

**Understanding Trust in News:
The Role of News Literacy in New Zealand**

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the relationship between news literacy and trust in news and journalism in New Zealand. Using a mixed-methods approach, including a nationwide survey and semi-structured interviews, the study applies the 5Cs framework of news literacy, focusing specifically on the domains of context (understanding external influences on journalism) and creation (understanding how journalism is produced). The findings show that while New Zealanders are highly aware of the economic, political, and technological pressures affecting the news industry, but their understanding of journalistic processes such as editorial decision-making and ethics is limited. This disconnect contributes to four major public concerns: political influence, attention-driven journalism, inconsistent quality of news in the digital environment, and lack of transparency in newsroom operations. The study identifies three types of news consumers: (1) Context + Creation Aware, who are critically informed and selectively trusting; (2) Context-Dominant, who recognise external pressures but have limited insight into how journalism works; and (3) Surface Awareness, who tend to trust based on familiarity or emotional resonance rather than deeper knowledge. The research concludes that improving news literacy, especially in terms of understanding context and creation, is essential for rebuilding public trust and supporting journalism's democratic role.

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the research background to the central problem of the thesis: the decline in trust in news. While situated within a global context, the study specifically focuses on trust in news and news literacy in New Zealand. Since 2020, the AUT research centre for Journalism, Media and Democracy (JMAD) has examined public trust in New Zealand's news media. While its reports capture broader trends, this research seeks to explore trust in news more deeply through the lens of news literacy. This chapter outlines the key concepts of the study—news trust and news literacy—along with the research approach, methodology, aims, and rationale.

1.1. Background

While low trust in news has been a longstanding challenge for journalism globally, recent political events have brought renewed attention to this issue (Park et al., 2023). Following the widespread debate over fake news during the 2015–2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, public concern about trust in journalism significantly increased (Fisher, 2016). The war in Ukraine has further heightened anxieties, particularly around the impact of propaganda on public perception (Szostek, 2018). According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's *Digital News Report*, declining trust in news may be exacerbated by social media, the internet, entrenched political polarisation, and perceptions of mainstream media bias (Newman et al., 2017). In response, scholars have conducted numerous studies on news trust, examining its definitions, causes, consequences, and potential solutions (Toff et al., 2021; Usher, 2018; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). These efforts have provided valuable insights to help the news industry rebuild trust. Nevertheless, trust in journalism has remained persistently low in many contexts.

1.1.1. Declining trust in news internationally

As stated, this research investigates New Zealanders trust in news and their news literacy and therefore it is important to understand the wider context of trust in news. The global decline in trust in news continues to be a significant concern across various countries as evidenced by the Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report 2024*. In 2024, the global average for trust in news stood at 40%—a four percentage points lower than during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Newman et al., 2024). The decline in trust in news is not happening across all nations and regions with some countries experiencing more pronounced declines than others.

In Europe, the decline in trust in news is particularly concerning in some countries. For example, Greece and Hungary report the lowest levels of news trust at 23%, reflecting deep-seated concerns about undue political and business influence over the media. Conversely,

some countries maintain relatively high levels of trust. In Finland, 69% of its population trust the news, and this is followed by other Scandinavian countries including Denmark (57%) and Norway (55%). The trend extends beyond Europe, with significant variations observed in other regions. In Asia, South Korea (31%) and Taiwan (33%) are among the countries with the lowest trust in news media globally. The United States has also experienced a notable decline, with only 32% of respondents expressing trust in the news media (Newman et al., 2024).

The reasons for decline in trust vary, but there are some common themes. A significant proportion (87%) of those who distrust news describe it as biased and unbalanced. Furthermore, 82% of those who distrust news believe that it reflects the political leanings of the newsroom, suggesting a widespread concern about political influence on reporting. Another common criticism is that news is too opinionated, lacking in actual information, with 76% of distrustful respondents expressing this view (Newman et al., 2024).

1.1.2. Substantial decline in news trust in New Zealand

In New Zealand, trust in news has experienced a significant decline in recent years, with a particularly sharp drop observed from 2023 to 2024. According to the JMAD *Trust in News in Aotearoa New Zealand* report, general trust in news fell from 42% in 2023 to 33% in 2024, marking a substantial 9 percentage points decrease (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2024). This decline is part of a broader trend, as the JMAD reports has recorded a 20% slump in trust over five years, indicating a persistent erosion of confidence in news media among New Zealanders. The 2024 report indicates that those who distrust or avoid the news are most concerned about its negativity, perceived political bias, and opinion masquerading as news (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2024). In 2025, the trust in news in general in New Zealand was stabilising with a drop of one percentage points from 33% in 2024 to 32% in 2025 (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2025).

While this pattern mirrors global trends, the decline in trust in New Zealand is also shaped by local factors. One key contributor is the economic strain on the country's news industry, particularly following the introduction of the Public Interest Journalism Fund (PIJF).

Launched to support journalism that is not commercially viable, the PIJF allocated NZ\$55 million between 2021 and 2023 to fund local news initiatives. Despite its public service intentions, the fund sparked controversy and scepticism, with some members of the public perceiving it as compromising journalistic independence and, consequently, undermining trust in the media (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2024). Reflecting these concerns, only 27% of respondents in 2024 believed that the news media were "independent of undue political or government influence most of the time" (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2024, p. 20).

Beyond economic concerns, political orientation plays a substantial role in shaping attitudes toward the media. The JMAD 2025 report found that supporters of the ACT Party and New Zealand First—both right-leaning political parties—were among the least trusting of the media. Similarly, Beattie, Kerr and Arnold (2024) found that individuals positioned at either end of the political spectrum, particularly those identifying as far-right or far-left, were more likely to avoid the news compared to centrist audiences. This pattern of news avoidance appears to be driven in part by the belief that news content is excessively opinionated and lacks sufficient factual grounding—a criticism echoed in both studies (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2024; Beattie, Kerr, & Arnold, 2024). These findings are consistent with those of the Reuters Institute’s 2017 report which identified political polarisation and perceived media bias as core drivers of mistrust in news globally (Newman et al., 2024).

1.1.3. Systemic factors

Scholars attribute the decline in trust in news to a complex interplay of factors, including rising economic inequality, political polarisation, institutional failures, transformations in the media landscape, social isolation, perceived dishonesty in leadership, technological change, and broader socioeconomic disparities. Fawzi et al. (2021) categorise these influences into two main levels - societal and individual - which collectively shape news consumers’ trust.

At the societal level, economic, political, and technological shifts have all contributed to the erosion of trust in news. Financial pressures on the media industry have led to public concern that news organisations prioritise profitability over public service, thereby compromising journalistic integrity (Nelson et al., 2024). Similarly, a Pew Research Centre’s (2020) survey found that audiences were not only sceptical of reporting quality but also deeply cynical about the commercial motivations underpinning news production. In some countries, government financial support for the media is perceived as undermining journalistic independence and the ability of journalists to hold political power to account, further weakening trust (Newman et al., 2024). Political polarisation has also intensified public distrust, as people tend to judge news outlets based on whether they perceive them to align with their own political beliefs (Newman et al., 2024). In addition, technological developments - particularly the rise of social media and algorithm-driven news curation - have fundamentally altered how people access and evaluate news. With increasing exposure to high volumes of content, individuals often adopt filtering strategies to manage their consumption (Liu et al., 2023) which can inadvertently reinforce echo chambers. The growing presence of false or misleading information online has further heightened audience scepticism, prompting a more cautious and selective approach to identifying trustworthy sources (Pennycook et al., 2021).

At the individual level, trust in news is shaped by personal attributes in interaction with wider social and political contexts (Fawzi et al., 2021). Demographic variables such as age, gender, and education influence how individuals perceive and engage with news content (Verma et al., 2018), underscoring that trust is contingent on one's experiences, background, and worldview. Media literacy, in particular, plays a critical role. Individuals with higher media literacy are more adept at evaluating information credibility and resisting misinformation. Studies show that media literacy training enhances individuals' perceptions of news credibility and increases their trust in journalism, while simultaneously reducing perceptions of media bias (Vraga et al., 2012).

1.2. The nature of trust in news

Trust in news can be seen as a trust relationship between news and news consumers. The relationship can be described as “the willingness of the news recipients to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner” (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5). This concept draws upon psychology theories of trust, particularly as outlined by Rousseau et al. (1998) who describe trust as a “psychological state” (p. 395) in which individuals accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of another's intentions or behaviour. Under this vulnerability, trusting news also means taking a risk (Giddens, 1990; Grosser, 2016; Luhmann, 1979) as drawing on the definition of trust, trust involves risks. Van Dalen (2023) explains that the risk includes getting wrong information, missing out important events or making badly informed decisions, because news recipients cannot keep an eye on all the decisions and choices made in the news-making process.

Trust in news can also be understood as a form of institutional trust, whereby individuals place confidence in the journalistic institution - such as a news organisation - rather than in specific journalists or individual stories (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Institutional trust is primarily cognitive, rooted in individuals' assessments of an institution's performance, transparency, and accountability (Rousseau et al., 1998). Unlike interpersonal trust, which is built through direct interaction and familiarity, institutional trust develops in situations where individuals lack personal experience with the institution and must rely on indirect cues and perceptions (Khodyakov, 2007). In the context of journalism, this distinction is particularly relevant: most news consumers have limited knowledge of how journalism is produced, which can significantly influence their levels of trust in news and the media as an institution.

This perspective suggests that news consumers' trust in journalism is shaped more by their perceptions of what journalism represents than by an informed understanding of how it operates in practice. This aligns with findings by Toff et al. (2021) who observe that trust in

news is often influenced by audiences' impressions of news brands rather than detailed knowledge of journalistic processes. Their report indicates that, for many consumers, trust functions as a heuristic based on three key factors: familiarity, reputation, and likeability. Familiarity refers to repeated exposure to a news brand, which can foster a sense of reliability; reputation involves the perceived credibility and societal standing of the outlet; and likeability is tied to the tone, relatability, and perceived values of the brand. The report's findings underscore that trust in news is frequently anchored in brand identity and the emotions it evokes, rather than in a critical evaluation of journalistic practices or editorial standards.

While brand perceptions play a major role, research from the Reuters Institute highlights that consumers also hold concrete expectations about the institutional qualities of trustworthy journalism (Newman et al., 2022; 2023; 2024). Across 47 markets, survey respondents have repeatedly emphasised transparency, high journalistic standards, freedom from bias as top expectations for trustworthy news. Additionally, fair representation of people and communities, as well as the avoidance of exaggeration or sensationalism, are seen as essential elements in fostering trust. These findings are backed by the JMAD's *Trust in News in Aotearoa New Zealand* reports from 2020-2025.

Scholars further elaborate on these dimensions. Karlsson (2010) underscores the role of transparency rituals, such as disclosing sources and editorial decision-making, in enabling audiences to evaluate news credibility. Similarly, Vos and Craft (2016) observe that visible accountability mechanisms, including corrections and the presence of ombudspersons, are positively associated with audience trust because they reflect a willingness to admit and rectify mistakes. Regarding journalistic standards, McQuail (2010) identifies accuracy and impartiality as foundational elements of trustworthy journalism. For freedom from bias, Kohring and Matthes (2007) argue that perceived independence from political or commercial interests significantly enhances audience trust. Fair representation is also crucial: Edgerly et al. (2018) demonstrate that inclusive and equitable coverage of diverse social groups strengthens public confidence in news organisations. Lastly, sensationalist reporting is widely regarded as detrimental to trust with McQuail (2010) noting that exaggerated or emotionally charged content undermines credibility.

1.3. Media and news literacy in trust in news

Media literacy is generally defined as the ability to access, analyse, and produce information, which requires a set of specific skills and knowledge (Potter, 2022). However, contemporary media literacy approaches are often designed primarily to protect news consumers from manipulation and deceptive content which can unintentionally undermine trust in legitimate

news. As Hameleers (2023) notes, media literacy interventions may have “unintended consequences” by reducing the perceived credibility of factual and professionally produced news content.

Therefore, this research focuses on news literacy, a specific subset of media literacy that refers to the ability to critically assess the credibility of news content (Craft et al., 2017). While broader media literacy efforts often aim to help citizens detect manipulation and deceptive content, they can sometimes foster excessive scepticism that spills over into distrust of legitimate journalism (Hameleers, 2023). News literacy, in particular, encourages citizens to critically assess the reliability of information by understanding journalistic routines, fact-checking practices, and editorial ethics (Craft et al., 2017). This approach helps individuals distinguish between misinformation and professional journalism, leading to more informed and constructive critical engagement.

1.3.1 News literacy and critical thinking

News literacy is often taught as a component of broader media literacy, but it rarely receives targeted emphasis in formal education (Ashley et al, 2013; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). As a result, citizens who are educated with media literacy, are often receiving general critical thinking training applicable to a wide range of media rather than gaining specific knowledge about how journalism operates. This is significant because news literacy requires more than the ability to critique media messages. It also involves understanding journalistic processes, editorial safeguards, ethical standards, and the institutional context in which news is produced (Craft et al., 2017).

Because contemporary media literacy initiatives are largely designed to counter misinformation and fake news, they tend to prioritise defensive skills such as identifying manipulation, bias, or persuasive tactics rather than fostering an appreciation for professional journalism. For example, in the United States the National Association for Media Literacy Education (2007) defines media literacy as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication, placing strong emphasis on active inquiry and critical thinking. Potter’s (2022) analysis of 210 academic articles confirmed that “critical thinking” and “critical analysis” are the most frequently cited media literacy outcomes.

While these skills are important, scholars such as Bulger and Davison (2018) have cautioned that media literacy interventions can sometimes backfire. They can create overconfidence in one’s ability to detect misinformation, inadvertently reducing trust in credible journalism. This effect is echoed by research in other domains. For instance, Pongiglione (2022) argues that the intention to exercise critical thinking, especially when not grounded in domain-specific knowledge, can foster excessive scepticism, even toward

recognised experts. Vranic, Hromatko, and Tonković (2022) further demonstrate that individuals who overestimate their critical thinking abilities are more prone to distrust science and believe in conspiracy theories.

1.3.2. News literacy and trust in news

In the context of trust in news, news literacy serves as a foundation for constructive critical thinking. As Bailin et al. (1999) note, effective critical thinking requires more than generic scepticism; it depends on understanding key concepts and background knowledge in the relevant field. For news consumers, that means knowing how journalism is produced, regulated, and differentiated from non-journalistic content.

The relevance of news literacy to trust in news has been confirmed by findings from the Independent Monitor for the Press (IMPRESS). Their 2022 *News Literacy Report* found that those with limited knowledge of how journalism works were less confident in assessing the reliability of news. Many respondents believed the media was largely unregulated and driven by commercial or political agendas. Notably, three-quarters of participants who were uncertain about journalistic regulation also reported low levels of trust in the news (Firmstone et al., 2022). These findings underscore the need to move beyond generic media literacy and focus more intentionally on news literacy providing citizens with the conceptual tools to engage with journalism critically but constructively, rather than dismissively.

1.4. Approach and method

This research is grounded on democracy and deliberative democracy theories and on a believe that a purpose of journalism is to help citizens to participate in a democratic society and its deliberations. The premise of the thesis is that trust in news aids people's consumption of verified news and information, therefore aiding them to participate in democratic processes. The underlying assumption in the thesis is that news literacy is an important part of news trust and democratic deliberations.

To explore the relationship between trust in news and news literacy among New Zealanders, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach. It uses an online survey to gather quantitative data about participants' levels of news trust and literacy, and semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative insights into how individuals understand and engage with journalism. This research applies the 5Cs framework of news literacy developed by Tully et al., (2020). It conceptualises news literacy across five interconnected domains: context, creation, content, circulation, and consumption. These domains provide a holistic approach to understanding how individuals interact with news in today's complex media environment. While all five components contribute to a comprehensive view of news literacy, this study focuses specifically on context, which refers to understanding the external influences that shape

journalism, such as financial, political, and technological pressures, and creation which addresses how journalism is produced. The latter includes knowledge of editorial routines, ethical standards, and regulatory structures. These two domains help analyses of how people understand journalism as a professional practice that is shaped by real-world conditions. By focusing on these two areas, this research explores whether greater awareness of how journalism works and what affects it can lead to more thoughtful and constructive engagement with the news, and in turn, foster higher levels of trust in news.

1.5. Aim, rationale and research questions

As explained, this research aims to explore the relationship between trust in news and news literacy among New Zealanders. Specifically, it investigates whether people's trust in journalism is influenced by their understanding of how journalism works—including the institutional processes behind news production—and their awareness of the broader social, political, and economic contexts in which journalism operates.

While the JMAD's trust in news reports (2020–2025) provide valuable insights into public perceptions of news trust in New Zealand, they do not specifically examine how trust in news relates to people's knowledge of journalistic practice. Similarly, the Reuters Institute's reports offer international comparisons on news trust, but lack a focus on the role of news literacy in shaping it. Therefore, this research seeks to fill that gap by asking how and to what extent trust in news is connected to people's news literacy.

Additionally, there is limited academic research examining the relationship between trust in news and news literacy. This study addresses that gap by exploring how news consumers' understanding of journalism, particularly how it is produced and the wider political, economic, and technological context in which it operates, influences their trust in news. While current media literacy efforts have proven effective in reducing belief in misinformation and disinformation, they can sometimes lead to uncertainty or even scepticism toward credible news sources. In contrast, this research argues that when people develop a more comprehensive understanding of how journalism works, they are more likely to approach news critically but constructively. Rather than dismissing the media altogether, these individuals are better equipped to identify credible reporting and make informed judgments, ultimately fostering greater trust in news.

Based on the aims and focus of this study, the research questions in this research are:

R1: To what extent do New Zealanders demonstrate news literacy in the domains of context and creation?

R2: In what ways does the news literacy among New Zealanders influence their perceptions of news trustworthiness and contribute to declining trust in news media?

1.6. Thesis structure

The research is structured in 7 chapters. The main chapters are described here.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Outlines the research problem of declining trust in news and introduces the study's aim to explore its connection with news literacy in New Zealand. It presents key concepts, research questions, and the methodological approach.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Reviews scholarship on the democratic theory, trust in news, media and news literacy, as well as introduces the 5Cs framework, focusing on the context and creation domains.

Chapter 3: Research design and methodology

Details the mixed-methods design, including survey and interview methods, and explains the ethical concerns and limitation in this research.

Chapter 4: Findings

Presents key findings from survey and interview data, identifying different types of news literacy and trust, and outlining four major public concerns about journalism.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Interprets findings through the lens of deliberative democracy and institutional knowledge, emphasising the impact of limited understanding of news production on trust.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and limitations

Summarises the study, answers the research questions, and offers recommendations for improving news literacy and public trust in journalism. The chapter also outlines key limitations of the study and how they may affect the interpretation of findings.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter offers a review of scholarly work on trust in news, media literacy, and news literacy. It distinguishes between broader media literacy and the more specific domain of news literacy, arguing that institutional knowledge of journalism is often overlooked in current education and research. It also introduces the theoretical lens of deliberative democracy and identifies a key research gap: the need to explore how knowledge of journalism's internal practices influences public trust in news.

2.1. Deliberative democracy framework

The main concern in this research is the low trust in news and its impact on deliberative democracy (Grecu & Chiriac, 2021; Wright et al., 2024). It can be argued that without journalism, and trust in journalism, deliberative democracy cannot function if citizens are not informed about issues of public importance.

2.1.1. Deliberative democracy

Gutmann and Thompson define deliberative democracy as one where "citizens or their representatives can disagree morally, but where they can reason together to reach mutually acceptable decisions" (1996, p. 2). Bächtiger et al. (2018) describe deliberative democracy as a communicative and transformative model of democratic governance that promotes mutual dialogue and encourages citizens to critically reflect on their preferences, values, and interests when addressing collective issues. As Mansbridge et al. (2010) note, it stands in contrast to narrow self-interest, highlighting the importance of justifications that appeal to mutually acceptable ideals of the public good. This model shifts democratic legitimacy from being vote-centric to talk-centric where the deliberative process, rather than the outcome, is the foundation of legitimacy (Chambers, 2003).

Deliberation is a process through which the public exchanges ideas and reasons as free and equal participants aiming to promote the common good. It encourages citizens to approach laws and policies with a focus on justice, rather than personal or partisan advantage (Curato et al., 2017; Boettcher, 2019). Baym (2023) describes the goal of deliberation as reaching a truly public opinion - one that rises above competition and avoids the pursuit of money or status. This perspective echoes Gutmann and Thompson's (2004) argument that legitimacy in democratic decisions depends on offering reasons that all affected parties can understand, helping people move toward justice rather than self-interest. The common good is not simply the sum of individual preferences, but it emerges through transformative dialogue, where people adjust their views after hearing different perspectives and evidence (Boettcher, 2019; Baym, 2005).

Unlike general discussion, deliberation also involves an emotional dimension where openness, respect, and inclusivity help people handle conflict and build understanding (Curato et al., 2017; Grecu & Chiriac, 2021). Bächtiger et al. (2018) note that deliberation is valuable because it fosters respectful communication that embraces pluralism while aiming for fair, shared outcomes even when disagreements persist. Participants are expected to reconsider their views and advocacy strategies in response to strong arguments (Boettcher, 2019). While reaching consensus is ideal, deliberation also focuses on clarifying differences and finding common ground (Bächtiger et al., 2018).

Deliberative democracy is committed to inclusivity and equality (Curato et al., 2017). As Schmitt-Beck and Lup (2013) point out, widespread public communication is essential. It is not just as a process, but it is a condition for legitimacy. This aligns with Habermas's vision of a public sphere where fair dialogue is free from power imbalances (Habermas, 1996). Goodin (2008) argues that deliberative forums must tackle inequalities in education, resources, and social status to ensure that everyone can participate equally. This often involves proactive steps, such as recruiting underrepresented voices and designing systems that reduce power gaps (Karpowitz & Raphael, 2016).

Despite its idealistic appeal, deliberative democracy faces real challenges when put into practice. Critics often call it unrealistic or utopian because deep-rooted inequalities and power imbalances make it hard for everyone to participate equally (Sanders, 1997). For deliberation to work well, Curato et al. (2017) argue that deliberative democracy is realistic, as long as it is embedded within institutional and interpersonal frameworks that promote equitable participation, rational discourse, and mutual respect. The legitimacy of outcomes comes from the quality of the process where participants offer reasons that are mutual, understandable, and taken seriously (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). By emphasising inclusive dialogue and collective reasoning, deliberative democracy helps societies navigate differences and find solutions aimed at justice and the public good (OECD, 2021).

2.1.2. Role of journalism in a deliberative democracy

Within deliberative democracy, journalism's role extends far beyond simply reporting events. It provides the arena necessary for deliberative discussions to take place successfully (Strömbäck, 2005). Habermas (1996) states that the legitimacy of democratic decisions depends on the quality of public discourse and the participation of informed citizens, as deliberative processes require participants to engage in reasoned debate based on a shared understanding of facts and norms. Schudson (2008) also sees journalism as a key democratic institution. By securing the flow of verified facts and contextual explanations that enable citizens to navigate complexity, journalism must give people information that is

accurate, accessible, diverse, relevant, and timely, helping them stay informed about public issues.

Gans (1998) states that journalism's democratic mandate is to maximize informed citizenship by prioritising coverage of issues with public significance over sensationalism. According to Bohman (1996), an informed citizen demonstrates a communicative competence, meaning they are equipped with the skills to interpret, question, and discuss policy matters in ways that are inclusive and publicly justified. Schudson (1998) says it also entails understanding how to use information in democratic processes such as voting, protesting, or engaging in deliberative forums. Similarly, Bächtiger et al. (2018) suggest that informed citizens possess deliberative capacities, including the willingness to listen, reflect, and revise one's opinions in response to better arguments. Schudson (2008) categorises journalism's democratic contributions into seven functions including informing the public, analysis, investigation, empathy, creating a public forum, and mobilisation. Importantly, Schudson emphasises that journalism can provide fair and comprehensive information that helps citizens navigate a complex world by investigating concentrated sources of power and informing the audience about others in their society. Therefore, journalism bridges informal public discourse and formal policymaking by providing citizens with the factual and contextual knowledge necessary to engage in reasoned debate (Habermas, 1996; Mansbridge et al. (2010).

Based on this, we can argue that journalism fosters deliberative democracy by including all community members to participate in collective deliberations and democratic decisions. By acting as a *super partes*, journalism enables diverse stakeholders, including marginalised groups, to engage in reasoned debate, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of democratic outcomes (Strömbäck, 2005). A framework of deliberative newsworthiness has emerged under this ideal. Developed by Marciel (2025), deliberative newsworthiness means amplifying marginalised voices contextualising systemic challenges, and prioritising issues that most significantly impact social justice, such as climate policy, wealth inequality or healthcare access. This is different from traditional journalism which often relies on elite-centric or conflict-driven criteria, such as celebrity scandals or local crime, by emphasising viewpoints from different parties to deepen public understanding and stimulate nuanced debate.

2.1.3. Impact of low trust in news on democracy

As discussed, the role of journalism is to keep citizens informed, but low news trust undermines this goal (Craft et al, 2017; Hanitzsch et al, 2018). When trust in journalism erodes, citizens are less likely to accept the verified facts and contextual explanations as the

common basis for discussion, making it harder to reach shared understandings or participate meaningfully in democratic processes. Jakobsson and Stiernstedt (2023) believe that without news trust, there is no consensus on facts, making it challenging to reach agreements in policy debates and ultimately hindering policymaking. Coleman (2012) says that because citizenship only works on the basis of common knowledge and shared agreement about ways to live, citizens not only need to become informed themselves, but to trust that others around them are similarly civically informed.

A lack of trusted news sources deepens information asymmetries, leaving citizens vulnerable to manipulation by political elites and algorithmic echo chambers (Sax, 2022). Without trusted news media, misinformation thrives and citizens retreat into fragmented media environments, weakening deliberative discourse (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). This is evident in the spread of election-related misinformation. False claims about voter fraud, amplified by partisan outlets and political figures, have damaged public confidence in electoral integrity (Brookings Institution, 2024). A recent survey by the collaborative multi-racial political study found that 57% of white Americans believed voter fraud occurred during the 2020 U.S. election, highlighting the influence of disinformation (Brookings Institution, 2024). Without a shared commitment to factual accuracy, democratic accountability crumbles, as citizens lack the tools to evaluate power or demand responsible governance (Coleman, 2012).

Low trust in news also weakens civic solidarity by undermining the perception that fellow citizens are similarly informed. Coleman (2012) argues that democratic participation requires not only individual knowledge but collective confidence in shared civic norms. The Reuters Institute further highlights the correlation between political disengagement and news distrust, as those uninterested in politics exhibit significantly lower trust in journalism (32% vs. 50% among politically engaged citizens), exacerbating democratic apathy (Newman et al., 2024).

2.2. Definitions of trust in general and trust in news

it is clear that news and journalism can help citizens participate in democratic deliberations, but only if they trust the news and journalism. In this research, it is important to define what we mean by trust and trust in news.

2.2.1. Trust in general

Trust is a complex concept and hard to define as many scholars have noted (Wang & Emurian, 2005; McKnight & Chervany, 2001; Hasnain, 2019; Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2022). Nissenbaum (2001) says that trust encompasses a wide range of relationships and involves various objects. As a topic across multiple disciplines, trust has been interpreted differently depending on the context, resulting in diverse understandings and applications (Khodyakov 2007; McKnight & Chervany, 2001).

However, several definitions have gained prominence in academic literature, particularly those by Mayer et al. (1995) and Rousseau et al. (1998). Mayer et al. (1995) emphasise the dynamic between trustor and trustee, defining trust as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that party” (p. 712). Mayer et al. (1995) further explain that the trustor is the individual or entity that places trust in another, demonstrating a willingness to be vulnerable based on positive expectations regarding the trustee's actions; conversely, the trustee is the party in whom trust is placed and is responsible for fulfilling actions that are significant to the trustor while exhibiting trustworthiness through their behaviour. This relationship forms the foundation of trust across various contexts, from interpersonal interactions to organisational settings. Rousseau et al. (1998) define, trust as a "psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another" (p. 395). Rousseau et al. (1998) highlight the inherent risk in the trust relationship, stating that the trustor assumes risk by trusting, as they cannot fully monitor or control the trustee's actions. This aligns with Mayer et al. (1995) framework, which positions expectations as central to the dynamic: the trustee must act in accordance with the trustor's expectations, often involving critical actions important to the trustor despite the inability to monitor or control those actions.

Trust is foundational to the effective functioning of institutions and society. It underpins social cohesion, supports civic participation, and enables cooperation within and across institutions (Fukuyama, 1996). High levels of trust facilitate smooth interpersonal and organisational relationships, reduce transactional costs, and enhance compliance with laws, regulations, and public policies (Mayer et al., 1995). In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or financial shocks, public trust is essential for institutional legitimacy and collective action (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020; Gorton & Metrick, 2012).

Its decline can lead to greater individual anxiety, lower compliance with public measures, and reduced engagement in democratic processes (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Justino & Samarin, 2025). For example, the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic both illustrated how institutional failures or lack of transparency can erode public trust, with serious consequences for social and economic stability (Gorton & Metrick, 2012; Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020). However, trust in institutions, particularly governments, media, and professionals, has declined significantly in recent decades. This downward trend, described by some as a “culture of suspicion” or “crisis of trust” (O’Neill, 2002; Lenard, 2005; Swain & Tait, 2007), can be traced back to the 1960s. Events such as the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and economic uncertainty eroded public confidence in government, with

surveys showing a long-term decline in trust in the U.S. federal government (Pew Research Center, 2024). Globally, as of 2023, only 39% of people expressed high or moderate trust in their national governments. This erosion of trust is linked to reduced civic engagement, lower political participation, and weakened democratic institutions (Putnam, 1995; Justino & Samarin, 2024).

2.2.2. Trust in news

Building on the general nature of trust, trust in news can be seen as the trust relationship between news and news consumers. The relationship can be described as “the willingness of the news recipients to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory matter” (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5). This concept draws upon psychology theories of trust as outlined by Rousseau et al. (1998), in which individuals accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of another’s intentions or behaviour. Under this vulnerability, trusting news also means taking a risk (Giddens, 1990; Grosser, 2016; Luhman, 1979), as drawing on the definition of trust, trust involves risks. Van Dalen (2023) explains that the risk includes getting wrong information, missing out important events or making badly informed decisions, because news recipients cannot keep an eye on all the decisions and choices made in the news-making process.

Trust in news can be understood as a form of institutional trust, with journalism regarded as a societal institution (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Institutional trust is primarily cognitive, relying on individuals’ assessments of an institution’s performance, transparency, and accountability (Tsfati & Cohen, 2003). Unlike interpersonal trust, which develops through direct relationships and familiarity, institutional trust emerges in contexts where individuals have limited personal interaction with the institution (Khodyakov, 2007). As such, it is grounded more in belief than in experience. McKnight et al. (1998) define institutional trust as “the belief that proper impersonal structures are in place to enable one to anticipate a successful future endeavour,” highlighting that trust is rooted in confidence in institutional mechanisms and norms.

2.2.3. Differentiating trust and trustworthiness

Although this research focuses on trust in news rather than the trustworthiness of journalists or journalistic institutions, it is essential to clarify these concepts, as they are deeply intertwined. Scholars have described trustworthiness as a key element that connects the trustor and trustee to form a trust relationship; however, trust and trustworthiness are not always aligned (Mayer et al, 1995; Nissenbaum, 2001; Robbins, 2016). News consumers may withhold trust even when journalists or news organisations exhibit qualities that make them trustworthy.

McLeod (2014) states that "trust is an attitude that we have towards people whom we hope will be trustworthy, where trustworthiness is a property, not an attitude" (p.12). Hardin (2002) describes that trustworthiness is closely linked to the trustor's expectations, proposing that we place our trust in persons whom we believe have strong reasons to act in our best interests. However, Jones (2013) has pointed out trust and trustworthiness often misalign, with saying that trusting the untrustworthy and not trusting the trustworthy always has a cost. This indicates that trustor potentially not placing trust on a trustworthy trustee, vice versa, trustor potentially places trust on an untrustworthy trustee.

According to scholars, the core qualities necessary for news to be considered trustworthy include ability, benevolence, integrity, reliability to commitments, and consistency (Mayer et al., 1995; Hancock et al., 2023). In the journalistic context, news outlets must demonstrate ability through journalists' professional competence, such as providing accurate and timely reporting. Benevolence requires outlets to act in the public interest rather than for self-gain. Integrity involves adherence to ethical standards such as honesty, fairness, and transparency. Reliability is shown by consistently fulfilling commitments to act ethically, professionally, and in the public interest. Finally, consistency in upholding these standards over time is essential for maintaining trustworthiness. These expectations are supported by research showing that news consumers value accuracy, timeliness, and fairness (Newman et al., 2024; Pew Research Centre, 2024; Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2024). As trustworthiness has also been described as a moral virtue (Potter, 2002), news outlets are obligated to uphold these standards not only to foster trust but also to fulfil their ethical responsibilities to the public.

2.2.4. Trust, confidence, credibility, and reliability

Other related concepts include confidence, credibility, and reliability, as much of the research on trust in news has intertwined these terms (Henke et al., 2019; Swart & Broersma 2021; Ostertag 2010). While they are deeply interconnected, they are distinct concepts with unique characteristics and not interchangeable (Van Dalen, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Each captures unique aspects of how news consumers evaluate and relate to news media, so it is crucial to distinguish the concepts to develop precise measures.

Confidence refers to an individual's belief in their own abilities or the reliability of information based on past experiences. Scholars note that trust can enhance confidence: when individuals trust a source or authority figure, their confidence in that source's information increases (Hancock et al., 2023). Credibility encompasses perceptions of knowledge and integrity. Without it, individuals are less likely to be trusted (Jenkins et al., 2009). Credibility is critical because it establishes the foundation upon which trust is built. Research indicates

that credibility is developed through consistent behaviour and demonstrated expertise over time (Metzger et al., 2003). Reliability is defined as the consistency with which an individual or system meets expectations. It serves as an objective measure of dependability—essentially whether someone can be counted on to follow through on commitments. Reliability is crucial for establishing trust; when individuals consistently meet expectations, they foster a sense of security that enhances trust (Mayer et al., 1995).

2.3. Trust in news, news, and media literacy

The aim of this research is to explore the relationship between trust in news and news literacy, focusing on how both enable meaningful participation in deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy depends on citizens being well-informed and capable of critically engaging with public issues. This requires not only trust in news but also an understanding of how journalism works, including its processes and the media environment in which it operates. To establish this connection, it is important to define what constitutes media and news literacy and examine how these concepts have been linked to trust in news in previous research.

When investigating trust in news, Fawzi et al. (2021) identify both individual- and societal-level factors. Among the individual-level factors, media literacy plays a critical role. They define media literacy as that “Media literacy refers to the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms. It is assumed that media-literate individuals are better able to judge the quality of news, which may foster trust in news media.” (p. 162) This is particularly relevant given that low trust in news is often linked to perceived bias, ideological polarisation, exposure to misinformation, and a lack of transparency or understanding of journalistic practices (Newman et al., 2024; Fawzi et al., 2021; Pew Research Centre, 2024). While such studies refer to media literacy more broadly, their implications align closely with the concept of news literacy, which focuses specifically on the knowledge and skills needed to understand how journalism operates and to evaluate its trustworthiness.

2.3.1. Definitions of media literacy

According to Potter (2022), who conducted an extensive analysis of media literacy definitions and found over 400 definitional elements, most definitions of media literacy include elements related to accessing, analysing, evaluating, and creating media messages (Potter, 2022). Some definitions highlight both the knowledge about media and the skills needed to engage with media critically (Potter, 2022).

In terms of the knowledge, some scholars emphasise the knowledge on the media itself as the crucial element for media literacy, and categorise the media knowledge in different aspects. Buckingham (2003) proposes four key concepts essential for media literacy:

production, language, representation, and audience. Knowledge of production involves understanding who creates media messages and why, an aspect that is connected to this research. Language knowledge encompasses understanding how media use various codes and conventions to convey meaning. Representation knowledge involves recognising how media portray particular groups or ideas. Audience knowledge includes understanding how different audiences interpret media messages and how media target specific audiences. Apart from the media knowledge, Potter (2004) notes the knowledge of the real world and the self can enable individuals to be more aware during information processing tasks. He says the five key knowledge structures are required to be media literate: understanding of media content, media industries, media effects, the real world, and the self. Media industries knowledge encompasses the development of media industries, economics, ownership and control, and marketing messages. Media effects knowledge includes understanding the broad perspective of effects, risk factors, processes of influence, and factors in the process of influence. Real world knowledge provides a basis for comparing media portrayals with reality. Finally, knowledge of the self includes understanding one's personal knowledge style and goals (Potter, 2004). Furthermore, Jenkins et al. (2009) emphasise the importance of participatory culture in the digital age, suggesting that media literacy should include knowledge of how to create and share media content, as well as how to navigate online communities and collaborative environments.

In terms of the skills, Potter (2004) further suggests skills in interacting with media content, listing out seven key skills as a requirement for media literacy: analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstraction. Skills in critical analysis and evaluation skills are also central to media literacy, as it enables individuals to deconstruct messages, detect bias and propaganda, and understand how media messages portray reality (Andersson, 2021), making it essential for individuals to distinguish between credible sources and misinformation (Scheufele & Krause, 2019). Hobbs (2010) argues that within the growing body of media literacy scholarship, critical thinking is the most frequently mentioned skill, highlighting its importance in the field. The ability to think critically about information sources is crucial for navigating the complex media landscape and making informed judgments about the credibility of media messages. Arke and Primack (2009) developed a method to measure these skills, focusing on the ability to identify the purpose of media messages, explain viewpoints, describe techniques used, and evaluate content critically.

2.3.2. Media literacy and trust in news

While media literacy influences how news consumers evaluate the quality of news contemporary approaches to media literacy are not primarily designed to foster trust in news,

but rather to protect individuals against bias, misinformation, and disinformation media (Pennycook et al., 2021; Ashley et al., 2013; Craft et al., 2017; Hameleers, 2023). Examples include school-based curricula that teaches pupils about authorship and bias, fact-checking and interventions to correct misinformation (Masterman & Manton, 2011; Clayton et al., 2020). Media literacy efforts have also educated people about browser extensions by prompting users to consider accuracy before sharing content (Pennycook et al., 2021). Furthermore, media literacy has included well public awareness campaigns on social media (Guess et al., 2020). Despite these diverse efforts to increase media literacy, trust in news has continued to decline globally, revealing a paradox: while interventions are increasingly widespread, their long-term effects on public trust remain uncertain, particularly in environments of high political polarisation and information overload.

Some studies argue that the contemporary media literacy approaches can lead to scepticism and overconfidence in news content analysis, resulting in a low trust in news (Guess et al., 2020; Bulger and Davison, 2018). Maksl et al., (2015) explain that “higher levels of media literacy may also lead to more critical attitudes toward the news media and thus lower trust, especially when individuals become more aware of media biases and shortcomings.” (p. 162). Bulger and Davison (2018) also has evaluated media literacy efforts relative to the contemporary media landscape and raised concerns about potential negative outcomes. They suggest media literacy efforts might produce overconfidence in individuals' skills in analysing media information. Furthermore, they question whether signals for trustworthiness aimed at limiting fake news might backfire, leading to increased uncertainty among news consumers regarding media messages. Moreover, Hameleers (2023) believes media literacy interventions on the credibility of factual information can have “unintended consequences.” This observation aligns with recent findings from a study by Guess et al. (2020) which demonstrates that media literacy tips aimed at fostering scepticism towards false news can also reduce trust in true news. The unintended consequences of media literacy interventions are particularly concerning given that only a small portion of news consumed daily consists of misinformation or fake news. According to a study by Grinberg et al. (2019), exposure to fake news sources during the 2016 U.S. presidential election was limited, with only 1% of users accounting for 80% of fake news source exposures. This suggests that the majority of news consumers encounter relatively little misinformation in their daily media diet.

2.3.3. Definitions of news literacy

News literacy is recognised as a subset of media literacy, focusing specifically on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to critically engage with news content (Tully et al., 2020; Maksl et al., 2015; Vraga et al., 2021). Maksl et al. (2015), drawing on Potter’s (2004) media literacy framework, explain that higher levels of news media literacy are

achieved when individuals possess greater knowledge about the content of news, the conditions under which news is produced, and the effects news can have on both society and individuals. Similarly, Vraga et al. (2021) define news literacy as “knowledge of the personal and social processes by which news is produced, distributed, and consumed, and skills that allow users some control over these processes” (p. 5).

News literacy equips individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to critically assess news content and make informed decisions, distinguishing it from general media literacy by its specific focus on journalism. As a subset of media literacy, news literacy shares the broader goal of moving individuals beyond passive media consumption, but it does so within the specific context of news (Potter, 2004). This perspective highlights the importance of deliberate and reflective news engagement, enabling individuals to better navigate the information they encounter. As Tully et al. (2020) state, news literacy “emphasises the development of knowledge, skills, and a personal sense of control about media choices” (p. 212). Building on this, Fleming (2014) describes news literacy as fostering regular and sceptical news habits, helping individuals assess the reliability of information for personal and civic decision-making. A further dimension of news literacy is the aim to think like a journalist. Miller (2010) notes that news literacy education seeks to train news consumers to approach news with the same critical, investigative, and ethical standards that guide journalists. Ultimately, this approach promotes a sense of agency by encouraging people to actively manage their news consumption, maintain critical distance, and recognise the boundaries between news, entertainment, and opinion.

Additionally, some scholars emphasise the civic roles of news literacy, which set it apart from other forms of media literacy due to the unique societal function of news. Schneider (2013) notes that news literacy is distinguished by its strong connection to civic engagement, as news serves as a vital form of information that supports democratic participation and informed citizenship. Mihailidis & Thevenin (2013) frames news literacy as a bridge between journalists and citizens, cultivating informed sceptics who can critique media while also understanding its importance in a democracy. This perspective encourages news consumers not only to critically assess journalism but also to appreciate its societal value and its role in maintaining a healthy democracy.

2.3.4. News literacy and trust in news

News literacy is uniquely positioned to support trust in news by helping individuals critically engage with journalism, rather than reject media altogether. As discussed, media literacy education is essential for developing critical thinking about media, but it often emphasizes the negative consequences of media exposure such as manipulation, bias, and

misinformation. This sometimes leads individuals to be sceptical, or even reject all media content, including credible news, rather than learning to differentiate between trustworthy and untrustworthy sources (Nelson & Lewis, 2021). While media literacy broadly concerns the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create messages across all forms of media, news literacy is crucial because news is a unique form of information with civic responsibility. By focusing specifically on the quality of news, setting it apart from other media types such as entertainment, advertising, or opinion, news literacy homes in on credibility, verification, and the civic role of news, by equipping news consumers with knowledge to understand and appreciate journalism. News literacy directly addresses trust in news by equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills to understand how news is produced, distributed, and consumed.

Research has highlighted the role of news literacy in fostering trust in news. For instance, the *IMPRESS News Literacy Report* found that individuals with limited knowledge of how journalism is regulated and produced consistently reported lower levels of trust (Firmstone & Steel, 2022). The survey revealed that a significant majority of respondents would trust news more if they had a better understanding of regulation and journalistic processes, suggesting that trust is closely tied to transparency and public awareness of how news is created. These findings underscore that transparency and knowledge of journalistic practices are central to building trust in news. The JMAD's report supports this perspective, stating that "without adequate media literacy education, the public is more likely to fall into algorithm-driven echo chambers, believe misinformation, and distrust traditional news outlets" (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2025, p. 12). While this statement refers broadly to media literacy, the findings implicitly point to the importance of news literacy in shaping trust. When asked what would increase their trust in news, respondents strongly emphasised the need for greater transparency from news organisations. This reflects a growing public desire not just for general media literacy, but for a deeper understanding of news production processes that enables more informed and confident evaluations of news trustworthiness.

2.3.5. News literacy frameworks

This research considers news literacy frameworks as tools to assess individuals' abilities to engage critically with news. Scholars have developed various frameworks for different purposes, including education and empirical research (Tully et al., 2021; News Literacy Project, 2022; Ashley et al., 2013).

Frameworks designed for educational contexts, such as the News Literacy Project's teaching framework, emphasise conceptual understanding, critical thinking, and the development of practical habits of mind in students (News Literacy Project, 2022). Similarly,

Ad Fontes Media provides educational resources centred on its Media Bias Chart, which visually maps news sources by their reliability and political bias.

For research purposes, Ashley et al. (2013) propose a framework that categorises news literacy into themes such as authors and audiences, messages and meanings, and representation and reality, enabling quantitative assessment of individuals' awareness and evaluation skills. Another widely used research tool is the News Media Literacy (NML) Scale, which draws on Potter's (2004) media literacy model. This scale measures individuals' knowledge about media content, industries, effects, and personal interpretation, tailored specifically to the news context. Additionally, Tully et al. (2021) introduce the 5C framework, which organises news literacy into five dimensions: context, creation, content, circulation, and consumption. This model captures the complexity of the contemporary news ecosystem and serves as a comprehensive tool for assessing news literacy in research settings.

2.3.5.1. 5Cs of news literacy

The 5Cs framework is the most suitable tool for this research because it provides a civically grounded, research-oriented structure that aligns with the research's focus on trust in news. While this study does not investigate all five domains the framework's design captures the full ecosystem of news—context, creation, content, circulation, and consumption—offering flexibility to focus on the dimensions most relevant to the research aims. Its structured yet adaptable approach allows for a more targeted assessment of news literacy while retaining conceptual coherence.

The 5Cs framework also places greater emphasis on the civic function of journalism compared to other tools such as the News Media Literacy (NML) Scale. It explicitly includes knowledge of the legal, political, and economic conditions shaping journalism, such as press freedom, regulation, and journalism's watchdog role. These elements are directly relevant to how citizens evaluate and trust news. In contrast, the NML Scale, adapted from Potter's (2004) broader media literacy model, includes some items related to news production and consumption but does not centre civic or democratic roles as core constructs. Moreover, the NML Scale mixes attitudes, behaviours, and self-efficacy with knowledge, making it less precise for examining how specific aspects of news literacy relate to trust. By drawing selectively on the 5C framework, this study leverages its conceptual strengths while tailoring it to the study's analytical focus.

2.3.5.2. Context and creation as the research focus

In this research, two aspects of the 5C framework are chosen to investigate: context and creation. While there is limited research directly investigating the connection between news literacy and trust in news, the Impress News Literacy Report provides exceptional insight into this relationship. Mapping its findings onto the 5C framework for news literacy, the report primarily emphasizes the context and creation domains—both of which are shown to be strongly linked to public trust in news.

Context involves knowledge of the social, legal, and economic environments in which news is produced. This includes understanding of regulation, press standards, and the role of journalism in society (Tully et al., 2021). Knowledge in this domain involves recognising how business structures, government, and technology companies impact news, while skills include interpreting legal constraints or platform policies and assessing their influence on news production. The IMPRESS report found that accurate understanding of news regulation is low: 45% of respondents mistakenly believed that television, radio, newspapers, and online news are regulated by the same body, and 33% did not know who regulates these outputs at all (Firmstone & Steel, 2022). Additionally, 59% incorrectly thought newspapers and their online variants must be signed up to a regulating body, which is not the case. The report found that 70% of respondents would trust the news more if they knew more about how news was regulated, and 66% said they would trust news more if they understood journalistic production processes better (Firmstone & Steel, 2022).

Creation focuses on the process by which news is conceived, reported, and produced by journalists and other actors. It encompasses knowledge of who creates news (e.g., journalists, editors, algorithms), their professional values, routines, and the ways in which news is selected and presented. Skills in this domain involve identifying newsworthy information, distinguishing news from opinion or advertising, and understanding the role of news creators in society. The IMPRESS report also notes that low knowledge of creation correlates with higher distrust: among those who felt they did not understand how journalism works, distrust was 62%, five percentage points higher than the general population (Firmstone & Steel, 2022). Conversely, those who felt knowledgeable about journalism were 7% more likely to trust journalists and 5% less likely to distrust them. The report demonstrates that increasing transparency and public understanding in these areas is essential for rebuilding trust in news (Firmstone & Steel, 2022).

Despite these findings, there remains a notable gap in qualitative research exploring how people interpret and experience news literacy and trust, particularly within the New Zealand

context. Most existing studies rely on quantitative surveys or focus groups conducted in the UK. Qualitative research, by contrast, can offer deeper insight into how individuals make sense of regulatory frameworks, newsroom routines, and their own engagement with news, capturing the complexity of public attitudes and lived experiences (Kohring et al., 2007; Garusi & Splendore, 2023). This is especially relevant in New Zealand, where no studies have yet examined the relationship between news literacy and trust in news, and where media structures and audience expectations may differ from those in the UK. This research addresses that gap by investigating (RQ1) the extent to which New Zealanders understand both the external context and internal processes involved in news production, and (RQ2) how these understandings relate to their trust in news.

Other important aspects of the 5Cs framework—content, circulation, and consumption—are beyond the scope of this research. While they are valuable for understanding how people engage with news, they are not necessarily focused on how well individuals understand how journalism works, including the systems and processes that underpin news production. Content refers to the qualitative characteristics of a news story, such as recognising news values, identifying misinformation, and evaluating sources and evidence. Circulation involves how news is distributed across platforms and shaped by media organisations, algorithms, and audiences. Consumption relates to personal factors that shape how individuals' access, interpret, and are influenced by news, including their biases and habits. These domains address broader engagement with news but do not directly measure institutional knowledge of journalism. In contrast, existing research such as the *Impress News Literacy Report* (Firmstone & Steel, 2022) and JMAD's 2025 trust report (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2025), emphasises that trust in news is closely tied to how well people understand the regulatory and production processes behind journalism. As such, this research focuses specifically on the context and creation domains, which are most directly related to trust in news and understanding of journalistic works.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter details the method and approach adopted for the research, explaining details of the quantitative survey data conducted and the process of qualitative, semi-structured interviews. The chapter explains the rationale for the research design, describes participant recruitment and data collection procedures, and outlines the analytical tools used. Ethical considerations and limitations of the study are also discussed.

3.1. Research design

This research employs a mixed-method approach to investigate how the trust in news and news literacy may connect by exploring both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of these. The study was conducted in two stages. First, an anonymous, electronic survey, was used to capture broad trends and patterns of news trust and news literacy among New Zealand residents. The second stage consisted of semi-structured interviews, aiming to dive deeper into New Zealanders knowledge in journalism and how this knowledge may influence their trust in news. Qualitative methods are particularly effective for studying news literacy because they allow researchers to uncover complex relationships between individuals' media knowledge and their trust in news (Bertrand & Hughes, 2017).

Surveys are particularly well-suited for collecting quantitative data from a large sample, enabling the identification of demographic and behavioural trends (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, online surveys are cost-effective and highly accessible, allowing participants from diverse geographic locations to contribute, ensuring that the study captures a wide range of perspectives (Evans & Mathur, 2005). In this research, the survey served as the preliminary phase in the mixed-methods design as it was used to generate quantitative data that subsequently informed the qualitative exploration. By identifying key themes and patterns in the survey responses, more insightful interview questions could be developed.

The semi-structured interviews were used to complement the survey and to provide providing qualitative in-depth and contextual understanding of participants' trust in news and news literacy. In general, interviews enable participants to articulate personal experiences and perspectives that cannot be fully captured through standardised survey questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Aligned with the principles of mixed-method research, the qualitative phase serves to explain patterns observed in the survey data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For instance, the interview can explore the nuanced links between trends in trust in news and varying degrees of news literacy by asking interviewees how their knowledge and understanding of journalistic practices shape their perceptions of news trust. In-depth

accounts can provide a rich, contextualized understanding of the factors influencing trust, thereby enhancing the rigor and validity of the research findings (Seale, 2017).

3.2. Data collection

The participants of this study are New Zealand residents who volunteered to participate in the research. The recruitment was conducted through social media and online forum posts (e.g., New Zealand Facebook community groups, New Zealand Reddit community groups) with the aim to ensure a diverse participant pool representing various demographics across New Zealand. Inclusion criteria required participants to be current New Zealand residents aged 18+. Those who were current professional journalists were excluded from the survey and interviews to avoid conflating industry knowledge with general news literacy. The survey included Likert scale questions to assess participants' trust in news and their knowledge of journalism. The survey questions were informed by the JMAD *Trust in News in Aotearoa New Zealand* report (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2024) and the Reuters Institute's *Digital News Reports* (Newman et al., 2024). (The survey results are provided in the Appendix 1 for reference).

The study recruited 250 New Zealand residents for the survey that included an opt-in prompt for participation in the second stage of the research, in-depth interviews. Willing participants provided their email addresses and names through a separate form that was uploaded on AUT's Qualtrics survey platform. From the survey cohort, the first 11 participants who expressed willingness to be interviewed were selected for semi-structured interviews. All interviews were conducted via Zoom to accommodate geographic diversity, reflecting New Zealand's distributed population.

The interview questions were based on existing literature in trust in news and news literacy, as well as findings from the survey results. The survey revealed several key concerns such as generally low levels of trust, perceived political bias, the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation, and a widespread lack of understanding about how journalism operates. These themes informed the design of the semi-structured interviews, which aimed to explore participants' underlying attitudes and reasoning related to trust or distrust in news, their levels of news literacy, and the relationship between the two.

The questions were designed to cover both participants' trust in news such as which media or news sources they trust and why as well as their knowledge of journalistic practices, particularly in the context and creation domains of the 5C framework. Asking participants why they trust or distrust specific news sources helped to elicit deeper insights into their

perceptions of political bias and the role of misinformation and disinformation. Questions about their understanding of journalistic processes further allowed the study to identify areas where participants were more or less knowledgeable and how they applied this knowledge and skills when evaluating the trustworthiness of news.

Each participant was asked six main questions, accompanied by follow-up prompts to allow for elaboration and clarification. The core questions included:

1. *Can you rate how much you trust news in general, on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Not at all, 5 = Completely)? Why?*
2. *Which media sources do you trust more? Why?*
3. *Do you think journalists today are professional? Why?*
4. *Do you have knowledge in how journalists create news stories?*
5. *Would knowing how news is made make you trust it more? Why?*
6. *Should news media explain journalism better?*

Interview participants were based on different regions and their age and professions varied as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Interviewees of the research

Interviewees	Age	Region	Work/Profession
1	46-55	Christchurch	Finance
2	56-65	Auckland	Unemployed
3	26-35	Tauranga	Technology
4	N/A	N/A	N/A
5	N/A	N/A	N/A
6	46-55	Christchurch	Technology
7	18-25	Christchurch	Retail
8	56-65	Tauranga	Retired
9	65+	Whangarei	Retired
10	46-55	Tauranga	Government
11	45-55	Auckland	Technology

*The research was designed to maximise interviewees' anonymity; therefore, only their contact email addresses were retained for the interviews. Although interviewees were asked about their age, region, and work/profession after the interviews, it was up to them whether to provide those details. 'N/A' indicates information not provided by the interviewees.

3.3. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise and organise the quantitative survey data, providing an overview of participants' responses and identifying broader trends relevant to the larger population. In media research, such statistics are particularly valuable for detecting patterns that can guide deeper qualitative inquiry (Gunter, 2000). Thematic analysis was applied to the semi-structured interview transcripts to identify recurring themes related to participants' perceptions of news literacy and trust in news, allowing for the exploration of more nuanced individual experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To evaluate participants' news literacy, the study focused on the *context* and *creation* domains from the 5C framework.

Themes related to participants' knowledge and skills in the *context* and *creation* domains were categorised to address RQ1. This qualitative insight complemented the survey data, which captured only limited aspects of participants' contextual and creational knowledge.

Themes that revealed how participants' understanding of context and creation influenced their perceptions of trust in news were analysed to address RQ2. Additionally, patterns in how participants evaluated the trustworthiness of news—alongside their news literacy and backgrounds in journalism or media—were used to group participants. This categorisation enabled further analysis of how different levels and types of news literacy may correspond with differing levels of trust in news.

3.4. Ethical considerations

This research adheres to ethical principles to uphold academic standards. Both the survey and interviews have an approval from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC reference number 24/18).

Participants of the study were informed of study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. They were provided with a detailed information sheet before proceeding to the survey and interview. For the interview, consent forms were also obtained prior the Zoom conversation. During the Zoom conversation, participants were verbally informed again with study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. They were asked to provide explicit consent before the recording and transcription. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. This ensures their autonomy and awareness of how their data will be used.

Survey data was collected anonymously through AUT survey platform Qualtrics, ensuring that no personally identifiable information was linked to responses. For interviews,

participants provided their names and email addresses separately from survey data to maintain anonymity during the selection process. All data were stored securely on the researcher's devices compliant with institutional ethical standards

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the survey and interview data in the context of research question *RQ1*: To what extent do New Zealanders demonstrate news literacy in the domains of context and creation? and the research question *RQ2*: *In what ways does the news literacy among New Zealanders influence their perceptions of news credibility and contribute to declining trust in news media?* The findings are based on the survey of 250 New Zealand residents run on the AUT Qualtrics survey platform. The chapter also offers findings of the 11 interviews, conducted online, for the research.

The findings describe the extent of news literacy among New Zealanders in the domains of context and creation, highlighting key themes such as awareness of financial pressures, digital media challenges, perceptions of journalistic professionalism, and calls for transparency.

Under the 5Cs framework, context refers to the social, legal, and economic environment in which news is produced. This includes understanding the organisational structures, ownership, business models, legal protections, and broader societal forces that influence journalism. Knowledge in this domain involves recognizing how business structures, government, and technology companies impact news, while skills include interpreting legal constraints or platform policies and assessing their influence on news production (Tully et al. 2021). Creation focuses on the process by which news is conceived, reported, and produced by journalists and other actors. It encompasses knowledge of who creates news (e.g., journalists, editors, algorithms), their professional values, routines, and the ways in which news is selected and presented. Skills in this domain involve identifying newsworthy information, distinguishing news from opinion or advertising, and understanding the role of news creators in society (Tully et al. 2021).

4.1. Findings for RQ1

To what extent do New Zealanders demonstrate news literacy in the domains of context and creation?

Findings show that New Zealanders demonstrate stronger news literacy in the context domain than in the creation domain. This means that most are aware of the political, economic, and digital forces shaping journalism, and many apply this knowledge when

evaluating news. However, their understanding of how news is created - such as editorial routines, sourcing, and verification - is more limited.

4.1.1. Context domain of news literacy

Findings from both the survey and interviews indicate that New Zealanders exhibit a robust knowledge on how the economic, political, and digital environments that influence journalism, and demonstrate skills to critical engage with the news that are potentially influenced by those contextual forces.

Table 2: New Zealanders concerned about news manipulation

	Not at all concerned	Not very concerned	Somewhat concerned	Very concerned	Extremely concerned
Stories where facts are spun or twisted to push a particular agenda	0%	0%	13%	34%	53%

Table 3: New Zealanders' knowledge in journalism (context)

	Very Little Knowledge	Limited Knowledge	Moderate Knowledge	Above Average Knowledge	Extensive Knowledge
Values and roles of journalism in democracy	7%	22%	33%	25%	13%
How journalism is regulated	25%	31%	26%	15%	3%

Good awareness of how financial struggles impact news

Both survey respondents and interviewees of this research demonstrated a strong awareness and concern of how news is produced under the current economic environment, and the understanding of media ownership. Interviewees were highly aware of news media as a business, particularly the financial pressures and ownership structures that shape journalism in New Zealand's. They were relatively confident in discussing the economic challenges facing news organisations, including reduced resources, underfunding, and the collapse of traditional advertising models as seen in their comments.

"They're doing a lot less than ten or twenty years ago. Had more resources, more money. The media and things are very tight now. " (Interviewee 2)

"Journalists are under a horrific time crunch, not paid enough. Funding from ads isn't sustainable." (Interviewee 7)

“The existing business model for delivery of journalism doesn’t work. Newsrooms are like being decimated, the advertising revenue just there are free alternatives.”

(Interviewee 10)

“The problem with journalism is that the newsrooms are often underfunded, and they just don’t get to stuff as much as they should.” (Interviewee 11)

Interviewees expressed concerns that media ownership in New Zealand compromises impartiality and creates conflicts of interest. Regarding Warner Bros. Discovery’s decision to shut down Newshub and Canadian billionaire James Grenon’s push for control over NZME, they voiced anxieties about foreign influence and commercial priorities overtaking public interest.

“I have real concerns about the potential buyer takeover. It feels like there might be an Americanization of the New Zealand news media, which I think would be fairly terrible for trust in news.” (Interviewee 11)

Moreover, Simon Power, a former National Party MP, was appointed CEO of state-owned broadcaster TVNZ in 2022. Power’s political background raised questions about editorial independence and media neutrality.

“Simon Power was a National Member of Parliament for a long time and then he became in charge of One News, so at that point you have to be careful that somebody doesn’t have a conflict of interest.” (Interviewee 10)

Critical awareness of political influence in news

Apart from the economic aspect, interviewees demonstrated a strong awareness of how the wider social environment shapes journalism, particularly political factors. They knew that journalism can be shaped by political relationships and the polarisation exacerbated by online media. They also demonstrated a critical engagement with news in an increasingly fragmented and polarised information environment. Interviewees noted that there is an intricate relationship between politicians and journalists, saying that political leanings and affiliations can influence how news is framed and reported.

“The entirety of that system is symbiotic. The politicians need the journalists which are actually editors, but the politicians need those editors to amplify their message for free, because they don’t have to spend their campaign money. And the editors need the politicians in order to get enough content that they can use in order to sell advertisements.” (Interviewee 6)

"The media should not be able to be too friendly with the politician' while they're in. There should be a separation. If we know that the media is separated from the politicians, then we will trust them." (Interviewee 5)

Moreover, interviewees had knowledge of the growing polarisation in political discourse. They recognised that the media landscape is increasingly divided, with individuals gravitating toward content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. This phenomenon is understood to be exacerbated by social media algorithms that amplify existing biases and reinforce echo chambers.

"In New Zealand we have two camps. People who can read that are more likely in the cognitive bias sense to agree with the stuff they read" (Interviewee 3).

"The algorithm tends to accentuate those divides—those bubbles, those echo chambers." (Interviewee 3)

Survey data further supports this concern about political bias and manipulation in news reporting as seen in table 2. When asked how concerned they were about news stories in which facts are spun or distorted to promote a particular agenda, a total of 87% of respondents indicated they were "very concerned" and "extremely concerned." Specifically, 53% said they were "extremely concerned," 34% were "very concerned," and 13% were "somewhat concerned." Notably, no respondents said they were "not at all concerned" or "not very concerned."

Critical awareness of online fragmentation influence in news landscape

In addition to political factors, interviewees demonstrated a strong understanding of how the digital media environment influences today's news landscape. They were particularly aware how online fragmentation may affect quality with an increase in misinformation and opinion-based content alongside credible journalism. They were critically aware of how online fragmentation shapes the way news is presented, and critically engaged with online news with proactive fact-checking behaviours.

"Because it allows more people to share more information, there's a higher volume of information out there. So, the gap in quality has widened—between what I see as well-researched journalism from reputable outlets and, on the other end, opinion pieces or outright misinformation, which have become more common due to the ease of sharing on multiple platforms." (Interviewee 3)

"News reporting is a lot more democratic like anyone can do it, but that's a double-edged sword. It means that more people can tell their story, which is a good thing, but

it means that can be abused by people that want to use the ability to spread false narratives, to make money or hurt certain groups of people.” (Interviewee 4)

An interviewee mentioned the development of online media has eroded the shared civic experience once provided by traditional media, and the quality and narratives may vary due to algorithms.

“Traditional media you’re more likely to get a balanced diet of news than you are in an algorithmic based social media which is going to tend to feed you news that meets your pre-existing biases.” (Interviewee 7)

“Before, everyone tuned into the 6 o’clock news; now, no two people get the same information. It’s fractured.” (Interviewee 7)

Interviewees also showed strong critical engagement with digital content. They reported actively fact-checking unfamiliar stories and seeking out original sources to assess credibility.

“When something is new to me, I’m more likely to fact check. If there’s a website I don’t know, and someone sends me a link, I’ll look for that information on Google or maybe you can ask A.I.” (interviewee 3)

“The other thing I do like about social media is, I can check stories. if I see a story which I don’t agree with. I can quite easily, on social media, find the real interview.” (Interviewee 5)

Moderate knowledge on the role of journalism in society

Understanding the democratic function of journalism is a key aspect of news literacy, as it shapes how individuals interpret the role and value of news media within society. The findings show that both survey respondents and interviewees have moderate knowledge on the democratic function of journalism with many able to articulate its role in informing the public, supporting democracy, and fostering social cohesion.

As seen in table 3, majority of respondent (33%) rate knowledge of the “values and roles of journalism in democracy” as moderate while 22% report they have limited knowledge, and 25% report they have above average knowledge, indicating a moderate level of understanding of journalism’s civic responsibilities.

Interviewees place focuses on informing the public with accurate and objective information as a core role of journalism.

“Just report the news objectively, report what happened. And let me make up my own mind whether it’s a good or bad thing.” (Interviewee 2)

“Their role is not to give their opinion. Their role is to report the news. So that is to report facts, not what they think the facts are.” (Interviewee 5)

An interviewee notes the role of journalism in supporting democracy and fostering social cohesion. The news media is seen as essential for informing the public and enabling shared understanding, recognising its importance in ensuring an informed citizenry and maintaining societal trust.

“Particularly liberal democracy, people being informed, but not only being informed, but being informed at the same time about the same thing... that increases social cohesion.” (Interviewee 11)

Limited knowledge on the regulation of journalism

The findings reveal that both survey respondents and interviewees have generally limited knowledge in journalism regulation with only a small proportion indicating they have strong knowledge in this area. While some were aware of the existence of self-regulatory bodies, there was scepticism about their effectiveness and little understanding of the legal or ethical frameworks involved.

As seen in table 3, only 3% report extensive knowledge and 15% above average, while over half (56%) describe their knowledge as very little or limited. One in four (25%) say they have very little knowledge of regulation. This reflects a widespread lack of awareness about the specific regulatory bodies, codes of conduct, or legal frameworks that govern journalism in New Zealand.

An Interviewee was aware of self-regulatory bodies like the Media Council but was sceptical about their effectiveness.

“In New Zealand it’s that Media Council. Somebody does a complaint, but all they do is go, ‘Oh, you were naughty! Don’t do that again and publish an apology,’ but it’s too late. Damage already done. So they need to, maybe look at that and make it a bit more punishable.” (Interviewee 5)

Knowledge and skills in the context domain

In terms of knowledge, interviewees showed strong awareness of the social, legal, and economic forces shaping news production, especially in terms of financial and political

influence and digital media environment. They demonstrated a strong understanding of the financial struggles facing news organisations, such as reduced resources, underfunding, and the collapse of traditional advertising models. They were also aware of how media ownership—especially foreign or politically connected ownership—can influence editorial independence. Both survey respondents and interviewees were able to articulate concerns about commercial priorities overtaking the public interest and recognised the potential for conflicts of interest when politically affiliated individuals are appointed to senior media roles. Additionally, there was widespread recognition of the impact of digital transformation and social media on news polarisation and fragmentation, as well as an understanding that algorithms and echo chambers can reinforce existing biases.

In terms of skills, interviewees were able to critically interpret and discuss the financial and ownership structures affecting news organisations. They could identify the influence of business models, government, and technology on news production. Many were adept at recognising signs of bias or conflicts of interest and can assess how editorial decisions may be shaped by commercial or political pressures. There was also evidence of strong critical engagement with digital news, as interviewees report fact-checking unfamiliar stories and seeking out original sources to verify information. Furthermore, interviewees showed the ability to interpret broader societal forces, such as political relationships and online polarisation, and understand how this shapes the news environment. This included recognising the role of algorithms in amplifying certain perspectives and the risks posed by misinformation and echo chambers.

4.1.2. Creation domain of news literacy

Findings of the research reveal that New Zealanders have limited to moderate understanding of how news is produced and reported and what the decision-making mechanisms are. While interviewees were broadly aware that editors and senior journalists make key decisions about which stories to cover, survey showed that majority of respondents only had less knowledge on the internal processes behind news selection and production. Perceptions of journalistic professionalism were mixed—some viewed journalists as self-promotional or biased while others (who have had direct experience with journalists) defended their integrity and working conditions. Interviewees also displayed skills in distinguishing factual news from opinion.

Table 4: New Zealanders' knowledge in journalism (creation)

	Very Little Knowledge	Limited Knowledge	Moderate Knowledge	Above Average Knowledge	Extensive Knowledge
How news media operates	13%	34%	34%	15%	5%
How news is produced	14%	35%	31%	16%	5%
How journalists choose which stories to cover	15%	36%	31%	16%	2%

Moderate to limited knowledge on news media operations

When it comes to the inner workings of news business operations, both survey respondents and interviewees' understanding is generally between moderate to limited, and often based on indirect or informal sources.

The research found that survey respondents' knowledge about news media operations was modest. As seen in table 4, only 5% of them rated their knowledge of how news media operates as extensive while 13% reported very little knowledge and 34% limited knowledge on this.

Many interviewees admitted their knowledge was limited and often shaped by indirect sources such as anecdotes, family members, or portrayals in popular media.

“My understanding is not very high. But I know that I expect that well researched, edited information is likely to have several layers of people having a look at it and then approving it before it gets [published].” (Interviewee 3)

“I guess I’ve seen a few TV programs about that kind of stuff. I guess I’ve never really sat down and thought about it very hard.” (Interviewee 4)

Limited knowledge on news production process

Understanding of the news production process was limited, though there was broad recognition of the importance of fact-checking and source verification.

As seen in table 4, only 16% of survey respondents rated their knowledge of how news is produced as above average, and just 5% as extensive, while 49% reported having very little or limited knowledge.

Interviewees also admitted that their understanding is basic and expressed concerns about the fact-checking process, although their knowledge in this area is limited.

“I understand, at a very basic level, that in a good journalist and a good editorial organisation, they are doing some level of review and fact checking. These journalists also have standards in terms of the quality of source information.” (Interviewee 3)

“It’s the sourcing and fact checking (to enhance the trust in news) That’s the bit that most people would like to understand more about.” (Interviewee 8)

Perceptions of editorial control

Both survey respondents and interviewees' knowledge of how journalists choose which stories to cover is generally limited. While few understand the detailed decision-making process, they consistently identify editors and senior journalists as key decision-makers.

As seen in table 4, only 16% of survey respondents rate their knowledge of how journalists choose which stories to cover as above average, and 2% as extensive, while 15% report very little, and 36% report limited knowledge.

Interviewees believe that editors and senior journalists play a decisive role in story selection, which can influence perceptions of bias or omission. An interviewee says that the public does not have much knowledge on news making process, but aware of the decisive role of editors,

“They (the public) know somebody in an editorial position decides what stories run and which don’t.” (interviewee 2)

“Somebody like the editor, news editor, senior person in the newsroom makes that decision (of which news stories to cover).” (Interviewee 1)

Apart from the editor’s role in decision-making, interviewees are also aware that newsrooms monitor audience engagement and may adjust content based on what receives the most attention.

“They look at what gets the most clicks or comments and use that to decide what to cover more in the future.” (Interviewee 3)

Journalism professionalism not widely recognised

The findings reveal journalist professionalism is not widely recognised, and interviewees mostly understood that through media and personal connections, shaping their perception of journalist professionalism.

Interviewees observed that journalists' personal social media activity can affect public perceptions of their objectivity, and criticised the rise of celebrity-focused journalism and self-promotion.

"People have been able to go on to journalists' own personal Twitter and Facebook pages, and they've seen journalists express quite strongly anti-national opinions."
(Interviewee 2)

"I got sick of the journalists trying to make a career out of being on TV. It was about New Zealand seeing people who are on TV as being celebrities rather than not. I think that they'd do further themselves rather than anything either academic or about an issue." (Interviewee 1)

Conversely, interviewees who have worked with journalists defend their professionalism. Interviewee 7 says journalists' integrity based on firsthand experience, attributing errors to systemic pressures rather than malice.

"Journalists don't have bad intentions. Mistakes are genuine accidents. They're under crunch and trying to find stories." (Interviewee 7)

"I know some people well. I was friends with people who were going through journalism school. I know the types of classes, particularly around ethics that they take." (Interviewee 11)

Cautious skill in distinguishing between factual news and opinion

Interviewees demonstrate a cautious skill in distinguishing between factual news and opinion. They are generally aware that opinion pieces are more subjective and tend to approach them with a higher degree of scepticism. They actively look for cues such as bylines, tone, and source credibility to help determine whether a piece is factual reporting or editorial commentary.

"If it's like an opinion piece, that's on a news website, then that trust is because that's clearly a biased article. I tend to have lower trust in those." (Interviewee 8)

"There's more of a practice of expressing when something is opinion and expressing when something is news. You can draw a distinction between what is opinion and what is news in traditional media easier than you can in social media." (Interviewee 10)

"If I read something I'll check the source of where that came from, and if it's like some other random URL that I've never heard of, where it's not verifiable who wrote the

opinion, or who wrote the article, then my acceptance of whatever that piece is going to be a lot lower. (Interviewee 11)”

Knowledge and skills in creation domain

In terms of knowledge, both survey respondents and interviewees' knowledge in the creation domain of news literacy was proven limited. Survey respondents rated their knowledge about news media operations as modest. While most interviewees recognised that journalists, editors, and senior newsroom staff are responsible for selecting and producing news, their understanding of the inner workings of newsrooms and the specifics of news production processes was limited. Much of their knowledge was shaped by indirect sources such as anecdotes, popular media, or personal connections. There was a broad awareness of the importance of fact-checking and editorial oversight, but limited insight into how these practices is carried out in practice. Additionally, perceptions of journalistic professionalism were mixed, with some scepticism about objectivity and motives, especially in the context of journalists' public profiles and social media activity.

In terms of skills, interviewees were particularly cautious in distinguishing between factual news, opinion and advertising. They were attentive to cues such as bylines, tone, and source credibility, and tend to approach opinion pieces or content from unfamiliar sources with greater scepticism. Many interviewees knew that editorial decisions and audience engagement can influence what stories are covered, and they used this understanding to inform their judgement of news trustworthiness.

4.1.3. RQ1's key findings

Overall, both survey respondents and interviewees demonstrate strong news literacy in the context domain, showing a high level of awareness and critical understanding of the social, economic, and political forces shaping news production. They are particularly attuned to the impact of financial pressures, political factors and digital transformation, and possess well-developed skills in recognising bias, identifying conflicts of interest, and engaging critically with digital news. While they are well aware of the contextual forces influencing journalism, a gap exists in their knowledge of journalism regulation and how it upholds news quality under such pressures. They are generally unfamiliar with regulatory frameworks and sceptical about the effectiveness of regulatory bodies. However, their strength in contextual awareness is not matched in the creation domain, where their understanding of newsroom operations, editorial routines, and fact-checking processes remains modest and is often shaped by indirect or informal sources. Although they can identify key roles such as editors and journalists, their insight into how news is actually produced and verified is limited. Their

ability to distinguish between news and opinion—though present—tends to be cautious rather than confident.

4.2. Findings for RQ2

In what ways does the news literacy among New Zealanders influence their perceptions of news trustworthiness and contribute to declining trust in news media?

As literature has shown, people are more likely to evaluate the trustworthiness of news based on their existing knowledge and beliefs (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Based on findings from R1, we can say that New Zealanders participating in this research had generally a high level of news literacy in the context domain, but a weaker understanding in the creation domain. As a result, their evaluations of news trustworthiness were mostly based on their contextual awareness—such as recognising political, economic, and social influences—rather than a deeper understanding of how news is produced. As the outcomes of their evaluations, they raised several concerns in the trustworthiness of news. These concerns related to political influence on journalism; attention-driven journalism; inconsistent quality in digital news environment; and lack of transparency in newsroom.

However, different levels and types of news literacy influence how interviewees responded to these concerns. To illustrate this, interviewees were categorised into three groups based on their combined knowledge and critical skills in the context and creation domains: high in both domains, high in context and moderate in creation, and moderate in both or limited in creation. Although their overall trust in news varied, they shared similar evaluative attitudes within each group.

- Group 1 (Context + Creation Aware) demonstrated informed and selective trust, using both contextual understanding and internal content cues—such as sourcing, tone, and structure—to assess news credibility.
- Group 2 (Context-Dominant) showed cautious and critical trust, guided mainly by external factors like political or commercial influence, but with limited insight into journalistic routines.
- Group 3 (Surface Awareness) reflected habitual or emotionally driven trust, relying more on familiarity, visibility, or emotional tone, rather than a deeper evaluation of context or content. Each group demonstrates a distinct way in which the four concerns shape their evaluation of news trust.

For those with high news literacy in both domains, trust was selective, drawing on their understanding of both contextual influences and internal newsroom processes. For those high in context and moderate in creation, trust was marked by contextual scepticism; and for

those with moderate to limited in both domains, trust was cautious and heavily reliant on external cues such as brand reputation. Across all groups, the primary concerns act as filters when evaluating the trustworthiness of news, but they depend on each interviewee's specific news literacy profile.

4.2.1. Primary concerns of the trustworthiness of news

Drawing from both interview responses and survey findings, interviewees' contextual knowledge strongly shaped how they assessed the trustworthiness of news. The detailed data below outlines the key concerns raised and the reasoning behind their evaluations.

Table 5: New Zealanders concerned about news

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
The news is too opinionated and lacks factual information	1%	15%	13%	39%	31%
The reporting in the news is biased and not balanced	2%	14%	12%	37%	35%
News is too much a result of the political leaning of the newsroom	4%	10%	13%	33%	41%
Government financial support for the media in NZ means you cannot trust journalists to hold the government to account	26%	19%	12%	22%	22%
I can't trust news that is full of grammatical errors and other mistakes	2%	7%	9%	26%	56%
There is a lack of transparency in the way the news media operates	5%	12%	20%	32%	31%

Political influence

Political relationships and government funding have emerged as critical factors shaping 'trust in news'. Both survey and interview data reveal widespread scepticism regarding the fairness of news coverage and the editorial independence of news organisations that receive public financial support.

With regard to political relationships, interviewees articulate how such influence may compromise the fairness and neutrality of news content, contributing to a decline in trust in the media'

“When they’re reporting on politicians, they get little bits of their words and they twist them.” (Interviewee 5)

“Domestic politics? I don’t believe a word. Journalists need access, so they avoid hard questions. It’s pay-for-play.” (interviewee 6)

“The public feel that there is a level of editorial bias, even within the journalists themselves, to only report things that they want to report in the way that they want to report in order to fulfil a narrative.” (Interviewee 11)

Additionally, an interviewee raised concern some stories are omitted or downplayed to avoid controversy, especially around sensitive topics like transgender issues.

“I believe mainstream media is not covering stories because they fear it might be a backlash against the trans community. They’ve just decided not to cover it at all.” (Interviewee 3)

These comments link to the survey findings which indicate a strong perception among respondents that news in New Zealand is overly opinionated, biased, and politically influenced. As seen in table 5, a combined 70% of respondents somewhat agree or strongly agreed that the news is too opinionated and lacks factual information while only 16% disagreed. Similarly, 72% agreed that the reporting in the news is biased and not balanced,” and 74% believe that “news is too much a result of the political leaning of the newsroom.”

Additionally, interviewees expressed concerns that the government’s Public Interest Journalism Fund had influenced the editorial independence of news organisations, making news become biased.

“The whole news media industry has got to a problem because there’s not enough money in it. If the government puts in money. Is it still impartial?” (Interviewee 1)

“Some people think [The Public Interest Journalism Fund] influenced coverage of Treaty and Māori issues. it’s a perception, not reality, but it exists.” (Interviewee 2)

“The Public Interest Journalism Fund that Labour brought out made the media promote or not go against Māori interests.” (Interviewee 9)

Survey findings show a divided public opinion, indicating that nearly half of the respondents view public funding as a potential threat to media independence. While 44% of respondents somewhat agree or strongly agree that “government financial support for the media in New Zealand means you cannot trust journalists to hold the government to account,” 26% strongly disagree and 19% somewhat disagree (table 5).

Attention-driven journalism

Both survey respondents and interviewees expressed the concern of clickbait and attention-driven journalism that affect their trust in news. They recognised that financial pressures, particularly the need for advertising revenue in a competitive digital landscape, are reshaping the priorities of news organisations. However, they also were aware that in this environment, content that attracts attention, drives traffic and maximises engagement is often prioritised over balanced, factual reporting.

Interviewees pointed that the small size of the New Zealand media market is perceived to intensify these pressures, turning news stories to be sensational and opinionated.

“In New Zealand, we’re a very small economy. Some of the journalists [are] under more financial pressure to fit the business model where you’re selling adverts requires you to have relatively sensationalist headlines.” (Interviewee 3)

“New Zealand’s tiny economy forces journalists into clickbait. You need sensational headlines to survive.” (Interviewee 6)

They also recognised that the pressures of the digital economy—particularly the need to generate traffic and advertising revenue—have incentivised sensationalist reporting and emotional headlines, which gain more clickbait.

“There’s an incentive for news media to try and get your attention because they’re selling ad revenue from their websites. Times in conflict, and it can reduce from the quality of the journalism.” (Interviewee 3)

“They don’t have the income. They’re looking for clickbait and opinionated pieces, instead of news.” (Interviewee 9)

“Journalists now create content for clicks, not truth.” (Interviewee 6)

“It’s an attention economy. You need attention. And unfortunately, the attention that the content that generates the most attention is sensationalist. It’s rage inducing, it inspires fear or anger.” (Interviewee 11)

“Since [news] moved online. They’re competing with a lot of other content employ clickbait headlines. [It] makes me less inclined to trust them.” (Interviewee 7)

“The way that social media has these algorithms... you might be tempted to write your story in a way that like tricks the algorithm rather than is focused on the truth.” (Interviewee 4)

Inconsistent quality in the digital news environment

Interviewees expressed that the quality and accuracy of news are affected due to time pressure in the digital environment.

They also described how the dominance of social media has eroded traditional standards of verification and editorial rigor.

*"[The emerge of digital media] would obviously affect the quality [of news] To verify things, you need to go investigate, and get quotes and see evidence and stuff, and that all takes time... with, you know, lots of news being published on social media."
(Interviewee 4)*

*"Social media tempts journalists to write for algorithms, not truth. Speed over accuracy ruins quality."
(Interviewee 6)*

Survey findings show that mistakes on news content led to distrust. Approximately 82% of respondents agreed (with 56% strongly agreeing) that they could not trust news that is full of grammatical errors and other mistakes.

Lack of transparency in newsroom

Both survey respondents and interviewees were concerned about the lack of transparency in newsroom practices, particularly regarding how editorial decisions are made and the fact-checking process. They questioned why certain stories are selected or omitted, and called for more visibility into the processes behind news production. Interviewees raised concerns about subjective editorial choices and how these shape public narratives.

*"There's some stuff they just won't report on. And you wonder why."
(Interviewee 5)
"What you're seeing is not always the whole picture. Editors decide the angle."
(Interviewee 6)*

Interviewees suggested that trust in news could be improved if audiences had greater insight into how information is gathered and whether diverse viewpoints are considered.

*"If people knew how a story is put together. They could know [journalists] did this and this, to make it trustworthy."
(Interviewee 7)*

*"They [news consumers] need to understand the sources of news, the editorial position of the publisher, because that will give you an understanding about what their agenda is."
(Interviewee 8)*

“If people are educated into what journalistic standards are, what journalistic training means, what a newsroom does, how their processes work to verify information, there would be a natural increase in trust for the news.” (Interviewee 11)

This concern is supported by survey findings: 63% of survey respondents agreed (32% somewhat agree, 31% strongly agree) that “there is a lack of transparency in the way the news media operates”, suggesting a widely shared perception that journalistic processes are poorly communicated to the public.

4.2.2. Three groups of different trust in news

As discussed above, interviewees were grouped according to patterns in their knowledge and critical interpretation of news, using two core domains from the 5Cs news literacy framework: context and creation. These groupings were derived through the researcher’s observation and thematic analysis of interviewees’ responses. They emerged inductively from recurring patterns in how they described their trust in news, the knowledge they applied when evaluating journalism, and their ability to reflect on both external influences and internal processes. Each group demonstrated how their evaluation of news trust is shaped by the four key concerns identified in this research—political influence, attention-driven journalism, inconsistent quality in the digital environment, and lack of transparency. Their preferred news sources and levels of trust were closely tied to how they interpreted these issues through the lens of their news literacy strengths.

Context and creation-aware: selective and informed trust

Interviewees in this group demonstrated informed and selective trust, grounded in their combined awareness of contextual influences on journalism and internal newsroom practices. While they were mindful of political influence, inconsistent digital quality, audience-driven pressures and lack of transparency in newsroom, these concerns did not lead them to outright distrust the news. Instead, such factors acted as filters that prompted more critical engagement with the content itself. Owing to their existing knowledge in news creation, these interviewees are less likely to be swayed by perceptions of transparency in newsroom. They tend to actively seek internal content clues—such as sourcing transparency, factual balance, structural clarity and tone—to assess the trustworthiness of news.

Table 6: Context and creation-aware interviewees

Interviewee	News literacy
4	Media knowledge gained from journalist family member; skilled in identifying tone and structure.
5	Prior media-related work experience; critical sourcing awareness; distinguishes reporting from opinion.

7	Prior work experience in newsroom; understands newsroom routines and editorial balance.
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One interviewee, who previously worked in a newsroom, explained why they trust outlets with strong editorial routines:

“I worked in the newsroom. I know how they (journalists) choose stories. It’s based on balance, on verification. That’s what gives me trust.” (Interviewee 7)

Another interviewee emphasised the value of source transparency and journalistic standards:

“I trust it more if I know where the information comes from... if it’s clear what’s reported and what’s opinion.” (Interviewee 5)

Demonstrating skill in interpretation, one interviewee described how they actively distinguish news from commentary:

“I can tell whether it’s an opinion or an article based on tone, balance, and structure.” (Interviewee 4)

Interviewees in this group trusted outlets that they perceive as upholding professional norms, such as RNZ, TVNZ, and *The Guardian*, valuing transparency, fact-checking, and editorial integrity. Their trust is not passive but evaluative, built on an understanding of both the external pressures journalism faces and the internal signals of credible reporting.

Context-dominant: cautious and critical trust

Interviewees in this group demonstrated cautious and critical trust. They are less likely to evaluate content using internal production cues. Instead, their assessments often rely on broader impressions of the media environment. These interviewees tend to believe that news is heavily shaped by external contextual pressures, deeply concerns the political influence, inconsistent quality, attention-driven journalism. They are also concerned about lack of transparency in newsroom but have limited understanding of inner newsroom operation to evaluate how journalists produce news under the contextual pressures. As a result, their evaluation of trustworthiness focuses more on who owns or funds the outlet, or what is omitted, rather than how the news is produced or verified.

An interviewee voiced this uncertainty directly, saying:

“I’m not sure if it’s bias or just what they think is important.” (Interviewee 2)

“If the government funds it, of course it’ll be biased.” (Interviewee 2)

Table 7: Context-dominant interviewees

Interviewee	News literacy
1	No media industry experience; context-aware; critiques emotional tone but lacks creation insight.
2	No media industry experience; distrusts due to political influence; lacks sourcing knowledge.
3	Media knowledge gained from family member who worked in media; highlights headline drama; lacks deeper editorial understanding.
6	No media industry experience; criticises outrage framing; doesn't reference sourcing or structure.
8	Prior media-related work experience; context-aware; interprets omissions; lacks newsroom knowledge or content-based

Interviewees also show a strong sensitivity to emotional presentation, which becomes a red flag for distrust.

“They lead with whatever’s going to stir people up.” (Interviewee 1)

“It’s obvious when a piece is just to get clicks—big headlines, drama.” (Interviewee 3)

“It’s like they’re trying to trigger reaction... a lot of outrage.” (Interviewee 6)

As a result, trust is typically reserved for outlets seen as independent, neutral, or less commercial, such as RNZ or certain legacy newspapers. However, even with these outlets, trust is still fragile and often based more on their apparent independence from politics or big business than on proven journalistic quality

Surface awareness – passive trust

Interviewees in this group demonstrated moderate to low awareness in both the context and creation domains. They are aware of the broader news environment, and the four key concerns influence their perception of news in general, leading to broad scepticism or passive acceptance, depending on the outlet’s visibility or emotional appeal. They evaluate the trustworthiness of news largely depend on outlet familiarity, emotional tone, or repetition.

Table 8: Surface awareness interviewees

Interviewee	News literacy
9	No media industry experience; expresses confusion about journalism roles; trusts familiar outlets.
10	Worked with people who are in the news industry; limited awareness; passive trust; unclear on how journalism operates.
11	Media knowledge gained from friend’s journalism background; general scepticism; lacks insight into journalistic standards; relies on visibility.

An interviewee revealed how trust can be shaped by social repetition:

“I usually just go to Stuff or Herald. It’s what I grew up with.” (Interviewee 10)

“If everyone’s talking about it or sharing it, I’ll believe it’s probably true.” (Interviewee 11)

Interviewees also shared that the lack of understanding of newsroom operations led to their confusions.

“I’ve never worked in media, so I don’t really know how they choose what to cover.” (Interviewee 9)

“I don’t know how they work behind the scenes... I just get the gist.” (Interviewee 10)

These examples reflect how trust in mainstream platforms like Stuff or the New Zealand Herald arises more from brand familiarity or peer validation than from any clearly articulated understanding of editorial practices or verification standards. While interviewees in this group are not overtly distrustful of news, their trust remains passive and uncritical, shaped more by visibility than informed.

4.2.3. RQ2’s key findings

Across the interviews, four major concerns emerged in interviewees’ assessments of news trustworthiness: political influence on journalism, attention-driven journalism, inconsistent quality in the digital news environment, and a lack of transparency in newsroom practices. Interviewees’ trust in news was closely tied to their knowledge in context and creation domains. Those with stronger contextual or creational understanding tended to evaluate news more critically and selectively. Rather than relying on general impressions or surface-level judgments, they assessed trustworthiness based on perceived independence, editorial transparency, and professional standards.

4.3. Summary of RQ1 and RQ2 findings

Together, the R1 and R2 findings highlights an imbalance between contextual and creational understanding, and how this imbalance influences their trust in news.

In R1, interviewees demonstrated strong contextual literacy, but their understanding of news creation processes was significantly weaker. While they could identify external threats to journalism, interviewees showed limited knowledge of internal safeguards—such as editorial standards, fact-checking routines, journalistic ethics, and regulatory frameworks—intended to uphold journalistic integrity. This knowledge gap left many New Zealanders lacking

confidence in evaluating journalistic professionalism, particularly in how newsrooms maintain standards under external pressure.

In R2, four major concerns, political influence on journalism, attention-driven journalism, inconsistent quality in digital news environment, and lack of transparency in newsroom, were identified. However, the findings suggest three distinct audience profiles based on their levels of news literacy. Group 1 interviewees demonstrated both contextual and creational knowledge. They engaged in healthy critical evaluation, selectively choosing which news to trust based on content and cues about how it was produced. Their informed scepticism reflected not only awareness of external pressures but also some understanding of journalistic practice, enabling them to assess trustworthiness with greater confidence. Group 2 interviewees showed strong contextual awareness but had limited understanding in news creation. Their trust judgments were shaped largely by scepticism about external influences such as political bias and commercial agendas. Without sufficient knowledge of how news is created, their scepticism often leaned toward doubt, lacking the grounding necessary for balanced evaluation. Group 3 interviewees demonstrated limited knowledge in both domains. Their trust evaluations were largely intuitive, shaped by general impressions, personal experience, or second-hand narratives. While their views may still reflect important public sentiments, their engagement with journalism was less informed and more passive.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the implications of the research findings on New Zealanders' trust in news and their levels of news literacy. By analysing how participants engage with journalism—particularly through the contextual and creational domains of the 5C news literacy framework—this study offers a more nuanced understanding news trust. The findings suggest a pattern of selective scepticism shaped by individuals' existing knowledge, values, and perceptions of journalism. The chapter connects research findings to existing literature, including the JMAD's *Trust in News in Aotearoa New Zealand* report and identifies both consistencies and gaps in research. The chapter also reflects on the broader implications for news literacy education, media transparency, and the democratic role of journalism, before outlining the limitations of the research.

5.1. Not distrusting news, but critically engaging with news

This research focused on trust in news in the New Zealand context, building on the JMAD's trust in news reports in (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2023; 2024; 2025). It aimed to add depth to the existing literature, and found that New Zealanders are not just simply distrusting the news, they are engaging with it critically.

The findings echo those of Myllylahti and Treadwell (2025). R2 has identified four major concerns that were raised by both survey respondents and participants related to news trust: political influence, attention-driven journalism, inconsistent quality in the digital environment, and a lack of transparency in newsroom practices – the concerns highlighted by Myllylahti and Treadwell (2025). They have found that political bias, commercial agendas, and limited transparency are central factors shaping the trust in news in Aotearoa. While their reports offer a broad national overview based on large-scale surveys and focus groups, this research provides a more nuanced analysis by focusing specifically on the relationship between trust in news and news literacy, adding to the current knowledge about news trust. While this research used a survey as research tools (similarly to the JMAD research), it also conducted semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data, allowing interviewees to articulate their experiences and perceptions in greater depth.

This research further explored New Zealanders trust in news by examining how they engage with journalism from the news literacy perspective. Interviewees in this study demonstrated a form of critical engagement. The findings from R2 showed interviewees approached journalism with caution and selective trust rather than accepting or rejecting all news outright. Many scholars have emphasised that trust is not a binary concept of belief or disbelief. Instead, it is often conditional, selective, and shaped by individuals' prior knowledge, values, and media experiences (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

Interviewees in this research selectively trusted certain types of news based on their awareness of media context and journalistic practices. These findings suggest that declining trust reflects a more sceptical and discerning public rather than wholesale rejection.

This critical engagement suggests that interviewees are not passive consumers but active evaluators of news—a key element of a healthy deliberative democracy (Coleman, 2012; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). Deliberative democracy depends on citizens who can assess the trustworthiness of information, understand how journalism functions, and participate in public discourse grounded in shared facts. By showing that people are still engaging with news - albeit selectively and critically - this research demonstrates that the foundations for democratic deliberation remain in place, though they must be strengthened through improved news literacy.

5.2. News literacy and critical engagement

Both R1 and R2 found that New Zealanders tend to have a varied understanding of the news industry, demonstrating greater awareness of external contextual factors than of internal journalistic practices. This gap suggests a lack of comprehensive understanding on how journalism functions. This lack may affect their critical engagement and understanding of news as constructive force.

For the constructive critical engagement, it must be grounded not only in cognitive skills but also in a foundational understanding of journalistic processes and standards. Without this, scepticism can become misdirected. When citizens are highly aware of political, commercial, and digital pressures on the media but lack knowledge of the editorial safeguards and regulatory frameworks that uphold journalistic professionalism, they may conclude that news is entirely shaped by external influences. This highlights that creational knowledge is equally important as contextual awareness for fostering a healthy, critical relationship with the news, allowing them to effectively assess trustworthiness of news.

Equipping New Zealanders with stronger news literacy would enable them to evaluate the trustworthiness of news with greater confidence and to place higher trust in news that upholds professional integrity. It also fosters greater appreciation for journalism's role in informing the public about societal affairs. This, in turn, reinforces journalism's essential function in deliberative democracy—informing citizens, holding power to account, and enabling rational public discourse (Coleman, 2012; Schudson, 2008).

5.3. Rethinking news literacy education

R2's findings highlight the need to rethink news literacy education in New Zealand, shifting it beyond surface-level bias detection toward a deeper understanding of how journalism is produced and regulated.

Current initiatives focus broadly on the media environment but lack emphasis on journalism-specific processes. Programmes such as the National Curriculum's Media Studies (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2023), Netsafe's digital literacy resources (Netsafe, 2021), and Media Literacy Week (Media Council, 2022) promote valuable skills in accessing, analysing, and evaluating media. However, they tend to prioritise topics such as misinformation, advertising influence, and online safety rather than offering insight into the institutional safeguards of journalism. Media Studies under NCEA often cover media effects and representation, but they do not systematically address editorial processes, fact-checking routines, or journalistic ethics. Similarly, while Netsafe's tools are effective for identifying scams and harmful content, they largely emphasise defensive strategies rather than encouraging trust in news.

At the same time, the lack of transparency within newsrooms must also be addressed. As Karlsson (2010) notes, transparency efforts are often symbolic—such as bylines or timestamps—rather than genuinely informative. This concern is echoed in the JMAD report which found that transparency was the top-ranked factor that would increase trust in news: 60% of respondents rated transparency in how news is made as “very important”, and an additional 25% rated it as “important” (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2025).

Together, enhancing news literacy with a stronger focus on journalistic processes and improving transparency within newsrooms can significantly strengthen deliberative democracy. When citizens understand how journalism works and can see clearly how news is produced, they are better equipped to assess credibility, place informed trust in reliable sources, and engage meaningfully in public discourse. These two approaches not only foster more constructive critical engagement with news but also help restore journalism's legitimacy as a cornerstone of democratic life.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

In conclusion, this research found that New Zealanders possess a relatively strong understanding of the context in which journalism is produced, demonstrating awareness of external pressures such as financial strain, political influence, and the challenges brought by digital transformation. However, in contrast to their contextual awareness, both survey respondents and interviewees showed a limited understanding of the creation of news—specifically how journalism is produced, regulated, and fact-checked. This lack of knowledge left many unable to assess the internal credibility of professional journalism. The imbalance between recognising external pressures and understanding internal operations contributed to widespread public concerns, which this research categorised into four main areas: political influence on journalism, attention-driven news values, inconsistent quality in the digital environment, and a lack of transparency in newsroom practices.

The study also found that different levels of news literacy can shape news trust. Interviewees were categorised into three groups based on their self-declared level of news literacy. Group 1 exhibited both strong context and creation-domain knowledge—often due to professional or academic familiarity with journalism—and demonstrated evaluative trust, engaging critically with news but also recognising the constraints and professional norms within which journalism operates. Group 2 demonstrated high contextual awareness but limited understanding of news creation processes. These interviewees showed more scepticism, relying on their awareness of political and financial influences to critique news content, but lacking deeper knowledge of journalistic standards, routines, and regulation. Group 3 showed limited knowledge in both domains and displayed low trust, often basing their judgments on personal intuition or informal cues. These groupings illustrate that stronger institutional knowledge—particularly about how journalism is produced—supports more constructive forms of trust, reinforcing a comprehensive news literacy education for fostering democratic participation.

The research findings also propose that declining trust in news does not necessarily indicate complete distrust, but rather a form of critical engagement shaped by contextual awareness and limited knowledge of news creation. While many New Zealanders understand the external pressures facing journalism, such as financial constraints and political influence, they often lack insight into how news is produced, fact-checked, and regulated. This gap contributes to scepticism and selective trust.

This research argues that strengthening of institutional knowledge through targeted news literacy education—focused on journalistic standards, editorial processes, and

transparency—is essential for fostering evaluative trust and enabling meaningful participation in a deliberative democracy.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. While the survey collected responses from 250 participants and the interview sample included 11 individuals, the overall sample is not nationally representative in terms of age, ethnicity, region, or media habits. The qualitative interviews offered in-depth perspectives, but due to the small sample size, they serve more to illustrate emerging patterns than to support definitive conclusions. As such, the findings should be interpreted with caution and not assumed to reflect the views of the broader New Zealand population.

The recruitment methods likely attracted individuals with a pre-existing interest in news and media, potentially introducing self-selection bias. These participants are more likely to possess higher levels of news literacy. Although this research categorised participants into three groups based on their news literacy, with two of the groups demonstrating relatively higher literacy in the context domain, it is likely that a larger portion of the general New Zealand population has lower literacy across both domains. The existence of three groups in this research does not imply that these groups are evenly distributed in the broader population.

The sample also skewed toward older participants, who may be more attuned to shifts in the media landscape, having experienced the transition from traditional to digital news environments. Their concerns often focused on how these changes have affected the quality of news. In contrast, a younger demographic, more accustomed to digital consumption, might offer different insights into the subtler changes of the digital era, such as the shift from text-based to video content, or from Facebook to TikTok as dominant platforms.

Given these limitations, this study does not aim to generalise to all New Zealanders. Rather, it seeks to deepen understanding of how specific groups engage with news and to highlight patterns that warrant further investigation. Future research with nationally representative samples and mixed-methods approaches could expand on these findings and assess their broader relevance.

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APPENDIX 1: Results of the survey conducted for this research

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat disagree</i>	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat agree</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>
I think I can trust most news most of the time	19%	28%	16%	32%	4%
I think I can trust most of the news I consume most of the time	13%	22%	18%	39%	9%
I think I can trust most online news	24%	47%	14%	14%	1%
I think I can trust most news from newspapers and radio	20%	26%	15%	32%	7%
News provides me with quality information about important issues	13%	23%	14%	39%	10%
Journalists generally do their best to tell both sides of a story	33%	31%	14%	17%	4%
News media generally hold the Government to account	28%	28%	14%	24%	5%
I think I can trust most news from newspapers and radio	20%	26%	12%	36%	6%
While the news includes people's opinions, it is based on facts	23%	30%	17%	24%	5%
I pay for news that is trustworthy	29%	15%	29%	17%	10%
With so much misinformation these days, I depend on professional journalists to conduct fair and honest reporting	19%	11%	15%	28%	28%
The news is too opinionated and lacks factual information	1%	15%	13%	39%	31%
The reporting in the news is biased and not balanced	2%	14%	12%	37%	35%
News is too much a result of the political leaning of the newsroom	4%	10%	13%	33%	41%

Government financial support for the media in NZ means you cannot trust journalists to hold the Government to account	26%	19%	12%	22%	22%
There is a lack of transparency in the way the news media operates	5%	12%	20%	32%	31%
The range of voices in the news is too narrow and usually represents society's elites	6%	17%	13%	35%	29%
I can't trust news that is full of grammatical errors and other mistakes	2%	7%	9%	26%	56%
<i>Statements</i>	<i>Not at all concerned</i>	<i>Not very concerned</i>	<i>Somewhat concerned</i>	<i>Very concerned</i>	<i>Extremely concerned</i>
Poor journalism (factual mistakes, dumbed down stories, misleading headlines/clickbait)	0%	2%	17%	39%	43%
Stories where facts are spun or twisted to push a particular agenda	0%	0%	13%	34%	53%
Stories that are completely made up for political or commercial reasons that look like news stories but turn out to be advertisements	0%	2%	13%	26%	58%
Stories that are completely made up to make people laugh (satire)	39%	35%	12%	7%	9%
The use of the term fake news (e.g. by politicians, others) to discredit news media they don't like	4%	7%	15%	31%	43%
<i>Statements</i>	<i>Very Little Knowledge</i>	<i>Limited Knowledge</i>	<i>Moderate Knowledge</i>	<i>Above Average Knowledge</i>	<i>Extensive Knowledge</i>
How journalists choose which stories to cover	15%	36%	31%	16%	2%

How news is produced	14%	35%	31%	16%	5%
How news media operates	13%	34%	34%	15%	5%
How journalism is regulated	25%	31%	26%	15%	3%
Values and roles of journalism in democracy	7%	22%	33%	25%	13%