

FULL PAPER

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in journalistic communication on COVID-19**

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COVID-19-Skeptiker*innen: Die Rolle moralischer Bewertungen
in Bezug auf Vertrauen und Misstrauen in journalistische
Kommunikation zu COVID-19**

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COVID-19 sceptics' attitudes and expectations toward the media: Understanding the role of moral judgements on trust and distrust in journalistic communication on COVID-19

Medieneinstellungen und -erwartungen von COVID-19-Skeptiker*innen: Die Rolle moralischer Bewertungen in Bezug auf Vertrauen und Misstrauen in journalistische Kommunikation zu COVID-19

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Abstract: During the COVID-19 pandemic, the German population has become polarised and distrust in social institutions has grown. Despite generally high levels of trust in science, we have witnessed the emergence of science and COVID-19 sceptics, who are critical of widely accepted scientific knowledge about COVID-19 health risks, treatment and vaccines. While journalistic information on scientific topics is assumed to be central to knowledge formation, little is known thus far about the use of media and the formation of COVID-19 sceptics' attitudes. This exploratory interview study therefore investigated the trust and distrust expressed by German COVID-19 sceptics regarding journalistic information on COVID-19. Results indicate that COVID-19 sceptics perceive themselves as critical, responsible media users and informed recipients. They increasingly distrust journalistic science coverage due to what they view as moral failures in journalism; as a result, they prefer alternative media that they believe to be morally superior.

Keywords: COVID-19, science communication, media scepticism, media trust, moral judgements.

Zusammenfassung: Während der COVID-19 Pandemie konnte in der deutschen Bevölkerung eine Polarisierung sowie ein gestiegenes Misstrauen in soziale Institutionen beobachtet werden. Obwohl das Vertrauen in Wissenschaft im Allgemeinen hoch ist, hat sich eine Gruppe von Wissenschafts- und COVID-19-Skeptiker*innen gebildet, die allgemein anerkannten wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnissen im Kontext der Pandemie kritisch gegenübersteht. Während journalistische Informationen als zentral für die Wissensbildung gelten, ist bisher wenig über die Mediennutzung und -bewertung durch COVID-19-Skeptiker*innen bekannt. Diese explorative Interviewstudie untersucht daher das Vertrauen und Misstrauen deutscher COVID-19 Skeptiker*innen in journalistische Informationen zur Corona-Pandemie. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass sich COVID-19 Skeptiker*innen als kritische, verantwortungsbewusste Mediennutzende sowie informierte Rezipierende wahrnehmen. Dabei wächst ihr Misstrauen gegenüber der journalistischen Wissenschaftsberichterstattung –

Journalismus allgemein wird zunehmend als moralisch defizitär wahrgenommen. Die Befragten präferieren alternative Medien, die sie als moralisch überlegen bewerteten.

Schlagwörter: COVID-19, Wissenschaftskommunikation, Medienskepsis, Medienvertrauen, moralische Beurteilung.

1. Introduction

It is challenging to characterise citizens' trust in the media and science during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analyses such as the "Digital News Report 2020" by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism have found that a majority (83%) of the worldwide population trusts scientists and doctors on the information related to COVID-19, and approximately 75 percent of the international respondents trust national or global health organisations (Newman et al., 2020, p. 12). There is furthermore a generally low level of trust in media around the globe, with only 44 percent of respondents reporting that they trust the media news overall; notably, this is a global average, and percentages vary in different countries (e.g., USA: 26%, Germany: 50%, Finland: 69%; Newman et al., 2022, p. 9). In the German context, surveys have reported a decreasing number (2020: 27%, 2021: 21%, 2022: 13%) of people who trust journalistic statements on COVID-19 (Wissenschaft im Dialog, 2022, 2021, 2020) and a certain polarisation within the German population between those who trust the media and those who do not (Schultz et al., 2020) – which however has decreased in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic (Jakobs et al., 2021). Crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, thus both stress the relevance of the media as trustworthy information intermediary but also lead to a critical questioning and scepticism against the media in parts of the population.

Strikingly, protests in several countries related to pandemic restrictions reveal that protesters often conflate their criticism of government actions with criticism of the media and of science (Reisin, 2021). Moreover, in Germany, the mainstream media (MSM) are often referred to as "Lügenpresse," which translates to "lying press," a political buzzword expressing distrust toward allegedly manipulative journalistic media (Fromm & Ulrich, 2021). These negative views of the MSM could plausibly influence protesters' perception of and trust in scientific findings related to COVID-19, scientists and scientific institutions.

This is potentially problematic as democratic societies rely on deliberative communication and basic levels of trust in public communication and media institutions (Schielicke et al., 2014). Trustworthy media outlets affect political discourse, enable the formation of political opinions, and provide essential information that allows individuals to make informed decisions (Tsftati & Cohen, 2005). Trust in the media is a societally relevant topic because media rely on a certain level of trust to fulfil their social task of informing the public – high levels of mistrust or even cynicism towards the media can thus have far-reaching consequences (Blöbaum, 2022). At the same time, very high levels of trust (i.e., overreliance, blind trust) in the media have to be seen as equally problematic, as this would be accompanied by a lack of critical vigilance (Quiring et al., 2021). From the per-

spective of normative democratic theory, a trustful, but nevertheless sceptical audience seems particularly desirable.

The phenomenon of media scepticism is not new and is an established research topic in communication studies (e.g., Blöbaum et al., 2020; Quiring et al., 2021). We define sceptics as recipients with a critical, vigilant attitude towards the media – which however is not to be equated with pronounced distrust (Blöbaum et al., 2020; Quiring et al., 2021). Research often focuses on recipients' media use, expectations related to quality and performance evaluations of media coverage moderated by expectations of and experiences with the media (for an overview, see Fawzi et al., 2021). Connections have also been noted between experiences with media coverage of crises and resultant media criticism (Herrmann & Wiafe, 2020).

While trust in science and science-related topics is generally high in Germany (Newman et al., 2020; Wissenschaft im Dialog, 2022), a segment of the population displays rather critical attitudes toward journalistic communication about science and scientific research (Eberl et al., 2021; Mede & Schäfer, 2020; Rutjens et al., 2022). This behaviour can have far-reaching consequences: Studies show that COVID-19 scepticism is related to vaccination behaviour as well as compliance with political guidelines and preventive behavioural measures regarding the pandemic (Gehrau et al., 2021; Latkin et al., 2022; Rothmund et al., 2022). Little is known about this segment's media-related behaviour, expectations of quality, assessment of the media and trust relationships with established MSM outlets, alternative media sources, and various social media platforms. That is why we contribute to this research gap by exploring the media use and quality expectations of German COVID-19 sceptics as a subgroup of science sceptics (Rutjens et al., 2021). Latkin et al. (2022) define COVID-19 scepticism as “the denial of the seriousness of the illness and the perception that the pandemic is overblown or a hoax” (p. 7918). We address two research questions and relate the answers to issues of trust and distrust:

RQ1: *How do German COVID-19 sceptics inform themselves about scientific issues related to the disease?*

RQ2: *What are German COVID-19 sceptics' attitudes and expectations toward journalistic communication on the disease?*

In the present study, twelve semi-standardised interviews with German COVID-19 sceptics were analysed using research categories derived from theory to better understand the role of science-related media communication as it relates to the distrust expressed by COVID-19 sceptics. The results indicate that German COVID-19 sceptics do not view themselves as science sceptics, but as critical, responsible media users and informed recipients of scientific information conveyed by the media. They have grown increasingly distrustful of media coverage of COVID-19 due to what they perceive as moral failures of journalism in the areas of objectivity, deliberation, and autonomy. In accordance, COVID-19 sceptics turn toward alternative media, which they considered to be morally superior.

2. Theory and state of research

The importance of trust in various areas of life has already been emphasised in many papers and studies (for an overview see Engelke, 2018). Trust is a basic mechanism that is relevant for individuals, organizations and societies (Luhmann, 1968). In times of crisis, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for trust becomes obvious: Politics need to be trusted by citizens to be able to perform crisis management and produce socially accepted and binding decisions; scientists need to be trusted to generate valid, reproducible knowledge and citizens need to trust the media to be provided with accurate information about current events and developments (Baum & Haberl, 2020; Schielicke et al., 2014). It should be noted, however, that the media are more than simply objects and receivers of trust. Kohring (2004) referred to the media as intermediaries of trust, because of their vital role in the formation and mediation of trust: distrustful, sceptical attitudes toward the media and specific media coverage affect the formation of trust and distrust toward other social systems – in this case, science. Hereby, established journalistic media and alternative media have to be considered.

In the present study, we differentiate between various channels and sources of information on the COVID-19 pandemic, following the distinction suggested by Hetzel et al. (2022): They differentiate between media channels in the sense of platforms on which information is distributed, such as social media platforms, and media sources, including ‘mainstream’ journalistic media, alternative media and what they call “alternative influencers” (p. 512).

During the COVID19-pandemic, individuals took on important roles in the public debate on the crisis, too. In Germany, for example Sucharit Bhakdi (a former professor of medical microbiology) and Wolfgang Wodarg (a specialist in internal medicine, social medicine, and environmental health) publicly argued against the COVID19-politics of the government (Frei & Nachtwey, 2021).

2.1 Trust in and through media

Even though there are diverse perspectives and no universal definition of trust in institutions, studies on this phenomenon have yielded the following five key criteria to describe the concept of trust (cf. Blöbaum et al., 2020):

- 1) Trust is relational and can be characterised as a relationship between a trustor – in this case, the recipients – and a trustee who is (or is not) trusted – in this case, the media (Jakob, 2012).
- 2) Trust reduces social complexities by generalising expectations in accordance with previous experience and enables action by bridging knowledge gaps (Luhmann, 1968; Simmel, 1908). Trust in the media enables action by providing information that recipients could not obtain otherwise (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005).
- 3) Trust is based on the past and directed towards the future. While trust is a mechanism that reduces complexity and enables future actions, this is only possible because of past experiences with the trustee (Hardin, 2002). Trust in the media therefore is highly dependent on past media interactions and experiences with journalistic coverage (Jakobs, 2018).

- 4) Trust is founded on expectations (Barber, 1983). In every trust relationship, the trustor cultivates certain expectations of the trustee and the task performed by the trustee (Hardin, 2002; Luhmann, 1968). These expectations, which are contingent on both the trustor and trustee as well as the history of the trust relationship (Fischer, 2016), determine the trustee's perceived level of trustworthiness; trustors' perceptions of trustworthiness rise and fall according to the fulfilment of their expectations by the trustee (Chen et al., 2011; Mayer et al., 1995). Expectations of journalism are often formulated and evaluated according to quality standards, which have a decisive effect on future media content (Fawzi & Obermaier, 2019; Uth, 2021, 2022).
- 5) Trust is a process involving risk and uncertainty (Das & Teng, 2004). Because it is impossible for a trustor to control a trustee, trust necessarily entails the risk that the trustor's expectations could be disappointed (Das & Teng, 2004; Mayer et al., 1995). This risk is especially evident with the media, since they tend to report on events outside of the typical viewer's realm and it is difficult to verify whether this information is incomplete, distorted or erroneous (Grosser, 2016). Recipients enter a risk whenever they use information stemming from media reporting, i.e., when storing, processing, or using information for future conversations, opinions, or decisions (Prochazka, 2020). Relying on media information can imply varying risks – ranging from using wrong information in conversations with others up to basing important decisions on faulty information (Strömbäck et al., 2020).
- 6) The media are not only dependent on trust and trustees themselves, but also intermediaries of trust: As they convey information on other social systems, they contribute to building trust – or distrust – in these systems (Blöbaum, 2014; Kohring, 2004). If recipients have high trust in the media, this can build and reinforce trust in the institutions and actors they positively report on – however, if the media themselves are not trusted, this can also affect trust in the actors and institutions they report on negatively (Blöbaum, 2022). The trust relationship with the media thus influences how we judge and whether we trust the actors and institutions they cover – and the perceived trustworthiness of the media can spread out to other trustees.

Distrust and scepticism in and through media

In trust research, the relationship between trust and distrust is not clearly defined, and there are several theoretical perspectives on how the constructs are related. Distrust in the media is not seen as an antithesis to trust, but rather as a functional equivalent (Luhmann, 1968). Distrust can be defined as “the unwillingness of the distrustor to engage in an action based on negative expectations regarding the distrustee” (Engelke et al., 2019, p. 68).

It should be noted that low trust is not the same as distrust (Engelke, 2018; Ullmann-Margalit, 2004) – the main reason being that both concepts are preceded by different antecedents (Engelke et al., 2019). Furthermore, there are other states between trust and distrust that function as equivalents (Luhmann, 1968), such as indifference towards the media or media scepticism, which is located bet-

ween trust and distrust. There are several definitions for the phenomenon of media scepticism, and most connote a critical, negative, or even cynical attitude toward the media (Blöbaum et al., 2020; Tsfati, 2003). In this paper, we will apply the definition proposed by Blöbaum et al. (2020), which describes scepticism as a distanced, vigilant attitude toward an object without necessarily being accompanied by pronounced distrust. In line with the understanding of Quiring et al. (2021), scepticism can thus be regarded as constructive for society: “Scepticism, at its core, is a critical attitude that includes an awareness of the flaws of news reporting, but also a tolerance toward these flaws as long as they remain exceptions” (p. 3499). Instead of being viewed as dysfunctional, scepticism and the accompanying critical attitudes are considered functional for democratic discourse (Fisher, 2016). Scepticism is therefore regarded as a characteristic of democratic societies, and a healthy amount of scepticism is to be preferred over blind trust in media coverage and scientific findings (Blöbaum et al., 2020; Reinemann et al., 2017). We thus define media sceptics as recipients with a critical, vigilant attitude towards the media – which however is not to be equated with pronounced distrust (Blöbaum et al., 2020; Quiring et al., 2021).

Media use and quality expectations as influencing factors

Various factors influence the trust-distrust relationship between the trustor and the trustee. Fawzi et al. (2021) differ between social, political and media characteristics on both the individual and societal level. As several studies show, besides political attitudes, foremost media-related characteristics are influential when it comes to how trust is built (e.g., Obermaier, 2020; Prochazka, 2020). Out of these media-related characteristics, two variables emerged as particularly relevant in the present research: Media use and the perceived fulfilment of media-related expectations (mostly regarding journalistic quality, see Obermaier, 2020; Prochazka, 2020).

2.2 Media use, trust, scepticism, and distrust

Media use is a commonly cited factor when discussing trust in and through media (Schielicke et al., 2014; Strömbäck et al., 2020). In general, it is not exactly clear whether media use influences media trust or if the converse is true. Because trust is dependent upon past experiences with the trustee, it is reasonable to believe that media use influences the level of trust (Blöbaum, 2016; Jakob, 2012). However, it is equally plausible that recipients tend to use media they already trust (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003) because of their specific needs and expectations (Blöbaum et al., 2020). As such, the relationship between media use and media trust can be viewed as a self-reinforcing circle. Several studies have shown the linkage between media use and media trust (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Schranz et al., 2018). Notably, lower levels of trust in established media outlets tend to be correlated with higher usage rates of alternative media sources (Jakob et al., 2017; Tsfati, 2010). This influence tends to be minimal, though, and even individuals who do not trust traditional media use these sources at times

(Schultz et al., 2017; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). A first longitudinal study by Hopmann et al. (2015) was able to show that the consumption of specific media was followed by an increase of trust in these media, suggesting that it is indeed media usage and the experiences made during that which influence trust in the media. On the other hand, gathering news from social and alternative media is positively related to media distrust, because recipients believe these sources offer anti-mainstream information, they would be unable to find in traditional media and often critique established media outlets (Bailey et al., 2007; Fletcher & Park, 2017; Jakob et al., 2017; Tsfati, 2010). This, in turn, reaffirms and strengthens existing distrust and perpetuates the shift away from traditional media (Thorbjørnsrud & Figschou, 2020). In this way, the consequence of a distrusting attitude can be “selective exposure” (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985), wherein media conforming to existing attitudes are increasingly drawn upon to avoid information that deviates from one’s opinions, causing a reinforcing spiral into ever-higher levels of media distrust and lower usage (Mede et al., 2020).

Mede et al. (2020) also investigated media performance and concluded that media scepticism is primarily the result of experiencing actual or perceived journalistic failures, such as a lack of objectivity, comprehensibility, relevance and – most importantly – diversity. If recipients are being disappointed repeatedly, trust in the media turns to distrust and in extreme cases even to hostility or cynicism. We can thus assume that key experiences with specific media sources promote the formation of scepticism and a critical vigilance when encountering media information (Blöbaum et al., 2020).

After considering the reinforcing, circular nature of trust, distrust, and media use on one hand, and the potential role of media offerings as intermediaries of (dis-)trust in the context of COVID-19 sceptics on the other hand, the first research question this study asks is:

How do German COVID-19 sceptics inform themselves about scientific issues related to the disease? (RQ1)

2.3 Quality expectations, trust, scepticism, and distrust

Trust relationships are based on the trustor’s expectations of the trustee and their performance. The perception of trustworthiness is contingent on whether the trustee fulfils these expectations (Fawzi & Obermaier, 2019). Expectations related to societal systems – in this case, the media system – are determined according to the system’s function within society. According to Grosser (2016, p. 1038), “The perceived trustworthiness of a system depends on the extent to which the trustor perceives characteristics that legitimise his or her expectations regarding the system’s correct functioning as being fulfilled.” This implies that if recipients perceive that the media fulfil their task of selecting and reporting current events in an appropriate manner, they will be trusted. The performance of the media is often operationalised through the concept of quality (e.g., Obermaier, 2020; Prochazka, 2020). Similar to the formation of expectations, quality-related criteria applied to

journalism are also derived from its societal function (Fawzi & Obermaier, 2019; Grosser, 2016; Urban & Schweiger, 2014).

In addition to this functional-systemic view, the normative democracy-oriented perspective considers quality criteria rooted in pluralistic-democratic values such as transparency, content accuracy and diversity (Voigt, 2016). Just as the perceived quality of journalistic output is influenced by its societal function, characteristics associated with quality – such as balance, relevance, timeliness, novelty, correctness, and completeness – are indicative of the trustworthiness of journalistic content (Blöbaum, 2016; Grosser, 2016; Obermaier, 2020; Prochazka, 2020; Schielicke et al., 2014).

Because recipients' attitudes and expectations toward specific media content can affect their trust or distrust, the second research question is:

What are German COVID-19 sceptics' attitudes and expectations toward journalistic communication on the disease? (RQ2)

3. Method

In the present study, semi-standardised interviews with COVID-19 sceptics were conducted to fully understand their media use, media-related attitudes and quality expectations and the role of these factors in building trust and distrust in journalistic communication on the disease. Participants were recruited via posts in 23 German-language Facebook groups for COVID-19 sceptics; these groups included “Corona Madness”, “We-don't-believe-in-the-Corona-Lie – The Original,” and “Corona Rebels” (Note: These are English translations of the original German group names). Even though recruitment has been challenging (ten facebook groups declined access), we have been able to conduct twelve interviews with COVID-19 sceptics via Zoom between September 2020 and November 2020. The interview guidelines operationalised the analytical categories described above: media use, attitude toward journalistic communication on COVID-19 and trust or distrust of various forms of media.

The interview questions and follow-up queries aimed to explore various aspects of each category and ensure comparability among the interviews (Helfferich, 2019; Loosen, 2016). Even though the interviews were structured according to specific guidelines, we agreed on a flexible format in which interview questions could be skipped, varied, and rearranged according to respondents' answers and the course of each interview. Table 1 delineates the context and aims of the analytical categories and provides sample questions.

The two first authors of this study conducted the interviews in tandem to ensure proper control and facilitate a higher level of attention between the interviewees and the interviewers (Loosen, 2016). The interviews were conducted in German and recorded, resulting in a total of 505 minutes of audio. The recordings were then transcribed, the transcripts were edited to improve readability, and excerpts quoted in this text were translated into English.

Table 1. Analytical categories, rationale for each category and sample questions

Categories	Context	Aim	Sample questions
Media use	Media use illustrates experiences that influenced respondents.	To catalogue the media repertoires of COVID-19 sceptics.	Other than Facebook groups, what media sources do you use to learn COVID-19 information?
Attitude toward journalistic communication on COVID-19	Perceptions and evaluations of journalistic communication on COVID-19 is associated with quality expectations.	To explore the judgments and quality expectations of COVID-19 sceptics.	What are characteristics of ideal journalistic communication on scientific topics? Does current COVID-19 reporting fulfil these criteria? Why or why not?
Trust or distrust in media	Trust and distrust in media information is linked to media use and expectations related to quality.	To fully understand COVID-19 sceptics' trust and distrust in journalistic communication on COVID-19.	Are there media outlets more trustworthy than others? Which criteria determine trustworthiness? What experiences affected your trust in journalistic communication on COVID-19?

The same two authors thematically coded and analysed the transcripts by structuring the data according to the qualitative content analysis method – with the aim of both summarizing and structuring the content given in the interviews (Mayring, 2015, 2016). Data analysis was conducted via the open-access web application QCAmap and included both deductive and inductive approaches (Mayring, 2015; Reichertz, 2014). Deductive logic was applied to identify relevant citations in the interview transcripts in accordance with the listed categories, and relevant text passages were then inductively interpreted (Schreier, 2014). Finally, the authors discussed the results to ensure consistency of interpretations.

4. Results

It should be initially noted that none of the respondents viewed themselves as science or COVID-19 sceptics; rather, they considered themselves to be critically thinking, responsible media users. When asked to reflect on their media behaviour, most of the participants considered themselves media-literate and capable of accurately assessing media content due to what they call an “inner compass.” The respondents did stress that they preferred information backed up by scientific findings, however, this did not include scientific findings and experts presented by the established media. Some drew a sharp distinction between their own media use and that of people who primarily used, believed, and trusted MSM sources. Respondents were harshly critical of this behaviour, describing it as being naive: “A lot of media consumers just swallow that [media information] and make it

their opinion without question.” In contrast, most participants considered their own media use as informed, literate, and comprehensive.

4.1 How do German COVID-19 sceptics inform themselves about scientific issues related to the disease? (RQ1)

When asked to describe changes to their media use during the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the respondents stated that they used media to a significantly greater degree now, compared to before the pandemic. The respondents rated the pandemic as an important topic with immediate consequences affecting their lives, which intensified their perceived need for information and increased their rates of media usage in order “to be able to deal with Corona [and to] classify it for myself.” They reportedly used a wide range of media to clarify contradictory media statements and to understand the full and proper context of the pandemic so they could objectively form their own opinions. The interviewees also reported feeling compelled to compare information from various media outlets to gain a comprehensive overview and evaluate specific media coverage. This could be related to the respondents’ general distrust toward established media and scepticism toward journalistic information about COVID-19: Most of the interviewees reported that they had developed antipathy and distrust toward established journalistic media because of the outlets’ presentation of COVID-19-related facts that contradicted the interviewees’ own understanding of scientific evidence and their general perspective on the pandemic and effectiveness of countermeasures. While for some respondents this led to an increased need of comparing and checking different sources to reach a comprehensive understanding, other respondents decided to shun established media altogether: “Before, I also tended to use other media for information, which I actually avoid now because of my feeling of one-sidedness. To the point that I really turn off the car radio when the news comes on.”

Accessing information

The participants had a broad, diverse media repertoire, and respondents mostly accessed media via online platforms and intermediaries; some used established media to stay informed about pandemic control measures, others primarily relied on alternative and/or social media or gleaned information from a mix of media sources.

The main commonality shared by the interviewees was their use of preselected content that was mediated by the algorithms of online intermediaries or like-minded friends, which one participant acknowledged: “You have to search for the pearls, either by searching for them by yourself or by receiving them via Facebook or Telegram, private contacts, WhatsApp groups or friends.” Social media was seen as a useful informational tool and as a means to gauge public sentiment. Accordingly, Facebook is not seen as a medium to provide information, but as a “platform for distribution” to obtain an overview.

4.2 What are German COVID-19 sceptics' attitudes and expectations toward journalistic communication on the disease? (RQ2)

When it comes to which media to trust regarding information on the COVID-19 pandemic, the respondents overall showed a strong preference for alternative media and social media platforms. They reported generally positive opinions of these media outlets and trust the scientific information presented by these sources to a greater degree than established journalistic outlets, which they think could not be trusted. This distrust in established media is mainly based on perceived moral failures of journalistic media: The respondents view established media as biased and dependent on the political elites, and they state unequivocally that the MSM do not meet their expectations of a fair, objective and independent media. Instead, the respondents used the following terms to characterise established media sources: “conformity,” “manipulation,” “propaganda,” “censorship,” “opinion dictatorship” and “scaremongering.”

Growing distrust based on failed quality expectations

When considering the trustworthiness of media, quality expectations related to media offerings are essential because they provide indications as to the assessment of trustworthiness and can thus affect the formation of attitudes. Considering distrust in established media sources, the respondents mostly related to normative expectations and judgements based on moral failures; objectivity, factuality, diversity, openness, honesty, and transparency were cited as important criteria. Strikingly, the respondents' perspectives on these criteria differed from established journalistic and academic interpretations of the same.

Classic journalistic interpretations of quality criteria are often given as reasons for distrust of MSM. One such example is the notion of objectivity.

COVID-sceptics' requirements to objective media

When asked what constitutes trustworthy information offers, respondents primarily named objectivity as one decisive characteristic. Interestingly, the participants interpreted this norm in an unorthodox manner: Their notion of objectivity stipulated that scientific counter-opinions should be equally presented to the information the scientific community perceives as scientific consensus. Due to the selection and over-representation of established scientists such as Dr. Drosten in Germany or Dr. Fauci in the US, they did not see objectivity as given in the MSM. They perceived the public discourse to be one-sided and pointed out that the same few experts dominated the media. This partially results in the recipients' perception to be insufficiently informed about different perspectives on the problem. While MSM journalists predominantly select topics and facts according to journalistic routines, standards, and procedures, the interviewees were more strongly focused on the equal inclusion of counter-opinions and scientists, even if those counter-opinions only represented a minority segment of the population. When asked about this, one participant responded, “you must confront contrary

opinions as objectively as possible and weigh the arguments without defaming and devaluing the other side.” The interviewees agreed that the task of journalism was objective reporting, but their expectations have not been met by the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, they concurred that the MSM assumed a clear stance on the topic and therefore violated the norm of objectivity. However, this strong representation of established experts in the MSM can be explained by journalistic routines and quality criteria (Blöbaum, 2017): From a traditional point of view, journalism gives voice to the most prestigious experts which leads to a high prevalence of a small circle of actors (Blöbaum, 2017).

In addition to these concerns, the participants accused the MSM of disrespecting opposing voices. They felt that experts and other people with opinions that differ from those cited by the established media were often insulted and discredited. This worsened their perceptions of biased and unfair media coverage. The respondents criticised derogatory media reporting of protesters and supporters of the “Querdenken” movement, which is a German populist movement protesting – among others – against the COVID-19 regulations introduced by the government. The participants either identified or sympathised with this movement and reported that the MSM’s behaviour toward the group increased their distrust. Also, the interviewees frequently perceived biased reporting by the established media seeking to discredit experts with alternative opinions. From the respondents’ point of view, this has led to polarisation and significantly limited the scope of the public debate as well as the chance for adequate participation of the civil society in the decision-making process.

Representation and perceived lack of plurality

The allure of being represented in the media is one of the strongest arguments in favour of the use of and trust in alternative media offerings. The respondents particularly mentioned online blogs, the main ones being “NachDenkSeiten,” “Rubikon,” and “Tichys Einblick.” Most of the respondents admitted that they identified with the opinions disseminated by alternative media and preferred these news. One participant for example stated:

“I don’t necessarily like everything that is written in these alternative media, but I like most of it. Because those are exactly the things and the thoughts that I also have [and] have had from the beginning.”

Because their opinions were taken into consideration in such a way that they felt heard and represented, the study participants were able to overlook shortcomings and failures of alternative media related to journalistic quality and perceived alternative media coverage in a positive light. Some respondents also named established media outlets such as the Austrian channel “ServusTV” and praised the broadcast “Corona-Quartett” that would comply with this requirement. The overwhelming majority of MSM reporting, however, was repeatedly criticised as a one-size-fits-all approach and for a lack of plurality of opinion.

The media and democracy: deliberation vs. propaganda

The respondents asserted that the MSM should inform recipients, instead of patronising them: “The media should support us as citizens so that we can form opinions with information that we cannot obtain on our own.” The participants also complained that their opinions and the scientific perspectives representing their perspectives were excluded by the established media, which they felt impaired the democratic process and violated norms of deliberation. One participant hypothesised that the exclusion of critical voices would cause more people to turn away from established media outlets and exclusively consume alternative media content.

Above all else, the interviewees firmly believed that journalists should exercise criticism and supervision of the elites in the sciences and in politics. If these expectations are not fulfilled, the media will continue to appear less credible and trustworthy, which can lead to aversion. Contrary to this expectation towards the media, the respondents viewed the established media as being particularly dependent on politics and the economy and accused them of manipulation and propaganda. Their concern about political influence affected their attitudes toward MSM. Partly, the interviewees did not differentiate between political elites and journalistic media; thus, they projected their evaluations of various political measures onto the media. Mainstream media and politics were often seen as one. A participant described the traditional media as “just another government spokesperson” who merely relayed information without criticism. The failure to place the new virus in perspective by comparing it with the influenza was also strongly criticised, as was the refusal to acknowledge the negative psychological consequences caused by the lockdown.

When asked to reflect on the media coverage of the pandemic, the respondents complained about the lack of criticism toward the government in the MSM; one participant also discussed the manner in which false and biased information about scientific findings from a single ideological viewpoint was spread as a kind of “missionary work” with the aim to convert people. Moreover, the interviewees felt that the pressure to handle the pandemic increased the influence of the political elites on journalism and its reporting. In this context, the respondents relate to interpretation patterns that are common in science-related populism (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). Most interviewees agreed that COVID-19 journalistic media content was “dictated, bought, or enforced” and that content was “censored.”

Unfree MSM vs. free alternative media

Besides political affiliations, the interviewees further assumed the existence of certain economic dependencies of the MSM. The established media compete in an open market and therefore have to struggle for attention. According to the participants, journalists are driven by the need to increase their range and the number of clicks, which they felt was the main reason behind the MSM's story-selection strategies that favour negative facts about COVID-19. In this context, the respondents point out that fear and scaremongering are especially prevalent in the lea-

ding MSM outlets. However, studies show that in the instance of particular risks and dangers, certain topics are overrepresented in the media (Rossmann & Meyer, 2017), such as in the case of COVID-19. This is because science journalism focuses on the same news factors as other forms of journalism: novelty, topicality, personalisation, negativity, unpredictability, significance, and proximity (Blöbaum, 2017).

In contrast, alternative media were considered to be truly “free media.” Alternative news sources were generally perceived as being independent and critical because these news outlets address issues and represent opinions that are not covered by the MSM. For this reason, the participants feel alternative media represent a counter-opinion voice, a characteristic that grants them a tremendous advantage over established media sources. According to the respondents, different experts’ opinions are compared and discussed in the alternative media, unlike in the established media; this inclusion of critical voices facilitates an open discourse and creates an overall impression of objectivity within the alternative media. The interviewees also believed that alternative media information was presented in a more differentiated and credible manner, because interviews are shown in full, or reporting is live.

Perception of alternative media

Despite generally positive perceptions, some interviewees also expressed critical attitudes toward alternative media. As with established media, some alternative media offerings were not considered trustworthy because they reported in a biased manner. However, one participant argued that this one-sidedness was partly justified as a “consequence of the one-sidedness in the mainstream media, so that the alternative media picks up everything that is not reported there.”

Moreover, the respondents felt that some alternative media outlets offered low-quality journalistic material that was poorly presented and/or incomprehensible. However, stylistic elements – such as layout, wording, and comprehensibility – do not seem to be important to the respondents. In fact, they mostly praised alternative media content despite inferior stylistic and quality standards.

Interviewees also noted that alternative media sometimes drifted into spreading conspiracy theories: “There are certainly some who overshoot the mark. They come up with conspiracy ideas that are not backed by anything.” These critical observations regarding alternative media are indicative of the participants’ literate media use and imply a certain vigilance and healthy scepticism of the media. In line with previous research (e.g., Jakob et al., 2019), the respondents have drawn a clear distinction between media scepticism and belief in conspiracy theories and are able to clearly argue and cite the reasons for their scepticism toward certain media.

Similar to alternative media, also social media platforms are seen as diverse spaces that allow freedom of opinion, and the media content distributed via social networks is perceived as being well varied and authentic. Especially Facebook and Telegram were considered to be important social media channels. Respondents felt that those channels in particular offered access to “free information.”

Nevertheless, some respondents also hold a critical view of social media and doubt their objectivity. Facebook groups, for example, have been criticised because they would mainly provide information that fitted their narrative. Furthermore, the interviewees pointed out the absence of gatekeepers on social media and criticised the flood of information, which required users to invest additional time and resources to search for suitable information amongst the plethora of posts. Moreover, the interviewees observed that the discourse on social media was often highly emotionalised, especially in relation to COVID-19. Finally, the respondents questioned the independence of some social media platforms. They suspect deliberate censorship of undesirable content because some sites allow fact-checkers to hide or delete posts that violate platform rules. In this context, the respondents described Telegram to be a particularly independent forum because it does not impose any restrictions on posted content.

5. Summary and discussion

This study explored issues related to the media repertoires and media trust and distrust of German COVID-19 sceptics. Based on twelve qualitative semi-standardised interviews, we explored the media repertoires of COVID-19 sceptics, their attitudes and expectations toward different types of media and the complex interactions between media use, expectations related to quality and processes of building trust and distrust in journalistic coverage of COVID-19.

Our analysis revealed several similarities among the respondents. Overall, they saw themselves as critical, responsible media users, but their perspectives on the trustworthiness of various types of media differ: While their trust toward alternative media outlets and social media platforms and intermediaries is relatively high, they described significant levels of distrust toward established media outlets. They base their assessments on their intrinsic quality expectations and judgments related to moral standards; however, the manner in which they evaluated expectations related to quality is different than that of non-sceptical audiences (e.g., Wicke & Taddicken, 2021). It also differs from what we are discussing with journalism studies and what shapes journalistic practices (e.g., Riedl & Eberl, 2020).

Considering their focus on moral quality standards, the interviewees' assessment of established media outlets is devastating. They perceived fundamental failures in MSM sources and reported not feeling represented and acknowledged by traditional media. These observations resulted in growing distrust – a finding known from other studies analysing reasons for media distrust (e.g., Newman & Fletcher, 2017). In contrast, alternative media and social media platforms were considered superior because the respondents viewed them as offering truly objective content and a variety of opinions.

While the participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of objectivity, their notion of objectivity is of an opinionated nature and does not differ between widely accepted scientific findings and fringe counter opinions. Their expectation of objective reporting on COVID-19 included an equal presentation of widely accepted findings and minority opinions – a phenomenon that is currently widely

discussed under the critical term of “false balance” (Koehler, 2016). The respondents seem to attribute trust to media content that aligns with and confirms their opinions, irrespective of whether it is accurate and balanced (cf. Maurer et al., 2018). This might indicate a large, possibly unbridgeable gap between the moral expectations of COVID-19 sceptics and traditional journalistic standards, the adherents of which would reject the sceptics’ notion of objectivity as false balance. Comparing the perception of media content between the majority of society and the “Querdenker” movement in Germany, Walzenbach and Hinz (2022) point out that ideological aspects play a greater role in judging the credibility of media than objective quality standards. This validates the concept of “confirmation bias”: People in general are more likely to consider media content that confirms their opinion as more credible (Walzenbach & Hinz, 2022).

The pandemic served as a catalyst that prompted the estrangement between COVID-19 sceptics and established media sources and led them to embrace alternative content and join these communities. As their distrust in established journalism grew, their trust in alternative outlets increased. When asked about MSM outlets, most respondents described a personal crisis of trust associated with media reporting on COVID-19.

The pandemic provided ample opportunities to respondents to match journalistic communication on a scientific topic with experiences from their lifeworld. The study participants correlated mistakes, falsehoods, inconsistencies with their own observations and confirmed that these experiences contributed to their growing distrust in established media (cf. Livio & Cohen, 2018; Mede et al., 2020). While some respondents concluded that there was potential for improvements in MSM-reporting, such as separating opinion and news, respectfully interacting with experts and individuals with counter-opinions, and the adoption of critical self-reflection in the media, most remained pessimistic and did not believe that any of these changes would ever be implemented. For some participants, regaining trust seemed possible by making media coverage more open and transparent. Others felt that they will never again trust the MSM: “Well, I would say that they have lost me.” The respondents’ pessimistic view corresponds with our observation that COVID-19 sceptics reinterpret journalistic norms from their own perspectives, resulting in the formation of moral judgements and quality expectations that traditional journalistic media outlets are unable to meet because of their professional standards, e.g., regarding objectivity. This, in turn, has consequences for future trust-building activities in journalism. Traditional media often lean toward quality management to win back trust (Uth, 2021, 2022; Zahay et al., 2020). In the light of our results, this strategy might need to be reconsidered.

Generally, one main finding became apparent: While all respondents have been recruited via COVID-19 sceptic social media sites, their attitudes towards the media are multifaceted. The respondents describe themselves as media literate and claim to hold a healthy, vigilant scepticism towards the media. As the interviews show, the respondents do indeed partly show a behaviour that, according to our earlier definitions, can be classified as sceptical. For example, they critically reflect on flaws of alternative media, too. At other times, however, the respondents take a rather distrusting or sometimes even cynical stance towards the esta-

blished media – for example when equating them with a “government spokesperson” or by stating that the MSM have lost them as recipients. These behaviours can no longer be seen as a healthy scepticism, but rather display dysfunctional distrust or cynicism.

In light of our findings, we hypothesise that certain aspects of representation have comparatively greater potential to rebuild trust. If news outlets want to try to win back rather sceptical recipients, they should focus on engaging and involving audiences (cf. Meier et al., 2018) and offer more opportunities to participate in public discourse. In view of future crises and delicate issues, MSM should develop new formats for dealing with media scepticism and media related populist attitudes. As COVID-19 has shown, strict alignment with a particular opinion can strengthen and reinforce populist movements and the polarisation of society (Boberg et al., 2020) – and even have a negative impact on vaccination intentions (Gehrau et al., 2021). Future research should specifically investigate the manner in which these critical groups can be “won back” to established media outlets.

6. Limitations and future Research

This study also comes with certain limitations: First of all, it has a small number of respondents. This is mainly due to the peculiarity of the respondents (as they are partly cynical media users and we reached them out through social media) and the sensitive subject itself. The results therefore are not representative but provide insights to a hard-to-reach population of media-sceptical respondents in Germany. Thus, recruitment of interviewees and data collection has been strictly anonymous. We did not collect information about gender, age or occupation. Such information within the interviews has been removed in the process of anonymisation. Therefore, it is not possible to contextualise the results and classify them using empirical data already available – which would have added further interesting insights. Our results, however, might help to develop hypotheses that can be tested in future representative surveys. Considering the pandemic's global effects and similar developments in many (at least Western) countries, it also seems highly relevant to compare our results to other media-sceptical groups and movements, for example the Q-Anon movement in the USA.

Acknowledgements: This is a student-led paper, the first two authors marked with the asterisk (*) equally contributed to the paper. There are no conflicts of interest that influenced data collection and analysis.

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Appendix

(A) Interview guide [translation]

Guiding theme: Media use

We reached you via the Facebook group XY. What do you use this group for? / We reached you via Facebook, there our call was shared in different groups. What do you use the group where you saw our appeal for?

Do you also use the Facebook group for other things e. g. to inform yourself about other topics / for mutual exchange?

How important is this group to you to inform yourself about COVID-19?

What news services do you use apart from this Facebook group when you want to inform yourself about COVID-19?

Can you name specific media / news providers / news channels?

If media mix:

That's a lot of different media you just referred to. Which ones are particularly important to you – and why these in particular?

If mainly established media:

These are mainly classic or established media offerings. Are there any reasons why you particularly value these offerings?

Do you use other media offerings, such as media offerings outside the mainstream?

If mainly alternative media:

These are mainly media offerings that stand apart from the so-called mainstream media. Are there any reasons why you particularly value these offerings?

Do you use other media offerings, such as of the so-called mainstream media?

If mainly social media:

From which sources [profiles, pages, channels] within social media do you get the information?

You have now mainly mentioned social media. Why are these media particularly important to you in the context of COVID-19?

Do you use other media offerings, such as media offerings outside of social media?

Guiding theme: Attitude or attitude towards science media coverage using the example of COVID-19

In your opinion, what would ideal reporting around the topic of the coronavirus look like?

Possible question, if not obvious from the answers to the previous questions:

Can you name concrete criteria / characteristics?

You have just named characteristics that make up ideal reporting for you. How do you think the media is currently reporting on the coronavirus issue?

Are your expectations met and are you satisfied with the coverage?

In the context of the COVID-19, there has been a lot of criticism of journalistic work. There are also different voices in communication studies that criticise, for example, a lack of critical reflection on information. What is your opinion on this? How do you judge the reporting in the mainstream media?

To what extent do you think that the mainstream media present a comprehensive picture of reality?

Do you think that different points of view are sufficiently highlighted?

Do you feel adequately represented?

Possible question if only negative aspects have been discussed: Is there also something that struck you as positive about the reporting on COVID-19?

In media such as the online magazine "Tichys Einblick", accusations of the mainstream media being close to the government are often made. Can you identify a tendency in the reporting?

What do media offerings outside the mainstream do differently in their coverage of COVID-19, especially in comparison to established media?

And independently of COVID-19, are these points that also apply to media coverage in general?

Guiding theme: Trust in media

In the field of communication science, but also in the general public, there is talk of a crisis of confidence in journalism. How do you see this?

If agreed: Why do you think there is this crisis of confidence? What are the media doing wrong?

If not agreed: What do you think could be the reasons for talking about a crisis of confidence? What could be the triggers for such a crisis of confidence?

What constitutes trustworthy reporting for you?

Surely you trust some media offerings more than others. What characteristics do you use to decide which news offerings you trust? Why?

Possible question: How do news offerings that you trust differ from those that you trust less?

Contingent question: Does this also have to do with individual journalists who are responsible for the respective contributions?

Contingent question: Earlier we had already talked about differences between the so-called mainstream media and offerings outside this mainstream. In your view, are there also differences here in terms of trustworthiness?

What is the reason that X is more trustworthy than Y?

Possible question for alternative media: Do you trust the media you use more than the so-called mainstream media?

Guiding theme: Trust during COVID-19

Has your trust in science media coverage changed during the coronavirus pandemic? Are there any particularities around the topic of COVID-19 regarding the trustworthiness of different media?

Possible question, if “yes”: Have you had specific experiences or experienced situations during COVID-19 that may have contributed to a change in your trust in different media coverage?

Contingent question, if only “yes”: Can you describe your experiences?

Contingent question, if negative change: What would [the mentioned media offerings] have to do differently in order to regain trustworthiness and is that even possible?

(B) Research categories

1. Media use

- 1.1. for the purpose of getting information about COVID-19
- 1.2. for mutual exchange among each other
- 1.3. to form opinions
- 1.4. self-reflection
- 1.5. Change in usage behaviour

2. Attitude towards science media coverage

- 2.1. Expectations of reporting (quality characteristics)
- 2.2. Evaluation, perception and judgement of reporting
 - 2.2.1. of established media/lead media/mainstream media
 - 2.2.2. of alternative media
 - 2.2.3. of social media

3. Trust and trustworthiness

- 3.1. Characteristics of trustworthy reporting
- 3.2. Trust during the coronavirus pandemic
 - 3.2.1. Changes in trust
 - 3.2.2. Experiences that have influenced trust
 - 3.2.3. Particularities regarding the issue
- 3.3. Potential for improvement