

Young people's understandings of trust in news media and perceptions of
reporting techniques



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Abstract

Research has found trust in news media in Western nations is at an all-time low. Endemic media distrust is associated with a loss of faith in democracy and higher media cynicism. Existing research on trust in news has been limited and primarily quantitative, rarely exploring the underlying understandings. The present study explores understandings of trust and truth in news media among 18–22-year-olds within a psychological framework in order to better understand how trust and drivers of distrust are conceptualised by young adult audiences. Two focus groups were run with 18 first-year psychology students. Participants were asked what they considered made news trustworthy or untrustworthy. They were then shown news media that featured constructive journalism techniques and asked about which features (if any) contributed to judgements of trustworthiness. The discussions were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis and five themes were generated. Limitations to Trust and Truth, Good and Bad Bias, Evaluating Solutions, Rigour vs. Giving Voice, and Truth Triangulation. Social Representations Theory was utilised in understanding the contradictory nature of these themes as themata; dialectic notions that exist within a single representation. The analysis found pervasive amounts of ambivalence among participants understandings of news trust. News media was considered wholly untrustworthy. Truth was described as something that can't be gleaned from a single news article, and instead has to be ascertained via individual news consumers. These findings suggest that young audience's conceptions of trust in news may be undergoing transformations due to an evolving and turbulent news media landscape.

Keywords: Constructive journalism; trust; social representations; social psychology

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University, and, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published except where due reference is made. I give permission for the digital version of this thesis to be made available on the web, via the University of Adelaide's digital thesis repository, the Library Search and through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the School to restrict access for a period of time.

Contributor Roles Table

ROLE	ROLE DESCRIPTION	STUDENT	SUPERVISOR 1	SUPERVISOR 2
CONCEPTUALIZATION	Ideas; formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims.	X	X	X
METHODOLOGY	Development or design of methodology; creation of models.	X	X	X
PROJECT ADMINISTRATION	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution.	X	X	X
SUPERVISION	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team.		X	X
RESOURCES	Provision of study materials, laboratory samples, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools.	X	X	X
SOFTWARE	Programming, software development; designing computer programs; implementation of the computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code.			
INVESTIGATION	Conducting research - specifically performing experiments, or data/evidence collection.	X	X	
VALIDATION	Verification of the overall replication/reproducibility of results/experiments.	X	X	X
DATA CURATION	Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data (including software code, where it is necessary for interpreting the data itself) for initial use and later re-use.			
FORMAL ANALYSIS	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyze or synthesize study data.	X		

VISUALIZATION	Visualization/data presentation of the results.			
WRITING – ORIGINAL DRAFT	Specifically writing the initial draft.	X		
WRITING – REVIEW & EDITING	Critical review, commentary or revision of original draft	X	X	X

Young people's understandings of trust in news media and perceptions of reporting techniques

Pervasive News Media Distrust

An analysis of the 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report found that approximately 60% of people across nine large western nations do not trust news media (Newman & Fletcher, 2017). While most prevalent in the United States (Hanitzsch et al., 2018), this decline is also occurring in nations with previously high levels of trust in the news (Newman & Fletcher, 2017). Trust in news correlates positively with support for democracy and democratic institutions (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Knudsen et al., 2022). Such a decline in trust therefore suggests a challenge for functioning democratic systems. However, some have argued that traditional notions of trust may cease to be useful metrics, and that such declines in trust are in fact logical reactions to changes in the news media landscape and perceived increases in misinformation (Fisher, 2016). Regardless, a better understanding of this cultural shift is relevant to societies, individuals, and news producers alike.

The rise of the 24/7 news cycle, combined with easy access to news via online sources, appears to have contributed to news distrust. Additionally, audiences increasingly describe and condemn echo chambers and biased news consumer practices, further driving distrust of news media as a whole (Zhou & Zafarani, 2021). Lewandowsky et al. (2017) suggest that distrust in institutions is entangled with trust in news, and that an evolving media landscape combined with growing inequality and general social unrest are making traditional notions of trustworthy news media increasingly obsolete and unappealing to audiences.

Newman & Fletcher (2017), in their analysis of open-ended responses across a range of countries, found bias, spin, and agendas to be the most cited reasons for news media distrust. Many respondents described news media as a tool operated by the elite to further their interests. Declining trust was also found across both traditional and online news

mediums. While TV news is considered less likely to contain falsehoods due to its use of imagery and vetted reporters, many still perceived it as reporting opinions and pushing agendas rather than remaining objective. Similarly, social media was criticised for a perceived contamination of news with falsehoods and personal opinions (Newman & Fletcher, 2017).

While its role in support for democracy and perceptions of misinformation is still under scrutiny, how audiences conceptualise trustworthy news is a topic of concern for democratic societies. There are few qualitative studies, and those that exist are situated within the discipline of media studies, therefore lacking a psychological perspective which could provide insight into complex, underlying understandings of trust in news.

Conceptions of Trust in News Media

Trust is broadly defined as a psychological state in which the trustor uses expectations of intentions and behaviour of the trustee to accept vulnerability (Rousseau et al., 1998). Vulnerability here refers to the risk that audiences take when they trust news producers to share truthful information and follow best practices. Although news media can be conceptualised as being produced both by individual journalists and journalism institutions, audiences tend to trust individual journalists while distrusting news media institutions (Newman & Fletcher, 2017). The current decline in news media trust therefore appears to be rooted in systems or institutional trust rather than individual trust.

Theories of news trust specifically are situated within a further subset of systems trust. News trust is theorised to comprise of past experiences, expectations and feelings of uncertainty in outcomes and intentions (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Uncertainty in intentions appears to be especially relevant, given a rising public scepticism toward 'elite' groups (Mudde, 2004). Audiences appear to apply this label to journalists, describing them as powerful social actors with no barriers to prevent the abuse of their power (Coleman et al.,

2012). By extension, the increasing decentralisation of news media production has been described by audiences during focus groups as a positive change due to the redistribution of this social power among common people (Coleman et al., 2012).

Previous qualitative research of news trust appears to support these theories. Responsibility, integrity, and inclusiveness have been reported as key tenets of news trust by members of traditionally underserved communities (Schmidt et al., 2019). Truth and facts have been described as essential aspects of trustworthy news media, as is independence and a lack of agendas (Knudsen et al., 2022). Lack of journalistic rigour, adequate research, and proper explanations are also often cited as reasons for distrust (Coleman et al., 2012), suggesting that audiences feel that journalists have a responsibility they are failing to fulfil. Ideological polarisation and cultural perceptions of political institutions are also theorised to be major factors in news media trust (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Jain, 2021). However, much of this research comes from a United States context; whether these perceptions of news trust hold in an Australian context remains to be seen.

Constructive journalism as a response

Constructive journalism is a relatively new approach to the production of news media, and has been described as a possible remedy for news media's decline in popularity and prestige (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018). Constructive journalism acknowledges the active role that journalists play in the construction of news consumers social realities (Waisbord, 2013). Although this set of practices has existed for some time, the most recent and popular incarnation was developed by McIntyre & Gyldensted (2018), drawing heavily on positive psychology and advocate for a focus on solutions.

Journalists often report feeling responsible for contributing to social well-being (McIntyre et al., 2018), and audiences generally agree, conceptualising the journalist as responsible for the social impacts of their work (Coleman et al., 2012; Hermans &

Gyldensted, 2019). The key characteristics of constructive journalism that audiences have been found to value include solutions orientation, positive tone, depolarising techniques, and the inclusion of adequate context (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019). In an experimental study, audiences preferred news media that utilised solutions framing over negative framing (Baden et al., 2019). However, which characteristics of constructive journalism are valued and how strongly differed across age and educational attainment in a survey among Dutch participants (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019), with younger audiences preferencing all characteristics lower than older audiences.

While often claimed as a remedy to low news trust, trust in constructive journalism is under-researched. That which exists is primarily quantitative and has produced mixed findings. An experimental study found that audiences tend to find reports containing constructive techniques more trustworthy (Thier et al., 2021). Constructive journalism techniques have also been found to increase the positive affect of audiences (Baden et al., 2019) suggesting their inclusion would address negativity, the leading reason for news avoidance (Newman & Fletcher, 2017). However, audiences have also described news with a focus on positivity as more likely to contain advertising (Meier, 2018). What has yet gone unexplored is how these characteristics contribute to trust, and whether younger audiences follow these general trends.

Young People and News Media Trust

While news media distrust is prevalent across all demographics, young people and lower socio-economic groups were found least likely to trust news media (Newman & Fletcher, 2017). This may contribute to younger audiences valuing constructive journalism techniques less than older demographics (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019), and suggests that younger audiences perceive constructive journalism techniques differently to older audiences. Level of education also correlates with preferences for specific constructive journalism

techniques, suggesting that it also plays a role in conceptions of news media trust (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019). Again, little research exists that explores the underlying perceptions that shape these understandings. The existing constructive journalism research also lacks a consistent theoretical basis. This study therefore aims to explore perceptions of news trust and constructive journalism techniques, drawing on Social Representations Theory.

SRT and Themata

Social Representations Theory (SRT) (Moscovici, 2000) posits that the psychology of individuals is situated simultaneously within the minds of individuals and their social and cultural environments. Individuals are therefore both products of their societal context and active in the ongoing negotiations of social meaning. Social representations are the socially created and communicated knowledge that group members share, and the foundation with which we construct our social realities. As Höijer (2011) describes, SRT is a prudent framework for news media research due to its focus on social communication.

Although social representations are consensual in nature, all members of a community are unlikely to agree upon a definitive form. Contradictions and disagreement are inherent to most social representations, as described by Markova (2000) in defining the concepts of problematisation and themata. Occasionally consensus regarding the composition of a social representation becomes impossible, often due to shifts in cultural or social ways of thinking. This is described as problematisation. Once problematised, categories of thought within the social representation conflict and struggle against one-another. These oppositional categories of thought are themata (Markova, 2000). Themata are dialectical, mutually defining one-another through their epistemological conflict. Problematisation often results in new social representations being formed or existing representations undergoing transformations. Recent declines in media trust and the current post-truth era could be indications of the problematisation of the social representation of news media trust. Audiences are reassessing

how they conceptualise news trust (Lewandowsky et al., 2017), while journalists are reassessing the values and practices with which they produce news media (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018). SRT, therefore, provides a comprehensive framework for interpreting conceptualisations of news trust in the present study.

The Present Study

Rising media distrust and actively changing conceptions of trust in news media are well-established. There is, however, a gap in richer, underlying understandings of news trust, especially among younger audiences. Most research on news trust relies on close-ended questions or single scales of trust (Jain, 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020) that may not fully thoroughly capture the underlying complexity. The more exploratory research that does exist is typically situated outside an Australian context (Knudsen et al., 2022), and rarely consults young people specifically (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019). Constructive journalism as a set of media production principles has received little attention in terms of how audiences perceive it as contributing (or failing to contribute) to trustworthy reporting (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019).

The present study will utilise a qualitative methodology to explore how young Australians conceptualise news media trust and how constructive journalism techniques may contribute to these understandings. To achieve this, three research aims were generated. First, to explore how young Australians understand trust in news media and perceive reporting techniques. Second, to explore how constructive journalism reporting techniques contribute to understandings of trust in news media among young Australians (if at all). Lastly, to explore how young Australians conceptualise trustworthy news media in an era of low news media trust.

Method

Design

This study utilised a qualitative focus group methodology within a critical realist framework. This framework was selected as it allowed participants' descriptions and thoughts to be understood as constituting their own, personally true realities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study was exploratory and primarily inductive, due to the aim of exploring participant understandings as well as the scarcity of similar research in methodology and area. The interview schedule questions were therefore primarily guided by the research aims of the study.

The use of focus groups brought the benefit of open-ended and participant-led discussion that remained relevant to the research aims via a prepared interview schedule. Focus groups are especially useful for exploratory studies due the opportunity afforded participants to interact and respond simultaneously, often producing unexpected and novel opinions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Ethics approval was sought and granted by the University of Adelaide School of Psychology Human Research Subcommittee prior to commencement of the study (approval number 23/40).

Participants

Participants were recruited from the University of Adelaide, and all were students enrolled in a Bachelor of Psychological Science. The study was advertised via the University of Adelaide's School of Psychology Research Participation System. Participants were compensated with 3 units of course credit.

The concept of information power (Malterud et al., 2016) guided the choice of sample size for this study. Information power is an alternative to saturation in qualitative research used to assist in estimating an adequate sample size for rigorous qualitative analysis. Factors such as the moderately dense specificity of the target group, the strong quality of

dialogue between participants and researcher, and the cross-case nature of the analysis suggested a maximum sample size of 20 would be sufficient. The study had 18 total participants. Participants were aged 18-20 years ($M = 19$, $SD = 0.61$). Four identified as female, one as male, and one as non-binary, with the rest opting not to disclose their gender. Most participants reported using TV, social media, and other online sources for finding news, and reported consuming news media between one and five times per day. These participants were split across two groups, with ten and eight members respectively. Ten people were originally sought for each group, but only 18 people were recruited within the time constraints of the study. Although below the target of 20, the guidelines supplied by the concept of information power did not indicate any detriment to the rigour of the study.

Procedure

Conversational data was collected via two focus group sessions, which ran for 85 minutes and 83 minutes respectively, on the 16th and 23rd of May 2023. Demographic information was collected via a short online survey, hosted on SurveyMonkey. The survey asked for age, gender, mediums and outlets used for finding news, and the frequency with which news is read, watched, or sought out. The focus groups began with questions about perceptions of news and trust in news in general (~45 minutes). This was followed by showing a short audio-visual news report produced with constructive journalism techniques (~5 minutes). Lastly participants were asked about this report specifically and their perceptions of its trustworthiness (~45 minutes). Indicative questions are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1*Indicative Questions from the Focus Group Interview Schedule*

Question
What is your general perception of news media?
Do you generally think that news is trustworthy? Why/why not?
What elements of a news report make it trustworthy/untrustworthy to you? Why?

Each group was shown a different audio-visual report. Both reported on climate change, with this topic chosen due to its natural fit with constructive journalism and high social and cultural relevance. However, group one's report discussed a societal-level solution (lab-grown seaweed used in the diets of cows for reducing methane emissions) while group two's report discussed individual-level solutions (insulating your home, reducing food waste, etc.). The study was originally designed for both groups to be shown the first report. When much discussion from the first session focused on the non-participatory nature of the solution, the decision was made to use a report with an individual-level solution for the second group. This allowed for richer data and more thorough discussion regarding solutions in news media. An audio recording device was used during the focus groups. The resultant recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai, however a thorough examination was conducted to ensure the transcripts were accurate.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to address this study's research aims, during which patterns within the data were identified and themes were generated (Braun & Clarke,

2006). The exploratory nature of this study's aims required an inductive approach, with the data itself driving theme generation. An audit trail was maintained throughout analysis that recorded key analysis decisions.

The steps followed were the six outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) in their conception of reflexive thematic analysis. Data familiarisation involved transcription of the audio recordings and multiple re-reads of the focus group transcripts. Transcription involved the correcting of minor spelling and grammatical errors. Initial codes were generated, then sorted and grouped into candidate themes. These candidate themes were then refined, defined, and named within the context of the entire dataset. NVivo 12 was used to perform the coding portion of the analysis.

Personal Reflexive Statement

I am a 25-year-old, white, Australian-born cis-gendered male. Although a bit older than the participants of this study, I predicted I would share some of their understandings (and sometimes frustrations) regarding news media. Data familiarisation proved me correct. It was therefore important to me that I remain critical and ensure I was a conduit, not an arbiter, of participants understandings. Additionally, I wanted to frame participants understandings as valid social realities, rather than condemn or critique those that differed from the mainstream. My own biases were tempered by regular discussions with my academic supervisors and keeping an audit trail of key research decisions. These steps were measures to ensure quality and rigour in this qualitative study (Tracy, 2010).

Results

The analysis generated five themes. ‘Limitations to Trust and Truth’ captures the ways in which participants felt that news media was inherently untrustworthy. ‘Good & Bad Bias’ builds on the previous theme’s ideas by reporting on participant’s beliefs that bias is both ubiquitous and inescapable while simultaneously necessary in some reporting. ‘Encouraging Action and Holding People Responsible in News Solutions’ captures key axes upon which news media solutions were evaluated, such as participatory/exclusionary, encouraging/discouraging action, and holding accountable/shifting responsibility. ‘Rigour vs. Giving Voice on Social Media’ captures participant’s feelings of ambivalence regarding social media as a place for hearing from common people despite very little regulation and a greater risk of exposure to misinformation. ‘Truth Triangulation’ captures participants methods for making judgements of trustworthiness when all news media is perceived as inherently untrustworthy,

Minor spelling and grammatical errors were corrected in the following extracts, while the appendix contains participants’ unedited speech. Words added to provide necessary context are shown in square parentheses. Words and sections removed for conciseness have been replaced with [...].

“A good rule is to just not trust anything”: Limitations to Trust and Truth

Subjectivity (or lack of objectivity) in news media was considered by participants to be ubiquitous and unavoidable. Notions of bias and agendas were pervasive throughout the data and attributed to both news consumers and producers. Many standard news media characteristics were described negatively, and these descriptions were then leveraged by participants as reasons to distrust all news media.

Bias was described by participants as a trait that all individuals, specifically news producers, incorporate into their work: “Anything people write is biased, because they're

writing from their own opinions and perspectives” (P4, Group 1). Many participants described trusting news media as unconceivable, with blanket mistrust a foregone conclusion. “A good rule is to just not trust anything, just kind of outright assume that there's, like, there's bias, there's misrepresentation” (P1, Group 1). Participants also considered consumers active participants in the news consumption process, with consumers' beliefs understood as modulating judgements of trustworthiness.

“I think a person's pre-existing opinion also plays a factor in whether they believe the source is reputable or not, like, if an anti-vax person sees, like, why you should get the vaccine, they'll be like, well, that's not reputable. Like, I'm not going to believe that whereas if they see why, you shouldn't get the vaccine, they will go and read it. And they'll be like, yeah, like, they'll just automatically think that it's credible.” (P14, Group 2)

Specific demographics were also described as having their personal ideologies influence their perceptions of trustworthy news media. “My grandparents they've very conservative. I'm sure everyone's grandparents are. So, like, anytime I talk about the news, I just know that, yeah, there's going to be some sort of disagreement about trust” (P6, Group 1).

Objectivity in news was therefore understood by participants as a noble goal constrained by human subjectivities and the impossibility of remaining objectivity. “There's no such thing as an unbiased news story, like there's no such thing as the middle” (P3, Group 1). It is worth noting that participants did not position themselves as above these subjectivities, and both reported and eschewed trusting based on agreement.

“I think one of the things that makes me trust an article and like, I just want to say, I know that this is wrong, not the way to go about it, but just like, if I agree with it.” (P1, Group 1)

Another participant concurred, describing that:

“I tend to perceive things that I agree with as being less biased as well. Whereas if it disagrees, I'm going to go that's biased that's wrong. [...] Like just because I agree with it doesn't mean it's not biased.” (P2, Group 1)

News producers were also described as reporting on a topic only if it furthered an agenda. This extended to the audio-visual reports, which were described as disguising ulterior motives because they did not advocate for a specific belief. Put simply, lack of an obvious agenda was not understood as having no agenda, but as disguising one.

“It was kind of very leading to a specific agenda. And like a lot of articles and media won't do it (report), unless they have an agenda, like this one is maybe just more disguised in that they're giving you the information, and they haven't really effectively made you form an opinion.” (P7, Group 1)

The audio-visual reports were also criticised for their simplification of the topic of climate change. Participants questioned the suitability of a short video to inform on climate change. “Give me a peer reviewed paper, not this little video” (P2, Group 1). What news media is qualified to cover then is called into question if a global social issue is considered beyond it. Participants also described the audio-visual report's claims as sensationalist and too hyperbolic to be taken seriously. “Look at this miracle that we've created, it's so small and cute [...] and it's going to change the world” (P1, Group 1).

Social structures were also described as reasons to consider news media inherently untrustworthy. The social and incentive structures of capitalism, salaries, and funding were provided as hurdles to trustworthy, quality journalism. “In our society, you can't actually have really good journalism, because of the capitalism and that kind of thing because of like, salaries, and you need to actually fund these things” (P7, Group 1). Seeking popularity and attention was also described as a common motivation of news media and a further reason to

distrust it. “It just, it makes it hard to actually conceptualise things the way they are, because they're always made out to be like dramatized, and kind of like fear mongering is more popular, you can get more attention for it” (P1, Group 1).

Participants described news media as inherently untrustworthy and subjective. News media was understood as a product of the biases and agendas of those that produced it. News consumers were described as often selectively consuming news that aligned with their biases, preventing them from arriving at objective conclusions. Characteristics such as sensationalism, simplification, and disguised agendas were provided as ever-present contributors to permanent distrust. Complex social and incentive structures were understood as further barriers to trustworthy and objective news media.

“It's not tainted by bias, but it's through a lens”: Good & Bad Bias

Bias being ubiquitous was largely uncontested within the data. However, the description of bias as problematic in news was not unanimous. Some participants described bias as, alternatively, a ‘lens’ through which issues are reported or understood. If consumers are conscious of the existence of these lenses, and ensure diversity in the news they consume, bias was positioned as not wholly negative.

“I don't think it's as bad as people say it is personally like, I don't think it's good. But I think it's expected or not expected. [...] So long as you understand that this story is, it's not tainted by bias, but it's through a lens, rather, as long as you understand that, that lens is there, and that there are other lenses, and you look at those lenses from time to time, then that's fine.” (P3, Group 1)

Some participants also considered bias or lenses to be a necessary aspect of news media. Some news, such as that of a political or divisive nature, make staying objective or without bias impossible and undesirable. A topic that one group cares highly about but is considered unimportant or perhaps non-existent by another group is impossible to discuss in

an unbiased way by unbiased news media producers. “If you want to talk about something that only the left would care about, you're not going to try and have that conversation using a news article from a right-wing lens” (P3, Group 1).

Lenses were also described by participants as useful for forming opinions. Utilising multiple lenses by reading across opinions or biases was championed as proper news consumer practice. Again, bias here is positioned as an irremovable aspect of news media that, when utilised correctly by the consumer, can become a useful tool or aspect of news consumption.

“I kind of find that getting multiple lenses [...] is actually just the easiest and best way to evaluate something, almost not actually just looking at one thing and going, Is this good or bad? Like, it's kind of really difficult to do that without other opinions.” (P7, Group 1)

Bias was understood by participants as simultaneously a justification for extreme cynicism and an inevitable and sometimes useful aspect of some reporting. Explicitly political or divisive topics were described as requiring some level of opinion or agenda to be properly reported. Bias was also positioned as a potential utility, whereby audiences can ensure they are reading across opinions or views.

“Where's the protest?": Encouraging Action, Holding People Responsible in News Solutions

Both focus groups were shown an audio-visual news report that discussed climate change and possible solutions. One report contained a societal-level solution while the other offered individual-level solutions. The inclusion of solutions in news media received no criticism from participants. However, solutions were rarely framed as social/individual by participants. More common were the dichotomies of participatory/exclusionary, encouraging/discouraging action, and enforcing accountability/shifting responsibility. While

participants expressed a preference for some sides of these axes, others produced no obvious consensus and significant ambivalence regarding which types of solutions contribute to conceptions of trustworthy news media.

Participatory/exclusionary was a key axis upon which participants discussed solutions. Many participants expressed a preference for solutions that they could participate in. “Food wastage, everyone can [...] be mindful. I'm not going to pack two sandwiches, when really, I can only eat one. Whereas, you know, fixing things in your home, that's not really our demographic” (P12, Group 2). Solutions they could not personally implement, or they felt were more suitable for a different demographic, were considered exclusionary. “This feels like it was made for the older generation, because it doesn't come up with any new ideas that anyone can personally do” (P10, Group 2). New and participatory solutions were framed by participants as being endorsed by and more appropriate for younger people.

Another axis considered by participants was whether solutions encouraged or discouraged individual action. Solutions that did not encourage individuals to contribute, or offered no avenue for contribution, were described as motivated by discouraging individual action. “They kind of want to get you to do nothing, because I can't do anything about this seaweed” (P2, Group 1). A lack of encouragement was also described as evidence of further undisclosed motives. “Their agenda might be to say, ‘Oh the cattle industry is fine, we're fixing it, don't worry about it.’ So, it's kind of like a diversion” (P1, Group 1).

However, this was not a universal preference. Some participants preferred a lack of a call to individual action and limited social critique. The methane-reducing seaweed report was described as more realistic due to its lack of advocacy for the removal or restructuring of societal institutions.

“Something I actually like about it, how it is politically neutral. Like I do find that kind of refreshing, because a lot of the time it is it is kind of pushing a narrative of It's

all up to you, you need to change your whole life to help climate change. But then this is kind of like, it's accepted that there are cattle, and they are going to cause climate emissions and all that kind of thing. And it's like, it's accepted that to a degree and that makes it more like, I like that.” (P7, Group 1)

Participants also evaluated solutions in terms of how responsibility and accountability were reported. Individual-level solutions were tempered by the acknowledgement of external factors and how responsibility was framed. Solutions that acknowledged further factors outside those directly related to the solution were commonly preferred by participants. Offering an individual-level solution without further context of the issue was described as obscuring who is truly accountable and making participants feel solely responsible for implementing the solution. “It wasn't really talking about like big businesses and [...] what they can do, he was saying ‘If you do these four things, the problems solved’, but also didn't really mention the other factors” (P11, Group 2).

Despite plenty of criticism regarding their content, participants did not object to the inclusion of the solutions themselves. The report that featured individual-level solutions advocated for voting as a solution to climate change. Participants' comments on this varied but none critiqued its inclusion. In fact, some participants advocated for more explicit and detailed political solutions than those in the reports. “You're like, where's the protest?” (P2, Group 1).

Solutions in news media were widely accepted. Participants' ability to participate in the reported solution was a primary concern and axis of evaluation, where participatory solutions were somewhat preferred but not wholly endorsed. Whether the solution discourages or encourages action was commonly discussed, with encouraging action being generally preferred but also often contested. Lastly solutions were viewed as either appropriately acknowledging the accountability regarding the issues discussed or shifting the

responsibility for fixing them. Participants expressed a preference for solutions that did not position individuals as solely responsible for fixing social problems and detailing external factors. There was much ambivalence surrounding which type of news media solutions were ideal.

“It can give a voice to so many people to share their experiences”: Rigour and Giving Voice on Social Media

Most participants described using social media for consuming news, with TikTok and Instagram the most common platforms. Despite this preference, social media was consistently discussed with ambivalence and very little straight-forward endorsement. Social media’s accessibility, ease of access, and ability to amplify diverse voices were described as positives. Lack of regulation and formal processes, and a tendency to harbour misinformation were commonly discussed negatives. Participants framed not using social media for news as likely to result in consuming no news at all, which was considered an undesirable outcome.

Regulation was a commonly discussed aspects of news media both new and traditional. Although praise for traditional news media was scarce, that praise that did exist focused on the regulation and stricter processes that traditional news media employ. Traditional news media’s inherent lack of flexibility, relative to social media, was another positive, however flexibility in consumption options was discussed with ambivalence.

“The good thing about the [traditional] news is you can't swipe. You can't pick and choose what they're playing. But then again, then you have to rely on the people who are broadcasting it to give you the right things.” (P11, Group 2)

This was juxtaposed with social media, in which participants provided no shortage of critique.

“I can't trust social media a lot of the time. Because whatever you're interested in, it will just feed you more of that. And then even if it's right, it's like, you just don't see any other side of this.” (P16, Group 2)

Rigour was another commonly considered aspect of trustworthiness and was described as an essential aspect of news media. Opinion, accordingly, was often positioned as antithetical to news, with laypeople described as people whose writings should not be mistaken for news. “If they're saying, ‘Yeah, I'm a researcher in this field’, but most of the time, it's just someone who's saying their opinion, which is fine, but you can't get your news from the average Joe walking down the street” (P11, Group 2).

Providing evidence of education, experience, or publication history was described by participants as a necessary aspect of rigorous and trustworthy news media. However, participants acknowledged that credibility was more difficult to prove for social media news due to the short-form, attention-focused nature of the medium.

“Because of the new form of media that we have like so much social media, it's like trying to grab your attention that they like, do it at the lack of these kind of things, and by sacrificing it, and it's like, it's such a new issue of how to show credibility in media because you need to grab attention in such a small amount of time.” (P7, Group 1)

It is worth noting that the rigour of traditional news media was not questioned or critiqued. This could be an implicit endorsement of the rigour of traditional news media, or an indicator that the rigour of traditional news media was taken for granted.

However, rigour and regulation were not described as universally positive. While a lack of rigour on social media was described as engendering misinformation, participants also positioned social media as allowing for more diversity and subversive content. The ability for people removed from the typical news production process to share experiences and

information was described as a welcome change to the status quo of traditional news mediums.

“I feel like TikTok can be good in like, it can give like a voice to, like, so many people like to share their experiences, like about things and like, uncertain situations. But then it can also like, I don't know, people can just be making things up as well.” (P15, Group 2)

Similarly, the value of news producer credentials received some scrutiny as an absolute indicator of trustworthiness. While education was seen as evidence of credibility to some, others described this as not necessarily making the producer worth listening to. “I feel a bit more comfortable knowing that someone who's got like an associate professor or studies at this university or does that I can be like, ‘Okay, you're actually doing this’” (P11, Group 2).

“That's quite interesting because like, I agree, and I'm the exact same but now with the just saying that over, it makes me think like, there are so many people out there who have done 10 years of study and who are still stupid and still have the most like discriminatory thoughts.” (P10, Group 2)

Social media was discussed by participants as the primary method for consuming news media due to its ease of access. The regulation and consumer choice provided by social media were compared to traditional news and described as both positive and negative. While rigour was seen as superior in traditional news, social media was understood as providing a more accessible method of communication and information dissemination. Social media was described as a medium through which the voice of the common people can be heard.

Participants described social media with much ambivalence, suggesting that it allows diverse and subversive content to flourish as well as misinformation.

“I don't think I've ever looked at one article and gone. ‘Oh, yeah’”: Truth Triangulation

Despite blanket distrust of news media, participants also discussed their approaches for assessing truthful information. Participants overwhelmingly endorsed a process of truth triangulation, in which multiple sources are cross-referenced and information is discussed before arriving at conclusions. Participants suggested that this process mitigates bias both within news reports and audiences' news consuming habits. However, it was also described as an effortful process and not always useful or justified.

Consuming news media from a single source described as uncommon by participants. “I don't think I've ever looked at one article and gone. ‘Oh, yeah. Like, Oh, yeah.’ I generally always look at multiple and what other people are saying I might share with my friends and see what they think” (P2, Group 1).

Participants described truth as simply being too complex or expansive to be found within a single article, with public discussion also positioned as essential to the news consumption process. “I generally always look at multiple and what other people are saying [...] there's just not enough information in one article anyway” (P2, Group 1).

Reading critique of reports was also described as a part of the truth triangulation process.

“Looking at all the information available, and then forming your opinion from that instead of just going oh I agree with this or like, because I like to look at the critiques of the information that's given and kind of like, think of why it might not be right, and then, like build from that.” (P7, Group 1)

Some participants went a step further and stated that they would never consider wholeheartedly believing a single news article, with judgements of trust described as impossible based on a single source.

“I wouldn't, no matter what if there was like a really green flag about an article, I wouldn't even just like, take that. Yeah, I wouldn't take that wholeheartedly. I kind of find that getting multiple lenses, like he said, is actually just the easiest and best way to evaluate something, almost not actually just looking at one thing and going, Is this good or bad? Like, it's kind of really difficult to do that without other opinions.” (P7, Group 1)

While unanimously positive, endorsements of the truth triangulation process varied across participants. One common sentiment was that reading from one source that confirms your existing beliefs is indulging in bias, implying that trust cannot be founded on a single source and that truth does not exist within one set of beliefs.

“Thinking politically, the best way for change to happen is for people that disagree with each other, to be in, kind of just be working closely together. And so, it's important if it's like important to have both sides of the story. And so, if you only trust sources that you agree with, then it's just extremely biased. And you just don't learn a whole lot.” (P1, Group 1)

Despite the importance placed on the truth triangulation process, participants considered the process nonessential in certain circumstances. Obvious fabrications were positioned as not requiring fact checking due to their evidently false nature. However, seemingly obvious false information encountered multiple times was described as worthy of fact-checking, implying that recurring encounters of the same reported information are inherently more trustworthy than reported information encountered once.

“I didn't cross check it because to me, I was like, nah that's so out of pocket. That's never going to happen. And then I cross checked it once it was like it was like repeating. But yeah, so that's unless I think it's total utter bull like I cross check absolutely everything.” (P12, Group 2)

The source and topic of a news report were also factors regarding whether truth triangulation was necessary. Opinion pieces were described as beyond the need for truth-seeking, due to their labelling acting as a disclaimer to the news article's tendency to be non-objective and opinion driven.

“I think depending on the type of source that it is, depends on whether we'll cross check or not. So, if it's an opinion piece, you know it's an opinion piece. So, looking at it retrospectively, you've already gone, this is an opinion, they're obviously going to share one side of the story.” (P14, Group 2)

Truth was therefore understood as the outcome of a triangulation process and not residing within one piece of news media. A single piece of news media was described as inevitably subjective and too simple to be trusted on its own. This triangulation was described as taking place across multiple articles, sources, personal biases, and ideologies. Despite common endorsements of truth triangulation, it was also described as effortful and not always essential.

Discussion

The analysis provides insight into young Australian's understandings of trustworthy news media and their perceptions of reporting techniques. This study utilised a focus group methodology with open-ended discussion among young Australians (18 to 20 years old). Reflexive thematic analysis within a critical realist framework was used to analyse the results, with five themes being generated. Participants broadly described news media as untrustworthy and inherently biased. While bias was described as ubiquitous, some participants conceptualized bias as a lens necessary for discussing highly subjective topics. Participants were largely approving of solutions included in news media, including explicitly political solutions, but were highly ambivalent regarding which types of solutions were most trustworthy. Participants described social media as their preferred source of news, while describing it as both prone to contain falsehoods and a unique conduit for hearing from everyday people. Participants did not describe trustworthiness as a trait of individual reports but as the outcome of a process involving fact-checking and reading multiple, varied sources.

Participants frequently directed discussion away from characteristics of individual reports and toward discussions of the nature of news and trust. When participants did discuss reporting techniques, evaluations were overwhelmingly negative. Discussion of solutions indicated that their inclusion was broadly accepted as part of news media. While some participants expressed a preference for solutions that provided practical actions, this preference was not universal, with much ambivalence regarding the most trustworthy type of solutions. However, there was relative consensus that solutions should not shift the responsibility for solving the problem solely onto audiences.

Positive tone, a staple of modern approaches to constructive journalism (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019), went largely undiscussed. When commenting on the audio-visual reports, participants briefly described their positive tone as sensationalism and an indicator of a lack

of adequate information. One participant labelled the audio-visual report as an advertisement multiple times when referring to its upbeat tone. Previous research has suggested that positively framed news is sometimes perceived as containing advertising (Meier, 2018), which these findings seem to concur with. This lack of discussion of constructive journalism techniques may indicate indifference to their inclusion in news media. This may be due to the consistently low levels of news trust overall. If the trustworthiness of a specific report is a foregone conclusion, assessments of the trustworthiness of its constituent reporting techniques may be considered irrelevant.

Participants gave simultaneously positive and negative appraisals of traditional journalistic processes. Journalistic rigour was described as both ensuring quality and reducing misinformation in general. Simultaneously, strict production processes were understood as restricting who can participate and what topics can be discussed.

While typically accepted in news media, constructive journalism techniques may not provide a straightforward increase in trust among younger audiences. Participants referred often to agendas and complex social factors as reasons for considering all news untrustworthy. Likewise, the decentralisation of news media production was described with ambivalence. These are factors outside the influence of the typical journalist and the techniques that constitute constructive journalism. However, the inclusion of solutions was widely supported by participants and is an integral part of many constructive journalism approaches (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018). Whether constructive journalism contributes to judgements of news media trust by young, Australian audiences appears mixed.

Participants were considerably more eager to discuss how they conceptualised the inherent untrustworthiness of news. These descriptions of low general trust in news media appear consistent with previous research both quantitative (Newman & Fletcher, 2017), and qualitative (Knudsen et al., 2022), but participants understandings of bias and agendas, as

well as their descriptions of their consumption practices, assisted in illuminating underlying understandings. All news in all formats were described as inherently containing bias, agendas, and consistently lacking objectivity and sufficient context. Many participants described it sensible to assume that *no* news is trustworthy. Participants also described trustworthiness as the output of a process of truth triangulation rather than an aspect of a single report. Therefore, specific reporting techniques appeared to be of less importance than the framing, topics, and context of the report. The current climate of extremely low news trust may have shifted younger audiences focus from individual articles to the greater social context and their own personal news consumption practices.

While there is little methodologically similar research for comparison, support was found for existing theories of media trust. The tenet of uncertainty in intentions (Hanitzsch et al., 2018) was heavily reflected in the results. Participants made repeated references to possible ill intentions, personal biases, and agendas. Likewise, the complex social concepts of wages and funding were justifications given for blanket distrust of news. Previously found audience support for the decentralisation of news media production (Coleman et al., 2012) was reflected in this study, with participants espousing the benefits of news produced by common people, albeit with many caveats. Participants consistent discussion of misinformation, agendas, and echo chambers as reasons for scepticism align with previous findings that perceptions of a rise in fake news or misinformation contribute to news distrust (Zhou & Zafarani, 2021).

While previous research suggests that audiences perceive journalistic rigour and process as a key aspect of trustworthy news (Coleman et al., 2012), this study's findings do not neatly align. While journalistic process was described favourably at times, this was not without ambivalence. Additionally, a lack of agendas is also often cited as indicative of trustworthy news media (Knudsen et al., 2022). While participants concurred, they also

described agendas and bias as inevitable aspects of news media, and therefore something that should be properly understood and considered when consuming news. The outright decoupling of bias and agendas from news was described as unfeasible, a conception often reported by research of post-truth sentiments (Fisher, 2016).

SRT provided a valuable lens through which to understand these results. Participants' understandings of trustworthy news media and reporting practices were highly ambivalent, incorporating aspects of mainstream understandings of trustworthy news media alongside more unique conceptions. While participants often denounced bias and agendas as antithetical to news media, many simultaneously embraced political advocacy as a feature of news. Additionally, social media was understood as both conducive to diverse and subversive speakers and topics as well as misinformation. These oppositional understandings are well understood by the concept of Themata (Markova, 2000), dialectical beliefs within the same social representation that mutually define one-another. Themata are most often encountered during a cultural or social shift when previously stable social representations become problematised. Recent declines in trust in news could be said to have problematised traditional notions of trustworthy news media, leading the public to redefine their conceptions of trustworthy news media. SRT posits that previously mainstream understandings are not wholly rejected but instead become subject to epistemic conflict and struggle. This would account for the appearance of new understandings of news trust side-by-side with more traditional understandings, as was present in the results. However, this application of SRT does juxtapose with existing theories of news trust, suggesting that news trust may contain more nuance and ambivalence than previously theorised.

Strengths and Limitations

The application of SRT was a particular strength. While previous media research has touched on the turbulent state of news trust (Fisher, 2016), SRT provided a strong theoretical framework for how and why such ambivalence is maintained and proliferated.

The use of a qualitative focus group method was also a strength of the study. Open ended discussion provided rich data about participants' underlying understandings of news media trust. This was unique among the existing literature with few exceptions (Coleman et al., 2012), and allowed participants to freely direct discussion, which proved highly influential on the direction of the study. While originally designed to focus on participants perceptions of constructive journalism techniques, participants rarely referred to them when discussing news media trustworthiness. Such an exploratory study greatly benefited from this methodology, allowing participants to direct discussion to what they understood as most relevant. However, while anonymity of the data was guaranteed, participants may have felt some level of pressure to provide socially desirable answers, as is known to occur in situations with strong expected behaviours or attitudes such as focus groups (Grimm, 2010). The prevalence of discussion on independent fact-checking could have been partly due to this.

Additionally, the sample was drawn exclusively from undergraduate psychology students at the University of Adelaide due to convenience and a narrow study scope. Although the findings align with the established literature in parts, it is feasible that a similar sample from a different area of tertiary education, or without tertiary education, would have described different conceptualisations of trustworthy news media, as is suggested by previous research (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019). In short, transferability is constrained by both level and area of education. However, such a focus on young people specifically was unique within the literature and has illuminated an area that is current under researched.

Implications and Future Research

These results have implications for future research of news media trust, specifically regarding ambivalence as understood through the lens of SRT and Themata. Much previous research has used quantitative scales of trust or reporting techniques, while the existing qualitative research has little to say about ambivalence within understandings. Further research could expand on this study's findings by continuing to explore this ambivalence in news media trust.

This study also provides a starting point for further exploration of news trust across topics and issues. Climate change was chosen as the topic of the audio-visual reports due to its natural fit with constructive journalism techniques (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019). However, an individual's trust in journalists to select relevant topics is known to influence trust in news (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), and differing results may be generated with different news topics of varying relevance to participants.

The preferences found for certain types of solutions could also be researched further. While it is well understood that solutions are evaluated on an individual/societal axis (Chater & Loewenstein, 2022), the further axes conceptualised by this study could be further explored. Deeper understandings of why these preferences were expressed, and what an ideal solution may practically look like, was beyond the scope of this study.

The concept of truth triangulation was ubiquitous during focus group discussions. However, there was little scope to investigate it specifically. Investigating how truth triangulation is learned, how it comes to be valued, and an in-depth understanding of its constituent processes would assist in further understanding how audiences conceptualise news trust and truth.

The sample consisted only of undergraduate psychology students. Future research could utilise a more diverse sample of Australians from different areas of education or

without tertiary education, given previous research seems to indicate that some tertiary education produces different levels of support for constructive journalism techniques (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019).

Conclusion

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature of news media trust by exploring the rich understandings of young Australian audiences. Participants described a general attitude of distrust and scepticism with little regard for reporting techniques. They expressed a preference for solutions in news that did not place responsibility solely on individuals but were otherwise ambivalent regarding news media solutions. A process of truth triangulation was described as the way participants reached the truth when individual articles cannot be relied upon. Decentralisation of news production was described as both a positive and negative development in the news media landscape. Utilising a psychological perspective through the lens of Social Representations Theory, these findings suggest that young people's conceptions of news trust are undergoing a fundamental transformation due to an evolving news media landscape and the problematisation of previously uncontested conceptions. Understandings of trust in news media may therefore be more complex, nuanced, and contain more ambivalence than previously reported.

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Appendix 1

Links to Audio-Visual News Reports

Report 1 (shown to group 1)

<https://www.lx.com/climate/could-seaweed-help-slow-climate-change/59103/>

Report 2 (shown to group 2)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vd-bGz8JXd8>