Media Trust and the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Analysis of Short-Term Trust Changes, Their Ideological Drivers and Consequences in Switzerland

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Abstract
We analyze short-term media trust changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, their ideological drivers and consequences based on panel data in German-speaking Switzerland. We thereby differentiate trust in political information from different types of traditional and non-traditional media. COVID-19 serves as a natural experiment, in which citizens’ media trust at the outbreak of the crisis is compared with the same variables after the severe lockdown measures were lifted. Our data reveal that (1) media trust is consequential as it is associated with people’s willingness to follow Covid-19 regulations; (2) media trust changes during the pandemic, with trust levels for most media decreasing, with the exception of public service broadcasting; (3) trust losses are hardly connected to ideological divides in Switzerland. Our findings highlight that public service broadcasting plays an exceptional role in the fight against a pandemic and that contrary to the US, no partisan trust divide occurs.

Keywords
COVID-19, media trust, short-term trust changes, ideological attitudes, willingness to follow Covid-19 regulations

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Trust in the media is high on the public and scientific agendas in times when an American president calls CNN “fake news” (Jamieson, 2017) and protesters in Europe are on the street calling traditional media the “lying press.” Research has clearly shown that media trust differs among countries in absolute terms as well as in its development (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2019), with a substantial group of people not trusting the media in all countries (Newman & Fletcher, 2017; Schultz et al., 2017). However, our understanding is limited regarding how external turbulences might impact trust in media, for whom and with what consequences.

It is here where our paper comes in. We search for short-term media trust changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, their ideological drivers as well as their consequences. Studying media trust changes during crises is important as it might help us better understand which circumstances cause the often-studied long-term (aggregate) trust changes. Beyond, a better understanding of changing trust in media sources during the pandemic, reveals the potentials and pitfalls of effective risk communication, which has proven to be one of the most important preventive measures (Haug et al., 2020). This is all the more important as COVID-19 is the first pandemic that hits a multi-channel information environment, that constantly disseminates information about the virus, its consequences, and actions, but through which also “[f]ake news spreads faster and more easily than [the] virus” itself (WHO director general).¹ In this paper, we ask three research questions: (1) Is media trust associated with the willingness to follow COVID-19 regulations?; (2) Does media trust change during the COVID-19 crisis, and if so, which media types gain it and which lose it? and (3) How do populist attitudes as well as party preferences influence such media trust changes? To answer these questions, we rely on panel survey data in German-speaking Switzerland collected at the outbreak of the crisis (beginning of March 2020) and after the severe lockdown measures were lifted (middle of May 2020).

With our study, we move beyond classical aggregate long-term analyses of media trust development (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2019) while adding to psychological studies that measure short-term individual trust changes during arbitrary time intervals (Fleeson & Leicht, 2006; Otto et al., 2018). By focusing on short-term, individual media trust developments during the pandemic, we take seriously that communication dynamics do “not occur at all times and in all situations” (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, p. 349). We add to the few existing panel studies on COVID-19 (e.g., Nielsen, Kalogeropoulos et al., 2020; Viehmann et al., 2020; Wolling et al., 2021) in a three-fold manner: first, we highlight the relevance of measuring trust in non-traditional media in addition to trust in traditional media in this first fully media-tized pandemic. Second, we contribute to a better understanding of the drivers of media trust changes by bringing in an explanatory perspective on short-term trust changes during a crisis situation. Hereby, we focus on ideological attitudes, especially populism as well as party preferences. Third, we move research beyond the often-studied US or UK context characterized by strong polarization and a clear-cut two-party system. To answer our research questions, we first define media trust, move to its consequences, and finally develop the framework for media trust changes during crises and its drivers.
Defining Media Trust

The concept of trust refers to “relations over time between two sides: a trustor, the side that places trust, and a trustee, the side being trusted” (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003, p. 505). Transferred to the context of media and journalism, trust refers to “the willingness of the audience 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; see also Fawzi et al., 2021). If we take a critical look at the state of research, one of the biggest challenges and inconsistencies concerns the issue of measuring media trust and the question what is exactly trusted and by whom. The operationalizations used in existing literature range from indicating the level of trust in “the media” as societal institutions (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) to the use of multidimensional scales to assess media trust (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Yale et al., 2015). With the aim of reaching greater theoretical clarity, Strömbäck et al. (2020) call for measuring “trust in the information coming from news media” (p. 149) instead of focusing on trust in media as institutions or in content producers. Following this argumentation, we focus on trust in political information. However, in high-choice media environments, journalistic organizations adopt new ways of delivering news (e.g., via social media) and new non-journalistic online platforms emerge that also present political information (Strömbäck et al., 2020). In this paper, we compare trust in political information that stems from different sources. Namely, we distinguish between trust in political information from different types of traditional media that follow professional journalistic practices, such as the press, television and radio, and trust in political information from different types of non-traditional media, which do not necessarily follow journalistic standards. Non-traditional media in our study refer to sources, which are not related to professional journalism per se, such as blogs and other forms of independent (i.e. not bound to an institution) commenting (e.g., on a webpage), social media, messenger apps, and video platforms. Although the above-mentioned online platforms can also be utilized by traditional media as part of their distribution strategies, the large proportion of their content is generated by (often anonymous) users and not media professionals. As a consequence, the practices of strict factual verification are less established there (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). We refrain from referring to non-traditional media per se as alternative (e.g., Elvestad et al., 2018; Macek et al., 2018), as we do not suggest that all of these channels offer alternative views. However, we find it important to distinguish between traditional and non-traditional media: despite the line between the two becoming more blurry as journalistic distribution practices change, there is evidence that news consumers have different levels of trust in different types of media and specific news sources. Comparing trust in traditional media and non-traditional media shows that trust in traditional media, news media and specific news brands is in general higher than trust in digital platforms, social media, video hosting websites and messaging apps (e.g., European Union, 2018; Jakobs et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2020, 2021; Toff et al., 2021). More particular, Toff et al. (2021) found wide gaps between trust in news media and trust in news from Facebook and WhatsApp across countries, while for YouTube the trust gap varies somewhat more between the
countries studied. Finally, research also shows trust variation among non-traditional outlets with blogs being the most trusted source (Johnson & Kaye, 2009). Studies examining trust in information sources on Covid-19 in particular (e.g., Betsch et al., 2020; Figueiras et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2021; YouGov, 2020) replicate that people judge news and information about COVID-19 from social media, video sites and messaging apps as less trustworthy than from news organizations (Nielsen et al., 2021; Nielsen, Kalogeropoulos et al., 2020).

Consequences of Media Trust

We know that media trust and its potential changes during a crisis matter. Media trust is closely associated with general trust in democracy (and therefore also with its capacities to fight a pandemic in contrast to autocratic regimes): “It is impossible to trust democracy unless one perceives that the electorate is well and fairly informed, possessing an accurate picture of the issues at hand” (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005, p. 32). Thus, a healthy democracy requires that citizens trust the main communication infrastructure and differentiate between trusted and non-trusted sources (Fisher, 2018).

Media trust shapes the audience selection of news (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003) as well as the potential of information to have an influence: trusted sources affect our opinions and behaviors whereas non-trusted sources are less likely to do so (e.g., Ladd, 2012; Spiegelhalter, 2017). In this vein, the fight against a pandemic for which proactive crisis communication is key (Haug et al., 2020) relies on a trusted information infrastructure to have an effect. Also during the Covid-19 pandemic, prior research has revealed that (dis-)trust in information sources is related to vaccination beliefs (Woko et al., 2020), threat perceptions (Filkuková et al., 2021), beliefs in Covid-19 myths (Melki et al., 2021), levels of compliance to preventive measures (Wu & Shen, 2022; Zhao et al., 2020), as well as to purchasing behaviors (Jeżewska-Zychowicz et al., 2020). Trust in traditional media is associated with perceptions of the seriousness of the pandemic (e.g., Filkuková et al., 2021), whereas trust in social media relates more strongly to Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Melki et al., 2021). We therefore expect:

H1a: The more people trust political information from traditional media during the COVID-19 crisis, the more they are willing to follow COVID-19 regulations.

H1b: The more people trust political information from non-traditional media during the COVID-19 crisis, the less they are willing to follow COVID-19 regulations.

Short-term Media Trust Changes

Today’s research on media trust changes comes from two perspectives: an aggregate social science and an individual-level psychological perspective. First, social science research has started to study developments and changes in media trust. Researchers primarily analyze long-term changes on an aggregated level, indicating whether trust is rising or falling within a country (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Jones, 2018; Newman
et al., 2019; Schultz et al., 2017). For example, based on Reuters digital news reports (Newman et al., 2020, 2021), yearly changes in the level of overall news trust and the level of trust in news in social media have been observed across and on a country-by-country basis. Moreover, initial evidence exists for changes in media trust during political crises, transitions, and conflicts. For example, Köhler and Otto (2018) show, based on Eurobarometer data, that trust in traditional media decreased in Spain and Greece during the EU financial crisis by about 13% to 20%. Likewise, media trust decreased in Egypt by 20% since the Arab Spring (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). In France an 11% drop in media trust from 2018 to 2019 has been observed, which is attributed in particular to the coverage of the yellow vest protests (Antheaume, 2019). Rather short-term fluctuations in media trust seem to be triggered by armed conflicts or terrorist attacks. In most cases analyzed, such crises lead to an erosion of media trust (e.g., Choi et al., 2006; Johnson, 1993). However, crises also have the potential to increase the level of media trust: First indications of longer-term changes at aggregate level are already evident in the context of COVID-19: For example, data from the Reuters digital news report (Newman et al., 2020, 2021) show an increase in media trust from 2020 to 2021 in almost all countries. Hence, the previous downward trend was altered during the COVID-19 pandemic; authors suggest that COVID has “demonstrated the value of accurate and reliable information at a time when lives are at stake” (Newman et al., 2021, p. 9). This more general trend was also observed in Switzerland (Udris & Eisenegger, 2021, p. 107). Moreover, data from the Edelman Trust Barometer (2019) reveals an increase of about 7 percent points in trust in news sources from January to May 2020.

While these studies indicate the potential for media trust changes, they also reveal the limitations of this strand of research. Long-term aggregate studies on trust changes are complicated by the fact that people in changing media environments are likely to have different perceptions when asked to evaluate their trust in the media over the course of time (see Daniller et al., 2017). Further, long-term and aggregate studies on specific events fail to reveal any individual-level changes and thus are limited in detecting the causes and consequences of such changes.

Second, psychological research studies short-term trust changes on an individual level. These studies all rely on panel data, analyzing the fluidity of trust for each person. They show substantial within-person variation in (media) trust (e.g., Fleeson & Leicht, 2006; Major & Atwood, 1997; Otto et al., 2018). Yet, at the same time, it seems that people fluctuate around their individual means (Fleeson & Leicht, 2006) such that differences among individuals remain stable across time (Baumert et al., 2017).

Psychological studies rely on arbitrary moments in time for the repeated measurements, which makes it difficult to detect substantial changes in trust, as research indicates that specific situations in which people actively seek political information (Baumert et al., 2017) or where the public is more attentive (Song & Boomgaarden, 2017) trigger such changes. The relevance of “rapid and episodic events” for the disturbance of stability is acknowledged in evolution theory (Eldredge & Gould, 1972, p. 84) as well as in the description of policy changes (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002).
Very recently, researchers have started to bring together individual-level trust research with the analysis of specific situations. Hereby the Covid-19 pandemic has served as an ideal ground for research for three reasons. First, we know that heightened news exposure is related to trust changes (Baumert et al., 2017). Evidence already suggests that during the pandemic news exposure has substantially increased (Nielsen, Kalogeropoulos et al., 2020). Second, research indicates that people with higher levels of trust in political institutions also show higher levels of trust in news media (e.g., Ariely, 2015; Bennett et al., 1999; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Lee, 2010; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) which might be due to the fact that traditional news media tend to index the voices of political elites (Adam, 2007; Bennett, 1990). Interestingly, we see that trust in political institutions has changed during the Covid-19 pandemic with most studies indicating substantial trust increases at least for the first stage of the crisis (Bol et al., 2021; de León et al., 2022; Devine et al., 2021; Esaiasson et al., 2021; Schraff, 2021). Third, in such exceptional situations, it is likely that at least part of the population will become highly involved. High involvement—be it physical or psychological—has been shown to increase people’s perceptions of news coverage bias (for an overview, see Perloff, 2015; Vallone et al., 1985), which decreases trust in traditional media (Choi et al., 2006; Newman & Fletcher, 2017).

We already see first evidence that media trust changes also on an individual level during the pandemic. These individual-level studies show that during the initial stage of the pandemic media trust does not necessarily increase as suggested by the long-term aggregate studies. For example, findings from a 10-wave panel survey in the UK show a decline in trust in news and information about COVID-19 from news organizations as from 57% in April to 45% in August (Nielsen, Kalogeropoulos et al., 2020). Likewise, the findings of a three-wave panel survey in Germany with survey waves in March, April and July 2020 also show a slight decline in trust in crisis reporting by the established media (Viehmann et al., 2020) whereas the findings of a four-wave panel survey in Germany by Wolling et al. (2021), on the other hand, show stability of trust levels. These findings call for a more thorough analysis of the periods and factors that increase or decrease media trust during the pandemic. To contribute, we ask respectively expect:

RQ1: Does trust in political information from (different types of) traditional media change during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic and if so, in which direction?
H2: Changes in trust in political information from traditional media are positively related to changes in political trust.

Our knowledge is limited regarding potential changes of trust in political information stemming from non-traditional media during crises and the relation of these changes to trust in traditional media. Research has shown that trust in traditional media is generally higher than trust in non-traditional media. This holds in general as well as during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Newman et al., 2020; Nielsen, Kalogeropoulos et al., 2020). We also know from aggregate level studies that trust in social media is
subject to change (Newman et al., 2019, 2020, 2021). However, our knowledge is limited on individual-level short-term trust changes in the information stemming from non-traditional media. Additionally, our knowledge is also limited regarding its relation to trust in traditional media. Research has connected distrust in traditional media with the increased usage of non-traditional media (e.g., Fletcher & Park, 2017; Kohring, 2019; Tsafiri, 2010) without identifying whether this increased usage accompanies increased trust in these non-traditional channels. Exploring the relation between both trust variants among youth audiences in three European countries, Macek et al. (2018) show that there are people who trust both, neither, or only one of them. As we lack knowledge on how crises affect trust in non-traditional media and how this trust is related to trust in traditional media, we pose the following questions:

RQ2: Does trust in political information from (different types of) non-traditional media change during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic and if so, in which direction?

RQ3: Are changes in trust in political information from non-traditional media systematically related to changes in trust in traditional media?

Ideological drivers of media trust changes. Do people’s ideological attitudes matter in explaining who loses media trust and who gains it during a crisis? We focus on populism as a “thin” ideology (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2004) and on the role of party preferences.

Populism as a “thin” ideology is characterized by a rather narrow set of ideas (Mudde, 2004). This set of ideas centers around the antagonism between the good people and the evil and corrupt elites. As a consequence, the people should have unrestricted power and sovereignty (Mudde, 2004; Wirth et al., 2016). People are regarded as homogenous or monolithic (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; for a summary Wirth et al., 2016) standing against elites—be they political, economic, cultural (i.e., the media), intellectual or legal (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Populist attitudes are relevant for understanding media trust. Research has shown that populist voters are united by hostile media perceptions toward traditional media (Schulz et al., 2020). Traditional media are regarded part of the ruling elite and involved in elite conspiracy (e.g., Esser et al., 2017; Fawzi, 2019; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mazzoleni et al., 2003) what is made clear by populist leaders in their anti-media rhetoric. Consequently, traditional media are one of the natural opponents of the good and homogenous people. This phenomenon has been coined “anti-media populism” (Krämer, 2018). Also empirically, the relevance of populist attitudes for trust perceptions as regards traditional media has been proven (Pew Research Center, 2018): in Germany for example 78% of the non-populists trust the media somehow whereas it is only 47% of those holding populist attitudes.

On what we lack knowledge, however, is the role of populist attitudes for short-term media trust changes, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Do those holding populist attitudes further lose trust in traditional media during the pandemic? In this pandemic, political elites in Western Europe have taken strong measures limiting the
freedom and sovereignty of the people to avoid the further spread of the virus (e.g., social distancing). Thereby, participatory rights (i.e., demonstrations or direct democratic possibilities) have been limited whereas the power of executives has increased. Traditional media indexing these political elites (Bennett, 1990, for Covid-reporting in Switzerland, Forschungszentrum Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft [Fög], 2020) and being part of the establishment themselves, are thus likely to turn into scapegoats of populists whereas non-traditional channels that allow to circumvent the media turn important. We thus expect:

H3: The more people hold populist attitudes, the more (a) they lose trust in political information from traditional media during the Covid-19 crisis and the more (b) they gain trust in this information from non-traditional media.

Research indicates that populist attitudes are the most important ideological driver for media trust (Pew-Research Center, 2018), whereas partisan ideologies show mixed relations to media trust (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014): in some countries conservatives trust more whereas in others they do less whereas in others there is no divide between left- and right-leaning people (see e.g., for Switzerland, Udris & Hauser, 2017). It is unclear how partisan attitudes have impacted media trust changes during the pandemic. First evidence points out, that right-wingers lose more media trust in the UK (Fletcher et al., 2020), that those in the US follow fewer preventive measures (Zhao et al., 2020) and that these people criticize the elite more for exaggerating the crisis and also judge the role of the media more critically (for the US: Jamieson & Albarracin, 2020; Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020; for the UK: Nielsen, Fletcher et al., 2020). These results, however, come from highly divided, two-party systems and thus cannot easily be transferred to multi-party systems. Consequently, we pose the question:

RQ4: Do people with right-wing party preferences a) lose more trust in political information from traditional media and b) gain more trust in political information from non-traditional media during the COVID-crisis compared to people with left-wing party preferences?

Data Collection and Methodology

To study short-term media trust changes during crises, its drivers as well as its potential consequences, we used the COVID-19 pandemic as a natural experiment. We collected panel data in German-speaking Switzerland from March 2 to 15 in the year 2020 (n=1297; cooperation rate 43.6%, see for more information Supplemental Appendices A1 and A2), when the COVID case numbers in Switzerland were still low and protection measures were sparse. With strong growth rates in Switzerland (and worldwide), the World Health Organization categorized COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, and the Swiss government decided on March 16 to fundamentally cut back public life, with the national executive taking over (without consultation of national/
regional parliaments). Our second panel wave \((n=768, \text{response rate } 59.\%)\) took place in mid-May after most of the emergency measures had been lifted on May 11 but the exceptional ruling situation still existed. Statistical comparisons showed that there were no significant differences between the composition of wave 1 and wave 2’s samples in terms of age, gender, and education. Additionally, attrition was not found to bear any association to baseline levels of trust (political trust, \(t\) (1,150.96) = 0.10; trust in traditional media \(t\) (1292) = −1.40; trust in non-traditional media, \(t\) (1265) = 1.86, for all \(p > .05\)) nor to levels of populist attitudes \((t\) (1,161.27) = 994, \(ns\)). This means that there were no significant differences in trust and populism levels between the respondents who participated in wave 2 and those who did not.

We selected German-speaking Switzerland as a region that stands out in media trust in routine times within the Swiss language regions (Udris & Hauser, 2017) and shows relatively high levels of media trust compared to other countries (Newman et al., 2020). It has a strong and trusted public service broadcasting system which has also kept distance to official Swiss politics during the pandemic (Fög, 2020). Beyond, Switzerland shows no partisan divide in trust levels (Udris & Hauser, 2017). This selection thus allows to understand how the crisis hits a well-functioning media system and whether—contrary to the US and the UK—such a system manages to avoid clear-cut partisan divides as regards media trust. Besides, Switzerland stands out as regards the success of populist radical right parties: the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), a right-wing populist party, has won more than 25% of the votes in the last five national elections.

The survey data were collected by the market research company demoSCOPE. Adopting an online panel-based approach, a sample was drawn from a group of Swiss nationals following population quotas for gender, age, and education (see Supplemental Appendices A1 and A2). Four main categories of variables were included in our analyses: (1) media trust; (2) political attitudes, that is, political trust, populism and propensity to vote for a political party; (3) willingness to follow Covid-19 regulations, and (4) demographic controls, as well as use of traditional and non-traditional media as a controls (see Supplemental Appendix B for the exact wording of all items). Media trust was measured by asking respondents how strongly (1 = not at all to 5 = completely) they trust political information from various sources. The measure was based on the approach taken on the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman, 2019), which asked participants to rate their trust for a variety of news sources. For traditional media, we measured trust in political information from newspapers, public service TV, private TV, and public and private radio, resulting in a composite trust in traditional media scale \((w1: \alpha = .9, M = 3.5, SD = 0.7; w2: \alpha = .9, M = 3.4, SD = 0.7)\). For non-traditional media, trust in political information was measured for blogs/independent commentators, social networks, messaging apps, and video portals \((\text{composite scale: } w1: \alpha = .8, M = 2.3, SD = 0.7; w2: \alpha = .9, M = 2.2, SD = 0.8)\). The results of exploratory factor analysis corroborate this division of the underlying media trust variables (see Supplemental Appendix C for the full results and reported factor loadings).
Political trust was measured using three items based on the American National Election Study (American National Election Studies [ANES], 2017), which asked participants how much they agreed (1=not at all to 5=completely) with the statements “In most cases...” “...one can trust politicians,” “...politics does the right thing,” and “...politics cares about the citizens.” (W1: $\alpha = .9$, $M = 3.1$, $SD = 0.9$ W2: $\alpha = .9$, $M = 3.3$, $SD = 0.8$).

Populist attitudes were measured in survey 1 by asking participants how much (1=not at all to 5=completely) they agreed with nine statements on the relationship between the people and political elites (e.g., members of Parliament lose contact with the citizens quite quickly, the citizens should always be asked when important decisions are taken, the citizens are united by a good and honest character) (see Schulz et al., 2018) ($\alpha = .8$, $M = 3.3$, $SD = 0.6$, see Supplemental Appendix D for factor loadings). Following theoretical arguments about the non-compensatory nature of the multi-dimensional populism construct (Wuttke et al., 2020), according to which all components of the construct (i.e., anti-elitism, homogeneous people, people’s sovereignty) are necessary to the same degree, we approached the calculation of populist attitudes through a partially compensatory approach by calculating the geometric instead of the arithmetic mean.4

Propensity to vote (PV) was measured for all parties currently holding federal representation by asking participants how likely (1=very unlikely to 5=very likely) they were to ever vote for each party: SVP (“Schweizerische Volkspartei,” populist right, $M=2.4$; $SD=1.5$), SP (“Sozialdemokratische Partei,” left, $M=2.8$, $SD=1.4$); FDP (“Freisinnig Demokratische Partei,” right-liberal, $M=2.7$, $SD=1.2$); CVP (“Christlichdemokratische Volkspartei,” centrist, $M=2.4$, $SD=1.1$); GPS (“Grüne,” left, $M=2.5$, $SD=1.3$), GLP (“Grünliberale Partei,” centrist, $M=2.5$, $SD=1.3$). The measure was obtained from the Swiss National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR).

Willingness to follow Covid-19 regulations was assessed by asking participants in wave 2 to what extent (1=does not apply at all to 5=fully applies) they followed a series of Federal Council requirements to combat the crisis, such as staying at home, keeping a minimum distance, or wearing a mask ($\alpha = .7$, $M=3.6$, $SD=0.9$).

Demographic controls were measured in wave 1. Age ($M=47.7$, $SD=16.6$) was measured by asking respondents their age. People up to age 75 (due to our strong interest in non-traditional media and due to panel availability of the market research company) were invited to participate in the study. Concerning gender, 44.3% of the participants in the sample were female. In terms of education, 2.6% of the sample only finished obligatory school, 53.4% had secondary education, and 44.0% had higher education.

Media use was measured by asking participants how frequently (1=never to 5=daily) they used the following media to learn about politics: newspaper, public service TV, private TV, public service radio, and private radio (composite scale: w2: $\alpha = .62$, $M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.91$); blogs/independent commentators, social networks, messaging apps, and video portals (composite scale: w2: $\alpha = .73$, $M = 1.74$, $SD = 0.75$).5
Analysis Strategy

To test whether media trust is associated with people’s willingness to follow COVID-19-related regulations (H1a, H1b), we use a linear regression model where willingness to comply with COVID-19-related restrictions is a dependent variable, and levels of trust in traditional and non-traditional media are independent variables. We also control for demographics (age, gender and level of education) and political trust. To test for short-term media trust changes (RQ1 and 2), we compared the levels of trust in different types of traditional media (non-traditional media) in wave 1 and wave 2, performing paired t-tests to check whether the observed differences were statistically significant. To test how different trust measures are related, we computed Pearson correlations between changes in trust in traditional media and the changes in political trust (H2) as well as between changes in trust in traditional media and changes in trust in non-traditional media (RQ3).

Finally, to determine the relevance of ideological drivers for understanding trust changes, we rely on a difference score model. We have chosen this model over a residualized change model as the former allows for non-biased estimates also in non-randomized studies (Castro-Schilo & Grimm, 2018). Such nonrandomized studies are characterized by baseline differences across people with different predictor values—in our case media trust variation is bound to populism/party preferences in wave 1. For the difference score model, we regressed populism (H3) as well as propensity to vote (RQ4) controlled for demographic and news use variables on the difference score of (non-) traditional media trust. The difference score was calculated by subtracting the average trust in political information from all types of traditional media (non-traditional media) in wave 1 from the same value in wave 2 (see for descriptive statistics of the dependent variable, Supplemental Appendix E).

Results

1) Consequences of media trust: Our regression analysis reveals (Table 1) that higher levels of trust in traditional media are positively associated with the willingness to comply with COVID-19-related restrictions (estimate = 0.23, \( p < .01 \)). Levels of trust in non-traditional media, conversely, are negatively associated with willingness to comply with the restrictions (estimate = −0.08), however, the result is significant only at \( p < .1 \) level. In addition, females and older people are more likely to comply with the restrictions. These results hold even if we control for political trust, which turns out to be a positive predictor of the willingness to comply with, however, less relevance (estimate = 0.12) than trust in traditional media. Although both hypotheses (H1a and H1b) are supported, it becomes clear that (1) trust in political information from traditional media is more consequential: those trusting the traditional information infrastructure tend to more strongly comply with the restrictions and that (2) due to the low R-square many other factors beyond media trust influence the willingness to comply with COVID-19 restrictions.
Table 2 shows that traditional media are trusted more than non-traditional media at the beginning and during the course of the crisis. On an aggregate level, we see that trust in political information from different types of media is going down slightly during the COVID-19 crisis. The most substantial decrease is found for social media, blogs, and newspapers. Interestingly, the changes found are not significant for video portals, private TV and public TV/radio. Public service broadcasting, thereby, plays on outstanding role nevertheless: it manages to keep its outstanding trust levels to which no other medium can live up. Interestingly, on an individual level, we see more changes: more than 50% of the people change their trust evaluations from W1 to W2 for private TV and radio as well as for all non-traditional media, with a substantial portion of our participants even changing their trust evaluations by two or more points on a five-point scale. Also, on an individual level, fewer changes are observed for public service broadcasting (and newspapers).

Based on these findings, we see that trust in traditional media (RQ1) and trust in non-traditional media (RQ2) are indeed changing during the crisis—more so on an individual level compared to the aggregate level. Hereby, we observe a trust loss. However, public service broadcasting is standing out. It has the highest absolute trust values at the beginning and during the course of the crisis, and it—despite its very high trust levels—does not experience any significant trust losses.

Contrary to the trust decreases in political information we have witnessed, a paired t-test shows that there was a significant increase in political trust from W1 ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 0.9$) to W2 ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 0.8$; $t(767) = -8.25$, $p < .01$). Although political and media trust on the aggregate level run in different directions during the initial phase of
|                   | Newspapers | Public TV | Private TV | Public Radio | Private Radio | Blogs | Social Media | Messengers | Video Portals |
|-------------------|------------|-----------|------------|--------------|---------------|-------|--------------|------------|---------------|
| Aggregate level changes |            |           |            |              |               |       |              |            |               |
| Mean value, wave 1 | 3.58       | 3.84      | 3.00       | 3.82         | 3.13          | 2.49  | 2.16         | 2.17       | 2.26          |
| Mean value, wave 2 | 3.42       | 3.79      | 2.94       | 3.80         | 3.09          | 2.34  | 2.04         | 2.11       | 2.21          |
| Mean change (w2–w1)* | -0.16      | -0.05     | -0.06      | -0.04        | -0.07         | -0.16 | -0.14        | -0.08      | -0.06         |
| T-test p-value     | .00        | .11       | .09        | .22          | .05           | .00   | .05          | .09        |               |
| Individual-level changes |            |           |            |              |               |       |              |            |               |
| % of people who have changed trust | 46.80      | 43.20     | 50.87      | 39.60        | 51.46         | 51.92 | 51.04        | 51.34      | 51.82         |
| % of people who have changed trust more than one point on the scale | 6.1        | 5.9       | 9.1        | 5.7          | 8.6           | 12.5  | 9.5          | 12.2       | 10.2          |
| Share of people with high (4 or 5 on 5-point scale) level of trust |            |           |            |              |               |       |              |            |               |
| % of people with high trust, wave 1 | 63.7       | 74.6      | 34         | 73.9         | 41.2          | 13    | 6.3          | 6.3        | 7.9           |
| % of people with high trust, wave 2 | 54.6       | 73.6      | 30.4       | 73.5         | 35.8          | 8.9   | 5.8          | 5.3        | 6.6           |
| Number of observations | 750        | 750       | 690        | 732          | 651           | 626   | 672          | 670        | 685           |

*Note. We have reported here the means of the differences on the individual level. If case numbers between W1 and W2 differ, this does not necessarily completely match the aggregate differences of the means.
In addition, exploration of research question 3 demonstrated that there is a positive relationship between the changes in trust in traditional media and changes in trust in non-traditional media in Switzerland (Supplemental Appendix F). This means that people who lose trust in one kind of media during the crisis are likely to lose trust in another one, and vice versa.

(3) Ideological drivers of media trust: Finally, H3a suggests that people with populist attitudes further lose trust in traditional media during the crisis. Beyond, RQ4 asks whether trust changes in traditional media are also associated to partisan divides. Table 3 shows the results of the difference score models. The results indicate that populism and propensity to vote for the Social democrats are significantly related to trust losses in the political information of traditional media during the initial stage of the crisis. However, although these predictors prove to be statistically significant, their contribution to explaining trust changes is marginal as indicated by the very low

| Table 3. Difference Score Models for Trust Changes in Traditional Media. |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Change in trust in traditional media (w2−w1) | Change in trust in traditional media (w2−w1) |
| Female | −0.11*** (0.05) | −0.11** (0.06) |
| Age | −0.001 (0.002) | −0.001 (0.002) |
| Education level | 0.05 (0.047) | 0.04 (0.05) |
| Populism | −0.07* (0.04) | −0.09* (0.046) |
| Traditional media use, wave 2 | 0.05 (0.029) | 0.066 (0.033) |
| Non-traditional media use, wave 2 | −0.06* (0.033) | −0.04 (0.035) |
| Propensity to vote (PV): SVP | | −0.02 (0.022) |
| PV: SP | | −0.05* (0.024) |
| PV: FDP | | 0.01 (0.025) |
| PV: CVP | | −0.0004 (0.026) |
| PV: GPS | | 0.05 (0.029) |
| PV: GLP | | −0.04 (0.027) |
| Constant | 0.05 (0.209) | 0.27 (0.251) |
| Observations | 616 | 539 |
| R² | 0.02 | .04 |
| Adjusted R² | 0.01 | .01 |
| Residual std. error | 0.61 (df=610) | 0.61 (df=527) |
| F statistic | 2.412** (df=6; 610) | 1.622* (df=12; 527) |

Note. Negative values of the difference score indicate trust loss. Consequently, negative coefficients indicate that, for example, high values of populism are associated with negative values of changes (trust loss). Regression coefficients are unstandardized.

*p < .1. **p < .05. ***p < .01.
adjusted $R$-square. Finally, Table 4 summarizes the drivers of trust changes in non-traditional media. Our most outstanding observation here is that trust changes in non-traditional media are only weakly connected to ideological predispositions: we see no influence of populism at all and some evidence of partisanship to trigger trust changes (e.g., for Social Democrats, the CVP and the GLP trust losses; for the GPS weak trust gains are observed). Interestingly, such trust changes in non-traditional media are strongly influenced by our control variable: traditional media use is strongly connected to trust-losses in non-traditional media whereas non-traditional media use leads to trust gains in these non-traditional media. Step-wise regressions thereby show that the explained variance is driven by news use variables, but hardly by ideology which leads us to reject H3a/b.

**Discussion**

By searching for short-term media trust changes during the initial phase of COVID-19, their ideological drivers as well as their consequences, our analyses reveal five major findings. First, *media trust can change* due to external turbulences. Such changes are larger on the individual level, but they are also statistically significant on a societal level, leading to trust losses during the first wave of COVID-19. Second, *public service broadcasting does fulfill an exceptional role* during such external turbulences (see for similar results for the UK, Newman et al., 2021). It is not only the most trusted news source in Switzerland; but also the one which manages to keep its high trust values and which shows the lowest individual trust fluctuations. Third, during the pandemic, we find some evidence for a *trust nexus* that connects trust in traditional media and politics, as shown by Hanitzsch et al. (2018). However, two qualifications have to be made here: first, such nexus seems to also move to non-traditional media; second, although we find a positive relation between media trust and political trust on an individual level, the aggregate changes indicate that such relation is weaker than expected in the current crisis: whereas politics wins trust in the first stage of the pandemic, media loses it.

Fourth, contrary to findings from the US and UK, *political attitudes hardly affect who loses trust* during the crisis in Switzerland. This is all the more important as we neither observe a partisan, nor a populist divide as regards trust in political information stemming from traditional nor from non-traditional media. Interestingly, trust changes as regards non-traditional media are influenced by news use variables whereas the same does not hold for trust changes in traditional media. Finally, the observed *trust changes matter* as we show that those trusting information from traditional media are more likely to follow the official rules to fight the pandemic whereas those trusting information from non-traditional media follow the rules less. Hereby trust in traditional media turn out to be the single most important predictor—even more important than political trust.

Media trust is changing during the crisis, and it might also impact how well countries manage the COVID-19 pandemic. A communication infrastructure that relies on trusted traditional media is one of the key resources of democracies in times of crisis
as it is strongly linked to the possibility to successfully implement policy measures. It seems that the well-established public service broadcaster in Switzerland plays an important role: its information provision is most trusted, its average trust values remain stable during the crisis (in contrast to most other media), and it experiences the least fluctuation in trust on the individual level. Contrary to the positive effect of trust in political information from traditional media, trust in non-traditional media hinders the successful fight against a pandemic. It is crucial for future studies, to not only focus on trust in traditional media, but also look at trust in non-traditional media.

Beyond, our research clearly indicates that we should not easily generalize from the most-studied contexts, that is, the US, to other countries. Contrary to the US, Switzerland does not seem to experience a clear-cut increase in partisan or populist divides as regards media trust at least during the initial stage of the crisis. Interestingly, the lack of ideological division in routine times as regards media trust (Udris & Hauser, 2017) seems to carry over to the crisis. This is all the more relevant as Switzerland—despite its multi-party system, in which all large parties are forced to work together, and its strong direct democracy—experiences a substantial increase in affective polarization that is comparable to the one in the US (Boxell et al., 2021), meaning that

### Table 4. Difference Score Models for Trust Changes in Non-Traditional Media.

|                                      | Change in trust in non-traditional media (w2−w1) | Change in trust in non-traditional media (w2−w1) |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Female                               | 0.06 (0.069)                                  | 0.12 (0.074)                                  |
| Age                                  | 0.0003 (0.002)                                 | −0.001 (0.002)                                |
| Education level                      | −0.07 (0.064)                                 | −0.06 (0.0767)                                |
| Populism                             | 0.16*** (0.055)                               | 0.1 (0.061)                                   |
| Traditional media use, wave 1       | −0.24*** (0.040)                              | −0.24*** (0.043)                              |
| Non-traditional media use, wave 1    | 0.62*** (0.045)                               | 0.64*** (0.046)                               |
| Propensity to vote (PV): SVP         |                                               | 0.01 (0.028)                                  |
| PV: SP                               | −0.13*** (0.032)                              |                                               |
| PV: FDP                              | −0.03 (0.033)                                 |                                               |
| PV: CVP                              | −0.08** (0.034)                               |                                               |
| PV: GPS                              | 0.08** (0.039)                                |                                               |
| PV: GLP                              | −0.08** (0.035)                               |                                               |
| Constant                             | −2.07*** (0.299)                              | −1.32*** (0.335)                              |
| Observations                         | 599                                           | 521                                           |
| R²                                   | 0.27                                          | 0.34                                          |
| Adjusted R²                          | 0.27                                          | 0.33                                          |
| Residual std. error                  | 0.83 (df= 501)                                | 0.799 (df= 509)                               |
| F Statistic                          | 37.14*** (df= 6; 593)                         | 21.88*** (df= 12; 509)                        |

Note. Negative values of the difference score indicate trust loss. Consequently, negative coefficients indicate that, for example, high values of traditional media use are associated with negative values of changes (trust loss). Regression coefficients are unstandardized.

*p < .1. **p < .05. ***p < .01.
citizens also in Switzerland increasingly feel more negative toward other parties than their own. However, this political polarization has not infected the media landscape so far. More research is needed to better understand the link between polarized politics and polarized/non-polarized media systems and the role of public service broadcasting therein.

Moreover, our study calls for a better understanding of individual-level trust changes. Are these individual-level changes indicating measurement error, or do they confer substantial information? Prior (2010) follows the first idea when correcting long-term panel data on political interest for measurement error. Conversely, Zaller (1992) suggests that attitudes are formed on the spot based on different considerations that individuals have. This implies that a new situation in times of crisis leads to new considerations, which results in substantial media trust changes. Determining which interpretation is correct requires studying the considerations at each point in time that underlie people’s judgments.

Finally, more panel waves would be necessary to study the full communication dynamics during a pandemic. Reciprocal processes are likely to occur during specific outstanding situations, such as COVID-19. Our study reveals that media trust decline—shown on an aggregate level for Switzerland before the pandemic (see Newman et al., 2018, 2020)—is continuing during the initial stage of the pandemic. However, in 2021, Reuters Data have found a media trust increase in Switzerland bringing levels back to those of 2018 (Newman et al., 2021). Looking only at the aggregate long-term trends, one would have probably concluded that Covid-19 has triggered media trust. Our data indicate that this is not true for the outbreak of the crisis. More research is thus necessary to account for the circumstances within the pandemic that flipped the trend around.

Of course, our study is not without limitations. First, this study involves only one crisis in one country and thus the generalizability of our results is unknown. In the same vein, we have to admit that our wave 1 measurement might already be affected by the pandemic. Second, we have measured media trust on a relatively general level (i.e., trust in traditional versus non-traditional media respectively) and in different media types (newspapers, blogs etc.). Such a broad measurement strategy might conceal changes in trust, as individuals may not perceive each newspaper or blog in the same way, in particular considering that traditional media outlets increasingly adopt new models of content distribution relying on non-traditional channels such as social media platforms or online video channels. Beyond, we have refrained from measuring trust in Covid-specific information, but have focused on trust in political information more generally, which makes it more difficult to link the trust changes to the pandemic and the provided information.

Third, although we have relied on a well-tested scale for measuring populist attitudes (Schulz et al., 2018), we have to admit that the factor loadings for the items “homogeneity of the people” contribute less to the overall concept of populism. In this vein, we might speculate that the concept of people’s sovereignty, central to the concept of populism, might have a different connotation when asked in a country like Switzerland with a strong direct democratic system. And finally, our models clearly
reveal that media trust is only one factor that influences the willingness to comply with Covid-19 restrictions which calls for a model that more fully specifies these factors.

Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic has served as a unique natural experiment, allowing us to observe the dynamics of media trust perceptions that are often regarded as quite stable, search for their ideological drivers and show how consequential media trust is for the fight of a pandemic.

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**Data Availability Statement**

The authors agree to make other specific information about the study available within 30 days following a request for such information. This includes all details listed in Section III-A of the AAPOR Code of Ethics (https://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/AAPOR-Code-of-Ethics/AAPOR_Code_Accepted_Version_11302015.aspx).

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**Notes**

1. Speech, 15th of February, https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/munich-security-conference
2. This analysis focuses on understanding the consequences of media trust. It is not intended to fully explain who is following Covid-19 regulations.
3. In the literature there is a wide range of approaches to measuring media trust. Scales such as those developed by Kohring and Matthes (2007) are advantageous for measuring trust in journalists respectfully reporting on a particular issue in a differentiated way on different dimensions (e.g., trust in topic selectivity or fact selectivity). However, the central aim of our paper is to examine the relationship between trust in different types of traditional and non-traditional media for political information (see Strömbäck et al., 2020). For this reason, what is relevant for us when measuring is not different dimensions of trust in reporting, but a differentiation of trust in different media types as sources for political information.
4. The arithmetic average is the sum of a series of numbers divided by the count of that series of numbers, while the geometric mean is the nth root of the product of those numbers. While both denote a central point in a set of numbers, the geometric mean does so for a sequence in geometric progression.
5. We have controlled for the media use measured in wave 2 as we asked people about their political use of information in the preceding weeks. Thus, this period of media use refers to the period for which we have also examined the changes in media trust.

6. We have also examined the regression models for the presence of multicollinearity due to potentially strong correlations between independent variables; the Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) were below 2 for all variables (except the propensity to vote for the Greens in the traditional media-related model; the corresponding VIF was 2.1), hence we concluded that our model is not affected by multicollinearity. Additionally, we list the descriptive statistics for change score dependent variables in Supplemental Appendix E.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online: https://www.ikmb.unibe.ch/about_us/people/prof_dr_adam_silke/index_eng.html#pane383340

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