Denmark is a high-trust country, whereas Germany and Czechia are considered medium trust countries. Trust in media and journalism in Greece and Serbia is low, and attitudes in Poland and Italy are polarised, showing both high levels of trust and distrust. A problem emerges particularly in those countries where widespread distrust in mainstream journalism and public service media tends to run parallel to higher rates of trust in social media as a relevant alternative source of news. Certainly,

this situation is not true for most countries with higher rates of trust in traditional media, given that citizens of these countries also tend to express low levels of trust in private websites and social media.

### ***# Counter-strategies to curb and prevent the share of disinformation***

The findings of our comparative analysis of expert interviews also provide empirical evidence for the need to limit the role of social media in disinformation (recommendation #1), and the need to assist independent media and journalism (recommendation #3). Consulted experts observed an increase in disinformation and (foreign) state propaganda, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and later the war in Ukraine. This development has also raised security concerns. To deal with this challenge of dissemination of disinformation outside the institutionalised channels of the media, experts see a need to strengthen the role of professional journalists as ‘trust mediators’ also on social media news platforms, for instance, by facilitating open-access of fact-checked news, or by making information sources transparent. Media and communication experts also emphasise the need for an improved platform design, to avoid, for instance, unmonitored algorithms selecting alternative media over evidence-based news.

Self-regulation of social media platforms is increasingly seen as insufficient, and some experts attributed an important role to the EU in terms of co-regulating platforms. Purely market-driven online spaces would provide a floor for disinformation to spread, and it would be important to demonetise such information. In this context, experts stressed the importance of respecting democratic principles, such as the freedom of expression in the fight against disinformation. Actions need to be proportionate and ensure the right balance of freedoms and control.

Expert interviews also pointed to the need to engage more systematically in promoting media literacy within the European population. In terms of education, experts commonly agreed that education programmes are needed to improve resilience against online disinformation, which has become more prevalent since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. They call for training on media and news literacy and the reflective use of the media, as well as supporting fact-checking initiatives.

### **# Safety of journalists**

A recurrent topic of the expert interviews referred to the problem of safety for independent journalism. Experts expressed concern at the increase of smear campaigns and hate speech on social media, which have caused harm to the reputation and safety of journalists. Several journalists also underscored the recent increase in verbal or physical attacks on reporters by non-state actors, for instance, at demonstrations, or when conducting interviews. In other cases, media experts voiced concern about state actors who exploited their power and verbally attacked and intimidated journalists, for example in Serbia. The expert interviews thus agree that there is an urgent need for action to support independent and critical journalism, which is also widely considered to be a trustworthy source of information by citizens in the various countries under analysis.

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### **Research parameters and project information**

The EnTrust project is funded by the EU in the context of the Horizon2020 Research and Innovation Programme (Grant Agreement No. 870572). The recommendations and findings presented in this policy brief are based on the [Integrated Report on Trust and the Media](#),

as well as on an [expert roundtable](#) between the research team and the following experts: Barbora Bukovská, Article 19; Artemiza-Tatiana Chisca, Council of Europe - Media and Internet Governance Division; Audrius Perkauskas, European Commission - DG Connect - Audiovisual and Media Services Policy; Renate Schroeder, European Federation of Journalists; Harry Panagopoulos, European Commission - DG Just - EU Citizenship Rights and Free Movement; Jan Penfrat, European Digital Rights; and Alberto Rabbachin, European Commission - DG Connect - Media Convergence and Social Media.

The EnTrust consortium consists of eight partner teams conducting research and dissemination activities in seven countries (the Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Germany, Italy, Poland and Serbia), and at the EU-level. Its work-plan consists of seven work packages devoted to the systematic analysis and reflection of different aspects of the topic:

1. The Theoretical and Normative Underpinnings of Trust and Distrust
2. Trust and Distrust at the Street-level of Public Policy
3. The Role of Democratic Social Movements in the Formation of Trust and Distrust
4. The Role of the Media in Trust and Distrust Building: Information or Polarisation?
5. Developmental-psychological Insight into Trust and Distrust
6. Appraising Citizens' Trust and Distrust in Governance: Forms, Determinants, Effects and Remedies
7. Civilising Trust and Distrust: Role Models and Recommendations

Further work packages are committed to the dissemination, exploitation and communication of research, management and ethical issues.

Further information on the EnTrust project is available at [www.entrust-project.eu](http://www.entrust-project.eu).

### Consortium:

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### Social Media Links



#### Project Information

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