

Before reception: Trust in the news as infrastructure

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Abstract

Given the necessity of trust to the fulfillment of the news media's democratic and civic roles, the decline of trust in the news has become a major theme in journalism and communication studies, with researchers typically focusing on news audiences and measuring attitudes toward news products. Alongside the importance of reception, this paper advocates for conceptualizing trust not solely as a response to news, but as a key component in the infrastructure that makes news possible. Through an exploration of the role of trust at every stage of the newsmaking process, we argue that trust structures and underpins news funding, production, circulation, and audience measurement. Expanding the conceptual framework through which trust is assessed to consider its infrastructural role affords greater clarity on the consequences of distrust in news. We highlight future research directions and areas of inquiry made possible by theorizing trust in news in this way.

Keywords

journalism, trust, infrastructure, STS, news funding, analytics

The downward trajectory of trust in news media, highlighted by a multitude of global survey assessments (Brenan, 2019), has centralized the study of trust in the fields of journalism and communication (Fisher, 2016; Newman et al., 2019). Although current research confirms that trust is a multifaceted and complicated site of study, theoretical clarity on these fundamental questions remains limited (Kohring and Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Drawing from STS and Information Studies, we argue that greater theoretical clarity around trust can be pursued through *infrastructural* thinking.

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The centrality and malleability of trust within the production, distribution, and consumption of journalism, marks trust as an infrastructural element of journalism. Moreover, the current “crisis” of trust in journalism—wherein a lack of trust in news media threatens journalism’s stability and even existence—is undeniably an instance of infrastructural breakdown. Positioning it as such allows journalism studies to properly consider the role of trust in newsmaking and the tensions inherent within the sustainment of trust in journalism.

Overwhelmingly, extant understandings of trust in news media frame trust as an issue related to the reception of news products. Even when broadened to considerations of news production, trust is most often defined in relation to how these considerations impact assessments of the quality of the *products* of journalism. Positioning trust as an outcome of journalism that is decided by the audience nullifies the dynamic relationships between audiences and newsmakers that underpin news media consumption and production. The reception-oriented paradigm of trust, while useful, often leaves uninterrogated numerous questions, like *how* trust in news is sustained through periods of instability and change, how journalism routines and news contents are changing in response to lower levels of trust, and what trust/distrust actually results in.

In order to expand theoretical understandings of trust in news media, we propose looking at trust *as infrastructure* within journalism studies: an element that is written into the fabric of newsmaking and governs the relationships required to produce, disseminate, consume, and engage with news. A resource, rather than merely an outcome. The crucial role of trust throughout the life of news is not new. Trust and distrust have always filled a multitude of functions in newsmaking. However, infrastructure is typically made hypervisible specifically when it fails us (Pickard, 2014; Ananny, 2018). This, in part, explains why trust in news media has become such a major object of interest in the past few years. Precisely because trust is diminished, we can now identify its infrastructural role and see how a variety of links in the chain are adversely affected as a result. In this vein, initiatives like The Trust Project and Trusting News now encourage journalists to consider the relationship between trust levels and infrastructural elements such as funding, sourcing, and interactivity.

This paper advocates for conceptualizing trust not solely as a response to news, but as a key part of the sociotechnical and physical infrastructure that makes news possible. We first highlight how infrastructural thinking has been usefully applied to communication and journalism studies to account for the changing nature of human and non-human actors implicated in newsmaking, and to illuminate the role of the press and journalism within the broader communication and information infrastructures foundational to modern life. Subsequently, we attend to the different stages of journalism—from funding to measuring engagement—in order to make the case that trust is embedded into every activity, personnel, and object associated with news media. Through this exploration we show that trust is part of the infrastructural fabric that underpins journalism and how its diminishment necessitates significant alterations in the processes of journalism and its outcomes. Finally, we highlight future research directions and areas of inquiry made possible by understanding news media trust from an infrastructural lens.

The “Crisis of Trust” as infrastructural breakdown

By infrastructure, we refer not only to the material objects vital to the creation of journalism in its many forms, but also the embedded practices, institutions, technologies, and labor that underpin the very existence and sustainment of news media as a productive industry. Borrowing from science and technology studies, centering infrastructure illuminates that which typically exists in the background, invisible, and often taken for granted (Bowker et al., 2009; Star and Ruhleder, 1996). Infrastructural thinking in journalism studies also attends to the role of the press (Ananny, 2018), of journalism (Graves and Anderson, 2020) and of media (Nechushtai, 2018) in what Bowker and Star (1999) call “the scaffolding of modern life” (1999: 47). Further, it accounts for an increasing variety of nonhuman technological actants in newsmaking (Moran and Usher, 2021; Fink and Anderson, 2015; Lewis and Westlund, 2015).

However, infrastructural theory is not narrowed simply to make sense of technological impositions within newsmaking. It allows for the consideration of essentially everything that underpins newsmaking and, moving outwards, how journalism sits within a broader communication infrastructure. Ananny (2013: 628) notes that infrastructure is a “fundamentally relational concept.” In addition to the physical and sociotechnical objects required to produce journalism, it also attends to the invisible, temporally bound and always-changing assemblages of material and immaterial objects, labor, organizational processes, non-human agents, and socio-technical structures that interact to produce a certain kind of journalism fit for a certain public role.

Perhaps one of the most compelling arguments for attending to trust as infrastructure is its visibility only in light of its breakdown (Star and Ruhleder, 1996). Failure renders infrastructure publicly visible—laying bare its web of relations and sites of interaction. Despite their importance, relationships of trust between audiences, and news media go mostly unnoticed until they begin to fail. The current “crisis of trust,” in highlighting the infrastructural failures occurring across a multitude of spaces and processes of journalism, exists as a point of opportunity to better understand *actually existing* trust in addition to examining the multitude of infrastructural elements that are enmeshed in the creation, dissemination and evaluation of trusted journalism.

It is with this in mind that we propose thinking about *trust as infrastructure* within journalism and news media. It allows us to consider how organizational, technological, and other configurations within newsrooms constantly shift to better orient towards what audiences deem trustworthy, and to analyze the positive and negative outcomes of these shifts. These changing configurations serve as important “boundary objects” (Star and Griesemer, 1989) through which “communities of practice assemble, cohere, debate, and create” (Ananny, 2013: 628). Understanding how trust underpins newsmaking and the products of journalism, requires thinking of trust as more than an outcome. Trust, instead, is embedded in all aspects of journalism, is built on other infrastructures similarly vital to newsmaking, and shapes and is shaped by the multitude of actors and communities that attend to it.

Reconceptualizing trust as an object of research in journalism studies

Trust is a central concern because of its centrality to news media's democratic and civic roles (Holbert, 2005; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). Sustained measurements of public opinion on news media highlight a growing distrust in media institutions (Newman et al., 2019) cementing it as a key area for academic exploration. However, researchers face the difficult task of building towards clearer theoretical understandings of both "trust" and "media," in addition to accounting for how trust in news media empirically exists in a multitude of differing media systems globally and across time. The enormity of such an endeavor has resulted in an embedded contradiction within the literature wherein researchers "seem to agree that we still lack a theoretically derived, reliable, and validated instrument for the measurement of trust in news media" (Kohring and Matthes, 2007: 232), yet consistently rely upon limited survey questions of "do you trust in X" to capture audience sentiments and cement concerning narratives of distrust.

Kohring and Matthes' (2007) work to validate a multidimensional scale for measuring trust marks the most concerted effort within trust research to grapple with the difficulties of operationalizing such a complex construct. The authors note how research is hindered by a lack of theoretical grounding—"in most of the research, journalism theory seems to be considered with an attitude of common sense which sees news media merely as an information facilitator" (2007: 237). This results in a disregarding of the roles of selectivity central to journalism's value and position within the public sphere. Kohring and Matthes' subsequent scale looks to capture how audience's judge an outlet's ability to fulfil duties of selectivity. This addition highlights the multiplicity of audience assessments of trust in news media and the hurdles to systematically capturing this through survey measurement.

Extant knowledge of trust in news media has thus far been shaped overwhelmingly by audience studies focusing on an audiences' self-reported propensity towards generalized or particularized trust. Such studies have been vital in understanding the role of the audience in relationships of news media trust. However, a dominance of audience studies results in trust in news media being conceptualized as something audiences predominantly control. The role of journalism, journalists, and outlets is therefore relegated to something whose quality or value is judged, rather than active agents that are embedded within fluid relationships with audiences. As a result, trust is most often seen as an outcome. Attempting to bridge this divide is a newer vein of research exploring "engaged" journalism (Batsell, 2015; Nelson, 2019)—novel strategies sought by news outlets to actively engage with their audiences. This research highlights the strategies, technologies, and analytical assumptions of producers of news in the pursuit of audience approval and, ultimately, trust. However, there still remains a dominant focus on trust as an outcome to be achieved by journalism, leaving under-explored what trust actually achieves.

Underpinning journalism's democratic role is the grounding tenet that trust in news media is vital as it allows for the spread of good information that leads to an informed public. For publics to read, remember and utilize this information they must trust that it is good. However, this is increasingly complicated by a networked media environment that

tests the already porous boundaries of journalism. Researchers are thus struggling to explain the complications of a thriving climate of misinformation and information disorder (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017), rising distrust in legacy news media, increasing trust in partisan media, and an urgent need to equip digital citizens with a “skeptical way of knowing” in their consumption of news media (Kovach and Rosentiel, 2011). To make sense of these complications, we argue for a theoretical expansion of trust that decenters it as an outcome of journalism and instead understands the ways in which trust is a resource cultivated, utilized, and sometimes misused by a constellation of actors that maintain relationships with one another because of journalism. Trust pervades every process and stage of journalism and is a consideration of producers and consumers of journalism alike. Further, a decentering of trust as a normative outcome of “good” journalism, leaves room for future research to better understand how trust in an ever-expanding body of “news media” can have negative implications, such as aiding the spread of misinformation. We argue that trust is a central feature *throughout* the lifecycle of news, rather than simply an external response at the end of it. Through an illumination of the ways in which trust underpins every practice and process intrinsic to journalism, we aim to broaden theoretical understandings of trust in news media.

The functions of trust in the life cycle of news

Trust and the economics of newsmaking

Funding mechanisms are the foundational infrastructure required for journalism to survive. The recent proliferation of funding models for journalism illuminates the industry’s struggles to stay economically viable. It also shows the growing variety of relationships between news producers and their funders and the centralized role of trust in these relationships. Further, the justifications behind choosing certain economic structures over others reveal how newsmakers perceive evaluations of news media trust as increasingly intertwined with normative public assessments of the business models of journalism.

Funding structures are always relational, with news organizations being required to justify investments in them to advertisers and audiences alike (Benson, 2016). For at least a century, journalism in the U.S. has been primarily subsidized by advertisers, and in many other parts of the world, the same model has been in place for decades. News content, sold to members of the public at a deep discount, drew eyeballs; these eyeballs were traded as a commodity to advertisers, that provided the majority of income for news organizations (Napoli, 2003; Hamilton, 2004). In this model, members of the public were not directly funding news: It was public *interest* that secured revenue, not necessarily public approval. In the U.S., where reliance on advertising in the post-war era has been especially strong (McChesney, 2003), this assured that journalists were relatively protected from the need to appeal to the preferences of individual members of the public, because their key funders were mass advertisers. To be sure, news organizations were wary of advertising that could potentially jeopardize their credibility with readers; yet this attention to brand values did not challenge the overall model, and even reinforced it, by

securing the value and respectability of advertising in newspapers. Some have praised the benefits of this model, in which “Wal-Mart was willing to subsidize the Baghdad bureau” (Shirky, 2008). Others have argued that this arrangement created perverse incentives for news producers to please advertisers (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; McChesney and Nichols 2002).

The last few decades have seen a persistent decline of advertising as a reliable source of funding, ushering in a transition to other sources—particularly circulation revenue and philanthropy—as primary sources of revenue for many news organizations (Benson, 2018; Konieczna, 2018). This shift represents an essential transformation of news from subsidized public good to direct consumer product, as subscription and donation models rest upon explicit consumer support in an outlet’s journalistic product.

When the trust of individual news consumers becomes key to securing the revenue necessary for newsmaking, trust becomes written into the fabric of the infrastructure of journalism. Arguably, when readers provided only a small share of the revenue directly, their trust was not of existential concern for news organizations. If an overt distrust of an outlet manifested itself as avoidance of that outlet, this would have implications for its audience size and reach that would impact its value to advertisers. However, the lack of direct link between audiences and funding protected against economic ramifications of fluctuations in trust. Now that many outlets rely on readers and donors to directly provide most of their revenue, pursuing reader and donor trust is necessary for financial and operational stability.

As news organizations become more independent of advertising revenue, they are also growing more dependent on the approval of these new types of direct funders. The relevance of trust within this relationship has been mostly blatantly demonstrated in recent campaigns that call on members of the public to exert pressure to change editorial policies by cancelling subscriptions, or, in many countries, rejecting taxation that supports public-service media (Sehl et al., 2020). For instance, in June 2020, media critics called on *New York Times* readers to cancel their subscriptions to the paper over its decision to publish a controversial op-ed by Senator Tom Cotton that advocated for military crackdowns in cities across America in response to anti-police brutality protests. In advocating for *Times* readers to unsubscribe, *New Republic* contributor Rachel Hawley made explicit the direct link between reader support, and therefore trust, and economic survival: “if journalism is to have a future, that future looks like whatever readers are willing to pay for directly” (Hawley, 2020).

News media outlets clearly recognize how audiences perceive sources of funding as differently impacting the potential editorial independence of outlets—possibly due to concerns over the impact of funding structures on editorial decisions—and even more blatantly, how the “wrong” kind of financial supporters can damage the credibility of the outlet. These connections are made explicit in the widespread use of native digital advertising in journalism. Although traditional advertising merely commodified reader attention, native advertising entails a commodification of the trustworthiness and reputation of the news outlet itself. The success of a native advertisement rests on its ability to “borrow the credibility and authority of their respective news publishers” (Sirrah, 2019). Academic explorations of native advertising illuminate how native advertising deceives

audiences and can (when poorly distinguished as *paid-for* content) exacerbate concerns over fake and counterfeit news (Glasser et al., 2020; Schauster et al., 2016). The resulting picture is one of a fractured infrastructure; trust is vital to the economic foundation of newsmaking and is increasingly being directly drawn upon to fortify news outlets through practices like native advertising. However, directly harnessing this resource for financial stability risks depleting it as a resource for journalism's other primary activities—too much or the wrong kind of native advertising erodes the very relationships of trust that make it a valuable endeavor.

The role of trust as a building block in securing funding for news is not entirely new: All funding mechanisms rely on the trust of funders (Benson, 2016). Yet the breakdown of the advertising model makes the preferences of individual members of the public, once again, central in securing the stability of news organizations, making distrust not only a problem of reception, but also of funding. The growing audience turn within the economics of newsmaking—epitomized by the increasing value of native advertising and the rise (again) of subscription models—reveals the duality of trust as an infrastructural element of journalism. Trust acts as a visible foundation underpinning the success of all other profit-oriented organizational and sociotechnical infrastructure—if trust is eroded, the success of revenue streams is diminished. In addition, trust exists as a financially valuable resource in of itself, an infrastructural bridge allowing the highest bidding advertiser access to the broader resources of the newsroom.

Trust and news production

Considerations of trust are intimately tied to the professional activities undertaken to produce news media. Indeed, it can be argued that professional standards in newsmaking—including but not limited to; fact-checking, the use of multiple sources, the use of elite and/or professional sources for background contextualization, author transparency through bylines and mastheads, and stylistic norms captured in style books—were all built up, and are adapted over time, explicitly to engender trust in the products of journalism and into the institution of journalism.

Further, while trust is often conceptualized as an external response to journalism, reporters and editors are constantly responsive to the trust/distrust conditions in which they operate, and their work is shaped in negotiation with these conditions. Scholars have been exploring for some time how reporting is affected and modified in response to trust/distrust (Wenzel, 2020; Wenzel et al., 2020; Zahay et al., 2020). There is increasing evidence that editors are modifying how stories are presented as a result of distrust: For example, in the past few years it has become a much more common practice to publish explainers that detail how stories were produced, and editors have also been publishing more raw documents and primary materials as part of major stories with the purpose of increasing trust levels (Mor and Reich, 2018). These examples show how persistently low trust levels are coming to shape how reporters and editors approach news, present it, and contextualize it. In this way trust is a structuring element of journalism, shaping how journalistic work can be undertaken and even shaping the products produced by

journalists. Trust thus exists as an infrastructural element underpinning and interconnecting with other vital infrastructure journalists draw upon to produce their work.

Reporters highlight how lower trust levels have dramatically altered the landscape they work in and made it considerably more difficult to gain access to the sources and information they need to conduct their work. For instance, tensions and distrust between the institutions of media and government—as was particularly apparent during the Trump administration—meant reporters experienced increasing difficulty in gaining institutional access and official sources.

Distrust similarly reverberates back into the public realm, with reporters saying it is also becoming substantially more difficult to get members of the public to talk to the media (Palmer, 2017). Further, relationships of distrust between sources and journalists work both ways, meaning that in conditions of distrust with the public, journalists may also be more uneasy about trusting the information they are given by a potentially hostile public. And so, reporters regularly modify their practices to fit the new landscape in which they report, altering their journalistic processes to overcome infrastructural breakdowns caused by distrust and rebuild and harness public trust elsewhere. Our own research into news startups and niche outlets, as well as legacy media (see Moran, 2020b; Nechushtai, 2020), shows that the editorial direction taken by these organizations is shaped by perceptions of the relationships of trust that outlets have with their audience. Decisions to pursue certain stories are driven by a sense of strong expectation from the audience, a feeling that they are obligated to cover certain stories because of the expectations of core (or vocal) readership.

This perceived expectation can lead editors to take decisions that run counter to more traditional editorial logics that prioritize relevance to the public as a whole over loyalty to a specific subset of audience. For instance, it can lead editors to post articles that are, by digital metrics, not popular. It also results in outlets publishing edited versions of stories that have already been published in other media or news agencies, not because that adds to public knowledge, but specifically with the goal of demonstrating to readers that they share their priorities and avoid any risk of damaging that relationship of trust. It similarly results in outlets reporting certain stories precisely because they believe their audiences feel that these stories went underreported or unreported by traditional media. Taken together, research around changing newsroom practices reveal how trust is a key resource and consideration in news production.

Trust and news circulation

Across the many different modes of news distribution—print, broadcast and digital, commercial, and interpersonal—established reputation, that is, the stable manifestation of trust, remains a decisive factor that determines which news sources will be amplified, gaining impact and traction, and which will be marginalized, or even de-platformed, and fail to reach those goals. In every kind of technological environment, research shows that it is simply impossible for outlets that have not gained the trust of audiences (and sometimes regulators) to obtain a significant presence in news markets and in public life. Accordingly, without trust news media cannot achieve its primary function—to be

consumed—and, further, cannot perform its democratic function. Trust is therefore a key building block within the infrastructure that makes the dissemination of news content function.

In the high-modernist era of news, access to some of the primary channels of news was strongly regulated, to ensure both standards of quality and diversity in content. Trust was embedded in these arrangements and written into those decisions, and its existence, or lack thereof, determined whether news outlets could gain access to important routes of distribution. However, the rise of digital intermediaries and their steadily growing role as gateways to news has created an important alternative channel for news circulation: the re-publishing of news by consumers themselves on platforms. Much of news discovery now rests not on formal distribution by news organizations, but on voluntary distribution within personal networks. Members of the public are secondary distributors that shape the news landscape visible to their peers.

In these emerging spaces, regulation and hierarchy are nascent, abundance is assumed to be guaranteed, and information landscapes are expected to be uniquely democratic compared to their pre-digital counterparts. Yet in these spaces, it becomes evident just how much the pathway to audiences relies on trust relationships with audiences and is determined by them. In these growing news markets gaining individuals' trust becomes key for exposure and reach, and thus the centrality of trust and reputation in shaping patterns of circulation is further accentuated.

Trust/distrust thus play a big role in the redistributive choices of news consumers and in how they advocate for their favorite news sources online. This is exacerbated in the platform era by algorithms that operate “rich get richer” type structures wherein content that has been preferred (recirculated, liked, commented on, etc.) by news audiences is prioritized and offered higher visibility on the feeds of others. Cultivating a deep relationship of trust with a small audience can therefore be leveraged, through the logics of social media, into much larger circulation and dissemination. Accordingly, recirculation and recontextualization of content by their audience is not only a key goal for outlets wishing to optimize their exposure, but also acts as proof of this relationship of trust and one of its primary positive outcomes. However, the combination of trust as part of the infrastructure of news circulation, and trust and circulation being separate from traditional standards of diversity and quality, also results in problematic outcomes. For instance, the rise of highly partisan media, and the role they have played in spreading misinformation around the 2020 US Presidential Election (see [Election Integrity Partnership, 2021](#)), highlights how partisan news outlets can build trust from a niche audience into a powerful tool for more broadly disseminating damaging content positioned as journalism.

In addition to the role of trust in recirculation by members of the audience, much research also shows that the role of trust in shaping circulation routes in digital spaces is not limited to users' behaviors. For the search functions of digital platforms, too, which are typically expected to be more neutral, reputation remains a decisive factor that gets outlets access to eyeballs and to prestigious presence in public life ([Nechushtai and Lewis, 2019](#)). This could potentially curtail the ability of news outlets to take advantage of the intertwining of trust and circulation to spread bad content, but this relies on search

platforms optimizing their algorithms to prioritize *trustworthy* content, not simply trusted (or in most cases, engaged with) content.

Necessitating further consideration is the fact that different distribution channels and platforms themselves retain differential perceptions of trustworthiness from their users. Moreover, similarly assessments of trustworthiness of platforms are made by news outlets and journalists. News outlets view certain platforms—such as Facebook and Twitter—as more or less trustworthy, in part due to a history of tumultuous relationships between platforms and journalism. This is often found in the folk theories outlets cultivate regarding *how* platforms work for or against them, for example, right-leaning outlets often complain about censorship or shadowbanning of their content on Facebook. Decisions over how to disseminate journalism are therefore intertwined with assessments of trust of the distribution channels. And these assessments are similarly undertaken by audiences, as they express more or less trust in journalism depending on which platform they find or view the journalism in question.

All this is not to say that alternative media cannot succeed in gaining significant presence and audiences in digital spaces. They certainly can, and often do (Donovan and Boyd, 2019; Marwick and Lewis, 2017). But rather than a paradox, this dynamic actually demonstrates the decisive role of trust in securing such successes. Gaining the trust of more and more members of the audience is the only way for such outlets to ensure meaningful digital circulation through secondary distribution and amplification.

Trust and audience measurement

Metajournalistic and academic explorations of audience measurement have primarily focused on the advantages and shortcomings of tools geared towards quantitative digital metrics. Measurement is thus often pigeon-holed as limited attention metrics (see Christin, 2018). This propensity is both understandable and necessary given that audience measurement is first and foremost a market research tool needed to relay audience reach to advertisers, and as such has often only measured attention, as opposed to more expansively capturing how audiences engage with, and respond to, the news they encounter. Further, the growing import of search engine optimization (SEO) and a flourishing of “clickbait journalism” designed specifically to game SEO algorithms (Richmond, 2008; Moyo et al., 2019; Cherubini and Nielsen, 2016), props up critique that quantitative audience measurement is negatively shaping journalism by making it indistinct from the plurality of “content” the Internet offers for quick consumption (that make lack the journalistic rigor and standards expected of news media). However, in the context of a perfect storm of declining advertising profits, a competitive digital market and existential crises of journalism’s purpose in a digital ecosystem, measurement has become far more expansive than a mere measure of advertising reach (Christin, 2020). An emerging “measurable journalism” (Carlson, 2018) encompasses an expansive field of agents, actors, processes, and practices geared towards systematically capturing the multidimensionality of relationships between news media and its audience. And, importantly, trust underpins the configurations and efficacy of such measurement within newsrooms.

Audience measurement has thus migrated across the newsroom, spreading from business teams to become more integrated into the daily work of editorial teams (Petre, 2018). Popular analytics platforms like Chartbeat and Hearken are “designed specifically for journalists to use in the course of editorial work” (Petre, 2018: 511), often combining sophisticated attention and sharing metrics—time spent reading, stories subsequently clicked on, platforms shared to, inbound and outbound destinations—with broader sentiment and trend-based measurements. Interestingly, the emergence of audience metrics tools designed specifically for the needs and outcomes of journalism also raises questions as to how news outlets pick and choose between measurement tools (and the providers of tools) based on their own assessments of trust in external actors. Our own research in both legacy and digitally-native newsrooms highlights how newsrooms combine digital analytics from such analytics platforms with more qualitative measures obtained through (amongst others) social media posts, offline audience events, and relationships with audiences built through online platforms like Slack, WhatsApp and in Facebook Groups, and Reddit threads (Lewis et al., 2014; Moran, 2020a). The time and resource required to collect and contextualize the multitude of analytics available to newsrooms highlights how important measurement is beyond mere clicks. Measurement acts as a check on every part of the infrastructure of newsmaking, ensuring that the actor-network assemblages that underpin journalism are properly oriented towards the goals of the outlet’s journalism. This measurement check is undoubtedly a check upon trust: growing obsessions over expanding, refining, and contextualizing data driven by the desire to turn measurement proxies of attention, implicit and explicit support into concrete knowledge about the trust relationships that exist between audiences and outlets.

Further evidence for the infrastructural role of trust within audience measurement is seen clearly in the rise of the role of “engagement editors” within newsrooms (Assmann and Diakopoulos, 2017; Ferrer-Conill and Tandor Jr. 2018). The importance of engagement editors—charged with distilling measurement data and formulating editorial insight and facilitating audience engagement and feedback—has increased in recent years, with the role becoming commonplace in news outlets (Murtha, 2015). Trust is therefore cemented within newsmaking not only by the sociotechnical frameworks provided by external actors but by labor within the newsroom dedicated to conducting relational practices and organizational processes to build and sustain multidimensional trust for the outlet. The decision-making they undertake to decide *which* analytics platforms to use, *what* data to collect and *how* to contextualize it is further implicated by the infrastructural role of trust in newsmaking. Engagement editors must evaluate the trustworthiness of the analytics platforms they choose to utilize—whether the external providers are credible, and whether the measurement being undertaken accurately captures what they deem to be valuable information about their audience. These decisions are curtailed by the resources available to each outlet—the dominance of Google Analytics and metrics from social media platforms in audience measurement can, in the main, be attributed to their low/no cost to budget-strapped newsrooms. However, the choices made of providers of data and over kinds of data are very much educated by the infrastructure of trust in their outlet and how it underpins the other stages of their journalism.

In sum, the pursuit of greater knowledge about trust is leading to a diversification of the infrastructure of measurement and an upturn in “engaged” journalism practices that further cement the infrastructural role of trust. Audience measurement draws upon the same infrastructure of trust integral to other stages of newsmaking and, in doing so, reifies the necessity of trust to the work of all employees within the newsroom. Measurement makes trust a tangible resource for the newsroom—audience metrics systematically capture, evaluate, and communicate the existence of a multitude of audience relationships with the products the outlets, its journalists, its brand, and news media writ large. Further, the sociotechnical systems, labor, organizational processes, and more built-in service of this measurement cement an infrastructure of trust that extends beyond underpinning the work of audience engagement editors and funders to implicate journalists, editors, and more.

Discussion and future directions

This paper emerges out of increasing scholarship and conversation around trust in news media. Addressing shortcomings in our knowledge of trust requires an expansion of current theoretical paradigms to consider trust not simply as something bestowed upon the products and actors of journalism by audiences as a consequence of their external judgement. Instead, we argue that trust is infrastructural—a much more expansive theoretical paradigm that allows researchers to consider how trust underpins every process, practice and personnel of journalism. Trust is not simply the outcome of a job well done, or an assessment of quality of value: it is a valuable resource that shapes the very process, outcomes, and meanings of journalism itself. This can be seen in how calculations and considerations of trust configure into every stage of the newsmaking process, and the contradictions inherent within the everyday decisions made around producing journalism under increasingly difficult conditions.

Our difficulty in fully comprehending rising distrust in news media stems from the narrow theoretical definition of trust as the outcome of good journalism. Because of this, scholarship has struggled to grapple with why audiences do not trust *good* journalism that displays all the necessary markers of professional credibility, and similarly, why audiences increasingly trust *bad* journalism, or information that pretends to be journalism. Shifting trust away from an outcome and towards being seen as infrastructural helps move towards answering these confusions.

In particular, an infrastructural lens pays attention to constellations of actors, agents, and relationships that underpin trust, setting up new sites for interrogation when trust breaks down. For example, an interrogation of trust within the economics of newsmaking highlights a multitude of necessary considerations from how credible audiences perceive the financial structure of the outlet to be, how the relationships between advertisers and consumers impact (and are impacted by) news media trust, and the primacy of trust between funders and newsmakers for survival during times of slim profitability. This expansion of sites and actors of study asks researchers to look beyond audience surveys to illuminate the many factors implicated in assessments of trust.

Moreover, it shifts towards relational conceptions of trust wherein final measurements of trust are a culmination of the relationships built, maintained and tested between a growing number of actors, agents, objects, and technologies involved in journalism. This does not simplify routes to understanding the messiness of trust in news media, but it does provide a wealth of novel points of inquiry for researchers attempting to build towards understanding.

What is readily apparent within the analysis presented is the utility of studying erosions of trust in news media, or increases in distrust, as instances of infrastructural breakdown. Conversations with journalists on-the-ground reveal how breakdowns in trust reverberate into the processes of journalism making it more difficult to access information and maintain relationships with vital sources. Similarly, breakdowns in trust shape how (and whether) audiences disseminate news across social media platforms, impacting the visibility of the products of journalism in digital spaces. The breakdown of trust between audiences and news media is undeniably an example of infrastructural failure—a failure which has ramifications for all other parts of journalism’s infrastructure and consequently its ability to sustain.

Further, labeling trust this way is necessary to properly examine how actors attempt to rectify or bridge infrastructural gaps that emerge out of a lack of trust. Journalists have to find creative ways to work around a lack of access to sources, and engagement editors must implement new strategies to disseminate news content online, the outcomes of which may be able to build new (or strengthen existing) relationships of trust that will have a further shaping influence on these activities.

We argue there exists many directions research can take up from the starting point of seeing trust as part of journalism’s infrastructure. These avenues include (but are not limited to) the role of trust in news media in the spread of mis/disinformation, the impact of trust on news production, the ability of news outlets to survive periods of instability and moments of failure, economic experimentation within the funding of journalism, and the impact of digital platforms on news media trust.

Importantly, framing trust as an infrastructural resource allows for further exploration of how trust enables the spread of bad journalism. Research in this area may take the shape of production studies that further examine how considerations of relationships of trust with audiences impact what news gets reported and how. Similarly, future research could contend with how relationships of trust between audiences, outlets, and journalists impact news sharing behaviors. An infrastructural lens is vital for answering such questions, as it pushes research to consider trust not only as an outcome of these relationships but as a structuring resource within them.

Further, seeing trust as infrastructural is useful for studying the tumultuous political economy of newsmaking, laying the groundwork for research into the economic value of trust and its ability to be leveraged for financial stability. This framework will also help researchers examine the reporting and editing strategies that journalists develop in response to distrust among sources and publics.

Finally, and of substantial importance, an infrastructural lens is central to understanding the creeping influence of digital platforms. The complications of trust-building highlight the inescapable influence of social media and other digital platforms given that

they increasingly make up the sociotechnical infrastructure of newsrooms. Consequently, news media trust cannot be considered absent of trust in social media and digital platforms more broadly. Conceptualizing these moving parts as infrastructural not only accounts for how they underpin and structure contemporary journalism, but also attends to the role of external platforms in impacting relationships of news media trust given the enmeshing interdependencies of infrastructure.

Trust is a vital concern, active resource, and necessary orientation within journalism. Accordingly, we argue that trust should be seen as part of the fabric of every practice and process intrinsic to journalism—as core infrastructure. This is by no means a novel consideration, but it is one that has not yet been properly integrated into journalism theory. By re-orientating theoretical considerations of trust towards an infrastructural lens, future research can better reflect the relational nature of journalism. Moreover, seeing trust as infrastructure opens up novel sites of study and implicates previously uninterrogated actors and agents that will afford journalism and communications greater perspective on the nature and outcomes of a perceived “crisis of trust” in news.

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