

**The Information Influence: The Effect of Media Source on Trust in Government  
Institutions**

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## Introduction

In the rapidly evolving information age, digital media has created a tectonic shift in media and information consumption. Gone are the days when most people tuned in to a few trusted television networks or diligently flipped through the morning newspaper. Today, a tweet, a blog post, or a viral video can hold as much influence as a front-page headline. Digital media offers new freedom to share information that might be censored or manipulated in traditional media to fit a specific narrative. This new media frontier is less constrained by previous traditional checks and balances, which leads us to question how one's primary news source (digital vs. traditional) may influence one's trust in government institutions.

Past research has found notable differences in trust levels based on a person's primary media source. Studies show that individuals who mainly consumed traditional media sources, such as television and newspapers, responded with higher trust in government institutions than groups that primarily engaged with digital media, such as the Internet. A sample containing 426 participants answered questions about their media use to receive news, specifically whether digital or non-digital (Li et al., 2021). As hypothesized, traditional media use was associated with higher government trust than digital media use. These findings suggest that the medium used for news consumption can influence public perceptions and trust in governmental entities. The study also accounted for confounding variables, such as those who use traditional media instead of digital media may be of lower socioeconomic status (SES), older, or have a lower educational level, and found these arguments were not well-supported. However, the study did not evaluate the credibility of these digital sources used by participants. Assessing whether these sources use accurate information or indulge in spreading misinformation could offer deeper insights into the trust dynamics observed.

Understanding how using different media sources influences trust in institutions also affects how we respond to significant events, such as a pandemic. A study gave 194 US and UK adolescents a survey asking where students were learning about COVID-19, how much they trusted different sources of knowledge, and what they knew about COVID-19 (Mathews et al., 2021). Participants with high trust in government leadership who primarily consumed traditional media responded less accurately to a COVID-19 literacy assessment. Trust in governing institutions and reliance on traditional media may make individuals more susceptible to misinformation, leading to problems addressing crises like a pandemic. Another study found that despite the engagement in pandemic-related discussions on social media, there were high levels of skepticism about the effectiveness of government-implemented regulations (Paskarina, 2023). The study highlights how the intersection of media consumption and public trust in government is essential to shaping public perceptions and trust.

With the emergence of digital platforms, they have increased access to information that traditional media may not address. Laor & Lissitsa (2022) define the modern media ecosystem as a 'hybrid media system' in which many forms of media shape consumer's perceptions, especially during times of crisis. Consumers can now actively engage when choosing their media source and not be constrained to mainstream news sources. However, past research has not addressed the nuances of specific digital platforms and the multidimensional aspects of trust in government institutions. This study aims to advance the study done by Laor and Lissitsa (2022) to understand the interplay between multiple media sources and the 'hybrid media system.' To see if lower trust in government from digital media sources is influenced by misinformation or the ability to cross-reference and understand the intricacies of the whole story. It is hypothesized that individuals who primarily consume digital media sources will exhibit lower trust in government

institutions, with the extent of this distrust being moderated by exposure to misinformation and the ability to cross-reference information across diverse sources.

### **Methods**

The present study examined the relationship between an individual's primary news source and trust in government institutions. Data were sourced from the 2018 General Social Survey (GSS).

**Participants.** A total of 2,341 participants are included in the GSS. Of these, 1,143 answered questions relevant to the current study ( $M_{\text{Age}} = 48.90$ ,  $SD = 18.09$ ) and formed a sample representative of the American population. Of these, 45% identified as male and 55% as female.

**Procedure and materials.** This study utilized the GSS, which adopts a multi-stage housing cluster in the United States, to understand the area probability sample of census tracts. This approach ensures an equal probability sampling of housing units nationwide. The GSS dataset is publicly accessible and contains 1,016 variables. This study utilizes a subset of these variables that were selected to align with the specific research objectives.

**Trust in Government.** Trust in government was measured by three items: confidence in the U.S. Congress, confidence in the federal government's executive branch, and confidence in the United States Supreme Court. Confidence in U.S. Congress was rated by participants on a Likert scale from 1 (Complete Confidence) to 5 (No Confidence at all). The confidence in U.S. Congress scale was transformed to match the 1-to-3 scale of other measures by recoding the 1-to-5 scale into three categories: 1-2 = 1 (High Confidence), 3 = 2 (Some Confidence), and 4-5 = 3 (Low Confidence). The following measure of participants' confidence in the executive branch of the federal government was indicated as 1 (A Great Deal), 2 (Only Some), and 3 (Hardly Any). The last measure combined for the trust in government score was confidence in

the U.S. Supreme Court, indicated by participants as 1 (A Great Deal), 2 (Only Some), and 3 (Hardly Any).

**News Source.** News source was measured with a single item in which participants responded with their primary source of information about events in the news. Participants indicated their primary source of information with 1 (Newspaper), 2 (Magazines), 3 (The internet), 4 (Books or other printed material), 5 (T.V.), 6 (Radio), 7 (Government agencies), 8 (Family), 9 (Friends/Colleagues), and 10 (Other).

**Demographics.** Participants also responded to general demographic questions assessing their age and sex.

## Results

A one-way ANOVA was performed to compare the impact of an individual's primary source of information about events in the news and trust in government institutions. The analysis revealed a significant effect at the .05 level,  $F(7, 360) = 2.250, p = .030$ .

Tukey's HSD post hoc test did not reveal statistically significant differences between specific pairs of information sources. While the mean trust score for the category 'Other' ( $M = 1.0046, SD = 0.630$ ) was the highest among the categories, pairwise comparisons with other groups such as Newspapers ( $M = -.3048, SD = 0.711$ ), TV ( $M = -.0610, SD = 0.761$ ), and the Internet ( $M = .1182, SD = 0.679$ ) did not reach statistical significance. This indicates that, despite the overall ANOVA result, the differences in trust scores between specific information sources are not pronounced when comparing individual sources directly.

## Discussion

This study sought to assess the impact of an individual's primary news source on one's trust in government institutions. The results partially supported this hypothesis, with the one-way

ANOVA indicating a significant effect of the information source on trust levels. However, this overall significance was not found in the detailed analysis of specific information sources.

Tukey's HSD post hoc test showed that while the 'Other' category had the highest mean trust score, differences between specific pairs of information sources, such as Newspapers, TV, and the Internet, were not statistically significant. This suggests that the type of media consumed may have a more nuanced effect on trust in government institutions than initially hypothesized.

Results from this study add to the existing literature on the impact of media consumption on trust in government institutions by examining how different media sources within a 'hybrid media system' influence public trust. Previous research by Li et al. (2021) and Mathews et al. (2021) primarily focused on the interaction between traditional and digital media on trust. These studies highlighted the complexity within these categories and then need to understand the complexity of modern media. The study builds on the concept of a 'hybrid media system' described by Laor and Lissitsa (2022) to advance our understanding of the interplay between multiple media sources and their impact on public perception and trust.

However, the study has several significant limitations. First, the use of the General Social Survey data limits the analysis to the survey's predefined variables and categories that may overlook emerging media sources. This limitation is significant because the GSS may not fully capture the evolving landscape of digital media. Emerging and increasingly influential digital platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram have gained substantial popularity and are not explicitly accounted for in the GSS data. These platforms represent a significant segment of the modern media ecosystem and have unique content delivery and user interaction characteristics that might shape public perceptions and trust differently. Secondly, the 'Other' category in the media sources is broad and undefined. This might mask the effects of specific and less common

sources of information. By grouping these varied sources under a single section, we miss the opportunity to explore and understand the unique dynamics and trust relationships each source might impact their audience. Lastly, the study's cross-sectional design impacts the ability to make causal inferences, making it challenging to determine whether media consumption drives trust in government institutions or vice versa. Since the data represents a single point in time, it is difficult to conclude the impact between media consumption and trust in government institutions. This means we cannot definitively conclude whether media consumption patterns influence trust levels in government or if individuals' existing levels of trust in government have shaped their media consumption choices.

Future research should focus on longitudinal designs to better understand the directionality of this relationship. Additionally, studies could benefit by using broader and more specific categorization of media sources, especially given the evolving nature of how people consume news. Expanding the research to include newer media sources and platforms would also be valuable. Finally, examining this relationship in different cultural or political contexts would be insightful, as media consumption and trust in government institutions are likely influenced by broader societal factors.

## References

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