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Going Beyond General Media Trust: An Analysis of Topical Media Trust, its Antecedents and Effects on Issue (Mis) perceptions

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Abstract

A key problem with research on news media trust is that it has mostly focused on general media trust and that there is limited research on how media trust might vary across levels of analysis. In this paper, we seek to remedy this by investigating whether news media trust differs depending on the topic of news coverage and whether topical trust can be distinguished from general media trust. We also investigate the antecedents of trust in news coverage of different topics and the effects of topical trust on issue (mis)perceptions. Among other things, findings show that topical media trust can be distinguished from general media trust and is a better predictor of correct perceptions on political matters.

Introduction

One key question in media and communication research over the last decades has revolved around the issue of media trust, focusing on both the development of news media trust over time and on factors that might explain levels of news media trust on the individual or the aggregate level (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018; Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Nielsen, 2020; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Trust in media is an important phenomenon as it influences audience news media use, moderates media effects, and shapes audience political perceptions and preferences (Damstra et al., 2021; Fawzi et al., 2021; Ladd, 2011; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Thus far, most research has conceptualized media trust as a form of generalized or institutional trust, asking, for example, about trust in television or the press (Engelke, Hase, & Wintterlin, 2019; Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020). This is, however, problematic for at least two reasons. First, because research demonstrates that it is increasingly unclear what people are thinking about when asked about their trust in news media (types) in general (Daniller, Allen, Tallevi, & Mutz, 2017). Second, because research has ignored the fact that news media trust might differ depending on the coverage of different topics. The latter is problematic because the transition into a high-choice media environment has diversified the topics that news media cover (Edy & Meirick, 2019), and because of the variance in the degree that different topics are considered politicized (e.g., Chinn, Hart, & Soroka,

2020). The blurring together of coverage of different topics in measures of trust is perhaps one of the reasons that "despite extensive research, our knowledge of news media trust might be more limited than appears at first glance" (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 145).

One key question is thus if and how media trust differs depending on the topic of the news coverage and if topical media trust can be distinguished from general media trust. If results show that these two forms of media trust do not differ significantly, it would suggest that it is sufficient to use measures of general media trust. On the other hand, if results show that media trust differs depending on the topic and is distinguished from general media trust, it would suggest that focusing on general media trust is insufficient for a deeper understanding of media trust.

Based on this, the purpose of this paper is to investigate (a) if media trust differs depending on the topic of news coverage and (b) whether trust in the news coverage of different topics can be distinguished from general media trust. To address the discriminant validity of measures of trust in the news coverage of different topics, we will furthermore investigate whether the antecedents of general and topical media trust differ and whether the effects of general and topical media trust differ. More specifically, based on the notion of an increasing prevalence of misperceptions (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017), we will focus on the effects of general and topical media trust on people's

(mis)perceptions. Empirically, the study will focus on the case of Sweden and people's general media trust and trust in the news coverage of 10 topics: immigration, crime, climate, medicine, genetically modified food, health care, the economy, education, labor market, and terrorism.

Conceptualizing and Operationalizing (News) Media Trust

Broadly speaking, news media trust refers to "the relationship between citizens (the trustors) and the news media (the trustees), where citizens, however tacit or habitual, in situations of uncertainty expect that interactions with the news media will lead to gains rather than losses" (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 142; see also Fawzi et al., 2021). Thus, news media trust involves (a) a relationship that (b) comes to the fore in situations of uncertainty, and that (c) is built on expectations.

One problem with this and other broad conceptualizations of news media trust (Engelke, Hase, & Wintterlin, 2019; Fawzi et al., 2021; Fischer, 2018), however, is that it is ambiguous with respect to the object of trust and the concept of "news media." This is particularly problematic in high-choice media environments where the concept of news media is more ambiguous than it used to be and where people might have very different things in mind when responding to questions about their trust in news media (Daniller, Allen, Tallevi, & Mutz, 2017; Ladd, 2011). This conceptual problem is exacerbated by the fact that most research on news media trust at the operational level is based on quite unspecific measures, with the main distinction being made between different media types (e.g., in the World Values Surveys, respondents are asked about their confidence in "the press" and "television").

While studies based on these kinds of broad measures have generated many important insights and are useful in comparative research (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), they do not take into account that media trust can be located at different levels of analysis, ranging from trust in news media in general to trust in different media types, trust in different media outlets, and trust in the media coverage of different topics (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Previous research has substantiated, for example, that many people do not trust the news media in general while still trusting whatever news media they normally use (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Nielsen, 2020) or media that they perceive as closer to themselves ideologically (Soontjens, Van Remoortere, & Walgrave, 2020). For example, evidence from the United States shows that "Republicans and Democrats place their trust in nearly inverse media environments" (Jurkowitz, Mitchell, Shearer, & Walker, 2020, p. 4).

While research has already examined how trust in media varies across news outlets and media platforms, it has largely ignored the possible variance in media trust across topics (but see Andersson, 2017, 2018). At the same time, data by the American Press Institute (2016) suggest that audience expectations of news media coverage vary across news topics. Among other things, expert sources and concise and accurate reporting were far more likely to be expected from news coverage of national politics than from news coverage of sports. There were even variations in the expectations from news coverage of domestic and international news. If audiences expect different things from media coverage of different

issues, then they are also likely to evaluate and trust the news coverage of different issues differently.

Trusting the News Coverage of Some Topics More Than Others?

Beyond findings that people have different expectations of the news coverage of different topics, there are at least five theoretically grounded reasons why people might trust the news media coverage of some topics more than others. First, people's personal experiences with different topics may vary. This is important as research suggests that a perceived lack of correspondence between events as experienced in person and the way these events were depicted in news media coverage is one of the strongest predictors of news media trust (Livio & Cohen, 2018). That is, when people's personal experiences stand in contrast with the news coverage, it is negatively associated with trust in media, even though personal experiences are always anecdotal. As the news media almost by definition deal with the impersonal, nonimmediate world (Mutz, 1998), people lack personal experience in many domains. Not so many people have a first-hand experience as witnesses of crime, but on the other hand, many have at least some experiences of, for example, issues such as health care or schooling. This implies that audience trust in media might vary by topic.

Second, similar to the notion of personal experience with topics is the concept of "topic relevance" (Mummolo, 2016). This concept relates to the finding that audiences tend to be attentive to news coverage of issues that bear relevance to their lives—for example, seniors tend to follow coverage of social security, citizens without health insurance tend to follow debates on health care, etc. This heightened attention may lead to consumption of topic-relevant news from different sources and the corroboration of these sources may influence trust in news coverage of the topic more generally.

Third, some issues are usually more politicized than others (Chinn, Hart, & Soroka, 2020). Issue ownership theory also suggests that political parties' "own" different issues, in the sense that specific political parties are associated among voters with certain issues and considered better able to deal with these than other parties (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Seeberg, 2016; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2012). For example, right-leaning parties are often perceived to own issues such as law and order and immigration, while left-leaning parties are often perceived to own issues such as social security and the environment (Seeberg, 2016). This politicization of topics may influence citizens' assessment of the news coverage of different topics. The fact that news media focus on certain topics, define them as problems, and frame them in certain ways may make some partisans skeptical of whether news media cover these topics given their innate importance or to serve a political agenda.

Fourth, findings regarding the hostile media phenomenon can also help to understand why people perceive the coverage of topics differently. The hostile media phenomenon suggests that people tend to perceive the news media as being biased against their own side in a political conflict (Hansen & Kim, 2011; Perloff, 2015). The stronger their preexisting attitudes and the more involved citizens are with a certain issue, the greater the likelihood that they will experience hostile media perceptions (Perloff, 2015). Research furthermore shows that politicians also tend to perceive the media as biased against their side, and that this holds particularly true for politicians belonging to

more extreme right-wing parties (Soontjens, Van Remoortere, & Walgrave, 2020) and with more extreme ideological leaning (Matthes, Maurer, & Arendt, 2019). Considering that citizens might have stronger preexisting attitudes and be more involved with some issues than others, this implies that the media might be perceived as more hostile with respect to certain topics than with respect to others, which in turn might affect the extent to which citizens trust the coverage of different topics.

Fifth, differential elite criticisms of news coverage may also explain differences in audience media trust across topics. Research suggests that political elites may strategically try to weaken the news media's credibility and thereby shield themselves from negative news (Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999). While such efforts might target the media in general, as in arguments claiming a general "liberal bias" (Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999), they might also target the news media coverage of specific topics. A prime example is the media coverage of immigration, where many politicians as well as partisan alternative media have criticized the news media coverage for being too positive (Holt & Haller, 2017; Ihlebaek & Nygaard, 2021). Research also suggests that many citizens think that the news media do not devote enough coverage to negative aspects of immigration (Andersson, 2017; Beyer & Matthes, 2015). In Sweden, the context of this study, some research furthermore shows that citizens have less trust in the news coverage of immigration than in the coverage of issues such as health care (Andersson, 2017, 2018). Taken together, this suggests that the news media coverage of some topics is more targeted by political actors and affiliated partisan media, making the media coverage of these topics politically more controversial (i.e., coverage that is more disputed, and that stirs elite and public reactions that vary across party lines) which in turn might affect the extent to which citizens trust the news media coverage of different topics.

Based on the above argumentation, the present study assumes that given that people have different personal experiences and involvement with different topics and that they are exposed to differing political discourses about the news coverage of different topics, their trust in the news coverage of different topics should differ. Hence, our first hypothesis is that news media trust will differ depending on the topic of the news coverage (H1).

In this context, we assume that people hold a mental construct for "the mainstream media." This assumption has been substantiated in past research showing that when asked about "the media," people tend to think about prominent mainstream sources (Ladd, 2011; Tsfati, 2002), though this has diversified with the diversification of the media map (Daniller, Allen, Tallevi, & Mutz, 2017). We also assume that people can differentiate between the coverage of different topics in these prominent sources and evaluate it. While we do not know exactly how people aggregate their experiences with different media outlets covering different topics, we assume that this is a rather general assessment influenced by audience evaluation of prime outlets, taking into account elite discourses (criticism, praise, or attacks on media-specific news coverage or the media coverage of a given topic).

Topical News Coverage and Political Ideology

If trust in the news coverage of different topics can be distinguished from general media trust, then the antecedents of these different types of trust should also differ. Given that political ideology serves to both organize and affect a range of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009) and given that it is well known that left-right ideological placement predicts media trust operationalized as general media trust or trust in specific media outlets (Gottfried, Stocking, & Grieco, 2018; Fawzi, 2019; Jurkowitz, Mitchell, Shearer, & Walker, 2020; Lee, 2010; Suiter & Fletcher, 2020), it is interesting to study the role of political ideology as a predictor of trust in news coverage of different topics. Left-right ideological placement was found to be correlated with general media trust in Sweden (Andersson, 2017, 2018; Strömbäck & Karlsson, 2017), perhaps due to accusations from right-wing populist politicians and political alternative media that the Swedish news media are leftist (Holt, 2016; Widholm & Mårtensson, 2018).

However, when it comes to the association between ideological leaning and citizens' trust in the news coverage of different topics, we believe it is imperative to distinguish between the news coverage of issues that are politically controversial and the news coverage of other issues. In the former case, it can be expected that hostile media perceptions are more common, spurred by attacks on the news media from politicians and political alternative media that dispute the mainstream news media coverage of the issues. In Sweden, that holds for the coverage of immigration, but also crime and the environment, where a recurrent critique by populist right-leaning politicians and alternative media is that the news media cover up crime committed by immigrants (Holt, 2016). Climate change denial is also more prevalent among citizens farther to the right and has been linked to distrust in public service media (Jylhä, Strimling, & Rydgren, 2020; Oscarsson, Strömbäck, & Jönsson, 2021).

On a general theoretical level, we thus expect a stronger linkage between ideological leaning and trust in the news coverage of different topics when (a) the issue is owned by a particular party or (b) the hostile media phenomenon has been activated by (c) recurrent public critique of the news coverage of that particular topic. In the case of Sweden, political attacks related to the news coverage of immigration, crime, and climate thus lead us to expect that there will be a negative correlation between leaning to the right ideologically and trust in the news coverage of immigration (H2a), crime (H2b), and climate change (H2c). With respect to trust in the news coverage of other topics, we do not have strong reasons to expect a certain direction in the relationship with ideological leaning. Hence, we pose the following research question (RQ1): What is the relationship between ideological leaning and trust in the news coverage of different topics? The motivation behind this research question is not mere curiosity, however. Examining the association between topical media trust and ideology, and the significance of the differences between these associations, would help us establish the discriminant validity of the different topical trust items.

Topical News Media Trust and Political Factors

Beyond the role of ideological leaning, if trust in news media coverage of different topics is at least partly independent and distinct from indicators of trust in other topics and news media trust in general, then the correlation with predictors other than political ideology should also differ. To investigate whether this is the case and establish the discriminant validity of the different topical trust items (Tsfati, 2020), we will investigate the association between trust in news media coverage

of different topics on the one hand and political interest and education on the other. These two factors were selected, first, as prior research found them to be rather consistent predictors of media trust (relative, e.g., to age and political participation; see Tsfati & Ariely, 2014, p. 770; Tsfati, 2002, pp. 100–106), and second, because (relative to factors such as gender) there is a theoretical rationale examining their differential effects on media trust, as explained below.

Political Interest

According to Zaller's (1996) notion of reception gaps, those more politically interested are more likely to receive news messages, especially if these are not top headlines but enjoy relatively modest exposure. As explained above, in the Swedish case, the news media have been repeatedly criticized for their coverage of immigration and to some extent crime and climate change (Holt, 2016). While criticisms of news media coverage of these topics are recurrent, they seldom receive main headlines. Hence, they are more likely to be received by those who are more interested in politics and follow the news media more closely. This is true especially after controlling for ideology, which, given selective exposure, may be correlated with heightened exposure to such critiques by right-wing audiences. Given this, we hypothesize (*H3*) that in Sweden, political interest will be negatively associated with trust in the news coverage of immigration (*H3a*), crime (*H3b*), and climate change (*H3c*), and that the associations between these topical trust items and political interest will be more negative compared to trust in news coverage of other topics.

Research also shows that despite their tendency to balance their coverage, when news media cover scientific issues that enjoy relative expert consensus, they tend to orient their coverage in favor of the mainstream expert community and present positions that are opposed to expert agreement only in a minority of cases (Merkley, 2020). In line with this, a content analysis of Swedish news coverage of climate change found that the issue of global warming, for example, was predominantly framed as a severe social problem caused by human activity, leaving very little room for climate skeptics (Shehata & Hopmann, 2012). Research also demonstrates that, in the Swedish case, education is positively associated with acceptance of the scientific consensus in the cases of genetically modified organisms (GMO; Bonny, 2003) and climate change (Sundblad, Biel, & Gärling, 2007). Given that people tend to trust the news media when news coverage is aligned with their predispositions, we thus expect that education will be positively associated with trust in media coverage of climate (*H4a*), medicine (*H4b*), and GMO (*H4c*).

Lastly, beyond the role of ideology, political interest and education, we assume that general and topical news media trust are differently correlated with different factors given the varying levels of involvement respondents have with the different topics. We therefore ask (*RQ2*) whether the magnitude and direction of the associations between various political and demographic factors and general media trust would be different as compared to the magnitude and sign of the same predictor and trust in media coverage of different topics.

Topical News Media Trust and Accuracy of Perceptions

To further address the discriminant validity of measures of trust in the news coverage of different topics, and whether the

distinction between trust in news coverage of different topics is useful compared to measures of general media trust, we will also investigate the relationship between topical media trust and the accuracy of people's perceptions of issue-related facts. This is particularly important given evidence suggesting an increasing prevalence of misperceptions (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2022). In general, previous research demonstrates that those trusting the media tend to be more influenced by them (Tsfati, 2002). Ladd (2011), for example, found that audiences that trust the mainstream media learn from the coverage about the macro-level economic conditions, whereas those that distrust media tend to hold inaccurate information about the economy. He concludes that "attitudes toward the institutional news media shape how people acquire political information. Those who trust the press are more accepting of new messages about national conditions in major policy areas" (p. 138).

Trusting audiences not only learn the facts from media, but also internalize media information in ways that affect other attitudes and behaviors. For example, trusting audiences tend to worry about influenza when news media coverage warns of influenza viruses, and to worry and protect themselves from haze pollution when media cover such risks (Lin & Bautista, 2016; for similar evidence from the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, see Zhao, Wu, Crimmins, & Ailshire, 2020). Trusting audiences also learn from media about the distribution of opinions in society (Tsfati, 2003a) and about the importance of national problems (Tsfati, 2003b), which were found in previous research to be politically relevant. Research also suggests that audiences scoring high on media trust tend to weigh in media information in political decision making, whereas their distrusting counterparts tend to rely on partisan heuristics (Ladd, 2011).

Building on this, if people trust the news media coverage of some topics more than that of other topics, then the influence of topical media trust on knowledge acquired from following the news coverage of these topics should be stronger than the influence of general media trust. This follows from the definition of trust. In situations of trust, trustors are willing to take risks by relying on trustees. In the context of media trust, assuming that people strive for accurate information and scan the media for such information (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998), when an individual trusts news media coverage of topic X, she should be willing to take the risk and accept news media information in this area as true. However, the same individual may have lower trust in the news coverage of Y, and in this area, she would be more likely to reject some of the information presented by the media. This hypothetical individual's higher trust in media coverage of topic X is not supposed to affect her knowledge on topic Y and her lower trust in media coverage of topic Y is not supposed to affect her knowledge of topic X.

In sum, prior research found that trust in news coverage in general leads to media-consistent knowledge (Ladd, 2011). We theorize that more specific reference to the object of trust (i.e., trust in the coverage of a given topic) should work similarly, based on the logic and conceptualization of trust. We therefore hypothesize that trust in news media coverage of a given topic is correlated with more accurate knowledge on that topic (*H5*). However, given the lack of prior research, we do not know how these associations will compare with the association between general news media trust and the same topical knowledge. To explore this we ask (*RQ3*): Are the

associations between topical trust with knowledge of a given topic stronger or weaker compared to the associations of general news media trust and knowledge of the same topic?

Case Selection, Methodology, and Data

To investigate the hypotheses and answer the research questions above, this study draws on a large-scale survey conducted in Sweden, a media system representing a typical example of the Democratic Corporatist Model (Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, & Castro, 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Sweden is a country still characterized by quite widespread use of traditional news media, but also an increasing use of online political alternative media (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Nielsen, 2020). In terms of media trust, research shows that levels of media trust in Sweden are quite high and stable, but also an increasing politicization of media trust, characterized by politically motivated elite positions towards the news media as well as correlations between right-wing ideology and media mistrust (Andersson, 2018). Research suggests that this politicization is mainly driven by supporters of the Sweden Democrats, an authoritarian right-wing populist party (Andersson, 2017; Strömbäck & Karlsson, 2017).

Data were collected by the Laboratory of Opinion Research (LORE), a research infrastructure at the University of Gothenburg. A probability-based sample was recruited for the survey. The net sample size (the number of individuals to which an e-mail invitation to participate in the specific panel-survey study was sent, minus e-mail bounce-backs) was 5,223 residents between 18 and 80 years old. Of these residents, 3,329 completed the questionnaire. Additional details about sampling and recruitment are provided in Supplementary Appendix 1. The participation rate was 63.7% (American Association for Public Opinion Research Response Rate 5 [AAPOR RR5] = 59.7%). The online survey was in the field between February 24 and March 25, 2020. Demographic breakdown of the sample, which is largely representative of the Swedish population, is presented in Supplementary Appendix 1.

Measures

Our focal concept of *topical trust* was measured using 10 items tapping participants' trust in news media coverage of different topics. Respondents were asked "Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from the news media in Sweden when they cover the following topics?" The 10 topics, presented in random order, were immigration, crime, climate, medicine, genetically modified food, health care, the economy, education, labor market, and terrorism.[1]

[1] The topics were selected based on three considerations. First, all of them enjoy a minimal level of prominence and news coverage in Sweden in the years that preceded data collection, as documented by content analysis (Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019; Sandberg & Ihlebæk, 2019). Second, we sought to select topics that vary in the salience, politicization, and elite criticism. Immigration and crime enjoy a rather high presence on mainstream news agenda in Sweden; the environment, economy, and education enjoy medium–low attention, and labor market, defense, and terrorism receive only limited attention (Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019; Sandberg & Ihlebæk, 2019, p. 432). In terms of issue ownership, the issues include topics owned by right wing parties (e.g., crime and immigration), and by left-wing parties (climate, labor) as well as, in Sweden, relatively non-politicized topics (e.g., medicine). As explained above, a key consideration was the different amount and volume of criticism of the coverage of the topics by mainstream media: News media coverage of immigration has been heavily criticized (Holt & Haller, 2017; Ihlebaek & Nygaard, 2021), while the coverage of other issues received less or no criticism. In addition, some topics relate to more controversial topics in which there is no public consensus (e.g., immigration), whereas there is more public consensus in Sweden regarding policies relating to issues such as health care and education.

Answer categories varied between "1" for "do not trust at all" to "7" for "trust completely."

General trust in media was measured using two constructs. First, we used the five items from Meyer's (1988) *credibility index*, frequently used as an indicator of trust in media (see Strömbäck et al., 2020). Respondents were asked "Generally speaking, to what extent do you agree with the following statements about the Swedish news media?" The statements asked whether the news media are "fair," "unbiased," "tell the whole story," "accurate," and "separate fact and opinion" in their news coverage. Answer categories varied between "1" for "strongly disagree" to "7" for "strongly agree."[2] Second, as single-item measures of *general media trust* are much more common and more easily applicable, we also used a single-item indicator of general media trust worded "Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from the news media in Sweden?" with answer categories varying between "1" for "do not trust at all" to "7" for "trust completely" ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 1.33$). Given that using the credibility index resulted with higher explained variances in the models predicting the topical trust items and accuracy of perceptions below (and given that using both the single-item and the credibility index in the same models was impossible due to collinearity concerns), the models we report below use the credibility index as an indicator of trust in media.[3] The single-item measure of general trust serves as a better comparison to the single-item measures of topical trust and this is the reason our main comparison of predictors of trust uses this indicator of general media trust.[4]

To examine whether the different media trust items tap different constructs, we tested two confirmatory factor models, one with two correlated trust latent factors (credibility scale and topical trust), and one with a single latent trust factor composed of the news general media trust items, affecting the 10 topical trust items. Given that the models are not nested, it is impossible to present a direct statistical comparison between them. However, fit statistics for the latter model (normed fit index [NFI] = 0.998; Tucker–Lewis index [TLI] = 0.994; comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.998; root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.978; Akaike information criterion [AIC] = 462.327) were higher compared with those of the former (NFI = 0.953; TLI = 0.941; CFI = 0.955; RMSEA = 0.920; AIC = 2436.632). As a result, in the statistical analyses reported below, we model the topical trust items separately and predict them using the general media trust index.

Political ideology was measured using the item "Where would you place yourself on a political left-right scale?," with answer categories varying between "0" for "far to the left" and "10" for "far to the right" ($M = 4.99$; $SD = 2.44$). *Political interest* was measured using an item asking respondents how interested they are in political content on media, with answer categories varying between "1" for "not at all interested" and "7" for "very interested" ($M = 4.77$; $SD = 1.56$). Our models

[2] To examine the construct validity of this measure, we examined its correlation with political ideology. The correlation between right-wing ideology and the credibility index was negative and significant ($r = -.338$; $p < .001$), in line with past research (Andersson, 2017, 2018). Partial correlation after controlling for news use, political interest, sex, age, income, education, and political ideology was also negative and significant ($r = -.289$; $p < .001$).

[3] Models using the single-item general media trust measure are reported in addition and as robustness checks in Supplementary Appendixes 3 and 4.

[4] The online appendix reports the reverse model that utilizes the credibility index as the dependent variable and the single-item measure as the predictor.

Table 1. Mean Levels of Trust in Media Coverage of Various Topics (Standard Deviations), With Multiple Comparisons Using Scheffe Adjustments

Immigration	Crime	GMO	Terrorism	Climate	Health Care	Labor	Education	Medicine	Economy
3.77 (1.68)[a]	4.01 (1.61)[b]	4.21 (1.49)[c]	4.32 (1.59)[d]	4.34 (1.59)[d]	4.44 (1.46)[e]	4.45 (1.43)[e]	4.50 (1.39)[e]	4.62 (1.39)[f]	4.67 (1.37)[f]

Note. GMO = genetically modified organism. Different superscripts represent significantly different means. The overall difference in topical media trust was tested using a mixed analysis of variance with topical trust as the dependent variable, the topic as a within-subject factor, and the respondent as a random factor. The results show that the within-subject test was significant [F (9, 3112) = 338.37, p < .001; partial η^2 = 0.365; Roy's Largest Root = 0.575].

also controlled for sex (50.2% female), age (M = 46.80; SD = 16.64), income (M = 1.63; SD = 0.75; on a scale varying between "1" for "living comfortably on present income" to "4" for "finding it very difficult on present income"), and education (M = 5.61; SD = 2.04; on a scale varying between "1" for "did not complete elementary school" to "9" for "PhD").

Accuracy of perceptions relates to beliefs about issue-relevant facts that are consistent with the best available scientific evidence (following Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017; Garrett et al., 2016). We measured respondents' perceptions on five policy issues that have been subject to various degrees of public controversies: climate change, vaccination, GMOs, crime, and immigration. For each topic, respondents were asked to indicate whether four factual statements were true or false, on a scale ranging from "1" ("Very certain it is false") to "5" ("Very certain it is true"). For each topic, two of the statements were compatible with relevant scientific evidence and expert opinions, while two represented misperceptions. Combined, these 20 items form a reliable scale with an alpha of .75. Based on these, we constructed an additive index for each topic separately (varying between 0 = high degree of misperceptions to 1 = high degree of correct perceptions).[5]

Results

Turning to the results, *H1* predicted that news media trust will differ depending on the topic of the news coverage. To test this hypothesis, a mixed regression model was estimated with topical trust as the dependent variable, the topic as a within-subject factor, and the respondent as a random factor. The results show that the within-subject test was significant [F (9, 3112) = 338.37, p < .001], as predicted by *H1*. Table 1 presents means and standard deviations of trust in news coverage of the various topics, as well as results for multiple comparisons using Scheffe adjustments.

Results demonstrate that trust in news coverage of immigration was the lowest (M = 3.77; SD = 1.68), followed by trust in news coverage of crime (M = 4.01; SD = 1.61) and GMO (M = 4.21; SD = 1.49). These items were significantly different from all the rest and from each other. Trust in news coverage of terrorism (M = 4.32; SD = 1.59), climate (M = 4.34; SD = 1.59), health care (M = 4.44; SD = 1.46), labor (M = 4.45; SD = 1.43), and education (M = 4.50; SD = 1.39) were higher. The public reported the highest levels of trust towards news coverage of medicine (M = 4.62; SD = 1.39), and the economy (M = 4.67; SD = 1.37), that were significantly higher than all other items, but not from each other. In other words, the significant differences in the mean trust in media coverage

across different topics substantiates the basic assumption of the present investigation, that audience trust towards the news coverage of different topics is different.[6]

Predicting Topical News Media Trust

The next step in the analysis is to examine whether trust in news coverage of different topics is predicted by different individual-level factors. To examine this, we ran a series of ordinal regression models, each predicting trust in news coverage of a different topic. Results are presented in Table 2. *RQ1* inquired about the possibility of different associations between ideology and trust in news coverage of different topics. As expected by *H2a*, right-wing ideology was negatively associated with trust in news coverage of immigration (b = −.14, SE = 0.015, p < .001). Right-wing ideology was also negatively associated with trust in news coverage of crime (b = −.071, SE = 0.015, p < .001) (supporting *H2b*), and climate (b = −.102, SE = 0.015, p < .001) (supporting *H2c*). In line with our expectation that ideology might also correlate with topical media trust more broadly, ideology was also significantly associated with trust in coverage of several other issue topics. Specifically, our results show that right-wing ideology was negatively associated with trust in news coverage of labor issues (b = − .042, SE = 0.015, p = .004), and positively associated with trust in news coverage of the economy (b = .061, SE = 0.015, p < .001), and medicine (b = .035, SE = 0.014, p = .015). The associations between ideology and trust in the news coverage of terrorism (b = −.014, SE = 0.014, p = .326), education (b = −.014, SE = 0.014, p = .321), GMO (b = −.023, SE = 0.014, p = .105), and health care (b = −.024, SE = 0.014, p = .096) were not significantly different from zero. As shown in Table 2, some of the coefficients for the associations between ideology and the topical news trust items were significantly different from each other.[7] The fact that different associations were observed between ideology (perhaps one of the most deep-engrained political attitudes) and trust in media coverage of different topics helps us substantiate that the different topical trust perceptions are separate from each other and by that demonstrate their discriminant validity.

Our third and fourth hypotheses predicted different associations between political interest and education and the different topical trust items. The results show that politically interested respondents tended to trust the news coverage of the economy (b = 0.108, SE = 0.023, p < .001), medicine (b = 0.147, SE =

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[5] As the items contained items representing both correct perceptions and misperceptions, and some items intended to confuse ideologues from both sides of each topic, they did not always load together in an Exploratory Factor Analysis. Supplementary Appendix 2 details the results of factor analyses as well as the question wording and descriptive statistics for the accuracy of perceptions indices.

[6] To rule out the possibility that differences in general media trust explain the differences in topical media trust, we added the general news media trust index to the model as a between-subject covariate. The results show that the effect of the general media trust index was significant [F (1, 28,000) = 5519.97, p < .001] as was the within-subject effect [F (9, 3112) = 338.37, p < .001].

[7] For example, the negative associations between ideology and trust in news coverage of immigration and climate were stronger compared to all other coefficients. The positive associations between ideology and news coverage of the economy were significantly different from all other coefficients.

Table 2. Ordinal Regression Models Predicting Trust in Media Coverage of Topics

	Immigration	Crime	Climate	Medicine	GMO	Health Care	Economy	Education	Labor	Terrorism	General media trust
Ideology	−.141*** (0.015)[a]	−.071*** (0.015)[b]	−.102*** (0.015)[a]	.035* (0.014)[c]	−.023 (0.014)[d]	−.024 (0.014)[d]	.061*** (0.015)[e]	−.014 (0.015)[d]	−.042** (0.015)[bd]	−.014 (0.014)[d]	−.042*** (0.015)[bd]
News credibility scale	1.413*** (0.034)[a]	1.347*** (0.033)[ab]	1.260*** (0.032)[bce]	1.055*** (0.030)[c]	1.055*** (0.030)[c]	1.162*** (0.031)[d]	1.136*** (0.031)[cd]	1.228*** (0.032)[e]	1.259*** (0.033)[be]	1.280*** (0.033)[be]	1.671*** (0.040)[f]
Political interest	−.066** (0.023)[a]	−.064** (0.023)[a]	0.03 (0.023)[b]	.147*** (0.023)[c]	.101*** (0.023)[cd]	.063** (0.023)[be]	.108*** (0.023)[cde]	.051* (0.023)[be]	0.042 (0.023)[bc]	0.033 (0.023)[b]	.069** (0.024)[bcd]
Sex	−.169* (0.069)[a]	−.072 (0.069)[a]	0.01 (0.069)[a]	.468*** (0.069)[b]	.206** (0.068)[c]	.277*** (0.069)[bc]	.369*** (0.069)[bc]	.288*** (0.069)[bc]	.217** (0.069)[c]	.242*** (0.069)[c]	−.179** (0.23)[a]
Age	.007 (0.021)[ab]	.043* (0.021)[a]	−.077*** (0.021)[cfg]	−.058** (0.021)[cg]	−.165*** (0.021)[d]	−.050* (0.021)[bceg]	−.101*** (0.021)[cf]	−.082*** (0.021)[fg]	−.129*** (0.021)[edf]	−.028 (0.021)[bc]	−.009 (0.022)[ab]
Income	−.320*** (0.047)[a]	−.244* (0.046)[a]	−.273*** (0.046)[bc]	−.292*** (0.046)[b]	−.245*** (0.045)[b]	−.233*** (0.046)[b]	−.302*** (0.046)[b]	−.264*** (0.046)[b]	−.369*** (0.046)[cd]	−.218*** (0.046)[b]	−.210*** (0.048)[ab]
Education	−.052** (0.017)[a]	.023 (0.017)[bc]	.057** (0.017)[b]	0.013 (0.017)[bc]	.059*** (0.017)[b]	0.03 (0.017)[bc]	0.026 (0.017)[bc]	0.008 (0.017)[c]	.040* (0.017)[bc]	.044* (0.017)[bc]	.051** (0.018)[a]
R^2	.59	.55	.53	.42	.43	.47	.45	.49	.52	.51	.63

Note. GMO = genetically modified organism. Different superscripts represent significantly different coefficients across models.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

0.023, $p < .001$), health care ($b = 0.063$, $SE = 0.023$, $p = .005$), education ($b = 0.051$, $SE = 0.023$, $p = .02$), and GMO ($b = 0.101$, $SE = 0.023$, $p < .001$), and to distrust news coverage of immigration ($b = −0.066$, $SE = 0.023$, $p = .004$), in line with *H3a*, and crime ($b = −0.064$, $SE = 0.023$, $p = .005$), in line with *H3b*. *H3c*, hypothesizing a negative association between political interest and trust in the coverage of climate, was however not supported.[8]

As expected by *H4a* and *H4b*, education was positively associated with trust in news coverage of climate ($b = 0.057$, $SE = 0.017$, $p = .001$) and of GMO ($b = 0.059$, $SE = 0.017$, $p < .001$). In contrast to the expectation of *H4c*, the association between education and trust in news coverage of medicine was not significant ($b = 0.013$; $SE = 0.017$, $p = .441$). However, education was positively associated with trust in media coverage of labor ($b = 0.040$, $SE = 0.017$, $p = .021$) and terrorism ($b = 0.044$, $SE = 0.017$, $p = .010$), and negatively associated with trust in news coverage of immigration ($b = −0.052$, $SE = 0.017$, $p = .003$).

Our second research question inquired about possible differences between the magnitude and size of the predictors of general media trust and the different topical media trust items. As demonstrated by the comparisons in Table 2, the predictors of the single-item general media trust measure were statistically different in magnitude, and sometime also in sign, compared to the topical media trust items. While it

seems like general media trust had similar associations with the predictors as trust in media coverage of immigration (for four out of seven predictors, the coefficients were not significantly different), even in this most similar case, the associations between general media trust and ideology, political interest, and the news credibility scale were significantly different for general media trust compared to the topical trust in the coverage of immigration. That is, not even one of the 10 topical trust items displayed statistically similar associations with all predictors as did general media trust. This substantiates the discriminant validity of general versus topical media trust.

The Association Between Topical News Media Trust and Accuracy of Perceptions

To test *H5* predicting that trust in the news media coverage of a given topic is correlated with more accurate knowledge on that topic, we ran five ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models, each predicting accuracy of perceptions in the context of a single topic by trust in news media coverage of that same topic, the credibility index, and the demographic and political covariates included as control variables. Results are presented in Table 3.

In contrast to *H5*, trust in media coverage of immigration was negatively, and not positively, associated with holding accurate perceptions regarding immigration ($b = −0.017$, $SE = 0.006$, $p < .001$). However, in the case of all four other topics (crime, climate, medicine/vaccines, and GMO), and in line with *H5*, trust in the news media coverage of a topic was positively related to holding accurate perceptions of that topic. All associations were also statistically different from zero: Trust in media coverage of crime was positively associated with holding accurate perceptions regarding crime ($b = 0.009$, $SE = 0.002$, $p < .001$). Trust in news media coverage of climate was positively associated with holding accurate perceptions regarding climate ($b = 0.027$, $SE = 0.002$, $p < .001$). Trust in news media coverage of medicine was positively associated with holding accurate perceptions regarding vaccines ($b = 0.028$, $SE = 0.003$, $p < .001$). Lastly, trust in news media coverage of GMO was positively associated with

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[8] A reviewer suggested testing the possibility that ideology interacts with political interest in shaping topical media trust perceptions. The rationale was that interested audiences are more likely to tap the political and ideological cues by elites. However, this interaction was statistically significant in only two out of the 10 models: In the case of immigration (the interaction term: $b = −0.017$, $SE = 0.001$, $p = .001$), the negative effect of ideology increased with the increase in political interest (when political interest was 3, the effect of ideology was $b = −0.054$, $SE = 0.013$; when political interest was 5, the effect of ideology was $b = −0.088$, $SE = 0.001$; when political interest was 6, the effect of ideology was $b = −0.105$, $SE = 0.010$; all significant at $p < .001$). In the case of climate (the interaction term: $b = −0.016$, $SE = 0.006$, $p = .003$), the positive effect of ideology decreased with the increase in political interest (when political interest was 2, the effect of ideology was $b = 0.056$, $SE = 0.022$; $p = .009$; when political interest was 5 or higher, the sign of the coefficient was negative and the effect was not statistically significant). That is, interested liberals tend to trust news coverage of immigration and uninterested conservatives tended to trust news coverage of climate.

Table 3. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models Predicting Accuracy of Perceptions of Topics

B/β (*SE*)	Immigration	Crime	Climate	Vaccines	GMO
Topical media trust	−.017***/−.166 (0.006)	.009***/.088 (0.002)	.027***/.324 (0.002)	.028***/.226 (0.003)	.012***/.096 (0.003)
News credibility scale	−.002/−.013 (0.003)	.014***/.133 (0.003)	−.001/−.006 (0.002)	−.002/−.013 (0.003)	−.001/−.008 (0.003)
Mainstream news use	.002/.020 (0.002)	.003/.026 (0.002)	−.003#/−.032 (0.002)	−.006*/−.053 (0.002)	.002/.020 (0.002)
Political interest	.015***/.136 (0.002)	.003#/.032 (0.002)	.000/−.004 (0.001)	.014***/.120 (0.002)	.007***/.064 (0.002)
Sex	.067***/.196 (0.006)	.011*/.037 (0.005)	.005/.021 (0.004)	−.006/−.018 (0.006)	.098***/.272 (0.006)
Age	.010***/.097 (0.002)	−.011/−.117 (0.002)	−.005***/−.066 (0.002)	−.005*/−.051 (0.002)	−.015***/−.035 (0.002)
Income	−.008#/−.034 (0.004)	−.026***/−.127 (0.003)	−.019***/−.109 (0.003)	−.024***/−.103 (0.004)	−.018***/−.077 (0.004)
Education	.011***/.135 (0.001)	.010***/.133 (0.001)	.009***/.141 (0.001)	.014***/.162 (0.004)	.016***/.179 (0.002)
Ideology	.012***/.165 (0.001)	−.018***/−.278 (0.001)	−.009***/−.171 (0.001)	−.003*/−.038 (0.001)	−.001/−.009 (0.001)
R^2	.184	.223	.23	.141	.158
N	3,029	3,031	3,031	3,030	2,998

Note. GMO = genetically modified organism.
# $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

holding accurate perceptions of this topic ($b = 0.012$, $SE = 0.003$, $p < .001$).

Our third research question (*RQ3*) inquired whether the associations between topical trust and accurate topical perceptions would be stronger or weaker compared to the associations of general news media trust (the credibility index) and accurate perceptions of the same topics. Table 3 presents standardized regression coefficients that allow for comparing effect sizes across and within models. In three of the five models (climate, vaccines, and GMO), the standardized coefficient for the effect of topical trust on accuracy of perceptions was larger than the standardized coefficient for the credibility index (as an indicator of general media trust). In the case of immigration, the effect of topical trust was stronger than the effect of general trust, but in contrast to our expectations (i.e., the coefficient was negative, while we expected a positive association). And in the case of crime, the general media trust index was a better predictor of accuracy of perceptions, compared to trust in news coverage of crime.

To further check the robustness of the results and investigate whether the specific topical media trust item better predicted accuracy of perceptions compared to the other topical media trust items, we ran models predicting the accuracy of perceptions constructs using all possible pairs of topical media trust items. The results are described in Supplementary Appendix 5, and show that in 17 out of 20 possible comparisons, results were in line with expectations.

Discussion

As noted in the *Introduction* section, a key problem in research on news media trust is that most studies have focused on general media trust and that research investigating whether news media trust differs across levels of analysis is scarce. In this study, we have sought to remedy these shortcomings by investigating (a) how news media trust differs depending on the topic of news coverage, (b) whether trust in the news coverage of different topics can be distinguished from general news media trust, (c) whether the antecedents of general and topical media trust differ, and (d) whether the effects of general and topical media trust on accuracy of perceptions of different topics differ.

The most important takeaway from the results is that media trust does differ depending on the topic of the news coverage and that general and topical media trust can be differentiated. More specifically, four types of evidence support the differentiation of topical news media trust from general media trust.

First, the analyses show that items measuring trust in news coverage of different topics do not belong to the same latent factor as do items measuring general media trust. In our data, a measurement model portraying the topical trust items as separate items affected by general media trust fit the data better, compared to a model portraying a single latent topical trust factor, affected by general media trust. This is despite the fact that the separate topical trust items were rather highly correlated with the general media trust index (Pearson's correlations ranged between .60 and .73). But these high correlations mean that general media trust, at best, accounted for only little more than half of the variance in trust in news media coverage of the different topics.

Second, the results show that the mean levels of media trust differed significantly across topics. Along with our expectations, the news media enjoyed lowest trust for their coverage of immigration and crime. As pointed out, the Swedish media have many times been attacked for the way they cover immigration and crime. The finding that trust in news coverage of

these topics is lower than in the coverage of other topics is in line with previous work documenting the effects of elite criticism on people's media trust assessments (Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Ladd, 2011; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999), although we here cannot establish the causal link.

Third, the results show that the antecedents of general and topical media trust differ. More specifically, right-leaning respondents tended to distrust the media in general and their coverage of most issues (including immigration, crime, climate, and labor and to some extent also GMO and health care) more than people of more centrist and leftist leaning. It is worth pointing out that despite these associations (and the lower general media trust among right-wing respondents), trust in news coverage of the economy and medicine was *positively* associated with right-wing ideology. Although we cannot provide a full account explaining these differences, the association between left-wing ideology and media trust of immigration, crime, and climate may be related to the politicization of these issues and specifically of attacks by right-wing politicians on mainstream media coverage of these topics.

In addition, the results show that trust in the more politicized topics was lower among politically interested respondents. In line with Zaller's (1996) notion of reception gaps, only those interested in politics have probably received, and hence internalized, these criticisms. Also, education differentially correlated with the topical trust items, exhibiting a positive correlation with trust in news coverage of climate and GMO. As hypothesized, educated respondents are more likely to align with news coverage of these topics, which most of the time tends to reflect expert positions and scientific consensus.

Fourth, in most cases, the results show that trust in the news media coverage of a topic significantly predicted accuracy of perceptions of that topic, and that it was a better predictor of accurate perceptions compared to general media trust. This demonstrates that the items measuring trust in news coverage of different topics are not only distinguishable from each other and from general news media trust, but that they can be superior to general media trust in predicting social and political phenomena.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of previous research on media trust. One of the most important conundrums resulting from past research is related to the modest effects of media trust on exposure to mainstream news and of mainstream news effects, which has led scholars to ask how it could be that people mistrust news media but still attend to and are influenced by them (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati, 2002). A potential explanation based on this study might simply be that previous research has utilized too broad measures of media trust. The current study demonstrates better outcomes of media trust measures that were focused on trust in news coverage of specific topics, which outperformed general media trust in predicting knowledge. In a similar manner, perhaps items asking about trust in news coverage of the elections would outperform general media trust and show stronger effects of media trust. The current exploration offers a pathway to examine such possibilities in future research.

While our analysis demonstrated that topical trust items often are superior predictors of the accuracy of political perceptions, this of course does not mean that measures of general media trust should be abandoned. First, the general measures

of media trust allow for easy and efficient comparisons across countries and to other institutions. Second, they may be more useful in predicting news exposure and moderators of media effects. Third, measures of trust in specific news organizations or sources may be superior predictors of exposure to these news sources. In light of this, future research should systematically compare the performance of different trust measures across different research contexts. Possible interactions between outlet-specific and topic-specific indicators of media trust should also be examined in future research.

As any other study, the current study suffers from some limitations. First, trust in news coverage of topics was measured using 10 single-item measures, each tapping trust in news coverage of a single topic. This measurement had three drawbacks. First, of course, single-item measures are inferior compared to multiple-item measures. Second, they refer to the Swedish media in general and do not specify the sources. Third, they provide relatively little insight as to what respondents have in mind while assessing their trust in media coverage of different topics. The current data (while demonstrating systematic differences in trust in news media coverage of different topics) are unable to parse out whether variation in topic-specific news media trust are due to differences in attention paid to different topics (and political discourse about news coverage of that topic), greater involvement or investment in the perceived importance of accuracy for coverage of a topic, or distinct assessments of the performance of the news media in its actual coverage. At the same time, the length of a survey is always limited and measuring trust in each of the topics in each possible outlet using multiple items was not possible. Important to note, though, is that the single-item measures of media trust outperformed the five-item general media trust measure. Future research could benefit from further investigating what survey respondents are thinking about when they are asked to think about trust in news in this way.

A second limitation is the reliance on a cross-sectional design, which inhibits causal claims and inferences. Our conclusion that trust in news coverage of topics is distinct from general media trust relied first and foremost on associations, not on causal effects. Still, in the case of the association between ideology and the topical trust, it is probable that the direction of the association is between the former and the latter, as ideology is a deeper and more stable construct compared to trust in news media coverage of different topics. In the case of the association between trust in news coverage of different issues and knowledge pertaining to these, the causal interpretation may rely on previous findings (Ladd, 2011) that have shown the direction of the association between media trust and learning using longitudinal designs.

Thirdly, our ability to generalize the findings to other countries and cultures is unclear, given that political issues tend to vary in salience between countries (see Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014). Part of our explanation for the differing effects of interest on topical media trust rested on the salience and politicization of certain issues in the Swedish political context, and on the fact that news coverage of these issues is harshly criticized. The findings reported above about the association between trust in news coverage of immigration and crime and political interest may thus be related to the Swedish context whereas in other contexts we will see interested audiences mistrusting the news coverage of other topics. In other words, while the theoretically important finding that

trust in the news coverage of different topics differs and can be distinguished from general media trust can probably be generalized, the specific findings related to antecedents and effects of trust in the news coverage of different topics are likely to differ across countries depending on what topics are more salient and politicized.

Despite these limitations, we believe that this research significantly contributes to our understanding of media trust by demonstrating that trust in news coverage of specific topics is distinct and distinguishable from general media trust. Our evidence demonstrated not only this, but also the superiority of the distinction when trying to predict potential outcomes of news coverage on people's perceptions of societal issues. Future research should build on this progress and utilize measures that bring even additional refinement into the measurement of audience trust in the news media.

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Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available at *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* online.

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