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DIGITAL MEDIA AND POPULISM

The Online News Consumption of Citizens Holding Populist Attitudes & its Implication for Democratic Public Spheres

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The policy report is based on an empirical study carried out by Caterina Froio (Sciences Po, CEE), Nora Kirkizh, Sebastian Stier (GESIS Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences in Mannheim) and Ralph Schroeder (University of Oxford, OII), supported by the Volkswagen Foundation (Grant No. 94758). Data and duplication material is available [here](#). The study highlights the following points relevant for democratic public spheres that should be considered by policymakers when designing public policy and advocating for political change:

- Today, citizens navigate a “high-choice media environment” with an ever-increasing variety of sources of political information and news available online. Traditional media are competing with a multitude of digital-born information outlets and people can access a wide range of sources with relative ease, at low cost and more targeted.
- On the Internet, most people in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States still get the news from established sources - such as the legacy press or public broadcasting- and citizens holding populist attitudes do not avoid these.
- Concerns that digital media would drive citizens holding populist attitudes to alternative news sources at a large scale are unwarranted, even if these citizens do consume less legacy news. This trend highlights the weakened role of the press, which is a troubling sign for public debates in democracies: a strong press adhering to high journalistic standards provide the framework for a well-informed public sphere and democratic opinion-formation.
- The effects that populist attitudes have on the news diets of citizens differ significantly across countries depending on their political and media system. Specifically, when holding populist attitudes, the likelihood to navigate to alternative news sources is strongly dependent on the configuration of the media environment in each country: Only if there is a noteworthy hyperpartisan news ecosystem in the country (like in the US), people holding populist attitudes actually do navigate to these sources.
- Policymakers must understand the structure of the national media system and the implications it has for the online news consumption of people with different political attitudes. With this in mind, governments and policymakers must find ways to prevent that already disaffected or skeptical citizens turn their back towards the legacy press. Finally, more research is needed to understand if people holding populist attitudes process online information and news differently than others, and whether social networking sites, including Facebook and Twitter, and algorithmic filtering lead to selective news exposure per se.

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1. Introduction

Criticizing, rejecting, or discrediting the quality press is a common tactic of populist actors around the world. Through accusations of fake news and biased reporting, politicians like Donald Trump, Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro have sought to question the credibility of the legacy press placing it at the core of their anti-establishment campaigns. Many argue that by multiplying and diversifying the sources of the news the Internet contributed to the success of populist parties and leaders. Yet empirical evidence on the relationship between populism and online news-seeking behavior is still lacking. To expand existing knowledge, this study examined if individuals holding populist attitudes favor specific types of news sources available online.

Populist attitudes are defined as anti-elitist beliefs, a preference for popular sovereignty and a belief in the homogeneity and virtuousness of the people (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014). The question whether populist attitudes lead to selective consumption of online news is of central importance for the state of public spheres and opinion-formation in democracies. If different political attitudes lead to the selective consumption of less balanced online news sources this might reduce shared realities and exposure to different opinions, polarizing public debates and, ultimately, contributing to the fragmentation of public spheres or the creation of alternative public spheres (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018).

Extant research on populism and political communication has predominantly focused on the relationship between populist attitudes and offline media use (including tabloids). These scholars demonstrated that people holding populist attitudes evaluate the offline news media more negatively and rely less on established news sources like the legacy press (Fawzi 2019; Newman et al 2019; Pew Research 2018; Schulz et al. 2018; Schulz 2019b). However, there is still no solid evidence on whether citizens embracing populist worldviews consume specific types of *online* news sources. Therefore, this research investigated the relationship between populist attitudes and the consumption of different types of news to find out whether populist attitudes lead to selective online news diets. In doing so it contributes to assessing the role of the media for “the political success and failure of populist forces” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 114). Instead of focusing on populist parties and politicians the study examined populist attitudes at the level of individuals and whether these attitudes lead to the consumption of selected news and information online.

The study has been supported by the Volkswagen Foundation (Grant No. 94758). It uses a unique dataset linking web site visits by Internet users in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States to their political attitudes and

socio-demographic characteristics.¹ This research measures whether populist attitudes result in specific news web sites being visited. Following established typologies of news sources (Benkler et al. 2018; Esser 1999; Guess et al. 2019; Krämer 2018; Mazzoleni 2008; Pennycook and Rand 2019; Schulz 2019a), the study distinguishes between six different types of news websites: tabloid press, legacy press, public broadcasters, hyperpartisan news, commercial broadcasters, digital-born outlets (see **Table 1**). The analysis shows that populist attitudes do leave a mark on people's online news consumption but the evidence for this phenomenon is highly dependent on the configuration of a country's media system. Specifically, the findings show that **citizens holding populist attitudes do visit less websites from the legacy press while consuming more "hyperpartisan news"** – news outlets with a narrow and skewed political agenda that do not make an effort to balance different opinions and representations of political issues. Nevertheless, the results also show that **citizens supporting populist parties or politicians still primarily get their news from established sources.**

¹ Participants of the study installed web tracking tools on their devices and answered a survey on media and politics. The collection of Web tracking data for this study was done in full compliance with EU GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) regulations.

Table 1: Six different types of news web sites

| Type of news | Characteristics | Examples |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Tabloid press | Uses a more personalized and sensationalist style and focuses on soft news (Esser 1999); frames politics from a layperson 's perspective | <i>Globe</i> (US), <i>The Sun</i> (UK), <i>Daily Mail</i> (UK), <i>BILD</i> (Germany), <i>20 Minutes</i> (France) |
| Legacy press | Broadsheets, regional newspapers and weekly current affairs magazines with professional staff following journalistic standards; journalistic norms require representing a diversity of views, present a broad agenda of newsworthy topics | <i>The Guardian</i> (UK), <i>The New York Times</i> (US), <i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i> (Germany), <i>Le Monde</i> (France), <i>El País</i> (Spain) |
| Public broadcasters | State funded public service media; public service mandates require representing a diversity of views, present broad agenda of newsworthy topics | <i>RTF</i> (France), <i>ARD</i> , <i>ZDF</i> (Germany), <i>BBC</i> (UK), <i>Rai</i> (Italy), <i>RTVE</i> (Spain) |
| Hyperpartisan news | Pretend to be news outlets while promoting a narrow and skewed political agenda without making an effort toward a balanced representation of major political issues, events or political actors; tendency to frame political opponents as illegitimate groups | <i>Breitbart</i> (US), <i>The Canary</i> (UK), <i>Daily Kos</i> (US) |
| Commercial broadcasters | Privately owned television and radio stations | <i>TFL</i> (France), <i>Sky</i> |
| Digital-born outlets | Providers of political contents that are distributed exclusively via digital channels, i.e., not via print or traditional broadcasting (this excludes the online versions of traditional media) | <i>HuffPost</i> , <i>Buzzfeed</i> |

In sum, **concerns that digital media drive citizens with populist attitudes to alternative news sources at large scale are unwarranted.** However, policy-makers/decision-makers must find ways to prevent that already disaffected and skeptical citizens turn their back towards the legacy press and withdraw from the public sphere. Even though citizens holding populist attitudes do not avoid established sources, more research is needed to analyze whether populist citizens process information from the legacy press differently. Furthermore, news exposure through social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter need to be examined more closely.

2. On the Internet, citizens holding populist attitudes read established news sources, but not much the legacy press

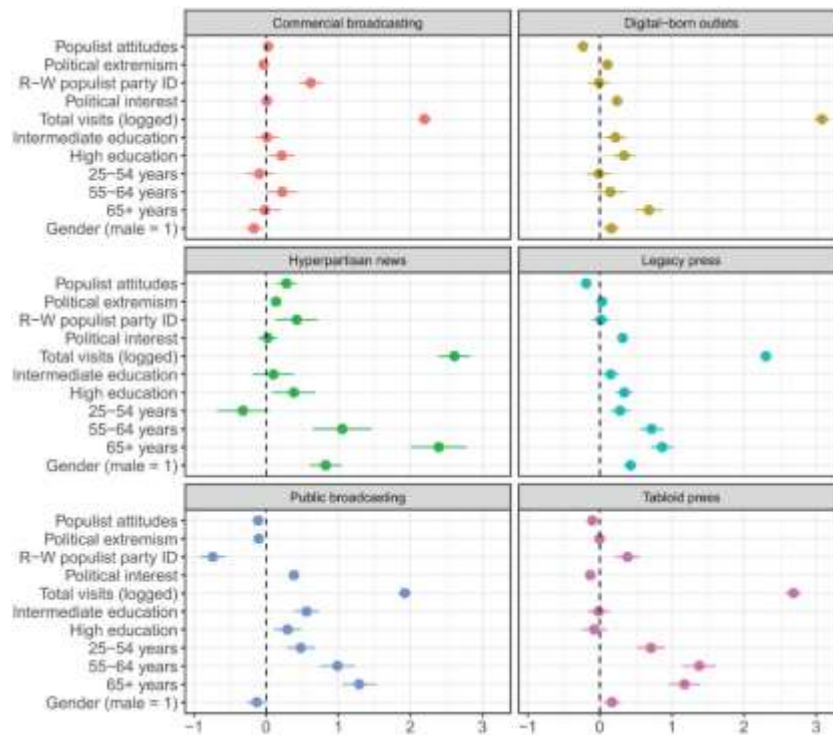
The landscape of the media and news sources has expanded and diversified considerably over the last decades, not least due to the internet and social networking sites. In today's high-choice digital media environment there is an ever-increasing variety of sources of political information and news. Traditional media are competing with a multitude of digital-born information outlets and users can access a wide range of sources with relative ease, at low cost and more targeted. To ensure a healthy public sphere in democracies, it is necessary to assess which information and news sources are chosen by which people: Do populist attitudes lead people to select certain information and online news sources over others?

Populism depicts the mainstream media as being part of an elite conspiracy (Krämer 2018). Accordingly, people holding populist attitudes can be expected to avoid the mainstream media by opting for alternative sources. Populist attitudes should thus result in an avoidance of certain pieces of content and sources that are perceived as "conspiring against the people". The identity and perceived trustworthiness of the news source should play a major role in influencing which content is selected by people holding populist attitudes. In the past, researchers suggested that a populist worldview translates into a hostile perception of the legacy press and public service media offline. But how do citizens holding populist attitudes consume the news *online*? This study shows that on the Internet, **citizens holding populist attitudes do not avoid established sources per se but consume less news from the legacy press.**

Most people in the six countries under study still get their news from established sources. Despite having an increasing autonomy, variety, and freedom to choose news

sources, citizens with populist attitudes do not avoid established news sources as expected. The results are illustrated in Figure 1

Figure 1. The relationship between populist attitudes and online news consumption².



Building on Figure 1, the online news consumption patterns of citizens holding populist attitudes can be summarized as follows:

- They visit websites of the *legacy press* (such as Le Monde and the New York Times) less often than other people
- They do not avoid news on websites of *public broadcasters* (like the BBC)
- They tend to consult more *hyperpartisan* sources (like Breitbart)
- They tend to consume less *tabloid* news (like the Sun)

² Note. Coefficients and 95 percent confidence intervals from negative binomial regression models on weighted data. “Low education” is the reference category for education. “Female” is the reference category for gender. “18–24 years” is the reference category for age. Country dummy variables are included but not reported. Full results can be found in Table A8 in the Online Appendix available here <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/1940161220907018>.

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- They visit *digital-born outlets* (like the HuffPost) less frequently
- There is no effect of populist attitudes on the consumption of *commercial broadcasting websites*

To sum up, citizens with pronounced populist attitudes do not avoid public service news as assumed based on their worldview. As they mostly access news and information from public service broadcasters, the question remains whether people with populist attitudes might process this information differently. Their motive to visit such websites might actually not be to inform themselves but to occasionally monitor what the “fake news media” or “lying press” has to say confirming their belief that these sources are indeed biased. Interestingly, in most of the countries under study people with populist attitudes do not lean towards the tabloid press although they should feel aligned with the tabloid style of news coverage that pits the ordinary people against the elites.

Potentially severe implications for democratic politics

The finding that citizens holding populist attitudes consume less legacy news has potentially severe implications for democracy as it points to for the weakened role of the legacy press and the emergence of disrupted public spheres. The fragmentation of public spheres threatens democratic formation of opinion as well as the agreement over common visions for the future by creating divides that are increasingly difficult to bridge. Such divides have to be bridged to allow for a public sphere in which constructive and well-informed public debates can take place. Historically, the legacy press adhering to high standards has been providing the framework and the material for a healthy public sphere.

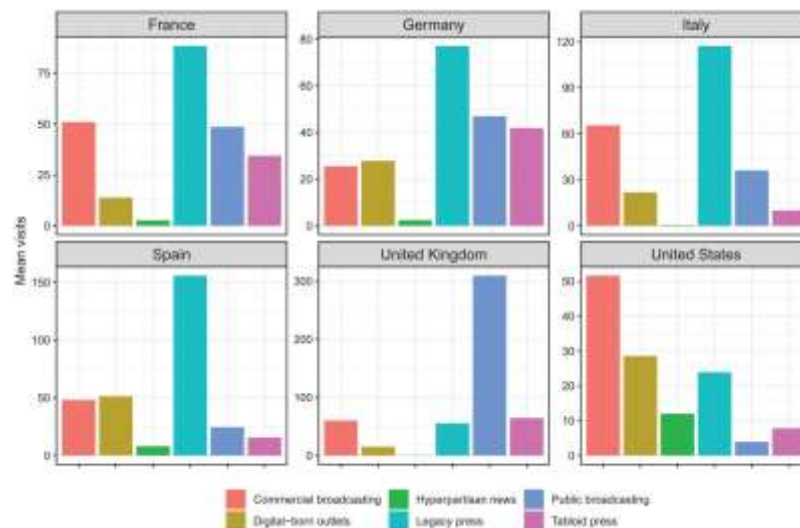
At the same time, the concerns that digital media would drive citizens with populist attitudes to alternative sources at a large scale are unwarranted. In the countries under study, legacy press outlets were still consumed nineteen times as much as hyperpartisan news and for most of the countries it has not been confirmed that populist attitudes lead to more visits to hyperpartisan websites. **Hyperpartisan news are still a fringe phenomenon:** Despite their demonstrated mistrust of the mainstream media, citizens endorsing a populist worldview stick to well-known sources. All in all, populist attitudes do leave pronounced marks on people’s media diets, but the effects are not the same in countries with different media systems (see II).

3. Selective news exposure of citizens holding populist attitudes varies across different media systems

The effects that populist attitudes have on the news diets of those people differ significantly across the countries under study. The research demonstrates that the effects of populist attitudes on the news diets of people are dependent on country-level characteristics. The countries under study differ as to their political systems and their media systems, notably displaying different electoral systems, political cultures, and levels of societal polarization. Furthermore, some countries have an established tabloid press like the UK or a strong public broadcasting presence like most European countries. Others have a strong hyperpartisan media presence like the US. Consequently, there are structural differences between the media systems which also translate into different levels of selective news exposure.

To begin with, the four researchers demonstrate that the number of visits per news type varies across countries. Figure 2 presents the mean visits by participant for each news type for each country.

Figure 2 Mean visits by participant for each news type³



³ Note. Each country has an individual range on the y-axis.

The legacy press which includes also regional newspapers clearly dominates the news websites visits in continental European countries and reflects the strong tradition of regional and national legacy press news outlets. In the UK, the state-funded public broadcaster BBC is the overwhelming market leader when it comes to news website visits. Digital-born outlets and hyperpartisan news have the highest market shares in the US which has a much stronger ecosystem of digital-only and hyperpartisan news websites than any other country in the study.

In addition, the study shows that the effect of populist attitudes on visiting hyperpartisan websites varies across countries. It is only in the US and Germany that populist attitudes increase the likelihood of people visiting hyperpartisan websites meaning the stronger the populist attitudes of people the more likely are they to visit hyperpartisan websites. This suggests that citizens with populist attitudes navigate to hyperpartisan news sources only if there is a noteworthy hyperpartisan news ecosystem in the country. For example, in the UK the tabloid press already saturates the market with sensationalist news and holding populist attitudes does not make people in the UK more likely to navigate to hyperpartisan news sources. On the contrary, the effect of populist attitudes on opting for hyperpartisan news is the strongest in Germany which suggests that people substitute tabloid news with hyperpartisan media. One possible explanation is the fact that Germany's highest-circulating and best-known tabloid newspaper BILD has frequently reported critically about populist radical right parties. In fact, populist citizens in Germany are less likely to consult tabloid news outlets.

Finally, the research demonstrates that **populist attitudes decrease the likelihood to consult the legacy press – in most countries.** In fact, in most countries populist citizens are less likely to visit news content from the legacy press. Only in the US and Spain this effect is not significant and populist citizens do not necessarily consume less legacy press. This might be because the legacy press has an overwhelmingly dominant role in the news media ecosystem in Spain and by for the most web site visits than any other news type. For the US it might be the other way around where the legacy press has a secondary role and commercial broadcasting clearly dominates the news website visits of people.

Overall, the news consumption of citizens with populist attitudes as well as their likelihood to opt for hyperpartisan news is strongly related to the supply side of national media systems. It cannot be said for all countries that populist attitudes result in people consuming less legacy news and more hyperpartisan news instead.

Public Policy Recommendations

1. Policymakers must analyze and be aware of the structure of the national media system and the implications it has for the news consumption of people with different political attitudes. Selective exposure of people with different political attitudes is highly dependent on the structure and supply of the media system. Becoming aware of that is the first step towards an adequate policy response to increasing fragmentation of public spheres.

2. Policymakers must find ways to prevent that already disaffected or skeptical citizens turn their back towards the legacy press. The legacy press and its journalistic norms play an important part in informing positions and building mutual understanding. If it is generally accepted and respected as a means of communication and exchange, a strong legacy press is critical to prevent fragmentation of democratic public spheres as well as the deepening of polarization in Western democracies. It is a common task of the legacy press and public broadcasting to formulate strategies to help disaffected citizens regain trust. More generally, policy-makers must find ways to ensure that the news that are being consumed adhere to general journalistic norms such as balancing of opinion to prevent the fragmentation of realities and ensure that a well-informed public debate is possible.

3. Apart from taking initial measures to prevent the fragmentation of public spheres and shared visions, more research is needed to better understand the news consumption of people with populist attitudes and its implications for public debates and opinion-formation in democracies. This study highlighted that populist citizens do not necessarily avoid mainstream media and drift off to hyperpartisan news. In order to formulate appropriate long-term policy responses, further research is needed to understand whether people with populist attitudes *process* information differently. Ultimately, democracies rely on well-informed public debates among their citizens to formulate shared visions for the future. If people with populist attitudes process information differently this calls for increased focus on delivering media and civic competences in school curricula but also via lifelong learning initiatives.

Furthermore, the exposure to news within social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter must also be studied more closely. Most social networking sites filter the content (including news) based on engagement metrics and the behavior of users and their network. Here the question is not only whether people holding populist attitudes deliberately opt for other news sources, but also whether they are selectively exposed to certain news due to algorithmic filtering and processes outside their consciousness.

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