Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The nature, origins, and consequences of media cynicism and (dis)trust in Serbia

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February, 2021

Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Under the Direction of Professor Young Min

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Presented to the Faculty of Korea University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

February, 2021

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Cedomir Markov's Dissertation for

the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Media and Communication

Has Been Reviewed and Approved.

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Abstract

Scholars and pundits frequently argue that contemporary professional journalism is experiencing an unprecedented legitimacy crisis. Although the public's dissatisfaction with news media is not a new phenomenon, its extent, manifestations, and potential democratic implications are becoming increasingly worrisome. Extant communication scholarship typically interprets this crisis in terms of rapidly increasing media distrust. However, several conceptual and measurement issues surrounding the construct of media (dis)trust have impeded the development of a coherent theory explaining the relevance, causes, and solutions for growing public animosity toward media. Chief among these issues is the absence of a clear understanding of the nature of media distrust, which at times has been described as a reflection of the public's probing skepticism, and at other times has been equated to a form of debilitating cynicism.

The main argument in this dissertation is that media distrust and cynicism are two related but distinct perceptions of news media that indicate qualitatively different ways in which audiences relate to news media. Diverse theoretical and empirical evidence is presented to substantiate this argument. Combining insights from multidisciplinary research on cynicism and the study of media perceptions, this dissertation proposes a new conceptual definition of media cynicism. Here, media cynicism is defined as

a generalized antagonism toward news media characterized by the belief that media actors are motivated exclusively by self-interests and pessimistic views that journalism could not be improved. Based on this definition, a new set of indicators was developed to measure media cynicism. This made it possible to compare and contrast this newly proposed measure of cynicism with the widely used instrument that measures media distrust in terms of dimensionality and relationships with external variables.

Following a complementary mixed-methods design, both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered for analysis. Data were collected in Serbia, a transitioning democracy with recent experience with oppressive regimes. The country's turbulent history has left a strong mark on how the media operate and how the media are perceived by audiences, making Serbia an appropriate context to study negative media perceptions. Study 1 employed a web-based survey (N = 502) to test hypotheses relating to dimensionality, antecedents, and consequences of media distrust and cynicism. Both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses results consistently showed that the indicators of media distrust and cynicism are not influenced by the same underlying dimension. Further, structural equation modeling results indicated that the two perceptions could have different origins and consequences. Media (dis)trust appears to be predominately a function of perceived media professionalism, whereas

media cynicism was found to be influenced by audience-related, media-related, relational, and contextual factors. The two perceptions may also indicate different ways in which citizens interact with politics and the news. Media distrust was associated with lower political trust and reduced news exposure through mainstream outlets and on social media. Cynicism, in contrast, was found to increase news engagement and exposure to the news through social media.

To complement the findings of Study 1 and elaborate on identified patterns, Study 2 adopted an audience-centric approach to explore perceptions of and experiences with news media in a more holistic manner. This was accomplished by conducting in-depth interviews (N = 20) with diverse participants. Thematic coding of the data revealed that experiences of media distrust and cynicism may differ based on the audience's political interest, motivation, and self-efficacy. Whereas general media cynicism consistently applies to all media actors indiscriminately, partisan media cynicism only affects uncongenial outlets, and ambivalent media cynicism coexists with a relatively high degree of empathy for newspersons. Participants typically assessed the trustworthiness of specific news outlets or groups of homogenous outlets, and many struggled to apply these assessments to more abstract targets (i.e., news media in general). Although participants commonly used normative terms when evaluating the media

(e.g., objectivity, accuracy, and neutrality), many infused such terms with their own biases, indicating a gap between academic and lay understandings of professionalism and trustworthiness of the media. In some cases, participants strongly relied on their self-efficacy instead of media trust, indicating that some audiences perceive much more control over public information than is recognized in the literature. Finally, practices relating to audiences' media repertoires, news avoidance, and news engagement were found to vary based on the expressions of media distrust and cynicism. Importantly, the findings indicated that under certain conditions, media cynicism could lead to disruptive civic behaviors.

The findings of this dissertation have important theoretical and practical implications. In order to more precisely describe the characteristics of the crisis in audience-media relationships and understand its causes and consequences, future studies should include media cynicism when analyzing media perceptions. Moreover, this dissertation provides analytical tools that can help media practitioners and civic educators to formulate promising solutions to counter the public's growing discontent with the media and forge democracy-supporting audience-media relationships.[1]

[1] The author of this dissertation is a Global Korea Scholarship scholar sponsored by the Korean Government.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1. Rising public antagonism toward news media and the study of media trust

Public perceptions of the news media have been an important and extensively studies topic in communication research for decades (for an overview, see McLeod, Wise, & Perryman, 2017). Recent evidence has shown that audiences around the world are expressing increasingly antagonistic views about news media, signaling a severe crisis in the audience-media relationship. According to Ipsos Global Advisor (2019), 52% of audiences in 27 countries believe that fake news is prevalent in traditional media, while 62% have the same belief regarding online news outlets. The same report also found widespread disbelief that journalists have good intentions when delivering the news, although the results vary across countries. Whereas one half of respondents in the US, Mexico, Peru, Saudi Arabia, and Japan were found to believe that television journalists have good intentions, only one third of respondents shared this view in countries like Turkey, Poland, Hungary, Italy, and Serbia.

According to a *Columbia Journalism Review* (CJR) poll,[2] 60% of Americans think that journalists receive money from the sources they report

[2] https://www.cjr.org/special_report/how-does-journalism-happen-poll.php

on. Almost half of Democrats and an overwhelming majority of Republicans agree to some extent that journalists care more about making money than telling the truth. “A big swath of the public doesn’t like us or trust us, polls show; many Americans even question the value of the press as an institution,” writes Pope (2019, para. 8) in a recent issue of CJR entitled “How They See Us.” A recent incident illustrates this sentiment. In March 2020, *National Public Radio* aired an episode of a popular radio program On Point entitled “Living Paycheck to Paycheck During the Coronavirus Crisis.” The program tackled the issue of how a global pandemic affects the poor disproportionately. In one segment of the program, listeners were asked to call in and share their experiences. Brian, a farmer from Missouri, had this to say:

> I am really looking to the government for some leadership on things like Medicare for All, for instance, and I realized, that would never happen under the Trump administration. But I would also like to point out the hypocrisy of NPR who takes a substantial amount of their funding from large corporations who fight to prevent things like Medicare for All from passing, paid sick leave, living minimum wage. And I would just implore anybody who is listening today to turn off NPR and go to new independent media, like *The Hill Rising, Secular Talk, The Michael Brooks Show, Jimmy Dore, Status Q*. These are all people who are

> independent, they are able to speak truth to power because they are not dependent on these corporations for their funding. (Chakrabarti, 2020, 29:11)

To study a variety of troubling media perceptions like those described above, communication scholars frequently apply the theoretical framework of media trust (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). In a variety of social interactions, trust is considered a cohesive force that facilitates cooperation and leads to mutually beneficial outcomes (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). At the societal level, trust is often seen as an effective mechanism that enables the smooth functioning of complex modern democracies (Warren, 1999). Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that trust has long been the topic of intellectual inquiry in philosophy and social sciences. When the concept of trust was adopted in media studies, an impressive body of work already existed in psychology, sociology, political science, and related disciplines. In recent decades, the concept of media trust has become an important aspect of public opinion research as well. A keyword search in electronic databases (e.g., Web of Science and ProQuest) revealed that the number of peer-reviewed empirical studies in which “media trust” or “trust in news media” were measured as one of the variables in analysis steadily increased between 1987 and 2019 (Figure 1).

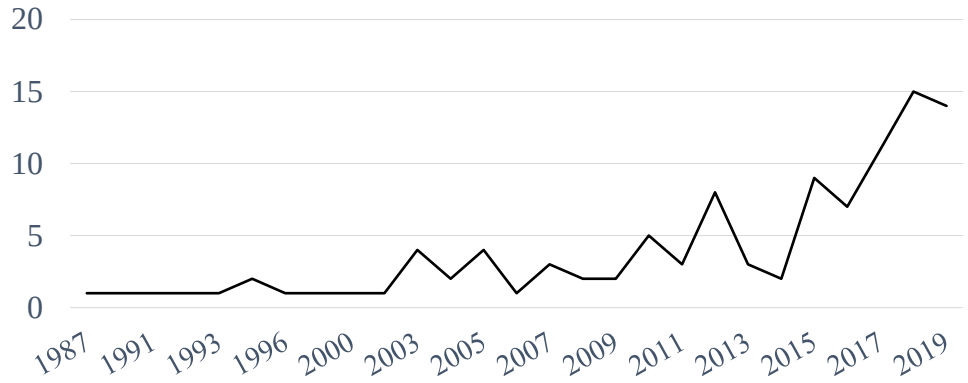

Figure 1 Number of empirical studies measuring media trust published yearly in peer-reviewed journals.

Although a universally agreed upon definition does not exist, to trust the news media, at its core, means to believe that the media possess the capacity and motivation to deliver a range of desirable outcomes, such as objective, impartial, and complete news coverage (Coleman, 2012; Thurman, Moeller, Helberger, & Trilling, 2019; Tsfati, 2004, 2010; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Extant conceptualizations have been primarily focused on elaborating the scope of outcomes to which media trust refer while overlooking any distinction between criteria used to judge how likely the media are to deliver such outcomes. As a result, the commonly used measures of media trust do not differentiate whether a trust judgement refers to the media's reliability, capacity, or motivation to perform desired tasks. In other words, contemporary mainstream definitions of media trust imply that

a trust judgement is based on a comprehensive assessment encompassing a variety of relevant criteria without distinguishing these criteria.

This lack of conceptual clarity relating to the nature of media (dis)trust leaves room for inconsistent interpretations of research findings (Strömbäck et al., 2020). It could be argued that deteriorating media trust is not a problematic development. After all, democracies thrive on critical citizens who do not take information at face value, but question it and demand evidence regardless of its source (Blöbaum, 2014; Engelke, Hase, & Wintterlin, 2019; Tsfati & Cohen, 2013; Usher, 2017). However, we also ascribe some important normative functions to news media in democracies, such as monitoring the government and informing citizens about relevant political developments (e.g., Gans, 2003). Trust plays an important role in promoting audience cooperation and facilitates exposure and attention to the news, ultimately allowing the news media to effectively perform these functions (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). From this perspective, increasing public distrust in news media appears more troubling as it indicates potential disengagement from the system of political information. The normative solution for this conundrum would be to encourage citizens to be critical but also to trust the media when trust is warranted, i.e., to be open to the possibility that the media could be trustworthy in the presence of evidence. However, as mentioned above, common definitions and indicators of media

trust cannot clarify whether media distrust is an expression of a critical outlook that requires evidence or a manifestation of close-mindedness to the mere notion of trustworthy media. Therefore, based on the findings in the current literature, one can only speculate—as many already have (see Pinkleton & Austin, 2004; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Usher, 2017)—whether the diagnosed distrust reflects "healthy skepticism" or "corrosive cynicism."

2. The case for studying media cynicism

The main argument in this dissertation is that media distrust and media cynicism represent two related but distinct phenomena that indicate qualitatively different ways in which citizens relate to news media and could, therefore, have different democratic implications. To elaborate this argument, this dissertation revisits the concept of media cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), which occasionally resurfaces in communication literature but has never been fully explicated. As noted above, a trust judgement is based on a comprehensive evaluation of the extent to which the news media can and want to perform functions that citizens expect them to. Media cynicism is much more specific and intense in comparison. It refers to the perception that the self-interest of media actors is the only driving force behind news reporting and a definitive belief that the media system has

already failed citizens beyond repair (see Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hopmann, Shehata, & Strömbäck, 2015; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

This inquiry is motivated by both theoretical and practical considerations. Without a proper definition of the nature of media trust and its relationship with similar concepts, it is not possible to formulate a coherent and useful theory of media trust that can reliably explain why trust decreases, why it matters, and how it can be recovered (McLeod et al., 2017, Strömbäck et al., 2020). The goal of this dissertation is to propose tools for delineating media cynicism from distrust and by doing so, make progress toward a better understanding of the nature of public perceptions of news media.

This dissertation also argues that media cynicism, rather than distrust, may provide a more relevant description of the current crisis in the audience-media relationship, as indicated in earlier examples. A growing body of evidence shows that citizens across the world increasingly question the core principles of professional journalism (Flew, 2019), which are built into the assumptions of media trust analyses. Further, the level of animosity expressed by citizens toward the news media cannot be fully explained by typical trust indicators which are limited to less intense assessments (Eisinger, 2000; Robinson & Holbert, 2018). Finally, the underlying theme in the discussed examples is the belief that journalism does not work and that

its principles are being misused and exploited by greedy media to advance their selfish interests. By more precisely describing the nature of public antagonism toward the news media, it will be possible to more accurately diagnose the extent and causes of the current crisis and suggest solutions to forge more democratically desirable relations between news media and their audiences.

3. The present study

The discussion on the nature of and relationship between cynicism and distrust is not a new one. A growing body of literature in sociology, political science, and organization studies shows that a meaningful theoretical and empirical distinction can be made between cynical attitudes and distrust (e.g., Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Pattyn, Van Hiel, Dhont, & Onraet, 2012; Quenette, 2013). This dissertation takes inspiration from that body of literature and applies its insights to the context of media perceptions (McLeod et al., 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati & Cohen, 2013) in an attempt to increase the conceptual clarity of the constructs in question and improve the analytic tools that public opinion researchers use to study media attitudes.

To substantiate the outlined arguments, this dissertation aims to show that the compositions of media distrust and media cynicism differ

qualitatively and that the two perceptions have different relationships with the same external variables. The analysis first examined what media distrust and cynicism are, how they can be observed, and how the distinction between them can be determined. The findings showed that media distrust is primarily concerned with outcomes of news reporting, but they also indicated major discrepancies between the academic and public understandings of trust-related terms. Media cynicism emerged as a perception predominately focused on the processes that make journalism incapable of delivering its normative functions. To demonstrate that this distinction matters, the analysis next explored whether the two perceptions show meaningful differences in their relationships with other variables that could be hypothesized as their causes and consequences. Media distrust appeared to be mostly a function of perceived media professionalism, while cynicism was predicted by several factors related to the characteristics of the audience, media, and participants' discussion groups. The findings also indicate that although there is significant theoretical overlap between the two perceptions, there may still be important differences in terms of their consequences. For instance, whereas media distrust often appeared to reduce news exposure, cynicism seemed to increase it, albeit only on social media. Several factors were identified, such as the nature of motivation or self-

efficacy, that appear to moderate relationships between media perceptions and resulting practices.

The dissertation employed a complementary mixed-methods research design comprising a web-based survey and semi-structured interviews with diverse audiences. A mixed-methods design was selected because of its ability to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of phenomena by maximizing the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative techniques (Creswell, 2008). In this study, a web-based survey was used to test whether the newly proposed measure of media cynicism can be meaningfully distinguished from indicators of media trust, and how predictors and correlates of the two perceptions differ. In-depth interviews were used to further elaborate the survey findings by providing a deeper insight into audiences' experiences of media distrust and cynicism and exploring how audiences interpret their relationships with news media.

The data were collected in Serbia, which was chosen as a theoretically justified case to study negative media perceptions. Serbia is a transitioning democracy whose citizens have had complex and troubling experiences with news media (Pjesivac, 2017; Rupar, Němcová Tejkalová, Láb, & Seizova, 2019). After the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević was overthrown in by a popular uprising in 2000, the media sector underwent comprehensive privatization, the national broadcaster started transitioning from being a

state-owned propaganda tool to a public broadcasting service, and media regulations were changed to match the EU standards (Radovic & Luther, 2012). However, even two decades later, the media system is still burdened with serious problems, such as the lack of transparency in the structure of ownership, strong political and economic pressures, and increasing tabloidization (IREX, 2019). It should not come as a surprise, then, that Serbian citizens hold their press in low regard, a perception that has consistently surfaced in opinion polls and academic studies (Ipsos Global Advisor, 2019; Markov & Min, 2020; Pjesivac, 2017).

4. Structure of the dissertation

The following chapter continues with a review of relevant literature related to (dis)trust and cynicism in the context of media studies, which served as a basis for research questions to guide Study 1. The chapter starts with a discussion of different conceptualizations of media trust with emphasis on contentious aspects such as the number and types of dimensions and targets of media trust. A review of multidisciplinary conceptualizations of cynicism is followed by a discussion on the application of the defining features of cynicism in the context of media perceptions. After providing working definitions of media trust and cynicism, the discussion continues with an overview of their potential causes. A four-source structure

comprising audience-related, media-related, relational, and contextual factors is proposed to help understand how media distrust and cynicism are being formed, paying attention to similarities and potential differences in their origins. Finally, to examine whether media cynicism as defined in this study presents a useful addition to public opinion research, the chapter includes a discussion on potential consequences of both perceptions. To this end, this dissertation identifies a number of variables in the extant literature representing relational (e.g., news exposure, news engagement, and willingness to pay for the news) and wider democratic (e.g., political trust and political participation) consequences of media cynicism and distrust. The chapter ends with a discussion on political conditions, the media environment, and public perceptions of news media in Serbia, explaining how this context provides a theoretically justified case for the present analysis.

Chapter 3 describes the research methods used in Study 1. To develop a new measure of media cynicism, a set of potential indicators was formulated based on the proposed conceptual definition and refined in consultation with a panel of experts. This process is explained in detail first, followed by a description of the research procedures, sampling strategy, and operational definitions used in online survey (N = 502), which was the main data collection method in Study 1. The survey was conducted in August 2020,

and it comprised items measuring media distrust and cynicism, as well as a wide range of political and media-related variables that emerged as relevant based on the literature review in the previous chapter. The results of the data analyses are presented in Chapter 4. The convergent and discriminant validity of media cynicism and media trust were tested using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Structural equation modeling was used to test the hypothesized origins and consequences of media distrust and cynicism. Finally, the findings of Study 1 are discussed in Chapter 5, identifying the motivations for designing Study 2 as a follow-up investigation.

The outline of Study 2 is laid out in Chapter 6, highlighting the study goals and research questions. The purpose of Study 2 was to clarify several matters that remained unanswered due to the design of Study 1. For this reason, Study 2 used a more flexible audience-centric research approach, giving participants the opportunity to discuss views about news media in their own words. The research method employed in Study 2 is explained in Chapter 7. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with diverse audiences focusing on their experiences with, expectations of, and evaluations of news media. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis and emergent coding to identify relevant patterns relating to the research questions. The findings of Study 2 are presented in Chapter 8 focusing on

aspects in which the difference between manifested distrust and cynicism can be observed, variations in experienced distrust and cynicism based on the audiences' predispositions, and resulting political and media practices. An independent discussion on the contributions and limitations of the findings of Study 2 is presented in Chapter 9. This dissertation closes with a general discussion in Chapter 10 in which theoretical and practical implications of the combined findings from both studies are considered.

Chapter 2. Literature review

1. Conceptualization: Media (dis)trust and media cynicism

1) Media (dis)trust

In social sciences, trust is commonly understood as a relational phenomenon. It denotes a relationship between the subject (i.e., trustor) and object (i.e., trustee, target) in which the latter performs an action of interest to the former who has no control over such action. Therefore, a trust relationship is always bound in risk or uncertainty because it can result in harm instead of benefit for the trustor (PytlikZillig & Kimbrough, 2016). This understanding of trust is different from dispositional trust (e.g., Rotter, 1967), which refers to the propensity to trust others, regardless of target. An individual's amount of dispositional trust is influenced by personality, culture, and socialization experiences and may influence how much a person will trust different people or institutions (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995).

With respect to the exact nature of relational trust, contemporary scholarship recognizes two dominant approaches. The first one describes trust as *confident positive expectations* from the trustee (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). This approach equates trust with a perception of the object's trustworthiness, or the belief that the object is motivated and capable of delivering a desired outcome. The

second approach argues that trust is not simply an evaluation of trustworthiness, but one step beyond – a *judgement to accept vulnerability* (i.e., temporarily suspend uncertainty) in the trustor's relationship with the trustee (Mayer et al., 1995). Thus, what the former approach describes as the nature of trust, the latter approach sees as a micro-foundation of trust.

Although both relational approaches have been echoed in conceptualizations of media trust, the tradition emphasizing positive expectations has been considerably more prevalent in extant definitions, illustrated by following examples:

> [T]rust in the media is understood, grosso modo, as the perception of the media being objective, impartial, accurate, or unbiased. (Ardèvol-Abreu, Hooker, & De Zúñiga, 2018, pp. 615–616)
>
> Trust in the press essentially relates to one's perception of how well the news media will meet certain expectations relative to presenting and selecting news/public affairs information, and the motivations for doing so. (Peifer, 2018, p. 735)
>
> Trust in the institutions of journalism and the news media is thus the expectation that journalists will live by their professional standards. (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005, p. 31)

Yet, a big question in current conceptualizations of media trust has been that of the dimensionality and nature of trust (Kohring & Matthes, 2007;

Strömbäck et al., 2020). Usually, when the issue of the dimensions of media trust is discussed in the literature, it refers to the properties and/or activities of the media that are believed to encompass the scope of media trust. Previous definitions include varying numbers and types of dimensions, such as assessments of fairness, accuracy, completeness, reliability, selectivity, or community affiliation. Kohring and Matthes (2007) criticized earlier conceptualization attempts for rarely, if ever, deriving dimensions of media trust based on coherent theoretical arguments. Other scholars, however, noted that although theoretical reasons may exist to consider media trust multidimensional, empirical analysis usually shows a unidimensional structure (Strömback et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the basis for assessments evaluating the trustworthiness of the media have not received nearly as much scholarly attention as the discussion on the scope of trust. Indicators used to measure media trust are typically framed in terms of perceived results (e.g., how objective, impartial, complete the news reporting is) without emphasizing the aspects of media trustworthiness used as a basis for evaluation (e.g., how knowledgeable, skillful, honest, reliable, or principled the media are in delivering objective reporting). Therefore, the existing approaches conceptualize trust as a comprehensive, global evaluation of the extent to which the media meet a range of citizens' expectations.

Another group of conceptual issues relates to the designation of the object of media trust.[3] Characteristics of contemporary media environments, such as hybridity and convergence (Chadwick, 2013), have made traditional distinctions among different types of media (e.g., according to the source or channel) obsolete. The question, then, is how the news media should be defined in order to make a relevant and consequential object of trust. In previous studies, media trust has frequently been conceptualized as an overall evaluation of news media in general (e.g., Ladd, 2012; Tsfati, 2010). In this approach, it is assumed that citizens possess a notion of a general media referent (i.e., schema) which transcends specific news outlets and journalists. In other studies, media trust was directed at somewhat less abstract targets, although widely accepted criteria about how media systems should be meaningfully divided into smaller units does not exist. So far, these classifications were developed specifically to meet the needs and contexts of their respective studies (Engelke et al., 2019). A frequently made distinction is the one between trust in traditional (i.e., legacy, mainstream) and alternative news media. The problem with this approach is that the

[3] Although "media" is an all-encompassing term which may refer to different types of content (e.g., education, entertainment), in this dissertation, it was used more narrowly to denote news media, unless it is explicitly noted otherwise. Therefore, terms like media (dis)trust and media cynicism are used to study these perceptions with respect to news media or professional journalism. Using this terminology allows this dissertation to remain consistent with the extant literature (see Strömbäck, 2020).

demarcation line between traditional and alternative media is becoming increasingly blurred.

In conclusion, media trust has been studied as an all-encompassing and multi-referent construct. This has made it difficult to precisely define its conceptual boundaries and formulate parsimonious and convincing models to understand its causes and predict its consequences. However, reconceptualizing media trust is not the focus of this study, so this study follows the most common approach to conceptualizing and measuring media trust as confident expectations of the news media (e.g., Tsfati, 2010). In terms of the target of trust, this dissertation is primarily interested in generalized media trust, i.e., trust in the whole system of professional journalism.

2) Media cynicism

> *Future research should carefully disentangle whether and under what conditions low trust in news on social media entails cynicism or skepticism.*
>
> Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020, p. 10

At times, scholars have used the word cynicism as a synonym for distrust in various disciplines (Adriaansen, van Praag & De Vreese, 2010; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Erber & Lau, 1990; Jackson, 2011). For instance,

low levels of political or social trust identified in public opinion polls would be interpreted as indicators of public cynicism. Low trust found in a working environment would be taken as a measure of organizational cynicism. At the same time, there have been increasing calls in both interdisciplinary literature and communication studies for scholars to pay closer attention to these differences and provide a careful explication of the concepts under examination (e.g., Chiaburu, Peng, Oh, Banks, & Lomeli, 2013; Dancey, 2012; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Eisinger, 2000; Pattyn et al., 2012). In a classic example, Kanter and Mirvis (1989, p. 301) stated that

> skepticism and cynicism are not, by any means, interchangeable concepts. Skepticism is healthy, probing, and often creative and is of value to an organization and a society if only to prevent inertia in the first case and demagoguery in the second. Skeptics doubt the substance of communications; cynics not only doubt what is said but the motives for saying it. Cynics project their own suspicions of human nature onto authority figures and other people. Skeptics are basically empiricists—people who may doubt words but are open to reason and willing to be convinced by deeds.

(1) Dimensions of cynicism

① Attribution of self-serving motives

A review of multidisciplinary definitions reveals that the core element of cynicism is a negative perception of the motives driving the behavior of others (Agger, Goldstein, & Pearl, 1961; Citrin & Stoker, 2018; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Quenette, 2013). Whereas social cynicism denotes such suspicion directed at other people indiscriminately, in more specific incarnations, cynicism has distinct targets (Pattyn et al., 2012). For instance, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) defined political cynicism as the belief that the political system is inherently corrupt and that political actors—only concerned with winning—are driven by self-serving motives at the expense of the public good. Other definitions of political cynicism center around the similar belief in the lack of integrity of political actors (Agger et al., 1961; Dancey, 2012). This makes cynicism more specific than trust and distrust,[4] which includes a more comprehensive evaluation of the target's trustworthiness.

Robbins (2014) defines motivation as the nature of the commitment in a relationship. It is an answer to the question of why the observed side acts in a certain way, e.g., why the media ask certain questions or report certain

[4] In some approaches, cynicism is even explicitly defined as a subdimension of trust. Quenette (2013) conceptualizes trust in politicians as comprising four dimensions: assessments of reliability, ability, integrity, and motivations. The final category—perceptions of motivations—is the only one related to cynicism. She defines it as a spectrum going from altruism to skepticism to cynicism. Dancey (2012) similarly defines cynicism as a component of political trust, the one tapping into perceived integrity of political actors.

stories. When diagnosing cynicism, the main question is whether citizens perceive the motives of newspersons to be primarily instrumental or expressive. *Instrumental* motivation is motivation based on potential costs and benefits that will result from a behavior. *Expressive* motivation is centered around a value system beyond profiteering. For instance, benevolence and integrity typically describe two versions of expressive motivations. Whereas *benevolence* (goodwill) indicates that the target cares about the observer and has their best interest in mind, *virtuous disposition* (integrity) means that the target reliably abides to a clear system of values (Mayer et al., 1995; Robbins, 2014). In the current context, the benevolence of the media could be interpreted as the media's intent to provide content that is beneficial to the audience, e.g., informative and useful. The opposite would be malevolence, or the intent to provide manipulative contents, which would ultimately be harmful for the audience. The integrity of the news media refers to the media's devotion to a set of principles and values, such as justice or protection of the public interest. Integrity is compromised when journalistic actions are unprincipled, i.e., motivated by special interests.

The cynicism literature commonly indicates that cynics perceive instrumental and expressive motivations as mutually exclusive. However, it is quite possible for the media to be driven by *encapsulated* interests, meaning that the media are motivated to perform in the best interests of the

audience because this behavior is in the media's best (financial) interest as well. In this case, instrumental interests do not necessarily need to be inconsistent with the media's integrity. Yet, cynics do not make nuanced judgements regarding the motives of the media. In contrast, they see an a priori malicious intent behind any action of the media. Similarly, they tend to strongly reject idealism and the belief that the media could be motivated by adherence to journalistic values and standards.

Previous research uncovered findings that potentially echo the public's cynical views of the motives of journalists and news organizations. When asked about their opinions on political news coverage, many respondents in a study by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) wrote about self-interests driving journalists' decisions. These answers were primarily framed in terms of financial benefits for the media and the expectation that their decisions are primarily driven by profit maximization and the protection of their and their patrons' financial interests. In more recent research conducted in three Balkan countries, Pjesivac, Imre, and Spasovska (2016) identified a prevalent perception of corruption in news media, specifically, the belief that the media are yielding to the demands of media owners or other external political and economic sources of power when making professional decisions.

② Pessimism about the object's future conduct

Consistent with extremely negative views of the object's motives, cynicism also involves expecting only the worst from the object. According to Krouwel and Abts (2007), political cynicism is characterized by a much stronger degree of close-mindedness (lack of receptivity) toward political actors when compared to other expressions of political discontent, such as distrust and skepticism. The negativity reflected in political cynicism is so strong and unquestionable that it does not leave any room for the possibility that political actors could perform in a satisfactory manner. A similar description of cynicism can be found in other fields as well. For instance, cynicism about organizational change is defined as pessimism about the possibility that change can bring successful outcomes (Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 2000).

Dancey (2012) similarly describes cynicism as a *definitive* pessimism about human nature. Whereas trust is only relevant in uncertain situations—defined by the trustor's lack of control over the outcome—cynicism is characterized by the perceived lack of uncertainty. Cynics, unlike skeptics, are certain that the object is corrupt and solely motivated by advancing their own interests (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). Therefore, they habitually expect the worst from others. This is similar to how Luhmann (1979) described the basic difference between trust and confidence – in terms of the

presence/absence of uncertainty. Some interactions and relationships can develop habitually reliable outcomes, seemingly erasing the uncertainty which is typical for the context of trust. If a person habitually expects a certain (positive) outcome, we are not dealing with trust but confidence. Similarly, it can be said that if a person habitually expects that interaction with the target will result in a harmful outcome, this may represent cynicism rather than simple distrust.

Communication scholars have also described this kind of pessimism in the public's perceptions of news media. Pjesivac et al. (2016) found that some respondents were resistant to the mere idea that the media could be trustworthy; they were certain that the media are highly corrupt. As certainty increases, the need to make a trust judgement lowers and habitual reliance on cynical beliefs increases. Van Duyn & Collier (2019) described a similar perception as *media nihilism*, which is characterized by a strong certainty that the information coming from the media is dishonest. Therefore, pessimism in the current context implies that one feels so disappointed with the media system that they do not believe in the possibility of the improvement anymore. This kind of rigidity is what makes cynicism potentially more dangerous than mere distrust. It implies that the audience do not see the media system as worth saving anymore, because any such attempt will fail and lead to future disappointments.

(2) Defining media cynicism

Based on the literature review presented above, media cynicism can be defined as *a generalized antagonism toward mainstream news media characterized by the following two components:*

- *Perceived self-serving motives of news media actors* (the belief that news reporting is always the product of the opportunism of newspersons incompatible with altruistic considerations, i.e., benevolence, goodwill, or adherence to professional values and ethical standards), and

- *Pessimistic views of journalistic conduct* (the belief that the news media have already failed their audiences beyond the point of repair and that any attempts to improve journalism will be meaningless).

The proposed conceptual definition of media cynicism was developed taking into account another frequently argued distinguishing characteristic between cynicism and distrust – the stronger emotional overtone of the former (Dean, Branders, & Dharwadkar, 1998). Miller (1974) defined political cynicism in terms of negative affect in addition to the experience of failed expectations. Eisinger (2000) argued that cynicism is more than simple distrust, because it involves a visceral contempt for the target. He criticized commonly used measures of cynicism, such as those developed by Miller (1974) or Cappella and Jamieson (1997), for lacking the content validity and failing to capture intense negative emotions, such as contempt, antagonism,

and hostility. Similarly, Abraham (2000) and Dean et al. (1998) defined organizational cynicism as a combination of the belief in the lack of integrity and strong negative emotions toward the organization.

The negative emotional connotation of media cynicism is implied in its conceptual definition. The component "perceived self-serving motives" is defined in terms of manipulative and malicious intent, and disregard for public interest, which can logically be associated with the public's contempt and anger toward news media already documented in the contemporary literature (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Ladd, 2012). Similarly, the pessimism component implies disappointment with the observation that the news media are unable to meet positive expectations. These considerations were applied in the development of an index to measure media cynicism.

As the above literature review has shown, there is a theoretical basis for considering media distrust and cynicism as related but distinct phenomena. They both connote negative assessments of the news media, but their difference is not merely quantitative. First, trust is a more comprehensive evaluation that can be based on a variety of appraisals, whereas cynicism is based on a very specific interpretation of the target's motives. Further, trust applies in uncertain situations implying at least some receptivity to the object, whereas cynicism is characterized by high certainty in negative outcomes and close-mindedness toward the object. Finally, cynicism has a

stronger emotional connotation and is more intense than trust. To examine whether the empirical data support this theoretical distinction, the following research questions (RQ) were developed:

RQ1: How can media cynicism be measured in the general population in a reliable and valid manner?

RQ2: Can media distrust and media cynicism be empirically distinguished?

2. Exploring the antecedents of media (dis)trust and cynicism

If media distrust and cynicism are indeed distinct perceptions, it is important to understand why some people simply become distrusting and others turn cynical. Previous research has indicated that related perceptions may have similar origins. (McLeod et al., 2017). Therefore, this section begins with a review of the literature on the antecedents of media trust, which is a more established area of research in comparison to the study of cynicism. Then, the potential role of the hypothesized sources of media trust is discussed in the context of the formation of cynicism. This analysis shows the extent to which existing knowledge on the development of media distrust can account for the formation of media cynicism, and to what degree the explanation of the origins of cynicism requires further sophistication.

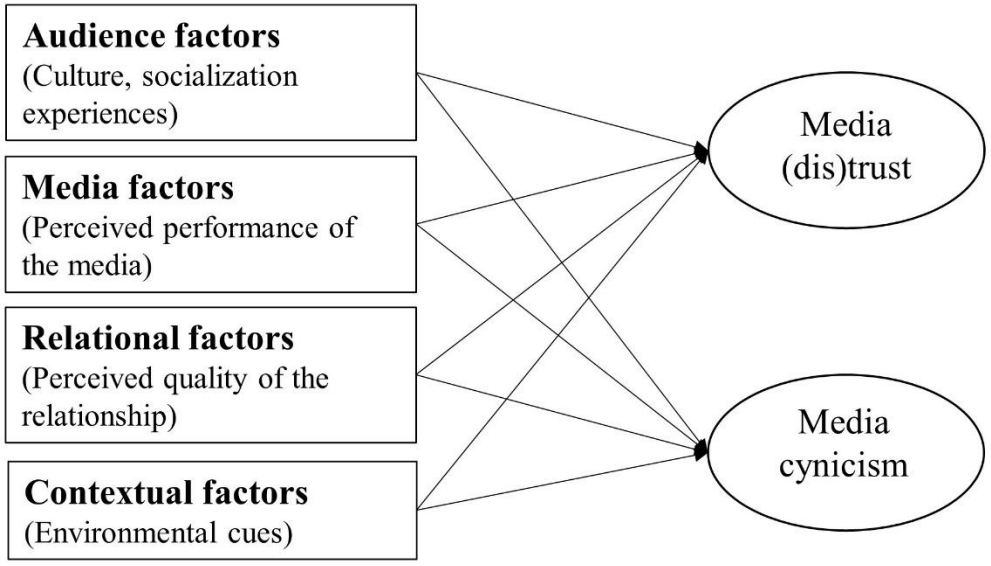

Figure 2 Theoretical model of factors predicting media (dis)trust and cynicism at the micro level.

As a relational phenomenon (PytlikZillig & Kimbrough, 2016; Robbins, 2014), trust can be explained as a function of various factors endogenous and exogenous to the trust relationship. Sources endogenous to the trust relationship include the characteristics of the trustor (e.g., propensity to trust) and trustee (e.g., perceived conduct), as well as the quality of their relationships. Sources exogenous to the trust relationship include the characteristics of the context (e.g., norms and values) in which a trust relationship takes place (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006). Applied to the current examination, this means that media trust can be influenced by factors relating to the audience, the news media, their relationship, and the wider socio-political context (Figure 2). A variety of specific manifestations representing

each group of factors have been hypothesized and/or tested as potential sources of media trust.

1) Audience factors

Institutional trust is sometimes considered to be nothing more than the extension of people's propensity to trust others. This idea is reflected in cultural theories of institutional trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001). At the macro level, cultural theories suggest that some societies have a more pronounced culture of trust than others. Levels of trust are considered stable and shaped by the long-term historical experiences of relationship formation and inequalities within a society. For instance, Scandinavian and Eastern European countries are often considered to be typical examples of trusting and distrusting cultures, respectively. As such, trust in Scandinavian news is among the highest recorded in the world, whereas trust in the news media of post-communist Eastern European societies is among the lowest in the world (Müller, 2013; Pjesivac, 2017; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). However, macro-level cultural theories cannot explain the variability in media trust within societies. They also cannot explain the sharp decline in media trust in recent years in some societies, e.g., the US (Jones, 2004).

At the individual level, cultural theories recognize that not all people have an equal propensity to trust and that these differences are a function of

different socialization experiences. This means that factors like race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status shape the experiences one has with others during their formative years. These experiences, in turn, shape the expectations a person will have in interactions with unfamiliar objects. The construct that captures this tendency is generalized (social) trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001). This simply refers to people's tendency to trust others, not based on their experience with the object of interaction but based on their projected expectations of the nature of people and institutions. The argument, in a nutshell, is that people tend to (dis)trust the media because they were socialized to (dis)trust others (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Pjesivac, 2017).

Generalized trust could also be relevant for the formation of media cynicism. As noted above, Kanter and Mirvis (1989, p. 301) argued that "[c]ynics project their own suspicions of human nature onto authority figures and other people." Indeed, previous research has found that a cynical disposition can predict political and organizational cynicism (Chiaburu et al., 2012; Pattyn et al., 2012). In societies that have had experiences with oppressive regimes, like Serbia, those with low general trust may be particularly wary of the motives of others, trying to protect themselves from being taken advantage of. Therefore, citizens with low general trust may be inclined to evaluate others primarily in terms of vested interests rather than

competences or performance. Further, considering that generalized trust is a relatively stable characteristic (Uslaner, 2000), it implies a high degree of certainty that people (and institutions) do not change. Therefore, it can be expected that those with low trust will be both suspicious of the motives of media actors and pessimistic regarding the prospect of change in journalism.

2) Media factors

A common alternative explanation is that media trust depends on the quality of media performance and not on the characteristics of the audience. This argument is in line with performance theories of institutional trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001). The first one is concerned with institutional performance as measured by objective indicators. The expectation is that some journalistic practices (e.g., fact-checking) positively influence the media's trustworthiness, while others (e.g., sensationalism, horserace framing, the use of anonymous sources) diminish it (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hopmann, Shehata, & Strömbäck, 2015).

A constructivist interpretation of performance theories suggests that it is not the objective indicators, but subjective assessments of institutional performance that influence the level of institutional trust. In other words, an objective measure of fairness in reporting might be inferior to a subjective perception of political bias when making a trust judgement. This is because

the nature of trust is commonly understood as the extent to which the result of an interaction is expected to conform to one's wishes (Luhmann, 1979). A common assumption in theories of media trust is that a person initiates media exposure with the intent of becoming informed (Tsfati, 2004). Most people cannot independently gather and check relevant political information. Therefore, they "delegate" this task to the news media with the expectation that professional journalism can help achieve this goal. As news exposure is a recurring practice, people are able to assess the extent to which the media performance helped them become informed and adjust their expectations accordingly.

Previous studies have found perceived media corruption (Pjesivac, 2017) and perceived correspondence between news reporting and personal experiences (Livio & Cohen, 2018) to be strong predictors of media trust. However, a comprehensive construct that describes satisfaction with media performance is *perceived media professionalism* (Culver & Lee, 2019; Fawzi, 2019; Min, 2016; Peifer, 2018). This refers to the degree to which audiences believe that media performance is consistent with the recognized norms and functions of professional journalism (e.g., objectivity, impartiality, accuracy, and pluralism). Successful embodiment of professional norms serves as an important heuristic that can assure audiences

that exposure to the news media will lead to a desirable outcome, i.e., that trust is warranted.

Kanter and Mirvis (1989) discussed the relevance of experiences and evaluations of an object in the formation of cynicism. When unrealistically high expectations meet disappointing experiences, the result is disillusionment and feelings of deception, betrayal, and defeat. In such situations, cynicism emerges as a coping strategy to prevent one from future disappointments. Previous research in organizational sciences has found that a lack of perceived organizational support, insufficient distributive and procedural justice, and psychological contract violation are triggers of workplace cynicism (Abraham, 2000; Chiaburu et al., 2012). Similarly, political scandals are considered an important source of political cynicism (Dancey, 2012). Citizens of Serbia, as well as citizens of other young democracies, expect more professionalism in news media but are repeatedly unimpressed with media performance (Pjesivac et al., 2016; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2016). For those who started with high expectations, this dissatisfaction can bring disappointment and lead to frustration after repeatedly being let down. A person may then embrace cynical views about the media to prevent future negative experiences. If newspersons are seen as self-interested actors, this could explain why the media continuously fail to perform as one expects them to. Cynicism can also drastically reduce

expectations from future performance and help the audience avoid the stressful experience of being disappointed.

3) Relational factors

As a relational phenomenon, trust is not only influenced by the characteristics of the subject and object, but also by the properties of their relationship. Many have argued that media trust has declined as a result of the detachment of the media from communities they are supposed to serve (e.g., Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). By so doing, the media have demonstrated a lack of devotion to the public and realignment with elite actors. This has caused citizens to become more like clients or consumers in a relationship with the media that is becoming increasingly transactional. For this reason, scholars have frequently referenced ideas of public or community journalism as a way to restore trust. For instance, Fink (2019) implored journalists to regularly meet both their audiences and news avoiders and actively listen to their grievances. Similarly, Lewis (2019) called for abandoning self-centeredness and embracing relational journalism, which is based on understanding the communities to which the media belong. The bottom line in these accounts is that citizens are more likely to trust the media if they perceive the media as a part of the people and as a partner who treats citizens fairly and with respect, knowing and

understanding citizens' problems and concerns. Yet, although these ideas have been prominent in public discourse and opinion pieces, they have rarely been tested empirically.

A concept that is commonly used to describe the quality of a relationship is a perception of the partner's responsiveness, i.e., the extent to which the object is seen as attentive to the subject's wants and needs (Esaiasson, Kölln, & Turper, 2015). A responsive interaction partner is considered a sign of a healthy relationship in which making oneself vulnerable (i.e., trusting) is justified. For instance, Torcal (2014) has shown that perceived political responsiveness is more strongly associated with political trust in Spain and Portugal than evaluation of the government's economic performance. Similarly, perceived media responsiveness may be expected to affect an individual's level of trust in news media. Responsive media listen to their audiences and take their feedback seriously (de Haan, 2012). This would make perceived responsiveness a potential indicator of trust because it demonstrates that the media care about providing adequate service to their audience.

Moreover, a lack of responsiveness could also trigger suspicion about the media's motives. If the media are seen as detached from the audience they serve, this may indicate that they have some other interests to protect. In contrast, increased receptiveness and engaging in communication with the

audience could help the media make a case for their devotion to the public interest. This means that low perceived responsiveness could also lead to media cynicism by providing evidence against the media's benevolence. Further, high perceived media responsiveness could reduce pessimism about journalism, because it would signal that the media are attempting to provide better service.

4) Contextual factors

A large number of factors exogenous to the audience-media relationship could provide important cues for media's trustworthiness (Müller, 2013) and ultimately impact public trust in news media. At the macro level, these contextual factors include the system of norms and rules that provide a framework for the trust relationship, such as the political system in which the media operate. Just as macro-level cultural theories suggest that some societies are more trusting than others, macro-level contextual factors suggest that some political systems produce more trustworthy media systems than others. For instance, Tsfati and Ariely (2014) found that higher ratios of government shares in media market reduces media trust, but only in non-democratic countries. In addition, Yamamoto, Lee, and Ran (2016) found that structural and political pluralism at the prefectural level in Japan negatively influence media trust.

At the micro level, immediate and wider social environments provide important repositories for cues of media trustworthiness. The most notable example is public criticism of the media. For instance, Peifer (2018) found that exposure to popular parodies of news reduces media trust. It is well known that the anti-media rhetoric of political elites successfully decreases public trust in news media (Ladd, 2012; Peifer, 2018).

The audience could also be susceptible to similar criticisms coming from their immediate social networks. Audiences' discussion networks will include varying degrees of criticisms toward the media depending on the people in their networks. If one's discussion network is hostile toward media, they will be reminded that the media are not to be trusted. Ognyanova (2019) found support for this claim. Using a longitudinal design, she showed that the composition of one's social network influences their level of trust in news media. Put differently, due to social influence mechanisms, people are receptive to what others close to them think about the media. For instance, when people whose opinion we respect criticize the media, it can make us question previously adopted warrants of trust (e.g., perceived professionalism or responsiveness). As a result, even if a social group started with varying levels of media trust, they may converge toward the majority position. The author was able to reject the alternative homophily explanation – that people seek others with similar levels of trust to theirs.

It is noticeable that the most effective public criticisms of news media focus specifically on the corrupt nature and motives of the news media, whether they are coming from alternative news outlets or politicians. Opinion leaders frequently target audiences' perceptions of media integrity and benevolence when they allege that the media are corrupt and dangerous for society (Flew, 2019; Ladd & Podkul, 2019). If this kind of rhetoric is replicated in ordinary people's conversations about the news media, we can expect that people who have media cynics in their discussion networks will be exposed to harsh criticisms toward news media. Therefore, even if their assessments of the media were originally framed in terms of output quality, they may shift toward giving more weight to the motivations of news reporting. If their immediate social environment frames media motivations in terms of the media's self-interests, social influence could also make individuals with excessive media hostility in their discussion network more cynical about news media.

Based on the literature review, a comprehensive but parsimonious four-source model predicting media perceptions was suggested, comprising the audience-related, media-related, relational, and contextual factors. Building upon the extant research, selection of predictor variables was conducted to represent each source in a relevant and straightforward manner. The following RQs were asked to guide the empirical analysis and assess how

well the suggested model explains the origins of media (dis)trust and cynicism.

RQ3: How well does a four-source model predict media distrust and media cynicism?

RQ4: How do predictors of media distrust differ from those of media cynicism?

3. Exploring the consequences of media (dis)trust and cynicism

The central reason why scholars are interested in studying public perceptions of the news media in general is that these perceptions are expected to have important democratic implications (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). In order to demonstrate the usefulness of media cynicism in public opinion research, it is necessary to demonstrate that it can predict relevant consequences beyond those predicted by media trust or with greater reliability. In addition to being a more consequential perception than distrust, there are scholars who argue that cynicism is potentially a more detrimental attitude compared to distrust (Eisinger, 2000; Pattyn et al., 2012; Quenette, 2013). To examine these contentions, this dissertation compares the ability of each variable to predict several outcomes relevant for assessing the quality of audiences' relationships with the media and political systems.

1) Relational consequences

Relational theories of trust predict that trusting attitudes will lead to *trusting behaviors* by decreasing the amount of uncertainty a trustor experiences and increasing the willingness to take risks with the target. The most desirable manifestation of risk taking is cooperation depending on the context of the trust situation (Mayer et al., 1995; Robbins, 2014). In contrast, cynicism connotes a very damaged relationship that leads to detachment or overt hostility. As Kanter and Mirvis (1989) have stated, cynics see their workplace as a jungle, so they behave and form other relevant views accordingly. Scholars have argued that cynicism makes people disappointed and disillusioned with the object to the point that, in their mind, the only viable strategy is to completely abandon any relationship with the target (Agger et al., 1961; Erber & Lau, 1990). However, the empirical research has not always found support for the detachment hypothesis (De Vreese & Semetko, 2002). An alternative view is that cynicism does not necessarily make people leave the relationship but makes them extremely hostile toward the target. For instance, Pattyn et al. (2012) discussed political cynicism as the organizing principle of a wider anti-politics worldview. As a result, instead of detachment, cynical citizens may start practicing protest behaviors in order to sabotage, stultify, or in other ways ridicule or humiliate the target. This study focuses on three intended behaviors toward the media in order to

test the relevance of media distrust and cynicism in terms of relational outcomes.

(1) News exposure

So far, the most studied consequence of media trust has been exposure to news media. Those who trust the media perceive the system of professional journalism as a legitimate organizing source of public information. Therefore, it is rational for these people to seek exposure to mainstream news media since it is believed that such exposure will contribute to one's aim of becoming well informed (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). By the same token, distrusting citizens may seek the alternatives that may be more successful at providing desired outcomes. This is possible to the extent that the media system provides such alternatives and that distrusting citizens retain the intention to engage with public information. Indeed, previous studies have provided some support for this pattern (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2017; Fletcher & Park, 2017; Tsfati, 2010; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

A distrusting audience may seek an alternative to the mainstream media that better embodies journalistic professional standards. Cynics, on the other hand, may opt for different strategies. In line with the detachment hypothesis, media cynics can become completely alienated from public

information, abandoning all types of news exposure altogether. This is because they believe that the media do not try to inform but rather to manipulate the public, and therefore, there is nothing to gain from exposure. Pessimism may also lead cynics to believe that if the mainstream media are malicious, their alternatives may be the same. However, the protest hypothesis predicts that cynics may maintain news exposure, but with a more antagonistic approach. For instance, instead of using the mainstream media to become informed, they may use them to become familiar with "manipulation attempts." Further, cynical audiences may selectively seek alternatives that reaffirm their prior belief in the corrupt nature of the media. High-choice media environments offer a variety of such sources, particularly in the blogosphere and on social media, which range from hyper partisan to purely conspiratorial.

(2) News engagement

In contemporary media environments, consumption of news frequently takes more active forms compared to simple exposure. *News engagement* is a concept used in the literature to refer to a variety of activities that are available to news audiences in digital settings, such as commenting, evaluating, and sharing the news (Karnowski, Kümpel, Leonhard, & Leiner, 2017). The virtuous circle theory (Norris, 2001) predicts that media trust

increases news engagement through mutual reinforcement of positive attitudes toward news media and increased self-efficacy. The more citizens trust the media, the more they are attentive to the news, which should facilitate political learning and extend to a variety of democratically desirable engaging behaviors. However, previous research (Fletcher & Park, 2017) found the opposite to be true in several countries; decreased trust in the media correlated with increased engagement with the news. This finding echoes the corrective action hypothesis, which posits that audiences with pronounced hostile media perceptions engage more readily in political discussion in order to correct perceived mistakes of the news media (Rojas, 2010). By the same token, it may be the case that distrusting audiences engage with the news to alleviate the doubts they have about the reporting.

Depending on which hypothesis is correct in the case of news exposure, we may expect to see a consistent influence of cynicism on news engagement as well. If the detachment hypothesis is correct, it would mean that by completely avoiding the news, cynicism will reduce not only exposure but also other forms of engagement. Indeed, when exposure is ceased, opportunities for news engagement are substantially limited. If, on the other hand, the protest hypothesis is correct, media cynics may in fact be motivated to engage with the news, but not in a constructive way. For instance, cynics may comment or share the news on their social media to

demonstrate to others what they see as proof for the corrupt nature of the media. The radio caller from the beginning of the previous chapter provides an illustration of this tendency.

(3) Willingness to pay for the news

For media to successfully perform expected functions, they need to rely on stable and diverse sources of income to secure resources needed for often lengthy and expensive journalistic endeavors (Schudson, 2011). Given the increased competition as a result of the proliferation of news sources and declining advertising revenues, generating revenue through user contributions, such as subscription fees and/or donations, is becoming increasingly important for media sustainability (Cagé, 2016). Further, considering that the public frequently perceives financing as a source of corruption in the media, the audience's willingness to pay (WTP) for the news could strengthen media independence. Previous research in other disciplines has indicated that people's WTP for goods and services is influenced by their trust in the service provider, among other things. The more people trust the government, the more they are willing to pay for public projects (Anderson, 2017; Oh & Hong, 2012).

As concluded in a recent systematic literature review of the research on paying for the news (O'Brien, Wellbrock, & Kleer, 2020), it is surprising

that communication researchers have not paid more attention to the relationship between media trust and WTP for the news. Trusting audiences are prone to taking more risks regarding the media, because they believe that taking risks will work to their benefit. In digital settings, subscription-based news services include news reports and analyses that are not available to non-paying users. Therefore, those who trust the media may believe that by paying for the news, they receive access to journalism that will make them better informed. Additionally, trusting audiences may be additionally motivated to pay for the news through the belief that this will help the media increase their independence and continue to provide good journalism.

In contrast, media cynics do not see the value of news produced by professional news organizations, and therefore, find no value in purchasing it. In fact, cynicism is associated with the belief that the media are not interested in informing the public. Therefore, cynics may even see paying for the news as a naïve response of manipulated audiences. As a result, cynicism will reduce WTP for the news because cynics do not see any value in professional news reporting for them personally or for society at large.

2) Democratic consequences beyond the audience-media relationship

Because the news media are a social institution in charge of facilitating the dissemination of public information, news reporting is also considered

consequential for citizens' political cognitions and behaviors. Traditionally, scholars have considered exposure to media content to be the main mechanism for delivering these outcomes. Some scholars have posited that news exposure increases the political efficacy of the audience through learning and leads to political engagement (e.g., Norris, 2000). In contrast, others have argued that news exposure may reduce political interest and efficacy and ultimately result in political apathy. This is due to several prevalent characteristics of political coverage—e.g., excessive negativity, sensationalism, and focus on political strategies rather than issues—that could distract audiences from learning about core political issues and frustrate them by conveying that political processes are outside of their control (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

Yet, there are also scholars who note that exposure is not the most effective mechanism, and certainly not the only one, for achieving the effects of political news coverage. As Pinkleton and Austin (2002) have argued, existing measures of news exposure frequency typically neglect personal motivations and differences in cognitive processing, which could influence how different citizens interpret the same information from the media. Another concept—attention to news media (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986)—implies increased mental effort and more systematic processing compared to

casual exposure and was frequently argued to be a more consequential expression of media reception than exposure.

Previous research, however, has shown that beyond both exposure and attention, perceptions of news media strongly predict media effects (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Pinkleton & Austin, 2002). Among them, media trust was consistently found to have relevant democratic implications (Bennett et al., 1999; Ladd, 2010; Rose, 2014; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). As Brants (2013, p. 17) put it, media trust is "the lifeblood of journalism's role in and contribution to people's sense making."

(1) Political trust

Political trust refers to citizens' positive expectation that political systems function within the framework of accepted norms and values that facilitate smooth performance of vital democratic processes (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Citizens receive most information about how political processes work from professional news media. Since the media facilitate the public conversation between citizens and political actors, how they are perceived will influence how the whole political process is seen (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). If the media are not seen as trustworthy, the link between the public and political system will be broken, and consequently, the political process will also not be seen as capable of delivering expected outcomes. Previous

research has consistently found empirical support for the argument that media trust extends to political trust (Ariely, 2015; Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018; Min, 2016).

By the same argument, media cynicism should also be relevant for the formation of political distrust. This is because rather than being simply dissatisfied with the role of news media as the facilitator of democratic processes, media cynics completely reject news media. Cynics think about the news media mostly in terms of the media's self-interests involved in transactional relations with the political actors on which they are reporting. They likely perceive the media as only pretending to monitor the work of decision makers in the name of the public good. Therefore, the political process does not work by default. The reason is that public officials are considered to be just as corrupt as media workers, or as having unchecked power to practice arbitrary decision making in the absence of a credible institutionalized actor who would report on their wrongdoings. Regardless of the interpretation, media cynicism likely reduces trust in politics as well.

(2) Political participation

Democracies thrive when citizens are involved in political processes through voting, campaigning, protesting, or other forms of institutional and non-institutional engagement (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2008). Arguably

the most influential theory of political participation—the civic voluntarism model—explains varying levels of participation as a result of individual resources, access to networks, and psychological engagement (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). In other words, people tend to engage when they have the time and knowledge needed to do so, as well as when others in their social circles are also politically active. However, the third component in the model implies that citizens also need to be motivated to engage politically. Perceptions of news media may be relevant for participation in politics by influencing the motivation to engage.

One democratic function of the media, at least in some normative theories, is to stimulate political participation of the audience. Communication scholars refer to this function as the mobilizer role (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Weaver, Beam, Brownley, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2007), which posits that news reporting should be engaging so that it encourages the audience to act. According to this view, journalism should frame citizens' political engagement as desirable and actively promote it. As discussed above, citizens' perceptions of media and of politics in many societies are strongly linked (Ariely, 2015). This implies that many citizens see the media as an established political institution, and those who trust the media will likely perceive the political process as legitimate (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). If the media successfully perform their mobilizing function,

trusting citizens should be receptive to the media's dominant narrative on political engagement. As a result, trust in news media could transfer to support for the democratic process and positive attitudes about political participation, which should ultimately result in increased engagement.

In contrast, media cynicism implies a fractured attachment to the mainstream public information process. If the mainstream media encourage forms of political participation, media cynics are likely to presume that they have malicious intent. They may avoid legitimizing the media's hidden interests by deciding to disengage. This is even more likely in the context of generalized disaffection in which the line between the media and politics is blurred. An alternative view is that cynics may differ from other citizens in the quality of political participation rather than the amount. For instance, some non-institutional forms of political participation (e.g., rioting, boycotting) may not be encouraged by the mainstream media, but they could be endorsed by alternative outlets. Further, as protest candidates appear more frequently on the ballots, their success is usually tied to a platform provided by social media, political blogs, or other sources outside of the mainstream that media cynics are more inclined to seek out (Zimmerman & Kohring, 2020).

The above review discussed different perspectives on how media distrust and cynicism can lead to a number of relevant media-related and

political consequences. Scholars and pundits have long considered both perceptions consequential, but their actual effects have rarely been tested. This is evident in the enduring coexistence of alternative predictions, which warrant more empirical testing. Based on a review of extant literature, this study selected three relational and two wider democratic cognitions and behaviors to explore the relevance of media distrust and cynicism. The analysis is guided by the following questions:

RQ5: How does the predictive potential of media cynicism compare to that of media distrust?

RQ6: Does media cynicism predict more detrimental normative consequences compared to media distrust?

4. The context of the study

1) Political and media environment in Serbia

To properly understand the context of the audience-media relationship in Serbia and its relevance as a site for studying negative media perceptions, it is important to discuss the main defining features of the Serbian media system and some key factors that have shaped it. As the extant literature suggests, the modern media environment in Serbia mirrors the legacies of the major social, political, and economic shifts that the country experienced in

recent history, replacing the communist regime with authoritarianism before entering a turbulent transition to democracy (Rupar et al., 2019).

From the end of the World War 2 until the last decade of the 20th century, the state had complete ownership of the media whose editorial competences were under the strict control of the Communist Party. During this period, Serbia was a part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, one of the countries that founded the Non-Aligned Movement. Before its demise, the country enjoyed a period of relative openness and prosperity, which to many represented a socialist alternative to the more oppressive regimes of the Soviet bloc. However, this openness did not apply to political journalism; news media served strictly as a mouthpiece for the establishment, while dissenting political voices were routinely silenced (Pjesivac, 2017).

The fall of communism took a more sinister turn in Yugoslavia compared to the rest of the region, and the country was dismantled in a series of civil wars in the 1990s. During this period, Serbia restored multipartyism and private ownership in the media. By the end of the decade, there were already more than 1,000 media outlets, most of which were privately owned (Milutinović, 2017). However, the country was governed by the authoritarian regime of Milošević, which used both the state as well as closely aligned private media to spread war propaganda and demonize state opponents. The

regime ruthlessly persecuted nascent news outlets that started practicing investigative and adversarial journalism (Pjesivac & Imre, 2018). Media observers in Serbia commonly reference the infamous Information Law[5] from 1998 as a prime example. It allowed the regime to impose heavy fines for slander and defamation, which led to the temporary and permanent closing of some outlets. The minister of information at the time the Law was adopted was the current president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić.

After the Milošević's regime was overthrown, Serbia started a series of comprehensive reforms intended to democratize its social, political, and economic institutions. As in other post-communist European countries, this process involved aligning the relevant institutional framework with European practices and legislation as a part of the country's formal path to becoming a member of the EU. The most important aspects of media reforms included harmonizing media legislation with the EU standards, removing the media from state ownership, and transforming state TV into a public broadcasting system (Milutinović, 2017).

Two decades after media reforms started, it is difficult to provide a straightforward assessment of their effects, but it is clear that progress has not been linear and that it has frequently failed to meet expectations. Today,

[5] https://cpj.org/reports/2000/08/serb-info-law/

Serbia has a dual media system with a public broadcasting system and the remainder privately owned. Privatization was finally completed in 2016, more than a decade and a half after the regime change in 2000. Similar to other countries in the region, the new owners became large foreign media corporations or local businessmen closely tied with the ruling party, creating what some authors call Murdochization of the media scene (see Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2016). Further, the ownership structure of numerous outlets notoriously lacks transparency as opaque offshore companies frequently serve as nominal placeholders for real owners. Further complicating the development of media professionalism is severe competition among outlets in an oversaturated market. The advertising market took a severe blow in the economic crisis of 2008 and never fully recovered. This left the media vulnerable to pressures from different sources of power that can control funding to influence coverage. As a result, news reporting in Serbia is often criticized for growing tabloidization, partiality, and breaches of ethical norms (Milutinović, 2017). At the same time, professional news outlets and individual journalists, continuing to work in hard conditions, are regularly recognized for their investigative efforts by both local and international journalism observers (IREX, 2019).

Discussing the changes in the Serbian media environment in the 21st century in terms of media freedoms, Castaldo and Pinna (2018) identified

three periods: slow but steady progress from 2000 to 2008, stagnation between 2008 and 2012, and rapid deterioration from 2012 onwards. During the first period, political power was held by the parties that were in opposition during the 1990s. However, during the next four years (2008–2012), Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) returned to power as a minor coalition partner in a government led by its former nemesis and a strongly pro-EU Democratic Party (DS). Finally, the last eight years were marked by the political domination of Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). As a member of a far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS), Vučić served as Milošević's minister for information. In 2008, a fraction of SRS founded SNS as a populist, national-conservative party that embraced a neoliberal economic orientation and a pro-EU agenda. SNS became the dominant political party in Serbian political life due to the popularity of its leader, whose rise to power many connect with the recent decline in freedom of the press in Serbia.

Indeed, deteriorating media conditions in Serbia over the last eight years have been consistently recorded by many democracy and media watchdog organizations such as Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, and IREX. Castaldo and Pinna (2018) argue that this period cannot be explained in terms of slow or inconsistent implementation of reforms but rather as a process of de-Europeanization – a push away from values like freedom of

expression or freedom of the press advocated by the EU. What is puzzling, as the authors argue, is that this period coincided with Serbia's biggest progress toward EU accession, under a government that is generally endorsed by EU leaders.

However, the developments described above do not constitute an exception limited to Serbia by any means. On the contrary, according to Freedom House (2019), they epitomize a decade-long global trend in deteriorating media conditions entangled in a "downward spiral." This trend is characteristic of many countries ruled by right-wing populist strongmen who exploit citizens' dissatisfaction with the establishment, portraying themselves as one of the people and the media as members of the corrupt elite. Freedom House warns that not even the most advanced democracies are immune to this trend. In addition to Serbia, some of the countries with the biggest decline in media freedom include EU member states like Poland and Hungary. In fact, Freedom House notes important similarities between the Serbian and Hungarian presidents and the dangerous playbook they are writing for other leaders with a similar distaste for critical press.

> Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary and Aleksandar Vučić's administration in Serbia have had great success in snuffing out critical journalism, blazing a trail for populist forces elsewhere. Both leaders have consolidated media ownership in the hands of their cronies,

> ensuring that the outlets with the widest reach support the government and smear its perceived opponents. In Hungary, where the process has advanced much further, nearly 80 percent of the media are owned by government allies. (Freedom House, 2019, para. 7)

2) Citizens' views about news media in Serbia

The above discussion on Serbian media conditions built on academic, policy-based, and media expert reports that focus on objective conditions in the media and the nexus of media and politics. The main conclusion is that the supply of professional news media in Serbia is in severe shortage. However, this dissertation is primarily focused on the perspective of the audience, which these accounts typically do not reflect. Citizens can play an active role in the formation (and transformation) of democratic institutions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012), as Serbian example also shows. The importance of understanding the audience's perspectives in the context of current anti-establishment sentiments is also echoed in Holbert's (2019) call to political communication scholars to study the reasons for democratic deconsolidation and support for illiberal values.

Therefore, it is surprising that until recently, systematic examinations of news audiences in Serbia have been rare. A public opinion poll conducted in

2005[6] by the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), an NGO that monitors elections, asked citizens about their trust in different institutions using a 1–4 scale where higher numbers indicate more trust. The average trust for media-related targets like journalists (2.22), the press (2.21), and TV (2.19) was similar to the level of trust in the EU (2.17) and in trade unions (2.20). In comparison, the same poll found the church (2.97), the education system (2.91), the health-care system (2.86), and the armed forces (2.64) to be the most trusted, and the government (2.01), parliament (1.98), political parties (1.92), and politicians (1.78) to be the least trusted actors in Serbian society. Four years later, the European Value Study (EVS) found some signs of decline in Serbian citizens' trust in the media, although it is not possible to directly compare the two survey results since they used slightly different methodologies. The 2008 EVS[7] asked respondents about their confidence in the press on a 1–4 scale (from 1 = *no confidence* to 4 = *a great deal of confidence*). The average confidence score for the press was 1.72 with 88% of respondents reporting having not much or no confidence at all in the press. In this 2008 survey, citizens' assessments of the press came closer to those of the government (1.80) and parliament (1.74), but stayed

[6] http://www.cesid.rs/istrazivanja/
[7] https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/methodology-data-documentation/previous-surveys-1981-2008/survey-2008/

below confidence in the church (2.72), the education system (2.56), the health care system (2.33), or the armed forces (2.34). Yet, with respect to perceptions of corruption in different sectors, another poll conducted by TNS Medium Gallup in 2010[8] showed that Serbian citizens differentiated between media and political institutions at the end of the decade. This poll found that 53% of citizens thought the media were significantly or highly corrupt in Serbia, which was a significant increase from 48% a year before. The same poll revealed that most respondents perceived political parties (80%), the judiciary (70%), and the healthcare system (70%) as corrupt, while the least had such beliefs about the church (28%), the financial sector (34%), and public services (38%).

Analyses of citizens' views about news media became much more frequent in the second decade of the 21st century, but still mostly focused on media trust. For instance, a Eurobarometer survey includes items that ask respondents whether they tend to or tend not to trust different types of media. Using these data, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU)[9] calculates a net trust index (NTI) as the difference between the percentage of people who tend to and those who tend not to trust the media. Data are available for Serbia since 2012, and they show some oscillation but also indicate several

[8] http://www.acas.rs/predstavljanje-istrazivanja/
[9] https://www.ebu.ch/publications/research/login_only/report/trust-in-media

patterns (Table 1). For instance, the tendency to trust traditional media in Serbia is among lowest in Europe with the press being the least trusted type of media. The internet appears to be more trusted with an approximately equal number of those who tend to and those who tend not to trust it. On the other hand, trust in social media is also low, similar to trust in TV or radio. Since 2015, the EBU also started recording trust in media in general. In the observed period, between 11% and 15% of Serbian citizens expressed high trust in media in general. At the same time, the percentage of citizens who expressed low or no trust at all in media was much higher and oscillated between 47 and 55. These numbers are similar not only to those of other countries in the region but also to numbers of some more established democracies like the UK, France, or Spain. They are also consistent with a recent report by Ipsos Global Advisor (2019), which found that only 11% and 17% of Serbians have a fair amount or great deal of trust in print and electronic media, respectively, and ranked Serbia among least trusting audiences from 27 nations.

Several recent academic studies have scrutinized negative media perceptions in Serbia and provided some insight into their characteristics and causes. For instance, Pjesivac et al. (2016) found that distrusting the media has different connotations for different citizens in Serbia. In some cases, it is an expression of a lack of faith in the expertise of journalists. In other cases,

it takes the form of a lack of trust in journalistic selective practices. However, the authors also found that media distrust can connote a lack of confidence that journalism is even capable of being trustworthy. Another study (Pjesivac, 2017) found that the reasons for such widespread distrust in media lie in generally low levels of social trust and the perception that media workers are corrupt. A more recent study (Markov & Min, 2020) indicated that media trust is low because citizens are not satisfied with how the media monitor the government and provide a public forum. The same study also found that populist attitudes predict relatively higher trust in online news outlets compared to traditional media such as the public broadcaster.

In conclusion, Serbian citizens express predominately negative but complex perceptions of news media which are informed by the turbulent changes in Serbian political and media systems in recent years. This makes Serbia a justified case for studying the relationship between media cynicism and distrust. Although the lack of a systematic inquiry into media trust (or other media perceptions) in Serbia makes it impossible to make a strong claim, the existing data signal that public perceptions do not necessarily reflect the expert assessment of the media environment, as indicated by influential reports from organizations like Freedom House. At the same time, recent developments in Serbian media and political environments, as well as the public's dissatisfaction with established democratic institutions, are not a

unique phenomenon, and they represent a global trend experienced in diverse countries including Brazil, Hungary, the Philippines, Poland, Turkey, the UK, and the US. Therefore, the insight provided in this dissertation may be relevant beyond the local or regional context.

Table 1 Net trust index in Serbia according to media type 2012–2019

	Radio	TV	Print	Web	SNS
2012	-17	-15	-22	-9	/
2013	-10	-3	-18	8	/
2014	-12	-1	-32	7	-14
2015	-15	-18	-39	4	-21
2016	-20	-20	-36	-2	-20
2017	-25	-16	-41	1	-18
2018	-16	-13	-34	-6	-24
2019	-21	-6	-36	1	-22

Notes: Net trust index is calculated by subtracting the percentage of the population that tend not to trust a medium from the percentage of the population that tend to trust it. Source: European Broadcasting Union.

Chapter 3. Study 1 methods

Study 1 was conducted to answer the RQs raised in the previous chapter and examine the relationship between the empirical indicators of media distrust and cynicism. To this end, the first goal of Study 1 was to develop an index to measure media cynicism. The second goal was to collect and analyze the data appropriate to test the performance of the newly developed measure and its relationships with other variables of interest.

1. Media cynicism index development

1) Item generation

In order to develop a new measurement of media cynicism, various sources were used as models, including previous measures of cynicism in different fields (Agger et al., 1961; Guggenheim, Kwak, & Campbell, 2011; Pattyn et al., 2012; Wanous et al., 2000) and audience comments found in existing academic studies and online (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Pjesivac et al., 2016). Initially, 24 items were formulated to operationalize distinct components of media cynicism.[10] While formulating the items, special care

[10] Originally, an additional third component of the conceptual definition of media cynicism was proposed – negative emotions toward the news media. This component was suggested to reflect a frequently argued distinction between cynicism and distrust – that the former entails a stronger emotional connotation. However, this component received a substantial criticism from the panel of experts. One expert expressed concerns about whether it is possible to delineate the public's negative affect toward news media from emotions about events covered in the news. Another expert commented that by introducing this dimension,

was taken to capture the meaning behind the theoretically derived components of media cynicism and reflect on criticisms frequently voiced in the extant literature regarding the commonly used measures of trust, cynicism, and other relevant public perceptions (e.g., Eisinger, 2000).

One such criticism deals with the object of the perceptions that authors are interested in measuring (Engelke et al., 2019). In the current study, media cynicism is defined as a generalized animosity toward news media. This means that the appropriate object is the whole system of professional journalism. Although media systems are dynamic and fluctuating categories, previous research has shown that audiences possess a relevant schema representing their generalized conception of journalism (e.g., Ladd, 2012). In the proposed items, an attempt was made to use the same referents used by audiences in everyday life to denote generalized media targets, such as journalists, the media, or news media. Therefore, an important assumption is that the referents used in these items are all reflections of the same generalized object and not different targets referring to people (e.g., journalists) and organizations (e.g., news media).

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the focus of the definition shifts from the public's perceptions of media to personal feelings, while the definition of media cynicism becomes conflated with related phenomena, such as hostility. Reflecting on the experts' feedback, this dimension was excluded from the proposed definition. It was also determined that the remaining two components of media cynicism—perceived self-serving motives and pessimistic views about journalism—and their indicators already entail much stronger negative affective connotation compared to distrust.

2) Expert review

While creating indicators to measure media cynicism, special attention was paid to maximize the content validity of the measure, since not much prior work has been done on delineating indicators of media cynicism from media distrust. Content validity indicates the degree to which proposed indicators capture all content domains of the concept they are intended to measure (Babbie, 2014). A common method to assess and increase the content validity of a measure is to consult a panel of experts on the subject matter (see Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014; Haynes, Richard, & Kubany, 1995). Here, an expert was defined as a scholar who has published peer reviewed articles on trust, cynicism, and related perceptions in the context of media and politics in recent years. Following this general criterion, a list of 15 experts was compiled, including scholars who have published some of the most influential articles on relevant topics in leading communication and political science journals.

An initial invitation to assess the conceptual and operational definitions of media cynicism was sent on June 23, 2020. The experts were informed about the purpose of the study, the reason they were selected, and were asked to complete the evaluation questionnaire by July 24, 2020. Two weeks later, a reminder was sent to all experts who neither declined nor accepted the invitation.

The experts were asked to rate how relevant (from 1 = *not relevant* to 4 = *extremely relevant*) the components of the conceptual definition were in capturing the intended meaning of media cynicism and how relevant the proposed items were in measuring their respective components. Experts were also asked to offer additional comments regarding each component and item individually, or for the overall conceptual definition and index of media cynicism.

Within the requested period, one expert declined to participate, while five completed the questionnaire. Considering the relatively small number of proposed items, of primary interest was the experts' qualitative (open-ended) feedback to further improve the items. The quantitative scores were considered supplementary information rather than a criterion for elimination.

Feedback concerning the two components of the media cynicism definition was mostly positive. Two experts expressed concerns about whether the term "self-serving" as a description of motives in the first component is broad enough to encompass perceptions of political bias or the lack of independence in the media as a part of their perceived motives from the perspective of a cynic. However, "self-serving" was designated as a comprehensive descriptor that refers to diverse instrumental motives (e.g., financial, partisan, access-related) in contrast to expressive motives, and the label was not changed. Further, another expert criticized the decision to

name the second dimension “pessimistic views about journalism” arguing that the name should better reflect the essence of the dimension, i.e., the belief that the system is broken beyond repair. The name of this dimension was retained too, however, for consistency with other cynicism definitions (e.g., Wancous et al., 2000), and because pessimism reflects certainty that the system has failed and that it cannot be saved.

Finally, based on the experts’ feedback, 10 of 15 proposed media cynicism items were revised. Although they differ in the extent to which they changed the original item, the revisions were mostly concerned with rephrasing the items in such a way to better emphasize cynical perceptions and negative connotations (Table 2). For instance, the item “News organizations would do whatever they can to maximize their profits” was changed into “News organizations only operate to maximize their profits.” Whereas the original formulation could potentially be interpreted as a devotion to doing good business, the revised item places emphasis on the exclusivity of profit-generating motives in journalism.

Table 2 Original and revised items to measure media cynicism

Code	Original	Revised
	[Instructions] Thinking about the mainstream news media in general in Serbia (e.g., daily newspapers, news magazines,	**[Instructions]** Thinking about the mainstream news media in general in Serbia, to what extent do you agree or disagree with

	TV and radio newscasts), to what extent do you agree or disagree with following statements?	following statements? The news media refer to daily newspapers, news magazines, TV, radio, online news websites, and other news outlets produced by professional journalists.
CM1	News organizations would do whatever they can to maximize their profits.	News organizations only operate to maximize their profits.
CM2	Journalists are prepared to lie to us whenever it suits their purposes.	No revision
CM3	The news media pretend to care more about people than they actually do.	No revision
CM4	The news media intentionally report in a divisive way because it is more profitable.	No revision
CM5	The news media do not care who they hurt if it serves their interests.	The news media do not care about the damage their reporting will cause as long as it serves their interests.
CM6	News coverage is designed to please a few powerful bosses who secretly control the media.	The news media do not care about protecting the interests of regular people.
CM7	Even if some news reports appear professional, this is because it serves the news organization in some way and not because it protects the public's interests.	Even if a news report appears professional, this is only because the news organization had something to gain from it.
CM8	The idea that the news media could have integrity is laughable.	No revision
CP1	Journalism in this country has completely failed the public.	Journalism in this country always ends up failing the public.

CP2	There may be new media outlets on the market, but this will not essentially change the overall low quality of public information.	The system of professional journalism as we have it today will never be able to adequately inform the public.
CP3	Most of the measures that are intended to improve journalism in this country will not do much good.	Most of the measures that are intended to improve how the news media in this country cover the news will not do much good.
CP4	The news media in this country are only getting worse with time.	The news media in this country will never be better at informing the public.
CP5	Corruption will always be present in the news media in this country.	No revision
CP6	It does not really matter where you get the news from – they always conceal the most important things.	You can never get truly informed by reading the mainstream news in this country.
CP7	All journalists are bad – some are just worse than others.	No revision

Note: The codes CM and CP indicate that the item was developed to measure the perceived motives and pessimism components, respectively.

2. Web-based survey

1) Participants

In order to validate the developed measure of media cynicism, a web-based survey of adult Serbian citizens (N = 502) was conducted between August 17 and August 20, 2020. Online surveys allow multiple opportunities for presentation of questions, produce results quickly and at lower costs

compared to traditional survey methods, and may even provide better quality data as respondents can respond privately at their convenience. For these reasons, online surveys are frequently used in communication studies (e.g., Culver & lee, 2019; Livio & Cohen, 2018; Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay, 2015).

On the other hand, a major shortcoming of web-based surveys is that they typically use non-probability samples making the data less representative of the general population. The ratio of internet users in Serbia is 77.4%, which is somewhat below the European average of 82.5% but quite comparable to other countries in South and East Europe and well above the global average of 53.6%.[11] However, non-users tend to be predominately older, poorer, and less educated compared to users of the internet, which can produce bias in the data obtained through web-based survey. To partially remedy this problem, previous studies have assigned quotas to match the population census data with regard to age, sex, education, region, or race (e.g., Livio & Cohen, 2018; Stoycheff, 2013; Tsfati & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2018). According to the American Association for Public Opinion Research,[12] these kinds of corrections can reduce somewhere between 30%

[11] https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx
[12] https://www.aapor.org/Education-Resources/Election-Polling-Resources/Online-Panels.aspx

and 60% of the error introduced by the unrepresentativeness of the sample. Therefore, quotas for age, gender, and education were used in order to increase the similarity of the non-probability sample used in this study with the general population and improve the representativeness of the data.

The final sample comprised men (51%) and women (49%) almost equally. The average age of respondents was 38.5 (*SD* = 11.70), ranging from 18 to 70 years. As indicated above, due to the structure of the online panel from which the respondents were recruited, the sample underrepresented citizens above 65 years of age. In terms of regional representation, 27.1% of participants were from Vojvodina (*n* = 136), 25.5% from Belgrade (*n* = 128), 26.5% from Central-West Serbia (*n* = 133), and 20.9% from South-East Serbia (*n* = 105). More respondents reported living in urban (63.70%) compared to rural areas. The highest percentage of respondents reported completing a high-school education (42.2%), followed by university degree (35.1%), some college (14.5%), and graduate school (8.2%). Overall, the final sample is diverse and comparable to the general population in terms of gender, geographic region, and type of area, but it is younger and better educated than the general population.

2) Procedure

Ipsos Strategic Marketing, the polling agency used for data collection, runs a diverse online panel of approximately 35,000 participants in Serbia. Panel members occasionally participate in market or academic surveys to earn points which can later be exchanged for cash or prizes. An email invitation to participate in the survey was sent out to approximately 5,000 panel members who could participate given that the quota for their demographic profile was not filled. The number of points awarded to those who participated was worth approximately $2. After all quotas were filled and the desired number of respondents was reached, data collection was terminated.

The email invitation informed potential participants about the topic of the survey, the estimated time needed to fill out the questionnaire, and the number of points respondents could earn. Those who were interested in participating could do so by following the link in the email. There, they were first presented with detailed information about the survey, including how the data will be handled, stored, and used, as well as information regarding the benefits and risks of participating. After reading the information, participants were asked whether they consent to participate in the study. The study design, including the procedure regarding expressing informed consent, was approved under Korea University IRB protocol number IRB-2020-0121, from August 4, 2020.

Those who gave their consent to participate in the study could access the questionnaire. The questions were divided into blocks to reduce the burden on respondents. Variables were distributed in blocks in such a way to minimize priming effects. The composition of variables within a block was fixed, but the item order (where items had the same set of instructions) was randomized for each respondent to reduce the order effect. The questionnaire was originally developed in English and translated into Serbian by the author with the assistance of a professional translator and editor. Survey items were intended to measure the main variables (media trust and media cynicism), their predictors and correlates, demographics, and other control variables. All variables were measured with a 7-point scale unless otherwise noted. The complete questionnaire is available in Appendix A.

3) Measures

(1) Main variables

Media trust (M = 2.59, SD = 1.30, α = .85) was measured using a common five-item instrument whose origins trace back to the research on media credibility in the 1980s and 1990s (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Meyer, 1988; West, 1994). In the current study, the instrument was adapted according to work by Strömbäck et al. (2020) to measure trust in news media in general so that it would have a target compatible to that in the media

cynicism index. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with five statements including “The news media are fair when covering the news” and “The news media are unbiased when covering the news.” In the subsequent analyses, if the term media distrust was used, it indicates that the media trust index was reverse-coded.

Media cynicism was measured using the 15 items developed according to the previously described procedure. Eight items were developed to measure the perceived self-serving motives component including “Journalists are prepared to lie to us whenever it suits their purposes” and “The news media do not care about the damage their reporting will cause as long as it serves their interests.” Additionally, seven more items were developed to measure another component—pessimistic views about journalism—including “Journalism in this country always ends up failing the citizens” and “Corruption will always be present in news media in this country.” A complete and detailed description of the procedures used to provide initial evidence of the reliability and validity of these measures will be presented in the next chapter. Based on these analyses, the total number of items was reduced to 10: five representing pessimism about journalism and five representing the belief in the self-serving motives of media actors. Further, it was determined that the best way to measure media cynicism is to model it as a second-order latent variable comprising two first-order factors.

This means that media cynicism is not directly observable but can be inferred through the factors regarding perceived motives of media actors and pessimism about journalism. Although media cynicism cannot be directly measured, second-order factor score weights were used to provide a closer estimate for the use of the index outside of structural equation modeling (*M* = .49, *SD* = .08, range = .09–.53).

(2) Antecedents of media distrust and media cynicism

Generalized (social) trust (*M* = 2.83, *SD* = 1.39, α = .82) was measured with a standardized three-item instrument used frequently in large-N surveys. Example items include "In your opinion, to what extent is it generally possible to trust people" and "Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair." *Perceived media professionalism* (*M* = 2.43, *SD* = 1.18, α = .85) was measured using a method similar to that of previous research (Fawzi, 2019; Min, 2016; Peifer, 2018) with five items probing Serbian citizens' opinions about different aspects of professional news reporting (e.g., "When tackling important social issues, Serbian media do not favor any side, but report in a neutral manner"). *Perceived media responsiveness* (*M* = 2.87, *SD* = 1.29, α = .86) was measured using the operational definition proposed by van der Wurff and Schoenbach (2014). Respondents were asked to report how

successful news media are at responding to audience complaints, considering the wishes of their audiences, building up good relationships with their audiences, and siding with ordinary people when reporting on conflict. Finally, the name generator technique was used to measure *hostility toward media in respondents' discussion networks* (M = 3.57, SD = .83, α = .69). First, respondents were asked to report the initials or nicknames of up to three people with whom they discussed politics and current events in the last six months. Then, for each discussant, respondents were asked to recall how often they heard them criticize the work of news media, the quality of news, or the influence of media on society (from 1 = *never* to 5 = *every day*). Media hostility in one's discussion network was then calculated as the average score to the latter question. It is important to note that 389 respondents (77.5% of the overall sample) reported at least one discussant.

(3) Consequences of media distrust and media cynicism

News media exposure was measured as the number of days in the previous week during which a respondent used ten different channels to get informed about politics. EFA was performed on ten items using the principal component (PC) extraction and direct oblimin rotation method, which yielded three components with eigenvalues larger than 1. *Mainstream news exposure* (M = 4.08, SD = 2.05, α = .76) comprises exposure to a public

broadcasting service, print media, and network TV. These are the most popular and long-lasting news outlets in the Serbian media environment (IREX, 2019). The second component was labeled *exposure to alternative news media* and includes following news on cable TV, websites and apps of traditional media, and online-only news outlets (M = 5.07, SD = 1.08, α = .71). Some of the most popular cable TV and digital-born outlets practice investigative ("watchdog") journalism frequently critical of the government. Therefore, these outlets are not an alternative to professional journalism, but to the mainstream news outlets in Serbia, which are mostly recognizable for their strong pro-government bias or more balanced and neutral coverage (IREX, 2019). Finally, *social media-based news exposure* (M = 6.03, SD = 1.99, α = .74) refers to using messaging apps, social media, and online video sharing platforms for information. *News engagement* (M = 1.84, SD = .71, α = .87) was measured with six items asking respondents how frequently (from 1 = *never* to 5 = *every day*) they engage in behaviors such as sharing, commenting, or liking the news. Respondents expressed their *willingness to pay for the news* (M = 2.58, SD = 1.38, α = .75) by responding to four questions asking how likely they are to pay for the access to news on different platforms (e.g., in print, online, cable).

Political trust (M = 2.41, SD = 1.59, α = .94) was measured as the average of four indicators asking respondent how much trust they have in the

president, the government, the national assembly, and political parties in Serbia. Finally, to measure *political participation*, respondents were asked to select from the following list which activities they participated in during the previous year: voting in elections, attending a rally, participating in demonstrations, signing a petition, donating money to a political cause, and participating in campaigns, party committees, and other types of political groups. However, Chronbach's alpha for all items was .37, indicating low reliability. The item "voting in elections" most adversely affected reliability and was therefore removed from further analysis. The summated score of the remaining five items was taken as the indicator of political participation (M = 0.81, SD = 1.00, range = 0–4, α = .53).

3. Analytical strategy

1) Examining the dimensionality of media distrust and cynicism

The focus of RQ1 and RQ2 was to examine the properties of the newly developed measure of media cynicism and its distinctiveness from media distrust. To answer these questions, the sample was randomly split in half (n = 251), and EFA and CFA were performed on the different subsets of the sample. EFA was used on one half to explore the structure of the data and eliminate items with problematic communalities and factor loadings. Communality shows the amount of variance that an indicator shares with the

factor solution and should be above .5 (Hair et al., 2014). According to the same authors, factor loadings of .5 and above can be considered practically significant. Therefore, only indicators with factor loadings of at least .5 and without cross-loadings (simultaneously loading significantly on more than one factor) were retained.

CFA was then conducted on the second half of the sample to test the convergent and discriminant validity by estimating and comparing fit indices of alternative measurement models (Figure 3). This analytical strategy has been commonly used in recent public opinion research with similar purposes (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005; Tsfati & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2018). Measurement model A in Figure 3 is based on the hypothesis that media distrust fully captures the audience's cynical views about news media. If this is the case, indicators of both media cynicism and media distrust will be influenced by the same underlying factor. This would mean that media cynicism is a redundant variable that does not constitute any meaningful independent contribution to the understanding of media perceptions.

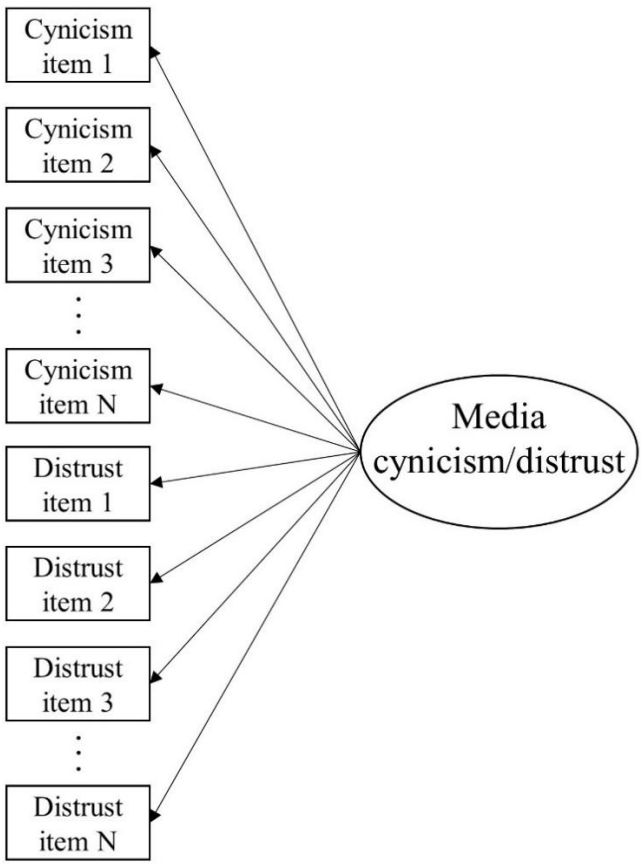
An alternative hypothesis, endorsed in this dissertation, posits that a meaningful distinction between media distrust and media cynicism exists and will be reflected in the structure of empirical data. This hypothesis is represented in Model B in Figure 3. In it, indicators of media distrust and media cynicism load separately on their respective factors, which are

allowed to correlate. If fit indices of Model B show a significant improvement over Model A, this will indicate that media cynicism can and should be differentiated from media distrust. At the same time, since the two perceptions have a partial theoretical overlap, a significant correlation between the two factors should also be expected.

Commonly used cut-off criteria for goodness-of-fit (GOF) measures proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999) suggest that a comparative fit index (CFI) of .95 and above, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) of .6 and below, and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) of .8 and below indicate models of acceptable fit. At the same time, it is frequently debated how sensitive GOF indices are to sample size and model complexity (Weston & Gore, 2006). Hair et al. (2014) suggest reporting one incremental (e.g., CFA or Tucker–Lewis index (TLI)) and one absolute index (e.g., RMSEA or SRMR) in addition to χ^2 and associated degree of freedom to provide sufficient information to assess the model fit. Absolute fit indices estimate how well a specified model represents the data irrespective of any alternative model. In contrast, incremental fit indices show the improvement achieved by comparing a specified model to a baseline model. To establish whether a model has an acceptable fit, the authors further suggest adjusting the cutoff values based on research characteristics. For models with more than 12 and fewer than 30 indicators

as well as more than 250 cases, the authors suggest that a good model fit should be indicated by a CFI above .95 and an RMSEA below .7. These characteristics correspond to the measurement models in this study, and the associated cutoff values are used to assess their fit.

Model A. One-factor model



Model B. Two-factor oblique model

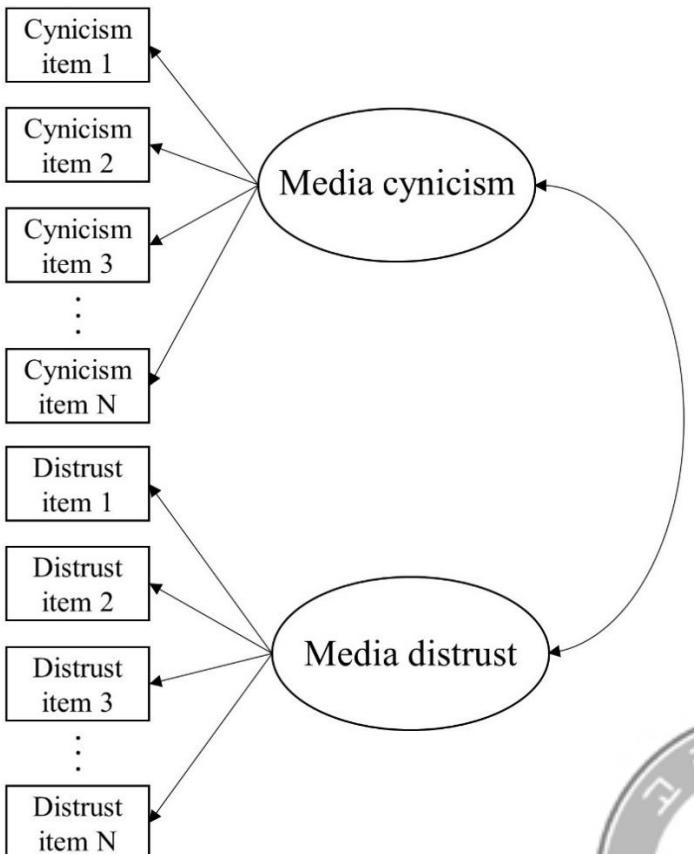
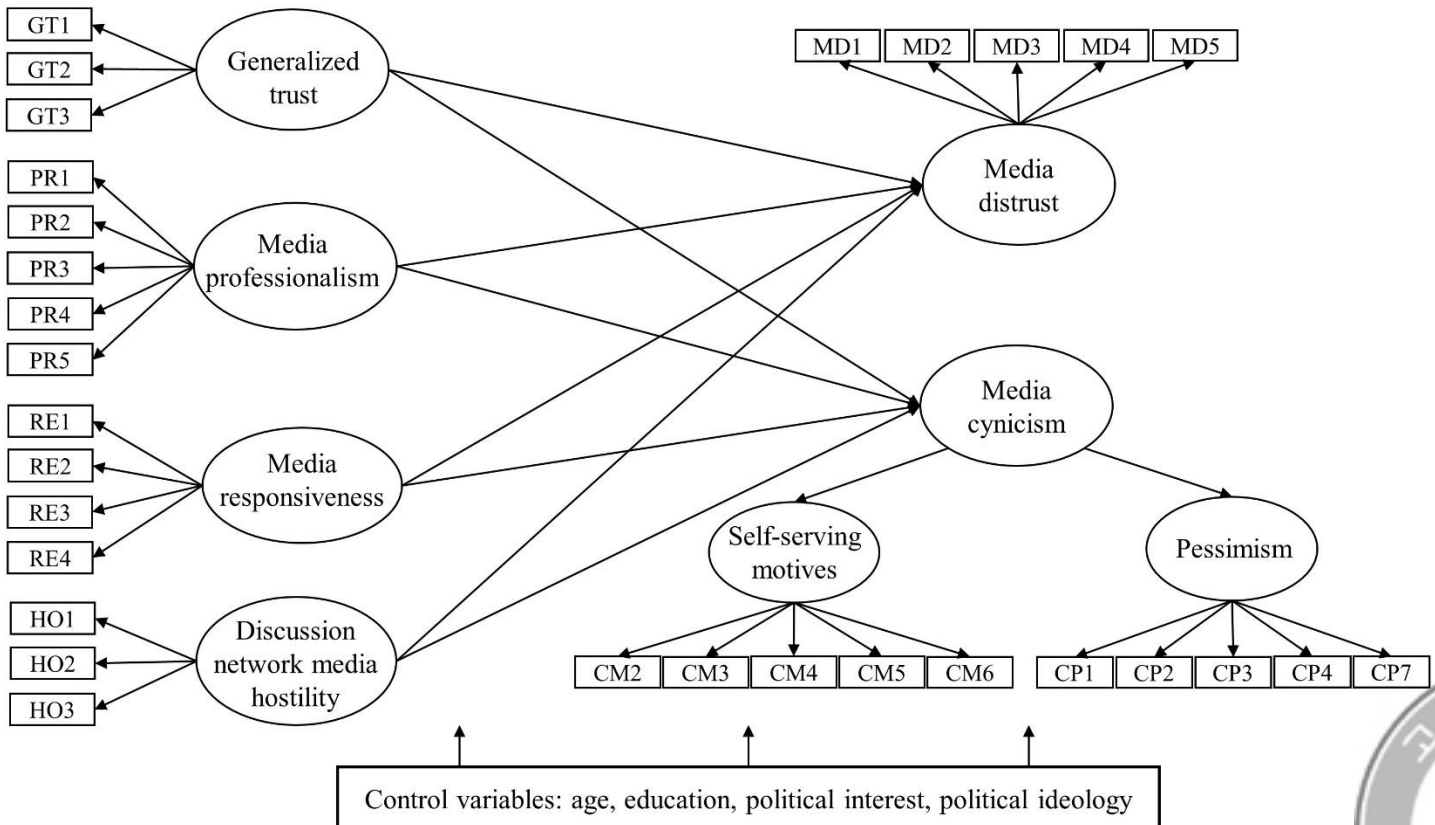


Figure 3 Alternative measurement models of media distrust and/or media cynicism.

Model A. Antecedents of media distrust and cynicism



Model B. Consequences of media distrust and cynicism

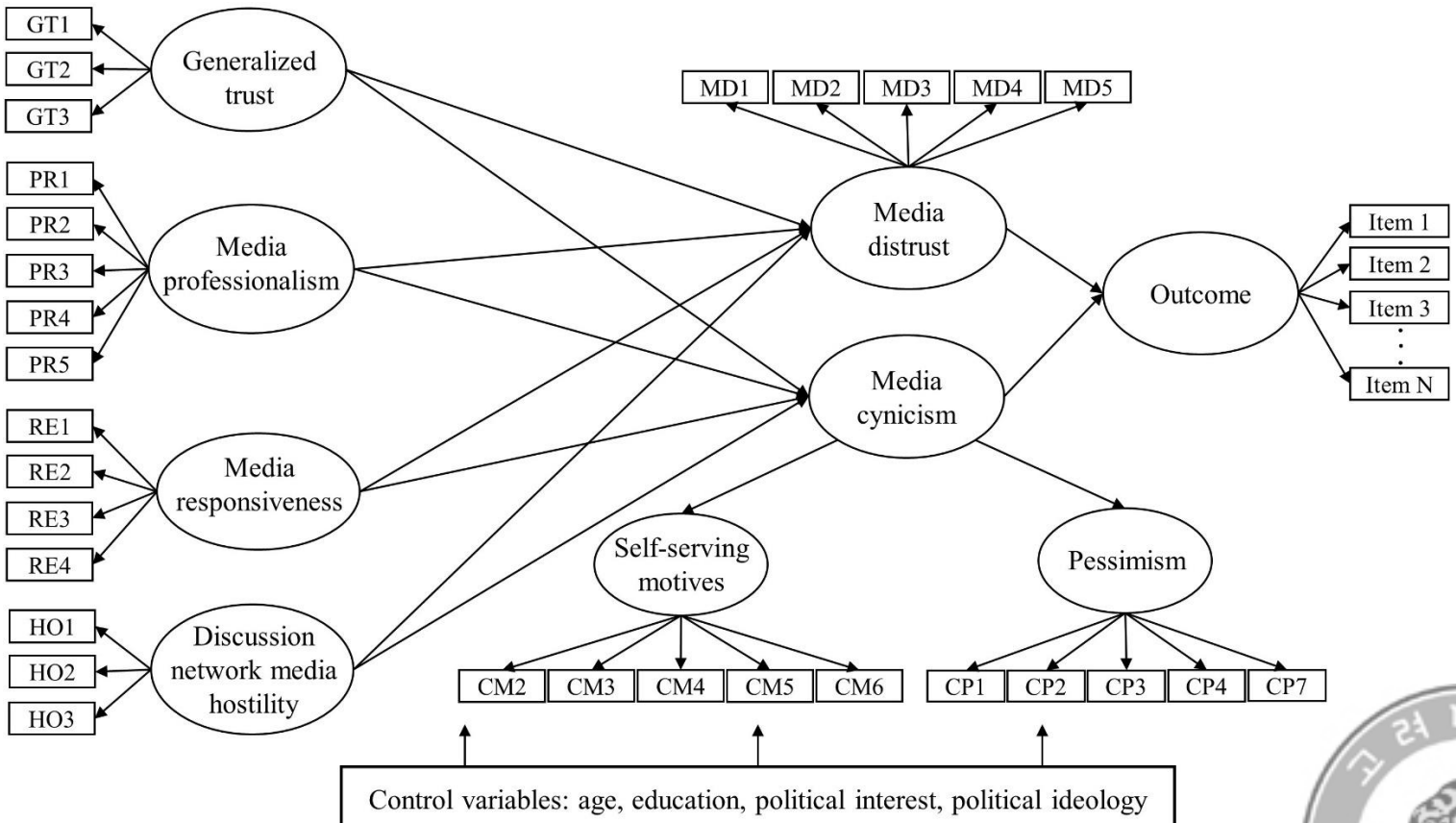


Figure 4 Theoretical models testing antecedents and consequences of media distrust and cynicism.

2) Specifying structural equation models

After determining the reliability and validity of the media cynicism index, the hypothesized antecedents and consequences of media distrust and cynicism (RQ3 to RQ6) were examined by estimating several structural equation models (SEMs). The base theoretical models are presented in Figure 4.

Model A was designed to estimate the influence of four hypothesized antecedents on media cynicism and distrust simultaneously. The four exogenous variables in the model are generalized trust, perceived media professionalism, perceived media responsiveness, and media hostility in one's discussion group. The model also includes four control variables—age, education, political interest, and political ideology—which are commonly associated with differences in perceptions about media and politics (e.g., Pinkleton & Austin, 2004). To account for other unmeasured predictors and reduce bias in the estimates, all exogenous variables were correlated. The disturbances of media distrust and media cynicism were correlated for the same reason.

The purpose of Model B was to estimate hypothesized consequences of media distrust and cynicism. Model A and Model B are equivalent, differing only in that Model B includes a different hypothesized outcome related to news exposure, news engagement, willingness to pay for the news, political

trust, and political participation. Model B is the base model and only includes the key relationships of interest for this study. The structure of the model, however, includes other potential and, at least in some cases, plausible paths. The model implies that media distrust and cynicism could play a mediating role between their antecedents and consequences, creating a number of potential triads. Therefore, direct paths could exist between the antecedents and consequences of media distrust and cynicism. In some cases, these paths are quite logical and theoretically justified. For instance, evaluation of media performance could also directly influence news exposure (and not only through media distrust and/or cynicism). This is because the more satisfied people are with the performance of professional journalism, the more value they see in their reporting, which should increase their motivation to use mainstream media.

Even though estimating direct paths between the antecedents and consequences of media cynicism/trust is not the focus of this inquiry, these paths should be addressed in order to more accurately specify the model and reduce bias in assessing the influence of media distrust/cynicism on relevant variables. To determine which direct paths should be drawn, this study followed a similar approach to that used by Tsfati and Cohen (2005) based on testing the chi-square difference for relevant nested models. Chi-square of the base model was calculated as a reference point. Then, a direct path was

added from each antecedent to the endogenous variable predicted by the model. Adding a path results in the reduction of one degree of freedom and is only justified if it significantly improves the model. To calculate this, the chi-square difference between a model with a direct path and the base model was tested. If the chi-square difference is significant, it is justified to retain the path, otherwise, it makes sense to remove it. Models with added paths can only be compared with the base model (and not between themselves) as they are nested only in the base model. This procedure was repeated for each outcome variable, and only direct paths with a significantly different chi-square from that in the base model were retained.

Based on the previously specified models, IBM SPSS Amos was used to estimate path coefficients using the maximum likelihood method. SEMs specified in this study have more than 250 cases and more than 30 observed indicators. Such models should have an RMSEA below .07 and a CFI of .90 or higher to indicate acceptable fit (Hair et al., 2014).

Chapter 4. Study 1 results

1. Media cynicism index validation

1) Item analysis

Item analysis found that all proposed 15 indicators of media cynicism show acceptable corrected item-total correlations, but most items display a moderate to high negative skew (Table 3). According to Hair et al. (2014), skewness larger than |1| is considered substantial, although it may have a negligible influence considering the sample size. Problems may still arise in further analysis as multivariate normality may not be achieved due to univariate non-normality. Seven media cynicism items had skewness values below -1. However, given the exploratory stage of the media cynicism index development, a decision was made not to exclude these items, but to transform them to reduce the deviation from normality. This was achieved by taking the cubed terms.

2) EFA

A randomly selected one half of the sample (n = 251) was used for EFA. Initially, all 15 original media cynicism items were entered with the PC extraction method and direct oblimin rotation. This solution resulted in three components with eigenvalues above 1 explaining 66.3% of variance. However, two items had communalities below .5 (CM1 and CP5), and two

more items had substantial cross-loadings (CM7 and CP6). These items were removed, and EFA was repeated with the remaining 11 items, extracting two components with eigenvalues above 1 and 66.5% of variance explained. However, item CM8 was deleted due to low communality (.36). The final ten media cynicism items loaded on two components which account for 70.1% of variance. All items had communalities greater than .5 and factor loadings greater than .7 with no cross-loading issues.

The main argument in this dissertation is that media distrust and media cynicism present related but distinct perceptions. To substantiate this, it is important to show that media distrust and cynicism items load on factors that are correlated but distinguishable. For this reason, five media distrust items were added to the EFA of the remaining ten media cynicism items. Three components with eigenvalues above 1 were extracted with 69.1% of variance explained (Table 4, Model A). Media distrust items loaded on a separate factor from media cynicism items, which loaded on two dimensions for perceived self-serving motives and pessimistic views about journalism. All items had acceptable communalities and high factor loadings.

To further show whether media distrust and cynicism items load separately, the same EFA was repeated with the number of extracted factors set to two (Table 4, Model B). Media distrust and cynicism items loaded separately, as could be expected based on the previously outlined theoretical

arguments. All items appeared to have relatively high factor loadings, but two of them had communalities below .5 (CP4 and CP7).

3) CFA

In the next stage of the analysis, the structure of the data was examined by performing CFA on the other randomly selected half of the sample (n = 251). To understand which structure best represents the data, several competing measurement models were tested. Of primary interest was the comparison between the two hypothesized models (models A and B in Figure 5). Additionally, orthogonal and oblique models were compared to identify which better describes the relationship between media cynicism and distrust, and whether media cynicism can better be explained as a hierarchical factor (models C, D, and E in Figure 5).

A single-factor model showed poor model fit (χ^2/df = 7.30, CFI = .723, RMSEA = .159) and indicated that the variance in indicators of media cynicism and distrust cannot be attributed to a uniform underlying dimension. In contrast, a two-factor oblique model showed an improvement in all model fit indices (χ^2/df = 4.36, CFI = .854, RMSEA = .116). The test of chi-square difference showed that the improvement of the fit in Model B is significant (Table 5). However, the two-factor model still did not achieve acceptable GOF values. Modeling media cynicism and distrust as orthogonal

(Model C) only decreased the model fit (χ^2/df = 5.50, CFI = .802, RMSEA = .134). A comparison of the three models illustrates that considering media distrust and cynicism as unrelated would not be appropriate. At the same time, a simple two-factor model does not provide a satisfactory illustration of media distrust and cynicism, although it provides a better explanation compared to a unidimensional model.

To further examine the dimensionality of media cynicism, an alternative possibility was explored – that there is a hierarchical structure in the data. A common hierarchical alternative to the previous models is a latent factor (Figure 5, Model D). In the current case, it could be argued that media cynicism is a second-order latent factor comprising two first-order factors: perceived self-interest of news media and pessimism about journalism. This structure would mean that media cynicism cannot be directly observed but can be inferred through the two first-order factors. This is a plausible explanation, and it is consistent with an influential conceptualization of media trust as a second-order latent factor (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). However, the previous theoretical analysis yielded only two dimensions of media cynicism that could be considered first-order factors in a hierarchical structure. Modeling a second-order latent factor would require three first-order factors for the model to be just-identified (Kline, 2016). However, Chen, Hayes, Carver, Laurenceau, and Zhang (2012, p. 226) describe two

situations in which it is possible to identify a second order factor using only two first-order factors. The first one is when the loadings of the second-order factor are equally constrained. The other is when the second order factor is related with an external variable. Since the purpose of this dissertation is to consider media cynicism and distrust simultaneously and in relationship with other variables, the latter applies to the current case. This specification is consistent with recent research (e.g., Choi, 2016; Swedler et al., 2015). However, it should be noted that if this study intended only to test the media cynicism measurement model, another hierarchical structure, such as a bifactor model (see Chen, West, & Sousa, 2006), might have been more appropriate.

When cynicism is modeled as a second-order factor and correlated with media distrust (Model D), the solution shows a superior model fit compared to the previous models (χ^2/df = 2.10, CFI = .953, RMSEA = .066). Further, the model fit is acceptable based on guidelines by Hair et al. (2014). The coefficient between media distrust and cynicism is .71. Again, allowing media cynicism and distrust to correlate freely is justified as the fit of the orthogonal model (Model E) deteriorates below acceptable values (χ^2/df = 3.25, CFI = .902, RMSEA = .095).

Table 3 Item analysis of the 15 indicators originally proposed to measure media cynicism

Item	*M*	*SD*	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Skewness (*SD* = .11)	Kurtosis (*SD* = .22)	Skew after transformation (cubed term)
CM1	5.62	1.42	.52	-.95	.42	
CM2	6.17	1.24	.66	-1.70	2.88	-.85
CM3	6.04	1.28	.69	-1.41	1.63	-.64
CM4	6.04	1.29	.65	-1.40	1.59	-.65
CM5	6.08	1.37	.60	-1.80	3.21	-.81
CM6	5.94	1.36	.71	-1.36	1.62	-.53
CM7	5.17	1.55	.64	-.47	-.67	
CM8	4.90	1.76	.55	-.47	-.62	
CP1	4.79	1.61	.74	-.54	-.15	
CP2	5.30	1.55	.73	-.78	.12	
CP3	4.99	1.55	.71	-.44	-.28	
CP4	4.42	1.78	.61	-.30	-.71	
CP5	5.74	1.50	.65	-1.08	.49	-.35
CP6	5.78	1.56	.62	-1.19	.68	-.48
CP7	3.30	1.83	.51	.32	-.83	

Note: CM and CP codes indicate items intended to measure perceived self-serving motives of media actors and pessimism about journalism, respectively. See Appendix A for item wordings.

Table 4 EFA of media cynicism and media distrust indicators

	A Component			B Component	
	1	2	3	1	2
CM2	**.86**	-.09	.05	**.82**	-.12
CM3	**.86**	-.07	.04	**.82**	-.09
CM4	**.90**	.05	-.09	**.74**	.02
CM5	**.79**	.11	.02	**.74**	.09
CM6	**.78**	.03	.08	**.78**	.01
CP1	.14	.04	**.76**	**.74**	.06
CP2	.12	.19	**.67**	**.65**	.21
CP3	.12	.10	**.73**	**.70**	.12
CP4	-.05	-.03	**.87**	**.66**	.00
CP7	-.06	-.08	**.81**	**.60**	-.05
MD1	.01	**.78**	-.11	-.08	**.78**
MD2	.11	**.82**	.07	.16	**.82**
MD3	.01	**.81**	-.08	-.05	**.81**
MD4	.02	**.84**	.10	.10	**.84**
MD5	-.10	**.69**	.13	.02	**.70**

Notes: Factor loadings > .50 are in boldface. A: The number of components extracted based on eigenvalues larger than 1. PC extraction, pattern matrix after oblimin rotation with 6 iterations. 69.1% of variance explained. B: The number of components fixed to 2. PC extraction, pattern matrix after oblimin rotation with 4 iterations. 58.7% of variance explained. CM, CP, and MD codes indicate items intended to measure perceived self-serving motives of media actors, pessimism about journalism, and media distrust, respectively. See Appendix A for item wordings.

Of all tested measurement models, the model that fits the data the best is the one in which media cynicism is modeled as the second-order factor and

is allowed to freely correlate with media distrust (Model D). Internal consistency of the model was examined by calculating composite reliability (CR), which measures within-item consistency, taking into account factor loadings and measurement error. The CR for every factor in the model was above the recommended threshold of .70 (perceived motives = .89, pessimism about journalism = .86, media cynicism = .83, media distrust = .85), indicating acceptable reliability of the measure (Hair et al., 2014). Furthermore, examination of average variance extracted (AVE) suggested that the model has acceptable convergent validity. AVE shows the amount of variance in indicators, which is accounted for by the latent factor. A common cutoff value for AVE is .5 with greater values indicating that the amount of the variance explained by the latent factor is larger than the remaining error (Hair et al., 2014). All factors in Model D meet this criterion (perceived motives = .61, pessimism about journalism = .55, media cynicism = .71, and media distrust = .55), suggesting acceptable convergent validity.

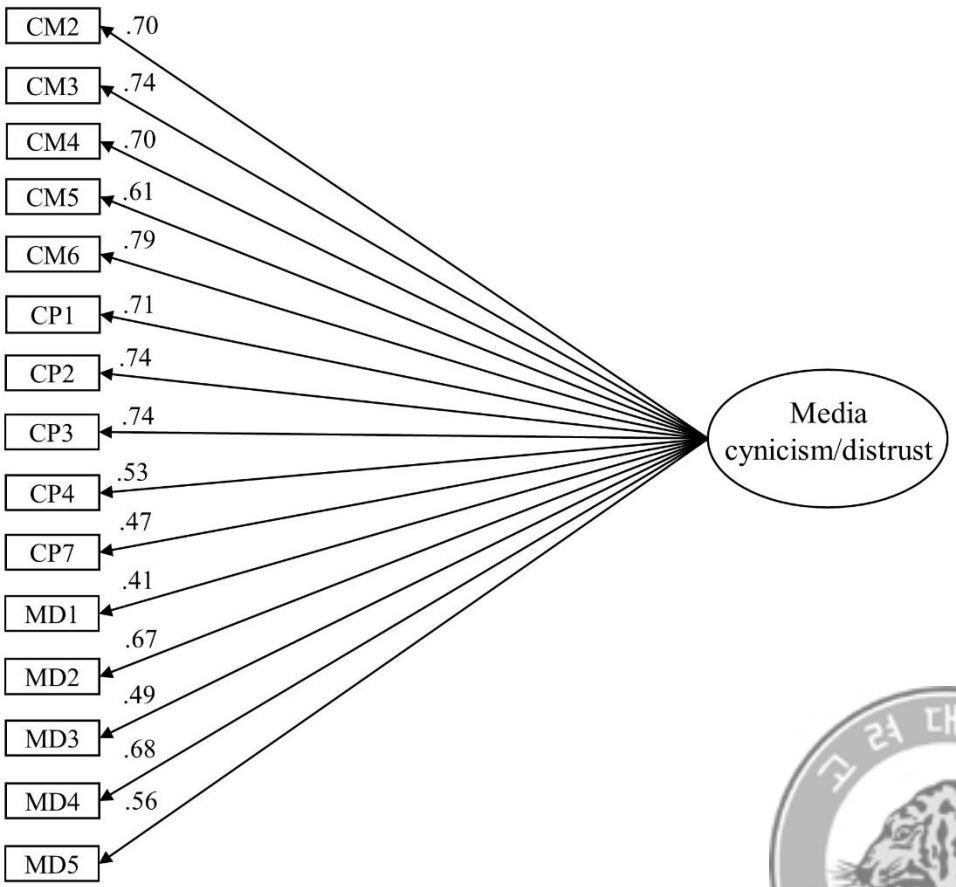
In conclusion, in exploring RQ1, some evidence was found that the final ten items present a reliable and valid measure of media cynicism, which should be modeled as a second-order latent variable. The EFA and CFA results consistently showed that media distrust and media cynicism items always load better on their respective factors rather than on the same factor (Table 4, Table 5), providing initial evidence of discriminant validity (RQ2).

Table 5 Model fit indices for competing measurement models

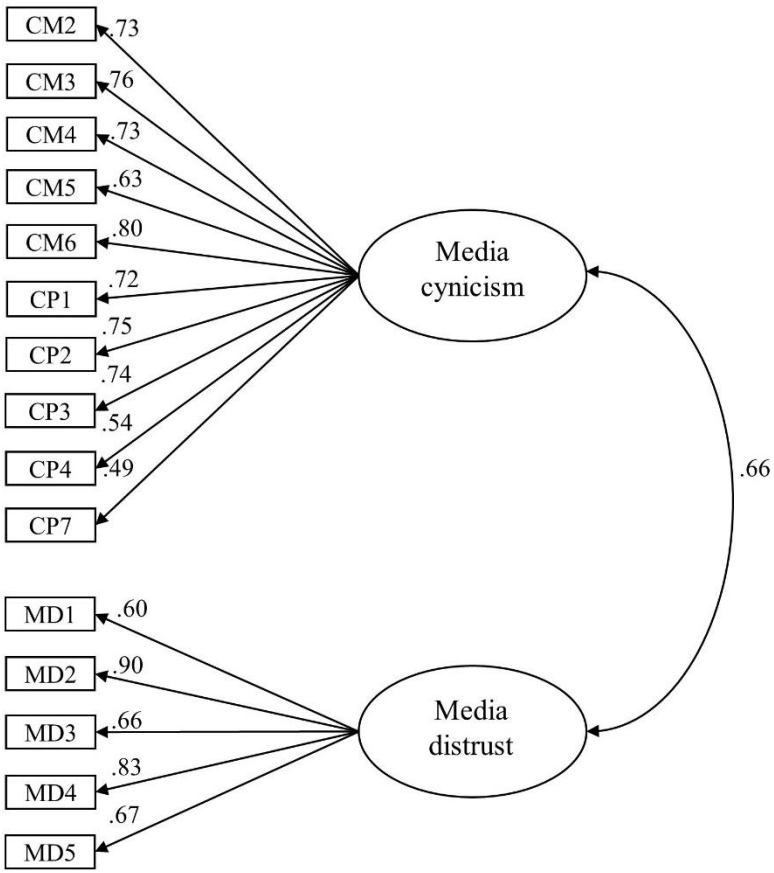
	χ^2/df	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	AIC	Δdf	$\Delta\chi^2$
A	7.30	.723	.159	.102	717.17	A vs. B: 1	268.98*
B	4.36	.854	.116	.074	450.19		
C	5.50	.802	.134	.227	555.47	C vs. B: 1	107.30*
D	2.10	.953	.066	.052	248.33		
E	3.25	.902	.095	.221	351.30	E vs. D: 2	106.97*

Notes: A = one-factor model; B = two-factor oblique model; C = two-factor orthogonal model; D = second-order oblique model; E = second-order orthogonal model.
*$p < .05$.

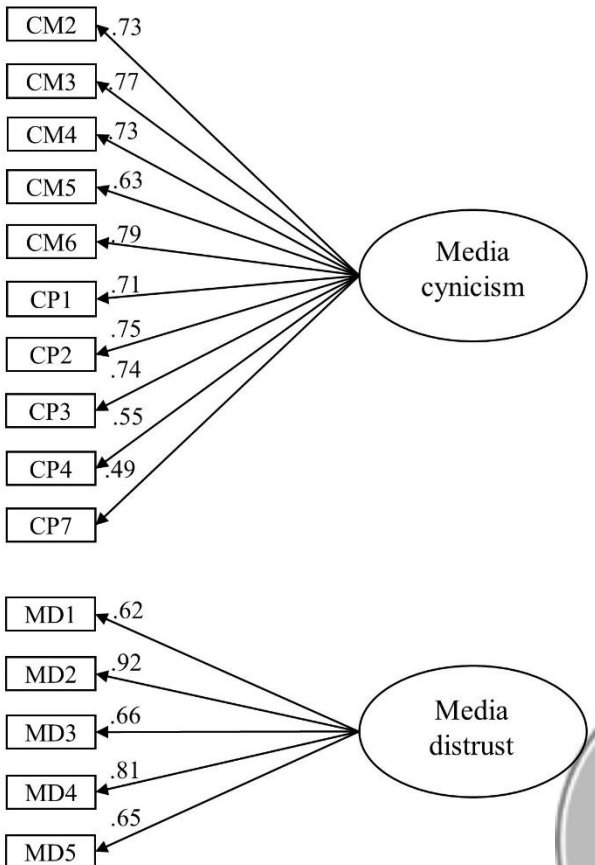
Model A. Unidimensional measurement model of media cynicism/distrust



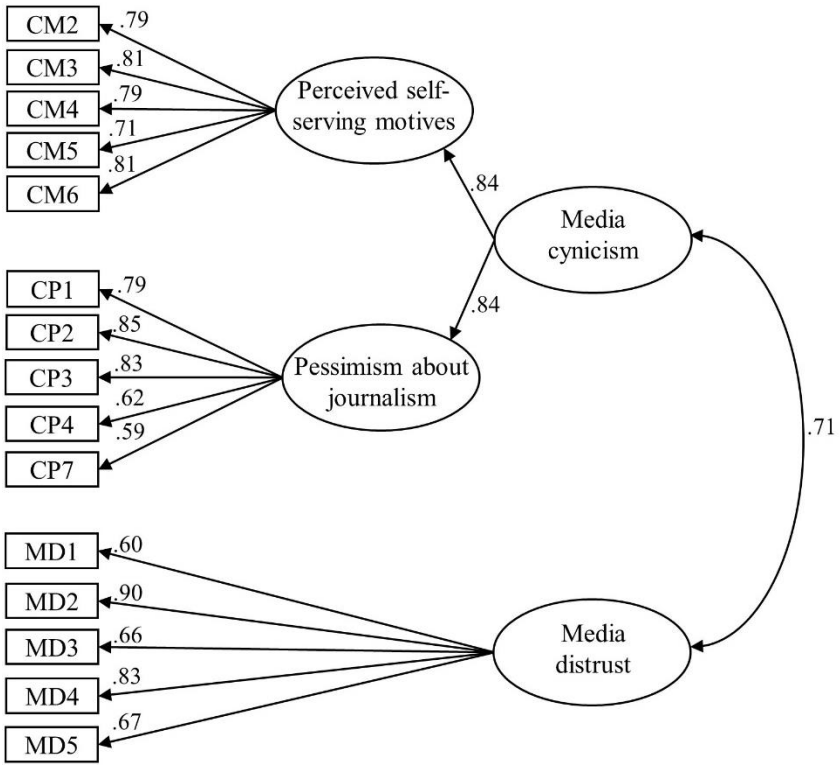
Model B. Two-factor oblique model of media cynicism and media distrust



Model C. Two-factor orthogonal model of media cynicism and media distrust



Model D. Media cynicism as second-order factor oblique to media distrust



Model E. Media cynicism as second-order factor orthogonal to media distrust

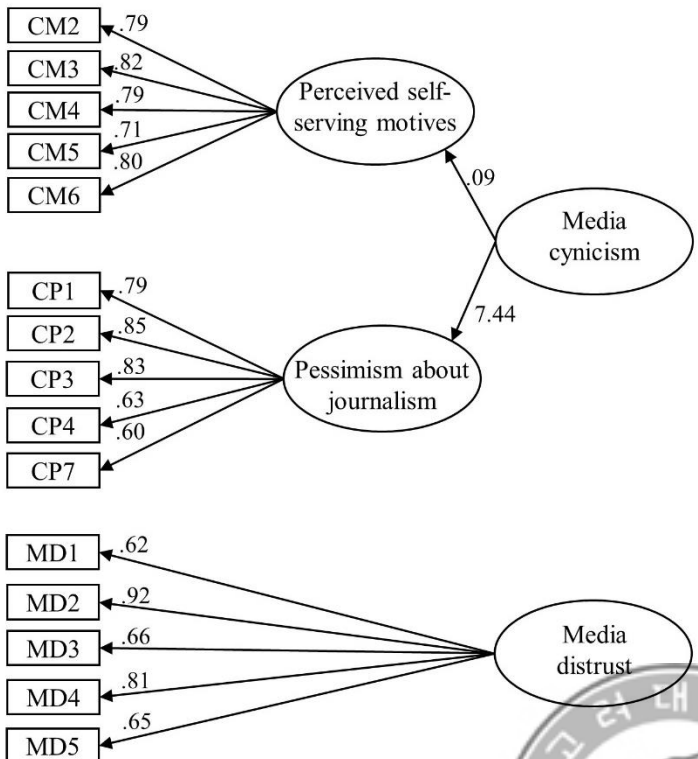


Figure 5 Competing measurement models of media distrust and cynicism estimated using CFA. Entries are standardized coefficient estimates.

Table 6 Correlation matrix for media cynicism, media distrust, and their hypothesized predictors and outcomes

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1													
2	.51**												
3	-.29**	-.14**											
4	-.55**	-.72**	.20**										
5	-.46**	-.53**	.19**	.62**									
6	.36**	.36**	-.04	-.40**	-.37**								
7	-.21**	-.34**	.01	.36**	.27**	-.16**							
8	-.01	.02	.07	.02	.07	.14**	.45**						
9	.06	-.05	-.01	.04	.05	.09	.27**	.37**					
10	.04	-.01	.03	.08	.10*	.13**	.29**	.37**	.40**				
11	-.21**	-.15**	.10*	.22**	.24**	-.04	.47**	.41**	.29**	.40**			
12	-.45**	-.57**	.16**	.64**	.47**	-.37**	.46**	.10*	.08	.05	.24**		
13	.14**	.17**	.05	-.22**	-.13**	.23**	-.09*	.16**	.13**	.32**	.11*	-.18**	

Notes: 1: Media cynicism, 2: Media distrust, 3: Generalized trust, 4: Media professionalism, 5: Media responsiveness, 6: Discussion network media hostility, 7: Mainstream news exposure, 8: Alternative news exposure, 9: Social media-based news exposure, 10: News engagement, 11: WTP for the news, 12: Political trust, 13: Political participation.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

2. Predictors of media distrust and media cynicism

After determining the best way to measure media cynicism, the analysis explored differences in predictors of media cynicism and distrust,[13] which was the focus of RQ3 and RQ4. The SEM predicting media distrust and cynicism (Figure 6) achieved acceptable model fit (χ^2/df = 1.66, CFI = .960, RMSEA = .036), and it was used to estimate hypothesized relationships.

The data suggest that the perception of journalistic output as professional is negatively correlated with distrust in news media (b = -.78, SE = .08, p < .001). In fact, among all four hypothesized predictors, perceived professionalism was the only one that displayed a significant relationship with media distrust. Therefore, the data indicate that trust in news media among Serbian citizens is primarily a function of citizens' assessments of objectivity, balance, and accuracy in news reporting. This finding provides further support for the performance theories of media trust.

The remaining factors were not able to explain any additional variability in media distrust beyond professionalism assessments. Contrary to some previous research (e.g., Pjesivac, 2017), the SEM in this study found that generalized trust (b = .02, SE = .03, p = .628) was not significantly associated with media distrust. This means that widespread media distrust in

[13] The entire sample from Study 1 (N = 502) was used for this and following analyses.

Serbia (and potentially other countries) cannot be simply attributed to citizens' low level of general trust toward others. Perceived responsiveness (b = -.02, SE = .06, p = .732) also failed to predict media distrust, indicating the limited potential of commonly suggested methods to reduce distrust through outreach to audiences and increased communication. Finally, the amount of media hostility in one's discussion network (b = .12, SE = .08, p = .140) could also not reliably predict media distrust. This finding indicates that elite criticisms of news media (Ladd, 2012) may be more successful at reducing media trust compared to the same criticisms coming from one's immediate surroundings. Alternatively, the findings of this study may also indicate that the influence of one's social network on media trust identified in previous research among young adults (Ognyanova, 2019) does not necessarily generalize to the population at large.

In contrast to media distrust, the analysis in this study indicates that media cynicism may be susceptible to a wider range of factors. Similar to media distrust, the strongest predictor was perceived media professionalism (b = -.39, SE = .07, p < .001), indicating the importance of negative experiences for the formation of cynicism (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). However, experiences with news media only provide a partial explanation for what makes people cynical toward news media. Unlike media distrust, cynicism was also significantly associated with the level of generalized trust

(b = -.18, SE = .04, p < .001). This suggests that generalized suspicion about others translates into questioning the intentions of media actors and their potential to change rather than citizens' expectations of a desirable media performance. Exposure to criticisms about news media in one's discussion group was found to further increase cynical attitudes (b = .24, SE = .09, p = .010). This finding may indicate that when people talk about news media, their criticisms revolve more around why the media report in a certain way and why they are unlikely to change, rather than how the media are or should be reporting. Finally, perceived media responsiveness also predicted media cynicism, although this relationship was only marginally significant (b = -.12, SE = .06, p = .058). Therefore, it seems that to some extent (or to some people), the perception that the media do not listen to or care about what their audiences think influences the interpretation of the media's true intentions.

In addressing RQ3, we can conclude that the four-source structure provides an appropriate prediction of both media distrust and cynicism (Table 7). This conclusion is based on the finding that the estimated model was a good fit for the data as determined by acceptable GOF indices. Further, the four hypothesized factors accounted for approximately 65% and 67% of explained variance in media distrust and cynicism, respectively.

In order to answer RQ4, it is necessary to examine the differences between effects of the same predictors on media cynicism and distrust and determine how meaningful these differences are. For instance, generalized trust and media hostility in discussion network were significant predictors of media cynicism but not distrust. Therefore, based on a formal test of statistical significance, we can conclude that these two factors play a more important role in the formation of cynicism compared to the formation of trust. However, it is more difficult to determine the relative impact of perceived media professionalism and responsiveness as the former was a significant predictor of both perceptions, and the latter was only a marginally significant predictor in the case of cynicism. To address this, it is possible to calculate critical ratios in Amos for pairwise comparison of estimates to formally test whether two parameters are equal (Arbuckle, 2012). The critical ratio for two estimates of influence of perceived media professionalism is 3.97, which is significant at the $p < .05$ level. For the difference between estimates of perceived media responsiveness, the critical ratio is -1.32, which is not statistically significant at a conventional level. Therefore, we can conclude that perceiving journalistic output as unprofessional increases distrust more significantly than cynicism about news media. On the other hand, although perceiving news media as responsive appears to somewhat reduce media cynicism, this effect may be

practically negligible. This is because it is indistinguishable from the non-significant association between perceived media responsiveness and media distrust. To understand when perceiving media as responsive can more substantially change attitudes about journalism, further investigation is needed regarding what conditions can help maximize the impact of perceived responsiveness on reducing media cynicism.

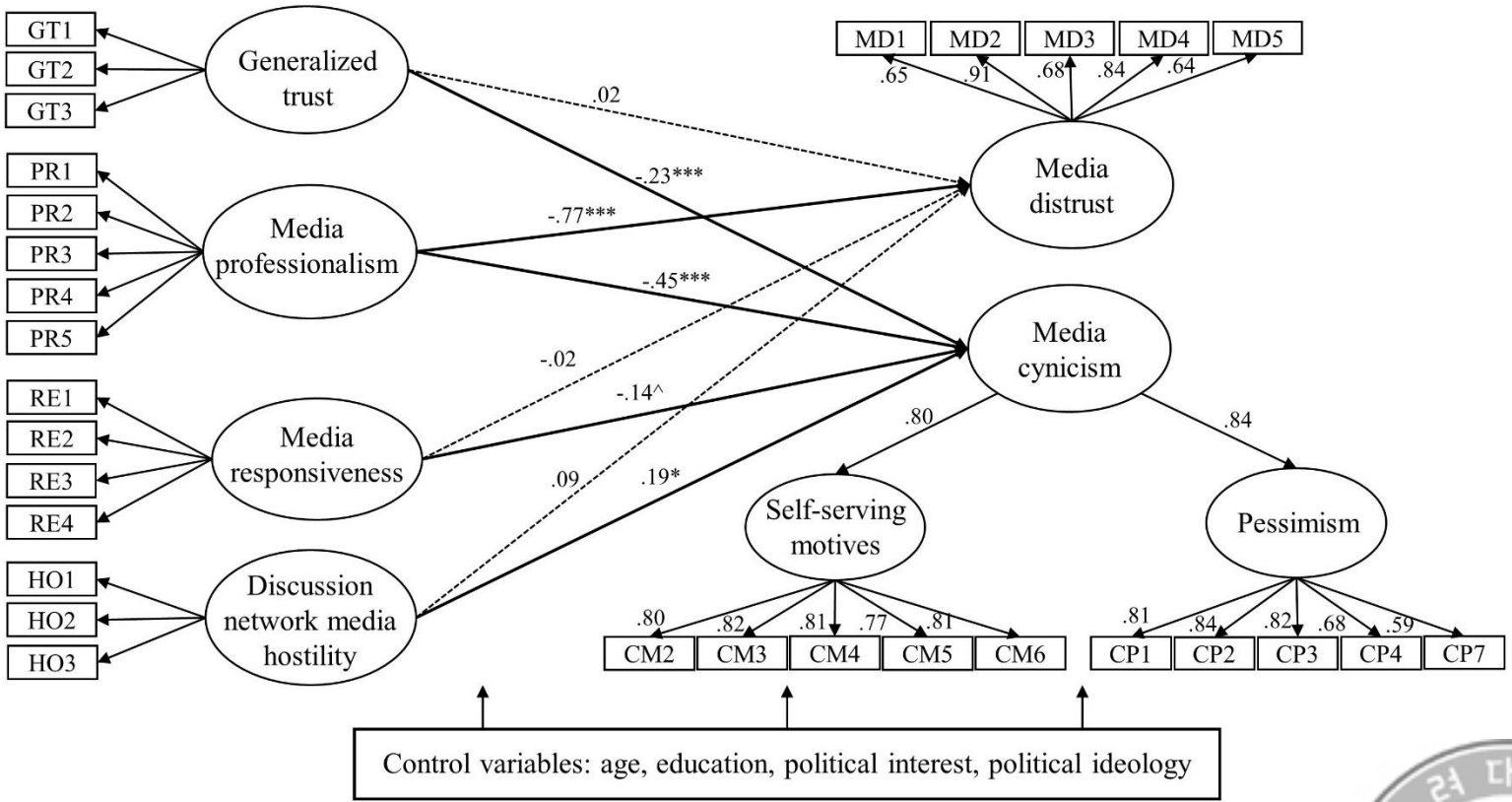
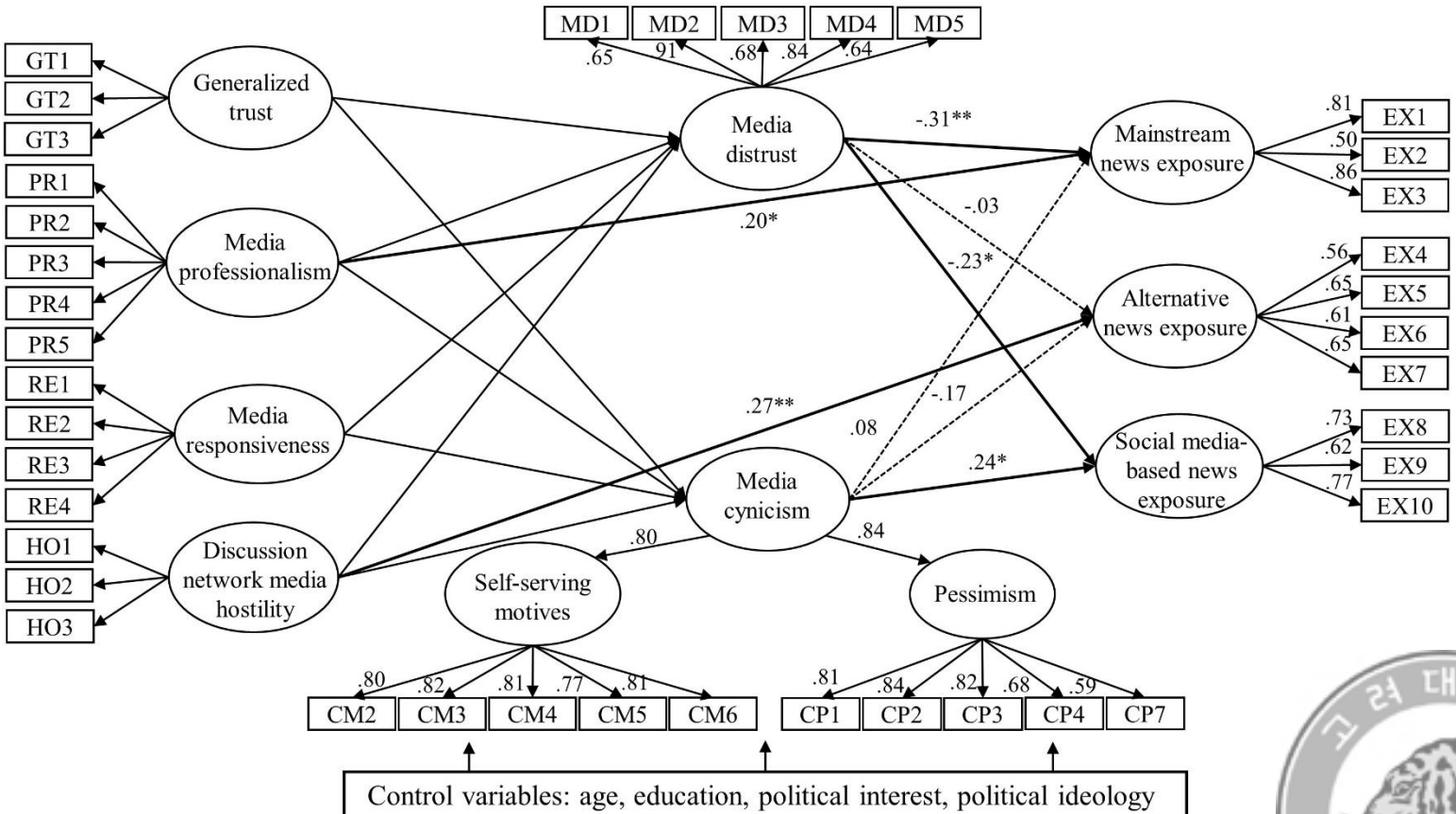
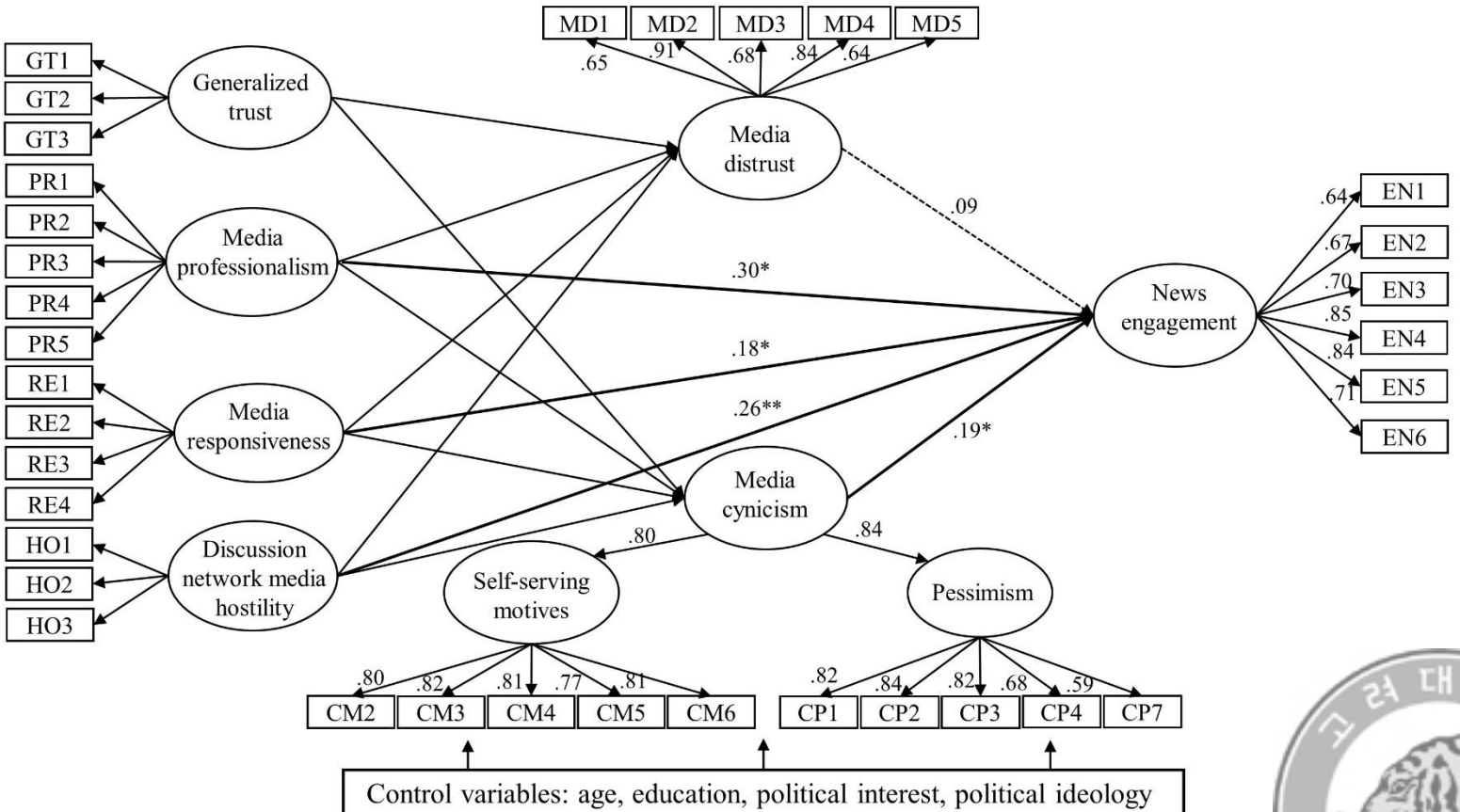


Figure 6 SEM estimating hypothesized antecedents of media distrust and cynicism. Path entries are standardized SEM coefficients. The model includes covariances between all four exogenous variables and between the errors of media distrust and cynicism. ^$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

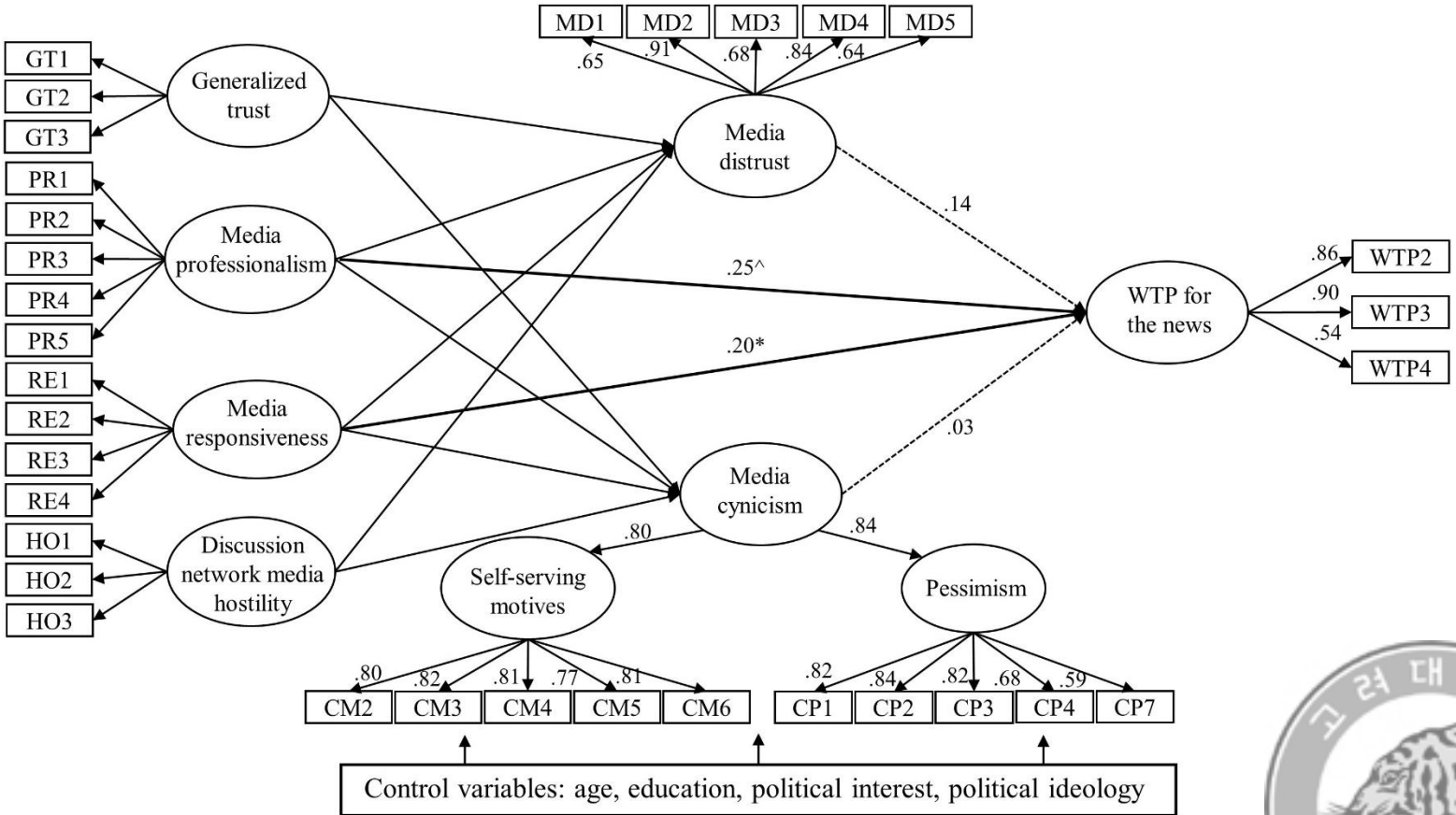
Model 1. SEM predicting different types of news exposure



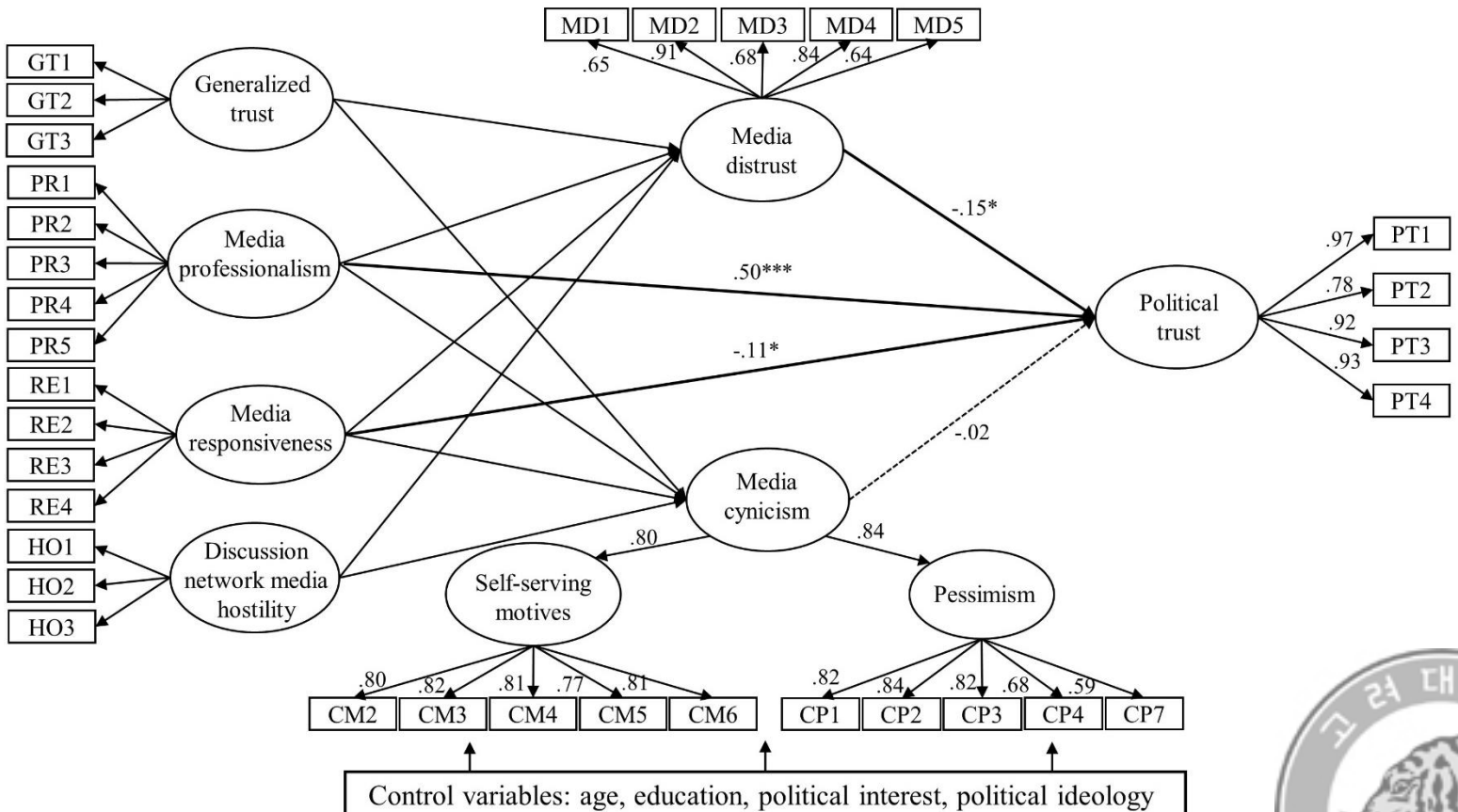
Model 2. SEM predicting news engagement



Model 3. SEM predicting willingness to pay for the news



Model 4. SEM predicting political trust



Model 5. SEM predicting political participation

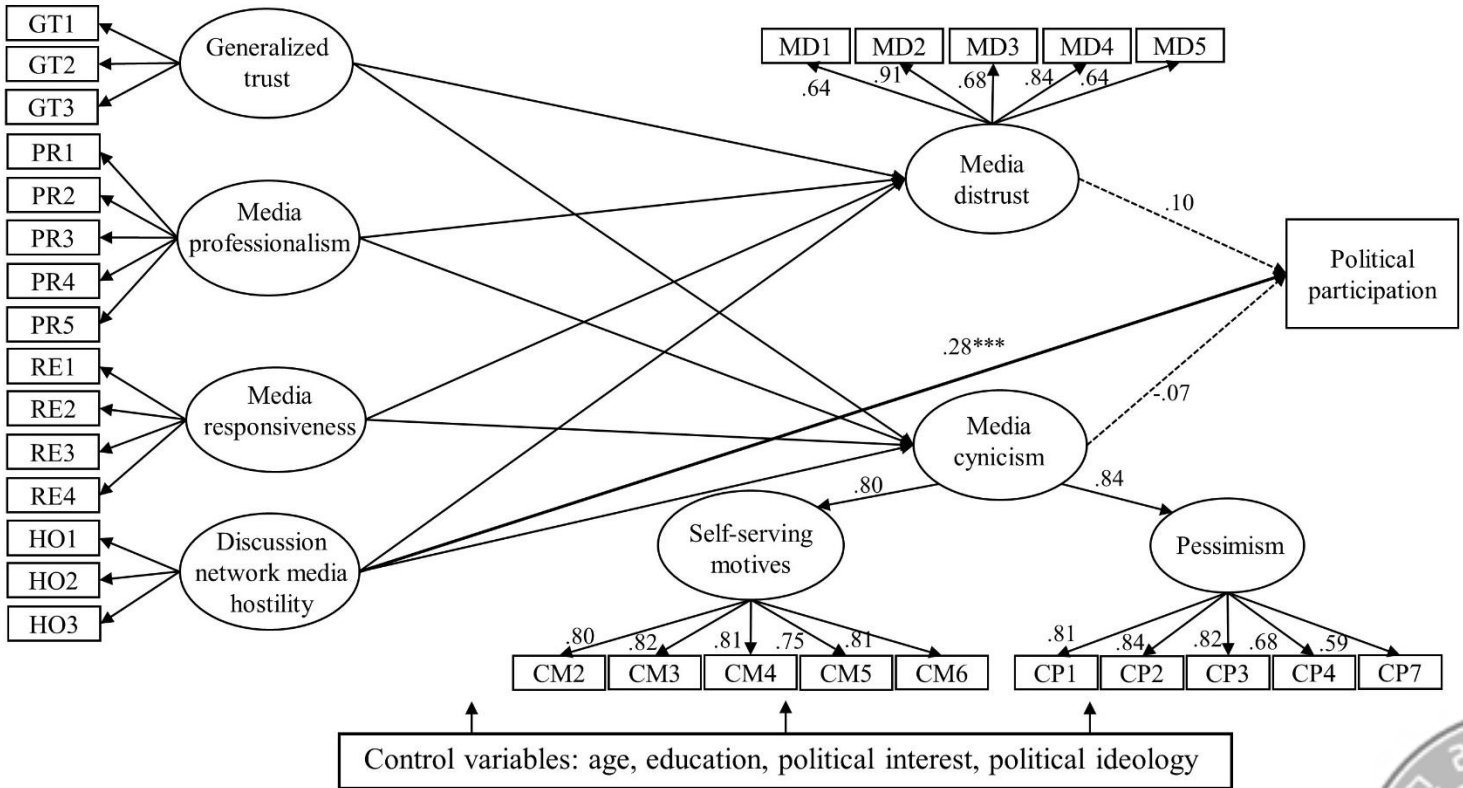


Figure 7 SEMs estimating hypothesized consequences of media distrust and cynicism. Path entries are standardized SEM coefficients. All models include covariances between all four exogenous variables and between the errors of media distrust and cynicism. ^$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, ***$p < .001$

Table 7 Path estimates for predictors of media distrust and cynicism

	Media distrust *b* (*SE*)	Media cynicism *b* (*SE*)	Critical ratio for the difference between estimates
Generalized trust	.02 (.03)	-.18*** (.04)	
Media professionalism	-.78*** (.08)	-.39*** (.07)	4.00*
Media responsiveness	-.02 (.06)	-.12^ (.06)	-1.32
Discussion network media hostility	.12 (.08)	.24* (.09)	
R^2	.65	.67	

Notes: The model also controls for age, education, political interest, and ideology. The errors of media distrust and cynicism were correlated.
^$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 8 Goodness-of-fit indices for SEMs estimating consequences of media distrust and cynicism

	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Model 1 (Predicting news exposure)	1.76	.934	.921	.039
Model 2 (Predicting news engagement)	1.89	.938	.926	.042
Model 3 (Predicting WTP for the news)	1.71	.953	.943	.038
Model 4 (Predicting political trust)	1.81	.953	.943	.040
Model 5 (Predicting political participation)	1.63	.960	.951	.035

Table 9 Path estimates for outcomes of media distrust and cynicism

	Mainstream news exposure *b* (*SE*)	Alternative news exposure *b* (*SE*)	Social media-based news exposure *b* (*SE*)	News engagement *b* (*SE*)	Willingness to pay for the news *b* (*SE*)	Political trust *b* (*SE*)	Political participation *b* (*SE*)
Media distrust	-.63** (.20)	-.05 (.13)	-.44* (.17)	.05 (.06)	.15 (.11)	-.25* (.13)	.10 (.07)
Media cynicism	.18 (.21)	-.29 (.18)	.55* (.21)	.12* (.06)	.04 (.11)	-.04 (.13)	-.07 (.91)
Critical ratio for the difference between estimates			2.79*	.75		1.04	

Notes: Each model includes additional exogenous variables (generalized trust, perceived media professionalism, media responsiveness, and media hostility in one's discussion network) and control variables (age, education, political interest, and ideology) as shown in Figure 7.

^$p < .10$. *$p \leq .05$. **$p < .01$.

3. Outcomes of media distrust and media cynicism

Five SEMs were specified estimating seven hypothesized consequences of media cynicism and media distrust (Figure 7). All models achieved acceptable GOF indices, suggesting that these theoretical models provide an adequate representation of the data (Table 8). Based on the results of SEM analyses, media distrust and media cynicism were at least marginally significant predictors of three and two hypothesized variables, respectively[14] (Table 9).

The first model predicted news exposure in different types of outlets – mainstream, alternative, and social media. According to the results, media distrust reduces exposure to mainstream news media (b = -.63, SE = .20, p = .002) and news on social media (b = -.44, SE = .17, p = .009), while it does not appear to influence exposure to alternative news outlets (b = -.05, SE = .13, p = .708). On the other hand, cynicism increases consumption of news on social media (b = .55, SE = .21, p = .009) but was not related to exposure to alternative media (b = -.29, SE = .18, p = .101) or to mainstream media (b = .18, SE = .21, p = .376). Taken together, these results indicate that media distrust and media cynicism could affect news exposure in different ways: while distrust reduces exposure, cynicism increases it, albeit only for news

[14] In addition, media cynicism predicted one more exploratory variable.

exposure on social media. This oppositional pattern is clearly seen when examining the single variable social-media news exposure, further substantiating the claim that distrust and cynicism are not redundant categories.

The models in this study included additional predictors of news exposure (and other examined outcomes) specified according to the procedure outlined in the previous chapter. Although not hypothesized, these findings may provide insights into the contexts of identified patterns. For instance, perceived media professionalism (b = .41, SE = .20, p = .042), just like media trust, increased exposure only to mainstream news media and not to alternative news outlets. This may indicate that the conception of news media in general for Serbian citizens typically revolves around mainstream outlets such as public broadcasters, TV channels with national coverage, and daily newspapers. Further, discussion network media hostility was found to increase exposure to alternative news outlets (b = .57, SE = .18, p = .002), indicating that the criticisms respondents have reported were likely targeted at mainstream news outlets.

Model 2 estimated the influence of media distrust and cynicism on news engagement. The results show that while news engagement was not affected by media distrust (b = .05, SE = .06, p = .386), it appears to increase with media cynicism (b = .12, SE = .06, p = .050), but this relationship was found

to be only borderline significant. This suggests that the more cynical people are toward news media, the more frequently they engage in sharing, commenting, liking, and producing news. This could indicate that cynicism leads to higher incidence of protest behaviors. In line with this explanation is the finding that news engagement also increases with exposure to media hostility in one's discussion network (b = .20, SE = .07, p = .004). A contradictory pattern was identified in the positive correlations between both perceived professionalism and news engagement (b = .17, SE = .07, p = .026) and responsiveness and news engagement (b = .10, SE = .05, p = .035). Taken together, these findings indicate that there may exist different routes to news engagement in which media cynicism and distrust could play different roles. To test this, future examinations will need to consider the quality of engagement in addition to its frequency.

Surprisingly, neither media distrust (b = .15, SE = .11, p = .190) nor cynicism (b = .04, SE = .11, p = .732) were found to significantly influence one's WTP for the news (Model 3). In contrast, WTP for the news was predicted by perceived media responsiveness (b = .21, SE = .09, p = .016) and marginally by media professionalism (b = .25, SE = .14, p = .051). This illustrates the need for more theorizing on what attitudes about media translate to paying behaviors (O'Brien et al., 2020) as news outlets increasingly rely on their audiences' support for survival. It should be noted

that the measure used in this study included items that probe WTP for access to cable and online news (both traditional and alternative). Another item that was excluded from the composite measure due to its low factor loading was willingness to buy newspapers in print. This item, unlike others, unambiguously indicates paying for mainstream news in the most conventional form. Strictly for exploratory purposes, the composite WTP variable was substituted with a single indicator for WTP for print newspapers, and the analysis was repeated (χ^2/df = 1.61, CFI = .961, RMSEA = .035). Media distrust again did not influence paying intent (*b* = .22, *SE* = .18, *p* = .227), but media professionalism did influence paying intent in the expected direction (*b* = .39, *SE* = .20, *p* = .048). In addition, media cynicism also significantly reduced WTP for newspapers (*b* = -.38, *SE* = .18, *p* = .035). Taken together, the findings indicate that media cynicism may be more relevant than media distrust with regard to paying behaviors, but only for specific types of outlets.

Results in Model 4 indicate that political trust may be negatively influenced by media distrust (*b* = -.25, *SE* = .13, *p* = .053), but this relationship was only marginally significant. Media cynicism, on the other hand, was not found to be associated with political trust in a significant way (*b* = -.04, *SE* = .13, *p* = .735). The association between political trust and media distrust is not surprising as it has widely been documented in the

literature (see Ariely, 2015). This link is further strengthened by the consistent finding that the perception of media performance as unprofessional strongly correlates with trust in political institutions (b = -.85, SE = .15, p < .001). As argued above, the patterns identified in previous models indicate that for many Serbian citizens, mainstream news outlets appear to epitomize news media in general. These outlets are often seen either as closely related to or at least as not actively adversarial toward the government. Therefore, it is not surprising that attitudes about mainstream news media also extend to consistent attitudes about mainstream political institutions in the Serbian context. However, the question of why media cynicism was not able to predict political distrust above media distrust is puzzling and deserves closer examination.

Finally, regarding political participation, no discernable influence of either media distrust (b = .10, SE = .07, p = .164) or media cynicism (b = -.07, SE = .09, p = .418) was found (Model 5). The only significant predictor of political participation was found to be media hostility in discussion network (b = .38, SE = .11, p < .001). Considering the previous patterns, this finding could indicate that exposure to criticisms about news media increases political protest actions, but without data on the qualitative aspects of participation, this remains uncertain. It is also important to note that due to

its negative influence on the reliability of the measure, voting[15] was not included in the summated measure of participation.

To answer RQ5, the same strategy was used as in the comparison of coefficient differences of predictors of media distrust and cynicism (Table 9). The effects of media distrust and cynicism on WTP for the news and political participation were not compared because both estimates in these cases were not significant. One may conclude that mainstream news exposure is more strongly influenced by media distrust than cynicism because only the former relationship was statistically significant. However, other effects appeared to be relatively more subtle, necessitating an examination of relevant critical ratios for pairwise differences between parameters. Among these, the only significant difference appeared to be between the effects of media distrust and cynicism on social media-based news exposure (critical ratio = 2.79, $p < .05$). There seemed to be no meaningful difference in the strength of the influence of both perceptions on news engagement (critical ratio = .75, *n. s.*) and political trust (critical ratio = 1.04, *n. s.*).

With respect to RQ6, there was no sufficient evidence to support the argument that media cynicism leads to more detrimental consequences than

[15] Even with the inclusion of the voting indicator in the summated measure of political participation, the results remain essentially unchanged.

media distrust. The results do not suggest that cynicism leads to complete detachment from the media. According to the data, the only media-related behavior that deteriorated due to the audience's cynicism was buying newspapers. In contrast, it seems more plausible that cynicism leads to more protest behavior in the information environment as cynics turn to social rather than professional media for news and engage with the news more.

Chapter 5. Study 1 discussion

This study explored a long-standing issue in the field of media perceptions relating to the nature of and relationship between media distrust and cynicism. Building upon extant multidisciplinary conceptualizations of trust and cynicism (e.g., Eisinger, 2000; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Krouwel & Abts, 2007; Mayer et al., 1995; Pattyn et al., 2012), a new definition of media cynicism was developed as a qualitatively different perception from media distrust. The subsequent analyses provided empirical support for this claim. The measurement models clearly showed that indicators of cynicism and distrust are not influenced by the same factor. Moreover, the two perceptions exhibited several notable differences in relation to external variables. This indicates that cynicism and distrust may have distinct geneses and lead to qualitatively different ways in which citizens form and maintain relationships with news media.

1. On distinguishing media cynicism from media distrust

Factor analyses showed that indicators of media distrust and media cynicism cannot be explained by the same underlying dimension. However, although a two-factor model was a better fit than a single factor model, it still did not manage to provide a completely adequate description of the structure in the data. Acceptable fit was achieved when media cynicism was modeled

as a second order factor oblique to media distrust. The most important implication of these findings is that it is not justified to equate media distrust with cynicism. In other words, distrusting the media does not necessarily entail believing that newspersons have malicious intent or that the media could not perform any better. Distrust means lowering one's expectations that news reporting will conform to desired outcomes. Media cynicism, on the other hand, denotes believing that newspersons are inherently corrupt, and that the system of professional journalism is broken beyond repair. Therefore, media cynicism is a highly negative and antagonistic perception of news media that cannot be fully explained by common indicators of media distrust. To reflect this, future public opinion polls and academic studies should include measures of media cynicism in their examinations of media perceptions.

The instrument proposed in this study is imperfect, but it provides a solid foundation to continue advancing a reliable and valid measure of media cynicism with appropriate refinement and validation. The instrument was developed reflecting the main theoretical components of cynicism in the context of media perceptions, and its content validity was strengthened in consultation with academic experts in the field. However, even though the instrument showed overall solid psychometric properties, it also has several limitations that should be addressed. First, several indicators were

substantially skewed toward extreme values. This may be due to the context in which data were gathered. It could be that public perceptions of news media in Serbia have reached such a low point that strongly agreeing with even the most hostile statements about news media has become commonsensical. It would be interesting to see whether the same indicators would achieve a more normal distribution in societies with more favorable media perceptions on average (e.g., Northern Europe). However, to improve performance of the instrument, the indicators in question should be reformulated or replaced, making sure to reflect appropriate theoretical meaning but choosing themes that are not commonplace among audiences.

In addition, the indicators showed a bidimensional rather than unidimensional structure. The two dimensions corresponded with the two aspects of media cynicism emphasized in the proposed conceptual definition. It is possible that the formulation of indicators that emphasize different aspects of cynicism separately artificially created the impression that the structure of media cynicism is multidimensional. If this is the case, and the structure of media cynicism is unidimensional, pessimistic outlook should have been implied in indicators similar to the implication of negative affect toward news media. To further explore this idea, future studies should rephrase the indicators to emphasize the belief that newspersons have exclusively instrumental motivation while implying the pessimistic prospect

of such a belief. For instance, the item “News organizations only operate to maximize their profits” could be changed into “News organizations will never be able to operate with any goal other than maximizing their profits.”

2. On differentiating the causes of media distrust and media cynicism

Most empirical studies on media trust deal with its causes (McLeod et al., 2017), but the investigation in this study differs from previous research in some important regards. Factors representing different sources and competing explanations of media distrust and cynicism were analyzed simultaneously using SEM. Based on the findings, media distrust appears to be caused predominately by negative assessments of media performance. In contrast, cynicism seems to be more sensitive to a wider range of available cues beyond perceived media professionalism, including social distrust, media hostility in one’s discussion network, and, to some extent, perceived media responsiveness.

A popular debate between explanations of institutional trust based on culture and performance (see Mishler & Rose, 2001) has gained some traction in the study of media trust as well (Pjesivac, 2017; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). The impact of social trust on media distrust has been tested numerous times with inconclusive results (e.g., Jackob, 2012; Kim & Choi, 2017; Lee, 2010, Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Yamamoto et al., 2016). When measures of

media performance were included in the analysis, previous studies would usually provide a superior explanation of media trust (e.g., Pjesivac, 2017). However, previous research typically did not differentiate media cynicism from distrust. The findings in this study show that performance assessments are the most robust explanation not only of media distrust but also of media cynicism. Cultural explanations appear to be much more limited in comparison, albeit not entirely insignificant. Social trust was found to reduce media cynicism and not media distrust. This may be because indicators of social trust prime respondents to think about the perceived nature of unknown people. This is more proximal to the properties of media cynicism that largely deal with the character of media actors compared to media trust, which has a heavy focus on professional outcomes. Therefore, the findings in this study imply that the apparent significant relationship between social trust and media distrust identified in some previous studies may have surfaced as a result of not considering other relevant factors (i.e., performance) or not distinguishing cynicism from distrust.

The model examined in this study was extended beyond typical cultural and performance factors to include relational and contextual characteristics. However, these factors did not provide any additional explanation of media distrust beyond perceived media professionalism. This was particularly interesting in the case of perceived media responsiveness. As discussed

earlier, scholars have frequently called for news professionals to try and restore media trust by forging closer relationships with their audiences (e.g., Lewis, 2019). Although improving connections with news audiences is itself a valuable goal and should always be encouraged, the results of this study indicate that it is limited as a strategy to recover failing media trust. Based on these findings, Serbian audiences do not require involvement in the production of news in order to trust the media. On the other hand, perceived media responsiveness may play some role in reducing media cynicism, but this relationship was only marginally significant. Based on this finding, actively trying to engage audiences seems to provide a signal that the media might have motives other than profiteering and that a more desirable journalistic performance is possible. However, there may have been a moderating variable that prevented us from identifying a stronger relationship. For instance, perceived responsiveness may be a more important factor for audiences with advanced digital skills because such audiences are familiar with the tools of the digital environment that news media use to engage more actively with their users. Since the sample in this study was self-selected from an online panel, it comprised respondents who on average should have higher digital skills compared to the general population. If that is the case, this relationship should appear stronger and reach statistical significance if tested in a random probability sample.

Recent research has suggested that media trust decreases due to the widely available external cues of the dis-trustworthiness of news media (Ladd, 2012; Ognyanova, 2019). The finding that is relevant for this argument is that encountering criticisms about media in one's discussion network does not influence media distrust but does seem to increase media cynicism. Similar to the finding on the influence of generalized trust on media distrust, it is possible that a link between exposure to criticisms about media and media distrust was identified in previous research simply because it did not consider all relevant predictors (e.g., perceived professionalism) and/or separate cynicism from distrust. In addition, most studies, including the present one, typically examine the effects of criticisms about media coming from one source. However, citizens regularly encounter such criticisms from a variety of both elite and non-elite sources. Future studies should examine the effectiveness of criticisms from different sources on both distrust and cynicism, controlling for relevant factors.

3. On differentiating the consequences of media distrust and media cynicism

With some notable exceptions (e.g., Ladd, 2010), research on the consequences of media trust has been relatively scarce (McLeod et al., 2017). Therefore, the analysis presented in this segment has been largely

exploratory. Based on the findings of this study, media distrust appears to reduce various types of news consumption and political trust, indicating a link between trust in news media and institutional legitimacy. As discussed earlier, EFA of news exposure resulted in three factors, which were labeled mainstream (public broadcasters, private TV stations with national coverage, and daily newspapers), alternative (cable TV and online news outlets), and social media-based (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) news exposure. The first two groups comprise professional news outlets that most significantly differ in terms of their editorial policies. Mainstream news outlets in Serbia practice neutral to strongly pro-government reporting. The outlets labeled "alternative" typically practice more investigative news reporting and are often critical of the government. It is important to emphasize that the term "alternative" was not used here to signify an alternative to professional journalism but rather an alternative to mainstream outlets in terms of their editorial policies and journalistic style. The third factor—social media-based news exposure—can include both professional and non-professional news sources, depending on how users tailor their social media news environments. The common expectation in the literature is that media distrust reduces exposure to the mainstream and increases exposure to non-professional news sources (Strömbäck et al., 2020). The findings in this study corroborate the first link but are inconsistent with the second one

because media distrust was found to reduce exposure to both mainstream news outlets and news on social media. Therefore, these findings indicate that those who simply distrust the media have reduced their overall exposure to the news and do not seek alternatives.

No evidence was found that cynicism leads to similar detachment tendencies as with media distrust. In contrast, cynicism was found to increase social media-based news consumption and news engagement. It is particularly interesting that media distrust and cynicism were observed to form opposite relationships with the same variable – news exposure on social media. This is a clear indication that the two variables are not redundant. Furthermore, this finding shows that it is not distrust, but rather cynicism, that could drive exposure away from professional sources. It also seems that when cynical audiences visit social media to seek the news, potentially from informal sources, they also use the platform to express their hostility toward news media. In a digital space, these criticisms become available cues of corruption in the media, reinforcing a cycle of media cynicism. If this interpretation is correct, the consequences of media cynicism may be more consistent with protest behaviors than detachment, leading to anti-media practices similar to political cynics engaging in anti-political practices (Pattyn et al., 2012). However, without data on the quality and frequency of

exposure and engagement, this remains a speculation that calls for more testing.

These findings should not be overinterpreted. It is worth noting that neither variable was found to be related to alternative news exposure, WTP for the news, or political participation, and in several cases, the relationships were only borderline significant. Therefore, much is still unknown regarding the democratic consequences of media distrust and cynicism, and alternative strategies may be needed to reexamine the relevance of the proposed conceptual distinction.

4. Limitations and need for follow-up examination

As discussed above, the findings of Study 1 helped us make a clearer distinction between media distrust and cynicism, but left some important questions unanswered due to the characteristics of the design used. The findings could not identify clear and consistent patterns between negative media perceptions and resulting political and media practices. There were indicators that media distrust may lead to some forms of institutional detachment, but the pattern was not consistent. Distrust was found to reduce political trust and different types of news exposure, but it did not affect news engagement, WTP for the news, or political participation. On the other hand, cynicism was found to increase exposure to news on social media and news

engagement, which may indicate that cynicism leads to more protest behaviors. However, this pattern was also not entirely consistent as cynicism was not related to mainstream or alternative news exposure, political participation, or WTP for the news.

There are several potential explanations for the unclear patterns described above, but these explanations cannot be tested using the data collected in Study 1. First, it is possible that the measures of media distrust and cynicism used in this study were only moderately successful in targeting the intended concepts. Although the chief concern in media trust studies is the audience's perceptions, the extant research has been surprisingly media centric so far. The core aspects of media trustworthiness are derived from normative theories of journalism, which are assumed to resonate with contemporary audiences. However, previous research conducted with a constructivist approach has discovered that media trust has different manifestations in the audience that are not necessarily consistent with academic definitions (Coleman, Morrison, & Anthony, 2012; Pjesivac et al., 2016). Similarly, given that not much prior work has been done on conceptualizing media cynicism, the proposed definition may have failed to capture some important aspects of cynical attitudes. Therefore, it is possible that citizens' experiences distrust and cynicism in relation to news media may differ from the academic conceptions of distrust and cynicism in some

important respects, and this discrepancy may have hindered the attempts to measure these perceptions and analyze their relationships with other variables.

Another possibility is that the analyses were impeded by the definition of the target of these perceptions, rather than (or in addition to) the definitions of cynicism and distrust. The focus in this study was on professional news media, or in other words, news media in general. As noted earlier, an assumption was made that respondents share such a general, abstract conception of news media that transcends specific journalists and news companies. In fact, previous research has reported some support for this claim (Ladd, 2012). However, scholars have also argued that measures at such a high level of abstraction may be particularly unreliable as many respondents may utilize available heuristics to formulate a judgement (Daniller, Allen, Tallevi, & Mutz, 2017). Due to differences in exposure habits and knowledge about news media, respondents could have different frames of reference when answering questions about news media in general. Some may consider several outlets they are familiar with, while negativity bias may lead others to project their most negative assessments on the whole system of professional journalism. Similar concerns were echoed in a recent systematic review of the research on the influence of media trust on news exposure (Strömbäck et al., 2020). The authors called for using consistent

targets when studying media trust and news exposure and increasing specificity to reduce ambiguities for respondents.

Finally, the selection and operationalization of the examined consequences may be problematic. For instance, news exposure was measured simply as the frequency of attending to the news using a variety of methods However, in high-choice media environments, the news faces unprecedented competition from an ever-growing abundance of entertainment programming. Rather than asking from which sources, it may be more relevant to ask whether and how citizens get the news (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy, 2012). Also, knowing the frequency of news exposure on a particular channel (e.g., social media) does not reveal much about a respondent's exposure habits. In digital media environments, audiences can personalize their media repertoires combining sources and channels. Therefore, to understand how media perceptions relate to news consumption, a more comprehensive approach is needed that would allow us to consider different patterns and modes of news exposure, including the decision to actively avoid some (or all) types of news. Similarly, it may be possible to better understand how media distrust and cynicism relate with other variables, such as news engagement and political participation, if it is known what these behaviors entail beyond merely counting the frequency with which they occur. Therefore, to increase our understanding of the effect of

media distrust and cynicism on how citizens relate to news media and politics, more qualitative insight into relevant cognitions and behaviors is needed.

Some of the issues and limitations identified above exemplify the shortcomings recognized in previous research as well (e.g., Bennett & Pfetch, 2018) and are a part of the on-going discussion about how to increase the precision and relevance of research on the public's perceptions of news media in current information environments. This dissertation attempted to address these limitations and contribute to this discussion by complementing previous analysis with a qualitative inquiry in the follow-up study, as qualitative insight can help provide a deeper, more contextualized understanding of communication phenomena (Humprecht, Hellmueller, & Lischka, 2020; Ksiazek, Peer, & Lessard, 2018; McLeod et al., 2017; Usher, Holcomb, & Littman, 2018). This approach was selected out of the belief that—in line with the tenets of mixed-methods research design—combining qualitative and quantitative approaches would help provide insight that would be otherwise difficult to obtain using any single approach independently (Creswell, 2014).

Chapter 6. Study 2 overview

Although Study 1 demonstrated that media distrust and cynicism can be empirically distinguished, it provided limited insight into the democratic relevance of these perceptions. Study 2 attempted to scrutinize three potential reasons for these limitations: (1) issues with capturing the nature of distrust and cynicism in the conceptual and operational definitions that were used, (2) problems associated with designating a highly abstract object (i.e., news media in general) as the target of these perceptions, and (3) the selection and operationalization of the observed consequences. To address these issues, Study 2 took a more audience-centric, inductive, and generative approach, which makes it possible to discuss audiences' experiences of news media in terms that matter to them. Rather than simply studying what people think about certain issues related to news media, Study 2 explores how they think about media and how they associate different experiences in a natural manner. By prioritizing audience's authentic expressions of experiences and perceptions of media, it is possible to improve available analytic tools and better understand how democracy-supporting relationships between the news media and their audiences can be forged.

The first question that motivated the current inquiry concerned the extent to which the definitions of media distrust and media cynicism used in Study 1 capture relevant categories that citizens use to think about news

media. Although there have been noteworthy recent efforts in reconceptualizing media trust (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Usher, 2017), the most common measure—used in Study 1 as well—was developed decades ago when audiences' news exposure habits, needs, and demands were considerably different from today. Using a qualitative approach, Pjesivac et al. (2016) identified different connotations of media trust for audiences in Serbia, Croatia, and North Macedonia. Among the participants in this study, media trust variably manifested as faith in journalism as an expert system (a belief that journalists have specialized knowledge and expertise which warrants relying on them), trust in journalistic selectivity (a more active form of trust that includes making judgements based on assessed trustworthiness, similar to mainstream conceptualizations of trust in the extant literature), and confidence in journalism (a high degree of certainty in the outcome of interactions with the media, similar to the conceptualization of cynicism used in this study). Further, Coleman et al. (2012) found that for audiences in the United Kingdom, trust in news media entails more than a simple belief that journalists provide accurate accounts, as is sometimes considered. Using focus group data, the authors argued that for their participants, trust judgements also included assessments of how useful, reliable, and even amusing the news is, which does not necessarily correspond to how scholars envision media trust.

Similarly, news environments have drastically changed since systematic measurements of media trust began in the 1970s. Digital technologies allow citizens myriad possibilities to create personalized news ecosystems in line with what they count as news (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Therefore, any in-depth attempt to understand how audiences perceive news media should include a thorough reexamination of what counts as the news to audiences in high-choice media environments. As argued in Chapter 2, the Serbian media system has gone through many turbulent periods in recent history, which affected how journalists and audiences understand the role and function of journalism (Pjesivac & Imre, 2018). Today, Serbia has an over-saturated media market with outlets that significantly vary in how they practice journalism. As in many societies across the world, the Serbian news environment is regularly updated with news providers other than established news sources. Although television remains an important information source, recent data show that Serbian news audiences increasingly rely on the internet and social media to get their news (Ipsos Global Advisor, 2019). Therefore, it is possible that different respondents used different frames of reference when answering the questions about news media in general in Study 1. In addition, as other scholars have argued (McLeod et al., 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2020), perceptions of news media in general are not necessarily the most relevant media perceptions. For instance, a person could

have only a small number of trusted and respected outlets, and this small number may provide all the information needed for an individual to become a "self-governing" citizen. In such a case, it may be less important whether a person thinks that journalists are not to be trusted in general if they have found a small group of outlets that they consider exceptions. Therefore, the study of public perceptions of journalism in high-choice media environments should be sensitive to the fluid ways in which citizens in high-choice media environments understand what news media are. A qualitative inquiry can help us explore in a flexible and organic manner not only what characteristics are entailed by relevant perceptions of the media, but also to which media-related targets they apply and how they vary according to the target.

Finally, Study 2 also attempted to reexamine the relevance of media distrust and cynicism by exploring how audiences engage with news media and politics in a holistic manner, without prior restriction of the employed analytic categories. Instead of simply measuring intensities and frequencies, Study 2 made it possible to further explore the cognitions and behaviors in question in greater depth by also focusing on relevant qualitative characteristics. This allowed further exploration of a tentative conclusion from Study 1 that media distrust and cynicism could lead to more detachment and protest behaviors, respectively. Using a generative approach,

a wide range of political and media practices that audiences consider relevant was examined.

Therefore, Study 2 was designed to elaborate, refine, and complement the findings of Study 1, and by so doing, provide a deeper understanding of the nature of media distrust and cynicism and of the relevance of these perceptions for contemporary audience-media relationships. The following research questions were posed to lead the analysis.

RQ7: What do participants' interpretive accounts suggest about how media cynicism and (dis)trust are experienced and manifested?

RQ8: How are participants' media practices and political practices related to their experiences of media distrust and cynicism?

Chapter 7. Study 2 methods

1. Sampling and participants

The population of interest for this study was broadly defined as news audiences in Serbia. Since the focus of this dissertation is not on consumption of media but on perceptions of the media, the population includes both active and non-active consumers of news. This is justified when considering the ubiquitous nature of the media. Most people are incidentally or indirectly exposed to the news and form opinions about news media, even if they are not active consumers of news media. Therefore, the goal was to collect the data from diverse participants who reflect important differences among contemporary news audiences in Serbia. The intent was not to obtain a representative sample, but instead to maximize the diversity of perspectives and experiences that participants bring to the study. An effort was made to provide a balanced representation in terms of demographics and political views in order to learn how people from different walks of life experience the role and work of news media.

The study utilized a purposive sample which was obtained using the snowball sampling technique. Snowball sampling is a method in which a recruited participant provides the researcher with a suggestion for one or more future respondents (Creswell, 2014). It is a particularly useful approach when studying sensitive topics and/or when identifying participants who are

difficult to reach, but its application goes well beyond such designs. Samples obtained using this method, however, tend to be relatively homogenous.

As the popularity of the snowball sampling method grew in qualitative research, scholars developed techniques to increase the diversity of samples it produces (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). To ensure sample diversity in the current study, two such techniques were employed. First, sample seed diversity was maximized by recruiting three initial respondents (P1, P5, and P7 in Table 10) who differ widely in several important respects. For instance, P5 is an older adult whose early socialization and young adulthood took place under the communist regime in Yugoslavia. She is now retired, lives in a village with her son and his family, and is a strong supporter of the current government and president Vučić. In contrast, P1 and P7 are both relatively younger, and they grew up during the final years before Yugoslavia was dissolved (P1) or under the authoritarian regime in Serbia in the 1990s (P7). P1 lives in a middle-sized city with his wife and sons and is an executive director of a nonprofit organization. He is moderately interested in politics without clear party preferences. P7, on the other hand, lives in a large city and works as a PR manager. Although she does not support any specific political party, she is highly interested in politics and extremely critical of the current government. Therefore, the initial three respondents differ in age, gender, socioeconomic status, and political views, which could

all be relevant for how they experience the news media. They were introduced to the study by contacts in the researcher's wider social network.

Consistent with snowball sampling, each participant was asked to inform up to two acquaintances about the study and provide them with the researcher's contact information if they showed interest in participating. The second instrument for increasing the diversity of the sample was applied at this stage. Respondents were specifically asked to recommend individuals with different attitudes about the news media compared to their own. Several respondents recommended acquaintances who enjoy following the news more or less than them, while others suggested people who have different news preferences from theirs. In order to determine whether a potential participant would indeed increase the diversity of sample, they were first asked to fill in a short questionnaire. The questionnaire contained items measuring attitudes toward the media and politics as well as questions about demographics. To participate in the study, a candidate needed to report at least two discernable characteristics from the most similar respondent in the study in terms of gender, education, age (i.e., decade of life), place of residence (i.e., rural vs. urban area), political interest (i.e., high, moderate, low), or preferred political party.

Twenty participants were selected while three candidates were eliminated because the sample already included profiles very similar to theirs

(Table 10). Participants ranged in age from 25 to 84 with an average of 46.6. Nine identified as female, while 11 identified as male. Seven lived in rural areas, and all others lived in urban areas. Four statistical regions of Serbia are represented in the sample with nine respondents coming from Vojvodina, four each from Belgrade and the South-East region, and three respondents from the Center-West region. Eleven respondents had completed high school, while the others had at least a university degree. On average, the sample was moderate in terms of both political ideology and interest. Half of the respondents did not have a clear preference when it comes to political party, while four respondents supported the main ruling party and the main opposition party, each. Two respondents reported that they do not support any party and would not participate in the next elections. The sampling was terminated when the saturation point was reached, i.e., when it seemed that the addition of new respondents would not significantly change the findings in any direction.

Table 10 Characteristics of the sampled participants

ID	Sex	Age	Region	Area	Education	Ideo-logy	Pol. interest	Preferred party	Interview length	Interview method
P1	M	39	Vojvodina	Urban	University	3	4	Undecided	90.49	Online
P2	F	66	Vojvodina	Urban	University	2	2	Undecided	100.22	In person
P3	M	31	Vojvodina	Urban	Grad school	2	7	SZS	91.47	In person
P4	M	84	Center-West	Rural	University	6	5	SNS	75.37	In person
P5	F	74	Vojvodina	Rural	High school	6	4	SNS	79.56	In person
P6	M	39	South-East	Urban	High school	4	6	SZS	79.25	Online
P7	F	33	South-East	Urban	University	1	7	Undecided	86.02	Online
P8	M	28	Belgrade	Urban	University	4	2	Undecided	78.46	In person
P9	M	36	South-East	Rural	University	3	7	SZS	66.44	In person
P10	M	25	Vojvodina	Urban	University	4	3	Undecided	73.51	In person
P11	F	36	South-East	Rural	High school	5	4	SNS	60.33	In person
P12	F	34	Belgrade	Urban	High school	6	6	Undecided	78.28	Online
P13	F	47	Center-West	Urban	High school	5	3	No vote	75.27	In person
P14	M	47	Vojvodina	Rural	High school	4	7	Undecided	95.07	Online
P15	M	52	Belgrade	Urban	High school	2	6	Undecided	72.16	In person
P16	M	72	Vojvodina	Rural	High school	6	2	Undecided	71.12	In person
P17	M	66	Vojvodina	Urban	University	2	5	Undecided	101.26	In person

P18	F	43	Vojvodina	Urban	High school	4	4	SZS	53.49	In person
P19	F	56	Center-West	Rural	High school	5	3	SNS	81.16	In person
P20	F	25	Belgrade	Urban	High school	4	4	No vote	72.08	In person

Notes: All reported attitudes were measured using a 7-point scale consistent with survey measures in Study 1. Ideology was measured from 1 = *left* to 7 = *right*; political interest from 1 = *not interested at all* to 7 = *extremely interested*; preferred party was measured by asking for which party the respondent would vote if the election were tomorrow, SNS and SZS are the main ruling and opposition parties, respectively; interview length is given in minutes.

2. Procedure

Interviews were conducted in August and September 2020. Consistent with Study 1, the interview procedure was approved according to Korea University IRB protocol number IRB-2020-0121 from August 4, 2020. Since data were collected during the coronavirus pandemic, interviews were conducted following the guidelines of the Government of Serbia to prevent the spread of the virus. Respondents were asked to choose if they would prefer being interviewed online or in person in a setting that would allow for the interview to be conducted safely. Five interviews were conducted online and the remainder in person at locations chosen by the respondents.

Participants first received information about the study and were asked to sign the consent form upon reading it. They were also verbally informed about the topic, approximate length of the interview, purpose of the study, intended use of data, and measures taken to protect their identity. After completing the interview, respondents received 500 RSD (approximately $5) for participating in the study. The average duration of the interviews was 75 minutes with a range of 53 to 101 minutes. The length of an interview was mostly a function of the respondent's interest in media and politics, and their willingness to discuss these topics.

Interviews were semi-structured. This form was selected because it is flexible enough to secure a focused conversation by defining the main topics

of discussion while allowing for conversation to move freely within these boundaries depending on the specific experiences and interests of the respondent. Overall, the questions that were asked to participants were intended to probe participants' expectations and evaluations of the news media, as well as their experiences with news media and politics (see Appendix B for a list of the most common interview questions). All interviews started with questions about the political interests and media practices of the respondent (e.g., "How do you usually follow the news," "Are there any topics in the news that caught your attention recently"). These questions served to familiarize the respondent with the topic of discussion and to help the researcher identify the respondent's media habits. After that, the conversation moved naturally between different topics of interest for the study.

Respondents' experiences with news media and politics were further probed by asking questions related to news exposure, news engagement, paying for the news, and political participation, parallel to Study 1. However, the interview setting made it possible to examine these experiences in greater depth. When participants reported a behavior (e.g., commenting on the news or donating money to a news outlets), this was followed up with a prompt for a detailed description of the behavior, the motivation for engaging in such behavior, and satisfaction with the outcome. When participants reported

never practicing the behavior in question, they were asked about the reasons for it as well as under what conditions they might start.

Discussion about evaluations of the media started early in the conversation. Participants were first asked how they would describe the news media scene in Serbia to someone who is not familiar with it. They were then asked about the criteria used to provide such classifications and were further encouraged to provide deeper reflections on their opinions about the different groups of media they identified. In addition, respondents were asked what they see as the main problems and strengths of the Serbian media system, when and why they have experienced feeling satisfied or dissatisfied with reporting, how helpful they find the coverage of topics that are of interest to the society as a whole (such as pandemic or election coverage), and how they assess the influence of media in society.

In addition to learning how audiences interpret their relationship with the news media, Study 2 was also designed to explore more specifically how respondents experience (dis)trust and cynical attitudes toward media. To do this, discussion on evaluations of news media included additional sub-topics, which made it possible to probe such experiences. However, terms like trust and cynicism were not used. Instead, when respondents referenced concepts or examples relevant to these categories, they were invited to provide further reflections. For instance, several participants volunteered evaluations of the

media in terms of reliability, objectivity, bias, or independence. In such cases, they were asked to explain how they understood these terms. In other cases, follow-up questions were used. For instance, to explore how participants understand the motives of journalists and news outlets, while they were discussing how journalism works from their perspective, they were asked questions like “Why do you think journalists report in such a way” or “What do you think motivated the outlet to pursue this story.”

The final interview topic was intended to examine the expectations respondents have of good journalism. This topic was introduced as potentially relevant for understanding the formation of (dis)trust and cynical attitudes from the audience’s perspective. Distrust is often described in terms of the gap between one’s expectations and evaluations of a target’s conduct. In addition, cynicism is frequently portrayed as a result of failed high expectations that were unrealistic to begin with. To better understand how participants in this study imagine desirable journalism, they were asked questions like “What do you expect of a good news report,” “What roles should the news media play in our society,” or “What would you consider an improvement in problematic areas that you described.”

As it was important to explore how media perceptions vary between different media targets, the conversation also shifted between general and more specific levels of media. Most respondents described the media system

in Serbia as extremely polarized and limited their observations to a certain type of media or even a specific outlet or journalist. They also demonstrated varying abilities to discuss the news media and journalists in general terms. Different follow-up questions were used to explore the extent to which an attitude is generalized or limited to a specific target. These included "Does this evaluation apply to all journalists and outlets equally," "Are there exceptions to the view you just described," or "What do you think is the percentage of journalists today in Serbia who possess this characteristic."

3. Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis. The themes relevant to each research question were analyzed following the emergent design (Figure 8). This means that the responses were coded inductively to identify important categories and patterns in the data rather than looking for theoretically pre-defined motifs. The analysis follows the common framework for descriptive-interpretative qualitative research summarized by Elliott and Timulak (2005).

During the first reading, the transcripts were inspected for meaning units in the data. Meaning units refer to the ideas expressed in responses that can independently provide some insight into the phenomenon of interest. Meaning units identified in all transcripts were marked and annotated,

effectively becoming the units of analysis. After the first reading, the data were roughly divided into relevant and irrelevant sections.

The subsequent readings were conducted with more focused scrutiny of previously identified units consistent with the constant comparative method (Grove, 1988). In an iterative process, units were contrasted and compared in order to formulate categories (domains) that meaningfully converge. These were more abstract analytic categories, each comprising related meaning units and distinct enough to be meaningfully differentiated from other categories. In the beginning, a meaning unit could be assigned to one or more relevant categories. As the analysis progressed, units could be reassigned to different categories, or dropped if they could not be assigned, until an optimal solution was found.

At the next stage, the analysis examined the categories and different expressions (properties) they can take. The goal was to organize each category in a parsimonious but meaningful manner that would make it possible to describe and compare different manifestations. Finally, patterns were identified by analyzing how different properties co-occur in the data and relating them to the existing research findings and theory related to media cynicism and distrust.

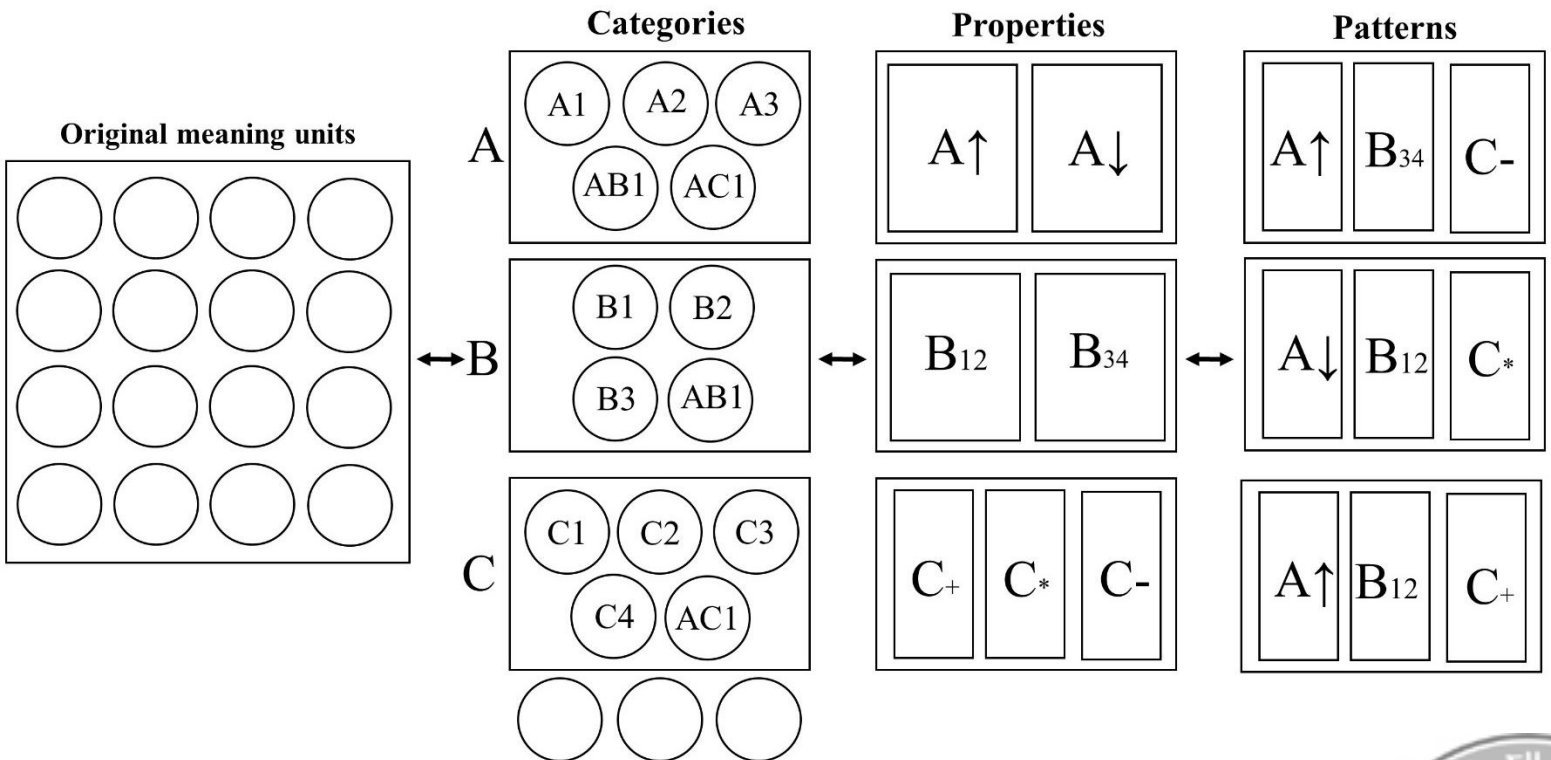


Figure 8 Schematic representation of the analytic strategy used in Study 2. Empty circles signify unassigned meaning units. Bidirectional arrows indicate the iterative nature of the approach.

Table 11 Meaning units and categories identified in the data

Meaning units	Categories	Properties
▪ Journalists should be able to resist any pressures and report professionally regardless of the editorial policy ▪ Journalists cannot go against editorial policy even if it contradicts professional reporting ▪ Journalists need to understand the responsibility they have for the job they do ▪ Journalism is not different from any other profession or industry that function in the market ▪ It's the same everywhere, not just in Serbia – independent journalism does not exist	The nature and purpose of journalism: Between ideals and realism	❖ Journalism as a public service ❖ Journalism as a business
▪ The Serbian media system is extremely polarized ▪ The main categories of media are pro-government vs. pro-opposition outlets, regime vs. independent outlets, tabloid vs. serious outlets, etc. ▪ The system at large is diverse enough to provide all relevant information and every relevant position ▪ There are too many news outlets, and they are creating confusion with the amount of the news they produce ▪ I don't see much difference between news outlets ▪ There are real journalists and quasi journalists	Conceptions of the media system: Are they all the same?	❖ High differentiation ❖ Low differentiation

▪ There is much bias in the media, which in some cases is unconcealed and extreme ▪ I wish the media would rely more on facts and cut down on comments and opinions ▪ The media are rarely objective, they do not show us the other side ▪ The media do not outright lie, they selectively choose topics, facts, and opinions that serve them and leave out those that are undesirable ▪ There is a lot of hatred, aggression, and vulgarity in the media ▪ The media should be more patriotic ▪ I believe there are media outlets that care about social values and protecting the public interest ▪ Journalists and news outlets are only interested in increasing their profit ▪ The media only care about protecting the interests of their sponsors ▪ (Some) journalists are only interested in gaining access, privileges, and popularity	Evaluation grounds and criteria: How and why was this news reported?	❖ Emphasizing outcomes ❖ Emphasizing motives

▪ Editorial decisions are not made in the newsrooms; they are made elsewhere (in government, political parties, foreign countries, etc.) ▪ The media sold out to powerful actors in business and politics who use them for their projects ▪ The media have an enormous influence, and they use it to manipulate people ▪ Journalists are underpaid and have dreadful employment opportunities ▪ Journalism is an extremely dangerous profession ▪ People tend to be too critical toward journalists without accepting their part of the responsibility ▪ Many journalists could perform better but engage in self-censorship because they don't have a choice	Journalistic status and agency: It is (not) up to them	❖ Complicit journalists ❖ Manipulative journalists ❖ Precarious journalists

Notes: Meaning units were edited for clarity and consistency based on multiple responses. The list is not exhaustive; it only includes meaning units illustrative of their respective categories.

Chapter 8. Study 2 findings

Analysis of interview data revealed that both distrust and cynicism are highly salient and prevalent categories of perceptions of the media. They can be difficult to differentiate when participant offer blanket negative assessments of the media, such as “I don’t think much of our news media” or “We have awful media in this country.” Yet, as the conversations progressed, important differences started to emerge revealing more complexity behind the expressed negativity.

Participants primarily experienced cynicism through beliefs in a fixed set of rules that govern how journalism operate. These rules were described in extremely negative terms, which minimized any potential for journalism to play a constructive role in society. In some accounts, journalism was seen as an instrument of powerful economic and political actors used purposefully to advance their interests. Others believed that news media actively use their social position for financial gain and other benefits, not caring about the damage they may create along the way.

In contrast, distrust appeared to be a less deterministic assessment primarily relating to the quality of journalistic outputs. Participants displayed a range of expectations from news reporting, some of which were consistent (e.g., objectivity and accuracy), and others that were less consistent (e.g., decency and patriotism) with prominent academic definitions of

trustworthiness of media. Assessments of journalistic output were typically consistent with participants' views about journalistic processes. When they were asked to evaluate reporting on a specific topic, some participants discussed their views on how journalism works. However, there were also numerous responses in which assessments of the process and of the outcomes showed more independence, providing additional support for the main argument in this dissertation that media cynicism and distrust are related but separable perceptions.

The iterative coding procedure outlined earlier suggested a much more nuanced way to describe not only how media distrust and cynicism mutually converge and differ, but also how each perception can be experienced in distinct ways depending on participants' characteristics and worldviews. Four basic categories of media perceptions were identified: those related to the nature of the journalistic profession, conceptions of media system, criteria used to evaluate journalism, and beliefs about the agency and status of journalists (Table 11). The four categories emerged from the interactions between the researcher and participants. As such, they do not represent a pre-conceived interview structure but reflect the interactive nature of this inquiry. The presentation of findings continues with a more detailed description of these categories as they provide important opportunities to discuss differences and similarities in manifested distrust and cynicism. To

provide an answer to RQ7, a description of the different manifestations of media cynicism and distrust indicated in the data follows. Cynical attitudes interacted with basic views about journalism and newspersons to produce discernable patterns of media cynicism. Further, media (dis)trust also gained different connotations in participants' accounts based on their understandings of the key elements in a trust relationship. The chapter concludes by outlining the relevance of experienced cynicism and distrust for participants' political and media practices, which was the focus of RQ8. The analysis presented here is focused on answering research questions and, therefore, does not constitute an exhaustive list of themes and patterns that exist in the data.

1. Basic categories of media perceptions

1) The nature and purpose of journalism: Between ideals and realism

For some participants, journalism represents an important political institution to which they ascribe various functions, such as to "illuminate" or "enlighten" citizens, facilitate public discussions, or help society move forward (e.g., P2, P3, P6, P8, P15). These responses echo the normative ideals embedded in the classic social responsibility model of the media (McQuail, 2010), which requires news media to prioritize the public interest. Participants who believe in such democracy-supporting functions of

journalism typically considered meeting these functions to be an ideal that is still beyond the reach of Serbian journalism. This is consistent with findings from previous research conducted in Bulgaria, a country with a relatively similar socio-political context as Serbia (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2016). The author found a substantial gap between what citizens expected from "ideal" journalism vs. how they perceived "real" journalism to be, which was echoed in the findings of the present study as well.

> Journalism should contribute to some important goals so that we finally become a truly democratic society in which all citizens have access to information, a society with the rule of law and dialogue in parliament, which cares about socially marginalized people. But the journalism we have today is nowhere near meeting these goals. (P3, 31, male, economist)

In contrast, another group of participants dismissed the notion of journalistic ideals altogether (e.g., P1, P4, P10, P16, P17). It is not that these respondents believed that Serbian journalists were failing at delivering these functions, rather, they saw thinking in idealistic terms as naïve and irrelevant altogether. They emphasized that journalism is simply a business like any other industry or profession, and that editorial decisions are made solely in the best financial interests of the outlet. According to this view, the media do not have virtuous social functions beyond surviving in the market. This line

of thinking is more consistent with the liberal or market understanding of the media (McQuail, 2010) in that it views journalism simply as a pragmatic industry motivated to meet the demands of audiences, while audiences have the ability to avoid or reject undesirable contents.

> I see that (the lack of personal journalistic independence from the outlet's editorial policy) as a natural thing, as business. I think journalism today is business, a struggle for market, marketing, who will be watched. Everyone has their audiences, and they operate in accordance with their business goals. This is just how things work, it shouldn't come as a surprise, and I find it acceptable. Anyways, everyone has the right to watch whatever they want. (P1, 39, male, NGO director)

Democratic theories of journalism acknowledge the coexistence of both business and public service orientations in contemporary journalism (Schudson, 2003). This uneasy cohabitation has inspired numerous professional, accountability, and ethical instruments to ensure that professional journalism does not lose sight of its democratic priorities (see Bertrand, 2000). Ultimately, a news outlet needs good business performance in order to provide high quality public service, but doing good business is not a guarantee that an outlet will live up to democratic ideals.

This topic is the first arena for applying cynical attitudes and experiencing the nature of journalism in black-and-white terms. From a strictly cynical perspective, not only is journalism seen as a profit-seeking industry, but financial and democratic goals are seen as necessarily contradictory. P10 exemplified this position by saying that "journalists do not care about the public interest because this is not what they are paid to do." If journalism is strictly seen as a business, considering journalistic ideals when evaluating the media is unnecessary or misleading, since reaching these ideals is not seen as a relevant goal in journalistic work. A distrusting but less cynical position would acknowledge both orientations of journalism and be open to the possibility that journalists could occasionally put their public orientation first and/or even go against the outlet's business interests. Several participants echoed such views by expressing the belief that financial pressures in journalism are obvious and inevitable but do not exclude the possibility of producing quality reporting (e.g., P2, P8, P11).

2) Conceptions of the media system: Are they all the same?

The key concepts that emerged as important to an understanding of participants' conceptions of the media system are polarization and differentiation. Polarization refers to perceiving irreconcilable differences in how outlets practice journalism. Differentiation refers to the extent of

diversity or meaningful differences that participants saw between outlets in a media system.

Almost all respondents, with two exceptions, described the media system in Serbia as deeply polarized. The most common basis for this perceived polarization was the direction of political bias in reporting (pro-government vs. pro-opposition). This view was common among highly politically interested partisans (e.g., P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P18), who easily sort all news outlets into two groups: like-minded and uncongenial media. In such cases, the gap between the two groups of outlets was perceived as extreme and described in simplistic terms as "real" vs. "quasi" journalism.

> There are regime media which conduct propaganda and there are these other media which are trying to say something and stand up to it. It does not mean that what these other media are doing is all truth and that they are completely objective, but they are far more realistic than pro-regime outlets. And they don't have the same conditions to report. (P6, 39, male, port worker)

> It was really frustrating to watch the coverage of the recent protests. TV Pink[16] was really exaggerating, I did not like that… They were only

[16] TV Pink was the most commonly cited example of an outlet with extreme pro-government bias. For almost three decades, TV Pink has been the most successful private TV station. In recent years, the backbone of its entertainment program has been reality TV shows recognizable for the frequent anti-social behavior of its participants.

talking about Vučić and state politics. Maybe it is stupid to call them Vučić's television, but that's what I think. N1[17] also exaggerates occasionally, I also dislike many things there, but at least they show the protests, and you can see it for yourself, you do not need a journalist to tell you what is going on. It feels like they were reporting from two different cities. I found it to be quite funny. (P13, 47, female, homemaker)

However, not all participants who described the media system as polarized considered the differences between outlets of opposite poles substantial. For instance, some politically interested non-partisans (e.g., P1, P12) considered outlets like TV Pink and N1 to be equally biased, just in opposite directions. These participants recognized a third group of outlets typically comprising the national public broadcaster (RTS) and two TV channels with national coverage (TV Prva and TV B92), which they considered more neutral or moderate compared to the extremely partisan outlets.

The degree of perceived diversity also varied depending on how participants perceived the relative size of the poles. Many described Serbian

[17] TV N1 is a regional cable news channel that covers Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia. It was launched in 2014 as a CNN affiliate. While many respondents locate it on the opposite pole from TV Pink, it is referred to inconsistently as a "pro-opposition" and "independent" outlet by government supporting and pro-opposition participants, respectively.

media polarization as asymmetrical, placing only a small number of outlets, or even a single outlet, on their preferred pole. For instance, P8 saw the national public broadcaster as the only "serious" outlet compared to other media he labeled "kitsch." P18, on the other hand, singled out N1 as the only "informative" outlet in contrast to others which she experienced as "propagandist." Finally, two participants (P11, P14) explicitly described all Serbian news outlets as similar, reporting the lowest degree of differentiation.

Cynicism informs conceptions of media systems by suggesting that all media actors are fundamentally motivated by self-interest, making it hard to meaningfully differentiate between available news outlets (or journalists) (e.g., Krouwel & Abts, 2007). Moreover, perceiving all actors as corrupt breeds pessimism that any meaningful change in the system is possible. This is because even if an individual actor tries to break from a seemingly crooked pattern, such an attempt is expected to be suppressed by the system that is already corrupt beyond repair. This was a frequently shared view among participants (e.g., P10, P12, P14, P15, P20). On the other hand, less cynical general media distrust is more open to a flexible differentiation between actors within the media system based on their professional conduct. This was observed among participants who demonstrated some degree of

reflexivity when critically examining the professional conduct of congenial outlets (e.g., P3, P15, P17).

3) Evaluating journalism: How and why was this news reported?

When participants evaluated news reporting, they typically compared the outcome (i.e., a news report) to professional standards that they considered important, and/or they tried to infer why a certain story was reported and why it was reported in a specific way. The former evaluation criterion deals with the quality of journalistic output, while the latter is related to the intentions of newspersons.

With minor but notable exceptions, the professional standards that participants referred to were consistent with the mainstream definitions of journalistic professionalism (e.g., Hallin & Mancini, 2004). For instance, participants commonly criticized the extent of bias—understood narrowly as party favoritism—in Serbian media, while simultaneously expressing the belief that some level of political bias is inevitable. They objected to exaggerated levels of bias, which they described as "unconcealed," "impassioned" (P1, P5, P9, P12, P14), and "extreme" (P3, P6, P16, P17). Other frequently invoked professional standards included factualness, objectivity, and completeness. Participants were less concerned about outright lies in the media than selective practices used to choose which topics

and facts to cover (see Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Most were dissatisfied with the arbitrary selection of topics, interviewees, and questions used to promote preferred positions. In contrast, participants valued journalism based on pure facts, freed from journalists' opinions or interpretations, which were seen as attempts at manipulating and influencing public opinion, consistent with findings from previous research (Coleman et al., 2012).

Several participants—mostly older conservatives or less politically interested younger respondents—relied on criteria less consistent with dominant understandings of media professionalism. These criteria included patriotism, decency, and functionality. For instance, several respondents expressed resentment toward outlets critical of the government for never reporting affirmatively about the government's results (P4, P5, P13, P16). For some of them, this practice indicated that such outlets do not support Serbia's prosperity and are, thus, unpatriotic.

When asked to evaluate news reporting in an open-ended way, many participants discussed the intentions behind the reporting rather than (or in addition to) the quality of the news. Participants typically mentioned instrumental motives of journalists and news outlets when considering why or how the media report on specific issues. In this case, instrumental motivation primarily referred to financial benefits for journalists, news organization, media owners, or funders. In addition, some respondents also

discussed partisanship and personal benefits, such as access, privilege, and popularity, as relevant motives. In contrast, participants rarely mentioned expressive motives (e.g., protection of the public interest) as relevant in news reporting. If they did, this view was typically limited to a small number of preferred outlets.

The salience of cynical attitudes in this category illustrates most directly the component of the conceptual definition of media cynicism that deals with the belief in the self-serving motives of media actors. Study 2 data revealed the prevalence and accessibility of such beliefs. Participants frequently referenced them even when answering questions that were not narrowly about evaluating the media (e.g., questions about exposure habits and interest in the news). Similar to cynical views about the nature of the journalistic profession, the data further illustrated a cynical tendency to evaluate the media in simplified and categorical terms. Similarly, manifestations of distrust were most pronounced when citizens engaged in evaluating journalistic performance. However, whereas both cynicism and distrust represent negative assessments of performance, these assessments are much more rigid in the case of cynicism. In addition, distrust is not necessarily based on perceived instrumental motives of news media. Several participants (e.g., P8, P11, P13) described their distrust in news media based on their

dissatisfaction with news coverage while believing that journalists probably had good intentions.

4) Journalistic position and agency: It is (not) up to them

Participants also exhibited important differences in how they understand the status and agency of people who produce journalism. One view depicted journalists as calculated manipulators who have substantial influence on their audiences, specific individuals, and society as a whole, which they use in irresponsible and sinister ways. In this framework, journalists are believed to either not recognize or intentionally disregard the public interest for personal gain. As a result, journalism is seen as actively interfering with the well-being of society. This view shares some similarities with the phenomenon described by Robinson and Holbert (2018) as perceiving journalism as a threat to political performance.

> They (the pro-government outlets) have been demonizing Dragan Đilas (the main opposition leader) most consistently in recent years. There was this one situation which really upset me, when those guys came in front of his house during the lockdown and insulted him in front of his children. That was the worst. Now, I don't know if they were instructed to do so or if they were egged on by those garbage media they watch, and it shouldn't matter. The point is that a man was humiliated in front

of his children. That shouldn't happen to anyone. (P3, male, 31, economist)

Another equally unflattering depiction was that of complicit journalists. According to this view, journalists have a good understanding of the responsibility they have and the damage they can cause, but they decide to ignore such concerns because they have "sold out" (e.g., P12, P15, P16). Implicit in these accounts is that journalists have the competences necessary to perform better, but they have decided to compromise their integrity for personal gain. In this view, journalists are not seen as active agents of chaos (like manipulative journalists) but simply as people who chose an easier and less honorable path.

Finally, there was also a view that describes the position of journalists in precarious terms. In this case, the perceived agency of journalists is low but is framed in more positive terms compared to the position that sees journalists as complicit. The precariousness of journalists was primarily described in terms of low earnings, insecure employment, and high competition, but also the stress, pressures, and risks surrounding the profession. Those who adopted this position expressed more empathy and understanding for journalists (e.g., P2, P8, P13).

This dimension is relevant for expressing cynicism because it speaks to the role and responsibility of individual journalists for the state of news

media and issues in society. It also indicates the potential that participants see for positive changes in journalism. Journalists may be seen as highly competent in performing their professional duties, which could indicate positive attitudes and trust. However, if journalists are seen as likely to put their capacities to dishonorable purposes, regardless of the reason for doing so (e.g., greedy human nature, scarce resources, or precarious work conditions), such perceptions encourage pessimism that any meaningful change is possible. On the other hand, uncynical distrust can acknowledge journalists' agency without automatically linking it to the advancement of self-interest. For instance, P9 exemplified this position while discussing a case that attracted much public attention in Serbia when an RTS journalist was uncharacteristically persistent with uncomfortable questions in an interview with the president. Participants with strongly pronounced cynicism dismissed the episode as a preplanned show in which the journalist simply played a role as instructed by the editors and the president's team (e.g., P10, P14). In contrast, P9, who reportedly has no trust in the national public broadcaster, said that the TV host's "journalistic instincts probably finally told her to stand up to (the president's) obnoxious behavior," demonstrating some openness to the idea that journalists can use their agency in ways that are ethical and democratically desirable.

Table 12 Expressions of media cynicism and distrust in four basic categories of media perceptions

	The nature and purpose of journalism	**Conception of the media system**	**Evaluation criteria**	**Journalistic status and agency**
Media cynicism	Business motives incompatible with public service	The system inevitably converges to the lowest common denominator	Fixed negative assessments of the output, instrumental motives	If agency is acknowledged, it is believed to be used for negative purposes
Media distrust	Both business and public service orientations are relevant	Differentiation within the system is possible	Amenable negative assessments of the output	Agency is acknowledged and can be used variably

2. Manifestations of media cynicism

As noted above, participants in Study 2 frequently expressed views that were remarkably consistent with the proposed definition of media cynicism, even unprompted. However, Study 2 also revealed some differences in experiences of media cynicism which could be relevant for audience-media relationships beyond the intensity of cynical views. Three discernible cynical patterns were identified, which were labeled general, partisan, and ambivalent media cynicism. These patterns are not mutually exclusive, but they are sufficiently distinguishable to serve as a useful analytic framework to study media cynicism and refine the findings from Study 1.

1) General media cynicism

The first manifestation of media cynicism rests on belief in a firm set of rules applied to the basic organizing principles of journalism that inevitably domesticate all practitioners. General media cynics dismiss journalistic ideals in news reporting as naïve wishful thinking. They believe that all journalism is a product of different self-interests. Although they may perceive some diversity in the media system, the idea that journalism is necessarily motivated by self-interests is applied to all media actors without exception. Therefore, in order to make sense of the news, general media cynics ask whose interests the news they read is supposed to advance. Since journalism is seen as a tool to promote different interests, media workers are typically seen as complicit – professionals who put their expertise in the service of their patrons for personal benefit. This pattern was identified among participants of varied age, sex, place of residence, and education level. However, there were some notable similarities between these participants to suggest what characteristics may interact with cynical views to lead to general media cynicism. General media cynics are highly interested in politics but lack a clear partisan preference. They have a great need for orientation and consider being informed valuable but not a priority.

The belief that media actors have exclusively self-serving motives is highly salient in this pattern. In fact, general cynics share a primarily

transactional view of journalism which posits that journalists will publish anything their patrons ask of them. Several participants used the same idiom, which roughly translates to *tie the donkey where the boss wants*, to express this view (e.g., P4, P14, P16).

> Tie the donkey where the boss wants – that is the rule of the game and there is no arguing with that. The editor says what you can and cannot publish, and we know whom the editor needs to listen to. Journalist must write strictly what their editor tells them to. (P4, 84, male, retired engineer)

Unsurprisingly, the most commonly referenced sources whose interests news media try to protect included the government, political parties, local and multinational corporations, and foreign powers. However, some participants reported not being sure exactly whose interests journalists are protecting, but having a strong impression that those must be the interests of some powerful actors. Whatever the case is, participants considered that providing favorable coverage to their patrons secures financial benefits for media workers.

> No one finds a piece of information out of pure boredom. So, when a piece of information finds its way to the audience, it naturally opens the door to suspicion, for instance, that maybe it was paid for. Regardless of the nature of information, if it reaches us, based on everything we have

experienced, we may conclude that the regime or someone else paid for it or made some sort of a deal. (P10, 25, male, software developer)

The pessimistic orientation of general cynicism is reflected in the certainty with which general cynics believe their opinions reflect fixed rules about how journalism works. When a reporter exhibits professional conduct in line with journalistic standards and norms, general cynics may remain unimpressed and believe that such conduct was a part of a calculated attempt to achieve some less principled goal. They even have low expectations of the new generation of journalists. The market rules that govern journalism are seen as so powerful that they will inevitably corrupt every new actor who joins the field, no matter how pure their intentions originally were.

Of course, every journalist wants to report from a warzone, on some topics they consider important, to perform investigative journalism to make the world better…just like a future doctor who is entering medical school, they want to help people, but very soon they learn that it is not adequately paid and then they turn, some to sensational journalism, others to corruption, while some just leave…no one at 19 starts journalism school with a life goal to work for Pink and talk about Zadruga (a popular reality show notorious for the uncivilized behavior of its participants), but then people have to pay the bills and rent and

they become susceptible to anything. (P12, female, 34, call center manager)

2) Partisan media cynicism

For partisan media cynics, there is no single universal principle that applies to all media actors indiscriminately. Partisan cynics share many beliefs with general cynics about the nature of journalism but with one key difference – they limit such beliefs to counter-attitudinal outlets. These outlets are then strongly contrasted with pro-attitudinal outlets, which are believed to operate in a substantially different way. In fact, the gap between the two groups of outlets is so deep that counter-attitudinal and pro-attitudinal outlets are commonly perceived as "quasi" and "real" journalism, respectively. Unsurprisingly, partisan cynics are highly involved in politics with clearly defined partisan, or at least ideological, positions. Pro-government partisan cynics tended to be older and more rural than their anti-government counterparts in the sample. The generational divide often emerged in discussions about participants' environments. Anti-government partisan cynics commonly described government supporters as retired citizens "who watch TV the whole day." Pro-government partisan cynics discussed conflicting with younger members of their families about political views.

In partisan cynicism, the belief that newspersons are motivated exclusively by self-serving interests is limited to counter-attitudinal outlets. These outlets are seen as predatory manipulators who will stop at nothing to secure financial benefits, privileges, and access. This includes producing quasi journalism, which was described as the demonization of opponents, propaganda, manipulation, entertainment, and distraction (P2, P3, P6, P18). Two participants of this study from opposite political sides illustrate this.

> These garbage (pro-government) media care only about money and privileges. It means they do favors for the government and expect something in return. They chose their side, and they want to maintain the status quo as long as possible because it provides them with money and privileges. It is a mutual benefit. They don't just work for the government; they work for themselves. (P3, male, 31, economist)

> I want to understand everything, but that kind of hatred I cannot understand. They (outlets critical toward the government) are not anti-Vučić, the are anti-Serbia... They don't want roads to be built or factories to be open... I guess they are running out of money they stole. That crowd is paid by Đilas (one of the main opposition leaders) and they do as they are told. (P5, 74, female, retired technician)

When it comes to evaluating pro-attitudinal outlets rather than counter-attitudinal outlets, some partisan cynics adopt a similarly fixed approach but

with the opposite valence; they evaluate the motives of such outlets as expressive (i.e., oriented toward protecting the public interest). However, there were also partisan cynics who showed more reflexivity and nuance when describing the motives of pro-attitudinal outlets. For instance, several pro-opposition participants discussed how their like-minded media started showing signs of bias in their reporting at times comparable to that in pro-government outlets (e.g., P3, P6, P18). Some reported that these perceptions of bias made them suspicious of the motives of these outlets. In addition, pro-government participants (e.g., P4, P4, P19) noted that their preferred outlets frequently "exaggerate" in their coverage, which they interpreted as profit-motivated but still benign.

The pessimism of partisan cynicism is primarily rooted in the conviction that uncongenial outlets necessarily have malicious intent. This was so pronounced in some cases that it almost seemed dehumanizing. "Quasi" journalists are seen as vicious manipulators who are either unaware of or indifferent about the damage their reporting can cause, as long as they can obtain desired benefits. In addition, no meaningful change on the opposite side is seen as possible because their audiences and political patrons are believed to incentivize the worst kind of performance. The audience is seen as naïve, uneducated, and impassioned blind followers who uncritically ask for extreme partisan coverage. Finally, the opposing political side is seen as

only capable of generating political support through manipulation enabled by the aligned media. As long as these structures work in the described direction, the expectation is that coverage in the opposing media can only become worse.

3) Ambivalent media cynicism

Like partisan media cynics, ambivalent cynics also express dual views about the nature of the journalistic profession and use diverse evaluation criteria in their judgements. However, whereas partisan cynics apply these views consistently based on an outlet's alignment, ambivalent cynics hold these conflicting views in constant flux. The reason for deciding to label this pattern as a manifestation of cynicism is that the anticipated resolution of this conflict was still typically framed in cynical terms; i.e., more often than not, journalism will simply be business, and news reporting will mostly be motivated by media actors' self-interests. Unlike partisan cynics and similar to general cynics, ambivalent media cynics believe that this "rule" applies equally to outlets across the board. Unlike the other two groups, even when ambivalent cynics express media cynicism, they do not show contempt but a surprising amount of understanding and empathy for journalists. Compared with other participants, ambivalent cynics tended to be younger and less interested in politics. Rather than being completely disinterested, these

participants do not prioritize political issues, or they simply care about a narrow scope of political topics, often evoking the profile of single-issue voters (Conover, Gray, & Coombs, 1982). For these participants, news and politics represent a more distant world than for the two groups described before. Although this was the smallest group in the sample by comparison, there are indications that its relative size could be much more substantial in general audiences.[18]

Ambivalent cynics believe that journalists probably want to do their job as professionally as they can, but the reality often requires them to make less than praiseworthy decisions. If social conditions were better, these participants may argue, journalists would probably be more driven by professional norms and values. However, ambivalent cynics made frequent references to injustice, inequality, and wide-spread corruption as defining characteristics of Serbian society. Under such conditions, they believe it is only logical that newspersons, like everyone else, would be primarily motivated by their financial interests.

In fact, when discussing journalists, these participants often used phrases like “as we all do” or “just like everyone else.” They believe that

[18] During the interview, two participants in this group expressed their concerns that they may not be the most adequate interviewees because they are not very interested in the topics we were discussing. Interestingly, several participants reported that their less politically interested acquaintances declined the invitation to participate in the study citing similar concerns.

journalists share the hardships of the rest of society and should not be held to higher standards. In this way, for ambivalent cynicism, understanding and empathy substitute the resentment and disgust of partisan cynicism and the suspicion and wariness of general cynicism. However, this is a source of pessimism about the potential for change in journalism. Because society is seen as deeply structurally damaged, no section or individual actor can rise above it, let alone fix it. Journalism is seen primarily as a precarious profession – underpaid, insecure, dangerous, and stressful. Not only are journalists expected to frequently make difficult professional and moral concessions, but everyone else would be expected to do the same in their place.

> I think that smart journalists today know where to set the boundary to how much they are allowed to pursue, insist on, or publish information that is forbidden. Today, a smart journalist knows how to estimate the risk and not overstep that boundary, because overstepping the boundary can mean losing one's job, or even losing one's life. We had that situation before. Therefore, I have an absolute understanding for journalists when they are afraid to publish some information and for how they act in such situations. (P8, male, 28, court intern)
>
> How is a journalist supposed to be independent when they work for peanuts? Are they supposed to risk getting fired or experiencing

violence? You learn some information and you know it is dangerous for your life, what would you do? Not many would dare. (P13, 47, female, homemaker)

3. Manifestations of media (dis)trust

Distrust was also a relatively salient category, and many participants referenced it quite early in the conversation. Some explicitly mentioned (dis)trust when describing why they consume (or avoid) news in certain outlets or while evaluating journalistic performance, as described above. When asked to reflect deeper on what (dis)trust in media means for them, participants commonly echoed mainstream conceptualizations of media trust by referencing expectations that media performance will be consistent with various professional standards.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the three basic elements that form a trust relationship are the two actors—the one who trusts and the one who is trusted—as well as the domain of trust, which specifies the area(s) to which trust applies. Two important elements in participants' accounts of media trust were found that further illuminate how contemporary audiences experience (dis)trust in news: perceived trustworthiness of the media and self-efficacy in public information. The former refers to the expectation that the media will provide a desirable outcome within the relevant domain of trust. The latter

describes the role ascribed to oneself in a trust relationship, i.e., in achieving such desirable outcome. A closer look into these two elements suggests different meanings that media (dis)trust may take in a high-choice media environment.

1) Perceived media trustworthiness

In relational theories of trust, perceived trustworthiness refers to the observed properties of the object that provide assurance to the observer that the object will perform as expected in relevant domains (Mayer et al., 1995). As discussed in Chapter 2, most prominent academic theories equate media trust with perceived trustworthiness while occasionally disagreeing on the domains to which media trust applies (e.g., Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Tsfati, 2010). However, these domains are commonly derived from normative theories of journalism. The data found that this approach resonated with participants' accounts to some extent, but also indicated frequent discrepancies between the academic understanding and the public's understanding of some commonly used normative ideas like objectivity. Further, the data also speak to the problems associated with using trustworthiness criteria when assessing media perceptions on more abstract levels.

Consistent with contemporary literature, participants most commonly emphasized expectations related to accuracy, objectivity, and selection of facts and topics as their experiences of media trust. Participants typically conveyed several expectations that converged around similar themes – that they do not want to be lied to by the media, that they expect to receive only the facts without journalistic opinions or assessments, and that they do not want any relevant information to be hidden from them. However, when asked to reflect on what these terms mean for them and how they can be verified, participants resorted to different strategies. Some mentioned ritualized journalistic practices employed to demonstrate professionalism. For instance, P3, P6, and P18 stated that they believe that N1 is more objective than other outlets since their news reports frequently end with a statement that a journalist tried to reach the other side, albeit often unsuccessfully. P1 and P14 believed that there are no objective outlets in Serbian media since no single outlet equally critiques opposing political sides. It was also quite common that participants interpreted the referenced journalistic standards through their partisan lenses. For instance, anti-government participants often attributed objectivity to news reporting merely because it was critical of the government (e.g., P2, P15, P18). Similarly, pro-government participants rejected opinion journalism, but only from outlets critical of the government; opinions in like-minded media were found to be

fact-based and informed, i.e., credible (e.g., P4, P5, P19). This implies that citizens frequently use categories like trust, credibility, and a host of journalistic professional norms and values to justify their selection of thought-confirming outlets in a process of motivated reasoning (Arceneaux et al., 2012; Stroud, 2011). Finally, there were participants who tried to assess media trustworthiness based on their real-world experiences. In such cases, participants frequently brought up information they received from personal contacts as proof that the media cannot be trusted. This is in line with a recent survey that found that citizens in Serbia and several other countries overwhelmingly trust personal contacts more than the media (Ipsos Global Advisor, 2019). For instance, several respondents mentioned the information they received from acquaintances working in health-care institutions as proof that the media should not be trusted when it comes to reporting on the coronavirus pandemic.

Theoretically, perceptions of trustworthiness can be applied to assessments of news media at various levels – from specific outlets and journalists to news media in general. In fact, this is an important assumption in contemporary media research – that regardless of the diversity that exists in modern media environments, citizens share an understanding of the essence of professional journalism that unites diverse news sources and can assess the trustworthiness of such an abstract target (e.g., Ladd, 2012).

However, the participants in this study typically discussed the trustworthiness of specific media targets. The outlets that conformed to one's expectations were deemed trustworthy, and in most cases, these were the outlets one used most frequently to get the news. When asked why other people trust the outlets they deemed dis-trustworthy, it was not unusual for participants to express extremely negative views of such audiences, calling them naïve, gullible, uneducated, and even primitive (P2, P8, P17). This finding echoes the literature on the third person effect (McLeod et al., 2017), which describes the tendency to attribute susceptibility to negative influence of the media disproportionately to others rather than to one's self. It also shows that the risks associated with news exposure are perceived to extend beyond simply failing to obtain relevant information and include the possibility of being tricked or manipulated by the media. Finding a trustworthy outlet then becomes a strategy that signifies that a person practiced wise judgement and will not be taken advantage of like the gullible other.

Although some participants were able to assess the trustworthiness of news media in general, others experienced considerable difficulties when doing so. Some explicitly stated that available news media options are too diverse to be evaluated in any blanket terms (e.g., P3, P7, P13). Others would start discussing the trustworthiness of journalists or media in general,

but soon declared that such an assessment might be overly simplified as it only applies to the majority and that there are important exceptions (e.g., P2, P6, P15). Therefore, many participants did not demonstrate a sufficiently abstract schema that could encapsulate the diversity that exists in the news media environment. When they were asked to try anyway and assess the trustworthiness of news media in general, they typically used the outlets perceived to be the most popular, consistent with the assertion by Daniller et al. (2017).

2) Self-efficacy in public information

Extant academic definitions of media trust reference earlier focus on assessments of media trustworthiness while discounting the role of the audience. This is one of the reasons why mainstream approaches have had difficulties differentiating distrust from cynicism and skepticism. An important theoretical assumption posits that contemporary conceptualizations treat the subject of the trust relationship as active, which differentiates trust from more passive dependence inherent in faith and confidence (Hupcey, Penrod, Morse, & Mitcham, 2001). However, consistent with previous research (Pjesivac et al., 2016), the findings of this study showed that participants differ with respect to their perceived control

in relation to news media, which may be relevant for reexamining the role of media trust in contemporary news environments.

Most participants conveyed their experiences of distrust as relatively passive in that they equated distrust with a perceived lack of trustworthiness, i.e., the media's failure to provide information that conforms to their expectations. However, there were also some participants who adopted the position that passively expecting the media to provide desired information is not sufficient to become a well-informed citizen, the ultimate goal of news exposure (e.g., P1, P12, P14). These participants embraced a more engaged role, not as an object of news exposure, but rather as a subject in public information processes. Self-efficacy in the context of media trust means that although individual news sources may be seen as dis-trustworthy, engaging in the public information environment is warranted based on the belief that the media system provides the pieces of the puzzle and that the subject has the necessary resources to put them together. Although individual outlets may seem to be unsatisfactory and unreliable providers of relevant information, the whole media system provides an arena in which it is possible to meet public information expectations. This is facilitated by the trustor's agency and confidence that they can successfully navigate through the muddle that exists in the news environment and come out with essential information.

> You can never know who is 100% right. I know whom I trust more and whom I trust less, and then I take more media and some common sense to determine what is going on…It is not sufficient to simply follow both sides to know the truth. (P6, 39, male, port worker)

Similar to perceived media trustworthiness, self-efficacy could also theoretically be applied at different levels of news exposure. However, participants in the current study referenced their self-efficacy most commonly in relation to the whole media system rather than specific outlets. This may be due to the participants' understanding of pluralism in Serbian news media. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), there are two types of media pluralism. Internal pluralism exists at the level of the individual outlet by covering a wide range of political perspectives and tendencies that exist in a society. In contrast, external pluralism exists in societies with largely uniform individual outlets, which at the system level represent a variety of viewpoints. P1 succinctly described his belief in external pluralism in Serbian media by saying that "you cannot say everything anywhere, but you can say anything somewhere." In his view, partisans know exactly where to turn to receive information that confirms their worldviews. Other citizens, if they wish to be informed, need to practice proactive exposure – combining news sources and exercising critical thinking. Since individual outlets are seen as internally uniform, it is relatively easy to decide whether (or to what

extent) they are seen as trustworthy. Unless an individual has a good grasp on journalism, the easiest way to do this is by infusing trustworthiness assessments with one's own political bias. For those who "do not have a dog in the fight," this environment does not offer individual outlets that would be sufficient to receive relevant information. The only way for them to achieve the goal of becoming well-informed is to consider the media environment as a whole and reimagine their trust-relationship with the whole media system.

4. Engagement with news media and politics from the audience's perspective

RQ8 was asked in order to further explore the democratic implications of media distrust and cynicism in a more holistic manner and elaborate on the findings of Study 1. Three general patterns were found that can parsimoniously describe how participants relate to news media and politics based on the amount of time participants dedicate to news-seeking, the composition of their media repertoires, and the importance they attribute to civic values. Although a wide range of political and media practices may be relevant, the analysis in this segment revolves mostly around the different ways in which participants use and interact with political information, as these practices showed the most variability based on relevant media perceptions. In addition, these findings underlined the importance of

additional factors, such as involvement and self-efficacy, that complicate the relationships between media distrust or cynicism and resulting practices. It was also found that reports of the most undesirable and disruptive civic practices coincided with instances of the most excessive manifested cynicism.

1) Self-protecting news avoiders

Several participants expressed a clear preference for actively avoiding the news in order to protect themselves from the negative influence of news media. Being well-informed was not ranked high among their priorities (although it may have been at a certain point in the past). They reported news exposure that oscillates between complete avoidance, incidental, and irregular exposure. They see political participation as a personal choice and not a civic duty and are strongly repelled by the pervasive politicization of society. The most important characteristics that coincided with this pattern were low to moderate perceived trustworthiness of news media, low self-efficacy, and experiences of ambivalent or general cynicism.

Some participants reported perceiving the omnipresence of media and politics as an overwhelming nuisance in their lives. Lacking a stronger motivation to get involved with political information (e.g., the need for orientation or partisanship), these participants may encounter difficulties

when assessing trustworthiness in the context of the media, which could hinder their ability to navigate the abundance of available sources. Moreover, they frequently expressed the fear of becoming victims of news exposure. For instance, P11 discussed how she used to regularly follow the coronavirus coverage during the early weeks of pandemic until she began to feel that such heavy exposure may be detrimental for her mental health. P8 described feeling "poisoned" by the negativity in news media or in political discussions taking place in his surroundings. P16 even went as far as describing feeling ashamed for allowing himself to be "manipulated" by the pro-opposition media—which he supported in the 1990s—after realizing that these outlets did not share his social values. For these participants, the risk of exposure is not simply failing to obtain relevant information. The risk becomes the much more dangerous prospect of experiencing distress, conflict, or discomfort, which potentially makes them wary of news exposure and leads them to generalizing some degree of media distrust. In order to overcome the adversity of news and politics, these participants appeared to have chosen active news avoidance as way to exercise their agency. Digital media environments allow such audiences to completely disconnect from the news if they wish to do so. Without news exposure to boost their political efficacy and interest, they may also grow increasingly distant from politics. This could be observed in the case of participants who proudly proclaimed that

they were apolitical, trying to contrast themselves from more engaged others, who were seen as excessively politicized by the media (e.g., P11, P16).

Experiences of cynicism can further strengthen or complicate this relationship. Cynicism can provide additional justification for the decision to completely cease exposure. If news media are seen as inherently corrupt and incapable of more professional performance, then tuning out can easily be justified as a rational strategy. This was the case with P16, whose previous disappointments with news media led him to conclude that the media are all the same and that he is better off without news exposure. In addition to actively avoiding any form of engagement with the news and politics, P16 shared a story that indicates how excessive cynicism may push this pattern toward extremes. He reported completely terminating communication with his life-long next-door neighbor who reportedly insisted on starting political conversations. To P16, his neighbor personified the ability of news media to indoctrinate their audiences. This example suggests that avoidance of news media can in some cases spill over to avoidance of avid news audiences.

Ambivalent cynicism, on the other hand, can make this pattern of detachment somewhat more porous. This is because ambivalent cynics do not believe that underwhelming media performance is necessarily a result of the malicious intent of newspersons, but rather a side-effect of market pressures that frequently push journalists toward hyperproduction and

sensationalism (P8, P11). This view appears to make ambivalent cynics more permissive toward journalists and more open-minded to potential engagement in the future, albeit a limited one. Participants who most closely exemplified this profile (e.g., P8, P11, P13, P20) reported a general preference for avoiding the news but had far less systematic and consistent avoidance practices compared to P16. In fact, their exposure patterns can better be described as irregular or incidental. They reported occasionally paying attention to the news that they encounter on social media (P11), when their family watch the news on TV (P8), or while waiting for an entertainment program to begin (P13, P20). These participants described being uninformed by choice but left room for seeking exposure if they became interested in a news story.

2) Highly motivated and expressive news junkies

The second relational pattern is characterized by avid news exposure and passionate engagement. For participants who reported practices consistent with this pattern, it is not uncommon for them to check the news several times a day but in a strictly selective fashion. These participants appeared to enjoy discussing politics and engaging in active forms of news consumption, such as commenting or sharing the news on social media. They

described being informed and being politically engaged as civic duties and reported regularly voting and practicing other forms of engagement.

This pattern of heightened attention to and involvement with the news appears to be driven by partisan motivations and facilitated by the perceived trustworthiness of like-minded news sources. Partisans are often motivated by reaching their preferred conclusion, i.e., confirming their strong prior beliefs. Support for one's preconceptions is most likely found in like-minded partisan outlets. When news exposure is approached through a strictly partisan lens, perceptions of news quality become conflated with political bias. Thought-confirming information is then assessed as objective, factual, or impartial, leading to the conclusion that a like-minded outlet is "trustworthy" (Stroud, 2011). Because partisan outlets continually provide support for their views, partisans perceive them as trustworthy and use them as their primary sources of information.

Partisan cynicism can further strengthen this pattern by highlighting the perception that the other side is not only politically distant, but dangerous and ultimately less deserving. Partisan cynics in the sample described the uncongenial media as crooked and manipulative and their audiences as naïve at best and outright backward at worst (e.g., P2, P3, P4, P5, P18, P19). In some cases, cynical views appeared to additionally encourage behaviors to which partisans are already inclined. For instance, most participants

(partisans and non-partisans alike) were found to be highly unlikely to pay for the news due to their reported financial circumstances or the stance that all the news they need is already available for free online. However, rare participants who reported some paying behaviors described their motives for doing so in terms that are consistent with partisan cynicism. P15 discussed donating money to a local news outlet from a different region whose program he never intended to follow. The motivation to donate money was the perceived injustice experienced by one of the outlet's journalists who faced repercussions for reporting critically on the local government. In a climate in which audiences rarely pay even for news that they intend to consume, donating to an outlet in whose reporting one is not even interested appears remarkable. What caused this outlet to receive a donation was not the quality of its reporting, but the perception of having a common adversary.

There were also instances in which it was possible to observe how an interaction between partisan-based (dis)trustworthiness and partisan cynicism could significantly alter resulting practices. Although extreme partisanship makes dialogue between opposite sides difficult, it does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of having a conversation altogether, as long as the motives of the other side are acknowledged as sincere and equally worthy. Partisan cynicism eliminates this possibility by intensifying

hostility toward the other side and effectively transforming them from opponent to enemy. A partisan with less pronounced cynical attitudes may try to engage the other side in constructive ways. For instance, P7 recalled an experience in which she commented on the news of a pro-government outlet, asking editors and journalists why they did not publish the link to the news from a critical outlet that they were criticizing. She described thinking it was important for both the journalist who wrote the piece and their readers to be reminded that such behavior was unprofessional, even if they did not respond to her comment. Other participants with more pronounced partisan cynical tendencies showed less open-mindedness for the other side in their media practices. For instance, P15 reported occasionally commenting on the news in uncongenial outlets simply to "annoy and trigger" the staff and the audience of such outlets. He described his motivation as entertainment and a small act of vengeance against insincere outlets who he believed to be trying to shift public opinion by filtering the comments section. In another example, P3 told an anecdote about a time when he was approached by a journalist from an uncongenial outlet for a vox populi. After the journalist asked if he would like to comment on the topic for their newspaper, P3 responded, "Yes, as soon as you become a real newspaper." He stated that he felt so good for having an opportunity to tell someone from a disliked news outlet what he thought about them that he even posted about the encounter on his social

media. The important distinction in the latter two examples compared to the earlier one is that any attempt to engage in constructive interaction with the other side was rendered meaningless. A cynic appears to engage with the other side in an entertaining way, which is less about the substance of the divide and more about demonstrating one's own virtue and/or the other side's inferiority.

3) Proactive but cautious news seekers

The final pattern describes regular and routinized news exposure from several times a week to once a day using diverse sources. The typical news diet in this pattern can be described as combining sources and *reading between the lines* as a strategy to becoming properly informed. This motif was frequently identified in qualitative studies of news audiences in this part of Europe (Pjesivac et al., 2016; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2016). The strategy implies a highly pro-active approach that requires significant effort on the side of the audience. At the same time, although this pattern puts emphasis on being informed, it also includes a disdain toward what is seen as the hyper-politicization of society. Therefore, although participants who displayed this pattern reported practicing regular news exposure, they rarely appeared to extend it to more active forms of news engagement. They also described political participation in terms of a choice rather than a duty.

Although they emphasized the importance of voting, they appeared to be proud of being moderately political and rarely reported other forms of participation beyond voting.

The participants who displayed this pattern typically assessed the trustworthiness of news media in general as unsatisfactory. However, their need for orientation was strong enough to prevent them from detachment, while their involvement was low enough not to give way to partisan selectivity. Being highly efficacious, these participants instead seem to navigate through the media system without being devoted to a single outlet or a group of outlets. They frequently reported practicing exposure to outlets they consider dis-trustworthy. This phenomenon has been discussed in the literature, epitomized in the title of Tsfati and Cappella's (2003) article "Do People Watch What They Do Not Trust." The findings of this study suggest that at least some people do, not because they expect to find objective information in a dis-trustworthy source, but because they believe that the information they can obtain from a dis-trustworthy source is a piece of the puzzle necessary to see the objective picture.

Cynicism can act as an important heuristic when reading between the lines. Participants often relied on their general cynicism as a cue to understanding the motives that guided the selection and presentation of news stories so they can infer what was omitted.

> I usually follow several sources. It means I neither like Pink nor N1, but I follow what both of them are reporting and based on that, I can get some sort of impression about what is going on. Because I know more or less how and for whose interests they work. (P1, 39, male, NGO director)

Cynical attitudes can also affect this pattern beyond providing a heuristic for reading between the lines. Using the terminology from Study 1, most participants described combining sources from available mainstream (typically pro-government or neutral) and alternative (typically critical of the government) news outlets. However, two participants (P14, P17) appeared much more open to informal sources of information, such as political blogs or influential commentators on social media. Interestingly, these two participants also had highly salient beliefs in conspiracy theories, such as those related to the artificial nature of the coronavirus and the control of the deep state over political events in the country. P14 even reported completely rejecting any information coming from professional news media and being open only to information coming from outside of the mainstream. His main information sources include personal contacts and conspiratorial websites such as *Infowars.com* or its Serbian equivalent *Srbin.info*. Therefore, very strong general cynicism can lead to routinely discounting all professional

sources as carriers of manipulative information and seeking the truth solely in non-professional sources, which are difficult to verify.

> I just don't trust 99% of the media. My only source is the internet, because the chance for censorship and manipulation is lower there due to the pace of information flow … And when it comes to the traditional media, I think that's well known to everyone already: those who hold the power, control the media. That's how it works. (P14, 47, male, farmer)

Further, strongly pronounced cynicism in combination with high self-efficacy could incite a tendency in this pattern toward "protecting" others from negative media influence. Participants who described such tendencies commonly explained their current position toward news media as a product of some important lessons from the past that made them understand how things work in the media more clearly. Like news avoiders, they tend to see other audiences as naïve, impassioned, and excessively involved. Unlike news avoiders, participants in this pattern appeared to be confident that they are immune to the negative influence of news media. However, they often seemed more concerned for the people they care about whom they sometimes try to "teach" how to protect themselves from the media. P1 described how realizing that journalism is just a business in which everyone tries to protect their own interests helped him become less agitated about the

news. He discussed how he is trying to convey these beliefs to his teenage son to help him understand the same things faster. P17 described his spouse as a highly involved partisan who can spend hours immersed in a passionate debate on social media or in the comments section below the news. He discussed having arguments in the past after trying to make her realize that such behavior negatively influences her well-being, while only serving the goals of the news media by increasing her dependence on the news.

Chapter 9. Study 2 discussion

Building on several inconsistent findings and limitations of Study 1, Study 2 used an audience-centric approach to explore how participants experience distrust and cynicism, and how these experiences relate to their media and political practices. Some of the findings help explain patterns identified in Study 1, while others provide further insights into the relationship between audiences and the news media. This chapter discusses the unique contributions of Study 2 to the literature. The concluding chapter addresses how the findings of the two studies combined help us better understand media perceptions and their relevance for democracy.

Study 2 identified several areas in which media cynicism can be differentiated from simple distrust. These findings can be used to improve the content validity of the tools used to measure the two perceptions. Further, both cynicism and (dis)trust emerged as highly functional attitudes, not only for reducing uncertainty (Luhmann, 1979) or preventing future disappointments with the target (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989), but also for drawing a contrast between the self and the past self and/or others, both of whom the self perceives as victimized by the media. Expressing distrust and cynicism can, thus, become a convenient strategy to profess one's mastery over a seemingly corrupt and dangerous system of public information. This can explain in part why negative media beliefs were found to be so prevalent,

but it also implies a great deal of perceived social desirability in reporting media distrust and cynicism.

Consistent with previous research (Schwarzenegger, 2020), Study 2 found widespread negativity about news media to be intertwined with audiences' experiences, personal characteristics, and beliefs about society and politics. Factors such as political interest, partisanship, need for orientation, and self-efficacy were identified as highly relevant for how media distrust and cynicism were experienced among participants in this study. There seemed to be an interplay between these factors and beliefs about media that led to different expressions of media cynicism and distrust, which further extended to relevant media and political practices. This conclusion is consistent with a recent study by Schwarzenegger (2020) examining "personal epistemologies of the media" as comprehensive ways in which audiences understand how the media work, though the focus in the present study on trust judgements and cynical attitudes was much more specific. The author described three dimensions of personal epistemologies. Selective criticality refers to valuing critical thinking but limiting it to specific areas of the information environment. This dimension is similar to partisan cynicism identified in the present study. However, the emphasis on cynicism rather than criticality in this study indicates an a priori rejection of the target while criticality may be well-reasoned and open to correction. The

evidence gathered in both studies in this dissertation suggests the importance of making this distinction, and this insight may be relevant for reconceptualizing selective criticality more consistent with the definition of media cynicism proposed here. The findings in this dissertation further showed that media cynicism is not always selective but can be generalized with different degrees of consistency (i.e., general vs. ambivalent media cynicism). It could be that while this kind of generalized negativity toward media was prevalent in Serbia, the same is not the case in Germany, where Schwarzenegger's (2020) study was conducted. Alternatively, it is possible that the analytical tools used in the present study were better suited to detect such generalized antagonism. This should be explored in future studies.

Schwarzenegger (2020) called the second dimension "pragmatic trust" to describe strategically choosing which outlets to trust in order to reduce uncertainty. Pragmatic trust ranges from naïve to informed, with the former including less reflexivity regarding the reasons for trusting and the latter being characterized by skepticism and a better understanding of how journalism works and what its limitations are. Passive and active forms of (dis)trust in specific outlets identified in the present study correspond with the notion of pragmatic trust and echo another recent study (Pjesivac et al., 2016). The "passive" or "naïve" property of (dis)trust in this study refers to conflating the trustworthiness of an outlet with the production of reporting

that conforms to one's biases. The "active" or "informed" property entails providing consistent rationale for trust judgements grounded in an understanding of professional journalistic principles. These findings call for more research on audiences' conceptions of trustworthiness instead of assuming that academic categories necessarily apply. Finally, the present study's finding that some participants rely on their self-efficacy as a substitute for generalized media distrust is consistent with the competence-confidence dimension of personal media epistemologies. Both findings indicate that audiences in diverse contexts perceive that they have much more agency in relation to news media compared to what is commonly implied in studies of media perceptions. Future studies should consider the amount of perceived control over public information that audiences have when examining the relevance of media perceptions (also see Jackob, 2012).

The political and media practices that showed the most variability according to different expressions of media distrust and cynicism included diversifying/restricting media repertoires, active news avoidance, and expressive political and news participation. These findings supported the argument that more than just frequency, other dimensions of news consumption provide valuable insight into the relevance of negative media perceptions (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). In addition, it was found that the manifestations of media cynicism and distrust, rather than simply the

intensity of these perceptions, could be more closely associated with relevant practices. This finding suggests that future studies should focus on specifying appropriate interaction terms to better capture how cynicism and distrust are experienced by audiences. This idea is elaborated further in the next chapter. It is also worth noting that this study found that highly pronounced media cynicism may extend to hostility toward perceived news audiences and lead to some troubling civic behaviors. Following these findings, future studies should conduct more formal tests of the relationships between media cynicism and potentially disruptive practices, such as seeking conspiratorial news sources, cutting off talk (Wells et al., 2017), or willingness to actively silence others (Tsfati & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2018).

Finally, Study 2 may help explain why some of the hypothesized relationships in Study 1 could not be observed. Study 2 found that participants generally appeared reluctant to pay for access to the news regardless of their attitudes about news media. Interestingly, although many participants considered journalism to be nothing more than business, they did not see the news as goods worth paying for. The reasons participants mentioned for the lack of WTP for the news included financial circumstances and the ubiquity of freely available news contents on social media. Similarly, not much variability was found in terms of political participation. Most participants reportedly considered voting important but

rarely had any interest in other forms of participation. A notable exception was the partisan cynics who typically enjoy talking about politics and engaging in other forms of expressive political participation.

In conclusion, Study 2 provided additional support for the distinctiveness of media distrust and cynicism, but it also pointed toward important differences in how these perceptions are experienced based on participants' personal characteristics and beliefs. In order to understand the democratic relevance of media cynicism and distrust, future studies should focus on examining different manifestations of these perceptions in order to better describe the boundary conditions in the study of media perceptions effects. This is particularly important as the findings in this study imply that under certain conditions, cynicism may lead to highly undesirable democratic consequences.

Chapter 10. General discussion

Building on existing theories and research on media perceptions, the goal of this dissertation was to examine whether and how media distrust and cynicism can be differentiated and to determine the relevance of this distinction. To provide empirical support for the presented arguments, this study utilized a mixed-methods research approach involving data from a web-based online survey (N = 502) and qualitative interviews with news audiences (N = 20) in Serbia. The first study tested the reliability and validity of a newly proposed measure based on media cynicism defined as a combination of the belief that media actors are exclusively driven by self-serving motives and pessimism about journalistic conduct. The findings supported the argument that media distrust and cynicism contribute independently to our understanding of the public's perceptions of and relationships with news media. Following these findings, Study 2 set out to further elaborate the patterns identified in Study 1. It was discovered that both cynicism and distrust can be experienced in various ways that indicate distinct relational patterns with media and politics. Taken together, these findings indicate that the intensification of media cynicism is a particularly worrisome phenomenon because it is susceptible to a wider range of factors compared to media distrust and may lead to particularly disruptive civic behaviors. Each study possesses unique contributions and limitations which

were discussed independently in chapters 5 and 9. However, the two studies were designed with the same research goal in mind. Therefore, the concluding chapter examines the findings from both studies as a whole and discusses their conjoint relevance for scholars and practitioners interested in studying and improving media perceptions.

1. Summary of major research findings

1) On the nature of and relationship between media distrust and media cynicism

- A single underlying dimension cannot encompass both media distrust and media cynicism; they are two related but distinguishable negative perceptions of news media.
- Media distrust is an outcome-oriented perception; it denotes low expectations that performance of news media will be consistent with the audience's interpretation of professional journalistic conduct.
- Depending on their motivation, audiences occasionally assess journalistic professionalism through the lens of their biases, reducing media trust to the expectation of thought-affirming news reporting.
- The uncertainty surrounding the trust relationship with news media goes beyond failing to obtain relevant political information to include the possibility of being manipulated by the media.

- Audiences differ in their perceived amount of control with respect to obtaining relevant information and avoiding manipulation by the news media; their self-efficacy can effectively substitute a lack of media trust.
- Media cynicism is a process-oriented perception; it denotes a strong conviction that news reporting is driven by self-serving motives of media actors coupled with definite pessimism regarding future journalistic conduct.
- Cynical beliefs about the media are distinguishable from simple distrust but appear to have a hierarchical rather than unidimensional structure.
- Media cynicism can have different manifestations depending on the audience's involvement with news media and politics: general media cynicism is applied to fundamental views about how journalism operates and therefore generalizes to all media actors indiscriminately; partisan media cynicism is applied selectively to uncongenial outlets; ambivalent cynical attitudes coexist with the belief that although newspersons probably want to perform professionally, their conduct typically falls short due to some factors outside of their control.

2) On the antecedents of media distrust and media cynicism

- Perceived media professionalism was the only factor that was able to significantly predict media distrust in our SEM.
- In contrast, media cynicism appeared to be more susceptible to a wider range of factors; it was predicted by comparably lower social trust and perceived media professionalism, as well as higher hostility toward news media in one's discussion network. Perceived media responsiveness was also a negative predictor of media cynicism, but this relationship was only marginally significant.
- Both media distrust and cynicism seemed to have important contrasting functions for audiences; many expressed negative views about the media to differentiate themselves from their former selves and/or others who are perceived as gullible and easily swayed by the media.
- The interaction between audiences' involvement and cynical views gave way to different experiences of media cynicism: general cynics were typically highly interested in politics but without clear partisan preferences; partisan cynics demonstrated high interest in news and politics with clear partisan preferences; ambivalent cynics commonly had low interest in politics and no party preferences.

3) On the consequences of media distrust and media cynicism

- After controlling for a variety of relevant factors, the SEM results showed distrust of news media was correlated with decreased time watching the news on mainstream sources and on social media, as well as decreased trust in political institutions.
- Qualitative data showed that the relationship between media distrust and news exposure habits may be contingent on audiences' involvement and self-efficacy: in the presence of high self-efficacy, political interest, and weak partisanship, media distrust may not influence the amount of news exposure but may increase its diversity; for those with partisan motivation, general media distrust appeared to be related to partisan selectivity of news sources rather than overall amount of exposure; for those with low self-efficacy, low to moderate political interest, and weak partisanship, media distrust seemed to lead to active news avoidance.
- SEM results also showed that media cynicism was associated with greater exposure to the news on social media and news engagement.
- Qualitative findings indicated that this pattern could be driven by partisan cynics who gravitate toward social media for information because social media facilitates opportunities for selective exposure and provides a platform for expressive participation.

- Further, cynicism appeared to strengthen the relationship between media distrust and news consumption habits described above; diversifying news diets in the presence of high cynicism appears to drive exposure toward fringe sources, while cynicism seems to provide a rationale for partisan selectivity and news avoidance as good strategies by signaling that uncongenial or all news media are dangerous.
- Media cynicism also extended to negative perceptions of imagined media audiences and in some cases appeared to lead to some extreme consequences, such as completely terminating communication or engaging with the other side to humiliate them.

2. Theoretical implications

Although the contemporary literature includes occasional reminders that widely discussed media distrust is not the same as media cynicism (e.g., Hopmann et al., 2015; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020), the latter concept has failed to attract significant attempts at explication after it was popularized in the seminal work by Cappella and Jamieson (1997). Using two sets of data, this dissertation has shown that although there is a large amount of conceptual overlap between the two perceptions, automatically equating distrust with cynicism will fail to acknowledge some increasingly relevant

nuances in public opinion. Of import is the distinction between the recorded public negativity about the media being simply about dissatisfaction with journalistic output (i.e., distrust), and this negativity reflecting the belief that the target is irreversibly corrupt and inevitably produces not only unsatisfactory but also harmful content (i.e., cynicism). This is not merely a difference in the degree of negativity; cynicism is characterized by a strong conviction that makes it more resistant to change even in the presence of evidence. This makes cynicism a more problematic perception, and this distinction should be reflected in future inquiries of public opinion about news media.

To further improve the tools used to accurately diagnose negative perceptions of news media, it is important to work further on the concept explication of media cynicism provided in this dissertation. Study 2 indicated several areas in which cynical views about news media commonly surfaced in the sample (e.g., views about the journalistic profession, perceived differentiation between media actors, criteria used to evaluate journalism, and views about journalistic agency and status). These findings can be used as a guide to further refine indicators developed to measure media cynicism. Insights from different political, market, and media contexts are needed to examine to what extent media cynicism as defined here represents a universal experience of contemporary news audiences.

This dissertation also has implications for the study of general media (dis)trust. Commonly used measures, such as the one used in Study 1, rely on some important assumptions (see Ladd, 2012; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003), which were challenging to confirm in this study. It appeared that many participants in Study 2 struggled to assess the trustworthiness of news media in general due to perceived irreconcilable differences between available news outlets. In order to answer general media trust questions, these participants may have needed to ground their responses in a more uniform target. The patterns identified in Study 1 suggested that in the current case, such targets were Serbian mainstream outlets (daily newspapers, public broadcasters, and TV channels with national coverage). Given the longevity and popularity of these outlets in Serbia, a case could be made that they may in fact come close to representing "news media in general" for Serbian audiences. However, this was not the case for strong partisans for whom these outlets represent a specific segment of the market based on their political preference. Further, many participants discussed media trust using vocabulary consistent with academic literature (i.e., expectation to receive objective and accurate information) while understanding the components of trustworthiness through the lens of their biases. Therefore, although the initial intent in this study was to explore citizens' trust in the overall system of public information, some participants have instead effectively

communicated the extent to which the output of mainstream outlets conforms to their political beliefs. This finding is illustrative of conceptual issues with media trust discussed in earlier chapters, which have in part motivated this inquiry. It is also consistent with previous research which finds discrepancies between scholarly and lay understandings of commonly used trust-related terms (see Coleman et al., 2012; Pjesivac et al., 2016). More reflection about what these discrepancies mean for the study of media distrust is needed in the literature. Further, until methods of diagnosing general media (dis)trust with greater validity become available, the findings in this dissertation echo recent recommendations (Daniller et al., 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2020) and call for using multiple specific referents to measure media trust in strongly polarized societies.

The analysis of the antecedents of media distrust and cynicism in this dissertation indicates that contemporary social, political, and technological conditions may continue to facilitate the spread of media cynicism rather than media distrust. Social media—reported to be the primary avenue for political news by many participants in this study—provides a platform for a variety of informal sources that are competing with professional news media for primacy in truth-telling (Flew, 2019; Ladd & Podkul, 2019). These sources, whether they are populist leaders, alternative news outlets, or influential pundits, often build their reputation by demonizing professional

news organizations and presenting themselves as the only actors who understand and care about the interests of the people. Study 2 indicated that many participants respond well to this rhetoric, and in many cases reproduce it either in their immediate environments or online. By reproducing such rhetoric, the audience's expressive criticisms then become cues about the dangers of news media available to other users, illustrating the contagious properties of media cynicism.

The combined findings in this segment point toward some new hypotheses to be tested in future studies. The high functionality of negative media perceptions, which was identified in Study 2, indicates some potentially important audience-related and contextual factors that were omitted from the model of antecedents used in this study. For instance, media distrust and media cynicism may develop as a result of past experiences in which one believes they were manipulated by the news media. P16 illustrates this link by reporting feeling ashamed of himself after "learning" that the media he used to trust in the past were in fact dishonest. Yet, another finding suggested that it is not necessary to draw from personal experiences when forming opinions about news media; audiences can rely on vicarious experiences instead. Consider P13, for example, who believes her in-laws to be "brainwashed" by the media. She reports that they changed their position from strongly opposing to strongly supporting the current

president. She attributes such a drastic change solely to the influence of the newspapers and TV channels her in-laws consume every day. P4 similarly described anti-government protesters as manipulated by the "pro-opposition" media who "hate" president Vučić. Therefore, by attributing undesirable consequences to news exposure (e.g., being "brainwashed" or "manipulated"), citizens may adopt a more antagonistic position as a deterrent to falling prey to the media. Therefore, future studies should also examine to what extent perceiving others as victims of news exposure is connected to media distrust and cynicism. More formally, it is necessary to explore how perceptions of media effects, such as the third-person effect or persuasive press inference (see McLeod et al., 2017), relate to media distrust and cynicism.

Finally, with respect to the democratic relevance of the examined perceptions, this dissertation revealed that both media distrust and cynicism may play important roles in the development of a variety of practices, albeit not necessarily in a direct manner. The analysis in this segment was mostly exploratory, and future studies should continue to work on specifying boundary conditions for effects of media distrust and media cynicism. Several hypotheses were proposed for further studies on contingencies in relationships between media distrust and news exposure habits. Some important moderators that should be considered include political interest, the

nature of motivation, and self-efficacy. These factors can influence whether distrust will extend to reducing or actively avoiding overall news exposure, diversifying one's media diet, or selectively using news sources that confirm one's prior beliefs. Exploring such moderating factors may help further explain why previous research has only found a modest association between media distrust and news exposure (Strömbäck et al., 2020).

The findings in Study 2 also indicated that the clearest relational patterns emerged when media distrust was accompanied with a high degree of media cynicism. This may signal that media cynicism is another potential moderator between media distrust and resulting practices. However, the findings revealed that cynicism could also be important as an independent factor beyond media distrust. For instance, Study 1 showed that media distrust and cynicism predict news exposure on social media in opposite ways and that only cynicism was a significant predictor of news engagement. Moreover, Study 2 suggested how media cynicism could lead to undesirable civic behaviors beyond simple distrust. It appears that media cynicism is not limited to hostile perceptions about news media, but that it also extends to similar perceptions about news audiences. Participants used heavily charged vocabulary to describe other audiences as "brainwashed," "manipulated," or "toxic," and these audiences were looked down upon as either easily deceived or dangerously politicized by the news coverage. Such views

emerged while participants were reporting some rather extreme behaviors, such as completely ceasing communication or engaging in insubstantial confrontations to humiliate others or demonstrate one's virtue. Based on these findings, this dissertation suggests that media cynicism, rather than media distrust, may spill over to troubling views about imagined news audiences, which can result in behaviors with the potential to disrupt civic discussion. If this is correct, it would mean that media cynicism may be relevant for a wider range of civic behaviors beyond media practices. This proposition should be translated into adequate hypotheses and empirically tested.

3. Practical implications

1) Implications for professional news production

There is a lively discussion in contemporary literature about the benefits of professional news media reconsidering their practices to address deteriorating media trust (Fink, 2019; Lewis, 2019; Robinson, 2019). The findings in this study underline the importance of this conversation since disappointment with media performance was found to be the sole predictor of media distrust and the strongest predictor of media cynicism. Yet, it is important to reiterate that this study did not test the effects of actual journalistic practices on media distrust and cynicism; instead, this study dealt

with the audience's assessments of these practices. As discussed above, this approach allowed us to observe that although participants commonly referenced journalistic norms and standards when assessing news media, they frequently infused those terms with their own biases and preferences. Therefore, it is likely that even if a biased outlet started bringing its performance in line with professional journalistic norms and standards, parts of its partisan audiences would not register this as improved professionalism but rather as a breach of trust. Participants in Study 2 illustrated this paradox. For instance, P4, who can be described as a pro-government partisan cynic, mentioned that one of his favorite TV programs is a talk show on the strongly pro-government channel TV Happy. However, P4 remarked that the show host "seems to be losing his mind" because he started inviting guests who have political views that P4 considers unacceptable. From the normative perspective, even a small attempt to diversify an otherwise almost uniformly pro-government program should be welcomed. However, its target audience may interpret it as professional decline and punish the outlet with reduced trust and maybe even exposure. Therefore, the problem is not that citizens do not trust political tabloids or biased TV stations, but that they often do not recognize when journalism produces output closer to standards they claim to expect.

Following this discussion, it may be concluded that individual outlets are not incentivized to increase citizens' trust in professional journalism the way media experts and journalism studies scholars expect them to. Instead, similar to the tactics used by alternative information sources described earlier, even professional news outlets may be more interested in portraying themselves as islands of trustworthiness surrounded by overall dishonest news media. In other words, news outlets may be incentivized to forge partisan cynics as their audience because partisan cynics have emerged as highly devoted news users, ready to support and engage with the outlet. The success of partisan outlets and what Stroud (2011) calls "niche news" supports this as a good business strategy. However, as discussed above, cultivating cynicism in any form among news audiences may set a dangerous precedent because cynicism corrupts regular political and media practices and has detrimental consequences for democracies. It should be pointed out that cultivating partisan cynicism as a good business strategy may prove to only meet short-term goals and have a boomerang effect on the outlet. As the qualitative data indicate, partisan cynics tend to abandon the outlet as soon as its reporting stops supporting their beliefs.

The discussion above suggests several ways in which media practices could effectively address public dissatisfaction with professional journalism. First, news outlets should refrain from antagonizing other outlets and their

audiences. Antagonizing other outlets can meet short-terms business goals for an outlet while causing more damage in the long run. Citizens are already primed to be cynical about news media by a variety of sources. If professional news outlets use the same strategy, they can become a victim of their own making once their (even highly professional) conduct becomes dissonant with the expectations of their cynical audiences. In addition, news media should increase efforts to open a dialogue with their audiences about why and how professional journalism provides important democracy-supporting functions. Continually improving professional conduct remains a clear priority in a media system with a devastated quality of reporting. However, as audiences may fail to acknowledge or may even actively dismiss signs of professional improvement, news media should put more effort into discussing what good journalism is, how it is performed, and how it can be recognized. Previous research (Pingree et al., 2018) has shown that fact-checking improves media trust only when it is accompanied with pieces defending the journalistic profession. Similarly, it can be expected that citizens will not miss an opportunity to acknowledge improvements in journalism and update their trust judgements when they are reminded of the assets of professional journalism. Ideally, a public campaign with such goals would be implemented in coordination with major news outlets irrespective of their editorial policies or journalistic styles. Yet, in a deeply polarized

media environment, this kind of broadly coordinated media campaign is not likely. Therefore, the outlet best positioned to carry out such a campaign is the national public broadcaster. This is because RTS still attracts the widest and most diverse news audiences in the Serbian media environment, and as a public broadcaster, it has a responsibility to set an example in professional and ethical conduct.

2) Implications for civic education

This dissertation has emphasized the importance of considering media cynicism as a highly relevant perception of news media. The analyses found cynicism to be susceptible to a wider range of factors compared to distrust, which implies that adjustments to media performance may end up having a limited ability to counter media cynicism. Therefore, the practical implications and suggestions discussed in this dissertation are not targeted only at newspersons but also at relevant educators of civic skills at various levels. In fact, the segments of the audience who are already extremely hostile toward news media may respond better to pro-media messages coming from different sources, such as formal and informal civic educators.

In the previous three decades, the Serbian media sector benefited from considerable foreign aid focused primarily on increasing the quality of journalistic output by bringing news production capacities closer to

established professional standards (Rupar et al., 2019). These projects typically did not actively examine audiences' perspectives. However, some departures from this trend have been observed, possibly due to the growing prominence of media literacy programs (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). Two recent initiatives illustrate this trend. Serbia is a participant in a three-year project (2019–2021) entitled "Building Trust in Media in South East Europe and Turkey" launched by the EU and UNESCO.[19] The project focuses on three segments: increasing media professionalism, improving media accountability, and developing media and information literacy skills among youth. The aim of the final part of the project is to develop a systematic approach to teaching critical information seeking and verification skills in both formal and informal settings. Another example is a campaign entitled "Independent Media Depend on You" by IREX and USAID.[20] The goal of this campaign was to raise awareness about the importance of independent media and to create more mutually supportive audience-media relationships. More specifically, the campaign was intended to familiarize citizens with the role of independent media in society and the ways in which audiences can support the work of such media, financially and otherwise.

[19] https://en.unesco.org/trust-in-media-see
[20] https://podrzimedije.rs/

The significance of initiatives like these lies in the fact that they acknowledge the active role of audiences in shaping the public information environment, a position advocated throughout this dissertation. Similar programs in the future should consider this study's finding that citizens frequently adopt distrusting and cynical attitudes as a perceived sign of having a good understanding of the situation in the media. Such programs should prioritize scrutinizing verification methods citizens use when assessing news reporting. When asked about how they can recognize accurate or objective content in the news, many participants in this study provided vague responses referencing "common sense" or "logical thinking." As discussed earlier, citizens should be more familiar with journalistic practices institutionalized to demonstrate the professional nature of the news. Familiarity with data journalism, fact-checking services, and emerging transparency practices could be of assistance to increase citizens' capacity to assess good journalism. Furthermore, familiarizing citizens with journalistic processes may be particularly important in countering media cynicism. Demystifying the process of journalism can make the audience less susceptible to often unfounded and overly simplistic points of criticism that typically take advantage of difficulties in accurately understanding how journalism works. With a better understanding of funding, selection of news topics, sourcing practices, or verification methods, citizens will have a

better-informed starting point when encountering completely dismissive views of professional journalism.

When teaching critical skills, these programs should be particularly careful not to promote media cynicism, but to offer a functional alternative to it. In fact, they should be focused on challenging simplistic thinking, whether towards a news outlet one dislikes or its audience. Instead of antagonizing the audiences of uncongenial media, these programs should promote understanding such audiences as fellow citizens who mostly have similar aspirations and concerns regarding public information, as the findings of this study also showed. Furthermore, these programs should empower audiences to critically examine not only the content of the news reporting, but also their own preconceptions and messages about the media coming from different sources.

4. Limitations and future studies

Several important limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study and when planning future directions in the study of media distrust and cynicism. Above all, this dissertation did not use data or procedures that would have allowed us to establish a causal sequence among the variables in question. Causal relationships were only suggested based on existing theory and previous research findings, but they could not be

verified. Future studies should utilize research methods better suitable for detecting causality. For instance, a longitudinal or experimental research design could be helpful for establishing causality, like the one between media perceptions and news exposure habits.

Further, the study utilized self-reported data, which are subject to various biases. In the Serbian context, social desirability may have led participants to overreport negative perceptions of news media. Methodological advancements that would allow us to infer media distrust and cynicism in an unobtrusive manner are necessary. Future studies should also investigate the impact of different journalistic practices (rather than perceptions of such practices) on media distrust and cynicism. Combining content analysis and a longitudinal survey may be suitable for such purposes.

Another limitation is related to the sampling strategies used in both studies. The web-based survey in Study 1 used a self-selected sample of participants in an online panel. Participants in Study 2 were asked by their acquaintances to contact the researcher if they were interested in participating in an interview. Both sampling strategies likely favored participants who are more efficacious and interested in news and politics compared to the general public. In order to establish the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the overall population, future studies should validate them with data gathered from random probability samples.

Given the contextual nature of this inquiry, its conclusions may be limited to Serbia and societies with comparable political and cultural contexts (e.g., new democracies of Eastern Europe), but the precise limitations cannot be known without systematic comparative data. Conventional wisdom suggests that the specificities of different media systems influence public perceptions of the media. The rare comparative quantitative studies on media trust have found some evidence that media trust varies across political or media systems (e.g., Müller, 2013; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). At the same time, there is also some evidence that audiences' perceptions of media can be very similar across systems, regardless of the apparent system-level differences. A mixed-methods study of media trust by Elvestad, Phillips, and Feuerstein (2018) found no meaningful country-level differences in media perceptions among audiences in the UK, Israel, and Norway. Further, although our respective studies are situated within somewhat different strands of literature, the findings in this study are remarkably consistent with previous research (Schwarzenegger, 2020) conducted in Germany, in which the development of political and media institutions followed a significantly different trajectory compared to that of Serbia. Therefore, without claiming universality, restricting the findings of this study to the specificities of the Serbian context would fail to acknowledge the striking convergence of media perceptions across societies.

As discussed above, these findings have important theoretical and practical implications that suggest that the proposed framework is useful and should be further examined in diverse contexts.

As discussed earlier, future studies should also refine and validate the instrument developed to measure media cynicism and test the newly proposed hypotheses relating to the antecedents and consequences of media cynicism and media distrust. In addition, future studies should focus more on testing the effectiveness of interventions like those discussed earlier in this chapter on improving the public's perceptions of news media. An impressive body of literature was accumulated in recent years exploring the causes of deteriorating perceptions of news media. It is, therefore, surprising that not much is known about how effective different proposed solutions are. This should become an important aspect of future research on the public's perceptions of and relationships with news media.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, by conceptually explicating the relationship between media distrust and cynicism, and by using a mixed-methods research design, it was possible to establish a more nuanced understanding of negative media perceptions and their relevance for audiences' political and media practices. As the above discussion shows, this insight would have been limited if the

inquiry of media perceptions considered either distrust or cynicism alone, or if the research design was restricted to one methodology. These elements combined provided detailed answers to some important questions in the literature and suggested new hypotheses to guide future research on changing news audiences. The solution to intensifying public antagonism toward news media is not to strive for the high-level media trust reported in the US shortly after the Watergate scandal. This is not attainable as the social, political, economic, and technological conditions of that era are irreversibly gone (Ladd, 2012). It is not desirable either, as it might connote a degree of passive confidence, which may be at odds with democratic citizenship that values criticality (Pjesivac et al., 2016). However, simply accepting the reality of devastated media trust is also unacceptable, as it can severely reduce civic capacities through various forms of institutional detachment.

The answer starts with accurately understanding the nature of the problem. It makes a difference whether citizens are simply dissatisfied with the quality of reporting or if they have deeper concerns about sinister rules that are driving professional journalism and producing harmful outcomes by default. The proposed solutions should, therefore, include forging self-efficacy and critical skills of citizens together with active reflection on personal biases. Instead of simply expecting the media to become more objective, it may be more relevant to refocus on how citizens could be

empowered to deduce the objective picture from available sources. However, forging critical skills should be a constructive alternative instead of a path to media cynicism. It was found that cynicism may coexist with active civic practices, but cynicism can corrupt these practices. Citizens' criticality should not be limited to their own observations of professional news media but should also be applied to the scrutiny of cynical rhetoric about news media coming from different sources. If citizens are less susceptible to cynical cues, even if perceived trustworthiness of the media remains low, citizens may become more willing to accept vulnerability by relying on their own capacity to obtain relevant information from news exposure. It may seem particularly difficult to advocate reducing cynicism with dominant social currents actively incentivizing its dissemination. Nevertheless, this dissertation can support such future attempts by helping to define the problems at stake more precisely and offering analytic tools to adequately address them.

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Appendix A. Survey instrument

Block 1
NEWS MEDIA EXPOSURE

Over the last week, how many days have you used each of the following to get information about current events and politics?

[NEX1] Public service broadcasters
[NEX2] Printed newspapers and news magazines
[NEX3] Network TV
[NEX4] Cable TV
[NEX5] Websites or mobile apps of TV and radio companies
[NEX6] Websites or apps of newspapers and magazines
[NEX7] Online-only news outlets
[NEX8] Massaging apps (Viber, WhatsApp)
[NEX9] Social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook)
[NEX10] Online video sharing platforms (e.g., YouTube)

0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
days	day	days	days	days	days	days	days

NEWS ENGAGEMENT

Next, we would like to ask about your habits when using the news. Specifically, please indicate how frequently you engage in each of the following activities.

[NENG1] Share news links from online news sources on your social media
[NENG2] Repost news that other users have posted
[NENG3] Contribute your own news articles, opinion pieces, pictures, or videos about news events
[NENG4] Post comments, questions, or information in response to news stories that you read
[NENG5] Respond to news comments that other people have posted
[NENG6] Express approval of other users' comments using features such as the "like" or "favorite" buttons

Never	Rarely (a few times a year)	Sometimes (a few times a month)	Frequently (a few times a week)	Every day
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

WILLINGNESS TO PAY FOR THE NEWS

Most news organizations are private companies whose profit partly depends on the audience's willingness to pay for the news they provide. At the same time, network TV, radio, and the internet allow citizens to receive the news without additional charges. As a result, people greatly differ in their willingness to pay for the news. How likely is it that you would pay for news and information on the following platforms?

[WTP1] For print media (newspapers and newsmagazines)
[WTP2] For online editions of traditional media (website access, single article, or app)
[WTP3] For online-only news outlets (website access, single article, or app)
[WTP4] For access to cable news channels

Very unlikely	Unlikely	Somewhat unlikely	Undecided	Somewhat likely	Likely	Very likely
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

Block 2.
MEDIA CYNICISM and GENERALIZED MEDIA TRUST

Thinking about the mainstream news media in general in Serbia (e.g., daily newspapers, news magazines, TV and radio newscasts), to what extent do you agree or disagree with following statements?

[CM1] News organizations only operate to maximize their profits
[CM2] Journalists are prepared to lie to us whenever it suits their purposes
[CM3] The news media pretend to care more about people than they actually do
[CM4] The news media intentionally report in a divisive way because it is more profitable
[CM5] The news media do not care about the damage their reporting will cause as long as it serves their interests

[CM6] The news media do not care about protecting the interests of regular people
[CM7] Even if a news report appears professional, this is only because the news organization had something to gain from it
[CM8] The idea that the news media could have integrity is laughable.
[CP1] Journalism in this country always ends up failing the public
[CP2] The system of professional journalism as we have it today will never be able to adequately inform the public
[CP3] Most of the measures that are intended to improve how the news media in this country cover the news will not do much good
[CP4] The news media in this country will never be better at informing the public
[CP5] Corruption will always be present in the news media in this country
[CP6] You can never get truly informed by reading the mainstream news in this country
[CP7] All journalists are bad – some are just worse than others
[MT1] The news media are fair when covering the news
[MT2] The news media are unbiased when covering the news
[MT3] The news media tell the whole story when covering the news
[MT4] The news media are accurate when covering the news
[MT5] The news media separate facts from opinions when covering the news

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

Block 3.
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Which of the following have you done at least once in the previous year? Yes/No

[PENG1] Voted in local, regional, or national elections
[PENG2] Attended a political rally
[PENG3] Participated in any demonstrations, protests, or marches
[PENG4] Donated money to a campaign or political cause

[PENG5] Participated in public interest groups, political action groups, political clubs, political campaigns, or political party committees
[PENG6] Signed or shared an online petition

POLITICAL TRUST

To what extent do you trust or distrust the following organizations, institutions, and groups of people in our society?

[PT1] Government
[PT2] Political parties
[PT3] Parliament
[PT4] President

Strongly distrust	Mostly distrust	Somewhat distrust	Neither trust nor distrust	Somewhat trust	Mostly trust	Strongly trust
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

SOCIAL TRUST

[GT1] In your opinion, to what extent is it generally possible to trust people?

People cannot generally be trusted						Most people can be trusted
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

[GT2] Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?

Most people would try to take advantage of me						Most people would try to be fair
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

[GT3] Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?

People mostly look out for themselves						People mostly try to be helpful
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

Block 4.
PERCEIVED MEDIA PROFESSIONALISM

Now we would like to ask you to think about news reporting in Serbia. To what extent do you agree or disagree with following statements?

[PR1] Serbian media inform the public in objective manner
[PR2] When tackling important social issues, Serbian media do not favor any side, but report in neutral manner
[PR3] The content of reporting in Serbian media is based on accurate facts
[PR4] Minority points of view and marginalized groups' standpoints are adequately represented in Serbian media
[PR5] Serbian media are guided more by the public interest than by their financial interests

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

PERCEIVED MEDIA RESPONSIVENESS

How successful or unsuccessful are the Serbian news media when it comes to the following?

[RE1] Responding to audience complaints
[RE2] Considering the wishes of their readers, listeners, and viewers
[RE3] Building up good relationships with their readers, listeners, and viewers
[RE4] Siding with ordinary people when reporting on conflict

Completely unsuccessful			Neither successful nor unsuccessful			Completely successful
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

MEDIA HOSTILITY IN DISCUSSION NETWORK

From time to time, most people discuss politics and current affairs with other people. Looking back over the last six months, who are the people with whom you discussed politics and current events? Just write their first names or initials.

[HO1] ___
[HO2] ___
[HO3] ___

[HO1/2] [HO2/2] [HO3/2] Thinking about [discussant's name], have you ever heard them criticize the work of news media, the quality of news, or the influence of media on our society?

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Every day
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

Block 5.
POLITICAL INTEREST

Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. How interested, if at all, would you say you are about what's going on in government and public affairs?

Completely uninterested			Neither interested nor uninterested			Extremely interested
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Where would you place your political views on a scale from 0 to 10, if 0 means political left and 10 means political right?

Political left							Political right
0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

GENDER

Which of the following best describes your gender?

(1) Woman
(2) Man
(3) Prefer not to say
(4) Prefer to self-describe_____

AGE

In what year were you born? Input _____ (the year of birth)

INCOME

Please indicate the range that best reflects your average monthly income.

(1) Less than 20,000 RSD
(2) 20,000 RSD – 39,999 RSD
(3) 40,000 RSD – 59,999 RSD
(4) 60,000 RSD – 79,999 RSD
(5) 80,000 RSD – 99,999 RSD
(6) More than 100,000 RSD
(7) Prefer not to say

EDUCATION

What is the highest level of education you have obtained?

(1) Incomplete elementary school
(2) Elementary school (8 grades)
(3) High school
(4) Junior college (2-year course)
(5) College (4-year course)
(6) Graduate school (Master, PhD)
(7) Prefer not to say

AREA

Which of the following best describes your place of residence?

(1) Large city

(2) Suburbs or the wider area surrounding a large city
(3) A small town
(4) Village
(5) A farm or individual agricultural property

REGION

To what statistical region does your place of residence belong?

(1) Belgrade
(2) AP Vojvodina
(3) Center-West
(4) South-East

Appendix B. Interview questions

The following list includes potential conversation starters intended to address relevant interview topics. The exact questions that were asked varied based on participants' interests, familiarity with news media and specific cases, as well as their willingness to discuss certain topics. The questions are grouped into their respective categories for readability purposes. However, the interviews typically moved back and forth between the topics to preserve the natural flow of the conversation. Further, some questions did not need to be asked explicitly because respondents addressed them while answering a different question.

Experiences with news media and the political system

- How interested are you in following the news? What kinds of topics in the news interest you the most?
- Tell me something about your news exposure habits. When you want to get the news, what channels/devices do you use? What sources do you follow? How often?
- Imagine you are speaking with someone who is not familiar with the media system in Serbia. How would you categorize and describe the media offered in Serbia?
- Do you pay for access to news in any way? Why (not)?
- Do you ever like, comment, or share the news online? Give me an example.
- To what extent do you think that social media can substitute professional journalism?
- What do you think about using tabloids/political blogs/foreign sources/individual social media accounts to seek information?
- How can a person become well informed in Serbia?
- Do you sometimes use the news from outlets you dislike? Why (not)?
- Have you ever contacted the media directly regarding some issue you wanted them to report on?
- When you are dissatisfied with news reporting, how do you express such dissatisfaction? Have you ever contacted the media directly to express your dissatisfaction or criticism with reporting? Why (not)?
- Do you ever express your support or compliment the media when you are satisfied with reporting? Why (not)?
- What do you think about how the country has been doing recently? Why is that so?

- Do you vote regularly? How important is it to vote?

Evaluations of news media

- To what extent do you think that journalists have the necessary knowledge and skills to report on the topics of your interest?
- Why do you use these media?
- What do you mean by bias/professionalism/objectivity/independence?
- What do you mean by the regime/opposition media?
- Why do the media select/avoid certain topics? Does this apply to news outlets across the board? Are there outlets/journalists with a different motivation?
- Are there any outlets/journalists in Serbia that meet the criteria of good journalism that you described? Are some outlets/journalists in Serbia closer to meeting these ideals than others?
- Do you remember a time when the quality of journalism in Serbia was different (better or worse) than now? Or was it always the same? Why is that so?
- Can you give me an example of a time when you were particularly dissatisfied with news reporting in Serbia? What was the reason for your dissatisfaction? Why do you think the media reported in such a way? How should the media have reported in this situation?
- Can you give me an example of a time when you were satisfied with the reporting in Serbian media? What was the reason for your satisfaction?
- To what extent do you believe that journalists and editors know their audiences, people like you? To what extent do they understand the issues you consider important?
- What are the main strengths of the media system in Serbia?
- What are the biggest weaknesses of the media system in Serbia?
- How would you describe the influence of news media on our society?
- There are some people who say that all news outlets in Serbia are the same. What do you think about that?
- You mentioned different types of news outlets/journalists in Serbia. Although you identified some important differences in their work, do you think that they still essentially perform the same profession?

Expectations of news media

- What do you expect from good journalism/journalists/news reports?
- What is a desirable role that news outlets and journalists should play in our society?
- How do changes in the ownership structure of a media outlet influence the characteristics of the journalism it produces?
- Is it possible for the media to be professional/objective/independent/unbiased?
- When there is a conflict between business and professional journalistic standards, how does it get resolved in Serbian media?
- Can a journalist preserve their integrity and independence regardless of who is the owner of the media outlet that they work for?
- You mentioned some problematic aspects of journalism in Serbia. What would you consider to be an improvement in these areas?
- How likely is it that the quality of journalism in Serbia will improve in future? Why is that so?
- What is needed for journalism in Serbia to improve?

국문초록

미디어 냉소주의와 불신의 본질, 원인과 결과에 대하여: 세르비아 사례를 중심으로

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많은 학자와 전문가들은 오늘날의 저널리즘이 전례 없는 정당성 위기를 겪고 있다고 주장한다. 역사적으로 볼 때, 언론에 대한 이용자의 불만이 완전히 새로운 현상은 아니지만, 그 규모와 양상, 특히 민주주의에 끼치는 영향의 측면에서 과거와는 다른 우려를 낳고 있다.

이와 관련해 많은 연구자들이 언론과 이용자의 관계를 분석하는 과정에서 '미디어 냉소주의'를 '미디어 신뢰' 또는 '미디어 불신'과 연관시켜왔다. 그러나 미디어 신뢰(또는 불신)와 미디어 냉소주의를 개념적으로 명확히 구분하지 않은 연구는 오히려 현상의 원인과 해법을 적절하게 제시하는 이론의 개발을 더디게 만들었다. 이러한 혼란은 미디어 불신 및 미디어 냉소주의의 본질적 특성을 명확하게 구분하지 못한 것에서 비롯된 것으로 보인다.

이 논문은 미디어 불신과 미디어 냉소주의가 상호 연관되면서도 질적으로 구분되는 개념이라는 점을 규명했다. 냉소주의에 대한 다학제적 이론적 접근과 뉴스 미디어에 대한 시민의 인식을 다루는 다양한 연구 결과를 바탕으로, 이 논문은 '미디어 냉소주의'에 대한 새로운 개념 정의를 제안했다.

[21] 본 논문 작성자는 한국정부초청장학금(Global Korea Scholarship)을 지원받은 장학생임

이 논문이 재개념화한 미디어 냉소주의는 뉴스 미디어에 대한 일반화된 적대감을 뜻한다. 이는 언론 행위가 주로 자사이기주의적 동기에서 비롯된다는 인식과 저널리즘이 개선되기 어렵다는 비관적 태도로 구성된다. 이 연구는 하위 차원과 지표, 그리고 외적 변수들과의 관계를 중심으로 미디어 냉소주의와 미디어 불신을 비교하고 대조할 수 있었다.

이 연구는 혼합적 연구방법을 적용하여 양적, 질적 자료를 모두 수집했으며, 최근까지 억압적 정치체제를 겪었던 신생 민주국가 세르비아를 대상으로 연구를 수행했다. 세르비아가 겪은 정치사회적 굴곡은 뉴스 미디어의 작동 방식과 시민들의 미디어 인식에도 큰 영향을 미쳤으며, 이는 언론에 대한 부정적 인식을 연구하는 데에 적절한 환경을 제공했다.

<연구 1>은 온라인 설문조사(N = 502)를 통해 미디어 냉소주의와 불신에 대한 측정모델을 검증했다. 탐색적/확증적 요인 분석 결과, 미디어 냉소주의와 불신은 공통의 차원에 영향을 받지 않았으며 상이한 차원들로 구성되는 것을 확인할 수 있었다. 미디어 냉소주의와 불신의 원인 및 결과에 대한 구조방정식 모형 분석도 두 개념 사이의 차별성을 확인해 주었다. 미디어 불신의 가장 큰 원인은 미디어 전문성에 대한 이용자 인식으로 나타난 반면, 미디어 냉소주의는 이용자와 미디어 관계와 이용자를 둘러싼 맥락적 요인(예컨대, 지인들의 미디어 적대감 등)에서 비롯되는 것으로 관찰됐다. 또한 미디어 냉소주의와 불신은 미디어 행위와 정치적 행위에도 상이한 결과를 초래하는 것으로 나타났다. 미디어 불신은 정치 불신을 촉진하는 한편 전통적 뉴스 이용을 감소시키는 효과를 보인 반면, 미디어 냉소주의는 소셜미디어를 통한 뉴스 이용을 높이고 뉴스 관여도를 증진하는 것으로 나타났다.

<연구 1>의 결과를 보완하고 정교화하기 위해, <연구 2>는 이용자 중심의 접근을 통해 이용자의 미디어 인식과 경험을 직접적으로

탐색했다. 이를 위해 다양한 연령대의 미디어 이용자들(N = 20)과 심층 인터뷰를 실시했다.

연구 결과, 시민들이 경험하는 미디어 냉소주의와 불신은 그들의 정치적 관심, 뉴스와 정치에 관심을 가지는 동기, 자기효능감 등에 따라 다르게 나타났다. '일반적 미디어 냉소주의' 집단은 모든 언론인과 언론사를 부정적으로 인식한 반면, '정파적 냉소주의' 집단은 정치적 입장이 다른 언론사에 대해서만 적대감을 나타냈다. '양가적 미디어 냉소주의' 집단은 미디어에 대해 비관적 태도를 보이면서도 언론인들의 상황에 대해서는 상대적으로 높은 공감을 보였다.

인터뷰 참여자들은 특정한 뉴스 미디어의 신뢰성은 수월하게 평가했으나, 추상적 대상, 즉 뉴스 미디어 일반을 평가하는 것에는 능숙하지 않았다. 뉴스 미디어를 평가할 때 인터뷰 참여자들은 종종 규범적 용어들(예컨대, 객관성, 정확성, 혹은 중립성)을 사용했지만, 그 중 많은 사람들이 주관적이고 편향된 방식으로 각 용어를 해석하고 사용하는 것으로 나타났다. 이는 미디어 전문성과 신뢰성에 대한 학문적 이해와 보통 시민들의 인식 사이에 격차가 존재할 수 있음을 암시한다. 일부 시민들은 미디어 신뢰가 아닌 자기효능감에 의존하여 공적 정보의 객관성을 파악하고 판단하는 것으로 나타났다. 이는 선행 연구에서 제기한 것보다 더 높은 수준으로 시민들이 뉴스에 대한 자신의 통제력을 평가하고 있음을 보여준다.

더 나아가, 미디어 냉소주의나 불신의 형태에 따라 이용자들의 미디어 레퍼토리, 뉴스 회피, 뉴스 관여도 등도 달라지는 것으로 나타났다. 특히 특정 미디어 냉소주의 유형은 시민적, 사회적 소통에 매우 부정적인 영향을 주는 것으로 나타났다.

이 논문의 연구 결과는 중요한 이론적, 실천적 함의를 가진다. 무엇보다 이 연구는 이용자-미디어 관계 위기의 본질을 정확하게 이해하고 그 원인과 결과를 적절하게 설명하기 위해서 향후 연구는

냉소주의를 중심으로 시민들의 미디어 인식을 탐색해야 한다고 제안했다. 미디어에 대한 시민들의 불만에 대처하고 민주주의에 기여하는 방식으로 미디어와 이용자 관계를 개선하기 위해, 미디어 전문가와 시민 교육자들은 이 논문의 분석적 도구를 유용하게 활용할 수 있을 것이다.