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What Do Media Audiences Mean When They Talk About Media Trust? An Open-ended Approach to How Audiences Interpret the "Trust-question"

Peter Jakobsson[a] and Fredrik Stiernstedt[b]

[a]Department of Informatics and Media, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden; [b]Department of Media and Communication Studies, Södertörn University, Huddinge, Sweden

ABSTRACT

While studies of media trust that rely on survey data and statistical analysis give us valuable information, there is some uncertainty about what exactly is being measured with these study designs. There is a need for more inductive and qualitative studies that can help us develop our understanding of the concept and phenomena of trust as such. In this article, we present an analysis of a qualitative interview study ($N = 97$) with open-ended questions of trust. The results suggest that, although there are many ways to interpret this question, only some lead people to evaluate what researchers usually associate with media trust. Instead, informants saw trust as an "impossible" question; they saw it as an opportunity to communicate a standpoint express identity and emotion or casts the trust-question as an issue of knowledge and rationality. We consider that the results from this study illustrate some of the difficulties that need to be overcome in order to advance the research on media trust.

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The question of trust and distrust in the media is of considerable relevance in both academic and public debate (e.g., Fink 2019). Surveys show that trust in the media is decreasing in many countries (Edelman Trust Barometer 2023; *Reuters Digital News Report* 2024; Shirikov 2020). While this might be a cause for concern, considerable conceptual ambiguity surrounds such research. Aside from theoretical and operational ambiguities, there are ambiguities in research respondents' interpretations of the questions posed by the researcher about "trust" and "distrust" (Fisher 2016; Schwarzenegger 2020). This general conceptual ambiguity hampers our understanding not only of trust and distrust but also of what fluctuations in media trust mean, how they can be explained and what consequences they might have (Jakobsson and Stiernstedt 2023; Strömbäck et al. 2020).

In survey-based research, it is common with direct questions about trust in the media. Informants are often asked to mark their degree of trust on a Likert scale. While such an operationalisation is methodologically sound and theoretically productive in many cases,

CONTACT Fredrik Stiernstedt fredrik.stiernstedt@sh.se

it is still somewhat unclear exactly what respondents are answering when asked about their "trust" in the media (Jakobsson and Stiernstedt 2023; Knudsen et al. 2022). It is of course possible that, despite diverse interpretations among respondents, the survey-based research still manages to capture broad trends that remain meaningful, and that surveys capture underlying attitudinal dispositions, even if interpretations vary at the individual level. Nevertheless, trust and distrust have mainly been used as "researcher-defined" (Knudsen et al. 2022) concepts, and inductive approaches that explore the "folk theories" (Kleis Nielsen 2016) of trust are still lacking in the field (Fawzi et al. 2021; Knudsen et al. 2022).

In this article, we draw on the results of a qualitative interview study ($N = 97$) to contribute to the growing research field of bottom-up and audience-centred journalism studies (Bengtsson and Johansson 2024; Kyriakidou et al. 2023; Swart et al. 2022). Previous research in this area has often handled the issue of what citizens mean by "media trust" by explicitly asking them to define or describe in their own words what they mean by the word "trust". For example, Knudsen et al. (2022) used an open-ended survey that asked people, "In your own words, what does trusting the media mean to you?" (2354). By asking these types of questions, researchers have mainly received answers about what it is that informants think *explains* their own media trust. In Knudsen et al.'s (2022) study, the respondents said that they experience trust when they think that the media is being truthful, independent or objective. However, this kind of answer does not really provide insight into the "meaning" of trust; rather, it reveals what respondents think are important explanations for why they might feel or experience trust in (some) media and journalism.

We suspect that asking people to "define" media trust or asking them to elaborate on the "meaning" of media trust does not reveal the full story of what people mean when they answer the "media trust question" in a survey. Asking people to elaborate on the definition of a word invites certain answers but can also hide other, more spontaneous reactions and answers to the "trust question". To find empirical support for our suspicion, we have conducted a study in which we analysed how people interpret the "trust question" as such. When someone asks them to rate their media trust, what are they responding to? This, we argue, is another way to understand people's "definition" of media trust. To get to such knowledge, we did not explicitly or directly ask people how they define the question of media trust. Instead, we analysed the many ways in which people chose to answer the "trust question". Some people answered the questions as having to do with journalistic professionalism and news media performance, whereas others answered the questions as having to do with themselves and their personal and political identities. Our analysis seeks to bring light to the question, *what are the informants talking about when they describe their trust in the media?* Or, in other words, *how do informants interpret the "trust question"?*

An Open-ended Approach to Media (Dis)trust

Recent research reviews (Fawzi et al. 2021; Jakobsson and Stiernstedt 2025) have shown that studies of media trust and media distrust mainly use quantitative and statistical methods and survey or quasi-experimental data when studying the phenomena. Hence, the methodologies and approaches commonly used in studies of trust and distrust rest on what Knudsen et al. (2022) call "researcher-defined" concepts of trust and distrust;

that is, the definitions of the concepts and the measures are predefined by the researchers and are theoretically grounded in preconceived notions of what trust and distrust are.

Practical operationalisations of trust have measured it in a variety of ways. Some such measures are broad and general, such as, "In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media?" (Gallup) or "I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain media and institutions. For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it" (Eurobarometer) (quoted from Strömbäck et al. 2020, 143). Other measures are based on specific questions on media content, media organisations or journalists themselves. What is clear, however, is that there is no agreed-upon measurement or operationalisation of media trust in the literature, and that the level of abstraction varies among different studies. It also seems difficult to find conceptualisations and operationalisations of trust and distrust—beyond very general and broad ones—that hold up theoretically and empirically in studies with a quantitative and statistical methodology. As concluded by Strömbäck et al. (2020), the result may be that "despite extensive research, our knowledge of news media trust might be more limited than what appears at first glance" (145).

In this article, we follow an open-ended approach, using qualitative interviews. Such an approach to the question of media trust has been attempted in previous studies using open-ended survey methods or qualitative interviews, with the primary aim of empirically analysing how audiences define trust. For example, Newman and Richard (2017) studied news trust and how audiences understand the media's ability to distinguish fact from fiction, showing that uncertainty regarding the autonomy of journalists generally results in lower trust in the media's ability to distinguish between fact and fiction. While this study is relevant since it includes a more open-ended approach (textbox in an online survey) it is different from our approach since it is not directly about trust, but about media performance. The study does, however, indicate that the perception of journalistic professionalism and autonomy is part of what builds "trust" or a lack thereof among media users. Schmidt, Heyamoto, and Milbourn (2019) specifically focussed on "underserved communities" and studied the "folk theories" of trust among these communities, finding that responsibility, integrity and inclusiveness were important for audiences when assessing news media and crucial for forming trust. Their study was conducted through focus groups and differs from the present study since it more clearly steered the conversations to issues of why one trusts, using three broad questions directly mentioning the concept of trust and asking respondents to explain them. Knudsen et al. (2022) used a survey design in which media users in Norway answered open-ended questions on media trust. As Newman and Richard (2017, see above) they used open-ended text-responses in a survey prompting the individuals responding to the survey in the following way: "There has been a lot of talk about 'trust in media'. In your own words, what does trust in the media mean to you?" The pattern within the respondents' answers showed that truthfulness, independency and objectivity, and thoroughness and professionalism, as well as (the absence of) bias, were important dimensions in what media users experienced as trustworthy.

Our study is different from Knudsen et al.'s (2022) work, since in-depth ethnographic interviews invites the informants to speak more freely and in length about their relations to media and journalism, and hence open for a wider set of interpretative possibilities for how to understand what trust—or lack thereof—means for people. Different from all

these previous studies we are not only interested in how people define the concept of trust (and distrust) with their own words. We also seek to understand how they interpret and relate to the very question of trust as such: what do people think about, and what are they answering to, when researchers prompt them with questions about trust and distrust? This issue partly coincides with the previous work, but also goes beyond these studies and are somewhat broader in scope.

In general, the work by Knudsen et al. (2022) suggests that trust—or distrust—in the media and in journalism has a strong connection to journalistic practices and content and is formed mainly through evaluations of existing journalism. While this is arguably one part of the story, there are reasons to suspect that audiences' understandings of media trust are wider and go beyond the media as such. The question of how media trust is formed and what causes media trust and media distrust is connected to how people understand what trust as such is and what the concept entails. Terry Flew (2021) suggests, for example, that distrust in the media is mainly connected to political beliefs. Other scholars point to political efficacy (Martin, Martins, and Naqvi 2018), the media system in general (Fenton 2019) and social organisation more broadly (Cammaerts 2015). Christian Schwarzenegger (2020) empirically showed how people's personal epistemologies of the media—what he calls their "pragmatic trust"—are formed in relation to beliefs, prior experiences, world views and political orientations. Kyriakidou et al. (2023) state,

> the way people understand and engage with news media are *[sic]* framed not only by their direct exposure to them […] but also other factors, such [as] the broader media system and political culture, social discourses about the role of journalism and interpersonal relations (Kyriakidou et al. 2023, 2381).

The quoted work then suggests that, for audiences, media trust is not only about different dimensions of journalistic professionalism or media performance, and other ways to measure the "trust question", such as survey questions and interview questions about media trust, may be needed to identify other bases of media trust. To explore how users and audiences make sense of and interpret trust in the media, the present paper aligns with a growing research field of bottom-up and audience-centred journalism studies (e.g., Swart et al. 2022). In this field, "folk theories" (Kleis Nielsen 2016) of journalism and the media are studied with the aim of moving beyond normative and preconceived notions of what journalism and its role in society are and instead exploring the various understandings of concepts such as "news" and "journalism" among the public (e.g., Bengtsson and Johansson 2024). In this study, we do not presuppose that audiences' answers to the "trust question" reflect their evaluations of the democratic functions of the news media; rather, we are open to the different ways of approaching the "trust question", as suggested by our respondents. Their answers to this question range from rational and emotional evaluations of the news media to political statements and signals of social and personal identity. Moreover, quite a few of our respondents protest against the question, arguing that it cannot be a given a straight answer. Thus, we argue the need for an inductive and qualitative approach that seeks to account for the meaning of the "trust question" itself.

Against this background we answer the following two research questions:

> (RQ1) What issues and questions are actualised through the "trust question"? That is, how is it interpreted by the respondents, and what are they responding to?

(RQ2) What different kinds of social and cultural dynamics are highlighted by the different ways in which the "trust question" is interpreted?

The answers to these questions lead us to develop a more robust understanding of the meaning and significance of trust in media and journalism; they can also help researchers in both posing questions about trust and providing new analytical insights.

Method

Empirically, this article draws on an interview study focusing on media trust and its connection to social imaginaries. The research was carried out in Sweden, a social context with high levels of both political trust and media trust.

The recruitment of respondents was carried out in a variety of ways: we carried out online recruitment in Facebook groups and Twitter threads addressing questions about Swedish news media and journalism; we also recruited informants through analogue advertising (i.e., posters), among students and through snowballing. We actively sought to recruit both people that expressed "low trust" (suspicion, hostility, media criticism etc) of media and journalism in for example online forums, and people that expressed "high trust" in media and journalism. While four out of five Swedes (81%)—in survey research—report that they have high or relatively high trust in the media (Facht and Falk 2025) our sample consists of 60 informants that we define as "low-trusters" and 37 that we define as "trusters". In total, we carried out 97 interviews online using video-conference software. We carried out the interviews ourselves and transcribed them using an AI-supported software.

The respondents were spread out across Sweden, from north to south, and in both cities and in rural areas. Of the 97 informants, 70 were men; the average age was 53 years, with the youngest being 24 and the oldest 80 years old. While trust in the media is generally higher among older people than among younger media audiences (Facht and Falk 2025), our sample has a relatively high age, which is most likely a result of the recruitment process, we for example relied on recruitment through discussion forums on Facebook, where the average age among users is a bit higher (Facht and Falk 2025). Media trust is, as recorded in previous research, politically polarised, where right-wing voters in generally being less trusting than left-wing voters. In particular voters for the right-wing populist party gave lower political and media trust (Andersson 2019). When it comes to media repertoires and media consumption, most of the people interviewed for this study are heavy media users. Most of them, also among the older informants, use both traditional media (newspapers, television), social media (Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram) and digital news services. Some report the use of podcasts and of following specific influencers or citizen-journalists on for example Youtube; some use foreign media outlets (such as French, British or German press) as well as alternative (right-wing) media. There are no substantial differences in news media consumption between older and younger informants in our sample, which is most likely since we recruited participants that would be interested and willing to talk about news media and journalism, and therefore has an interest in these issues.

The interviews were semi-structured, and the interview guide were constructed in six blocks with a few guiding questions in each. The interview guide was pretested in a smaller number of interviews and revised after that. The interviews started with

background questions about the respondents' current life situation (age, education, occupation, social background, family etc) before going on to discuss the subjects of news media use (what media, when, how much, for what purposes, etc.), news media quality (are there any media outlets that are better than others, why?, etc.), news media trust (do you generally trust the media, why/why not? Trust in relation to different kinds of media, trust in relation to different kinds of reporting etc.) and the role of journalism in society (what is the purpose of journalism? what do you think would be needed for the media to be better?, etc). Towards the end of the interviews, we broadened the discussion to include our respondents' views on Swedish politics and Swedish society more generally (what are your thoughts on the general political and social development? how do you see your future? who do you think has most power in society?, etc). Here, we particularly focussed on our respondents' ideas and feelings about broader social developments and the past and the future, and on how they perceived their own place within societal development. The interviews lasted around 1–1.5 h each, and the same interview guide was followed for all 97 informants. Following the ideal of theoretical saturation, we kept on interviewing respondents until no new insights or were revealed by further data collection.

For the analysis in this article, we relied on transcriptions from the interviews. The analysis was conducted thematically, by identifying themes in how the informants spoke about the concepts of media trust and media distrust and how they interpreted them. We did not use any software for the analytical process, but constructed the analytical themes trough close, and repeated reading of the interview transcripts, as well as listening to the recordings, finding categories and recurring themes in the material. The themes developed in the analysis thus consisted of different aspects and expressions of media trust and distrust.

In this article, we refer to the respondents with numbers (e.g., Interview 1, Interview 2, etc.) to preserve their privacy. However, the analysis does not draw only from the quoted respondents; rather, these respondents are used as illustrative examples of the main themes and recurring patterns in our material as a whole.

Findings

The Trust Question as Difficult and "Impossible" to Answer

In all the interviews, we ask our informants the direct question of whether they generally "trust the reports and the information [they] receive from the media". While many give a clear "yes" or "no" to this question, it would be fair to say that the people we have interviewed in general—during the course of the interview—give both a clear "yes" and a clear "no" to the question of whether they trust the media or not, pointing to the fact that the issue of media trust is complex and cannot easily be caught in dichotomies such as "trust/distrust".

Respondents' awareness of this complexity is sometimes expressed as an explicit reluctance to answer the question about their trust in the media. Instead of answering the question, a respondent might answer that "it depends on how the question is asked" (Interview 71); that the meaning of trust is unclear, subjective and individual, making it impossible to give a straight answer to the question (Interview 24); or that trust is

something that must be decided "in the moment" (i.e., in relation to each specific situation and each specific news story, for example), so the question cannot be given a general answer (Interview 59). A common pattern in the interviews is thus to answer, like one of our informants, "I both trust and don't trust the media" (Interview 19).

Other ways to qualify the issue of trust in the media exist, beyond asking a simple and direct question. For example, trust can be related to the question of differences between *media genres*. In fact, the interviewees raise this question themselves. Although many spontaneously express a lack of trust, they may simultaneously want to emphasise that their answer does not apply to all types of media content. Sports and business news, for example, appear repeatedly in the material as types of journalism perceived as "credible" and "reliable". Moreover, it is not unusual for the interviewees to discuss media genres more broadly and thereby qualify the question. Trust and distrust, the informants point out, are not necessarily categories that can be applied to all forms of media content.

Another way in which the interviewees qualify the issue of trust is to point to the difference between specific media, individual journalists and particular issues, on the one hand, and "the media" as a whole on the other. Upon closer reflection, particularly as we talk about the issue in the interviews, the respondents tend to express that they probably have trust in the media *in general* (e.g., the media output as a whole and most of the time) but also that *all* media are biased, uncertain and deficient. This seeming paradox refers to that trust is perceived as something that one acquires from a broad use of (flawed) media, from reading many (untrustworthy) journalists' texts in several different (biased) media outlets. The respondents tend to highlight their own ability to navigate the (in general corrupt) mediated public sphere:

> I generally have trust that you can get a pretty good picture [of the world] if you take part in large parts of the Swedish media output. It's not enough to follow one or a few media. It doesn't work. But, by following media with different political viewpoints, I think you can get a pretty good understanding. […] I actually have trust in the Swedish mediated public debate in general. Fairly high trust. (Interview 21)

The answer to the "trust question" is framed by this informant mainly as trust in his own ability to evaluate the content, and see through the biases, of the media that he communicates. So, trust in the media is trust in one's own competence, which—as we will see below—also tends to coincide with the stance that *others in general* lack this competence.

The difficulty with answering the "trust question" is also related to a perceived difference in trust between different topics. That is, a person can lack trust in the media when it comes to certain issues (e.g., climate change and immigration, which are mentioned by our respondents as topics upon which the media are biased) but trust the media in other issues where such bias is not perceived. This is connected to the much-discussed "hostile media" effect (Vallone, Ross, and Lepper 1985), which describes how, in cases where individuals have strong political commitment to a certain issue, they tend to perceive the media as an adversary in this particular issue. In the interviews, this is even described as the established mainstream media spreading "disinformation" and "fake news" on these specific issues (i.e., immigration and climate) (Interview 20), despite being trustworthy regarding other aspects of reality.

Yet another way in which the respondents express that they could not give a straight answer to the "trust question" is by acknowledging their own epistemic disadvantage.

These respondents argue that they are not in a position from which they can express either trust or distrust in the media. From their perspective, it is impossible to know whether the media are trustworthy or not. For these respondents, trust becomes an existential question about what kind of life they want to lead. Thus, to trust or not to trust becomes a matter of choice with very little connection to things such as media performance or journalistic professionality. One respondent says that he "does not have it in him to distrust the media" (Interview 65), arguing that it would be very difficult for him to lead his life without trusting the news media, even though he wouldn't be as trusting if he had a choice. Another respondent expresses that he was humbled by the amount of information and knowledge needed to make an informed choice about whether to trust or distrust the media. In the end, though, he chose to trust the media, since

> I wouldn't know, for example, how I would go about being able to refute or come up with some kind of better alternative [than the information presented in the news]. So, I have no choice other than to trust it. (Interview 91)

The fact that trust is seen as a complex or even impossible issue by those we interviewed also meant that they often spontaneously raised the issue with results from media trust surveys and measurements more generally (this was then nothing that we specifically asked for in the interviews, but concerns that the informants raised themselves). Distrust is sometimes expressed towards this type of research, as it is considered to be funded and commissioned by the media organisations themselves (which is not necessarily the case, of course) and that such studies are considered to be carried out to increase support for mainstream media. Some of our informants also distrust the surveys based on their own experiences from everyday life. They claim, for example, that they "don't know anyone" who trusts the media, so how can the surveys show that media trust is generally high within the population? Objections of this type can perhaps mainly be viewed as expressions of what some researchers have called an "epistemic crisis" (Dahlgren 2018)—that is, that traditional knowledge-producing institutions such as universities or research institutes are increasingly being questioned and met with distrust, on unclear grounds, in contemporary society.

There are also objections to surveys and measurements of trust that focus on the informants' own reflections and experiences, regarding the difficulty of conceptualising and summarising this issue in a simple survey design. A respondent emphasises, for example, that the surveys of trust this respondent has personal experience of "ask too blunt and general questions" (Interview 5). The informants are happy to point out other ways researchers should ask in order to get better surveys, such as "focusing the surveys on certain specific topics in the media's reporting" (Interview 16) (which in fact is often done in this type of surveys). They also note that it is possible that trust is overrated when measured in this way because people generally answer the surveys without much thought or that they answer as they "wish it were, that they *want* to feel high trust in the media" (Interview 19).

Taken together, the results from the interviews indicate that people generally have a nuanced and complex view of the issue of trust in the media. This means that they would prefer to answer the question about their trust in the media through a longer story or argument or through several different questions, rather than through a single question. More importantly, it means that the informants give different and contradictory

answers throughout the interviews, depending on the *context* and their current line of thought. As we have shown, some of the respondents also protest against the question and characterise it as an impossible question. The perceived impossibility of the question leads some respondents to question other people's supposed trust or distrust, as measured in surveys or other kinds of research.

The Trust Question as an Opportunity to Express Dislike with the Media

As described above, the issue of trust is loaded with a set of different meanings. The respondents may first say that they lack trust in the media but later qualify this position with the fact that they "actually" do not distrust the media *per se*. They trust that the information they receive through the media is essentially correct and that journalists are essentially doing a good job. But they *dislike* the media. This is what Szostek (2018) has phrased as "believing the message while disbelieving the messenger" (81). This feeling of scepticism towards the media can have various grounds but can be expressed as a matter of trust. To express that one has trust—or a lack of it—in the media is, in a way, a proxy for communicating a general dislike of the media as an institution.

Disliking the media can have different grounds. Some think that they give voice to a social elite they want to distance themselves from. Some think that the media are too commercialised and "just chasing clicks". Others dislike journalists as a group and, perhaps, dislike above all the position journalists have in society, which they view as an undeservedly high status. This is sometimes expressed in a cautious way: "Sometimes I'm annoyed by 'distinguished' journalists at 'respected' media houses" (Interview 23). Others express it more drastically:

> Our journalists should be fired, the whole damn bunch, and then most of the politicians too. Replace them with ordinary people instead. People who have lived out in the real world and not within academic walls. (Interview 51)

A recurring theme in the interviews is that journalists are ignorant and careless. There is also the question of the increasing tabloidisation and banalisation of the news media that people think they see. The common theme among these different examples is that interview answers to the "trust question" have little to do with things that are associated with researcher-defined notions of media trust, such as autonomy, objectivity, partiality and so forth. One interpretation of this, is that the informants take the "trust question" as an opportunity to express other views about news and journalism, or at least that the informants' interpretation of trust is wider and includes other things than in preconceived notions of the concept, as used in much research.

Another way in which our respondents use the trust question is to signal or *communicate a political position* that they think differs from the ideological centre of gravity of the media. This is generally found among the individuals among our informants who say that they have a generally low trust in the media. Not infrequently, this reasoning goes like this: in the media in general, there is a liberal bias or a left-wing orientation. Even if it does not lead to an actual reason to distrust that the information received via the media is incorrect, it leads to dissatisfaction with the media.

> Even if the news is fundamentally true, it will not be or *feel* true for many because the media has been too biased for too many years, which has meant that people have no trust in them.

> Public service television is the best example of this. It is extremely biased to the left. It's too extreme. (Interview 5).

In this context, "lacking trust" in the media simply means wanting to express one's dissatisfaction with this alleged left-wing bias and communicate one's own political position, as a conservative or right-wing voter. It is not an evaluation of the trustworthiness of a specific news item or even the information in general that is communicated by the media.

The Trust Question as a Matter of Belonging and Identity

Trusting or distrusting the media is also related to the identity of the informants. More specifically, distrust of the media is part of the informants' *political identity*. As shown in previous research, low trust in media and journalism has become part of political identity as a right-wing voter, something that emerged gradually during the twentieth century (Shumate 2022). Thinking of yourself as someone who does not trust the media and sympathising with other people who also lack such trust are thus ways of expressing and shaping your political identity and creating a sense of belonging with others who also distrust media and journalism. And conversely, expressing trust in the media and defining yourself as a person who trusts the media has in effect become part of defining yourself as a liberal person.

Still, distrust of the media is not just part of a political identity in the narrow sense; it also relates to the broader phenomena of creating a feeling of belonging and identifying with others, through creating in- and out groups. Being a person who "does not trust" means that you are part of a group that is "not like everyone else": you do not belong to the crowd that is easily deceived or naive enough to believe in the messages and ideas put forward by the "media elite".

> It feels like people are sleeping. They just trust mindlessly. It's sad that people don't see. But I understand [why people feel this way] and I can't influence that at all. That's how I feel. So, I ignore it. I can't bear to care. It's because I see people sleeping. So, let them sleep. (Interview 74).

Trusting the media can similarly be a way of expressing an identity as belonging to the mainstream and associating oneself with the majority position. As one of our respondents says, the media "maintains a loyalty with the mainstream" and that this inspires trust in people like her, who are not "radicals" (Interview 13).

The lack of trust as a (political) identity is often—but not always—manifestly expressed by the informants. Sometimes, though, it is a more of an *unspoken feeling*. Among those in our material who display trust in the media and among those who do not, they express this as a "feeling"—why one trusts or distrusts is then somewhat inexplicable and mysterious, and it might be difficult for the informants to explain in more detail why they feel that way.

> Well, that's just how I feel. But it's not fact-based. It's based on rumours maybe. Yes … Or … I don't know, I've never put any energy into looking into it [whether the media is trustworthy or not]. (Interview 96)

Trust as a matter of identity and feelings is connected to norms and "feeling rules" (Hochschild 1979) associated with trust (Lehaff 2022). This matter has particular relevance in Swedish society, where trust in media and journalism is exceptionally high (Stiernstedt,

Jakobsson, and Lindell 2024). Moreover, it is not just trust in the media and journalism that is widespread in Sweden and the other Nordic countries; trust in general is high in these countries. Trust is therefore something of an *unspoken norm* in Nordic society, in ways that are not necessarily the case in other parts of the world.

This norm is expressed in the interviews, where it becomes clear that many of those we speak to struggle with this issue. Trust in the media is something that one "should" have, something that is "good"; even those who lack trust express that it can almost be perceived as part of your civic duty to have trust in the media. For example, this informant commented,

> I trust that they mean well, that they [the journalists] value being impartial and giving an accurate picture of society […] In a way, I trust [the media] and, above all, *I want to trust them*. (Interview 10)

It can be imagined that the will to express trust in the quote above is about a will to relate to this unspoken norm. In the interviews, however, there are also examples of how informants identify and question the norm of trust, or question other people's trust as being an expression of a mindless adherence to such a norm.

The Trust Question as a Matter of Rational Judgments of Media Content

Finally, there is a way to understand and interpret one's own and others' trust as a matter of *rational choice* (cf. Cook and Santana 2017). Many informants have a strong wish to emphasise and underline their own rationality and reason. Trust is then *not* about a feeling, or about community or norms; it is the result of *reasoning*.

Some of the interviewees are heavy media consumers and spend a considerable amount of time with the media. This is described as an active choice and as something they do to get as broad a picture as possible of various issues and to get as close to the truth as possible. The respondents thus emphasise that trust—and distrust—towards the media is created by having knowledge and a deep understanding of various issues.

> If I were to choose to read morning newspapers, I would also experience that there was a need to also use other media, to read other media to get a clearer picture. I would also read special magazines, such as magazines from various interest organisations. If you read such sources and read broadly, you get a lot more perspectives on important issues that do not appear in the mainstream newspapers. So, in a perfect world, you would get all information through using a broad repertoire of sources. But it doesn't work. There is not enough time for that. So, then, you must use these broad media, get a general picture and then, if you realise that something is missing, then you must read up elsewhere. You can see the media as a hydra, a creature with many heads. (Interview 21)

Consuming a lot of media and a variety of media creates both trust and distrust for our informants. It is through such broad consumption that they think they see inaccuracies, flaws and bias in the media, which reduces their trust in them. But it is also through a broad consumption of news that they can arrive at a relative level of trust that the media—overall—gives them a reasonably accurate picture of reality.

Many interviewees point out that you can use your own "common sense" to evaluate the media and decide whether they can be trusted or not. Some have a strong belief in

the ability of their own intellect to determine what is true and correct or not, even when they are not convinced that this applies to others:

> I think like this: it is not so difficult if you have studied 5–6 years at university. And when you surround yourself with people who can reflect on things. So, for me it's not that difficult [to evaluate the trustworthiness of the media], but not everyone has such a situation. (Interview 1)

This also connect to the well-known "third-person effect" in communication where individuals tend think that media have greater effect on others than on himself or herself (Davison 1983). In a similar way, respondents tended to hold the view that their ability to make evaluations of media content and have a *rational trust* in the media was higher than other peoples' abilities. Regardless of whether one believes that it is a good method or not to use one's own "common sense" to test the validity of media statements, this perspective indicates that the informants perceive trust as something that can and should be determined through rational thought processes and that trust—or distrust—is a rational choice based on knowledge and experience (Table 1).

Discussion

While studies of media trust that rely on survey data and statistical analysis give us valuable information, there is some uncertainty about what exactly is being measured with these study designs. Studies of this kind "work", at least to some extent, since they

Table 1. Overview of the different interpretations of the trust question.

Interpretations of the trust-question	Examples from the interviews
The trust question as difficult and "impossible" to answer	• Seeing trust as a continuum rather than binary opposite • Stating that trust and distrust can coexist • Framing it as an impossible question due to "epistemic disadvantage" • Framing it as an impossible question since trust must be evaluated in specific contexts and cannot be given a general answer • Expressing doubts whether trust can be measured at all
The trust question as an opportunity to express dislike with the media	• Thinking that the media give voice to a social elite they want to distance themselves from and expressing this distancing as distrust • Disliking journalists as a group and expresses this dislike as distrust • Critiquing the media's commercialisation and poor performance and express this critique as a lack of trust • Feeling that the media are ideologically biased and express their divergent political position as a question of distrust
The trust question as a matter of belonging and identity	• Thinking of yourself as someone who does not trust the media and sympathising with other people who also lack trust. • Being a person who "trusts" or "does not trust" and expressing this identity • An expression of belonging to emotional communities and or accepting or rejecting (unspoken) trust norms in society
The trust question as a matter of rational judgments of media content	• Emphasizing rationality and reason and claiming trust/distrust as the result of reasoning

have managed to find some relatively reliable predictors and correlates for media trust. It might be the case that despite diverse interpretations among respondents, the survey-based research still manages to capture broad trends that are meaningful. However, there is a need for more inductive and qualitative studies that can help us develop our understanding of the concept and phenomena of trust as such. In this article, we presented an analysis of a qualitative interview study ($N = 97$) with open-ended questions of trust. The specific contribution of this article is that we have analysed the many different ways in which people interpret the question about whether they trust the media. The results suggest that, although there are many ways to interpret this question, only some lead people to evaluate what researchers usually associate with media trust. Some of the informants saw trust as an "impossible" question; hence, they gave contradictory and opaque answers to the question of their trust in the media or protested against the question as such. The results further show that the question of trust was perceived as an opportunity to communicate a standpoint—whether an opinion about the media or about journalism, or a more general political standpoint. In that sense, the question of trust among our informants was connected to questions of identity and emotions. On the other hand, for at least some of the informants, the question of trust was interpreted as an issue connected to rational choices and cognitive evaluations of the media and journalism, often with the idea that, since all media are flawed and/or biased, it is necessary to consume media broadly and make conscious choices regarding what to trust/distrust.

We consider that the results from this study illustrate some of the difficulties that need to be overcome in order to advance the research on media trust, as well as some perennial problems that might not be possible to overcome. The analysis suggests that the data we receive from survey research on trust can reflect a number of different things, only some of which are identical with or adjacent to the most common conceptualisations of media trust, such 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, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018, 5). Such data can also reflect things such as people's adherence to trust norms (or to norms to be critical and independent thinkers) or can be a way for respondents to communicate that they belong to a social group. Of course, it is not news to any researcher who has worked with such methods that people have different ways of interpreting interview questions or survey questions. With this article, we hope to contribute, not a reminder that this is how things are, but a first attempt, to our best knowledge, to map the different ways in which people interpret the "trust question".

Respondents that interpret the "trust question" as a question about their feelings for—or rational beliefs about—the professionality of journalists are not a problem for media trust research, since these kinds of answers are aligned with researcher-defined notions of trust. People who are more cautious and unwilling to answer the question might be more of a problem, since the answers they give seem to be very context dependent. The biggest problem for media trust research, however, seems to come from people who interpret the question as having to do more with their political and personal identity than with their expectations of the news media. This finding indicates that survey research carried out in an environment where media trust has become a politicised and polarised issue should be interpreted differently from research carried out in other environments.

It might also be against this background that we should interpret reports of falling trust levels in many countries around the world (see for example the Edelman trust barometer or Reuters Digital News Report). As since long established in research, media trust is strongly connected to political trust and trust in societal institutions more generally. We also know from previous research that one of the strongest predictors for media trust is elite opinions. When opinion leaders express low trust or is highly critical of journalism and the media, that tends to lead to lowered trust in the population (Ladd 2012). Media critique and accusations of "fake news" and a sentiment of suspicion towards the media from for example political elites have been common, especially from right-wing populist politicians, during the last decade (e.g., Strömbäck and Åkerlund 2025). Furthermore, as data suggests, there is not necessarily a *general* decline in media trust, but what we seem to be witnessing is a situation in which trust in news media and journalism is becoming increasingly polarised within the population (Andersson 2019). While trust differs between generations and groups with different level of education, it is the political polarisation of trust that stands out, with right-wing voters displaying increasingly lowered levels of trust in the media. Of importance for journalism, and journalism research, might in such a situation be not to—at least not without thorough reflection—interpret findings of lowered trust-levels as connected to journalistic performance. Falling trust levels might, following from our analysis, mainly be interpreted as message about a shift in political sentiment and increasing political polarisation, as well as more widespread "antimedia populism" (Fawzi and Krämer 2021) in many societies.

The different ways in which people interpret the "trust question" might be part of the explanation for some of the inconsistencies and conflicting results in this field of study. How this problem should be addressed is not easy to answer, however. One approach would be to carry out more frequent qualitative studies and to do these in more geographical, social and political contexts. Media trust research is still heavily dominated by quantitative research, while our analysis points to the need for a combination of perspectives from quantitative and qualitative research. In many countries, media trust surveys are distributed annually, whereas qualitative studies on media trust are done more infrequently and sporadically. It would be ideal if annual surveys were combined with annual qualitative studies that could provide additional insights into how respondents interpret the survey questions. It might also be possible to further refine the measures used in survey research based on findings from such recurring qualitative and open-ended data on media trust.

To conclude, the results from the interviews indicate that "trust in the media", as it is usually researched and measured in qualitative and quantitative research, is probably not a unified phenomenon. However, an underlying phenomenon might exist that is captured in surveys of trust, since "trust levels" tend to both be stable over time and correlate with other phenomena in predictable ways. This underlying phenomenon, then, is still undefined, but it does not fully align with the theoretical definitions and constructs of "media trust". It can also be concluded from the interviews that media trust—as the informants talk about it—has at least slightly to do with what the media actually do, how well they perform and whether they are worthy of our trust or not. This connects to an important and ongoing debate about trust and transparency. As has been shown in previous research (e.g., Karlsson, Clerwall, and Nord 2014) there seems to be an absence of any

transparency effect on issues of perceived credibility of news. Still, journalists and news outlets try to mitigate the decreasing overall trust and increasing political polarisation of trust, as evidenced in survey research, by transparency measures (Uth 2024). What this article suggests, however, is that "the trust question" concerns mainly other things than what the news media actually do, and hence that it is probably not a successful strategy to try to increase news media trust by more transparency concerning journalistic practices.

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