



## In media we trust? A comparative analysis of news trust in New Zealand and other Western media markets

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# In media we trust? A comparative analysis of news trust in New Zealand and other Western media markets

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## ABSTRACT

In the age of misinformation, trust and trustworthiness – core values of journalism – have become more important as news companies reeling from the pandemic seek emergency funding for their operations from the public and funders look for trusted brands to support. Earlier studies indicated people are more willing to pay for trusted news brands, and recently, the public funding of news has been directed to institutions that are regarded as trustworthy news outlets, and provide information that is in the public interest. While the concept of trust is complicated and measuring it is challenging, trust has rapidly become a key inquiry in academia. However, New Zealand lacks in this research, and this study aims to start to fill that gap. The paper is based on our survey of 1204 New Zealanders, and comparable data from 38 countries surveyed in the *Reuters Digital News Report 2019*. The paper finds that trust in news in New Zealand is high when compared internationally, but a large proportion (47%) of citizens don't trust the news. It also finds New Zealanders are more concerned about misinformation and disinformation than respondents in other Western societies.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Trust; trustworthiness; news; journalism; Aotearoa New Zealand

## Introduction

For trust not him that hath once broken faith.  
– William Shakespeare; Henry VI, Part 3

In early 2021, Google Scholar returned 15,900 results for the search term 'trust in the news' indicating the importance of the topic for academia, journalism, and the media industry. However, in New Zealand trust in the news has not been researched in an international setting, and this paper, based on comparative data analysis, adds to our institutional knowledge. The aim of the study was to compare levels of trust in news in New Zealand with other Western news markets. Fisher (2018) notes there is no single agreed definition for trust in terms of news media. Academics have connected trust in the news to the credibility of the media/medium, the message delivered, and a story's news sources. Our question relates to audiences' trust in journalistic institutions (news brands) and journalistic messages delivered (news).

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As many news organisations fight to maintain financial viability, trust in their news content has become a more important factor in building their revenue streams. Toff et al. observe that trust is part of the ‘practical commercial considerations since many media organisations’ business models are more reliant than ever on direct revenue from subscribers and supporters’ (2020, p. 6). In February 2021, Stuff chief executive Sinead Boucher said that ‘if news media cannot build and sustain trust from the public, then we have no future at all’ (Mercer 2021). Indeed, in July 2020, the New Zealand news publisher pulled out of Facebook and Instagram, citing the ‘growth of public trust as a core mission’ (Mercer 2021). In 2021, the New Zealand government announced a NZ\$55 million support package for public-interest journalism. In a media briefing, Broadcasting Minister Kris Faafoi emphasised the element of trust in public funding: ‘Covid-19 and the lockdowns last year highlighted the important role our media plays in providing up-to-date, independent and trusted information to the public’ (Peacock 2021). Additionally, the *Reuters Digital News Report in 2019* found that while people seem to be willing to pay for trusted news brands, a large proportion of people are simply not willing to pay for news (Newman et al. 2019). In an interview, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, said the public was ‘really alienated from a lot of the journalism that they see – they don’t find it particularly trustworthy. They don’t find it particularly relevant and they don’t find it leaves them in a better place’ (Faulconbridge 2019).

To combat misinformation and to regain the public’s trust, a global network of more than 200 news companies initiated The Trust Project. Its mission is to ‘amplify journalism’s commitment to transparency, accuracy, inclusion and fairness so that the public can make informed news choices’ (The Trust Project, [date unknown]). Trust Project chief executive Sally Lehrman says people need trusted news because their ‘everyday decisions can save lives and the economic stakes are equally high’ (The Trust Project 2020). In this context, understanding and researching trust in the news has become highly relevant.

## A complex issue of trust

Recent surveys of Western media markets show that in general, trust in news and news media is declining. In 2021, the *Edelman Trust Barometer* showed that globally trust in traditional media had declined to an all-time low (Edelman 2021). Similarly, the *Reuters Digital News Report 2020* found that fewer than four in 10 people surveyed across the countries involved trusted most news most of the time, and only 46% of people surveyed trusted the news they used themselves (Newman et al. 2020). The report noted that ‘political polarisation linked to rising uncertainty seems to have undermined trust in public broadcasters in particular’ (Newman et al. 2020, p. 9). On the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic has boosted people’s trust in well-established news brands, and accentuated the need for trusted and accurate journalism (Myllylähti and Treadwell 2020, pp. 2–3).

In general, the decline in public trust in journalism predates the internet, and in the United States at least, trust has been declining since the historic successes of public-interest journalism during the Vietnam War and the downfall of President Richard Nixon in the 1970s (Swift 2016). But the issue of trust has become more urgent because the digitalisation of media has blurred lines between traditional media and online media. Adding

to the mix of influences on levels of trust has been the collapse of business models of the traditional news corporations which have led to shrinking newsrooms (Fisher 2018). Other academics argue that the issue of trust in news is strongly linked to business models of journalism that ask people to pay for subscriptions, memberships and donations (Newman et al. 2020; Toff et al. 2020; Myllylahti and Treadwell 2020). Trust in the news may also be culturally determined to some extent, influenced by political practices, and newsroom cultures (Toff et al. 2020). Toff et al. (2020) state that trust is

both important and dangerous, both for the public and for the news media – important for the public because being able to trust news helps people navigate and engage with the world, but dangerous because not everything is equally trustworthy. (p. 5)

They point out trust is important for news companies because their journalism relies on it, but at the same time ‘it can be elusive and hard to regain when lost’ (Toff et al. 2020, p. 5).

While scholarship about trust in the news has recently increased, academics continue to struggle with its definition and measurement. Hanitzsch et al. (2018) define media trust as ‘a form of institutional trust; it is the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner’ (p. 5). More precisely, trust in news relates to the journalism system as a whole, journalists, and their working methods (Blöbaum 2014). Schudson (2019) notes that trust links to the journalists’ professional values and mission as they seek truth and hold governments and their officials accountable. Paradoxically, he argues that the journalistic ideal of holding government accountable is hurting trust because journalism is ‘less deferential than it once was to institutions and people in power’ (2019). Hanitzsch et al. (2018) argue that political trust is a key factor in understanding trust in the press, and this should be taken into account when conducting research on trust in media/news because it may explain why trust in news or news media is not universally declining outside the West. They say the ‘relation between trust and political trust is becoming stronger’ and therefore ‘discussion trends in media trust in isolation from the larger institutional context obviously misses the point’ (p. 19). Our research is limited in its scope, and as it does not include questions about trust in political institutions, may be limited its findings in this regard. However, we can acknowledge that in July 2020, 61% of New Zealanders agreed that the government is generally trustworthy, and that the trust has substantially increased amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and handling it (Goldfinch et al. 2021).

## **Trust and social media platforms**

Trust in news is not just linked to trust in political institutions or politicians but increasingly interlinked with the platform environment. Social media play their part in the erosion of trust in news media. They were already littered with mis/disinformation, but recently this form of information has become even more pervasive. Misinformation here refers to information which is incorrect or inaccurate, and disinformation to information which is intended to mislead audiences. The *Get the Trolls Out!* reports of the Media Diversity Institute show how social media platforms, including Twitter, have become major channels for disinformation, conspiracy theorists and groups such as QAnon (Media Diversity Institute 2020; De Smedt and Rupar 2020). QAnon has

‘successfully taken advantage of this atmosphere by expanding the scope of the conspiracy theory and using it to spread misinformation and fake news about an already complex and unsolved public health crisis’ (Media Diversity Institute 2020, p. 34).

In 2018, 15% of news consumed in New Zealand was on Facebook, and over 53% of news companies’ traffic came via social media and search engines (Myllylahti 2018). A survey conducted by think-tank *The Workshop* shows New Zealanders trust news they receive from family and friends more than that from social media: just 51% of New Zealanders trust news stories that were shared online (Keogh 2019). This relates to the abundance of misinformation on social media. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, ‘nasty rumours, inaccurate advice and bullying’ were circulating widely on social media in New Zealand (Cook 2020). Health Minister Chris Hipkins warned citizens disinformation had reached a ‘new and concerning level’ and that such information was not just ‘harmful and dangerous, it was totally and utterly wrong’ (Cook 2020).

In the United States, 59% of adults mistrust political and election news they receive via Facebook (Jurkowitz and Mitchell 2020). A survey of 12,043 adults also shows that 48% of the adults distrust Twitter and 42% Instagram (Jurkowitz and Mitchell 2020). However, Toff et al. (2020) note that the role of platforms in trust in the news is not well understood, but they may ‘undermine the public’s trust in news, even as they also help people find news’ (p. 7). In their research, Park et al. (2020) observe that social media aids news outlets to connect with their readers and to extend their audience reach, but ‘using social media for news, whether it is regarded as a source of news or whether people use it as a pathway to news, leads to an increase in general mistrust in news’ (p. 91). They find sharing news online had ‘a strong positive relationship with mistrust and a strong negative relationship with trust’ (Park et al. 2020, p. 91). Our research is also concerned with social media and trust in the news delivered through these platforms.

## Research questions

The aim of the study was to examine how similar trust in news in New Zealand is to other Western news markets or whether there are significant differences. Set against the scholarship discussed above, the main research questions for this paper are:

RQ1 Does general trust in the news in New Zealand differ from other Western media markets?

RQ2 Does trust in the news on social media differ between New Zealand and other Western media markets?

RQ3 Are there differences in trust in journalism and journalistic institutions between New Zealand and other Western media markets?

RQ4 Are there any main differences between concerns about journalism and/or mis/disinformation between news audiences in New Zealand and other Western markets?

## Materials and methods

This research is based on a comparative data analysis between surveys conducted by the AUT research centre for Journalism, Media and Democracy (JMAD) and the Reuters

Institute for the Study of Journalism. The data is extracted from the JMAD's *Trust in News in New Zealand* project in 2020 and the Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report 2019*. Both studies conducted a survey of the trust in news in their relevant markets – the New Zealand survey was conducted in 2020, and the Reuters survey in 2019. Both reports used the same methodology and same questions to survey the trust in news (Newman et al. 2019).

### **Data collection and sample**

Both *Trust in News in New Zealand* and the *Digital News Report 2019* used polling companies to conduct the survey. Reuters' surveys were done by polling company YouGov, using an online questionnaire, in January/February 2019. The sample for each country was approximately 2000 people which equals 76,000 people across 38 countries. The JMAD research was conducted by polling company Horizon Research, and the data was collected using an online questionnaire between 23 and 30 March 2020. The sample size was 1204 people. While the JMAD survey was conducted about the time of the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in New Zealand, only non-Covid-related questions were asked and it is impossible to establish how the pandemic may have affected responses.

## **Results**

### **General trust in news is relatively high**

The results for RQ1 show trust in news in New Zealand is relatively high compared to other Western media markets. In 2020, 53% of New Zealanders trusted most news most of the time. The number is lower than in Finland and Portugal, but on a par with Denmark. As seen in [Figure 1](#), general trust in news in New Zealand is considerably higher than in the large media markets, including the United States and the United Kingdom. Trust is higher also than in Australia. Additionally, in 2020, approximately 62% of New Zealanders trusted the news they personally consumed, and in Australia, the same figure was just 46%.

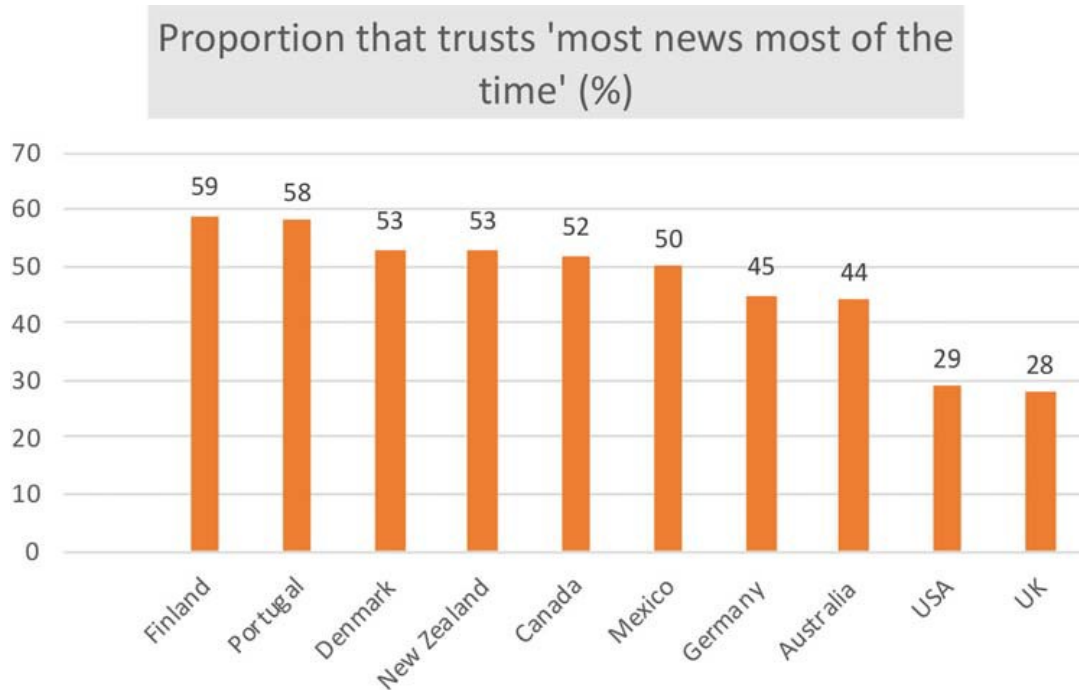
### **Search engines more trusted than social media**

The data analysis for RQ2 confirms that news consumers, in general, trust more news they receive via search engines than social media. Just 27% of New Zealanders trust news they find through search engines, and 16% of respondents trust news on social media ([Figure 2](#)). The New Zealand numbers are low when compared to the 38-country average from the Reuters research: in 2019, 33% of those surveyed trusted news in search and 23% trusted news found via social media. However, when compared to the Reuters report, trust in social media in New Zealand is higher than in the United States (14%) and the United Kingdom (10%), but somewhat lower than in Australia (18%).

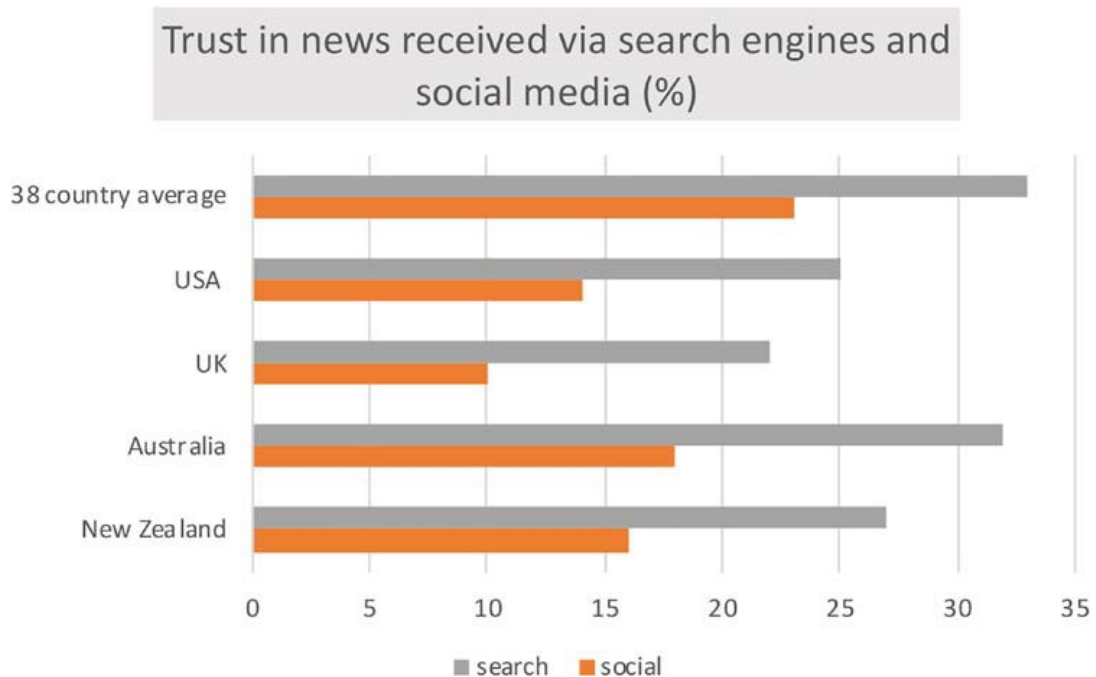
### **Television news and financial papers score highly**

The data analysis for RQ3 reveals that television news and financial newspapers scored highly in trust in New Zealand and selected other news markets. In New Zealand,





**Figure 1.** General trust in news in 10 Western media markets.



**Figure 2.** Trust in news via social media or search engines in selected markets.

state-owned radio broadcaster *RNZ* and television broadcaster *TVNZ* were the most trusted news outlets. Additionally, commercial TV broadcaster *Newshub* was ranked third, the digital-only news outlet *Newsroom* fourth, and the newspaper the *NZ Herald* fifth. Similarly, in the United Kingdom and Australia, national broadcasting corporations *BBC* and *ABC News* were ranked as the most trustworthy news brands. In the United

Kingdom, *BBC* was followed by the commercial TV-broadcaster *ITV*, financial newspaper the *Financial Times*, public-service broadcasting company *Channel 4*, and regional and local newspapers were in 5th place. In Australia, public broadcaster's *ABC* and *SBS* were most trusted, followed by the financial newspaper the *Australian Financial Review*, and the commercial TV-broadcasting channels *Channel 7* and *Channel 9* news. In the United States, local television networks were the most trusted sources for news, and these were followed by cable television companies, national radio broadcaster *NPR*, big newspaper brands including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

### **Concern high about mis- and disinformation on the internet**

When comparing RQ4 data, the analysis shows that New Zealanders have high levels of concern about mis- and disinformation on the internet. Only four other countries had a higher level of concern about real and fake news than New Zealand. In Brazil, 85% of respondents were worried about mis- and disinformation on the internet; the number for Portugal, South Africa and the UK was 70%. Approximately 68% of New Zealanders were concerned about what was real and what was fake on the internet, the same level of concern found in Mexico and Spain. The 38-country average stood at 55%, and the concern was lowest in Germany (38%) and the Netherlands (31%). The New Zealand-specific data also shows that its citizens are highly concerned about the state of journalism: 90% of respondents expressed worries about poor journalism and 95% were concerned about stories that may have a particular agenda.

### **Summary of results**

Based on our findings, it is evident that New Zealanders' trust in news, in general, is relatively high, and they also have a high level of trust in the news they personally consume. However, when compared to the 38-country average in the Reuters research, New Zealanders' trust in news found via search engines and social media is low. When compared to individual countries, including the US and the UK, New Zealanders' trust is somewhat higher than in these two countries. Overall findings show that compared to other English-speaking media markets including Australia, the UK, and the US, New Zealanders most trust in news they see or hear on public broadcasting platforms, or state-owned media. The pattern is similar in the other countries mentioned. However, in the large media markets, financial newspapers are on top of the trusted news brands list as well. Finally, New Zealanders have a high level of mistrust of the information they read or see on the internet. Compared to the 38-country average, New Zealanders are clearly more wary of misinformation and disinformation spreading on the net. Additionally, New Zealanders are highly concerned about poor and biased journalism. (Table 1, Figure 3).

### **Discussion**

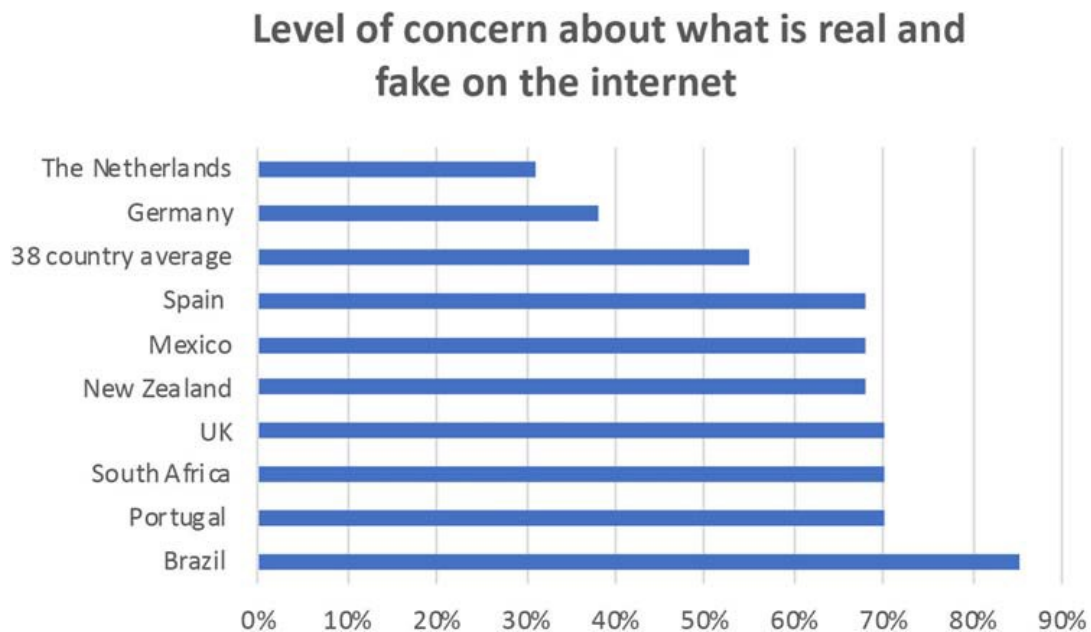
Trust in news, media or press is a complicated issue. As discussed, cultural, political, geographical, economic and other aspects can affect how news, news outlets and news workers – journalists – are received by the public. In 2018, Usher noted scholars 'have



**Table 1.** Level of concern about what is real and fake on the internet.

Brazil	85%
Portugal	70%
South Africa	70%
UK	70%
New Zealand	68%
Mexico	68%
Spain	68%
<b>38 country average</b>	<b>55%</b>
Germany	38%
The Netherlands	31%

thought about trust in limited ways that have failed to address the relational nature of trust that includes journalists, audiences, sources, and other social actors' (p. 564). Since then, trust research has embraced some of these aspects, as seen, for example, in the Reuters Institute's reports (Toff et al. 2020; Newman et al. 2020). Fisher (2018) observes that survey-based research about trust in news requires researchers to consider a range of factors impacting that trust. Our research, which is survey based, is mainly concerned with trust in journalistic institutions (news brands), journalism as a profession, and journalistic products (news), and it does not consider factors such as public trust in news sources. Strömbäck et al. (2020) and Toff et al. (2020) argue that while survey-based research captures some differences across countries and media ecosystems, it does not necessarily say much about the nature of those differences. It is true that while this research offers some insight to the differences in news trust across the selected countries, it cannot address the qualities of those differences. Hanitzsch et al. (2018) argue political trust is key to understanding trust in the press, and this should be taken into account when conducting research on trust in media/news because it may explain why trust in news or news media is not universally declining. Newman et al. (2020) note that in certain countries 'political polarisation linked to

**Figure 3.** Level of concern about what is real and fake on the internet.

rising uncertainty seems to have undermined trust in public broadcasters in particular' (Newman et al. 2020, p. 9). On the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic has boosted people's trust in well-established news brands, and their need for trusted news. When considering New Zealanders' trust in the news, it is worth noting that in New Zealand confidence in the government increased 83% between 2009 and 2020, and that the people's trust in the government has had 'a dramatic increase' as a result of Covid-pandemic (Curtin University 2021). Specific events, including Covid-19 and how it in general has been handled, may well affect people's trust in news. Newman et al. (2020) note that 'specific events clearly have affected trust in a number of countries this year [2020]' (p. 20). For example, the trust in news in Brazil declined 11% from the previous year because of a 'fractions election', and similarly in France because of 'the partisan nature of the Yellow Vest protests' when journalists were regarded as 'being part of the establishment' (Newman et al. 2020, p. 20). Our research was conducted during the pandemic, but our survey did not include specific Covid-related questions, and therefore it is difficult to assess how much the Covid reporting in the press and the government's handling of the crisis has affected trust in the news. In October 2020, a general election was held in New Zealand, but it is not possible to know what the impact on that had on the public's trust in news in early March 2020 when the survey was conducted.

### **Limitations**

Trust research based on online surveys and questionnaires has its limitations. Without qualitative research complementing them, it is impossible to assess certain aspects of trust in the news. For example, based on our research we don't know why people trust certain news organisations and media brands more than others, or why there are differences between trust in search engines and social media, or why people are worried about poor journalism. This could be further explored through interviews with editors, senior journalists and audiences. Our survey is limited in its scope, and it does not inquire about paying for news or trust in politics or politicians which many academics suggest is a crucial aspect of news and news media trust. Our survey in New Zealand is the first of its kind; it utilises the same questions and methodology of the Reuters Institute for Study of Journalism Digital News Report. Therefore, it offers valuable comparable international data.

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