

Media and politics: Reconfiguring authority and trust

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Department of Social and Political Sciences – University of Milan

In recent years, political communication has undergone a profound transformation, shaped by the interplay of media innovation, evolving public expectations, and shifting socio-political dynamics (Humprecht et al. 2022; Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). Traditional authority structures are being reconfigured as new actors and platforms redefine who holds influence and credibility in the public sphere (Bartsch et al. 2022; Carlson, 2017). Trust – essential for democratic processes and discourse – has become a central focus, as audiences increasingly navigate a fragmented and contested information ecosystem. Simultaneously, political trust faces significant challenges, with growing polarization and skepticism toward institutional actors. These developments compel us to interrogate the evolving dynamics of trust and authority: who is trusted, how trust is built and maintained, and how authority is conferred and legitimized in mediated political contexts. By exploring these questions, we can better understand the mechanisms underpinning a functioning public sphere and identify pathways for fostering democratic resilience in an era of rapid change.

Media trust represents a pivotal dimension of political communication, encompassing the audience's confidence in the accuracy, fairness, and reliability of news media. As articulated by Strömbäck et al. (2020), media trust significantly shapes how individuals engage with and interpret media content, influencing broader patterns of media consumption and public opinion formation. Tsfaty et al. (2022) argue, research must move beyond general notions of media trust to explore topical media trust—how trust varies across specific issues and contexts. This approach not only reveals the complexity of audience perceptions but also provides a richer framework for analyzing trust's role in mitigating issue-based misperceptions and fostering informed public discourse. Recent work by Garusi and Leonhardt (2024) advocates for a processual understanding of trust, highlighting trust-building as a dynamic and iterative procedure rather than a static condition (see also the related Eyal 2024). This perspective underscores the importance of examining how trust is cultivated through ongoing interactions between media organizations and their audiences, particularly in contexts emphasizing transparency and constructive journalism.

The legitimacy and stability of democratic systems does not depend only on media trust, but also on more generalized levels of political trust, broadly defined as citizens' confidence in political institutions and actors. In an era of increasing polarization and institutional skepticism, understanding the factors that influence political trust has become paramount and media trust emerges as a key determinant in this equation, as the media serves as the primary conduit through which citizens encounter political information. As Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl (2018) highlight, public trust in the media and political trust are deeply intertwined, often reinforcing or undermining one another. A decline in media trust can erode confidence in political actors, while skepticism toward politics can amplify doubts about the media's credibility. This nexus underscores the importance of examining trust as a multidimensional phenomenon, where the interplay between media and politics shapes the broader contours of public opinion and democratic engagement.

Authority is a foundational concept in understanding the structure and dynamics of public discourse. As explored by Carlson (2017), authority represents the capacity to be recognized as a legitimate source of knowledge or power in a given context, often contingent on social norms, institutional structures,

and cultural expectations. In the digital era, journalistic authority—historically rooted in professional norms and organizational prestige—faces significant challenges. The democratization of information production and dissemination has disrupted traditional hierarchies, forcing journalists to continually renegotiate their legitimacy amidst increasing competition from non-traditional actors and platforms. Carlson's work highlights the importance of viewing authority not as a static property but as a dynamic process shaped by interactions between journalists, audiences, and the broader information ecosystem.

Building on this perspective, Bartsch et al. (2024) introduce the concept of epistemic authority in the digital public sphere, emphasizing the role of credibility in the negotiation of truth claims. Their integrative framework underscores the complexity of authority in a fragmented media landscape, where trustworthiness must be earned and sustained across diverse and sometimes polarized audiences. Wahl Jorgensen (2024) further advances this discussion by exploring how entrepreneurial journalism leverages local knowledge to assert epistemic authority, demonstrating the evolving strategies employed by media actors to legitimize their claims. Finally, Vos and Thomas (2018) emphasize the discursive nature of journalistic authority in the "post-truth" age, where the traditional boundaries of expertise are increasingly contested. Together, these perspectives highlight the pressing need to analyze authority as a relational and contextual phenomenon, particularly in its implications for public trust and the functioning of democratic discourse.

However, despite their centrality, the concept of media and political trust, and their interconnections with conferred authority remain underexplored in key areas. Current research often overlooks the dynamic and relational nature of trust, failing to adequately account for how it evolves over time and across different media ecosystems. Moreover, studies have yet to fully integrate the impact of digital and algorithmically driven platforms, which have redefined the boundaries of journalistic authority and credibility. To advance the field, it is crucial to develop innovative frameworks that address these gaps, emphasizing the interplay between structural factors—such as ownership models and regulatory environments—and individual-level perceptions shaped by identity, ideology, and lived experience.

Starting from this framework, or also beyond this framework, we encourage the submission of papers investigating the trends linked to media trust, political trust, and authority as well as their interactions in the field of political communication. We are interested in both theoretical essays and empirical studies, and we welcome different methodological approaches and research designs (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods). Issues of interest include (but are not limited to):

- Changes and trends linked to media trust, political trust, institutional trust and authority as well as in their interactions.
- How the artificial intelligence environment, the role of data, platforms, algorithms, shape and change trust in the new political communications environment.
- Relationships between media and political trust from one side and trust in platforms from the other side.
- Trust and public opinion dynamics, voting behavior, electoral campaigns in democracies facing a crisis of trust.
- Electoral abstention: trust as precondition for electoral participation and democratic processes.
- How trust and authority is conferred according to new (digital) political communication actors (such as digital parties, social digital movements as well as “social journalism”).
- Which strategy apply political actors to increase trust.
- Epistemic authority in digital political communication: How authority is constructed, contested, and legitimized in the digital public sphere, with a focus on journalistic, political, and algorithmic actors. Distrust and communication strategies for gaining consensus from parties and movements of the radical sovereignist Right-Wing in Europe, especially from a Comparative Perspective (e.g., RN in France, AfD in Germany, FPÖ in Austria, Vox in Spain).

- Comparative approaches to media and political trust: Examining how trust and authority vary across cultural, national, or institutional contexts and their implications for global political communication.
- Actors and issues of the EU - supranational and national - political debate, with a particular focus on EU institutions, especially, though not exclusively, in electoral contexts.
- The role of misinformation, disinformation, polarization as well as incivility in trust dynamics: How affect trust in media, political actors, and institutions, and strategies to mitigate these effects.
- Public perception of journalistic authority: How audiences evaluate the credibility and legitimacy of journalistic actors in a fragmented and polarized media environment.
- Trust-building strategies in mediated political campaigns: Exploring innovative methods used by political actors to build and maintain trust through traditional and digital media.
- Trust and authority in times of crisis: Investigating how trust in media and political institutions fluctuates during crises (e.g., pandemics, natural disasters, or political instability).
- The role of influencers and alternative media in shaping authority: How non-traditional communicators (e.g., influencers, citizen journalists) redefine authority in the public sphere.
- The emergence of innovative forms and practices of political participation and the empowerment of digital citizenship as a product of online trust networks.
- Intersectionality in trust dynamics: How factors such as gender, race, class, and ideology interact to influence trust in media and politics.
- Ethical challenges in fostering trust: Analysing ethical dilemmas for journalists, political actors, and platforms in building or maintaining public trust and authority.
- Future-oriented perspectives on trust and authority: Conceptual and methodological innovations for studying trust and authority in rapidly evolving media and political environments.

Some references

- Bartsch, A., Neuberger, C., Stark, B., Karnowski, V., Maurer, M., Pentzold, C., Quandt, T., Quiring, O., & Schemer, C. (2024). Epistemic authority in the digital public sphere. An integrative conceptual framework and research agenda. *Communication Theory*, qtae020.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtae020>
- Carlson, M. (2017). *Journalistic authority: Legitimizing news in the digital era*. Columbia University Press.
- Eyal, G., Au, L., & Capotescu, C. (2024). Trust is a Verb!: A Critical Reconstruction of the Sociological Theory of Trust. *Sociologica*, 18(2), 169–191.
- Garusi, D., & Leonhardt, B. (2024). *Towards a processual understanding of trust: A study of trustbuilding strategies of constructive journalists*. Online first.
- Humprecht, E., Castro Herrero, L., Blassnig, S., Brüggemann, M., & Engesser, S. (2022). Media Systems in the Digital Age: An Empirical Comparison of 30 Countries. *Journal of Communication*, 72(2), 145–164.
- Štětka, V., & Mihelj, S. (2024). *The Illiberal Public Sphere: Media in Polarized Societies*. Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Strömbäck, J., Tsfati, Y., Boomgaarden, H., Damstra, A., Lindgren, E., Vliegenthart, R., & Lindholm, T. (2020). News media trust and its impact on media use: Toward a framework for future research. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 44(2), 139–156.
- Tsfati, Y., Strömbäck, J., Lindgren, E., Damstra, A., Boomgaarden, H. G., & Vliegenthart, R. (2022). Going Beyond General Media Trust: An Analysis of Topical Media Trust, its Antecedents and Effects on Issue (Mis)perceptions. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 34(2), edac010.

Useful information

Paper proposals should include name, affiliation, and email address, a title, an extended abstract (600/800 words excluding references), and bibliographical references.

Authors should also explicitly indicate whether they request the paper to be considered for publication (after the conference) in “ComPol - Comunicazione Politica”, the flagship journal of the Italian Association of Political Communication **at the end of the abstract**. In the case of ex aequo in the evaluations provided by referees, priority will be given to authors who have expressed interest for publication on ComPol - Comunicazione Politica.

Useful information on how to write an abstract for AssoComPol conferences can be found in the section “Abstract instructions”: <https://www.compol.it/eventi/convegno/convegno-2025/>

- Deadline for submission of proposals: **March 21**
- Notification of acceptance: **April 15**
- Full papers must be submitted by **June 16** in the conference paper room (accessible by login)

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