

## Trust and Distrust in Public Service Media: A Case Study From the Czech Republic

Urbániková, Marína; Smejkal, Klára

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Urbániková, M., & Smejkal, K. (2023). Trust and Distrust in Public Service Media: A Case Study From the Czech Republic. *Media and Communication*, 11(4), 297-307. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i4.7053>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Article

## Trust and Distrust in Public Service Media: A Case Study From the Czech Republic

Marína Urbániková \* and Klára Smejkal

Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Czech Republic

\* Corresponding author ([urbaniko@fss.muni.cz](mailto:urbaniko@fss.muni.cz))

Submitted: 26 April 2023 | Accepted: 11 July 2023 | Published: 7 December 2023

### Abstract

Although public service media is a trusted island in the media landscape of many countries, trust in public service media is not absolute and universal. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore what trust and distrust entail for the public, a perspective rarely applied in trust research. Also, it explores the extent to which the sources of trust and distrust are the same and whether the concepts of trust and distrust are identical (only inverse), or linked but separate. It focuses on the Czech Republic, where the level of trust in the news is among the lowest in the world, yet public service media is the most trusted news source (Newman et al., 2022). Based on four focus group discussions with the general public ( $N = 24$ ), this study analyzes the reasons for the audience's trust and distrust in Czech public service media. There are three main categories: trust in the message (i.e., people trust public service media if, in their view, it provides objective, truthful, reliable, relevant, and fast information without sensationalism and anti-system views); trust in the source (i.e., people trust public service media if they perceive the public service media journalists as professional); and trust in the public service media organizations (i.e., people trust public service media if they perceive the regulatory framework as effective in ensuring independence from politics and oversight boards as a guarantee for quality). As the reasons leading to trust were not identical (only inverse) to the reasons leading to distrust, our findings suggest that trust and distrust in public service media are not two sides of the same coin.

### Keywords

Czech Radio; Czech Television; distrust; media quality; public service media; skepticism; trust

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Trust, Social Cohesion, and Information Quality in Digital Journalism” edited by Thomas B. Ksiazek (Villanova University), Jacob L. Nelson (University of Utah), and Anita Varma (University of Texas at Austin).

© 2023 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio Press (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

Trust in journalism is a key ingredient without which journalists cannot fulfil their societal role as watchdogs, moderators of the public forum, and facilitators of shared experiences (Usher, 2018). At the same time, trust is also a fundamental prerequisite for the functioning and survival of public service media (PSM), which can serve as one of the cornerstones of democracy (UNESCO, 2008). Although PSM is a trusted island in the media landscape of many countries (European Broadcasting Union, 2022), trust in PSM is not absolute and universal. Previous research shows that younger audiences, ethnic

minorities, those with right-wing orientations, and lower education have less trust in PSM news (Jõesaar et al., 2022; Picone & Donders, 2020). What are the reasons for trust and distrust in PSM and its news service? How can PSM become more trustworthy in the eyes of the public, increase its legitimacy, and strengthen its relevance?

This contribution focuses on the case of the Czech Republic. It is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the level of public trust in the news is among the lowest in the world. According to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022* (Newman et al., 2022), the Czech Republic ranks 37th out of 46 countries surveyed. Second, while trust in PSM and commercial media as sources of news

is more or less balanced around the globe (Ipsos, 2019), in the Czech Republic, PSM is the most trusted national news source (Newman et al., 2022). Based on four focus group discussions with participants ( $N = 24$ ) whose socio-demographic characteristics follow the structure of the Czech population, this study explores the reasons for the audience's trust and distrust in PSM (i.e., Czech Television, Czech Radio).

This study contributes to existing scholarship in three ways. First, it uses a qualitative approach to explore what trust and distrust entail for the public, which is a surprisingly rarely applied perspective for trust research because most studies use a quantitative approach (Engelke et al., 2019). However, the qualitative approach enables a deeper understanding of the sources of trust and distrust on the part of the audience. Second, in PSM research, the audience perspective is often neglected (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2022; Lestón-Huerta et al., 2021) and the question of how the public evaluates and perceives PSM has received limited attention to date (Just et al., 2017; Sehl, 2020). Third, the article makes a theoretical contribution: Its broader aim is to explore the extent to which the sources of trust and distrust are the same, and whether the concepts of trust and distrust are identical (only inverse), or linked but separate, as Engelke et al. (2019) suggest.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *Trust and Distrust: Two Sides of the Same Coin?*

In today's complex and interdependent societies, trust is the social glue that binds people, organizations, and institutions (Sztompka, 2000). This includes the media and journalists: Without the trust of their audiences, they could not fulfil their roles (Usher, 2018), which would have serious consequences for society. Yet, trust in the media has been declining in many countries in recent years (Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Conceptually, different terms are used in media-trust research. While the term "credibility" is often employed in communication and journalism studies, the scholarship that draws on sociological traditions tends to refer to "trust" (Engelke et al., 2019; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Ultimately, these terms are commonly used interchangeably (Kohring & Matthes, 2007) and frequently describe the same constructs (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). In this study, we use "trust" as the key term in order to draw on broader sociological theories related to this concept (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Also, it is broader than the concept of credibility, which is currently understood as its subcategory which is related to the evaluation of media content (Fawzi et al., 2021).

Trust describes the relationship between a trustor and a trustee; it is:

The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation

that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the other part. (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 712)

Trust in the media can be defined as "the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5).

In their model of trust, Mayer et al. (1995) differentiate between factors that cause trust, the trust itself, and the outcomes. The factors that lead to trust are related to the trustor's propensity to trust and the three main characteristics of the trustee (Mayer et al., 1995): ability (i.e., skills, competencies), benevolence (i.e., the degree to which a trustee is believed to want to benefit the trustor), and integrity (i.e., adherence to the principles that the trustor finds acceptable). Applied to trust in the media, this means that audiences should trust the media if they are convinced of their professionalism, their good intentions to serve the public, and their adherence to the usual standards of journalistic quality and ethics.

Trust in media is a complex phenomenon that involves at least three levels: (a) trust in the news information, which relates to the media content; (b) trust in the journalists and those who deliver the news, which is a form of interpersonal trust; and (c) trust in the media organizations, which is a form of institutional trust and where we differentiate among trust in individual media brands, media types, and news media in general (Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Williams, 2012).

The lack of trust can have the character of distrust (i.e., the belief that the media and journalists are doing something wrong), mistrust (i.e., a doubt based upon suspicion), media skepticism (i.e., reluctance to trust without conclusive evidence), or media cynicism (i.e., distrust in the sincerity and nobility of journalists and the media; Cook & Gronke, 2005).

Another conceptual ambiguity concerns the relationship between trust and distrust. The two can be perceived as two ends of the same scale, which would mean that they are both determined by the same (but reversed) antecedents or as separate concepts based on different antecedents (Engelke et al., 2019). Engelke et al. (2019, p. 74) argue that trust and distrust are "linked but separate concepts" and that, although some antecedents are common for both concepts (just opposite), others are different for each of them. Their study showed that, first, some antecedents can be associated with both trust and distrust (e.g., while some recipients associated the high speed of reporting with trust, for others, speed was a reason for distrust) and, second, some antecedents were relevant only for one of the two concepts (e.g., familiarity with the journalist can be a reason for trust, although not knowing the journalists was never mentioned as a reason for distrust; Engelke et al., 2019). This difference in conceptualization has implications for the quantitative measurement of trust

and distrust because, if the two are distinct concepts, the usual single-scale measurement is inadequate (Engelke et al., 2019).

## 2.2. Sources and Correlates of Trust and Distrust

Previous empirical research, which is overwhelmingly quantitative, has identified several factors that influence or are associated with trust and distrust in journalists, news, and the media (for a detailed overview, see Fawzi et al., 2021). They can be distinguished into three categories: (a) wider social factors, (b) the characteristics of the audiences, and (c) the perceived characteristics of the media and media content.

First, previous studies suggest that trust in the media is lower in volatile political environments, politically polarized countries, and countries with low levels of political trust (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). There is empirical support for the “honeymoon effect”: In countries that have recently transitioned to democracy, initial excitement leads to increased levels of trust but is soon followed by disillusionment and a rapid decline in institutional trust, including in the media (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2019; Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

Second, when it comes to the audience factors, both institutional trust (specifically the trust in the government and political trust) and interpersonal trust are positively related to media trust (Jones, 2004; Lee, 2010; Pjesivac, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2016). The same applies to news consumption (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Wilner et al., 2022). On the contrary, political cynicism (Lee, 2010), exposure to disinformation (Ognyanova et al., 2020; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019), and the use of social media as the main source of news (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Park et al., 2020) correlate with lower levels of trust. Political ideology also plays a role: conservative and right-wing citizens and those who are on the political margins are more distrustful of the media (Jones, 2004; Lee, 2010; Schranz et al., 2018; Wilner et al., 2022). Research on socio-demographic correlates, such as gender, age, and level of education, has been inconclusive (for an overview, see Fawzi et al., 2021; Livio & Cohen, 2018).

The third group of factors relates to the perceived characteristics of the media and media content. Trust is negatively associated with perceived news media corruption (Pjesivac, 2017), perceived undue political and commercial influences (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019), and perceived journalistic errors (e.g., sensationalized or understated stories and stories that lack essential information; Wilner et al., 2022). On the contrary, trust is enhanced by the perceived correspondence between actual events as experienced in person and the media coverage of these same events (Livio & Cohen, 2018), and, according to some studies, by greater journalistic transparency (Curry & Stroud, 2021), although other studies find that transparency does not play a role (Karlsson et al., 2014; Tandoc & Thomas, 2017). Moreover, in one of the few qualitative studies on trust,

Knudsen et al. (2022) revealed that ordinary citizens refer to four main themes when explaining their understanding of trust in the media: truthfulness, thoroughness and professionalism, independence, and objectivity.

Another useful source of insight into the sources of audience trust in the media is various scales that measure the levels of trust and credibility (for an overview, see Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). These scales are typically, as Prochazka and Schweiger (2019) note, multi-item measures of trust in the news media and similar constructs, which are based on quality perceptions (e.g., balance, objectivity, honesty, accuracy, timeliness). They presume that trust in the media is linked to the assessment of its quality. This is also the premise of this study.

## 2.3. Audience Assessment and Trust in Public Service Media

In many countries, PSM enjoys a high level of public trust. For instance, PSM news is the most trusted source of news in 25 of the 27 EU member states, with the only two exceptions being Hungary and Poland (European Broadcasting Union, 2022). Even in times of increasing online offerings, citizens in various European countries consider PSM to be highly important (Just et al., 2017; Sehl, 2020).

This does not mean that the popularity of and trust in PSM is universal. Although many citizens rate the informational quality of PSM’s news service better than that of most other media outlets, some are skeptical of its independence and the quality of its journalism, they are critical of political and economic influences, and they are dissatisfied with how PSM fulfils its role (Just et al., 2017; Reiter et al., 2018; Sehl, 2020). Schulz et al. (2019) show that the audience for PSM news in eight European countries is primarily older and educated. When it comes to trust, PSM news is often less trusted by younger audiences, those with lower education, ethnic minorities, people with right-wing political orientation, and people with populist attitudes (Jöesaar et al., 2022; Picone & Donders, 2020; Schulz et al., 2019).

In addition, people who sympathize with populist parties not only trust PSM less but also have different expectations. Their trust is more closely linked to their perception of how well PSM represent their in-group values and attitudes, while the trust of people who are not sympathetic to populist parties is more closely linked to their perception of how well PSM adheres to the normative standards of journalism, like impartiality and objectivity (Smejkal et al., 2022). Still, across Europe, there is a strong positive relationship between the perceived freedom of PSM from political pressures and the level of trust in it (European Broadcasting Union, 2022). Using Spain as a case study, Campos-Rueda and Goyanes (2022) argue that citizens still expect the PSM to fulfil traditional values: independent and qualified journalism that delivers accurate and unbiased information.

## 2.4. Trust in the Media and Public Service Media in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, the level of public trust in the news is among the lowest in the world. Only 34% of the people claim to have trust in the news overall. This ranks it 37th out of 46 surveyed countries (Newman et al., 2022). There are several possible reasons: the perceived lack of media independence due to oligarchization, political ownership of media outlets, and commercialization; the rise of disinformation media that accuses the mainstream media of withholding important information; and attacks on journalists by populist politicians (Urbániková, 2022). In addition, the historical legacy of low interpersonal trust compared to Western countries and citizens' dissatisfaction with the state of the Czech society, along with the recent upheavals caused by the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic, may also bolster distrust in media (Urbániková, 2022).

However, the Czech PSM seems to be an island of trust in the sea of distrust. Czech Radio and Czech Television are the two most trusted news sources for Czech citizens: 58% and 56%, respectively, stated that they trust their news (Newman et al., 2022). As elsewhere in the world (Sehl et al., 2022), PSM is a thorn on the side of Czech populist and extremist parties and parties with authoritarian tendencies (Gosling, 2020). However, unlike in Hungary or Poland, the Czech PSM has so far resisted the pressure and maintained its independence from political power, despite various attempts to bring them under political control in recent years ("Concerns over increasing meddling in independence of Czech public broadcaster," 2021).

### 3. Data and Method

To learn more about the reasons for the audience's trust and distrust in PSM, and to explore the relationship between the concepts of trust and distrust, this contribution uses the Czech Republic as a case study and aims to answer two research questions:

RQ1: How do people explain and justify the extent to which they trust and distrust the Czech PSM?

RQ2: To what extent are the reasons for trust the same (just inverse) as the reasons for distrust, and to what extent do they differ?

To gain an in-depth understanding of what trust and distrust entail for the public, we adopted a qualitative approach and used the focus group method, which is a form of group interview about a predetermined set of discussion topics that is guided by a moderator (Bryman, 2012). We conducted four discussions, three online (via a video conferencing platform) and one in person (in the capital city of Prague due to its relatively easy accessibility from other regions). The ratio between the number of online and in-person focus groups was determined

by data from the Czech Statistical Office (2022), according to which four-fifths of Czech households have a computer or tablet and a similar proportion have access to the internet. The in-person focus group was attended exclusively by those who indicated during recruitment that they use the internet less than once a month.

Each focus group had six participants. The participants roughly replicated the structure of the Czech population in terms of gender, age, education, region, and the size of residence. The purpose of this approach was to achieve a sufficiently diverse sample of participants, without any claim to generalize the findings to the whole population. The participants were recruited by a professional market research agency. They were informed in advance of the research topic, their informed consent was obtained prior to the discussion, and they were financially rewarded for their participation. The discussions were held in November 2022 and the length of each was approximately 100 minutes.

The discussion guide (see the Supplementary File) included the topics of payment for media content and for PSM, the perceived importance of PSM, expectations for PSM, recommendations for PSM management, and trust and distrust in PSM. The participants were first asked to rate their level of trust in Czech Television and Czech Radio on a scale of 1 = *full trust* to 5 = *no trust* (for each medium separately) and to think about the reasons that led them to their indicated level of trust. This was followed by a detailed discussion of their reasoning and justification.

An audio recording and field notes were taken of each discussion. The recording was then transcribed verbatim and coded in Atlas.ti software. Thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), was used to analyze the data. The coding and data analysis was performed in two steps to increase the validity and reliability of the findings. The authors first inductively coded the discussions independently of each other, compared and discussed the codes, and then developed the final code structure and consolidated the codes into several content domains.

### 4. Findings: Trust and Distrust in Public Service Media

The participants ( $N = 24$ ) expressed more trust than distrust for Czech Television and Czech Radio, with a higher level of trust in the latter than in the former. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being *full trust*, Czech Television achieved an average score of 2.8 (i.e., 39% declared trust, 30% were neutral, 30% declared distrust) and Czech Radio had an average score of 2.1 (i.e., 74% declared trust, 10% were neutral, 16% declared distrust). The study focused on the analysis of the underlying reasons for trust and distrust. Based on the explanation that the participants provided for their level of trust in the Czech PSM, we inductively identified a number of factors that lead to trust and distrust (Figure 1). We categorized them according to the

three levels recognized in the literature (Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Williams, 2012): trust/distrust in the message (i.e., the PSM content), trust/distrust in the source (i.e., the PSM journalists), and trust/distrust in the PSM organizations (i.e., its structural position and its regulatory framework).

As depicted in Figure 1, some sources lead to both trust and distrust, which means that they are relevant to both concepts, even though the participants disagreed on the actual assessment of PSM in these aspects (e.g., perceived objectivity of the PSM content led to trust, while perceived lack of it led to distrust). We also identified several reasons that were related solely to trust, but no reason that led solely to distrust.

#### 4.1. Trust in Message: Not Just What Public Service Media Is “Allowed” to Say

To start with the level of the PSM content, the participants primarily discussed the news and current affairs programs and referred to traditional journalistic standards, such as objectivity, truthfulness, relevance, and timeliness, to justify their trust or distrust. Perceived objectivity proved to be the key. The participants agreed that, for PSM to be trusted, its content must be objective, which for them means that it should be impartial, balanced, and include the full spectrum of views without favoring one particular view.

However, they disagreed in two aspects. First, the participants had diametrically opposed assessments of the actual objectivity of the PSM content. While part of them praised it (e.g., “When I want to form an opinion, I turn on Czech Television; it doesn’t seem to me that it’s so influenced by politics and it seems to me to be

impartial”), others criticized its lack (e.g., “It seems to me that it’s always taken out of context...it’s always targeted against someone or for someone; I miss the objectivity there”). In this respect, the participants were particularly critical of Czech Television, not so much of Czech Radio.

Second, a deeper inquiry revealed that the different assessment was largely driven by differing perceptions of what views PSM should give space to. While some participants praised PSM for not presenting anti-system views and conspiracy or disinformation stories and explicitly cited that as a reason for trust, another part resented PSM for not giving space to all views and stories and for deliberately suppressing and withholding certain opinions. This can be illustrated by two topics in particular: the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, some participants argued that PSM does not give space to pro-Russian views and even assumed that the journalists are “forbidden” to do so (e.g., “The reason why the Russians went to war...[is that] Ukraine wanted to join NATO...The Russians didn’t like it. But...the journalists are forbidden to report this. That’s objectivity.”).

Some participants were similarly suspicious of PSM’s coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. They suspected the PSM of withholding information about the lower-than-expected efficacy of the Covid-19 vaccine, pressuring people to get vaccinated, uncritical promotion of the government’s view of the dangers of the virus, and scaring the people. As one participant put it: “For me, trust in [Czech] Television ended during the Covid-19 pandemic.”

Another significant source of trust (or, conversely, distrust) was the perceived truthfulness of the information provided by PSM. The participants agreed that truthful and reliable information, which is ideally verified from multiple sources, is important for their trust. Again, they

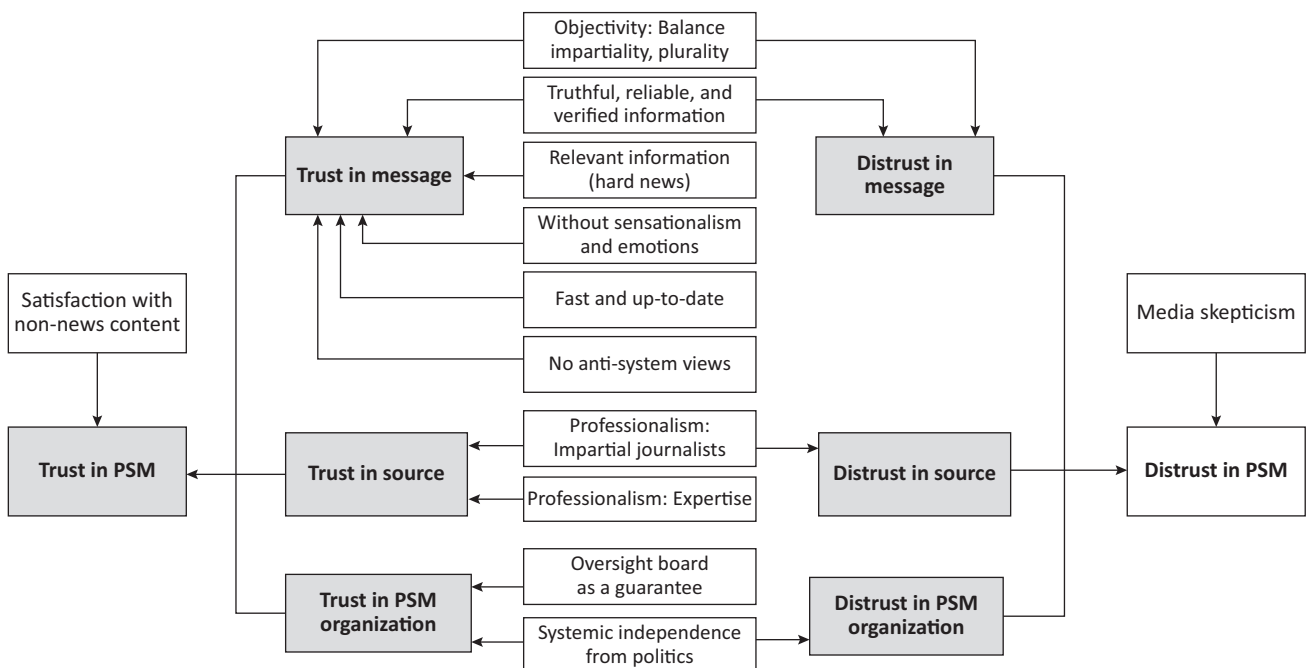


Figure 1. Sources of trust and distrust in Czech PSM.



disagreed on how they judged PSM performance in this regard. Here, the match between the media coverage and their personal experience proved to be an important criterion. Some participants argued that, although they do not have the opportunity to personally verify all of the news, the PSM news coverage is consistent with their own empirical experience:

Back in the days when it [the war in Ukraine] wasn't even talked about here, I already knew a man who was sending there [to Ukraine] bulletproof vests and things like that because his relatives were simply in life-threatening danger. So, I believe that they [PSM] are trying to be objective to the highest possible degree.

Conversely, other participants stated that they do not trust PSM because its news coverage is not consistent with their personal experience. One of them said: "A lot of the information I hear doesn't match what I know about it." Deeper questioning revealed that these participants did not suspect PSM of falsifying information or lying; rather, the problem seemed to be a different perspective on news selection. When the participants illustrated instances where PSM "did not tell the whole truth," they repeatedly used examples that did not conform to media logic and the media's common judgement of what is newsworthy. For example, when it comes to the war in Ukraine, one participant complained that Czech Television shows places where fighting is taking place but does not show places where there is no fighting:

I really have sources directly from Ukraine, and it is not as Czech Television portrays it...Yes, there is a war there. Terrible things are happening there, but they just generalize it to the whole of Ukraine. But Ukraine is a huge country...This is where I simply disagree with Czech Television, with what they are pushing into people's heads about what is happening there.

Next, we identified three reasons that are unique to trust. Some participants justified their trust in PSM on the grounds that, first, PSM news is fast and up to date, second, it delivers relevant information and hard news, and, third, PSM presents the news without sensationalism and excessive appeals to emotion. Here they contrasted PSM's news coverage with the news coverage provided by commercial television, which they perceived to be too emotionally tinged (e.g., commercial channels want to "make sure everyone watches it and is moved by the baby or the cat and dog at the end") and focused on irrelevant and sensational information (e.g., "They [Czech Television] are better than Nova or Prima...because, when you watch it, you see only murders, only violence, only something like that, but you don't learn much").

#### 4.2. *Trust in Journalists: Impartiality and Expertise*

Trust in PSM is also based on trust in its staff. The participants agreed that, to be trusted, PSM reporters and moderators should be sufficiently professional. They emphasized two dimensions of professionalism: impartiality and expertise. Some justified their trust on the grounds that PSM journalists manage to maintain impartiality and they have a high level of expertise (i.e., they are knowledgeable about what they do, tend to be well prepared for interviews, are able to respond to the interviewee's answers, and seem to have a good understanding of the topic). For instance, as one participant explained, discussions at Czech Radio "are conducted very professionally, they are not biased, no one is foisting anything on anyone....I think the moderators are capable and have good qualifications for their position."

From the perspective of other participants, PSM journalists fail to maintain impartiality, which then leads to their distrust of PSM. They mentioned interrupting guests, jumping in, being aggressive when asking questions, repeating the same question, and misinterpreting what a guest says (e.g., "putting something in the guest's mouth without the guest meaning to say it") as indicators of the lack of impartiality. One participant summarized it as follows: "I ask a person a question, I comment on his answer, but I don't impose my own opinions, which unfortunately happens on Czech Television today and every day."

#### 4.3. *Trust in Public Service Media Organizations: Independence and Supervision*

Trust also derives from trust in PSM as an organization. At this level, the participants reflected on the structural position and regulatory framework of PSM. As elsewhere in the world, the Czech PSM is supervised by specialized bodies, specifically the Czech Television Council and the Czech Radio Council (i.e., these are the bodies through which the public's right to control the activities of PSM is exercised). Some participants justified their trust in PSM by the existence of these councils and the stricter oversight that PSM are subject to compared to that of commercial media: "For both institutions, there are those councils above them that, if something were to happen, would step in. This is not the case with the commercial media. I don't trust them very much, I must admit." On the contrary, the opposite, where the activities of media councils would lead to distrust, was not noted.

In addition to the existence of media councils, the second (and related) factor at the systemic level was the broader independence of PSM from political power. Some of the participants who trusted PSM justified this by its systemic independence from political power, which stems, among other things, from the regulatory framework. On the other hand, some critical participants argued that the Czech PSM is, in practice, too subservient to politicians. For example, the Czech

parliament (i.e., the Chamber of Deputies) directly elects the members of the media councils, who then elect the directors general of PSM. The lack of an adequate barrier between PSM and politics was a reason for distrust among some participants: “Czech Television is not objective, Czech Television is governed by the Chamber of Deputies, the majority, I mean the majority in the Chamber of Deputies. That means Czech Television is not objective and the news is not objective.”

#### *4.4. What Else to Consider: Media Skepticism and Non-News Content*

In addition to the reasons for trust and distrust related to the three levels—message, source, and PSM as an organization—the analysis revealed two additional important aspects, one specific to building trust and the other to distrust. First, it seems that the reputation and trust in PSM can be enhanced and strengthened by high-quality non-news content. Even the participants who otherwise had many reservations about PSM usually appreciated its non-news programs, such as documentaries, films, series, entertainment programs, sports, and educational programs.

Second, distrust in PSM is not necessarily the result of a negative assessment of its performance. It may reflect a personal tendency towards skepticism. The testimonies of several participants suggest that complex and polarizing issues, such as the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic, have led them to be unsure about what to believe. This, coupled with the inability to personally verify information, leads to the tendency to distrust PSM and the media: “I don’t think there’s anything that’s 100% true, certainly when it comes to the war in Ukraine or the Covid...because everybody thinks something else....There’s nothing 100% reliable, so I don’t completely trust anything that’s said anywhere.”

### **5. Conclusions**

The four focus group discussions with the Czech public revealed several reasons that lead to trust and distrust in PSM. In line with previous literature (Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Williams, 2012), they can be grouped into three main categories: trust/distrust in the message (i.e., the PSM content), trust/distrust in the source (i.e., the PSM journalists), and trust/distrust in PSM as organizations. In general, the participants justified their trust or distrust with references to traditional journalistic standards as described in previous literature (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2022; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Knudsen et al., 2022; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Livio & Cohen, 2018; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Wilner et al., 2022). In addition, we identified two aspects that are specific to trust/distrust in PSM: the existence of an oversight board as a guarantee of PSM quality and the systemic independence of PSM from politics (i.e., the perceived effectiveness of the regulatory framework).

The participants agreed on the importance of four key aspects that can lead to both trust and distrust, depending on how they assess the actual PSM performance in this regard: objectivity, the provision of truthful information, the professionalism and impartiality of PSM journalists, and the systemic independence of PSM organizations from politics. While the distrustful participants justified their position on the grounds that PSM is not objective, does not provide truthful and verified information, has journalists who are not professional and impartial, and the PSM organizations are not sufficiently systemically independent from politics, the trusting participants argued the opposite. We also identified several reasons that were exclusively related to trust but no reason that would lead solely to distrust.

Interestingly, the participants declared higher trust in Czech Radio than in Czech Television, mainly due to the perceived higher objectivity. Without further research, it is difficult to say to what extent this assessment actually reflects the different degrees of adherence to the principles of objectivity by Czech Television and Czech Radio, to what extent this assessment can be influenced by the rhetoric of populist politicians who question the objectivity of Czech Television but not so much of Czech Radio, and to what extent radio, as a medium, can make it easier to maintain the appearance of neutrality and impartiality due to the absence of visual components (e.g., the sympathies or antipathies cannot be deduced from body language).

This study has several implications that are worth discussing. First, it supports previous literature (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005), which suggests that, when audiences think about and evaluate “the media,” they often actually refer to the news media. Similarly, the participants in our research justified their trust and distrust in PSM primarily on grounds related to its news content. This does not mean that they would reduce PSM to news and current affairs. On the contrary: Even those who otherwise had many reservations about the functioning of PSM usually appreciated its non-news programs, such as documentaries, films, series, entertainment programs, sports, and educational programs. This is an important message for PSM management because it means that the reputation and trust in PSM can be enhanced and strengthened by high-quality non-news content. If PSM wants to maintain legitimacy and popularity, in addition to the mission to inform, it should pay equal attention to the other two parts of the Reithian triad (i.e., to educate and entertain), because audience goodwill built upon these two pillars can mitigate potential dissatisfaction with the news.

Also, the media should think better about their strategy for dealing with opinions and information that can be labeled as conspiratorial or disinformation because, as this study shows, simply ignoring them weakens the trust of part of the audience. Ideally, these elements should be given space and refuted.



Second, one of the most obvious differences between trusting and distrusting participants was the latter's demand for the coverage of anti-system views for the sake of media objectivity. Their distrust in PSM stems from the lack of doing so. This is consistent with studies that examine low trust in PSM in Western Europe, where authoritarian populists accuse PSM of being biased against their anti-system views (Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2022). Thus, although our study is based on data on PSM audiences in the Czech Republic, its conclusions may have more general validity.

Third, the declared distrust in PSM is not necessarily the result of a negative assessment of PSM performance or the belief of malicious intent on the part of the PSM. It may also reflect a personal tendency towards skepticism. For some participants, this tendency seemed to be reinforced by two recent agendas in particular: the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic. In both cases, these are highly polarizing issues where it is difficult to verify the information personally, which leads to a general uncertainty among several participants about what to believe and a feeling that no medium (not just PSM) can be fully trusted. However, being skeptical and critical does not necessarily equal a total rejection of the media as such (Quiring et al., 2021).

Fourth, our findings are consistent with the model of trust developed by Mayer et al. (1995), according to which trust is related to the trustor's propensity to trust (e.g., as we show, personal tendency towards skepticism plays a role here) and to the (perceived) characteristics of the trustee: its ability (i.e., the perceived professionalism of PSM journalists), benevolence (i.e., the perceived intention of PSM to benefit the public, as, e.g., some participants believed that the PSM deliberately withheld some information), and integrity (i.e., perceived adherence to the usual standards of journalistic quality and ethics). As our study demonstrates, systemic guarantees of ability, benevolence, and integrity can be added as additional factors that go beyond this model. Some participants justified their trust by the existence of an oversight board to guarantee PSM quality and by the regulatory framework that maintains the independence of PSM from politics.

Fifth, the reasons that lead to trust in PSM were not identical (only inverse) to the reasons that lead to distrust; some of the identified reasons led to both trust and distrust, but others led only to trust. Our findings seem to suggest that trust and distrust are not two sides of the same coin, but rather two largely related but distinct concepts, as Engelke et al. (2019) suggest. However, interpretive caution is necessary here. The participants were given the task of first declaring their level of trust or distrust and then explaining their reasons, so it is possible that the reasons given have the character of a backward rationalization of trust as a deeper and more stable attitude.

In addition, although some reasons were given only by participants to justify their trust (e.g., the provision of timely and relevant information without sensationalism),

this does not necessarily mean that these aspects (if PSM fails in them) cannot lead to distrust. It may only mean that the distrusting participants do not have reservations about PSM's performance in this regard, but this is not enough for them to trust it. Thus, several concepts were conflated in the participants' statements: trust/distrust and the actual assessment of the PSM performance (overall trust/distrust was not always a perfect reflection of how participants evaluated PSM performance; even those who declared their distrust appreciated some aspects of PSM and vice versa). However, as Prochazka and Schweiger (2019) note, while trust is related to perceptions of quality, these are two distinct concepts. All of this points to the breadth and vagueness of the concept of trust, which seems to have the character of the deeper attitude and orientation of the individual (not necessarily based on a rational assessment of media performance) and which then serves as a projection screen for all sorts of reasoning and interpretations.

To separate trust and performance assessment, further qualitative studies could focus on trust and distrust in the media, in general, without reference to a specific medium. For example, the participants could be asked what qualities and characteristics a media outlet should generally have to be trusted, and conversely, what characteristics lead to distrust. However, such an abstract discussion may be more challenging for participants. Another option would be to discuss trust and distrust in different media outlets so that deeper common reasons can be better identified and more easily distinguished from specific quality assessments.

### Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (Grant No. GA22–30563S). We wish to thank all of the research participants for their time, and Lucie Čejková, Lukáš Slavík, Iveta Jansová, Alžběta Cutáková, and Františka Pilařová for their help and assistance in conducting the focus group discussions. We would also like to thank the issue editors and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on the earlier draft of the manuscript.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

### References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

- Bryman, A. (2012). Focus groups. In A. Bryman (Ed.), *Social research methods* (4th ed., pp. 500–520). Oxford University Press.
- Campos-Rueda, M., & Goyanes, M. (2022). Public service media for better democracies: Testing the role of perceptual and structural variables in shaping citizens' evaluations of public television. *Journalism*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849221114948>
- Concerns over increasing meddling in independence of Czech public broadcaster. (2021, April 1). *International Press Institute*. <https://ipi.media/concerns-over-increasing-meddling-in-independence-of-czech-public-broadcaster>
- Cook, T. E., & Gronke, P. (2005). The skeptical American: Revisiting the meanings of trust in government and confidence in institutions. *The Journal of Politics*, 67(3), 784–803.
- Curry, A. L., & Stroud, N. J. (2021). The effects of journalistic transparency on credibility assessments and engagement intentions. *Journalism*, 22(4), 901–918.
- Czech Statistical Office. (2022). *Využívání informačních a komunikačních technologií v domácnostech a mezi osobami—2022* [The use of information and communication technologies in households and persons—2022]. <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/1-pocitace-a-internet-v-domacnostech-4ebw3izyl9>
- Engelke, K. M., Hase, V., & Wintterlin, F. (2019). On measuring trust and distrust in journalism: Reflection of the status quo and suggestions for the road ahead. *Journal of Trust Research*, 9(1), 66–86.
- European Broadcasting Union. (2022). *Trust in public service media 2022*. <https://www.ebu.ch/research/membersonly/report/trust-in-public-service-media>
- Fawzi, N., Steindl, N., Obermaier, M., Prochazka, F., Arlt, D., Blöbaum, B., Dohle, M., Engelke, K. M., Hanitzsch, T., Jakob, N., Jakobs, I., Klawier, T., Post, S., Reinemann, C., Schweiger, W., & Ziegele, M. (2021). Concepts, causes and consequences of trust in news media—A literature review and framework. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 45(2), 154–174.
- Fisher, C. (2016). The trouble with “trust” in news media. *Communication Research and Practice*, 2(4), 451–465.
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., Ardèvol-Abreu, A., Diehl, T., Gómez Patiño, M., & Liu, J. H. (2019). Trust in institutional actors across 22 countries. Examining political, science, and media trust around the world. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 74, 237–262.
- Gosling, T. (2020, March 10). In the middle of pandemic, Czech television risks repeat crisis. *International Press Institute*. <https://ipi.media/in-the-middle-of-pandemic-czech-television-risks-repeat-crisis>
- Hanitzsch, T., Van Dalen, A., & Steindl, N. (2018). Caught in the nexus: A comparative and longitudinal analysis of public trust in the press. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(1), 3–23.
- Holtz-Bacha, C. (2021). The kiss of death. Public service media under right-wing populist attack. *European Journal of Communication*, 36(3), 221–237.
- Ipsos. (2019). *Trust in the media* [PowerPoint presentation]. <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-06/global-advisor-trust-in-media-2019.pdf>
- Jõesaar, A., Rožukalne, A., & Jastramskis, D. (2022). Trust in public service media in the Baltic states. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 53(4), 587–611.
- Jones, D. A. (2004). Why Americans don't trust the media. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 9(2), 60–75.
- Just, N., Büchi, M., & Latzer, M. (2017). A blind spot in public broadcasters' discovery of the public: How the public values public service. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 992–1011.
- Kalogeropoulos, A., Suiter, J., Udriș, L., & Eisenegger, M. (2019). News media trust and news consumption: Factors related to trust in news in 35 countries. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 3672–3693.
- Karlsson, M., Clerwall, C., & Nord, L. (2014). You ain't seen nothing yet: Transparency's (lack of) effect on source and message credibility. *Journalism Studies*, 15(5), 668–678.
- Knudsen, E., Dahlberg, S., Iversen, M. H., Johannesson, M. P., & Nygaard, S. (2022). How the public understands news media trust: An open-ended approach. *Journalism*, 23(11), 2347–2363.
- Kohring, M., & Matthes, J. (2007). Trust in news media: Development and validation of a multidimensional scale. *Communication Research*, 34(2), 231–252.
- Lee, T. T. (2010). Why they don't trust the media: An examination of factors predicting trust. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 54(1), 8–21.
- Lestón-Huerta, T., Goyanes, M., & Mazza, B. (2021). What have we learned about public service broadcasting in the world? A systematic literature review and suggestions for future research. *Revista Latina*, 79, 65–88.
- Livio, O., & Cohen, J. (2018). “Fool me once, shame on you”: Direct personal experience and media trust. *Journalism*, 19(5), 684–698.
- Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H., & Schoorman, F. D. (1995). An integrative model of organizational trust. *The Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 709–734.
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T., Eddy, K., & Nielsen, R. K. (2022). *Reuters Institute digital news report 2022*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Ognyanova, K., Lazer, D., Robertson, R. E., & Wilson, C. (2020). Misinformation in action: Fake news exposure is linked to lower trust in media, higher trust in government when your side is in power. *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 1(4). <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-024>
- Park, S., Fisher, C., Flew, T., & Dulleck, U. (2020). Global mistrust in news: The impact of social media on trust.

- International Journal on Media Management*, 22(2), 83–96.
- Picone, I., & Donders, K. (2020). Reach or trust optimisation? A citizen trust analysis in the Flemish public broadcaster VRT. *Media and Communication*, 8(3), 348–358.
- Pjesivac, I. (2017). The effects of culture and performance on trust in news media in post-communist Eastern Europe: The case of Serbia. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 94(4), 1191–1214.
- Prochazka, F., & Schweiger, W. (2019). How to measure generalized trust in news media? An adaptation and test of scales. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 13(1), 26–42.
- Quiring, O., Ziegele, M., Schemer, C., Jakob, N., Jakobs, I., & Schultz, T. (2021). Constructive skepticism, dysfunctional cynicism? Skepticism and cynicism differently determine generalized media trust. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 3497–3518.
- Reiter, G., Gonser, N., Grammel, M., & Gründl, J. (2018). Young audiences and their valuation of public service media: A case study in Austria. In G. F. Lowe, K. Donders, & H. Van den Bulck (Eds.), *Public service media in the networked society* (pp. 211–226). Nordicom.
- Schranz, M., Schneider, J., & Eisenegger, M. (2018). Media trust and media use. In K. Otto & A. Köhler (Eds.), *Trust in media and journalism* (pp. 73–91). Springer.
- Schulz, A., Levy, D. A. L., & Nielsen, R. K. (2019). *Old, educated, and politically diverse: The audience of public service news*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Sehl, A. (2020). Public service media in a digital media environment: Performance from an audience perspective. *Media and Communication*, 8(3), 359–372.
- Sehl, A., Simon, F. M., & Schroeder, R. (2022). The populist campaigns against European public service media: Hot air or existential threat? *International Communication Gazette*, 84(1), 3–23.
- Smejkal, K., Macek, J., Slavík, L., & Šerek, J. (2022). Just a “mouthpiece of biased elites”? Populist party sympathizers and trust in Czech public service media. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221143067>
- Strömbäck, J., Djerf-Pierre, M., & Shehata, A. (2016). A question of time? A longitudinal analysis of the relationship between news media consumption and political trust. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 21(1), 88–110.
- Strömbäck, J., Tsfati, Y., Boomgaarden, H., Damstra, A., Lindgren, E., Vliegenthart, R., & Lindholm, T. (2020). News media trust and its impact on media use: Toward a framework for future research. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 44(2), 139–156.
- Sztompka, P. (2000). *Trust: A sociological theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tandoc, E. C., & Thomas, R. J. (2017). Readers value objectivity over transparency. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 38(1), 32–45.
- Tsfati, Y., & Ariely, G. (2014). Individual and contextual correlates of trust in media across 44 countries. *Communication Research*, 41(6), 760–782.
- Tsfati, Y., & Cappella, J. N. (2005). Why do people watch news they do not trust? The need for cognition as a moderator in the association between news media skepticism and exposure. *Media Psychology*, 7(3), 251–271.
- UNESCO. (2008). *Media development indicators: A framework for assessing media development*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000163102>
- Urbániková, M. (2022). Journalists as liars, servants, and sell-outs? On the declining trust in the media in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. *Global Media Journal—German Edition*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.22032/dbt.55519>
- Usher, N. (2018). Re-thinking trust in the news. *Journalism Studies*, 19(4), 564–578.
- Wasserman, H., & Madrid-Morales, D. (2019). An exploratory study of “fake news” and media trust in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. *African Journalism Studies*, 40(1), 107–123.
- Williams, A. E. (2012). Trust or bust? Questioning the relationship between media trust and news attention. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(1), 116–131.
- Wilner, T., Wallace, R., Lacasa-Mas, I., & Goldstein, E. (2022). The tragedy of errors: Political ideology, perceived journalistic quality, and media trust. *Journalism Practice*, 16(8), 1673–1694.

## About the Authors



**Marína Urbániková** is an assistant professor at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism, Masaryk University, Czech Republic. Her research interests include the topics of public service media and its independence, journalistic autonomy, the security and safety of journalists, and gender and journalism. She is currently the principal investigator for the project Rethinking the Role of Czech Public Service Media: Expectations, Challenges, and Opportunities (2021–2023), which is supported by the Czech Science Foundation. She also authors reports on Slovakia as part of the Media Pluralism Monitor project, which is funded by the European Commission.



**Klára Smejkal** is a junior researcher and PhD candidate at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism, Masaryk University, Czech Republic. In her doctoral research, she focuses on the perception of public service media by their audiences. She is mainly interested in the trust in public service media and the link between political polarization, populism, and audience expectations.