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Pluralism in a Hybrid Media Environment from the User Perspective

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Research Project Report
December 2019
2019/02

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Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

Research Project Report
RSCAS/Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2019/02
December 2019

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I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Publications/
cadmus.eui.eu

The CMPF is co-financed by the European Union

Pluralism in a Hybrid Media Environment from the User Perspective

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This report was written at the request of the CMPF as part of the project "Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era" (MPM2020), co-funded by the EU.

Introduction[1]

Over the past decades, the communications and media ecology has undergone radical restructuring. Ubiquitous connectivity has created the conditions for communicative abundance manifesting through high intensity of information circulation and media saturation (Keane, 2013). New platform players replace many functions of traditional media and channel much of our social and economic traffic (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018), thus producing new social structures we live in (Couldry and Hepp, 2016). The platform players and intermediaries offer more varied communication services, able to collect information on users which can be exploited in algorithm-driven content selection. Personalisation of news and information search leads to selective exposure and personally tailored modes of media use to such an extent that it is almost unlikely that two people using the same search term get the same results (Dahlgren and Alvares, 2013: 53). At the same time, new and old media and communication forms interrelate and give a way to entire "hybrid media system", in which the logic of traditional media blends with the logic of interactive modes of communication (Chadwick, 2013: 19; Mazzoleni, 2014: 44).

These structural reconfigurations are not corrective, but transformative, and certainly not immune to new forms of control. Connective qualities of online platforms do not entail, on their own, respect for information and news qualities, or the values that support content production routines advancing democracies and social welfare. These limitations affect activities across the value-chain, for instance, the algorithmic-driven dissemination of political disinformation prior to elections (Davis, 2014) or alliances between platform players, increasingly engaging in content production, giving rise to new forms of centralization and gatekeeping (O'Maley and Kak, 2018). A new symbiotic relationship has emerged also between more traditional content producers (i.e. Disney, Time Warner) and the platform players (Google, Facebook) (Birkinbine et al., 2017). These structural changes influence media users and their relationship with the sources of information. Search engines, social media or news aggregators replace traditional media outlets as primary sources of information (Newman et al., 2018; 2019). Patterns of media consumption and news use are being irreversibly changed, while selection of and access to trustworthy and comprehensive news very much depends on motivation, competences and attention of media users. The high-level choice, paradoxically, might lead to avoidance of difference and elimination of accidental exposure to political information (Prior, 2007). In consequence, contemporary democracies struggle with growing distance between political elites and ordinary citizens, crisis of institutionalized politics and growing polarization of public debates and media coverage (Voltmer and Sorensen, 2016:2).

The aim of this paper is to provide a review of the literature examining changing patterns of news consumption and exposure and its effect on news pluralism and related policy considerations at the EU and national levels. The paper also attempts to consider relevant measures for an eventual assessment in the revised MPM 2020 methodology.

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Attention and Diversity

Abundance of content and high-choice media environment create unique conditions in which competition between providers (of both content and access) is directed to attract user's attention. While available content and information is not anymore subject to scarcity, it is the user's attention that is relatively limited. Some scholars refer to these circumstances as to an "attention economy" where attention is in short supply that is to be most effectively allocated (Lanham, 2006; Ksiazek et al., 2019). Thus, understanding media exposure becomes crucially important as it reflects a micro fraction of the available news media diet. The news repertoires selected by users are being composed of subsets of available content to which users are regularly exposed, while seeking out preferred sources and contents and filtering out unwanted (Taneja et al. 2012, Ksiazek et al. 2019). In this process, many factors might shape the diversity of someone's news repertoire, including interest in politics. Some researchers show that the role of algorithms is certainly salient, but probably not most important of all factors (Borgesius et al. 2016, Bodó et al., 2019). The choice of alternative media sources and platforms contributes to exposure to diverse information, especially when hybrid - old and new online - news sources are combined. Direct access to original news content providers strengthens their autonomy vis-à-vis intermediaries. The Cairncross Review observes that online platforms gained huge power both in terms of the online market for advertising and in guiding online readers to news (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2019). This superiority makes it for publishers hard to compete (2019:8). Similar consideration refers to the digital natives, for whom, just as for the legacy news media, there appears to be a same threat – the dominance of platforms players (Mediatique, 2018: 65). On the other hand, available research studies show that online social networks, which have become an important news source, expose people to more diverse information than traditional media (Napoli, 2011; Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017, Bodó et al., 2019). A crucial question then is what are qualities of diversity or pluralism that would contribute to advancing democracies and social welfare in an environment of communicative abundance?

What Kind of Pluralism in a Hybrid Media Environment?

Robert A. Dahl enumerates "alternative information" as one of seven essential institutional arrangements necessary to democracy (1989:223) under the condition of contributing to "enlightened understanding". "Alternative information" is referred to as a citizens' communicative right ("citizens have a right to seek out alternative sources of information"), empirical condition ("alternative sources of information exist") and legal obligation ("alternative sources of information are protected by law") (1989:223). Yet a mere existence of "alternative information" or space of diversity is not sufficient. In the age of communicative abundance, mediated information and opinions have a contingent meaning and contingent effects (Keane, 1999: 22). In a high quantity of available contents quality might remain obscure or not easily findable. Wardle and Derakshan observe that the complexity and scale of information pollution presents an unprecedented challenge (2017: 10). At the same time, pluralism in its normative sense does not refer to *any* kind of diversity, but diversity producing values – in particular the merit of deliberation and quality of representation. Moreover, diversity is generated in a media system, which is neither exclusively new, nor is it exclusively digital, but hybrid. Thus, deliberative and representative values of diversity sublimate in interactions and coevolution of older and newer media. In the hybrid media system, older media are adapting and renewing their channels

of delivery, performance and audiences, while newer media are becoming part of a new mainstream (Chadwick, 2013).

In these circumstances, the deliberative value of diversity manifests in creation of public opinion and validating different perspectives on matters of public interests that distill at various geopolitical contexts at the same time: local, national, supra-national, global. The formation of a plurality of "considered public opinions" (Habermas, 2006: 416) and "enlightened understanding" (Dahl, 1979, 1989) implies also action, decision-making through deliberation, or at least validating changing preferences of citizens. A space for deliberation co-created by hybrid media may still potentially serve the "classical" functions of democratic communication: as a forum for exchange of information, opinions and knowledge, monitoring of those who hold power and providing, interpreting and contextualizing information necessary for democratic participation. Yet, ways how these functions are fulfilled in the hybrid communication environment irreversibly change. The representative value of diversity on the other hand, refers to the ability to reflect in an open manner various social actors, groups, their needs and interests, and also fundamental views on social and political reality by the hybrid media system, including traditional, mixed media as well as digital natives.

Deliberative and representative values emerge against the common ground within which diversity manifests. There is a question: what represents this common ground in an abundant media environment? The concepts like partisan selective exposure; "echo chambers" where users seek likeminded communities and viewpoints; segmented/ fragmented audiences; exclusive polarization suggest that divides and cleavages - being the "products" of diversity - seem to lead to the loosing of a common ground for deliberation and representation. Where then to look for cohesive and integrative forces of diversity? For Hannah Arendt the common ground is represented by recognition that the public gathers in a *common* public space, thus *together*, ready to *listen* and *share* different views and experiences which everyone has gained thanks to the specific individual path but also a place occupied around the "common table" (Arendt, 1958: 57). Mark Deuze uses another metaphor – of "Silent Disco" – to paint a picture of societies living in hybrid media where "partygoers dance to music" they hear in their headphones. While listening to different, individualized streams of music, participants still dance *together* (Deuze, 2011: 145). This suggests of being together, and at the same time being alone in one's experience of communication and media use. In other words, users are more connected than ever before – whether through common global space of deliberation where the global debate and reasoning oscillates around common global issues, such as climate change, yet at the same time they are on their own in forging their communication habits (Deuze, 2011: 145) and creating individualized media profiles reinforcing identity boundaries.

Hybrid media pluralism can be seen as a dynamics between forces of commonalities and differences; the ground of shared knowledge and contesting differences; the existence of shared values and common standards (such as media freedom that safeguards the hybrid media infrastructure of public communications) and culturally different and geographically specific experiences. These forces have been both accommodated and shaped by media users. Yet the role of media users has been often overlooked in comparative measurements of media pluralism or has widely been considered unapproachable or missing in media policies (Breeman, J.M. et al., 2011; Napoli, 2007). Besides, media and news exposure has not been sufficiently contested against three false impressions in a hybrid communicative environment. First, a high saturation of information and communication is often wrongly identified with huge variety and diversity. Second, there is a false sense of being well-informed and false sense of control (Potter, 2011: 8).

Obviously, the usage of news diversity with its deliberative and representative values depends heavily on users' mental efforts of selection and construction of meaning. With a conscious attention to media use and constant linking it with personal purpose, diverse information can be more thoroughly transformed into subtle knowledge structures. Mindful media use may prevent an automatic processing of the information, enriching a user instead with a diversity of perspectives. Ultimately,

what strengthens deliberative and representative values of pluralism in a hybrid media environment, is pluralism of news generated by the usage of high-quality journalism, credibility, transparency and findability. These four aspects shape to great extent conditions of hybrid media pluralism in the digital era and point to new potential threats mainly experienced from the perspective of media users. The next section of the paper will briefly explore these four qualities and discuss how they are reflected in available research studies covering EU countries.

First important aspect of hybrid media pluralism can be seen as exposure to high-quality journalism. Although there is no agreement among scholars on the definition of high-quality journalism, and some studies view high-quality journalism as a subjective concept that depends neither solely on media users nor the news providers (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2019: 16), contours of this concept can be offered for further considerations. Regardless of platforms used and the form, high-quality journalism would imply using of information and reasoning that can be viewed as accurate, comprehensible, deepening knowledge on the subject of public interest. High-quality journalism is conditioned on the one hand by an existence of professional frameworks (including quality of journalistic training, the existence of professional associations safeguarding professional autonomy, effective self-regulatory measures and standards), on the other hand by quality of content and journalistic performance (manifested in accuracy, impartiality, evidence provided, comprehensibility, explanatory value, clear distinction between genres such as the news and commentary, etc.). Particularly valuable would be investigations into abuses of power (investigative journalism) and reporting on everyday politics (political journalism) as both facilitate democratic legitimacy and potentially contribute to increasing of political participation.

Just in the course of last two years the European public could learn how significant and at the same time vulnerable investigative and high-quality journalism is in Europe, when two investigative journalists were brutally murdered because of their work. Daphne Caruana Galizia, a well-known and established investigative journalist who focused on corruption and frauds among Maltese politicians, was assassinated by a car bomb on 16 October 2017. Ján Kuciak, a young investigative journalist who reported on tax frauds and worked for the Slovak news website Aktuality.sk owned by Ringier Axel Springer, was shot dead at his home on 21 February 2018. While there might be many reasons for re-emerging threats to high-quality journalism, including investigative reporting, an assumption that such risks do not happen in the Europe does not seem to hold true anymore (Marthoz, 2018).

High-quality journalism can only survive if it is adequately protected in regulation and supported by media users. It may be seen as a choice of a healthy media diet that empowers quality information processing, and ultimately leads to better-informed political choices, more engaged citizenship, cultural creativity and personal experience of knowledge. The healthy news diet needs reasonable diversity. As with quality food, sometimes quite small proportions of ingredients of high quality can better replace the empty calories of a large quantity of junk food (Klimkiewicz, 2014: 19).

Sources of News and the Condition of Press

Some knowledge about exposure to high-quality journalism can be drawn from studies on sources of news and media use, in particular with a focus on the role of the press, or digital natives offering high-quality journalism. Such data can be extracted from few studies, in particular conducted by Eurobarometer standard and special surveys, and digital news reports by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the Oxford University. In general, European users have access to news, including political information, through a large variety of media, while internet access increases opportunities for hybrid media use. The standard Eurobarometer survey on media use (Eurobarometer, 2017) does not distinguish specifically use of the news media, but refers to media generally. The 2017 results show an increase in the use of the internet and online social networks in

the media habits of Europeans, albeit the situation varies significantly from a country to country. Still, the main platform for media and news use remains the television – watched on a TV set. Audiences may be more fragmented and media consumption patterns more hybrid, but television is still hugely dominant for the European public. The highest score in this respect was reached in Bulgaria (92% respondents watch television everyday) and the lowest in Sweden (61%) (Eurobarometer, 2017: 5). Interestingly, popularity of TV as a main platform seems much higher in South-European countries (including East European countries from the South of Europe), while it seems to be lower or decreasing in North-European countries (including East European countries from a Northern part of Europe). The use of television via the internet has increased in most of the member states covered by the survey (27% average for EU) (Eurobarometer, 2017).

The second most important platform for the media use has become the Internet. 77% of respondents use internet at least once a week, and thus, the Internet has overtaken the radio in the media use (Eurobarometer, 2017: 4). The use of the internet on an everyday or almost everyday basis is highest in Western and Northern parts of Europe, in particular Netherlands (91%), Sweden (88%), Denmark (87%) and UK (78%). The lowest score for the use of the Internet was noted in Romania (42%), Croatia (52%), Slovakia (52%) and Italy (53%). At the same time, the proportion of Europeans who listen to the radio has also slightly risen in comparison with 2015. Most widespread is the everyday use of the radio in Germany (72%) and least common in Romania (24%) (Eurobarometer, 2017).

The press remains not only most important source of original news for other media, it also presents an institutional provenance of high-quality journalism, especially in the case of quality press. Yet the differences between EU countries seem very significant when it comes to the use of the written press. The most frequent use is reported in Finland (88% of respondents read the written press every day or two or three times a week), Sweden (87%) and Austria (88%), while the least frequent in Romania (28%), Greece (33%) and Malta (39%). Austria is also an interesting example of a country where the everyday use of the written press has risen in comparison with previous years (Eurobarometer, 2017: 12). The use of online social networks is on the rise in a large majority of member states, particularly in Poland (plus 11% since 2016) and Bulgaria (plus 10% since 2016). The daily use of social networks ranges from 32% in Germany and Czech Republic to 60% in Sweden (Eurobarometer, 2017: 18).

From the perspective of a potential usage of news diversity, it would be constructive to compare what are sources of news on national and European political matters. As regards the national matters, the Eurobarometer study shows that most Europeans approach news firstly in television (77%). This applies to all the countries with an exception of Lithuania, where users search first for the news in the written press. The Internet stands for the second most frequently mentioned platform (42%), with the most frequent use in Latvia (64%) and least frequent in Portugal (31%). In some countries, the second most preferred source for the national news is not the Internet but the radio (e.g. Germany – 53%, France – 44%, Slovakia – 47%), and in some other countries the second source is the written press (e.g. Italy – 43%, Finland – 61%, Sweden – 57%, Austria – 61%). Nevertheless, overall radio seems to be mentioned more frequently as the third source (39%) than the written press (36%). Mentions of the written press are falling in most member states with most significant decreases in Romania and Poland (Eurobarometer, 2017: 40). Online social networks have high scores in some countries (e.g. Malta – 45%, Cyprus – 31%). Similar proportionality can be observed with regard to the use of the news on European matters. Likewise, television is first preferred platform for news on European political matters (72%), the Internet occupies a second place (39%), radio (35%) and the written press (35%) reach the same score (Eurobarometer, 2017).

Similar trends can be observed in the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 showing that while users' preferences shift over time and a smartphone becomes more important gateway for first contact with the news, television still plays a key role in many countries (Newman et al. 2019). One of important implications of changing habits of media use for high-quality journalism and condition of the press in Europe is the weakening of the direct relationship between readers and publishers. A

large number of users (55%) prefer to access news through search engines and other intermediaries, where platforms deploy algorithms to select the stories (Newman et al., 2019: 14).[2] However, the study identifies significant country differences. Among them, for example Nordic countries (Finland, Norway, Sweden) represent a "direct access model" in which almost two thirds of respondents prefer to access a website or app directly (2019: 14).

The use of news sources may be affected also by other demographic categories such as age or education. For example, the Polish *Report on News Diversity in Poland from the User's Perspective* observes that more than 70% of media users access at least 7 news sources on a regular basis and about 40% of users access 11 and more sources on average. Yet, users with high education tend to use a larger number of and more diverse sources. A majority of these (55%) declared the usage of at least 16 sources on average and 30% 21 and more sources (Indicator, 2015). In Poland likewise in the case of other EU countries, television seems to be most frequently used platform for accessing the news on average, yet for younger users (up to 25 years) most important gateway for the first contact with the news is internet and social media, while most preferred news sources are radio and news portals (Indicator, 2015). Also, the Reuters Institute Digital Report observes that younger users consume news differently. Nearly half of the respondents declared that they come into first contact with the news via smartphone (Kalogeropolous, 2019: 55). The youngest users (18 - 24 years) seem to condition their news consumption on applications enabling news display via a smartphone or linking news access with the usage of other platforms such as Facebook, Netflix and Spotify. While younger users seem to understand the importance of traditional news providers, they tend to be less loyal than their parents preferring to pick-and-mix from multiple sources (Kalogeropolous, 2019: 58).

Credibility, Trust and Dealing with Disinformation

Credibility of the News

The second aspect of hybrid media pluralism discussed in this paper relates to credibility of the news. While ensuring credibility by editorial responsibility and internal verifying practices can be seen as part of high-quality journalism, it can also be analyzed independently due to its role in dealing with disinformation. Credibility not only improves quality of the content offered, it also strengthens trust of media users in a news provider they have chosen, and also in the news in general. Factors that contribute to trustworthiness of information include the level of competence of a source, their reputation and authority, the recency of information, how well corroborated the information is (Nurse et al., 2014). In general, institutionalized news providers such as the press institutions seem to better-equipped to safeguard these factors of credibility. The New York Times motto encouraging users to subscribe to its online edition convinces that "The truth is worth it." Yet, also in cases of quality press occurrences of disinformation and incorrect reporting happen. No media organization today may be fully immune from potential malpractices of their staff.

One of most widely described such cases includes pseudo-reporting of Jayson Blair, the New York Times reporter who fabricated sources, plagiarized material from other publications and pretended to be in places he never went (Sullivan, 2013). Another relatively recent instance unveiled the German reporter Class Relotius, working for Der Spiegel magazine, to fake stories on a grand scale over years, while allegedly collecting information for his coverage on reporting trips to the US (Connoly and Le

[2] Reuters Institute used a online sample consisting of 24 European countries (thus not all EU member states were covered), 6 countries from North and South America, 7 countries from Asia and a Pacific region and one from Africa. Also, the online sample will tend to under-represent the usage habits of respondents who are not online (e.g. older users.) (Newman et al., 2019: 6).

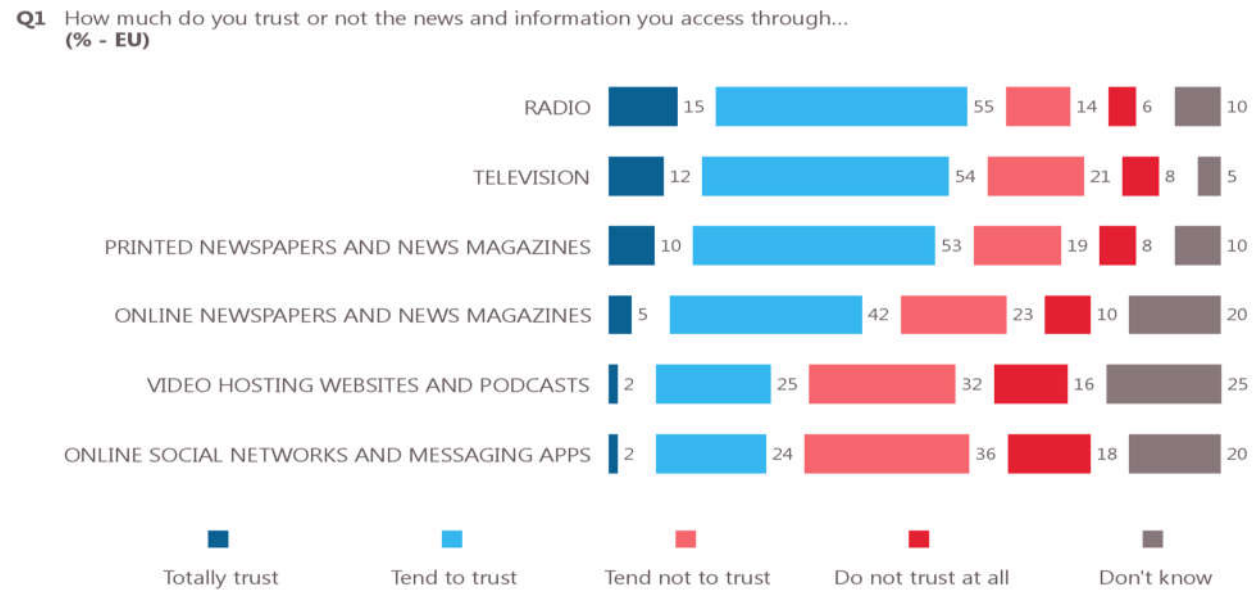
Blond, 2018). The difference between quality press newsrooms and anonymous sources of disinformation is that the former openly confesses the publication of incorrect content and often employs internal investigations and clarifications policy. There are namely the follow-up policies that make the difference and also, established standards exist against which such practices may be painstakingly assessed. The Trust Project initiative led by Sally Lehrman and run by a consortium of high-quality news companies (including among others The Washington Post, La Repubblica, The Economist) focuses on developing advanced methods to restore the public trust in news. The project offers a set of criteria (the trust indicators) which would help audiences know what content to trust. The trust indicators can be seen as standardized disclosures about a news organisation's commitment to credibility including the existence of corrections policy, verification/fact-checking standards, unnamed sources policy, author/reporter expertise information indicator, citation/references indicator and others (The Trust Project, 2019).

Trust in the News and Dealing with Disinformation

Comparative data on trust in the news media from various countries show the decline in trust of media users in the news media (e.g. Knight Foudation, 2018; Rodriguez and Zeichmeister, 2018) and are being associated with growing risks to freedom of the press and media pluralism in general (Freedom House, 2019; CMPF, 2018; RBW/RSF, 2019). The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018 found among respondents low levels of trust in search engines, with only 34% trusting the information relayed most of the time, and in social media, where the figure was just 23%. The authors suggest that exposure to a variety of sources with different perspectives in an aggregated environment can lead to "confusion, greater skepticism and ultimately a lack of trust" (Newman et al., 2018: 16). Other studies relate decreasing reliance on news with potential negative effects on media users' trust in political institutions (Ceron, 2015: 494).

The latest Eurobarometer Report on Fake News and Disinformation Online (Eurobarometer, 2018) reports that while Europeans seem to have relatively reasonable level of trust in the traditional media sources, distrust in the video hosting websites and social networks is high (Eurobarometer, 2018: 5). For example the proportion of those who trust the news and information accessed through the radio is 70%, television 66% and printed newspapers and newspaper magazines 63%. Trust is lower in relation to online newspapers and magazines (47%) and lower for video-hosting websites and podcasts (27%) and online social networks and messaging apps (26%) (Eurobarometer, 2018: 5).

Figure 1: Trust in the news accessed through traditional and online media in the European Union



Source: Eurobarometer (2018) Fake News and Disinformation Online.

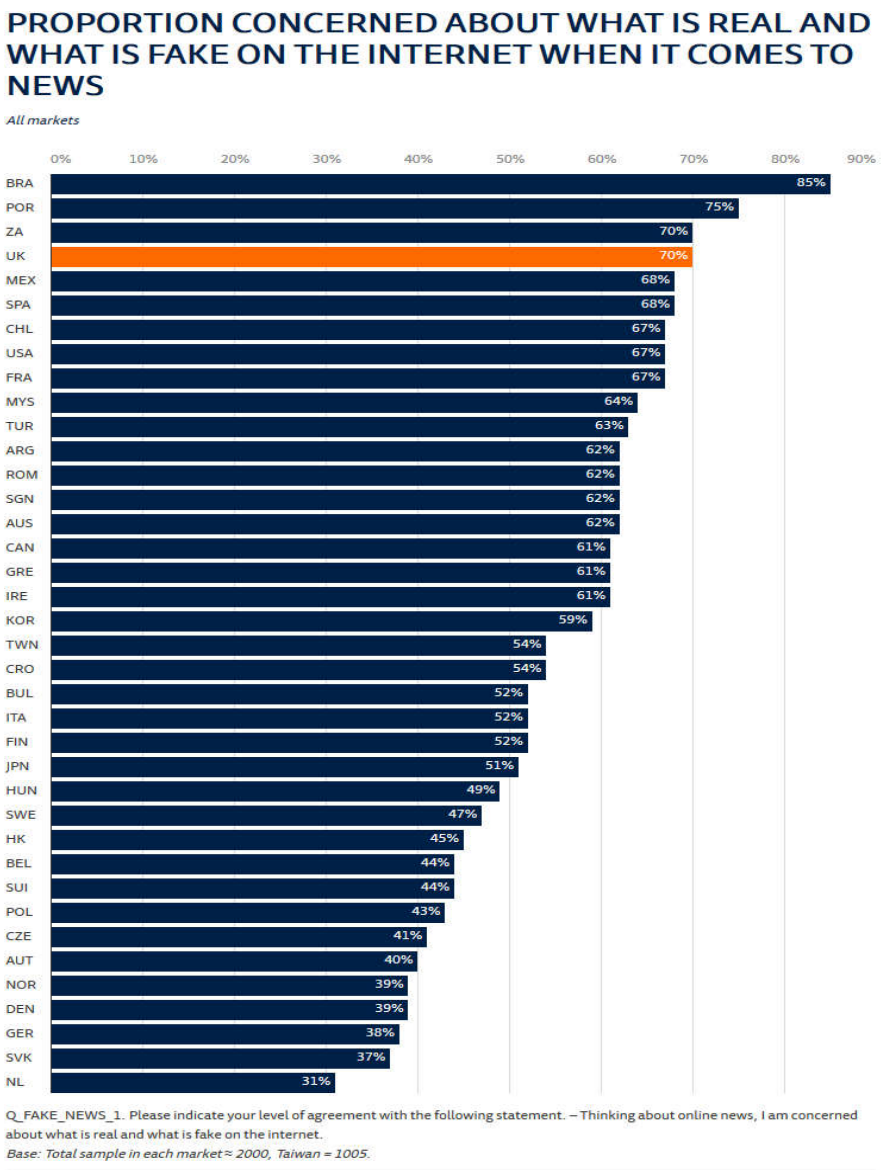
The situation varies considerably across the member states. Similarly as with radio and television, trust in printed newspapers and news magazines is highest among respondents in Finland (90%), followed by those in Luxembourg (82%), the Netherlands, Sweden (both 81%) and Denmark (80%). The countries with lowest trust in printed newspapers and news magazines include Hungary (33%), Malta (39%), Bulgaria (43%), Romania (45%) and Greece (49%). Interestingly, written press seems to be the most trusted source of news and information in Italy, although in most countries it is the third most trusted source (behind radio and television) (Eurobarometer, 2019: 7). The lowest level of trust in television is found in Greece (40% with 28% saying they do not trust it at all), followed by Hungary (48%), Poland (54%), Italy (56%) and Spain (57%). Noteworthy, Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) scores in most these countries high risk concerning independence in PSM governance and funding (CMPF, 2018). Worthy of mention, in most countries, users are less likely to trust online newspapers and magazines than to trust the three traditional sources (TV, radio and print press). The exceptions are Greece and Malta where trust in this source is higher than trust in the written press. Yet among young users the level of trust to online newspapers and news magazines is much higher reaching 60% (Eurobarometer, 2018: 10).

According to 2019 Reuters Digital News Report, across all countries the average level of trust in the news in general decreased to 42% and is basically lower than in Eurobarometer surveys. The news media remain most trusted in Finland (59%), Portugal (58%) and Denmark (57%), while least trusted in Hungary (28%) and Greece (27%). Trust levels in France have fallen to just 24% as the media have come under attack over their coverage of Yellow Vests movement (Newman et al., 2019: 10). In addition, in Poland, the CBOS's 2018 results of the polls show the lowest level of trust to the news media since 2002 (CBOS, 2018).

Along with trust in the news media, it would also be important to see how users deal with disinformation in order to better understand hybrid media pluralism from the user perspective. If users have difficulties in recognizing which news is of high quality and trustworthy and which lacks necessary professional safeguards such as editorial standards on performance, accountability, etc. then also their autonomous choice of news sources might be unnecessary limited. The Cairncross Review shows that half of UK adults worry about disinformation and a quarter do not know how to verify sources of information they find online (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2019: 7). The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 notes that more than half of users remains

concerned about their ability to separate what is real and fake on the internet (Newman et al., 2019: 22).

Figure 2: Proportion of users concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet when it comes to news



Source: Newman, N. et al. (2019) Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019.

Among European countries concern is highest in Portugal (75%), UK (70%), France (67%) and Greece (61%), while lowest in the Netherlands (31%), Germany (38%), Denmark and Norway (both 39%). The biggest jump in concern is visible in UK "where the news media have taken a lead in breaking stories about misinformation on Facebook and Youtube and there has been a high-profile House of Commons inquiry into the issue" (Newman et al. 2019: 22).

The 2018 Eurobarometer study observes that most respondents see disinformation as a problem for their countries. This proportion seems to be highest in Cyprus (91%), Greece and Italy (both 90%), while lowest in Belgium (70%), Luxembourg, Denmark and Estonia (all 73%). Also views on the impact of disinformation on democracy in general are consistent with this observation (Eurobarometer, 2018: 19).

Media Transparency

Levels of Media Transparency

From the user perspective, the relationship between trust in news and media transparency seems to be strong. A Gallup/Knight Foundation Survey found that various aspects of media transparency were among the items that respondents rated as most important conditions for their trust in news (Knight Foundation, 2018: 13). Media transparency can be perceived as both a condition and outcome of accountability that grounds media structures and operations in a social system. Media transparency stems from conditions under which both old and new media, including platform players – as organisations – attempt to make themselves reliable, trustworthy and credible vis-à-vis their users and other agents operating in hybrid media systems or in public governance (e.g. media authorities, regulatory agencies). This shows that transparency can be conducted in two different directions - 'upwards' (legal and administrative) and 'downwards' (civic), while each of them is guided by different rationales (Craufurd Smith et al., 2019). From the user perspective, 'downward', 'civic' transparency is important for individual understanding and assessment of content and service provided.

In general, media transparency cuts across several levels of media operations. At the structural level, transparency can be seen as both the means and processes by which the old media and new media share information concerning ownership structures, sources of financing, and control arrangements. This includes information about direct and indirect ownership, ties to other businesses, political affiliation of owners, geographical scope of operation, organizational control arrangements, including the level of editorial autonomy and independence, audience share and revenues, support from the state and public funding as well as contributions from state advertising. At the level of provision and distribution of content, in which platform and intermediaries play a principal role, transparency would embrace information on how the content is managed, edited, curated and/or created (Council of Europe, 2018) and on how algorithmic decision making processes work. Finally, at the level of journalistic practices, transparency would imply means of making newsrooms and individual journalists responsible towards the public, including credibility check.

In this sense, media transparency extends beyond merely the openness of the data as the information provided may require processing, interpretation or even explanation, especially when the data are incoherent or incomplete (Hood and Heald, 2006: 26) or appropriate contextualization is needed in order to help media and news users to better understand the content they choose and structural conditions in which this content is produced and distributed. Some media organizations, both digital natives and legacy media, share with their users information about ownership structures and financial results (e.g. The Guardian)[3] or about the conditions for commenting and contributing to debates, and the rules of moderation (e.g. French news portal Mediapart).[4] In its report on *Assessing Transparency: A Guide To Disclosing Information Online*, the European Broadcasting Union ('EBU') proposes helpful guidelines for public service media (PSM) transparency, offering a set of indicators covering corporate and financial matters, remit and social transparency in order to strengthen accountability vis-à-vis PSM users (EBU, 2015).

[3] See more on: The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/about/2017/nov/17/who-owns-the-guardian-our-unique-independent-structure.

4 See more on: Mediapart, https://blogs.mediapart.fr/charte-de-participation.

Media Transparency in Comparative Surveys

Unlike in surveys on news sources, trust in the news and perceived effects of disinformation, transparency-related issues have been largely missing in news consumption research. One of the attempts to address transparency-relevant issues can be found in the Polish *Report on News Diversity in Poland from the User's Perspective* commissioned by a national media authority KRRiT in 2015. Selected aspects of transparency are reflected in questions targeting users about their sufficient knowledge of news content they use, news originality or secondary use, ownership of news content providers and modes of their financing. Interestingly, a majority of respondents declared to know sufficiently whether the news content used by them is original or used from another source (51%), while 57% admitted they have no sufficient knowledge on ownership of news providers and 61% lacked knowledge on how news providers are financed (Indicator, 2015). This shows intriguing information asymmetry worth of further exploration, especially in cross-national context. The lack of users' knowledge about media ownership and mechanisms of financing may be seen as a limitation in making right choice of news content by users.

Findability and Dealing with Information Overload

Findability and News Avoidance

The fourth aspect relevant for hybrid media pluralism from the user perspective is findability and information overload. Paradoxically, having a greater control on the time and form of media use, users spend increasingly more time on searching and using the content that does not necessarily meet their personal purpose. James Potter observes that "information has shifted from one of gaining access to one of protecting ourselves from too much" (Potter, 2011:3). This results in various strategies users employ to search or avoid the news. Findability might play a decisive role in choice between these two strategies. Although users may be guided by various reasons in news avoidance, it can be a cause for concern if they "cut themselves" from a potential usage of news diversity. It might also be a reason for consideration if growing numbers of citizens seem to be disconnected from the news at all, whether this happens as a deliberative strategy of news avoidance or as a more accidental consequence of marginalization (Schrøder, 2016). It may mean that citizens are not sufficiently informed or knowledgeable to take decisions in elections, or are too much exposed to other types of content that exposure to news is squeezing (Kalogeropoulos, 2017).

How do we find our way in an age of information overload? How can we filter streams of complex information to pull out only what we want? These are questions posed by Peter Morville, the author of *Ambient Findability: What We Find Changes Who We Became*, who sees the usage of findability critical in personal and social development (Morville, 2009). One of the challenges to hybrid media pluralism from the user perspective is that news exposure is determined by successful representation in search engines and platforms. Thus, the impact of search engines and the algorithm they deploy for prioritization of certain sources of information over others (Van Hoboken, 2012) can be seen as a new form of control a user has to face, not having, at the same time, a sufficient control over his/her data used by interemediaries. Another challenge connected with exposure and usage of diverse news is "disaggregated news experience". For example, in traditional newspapers, stories are allocated and organized according to sections such as Politics, Sport, Business, etc. and at the same time, they are brought together into one output. In a digital environment, search results show single articles, while online content is effectively "unbundled". Online users can select only articles they wish to view, without necessarily being exposed to other content offered by the same provider (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2019: 7). While this disaggregated news experience potentially offers greater diversity of content, there is a question about quality as online users may be less likely

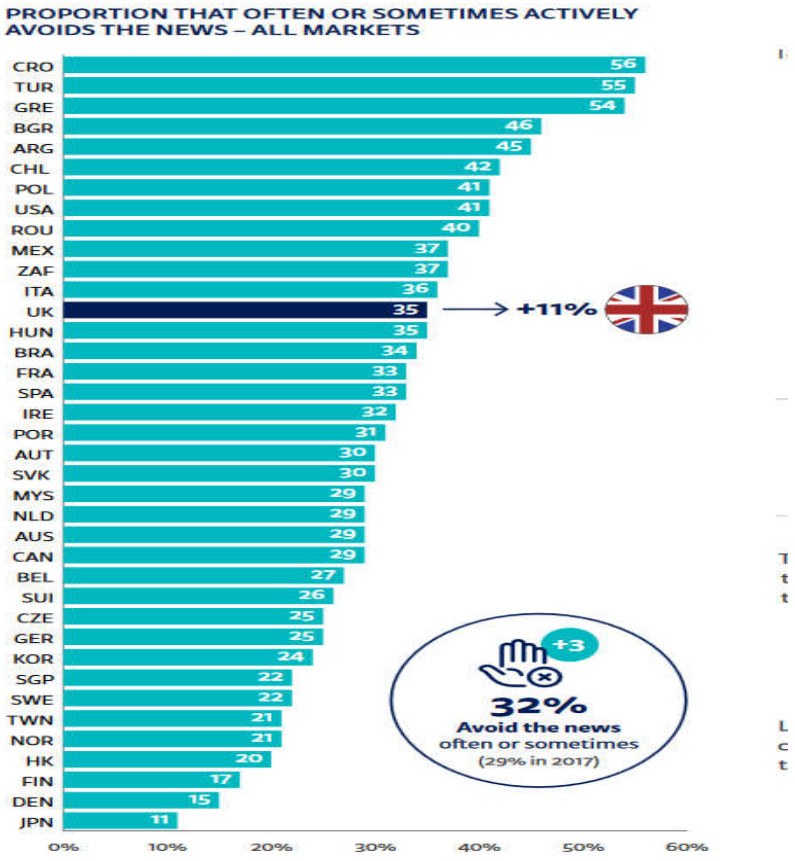
to explore full news package concerning e.g. public interest news with diverse commentaries or opinion articles.

News Avoidance in Surveys

An exposure to abundant variety of news sources accompanied by insufficient navigation skills and knowledge on quality of news sources may lead to confusion, information overload fatigue and ultimately news avoidance. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 reports that 28% respondents are worn out by the amount of news these days and users in general complain they are bombarded with multiple version of the same story (Newman et al., 2019: 27). The standard Eurobarometer survey on media use (Eurobarometer, 2017) shows that the overall percentage of those who do not search news on European political matters at all is relatively high – 11%, while in the case of news on national matters it reaches 6%. In some countries proportion of users avoiding national news is equally high – Italy (10%), Slovenia (11%), Bulgaria (11%) and Slovakia (12%). In contrary, countries with lowest score on news avoidance include Finland (1%), Sweden (1%), Denmark (1%), Latvia (2%) and Belgium (2%) (Eurobaromoter, 2017: 41). The percentage of those who do not search the news on European political matters is particularly high in Italy (21%) and Bulgaria (18%).

News avoidance as reported by the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 has increased in comparison with 2017. In general, 32% of respondents declare they often or sometimes actively avoid the news. The highest score of news avoidance amounts to 56% in Croatia, 55% in Turkey, 54% in Greece and 46% in Bulgaria. The lowest proportion of news avoidance is in Denmark (15%), Finland (17%), Norway (21%) and Sweden (22%) (Newman et al, 2019: 26).

Figure 3: Proportion of users that often or sometimes avoids the news



Source: Newman, N. et al. (2019) Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019.

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 notices that the UK has the highest growth in news avoidance reaching 11% mainly due to frustration over the polarizing nature of Brexit. 58% of respondents admitted the news had a negative impact on their mood, while 40% said "there was nothing they felt they could do to influence events" (Newman et al, 2019: 26). Most of the users (71%) also mentioned that the type of news they avoided was Brexit coverage (2019: 26).

Conclusions

This report has sketched a conceptual perspective for reconsideration of media pluralism from a user perspective in a hybrid media environment. There is a need to see media pluralism as a dynamic phenomenon generated by coexistence of renewing older media and new media replacing older structures. At the same time, pluralism in its normative sense does not refer to *any* kind of diversity, but diversity producing values – in particular deliberative and representative values. Their vital role depends heavily on the media use and changing habits of news consumption. This paper argues that what strengthens deliberative and representative values of hybrid media pluralism is news diversity generated by the usage of high-quality journalism, credibility, transparency and findability. These four aspects shape to great extent conditions of news consumption in a hybrid media environment and point to new potential threats and limitations.

The analyzed studies and surveys reflect some common trends concerning changing news habits in Europe. First, although the newspapers are still the main original sources for stories and provide institutional basis for high-quality journalism, they are not the primary gateways through which users access the news. The main platform for media use remains the television, while the use of the internet and online social networks grows in the media habits of Europeans. The direct relationship between readers and publishers is weakening with the exception of Nordic countries, where users prefer to access news online directly. Second, comparative data on trust in the news media show the decline in general. Still, trust seems to be higher in traditional news media (radio on the first place and then TV), while lower in the online news media. A large number of users remain concerned about their ability to separate what is real and fake on the internet, and about the impact of disinformation on democracy generally. Third, a significant number of users are worn out about information overload while proportion of users avoiding the news steadily increases. It should be acknowledged at the same time, that there seem to be remarkable differences between countries as well as demographic categories (e.g. young and older, more and less educated) within these patterns.

To summarize, the trends show that understanding a "whole picture of pluralism" in hybrid media systems requires a closer look at media use and changing news consumption habits, and linking these with other structural and regulatory considerations.

Recommendations for MPM 2020

Reflections presented in this paper suggest that an assessment of how media users consume the news can contribute to better understanding of risks to media pluralism in hybrid media environments. Particularly valuable would be data on sources of news, trust, dealing with disinformation, transparency from user's perspective and news avoidance.

The higher risk for pluralism in hybrid media environment would imply:

- declining or low use of news sources, in particular newspapers or digital natives that offer high-quality journalism;
- declining or low level of trust to news media, in particular newspapers, PSM or digital natives offering quality news;
- inability of users to deal with disinformation (e.g. a considerable level of users concerned about what is real and fake in news or concerned about impact of disinformation on democracies);
- lack of users' knowledge on sources of news, ownership and financing mechanisms;
- growing or high level of news avoidance.

For MPM 2020 there are generally three options:

1. To generate the new data through national surveys

Advantages: This would be the best option as the original set of the data can be tailored specifically for MPM 2020 purposes.

Disadvantages: Higher costs, commissioning of the work to survey agencies.

2. To use the available data for the assessment on the basis of one study

Standard Eurobarometer 88 media use survey (2017) and flash Eurobarometer 464 survey on fake news and disinformation (2018)

Advantages: Both surveys cover all EU countries. The 2017 survey enables to compare results with previous editions of the survey (e.g. 2016, 2017). It covers use/consumption, primary and secondary choice of platform, trust, users' account on objectivity/sufficiency of information about the EU. In addition, the 2018 survey provides information on users trust in media and their concern about disinformation.

Disadvantages: Both surveys operate with general and sector media categories such as radio, TV, social media in general, and do not analyze access/use/consumption of concrete media/news providers.

2018, 2019 Reuters Institute Digital News Reports

Advantages: The survey includes country report with a relatively detailed analysis of the access to and use of particular news outlets including digital natives, PSM. It also includes the data on trust and news avoidance.

Disadvantages: The Reuters Digital News Report does not cover all EU countries (21 of 28). The survey is based exclusively on online questionnaire, and thus might tend under-represent the consumption habits of people who are not online (e.g. elderly). In this sense, results for countries with lower internet penetration and online media use might tend to be less representative.

3. To offer analytical assessment of a country expert on the basis of combination of studies

Advantages: Combination of secondary sources enables to avoid gaps and data limitations in some countries.

Disadvantages: More vulnerable to subjective judgment, time-consuming and more work for country experts.

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QM-04-19-772-EN-N

Research Project Report
December 2019
2019/02

ISBN: 978-92-9084-806-6
doi: 10.2870/601042

Publications Office
of the European Union