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Traditional media versus new media: Between trust and use

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Abstract
The article explores if and to what extent traditional media, namely TV, radio and the printed press, are still more popular than new media when it comes to news consumption within the EU. It also looks at the level of trust in different news sources across EU member states. The article is based on the results of a pertinent Eurobarometer survey and a Reuters Institute study. According to these sources, television is one of the forms of media most used to access news, followed by online news platforms and radio. Trust in the mainstream broadcast and print media is also higher than in online news platforms and social media channels. The findings seek to feed both the public discussion and academic dialogue on media consumption and trust, and convey some compelling empirical data and analysis.

Keywords
Media trust, Media use, New media, Social networks, Public sphere

Introduction[1]

The media are of the utmost importance in disseminating information, imparting knowledge, and building up representations and ideologies in contemporary societies (Fotopoulos et al. 2022, 242). Pertinent research has shown that trust in news media among citizens seems, at the very least, fragile (Strömbäck et al. 2020, 139). Finland is the country with the highest levels of trust in the news media (69%), while Greece has the lowest rate (19%) (Statista 2023)—see Figure 1.

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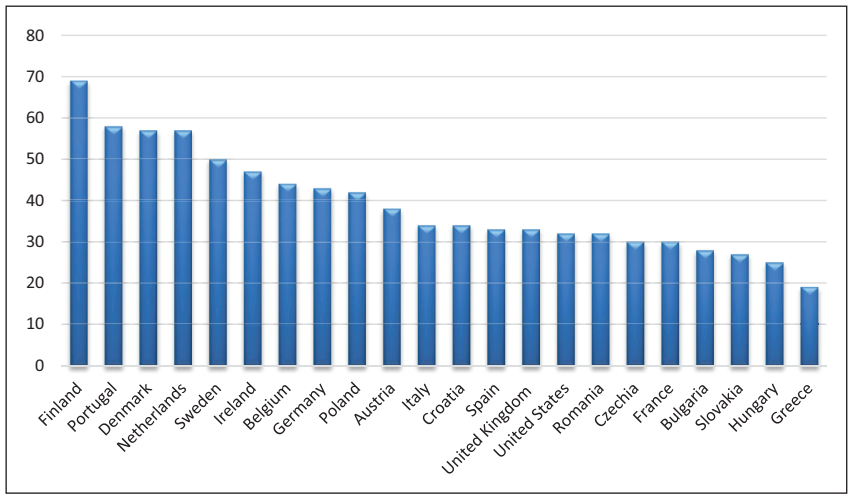


Figure 1. Percentage of adults who trust news media most of the time in selected countries worldwide (February 2023).
Source: Data from Statista (2023).

Meanwhile, the ever-expanding digitalisation process has created new high-choice media environments, making news more available and easier to access (Van Aelst et al. 2017, 5). New Internet-based media, including social networks, have penetrated people's everyday lives and have gradually become legitimate news sources (Pentina and Taradfar 2014, 211). Yet, for most people, television constitutes the main source of news consumption, notwithstanding the diversification of each country's media environment (Couldry et al. 2010, 48).

Against this backdrop, this article explores if and to what extent traditional media, namely TV, radio and the printed press, are still more popular than new media within the EU in terms of news consumption. At the same time, it looks at the level of trust that people have in various different news sources across the EU member states. To shed light on these two topics, the article relies on the results of a pertinent Eurobarometer survey and a Reuters Institute study. Thus, the article constitutes neither primary research nor an exhaustive or large-scale analysis of news consumption and trust in the news media as a whole.

Recent years have seen the increasing alienation and disenchantment of citizens with politics and the media (Braw 2014, 4), with the rise of a new wave of so-called alternative media and populist parties worldwide (Mauk 2020, 45). While a lot has been said about the negative effects of populism on democracy and on the political and media institutions (e.g. Kyle and Mounk 2018; Fawzi 2022), the current article seeks to feed both the public discussion and academic dialogue on citizens' trust in institutions. In this regard, it conveys some compelling empirical data and analysis, in conjunction with the underlying theoretical assumptions.

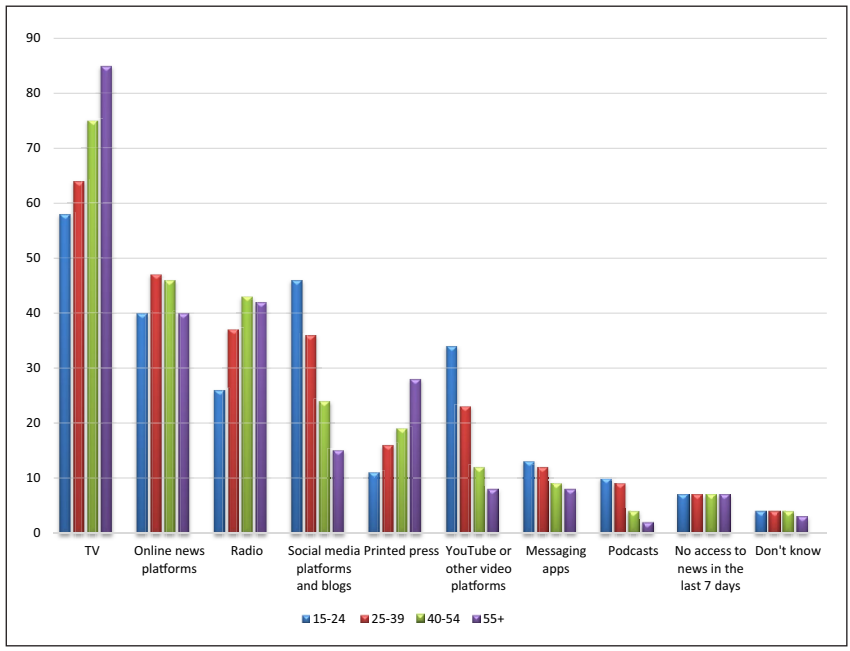


Figure 2. Most popular news sources by age in the EU27 (%).
Source: Data from Eurobarometer (2022).
Note: The respondents answered the question, 'Among the following, what media have you used the most to access news in the past seven days?'

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, persistent high inflation, Covid-19 and climate change, among other issues, pose new risks to media audiences, professionals, narratives and ultimately media environments. Citizens' perceptions are forged by what they see, hear and read in the media. In times of uncertainty, the rapid evolution of media technology, and the abundance of (dis)information and fake news, people should have and feel the need for access to clear, accurate and reliable information.

Media habits

According to the recent Eurobarometer (2022) survey, 75% of respondents claimed that television is one of their most used forms of media to access news, followed by online news platforms (43%) and radio (39%)—see Figure 2. Social media platforms and blogs were mentioned by fewer participants (26%), while 21% of respondents indicated that they use the written press to stay informed.

Unsurprisingly, there were socio-demographic and cross-country variations. For instance, older respondents seem to rely more on traditional media such as television and the printed press. For their part, younger participants are more likely to use social media

platforms and blogs (46% of 15–24 year-olds, compared to 15% of 55+ year-olds), or YouTube and other video platforms (34% compared to 8%). Moreover, while TV appears to be the most commonly used media source in most EU member states, with varying rates of popularity compared to online news platforms, Greece, Malta and Finland seemed to deviate from this rule (see Table 1).

A closer look reveals that the existing variations cannot be grouped according to member states' geographical locations (on north–south or east–west axes) or their type of media system[2] (Hallin and Mancini 2004). In terms of the latter, there is no clear pattern for those countries that have a polarised pluralist media model (France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain), a democratic corporatist media model (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands and Sweden) or a liberal media model (Ireland).

Similar trends can be observed in a longitudinal study by the Reuters Institute (Figure 3). More concretely, although TV consumption of news media in the EU has declined by almost 25% since 2015,[3] it remains the most prominent source of news. While social media are gaining more and more ground vis-à-vis traditional media in terms of news consumption, their growth seems to have stabilised since 2016. In this regard, social media do not seem to be capitalising on the decline of TV. As far as online news platforms are concerned, they have edged ahead of print media. Print readership, at 19.4%, has more than halved since 2015. However, the radical transformation in media consumption mentioned by some academics and pundits is yet to come (see, e.g. Langner and Klinke 2022, 143; Napoli 2011, 54).

Trust in the media

When it comes to trust in the news media, citizens expressed more confidence in traditional broadcast and print media, including their online presence, than in online news platforms and social media channels (e.g. Instagram and YouTube). Concretely, 49% of respondents in the EU claimed that publicly owned TV and radio stations, including their online versions, constitute trusted news sources, which was followed by the written press, selected by 39%. In the meantime, privately owned TV and radio stations were mentioned by 27% of participants as trusted media sources. Again, younger respondents expressed their preference for online news platforms and social media channels, considering them more trusted sources than mainstream broadcast and print media (see Figure 4).

Levels of trust also differed notably across the EU. For instance, in Finland, 73% of respondents expressed their trust in public TV and radio stations, while a very low level of trust in the public Hungarian and Polish media outlets (22% and 23% respectively) could be observed (see Table 2). Except in Poland, the level of trust in publicly owned audiovisual media services is higher than in privately owned ones across the EU member states. In fact, in some cases, namely in the Nordic countries and in some member states in Central and Eastern Europe, this lead is robust. In contrast, the rates seem to converge in the South, where countries are more often classified by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as

Table 1. Most popular news sources by age in the EU27 (%).

	TV	Online news platforms	Radio	Social media platforms and blogs	Print press	YouTube or other video platforms	Messaging apps	Podcasts	No access to news in the last 7 days	Don't know
EU27	75	43	39	26	21	15	10	5	7	4
Belgium	70	37	48	22	23	11	6	3	7	5
Bulgaria	86	60	34	47	13	26	9	6	5	1
Czechia	78	38	36	35	14	12	6	6	10	6
Denmark	72	53	32	18	17	8	4	6	7	6
Germany	73	38	47	16	26	15	13	6	7	4
Estonia	66	54	35	30	17	16	3	4	4	2
Ireland	62	48	44	47	19	19	8	8	3	1
Greece	60	63	24	46	13	25	6	3	3	2
Spain	76	35	36	31	20	10	4	5	10	3
France	78	29	45	19	22	15	7	4	10	5
Croatia	75	48	30	42	16	17	6	4	3	2
Italy	82	49	35	25	27	15	10	5	6	3
Cyprus	63	59	25	57	9	24	8	6	3	3
Latvia	51	45	28	41	9	28	13	4	6	2
Lithuania	70	54	28	44	9	23	5	8	3	3
Luxembourg	61	53	60	28	30	15	11	3	3	1
Hungary	58	57	28	43	9	21	6	5	9	3
Malta	52	65	22	55	11	12	11	3	2	2
Netherlands	72	37	33	23	23	8	12	3	9	5
Austria	68	40	45	21	34	15	14	4	6	3
Poland	72	57	43	33	13	21	24	5	5	3
Portugal	84	50	33	28	14	10	5	3	4	3
Romania	80	53	37	29	15	24	6	9	5	2
Slovenia	76	44	36	36	18	13	5	2	5	3
Slovakia	73	37	44	25	13	20	6	10	10	6
Finland	67	67	33	28	25	13	9	4	4	2
Sweden	65	60	35	25	23	13	4	6	5	3

Source: Data from Eurobarometer (2022).
Note: The respondents answered the question, 'Among the following, what media have you used the most to access news in the past seven days?'

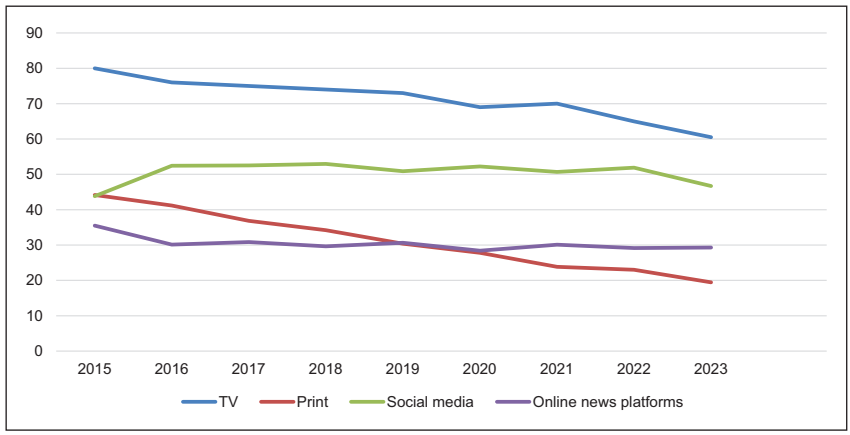


Figure 3. Sources of news in the EU (%).
Source: Data from Newman et al. (2023).
Note: Data were not available for Cyprus, Estonia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia, Malta and Slovenia.

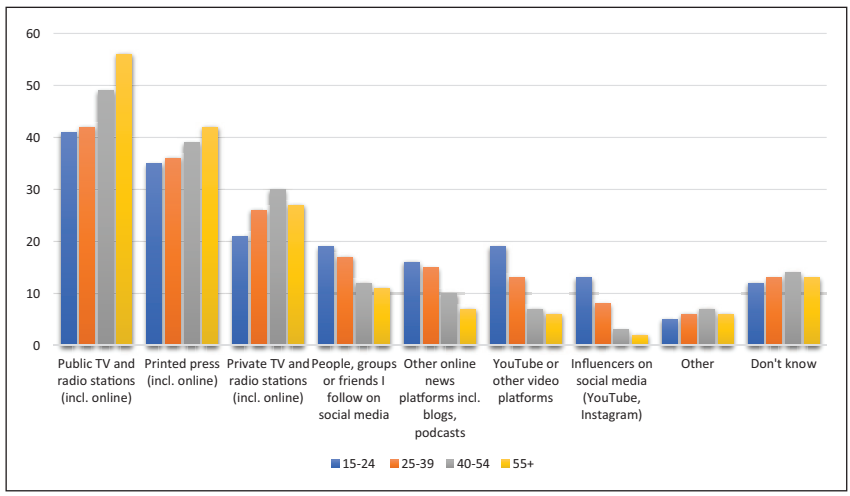


Figure 4. Trust in news source, by age (%).
Source: Eurobarometer (2022).
Note: Respondents were asked, 'Which news sources do you trust the most?'

having polarised pluralist media systems. A similar trend could be observed in Romania, while Poland was the only country where trust in private audiovisual media outweighed trust in publicly owned sources.

Another interesting aspect was that in certain countries, including Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary and Poland, respondents expressed more confidence in those people they followed on social media than in privately owned TV and radio or print press.

Table 2. Most-trusted news sources, by country (%).

	Public TV and radio stations (incl. online)	Print press (incl. online)	Private TV and radio stations (incl. online)	People, groups or friends I follow on social media	Other online news platforms incl. blogs, podcasts	YouTube or other video platforms	Influencers on social media (YouTube, Instagram)	Other	Don't know
EU27	49	39	27	14	11	10	5	6	13
Belgium	56	51	19	10	8	7	4	4	15
Bulgaria	44	18	21	25	23	19	7	6	11
Czechia	50	22	18	21	13	8	6	6	15
Denmark	66	46	11	9	5	4	3	4	14
Germany	62	42	20	9	7	8	3	7	12
Estonia	67	49	17	16	10	8	3	4	9
Ireland	59	45	17	18	15	9	6	5	8
Greece	34	34	31	23	29	18	6	8	5
Spain	45	44	36	13	11	7	5	6	14
France	49	46	29	10	7	9	5	7	14
Croatia	39	26	23	19	14	12	5	8	15
Italy	45	40	25	12	14	10	6	7	12
Cyprus	45	34	36	22	21	16	5	2	9
Latvia	51	21	15	20	12	19	12	6	12
Lithuania	56	28	16	21	16	18	8	6	10
Luxembourg	66	63	24	8	6	5	3	5	10
Hungary	22	21	16	25	22	15	8	10	17
Malta	45	40	29	12	25	7	4	4	9
Netherlands	57	54	27	10	8	5	3	4	13
Austria	56	45	22	10	6	7	3	8	11
Poland	23	18	43	26	11	16	7	6	15
Portugal	67	50	49	10	7	6	4	3	9
Romania	43	23	33	18	18	13	6	6	14
Slovenia	43	25	20	21	15	11	6	8	15
Slovakia	41	21	20	20	16	12	6	10	16
Finland	73	58	15	9	5	4	4	5	6
Sweden	66	52	10	10	8	6	3	5	11

Source: Eurobarometer (2022).
Note: Respondents were asked, 'Which news sources do you trust the most?'

Conclusion

First, this analysis aimed to explore the extent to which traditional media, namely TV, radio and the printed press, are still preferred as a primary source of information within the EU compared with new media. The results of a Eurobarometer survey and a Reuters Institute study support the assumption that traditional media are still more popular than new media in terms of news consumption. Irrespective of geographical variables (north versus south, east versus west) or EU member states' types of media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004), television constituted one of the media forms most used to access news, followed by online news platforms and radio. The potential dynamism of social media as sources of news information, established during the early years of their life, seems to have stabilised or even declined. Yet there are some intergenerational differences, as younger people are more likely to use social media platforms, blogs, YouTube or other video platforms than audiovisual or print media to access news.

Second, the article looked at the levels of trust in different news sources across the EU member states. The results of the Eurobarometer survey showed that most respondents in the EU expressed more confidence in traditional broadcast and print media than in online news platforms and social media channels. Thus the argument that traditional media are preferred as a primary source as they are generally perceived as more truthful than new media is confirmed (Johnson and Kaye 2015, 544). Furthermore, recent research has shown that social media constitute a more fertile area for the spreading of disinformation than traditional news channels (Benaissa Pedriza 2021, 605). However, according to the Eurobarometer (2022) survey, a majority of the respondents felt confident that they could distinguish between real news and fake news or disinformation. This confidence in identifying fake news seemed to increase with level of education and decrease with age.

Although this article is a one-off and focuses on just two surveys, it hopes to make a relevant contribution to the literature on media studies through its reference to some in-depth empirical data and analysis. To capture a more comprehensive picture, further research should address if and to what extent traditional media are still more popular and more trusted than new media in terms of news consumption in a longitudinal way. Furthermore, the interpretation of each member state's data could serve as a separate case study. In an effort to supplement these results, interviews with journalists and other media professionals could form part of a future study. Other aspects of concern could be also examined, including the rising social inequalities in news consumption that have been mentioned elsewhere (Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen 2017, 3).

Over the years, the media have held a pivotal role in (supra-)national public spheres, having been identified as 'the fourth branch of government' (Habermas 1996, 376). Their activities vary from disseminating information/knowledge and constructing ideologies and representations to exerting control over national governments. However, there has been a recent decline in interest in the news, with more and more people seeming to avoid it (Newman et al. 2023). It remains to be seen whether, in the future, mainstream

broadcast and print media continue to rank higher than online news platforms and social media channels in terms of news consumption and trust.

Notes

1. The views set out in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the EU. Neither the EU institutions and bodies nor any person acting on their behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained herein.
2. Hallin and Mancini classify countries' media–politics systems as liberal, democratic corporatist or polarised pluralist. A country's classification depends on the structure of its media markets, the media's political parallelism, the professionalisation of journalism, the role of the state and so on. Concretely, the liberal system is autonomous and market dominated. It is characterised by, among other things, medium newspaper circulation, information-oriented journalism, a neutral commercial press, a professional model of broadcast governance, non-institutionalised self-regulation and a high level of professionalisation. The democratic corporatist system is highly professionalised and is institutionally self-regulated. Its features include high newspaper circulation, a well-established party press and a politics-in-broadcasting system with substantial autonomy. Within this system one can identify strong state intervention with subsidies and well-developed public service broadcasting. At the same time, press freedom is protected. Finally, the polarised pluralist system is typified by, *inter alia*, low newspaper circulation, a high level of political parallelism, commentary-oriented journalism, a lower degree of professionalisation, politics-over-broadcasting systems and strong state intervention. For further information, see Hallin and Mancini (2004).
3. The study did not include data from Cyprus, Estonia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia, Malta or Slovenia.

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