

# Exploring the effects of traditional media, social media, and foreign media on hierarchical levels of political trust in China

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## Abstract

Although there is a consensus that mass media play an important role in the rise and fall of political trust in Western democracies, existing research on media use and political trust in China achieved relatively inconclusive findings. By using two surveys conducted in China in 2013 and 2018, we examine the effects of media use, including traditional media, social media, and foreign media, on Chinese citizens' trust in their central and local governments. Our research shows that traditional media usage such as watching TV and reading newspapers is positively associated with citizens' trust in the central government but is not related to their trust in local governments. Social media usage is negatively associated with trust in local governments but not with trust in the central government. Using VPNs to access foreign media is negatively associated with Chinese citizens' trust in the central government but does not affect their trust in local governments. We explain why different types of media have such contrasting effects on political trust in central versus local Chinese governments and discuss the theoretical and empirical implications of these findings.

## Keywords

political trust in central government, political trust in local governments, social media, traditional media, virtual private networks, foreign media

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Typically conceptualized as an individual's confidence in their governmental institutions, political trust is associated with regime legitimacy and political stability and is often considered as an important trait of democracy (Chen & Shi, 2001; Hetherington, 1998; Newton 2007; Uslaner, 2002; Wong, Wan, Hsiao, 2011; Yang & Tang, 2010; Hutchison, 2011; Hutchison & Johnson, 2011, 2017). Yet, public opinion surveys consistently show that the Chinese government enjoys high levels of trust among its citizens, higher than all democracies (Edelman, 2020; Yang & Tang, 2010). For instance, the World Values Survey (WVS) reported 94.6% of Chinese trusted their central government in 2018, and this number increased to 98% during the pandemic (Rieger & Wang, 2022; Wu, 2020). Unlike Western democracies where local governments typically receive higher levels of trust, the Chinese central government receives significantly higher levels of trust than local governments (Edelman, 2020; Li, 2004, 2008, & 2013). The sharp contrast is also true between 11 Asian countries and China (Wu & Wilkes, 2018).

Even though scholars find that mass media have a significant impact on the rise and fall of political trust in Western democracies (Chan, 1997; Moy & Scheufele, 2000; Newton, 2017), research on China reports inconclusive findings about media's impact on trust in government (Chen & Shi, 2001; Hutchison & Xu, 2017; Kennedy, 2009; Lu, 2014; Meng & Li, 2021; Wu & Wilkes, 2018). Part of the reason is because most studies only focused on one specific type of media or a specific context. For instance, some studies find that Internet usage decreases political trust in China (Cheng & Liao, 2017; Hu & Zhuang, 2017; Lu & Quan, 2015; Shen & Guo, 2013) but Meng and Li (2017) have reported a positive relationship between new media and political trust. Others find that traditional media such as newspapers, TV or radio have positive effects on political trust (Cheng & Liao, 2017; Jin & Nie, 2017; Lu & Quan, 2015; Wang, 2009). So far, very few studies have systematically compared the effects of traditional media, social media, and foreign media on trust in different levels of governments.

Noting the gaps in the literature and the potentially contradictory roles of new media on political trust in China, we examine how media usage affects political trust in China, and particularly, how the use of new forms of media, including social media and access to foreign media through VPNs (virtual private networks), affects political trust in Chinese governments, and how these effects differ from that of traditional media such as newspapers and TV. To this end, our study is one of the first to systematically compare the effects of three different types of media (traditional media, social media, and foreign media) on political trust in different levels of governments (central vs. local governments). We use two surveys, an original survey conducted by ourselves in 2013, and another survey conducted by a research team at Renmin University, to systematically study the effects of various media types on trust in central and local governments. Our goal is to capture the media effects on the evolving nature of political trust for an extended time period.

## Literature Review

### *Hierarchical Levels of Political Trust in China*

Previous research on political trust has focused overwhelmingly on trust towards the nation-state political institutions but largely ignored the multi-layered governmental structure (Munoz, 2017). Research on trust in governments of different geographical areas finds that "citizens in democracies tend to trust those governments that are smaller and closer to them" (Munoz, 2017, p. 71). Empirical evidence based on US, UK, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark, Japan, and Taiwan shows that public trust in local governments tends to be higher than trust in national governments (Chang & Chu, 2006; Cole & Kincaid, 2000; Denters, 2002; Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2016; Goot, 2002; Jennings,

1998; Pharr, Nye, Zelikow, & King, 1997). This pattern arises for several reasons. First, local governments in democracies provide services pertinent to citizens' daily life (e.g., education, healthcare, and security) and such direct contact with local governments on a daily basis is connected with higher democratic responsiveness among citizens (Munoz, 2017). Second, opportunities for voice in local government are often higher than those in national government so that people trust local government more (Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2016). Third, local governments receive less media attention than national government and therefore receive less blame (Munoz, 2017).

Empirical evidence from China, however, suggests an opposite pattern: Chinese citizens generally display a much higher level of trust in their central government than local governments (Li, 2004; Liu & Raine, 2016; Wu & Wilkes, 2018), and the central government had the highest level of trust than provincial, municipal, county, and subdistrict governments, with the subdistrict level of governments receiving the least trust (Liu & Raine, 2016). Li's (2004) interviews with Chinese peasant petitioners showed similar findings and Chinese peasant petitioners firmly trust that the central government has good intention and care about their rights and interests (Li, 2004). At times they may update their perceptions and begin to doubt the capacity of the central government to ensure policy implementation at the local level, however, they almost never doubt the good intention of the central government (Li, 2004; Lu, 2014).

It is understandable that Chinese citizens maintain high levels of trust in their governments because China has seen the most rapid progress in economic development and eradication of poverty in the past four decades. Indeed, researchers have documented economic performance as the single most important predictor of political trust in China (Chen et al., 1997; Wang, 2005; Wong et al., 2011; Yang & Tang, 2010; Hutchison & Xu, 2017). However, to date, studies on how media usage affects citizens' trust in government have reached divided conclusions.

### *Effects of Media Use on Political Trust*

Generally speaking, there are two theories that explain how media usage affects political trust: the media malaise thesis and the virtuous circle thesis. The media malaise thesis argues that political media coverage tends to focus on sensational negative news such as corruption and other political scandals, which generates mass cynicism and malaise and subsequently decreases political trust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Mutz & Reeve, 2005). Indeed, media in the West are frequently seen as independent watchdogs designed to monitor those in power, and therefore, it is common to see negative media coverage on politicians and political institutions (Martin, 2008). A large body of literature find that media consumption hurts political trust (Barnes and Gill, 2000; Earl Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger & Bennett, 1999; Pharr, Nye, Zelikow & King, 1997; Perry, Webster & Vowles, 1999; Shen & Guo, 2013).

The "virtuous circle" thesis instead argues that media content provides public information that helps citizens gain better knowledge of politics and public affairs, promotes their interests in politics and also helps enhance their trust in government (Norris, 2000). Simply put, the media plays a crucial role in the formation of an informed citizenry; political communication and citizens' trust in government forms a virtuous cycle that helps reinforce each other. There is also empirical evidence that supports this argument (Becker & Whitney, 1980; Ceron, 2015; Norris, 2000; O'Keefe, 1980; Wang, 2007).

The core disagreement of these two theories resides in whether political coverage of the media is mostly a negative or positive portrayal of the government. Even though the two theoretical views suggest different media effects on political trust, they could be both correct depending on the context. Some scholars even propose a third thesis, stating that the effect of media usage on political

trust should depend on specific contexts including media types, media content, motivation of media usage, degree of media usage and levels of trust in media, and the like (Jiang & Zhang, 2021; Kang & Zhu, 2021; Meng & Li, 2021; Niu, 2010). When the specific contexts change, the relationship between media usage and political trust could also change (Brosius, van Elsas & de Vreese, 2019; Echeverria & Mani, 2020; Guggenheim, Kwak & Campbell, 2011; Kim, Chen & De Zúñiga, 2013; Otto & Maier, 2016; Von Sikorski & Herbst, 2020; Tsfat, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009). Based on this more versatile theory, we argue that how media use affects political trust should really depend on the specific context, and most importantly, whether the dominant political content on a specific governmental level in a specific type of media is mostly positive or negative.

Using China as an example, traditional media, social media and foreign media all have different natures and the degree of governmental control on these media also differs, therefore one needs to analyze the nature and content of these media types (traditional media, social media, foreign media) in order to decide whether their coverage on the central government (or local governments) is mostly positive or negative. If a specific type of media has mostly positive coverage on the central government (or local government), then exposure to or usage of this media type will possibly increase citizens' trust in the corresponding government level, and vice versa. Therefore, the impact of each of these media types on trust in central and/or local governments could be positive, negative, or neutral.

In the sections below, we discuss more specifically how the use of traditional media, social media, and foreign media affects political trust in the central government and varying levels of local governments, respectively, and we will propose three sets of hypotheses to capture these relationships.

*Traditional media and political trust.* Political information through traditional media like newspapers, TV and radio typically flows from top down and leaves little space for alternative viewpoints or user-generated content (Ananny, 2014). Journalists largely preserve a one-way control over what to publish and audiences are merely recipients (Lewis, 2012) and consequently political elites such as governments, editors and journalists can often exploit the top-down nature of traditional media to deliver information that helps sustain the political status quo (Woodly, 2008). This consumption of one-way information is expected to influence political beliefs and perceptions as predicted by the three competing theoretical views mentioned previously, and studies show that consumption of traditional news media leads to higher confidence in political institutions in European countries (Ceron & Memoli, 2015; Norris, 2011).

Scholars have observed that the Chinese government promotes certain ideological discourses through both traditional media and new media (Chen & Wang, 2019; Xin, 2018) and simultaneously enforces regulations on content published in newspapers and broadcast on TV and radio (Lynch, 1999; Xu & Albert, 2014). For instance, recent ideological discourses such as “positive energy” and “tell China’s stories well” have been heavily promoted by state-owned media. One example is the 2021 China Positive Energy competition hosted jointly by the Central Cyberspace Administration of China, China Internet Development Foundation, and China Central Television (CCTV). It solicits 500 stories that focus mainly on themes like poverty alleviation, anti-pandemic achievements, and building an inclusive and prosperous society. There are stories like Zhang Dongdong, a local government official in Guizhou, helped villagers sell agricultural products online by hosting an online live show and an airplane that already took off reversed its route back to the Urumqi Hospital that was 1400 km away to save a Uyghur boy with a broken-arm whose life was on the line. Meanwhile, traditional Chinese media are regulated by the State Administration of Press,

Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) and content regulation is common (Lorentzen, 2014; Tai, 2014).

The strict regulations on traditional media along with the top-down ideological discourse initiatives make political coverages on central government mostly positive. For example, content analyses of traditional Chinese media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed a general positive portrayal of the party's leadership and the benevolence of the central government (Chan & Fung, 2021; Chen & Xu, 2021). Exposure to such content should contribute to higher levels of political trust, especially at the central government level, because the central government controls propaganda. Research on use of Chinese media has reported a positive relationship between using traditional media, such as newspapers, magazines, TV and radio, and political trust (Cheng & Liao, 2017; Jin & Nie, 2017; Lu & Quan, 2015; Wang, 2009). Therefore, we propose our first hypothesis:

H1-a: Exposure to traditional media such as newspapers and TV is positively related with trust in the Chinese central government.

Interestingly, Chen and Shi's seminal research (2001) has found that exposure to traditional news media such as TV, newspapers, and domestic radio leads to less trust in government among Chinese citizens. The authors argue that the saturation of official propaganda makes people think more about the messages and compare them with the political reality, and then further discredit the sources of information (Chen & Shi, 2001). This negative linkage could also be ascribed to negative reporting, which is prevalent in the west because the media are frequently seen as independent watchdogs designed to monitor those in power (Martin, 2008). In China, although the media are state-owned and closely monitored, journalists still strive to expose problems such as corruption and misconduct of governmental officials from time to time as the government deems it as a way of anti-corruption (Ng & Landry, 2013). For instance, *Focus Report*, a popular prime time show of the state-owned national TV station China Central Television (CCTV), regularly exposes wrongdoings of local officials and attracts serious attention from the public, but the negative reporting is limited (Chen & Xu, 2021).

Yang, Tang, Zhou, & Huhe. (2014) have examined the effect of negative news reporting on political trust in China and have found negative reporting by traditional Chinese media focuses on political institutions at lower levels or of less significance. Exposure to traditional news media decreases political trust in political institutions of less significance, such as police, civil services, and courts. Institutions with more political significance, such as the Communist Party, central government, National People's Congress, and the Liberation People's Army, are largely left intact (Yang et al., 2014). This finding is consistent with the media malaise thesis, which argues that negative political media coverage generates mass cynicism and malaise and subsequently decreases political trust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Mutz & Reeve, 2005). The difference is that in China, the target of negative reporting is mostly at lower levels of governments or political institutions with lower significance (Hyun, 2016; Yang et al., 2014). Therefore, we propose our second hypothesis as below:

H1-b: Exposure to traditional media such as newspapers and TV could have a negative effect on trust in local governments in China.

**Social media and political trust.** The emergence of Web 2.0 technology opens discussions on a new era of e-democracy because new media empowers the public through more peer-to-peer public discourse, unmediated civic engagement, expanded participation and more governmental

accountability (Best & Krueger, 2005; Hindman, 2009; Nisbet, Stoycheff & Pearce, 2012; Xu, Ye, & Zhang, 2018; Ye, Xu, & Zhang, 2017). Social media provide “egalitarian accesses to the production and the consumption of news that is no longer elite-biased” and can “help citizens evaluate the performance of the political system without the lens of elite media outlets” (Ceron, 2015, p.490). Information on new media mostly comes from user-generated content or individual sharing instead of established hierarchy (Hermida, 2010, 2013). Citizens are more likely to be exposed to alternative and marginalized voices that could foster critical thought and decrease political trust (Lewis, 2012). Researchers (e.g., Akinola, Omar & Mustapha, 2022; Im, Cho, Porumbescu, & Park, 2014; Norris, 2011) find that citizens spending more time on the Internet and social media display less trust in government and democratic satisfaction.

In China, social media enable rapid information exchange with little cost, providing a new venue for Chinese citizens to gain first-hand information on public affairs from sources other than the government (Krueger, 2002; Yang, 2007). Many governmental agencies have their own social media channels for individual citizens to reveal corruption and misconduct of their officials. The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, for example, opened an online platform and created an interactive mobile application to allow citizens to report corruption (Fu, 2015). Revealing misconducts of governmental officials on social media has become a popular trend in recent years, causing the downfall of many corrupted officials and making the government more transparent and accountable (Xu et al., 2018). Qin, Strömberg and Wu (2017) analyzed a dataset of 13.2 billion Weibo posts between 2008 and 2013 and reported a significantly large number of posts on topics such as corruption allegations and protests. In 2018, a famous TV host, Cui Yongyuan, revealed on Weibo that Shanghai police received hundreds of thousands Chinese Yuan in bribes when investigating a tax evasion case. Cui had nearly 16 million followers on Weibo at the time and his posts immediately spread to a large scale of audience, causing the whole nation to discuss corruptions of Chinese local governments. Online revelations such as these are countless and could potentially hurt local governments’ trustworthiness among local residents.

Because social media provide an unmediated public sphere for individual citizens to expose the wrongdoings of local government officials and information posted on social media can rapidly reach a large audience, using social media could have a downward effect on trust in local governments as predicted by the media malaise theory. Empirical research on use of Chinese social media has reported mixed findings, but most researchers have found that using the Internet is negatively related to trust in the government (Cheng & Liao, 2017; Hu & Zhuang, 2017; Lu & Quan, 2015; Shen & Guo, 2013), with some suggesting a positive relationship between the two (Meng & Li, 2017; Wang, 2009). We argue that it is critical to examine different levels of government when it comes to media use and political trust, as the Internet and social media could have a negative effect on trust in local governments but a positive effect on trust in the central government. As a first step, we propose the following hypothesis on the local government trust:

H2-a: The use of social media is negatively associated with political trust in local governments.

Nonetheless, we believe that this powerful effect of social media is limited when it comes to the Chinese central government. In China, negative reporting and discussions on high-profile central governmental officials are generally highly sensitive. As a result, political scandals of high-profile leaders and officials are among the topics most likely to be filtered and Li (2004) argued that “in China, people hear about misdeeds of central leaders only if they are disgraced or purged.” (p. 235). For example, Chief of the Chinese Communist Party General Office, Ling Jihua, encountered an



Internet-based scandal when his only son died in a car accident while driving a luxurious Ferrari with two young female companions. Discussions about this incident were blocked on the Internet.

Meanwhile, the central government promotes certain ideological conversations online, and some popular catchphrases under this umbrella are “positive energy,” “tell China’s stories well,” and “main melody.” Common themes of such posts typically include China’s rising economic and political influence in the international arena, China’s rapid economic growth in the past few decades and its progress in eradicating poverty, high-profile leaders visiting undeveloped regions and giving out charities to the poor. Men, Yang, Song, and Kiouisis (2018) reported that engagement in positive discussion about President Xi on social media was related to a positive perception of the president whose leadership communication attributes were positively related to leadership effectiveness and government-public relationship.

In sum, social media posts can have positive effects on political trust in the Chinese central government because (1) negative reporting and public criticism is often targeted at lower levels of governments, and (2) online “positive energy” and similar posts can enhance citizens’ confidence in the central government. The consumption of such content is supposed to cultivate positive beliefs on the central government. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2-b: Social media use could actually enhance trust in the central government.

**Foreign media and political trust.** Although popular foreign sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google are blocked by the Great Firewall of China, individuals can still access them by using VPNs through different means with some effort. According to a 2017 estimate, approximately 30% of Internet users frequently were using VPNs to access blocked foreign media content (“*UK media: Will China permanently block VPNs?*” July 12, 2017).<sup>1</sup> Foreign news media frequently report negatively on topics like human rights, political activism, and election procedures (Lu, Chu, & Shen, 2016). Recent content analyses of foreign media’s coverage of how the Chinese government handles the COVID-19 pandemic reveal a general negative portrayal (Chan & Fung, 2021; Jia & Lu, 2021; Zhang & Shaw, 2021). Criticism and negative reports of the central government and top Chinese leaders by foreign media are most likely accessible only on foreign media and through VPNs (Okuda, 2016; Zhang, 2016). In addition, Lu (2014) finds that accessing foreign media depresses Chinese citizens’ assessments of their Central government’s intention and competence. Lu, Tong, and Zhu (2019) reported that Chinese Internet users who used foreign media were less likely to trust the government. Zhang and Liu (2014) also find that using VPN to browse foreign sites could hurt political trust among Chinese citizens. To further extend current literature on the topic, we develop the following hypothesis:

H3-a: Accessing foreign media via VPNs decreases Chinese citizens’ political trust in the central government.

Because criticism of the local governments is generally seen on domestic media within China, there is no need for Chinese citizens to circumvent the Great Fire Wall to view such information. Additionally, foreign media is generally less interested in exposing problems of Chinese local governments. As a result, accessing foreign media may hurt political trust in the Central government but may not hurt trust in local governments, so we posit our last hypothesis:

H3-b: Accessing foreign media via VPNs does not decrease Chinese citizens’ political trust in local governments.

## Methods

### Participants

We used data from two surveys conducted in China to test our hypotheses. Regarding the first survey, we worked with a professional survey company which had more than 400,000 Chinese subscribers from 31 Chinese provinces. 17,035 participants were randomly selected from the pool and were invited to participate in the survey and 1202 participants completed the online survey (response rate = 7.06%). All returned online surveys were reviewed and cross checked by researchers calling back the interviewees to confirm the responses. The sample was weighted by gender to mimic the gender makeup in the population. The original sample included 60.3% males, and the weighted sample had 55.6% males and an average of 32.87 years old ( $SD = 8.30$ ). The second survey was conducted by a research team at the Renmin University in 2018, which included 5415 responses collected from three platforms: Wenjuan.com (1761), Weibo (2291), and Wechat (1363). Responses were considered as ineffective and were removed from the sample if respondents spent less than 8 minutes to complete the survey.

The two surveys were conducted by two different research teams at different times, covering over 6500 respondents. We decided to use the two surveys, one in 2013 and another one in 2018, instead of just using our original survey conducted in 2013, because the political environment and especially the political management of social media have changed significantly after 2013. We would like our data to reflect the changing political environment and the evolving nature of Chinese citizens' trust in governments. We also would like to find out whether findings based on our 2013 survey still hold in the post-2013 era with a different political context. In a [Supplementary Material](#) document, we present a detailed description of our key variables and how we measured them in both surveys.

### Measures

*Political trust in central and local governments.* Respondents are asked how much they trust different levels of Chinese governments. In the 2013 survey, respondents were asked to rate their level of trust in five levels of governments including central, provincial, prefecture, county, town/district levels, while the 2018 survey only involved four levels: central, provincial, town/district and village.

Because citizens in China most commonly interact with the village, town/district and county level governments for services such as education, health care, and security, we consider them as local governments. Therefore, our measurement of political trust in local governments is the average score of trust in these levels of local governments. Both surveys include a question on trust in the central government; therefore, we use this item as the measurement for political trust in central government.

*Traditional media use.* Both surveys ask respondents their frequency of using traditional media such as reading newspapers and watching TV. We measure traditional media usage by taking the average score of the frequency of reading newspapers and watching TV.

*Social media use.* Both surveys ask respondents their frequency of using various social media platforms including WeChat, Weibo, BBS, and blogs. We take the average score of various social media platforms as the measure for social media use.



*Foreign media use.* Both surveys include questions on the frequency of using foreign media such as Facebook and Twitter through VPN. We use the responses to these questions to measure foreign media use.

We considered several important predictors of political trust and include them as control variables. First, we controlled for *social trust* and measure it by using the classic survey item on interpersonal trust which is a question included by both surveys (Levi, 1996; Uslaner, 2002). Second, we controlled for *life satisfaction*, as a person's satisfaction with his or her own personal life is often a strong predictor of his or her trust in government (Citrin & Green, 1986; Macchia & Plagnol, 2019). Third, we controlled for political efficacy because an individual citizen's belief that he or she can play a part in bringing about desirable political and social change (Kenski & Stroud, 2006) is likely to associate with more favorable views toward their current political system. Fourth, participants' demographics including age, gender, education, income, occupation, and party membership were controlled as well. *Party membership* was controlled because communist party members will likely be more loyal to the government and show higher levels of trust. Last but not least, while we tried to keep the models based on the two surveys consistent, there were important variables that one survey included but the other did not. For instance, the 2013 survey asked respondents their awareness of *Internet surveillance*, which we included as a control, because government surveillance could generate anger among private citizens and consequently affect their trust in government and decisions of political participation (Best & Krueger, 2005). The 2018 survey included *political interest* which we included as a control variable.

## Statistical Analyses

For each of the two datasets (i.e., the 2013 and 2018 datasets), we ran two sets of statistical models: in Model 1, we used political trust in central government as the dependent variable and in Model 2, political trust in local governments was the dependent variable. Both models included traditional media usage, social media usage and foreign media usage as independent variables and a full set of the control variables mentioned previously. Results of the 2013 survey and the 2018 survey are reported in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

## Results

### Descriptive Analyses

The percentage of individuals distrusting each level of the government increased steadily as the governmental level goes from central to more local levels in both surveys, verifying the patterns portrayed by Li's qualitative study (2004). Below Figure 1 shows this pattern. As one can see in Figure 1(a) (based on the 2013 survey data) and Figure 1(b) (based on the 2018 survey data), the percentage of respondents saying that they trust the central government is the highest, and it declines as it goes from central to more local governmental levels.

*Hypothesis testing results.* Our first set of hypotheses (H1-a and H1-b) posit that traditional media usage has a positive effect on trust in central government but is negatively associated with trust in local governments. Results in Table 1 Model (1) and Table 2 Model (1) showed that after controlling for demographic variables and other factors such as social trust, life satisfaction and political efficacy, use of traditional media such as newspapers and TV had a positive and significant effect on trust in central government. Traditional media usage associated positively with trust in central

**Table 1.** Effects of Media Use on Political Trust in Central and Local Governments in China Based on the 2013 Survey.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Trust in the Central Government		Trust in Local Governments	
	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error (SE)	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error (SE)
<b>Media usage</b>				
Traditional media	.20**	(.06)	.11	(.06)
Social media	.10	(.06)	-.14**	(.05)
Foreign media	-.26***	(.04)	.001	(.03)
<b>Control variables</b>				
Social trust	.44***	(.05)	.48***	(.05)
Life satisfaction	.08***	(.02)	.14***	(.02)
Political efficacy	.20***	(.05)	.14**	(.05)
Gender	.27*	(.11)	-.21*	(.11)
Age	.21***	(.01)	-.02**	(.01)
Education	-.07	(.08)	-.12	(.08)
Income	-.09	(.05)	-.04	(.05)
Party membership	.18	(.13)	.01***	(.12)
Government surveillance	-.03	(.04)	-.53	(.04)
No. of observations	1202		1202	

Notes: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The results of this table are based on our data analyses on the 2013 survey. A positive coefficient indicates the variable has a positive effect on political trust, a negative coefficient indicates the variable has a negative effect on political trust. The significance level indicates whether the effect is statistically significant.

government, unstandardized  $B = .20$  ( $SE = .06$ ),  $p < .01$  for the 2013 survey (see Table 1 Model (1)) and  $B = .85$  ( $SE = .06$ ),  $p < .001$  for the 2018 survey (see Table 2 Model (1)). In other words, the more time Chinese citizens spent watching TV or reading newspapers, the more they trusted their central government. To our surprise, results from Table 1 Model (2) and Table 2 Model (2) showed that traditional media usage did not have a significant effect on citizens' trust in their local governments in both the 2013 and 2018 surveys ( $B = 0.11$  ( $SE = .06$ ),  $p > .05$  for 2013 survey, as seen in Table 1 Model (2);  $B = .002$  ( $SE = .12$ ),  $p > .05$  for 2018 survey, as seen in Table 2 Model (2)). Therefore, we find that traditional media usage enhances trust in central government but it does not have a significant effect on trust in local government. Thus, H1-a was supported, and H1-b was not.

Our second set of hypotheses (H2-a and H2-b) posits that social media use hurts trust in local governments but enhances trust in central government. Results in Table 1 Model (2) and Table 2 Model (2) showed that social media usage was negatively related to trust in local governments,  $B = -0.14$  ( $SE = .065$ ),  $p < .01$  for the 2013 survey (as seen in Table 1 Model (2)) and  $B = -.52$  ( $SE = .14$ ),  $p < .001$  for the 2018 survey (as seen in Table 2 Model (2)), therefore supporting H2-a (see Model 2 in Tables 1 and 2). However, social media usage was not significantly related to trust in the central government,  $B = .10$  ( $SE = .06$ ),  $p > .05$  for the 2013 survey (as seen in Table 1 Model (1)) and  $B = .20$  ( $SE = .06$ ),  $p > .05$  for the 2018 survey (as seen in Table 2 Model (1)), therefore not supporting H2-b. In other words, the more social media Chinese citizens used, the less they trusted their local governments. However, social media usage did shake their confidence and trust in the central government.

**Table 2.** Effects of Media Use on Political Trust in Central and Local Governments in China, Based on the 2018 Survey.

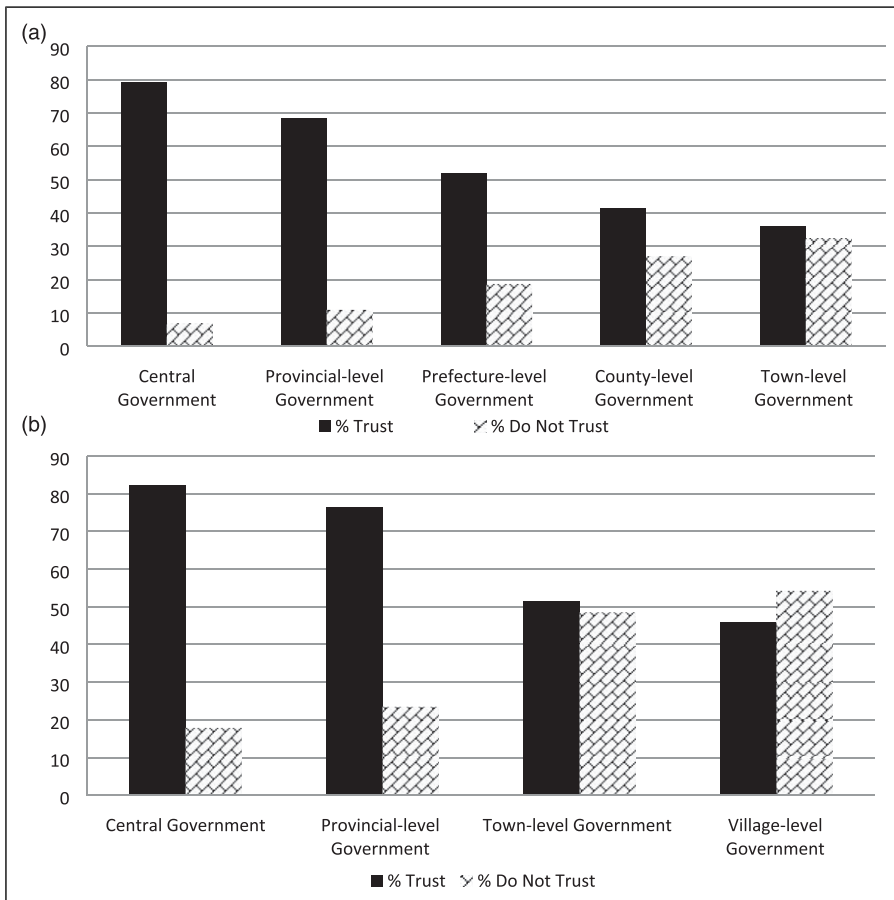
	Model 1		Model 2	
	Trust in the Central Government		Trust in Local Governments	
	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error (SE)	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error (SE)
<b>Media usage</b>				
Traditional media	.85***	(.06)	.002	(.12)
Social media	-.20	(.06)	-.52***	(.14)
Foreign media	-1.12***	(.04)	-.30	(.16)
<b>Control variables</b>				
Social trust	.47***	(.05)	.32***	(.03)
Life satisfaction	.62***	(.02)	.79***	(.03)
Political efficacy	.06*	(.05)	.17***	(.03)
Gender	-.03	(.11)	.02	(.05)
Age	-.004	(.01)	-.11***	(.02)
Education	-.15***	(.08)	-.08**	(.03)
Income	.02	(.05)	-.13***	(.02)
Party membership	-.07	(.13)	.22***	(.06)
Political interest	-.26***	(.04)	-.02	(.02)
No. of observations	5022		4789	

Notes: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The results of this table are based on our data analyses on the 2018 survey. A positive coefficient indicates the variable has a positive effect on political trust, a negative coefficient indicates the variable has a negative effect on political trust. The significance level indicates whether the effect is statistically significant.

Our third set of hypotheses (H3-a and H3-b) predicts that using foreign media through VPN hurts trust in the central government but does not affect trust in local governments. Results in [Table 1](#) Model (1) and [Table 2](#) Model (1) showed that foreign media usage was negatively associated with trust in the central government,  $B = -.26$  ( $SE = .04$ ),  $p < .001$  for the 2013 survey (as seen in [Table 1](#) Model (1)), and  $B = -1.12$  ( $SE = .04$ ),  $p < .001$  for the 2018 survey (as seen in [Table 2](#) Model (1)). In other words, the more Chinese citizens used foreign media through VPN, the less trust they had in their central government. Consistent with our prediction, results from [Table 1](#) Model (2) and [Table 2](#) Model (2) showed that foreign media usage was not related with trust in local governments,  $B = -.001$  ( $SE = .03$ ),  $p > .05$  for the 2013 survey (as seen in [Table 1](#) Model (2)), and  $B = -.30$  ( $SE = .16$ ),  $p > .05$  for the 2018 survey (as seen in [Table 2](#) Model (2)). Overall, these findings on foreign media supported both H3-a and H3-b.

Among the control variables, the 2013 and 2018 survey data delivered similar yet slightly nuanced results. First and foremost, both surveys showed strong evidence of a positive and significant correlation of three variables (social trust, life satisfaction, and political efficacy) with political trust at both the central and local level governments. Second, at least one survey showed that females and the elderly tended to trust the central government more than male and young adults; those with higher levels of education and political interest tended to have lower levels of trust in the central government. Third, at least one survey showed that the elderly, females and individuals with higher levels of income and education tended to have lower levels of trust in local governments. The CCP members tended to have higher levels of trust in local governments.



**Figure 1.** Political Trust in Chinese Central and Local Governments. (a). Based on 2013 survey. (b). Based on 2018 survey. Note: Bars indicating percentages of respondents trusting each governmental level.

To test the robustness of our results, we ran two sets of hierarchical regression models, corresponding to the ordered logit models in [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#). In each of the four models, we used demographic variables as block one, media use as block two, and the other variables as block three. The results are largely the same with our original ordered logit model. Models based on 2013 and 2018 data both suggest that traditional media usage boosts political trust in the central government, but foreign media usage reduces political trust in the central government. Evidence from the 2018 survey shows that social media use hurts political trust in the central governments. All these findings are congruent with our findings from the linear regression model. The only difference is that social media does not seem to have a significant effect on local government trust; however, all other findings are the same with our ordered logit models. We have included these results in the [Supplemental Materials](#).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Media use plays a significant role in political trust as suggested by both the media malaise theory and the virtuous circle theory and media coverage of political institutions influences public perceptions of the institutions and consequently their judgment on and trust in these political institutions (Ceron, 2015; Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Moy, Pfau & Kahlor, 1999). In China, the effect of the media on citizens' political trust in different levels of governments is understudied. Noting this gap in previous research, we examine the role of using various media types in Chinese citizens' trust in their central and local governments. Disentangling media types and levels of governments allows a much clearer understanding of the relationship between use of various media types and political trust in China.

First and foremost, we verify a different pattern of the hierarchical structure of political trust in China—trust level descends as governmental level goes down. Second, we find that usage of traditional media such as reading newspapers and watching TV helps increase Chinese citizens' trust in their central government but does not affect their trust in local governments. This finding, at first glance, seems to contradict with the media malaise theory which states media exposure leads to the decline of political trust and governmental legitimacy in western countries (Avery, 2009; Ceron, 2015; Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Newton, 2001; Norris, 2000, 2011). Yet, when considering the political features of China, especially how the traditional media system is managed and controlled in the country, this finding makes full logical sense. It is well known that in China traditional media like newspapers and TV stations are mostly state-owned and most news reports are screened before publication. Therefore, it is fairly common for them to carry positive coverage of its top leaders and central policies. In comparison, state media agencies often encourage their reporters to report misdeeds of local officials, which may lead to a lower trust in local governments among Chinese citizens. It is plausible that the effects of negative reporting from state media and some positive coverage by local media have canceled out each other's effects, which resulted in our null finding regarding the impact of exposure to traditional media on trust in local governments.

Unlike traditional media, social media usage has a negative impact on Chinese citizens' political trust at local levels. Social media promote peer-to-peer communication instead of elite-controlled content (Ceron, 2015; Davis, Love, & Killen, 2018) and enable fast spreading of democratic values across international borders (Khondker, 2011). In China, social media have empowered the public through more open public discourse, unmediated civic engagement and expanded participation, creating challenges to governmental control over public discourse (Xu et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2017). Because local governments in China have broad discretionary power to make and implement policies but lack oversight of its power, corruption and abuse of power exists more at the grass-root level (Gong, 2006). For instance, Pei (2018) noted that in 2014 the Chinese Communist Party's Discipline Inspection Commission received 10,349 corruption allegations from the masses against local government officials in Hangzhou municipality. When experiencing corruption and abuse of power through their interactions with local governments, individuals have the means to share their encounters on social media. Readers of such posts will likely resonate based on their own experience and decrease their trust in local governments. As a result, we see a negative correlation between social media usage and political trust in local governments, which exemplifies the powerful political role of social media in public discourse, and citizens can use social media as a powerful tool to monitor the government.

In contrast, the current study finds that social media use does not affect citizens' trust in the central government. On the one hand, the central government has devoted much effort to promote

certain ideological discourses such as “positive energy” and “tell China’s stories well” in the cyberspace, and stories with themes on China’s continued, strong economic development, poverty alleviation, effort in environment protection and the like have been widely circulated on the Internet ([ChinaNews.com, 2021](#)). According to the call for China Positive Energy 2021 Five-100s Stories, the goal of publicizing these stories online is to gather “positive energy” in cyberspace and prepare China to forge ahead in the years to come ([CCTV, 2021](#)). On the other hand, the central government also uses the Internet as a check on corruption (e.g., the online platform and mobile app created by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection), and it is not uncommon to witness misconducts of governmental officials being exposed on social media in recent years ([Xu et al., 2018](#)) despite its content control and monitoring on the Internet ([King et al., 2013, 2017](#)). With all these measures, the negative influence of social media on trust in the central government is discounted when encountering the central government’s systematic ideological discourses and cyberspace regulation and monitoring. This may explain why social media does not have a significant effect on trust in the central government.

Among all media types, foreign media usage is the only type that is negatively related to Chinese citizens’ trust in the central government. Compared to domestic media, foreign media often have more negative reports on the regime and often focus on the central government instead of local governments. When it comes to news report of China, some of the favorite topics of foreign media are human rights, political freedom, and environmental pollution, among many others. Access to such content will likely decrease Chinese citizens’ trust in the Chinese central government. Even though VPNs have been banned in China since 2018, individuals can still acquire VPNs with some effort and subsequently have access to foreign media.

### *Theoretical and Empirical Implications*

Our results have some interesting theoretical and practical implications on the political reality of China. Overall, we have confirmed that regarding political trust in China, despite the effects of media use on political trust vary depending on the type of media consumed and the level of government in question. Results confirm both the media malaise thesis and the virtual circle thesis. In other words, media consumption could affect political trust either positively or negatively. Empirically speaking, one highlight is that social media have played a central role in spreading democratic values across international borders ([Dzisah, 2018](#); [Khondker, 2011](#)). In China, social media have also empowered the public by increasing governmental transparency and accountability. Our finding on the negative association between social media usage and public confidence in local governments exemplifies the powerful political role of social media in China.

While our findings lend some support to the media malaise theory especially with social media, our research largely implies a drastically different political environment in China. The Chinese government has a strong influence on its media system and among the three different types of media, traditional media are state-owned and the easiest to monitor, followed by social media and foreign media. The central government not only uses both traditional and social media to boost public confidence in itself but uses them as a watchdog to monitor its governance, in which fewer messages are blocked but more are guided, a relatively new strategy of “conditional public opinion guidance” ([Tai, 2014](#)). Because of this, we have seen the opening of a window for complaints and criticism of governmental officials and policies. Foreign media use is the only type of media use that has a negative correlation with trust in the central government, and it is perhaps because the government could not control what appears on foreign media, nor could they completely ban the use of VPNs. Overall, we see a powerful role of social media in enabling voices of citizens and fostering



transparency of the government and access to VPNs opens a door for Chinese citizens to receive alternative information and views.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Our research is not without limitations. First, the findings are only correlational, not causal relationships because we used survey data. Second, we measured general use of different media types and did not specifically assess the kinds of content people are exposed to through those media. Third, we could not collect more recent data because of the evolving political environment in China, and we could only use what was available. With the limitations being said, the fact that both surveys delivered highly consistent results is quite encouraging.

Future research is needed in further exploring mechanisms through which social media use affect political trust, and how they operate in different political systems by comparing data gathered from western and eastern countries. Further, multiple mediators or moderators can also be examined simultaneously, such as perception of government transparency (Song & Lee, 2016), perception of government performance (Porumbescu, 2014), and pre-existing political ideology (Ceron & Memoli, 2015).

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### **Supplemental Material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### **Note**

1. This estimate was made before the sweeping crackdown of VPNs by the Chinese government in 2018.

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