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Selective Trust in News in the Comparative Context

Benjamin Toff

Abstract: This article argues for an approach to the study of trust in news that focuses not only on average levels of trust but variation when it comes to the different sources of news in a given media market. Drawing on large-scale survey data collected by the Reuters Institute in 2021 (approximately 93,000 respondents in 46 media markets), this article shows how around three quarters of audiences are, in fact, selectively trusting toward some news outlets and distrusting toward others. It further demonstrates how this "selective trust in news" occurs systematically in some markets more so than others. While trust in news in general is positively correlated with rates of press freedom, brand-level trust is not, and some of the most highly trusted brands are in places with low press freedom. Brand-level trust, on the other hand, is at least in part a function of a country's level of economic and social development. To the extent this higher level of trust may not always be warranted or deserved, this finding has important implications for independent news organizations and NGOs that seek to build greater skepticism and media literacy among the public.

Keywords: Trust in news, Comparative media systems, Quantitative analysis, Press freedom, Human development index, Audience research

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Introduction

Declining levels of trust in news in many places around the world has generated considerable concern from academic researchers, nonprofits and foundations, as well as journalists and practitioners (Fletcher, 2020; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Jones, 2018; Toff et al., 2021a). There are many compelling reasons for these concerns. Trust in news media is important not only for the continued health and survival of news organizations themselves, but for the public as well who are often reliant on the news media to navigate and engage in political and civic life.

However, scholarly concern about declining rates of trust in news has tended to focus rather narrowly on select media markets mostly concentrated in the United States and Northern Europe (e.g., Andersen et al., 2021; Ladd, 2011)—places with historically powerful independent journalistic institutions but which of late have seen erosions in press freedom (Kenny, 2020) at the same time as their legacy publishers and broadcasters have encountered significant economic headwinds (Pickard, 2019). Both of these trends have raised further existential alarms and contributed to concerns about trust. However, it is far from clear whether audience attitudes toward the press elsewhere in the world ought to be evaluated according to the same standards researchers have typically employed in these markets. That is, in many parts of the world where the press may be less independent or particularly beholden to corrupt owners or political figures, declining trust in news may in fact be a sign of healthy democratic resistance to illiberal forces in civil society rather than a symptom of declining journalistic authority (Carlson, 2017). Moreover, corruption, bias, and low-quality news is hardly confined to the Global South; measures of trust in news in general almost certainly obscure the mix of attitudes many audiences may hold toward varying news outlets in their countries.

This article makes both conceptual and descriptive contributions. It argues for an approach to the study of trust in news that focuses not only on average levels of trust, which is the convention in most comparative research, but also on variance—how consistently or inconsistently individual news brands are rated as trustworthy or untrustworthy. In so doing, I make a key distinction here between "generalized" versus "selective" trust in news. The latter is rarely examined even though from a normative standpoint, we ought to expect audiences to be discerning in what they choose to trust—placing their trust in *some* news media but rightly skeptical toward others. The objects of trust that audiences encounter and regularly evaluate are *not* all created equal; some outlets are much more objectively deserving of trust than others. In other cases, even the same brands are evaluated subjectively quite differently depending on the distinct worldviews of differing audience segments within a given country. Declining levels of trust at the country or media system level may indicate changes in the composition or quality of the political information environment that are often poorly captured by conventional measures. They may also reflect growing selectivity in how publics evaluate news media in their countries (i.e., more polarized publics). Merely focusing on average levels of trust in news in general fails to account for either of these dynamics.

After laying out the conceptual argument behind focusing on selective trust in news, the article goes on to demonstrate just how widespread such evaluations of news brands tends to be, drawing on large-scale survey data collected by the Reuters Institute in 2021 (approximately 93,000 respondents in 46 media markets). Around three quarters of audiences are in fact “selectively trusting” toward some news outlets but distrusting toward others. Selective trust in news also occurs systematically in some markets more so than others. While trust in news in general is positively correlated with rates of press freedom, brand-level trust is not. That is, many brands in places with high levels of press freedom are trusted by only a small percentage of the public, and vice versa; some of the most highly trusted brands are in places with low press freedom. Brand-level trust, on the other hand, is at least in part a function of a country’s level of economic and social development. All else equal, brands tend to be rated as more trustworthy in less developed countries and media markets. To the extent this higher level of trust toward individual outlets may not always be warranted or deserved, this finding has potentially important implications for independent news organizations and NGOs that seek to support free and democratic media. In these markets, a focus on high levels of *generalized* trust in news may actually be normatively problematic. Instead, a more critical objective may be facilitating more *selective* trust in news, helping the public to differentiate between outlets on the basis of the quality of the journalism they offer.

The article begins with a brief overview of relevant research on trust in news followed by a summary of its data and methods. The third section presents the main findings with a concluding discussion.

Challenges Around Measuring Trust in News in Comparative Contexts

Part of the reason research on the subject of trust in news has been so muddled is that the most commonly used measures in research studies focus on news media trust in general without differentiating between the sources of news people are thinking about when asked for their evaluations. For example, Tsfati and Ariely’s (2014) cross-country study of trust in news considers a mix of individual-level and country-level correlates of trust in news across 44 media markets, but it relies on World Values Survey data, which captures only “confidence” in “the press” and “television” as a proxy for overall trust in news. More recently, Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019) used data from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report in 2017 to assess how different modes of media consumption across 35 media markets explain variation in general trust in news, whether respondents believe they can “trust most news most of the time.” Such measures enable effective comparison across a variety of types of places but they may obscure important differences in terms of *what* news survey respondents are actually placing their trust in across these distinct media systems. When Daniller and colleagues (2017) used an experiment embedded in a survey (in the US) to better assess what sources people were thinking about when asked about generic media trust, they found that an accessibility bias may lead people to think about less trusted sources in the contemporary media environment—sources such as cable news or social media that did not exist in the past. When particular forms of news were specified in the question, levels of trust remained higher. This ambiguity in the underlying measure likely accounts for some of the observed decline in trust in news in some markets—but not all.[1]

A growing number of scholars including Schwarzenegger (2020) and Strömbäck et al. (2020) have begun advocating for greater specificity around the *object* of trust when measuring trust in news, noting that different levels of analysis may lead to different inferences and implications. They point to two potentially important dimensions of variation that more general measures tend to obscure. First, at the country level, the supply of news varies considerably from place to place and that means that the actual sources people are evaluating when they rate news as trustworthy are themselves quite distinct. Lower levels of trust in news in one country versus another may be due to actual differences in the quality of news in the two countries or they may reflect differences in the cultures around news consumption. Those cultural differences may reflect differences in interpersonal trust (Ward et al., 2014), shared folk theories about news (Palmer et al., 2020), elite discourse about news advanced by politicians (Van Duyn & Collier, 2018), or some combination of all of these factors. Disentangling these factors can prove challenging.

Second, at the individual level, we also know that people may hold a mix of different attitudes toward these different sources. Many audiences are quite disconnected from news if not indifferent altogether (Toff et al., 2021b); others are highly engaged and hold nuanced views of the sources they engage with. While recent studies have raised concerns about growing numbers of people who are generally distrusting of all sources they encounter, particularly those who are reliant on digital platforms to keep up with news (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019; Park et al., 2020; Ternullo, 2022), the number of people who adopt forms of "generalized skepticism" toward news remains unclear. Moreover, while generalized distrust may be concerning, so too is generalized trust particularly when media outlets are of uneven quality and may not all be deserving of trust.[2]

What is needed, I argue, is a focus not only on average trust in news in general at the country level but attention to the ways people are "selectively" trusting toward news in their countries. Even though news media literacy scholarship has increasingly come to emphasize the importance of training audiences to differentiate between individual news outlets and the distinct ways they practice journalism (e.g., Vraga &

[1] There are some exceptions to these practices. Tsfati (2010), for example, differentiates between use of mainstream online sites verse nonmainstream online sites in relation to news media trust.
[2] Prior studies have sometimes used the term "generalized skepticism" (e.g., Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019), which they argue more broadly captures an absence of trust as opposed to "generalized distrust," which connotes a more active critical evaluation. However, as Fawzi and colleagues (2021) note, there is no consensus on this point and the terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

Tully, 2021), prior research has rarely examined trust in news at the brand-level in order to assess how much of the public actually does this in practice. That leads to this study's first two descriptive research questions: (RQ1) How selectively trusting toward news are *individuals*? And (RQ2) How consistently or inconsistently are *brands* viewed as trustworthy? Furthermore, to examine patterns in selective trust in news, I also ask a third research question: (RQ3) How does brand-level trust vary systematically across *countries/media markets*?

Methods and Data

To examine these research questions, I draw on a unique dataset of media audience attitudes and behaviors collected by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, the 2021 Digital News Report (DNR) (Newman et al., 2021). These surveys, fielded online by the research firm YouGov, are based on internet samples representative to the online populations in each of the 46 markets included in that year's DNR. Sample sizes were approximately 2000 respondents in each market (N_{total} = 96,000).[3] The countries included in the sample span Africa, the Americas, Asia-Pacific, and Europe, encompassing most Western media systems, although less developed countries where surveys are more difficult to field were excluded. Additional methodological details about the sample are provided by the Reuters Institute.[4]

The main measures this study focuses on are survey questions capturing trust in news at different levels of analysis. Trust in news in general was measured by asking respondents to what extent they agreed or disagreement with the statement that they could trust "most news most of the time," which was measured on a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" (-2) to "strongly agree" (2). Respondents were also asked similarly about "most of the news I consume most of the time," measured on the same 5-point scale, as well as how "trustworthy" they perceived approximately 15 individual news brands in each market, measured on an 11-point scale ranging from "not at all trustworthy" (0) to "completely trustworthy" (10) with "neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy" (5) designated as the midpoint. The full brand list (N = 688) is available on the Reuters Institute website and generally contains the most commonly used and best-known outlets in each market, including state-owned and public service media, popular commercial outlets, and where relevant in some markets, online news portals.[5]

Responses to these brand-level trust questions are used in two ways: first, to

[3] Although most markets are synonymous with countries, the term "markets" is used because the data includes audiences in Taiwan and Hong Kong as well.
[4] See https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/methodology.
[5] In many markets, "local or regional newspapers" or other umbrella categories were also asked about, but these have been excluded from the analysis in this study. In some countries, where surveys were fielded in more than one language, separate lists of language-specific brands were also asked about. For the full list, see https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/interactive.

characterize *individuals* as either selectively trusting toward news (as opposed to generally trusting or distrusting toward all news outlets they were asked about); and second, to characterize *brands* as either consistently or inconsistently trusted by audiences. Individuals were categorized as "selectively trusting" if they trusted at least one brand and did not trust at least one brand. Those who reported trusting all of the brands asked about (excluding those they had never heard of) were defined as exhibiting "generalized trust" and those who said they did not trust any of the brands asked about defined as exhibiting "generalized distrust."[6] This operationalization no doubt oversimplifies considerable nuance within these categories, flattening out potentially important variation in the *degree* of selective trust that individuals display. More sophisticated measurement approaches could certainly be used—a point I return to in this article's discussion section—but as my aim in the first research question is merely to characterize how much audiences engage in selective evaluations of news media; this more black-and-white measure offers a minimalist baseline description of how widespread the underlying phenomenon actually is.

The second way these brand-level trust measures are used in the analysis involves focusing on how consistently or inconsistently each are evaluated by audiences in each market. This involves calculating not only the average level of trust toward each brand—making use of the full 11-point scale—but also how polarizing each brand is, which is captured by calculating the variance in audience evaluations of the trustworthiness of each brand. High variance in brand-level trust indicates brands that are more polarizing, low variance indicates that audiences have mostly uniform attitudes toward the brand (positive or negative). The least trusted brands in the DNR include tabloids The Sun in the UK (3.1) and Bild in Germany (3.4) whereas the most trusted brands overall were both in Kenya, Citizen TV (8.3) and KTN News (8.2). However, these are not the same as the most or least polarizing brands overall as the most and least trusted brands achieve such ratings only when most people share a consensus toward them—whether justified or not. Brands with the highest level of variance in trust included cable channel CNN in the US (11.8) and Turkish state-run news agency Anadolu Ajansı (11.5) whereas the least amount of variance in trust was observed in Singapore for aggregator Yahoo! News (3.1) and online news site Mothership.sg (3.2).

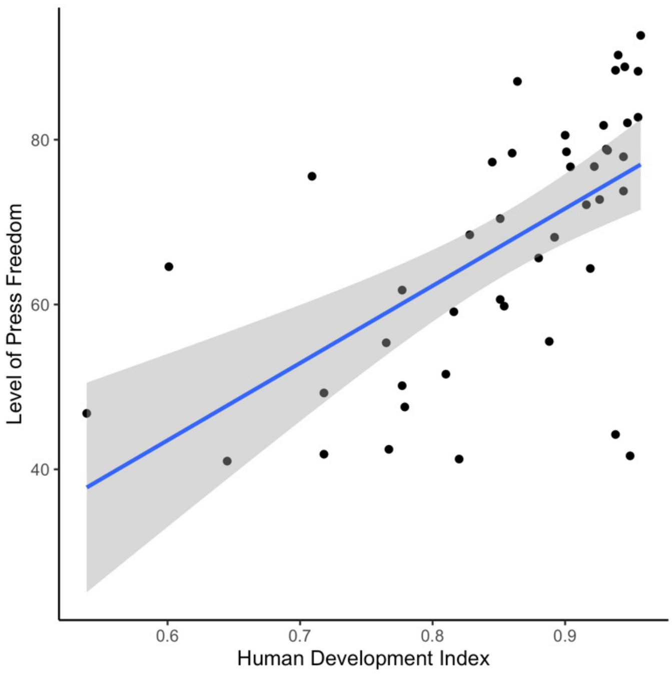
To examine the third research question concerning comparative differences across countries and media markets, these measures of brand-level trust are next clustered by country and analyzed in relation to two additional sources of secondary data: levels of press freedom in each country as measured by Reporters Without Borders and levels of economic and social welfare development as captured by the United Nations. The Press Freedom Index is based on a survey of experts who are asked to evaluate "pluralism, independence of the media, quality of legislative framework and safety of journalists in each country and region" (Reporters Without Borders,

[6] Responses greater than 5 were lumped together as "trusted" and those less than 5 as "not trusted" in order to reduce the overall complexity of the analysis and to avoid drawing inferences based on differences in country-specific response styles on scales (Harzing, 2006).

2022). The scale for the markets in this study range from 41 in India to 92.65 in Norway, using data for 2021. The United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI) tracks country-level development in a more comprehensive way beyond merely economic growth alone. It combines measures of life expectancy and health, education, and standards of living (United Nations Development Program, 2022). Most markets included in the DNR are at the "high" or "very high" end of the HDI with Ireland (0.955), Switzerland (0.955), and Norway (0.957) ranked most highly on this scale and Nigeria (0.539), Kenya (0.601), and India (0.645) at the lower end, using data for 2020.

These two measures capture two separate dimensions around which media environments and their audiences might vary. Although the two measures are correlated (*r* = 0.6), there remains considerable variation across the markets included in this study (see Fig. 2), allowing for an examination of distinct patterns associated with each measure across the 46 markets examined.

Figure 1: Country-level relationship between the 2020 Human Development Index, published by the United Nations Development Program (2022), and the 2021 Press Freedom Index, published by Reporters Without Borders (2022).

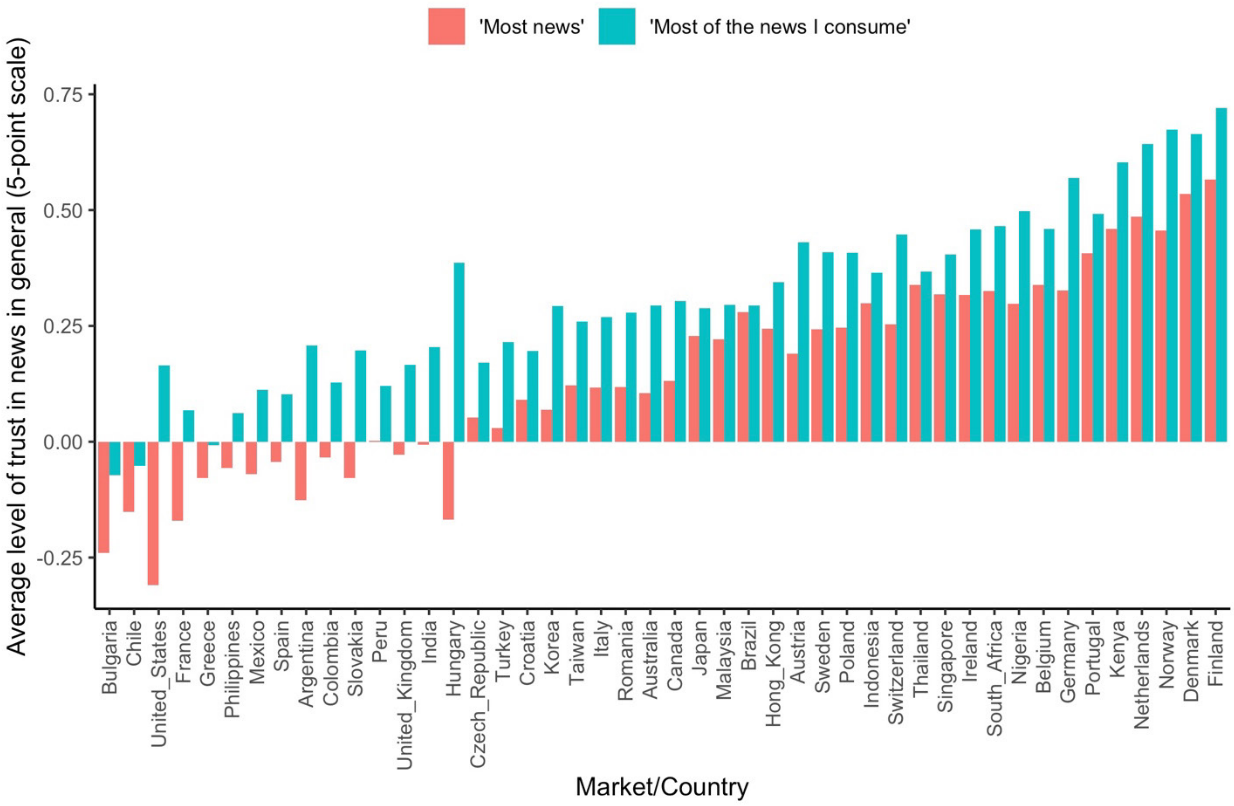


Findings

RQ1: How selectively trusting toward news are individuals?

We begin with a simple test of RQ1 by examining the difference between levels of trust in news in general and trust in news individuals personally consume. In Fig. 2, average levels of trust in news are plotted for each media market/country. In general, across these markets, respondents expressed significantly higher trust toward the sources they consume most of the time compared to most news overall. In some particularly polarized countries, such as the United States and Hungary, low levels of trust in news in general are not necessarily reflective of the substantially higher levels of trust toward news respondents themselves personally use, an indication that many audiences are engaging in selective evaluations of different sources of news in their country.

Figure 2: Average levels of trust in news in general by media market/country.

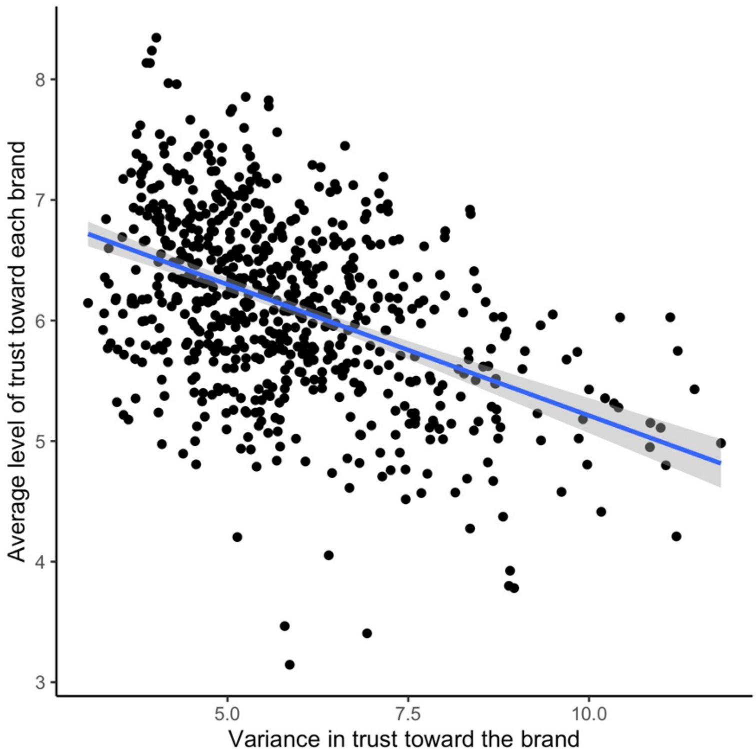


These results certainly suggest that at least some audiences make distinctions between news outlets in their countries, but these differences are small relative to the 5-point scale and still largely at a general level; respondents do not specify which sources of news they have in mind. However, we can assess that in more detail by examining how respondents evaluate the trustworthiness of individual brands. Doing so reveals just how widespread the practice of “selective trust” actually may be. More than three-quarters of people across the 46 markets in the 2021 DNR (77.4%) report selectively trusting some but not all news organizations they were asked about. That contrasts with about one-fifth of all respondents who displayed a “generalized trust” toward *all* of the brands they were asked about (19.9%). The small remainder (2.7%) trusted none of the brands, indicating that very few actually adopt an attitude of "generalized distrust." This suggests that selective trust in news not only exists, it is the way most people evaluate news in their countries.

RQ2: How consistently or inconsistently are brands viewed as trustworthy?

When we look at trust measured at the brand level, we find further evidence that audiences assign different levels of trust to different brands. While the variance in brand-level evaluations of trustworthiness tends to be clustered at the low end of the scale (see Fig. 3), with less polarizing brands often viewed as more trustworthy (r = -0.45), more than a third of all brands have a variance greater than 6 on an 11-point scale. In other words, while there is often consensus about the trustworthiness of brands, a considerable share of brands are actually evaluated as trustworthy by some audiences and untrustworthy by others—a degree of selectivity that may cancel each other out if looking only at average levels of trust toward each brand.

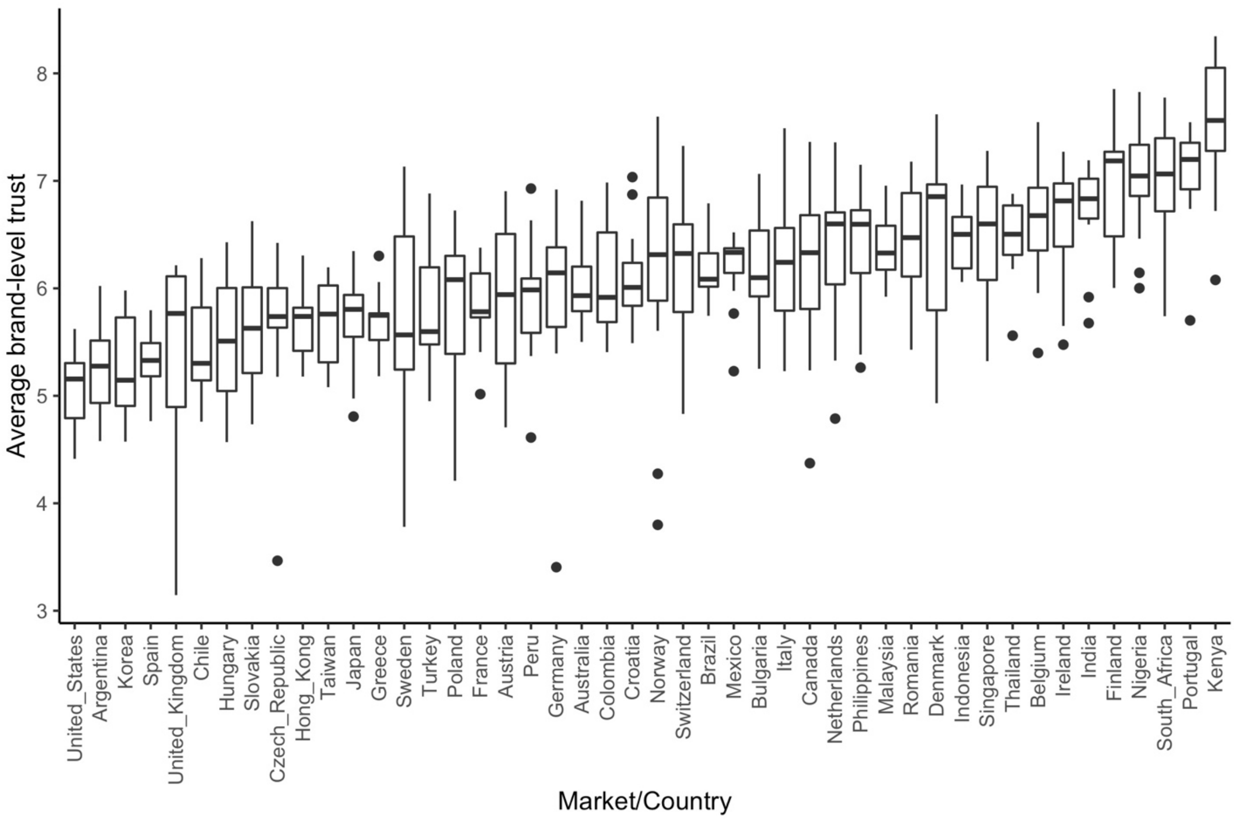
Figure 3: Audiences tend to evaluate brands on average more highly when there is more consensus (less polarization) about their trustworthiness, although about a third of the brands have a variance in their trust ratings greater than 6.



In fact, there exist many individual brands that are trusted much less so than the median brand in each market—in a few instances, much more so. These outliers include the aforementioned tabloids such as The Sun in the UK (3.1) and Bild in

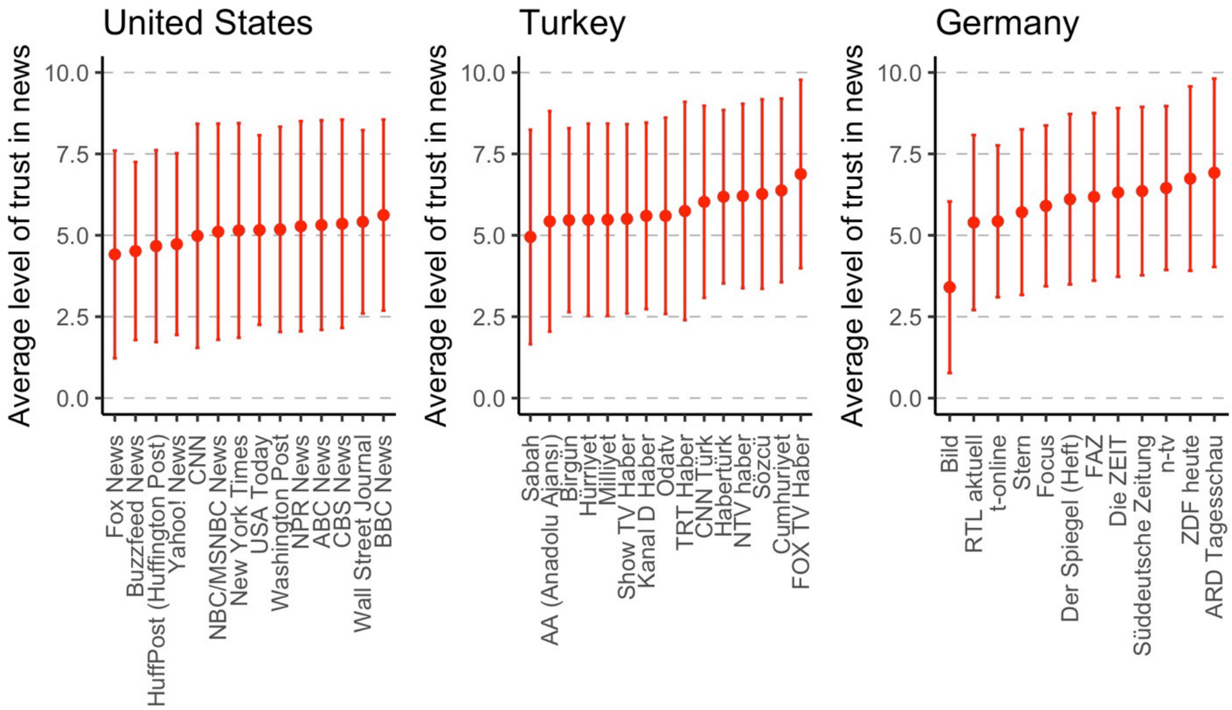
Germany (3.4) but also, for example, right-wing online news sites Resett (3.8) and Document.no (4.3) in Norway and 24-hour cable network BFM in France (5.0). These outliers are evident if we cluster brand-level trust ratings by country/market (Fig. 4).

Figure 4: Boxplots depicting distributions of average levels of trust toward individual news outlets in each market. Boxes denote the first and third quartiles (the 25th and 75th percentiles) in brand-level trust with lines accounting for 1.5 times this interquartile range. Outliers outside of this range are depicted with dots.



We can also see the degree to which audiences are selectively trusting toward news by examining some individual markets more closely. Take, for example, three countries at the high, medium, and low end of the scale in terms of the percentage who say in general they can trust most news most of the time: Germany (53%), Turkey (41%), and the US (29%). When examining variation in responses to the brand-level trust question (Fig. 5), plotting one standard deviation above and below the mean value for responses to this question (capturing approximately 95% of responses), it becomes apparent that nearly all brands elicit widely differing evaluations and overlap the midpoint of the scale. Looking only at averages in brand-level trust may obscure just how much brands are viewed differently by different respondents within these markets.

Figure 5: Average brand-level evaluations of trustworthiness are plotted for each of the three markets with error bars corresponding to one standard deviation above and below the mean value on the 11-point scale.



To be sure, there are some notable differences between brands as well. In the US, for example, the variance in trust toward CNN (11.8), MSNBC (11.0), and the New York Times (10.8) is more than double the level of variance found in brand-level trust in most other markets. Some countries, like Germany, have outliers at both the low and high ends of variance in brand-level trust. German online news portal t-online earned more uniform evaluations of trustworthiness (5.4) whereas public service broadcasters ZDF (6.7) and ARD (6.9) attracted the most varied evaluations in that market. But these differences in levels of polarization toward each brand look modest given that *most* brands are perceived quite differently by different respondents. There is often more variation in the range of responses to the trustworthiness question for an individual brand compared to variation across brands or even across markets.

RQ3: How does brand-level trust vary systematically by country/media market?

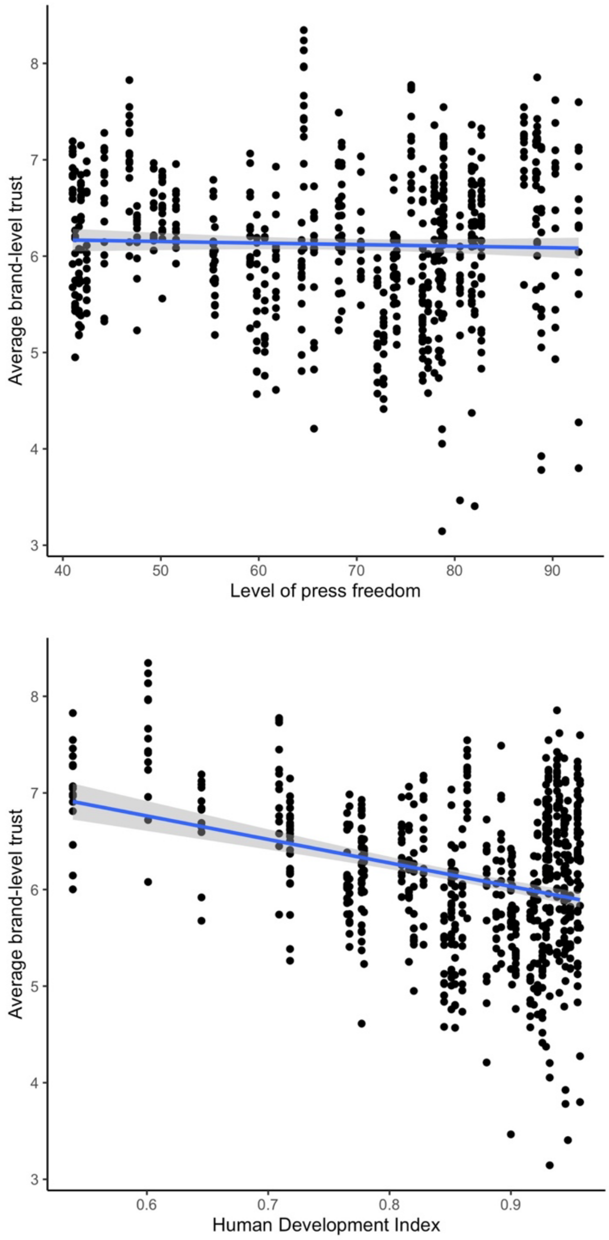
Our final research question seeks to assess what systematic patterns may explain differences in brand-level trust across a wide range of media markets. We can approach this question in a few ways. First, when examining individual responses to brand-level trust questions, we can see that the percentage engaging in selective trust in news also varies substantially across markets. Hong Kong (87.3%), the UK (89.4%), and the Czech Republic (90.0%) rank highest as places where nearly all audiences make some distinctions between brands they trust and brands they do not trust. This could be a function of the media environments in these countries, but it could also be related to levels of audience fragmentation and polarization, or a combination of these factors. At the other extreme are Kenya (60.2%), Finland (61.7%), Belgium (62.2%), Nigeria (65.2%), and Portugal (65.4%)—places with high levels of generalized trust where more than a third of all respondents said they trusted *all* of the brands asked about. Overall, comparing across the markets in the DNR, places with high levels of trust in news in general tend to be places where fewer people make selective evaluations of the trustworthiness of brands; the two measures are negatively correlated (r = -0.52).[7] For better or for worse, in places with high levels of average trust, a smaller portion of the public distinguishes between brands they trust and brands they do not trust.

A similar pattern is apparent when we look at news outlets as the unit of analysis and levels of variance in brand-level trust. That, too, tends to be negatively correlated with trust in news in general (r = -0.53); in places where people are more trusting towards news in general, there tends to be less polarization in brand-level trust with news outlets viewed more uniformly. This may be because audiences are less likely to have particular news outlets in mind that they personally do not trust when thinking about news in general or, more potentially normatively concerning, it may reflect a lack of differentiation between brands in these markets.

To further examine what factors might be systematically associated with variation in selective trust in news, I look at the relationship between brand-level trust and two measures of difference between countries/markets: indexes of press freedom and human development. This enables an assessment of how comparative patterns across markets may differ systematically. It is worth pointing out that when we examine the simple relationship between brand-level trust and each of these two measures, only levels of human development are correlated with brand-level trust and negatively so (r = -0.31). Each are depicted in scatterplots with trend lines in Fig. 6. Press freedom appears largely unrelated to brand-level trust. This is perhaps not surprising given that we have already mentioned several examples of brands in places with high press freedom that are at the very low end of the scale in terms of audience trust and vice versa. The significant relationship found for levels of development, however, is striking, as it suggests a distinct pattern may exist in less developed markets where brands are typically perceived more favorably, all else equal.

[7] Across these markets, levels of trust in news in general are also correlated with levels of generalized trust (r = 0.58).

Figure 6: Scatterplots of the relationship between average brand-level trust and the level of press freedom in each market/country and its score on the Human Development Index. The bivariate correlation between brand-level trust and press freedom is not significant (r = -0.03) but it is for human development (r = -0.31).



Of course, this apparent relationship could be spurious for several reasons. As noted above, press freedom and levels of human development are correlated, so it is possible that the true effect of one variable or the other may be obscured. Brand-level trustworthiness evaluations may also be a function of some other factors as well that may co-vary with these variables. These include (a) more general attitudes toward the institution of the news media in some markets and (b) levels of polarization toward brands in these markets since, as shown above, there is more selectivity around brand-level evaluations of trustworthiness in places with lower trust in news in general. What's more, the variance in brand-level evaluations of trustworthiness also tends to be slightly lower on average in more developed places (*r* = -0.09) and places with higher press freedom (*r* = -0.17). In a country like Nigeria, for example, which is ranked toward the bottom in terms of both press freedom and HDI compared to the other DNR markets, almost a third of respondents said they trusted all of the brands asked about. Then again, the same is true in Finland, a country at the other end of the scale in terms of press freedom and human development. While there are clearly cases that do not fit the overall pattern, the question is whether when examined systematically across these global markets, does either press freedom or human development explain differences in brand-level trust?

To more formally test across these markets for the significance of these possible factors underpinning the relationship between brand-level trust across media markets, a multivariate regression model was estimated containing each of these variables. This allows for an assessment of the independent effect of HDI on brand-level trust holding all other variables constant.[8] The results of this statistical analysis are summarized in Table 1.

The statistical analysis offers no evidence that press freedom is related to brand-level trust but the other three variables do appear to be systematic predictors of trust: levels on the Human Development Index, trust in news at the country-level, and variance in brand-level trust. That is, all else equal, brands in less developed markets tend to be viewed as more trustworthy whereas brands in more developed places elicit lower levels of trust. The difference may seem modest: 1.4 points on the 11-point trust scale when considering differences between the most and least developed countries in the sample. At the same time, that is approximately twice the size of the effect associated with trust in news in general and almost as large in magnitude as the effect associated with brand-level variance in trust. The difference in brand-level trust between markets where audiences are the least trusting versus most trusting toward news in general is approximately 0.7, and the difference in brand-level trust between the least and most polarizing brands is about 1.8 on average.

[8] Because news outlets are nested within countries/markets, a multi-level model was estimated containing a random intercept for each country.

Table 1: Predictors of brand-level trust in news across countries/markets

Variable	β (standard error)
(Intercept)	9.78* (0.42)
Press Freedom Index (at country-level)	0.00 (0.00)
Human Development Index (at country-level)	-3.35* (0.58)
Trust in news in general (at country-level)	0.84* (0.24)
Variance in trust (at brand-level)	-0.20* (0.02)
Markets/Countries (*N*)	45
Level 2 variance	0.07 (0.27)
Residual variance	0.29 (0.53)
Intraclass Correlation Coefficient	20.8%
Observations (*N*)	673

Note. Taiwan is excluded from this analysis because it is not rated on the UN's Human Development Index. Statistical significance is denoted by * $p < 0.001$.

Discussion

This study presents an alternative approach to considering trust in news in an international comparative context, making use of brand-level assessments of trustworthiness. It offers a reconceptualization around the construct of *selective trust in news* that seeks to move beyond generalized measures of trust, which do not differentiate between the individual sources in a given media market. Drawing on large-scale survey data from the 2021 DNR, the study shows not only how frequent selective trust in news tends to be in most countries at both the individual - and brand - level of analysis, it also demonstrates important systematic differences in terms of where audiences tend to be more discerning (or polarized) in their evaluations of individual news outlets. Less developed markets tend to be places where a smaller proportion of the public make selective evaluations about the trustworthiness of individual brands. What's more, all things equal, brands tend to be viewed as significantly more trustworthy in less developed countries—a phenomenon that appears unrelated to levels of press freedom across these markets. In other words, while selective trust in news is quite common, it is more common in more developed countries where brands tend to elicit more polarizing evaluations (think Fox News and the *New York Times* in the US, for example). Fewer distinctions are made between brands in less developed countries; on average audiences are more trusting toward all brands in such places.

Understanding precisely why these patterns occur is beyond the scope of this article. That said, one possible interpretation of these findings might be that news outlets in more developed countries are simply on average less trustworthy when evaluated according to objective standards. That is, these findings could be driven by actual differences in the supply of quality news across countries. Perhaps more developed markets are more likely to contain a wider array of sources, including some well-known brands that are commercially viable even as they are widely distrusted. There are certainly some examples of tabloid news in these markets that might plausibly contribute to these patterns. However, tabloid news is hardly confined to more developed countries. Somewhat more likely, these findings could reflect differences in the tendencies of news-consuming publics to selectively evaluate the individual sources of media content they encounter. After all, as previous studies have noted, in some Global South countries, rates of trust toward information on platforms such as Google or WhatsApp tend to be very high (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022) along with generally lower levels of digital media literacy (Badrinathan, 2021). That may contribute to problems around the spread of misinformation in these digital spaces. A focus on overall trust in news may obscure not only significant differences between subpopulations within countries but between countries in how audiences are evaluating sources.

One of the limitations of this study is that I have studiously avoided making my own evaluations about the individual brands in these markets. This makes it challenging to interpret what these patterns may mean when lower levels of selective trust are observed in key markets. As noted in the outset, however, the DNR does include evaluations about a variety of types of news outlets, including some that could be said to support illiberal political movements or that critics consider to be corrupt. While some degree of selective trust may be desirable from a normative standpoint, we cannot assess based on these data alone *on what basis* audiences are (or are not) engaging in such practices, just as we cannot be certain that audiences in countries with more polarization in brand-level evaluations are not simply applying their ideological predispositions to the way they evaluate news media. Selective trust in news may be rooted in evaluations about the quality of a news outlet's journalism, but that is hardly the only factor that matters. I take up some of these questions in other work with colleagues from the Reuters Institute (Toff et al., 2022), but it is also my hope that this article spurs future researchers to do the same.

Even without assessing on what basis audiences are or are not being selective, the final set of analyses showing that brands in less developed markets tend to be rated more highly offer a note of caution for lesser-known independent news organizations or NGOs that seek to build greater skepticism and literacy among audiences in these markets when it comes to how they differentiate between sources of information. While it is possible that all of the brands in these markets deserve to be trusted as highly as they are, it also seems likely that audiences in these markets may simply be more willing to place their trust in news organizations that may not, in fact, deserve it. Trust may be of critical importance for journalistic authority and civil society, but it can also be dangerous where it has not been earned and is otherwise misplaced.

In addition to the previously mentioned limitations, this study is not meant to be a definitive work on the subject of selective trust in news. Rather it is an invitation for additional scholarship in this vein. It is after all based solely on online surveys which capture audience segments that regularly use the internet, who tend to be younger and more socioeconomically advantaged. The survey also focuses mainly on more developed countries with less variation on the lower end of the human development and press freedom indexes. And there are certainly other dimensions of difference across countries I could have examined including their political or media systems. Nonetheless, by examining survey responses across 46 markets around the world and brand-level evaluations in particular, it offers a much wider examination into the construct of trust in news than most previous studies. Although declines in trust in news in many countries are cause for concern, researchers ought to be careful not to conflate general measures of trust, which are shaped by a variety of forces in society, with selective trust in sources that may or may not be deserving of the public's trust. In the comparative context, where all else equal brands are sometimes systematically given the benefit of the doubt by audiences who perhaps ought to be more skeptical, different kinds of policy solutions may be more appropriate in some contexts compared to others.

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