

A Survey of Public Perception, Misinformation and Trust Across Modern Media Platforms

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Abstract

In the digital information age, the public's relationship with media has undergone a fundamental shift. With traditional news outlets now competing against a vast ecosystem of social media platforms, blogs, podcasts, and user-generated content, understanding how people perceive, evaluate, and trust the information they encounter is increasingly urgent. This paper surveys the evolving dynamics between public perception, misinformation, and media trust across contemporary media platforms. It explores how misinformation ranging from accidental falsehoods to deliberately fabricated content affects public understanding and influences behavior, particularly in highly polarized or crisis-driven environments. The paper begins with a literature review that traces how academic and institutional research has addressed misinformation, its mechanisms of spread, and its societal consequences. Key studies on media trust are examined, focusing on the erosion of confidence in both traditional and digital platforms. Section three provides a platform-level analysis, highlighting the differing roles of legacy media, social networks, and emerging video-based applications in shaping perceptions and facilitating trust or distrust. Specific emphasis is placed on algorithmic recommendation systems, echo chambers, and the viral nature of emotionally charged content. The fourth section examines the psychological, cultural, and social factors influencing belief formation, skepticism, and susceptibility to misinformation. It discusses the impact of cognitive biases, political identity, and digital literacy on media evaluation. Using selected case studies and survey data, the paper illustrates how misinformation campaigns can affect public sentiment on issues like health, elections, and climate change. The paper concludes by outlining strategies for fostering a more informed and discerning public. These include platform accountability, improved media literacy education, and stronger policies to curb misinformation. Ultimately, the study underscores the urgent need for interdisciplinary solutions to restore public trust and strengthen the integrity of the modern media landscape.

Keywords: Credibility, Digital News, Fake News, Information Ecosystems, Media Literacy, Media Trust, Misinformation, Platform Society, Public Perception, Social Media.

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving digital world, the way people consume and evaluate information has changed dramatically. Traditional forms of media like newspapers and television have been supplemented and in some cases, overtaken by digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter (X), and TikTok. While these platforms offer easy access to a wide range of information, they also contribute to the spread of misinformation and challenge public trust in media. As the boundaries between facts, opinions, and falsehoods blur, understanding how individuals perceive the media they use becomes a critical area of inquiry.

Public perception of media content is shaped by a mix of individual beliefs, media exposure, social influence, and platform design. Trust in media is not only about believing what is reported but also about believing in the motives, transparency, and accountability of information sources. The rise of misinformation, defined as false or misleading information shared regardless of intent has become a pressing concern, especially in times of crisis like elections, pandemics, or international conflicts. Misleading information can spread quickly on digital platforms, influencing public opinion, shaping voting behavior, and even inciting violence.

Research shows that misinformation spreads more rapidly than verified information on social media, due in part to emotional appeal, algorithmic amplification, and confirmation bias (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). At the same time, growing political polarization and institutional distrust have eroded confidence in both mainstream media and newer platforms. Some audiences turn to alternative news sources out of scepticism, while others disengage from news altogether, leading to what scholars call "news fatigue". In this environment, perceptions of media reliability, bias, and credibility are more fragmented than ever before.

This paper aims to explore how public perception, misinformation, and trust interact across various media platforms. Section 2 reviews the existing literature on misinformation and media credibility. Section 3 analyses the role of modern platforms in shaping trust, with sub-sections focusing on social media, traditional news, and emerging platforms. Section 4 discusses the social and psychological factors influencing belief formation and distrust. Finally, Section 5 offers conclusions and future directions for improving media trust and reducing the impact of misinformation.

2. Literature Review on Misinformation, Media Trust and Public Belief

This section reviews scholarly and institutional research on three interconnected domains: the nature and spread of misinformation, the erosion of media trust, and public belief systems in the digital age. The aim is to provide a foundational understanding of how these issues intersect and influence individual and collective responses to media.

2.1. Understanding Misinformation in the Digital Era

Misinformation, defined as false or misleading content shared without malicious intent, has become a widespread concern due to the scale and speed of its distribution on digital platforms (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Studies reveal that misinformation spreads more rapidly than verified news, particularly when it appeals to emotions, confirms existing biases, or presents sensational narratives (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). Social media platforms, by design, amplify such content through algorithmic recommendation systems that prioritize engagement over accuracy. Recent scholarship also distinguishes between misinformation, disinformation (false information spread deliberately), and misinformation (truth used in a misleading context), offering a nuanced framework for understanding information pollution (Brennen et al., 2020). The role of influencers, bots, and coordinated campaigns in propagating false content is especially relevant in the context of elections, pandemics, and conflicts.

2.2. Erosion of Trust in Media

Trust in media has declined globally over the past two decades, especially in liberal democracies. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2024), only 42% of global respondents trust mainstream media to do what is right. This erosion of trust stems from perceptions of political bias, economic motivations, and institutional failure. In polarized societies, people are more likely to trust media sources that align with their ideologies, creating echo chambers that reinforce division (Stroud, 2011). Traditional journalism has also come under pressure from real-time digital competition, leading to the prioritization of speed over accuracy. This phenomenon, often called “churnalism,” contributes to errors, retractions, and sensational reporting, all of which damage credibility (Davies, 2008). Meanwhile, media fact-checking efforts have grown, but their impact is often limited by user resistance, especially when misinformation aligns with pre-existing beliefs.

2.3. Platform Influence and Information Ecosystems

Modern media platforms play a decisive role in shaping what people see, believe, and trust. Facebook, Twitter (now X), YouTube, and TikTok act not only as distributors but also as gatekeepers of information. These platforms use algorithms that filter content based on user behavior, resulting in “filter bubbles” and “information silos” (Pariser, 2011). This fragmented landscape contributes to selective exposure and confirmation bias, whereby individuals seek out sources that support their worldview while dismissing others. Research by (Bakshy et al., 2015) indicates that algorithmic curation may limit exposure to cross-cutting political content. Moreover, platforms often lack transparent mechanisms to flag or moderate misleading posts effectively. Despite content moderation efforts, many users remain vulnerable to disinformation due to low media literacy, emotional responses, or social influence.

2.4. Public Belief and Cognitive Biases

Cognitive psychology explains how people form beliefs and why misinformation is difficult to correct. The “backfire effect,” where corrections reinforce false beliefs, and the “illusory truth effect,” where repeated exposure makes false claims seem true, are common in online environments (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Trust is further complicated by affective polarization, in which people assess information not on accuracy but on emotional alignment with their group identity. Sociological research also highlights how trust is influenced by social networks, cultural values, and community narratives. Misinformation is more likely to be believed and shared when it is endorsed by peers or embedded in trusted local contexts. These factors make tackling misinformation not just a technological problem but a deeply social one. This literature review establishes that misinformation, declining media trust, and shifting public perceptions are complex and intertwined challenges.

3. Platform-Specific Analysis of Trust and Misinformation

Modern media platforms differ significantly in how they influence trust and facilitate the spread of misinformation. This section analyses three major categories: social media platforms, traditional news media, and emerging digital applications. Each plays a unique role in shaping user beliefs, trust, and content credibility.

3.1. Social Media Platforms

Social media has become the dominant gateway to news and information for a significant portion of the global population. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, and WhatsApp allow users to both consume and disseminate content, creating participatory media environments. However, these platforms also facilitate the rapid spread of false or misleading information, often without editorial oversight. Research shows that emotionally charged misinformation spreads more widely than factual content on platforms like Twitter (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). Algorithms that reward engagement likes, shares, comments prioritize content that is controversial, alarming, or polarizing. This has contributed to the creation of echo chambers and the reinforcement of

confirmation bias, where users mostly see information that aligns with their pre-existing views (Cinelli et al., 2021).

Moreover, trust in information shared on social media is highly variable and often based on the source of the post (e.g., a friend, influencer, or public figure) rather than on the credibility of the information itself. Efforts to combat misinformation such as fact-checking labels or content warnings have shown mixed results. While they increase awareness among some users, others dismiss or ignore them, especially when they perceive such interventions as politically biased.

3.2. Traditional News Media

Despite the growth of digital platforms, traditional news outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television remain important sources of information for many, particularly older adults. These institutions are often regarded as more credible due to their professional standards, editorial oversight, and accountability mechanisms. However, their role in maintaining public trust has been challenged by accusations of partisanship, corporate influence, and sensationalism. One major issue is the perception of bias. In politically polarized environments, audiences often accuse mainstream media of favoring particular ideologies or interest groups. For example, conservative viewers in the U.S. have shown higher levels of distrust toward outlets like CNN and The New York Times, while liberal audiences express scepticism toward Fox News.

Another concern is the increasing trend of “click-driven journalism,” where speed and engagement metrics influence editorial decisions. The competition for attention has led some media organizations to prioritize trending stories over in-depth reporting, blurring the line between information and entertainment. This has weakened trust, particularly among younger, digitally native audiences who often perceive traditional outlets as outdated or disconnected.

3.3. Emerging Platforms and Short-Form Media

Newer platforms like TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels have transformed how information particularly news and commentary is consumed, especially by Generation Z. These applications emphasize brevity, visual appeal, and algorithmic content delivery, allowing users to encounter news passively rather than through intentional search or reading. While these platforms have democratized content creation, they have also made misinformation harder to detect and regulate. Many creators present themselves as informal journalists or commentators without professional credentials or accountability. Content often blurs the boundary between opinion, humour, and factual reporting, which complicates the user’s ability to evaluate credibility. Short-form videos often rely on viral trends, which can help spread important messages quickly but also allow false claims to gain momentum before they are debunked. For example, misinformation about COVID-19 treatments and election fraud circulated widely on TikTok and YouTube before fact-checkers could intervene. The visual and fast-paced nature of this content makes traditional fact-checking tools less effective.

3.4. Messaging Apps and Private Groups

Platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook Messenger operate largely in closed digital spaces, where content circulates in private groups or direct messages. These environments foster intimacy and trust among users but also create ideal conditions for the unchecked spread of misinformation. False messages about health, security, and politics have been widely shared in these settings, particularly in regions with limited access to formal news media. The difficulty of monitoring content in encrypted spaces poses a major challenge for both researchers and policymakers. While these platforms offer users privacy and agency, they also shield misinformation from scrutiny, making it harder to track and correct false narratives (West, 2017).

As this section demonstrates, the nature and impact of misinformation and the level of public trust vary across platforms. While social media encourages broad and rapid dissemination, traditional media struggles with relevance and perception. Newer apps introduce novel challenges due to their format and pace.

4. Psychological, Social and Cultural Dimensions of Media Trust

While platform structures and content regulation significantly influence the media landscape, individual trust in information is also shaped by deeper psychological, social, and cultural factors. This section explores how cognitive biases, identity, education, and community contexts determine public responses to information accuracy and media credibility.

4.1. Cognitive Biases and Misinformation Acceptance

People do not process information in a purely rational manner. Instead, psychological research shows that cognitive biases play a major role in how individuals evaluate truth. The confirmation bias leads people to favour information that aligns with their existing beliefs while dismissing opposing views, reinforcing ideological divides (Nickerson, 1998). In digital media, this is worsened by algorithmic filtering that delivers personalized content.

Another relevant concept is the illusory truth effect, which shows that repeated exposure to a false statement increases its perceived truthfulness, even when people are aware that the statement is false (Fazio et al., 2015). This helps explain how viral misinformation on platforms like Facebook or TikTok can remain influential even after debunking efforts.

The backfire effect, though debated, suggests that factual corrections can sometimes strengthen people's commitment to false beliefs, especially when their identity or worldview is challenged (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). These psychological processes complicate attempts to combat misinformation through fact-checking or media interventions alone.

4.2. Social Identity and Group Influence

Social context also affects how individuals process media. According to social identity theory, people derive part of their self-concept from group memberships such as political affiliation, religion, ethnicity, or nationality (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Media messages that support in-group beliefs are more readily accepted, while messages from perceived out-groups are rejected, regardless of factual accuracy. This dynamic is intensified in online communities, where people engage in homophily the tendency to associate with similar others. These digital enclaves often reinforce trust in group-endorsed content while fostering skepticism toward outside information, further fragmenting the public sphere. Social media influencers and peer networks amplify this effect by serving as trusted intermediaries for news and commentary.

4.3. Cultural and Educational Factors

Cultural background influences how people interpret media content, including their tolerance for uncertainty, deference to authority, and attitudes toward media institutions. In high-context cultures, information is often interpreted through shared social meanings and implicit norms, while in low-context cultures, explicit verbal messages are valued more (Hall, 1976). These differences affect how misinformation is evaluated and challenged. Educational attainment is another crucial factor. People with higher media literacy and critical thinking skills are generally more able to identify misleading content and more likely to consult multiple sources before forming opinions (McDougall et al., 2018). However, digital literacy alone does not ensure scepticism individuals with advanced technical skills may still fall for misinformation if it aligns with their beliefs or if they distrust traditional institutions. In some regions, low literacy rates, limited access to formal news, and reliance on word-of-mouth contribute to the spread of misinformation. For example, in parts of

South Asia, Africa, and Latin America, health-related rumors on messaging apps have resulted in public panic, violence, or vaccine hesitancy.

4.4. Trust, Emotion, and Media Fatigue

Emotions, especially fear, anger, and outrage play a strong role in shaping how people engage with information. Emotional content is more likely to be remembered and shared, even when it lacks credibility (Berger & Milkman, 2012). This emotional dimension explains why misinformation often outperforms factual content in terms of reach and impact.

Additionally, growing exposure to conflicting information and sensational headlines can lead to news fatigue, where individuals deliberately disengage from media to avoid stress or confusion. This withdrawal, while understandable, contributes to lower awareness and reduced civic participation. For some, distrust becomes a protective mechanism against an overwhelming or hostile media environment. This section underscores the complexity of trust in media. People's perceptions are not only a reaction to content but are also deeply rooted in identity, emotion, social ties, and belief systems. Understanding these factors is essential for designing effective responses to misinformation and for fostering more resilient information ecosystems.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

In the current digital age, the relationship between media, trust, and public perception has grown increasingly complex. This survey has examined the evolving media environment, exploring how misinformation proliferates across platforms, why trust in media is declining, and how psychological and cultural factors shape audience responses. The findings suggest that the challenge is not solely technological but deeply rooted in social dynamics, emotional responses, and fragmented public spheres. Digital platforms especially social media have drastically altered the flow of information. They provide unprecedented access to news and personal expression but also facilitate the rapid spread of misinformation, often driven by algorithms that favor engagement over accuracy. Traditional media, while still valued by some, struggles to maintain credibility amid accusations of bias and commercialization. Meanwhile, newer platforms like TikTok and WhatsApp present unique challenges due to their design, virality, and limited transparency. Beyond platforms, trust in media is also shaped by individual and collective experiences. Cognitive biases such as confirmation bias and the illusory truth effect reduce the impact of fact-checking efforts. Social identity and cultural orientation further influence how people assess credibility and choose which sources to trust. As misinformation continues to shape opinions on critical issues like health, elections, and social justice, its consequences for public understanding and democratic discourse are increasingly urgent. To address these challenges, future efforts must be multidisciplinary and collaborative. Strengthening media and digital literacy from an early age is essential to equip individuals with the skills to evaluate content critically. Platforms must be more transparent in their moderation policies and recommender algorithms. Governments, educators, journalists, and civil society organizations must work together to foster more resilient information ecosystems. Further research should focus on regional case studies, comparative platform dynamics, and long-term trends in trust-building. As the media landscape continues to evolve, so too must our strategies for understanding and improving the public's relationship with truth, information, and democracy.

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