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Zaufanie do mediów
informacyjnych: naiwne
postrzeganie przyczyn jest
zdominowane przez...

**Trust in news media:
the naïve perception
of the causes is dominated
by the...***

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media litewskie w XXI wieku, kryzys zaufania,
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legacy media, news production models

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Summary

In the last twenty years trust in traditional news media has been declining all over the world, but there are few countries where the fall has been as dramatic as in Lithuania. While in the early 2000s the Lithuanian legacy media top-ranked any public trust survey, today their reputation as a reliable source of news could hardly be worse. Researchers from a number of EU countries have studied this process in general, yet none of their explanations seems to fit the Lithuanian realities. In Lithuania the trust deficit may be the result of changes, especially in the news production format, from a fairly orderly, 'objective' narratives to a fast-paced hodgepodge of scenes and multiple voices, i.e. a format which prioritizes immediacy and sensationalism (especially in 24-hour news channels). It is this shift that may have precipitated the collapse in trust in news media, and yet it has never been properly investigated. To get a better understanding of the problem, we examined the views of the general public collected in a recent survey and matched them with the views sampled from a series of structured interviews with the publishers, editors and journalists of local weekly newspapers. The latter were keenly aware of their reduced authority, the fragmentation of the field, and the precarious, chaotic conditions under which they had to work. They saw the root cause of their woes in the new strategic model adopted throughout the news media and inadequate government funding of the news industry.

1. Introduction

The trust in political and social institutions is elemental to the functioning of any democracy. Political trust (meaning here the trust in institutions, leaders, and norms of the political system) is a major asset for contemporary Western societies, and its decline is urgent¹. Institutional trust (as confidence in existing political institutions) in particular contributes both to democracy and to long-term political stability². This political stability might indeed be imperiled by various anti-systemic movements that are themselves triggered by sharp erosion in the political trust³. It is only natural that political distrust or systemic skepticism, political cynicism, are viewed as tendencies calling for effective counteractive measures.

The public trust is especially so crucial in the case of news media⁴. This particular social institution, as the “fourth estate”, is an inalienable part of the infrastructure that enables democracy in principle^{5,6}. Indeed, the particular media environment that is the case at any one particular point in time is capable of building or damaging the trust in other social institutions even in advanced democracies⁷. The lack of trust

¹ P.C. Bauer, M. Fatke, *Direct Democracy and Political Trust: Enhancing Trust, Initiating Distrust—or Both?*, „Swiss Political Science Review“ 2014, R. 20, nr 1, s. 62.

² J. Ishiyama, A. Pechenina, *Colored Revolutions, Interpersonal Trust, and Confidence in Institutions: The Consequences of Mass Uprisings**, „Social Science Quarterly“ 2016, R. 97, nr 3, s. 750.

³ P. Doerschler, P. Irving Jackson, *Do Muslims in Germany Really Fail to Integrate? Muslim Integration and Trust in Public Institutions*, „Journal of International Migration and Integration“ 2011, R. 13, nr 4.

⁴ A. Brosius, M. Hameleers, T.G.L.A. van der Meer, *Can we trust measures of trust? a comparison of results from open and closed questions*, „Quality & Quantity“ 2022, R. 56, nr 5, s. 2919.

⁵ S. Coleman, *Believing the news: From sinking trust to atrophied efficacy*, „European Journal of Communication“ 2012, R. 27, nr 1, s. 35.

⁶ E.V. Sapir, *Can we trust measures of trust? Measurement invariance in trust in EU news media*, „SN Social Sciences“ 2022, R. 2, nr 10, s. 226.

⁷ S. Khan, *Negotiating (dis)Trust to Advance Democracy through Media and Information Literacy*, „Postdigital Science and Education“ 2020, R. 2, nr 1, s. 170.

in the (mainstream) news industry can, indeed, weaken the audiences' trust in democracy as such⁸. Recently, the trust in news media has become the object of both philosophical speculation and empirical research.

[Problem; relevance] There is, indeed, a sense of a crisis in public trust in the news media. Many authors report from the historically low levels of such confidence: not mere "fluctuations", but an "extreme distrust in media"⁹. These urgent realities have encouraged two lines of scientific investigation. Recently, the indicators and indices themselves, the very measures of "trust", the measurement models as such, have been targeted in empirical studies¹⁰. Secondly, much of the recently published work started focusing on the parameters — the dimensions or at least the correlates — of this public trust in media, seeking to establish the causes behind (the low or high levels of) it. The causal studies could be classed into three pools according to different levels of granularity. A certain portion of them target

- the minimal subject-object (reader-message) interactions: indeed, certain characteristics of a piece of news, of a message, of its structure and its way of delivery play a role in its being valued as trustworthy or not. Examples here could be congruence, completeness, authenticity, timeliness etc¹¹.

Mid-level and macro-level studies rise above this plane of detail.

- Some of them look at specifics of particular media or modes (e. g., newspapers vs. the internet¹², in other words, here one assumes that the causes behind the distrust might have to do more with the medium than with anything else,
- or, in yet other works, the media as a social institution is being investigated in different contexts, measured against other social institutions, compared with

⁸ D.J. Carr, M. Barnidge, B.G. Lee, S.J. Tsang, *Cynics and Skeptics*, „Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly“ 2014, R. 91, nr 3, s. 465.

⁹ S. Khan, *Negotiating (dis)Trust to Advance Democracy through Media and Information Literacy...*, s. 170.

¹⁰ See for example: E.V. Sapir, *Can we trust measures of trust? Measurement invariance in trust in EU news media...*

¹¹ See: H. Cheng, J. Gonzalez-Ramirez, *Trust and the Media: Perceptions of Climate Change News Sources Among US College Students*, „Postdigital Science and Education“ 2021, R. 3, nr 3; S.H. Berg, J.K. O'Hara, M.T. Shortt, H. Thune, K.K. Brønnick, D.A. Lungu, J. Røislien, S. Wiig, *Health authorities' health risk communication with the public during pandemics: a rapid scoping review*, „BMC Public Health“ 2021, R. 21, nr 1; D. Kelly, *Evaluating the News: (Mis)Perceptions of Objectivity and Credibility*, „Political Behavior“ 2019, R. 41, nr 2; A. Appelman, S.S. Sundar, *Measuring Message Credibility*, „Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly“ 2016, R. 93, nr 1; M.J. Metzger, A.J. Flanagin, K. Eyal, D.R. Lemus, R.M. McCann, *Credibility for the 21st Century: Integrating Perspectives on Source, Message, and Media Credibility in the Contemporary Media Environment*, „Annals of the International Communication Association“ 2003, R. 27, nr 1.

¹² See: J. Gainous, J.P. Abbott, K.M. Wagner, *Traditional Versus Internet Media in a Restricted Information Environment: How Trust in the Medium Matters*, „Political Behavior“ 2019, R. 41, nr 2; C.P. Chandrasekhar, *The Business of News in the Age of the Internet*, „Social Scientist“ 2013, R. 41, 5/6.

different social entities, for example, in different cultural traditions (Western vs. Muslim countries¹³; assuming here that the trust in the media, understood rather holistically, is context-dependent.

The causal studies, most of them, have a rather clear pragmatic program or at least they can be construed as such. If the observed low levels of trust are due to, if they are caused by, certain identifiable characteristics, then certain decisions ranging from journalistic ethics through editorial policy and business models to, finally, public policy addressing some of the “problematic issues” might produce an increase in the trust.

However, in addition to the causes discovered in scientific research published in methodologically sound, reasoned studies, sometimes reporting even from controlled experiments pursuing reliably established correlates, parameters and dimensions, there are causes perceived and reflected, blame attributed, by various social groups without any methodical investigation into the causes informing those perceptions; in other words, there is the public perception of the “guilty.” Certain patterns of blame attribution feature in the naïve and latent understanding of the publishers and the audiences themselves: indeed, various subjects may comfortably claim that there are reasons for “me — us, them — not to trust the press,” more than that, those subjects may comfortably explain, what those reasons are. These patterns of blame attribution themselves have recently become a focus of attention in quite many research projects in other fields (responsibility for the failure of public service, responsibility for the pandemic¹⁴). The public perception of the causes conditioning the historically low public trust in news media, however, has never yet been investigated. However, this particular point of view is of great value when making suggestions as to the future public policy. It should address not only the objectively given imbalances and disparities (the real causes), but also be communicatively on target (addressing the perceived causes, the attributed blame). The knowledge of these perceptions is of value when constructing any educational or science popularization programs when seeking an educated, “enlightened society.”

[Goal and steps] Lithuania is here an interesting case. The fall in the trust in traditional news media, as observed over the last 20 years has been exceptionally dramatic in Lithuania. Having been the most trusted social institution in both relative and absolute terms in the early 2000s (see below), today the media in Lithuania is perceived to be among the most unreliable public structures. In this paper we focus

¹³ See e.g.: R. Wasif, *Does the Media's Anti-Western Bias Affect its Portrayal of NGOs in the Muslim World? Assessing Newspapers in Pakistan*, „VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations“ 2020, R. 31, nr 6.

¹⁴ See: M. Sievert, D. Vogel, T. Reinders, W. Ahmed, *The Power of Conformity in Citizens' Blame: Evidence from a Survey Experiment*, „Public Performance & Management Review“ 2020, R. 43, nr 1; P. Chaisty, C.J. Gerry, S. Whitefield, *The buck stops elsewhere: authoritarian resilience and the politics of responsibility for COVID-19 in Russia*, „Post-Soviet Affairs“ 2022, R. 38, nr 5.

on the perception of the causes of this decline, especially so on the blame attribution, as is the case in two domains: (1) the media staff (the journalists, editors, owners of regional weekly newspapers published in Lithuania) and (2) the general public, the general audiences. For the collection of our data we rely on a representative public opinion poll. Additionally, we report from a questionnaire-based study and a series of structured interviews with selected typical representatives of the industry. We trace the characteristics of blame attribution in the two pools, and finally compare the two patterns of thinking, seeing how this might be of use in the construction of — and especially so the communication of — public policy.

[Object and scope] We wish to see if the perception of the causes as is the case for the general public is different from the perception as is the case for the publishers, editors and journalists themselves. In the sense that the results of this study might be of value to Lithuanian policy makers, this is an applied study. As this is a study focusing on the Lithuanian realities, we remain confined to the specific Lithuanian context.

[Structure of the paper] The paper as follows is structured this way: first, we report from our initial survey of the field, seeing if there are patterns of blame attribution detectable in the Lithuanian public discourse. Then, in the second chapter, we outline our field work: the construction of the public opinion poll, and the questionnaire/interviews with the representatives of the profession. The third and the fourth chapters report from the results. The fifth chapter contextualizes them and concludes the argument.

2. Perceptions of the trust in news media

[Literature] The audiences' trust in the Lithuanian news media has been exhibitive of great variation over the past 30 years. Whereas in the beginning of the period, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, once the Soviet public information model and state control of the media had been discontinued, the media experienced a massive peak in the public trust (years 1997–2000). However, over the following years the trust steadily declined: those trusting the media and those distrustful of it becoming roughly equal in number in the years 2020–2021.

At one point, in 2000–2001, the Lithuanian media was the most trusted public institution in the country (s. n. 2000a; s. n. 2000b; s. n. 2001), topping the levels of confidence that the population usually reserves for the first responders, the Lithuanian military and health services system.

A short survey of the Lithuanian public discourse suggests that the dramatic fall in the case of news media is much discussed, it is indeed often highlighted in general conversation. For the most part, it is perceived to be a problem, a universally undesi-

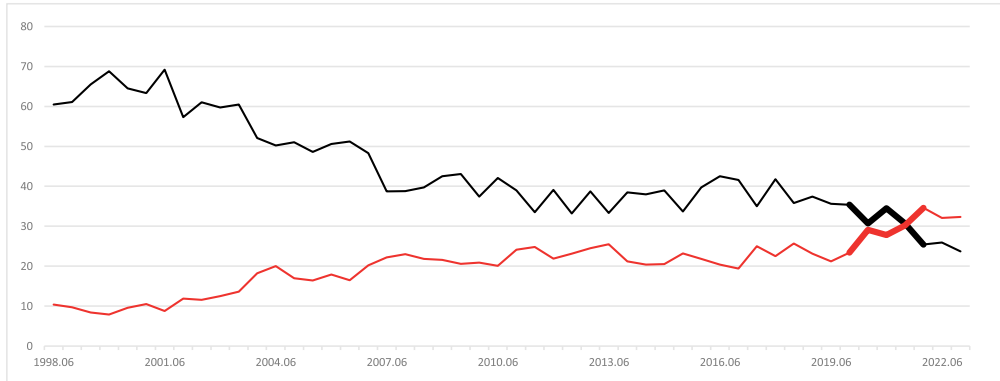


Fig. 1. Public trust in news media in Lithuania; 1998–2022. The proportion of the audiences trusting the news media — in black; distrusting — in red. The segments that are shown in detail below — in bold. © “Lietuvos rytas,” “Vilmorus,” 1998–2022. Information amassed by the authors.

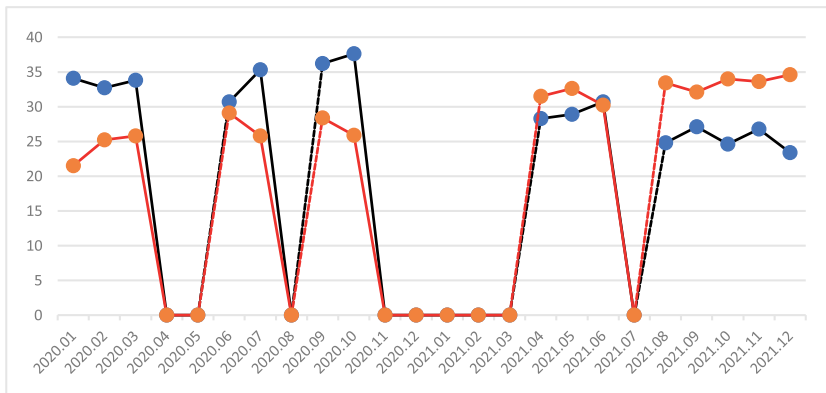


Fig. 2. Public trust in news media in Lithuania; detail; years 2020–2021. The proportion of the audiences trusting the news media — in black; distrusting — in red.

© “Lietuvos rytas,” “Vilmorus,” 2020–2021. Information amassed by the authors.

erable phenomenon. Indeed, there are many opinion pieces, op-eds, comments, news articles, notes by politicians and various public figures, suggestions made during public discussions and press briefings, all of which comment on the “odious” fall. This is however not an invariable trend: for example, Vladas Gaidys, head of a polling organization, notes that remarkable and “scandalous” was the situation in the years 2000–2001, when the media was the most trusted institution. Such trust diverges from the usual European pattern dramatically. The current situation, in this respect, is the norm¹⁵.

¹⁵ M. Andrukaitytė, *Vladas Gaidys paaiškino, kodėl smuko pasitikėjimas žiniasklaida*, „Delfi žinios – Pagrindinis naujienų portalas Lietuvoje“ z 20.06.2020, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/vladas-gaidys-paaiskino-kodel-smuko-pasitikejimas-ziniasklaida-84583027> [access online: 26.02.2024].

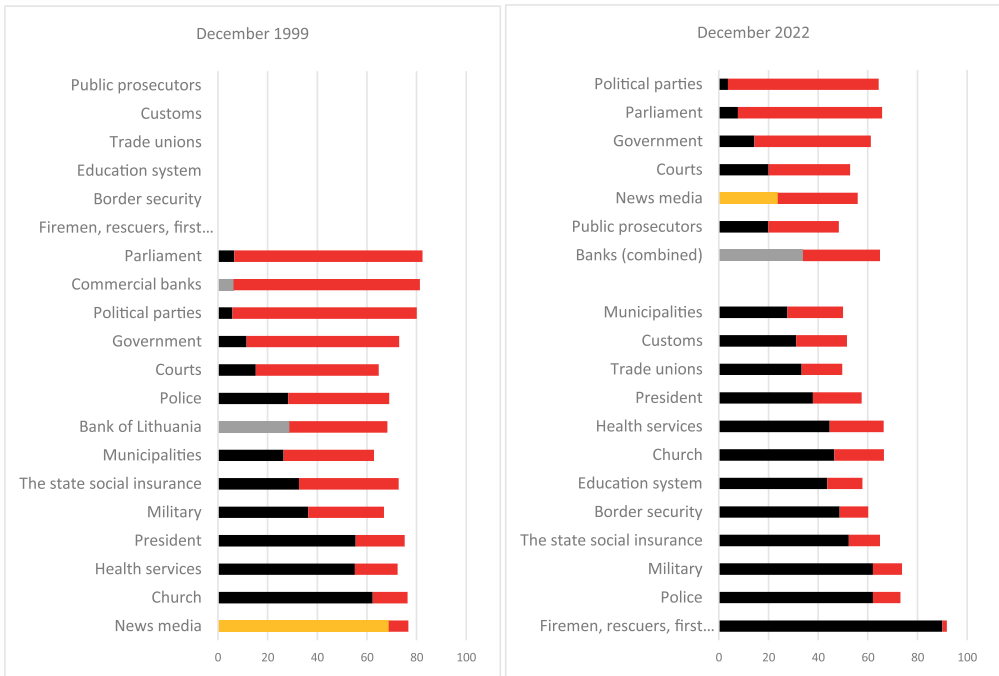


Fig. 3. Public trust in various social institutions in Lithuania; 1999, 2022 (the differences in the number of institutions where there is data available is due to a change in the research methodology between the two years). The proportion of the audiences trusting the particular institution — in black/yellow; distrusting — in red. Notice that the proportion of those who neither trust the institutions nor distrust them — the general apathy — has also grown across the board. Listed by the positive difference, ‘net trust’ (‘trust’ — ‘distrust’ = ‘net trust’).

© “Lietuvos rytas,” “Vilmorus,” 1998–2022.

The data also provide us with some preliminary guidelines as to what the public perception of the “guilty” and the accompanying patterns of blame attribution might involve.

To begin with, there clearly is no one universally agreed-on tendency, institution or set of event in terms of which the fall in trust is conveniently explained. Usually comments or whole articles focus on some one particular argument, suggesting that it might only be the most crucial. The instances where the mistrust is being explained informally abound. For example, Dainius Radzevičius (the chairman of the Union of Lithuanian Journalists; 2017¹⁶) speculates that a significant part of the blame must fall on the intensifying collaboration between media organizations and various businesses, news becoming but a form of hidden advertisement, indeed, news having

¹⁶ D. Radzevičius, *Žmonės vis labiau nepasitiki žiniasklaida. Taip ir turi būti*, http://www.lzs.lt/lt/naujienos/lzs_pirmininkas/archive/p17/zmones_vis_labiau_nepasitiki_ziniasklaida_taip_ir_turi_buti.html [access online: 26.02.2024].

already become a “marketing subproduct” no different from sheer propaganda. In contrast, politicians focus more on the domination of the negative contents (and so blame the industry practices): the relentless focus on “corruption, abuse of power and other problems” in the news encourages public “disappointment in political institutions, political apathy and distrust in media and the information that the media provide,” eventually damaging the trust in media itself (s. n. 2017). Elsewhere Radzevicius has attributed the low trust in the media to the deep divisions in society¹⁷. Some of these comments were made in the context of new bills, admittedly, remedying the situation being introduced in the Parliament.

Interestingly, the conclusions argued for by researchers (the scientifically discovered causes as opposed to naively perceived “causes”) find an outlet in such informal information exchange, too, and to a great extent. For example, there are cases of authors reflecting on the change in medium (mainly, the rise of internet) and the associated changes in information behavior as the main culprit. “Due to the internet there are now many low-quality, unprofessional, unethical news outlets, and so the public trust in media has fallen”^{18,19} refers to the conclusions presented by Reuters Institute, namely that the low trust in media correlates with deep divisions in the society, even though the quality of the information might be perfectly adequate. The divisions lead to the clutter of many conflicting opinions found within the same pages of a publication. Indeed, much attention is being paid to the trend of businesses, political organizations, even parties becoming “their own news channels”: information here is presented as objective, but the public does perceive it as being actually tendentious, as something that is meant to mobilize. Even though this behavior is more typical of social media, the distancing and distrust that it causes infects the whole field²⁰. Similar arguments, made by media researchers, are quoted when explaining the distrust: Deimantas Jastramskis, for example, is referred to as highlighting the fact that the “media” has become a nebulous, ill-defined field, with various “channels” — that are not really producing any journalism whatsoever — being put on a par with well-established media organizations; this has done

¹⁷ A. Stankevičius, *Lietuvoje pasitikėjimas žiniasklaida – žemiausias per 23 metus, ekspertai mato kelias priežastis*, <https://kaunas.kasvyksta.lt/2021/08/14/lietuvoje/lietuvoje-pasitikejimas-ziniasklaida-zemiausias-per-23-metus-ekspertai-mato-kelias-priezastis/> [access online: 26.02.2024].

¹⁸ M. Tovarovas, *Skaidrumas yra būdas atgauti pasitikėjimą – Universiteto žurnalistas*, <http://www.universitetozurnalistas.kf.vu.lt/2012/05/skaidrumas-yra-budas-atgauti-pasitikejima/> [access online: 26.02.2024].

¹⁹ D. Puslys, *Nuo menkstančio pasitikėjimo iki skaitytojų nenoro mokėti – didžiausi iššūkiai žiniasklaidai | Vilniaus politikos analizės institutas*, <https://vilniusinstitute.lt/nuo-menkstancio-pasitikejimo-iki-skaitytoju-nenoro-moketi-didziausi-issukiai-ziniasklaidai/> [access online: 26.02.2024].

²⁰ M. Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė, *Visuomeninė žiniasklaida ir demokratija neramiais laikais – Lietuvos pamok z 2022*, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/nuomones/3/1575984/monika-garbaciauskaitė-budriene-visuomenine-ziniasklaida-ir-demokratija-neramiais-laikais-lietuvos-pamokos> [access online: 26.02.2024].

damage to the industry overall²¹. Especially so in the context of the Ukraine war, much attention is being devoted to the flood of “deliberate misinformation” and the damage it does (s. n. 2022; s. n. 2021). Some popular publications refer to historiographical conclusions. The argument is made that there was no “objective” journalism in the Soviet Union, and that it is difficult to dispose of the suspicions even 30 years after the regaining of the Lithuanian independence. What one hears his neighbor tell him is perceived to be more trustworthy than the television news²² though this directly contradicts the aforementioned fact that the Lithuanian news media experienced unprecedented levels of trust in the early 2000s).

What is typical of such “science popularization” cases is that they tend to report and quote from the mid-level and macro-level work as mentioned above, not the more granular studies. Much of the research referred to is foreign in origin.

Overall, four conclusions might be suggested at this point:

- the public discourse data clearly indicates that the distrust in the news media is perceived as an identifiable phenomenon, not just ill-boding, but downright harmful at the current stage, a “problem”,
- the reasons behind the mistrust are of great interest to the general public, indeed, this is the domain where even the scientific, research work is being actively popularly referred to in the news;
- there is no consensus as to what those reasons might actually be — but as might be expected, a simple, single-reason explanation is much desired;
- the public trust in the news media is mentioned in the context of the proposition or/and enactment of new laws or regulations.

3. Methods

In order to clarify the perception of the causes behind the distrust as is the case for the general public and the news media field itself, we report (1) from a public opinion poll and (2) from the data that we collected via questionnaires and structured interviews with industry representatives.

(1) A representative public opinion poll was conducted in Lithuania by one of the major opinion polling companies, “Vilmorus.” The polling (in-person and telephone interviews) took place on February 3–8, 2022, the specific media-related questions

²¹ A. Stankevičius, *Lietuvoje pasitikėjimas žiniasklaida – žemiausias per 23 metus, ekspertai mato kelias priežastis...*

²² G. Jurkutė, *A. Streikus apie gandų visuomenę: tokia visuomenė nepasitiki žiniasklaida, labiau tiki nuogirdomis iš savo aplinkos* z 2021, <https://www.bernardinai.lt/a-streikus-apie-gandu-visuomene-tokia-visuomene-nepasitiki-ziniasklaida-labiau-tiki-nuogirdomis-is-savo-aplinkos/> [access online: 26.02.2024].

appended to the general monthly public opinion survey. The sample size (number of respondents) was 1005, proportionally reflecting the general population in terms of age (18 years of age and older; several different cohorts), gender and the place of residence (urban vs. rural population).

There were several questions asked, two of them pertaining to the public trust in the media:

- (Q2) “Do you trust the Lithuanian media?” (“I TRUST IT COMPLETELY”/“I TRUST IT”/“NEITHER YES, NOR NO”/“I DO NOT TRUST IT”/“I DO NOT TRUST IT AT ALL”)
- (Q3) “Why do not you trust the media?” (AN OPEN QUESTION)

An alternative would have been to formulate the question (Q3) in a more objective way, say “What are the causes behind the high distrust in the media?” or “why do not people trust the media in Lithuania?.” A more personalized question would however allow for a more honest answer. It would also elicit a reply that is free from any academic interference where a respondent might choose to repeat one of the causes she might have heard on the news etc. The particular formulation of the question asks for the respondent’s own evaluation.

(2) The representatives of the field (editors (or their deputies) of various Lithuanian newspapers) were contacted twice. (1) In March & April 2021 they were asked to fill in a questionnaire (76 editorial boards and/or publishers were reached out to; 71 questions in all were given, 90 per cent of those were closed questions; the response rate was 61,8 per cent; no self-contradictory answer sets received). Then in June & July 2021 twelve of the editorial boards were contacted again for a structured interview (the 12 selected on the basis of even geographical representation, variation in number of employees, turnover, publishing periodicity and size of the publication (number of pages per issue)). The 10 main (guiding) questions were provided to the interviewees in advance (reasoned and well-argued opinions were hoped for rather than spontaneous improvisation). The informants knew that any answers they provide will be anonymized before being made public in a research publication or quoted elsewhere.

The questions — the questionnaire and the structured interview questions alike — were varied, both the financial situation and the Covid-19 impact were probed, as well as staffing, readership, fake-news and similar current issues. (The various questions were mixed together so as to avoid the respondents answering tendentiously, remembering their own answers to previous questions and then altering their answers to the present ones accordingly.)

The questionnaire included three question on “standards, professionalism and ethics” issues, making the assumption that the industry representatives might eventually choose to connect these normative stances (or a relaxed attitude towards them) to the high distrust in the Lithuanian media:

- (Q25) “Does the recognition of having “committed serious professional misconduct” carry much weight?” (A CLOSED QUESTION)

- (Q20): “Information/content supplied by outside sources: are you organizing and engaging in efforts to ensure the accuracy of it?” (A CLOSED QUESTION)
- (Q18): “Do you sense that your (potential) readers actively consume and distribute fake-news?” (A CLOSED QUESTION)

The interviews included an openly worded question as to the causes behind the high mistrust in the Lithuanian media.

4. Results (opinion poll)

As Q2 included 5 options, not a “yes” or “no” distinction, the answers provide a more nuanced picture.

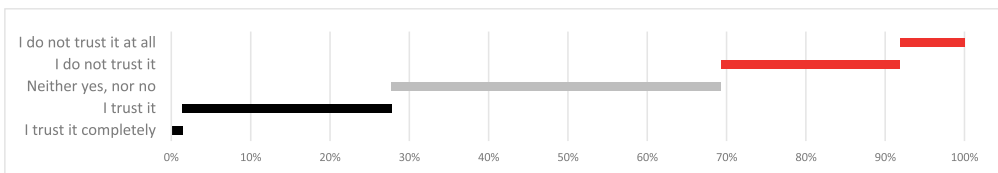


Fig. 4. Lithuanian audiences (Q2): “Do you trust the Lithuanian media?”; n = 1005.

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These results match the previously established pattern. Overall, the net distrust in the Lithuanian media is, indeed, the case (30,6% of those who do not trust it or do not trust it at all against 27,8% who trust it or trust it completely). Interestingly, the intensity of the negative sentiment is also much higher: 26,6% of those who do not trust the Lithuanian media “do not trust it at all”, whereas only 5,0% among those who trust it “trust it completely”.

It is worth investigating whether the trend is reversed (whether there is a net trust) in terms of any particular demographic characteristic. Indeed, a net trust is sometimes observed (as we are not testing any particular hypothesis, merely pursuing trends, we will forego any statistical significance testing):

- in terms of the place of residence, among those living in medium-sized towns (regional towns, not the capital or “regional capitals”, but not in rural areas either) a net trust is the case (34,3% trusting the media or trusting it completely against 26,5% not trusting it or not trusting it at all);
- in terms of socioeconomic circumstances and professions, only among the retirees and pensioners a net trust is the case (32,4% trusting the media or trusting it completely against 26,1% not trusting it or not trusting it at all); if the sample is divided into cohorts according to the age of the respondents, the same trend holds for those over 70 years of age as opposed to all the other age groups;

- in terms of educational attainment, a net trust is the case among high school dropouts (those who failed to earn a secondary education degree; 50,7% trusting the media or trusting it completely against 19,4% not trusting it or not trusting it at all); in all other groups (high school diploma holders, those having a professional qualification, college or university degree holders) a net mistrust is the case.
- The entirety of answers to the open-ended question as to the reason for the mistrust (disregarding those who did not answer or claimed not to know; 13,6%) can be divided into 5 strands of reasoning:
 - (1) reproaching the media for the dominance of negative stories (“a lot of negative contents” etc.);
 - (2) reproaching the media for low quality (“they copy from each other”, “it’s all but gossip”, “it’s nonsense”, “they’re unprofessional” etc.);
 - (3) a negative evaluation of, an unfavorable reflection on the truthfulness of the content (“the media is not objective”, “the media is lying”, “they are not telling the truth”, “they pervert the information”, “they pervert the facts”, “they report one-sidedly”, “their reporting is tendentious” etc.).
 - (4) an assumption of hidden relations with politicians, an assumption of journalists catering for the needs of political groups (“they only reflect the views of the government”, “they get the money from the government, they write what the government wants”, “it’s all politicized”, “they give in to the pressure of political parties”, “they are government’s lackeys” etc.);
 - (5) an assumption of hidden relations with interest groups, an assumption of journalists being paid for what they say, an assumption of corruption (“they are corrupt”, “they are bought”, “everything is paid for”, “all their articles are advertorials”, “it is all cash for comment”, “they only say what they are paid to say” etc.).

The criterion for this division is the appearance of certain keywords in the quotes (for example, “lying”, “lie” in the 3rd case and so on).

These 5 lines of reasoning are distributed rather disproportionally.

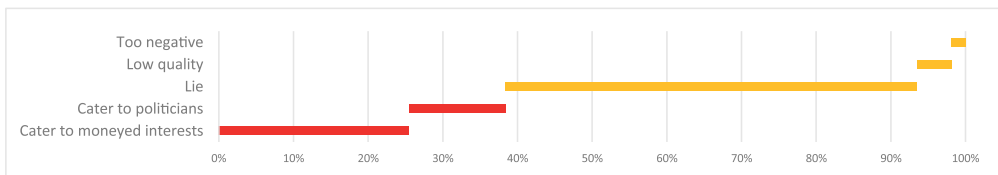


Fig. 5. Lithuanian audiences (Q3): “Why do not you trust the media?”; n = 263.

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It was our decision to separate the different lines of reasoning into two main blocks: (1) those arguments, assumptions and accusations where there are references being made to the social context of the journalistic productions (other interested agents in the field, their alleged payments, their needs being addressed) and (2) those

arguments, assumptions and accusations where the focus is on the textual qualities of the journalistic output (“perverting of facts” is categorically wrong irrespective of the social context or groups that the perverting is being done “in the name of”).

Interestingly, the accusation of catering to the needs of the political or economic/financial establishment can go two ways: either the respondent finds the newspaper, radio and television contents to be too much pro-government/establishment (“it’s all usurped by the conservatives” etc.), or else the contents may be found to be biased in favor of some other “political color”, alternative Weltanschauung-tendencies (“various parties’ political propaganda” etc.). These evaluations may fluctuate, at least somewhat, according to the political persuasions of the respondent. The argument could be made, that someone siding with one particular political tendency might perceive the dominance of likewise tendentious views in the media not as a drawback, or at least may not pay much attention to it. — The other accusations — those of negativity, low quality or lying — are in this respect more stable. Both types of reasons provided pertain to the journalistic professionalism — but the relationships that might develop between media organizations and political classes or economic/financial powers, even in media research, is sometimes perceived to be an objectively given unavoidable evil, a mere characteristic of some particular media system. For example, Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini choose “political parallelism” as a criterion when classifying various media systems into types. Vldas Gaidys also notes that the trust measures, in this respect, go hand in hand: if the audiences, overall, do not trust the government, and if they see that the media merely reflect the government’s position, the trust in both is low, always in parallel²³. — An accusation of “lying”, of “disinformation”, or of printing of stories where the “sources have not been checked” goes deeper than that: it pertains to the standards, professionalism and ethics issues.

As we see, this latter kind of reasoning dominates: overall, the accusations of lying, of being low quality and of producing too much of contents that focuses on the negative phenomena are somewhat more common. The accusation of “lying”, “perverting the truth”, “perverting the facts” is the most common type of all, “lying” being among the most common words in the corpus.

5. Results (industry data)

The information from the representatives of the news media being collected both via a questionnaire and during structured interviews, two different strategies were employed. The questionnaire included the three aforementioned preparatory closed

²³ A. Stankevičius, *Lietuvoje pasitikėjimas žiniasklaida – žemiausias per 23 metus, ekspertai mato kelias priežastis...*

questions, while the interview, in terms of this paper, involved but one open-ended question, namely, “why is the level of distrust in the news media so high in Lithuania.”

As the second chapter has already indicated, much of the public discourse when discussing the mistrust in the news media focuses on the ethical, professionalism issues. Accordingly, the three preparatory questions targeted the specifics.

Question no. 25 probed whether the field itself finds sensible the Lithuanian mechanism currently in use to address the unprofessionalism in journalism. Those claiming their reputation has been damaged by an unfair treatment in the media or that their right to protection of privacy has been violated — or those wanting to pursue damages, — may place a complaint with either of the authorized institutes. (1) The Office of the Inspector of Journalist Ethics (a state budgetary body) evaluates any misconduct vis-à-vis the established legal framework. The Commission of Ethics in the Provision of Information to the Public (making decisions on behalf of the Association of Ethics in the Provision of Information to the Public) evaluates any misconduct vis-à-vis their Code of Ethics. Complainants may eventually also choose to petition a court. In any case, a producer of public information might be deemed (and be legally proclaimed) to “have committed serious professional misconduct”, which means that thenceforth they may not be granted state funding or support. The measure — not reaching the level of actual damages to the complainant — is thus quite straightforward: a financial sanction.

The industry representatives were asked whether the recognition of having “committed serious professional misconduct” carries much weight. A third of the respondents agree with the intent of the lawgiver: all the recognition does is deny the publisher access to state funds. Almost twice as many go further: the recognition does carry a certain additional conceptual, moral, historical weight, it is capable of branding a publisher, making him a social pariah. However, as many as a fifth of the respondents suggested that the recognition does not usually mean anything of the sort, it never goes beyond its intended financial consequences, because “everybody knows that it’s all relative and it’s but interests”, indicating a relatively high level of cynicism. In terms of the ultimate research question of this paper — indicating a certain acceptance that the mistrust towards the entire news industry in the country is justified, sharing in the mistrust, at least indicating a lack of confidence in the industry’s (self-)regulation bodies.

Question no. 20 addressed the journalism practices at the Lithuanian editorial boards. The representatives were asked whether they think their board does all that could be expected of them in terms of “checking their sources”, do they proactively engage in identifying and debunking fake-news. There was no (statistically significant) difference between the large (6 or more full-time or part-time employees) and the small (5 or less) news boards.

Question no. 18 focused on the way the news boards perceive their (actual and potential) audiences. The representatives were asked whether they sense that their

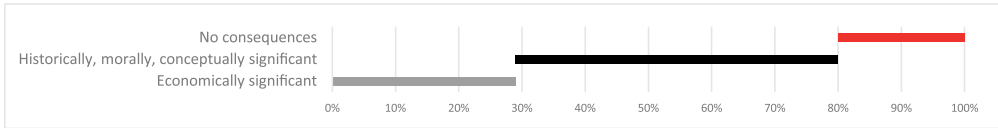


Fig. 6. Industry representatives (Q25): “Does the recognition of having “committed serious professional misconduct” carry much weight?”; n = 47.

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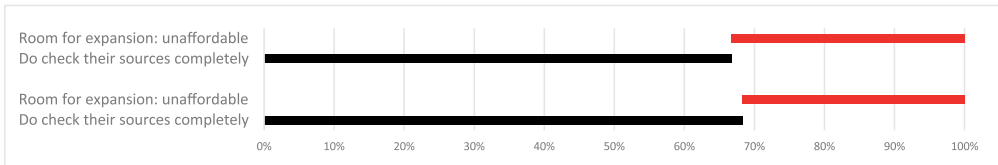


Fig. 7. Industry representatives (Q20): “Information/content supplied by outside sources: are you organizing and engaging in efforts to ensure the accuracy of it?”. Large news boards, above, n = 6; small news boards, below, n = 41.

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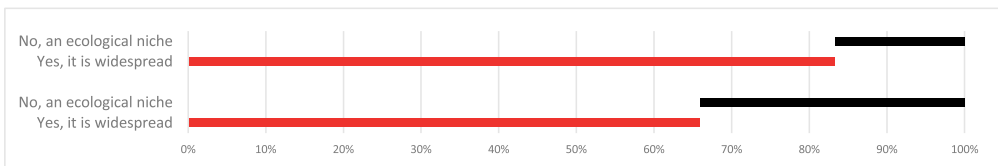


Fig. 8. Industry representatives (Q18): “Do you sense that your (potential) readers actively consume and distribute fake-news?”. Large news boards, above, n = 6; small news boards, below, n = 41. The difference is statistically insignificant.

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audiences actively consume and distribute fake-news. Though the difference was not significant statistically, proportionally more large publishers stated that this is the case; small editorial boards were wary not to exaggerate the problem.

Overall, the last two questions, in terms of the research program of this paper, suggested, that a part of the answer as to who is to blame for the fall in the trust in news media may lie in somewhat different self-perception of the various media organizations. The small editorial boards, the publishers operating small-town newspapers may deem themselves to be positioned — and affected by various social trends — differently when compared to the large publishers. Indeed, that was the difference that came to prominence in the structured interviews.

The interview data. The most common answer to the open-ended question as to why the level of distrust in the news media is so high in Lithuania, is well represented by this direct quote: “[...] we do understand that this is an objective problem, but it is not something that our small editorial board is directly affected by. We are a small

local newspaper. We know our readers. Our readers know us. This whole issue of the low trust in the news media is not really a problem that we somehow sense in our operations. [...]” Indeed, most of the interviewees emphasized the intimacy, the honest connection they have with their audiences, the many direct interactions with their readership which is a part of their process of gathering the news, and so outsourced the problem entirely — relegating it to the domain of the anonymous “internet news platforms” and “big press”, “big media”.

The issue was touched upon, too, when discussing other questions, say, the fierce competition between the newspapers if there are several in the same district. There are cases where one of the papers has alleged close ties to the political elites in the region, is even allegedly run by the politicians or their relations. Even in the case of a public conflict between several news boards within the same district, conflicting accounts being presented in the papers, even court cases pending, the editors did not see any of it as producing issues with the trust: “[...] our readers know who is right, and we really do not have any trust issues with our readers [...]”.

Interestingly, the representatives of the larger editorial boards contacted maintained the same argument: the low trust in the media is a problem, but it is not “our problem”.

6. Conclusions

Three main findings are prominent here: when asked to reflect on the reasons behind the high level of distrust the Lithuanian society has towards the Lithuanian media

- (1) the audiences tend to focus on the professionalism in the field of journalism, attributing their personal lack of confidence to the journalists’ and editors’ failing to act ethically and transparently;
- (2) a certain proportion of the industry representatives themselves do indeed exhibit something of a cynical attitude towards the agenda of standards, professionalism and ethics; but this is not the dominating outlook;
- (3) finally, however, as far as the implementing of any concrete measures that might improve the situation is concerned, all of the industry representatives feel that it is not their obligation to address the issue in any way; indeed, if there are news outlets that the audiences do not trust, their particular newspaper is not one of those; that is the problem of some anonymous “internet news platforms” or “big press”, not the editors and publishers interviewed.

The problems with professionalism do seem to be a rather contextual explanation: many authors investigating the historical dynamics of the Lithuanian media landscape have highlighted the fact that within the general post-Soviet trajectory the advance

of commercialism has been a strong and noticeable trend^{24,25}. This would match the timeline as established in chapter 2 — that the audiences are certainly aware of. Commercialism was a trend in the journalism practice that took time to develop; naturally, it is only along with the maturing of the post-Soviet media organizations and practices that the media outlets started losing in confidence that the public affords them. As we have seen, the focus on professionalism is also something of a trend within the Lithuanian public discourse whenever the historically low trust in media is discussed²⁶.

But this naively constructed narrative stands in a sharp contrast to the attitudes that the media organizations themselves are exhibitivie of. Garbaciauskaite-Budrienė²⁷, head of the Lithuanian national public broadcasting corporation, assigns the professionalism problems to the “other” biased agents, “amateurs,” in the field doing their own journalistic work for themselves, not to the established media channels. Likewise, our results indicate that the media establishment is willing to accept no part of the blame.

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²⁵ A. Balčytienė, *Culture as a Guide in Theoretical Explorations of Baltic Media*, [in:] *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*, red. D. C. Hallin, P. Mancini, Cambridge University Press 2012, s. 71.

²⁶ See for example: M. Tovarovas, *Skaidrumas yra būdas atgauti pasitikėjimą – Universiteto žurnalistas...*; Zukiene as quoted in: S. Kuprionytė, *Nekintančios žurnalistikos vertybės*, http://lzs.lt/lt/naujienos/ziniasklaida_lietuvoje/archyvas/silvija_kuprionytenekintancios_zurnalistikos_vertybes.html [access online: 26.02.2024].

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