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Ritual Reinforcement: Habit, Emotion, and Identity as Attributes of Trust in News

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ABSTRACT

Theory and research about trust in news typically draws on normative understandings of news as a conduit for information transmission in the service of the media's role as the Fourth Estate in democratic systems. These approaches rely on a narrow top-down view of trust, and of how and why people use news in their daily lives. In this study, we offer a complementary audience-centric view of trust in news, which foregrounds three attributes beyond politics and professional practice, closer to Carey's formulation of communication as ritual, which we argue is better aligned with how much of the public engages with news. Our qualitative analysis of focus groups and interviews in Brazil, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States identifies three attributes of trust in news that extend beyond the transmission view of communication—specifically those pertaining to habit, emotion, and identity. These findings show the importance of considering how trust operates through sociocultural levels sometimes in tandem with, but in other ways orthogonal to, political factors. We posit that journalists and reformer-advocates for journalism seeking effective strategies for rebuilding trust may need to look beyond politics and the professional practices in the industry to do so.

Declining trust in news in many countries has prompted growing interest in what is driving these trends and possible solutions for reversing them. Discussions often center around normative understandings of the news media as a democratic institution serving the public's political information needs. However, such approaches to trust, heavily rooted in political theory and journalistic norms, rely on somewhat narrow understandings of how and why audiences use news in their daily lives.

In this article, we propose a complementary audience-centric approach to understanding trust in news derived from extensive cross-national, inductive research with members

of the public. We foreground qualitative findings spanning four countries—Brazil, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States—and place them in dialogue with scholarship taking a cultural approach to news. Drawing on James Carey's ritual understanding of communication, we illustrate the importance of three attributes—habit, emotion, and identity—when it comes to how audiences describe what trust in news means to them. In so doing, we offer a socially grounded theory of how trust may be formed, maintained, and reinforced through people's sometimes mundane uses of media. These findings, which conceptualize news as more than a (democratic) institution responsible for transmitting (political) information, suggest that understanding declining trust and efforts to rebuild it may require attending to more sociocultural attributes around how people access and engage with news rather than merely journalists' professional practices or the "trust nexus" between politics and the press.

Broadening our Understanding of Trust in News

Declining trust in news in many countries (Newman et al. 2022) has prompted extensive research seeking to diagnose causes of these trends, their impact, and how to reverse them. Social scientists have focused on politics, including the link between how people perceive news media and political institutions and how partisan polarization may shape trust in news (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2017; Ladd 2012; Suiter and Fletcher 2020). Meanwhile, journalism scholars and reformers have often emphasized information quality (e.g., Kohring and Matthes 2007) and professional journalistic practices, such as transparency, fact-checking initiatives, and efforts to engage in more meaningful ways (Koliska 2022; Masullo et al. 2022; Peacock, Masullo, and Stroud 2020; Pingree et al. 2018; Robinson 2023). These conceptualizations of trust in news are valuable but incomplete insofar as they fail to capture other attributes relevant to the public.

The Predominant Transmission View of Communication in Trust Research

While there has been growing interest in the role of digital platforms in mediating news consumption, and in factors beyond politics and professional practices for trust (see Fawzi et al. 2021), trust in news research tends to adopt a narrower conceptualization of communication—and of news—as fundamentally a matter of disseminating or imparting information (for an exception, see Swart and Broersma 2022). This is what Carey (2009) referred to in his influential work as a "transmission view of communication," which has long dominated the social scientific study of communication. We see this emphasis on news through the lens of information acquisition in efforts to operationalize and devise uniform measures of trust and its constituent dimensions, which typically privilege cognitive evaluations and normative perspectives of journalism anchored in professional ideals, for example, asking respondents to assess whether they think the information reported by news outlets is fair, unbiased, accurate, etc. (e.g., Kohring and Matthes 2007; Strömbäck et al. 2020).

There are several reasons why trust in news research may emphasize these considerations. The first is theoretical and reflects scholars' normative conceptions of journalism as a pillar of democracy and of trust as the product of deliberate choices around consuming civic information. The second reason is professional/sociological, reflecting journalists'

conceptions of their work and normative role in society (e.g., as watchdogs of power or purveyors of information), which also leads to a focus on transmission. The third reason is methodological and derives from the quantitative emphasis of much trust research and reliance on closed-ended survey questions phrased according to researchers' and practitioners' preconceptions, which may not fully capture how audiences think about trust in everyday life.

As such, prominent scholarship anchored in a transmission view of communication has made important but incomplete contributions to our understanding of trust in news. When journalists, in turn, seek to earn, maintain, and renew trust, this can lead to a focus on strategies that center mainly on cognitive interventions (e.g., info boxes, transparency badges, etc.), which may not always be effective (Masullo et al. 2022; Peacock, Masullo, and Stroud 2020), or on politics (e.g., discussions about impartiality), which clearly matters for some people in some places (Ladd 2012; Lee 2010) but in ways that can be overstated for others (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022). As such, researchers risk overlooking the importance of attributes that are not purely cognitive or rational, which may nonetheless shape trust. In practice, people can and do make trust judgments in the absence of proper credibility assessments—which would require them to use and evaluate news—based on attributes that go beyond the base quality of information. These, we argue, are often more aligned with a ritual view of communication.

Trust from a Ritual View of Communication

While the transmission view of communication is important for understanding aspects of trust in news, we suggest it may be incomplete. Instead, when we take a bottom-up approach to assessing trust in news from the perspective of audiences around the world, a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon comes into focus. This picture evokes a wider view of the role and function of communication in people's lives, what Carey (2009) refers to as its more "ritualistic" attributes. We use the term "attributes" in a deliberate echo of Eveland's (2003) "mix-of-attributes" approach. Like Eveland, we seek to map the core dimensions of our object of study, identifying the constituent parts by which it might vary in order to advance more systematic comparative research. Whereas Eveland's (2003) aim was to identify attributes of digital media, what others might call "affordances," at a time of rapid technological change in order to isolate causal factors in quantitative analyses of media effects, ours is a more modest but nonetheless important aim given the dominant but narrow focus of much trust in news research. By applying a "mix-of-attributes" approach to the study of trust in news, we seek to single out constituent parts of this phenomenon, especially those ritualistic attributes sometimes overlooked in conceptualizing trust in news. That said, unlike in Eveland's approach, which involved distinguishing key attributes of media that might vary to improve the study of media effects, our audience-centric approach leads us to adopt this approach in reverse: we focus on how audiences understand the effect (trust in news) in order to theorize about the wider range of attributes of media consumption that may produce these effects. In other words, by identifying core attributes of trust in news beyond those most typically examined, we offer what we hope is a useful

framework for future research on the subject, including studies that test the causal relationships suggested by our theory—a point we return to in our discussion.

The ritualistic attributes we focus on include those directed toward the "maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (Carey 2009, 15). As Carey explains, this view of communication does not disregard the importance of information acquisition but offers an enlarged view of what these behaviors encompass, one "in which the reader joins a world of contending forces as an observer at play" (Carey 2009, 17). A ritual approach invites thinking about news use as more than a solitary process of receiving and processing discrete pieces of information, acknowledging how the act of using news is meaningful in people's daily lives as they relate to the world around them.

Here we elaborate on two complementary and interrelated conceptualizations of the ritual metaphor and highlight findings that are particularly relevant for the attributes of trust identified in our study: habit, emotion, and identity. The first conceptualization underscores the symbolic importance of apparently mundane and taken-for-granted news uses—"everyday practices and customs that punctuate our daily lives" (Sumiala 2014, 939)—where the "ordinariness of the everyday is replaced by a different kind of intensity—heightened and symbolically charged" (Silverstone 1994, 168). One body of work adopting this approach qualitatively examines news use routines and habits from the vantage point of audiences. This research underscores how traditional media rituals are embedded in people's broader lives, shaped by their physical and temporal contexts, such as reading the newspaper with the morning coffee (Boczkowski et al. 2022; Fortunati, Taipale, and Farinosi 2014; Groot Kormelink 2022). These practices are ritualized in different ways and degrees (Fortunati, Taipale, and Farinosi 2014), with news itself varyingly central or peripheral (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Suenzo 2020).

Such work also highlights affective dimensions of news use, alongside the materiality of news objects, as ritualized practices signify, for example, moments of peace or relaxation (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Suenzo 2020; Fortunati, Taipale, and Farinosi 2014; Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2019) or, for others, anxiety (Toff and Nielsen 2022). In examining shifting news practices vis-à-vis the digitalization of news, Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink (2015) identify user practices, ranging from reading to snacking, which "differ in function, impact, and rhythm" (675). Likewise, Fortunati, Taipale, and Farinosi (2014) discuss how differences in the materiality of print versus online newspapers offer readers a different "sense of mastery" which shape users' "sense of authenticity and verifiability" (835). By showing how material and interpretive practices are intertwined (Siles and Boczkowski 2012) and enveloped by everyday routines (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Suenzo 2020), such findings encourage a closer examination of how habit and emotion matter for trust in news.

A second conceptualization of communication as ritual foregrounds news practices as vehicles to connect with shared beliefs and values, enabling people to symbolically define their "place and position to the world" (Silverstone 1994, 168), or in Carey's (2009, 17) words, "invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it." In their study examining coverage of Trump's election, Moe, Ytre-Arne, and Nærland (2021) show how news sometimes works as a myth, "conveying broad cultural messages rather than as singular pieces of information" (2767) that unifies people around shared values. Here, too, affect plays an important role as the foundation for

social cohesion. As Peters (2019) explains, following a Durkheimian approach to ritual, "Affect and emotional sentiment, as opposed to instrumental rationality, were key to creating such bonds" (3). A similar line of thinking underpins Anderson's (1991) emphasis on the role played by newspapers in maintaining nations as "imagined communities".

This emphasis on values resonates with what Coleman (2012) calls "second-order" trust, which has less to do with news organizations fulfilling expectations and more to do with audiences and news organizations agreeing on what news should be in the first place. News only succeeds at fulfilling its purpose if both "can be said to have a joint investment in the values of a commonly experienced world" (Coleman 2012, 36–37). A ritual approach to trust, hence, invites a greater emphasis on identity, which includes but goes beyond politics (Kreiss 2018; Ladd 2012), encompassing other social and personal identities. The "roles" people adopt in relation to news will be shaped by their perceptions of the beliefs and values they see portrayed there, and how these, in turn, relate to their sense of self.

While a growing number of studies have adopted aspects of the ritual framework for understanding news audiences, it has been largely absent from trust in news research. We use it here to foreground the importance of mundane, taken-for-granted news uses and feelings of (dis)connection with the views of the world portrayed in it, which interact with assessments about the quality of the information contained therein to shape trust. Additionally, by identifying distinct ritualistic attributes of trust, our framework invites consideration of how each may work in combination, or separately, to bolster or undermine audience trust. Therefore, the question motivating this study is: When examined in an audience-centric manner, what attributes consistent with a ritual view of communication are perceived as most relevant in shaping trust in news? Our approach is motivated by calls for a more radical audience turn in journalism studies (Swart et al. 2022) and for constructivist approaches (Coleman 2012), grounded in audience understandings about what constitutes both "news" and "trust".

Methods and Data

This article uses data from a larger iterative, cross-national study of trust in news. We focus on three attributes—habit, emotion, and identity—which we developed inductively over the course of our data collection and analysis. We draw on in-depth interviews and online focus groups with people (N = 132) in four countries across the Global North and South: Brazil, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We selected countries that vary in their cultures, politics, and media systems, while limiting the number of countries so we could consider the importance of context in each location. The countries also vary in their levels of trust in news: India (38%), the UK (36%), and the US (29%) had trust levels below the average across the 46 countries in the *Digital News Report 2021* (44%), whereas Brazil had above-average levels (54%) (Newman et al. 2021) at the time of our study.[1]

To recruit participants, we worked with a research firm to identify a mix of people who were more versus less trusting of news in general. We sought variation in demographic characteristics, including age, partisanship, and media use (see Appendix for details on the methodology, including demographic information in Table 1, and focus group/interview guides). Following ethics approval, and after obtaining participants' informed consent, the focus groups were conducted by a research firm in January of 2021 using

a text-based platform. The focus groups lasted 90 min and were observed by members of our research team. In total, 71 people participated in eight groups—two per country. Insights from these sessions informed in-depth interviews with another 62 participants, conducted online in January and February of 2021.

During the interviews and focus groups, participants described how they typically stayed informed, how they discerned trustworthiness, and how they felt about journalism, among other topics. A wide variety of media practices were represented, from those who rarely sought out news to those with daily news habits.

Most focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in English, except those in Brazil (in Portuguese) and a portion in India (in Hindi). All were recorded, transcribed, and inductively analyzed using NVivo software. After an initial reading of the transcripts, we developed a preliminary list of themes and subthemes capturing a variety of attributes that participants discussed when explaining trust, which we refined in an iterative process. We found some within-country and between-country variation, and while we note some differences in the findings, we focus on key commonalities that provide the basis for our inductive theorizing. We reference study participants with pseudonyms and identify focus group quotes with an asterisk.

Similar to Eveland (2003), we do not present an exhaustive list of all attributes relevant to trust in news but rather a selection we hope will be generative for future research. As previous scholarship has extensively covered many areas core to the conventional trans-mission paradigm, including public perceptions of chronic bias in reporting and beliefs about media manipulation that underpin distrust among some audiences (e.g., Mont'Al-verne et al. 2023; Nelson and Lewis 2023; Ojala 2021), we focus instead on those ritualistic attributes most closely related to people's everyday media practices and the symbolic role of news in this context. This latter set of attributes would have been easy to overlook had we not chosen to focus our attention on them as they tend to be more challenging for participants to articulate or identify. By highlighting them, we aim to advance a frame-work for considering how each may work in combination with one another or in conjunc-tion with other informational attributes to shape audience trust and distrust in ways obscured by prior research.[2]

Findings

In this section, we outline how three interlocking attributes were often central to trust: (a) habit, (b) emotion, and (c) identity. While we examine each individually for the analysis, it will become clear how these attributes combine in ways that encourage a "ritual reinforcement" of trust. In presenting these results, we underscore how expressions of trust rarely equated to "blind trust," and more typically described positive attitudes or pre-dispositions towards select news brands, which could nonetheless be brought into ques-tion in certain circumstances.

News Habits as an Attribute of Trust in News

As many talked about news organizations they trusted most, it became clear that habit was a key attribute of trust. While news use, especially habitual news use, is often thought about as an anticipated consequence of trust, participants alluded to how

news use rituals may help drive trust in the first place and sustain it over time in a circular, reinforcing manner. When discussing news outlets they trusted more, participants frequently acknowledged using them regularly, often as habitual practices or longstanding routines, and attributed their trust in those sources to the sense of familiarity their habits engendered. News rituals were especially common among participants over 30, who more often described traditional news habits they learned during their formative years in a pre- or early internet era (e.g., reading the newspaper, watching television news), relative to younger audiences who relied more on social media for news.

For example, when asked to explain his preference for the BBC, a brand he trusted above others, Robert (UK, 43) explained, "Maybe because I always have … That's part of it, habit." Two Brazilian interviewees summarized their trust in particular sources in the following terms: "I trust in those sources I read" (Lia, 43) and "I trust the media I follow" (Lara, 38). That is, they described routine news use as preceding trust rather than following from it. This doesn't mean habitual use was always conducive to trust. News habits can be rooted in functions such as entertainment that have less to do with information accuracy and thus be less connected to trust (Tsfati and Cappella 2005). However, those who consumed news for informational purposes often described ritualized use as playing an important role in reinforcing their trust.

This was especially clear in Kavita's (India, 43) explanation of why she trusted her preferred news sources above others, even as she acknowledged they might not differ substantially. She explained: "I trust NDTV more because I watch it more. It's not that they show better news than others; I have no criteria to choose any particular channel." She made a similar argument regarding her preferred newspaper: "I like the source of *Times of India* as they provide only verified news. I am not saying that other newspapers don't provide verified news, but as I am reading this brand only for a long time, I trust it." In other words, some described trust as resulting from habitual news use rather than the other way around.

While ongoing relationships with news brands were often intertwined with cognitive evaluations of their coverage, such perceptions were formed and crystallized *through* ongoing interactions with news, embedded in larger daily rituals. For Kayla (US, 34), using a trusted news source was an important link in the chain of actions that made up her daily routine, similar to previous studies (e.g., Groot Kormelink 2022): "It's easy. I'm in bed. I can turn on the TV. I know that the station goes right to my local news and then it turns right into 'Good Morning America.'" This habit was hardly new: "My mom would wake up, and she'd watch it while she drank coffee, so I just got in that habit even when I was younger. And that habit stuck with me." Victoria* (UK, 29) also emphasized the ritualized nature of her relationship with her most trusted news sources: "Quite often it's routine and familiarity—reading newspapers on specific days of the week or including news websites as part of your morning routine (…) It's partly what you've grown up with and, so, what is familiar." For these interviewees, news habits formed part of a routine that was familiar and reassuring.

Trust in brands cultivated through habitual news practices, past and present, also extended to digital platforms, providing people with a sense of familiarity, which helped judge the trustworthiness of news they encountered on social media.[3] As Beatriz (Brazil, 26) put it, "I trust more in the ones I am more familiar with." Similarly, when encountering news on Facebook, Abigail (UK, 58) preferred "sources that I've

actually grown up with." Likewise, John (US, 39), paid closer attention to sources on Facebook that he used habitually outside the platform. In this way, news habits were among the attributes informing trust judgements of news people encountered in other contexts.

The material features of news that shaped habitual practices also mattered for perceptions of trustworthiness. Lia (Brazil, 43) described her preference for a smaller newspaper that "is a habit, a heritage," including the enjoyment of holding the paper and smelling the page. She acknowledged that her trust in this newspaper was higher than it was for Google News: "In theory it should be the same, but I do not know why the paper touch gives me more security and confidence." Michael* (UK, 40), who bought a print newspaper every Saturday, explained, "I enjoy the experience of relaxing with a physical publication." Meanwhile, Pratik (India, 32), who was most trusting of print news he consumed "in the morning and over a cup of tea or coffee," described how reading the newspaper "feels like I'm still into studies or something because the work I'm doing is just about research." In illustrating how the embodied experience of news rituals matter for trust, these quotes foreshadow a second attribute that a ritualistic approach to communication brings to the fore: emotion.

Emotion as an Attribute of Trust in News

In this section, we show how emotion can matter for trust in two ways: (1) as a foundation for bonds with news outlets or journalists that enable trust and (2) by helping sustain the very constitution of trust as an attitude that transcends reason-based judgments.

As suggested in the previous section, news use habits were often intertwined with a sense of attachment to sources perceived as more trustworthy. Kavita's (India, 43) family received a newspaper that was in her native language, Marathi:

> I am reading *Sakal* for a long time, and I like its content. It is trustworthy. It is possible that other newspaper brands would have the same content, but as I am reading it from the start, I am *attached* with it.

Aside from preferring a newspaper in her mother tongue, Kavita felt a deeper connection with *Sakal* that made it symbolically important to her—a connection forged through ritualistic habit but also one freighted with emotion, illustrating how entangled these attributes can be.

Sometimes these attachments were anchored in interpersonal relationships that transcended news. For example, Russell (US, 28) explained his trust in NPR thanks to "teachers and elders" who taught him it was a good source. He "had one teacher in high school where we would listen to NPR every day," which had "a pretty strong effect on me." Meanwhile, Samantha (UK, 33) preferred the BBC "because it's what I've been used to. My dad would have looked on BBC … So, I see it as, *I* would want to look at [it]." While she acknowledged this was a preconception (rather than something she carefully deliberated on), she also pointed out that her dad was at the "top of the list of people that I would be trusting of, so that's probably influenced it a lot." In other words, trust perceptions were sometimes entangled in intimate relationships, as people relied on others in forming habits and opinions.

Often, attachments had less to do with brands than with columnists, podcast hosts, and especially news anchors with whom people felt emotional bonds—what media

scholars have called parasocial relationships (Horton and Richard Wohl 1956; Rubin and McHugh 1987). Some found it easier to connect with those who showed their more human side. For example, Christopher (UK, 44) felt some radio hosts were more relatable than "prim and proper" TV presenters because "a little bit of their personalities come out more," which helped him "warm to them." Others emphasized the importance of such relationships enduring over time. Kayla (US, 34), described her trust in ABC News as partly stemming from her acquaintance with the anchors: "They've had the same anchors for so long. We've grown up together." Likewise, Alice (UK, 34) was more inclined to trust information from anchors she had long watched:

> I grew up watching George Alagiah. Sometimes, you build that rapport with a presenter, and you think, "What they're saying is correct." (…) Maybe there's something there, just because somebody's saying it who's in that position, that I've known all my life, I'm more inclined to trust that information.

The emotional component of these bonds is especially meaningful when considering that many described trust as largely intuitive (Nelson and Lewis 2023; Swart and Broersma 2022) or arising from particular feelings. These responses referred to trust as something people did or did not *feel*. This "gut" foundation for trust made it difficult for some to explain. As Andrew (UK, 25) described, "It's hard to put it into words because it's very instinctual. I don't really think about it. I just have a general feeling, really." In a similar vein, when asked for an example of a news organization she trusted more, Helen (US, 30) offered one example, but acknowledged, "I couldn't tell you the why behind it." Such quotes illustrate how for many people, at least some of the time, trust went beyond rational deliberation. While rationalization may indeed play a role—determining trust or justifying it post-hoc—affective responses to news can also intersect with these cognitions, shaping trust in ways that are often unconscious.

What does trust feel like? For some, trust involved feeling more "secure," as Lia (Brazil, 43) put it. Ana (Brazil, 32) described her experience using a trusted outlet as "a feeling of comfort." Others described trust as a matter of feeling calmer or, in Gemma's (UK, 23) words, "a feeling of ease." Comparing across outlets, Joseph (UK, 33) explained, "When I'm watching Channel 4 News, I definitely feel more relaxed than when I'm watching BBC News." These descriptions resonate with work by Gajardo and Costera Meijer (2023) showing how very loyal audiences can form strong emotional attachments with journalists or news brands, characterized in part by feelings of safety and security, which underscores how trust can sometimes be less about the content of news and more about the experience of consuming it.

This affective attribute of trust sometimes related to the sensory, embodied experience of the materiality of news objects discussed previously. For example, Joseph (UK, 33) described feeling calmer when watching Channel 4, in part, because it's "more relaxed and chilled out in terms of their set and the way they report things, the mannerisms of the presenters" whereas he described the BBC as "a sterile environment. It kind of makes you feel like they're disconnected to you." Lara (Brazil, 38) explained that what she most appreciated about CNN Brasil, a brand she trusted, was "their easiness: the way they get into my home. I know there are bad news, but I like how they also know to take it easy at times." This emotional experience made it easier to connect with them.

Several UK participants acknowledged how the affordances of news modes shaped their feelings of closeness and intuitive trust judgments. Comparing across modes, Robert (UK, 43) suggested that TV "has an advantage because you can see people's expressions." When establishing trust, it was important for him to "see how the two people are interacting; the facial expressions, body language, etc." Likewise, Samantha (UK, 33) was more trusting of TV and radio "because it's real people," whereas it is "easier to mislead people in print." These quotes reflect how certain features, especially those mimicking aspects of face-to-face communication, favored trust on emotional or intuitive grounds.

For others, emotions, particularly negative ones, had more to do with the substance of news and how it was covered. For example, Raymond (US, 57) explained that "in the past, I watched a lot of CNN, but I've gotten irritated with them, so I don't listen to this anymore." Similarly, Gemma (UK, 23) acknowledged,

> If something starts to rile me up and make me feel angry, then I'm already going to distrust it because I have a biased opinion on it already, so I think my emotions really impact the way I read things.

Such responses show how emotional reactions to news stories are also important for trust and distrust, connected to a third underappreciated attribute of trust: identity.

Identity as an Attribute of Trust in News

The third attribute we found to be meaningful for trust from a ritual view of communication was identity: people's sense of who they are in relation to the worldviews they see reflected in the news. Political identities were central to how a subset of participants judged the trustworthiness of news, but they were not equally important everywhere. Consistent with previous work, they were more salient among more partisans and those more interested in politics. We found some country differences as partisan identities were more common among US respondents, and to a lesser degree, in Brazil and the UK (Gallup and Knight Foundation 2018; Suiter and Fletcher 2020; Toff et al. 2021). However, large segments of the public are highly disengaged from politics, or as Helen (US, 30) put it, when explaining why she felt news media did not represent people like her: "They choose one [side] or the other, and never the ones that don't care." Given that researchers have devoted considerable attention to political identities and partisanship in the trust literature, and given our emphasis on attributes beyond politics, we focus here on other kinds of identities—both *social* and *personal*—which can otherwise be overlooked.

First, some participants alluded to the importance of *social* identities such as nationality (in the UK), religion (in Brazil, India, and the US), class (India and the UK) and race (in Brazil, the UK, and the US) when discussing trust. Some said they were more inclined to trust news outlets that resonated with their own identities in these ways. For example, Robert's (UK, 43) trust in the BBC was bound up in seeing his national identity reflected, something others also alluded to when discussing the public service broadcaster, although unique to UK respondents. Asked if he associated any feelings with the BBC as a brand he trusted more, Robert responded: "It feels British. And I feel British, so there's that." Meanwhile, Raymond (US, 57) said he was more inclined to trust news sources that reflected his religious beliefs, even as he admitted they were also biased, something he

was otherwise critical of: "I tend to trust, to some degree, Christian resources more than some of the other types of approaches."

Others *distrusted* sources that represented perspectives disconnected from their own social identities, creating feelings of exclusion. This was typically linked to grievances about systemic misrepresentation of particular groups. In India, these complaints often referenced the lack of attention to the "common man." As Farah (India, 40) put it, "If you're just showing the parties, you're just showing the celebrities … what has the common man got to do with all this stuff if he doesn't have a morsel to eat?" Elsewhere, participants, especially people of color in Brazil, the UK, and US, criticized representation along racial lines (see, e.g., Kilgo et al. 2020), which led to skepticism especially around race-related topics. Regina (US, 72) regretted the "unjust treatment of African Americans" in the news and sought out "Karen stories" on Facebook rather than on traditional media. Meanwhile, Maria (Brazil, 37) suggested Brazilian media tended to focus on showing "Black people in situations of violence, when Black men are violent and Black women suffer, or they show Black people as poor or fragile." Feeling like their social identities were mis- or under-represented instilled a sense of disconnection for some.

For others, *personal* identities, tied to certain beliefs or values, were meaningful for trust. For example, explaining her trust in a preferred outlet, Laura (UK, 54) reasoned that "the way in which the news is reported … resonates more with my own feelings and thoughts, I guess because I see them as chiming with my human side and my beliefs." She described how using this kind of news felt, echoing Carey's description of ritual communication as intrinsically satisfying: "I guess it's just comfortable for me." Likewise, Antoine (UK, 29) describing feeling "contentment" when using his most trusted news source:

> I know exactly what I can expect, I know what I'm going to get from them most of the time … And sometimes a sense of relief as well, just to know that my viewpoint or the way I see things is being reflected.

Trust or distrust in specific outlets was also sometimes bound up in how participants saw themselves in relation to those sources' "imagined audiences,"[4] which provided a basis for belonging or distinction. The latter function was especially clear among some British respondents who shared negative impressions of tabloid newspapers they believed catered to specific "kinds" of people—people unlike them. For example, Paul's (UK, 66) substantive critiques of a tabloid he distrusted overlapped with a subtle commentary about the newspaper's audience:

> *The Sun* has got very good news in it. It's out of the same stable as *The Times*, … but I wouldn't read it … It's just a different world, almost, and much more on celebrities, less on what I'd call serious news … There are people who … want to know what the Kardashians have done. Fair enough.

Likewise, Alice (UK, 34) admitted to reading one tabloid—and its comment section—online but distinguished herself from its imagined audience:

> Unfortunately, I do also read the *Daily Mail*, but that is not for news purposes; it's just interesting to see what's going on with the population. The majority of the population read the *Daily Mail*, and their views are fascinating, but it's not something I take as being news per se.

By situating herself in opposition to "the population" she envisioned read the tabloid, Alice reaffirmed her sense of self as distinct. It is plausible that such views of popular media were connected to social imaginaries around class, which have historically been salient in the UK (e.g., Chan and Goldthorpe 2007).

People's sense of self was also implicated in their willingness to express trust, with some differentiating themselves from "sheep who will follow anything" (Cristopher, UK, 44), similar to previous studies emphasizing generalized skepticism toward all news (Fletcher and Nielsen 2019; Nelson and Lewis 2023). Taking a blanket skeptical approach to news reinforced people's notions of themselves as clever and self-determining news consumers. As John (US, 39) said, "I guess without sounding arrogant about it, I sort of pride myself—and my closest friends—we try our best to question what we're hearing." Many participants emphasized their desire to "make up my own mind" and perceived bias as threatening their ability to do so in a competent, self-sufficient manner, resulting in distrust.

Discussion

Drawing on an inductive, qualitative study across four countries in the Global North and South, this article foregrounds "ritualistic" attributes of trust in news as opposed to those more aligned with the "transmission" model of communication outlined by Carey's cultural approach. We looked beyond politics and journalistic practices and offer a framework that considers three attributes: (1) news use *habits*, (2) *emotional* connections with and responses to news, and (3) personal and/or social *identity*. While we cannot adjudicate to what degree each attribute may be shaped by trust rather than a driver of trust (i.e., determine causality), our findings highlight their perceived importance for audiences when describing the news they trust and how they think about trust more generally.

Our mix-of-attributes approach underscores how these interconnected, yet distinct, attributes may combine with one another but how also how they relate to interpretations of specific information or journalistic practices. Our findings suggest the ordinary but symbolically meaningful ways people think about news in everyday life may be a powerful lens through which information itself gets evaluated—a powerful reminder of how trustworthiness can seem quite subjective when we appreciate audiences not merely as citizens and voters but as social individuals navigating a range of media choices serving different emotional needs.

For social scientists researching trust in news, these findings demonstrate the importance of audience-centric research, but also the value of examining trust as more than a cognitive evaluation of information. Studies have demonstrated a robust "trust nexus" between politics and the press (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2017), but less political, more cultural attributes may also be contributing to global changes. Our findings expand on scholarship challenging assumptions about trust as a primarily rational evaluation about information credibility, showing how beyond "tacit knowledge" (Swart and Broersma 2022), emotions and emotional connections—intertwined with habits and identity—are implicated in trust. In foregrounding emotion, we also highlight an avenue for bridging trust in news research with trust scholarship from philosophy and sociology advocating for explicitly acknowledging trust's emotional dimensions (Jones

1996; Lewis and Weigert 1985), something largely absent from empirical and theoretical work on trust in news.

These findings also place trust scholarship in dialogue with the growing emphasis on emotion in journalism studies (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020), which underscores the potential importance of emotions in encouraging or discouraging habitual use and thereby reinforcing or eroding trust over time. While our approach does not allow us to identify the causal ordering of these dynamics—e.g., do people feel certain ways when using news they trust or do they trust news because of its emotional impact—the embodied sensory experiences of news use articulated by participants, including differing degrees of "relaxation" or "security," point toward new avenues for research that considers how the materiality of news may or may not be conducive for trust (see also Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Suenzo 2020; Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2019; Mathews 2024; and on information-seeking and emotions: Albertson and Gadarian 2015). Efforts to cultivate more soothing, positive emotional experiences around news consumption may help improve trust but conflict with efforts to deepen engagement as measured through clicks and time spent with news. Similarly, we see opportunity for further consideration of other emotional attributes of news use, including parasocial relationships, which provide important foundations for trust in specific brands or journalists, in line with relational approaches to trust in news (Lewis 2018; Schiffrin 2019).

The centrality of ritualistic news habits in sustaining trusting relationships with news brands and journalists could also help explain why the growing reliance on social media for news is linked to lower levels of trust (Park et al. 2020), prompting greater concern with how changing news habits among younger audiences will impact trust in the long term. Generational differences accounted for some variation we saw vis-à-vis habits, as older participants tended to have more ritualized news practices, especially offline, that were sufficiently engrained to resist or coexist with online news use. Younger participants had fewer news-specific media habits, consuming news more often via social media, where consumption is more incidental and news brands less differentiated (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi 2018; Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, and Nielsen 2018). As ritualistic news practices wane, trust in brands may further erode, a more extreme version of the de-ritualization Fortunati, Taipale, and Farinosi (2014) identified in the shift from print to online news. To the degree that prior habits and familiarity with news brands enable trust on platforms, younger audiences may also become less able to recognize trustworthy sources there.

Furthermore, participants described trust in terms that extended beyond news itself and instead involved their social and personal identities. While such judgments intersected with evaluations of information quality and accuracy, they were also bound up in people's sense of inclusion (leading to greater trust) or exclusion (leading to greater distrust) from various forms of "community" or "transcendent values" they saw reflected, including but not limited to politics. For participants from marginalized groups, distrust was often described in connection to systematic mis- or under-representation of their social identities in media. For others, distrust could also be based on perceived misrepresentation of groups the felt solidarity toward. While we saw variation in the specific identities participants focused on— Indians and Britons more frequently alluded to class; religion came up more in Brazil, India, and the US (unlike the UK, a more secular country, where national identity uniquely came up with regards to the public service broadcaster BBC); and race was salient in Brazil, the US,

and UK, countries with distinct histories of structural racism—more generally, we found that social structures and identities often served as critical lens through which participants view their own news habits and feelings of connection/disconnection from news in each country. While we cannot make definitive claims given the small numbers in this study, our findings point to ways in which trust may be shaped not only by how participants think about news but also how they feel about themselves in relation to it (see Nelson 2021a).

For advocates and reformers seeking to build trust in news, these findings invite a wider range of approaches that extend beyond the existing emphasis on professional editorial practices, such as transparency initiatives, and instead at the potential value of strategies aimed at stimulating news habits, albeit not without its own challenges (e.g., Groot Kormelink 2022). While reviving the love of print among young audiences may be unrealistic, online formats that encourage habit formation (e.g., newsletters), may be most promising in this regard.

News organizations may also want to further explore alternatives for cultivating emotional connections with audiences and assess their tradeoffs. Television and radio news, where specific journalists and anchors are most visible to audiences, may have an advantage. However, newer formats like podcasts and digital platforms like TikTok may also provide tools for building emotional and parasocial ties, especially with younger audiences who place a premium on host personalities, while also enabling connections on a more emotional level through music and humor (e.g., Newman and Gallo, 2020; Newman 2022), even as this entails other challenges (Nelson 2021b; Ross Arguedas et al. 2022). Journalists' efforts to showcase their professional and personal identities on social media are often fraught and can collide with expectations around branding at the organizational level, which may risk journalists coming across as inauthentic (Holton and Molyneux 2017).

Finally, news organizations seeking trust will need to continue grappling with how conscious and unconscious decisions about what stories to tell and how to tell them, in addition to broader messaging around their brands and the "kinds of people" they serve, enable a sense of connection with some while alienating others.

In foregrounding the role of ritual attributes in shaping trust in news, we do not suggest issues around information transmission are unimportant but that they matter alongside—and are intertwined with—these other attributes. In doing so, we hope this audience-centric, mix-of-attributes approach opens new avenues for scholarship around interventions. Future research is needed to better understand whether ritualistic attributes are more important for some people than others, and how changing habits around news use may impact trust long-term. Research could also examine whether the role of emotions varies depending on the object of trust (e.g., news brands vs. journalists vs. individual stories) or whether emotions affect distrust differently than they do trust. Lastly, we see promise from studying efforts that harness the combination of habit, emotion, and identity in ways that reinforce each other.

Notes

1. Trust has since remained mostly stable in three of the countries but declined in Brazil.

2. While quantitative studies have found the COVID-19 crisis increased trust in news (e.g., Knudsen et al. 2023), few participants in this study cited the pandemic as a factor shaping their trust. Many raised concerns about misinformation or described COVID news as overwhelming, but we did not find clear evidence of the pandemic significantly altering pre-existing views about the news media, perhaps due to the timing of the data collection.

3. Habits are not the only pathways to familiarity, but they can provide a deeper sense of acquaintance with brands than other mechanisms.

4. We use the concept of "imagined audiences" (e.g., Litt, 2012; Nelson 2021a), which typically describes how individuals or news organizations conceptualize the people they are communicating with, to illuminate how members of the public can also imagine news audiences.

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