

Constructive Skepticism, Dysfunctional Cynicism? Skepticism and Cynicism Differently Determine Generalized Media Trust

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Although there is a growing body of research on trust in the media, it is still unclear whether any kind of critical attitude toward the media is harmful to democratic societies. Building on approaches on cynicism and skepticism, we argue that there is a need to differentiate between two distinct determinants of media trust. One is based on observed shortcomings, such as the tendency of news media to exaggerate negative aspects. Being aware of these shortcomings and benevolently criticizing the media can be interpreted as constructive skepticism. The second determinant relies on unsubstantiated claims such as assuming a conspiracy of the media and political actors. Such sweeping denunciation can be interpreted as dysfunctional cynicism. Based on survey data, we show that cynicism is associated with lower media trust and skepticism is associated with higher media trust. The results have strong implications for democratic societies and their way of treating different forms of media criticism.

Keywords: media trust, media cynicism, media skepticism, political communication, journalism

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Trust in the media is a central issue in the discourse on the stability of democracies (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Coleman, 2012; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Various researchers started to investigate a potential decline in media trust as early as the 1990s and linked it to political trust and the functioning of democracy (e.g., Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Tsfaty & Cohen, 2005). Such discussions have intensified recently, as developments such as former U.S. President Donald Trump's opposition to mainstream media, the rise of populist parties in Europe, and their antagonism toward the established news media have opened new gateways to destabilize citizens' trust. Although the media and their mechanisms of producing and depicting news can add to distrust toward other democratic institutions (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996), a general willingness to trust institutions—among them the mainstream media—is an important prerequisite for democratic systems (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Citizens who do not trust the news media are also less likely to trust democracy in general (Ladd, 2012; Tsfaty & Cohen, 2005). However, the literature also suggests that critical attitudes toward the media are not always dysfunctional to democratic systems. In fact, instead of naively trusting in whatever public sources present, a certain degree of critical vigilance—that is, a willingness to question official (and media) information—is vital to democracies as well (Warren, 2017). Therefore, on the one hand, there is some sort of critical attitude toward the media that can be dysfunctional to democracies, but on the other hand, there also seems to exist another sort of critical attitude that can result in positive democratic outcomes. The current study attempts to dissolve this paradox by distinguishing two different critical attitudes toward the media, namely media skepticism and media cynicism, and by conceptualizing them as determinants of generalized media trust (and explicitly not—as often done before—as trust itself). We define generalized media trust as a subjective, relatively stable, and comprehensive individual perception independent of the objective qualities of the source that relates to people's "trust *in the institutions* [emphasis added] of the mainstream news media" (Tsfaty & Cappella, 2003, p. 506), that is, what Strömbäck and colleagues (2020) call "trust in the news media in general" (p. 147). Separating generalized trust (a resulting state) from its determinants (causes) offers the chance to explain trust by different forms of critical attitudes.

Although there is a growing body of research on media trust (e.g., Bennett et al., 1999; Cappella & Jamieson, 1996, 1997; Jones, 2004; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Tsfaty, 2003, 2010; Tsfaty & Cappella, 2003, 2005), theoretical conceptions of trust are heterogeneous and often do not distinguish between different determinants of and media trust itself. In addition, media trust researchers often do not consider theoretical differences between specific determinants of trust. In contrast, research on political trust and related concepts distinguishes political skepticism and cynicism as distinct determinants of political trust, apathy, or media satisfaction (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Pinkleton, Austin, Zhou, Willoughby, & Reiser, 2012; Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014). Pinkleton and associates (2012), for example, explicitly conceptualized political skepticism and cynicism as determinants of individuals' satisfaction with the news media. Likewise, research on organizational trust differentiates between skepticism (e.g., competence and ability appraisals) and cynicism (e.g., malevolence appraisals; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995).

Finally, extant measures of media trust are not sensitive enough to capture the malevolent allegations of, for example, populist actors who accuse the mainstream media of manipulating public opinion (Dostal, 2015; Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2016; Robinson & Holbert, 2018). This lack of conceptual clarity impedes the identification of the causes of media trust as well as its consequences.

To address these shortcomings, the current study provides a framework that distinguishes between skepticism and cynicism toward the media as two distinct determinants of media trust. We build on an idea from Cappella and Jamieson (1996), who suggested that skepticism and cynicism are distinct determinants of trust (see also Pinkleton et al., 2012). Specifically, skepticism and cynicism refer to citizens' critical attitudes toward societal actors and institutions and can affect their trust toward them. Transferred to the media, this means that skepticism can also be clearly differentiated from cynicism toward the media and that both determinants should have differential effects. We tested the appropriateness of skepticism and cynicism as determinants of media trust by assessing social, political, and media usage-related predictors of these determinants with the help of survey data from a representative sample in Germany.

Skepticism and Cynicism as Determinants of Media Trust

Trust is a relationship between at least two actors (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003), namely a truster (i.e., someone who trusts somebody) and a trustee (i.e., someone receiving trust). The truster expects with some confidence that the trustee will "perform an action that is beneficial or at least not detrimental to [the truster]" (Gambetta, 2000, p. 217) and therefore considers engaging in some form of cooperation. However, this involves a certain risk for the truster because there is a chance that the trustee will act contrary to her or his expectations (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). Trust can refer to different actors and objects, and it can vary regarding its specificity. Regarding generalized media trust, we conceive of this trust as "trust in the *institutions of the mainstream news media* [emphasis added]" (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003, p. 506), that is, trust in the media system. In this view, media trust is a generalized attitude that is the result of people's (subjective) perceptions of the media.

One class of these perceptions refers to how competent or professional journalists or media are (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Another class of people's perceptions refers to the media's motivations, may they be good (e.g., educate people) or bad (e.g., manipulate public opinion; McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Thus, the level of people's generalized trust in the media is influenced by at least two distinct perceptions, which are appraisals of competence and performance on the one hand and perceived benevolent or malevolent motivations of the media on the other hand.

These considerations resemble the distinction between skepticism and cynicism in previous research (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Pinkleton et al., 2012; Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014). This research has conceptualized skepticism as a critical appraisal of the competence and performance of public institutions. Specifically, being skeptical resembles the method of academic reasoning: being scrupulous, doubtful, and critical. Skepticism is based on observable imperfect performances of the media, such as exaggerations of problems or focus on negativity (Kepplinger, Geiss, & Siebert, 2012). However, although skepticism is a critical attitude, it still has a constructive component, meaning that improvement is just a matter of good journalistic education and practice. Thus, skepticism is not an across-the-board rejection of the media as a legitimate democratic institution (for a similar argument, cf. Pinkleton et al., 2012; Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014). Skepticism, at its core, is a critical attitude that includes an awareness of the flaws of news reporting, but also a tolerance toward these flaws as long as they remain exceptions. Therefore, skepticism is likely to be associated with critical engagement with and evaluation of the media, for example, by checking additional sources (Jackob, Schultz, et al., 2019; Pinkleton et al., 2012; Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014). Such a critical yet constructive attitude could well be associated with high levels of generalized trust.

Whereas skepticism reflects a balanced attitude, cynicism is characterized by an undifferentiated and across-the-board opposition to democratic institutions. As such, cynicism excludes the reflective balancing of perceptions. Cynicism, in the context of the news media, refers to allegations that the whole media business is flawed and should result in a complete rejection of news as fabricated or severely distorted (Pinkleton et al., 2012; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014). In addition, cynics do not primarily criticize the media because of their lack of competence or performance, but because of their allegedly malevolent motivations to manipulate public opinion and conspire with political actors (Dostal, 2015; Engesser et al., 2016). In sum, cynicism is an exclusively negative, highly sentencing, and destructive attitude. Therefore, it is likely to assume that cynicism is a seed of distrust in the media. To date, however, empirical operationalizations have not sufficiently reflected the theoretical distinction between these two determinants of media trust and generalized media trust itself.

Measurement of Media Trust

Previous research has distinguished between unidimensional and multidimensional measures of media trust (for an overview, see Strömbäck et al., 2020). Single-item measures are necessarily unidimensional in their very nature. Studies using such measures include the World Values Survey, European Social Survey, Eurobarometer, and studies from the Roper Center (e.g., Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). This research operationalizes media trust by asking respondents how much they trust institutions like the press or television. Although single-item measures are frequently used to compare media trust across cultures and/or different media institutions (e.g., Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), the reliability and validity of these measures cannot be determined (Kohring & Matthes, 2007).

Tsfati and Cappella (2003) used a multi-item measure of media trust ("news media skepticism measure"; p. 511), which they treated as a unidimensional scale that allowed them to report an internal consistency. However, they included very different theoretical dimensions in a single measure. For example, their measure contained generalized items on institutional trust (e.g., "How much confidence would you say you have in the people now running these institutions?"; p. 522) as well as specific indicators tapping media performance (e.g., "please indicate whether they are fair"; p. 522). Their measure also included items that referred to the media's motivation to do good, such as "The news media help society to solve its problems" (p. 522). By doing so, they could not disentangle the specific determinants of media trust from trust itself.

Multidimensional measurements propose that there are different dimensions of trust. Kohring and Matthes (2007) based their trust scale on journalistic performance indicators, that is, competence and ability assessments. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative survey methodology, they created and validated a scale of media trust that encompasses four different dimensions: the selectivity of topics, the selectivity of facts, the accuracy of depictions, and the journalistic assessment of the topics chosen. As Kohring and Matthes state, they did not measure trust directly: "In this conceptual view, trust in the news media itself is regarded as a higher order construct" (p. 340). They regard trust as a latent construct that can be measured via the four dimensions mentioned above. Although this scale offers a good starting point to study trust in journalistic performance and competence (see also Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019), it does not completely fit the study of current developments for two reasons: First, if trust is conceptualized this way, it is empirically impossible to separate media trust itself (e.g., "I trust the media") from empirically

distinct determinants of trust (e.g., skepticism: "I think the media sometimes exaggerate facts"; cynicism: "I think the media manipulate public opinion"). Second, by focusing on performance and competence, the scale might not capture media cynicism (i.e., malevolence/benevolence assessments).

In sum, existing scales provide valuable insights but exhibit limitations that impede the proper investigation of current social and political developments in media trust.

Hypotheses

Distinctiveness of Constructs

The previous theorizing suggests that media skepticism and media cynicism are distinct constructs that are distinct from generalized media trust itself. This distinctness can be tested by means of confirmatory factor analysis.

H1: Media skepticism, media cynicism, and generalized media trust form three distinct constructs.

Relation Among Media Skepticism, Media Cynicism, and Generalized Media Trust

If media skepticism and media cynicism are distinct from generalized media trust, it can be assumed that these constructs are determinants of media trust. Specifically, skepticism appears as a rather constructive attitude of attentive citizens. Therefore, people high in skepticism may not lose trust in the media in general. Given that skepticism implies tolerance of the imperfections, it can be assumed that skepticism is positively related to generalized trust in the media.

H2: Media skepticism is positively associated with generalized trust in the media.

In contrast, media cynicism reflects the notion that the media business is flawed. It stems from the assumption that media business is driven by bad intentions and malevolent motivations of media actors (Dostal, 2015; Engesser et al., 2016). Therefore, we assumed that media cynicism would be negatively related to generalized trust in the media.

H3: Media cynicism is associated with lower levels of generalized trust in the media.

Social, Political, and Media Usage-Related Predictors of Skepticism and Cynicism

To better understand the causes of media trust, previous research has investigated various social, political, and media usage-related variables, such as education, political attitudes, and patterns of media consumption (Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, 2001; Jones, 2004; Tsfaty & Ariely, 2014). However, the findings do not provide a clear picture, which is likely also because of the inconsistent definitions and operationalizations of media trust described above. In addition, these variables might differently predict cynicism and skepticism. We largely based our choice of variables on a comprehensive investigation of trust toward the media by Tsfaty and Ariely (2014), who introduced four groups of predictors of media trust:

sociodemographics, interpersonal trust, political attitudes, and media use. We discuss these predictors and elaborate how they are related to skepticism and cynicism.

Researchers have repeatedly examined the sociodemographics and interpersonal trust as predictors of media trust. Some studies have found that women trust the media more than men, others have found an inverse relationship, and in some studies, gender did not predict media trust at all (see Tsfaty & Ariely, 2014). Similar inconsistencies exist concerning the influence of age, which is why we did not derive specific hypotheses regarding the relations of age and gender with skepticism and cynicism. Education, however, could positively predict engagement in skeptical thinking as this activity closely resembles academic reasoning. Similarly, less-educated individuals are more likely to engage in undifferentiated thinking and to believe, for example, in conspiracy theories (Schultz, Jakob, Ziegele, Quiring, & Schemer, 2017). As our understanding of media cynicism includes some elements of conspiracy theories (e.g., that the media and politicians conspire to lie to the public), these individuals could likely exhibit more cynicism toward the media.

H4: Higher education is associated with (a) higher levels of media skepticism and (b) lower levels of media cynicism.

Interpersonal trust is a predisposition of individuals to experience their social environment as honest and trustworthy (Gambetta, 2000). Individuals scoring high on interpersonal trust often hold an optimistic worldview and primarily see social interactions as opportunities (Uslaner, 2002). Various studies have found positive associations between interpersonal trust and media trust (Tsfaty & Ariely, 2014). Tsfaty and Ariely (2014) also describe individuals with high levels of interpersonal trust as less cynical. In contrast, high interpersonal trust makes people more tolerant toward the mistakes of their peers (Uslaner, 2002). It thus can be assumed that interpersonal trust is negatively related to media cynicism and positively related to media skepticism.

H5: Interpersonal trust is associated with (a) higher levels of media skepticism and (b) lower levels of cynicism.

The association between individuals' news media consumption patterns and their level of media trust is likely reciprocal, that is, media (dis)trust can be both the cause and consequence of using specific news media (Tsfaty & Ariely, 2014). For traditional news media, such as newspapers and television, research has reported a relatively stable and positive association between the frequency of exposure to media and the level of media trust (Jakob, 2010; Tsfaty & Cappella, 2003, 2005). Nowadays, however, many individuals use so-called nonmainstream information on blogs, social network sites, video platforms, and alternative news websites (Zannettou et al., 2017). Some of these sites, such as the Breitbart News Network, explicitly oppose the mainstream media and accuse them of lying (e.g., Boberg, Quandt, Schatto-Eckrodt, & Frischlich, 2020). Such exposure can have detrimental consequences for individuals' media trust. In fact, previous studies have reported a negative association between the consumption of nonmainstream news and media trust (Tsfaty & Ariely, 2014). Concerning skepticism and cynicism, we assumed that, on the one hand, individuals who frequently use mainstream news media will notice the actual shortcomings of the coverage more often than nonusers. On the other hand, assuming audience rationality, these users will

perceive more benefits than losses from using these media (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Combining these two assumptions, frequent users of mainstream media can be assumed to show higher levels of skepticism. At the same time, these individuals will likely not sweepingly condemn the news media they use and should therefore report lower levels of cynicism. In contrast, so-called alternative news media are particularly loud in accusing the established news media of being the lap dog of the ruling elite (e.g., Boberg et al., 2020). Individuals who frequently use these nonmainstream news sources can be assumed to report higher levels of cynicism. Rejecting the established media as a whole, these users should also show lower levels of differentiated media skepticism.

H6: Exposure to traditional print and TV news is associated with (a) higher levels of media skepticism and (b) lower levels of cynicism.

H7: Exposure to nonmainstream online news sources is associated with (a) lower levels of media skepticism and (b) higher levels of media cynicism.

Finally, various political attitudes have been investigated as predictors of media trust (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). These attitudes encompass political interest (Moehler & Singh, 2011), political disaffection (Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014), and party preferences (Lee, 2010). Previous research has argued that the level of traditional political engagement is associated with a critical yet balanced skepticism toward the political system and with less-cynical attitudes (Hutchens, Hmielowski, Pinkleton, & Beam, 2016). This relationship should also hold true for political interest (Prior & Bougher, 2018). As trust-related attitudes toward the political system are closely associated with attitudes toward the established news media (Hanitzsch et al., 2018), political interest can be assumed to be associated with higher levels of skepticism and lower levels of cynicism. In contrast, political disaffection is a form of disengagement with politics and closely related to political cynicism (Pinkleton et al., 2012). Reconsidering the close relations between trust-related attitudes toward the political system and toward the established news media, politically disaffected individuals can be assumed to be cynical about the established news media as well (Pinkleton et al., 2012), while they are, at the same time, not motivated to engage in the critical yet balanced thinking that characterizes media skepticism.

H8: Political interest is associated with (a) higher levels of media skepticism and (b) lower levels of media cynicism.

H9: Political disaffection is associated with (a) lower levels of media skepticism and (b) higher levels of media cynicism.

Regarding party affiliation, previous research has mainly examined its influence for U.S. politics (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). The political system in Germany, however, differs from the U.S. system in some respects. For Germany, it can be assumed that individuals' affiliation to populist parties (both left wing and right wing) will increase their cynicism toward the media, on the one hand, because the established media tend to cover the activities of these parties critically (Müller et al., 2017), and, on the other hand, because populist parties tend to incite their members against the established media (Müller & Schulz, 2021). Findings from previous studies in Germany have supported this assumption both for right-wing populist parties

(Schindler, Fortkord, Posthumus, Obermaier, & Reinemann, 2018) and left-wing parties (Jackob, Jakobs, et al., 2019). At the same time, a strong support for populist parties—whose leaders often reject the established news media across the board—should decrease individuals' media skepticism, which requires a critical yet balancing stance.

H10: Support for populist parties is associated with (a) lower levels of media skepticism and (b) higher levels of media cynicism.

Method

We drew on data from a 2017 national representative telephone survey to test our hypotheses. The interviews were conducted during September and October 2017 by a polling company, which administered the questionnaire to a random sample of the German population aged 18 and above. The average duration of the interviews was 25 minutes. The polling company generated the sample using the ADM-Sampling-System for telephone surveys. This system is based on the regularly updated range of numbers available in the German telephone network (von der Heyde, 2013) and thus allows generating representative samples. On a household level, the last-birthday method was used to randomly select the individual interviewee (Lepkowski, 2008). Overall, 18,446 individuals were contacted. A total of 1,200 respondents completed the survey. The response rate thus was 6.5%. The sample is representative of the German population in terms of gender (51% female), education (31% held a university-entrance diploma or a university degree, 68% held a general certificate of secondary education or lower), age ($M = 50$ years), and region of residence (16% lived in East Germany).

Measures

Generalized Media Trust, Skepticism, and Cynicism

All answers, unless noted otherwise, were recorded on 5-point Likert scales (1 = *do not agree at all* to 5 = *fully agree*). Regarding generalized media trust, we relied on scales used in previous research (e.g., Jakob, 2010; Tsfaty & Cappella, 2003) but removed all items that suggested reasons why respondents (dis)trusted the media, such as "The news media tell the whole story" (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003, p. 522). We arrived at three items that stated, for example, "The established news media can be trusted" ($\alpha = .79$; see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of the Generalized Trust, Media Skepticism, and Media Cynicism Scales and Individual Items.

Item	α	M	SD
Generalized media trust	.79	3.17	0.78
T1: The established news media can be trusted.		3.13	0.93
T2: You can rely on the established news media.		3.08	0.90
T3: When it comes to really important issues, such as political scandals, crises, health risks, and threats to the environment, I trust the established news media.		3.30	0.95
Media skepticism	.70	3.61	0.62
SK1: The established news media sometimes are biased, but overall, they reflect the different opinions of the society well.		3.59	0.85
SK2: The established news media exaggerate some facts, but overall, they try to provide an objective account of what is going on in the society.		3.56	0.80
SK3: Even if established news media organizations are sometimes wrong, there are enough good sources you can rely on.		3.88	0.85
SK4: The economy exerts pressure on the established news media, but they still strive for independence.		3.41	0.92
Media cynicism	.82	2.50	0.85
CY1: The established news media and politics conspire to manipulate peoples' opinions.		2.56	1.06
CY2: The established news media systematically tell lies to the German people.		2.28	0.96
CY3: The established news media in Germany are merely the mouthpiece of those in power.		2.68	1.05
CY4: The established news media prescribe the people what to think.		2.48	1.11

Regarding media cynicism, we adopted previous concepts and scales of cynicism toward the political and media systems (Brants & Voltmer, 2011; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Pinkleton et al., 2012). These statements were complemented by items derived from the public debate about the lying press and fake news in Europe and the United States (Dostal, 2015; Engesser et al., 2016). We pretested several items in two surveys in 2015 and 2016 and arrived at a total of four items, for example, "The established news media and politics conspire to manipulate people's opinions" and "The established news media are merely the mouthpiece of those in power" ($\alpha = .82$; see Table 1).

To construct the scale of media skepticism, we first scanned the literature for empirically corroborated shortcomings of the news media (e.g., Kepplinger et al., 2012; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Again, we pretested several items with the help of two surveys in 2015 and 2016. We started with one-sided items, which asked for only competence and performance indicators like "The news media are balanced" or "The news media are biased." Analyses, however, revealed that these one-sided items are not appropriate to differentiate skeptics from cynics, because every cynic who condemns the news media's

motivations would also deny their competence, yet without engaging in critical elaboration. Skepticism, according to our definition, means critical but constructive assessment of the media. We therefore phrased the shortcomings of the established media in a way that reflected this balancing attitude. At the same time, we phrased the items in a conditional way, that is, in a way that clearly linked the first statement to the second one. The resulting two-sided, conditional items can only be agreed on by a skeptic, but not by a cynic or a naive trustor. We perceive that these items better capture our idea of skepticism, yet they also bear the risk that they are harder to answer in a survey (for other two-sided items and their pros and cons, see Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2005). In sum, four items were established, for example, "The established news media sometimes exaggerate facts, but overall, they still try to provide a fair account of what is going on in the society" ($\alpha = .70$; see Table 1). In this example, a cynic could not agree with the second statement, a naive trustor would rather not agree with the first one, and a skeptic would probably agree with both statements.

The factor structure of the scales was tested with confirmatory factor analyses using structural equation modeling (SEM) with AMOS. To assess the fit of the model, we applied the following criteria (Hu & Bentler, 1999): First, a good model fit is given if the value of chi square divided by the degrees of freedom does not exceed a value of 2. Second, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) should not exceed a value of .06. Third, the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) and the comparative fit index (CFI) should not fall below .95. All items as well as their means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1.

Social Characteristics of the Respondents

We measured respondents' gender, age, and formal education. Interpersonal trust was measured using a three-item short scale (Beierlein, Kemper, Kovaleva, & Rammstedt, 2012). Items are, for example, "I am convinced that most people have good intentions." The internal consistency of the scale was slightly below satisfactory ($\alpha = .68$), but was improved to $\alpha = .73$ after eliminating the third item "Today, you cannot trust anyone" (reversed).

Media Use Patterns

We used 5-point scales (1 = *never* to 5 = *daily*) to measure respondents' use of established offline news media (printed newspapers, tabloid papers, TV) and established online news media (websites/apps of publishers and broadcasters). In addition, we measured respondents' use of alternative news sources, that is, news on social network sites, video platforms, weblogs, discussion forums, and on alternative news websites.

Political Attitudes

To measure the preference for populist political parties, respondents reported their likelihood of voting for the populist right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the left-wing party Die Linke (5-point scales; 1 = *very unlikely* to 5 = *very likely*). We also asked participants how likely they would vote for center-right and center-left parties (CDU, FDP, SPD, Grüne). For data analysis, we considered these four parties as control variables. Political interest was measured with a single item ("I am really interested in

political issues”; 5-point scale; 1 = *completely disagree* to 5 = *completely agree*). Finally, we measured respondents’ political disaffection using three items from Vetter (1997). One item, for example, reads, “Politicians do not care what people like me think about.” The internal consistency of the resulting scale was satisfactory ($\alpha = .81$).

Data Analysis and Results

The data were analyzed using SEM in AMOS 23 with maximum likelihood estimation. We started with the factor analyses to test whether the different items theoretically representing generalized media trust, skepticism, and cynicism empirically also constituted three distinct factors (see Figure 1; H1).

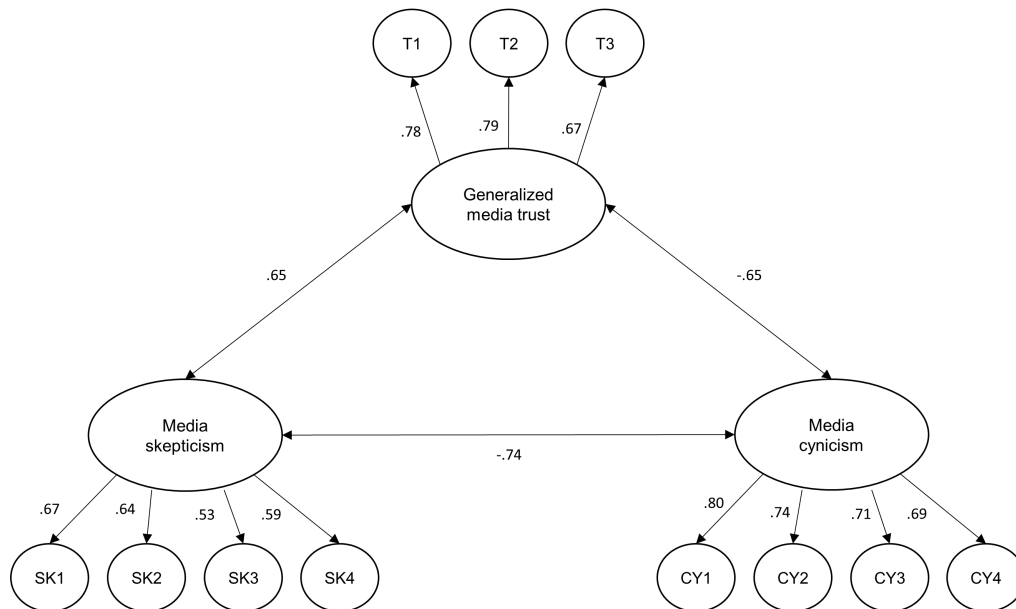


Figure 1. Confirmatory factor analysis of generalized media trust, media skepticism, and media cynicism. Maximum likelihood-estimation, $\chi^2/df = 2.79$ (N = 1,200), $p < .001$; comparative fit index = .98; Tucker-Lewis index = .97; root mean square error of approximation = .04. Standardized estimates.

We first computed a one-factor model (see Model 1 in Table 2) that assumed that all items that measured skepticism, cynicism, and generalized trust would load on a single factor. The resulting model had a poor fit (see Model 1 in Table 2). We then tested several two-factor solutions that assumed that either skepticism and cynicism, cynicism and generalized trust, or trust and skepticism would load on a single factor while the remaining construct would form the second factor (see Models 2–4 in Table 2). The fit of these models improved, but still did not reach acceptable levels (see Models 2–4 in Table 2). We finally tested the three-factor solution we theoretically proposed above (see Model 5 in Table 2). This solution yielded the best model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.79$, $p < .001$; TLI = .97; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .04). To test whether the three-factor model performed significantly better than the other models, we computed four chi-square tests of difference between Model 5 and the other models. The results in Table 2 show that the fit of the three-factor solution was significantly better than the fit of any other model. These findings supported Hypothesis 1.

Table 2. Overview of Fit Indices of Different Models of Cynicism, Skepticism, and Generalized Trust.

Fit index	Model 1: Single factor	Model 2: Two factors (skepticism vs. cynicism/ generalized trust)	Model 3: Two factors (cynicism vs. skepticism/ generalized trust)	Model 4: Two factors (skepticism/ cynicism vs. generalized trust)	Model 5: Three factors
χ^2	714.51	563.82	425.69	308.43	114.54
<i>df</i>	44	43	43	43	41
χ^2/df	16.24	13.11	9.90	7.17	2.79
CFI	.85	.88	.91	.94	.98
TLI	.77	.82	.87	.91	.97
AIC	780.51	631.82	493.69	376.43	186.54
RMSEA	.113	.100	.086	.070	.039
χ^2 diff to Model 5	599.97***	449.28***	311.15***	193.89***	–

Note. CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; AIC = Akaike information criterion; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation. $N = 1,200$; model comparisons using χ^2 tests of difference. *** $p < .001$.

To test the remaining hypotheses, we added additional variables to the SEM that included the final three-factor solution of skepticism, cynicism, and generalized trust. In this extended SEM, skepticism and cynicism were modeled as determinants of generalized media trust. The variables predicting skepticism,

cynicism, and generalized trust included the latent variables interpersonal trust and political disaffection, as well as the manifest predictors age, education, gender, and political attitudes. In addition, the manifest variables measuring the frequencies of users' consumption of established news media (TV, newspapers, tabloid press) and alternative media (social network sites, video platforms, blogs, forums, alternative news websites) were included in the model to predict skepticism, cynicism, and generalized media trust. Considering the large sample size, this model fit the data quite well (Hu & Bentler, 1999): $\chi^2/df = 1.87$ ($N = 1,200$), $p < .001$; CFI = .97; TLI = .95; RMSEA = .03. Figure 2 illustrates the results and the final SEM. Overall, the variables included in the model explained $R^2 = .33$ of the variance of media skepticism, $R^2 = .42$ of the variance of media cynicism, and $R^2 = .51$ of the variance of citizens' generalized media trust.

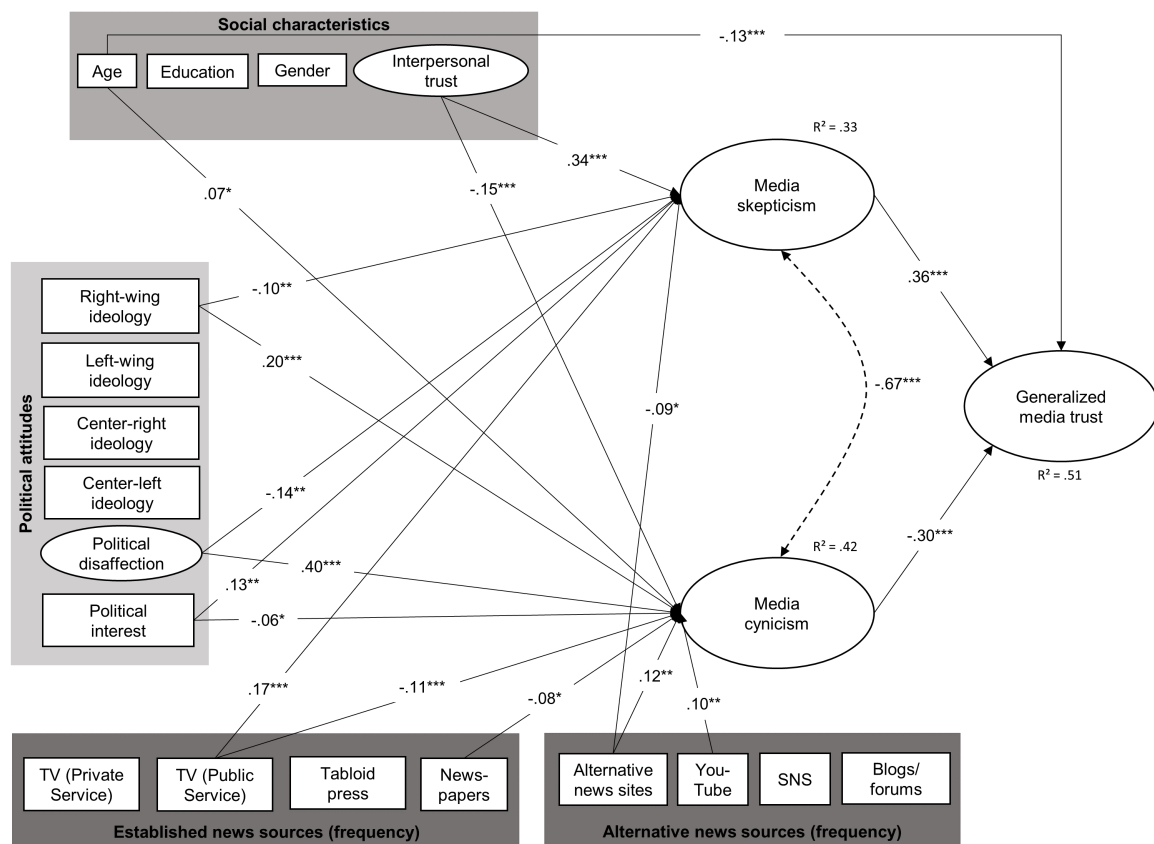


Figure 2. Structural equation model. Maximum likelihood-estimation, $\chi^2/df = 1.89$ ($N = 1,200$), $p < .001$; comparative fit index = .97; Tucker-Lewis index = .95; root mean square error of approximation = .03. Standardized estimates. Variables in circles represent latent constructs, variables in rectangles represent manifest variables. SNS = social network sites. Correlations between independent variables as well as insignificant direct effects of the independent variables on skepticism, cynicism, and media trust are not shown for reasons of clarity.

Hypothesis 2 assumed a positive association between skepticism and generalized media trust. Consistent with this assumption, higher levels of skepticism were associated with higher levels of generalized media trust ($\beta = .36, p < .001$).

Hypothesis 3 predicted a negative association between cynicism and generalized trust in the news media. In fact, the more cynical respondents were toward the media, the less they trusted them ($\beta = -.30, p < .001$).

Regarding social factors, education was unrelated to both the respondents' levels of media skepticism and cynicism. Hypothesis 4 was not supported. Instead, the data suggested that older respondents were more cynical toward the media ($\beta = .07, p < .05$). We also found a negative correlation between age and generalized media trust ($\beta = -.13, p < .001$), meaning that older citizens trust the media less than younger citizens. Hypothesis 5 predicted that interpersonal trust would be positively associated with skepticism (H5a) and negatively associated with cynicism (H5b). In fact, the data showed that the more respondents believed that their social environment and human beings are trustworthy, the less cynical ($\beta = -.15, p < .001$) and the more skeptical ($\beta = .34, p < .001$) they were. Hypothesis 5a and Hypothesis 5b were supported.

Hypothesis 6 predicted that the frequent use of mainstream news media would be associated with higher levels of skepticism (H6a) and lower levels of cynicism (H6b). Our results supported these hypotheses, but only regarding the use of public service TV. Specifically, the more frequently citizens watched news on public service TV, the less cynical ($\beta = -.11, p < .001$) and the more skeptical they were ($\beta = .17, p < .001$). No such consistent patterns emerged regarding the use of private broadcasting as well as of newspapers or the tabloid press.

Hypothesis 7 predicted that the frequency of using nonmainstream sources would be associated with lower levels of skepticism (H7a) and higher levels of cynicism (H7b). However, only the frequencies of using alternative news sites ($\beta = .12, p < .01$) and video platforms ($\beta = .10, p < .01$) were associated with higher levels of cynicism. Interestingly, only the frequency of using alternative news sites ($\beta = -.09, p < .05$), but not of video platforms, was associated with lower levels of media skepticism. Our results therefore provided only limited support for Hypothesis 7a and Hypothesis 7b.

Regarding political attitudes, political interest was associated with higher levels of skepticism ($\beta = .13, p < .01$) and lower levels of cynicism ($\beta = -.06, p < .05$). These findings supported Hypothesis 8. Similarly, supporting Hypothesis 9, the data revealed a negative relation between political disaffection and skepticism ($\beta = -.14, p < .01, H9a$) and a positive relation between political disaffection and cynicism ($\beta = .40, p < .001, H9b$). Finally, citizens sympathizing with the right-wing populist party AfD showed higher levels of media cynicism ($\beta = .20, p < .001$) and lower levels of skepticism ($\beta = -.10, p < .05$). Respondents' support for the radical left-wing party Die Linke was unrelated to their levels of skepticism and cynicism. Hypothesis 10 was therefore only partially supported.

Discussion

Our study aimed at disentangling potential determinants from the generalized media trust. We argued that cynicism and skepticism toward the media should be considered as such distinct determinants. Accordingly, generalized media trust, cynicism, and skepticism toward the media should form three distinct constructs. Our empirical findings support this assumption. In addition, in line with our hypotheses, we found that an increase in cynicism resulted in a decrease in generalized trust. In contrast, skepticism was positively associated with generalized trust. Given that skepticism, per definition, implies a benevolent outlook on the failures of human activities, this finding is not unintuitive and supports our theoretical framework. Still, future studies need to explore the stability of the constructs introduced in this article.

Regarding the factors influencing skepticism and cynicism, our results corroborate the significance of political interest, political disaffection, and interpersonal trust in predicting trust-related concepts (e.g., Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). For example, politically disaffected people showed higher levels of cynicism and lower levels of skepticism. Previous studies have investigated political disaffection under the term of political cynicism (e.g., Pinkleton et al., 2012), so it is unsurprising that cynicism toward one democratic institution (i.e., politics) is related to cynicism toward another (i.e., the mainstream media). In fact, the association between political disaffection and media cynicism can be interpreted as a sign of an active spiral of cynicism (Capella & Jamieson, 1997). Citizens' level of interpersonal trust was related to lower levels of cynicism, but we also found a positive association between interpersonal trust and skepticism. Our hypotheses regarding the associations between exposure to mainstream and nonmainstream news outlets and media skepticism/cynicism were only partially supported by our data. Regarding exposure to traditional print and TV news, only the use of public service broadcasting was associated with lower levels of cynicism and higher levels of skepticism. In Germany, public service broadcasting regularly receives the highest trust ratings from its audience (e.g., Jakob, Schultz, et al., 2019), which could explain the comparatively strong associations between use of public service broadcasting and skepticism/cynicism. Regarding nonmainstream online news sources, the frequencies of using alternative news sites and video platforms were associated with higher levels of cynicism. Alternative media sites, such as Breitbart or Ken.fm, often "accuse the mainstream media to participate in an elite conspiracy against ordinary people" (e.g., Müller & Schulz, 2021, p. 2). In addition, the algorithms of such platforms tend to reinforce the preferences of their users by recommending similar information they have already consumed. Consequently, people focusing their media diet on the latter channels probably slowly develop a more cynical attitude toward the mainstream media.

Regarding political attitudes, only support for the right-wing populist party AfD was associated with higher levels of media cynicism and lower levels of skepticism. Support for the radical left had no such effects. This may be attributed in particular to the communication activities of members of right-wing populist parties, such as the AfD, who clearly oppose the mainstream media (Engesser et al., 2016), whereas officials and members of Die Linke do not mobilize against media organizations in a comparable way.

Finally, contrary to our expectations, education was not associated with media skepticism or cynicism. Only older respondents were more cynical toward the media and they trusted the media less than younger citizens. In general, the influence of sociodemographic factors on media trust varies largely among different studies (e.g., Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Therefore, although it makes sense to include sociodemographics as

control variables in models predicting trust-related concepts, we assume that, depending on the other variables included in these models, interpreting sociodemographics is only of limited use.

From a normative perspective, our findings have important implications for democratic societies: Being skeptical toward the mainstream news media—and, possibly, toward democratic institutions in general—apparently does not undermine the basic trust in them, which is needed for democracy to work efficiently and sustainably (e.g., Ladd, 2012; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Rather than skepticism, it is a sweeping cynicism that might be politically dysfunctional. Reducing this cynicism and cultivating skepticism can be regarded as important tasks for politicians, media educators, and the educational system in general. Our findings on the predictors of cynicism suggest that this could partly be achieved by supporting political interest, better explaining the structure of the news media and the shortcomings of their reporting, and increasing citizens' awareness of the shortcomings of nonmainstream online news sources. Furthermore, benevolent skepticism is not the default of human thinking; it is the result of systematic training and education at school or within the course of academic studies. Skeptics are relativists and philanthropists, they embody the maxim of *errare humanum est* and "do not burn witches" (Musgrave, 1993, p. 27). Consequently, teaching skepticism could be regarded as some kind of inoculation against democratically dysfunctional cynicism. In short, cynicism poses a real threat to democracies by eroding their foundations and should therefore be challenged, but, at the same time, we should still have an eye on cultivating skepticism, which seems suited to take up this challenge. Democracy does not benefit from blind trust in its leaders and institutions but a critical participation of all members of society.

Various political or media usage-related concepts positively predicted skepticism and, at the same time, negatively predicted cynicism. It is thus legitimate to assume that skeptical attitudes are in fact some kind of antipole to cynical attitudes. In our data, extreme party preferences, low interpersonal trust, political disaffection, and high levels of some nonmainstream online media usage clearly separated citizens' approval of cynical statements from their approval of skeptical statements. These findings provide theoretical and empirical pathways for discriminating functional skeptical attitudes and dysfunctional cynical attitudes.

This study separated two important determinants of media trust—media skepticism and cynicism—from the state of generalized trust itself and thereby helps to clarify the relationship among constructs that have been investigated under one label. Still, the results should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the comparability of our results with findings from previous studies is limited because those studies did not differentiate between generalized media trust, skepticism, and cynicism. However, we can compare our results regarding the predictors of skepticism and cynicism with the literature on the predictors of generalized media trust. Similar to previous studies (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Tsfati & Capella, 2003), we found, for example, that low levels of interpersonal trust and the frequent use of alternative online news were associated with higher levels of cynicism toward the media and higher levels of cynicism were associated with lower levels of media trust. In contrast, and consistent with previous studies, political interest and the use of newspapers and TV news were associated with lower levels of cynicism. These similarities imply that our findings can be generalized to other contexts to some extent. Still, there are some differences between our results and the findings from previous studies. These differences refer to the associations among gender, education, age, and media cynicism/trust (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Future studies should investigate more

closely whether these differences are specific to the German population or because of the empirical differentiation of skepticism, cynicism, and generalized media trust.

A second limitation is the cross-sectional design that limits causal interpretations. We cannot definitely say whether skepticism and cynicism toward the media are really determinants of generalized media trust, or whether they reflect media trust or share a reciprocal relationship. Our theoretical argumentation justifies the assumed directions of the effects, but longitudinal data are needed to answer such questions conclusively.

Third, our measure of skepticism needs further development. We deliberately decided to use two-sided items to capture the critical yet forgiving attitude of what we conceptualized as skepticism. Still, the internal consistency of our scale was not entirely satisfying, and we acknowledge that there are methodological issues related to using two-sided items. Therefore, we encourage future research to refine or revise our measure of skepticism. In general, more research is needed to provide more information about the people who are skeptical or cynical. One possibility would be to provide insights into the news repertoires of cynics and skeptics. To what extent do these people differ, for example, regarding the breadth and depth of their consumption of mainstream and alternative news sources?

Finally, our results may well be influenced by the structure of the German media system, which still offers a huge variety of high-quality, low-quality, and a large range of alternative media outlets. Furthermore, Germany maintains public broadcasting services, which are trusted by a relatively large share of the population (Jackob, 2010). So, our participants had a chance to choose. If media systems concentrate and start to polarize, this development might result in more exclusive attitudes toward the media, which might again result in more cynicism and less trust in the media system as a whole.

Despite these limitations, our study adds a new perspective to the scientific literature and the public debate on media trust. Future studies might use and refine our proposed operationalization of the state and the causes of generalized media trust and apply it to other democratic institutions, such as the political system itself.

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