

David Nicolas Hopmann*, Agnieszka Stępińska, James Stanyer, Denis Halagiera, Ludovic Terren, Luisa Gehle, Christine E. Meltzer, Raluca Buturoiu, Nicoleta Corbu, Ana S. Cardenal, and Christian Schemer

A qualitative examination of (political) media diets across age cohorts in five countries

<https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2023-0014>

Abstract: In recent research, the concept of “media diets” has received increased attention. However, the concept remains vague and not fully developed, and rarely, if at all, do researchers ask citizens about their perceptions of their own and others’ media diets. With the ongoing transformation of the media landscape, there has never been a more pertinent time to explore these perceptions, which this research intends to do. The main goal of this paper then is to identify recommendations addressing recently voiced concerns about news consumption patterns in contemporary society to relevant stakeholders. Empirically, the study is based on a series of focus group interviews with younger (18–25 years old) and older (over 55) adults in five European countries (Germany, Poland, Romania, Spain, and the UK). Our

***Corresponding author: David Nicolas Hopmann**, University of Southern Denmark, Center for Journalism, Odense, Denmark, E-mail: dnh@sam.sdu.dk.

Agnieszka Stępińska, Adam Mickiewicz University, Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Poznań, Poland, E-mail: agnieszka.stepinska@amu.edu.pl. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7361-2986>

James Stanyer, Loughborough University, Loughborough, United Kingdom, E-mail: J.Stanyer@lboro.ac.uk

Denis Halagiera, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland, E-mail: denis.halagiera@amu.edu.pl. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5575-0624>

Ludovic Terren, University of Antwerp, Belgium, E-mail: Ludovic.Terren@uantwerpen.be. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7075-7573>

Luisa Gehle, Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany, E-mail: gehle@uni-mainz.de

Christine E. Meltzer, Hanover University of Music, Drama and Media, Hannover, Germany, E-mail: Christine.Meltzer@ijk.hmtm-hannover.de

Raluca Buturoiu, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Communication, Bucharest, Romania, E-mail: raluca.buturoiu@comunicare.ro. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9841-0929>

Nicoleta Corbu, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Communication, Bucharest, Romania, E-mail: nicoleta.corbu@comunicare.ro. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9606-9827>

Ana S. Cardenal, Open University of Catalonia, Barcelona, Spain, E-mail: acardenal@uoc.edu

Christian Schemer, Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany, E-mail: schemer@uni-mainz.de

results show important cohort differences as well as cross-country similarities, which are pertinent insights for the formulation of stakeholder recommendations.

Keywords: media diets, news avoidance, selective exposure, disinformation, qualitative methods, focus groups

1 Introduction

Recent research has raised several concerns about citizens, particularly younger ones, in contemporary media-rich democracies (e.g., Hills, 2019). These concerns include: citizens being undiscerning about the media they consume; citizens avoiding political news and information; and citizens selecting information that confirms their prejudices (Van Aelst et al., 2017).

While the volume of research on these topics has grown, it is notable that studies exploring these issues rarely discuss them with citizens. In this paper, we argue that such an approach is vital for getting an in-depth understanding of citizen engagement in the democratic political information environment, and essential for addressing these concerns. By mapping citizens' perceptions of their own and others' media consumption on the one hand, and their normative perceptions of media use on the other hand, we chart the space for policy action likely perceived appropriate and therefore viable (Tankard and Paluck, 2016). The main goal of this paper therefore is to identify recommendations to relevant stakeholders. We explore citizens' media use and normative perceptions of media use using the analogy of "diets." Prior findings tell us that using the diet analogy is an expedient way for citizens to make sense of their existing practices and to identify healthy normative practices (Marcu et al., 2015). There has been some recent academic interest in the media diets of citizens (Young and Anderson, 2017), but the concept remains vague and not fully developed, and rarely, if at all, do researchers ask different cohorts of citizens about their normative perceptions and associated performative actions.

To reach our main goal of mapping the space of viable policy recommendations, we need to go into three directions. First, we explore how common people, in their own words, consume various types of media content within the current media landscape. Second, we identify perceptions of "healthy" media content that citizens should consume to develop sound judgment and attitudes. Third, we are interested in charting perceptions of the main types of media content and their use across countries and age levels. To achieve this, this paper draws on a series of focus group interviews. Rejecting a naive universalism that often accompanies qualitative research with the public, the scope of this study is widened by

a cross-country design. Indeed, focus groups with younger (18–25 years old) and older adults (over 55) were conducted in five European countries with different media systems (Germany, Poland, Romania, Spain, and the UK). We decided to focus on these two groups because there is an extensive literature suggesting age is one of the key factors influencing news consumption in the high-choice media environment (Boulianne and Shehata, 2022). Patterns of news consumption of youths in comparison with the elderly are not only very different per se, but they reflect the current changes of the citizenship model in a democracy (Bennett, 2008; Boulianne and Shehata, 2022). Also, we followed sources like Eurobarometer (2020) that reveal significant differences in news media consumption between these two age groups.

2 Literature review

In line with the preceding introduction, the following literature review distinguishes between three areas: first-person political news use, first-person political news norms, and third-person perceptions. First-person political news use refers to the analysis of people's description of their own political media diets. First-person political news norms encompass references to what a “healthy” political media diet should look like, whereas third-person perceptions refer to perceptions of political news use patterns across cohorts.

First-person political news use

Over the last decades, the entire media landscape has undergone several transformations, including the transition from low-choice to high-choice media environments (Castro et al., 2022). This change, mainly facilitated by the technological development and the rise of digital, social, and mobile media platforms, affects political information environments and challenges democracy (Andersen and Strömbäck, 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2017). On the demand side, people rely on relatively small subsets of (their preferred) media, representing the collection of media content individuals are exposed to—either voluntarily or accidentally—on a regular basis (Wolfsfeld et al., 2016). Some authors, for example Dubois and Blank (2018, p. 733), call “the regular, daily set of media individuals use (...) their *media diet*.”

Recent research suggests that people mix different media sources and media content to form an individual news diet (Andersen et al., 2022; Diehl et al., 2019). These news diets have been grouped into different types of media diets or subsumed under a few profile labels. The “profiles” represent different news consump-

tion patterns and their implications for various aspects of the democratic process, such as political learning (Andersen et al., 2022), political knowledge (Castro et al., 2022), and political participation (Geers and Vliegenthart, 2021). Such studies divide news consumers according to frequency and quantity of news consumption (Andersen et al., 2022). For example, in a comparative study in 17 European countries ($N = 28,317$), Castro et al. (2022) differentiated between five news user profiles: “news minimalists,” “social media news users,” “traditionalists,” “online news seekers,” and “hyper news consumers.”

Against this backdrop, it becomes important to better understand the causes and motivations for media use that guide people through today’s high-choice media landscape. Hence, our first research question (RQ1) is: How do common people describe their news media diets in the current media landscape?

First-person political news norms

Another important question is what people believe they, as citizens in a society, should consume. One starting point for thinking about a “healthy” media diet is inspired by the saying “you are what you read” (Jackson, 2019), adapting the proverbial saying “you are what you eat.” In that vein, excessive consumption of information and information snacking (often happening in the online environment) is associated with information overload (Bawden and Robinson, 2009; Li, 2017). Information overload refers to “the situation where information exceeds the ability of a user to process and utilize it, resulting in negative feelings of failure” (Fan et al., 2021, p. 2). The negative effects of information overload include user exhaustion, which in turn leads to users’ discontinued usage of media (Fu et al., 2020), depression, malaise, anxiety, and insecurities (Dismukes, 2019).

Information overload is also associated with another malign phenomenon in the public sphere, namely the increasingly difficulty for people to discern true from false information (Lewandowsky, 2019). Nowadays, people’s media diets might contain much information that has the potential to be misleading or even false. For example, there are various conspiracy theories or misleading narratives that may become part of a media diet, possibly intentionally but most often unintentionally, as a side effect of using many media outlets and various platforms (Theocharis et al., 2021). Because it is nearly impossible to process all the information they come across, people with such high media use end up being less informed. According to Benton (2021), the “healthiest” news media diet is probably traditional media, consumed in a conscious manner, as too much of any media might leave people uninformed or selectively informed.

Despite the increasing availability of news, some people may avoid political news. This could be due to various reasons, including a feeling of being overloaded with information, pessimistic news coverage having a negative effect on people's mood (Boukes and Vliegenthart, 2017), or a lack of media trust (Zerba, 2011). Although news avoidance has some positive side effects, such as improved perceived well-being (de Bruin et al., 2021), it can leave people uninformed about important public issues. Such a lack of exposure to news has important democratic ramifications: While exposure to news increases political knowledge and engagement (Aalberg and Curran, 2012), news avoidance might contribute to declining levels of political knowledge and belief accuracy (Damstra et al., 2023) and fragmentation (e.g., along educational lines, Karlsen et al., 2020), all of which can undermine the democratic process.

Recent changes to the political information environment have also increased the potential for media users to limit their exposure to attitude-inconsistent views (Stroud, 2008). Selectively exposed news users can be thought of as being in “echo chambers” of their own beliefs and interests (Sunstein, 2018). This might contribute to polarization, and threaten the existence of a shared space for information seeking, debate, and opinion formation (Terren and Borge-Bravo, 2021). Today, there are also more opportunities for media users to selectively expose themselves to—and for social and digital media, to automatically drive users toward—entertainment that directs attention away from political concerns entirely.

To date, most of the studies investigating people's media diets and their effects make recommendations about what news people should consume and how, to limit unhealthy effects. However, researchers have not investigated—to the best of our knowledge—what *people* think is a healthy way of consuming media content. Hence, we formulate the following second research question (RQ2): What do common people perceive as a “healthy” news media diet?

Third-person perceptions

A relevant starting point for a discussion of how citizens perceive others' media use in the current media landscape is considering differences across age cohorts. We believe that exploring age cohorts' views of one another can provide important insights for understanding the multi-faceted problem of how news consumption shapes citizenship, and could help chart the map of a legitimate space of action to support democratic values. The literature suggests that the citizenship model is related to how each cohort engages in politics (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2008), which is intrinsically related to news consumption patterns (Boulianne and Shehata, 2022). Additionally, research shows that news consumption habits are formed early

in life and stay stable throughout one's life cycle (Ghersetti and Westlund, 2018; van der Goot and Beentjes, 2015). In this context, the view of one's cohort on the habits of others reflects how generations born and socialized in a low- versus high-choice media environment understand the co-creation of citizenship values in a democracy. We therefore also investigate third-person perceptions because we believe that perceptions "of others" are crucial to understand for formulating recommendations to stakeholders.

Prior studies on political news consumption showed that while younger cohorts of today favor online sources and social media, older cohorts rely more on traditional sources such as flow television and newspapers (Andersen et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2021). Young individuals under 25 across the globe display a fundamentally different approach to obtaining news and political information than every cohort before. They use news websites more rarely and rely heavily on social media platforms (Newman et al., 2021). Compared to older cohorts, millennials are most broadly positioned and make use of news offers in traditional as well as online and social media sources. The older the cohort, the more pronounced the drop in website and social media use, and the higher the use of TV, radio, and newspapers (Diehl et al., 2019). Findings also suggest that younger media users have greater difficulty absorbing new information than older ones, and younger media users tend to forget information obtained from the media more quickly than older ones—but they are also able to find information more quickly online. Hence, while older cohorts retrieve information from memory, younger cohorts might easily look it up online and turn toward social media when they need specific information (Kleinberg and Lau, 2019). This difference between age cohorts is supported by data showing that both younger and older cohorts are exposed to more political information prior to an election (i.e., when in need of political information), while political news exposure drops after the election. This drop is larger for younger cohorts than for older ones (Andersen et al., 2021). Yet, younger cohorts may be more conscientious in their use of social media, and less likely to spread disinformation than older cohorts (Guess et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, we are particularly interested in studying how people from two different cohorts perceive media consumption diets across cohorts, and how people reflect on the social (societal) consequences of media consumption diets across cohorts. It is important to note that we deliberately speak of (age) cohorts, not (social) generations. Prior studies on media and generations are heavily inspired by Karl Mannheim's conceptualization of generations (Timonen and Conlon, 2015). Following this conceptualization, having the same generation location (i.e., age cohort) is not to be equated with membership of a specific generation as an actuality (Hart-Brinson et al., 2016, p. 93), which requires more than being born in a specific period. Nevertheless, given the pervasiveness of media, we argue

that being a member of a specific cohort means sharing formative media experiences; it is hence a plausible approach to contrast two cohorts with each other. To what extent these shared experiences are sufficient to speak of generations as an actuality rather than cohorts as understood by Mannheim is beyond the scope of our analysis. Therefore, our third research question (RQ3) is: How do people perceive news media diets across cohorts?

3 Data and methods

This research draws on a series of focus group interviews. Given that we are interested in the study of a domain which is undergoing dramatic changes, focus group interviews seem to be a particularly suited methodological approach. They allow for more spontaneity, ambiguity, and reflection than would be possible when participants are asked to choose between a limited number of specific and fixed survey items (Fern, 2001). Focus groups have been proven to foster discussions that build on people's opinions, concerns, life experiences, and so on, while also creating a framework that allows participants to "pursue their own priorities, in their own terms, in their own vocabulary" (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999, p. 5). At the same time, focus groups—like other methods that involve self-reporting—are prone to social desirability bias. In line with previous research (Ried et al., 2022), we sought to minimize this bias by providing an informal and spontaneous conversation setting, the provision of confidentiality and anonymity assurances, and a clear description of the research purpose.

We conducted focus group interviews between April and July 2021 in five European countries: Germany (DE), Poland (PL), Romania (RO), Spain (ES), and the United Kingdom (UK). This sample of countries covers variation in terms of media systems as well as other characteristics relevant for the present study. These include the market share of public service broadcasting (PSB)¹, press freedom², ICT skills³, and trust in news provided by different media types⁴. Germany and the UK are characterized by fairly high market shares of public service broadcasting, press freedom, high basic ICT skills, but low trust in online social networks. In Poland and Romania, the PSB market share is low and press freedom is problematic (Romania

1 <http://yearbook.obs.coe.int/s/document/6633/tv-aud-daily-audience-market-share-of-public-television-1999-2020>

2 <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

3 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tepsr_sp410/default/table?lang=en

4 https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf

hovers at the border of what is described as “problematic” by Reporters Without Borders). Basic ICT skills are lower but trust in online social networks is higher. Spain is located in between but has a notably low trust in TV.

Regarding the participants, the pronounced cohort differences in media use in today’s media landscape (e.g., Andersen et al., 2021) guided the decision to form two focus groups per country, one with young adults (18–25 years old) and one with adults over 55 years old. As such there were ten focus groups in total. Although there was no formal requirement that each focus group was gender-balanced, it was strongly advised. Across all young-adult groups, there were only slightly more female (16) than male (15) participants; among the over 55-year-olds, the ratio was 14 to 13. In each country, the focus group participants were first identified by the authors using existing contacts. Potential participants were contacted, either via e-mail or phone, and those interested were provided with full information about the project before consenting to take part. Additional subjects were recruited via non-probability chain referral, also called snowball sampling, as well as an open invitation sent to students via university mailing systems. Participants were free to withdraw from the focus groups at any time. All focus group discussions were conducted online via platforms such as Zoom, MS Teams, or Jitsi. The discussions lasted around 90 minutes, and each focus group was moderated by the same moderator (one per country) based on a standardized question guide (see Appendix A for additional details).

Prior to the data collection, each participant received an invitation and a file with information about the project. Before the focus group discussions started, respondents provided consent. To ensure consistency across groups, all discussions had the same three-part structure. The groups started with a discussion of participants’ news consumption and the main sources of political information (within society in general, across different cohorts, audience members), followed by a consideration of what a “healthy media diet” should look like. The second part of the group discussion started with a general (open) question about the main negative and positive aspects related to today’s media landscape and political information environment. In that part of the discussion, the focus was on any threats, problems, concerns, challenges, or opportunities perceived by the participants. If mentioned by participants, discussion was encouraged, including about participants’ expectations as well as about who should deal with these threats and how these threats should be dealt with. During the third part of the group discussion, we addressed (a) political information avoidance, (b) selective information exposure, and (c) disinformation exposure and its perceived ubiquity. These issues were not discussed in part three if they had been discussed by participants in the first or second parts of the discussion. The discussions were recorded, and full transcripts were prepared based on the recordings. In line with best practice, while preparing tran-

scripts, all personal data were deleted from the document; the final transcripts are fully anonymized.

As Salgado and Stanyer (2019, p. 25) observe, “one of the main challenges of conducting qualitative comparative research in multiple languages is the issue of accurate translations.” There were five different languages used in this study. The question guide was translated from English (the working language of the research) into the different languages spoken by the authors. After the interviews, all the focus group transcripts were transcribed in the native language. All passages relevant to this paper were then translated to English. The first stage of analysis involved the authors in each country identifying key themes in the responses to each question. In the second stage, the data were sent to the two lead authors who analyzed the translated responses across countries. Though not fundamental to the project, direct quotes were included to provide additional insights and context (Salgado and Stanyer, 2019, p. 29).

4 Results

In this section, we present overviews of the responses to the three research questions. These overviews are then summarized in a table at the end of this section before we proceed to a discussion of the findings.

RQ1: How do common people describe their news media diets in the current media landscape?

It is clear across all included countries that social media are the main source of political information for young adults. A variety of sources were mentioned by focus group participants. In Poland, Facebook News and Google News were noted as important sources by young media users, while in Germany, Romania, Spain, and the UK, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp were also considered relevant. Participants emphasized the instantaneous, easily accessible nature of information (PL, DE). Only in the UK, accidental exposure to political news via conventional media (radio or television at home) was mentioned. The role of family and friends in shaping news consumption was also mentioned (DE, UK).

Overall, young participants in all sampled countries did not report avoiding all news, but neither did they seem to search news out. The young participants seem to gain news in a fragmented fashion from a wide range of sources rather than a specific news channel. There seems to be some accidental exposure to

political news and/or interest-driven exposure to specific issues. Moreover, not only are they reporting to not engage in what may be considered beneficial news consumption for their role as citizens in society, but they also do not believe that others do.

At the same time, across all countries, mainstream TV news channels were the primary source of news and information for the older news media users. PSB was mentioned as an important source in Germany and the UK, in line with high market shares of PSB in these countries⁵. For instance, a German respondent noted: “Public broadcasting is watched a lot. That’s where people mainly get informed. With exceptions, I know a few people my age who also watch private television, but that’s rather unusual” (DEC07). However, in that case, there was no broad international consensus, due to differences in political contexts of the media systems. For example, in Poland, where the public media is highly politicized, public service media is deemed less accurate and less trusted by those who do not support the current right-wing government led by Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice). The following quote illustrates this notion: “I believe it is impossible to watch state television without having an allergic reaction. The quality of information is poor, the degree of manipulation is high, even disgusting. I tried to read the information offered by national sources; however, after a while, I gave up” (PLC01).

Respondents mentioned newspapers as important sources, too. In Spain, participants declared reading newspapers regularly (most often digital, sometimes print). Older people seemed to be interested in an in-depth coverage of issues, for which newspapers were praised. The responses provided reflected a strong defense of print news. At the same time, accessing news and information online alongside conventional media was also reported. In Poland, for example, two main approaches to media use emerged from the answers provided: using different types of media (both traditional and online), and neglecting traditional media such as television or radio and using the internet as main source of information. In Romania, the narrative regarding online media use was one of additional use, as illustrated by this quote: “I also use Facebook, the internet, and [online] newspapers, but this is my opinion, that our generation mostly watches TV” (ROC10). In the UK, for older participants, even though conventional media were still the most important source, news was often accessed online. For instance, one participant “confessed” to quickly accessing outlets online too, dipping into the media: “I do confess I read the *Mail* in the morning on the internet, but that’s just a quick scroll through and then on to the next” (UKC13).

5 <http://yearbook.obs.coe.int/s/document/6633/tv-aud-daily-audience-market-share-of-public-television-1999-2020>

RQ2: What do common people perceive as a “healthy” news media diet?

There was a clear perception among the younger participants of what a healthy media diet should include. Participants suggested characteristics such as a balance of sources (DE, RO, UK, PL); absence of selective news use unless it means the avoidance of “superficial” news (PL); use of quality news (PL); public service news (DE, UK); and a careful selection of sources (ES). To mention a few examples, participant UKC03 raised the need to access a mix of opinions and check multiple sources. A similar approach was found in Romania, Germany, and Poland:

A healthy diet means using several sources. It is also about comparing and analyzing. We cannot swallow information from one source. A balance is required. We often limit ourselves to one source, thus limiting our field of vision. (PLC09)

Participants also mentioned the need to mix traditional media and other media as well as contrast information found in different sources (RO, UK, PL, ES). In addition, the importance of an impartial source of news for a media diet to be “healthy” was mentioned. In this context, the important role of PSB in providing balanced news was mentioned (UK). To remain healthy in their news consumption, young adults also claimed that they should take responsibility for the information they consume and check the facts (PL, RO); exercise healthy skepticism (UK); and take the time to read as opposed to skim through (UK, PL). As one participant from Poland stated:

A good diet means eating good quality food. We cannot swallow facts or pseudo-facts. We need to dig deep into the sources and also read about some events on different websites. It might be a good idea to consult with someone who knows the given topic. (PLC12)

Though none of the young adults explicitly mentioned “political news” as an ingredient of a healthy media diet, respondents agreed that it is *expedient within a democracy* to consume some level of news. This notion is closely connected with the fact that young people in our sample were not very interested in political news (all countries). Heavy consumers of political news were rarely encountered (RO, ES), and the general belief was that young citizens are not normally interested in political news (RO):

To me, it seems that young people in Romania don’t give much importance to news... I mean there are some young people interested in politics maybe, but the majority don’t pay any kind of attention to news. (ROC01)

In contrast, groups of older adults noted that a healthy media diet needed to include political information (DE, RO). In Germany, participants attached high importance

to its presence. One participant from Germany noted: “For me, it is very valuable from a political point of view if there is a large proportion of political education in everyday life. I find that very important” (DEC07). The answers also revealed that it was not just about the presence of politics but also about the quality of the ingredients (ES, PL, RO). In Spain, discussants noted that a healthy media diet should be composed of quality information, with participants emphasizing the importance of knowing who produces and writes the information. In Romania, the emphasis was on consuming less news but of a high quality. In Poland, positive comparisons with the poor diets of the past were made. As a post-communist country, one can compare the media performance and the media diet of the Polish people under the communist regime with recent media content and the way people consume it these days.

Selective diets were also seen as unhealthy by the oldest media users. They claimed that such a diet reinforces people’s existing views. However, in some countries (RO, PL), older adults acknowledged that it was important to avoid some news sources in the diet. Two reasons for avoidance were mentioned. First, there is a tendency to avoid political news due to biased media coverage. Second, a sense of being overwhelmed by the amount of political news in the media was mentioned. The following quote illustrates this notion:

The way of searching for information is onerous and time-consuming. I found that an overwhelming amount of political information is completely unnecessary for me. I am only interested in information related to my loved ones and my family. The flow of false and polluting information is so huge that I have limited my media consumption. (PLC07)

Diversity of the media diet was also mentioned as important (ES, PL). In Spain, discussants mentioned the importance of a combination of different media and sources. In Poland, participants claimed that they are trying to make this media diet as diverse as possible, but it is selective at the same time: “The internet has given us access to various sources of information. I read in three or four foreign languages” (PLC04). Finally, in the UK, participants acknowledged that a healthy media diet was a broad diet, like the one that includes media from different political positions: “I do make myself read the *Telegraph* sometimes. I do make myself read the *New Statesman* sometimes, and the *Spectator* sometimes” (UKC14).

RQ3: How do people perceive news media diets across cohorts?

Despite a clear perception of what a healthy media diet should include, participants of the focus group discussions across all countries were quite critical about citizens’ performance in that matter. While discussing citizens’ media diets, par-

ticipants extensively focused on differences between younger and older cohorts. Participants were critical of the media diets of both their own and the other cohort, but for different reasons.

Young participants distinguished between the way they gained political information via social media platforms as distinct from older citizens, who were perceived as still heavily relying on conventional media and news sources and TV news bulletins. In Germany, one young participant (DEC03) observed: “Traditional news watching is probably almost non-existent in our cohort. Instead, most of it is obtained via social media.” Hence, while young media participants assume that the other young people’s diet (and their own diet) is diverse, and sometimes even more diverse than the older cohort (PL, UK), they also claimed that their media diet was very unhealthy:

I believe that nowadays young people have a toxic media diet because not all that is online is OK (...) Very few are interested in politics or education, science, and many are only interested in sensationalist stories, TikTok, Instagram. (ROC01)

The worst way to inform ourselves is how we are doing it today. (ESC07)

Young participants described their cohort as undiscerning news consumers continually scrolling, looking for interesting information, whether political or not (UK). Others talked of grazing or skimming the news presented to them via algorithms on their devices, focusing on political news only if they were interested in the topic. In the UK, news consumption was seen as mainly interest-driven (UK), and young adults were perceived as people lacking much patience or going in-depth when seeking information. As to what types of news interested participants, young people were seen as mainly interested in sensationalist news (RO) or attracted by clickbait (PL, RO). At the same time, younger participants admitted that they are looking for information that presents politics in a rather entertaining way.

I have noticed that there is a great emphasis on infotainment, satire, memes, and sites that portray political events in a specific way. Examples are websites such as ASZDziennik or Donald.pl. We can find a humorous commentary on political events in Poland. Perhaps this is a method to reach out to younger generations. (PLC10)

Older adults were seen by the younger adults as less savvy news consumers, more vulnerable, and more likely to stick to a single source compared to young people (DE, PL, ES). As one young participant in Spain noted: “Young people tend to inform themselves online and thus to be exposed to more sources and opinions than (older) people who buy one newspaper or watch the same TV channel” (ESC11). Spanish young participants also noted that older people were more likely

to believe in fake news as they are used to trusting traditional media sources and the news in general. In Germany, the young participants in the focus group were sure that they were better at evaluating sources than their parents. When asked about why they think they are better, the fact that they grew up with new media was mentioned.

In some countries, older citizens were seen by younger people as relying on conventional media that reflect their political views (DE, ES, PL, RO). For instance, in Romania one young media user noted:

The elderly have clear political preferences, and many times they remain in a bubble, in an echo chamber, and only consume specific TV channels; I believe that the elderly consume much more TV than social media and remain in their bubble, because they feed themselves only with news about a certain issue, party, or ideology. (ROC07)

Cohort differences also emerged in the conversations with older adults. There was a perception that the younger cohorts' news consumption and interests were fundamentally different from their own (DE, RO, UK). In Romania, one discussant noted:

I believe there are differences: I look at my daughter, she is not interested in politics, nor in TV political news. She doesn't watch much TV. They are a cohort who grew up with computers, iPads, laptops; they often have different activities they enjoy, and forget to watch news on TV. (ROC13)

Older citizens were perceived as much more interested in politics and political news. According to older participants, young cohorts are mostly consuming social media (including for informational purposes). In the UK, there was a mixed perception about younger cohorts' news consumption, based on participants' grandchildren. One view was that they were "not too much worried about the news" (UKC10), adding that when they were young news was not central to them either.

Another issue raised by older participants was the time-bound nature of their news consumption repertoires. News was still watched at specific times during the day (DE, ES). In Germany, older participants noted that what sets them apart from other cohorts is their time-bound routine. One commented: "For us, I would say it's a given: news at 8 o'clock. And I don't think the younger cohort has this rhythm at all. They watch it when they have the time or feel like it. There is definitely a big difference" (DEC07). Finally, most Spanish participants noted that they listen to the news on the radio, mostly in the morning, while some of them watch TV news in the evening.

Table 1: News diets: similarities and differences between focus groups.

	Young adults (18–25)	Older adults (55+)
First-person political news use	– News almost exclusively via social media platforms (DE, ES, RO, PL, UK)* – Accidental/interest-driven exposure – Public service broadcasting (PSB) not raised (DE, ES, PL, RO, UK)	– News mainly if not exclusively via conventional news channels, complemented with social media – Deliberate exposure. The importance of PSB emphasized (DE, UK)
First-person political news norms	– A balance of news sources (DE, RO, UK) – Quality news (PL) – Being discerning (ES, PL, RO, UK) – Including public service news (DE, UK) – Including political news (DE, ES, PL, RO, UK) – Citizen’s duty to read carefully and fact-check (PL, RO, UK) – PSB raised (DE, UK)	– A balance of news sources (ES, PL, UK) – Quality news (ES, PL, RO) – Including political news (DE, RO) – PSB not raised (DE, ES, PL, RO, UK)
Third-person perceptions	– Younger users seen as unhealthy and undiscerning, news avoiders (PL, RO, UK) – Older users seen as adopting an appointment to view strategy (DE, ES) – Older users seen as less savvy and relying on single outlet (DE, ES, PL) – Older users seen as relying on conventional media (DE, ES, PL, RO)	– Older users seen as more interested in politics (RO) – Younger users seen as gaining news only from social media (DE, ES, PL, RO, UK) – Younger users saw themselves (PL) or were seen by older participants (ES) as mostly interested in entertainment – Younger and older users seen as having fundamentally different news interests (DE, RO, UK)

* Country initials represent the country focus group where this view was expressed.

5 Discussion

The participants in this focus group study echoed the concerns raised in the literature (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017) but also provided additional valuable insights into media diets and normative perceptions. An overview of the findings is reported in Table 1. In relation to RQ1, if we consider the “collection” of media sources that people regularly use and how participants describe their media diets within the current media landscape, the focus groups revealed a clear cross-country cohort

difference in media diets with some country variation. The cohort difference is quite stark: While younger people are mostly on social media, the older cohort are mainly stuck with legacy media. In terms of Castro et al.'s (2022) news user profiles, younger people are mainly "social media news users," perhaps "online news seekers" but only if of interest to them, while the older cohort could be classified as "traditionalists." The extent to which the diets included PSB was one stand-out variation amongst older adults, with older adults in the UK and Germany raising it as an important part of their diets, in line with these countries' high PSB market shares. In the UK and Germany, PSB was presented as a highly trusted news source compared to the other countries (Spain, Romania, Poland).

In relation to RQ2 and the normative dimensions, the focus groups revealed more similarities between age groups than differences. Both age groups across countries agreed that healthy diets should include quality news; a balance of sources; and citizens should be discerning in their consumption, avoiding "rubbish." There was a clear normative perception across groups. Though the dietary requirements were not the same, there was some overlap in what was seen as essential with regard to citizens' information intake. There were also some glaring differences between the descriptive and the normative diets especially amongst younger adults. The latter mentioned, for example, the importance of PSB in a healthy media diet, although it did not (yet?) feature in their own diets.

In relation to RQ3 and the perceptions of the dietary performance of other citizens, young participants saw the diet of people from their own cohort generally as unhealthy, "toxic" even. They tended to see their consumption as undiscerning and young people as not paying enough attention to the news. They drew a clear distinction, however, between their own media diet and that of older citizens. While they may be less attentive and discerning, they saw older citizens as "less savvy" consumers, possibly more gullible when it came to fake news. The older participants saw the diets of other cohorts as different, too. While older citizens were presented as consuming news via conventional media at fixed times during the day, younger cohorts were presented as not very interested in political news, and thought to graze or snack information on social media throughout the day.

Reflecting upon the discussions amongst both cohorts, the notion of a third-person effect (Davison, 1983) comes to mind. Each cohort believed that the other had a poorer media diet. The youths consider that the elderly are prone to selective exposure, disinformation, and a less diverse media diet (due to their general lack of interest for alternative media). Older participants talked about an almost total lack of interest for (political) news among younger cohorts. There is a paradox in this perception of others, as at the same time each cohort also mentioned the shortcomings of their own media diets (and their cohort's). Additionally, our study suggests that people of all ages perceive discrepancies between a healthy media diet and

their own diet. The metaphor of “food consumption” proved to be a good trigger for making people reflect critically about their own news consumption habits.

One of the main advantages of qualitative studies of media audiences is the opportunity to collect information on opinions, experiences, and expectations explicitly presented by the news media users with their own words. As such, focus groups, due to their typically smaller samples, are not best suited to assess differences between demographic groups or categories. Despite this limitation, findings of this study revealed several similarities and differences across the two age groups of respondents that deserve further investigation, including how media diets affect knowledge about public affairs and opinions about them—which are important steps towards a better understanding of healthy principles within a democracy.

Based on our findings, several recommendations to stakeholders could be made. First, journalists need to be aware of cohort differences and address each audience equally on their preferred channels to ensure that a good balance of quality and “healthy” media content is provided to everybody. Arguably, many—if not most—journalists already have a good sense hereof. Second, the PSB in three of the five countries (ES, PL, RO) should be aware of the dangers of being perceived as biased. From this point of view, steps need to be taken to ensure their political independence. Knowing that people are sensitive to the food metaphor regarding media consumption, policymakers could imagine awareness campaigns using such semantics to inform the public about the dangers of “unhealthy” media consumption patterns. This suggestion assumes that policymakers are interested in supporting an informed, unbiased public debate, which is not always warranted (e.g., Poland). We see that in the UK and Germany, young respondents report limited use of PSB, but they also report that they ought to use it more. It remains to be seen whether this norm eventually will materialize. Educators could also extend their efforts in addressing problems by raising young people’s levels of (digital) media literacy, resilience, and interest in political news.

Third, we need to address the apparent discrepancy between what citizens appear to perceive as a healthy news media diet and their actual news consumption. A picture emerges that people do have an idea of what a healthy media diet is, but they often go for “less healthy” media content. Is choice just up to media users? Are we as researchers simply to categorize the provided answers as signs of social desirability, or are we to take the answers as expressions of true intentions calling for stakeholders such as policymakers and journalists to take the lead in developing a “healthy media diet campaign”? Such campaigns should not only highlight the ingredients/ideal of a healthy media diet (as these are apparently known by citizens) but also suggest where to get this healthy media diet and how to avoid “mistakes,” that is, how to navigate competences in media literacy. Another ques-

tion that emerges is the role of social media platforms and their algorithmic curation. Ensuring a healthy media diet is likely not a priority when developing such algorithms.

Finally, we may consider how differences in news consumption patterns affect political communication in general. Changing the perspective toward a political actor-oriented or a journalist-oriented view, we may wonder to what extent citizens' perceptions and opinions, as those shared during our discussions, are acknowledged by relevant stakeholders (i.e., journalists, politicians) in the flow of political information.

Acknowledgement: The study was founded by the project THREATPIE: The Threats and Potentials of a Changing Political Information Environment financially supported by NORFACE Joint Research Programme on Democratic Governance in a Turbulent Age and co-funded by FWO, DFF, ANR, DFG, National Science Centre, Poland, NWO, AEI, ESRC and the European Commission through Horizon 2020 under grant agreement No 822166. For more details, see <http://threatpie.eu>.

References

- Aalberg, T., & Curran, J. (2012). *How media inform democracy: A comparative approach*. London: Routledge.
- Andersen, K., Ohme, J., Bjarnøe, C., Bordacconi, M. J., Albæk, E., & De Vreese, C. H. (2021). *Generational gaps in political media use and civic engagement: From Baby Boomers to Generation Z*. New York: Routledge.
- Andersen, K., Johansson, J., Johansson, B., & Shehata, A. (2022). Maintenance and reformation of news repertoires: A latent transition analysis. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 99(1), 237–261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990211019750>
- Andersen, K., & Strömbäck, J. (2021). Media platforms and political learning: The democratic challenge of news consumption on computers and mobile devices. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 20.
- Bawden, D., & Robinson, L. (2009). The dark side of information: Overload, anxiety and other paradoxes and pathologies. *Journal of Information Science*, 35(2), 180–191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551508095781>
- Bennett, W. L. (2008). Changing citizenship in the digital age. In W. L. Bennett (Ed.), *Civic life online: Learning how digital media can engage youth* (pp. 1–24). MIT Press.
- Benton, J. (2021). *What's the healthiest news diet? Probably traditional media, but don't gorge yourself: Too much can leave you less informed*. NiemanLab. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2021/05/whats-the-healthiest-news-diet-probably-traditional-media-but-dont-gorge-yourself-too-much-can-leave-you-less-informed/>
- Boukes, M., & Vliegenthart, R. (2017). News consumption and its unpleasant side effect: Studying the effect of hard and soft news exposure on mental well-being over time. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*, 29(3), 137–147. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000224>

- Boulianne, S., & Shehata, A. (2022). Age differences in online news consumption and online political expression in the United States, United Kingdom, and France. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(3), 763–783. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211060271>
- de Bruin, K., de Haan, Y., Vliegthart, R., Kruikemeier, S., & Boukes, M. (2021). News avoidance during the Covid-19 crisis: Understanding information overload. *Digital Journalism*, 9(9), 1286–1302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1957967>
- Castro, L., Strömbäck, J., Esser, F., Van Aelst, P., de Vreese, C., Aalberg, T., Cardenal, A. S., Corbu, N., Hopmann, D. N., Koc-Michalska, K., Matthes, J., Schemer, C., Sheaffer, T., Splendore, S., Stanyer, J., Stepińska, A., Štětka, V., & Theocharis, Y. (2022). Navigating high-choice European political information environments: A comparative analysis of news user profiles and political knowledge. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(4), 827–859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211012572>
- Dalton, R. J. (2008). Citizenship norms and the expansion of political participation. *Political Studies*, 56(1), 76–98. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00718.x>
- Damstra, A., Vliegthart, R., Boomgaarden, H., Glüer, K., Lindgren, E., Strömbäck, J., Tsati, Y. (2023). Knowledge and the news: An investigation of the relation between news use, news avoidance, and the presence of (mis)beliefs. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 28(1), 29–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211031457>
- Davison, W. P. (1983). The Third-Person Effect in communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1086/268763>
- Diehl, T., Barnidge, M., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2019). Multi-platform news use and political participation across age groups: Toward a valid metric of platform diversity and its effects. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 96(2), 428–451. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699018783960>
- Dismukes, L. (2019). Do you have a balanced social media diet? *UT News*. <https://news.utexas.edu/2019/04/04/we-are-what-we-consume-do-you-have-a-balanced-social-media-diet/>
- Dubois, E., & Blank, G. (2018). The echo chamber is overstated: The moderating effect of political interest and diverse media. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21(5), 729–745. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428656>
- Eurobarometer (2020). *Standard Eurobarometer 92*. Brussels: European Commission.
- Fan, M., Huang, Y., Qalati, S. A., Muhammad Shah, S. M., Ostic, D., & Pu, Z. (2021). Effects of information overload, communication overload, and inequality on digital distrust: A cyber-violence behavior mechanism. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 1060. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.643981>
- Fern, E. F. (2001). *Advanced focus group research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Fu, S., Li, H., Liu, Y., Pirkkalainen, H., & Salo, M. (2020). Social media overload, exhaustion, and use discontinuance: Examining the effects of information overload, system feature overload, and social overload. *Information Processing & Management*, 57(6). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.643981>
- Geers, S., & Vliegthart, R. (2021). Being inside or outside the virtuous circle: How news media repertoires relate to political participation repertoires. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 21.
- Ghersetti, M., & Westlund, O. (2018). Habits and generational media use. *Journalism Studies*, 19(7), 1039–1058. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1254061>
- Guess, A., Nagler, J., & Tucker, J. (2019). Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook. *Science Advances*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aau4586>
- Hart-Brinson, P., Yang, G., & Aoldi, P. (2016). Techno-social generations and communication research. In J. F. Nussbaum (Ed.), *Communication across the life span* (pp. 91–106). New York: Peter Lang.

- Hills, T. T. (2019). The dark side of information proliferation. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 14(3), 323–330. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691618803647>
- Jackson, J. (2019). *You are what you read: Why changing your media diet can change the world*. Unbound.
- Karlsen, R., Beyer, A., & Steen-Johnsen, K. (2020). Do high-choice media environments facilitate news avoidance? A longitudinal study 1997–2016. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 64(5), 794–814. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2020.1835428>
- Kitzinger, J. & Barbour, R. S. (1999). Introduction: The challenge and promise of focus groups. In R. S. Barbour & J. Kitzinger (Eds.), *Developing focus group research* (pp. 1–20). London: Sage.
- Kleinberg, M. S., & Lau, R. R. (2019). The importance of political knowledge for effective citizenship: Differences between the broadcast and internet generations. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 83(2), 338–362. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz025>
- Lewandowsky, S. (2019). The “post-truth” world, misinformation, and information literacy: A perspective from cognitive science. In S. Goldstein (Ed.), *Informed societies: Why information literacy matters for citizenship, participation and democracy* (pp. 69–88). Facet.
- Li, C.-Y. (2017). Why do online consumers experience information overload? An extension of communication theory. *Journal of Information Science*, 43(6), 835–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551516670096>
- Marcu, A., Gaspar, R., Rutsaert, P., Seibt, B., Fletcher, D., Verbeke, W., & Barnett, J. (2015). Analogies, metaphors, and wondering about the future: Lay sense-making around synthetic meat. *Public Understanding of Science*, 24(5), 547–562. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662514521106>
- Newman, N. et al. (2021). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Ried, L., Eckerd, S., & Kaufmann, L. (2022). Social desirability bias in PSM surveys and behavioral experiments: Considerations for design development and data collection. *Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management*, 28(1). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pursup.2021.100743>
- Salgado, S., & Stanyer, J. (2019). Perceptions of populism: A qualitative comparative approach to studying the views of journalists and politicians. In C. Reinemann, J. Stanyer, T. Aalberg, F. Esser, & C. de Vreese (Eds.), *Communicating populism: Comparing actor perceptions, media coverage, and effects on citizens in Europe*. London: Routledge.
- Stroud, N. J. (2008). Media use and political predispositions: Revisiting the concept of selective exposure. *Political Behavior*, 30(3), 341–366. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-007-9050-9>
- Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *#Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.
- Tankard, M. E., & Levy Paluck, E. (2016). Norm perception as a vehicle for social change. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 10(1), 181–211. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12022>
- Terren, L., & Borge-Bravo, R. (2021). Echo chambers on social media: A systematic review of the literature. *Review of Communication Research*, 9, 99–118. <https://doi.org/10.12840/issn.2255-4165.028>
- Theocharis, Y., Cardenal, A., Jin, S., Aalberg, T., Hopmann, D. N., Strömbäck, J., Castro, L., Esser, F., Van Aelst, P., de Vreese, C., Corbu, N., Koc-Michalska, K., Matthes, J., Schemer, C., Sheaffer, T., Splendore, S., Stanyer, J., Stępińska, A., & Štětka, V. (2021). *Does the platform matter? Social media and COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs in 17 countries*. New Media & Society. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211045666>
- Timonen, V., & Conlon, C. (2015). Beyond Mannheim: Conceptualising how people “talk” and “do” generations in contemporary society. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 24, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2015.03.001>

- Van Aelst, P., Strömbäck, J., Aalberg, T., Esser, F., de Vreese, C., Matthes, J., Hopmann, D., Salgado, S., Hubé, N., Stępińska, A., Papathanassopoulos, S., Berganza, R., Legnante, G., Reinemann, C., Sheafer, T., & Stanyer, J. (2017). Political communication in a high-choice media environment: A challenge for democracy? *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 41(1), 3–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2017.1288551>
- van der Goot, M., & Beentjes, J. W. J. (2015). Media use across the life-span. In W. Donsbach (Ed.), *The concise encyclopedia of communication* (pp. 373–374). Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Wolfsfeld, G., Yarchi, M., & Samuel-Azran, T. (2016). Political information repertoires and political participation. *New Media & Society*, 18(9), 2096–2115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815580413>
- Young, D. G., & Anderson, K. (2017). Media diet homogeneity in a fragmented media landscape. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 25(1), 33–47.
- Zerba, A. (2011). Young adults' reasons behind avoidances of daily print newspapers and their ideas for change. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 88(3), 597–614.

Supplemental Material: This article contains supplementary material (<https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2023-0014>).