Media Performance in Times of Media Change

Editors

Melanie Magin and Birgit Stark

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Editorial

More Relevant Today Than Ever: Past, Present and Future of Media Performance Research

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Abstract
Media performance is constitutive for functioning democracies. But what is the situation regarding media performance in the age of digitalisation? And how can media performance continue to be assured under the current difficult economic conditions for the news industry? In this essay, we give a short overview of how media performance research has developed from the introduction of private broadcasting to the spread of the Internet and social media. In the course of this development, the initial focus of media performance research on media content has broadened to include media quality from the user perspective. We show how the contributions to this thematic issue relate with existing lines of media performance research, but also add new facets to them. Finally, we point to the directions in which research on media performance should evolve in order to keep pace with current developments in the media market.

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Media Performance in Times of Media Change" edited by Melanie Magin (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway) and Birgit Stark (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany).

1. Introduction

The Coronavirus crisis has shown how much modern societies depend on professional news media which provide the citizenry with reliable information. Media of high quality ensure a free political discourse, inform the public comprehensively about current developments, enable citizens' well-informed decision-making, and contribute to the integration of society. Media performance is thus constitutive for functioning democracies. Recently, however, fundamental structural changes such as the digital transformation of news markets and the "platformization" of news distribution and consumption pressurize the media (Diakopoulos, 2019). These developments raise the question how democratically valuable quality of news can be further ensured. The present thematic issue is intended to contribute to taking stock on the state of media performance research.

2. The Development of Media Performance Research

Research on media performance has a long tradition in communication studies. Various approaches to the analysis of media performance have been applied: the deduction of normative standards from democratic theory, the construction of legal norms as criteria of performance, the functional consideration of journalism as a specific system with distinct professional standards, and audience-centred approaches. Quality judgements can be based on very different aspects and levels of journal-

ism as well as on different perspectives. The decisive factor is the perspective from which the evaluation is made because the same product may be considered as high quality by experts, for example, but fail to be accepted by the audience.

Due to the multidimensionality of media performance, but also due to this diversity of approaches is the methodological question of how quality can be measured still being discussed to date. Since the publication of Denis McQuail's seminal book on *Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest* in 1992 (McQuail, 1992), media performance research has evolved into a distinct field of study. However, research on corresponding questions began much earlier. It has repeatedly flared up when structural changes in media systems seemed to endanger the democratic functioning of the media.

One such change in the 1980s was the introduction of commercial broadcasting in many European countries where previously there had been only public service broadcasters. It was widely feared that the public service broadcasters would adapt their supply in content and style to that of the commercial broadcasters which would lead to decreasing media performance (Schatz, 1994). In the meantime, it is not this thesis of convergence in terms of content that is steering the change, but technical media convergence. As a result, new models of editorial organization and cross-media work have led to first serious changes in journalistic quality. The ongoing digitalization, the spread of social media, and the increasing power of intermediaries such as Google and Facebook have led to further serious changes. In recent years, this has strongly changed working conditions, role perceptions, and practices of journalists as well as on the technical, legal, normative, and cultural framework of journalism.

Hence, media performance research received a new facet in the early 21st century when the rise of the Internet raised concerns about the survival of the traditional news media. These suddenly had to compete with numerous content providers online, and their economic basis was threatened by the migration of advertising revenues to the net. The necessity to select from a multiplied supply of both journalistic and non-journalistic sources gave users a more active role in the process of news distribution and consumption. As a result, media performance research came to realize that the highest media performance is of no use if users do not make use of it. This has led to an increased interest in media performance from the user perspective. By strengthening this perspective, media performance research now takes account of the fact that every political information environment has two sides: supply and demand (Van Aelst et al., 2017). However, both sides are still being investigated largely independently of each other: To date, studies regularly focus either on the quality of media content or on performance from the user perspective.

Most recent developments have further strengthened the user perspective in media performance re-

search. The news media have received new competition from the intermediaries—social media, search engines, and news aggregators (Webster, 2010). These are increasingly taking on the role of journalistic gatekeepers and have thus become content providers themselves. A growing number of (particularly younger) recipients consume news (only) online, often approaching them via the intermediaries (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andı, & Nielsen, 2020). In contrast to the social integration function of the news media, it is feared that the intermediaries foster audience fragmentation and ideological polarization since they provide every single user with personalised news (Stark, Stegmann, Magin, & Jürgens, 2020). The popularity of the intermediaries results in an increasing part of the advertising budget being spent for them which further reduces the resources for professional journalism and high media performance significantly (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019). To remain visible for the audience, news media must adapt to social media logics. Softening the news (Otto, Glogger, & Boukes, 2017) might be a strategy to adjust to these rules. These trends, often labelled with buzzwords such as sensationalization, tabloidization, infotainment, or soft news, are not new, but may intensify in times of 'audience metrics' and aggregation of news. This might result in a decline in media performance—and with it in a potential loss of reputation of the news media and users' trust in them. Even though users currently trust the news media more strongly than the intermediaries (Newman et al., 2020), there is great concern about a potential decline in media trust (Strömbäck et al., 2020). It is therefore obvious to link media performance research with research on media trust.

3. Current Perspectives on Media Performance

Media performance research has thus always adapted to current developments of the media markets without forgetting its origins. This characteristic combination of tradition and innovation is also evident in our thematic issue. As the research field as a whole does, it focuses particularly on the supply (content) and demand (user) perspective on media performance. The analyses show how values and norms of journalism change fundamentally in the context of structural changes in different national media environments and which methodological adjustments in research are necessary.

In light of the current platformization, Steiner (2020) examines to what extent traditional indicators need to be modified and expanded in order to adequately analyse the softening of news on social media. Her study thus establishes an urgently needed link between media performance research and research on intermediaries. A content analysis of four German media shows that the softening of political news on social media is less pronounced than often feared.

Udris, Eisenegger, Vogler, Schneider, and Häuptli (2020) take a comparative approach that is rare in media performance research so far. Their content analysis ex-

amines the provision of hard news (measured on three dimensions: topic, focus, style) through 53 Swiss media. Regression analyses on the influence of numerous structural factors on the macrolevel (media system) and the meso-level (media types) show that the media type can best explain the quality of content.

Fürst (2020) is also concerned with structural influences on media performance, albeit from a different perspective: How journalists' use of audience metrics affects media performance. Her analysis reveals a negative effect on news quality since audience metrics increase economic pressures on newsrooms. Moreover, a dominant, market-driven rhetoric erroneously equates measures of audience size with audience interests and good journalistic work.

Weiß, Kösters, and Mahrt (2020) propose a new procedure for analysing the diversity of political coverage by deriving value frames from democratic theories of citizenship and the cleavage approach. This procedure is more adequate for investigating viewpoint diversity than traditional indicators. The analytical potential of their approach is demonstrated by a content analysis of migration coverage in 16 German offline and online media.

In order to achieve its desired effect, media performance must be received by the users—and in order to measure its effects, we need precise knowledge about who uses which media (performance). Hasebrink and Hölig (2020) propose a new multidimensional conceptual framework for the definition of audience-based indicators for news media performance and show how strongly the performance users expect and perceive is influenced by different news brands and their specific contribution to public communication. The authors point out that future studies should combine data on supply and demand to find out who actually receives which performance.

Geiß (2020) already bridges this gap. By combining content analytical and survey data on the individual level, he examines the hitherto neglected question of how users' news selection affects the quality of information they receive. He shows that the quality received depends less on which mainstream media are used, but rather on how much news users consume overall. The findings also suggest that an alarming large stratum of society uses news media so marginally that there is no real chance of acquiring the most basic knowledge about even highly salient current affairs issues.

Steppat, Castro Herrero, and Esser (2020) confirm that individual usage patterns (media habits) influence which performance users receive, but that this influence must be considered against the background of the surrounding news environment. Their comparative survey in five countries (Denmark, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, USA) shows that users from less fragmented-polarized media environments and those of traditional media are more satisfied with media performance than users from more fragmented-polarized media environments and those of alternative media.

Fawzi and Mothes (2020) deal with the question how media trust relates with the media performance users expect and their evaluations of the performance they receive. Their representative survey from Germany makes the close connection between performance and trust very clear: The media often disappoint people's high expectations, which leads to lower media trust.

Both Picone and Donders (2020) and Sehl (2020) take on the changing role and increased criticism of public service media (PSM) in many countries to examine how citizens evaluate PSM in comparison to other media types. Survey data from four European countries—Belgium (Flanders), France, Germany, and the UK—show that users attribute a clear societal role and higher performance to PSM than to other media types. PSM is obviously still seen as a as flagship of quality journalism by the majority in these countries. For Flanders, the results show in addition that PSM have difficulties to reach young and lower-educated citizens, but that they still lead when it comes to trust.

4. Future Directions for Media Performance Research

The studies collected in this thematic issue provide good indications of the direction in which media performance research has developed most recently and should develop further: The different perspectives on media performance presented here—media structures, news production and distribution, content, and consumption—should be investigated in direct relationship to each other. A stronger focus on comparative research—including longitudinal comparisons—should provide further insight into the factors that hinder or promote media performance (Weiß et al., 2016; for an exception see fög—Forschungsinstitut Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft & University of Zurich, 2019). Besides, we see a particular need for further research in the following directions: Which role do and should different normative perspectives play in media performance research, and how does the normative standpoint influence the measurement of media performance? Which methodological approaches are and can be used to investigate current developments in media performance (e.g., aggregation of news)? How must and can the traditional indicators of media performance be adapted to the high-choice media environment and become more standardized than previously? How do the implementation and use of personalized recommender system affect the perception of media quality? How can computational methods be applied in media performance research—which requires more intense interdisciplinary collaboration between social science and computer science? How can media performance research contribute to the investigation of disinformation online ('fake news')? And how can it be linked to media literacy research, focusing on how users deal with media content of varying quality?

Answers to these questions could help the media to develop strategies with which they can ensure their

survival. Media users could learn therefrom how to find and use reliable, high-quality content in the current information flood. Media policy could draw important conclusions therefrom to take measures ensuring democratically valuable media performance. Against the background of the most recent developments, media performance research is perhaps more relevant today than ever. We hope that our thematic issue will give new impulses to the field.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Soft Presentation of Hard News? A Content Analysis of Political Facebook Posts

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Abstract
The current media environment is primarily characterised by a large amount of information and, in contrast, rather fragmented audience attention. This is especially true for social media, particularly Facebook, which have become important news sources for many people. Journalists cannot help but publish content on Facebook if they want to reach the part of their audience that mainly—or even only—consumes news there. On Facebook, journalists are at the mercy of the algorithm that determines the visibility of their content. Because user engagement is a crucial factor in the algorithm, concerns have been raised that journalists are abandoning their normative quality standards to make the news as attractive as possible to the audience—at the expense of media performance. A softened presentation of the news, particularly in Facebook posts, may help achieve this aim, but research on this subject is lacking. The present study analyses this practice of softening the news in four German media outlets' (*BILD*, *FAZ*, *Der Spiegel*, *Tagesschau*) political Facebook posts. The results show that the overall level of news softening is low to medium. Furthermore, comparing them to website teasers reveals that news softening is only slightly higher on Facebook (mainly *BILD* and *Der Spiegel*), and that there are no converging trends between quality or public service media and tabloid media. Exaggerated fears about news softening are therefore unnecessary. Continued analysis of news softening, as well as ongoing adaption of the concept according to dynamic developments, is nevertheless important.

1. Introduction

The current media environment has made it increasingly difficult for journalists to attract attention. This is particularly true for social media, which have become important news sources for many people in recent years (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019). Although Facebook's importance has somewhat decreased most recently and the younger audience is increasingly turning to Instagram, Facebook remains by far the most important social media platform for news (Newman et al., 2019). Consequently, journalists must publish content on this platform (e.g., Lischka, 2018) to reach their entire audience. However, Facebook cre-

ates a dilemma: On the one hand, journalists want to inform people as fully as possible; on the other hand, to achieve this goal, their content must be visible, and its visibility is determined by Facebook's algorithm. Users' content engagement, such as the number of reactions, shares, and comments, is particularly important in this respect (Bucher, 2012; DeVito, 2017). The algorithm in connection with user engagement thus determines which principles are important to achieve high visibility. Journalists may therefore adapt to these principles that shape the so-called social media logic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013), that is, alter their presentation of the news to attract attention and increase engagement with the content.

A softened presentation of the news (e.g., using emotional language to arouse emotions) may be a way to achieve this aim (Lischka, 2018). Although some studies have pointed to positive effects, particularly in the context of television (e.g., Grabe, Lang, & Zhao, 2003), news softening is often associated with lower standards of media performance (Esser, 1999). Researchers particularly criticize the tendency of news softening to emphasise more dramatic but unimportant aspects of a news story at the expense of core information, which will lead to an insufficiently informed citizenry (e.g., Graber, 1994). News softening is therefore seen rather critically, also in the context of social media (Steiner, 2016).

Despite these concerns, research on news softening on social media is widely lacking so far. Few studies have investigated news softening on Facebook: 1) Lischka and Werning (2017) compared newspapers' selection of hard and soft news between their Facebook posts and the print editions; 2) Steiner (2016) compared the softened presentation (colloquial language, personalisation, narration, emotionalisation) of political news on television and on Facebook, including the articles linked on Facebook rather than only the posts themselves; and 3) Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019) analysed news softening within newspapers' Facebook posts but restricted their analysis to indicators of subjective language (subjective adjectives, emoticons). The present study, a quantitative content analysis, overcomes this research gap. It derives the most important criteria of news softening from the social media logic and analyses them in the political Facebook posts of four German media outlets: *BILD*, *Tagesschau*, *Der Spiegel*, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (*FAZ*). Additionally, it compares individual media outlets' Facebook posts with their website teasers. In this way, the study also determines whether news softening is considerably stronger in Facebook posts and can thus be seen as a means of adapting to the social media logic.

The article begins by examining the conditions for journalism online and on social media and describes the concept of news softening as a means to cope with the shifting conditions. The article then presents the methods and the results sections and closes with a conclusion and outlook on future research.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. User Attention in the Online and Social Media Environment

The rise of tabloids and commercial television has long been regarded as the main driver of news softening because of the economic pressure that these media types place on news journalism. However, the growing importance of the Internet and the digitalisation of news journalism are also key factors that intensify news items' struggle for attention and may therefore result in news softening (Magin, 2019a).

From the time journalists started to provide content on their news brands' websites, they have had to fight to attract attention to finance their work. Because most people, particularly Germans, are not willing to pay for online news (Newman et al., 2019), journalists depend on high click rates to increase their advertising revenues. Therefore, they evermore use real-time audience metrics (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Tandoc, 2015; Vu, 2014) to observe how minor changes to their websites directly influence clicks. As a consequence, journalists do not only place news teasers more prominently (Vu, 2014) to increase the visibility of high-potential articles but may also change headlines (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016). Softening the presentation of website teasers may thus help to adjust to news consumers' interests.

On Facebook, journalists do not only lack audience metrics and the possibility to strategically alter the placement of news items, but also advertising revenues flow primarily to the social media platform (Bell & Taylor, 2017). In addition, journalists' content competes with many other types of content on Facebook's marketplace of attention, with the algorithm deciding which items have greater visibility. Although the algorithm changes continuously, users' interaction with an item is the essential factor that determines how visible the item is in the newsfeeds of many others (Bucher, 2012; DeVito, 2017). This situation intensifies the need for journalists to focus on users' interests to ensure their content is as visible as possible. They may therefore face trade-offs between adhering to their news paradigm and adapting to the social media logic (Steiner, Magin, & Stark, 2019; van Dijck & Poell, 2013), between civic value and shareability (Bell & Taylor, 2017). More specifically, the social media logic may incentivise lower-quality and softer content (Bell & Taylor, 2017; Steiner, 2016). Journalists may therefore soften the presentation of their Facebook posts to attract the highest possible attention (Steiner, 2016).

2.2. Softening of News as a Means of Adapting to the Social Media Logic

The concept of softening the news describes changes in journalism aimed at attracting audience attention under new competitive pressure (Magin, 2019a; Otto, Glogger, & Boukes, 2017). Otto et al. (2017) define news softening as a higher-order concept that refers to different levels (e.g., level of media type, news item level or within-item level). Furthermore, news softening represents a multidimensional concept (Esser, 1999; Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012); the different dimensions and indicators form a continuum on the basis of which one can assess the degree of news softening (Reinemann et al., 2012). On the one hand, Reinemann et al. (2012) refer to a distinction between 'hard news,' such as politics, and 'soft news,' such as human interest stories (topic dimension). This dimension refers to the journalistic selection as the first step of the news production process. On the other hand, the authors refer to how the news

story is presented (news presentation as a second step) in terms of framing (focus dimension, e.g., episodic vs. individual framing) or in terms of verbal and visual style elements (style dimension, e.g., use of emotional language).

Regarding these two steps, journalists have two options of softening the news: They can either 1) select soft news topics instead of hard news topics and/or 2) present them in a softened way (see Figure 1). Since the present study takes only political news into account, it concentrates on only the second option. Journalists adopting this approach can alter the presentation of whole articles or simply the headlines, website teasers or Facebook posts. However, as many people scan news teasers on websites (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015) or the Facebook posts in their newsfeeds (Steiner, Magin, Stark, & Jürgens, 2019; Vraga, Bode, & Troller-Renfree, 2016), the latter mode of news softening seems to be most effective in producing audience attention (see also Magin, 2019a; Steiner, 2019). This analysis of news softening therefore focuses on Facebook posts and website teasers (see Figure 1).

Three aspects in particular are pivotal for adapting to the social media logic (see Figure 1). First, the significance of *emotionalisation* within Facebook has manifested itself within the platform architecture, at the latest with the introduction of 'reactions' in 2016 (Larsson, 2018; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Emotionalising social media content can increase virality (see also Berger & Milkman, 2012). Second, *subjectivity* has become more important within social media (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019): Many Facebook users who share items on Facebook express their feelings about the shared item within their status messages. Subjective

items may also increase user engagement (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019), and users may comment on particularly controversial news items more frequently (Tenenboim & Cohen, 2015). Although subjectivity is not new to professional journalism, this way of presentation may be a means to increase a news item's virality on Facebook (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). The third element is built on the importance of human relations and social media's primary goal of connecting people (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). This has altered the political logic in that it has "provide[d] new impetus to [its] personalization" (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013, p. 757). *Personalising* politics may be relevant not only for political campaigns (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013) but also for journalistic coverage in which politicians become the "main anchor of interpretation and evaluation" (Otto et al., 2017, p. 143) of the news. In summary, to adapt to the social media logic, journalists must emotionalise the news and present it in a more subjective and personalised way.

The characteristics explained above comprise two distinct journalistic strategies of news softening (see Figure 1)—applying stylistic features and content-related features (see also Otto et al., 2017). *Stylistic features* are a means to arouse emotions but without altering the content itself. They refer to the concept of sensationalism (e.g., Uribe & Gunter, 2007), which can be seen as news softening on the lowest level, the within-item level (Otto et al., 2017). In the present study, *affective wording* (see Reinemann et al., 2012), one way of emotionalising content, can be assigned to this strategy. An approach centred on *content-related features*, on the other hand, means that certain aspects are highlighted—which in turn may alter the framework of interpretation of the
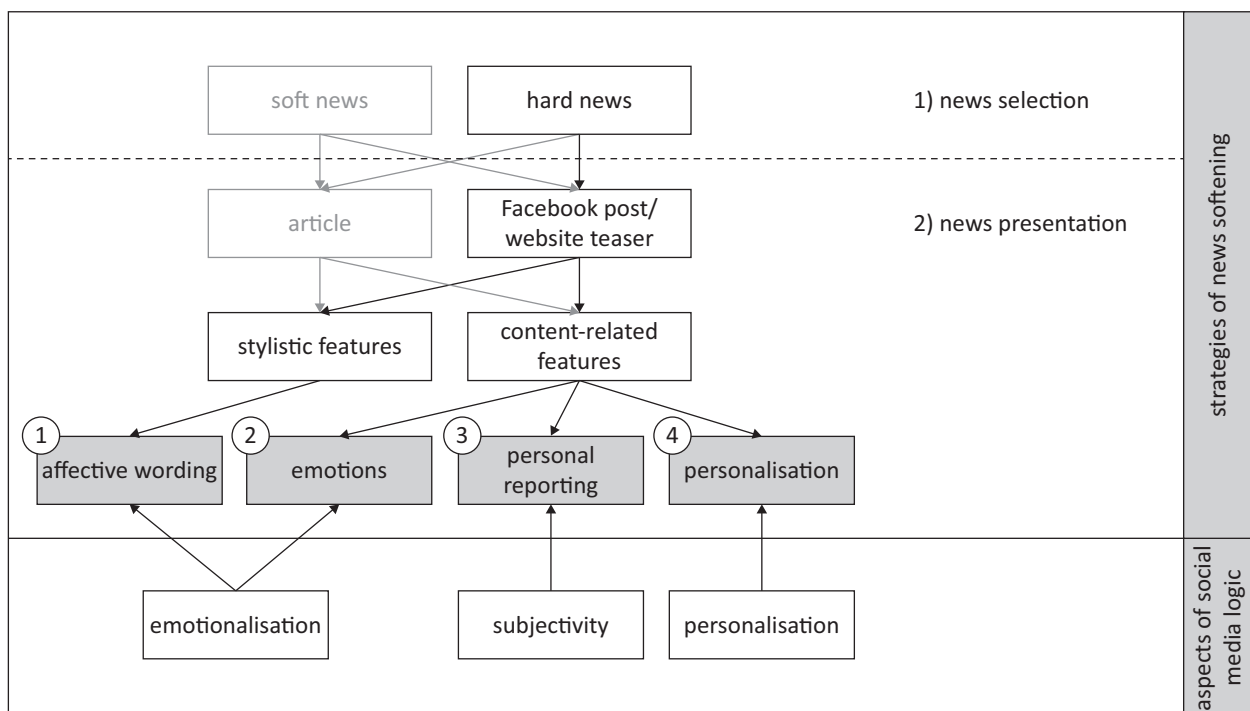

Figure 1. Journalistic news softening strategies.

whole news item. Thus, this approach operates at the news item level (Otto et al., 2017) and is roughly comparable with the focus dimension of Reinemann et al. (2012). However, while Reinemann et al. (2012) refer to whole articles and their overall framing, even a single sentence or an intentionally used picture can change the interpretation frame within a Facebook post or website teaser. In the present study, both presenting the news in a more subjective way, that is, including the journalist's viewpoint (*personal reporting*: Reinemann et al., 2012), and highlighting politicians (*personalisation*) belong to the category of content-related features. In addition, emotionalisation not only refers to stylistic features but also represents a content-related strategy in the sense that journalists may report on *emotions* within the text or illustrate them in photos. In total, there are four relevant sub-dimensions of news softening (Figure 1): The stylistic feature of 1) affective wording and the content-related features of 2) emotions, 3) personal reporting, and 4) personalisation.

First, *affective wording* includes the use of strong language (including strong verbs and adjectives or superlatives, e.g., 'this is the biggest disaster we've ever had'; Reinemann et al., 2012) but may also refer to emotional metaphors (e.g., 'heart-breaking story'; Leidenberger, 2015). Metaphors can help to construct a mental image to increase the reader's attention (Molek-Kozakowska, 2014) and are thus particularly critical in headlines and website teasers (Wiesinger, 2015) or Facebook posts. Second, reporting on (e.g., 'he was angry/sad') or presenting *emotions* (e.g., showing crying people) is another central aspect of emotionalisation (Reinemann et al., 2012) and occurs on both the verbal level and the visual level. Although many studies have focused only on verbal indicators (Lefkowitz, 2018; Magin, 2019a), it is essential to consider visual indicators as well (e.g., see Leidenberger, 2015), particularly since visualisation is a key aspect of social media. Third, *personal reporting* means the appearance of the journalist's point of view; it is the opposite of objective reporting and a central feature of news softening (Reinemann et al., 2012). Fourth, *personalisation*, another important aspect of news softening (Esser, 1999; Patterson, 2000), focuses on politicians instead of institutions, parties, or issues and emphasises politicians' personal traits, whereby this latter aspect of personal traits has received less research attention (Adam & Maier, 2010, p. 216; van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012). Within Facebook posts and website teasers, journalists can achieve a focus on politicians by showing photographs of them (see Magin, 2019a) or by including evaluative statements by them in the text (for a comparable measurement, see Wilke & Reinemann, 2001).

2.3. The Softening of News in Facebook Posts and Website Teasers

Despite fears that journalistic content on the Internet, and especially on social media, is becoming softer, only a few studies have investigated these concerns. Thus far, most research has focused on the spillover of tabloids' news values on so-called quality or elite newspapers (Esser, 1999; Lefkowitz, 2018; Magin, 2019a) or has compared public service with commercial media outlets (e.g., Donsbach & Büttner, 2005; Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001). Only a few analyses (e.g., Gran, 2015; Karlsson, 2016; Magin, Steiner, Häuptli, Stark, & Udris, in press) have explored online news softening. Their results indicate a slight increase of news softening online—however, not for all media (Magin et al., in press)—over the course of time or when compared to offline news. Gran (2015) points to a need for further research in the context of social media, such as Facebook, but the few existing studies thereon (Lischka, 2018; Lischka & Werning, 2017; Magin et al., in press; Steiner, 2016) have not adequately addressed this need.

Lischka and Werning (2017) compared three regional German newspapers in terms of their selection of hard and soft news topics on Facebook and in their print editions. They demonstrated that the analysed outlets spread more soft news on Facebook to increase the reach of the normatively more important hard news. Steiner (2016) compared news softening between German television news on TV and on Facebook and identified differences within the groups of public service and commercial media outlets, finding slightly stronger personalisation by the public service media outlet *Tagesschau* on Facebook when compared to television. However, the study did not focus solely on Facebook posts but also included the articles linked by them. Another study by Magin et al. (in press) contrasts the German tabloid *BILD* with the quality newspaper *FAZ* and discovers opposing trends: While the *FAZ* is slightly more softened online and on Facebook, news softening for the *BILD* even slightly decreases compared to its offline news supply. But again, the study analysed the linked articles but did not take into account the Facebook posts themselves. This research gap is addressed by both Lischka (2018) and Hågvar (2019) who focused on soft news presentation strategies in Facebook posts. Based on her quantitative and qualitative surveys of journalists from Finland and Switzerland, Lischka (2018) concluded that emotions, in particular, play a greater role on Facebook than on news websites. However, although the surveyed journalists stated that they sometimes soften hard news to make it more appealing for the audience, they also said that their journalistic standards set boundaries on this. Additionally, Hågvar (2019) used a qualitative content analysis and interviews to detect soft news strategies, such as expressing emotions and using more subjective language, in Norwegian Facebook posts. However, this study analysed only the status messages (i.e., the text at the top of the Facebook post; see Figure 2) of Facebook news posts. Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019) compared different elements (e.g., status message, headline within link preview) of Facebook posts in their computational content

Figure 2. Structure of Facebook posts: Units of analysis. Note: See Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019, p. 50).

analysis of Belgian and Dutch newspapers, but they restricted their study to a single soft news aspect, the use of subjective language.

Overall, these studies provide first indications of slightly stronger news softening on Facebook compared to traditional and online news outlets as a way of adapting to the social media logic. However, there is still a lack of research examining news softening as a means of altered news presentation while simultaneously taking into account the most important indicators and all elements of Facebook posts (including pictures). In addition, research on news softening in the Facebook posts of German media outlets is missing. Since political news is most critical for strengthening democracy and for which a softened presentation may be more harmful, further research should focus on political news. The present article therefore investigates the following research questions:

RQ1: How softened is political news of German media outlets presented on Facebook?

RQ2: Which sub-dimensions of news softening are most prevalent?

Since news softening may be a means of adapting to the social media logic, journalists may apply news softening to a stronger degree on Facebook than on news websites but corresponding studies that compare both channels are lacking. This article therefore tests the following hypothesis:

H1: Website teasers are softened to a lesser degree than Facebook posts.

Furthermore, news softening may also differ between different types of media. While quality and public service media have traditionally been largely secured by a com-

paratively high share of subscriptions and public fees, tabloids are predominantly sold at the streets and thus more dependent on attracting the largest possible audience day by day. Thus, news softening can be a strategic journalistic decision with the aim of attracting more audience attention. In this respect, tabloids are generally assumed to apply this strategy to a stronger degree than quality and public service media (e.g., Donsbach & Büttner, 2005; Lefkowitz, 2018). However, the commercial pressure on the Internet is increasingly reducing these differences. On Facebook, the attention scarcity and therewith competitive pressure is even more pronounced than on websites. The social media logic may therefore promote convergence between these media types, although quality and public service media are assumed to still soften their political news to a lesser degree than tabloid media on Facebook (Magin, 2019b) due to their normative journalistic standards. Thus, the analysis tests the following hypotheses:

H2a: Facebook posts from quality and public service media are softened to a lesser degree than those from tabloid media.

H2b: The difference in news softening between quality and public service media, on the one hand, and tabloid media, on the other hand, is smaller on Facebook than on websites.

3. Method

To test the hypotheses and answer the research questions, a quantitative content analysis investigated the political 1) Facebook news posts and 2) website teasers of four German media outlets all of which are important representatives of the media types taken into account: one tabloid newspaper (*BILD*), one quality newspaper (*FAZ*), one news magazine (*Der Spiegel*), and one

public service newscast (*Tagesschau*). All these outlets have a comparatively high reach on their website and on Facebook and are thus significant news sources for the German population (Newman et al., 2019). Three of these four media outlets can be clearly categorised: Due to its role as an opinion leader for the public and journalists and its high proportion of articles produced in-house, *FAZ* is a German quality newspaper (Eilders, 2002; Wilke, 1999). *BILD* is the most important tabloid, and *Tagesschau* is the most important public service medium (Newman et al., 2019). *Der Spiegel* is considered a quality news outlet in the offline sector but is assumed to orient itself toward the popular media in the online sector (Bönisch, 2006).

News items dealing with domestic politics were investigated. The definition of 'domestic politics' includes articles on national politics, articles on regional policy and foreign affairs (when referring to national politics), and pieces on issues of societal interest which could be negotiated in national political institutions (e.g., employment conditions in the health sector, unemployment statistics, food pollution caused by new pesticides).

3.1. Sample and Collection of Material

The material was collected over two periods, from the end of May 2018 to the beginning of July 2018 and from mid-September 2018 to the end of October 2018. The selection of these two periods avoids bias due to coverage of specific topics. For the analysis, four weeks were selected from both periods in such a way that parliamentary sitting weeks and non-sitting weeks were included in both periods—under the assumption that the political and with it the media agenda may differ in this respect.

The Facebook posts were stored with the help of Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2019). This program can access IDs of posts via an application programming interface (API). For the coding, this ID was later used to open the Facebook posts in a browser. In order to identify all relevant posts, two coders opened each Facebook post and decided whether it addressed domestic policy according to the above-mentioned criteria. The reliability of this decision was satisfactory, with an average agreement between coders of 94%.

The website teasers were stored automatically using the software Python and Selenium. Specifically, a Firefox browser was programmed to open the homepages of all four media outlets every hour. The computer was programmed to take an automatic screenshot of the entire page, which was then automatically saved as an image file (for a comparable methodological approach, see Jürgens, Stark, & Magin, 2015). If there were problems loading the website, the page was reloaded in a second or third attempt shortly afterwards. This minimised instances of data loss. Based on the assumption that most teasers are placed on the homepage before they are moved to sub-pages, only the homepage was saved. Similar to the approach used for Facebook, four coders

decided which teasers addressed domestic policy and should thus be included in the analysis. They looked at given areas within the homepage (general overview, policy categories) at two-hour intervals from 6 am to 10 pm. If there was more than one version of a news teaser—in cases where the journalist changed the headline slightly or chose another picture—the version that included a picture (first criterion) and that was released earliest (second criterion, if there was more than one version including a picture) was chosen. The average agreement between coders, based on all identified screenshots for one day per outlet, was satisfactory at 79%. Due to the large number of relevant website teasers, a random sample was taken from all relevant teasers for each medium.

The final sample includes a total of 1,243 Facebook posts (*BILD*: $n = 148$; *FAZ*: $n = 473$; *Der Spiegel*: $n = 323$; *Tagesschau*: $n = 299$) and 1,978 website teasers (*BILD*: $n = 446$; *FAZ*: $n = 583$; *Der Spiegel*: $n = 512$; *Tagesschau*: $n = 437$).

3.2. Measurement and Reliability

The sub-dimension *affective wording* includes strong language and emotional metaphors (for an overview of all variables see Table 1). The sub-dimension *emotions* was also measured by two indicators: verbal reporting on emotions and the visual presentation of emotions in photographs (the latter indicator was only used for website teasers and Facebook posts that included pictures). Emotions within photographs were only coded if they were clearly visible. This was important because there are many cases of doubt in this category, as even the neutral facial expression of persons could be interpreted as slightly positive or slightly negative by some coders. For the sub-dimension of *personal reporting*, the coders decided whether the journalist's point of view appeared in the Facebook post or website teaser. *Personalisation* was identified with the help of two indicators. First, the coders determined whether the photograph showed a politician (for website teasers and Facebook posts including pictures). If more than one person appeared in the photograph, the coders decided whether one politician was in focus. Second, the coders decided whether an evaluative statement by a politician was included. Here the measurement is based on Wilke and Reinemann (2001), whereby the additional restriction to evaluative statements in this study only takes into account those teasers and posts that are more clearly framed by the perspective of the respective politician (see also Adam & Maier, 2010), which makes the measurement somewhat stricter. Besides, Wilke and Reinemann (2001) also measure the length of the statements, which makes little sense given the already limited text within Facebook posts and website teasers.

The coding distinguished between three units of analysis. For Facebook posts (see Figure 2), these units were 1) the status message, 2) the post text (all other text included in the Facebook post, which in most cases meant

Table 1. Overview of sub-dimensions and the measurement of related indicators.

Sub-dimension	Indicator (coding)	Units of analysis (number)	Standardisation of value range/ calculation of index	Inter-coder reliability (Brennan-Prediger's kappa)
Affective wording	Strong language (0/1)	Status message and post text/headline and lead (2)	Sum of values/2	.76
	Emotional metaphors (0/1)	Status message and post text/headline and lead (2)	Sum of values/2	.88
	Sub-index affective wording		Sum of values of both indicators/2	
Emotions	Reporting on emotions (0/1)	Status message and post text/headline and lead (2)	Sum of values/2	.93
	Presenting emotions (0/1)	Picture (1)	Original value	.85
	Sub-index emotions		Sum of values of both indicators/2	
Personal reporting	Journalists' points of view (0/1)	Status message and post text/headline and lead (2)	Sum of values/2	.67
Personalisation	Photo with politician (0/1)	Picture (1)	Original value	.71 (identification person); .93 (identification politician)
	Evaluative statement from politician (0/1)	Facebook post/website teaser (1)	Original value	.86
	Sub-index personalisation		Sum of values of both indicators/2	
Index total			Sum of all sub-dimensions/4	

the text in the link preview), and 3) the picture. For website teasers (see Figure 3), these units were 1) the headline, 2) the lead text, and 3) the picture. All indicators were binary coded (0/1 = not appearing/appearing within the respective unit of analysis). The visual indicators were coded with regard to one unit of analysis (the picture of the Facebook post/the website teaser). The verbal indicators were coded with regard to two units of analysis (the status message and post text, or the headline and lead; see Table 1). Only the evaluative statements from politicians were not analysed separately for two units of analysis. Here, separate coding was difficult to achieve, for example, because the statements extended over several units of analysis or because statements in one unit of analysis were assigned to the party and, in another, to the politician. For all indicators that were coded with regard to two units of analysis, both values were summed. To improve the comparability of the indicators, this sum was then standardised (see Table 1) to a value range from 0 (not present at all; no softening) to 1 (present within both units of analysis; strongest possible softening).

For each sub-dimension that included more than one indicator, the values of the indicators were averaged into

Figure 3. Structure of website teaser: Units of analysis.

a sub-index. The sub-indices from all sub-dimensions were then again averaged into an overall index. Again, the values of this index range from 0 (no features at all; not softened at all) to 1 (all features used to the greatest possible extent; completely softened).

Three coders completed the coding of the Facebook news posts and website teasers. The reliability of their coding was tested using Brennan-Prediger's kappa. This coefficient is chance-corrected and more robust than Krippendorff's alpha regarding variables with a skewed distribution (Quarfoot & Levine, 2016). Reliability coefficients were perfect (1.00) for formal variables (ID, outlet) and very good or at least satisfactory (between 0.67 and 0.93, see Table 1) for all other variables.

4. Results

This section first concentrates on news softening in Facebook posts (RQ1) and examines different sub-dimensions in greater detail (RQ2). The analysis then contrasts Facebook posts with website teasers (H1) and

hereby additionally focuses on the difference between quality and public service media outlets, on the one hand, and tabloid media outlets, on the other hand (H2).

4.1. Softening of News in Political Facebook Posts

To answer RQ1 and RQ2, ANOVAs were run for each indicator, each sub-index, and the overall index. Table 2 shows the mean values for each media outlet. At first glance, the values suggest a low to medium level of news softening (RQ1). A further examination reveals that for more than two-thirds of the posts, the softening value is below 0.30; only 1% of all Facebook posts have values above 0.60. This means that most Facebook posts are moderately softened.

Considering the individual sub-dimensions (RQ2) reveals clear differences. While emotions are seldom presented or reported on, personalisation is the most important aspect of news softening and seems to be a rather common journalistic strategy across all outlets. The visual aspect—showing politicians in photographs—

Table 2. Comparison of Facebook posts regarding news softening.

Mean values	Facebook *BILD* (A; $n = 148$)	Facebook *FAZ* (B; $n = 473$)	Facebook *Der Spiegel* (C; $n = 323$)	Facebook *Tagesschau* (D; $n = 299$)
Reporting on emotions	.05	.04	.04	.04
Presenting emotions [1]	.13	.10	.08	.06
Sub-index emotions	.09	.07	.06	.05
Emotional metaphors	.11	.09	.11	.09
Strong language	.29 [B,D]	.18	.27 [B,D]	.15
Sub-index affective wording	.20 [b,D]	.14	.19 [B,D]	.12
Statements from politicians	.26	.33	.35	.42 [A,b]
Showing politicians in photos [1]	.46	.53	.60 [D]	.46
Sub-index personalisation	.36	.43	.47 [a]	.44
Sub-index personal reporting	.27 [b,D]	.18 [D]	.23 [D]	.10
Index total	.23 [D]	.20	.24 [B,D]	.18

Notes: [Aa] = The letters following the values indicate from what other values the respective value significantly differs (ANOVA post-hoc tests; lowercase letters: $p < 0.05$, uppercase letters: $p < 0.01$).[1] = For this analysis, only Facebook posts that contained pictures were used; in the case of Facebook *BILD* and Facebook *Der Spiegel*, there were a few missing cases due to the pictures' deletion before the Facebook post was coded: Facebook *BILD* $n = 126$; Facebook *FAZ* $n = 473$; Facebook *Der Spiegel* $n = 314$; Facebook *Tagesschau* $n = 297$.

is, however, somewhat more pronounced within this sub-dimension. Compared to this, the degree of personal reporting is rather low to medium-high for all outlets, with a significantly lower value for *Tagesschau*.

Regarding the emotionalisation of Facebook posts, there are clear differences between reporting on and presenting emotions versus affective wording. Indicators of the first sub-dimension rarely occur. This is particularly true for verbal reporting on emotions, which may be more appropriate and more common in human interest stories than in political news. Affective wording, which refers to stylistic features, is used to a greater extent, with strong language being more common than metaphors.

In summary, the overall index of news softening on Facebook is increased primarily by personalisation, but affective wording and personal reporting still play comparatively large roles.

4.2. Difference in News Softening of Facebook Posts and Website Teasers

Having examined news softening on Facebook, the analysis next considers whether the degree of news softening is higher on Facebook than on news websites (H1) and the extent to which quality and public service media differ from tabloid media in this regard (H2a, H2b).

Regarding H1, t-tests were performed to examine the mean differences between the website teasers and Facebook posts for each medium and each indicator. The data presented in Table 3 confirm H1 only for *BILD* and *Der Spiegel*. For *BILD*, the higher degree of news softening can be attributed mainly to a greater use of strong language and a higher degree of personal reporting. Due to a higher degree of (visual) personalisation within website teasers, the difference in the overall index is nevertheless minor. Facebook posts of *Der Spiegel* also contain significantly more emotional language (strong language), but they additionally refer more often to evaluative statements of politicians than website teasers. Again, the overall difference is slight, as the other indicators hardly differ.

As with *BILD* and *Der Spiegel*, news softening in the posts of *Tagesschau* is somewhat more pronounced on Facebook, but not to a significant degree. The Facebook posts contain significantly more evaluative statements from politicians, while all other indicators are not or hardly used more frequently compared to the website teasers. In the case of *FAZ*, significant differences can only be identified for the use of strong language and the presentation of emotions in photos (although emotions are still presented quite seldom).

This outcome indicates that while news softening may be a means to adapt to the social media logic, particularly

Table 3. Comparison of website teasers and Facebook posts regarding news softening.

	BILD		FAZ		Der Spiegel		Tagesschau	
	Website ($n = 446$)	Facebook ($n = 148$)	Website ($n = 583$)	Facebook ($n = 473$)	Website ($n = 512$)	Facebook ($n = 323$)	Website ($n = 437$)	Facebook ($n = 299$)
Reporting on emotions	.01	.05 *	.04	.04	.04	.04	.02	.04 *
Presenting emotions [1]	.08	.13	.06	.10 **	.08	.08	.05	.06
Sub-index emotions	.05	.09 **	.05	.07 *	.06	.06	.03	.05
Emotional metaphors	.08	.11	.13 *	.09	.09	.11	.10	.09
Strong language	.17	.29 **	.11	.18 **	.17	.27 **	.11	.15
Sub-index affective wording	.13	.20 **	.12	.14	.13	.19 **	.10	.12
Statements from politicians	.21	.26	.30	.33	.27	.35 *	.32	.42 **
Showing politicians in photos [1]	.70 **	.46	.54	.53	.57	.60	.44	.46
Sub-index personalisation	.45 **	.36	.42	.43	.42	.47	.38	.44
Sub-index personal reporting	.10	.27 **	.21	.18	.23	.23	.11	.10
Index total	.18	.23 **	.20	.20	.21	.24 **	.16	.18

Notes: [1] = For this analysis, only Facebook posts and website teasers that contained pictures were used; in the case of Facebook *BILD* and Facebook *Der Spiegel*, there were a few missing cases due to the pictures' deletion before the Facebook post was coded: bild.de $n = 377$, Facebook *BILD* $n = 126$; faz.net $n = 530$, Facebook *FAZ* $n = 473$; spiegel.de $n = 424$, Facebook *Der Spiegel* $n = 314$; tagesschau.de $n = 437$, Facebook *Tagesschau* $n = 297$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (t-tests).

quality and public service media outlets hardly use this strategy. Regarding the indicators, the stylistic feature of strong language and references to evaluative statements by politicians are more widely used on Facebook. By contrast, the values for showing politicians in pictures hint at a ceiling effect, meaning that this aspect already plays such a major role on media outlets' websites that it could hardly be further increased on Facebook.

In the next step, ANOVAs were conducted for comparing website teasers and Facebook posts to determine whether quality and public service media use less softening within Facebook (H2a) and whether the difference between these outlets and tabloid media decreases on Facebook (H2b).

Table 4 partially confirms H2a. Post-hoc tests show that Facebook posts of *BILD* are presented in a sig-

nificantly more softened manner than those from *Tagesschau*, whereas the difference between *BILD* and *FAZ* is smaller and non-significant. *Der Spiegel*, which cannot be clearly categorised as a quality or tabloid medium, provides content that is even slightly more softened than that of *BILD*. Particularly strong language is used to a significantly higher degree by *Der Spiegel* and *BILD* than by *FAZ* and *Tagesschau*. For personal reporting, *Tagesschau* Facebook posts have a considerably lower value than those from all other outlets. Overall, however, the differences between the media outlets are relatively small.

Comparing Facebook with the websites reveals even slightly smaller differences among the media outlets for the website teasers. While *BILD* and *Der Spiegel* website teasers are still significantly more softened than *Tagesschau* website teasers, the overall value of *FAZ* is

Table 4. Comparison of Facebook posts and website teasers regarding news softening.

	Facebook				Website			
Mean values	BILD (A; $n = 148$)	FAZ (B; $n = 473$)	Der Spiegel (C; $n = 323$)	Tagesschau (D; $n = 299$)	BILD (A; $n = 446$)	FAZ (B; $n = 583$)	Der Spiegel (C; $n = 512$)	Tagesschau (D; $n = 437$)
Reporting on emotions	.05	.04	.04	.04	.01	.04 [a]	.04 [A]	.02
Presenting emotions [1]	.13	.10	.08	.06	.08	.06	.08	.05
Sub-index emotions	.09	.07	.06	.05	.05	.05	.06 [d]	.03
Emotional metaphors	.11	.09	.11	.09	.08	.13 [A]	.09	.10
Strong language	.29 [B,D]	.18	.27 [B,D]	.15	.17 [B,D]	.11	.17 [B,D]	.11
Sub-index affective wording	.20 [b,D]	.14	.19 [B,D]	.12	.13	.12	.13	.10
Statements from politicians	.26	.33	.35	.42 [A,b]	.21	.30 [A]	.27	.32 [A]
Showing politicians in photos [1]	.46	.53	.60 [D]	.46	.70 [B,C,D]	.54 [d]	.57 [D]	.44
Sub-index personalisation	.36	.43	.47 [a]	.44	.45 [d]	.42	.42	.38
Sub-index personal reporting	.27 [b,D]	.18 [D]	.23 [D]	.10	.10	.21 [A,D]	.23 [A,D]	.11
Index total	.23 [D]	.20	.24 [B,D]	.18	.18 [d]	.20 [D]	.21 [a,D]	.16

Notes: [Aa] = The letters following the values indicate from what other values the respective value significantly differs (ANOVA post-hoc tests; lowercase letters: $p < 0.05$, uppercase letters: $p < 0.01$). [1] = For this analysis, only Facebook posts and website teasers that contained pictures were used; in the case of Facebook *BILD* and Facebook *Der Spiegel*, there were a few missing cases due to the pictures' deletion before the Facebook post was coded: bild.de $n = 377$, Facebook *BILD* $n = 126$; faz.net $n = 530$, Facebook *FAZ* $n = 473$; spiegel.de $n = 424$, Facebook *Der Spiegel* $n = 314$; tagesschau.de $n = 437$, Facebook *Tagesschau* $n = 297$.

even slightly higher than that of *BILD*. H2b—which assumes converging trends between quality and public service media, on the one hand, and tabloid media, on the other hand, can thus be rejected. Rather, *BILD* and *Der Spiegel* are the outlets that seem to adjust to the social media logic in a stronger way—as already described with regard to H1—thus slightly widening the gap between quality or public service and tabloid media.

5. Conclusions

Since Facebook is a relevant news source for many people (Newman et al., 2019), journalists provide content on that platform to reach a wider audience. However, because Facebook users' engagement with published content largely determines that content's visibility (Bucher, 2012; DeVito, 2017), journalists seek to attract the highest possible attention on this platform. This situation has given rise to fears that journalists will lower their normative quality standards according to the social media logic, as softening the news is a suitable means of attracting the audience's attention, but research on news softening on Facebook is lacking. This study examines news softening in the political Facebook posts of four German media outlets. It also compares these Facebook posts with website teasers from the same media outlets to determine whether news softening is indeed stronger on Facebook than on news websites: That outcome would indicate that journalists have used news softening to adapt to the social media logic. The study also examines whether differences between media outlets converge on Facebook.

The results show that the overall degree of news softening is low to medium across all outlets. Personalisation is the most pronounced sub-dimension in the Facebook posts of all outlets, while other aspects, such as reporting on or presenting emotions, occur comparatively rarely. Furthermore, the comparison of Facebook posts with website teasers shows that only *BILD* and *Der Spiegel* have considerably intensified news softening on Facebook, particularly with regard to affective wording, which leads to a slightly greater difference between these outlets and the quality and public service outlets on Facebook.

The fear that political news posts on Facebook are extremely softened and thus not able to fulfil their information function is therefore exaggerated. Although journalists apply news softening to some extent to increase the attention of Facebook users, they maintain their normative quality standards. However, measuring news softening only on the basis of political news is a quite restrictive approach. To obtain a complete picture, studies should not only examine news softening in terms of an altered presentation of political news but at the same time also in terms of topic selection, that is, the share of hard and soft news which may be another consequence of increased audience orientation on social media (see Lischka & Werning, 2017). Moreover, to fully assess the degree of news softening and its

impact on democracy, one must also consider the actual effect of news softening on people's information processing and knowledge. This effect may be different on Facebook, where the context—which includes entertaining and non-journalistic posts—is different than on news outlets' websites. Heiss and Matthes (2019) made a promising first step in this direction with related experiments suggesting that a humorous context can intensify attention on political posts. Future studies should further investigate whether these posts are also read and clicked on, whether a softened presentation of political posts will further intensify the attention paid to the respective news post and whether a softened news post is perceived differently within this specific information environment than within a news website.

The comparison of website teasers with Facebook posts challenges the assumption that the social media logic results in overall increased news softening, at least at first glance. The quality and public service outlets in particular do not soften their news to a significantly greater extent on Facebook compared to their websites. There are several explanations for this finding. The most obvious is that the normative quality standards of these media outlets prevent strong adjustment, which would confirm Lischka's (2018) finding that these norms put limits on news softening. Beyond that justification, another possibility is that the adaptation of news to the social media logic is not limited to social media platforms but also manifests in other contexts, including outlets' websites. Thus, a stronger adaptation to the social media logic would result in more intense news softening of both Facebook posts and website teasers; this might also explain the lack of differences between Facebook posts and website teasers. However, this interpretation is speculative as this question is beyond the scope of this study. Assessing this possibility would require comparative website data from previous years and additional qualitative interviews with journalists. Finally, news softening may be stronger on Facebook, but the traditional indicators used here cannot measure this. In other words, the means of softening news may be changing on Facebook so that the traditional measurement approach is no longer valid. Elements particularly used on social media, such as the use of emoticons (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019) or clickbait (Blom & Hansen, 2015), may additionally contribute to news softening (see also Hågvar, 2019) and should therefore be considered in future research.

Furthermore, although there seems to be no convergence on Facebook between media types, the differences between these media outlets are still surprisingly small with regard to both Facebook posts and website teasers. The small differences suggest that there may already be converging trends on the websites. Moreover, these small differences may also be country-specific. In Germany, quality and tabloid media traditionally differ less than for example in the UK (Esser, 1999) and the news softening trend tends to be weaker as well than

in the Anglo-American system (Umbricht & Esser, 2016). Comparative research might thus help here to better interpret these country-specific results.

Besides, the small differences may also point to one limitation of the study: Although the indicators were coded in as much detail as possible and with regard to several units of analysis, the coding was binary. This approach may have resulted in existing variance (e.g., different degrees of strong language) not being coded. An appropriate coding approach based on a more detailed scale, as is possible in journalistic articles, would, however, be difficult to implement with regard to website teasers and Facebook posts due to the small amount of text. This is also the reason why some indicators (e.g., for personalisation) are quite superficial.

Nevertheless, the present study is an important first step in research on news softening on Facebook. Future research should improve and adapt the measurement of news softening for new information environments. Furthermore, research shows that younger audiences are increasingly turning to Instagram or WhatsApp (Newman et al., 2019) for news, which is why future studies should also focus on these platforms. In this way, research can react to current developments, draw a complete picture of how strongly news is softened on social media, and determine the extent to which audiences who consume news there are well-informed.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Mapping and Explaining Media Quality: Insights from Switzerland's Multilingual Media System

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Abstract
In this article, we analyse how various macro- and meso-level factors influence news media's provision of hard news, an important element of media quality. The research draws on a content analysis of more than 100,000 news items between 2015 and 2019 from 53 print, radio, TV, and online news outlets in Switzerland, a small state with three linguistically segmented media markets, each of which is partially influenced by a large neighbouring country (Germany, France, and Italy). The research design takes into account the multi-dimensional character of hard news and allows for analysis with explanatory factors on different levels: On the meso-level, ownership types complemented with media types, and on the macro-level language regions of different market size. Findings show large differences in the importance of hard news overall and these findings are consistent across the three dimensions of hard news (topic dimension, focus dimension, style dimension). Hard news orientation differs especially between private and public media, but also within privately held media outlets, and less so within public media, which points to a general quality culture embedded within public media organizations. Thus, rather than by language region and the according media market size or by ownership types, quality differences can be best explained by media types.

1. Introduction

Amid the ongoing transformation in the media sector, a major concern is that economic constraints and the increasing competition for audience share will reduce the quality of news, leading to a 'tabloidization' or 'softening' of news (Magin & Stark, 2015). However, rather than assuming a universal trend, scholars point to the evidence that media performance or media quality still largely varies across individual outlets and types of media (Van Aelst et al., 2017, p. 8). These differences in the supply of news are important for several reasons. First, in

current media policy debates, there is a growing consensus that the media increasingly lack the resources to produce high-quality journalism and should, therefore, be financially supported. Of course, this also implies that financial support should only be made if media companies actually invest in the quality of reporting. While the ownership form of public service media already includes legal obligations to invest in quality journalism, private media companies, especially those needing to satisfy shareholders, are more likely to save costs and reduce quality. Second, quality differences among media outlets on the supply side can go hand in hand with or even aggravate

differences in the demand for quality news. In an integrative public sphere, however, good media quality occurs in several types of media spread across societal segments and strata and is not restricted to very few elite media outlets. Which outlets actually offer good quality and why some outlets offer better quality than others are therefore increasingly relevant questions.

Our article considers the role of media ownership and media types for media quality, focusing on the multi-dimensional concept of 'hard news' (Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012) as one important indicator of media quality. Additionally, we devote our attention to macro-level factors by investigating a multilingual country with segmented media markets. We chose Switzerland, a typical case of the "central" model of media and politics according to Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, and Castro (2014). At the same time, Switzerland is a particularly interesting case for three reasons. First, Switzerland's media system is segmented along language regions, each of which is different in market size and partially shaped by the larger neighboring countries (Germany, France, and Italy). Second, Switzerland's media structures in the private press sector changed later but more rapidly than in neighboring countries (Udris & Lucht, 2014). This includes the rapid success of traditional commercial tabloid and newer tabloid-like cost-free commuter newspapers both offline and online. In fact, according to survey data from 38 markets (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019), Switzerland now is the only country where a cost-free commuter outlet is the dominant brand in the print and online sector. Third, despite this trend towards commercialization, Switzerland has a strong public service broadcaster. This is typical as small states tend to adopt a regulatory approach to counter commercial pressures (Puppis, 2009, pp. 10–11). In sum, the multilingual Swiss media system shows both homogenizing patterns, e.g., a widely used public service broadcaster and successful cost-free commercial newspapers operating in all three language regions, but also differentiation patterns accompanied by different opportunities in each of the three media markets.

The first goal of our article is to map this multilingual media system in the three language regions and check the commonalities and differences of media outlets in terms of their hard news orientation. The second goal of the article is to explain hard news orientation by systematically comparing ownership modes, media types, and language regions. We make use of a unique dataset, which includes multi-dimensional hard news measures for 53 different media outlets in three language regions in Switzerland based on a representative manual content analysis of more than 100,000 news items between 2015 and 2019.

2. Hard News and the Quality of News Media

Given the essential functions of news media in modern democracies, the quality of news has been an important field of research. At the same time, many scholars involved in the study of media quality "have outlined the conceptual difficulties of applying one standard of excellence to all news markets" (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014, p. 368). Numerous lists and catalogues exist which differ in (the number of) quality criteria and their theoretical background (e.g., Rodríguez Hidalgo, Rivera-Rogel, & Romero-Rodríguez, 2020; Schatz & Schulz, 1992). Within this heterogeneous literature, the consensus is that media quality is best understood in relation to normative concepts of democracy (Strömbäck, 2005) and that media quality itself is a multi-dimensional concept (Maurer, 2017). For the purpose of this article, we do not discuss the debates about different normative concepts and how empirical findings would ideally be interpreted and contrasted in light of different models of democracy (e.g., liberal vs. participatory model) but rather focus on the issue of dimensions of media quality.

Apart from highly notable exceptions where different quality dimensions and their interplay are analyzed empirically in a systematic way (de Vreese, Claes H., Esser, & Hopmann, 2017; Seethaler, 2015), most scholars empirically use more or less detailed and fine-grained analyses to focus on only one quality dimension or one quality concept such as diversity (Humprecht & Esser, 2017), impartiality and balance (Cushion & Lewis, 2017), or deliberation (Wessler & Rinke, 2014). Among the studies focusing on one concept, the concept of 'hard news' has increasingly gained traction. It is rooted in wider debates about the 'tabloidization' or 'softening' of news in general, especially in political news coverage (Otto, Glogger, & Boukes, 2017), and hard news itself is sometimes even taken as a synonym for media quality as in "quality hard news journalism" (Anderson, 2016). The concept of hard news has been conceptually specified by Reinemann et al. (2012) and tested in empirical studies by Magin and Stark (2015), and Reinemann, Stanyer, and Scherr (2017). In the model proposed by Reinemann et al. (2012, p. 232), hard news is distinguished from soft news along three dimensions: "(1) The subject matter covered (*topic dimension*), (2) the specific aspects of events or topics emphasized (*focus dimension*), and (3) the way events or topics are visually and verbally presented (*style dimension*)." For instance, a news item about political affairs (topic) which puts events into context (focus dimension) and presents them in a matter-of-fact, unemotional tone (style) would be on one end of the spectrum of hard news vs. soft news, while a news item about sports which simply recounts the events using emotional language would be on the other end. This multi-dimensional conceptualization of hard news has two advantages. First, it takes into account insights from the research on 'media logic' where the selection (topic dimension), the interpretation (focus dimension) and the portrayal (style dimension) of news are distinguished (e.g., Meyen, 2015). Second, and even more importantly, it addresses the relevance (through the topic and focus dimension) and deliberation (through the style dimension) in news media

content and can thus be considered an important indicator of media quality overall.

3. Hard News and Quality Explained

When comparing media quality and hard news across outlets in various media sectors and channels, scholars usually find large variation. Seethaler (2015), for instance, observed that the shares of hard news topics ranged from around 40% on the website of the cost-free newspaper *Österreich* to more than 90% in the subscription newspaper *Der Standard*. This begs the obvious question of how these striking differences can be explained. As Picard and van Weezel (2008, p. 29) observed, "good and poor performance can result under all forms." However, against this 'every organization is different' argument, scholars working with comparative studies and relying on multi-level models such as the "hierarchy of influences" model propagated by Reese and Shoemaker (2016) have repeatedly stressed the importance of meso- and macro-level factors to explain media content in general (cf. paragraph below): modes of ownership (meso), media types (falling between the meso- and macro-level), and the media system as such, which offers a certain market size, follows path-dependencies from general models of media and politics, and is embedded in specific communication cultures (macro-level).

In their theoretical discussion of new institutionalism and field theory, Benson, Neff, and Hessérus (2018, pp. 276–277) argue that the degree of hard news "public affairs coverage," one central indicator of media's "public service orientation," depends also on *ownership* of media outlets. The premise is that the three "broad modes of ownership" as a meso-level factor—political instrumentalism, economic instrumentalism, and public service orientation—affect journalistic practice and thus media content (quality reporting). A similar argument is made by Nielsen, who speaks of the "power," "profit," and the "the public" rationale when organizations operate media outlets (Nielsen, 2017). In the power rationale, media are operated as organs of influence by their owners similarly to political parties or religious organizations, who ultimately want to change the world. While the profit rationale means that the operation of a news outlet is—*ceteris paribus*—about making profit, the public rationale is about "politically mandated delivery of a service to the public" (Nielsen, 2017, p. 34). From this perspective, public service media as ideal types are considered to be in the best position to serve the public interest and offer the highest quality of reporting.

These three modes serve as ideal types and in practice, news media might follow more than one rationale at the same time or have a mode of ownership falling in between the three modes. This applies particularly to privately owned media organization operating in the profit rationale, whose degree of profit orientation can substantially differ. This is why the literature has suggested distinguishing between privately held

media organizations and those which are traded on the stock market. Stock market-listed media organizations experience greater pressure from shareholders and are more highly profit-driven than other types of media organization (e.g., McMenamin, Flynn, O'Malley, & Rafter, 2013; Picard, 2004). As a result, they are more likely to achieve higher profits by cutting newsroom budgets and reducing the amount and quality of news (Dunaway & Lawrence, 2015). In sum, the literature suggests that public ownership more so than private ownership, and even more so than publicly traded stock-market ownership, should go hand in hand with higher-quality reporting, hence a higher hard news orientation.

Another strand of the literature argues that differences in news performance result primarily from specific *media types* (e.g., Karidi, 2018), i.e., groups of media outlets which share certain characteristics such as business and revenue models (e.g., reliance on advertising instead of subscription revenue), audience orientation (e.g., up-market vs. down-market newspapers), production schedules (e.g., daily or weekly outlets), and media channels (e.g., press, television, online). For instance, in their cross-country content analysis of political news, Reinemann et al. (2017, p. 147) concluded that "medium type explains the extent to which more hard news or less hard news is published," i.e., public TV and broadsheet newspapers offered more hard news than commercial TV or tabloids. Similarly, observing large differences in how media use soft news elements of human interest in election coverage, Strömbäck and Van Aelst (2010) find that media types matter and that scholars should systematically consider them as "structural antecedents" of news coverage. So far, media types (e.g., commercial vs. public service TV news) seem to trump mere channels (e.g., print vs. TV) as explanatory factors. Whether online channels, given their production logics, still differ from other channels and lead, for instance, to lower hard news orientation or whether there is homogenization between offline and online counterparts, is still an open question (e.g., Steiner, Magin, & Stark, 2019).

Finally, literature, especially in the tradition of comparative studies, evidently argues for the importance of macro-level *media system* factors. At the media system level, smaller market size and the associated high production costs have been found to reduce media quality and provision of hard news (Reinemann et al., 2017). Usually, media system factors such as market size are tested by comparing different countries to better isolate them from non-media factors such as the political system (e.g., Kriesi, 2012). In this light, multilingual countries such as Belgium, Canada, or Switzerland might offer another alternative to examine media system factors. Segmented media markets within one country share the same political system and often also share the same media organizations (e.g., the same national public service broadcaster), thus allowing researchers to keep these additional macro-level factors constant and to focus on market size. This becomes especially interesting in multilin-

gual countries where segmented media markets clearly differ in size, as in Switzerland, the case for our analysis. Switzerland has four language regions (including a very small one including only 0.5% of the population) and thus four official languages (German, French, Italian, and Rhaeto-Romanic). The language regions constitute more or less independent and segmented media markets. Most people in German-speaking Switzerland, for instance, only consume media outlets from German-speaking and never from French- or Italian-speaking Switzerland. Many Swiss citizens also use media from the neighboring countries, i.e., Germany, France, and Italy, while people in those countries rarely use Swiss media. This segmentation into three submarkets and the influence of the 'next door giants' further reduce the size of the already small media market within which Swiss media can operate. The market in German-speaking Switzerland consists of 5,2 million adults, with the markets in French-speaking Switzerland (1,8 million), and especially in Italian-speaking Switzerland (roughly 300,000) being even smaller. Given these differences in market size, one could expect higher media quality for outlets in German-speaking Switzerland, given that more resources are available (e.g., size of the audience translates into more public funding for the public broadcaster as well as providing more advertising and subscription revenue). At the same time, one could also expect greater variation among media types and within media types within the German-speaking market than in the smaller markets. With a higher number of competitors, product differentiation becomes more important, which is why quality (high or low) could be one of the distinguishing features of a media outlet. In this light, it is not surprising to see that Switzerland's media companies launched cost-free, tabloidized commuter newspapers initially in the largest language region and finally in the smallest language region. Overall, however, one could expect a higher hard news orientation in German-speaking Switzerland than in the other two language regions.

To sum up, differences in hard news orientation are also to be expected in the case of Switzerland. Regarding media ownership, public service media are expected to offer more hard news than semi-public, private and, above all, stock market traded companies (H1). Regarding media types, public radio, and public TV, as well as subscription newspapers, are expected to offer most hard news, and commercial newspapers are expected to offer the least (H2). Furthermore, we explore whether online news media offer more or less hard news than their offline counterparts (RQ1). Regarding language regions, hard news orientation is expected to be highest in German-speaking Switzerland, the largest media market, and lowest in Italian-speaking Switzerland, the smallest media market (H3).

In the following section, we describe the methods used to map and explain hard news orientation in Switzerland generally as well as within its three main language regions.

4. Method

The data in this article comes from a large content analysis of the daily output of 53 media outlets in Switzerland in all three language regions. By including newspapers, online news sites, radio and television newscasts, and news magazines, all relevant types of news media were considered. Below, we first sketch how the selected media outlets are categorized into our explanatory variables, i.e., ownership, media type, and language region (Section 4.1). We then give information on the dependent variable, i.e., hard news and its three dimensions (Section 4.2).

4.1. Media outlets: Ownership, Media Types, and Language Regions

The selection of media outlets (see Table 1 and the Supplementary File) was done to assure that those outlets with the highest reach of each media type were represented. For each outlet and each calendar year (cf. Section 4.2), we determined the ownership category, media type, and language region. For ownership, we determined the company which ultimately owned the media and classified those companies along with their basic ownership structure and mode of financing. *Public* ownership refers to the public service broadcaster SRG SSR, which receives a license fee of more than one billion Swiss Francs annually to offer radio, television, and online services. *Private* ownership applies to print and online media produced by privately-owned companies; the private company Tamedia (now TX Group), however, is publicly listed on the stock market; hence it is coded as *stock*. Finally, *semi-public* ownership applies to regional or local TV programs offered by private companies which have a license to offer regional news and the right to be broadcast by cable operators ('must carry' rule). They receive public funding, which can even make up more than half of a station's revenue, which is why we coded them as semi-public and not as private. The private regional broadcaster *TeleZüri*, however, which does not receive any funding and does not operate with a license, was coded as *private*.

The categorization of media types was based on the distinction of media channels, audience orientation, and revenue models. In broadcasting, apart from local TV news, we examined news from the public broadcaster. In the press, there are mass-market oriented tabloid and tabloid-like cost-free newspapers, highly reliant on advertising, as well as subscription newspapers, which obviously generate a larger amount from subscriptions. Table 1 shows that media types from the print, television, and radio sector usually have online equivalents (marked with ON), with the exception of local TV stations, which often lack the resources to offer a fully-fledged up-to-date news site beyond simply a collection of video clips.

Of course, there is some overlap between ownership and media type categories (cf. Supplementary File)

Table 1. Media sample: Number of outlets and news items examined.

		German		French		Italian		Total	
			n		n		n		n
Ownership	Private	16	33446	5	6957	2	5404	23	45807
	Public	5	6933	3	4322	3	4730	11	15985
	Semi-public	3	4876	1	691	1	1349	5	6916
	Stock	7	17836	5	12612	2	2530	14	32978
Media type	COMM	3	4998	1	2301	1	1216	5	8515
	COMM ON	4	8099	2	5049	1	1314	7	14462
	LOCAL TV	4	6593	1	691	1	1349	6	8633
	PUBLIC ON	1	1305	1	1229	1	1605	3	4139
	PUBLIC RADIO	2	3163	1	1339	1	1344	4	5846
	PUBLIC TV	2	2465	1	1754	1	1781	4	6000
	SUB	9	22809	4	7288	1	3929	14	34026
	SUB ON	6	13659	3	4931	1	1475	10	20065
total		31	63091	14	24582	8	14013	53	101686

Notes: Total N = 101,686 news items. The table shows the number of outlets and the number of content-analyzed news items (n columns) in each category. Media types: Tabloid and cost-free commercial newspapers (COMM) and their websites (COMM ON); local TV stations (LOCAL TV); radio and TV news by the public service broadcaster (PUBLIC RADIO, PUBLIC TV) and its websites (PUBLIC ON); subscription newspapers (SUB) and their websites (SUB ON).

because media outlets have developed in the context of interdependent market-specific and legal structures. Public service media constitute both a distinct type of ownership and distinct media types (public radio, public television, and the online news sites by the public broadcaster). Similarly, there are no purely publicly funded newspapers. Still, for most ownership types, several media types can be found empirically. AZ Medien (now CH Media), for instance, not only produces regional subscription newspapers but also a commercial news site, one local TV station not funded by the public license fee, and local TV stations which are largely publicly funded (semi-public). Finally, the language region was operationalized on the outlet level with the straightforward indicator in which language region the media outlet was produced.

4.2. Hard News Measures

The coding measures the degree of hard news in Switzerland's news outlets based on the above-mentioned criteria. We conducted a secondary analysis of existing data on media quality in multiple dimensions (Research Center for the Public Sphere and Society [fög]—University of Zurich, 2019). The data comes from a manual content analysis of 53 outlets, including a representative sample of all news items in a calendar year (artificial weeks) regardless of the section (e.g., business section) or geographical scope (e.g., foreign news). In order to guarantee representativeness, the number of artificial weeks varied across outlets, as each outlet has a different daily output. In total, 101,686 news items were analyzed. The coding was done by a team of trained human coders; intercoder reliability scores were calculated using Krippendorff's alpha, showing satisfyingly high values for the variables we selected (societal sphere: 0.94, societal level: 0.79, thematic framing: 0.88, communication style: 0.74; Research Center for the Public Sphere and Society [fög]—University of Zurich, 2019, p. 171).

For our operationalization, we took into account all three dimensions of hard news (cf. Table 2). Among the variables in the dataset, we selected those which matched (at least largely) the conceptualization of Reinemann et al. (2012).

As for the topic dimension, we coded the main topic, distinguishing between societal spheres. Our definition of a hard news topic is wider than that used by Reinemann et al. (2012), who mainly measure the political relevance. Since our sample includes news coverage about topics beyond politics, we rely on Curran, Iyengar, Brink Lund, and Salovaara-Moring (2009, p. 9), who define hard news as reports about politics, public administration, the economy, and arts and culture (which also includes media, science, technology, religion and related topics), while soft news consists of reports about celebrities, human interest, sport, and other entertainment-centered stories. Only one main topic, thus one societal sphere, could be coded per news item.

On the focus dimension, we used two indicators. The first provides information about societal relevance. It was operationalized as news items focusing mainly on the macro-level (e.g., society or large parts of society), not the meso- (organizations) or the micro-level (individual actors). Only one level could be coded per news item. The second indicator addresses the difference between thematic and episodic framing (Iyengar, 1991) and was measured with a binary variable. In the focus dimension, a hard news orientation thus means a higher importance

Table 2. Operationalization of hard news.

Hard news dimension	Variables	Calculation
Topic dimension	Societal sphere	% of articles coded as 'politics, economy, or arts & culture'
Focus dimension	Societal level	% of articles coded as 'macro'
	Thematic vs. episodic framing	% of articles coded as 'thematic'
Focus dimension (total)		(% macro + % thematic/2)
Style dimension	Communication style	% of articles coded as 'cognitive-rationalistic'
Hard news measure (total)		(topic dimension + focus dimension (total) + style dimension)/3

of news items focusing on the macro level and with a thematic framing.

In the style dimension, a binary variable distinguishing between a cognitive-rationalistic and a moralistic-emotional communication style was used to take into account the dominant style of argumentation. We used the share of news items with a 'cognitive-rationalistic' communication style as an indicator of hard news.

Finally, as proposed by Reinemann et al. (2017), we combined the dimensions into an overall hard news measure, with each dimension having the same weight. This is why we also calculated the arithmetic mean between the two indicators in the focus dimension. As for the overall measure, no further transformations were necessary, as each indicator was of the same data type (i.e., share of news items within a category).

For the forthcoming analysis, we used the hard news measures per media outlet from each calendar year (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019) as units of analysis also to account for possible variation of an outlet in the temporal dimension. The total number of cases (i.e., hard news measures of all outlets in all calendar years) was 258 instead of 265 because, for five media outlets, data was available for only three or four calendar years. These yearly hard news measures were used to calculate average measures for each category and to calculate the variation within each category (standard deviation).

5. Results

In this section, we first show descriptive statistics on hard news measures across ownership types, media types, and language regions before we turn to the regression model.

Table 3 makes it clear that public ownership is related to a higher hard news orientation, significantly and consistently across language regions, confirming H1. Contrary to our expectations, stock-market traded companies do not always offer less hard news compared to (other) private media companies; the provision of hard news is notably lower in French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland but not in German-speaking Switzerland. Furthermore, outlets of stock market traded companies overall have values rather similar to semi-public outlets. Thus, H1 is only partially supported.

One reason why three of the four ownership modes do not differ very much overall in terms of hard news orientation is that these three ownership modes consist of outlets with very heterogeneous hard news measures. Hence, variation within ownership modes clearly differs, as the standard deviation measures attest. Variation is relatively high within the semi-public mode (most of the examined local TV stations), even though our sample consists of only 5 outlets (SD 6.1%), as well as being high within the stock market mode (15 outlets; SD 6.4%),

Table 3. Average hard news measures by ownership type and language region.

	German (X)		French (Y)		Italian (Z)		Total		SD
Private (^{A})	49.7%	B	58.0%	B, D	55.6%	B, D	52.0%	B	11.7%
Public (^{B})	71.2%	A, C, D	68.8%	A, D	66.4%	A, D	69.3%	A, C, D	4.2%
Semi-public (^{C})	50.6%	B	59.9%		60.4%	D	54.5%	B	6.1%
Stock (^{D})	52.5%	B	49.5%	A, B, D	47.3%	A, B, D	50.7%	B	6.4%
All	54.1%		57.4%		58.2%		55.6%		11.3%

Notes: Total N = 101,686 news items in 258 units of analysis (measure per year and outlet). The table shows average hard news measures for each category in the three regions as well as the standard deviation for each of them. Means with letters are significantly higher than the comparison category at the $p < 0.001$ level.

and yet even higher within the private ownership mode (25 outlets; SD 11.7%). To illustrate: In private companies, measures widely ranged from 28.7% (*Blick am Abend* in 2015) to 69.4% (*NZZ* in 2019). Compared to that, variation within the public ownership mode is quite low (11 outlets; SD 4.2%).

Turning our attention to media types in Table 4, we observe differences which are clearer than those found for ownership modes. Hard news orientation is significantly higher not only in public media types (radio, television, partially also online) compared to most media types but also in subscription newspapers (and their online news sites) compared to commercial newspapers (and their online news sites), with local TV falling in between. H2 is supported. Thus, the Swiss media system is clearly stratified in terms of quality among media types. As for RQ1, online media types do not offer less hard news than offline media counterparts.

While media types clearly differ from each other, it is also important to take into account the variation within media types. Again, variation differs; it is much lower within the public media types (radio, TV, online) but especially high within commercial newspapers and local TV news. Thus, the data points to the importance of media types as antecedents of hard news orientation but also to organization-specific factors. The case of local TV is instructive. The six selected news outlets widely range from 44.5% (*Tele M1* in 2016) to 66.8% (*Léman Bleu* in 2015). All these local news outlets, which operate in rather small regional markets, have relatively small budgets of roughly 5 to 10 million Swiss Francs per year and all but one (*TeleZüri*) have a license and the same legal obligations to produce local news. These considerable differences are probably the strongest argument in

our data that hard news orientation depends also on the editorial mission or 'quality strategy' of a specific media company.

Finally, there are hardly any differences in hard news orientation associated with the language regions. Contrary to H3, hard news orientation is not highest in German-speaking Switzerland but in the smallest language region—the region with the smallest media market. In line with our expectation, however, we find smaller variation especially in Italian-speaking Switzerland, possibly a result of a homogenization process. Differences among media outlets and types are not as marked (standard deviation: 8.4%, not displayed) as in French-speaking Switzerland (standard deviation: 9.9%) and the largest media market in German-speaking Switzerland (standard deviation: 12.3%). The German-speaking media market features both several subscription newspapers which carry a lot of hard news and several commercial newspapers with very little hard news: most likely the result of there being greater opportunities for product differentiation given the bigger market size.

To better test the importance of the explanatory factors and to check possible differences among the three dimensions of hard news, we used a regression model. The model also controls for the calendar year, allowing one to see possible changes over time. The model in Table 5 supports the finding described above that media types best explain the differences in media's overall hard news orientation. Compared to media types, ownership (measured with a binary variable contrasting public and semi-public ownership from private and stock ownership) has hardly any impact. Language regions have a relatively small effect as well. Hardly any effects can be

Table 4. Average quality scores by media type and language region.

	German (X)		French (Y)		Italian (Z)		Total		SD
COMM (^{A})	35.2%	C, D, E, F, G, H	45.4%	D, E, F	46.1%	C, D, E, F, G, H	39.0%	C, D, E, F, G, H	8.7%
COMM ON (^{B})	37.5%	C, D, E, F, G, H	44.8%	C, D, E, F, G, H	48.5%	C, D, E, F, G	41.8%	C, D, E, F, G, H	6.0%
LOCAL TV (^{C})	50.0%	A, B, D, E, F, G, H	59.9%	B	60.4%	A, B, E, F	53.4%	A, B, D, E, F	6.1%
PUBLIC ON (^{D})	66.5%	A, B, C	65.4%	A, B	61.0%	A, B, E, F, H	64.3%	A, B, C, H	2.8%
PUBLIC RADIO (^{E})	73.2%	A, B, C, G, H	72.1%	A, B, G, H	70.1%	A, B, C, D, G, H	72.1%	A, B, C, G, H	2.2%
PUBLIC TV (^{F})	71.7%	A, B, C, G, H	69.0%	A, B	68.2%	A, B, C, D, G, H	70.1%	A, B, C, G, H	3.2%
SUB (^{G})	57.4%	A, B, C, E, F	58.3%	B, E	57.5%	A, B, E, F	57.7%	A, B, E, F	5.4%
SUB ON (^{H})	57.3%	A, B, C, E, F	56.4%	B, E	53.7%	A, D, E, F	56.7%	A, B, D, E, F	5.5%
All	54.1%		57.4%		58.2%		55.6%		11.3%

Notes: Total N = 101.686 news items in 258 units of analysis (measure per year and outlet). The table shows average hard news measures for each category in the three regions as well as the standard deviation for all outlets of each category. Means with letters are significantly higher than the comparison category at the p < 0.001 level. Media types: Tabloid and cost-free commercial newspapers (COMM) and their websites (COMM ON); local TV stations (LOCAL TV); radio and TV news by the public service broadcaster (PUBLIC RADIO, PUBLIC TV) and its websites (PUBLIC ON); subscription newspapers (SUB) and their websites (SUB ON).

Table 5. Model predicting (dimensions of) hard news orientation.

Predictors	Hard news		Topic dimension		Focus dimension		Style dimension	
	Estimates	Std. Error	Estimates	Std. Error	Estimates	Std. Error	Estimates	Std. Error
(Intercept)	39.19 ***	1.27	37.35 ***	1.92	10.90 ***	1.25	69.32 ***	1.72
year_ordinal	−0.37	0.24	−0.75 *	0.37	−0.48 *	0.24	0.13	0.33
language region [French]	2.43 **	0.81	4.44 ***	1.22	−2.68 ***	0.79	5.51 ***	1.10
language region [Italian]	2.27 *	1.00	1.39	1.51	−2.28 *	0.98	7.69 ***	1.35
media type [COMM ON]	2.52	1.44	1.57	2.17	3.02 *	1.41	2.98	1.95
media type [LOCAL TV]	9.86 ***	2.66	9.82 *	4.02	1.95	2.61	17.82 ***	3.61
media type [PUBLIC ON]	19.07 ***	3.19	28.12 ***	4.82	9.79 **	3.13	19.31 ***	4.33
media type [PUBLIC RADIO]	27.29 ***	3.12	38.94 ***	4.71	20.79 ***	3.06	22.14 ***	4.23
media type [PUBLIC TV]	25.31 ***	3.12	33.29 ***	4.71	22.46 ***	3.06	20.19 ***	4.23
media type [SUB]	18.77 ***	1.24	22.69 ***	1.87	10.86 ***	1.22	22.75 ***	1.68
media type [SUB ON]	17.63 ***	1.29	19.51 ***	1.95	13.15 ***	1.27	20.23 ***	1.75
ownership	5.58 *	2.69	7.10	4.06	5.80 *	2.64	3.84	3.64
R^2/R^2adjusted	0.776/0.766		0.748/0.737		0.710/0.697		0.631/0.615	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Total N = 101,686 news items in 258 units of analysis (measure per year and outlet). For media types, the reference category is commercial newspapers (COMM); for language regions, the reference category is German-speaking Switzerland. Media types: Tabloid and cost-free commercial newspapers (COMM) and their websites (COMM ON); local TV stations (LOCAL TV); radio and TV news by the public service broadcaster (PUBLIC RADIO, PUBLIC TV) and its websites (PUBLIC ON); subscription newspapers (SUB) and their websites (SUB ON).

observed over time (year), which means there is no trend towards more or less hard news in Swiss media outlets between 2015 and 2019.

When we break down the hard news concept into its three dimensions, these (non-)effects basically stay the same as for the overall measure. This underlines the fact that all three dimensions are empirically part of the same overall construct. Slight deviations from this pattern can be found on the level of language regions and ownership. First, in the two smaller media markets, there is more hard news in the style dimension and (partially) in the topic dimension but not in the focus dimension. With much caution, this could be interpreted as an effect of the smaller market size, where fewer resources lead to a higher reliance on news agency reports, especially for hard news topics. The measures then might reflect news agencies' typical way of reporting (i.e., offering basic news instead of news analyses with thematic framing, written in a cognitive-rationalistic style). Second, the (small) effect of ownership is visible only in the focus dimension; non-private ownership, especially fully public

ownership, is related to more thematic framing. This is one indication that stable funding makes the planning of news easier and leads to an organizational culture in which background reporting plays an important role. However, both interpretations would need to be tested with additional data and additional methods.

6. Conclusions

Based on a multi-dimensional operationalization of hard news (Reinemann et al., 2012), a central indicator of the overall quality of media, our study of 53 news outlets in Switzerland has revealed that hard news orientation crucially differs among individual outlets and especially among types of media. This result of a stratified media system serves as a reminder that any study on media quality in a given system needs to carefully select and justify a representative sample of outlets. As well as mapping media quality, our goal was to explain it. The factors examined, i.e., language regions and media markets on the macro level, types of ownership on the meso-

level, and media types (falling between the meso- and the macro-level), turned out to be not equally important.

Ownership of media only had a limited effect. Against theoretical expectations, outlets of stock market traded companies did not perform worse than outlets from non-listed companies. However, public service media were found to substantially offer more hard news compared to other ownership forms, supporting previous research (e.g., Reinemann et al., 2017). Public service media across the three language regions performed quite similarly, indicating their "homogenization logic" described by Benson et al. (2018). Although its outlets are produced by three different operating units—Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen (SRF) in German-speaking Switzerland, Radio Télévision Suisse (RTS) in French-speaking Switzerland, and Radiotelevisione svizzera (RSI) in Italian-speaking Switzerland—the overall umbrella organization SRG SSR and the according legal mandate seem to have contributed to an overall editorial mission which promotes quality. This is an important finding given that public service media are especially accountable and responsible for producing quality journalism. Compared to ownership, media types as explanatory factor turned out to be much more closely related to the amount of hard news measured and thus explained the differences better. Media types also explain the differences better than mere channels; in our data, websites of news outlets did not differ much from their counterparts in the radio, TV, or print sector. We therefore strongly underline the plea by Strömbäck and Van Aelst (2010) that media types should be systematically considered as structural antecedents of news coverage in content analyses.

Finally, the language regions did not differ significantly in terms of hard news provision, nor did we see a negative impact of small market size on hard news orientation. However, the size of the market turned out to explain the degree of variation within language regions, with the largest market showing the highest variation and product differentiation and the smallest market showing the lowest. In light of the similar results across language regions, we do not presuppose that other, more cultural differences on the macro-level might are unimportant when explaining how much hard news is offered. However, theoretical expectations are ambivalent; while comparative research on 'communication cultures' shows fewer "popularization techniques" and thus higher quality in German-speaking countries (including German-speaking Switzerland; Umbricht & Esser, 2016), comparative research on journalists' role conceptions suggests the opposite by finding less audience orientation and thus supposedly more hard news in the Francophone countries (including French-speaking Switzerland; Bonin et al., 2017). More research is needed to link specific cultural factors to specific dimensions and indicators of media quality. Apart from our explanatory factors, our data still showed considerable variation within media types and language regions and especially within ownership modes. To a certain extent, quality in general, and hard news orientation in particular, is contingent upon the structures and strategies of specific organizations and their news outlets. This finding has two implications. First, scholars are encouraged to look for other structural factors which explain quality; second, if quality also depends more on 'soft' or organization-specific factors which can hardly be measured, any media regulation which includes funding (requiring quality journalism) needs to focus on media content as the actual output.

Our study also comes with limitations. First, the focus on Switzerland limits the generalizability of the results, although Switzerland can be considered a good representative of the central model. In future research, news in Switzerland's segmented media system could be compared with other multilingual systems, ideally, Belgium or Canada, or one Swiss language region could be compared with neighboring countries. The collaborative project "Media Performance and Democracy" (https://en.mediaperformance.uni-mainz.de) is currently working on explaining media quality in Austria, Germany, and German-speaking Switzerland based on a wide set of quality indicators, including hard news. Second, although we tested several possible factors to explain certain aspects of media quality, our method relying on content analysis did not allow us to flesh out the exact mechanisms. In order to find out exactly how public ownership, for instance, affects media quality, other methods such as newsroom observations are needed. Third, we measured each outlet separately and could not take into account the fact that an outlet's quality might stem mainly from resources jointly shared with other outlets. In fact, to save costs, three large Swiss media companies have been implementing centralized newsrooms above the outlet level, where news items are shared among different outlets, reducing diversity at the system level. Given that this problem is spreading also in countries like Germany (e.g., Funke) and the US (e.g., Gannett), scholars should turn their attention to this type of "media content concentration" (Vogler, Udris, & Eisenegger, 2020). Fourth, due to the increasing importance of third-party platforms, it would be necessary to examine media types including third-party platforms (e.g., outlets' Twitter accounts, Facebook pages etc.) to check to what extent outlets possibly adapt to the platforms' logics and change their hard news orientation (Häuptli, Schwaiger, & Eisenegger, 2020; Steiner et al., 2019).

Despite these limitations, our article presents a comprehensive mapping of media quality based on theoretically derived indicators of hard news, which could be used and refined in subsequent studies. Examining a large and representative sample of outlets across different channels and examining the typical output of outlets from all different sections, our article contributes to the ever-burning question of which structural factors can and which cannot explain the quality of news coverage.

COGITATIO

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Article

In the Service of Good Journalism and Audience Interests? How Audience Metrics Affect News Quality

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Abstract
A large and growing body of literature shows that audience metrics exert a significant influence in many newsrooms around the world. Scholars assume that this might affect the quality of news, but findings on how audience metrics influence news quality and media performance are scattered. Based on a widely used set of news quality criteria, this article is the first to focus on this question. It reviews and discusses the existing findings by considering the influence of audience metrics across four analytical dimensions: A) the allocation of resources and recognition; B) the volume, practices and rhythms of news production; C) the selection and placement of topics; and D) the formats and styles of news presentation. The analysis reveals that journalists' use of audience metrics has a mainly negative impact on news quality. This effect is the result of both the growing economic pressures on newsrooms and a dominant rhetoric that equates measures of audience size with audience interests and good journalistic work.

Issue
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1. Introduction

Since the pioneering studies of MacGregor (2007) and Anderson (2011), reflection on the role of audience metrics in newsrooms "has become an important new area in journalism research" (Bruns, 2016, p. 521), with more than 100 studies shedding light on this issue. Overall, these studies indicate a strong orientation towards quantified audiences. Although social media shares and likes have increased in importance (e.g., Ferrucci, 2020), many newsrooms still prioritise page views and unique visitors, as these are the currencies that are key to earning advertising revenues (Belair-Gagnon, 2019; Blanchett Neheli, 2018; Christin, 2018; Giomelakis, Sidiropoulos, Gilou, & Veglis, 2019; Nelson & Tandoc, 2019; Slaček Brlek, 2018; Tandoc, 2014; Vu, 2014; Wang, 2018). Most scholars presume that page views and unique visitors dis-

play "audience interests," "preferences," "needs," and "taste," therefore considering the growing influence of metrics as indicative of the empowerment of the audience (Bright & Nicholls, 2014, p. 178; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013, pp. 67–69; Tandoc, 2019, pp. 18–19; Vu, 2014, pp. 1095, 1106; for a critical perspective, see Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2018). Others argue that the growing impact of these metrics is primarily motivated by commercial pressure (Currah, 2009; Moyo, Mare, & Matsilele, 2019; Nguyen, 2013; Phillips, 2015). Both perspectives, however, see audience metrics as likely to weaken journalistic autonomy and the traditional criteria of newsworthiness.

Hence, audience metrics are crucial for reflecting on changes in media performance due to digitisation and datafication (Bruns, 2016; Wang, 2018). However, although it is assumed that metrics-driven practices "even-

tually affect the quality of news" (Vu, 2014, p. 1107), little attention has been paid to this "important question" (Tandoc & Vos, 2016, p. 963). To date, no studies or reviews have focused on the relationship between audience metrics and news quality. Further, studies on audience metrics seldom refer to terms such as news "quality" or "good" journalism, whereas research on news quality and media performance takes little notice of the role of audience metrics (e.g., Eisenegger, Schranz, & Gisler, 2017; Meier, 2019; van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014).

Thus, this article aims to address this gap in the literature by systematically reviewing and discussing the scattered findings on how audience metrics might impact news quality. First, a literature search was conducted using Google Scholar and the database Communication & Mass Media Complete (CMMC). With CMMC, broad search terms were used ("audience metrics" OR "web metrics" OR "audience analytics" OR "web analytics") in order to identify a wide range of relevant publications. Articles that contained one of these search terms in the title, keywords or abstract were collected and read (n = 95). Since Google Scholar displays a vast number of results, this search was conducted with the following terms related to news quality: search terms 1 ("audience metrics," "web metrics," "audience analytics," "web analytics") in combination with search terms 2 ("journalistic quality," "news quality," "media performance," clickbait, performance journalism, journalism quality). The combination of search terms 1 and 2 led to 24 searches. For each of these 24 searches, the first 30 results (as listed by relevance) were collected and read. Both the CMMC and Google Scholar searches captured all articles published before 29 February 2020. Studies were considered relevant if they provided empirical findings or original considerations on the influence of audience metrics on news quality, and if they were published as journal articles, books, book chapters or research reports. In cases where authors published the same findings and considerations in different places, only the most recent publication was included. The 44 studies that were found contained further information on relevant research articles, which were then also read and included, resulting in the addition of 19 publications. As most studies in this research area are published in scientific journals, this review is mainly based on journal articles. However, it is also comprised of studies that were published as books (e.g., Currah, 2009; Tandoc, 2019), research reports (e.g., Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016), and book chapters (e.g., Poell & van Dijck, 2015), including handbook articles (e.g., Bruns, 2016).

Since the understanding of news quality differs depending on the applied theoretical approach and normative perspective, "there is no consensus in international research concerning the exact labelling, form, and number" (Meier, 2019, p. 3) of criteria of news quality. However, many studies consider the following criteria as important (Arnold, 2008; Belair-Gagnon, 2019; Blanchett Neheli, 2018; Eisenegger et al., 2017; Lacy

& Rosenstiel, 2015, pp. 27–28; Magin, 2019; McQuail, 1992; Meier, 2019): diversity of topics and sources; comprehensiveness of coverage (range or fullness of topics) and relevance in terms of public issues and political information (most important topics); independence from economic and political interests; accuracy of reporting; in-depth reporting (providing context); investigative and original reporting; clarity (clear, concise and non-sensational style); and timeliness (novelty and references to current debates). In contrast, tabloidisation is seen as an increase of news that is generally considered to be of lower quality, with a dominance of politically irrelevant topics (soft news), a focus on episodic framing and a visual, emotionalised, opinion-driven style (Magin, 2019). Understandings of news quality also vary between different groups in society (Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015; Meier, 2019; Molyneux & Coddington, 2020). However, research has shown that many users expect the abovementioned features: They are particularly interested in information about political and local topics (De Waal & Schoenbach, 2010, p. 485; Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015) and expect news media to report independently and accurately, convey diverse positions, provide contextual information and offer an overview of the most recent and important events and topics. In contrast, entertainment and journalists' personal views play a significantly more limited role in users' expectations of journalism (Abdenour & Riffe, 2019; Costera Meijer, 2013; Heise, Loosen, Reimer, & Schmidt, 2014; Neuberger, 2014; van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014).

Based on the abovementioned criteria of news quality, this article reviews and discusses existing findings on the interplay of media performance and audience metrics. In doing so, it analytically distinguishes the influence of audience metrics across four dimensions: the allocation of resources and recognition (Section 2); the volume, practices and rhythms of news production (Section 3); the selection and placement of topics (Section 4); and the formats and styles of news presentation (Section 5). Within these sections, explicit references to the abovementioned news quality criteria or the overall news quality are highlighted with italics. The article concludes with reflections on how datafication establishes new norms of evaluation that are linked to a rhetoric of audience empowerment while actually neglecting audience interests and quality issues (Section 6).

2. Allocation of Resources and Recognition

Due to shrinking advertising revenues and the financial crisis in journalism, the recent decade has brought significant cutbacks to many newsrooms across the world. Editorial departments, many of which have been restructured into integrated newsrooms, face the challenge of producing more content for various channels while employing fewer journalists. Therefore, the working conditions of journalists have deteriorated, with many journalists feeling pressured to produce more articles in less

time (Agarwal & Barthel, 2015; Chadha & Wells, 2016; Currah, 2009; Phillips, 2015; Puppis, Schönhagen, Fürst, Hofstetter, & Meissner, 2014; Siegelbaum & Thomas, 2016). Given this scarcity of resources in newsrooms, the emergence of new job profiles and new areas of responsibility is even more striking. One of these new profiles and tasks is the analysis and optimisation of audience metrics, with job titles such as "social media," "audience," "traffic" or "growth" editor (Belair-Gagnon, 2019, p. 765; Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016, p. 9; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018, p. 441; Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2019, p. 122; Lamot & Paulussen, 2020, p. 364; Poell & van Dijck, 2015, p. 194). These editors are responsible for increasing the overall traffic of the editorial content and identifying trending topics that are likely to drive traffic, often by means of search engine optimisation (SEO) and social media optimisation (SMO). They identify 'popular' terms and topics and make recommendations to their colleagues as to which of these should be included in their reporting (Bunce, 2015; Christin, 2018; Phillips, 2015; Poell & van Dijck, 2015; Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015; Tandoc & Vos, 2016).

The use of audience metrics is becoming an integral part of the daily work of journalists. In many editorial offices, journalists are expected to check the page views of their articles at least once a day. In addition, audience metrics are regularly reviewed in editorial meetings or sent via e-mail to the entire newsroom, typically as a ranking of the most popular articles of the day, week or month (Anderson, 2011; Belair-Gagnon, 2019; Blanchett Neheli, 2018; Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Christin, 2018; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Ferrucci, 2020; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013; Lamot & Paulussen, 2020; Lawrence, Radcliffe, & Schmidt, 2018; Moyo et al., 2019; Nelson & Tandoc, 2019; Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015; Tandoc, 2014; Usher, 2012, 2016; Whittaker, 2018). Besides monitoring audience metrics, journalists are increasingly expected to promote their articles on social media and build up a followership to enhance traffic numbers (Agarwal & Barthel, 2015; Chadha & Wells, 2016; Siegelbaum & Thomas, 2016; Tandoc & Vos, 2016; Whittaker, 2018). The work and performance of journalists is judged more and more by their ability to generate traffic (Bunce, 2015, 2019; Lamot & Paulussen, 2020; Nelson & Tandoc, 2019; Tandoc & Vos, 2016; Usher, 2012). Audience metrics not only give journalists "a sense of success…but also of the expectations that exist at the managerial level about what constitutes good newswork" (Bucher, 2017, p. 928; see also Anderson, 2011, p. 562; Bunce, 2019; Duffy, Ling, & Tandoc, 2018; Lawrence et al., 2018, pp. 1227–1228; Tandoc, 2019; Wang, 2018, p. 484). In some newsrooms, editors are paid based on page views, with metrics being used to allocate resources and stimulate competition among editors (Currah, 2009, p. 87; Ferrer-Conill, 2017; Moyo et al., 2019, p. 501; Petre, 2015). Some journalists even "think that they are not doing a good job when their articles no longer appear in the top 10 for a few days" (Lamot & Paulussen, 2020, p. 366). The "phrase

'doing well' has entered the field's lexicon to refer to stories that draw high audience metrics" (Tandoc, 2019, p. 69) or to acknowledge that journalists did a good job in terms of increasing page views (Groves & Brown-Smith, 2011, p. 117). In contrast, recognition for and discussions of *journalistic quality* are diminishing (Slaček Brlek, 2018; Usher, 2012) or are increasingly overruled by the argument that page views provide a more objective and useful indication of which headline or story is "better" (Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2019, pp. 120–122). In the words of an interviewed journalist: "Really, no emails are circulating about what the best stories are, just the ones getting clicks" (Ferrucci, 2020, p. 252).

Thus, the monitoring, analysis and optimisation of audience metrics require resources, thereby further reducing the already scarce time, money, and personnel assigned to the production of news articles. The reduction of these resources is known to have a negative impact on the *overall quality* of news coverage (Puppis et al., 2014; Reich & Godler, 2014; Siegelbaum & Thomas, 2016). In the long run, audience metrics also change journalists' understanding of what *good journalism* means and how it is accomplished.

3. Volume, Practices and Rhythms of News Production

With many media users searching for news several times a day and a stiff competition for attention, newsrooms experience a growing pressure to constantly update their websites (Usher, 2016, 2018). At the same time, journalists must prepare their content for multiple channels and platforms (Agarwal & Barthel, 2015; Currah, 2009; Hanusch, 2017; Tandoc, 2014). This high and constant demand for new stories often results in limited opportunities for journalists to produce original articles, instead encouraging the proliferation of pre-packaged material. This practice is called "churnalism" (Thurman & Myllylahti, 2009, p. 701) and includes the dissemination of not only public relations material and news agency copy, but also stories published by other media outlets (Arenberg & Lowrey, 2019; Groves & Brown-Smith, 2011; Phillips, 2015; Thurman & Myllylahti, 2009). The latter is also labelled as "news aggregation" and refers to "the practice of taking information from published sources, reshaping it, and republishing it" (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020, p. 429). Aggregation has "become one of the dominant forms of digital newswork" (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020, p. 429) and is typically based on one or few sources without the addition of substantial information or context (Agarwal & Barthel, 2015; Molyneux & Coddington, 2020).

This practice of churnalism is driven by both the challenges of increasing workload and the monitoring of audience metrics (Agarwal & Barthel, 2015; Molyneux & Coddington, 2020; Thurman & Myllylahti, 2009). Many journalists track and slightly rewrite popular content in order to produce "quick hit" pieces (Siegelbaum & Thomas, 2016, p. 400; Usher, 2016, p. 174), meaning

breaking news and "quick stories, with few sources, that are likely to generate traffic" (Arenberg & Lowrey, 2019, p. 143), often with the use of SEO or SMO strategies (Poell & van Dijck, 2015; Usher, 2012). This can make journalists feel that they are no longer doing "quality journalism" (Usher, 2018, p. 26). As the online editors of the two leading daily newspapers in Slovenia and Serbia described it, "we sit, skim the web looking for information and reassemble it" (Vobič & Milojević, 2014, p. 1032; for US journalists see Agarwal & Barthel, 2015). In their view, journalism has become a matter of "pure economy" where they "hunt for clicks by following what is out there online and what might get our readers' attention" (Vobič & Milojević, 2014, p. 1032). The "constant stream of breaking news" (Usher, 2018, p. 29) is also motivated by the need to increase audience traffic. A strong orientation towards metrics can lead to the strategy of massively expanding the amount of published content. The rationale here is that most articles—taken alone—will generate little traffic, while the mass of reports as a whole could draw sufficient traffic and, therefore, advertising revenue (Blanchett Neheli, 2018; Christin, 2018; Ferrer-Conill, 2017; Petre, 2015; Poell & van Dijck, 2015; Thurman & Myllylahti, 2009; Usher, 2016).

The scarce resources that are available are increasingly allocated according to whether they directly translate into driving traffic. What becomes less important is checking information to ensure *accuracy*, adding first-hand (*original*) and *diverse sources* and building up a network of informants that, in the long term, allow for *in-depth coverage* and the *diversity of sources*. Instead, researching sources and "going outside means losing time in traffic" (Boesman, d'Haenens, & Van Gorp, 2015, p. 917; see also Agarwal & Barthel, 2015; Currah, 2009; Phillips, 2015; Siegelbaum & Thomas, 2016). Newsrooms that focus strongly on measures of audience size "may find it difficult to justify long-term investment in potentially loss-making activities such as in-depth investigative journalism" (Bruns, 2016, p. 521). This is supported by interviews with journalists: the pressure to gain high audience numbers results in journalists doing less *original reporting* and *in-depth investigations* (Agarwal & Barthel, 2015; Groves & Brown-Smith, 2011; Petre, 2015; Usher, 2018).

Audience metrics not only influence the volume and practices of news production but also its rhythms. The workflows in editorial offices are strongly influenced by the times at which users access content. Online newsrooms monitor and evaluate this closely (Belair-Gagnon, 2019; Duffy et al., 2018; Ferrucci, 2020) in order to produce and publish articles "when they are likely to achieve the highest readerships" (Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015, p. 320). Moreover, some newsrooms use day-parting as a strategy to enhance the number of page views and visitors:

This may mean giving readers news alerts to their mobiles first thing in the morning, something lighter

to read at lunch time, something different in the afternoon, more mobile content to read on their way home from work, and fresh content in the evening. (Thurman & Myllylahti, 2009, p. 702)

In the case of an Australian digital-only newsroom, the amount of soft news reportedly increases during the day, so that "when people are on their way home, or have just gotten home, the tone of the site does shift, because that's what people are looking for at that time of the day" (Hanusch, 2017, p. 1581). As a consequence, users cannot generally expect a certain *news quality*. While *timeliness* is enhanced, it becomes more difficult to get an *overview of the most important news*. The most prominently placed stories on the homepage no longer reflect the news value and *relevance* of these topics—as users usually expect (Costera Meijer, 2013; von Krogh & Andersson, 2016). Instead, the selection and presentation of news is adapted to the average usage behaviour of each hour and the metrics-driven anticipations of what users might want to read.

4. Selection and Placement of Topics

The influence of audience metrics on the selection and placement of topics is a particularly important area of current research, as it is strongly intertwined with notions of journalistic autonomy (Anderson, 2011; Boesman et al., 2015; Phillips, 2015), given that journalists select topics according to their own professional selection criteria. News values include celebrity, entertainment, personalisation and visuality (Eilders, 2006; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017), which are typical characteristics of soft news or tabloidisation (Magin, 2019; Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012). However, the core of news values—such as controversy, continuity, reach, and proximity (Eilders, 2006)—is oriented towards social relevance and public affairs (Lamot & Van Aelst, 2020) and therefore reflects the societal role and function of journalism, which is to provide a public forum for the ongoing discourse in society (Arnold, 2008). This societal role is addressed in normative ideas regarding the public mission of media, which have been expressed not only by scientists and media policy-makers but also by journalists and media users (Arnold, 2008; Costera Meijer, 2013; McQuail, 1992). While the traditional principles of journalism draw a strong distinction between hard news and soft news due to differing *relevance* (Reinemann et al., 2012), audience metrics put all articles "on the same scale" (Christin, 2018, p. 1389).

Numerous studies have shown that newsrooms increasingly select topics according to audience metrics (e.g., Anderson, 2011; Blanchett Neheli, 2018; Bunce, 2019; Ferrucci, 2020; Giomelakis et al., 2019; Hanusch, 2017; Puppis et al., 2014; Tandoc, 2019; Usher, 2016). Interviews with journalists reveal that the editorial staff not only has to produce important and prestigious articles but also stories that serve as 'click hits' or 'mag-

nets' (Arenberg & Lowrey, 2019; Belair-Gagnon, 2019, p. 768; Currah, 2009, p. 86; Hanusch, 2017, p. 1579; Siegelbaum & Thomas, 2016, p. 400). If the coverage does not generate enough traffic over a certain period of time, "[the news desk] will publish some populist story like a story about David Beckham's underwear to get reader figures up quickly" (Thurman & Myllylahti, 2009, p. 699). Moreover, the quest for traffic often leads to producing many articles in a short time (see Section 3), with constant eyes on available content for aggregation as well as trending topics on social media that could be used to produce "quicker hits and little things"—even though journalists may sometimes feel that this information is not *relevant* but "'trivial,' or 'inane,' and did not merit any attention" (Chadha & Wells, 2016, p. 1026; see also Bunce, 2015; Usher, 2012). Based on a rhetoric of audience interests and journalists' performance, such high-traffic stories deemed not newsworthy can still gain a specific worth: "But again, the audience obviously on that day really wanted that story…and we did well that day" (Blanchett Neheli, 2018, p. 1045). A growing number of newsrooms take for granted that audience metrics directly reflect what people want, need, and think (Chua & Westlund, 2019; Ferrucci, 2020; Lamot & Paulussen, 2020).

Both researchers and the journalists themselves assume that a strong orientation towards audience metrics will eventually translate into a rise of soft news and tabloidisation (Bright & Nicholls, 2014, p. 172; Currah, 2009, p. 87; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013, p. 69; Moyo et al., 2019; Puppis et al., 2014; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015). Some perfect examples of this traffic-driven tabloidisation are stories about animals, crime, sex, and celebrities (Anderson, 2011, p. 561; Blanchett Neheli, 2018, p. 1045; Christin, 2018, p. 1403; Currah, 2009; Hanusch, 2017, p. 1579; Nguyen, 2013; Tandoc, 2014, p. 570; Usher, 2018). The monitoring of audience metrics has also motivated quality news media to add "entirely new categories of coverage—such as 'celebrity,' 'lifestyle' and 'weird'"—to their websites (Currah, 2009, p. 88).

If news websites have not established a paywall or subscription model, their financing is based solely on advertising revenues, which are typically contingent upon the number of page views and unique visitors (Blanchett Neheli, 2018; Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Christin, 2018; Petre, 2015; Tandoc, 2014; Thurman & Myllylahti, 2009). In the face of growing economic pressure and scarce resources, journalists increasingly find themselves in conflict to meet both professional selection criteria and objectives to maximise audience metrics (Currah, 2009, p. 48; Lee, Lewis, & Powers, 2014, p. 512; Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015; Tandoc, 2014, 2019; Thurman & Myllylahti, 2009, p. 699). Accordingly, articles with a high number of page views usually receive follow-up reports, while those with lower audience traffic are less likely to receive further coverage, regardless of content, *quality*, and journalistic *relevance* (Arenberg & Lowrey, 2019, p. 141; Bunce, 2015; Currah, 2009, p. 47; Ferrucci, 2020;

Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013, pp. 72–73; Lamot & Paulussen, 2020, p. 367; MacGregor, 2007, p. 288; Moyo et al., 2019; Tandoc, 2014, p. 567; 2019, p. 45; Vu, 2014, p. 1104; Welbers, van Atteveldt, Kleinnijenhuis, Ruigrok, & Schaper, 2016). Due to expectations of high audience traffic, journalists are sometimes "forced to look for angles and come up with something when actually nothing has changed" (Bunce, 2015, p. 20), leading to deception in terms of *timely* and *relevant news*.

Moreover, high-traffic articles typically "spend longer in the spotlight" (Bright & Nicholls, 2014, p. 178), while reports with lower numbers of page views are moved further down the homepage or are completely removed from it (Anderson, 2011, pp. 560–561; Blanchett Neheli, 2018, p. 1046; Bright & Nicholls, 2014, p. 178; Christin, 2018; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013, p. 72; MacGregor, 2007, p. 287; Meier & Tüshaus, 2006; Tandoc, 2014, p. 568; Vu, 2014; with contrary findings: Lee et al., 2014). Since audience metrics fuel competition among journalists, the placement of stories is also influenced by journalists feeling pressured to increase the traffic of their articles. Some journalists try to convince editors to place their articles prominently on the homepage in order to boost their personal record of attracting page views (Lamot & Paulussen, 2020, p. 366). Furthermore, previous audience numbers are used as arguments in editorial discussions when "journalists argue for a more prominent position on the front page" (Bucher, 2017, p. 929). In the long run, the regular monitoring of audience metrics illuminates the kinds of topics that generally attract a lot of traffic, which are then covered more often and more prominently (Agarwal & Barthel, 2015, p. 388; Arenberg & Lowrey, 2019; Belair-Gagnon, 2019; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013, p. 73; MacGregor, 2007; Meier & Tüshaus, 2006; Moyo et al., 2019; Tandoc, 2019, p. 45). These practices and trends weaken *journalistic independence* as well as the professional standards of news selection that value *relevance*, as editorial values are increasingly overpowered by the economically motivated pursuit of the largest possible audience.

Nevertheless, journalists not only admit the influence of audience metrics and perceive a trend towards tabloidisation, but they also point out that established selection criteria and their professional judgement are often, or even mostly, a priority (Bright & Nicholls, 2014, p. 173; Chua & Westlund, 2019, pp. 160–161; Duffy et al., 2018; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013, p. 73; Meyen & Riesmeyer, 2009, p. 182; Thurman & Myllylahti, 2009, pp. 698–699; Whittaker, 2018). Although soft news is said to be increasing, partly due to day-parting (see Section 3), coverage is all in all considered to be a mix of hard news and soft news (Hanusch, 2017; Lamot & Paulussen, 2020). This could potentially indicate that the orientation toward audience metrics has its limits: Professional selection and *relevance* criteria have lost some of their significance, but they are still very important. For example, journalists consider it a problem to neglect topics with high journalistic relevance, insofar as "it

just makes you look bad if you're a big news site and you don't have the right news there" (Anderson, 2011, p. 560; see also Bucher, 2017, p. 926; Hanusch, 2017, p. 1579; Lamot & Paulussen, 2020, pp. 366–367). However, while they may assign particular relevance to hard news, they are also inclined to place soft news more prominently to attract high numbers of page views. Recent evidence suggests that the selection and placement of soft news, compared to hard news, is more dependent on audience metrics (Lamot & Van Aelst, 2020; Nelson & Tandoc, 2019). However, it should be acknowledged that journalists "may also feel a need to underemphasize what is regarded by many as an essentially negative habit of placing popularity over importance in the news" (Bright & Nicholls, 2014, p. 173; see also Hanusch, 2017, p. 1583; Slaček Brlek, 2018, p. 225). Moreover, as audience metrics are regularly used in newsrooms across the world, their influence might increasingly go unnoticed by journalists (Duffy et al., 2018, p. 1142).

Thus, research cannot rely solely on findings from surveys and interview studies. Ethnographic studies that combine participant observation and interview methods reveal that journalists refer to the importance of a balance between maximising audience metrics and maintaining editorial values, while "most of the time, the balancing act does not lead to the ideal, and often, it tips towards the goal of increasing traffic by using web analytics to come up with click-bait stories" (Tandoc, 2014, p. 570). Such studies can also yield conflicting findings. While a managing editor of a French online-only news website explained that important news about the civil war in Syria and similar stories are chosen as lead stories despite their comparatively low page views, other editors revealed that tabloid topics make for good leads (Christin, 2018, pp. 1401–1404). Thus, more in-depth studies are needed on how newsrooms try to balance these different logics and principles, including analyses that compare journalists' perceptions with the actual coverage of the outlet. A pioneering study of Welbers et al. (2016) combined content analysis with interviews and found that page views influenced the journalistic selection of topics, but that editors predominantly denied such an influence.

One relatively hidden consequence of this trend is that, given the scarcity of resources in many newsrooms, the selection and frequent updating of high-traffic stories comes at the expense of journalistically *relevant* topics that then receive little to no *investigation* and coverage (Moyo et al., 2019, p. 503; Petre, 2015, p. 7). This reduces the *comprehensiveness of coverage*.

5. Formats and Styles of News Presentation

A few studies indicate that the monitoring of audience metrics has contributed to a rise of "personal stories" (Poell & van Dijck, 2015, p. 193), comment and opinion pieces (Currah, 2009, pp. 88, 129–132), and "'blog posts,' or pieces that are shorter and less closely edited

than regular articles" (Christin, 2018, p. 1395). Such blogs, in many cases run by legacy media organisations, present "breaking news in an 'informal and conversational' manner" or give "readers the latest updates on unfolding new events, often without providing the supporting context" (Poell & van Dijck, 2015, p. 193). Another traffic-driven development is the increased use of photos, graphics, and videos (Currah, 2009; Duffy et al., 2018; Schwalbe, Silcock, & Candello, 2015; Vu, 2014). Galleries with visual content as well as slideshows are typical examples that are designed to boost page views (Christin, 2018, p. 1403; Currah, 2009, p. 72; Petre, 2015, p. 5; Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015). Visual content has also become more important because, compared to plain text, it generates more traffic on social media (Poell & van Dijck, 2015, pp. 186, 193; Schwalbe et al., 2015) with often minimal *contextual information* (Christin, 2018, p. 1403; Schwalbe et al., 2015). Due to the analysis of audience metrics, some newsrooms have significantly shortened the length of video clips at the cost of *in-depth reporting* (Duffy et al., 2018).

There is strong evidence that not only formats but also styles of presentation have changed due to audience metrics. While early studies concluded that audience metrics are rarely used for the immediate modification of articles (MacGregor, 2007), more recent studies indicate that news reports are often modified if they do not generate the expected number of page views, in particular by changing headlines or exchanging pictures and videos (Bodó, 2019; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013; Moyo et al., 2019; Slaček Brlek, 2018; Tandoc, 2014; Whittaker, 2018; Wyss, 2013). On the basis of these information cues, users decide whether or not to click on an article. When an article receives less page views than others, journalists often think that they must have done something "wrong" (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013, pp. 68, 72–73; Meyen & Riesmeyer, 2009, p. 185; Whittaker, 2018, p. 86). This is then often seen as a call to rewrite the headline or parts of the text so that important stories can find their way to users (Bodó, 2019; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013, p. 73; Meier & Tüshaus, 2006; Slaček Brlek, 2018; von Krogh & Andersson, 2016, p. 1061). However, it remains unclear whether these metric-driven changes contribute to improved *clarity* of an article or, for instance, to sensationalism or clickbaiting, of which Ferrucci (2020, p. 254) gives an example.

Moreover, some newsrooms systematically base their decisions regarding the style of articles on how this affects traffic. A/B testing, through which (typically two different) sections of the audience are shown different headlines of a story within a short span of time, is applied in order to come up with a "winning" headline that attracts the most page views (Belair-Gagnon, 2019, p. 766; Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2019, p. 120; Lamot & Paulussen, 2020, p. 367). Some journalists consider those "winning" headlines and pictures to be the 'better' ones (Belair-Gagnon, 2019; Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2019; Meier & Tüshaus, 2006). Here, measures of audience size

are "equated with a job well done" and the serving of audience interests (Tandoc, 2014, p. 569).

Monitoring and adapting to metrics can have long-term effects. Articles are increasingly created in such a way that they are more likely to attract many users, including traffic from search engines and social media. The accumulated experience of editors in dealing with metrics as well as SEO/SMO strategies and A/B testing (Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2019, p. 121; Poell & van Dijck, 2015) can reinforce *tabloidisation*. Indicators of this are the use of simplifications, exaggerations, and sensational elements (Phillips, 2015; Wyss, 2013) as well as headlines containing names of prominent people and words such as "bra," "naked," and "sex" (Blanchett Neheli, 2018, p. 1045; Christin, 2018, p. 1403; Meier & Tüshaus, 2006, p. 4; Meyen & Riesmeyer, 2009, p. 181; Tandoc, 2014, p. 568). An online-specific tabloid style is the clickbait headline (Magin, 2019, p. 1708). Considered as a tactic that misleads users in order to boost traffic, many journalists show an aversion towards clickbait and deny such practices (Belair-Gagnon, 2019; Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2019, p. 121). They try to use a style that is "sexy" (Moyo et al., 2019, p. 502) but not "too 'clickbaity'" (Lamot & Paulussen, 2020, p. 367)—although sometimes resorting to it anyway (Blom & Hansen, 2015; Kilgo & Sinta, 2016; Kuiken, Schuth, Spitters, & Marx, 2017; Tandoc, 2014, p. 570). Instead of *clarity*, clickbait headlines create an information gap and raise exaggerated expectations (for instance, 'You would never believe what this…'). Taken together, these findings clearly point to the *increasing tabloidisation and homogeneity of news coverage*.

6. Conclusion

This article has distinguished between four basic dimensions of journalistic production processes in newsrooms and, by systematically reviewing the research literature, it has found that audience metrics have a mainly negative impact on news quality (following the news quality criteria given in the Introduction), particularly in profit-driven newsrooms and in connection with growing economic pressures. With respect to the *allocation of resources and recognition*, it has become clear that audience metrics further exacerbate an already precarious situation. Despite significant staff cuts, new jobs are created that focus on how to increase audience traffic. Moreover, most journalists are expected to monitor and optimise audience metrics and are valued for 'doing well' in this matter. This development amplifies the problem of scarce resources for investigating and writing news stories and is therefore considered as an "indirect indicator" (Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015, p. 29) of decreasing news quality. Moreover, audience metrics have changed the *volume*, *practices*, *and rhythms of news production*. To maximise traffic, many newsrooms aim to produce a large number of 'quick hit' stories and a potentially diverse supply of up-to-date content. However, this is accompanied by a decrease of original coverage, investigative journal-

ism and source diversity. As audience traffic becomes more important, less emphasis is placed on researching and verifying information and providing a comprehensive overview of current events and relevant topics. The findings on the *selection and placement of topics* have shown that journalists increasingly select, present and follow up on topics depending on audience numbers and regardless of journalistic relevance and newsworthiness. This tends to lead to an increase in more prominently placed soft news, while some topics of public interest are likely to receive little to no investigation and coverage. This trend reduces the comprehensiveness of coverage and clearly weakens journalistic independence and editorial values. Lastly, the systematic review has revealed that the use of audience metrics stimulates the tabloidisation of *formats and styles of news presentation*, including clickbaiting, sensationalism and a stronger focus on visual content.

Most studies discussed in this review were conducted by means of qualitative interviews with journalists, ethnographic newsroom observations and standardised surveys of journalists, therefore using "expert judgements" (Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015, p. 29; see also Meier, 2019, p. 6) on changes in news quality. The statements and perceptions of journalists are particularly important when it comes to determining (the lack of) independence from economic interests, comprehensiveness of coverage, original reporting, and accuracy since they are often aware of how the quest for high audience numbers has prevented them from following editorial values, reporting on and investigating important topics, and checking basic information. In the future, however, more studies are needed that conduct content analyses and combine different methods (see Welbers et al., 2016) to further examine the impact of audience metrics on news quality.

Journalists sometimes feel that they have to abandon professional standards of news quality in order to optimise traffic and respond to economic pressures. However, in many cases, audience metrics have already changed how journalists perceive news quality, good journalistic work, and audience expectations. Traffic numbers are often regarded as precise and objective indications of audience interests and are used to justify decisions that are uncertain or contradict professional journalistic standards (Bunce, 2019; Christin, 2018; Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2019; Usher, 2012; Whittaker, 2018). As Bucher (2017, p. 929) has put it, audience metrics "become imbued with discursive power used to negotiate with." This goes beyond economic pressures and the commercialisation of news media and concerns all media types—even those that conceive themselves as mostly independent from commercial influences (Ferrucci, 2020; Hanusch, 2017; Lawrence et al., 2018; Puppis et al., 2014, p. 21; Usher, 2012).

Yet, audience expectations are much more complex and actually align with the core journalistic standards of news quality (Abdenour & Riffe, 2019; Costera Meijer,

2013; De Waal & Schoenbach, 2010; Heise et al., 2014; Neuberger, 2014; van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014). In this light, the recent traffic-driven developments in journalism clearly undermine audience interests and the reputation of news media. Reception studies have revealed that page views and unique visitors are currencies of the advertising industry that are not instructive to capture audience interests (Costera Meijer, 2013; Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2018). Datafication and audience metrics therefore do not empower the audience to take on the role "as gatekeeper" (Vu, 2014) or serve news-interested and loyal users (Costera Meijer, 2013; Phillips, 2015; Usher, 2012, p. 1911). Instead, the dominant audience metrics put the short-term behaviour of all online users, including "casual visitors" (Phillips, 2015, p. 79) looking for various kinds of content, first and lead to a redefinition of journalistic standards of news production.

All in all, the findings in this article correspond to longitudinal content analyses that have found a decline in the news quality of selected print, online, and broadcasting media in recent years (Eisenegger et al., 2017; Karidi, 2018). However, the impact of audience metrics should also be considered on the macro level. In terms of the media system as a whole, the growing importance of audience metrics coupled with a decline in journalistic resources tends to reduce the diversity and quality of news: a large amount of similar or even identical content is created, with many reports receiving little verification and contextualisation, thereby fuelling the dissemination of inaccurate or superficial information. In times of precarious working conditions, scarce newsroom resources, and an abundance of information, it has become more crucial than ever how journalists understand their professional role and audience interests—well beyond traffic data that cannot capture the quality of news and its value in the eyes of the audience.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Democratic Theory and the Potential of Value Frames in Assessing Media Performance

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Abstract
Media users need information and knowledge to act as free citizens. From this basic democratic assumption, news standards for media performance can be derived. Porto's (2007) model of the 'interpreting citizen' assigns a central role to the diversity of interpretive frames. These frames enable citizens to make judgments about societal issues and related political positions. However, a theoretical foundation for classifying these frames in terms of their content is missing. We propose to derive such a basis from democratic theories of citizenship, which assume that values define a citizen's position vis-à-vis the political sphere. Building on the cleavage approach from political science, we characterize which values organize political debates. The results of a large-scale content analysis of German news media demonstrate which empirical insights into media performance can be gained with a theoretically derived classification of value frames (most notably, measuring the substantive content of plurality). Based on this, we discuss additional avenues for future research.

Issue
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1. Introduction

Theories of public opinion argue that democracy can function only through public communication of a certain quality, as public communication creates the conditions for citizens to act. Participatory approaches address this requirement explicitly by characterizing the function of public communication in a democracy as the 'empowerment' of citizens to exercise their political freedom (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002). Liberal approaches to public sphere theory additionally assume that public communication creates a 'marketplace of ideas' that allows citizens to form their own opinion and identify representations of their political stances. In this article, we discuss which performance public communication must provide to enable this type of active citizenship.

Porto (2007), based on his model of citizenship, defines plurality as a key indicator of media performance. He suggests operationalizing this well-established dimension of media performance (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009) via measuring the diversity of interpretive frames. Following Porto, we argue that the communication of normative interpretations or viewpoints is central to how individual citizens process political issues and positions. However, our discussion of Porto's propositions reveals the need for a thorough theoretical foundation to adequately conceptualize the plurality of interpretive frames (Section 2). In Section 3, we introduce political values as a pivotal concept for such a classification of plurality. Political values and value conflicts (cleavages) shape a citizen's view of politics. Based on this understanding, we propose a concept for the empirical assessment of 'value frames,' that is, patterns

of interpretation based on fundamental political values (Section 4). This approach is in line with different understandings of media diversity, which McQuail (1992) describes as "diversity as reflection" (p. 144) and "reflecting political divisions" (p. 163). Based on a large-scale content analysis of German news media, we then illustrate the capabilities of the proposed instrument for examining media performance.

The goal of the article is to demonstrate that value frames allow a detailed and theoretically grounded classification of the plurality of political positions across different issues. The measurement we propose extends previous approaches to capture plurality as a central indicator of media performance. Although the diversity of actors or topics is a manifest indicator of plurality that can be coded with relative ease (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014; McQuail, 1992), it only indirectly reflects the substantive content of political positions, if at all. How media display actors or issues does not need to align with the diversity of political positions. It is possible, for instance, that the media cover only a limited spectrum of positions although a diversity of actors is mentioned (Baden & Springer, 2017). Instead of using actors or issues as proxies for diversity, therefore, we propose to measure viewpoint diversity directly to advance the study of media performance in communication research. However, value frames thus also serve as an example of the integrative and interdisciplinary potential of media and communication studies. On the one hand, the proposed instrument builds on policy research, political sociology, and political psychology. On the other hand, these disciplines gain from studies of media performance that substantiate the importance of public communication for the functioning of democracy.

2. Models of Citizenship and Standards of Media Performance

Democratic theory forms the basis for research on media performance in communication studies, from which standards for assessing and classifying journalistic performance are derived. However, sometimes the respective notions of the role of the citizen remain implicit. A 2003 issue of *Political Communication* contained an explicit debate on such 'models' of citizenship. It includes Zaller (2003) building on Schudson's (1998) previous model of the 'monitorial citizen,' by combining it with a critique of standards for comprehensive and factual reporting. While emphasizing the historical and social contingency of these standards, Zaller agrees with Schudson in assuming that citizens must be able to critically overlook their political environment. Zaller postulates that citizens alternate between superficial knowledge of current events and an in-depth examination of only those issues that require their attention. Because attention plays a decisive role in this process, Zaller assigns journalism the task of providing a "burglar alarm" (p. 121) to draw attention.

Zaller's (2003) point of reference is the democratic principle that politicians must be held accountable by the citizenry. However, this accountability requires publicly available information on important issues. Such information should enable citizens to critically examine what politicians' activities mean for citizens and what deserves their attention. This raises the question of how this information must be shaped so that citizens can hold politicians accountable. Zaller's (2003) answer to this question focuses entirely on how attention can be attracted. His praise of alarmism as a function of journalism, however, ignores the obvious pitfalls of alarmist mediation versus an enlightened perception of politics. First, what is most sensational and draws attention is not necessarily the same as what is important, in the sense of being relevant to the social circumstances of life. A focus on the former would relieve politicians of the pressure to justify their actions and compromise citizens' ability to hold the politicians accountable. Second, the emotionalization and moralization typical of alarmist reporting would replace an informed representation of processes and positions. This would hinder citizens' ability to adequately assess what the positions or decisions of politicians mean for them (Bennett, 2003).

Porto (2007) seeks to overcome these limitations inherent in the model of the 'monitorial citizen,' without succumbing to the fiction of a citizen fully informed on all matters, either. Drawing from political psychology and the concept of civic competence, he discusses what kinds of information citizens need to perform their role competently. In his resulting model of the 'interpreting citizen,' he assigns a key role to the availability of 'interpretive frames' for "citizens' ability to interpret political reality in a consistent way" (p. 311). These interpretive frames enable an understanding of why events or processes are relevant for society. The frames offer an interpretation of the extent to which a problem affects the social and political life of a community, what defines the problem at its core, what causes the problem, who is responsible for it, and what measures should be used to solve the problem. Thus, Porto follows a general frame definition.

He emphasizes that such interpretations are expressed by 'sponsors' who promote specific perspectives on issues and events in public discourse. The resulting differences in the publicly available interpretations of political reality are based on diverging interests or points of view, which shape how a sponsor interprets an issue. Employees' or entrepreneurs' interpretations, for example, are likely to differ in what they see as the core of an issue such as digitization (e.g., job security versus profitability and security of investments) and what measures, therefore, are considered appropriate to resolve the issue. Thus, to enable citizenship in a free society, Porto (2007, p. 303) assumes that citizens must be able to perceive diverse competing interpretations of societal issues. Only the availability of such a plurality of interpretations enables citizens to form their own opinions and consequently, to perform their role competently.

Plurality, as a necessary condition for the legitimacy of politics in a democracy, is a well-established standard for public discourse in the theory of the public sphere (Weiß et al., 2016). Porto (2007) transfers this idea from the macro-level to the level of individuals' competence to act. Again, he draws on an argument from political psychology that assumes that only examining diverse competing interpretations creates the basis for consistent judgment by individual citizens. This assumption is supported by research on framing effects (Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). What is left unspoken by Porto and in framing research, however, is the difference between 'blind' followership of positions and informed partisanship that acknowledges alternatives, and thus, gains a deeper understanding of the meaning of the political positions. The latter is described by liberal-democracy theorist Dahl (1989, p. 307) as an "enlightened understanding.''

How can such an ideal be reached? On an individual level, examining diverse interpretive frames forms the basis of competent citizenship. At the societal level, this requires a media system that makes the pluralistic competition of political positions visible. To determine whether the media provide this plurality, interpretive frames must be defined and classified in a way that reveals which divergent viewpoints have entered the publicly available interpretation of reality. Porto (2007, p. 309), therefore, calls for framing analyses to unveil how the competition of interpretations is related to political power struggles. Such an analysis would necessitate a classification of interpretive frames that makes clear which respective position they support on a political issue. What is needed is a concept that describes the basic positions of political disputes in modern democracies and makes the positions identifiable via interpretive frames. We propose 'value frames' as such a concept. Value frames are patterns of interpretation based on fundamental political values and interpret issues or events in light of the latter (Ball-Rokeach & Loges, 1996). These values affect which specific position is taken on controversial political issues.

To fulfill the analytical demands of Porto's model of the 'interpreting citizen,' two tasks arise from the previous considerations: First, the role of citizens in shaping the interpretive frames by which policies and politicians are judged must be clarified. This will further explain how central political values are to interpretive frames. Second, a classification of a potentially wide variety of competing interpretive frames must be developed.

3. The Relevance of Political Values for Citizens' Perspectives

When people use political ideologies (such as liberalism, socialism, or nationalism) or religious beliefs as the basis of their political stance, they are moving within systems of interpretation. This article is an attempt to describe which interpretive transitions are necessary to

move from practical everyday experiences to the development of a political mode of interpretation. To determine what is important for people in their political role as citizens and therefore, what shapes their view of politics, interests related to practices of everyday life form the starting point. These interests vary with individuals' social situation (their interest in well-paid work or in a cheap labor force, their interest in affordable housing or in a return on property investments, their interest in unrestricted mobility or in an unpolluted environment, etc.).

Such interests reflect the options for and constraints on the success of an individual's life project. This perspective is necessarily egocentric, because the view of social conditions is determined by the question what these mean to the individual. This life-practical and interest-related perspective of the private individual is separate from their role as a citizen.

In their daily life, citizens experience in numerous ways that their personal life project is dependent on social circumstances. Therefore, shaping these circumstances becomes part of their individual interests. However, the reflection of their personal situation and interests on the sphere of politics includes a transformation. Individual interests are transformed into demands for a system of rights and public services on which the scope and legitimacy of one's own interests depend. When the interests of different actors collide, the individual depends on the institutions of the rule of law to deal with and ideally resolve the collision of competing demands. Such individual interests additionally presuppose a public-service infrastructure, from public transportation to social housing to education, and much more.

This system of conditions for the realization of interests in societies is itself subject to change. The system is permanently transformed through the pressure of social demands. Such concrete demands represent an initial transformation of interests. Interests that are put forward as claims refer to the established or hoped-for general recognition of their validity within society. An interest becomes a claim by discursively and then practically incorporating it into a system of legally validatable claims. In political science, this transformation is analyzed when the role of parties in mediating between the concerns of citizens and the system of power that establishes rules of general validity is assessed. From this vantage point, parties are organs of 'interest aggregation': Through this aggregation, individual interests become part of a concept or program for harmonizing different interests and their interaction (see, for example, Lawson & Poguntke, 2004). Although this integration entails the validation of some interests, it also limits their claim to validity in relation to others.

Citizens, therefore, must observe claims to political validity that reflect their interests. According to Faden-Kuhne (2012), citizens base this appraisal on their internalized normative values "to assess the positions of the parties on specific political issues or to determine

whether the positions of the parties correspond to their own ideas" (p. 92, authors' translation). In practice, this assessment is already fully structured, as it takes place along established lines of conflict that can be characterized by maxims of good politics.

These maxims represent and articulate political values. Values are understood not as maxims by which individuals should conduct their lives, but as fundamental ideas about the organization of society (Feldman, 2003). Thus, values reflect social interests, but transform them into ideas about desirable social conditions that give validity to an individual's interests alongside those of other citizens. Therefore, a claim to societally shared values is not just a rhetorical technique. Even if seemingly instrumental and tactical, an appeal to values acknowledges that for claims to be justified, they must refer to some universally acceptable goal. Linking interests to values in this way changes their substance: Only if they appear to advance the success of living conditions in general can they expect recognition even from those who do not share the respective interests, but who would nevertheless be affected if these interests are met. Interest-based demands that allude to generalizable values, therefore, are an integral part of peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution in society.

Following these principles in public discourse does not end social conflicts, but it transforms the competition and conflict of social interests into a competition for implementing politics based on different normative principles. In modern democracies, this competition has been condensed into conflicts of political values that are established at various levels and thus, develop formative power. These lines of conflict are characterized by cleavages (Kitschelt, 1994; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967).

To illustrate the basic ideas of cleavages, those present in Germany are given as an example. As in other Western societies (de Wilde, Koopmans, Merkel, Strijbis, & Zürn, 2019), three fundamental lines of conflict characterize public discourse in Germany (Niedermayer, 2009). In the first socioeconomic axis of conflict, the ideal of a free market is opposed to an orientation toward welfare-state services. This line of conflict transforms the traditional class-based opposition of labor and capital into a dispute over the scope of state intervention in capitalist economies. Interests clash between the extremes of the individual pursuit of private success and social justice through collectively organized solidarity. The second sociocultural axis of conflict opposes libertarian to authoritarian positions. This dimension of conflict concerns the regulation of social order. One extreme position in this cleavage regards universal civil rights as the guiding principle of good politics. This position emphasizes participation and plurality, while the opposing pole insists on law and order being enforced by hierarchical authorities and sees conventional and conformist morality as binding. Grande and Kriesi (2012) have pointed out that these long-established dimensions of conflict are increasingly challenged by globalization, which has produced a

third line of conflict. Divided between winners and losers of globalization, the first two cleavages are projected on an additionally fundamental question. It contrasts integrative positions, which advocate transnational political alliances and a multicultural composition of societies at the national level, with demarcating positions, which champion national sovereignty over international cooperation and insist on the ethnic homogeneity and demarcation of societies. This latter position is characteristic of right-wing populism and negates that which gives political dispute its potentially peacemaking function: the search for a common ground that integrates divergent points of view. This function translates conflicts into a question of 'more or less' regarding the social resources spent on different interpretations of a basic value such as 'justice' and to whom these interpretations are institutionally applied. The demarcation position, in contrast, promotes an ultimate identity conflict of 'either/or' in which only one's own position is recognized as legitimate, and opposing positions must be discredited, criminalized, and ultimately, overpowered.

How these cleavages as conflicts between fundamental political values shape public discourse can be determined at several interdependent levels. The cleavage concept originally identified social groups as sponsors of the basic political values that divide an axis of conflict. A social cleavage, thus, is understood as:

> A deep-seated, robust, conflictual and, within the framework of the intermediary system, organizationally solidified line of conflict between social groups, which are defined by their socio-structural position and the material interests and political values derived from it, or primarily by their different values. (Niedermayer, 2009, p. 35, authors' translation)

Such groups form political milieus whose members share the same basic political values and thus, distinguish themselves from other milieus (Kösters & Jandura, 2019). Political parties are the representatives and advocates of a milieu's understanding of good politics. How parties compete for the implementation of their political ideas can also be systematically characterized by their position in fundamental conflicts of values (Niedermayer, 2009, p. 37). From this point of view, parties ensure that the normative maxims of fundamental conflicts of values shape decision-making processes (Schön & Rein, 1994). In their competition for power, parties present themselves in relation to fundamental values and thus, continually affirm them as important points of reference for the citizenry's formation of political opinions (Bartolini & Mair, 1990). Last, conflicts of values are also reiterated by journalists who use the conflicts as schemata for presenting and evaluating political processes (Lee, McLeod, & Shah, 2008).

Overall, public discourse is fundamentally structured by the three main axes of conflict. The conflict of political positions in the public sphere is carried out as a strug-

gle of interpretive frameworks. In this struggle, actors interpret a given issue against the background of the normative value positions the actors represent and classify the issue by using respective value frames. Thus, public utterances contribute to the value frames competition (Scheufele & Engelmann, 2013).

With the help of value frames, our initial question of what citizens should devote attention to can be answered. Citizens find themselves reflected in those value frames from public discourse that guide the citizens' own assessment and practical evaluation of politics. In this sense, Dahlgren (2005) sees values as the core of "civic cultures" (p. 18), that is, typical forms of citizenship that are rooted in real-world experiences. To enable citizenship through public communication, that and how guiding principles of good politics are affected by a given issue or proposal must be clear. For an informed understanding of politics, citizens must be able to discern what affects their own values, who stands up for the latter, who contradicts these values, what is or can be done to implement the values, etc. This must be made transparent through value frames in public interpretations of issues. Values from the opposing poles of the fundamental cleavages thus fill in what the evaluative interpretive frames in Porto's (2007) concept of the 'interpreting citizen' mean (see Section 2). In this sense, frames corresponding to the extremes of the axes of conflict provide a general basis for assessing media performance.

4. Empirical Assessment and Classification of Value Frames along Cleavages

Through value frames, a universal standard of democratic media performance can be analyzed: the diversity of political interpretations. Typically, the diversity of speakers is used as an indicator of diversity (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014; McQuail, 1992), although it has its limitations as mentioned above (Baden & Springer, 2017). With value frames, diversity of public discourse can be determined at the level of the content. As the opposing sides of cleavages reflect basic political values that shape attitudes on various issues, diversity can be determined not only in relation to single issues but also across different policy fields. Political scientists use the cleavage concept to characterize the heterogeneity of political positions in society, as well as between political parties. Adapting this concept for framing research in communication studies provides a direct avenue for analyzing to what degree political diversity in society and politics is made transparent by the media. Conversely, a cleavage-based analysis of value frames can offer political science insights into which political positions of social groups and political parties are represented in which media arenas.

Two extant studies follow this framework. Scheufele and Engelmann (2013) propose a measurement of value frames based on Porto's (2007) considerations. Regarding electoral debate, they state: "The media should rather communicate to voters which part of the

value space is home to political parties and which coalitions of representation they therefore offer" (Scheufele & Engelmann, 2013, p. 535, authors' translation, emphasis in original). To measure value frames, Scheufele and Engelmann follow the concept of 'master frames' (Benford & Snow, 2000) and theoretically distinguish between cleavages. However, instead of sticking to the established cleavages from political sociology (see Section 3), the authors introduce a number of 'universal' as well as 'policy-field specific' values. Scheufele and Engelmann's distinction is not always straightforward (e.g., the distinction between 'solidarity' and 'justice' as universal values or between 'solidarity' as a universal value and 'state interventionism' as a value specific to a policy area).

In contrast, Höglinger, Wüest, and Helbling (2012) work with the original differentiation between the economic and cultural axes of conflict. The authors' definition of frames, however, focuses entirely on how the extremes of the respective conflicts align with the phenomenon of globalization, in line with their research question: "How do political actors justify the opposition and support of globalization?" (Höglinger et al., 2012, p. 229). Their content analysis stems from a research group studying the potentially formative power of the recently emerged cleavage between integration and demarcation for politics and public debate (Grande & Kriesi, 2012). Because of this limited focus, Höglinger et al.'s (2012) operationalization cannot serve as a universal classification of issues.

The following proposal for measuring value frames in public discourse is intended as a solution to this problem. Closely following the definitions of the extremes of each of the three fundamental lines of conflicts from political sociology (see Table 1), this framework allows an assessment of the degree of diversity in news coverage—a central feature of media performance in democracies.

Value frames can be applied to the public discourse on various political issues: Regarding the environment and climate protection, for instance, the socioeconomic axis of conflict is particularly relevant. At one end of the spectrum, welfare state-oriented positions stress strict regulations to ensure that environmental damage does not impair the living conditions of current and future members of society. At the other end, market-liberal positions emphasize how environmental regulations impede economic growth. Balanced positions might argue for regulations that reward environmentally sustainable economic activities. On an issue such as assisted suicide, the sociocultural axis will likely be salient. Libertarian positions would champion the individual's right to decide matters of their own life, while an authoritarian position, depending on the cultural context, may favor the position of churches or other authorities that provide guidance about how lives should be lived—or ended. For some issues, more than one axis of conflict is pertinent. For climate protection, a position can combine, for example, statements that favor welfare state-oriented solu-

Table 1. Fundamental value frames: Abridged version.

Value frame	Description
Market liberalism	Guiding principle: Individual pursuit of economic success. Policies should improve the conditions of business activities, but refrain from regulation. Individual economic effort is preferred over compensation for disadvantages.
Welfare state orientation	Guiding principle: Participation by all members of society in economic welfare and social and cultural life. Policies should guarantee the welfare of all members of society and enable dignified living conditions. Restrictive regulation of private businesses is necessary to share burdens.
Libertarianism	Guiding principle: Respect for the freedom and self-determination of the individual. Policies should guarantee the right to individual self-determination and to democratic participation, for all human beings.
Authoritarianism	Guiding principle: Respect for order and traditions of decency. The basis for legitimate membership in the political community is a moral community based on tradition and genealogy. Policies should uphold traditions and enable the unchallenged enforcement of the legal order.
Integration	Guiding principle: Problems and conflicts are solved through cooperation and compromise. Democracy and human rights are regarded as the basis of political communities. Cooperation between individuals, regions, and nations is the preferred way to solve problems.
Demarcation	Guiding principle: Problems and conflicts are managed by the people uniting and the nation standing its ground against adversaries. The political community is understood as a fighting unit that needs to establish its national unity internally and assert its interests externally. Cultural and political processes should contribute to establishing identification with the nation.

Note: The full description of value frames is included in the Supplementary File that also contains coding instructions and examples.

tions with international cooperation. Thus, value frames are comparatively universal indicators of media diversity as the frames transcend issues, while providing more information than the mere number of different speakers.

5. Empirical Insights into Media Performance Through Value Frames

We illustrate the benefits of an analysis of value frames in public discourse through findings from a large-scale content analysis. Selected findings are presented below to demonstrate the capabilities of an analysis of value frames to assess media performance. For this article, 5,279 content items from 16 German media outlets (print, television, radio, and online) were analyzed. The sample consists of media outlets that represent different types of German news media: *Die Zeit* and *Der Spiegel* (weekly magazines), *FAZ*, *SZ* (quality daily newspapers, conservative and liberal, respectively), *Bild* (tabloid press), *Rheinische Post* (regional daily), *taz* and *Junge Freiheit* (print outlets targeting the left and right fringes of the political spectrum, respectively), Tagesschau, WDR aktuell (public service television and radio news), RTL aktuell (commercial television news), spiegel.de, faz.net, bild.de, and tagesschau.de (online equivalents of the respective outlets), and t-online.de (online news portal). The content analysis comprises four periods of inquiry in 2018 (26 May–15 June, 29 June–5 July, 17 September–

7 October, 22 October–28 October). To avoid event- or issue-related bias, this selection includes parliamentary sitting weeks as well as non-sitting weeks. The data are based on a random sample of all published articles that focus on national politics, the filter criterion (sampling error between 3% and 5%, except for a full survey of *Die Zeit*, *Der Spiegel*, *Junge Freiheit*, Tagesschau, RTL aktuell, and bild.de). For each article, the value frames of up to three actors are coded. For each actor and for each cleavage, coders assess whether the actor favors one side, whether the actor takes up a balanced position, or whether there is no cleavage reference (see the Supplementary File for the coding instructions). Despite the relatively high level of abstractness of value frames, the coding reliability across coders reached acceptable levels (Brennan and Prediger's kappa between 0.8 and 0.9).

5.1. The Share of Value Frames in News Content as a Prerequisite of Comprehension

As discussed above, Porto (2007) argues that citizens require media to make transparent how political processes and proposals relate to fundamental values. Therefore, in the first step, we determine the extent to which different types of media display value frames (Table 2). Quality daily and weekly print media as well as public-service TV news provide users with the most extensive overview

Table 2. Proportion of articles with value frames.

Media outlet	Total number of articles (*n*)	Share of articles with value frames (%)
Die Zeit	117	47.9
Tagesschau	193	44.0
Der Spiegel	149	42.3
FAZ	619	40.2
tagesschau.de	487	39.6
SZ	576	38.0
t-online.de	286	35.3
spiegel.de	594	35.2
faz.net	491	34.8
Rheinische Post	256	34.0
taz	282	33.3
RTL aktuell	183	32.8
bild.de	441	29.5
Junge Freiheit	180	29.4
Bild	264	27.3
WDR aktuell	161	23.6
Total	5,279	35.6

Note: Cramér's V = 0.1.

of normative frames that shape debates. The tabloid *Bild* and news from commercial television program RTL provide less transparency of normative positions. Media that function as a forum for extreme political camps (such as the right-wing *Junge Freiheit*) likewise rarely contain value frames. Their high frequency (and therefore, the high level of normative transparency) in the public broadcaster Tagesschau, at the other end of the spectrum, is remarkable, especially as its 15-minute format is restrictive when compared to broadsheets like *Die Zeit*, *SZ*, or *FAZ*. Articles on the online edition tagesschau.de also frequently contain value frames. Thus, public television news is characterized by its extensive efforts to ensure the transparency of normative positions.

5.2. Plurality in the Mediation of Value Frames

The mere frequency of value frames in news is not the only indicator of media performance. Citizens should also be able to assess the breadth of a debate and the different positions expressed on a given issue. Plurality, therefore, is a necessary requirement, not only on the individual but also on the systemic level. Value frames allow characterization of how diverse specific issues or larger policy areas appear in media coverage. Such an

analysis provides an avenue for assessing media performance as required by liberal concepts of the public sphere, according to the idea of a 'marketplace of ideas.' Through value frames, plurality cannot only be measured by the diversity of speakers in a debate but also captured directly via the normative foundations of publicly visible policy concepts.

To illustrate the insight into plurality enabled by value frames, their diversity is presented for two policy areas as apparent in the coverage of the quality papers *FAZ* and *SZ*. For one of the dominant topics in 2018, migration, a comparison of the two papers reveals that they emphasize integrative and demarcating frames to an almost equal degree (Table 3). A similar picture emerges for their reporting on the broader field of economic issues, where market-liberal and welfare state-oriented frames are balanced (Table 4). *FAZ* additionally presents frames that advocate free transnational economic relations (integration) over national-state protectionist ones (demarcation), while the reporting in *SZ* reverses the emphases.

The prominence of value frames thus differs in two respects for the selected policy fields: First, different axes of conflict are relevant for each policy field. In the case of migration, the conflict is between integration and demarcation, and for economic issues, mainly the socioe-

Table 3. Coverage of the issue of migration: Distribution of value frames in quality newspapers.

Media outlet/frame	*n* (statements)	Libertarianism		Authoritarianism		Integration		Demarcation	
		%	Diff. to avg.	%	Diff. to avg.	%	Diff. to avg.	%	Diff. to avg.
FAZ	62	1.6	−3.2	1.6	−4.0	48.4	2.4	48.4	6.3
SZ	54	3.7	−1.1	3.7	−1.9	40.7	−5.3	51.9	9.8
All media	605	4.8		5.6		46.0		42.1	

Note: Cramér's V = 0.1.

Table 4. Coverage of economic issues: Distribution of value frames in quality newspapers.

Media outlet/frame	n (statements)	Market liberalism		Welfare state orientation		Libertarianism		Authoritarianism		Integration		Demarcation	
		%	Diff. to avg.	%	Diff. to avg.	%	Diff. to avg.	%	Diff. to avg.	%	Diff. to avg.	%	Diff. to avg.
FAZ	79	31.6	5.0	32.9	−4.5	3.8	−1.1	—	—	20.3	0.3	11.4	2.0
SZ	37	27.0	0.4	29.7	−7.7	2.7	−2.2	—	—	16.2	−3.8	24.3	14.9
All media	350	26.6		37.4		4.9		—		20.0		9.4	

Note: Cramér's V = 0.2.

conomic axis of conflict as well as integration versus demarcation. Second, which value frames a medium emphasizes, therefore, can differ from issue to issue. For this reason, it makes sense to examine the plurality of news coverage separately by policy field or topical area.

Plurality of news coverage can further be assessed through the degree to which *competing* normative frames (such as a market-liberal and a welfare-state perspective) are presented in the same article. Across all topics and news outlets, such a dialogical presentation of conflicting positions within the same article rarely occurs (in about one fifth of the articles; Table 5). Again, with the exception of news from public-service radio WDR aktuell, news from public-service broadcasting provides above-average performance. For the other media, no clear hierarchy emerges. Presenting competing value frames within one article is a parsimonious way to ensure plurality. However, the media can, of course, also establish a 'marketplace of ideas' by representing competing positions in separate articles. An analysis by issue or policy area as presented in Table 3 and Table 4 allows an assessment of this form of plurality.

5.3. The Media's Emphasis on Political Values: Editorial Lines

In addition to reporting on the positions of political actors, the media play an active role in the process of opinion building in society. They take positions in opinion pieces and editorials (Eilders, 2002) and by systematically favoring selected political positions in their reporting (Kepplinger, Brosius, & Staab, 1991). Taken together, this makes up the media's 'editorial line.' Measuring value frames allows a precise diagnosis of these lines.

After examining specific issues and policy areas in the previous section, our focus shifts back to the overall news coverage of each outlet. We examine the chances each value frame has of being reflected in the selected media. The following media-specific patterns of value frames emerge: 1) The conservative *FAZ* and the liberal *SZ* are similar in their emphasis on libertarian versus authoritarian positions. However, they differ significantly in the weight they award to welfare state positions. These clearly dominate market-liberal positions in *SZ*, while the relationship is more balanced in *FAZ*; 2) the tabloid *Bild*

Table 5. Proportion of articles with opposing positions.

Media outlet	Number of articles with value frames (n)	Share of articles with opposing positions
Tagesschau	85	27.1
Der Spiegel	63	25.4
RTL aktuell	60	25.0
tagesschau.de	193	24.4
Die Zeit	56	23.2
t-online.de	101	22.8
Bild	72	22.2
FAZ	249	22.1
faz.net	171	20.5
bild.de	130	18.5
WDR aktuell	38	18.4
SZ	219	17.8
Rheinische Post	87	17.2
spiegel.de	209	17.2
Junge Freiheit	53	11.3
taz	94	5.3
Total	1,880	19.9

Note: Cramér's V = 0.1.

Table 6. Distribution of value frames depending on the medium.

Media outlet/frame	n (statements)	Market liberalism %	Diff. to avg.	Welfare state orientation %	Diff. to avg.	Libertarianism %	Diff. to avg.	Authoritarianism %	Diff. to avg.	Integration %	Diff. to avg.	Demarcation %	Diff. to avg.
FAZ	364	11.0	3.5	17.9	2.7	12.4	−1.3	4.1	−1.4	37.1	−0.2	17.6	−3.3
SZ	300	7.7	0.2	20.0	4.8	12.0	−1.7	2.3	−3.2	36.7	−0.4	21.3	0.4
Der Spiegel	82	**17.1**	9.6	15.9	0.7	15.9	2.2	7.3	1.8	**29.3**	−8.0	**14.6**	−6.3
Die Zeit	75	6.7	−0.8	12.0	−3.2	12.0	−1.7	4.0	−1.5	37.3	0.0	**28.0**	7.1
Bild	95	8.4	0.9	12.6	−2.6	10.5	−3.2	**11.6**	6.1	**27.4**	−9.9	**29.5**	8.6
Junge Freiheit	65	**1.5**	−6.0	**3.1**	−12.1	15.4	1.7	4.6	−0.9	40.0	2.7	**35.4**	14.5
taz	110	4.5	−3.0	21.8	6.6	**28.2**	14.5	3.6	−1.9	**26.4**	−10.9	15.5	−5.4
Rheinische Post	99	8.1	0.6	28.3	13.1	18.2	4.5	7.1	1.6	**30.3**	−7.0	**8.1**	−12.8
Tagesschau	125	12.0	4.5	14.4	−0.8	11.2	−2.5	2.4	−3.1	37.6	0.3	22.4	1.5
RTL aktuell	85	4.7	−2.8	16.5	1.3	9.4	−4.3	7.1	1.6	36.5	−0.8	**25.9**	5.0
WDR aktuell	52	5.8	−1.7	25.0	9.8	**1.9**	−11.8	5.8	0.3	**42.3**	5.0	19.2	−1.7
bild.de	169	8.9	1.4	**10.1**	−5.1	14.8	1.1	6.5	1.0	37.9	0.6	21.9	1.0
faz.net	239	8.4	0.9	16.7	1.5	13.4	−0.3	6.7	1.2	36.4	−0.9	18.4	−2.5
spiegel.de	282	3.5	−4.0	**9.9**	−5.3	13.8	0.1	7.1	1.6	41.5	4.2	24.1	3.2
tagesschau.de	285	4.6	−2.9	12.3	−2.9	13.3	−0.4	7.0	1.5	**44.9**	7.6	17.9	−3.0
t-online.de	134	5.2	−2.3	**8.2**	−7.0	15.7	2.0	4.5	−1.0	38.1	0.8	**28.4**	7.5
Total	2,561	7.5		15.2		13.7		5.5		37.3		20.9	

Notes: Cramér's V = 0.1. Differences of more than +/− 5% from the overall average are indicated in bold.

stands out with its high proportion of authoritarian positions, which is more than twice as high as the average of the sample as a whole; and 3) media outlets on the fringes of the political spectrum put forward value frames that correspond to the outlets' particular political profile in the media market. In *taz*, libertarian positions are strongly pronounced, while demarcating positions are more prominent in *Junge Freiheit* than in any other outlet (Table 6).

Thus, the analysis uncovers the preferred political values of each medium, reflecting their 'editorial line,' that is, the active position of the media in political debates. An analysis of three dimensions of value frames is clearly more precise than the positioning on the left–right axis found in previous studies. Value frames indicate in a differentiated manner which normative positions are favored in each medium. Such an analysis of media coverage is also more comprehensive than an analysis of editorials or of individual controversial issues alone.

6. Conclusions: Value Frames as a Key to Media Performance

The analysis of value frames in public discourse provides a tool for assessing to what extent mediated public communication provides users with a basis for evaluating politics as citizens of a liberal democracy. How media communicate value frames is crucial to the meaning that 'interpreting citizens' assign to the mediated portrayals of politics. Media lay the foundation for the orientation of the citizenry regarding their basic understanding of good politics—and who represents them or opposes them.

To the extent that the media present competing value frames for a given area of politics, the media also fulfill their role as providers of a 'marketplace of ideas' to different degrees. Value frames allow a direct classification of the substantive content of plurality. They provide information about the extent of plurality for specific issues and across policy fields. Thus, value frames are suited for dealing with the core dimensions of theories of the public sphere.

Limitations concerning the explanatory power of value frames in characterizing political positions result from shifts in the political lines of conflict. For example, right-wing populist actors link the demand for more participation, which thus far has been defined as a libertarian position on the sociocultural axis of conflict, with law and order positions that mark the opposite pole. Such discursive shifts make it necessary to continuously monitor the applicability of conflict positions and adjust them if necessary. Value frames reflect basic political positions in political statements. Thus, the frames do not include all aspects of political positions (such as pragmatic or efficiency-oriented evaluations). However, the value frames describe a central part of the political discourse that emphasizes the forum function of the media.

In addition to characterizing the media's role as a 'marketplace of ideas,' value frames provide an additional approach for journalism research. The 'editorial line' of media outlets can be characterized more pre-

cisely by their position on the axes of conflict that fundamentally structure the political debate. The position of a medium can also be specified in a more differentiated manner for specific policy areas or sections of an outlet. In this way, the inner heterogeneity and diversity of editorial work are uncovered.

Although the present article is limited to an analysis of media coverage at the level of outlets and topics, value frames can be applied in additional ways. One extension concerns an actor-based coding of value frames. If the positions of specific political actors (individuals or organizations) on a given issue are expressed in an article, the value frames inherent in the respective statements can be attributed to the actor. This allows an analysis of mediated portrayals of political actors and their own positioning in different policy areas. For political parties, such an analysis can be compared to classifications of party positions from political science (Franzmann & Kaiser, 2006). Thus, value frames provide an avenue for studying the so-called 'media-party parallelism' (van Kempen, 2007). This provides insights into the different chances of parties for public resonance, that is, their ability to communicate their normative positions in different media arenas.

Value frames also form a bridging concept for analyzing political milieus in political sociology. Content analyses of value frames provide information about the extent to which the political values typical of a given milieu are represented in public discourse. Furthermore, it can be shown which medium acts as a forum for which specific milieus. Thus, communication studies can contribute to the ongoing debate in political science of a 'crisis of representation' (Linden & Thaa, 2011). The inclusion of milieus in the process of opinion-building depends on the public representation of milieu-specific political values. Therefore, an analysis of media performance through value frames can contribute to an understanding of the role of the media in political integration or the fragmentation of societies. Thus, value frames are useful for dealing with a range of questions related to democratic theory on the role of the media in political processes.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Article

Audience-Based Indicators for News Media Performance: A Conceptual Framework and Findings from Germany

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Abstract
Many attempts to conceptualize and to assess the performance of media systems or single news media outlets focus on the "supply side" of public communication, operationalized as characteristics of the news content and the form of presentation. These characteristics indicate the potential performance of news media; they are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for media performance. In order to assess the actual performance of news media we need to know what kind of audiences they reach, how they fulfil their users' news-related interests and needs, and how they contribute to their users' perceptions of the news environment. In this article, we propose a conceptual framework for the definition of audience-based indicators for news media performance. We apply this framework to data gathered as part of the 2019 Reuters Institute Digital News Survey for Germany. We compare 42 news media, both online and offline, in regard to their reach in different parts of the population, and to their audiences' interest in news and politics, their trust in media, and their perceptions of the overall performance of German news media. The findings underline that news media performance is a multidimensional concept and that there are different ways in which news media can perform. Furthermore, the particular type of media, technically or organizationally, still matters when it comes to audiences' expectations and perceived functions.

1. Introduction

Media performance is a particularly relevant issue today. In regard to media-related changes, the ongoing processes of convergence (Sparviero, Peil, & Balbi, 2017) and deep mediatization (Hepp, 2020) are challenging all media to (re-)define their contribution to public communication and their position within the media environment. In regard to societal changes, recent political and social developments have substantial implications for democratic processes and social cohesion, leading to serious expectations regarding the media—and the extent to which the media fulfil these expectations. The need to evaluate the performance of individual media is particu-

larly urgent for the area of news as it tends to be the key source that people use to keep themselves up-to-date on what is going on in the world and to build their opinion about current political issues.

When it comes to investigating news media performance, research often focuses on the supply side of the communicative process, that is, the content that is offered. By means of content analysis, this study measures a range of indicators, for example, the public relevance of the sampled news, the pluralism of topics and opinions, and the deliberative characteristics of the text (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014; Weiß et al., 2016). However, these indicators only reflect the communicative *potential* offered by the media, a necessary but not a sufficient con-

dition for successful communication. In order to evaluate the degree to which they fulfil their communicative functions and actually "perform," we need to know if there are users who use these media for certain reasons and which effect those media might have.

While there might be much consensus that the users' perspective should be included in the assessment of media performance, there is controversy over the way users can be involved (Hasebrink, 2011). In recent years, several researchers have developed a user-centered perspective on media performance. For instance, in order to explore the often conflicting relationship between normative objectives, journalistic standards and users interests, Urban and Schweiger (2014) investigated the extent to which media users are able to judge news texts in regard to a range of normative criteria. While this approach begins from a normative perspective, Costera Meijer and Bijleveld (2016) adopt a user-centered perspective by investigating what users experience as "valuable journalism."

Current research demonstrates that media performance from an audience perspective can be analyzed on a variety of levels. Some studies refer to users' views of journalism as a profession (e.g., van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014). Others are interested in the perceived performance of the news environment in a specific country (e.g., Arlt, 2019; Jackob et al., 2019). Some researchers set out to measure and compare the performance of different news brands (e.g., Kim, Baek, & Martin, 2010). Finally, there exists a breadth of research that examines the perceived performance of specific pieces of journalism (e.g., Urban & Schweiger, 2014). This article refers to the level of single news media: We aim to develop audience-based indicators for the performance of single news media and their specific contribution to public communication. First, we propose a conceptual framework for the definition of audience-based indicators. Second, based on data accumulated in the 2019 Reuters Institute Digital News Survey, we apply this framework to German news media. Finally, we will discuss the findings in regard to the implications involved in the continuous monitoring of news media performance.

2. Conceptual Framework

As argued above, the assessment of media performance has to go beyond the characteristics of media content that represent their potential performance. In order to grasp the *actual* performance it has to include the perspective of media audiences. We define media performance as the communicative impact of the respective media in regard to normative expectations concerning public communication; it refers to the communicative functions that news media should fulfil as prerequisites of informed opinion building, democratic participation, and social cohesion (McQuail, 1992). Our conceptual framework builds on research on media uses and media effects that distinguishes: a) observable contacts of

users with specific media as analyzed by audience research (Webster, Phalen, & Lichty, 2005); b) users' motivations for selecting specific media as analyzed in line with a uses-and-gratifications approach (Ruggiero, 2000); and c) the impact interactions with these media have, analyzed within the framework of media effects (Potter, 2011). In what follows, for each of these perspectives on audiences—contacts, motivation, impact—we will discuss audience-based indicators that reflect the relevant normative expectations concerning the performance of news media.

In regard to media interactions, theories on media functions within democratic societies emphasize the need for general participation; in the ideal case, every citizen should be informed about issues of public relevance. Thus, from this perspective, the use of news media is a prerequisite for modern democracies (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018). If a news program reaches just a few users, it is unlikely that it has a major communicative impact, thus its performance can be considered as low—even if, according to content analyses, it offers high quality content. Against this background, an important criterion for the performance of news media is the size of its audience. However, reach might be misleading if it is treated as the only indicator. Its main advantages—it is easy to measure, to understand, and to communicate—are necessarily linked with important disadvantages: It is not sensitive to differences between users with different social backgrounds and news-related interests and needs.

In order to compensate these limitations, we refer to normative arguments stressing that we have to go beyond the size of the audience by looking at its "structure," that is, its composition by different social groups (e.g., Morley, 1980). In this respect, we observe a tension between different specifications of normative objectives. Some normative discussions, for example, regarding the remit of public broadcasters, define a balanced representation of all social groups as a benchmark (e.g., Thomass, Moe, & d'Haenens, 2015). In this respect, high media performance refers to the principles of social inclusion and of equal access to information for all parts of society. This criterion is in conflict with professional orientations that stress the fact that communicators should carefully consider who their target groups are in order to be able to tailor content to the interests and needs of these particular groups (e.g., Taneja & Mamoria, 2012). From this perspective, media outlets that successfully reach specific target groups would be expected to perform high. Thus, based on normative considerations in regard to the structure of the audience, we cannot think about media performance as a one-dimensional concept. Instead, there are different ways of gauging high performance: Some media perform highly by reaching a diverse audience, while other media perform highly by fulfilling the particular needs of specific social groups. For the explorative objectives of the study at hand, we decided to choose age as an indicator for the social structure of news audiences. As many studies on news consumption

have shown, younger and older groups differ substantially in the sources they use for news (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Kleis Nielsen, 2019), and public service media are often criticized for not reaching a young audience (Schulz, Levy, & Nielsen, 2019).

Within the overall media and communications environment, news media set out to serve specific functions. Following the uses-and-gratifications approach (e.g., Ruggiero, 2000), we argue that individuals who are very interested in public issues are more likely to use specific news media because they appreciate the experience that these media provide and the gratifications they seek. A news medium that reaches an audience, which is particularly interested in news and uses them quite frequently, seems to offer something that exactly meets these interests—and, therefore, demonstrates a measure of high performance. One might use the term 'news-ness' (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020) to describe this phenomenon: News that succeed in reaching people who are highly interested in news are obviously perceived as news. However, similar to the above argument on audience structure, this indicator can be interpreted in a different way: News that successfully reach those who are interested in news seem to neglect those who are less interested in news and, therefore, contribute to a widening societal gap (e.g., Schulz et al., 2019). Other news, then, might be regarded as performing high, because they succeed in reaching less-interested segments of the population. Once again, we have to face the fact that "performance" is revealed in many different guises.

News are offered to keep people up-to-date on current affairs, to let them know about political issues, to help them understand societal conflicts, and to assist them in building an opinion on relevant issues. So, when it comes to assessing news media performance, we should include measures that indicate the extent to which news media have an impact on their audiences. This argument touches on a highly complex and controversial area of research that is shaped by epistemological and methodological doubts about the measurement of media effects (Potter, 2011). It would go beyond the scope of this study to offer a fully theorized set of indicators to measure the communicative impact of news media. For pragmatic reasons concerning data availability, we propose to make use of indicators included in the Reuters Institute Digital News Survey that measure how respondents perceive the performance of news media in their country.

One concept that stands out as an often researched indicator of the audience's view of news media performance is trust in news (Engelke, Hase, & Wintterlin, 2019; Jackob et al., 2019). One may argue if trust in news, in relation to news use, is rather an independent or a dependent variable—both directions make sense. Nevertheless, in the context at hand, we regard it as an indicator of media performance if the audience of a news medium has a particularly high level of trust in news.

Besides trust, we consider audiences' perceptions of the extent to which the news media in their country are performing well in regard to specific functions. The Reuters Institute Digital News Survey includes indicators for five functions that reflect scholarly discussions (Newman et al., 2019): a) "Watchdog," i.e., the degree to which the news media monitor and scrutinize powerful people and businesses; b) "relevance of topics," i.e., if the topics chosen by the news media feel relevant to users; c) "tone," i.e., if the news media find a balance between negativity and positivity in their description of events; d) "immediacy," i.e., if the news media keep the users up to date about what is going on; and e) "depth," i.e., if the news media help users understand the news of the day.

Figure 1 provides an overview of our conceptual framework with its three perspectives and the respective indicators. Our empirical approach as presented below starts from the assumption that these perspectives are interrelated and that single news media can be characterized by a specific pattern of indicators representing specific grades of media performance.

3. Method

In order to empirically apply the conceptual framework on news media's performance from an audience perspective we draw on data that were collected by the Reuters Institute Digital News Survey. Beginning in 2012, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism has been running an annual survey on news consumption in many countries around the world. The survey in 2019 (Newman et al., 2019) was conducted in 38 countries
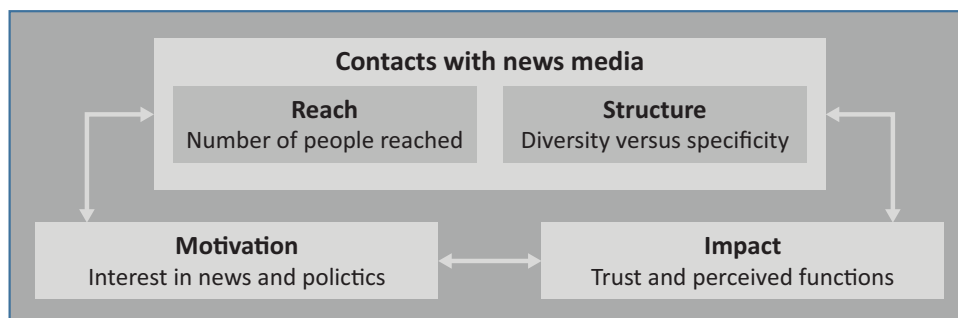

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for audience-based indicators of news media performance.

by YouGov through an online questionnaire over the months of January and February 2019. In each country, sampling was based on and weighted according to nationally representative quotas for age, gender, region, and education. Respondents who said that they had not consumed any news in the past month were filtered out (around 3% across countries). Due to the methodology and the use of online samples, we have to be aware that the results reflect online users who use news at least once a month and who are more oriented to online communication. Our analyses use the German part of the survey that is organized in cooperation with the Leibniz Institute for Media Research | Hans Bredow Institute as a national partner. The German sample includes n = 2,022 respondents.

One of the characteristics of this study that make it particularly fruitful for our research question is that, for each country, it includes information on the use of the most relevant national news outlets representing different types of media. This makes it possible to compare these news media in regard to their media performance. In the German survey, respondents were asked if they have used specific online and offline sources for news in the last week. Most of these sources were specific news brands. In addition, three generic categories were used that reflect the highly regionalized media landscape in Germany: "regional newspapers," "public service radio," and "private radio." Brought together, our analyses can build on data for 42 news brands (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File for a list of these brands).

For each of these brands we analyzed the characteristics of their respective audiences. The basic indicator is the overall reach of the brand; in this case, reach is defined as the percentage of people who said that they have used the news outlet within the last week. Following our conceptual model, the audiences of these brands are then described by indicators for structure, motivation, and impact.

As for structure, we analyzed the reach of each medium in the youngest (18–24 years) and the oldest group (65 years and older). In addition, we calculated the difference between these two groups, with positive values indicating a wider reach among older people, negative values indicating a wider reach among younger people, and values close to zero indicating a similar reach in both groups. Finally, we calculated the mean age of the audience.

As for motivation, we defined the following indicators. First, the mean frequency of news use was calculated based on respondents' claims about how often they access news on a nine-point-scale, from 0 = never to 9 = more than 10 times a day. Second, interest in news was measured by asking "How interested, if at all, would you say you are in news?" with a five-point-scale from 4 = extremely interested to 0 = not at all interested. Third, interest in politics was measured by asking "How interested, if at all, would you say you are in politics?" using the same scale.

As for impact, in this case the perceived performance of news media in Germany, we defined indicators referring to trust in news and to perceived functions of news media. In regard to trust, we used mean values of respondents' level of agreement with two statements: "I think you can trust most news most of the time" and "I think I can trust most of the news I consume most of the time." The five-point-scale had a range from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. In addition, we calculated the difference between these two items: Higher positive values indicate a larger gap between trust in news media the respondents use themselves, and trust in media in general. In regard to perceived functions of news media, we used means of the level of agreement (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) with the following items: "The news media monitor and scrutinize powerful people and businesses" ("watchdog"); "The topics chosen by the news media do not feel relevant to me" (recoded, higher values indicate higher relevance of topics, "relevance"); "The news media often take a too negative view of events" (recoded, higher values indicate higher satisfaction with the tone; "tone"); "The news media keep me up to date about what's going on" ("immediacy"); "The news media help me understand the news of the day" ("depth").

Table A1 lists all these indicators for the 42 news brands. In the first step of our analysis they serve as descriptive indicators for individual media brands' performance. In the second step, in order to identify distinct patterns of news media performance, we ran a hierarchical cluster analysis based on standardized values of these indicators. It is important to note that this methodological approach takes a media-centered perspective: We describe news media by characteristics of their aggregate audiences. From a user-centered perspective, we know that most users use more than one news medium and compose more or less complex news repertoires (Hasebrink, 2017); thus the aggregate audiences as described in our study partly overlap because some users belong to several audiences. However, this does not confine our argument to the idea that single news outlets' performance can be assessed and compared based on characteristics of their respective audiences.

4. Findings

4.1. News Brands' Reach

The key indicator for any kind of research on media audiences is the number of individuals who actually use them. A wide reach indicates that an outlet has a high potential to have a communicative impact. For each of the selected news outlets, Table A1 shows the percentage of people who said they have used it in the last week (column 1). *Tagesschau*, the daily news broadcast provided by the public service broadcaster ARD, has the highest reach (48.2%), followed by the aggregate category of regional newspapers (33.8%) and other tele-

vision news formats. The aggregate categories of regional public and private radio channels reach about one-fifth of the population, respectively. Among the printed news media, the tabloid *BILD* has the widest reach (11.0%), other national newspapers, often considered as the "quality press," reach less than half of this figure. The four major weekly print magazines reach between five to ten percent of the population. In regard to online news sources, the online services provided by a number of magazines (*Spiegel Online*, *Focus Online*), newspapers (*bild.de*), and television broadcasters (*tagesschau.de*, n-tv.de) reach more than one-tenth of the population. In addition, the general platforms of internet service providers (t-online.de, web.de, gmx.de) play a significant role in Germans' news consumption.

4.2. Structure of Audiences

As shown above, some discussions on news media's performance refer to the question whether these brands reach all parts of society or if they are instead targeted to specific groups. In normative terms, this distinction is quite ambivalent since there are good reasons to value both of these objectives. On the one hand, reaching all parts of society corresponds with democratic and pluralist values; it reflects an inclusive communicative function. On the other hand, targeting news to the specific needs and preferences of particular groups can help to better reach these groups and to support them in building their own opinion.

In order to illustrate this argument we selected the age distribution of news brands' audiences as an example. Table A1 presents the reach of the news brands among respondents between 18 and 24 years-old (column 2) and older than 65 years-old (column 3). Column 4 shows the difference between these percentages in terms of how much higher the reach in the group 65 years-old and older is than in the group between 18 and 24 years-old. Column 5 shows the average age of the audiences.

Television news audiences are characterized by a substantially wider reach in the older group than it is in the younger group; thus the average age of their audience is higher than for other news media. A significant exception is *ProSieben Newstime*. In line with this private channel's strategic orientation towards young audiences, its news broadcast has a wider reach in the youngest group. As for radio and print media, the differences between the two groups are rather small. In many cases, online news' reach is higher in the younger group; this is particularly true for online news offered by print media brands. The opposite is true for the news offered by internet service providers that have a wider reach among the older age group.

As previously discussed, it remains debatable whether a balanced reach in different parts of the population is an objective in itself or if it is preferable that news media try to reach specialized audiences in order to fulfil specific needs and preferences. So, one might say that *ARD Tagesschau*, despite its high reach in the total population, fails to reach young audiences—the reach in the oldest group is more than 40 percentage points higher than it is for the youngest group. In this case, this discrepancy between the general reach and the reach among young people can be alleviated by the fact that, within the youngest group, *ARD Tagesschau* still has a wider reach than all other news sources. However, it is worthwhile to consider news brands' ability to reach specific audiences that tend to use less news as a relevant indicator for media performance—beyond the general reach.

4.3. Interest in News and Politics

In this section, we take as our starting point that news are made for people who are interested in current affairs. We can, therefore, regard it as an indicator for news media performance when the people they reach frequently use news and are highly interested in it. However, similar to the discussion in the previous section, one might argue that an even more important indicator of performance is the extent to which these news media are able to reach those audiences who are less interested. In regard to this issue, Table A1 shows three indicators: the average frequency of news use (column 6); the average interest in news (column 7); and the average interest in politics (column 8).

As far as frequency of news is concerned, the first observation is that almost all news brands' audiences use news more often than the overall population (mean = 6.73). This is a logical result of the fact that these audiences are defined based on the statement that they have used a particular news medium. With that in mind, it is rather surprising that the audiences of the three private television stations' news output barely reach the average of the whole population, which means that the news audiences they reach are less likely to use news than the audiences of all other news brands. On the opposite end of this scale, there is a clear finding that users of online news, particularly those originating from print media brands, are the most frequent users.

The second indicator, interest in news (Table A1, column 7), correlates highly with the previous one (r = .75, n = 42, p < .01). Again, audiences of private television news are the least interested, together with regional newspaper *Rheinische Post*, tabloid *BILD*, and one of the internet service providers. What these media seem to have in common is that they are used for reasons other than news. On the opposite side of this scale, we find online news that originate from television broadcasters and print media, and the national newspapers that are regarded as the "quality press."

The third indicator, interest in politics (Table A1, column 8), is also highly correlated with frequency of news use (r = .77, p < .01), and correlates even more strongly with interest in news (p = .89, n = 42, p < .01). The

main observations mentioned above, therefore, hold for this indicator, as well: The audiences of online news that originate from print media and television broadcasters as well as national newspapers are most interested in politics, while the audiences of private television news, tabloids, regional newspapers, and internet service providers are least interested. There is a moderately negative correlation between interest in politics and reach ($r = -.35$, $n = 42$, $p < .05$) which indicates that news brands with larger audiences reach a broad range of people that tend to be less interested in politics, while some more specialized brands with smaller audiences reach those people who are particularly interested.

In view of the low and, with the exception of interest in politics, insignificant correlations between reach and the three indicators discussed in this section, we can conclude that frequency of news use and interest in news and politics represent an independent dimension of news media performance. Some news brands—for example, public television news—perform highly by reaching a large audience, while others—for example, online news provided by print or television organizations—perform highly by serving the expectations of people who are particularly interested in news and politics. In addition, one might argue that some media brands—for example, private television broadcasters or tabloids—demonstrate high performance by reaching those people who are less interested in news and politics. Again, we are confronted with the ambivalence of indicators for media performance: Depending on the exact objective, it may be worthwhile to serve those who have a particular interest in news, or to reach those who, due to a lack of interest in news, would otherwise not consume any news content at all.

4.4. Trust in News

As discussed in the theoretical section of this article, trust in news can be regarded as one potential outcome of using a particular news brand and, as such, indicate a certain level of performance for that brand. With respect to this concept, Table A1 shows findings for trust in news media in general (column 9) and for trust in the media the person actually uses (column 10). In addition, we calculated the difference between the answers to these questions, which indicates the perceived gap between news that are actually used and news in general (column 11). This gap might be regarded as a particularly interesting indicator for news media performance.

Starting with general trust in the news media, the average value of this indicator for the whole sample tends slightly to the positive end of the scale (mean = 3.22). The fact that the general trust of the audiences of most news brands is higher than this average indicates that news users tend to trust more in news. However, there are some audiences below this average: Interestingly, at the lower end of this scale, we find national newspapers (*Handelsblatt*, *Welt*) and magazines (*ZEIT*); on the upper

end of the scale, we observe a mixture of online news from television broadcasters, public television news and regional newspapers. Obviously, trust in the news media that are actually used (Table A1, column 10) is moderately higher (mean = 3.53). This indicator is strongly correlated with general trust ($r = .81$, $n = 42$, $p < .01$), there are, therefore, no substantial differences between the news brands with the highest and the lowest values.

The difference between trust in the media that are actually used and media in general (Table A1, column 11) can be interpreted as the perceived gap between the performance of one's preferred news media and the media that are used by the average population. In the top ranks, we find national newspapers and magazines, online and offline, and online news provided by public television outlets. On the other hand, indicating a low gap between one's preferred media and media in general, there are private television news, online and offline, and, more difficult to interpret, the national newspaper *Tageszeitung*. This indicator is strongly correlated with all three indicators in the previous section, i.e., news frequency ($r = .55$, $n = 42$, $p < .01$), interest in news ($r = .45$, $n = 42$, $p < .01$) and in politics ($r = .51$, $n = 42$, $p < .01$). We can conclude from these data that news media audiences that are more interested in news and politics also tend to perceive a wider gap between media in general and their preferred media.

4.5. Perceived Functions of News Media

For the final step of this analysis, we examine the degree to which audiences of different news brands believe that the media in general fulfil certain journalistic functions: "watchdog" (see Table A1, column 12); "relevance of topics" (column 13); "tone" (column 14); "immediacy" (column 15); and "depth" (column 16). If the audience of a news brand strongly believes that the German news media fulfil these functions, we conclude that this news brand is likely to contribute to this function—or at least to suggest that the media demonstrate a high level of performance on these terms.

Across the news brands, "watchdog," "immediacy," and "depth" are highly correlated ($r > .65$, $n = 42$, $p < .01$). These items also have a strong correlation with trust in news in general and trust in used news. Consequently, these functions, together with trust in news, represent the core of the perceived performance of the news environment. With regard to the audiences of specific brands, the perception of the "watchdog" function is strongest for audiences of online news from television broadcasters and of television news, while newspaper and magazine readers are most critical in this respect. High "immediacy" is perceived by audiences of online and television news while low "immediacy" is perceived by the readers of some newspapers.

The perception that the topics chosen by the news media feel relevant (Table A1, column 13) is moderately correlated with "immediacy" and "depth" ($r > .39$, $n = 42$,

p < .05). In addition, it is correlated with the overall reach (r = .45, n = 42, p < .01), the frequency of news use (r = .41, n = 42, p < .01), and trust in media used (r = .49, n = 42, p < .01). This pattern indicates that the personal relevance of topics is the function that is most closely linked to the likelihood to use news and to trust these news media. This perception is, therefore, highest among the audiences of news media with a high reach, for instance public service television and radio news and their online affiliates, and some online news provided by magazines (*ZEIT Online* and *Spiegel Online*).

The fifth function "tone" is not correlated with any of the other functions. Overall, the differences between the news brands are rather minor, indicating that this item cannot contribute to a reliable assessment of news media performance.

4.6. Patterns of News Media Performance

The findings presented so far support the assumption discussed in Section 2 that media performance cannot be operationalized as a one-dimensional concept. While some of the proposed indicators are correlated, others are not. Together with the argument that some of these indicators are inherently ambivalent, this observation leads to the question of whether or not we can identify specific patterns of media performance. In order to answer this question we conducted a hierarchical cluster analysis (Ward algorithm based on z-standardized values) on the basis of the indicators presented above. After an inspection of solutions between two and ten clusters with regard to the Euclidian Distance between clusters, and the interpretability in terms of specific media types, we decided to work with the seven clusters solution (Table 1).

In Cluster 1, we find the four news broadcasts that are offered by German public broadcasters and the generic category "regional newspapers." Key characteristics are the very high reach, particularly among older groups resulting in a high difference between the age groups; but even among the youngest group, they reach the second highest value. While news frequency and interest in news and politics are slightly below average, these audiences demonstrate a degree of trust toward news media in general and particularly toward the media they use on a regular basis. In regard to the perceived functions of news media, they have high values in the relevance of topics, immediacy, and depth.

Cluster 2, the largest one, includes private television news (3), the generic category "private radio," the tabloid *BILD*, television news channels (2), and online platforms (3); and the two selected examples for regional public radio and regional newspapers. Their reach is rather high, older groups are better reached than younger groups. As the most evident characteristic, these audiences are least interested in news and politics. Indicators for trust and perceived functions are slightly below the average.

Public radio, online news from magazine news brands (3, except *stern.de*), and the online affiliates of public television news program *Tagesschau* and the national newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* make up Cluster 3. Together, they have the highest reach among the youngest group, while the reach among the oldest group is lower. Frequency of news use is very high, the same is true for trust in the news they use—the high difference between trust in used news compared to trust in media in general indicates a strong belief among these audiences that the media they use are more trustworthy than other media. In addition, similar to Cluster 1, these audiences are more likely to perceive a high relevance of topics and immediacy of news media.

Cluster 4 includes national newspapers (4, except *Tageszeitung*) and the weekly newspaper *ZEIT* together with, perhaps unexpectedly, online news from *N24* and *BILD*. The average reach is rather low, with almost no difference between the youngest and oldest group. The audiences of these news media are very skeptical about news media in general and also about the media they use: they trust them less than any other cluster. This goes along with rather low values regarding the perceived watchdog function, the relevance of topics, and immediacy.

In Cluster 5 we find printed magazines (3), the daily newspaper *Tageszeitung*, and online news from different kinds of media, *n-tv*, *Stern*, and *ZDF Heute*. Their reach is rather low, with no difference between younger and older groups. Their audiences are slightly above average with regard to their interest in news and politics, and they are quite trustful towards media in general and used media. In addition, they are more likely to perceive a watchdog function and immediacy of the news media.

Cluster 6 includes three of the four online newspapers. As for Clusters 4 and 5, the overall reach is rather low; however, they have a clear bias towards younger audiences. Frequency of news use and interest in news and politics are higher than in any other cluster, while trust in news media in general is rather low. For this cluster, we observe the highest difference between trust in used media and in media in general. With regard to the functions of news media, these audiences seem to lack the watchdog function and in depth news coverage that would help audiences to better understand the news of the day.

Cluster 7, the smallest cluster, includes the online news offered by private broadcasters (2). Their reach is very low, particularly among older groups. These audiences are low in terms of frequency of news use and interest in politics, but highest in trust. The difference between trust in used media and media in general is lower than in any other cluster. As for perceived functions, they have the highest values regarding watchdog and tone, and the lowest value regarding relevance of topics.

The seven clusters underline that news media performance has to be conceptualized in a multi-dimensional way: There are different ways for news media to perform.

Table 1. Clusters of news media based on performance indicators.

Cluster	cases	Reach (%)					Motivation (means)			Trust (means)			Perceived functions of news media (means)				
		(1) Total	(2) 18–24 yrs.	(3) 65+ yrs.	(4) Diff. (3)–(2)	(5) Age in yrs.	(6) News frequency	(7) Interest in news	(8) Interest in politics	(9) Media in general	(10) Used media	(11) Diff. (10)–(9)	(12) Watchdog	(13) Relevance of topics	(14) Tone	(15) Immediacy	(16) Depth
1) Public TV and regional newspapers	n = 5	34,0*	16,9*	54,8*	37,9*	54,6*	7,02	3,16	2,83	3,43*	3,69*	0,26	3,27	3,51*	2,89	3,82*	3,52
2) Private TV, private radio, tabloid, regional public radio, *Rheinische Post*, TV news channels, online platforms	n = 12	14,1	8,8	15,0	6,2	49,9	6,91#	3,03#	2,61#	3,27	3,52	0,25	3,17	3,38	2,86	3,72	3,45
3) Public radio, online magazines, *tagesschau.de*, *sz.de*	n = 6	13,9	17,7*	13,2	−4,4#	47,3	7,33*	3,28	3,02	3,33	3,70*	0,37*	3,20	3,54*	2,94	3,83*	3,54
4) National newspapers, *ZEIT*, online: *n24.de*, *bild.de*	n = 7	6,1	6,2	5,4	−0,8	45,2#	7,14	3,26	2,99	3,08#	3,41#	0,33	3,07#	3,32	2,84	3,64#	3,36
5) Magazines (except *ZEIT*), *Tageszeitung*, online: *n-tv.de*, *stern.de*, *heute.de*	n = 7	7,3	7,6	8,5	0,8	48,4	7,13	3,30	3,02	3,35	3,62	0,27	3,34*	3,42	2,79#	3,84*	3,63*
6) Online newspapers (except *sz.de*)	n = 3	6,2	10,1	4,8	−5,4#	45,1#	7,40*	3,46*	3,28*	3,17#	3,59	0,42*	3,05#	3,41	2,97	3,78	3,27#
7) Online private television	n = 2	3,8#	3,5#	2,5#	−1,1	46,0	6,94#	3,20	2,75	3,56*	3,70*	0,15#	3,35*	3,20#	3,01*	3,79	3,42
Total	n = 42	12,9	10,2	15,5	5,2	48,5	7,10	3,20	2,88	3,28	3,58	0,29	3,20	3,41	2,87	3,76	3,47

Notes: Base = 2,022 respondents; * = highest and # = lowest values of the respective indicators. For details regarding the underlying scales, see Table A1 (in the Supplementary File).

While some news media are good at reaching a large audience (e.g., Cluster 1), others manage to inform younger audiences (e.g., Clusters 4 and 6). Some media are good at serving those who are particularly interested in news and politics (e.g., Cluster 6), others successfully reach people who are less interested (e.g., Cluster 2). Some media contribute to the impression that media fulfil a watchdog function (e.g., Clusters 5 and 7), while others contribute to the impression that news media select relevant topics (Clusters 1 and 3). We will discuss the implications of these patterns below.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have proposed a conceptual framework for the definition of audience-based indicators for news media performance that allow for the assessment of individual news providers' contribution to the news environment. This framework includes the overall reach of a news medium, the structure of its audience—in this case illustrated by different age groups—the audiences' motivation to use news, their trust in news media, and its perceived functions. Based on these indicators, we identified different patterns of media performance that reflect the multi-dimensional character of normative expectations.

Before we discuss the findings we have to emphasize a couple of limitations of our approach to conceptualize news media's performance from an audience perspective. First, there is no coherent theoretical approach that can guide the definition of indicators. While we have built the general framework on the basis of conceptual distinctions from audience and reception studies, the selection of specific indicators had to be done in an exploratory way—and within the range of items that have been used by the Reuters Institute Digital News Survey. Second, in this survey, trust and perceived media functions are measured by single items and not by established scales, which might go along with a lack of reliability and validity. Third, we have no data on audiences' direct evaluation of the news media they use; for these reasons we had to use indirect indicators for the perceived performance of the news media in general. And fourth, applying hierarchical cluster analysis is an exploratory process that depends on the news media included in the sample, the set of indicators, and the exact algorithm. It is necessary, therefore, to carry out corresponding analyses for other data sets.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our study can contribute to a more comprehensive and meaningful discourse on news media performance which includes the audience perspective. An initial, and somewhat striking, finding is that the clusters of media performance are largely characterized by specific media types. In most cases, news brands that belong to the same type of medium have been attributed to the same cluster. Furthermore, there does not seem to be very high commonalities between offline and online news offered by

the same company. These observations stress that the distinction between different types of media—with respect to technical and organizational issues—remains relevant in the digital news environment. In this respect, the process of convergence does not level out the established images of news brands and media technologies.

The observed patterns of media performance reflect the fact that there are different ways to contribute to public communication: While traditional television news and regional newspapers perform high by informing large parts of the population, online newspapers' and magazines' contribution relates to the fact that they reach specific groups such as, in this case, young people. Online newspapers best serve the interests of those who are particularly interested in news and politics, while private television and private radio as well as tabloid newspapers and online platforms succeed in disseminating news to those who are less interested. Television audiences perceive the news environment in general as rather trustworthy, readers of national newspapers are most skeptical in this respect. Readers of online newspapers and magazines have much more trust in the media they use than in media in general. Readers of magazines and some online news appreciate the watchdog function, the immediacy, and the depth of news media coverage, while audiences of public radio and television and of online magazines appreciate the relevance of the topics as offered by news media.

In regard to our objective of developing audience-based indicators for media performance, these findings could be considered frustrating, since the performance of media is often intuitively imagined as a one-dimensional scale between "good" and "bad." The reality of public communication is actually much more complex. The fact that we do not find this one-dimensional scale and that there are different ways to perform should not lead to the conclusion that everything that news media do is good. As we have argued above, we define news media performance as communicative impact in regard to normative expectations concerning public communication. As we have argued and as the findings reflect, normative objectives might be ambivalent or at times conflict with each other. It is necessary, therefore, to understand that there are different ways to "perform" and that different kinds of news media contribute to the overall news environment in specific ways.

The proposed conceptual framework for the assessment of audience-based indicators for media performance can serve as a multi-dimensional benchmark for assessments of and public debates on individual news media's performance. For instance, public television and regional newspapers (Cluster 1) might be satisfied with their wide reach and the finding that their audiences think that news media in general succeed in covering relevant topics. At the same time they should consider how to better reach young audiences and to contribute to their audiences' perception that news media fulfil their watchdog function. As another example, we can look at

the largest group of news media including private television and radio, tabloid newspapers, and online platforms (Cluster 2), that reach audiences that are least interested in news and politics. From a normative point of view, the potential argument that they succeed in serving people who are less interested in news only holds if it can be shown that they actually offer reliable news that help their audiences to better understand the world—this means we need to embellish the analysis with information on the actual content.

This leads to future perspectives for our research. We are currently preparing further analyses in the following directions. First, the operationalization of our conceptual framework has been based on the German data collected as part of the Reuters Institute Digital News Survey. This gives us an opportunity to extend the analysis to other national news environments and to compare these environments in regard to the respective patterns of media performance. Second, considering a comprehensive model on media performance, in this article we have excluded the role of content as provided by different news media. The next logical step is to fuse audience data with data from content analyses of the same news media. As part of the collaborative project "Media Performance and Democracy" (https://en.mediaperformance.uni-mainz.de) we are currently working on merging the data presented here with content analyses that have been conducted on the most relevant news media in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland (Weiß et al., 2016). This will allow for an empirical link between normative indicators for the potential performance of single news media and indicators on performance as perceived by their respective audiences. This approach will assist in further developing a continuous monitoring of news media performance in changing news environments. Given the serious challenges that news media currently face, economic pressures especially, political interventions in media freedom, a high degree of media skepticism, and the emergence of so-called "fake news," these kinds of continuous efforts to observe news media's performance will be an important task for future research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Self-Inflicted Deprivation? Quality-as-Sent and Quality-as-Received in German News Media

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Abstract
Both the news media and citizens have been blamed for citizens' lack of political sophistication. Citizens' information source choices can certainly contribute to suboptimal results of opinion formation when citizens' media menus feature few, redundant, or poor-quality outlets. How strongly news consumers' choices affect the quality of information they receive has rarely been investigated, however. The study uses a novel method investigating how content-as-sent translates into content-as-received that is applicable to high-choice information environments. It explores quality-as-sent and quality-as-received in a content analysis that is combined with survey data on news use. This study focuses on 'selection quality' measured in terms of scope and balance of subtopic units, information units, and protagonist statements sent/received. Regarding *quality-as-sent*, the scope of news proves to be lowest in TV news and substantially greater for online news and newspapers; imbalance of coverage varies only moderately between outlets. As for *quality-as-received,* the scope citizens received was only a small fraction of what the news outlets provided in combination or what the highest-quality news outlet provided, but was close to what one average news outlet provided. There was substantial stratification in the extent to which news coverage quality materializes at the recipient level. Scope-as-received grew mainly with using more news, relatively independent of which specific news outlets were used. Imbalance-as-received, however, was a function of the use of specific outlet types and specific outlets rather than the general extent of news use. Using additional news media improved the quality-as-received, invalidating the notion that different news outlets merely provide "more of the same."

Keywords
news bias; news diversity; news journalism; news performance; news quality; news use; online news

1. Introduction

"Enlightened understanding" (Dahl, 1991) is regarded a prerequisite for democracy to work. It means that citizens need to be aware of current political issues, their various facets, the policy alternatives on the table, the reasoning behind them, their possible/likely consequences, and the goals the discourse protagonists pursue. Only thereby can they assess which policy proposals better fit their own interests or the interests of the social group/category they identify with (Dahl, 1991).

Is the bottle half-full or half-empty? It is common sense among political communication scholars that the overall outcomes of opinion formation in democracies could be better—the bottle is certainly not spilling over (Neuman, 1986). Additionally, the stratification of uninformedness (Barabas & Jerit, 2009) along socioeconomic cleavages can go so far that even economically disadvantaged parts of the population oppose redistributive policies (Berinsky, 2002). Even though democracies appear to be relatively resilient against uninformedness of their citizens (Lupia, 1994) and democratic ideals are highly demanding (Zaller, 2003), citizens' motivation for opinion formation can be high and outcomes can be satisfying, under specific conditions, even in socioeconomically disadvantaged strata (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005). Levels and

stratification of political informedness can change, and the factors that influence them can be analyzed.

This study tries to develop and showcase a methodology that can help us analyze where the problem originates and where improvements could start. Scholars have put great effort into (a) analyzing citizen-related factors contributing to uninformedness (Neuman, 1986) and (b) mapping the weaknesses of news coverage (Patterson, 1993). Relatively little effort has been made to look at the link between the two: To what extent does the content the news media provide actually reach citizens—and what part of the picture the media offer is lost in transition? How stratified is this transitional loss between average citizens, the best-informed and the least-informed strata of society? In other words, to what extent is the lack of exposure to political information the consequence of individual media use choices (and thereby an instance of 'self-deprivation')? How much does it lag behind the information provided by the news media taken together, and how does it compare to the information a typical news outlet provides?

This article's primary contribution is to develop a methodology and a paradigm for conducting analyses of how news quality as-sent translates into news quality as-received, and demonstrate its usefulness in a case study set in Germany. This helps assess the extent to which patterns of media use interfere with news performance, and which media contribute to improving or to lowering news performance.

2. Selection Performance for Subtopics, Information and Protagonist Statements

A vast number of dimensions, criteria and indicators for news performance have been developed (e.g., McQuail, 1992; Schatz & Schulz, 1992). This involves criteria such as truth, comprehensibility, or relevance, some of them 'ephemeral' criteria. This study focuses on selection performance/quality, which relates to the widespread criticism by sources and protagonists that the selection and weighting of issues, information or protagonists is inadequate (e.g., Kepplinger & Glaab, 2007; Maier, 2005). In the same vein, audience's trust in the way news media select issues and information are central dimensions of media trust (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). In addition to covering a broad array of criticisms of news performance, studying selection performance allows a coherent operationalization and the construction of ecologically valid benchmarks (see Section 3).

Criticism of the media's selection performance can concern (a) the *volume* of news coverage or news exposure, attesting inadequate (either too small or too large) amounts (Ricchiardi, 2008). Criticism can also concern (b) the *scope* of information and perspectives that are being covered in the media or that citizens are exposed to (Entman, 2004). The concept of 'scope' is closely related to the concept of 'information diversity'. Diversity measures jointly measure (1) what share of a set of mes-

sages is sent or received and (2) how well the distributions of the frequencies of the messages sent or received match an equal distribution (Humprecht & Büchel, 2013). In contrast, this study's analysis of *scope* focuses only on what share of the available information is sent/received at least once, neglecting the equality of the frequency distribution. That means it will not consider it a quality deficit if some information is provided multiple times while another is provided only once. Only information that is completely absent constitutes an information 'gap' indicating lower 'scope'. Finally, criticism can focus on (3) partisan *imbalance*, asking which information and which perspectives are selected, and to what extent one of the sides in the conflict is systematically advantaged or disadvantaged (Entman, 2004; Kepplinger, Brosius, & Staab, 1991).

Consequently, this analysis of 'selection quality' will assess the *volume*, *scope*, and *partisan imbalance* of subtopic units (SUs), information units (IUs) and protagonist statements (PSs) covered by the media and which the recipients were exposed to. A good overview of SUs provides a comprehensive impression of an issue's various aspects and narratives. A good overview of IUs provides the essential facts and arguments needed to evaluate the different policy alternatives. A good overview of PSs allows mapping the essential participants in the debates, which positions and arguments they endorse, and which interests and groups they represent or ally with. Together, these components provide a basis for "enlightened understanding" (Dahl, 1991; see also Geiß, 2015). Even the (im)balance of coverage can be analyzed from a selection quality perspective. I assign an 'instrumentality tag' (instrumental for side A: −1; instrumental for side B: +1; similarly instrumental for any side: 0) to each SU, IU and PS and weight each unit by its tag.

The performance of news content sent and the quality of news content received have rarely been studied in conjunction, despite widespread calls to do so (Helberger, Karppinen, & D'Acunto, 2018; McQuail, 1992; Napoli, 2011; van Cuilenburg & van der Wurff, 2007). The few pioneering studies that exist have not matched content data and survey data in a way that allows a direct comparison of content-as-sent (content analysis data) and content-as-received (survey data); they either asked specifically designed survey questions to assess perceived content-as-received characteristics (van der Wurff, 2011) or calculated diversity based on program/channel/outlet diversity rather than looking at the specific diversity of the content received (Dahlstrom & Scheufele, 2010). This study extends exposure diversity designs by assessing how citizens' habits of media use affect the degree to which the full quality the news media provide is utilized.

3. Standards for Evaluating News Quality-as-Received

Assessments of news quality necessitate a benchmark or standard to measure the performance of news against.

Commonly used standards include: absolute standards (e.g., Humprecht & Büchel, 2013), extra-media standards (Schönhagen & Brosius, 2004), and intra-media standards (e.g., Kepplinger, 1985). Absolute standards define an optimal value/target value that a quality criterion should approach, such as 'perfect balance' of evaluative statements (target value: 0) or 'maximum diversity' (target value: infinity). Such standards have been criticized because perfect balance may be artificial (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004) or because extreme diversity would overstrain attention and processing capacities of users (van Cuilenburg, 1998). Extra-media standards define a target value through media-independent data, like crime statistics time series. For instance, time series of the 'true prevalence' (target value) of murder cases and murder reports in the news should match. Complete proportionality is, however, only desirable to some extent and the value of such analyses is not universal (Rosengren, 1970). Intra-media standards define particular media or sets of media as benchmarks (e.g., highly reputed newspapers, target value) that other media should match as closely as possible.

In the current study, the information the news media supply (news-as-sent) serves as a standard to compare citizens' estimated news exposure (news-as-received) with. This is a specific form of intra-media standard which is suited to test to what extent recipients make use of the news quality the news media provide. It defines the subtopics, information and protagonist mentioned in all relevant media taken together as the 'relevant set'. Within this set, quality is viewed as greater if a larger share of the relevant set of subtopics, information and protagonists is covered (scope) and their valence/instrumentality is more balanced regarding the main conflict cleavage.

4. Hypotheses and Research Questions

This study will explore: (1) the quality of news-as-received among a regional sample of German citizens and (2) the quality of news-as-sent by German media popular among that sample (see Section 5.1 for details). The goal is to systematically compare selection quality in news-as-sent and news-as-received, and assess which mechanisms and which factors contribute to a higher or lower quality of news-as-received. In particular, I am interested in the audience members with the lowest selection quality-as-received. The potential for societal fragmentation (or conversely, the width of the 'commom meeting ground') can also be assessed from a selection quality perspective (Geiß et al., 2018).

4.1. Media Types

As a benchmark for comparison, and closer to traditional analyses of media performance, this study will engage in mapping news quality-as-sent from a selection performance perspective: How does selection performance

(volume, scope, bias) differ between news types and news outlets? Two rough assumptions guide my working hypotheses: (1) At the national level, elite or quality newspapers address politically sophisticated readers (that tend to be more educated and wealthy) with hard news and serious, low-key presentation (in contrast to tabloid newspapers). In the quality newspaper segment, outlets address different segments of the left-right political spectrum who expect that their political ideology is reflected in the newspaper's coverage. 'Quality newspapers' typically have a good reputation and are therefore influential among decision-makers and journalists. They are attributed high importance, despite their limited immediate audience (Kepplinger, 1998). Quality newspapers should provide the greatest amount and diversity of information/speakers, but with substantial imbalance between political camps due to the politicized and partisan audiences they address; and (2) In contrast, TV news and regional newspaper markets in Germany are not partitioned by political ideology but address the widest possible audience by adopting a centrist editorial line. They try to attract and address audiences regardless of their politicization and political ideology. In particular, the volume of political information will be lower to not overstrain the audience; this finds expression in relatively short airtime/little page space allocated to national political issues. Both TV news and regional newspapers should also report in a balanced fashion to not deter potential users with strong ideologies:

> H1: Quality newspapers cover current affairs issues at (a) greater volume, (b) in greater scope and (c) with greater imbalance than regional newspapers and TV news.

Expectations are more ambiguous for online news. Online news are projection surfaces for hopes and fears regarding news quality. Scholars have voiced the apprehension that news coverage online may be less voluminous, less comprehensive and less rigorous, and online news media more strongly than other media provide only "more of the same" (Boczkowski & Santos, 2007; Klinenberg, 2005). Others have stressed continuities between online news and their offline counterparts (Humprecht & Büchel, 2013). Facing these two competing assumptions for online news, I ask:

> RQ1: How does the (a) volume, (b) scope, (c) imbalance in online news sites compare to quality newspapers, regional newspapers, and TV news?

4.2. The Bumpy Transition from News-as-Sent to News-as-Received

The next step is to assess how news quality-as-sent is transmitted to the audience's news quality-as-received. A particular focus is on those whose news quality-as-received is low, which processes lead to deprivation, and

which role individuals' news choices play in producing lower quality-as-received: What quality of information do average citizens receive from the media they actually use compared to the whole set of relevant news media and compared to single news media's performance (in terms of *volume*, *scope*, *bias*)? What about the bottom 25% and the bottom 5% of citizens?

News quality-as-received can only be as high as news quality-as-sent—the latter defines the upper limit. But two major factors should contribute in a systematic way to lowering news quality-as-received compared to news quality-as-sent: News avoidance (Van den Bulck, 2006) and partisan selective exposure (Garrett & Stroud, 2014) are expected to contribute to these problematic outcomes.

4.2.1. News Avoidance

The overall extent of news use intervenes between news content available and received. In its most extreme form, some citizens may intentionally or unintentionally avoid news and not use any current affairs news; others may boycott particular sets of news media; yet others may simply reduce their news exposure to a minimum. These are forms of intentional news avoidance (Van den Bulck, 2006). Intentional news avoidance is more widespread among younger, less educated citizens with lower income (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010), potentially contributing to stratification of political informedness along socioeconomic divides. The share of news avoiders has increased in the last decades, up to around 10% in Germany in 2010 (Elvestad, Blekesaune, & Aalberg, 2014), probably as a result of increased availability of non-news content (Prior, 2007). I therefore expect:

> H2: A high share of citizens (10% or more) practices total news avoidance.

By practicing news avoidance, a sizable part of the citizenry inflict information poverty on themselves by not following any news media. Per this study's methodology this will lead to estimated exposure volume and scope of *zero*.

Depending on how widespread it is, news avoidance may lead to a problematic stratification by itself. Beyond that, I will look at those who do use news media, but rarely. I will explore how much the lower and lowest strata of the citizenry lag behind the average citizens (Barabas & Jerit, 2009).

> RQ2: What news quality (volume, scope) will the 50%/25%/5% of citizens with the lowest scope of exposure receive?

4.2.2. Partisan Selective Exposure

Partisan selective exposure is the outcome of various processes that lead to disproportionate exposure to content that corresponds to one's own ideology, particularly one's political orientation (Garrett & Stroud, 2014). If one's own political orientation affects the choice of outlets one habitually uses, this should result in substantial polarization of exposure as compared to content supplied as a whole. At the outlet level, one would habitually use news outlets one expects to report in line with one's political orientation. Conservative citizens will look for conservative news outlets, liberal citizens will look for liberal news outlets.

> H3: Magnification of imbalance: Average imbalance of exposure is greater than average imbalance in media coverage.

4.3. Fragmentation

There are concerns that societies may experience an erosion of the 'common meeting ground' between citizens. A 'common meeting ground' is a set of common concerns and narratives (SUs), information and arguments (IUs) and relevant actors (PSs) involved in the issue that large parts of the citizenry of a country share (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). However, to assess the risk for fragmentation, scholars lack some basic information: How widespread can we expect particular SUs, IUs and PSs to be in the first place? If news media simply provide "more of the same" (Boczkowski & Santos, 2007), most SUs, IUs and PSs should be very widespread and the common meeting ground would be sizable. If news outlets have grown more fragmented, there should be little overlap in the SUs they cover and the IUs/PSs they present (Geiß, 2015). This study explores the typical size and shape of this common meeting ground in issues that are high on the media and the public agenda.

> RQ3: How large is the common ground of SUs, IUs, and PSs? What share of the subtopic, information, and PS universes reaches at least 25%/50% of the population?

4.4. News Use and Quality-as-Received

After having obtained a better understanding of the severity of self-inflicted information deprivation and the potential extent of fragmentation, I shall focus on predictors of higher or lower selection quality-as-received: To what degree does media use of participants—extent of news use in general, use of specific media types (such as quality newspapers, TV news etc.), and most specifically use of particular news outlets—predict volume, scope and imbalance of SUs, IUs and PSs received?

4.4.1. Volume

All news outlets will cover SUs, IUs and PSs such that simply using more news will boost the volume of expo-

sure (H4). On top of that general effect, using quality newspapers more will boost volume even more due to high volume of political news coverage they provide (H5). There is, however, no reason to assume that specific outlets within each media type should have specific effects on volume of exposure (H6).

4.4.2. Scope

More volume could go along with greater scope as well. But some scholars warn that more exposure may simply mean getting "more of the same" content (Boczkowski & Santos, 2007). Therefore, there is the possibility that simply using more outlets or more outlets of a particular type would not meaningfully extend the scope of exposure, only the volume. However, studies of issue coverage suggest that the overlap between news outlets may be relatively small (Rössler, 2003). In fact, some scholars apprehend that the diversity of issues and information could contribute to societal fragmentation and political polarization (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). This gives rise to the following question:

> RQ4: How do news use in general, news type use, and news outlet use contribute to explaining scope of SU, IU and PS exposure?

4.4.3. Imbalance

There are two widespread ideas regarding imbalance: (1) Editorial lines of news outlets determine the imbalance (Kepplinger et al., 1991) such that individual outlet choices would mainly determine the level of imbalance-as-received; (2) More or less all news media (or at least: the 'mainstream' news media) create a common or consonant 'media reality' by emphasizing the same SUs, IUs and PSs—and neglecting others (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007). This way, individual outlet choice is not important but rather more intense media use would lead to greater imbalance. I will therefore explore:

> RQ5: How do news use in general, news type use, and news outlet use contribute to explaining political imbalance of SU, IU and PS exposure?

5. Method

5.1. Design

The study combines a survey with content analysis data. To keep the list of news outlets to include in the content analysis manageable, I drew a regional survey sample from one metropolitan area in Germany. News outlets were selected if they were used regularly (i.e. once a week or more often) by more than 5% of the survey respondents, leading to a selection of five TV newscasts (Tagesschau [ts], Tagesthemen [tt], Heute [h], Heute Journal [hj], RTL aktuell [rtl]), two online news

sites (Tagesschau.de [td], Spiegel.de [sp]), two regional newspapers (Allgemeine Zeitung [az], Mainzer Rhein-Zeitung [mrz]) and two quality newspapers (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung [faz], Süddeutsche Zeitung [sz]). Both online news outlets were established broadcast or print media brands that emphasize serious political news. Therefore, in online news, we would expect a relatively high volume and scope of coverage in line with the reputation of the news brands of the online news outlets.

The selected issues were Childcare Benefit Debate [Childcare], Breivik Trial [Breivik], and Syrian Civil War [Syria]. They were chosen in an issue monitoring procedure that sought to identify highly salient issues that had most different characteristics, e.g., in terms of being domestic (Childcare), foreign (Breivik) or international (Syria).

5.2. Survey

5.2.1. Sample

The study was designed as a weekly panel survey (computer-assisted telephone interviewing) for reasons not relevant in the current research context, in which the last panel wave available per participant will be treated like a cross-sectional survey. Before the primary field period (wave 1: 23–28 April; wave 2: 30 April–5 May; wave 3: 7–12 May 2012), participants for the panel were recruited in a screening survey (9–21 April 2012) with only few questions on sociodemographics and media use.

The inference population were the adult population of the selected metropolitan region. Landline telephone numbers were generated randomly. 736 persons were successfully contacted and 443 persons volunteered to participate in the main study (AAPOR RR3 = 443/2512 = .176; RR4 = 736/2512 = .293). Overall, the data used here stem from 262 participants, either from wave 2 (Breivik; the issue was dropped after week two because media coverage had declined to almost zero) or 3 (Syria, Childcare).

5.2.2. Measures

The only measures used here were the questions about interviewees' news consumption in general. One set of questions was asked only the first time a participant took part in the main study to compile a list of their relevant set of news outlets; they could name up to two TV newscasts, two newspapers and two online news sites.

Then, the outlets each individual had mentioned as relevant were presented in each wave and individuals were asked to state how often they had used the outlet in the past seven days. The response format was an eight-point scale 0–7 days.

The responses were used in three versions: (1) as responses per outlet (raw data), (2) summed up by media type (quality newspapers: 0–14; regional newspapers: 0–14; TV news: 0–14; online news: 0–14), (3) summed

up to an overall score (0–42, as respondents could not name more than six news outlets overall).

5.3. Content Analysis

5.3.1. Sample

The content analysis stretched over four weeks until the last day of the survey field period (16 April–12 May, 2012). The relevant news stories were those in the eleven news outlets that covered any of the three selected issues (Syria, Childcare, Breivik).

Only salient news stories were considered. This was to ensure that coverage is only considered if a typical user has a decent probability to be exposed to the content. For TV news, the entire newscast was analyzed. Stories in newspapers and online news sites are used more selectively such that only those articles were analyzed that were: (a) published on the front-page, (b) previewed/teased/linked on the front-page or (c) were published in the politics section of regional newspapers as one regional newspaper published no national or international stories on the front-page. The procedure ensures a better comparability of the real-world exposure to content than analyzing all news stories published.

5.3.2. Measures

Before conducting the quantitative analysis, all news stories selected were subjected to a qualitative analysis of:

- The SUs or subnarratives the broader issue consists of. Each topic was subdivided into 14 or 15 SUs or subnarratives ('universe of SUs').
- The IUs the news provide, independent of whether they were provided by the author(s) or by one source or several sources. The list or 'universe of IUs' per issue had either 89 (Childcare, Breivik) or 91 (Syria) entries. Only politically meaningful information was considered; e.g., a report that mentioned the color of a politicians' jacket was dropped if it failed to show how and why this fact was significant. In cases of doubt, the information was included in the list.
- The protagonists whose statements on the issue were included in the news stories, independent of whether it was a direct/indirect quotation or a narration of their statement. To count as a PS, at least one position regarding the issue or at least one argument had to be included in the statement. The list entries mention the protagonist, not the content of their statement because that could vary over time and between outlets and overlap with IUs. The 'universe of PS' encompassed 39 (Breivik), 45 (Syria) or 73 (Childcare) entries.

These lists were included in the coding instructions and the five human coders were instructed to list all SUs, IUs and PSs that were included in each news story. Inter-coder reliability of the coding procedure was based on 176/1076/628 codings (SUs/IUs/PSs) and led to raw agreement scores of .886/.905/.923 and Brennan and Prediger's Kappa values (chance-agreement corrected) of .772/.810/.846, respectively.

5.4. Content/User Linkage Analysis

Combining media use data with content analysis data to arrive at exposure data ('linkage analysis'; Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980) has become increasingly popular in communication research (Schuck, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2015; Geiß, 2019). 'Linkage analysis' involves intricate decision regarding the time window and time envelop of media effects after contact (Geiß, 2019). For the current analysis, these decisions are made very conservatively because I do not want to speculate about media effects but about contact with media content (exposure) per se. Therefore, all content respondents may have had contact with is considered (unlimited time window), and there is no reduced weight for content that has been consumed a long time ago (no forgetting curve). Apart from that, the linkage is done using outlet-specific media use and considers the placement of news stories to weight exposure because better-placed news stories are more likely to be received (Geiß, 2019).

To link content and user data, a contact probability was calculated between each news story and each interviewee, which was used to weight the content data for each individual. Contact probability weight (w) is a product of the time weight, the use weight and the salience weight: $w_{contact} = w_{time} \times w_{use} \times w_{salience}$. Each of the weights ranges between 0 and 1. The time weight is '1' if the news story was published prior to the interview and '0' if it was published after the interview. The use weight reflects how likely it is the respondent has used the specific edition the news story was published in (e.g., when using 2 out of 7 editions per week $w_{use} = 2/7$). The salience weight reflects how likely it is that someone who has used the edition the story was published in would also read/watch the news story (e.g., for a front-page headliner $w_{salience} = 1.0$; for a minor story in the marginal column at the bottom of a less prominent page: $w_{salience} = 0.125$). I collected extensive presentation features from all news stories to give each a specific weight. The weights were derived from eye-tracking studies available (Adam, Quinn, & Edmonds, 2007; Bucher & Schumacher, 2012; Holsanova, Rahm, & Holmqvist, 2006).

5.5. Indicators

This study investigates SU selection, IU selection and PS selection regarding four criteria: Volume, scope, tone and imbalance that the news media provide (as-sent) and that the news consumers are exposed to (as-received) according to the data linking proce-

dure. Volume is indicated by the number of words sent/received. Scope is defined as the share of all available unique units (SUs, IUs, PSs, respectively) sent/received. Tone is defined as the overbalance of instrumental units (SUs, IUs, PSs, respectively) that are instrumental to the political right over those that are instrumental to the political left. Imbalance is based on the tone, but the measure disregards the sign—meaning that it is unimportant whether units instrumental for the left or units instrumental for the right dominate; only the distance to 0 (neutral) counts. Technically, it is defined as the absolute value of the tone.

Figure 1 illustrates how volume, scope, tone and bias are calculated. Volume is defined as how many SUs/IUs/PSs a citizen was exposed to for at least 10 seconds/23 words (which equals 10 seconds of reading at a speed of 140 words per minute); if a unit was received longer than 10 seconds, it was counted several (up to 10) times.

Scope is the share of units that (a) were present at least once in the coverage, and (b) that a citizen was exposed to for at least 10 seconds/23 words; if an SU/IU/PS was sent/received several times, it was counted only once.

Tone is the ratio of the overbalance of exposure to units with right-leaning instrumentality over those with left-leaning instrumentality (nominator) divided by the sum of exposure to all units (demoninator). Negative values indicate a bias towards the left pole, positive values indicate a bias towards the right pole. Imbalance is the absolute value of the tone. Higher values indicate a greater imbalance.

6. Results

6.1. Content-as-Sent Performance

The news-as-sent performance serves as a benchmark for assessing news-as-received quality at the user level (H1 and RQ1).

6.1.1. Volume and Scope

The total number of words published about the three issues was 39111. Quality newspapers published on average 6158 words; an average online news site published 4768 words; an average regional newspaper published 3619 words, and an average TV newscast published 2005 words (Table A1 in the Supplementary File).

What share of the universe of SUs, IUs and PSs were present in the different news media? Quality newspapers and online news sites had the broadest scope. Quality newspapers featured 66%/50%/42% of the SU/IU/PS universe, respectively. Online news sites covered 56%/48%/43% of the SU/IU/PS universe. Regional newspapers (50% SU/32% IU/29% PS) and TV news (56% SU/32% IU/29% PS) were clearly behind regarding IU and PS scope.

Quality newspapers generally outperform regional newspapers and TV newscasts in terms of volume and scope of their coverage. This supports H1a and H1b. Online news sites are closer to the quality newspapers than to TV newscasts or regional newspapers regarding volume and scope of coverage (RQ1).
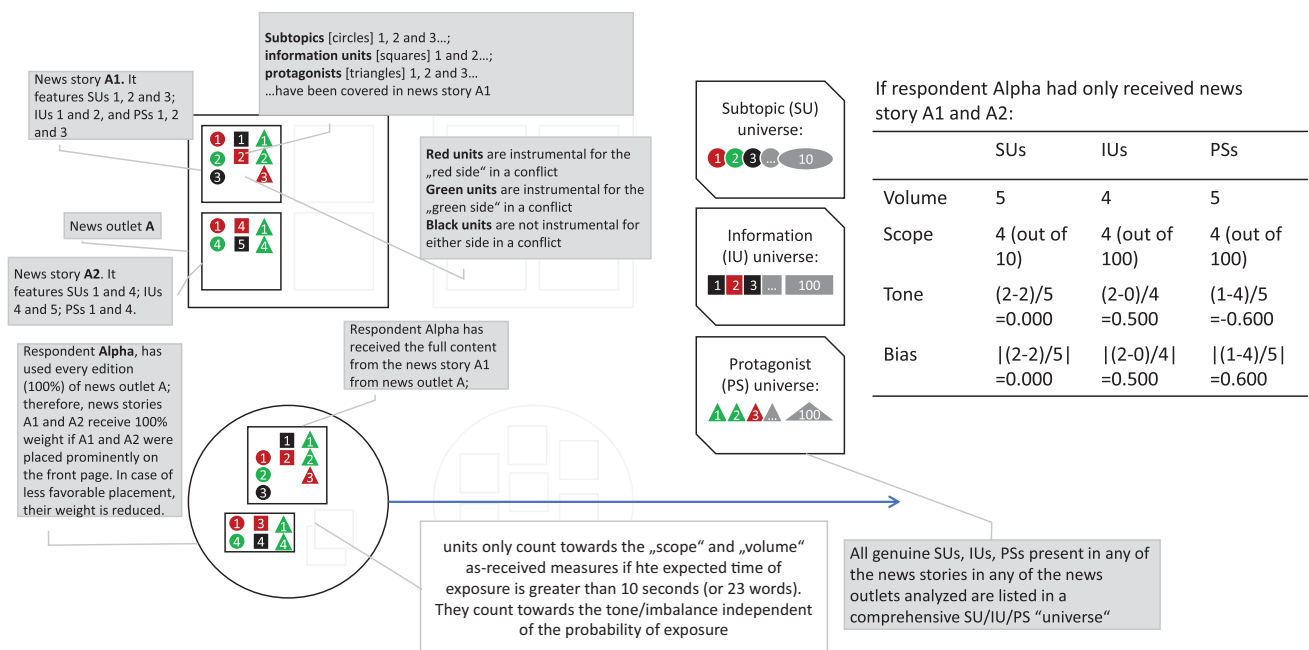

Figure 1. Definitions of quality as-sent and quality as-received measures.

6.1.2. Imbalance

The analysis of imbalance is restricted to the Childcare issue because it was the only classical domestic issue where a clear cleavage between camps (in this case: government vs opposition) emerged (position issue). The other two issues turned out to be valence issues (Stokes, 1963). All media had a significant SU imbalance: They consensually emphasized sub-issues that were instrumental for the opponents of the Childcare benefits (position of the 'left' opposition) (M = −53). However, the extent of this imbalance varied with individual outlets. For instance, conservative quality newspaper FAZ had an imbalance of 32 (tone: −32) whereas the left-leaning quality newspaper SZ had a imbalance of 61 (tone: −61). This means that the overbalance of SUs that were instrumental for the opponents of the Childcare benefit was much more pronounced in SZ than in FAZ. Still, both had an imbalance in the same direction, despite their differing political orientations.

The IU imbalance was much less pronounced (M = −12), and there were both outlets with a rightward and with a leftward imbalance. For instance, Heute Journal gave more weight to IUs that were instrumental for the supporters of the Childcare benefits (+21) while Spiegel.de featured more IUs that were instrumental for its opponents (−26). These tendencies are cum grano salis in line with editorial lines as perceived by MPs and their press officers as surveyed in the 1990s (Kepplinger, 1998).

PS imbalance was more pronounced and pointed into the opposite direction (M = +22): more protagonists came to voice their arguments and points-of-view that were supporters of the Childcare benefits. All outlets exhibited this rightward imbalance, even the 'left-leaning' ones such as SZ.

Media types did not differ substantially in their degree of imbalance, in contrast to H1c.

6.2. Content-as-Received Quality

The news-as-received performance is compared to the benchmark in order to put user-level news quality received relates into perspective—to judge how high or low volume, scope and imbalance received is, and how stratified quality is when likelihood of exposure is the criterion (H2-3 and RQ2-3).

6.2.1. News Avoiders

Respondents who constantly answered that they had not used any of the 11 news media under study was 27%; for them, the data linking procedure produced an assumed volume of exposure of 0. Even when considering other news outlets they had mentioned, 24% of the participants would be counted as news avoiders, which is substantially more than in previous studies (Elvestad et al., 2014). H2 is supported, though the data possibly exaggerate the percentage of news avoiders.

6.2.2. Average Scope

This analysis excludes the 'news avoiders' and only considers the 73% of respondents who had used at least one of the 11 news outlets studied at least once a week. The scope of exposure relative to scope of coverage was strongly contingent on the issue: In the Syria issue, scope in exposure was *below* scope in coverage. The median respondent was exposed to a scope of 40%/21%/20% of the SU/IU/PS universe, whereas the median news outlet covered 59%/37%/37%. In the other two issues, the median respondent's scope was similar to the median news outlet's scope. The median recipient in the Childcare issue was at 54%/35%/32% (Breivik: 53%/40%/28%) and the median outlet at 57%/36%/33% (Breivik: 54%/42%/31%) (Table 1 and Figure 2). So, news-as-received performance relative to the news-as-sent depends on the issue—but news-as-received *can* match the quality of news-as-sent in a single outlet as news consumers often use more than one outlet. Content-as-received performance was good in the two issues with high media salience (Breivik and Childcare) but was relatively poor in the issue with moderate media salience (Syria). As a working hypothesis, media salience of the issue may be an important contingent condition. The lower media salience of and exposure to the Syria issue may reflect its lower geographical proximity and the fact that Syria had already been covered for several months. Obviously, strong emphasis of an issue in the media is necessary such that enough contacts with SUs/IUs/PSs come to happen.

6.2.3. Stratification of Scope

But what about those bottom 5% and bottom 25% with a particularly low scope of exposure (again, not considering the 27% of 'news avoiders')? In the Syria issue, the bottom 25% had contact with 27% of SUs (bottom 5%: 0%), 7% (0%) of IUs and 9% (0%) of PSs. In the Childcare issue, it were 36% (7%) of SUs, 24% (4%) of IUs, and 19% (2%) of PSs. In the Breivik issue, the bottom 25% (bottom 5%) got into contact with 40% (4%) of SUs, 26% (2%) of IUs and 13% (3%) of PSs (Table 1 and Figure 2). This answers RQ2: While the median recipient gets a small but reasonable part of the information the news media provide, the lowest 25% have contact with a substantially lower scope of subtopics, IUs and PSs that already could be precarious. The bottom 5% are in contact with extremely little information such that there is only a marginal difference to the total news avoiders.

6.2.4. Magnification

Imbalance in reception of SUs, IUs and PSs can only be assessed for the Childcare issue. The data impressively contradict the magnification hypothesis H3. The average tonality in the news received is more centrist than the average tonality in the news sent. Rather than extremizing

Table 1. Scope of coverage sent and received.

	Subtopics			Information units			Protagonist statements		
	Syria %	Childcare %	Breivik %	Syria %	Childcare %	Breivik %	Syria %	Childcare %	Breivik %
Sent: Media									
All media	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Best outlet	80	87	87	68	54	76	68	49	69
Median outlet	59	57	54	37	36	42	37	33	31
Poorest outlet	20	33	27	11	19	17	11	19	3
Received: Users (omitting news avoiders)									
lowest 5%	0	7	4	0	4	2	0	2	3
lowest 25%	27	36	40	7	24	26	9	19	13
median	40	54	53	21	35	40	20	32	28
top 25%	53	71	60	29	43	49	31	38	38
top 5%	67	79	76	43	56	67	47	49	52
	(n = 149)	(n = 148)	(n = 154)	(n = 149)	(n = 148)	(n = 154)	(n = 149)	(n = 148)	(n = 154)

Note: News avoiders were omitted in this analysis.

or polarizing the news consumers, news-as-received are slightly skewed towards the middle-of-the-road (Table 2 and Figure 3).

6.2.5. Common Ground versus Fragmentation

This explorative analysis assesses the size of the common meeting ground in terms of SUs, IUs and PSs that reach a certain spread among the respondents. Figure 4 shows the penetration of each SU, IU and PS by issue, illustrating that penetration was highest in the Childcare issue and was higher for SUs than for IUs and PSs. The high share of news avoiders defines the upper limit of penetration at 73%. The share of SUs that reach a penetration of 50% [25%] or more is 36% [64%] (Childcare)/33% [53%] (Breivik)/14% [50%] (Syria). The share of IUs with a penetration of 50% [25%] or more is 17% [42%] (Childcare)/21% [42%] (Breivik)/5% [22%] (Syria). The share of PSs reaching a penetration of 50% [25%] or more is 11% [36%] (Childcare)/8% [23%] (Breivik)/5% [25%] (Syria). This answers RQ3.

6.3. Predicting Content-as-Received from News Use

How does the news-as-received performance react to changes in news outlet use (H4-6 and RQ4-5)? When looking at the models and the media use variables that boost explanatory power, there are two dominant patterns: Volume and scope of SU/IU/PS exposure are mostly affected by the extent of news outlet use while it is relatively unimportant which types of outlets individuals used or which specific outlets they used. This corresponds to H4 and H6 (Figure 5) and answers RQ4. Type-specific and, in particular, outlet-specific use is impor-

tant for explaining SU/IU/PS imbalance (Figure 5). This answers RQ5.

The coefficients of using specific outlets (Figure 6) corroborates these findings: The coefficients for volume of exposure are positive and statistically significant for all outlets (H4 supported) but quality newspapers do not systematically stand out (H5 not supported). Scope of exposure is consistently positively affected by using news outlets, relatively independent of which outlets one chooses (RQ4). Using online news all in all had a reliable positive impact on volume- and scope-as-received – but the effects were not fundamentally different from those of using newspapers or TV news. Interestingly, imbalance of exposure is systematically reduced by some outlets and systematically increased by others; still, the same outlet may increase imbalance on one content dimension (e.g., SU) but reduce imbalance on another (e.g., IU). Again, no specific outlet or media type seems to have a consistent negative effect on quality-as-received.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

7.1. A New Paradigm for Studying News Quality-as-Received: Opportunities, Challenges, Limitations

The greatest strength and at the same time the greatest weakness of the current study and the whole paradigm is its ecological approach—maximizing ecological validity at the cost of making some strong assumptions that cannot be corroborated within this research design (but probably using other research designs). For instance, the design assumes that the SUs, IUs and PSs the news media jointly provide can serve as a benchmark of high scope.
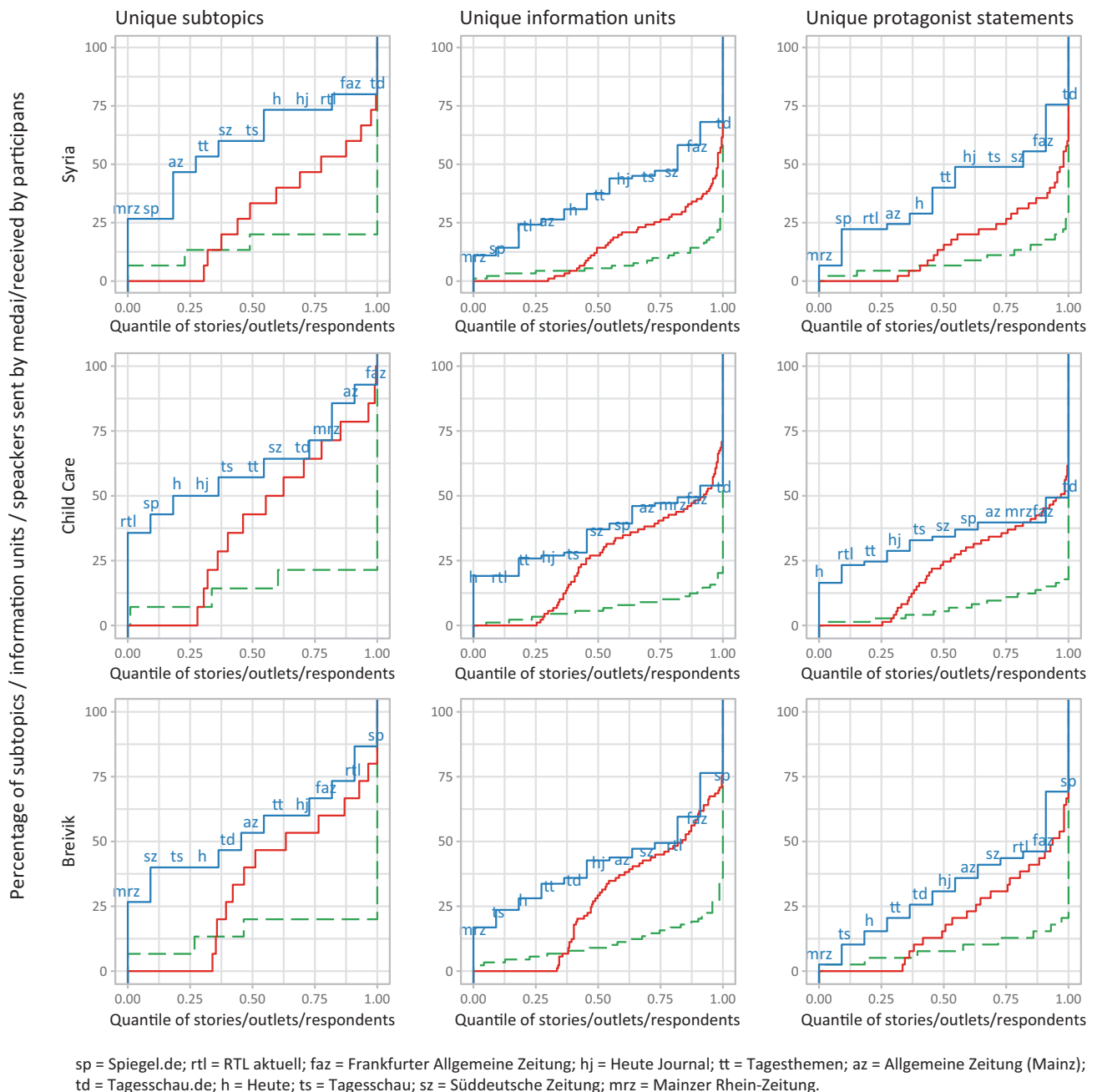
Figure 2. Stratification of scope as-sent (outlets: blue solid, news stories: green dashed line) and scope-as-received (red solid line).

sp = Spiegel.de; rtl = RTL aktuell; faz = Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung; hj = Heute Journal; tt = Tagesthemen; az = Allgemeine Zeitung (Mainz); td = Tagesschau.de; h = Heute; ts = Tagesschau; sz = Süddeutsche Zeitung; mrz = Mainzer Rhein-Zeitung.

This benchmark could include irrelevant SUs, IUs, or PSs or overlook important SUs, IUs or PSs. This is of particular importance from a framing perspective, where the omission of potentially relevant perspectives and information is one key element in the construction of frames (Entman, 2004).

There is also an element of subjectivity in assigning 'instrumentality tags' to the SUs, IUs and PSs: while many of these decisions are clear-cut, there are certainly some information elements and protagonists classified as 'pro' or 'anti' 'Childcare benefits' here that could also be classified as 'ambivalent' or 'neutral', and vice-versa. Still, the procedure of simply coding the occurrence of particular

IUs and statements and then tagging them as 'pro' or 'anti' allows much greater transparency then simply letting coders make the decisions about 'tone'.

The great effort necessary to collect such data imposes additional limitations regarding the number of issues, the number of news media and the time frame that can be investigated.

Also, upscaling the paradigm to come closer to measuring exactly which news stories an individual had contact with is challenging. In the current study, the data on news consumers' behaviors—even though at the state-of-the-art—is relatively crude: there is only a probability of having used an edition of a news outlet and I as-

Table 2. Imbalance of coverage sent and received.

	Subtopics		Information units		Protagonist statements	
	Tone	Imbalance	Tone	Imbalance	Tone	Imbalance
Sent: Media						
Leftmost outlet	−75	75	−32	32	0	0
Most balanced outlet	−32	32	0	0	0	0
Rightmost outlet	−32	32	24	24	69	69
Average outlet	−53	53	−12	12	22	22
Received: Users						
leftmost 5%	−67	0	−27	0	0	5
leftmost 25%	−27	13	−12	3	11	12
Median	−20	20	−5	6	18	19
rightmost 25%	−13	28	0	13	30	32
rightmost 5%	0	67	5	31	69	80

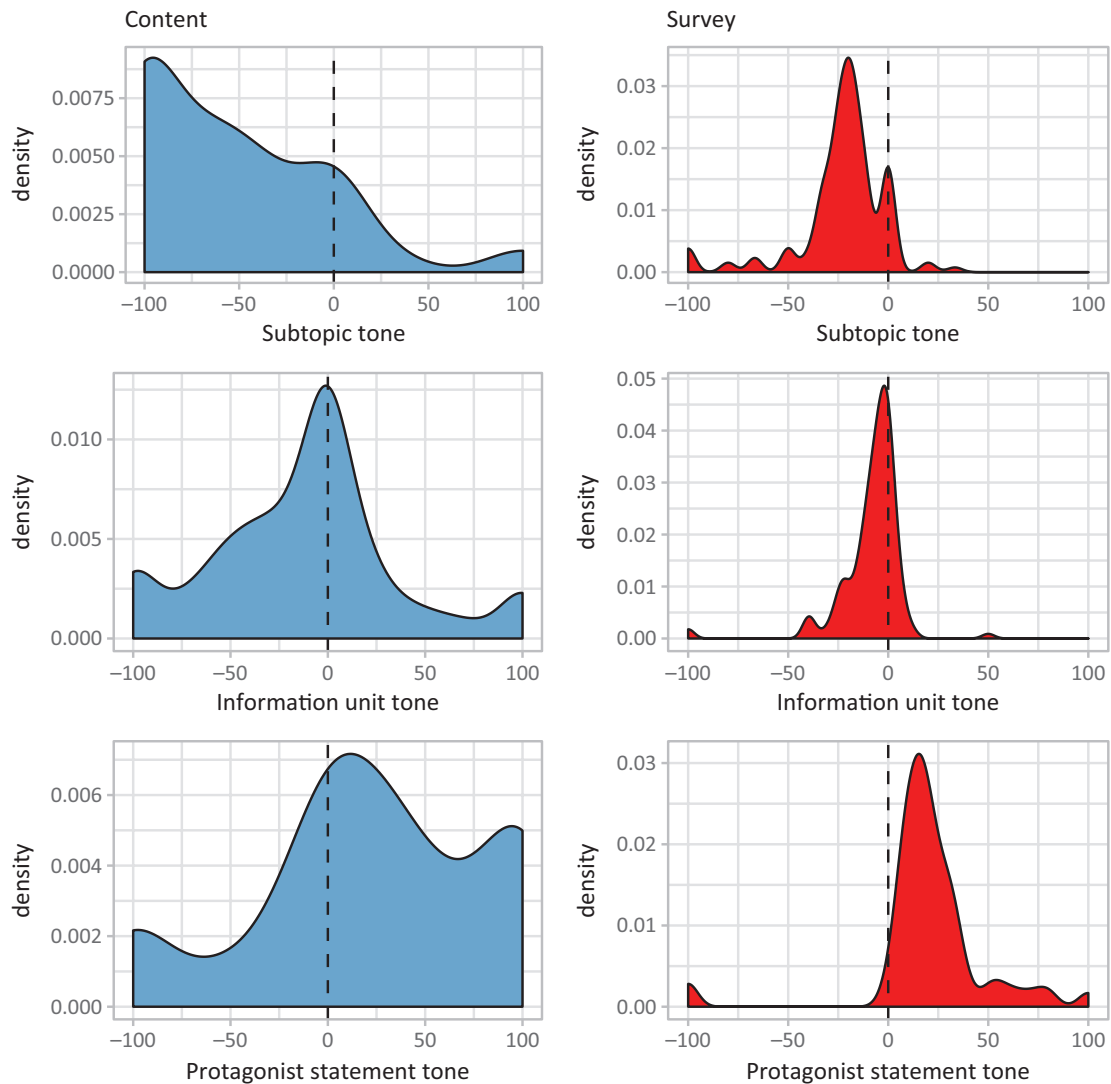Note. News avoiders were omitted in this analysis.

Figure 3. Stratification of tone-as-sent (news stories: left; blue) and tone-as-received (respondents: right; red).
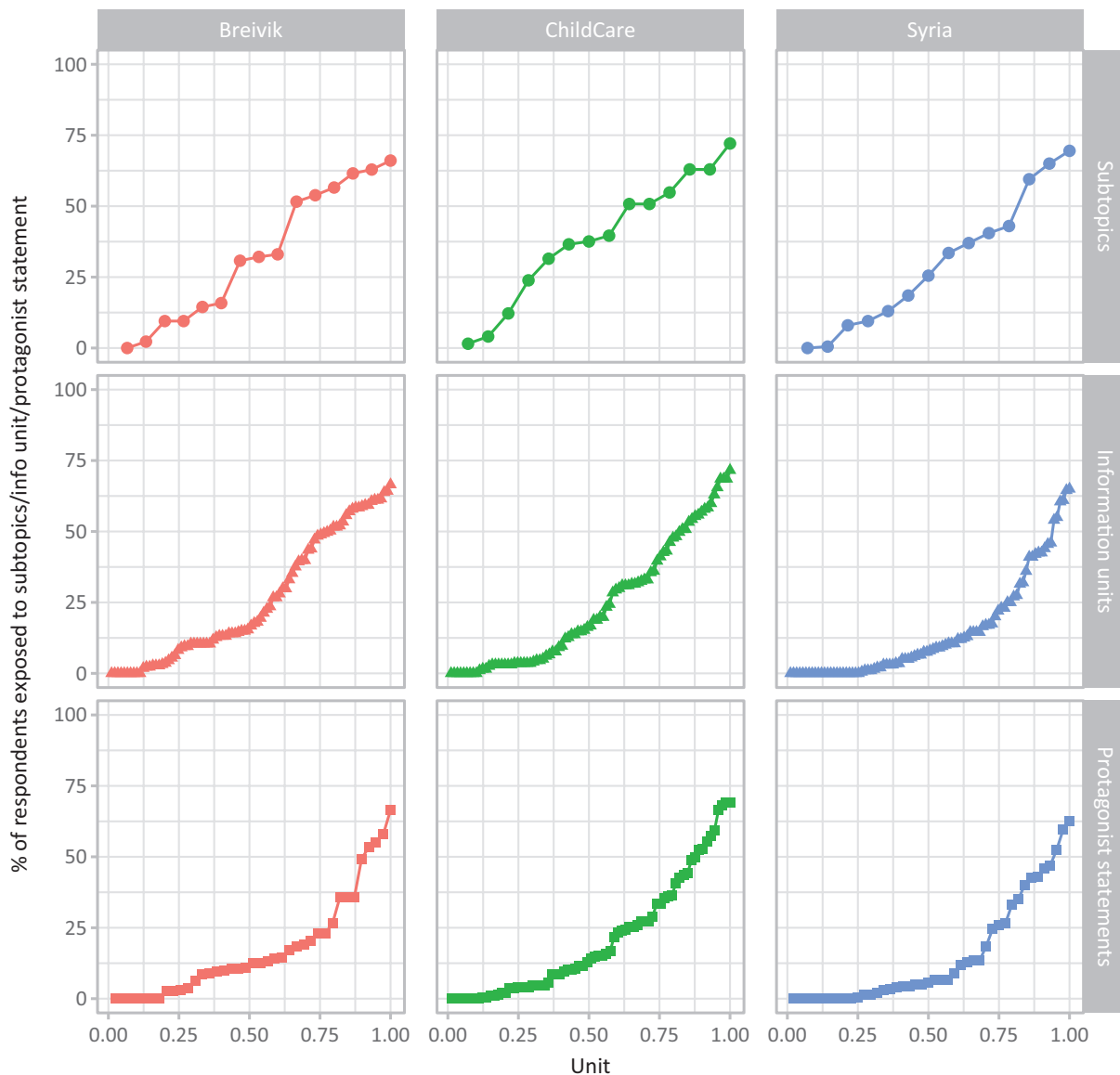
Figure 4. Size of the common meeting ground for subtopics, IUs and PSs (based on the scope measure).

sume that news consumers select news stories according to their salience only. Including richer news outlet and news story choice data (e.g., using copy-test, diary or tracking data) is a promising direction to go in to increase the precision of the exposure estimates. Still, the same paradigm and analysis techniques could be used, with more precise underlying data. Considering exposure through 'information intermediaries' poses an additional challenge.

7.2. Exploratory Insights into the Structures of Political Information Intake

The hypotheses and research questions are of general relevance, but the generalizability of the empirical findings presented here is limited as it is a single-country study of Germany. The situation in Germany, however, should resemble that in other Democratic-Corporatist media systems with strong public service broadcasting to some de-

gree; still, the generalizability of the results needs to be checked by applying similar designs in various contexts or comparative studies.

7.2.1. Volume

Volume of news coverage varied substantially between the issues, with the Childcare debate getting almost twice the coverage as the Syrian Civil War. Of course, the sheer volume does not always count, but more voluminous coverage and exposure was strongly linked with a greater scope of coverage and exposure in the present study.

7.2.2. Scope

All media had considerable 'blind spots' in their coverage, even the quality newspapers. The other news outlets complemented the coverage of even the most information-rich outlets. To be sure, the 'blind spots'
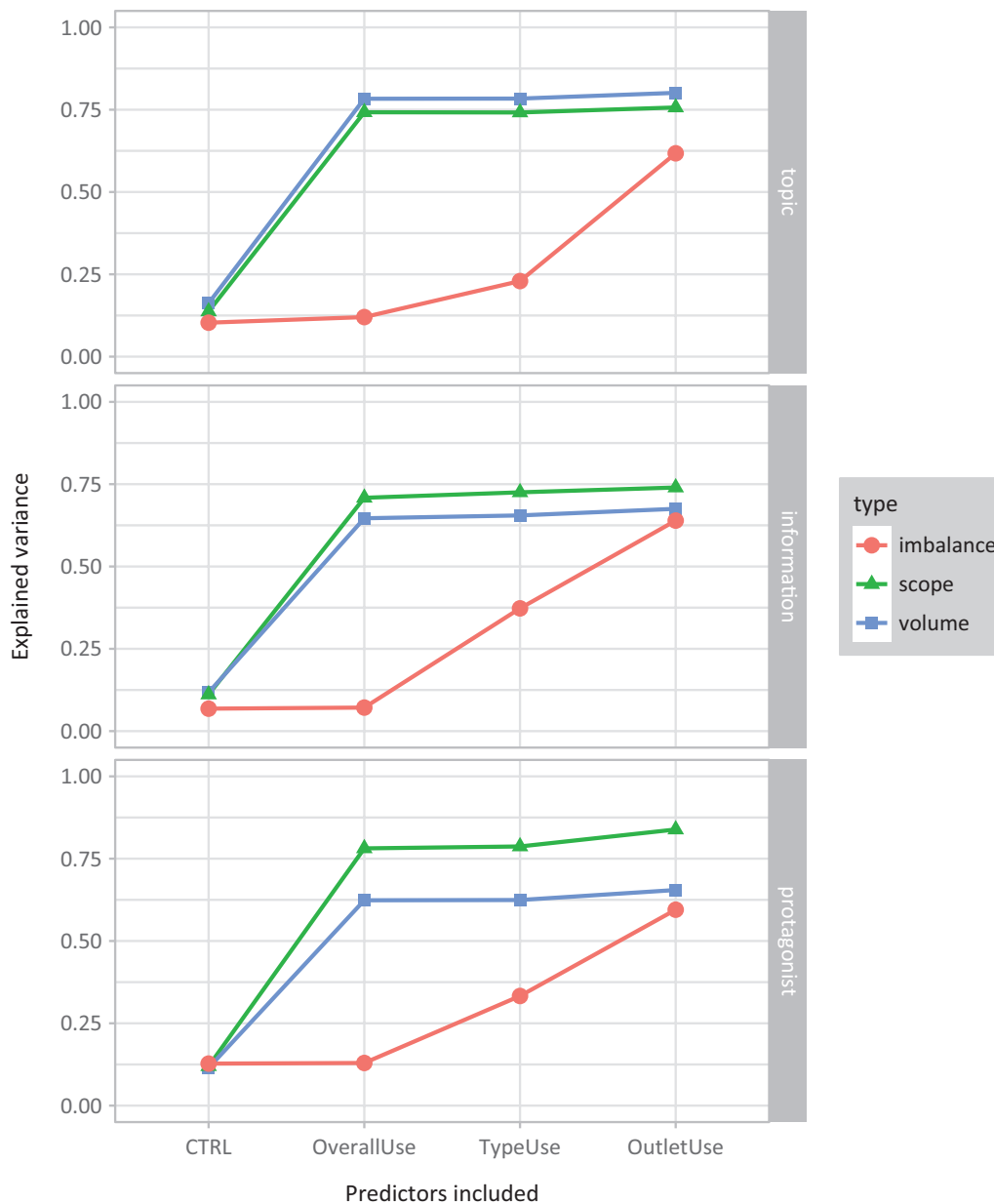
**Figure 5.** Explanatory power of model components for predicting volume, scope and imbalance of exposure.

were considerably smaller in quality newspapers and on-line news sites, compared to regional newspapers and TV news, particularly when viewing information scope and protagonist scope. Still, all media contributed important puzzle pieces to the overall picture of the issues: A qualitative inspection of the SUs, IUs and PSs provided only by single outlets (not reported here) showed that regional newspapers were strong in providing a regional or local 'spin' in the Childcare issue. TV news were relatively strong in covering the Syria Conflict more continuously than the print and online media.

The most clear-cut predictor of a high scope of exposure is simply to use more news. Even a quality newspaper readers would benefit from tuning in to TV news in addition. The news media's coverage of current issues is only mildly repetitive and the information over-lap between different outlets is limited. The idea that using more news would only provide "more of the same" seems unsubstantiated even in intensively covered issues. The way news consumers make use of the news at the moment, the average news consumer's scope is similar to that the average news outlet provides, but much below that of the news outlet with the greatest scope or the scope of all news outlets taken together.

7.2.3. Stratification

The data impressively show that not only news avoiders have severe information gaps. The least-informed 5% came into contact with only a handful of SUs, IUs and PSs. The least-informed 25% (omitting the news avoiders) only came into contact with less than half of the SUs,
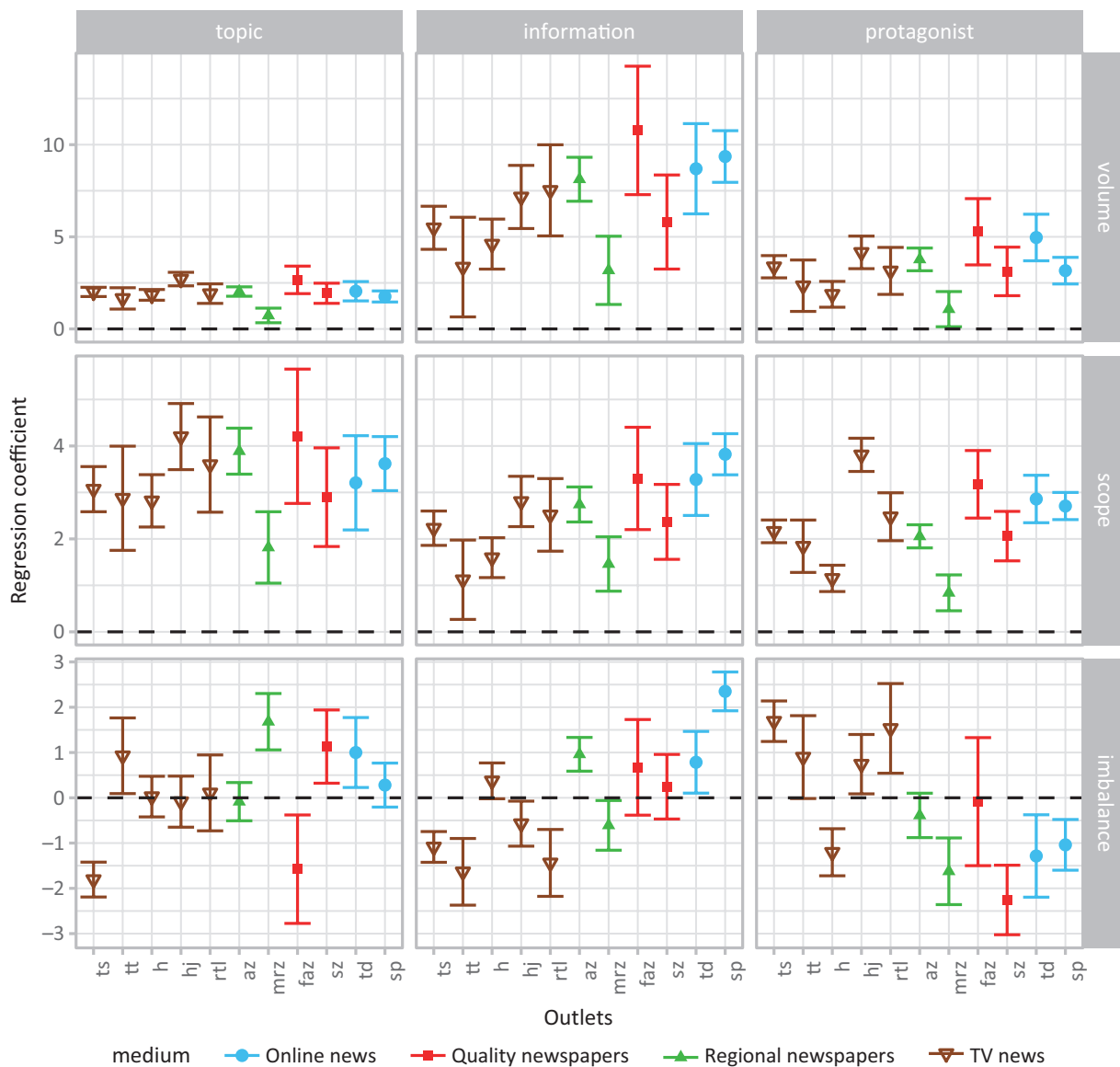
Figure 6. Estimated impact of news outlet use on volume, scope and imbalance of exposure. Table A2 and Figure A1 in the Supplementary File document the analyses in more detail.

roughly a quarter of the IUs, and one fifth of the PSs in the intensely covered issues (Breivik, Childcare). In the less-intensely covered Syria issue, these figures were substantially lower. This gives testimony to great stratification of SU/IU/PS exposure.

7.2.4. Fragmentation

The stratification of exposure quality also puts severe limits on the generation of a 'common meeting ground'— even when issues are in the focus of public and media attention. In the Syria issue, only 14% of SUs, 5% of IUs and 5% of PSs can be assumed to reach more than half the citizenry through the media they use. The share of SUs, IUs and PSs with a 50% penetration was somewhat

higher in the other two issues, but still meagre. Though contact with SUs/IUs/PSs through other channels is possible, collective awareness can at best be assumed for a very small core set of SUs, IUs and PSs.

7.2.5. Imbalance

The analysis of imbalance is limited to a single issue (Childcare debate) as it was the only domestic policy debate. Interestingly, there was great imbalance for SUs and for PSs that were observed across news outlets: All outlets exhibited a 'leftward' imbalance regarding the SUs, and all had a 'rightward' imbalance regarding the PSs. Editorial policies only mildly affected the overall picture. The imbalances translated to the audience, with a

skew towards greater 'balance'. Contrary to expectations, recipients' news outlet preferences did not 'polarize' the content the news provided, also because news outlets did not 'color' the issue in ideological terms. In cases or contexts where coverage is more polarized, partisan selective exposure may play a more significant role. Also, designs that can consider selectivity at the story level rather than at the outlet level only may be better suited to discover patterns of partisan selectivity.

In this study, imbalance in the news coverage seemed to be more an expression of news media logic (Asp, 2014) than product of ideological biases. The dominance of SUs that are instrumental for the 'left' reflects that the opposition successfully set the subtopic agenda. The opposition recognized that the Childcare benefits were unpopular and could trigger a government crisis as the issue divided the three government parties. The government parties had to defend against these criticisms and deal with the coalition crisis. Therefore the most salient SUs were the ones most critical towards the Childcare benefits. In contrast, the dominance of the supporters of the Childcare benefits among the PSs results from their position in power: Supporters of Childcare benefits were in charge and had to respond to criticisms, defending the policy proposal and laying out their rationale. The political opposition decided on the battlefield (SUs), but the government parties had the stronger weapons (PSs), leading to a roughly balanced contest regarding the IUs.

7.2.6. The Broader Picture

As a consequence of their media use choices, many citizens suffer from self-inflicted deprivation – they could get a much better impression of current affairs issues if they made other media use choices. The bottom 5% (to a much lesser degree: the bottom 25%) make media use choices that lead them to miss even most of the core information concerning the heavily covered issues I investigated. News avoiders and the bottom 5% get exposed to virtually zero information in all issues. Whether the bottom 25% can also be regarded as 'information-deprived' depends on the issue-at-hand: in the Syria issue, even the bottom 25% received SUs, IUs and PSs with very low scope; in the Breivik and Child Care issues, the bottom 25% received at least a solid core set of SUs, IUs and PSs. This full and partial self-inflicted deprivation is, most likely, also the major cause for the limited size of the 'common meeting ground' in terms of shared SUs, IUs and PSs.

But is it the sheer (low) amount of news use or is it the (poor) choice of specific outlet types or outlets that causes deprivation in terms of low volume and low scope of exposure? This study indicates that the major factor is simply that individuals use too little news in general. Rarely using news causes low volume and low scope of exposure, relatively independent of which specific news outlet one chooses to use or not use.

This analysis has illustrated how the quality of news-as-sent and news-as-received can be compared, and that the ensuing results are meaningful for analyzing public discourse. The distinction between news-as-sent and news-as-received has proven anything but trivial, but fruitful. Broader application of this analytical framework will contribute to our understanding of how information use affects public opinion formation against the background of public discourse.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

News Media Performance Evaluated by National Audiences: How Media Environments and User Preferences Matter

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Abstract

Media fragmentation and polarization have contributed to blurring the lines between professional and non-professional journalism. Internationally, more fragmented-polarized media environments are often associated with the emergence of non-professional news providers, the weakening of journalistic standards, and the segmentation of audiences along ideological leanings. Furthermore, these environments are home to partisan and alternative news media outlets, some of which try to actively undermine the credibility of traditional mainstream media in their reporting. By following an audience-centric approach, this study investigates the consequences of more fragmented-polarized media environments and consumption habits on users' perceptions of news media performance. We use online-survey data from five countries that differ in the extent of fragmentation and polarization in the media environment (CH = 1,859, DK = 2,667, IT = 2,121, PL = 2,536, US = 3,493). We find that perceptions of high news media performance are more likely to be expressed by citizens from less fragmented-polarized media environments. Positive perceptions of news media performance are also stronger among users of traditional media, and those who inform themselves in a more attitude-congruent manner. By contrast, citizens from more fragmented-polarized media environments and users of alternative news media tend to express less satisfaction with news media performance. Based on these results, we argue that perceptions of news media performance among news users are shaped by their individual media choices as well as by the composition of the news media environments that surrounds them.

Keywords

alternative media; audiences; media environment; media performance; news; online media; polarization; traditional media

1. Introduction

When evaluating media content and performance, the perspective of media users plays an ever-increasing role in current multi-platform information environments. Greater opportunities for media audiences to make their voices heard have also meant that audiences are increasingly expressing their opinions about the quality of news and media (e.g., Dohle, 2018).

Both media quality and news media performance research consider the audience perspective as an important research approach (Maurer, 2017). Studies have found that media audiences' views are highly generalizable, and that users apply normative standards similar to those used by journalists and experts to evaluate news media performance (Neuberger, 2014; Urban & Schweiger, 2014). Despite its undoubted relevance, research on audience perceptions and demands for high

quality news journalism is still scarce and scattered. In particular, the antecedents of audiences' media perceptions have rarely been scrutinized.

Using the theory of subjective quality assessment (Wolling, 2009), we argue that both the structure of the media environment and the motivations and behaviors of media users influence audiences' attitudes toward the media. The present study distinguishes itself by focusing on individual and structural conditions and their influence on news media evaluations by audiences. We draw on different theoretical works that highlight the potential role of media fragmentation and polarization in decreasing journalistic quality and fueling audiences' animadversion toward the media as a whole (Mancini, 2013; Tong, 2018).

A second aim of this study is to scrutinize whether certain media use habits at the individual level (traditional, online, alternative news media use, and attitude-congruent exposure) have an impact on people's overall perceptions of the media. According to the media dependency theory, that argues that media usage shapes people's attitudes toward political institutions (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), we expect media use to also explain individual attitudes toward the media as an institution (Gronke & Cook, 2007).

To address both research aims, we conceptualize perceptions of news media performance as a multidimensional construct and test it via an online survey in five countries that differ in the extent of the fragmentation and polarization of their media environments (CH = 1859, DK = 2667, IT = 2121, PL = 2536, US = 3493). Our results are discussed in light of their potential democratic implications in the final section of the article.

2. Media Assessments by the Audience

Within research on news media performance, the perspective of media users plays an ever-increasing role. Peters and Witschge (2015, p. 20) go so far as to postulate "[a]n audience-centred, or at least audience-inclusive, perspective on the (democratic and societal) functions of journalism is crucial if we want theory that is not only internally consistent but also aligns with—and is testable against—people's lived experiences."

New technological developments provide media users with unprecedented possibilities to express their opinions about the quality of news through, for example, reader comments or on social media (Dohle, 2018). These new possibilities put additional pressures on journalistic work, since audiences' negative evaluations of journalists' coverage can impact the public image of the news outlet for which they work (Dohle, 2018). In times of abundant media choices (Prior, 2007) and new technological possibilities to personalize media use (Peters & Schrøder, 2018), favorable audience perceptions are crucial for the economic viability of media brands. In his theory of subjective quality assessment, Wolling (2009) stresses the importance of news outlets fulfilling audi-

ences' quality expectations, since such expectations further determine future use (McQuail, 1992; Tsfati, 2010).

Given this background and contextualization, it follows that the audience perspective on news media performance is a relevant research approach (Maurer, 2017; McQuail, 1992). Nevertheless, only in recent years have audience-driven approaches been adopted more systematically for evaluating news media performance. These studies have shown that media users are well equipped to differentiate quality in news reporting and evaluate whether media content meets specific normative standards. Van der Wurff and Schoenbach (2014) found that many of citizens' expectations on news media performance align with those of experts and journalists, and what they consider main democratic functions of the media, such as journalistic independence. Heider, McCombs, and Poindexter (2005) found that audiences appreciate factual accuracy and unbiased reporting. In a similar vein, Urban and Schweiger (2014) concluded that individuals are able to recognize normative quality criteria in media content, such as impartiality or diversity. Another study on the components of 'valuable journalism' concluded that audience expectations of quality are much higher than journalists suspect, and that these audience expectations can be a helpful measure for news organizations interested in nurturing a growing, satisfied audience (Costera Meijer & Bijleveld, 2016).

Unfortunately, research on audience perceptions of news media performance is still scarce and dispersed. In our opinion, what has received too little attention in the discussion of media evaluations by the public so far is the fact that such assessments are not free from restriction. According to the theory of subjective quality assessment (Wolling, 2009), it is, on the one hand, the external conditions set by the structure of the media environment and, on the other hand, personal characteristics of the users (e.g., their motivations and attitudes) that ultimately influence their media evaluations. These factors of influence place specific demands on research in terms of systematically investigating different media environments and determining the influence of media user personality traits on the evaluation of news media performance in the respective environments.

The present study distinguishes itself by focusing on both individual-level media habits and usage patterns, and key characteristics of the media environment (media fragmentation and polarization) and analyzing their influence on audiences' media evaluations by means of a cross-national survey.

3. The Role of Media Fragmentation and Polarization on News Media Performance Ratings

News media environments have undergone dramatic changes in the last two decades. Two developments are crucial in this regard: news media fragmentation and polarization. With regards to the former, in this study we define media fragmentation as the division of the

news audience into ever-smaller groups, causing individual news outlets to lose audience shares and news users to forfeit a shared frame of reference (Geiß, Magin, Stark, & Jürgens, 2018; Webster, 2005). Others have argued that—in particular with the emergence of online news—the amount of political information (journalistic and non-journalistic) that we see today is unprecedented (e.g., Neuman, Park, & Panek, 2012; van Aelst et al., 2017). Despite the proliferation of news channels, platforms and online outlets, and the across-the-board transition from low- to so-called high-choice media environments (van Aelst et al., 2017), media fragmentation in the online domain seems to have been overestimated, however. There is still a significant share of audience duplication and overlaps between offline and online news consumption (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Weeks, Ksiazek, & Holbert, 2016). Mukerjee, Majó-Vázquez, and González-Bailón (2018) find limited evidence for fragmentation in the online environment, although they identify differences between countries with the US having a seemingly more fragmented online media environment than the UK. Other studies highlight further country differences (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Majó-Vázquez, Nielsen, & González-Bailón, 2019).

In regard to the second factor, media polarization denotes the level of political partisanship and ideological extremity of news outlets in any given news media environment (Fletcher, Cornia, & Nielsen, 2019). Media polarization is a direct consequence of news outlet specialization based on political ideology (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010) in the sense that outlets develop closer ties to certain political actors or ideologies and middle-ground news outlets loose market shares to these more partisan outlets. Numerous studies point to rather strong differences among countries when it comes to alignments between the media and the political system (Fletcher et al., 2019; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). These differences are partly rooted in countries' differing historical paths and political systems and are changing over time. In line with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) original typology of media systems, Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, and Castro Herrero (2014) empirically showed that political parallelism is particularly strong in many Mediterranean countries, and also in certain countries in Eastern Europe (Castro Herrero, Humprecht, Engesser, Brüggemann, & Büchel, 2017). They have also shown that levels of political parallelism serve to differentiate Scandinavian countries from other countries formerly assigned to the original Democratic Corporatist model. Similarly, while former studies attributed low levels of political parallelism to the US (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), Nechushtai (2018) points to the fact that also the US is moving steadily towards the Mediterranean model in terms of a more polarized media system.

Overall, while evidence for both phenomena—media fragmentation and polarization—is mixed and varies across country, with cable TV and the emergence of online media the availability of news media sources have greatly increased (Neuman et al., 2012), and with it the availability of more politically tainted content . As previous studies showed, both phenomena—media polarization and fragmentation—are likely to develop together (Webster, 2005; Yuan, 2008), as with higher media supply news outlets are more likely to slant their reporting to attract specialized audiences (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010) and audiences seek out outlets more closely related to their own political convictions (Stroud, 2011).

Also relevant for the purposes of this study, it has been shown that both phenomena go hand-in-hand with a decline in objective news reporting and a softening of traditional journalistic standards (Mancini, 2013). We therefore argue that the intertwining of media fragmentation and polarization contribute to undermining positive perceptions of news media performance in two ways. First, more fragmented-polarized media environments add to an actual decline of news media performance. Shrinking audience shares increase the economic hardships of news outlets. The loss in financial revenues has tangible consequences for news media performance, such as decreasing topic diversity and impartiality and an orientation toward popularization (Scott, 2005; Umbricht & Esser, 2016). Furthermore, with a multiplication of information sources, audience's tastes play a more crucial role than ever before. Indeed, media polarization arises as a result of news outlets targeting audiences with distinct political preferences (Stroud, 2011). Tong (2018) points out a dilemma: Journalism can only lose in times of political polarization because news outlets either have to abandon the principle of objectivity or endure harsh criticism by, for example, political activists without fighting back. These repeated attacks on their integrity may well damage their reputation in the public eye. Particularly in times of increased political polarization, news outlets seem to follow the strategy of adopting more partisan positions and abandoning the ideal of objectivity in favor of biased reporting (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010). This is relevant for our study since previous research posits that satisfaction with news media performance is in part a reflection of how neutral and objective media is perceived to be (Towner & Lego Munoz, 2016).

Second, more fragmented-polarized media environments contribute to a perceived decline in media quality by facilitating the emergence of both so-called alternative and hyper-partisan news media sources (Ladd, 2011). Hyper-partisan news sources tend to be blatantly opinionated and less professionalized, thereby eroding journalists' traditional values and challenging journalistic legitimacy (Tong, 2018). While alternative news media tend to openly position themselves as the antithesis of the mainstream media, and degrade the mainstream media as lapdogs to the political establishment (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). Thus, a more fragmented-polarized media environment can promote negative perceptions of news media performance in both direct and indirect ways.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that these two processes (trends of media fragmentation and polarization) have not taken place at the same speed and to the same extent across different news media environments (Fletcher et al., 2019; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). Media use research has long neglected the crucial role of information environments in offering varying boundary conditions for individual-level news consumption processes (Boomgaarden & Song, 2019). We account for the close link between micro and macro factors by looking at news users' perceptions of news media performance in information environments that differ in the extent of their media fragmentation and polarization. With reference to the theoretical considerations outlined above, we expect that:

H1: Perceptions of news media performance are more negative among news users in more fragmented-polarized media environments.

4. Media Use Habits on Individuals' Satisfaction with News Media Performance

Drawing on media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), we further argue that the media sources people use and pay attention to crucially explain their political attitudes and, by extension, their loyalties toward and perceptions of the media as a whole (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013; Towner & Lego Munoz, 2016). In the following, we delve into the characteristics of distinct media types and attitude-congruent news-use patterns and present some expectations regarding how individuals' media use shapes their evaluations of news media performance.

4.1. Use of Different Media Types

Previous research has highlighted the importance of traditional, well-established media brands in perceptions of media quality (McDowell, 2011; Urban & Schweiger, 2014). Comparing different traditional and online news formats, Neuberger (2014) showed that news users rate traditional news sources significantly higher in terms of objectivity, independence, and audience orientation. By contrast, audiences do not associate online news sources relying on user-generated content with practices of 'good journalism' (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013). Most importantly, Gil de Zúñiga and Hinsley (2013) provided support for the assumption that using more traditional and professionalized media sources actually leads to higher media trust and more positive perceptions toward the media in general by enhancing people's beliefs that media coverage attains standards of good journalism (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013; see also Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019). Neuberger (2014) also found that social media sources in particular have been linked to more negative evaluations of news media performance. In a similar vein, different

studies found a negative relationship between news-related social media use and satisfaction with news media performance—partially due to uncivil or negative commenting on news stories by social media users (Dohle, 2018).

Greater media skepticism and negativity toward journalism are also associated with the use of more anti-establishment and advocative media sources that label themselves as 'alternative' to the mainstream media (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). Alternative news media outlets tend to present themselves as counter-discursive, counter-hegemonic and antithetic to the mainstream media (Atton, 2015). As outlined earlier, they also challenge journalistic legitimacy by providing a platform for voices not represented in mainstream media coverage and blaming mainstream journalism for their purported negligence in this regard (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019).

Drawing on the media dependency theory, we posit that media users assess the performance of the media in general from the perceived performance of the media types they use. In particular, we expect media users who rely on high-performing media products (such as established news brands) to apply this higher quality assessment in their evaluations of the media in general (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013). Against the backdrop of previous research findings, we hypothesize:

H2: Perceptions of news media performance are more positive among users of traditional news media.

Accordingly, it follows that users of media sources that show lower performance in their content (such as online-only sources and social media) should appraise overall news media performance more negatively. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3: Perceptions of news media performance are more negative among users of online news media.

Due to the specific character of alternative news media as a self-perceived corrective to the media in general (Holt, Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019) and their (overall) less professionalized character (Atton, 2015), we expect their users to perceive the media in an overall more negative light. Consequently, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H4: Perceptions of news media performance are more negative among users of alternative news media.

4.2. Use of Attitude-Congruent Contents

We expect attitude-congruent media use—meaning the use of information that is in line with one's views—to enhance more positive views of news media performance among the public. One reason is that individuals' satisfaction with news media performance is often associated with how neutral and objective media is perceived to be

(Towner & LegoMunoz, 2016). Individuals tend to perceive information as biased when it does not support their position, and as balanced when the information aligns with their views (Gunther, Edgerly, Akin, & Broesch, 2012). Previous research has also shown that individuals who use attitude-congruent information further evaluate this information be to of higher quality (Greitemeyer & Schulz-Hardt, 2003) and attribute greater 'news-ness' to congenial rather than uncongenial sources (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020). We therefore hypothesize that:

> H5: Perceptions of news media performance are more positive among users who inform themselves more attitude-congruently.

5. Operationalizing Perceptions of News Media Performance

Media performance can be understood as an indicator of how well media is serving the public interest (McQuail, 1992). While McQuail (1992) refers to the overall media, he especially highlights the important role played by news media to contribute to an informed public. Different operationalizations of news media performance using various empirical dimensions have been put forth from multiple disciplines. Stemming from an audience-driven perspective, we measure individuals' perceptions of news media performance across four of those dimensions, which we label 'diversity,' 'representation,' 'objectivity,' and 'journalistic independence.' Our approach is informed by three strands of literature, namely (a) media policy and institutionalist perspectives focusing on democratic functions of the media (McQuail, 1992; Tuchman, 1980), (b) empirical studies that extend their theorizing with surveys and experimental research using audience perceptions of news media (Heider et al., 2005; Neuberger, 2014; Urban & Schweiger, 2014), and (c) surveys from journalists capturing their dictates and professional norms when covering news (Hanitzsch & Berganza, 2012).

First, research in the domain of media policy has investigated media 'diversity' by scrutinizing "the variety or breadth of media content available to media consumers, with higher consumer welfare provided by high diversity" (Rössler, 2007, p. 467). From a normative standpoint, media diversity serves to indicate how well media functions as a marketplace of ideas that represents all relevant issues and voices within a society (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014). A diverse media environment enables citizens to be attuned to different opinions and reevaluate their own (Napoli, 2011). Research has mainly looked at two components of media diversity: source and content diversity. While source diversity deals with the presence of different types of media outlets within a particular media market, content diversity specifically considers whether different topics are discussed in the news or whether different viewpoints are presented (Napoli, 2011).

Second, news media 'representation' indicates an orientation toward the audience and a consideration of their concerns and opinions in news coverage. News media representation accounts for the representation function of the media and its ability to convey the publics' opinions to those in power (Curran, 2005). Van der Wurff and Schoenbach (2014) have shown that news users perceive journalism to be performing well when reporting on issues and events close to their everyday life. Feeling involved in news making is particularly important in times of increased news choices where audience preferences matter more in guiding choices (Prior, 2007). While inclusion of the audience can vary in its degree (Peters & Witschge, 2015), we argue that a minimal understanding of representation entails depiction of issues and opinions members of the audience hold important (Neuberger, 2014), as well as the availability of news outlets that represent their views (Costera Meijer & Bijleveld, 2016). In McQuail's (1992) theoretical model, representation or representativeness is part of media diversity. In our analysis, representation of the audience emerges as an independent factor (see results section).

Third, 'objectivity' refers to the journalistic norm of depicting reality as faithfully and accurately as possible. Journalists who follow this standard report on events without being influenced by their own opinions or interests (Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1980). In countries with long-standing traditions of objective news reporting, the public agenda is less restricted to those more divisive issues of the day, and more concerned with the most societally relevant and consequential policy issues and actors, thereby contributing to political institutions that are high functioning and responsive. Scholars have agreed on certain key features that characterize objectivity as a defining character of media that is performing well. According to Westerståhl (1983), objectivity in news reporting contains four components: truthful reporting, relevance, balance, and a neutral presentation of facts. Following Schudson (2001), objectivity is synonymous with factual, unemotional, and impartial reporting.

Finally, 'journalistic independence' is another key cornerstone of any healthy democracy and is inherent in the notion of press freedom. Following McQuail (1992), independent journalists render political elites accountable and act as a watchdog of those in power. They are free from political and economic interference and refrain from expressing any partisan affiliations (Hanitzsch & Berganza, 2012). Journalistic independence is therefore strongly intertwined with the other three dimensions of media performance (diversity, representation, and objectivity) outlined above. Absence of government interference ensures diverse reporting, allows media to voice citizens' demands, and serve as a free intermediary between ordinary citizens and those in power (Curran, 2005). Through the adherence to professional standards such as the objectivity principle, the media further establishes its legitimacy as an independent institution (Tong, 2018).

6. Method

As argued above, we anticipate that media environments are important factors that shape citizens' perceptions of news media performance. In the following section, we therefore describe our selection of countries before turning to the data description and measures used to test our hypotheses.

As a first set of countries, we identified Italy, Poland, and the US. These three countries have relatively large and highly commercialized media markets. Public service media either plays a peripheral role (US) or is highly tainted by political interference (Italy and Poland; Esser et al., 2012; Newman et al., 2019). Alternative and partisan news sources are strong in all three cases (Mancini, 2013; Mocek, 2019; Nechushtai, 2018). Media environments in the second set of countries—Denmark and Switzerland—share many commonalities: Their markets are small in size, and are characterized by a high distribution of catch-all media with little partisan leanings (Marquis, Schaub, & Gerber, 2011; Nord, 2016), and a strong press and public service media sector (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online survey among N = 12,676 news users in five countries (CH = 1,859; DK = 2,667; IT = 2,121; PL = 2,536; US = 3,493) in July 2018. Participants were recruited from an online access panel following a quota procedure regarding sex, age, and education of the individual national population above 18 years of age (CH: M_{age} = 53.5, SD = 14.6, 55% female; DK: M_{age} = 50.3, SD = 14.9, 51.8% female; IT: M_{age} = 47.9, SD = 13.9, 47.2% female; PL: M_{age} = 42.7, SD = 14.2, 51.8% female; US: M_{age} = 50.5, SD = 14.5, 51.3% female).

6.1. Measures

6.1.1. Perceived News Media Performance

We asked news users to rate several statements about their respective media environments on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Via confirmatory factor analysis, we identified four indicators corresponding to the four dimensions of media performance outlined above—diversity, objectivity, representation, and journalistic independence (see the following section for a step-by-step description of this analysis). Table 1 shows item wordings of all perceived news media performance indicators with their respective reliability scores. All four indicators were combined into a mean-score index to evaluate perceived news media performance (M = 3.03; SD = .80; Cronbach's α = .73).

6.1.2. Media Fragmentation and Polarization

To test the effect of varying degrees of fragmentation and polarization in each media environment, we constructed a combined index with five indicators (media fragmentation: news media market size, shared news, share of public service broadcaster; media polarization: political parallelism and audience polarization—for details on the respective indicators see the Supplementary File). For each indicator, we ranked the five media environments according to their values. Subsequently, we calculated a mean score index of the ranks of the five indicators. Ranks have been inverted so that higher values mean, for example, bigger active news user markets, less shared news, and smaller public service broadcaster audience share. This way, higher numbers stand for higher lev-

Table 1. Item wording of media performance indicators.

Item	Wording	M	SD	Cronbach's α/ Spearman-Brown ρ
div1	Compared with other countries, the media in [country] are very diverse			
div2	Media in [country] handle a lot of different topics	3.37	.94	.74
div3	Media in [country] take great care in examining political issues from different sides			
rep1	In [country], a large selection of media is available to me that represent political views that are similar to my own			
rep2	I have the feeling that my own opinion is represented often in the media in [country]	3.15	.99	.74
jouin1	The media in [country] are influenced by political elites [inverted]			
jouin2	The media in [country] are full of partisan statements [inverted]	2.22	.95	.75
obj1	The media in [country] report impartially			
obj2	The media in [country] report without errors			
obj3	Media in [country] always clearly differentiate between news and opinions	2.79	.79	.71
obj4	Media in [country] rely on arguments instead of emotions			

els of media fragmentation and polarization (CH = 1.42; DK = 1.42; PL = 3.42; IT = 4.09; US = 4.5).

6.1.3. Media Type Use

Respondents' use of different media types was assessed through a dichotomous variable. Participants were asked whether they used a particular type of media source (1 = yes, 0 = no). They could select from four different media types (TV, newspaper, online-only, and social media). Participants could choose multiple media sources (76.8% of participants used TV, 52.5% newspapers, 37.8% social media, and 36.3% online-only).

To measure alternative news media use, we asked participants whether they seek out alternative sources of information to contrast mainstream news reporting in order to receive a more all-encompassing version of events on a 4-point scale (1 = 'no, not at all,' 2 = 'no, mostly not,' 3 = 'yes, mostly,' 4 = 'yes, definitely'). This operationalization resonates with the most recent definition for alternative news media provided by who characterize alternative news media as correctives to mainstream media. Responses 1 to 2 were then recoded as 0 (49.9%), while responses 3 to 4 were recoded as 1 (50.1%). Exact question wording can be found in the Supplementary File.

6.1.4. Attitude-Congruent Media Exposure

In addition to media source types, we asked participants to indicate which specific news outlets they regularly use and to rate all outlets on a standard 11-point left–right ideological scale (Goldman & Mutz, 2011). We later subtracted the scores for the news outlets from the participants' own left–right self-placement and built a mean-score index (Cronbach's α = .91). This indicator accounts for the overall distance news users perceive between their own attitudes and the perceived political positions advocated by the news media they use independent of participants' own political orientation. The scores were inverted to facilitate interpretation, so that higher numbers indicate high agreement between the political position of the participant and the media sources (s)he uses (M = 7.6, SD = 1.7).

We furthermore controlled for demographics (sex, age, and education), political interest, interest in news, left–right political orientation, and political extremity (for a more detailed description of their operationalization see the Supplementary File).

7. Results

One of the main aims of this article is to compare news media performances evaluations across countries. For this purpose, it is important to ensure that any model used is applicable in different cultural contexts (Davidov, 2009). Before turning to our hypotheses, we therefore tested whether our model with four indicators— diversity, objectivity, representation, and journalistic

independence—measures the underlying construct— news media performance—equally well in all five countries considered.

7.1. Establishing Measurement Invariance for News Media Performance

To verify measurement invariance, we conducted both confirmatory factor analysis and multi-group confirmatory factor analysis. Our assessment of measurement invariance followed four steps: First, we established with the pooled dataset whether the model with four distinct endogenous variables (diversity, objectivity, representation, and journalistic independence) fits the data better than a one-factor solution. Second, we tested whether our proposed model with four factors describes the exogenous variable news media performance equally well across all five country contexts (configural invariance). Last, we tested for metric and scalar invariance across the different country contexts to be able to compare group means.

To test whether the four factors we identified (diversity, representation, objectivity, and journalistic independence) define the outcome variable 'news media performance' more accurately than a one-factor solution, we used AMOS 25.0.0 and calculated a confirmatory factor analysis using maximum likelihood estimation. Compared to the one-factor solution (RMSEA = .121; CFI = .900) the four-factor solution (Figure 1) displays a much better model fit (RMSEA = .055; CFI = .984). Our four-factor model lies within the proposed limits by Hu and Bentler (1999) who suggest a RMSEA $\leq$ .060 and a CFI $\geq$ .950 as a good model fit. We also tested a three-factor model with diversity and representation indicators constituting one factor. This model showed a poorer fit in comparison with the four-factor model (CFI = .902; RMSEA = .63), suggesting that the model put forth by McQuail (1992) needs to be extended by making representation an independent factor aside from the diversity domain.

In a next step, we applied multi-group confirmatory factor analysis by using our five countries as groups to test whether the proposed factor structure is identical across the different subsamples. Table 2 shows that across all five countries, the four-factor model demonstrates a good fit within the proposed boundaries (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Only exception is the RMSEA for Poland, in which RMSEA = .072 slightly exceeds the proposed limits by . Nevertheless, the CFI for our proposed model with the Polish subsample is well above the proposed threshold of CFI $\geq$ .950. This result can be seen as a proof for configural invariance (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998).

In a third step, we looked at metric invariance. Metric invariance ensures that citizens from different countries have an equal understanding of the individual survey items. To test whether our model demonstrates measurement invariance across the five different countries, we restricted the factor loadings between each item
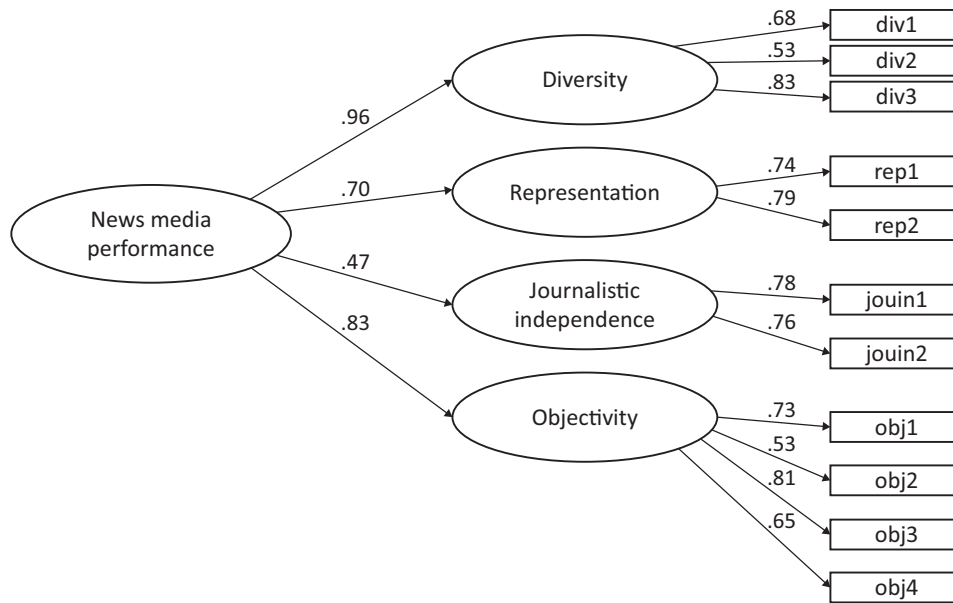
Figure 1. Confirmatory factor analysis with indicators for perceived news media performance.

and the respective construct they are supposed to measure (diversity, objectivity, journalistic independence, and representation). Due to the large sample size, multi-group confirmatory factor analysis is likely to overestimate differences between constraint and unconstraint models (Davidov, 2009). Thus, we relied on Chen's (2007) recommendation to compare RMSEA and CFI between models. An indication of lack of invariance can be detected when the RMSEA rises more than .015 units and the CFI exceeds .010 when comparing between constraint and unconstrained models (Chen, 2007). With a ΔRMSEA = $-$.007 and a ΔCFI = .000, our model demonstrates metric invariance (see Table 2).

Lastly, to measure scalar invariance, we also compared fit indices of our model after additionally constraining the intercepts. Establishing scalar invariance allows us to substantiate multi-group comparisons of factor means, so we can confidently interpret statistically significant differences between group means. Here, the picture is less clear than for the metric invariance: The CFI decreases by .065, nevertheless the RMSEA is .040, well below the conventional threshold of ≤ .060. Additionally,

the value of RMSEA drops by .015, which still lies within the proposed threshold (Chen, 2007). We interpret these results as support that our proposed model also demonstrates scalar invariance.

News media performance evaluation is measurable across countries. Our confirmatory factor analysis shows a good fit for the presumed model. Multi-group confirmatory factor analysis furthermore demonstrates that the presumed model exhibits a good fit within different country contexts, as well as metric and scalar invariance which allows for cross-country comparison (Chen, 2007; Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998).

7.2. Cross-National and Individual Differences in Perceptions of News Media Performance

We first have a closer look into how our dependent variable performs across the five countries considered. For this, we compared the individual countries in their assessment of the four factors constituting news media performance in this study. As we can see in Figure 2, our countries cluster in two distinct groups: On the one hand,

Table 2. Model fit indices for different steps to determine measurement invariance.

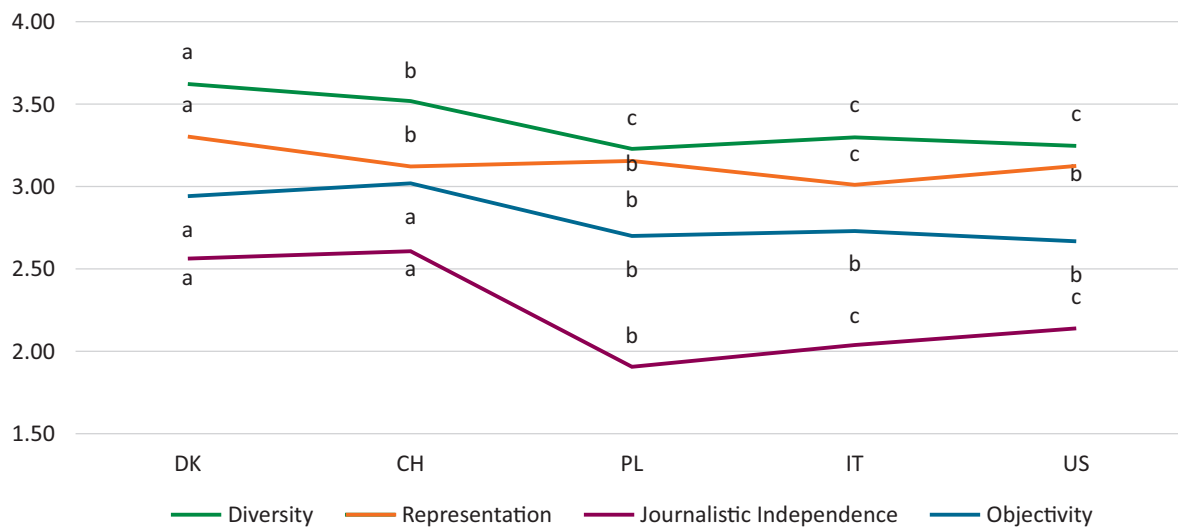| Model	N	Chi2	df	CFI	RMSEA	ΔCFI	ΔRMSEA
Pooled	12,676	473.57	12	.984	.055		
Invariance:							
Configural	12,676	544.87	60	.983	.025		
Metric	12,676	801.311	88	.976	.025	$-$.007	.000
Scalar	12,676	2747.51	132	.911	.040	$-$.065	$-$.015
DK	2,667	116.621	12	.981	.057		
CH	1,859	76.58	12	.981	.054		
IT	2,121	87.778	12	.985	.055		
PL	2,536	169.061	12	.973	.072		
US	3,493	94.828	12	.991	.044		

Figure 2. Countries differences in perceived news media performance by individual indicators. Note: Groups with different identification letters (a, b, c) are significantly different according to Bonferroni-corrected post hoc tests (p < .05).

CH and DK with the most positive evaluations across all four indicators, and on the other hand, PL, IT, and the US with overall lower values on all four indicators. Respondents in PL, IT and US are particularly critical of the performance indicators objectivity and journalistic independence in comparison to news users in DK and CH. The picture looks different for the other two factors, diversity and representation, where country differences are less clear between the two groups. Overall, diversity receives the highest audience ratings across all countries on a 5-point scale (M_{DK} = 3.62; M_{CH} = 3.52; M_{PL} = 3.23; M_{IT} = 3.30; M_{US} = 3.25).

For explaining differences across countries and media use types, we estimated a cluster bootstrapped regression with 1,000 replications (clustered on countries) using the 'bootcov' function in the 'rms: Regression Modeling Strategies' package (Harrell, 2019) in R. This solution allows to account for the nested structure of our data and the small cluster number with only five cases (Huang, 2018).

Results of the regression analysis are summarized in Table 3. H1 stated that news users in more fragmented-polarized countries perceive the media as performing more poorly. This expectation is clearly confirmed. We

Table 3. Cluster bootstrapped regression model predicting media performance.

		B	SE B
	(Constant)	2.725	.091
Controls			
	Sex [baseline male]	.013	.047
	Education	−.042 †	.022
	Age	−.005 *	.002
	Political interest	−.034	.033
	Interest in political news	.073 *	.036
	Political orientation	.004	.016
	Political extremity	.008	.017
Predictors #1 to #5			
	User in more fragmented-polarized media environments	.073 *	.025
Traditional media	User of TV	.105 **	.032
	User of print newspaper	.115 *	.036
Online media	User of online-only news	−.041	.045
	User of social media	−.005	.022
	User of alternative news media	−.341 ***	.063
	User of attitude-congruent media	.116 ***	.014
N		12469	
R^2		.180	
F		670.56 ***	

Notes: Estimates are unstandardized coefficients (B) with standards errors (SE B). *** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, † p < .1 (two-tailed).

find a negative relationship between the level of fragmentation and polarization in the media environment and the evaluation of the news media performance (b = −.073, SE = .025, p < .05). Put differently: The varying levels of fragmentation and polarization are an important factor explaining why citizens in the two country groups rate news performance so differently.

H2 and H3 were concerned with the use of traditional and online media types on perceptions of news media performance. We find that using traditional media, such as TV (b = .105, SE = .032, p < .01) and newspapers (b = .115, SE = .036, p < .05) increase one's likelihood of holding more positive perceptions of news media performance, as hypothesized (H2). The use of online media, by contrast, has no positive influence on the appreciation of news media performance in one's own country. However, the negative relationships we find between the general evaluation of news media performance, on the one hand, and news usage on online-only (b = −.041, SE = .045, p > .05) and social media channels (b = −.005, SE = .022, p > .05), on the other hand, do not reach significance. Therefore H3 is not confirmed. Turning now to H4, we expected use of alternative news media would be detrimental to satisfaction with news media performance, and, indeed, we find a negative relationship between using alternative news media sources and perceiving the media as performing well (b = −.341, SE = .063, p < .001). With regards to our last hypothesis, we find that attitude-congruent media exposure in the everyday media diet has a positive effect on the perception of news media performance (b = .116, SE = .014, p < .001), as anticipated (H5).

8. Conclusion

Audiences' perceptions of how the media performs its societal role are crucial in understanding why citizens use or do not use various news sources. What people think of and expect from their country's news media influences long-term patterns of news use (Tsfati, 2010; Wolling, 2009) and thus the media's ability to contribute to an informed public sphere and engaged citizenship in that country (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). In this article, we acknowledge the importance of the media user's perspective and test whether factors in individual media use and in the media environment shape perceptions of four key dimensions of news media performance (diversity, representation, objectivity, and journalistic independence) among respondents to a cross-national online survey.

Previous studies building on content analysis revealed that new trends brought about by media fragmentation and polarization (rise of less professionalized sources, increased popularization, and anti-establishment discourses) have impacted actual news performance by, for example, undermining diverse and objective news reporting (Benson, Blach-Ørsten, Powers, Willig, & Zambrano, 2012; Umbricht & Esser, 2016). Our

study demonstrates that users' evaluations of news media performance in different media environments come to similar conclusions as studies looking at actual media content. This further underlines the aptness of audience-centered approaches in the assessment of news media performance for future comparative research projects.

Comparing media environments, we find the perception of news media performance differs significantly in two groups of countries with different levels of media fragmentation and polarization. In particular, the higher the level of fragmentation and polarization, the worse the perceived news performance, especially with regard to journalistic independence and objectivity. This clearly applies to Poland, Italy and the US. In the same breath, however, we would like to emphasize that for the other two dimensions of news performance, diversity and representation, we do not see fundamentally different assessments in the two country groups. Perceptions of whether the news media are pluralistic and whether one's own views are represented in the news seem to develop more independently of whether citizens live in more or less fragmented-polarized media environments. This is different for the perception of objectivity (how impartial, factual, neutral, and substantial the news are) and journalistic independence (how unaffected from parties and political powers the news are). Regarding these two factors, citizens in the two country groups (more and less polarized media environments) see clear differences. Our argument that this is linked to varying degrees of national media fragmentation and polarization fits well with Mancini's (2013) line of thought, as objectivity and journalistic independence are more tied to each countries' levels of political interference on the media and varying journalistic standards. By contrast, perceptions of diversity and representation seem to depend less on factors bound to traditional media environments due to increased platformization of the news and global trends in online news consumption (Flew & Waisbord, 2015; Newman et al., 2019).

Our results further show that using traditional media such as TV or newspapers enhance user satisfaction with news media performance. This is particularly comforting as traditional media are still among the most frequently used news sources in most countries (Newman et al., 2019). We find no such effect for online-only news sources and social media use for news. Our findings also reveal that higher levels of attitude-congruent media exposure make for more positive assessments of news media performance. To date, research has shown that users of opinion-congruent information perceive the very same information as high quality (Greitemeyer & Schulz-Hardt, 2003). Our research further shows that this effect can be extended to the evaluation of the news media in general. This finding has important implications. As Goldman and Mutz (2011) have already pointed out, people tend to perceive media sources as 'friendlier' when they are closer to one's own opinion. While citizens who inform themselves attitude-congruently per-

ceive the media they use to be impartial, balanced, and diverse—as Goldman and Mutz elaborate—the information they receive might actually not reflect these characteristics. In the long run, this might increase perceived quality gaps between like-minded and non-like-minded information and make citizens judge non-like-minded information more defensively and critically.

Interestingly, while more attitude-congruent media exposure increases perceptions of the media to perform well, we find the opposite trend for other media sources that similarly depart from journalistic standards of impartiality. The use of alternative news media sources seems to promote people's image that the news media performs poorly. The underlying explanation in this case may not be rooted in spillovers from people's evaluations of their news diets to their evaluations of the media in general. For alternative news media users, another reason may come to the fore: The representation of 'the' media in actual coverage of such alternative news media sources is explicitly negative (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019).

Our study is not without limitations. While our operationalization of perceived news media performance is grounded in a wide range of well-established studies from different communication fields, it is just one of many possibilities. By analyzing other indicators of news media performance (e.g., analytical depth or topicality), one might potentially come to different conclusions. Since the focus of this study lies in identifying differences in news media performance evaluations across countries, we have deliberately opted for an overarching, holistic judgment (similar to Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013), by asking participants to rate performance of the media in their country. This approach, however, leaves room for interpretation on the part of the individual respondent regarding what constitutes news media, which we cannot control conclusively. Nor do we have the means to compare answers to the same question for 'the' media, 'mainstream' media, or the media 'used' by a respondent. Even though recent studies provide evidence that news users have a rather traditional and common view on what is news and what not (Hartley, 2018), particularly in fragmented-polarized media environments, what exactly constitutes news media might differ greatly depending on who is being asked (Daniller, Allen, Tallevi, & Mutz, 2017). Future studies need to investigate this differentiation more closely, however, by using a broader range of fine-grained indicators of perceived news media performance. Relatedly, while our operationalization of alternative news media use relies on recent theoretical approaches characterizing alternative news media as correctives to the mainstream (e.g., Holt et al., 2019), it is not without shortcomings. To our knowledge, our study is the first to actually investigate perceived news media performance among alternative news media users. However, neither our question wording nor our cross-sectional design are able to elucidate whether it is the content of alternative news media or the motives to use them (i.e., higher animadversion toward mainstream media) what erodes overall trust and satisfaction with the media. Similarly, our study only allows us to take a snapshot at country differences in terms of media fragmentation and polarization; a larger country sample and longitudinal data would be needed to observe the extent and implications of these trends in more depth.

Taken together, our findings suggest that both individual use patterns and contextual factors (media fragmentation and polarization) affect people's perceptions of media quality and performance. Whereas media users make inferences from their everyday news diets to the news media in general, they also seem to be able to identify actual across-the-board decreases in journalistic quality in those systems where diverse, objective, representative, and independent media coverage is compromised (i.e., in more fragmented-polarized media environments). More research lies ahead to determine the potential of traditional news media to mitigate negative media perceptions that come with increasingly fragmented-polarized and multi-platform media environments.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Perceptions of Media Performance: Expectation–Evaluation Discrepancies and Their Relationship with Media-Related and Populist Attitudes

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Abstract
Public criticism of professional media is omnipresent in many democratic societies. This debate has often been examined concerning what the audience demands from the media (expectations) or how they evaluate media performance (evaluations). Based on a representative, quota-based online survey of the German population in 2019, this study examines citizens' expectations, evaluations, and the discrepancies between both, as well as their relationship with media trust, socio-political predispositions—particularly populist attitudes—and individual media use in high-choice media environments. Results show that citizens have high expectations of the media which they mainly do not see fulfilled and that expectation–evaluation discrepancies are related to lower media trust in the case of particularly important and/or most noticeably underperformed media functions. Both expectations and evaluations were associated with populist attitudes, but only in the case of anti-elite attitudes in such a way that increased expectations collide with negative media evaluations. For anti-outgroup attitudes, instead, the analyses show a generally negative assessment of journalistic media, both in terms of expectations and evaluations. Media use does only play a minor role.

Issue
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1. Introduction

In many Western democracies, some segments of society have become increasingly disappointed with the performance of the established media. Professional journalistic media are being criticized for disseminating 'fake news,' for being too close to the political and economic elites, and for reporting in a way that substantially diverges from what these citizens perceive as reality (Jackob et al., 2019; Ladd, 2012). These allegations address normative functions that are expected to be fulfilled by journalistic media in democratic societies, such as providing information, serving as a watchdog for society, enabling the constitution of a public forum for the exchange of ideas, or facilitating civic participation and mobilization (e.g., Graber, 2003; Schudson, 2008).

Communication research has only recently started to deal more intensively with the audience perspective on these normative media functions and to investigate, for instance, the extent to which citizens' values are congruent with key normative roles in journalism (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013; Peifer, 2018). This research usually examines what users demand from the media (*expectations*) or how they evaluate the media's actual performance (*evaluations*) but has rarely analyzed both in a comparative way. This leads to the open questions

of whether negative media evaluations are related to disappointed expectations, how expectation–evaluation discrepancies are linked to media trust, and which user characteristics are associated with specific expectations and evaluations. The present study aims to address these questions based on a quota-based online survey, representative for Germany, where accusations of the media as the 'lying press' have become increasingly loud in recent years—most of all in the wake of the surge of the populist party AfD—and have considerably undermined public trust in professional media among some groups of society (Fawzi, 2019; Jackob et al., 2019).

2. Normative Media Functions and Media Performance

Since professional journalistic media play a central role in shaping public discourse in modern democracies, they are required to meet high normative standards, derived from their main public service function (Norris, 2000; Strömbäck, 2005). Depending on the specificities of the democratic system at hand, the functions of the media and journalism are given different priorities (e.g., Strömbäck, 2005). The most important function of the media in a democracy is informing the public about what is going on in politics and society, which relates to normative demands on the quality of reporting, such as completeness, balance, or accuracy (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014; McQuail, 1992; Urban & Schweiger, 2014). In close association with this information function, mass media are also expected to create a public forum to enable deliberation in public discourse by involving all groups in society and actively mediating between political institutions and citizens. In their watchdog function, the media are additionally expected to monitor societal elites and to hold them accountable to legal and moral standards. The analysis function of the media is supposed to support citizens in making sense of the complexities of political and social developments.

It is expected that journalists provide an interpretation of current issues and report on suggestions on how to solve society's problems (Schudson, 2008; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2006). It is also the media's task to promote social empathy by creating a sense of community and ensuring that citizens identify with the society they live in. The media are thus supposed to make citizens aware of the experiences and interests of other people, especially less privileged groups.

Finally, the mobilization function expects the media to support politically active and involved citizenship and to convey democratic norms and values (Schudson, 2008). The media should arouse interest in political issues and show citizens how they can get involved in political affairs (Schudson, 2008). These normative functions of the press are not fixed and the capacity of the media to fulfill them has often been doubted (e.g., Chomsky, 2002; Graber, 2003). The question remains, however, whether citizens as the main addressee of journalistic content, and thus normative ideals related to journalistic media,

share these expectations, and how well they see them fulfilled (Peifer, 2018).

3. Citizens' Expectations and Evaluations of Media Performance

Research examining citizens' expectations and evaluations of media performance is usually based on journalistic role conceptions or quality criteria which again are usually derived from normative media functions. A recent study by Peifer (2018), for instance, developed a 15-item scale of perceived news media importance, which includes both the individual as well as the overall social importance of six media functions, such as information, watchdog, and mobilization (e.g., "provide me with a daily account of what is happening in the world" or "provide analysis and interpretation of the complex problems around me"; p. 23). In the Netherlands, van der Wurff and Schönbach (2014) showed that the various journalistic role expectations and ideals, such as the information and watchdog roles, are consistently expected by citizens (but see for Asian media systems Guo & Li, 2011; Tandoc & Duffy, 2016). Research in the US, Sweden, and Israel found that this also holds for quality criteria such as neutrality, balance, or factuality (Heider, McCombs, & Poindexter, 2005; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019; Tsfati, Meyers, & Peri, 2006). The findings indicate that recipients have similar demands on journalism like other professional stakeholders such as journalists themselves, however, they differ concerning the importance they give to some functions, such as the watchdog or mobilizing function (Eberl & Riedl, 2020; Hölig, Loosen, & Reimer, 2020; Tsfati et al., 2006; van der Wurff & Schönbach, 2014; Vos, Eichholz, & Karaliova, 2019).

Audience perceptions and evaluations of the media that are analyzed within the framework of quality perceptions either focus on news coverage of specific topics, such as the refugee crisis (Arlt & Wolling, 2018), the quality of specific media outlets (e.g., Arnold, 2009), or specific programs (Heise, Loosen, Reimer, & Schmidt, 2014). An exception is research on media trust, media credibility, and media bias that has extensively examined public perception of the media in general. This research has shown that in many countries, the public does not have a very favorable perception of journalism (e.g., Ladd, 2012; Lee, 2010; Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

A recent study in Germany shows that users are fairly satisfied with some media performances but rather disappointed with others (BR, 2016). The majority (81%) believe that the media publish topics that are important to society. For 76%, the media offer orientation in terms of the relevance of information, and 64% agree that the media uncover political and social grievances. However, more respondents believe that the media support the establishment instead of controlling it (for other points of media criticism, see e.g., Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019; Kaun, 2014; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2016).

Few studies have analyzed citizens' expectations in direct comparison to their evaluations of the same dimensions. A study by Donsbach, Rentsch, Schielicke, and Degen (2009) showed that journalists are perceived to be more intolerant of other opinions and to support socially disadvantaged people less than users would demand. In contrast, journalists are seen to be more likely to assert their own needs and to have more power and influence than users would like them to have (pp. 71–73; see also Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019). Furthermore, studies have shown that media expectations predict media evaluations (Lambe, Caplan, Cai, & Signorielli, 2004; Wolling, 2004) and media evaluations, in turn, are associated with more general evaluations of media trust (Schielicke, Mothes, & Donsbach, 2014). The relationship between expectations, evaluations, and media trust is often discussed in media trust literature—following a conceptualization of media (dis)trust as a consequence of users' (disappointed) perceptions of how relevant media functions are met in actual media coverage (e.g., Hanitzsch, van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018; Müller, 2013). Media performance evaluations are also used to measure media trust (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). However, the relationship between performance evaluation-expectation *discrepancies* and media trust has barely been examined empirically (but see Prochazka's [2020] study on the influence of quality expectations and perceptions as well as their discrepancies on media trust). Against this background, our study investigates the following research questions:

RQ1: Which of the six normative media functions show discrepancies between what citizens demand from the media and their perceptions of media performance?

RQ2: How do performance expectation–evaluation discrepancies relate to overall media trust?

4. What Matters? The Role of Political and Media-Related Characteristics

Which individual characteristics are linked to how users evaluate and perceive the media's role in society? Following media trust research that has recently started to investigate causes and consequences more profoundly, one can distinguish between socio-political and media-related characteristics. Beyond sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, and education (e.g., Cook & Gronke, 2001; Hopmann, Shehata, & Strömbäck, 2015; Lee, 2010; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), research has shown that political ideology (Gunther, 1988; Ladd, 2012) and political interest (Fawzi, 2019; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) is particularly associated with media trust. More recent studies have shown that what has been called a "populist worldview" goes hand in hand with negative attitudes towards the media. Especially anti-elite attitudes, which are directed against politicians, are

related to distrust in the media and a more negative and hostile perception of media performance (Fawzi, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2018; Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2020). A reason might be that populists tend to perceive the media as part of the political elite who betray the sovereign people. This may also explain why exclusionary populist attitudes (that exclude specific outgroups such as immigrants from the ingroup of the people) are negatively associated with media trust (Fawzi, 2019).

Besides these pre-existing political attitudes, individuals' media repertoires should also relate to specific user demands and evaluations. Based on selective exposure theory, it can be assumed that the media content that is individually used substantially affects what recipients expect from the media and how they evaluate specific information or media performance in general (Mothes, 2017; Tsfati & Peri, 2006). In today's high-choice media environments, recipients can choose from a vast range of information sources, from established mainstream media to partisan alternative media, from political sources to user-generated content. The latter sources intensively criticize mainstream media's performance; alternative media present themselves as opposed to mainstream media (Holt, Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019). In this context, trust research has shown that the use of mainstream media is positively associated with media trust, while alternative media and social media use can have a negative impact (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris, & Eisenegger, 2019; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Gil de Zúñiga and Hinsley (2013), for instance, found that traditional media use goes hand in hand with a positive perception of media performance (see also Vos et al., 2019).

Moreover, a theoretical link exists between media perceptions and media-related knowledge as a central dimension of media literacy (Livingstone, 2004), as knowledge about media and journalism should enable individuals to assess media performance more elaborately (Martens & Hobbs, 2015).. However, research related to media trust has not produced consistent results in this respect and found that media literacy can both increase and decrease media trust (e.g., Ashley, Poepsel, & Willis, 2010; Vraga, Tully, Akin, & Rojas, 2012).

Although media trust research provides important insights into how media evaluations can be explained, it remains an open question of how exactly media performance expectations, evaluations, and the discrepancy between both are linked to media trust. We will, therefore, refrain from formulating specific hypotheses and, instead, investigate the following research questions: Which political (political interest, ideology, and populist attitudes) and media-related (media repertoire, partisan selective exposure, and media literacy) characteristics are associated with recipients' expectations (RQ3a) and evaluations (RQ3b) of media performance, as well as the discrepancy between both (RQ3c)? Do political or media-related characteristics show higher explanatory power? (RQ4).

5. Method

5.1. Sample

A quota-based online survey of the general German population, representative for age, gender, and education, was conducted in September 2019 via an online access panel (Dynata). Participants received an incentive in exchange for their participation. Overall, 1114 respondents completed the questionnaire. In the course of data cleaning, we excluded those respondents who finished faster than one-third of the medium time of the whole sample. This resulted in a final sample of $N = 1000$ participants. The respondents were, on average, 50 years ($SD = 15$) and 49% were female.

5.2. Measures

Expectations of media performance: Based on normative media functions and existing research on media perfor-

mance (Peifer, 2018), journalistic role ideals (Hanitzsch, 2011), and journalistic role performance (e.g., Mellado et al., 2020), we asked respondents what they demand of the media concerning six functions based on 16 items (for more details, see Figure 1): information (1 item), public forum (4 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$), watchdog (2 items, $\alpha = .78$), analysis (3 items, $\alpha = .78$), social empathy (2 items, $\alpha = .74$), and mobilization (4 items, $\alpha = .88$; 5-point scales from 1 = *does not apply at all* to 5 = *fully applies*). A principal component analysis revealed a one-factor solution ($M = 3.94$, $SD = .81$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$). However, we decided to also calculate indices for the six media functions separately, based on their theoretical classification.

Evaluations of media performance: Respondents were asked to evaluate their perceptions of actual media performance by means of the same 16 items: information, public forum (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$), watchdog ($\alpha = .77$), analysis ($\alpha = .84$), social empathy ($\alpha = .80$) and mobilization ($\alpha = .88$; 5-point scale from 1 = *does not ap-*

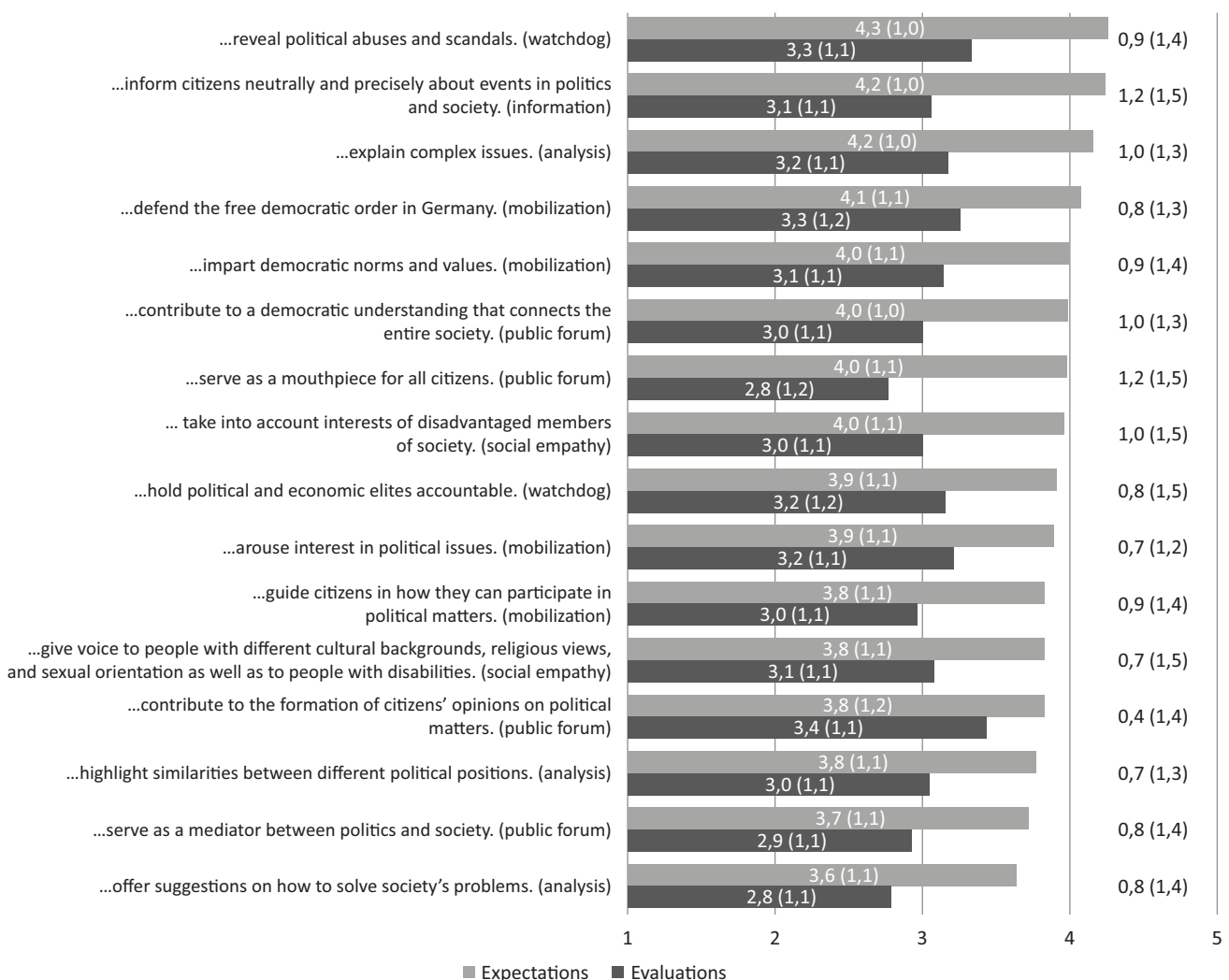**Figure 1.** Citizens' expectations and evaluations of media performance in comparison. Notes: Mean values with *SD* in parentheses; light grey values represent mean expectation–evaluation discrepancies (*SD* in parentheses); $862 \leq n \leq 941$.

ply at all to 5 = fully applies). Again, a principal component analysis revealed a one-factor solution ($M = 3.09$, $SD = .89$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$).

The discrepancy between *expectations and evaluations* was calculated as the individual difference between both ratings by subtracting evaluations from expectations.

Media trust: The overall assessment of respondents' trust in journalistic media was measured by five items adapted from Kohring and Matthes (2007), measured on 5-point scales (1 = *does not apply at all*; 5 = *fully applies*): "Relevant topics received the necessary attention" ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.15$), "All important information regarding relevant topics is provided" ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.13$), "Reporting includes different points of view" ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.14$), "The reports recount the facts truthfully" ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.16$), and "The journalists' opinions are well-founded" ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.09$). Items were averaged for an overall index of media trust ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.01$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$).

Political predispositions: Political interest was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very strong*).

Respondents were asked to assess their *political ideology* on a left-right scale ranging from 1 = *left* to 11 = *right* ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 2.04$). Following the multi-dimensional understanding of populism, we measured *populist attitudes* in four dimensions with individual items measured on 5-point scales from 1 = *does not apply at all* to 5 = *fully applies* (for a full list of items and descriptive statistics, see Table 1): Homogeneity of the people (5 items, Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$), demand for people's sovereignty (5 items, $\alpha = .878$), anti-elite populism (8 items, $\alpha = .8$), and anti-outgroup populism (4 items, $\alpha = .905$; Fawzi, 2019; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017; Schulz et al., 2017). We opted to analyze the sub-dimensions separately, as each represents populist attitudes in a specific way (e. g., "empty populism": homogeneity of the people; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Media use: The individual media repertoire was measured by asking respondents how often, on average, they use eleven different media genres for political information (1 = *never*, 5 = *daily*): public-service broadcasting ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.38$); private broadcasting ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.53$); national newspapers and news magazines

Table 1. Descriptive overview of populist attitude dimensions.

Dimension	M	SD
Homogeneity of the people	3.18	0.84
The people in Germany are all pulling together.	2.53	1.21
People in Germany share common cultural values.	3.23	1.08
If one wanted to, one could make policies that are in the interest of all ordinary citizens.	3.62	1.13
Although Germans are very different from each other, when it comes down to it they all think the same.	3.16	1.16
Ordinary people share the same values and interests.	3.40	1.10
Demand for people's sovereignty	3.90	0.94
The people should have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums.	3.92	1.17
The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken.	3.94	1.16
The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.	3.74	1.18
The politicians in parliament need to follow the will of the people.	4.06	1.06
We need a strong head of government who can push through what the people in Germany really want.	3.85	1.20
Anti-elite populism	3.84	0.85
Members of parliament very quickly lose touch with ordinary people.	4.07	1.01
Politicians are corrupt.	3.37	1.22
Politicians make decisions that harm the interests of ordinary people.	3.58	1.13
Politicians care about what people like me think. (reverse coded for index calculation)	2.29	1.21
There is a large gap between the people and politicians.	4.05	1.04
People like me do not have an impact on the government's decisions.	3.66	1.20
The differences between ordinary people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people.	3.90	1.09
Politicians talk too much and act too little.	4.20	1.02
Anti-outgroup populism	3.16	1.25
Immigrants cost our country a lot of money that should rather be invested in our people.	3.31	1.42
Immigrants are responsible for a lot of our nation's problems.	3.07	1.39
People who are not originally from Germany have no right to receive our social benefits.	3.00	1.42
Muslims and their religion do not fit into our culture.	3.27	1.43

($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.36$); local newspapers ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.43$); tabloid newspapers ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.13$); newspaper websites, news magazines or public-service broadcasters ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.52$); tabloid websites or private broadcasters ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.26$); user comments on social media sites ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.39$); social media channels of influencers, bloggers or public figures ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 1.31$); social media channels of political actors, groups, or parties ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.31$); alternative partisan media ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.24$).

Partisan selective exposure: In addition to general media use, the use of congruent media coverage was measured by four items derived from Tsfati (2016), for instance, "I avoid exposure to media outlets expressing views other than my own," "I try to expose myself only to media outlets and news messages that are in line with my own attitudes." ($1 = do\ not\ agree\ at\ all$, $5 = fully\ agree$; $M = 2.62$, $SD = .95$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$)

Media knowledge: Focusing on media knowledge as a dimension of media literacy, six statements were presented to respondents. For each statement, respondents were asked to indicate whether they think it was true or false (e.g., "Journalists can report what they want, there are no legal restrictions."). If they chose the "don't know"-answer, this was considered a wrong answer. A media knowledge index was calculated from 0 correct answers to 6 correct answers ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.44$).

Sociodemographics: Age, gender, education (recoded as $0 = lower\ education$, $1 = higher\ education$), and place of residence ($0 = West\ Germany$, $1 = East\ Germany$) were additionally included in the questionnaire as control variables.

6. Results

When first looking at the descriptive distribution of expectations and evaluations, results show that users have high expectations regarding media performance; the majority of respondents believe that professional journalistic media should fulfill all six normative functions. Citizens first and foremost expect the media to reveal political abuse, to inform the public objectively, and to ex-

plain the complexity of political issues to their audience. The majority also wants the media to take an active and mobilizing role in our democracy by defending the free democratic order and imparting democratic norms and values. Furthermore, the media should contribute to the democratic education of society as a whole and serve as a mouthpiece for all citizens. Users also expect the media to represent the interests of the disadvantaged and give them a voice so they are heard by more privileged members of society. Slightly less important but still relevant expectations towards the media concern their mediating role between politics and society and the analysis of solutions that are discussed for society's problems.

Concerning actual media performance, citizens mainly do not see these expectations fulfilled. A large part of the respondents is not satisfied with how the media perform. The discrepancy between expectations and evaluations (RQ1) varies from 1.2 scale points (neutral information and mouthpiece for all citizens) to 0.4 scale points (public opinion formation). There is not a single function that the media outperform from the recipients' point of view (see Figure 1).

Going from single items to the six dimensions of normative media functions, the most pronounced differences between these dimensions emerge on the level of user *expectations* (see Table 2). Particularly high expectations are found for the most traditional journalistic principles, that is, the 'information' and the 'watchdog' function. Least important to respondents—although still above the scale center—are 'public forum,' 'analysis,' and 'social empathy.' On the *evaluation* level, differences between the six normative functions are overall less pronounced. Respondents see all functions less represented in actual media coverage than expected.

However, all evaluation means range slightly above the center of the scale, with the 'watchdog' and the 'mobilization' functions showing the highest values. On average, evaluations deviate from expectations by one scale point, with merely small differences between individual dimensions. Only the 'information' function somewhat stands out with the largest discrepancy. However, in the case of 'information,' only one item represents the

Table 2. Repeated-measures ANOVAs on differences in mean expectations, evaluations, and evaluation-expectation discrepancies for the six dimensions of normative media functions (*SD* in parentheses).

	Expectation	Evaluation	Expectation–Evaluation Discrepancy
Information	4.26 (1.00)[a]	3.06 (1.15)[a]	1.22 (1.47)[a]
Public forum	3.89 (0.87)[b]	3.04 (0.95)[a]	0.85 (1.09)[b]
Watchdog	4.09 (0.95)[c]	3.25 (1.01)[b]	0.85 (1.27)[b]
Analysis	3.86 (0.88)[b]	3.01 (0.95)[a]	0.87 (1.12)[b]
Social empathy	3.89 (0.96)[b]	3.04 (1.03)[a]	0.87 (1.31)[b]
Mobilization	3.95 (0.92)[d]	3.15 (0.96)[c]	0.81 (1.07)[b]
Test statistics	$F(5, 4635) = 85.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .085$	$F(5, 4370) = 28.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .032$	$F(5, 4295) = 35.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .040$

Notes: $860 \leq n \leq 928$; Means with different superscripts per construct differed significantly at $p < .05$ in repeated-measures ANOVAs with Bonferroni correction. *** $p < .001$.

whole dimension, while larger discrepancies in individual items of other dimensions are less reflected due to the index they are part of. This particularly applies to the 'public forum'-item "serving as a mouthpiece for all citizens" (see Figure 1) and, thus, an item that in a sense reflects the counterpart of 'information' by representing the news flow *from the citizen* rather than *towards the citizen*.

How do these discrepancies translate into more general evaluations of the media as institutions that can be trusted (RQ2)? The results of the linear regression analysis in Table 3 show that media trust is significantly related to four of the six dimensions of expectation–evaluation discrepancies. Specifically, higher discrepancies are linked to lower scores on media trust for the normative media functions of 'information,' 'public forum,' and 'watchdog'—hence, the three dimensions that are particularly important to users and/or most noticeably underperformed. Users are thus more skeptic of journalistic media if they *expect* the media to adhere to their main public service functions of reporting news in a neutral and precise way (information), of supporting public discourse by mediating between politics and society (public forum), and of monitoring what powerful actors in society do (watchdog), but do not *see* these expectations properly met in actual media coverage. The same pattern does not emerge with regards to 'analysis' and 'mobilization' functions. In these cases, respondents show similar levels of media trust, regardless of how large the discrepancies are between their expectations for the media to provide comprehensive analysis on complex issues (analysis) and to support political participation (mobilization) and respondents' perceptions of how well these standards are fulfilled. Lastly, 'social empathy' presents a special case in that a higher discrepancy on this dimension is associated with higher instead

of lower media trust—a surprising finding that may indicate a certain level of social desirability among respondents when assessing the related items in terms of their individual relevance.

Expectations and evaluations are further linked to both socio-political and media-related characteristics (RQ3a, RQ3b). In terms of citizens' expectations, age shows a positive relationship, as does political interest (see Table 4). Moreover, the more respondents place themselves on the left side of the political ideology scale, the higher their expectations of media performance. Furthermore, all dimensions of populist ideology play a role in citizens' evaluation of the media, but not in a consistent way: Individuals who perceive the people to be a homogenous group have higher expectations and also evaluate media performance more positively. Demand for people's sovereignty goes hand in hand with higher expectations but is not associated with performance evaluations. Anti-elite populist attitudes also come along with higher demands of media performance, but with a more negative perception of actual media performance. For those individuals, increased expectations collide with negative media perceptions. For anti-outgroup attitudes, in contrast, the analyses show a generally negative assessment of professional journalistic media, as they have both lower expectations and more negative perceptions. The expectation–evaluation discrepancy is higher for individuals with lower political interest and with a more right-wing ideology (RQ3c). While homogeneity perceptions regarding the people are related to lower discrepancies, individuals with higher scores on the two populist dimensions 'demand for sovereignty' and 'anti-elite populism' show larger discrepancies between their expectations and perceived media performance.

In comparison to political predispositions, recipients' media use and literacy only play a marginal role with less

Table 3. Linear regression model of the relationship between expectation–evaluation discrepancies and media trust.

	b	SE	β	p
Constant	3.182	.148		
Sociodemographics				
Gender	.082	.061	.041	.178
Age	.004	.002	.059	.052
Education	.036	.062	.017	.563
Place of residence	−.110	.083	−.038	.186
Δ Adj. R^2			.002	
Expectation–evaluation discrepancies				
Information	−.261	.029	−.379	< .001
Public forum	−.119	.051	−.128	.020
Watchdog	−.085	.037	−.106	.021
Analysis	−.060	.047	−.067	.203
Social empathy	.082	.031	.106	.008
Mobilization	.005	.049	.005	.920
Δ Adj. R^2			.291***	
Adj. R^2			.293***	

Notes: n = 855; VIF < 3.7, Durbin-Watson = 2.01. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Explaining citizens' expectations, evaluations, and expectation–evaluation discrepancies of media performance.

	Expectations	Evaluations	Expectation–evaluation discrepancy
Constant	1.966***	2.536***	−.564
Sociodemographics			
Gender	−.098	−.103	.019
Age	.008***	.003	.004
Education	−.037	−.043	.005
Place of residence	−.080	−.206*	.131
△ Adj. R²	.062	.010	.020
Political characteristics			
Political interest	.153***	.048	.109**
Political ideology	−.044***	−.009	−.037**
Homogeneity of the people	.110***	.209***	−.109**
Demand for Sovereignty	.186***	−.002	.198***
Anti-Elite populism	.101**	−.255***	.352***
Anti-outgroup populism	−.075**	−.089**	.005
△ Adj. R²	.191	.155	.186
Media-related characteristics			
Public-service broadcasting	.036	.092***	−.050
National newspapers and news magazines	−.013	.041	.054
Local newspapers	.049*	.038	.010
Newspaper websites, news magazines or PSB	.054**	.021	.028
Private broadcasting	.002	.034	−.028
Tabloid newspapers	−.050	.035	−.088**
Tabloid websites or private broadcasters	−.036	.016	−.051
Online user comments	−.003	−.091***	.086**
Social media channels of influencers, bloggers, or public figures	.063*	.044	.017
Social media channels of political actors, groups or parties	.015	.015	.002
Alternative partisan media	−.015	−.030	.016
Partisan selective exposure	−.053	.119***	−.161***
Media knowledge	.022	.026	−.007
△ Adj. R²	.024	.071	.047
Adj. R²	.277***	.236***	.253***

Notes: Unstandardized b-values. 773 ≤ n ≤ 785; VIF < 2.6, Durbin-Watson-test: 1.92–2.06. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

explanatory power (RQ4). However, results show that the information sources recipients use in a high-choice media environment matter for users' evaluation of professional journalistic media. The use of legacy media outlets, local newspapers, and online websites of quality media is related to higher expectations, while public-service broadcasting use is associated with better evaluations of media performance. Those who receive news from sources such as influencers or bloggers also have higher expectations of journalistic media. In contrast, reading online user comments is associated with more negative evaluations of media performance. Finally, exposure to congruent media content is not related to expectations but comes along with more positive views of media performance. Media knowledge does not play a role in explaining both expectations and evaluations. In terms of expectation–evaluation discrepancies, tabloid media use and partisan selective exposure are associated with smaller discrepancies, while heavy use of user comments is related to larger discrepancies (for information on pre-

dictors of individual expectation–evaluation discrepancies for each of the six dimensions of normative media functions, see Supplementary File).

In the next step, we were interested in the extent to which expectations and evaluations differ at the level of the six individual dimensions of media functions. We will particularly focus on the impact of political predispositions due to their significant importance in shaping user demands and perceptions. After controlling for sociodemographic variables, the results show that political interest is positively linked to both expectations and evaluations across all six media functions. For political ideology, we find mixed results. Left-wing orientation is consistently associated with higher expectations, but the evaluation of the public forum, analysis, and mobilization functions is independent of political ideology.

Concerning populist attitudes, homogeneity perceptions consistently go along with higher expectations (except for the information function) and more positive evaluations. The more users claim people's sovereignty,

the higher their expectations of all six media functions. Media performance evaluations, in contrast, are not linked to this populist dimension. In terms of anti-elite populism, results show that higher expectations of individuals supporting anti-elite ideas are only due to higher expectations regarding the media's information and watchdog functions. Yet, negative perceptions of media performance by anti-elitist recipients are directed at all six media functions. In contrast, the overall negative evaluation of the media's role in society by citizens with exclusionary populist attitudes can be traced back to all media functions *except* the watchdog role (see Table 5).

7. Discussion

In today's media environments, professional journalistic news media compete with a vast number of alternative information sources for the attention of the audience. At the same time, journalistic news media face fundamental public criticism, especially voiced by populists. Against this background, the present study had two aims: first, to determine the extent to which civic demands of the media collide with their perceptions of actual media performance, and how this discrepancy is linked to overall media trust; and second, to determine to which extent socio-political predispositions and media-related behaviors are linked to citizens' expectations, evaluations, and expectation–evaluation discrepancies in terms of six media functions: information, public forum, watchdog, analysis, social empathy, and mobilization.

Our study provides systematic insights into how German citizens' expectations regarding normative media functions collide with their evaluations, and how these discrepancies are related to overall media trust. Our findings show that the public has high expectations of the media which they do not see completely fulfilled, and that resulting expectation–evaluation discrepancies are associated with lower levels of media trust, if normative functions are addressed that are of particular relevance to the users and/or perceived as particularly underperformed.

Our study additionally extends earlier research by showing that both expectations and evaluations are linked to populist attitudes. However, increased expectations collided with negative media evaluations only in the case of anti-elite attitudes. For anti-outgroup attitudes, in contrast, the analyses show a generally negative assessment of professional journalistic media, both in terms of expectations and evaluations. This finding confirms the mismatch between this particular populist dimension, representing the anti-pluralistic character of populism, and the normative expectations towards the media in pluralistic societies.

In line with previous research, our study also shows that media expectations and evaluations are strongly related to pre-existing political attitudes. Interestingly, they matter much more than the actual media repertoire. Whether recipients get their news primarily from public-

service broadcasters, partisan media or other sources has little impact on how they perceive media performance. Future media trust research should, therefore, add political predispositions more systematically to the equation, in addition to media use as a central concept related to media trust in extant research. Noteworthy, however, is the negative association between the use of online user comments and performance evaluations. This might be due to a dominant representation of dissatisfied users who take advantage of commenting options to publicly criticize established media (e.g., Craft, Vos, & Wolfgang, 2016; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2016).

These results have important implications. The fact that a large part of users does not perceive professional journalistic media to fulfill their normative functions, could lead to a further polarization of society. In particular, those recipients who regard politicians as the divisive and malicious elite are also the ones who are disappointed by the media and, hence, do not feel represented by them. Why should they use these media outlets for political news, why should they be willing to pay for their content? They will rather turn to more partisan outlets that are in line with their populist worldviews or avoid political news altogether.

Several limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. Our classification of independent and dependent variables is based on theoretical arguments. We assessed political predispositions, media use, and media knowledge as independent variables. In reality, however, they might also be affected by media perceptions. This reciprocal relationship cannot be addressed by cross-sectional data and calls for longitudinal designs. Moreover, measuring discrepancies between expectations and evaluations comes with some challenges. Most of all, asking individuals to indicate their expectations may negatively affect their performance evaluations (e.g., Park & Yi, 2016). This is particularly likely when the evaluation dimensions are of high normative relevance and the attitude object is rather vague (Daniller, Allen, Tallevi, & Mutz, 2017; Webster & Entwisle, 1976), as is the case with basically desirable journalistic quality dimensions in general reference to 'journalistic media.' Hence, future studies should consider including a greater variety of normatively desirable and undesirable evaluation dimensions to assess the performance of more specific journalistic media outlets.

Overall, however, we hope that our study can shed some light on how user expectations and evaluations of media performance relate to more general perceptions of media trust in the broader context of a politically charged high-choice media environment where journalistic media may find themselves in a growing predicament: Being seen as part of the 'enemy' by a substantial part of society, journalistic media may gradually lose their ability to contribute to social synchronization and to represent all groups of society, which is—from a public service point of view—at the heart of what professional media should aim for in democratic societies.

Table 5. Explaining citizens' expectations and evaluations of six normative media functions.

	Information		Public forum		Watchdog		Analysis		Social empathy		Mobilization	
	Expectation	Evaluation	Expectation	Evaluation	Expectation	Evaluation	Expectation	Evaluation	Expectation	Evaluation	Expectation	Evaluation
Constant	2.194***	3.654***	2.022***	3.046***	1.622***	3.311***	2.133***	3.300***	2.849***	2.514***	1.931***	3.188***
Gender	−.143	−.128	−.095	−.126	.003	−.115	−.115	−.049	−.115	−.033	−.064	−0.054
Age	.011***	.005	.008***	.004	.011***	.01***	.007	.003	.006**	.004	.011***	.006**
Education	.184**	.051	.007	.050	.039	.056	−.035	.016	−.085	.096	.060	−.001
Place of residence	−.054	−.186	−.102	−.241*	−.101	−.205*	−.101	−.217*	−.105	−.188	−.093	−.217**
Δ Adj. R²	.061	.002	.041	.005	.064	.020	.037	.004	.027	.011	.066	.011
Political interest	.203***	.042	.173***	.097**	.182***	.105**	.211***	.091**	.131***	.155***	.272***	.134***
Political ideology	−.027	−.042*	−.041**	−.005	−.048**	−.04*	−.048**	−.018	−.073***	.045*	−.048**	−.007
Homogeneity of the people	−.082*	.327***	.161***	.288***	.049***	.225***	.110**	.233***	.174***	.271***	.079*	.243***
Demand for Sovereignty	.162***	.022	.206***	.063	.212***	.031	.19***	.018	.226***	−.077	.197***	.037
Anti-Elite populism	.230***	−.347***	.058	−.307***	.18***	−.308***	.078	−.317***	.080	−.226***	.057	−.318***
Anti-outgroup populism	−.080**	−.129**	−.082**	−.104**	−.023	−.063	−.068***	−.053	−.217***	−.073*	−.118***	−.108**
Adj. R²	.179***	.136***	.190***	.145***	.217***	.130***	.187***	.119***	.205***	.124***	.234***	.161***

Notes: Unstandardized b-values. $755 \leq n \leq 781$; VIF < 2.05, Durbin-Watson-test: 1.83–2.10. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Reach or Trust Optimisation? A Citizen Trust Analysis in the Flemish Public Broadcaster VRT

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Abstract

In democracies, one of Public Service Media's (PSM) main roles is to inform the public. In a digital news ecosystem, where commercial, citizen, and alternative news sources have multiplied, questions about the ability and need for PSM to fulfil this role are increasingly being raised. While the role of PSM can and should be scrutinized, a too-narrow a focus on an informed citizenry may obfuscate aspects, other than audience reach and objectivity, that are key to this information role, such as trust. Against this background, this article studies whether and to what extent citizens still trust the news and information services of their public broadcaster, asking if that trust is still high, whether there is a difference between groups in the population, and if trust is in line with reach. Based on a representative survey of news users in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking community of Belgium, the article studies the reach and trust scores of the brands of VRT, Flanders' PSM, and compares them to those of its main competitors, with a specific focus on differences in terms of age, education levels, and political orientation. The results suggest that VRT struggles more than the main commercial players to reach young people and the lower-educated, but still leads when it comes to trust. The data show the continued importance of widening our assessment of PSM beyond market-focused indicators of reach.

1. Introduction

Public Service Media (PSM) can be defined as the provision of media services, across devices and platforms, that contributes to the democratic, cultural and social wellbeing of society (see contributions in Lowe & Martin, 2013; Lowe, Van den Bulck, & Donders, 2018). Often, the delivery of such services is entrusted to public broadcasters. For all of them, strengthening informed citizenship is an, if not their most, important task. PSM has a "responsibility for the health of the political process and the quality of public discourse generated with it" (Blumler, as cited in Hesmondhalgh, 2019, pp. 152). Having said that, four

trends have hindered public broadcasters in their work to inform the citizenry.

First, the online environment results in lower reach of public broadcasters' news services and, particularly with younger audiences, as well as encouraging the rapid consumption of news (Cola & Prario, 2012). Second, the rise of disinformation comes with lower trust in traditional media outlets (Fletcher & Park, 2017). The line between what is true and what is false seems to have become more blurred and public broadcasters are finding it difficult to position themselves in a 'post-truth society' (Gibson, 2018); even if that latter concept has been rightfully criticised by some (e.g., Fuller, 2018). Third, and re-

lated to the former, a rise of populism in a multitude of EU Member States puts additional pressure on legacy news media and allegedly 'leftist' and progressive public broadcasters (Wettstein, Esser, Schulz, Wirz, & Wirth, 2018). In some countries such as Poland and Hungary, the re-balancing of powers and the strive for pluralism between conservative and progressive, left- and right-wing ideologies, etc., has resulted in a complete political capture of the PSM system (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). In other countries, it at least creates the possibility of self-censorship with journalists who fear #lügenpresse, #MSM, #fakenews, etc. Fourth, most European public broadcasters have faced budget cuts over the last few years, making it more difficult to maintain investment in journalism (European Broadcasting Union, 2018).

Against this background, we studied whether and to what extent citizens still trust the news and information services of their public broadcaster, asking if that trust is still high, whether there is a difference between groups in the population, and if trust is in line with reach.

The focus of our analysis is Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium with 6.5 million inhabitants. The Flemish media market is rather concentrated with only four (cross)-media companies supplying a significant portion of the audience with news: DPGMedia, Mediahuis, Roularta, and VRT. DPG Media has been particularly wide-ranging, covering newspapers, magazines, online brands, television and radio. Mediahuis and Roularta are mainly active in print and online. VRT offers services on radio, television, and online. DPGMedia leads in print and online news, followed by Mediahuis, while VRT has the highest market share in radio and television (Vlaamse Regulator voor de Media, 2020). There are smaller online news sites, such as Doorbraak.be, SCEPTR and Apache, but these are niche publications. The first two are more partisan right-wing outlets although they do impact public opinion, whereas the latter has greater impact on political debate.

Public service broadcasting takes a key position in both the French and Dutch speaking communities, which are autonomous in their decision-making on PSM. While both can be seen as democratic corporatist systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), there are notable differences though with more pressure in Flanders from commercial competitors and right-wing politicians to limit VRT in its activities, specifically online. That has also resulted in declining government funding since 2007, the rejection of a pre-school children's channel after an ex ante evaluation, and a Government Agreement in 2019 which mentioned the Flemish Government's intentions to limit the amount of text in online news. Remarkable according to some (Donders, Van den Bulck, & Raats, 2019) given that the Flemish media market is so concentrated and the public broadcaster thus adds to not only internal but also external pluralism.

While applauded for its high-quality service delivery, criticism from the main right-wing parties for its alleged political bias as well as for distorting the online market is on the rise (Donders, Van den Bulck, & Raats, 2018). It is not clear whether this trend in opinion is also likely to be observed among audiences. Based on a representative survey among Flemish citizens, we find high levels of trust in the Flemish public broadcaster VRT, although having that said, results are slightly different for young people and right-wing voters. The article consists of five parts. First, we formulate a problem statement and key research questions in the introduction. Second, we theorise what task public broadcasters have in the area of news and information, relating this to the need for citizens' trust in the impartiality of public broadcasters. Third, we explain the methodology underlying the representative survey, then we present our findings, and finally, we outline our conclusions and reflect on the importance of trust in PSM.

2. PSM, Informed Citizenship and Trust

2.1. PSM and Informed Citizenship

Information provision has been a core task of public broadcasters ever since their creation in the 1930s (Price & Raboy, 2003). Public broadcasters should inform citizenships, confront people with different viewpoints, and in so doing strengthen democracy (Van den Bulck, 2016). Political citizenship is thus not only about being informed, but also about having access to different interpretative frameworks and deliberative fora where information can be discussed and evaluated. Political citizenship requires pluralism, which is not the same as an abundance of content. Structural pluralism, so Beata Klimkiewicz (2010, p. 907) says, "refers to a condition where diverse, independent media entities exist within a system and are arranged together in a particular way." Allen, Connolly, and Hargreaves Heap (2017, p. 47) see media pluralism as "an essential pillar in the right to information and freedom of expression." It requires the representation of all relevant opinions and the potential for citizens to engage in a debate rather than acting as mere spectators. Citizens should be part of a process of interaction and genuine dialogue within some sort of public sphere (Habermas, 1991) and this should not be eroded to the point where news is only consumed (Scannell, 1995, pp. 23–24; see also McQuail, 1998, p. 140).

As maintained by Picard and Pickard (2018, p. 16) "a healthy democracy requires opportunities for citizens to deliberate in public spaces that are largely independent of state and market forces." The European understanding of media pluralism as a necessary condition for political citizenship goes beyond rejecting government control over media; it extends to avoiding commercial interests from becoming so overly dominant that they inhibit the free, pluralistic exchange of media services (Czepek, Hellwig, & Novak, 2009). That opinion diverges significantly from the US model where the freedom of individual media owners is placed above the equal right of

all citizens to receive information as well as to express their opinions (Humphreys, 1996). While the 'free marketplace of ideas' has not delivered—look for example at the low voter turnouts—also several EU Member States have adopted media policies that are inspired by libertarian ideas.

There is disagreement on whether public broadcasters have contributed to informed citizenship. Research indeed shows higher levels of current affairs knowledge among citizens who access strong public broadcasting systems (Soroka et al., 2013). People watching public broadcasters learn more about domestic and international affairs than those watching commercial news. Factors such as independence, adequate public funding, and audience share are relevant factors in determining levels of hard news in particular (Soroka et al., 2013).

Some scholars have been more critical though, pointing to public broadcasters' insufficient investment in investigative journalism (Cordell, 2009) and their lack of criticism of ruling parties which largely results from funding issues and/or institutional weakness (Stetka & Örnebring, 2013). Furthermore, they have been criticised for reporting in overly dramatic manners without paying adequate attention to the historical context of serious issues such as the financial crisis in 2008/2009 (Berry, 2013), as well as for plainly being mouthpieces of government (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006). Public broadcasters, some research shows, have gone along with the polarization of public discourse, without critically questioning statements made by politicians (e.g., related to the Brexit referendum, see Cushion & Lewis, 2017), or have failed to represent all opinions in society, specifically those of ethnic minorities (Panis, Paulussen, & Dhoest, 2019). Some also argue that there has been a heavy emphasis on one-directional knowledge transfer (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007) rather than a two-way understanding of political processes, current affairs, and events in society. Overall, one could conclude that public broadcasters in Western and Northern European countries have demonstrably contributed to informed citizenship while being imperfect in delivering that objective in several ways.

2.2. Informed Citizenship and Trust

The discussion on the role of PSM has intensified in a context of internationalisation, further commodification of media users, and disinformation. While some argue that the role of public broadcasters becomes more important (Ramsey, 2018), some market failure thinking on PSM is on the rise again. The questioning of the BBC license fee in the UK by conservative politicians is a case in point. They point at the digital environment which has rendered the BBC a dinosaur as well as at its allegedly biased reporting.

Underlying these various contesting views on the performance of PSM is the ideal of an informed citizenry, one that consists of rational, information-seeking, politically engaged citizens—which is still the default view

amongst media professionals (Graves, 2017, p. 1242). Indeed, as is clear from the above, this view is dominant in newsrooms and with policymakers and academics as well, even if it has been contested before (Graeff, 2019). Will this view hold against the background of a 'global democratic recession' during which we witness, among others, the growing popularity of right-wing nationalist parties, a severe EU political crisis, and the unnerving political theatre of the US president (Graves, 2017, p. 1239)? The sense of crisis revolves around the erosion of accountability in the media system. Van Aelst et al. (2017, p. 12) consider that the rise of partisan media forms a key challenge for the political information environment as it leads to "opportunity structures for selective exposure based on political attitudes and beliefs" rather than on factual information. In its most radical articulation, this means that facts and truth do not matter, and the current distributed media ecosystem seems to further amplify those who pursue 'post-truth politics' (Suiter, 2016) which challenges the democratic public sphere and promotes societal conflict.

If facts do not matter, then what are the benefits of an informed citizenry? Such a context forces us to revisit our understanding of information in relation to citizenship. An interesting case concerns fact-checking as a solution to false information (Nieminen & Rapeli, 2018). While still inconclusive, various studies seem to suggest that fact-checking might increase factual knowledge, but that this does not necessarily affect citizens' ideological beliefs and political choices (see Tucker et al., 2018). In the US, for example, when the mainstream media went to great lengths to challenge conspiracy reports that linked Hillary Clinton to a child trafficking ring run from a pizza shop, the many people who distrust 'liberal' media saw this rather as a confirmation that there was something to investigate (Boyd, 2017).

At this point, trust enters the equation. As Strömbäck et al. (2020) suggest, informative news media will hardly lead to the democratic ideal of an informed citizenry if citizens do not consume or do not trust the news. We might thereby tend to think that the consumption of a certain news source implies the source is trusted. The authors are however keen to stress the complexity of the relationship between news trust and news use:

> Overall previous research suggests that media trust is associated with greater use of news media while media distrust is associated with greater use of non-mainstream news sources, but that the relationship between media trust and media use is quite modest. (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 8)

On top of that, news use is not always an instrumental practice driven by a rational, informative and selective orientation towards the media, but can also be more ritual, driven by distraction, affection and habits (Rubin, 2002, pp. 534–535). This can even lead to people using news they do not trust, e.g., when their need for cog-

nition is higher than their distrust in the news (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005) or their orientation towards convenience leads them to choose less trusted over more trusted news (Jarvis, Stroud, & Gilliland, 2009).

What is clear though, is that news use and news trust do not necessarily match. In other words, reach is not necessarily an indicator of trust. Exactly this differentiation is often lacking in the way news organisations, PSM included, assess their goals. Traditionally, VRT in Flanders, in line with other PSMs in Western democracies, has been required through their charter agreements with the subsidising governments, to cater to a wide audience (e.g., Vlaamse Regering & VRT, 2011, 2015). The idea that a PSM organisation should be there for all citizens has been a leeway for reach to become a central measurement to assess a PSM's success, much in line with commercial logics (Donders, 2012). In the pressured news ecosystem described above, this focus on reach, further emphasized by editorial analytics entering the newsroom, has led to critical scrutiny.

Journalism scholar Jay Rosen (2018) put it well when he wondered what a news organization would look like if it were not optimized for reach, but for trust? Admittedly, optimising for trust is not without problems; alternative media, populist politicians and fearmongers on any side of the political spectrum have all mastered ways to gain people's trust, regardless of the truth. Rosen himself has addressed this issue by recalibrating his question of how to generate trust by publishing news that still adheres to high standards of verification. It is exactly at this intersection between information, reach and trust that one of journalism's key challenges materialises. As partisan media do not need to balance trust with factuality and commercial media might find it challenging because of stringent market conditions, PSM organisations—at least those who are financially and politically independent— are the media actors par excellence to take up the challenge to combine reach with trust.

Coming back to the notion of an informed citizenry, this approach requires us to rethink its centrality in our conception of democratic, factual, and trustworthy news offerings. In her critical assessment of the conception of trust in news media, Fisher (2016, p. 461) points out the issue regarding the normative link between news and informed citizenry:

> Relying on the assumption that the news consumer will interpret trust based on traditional conceptions of reliability and accuracy bound up in the ideal of the informed citizen, does not adequately accommodate how and why people are accessing news media.

The kind of citizenship she is hinting at is one with "an orientation towards a public world, including politics and broader public issues, beyond matters of purely private concern" (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007; p. xv). Such a view on citizenry adheres much more to Schudson's (1995, p. 169) notion of a monitorial citizen:

We cannot always be fully informed about what happens in society, but we should be sufficiently informed to recognize possible threats to our personal and collective wellbeing.

If the objective is to have a widely informed public, then reach is an important metric. If the goal is to make sure that when needed, people can turn to relevant information, a degree of trust becomes essential. The question is then: Do citizens still trust PSM organisations? This article will, therefore, look at the performance of PSM organisations in terms of reach and trust, and in doing so, complement a view that 'maximizes on reach' and relates to an 'informed citizenry' with a view that 'maximises on trust' and relates to a 'publicly connected citizenry.'

2.3. Operationalising Trust in the News

While research into trust in the media has a long research tradition, a single definition or reliable operationalisation of news trust is lacking in the literature (Fisher, 2016, p. 455). An important part of that conceptual vagueness is due to the notion of 'media' variably referring across studies to media in general, to different media types, to media as institutions, to individual media outlets, to journalists, as well as to the content or topic of media coverage (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 9). In an effort to increase conceptual clarity, Strömbäck et al. (2020, p. 10) suggest a central focus on trust in the information coming from news media rather than trust in the media as institutions or in individual news producers.

To a large extent, we adhere to this perspective. In the study, respondents were asked to denote whether they agree or disagree, via a 1–5-point Likert scale, with the following statement: 'I think you can trust most *news* most of the time.' An equivalent question was asked for trust in the news one consumes, news in social media, and news in search engines, always leaving the concept open to the interpretation of the respondent (see also Fletcher & Park, 2017, p. 1290). However, the argumentation proposed by Strömbäck and his colleagues once more puts central the idea of an informed citizenry that needs verified, reliable, and factual information to play its democratic role. Then indeed, the most important thing is that citizens trust the information in itself.

But when considering a publicly connected citizenry, trust in the news providers becomes equally important. Rather than continuously engaging in information-gathering, people are mainly busy living their own lives, and in doing so might often just scan the headlines, while trying to remain alert and ready to respond to news that affects their lives (Graves, 2017, p. 1243). In navigating the high choice news environment, they develop epistemological strategies to assess which news to trust. One such strategy is pragmatic trust, where news users confide in specific news sources based on personal experience but also institutional reputation (Schwarzenegger, 2020, p. 371). In this study, we therefore also look at trust in news brands. Respondents were invited to answer the

question: 'How trustworthy would you say news from the following brand is?'—on the condition that they had heard of the brand and without differentiating for the device or channel they used to access the brand. A scale from 0 to 10 was used where 0 is 'not at all trustworthy' and 10 is 'completely trustworthy.'

3. Methodology

In this article, we use the raw data of the 2020 *Digital News Report* (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Nielsen, 2020). The survey was conducted by YouGov with respondents from an online panel in January 2020—just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit most countries—across 40 markets spread over six continents. The data set used for this article concerns 980 news users from Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium), is representative of the online population and is weighted according to targets on variables such as age, gender, and education.

Our focus of the analysis was mainly on questions relating to reach and trust, limiting the analysis to the brands of VRT and its main commercial counterparts. We break down the results according to three socio-demographic dimensions: age, education level, and political orientation. For age, we choose to differentiate within the younger age groups when presenting the data, as younger people are more likely to have a preference for non-mainstream news sources than older people (Fletcher & Park, 2017, p. 1292). We work with three brackets: 18 to 24 years, 25 to 34 years, and 35 years and older. For education levels, we asked 10 categories, which we recoded into lower education (all levels up to upper secondary education), middle (from upper secondary education to short-cycle tertiary education), and higher education (bachelors, masters and doctorates). For political orientation, we asked respondents to position themselves on a left–right political scale ranging from 'very left-wing' and 'fairly left-wing' to 'slightly left of centre,' 'centre' and 'slightly right of centre,' to 'fairly right-wing' and 'very right-wing,' recoding them accordingly into left, centre, and right. For each of these sociodemographic variables, statistical significance was tested via a One-way ANOVA test for the dependent variable (brand trust scores) and calculated using a Tukey post-hoc test (see Supplementary File Annex 2).

For reach, the question was divided into one for offline and one for online brands. For offline media, the question was formulated so as to encompass all forms of use, including delayed viewing of radio and television; for online media, the question encompassed all channels or devices used, including via apps and social media. The respondents were asked to mark the brands they used three days a week or more. In the analysis, we interpret this as use on a regular basis. For VRT, this means that the following channels were included: the main television channel één, the information and cultural channel Canvas, the information radio channel Radio 1, as well as the popular radio channel Radio 2, the alternative niche

radio channel Stubru, and the niche entertainment radio MNM. In the presentation of the data, we grouped the television channels under VRT TV, the generalist radio channels under VRT Radio (broad), and the niche radio channels under VRT Radio (niche).

We benchmark the results against the most popular news brands in Flanders on the one hand and key 'quality' news brands on the other hand. The most popular brands include the television station VTM, the radio station Q Music and the newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, all owned by DPG Media, and the newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad*, owned by Mediahuis. The quality news brands include the newspapers *De Standaard*, owned by Mediahuis, and *De Morgen*, owned by DPG Media. This gives a similar picture online. For VRT, the general news brand VRT NWS is probed—also in the brand trust question. For the popular media, the online counterparts of *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* were included. It is important to mention that VTM and Q Music are run based on advertisements only and hence offer their content for free, whereas all the other newspapers here operate some form of hybrid/metered paywall, offering a combination of free and a paid news offerings.

4. Findings

Before looking specifically at the levels of (self-reported) trust in the public broadcaster amongst Flemish news users, we analyse how the public broadcasters' offline and online channels compare to those of commercial players in terms of use.

4.1. Reach of PSM News Is Big but Differs Significantly across Age and Education

Our data show, firstly, that VRT is still widely used for news in Flanders. All VRT channels and brands combined are regularly used by 60% of Flemish news users. Secondly, while VRT is dominant offline, it has not been able to hold that same position online. Its television channels are regularly used by 33% of Flemish news users, slightly more than main commercial channel VTM. Online, however, only 23% of Flemish news users regularly turn to its news site. Here, VRTNWS is outperformed by the online offering of the commercial newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* (39%) and closely followed by *Het Nieuwsblad* (22%). Thirdly, behind the general numbers lie important differences in terms of the target audiences and competition with commercial partners. Let us zoom in on how VRT's reach for news differs across age, education level, and political orientation.

4.1.1. Age

VRT regularly reaches 52% of news users between 18 and 24 years old (see Table 1 in Supplementary File Annex 1). VRT reaches the young with news mainly through its ded-

icated radio stations (29%), Stubru and MNM. Television is clearly a more difficult story. Reach is almost twice as high amongst regular users over 35 years old (38%) as amongst those under 35 years (20%). Is VRT reaching more young people via its website or social media (see Table 2 in Supplementary File Annex 1)? No. Online reach (21%) is only slightly higher than television amongst the 18 to 24 years old. What is maybe most remarkable here is that VRTNWS is performing particularly poorly amongst the 'millennial' age group of 24 to 34 year olds (14%) and has the highest reach in the over 35 age group (25%). So, VRT reaches younger audiences mainly through its dedicated radio stations and has not yet managed to convert its decreasing TV audience into an online audience.

One might, of course, suspect young people to be a tough audience. So how does VRT compare to other popular news brands in this regard? Once more, VRT's niche radios perform well as they reach more young people than any other news brand. Admittedly, we are talking about hourly news updates here, not in-depth coverage. When we turn to television, één (VRT) and VTM (DPGMedia) provide the only two television news bulletins in Flanders, which are comparable in terms of length, frequency, and format. Both provide additional current affairs shows, but VRT offers significantly more of these through its second channel Canvas. Even with both channels combined, VTM (26%) is performing better amongst the youngest age group than VRT (19%). Popular newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* reaches roughly the same amount of 18 to 24 years old (18%) as the public broadcasters' television stations. Online, *Het Laatste Nieuws* leads the pack (36%) by a large margin, but VRT NWS (21%) is doing a much better job in reaching young people online than the other newspapers' websites (see Table 2 in Supplementary File Annex 1). VTM and *Het Laatste Nieuws* are also part of the same media group, DPG Media, and since the latter took full ownership of VTM, cross-promotion between the newspaper and the television channel has increased. In short, VRT's main commercial counterpart, DPG Media, is doing a better job at reaching younger audiences both offline and online.

4.1.2. Education

When it comes to education levels (see Table 3 in Supplementary File Annex 1), VRT brands reach more higher-educated (70%) than middle- (49%) or lower-educated (56%) citizens. Whereas VTM (37%) reaches a greater number of lower educated citizens through television than VRT (28%), VRT reaches more of them than the popular newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* (25%).

We see a similar picture online (see Table 4 in Supplementary File Annex 1): VRT NWS (32%) and *Het Laatste Nieuws* (37%) both reach a significant portion of the higher-educated, but whereas *Het Laatste Nieuws* reaches a similar percentage of the lower- (41%) and middle-educated (41%), VRT NWS reaches

much less of them (18%), being surpassed also by *Het Nieuwsblad* (20%) amongst these groups. Again, compared to *De Standaard* (5%) and *De Morgen* (4%), VRT performs better here. So, VRT reaches fewer lower- and middle-educated people than popular brands but reaches more of them than other quality brands. It thus takes a middle-ground position.

4.1.3. Political Orientation

When looking at political orientation (see Table 5 in Supplementary File Annex 1), we see a rather nuanced view. Overall, VRT brands do not show a great deal of variation between left-, centre-, and right-wing citizens, reaching 65%, 64%, and 58% of each group, respectively. Through its television stations, VRT reaches more citizens on the left (40%) than the right (30%), but this is not the case through its broad radio networks (22% vs. 27%). VTM is even more 'polarised' in terms of the political orientation of its audience (19% vs. 35%), leaning more towards the right. Online (see Table 6 in Supplementary File Annex 1), this discrepancy is almost completely absent in the audience of VRT NWS, especially compared to its competitors.

4.2. PSM is the Most Trusted News Brand across Education and Political Orientation

Trust in the news, in general, is relatively high in Flanders, even if a slight downward trend has recently been detected. In 2020, Flanders was ranked 6th amongst the 40 countries surveyed in Newman et al. (2020). When it comes to social media and search engines, on the other hand, Flanders is much more aligned with other countries.

In our sample, when asked whether they agreed that most news can be trusted most of the time, 56% said yes, although when asked the same question about news via search engines and via social media, only 28% and 16% agreed, respectively. Clearly, news obtained through the intermediary of powerful technology companies is less trusted. Only 39% of the 18 to 24 age group agreed that they generally trusted the news compared to 56% of those over 35: a notable difference. Across educational levels, we only see slightly higher trust levels amongst the higher-educated, and regarding political orientation, there are slightly higher trust levels on the left. For trust in social media, one might suspect trust to be higher amongst younger generations as they are more likely to turn to social media for news. Hoverer, only 18% of those under 35 years old agree that news via social media can be trusted most of the time, compared to 15% of the group above 35 years old. Trust and use thus do not always match.

Against that background, VRT NWS succeeds in being the most trusted of the brands in our analysis, with an average score of 7.3 out of 10, outperforming not only the news of main commercial broadcaster

VTM (7), newspaper/site *Het Laatste Nieuws* (6.5), and radio Q Music (6.2), but also main quality newspapers like *De Standaard* (7) and *De Morgen* (6.6). The public broadcaster might not always be the most used news brand, but it is still the most trusted. That observation is confirmed also by the high market share of VRT NWS during the Coronavirus crisis (PDE, 2020). On the other hand, the scores of VRT and its main competitors are not that far apart.

4.2.1. Age

When looking at trust in relation to age (see Figure 1), we can conclude that, in general, Flemish news users under 35 years old tend to score news brands lower than those above 35, albeit with some notable exceptions. Also worth noting is that for every brand, the 25 to 35 age group is the least trusting, which could be due to their specific life phase. Still, amongst this age group, as amongst those over 35, the public broadcaster remains the most trusted brand, even holding up against quality newspapers. This is not the case amongst the

18 to 24 year olds. Not only do they trust VRT significantly less than those older than 35, but they also trust VTM more than VRT. VTM combines its higher reach in this age group with a (slightly) higher trust score. And while the use of *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* is much lower amongst this age group, the quality news brands resonate in terms of trust. This shows that while young people have much lower trust in the news in general, they do trust the main news brands, including the public broadcaster. It might indicate that young people, in particular, have developed a more cautious way of navigating the news, being critical about news in general, but using a 'traditional' compass which guides them towards the more trusted brands.

4.2.2. Education

We see more remarkable differences when considering education levels (see Figure 2). Higher-educated citizens trust VRT's news radio Radio 1 significantly more than lower-educated citizens, who in turn trust commercial brands like *Het Laatste Nieuws* and VTM Nieuws more
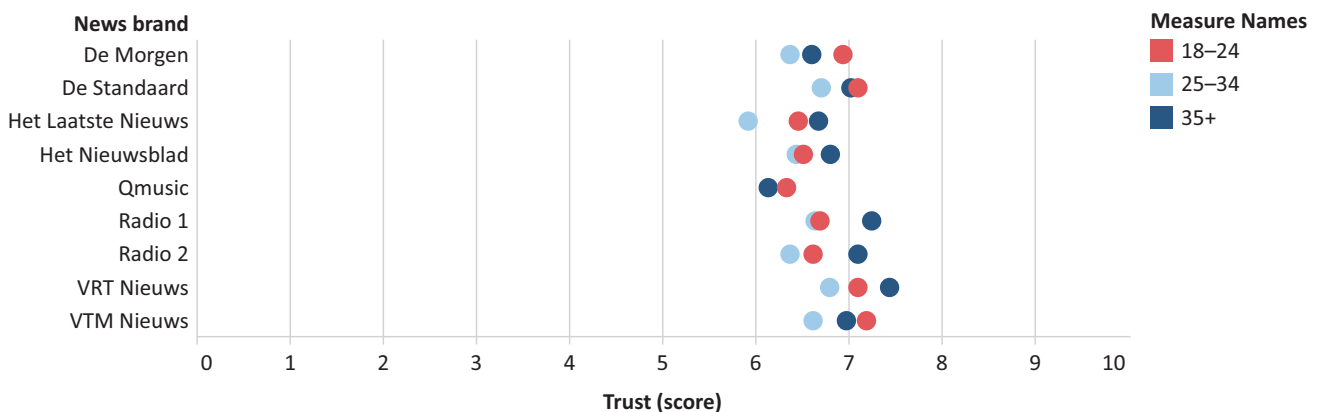

Figure 1. Trust in news brands by age. Notes: The question was 'How trustworthy would you say news from the following brands is? Please use the scale below, where 0 is "not at all trustworthy" and 10 is "completely trustworthy."' See Table 1 in Supplementary File Annex 2 for exact numbers and statistical significance tests.
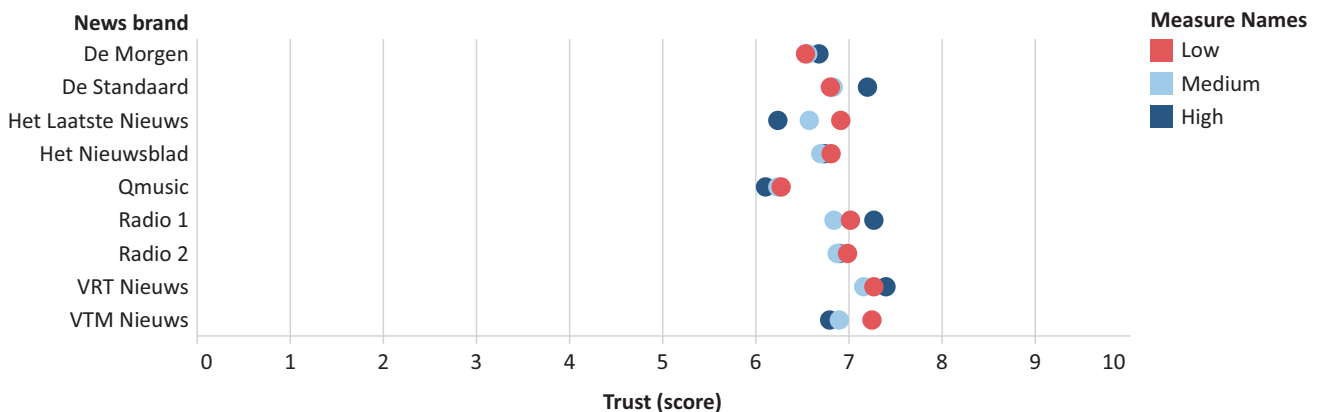

Figure 2. Trust in news brands by education level. Notes: The question was 'How trustworthy would you say news from the following brands is? Please use the scale below, where 0 is "not at all trustworthy" and 10 is "completely trustworthy."' See Table 2 in Supplementary File Annex 2 for exact numbers and statistical significance tests.

than higher-educated users. This seems to correspond broadly with reach: VRT and DPG Media reach more higher- and lower-educated citizens respectively and are also trusted more amongst those groups. But while trust in brands such as *Het Laatste Nieuws* and VTM drops significantly amongst the higher-educated, this does not hold for trust in VRT NWS amongst the lower-educated. VRT NWS, and also Radio 2, is much less differentiating in terms of education levels, especially when compared to VTM and *Het Laatste Nieuws*. Except for its information radio Radio 1, trust in VRT is quite similar across education levels.

4.2.3. Political Orientation

A similar pattern can be seen between people on the right showing slightly lower trust scores across all media, except for popular news brands *Het Nieuwsblad* en *Het Laatste Nieuws*, where trust is lower amongst left-wing citizens (Figure 3). In particular, trust in *Het Laatste Nieuws* is significantly lower amongst left-wing citizens. Trust in the public broadcaster, while still high, is in turn significantly lower amongst people on the right than on the left and in the centre. Here, it is VTM that seems to be the least 'polarising' brand. This right–left divide in trust is in line with the discourse and policies of right-wing political parties in Flanders, which have been critical about the scope and editorial decisions made by VRT. Still, even amongst citizens leaning to the right of the political spectrum, VRT remains the most trusted source amongst the brands covered. Again here, what might be a more accurate description is that trust in VRT NWS amongst right-wing voters is high and particularly high amongst left-wing voters.

5. Conclusions

Our research shows that VRT still reaches a lot of citizens and that its reach is higher among older and more highly educated people. While being a market leader in

radio and television, VRT has less reach with its online news offerings. The popular news brands of DPG Media and Mediahuis lead, with VRT being in the middle, and quality newspapers following with their news sites. VRT reaches fewer young people although, unlike commercial media, the discrepancy between age groups manifests itself mostly in relation to television rather than its online news offers. For radio, channels such as Stubru and MNM seem to be effective means of aiming information at young people. Essentially, data shows that VRT is no exception, and follows the major trends in news consumption that Western and North European PSM are generally confronted with (Schulz, Levy, & Nielsen, 2019). The status of online news differs somewhat with some public broadcasters such as the British BBC and Irish RTE being very competitive with their commercial online news offers.

Is the low reach of VRT with young people, compared to tabloid-like brands such as *Het Laatste Nieuws* and its website hln.be, a problem? Not per se. It might be logical that VRT reaches fewer young people compared to brands with more celebrity news, human interest, etc., as younger audiences, paradoxically, do not necessarily prioritise the consumption of 'serious' news over 'light' news, even if they deem the former more important (Costera Meijer, 2007). As most commercial news websites are increasingly putting their articles behind pay-walls, reach with young people might fall as willingness-to-pay is low within this group (Flamingo, 2019). At the same time, radio brands such as Stubru and MNM are experimenting with online-only content, also in the news domain, and might see their reach increase further. As such, VRT, through its various brands, is still feeding information with alternative perspectives into the high-choice news environment for people to consume at their own pace.

When we look at trust instead of reach, we see a different picture. VRT remains the most trusted news brand, even though most of its commercial counterparts also show high trust levels. The high level of trust in the news
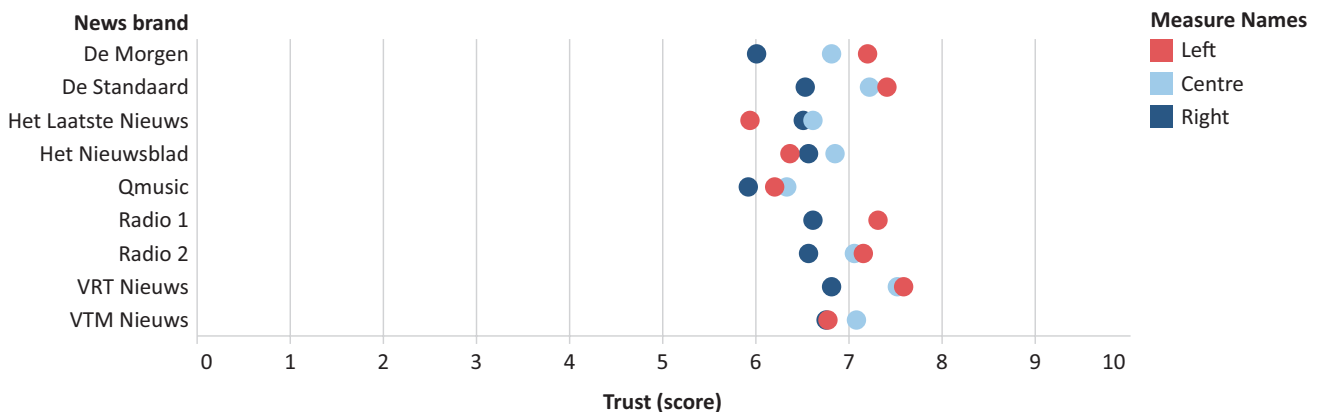

Figure 3. Trust in news brands by political orientation. Notes: The question was 'How trustworthy would you say news from the following brands is? Please use the scale below, where 0 is "not at all trustworthy" and 10 is "completely trustworthy."' See Table 3 in Supplementary File Annex 2 for exact numbers and statistical significance tests.

and most news brands in Flanders remains remarkable and might be the result of strong news brands (including those of VRT), the relatively slow take-up of digital news and a lack of big media scandals. Here too, breaking down the numbers shows a more nuanced situation. The more highly educated people have higher trust levels in news overall whereas older people and people with a left-wing orientations trust VRT more than the young and those with right-wing orientations. The latter have lower trust in the news generally, and their trust in VRT is still high. Young people (18 to 24 years old) trust the commercial broadcaster VTM more than VRT. That is somewhat concerning and should be looked into further.

Still, if we consider VRT as an organisation that should be optimised for trust rather than reach, then it would definitely meet its goals. This is important when we conceive citizens as publicly connected rather than strictly informed citizens. In that case, the presence of a trusted PSM in the ecosystem remains key, even if not always used. It also opens up the debate on competition. The scope of the PSM should not be to compete with others to attract the largest audience, nor should PSM be evaluated on that. Rather, it should be assessed on trust and how it works to maintain trust.

Even when putting trust first though, challenges can arise. If we look at young people, we see that in terms of trust, VTM scores slightly better. A commercial player, too, can succeed in providing news that is trusted by a younger audience. That offers interesting avenues for hypotheses. The main question here is: would VTM ever have reached this level of trust if it had not been forced to compete with VRT? Or the other way round, would VRT have the reach it has if it had not been forced to take into consideration the more 'user-friendly' approach of VTM?

The study at hand is leading us to question our view on the place of PSM in the news ecosystem. We conceive their impact to be valued, not so much on the level of a single organisation finding an online audience, but of an organisation injecting a specific kind of information and journalistic practice in the system for the whole system to benefit from. Previous studies have linked the presence of PSM to an overall higher degree of trust in both institutions and individuals and have linked the individual use of PSM with higher levels of social trust and trust in the media (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris, & Eisenegger, 2019, p. 3678). Assessing PSM from the perspective of trust and defining performance accordingly carves out a specific place for PSM in the public domain. This is a place that should be less governed by reaching people with information but by injecting trustworthy information into the ecosystem.

This perspective steps away from an all too market-driven logic of PSM as broad crowd-pleasers, but on the other hand does not focus on a too informed public either, which would reduce it to a mere hard news information provider. Rather, it puts forward the need for PSM to be a trusted source. In Flanders, despite what right-wing

politicians might claim, VRT still is that trusted source amongst its main stakeholders, namely its citizens.

Still, further reflection is needed on how to study and assess this role. Such an assessment will always depend on the indicators used. Increased competition of global tech giants and editorial analytics permeating public and private newsrooms do not offer the most fertile ground for discussing audience metrics that go beyond reach. Indicators valuing trust next to reach require a less information-centric view on citizenship to start with. In order to develop such an indicator, further research will be necessary that also tackles some of the limitations of this study. Firstly, qualitative research can help us understand why young people prefer one news source over another. It will also shed light on their trust in news media and their appreciation of core PSM values such as independence, impartiality, and quality. Secondly, while the focus of this article was on news consumption and trust, a more comprehensive account of news repertoires and their social stratification will add to a more layered and contextualized understanding of news consumption.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Public Service Media in a Digital Media Environment: Performance from an Audience Perspective

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Abstract

For decades, public service broadcasting has played an important role in the provision of news and information in many European countries. Today, however, public service media (PSM) are confronted with numerous challenges, including the need to legitimise their role in an increasingly digital media environment. Against this background, this study examines the audience perspective on the topic with an international comparative approach. It analyses the population's assessment of, and attitudes towards, the performance of PSM. The aim is to identify what relevance is attributed to PSM by the public in the digital age and how they see PSM's role in comparison to other more recent (digital) media offerings. An online survey was conducted in three specifically selected countries: Germany, France, and the UK. Overall, the findings show that respondents attribute a clear role to PSM and distinguish it from other media offerings in the increasingly digital media environment. They rate the information quality offered by PSM as higher than that of most other media offerings. Respondents are more likely to value social media platforms for entertainment purposes than PSM. The findings also reveal differences in the evaluation of PSM depending on PSM news use, interest in news, political interest, as well as on demographic variables. On the other hand, differences between the individual countries overall were surprisingly small, pointing to the fact that PSM across the countries sampled are—with deviations—perceived to be performing better than (most) other media, despite being confronted with changes and challenges in their environment.

Keywords

audience assessment; comparative research; digital transformation; media performance; online survey; public service media

1. Introduction

For decades, public service broadcasting has played an important role in the provision of news and information in many European countries. Public service broadcasters have traditionally been required to fulfil public service obligations, such as universality and diversity in access and coverage, as well as to provide high-quality national programmes grounded in an independent, impartial, and accountable approach (Schweizer & Puppis, 2018, pp. 114–115). Today, however, public service media (PSM) are confronted with numerous inter-

nal and external challenges: (1) PSM have a high reach regarding their news on the traditional radio and television channels, but for online news—in relation to their offline reach as well as compared to leading newspaper websites—it is less high (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andı, & Nielsen, 2020; Schulz, Levy, & Nielsen, 2019, pp. 12–14), resulting in a pressure for these traditional radio and television organisations to adapt to the digital media environment and to develop strategies for digital, mobile, and social media news distribution (Sehl, Cornia, & Nielsen, 2016); (2) PSM particularly struggle to reach young and hard-to-reach audiences in this new environ-

ment (Schulz et al., 2019, pp. 15–19), where they have to compete for attention with newer actors such as social media platforms or digital news start-ups as well as with purely non-journalistic offerings; (3) political and legal constraints challenge PSM (Brevini, 2013). Private sector media and some political parties accuse them of unfairly distorting competition through their public funding and call for more narrowly defined roles and remits. However, research has found little evidence of this so far (for an overview see Nielsen, Fletcher, Sehl, & Levy, 2016, pp. 56–77; Sehl, Fletcher, & Picard, 2020; Sjøvaag, Pedersen, Owren, & Thomas, 2018). Some countries go beyond this and are debating the legitimacy of PSM from both a liberal and a populist perspective. Right-wing populists claim that PSM coverage is distorted in favour of the establishment and is biased towards a pro-immigration and politically left-wing cultural elite (Sehl, Simon, & Schroeder, 2020).

Against this background, this study examines the audience perspective on the topic with an international comparative approach including three specifically selected countries: France, Germany, and the UK. It analyses the population's assessment of, and attitudes towards, the performance of PSM for news and information in relation to various context variables such as PSM news use, interest in news, political interest, and demographic characteristics. The aim is to identify, what relevance the public attributes to PSM, especially for news and information, in the digital age and how they see PSM's role in comparison to other more recent (digital) media offerings. In doing so, this study builds on studies about PSM reach and attitudes towards PSM in single countries (e.g., Holtmannspötter & Breunig, 2018; an exception for reach in multiple countries is Schulz et al., 2019). These existing single-country studies are often not independent, as they are commissioned by the PSM themselves. This study addresses these issues, as it is independent and comparative in design. The comparative approach allows discussion of whether the assessment is mainly influenced by country context or whether there is, at least for the sample countries, a tendency for how the public perceives PSM as distinct from other media.

To this end, an online survey was conducted in Germany, France, and the UK, representing different media systems (Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, & Castro, 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Apart from funding, the institutional and legal conditions under which PSM operate may either constrain or enable attempts by governments or other political elites to influence reporting (Hanretty, 2009). To understand the expected differences in the findings, it is therefore important to emphasise that while they are all PSM, they are not all the same.

The article is structured as follows: First, the question of how (public service) media should perform is discussed from a normative perspective, before research on media performance from an audience perspective is presented. On this basis, research questions are formulated and the method of the study laid out. In the penultimate section, findings are presented. The article concludes by summarising and interpreting the findings, discussing the limitations of the approach, and providing perspectives for future research.

2. Public Service Media and Media Performance

How media should perform is a question that can be answered from different perspectives, for example from an economic, an audience perspective, or from the professionals' point of view etc. Moreover, quality criteria are always derived from certain norms, principles, standards, or regulations, which must be stated (Wyss, 2002, p. 98).

How PSM specifically should perform is laid down in their legal basis and regulations in each country. However, these legally defined public service obligations are often relatively general and vague. Therefore, on this basis, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), an association which represents PSM in Europe and beyond, as well as the ARD, a joint organisation of Germany's mainly regional public service broadcasters, have developed value systems which are more operationalisable and also address the challenges PSM are facing today in the increasingly digital media environment. Their focus is on PSMs' value to society, and they actively aim to stimulate a societal debate around them (van Eimeren, 2019, p. 452). Consequently, the perspective on media performance here is a normative one. From this perspective, media performance is defined according to the function of news media in democratic societies (e.g., McQuail, 1992).

The EBU describes six core values and public service obligations of PSM: Universality (in access, reach, and content), independence, excellence, diversity, accountability, and innovation (EBU, 2012). These correspond partly to media performance and related criteria previously developed in communication studies for media in democracies (e.g., McQuail, 1992; Rager, 1994; Schatz & Schulz, 1992). Urban and Schweiger (2014) reviewed those different criteria catalogues and arrived at six basic quality dimensions: Diversity, relevance, accuracy, comprehensibility, impartiality, and compliance of ethical standards. In comparison, it is obvious that the EBU-criteria focus specifically on PSM and their obligations which partly differ from the expectations towards private sector media (e.g., regarding universality). However, some criteria explicitly mentioned in other studies are not mentioned in the EBU-list, possibly because dimensions and subcategories are arranged differently. It is also conceivable, however, that PSM in Europe have differed too much in terms of their legal requirements and values to arrive at a common denominator. In a nutshell, PSM tend to develop a higher degree of professionalism and independence from political control in countries with a strong democratic tradition than in countries where this democratic tradition is less pronounced or which have emerged from authoritarian regimes. In the latter, political clientelism and state paternalism are more frequent (Brevini, 2015).

This article builds on these theoretical considerations and empirical studies and adds to them by not only evaluating PSM, but by putting them in a context with other media types, legacy media and new digital media offerings, as well as by not focusing on one country only, but being comparative in its approach.

3. Media Performance from the Audience Perspective

Apart from the perspective of public value and the accompanying media qualities formulated by journalists, media experts, and scholars, there is the perspective of the audience itself. This is less researched than the normative perspective, however, the number of studies has grown in the last ten years.

Studies on how recipients evaluate different media offerings and/or whether they are able to determine the normative quality of reporting focus on different levels: On the macro-and meso-level, they analyse recipients' evaluations of media types such as radio, TV, newspaper, online (e.g., Holtmannspötter & Breunig, 2018, differentiated between private sector broadcasting and PSM; Neuberger, 2014), or specific media brands or programmes (e.g., Gehrau, 2008; Gscheidle & Geese, 2017). The findings of these surveys show that recipients indeed differentiate between different media types or brands in their quality evaluations and, for example, rate German PSM radio and TV offerings higher for information-centred qualities than those of private-sector radio and TV (Holtmannspötter & Breunig, 2018), or specific PSM TV news programmes higher than those of private-sector TV (Gscheidle & Geese, 2017). On the micro-level, they examine single news items, usually in a combination of content analysis and survey or experiment (e.g., Jungnickel, 2011; Urban & Schweiger, 2014). Overall, they indicate that recipients realise quality differences to a certain extent, but not fully. Furthermore, Urban and Schweiger (2014) identify media image as a factor influencing the assessment of a news item.

Apart from the question of the evaluation of different media offerings, studies have also analysed (role) expectations of the audience, often in relation to those of journalists. However, the focus here is on the audience. Tsfati, Meyers, and Peri (2006) compared Israeli public and journalist perceptions of what constitutes good and bad journalism. They found that the public rated verifying facts, neutrality, and not publishing rumours more important than public interest or interpreting the news. In a study comparing US newspaper journalists and US citizens, de Zúñiga and Hinsley (2013) observed that the public rated getting information quickly, covering stories that should be covered, and verifying facts most highly, while being a watchdog for the public, helping people and—interestingly—being objective was rated lowest. Heise, Loosen, Reimer, and Schmidt (2014) compared journalistic role expectations of journalists and audience members of a German PSM news programme (Tagesschau). Here, the audience rated—contrary to de Zúñiga and

Hinsley (2013)—objectivity highest, followed by explaining complex topics and criticising problems. To provide useful information for the audience in an advisor/guide role, entertainment and relaxation and opportunity for the audience to communicate among themselves was rated least important. Like de Zúñiga and Hinsley (2013), Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit (2019) focused on US journalists and US citizens. Their findings show that for citizens it was most important to get information to the public quickly, to not publish unverified content, and to investigate government claims. To develop intellectual or cultural interests, to influence the political agenda or entertainment instead was seen as least important. In addition, the study revealed that traditional news media use and social media use for work/news predicted higher support for traditional journalistic roles among citizens. Also, Vos, Eichholz, and Karaliova (2019) explored how the American audience assesses normative journalistic roles and compared their assessments to those of journalists. Most important to citizens was to "report things as they are," "educate the audience" and "provide information people need to make political decisions," while aiming to "influence public opinion," "be an adversary of the government" and "set the political agenda" were ranked lowest. (Vos et al., 2019, p. 1022)

Taken together, the studies show that citizens overall rate traditional journalistic role expectations important that are in line with normative media performance such as reporting quickly, on relevant topics, and in an objective manner, while they differentiate other roles such as acting in particular interests. These studies are an important context for the current study insofar as they provide information on how important the performances explored here are to audiences.

Fawzi (2020) analysed, based on a representative survey of the German population, to what extend the media are able to fulfil expected performances from a citizen's perspective; her findings show that the audience overall is satisfied with the media. However, while the respondents were satisfied with how the media fulfilled their watchdog, information, and opinion formation function, larger parts did not say this to the same extent regarding integration, articulation, and orientation functions. Fawzi further explored how different individual political variables and media use relate to the evaluation of media performance. She found that political interest, satisfaction with democracy, political confidence, and satisfaction with the current economic situation had a positive influence on the evaluation of media performance. The type of media (e.g., PSM or tabloids newspapers) respondents used were not significant predictors. Perceived media dependency and presumed media influence were positively related to the assessment of media performance.

Finally, studies are investigating the role of quality perceptions in selecting a media product: de Zúñiga and Hinsley (2013) found a positive association between the citizens' assessment of media performance and their

news and infotainment use. In line with that, Tsfati (2010) demonstrated that mainstream news exposure is related to trust in media, while exposure to non-mainstream news websites is associated with media scepticism.

To sum up, we have seen in the literature overview that the audience: (1) can evaluate media performance to a certain degree; (2) their expectations to journalistic roles highly overlap with normative media performance criteria; and (3) they are more likely to consume news they assess as being high performance and in which they trust than those news offerings they rate less highly or they are more sceptical about.

Nevertheless, it is important to underline that the audience perspective and the normative perspective do not need to be in line as it is expressed in the assumption that PSM are seen as merit goods (e.g., Holtz-Bacha, 2015, p. 38). Merit goods, often expensive to produce while providing little financial return, are not provided by supply and demand because what they produce is socially desirable (for an overview of studies on the social and political impact of PSM see Nielsen et al., 2016) while not paid enough for by the consumers (Ali, 2016).

4. Research Questions

This empirical study seeks to analyse audience perceptions of PSM performance compared to other media types in today's changing and increasingly digital media environment. Here actors compete for attention with legacy media such as commercial radio, TV, and newspapers, as well as newer actors like social media platforms. The aim is to identify, in a comparative design for France, Germany, and the UK, what relevance the public attributes to PSM, especially for news and information, in the digital age and how they see PSM's role compared to other and more recent (digital) media offerings. In this context, it is important to say that categories like social media or video platforms are, when evaluated e.g., regarding trust, usually evaluated overall in spite of the fact that they host a variety of actors and offer very diverse content—from private posts over public relations to propaganda content and professional journalism. However, little is also known about how much the audience actually differentiates between different actors and contents on these platforms.

The research questions for this three-country study are as follows:

RQ1: How do citizens rate the overall performance of PSM for information against other types of media?

RQ2: What specific performances do citizens associate with PSM compared to other types of media?

RQ3: How do PSM news use, interest in news, political interest, and demographics influence the evaluation of perceived PSM information quality?

5. Method

The study is based on an online survey conducted in three countries, France, Germany, and the UK, with respect to the assessment of and attitudes towards PSM compared to other types of media. In each of the three countries, 1,000 citizens, representative of gender and age (18–69 years in 10 years groups, e.g., 30–39 years), were sampled and surveyed via an ISO-certified online access panel provider (Respondi) in September 2019. As is common with online access panel providers, participants received a small financial incentive to take part in the survey.

The questionnaire (documented for transparency in the Supplementary File) was professionally translated to the relevant languages and scheduled to take 12 minutes to complete. Before answering questions, respondents were given a short explanation of what was meant by PSM in the questionnaire: For France, PSM was defined as all offerings of Radio France and France Télévisions; for Germany as all offerings of the ARD (including all regional ARD organisations, i.e., BR, HR, mdr, NDR, Radio Bremen, rbb, SR, SWR and WDR), of the ZDF and of Deutschlandradio; and for the UK, for the purposes of this questionnaire, PSM were defined as all services of the BBC.

This article is based on the following variables, which are described in the following paragraphs.

Sources of news: Respondents were asked where they get information about current events from, at least once a week. More than one answer was possible. Examples for each media type were provided specifically to each country context. For the UK, Channel 4 (publicly-owned and commercially-funded public service broadcaster) was treated as a special and separate case. The answer format of the multi-response questions was dichotomous.

Assessment of overall information quality of different types of media: For each type of media, this was measured separately by means of a four-point scale (very poor, generally poor, generally good, very good, don't know).

Assessment of specific performance of different types of media: The statements were taken from an ARD/ZDF-survey series Media and their Audiences (Medien und ihr Publikum, see Holtmannspötter & Breunig, 2018). Holtmannspötter and Breunig (2018) used those for a comparison of PSM and private sector radio and TV in Germany. In this respect, they cover normative values of PSM (similar to van Eimeren, 2019), but also categories relevant to private sector media in order to compare different types of media. The answer format of the multi-response questions was dichotomous.

Interest in news and interest in politics: The interest in both was measured by means of a four-point scale (no interest, not very strong, strong, very strong).

Demographics: Gender was measured as female, male, diverse. Age was measured in 10 year-age groups

(e.g., 30–39 years, for 18–69 years old). The highest educational qualification was adapted to each country context. These demographic variables were selected as measures on how PSM fulfil their mission of universality including different genders, age groups, and citizens from various educational backgrounds.

The three countries were chosen according to strategic sampling, since each country represents a different Western media system (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). As such, the survey covers media markets with varying conditions, including Germany with well-funded PSM as a representative of the democratic corporatist model; the UK as a representative of the liberal model, although this classification has been contested by some scholars due to its strong PSM and polarised press (e.g., Norris, 2009, pp. 333–334); and France within the polarised pluralist model, in which commercial media are often dominant. While in the UK and Germany direct influences of the political system on PSM content are unusual, PSM in France are in practice characterised by a higher level of state influence (see also Nord, 2015, p. 184). As a consequence of these differences, Kuhn (2006, p. 20) summarises: "France Télévisions does not enjoy the same status or legitimacy in the French media landscape that the BBC has in the UK equivalent."

Table 1 gives an overview of PSM in the three countries with key characteristics in order to provide some context for the comparative analysis.

Also when it comes to distributing their legacy programmes as well as additional services on the Internet, Brevini (2011, p. 175) argues that Southern Europe is behind the UK or Germany in this respect "as the expansion of public broadcasters into new media is a more recent phenomenon."

Furthermore, in the UK and Germany—like in many European countries—PSM conduct so-called public-value tests (Drei Stufen-Test in Germany), which aim at balancing the public interest of new online offerings with their market impact. In France, however, the control of state aid, as generally required by the European Commission for the member states, was not an issue for the online activities of PSM and a public-value test not implemented (Gransow, 2018).

In line with this, the overview of key data on PSM in the three countries shows that they have a high weekly reach for news offline in the UK and Germany, while their reach in France is somewhat lower. Only the BBC in the UK is able to nearly match their weekly offline reach for news online, while in France and Germany more respondents said social media is a source of news for them than get their news at least weekly from PSM online. Apart from what has just been said above, this also corresponds to the fact that the BBC transformed its organisation to digital relatively early on, while in France, Radio France and France Télévisions are still separate organisations, both generally including online, which only in September 2016 introduced a joint PSM news website, franceinfo (Sehl, Cornia, & Nielsen, 2017). In Germany, it is important to note that the remit of PSM online activities is strictly limited by legislative interventions. The online offers generally have to be related to broadcast programmes. Furthermore, there are time limitations for digital content to be accessed online (Nissen, 2015, p. 100).

While in all three countries PSM is mainly funded by public revenues (licence fees) in order to avoid direct influence by the state or business, the public revenues per capita vary and are almost double for Germany than France, with the UK being in between. Also normalised

Table 1. Context variables on PSM as well as social media in France, Germany, and the UK.

Country	PSM	Weekly PSM news offline reach (radio and/or TV) in % (2020)[†]	Weekly PSM news online reach in % (2020)[‡]	Weekly reach social media specifically as a source of news in % (2020)	Total revenues of PSM in EUR million (2014)	Total revenues of PSM/GDP in % (both 2014)	Public revenues of PSM in % (2014)	Public revenues of PSM per capita in EUR (both 2014)
France	Radio France	16	11	39	688	0.03	84	46
	France Télévisions	36			3,018	0.14	82	
Germany	ARD (aktuell) *	55	15	37	6,942	0.24	86	98
	ZDF	47	7		2,254	0.08	85	
UK	BBC	56	45	39	5,961[§]	0.26	82	76

Notes: [†] Calculations include for France, Public radio (France Inter etc.) (Radio France), France Télévisions (France Télévisions); for Germany, ARD News (Tagesschau, Tagesthemen), ZDF News (heute, heute-journal etc); for the UK, BBC News. [‡] Calculations include for France, France Info (online); for Germany, ARD News online (tagesschau.de etc.), ZDF News online (heute.de); for the UK, BBC News. * The methodology of the Reuters Institute Digital News Report measures ARD and public regional TV news separately. Public regional TV news is listed with 20 percent weekly reach. However, the PSM funding figures are for the ARD as a whole, including the regional organisations. [§] The figure for BBC total revenues includes the turnover of BBC Worldwide and other global commercial activities as well as licence fee revenues, in line with the methodology of the European Audiovisual Observatory (see also Sehl et al., 2016, p. 12). Sources: European Audiovisual Observatory (2016), Eurostat (2020), Newman et al. (2020), and World Bank (n.d.).

by the gross domestic product (GDP) at market prices, the German PSM together have a higher budget then the British and, at the bottom of the list, the French PSM. However, Germany also has, as explained above, a comprehensive PSM system with two main national PSM of which one (ARD) consists of nine regional PSM organisations (and a public international broadcaster, but this one is not funded by the licence fee, but mainly by the German federal tax budget).

6. Findings

RQ1: How do citizens rate the overall performance of PSM for information against other types of media?

Respondents in all three countries (France, Germany, and the UK) were asked how they rate the quality of information from different media types, including PSM. Across all three countries, the findings, in general, show that PSM are at the top of the ratings compared to other types of media (see Table 2). PSM radio and TV share first place with the national quality newspapers and local and regional newspapers. PSM online services rank directly behind. They are followed by commercial radio and TV, and at the bottom of the list are video platforms, social media platforms, and tabloids.

Kruskal-Wallis H tests show that there are statistically significant differences in PSM evaluations between the countries: for PSM radio: $\chi^2(2) = 11,313$, $p = 0.003$, with a mean evaluation score of 1,360.98 for Germany, 1,289.32 for the UK, and 1,260.08 for France; for PSM TV: $\chi^2(2) = 15,367$, $p = 0.000$, with a mean evaluation score of 1,466.30 for Germany, 1,405.43 for the UK, and 1,337.86 for France, and for PSM online: $\chi^2(2) = 59.922$, $p = 0.000$, with a mean evaluation score of 1,243.98 for Germany, 1,268.12 for the UK, and 1,049.17 for France.

Post-hoc-tests (Dunn-Bonferroni-Tests) show significant differences between France and Germany regarding PSM radio ($z = 3,268$, $p = .003$) as well as PSM TV evalu-

ations ($z = 3,918$, $p = .000$). However, in both cases, the effect sizes according to Cohen (1992): $r = 0.06$ resp. 0.07 are small. There is no evidence of a difference between the other pairs for PSM radio and TV. Instead, for PSM online evaluations, there is evidence not only of differences between Germany and France ($z = 6,324$, $p = .000$), but also the UK and France ($z = 7,146$, $p = .000$). Here, the effect sizes are a bit larger but still small ($r = 0.13$ resp. 0.15). These findings could possibly be due to the previously discussed lower status of PSM in France as well as the fact that until recently, there was no central news website of PSM in France, but rather news sites of both Radio France and France Télévisions with numerous subsites (Sehl et al., 2017). RQ3 below will address how PSM news use impacts on the quality assessment for each PSM platform and country.

Beyond PSM, the findings (see Table 2) show that online offerings are generally rated better in the UK than in Germany and France; this applies to social media platforms as well as video platforms. Tabloids, which play a more important role in the UK media market, are also rated better there than in France and Germany. On the other hand, national quality newspapers and local and regional newspapers are perceived worse in the UK than in France and Germany. Overall, however, the differences are minor and cannot always be explained by the media systems.

RQ2: What specific performances do citizens associate with PSM compared to other types of media?

Information from the local and regional environment is a basic need for many people. Newspapers are the most popular here in France and Germany, as this category also includes local and regional newspapers (see Table 3). However, the respondents stated that PSM are the second-most likely to provide this service (and in the UK even the most likely), far ahead of all other types of media.

Table 2. Assessment of information quality of various types of media in France, Germany, and the UK.

Type of medium	France	Germany	UK	Total
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
PSM radio	2.98 (.619)	3.05 (.778)	2.99 (.717)	3.01 (.709)
National quality newspapers	3.06 (.619)	3.04 (.715)	2.90 (.789)	3.00 (.714)
PSM TV	2.96 (.679)	3.04 (.854)	3.01 (.724)	3.00 (.757)
Local and regional newspapers	3.05 (.582)	3.01 (.707)	2.84 (.728)	2.97 (.680)
PSM online	2.71 (.698)	2.92 (.765)	2.95 (.751)	2.87 (.747)
Commercial radio	2.89 (.622)	2.75 (.738)	2.84 (.732)	2.83 (.702)
Magazines, Weeklies	2.88 (.601)	2.71 (.746)	2.81 (.743)	2.80 (.703)
Commercial TV	2.83 (.676)	2.63 (.819)	2.94 (.694)	2.80 (.745)
Video platforms	2.45 (.753)	2.42 (.796)	2.65 (.798)	2.50 (.789)
Social media	2.27 (.840)	2.30 (.892)	2.56 (.907)	2.38 (.890)
Tabloids	1.83 (.839)	1.90 (.803)	2.37 (.914)	2.03 (.887)

Note: Question "How do you rate the quality of information in the following media?" (Scale from 1 = very poor to 4 = very good; $n_{France} = 673–954$, $n_{Germany} = 734–947$, $n_{UK} = 683–906$, n differs by item and country due to missing data ["Don't know"-option]).

Table 3. Assessment of specific performances of various types of media in France, Germany, and the UK.

		Newspapers	Weekly news magazines	PSM (radio, TV, Internet)	Private broadcasting	Social networks	Video platforms	None of these	Don't know	Total
						All values in %				
Report on regional topics (p = .000)	FR	58*	22	35	18	16	6	5	15	175
	GER	61*	19	36	32	23	8	3	11	191
	UK	40	20	44*	17	26	9	7	17	196
Provide reliable and credible information (p = .000)	FR	50*	26	42	25	8	3	12	20	186
	GER	46	25	53*	22	10	7	12	14	190
	UK	29	19	43*	17	10	7	13	19	184
Are important when it comes to forming a political opinion (p = .000)	FR	43*	27	43*	24	12	8	15	22	194
	GER	52	28	59*	28	25	17	9	14	232
	UK	33	20	41*	20	18	9	16	19	202
Provide high-quality journalism (p = .000)	FR	46*	24	35	19	5	3	14	22	166
	GER	48	25	50*	16	5	6	12	16	177
	UK	34	23	39*	18	6	5	14	19	183
Provide comprehensive background information on many topics (p = .000)	FR	42*	34	38	20	11	8	10	19	183
	GER	37	32	48*	18	15	16	11	16	193
	UK	32	23	40*	20	17	12	11	17	199
Convey the values of our society (p = .000)	FR	30*	22	29	15	9	6	24	27	161
	GER	31	21	41*	17	14	8	20	22	174
	UK	21	13	29*	13	19	10	19	26	168
Provide interesting facts from research, technology, history, nature (p = .000)	FR	33	43*	38	18	11	12	10	20	185
	GER	36	44	55*	22	20	25	4	14	220
	UK	31	29	46*	23	25	17	7	17	224
Allow all sides to express their viewson social issues (p = .000)	FR	23	19	31	21	34*	15	12	23	178
	GER	23	14	34*	16	21	14	19	21	162
	UK	15	11	29	13	30*	13	16	20	165
Provide reliable and helpful information for everyday life (p = .000)	FR	43	33	44*	24	13	9	11	18	195
	GER	43	31	52*	28	23	18	8	14	216
	UK	33	21	46*	18	25	13	11	16	206
Highlight injustices and shortfalls (p = .000)	FR	31	21	33*	20	30	13	12	23	182
	GER	35	25	42*	26	30	18	11	20	206
	UK	31	18	33*	19	24	10	10	24	193

Table 3. (Cont.) Assessment of specific performances of various types of media in France, Germany, and the UK.

		Newspapers	Weekly news magazines	PSM (radio, TV, Internet)	Private broadcasting	Social networks	Video platforms	None of these	Don't know	Total
						All values in %				
Are independent of state, politics and business (*p* = .000)	FR	16	13	15	18	22*	14	22*	31	151
	GER	24	20	28*	24	25	20	22	21	184
	UK	14	13	19	15	18	14	21	28*	156
Are good for relaxing (*p* = .000)	FR	11	23	28*	19	27	19	20	17	164
	GER	14	25	35*	32	30	31	11	11	190
	UK	23	15	32*	17	31	22	16	13	189
Provide good entertainment (*p* = .000)	FR	12	24	35*	24	35*	23	14	16	183
	GER	18	28	46*	43	39	39	5	11	229
	UK	21	14	43*	23	37	27	8	13	217
Are enjoyable and amusing (*p* = .000)	FR	8	18	32*	22	31	23	16	18	167
	GER	13	24	35	35	40*	40*	8	13	207
	UK	21	16	35	16	41*	26	11	13	201
Contain too much advertising (*p* = .000)	FR	20	33	56*	41	38	32	5	12	237
	GER	17	37	30	53*	43	40	4	11	235
	UK	24	21	24	22	37*	27	8	15	215

Notes: Question "Below are some statements regarding services provided by the media. Please tick all the media to which each statement applies in your case. More than one answer may be given" (n_{France} = 1,000, $n_{Germany}$ = 1,000, n_{UK} = 1,000). * = dominant category/categories in the respective country.

Interestingly, there is a quite consistent difference between the audience assessments of PSM media performance in Germany and the UK versus France when it comes to several information-oriented categories. For "provide reliable and credible information," "provide high-quality journalism," "convey the values of our society," and "provide comprehensive background information on many topics" PSM in Germany and France (radio, TV, online) receive the highest levels of agreement, while in France this applies to newspapers.

However, in the category "allow all sides to express their views on social issues" only in Germany are PSM the category with the highest percentage. In France and the UK, most respondents associate this performance with social media platforms—possibly because of their focus on user-generated content.

There is also another remarkable point: Only 15 percent (France) and 19 percent (UK) of respondents perceive PSM as "independent of state, politics, and business". In France, the highest percentage of respondents state this for social media platforms or say "neither of these media" (22%). This can be interpreted cautiously in such a way that for many users, the democratic potential of the platforms to create and distribute their own content is obviously in the foreground, rather than the commercial goals of the platform companies (e.g., Nielsen & Ganter, 2017) or the political goals of some of the actors there. In the UK, the dominant group of respondents

"don't know" (28%). In Germany, the percentage of respondents who see PSM as independent of state, politics, and business is slightly higher (28%), but also percentages for this category are relatively low across all types of media. These findings generally show that a significant part of the population is sceptical about the independence of PSM and journalism in general.

Finally, PSM are seen as a little less "enjoyable or amusing". Here they are overtaken at least in Germany and the UK by social media platforms. So overall, PSM are associated with information-oriented characteristics, while other types of media, especially social media platforms, complement them especially in respect of their being enjoyable or amusing.

RQ3: How do PSM news use, interest in news, political interest, and demographics influence the evaluation of perceived PSM information quality?

This research question explores the effect of various factors on the evaluation of the quality of information in PSM. In addition to the interest in news and political interest, various central demographic factors (age, gender and formal education) have been included, based on the theoretical assumption that PSM should address society at large.

In various multiple linear regressions, the effects were calculated separately for PSM radio, TV, and

online—and separately for the three countries. The use of PSM as sources of information about current events (at least weekly), also separated by media genre, were used as control variables. This was done in blocks, with PSM news use as the control variables first, followed by interest in news and political interest, and finally, demographic data were included in the regression model.

To begin with: In all cases, the explained variance after the first block of PSM news use accounted for a large part of the variance explained by the entire model. Nonetheless, the other two blocks—interest in news and political interest as well as demographic data—led to a further explanation of variance.

The linear regression models show a quality score of .148 (Germany), .070 (UK), and .106 (France; adjusted R-squared) for the evaluation of the quality of information in PSM radio in the three countries (see Table 4). In addition to the use of PSM news on legacy platforms, the most significant and meaningful predictor is, with slight differences between countries, interest in news. Gender

(male) also has a significant, albeit weak, influence on the rating of the information quality of PSM radio programmes. In contrast, political interest is a significant predictor only in Germany and has a negative sign, meaning that political interest impacts negatively on the quality assessment. A possible interpretation could be that citizens that say that they are more interested in politics are therefore also more critical towards news and information. Age and formal education have no significant effect in any of the three countries.

Similarly, the significant effects can be seen in the evaluation of the information quality of PSM TV programmes in the three countries (see Table 5). Here the model achieves a quality of .142 (Germany), .059 (UK), and .112 (France; adjusted R-square). Again, in addition to the use of the PSM radio and TV for news, the interest in news has a significant influence and is a strong predictor in all three countries. Political interest, on the other hand, has a significant influence only in France and Germany, again with a negative sign. Furthermore, for

Table 4. Effects on the assessment of information quality of PSM radio in France, Germany, and the UK (multiple linear regression).

	Beta (Std. error)		
DV: Assessment of information quality of PSM radio	France	Germany	UK
PSM radio news use	.206 (.043)***	.199 (.053)***	.186 (.052)***
PSM TV news use	.144 (.045)***	.178 (.055)***	.102 (.055)**
PSM online news use	.009 (.050)	.081 (.053)*	.011 (.052)
Interest in news	.141 (.032)***	.225 (.050)***	.153 (.047)**
Political interest	−.016 (.028)	−.217 (.043)***	−.050 (.040)
Male	−.125 (0.41)***	−.078 (.050)*	−.082 (.052)*
Age	−.027 (.016)	.023 (.018)	−.018 (.019)
Formal education	−.001 (.012)	−.016 (.011)	−.043 (.013)
N	873	890	814
Adjusted R^2	.106	.148	.070

Notes: Columns showing standardised beta coefficients following by standard error in parentheses. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. n differs by country due to missing data for DV ["Don't know"-option] and "Other"-option for IV "Formal education".

Table 5. Effects on the assessment of information quality of PSM TV in France, Germany, and the UK (multiple linear regression).

	Beta (Std. error)		
DV: Assessment of information quality of PSM TV	France	Germany	UK
PSM radio news use	.122 (.046)***	.110 (.056)**	.076 (.051)*
PSM TV news use	.230 (.047)***	.256 (.059)***	.133 (.053)***
PSM online news use	−.035 (.053)	.107 (.057)**	.049 (.051)
Interest in news	.192 (.033)***	.183 (.052)***	.171 (.046)***
Political interest	−.080 (.030)*	−.171 (.045)***	−.047 (.038)
Male	−.076 (.043)*	−.089 (.053)**	−.075 (.050)*
Age	−.017 (.016)	−.010 (.019)	.004 (.018)
Formal education	−.017 (.013)	.002 (.012)	−.087 (.013)*
N	948	945	879
Adjusted R^2	.112	.142	.059

Notes: Columns showing standardised beta coefficients following by standard error in parentheses. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. n differs by country due to missing data for DV ["Don't know"-option] and "Other"-option for IV "Formal education".

gender (male) a significant, albeit weak influence, can be observed in all three countries, whereas formal education is only significant in the UK. Age has no relevant effect in any of the three countries.

Finally, it is interesting to note the deviations that arise when assessing the information quality of PSM online (see Table 6). Here the model achieves a quality of .167 (Germany), .068 (UK), and .082 (France; adjusted R-square). In terms of media use, significant effects are shown in all three countries for the news use of PSM online offerings themselves, while the news use of offline PSM platforms only partly has significant effects. For the third time, the interest in news in all three countries is a significant predictor for the evaluation of the information quality of PSM offerings, here online. The influence of political interest is for Germany significant, but negative.

For the first time, however, age is a significant predictor in all three countries. Obviously, online shows age effects that do not exist in this form for the traditional radio and TV distribution channels. The sign is negative. A possible explanation could be that there are differences in how digitally savvy different generations are and that, in this respect, age impacts on the evaluation. Furthermore, gender (male) is a significant, albeit weak, predictor in Germany and England, but not in France.

Overall, the use of the same offerings and interest in news have a clear influence across all PSM genres and countries and in Germany also political interest, however with a negative sign. In contrast, the demographic characteristics of gender, age, and formal education play a subordinate role at most. Overall, the explained variance is small; in other words, other factors better explain the evaluation of the PSM offerings. On the one hand, this is not surprising, and on the other hand, it is even a positive finding regarding the mission of PSM of universality and to be attractive to different groups in society, independent of gender, age, or education. From previous research, it is furthermore known that for the evaluation

of quality, criteria such as interest in a topic (Jungnickel, 2011), image of media brand (Urban & Schweiger, 2014) etc. instead play an important role.

7. Conclusion and Discussion

To summarise, the findings have shown that respondents attributed a clear role to PSM and clearly distinguished it from other media offerings in the increasingly digital media environment. They rated the information quality offered by PSM higher than that of most other media offerings. National quality newspapers as well as local and regional newspapers also performed well in terms of perceived information quality, while social media platforms and video platforms lagged behind. In this respect, the findings correspond to previous research which found that the audience can perceive differences in media performance at least to some degree (e.g., Jungnickel, 2011; Urban & Schweiger, 2014). However, the actual normative media performance needs to be measured by means of content analysis. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier on, a methodological limitation of current studies, including this one, is that in surveys they often measure social media or video platforms as overall categories when in fact they host a variety of actors and offer very diverse content. Nevertheless, obviously, an expansion of digital services has also not meant that legacy media services are not seen as important for informing society any more, at least not when it comes to the assessment of media performance. Interestingly, there were no major differences across the three sampled countries, but more minor deviations that can partly be interpreted as differences in the media systems (e.g., tabloids, which play a more important role in the UK media market [Hallin & Mancini, 2004], were also rated better there than in France and Germany). Furthermore, the post-hoc-tests showed significant differences between France and Germany regarding the evaluations of PSM radio, TV, and online information quality as well as between

Table 6. Effects on the assessment of information quality of PSM online in France, Germany, and the UK (multiple linear regression).

DV: Assessment of information quality of PSM online	Beta (Std. error)		
	France	Germany	UK
PSM radio news use	.037 (.054)	.153 (.054)***	.091 (.055)*
PSM TV news use	.068 (.056)	.147 (.056)***	.010 (.058)
PSM online news use	.187 (.059)***	.206 (.053)***	.173 (.055)***
Interest in news	.151 (.041)***	.218 (.050)***	.197 (.049)***
Political interest	−.021 (.035)	−.166 (.042)***	−.095 (.041)
Male	−.041 (.052)	−.080 (.051)*	−.091 (.055)*
Age	−.096 (.019)*	−.116 (.019)**	−.073 (.020)*
Formal education	−.045 (.016)	.054 (.011)	−.034 (.014)
N	723	818	815
Adjusted R^2	.082	.167	.068

Notes: Columns showing standardised beta coefficients following by standard error in parentheses. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. n differs by country due to missing data for DV ["Don't know"-option] and "Other"-option for IV "Formal education".

the UK and France regarding PSM online information quality. Although the effect sizes were in all cases small, these findings could possibly be due to the previously discussed lower status of PSM in France and, specifically for online, might directly reflect on recent developments in the French PSM as they only introduced a joint news website of both Radio France and France Télévisions in 2016 (Sehl et al., 2017).

In the assessment of specific performances of the various media, PSM scored particularly well in all categories in which information functions were queried. In this respect, the findings have shown that respondents saw traditional journalistic role expectations found in various studies actually largely fulfilled by PSM, such as reporting quickly, on relevant topics and in an objective manner (e.g., de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013; Heise et al., 2014; Tsfati et al., 2006; Vos et al., 2019; Willnat et al., 2019). Social media platforms were more likely to be valued by respondents in terms of entertainment.

There was one interesting difference between the audience assessments of PSM performance in Germany and the UK versus France. In a number of information-oriented categories in Germany and the UK, PSM (radio, TV, online) received the highest percentages of agreement, while in France this applied to newspapers. At the same time, PSM in France had the lowest percentages of agreement in comparison to the other two countries when it came to independence of state, politics, and business. This finding indeed corresponds to studies which describe high levels of influence of politics on PSM content in France (executive interventions, politicised councils; see Nord, 2015).

Nevertheless, overall, differences in assessments of and attitudes towards PSM between the individual countries were small. This was surprising, considering that these countries are characterised by differences, for example in (PSM) news use, PSM funding, in the organisational structures of PSM, the differences in PSM legal frameworks, and their insulation from direct political influence. This suggests that PSM across the sample countries enjoy—with deviations—a relatively strong position when it comes to their perceived media performance as distinct to other media, in spite of their being confronted with changes and challenges in the environment, including the need to deliver content across the various distribution platforms used by different target groups, as well as the rise of social media platforms. While in detail the country context mattered, e.g., in how (fast) they have adapted to digital for various reasons such as their legal frameworks, the findings have demonstrated that across these countries, the audience perceived a clear information-oriented profile of PSM and attested, with deviations especially for France, PSM a comparatively high quality.

However, the findings have also shown that a significant part of the population, albeit with some variation in country context, was sceptical about the independence of PSM and journalism in general. This aspect is impor-

tant to observe, especially as right-wing populism is gaining ground in many European countries and right-wing populists often attack the media and PSM specifically, calling it a 'state broadcaster' ('Staatsfunk'; Niemeier, 2018), trying to cut its remit, or even abolish it—or at least its public funding (on populist attacks on PSM see also Sehl, Simon et al., 2020).

It would have been desirable to give more contexts to PSM and challenges in individual countries. In future studies, it will therefore also be useful to deepen the quantitative findings of this survey, for example in group discussions. In this way, more can be discovered about the arguments for certain evaluations, and different groups, such as age groups or politically ideological groups, can be better understood.

The findings thus highlight that PSM in Western Europe still have a firm place in the opinion of respondents, despite the large number of available digital sources for news and information. However, these findings are not set in stone, and it would be helpful to observe them in longitudinal studies, as the media environment and media use are likely to continue to change. At the same time, there are also major challenges for PSM if they are to survive in this increasingly digital media environment. They must be able to drive the digital transformation in their own news organisations. Only then will they also become attractive for younger target groups, who attest to their being of good quality but who no longer use them as naturally as the older generations do, instead informing themselves via social media platforms. Here, PSM must continue to break new ground in news distribution and must adapt their formats accordingly in order to reach younger target groups—at least within the framework to which they are legally bound. In this respect the regression analyses of this study have shown for PSM online services—contrary to their offline services—that age indeed was a significant predictor of the assessment. Consequently, PSM need to live up to their mission of universality in order to legitimise themselves for society in the long term.

PSM need to find ways to communicate the (democratic) value of their services for society to the wider society, especially as they are paid by the public and discussions regarding (the amount of) the licence fee, not only by populists, will probably not keep silent. This may also include seeking discourse with those who do not support the idea of a shared and universal service, offering diversity in content and opinion in an increasingly fragmented and polarised society.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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