FULL PAPER

Media trust "until death"? Insights into critical media users' attitudes, their origins and consequences, and mistrust patterns

Medienvertrauen „bis in den Tod"? Medienkritische Rezipient:innen und ihre Einstellungen und Misstrauensmuster, deren Ursprünge und Konsequenzen

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Abstract: Media trust is under threat in many countries, and mistrust in mainstream media and discussions about "fake news" have increased in recent years. Critical attitudes toward the media can be a potential danger for society; therefore, it is crucial to know more about critical media users' attitudes, their origins and consequences, and mistrust patterns. Despite recent research focusing on mistrust, users' perspectives have been rather neglected. It is unclear how they describe their critical attitudes and what origins and consequences of those attitudes they perceive. In this study, qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 German media users who were critical of the media. The results provide insights into the intensity of users' critical attitudes and mistrust patterns, which are more or less intense and directed toward different media objects. Furthermore, the researcher investigated the origins of users' critical attitudes – above all, users named their socialization and major global events, such as wars or terrorist attacks, as the origins of their critical attitudes. The results also demonstrated the sometimes severe consequences critical attitudes have for media users, especially regarding their informational and communicational behavior and their relationships with other people.

Keywords: Media trust, mistrust, critical media users, qualitative in-depth interviews, survey.

Zusammenfassung: Medienvertrauen steht in vielen Ländern unter Druck, und Misstrauen gegenüber den Mainstream-Medien und Diskussionen über „Fake News" haben in den letzten Jahren zugenommen. Medienkritische Einstellungen können eine potenzielle Gefahr für die Gesellschaft darstellen. Daher ist es wichtig, mehr über die Einstellungen medienkritischer Rezipient:innen und ihre Misstrauensmuster sowie deren Ursprünge und Konsequenzen zu erfahren. Obwohl sich die Forschung derzeit mit Misstrauen beschäftigt, wurde die Perspektive der Nutzer:innen bisher vernachlässigt. Es ist unklar, wie sie ihre medienkritischen Einstellungen beschreiben und welche Ursprünge und Konsequenzen diese Einstellungen ihrer Wahrnehmung nach haben. In dieser Studie wurden qualitative Leitfaden-Interviews mit 17 deutschen Mediennutzer:innen geführt, die den Medien kritisch gegenüberstehen. Die Ergebnisse geben Aufschluss über die Intensität der kritischen Einstellungen und Misstrauensmuster der Nutzer:innen, die mehr oder weniger intensiv und auf unterschiedliche Medienobjekte gerichtet sind. Darüber hinaus liefern die Ergebnisse Aufschlüsse zum Ursprung der medienkritischen Einstellungen – vor allem ihre Sozi-

alisation und globale Großereignisse wie Kriege oder Terroranschläge wurden von den Nutzer:innen als Ursprünge ihrer medienkritischen Einstellungen genannt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen auch, welche zum Teil gravierenden Konsequenzen kritische Einstellungen für die Mediennutzer:innen haben, vor allem im Hinblick auf ihr Informations- und Kommunikationsverhalten und ihren Umgang mit anderen Menschen.

Schlagwörter: Medienvertrauen, Misstrauen, Einstellungen medienkritischer Rezipient:innen, qualitative Leitfaden-Interviews, Umfrage.

1. Introduction

In democratic societies, trust in the media plays an important role for citizens. From a normative perspective, using and trusting the media are important prerequisites for a functioning democracy because democratic societies need citizens who make informed decisions (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Since citizens cannot stay informed about everything that is happening in their countries, they rely on the media to orientate them (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). However, in many countries, trust has been undermined in recent years, resulting in mistrust of mainstream news media, discussions about fake news (Schwarzenegger, 2020), and accusations against the media (i.e., the "lying press"; Engelke et al., 2019). Mistrust of the media can be a potential danger for democratic societies. Though, a certain degree of a critical attitude toward media can be fruitful for democracies because it leads to engagement with trustworthy and reliable news (Ahmed, 2021). Furthermore, in countries with authoritarian regimes that utilize the media for propaganda purposes, critical attitudes toward the media and media usage patterns that do not only include mainstream media are important (Jakobs et al., in press). However, in democratic societies, citizens who fundamentally mistrust the media seldom use them to inform themselves about political issues, have lower trust in democracy, and tend not to accept political decisions (Ladd, 2012; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). In Germany, where this study was conducted, trust in the media is relatively high, and there seems to be no media trust crisis (Jakobs et al., 2021a; Reinemann et al., 2017; Schultz et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it is important for science and society to understand the attitudes of people who are critical of the media.

Due to intensified debate on the subject, research has been conducted on many different aspects of media trust; for example, on citizens' levels of media trust in different countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2018), the factors influencing media trust (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), different forms of media trust (Ognyanova, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020), and the consequences of media trust (Peifer, 2018; Tsfati, 2003). In recent years, research on mistrust in the media has also increased (Fawzi et al., 2021; Kyriakidou et al., 2022; Schwarzenegger, 2021). However, the theoretical concept of mistrust is not as clear as that of media trust – besides mistrust, researchers use different concepts, such as *media skepticism* (Tsfati & Capella, 2003), *media cynicism* (Quiring et al., 2021), *media bias* (Engelke et al., 2019) or *media hostility* (Schindler et al., 2018), which leads to a fragmentation of knowledge. Consequently, knowledge about mistrust of the media appears to be limited. However, considering the different concepts researchers use is helpful,

and integrating research on the different existing concepts can provide a more nuanced picture of critical media users' attitudes. In this paper, the researcher uses the concept of media users' critical attitudes as an umbrella term to cover the many different conceptualizations of mistrust of the media. Thus, the first aim of this paper is to theoretically clarify knowledge about and concepts of mistrust.

In empirical studies, some facets of users' critical attitudes – above all the perspectives of the users themselves – have remained uninvestigated; thus, the question of how they perceive their relationships with the media is important. Examining users' perspectives is the second aim of this paper, with a focus on how users describe the nature of their critical attitudes toward the media, their mistrust patterns, and the origins and consequences of their critical attitudes. The study reported in the second part of the paper addressed these questions using a qualitative approach and in-depth interviews with German media users who were critical of the media. Seventeen persons of different ages and with different educational backgrounds were interviewed. The interview guide consisted of questions on the nature and origins of their critical attitudes toward the media, their trust and mistrust, and the consequences of their critical attitudes. The results of this paper contribute to a better understanding of the patterns of critical attitudes from the perspectives of users and provide a foundation for further investigations on this important topic.

2. Media trust and mistrust of the media

Media trust is defined as the relationship between the media as trustee and the users as trustors (Jackob, 2012; Tsfati & Capella, 2003). Users trust the media to report on phenomena that are relevant to them but cannot be learned through personal experiences (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Users have to trust media coverage (Cuvalo, 2013) because, in most cases, they are unable to check media information or acquire extra-media data (Tsfati & Peri, 2006). Media trust therefore involves some risk for media users (Kohring, 2004; Sztompka, 1999) – they cannot know prior to encountering media content whether their expectations of the media will be fulfilled (Tsfati, 2003). Trust is based on past experiences (Müller, 2013) and positive expectations (Dernbach, 2005). Media trust takes different forms, meaning that users direct their trust toward different media objects (Blöbaum, 2016; Ognyanova, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020): Individuals may trust the media system overall and news media in general, or direct their trust to certain media genres, individual media brands, journalists, and media content.

Mistrust is not the opposite of trust in the sense that no trust automatically equals mistrust (Jakobs, 2018); when people lack trust, they do not automatically mistrust (Hartmann, 2011). Luhmann (1989) described mistrust as the functional equivalent of trust, explaining that mistrust is an alternative pattern that people can apply in uncertain situations. Mistrust can thus replace trust and have the same functions; for example, mistrust reduces complexity in the same way trust does. Nevertheless, the consequences differ; whereas trust leads to an increase in freedom because people can save their own resources and let others do things for

them, mistrust leads them to invest more of their own resources in doing things themselves or conducting extensive verifications.

Like trust, mistrust can presumably be directed toward the media in general or toward more specific media objects, such as media genres, media brands, or journalistic content (Engelke et al., 2019). In focus group discussions with media users about disinformation, Kyriakidou et al. (2022) found that skepticism regarding disinformation and the correctness of information was mostly directed toward specific media outlets or groups of outlets – not toward the media in general.

With regard to mistrust, different theoretical concepts relate to mistrust regarding the media, but are not identical (Blöbaum et al., 2020; Fawzi et al., 2021). Therefore, the following section describes these constructs, which have in common that they deal with users' critical attitudes toward the media.

3. Media users' critical attitudes and their origins and consequences

Different researchers have aimed to describe media users' critical attitudes toward the media. Tsfati and Capella (2003) called such attitudes media skepticism, which they defined as "the perception that journalists are not fair and objective in their reports, that they do not always tell the whole story, and that they would sacrifice accuracy and precision for personal and commercial gains" (p. 506). Media skepticism is directed toward the media in general – it is a "subjective feeling of alienation and mistrust toward the mainstream media" (Tsfati, 2003, p. 67).

Based on the work of Capella and Jamieson (1996), Quiring et al. (2021) differentiated between media skepticism, which is a critical but constructive attitude, and media cynicism, which is a dysfunctional critical attitude toward the media, accompanied by the assumption of a conspiracy between the media and political actors. The authors empirically separated these constructs from media trust. Schindler et al. (2018) described media hostility as a phenomenon similar to media cynicism – an extreme form of media criticism related to an aggressively manifested negative attitude toward the media. Furthermore, academic debates about misinformation and fake news have also concerned mistrust. As Kyriakidou et al. (2022) pointed out, in contemporary political experiences, a generalized mistrust has emerged that strengthens the perception of media spreading misinformation or fake news. Furthermore, they argued that the academic debate neglects the question of how the phenomenon is perceived from the public's perspective. This probably also holds true for other academic debates, such as those about mistrust.

Because so many concepts exist regarding mistrust of the media, the researcher decided not to focus on a single concept since this would have restricted the research focus. Furthermore, most media users are not familiar with academic concepts, and using them could have influenced the media users' answers because they may have tried to adapt their answers to the constructs applied by the researcher (for a similar bottom-up approach regarding disinformation, see Kyriakidou et al., 2022). Therefore, the researcher decided to focus on media users' critical attitudes, understood as an umbrella term comprising all the previously

mentioned constructs that researchers have developed to explain mistrust of the media. In this study, having a critical attitude meant being skeptical of mainstream media. According to Tsfati and Capella (2003), mainstream media include national and local television, radio, and newspapers. These are the most prominent outlets in the media system and represent what most people think of when they are asked about "the media" (Jackob, 2012). Media users' critical attitudes toward mainstream media can differ in intensity. Some users are expected to be only slightly critical, according to the media skepticism concept proposed by Quiring et al. (2021), whereas others are expected to be fundamentally critical, as the media cynicism concept by Quiring et al. (2021) or the media hostility concept by Schindler et al. (2018) pointed out. Mede et al. (2020) claimed that most users direct their skeptical attitudes toward the media in general, whereas only a few users are skeptical toward specific media outlets. Schwarzenegger (2021) described media users' critical attitudes as pragmatic in the sense that they rely on specific news sources, even if the users are suspicious of the media to varying degrees, just because they are not able to question everything. He found that media users' critical attitudes were either naïve – merely distinguishing between "good" and "bad" sources – or more reflective, in the sense that those users had knowledge of media production processes. Kyriakidou et al. (2022) described a *pragmatic skepticism* with which people use media: Users know the political economy of media institutions and the conditions under which journalists work. Therefore, they are critical when they use media and, consequently, develop specific strategies for using news, such as using different news platforms or relying on especially trustworthy sources (e.g., public service broadcasting). Furthermore, they apply fact-checking and verification strategies.

Critical media users can initially be identified by asking media users directly whether they are skeptical of mainstream media. It depends on the user's perspective whether that person categorizes him- or herself as critical. Second, to give users an idea of the criteria they can utilize for this assessment, they can be asked whether they use alternative media. The reason for this is that alternative media describe themselves as representing a perspective which mainstream media do not offer (Holt, 2018; Schwarzenegger, 2021). This implies that users of alternative media chose them for gaining another perspective – those persons are at least interested in the alternative position these media outlets offer. Therefore, using alternative media can indicate being critical of mainstream media. Third, in Germany, public service broadcasting is a particularly important representative of the mainstream media (Beck, 2018). Hence, critical German media users can also be identified by asking people whether they are critical of public service broadcasting.

To better explain the sources of media users' critical attitudes and the consequences they can have, the following paragraphs describe the research conducted on the origins and consequences of critical attitudes toward the media.

Regarding the origins of such critical attitudes, findings on media trust, mistrust, media skepticism, and media hostility are relevant. Regarding media trust, Fawzi et al. (2021) explained that, on the one hand, cultural theories assume that trust stems from interpersonal trust as a result of early individual socialization.

Differences in trust are thus explained as resulting from personal experiences, gender, and social background. On the other hand, institutional theories assume that trust arises from the perceived or actual performance of institutions. This approach explains trust as being based on a subjective evaluation of an institution's performance. Research on factors that explain media trust (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Jakobs et al., 2021b; Obermaier, 2020; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) has shown that factors from both explanatory attempts relate to media trust and can help to explain its origins. This is probably also the case for critical attitudes toward the media.

Research on mistrust of the media points out that it can result from people's unpleasant experiences during usage (i.e., when their expectations of the media are not met; Blöbaum et al., 2020). Furthermore, mistrust can result from a medium's negative image or from the negative experiences that other people report (Jackob, 2012). In addition, a generally negative perception of journalism (e.g., a perceived bias contrary to one's own view) can lead to mistrust (Engelke et al., 2019), as well as a perceived political bias or partisan perceptions of media coverage (Tsfati, 2003). Moreover, perceived shortcomings in journalistic depictions (e.g., exaggeration and "chasing what sells") can be reasons for mistrust (Blöbaum et al., 2020; Newman & Fletcher, 2017). Prochazka (2020) found that media users can develop mistrust when their expectations of journalism are not met. Mede et al. (2020) investigated the role of users' experiences during media use in fostering media skepticism. In particular, the skeptical users the researcher interviewed mentioned mistakes in media coverage or perceived bias.[1] Furthermore, crucial experiences were important factors influencing users' skepticism and were described as the causes of their media skepticism. In most cases, no single event led to media skepticism; instead, the users described it as a process that developed over time (Mede et al., 2020). Tsfati (2003) named as reasons for media skepticism elite cues, heightened media attention to journalistic mistakes, audience resentment of journalistic depictions of political issues, and biased perceptions of media coverage. Furthermore, low levels of media trust were related to media criticism (Ahmed, 2021), but the causal direction of this relationship remains unclear. Schindler et al. (2018) found that a populist attitude is related to media hostility, and that a hostile attitude toward the media can be strengthened by the use of alternative media outlets. Furthermore, the authors argued that the feeling that one's own opinion is not represented by the media fosters media hostility.

To date, studies have not clarified the stability of a critical attitude toward the media. In an experimental study, media users were confronted with an expectancy violation by the media (Jakobs, 2018). Afterwards, the users stated that they would, in the future, change their usage patterns regarding the source of the expectancy violation, but they would not completely stop using that media outlet.

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1 The texts written by Mede et al. (2020), Herrmann and Wiafe (2020), and Hollekamp and Tampier (2020) all described media skepticism based on the results of a single study – a project in which qualitative interviews and group discussions were conducted with skeptical media users in Germany (Blöbaum et al., 2020; Badura & Blöbaum, 2020).

Rather, they would check information against other sources. Thus, single negative experiences do not seem to lead to complete changes in media usage patterns. Regarding the duration of their critical attitudes, some users probably held them for a long time, whereas others developed them recently or due to a specific event. Herrmann and Wiafe (2020) found out that media users described the duration of media skepticism differently – some users were not able to name a specific starting point of their skeptical attitudes, others described their attitudes as skeptical from their earliest memories onward, and still others became more skeptical over time. Few users stated that they were not skeptical in the past but developed this attitude in recent years.

Regarding the consequences of critical attitudes toward the media, researchers have differentiated them according to the attitude intensity. A slightly critical attitude can be helpful for democratic purposes because it encourages news engagement (Ahmed, 2021), but a severe critical attitude can lead to the rejection of information supplied by the media and to news disengagement (Ahmed, 2021). Quiring et al. (2021) showed that skeptical media users had high media trust, whereas cynical media users had low media trust, and the latter were more politically disaffected. Schindler et al. (2018) found that media hostility led to feelings of rage and increased political participation. In their study, users with severe media hostility tended to express their own opinions more frequently in the media. Hollekamp and Tampier (2020) also found that media skepticism led to negative emotions – skeptical users reported different emotions ranging from anger or resignation to rage.

Different researchers have investigated the consequences of critical attitudes for media usage. Tsfati and Capella (2003, 2005) found that, despite not trusting them, skeptical people still used mainstream news outlets. Wagner and Boczkowski (2019) showed that media users, despite viewing the quality of media reports negatively, still trusted the news they consumed. Furthermore, they found that users developed different tactics to deal with information from suspicious sources; they checked information from multiple sources and used a mixture of traditional media and personal experiences. In Quiring et al.'s (2021) study, media use was related to the intensity of the critical attitude. Skeptical media users showed different media usage patterns than cynical users, but there were some similarities; whereas cynical people used more alternative news sources, both groups used established news outlets.

Finally, findings already exist regarding the types and origins of critical media users' attitudes, but the perspectives of the users themselves has mostly been neglected. Therefore, in this study, the researcher aimed to answer the following research questions:

> *RQ1: How do media users describe their critical attitudes toward the media? What patterns of mistrust do they perceive?*

Regarding this research question, the aim was to compare users' concepts with the many different academic constructs discussed previously and to determine the extent to which users' concepts match those of researchers.

RQ2: How do users describe the origins of their critical attitudes toward the media?

Regarding this question, the researcher aimed to understand whether users were able to explain where their critical attitudes originated and, if so, what causes they attributed to them.

RQ3: What consequences of their critical attitudes toward the media do users perceive?

The aim of this research question was to analyze the consequences of the attitudes critical media users perceived and the intensity of these consequences.

4. Methods

In June and July 2021, the researcher conducted qualitative in-depth interviews (Berger, 2000) with German media users who were critical of the media. Three statements were defined to identify critical media users, and potential participants had to agree with at least one of them to be invited for an interview. The statements were: "I am skeptical of the mainstream media," "I use alternative news outlets," and "I am critical of public service broadcasting."[2] The media users themselves decided whether they agreed with the statements; thus, it was their perspectives that determined whether they were considered critical media users.

The respondents were recruited by communication science students at a German university. The students started to search for eligible candidates among their families and circles of friends and acquaintances. When they did not know or find suitable candidates, they asked their friends and families to recommend suitable candidates. Some students also recruited potential participants via social media; for example, they searched for people who had made critical comments in news media posts and asked them whether they agreed with any of the statements (for a similar approach to recruiting skeptical media users, see Badura & Blöbaum, 2020). When recruiting via social media, the students remained anonymous and only gave their first names. Everyone who agreed with at least one of the statements was asked whether he or she was willing to participate in an interview regarding his or her attitudes toward and usage of the media. The respondents thus gave their informed consent. Those who agreed were included in the sample. Participation was anonymous – only the first names, age, gender, and educational background of the media users were documented. No more interviewees were recruited when the interviews reached theoretical saturation and, during the conversations, no new topics were mentioned.

Finally, 17 critical media users participated in the in-depth interviews. They varied in age, and there were more men in the sample than women, as Table 1 shows.

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2   The wording of the statements in German was: "Ich bin den Massenmedien gegenüber skeptisch eingestellt," "Ich nutze alternative Nachrichtenangebote abseits der Massenmedien," and "Ich sehe den öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunk kritisch".

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

Characteristics	Number of Respondents
Gender	
Male	12
Female	5
Education	
Very high – people with a university degree	7
High – people with a university entrance qualification (A Level/SAT)	7
Medium – people with an intermediate school certificate	3
Age	
20–29 years	6
30–39 years	2
40–49 years	6
50–59 years	1
60+ years	2

Furthermore, many of the respondents had a higher education background, and none of the participants had a low education level – possibly due to the university students recruiting from their own circles. Ten of the media users agreed with all three statements during the recruitment – three with two statements, and four with one statement. Fifteen users agreed to the statement "I am skeptical of the mainstream media," twelve to the statement "I use alternative news outlets," and thirteen to the statement "I am critical of public service broadcasting".

The students conducted one in-depth interview each. Ten of the interviewed media users were personally known to the interviewers, but no student interviewed a close relative or good friend – other students interviewed such media users. Interviewers who did not know their interviewees personally remained anonymous and only gave their first names. The interviewers were intensively trained by the researcher on how to conduct an interview and how to deal with problematic situations, and they conducted pilot interviews before the fieldwork. Due to the high number of interviewers, the students were also intensively trained to use the interview guide. After the interviews, the researcher conducted quality checks of the material to ensure consistency across the interviews. Three interviews were excluded because they did not fulfill the quality criteria (e.g., because the interviewers did not manage to initiate fluent conversations with the media users or because there were communication problems due to language issues).

The interview guide consisted of questions on media users' critical attitudes, trust and mistrust of traditional and alternative media, and the origins and consequences of their critical attitudes toward the media. The researcher made suggestions about formulating the interview questions and instructed the interviewers to take care to ask the aspect of interest in the way intended by the researcher to ensure the comparability of the interviews. However, the interviewers were free to

integrate topics of interest into their conversations as appropriate. They were also free to adhere to the order of questions in the interview guide, or to switch between the topics of interest in the course of the conversations if they wished (Philipps, 2017). The interview guide was extensively pretested during the pilot interviews. Afterwards, aspects that the interviewees were unsure of were clarified or examples were added where necessary in the interview guide.

Five interviews were conducted as in-person interviews, and twelve were conducted via video conferencing due to the COVID-19 restrictions imposed during the fieldwork. However, video calls were conducted when the respondents agreed to use video conferencing. To approximate personal meetings as closely as possible in the video calls, interviewers were not permitted to use sound alone. All interviews were recorded (only sound for the video calls), and all respondents had previously agreed to the recording. The technical aspects were pretested, and there were no technical problems during the interviews. Four of the interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes each, and the other 13 interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each.

After the interviews, the students transcribed them according to Dresing and Pehl's (2018) simple transcription rules. The transcripts formed the basis of the analysis. During the analysis, the researcher developed categories based on the material and identified appropriate excerpts from the interviews. This approach combined deductive and inductive procedures – the categories from the interview guide were used as a starting point, representing the deductive component of the procedure, and were expanded with new categories or additional subcategories according to what the media users reported during the conversations, adding an inductive aspect to the analysis. Comparable to the study of Kyriakidou et al. (2022), the focus was on the participants' own understandings of their critical attitudes. The researcher conducted the analysis alone using MAXQDA software.

5. Results

This section presents the results regarding the intensity and objects of users' critical attitudes toward the media and the origins and consequences of those attitudes.

5.1 Intensity and objects of the users' critical attitudes toward the media

Media users' critical attitudes toward the media differed in intensity – the analysis showed that users described themselves as very, moderately, or slightly critical of the media. This was expected, as the literature review revealed that critical attitudes toward the media can have differing intensities. Furthermore, critical attitudes were directed toward different media objects. In the interviews, the very critical media users exhibited intense rejection of the media, believing that the media and politicians cooperated in telling people what they should think and do. They used terms that were characteristic of discussions about dictatorships: "propaganda" (female, 49 years old, very high education), "brainwashing" (female, 49, very high education), or "enforced conformity" (male, 62, high education). One of the users even responded to an interviewer's comment that "most people trust the media" by saying, "Indeed, until death" (female, 47, very high education). Those people felt that the media did not adequately fulfill their responsibi-

lities. In their eyes, public service media were controlled by the government, and some of the users thought that commercial media were financed by think tanks or controlled by NATO. Regarding the "lying press" reproach, which in Germany has been intensively discussed in recent years (Jackob et al., 2019; Reinemann et al., 2017), another user stated, "There's a system behind it. ... A mistake can happen once, but when it becomes systematic and the mistake is deliberately repeated, then I speak of a really systematically lying press" (male, 22, high education). The critical attitudes of these users were general in the sense that they were directed toward the media system as a whole.

The moderately critical media users perceived themselves as critical, but their rejection of the media was less intense. They did not believe everything they read, consumed news from a critical perspective, and/or compared information across other media or extra-media sources. However, they believed that the media mostly fulfilled their responsibilities and felt that the journalistic production process worked well. One user explained:

> I'd say that I have a media-critical attitude inasmuch as I don't always believe everything I read. ... I hope the well-known media houses, like I said, have editorial departments behind them that have already fact-checked the message – that certain checks were already done in the background. (Male, 48, high education)

However, they often felt that the media reports' perspectives did not match their own points of view, as this user explained:

> Yes, I think that the addressed topics have a certain relevance ... or now, when they're reporting on elections, that it's done correctly, yes ... but I think, for me, the intentions behind it are also important, like, which world view is strengthened by it? (Male, 30, very high education)

These users, despite having some trust in the media, mistrusted certain aspects of it. However, their mistrust was not particularly general or intense – it was similarly directed toward the media system as a whole but restricted to specific aspects or areas of it. These users' views were more differentiated.

In principle, the slightly critical media users thought that the media system functioned well and the media fulfilled their responsibilities. However, they were critical of certain aspects of the media, such as the diversity of media reports and journalistic depictions. One user explained, "It's difficult to say, but I don't know, for 60 or 70 percent I'd say that, for the moment, I can trust in what is said" (male, 25, high education). Another user expressed his attitude as follows: "I'd say they always portray things in a different manner than I would like them to. Well, just eye-catching, a bit populist. Even though it may be correct, I disagree with the type of presentation" (male, 24, very high education). These users also checked information from other media or extra-media sources – not necessarily to verify information, but to gain a broader perspective on specific topics. They rarely believed that the media lied to the people:

> Well, as far as I'm concerned, the "lying press" means that some leading media misreport on purpose. I don't think that we can make that

case. I rather take the view that they leave things out. I don't think they twist the facts; I rather think that through the structure and narrative style, things are simply being left out. (Male, 22, high education)

The users' trust was not specific in the sense that it was directed toward specific media brands or media genres; rather, it was general. However, specific aspects of the media to which these users' criticisms were directed were excluded from the allocation of trust.

With regard to the composition of the three groups, users represented all genders, ages, and education levels, and no specific group composition was identified.

Regarding the intensity of people's critical attitudes, users described them as differing in intensity, probably depending on how strong their critical attitudes were. Some users were slightly critical – their descriptions resembled the media skeptical people described by Quiring et al. (2021). Other users were very critical – their attitudes reflected the concepts of media cynicism (Quiring et al., 2021) or media hostility (Schindler et al., 2018). However, the moderately critical users were somewhere in-between – it thus seems important for researchers not to work with too narrow categories, but to apply more nuanced gradings. Regarding the objects of users' critical attitudes, most users' attitudes were general in the sense that they were not directed toward specific media genres or single media outlets, but in a broader sense toward the media system overall. In the theoretical section, the researcher pointed out that trust is conceptualized as existing on different levels and expected mistrust to be directed toward different media objects (Engelke et al., 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020). At least for the critical media users interviewed in this study, this did not hold true – their attitudes were directed more to general objects than to specific ones. However, the critical attitudes were not always directed toward all aspects of journalistic work – some users trusted in specific parts of the journalistic news production process, but not in others.

5.2 Origins of the users' critical attitudes

When asked if they could describe where their critical attitudes came from, all interviewees were able to name their origins. Some of them mentioned, as described in the literature review, specific experiences that led to or strengthened their critical attitudes. Others claimed that they were always critical or that their attitudes developed over time. This was also the case in a former study (Herrmann & Wiafe, 2020). The users whose attitudes developed over time described it as a process and named no specific events influencing their critical attitudes. This also aligned with findings from a prior study (Mede et al., 2020).

The interviewees who reported specific experiences as sources of their critical attitudes referred to three different kinds of events. First, some named personal experiences, such as moving out of their parents' house and realizing that they now had to pay for public service broadcasting media, since, in Germany, each household has to pay a public service broadcasting fee. Another user mentioned traveling and experiencing how the media coverage in other countries differed. However, users also described personal experiences relating to topics on which they were experts and that were covered by the media in ways they deemed unacceptab-

le. Prior studies have also found that personal experiences play an important role in developing users' critical attitudes toward the media (Mede et al., 2020).

Second, major global events were often mentioned as incidents during which users developed critical attitudes toward the media, such as the wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yugoslavia; the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001; or the European refugee crisis in 2015. As one user explained, "That was a sudden shock, when I particularly noticed that something about the media coverage had fundamentally changed" (male, 47, high education). He described this incident as "my wake-up call, when I realized that the media coverage absolutely isn't working" (male, 47, high education). Prior studies have also found that similar events are important for users (Mede et al., 2020). Descriptions of "moments of awakening" are known from processes of radicalization as 'red pilling' (Lewis & Marwick, 2017).

The third group of experiences that users reported concerned the COVID-19 pandemic. One user explained, "Regarding coronavirus, I had the impression every article said one thing and the opposite at the same time, and you couldn't really figure out … where that information came from" (female, 34, very high education), whereas another stated, "And that was the moment when it made 'click' for me. That's when I changed and started to wonder about it" (male, 23, very high education). Thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic, personal experiences were important for the users, and some reported experiencing "moments of awakening" during the pandemic.

Additionally, some users explained that they always had critical attitudes and perceived no development or change in their attitudes. Others consciously mentioned an effect of their socialization; for example, parents who were very critical of the media and influenced their children, or schools that taught them to consume media critically.

The origins of users' critical attitudes had no clear relationships with the critical attitudes themselves – there was no pattern showing that a specific origin related to a specific type of critical attitude.

In summary, some users always had critical attitudes toward the media, while others consciously mentioned their socialization as the origin of their attitudes. Still others realized that their critical attitudes developed over time, without a specific incident influencing them, and many named specific events that led to or strengthened their critical attitudes, such as personal experiences, major global events, or, specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviewees were able to answer questions about the origins of their critical attitudes. The causes users described aligned with the reasons for trust, mistrust, media skepticism, and media cynicism/hostility as presented in the theoretical section of this paper. However, some users missed certain factors, such as sociodemographic characteristics or political attitudes, out of their descriptions. Researchers often use these characteristics to describe different groups of users, but the number of interviewees in this study was too low to develop a typology that could be compared to the classifications used in quantitative studies.

5.3 Consequences of the users' critical attitudes

Users perceived different consequences of their critical attitudes regarding their informational behavior and their behavior in dealing with others. Some users claimed uncertainty or felt overtaxed. Some of them said that it was difficult for them to verify information obtained from the media because, for example, they had no investigative skills or did not know which sources to check. Despite their willingness to become informed, they felt unable to do this adequately. Others felt confused by different points of view, as this user stated: "The more media I use, the more contrasting views I hear, and there isn't any common line, even if the same topic is spoken about. Ultimately, I don't even know what's true anymore, and it leaves me a bit unsettled" (male, 67, very high education). Possibly, among low-educated media users, this uncertainty might be even more widespread than among the users in this study who had at least a medium educational level.

Some users actively searched for different sources of information when they were uncertain. For most users, it was important to try to gain another perspective or multiple perspectives on a topic, as this user explained: "I try to access other sources on the topic … so that you can then piece the puzzle together" (male, 62, high education). For these users, being informed was an important goal, and they spent much effort and time searching for different media. Other users said that they remained rather passive and waited for someone else to send them information, while still others exhibited a certain degree of resignation: "You hear it, and you are told something, and then you either believe it or you simply don't. But for me to further investigate would be incredibly difficult because you can't even find such information" (female, 50, medium education). Hollekamp and Tampier's (2020) study also described this feeling of resignation. For these users, difficulties in informing themselves were so severe that they became resigned and no longer tried to actively seek information.

Critical users developed different strategies for dealing with media information. For some, the reliability of a source was important; they especially considered the reputation and credibility of a source when they received information. Others tried to access as many sources as possible: "When I want to figure out certain things, I try to read 10 articles on that topic, including mainstream ones, and then I usually figure out that there's an 80 percent overlap, and this is what I consider mostly true" (female, 47, very high education). Some had developed investigative skills and identified specific sources of information on the topic of interest. These strategies have also been described in prior studies (Kyriakidou et al., 2022; Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). However, they are extremely time consuming, and users need a strong willingness to overcome the difficulties they perceive in informing themselves from a single source or only from the mainstream media.

Many of the critical media users explained that they felt alone in their attitudes and that their attitudes had consequences for how and with whom they actually discussed topics. This is also a phenomenon known from prior studies (Quandt, 2021; Schwarzenegger, 2021). Many users said that they avoided starting discussions because they had experienced a lack of understanding in the past. Some explained that people in their surroundings refused to listen to them. Many critical

users felt that they could not express their opinions publicly; they perceived a narrow range of opinions and therefore remained silent:

> *I try to avoid it. … I can't be bothered. You often hear things here and there where one person says it's true and the other person says it isn't, and you're almost not even allowed to voice your own opinion without somehow being looked on as stupid.* (Female, 50, medium education)
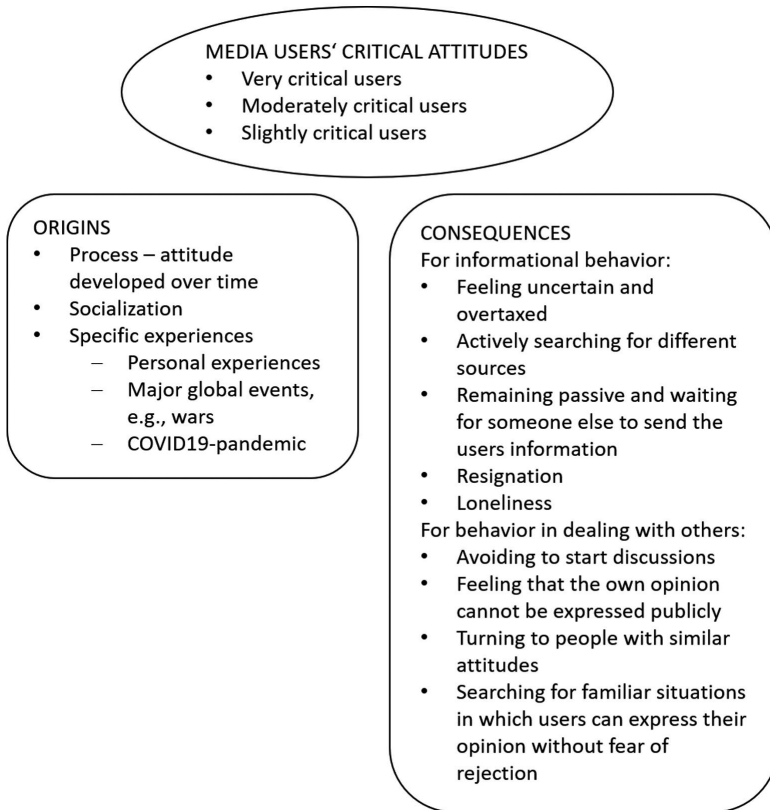
Single media users said that they turned to people with similar attitudes because they could discuss issues with them more freely, or that they sought familiar situations in which they could state their opinions without fear of rejection. Schwarzenegger (2021) made a similar observation.

Overall, the consequences of critical attitudes for users were diverse and, in many cases, affected how the users behaved. Some of the consequences had little impact, while others had a more severe one. However, the users also mentioned consequences that research has not so far investigated, and in contrast, missed an important research perspective from their descriptions – that of societal implications. The users focused on consequences that influenced themselves, whereas researchers generally investigate the implications of such consequences for society. The feeling of being alone with a critical attitude and unable to discuss topics with others can lead to the fragmentation of citizens and favor the separation of radicalized groups from other parts of society (Quandt, 2021).

5.4 Summary of the results

The results from the in-depth interviews in this study are summarized in figure 1.

Figure 1. *Summary: Intensity of critical media users' attitudes, their origins and consequences*

MEDIA USERS' CRITICAL ATTITUDES
- Very critical users
- Moderately critical users
- Slightly critical users

ORIGINS
- Process – attitude developed over time
- Socialization
- Specific experiences
  - Personal experiences
  - Major global events, e.g., wars
  - COVID19-pandemic

CONSEQUENCES
For informational behavior:
- Feeling uncertain and overtaxed
- Actively searching for different sources
- Remaining passive and waiting for someone else to send the users information
- Resignation
- Loneliness

For behavior in dealing with others:
- Avoiding to start discussions
- Feeling that the own opinion cannot be expressed publicly
- Turning to people with similar attitudes
- Searching for familiar situations in which users can express their opinion without fear of rejection

6. Discussion

In this study, the researcher investigated critical media users' attitudes, their trust and mistrust patterns, and the origins and consequences of users' critical attitudes. The multiple findings enrich the theoretical discussion about the concepts used to explain critical media users' attitudes, such as mistrust, media skepticism, and media cynicism/hostility, and support a deeper understanding of earlier findings.

First, the results provide insights into how users describe their critical attitudes – an important perspective that has been neglected in the research to date. The interviewees described their critical attitudes as differing in intensity, which was expected based on prior research. However, it became evident that not all users can be identified as clearly critical (or not) or mistrusting (or not); there are cate-

637

gories in between. This is an important factor that researchers should account for by, for example, not using too narrow constructs.

Second, the results show how critical media users describe their trust and mistrust patterns. In some cases, the users' descriptions aligned with the concepts researchers used, such as media trust, mistrust, or media skepticism. In other cases, the users' statements did not match the academic concepts, which is not surprising because the users had no reason to consider academic constructs and, sometimes, researchers did not clearly distinguish between concepts. For researchers, this implies that their concepts of trust, mistrust, and similar concepts resemble the perspectives of users – which is a prerequisite for describing users' attitudes with them. However, the users' descriptions and the researchers' conceptualizations are not congruent – which was expected and is not necessary from a scientific perspective. It would be helpful for future research to clarify the scientific understanding of the different constructs to avoid misunderstandings.

Third, the results showed that critical attitudes toward the media, such as media trust and mistrust, can also be directed toward different media objects. This study showed that when users criticize the media, although this can happen in a very general way (i.e., users criticize the media in general and direct their criticism toward the media system overall), their criticism can also be related to single aspects of the media and thus be more specific. In this study, users criticized, for example, the way journalists reported on certain topics, the variety of media coverage, or journalistic depictions. Their critical attitudes were rather general and related to the media system as a whole rather than to more specific media objects, as trust research has claimed (Strömbäck et al., 2020). In this study, users differentiated regarding another topic – journalistic work. Users stated that they trusted some aspects of the news production process but not others. A further conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that as soon as a user has some islands of trust – some sources he or she can rely on during media use – there can be no universal, generalized mistrust and no "trust until death." Thus, despite mistrusting some media or groups of media or being critical of some aspects of journalistic work, these users still have points of contact with the media; they can be reached by some media and are not completely uncoupled from social debates. This aspect is important for questions regarding the societal consequences of mistrust.

Fourth, the results shed light on the origins of user's critical attitudes. All the interviewees were able to answer questions about the origins of their critical attitudes. They thus had an idea of the causes and could name them. It is likely that not all of them were conscious of their critical attitudes all the time but could name the causes when asked to reflect on them. Interesting were the descriptions of the "moments of awakening" known from radicalization processes; hence, future research should investigate the extent to which the development of critical attitudes toward the media aligns with other processes of radicalization. Furthermore, it was noticeable that users did not mention certain factors that researchers typically use to explain critical attitudes – sociodemographic characteristics or political attitudes. Future research should synthesize the findings of quantitative studies on the factors that influence critical attitudes and compare them with what users tell researchers in qualitative interviews. In the current study, the number of interviewees was too

low to develop a typology for comparison with the groups described by quantitative studies. This could be a fruitful approach for further studies.

Fifth, since this study also analyzed the consequences of critical attitudes for users, there are some findings that are highly relevant to climates of opinion and the perceptions of critical media users. Some of the consequences the users experienced were expected, but it was surprising how diverse, intense, and severe the consequences of their critical attitudes could be for many users. Some users perceived such a narrow range of opinions that they either avoided talking to others about specific topics or actively sought people with similar attitudes with whom they could discuss their opinions freely. Both developments are a potential danger for democratic societies – when a group of people is no longer willing and able to discuss certain topics with others, this can result in polarization and create filter bubbles.

Despite the insights this study offers, it also has some limitations. There was a lack of diversity in the media users' genders and, especially, their education levels. Follow-up studies could use other recruitment methods to reach more diverse critical media users. Furthermore, it is possible that the students' recruitment among friends and family could have led to some social desirability in the answers, although the respondents' answers did not indicate that this was a problem (the respondents seemed to be open-minded in their answers). Due to COVID-19 restrictions, not all interviews could be conducted in person, but video calls allowed the interviewers to come as close as possible to personal meetings. Another limitation of this study was that many interviewers conducted one interview each. Despite many efforts to achieve standardization, fewer interviewers doing more interviews each would have been a better approach.

Finally, many of the results of this study can enhance the understanding of the perspectives of critical media users and strengthen research on critical media users' trust and mistrust. The first aim of this paper was to theoretically clarify knowledge about and concepts of mistrust. Integrating the different constructs under the umbrella of critical media users' attitudes revealed that knowledge about critical users' attitudes is not as limited as it appears when one focuses only on existing research on mistrust. This paper's contribution is a first step toward overcoming the fragmentation of researchers' knowledge about mistrust. The second aim of this paper was to strengthen users' perspectives on their critical attitudes toward the media and to help to understand how they perceive their relationship to the media. This paper therefore contributes to a deeper understanding of the nature of users' critical attitudes and the origins and consequences of those attitudes. Future research should concentrate on extending knowledge about users' critical attitudes, clarifying scientific concepts, and combining quantitative and qualitative findings regarding mistrust.

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