

Mechanisms of Trust

News Media in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes

von
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1. Introduction

Trust in the institutions of democracy has been extensively studied in the past (see Catterberg/Moreno 2005; Dogan 2005; Levi/Stoker 2000 for an overview). Much of the research was prompted by the fear that increasingly skeptical attitudes towards political institutions in democratic countries could undermine the stability of democratic systems. The study of political trust is, however, complicated by different levels of political support. It is often not obvious whether questions that pertain to political trust relate to the political system in general, the regime in power, or to specific politicians. Trust in the news media has received less attention. This is astonishing since the news media has a central role in democratic systems: it should keep the audience informed about policies and politicians and thereby enable citizens to cast an informed vote or to engage in political action. In authoritarian regimes, the news media are equally important because they spread a shared ideology that aims at legitimizing the regime in power. It is questionable whether or not the news media could perform such a function in the absence of the audience's trust in the news media.

Most studies on trust in political institutions are limited to Western democracies. While a number of studies address trust in institutions in non-Western democratic and authoritarian contexts (Pharr 1997; Inoguchi 2002; Kim et al. 2002; Kabashima et al. 2000; Chen/Shi 2001; Mishler/Rose 2005; Wang 2005; Kim 2005; Shlapentokh 2006; Lianjiang 2004), levels of trust in institutions in democratic and authoritarian countries are rarely compared. However, such a comparison might be instructive because levels of trust in the news media are often higher in authoritarian countries (figure 1.1).

High levels of trust in the news media are obviously not necessarily conducive to democratization. High levels of trust in authoritarian regimes are not restricted to the news media.

Levels of trust in government and parliament are equally high in authoritarian regimes (see figure 1.2 for levels of trust in government)

This study strives to find factors that explain these developments and explore their consequences: why is there a loss of trust in the news media in Western democracies compared to some authoritarian regimes? What are the dynamics of trust in the news media over time in Western democracies? What are the consequences of different levels of trust? Is low trust in the news media in Western democracies a reason to worry, or is the level of distrust healthy? What is actually meant when citizens answer survey questions referring to trust or confidence in the news media?

The present chapter deals with explanations given in the scientific literature. The following chapters then review these explanations in light of theories of the public sphere. The concept of

trust is related to market-oriented, deliberative, and critical theories of the public sphere. There is no well-developed theoretical framework that embeds trust in a theory of the public sphere. Therefore, the aim is to arrive at a more thorough understanding of the notion of trust in the context of the news media, to develop a theoretical framework that covers the role of trust in different types of public spheres, and to generate a set of hypotheses that can be empirically tested. This study argues that trust in the news media refers to the expectation of the audience that the news media can be believed, e.g. provide complete, relevant, and unbiased information. Trust may be based on three factors: it can be based on a rational analysis of the incentive structure of the trusted institution and the trusting actor, on a limitation of the horizon of alternatives, or on a belief or disbelief in the trusted actor to conform to expectations based on past experience. Based on Giddens and Beck, this study argues that an expansion of alternatives is one of the implic