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Tao Liu & Benjamin J. Bates

Northwest Normal University, China
University of Tennessee, USA

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What’s behind public trust in news media: A comparative study of America and China

Tao Lius* and Benjamin J. Batesb

aNorthwest Normal University, China; bUniversity of Tennessee, USA

The study first examines the media identification logic that the prime evaluating indicator for news media is public trust. Perceptions of trust are not only important from a marketing perspective, but also form a vital component of audiences’ aesthetic criticism of news and news sources. Comparing people’s attitudes towards media in America and China, this study finds media credibility ratings in China are much higher than those in America. Does this suggest that Chinese media are more credible, or are survey reports of public trust influenced by other factors? This study considers three perspectives for considering differences in reports of public trust – operation dynamics, imaged power, and national identity. We consider to what degree, and under what conditions, could the survey reports of perceived public trust in media be related to media system differences, both among countries and over time. The study also examines the role played by structural dialectics such as profit orientation or propaganda orientation; professionalism orientation or authority orientation; and imagined community or heterogeneity construction. Finally, given the limits of survey methods and wording, the study brings forward an evaluation framework for the availability of transnational comparisons of media credibility, based on five evaluating dimensions of identity mechanism: professionalism identity, antagonism identity, heterogeneity identity, public sphere identity, and the “Other” identity.

Keywords: public trust in media; aesthetic criticism; political image; imaged power; national identity; imagined community; conceptual equivalence; mediascapes; public sphere; heterogeneity construction

A search for news evaluation dimension

However funded, long-term survival for media rests on building and maintaining audiences (Altschull, 1984). For news media, credibility and public trust would seem to be critical components in developing audiences; after all, the value of news as a product should be related to perceptions of its accuracy and relevance. However, research suggests that the relationship between media credibility and media use are not all that clear – suggesting that increases in the use of particular media (media impact) were usually not accompanied by higher credibility ratings for that channel (Gunther, 1992; Himmelweit & Swift, 1976; Kiousis, 2001; Mulder, 1981; Rimmer & Weaver 1987; Wanta & Hu, 1994; Westley & Severin, 1964). That is, as Chaffee (1982) suggested, “several surveys have reported null or even negative correlations between channel use and credibility” (p. 63).

If a large circulation is not necessarily related to public trust, which factor should news media emphasize, media impact or media credibility? Two perspectives, reception

*Corresponding author. Email: oliutao@gmail.com
psychology and aesthetic criticism, can be used to shed light on this question. Reception psychology asks “What do you plan to sell to the audience?”, and suggests that the various media formats exhibit different priorities between media impact and media credibility. Entertainment formats place much more emphasis on media impact, since the main selling point is represented by arousing sensation and passive reception, where the “truth” of content is a secondary factor at best. News formats are a different case, as Stoff (2004, p. 25) argued: “Journalism represents time-honored traditions that have little to do with that brand of entertainment”. News is supposed to reflect reality, if not “Truth”. Thus, the primary evaluating factor for news formats, especially serious news, is tied to the common logic that “credibility sells newspapers”, as reported by the 1987 chairman of the American Society of Newspaper Editors’ Credibility Committee (quoted in Zhang, 2005, p. 45). That’s why news formats should emphasize credibility over circulation; to do otherwise would, in the long run, badly affect audiences’ loyalty towards the outlet in an era of increasing competition.

Consideration of the factors contributing to audiences’ aesthetic evaluation of news content and outlets in specific consumption contexts can also be helpful. The process by which people accept and assess specific messages is based on three interrelated psychological mechanisms of aesthetic criticism: classicality aesthetics, modernity aesthetics and post-modernity aesthetics. Which aesthetic cognition most impacts media credibility, or media impact?

News formats are grounded in the framework of serious expression, a central characteristic of classicality aesthetics, as manifested in the following aesthetic categories: “heteronomy, nature, loftiness, harmoniousness, eternality and lingering charm” (Liu, 2007, p. 116). In contrast, modernity aesthetics and post-modernity aesthetics, as interpreted and shaped by the mass media and civil society, emphasize emotional portrayal and identification with sensory experience. Modernity aesthetics is often linked to the characteristics of “self-discipline, alienation, romantics, resistance, shock, preposterousness” (Liu, 2007, p. 116), while post-modernity aesthetics emphasizes characteristics like game nature, crushing, irony, hyperbole, collage, and pastiche.

By drawing an analogy between media format and aesthetic mechanism, we can explore the argument that news formats are based on classicality aesthetics whose nature gives priority to human spirit and heart, which is linked to the crucial value orientation of public trust. Meanwhile, the nature of modernity aesthetics and post-modernity aesthetics bridges the fracture between sensual and formal impulse in its particular approach of game impulse. Under the background of such contradiction, “the spiritual content excessively overflows the material format” (Zhou, 2005, p. 186), the pleasant sensation of aesthetics finally comes into being in as a way of stimulating the “mass hallucination and unconscious carnivals” (p. 189) of entertainment content. From this, we can conclude that news media primarily emphasize media credibility, reposing on the psychological mechanisms of classicality aesthetics, while entertainment media places more emphasis on media impact, originating from the phenomenological mechanisms of modernity and/or post-modernity aesthetics.

Both approaches suggest that news formats place an emphasis on media credibility; the question is, however, how to interpret the survey data reporting different rating level of media credibility between America and China?
Longitudinal differences

The continuing decline of media credibility in America has been a familiar story over the past three decades (Bennett, 1998; Cooper, 1999; Gronke & Cook, 2007; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995; Iyengar & McGrady, 2007; Meyer & Zhang, 2002; Whitney, 1985). Humorist Dave Barry (1999, p. 20) suggested that one reason for public disaffection is that “editors are busy doing surveys on declining journalism credibility, so they have no time to look at the actual newspaper”. Sanford (1999, p. 11) noted that “A canyon of disbelief and distrust has developed between the public and the news media. Deep, complex and so contradictory as to be airless at times, this gorge has widened at an accelerating rate during the last decade”. These critical comments signal the rise of an “identification gap”, a phenomenon Gronke and Cook (2007, p. 262) called “blaming-the-messenger”.

But is the decline of media credibility a media concern, or is it related to a general decline in the trust of public institutions? Comparing the changing curve of media credibility in Pew Research Center’s research in 2005 (see Iyengar & McGrady, 2007, p. 58, Figure 3.4) and the curve of credibility in other institutions in General Social Survey (see Gronke & Cook, 2007, Figure 3), one can map out a comparative curve of public trust (see Figure 1) from which we can see a clear indication of diverging trends from 1973 to 2004. In the 1970s, media credibility levels almost matched those of other institutions; however, they began to diverge in 1980s, and have been in a precipitous decline since 1990. It seems clear that while there has been a slight (5%) decline of public trust in other institutions, news media performance is strikingly worse. In 1973, 85% of respondents indicated they had “a great deal” or “some” confidence in the press, while that number had dwindled to 57% by 2004.

If plummeting line charts aren’t sufficient to raise concerns, the downward curve of media credibility is confirmed through statistical analysis. The downtrend is statistically significant (using a difference-of-means test at $p < .001$); further, none of the occasional increases were statistically significant ($p = .924$). As to the curve of all other institutions, the difference-of-means shows statistical significance both in increases ($p < .002$) and decreases ($p < .004$), if you analyze the selected upward parts and downward parts aspects separately. In other words, the credibility of news institutions “always” experienced declines (or at least never meaningfully increased

![Figure 1. Credibility in media and all other institutions, 1973–2004 (USA).](image-url)
over the period), while perceptions of public trust in other institutions varied over the same period.

Compared with the inexorable declines and reduced public trust in news media in America, what has been the situation in China? Most recent surveys conclude that media credibility in China remains relatively stable and at a high level. In 2003, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences published surveys conducted by scholar Huixin Ke (2003, p. 700) which included measures of perceived media credibility. Compared with only 53% (see Figure 1) of GSS sample reporting “a great deal” and “only some” credibility in American media in 2001, Ke’s survey indicates media credibility in China reached a level of 85.3% in the first survey, and 91.2% for the second. But are such reports of high credibility generalizable, or only a special case?

The most negative perceptions of media in China are likely to have occurred during the SARS outbreak in 2003. At that time, both government and media kept silent about the serious outbreak and health hazard for 50 days, avoiding reporting about the seriousness of the epidemic or the number of victims and deaths. As information emerged from alternative sources, the whole country panicked, resulting in a crisis of confidence in both government and media.

Two days after the media was forced to respond to the pressure of both national and international public opinion, the Research Institute of Public Opinion in Renmin University of China conducted a survey in Beijing. Roughly two-thirds of the sample reported “a great deal” of credibility in media. Another survey, conducted by Tongji University of China during the late period of SARS, just one month after the media publicized the truth about the crisis, showed a recovery of media credibility, reporting a level of credibility (83.3%) near those reported by Ke (Zhang, 2006, p. 98). Zhu’s (1997) secondary analysis of six surveys with media trust and credibility items, conducted by various scholars from 1985 to 1989 found that the number of believers in media credibility was, on average, three times the number of skeptics. In four surveys from 1985 through 1987, the percentage of believers ranged from 29% to 41%, while skeptics accounted for between 5% and 13% of the samples. Zhu did find counterexamples in surveys following two critical political events: the pro-democracy demonstration in 1987 and Tiananmen democracy movement in 1989. In these, the levels were almost reversed: (16% vs. 41% in 1987, and 13% vs. 48% in 1989). Using a different approach, Jin (2006) asked a random sample (592 people) in Beijing to express their belief in credibility of the media on a scale from zero to ten, finding an average rating of 6.66 (scores between 6.0 and 8.0 mean “a great deal” of credibility in media). These survey results suggest a generally high and consistent perception of media credibility in China. The two outlier surveys suggest that while the public’s trust may be shaken in the short term by specific instances of journalistic malpractice and/or state interference, there is an underlying fundamental level of trust given news media in China.

It should be noted that direct comparisons of independent survey results across countries can be problematic; differences in sampling, methodology, and question wording can all impact on survey measures, particularly for such broad concepts of “media”, “trust”, and “credibility”. Measures of media credibility in the US and China, especially the accuracy of survey data from China, have been challenged by various studies. Zhu (1997) suggests, for instance, that the high rating level of media credibility in China largely results from the survey methodology (sample, measures, scale, questions, incentive, etc.) and respondent’s cognitive sophistication.
“National” samples in China are often based on respondents from selected major urban areas, and dealing with questions about “media credibility” in a rapidly changing media environment can be problematic. Further, while survey research in the US is better established and more prevalent, the more sophisticated credibility studies in the US also find significant differences in perceptions of credibility among media types, and between “media” generally and specific media outlets (Pew, 2007b). In addition, Rimmer and Weaver (1987) found evidence of question-wording effects in U.S. surveys. Potentially more troubling, some scholars (e.g. He, 2006; Link, 2005) argue that most national survey data from China may have been secretly falsified before publication for political purposes, directly contributing to higher media credibility ratings. Similar concerns have been raised about some industry-supported survey reports in the US, in that item-wording and analysis have been used to paint a more favorable picture of media trust.

Still, while there may be good reason to doubt the precision of individual survey results, there is less reason to doubt aggregate levels and trends reported across time and from multiple sources. There appears to be a consistent conceptual underpinning to the concept of media credibility, despite the range of specific measures (Kiousis, 2001; Rimmer & Weaver, 1987). Thus, consistent differences over time or across space suggest that there are underlying forces behind cross-cultural differences and general declines in media trust and credibility that are worthy of consideration.

Comparative (horizontal) differences

Media credibility in America, as a whole, has been declining over the last 30 years. As noted above, surveys have suggested differences within media types and formats, and even different trends in the level of trust. Which news outlets contribute more to the downward curve, national/international news institutions or local news institutions?

The Pew Research Center (2007a) studied the perception of public trust in different American news outlets from 1985 to 2007 (see Figure 2). Their results indicate that public trust in local news outlets tend to be higher than for national news outlets.
outlets, both for print and TV. For TV news channels, 79% of sample gave a favorable opinion toward local TV news in 2007, with slightly lower levels for cable TV news (75%) and network TV news (71%). The credibility gap was much greater for newspaper news outlets; 78% gave favorable ratings for local daily newspapers, compared to 60% for major national newspapers. From 1985 to 2007, the decline was generally greatest for newspapers (21 point drop for national/international news and 11 points in local); although TV news sources also showed a significant drop (for national/international news, an average drop of 17 points for TV; for local news, 10 points). It seems that the drop in credibility and public trust, while general and spread throughout various news media, is led by declining perceptions of national/international news outlets.

In China, media credibility among the various news outlets runs opposite to the American experience. There, it is the Party/National news outlets which are more likely than local news outlets to win people’s trust. The common adage that “what CCTV says” or “what People’s Daily says” has become a powerful testimony to public trust of news media. In Beijing, for example, CCTV was reported as the most credible news channel by 39.6% of respondents, with Beijing local TV a distant second (3.9%), followed by Dragon satellite TV (1.7%) and Hunan satellite TV (1.4%) (Jin, 2006). Among the 18 newspapers sold in Beijing, the People’s Daily (17.5%) and Cankao News (16.5%), affiliated with the Communist Party and the state-run Xinhua News Agency, respectively, were judged the most credible news outlets. Less highly regarded were the most popular local newspapers, such as Beijing Times (7.2%), Beijing Daily (1.3%) and Beijing Morning Post (1.2%), whose circulations is more than twice that of the national newspaper (see Figure 3). The results suggest an interesting relationship between mass appeal, party affiliation, and credibility.

The research suggests different trends in media credibility between America and China. What’s really behind the difference? While one explanation is that perceptions of trust reflect differences in quality and performance, most journalists and media scholars would challenge the notion that their professionalism and product has declined over time, or that there are innate differences among media forms and outlets. There is a strong tendency to blame audiences for the decline (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Gunther, 1992; Pew Research Center, 2004; Sanford, 1999). Where concerns over changing quality and performance are considered, any change tends
to be linked to shifting economic, technological, and market environments. Rather, there is a tendency to look at differences in markets and cultures, in changing economic, technological, and cultural environments. We’ll employ three perspectives to examine possible reasons for differences in media trust and credibility, both over time and across markets/cultures/nations.

**Operation dynamics: profit orientation and propaganda orientation**

One fundamental driving force shaping media performance is attributable to their operation dynamics; that is, what is considered to be the primary purpose and function of media outlets, and how to operate to fulfill their expected missions. While media are often expected to fulfill many different, possibly even contradictory, functions, differences in their primary orientation can impact both performance and public perception of that performance. From the public perspective, it can also make a significant difference in perceived trust and credibility if there is a discrepancy between a media outlet’s actual orientation and the orientation their audience expects them to have. In considering the cases of China and America, three different media orientations come into consideration: public interest, market profit, and political propaganda. In the public interest orientation, the expectation is that the media will primarily serve the public interest, objectively providing the information needed by the public. In the market profit orientation, the driving force is competition and financial success; while news and information may be the product, its provision will be shaped by competitive and market pressures. In the political propaganda orientation, news media are seen primarily as the channel for the state to provide information to its citizens.

Historically, the perception is that news media in America primarily follow a “public interest” orientation, although it is acknowledged that news media are commercial and face commercial pressures. After World War II, studies of the media’s mission frequently mentioned the following roles: social responsibility, watchdog, informed citizen, democratic society, firewall, the fourth power, etc. These helped to develop people’s expectations that, in the words of president Thomas Jefferson, “the media should become the best instrument for enlightening the mind of man, and improving him as a rational, moral, and social being” (see Hachten, 2005, p. 30). As we know, the First Amendment to the Constitution of The United States provided the media freedom to enter into public sphere, monitor the environment, cover public affairs, correlate social components, and transmit social inheritance; it also permits media the “freedom” to make profit in the marketplace. In less competitive times, high profits allowed news media to pursue both. In more competitive times, public service may take a back seat to the pursuit of profit.

In recent years, though, critics have increasingly asserted that the market profit orientation is becoming dominant, perhaps even becoming the only operational dynamic. Iyengar and McGrady (2007, p. 62) recently called the operating logic of news outlets “minimizing costs and maximizing revenues”, which arguably drives media to increasingly deviate from the expectations of the public. Several trends suggest that this may be taking place, largely driven by increasing levels of competition. First, news has been giving way to more entertainment-oriented content, a generally more attractive product in the market matrix. Even within “news”, there
is evidence of a shift from hard news to more discussion and soft news coverage (sports, entertainment news, emphasis on celebrities, etc.).

The shift in content focus is fairly well-studied. Iyengar and McGrady (2007) noted that the amount of time reserved for news in the typical thirty-minute news cast declined 10% over the past 10 years. Patterson (2000) showed that the amount of “sensationalized” content in network news reports, particularly cases of celebrities and crime, grew from approximately 25% of news aired in 1980 to 40% by 2000. Gilliam and Iyengar’s (2000) study of the Los Angeles TV market found crime accounting for close to 10 items daily from 1996 to 1997, while Klite, Bardwell and Salzman (1997) suggested that crime was the most prominently featured subject in local TV news, accounting for 75% of all local news coverage in 56 different cities.

The proportion of public affairs news has increasingly declined. Slattery and Hakanen (1994) found that news about government and policy fell from 54% to 15% in their sample of Philadelphia local newscasts from 1976 to 1992. “Even the New York Times, which features ‘All the News That’s Fit to Print’ as its motto, had to chart a similar course” (Iyengar & McGrady, 2007, p. 62). A similar result can be seen in Patterson’s (2000) research, which showed that 30% of all network news in 1980 included no policy content; by 2000, that figure had reached 50%.

Finally, media’s interest in covering political issues has largely given way to politician’s personal stories and “horse race” coverage. Political coverage shifted to reporting polls, combative punditry and “gotcha” moments, with the media “pack” stirring up trouble rather than addressing substantive issues in a rational environment. While survey-based coverage can be less labor-intensive than following the candidate on the spot to extract the issue-based coverage, and can give the impression of following the public agenda, critics (Iyengar & McGrady, 2007, p. 70) have alleged that media and campaigns routinely frame the survey data and deliberately control some polling-related stories. Meanwhile media’s interest in scandal abides, with more investigations of allegations of personal misconduct or other private matters.

To be sure, one could ask whether we should place the entire blame for the decline of media credibility on its own actions; their frequent rebuttal to complaints about the quality of coverage is that they are “just offering the audiences what they like”. There is a body of evidence showing that audiences prefer sensation-based news to coverage of public affairs. Stanford University researchers claimed polling-related and sensation-related stories attracted more attention than the stories focusing on the candidates’ personal attributes, and reports covering the candidates’ positions on public issues attracted even less attention (see Iyengar & McGrady, 2007, p. 71). The Pew Research Center found crime to be the news subject of most interest to the American public (see Hachten, 2005, p. 17). Under what Appadurai (1995) called “consumer-media culture”, the paradox between media’s inclination to “soft” news and people’s expectation of “sensation consuming” is trapped in a vicious circle. That is, under the logic of profit orientation with regards to media operation dynamics, the focus on sensation identification hardly contributes to the construction of public trust in media since the “alienation wall” will actually keep people from spiritual identification.

As media networks were commercially conglomerated, the organizational culture also changed. Corporate interests arguably focus more on short-term financial performance than on public interest obligations. When most American media
operated in conditions of limited competition, this often freed local news organizations to operate with minimal economic constraints or influence. However, as competition increased, the corporate emphasis on trying to maintain profit levels in the face of declining audiences and revenues put increasing pressure on the news organization to cater to perceived audience interests and to minimize costly hard news coverage (McManus, 1994).

The shift from a public interest orientation to a market-profit orientation is likely to have both direct and indirect impact on perceptions of media trust and credibility in America. As content shifts from the public interest (hard news) to what interests the public (and is cheap and easy to produce), it is not difficult to imagine that the public recognizes the transition from news to entertainment. Or that they consequently place less trust in media as sources for important news as a result. Further, news organizations’ public insistence that they are objective arbiters of public interest above reproach is increasingly at odds with their market orientations, and increasingly challenged in a competitive environment where interested audiences can seek independent verification and contrasting perspectives. While the shift to a market orientation might contribute to some decline in media trust and credibility, the increasingly obvious discrepancy between media claims and reality are likely to have contributed more to disillusionment with media generally.

In China, the fundamental operational dynamic for news media has been its propaganda orientation, which could be traced back to 50 years ago when Chairman Mao first put forward the policy “Statesman’s running newspaper”. News media were conceived of as party organs and official channels for the state, and thus shared their level of perceived trust and credibility. While the media environment has opened up in recent years to permit more market-oriented media, the legacy media and emphasis on state oversight of media content remains.

In China, the state-run media clearly perform from a propaganda orientation. Recent market reforms have opened the door to a second set of media outlets operating, from a revenue perspective at least, with a market orientation. While arguably more concerned with competing for audience share, those media still are expected to keep content and coverage in line with state guidance under the management of Central Propaganda Department. Media in China can also be argued to have begun incorporating a “public interest” orientation, a shift from exclusively serving the needs of the state to meeting the needs and demands of all strata of society. A practical approach often employed in China is to allocate the three orientations different weights grounded on the distinction of the media formats-news format, entertainment format, and special format.

For example, the propaganda orientation guarantees the media will possess sufficient space to report serious news without having to make concessions to entertainment format. All the nationwide channels, such as CCTV channel one and the majority of Provincial Satellite Television channels, are highly integrated channels with the main purpose of providing a great deal of news programs. CCTV channel one, for instance, broadcasts an average of 137 minutes of news program during prime time (from 6:00 to 11:00 in the evening), while the average time for news on any of three major network television channels in America is less than 60 minutes. Moreover, all nationwide channels, except for Oriental Television, are required to broadcast the most influential (as well as official and monopolistic) news program News Simulcast. While usurping some of the promised media independence, such
requirements can be seen as a beneficial and supportive social environment for the public to understand public affairs and political issues.

As for the entertainment format, although the government shows more openness on the entertainment side by providing relatively more freedom for self-management in the marketplace, there are still some prohibitions referring to political ideology and public ethics. For example, all foreign drama, foreign cartoons, online games, criminal dramas, vulgar shows, etc. are completely prohibited from 7:00 pm until 10:00 pm. There is also capacity to satisfy the public’s different needs without the consideration of rating pressure, through mandates for providing a range of “Protected Programs”. Some of these “Protected Programs” are attributed to the propaganda orientation (for example, China Nation, Learning Chinese); some are focused to serve the interest of specific social groups (Contemporary Laborer, China Stocks); others are mainly for the purpose of promoting television culture and aesthetics (Television Poem and Prose, Record of Culture Interview).

Still, it is clear that the propaganda orientation is dominant, particularly in state-run media. As noted above, in such cases, the media tend to share, with the government, general perceptions of trust and credibility. Regardless of what Westerners think of the Chinese government, it does remain highly thought of by its populace. Surveys reflect the high levels of “faith”, “belief”, and “trust” of the state within China. Reports that non-state media are less highly regarded are consistent with the idea that they are balancing a more market-oriented operational dynamic, in part by integrating a larger entertainment orientation. In China, a lifetime of operation under a propaganda orientation has cultivated an expectation that news should be serious and official. A lack of competition and alternative voices, in limiting challenges to state and media credibility, has reinforced perceptions of trust. State-run media maintain that focus in the emerging China media environment, while competitive media, to the degree that they differ from that perspective, are at odds with traditional perceptions of what news should be, and thus may be seen as less credible or trustworthy.

But should we completely attribute the higher media credibility simply to China’s political system? Although administrative intervention can promote the provision of serious (hard) news and set quality and ethical standards, it can also be argued that state oversight may limit the development of independent standards and practices, and in several noted cases, can prevent the transmission of news it perceives as inconvenient or not in the state’s interest. It is more accurate to suggest that from an operational dynamics perspective, the dominance of the propaganda orientation has contributed to a linking of perceptions of the state and its media. Whether media in China can maintain those levels may depend on how two trends develop.

First, the opening of media markets will bring in competition, new orientations, and, due to competitive pressures and shifting content, contribute to a rising discrepancy between perceptions of what news should be and what is presented, reducing perceptions of trust and credibility. Perhaps more significantly, to the degree to which competition brings different perspectives on news and challenges state ideology, it is possible that the people’s perception of what news is and should be will change as well. To the extent that such a perception integrates an expectation of independence, it could have a significant impact on the credibility of state-run news outlets.
Perceptions of function and performance: professionalism orientation and authority orientation

What is the relationship between media credibility and specific political communication regimes? Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1963) identified four media theories: the Authoritarian, Soviet, Social Responsibility and Libertarian. One general theme of their work is that media are perceived as serving different roles under the various theories. Altschull (1984) reframes this in saying that all media serve the “public interest”, but often differ in how that interest is defined. From both a logical and philosophical perspective, one can argue that media trust and credibility are determined in large part by the degree to which media are perceived to be accomplishing the job the public expects of them.

In a liberal political system, that job is to be an independent watchdog, but the press is also seen as fulfilling an informal socio-political role in conveying information about political issues and government actions. Are news media in America “the fourth branch of government” (Cater, 1959), following trends in state/official credibility? Or does their “independent” nature mean that their credibility will be unrelated to that of the state?

While media’s purpose may be a critical factor, so too is the perceived performance of same. Are media seen as being truly independent of the state? As Lippmann (1922, p. 9) observed, “the only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event”. Admittedly, the media in America, for the most part, often appear to be at odds with state officials as far as the domestic political events are concerned. However, when it comes to international disputes, especially national security or humanistic crises, the media tend to perform passively, following official pronouncements (Berkowitz, 2000; Robinson, 2005). Thus, the ability of the state to actively manage media coverage may also come into play. As former White House Communication Director David Gergen argued, “To govern successfully, the government has to set the agenda; it cannot let the press set the agenda for it” (see Hertzgaard, 1998, p. 33). In order to carry out the logic of “give and take” (Naveh, 2002, p. 8) and further set up a “clearer than truth political image” (Acheson, 1969, p. 375), politicians have demonstrated a range of effective, even classical, templates of media management, such as President Ronald Reagan’s “Eight Steps” (see Hertzgaard, 1998), Bill Clinton’s strategy of going directly to the public, and George W. Bush’s use of event-based images.

In fact, all these strategies of media management can be summarized as two aspects: environment warming-up and message management (Cohen, 1963; McCombs, 1972; McQuail, 1994; Naveh, 2002). Strategies employed by officials can be represented in three ways: selective resource publicity, interpretive frames (Carrsge, 1990; Wolfsfeld, 1997), and skillful story line narration (Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Entman, 1991; Gamson, 2005). All these research findings indicate that the individual’s view on national or international issues is affected by message framing, message salience, and message shaping.

How does the media respond when facing such systematic media management? In a sense, American media are in a classic double-bind situation. If they collude with the state’s or politician’s management efforts, they may be perceived as losing their independence. For example, Bennett (2005, p. 123), speaking of foreign policy and Iraq war coverage, said, “the media has been on the verge of becoming an unpaid
employee of the Department of Defense”. If their reaction is to always doubt “official” reports, they may be perceived as reactionary, and, if the official reports are valid, may then be perceived as dishonest or failing to provide needed information. At least, media may be seen as failing to provide reasoned and independent analyses.

A related issue may be the tendency to rely on story frames (a reliance that can be exploited by those seeking to manage news coverage). In a classic study, Sigal (1973) found that nearly three-quarters of all hard news came from officials, and only one-sixth of news could be traced to sources outside the government; less than 1% of all news stories were based on reporter’s own analysis, whereas more than 90% were based on the calculated messages of the actors involved in the situation. The media’s dependence on frames, whether “official” or not, resulted in an inevitable deviation from media professionalism, and consequently people’s perception of media credibility is diminished by media’s actual performance. If media credibility in America is based on the perception that media should perform in an independent professional orientation, the downward spiral of credibility may be a consequence of its “abuse” of Libertarian or Social Responsibility communication regime, and of its tendency to parrot, rather than report.

By comparing subsequent years in Figure 1, we can map out a new “changing credibility” tendency chart (see Figure 4), which suggests a significant correlation between trends of perceived credibility in media and in other official institutions. This is confirmed through use of a Paired Samples Test (p < .05), as well as a Paired Samples Correlations Test (p < .05) and a correlation measure of r = .737. It would seem that media trust follows the direction of general trust in institutions, suggesting at least that media are seen as an institution. However, we also see that the declines in media credibility trend higher, suggesting that the public also increasingly views them as deviating from expected performance norms and values.

The expectations for media under an Authoritarian or Communist press theory are different. There, the expectation is that media will serve the interests of the state. In that sense, one would expect that perceptions of media trust and credibility would be fundamentally based on perceptions of state trust and credibility. However, performance also matters, in the sense that deviation from expectations is likely to shift perceptions of media credibility. A survey about public trust and credibility

![Graph showing credibility changes compared to the previous year (China). (1 represents increase; 0 represents decrease)](image-url)
in various Chinese institutions conducted by Jin (2006) found that the media ranked third among the ten institutions considered (see Figure 5). She found that the public place more confidence in media than in other political institutions. By demonstrating more trust in media than most other political institutions, the public may be questioning whether the role expectation of the media/official is in accordance with its real function.

Another survey reported by Jin (2006) indicated that the three highest ranked role expectations for media are “a supervisor for inspecting the government and society” (67.5%), “a platform for news communication” (61.1%), and “a mouthpiece of the public” (54.9%), while the role as “a mouthpiece of the government and the Party”, by contrast, took no more than 13.0% (the lowest of the listed expectations). The misalignment of role expectation of media in China with the “official” expectations not only suggests that perceptions of media functions are varying from those under a pure authoritarian press theory, but that the manner of the variance attributes functions of power and service. The media, which actually has quite limited power to investigate sensitive political issues, to say nothing of its lack of power to resolve issues, has been imagined as having power similar to the courts, government, police, congress, etc. The rise of such power illusions may be a result of a crisis of confidence in official power, arising from the social contradictions that increasingly manifest in contemporary China.

The public is gradually losing confidence in official powers as a number of social issues are emerging and being discussed, such as political corruption, cases of injustice, property security, environment pollution, price inflation, the rising property gap, and human rights violations, among others. In the wake of rising distrust of some specific government officials and acts, the public turns to the media to protect their rights against injustice. There have been cases where people have had their grievances redressed through media coverage and exposure, which forced officials to handle the cases under the pressure of public opinion. Thus, the public may perceive the media as an effective political power equal to the official power. This perception can also be supported by arguing that lower credibility for local news media, compared to national, is based on the different levels of imaged power.

Are the media in China really a political power? The media is just a normal public institution affiliated with the government without any explicit executive power.
Media may be seen as being somewhat effective, but in most cases, the media are less independent in their coverage than they are a reflection of differing sides in internal power struggles. With limited discourse space to challenge the government, has the media been struggling to build an effective critical dialogue with the government, serving the public interest? CCTV’s weekly program News Probe may serve as an example. Though critical reports are quite sensitive in the media ecology of China, 26 investigative programs criticizing the government (52% of all aired programs) were successfully aired in 2003, whereas only eight programs were banned. Even after August, 2004, when the government further narrowed the “coverage space” by proclaiming that all the programs except Focus Interview in CCTV were forbidden to broadcast reports critical of the government, News Probe still strove to produce reports addressing political and social issues, especially those referring to power corruption (27% of programs in 2005, and 25% in 2006), which strengthened people’s imputation of power to media. Admittedly, some of these investigative report programs – Black Lung, Tragedy in Guanglong Village, Beyond Explosion, Trafficking in Children, Luxurious Government Buildings, Making a Living in Nightspots, In the Name of the Public, Millions in Hospital Bills, etc. – had finally been aired by skillfully avoiding some particularly sensitive aspects. Although one could condemn the need for compromise, the effort to bring these terrifying occurrences to light is praiseworthy. Such struggle, more or less, to meet people’s imaged power of media is a positive influence for media credibility in China.

In short, the perspective of power imagination essentially reveals conceptual equivalence problems with the term media credibility when coming to cross-national comparison and interpretation. That is, people’s expectations regarding the role of media in one cultural and political context can differ from that in others’. The nature of the media credibility in America and China depends primarily on different evaluation orientations; one is professionalism orientation while the other is power orientation. Even though the word media credibility has similar interpretations in America and China, there are still sufficient conceptual differences to create intercultural misunderstandings with regards to the power imagination.

Actually, one of the most important reasons why such conceptual difference regarding media credibility is important is deeply rooted in the cultural/political term discourse. Discourse dominates the way we define, interpret and address specific problem, because “it is a sign of power that actors can get the discourse to which they subscribe accepted by others” (Dryzek, 2005, p. 9). As Foucault (1980) stated, discourse can themselves embody power in the way they condition the perceptions and values of those subject to them, such that some interests are advanced, others suppressed. That is, due to different political discourse of the US and China, people’s perception towards the same term is possible to bring about different meaning. A further examination about how the discourse essentially acts on affecting and shaping people’s understanding towards conceptual difference of the term media credibility will discussed in the next section.

National and cultural identity: heterogeneity construction and imagined community
As noted before, attitudes about media trust and credibility are tied to concepts of media role and performance, which are connected to national and cultural definitions
of public interest. Perceptions of public interest are themselves tied to notions of identity under established social culture and political systems. Identity is defined as ideology perceived and integrated into consciousness through individual discourse and social interaction, made manifest in a personal narrative constructed and reconstructed across the life course and scripted in and through social interaction and social practice (Hammack, 2008).

The process of identity development represents the link between self and society, and also reflects power relations between the public and the state. Through identity formation, the narratives of a given social order or ideology effectively serve the interests of those in power (Foucault, 1980). Also, the relationship between a “master” narrative and a personal narrative of identity directly constructs the process of social reproduction and change. The concept of a master narrative is associated with notions of a “dominant discourse” which influences how people experience and interpret their cultural and political surrounds. Further, under the emerging global consumer-media culture, narrative seamlessly “situated” in dominant political discourse is increasingly regarded as threatening traditional notions of identity; creating a sense of existential insecurity in matters of identity which, most certainly, influences the process of social regeneration. Media narrative is increasingly recognized as “the gateway to meaning in understanding socially situated individual lives” (Hammack, 2008, p. 232). Changeux and Ricoeur (2000) argue that narration mediates between the two aspects – “one’s own world” and “one’s own body” – by interweaving them into a narrative, and thus further mediates between “phenomenological discourse” and “scientific discourse”. While personal narrative, the means of constructing the relationship between “Self” and “Other”, is greatly conditioned and influenced by media discourse (especially in a visual cultural age), conceptualizing identity as narrative may be useful in the context of interpreting the connection to public trust in media.

In culture criticism in the twentieth century, the concept of national identity aroused, or was included in, various critical theories and concepts, such as nation-state/nationalism, imagined community, national allegory, culture hegemony, nativism, interpellation, performativity, post-nationalism, and counter-discourse. All of these “national identity” concepts emphasize the role and imagining mechanisms of media culture. The concept of “Imagined Community”, employed by Anderson (1983), sets out to show how nationalism arose all over the globe and persists today across competing ideological boundaries with the promotion of print capitalism. Contrary to Anderson, many findings (Chinoy, 1999; Mi, 2005; Tomlinson, 1991) suggest that media culture, particularly visual media, greatly shape and promote the imagination and construction of national identity. National identity, together with self-identity, is built on a specific “script” of virtual reality in global consumer-media culture – encompassed by image, narratives and information created by the media, where the basic logic of national identity is largely interpreted by what Appadurai (1995) called “mediascapes”. The idiosyncratic nature of image and reality are profoundly mixed in a way that “ordinary lives today are more often powered not by the given-ness of things, but by the possibilities that the media suggest are available” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 52). Apparently, the cognitive pattern of national identity is beginning to be framed by the “disjunctive flows” of people, images, money, ideas and things. In other words, the identity of mainstream values or political ideology is facilitated by powerful media intervention in individuals’ lives, because
people are inclined to view their lives through the prisms of the possible lives interpreted by mass media in all their forms. Moreover, the consumer-media culture, along with its corresponding social agenda, not only “script” people’s own possible lives, but also the imagined lives of others living elsewhere. In fact, the decisive factors of mediascapes in global consumer-media culture are the hidden values behind shaped image and the dominating ideology behind circulated narrative elements. Not only can image and narrative elements widely exacerbate difference and fear, for instance, by representing terrorism and death or subverting a root value, but also foster a new ethnic community and solidarity via publicizing specific affirmative perceptions or far-off imagination intentionally.

As such, the extent to which people can identify with the specific nation-state largely rests on whether the cognitive pattern of self-identity can dovetail with the virtual reality created by media. As a cognitive construction of hyper-reality, national identity is, likewise, based on the difference of imagining mechanisms and imagining construction in terms of content and approaches of consumer-media culture between America and China. Our question, though, is whether the media in China plays the same role as American media in terms of creating and maintaining national identity.

While the role of media in shaping American identity is hotly debated, the state is rarely seen as playing an active, direct role in framing national identity. Rather, the U.S. government is specifically prohibited from distributing cultural materials within national borders. In addition, American news media have be chided recently for having “too patriotic” a perspective, that being seen as a violation of their independence and role as watchdog. It could be argued that America has achieved a Gramscian hegemony, where national values are so well-integrated that no direct intervention and/or manipulation are needed. Myriad studies, such as Gans’ classic Deciding What’s News (1979), suggest that traditional American values are well-reflected in news judgments. The US has been accused of exporting their national values and identity through media and its content (Tomlinson, 1991). Further, elements of American identity and values reflect a respect for diversity, particularly in opinions and debate, and a generally low level of trust in authority (Hofstede, 2001). American identity is arguably more focused on heterogeneity than homogeneity.

In America, the nature of heterogeneity construction is a question of whether the media could play a positive role in building and maintaining the public sphere for people’s participation in terms of self/national identity. The lower media credibility in America may be a reflection of the perception that the public sphere created by media is shrinking or at least splintering in modern society. Various factors, from the shift to more of a market orientation, increasing perception of media coverage being managed, the expansion of personal communication technologies and rise of new media, as well as innate components of journalism practice may hamper media’s ability to construct a heterogeneous, diverse image of identity.

Media’s coverage of sensitive issues invite and arouse criticism from specific interest groups in the public sphere, particularly when the political atmosphere is divisive and confrontational. Media coverage of such issues often quickly develop narratives and frame coverage to fit. Those who view the issue from different frames find it easy to impute this dissatisfaction with coverage to media bias. Thus, perceptions of bias may rise, regardless of the degree to which bias of the type imputed exists. For example, Republicans often feel that mainstream media in the US adopt largely Democratic frames when covering contested issues. One result,
according to Pew Research Center (2007a), is that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say the media “hurts democracy” (48% vs. 28%), find “stories often inaccurate” (63% vs. 43%) and “more politically biased” (70% vs. 39), and “more liberal” (75% vs. 37%). In addition, the American political system allows, if not supports, debates on highly divisive issues, partially reflecting America’s relatively diverse and heterogeneous culture. For such contentious issues, any view or position in media coverage will, more or less, kindle criticism of media performance, since it is difficult for media to completely avoid any personal viewpoint or emotional tendency in terms of framing and shaping news, especially in-depth reports. Therefore, the fact that American news media do cover and address potentially contentious and divisive issues is another factor resulting in greater perceptions of bias in the media, and thus a lower level of media credibility in America.

In contrast, Chinese state authority frames Western images as promoting both cultural and political hegemony from a Western perspective, emphasizing the challenge to cultural identity as a response to China’s rising, thus justifying an emphasis on actively using their control of Chinese media to reinforce a highly homogeneous national identity. As for the consumer-media culture in China, since the government somewhat holds and restricts the delimited coverage space, national identity is primarily represented as an ideology-oriented identity of mainstream values and dominating ideology. Meanwhile, people’s self-identity largely reposes on the state imagination, under the seamless narratives and grand narratives of nation-state/nationalism. The perspective from which Chinese media looks at China and her “Other”, the West, is easily identified by individuals under what Althusser (1972) called “ideological state apparati”. The individual would instinctively regard status and plight encompassed by media images and narratives as reasonable and real without, or incapable of, giving any insights into the “imagination distortion of ideology”. For this reason, we can conclude the imagining mechanisms and imagining construction in China is imagined community through the way of powerful “interpellation of the subject” (Althusser, 1972).

In America, national identity, along with its corresponding values, is rooted in and driven by civil society, where the “third sector” is formed and presented as sufficiently independent from the government and business sectors. On this point, the civil society refers to the so-called “intermediary institutions” that give voice to various sectors of society and enrich public participation in democracies. While there are still such “intermediary institutions” in China, they are all partially or totally affiliated with the government, and therefore do not constitute a sufficiently independent “third space”.

Arising from citizen consciousness, national identity in America is, in a sense, reflected in value-oriented identity, especially middle-class values: individualism, equality, competition, freedom, informality, material wealth, etc., which mesh with the state ideology. A most convincing example, for instance, could see the “war on terror” or “humanitarian war” in which citizen consciousness and state ideology show an unprecedented conformity while some other countries still retain the attitude that the humanitarian efforts have, partly, ulterior motives (Robinson, 2005). Moreover, the means by which these values in civil society are formed and affected depends on what Habermas (1989) termed “public sphere”, which “makes people better informed citizens, which in the process enhances democracy” (Manheim, 2008, p. 98). For this reason, public trust in media, a kind of the identification of civil society, hinges
on whether the media can successfully create a public sphere which embraces various coexistences and diversities, such as different opinions and beliefs.

Unlike the imagined community in China, the imagining mechanisms of national identity in America emphasize heterogeneity construction. Since the national identity in terms of consumer-media culture between America and China are incompatible with each other, how could media spin work, and how does the spin affect the public trust in media respectively?

Before discussing the cognitive mechanism of imagined community in China, it is necessary to move to another crucial media moment in China, the River Elegy event. As a nationally aired documentary series in 1989, River Elegy implicitly initiated an intellectual enlightenment, spurring the identification of western values, especially democracy, on the premise of completely demonizing a series of prominent Chinese cultural symbols: the Yellow River, the Great Wall, the Loess Plateau, and the dragon, which were seen to be responsible for the degeneration of Chinese civilization. River Elegy was largely regarded as the fuse for the democratic movement that culminated in the Tiananmen Square event, even involving some of the same principals behind River Elegy. After the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, River Elegy was officially banned in China. As Chinese scholar Jing Wang (1996, p. 2) noted, River Elegy “was the last milestone in the intellectual history of the 1980s that marked the cultural elite’s illusion”. Therefore, River Elegy, from its origin to failure, suggested that identifying “Other” values and identities, through publicizing the image of Western superiority challenging the established political regime in China, turned out to be an infeasible mechanism. After River Elegy, the Chinese government became so sensitive to media coverage that the media went back to its old way; the “Other” imagination stimulated by River Elegy quickly changed into “Self” imagination. Accordingly, imagined community was mostly reflected in socialist identity; the primary one in an official top-down discourse. From the lesson of River Elegy, two strategies were employed by the government to facilitate the imagining construction of national identity in global consumer-media culture.

On one hand, the media in China is struggling to build a closed, even unilateral approach to mediascapes for the sake of self-identity of socialist imagination on the international stage. In the wake of The Cold War, international socialism suffered from an unprecedented setback, which heavily corroded people’s conviction in socialism; China was no exception. Developing a more Western-style image frame for visual storytelling was put on the top of government’s agenda, which was strikingly characterized by self-identity of socialism and the Communist Party, including not only a series of grand slogans such as “safeguarding the great cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics” and “keeping Communist Party members progressive, innovative and forward-thinking”, but also an official discourse system by creating seamless mediascapes against Western culture infiltration. Moreover, all the sensitive problems weakening people’s confidence in socialism, such as religion, human rights, minority issues, education, military corruption, intellectual gathering, law weakness, building demolition, special interest groups, and racial conflicts are placed under government’s strict supervision; thus a vacuum was left within media coverage.

For instance, on October 23, 2006, News Probe in CCTV broadcast a program about the widespread corruption and deception in high education, which triggered student reactions in Jiangxi Garment Institute of Technology. After the event coverage, the originally narrow space for critical coverage in China was further
reduced. Furthermore, in order to promote socialist identity, the government not only employed the concept, the primary stage of socialism, as an explanation, or even a defense, to consolidate people’s confidence in socialism and the following communism, but also forbidding, filtering, or rereading antisocialist speech in foreign media. Such approaches to self-imagination created by media, in terms of socialist utopia and that China is becoming a powerful and wealthy country in the world strategically bridges people’s confused, even lost, value identity in the transforming age. While most people are dissatisfied with their national conditions, China is a notable exception – 81% of Chinese say they are satisfied with the way things are going in China in 2006, up from 72% in 2005 (Pew Research Center, 2006). Based on special mediascapes and identity psychology in China, the media wins people’s trust.

On the other hand, another strategy employed to bridge the imagination distance is a special story framing: grand narrative. Confucianism, the dominant culture in China, instructs people to put more emphasis on grand value compared to individual value, which is completely opposite to America. Based on such rooted value orientation, people are willing to preserve the national interest even at the cost of their individual interest when incapable of having both. The media has successfully built a perfect image in which all stories are framed in terms of grand narrative, whereby the official ideology behind the story is easily identified and accepted with the absence of citizen consciousness in China.

For example, one current controversial issue in China is the Three-Gorges Dam External Resettlement. The government has successfully persuaded millions of residents to leave their homesteads with minimal protest for the sake of accomplishing certain grand values. Likewise, when addressing the environmental deterioration and flood disaster in 2007, Western media such as *Time* and CNN questioned the substantial value of Three-Gorges Project; the media in China, however, skilfully shifted the image of individual narratives while emphasizing the nation’s honor in grand narratives, that is, underlining the nation’s accomplishments or failures, more than individuals’ gain or loss in most cases. When such a grand narrative is deeply rooted in people’s minds, it is, in essence, quite beyond people’s daily experience and perception, and usually gives expression to an illusory hope whether true or false, since individuals lack appropriate approaches to gain insights into the grand value in the name of nation.

In short, by constructing a closed socialist identity and employing a seamless narrative in terms of national identity in China, the media effectively create the unilateral imagined community, officially shaped by political discourse, which is consistent with its perceived purpose, and reflects a cultural tradition of trust and respect for authority (Hofstede, 2001).

From the perspective of national identity, the comparison of public trust in media between America and China, high or low, reveals a complicated picture. The higher level of media credibility revealed in survey data in China to a large extent builds on imagined community by creating seamless socialist imagination and grand narratives, with little connection with the criteria of news professionalism, and relatively homogeneous national and cultural values generally supportive of authority. Media credibility in America, on the contrary, rests on people’s attitude towards heterogeneities constructed in the public sphere created by media, on a belief in individuals and diversity of opinion, rather than faith in authority (or at least in the
authority of the state). Although the survey data can only somewhat interpret the
difference of media credibility, the data itself, and even the methods of surveying the
data, cannot directly demonstrate which one is essentially higher. In order to set up an
effective transnational comparison of media credibility, we should examine a “public”
evaluation framework.

**Conclusion: an evaluation framework of public trust in media**

When developing a framework for the evaluation of public trust in media, we should
first clarify the concept of “media”. One issue of trust may be, at least in the US, the
use of the generic term of media, when media in America can be diverse in coverage
and focus. Thus, one needs to focus on specific news media, or at least specific media
outlets, such as Network TV News, Cable TV News, National Newspaper, and Local
TV News. As Schneider and Lewis (1985) state, “the media represents a distant and
abstract force…” When people think of the media, they probably think of a powerful
institution, the role it plays in society, and the kind of people who work for it, as
opposed to specific newspapers or television programs of news stories” (p. 10). It is
therefore not useful to evaluate media credibility as a whole without taking the
differences between specific news mediums into account. In fact, compared with the
lower level of “media” credibility in America, Pew Research Center (see Kiousis,
2001) found that people in America regularly expressed a considerably higher level of
credibility for most specific news media outlets (over 80% in most cases).

The literature examined also suggest that examination of trust needs to be
performed within the context of recognizing specific media roles and functions, and
differing standards of news professionalism, which can be tied to the specific political
communication regime under which news media operate. As such, it is hardly possible
to compare the survey data of media credibility, high or low, in different countries by
simply asking people their attitudes about media or whether or not they trust media
coverage. Without context or precision, there can be no specific evaluation of
indicators or dimensions.

In short, the level of media credibility is, by its nature, reflected in the degree
people identify with media performance, as well as corresponding media culture in
mediascapes. According to the three perspectives examined above, five factors should
be considered in examining media and considering credibility: professionalism
identity, antagonism identity, heterogeneity identity, international identity, and
public sphere identity. A peripheral identity from the perspective of “Other” rather
than the domestic “National” identity allows some international media, such as CNN
or the BBC to achieve a higher general level of media credibility internationally by
effectively giving voice to international agenda (David, 2002; Naveh, 2002). These
dimensions provide a framework for identifying both the stated (or perceived)
function/role of the press, and the specific media outlet’s performance in terms of
matching that role. Credibility and trust are largely linked to perceptions of that
performance.

In other words, if the key media mission is to build a public sphere to serve the
public interest, the definition of what that public interest is, and how media should
serve that public interest, is critical to any comparative evaluation of media trust and
credibility. Journalism practice and news performance within that public sphere
reflect a series of news norms and news ethics, namely news professionalism.
Measurement of media trust and credibility, particularly involving comparisons across media, across time, or cross-culturally, need to be based less on general questions of trust and belief, and on a more rigorous consideration of media roles and purposes, and the public’s perception of their performance in that regard.

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