ESSACHESS – Journal for Communication Studies

Assemblages of Trust: A Discursive-Material Analysis of Czech Citizens' Perceptions of Media and Democracy

ESSACHESS –
Journal for Communication Studies
Volume 19 Issue 1(37), p. 107-130
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https://www.essachess.com/
DOI: 10.21409/essachess.1775-352x

Cite: ŠIMKOVÁ, K., & WIMMER, J. (2026). Assemblages of Trust: A Discursive-Material Analysis of Czech Citizens' Perceptions of Media and Democracy. *ESSACHESS*. 19(37): 107-130. https://doi.org/10.21409/V4F9-1317

Karolína ŠIMKOVÁ
Mgr., Charles University
CZECH REPUBLIC
e-mail: karolina.simkova@fsv.cuni.cz

Jeffrey WIMMER
Prof. Dr., University of Augsburg
GERMANY
e-mail: jeffrey.wimmer@uni-a.de

Abstract: This study examines how trust and mistrust in media and democracy in the Czech Republic emerge from the interaction of discursive interpretations and material conditions. Drawing on Carpentier's (2017) discursive-material framework and four focus groups (n=38), the study identifies three core dynamics: discursive constructions of (mis)trust shaped by perceptions of bias, corruption and political influence; material inequalities in access, literacy and communicative power that structure citizens' sense of voice; and residual democratic anchors, such as elections and EU integration, that sustain selective trust. The analysis further shows how media pluralism, ownership concentration and digital platforms reconfigure trust repertoires

Article received December 1, 2025. Article accepted May 20, 2026.
Conflict of Interest: The author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

in the Czech media environment. Across the four focus groups, trust emerged as a situated practice rather than a stable attitude, shaped by communicative infrastructures and everyday democratic experiences.
Keywords: Czech Republic, democracy, discursive-material approach, mistrust, trust in media

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Assemblages de confiance: une analyse discursive et matérielle des perceptions des citoyens tchèques sur les médias et la démocratie

Résumé: Cet article examine comment la confiance et la méfiance envers les médias et la démocratie en République tchèque émergent de l'interaction entre les interprétations discursives et les conditions matérielles. S'appuyant sur le cadre discursif-matériel de Carpentier (2017) et sur quatre groupes de discussion (n=38), l'étude identifie trois dynamiques centrales: les constructions discursives de la (mé)confiance, façonnées par les perceptions de partialité, de corruption et d'influence politique; les inégalités matérielles d'accès, d'alphabétisation et de pouvoir de communication qui structurent le sentiment d'expression des citoyens; et les ancrages démocratiques résiduels, tels que les élections et l'intégration européenne, qui entretiennent une confiance sélective. L'analyse de l'environnement informationnel tchèque montre en outre comment le pluralisme des médias, la concentration de la propriété et les plateformes numériques reconfigurent les répertoires de confiance. Ensemble, les résultats démontrent que la (manque de) confiance n'est pas une attitude stable, mais une pratique située, ancrée dans les infrastructures de communication.
Mots-clés : République tchèque, démocratie, approche discursive et matérielle, méfiance, confiance dans les médias

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Introduction

In contemporary Western democracies, trust in media has become an increasingly fragile component of the public sphere as journalism's democratic roles, information provision, accountability, and facilitating public deliberation depend fundamentally on its perceived credibility. Public debates increasingly revolve around questions of political bias, concentrated ownership structures and populist attacks on public-service media. The tension between trust and mistrust in media institutions has thus become central to understanding the communicative foundations of democracy. Trust allows citizens to orient themselves within increasingly complex information environments. At the same time, persistent mistrust can weaken confidence in the legitimacy of shared forms of knowledge (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Ladd, 2012).

The Czech Republic exemplifies this tension especially clearly, as concerns about media ownership, political interference, and oligarchic influence have deepened public scepticism toward journalism. A prominent example is the case of Andrej Babiš, the billionaire businessman and politician, who acquired major media outlets such as *Mladá fronta Dnes* and *Lidové noviny* through his conglomerate Agrofert in

2013. His dual role as political leader and media owner intensified public debates about editorial autonomy and media independence and contributed to a broader decline in trust in Czech journalism (Štětka et al., 2021). Recent surveys by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Štětka, 2025) and Czech research agencies (e.g., Median, 2022) indicate a persistent decline in media trust among Czech citizens, driven by perceptions that mainstream outlets align too closely with political and economic elites rather than serving the public good. Some citizens increasingly rely on alternative or digital sources of information. In some cases, this shift reflects legitimate criticism of mainstream journalism; in others it is linked to broader disengagement from democratic institutions.

These developments carry significant implications for the functioning of democracy, citizen participation, and social stability. This article explores how trust and mistrust are shaped through the interplay of discursive interpretations and material conditions within the Czech media environment, drawing on Carpentier's (2017) discursive-material ontology and its recent elaboration by Carpentier and Wimmer (2025). Accordingly, Czech citizens' perspectives were analysed through four focus groups, allowing key factors underlying trust and mistrust to be identified as contextually situated processes.

1. Theoretical Background

1.1. *(Lack of) Trust and Democracy*

Trust is widely regarded as a fundamental condition of possibility for democracy. Dahlgren (2013, p. 24), for instance, argues that "(a) minimal level of 'horizontal' trust, that is, between citizens, is necessary for the emergence of the social bonds of cooperation between those who collectively engage in politics; there is an irreducible social dimension to doing politics." Trust structures the relation between citizens and democratic institutions. Here, trust in democratic institutions is seen as crucial to the functioning of democracy itself, and "Numerous studies have lamented an endemic distrust of politicians, low levels of electoral participation, the decline of political parties, and widespread political apathy or passivity" (Jones in Rosanvallon, 2008, p. x). Interestingly, though, these discussions on trust have a counterpart, as distrust is also seen as an important component in the relation between citizens and the democratic state, allowing for critical evaluations of the workings of the state and for democratic participation to play its role. Mistrust can likewise be democratically productive. For instance, Endreß (2002, p. 78) sees the institutionalisation of mistrust in societies as a 'confidence-building measure'. Elections are a means of expressing mistrust in politics, political institutions, and actors. Appeal hearings in the judiciary, appeals against doping penalties in sport – in many domains, the contestation of decisions is institutionalized. The distinction between mistrust and distrust is therefore analytically crucial for understanding the complex relations between citizens and democratic institutions (Hardin 2002). Mistrust typically refers to cautious doubt about reliability or intentions of institutions. Whereas distrust denotes a more active

and oppositional stance, grounded in the belief that democratic institutions are deliberately deceptive, politically captured, or aligned with elite interests. Distrust therefore signifies a communicative rupture that may result in disengagement or a turn toward alternative or counter-hegemonic actors. While mistrust may still allow trust to be rebuilt through transparency, accountability, and dialogue, distrust reinforces polarisation, alienation, and the erosion of the shared communicative space that sustains democratic deliberation (Norris, 2011; Warren, 2018).

Democratic theory further highlights that trust enables citizens to rely on communicative institutions as mediators of shared knowledge and accountability (Luhmann, 1979; Coleman, 2012). Mistrust can be seen as a form of democratic vigilance or a critical awareness, sustaining reflexivity of the public sphere without undermining its communicative foundations (Giddens, 1990; O'Neill, 2002). Distrust, by contrast, signifies a normative breakdown of communicative legitimacy. When distrust becomes widespread, the epistemic foundations of democracy – the shared belief in the possibility of truthful communication – are eroded. The distinction between mistrust and distrust is not merely semantic but politically consequential, as it marks the difference between a critical yet functional democratic public and a fragmented, antagonistic communicative order incapable of sustaining collective sense-making (Fawzi, 2019; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Ladd, 2012).

1.2. *(Lack of) Trust and the Media*

Trust in the media constitutes a central pre-condition for news organisations to fulfil their democratic roles, including providing timely information, offering critique and oversight, and fulfilling the role of the "fourth estate" (Carlyle, 1904, p. 164). The extent to which people deem the press trustworthy largely depends on the capacity in which they prefer to see the media functioning: as a challenger of social injustices, a sentinel keeping the powerful in check, a custodian of moral and normative standards, a mirror of social reality, and so forth (see in more detail Carpentier and Wimmer, 2025, pp. 52-64). Audiences raised in liberal democracies grow up with the assumption that institutions, politics, science, and the media function reliably and fulfil their normative mandates. As a result, a baseline of trust persists in routine circumstances, since institutional fragility rarely becomes visible in everyday media use.

Research on media trust and mistrust spans communication studies, political science, sociology, and psychology. Much of this work, often grounded in individual-level and positivist approaches, examines the extent of trust, its predictors, and its consequences for political behaviour and media use. Urbániková and Smejkal (2023, p. 298) differentiate three levels of media trust, ranging from a micro to a macro perspective:

"(a) trust in the news information, which relates to the media content; (b) trust in the journalists and those who deliver the news, which is a form of interpersonal trust; and (c) trust in the media organizations, which is a form of institutional trust and

where we differentiate among trust in individual media brands, media types, and news media in general."

Media trust is understood as a multidimensional, context-dependent phenomenon shaped by a variety of individual characteristics, political factors, media quality indicators and broader social dynamics (Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Other analyses point to the more discursive and affective dimensions. Urbániková and Smejkal (2023, p. 299), for example, identify three determinants: "(…) (a) wider social factors, (b) the characteristics of the audiences, and (c) the perceived characteristics of the media and media content."

A substantial body of research shows that individual dispositions have a significant influence on trust in news media. These include political attitudes, general social trust and media literacy. Kohring and Matthes (2007) demonstrate that audiences evaluate multi-dimensional journalistic quality, such as accuracy, fairness, and completeness, to inform their trust judgments. Furthermore, higher levels of media literacy are associated with more differentiated and selective trust patterns (Anstead et al., 2025; Ashley et al., 2010). Recent survey research among journalism students similarly finds a moderate positive relationship between media literacy and selective trust in social-media news, interpreted by the authors as selective acceptance rather than uncritical belief (Hoşgör & Deniz, 2025). Political orientation is another strong predictor of media trust. In polarized contexts, audiences tend to trust outlets aligned with their ideological preferences (Fawzi, 2019). This dynamic of selective trust is particularly evident in populist movements, which frequently frame mainstream media as biased or untrustworthy (Ladd, 2012). At the societal level, the media landscape and its institutional embedding play an important role. Hanitzsch et al. (2018) show in a comparative analysis that trust in the press is higher in liberal-democratic contexts when journalistic independence is guaranteed, and media ethics standards are consistently implemented. Conversely, social polarisation and political fragmentation correlate with lower collective trust (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006). Audience experience with perceived bias or distortion in news coverage further affects trust assessments. Perceived partisan bias can gradually erode trust over time, as citizens who feel that reporting is skewed become less willing to rely on the media as an information source (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017). Conversely, exposure to diverse viewpoints can enhance perceived representation and civic inclusion and strengthen democratic participation (Dahlgren, 2009).

Building on Urbániková and Smejkal (2023), we distinguish between distrust, mistrust, scepticism, and cynicism. Distrust denotes a belief that media intentionally mislead, mistrust reflects general suspicion, scepticism refers to holding claims to evidentiary standards, and cynicism involves deeper doubts about journalistic integrity. These forms of distrust stem from various factors such as the transformation of political knowledge, economic pressures on the media industry, symbolic violence, and political polarization (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2025, pp. 80–96). Understanding these nuances is crucial for addressing the complex challenges surrounding media trust and its counterparts.

To expand the analytical precision of the discursive-material approach, this study develops the discursive-material trust dynamics model (DMTD). Building on Carpentier's (2017) non-hierarchical ontology of the discursive-material knot and the recent systematization of democratic–mediatic assemblages by Carpentier and Wimmer (2025), the DMTD model conceptualizes trust and mistrust as the outcomes of three recurring mechanisms. First, discursive attribution captures how citizens assign meaning to media actors, political institutions, and perceived power relations through interpretive frames such as bias, collusion, or legitimacy. Second, material structuring refers to infrastructural and institutional arrangements, like ownership concentration, regulatory environments, and algorithmic curation systems, that shape communicative power and the distribution of voice. Recent research demonstrates that algorithmic intermediation reconfigures gatekeeping and legitimacy, often reducing transparency and amplifying polarization. Third, practical anchoring describes how everyday democratic practices (elections, mobility, public-service encounters) stabilize or challenge trust orientations by providing embodied experiences of democratic functioning.

Participants rarely described trust as stable. Instead, trust shifted across contexts, institutions and communicative situations. Therefore, the DMTD model moves beyond descriptive accounts of assemblages by offering a structured explanation of how discursive and material dimensions jointly produce shifting trust repertoires. This framework situates the Czech case within broader debates on the entanglement of democracy and media infrastructures, reconstructing how trust is continually negotiated through the interaction of meaning-making, structural conditions and democratic experiences.

1.3. *The Nexus (Lack of) Trust, Media, and Democracy: The Case of the Czech Republic*

Trust in the media is closely tied to an overall democratic satisfaction and to a society's wider political culture (Norris, 2011). Empirical research indicates that high levels of trust in reputable media support democratic stability, whereas broad distrust signals potential fragility within democratic systems. An analysis by the European Broadcasting Union shows that in countries with very high trust in public media, such as Finland, around three-quarters of citizens are also satisfied with the functioning of democracy. In countries with extremely low trust in the media, such as Greece, only about one-third of citizens express satisfaction with democracy (EBU, 2024). Verboord (2024) also finds strong connections between institutional trust in media and trust in key public institutions like government, political parties, or science bodies, alongside individual media repertoires. Media users with a diverse and quality-related media repertoire tend to demonstrate higher institutional trust.

Even in contexts where trust in state institutions is low, public service media top the trust rankings. This means that trust in some media organizations (especially public broadcasters) can act as a bridge connecting citizens with the democratic system. Such residual trust is crucial for democratic processes because it sustains the

minimal informational consensus required for meaningful political contestation. Conversely, sustained mistrust undermines this consensus and can impede democratic deliberation. In this perspective, media trust can be understood metaphorically as a "barometer of democratic stability". When large sections of the population mistrust the established media, this often goes hand in hand with a general distrust of the political system.

The transformation of the Czech media system is commonly described in three stages (Císařová et al., 2024; Jebril et al., 2013). The first, pre-transition stage predated the social changes of the Velvet Revolution in 1989 and operated entirely under a state-controlled media framework. The second, transformation stage involved the rapid transformation of prior institutional structures and ushered in expansive socio-political and technological reforms. The third, post-transformation stage was characterized by the consolidation of legislative, political, economic, and ownership change into the long-term media environment that persists today. Czech journalists and news outlets today face persistent skepticism (Urbániková & Volek, 2018). A key factor is the widening gap between media and their audiences, partly rooted in the early post-1989 period, when many journalists saw themselves not as detached observers but as contributors to democratic reconstruction. As Jakubowicz (2001) notes, this "nation-building" orientation was widespread across Central and Eastern Europe. In this context, Czech reporters often set aside conventional norms such as neutrality or adversarial scrutiny and instead aligned their work with the values and goals of the emerging regime. Yet their early commitment to building a pluralist democracy soon collided with the growing dissatisfaction of most citizens, who reacted to the unfulfilled promises of transition. Distrust rose only gradually throughout the 1990s, audiences largely viewed journalists as allies in the pursuit of a brighter future.

Public trust in Czech media has reached historically low levels in recent survey measurements, both in comparison to history and in an international context. According to the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report (Štětka, 2025), only around one-third of Czechs trusted the news media in 2023 – among the lowest figures since measurements began in 2015. This figure was significantly below the global average (around 40% worldwide in 2023) and made the Czech Republic one of the countries with the lowest media trust in Europe. Although trust rose slightly in 2025 (reaching 33%), the change remains within the statistical margin of error. A closer look at different types of media and providers reveals clear differences in trust. Public service media (PSM) traditionally enjoy the highest reputation in the Czech Republic; *Český rozhlas* (Czech Radio) and *Česká televize* (Czech Television) continue to command the highest trust levels, with roughly 60% of respondents expressing confidence in them (Štětka, 2025). Some established, privately owned quality media outlets also achieve comparatively high trust ratings, such as the business newspaper Hospodářské noviny and major online news portals such as *Seznam Zprávy* and *Aktuálně.cz,* which are trusted by over 50% of respondents. An evaluation by the European Broadcasting

Union (EBU) indicates that around 67% of the Czech population trusts public media, but only 54% trust commercial media (EBU 2024).

Urbániková and Smejkal (2023) offer a detailed framework for audience trust and distrust in Czech public service media. They identify three main dimensions shaping audience evaluations: perceived content quality, journalistic professionalism and confidence in regulatory environment. Third, public trust is reinforced when the regulatory environment is regarded as effective and when supervisory bodies are seen as genuine guarantors of independence and quality. They further conclude that trust and mistrust do not simply oppose each other but can coexist within audience assessments.

Research also shows widespread distrust toward institutional authorities in the Czech Republic, such as the government and the church (Clifford, 2021). However, this historical wariness does not fully explain the decline in media trust, which is more directly linked to oligarchic ownership, weakened editorial autonomy and erosion of local newsrooms (Clifford 2021, p. 3). Bakke (2022) notes that, although new political parties such as *Mayors and Independents (Starostové a nezávislí),* the Pirates (*Piráti*), *ANO*, and *SPD* differ from traditional parties like *ČSSD* or *ODS* in terms of their members' education, age, professional experience, gender balance, and more**,** these changes have not substantially reduced the overall social bias of the Czech parliamentary elite. Thus, party system renewal has not translated into broader social representativeness. The developments expose how profoundly Czech politics has shifted: business-oriented parties and technocratic styles of governance – virtually absent from the scene a decade ago – have now become the prevailing model.

Ramet (2022) contends that Czech politics increasingly display signs of dysfunction, including corruption, inefficiency and entrenched patronage networks. Among the most pressing challenges she identifies are gender-based violence and the relatively low level of public confidence in the proper functioning of the country's democratic institutions. Across her analysis, Ramet underscores the central importance of the harm principle, tolerance, and equal rights, noting further that Czech civic culture is a hybrid formation whose stability depends heavily on the willingness of political and social actors to seek cooperation rather than confrontation, thereby enabling constructive compromise. Complementing this perspective, Raudenská and Pospíšilová (2022) add that while the Czech Republic performs relatively well compared to other post-communist states, political efficacy and personal interest strongly shape willingness to participate.

2. Measuring Trust and Lack of Trust in the Czech Republic: Methods

The discursive-material approach conceptualises discourses (e.g., language, frames, meaning-making) and material conditions (e.g., technologies, infrastructures, embodied practices) as inextricably intertwined within social phenomena (Carpentier, 2017; Carpentier & Wimmer, 2025). Rather than privileging either discourse or

matter, the approach emphasises their mutual constitution within contingent networks of meaning and practice. From this perspective, both democracy and media are understood as multi-layered assemblages in which discursive practices and material arrangements continually emerge, interact and transform. This framework offers an analytical lens for understanding trust and distrust as processes embedded in complex networks of practice, rather than fixed attitudes. Analytically, the approach requires examining the material conditions of communication, such as access to media, power relations, and economic resources, alongside discursive structures, rather than restricting attention to media content or output alone. Empirically, it involves asking how and why trust and mistrust emerge, and linking questions of materiality (e.g., technical accessibility) with prevailing discourses. Against this conceptual background, the study formulates the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the factors of (lack of) trust in media and democracy which Czech citizens acknowledge?

RQ2: To which discursive and material constructions in the field of media and democracy are they related?

RQ3: To what extent do processes of digitalisation transform this entanglement and become part of it?

We conducted four focus groups with Czech citizens (38 participants) representing heterogeneous socio-demographic backgrounds. Particular attention was paid to variation in gender and age. Half of the focus groups were conducted outside Prague, in Olomouc, to capture the perspectives beyond the capital. Participants from nearby towns and villages were also included to integrate both urban and rural experiences.

The interview guide consisted of four main questions with follow-ups addressing: (1) media use and political participation, (2) media attitudes, including criteria for assessing trustworthiness, media quality and diversity, and (3) political trust, focusing on expectations toward democracy and political institutions. Each group discussion lasted approximately 90 minutes. Each session was facilitated by one moderator and accompanied by an observer who took detailed field notes.

Interview analysis followed grounded theory (GT) methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). All discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed alongside observer notes and photographic documentation. All materials were coded following GT procedures. GT involves iterative coding and category development based on inductive interpretations of data (Charmaz, 2015). A core feature is the simultaneous conduct of data collection and analysis, meaning that both processes inform one another throughout the study (Charmaz, 2015). This makes GT particularly suitable for exploratory qualitative research, where emerging insights can be incorporated iteratively. In this way, insights from individual conversations can be gradually integrated into higher-level conceptual categories. Data analysis followed a structured, multi-stage procedure beginning with open coding, which produced 227 initial codes across the four focus groups. These codes were continuously compared,

allowing emerging concepts to be refined through constant-comparison procedures. Following Rawhani's (2023) call for greater transparency through relational coding, coding decisions were documented in analytic memos to clarify conceptual linkages across focus groups (Charmaz, 2015, pp. 162–192).

Following axial coding procedures in grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, pp. 198–222), initial open codes were grouped into 38 subcategories, which were subsequently consolidated into eight analytic categories. This stage enabled the articulation of relationships between categories, such as those connecting perceived bias, communicative power and institutional detachment. Given the interpretive complexity of discursive-material analysis, coding decisions and emerging conceptual relations were systematically documented through analytic memos and iterative category refinement (Charmaz, 2015, pp. 162–192).

The process culminated in selective coding, integrating the analytic categories into three core dimensions: discursive constructions of legitimacy, material infrastructures of communication and democratic anchoring practices. These dimensions provide the conceptual foundation of the theoretical model presented in the findings. Theoretical saturation was assessed based on the absence of new conceptual categories in the final two focus groups, in line with recommendations to enhance transparency in qualitative concept development (Tucker, 2016). To strengthen qualitative rigor and reflexivity (Tracy, 2010, pp. 842–845), intercoder discussions were conducted after each coding round, and preliminary analytical syntheses were presented at disciplinary conferences to strengthen validity. Joint coding within the research team, along with the presentation and discussion of analytical approaches and interim results with external colleagues at professional conferences, served as additional measures to ensure the quality of the GT-based analysis.

Given the exploratory, qualitative character of this study, the findings are not intended to offer representative claims about the Czech population. Instead, the analysis follows a GT logic, which prioritizes conceptual development over statistical generalization. As methodological literature emphasises, GT and related qualitative approaches aim to generate theoretical insights from limited samples rather than to achieve empirical representativeness. Accordingly, the four focus groups provide a basis for identifying recurrent discursive-material patterns that can inform subsequent research, but they do not allow structural conclusions about Czech democracy.

3. Explaining Trust and Lack of Trust

The analysis of the four focus groups reveals a complex and ambivalent relationship between (lack of) trust, media, and democracy in the Czech Republic.

3.1. *Discursive Constructions of Trust: Narratives of Power, Corruption, and Legitimacy*

From a discursive-material perspective, trust and lack of trust in Czech media and democracy are closely linked to how citizens talk about and experience power. Many participants constructed mistrust through narratives combining symbolic meaning (e.g., blame, justification) with material reference points such as media ownership, institutional control and corruption scandals. A dominant theme concerned perceived bias and the concentration of political influence over media institutions. Participants framed television and public broadcasters as one-sided and too aligned with political elites, suggesting that the media system itself reproduces structural inequality. A lack of objectivity undermines trust in media and, by extension, in democratic institutions.

"The government has the media, they have the Senate, they have the president, the government has everything, they have all the power... When someone from the government releases the information, the media spreads it without investigating what's true. If I want to say something, no one lets me speak before elections. It's not balanced; it's all one side." (FG2, Participant 16)

The findings reflect an individualised perspective that draws strongly on traditional discourses of journalistic quality. Because journalistic routines condense, abbreviate or omit information, many participants perceive media coverage as incomplete. Mistrust often stems from perceived deficiencies such as errors or lack of depth. Some participants therefore verify information across multiple sources because a single source might not be as trustworthy. They generally expressed less trust in alternative media and greater confidence in public service outlets. Media are assessed primarily through perceived quality and ownership structures, including in digital environments. Typically, Participant 3 (FG1) says:

"(...) I have a few selected YouTubers who I know are reliable because I've checked their information. But I would expand on that by saying that every media outlet, including public media, has limited time to cover a topic. And I think they often don't cover topics in depth. So, I often look at foreign media because I feel you can get a more comprehensive view of the same issue from different perspectives. I also look for additional information in economic or scientific articles beyond what the media provides."

These statements reveal a discursive knot between political and media power. Citizens perceive collusion simultaneously as linguistic distortion (biased framing) and as a material condition (ownership, control). Similarly, misinformation and polarization were understood as structural consequences of the contemporary hybrid media system, in which technological infrastructures reinforce ideological fragmentation.

"Some people follow one group of politicians and believe only what they say. Others believe something else. Everyone lives in their own bubble... It's hard to know what's real anymore." (FG1, Participant 1)

Corruption scandals and perceived institutional injustices further intensified these perceptions. Participants described the judiciary and government as self-serving systems detached from everyday life, where material privilege and procedural opacity undermine democratic accountability. This institutional scepticism spills over into perceptions of democracy itself. When institutions are seen as corrupt or unjust, trust in democracy declines,

"They throw something out there, they don't think about it, and then they realize it's wrong a month later. They're somewhere else, detached from real life. How can I trust a system where politicians sleep through sessions and still get paid?" (FG3, Participant 26)

"When old lies get uncovered, or a politician takes a bribe, it really affects how people see democracy... How can you trust the system then?" (FG1, Participant 5)

Some respondents invoked the communist past as a comparative narrative, framing contemporary democracy through nostalgia for a period perceived as more predictable and materially secure. These discursive memories function as benchmarks for current mistrust, translating collective history into affective orientation.

"Back then, you didn't have to deal with all this noise. Now everything is chaotic, and I don't know what's real anymore." (FG3, Participant 24)

Within our analytical framework, these patterns represent a discursive-material assemblage of legitimacy – a dense knot of narratives, practices and infrastructures through which citizens interpret authority. Trust and mistrust thus appear as performative acts: ways of situating oneself within overlapping networks of discourse and power.

3.2. *Material Conditions: Access, Voice, and Inequality in Communicative Infrastructures*

The second analytical cluster examines how material infrastructures of communication such as technologies, access, literacy and social hierarchies shape the possibilities of democratic participation. While discourse frames meaning, materiality influences who can speak, be heard and meaningfully act within the democratic public sphere. To operationalize the material dimension of our discursive-material approach, we distinguish three analytically distinct yet interrelated forms of materiality.

First, technological materiality refers to the algorithmic architectures and platform affordances that structure information flows and shape the visibility of political and news content. Gillespie (2018, pp. 196–214) suggests that social-media infrastructures shape public attention in ways that are often opaque to users and uneven in their distribution of visibility Empirical research shows that algorithmic prioritization, engagement-ranking systems, and opaque recommender logics reconfigure gatekeeping functions and influence perceptions of media legitimacy (Hastuti et al., 2025). These dynamics were emphasised by some younger media users,

who rely heavily on platform-curated feeds and thus experience information environments shaped more by algorithmic optimization than editorial judgment.

Second, institutional materiality encompasses the organizational and regulatory frameworks that structure media production and distribution. In the Czech context, shifts in media ownership, particularly the concentration of key outlets within oligarchic or corporate conglomerates, affect editorial autonomy and public perceptions of independence. Current market analyses reveal ongoing consolidation processes and regulatory struggles around competition, transparency, and public-service funding, all of which materially influence media trust dynamics (Šanda, 2025).

Third, infrastructural materiality captures the broader communication ecology, including regional media availability, the role of digital news aggregators, and the structural conditions of access. In the Czech Republic, platforms such as *Seznam.cz* function as dominant gateways to news and significantly influence how citizens encounter and evaluate information. Recent assessments underscore how economic pressures, declining print circulation, and digital transition reshape the communicative landscape and reinforce dependencies on platform infrastructures for everyday news consumption. Together, these three forms of materiality empirically ground the material side of trust assemblages and demonstrate how citizens' perceptions of (mis)trust are embedded in technological, institutional, and infrastructural conditions that shape both the possibilities and limits of democratic communication (Štětka, 2025).

Limited media and political literacy emerged as a recurring factor undermining confidence in both media and democratic outcomes. Many participants criticised citizens for making uninformed decisions, voting impulsively or consuming news uncritically, linking such behaviour to weaknesses in media education and platform design.

> "I think democracy is good, but people don't understand what they're voting for. Some decide on the spot or because of TikTok or TV. It's taken too lightly. That's what bothers me the most." (FG4, Participant 38)

From an analytical point of view the ideal of the critical citizen, born out of the Enlightenment, is linked to the idea of taking a critical stance towards the state and existing institutions. Mistrust is therefore not negative per se but is often a helpful mechanism. However, the discussions reveal that mistrust in all its forms has given way to an attitude that resembles a rather superficial form of scepticism.

> "(…) (B)ecause the question was whether we trust democracy in the Czech Republic or the system. I feel that there are certain pressures to suppress it, so I don't trust that the media or certain representatives are heading in that direction. So, in that sense, I don't trust it, but I still trust that people can handle it in a way that doesn't allow certain pressures to crush them." (FG2, Participant 14)

Once mistrust is voiced, more extreme forms of media criticism emerge. For example, participant 28 (FG3) described media as 'a tool to control people':

> "So, I do feel those pressures from above, but I think there's a great responsibility on people to see how they react to them. And I also have the feeling that there's a lot of effort to create chaos through various topics to distract people from things that are important, like dealing with gender issues. I think it's something that's artificially introduced into society because where there's chaos, it's easier to govern."

Some participants expressed outright rejection of both media and politics.

> "I think there's no trust now for anyone. It seems like they're all just talking based on what they think when they wake up in the morning. That's how it seems to me. Sometimes I just read the headlines, and every day it's different. So, there can hardly be any trust. (...) The media exaggerates everything and scares people. It's always something: prices will rise, there will be war, and gasoline will be expensive. And I don't know, nothing positive." (Participant 26)

Participants' accounts show that generational and ideological divides further illustrate material inequalities in communicative power. Although older participants often referred to television as a primary source of information, several also described Facebook as central to their everyday media use. Likewise, younger participants did not uniformly reject journalism, but mostly inhabit algorithmically driven social-media spaces. This technological stratification produces fragmented realities that erode the shared democratic discourse which, as noted by the participants themselves, serves as a fundamental prerequisite for the cultivation of trust.

> "The older generation watches certain TV stations; the younger ones are on TikTok. Both are being influenced. We end up arguing about everything, and no one believes the same facts. It's like living in different realities." (FG4, Participant 31)

Participants also reported a growing sense of exclusion from political decision-making and communication processes. This sense of helplessness – the perception that one's voice "does not matter" – led many to disengagement (e.g., non-voting) and withdrawal from public discussion:

> "I don't like to talk about politics because it only leads to fights. Everyone has their opinion, and it's not worth getting upset. So, I just stay away from it all." (FG1, Participant 9)

Finally, some participants perceived freedom of speech as restricted or selectively enforced. Such accounts link discursive control ("what can be said") to infrastructural power ("who controls the channels of saying") and correlate strongly with distrust.

> "Freedom of speech simply doesn't exist anymore. If you cross a certain line, they stop you. Even on TV or social media, if you say the wrong thing, it disappears." (FG3, Participant 23)

This cluster illustrates how materiality is constitutive of mistrust. Access, literacy and regulation co-produce perceptions of fairness and voice. In our analysis, mistrust

arises not merely from discourse but from experienced asymmetries in communicative capacity – the material infrastructures of democracy themselves become objects of scepticism.

3.3. *Democratic Anchors and Residual Trust: Assemblages of Practice and Experience*

Despite widespread scepticism, the focus groups revealed enduring nodes of trust rooted in tangible democratic practices and everyday experiences. These anchors, namely elections, freedom of movement, and European integration, illustrate how trust can materially and discursively be enacted through everyday participation.

Many respondents viewed elections as imperfect yet essential mechanisms of democratic agency and control. Although outcomes or voting behaviour were often contested (see 4.2), the act of voting itself functioned as a material reaffirmation of democratic principles.

"Elections are the foundation. Even if I don't like the outcome, I still believe in the principle. It's my free choice, and that's what matters." (FG4, Participant 35)

Similarly, freedom of travel and EU membership were described as experiential materializations of democracy. These freedoms contrasted with memories of restricted mobility under communism and symbolized the tangible benefits of democratic belonging.

"When I can travel freely, that increases my trust in democracy. It wasn't like this before. I remember standing in lines for bananas. So despite everything, I still think this system is better." (FG3, Participant 26)

However, these anchors coexist with the destabilizing effects of misinformation and polarization. Participants described an information environment that simultaneously enables and undermines trust. This paradox reflects a form of dialectic: democracy's legitimacy depends on the same media technologies that also complicate it. Thus, residual trust persists not as blind faith but as embodied practice, expressed through voting, travelling and everyday communicative encounters, through which democratic ideals take material form. These everyday democratic experiences appeared to stabilize at least minimal forms of trust and can therefore be understood as stabilizing assemblages.

3.4. *Mechanisms of Mistrust, Distrust, and Selective Re-Trust*

We can identify three mechanisms that explain how participants move from situational mistrust to generalized distrust, and under which conditions trust can be partially re-anchored. First, perceived collusion functions as an entry mechanism into mistrust. Participants repeatedly described media-political entanglements, ownership influence, and editorial bias as indicators of structural imbalance. These discursive interpretations constitute forms of situational mistrust: citizens question reliability without fully abandoning the possibility of repair. This aligns with studies showing

that perceived political alignment or partisanship in news coverage reduces trust and heightens critical distance toward mainstream outlets (Štětka, 2025).

Second, material reinforcement stabilises mistrust and transforms it into generalized distrust. Algorithmic curation systems reconfigure gatekeeping, prioritise engagement-driven content and often amplify polarized narratives (Hastuti et al., 2025). Research on social-media platforms suggests that algorithmic filtering and selective exposure can contribute to fragmented information environments and ideological reinforcement (Bakshy et al., 2015, pp. 1130f.). Such platforms decrease transparency and produce fragmented information environments that confirm pre-existing assumptions, thereby entrenching distrust. In the Czech context, widespread reliance on digital news aggregators further entrenches this uneven distribution of information, reinforcing perceptions that "you can't trust anyone anymore."

Third, anchoring practices provide a partial counterforce. Everyday democratic experiences, like elections or public-service encounters, offer reference points where trust can be selectively re-established. These experiences are materially grounded and discursively reaffirmed, enabling citizens to maintain a sense of minimal legitimacy even in environments characterised by structural skepticism. This mechanism helps explain why participants simultaneously express deep frustration with media and political institutions yet continue to value certain democratic rituals as meaningful.

These mechanisms help to outline a relationship: discursive interpretations initiate mistrust, material infrastructures stabilize distrust, and democratic practices condition selective re-trust. This structuring clarifies how trust is continually reshaped through the interplay of meaning, materiality, and practice. But the proposed mechanisms should not be understood as a linear model applicable to all citizens. In several discussions, different forms of mistrust overlapped or remained contradictory.

3.5. *Comparative Patterns Across Generations, Regions, and Socio-Political Orientations*

A comparative reading of the data reveals systematic divergences in how trust and mistrust are constructed across demographic and socio-political groups. First, generational differences are pronounced. Some older participants relied more strongly on television and radio, while others explicitly identified Facebook as their primary source of information. These patterns align with recent findings (Štětka, 2025). By contrast, some younger participants, who are often immersed in algorithmic feeds on platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, experience a fragmented information environment shaped by low transparency and engagement-based ranking. Research on algorithm literacy suggests substantial variability in how younger versus older users understand algorithmic infrastructures, reinforcing generational differences in trust and skepticism (Gagrčin et al., 2024).

Second, territorial differences reflect disparities in political distance and communicative access. Participants from Olomouc and surrounding rural areas consistently reported a heightened sense of marginalization and limited influence on

political decision-making, compared to participants from the capital of Prague. These perceptions align with broader evidence on uneven regional media infrastructures and the dominance of centralized media markets in the Czech Republic, which tend to privilege urban audiences and exacerbate territorial asymmetries in voice and representation. Regional disparities in media availability and economic conditions also shape different experiences of democratic legitimacy and media trust (Šanda, 2025).

Third, socio-political differences structure trust orientations in distinctive ways. Liberal-oriented participants emphasized the importance of media independence, journalistic professionalism and regulatory safeguards. By contrast, politically distrustful or populist-leaning participants relied more heavily on narratives of elite collusion and system-wide manipulation. Recent findings show that individuals who distrust political institutions but maintain trust in journalists are less prone to conspiracy thinking, whereas those who distrust both tend to perceive the entire information environment as illegitimate (Čejková & Macková, 2025). These socio-political differences help explain why some participants shift quickly from mistrust to generalized distrust, while others maintain selective trust repertoires anchored in specific institutions or communicative practices.

These comparative patterns demonstrate that trust dynamics are unevenly distributed across social groups. Generational, territorial, and ideological cleavages intersect with discursive interpretations and material infrastructures, shaping distinct trust trajectories within the Czech information environment.

4. Media Pluralism, Ownership, and the Reconfiguration of Trust in the Czech Information Environment

Comparative assessments of media systems confirm that today the Czech Republic possesses one of the most pluralistic and open media landscapes among post-communist countries. Freedom House's *Nations in Transit* report consistently rates the Czech media environment as comparatively free and diverse, emphasising relatively strong safeguards for editorial independence and democratic oversight (Freedom House, 2023). The country hosts numerous independent online media outlets and retains a strong tradition of investigative journalism. Nevertheless, concentration in traditional media remains a significant issue: a few large publishing groups, owned by wealthy business elite, dominate the newspaper market, and the leading private television station (*TV Nova)* belongs to an oligarchic conglomerate. These ownership structures fuel mistrust by reinforcing perceptions that economic or political interests may influence reporting. Therefore, parts of the public feel compelled to read media reports 'between the lines', searching for hidden agendas. Under such circumstances, it becomes increasingly difficult for the media to be accepted as neutral mediators within democratic communication.

The impact of disinformation is also indirectly reflected in our study. A significant proportion of the interviewees, across different age and socio-economic groups, endorsed 'alternative' narratives and expressed substantial mistrust toward mainstream media institutions. For example, conspiracy theories regarding vaccination and migration gained resonance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants who regularly encounter or consume false information tend to exhibit even lower levels of trust in traditional media sources. In the Czech Republic, disinformation websites and chain emails, particularly influential among older audiences, play a visible role. For example, before the 2018 Czech presidential election, substantial volumes of false information circulated to discredit pro-Western candidates. Such dynamics reinforce the belief among some citizens that 'you can't trust anyone anymore', neither politicians nor the media.

Traditional media occupy an ambivalent position: they function simultaneously as mediators of trust, scrutinizing political institutions to ensure accountability, and as objects of trust, whose institutional legitimacy is contingent upon audience perception. According to participants, this traditional relationship has fundamentally changed in the case of digital platforms. The use of online platforms and news aggregators has become part of everyday media life for almost all respondents. Representative of many, Participant 29 sketches his/her media habit:

"I do the same; I open *Seznam* (*Czech news aggregator*), scan the headlines, and if something catches my eye, I click on it. Then I form my own opinion. If I remember something from TV and then see it on *Seznam* and it matches, I think it might be relevant, but there are differences in how the news is interpreted."

Participants expressed scepticism toward platforms that was comparable to, or even greater than, their scepticism toward traditional media.

"I think social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok should be completely free of this (political information). It's crazy to see how people are goofing around with political topics on those platforms, and I don't think it belongs there. It has a huge influence on people, but it's more about popularity than forming opinions. And that's just... it shouldn't be there, in my opinion." (FG 1, Participant 8)

Respondents also found it more difficult to assess the structure and implications of digital information ecologies.

"You can trust private media, though the question is whether you can really call them media. These are usually people who do it on their own, broadcasting on YouTube or on Facebook. Sometimes they get a donation, and that's how they operate, but they're mostly enthusiasts who do reporting and really search for information or conduct interviews with various people. So, you can trust them." (Participant 18)

Influencers appear in the data as trust substitutes rather than trust authorities, embodying a personalised and performative mode of credibility that contrasts with institutional journalism. Their visibility on social media and their ability to set or

reinforce topics position them as important actors in public debate. This development was especially emphasised by younger interviewees.

"I think it's related to influencing. There were two cases recently where it might have influenced the elections. One was when Kovy (*Czech YouTuber*) released some videos, and then there was Mikýř (*Czech YouTuber*) – if anyone follows him – where it could have influenced things. And then there's Dominik Feri (*Czech ex-politician*), who probably started this. They increased voter turnout among young people, and probably also directed people on who to vote for and who not to vote for. So, yes. I agree that in the future, social media will tip the scales. Political debates on TV, where everyone argues and shouts over each other, won't be as important; it will all shift to social media." (Participant 37)

The interviews show that high levels of formal media pluralism do not translate into stable institutional trust. Instead, trust is reconfigured across platforms, actors, and practices, producing fragmented but functionally adaptive trust repertoires within the Czech information environment.

Conclusion: What (Lack of) Trust reveals about Democracy

Research on socio-technical trust emphasizes distinguishing between empirical assessments of how communication functions and normative claims about how democratic systems should function (Lahusen et al., 2024). To avoid normative overreach, the conclusion clarifies that the reflections offered here derive analytically from the discursive-material mechanisms identified throughout the study: discursive attributions of collusion, material reinforcement through infrastructural asymmetries, and anchoring practices that stabilize selective forms of trust. These elements jointly shape the dynamics through which trust is reproduced or eroded in the Czech information environment. Consequently, measures such as enhancing journalistic transparency or addressing algorithmic opacity are presented here not as prescriptive recommendations, but as analytic implications derived from the communicative structures documented in the data.

This analysis highlights several recurring tensions in how trust in media and democracy is articulated in the Czech context. Mistrust is closely tied to how citizens interpret the relationship between media and political power. Participants consistently described perceived bias, incomplete coverage and ownership concentration as indicators that media organisations operate too closely to political or economic actors. These assessments were grounded in concrete reference points such as corruption scandals, perceived institutional detachment, and everyday encounters with political communication. In this sense, mistrust emerges as a discursive-material construction shaped simultaneously by narratives of collusion and by structural features of the media system that citizens perceive as problematic.

The analysis of material conditions demonstrates that mistrust is also produced through inequalities in access, literacy and communicative capacity. Limited media

and political literacy, generational differences in platform use and the fragmentation of information environments contribute to citizens experiencing democratic communication as uneven and difficult to navigate. Feelings of exclusion from political decision-making and the perception that one's voice carries little weight reinforce scepticism. Under such conditions, mistrust often shifts from situational evaluations to more generalised doubt about media and politics.

The findings indicate that this scepticism coexists with identifiable democratic anchors. Elections, freedom of movement and European integration continue to function as meaningful reference points through which participants affirm a basic attachment to democratic principles. Public service media also remain comparatively trusted, even among respondents who express scepticism toward commercial outlets or political institutions. These anchors illustrate that trust has not disappeared; it is redistributed across practices and institutions.

While the Czech media system is comparatively pluralistic, ownership concentration in key sectors and the spread of disinformation continue to fuel doubts about independence and reliability. Participants respond to these conditions by forming selective trust repertoires that combine public service media with foreign outlets, online platforms, independent creators, or influencers. This points to a reconfiguration of trust in which institutional authority is weakened and attention shifts toward individual communicators or micro-sources, particularly within digital environments. Participants articulated expectations regarding conditions under which trust could be stabilized. Several approaches were mentioned: Media organisations should work more transparently, acknowledge mistakes and better explain their working methods. Political actors should reduce polarising rhetoric and refrain from attacking independent media. Disinformation should be addressed through fact-checking, platform regulation and media literacy initiatives. Citizens' initiatives should strengthen media diversity by supporting legal restrictions on conflicts of interest and promoting pluralistic, high-quality media offerings.

Digital platforms and news aggregators such as *Seznam* have become primary gateways to news, reshaping when, how and whom people trust. Whether media trust will decline or be reconfigured in the long term depends on platform transparency, the consistency of source disclosure by media outlets and the public's ability to understand the digitalisation of news environment. Equally notable is what was not addressed: issues such as sustainability and environment concerns were largely side-lined amid the perceived polycrisis. Respondents were deeply preoccupied with perceived present-day threats to media and democracy, causing long-term challenges and potential solutions to recede into the background.

While this study identifies broader patterns in how trust and mistrust are constructed, these observations must be understood as exploratory. The limited sample size does not allow for generalizations to the Czech population. Instead, the findings serve as analytically grounded hypotheses rather than population-level assessments. Comparative evidence from larger surveys, such as the 2025 Reuters

Institute report (Štětka, 2025), provides valuable contextual background but does not statistically validate our qualitative data. Future research combining qualitative depth with representative sampling would therefore be necessary to examine the structural scope of these dynamics.

Funding and Acknowledgements

This text is part of the MeDeMAP project, which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation action under Grant Agreement No. 101094984.

We are deeply grateful to Nico Carpentier for his close collaboration, methodological guidance, and sustained intellectual support throughout this empirical project.

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