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Perceived Sources Matter: Implications of Misinformation on Media Trust and News Avoidance Under Different Levels of Press Freedom

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Abstract

Extant research on the impact of misinformation on media trust and news avoidance behavior has produced competing arguments and findings. The present study argues that the relationships among misinformation, media trust, and news avoidance can be better specified by considering whether people perceive misinformation as coming primarily from established institutions or non-institutional sources. Given the close linkage between the mainstream news media and established social and political institutions, people are likely to exhibit lower levels of news trust and higher levels of news avoidance if they perceive misinformation as coming from institutional sources. In contrast, when people perceive misinformation as coming from non-institutional sources, they may rely on the news media as authoritative fact-checkers and hence trust the news more and avoid it less. Societal-level press freedom is likely to moderate such relationships. The arguments and hypotheses are tested by an analysis of *Digital News Report 2025* data.

Keywords

misinformation, institutional versus non-institutional sources, media trust, news avoidance, press freedom, cross-national analysis

Introduction

When misinformation becomes prevalent, people need to re-evaluate whether various communication actors, including the news media, are trustworthy. People may also

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reconfigure whether and how they consume news information. However, academic research on the impact of misinformation on news attitudes and behavior has come up with competing findings and arguments. While misinformation is sometimes found to lead people to distrust and avoid the news, it may also lead people to see the news media as an authoritative institution that helps verify information. News trust and news avoidance behavior are important concerns because they help shape and represent how citizens relate to news institutions and public affairs information, which can in turn influence a citizenry's ability to engage in meaningful deliberation.

The present study aims to clarify the relationships among misinformation perceptions, news trust, and active news avoidance by highlighting the importance of perceived sources of misinformation. Misinformation can originate from a wide range of sources. Professional fact-checkers, for instance, may focus on political fact-checking – that is, checking wrongful or misleading claims coming from politicians and public figures – or social media debunking – that is, verifying questionable information originating from society and widely circulating via social media (Graves et al., 2024; Mena, 2019). Depending on where misinformation is considered to arise, people may hold different attitudes toward the news media and exhibit different news consumption patterns because of the presumed relationship between the news media and the misinformation sources. Specifically, this article draws a conceptual distinction between institutional misinformation and non-institutional misinformation, anticipating that the perceived prevalence of the two types of misinformation will relate differently to news trust and news avoidance.

Specifying the relationships among misinformation perceptions, news trust, and news avoidance also requires us to consider the social-political context. Societies vary in levels of political and press freedom, which has implications for what media performances may be expected and how the relationships between the news media and other social and political institutions should be understood (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2024; Palmer et al., 2020). These can influence whether people tend to see the news media as part of the misinformation problem or as capable of managing the public sphere. The article thus treats political and press freedom as a moderator that shapes the impact of misinformation perceptions.

This article contributes to our understanding of the conditions under which perceived prevalence of misinformation could shape news trust and news avoidance in specific ways. The following reviews the literature, conceptualizes the distinction between institutional and non-institutional misinformation, and elaborates on the impact of political and press freedom. The resultant hypotheses are then tested with cross-national data from the Reuters Institute *Digital News Report 2025* (*DNR 2025)*.

Relationships Among Misinformation, News Trust, and News Avoidance

Researchers have long recognized the possible negative impact of misinformation on media trust. Nielsen and Graves (2017) argue that misinformation could foster generalized skepticism and undermine people's overall perception of the authenticity of the

information environment. Hence, people could trust all information sources less, including the news media (Stubenvoll et al., 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2022). Furthermore, "fake news" has been deployed by politicians as a label to attack news media organizations (Farhall et al., 2019; Farkas & Schou, 2018). Ordinary citizens, especially supporters of the politicians utilizing the label, can be influenced and exhibit lower levels of news trust (Egelhofer et al., 2022). Moreover, the perceived prevalence of misinformation within the broader political system can undermine trust in political institutions (Jones-Jang et al., 2021), which can spill over to the news media, especially as political trust and media trust are intertwined (Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

However, recent studies have found that the negative relationship between perceived prevalence of misinformation and media trust is not always robust. A two-wave panel survey conducted in the US, the UK, France, and Canada by Boulianne and Humprecht (2023) found that perceived exposure to misinformation did not undermine generalized trust in the news media in the context of elections and the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, perceived misinformation and media trust were even positively related to each other among right-wing citizens. Lee's (2024) study in Hong Kong found that the perceived seriousness of the misinformation problem relates negatively to media trust, but misinformation perceptions' relationships with media trust are moderated by political trust and political values. The perceived influence of misinformation on society is even significantly positively related to media trust among people who strongly reject the value of law and order.

Similarly, research on the relationship between misinformation perceptions and active news avoidance has produced contrasting findings and arguments. Active news avoidance refers to the conscious decision to stay away from the news at least occasionally (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020) due to information overload, a sense of inefficacy, the need for emotional management, and so on (Espeland, 2024; Goyanes et al., 2023; Schäfer et al., 2023). The prevalence of misinformation might influence news avoidance behavior. On one hand, misinformation contributes to the problem of information overload and can thus contribute to news avoidance. For example, a Pew Research Center survey found that about 40% of the U.S. public had reduced their news consumption in response to concerns about misinformation (Mitchell et al., 2019). Similarly, Chan et al. (2024) found that people who were concerned about fake news and experienced news fatigue were more likely to avoid the news. Moreover, news avoidance can be related to an individual's ability to make sense of misinformation. People who find it difficult to evaluate misinformation may simply decide that news consumption is not worth the effort (Hasell & Halversen, 2024).

On the other hand, individuals who perceive misinformation to be prevalent might be incentivized to selectively reconfigure their news consumption patterns to ensure the quality of information intake. Research has shown that active news avoidance is positively correlated with news curation (Lee et al., 2019; Merten, 2021), such that conscious attempts to avoid the news can be part of a person's deliberate news diet management. Wu-Ouyang (2024) found that heightened concerns about fake news can foster multiplatform users to filter out irrelevant or misleading content. Similarly, Chan et al. (2024) report that avoiding the news intermittently and engaging in news

authentication behaviors are not mutually exclusive for people who are concerned about fake news. Such complexities hint at the possibility that, under certain conditions, misinformation perceptions may not lead to news avoidance.

One pertinent condition is perceived sources of misinformation. People are likely to distrust and avoid the news if they see the news media as sources of misinformation. But misinformation widely circulated via digital media can come from a wide range of sources, such as online influencers, celebrities, and content farms. It can also be intentionally propagated by political agents (Tandoc et al., 2018). People's news attitudes and behavior may not be the same when they view misinformation as coming from sources unrelated to the press. The next section establishes the distinction between institutional and non-institutional sources of misinformation and elaborates on the arguments about how the perceived source of misinformation relates to news trust and avoidance.

Institutional Versus Non-Institutional Sources of Misinformation

Following the above discussion, the present study distinguishes between institutional and non-institutional misinformation. The former originates from actors belonging to formal institutions in the political, social, and economic arenas. These can include government officials, politicians from political parties or representative institutions, resourceful social organizations, mainstream news organizations, and major business corporations, though politicians and media institutions are mainly perceived by a substantial portion of the public as important sources of misinformation (Guess et al., 2017; Van der Linden et al., 2020). These institutions and actors are resourceful players with visible and significant roles in the operation of societies and tend to dominate public discourses. By contrast, non-institutional misinformation originates from a wide range of actors who operate outside formal social and political institutions. Influencers in online media, for instance, can be a source of misinformation on specific topics (Harff et al., 2022; Wasike, 2022). Beyond influencers, non-institutional actors encompass informal social groups and ordinary citizens.

Certainly, treating media organizations and political institutions as belonging to the same category might be questioned by those who see the media, at least in liberal democracies, as operating independently from and even being antagonistic toward political institutions. However, there are reasons to expect media and political institutions to be intertwined in public perceptions. The theoretical tradition of the political economy of the media has long highlighted news media's embeddedness in dominant power structures (McChesney, 1999). The influence of political and economic institutions on the news media has also been examined in more recent years under the label of media capture (Schiffrin, 2021; Wright et al., 2024). Empirically, Hanitzsch et al. (2018) found that media and political trust tend to be aligned, suggesting that media trust is part of a trust nexus representing people's trust of established institutions in general. Moreover, the global rise of populism is based on people's tendency to see "the elites" as a singular entity in opposition to "the people" (De la Torre & Srisa-Nga, 2021). We thus expect citizens to treat established media and political institutions as

belonging to a category, keeping in mind that the extent to which media and political institutions are viewed as intertwined might vary across contexts.

There is also internal variety among the non-institutional sources. For instance, influencers are, by definition, influential, whereas ordinary people are not. Yet there are no strong theoretical reasons to expect people to make fine-grained distinctions among non-institutional sources. The distinction between institutional and non-institutional constitutes a parsimonious dichotomy that can help us make sense of the (mis) information landscape. It also largely maps onto the distinction between political fact-checking and social media debunking as two distinguishable though not mutually exclusive fact-checking practices (Graves et al., 2024; Mena, 2019). Our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: Perceived institutional and non-institutional misinformation constitute two distinct components of misinformation perceptions.

For the present study, this distinction is significant because there are conceptual arguments to expect the two to relate to news trust and news avoidance differently. When people see the news media as part of a set of established institutions, they should trust the news media less and avoid the news more when they see established institutions as a major source of misinformation, thus making them view the news media as part of the origin of the misinformation problem. This leads to *H2*:

H2: The perceived prevalence of institutional misinformation (a) negatively relates to news trust and (b) positively relates to news avoidance.

H2 assumes news trust and news avoidance to be affected in the same way when misinformation is viewed as coming from the news media and when misinformation is regarded as coming from other established institutions, including political institutions. *H2* is premised on the validity of *H1*. However, it is worth noting up front that robustness checks will be conducted during the empirical analysis to discern whether perceived misinformation from the news media and perceived misinformation from political institutions indeed perform in similar ways.

In contrast, when misinformation coming from non-institutional sources is perceived to be prevalent, people may expect authoritative institutions to intervene and resolve the problem. Studies have shown that the perceived prevalence and/or influence of misinformation could generate support for digital platform monitoring and governmental interventions such as misinformation legislation (Lee, 2025; Tsang & Zhou, 2025). Beyond the possibility of governmental intervention, which might have repercussions on freedom of speech and information, people may simply turn to the news media as an institution capable of verifying what is truthful. Therefore, perceived non-institutional misinformation should relate positively to attitudes toward and engagement with the news:

H3: The perceived prevalence of non-institutional misinformation (a) positively relates to news trust and (b) negatively relates to news avoidance.

Political and Press Freedom as a Context-Level Moderator

In addition to how perceived misinformation directly relates to news trust and news avoidance, the present study examines how such relationships vary across societies with different levels of political and press freedom. Both are complex notions (Curran & Seaton, 2018; Neumann, 1953), the exact definitions of which can depend on the political theory one adopts. But generally speaking, political freedom refers to the extent to which citizens in a society are free from excessive juridical constraints and have the right to think and act as they desire, whereas press freedom refers to the extent to which the news media has the freedom to collect and distribute information about public matters. Political freedom centers on the rights and freedom of citizens, whereas press freedom centers on the media. In reality, of course, the two are highly correlated. A state disregarding the rights of individuals is unlikely to respect the free press, and vice versa. This article thus treats political and press freedom as forming one context-level variable.

For the present study, political and press freedom have two main implications. First, they can shape both actual and perceived relationships between the media and political institutions. The liberal conception of journalistic professionalism emphasizes the news media as an independent institution monitoring power holders on behalf of the public (Schudson, 2020). In democratic societies, citizens thus commonly expect the press to perform a watchdog role vis-à-vis the government and other powerful institutions (Fawzi & Mothes, 2020; Van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014), and they rely on the news media to evaluate government performance and form opinions (Nisbet & Stoycheff, 2013). By contrast, in authoritarian societies, the media is controlled by the state to various degrees. Journalists are more likely to see themselves as playing the role of loyal facilitators (Frías Vázquez et al., 2026). Media and political institutions are more closely intertwined. Indeed, empirical research has shown that despite a generally positive relationship between media and political trust, the strength of the relationship varies across political systems (Ariely, 2015). The trust nexus is relatively loose in societies with high degrees of freedom.

H1 posits that the media and established social and political institutions constitute one category of misinformation sources in public perception. On one hand, even in a free environment, the trust nexus (Hanitzsch et al., 2018) should remain present, and people are likely to see the media and established institutions as intertwined to some extent. On the other hand, people in societies with higher levels of press and political freedom should see the news media as relatively less closely intertwined with other established institutions. It follows that in societies with higher levels of press and political freedom, the relationship between perceived institutional misinformation and attitudes toward the press should be weaker because people should be less likely to see the media as part of the problem when they perceive other social and political institutions as sources of misinformation. This leads to *H4*:

> **H4:** The relationships between perceived institutional misinformation and (a) news trust and (b) news avoidance are weaker (i.e., less negative and less positive, respectively) in societies with higher levels of political and press freedom.

Second, the degree of political and press freedom impinges on media performance and the extent to which the news media can serve the public interest. In more autocratic societies, people may perceive the media as prioritizing political loyalty or ideological correctness over a commitment to facts and truth, leading to a general distrust or even cynicism toward official media content (Shields, 2021; Stockmann, 2013). In comparison, a free political and media environment can help foster "cultures of news consumption" (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020, p. 370). Admittedly, empirical research has not found linear relationships between press freedom and news trust at the societal level (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), but scholars have reported that people in countries with higher levels of press freedom are more likely to be active news consumers (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2018) and less likely to actively avoid the news (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). That is, without necessarily trusting the news media more, people in societies with higher levels of political and press freedom are more likely to find the news media more useful and relevant.

The hypothesized relationships between perceived prevalence of non-institutional misinformation and news trust and avoidance are premised on the plausible view that people turn to the media to verify facts. The relationships are more plausible when people find the news media relevant and useful. We thus expect the relationships to be more prominent in societies with higher levels of political and press freedom (*H5*):

> **H5:** The relationships between perceived non-institutional misinformation and (a) news trust and (b) news avoidance are stronger (i.e., more positive and more negative, respectively) in societies with higher levels of political and press freedom.

Method

This study uses the *DNR 2025* conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford (Newman et al., 2025), coupled with country-level data on political and press freedom based on publicly available indices. The DNR is a cross-national online survey that examines online news use around the world. The 2025 version contains items about perceptions of misinformation sources that are relevant to this article. It was conducted by YouGov with quota sampling in 48 countries and territories and a total sample size of 98,043 respondents. Country sample sizes range from 2,000 in Japan, Sweden, and Ireland to 2,627 in Canada.

Operationalization of Individual-Level Variables

Perceived Prevalence of Institutional and Non-Institutional Misinformation. Respondents were asked if they considered a list of seven entities to be major sources of false or misleading information online: (a) politicians or political parties in their country, (b) foreign governments or politicians, (c) news media and journalists, (d) activists or activist groups, (e) online influencers, (f) celebrities, and (g) ordinary people. Respondents could choose multiple options. That is, each option was essentially a yes/no variable. Although the questions did not ask respondents to estimate the amount of

misinformation coming from each entity, it is reasonable to presume that a respondent sees misinformation coming from an entity as prevalent if s/he sees that entity as a "major source" of misinformation. In relation to our conceptual distinction, the first three items should represent *institutional sources of misinformation*, whereas the other four are likely to represent *non-institutional sources of misinformation*. However, it is possible that, in some societies, prominent online influencers or activists can be viewed as coming from or closely tied to established institutions. Therefore, while we hypothesize that people should see a distinction between institutional and non-institutional sources, there are some uncertainties regarding which item should belong to which type. This is addressed in the analysis section.

News Trust. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with two statements: (a) "I think you can trust most news most of the time," and (b) "I think I can trust most of the news I consume most of the time." Answers were registered on a five-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). They were averaged to form the index (Spearman-Brown = 0.83, $M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.97$).

News Avoidance. Respondents were asked if they found themselves "actively trying to avoid news these days." The answers ranged from 1 (*often*) to 4 (*never*). The item was reverse-coded so that higher values represent greater levels of active news avoidance frequency ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.99$).

Control variables used in the analysis include demographics (sex, age, and education), internet use, news interest, news consumption, and political interest. Internet use was measured by asking the respondents how often they access the internet for any purpose ($M = 7.16$, $SD = 1.16$) from 1 (*less than once a week*) to 8 (*more than 10 times a day*). News consumption was measured by asking respondents how often they access news ($M = 7.41$, $SD = 1.99$) from 1 (*never*) to 10 (*more than 10 times a day*). To assess news interest and political interest, respondents were asked "how interested, if at all" they were "in the news" ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.99$) and "in politics" ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.15$); for both items, the range was from 1 (*not at all interested*) to 5 (*extremely interested*).

Operationalization of Political and Press Freedom

The Political Freedom Index was retrieved from Freedom House (2025), and press freedom scores were drawn from Reporters Without Borders' (2025) annual Press Freedom Index. Both indices range from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating greater levels of freedom. The two measures were highly correlated at $r = .85$. They were combined into a single variable ($M = 71.90$, $SD = 17.51$). Among the 48 territories included in the *DNR*, the scores range from 31.2 for Turkey to 95.6 for Norway. Following extant research (Li et al., 2026), we controlled for country-level economic development by using the Human Development Index (HDI) produced by the United Nations Development Programme (Taiwan's value is based on Taiwan government information).

Table 1. Factor Analysis on the Source of Misinformation Items.

	Promax rotation	
Perceived sources of misinformation	Factor 1	Factor 2
Ordinary people	.710	
Online influencers/personalities	.654	
Celebrities	.608	
Activists or activist groups	.509	
Politicians or political parties in my country		.778
News media and journalists		.677
Foreign governments, politicians, or political parties from other countries		.553
Eigenvalue	2.13	1.08
% of variance explained	30.43	15.43

Note. Categorical principal components analysis and Promax rotation were adopted. Entries are loadings in the pattern matrix. Factor loadings smaller than 0.40 are not shown for clarity.

Analysis and Findings

Institutional Versus Non-Institutional Misinformation

As noted, although *H1* hypothesizes a distinction between two factors, there are uncertainties regarding the status of some individual items (e.g., "activists"). We therefore first conducted an exploratory factor analysis using categorical principal component analysis and Promax rotation (as the items are dichotomous). Table 1 summarizes the results on the pooled data. The seven items indeed form two clean factors: the first three items form one factor, whereas the other four form another. They correspond to perceived institutional and non-institutional misinformation, respectively.

We also conducted exploratory factor analysis on the 48 samples individually. The same two-factor structure emerges in 20 countries. In most other countries, a two-factor solution also emerges, but there are small variations in which item belongs to which factor. For example, the "activists" category is grouped with institutional actors in Poland, South Africa, Hungary, Taiwan, and Romania. Nonetheless, most important for the present study's argument, the first 3 items – the political institutions and the news media – belong to the same factor in 35 territories. That is, media and political institutions are seen as interconnected sources of misinformation in the majority of territories.

To more formally test *H1* and further substantiate the empirical validity of the pattern shown in Table 1, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis using the pooled data. The final measurement model, which included residual correlations between the news media item and political institution items, yielded a good model fit ($\chi^2(11) = 1{,}934.32$; Comparative fit index = 0.976; Root mean square error of approximation = 0.042; Standardized root mean square residual = 0.031). *H1* is supported.

Based on these results, the first 3 items were summed to form an index from 0 to 3 of perceived institutional misinformation ($M = 1.18$, $SD = 1.03$ for the pooled data),

Table 2. Predicting News Trust and News Avoidance.

	News trust			News avoidance		
Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Fixed effects – Intercept	3.215***			2.285***		
Country-level						
Political and press freedom		.059***	.058***		−.046***	−.046***
HDI		−.053***	−.055***		−.044***	−.043***
Individual level						
Gender		.035***	.034***		.039***	.040***
Age		−.002	−.003		−.039***	−.038***
Education		.043***	.042***		−.046***	−.046***
News consumption		.071***	.071***		−.086***	−.086***
News interest		.205***	.204***		−.191***	−.190***
Internet use		−.025***	−.025***		.001	.001
Political interest		.028***	.028***		−.016***	−.016***
PIM		−.171***	−.170***		.092***	.091***
PNIM		.079***	.079***		−.018***	−.018***
Cross-level interactions						
Political and press freedom *X*						
PIM			−.048***			.023***
PNIM			.018***			−.010**
$N_{respondents}$	98,043	93,715	93,715	94,269	91,220	91,220
$N_{countries}$	48	48	48	48	48	48

Note. Standardized regression coefficients are shown. Missing values are deleted listwise. PIM = Perceived institutional misinformation; PNIM = Perceived non-institutional misinformation.
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

whereas items four to seven were summed to form an index of perceived non-institutional misinformation ($M = 1.37$, $SD = 1.19$ for the pooled data). For the robustness check to be conducted for H2, we also created a variable representing perceived misinformation from political institutions by adding the first two items together.

Predicting News Trust and News Avoidance

The integration of individual- and country-level variables necessitates a multilevel model to predict news trust and news avoidance. For each dependent variable, we first examined a random intercept null model (Models 1 and 4 in Table 2). The random intercept variances for both baseline models were significant (Model 1: $z = 5.09$, $p < .001$; Model 4: $z = 5.12$, $p < .001$). The intraclass correlation coefficient showed that countries accounted for 7.3% of the total variance for news trust and 6.0% for news avoidance, which suggested that further multilevel analysis was appropriate.

We then examined the main effects model by including the country-level index of political and press freedom and the individual-level predictors as fixed effects. Models 2 and 5 show the results. Unlike the null findings that are prevalent in the literature (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), the analysis shows a significant positive relationship between

political and press freedom and news trust. Consistent with Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020), there is a significant negative relationship between political and press freedom and news avoidance. The HDI, by contrast, relates negatively to both news trust and news avoidance. Among the individual-level factors, better educated people, females, frequent news consumers, people with higher levels of news interest and political interest, and people using the Internet less frequently were more likely to find the news trustworthy. After controlling for these factors, perceived institutional misinformation relates negatively to news trust ($\beta = -.171$, $p < .001$), while perceived non-institutional misinformation relates significantly positively to news trust ($\beta = .079$, $p < .001$). They are consistent with *H2a* and *H3a*.

Model 5 shows that, at the individual level, females, younger people, less educated people, infrequent news consumers, and people with lower levels of news interest and political interest were more likely to actively avoid the news. After controlling for other factors, perceived institutional misinformation significantly positively relates to news avoidance ($\beta = .092$, $p < .001$), whereas perceived non-institutional misinformation relates significantly negatively to news avoidance ($\beta = -.018$, $p < .001$). They are consistent with *H2b* and *H3b*.

Admittedly, the pooled sample size is huge, which renders very small regression coefficients statistically significant (e.g., the relationship between perceived non-institutional misinformation and news avoidance). To check the level of consistency of relationships across individual countries and territories, we conducted the analysis using only the individual-level factors for each country separately.

Table A1 in the Supplemental Material summarizes the results. Perceived institutional misinformation is significantly and negatively related to news trust in 43 of the 48 samples, while perceived non-institutional misinformation is significantly and positively related to news trust in 31 countries or territories. Perceived institutional misinformation is significantly and positively related to news avoidance in 34 of the 48 samples, whereas perceived non-institutional misinformation is significantly and negatively related to news avoidance in only 3 of the 48 countries. Overall, we can state that *H2a*, *H2b*, and *H3a* are well supported, as the relationships are significant in the majority of the territories in the *DNR 2025*, but one might argue that *H3b* is not really supported if the relationship is significant at $p < .05$ in only 3 of 48 cases. Meanwhile, the strength of the relationships also varies substantially across countries, hinting at the meaningfulness of considering the moderating influence of contextual factors.

The Moderating Role of Political and Press Freedom

To test the moderating role of political and press freedom, Models 3 and 6 included all the main effects terms and the two cross-level interaction terms. Model 3 shows that when the two interaction terms are added, both have a statistically significant coefficient. However, contrary to *H4a*, the interaction between perceived institutional misinformation and political and press freedom has a significant negative coefficient ($\beta = -.048$, $p < .001$). This means that the generally negative relationship between perceived institutional misinformation and news trust would be even more strongly

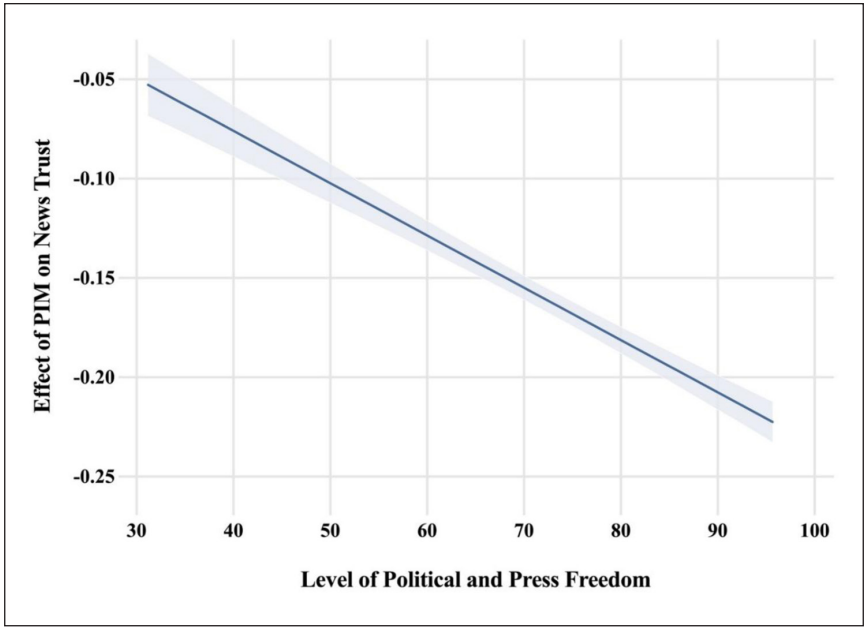

Figure 1. Conditional Effect of Perceived Institutional Misinformation on News Trust Across Levels of Political and Press Freedom.
Note. The solid line represents the conditional effect. The shaded band represents the 95% confidence interval.

negative in countries with high levels of political and press freedom. Meanwhile, *H5a* is supported. The interaction between perceived non-institutional misinformation and political and press freedom has a significant positive coefficient ($\beta = .018$, $p < .001$). The generally positive relationship between perceived non-institutional misinformation and news trust would be even more strongly positive in countries with high levels of political and press freedom.

The two interaction terms also have significant coefficients in Model 6. Again, contrary to expectation, the interaction between perceived institutional misinformation and political and press freedom has a significant positive coefficient ($\beta = .023$, $p < .001$). The generally positive relationship between perceived institutional misinformation and news avoidance is even more strongly positive when the level of political and press freedom is high. The interaction between perceived non-institutional misinformation and political and press freedom is significantly negative ($\beta = -.010$, $p < .01$): the generally negative relationship between perceived non-institutional misinformation and news avoidance is even more strongly negative when level of political and press freedom is high. On the whole, *H4* is consistently contradicted by the results, while both *H5a* and *H5b* are supported.

Figures 1 to 4 show the conditional effects plots for the interaction effects. Figure 1 reveals that the effect of perceived institutional misinformation on news trust is

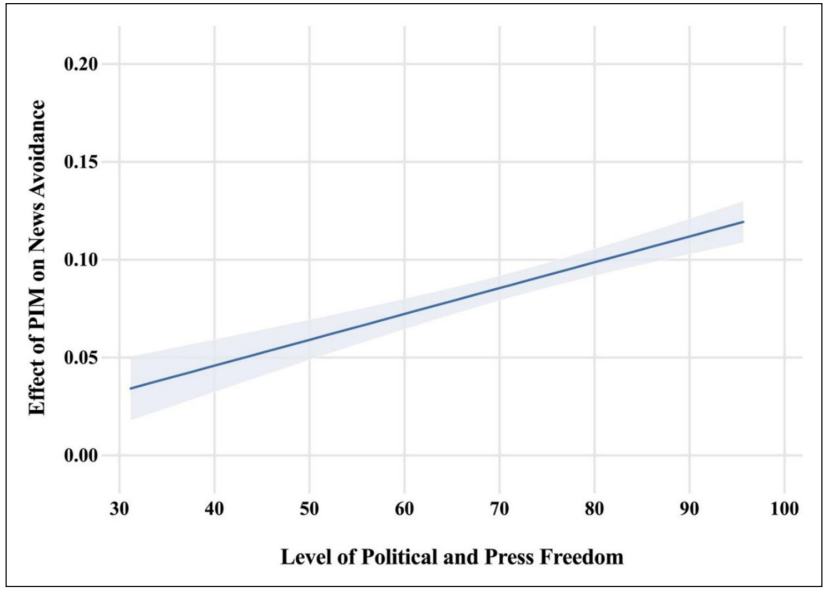

Figure 2. Conditional Effect of Perceived Institutional Misinformation on News Avoidance Across Levels of Political and Press Freedom.
Note. The solid line represents the conditional effect. The shaded band represents the 95% confidence interval.

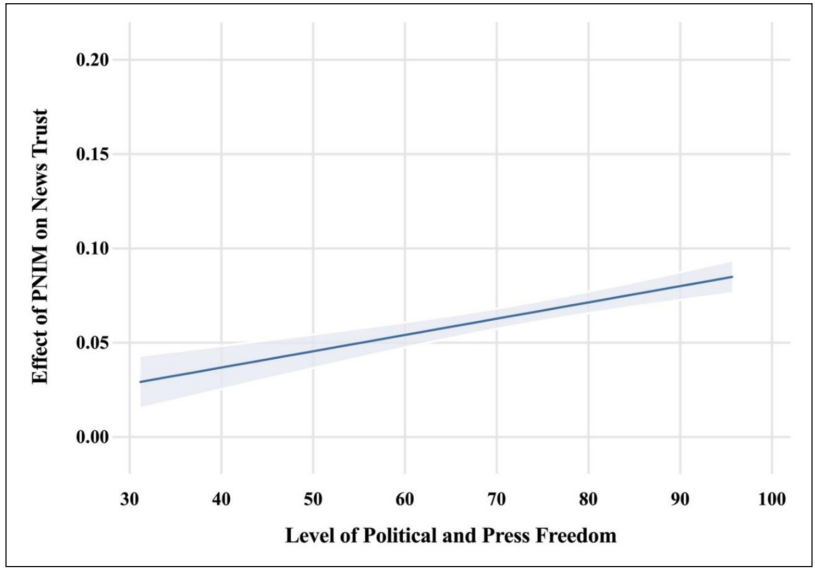

Figure 3. Conditional Effect of Perceived Non-institutional Misinformation on News Trust Across Levels of Political and Press Freedom.
Note. The solid line represents the conditional effect. The shaded band represents the 95% confidence interval.

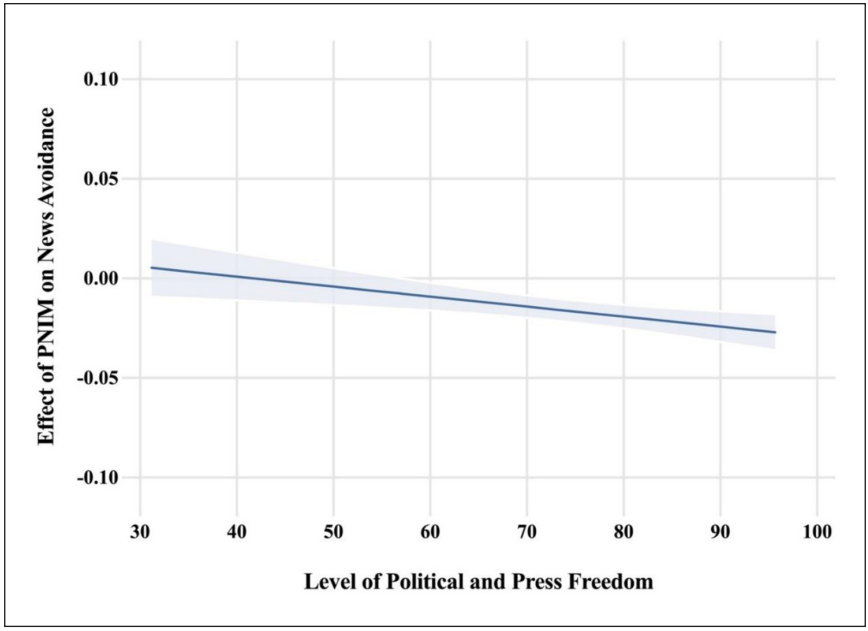

Figure 4. Conditional Effect of Perceived Non-institutional Misinformation on News Avoidance Across Levels of Political and Press Freedom.
Note. The solid line represents the conditional effect. The shaded band represents the 95% confidence interval.

significantly negative at all levels of political and press freedom (the lowest value of political and press freedom in the data set is 31.2 for Turkey). But as the level of freedom increases, the effect is more strongly negative. Similarly, the impact of perceived institutional misinformation on news avoidance (Figure 2) and the impact of perceived non-institutional misinformation on news trust (Figure 3) are statistically significant at all moderator values. The impact becomes more strongly positive when the level of political and press freedom increases.

However, the negative impact of perceived non-institutional misinformation on news avoidance is significant only when the level of political and press freedom is higher than 56.9 (Figure 4). In the data set, 34 of the 48 countries and territories meet this condition. The findings show that perceived non-institutional misinformation would not stop people from avoiding the news when the level of political and press freedom is below a certain threshold.

Further Analysis and Robustness Check

A series of additional analyses was conducted to ascertain the robustness of the conclusions to be drawn from the results. First, as indicated above, people may wonder whether the relationships between the perceived prevalence of institutional misinformation and the

dependent variables are attributable only to the perceived prevalence of misinformation from the news media. That is, people trusted the media less and avoided the news simply because they saw misinformation coming from the news media. Other established institutions are not relevant. To examine whether this would be the case, we conducted additional analysis by separating perceived prevalence of misinformation from the media from perceived prevalence of misinformation from political institutions (Table A2 in Supplemental Material). The results show that both perceived misinformation from the media and perceived misinformation from political institutions significantly predict both news trust and news avoidance. The results thus confirm the view that institutional misinformation does matter in the expected manner even when news media are removed from the measure.

Second, when the factor analysis was conducted in the 48 territories separately, the factor structure shown in Table 1 emerged in only 20 territories. On one hand, minor variations in factor structure are arguably inevitable and understandable in large-scale cross-national analysis, since how specific groups of actors relate to each other may vary across contexts. On the other hand, such variations do raise the question of whether the current findings would be applicable only to countries where the factor structure applies. Additional analyses were conducted by running the analysis for the 28 countries not having the exact factor structure shown in Table 1. The results show that support for *H2a*, *H2b*, *H3a*, *H5a*, and *H5b* remains intact, and the results regarding *H4* are also the same as those in Table 2 (see Table A3 in Supplemental Material).

Third, the news trust variable is composed of two items, with the second item concerning whether people trust the news that they personally consume. One might question whether this item has captured a sense of self-efficacy in finding trustworthy news and would perform differently than the other item. An additional analysis was conducted by treating the two items as the dependent variable in turn. The results show that all significant relationships remain intact for both items used as the dependent variable (Table A4 in Supplemental Material).

Fourth, the regression analysis in Table 2 employed listwise deletion of missing values. Hence, the sample sizes for the full model for news trust and news avoidance are smaller than the full sample size. We conducted the regression analysis again using mean replacement to handle missing values. The substantive results regarding the hypotheses remain exactly the same (Table A5 in Supplemental Material).

Finally, the present analysis only examines the two-way interactions between political and press freedom and the two perceived sources of misinformation variables. Readers may wonder whether there is a three-way interaction effect among political and press freedom, perceived institutional misinformation, and perceived non-institutional misinformation. Table A6 presents the results of the relevant additional analysis. The three-way interaction term is indeed statistically significant but only very weakly. The main findings regarding the focus of this article remain intact.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article tries to make sense of the relationships among misinformation perceptions, news trust, and active news avoidance. One way to clarify the relationships is to

pay attention to what people perceive to be the main sources of misinformation. To render the analysis theoretically meaningful, we propose the distinction between institutional and non-institutional misinformation. The first important finding is that perceived institutional and non-institutional misinformation are indeed distinctive factors. The two are not mutually exclusive. Individuals who see much misinformation as coming from institutional sources can see a fair share of misinformation as coming from non-institutional sources, but people do tend to see established institutional and non-institutional actors as forming two distinct groups of sources. In this dichotomy, the news media and political institutions are perceived to be intertwined in most places where the online survey was conducted.

The second important finding is constituted by the relationships between perceived institutional and non-institutional misinformation and news trust and avoidance. The public tends to see the media as an established institution, and trust in different established institutions tends to be intertwined (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). As a result, when people perceive much misinformation as coming from institutional sources, the news media could be implicated. This results in lower levels of news trust and a higher likelihood of news avoidance. In contrast, when much misinformation is perceived to be coming from non-institutional sources, people can turn to formal institutions to help address the problem. This can include supporting governmental interventions (Ho et al., 2022; Lee, 2025) and a higher likelihood of choosing the news media to obtain accurate information. However, the findings are mixed. Perceived non-institutional misinformation does relate to higher levels of news trust, but the relationship with news avoidance is very weak and significant in only 3 of 48 territories. One possible explanation for this weakness or non-existence is that although perceiving the prevalence of misinformation from non-institutional sources can lead people to trust the conventional news media to a greater extent, that does not mean that people have to consume the news more often or intensively. Maintaining a reasonable level of consumption of professional news media can already help people ascertain the validity of important facts.

Despite the non-support for *H3b*, the findings show overall that sources of misinformation do matter in the relationship between the misinformation problem and news attitudes and behavior. Specifying sources of misinformation can help us make sense of the sometimes conflicting findings and arguments in the literature. For instance, some researchers have found that concerns with misinformation could lead to news avoidance behavior (Chan et al., 2024), whereas others found that concerns with fake news can foster cross-platform news consumption and curation (Wu-Ouyang, 2024). One plausible explanation of the contrasting findings is that the types and sources of "fake news" are different when different variables are employed, and different relationships are being examined.

Another implication of the current analysis is that news trust and avoidance can be affected by how the misinformation problem evolves and how the professional media position themselves vis-à-vis other actors. Paradoxically, the proliferation of non-institutional misinformation might benefit the news media by offering opportunities for professional news media to demonstrate their value. When misinformation comes

from politicians or other actors in established social and political institutions, the news media would face the challenge of distancing themselves from such sources of misinformation.

The third insight revealed above is the moderating role of political and press freedom at the country level. Political and press freedom strengthens the positive relationship between perceived non-institutional misinformation and news trust and the negative relationship between perceived non-institutional misinformation and news avoidance. This supports our argument that in societies with higher levels of press and political freedom, people are more likely to find the news media to be relevant sources of truthful information. The perceived prevalence of misinformation coming from non-institutional sources could lead people to value the news media to a greater degree.

However, contrary to expectation, perceived institutional misinformation has a stronger negative impact on news trust and a stronger positive impact on news avoidance in countries with higher levels of political and press freedom. Here, we first recall that our hypothesis was based on the presumed autonomy of the news media and thus its relative distinctiveness from other established institutions in countries with higher levels of press freedom. The results show that even if the news media is seen as more autonomous, that does not absolve it from blame when people perceive misinformation as coming from established institutions.

What, then, could explain the contrary findings? One plausible argument is that in societies with low levels of political and press freedom, people are less likely to see the news as accurate in the first place (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). When people perceive misinformation as coming from established institutions, such perceptions do not violate their expectations. In contrast, in free societies where the news media are expected to manage the public sphere independently and monitor holders of power, the prevalence of institutional misinformation is more likely to violate people's expectations regarding media performance. As a result, the impact of institutional misinformation on news attitudes and behavior can be even more negative in places with higher levels of press and political freedom. This post hoc explanation cannot be tested using current data, and there is no large-scale cross-sectional survey on people's expectations of the news media. But in a recent seven-country comparative study of people's watchdog role expectations and performance evaluations, the expectation-evaluation gap is indeed *smaller* in India, where the press freedom ranking is particularly low, than in the US and five European democracies (Schwinges et al., 2025). This offers some prima facie support for the plausibility of the explanation. Future research can more formally examine this expectation violation argument.

In any case, the analysis presented above does confirm the importance of taking contextual variations into account when specifying the relationships among the misinformation problem, news trust, and news avoidance. Contextual differences can shape the configuration of the relationships between the news media and other institutions, as well as public perceptions of and expectations about the media. These factors can then influence how people respond to different types of misinformation.

A few limitations and future research directions can be noted. First, one might argue that certain potentially relevant control variables are absent in the *DNR* survey data. For

instance, one could ask whether perceived institutional misinformation represents a broader negative attitude toward political elites: that is, a populist orientation. We can only acknowledge this limitation and suggest future research to rectify the problem. However, it should also be noted that even if controlling for populism or other political orientations might weaken some of the results presented here, the distinctiveness between perceived institutional and non-institutional misinformation is unlikely to be erased. That is, it is very improbable that the impact of perceived institutional misinformation would be reversed and become identical to that of perceived non-institutional misinformation.

Second, the individual-level measures from the *DNR* are often one- or two-item measurements of specific concepts, as in the case of news avoidance and news trust. This can be considered a trade-off that is difficult to avoid given the practical and resource constraints involved in conducting large-scale cross-national surveys. Future research carried out in specific societies may further examine the implications of perceived institutional and non-institutional misinformation by adopting better measures. For instance, one could examine the implications of the two types of misinformation on the different kinds of news trust: general trust in the news, trust in specific media organizations, trust in journalists as a group, and so on. Beyond measurement issues, future research can examine other possible outcome variables beyond news trust and news avoidance. For instance, feelings of information confusion might relate more strongly to perceived institutional misinformation than to perceived non-institutional misinformation. Another notion worth exploring is hostile perception of the media, which may be strengthened by perceived institutional misinformation more than by perceived non-institutional misinformation does.

Third, given the use of political and press freedom as a contextual variable in this article, it should be acknowledged that the *DNR* focused disproportionately on societies with high degrees of political and press freedom. This is understandable given the difficulties in conducting research in unfree societies. Societies with low levels of press freedom are not totally unrepresented. The DNR in 2025 also covered 7 countries or territories that ranked below 120 out of 180 countries and territories in the world in RSF's press freedom rankings in 2025 (i.e., Peru, Mexico, Nigeria, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Turkey). Yet it remains worth noting a certain sample bias in the study, and the countries with the lowest levels of political and press freedom in international indices, such as Russia, Iran, and China, are not represented.

Fourth, the two-factor structure based on which the two perceived misinformation indices were created is strictly speaking applicable to only 20 territories. Given the varieties of social and political contexts involved, it is not surprising that the configuration of actors belonging to established institutions would vary somewhat across societies. But it does raise questions about the equivalence of the indices when applied to different countries. Our robustness check shows that the validity of our overall conclusion should not be affected by this issue. Future research can try to further address the equivalence in measurement issue.

Fifth, while the present study focuses on political and press freedom as the contextual factor and controls for economic development by using the HDI, scholars can

explore other potentially relevant contextual variables. One possibility is society-level polarization. Political polarization has been described as a worldwide concern (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019) and linked to the spread of fake news (Osmundsen et al., 2021). Following the approach of the present study, the question is not only whether the society-level degree of polarization would relate to the extent of the misinformation problem, news trust, news avoidance, or other variables; it is also whether contextual polarization would shape how people respond to misinformation and thus the relationship between perceptions of misinformation and other variables.

To conclude, the present article establishes the distinction between perceived institutional misinformation and non-institutional misinformation. Perceptions of sources of misinformation matter to news attitudes and behavior because they can affect whether people would see the news media as a source or a solution to the misinformation problem. Levels of political and press freedom also matter. A multilevel approach can more precisely specify the relationships among misinformation perceptions, news trust, and news avoidance.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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