

Reinforcing or Rethinking? What Do News Consumers Want From Journalism in the Post-Truth Era?

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Submitted: 30 October 2024 **Accepted:** 10 February 2025 **Published:** 9 April 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Protecting Democracy From Fake News: The EU’s Role in Countering Disinformation” edited by Jorge Tuñón Navarro (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid), Luis Bouza García (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid), and Alvaro Oleart (Université Libre de Bruxelles), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i476>

Abstract

Policymakers and news producers have long grappled with the challenges that fake news and misinformation pose to quality journalism. This has given rise to an extensive body of literature, covering various aspects from the characteristics of fake news to strategies for addressing it. However, the preferences of news consumers regarding the future of journalism and their views on how journalistic commitment to truth can best be maintained remain relatively overlooked in scholarly research. This article utilizes primary data from a survey ($N = 4,521$) fielded in Norway, Italy, and Poland in 2023 to show that, even in contemporary media environments, people continue to regard traditional journalistic ideals as the normative goals for future journalism. This suggests that journalists in an age of post-truth should focus less on rethinking journalism and more on adhering to its traditional goals of unbiased dissemination of facts.

Keywords

disinformation; fake news; journalism; journalistic quality; post-truth politics; public opinion

1. Introduction

The issue of fake news and misinformation has sparked extensive debate among academics and policymakers (European Commission, 2018; Swire et al., 2017; Valenzuela et al., 2019). While much of the discussion has centered on the dual challenges of targeted fake news and unintentional misinformation, as well as potential strategies to address them, two critical aspects remain underexplored. First, in the face of uncertainty about the future role of journalism and divergent expectations regarding how journalism should be rethought in the

era of post-truth (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021), we ask what qualities news consumers expect from professional journalism. Second, considering the alleged importance of fact-checking services in combating fake news and misinformation (e.g., Brandtzaeg et al., 2018), we examine how news consumers think these services should be organized.

This article addresses these questions through a survey fielded in 2023 in Norway, Italy, and Poland. The survey asks both what people believe makes journalism trustworthy, and whether fact-checking is best organized through independent organizations or legacy media bound to traditional norms of professional journalism. We thus move beyond an existing literature dealing with the effectiveness of fact-checking (e.g., Walter et al., 2020) to also investigate news consumers' expectations of fact-checking services.

Our data reveals that readers remain committed to traditional values of professional journalism, such as unbiased coverage, even as the broader media landscape around them is changing. Furthermore, they place less importance on features like the ability to comment on news stories and show only limited support for the notion that journalism should have immediate relevance to their daily lives. Lastly, our findings indicate that most people favor fact-checking services provided by independent organizations rather than legacy media, a preference especially evident among those on the political right and those distrustful of journalism. This is important because media industry initiatives that relate directly to the quality of the media product rather than the surrounding media infrastructure (as the Digital Services Act and the European Media Freedom Act do) can be an important complement to existing regulatory efforts to strengthen trust in traditional media. Moreover, a strong understanding of how news consumers want fact-checking to be structured can also help the media industry and the EU to tailor support for future initiatives in a way that enhances journalistic quality and aligns with consumer expectations.

To investigate news consumers' expectations of journalism and fact-checking, we first outline four qualities of journalism in democracy and formulate hypotheses about how these are embraced by different types of publics. We then introduce our survey design and explain the methods used to test our hypotheses. These survey data are then used to assess which journalism role models and approaches to fact-checking the public perceives as most important and credible, and how these perceptions are influenced by political ideology. We conclude by arguing that trust in journalism remains strongly grounded in shared expectations about professional standards of truth and unbiased news coverage. Complementing other contributions in this thematic issue—such as those examining the use of new AI tools in journalistic practice—our findings suggest that the most effective way for journalists to strengthen trust in traditional journalism is to reinforce their commitment to ideals that have long been at the core of both the journalistic profession and the public expectations of journalism. Our findings thus have wider implications for how journalism can consolidate by responding to public demands for quality news and reclaiming legitimacy in the age of post-truth politics (Ott, 2017; Waisbord, 2018).

2. News Consumers' Expectations in Journalism and Fact-Checking

Questions about trust in journalism have animated a large body of literature within media studies and related fields. Scholars who have investigated people's expectations in journalism found that news readers prefer journalists "to consider society's best interests: reporting in a socially responsible manner, alerting the public of threats and opportunities, accurately portraying the world, and contributing to society's well-being"

(Abdenour et al., 2021, p. 329). These expectations nevertheless vary by ideology: For instance, fiscal and social conservatives are more likely to believe that journalists should be detached observers, and not actors providing opinion and potentially biased analysis (Vos et al., 2019). This suggests broad support for the idea that journalists should serve as “watchdogs,” not only reporting events but also investigating critical issues and providing context for daily occurrences. However, as Kalogeropoulos et al. (2024) point out, this watchdog function is typically seen as much less important for readers than whether journalists report news quickly and accurately.

On the other hand, journalists also express divergent ideas about which of their multiple roles are most important, and their normative preferences and role ascriptions do not necessarily align with the perceptions held by readers (Custodi & Trenz, 2025; Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Weaver et al., 2019). Data from the US suggests that journalists are more likely to believe that interpretation and contextualization are the key functions of journalism (Weaver et al., 2019). American news consumers, on the other hand, believe that quick dissemination of news should be the main priority of journalism. Similarly, we find that journalism students were more likely to see the contextualizing and investigatory dimensions of journalism as more important after completing their studies than they were when they entered a journalism program (Hanna & Sanders, 2012). Lastly, we find that journalists are more likely to see their roles as altruistic and public-service oriented than what news consumers do (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013).

2.1. News Consumers' Expectations of Journalism

Readers' preferences for unbiased and truth-oriented journalism are shaped by their experiences as news consumers in high-choice news environments. The challenges journalism faces in the post-truth era (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021) and the proliferation of debates about fake news and disinformation (Al-Rawi, 2019) create a context in which ideals like trustworthiness and objectivity are perceived to be under threat. Disinformation, in particular, presents a specific challenge to journalistic values, as it erodes perceptions of journalism's credibility and raises questions about the profession's ability to fulfill its democratic role. Consequently, these perceptions may prompt news consumers to reaffirm traditional ideals such as accuracy, objectivity, and relevance, while critically evaluating journalism's performance.

This article contributes to our understanding of news consumers' role expectations and evaluations of journalistic quality in a media context increasingly characterized by post-truth challenges. While existing research has highlighted the importance of accuracy, contextualization, critique, and relevance as key features of journalistic quality (Loosen et al., 2020), it remains unclear how declining trust in journalism and different media systems cause people to reevaluate their expectations of what journalism is and should deliver. The empirical question, therefore, is whether disinformation and related threats encourage people to hold onto traditional journalistic ideals or lead them to adjust their expectations.

Depending on their ideological beliefs, news consumers will have different expectations of journalism. For instance, those who self-identify as belonging to the political right are more likely to believe that journalists should use a detached reporting style, focusing less on advocacy and interpretation than on the mere reporting of facts (Vos et al., 2019). We thus expect that the same people will have similar views of journalistic quality. However, we move beyond the existing literature in accounting for how this relationship is more likely to be curvilinear. In other words, much like populist actors on the left and right are more likely

to engage in post-truth discourses (Waisbord, 2018), non-mainstream voters are likely to adopt different views of what journalism is desirable from those who are in the political center. This is evident in how people with anti-establishment attitudes tend to have very different preferences for media consumption than more mainstream voters, preferring media sources that are lighter on contextualizing journalism (Hameleers et al., 2017b). The implication of this is that both left- and right-wing voters outside of the mainstream might be more likely than others to see contextualization as a less important feature of journalism. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H1a: News consumers with voting preferences outside of the political mainstream are less likely to prioritize contextualization as an important feature of quality journalism.

A possible reason for this is that contextualization forces journalists to somewhat depart from their roles as impartial observers, making more explicit choices about how to frame issues. Such choices are likely to be more controversial to voters outside of the political mainstream, who already tend to be skeptical of journalists and their ability to do their jobs in an unbiased way. This skepticism of mainstream journalism also translates to a greater propensity to expose oneself to and believe misinformation narratives (Hameleers et al., 2022).

It is possible that the other quality features of journalism that we survey would not be subject to the same dynamics. At the core of the populist critique of modern journalism (Van Dalen, 2021) is the idea that journalists are not acting as unbiased disseminators of facts, but rather as proper political actors. Journalism that is unbiased, accurate, and relevant might thus be considered a positive expectation. This yields the following testable hypothesis:

H1b: Relevance, objectivity, and truthfulness are likely to be equally important to both mainstream and non-mainstream partisan identifiers.

We do, however, expect there to be a difference between different groups that identify as being outside the political mainstream. As the literature suggests, cues regarding the low quality of journalism tend to predominantly come from right-wing populist leaders (Hameleers et al., 2017a) and populist right voters tends to have lower levels of education compared to the general electorate (Cordero et al., 2022). Given that education levels tend to correlate with trust in institutions more broadly, there is reason to suggest that right-wing non-centrists are more likely to be critical of contextualizing journalism than left-wing non-centrists. This leads to the following testable hypothesis:

H1c: Far right-wingers will be more critical of contextualization than both far leftists and centrist ideological identifiers.

It is also possible that there will be an effect of nationality, independently of ideology. This effect is likely to vary along with the media systems in place in each country and the extent to which it is characterized by parallelization. Such parallelization describes a situation where media messages are to some extent filtered through a partisan lens (Brüggemann et al., 2014). In contrast, other countries with lower levels of parallelization are characterized by media systems that enjoy high levels of journalistic professionalization, where unbiasedness plays an important role. It is reasonable to assume that in countries where parallelization is high, such as in the Mediterranean countries and Poland (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012), readers

might have a greater desire for objective journalism. In these countries, contextualization might more easily be seen as a way for journalists to advance a partisan agenda. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: News consumers in media systems with high levels of media parallelization are more likely than others to prioritize objectivity as a desired ideal of journalism.

Overall, understanding how news consumers evaluate journalistic qualities in the present day provides important insights into the contemporary challenges of the post-truth era. In fact, this perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of the current media landscape not only in terms of restraints but also in terms of new demands for quality journalism. Such a discussion is needed to contextualize the evidence of post-truth phenomena with counter-evidence of democratic resilience. First, it contributes to the development of an audience perspective of journalism. This is important because the quality of journalistic practice depends not only on media professionals but also on how well their practice is aligned with news consumers' views and expectations (Loosen et al., 2020). Second, there are large gaps in how news consumers and producers evaluate the performance of journalists (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013). Having an understanding of what people actually want from journalism is thus important because it can help media institutions and media regulators support the kind of journalism that is in demand and more likely seen as trustworthy.

2.2. Preferences for Institutionalized Fact-Checking

While we expect balanced information and truthfulness to be key characteristics that people expect from journalism, there are still remaining questions about people's expectations of fact-checking services. Past literature has extensively probed when and how people will find certain fact-checking messages more or less credible. However, there is much less attention paid to the infrastructure surrounding fact-checking and what people want from it. This makes it an open question whether people prefer fact-checking to be done by professional journalists working within legacy media, or by independent organizations working outside legacy media institutions. Understanding whether people actually want fact-checking that is done by professional journalists, as is most common today (Graves et al., 2016), rather than independent organizations is crucial for assessing the policy proposals and regulations for combating disinformation and fake news as contained in the European Media Freedom Act and Digital Services Act. To fully unleash the potential of fact-checking, it is important that it happens within a framework that bolsters the credibility of the responsible fact-checking institutions to the greatest extent possible.

In contrast to the knowledge gap related to how people think about the organization of fact-checking, journalists' understanding of and support for it has been extensively studied. Many journalists believe that the role of such fact-checkers is to uphold traditional journalistic values, even if these are sometimes ill-defined and potentially on a collision course with each other (Mena, 2019). Appeals to such values are nonetheless likely to encourage more journalists to engage in fact-checking than if they are simply told that audiences demand such practices (Graves et al., 2016). This shows that journalists have become socialized to the logic of fact-checking as part of their working ethos, and that it is seen as a valuable tool by news producers. However, its effectiveness in actually correcting people's erroneous beliefs about news is open to question: For instance, telling people that a meme has been fact-checked by a third-party fact-checker has no statistically significant effect on whether people are more likely to believe the correction (Oeldorf-Hirsch et al., 2020).

Regarding how people perceive the credibility of fact-checking messages, both ideology and media trust are important in shaping people's trust in fact-checking (Primig, 2024; Walter et al., 2020). We assume that those who express greater distrust of journalism will be less likely to view fact-checking conducted by journalists as preferable to that carried out by independent organizations. An important reason for this is that news media trust relates to ideas about how well media professionals fulfill their core functions, whether it relates to their unbiasedness, their willingness to tell the full story, or any of the other roles that consumers expect journalists to adopt. A belief that journalists are not doing all they can to fulfill these functions, should logically also correspond to a belief that the same people should not be tasked with fact-checking the output of media more broadly. We thus hypothesize:

H3: News consumers who are most likely to distrust journalism are also more likely to favor fact-checking by independent organizations than legacy media institutions.

Beyond media trust, political attitudes are likely to have an impact on people's views about the organization of fact-checking. Those on the right are more likely to distrust professional fact-checking than those on the left (Lyons et al., 2020). Similarly, correlations have been found between ideology and trust in legacy media (Lee, 2010) and susceptibility to misinformation (Hameleers et al., 2022). These general views are, however, much more pronounced on the political extremes. Right-leaning news consumers may perceive fact-checking done at an arms-length distance from professional newsrooms as more credible because it reduces the influence of professional journalists. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H4: Right-leaning news consumers are more likely to trust fact-checking by independent organizations than by legacy media institutions.

Understanding how people want fact-checking to be organized is not only a key question for media professionals interested in strengthening institutional fact-checking in a way that also strengthens the public perceptions of the legitimacy of media. It is also crucial for academics studying fact-checking, as it can shed light on how media industry choices impact the esteem in which the outcomes of fact-checking are held. This is a question that has gained relevance as fact-checking has become more strongly institutionalized than before (Lowrey, 2017).

3. Data and Methods

We investigate the hypotheses presented through a survey fielded in 2023 to 4,521 respondents in Norway, Italy, and Poland. These three countries are highly interesting for investigating people's beliefs about the journalistic response to post-truth discourses for a variety of reasons: First, they capture the beliefs of news consumers across a wide range of media systems (Brüggemann et al., 2014). Second, the three countries are also characterized by very different levels of trust in democratic institutions, with Norway standing out as a country with a particularly high level of trust in government (Stein et al., 2023). Lastly, we have observed over the last years an increasing politicization of critical journalism, especially in Poland, where the former populist-right government actively criticized independent media (Kelemen, 2017). Our data thus allow us to investigate attitudes towards journalism and fact-checking in contexts that feature very different levels of trust in legacy media, relations between the state and media, and politicization of journalists' role.

Our data are designed to be representative of the populations of the three countries with respect to age, gender, and regions of the country. The survey was conducted by the company YouGov and fielded through an online panel.

3.1. *Dependent Variables*

Our first set of dependent variables surveys people's views on the role of journalism by asking them what functions they believe journalism should fulfill. We ask about the perceived importance of journalists providing news that are (a) relevant to their lives, (b) accurately describing the events they report on, and providing reporting that is (c) objective and (d) contextualized. These four aspects of quality journalism align with the functions identified by scholars such as Weaver et al. (2019) and capture the diverse objectives of journalism. The English original of the question is phrased "journalism has a lot of functions to fulfill. How important for journalists' work do you believe each of the following is?" To operationalize preferences for the relevance criterion, we use the phrase "to provide news that is relevant to my life"; for factuality and accuracy "to accurately describe events as they happened"; for unbiasedness "to provide news that is objective"; and for contextualization "to give enough information that I can understand what is happening."

A preference for journalism that is mainly concerned with accuracy, is thus measured by asking whether people want journalism to only describe accurately what happened, while a preference for contextualization is measured by asking how highly people rate the importance of journalism that lets one comfortably understand the *why* of an event, and not only the *what*. Overall, our question is also less abstract than asking about "journalistic quality," as it points to features of the journalistic product and asks people to rate how important they find this in the news output they consume. The four variables are all Likert-scaled, with the response categories going from "very important" to "very unimportant." In all cases, we treat "don't know" as missing data.

One challenge is that people may hold journalism to a different standard of unbiasedness than the objectivity standard suggested by our closed questions. Previous literature has, for instance, found that academics and journalists think differently about what objectivity actually means (Post, 2015). It is reasonable to expect that the average news consumer would bring different understandings to bear when relating to such a contested concept. However, we expect that underneath all conceptions of objectivity, there rests a central concept of unbiasedness, even if there are disagreements about the rigor of that unbiasedness and how to measure it.

To investigate people's attitudes towards the question of how fact-checking should be structured, we ask: "Some fact-checking services are provided by people working for professional news media while others are independent organizations working outside of professional news media. Which do you believe will lead to the best results?" Once again, this question goes beyond asking about mere preferences for different forms of fact-checking. Instead, it asks people what model is best suited to fulfill the key function of fact-checking: preserving trust in journalism. The response categories for this dependent variable are "Fact-checking done by professional news media," the predominant model for fact-checking today (Graves, 2018), and "Fact-checking done by independent organizations." We treat this as a categorical variable, where a value of 0 indicates a preference for fact-checking done by professional journalists and a value of 1 expresses a preference for fact-checking done by independent organizations.

3.2. Independent Variables

Our first independent variable, relevant to both H2 and H4, is the respondents' ideology. Our original measure of ideology is Likert-scaled, where 1 corresponds to *strongly on the left* and 7 *strongly on the right*. Here we treat "don't know" as a missing value. To capture the effect of having an ideological leaning that is outside of the mainstream, we give those who responded *strongly on the left* and *strongly on the right* a value of 1, and everyone else a 0. We treat all those who responded "don't know" as having missing values, and remove them via listwise deletion.

Second, we create a multidimensional scale of trust in journalism. This index deviates from the pre-registration for this survey (Michailidou et al., 2023), as a confirmatory factor analysis (Brown, 2015) shows that only measures of the perceptions that news are accurate, relevant, and provide a full context for relevant events have sufficiently large factor loadings (> 0.4) to warrant inclusion in the journalism trust index. Figure A1 in the Supplementary File shows the results of this measurement model. The benefit of including a multidimensional scale of trust in journalism is that it allows us to capture views of more than one of the relevant dimensions of the very multifaceted concept that is trust in journalism.

3.3. Control Variables

In the second step, we introduce a comprehensive set of control variables, drawn from the literature on media and fact-checking trust, which are known to influence beliefs about both phenomena (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Koliska, 2022; Lyons et al., 2020; Walter et al., 2020).

We start with a measure of media use which asks "how many minutes a day do you spend reading or watching news?" Consumption of news is well-known to impact beliefs about journalism (Lee, 2010). Our measure has the benefit of specifying news consumption as the relevant phenomenon. We thus avoid conflating a range of possible media consumption patterns that may be theoretically unrelated to trust in journalism.

We also control for previous use of fact-checking services. Accordingly, after presenting an example of fact-checking from the respondent's own country, we ask: "Have you ever used any such services?" Response categories range from "yes, often" to "I have never used any of these services, but I am aware of them." For similar reasons, we include age, gender, and education—which correlate with trust in both media (Kohring & Matthes, 2007) and institutions more broadly (Armingeon & Ceka, 2014)—as control variables.

Finally, because the media systems of the three countries vary in terms of the level of state involvement, politicization of journalism, and journalistic norms (Brüggemann et al., 2014), we introduce fixed effects to control for this unmodelled variation. While such fixed effects make it challenging to estimate the effects of contextual factors like media systems and overall levels of political polarization regarding journalism, they do allow us to come closer to an accurate estimate of the individual-level covariates of theoretical interest.

Descriptive statistics, including the percentage of missing values and the number of unique categories, can be found in Table A1 of the Supplementary File.

3.4. Model Estimation

To model the preference for fact-checking alternatives and how ideology and trust in journalism impact beliefs about different roles of journalism we use fixed effects models. This means, for instance, that the preference for different forms of fact-checking Y stated by individual i in country j becomes a function of a theoretically interesting variable X_1 , a vector of control variables X_2 , and a country fixed effect λ_j . As the dependent variable measuring perceptions of fact-checking is a dichotomous indicator, we estimate the regression using logistic regressions. This is formalized as:

$$Y_{ij} = X_1 + X_2 + \lambda_j \quad (1)$$

Given that we are also interested in testing how ideology trust in journalism relates to both contextualization and objectivity, we also fit a regression model with identical vectors. This model takes advantage of the Likert-scaled nature of the dependent variable, is fitted using ordinary least squares with country-clustered standard errors, and is formalized as follows:

$$Y_{ij} = X_1 + X_2 + \lambda_j + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (2)$$

In summary, our analytical approach allows us to test whether there is in fact a relationship between ideology or trust in journalism that impacts not only broad evaluations of quality, but also the specific role of contextualization.

4. Results and Discussion

We begin by showing how our respondents evaluate each of the four traditional roles of journalism featured in our survey. This allows us to assess which roles the public perceive as most important and how these perceptions are influenced by political ideology. We then analyze the factors that shape preferences for different approaches to fact-checking.

4.1. What Do News Consumers Want From Journalism in an Age of Post-Truth?

When first examining the descriptive statistics, as outlined in Figure 1, what stands out is the primacy given to traditional virtues of journalism. Objectivity, accuracy and contextualization have long been seen as core professional principles for most journalists (Weaver et al., 2019). We find that respondents tend to report a similar affinity for these criteria, evaluating them as being of very similar importance. These results are noteworthy because they suggest that people do not automatically favor the most detached form of journalism. In fact, they place a comparable value on contextualization, which often requires journalists to adopt a more engaged and less distant stance.

Interestingly, there is somewhat less emphasis placed on the relevance criterion. Readers appear to see journalists reporting information accurately and providing contextualization as more important than the personal relevance of a news story. This finding suggests a potential disconnect between contemporary news media practices and the demands of news consumers. While news personalization and targeting have become widespread (Bodó et al., 2019), in part due to the assumption that relevance is a key factor in shaping consumers' preference for news, our data complicate this commonly held belief, indicating that accuracy and contextualization may be more important to audiences than previously assumed.

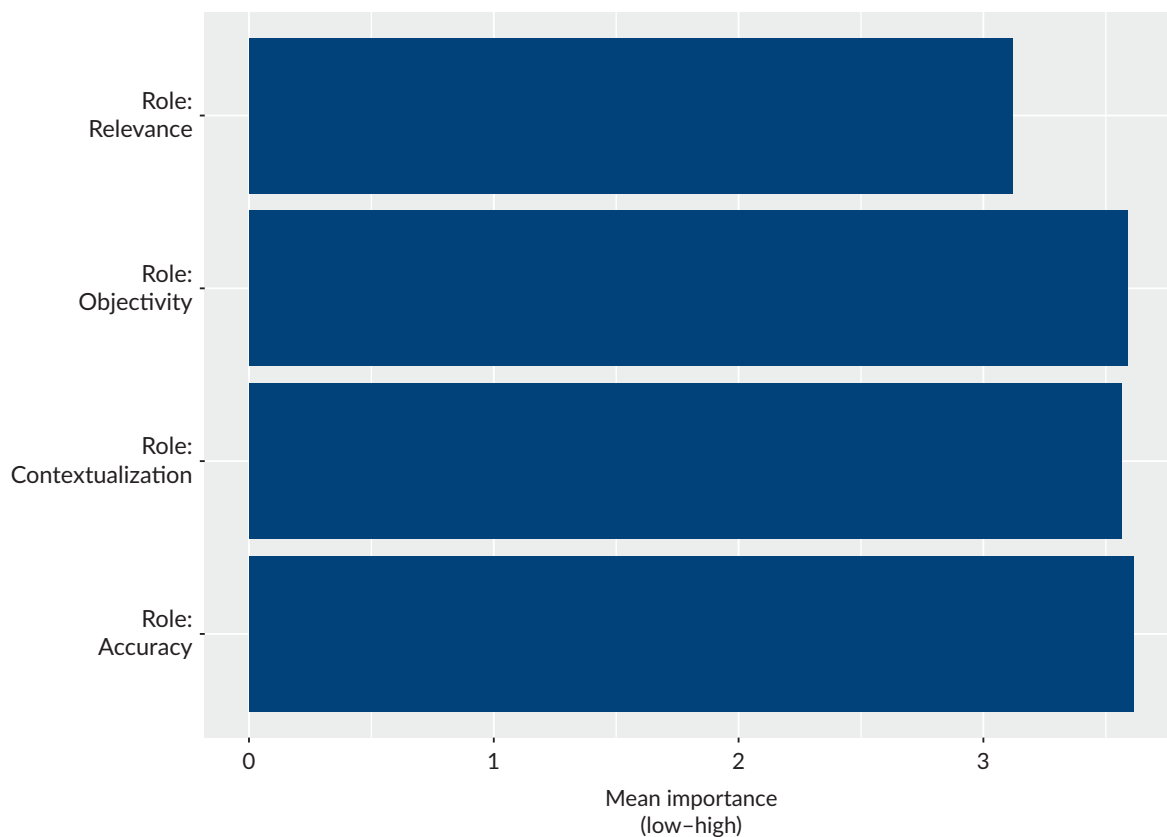


Figure 1. Perceived importance of journalism functions across all individuals.

The great emphasis placed on contextualization and objectivity is also important for another reason: It suggests that the “truth mediating” role that journalists play—where they are not seen as keepers of truth but rather as professionals explicitly tasked with seeking it through a set of tools that together constitute a journalistic method (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021)—also resonates with news consumers. However, it is important to note that there is a strong convergence of opinion around all four criteria.

Figure A2 of the Supplementary File illustrates that these criteria hold similar importance across the three countries. However, contextualization appears to be more important for Norwegian respondents compared to their Italian and Polish counterparts. An important reason for this may have to do with the variations in the structure of the media systems within each country. As Brüggemann et al. (2014) point out, the Norwegian media system is characterized by a high level of professionalization. Under these conditions, readers may come to take values like accuracy and objectivity for granted. In contrast, questions about the ability of journalists to deliver contextual news may be less taken for granted. People also appear similarly inclined to apply these criteria when evaluating the trustworthiness of specific news content (see Figure A4 of the Supplementary File). For instance, the presence of multiple viewpoints in a story is nearly as important to respondents as their trust in the journalist or the medium. Because such viewpoints are intimately connected with the ideals of objective and contextualizing journalism, we find a clear connection between what news consumers want journalism to be and the criteria they use to establish the credibility of specific news content.

However, a core feature of online media, namely the ability to debate news content through comment sections, appears to be far less important to respondents than factors such as the source of the news story,

as shown in Figure A3 of the Supplementary File. This is not particularly surprising, as motivated reasoning may lead people to place greater trust in news content from sources they already know (Taber & Lodge, 2006). This highlights a potential disconnect between journalists and news consumers regarding the characteristics they consider most important for building trust: While many journalists view their engagement with readers through comment sections as crucial to their work (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019), readers do not seem to perceive it as similarly important. This pattern is especially pronounced in Norway, where the perceived importance of comment sections by readers is even lower than in Italy and Poland (see Figure A3 of the Supplementary File).

As Table 1 shows, we find little evidence for the connection between non-mainstream ideological leanings and support for contextualization. Instead, we find that readers who are inside or outside the political mainstream evaluate the different qualities of journalism rather similarly. We thus reject H1a, which posits that readers from the far left and far right are equally less likely to prefer contextualizing journalism than those identifying as centrists, as the hypothesized pattern is not observed. We also reject H1c, as we find no evidence that far-right readers are less likely to believe that contextualization is important than centrists and far-leftists. Indeed, the only significant difference we find goes in the other direction: Readers identifying with a far-left ideology are *more* rather than less likely to see contextualization as a core feature of journalism.

However, we confirm H1b, which states that objectivity, relevance, and truthfulness will be equally important to people regardless of whether they belong to the political mainstream or adopt more non-centrist positions. This is illustrated by the fact that there are no significant differences between political centrists and far-left- or right-wingers in how they rate these particular features of journalism.

Table 1. Test of connection between ideology and preferences for journalism.

	Accuracy	Contextualization	Objectivity	Relevance
Far left	0.07 (0.02)	0.13* (0.02)	0.02 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.04)
Far right	-0.00 (0.09)	-0.07 (0.10)	0.09 (0.10)	0.03 (0.04)
Age	-0.08 (0.03)	-0.09 (0.02)	-0.09 (0.02)	-0.12** (0.01)
Gender	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)
Education	0.13* (0.03)	0.11* (0.02)	0.14* (0.02)	0.08* (0.01)
Trust in journalism	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.08 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.06)
Media use	0.02 (0.01)	0.03** (0)	0.05** (0)	0.01 (0.01)
Fixed country effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Clustered SEs	Country	Country	Country	Country
N	4,013	3,997	3,992	3,939

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$; country fixed effects; country-clustered SEs.

One core difference, as the panels of Figure 2 illustrate, is that there seems to be a much greater convergence of opinion regarding the role of objectivity among political non-centrists than centrists. The predicted values of panel D also show that the demand for objectivity seems to be more pronounced among those belonging to the far right, even if the differences are not large enough to be statistically significant at conventional levels. The same predicted values also show much lower support for contextualization among far right-wingers compared to both their left-wing counterparts and more centrist ideological identifiers (panel C).

However, we reject H2 (coefficients shown in Table A2 of the Supplementary File), which states that people living in media systems with a higher degree of parallelization are more likely to want objectivity to be a guiding principle of journalism. As Figure 3 suggests, both the mean assessment of objectivity as a desired ideal of journalism and the measure of uncertainty suggest that the baseline support for independent organizations doing fact-checking is identical across all countries. People who live in countries whose media feature a great deal of political parallelization thus seem just as likely to prioritize objectivity as a guiding ideal of journalism as those whose national media are more heavily professionalized.

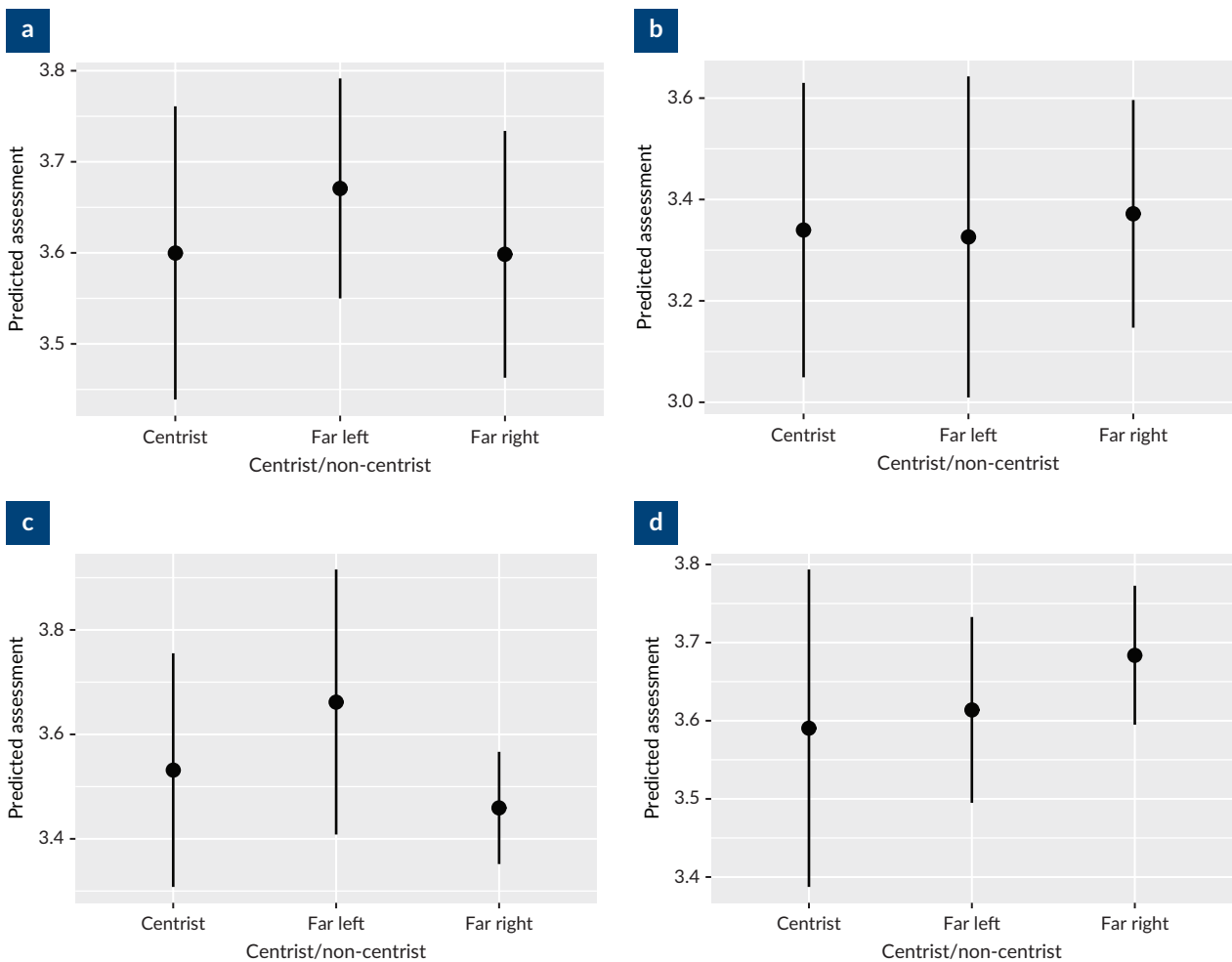


Figure 2. Impact of ideology on perceived importance of roles of journalism: (a) Accuracy, (b) relevance, (c) contextualization, (d) objectivity. Note: 95% prediction intervals shown.

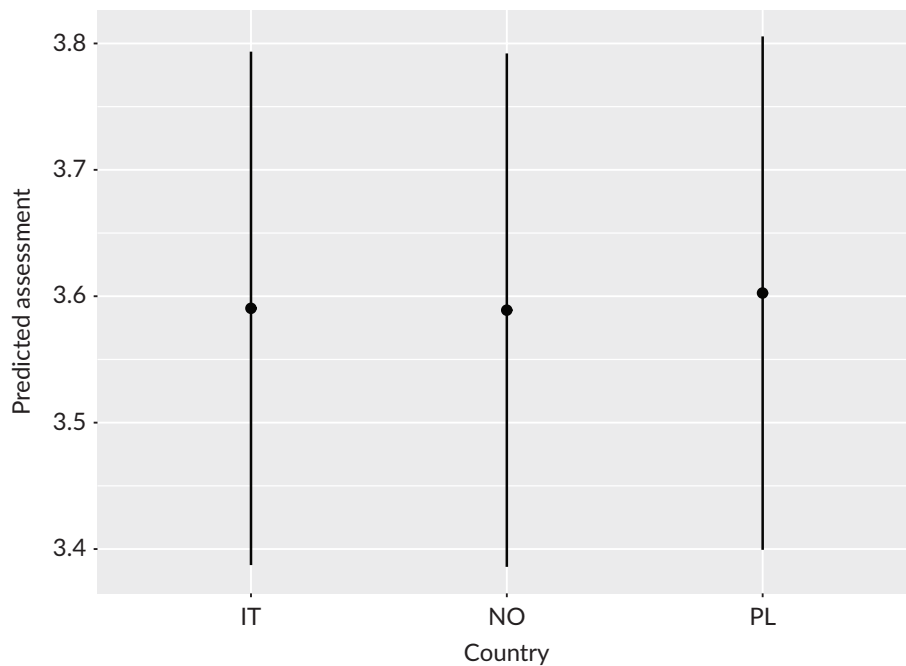


Figure 3. Predicted assessment of the importance of objectivity for news consumers of Italy (IT), Norway (NO), and Poland (PL). Note: 95% prediction intervals shown.

The evidence presented thus far portrays a news-consuming public that places significant value on the journalist’s role as both contextualizers and disseminators of timely and accurate information (Weaver et al., 2019). Importantly, news consumers of all ideological stripes seem to have largely overlapping views on the importance of these criteria. Our results also suggest that these views are somewhat independent of the structural features of the media systems of a respondent’s country of residence.

4.2. Understanding Individual-Level Preferences for Fact-Checking

We now proceed to a more formal investigation of the specific factors influencing preferences for various organizational modes of fact-checking. This analysis begins by first testing the base correlation between each variable, before expanding to include interactions.

As Table 2 shows, the relationship between ideology and support for fact-checking by independent organizations does not align with H3 and H4. Both the base and interaction models indicate that left-leaning respondents tend to favor more fact-checking conducted by independent organizations rather than fact-checking performed by institutionalized media to a greater extent than those on the right.

Two things stand out from the analysis reported in Table 2. The first is that there does not seem to be a strong correlation between holding views of politics that are outside of the political mainstream and views on how fact-checking should be organized. While we see that left-wingers outside of the political mainstream are, on average, more likely to believe that fact-checking should be done by professional organizations, the corresponding measure for right-wing individuals is associated with much uncertainty. The other thing that clearly stands out is that trust in journalism moderates the lower propensity of right-wingers to prefer fact-checking conducted by independent organizations. We find no similar pattern

Table 2. Preferences for fact-checking organizations.

	Base model	Interaction model
Far left	0.40* (0.19)	-0.02 (0.84)
Far right	-0.07 (0.46)	-1.47* (0.74)
Age	0.22** (0.07)	0.22** (0.07)
Gender	0.22*** (0.03)	0.23*** (0.03)
Education	0.05 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)
Trust in journalism	0.10*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)
Media use	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.04)
Far left X Trust in journalism		0.09 (0.17)
Far right X Trust in journalism		0.28*** (0.08)
Fixed country effects	Yes	Yes
Clustered SEs	Country	Country
N	2,860	2,860

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; coefficients are shown as log-odds, with country-clustered SEs and country-fixed effects.

for those belonging to the non-mainstream left. The fact that the hypothesized effect of non-mainstream beliefs is only found on the left means that we reject H4.

In contrast to the inconsistent effect of ideology, we find that there is a robust and statistically significant effect of trust in journalism. However, this seems to go in the opposite direction than what we hypothesized. As panel A of Figure 6 of the Supplementary File shows, going from the highest to the lowest levels of trust in journalism is associated with an increase in the predicted probability of supporting fact-checking by independent organizations that is slightly higher than 10%. Importantly, however, this effect is not moderated in any substantial way by people's political ideology. This is clear from panel B, which shows that there is a strong overlap between centrists and non-centrists with identical levels of trust in journalism. The difference, as Table 2 suggests, is that strong trust in journalism seems to have a stronger moderating impact on far right-wingers than on the other groups.

We thus reject both H3 and H4. This suggests that beliefs about how fact-checking should best be organized are not shaped along a U-shaped dimension where antipathy towards fact-checking done by professional journalists is equally strong on both sides of the political spectrum. Instead, this antipathy is more pronounced, in contrast to what we hypothesized, on the far left. However, a higher confidence in the ability of journalism to fulfill its core functions seems to be an important moderator of these beliefs. This aligns with how trust

in journalism on its own similarly influences news consumers' views on who should actually be in charge of fact-checking the news.

What stands out, despite trust in journalism acting as a differentiator, is the very large support that professional fact-checking done by journalists nevertheless enjoys among news consumers. This is evident from the predicted probabilities shown in Figure 4. Even among those who are the most distrustful of journalism, there is still a 70% probability that they will believe fact-checking should mainly be done by journalists working within traditional news organizations. Thus, despite there being a plethora of different ways of organizing fact-checking, there is still robust support for a professional model that sees journalists working within traditional media outlets to conduct fact-checks as opposed to “out-sourcing” it to external organizations.

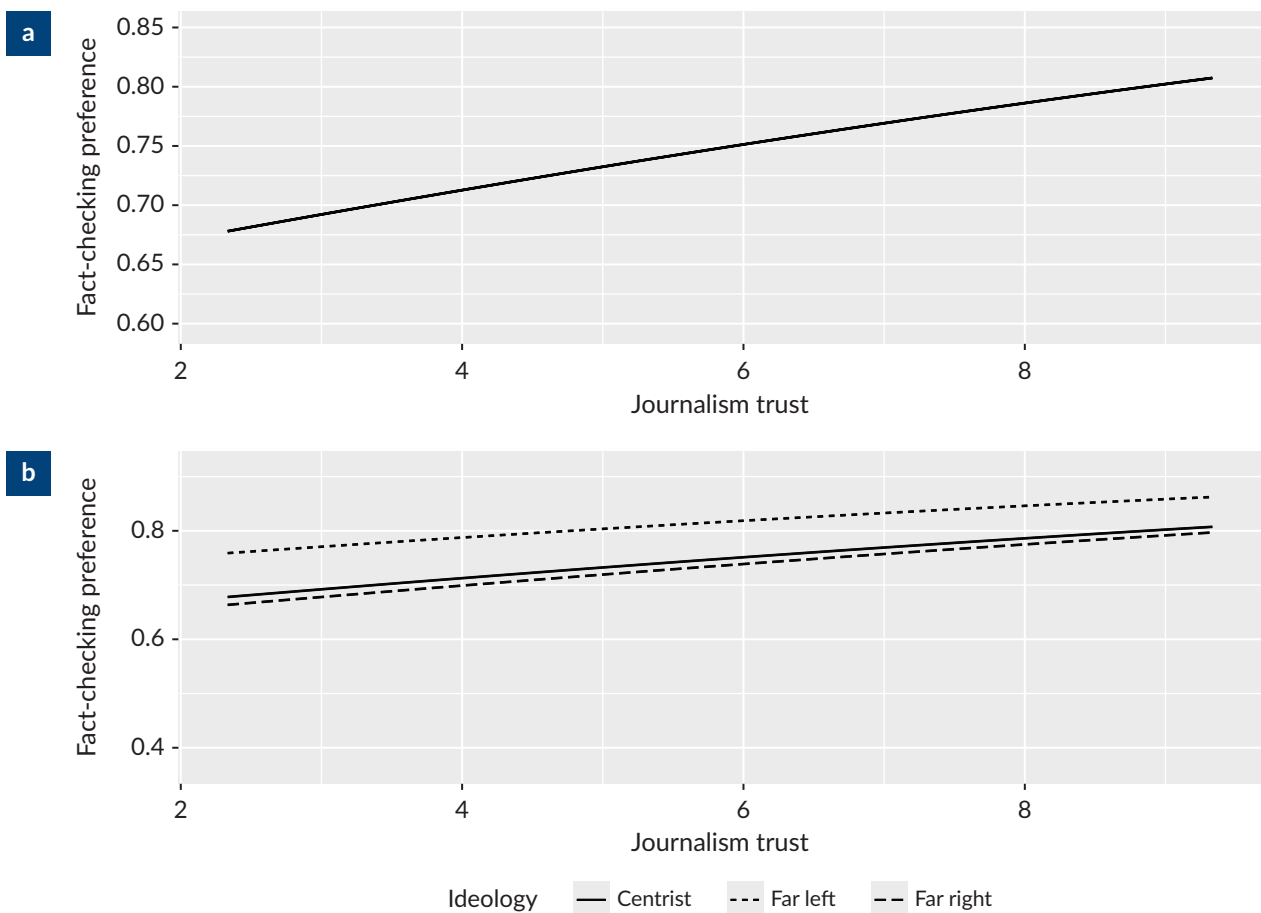


Figure 4. Base model (a) effect of journalism trust and its interaction with political ideology (b). Note: 95% prediction intervals shown.

5. Conclusion

This article explores the under-researched question of what kind of journalism the public wants and what kind of fact-checking infrastructure they are most likely to trust. In doing so, we contribute to the extensive literature on post-truth practices and principles (e.g., Bryanov et al. 2021; Iyengar & Massey, 2019; McIntyre, 2018), shedding light on what readers specifically seek from journalism. While our data provides only a

snapshot in time—meaning we cannot assess the changing importance of these criteria within the same countries over time—it nonetheless reveals important insights into the demands placed on journalism. These insights are particularly important as they come at a time when the media landscape has been transformed by technological and regulatory changes, as well as the growing challenge posed by the spread of fake news and elites questioning the legitimacy of traditional journalism. Our findings suggest that news consumers, despite technological advances such as artificial intelligence that are currently reshaping journalism, remain committed to very traditional ideas about what journalism should do. They want journalism to be unbiased, factual, and committed to contextualizing events. These expectations are largely consistent between readers across the political spectrum. It is only when it comes to the role of independent organizations in fact-checking that ideology plays a role, with those identifying as far right expressing significantly different views of this question than those belonging to the ideological center.

The question of how we operationalize “objectivity” also presents an important avenue of future research. Leveraging recent advances in the analysis of open-ended text questions (Roberts et al., 2014), future studies should examine the extent to which different conceptions of objectivity correlate with determinants of media trust such as age, education, and political ideology. The same applies to other core values of journalism, such as contextualization and accuracy.

Our results have two important implications: First, we show that readers are not ambivalent towards the question of how fact-checking should be organized to inspire the greatest confidence, and that this opinion varies by ideology. There is, in other words, no general deficit of media literacy that turns news readers into victims of falsehood. Instead, people make explicit decisions to trust or distrust particular news formats based on shared beliefs about what makes journalism trustworthy in a democracy. We thus show that upholding traditional journalistic values, such as impartiality and accurate news coverage, may be more beneficial in fostering high-quality journalism and trust in it, than relying on algorithms or other technologies to personalize news content for individual consumers.

We also note that individual preferences regarding how fact-checking services should be organized correlate with levels of media trust. Future research should therefore extend its focus from news content to the practices of news production and news reception. The question is not simply how a particular news content can be effectively identified as true or false, but how different forms of falsehood labeling by fact-checking organizations vary in terms of trust. To address this latter question, the study of falsehood in journalism needs to shift focus from news production to audience and reception analysis. Through our surveys of news consumers, we provide first insights into these variations in news readers’ preferences for the organization of fact-checking services. Our results also have implications for media practitioners who must consider how the infrastructure of fact-checking influences readers’ trust and how it can be effectively improved. Ultimately, understanding these dynamics will be essential for building a media ecosystem that fosters greater public trust and accountability.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the members of the RECLAIM consortium, as well as the editors and reviewers of *Media and Communication*, for their valuable comments, which have greatly improved the manuscript.

Funding

The authors gratefully acknowledge funding for this research through the Horizon Europe project RECLAIM: Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age. Publication of this article in open access was made possible due to the institutional membership agreement between the University of Oslo and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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