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"A Part of Me Will Always Be Suspicious": Citizens, Media, and Democratic Trust in France

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Abstract: In 2024, political tensions in France further reinforced the erosion of citizens' trust in the media. Drawing on 30 interviews and four focus groups (33 participants) with citizens, journalists, editors-in-chief, and regulatory authorities, the study shows that trust declines when democratic expectations, media discourses, and

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material conditions are misaligned. Citizens report politicization, poor representation, and "buzz"-driven coverage. Journalists highlight legal, economic, and organizational constraints that limit participation and depth. Despite disagreements over content and neutrality, all emphasize the need for accountability, dialogue, and media literacy. Our expanded discursive-material approach sheds light on these tensions and advocates inclusive, participatory journalism. Trust is reconceived as a relational process, sustained through participation, transparency, institutional and material support.

Keywords: media, democratic trust, participation, France, discursive-material approach

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"Une part de moi restera toujours méfiante": citoyens, médias, et confiance démocratique en France

Résumé : En 2024, les tensions politiques en France ont renforcé la fragilisation de la confiance des citoyens envers les médias. En s'appuyant sur 30 entretiens et quatre focus groups (33 participants) avec des citoyens, des journalistes, rédacteurs en chef et autorités de régulation, l'étude montre que la confiance s'érode lorsque les attentes démocratiques, les discours médiatiques et les conditions matérielles sont désalignés. Les citoyens dénoncent la politisation, une mauvaise représentation et une couverture axée sur le « buzz ». Les journalistes soulignent les contraintes légales, économiques et organisationnelles qui limitent la participation et la profondeur. Malgré des désaccords sur le contenu et la neutralité, tous réclament responsabilité, dialogue et éducation aux médias. Notre approche discursive et matérielle élargie éclaire ces tensions et recommande un journalisme inclusif et participatif. La confiance y est reconsidérée comme un processus relationnel, soutenu par la participation, la transparence et l'appui institutionnel et matériel.

Mots-clés: médias, confiance démocratique, participation, France, approche discursive-matérielle

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Introduction

Trust in news is widely seen as essential to democratic life: it shapes how citizens learn, deliberate, and hold power to account (Dahlgren, 2018; Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Yet trust in both "news in general" and specific brands has declined across many established democracies (Newman et al., 2023; Schulz et al., 2020). Audiences increasingly perceive bias, misinformation, and elite influence, eroding the capacity of journalism to inform and enable participation. Distrust weakens learning from news (Altay et al., 2024), heightens partisan reasoning in elections (Ladd, 2010), and facilitates conspiratorial thinking when official sources lose credibility (Van der Linden et al., 2021). Declining interest in news and selective avoidance compound these trends.

Existing explanations link distrust to broader political disillusionment (Hanitzsch et al., 2018), negativity in political coverage (Hopmann et al., 2015), limits to professional autonomy (Ariely, 2015), and regime type (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Building on this work, we argue that distrust also stems from misalignments between three dimensions: (1) citizens' democratic expectations; (2) the institutional discourses through which the media define their democratic role; and (3) the material conditions that shape journalistic production and public participation. Trust, we suggest, cannot be understood without accounting for these discursive and material disconnections.

To explore these dynamics, we focus on France, a critical case for examining the relationship between media systems and democratic expectations. With more than 5,000 press outlets and radio stations, hundreds of TV channels, and a growing number of digital platforms, the French media landscape is both diverse and highly structured. This configuration is shaped by a long-standing tradition of opinion-driven print journalism, in which many outlets maintain clear political orientations, alongside a tightly regulated audiovisual sector, particularly in public broadcasting. Recent changes in funding mechanisms, most notably the shift from a licence fee to direct state financing, have renewed concerns about editorial independence, while ongoing reforms such as the proposed "France Médias" holding structure have further intensified debates about political influence. At the same time, increasing concentration in the private audiovisual sector has raised questions about diversity of ownership. Moreover, unlike in many other European countries, France does not formally recognize "community media", limiting alternative spaces for participation. Taken together, these features create a particularly revealing context in which tensions between pluralism, regulation, and independence become highly visible, making France a critical case for examining how misalignments between democratic expectations, institutional discourses, and material conditions shape trust in the media. Furthermore, this configuration has recently been intensified by an unusually turbulent political context: in 2024, snap elections, parliamentary deadlock, cabinet reshuffles, and unrest in overseas territories have heightened public concerns about political and social representation, as well as access to information.

Against this backdrop, we examine how citizens articulate their expectations of media's democratic functions, how journalists understand their own role, and where these visions diverge. Drawing on thirty interviews with citizens, journalists, media executives, and regulators, alongside four focus groups, we map how trust is constructed, strained, and sometimes repaired. We find clear gaps over representation, neutrality, and depth, but also shared aspirations for accountability, responsiveness, and dialogue. We argue that rebuilding trust requires participatory and dialogic forms of journalism capable of reconnecting news producers with the publics they serve.

1. Citizens, Media, and the Democratic Expectation Gap

1.1. *Theoretical Framework*

Research on media and democracy has traditionally relied on normative models that assign journalism core democratic functions: informing citizens, supporting deliberation, holding power accountable, and fostering participation (Christians et al., 2009; McQuail, 1992). More recent work, however, highlights the growing gap between these ideals and citizens' lived experiences, shifting attention from institutional visions of democracy to how people actually encounter and interpret media (Coleman & Ross, 2010).

Deliberative traditions emphasize rational-critical debate, while Dahlgren's (2009, 2018) notion of *civic cultures* highlights the communicative capacities that enable participation. Contemporary media logics, i.e., abundance, speed, fragmentation, and competing knowledge claims, shape access to political information and condition trust (Andrejevic, 2013; Swart et al., 2019). Couldry's framework of *public connection* (Couldry et al. 2010, 2018) reinforces this citizen-centered view, conceptualizing democratic engagement as everyday media practice structured by access, representation, and dialogue.

To integrate these strands, we draw on the discursive-material approach (Carpentier, 2011, 2017; Carpentier & Wimmer, 2025). This framework understands media systems as sites where democratic meanings are continuously contested through both discourse and materiality. It suggests that trust (Newman et al., 2023) emerges from the alignment, or misalignment, between discursive visions of democracy and the material conditions that structure journalistic practice.

We extend this model into a triadic framework involving: (i) Institutional discourses: professional norms, legal frameworks, and organizational visions of journalism; (ii) Materiality: resources, infrastructures, and technological architectures that structure both journalistic practice and the conditions of access, reception, and participation for citizens; (iii) Citizens' discourses: democratic expectations, imaginaries, and evaluative criteria.

Trust, in this perspective, is not an intrinsic property of media institutions. It is a relational outcome produced through the alignment, or misalignment, between these three dimensions. When citizens' expectations regarding representation, neutrality, or participation are not met by institutional practices or are constrained by material conditions, tensions emerge that can undermine trust. Economic pressures toward sensationalism, political influences on agenda-setting, or algorithmic architectures that limit meaningful participation illustrate how material realities can clash with democratic ideals. These gaps help explain why individuals may feel both empowered to express themselves and simultaneously excluded from mediated public life (Coleman & Ross, 2010).

This framework positions trust not as a static attitude but as an ongoing relational achievement shaped by expectations, constraints, and negotiations. It allows us to analyze how citizens in contemporary France articulate democratic demands toward the media, how journalists interpret their own role, and where tensions between discourse and materiality give rise to distrust.

1.2. *Data Collection*

Between May-October 2024, we conducted a qualitative study combining semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 63 participants in total[1].

With respect to media professionals, we conducted 12 interviews across 6 media types (public TV/ radio, private TV, print, online-only outlet (pure player), regional/local press/ radio, and community media), interviewing both managers (M) and journalists (J). Six interviews were also conducted with regulators and unions.

Regarding the citizens, 11 individual interviews (Table 1) and four focus group discussions with 33 participants were conducted (Table 2). We stratified focus groups by age (18-35; 36+) and political interest (high/low): FG1 (18-35 high), FG2 (18-35 low), FG3 (36+ high), FG4 (36+ low). We purposively sampled for professional roles and audience diversity (gender, class, migration, political orientation). Interview guides covered accuracy/reliability, investigative capacity, debate facilitation, participation (especially for women/minorities), and democracy-supporting roles.

A multi-sited ethnographic approach (Marcus, 1995) enabled triangulation across citizens, producers, and regulators. Analysis followed abductive coding aligned with the triadic framework.

Table 1. Interviews

Age	**N°Interview**	**Gender**	**Political interest**	**Profession**	**Place of living**	**Political opinions**
18-24	I.2	Female	Quite interested	Student	Major city	Left
25-35	I.3	Female	Quite interested	Health sector	Small city	Left
25-35	I.8	Male	Very interested	Public security sector	Major city	Left
36-44	I.1	Male	Very interested	Health sector	Small city	Left
36-44	I.4	Male	Very interested	Education sector	Mid-sized city	Prefers not to say
36-44	I.5	Female	Very interested	Art sector	Major city, overseas	Far left & left

[1] All interviews have been anonymized.

36-44	I.6	Male	Not very interested	Health sector	Mid-sized city	Moderate right
45-54	I.11	Female	Quite interested	Management sector	Mid-sized city	Right, far right
55-65	I.7	Male	Quite interested	Retail sector, retired	Small city	From far left to right
55-65	I.9	Female	Very interested	Advocacy sector	Small city	Far left, Left
65+	I.10	Female	Quite interested	Health sector, retired	Small city	Center-right

Table 2. Focus groups

FG1: 18-35, high political interest
FG2: 18-35, low political interest
FG3: >36, high political interest
FG4: >36, low political interest

1. Citizens' Perceptions of Democracy and the Media: From Democratic Ideals to Democratic Realities

When asked to define democracy, participants initially expressed hesitation, yet their responses converged around a shared normative ideal. Democracy was described as a system grounded in popular sovereignty, representation, freedom of expression, and fairness:

> "Democracy […] is the capacity of a State to take its people into consideration and to give voice and power to the people." (I.1)

> "Guaranteeing that citizens can make their voices heard through an electoral method." (I.6)

> "Power to the people […] the freedom to express oneself in a society that must advocate fairness." (FG1)

These definitions reflect a relatively stable civic-republican understanding of democracy, combining representative mechanisms with expectations of participation and inclusion. This resonates with classical conceptions of democracy as a balance between representation and participation (Dahl, 1989), as well as with the idea of a shared political community within which democratic legitimacy is constructed (Anderson, 1983).

However, this normative consensus gives way to a more critical assessment when participants reflect on democracy in practice. Across interviews, they emphasize a disconnect between democratic ideals and lived realities, questioning the effectiveness of representation. Low electoral turnout, limited responsiveness of

political actors, and the absence of meaningful influence beyond voting are frequently mentioned:

"When 30% of voters turn out… whose representatives are they?" (I.5)

"We vote once every X year and then we don't control what happens anymore." (I.7)

Citizens described democracy as both stable and fragile, resilient in routine practice, yet vulnerable to manipulation or breakdown:

"Democracy has always worked […] but I'm afraid that one day it won't, and there will be civil war." (FG4)

This perceived imbalance between representation and participation generates a sense of democratic insufficiency. While institutions are not rejected outright, they are seen as only partially fulfilling their role. Democracy is thus experienced as both stable and fragile, functioning in routine terms, yet vulnerable to erosion. This ambivalence echoes approaches that conceptualize democracy as an ongoing and incomplete project rather than a fully stabilized system (Giddens, 2002).

Importantly, these perceptions are not uniformly distributed. They appear to be shaped by individuals' social positions and lived experiences, which influence both their expectations of democracy and their evaluation of its functioning. Differences related to class, professional background, and migration experience emerge as structuring elements in how participants position themselves in relation to democratic institutions.

Participants with migration backgrounds, for example, often describe an ambivalent relationship to political belonging, marked by partial inclusion and limited formal rights:

"I don't have the right to vote in France… I remain a bit of a citizen, a bit in between." (I.4)

Others compared France favorably to their country of origin while still expressing distrust:

"In France, democracy works quite well […] but politicians manipulate it a lot." (FG2)

Overall, the material suggests that these positional factors shape perceptions of both media credibility and democratic institutions. Participants frequently relate their distrust to experiences of marginalization, misrepresentation, or social distance. A more systematic analysis of these dynamics would require a dedicated research design and therefore lies beyond the scope of the present study, while constituting an important direction for future research.

Despite this diversity of trajectories, a recurring theme across participants' accounts is a perceived lack of representation, both by political actors and by the

media, which are frequently described as socially homogeneous, elite, and disconnected from everyday experiences. Importantly, this perception is not equally expressed: it is more pronounced among participants who feel structurally distant from positions of power, suggesting that experiences of misrepresentation are shaped by unequal social positions. In this sense, the critique of elite distance reflects not only a general dissatisfaction with representation, but also socially differentiated experiences of exclusion that contribute to the emergence of distrust:

> "We don't feel represented anymore… there is a real disconnect between what we are and what they represent." (FG3)

> "Politicians have been in politics for 40 years […], they don't know life." (I.8)

> "Journalists and politicians all come from the same schools. We need more diversity, why don't politicians come from civil society?" (FG4)

Citizens saw political and media institutions as intertwined spheres of power, both failing to meet expectations of access, responsiveness, and inclusion. This aligns with research showing frustration when democratic tools remain elitist or inaccessible (Coleman & Ross, 2010).

What emerges from these accounts is a shared frustration with the gap between democratic ideals and their material realization. From the perspective of our analytical framework, these perceptions can be understood as part of citizens' discourses, shaped by both normative expectations and socially situated experiences. The gap between democratic ideals and institutional practices thus reflects not only a general dissatisfaction with representation, but also differentiated experiences of exclusion and limited access to participation.

This misalignment constitutes a key condition for the emergence of distrust. While participants do not reject democratic principles, they question their effective realization, particularly when their own experiences of participation, recognition, and representation appear constrained. Distrust, in this sense, emerges less from a rejection of democracy itself than from the perception that its promises are unevenly fulfilled across social groups.

2. A Silent Dialogue: Structured Misalignments Between Citizens and Media

Although citizens and media professionals were interviewed separately, the inductive ethnographic approach revealed recurrent echoes between their accounts, which we conceptualize as a form of "silent dialogue." To analyze these dynamics, we draw on the triadic framework developed above, where trust and distrust are understood as emerging from the interaction between citizens' discourses, institutional discourses, and material conditions. The empirical findings show that these three dimensions do not operate in isolation but are articulated through different levels of the media system.

More specifically, the misalignments identified in the data can be analytically distinguished across three interrelated levels: structural constraints, organizational practices, and perceptual dynamics. Structural constraints primarily relate to material conditions (Lyubareva & Rochelandet, 2021; Lyubareva et al., 2020), organizational practices reflect the articulation between institutional discourses (e.g., professional norms) and material constraints shaping journalistic production, and perceptual dynamics capture how citizens interpret and evaluate these configurations, as shaped not only by discursive expectations but also by their material conditions of access, exposure, and participation (Coleman & Ross, 2010; Swart et al., 2019).

3.1 *Structural Misalignments: Economic and Political Constraints*

At the structural level, tensions primarily arise from the material conditions under which media operate, particularly ownership structures and economic pressures. Citizens frequently associate media organizations with political and economic elites, sometimes conflating state authority, private ownership, and editorial control:

> "For a TV channel, for example BFM TV[2], we all know that it belongs to the State. And […] it also belongs to Altice[3]." (FG1)

> "There is a person called Bolloré, the French billionaire, who owns several media outlets. And so, we clearly see that it is oriented, what is broadcast on its channels." (FG2)

While some statements reflect partial confusion about the structure of the media ecosystem, they more fundamentally express a perception that the media are embedded in economic and political power structures that constrain their autonomy. This perception resonates with analyses of the journalistic field that highlight how economic and political dependencies shape the production of information (Bourdieu, 1998).

Media professionals themselves acknowledge this tension, although they frame it in terms of necessary trade-offs. On the one hand, media entities require material resources in order to exist and function and financial resources are seen as essential for sustaining journalistic activity. On the other hand, managers and journalists share a common concern regarding the risk of shareholder interventionism:

> "You have billionaires who come and put marbles in the media. […] The disadvantage is that these billionaires […] also come with their ideas, their visions and the way they want us to deal with the news." (J., private radio)

> "To have the right to do investigative journalism, it is necessary to guarantee that the media are not owned by interests that hinder these investigations. If Vincent

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[2] One of the main continuous news private TV channels in France.

[3] Telecommunication and mass media company.

> Bolloré owns all the media, there will be no investigation on France in Africa." (M., national daily)

This reveals a structural misalignment within the triadic framework. Material conditions (ownership and funding structures) constrain journalistic practices and shape the production of content, while institutional discourses continue to promote ideals of independence and public service. Citizens, however, interpret these conditions as limiting media autonomy, thereby reinforcing perceptions of compromised independence and contributing to distrust. In triadic terms, this tension reflects a misalignment between material conditions, institutional discourses that emphasize independence, and citizens' discourses that interpret these conditions as evidence of compromised autonomy.

Importantly, this tension is not reducible to misinformation or lack of knowledge. Rather, it reflects a structural contradiction between the economic organization of media systems and normative expectations of independence. As such, distrust at this level is rooted in the perceived incompatibility between democratic ideals and the material conditions of media production.

Nevertheless, the materiality of the media system in which it is embedded is essential to the possibility of democratic media, since economic sustainability and solidity are necessary for democratic media to exist (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2025).

3.2. *Organizational Misalignments: Journalistic Practices and Constraints*

At the organizational level, misalignments emerge from the everyday practices through which journalism is produced. These include decisions about who is given a voice, how topics are selected, and the extent to which issues are explored in depth.

First, the findings of the interviews indicated that the lack of representation felt by citizens towards media production is also related to a pervasive sense of exclusion from the media landscape. Citizens contest the authority conveyed to actors who are given the word in the mediatic scene by expressing the will to "make the citizens talk more [and having] less experts" (FG4) on the media:

> "There are citizens who are knowledgeable in an area and they are not asked for their opinion." (FG4)

> "On the radio, there are brodcasts where the listeners have the floor, but to have access, there are already huge filters." (FG4)

However, journalists emphasize the necessity of selection and filtering, pointing to constraints related to format, credibility, and editorial coherence:

> "It is true that there is a selection, because otherwise, you have everything and anything on the air." (J., private radio)

"It would be complicated to invite someone who represents the Yellow Vests[4]… Finding someone who has a sufficiently articulated speech is complex." (J., public service radio)

"I don't want to put a citizen who is anti-vaccine with a doctor who has done all his studies on vaccination." (J., regional radio)

The issue of empowering citizens to express concerns through media channels is intricately linked to the structure and organization of media discourse. A private media executive highlighted the importance of regional branches, whose presence in local communities strengthens ties with citizens. While major broadcasters remain centralized, these regional services bring local perspectives that improve representation of diverse populations:

"On our local channels, we have an ease to give the floor to people because we talk about their daily lives […] we do TV for them." (M., private TV)

This observation resonates with the perspective of a public service media journalist who underscores the pivotal role of reporters in reflecting what citizens describe as the "field" or the "ground":

"We have a roaming reporter who will go around everywhere in France to make something other than the voice of the institutions heard. […] They really are the voice of the people." (J., public service radio)

These constraints are particularly visible in efforts to diversify the range of speakers represented in mainstream media, especially with regard to women and minority groups. A recurrent theme among journalists' accounts was the prevalent sentiment of illegitimacy among women, which was identified as a significant impediment to their full participation.

Finally, regarding the principle of internal pluralism, journalists and managers from the audio-visual media sector remind that they are bound by a stringent set of regulations, particularly during electoral periods, which are controlled by a national authority, the Regulatory Authority for Audiovisual and Digital Communication (ARCOM). This characteristic stands in contrast to the press which is not subject to the same rules as it traditionally is, in France, an opinion press:

"People criticize us for giving the *Rassemblement National*[5] (RN) too much of a say. We say: 'we are sorry, we are obliged'." (J., public service radio)

"We do not really have a choice, because you know that you have ARCOM watching over you." (J., private radio)

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[4] A social movement emerged at the end of 2018 as a consequence of the increase in the oil prices and the general cost of living.

[5] The RN is one of the main far-right parties in France.

This illustrates a misalignment between citizens' expectations of participation and institutional norms of journalistic production, which are themselves shaped by material constraints such as time pressure, audience competition, and production formats. From the perspective of the triadic framework, this tension emerges from the interaction between institutional discourses (professional norms of selection and credibility), material constraints (time, formats, and organizational routines), and citizens' discourses that emphasize inclusion and representativeness.

Similar tensions appear in the selection and treatment of topics. Citizens often perceive a strong gap between media agendas and their everyday realities, often expressed through the trope of the media not being "on the ground":

> "[During the Covid period] the news showed what they wanted to show. But in reality, it wasn't that at all. […] What we see on TV is not at all representative of what is really happening on the ground." (I.3)

> "I have the impression that what they say is not reality. When you walk down the street, it has nothing to do." (FG1)

Nevertheless, the media journalists and managers assert their role in assigning appropriate space to citizens' concerns. One manager from a public radio, for instance, reminds that arousing public interest relies on the choice of subjects which concern people, such as "education, health, environment, in certain countries, agriculture or public services" (M., public service radio). Furthermore, a private TV manager emphasizes a particular program in which citizens can directly address their concerns.

> "[During the elections], we have an assembly of citizens who come from different social and economic backgrounds, and who have the opportunity to challenge candidates. The questions come directly from citizens' problems." (M., private TV)

Citizens also criticize the media for distorting and oversimplifying information:

> "There is a form of fictionalization of this information, a truncated overview of reality. Because time is short, information must be simple […], therefore, this is not reality." (I.6)

Journalists and media managers see careful fact-checking and accuracy in reporting as central to their work. A public service journalist recounted a past mistake:

> "The Prosecutor's Office publishes a press release saying 'it is false'. […] I remember saying in my 1 p.m. newspaper that it was false, we apologize, we explain why. […] It really served me as a lesson that day." (J., public service radio)

In addition, citizens were critical of the issues raised by the media for being repetitive and sensational:

"They're focused on certain information. They play the same thing over and over again." (FG3)

"They use [a crime] by saying he's Moroccan […] and we immediately turn to another subject: immigration, profiteering…" (I.8)

Finally, they expressed dissatisfaction with the limited opportunities to engage with in-depth topics or follow issues to a clear conclusion:

"If we spend an hour and a half explaining that there is a problem and that there is going to be a manifestation, when there is a conclusion behind it, if you don't go looking for it, you will never hear about it. People don't know how it ended." (I.7)

Journalists, in contrast, describe constraints linked to editorial hierarchies, production rhythms, and limited resources, which restrict their ability to provide in-depth or continuous coverage. These dynamics contribute to fragmentation and discontinuity in news narratives, which can be interpreted through Bourdieu's notion of "structural amnesia" (1998):

"My editor said 'It's not necessary' when I wanted to include sound ambiance from a protest." (J., private media)

"Management was climate-skeptical and hostile to environmental coverage." (M., national daily)

A feminist editor highlights the difficulties of applying a gender analysis in journalism, which can be challenging:

"We shed light differently […]. I have many examples of poor reporting that impact opinion." (M., pure player)

As noted by some media professionals, a more in-depth exploration of topics characteristic of investigative journalism requires specialized resources that not all media outlets possess. The investigative cell developed by the public service media, nonetheless, has contributed to this evolution. In addition, an independent investigative pure player alluded to an approach that aims to ensure continuity of the subjects' treatment:

"That is also another principle of our editorial positioning. It's about not letting go of our subjects. That is to say, we release something, but we will come back to it later. We follow what we treat over time." (M., pure player)

The critique articulated by the citizenry is indicative of the pervasive political disenchantment that is engendered by the prevailing discursive conditions in the media (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 78). Despite journalists' willingness to represent people's realities, professional normativity (i.e., established journalistic frames) tends to diverge from this objective. Importantly, these tensions are not purely oppositional. Both citizens and media professionals express concerns about superficiality, repetition, and the difficulty of sustaining investigative work. This convergence suggests that distrust at this level is not simply the result of conflicting expectations,

but of shared constraints that shape journalistic practices. More broadly, these dynamics show how journalistic content results from the articulation of institutional norms and material constraints, while being evaluated by citizens through their own expectations and experiences.

3.3. *Perceptual Dynamics: Interpretations, Experience, and Distrust*

At the level of perceptual dynamics, misalignments are expressed through how citizens interpret and evaluate media content. In line with our analytical framework, perceptual dynamics capture how citizens make sense of journalistic practices and outputs, as shaped not only by their discursive expectations regarding democracy and information, but also by their material conditions of access, exposure, and participation. Distrust, in this perspective, emerges from the interaction between what citizens expect from the media and how they experience and interpret its content within specific informational environments.

A central dimension of these evaluations concerns the perceived lack of objectivity and the growing presence of opinion in news content. Many participants express the view that journalists prioritize personal viewpoints or political orientations at the expense of factual reporting:

> "We come to look for information, not opinions." (FG3)

> "A choice is necessarily subjective; there are limits to the trust we can give." (I.9)

> "I feel the journalist's personal opinion, especially during elections." (I.1)

These perceptions are reinforced by a widespread confusion regarding the distinction between reporting and commentary. Although audiences are, in principle, able to differentiate between journalistic genres (Neveu, 2024, p. 63), many participants report difficulty identifying whether they are exposed to factual information or editorial interpretation:

> "We don't know if they are presenters or editorialists." (FG4)

> "I'm tired of hearing France Inter slanted in the same direction." (I.11)

From the perspective of media professionals, however, the situation is framed differently. Journalists emphasize their commitment to serving the public interest, providing access to reality, and enabling citizens to form independent judgments:

> "It is fundamental to tell when someone lies and provide reading keys." (J., national daily)

> "We must have the independence to say that Total's exploitation is a climate catastrophe." (M., national daily)

> "My job is really to give people keys and they figure out how to open the door with them." (J., private radio)

They also acknowledge that distinguishing editorial content from news is a real professional concern that requires careful attention:

> "Editorials must be marked as such. We don't do it enough." (M., regional media)

More broadly, all media professionals stress that their work is guided by principles of pluralism, notably the confrontation of differing viewpoints:

> "We do not do objective journalism, but we must do honest journalism and seek all points of view." (M., pure player)

> "If we invite an Israeli, we then invite a Palestinian." (M., public service radio)

The issue of political diversity in the media remains a subject of ongoing debate within the profession. A journalist from a private outlet pointed out that, despite national regulations ensuring political pluralism during electoral periods, there is still a lack of diversity among columnists. At the same time, a journalist from a regional radio highlighted the limits of diversity regulations regarding the range of actors allowed to intervene in the media, stressing that journalists bear responsibility for preventing unnecessary controversies. He emphasized the potential negative effects of staging confrontations between two opposing sides and underlined the importance of maintaining the proper framework and conditions to ensure that diversity fosters constructive debate rather than conflict:

> "On a media like ours, I find that the diversity of columnists is not enormous" (J., private radio)

> "Do we just want to put on a show because we are going to put two roosters in an arena? Or do we really want to oppose two ideas, two concepts so that the citizen, the listener or the viewer can make their choice?" (J., regional media)

However, these professional norms do not fully align with citizens' expectations. While journalists emphasize pluralism and interpretive responsibility, many citizens continue to expect a form of neutrality understood as the absence of opinion (Joux, 2023). One citizen even invoked authoritarian "State media" as a model of neutrality (FG4), revealing profound confusion regarding pluralism and objectivity. In triadic terms, this tension reflects a misalignment between institutional discourses that promote pluralism and interpretive mediation, citizens' discourses that equate credibility with neutrality, and material conditions that shape both the production and reception of information. However, as highlighted by Carpentier and Wimmer (2025), factuality itself is embedded within representational regimes and cannot be reduced to pure objectivity, which helps explain the persistence of such misunderstandings.

These tensions are further reinforced by the conditions under which media content is produced and encountered. Citizens frequently criticize the increasing prominence of conflict, dramatization, and sensationalism in media coverage, which they associate with audience-driven logics:

"People attack people rather than ideas… it's more like a war clan." (I.2)

"It's more about buzz than journalism." (I.1)

"Teasing and voyeurism […], the taste of blood." (FG3)

Such perceptions suggest that media content is evaluated not only in terms of informational quality but also through its tone and format, which are seen as undermining democratic deliberation:

"It's just for show, to make money and get ratings." (I.6)

Not all media professionals share this view, however:

"After our investigation, we organized a debate on nuclear power where two opposing sides finally managed to discuss." (M., pure player)

More generally, in relation to the "buzz" logic, journalists link these dynamics to material constraints such as intensified competition, the search for audience attention, and editorial pressures from management. These pressures contribute to prioritizing news based on its perceived newsworthiness and emotional impact rather than its civic relevance:

"Floods in Martinique: 'Are there deaths?' If not, no interest." (J., private radio)

Despite the possibility that citizens may not be fully informed of the challenges confronting journalists, the two aforementioned testimonies indicate a convergence between the critical remarks expressed by citizens and those articulated by journalists concerning the audience search logic that is intrinsic to the media ecosystem.

The emphasis on dramatization and audience appeal can be interpreted through the logic of the "spectacle" (Debord, 1992), where visibility and attention structure information production. Both citizens and journalists express critical views of these dynamics, pointing to a convergence in their diagnosis of the media system despite their different positions within it. This is echoed in journalists' own critiques of an "economy of truth" (Coe, 2018, p. 417), highlighting their awareness of the economic conditions shaping news production.

Finally, perceptual dynamics are strongly shaped by the conditions of information access and exposure. Interviews reveal discomfort with abundant information, noting that more media outlets correlate with greater public distrust and uncertainty about information accuracy:

"Too much information. Over-information." (FG2)

"We are solicited from all sides […], the danger is to make the wrong choice and have a distorted idea of democracy." (I.9)

"Even what we see, we are not sure it is true." (FG1)

They also describe difficulties navigating contradictory information, reflecting a fragmented epistemic environment:

"One media said it was a migrant, another said someone from South America… I still don't know." (FG1)

These experiences are not only cognitive but also affective. The predominance of negative news content contributes to a sense of psychological distress and disengagement:

"I would like to see something positive at the end of shows." (I.8)

"Without Xanax[6], we cannot support French TV news." (FG4)

Within these perceptual dynamics, moments of crisis appear as specific situations in which trust is partially reconfigured. Several media professionals note that during major events, citizens tend to return to mainstream news sources, which are then perceived as more reliable:

"When something important happens, people who don't normally listen say: 'they are serious, I will listen to them'." (M., public service radio)

Media professionals note that the spread of disinformation, often linked to social media, has become pervasive and significantly transformed their professional environment, with some emphasizing the necessity of preserving epistemic value in order to combat it:

"Fighting disinformation means not providing information." (M., public service radio)

"Part of our job now is denying false information from colleagues or social networks." (M., regional media)

"We clarify controversies and explain science as much as possible." (M., national daily)

"We refuse pseudo-science; it maintains confusion." (J., community media)

Finally, media professionals acknowledge the predominance of negative news and discuss the potential of solution-oriented journalism as a response. While some express interest in this approach, it is also met with caution. As one pure player manager notes, "Sometimes, behind positive or solution journalism, the approach [can be] a little stupid or naive," highlighting concerns about oversimplification or loss of critical distance.

Moreover, regarding ARCOM's regulation of violent imagery, another journalist and union representative called for a deeper reflection on the limits of protecting collective public sensitivities, particularly when such vigilance risks undermining access to reality: "Well, war is bloody, so talking about a war while never showing images of war is a denial of reality".

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[6] An anti-anxiety medication.

These dynamics can be understood as part of a broader epistemic crisis (Dahlgren, 2018), in which the abundance of information, combined with fragmented exposure and attention-driven logics (Citton, 2013; Goldhaber, 1997), undermines the conditions for shared knowledge and trust. In this context, citizens' evaluations of media are shaped not only by content itself, but by the material environments in which information circulates and is consumed.

In sum, perceptual dynamics reveal how distrust emerges at the intersection of interpretation, experience, and access. They reflect a structured misalignment between citizens' expectations, institutional norms, and the material conditions of both media production and information reception. As such, they constitute a central dimension of the "silent dialogue," where shared concerns about the quality of information coexist with divergent interpretations of its causes and meanings.

Conclusion

Taken together, the tensions identified can be understood as different manifestations of the same underlying dynamic: the misalignment between citizens' discourses, institutional discourses, and material conditions. Each tension highlights a specific configuration of this triadic relationship, thereby illustrating the heuristic value of the proposed framework. The cross-analysis of citizens' and media professionals' perspectives shows that both groups engage with similar concerns, yet do so in parallel, with limited mutual recognition, resulting in structural, organizational, and perceptual misalignments. Despite these tensions, the findings point to a shared orientation: a concern for access to reality and for meaningful democratic communication. Distrust does not stem from fundamentally opposed visions, but from discrepancies between expectations, institutional narratives, and the conditions under which journalism is produced. In this sense, trust appears as a relational and co-produced phenomenon, emerging from the interaction between normative expectations and the constraints shaping media work.

The empirical material highlights concrete points of convergence. Citizens repeatedly express a need for explanation, contextualization, and interpretive support ("News is difficult to understand… the media could help us take a step back" (FG1)), while journalists emphasize the epistemic and pedagogical dimensions of their role. As one media professional notes, they "must re-educate the public to explain what professional media are" (M., online media), while another insists on the importance of "taking the time to explain" (M., private TV). These parallel concerns suggest not a lack of shared expectations, but the absence of structured forms through which they can be articulated and recognized.

Institutional responses to these tensions, ranging from media literacy initiatives to participatory formats and diversity policies, reflect an increasing awareness of the problem. Participatory experiments such as *Faut qu'on parle* (*Brut*, *La Croix*), or local investigative models like *Médiacités* illustrate attempts to reconnect with audiences

and make journalistic processes more transparent. However, their effectiveness remains uneven and difficult to assess. While such initiatives open spaces for interaction, they often operate within existing structural constraints that may limit their transformative capacity. Similarly, regulatory efforts to promote pluralism, particularly in the audiovisual sector, have not fully translated into broader representational diversity, as evidenced by the stagnation of women's presence in news and the persistent underrepresentation of certain social groups (ARCOM, 2026). These examples suggest that current responses tend to address specific dimensions of distrust without fully engaging with the underlying structural misalignments.

A central conclusion emerges: rebuilding trust depends less on reaffirming normative principles than on reducing the gap between democratic expectations and the material realities of news production. The analysis thus points to the importance of understanding journalism as a collective epistemic resource, while avoiding prescriptive generalizations. The normative implications developed in this study should not be read as broadly generalizable claims, but as analytically grounded interpretations emerging from qualitative inquiry. They nonetheless offer insight into the conditions under which trust in media can be sustained and renewed, and must ultimately be situated within broader theoretical debates on journalism and democracy.

The French media context provides a particularly revealing setting for these dynamics. Its structural configuration, marked by strong regulation, evolving public media funding, and increasing economic concentration, intensifies the tension between institutional claims of independence and the constraints perceived by citizens. In this context, skepticism toward media autonomy appears less as a diffuse distrust than as a response to perceived inconsistencies between proclaimed norms and observable conditions. The French case thus does not merely illustrate the triadic model; it demonstrates how specific institutional arrangements mediate and amplify the misalignments identified in this study.

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