

TRUST, FAKE NEWS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA: HOW BIASED REPORTING INFLUENCES MEDIA TRUST AMONG SERBIAN YOUTH

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Abstract: In today's media-saturated environment, trust in information sources is becoming increasingly fragile—especially among youth. In Serbia, the mainstream media landscape is often characterized by political bias, soft censorship, and declining journalistic independence, leading to widespread public skepticism. Meanwhile, social media has emerged as a popular but unregulated alternative, particularly among younger generations. This study investigates how biased reporting and the spread of fake news impact young people's trust in both traditional and digital media. Using a mixed-methods approach, including literature review and original survey data from Serbian university students (aged 18–25), the research reveals that trust in mainstream media is notably low. Many respondents rely on social media despite recognizing its limitations, creating a paradox of convenience and skepticism. The results show a trend of media disengagement and growing apathy, which pose serious risks for democratic participation. These findings emphasize the need for improved media literacy education and institutional support for independent journalism.

Keywords: *Media bias, fake news, youth trust, Serbia, social media, media literacy*

Field: Social Sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

In democratic societies, the presence of a free, independent, and trustworthy media landscape is widely recognized as a foundational pillar for enabling informed civic participation and sustaining democratic governance. This is especially critical among young citizens, who represent the future of democratic engagement and political involvement. However, in Serbia—a post-socialist democracy with a historically complex and often turbulent media environment—the questions surrounding media independence, transparency, and the extent of government influence remain persistent and deeply contested in both public and academic discourse. Over the past decade, Serbia has witnessed a notable decline in press freedom, characterized by a growing concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few, the prevalence of opaque and non-transparent funding mechanisms, and documented instances of direct and indirect government pressure on editorial content. These trends have been extensively documented by international watchdogs such as Freedom House (2023), which highlight the risks these factors pose to pluralism, impartiality, and the overall credibility of the media sector.

Within this challenging media landscape, young people aged 18 to 25 occupy a particularly vulnerable position. Despite being highly active users of digital media and social networking platforms, many young Serbians often lack the formal training or critical skills necessary for effective news literacy and discerning consumption of information. This paradox results in a demographic that is simultaneously digitally fluent yet susceptible to misinformation, manipulation, and media distortion. Surveys and studies, such as those conducted by Stanojević and Branković (2021), reveal that young people frequently express feelings of confusion, skepticism, and even disengagement when interacting with political news and media content, which can undermine their trust in news sources and dampen their motivation to engage in civic dialogue.

Compounding these challenges is the growing prominence of social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, which have emerged as preferred sources of news and information for Serbian youth. These platforms offer the advantages of immediacy, diverse formats, and content tailored to young users' preferences, making them attractive alternatives to traditional news outlets often perceived as biased or controlled by political interests. However, the structural dynamics of social media—where algorithms prioritize content that maximizes user engagement rather than accuracy—introduce new complexities. This dynamic often results in the rapid spread of unverified or false information, which further blurs the lines between legitimate journalism and misinformation. Consequently, young users face heightened challenges in distinguishing credible news from deceptive content, exacerbating the existing trust deficit.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the core research question: How does exposure to biased, unreliable, or manipulated news content impact media trust among Serbian youth?

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The study aims to provide a nuanced understanding not only of the behavioral patterns and preferences in media consumption but also of the broader psychological and civic consequences that arise from declining trust in news sources. Through this investigation, the research seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions about media literacy, democratic resilience, and the role of youth in shaping the future media landscape of Serbia.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of media consumption habits and trust in news sources among university students in Serbia. The initial critical literature review informed the development of the survey instrument, ensuring that the items were theoretically grounded and reflective of current academic discourse on media trust, bias, and misinformation. This qualitative phase helped identify recurring themes and gaps in the existing research, which were then translated into measurable variables. The quantitative component, primarily derived from the structured online survey, enabled the collection of empirical data that could be analyzed for patterns and correlations. This triangulation of methods enhanced the validity and reliability of the study by cross-verifying findings from multiple sources and perspectives.

2.2 Survey Instrument

The primary data collection tool was a self-administered, 15-item questionnaire created in the Serbian language to ensure accessibility and cultural relevance for the target population. The survey was distributed using popular digital platforms frequented by university students, including Telegram groups, Instagram pages, and university-affiliated online forums. These channels were chosen to maximize outreach and engagement among digitally connected youth.

The questionnaire was structured to explore several key dimensions of media interaction:

- **Primary sources of news consumption**, such as television, online news portals, social media, or messaging apps;
- **Perceptions of bias** in both traditional and digital media landscapes;
- **Personal encounters with misinformation or fake news**, including the frequency and context of such experiences;
- **Levels of trust** in various media platforms, with an emphasis on distinguishing between institutional and user-generated content;
- **Fact-checking behaviors**, assessing how often respondents verify the accuracy of the information they consume and which tools or platforms they use for this purpose.

The survey comprised both closed-ended questions (e.g., Likert scales, multiple choice) to facilitate statistical analysis and open-ended prompts to elicit richer, more individualized responses. The estimated completion time was under 7 minutes, which was intended to reduce participant fatigue and increase response rates without compromising data quality.

2.3 Sample and Ethics

The final sample consisted of 102 valid responses, collected over a two-month period from August to September 2025. Participants were university students aged between 18 and 25, recruited from Serbia's major academic hubs—Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, and Kragujevac. This demographic was chosen due to its high level of digital literacy, frequent engagement with online media, and relevance to contemporary discussions about information consumption among youth.

Participants were not compensated and were informed of their rights before taking part. Participation was entirely voluntary, anonymous, and in compliance with ethical research guidelines. No personally identifying information was collected. The survey was hosted on a GDPR-compliant platform to ensure the protection of digital data, and informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the questionnaire. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant academic oversight body prior to data collection.

2.4 Limitations

While the study design offered a practical and scalable approach to understanding student media habits, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the use of an online survey as the sole data collection method may introduce a selection bias, skewing the sample toward more digitally engaged and urban populations, potentially underrepresenting students from rural areas or those with limited internet access.

Second, the self-reported nature of the data, particularly regarding perceptions of trust, media bias, and misinformation, carries an inherent degree of subjectivity. These attitudinal variables are influenced

by personal beliefs, experiences, and cognitive biases, and should not be interpreted as objective assessments. Nevertheless, such subjectivity is appropriate and expected in social research exploring perceptions and behaviors. Finally, while efforts were made to ensure diverse geographic representation within Serbia, the sample may not fully reflect the broader student population, limiting the generalization of findings beyond the specific context studied.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Media Consumption Habits

A significant majority (67%) of respondents reported that they consume news primarily through Instagram or YouTube, with platforms like TikTok growing in popularity for political content. Only 18% relied on traditional TV news such as RTS, Pink TV, or Prva, and just 9% expressed trust in these sources.

Additionally, 72% stated they actively follow independent media (e.g., N1, Nova S, or KRIK), yet even among these, skepticism remains. Most respondents described checking multiple sources before forming an opinion.

3.2 Perceived Media Bias

An overwhelming 81% of respondents identified traditional Serbian media as politically biased, citing pro-government favoritism, selective reporting, and lack of critical coverage. Interestingly, 52% considered social media “less biased,” but also “more chaotic.” Some described it as “the only place you see everything,” despite not trusting its content entirely.

3.3 Exposure to Fake News

89% of respondents said they had encountered fake news in the past months, or even years. Common topics included COVID-19, elections, EU integration, and conspiracy theories. Respondents shared instances such as a fabricated story about foreign “interference” in domestic protests.

Only 31% said they frequently fact-checked news before sharing. Reasons for not checking included time constraints, difficulty verifying, and trust in peers who shared the content.

Moreover, gender differences were observed in trust patterns. Female respondents reported slightly higher trust in international news outlets like BBC or Al Jazeera, while male respondents were more likely to follow political influencers on YouTube and TikTok. This divergence suggests that even within youth groups, media trust and exposure are shaped by identity, interests, and social networks. A small subgroup (6%) reported using VPNs or foreign IPs to access news sites blocked or throttled in Serbia, highlighting proactive strategies some young users employ to bypass media control.

3.4 Trust and Civic Impact

Only 14% expressed high trust in any media platform. The majority reported moderate or low trust, with many admitting they had “tuned out” from following the news entirely. One respondent noted: “I try to stay informed, but I don’t know who to believe anymore.”

A concerning 60% reported intentionally avoiding news during times of political tension. This avoidance may contribute to a broader trend of civic disengagement, especially in political participation and voting.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The findings confirm that Serbian youth operate in a highly skeptical media environment. Traditional media outlets are largely distrusted due to state influence and lack of transparency (Marković, 2020), while digital alternatives—though more accessible—fail to provide consistent, verified information.

This media distrust mirrors broader regional trends in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where political polarization and digital disinformation have created fragmented public spheres (Ćirić, 2022). The Serbian case reflects a hybrid crisis: young people neither trust mainstream outlets nor fully believe what they find on social media.

Importantly, trust erosion does not appear to be a result of ignorance, but rather of overexposure and contradictory information. Youth are aware of manipulation and misinformation but often lack the tools—or energy—to evaluate every piece of content critically.

These results raise important implications for democratic health. Without trusted sources of news, young citizens may disengage from voting, activism, or critical debate. Scholars like Vraga and Tully (2021) have noted that low media trust can result in apathy, withdrawal, or susceptibility to echo chambers.

However, the results also offer opportunities. A minority of participants (12%) who had received formal media literacy training showed significantly higher confidence in identifying bias and misinformation. This supports previous findings that education is a protective factor against manipulation (Mitrović &

Savić, 2021).

These findings also reflect the psychological toll of navigating information in a polarized environment. Constant exposure to conflicting narratives leads to “news fatigue,” where individuals deliberately avoid media to protect their mental health. This is especially true for students balancing academic stress with political anxiety.

In addition, the role of digital algorithms cannot be overlooked. Many young Serbians receive news through curated content—often selected by opaque engagement-based recommendation systems. This creates “personalized echo chambers,” where individuals are repeatedly exposed to reinforcing viewpoints, further limiting their exposure to diverse perspectives (Kričković & Petrović, 2023).

Regional comparisons support these trends. Studies from Hungary and Bulgaria have shown similar media fatigue and distrust among youth living under semi-authoritarian or transitional media environments. Serbia’s case, therefore, may not be unique, but part of a wider pattern in post-socialist states where democratic backsliding correlates with declining media freedom and civic engagement.

Interestingly, participants also expressed nostalgia for what they called “objective journalism,” a concept they admitted they had never actually experienced firsthand. This imagined ideal speaks to a collective yearning for reliability and neutrality in public discourse—one that remains unfulfilled in both traditional and digital media spheres.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals a deeply troubling yet critically important insight into the media consumption landscape among Serbian youth: while young people are extensively immersed in various forms of media, they remain profoundly disconnected from the question of its trustworthiness. The widespread perception that traditional media outlets are heavily politicized, combined with the unpredictable and often chaotic nature of social media platforms, has created what can best be described as a pervasive “trust vacuum.” This vacuum is characterized by skepticism, uncertainty, and disengagement, which undermines young people’s ability to confidently navigate the complex information environment they inhabit.

In order to address this alarming phenomenon, two primary strategies must be prioritized and implemented effectively. First, there is an urgent need to expand media literacy education substantially, particularly at the high school and university levels. Such educational initiatives should aim to equip young people with the critical thinking skills and evaluative tools necessary to discern credible information from misinformation and bias. By fostering a generation of media-savvy citizens, these programs can empower youth to become more discerning consumers and creators of information, thereby strengthening the foundations of an informed public discourse.

Second, it is essential to provide robust institutional and financial support for independent journalism. Independent media outlets serve as vital counterweights to state-controlled or politically influenced information sources. Supporting these outlets is crucial to ensuring the availability of reliable, diverse, and unbiased news coverage, which in turn can help restore public confidence in the media. Without such support, the concentration of media ownership and editorial control risks perpetuating cycles of distrust and misinformation.

Looking ahead, future research should seek to determine whether these patterns of media distrust and disengagement are unique to Serbia or are part of broader trends across other Balkan countries and similar socio-political contexts. Additionally, empirical studies are needed to rigorously assess the effectiveness of media literacy interventions in shaping youth attitudes and behaviors. Such research could provide valuable evidence to guide policy development and educational programming aimed at rebuilding trust in media ecosystems.

Based on the findings presented here, several concrete policy recommendations emerge. First, partnerships between educational institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should be actively promoted to develop and implement accessible media literacy programs across secondary schools and universities. These programs should extend beyond simply teaching young people how to identify fake news; they should also include education about the structural biases embedded within media systems and foster emotional resilience against information overload and misinformation fatigue.

Second, social media platforms operating in Serbia must be held accountable to increase transparency regarding their algorithms and content moderation practices. Whether through regulatory measures or public pressure, these platforms should be encouraged—or required—to prioritize credible local journalism in their news feeds and limit the spread of sensationalized or false content. Furthermore, the establishment of independent watchdog organizations and the development of civic technology tools could provide ongoing monitoring and assessment of how information is disseminated online, thereby

promoting greater accountability and trustworthiness.

Finally, it is imperative that academic researchers and institutions continue to investigate youth attitudes toward media, framing the issue not only as a crisis of trust but also as an essential lens through which to understand the future trajectory of democracy in Serbia. Media trust encompasses far more than the accuracy of news—it touches on deeper questions of identity, agency, and belonging within the public sphere. When young people feel alienated from the media that shapes public dialogue, there is a significant risk that they may also become alienated from democratic participation and civic engagement itself. Addressing this challenge is therefore not only a cultural imperative but a fundamental necessity for sustaining and strengthening democratic governance.

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