

THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL INFORMATION ENVIRONMENTS IN
THE AGE OF MISINFORMATION

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Ural Berk Karaoğlu, certify that

- I am the sole author of this thesis and that I have fully acknowledged and documented in my thesis all sources of ideas and words, including digital resources, which have been produced or published by another person or institution;
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ABSTRACT

The Dynamics of Political Information Environments in the Age of Misinformation

This thesis examines the relationship between the news consumption behavior of individuals and the types of information environments they are situated within. Investigating the transformation of politics-media-society complex in the recent atmosphere of ‘the age of misinformation’, the thesis suggests that the increasing distrust towards information and consequential critical news consumption behavior of audiences are related to the structural changes in current political information environments. Political information environments are offered to be analyzed in the levels of country and individual, respectively referring to the frameworks developed by media systems and news repertoire approaches. Conceptualizing contextually significant dimensions of these two levels, a quantitative research has been designed and presumed effects were tested for 30 countries and 61789 individuals. Results suggest that people who live in countries with a weak mainstream media and individuals who have digitally-oriented and quantitatively diverse news repertoires are significantly more likely to be critical news consumers.

ÖZET

Yanlış Bilgi Çağında Siyasi Bilgi Ortamlarının Dinamikleri

Tez, bireylerin haber tüketim davranışları ile içinde bulundukları bilgi ortamlarının türleri arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektedir. Siyaset-medya-toplum yapısının günümüzün ‘yanlış bilgi çağı’ atmosferindeki dönüşümünü soruşturan tez, haber tüketicilerinin bilgiye karşı artan güvensizlikleri ve takiben edindikleri eleştirel haber tüketim davranışlarının günümüz siyasi bilgi ortamındaki yapısal değişimlerle ilgili olduğunu öne sürmektedir. Siyasi bilgi ortamlarının, sırayla medya sistemleri ve haber repertuarları yaklaşımlarının geliştirdiği çerçevelere karşılık gelen, ülke ve birey seviyelerinde incelenmesi önerilmiştir. Bu iki seviyenin bağlamsal olarak önemli boyutları kavramsallaştırılarak öngörülen etkiler 30 ülke ve 61789 birey ölçeğindeki nicel bir araştırmayla test edilmiştir. Sonuçlar, ana akım medyanın zayıf olduğu ülkelerde yaşayan kişilerin ve dijital merkezli ve nicel olarak çeşitli haber repertuarları bulunan bireylerin eleştirel haber tüketicisi olma olasılıklarının önemli ölçüde yüksek olduğunu göstermektedir.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	6
2.1 Media systems and changing media landscape.....	6
2.2 News repertoires and news consumption.....	11
2.3 The age of post-truth and misinformation.....	15
2.4 Conceptualization.....	18
CHAPTER 3: METHODS.....	27
3.1 Operationalization.....	28
3.2 Hypotheses.....	33
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	38
4.1 Main tests.....	38
4.2 Further analysis.....	43
4.3 Limitations.....	50
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	52
5.1 Online and fractionalized news diets as definite triggers of critical news consumption.....	53
5.2 Decline of mainstream media and environments of distrust.....	56
5.3 Stability of regional characteristics.....	57
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION.....	58
REFERENCES.....	61

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Summary Statistics of Countries and Media Systems.....	30
Table 2. Summary Statistics of Individual Demographics and News Repertoires.....	32
Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Answers to Critical News Consumption Questions.....	33
Table 4. Bivariate Statistics of the Relationship between Critical Consumption Score and Predictors.....	39
Table 5. Correlation Analysis of Offered Independent Variables.....	39
Table 6. Results on the Relationship between Critical News Consumption Score and Predictors.....	41
Table 7. Results on the Relationship between Critical News Consumption Statements and Predictors.....	48

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the relationship between politics, media and society had been dramatically restructured by political, technological and economic developments of the world. As populist political actors rose as surprisingly impactful alternatives to mainstream politics in many countries, the rapid expansion of the Internet and social media platforms have allowed people to share their unfiltered opinions with each other. Mainstream journalism was forced to integrate into digital world by financial concerns, at the same time competing with the flourishing market of the alternative media and trying to defend its position against the accusations from both politicians and the society. Shifting measures of trust and credibility have opened a space for radical ideas and actors, which further incited the worldwide decay of center politics, often accompanied by political polarization or fragmentation. In different parts of the world, this situation has transformed the role of news media from the direct, though interpretive, supplier of facts to the marketeer of a range of facts, which people either buy to reinforce their ideal positions or build an apathy towards; most of the time these options have asked the customer to evaluate the seller than to evaluate the product. After all, one of the most important consequences of this multidimensional transition was an emergent concern on the ways people consume, analyze, ignore and avoid political information -and misinformation-, which has defined phenomena we discuss under the titles of ‘the age of misinformation’ and ‘post-truth politics’.

Despite their success in making us grasp the basic idea on the characteristic mode of political communication today, concepts above are not there to diagnose the

whole issue once and for all. They declare that there is a problem in behaviors of political agents and give an idea on what structural factors behind them is, yet they do not offer what these factors actually are and how they vary for agents who are parts of the phenomena in different levels. In parallel with this line of thought, a comprehensive examination of the complexity that we experience necessitates to understand how society, as the main consumer of political information, struggle against the environment of information disorder. While it is possible to adopt an agent-based approach and work solely on individual, my thesis offers to investigate the ways the society situates itself in ‘political information environments’, in which people are both (1) involuntarily subjected to certain structural boundaries such as nationally developed ‘media systems’ and (2) free to filter the inbound information flow in distinct forms of ‘news repertoires’. As these two levels mediate the relationship between what people know and trust and what people demands to know and trust, measuring their influence on people’s attitudes towards news is essential in understanding the problem of today. In this regard, my main research question can be simply stated in this form: In which ways political information environments, at the levels of media systems and news repertoires, affect individuals’ perception and consumption of news?

Conducting a research over this question is important for several reasons. First of all, there are little to no empirical studies that aim to understand recent politics-media-society complex in its all levels, where the phenomenon of information disorder emerges. While studies on post-truth politics mostly stay within a theoretical debate and discuss only major cases like Trump and Brexit campaign, scholars who focus on misinformation approach the problem on individual level, looking at personal factors that make people vulnerable to misinformation. These

studies are no way insignificant in the implications of their results, yet, I suggest that this new era of political communication cannot be properly understood if we focus only a single analytical level, a case or a literature. That being said, another important aspect of this research is the large-scale integration of already advanced academic fields into the new context. On one side, current media systems literature heavily centered upon country-level comparative analyses. At the other side, news repertoire studies work on topics that are closer to this research, such as questioning how people decide which sources to follow in a high-choice media environment. My approach to these two research areas is to consider them as different layers of an individual's political information environment, which necessitates reconsidering the variables that constitute them. This reconsideration aims to understand the new forms of media structures, their effects over audiences who are subject to a major transformation on the mode of news consumption and overall, the current state of politics-media-society relations.

In addition to academic aims explained above, studying this topic is also important for its political impact. The presence of free public sphere and the reliability of information are two prerequisites of the modern understanding of democracy. At the current state of information technologies, we see audiences being included to news production processes more than ever, through the means of social media and grassroots journalism. As audiences' position on the news flow change from being a direct consumer to some form of an agenda setter distinct from professional journalists, the public sphere becomes more capable to grow out of elite influence. At the same time, this information liberation sets the public back from accessing news that are mostly refined and trustable. Based on many factors including experience, professional ethics and corporate liability, most of the times

news coming from professional media actors are more representative of the truth than news produced or reinterpreted at social environments. Unique dynamics of collective news production and consumption leads to an environment where there are no reference points on facts. That is to say, the trend offering unfiltered access to information deprives the society from accessing reliable information, which becomes a major threat to the operation of democratic systems.

Aiming to identify the general form of political information environments altering news consumption behavior of audiences, I organized my thesis to consist of six chapters, including this chapter as the introduction. The rest of the chapters are as follows:

In Chapter 2, I summarize the theoretical framework that my research will be built on. The chapter consist of four parts. In the first two parts, I discuss the overall state of media systems and news repertoire literatures, going over conceptual and methodological developments offered, topics that are focused on and gaps still to be filled. In the third part, I analyze the arguments aiming to explain the age of post-truth and misinformation. In the last part, I bring these discussions together to form the concepts (media system, news repertoire, news consumption behavior) I will work on, together with the important characteristics constituting them.

In Chapter 3, the methods section, I describe my data and use it to operationalize the concepts I defined in the previous chapter. Then, I set my hypothesis on the relationship between critical news consumption behavior and the structures of media systems and news repertoires.

In Chapter 4, I provide the main results of my study, followed by further analysis focused on divergences within variables and a look on the limitations of the study.

In Chapter 5, I provide a discussion on how the results of the study can be interpreted, describing the general form of political information environment leading people to be critical news consumers.

In Chapter 6, I conclude the findings of the thesis, how these findings can be interpreted within the current state of political information environments, and the approaches they offer for further studies.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

First three sections of this chapter will be the review of literature on different dimensions of the topic I focus on. These sections will cover what have been already said on media systems, news repertoires and the phenomena of post-truth and misinformation. In the fourth section, I will explain how I built my concepts over the literature. This last section will be consisting of my arguments on how to define media systems, news repertoires and news consumption behavior, considering prominent characteristics of them and raising related research questions in the context of the age of misinformation.

2.1 Media systems and changing media landscape

Media systems are defined within macro characteristics of how media emerged and operates in different parts of the world. As the emergence and operation of them is deeply affected by political systems and socio-economic variants, they are most commonly framed by comparative political studies working on country level of analysis. The earliest example of these type of studies being Siebert, Peterson & Schramm's 1956 book "Four Theories of the Press", their emphasis on the Cold War world hinders their work from offering a universal theoretical framework. Being a product of a 21st century world, it is undoubted that Hallin & Mancini's (2004) "Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics" is 'the' field-defining piece for media systems research, providing a methodologically sound,

complex, systematic and universally applicable theory which eases visualizing the macro logic of these systems.

In their work, Hallin & Mancini's main objective was to understand why the institution of press holds different positions in different countries. They answered this question by comparatively analyzing national political systems and identifying the reflections of these systems on the ways media actors function. This analytical perspective led them to set a theory of media systems, based on the similarities and differences of political development across regions.

Within Hallin & Mancini's scope, first sentence of this section can be rephrased as this: Media systems are defined by the corresponding/comparative similarities and differences of them with other media systems, rooted in distinct historical and political contexts, developing in parallel with the political system they operate within, with a room to evolve forward, diverge from the emergence point or merge with other systems. In particular, they follow this definition by comparatively analyzing European (and North American) media systems by four characteristics: the level of the development of mass circulation press, the level of parallelism between media and political factionalism, the level of professionalism of journalists and the level of state intervention (p. 21).

These characteristics were observed through phenomena that are categorically different from each other. Structures of media markets consisted of quantitative subdimensions such as the level of market reach of newspapers and also qualitative ones such as the sociopolitical role of media and modes of news production that are present. Similarly, they investigated political parallelism from different dimensions; inherent biases of newspapers, organizational ties between politicians and journalists,

partisan divergence between the audiences and journalistic roles were factors that are analyzed in defining the ultimate state of parallelism between media systems and political systems. For the dimension of professionalism, they analyzed public roles and ethics of journalists more distinct from their political orientation, while the discussion on the role of state focused on the level of state intervention in the media market. In the context of these characteristics, they observed some differences between European regions. Patterns of differences led them to define the media systems of the continent in three models: a commercialist liberal model for Anglo-Saxon countries, a balanced corporatist model of continental Europe and a politically-influenced pluralist model of Mediterranean countries.

Although Hallin & Mancini's 2004 media system classification was helpful to set a reference point for further analyses, it had many disputable, roughly defined and improvable elements, which are also acknowledged by themselves (Hallin & Mancini, 2017). For this reason, their theorization is more of an interest not to understand what media systems actually are in detail, but to understand how they develop and situate themselves in relation with each other and media environments which have smaller scope than media systems. They strongly underline that models they define are not rigid or has clear boundaries. Moreover, countries do not represent these models at similar levels, each country their work cover is only roughly defined by one of the models.

The kinetic nature of media systems Hallin & Mancini emphasized was investigated further by field studies. At one side, it is argued that this attribute may alter the standard relationship between media and politics. Ciaglia (2013) suggests that media actors being involved in representative politics and political actors migrating to media spheres show degrees of media system alterations in different

countries; “media and politics are able to converge and overlap rather than remain parallel” (p. 544). On the other side, Chadwick (2013) drew attention to how modern media systems separate within themselves. The fault line between traditional newsrooms and technology-supported alternative media opened a new page of analysis where interactions between different news norms and structures make both sides evolve, creating a distinct phenomenon of ‘a hybrid media system’. These types of transformations were also assumed by Hallin & Mancini’s (2011) later work, where they addressed the possibility that new media, specifically online media, would not necessarily follow their traditional antecedents within their systems. Overall, Ciaglia and Chadwick’s analyses show us that media systems are not even remotely rigid against inter-system or intra-system interactions. Diverse, and most of the times interactive, operational modes of online and traditional mediums make it challenging to define ‘the media system’, as even if we manage to define a system over the characteristics of one of them, it would not be conclusive of the dynamics within the system. For this reason, my suggestion is to treat media systems as a single layer of the grand political information environment, a part of “[the] mediated public space through which political information flows” (Esser et al., 2012, p. 249).

Beside theoretical discussion on the nature of media systems, the field also grew by additions and alterations to Hallin & Mancini’s initial conceptualization and methodological route. Conceptual updates were offered in a range of ways as considering additional components, such as bottom-up demands and participation of the audience, in classifying media systems (Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018), modifying the ingredients of existing typology (Brüggemann et al., 2014) and even moving the scope of framework from the system itself to ‘discursive power of its actors’ (Jungherr, Posegga & An, 2019). While the initial conceptualization of Hallin &

Mancini was open to these contributions despite its existing complexity, the methodological aspect of it had more space for development, since their work was mostly focused on comparative analysis. The issue of operationalization and quantitative analysis, which was later to be discussed by Hallin & Mancini (2017), was solved in different ways in empirical studies of the field. As studies mentioned above managed to match quantitative and categorical data with the national media systems classifications Hallin & Mancini built, some other works defined and operationalized wholly new sets of concepts corresponding to similar variables. A prominent example of this is Engesser & Franzetti's (2011) study, where they chose freedom, diversity, centrality and tradition as four dimensions corresponding to media systems and political systems at the same time. There were also efforts to take the field to more specific methodological environments such as 'qualitative comparative analysis' (QCA), working over the same dimensions Hallin & Mancini conceptualized (Büchel et al., 2016). Aiming to investigate whether three models Hallin & Mancini conceptualized were accurate, Büchel et al. adopted a method that creates typologies over the necessity or sufficiency of dimensions. In this work, they found Anglo-Saxon and Mediterranean models to be well defined, while Continental European model was separated into two groups that are prominently characterized either by the strength of the press or the heavy regulation of the media market.

Although complexity of the topics did not let media systems research program to have a consensus on its concepts and measurements, current state of literature puts many sound routes on the table. In the 'age of misinformation', country-level characteristics of these systems found to be still relevant (Flew & Waisbord, 2015), moderating people's news consumption patterns and perceptions to a certain extent (Aalberg, Blekesaune & Elvestad, 2013; Elvestad & Blekesaune,

2008). The relationship between these macro systems and their audiences, similar to what media system transformation studies imply, signifies the role of these systems as political information environments. On one hand, describing them as “the quantitative supply of news and public affairs content provided to a national audience by routinely available sources” (Esser et al., 2012, p. 250) highlights the supply side of these systems which vary through countries (Aalberg, Aelst & Curran, 2010). On the other hand, it is suggested that we should also observe how this supply is met with the demand side, the level where the mass information given by the system is filtered, reshaped and redistributed. Aelst et al. (2017) suggest that political information environments, which they define as “the aggregate supply of news or political information that is ‘out there’” (p. 5), should be thought together with its consumers, since increasing digitalization, fractionalization and integration of media actors allow the consumers to have a direct influence on the supply they receive. However, this influence is not limited to media systems only, as individuals also get exposed to the news in personalized spaces, which are located at parts of the aggregate supply. This situation necessitates to understand ‘news repertoires’ as another layer of the environment concerning this study.

2.2 News repertoires and news consumption

In comparison to the media systems research program and media studies working on user-level characteristics, news repertoire approach utilizes a more mixed framework, where the level of analysis is individual, yet the explanatory factors are media-related. To build a ‘news repertoire’ framework, these factors are identified and grouped in distinctive ways. The amount of news sources someone follows, the

frequency of consumption, the medium of the source (newspaper, television or online), its relative position in the media landscape (mainstream-alternative, central-peripheral) or its political position (liberal-conservative) can be the basis of what someone calls a news repertoire. It is even possible to treat these factors on equal footing, as operating a latent class analysis that defines major audience groups arising from different dimensions (Mourao et al., 2018; Swart, Peters & Broersma, 2017). In studies adopted this approach, there was no single dimension that defined news use or trust. Rather than analyzing the presence or absence of one trait, these studies compared categorically different audience groups such as low-frequency news users, regional news followers, conservatives or digitally-oriented audiences. This flexibility makes news repertoire approach an ideal tool in the analysis of ‘the internal architecture’ (Yuan, 2011) of individual news consumption within the crowded, multidimensional media market of today.

Within this multidimensional environment, the aspect field scholars most frequently emphasize is technological developments and in relation to it, the transformation of ‘where media exists’. The medium where the news supplier situates itself has dramatic effects on how effortfully, effectively and continually the message is received. The difference of medium, which was found meaningful even by research on the traditional newspaper-television duality (Shehata & Strömbacki 2011), became unavoidably present actor of studies with the rise of online journalism, social media and smartphones. Massanari & Howard’s 2011 study addresses the need to “treat information technologies as deeply embedded features of contemporary political communication” (Massanari & Howard, 2011, p. 191). Their study supports this argument by demonstrating that the news consumption behavior of individuals does not only differ due to their demographic characteristics or

political orientation; the preference of multiple sources or mediums also affects how they interact with the media content. In parallel with this, the late years of the news repertoire literature satisfied the “growing need for trans-media approaches” (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012) to a great extent (Strömback & Falasca, Kruikemeier, 2018; Schröder, 2015; Majo-Vazquez, Nielsen & Bailon, 2019; Kim, 2016; Swart, Peters & Broersma, 2017; Andersen, de Vreese & Albaek, 2016). These studies filled the gap in the literature by drawing attention to the effects of medium preference and combined medium use.

As high-choice media environments offer sources be consumed, at the other side of the equation, there are news-consuming audiences. News repertoire research establishes the link between media material and individual behavior by trying to explain how people arrange their personal news feeds, where the crowded media market gets filtered in accordance with the individual choice. ‘Selective exposure’ is the most popular theory that is offered by field studies, where it is argued that people consume information that affirms their existing beliefs and avoid information challenging them. Specifically on news research, it is offered that we should define the ‘information’ not as ‘message’ but as ‘sources’ (Tsfati, 2010), by the nature of media actors having degrees of credibility and trust that are effective in people’s selections (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). Moreover, the factor that is alternatively defined under the concepts of ‘need for cognition’ (Tsfati & Capella, 2005; Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015) and ‘worthwhileness [of news consumption]’ (Christian & Schröder, 2015; Schröder & Kobbernagel, 2010) draws attention to people’s information seeking behavior in terms of the cognitive effectiveness of the act. Aside the structural and situational boundaries surrounding the individual, which are found to have a significant effect on news consumption (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013),

these cognitive-psychological aspects form the bone structure of recent discussions on how ‘echo chambers’ and ‘filter bubbles’ are built by bringing the individual-level determinants of news environments into the debate.

“A situation in which people only hear opinions of one type, or opinions that are similar to their own” is the general definition of ‘echo chamber’ provided by Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.). ‘Filter bubble’ being the variation of an echo chamber in audience-built virtual spaces within social media filters and algorithms, both concepts simply make us imagine a homogeneous news/information box that covers itself from narratives outside of it. As selective exposure studies imply the building of this box, what it produces are misinformation for its indisputability and polarization for different boxes’ discreteness from each other. Today’s studies of political information environment work on these three concepts (selective exposure, misinformation, polarization) comprehensively (Hameleers & van der Meer (2020), since they are mostly intertwined on their logics. These issues will be explained further at the last part of my review.

Before passing to the next section, it should be also mentioned that the nature of selective exposure and the significance of echo chambers are not questions that are solved. There are studies arguing that the echo chambers are not as prevalent as it is addressed and there are factors such as high political interest that reduce a person’s likelihood to be in one of them (Weeks, Ksiazek & Holbert, 2016; Dubois & Blank, 2018). On the selective exposure side of the issue, Weeks and his colleagues (2016) study also shows that selective exposure is more likely to be the act of following the source that is liked than to be the act of avoiding the source that is disliked. An analysis which focuses on these concepts should not overlook the tendency of people to be on ‘omnivorous news diets’ (Massanari & Howard, 2011), meaning that they

actively use wide range of sources from different mediums and heavily interact with the news supplies. In the current trend of digitalization and fractionalization of media markets, where the misinformation age flourishes, it is likely that this type of news users are more prominent than before.

2.3 The age of post-truth and misinformation

The concept of ‘post-truth’ came to the center of political discussion as a product of Brexit and Trump campaigns in 2016, on where it is defined as a societal trend of emotional reasoning, apathy towards facts and overall an environment of contestation on truth. While the unconventionally populist nature of these campaigns was feeding the discussion on social transformation, the success of them was the ultimate shock for the mainstream understanding of politics. The speed of the spread of disinformation and the resistance against factual arguments countering them were more present than ever, mostly due to the unrestrainable web of online interaction, which incapacitated conventional politics. The atmosphere led the term post-truth to be the main referral on explaining what was happening. It gained an immediate popularity in describing what populist campaigners gave to the society, and how the society responded to them. Commentary on the concept referred to “blatant lies being routine across society [where] politicians can lie without condemnation” (Higgins, 2016, p. 9) and “[the situation where] factual rebuttals or fact checks are ignored on the basis that they are mere assertions” (Suiter, 2016, p. 25). These descriptions were also adopted to explain the mass refusal of scientific knowledge on topics such as climate change and the growing circulation of conspiracy theories. It became more or less a buzzword to point at epistemic conflicts that seemingly did not exist before.

Corner (2017) addressed the reconstructive role of this concept by defining it as “‘a self-consciously grand term of epochal shift (trading heavily on assumptions about an ‘era of truth’ we apparently once enjoyed)’” (p. 1100).

The characteristics of the epochal shift was addressed at the macro scale. Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook (2017) defined the post-truth era, or ‘the era of fake news’ (Albright, 2017), to be a product of societal trends operating in different dimensions, which they list as “a decline in social capital, growing economic inequality, increased polarization, declining trust in science, and an increasingly fractioned media landscape” (p. 3). While all these trends are associated with the wide concept of post-truth, the main focus of the debates became the changing forms of media distribution and consumption, more specifically, the Internet and the new medium structures enabling the spread of misinformation. In forms such as blogs, interactive news sites and social media platforms, the new consumption patterns of news had weakened the epistemic authority of journalism. Harsin (2018) refers to this shift when he defines the post-truth trend as “a breakdown of social trust” (p. 1); institutional role of journalists in presenting what is true to the society was replaced by a fractionalized media sphere without gatekeepers, a “dynamics, multilayered, chaotic public communication” (Waisbord, 2018b, p. 1869).

The obvious effect of this fractionalization, which has a longer history than the misinformation epidemic of 2016 (Lewandowsky et al., 2012), is the delegitimization of factual news reporting, of journalists who once had the authority to set the contextual basis for political discussions. Online news consumption does not allow this contextual basis to be set, as online news are to be consumed in an interactive way, where the direct information flow from news to the individual is disturbed by the social sphere surrounds it (Pangrazio, 2018). At

one side, the absence, or ineffectiveness, of the professional authority led people seek what is true and what is false by using political figures who they do or do not trust as heuristics (Swire et al. 2017). At the other side, online algorithms have been used by different groups to present discrete, socially contextualized news agenda to the wider public, deepening the epistemic contestation. “Repetition and illusory truth” (Harsin, 2018, p. 13) was used to increase the engagement to ‘news’ without institutional backup, which can be seen as both the outcome and the booster of post-truth politics.

Together, these analyses support the idea that the phenomenon of post-truth is not rooted from a social transformation. It is more likely that the main cause of it is the structural transformation of media production and consumption. In Waisbord’s (2018a) words, “post-truth denotes shifts in the structural conditions for public communication that are needed for truth-telling as agreements on the representation of reality” (p. 4). In an environment where people consume news products collectively, news are more than the information presented to the individual; they are vehicles that may disturb or strengthen the social circles consuming them. That is to say, post-truth society’s, and its algorithmic bubbles’, demand for news is not merely an informative one, it is also a constant demand of collective recreation. Consequently, news supply of this new era is more oriented on engagement than before. Feeding from the unfiltered demand on one side and the responsive supply on the other, the new structure of news flow grows the symptom of misinformation as an important character of today’s news consumption.

2.4 Conceptualization

The widespread phenomenon of misinformation raises the ultimate question: How the new information environment and its characteristics affect the news consumption patterns of people? In other words, how the structural transformation triggers the behavioral transformation in the context of media? To answer these questions, firstly we have to define the significant dimensions of these structures properly and raise related research questions, later expanding on the effects they may have on audiences.

2.4.1 Media systems

Recent literature points that media systems are not fully rigid, structural or top-down. Adding that we are in a period where media logics transform rapidly as a consequence of technological innovation and globalism, my conceptualization of media systems will not follow the historical framework of Hallin and Mancini, on which they question the development of these systems. As my thesis frames media systems only as a part of the supply-demand system of political news environments, a historical analysis already will not be needed, because the focus is more over the structural transformation of them than the factors behind their historical development. However, dimensions they use are helpful to imagine these systems' actual presence, so I partially include them in my framework.

Since media systems are predominantly discussed on national level even today, the role of the state is a dimension that should be singled out. What makes media systems research political is the weak capability of media to form itself independent from politics. For this reason, states' role in promoting or restricting

media production is a major determinant that should be separated from the inherent qualities of media markets:

R1: How the intervention of the state to the media market, through means such as regulations, incentives and censorship, affects the way people consume news?

Secondly, I put structure of media markets as an overarching dimension which includes aggregate states of audience distribution, number of prominent sources and popularity of different mediums in a media market. Although Hallin and Mancini's work conceptualizes the dimension with the same name differently, I prefer to emphasize (1) the states of online media development, (2) market concentration and (3) the plurality of news sources over this concept, since these are the main elements that are prevalent in addressing the difference between the post-truth era and the system before it.

As online news markets, especially the news consumption on social media platforms, grew concurrently with the concerns over fake news, the emergence of this new medium is a main structural change that has to be addressed in the context of media systems. While traditional media systems were presenting the news to the audience with a direct, one-way flow, online news markets provide more space for the interactive formations of news between audiences and the news producers. After the initial presentation of the news information, online audiences are more capable to alter the information at its consumption phase, redistribute it through their platforms and may trigger the consumption of the information different than its original form. Moreover, news producers may, and

have to, arrange their work in accordance with these specific consumption habits of online news users, in ways such as creating news that have a big potential for wide social media reach. This interactive process does not exist for the traditional news producers and consumer to this extent, since mediums such as television and newspaper have less opportunities for social interaction and the observation of audience behavior. To observe these differences, we have to understand the power of digitalization at the country-level:

R2: How the extent of digital news consumption in a country affects the ways the news are generally perceived?

The level of concentration of media markets is the second structural characteristic I suggest emphasizing over media systems. The concentration of the media market, in other words a media market having only few powerful sources that reaches the wide audience, is a phenomenon linked with the increasing economic power of media conglomerates and the decreasing visibility of independent, small-scale news providers. At first sight, this trend seems to have adverse effects on the capability of audiences to reach reliable information on news. Although concerns over the lack of diversity of concentrated media markets is valid, I argue that its effects on the spread of misinformation is in the opposite way. In a system where audiences get their news from few sources, it is likely that these audiences share common spaces, reference points and informational authorities that can hinder epistemic contestations. Lack of these mediating factors, meaning the divergence within media markets, is a structural problem that weakens the credibility of information in wider information environments. As this mediation is related to media sources' strength to reach the

general audience, it should be noted that the characteristic of ‘mainstream’ I discuss is not the one that describes established media corporates. If small-scale, independent or crowd-funded news providers are being followed by a major part of the society, they can also take the role of informational authority by their public influence and image. Overall, the effects of the power of these mainstream actors have to be investigated:

R3: What is the relationship between the strength of common, mainstream information environments and the news consumption behavior of audiences?

Third structural characteristic I want emphasize is the number of news sources operating in a media market. Since there are presumably thousands of online news sources in each country producing news institutionally independent from each other, this concept should be understood as the number of sources capable of influencing the public opinion, not the actual total count. Media systems with many different supply actors with considerable audience reach allow the diversity of opinions, consequently making it possible for marginal social groups to set the public agenda. By the extended plurality of different viewpoints offered to the information environment, it is more likely that sentimental and unfiltered news would emerge. This capability makes the system more open to the threat of misinformation, as it is a symptomatic of the decline of professionalism and institutional gatekeeping in news media. The potential vulnerability of media systems with this characteristic should not be overlooked:

R4: Is the multiplicity of news producers in a media system a significant determinant of the ways people navigate in a media market?

2.4.2 News repertoires

While media systems constitute the country-level characteristics of the political information environments framework, news repertoires constitute the individual-level, deeper layer. News repertoires are parts of this environment in the sense that although the individual builds them, the sphere where news demand is fulfilled is a social one, due to the interactive capabilities of news producers and consumers of the post-truth era in transforming it. Based on the emphasis of post-truth literature on the structural change of media consumption, my conceptualization of news repertoires follows a framework parallel to media systems. Leaving the role of the state dimension out, which is inherently national, I define news repertoires in three structural characteristics.

Construction of a repertoire indicates that a person who demand the news decides to ignore the supply from certain sources and mediums and prefer the use of others. In the context of developing technologies to distribute news, the main qualitative difference between news consumption patterns is whether they are online, from highly interactive sources such as newspaper websites, news apps or social media, or traditional, from sources with more direct flow such as printed newspapers, television channels or radio programs. Considering the wide gap between online and traditional news users' exposure to the viewpoints of different news producers and other news users, the medium preference should be investigated as the most significant factor shaping the repertoire:

R5: How the preference of online mediums over traditional ones affects one's news consumption behavior?

In addition to the transformation of medium attributes, news repertoires are also shaped by the positions of selected sources in the wider media sphere. News users can construct their repertoires in a form of a small and niche bubble, where they can avoid the popular agenda and confirm the specific information they already have. In contrast, news repertoires can be built in a way that the news user is highly exposed to popular viewpoints and modes of news production, making him a part of a bigger social sphere of news consumption. This dimension could be defined as the mainstream exposure of the news repertoire. With reference to the discussion on individually and algorithmically formed echo chambers, mainstream exposure should be treated as a mediating factor that opens the repertoire to diverse opinions and some form of a popular consensus:

R6: Do mainstream-oriented news diets make people more critical of their news consumption?

Following the qualitative dimensions of medium preference and mainstream exposure, the main quantitative measure of the news repertoire is obviously the number of sources included in it. Although a news user can build a small repertoire that is heterogeneous or a big one that is homogeneous with regards to truth claim, a repertoire with less sources mostly indicates that the room for contestation is small. In contrast, a fragmented repertoire with high number of sources is more capable to show varying arguments and frames. It can be argued that this dimension corresponds to a similar case with the dimension of mainstream exposure. However,

what makes this dimension different from the previous one is that fragmentation is an issue of magnitude, while mainstream exposure is an issue of intertwinement. A repertoire feeding from wide range of sources necessitates a more intense cognitive effort in deciding what the truth is than a more restricted one, regardless of the diversity of opinion it contains. While a news user exposed to a wider circle of news consumption gets diverse opinions in a social context, getting these opinions from different sources is a task on the level of individual. This is the last dimensions I suggest investigating within the context of structural characteristics of political information environments:

R7: Does the quantitative diversity of a news repertoire affect one's attitude towards news they consume?

2.4.3 Critical news consumption behavior

Individuals' processing of the information they received through the filters of media systems and news repertoires is the end point of the news flow for the supply route. People's decision to accept the information as it is presented, scrutinizing it, using it in the way of motivated reasoning, or wholly avoiding it are all parts of the news consumption behavior in general. In the context of the post-truth era, I intended to focus on a specific part of this consumption behavior, that is the news consumers' relationship with the threat of misinformation.

It should be noted that the relationship between individuals and misinformation is an issue predominantly discussed at the individual level, from the perspective of cognitive psychology. As it was mentioned in the literature, some studies investigated the new use aspect of this relationship by emphasizing concepts

such as selective exposure, worthwhileness and echo chambers. There are also works approaching the issue without a specific focus on the news environment, where the cognitive processing of the received information is directly observed (Kumar & Geethakumari, 2014; Swire & Ecker, 2018; Zhu et al., 2010). These psychological approaches will not be in the scope of my study. The reason behind this decision is that the discussions around ‘the age of misinformation’ are not in the similar vein with what has been said on the concept of misinformation itself. Although cognitive capabilities may definitely be affective factors behind one’s news consumption preferences, the current discussions’ main emphasis is over the new means of news production and consumption, together with the structural transformation of the media sphere. For this reason, my conceptualization of news consumption behavior is built on the state of the political information environment surrounding the individual, rather than how he perceives it.

In political information environments of today, new structures of the media market may urge audiences to use the news out of their historically informative purpose, to utilize them in a way to support their political/collective claims over the truth. These motivations cause an extreme vulnerability against misinformation, as people provide less attention to seek factual information in an environment where it is already contested. Consumption patterns of this trend include accepting the supply of information without questioning, avoidance from supply sources critical against it and overall stagnancy in seeking ways to improve the level of knowledge. This stagnancy was the first referral point for early theorization attempts on the post-truth era.

In another path, individuals who are more resistant against the trends of the news structure, who may be called critical news consumers, tend to be more attentive

to seek not beneficial cues but the truth at their information environments. At its surface, critical news consumption behavior is a concept similar to media literacy, as both refer to the analytical skills of people in filtering and locating the useful information in media. However, media literacy is a concept covering the use of all media, not just in the political context or even in the context of news. Moreover, through years it has been framed as an issue of pedagogy and the studies were aimed at the development of this skill via educational programs. On the other hand, the consumption behavior of the new information environments, which I prefer to define as critical news consumption, is not an outcome of any specific learning paths; it is a direct consequence of rising distrust and desperation against the incapability of the media sphere to provide factual information consistently. In this sense, critical news consumption should not be considered as a beneficial skill. It can be beneficial if the critical consumer finds his way to the truth, however, if his perception of truth is objectively wrong or he is misguided by motivated reasoning, being critical does not necessarily generate a positive outcome. For this reason, this pattern of consumption should be framed not as a skill, rather as a behavioral symptom of the environment amplifying distrust.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

In this chapter, I firstly explain the ways I operationalized the concepts defined previously: media systems, news repertoires and news consumption behavior. Afterwards, hypotheses are set on the expected effects of structural dimensions of political information environments over critical news consumption.

The main data source of this study is the raw dataset of Reuters Digital News Report 2019 (RDNR). Digital News Report is a project of Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, investigating digital news consumption habits of individuals across the world annually. 2019 issue was covering 75.000 people from 38 countries. I included 30 of them¹ in my analysis, since all the questions I wanted to operationalize were not asked in every country. From these countries, total number of 61789 participants filled an online survey at the beginning of 2019, where they answered various questions such as which news sources they frequently use and to what extent they interact with news media. The diversity of the questions was the main factor behind my decision to use this dataset, since many of these questions were open to be manipulated in a data structuring sense. From these questions, I operationalized the dimensions I discussed both at the individual level for news repertoires and at the aggregate level for media systems.

¹ Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, Slovakia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom and United States.

3.1 Operationalization

The section provides the details of the ways seven independent variables and one dependent variable were operationalized. The dimensions discussed at the previous chapter necessitates the construction of four variables (state pressure, digital dominance, market concentration, market magnitude) at the media systems level, three variables (digital medium preference, repertoire magnitude, mainstream exposure) at the news repertoire level, and one variable (critical news consumption index) which will be the focus of analysis. Below subsections, I explain this process respectively.

3.1.1 Media systems

To measure the first dimension, the role of the state, I followed what Engesser & Franzetti (2011) did on measuring the dimension they have in their study and used Press Freedom Index (PFI), the yearly updated list of Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans frontières, RSF). RSF's index is updated every year by sending a comprehensive questionnaire to selected media professionals, lawyers and sociologists. These professionals are asked to score national media systems' recent performances on pluralism, media independence, environment and self-censorship, legislative framework, transparency, infrastructure and abuses. Scores from these categories are combined into an index with a scale from 0 to 100, lower score indicating higher freedom for the press. To avoid observing any short-term shift that may occur in a country for a year, I averaged country scores of five years (2015-2019). This single factor represents *state pressure* in my framework.

Second dimension, the structure of media markets, consists of three elements: the predominance of online news consumption over traditional news consumption, the level of concentration in the media market and the number of noteworthy sources. Measuring these three dimensions, I use the aggregate data from my master dataset Reuters Digital News Report 2019 (RDNR). The predominance of online news consumption, coded as *digital dominance*, is a variable directly referring to the percentage of participants in a country, whose answer to the question of “Which would you say is your main source of news?” is websites/apps of newspapers, websites/apps of news magazines, websites/apps of TV and radio companies, websites/apps of other news outlets or social media.

Measuring the level of concentration in a media market, I again used an operationalization similar to Engesser & Franzetti (2011), who measured ‘the concentration ratio’ of national media markets by using the total circulation of top five newspapers and the total viewing time of top five TV channels. In RDNR, participants from all countries were presented with 70 brand names of national news sources in average (more or less half of them were traditional sources and the other half was online). They were asked if they used those sources to access news in the last week. This question was asked alternatively to observe if the participant used the listed sources three days or more in a week. Aiming to measure a more solid readership or viewership, and to avoid answers possibly related to coincidental exposure, I used the answers of the second question. In each country, I listed brand names from the most popular to the least popular, and took the cumulative number corresponds to the reach of top five news courses. The percentage of this number in the sample population gave me the rate of *market concentration* in the national media system, signaling the magnitude of the common news sphere.

Last dimension of my media systems framework is the one that measures the number of noteworthy sources in the media market. Using the same question on which the concentration ratio is measured, I observed the market reach of each individual sources asked at the questionnaire. From these sources, I drew the ones who are used by at least five percent of the participants and operationalized this variable as the total number of them, coded as *market magnitude*.

Outside of the variables that will be investigated on the scope of study, I also World Bank's (2019) data on countries' GDP per capita (US\$) as a control variable, to see whether the characteristics of media systems are relevant outside of the macro effects of economic development. Overall, five variables were coded for each of 30 countries that are observed (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary Statistics of Countries and Media Systems

	<i>State Pressure</i>	<i>Digital Dominance</i>	<i>Market Concentration</i>	<i>Market Magnitude</i>	<i>GDP per capita (US\$)</i>
Mean	20,77	44,31	71,93	21,99	41343,25
SD	10,49	7,22	7,23	6,25	20752,59
N	30	30	30	30	30

Sources of raw data: Press Freedom Index, 2015-2019; Reuters Digital News Report, 2019; World Bank Open Data, 2019.

3.1.2 News repertoires

Defining news repertoires, all variables were measured through specific questions asked to participants of RDNR, making the unit of analysis the individual consumer. The question on the main source of news, the one that is used to measure the predominance of online news consumption in media systems, is coded as a binary

variable to identify the medium preference, whether it is mainly online or traditional. The frequent use of online mediums was coded as 1 while the preference of traditional news use was coded as 0, which led me to define this variable as *digital medium preference*.

The quantitative dimension of news repertoires was operationalized as the total number of news sources an individual uses more than three times in a week, summed through binary answers the participant gave to the questioning of near 70 brands names. This dimension, *repertoire magnitude*, does not separate the number of traditional and online sources, as the main aim is to see the density of the repertoire rather than the quality of it.

With the aim of investigating the last dimension, the individual news repertoire's engagement with the wider news circle, I used the same questions benefited for the variable above. *Mainstream exposure* variable was operationalized to be the percentage of the market reach of the most popular news source the individual uses. In other words, the variable identifies the popularity of the most popular source one uses, to see the extent of the common information environment he shares with others.

The news repertoire sphere is measured through individual level variables. To control the effects of my selection of factors on this level of analysis, I used age, sex (0 = male, 1 = female) and the level of education (10 levels ranging from no education to doctoral or equivalent degree) as additional variables. The level of income was left out of this group, since its measurement in dataset had vague classification (categorized in three levels as low, medium and high) and 15% of participants did not answer the related question. Combining the dimensions of

interest and control variables, I have used six variables emerging from the answers of individuals (see Table 2).

Table 2. Summary Statistics of Individual Demographics and News Repertoires

	<i>Digital Medium Preference</i>	<i>Repertoire Magnitude</i>	<i>Mainstream Exposure</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Education</i>
Mean	0,46	4,12	26,47	46,56	0,52	5,96
SD	0,50	3,55	15,45	16,00	0,50	1,80
N	61789	61789	61789	61789	61789	61789

Sources of raw data: Reuters Digital News Report, 2019.

3.1.3 News consumption behavior

News consumption behaviors of individuals are measured through six yes or no questions from RDNR, which they question under the topic of news literacy:

Have you done of any of the following in the last year? Please select all that apply.

S1: I decided not to share a news story because I was unsure about its accuracy

S2: I checked a number of different sources to see whether a news story was reported in the same way

S3: I started relying more on sources of news that are considered more reputable

S4: I stopped using certain news sources because I was unsure about the accuracy of their reporting

S5: I discussed a news story with person I trust because I was unsure about its accuracy

S6: I stopped paying attention to news shared by someone because I am unsure whether I trust that person

Table 3 shows the frequency distribution of answers given to the questioning of each of these behaviors. Although these questions imply different behaviors that can be analyzed as different dimensions such as avoidance from unreliable sources, cross-checking, repertoire enhancement and social interaction, I decided to index them into

a score ranging from 0 positive answers to 6 positive answers at my main model, to observe a wider picture of news use. To not ignore the possibility that some answers may be more significant determinants of these behaviors than others, I standardized binary responses into z-scores and summed them into an index score. In this index of *critical news consumption*, higher scores indicates that the individual is more motivated to not be misinformed, while individuals with lower scores are more vulnerable against misinformative news.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Answers to Critical News Consumption Questions

% (N)	<i>S1</i>	<i>S2</i>	<i>S3</i>	<i>S4</i>	<i>S5</i>	<i>S6</i>
Yes	29,28 (18089)	41,72 (25780)	26,32 (16172)	23,89 (14762)	24,19 (14947)	22,09 (13649)
No	70,72 (43700)	58,28 (36009)	73,68 (45617)	76,11 (47027)	75,81 (46842)	77,91 (48140)
Total	100 (61789)	100 (61789)	100 (61789)	100 (61789)	100 (61789)	100 (61789)

Sources of raw data: Reuters Digital News Report, 2019.

3.2 Hypotheses

Investigating the effects of the structures of political information environments over critical news consumption, I set seven hypotheses, each linked to the characteristics of the media system and the news repertoire the individual is surrounded with:

H1: In media systems where the state applies more pressure over media, it is more likely that individuals are critical news consumers.

The interventionist role of the state over the media system is an external contributor to the structural transformation that already blurs the line between true and false information. The state's actions on regulating the media market in parallel with its

political agenda, or even its capability to do it, declines the social trust over media institutions, which is found to be direct audiences to seek alternative sources (Szostek, 2018). In a media system where news supply can be easily altered in accordance with politicians aims, it is expected that people would be more prudent on their news consumptions.

H2: In media systems where the use of online mediums is strong compared to the use of traditional mediums, it is more likely that individuals are critical news consumers.

The strength of online news market in comparison to the overall news sphere has many transformative effects on the media, including increased fractionalization, unfiltered news production, faster circulation of information and audiences more impactful on shaping the news agenda. Considering all of these, and with reference to studies addressing the transformation (Harsin, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Pangrazio, 2018), I expect individuals situated in media systems with higher online news use to be more investigative towards the news sources they use, therefore being more attentive to their news consumption.

H3: In media systems where the information supply is concentrated over few sources, it is less likely that individuals are critical news consumers.

Jungherr, Posegga & An (2019) define “the extent of direct reach” as an element of the organizational character of a media system, which is related to the influential and discursive power of different outlets in the environment. In line with this argument, I suggest that high concentration level on a media market indicates that there are few

powerful sources that can be affective over the contestation over truth. This situation may either be related to the fact that the society has some level of a consensus on the reliable sources within the media sphere, or some sources with contrasting ideological biases are so established that the supply of alternative sources are not needed. In both ways, the audience of the media system would be less motivated to ensure that the information provided to them are true, either because they already trust the source or because there are no more powerful sources that will strengthen their epistemic position further.

H4: In media systems where there are many news brands capable of supplying information to a considerable part of the audience, it is more likely that individuals are critical news consumers.

The literature points at the fragmentation of media sources (Aelst et al., 2017) and “the chaos of contemporary public communication” (Waisbord, 2018b) as the significant contributors of the phenomenon of post-truth. Fourth hypothesis is built on the effects of these contributors, by highlighting the multiplicity of media sources in a media system. The number of news sources of the media system, operating in an effectful way and reaching considerable part of the society, introduces more perspectives to the public eye on each talking points. While these points may be brought in in a professional way and be as factual as possible, the multiplicity of perspectives has a complicating effect on news users’ cognitive processes. In media systems with these effects, I expect audiences to be doubtful of the accuracy of the information they obtain, mostly by the fact that there are many of them.

H5: If an individual's news repertoire is mainly fed from online sources, it is more likely that he is a critical news consumer.

In parallel with the hypothesis on medium preference dimension of the media systems, I expect online news consumption to be impactful at the individual level too. In addition to the effects I listed on my second hypothesis, there are also some other factors unique to the news repertoire environment. Individual whose repertoire is mainly built on online sources should be more up to date of new information from wider sources. Online news consumption structures, such as apps with notifications and timelines of social media platforms, offer the news user the latest information consistently. I suggest that exposure to this flow, together with the ease of validating them from different sources, overall, the capacity to be 'omnivorous news consumers' (Massanari & Howard, 2011), would be a significant factor differentiating the level of critical news consumption of mainly online news users from mainly traditional news users.

H6: If an individual's news repertoire includes news sources that are used by the wide portion of the society, it is less likely that he is a critical news consumer.

It was already showed that distrust in media makes people to seek alternative, non-mainstream sources for information (Tsfati, 2010). While the sixth hypothesis is mostly based on this relationship, further details can be discussed. Mainstream news sources, not in terms of the content but in terms of the audience reach, provides a common ground for discussion, where less information is subjected to popular contestation in comparison to niche news sources. Assuming that most news sources

have some level of credibility in the eyes of their users, the information environment provides a confidence over information to the extent that news consumption patterns overlap. For this reason, news repertoires where there is a considerable shared environment with the national media system should be less promotive of news consumption behaviors such as confirmative cross checking.

H7: If an individual's news repertoire consists of high number of different sources, it is more likely that he is a critical news consumer.

Similar to what has been said on the overlapping dimension of media systems (Aelst et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018b), the multiplicity of sources should also have a positive effect on critical news use at the individual level. If an individual access information from a wide range of sources, it is probable that he is exposed to many contradicting viewpoints, so he should be more tended to questioning the accuracy of news.

Moreover, due to this wide range, he is capable of control his news use without an extensive effort. Replacing an information supply that is believed to be untrustful with a more credible one is easy for news users with wide repertoires, while people with narrower diets would be both incapable and hesitant to do the same.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In this section, I firstly present necessary pre-estimation test to validate the empirical structure I offered. After that, results of the testing of the hypotheses are presented. In the last section, additional analysis on media systems and the subsegments of news consumption behavior are provided.

4.1 Main Tests

Table 4 shows the results of bivariate regression analyses of the relationships between the dependent variable and each of seven operationalized independent variables. These preliminary tests confirm that all dimensions that were selected to be hypothesized have meaningful relationship with the critical news consumption score, if all other possible factors were left out. Moreover, all of four control variables (*age*, *gender*, *education*, *GDP per capita*) also showed meaningful association with the score. This confirmation allows us to not leave any variables out of the main model at this stage.

To detect possible multicollinearity issues between selected independent variables, correlation analysis was made, presenting the results at Table 5. One outcome noticeable is the medium level of correlation between market concentration and mainstream exposure, yet no pairs show correlation value higher than 0.5. The case was the same the correlation test was run including the control variables. This step confirms that all variables that I offer to include in the main model are

considerably independent from each other, leading me to not change any elements from the adopted framework I discussed at previous sections.

Table 4. Bivariate Statistics of the Relationship between Critical News Consumption Score and Predictors

<i>digital medium preference</i>	0.3121*** (0.0279)
<i>mainstream exposure</i>	0.0122*** (0.0009)
<i>repertoire magnitude</i>	0.2466*** (0.0038)
<i>state pressure</i>	0.0505*** (0.0013)
<i>digital dominance</i>	0.0196*** (0.0019)
<i>market concentration</i>	-0.0051** (0.0019)
<i>market magnitude</i>	0.0919*** (0.0022)

N= 61789. Standard errors are in parentheses; *<.05, **<.01, ***<.001.

Table 5. Correlation Analysis of Offered Independent Variables

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) <i>digital medium preference</i>	1.0000	-	-	-	-	-	-
(2) <i>mainstream exposure</i>	-0.1510	1.0000	-	-	-	-	-
(3) <i>repertoire magnitude</i>	-0.0824	0.3137	1.0000	-	-	-	-
(4) <i>state pressure</i>	0.0340	0.0670	0.0847	1.0000	-	-	-
(5) <i>digital dominance</i>	0.1393	0.0912	0.0271	0.2229	1.0000	-	-
(6) <i>market concentration</i>	0.0035	0.4638	0.0440	0.0791	0.0716	1.0000	-
(7) <i>market magnitude</i>	-0.0181	0.0328	0.1805	0.3558	-0.0503	0.0500	1.0000

The adopted framework considers both news repertoires and media systems as structures that are independent from individual-level characteristics. This understanding makes it necessary to measure their effects by multilevel regression analysis, where the relationship between two structural levels and the dependent variable of critical news consumption would be identified. Consisting of aggregate data drawn within the country unit of measurement, four variables defining media

systems fit to form one level. Testing solely the significance of country identification (without any of its dimensions) on critical news consumption, intraclass correlation coefficient was found to be 0.1021, which indicates it is meaningful to operationalize the dimensions of it as a second level to the individual level predictors. On the other hand, news repertoire variables were constructed from answers unique individuals gave to related questions, which makes it more sensible to treat them at the individual level. In theory, repertoires are structures of news flow produced by individuals, which are located in a smaller scale than media systems. However, defining them as a second level is methodologically problematic, since the data derived for their defining variables is not collected at the corresponding level.

Results of the mixed-effects multilevel regression models can be found in Table 6. Model 1 shows the results where independent variables are taken into the equation with the values described at the operationalization section. All demographic variables measured showed significant effects. In particular, the model indicates that male, young and highly educated participants tend to consume the news more rigorously than female, old and less educated participants. Moreover, all news repertoire dimensions were found to be significant predictors of one's score on critical news consumption index, at the positive direction. Altogether, having online medium as the main source of news, being exposed to sources that is shared by wider society and following a wide range of sources showed a positive relationship with the concerning dependent variable. These results allow us to confirm H5 and H7, while H6 should be rejected.

At the second level, media systems, three out of four dimensions chosen found to be insignificant in their relationship with the score of critical news consumption. The level of state pressure over media, the predominance of online

news use or the quantitative magnitude of the media market showed no meaningful effects on this score, which leads us to reject H1, H2 and H4. Although it is a dimension parallel to the mainstream exposure regarding its implications, the level of market concentration surprisingly had negative affect on the score of critical news consumption, confirming H3. Lastly, GDP per capita found to be a predictor of low score, implying that the score might be affected by specific factors related to the level of development that are not investigated.

Table 6. Results on the Relationship between Critical News Consumption Score and Predictors

Model 1	
Level 1 Predictors	
<i>age</i>	-0.0166*** (0.0009)
<i>gender</i>	-0.1843*** (0.0255)
<i>education</i>	0.1887*** (0.0073)
<i>digital medium preference</i>	0.3052*** (0.0272)
<i>mainstream exposure</i>	0.0076*** (0.0010)
<i>repertoire magnitude</i>	0.2230*** (0.0039)
Level 2 Predictors	
<i>GDP per capita</i>	-0.0001*** (0.0001)
<i>state pressure</i>	0.0009 (0.0153)
<i>digital dominance</i>	0.0305 (0.0201)
<i>market concentration</i>	-0.0733** (0.0217)
<i>market magnitude</i>	0.0210 (0.0233)
Constant	3.5066 (1.9422)
Level 1 Variance	9.9132 (0.0564)
Level 2 Variance	0.5102 (0.1330)

N= 61789. Standard errors are in parentheses; *<.05, **<.01, ***<.001.

To compare the sizes of effects different structural dimensions have, I considered to standardize the predictors. However, there are serious concerns specified in literature regarding the rationality of this operation, since variables measured in different ranges cannot be meaningfully compared (King, 1986; Bring, 1994). This restriction does not prevent the inter-level comparative analysis of some variables (mainstream exposure to market concentration and repertoire magnitude to market magnitude), where parallel dimensions have the same units of measurement. I argue that these variables are comparable, since these pairs correspond to the same attributes (the strength of common information environment and the multiplicity of viewpoints) at both layers.

Looking at the predictor powers of mainstream exposure and market concentration variables, we see that the presence of a common information environment and being in a part of it have contrasting effects on critical news consumption. While the size of the environment shared with the wider society has a positive effect on the score, the size of the shared environment at the media system has a negative effect dramatically bigger. On the other hand, the number of significant sources existing within the repertoire affects the score at the same direction as sources operating at the media system. As the effect of market magnitude is insignificant, this quantitative dimension seems to be only effective at the repertoire level.

Overall, we see that the main model of my thesis offers mixed results. By these results, we can only confirm three structural dimensions as the drivers of critical news consumption: Having a repertoire where online mediums are preferred over traditional ones, having a repertoire consisting of wide range of sources and

living in a country where the presence of mainstream is weak. The results do not successfully confirm other hypotheses.

4.2 Further analysis

Since not all hypotheses were confirmed by the results of regression analysis, further analysis is needed to identify the problems and additional information that may be gone unnoticed. The first part of this section will explain how dimensions of the media system level differ between countries. In this analysis, I will discuss regional dynamics and latent trends that are not observable by regression results. In the second part, I will provide the details on how critical news consumption may not be a wholistic behavior, by discussing the effects of structural dimensions over separate behavioral types.

4.2.1 Divergence of media systems

Dimensions of media systems showed no predicting power over critical news consumption scores of individuals, except the level of market concentration. While this may be the case for the big picture, I wanted to investigate whether these dimensions hold any ground for some country groups.²

Figure 1 shows the distribution of countries over a plot with dimensions of critical news consumption score and state pressure. The distribution of 26 countries indicates some form of a positive relationship between the predictor

² My initial attempt was to introduce regional groups such as Anglo-Saxon and Mediterranean countries to the main model as dummy-coded interaction terms at the country level, but multicollinearity issue made this type of an analysis impossible. For this reason, I only used descriptive statistics to analyze the divergence of media systems over selected dimensions.

and the score, as it was expected by H1. At this group, Scandinavian countries are clustered around the bottom with low critical news consumptions scores and low state pressure over media, followed by Western European countries who have slightly higher scores on each dimension. At the top of the curve, we mostly see South American countries, accompanied by United States. While the figure shows an apparent relationship between these variables, the most possible factor behind the failure of regression analysis is the outlier statuses of Asian countries. In contrast to other regional groups, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan does not constitute a cluster on this plot, by their scores varying on both dimensions.

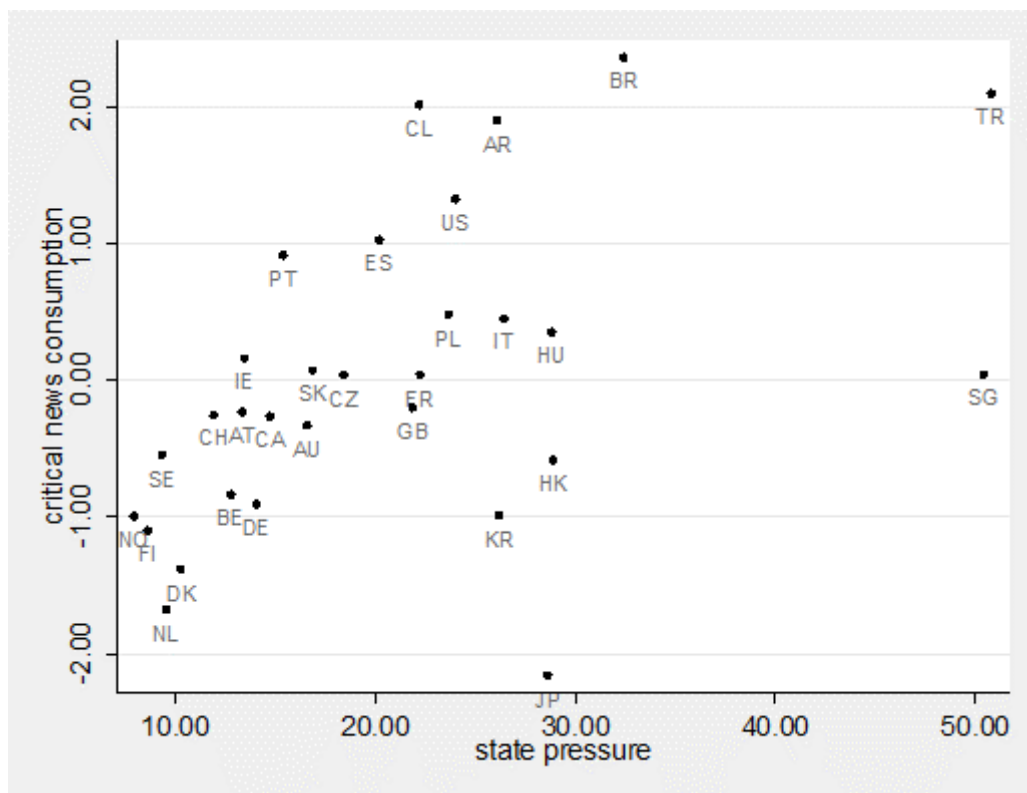


Figure 1. Two-way plot of critical news consumption score and state pressure

At Figure 2, we see that there is definitely no meaningful relationship between the dependent variable and digital dominance predictor. Other than minor differences between some regional groups such as Western Europe and South America, there are no trends, clusters or outliers that may be mentioned on this dimension.

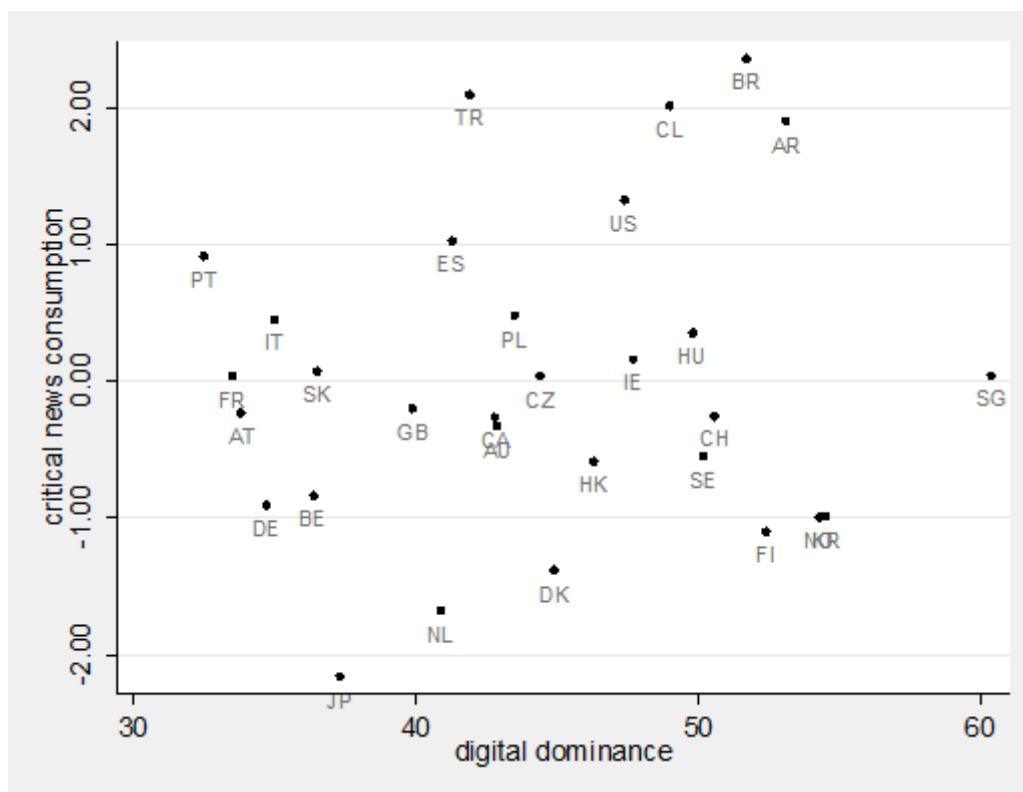


Figure 2. Two-way plot of critical news consumption score and digital dominance

Figure 3 shows the distribution of countries by their rate of market concentration, which was the only country-level predictor that had a significant effect on critical news consumption score. While some loose clusters may be seen for many regions, the slope is not exactly identifiable, therefore no conclusive statement can be made on the presence or direction of the slope from the figure. Absence of some countries, or inclusion of others, may easily affect the

interpretation of this relationship. That is to say, the effects of market concentration can only be investigated further if the dataset was including more observations at the country level.

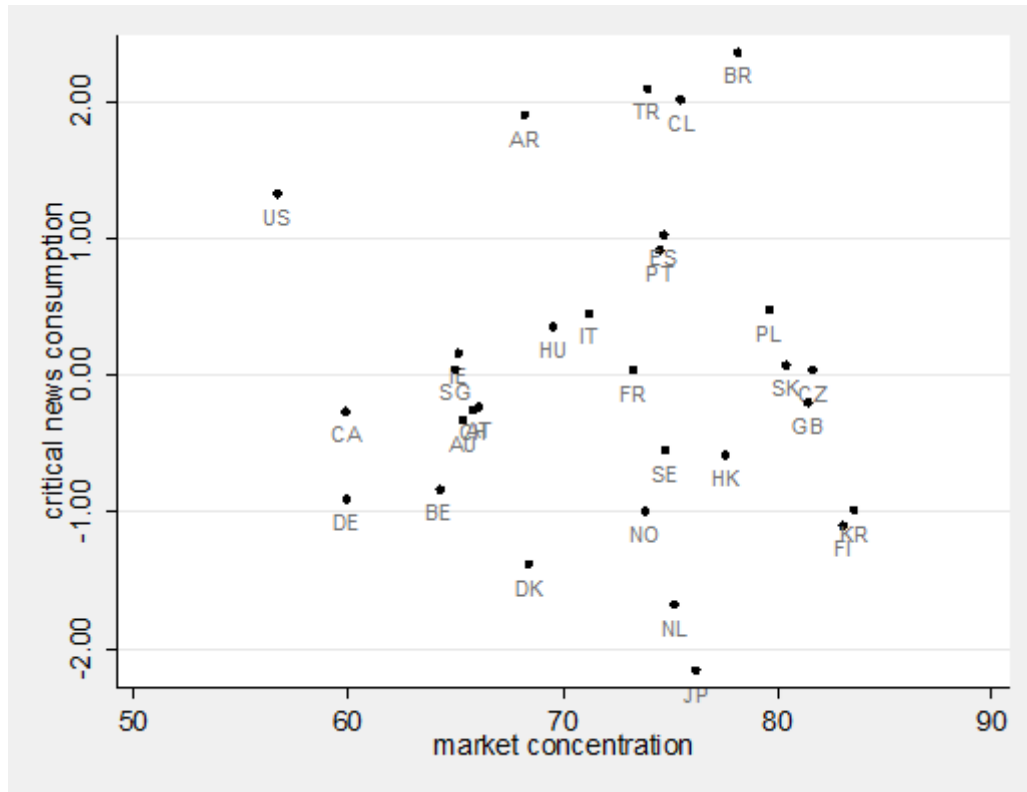


Figure 3. Two-way plot of critical news consumption score and market concentration

The last figure I wanted to observe was Figure 4, the one that consists of the market magnitude data. Although regression analysis no significant relationship between this dimension and the dependent variable, a positive relationship in line with H4 may be seen at the figure. It may be assumed that with the inclusion of other countries, the slope may be more apparent. Yet, the predicting power of this variable would be a weak one in the best-case scenario, since the existing countries seem to be spread diagonally.

Again, some regional clusters are visible for Scandinavia and South America, also some regional match ups such as Spain-Portugal and Austria-Switzerland.

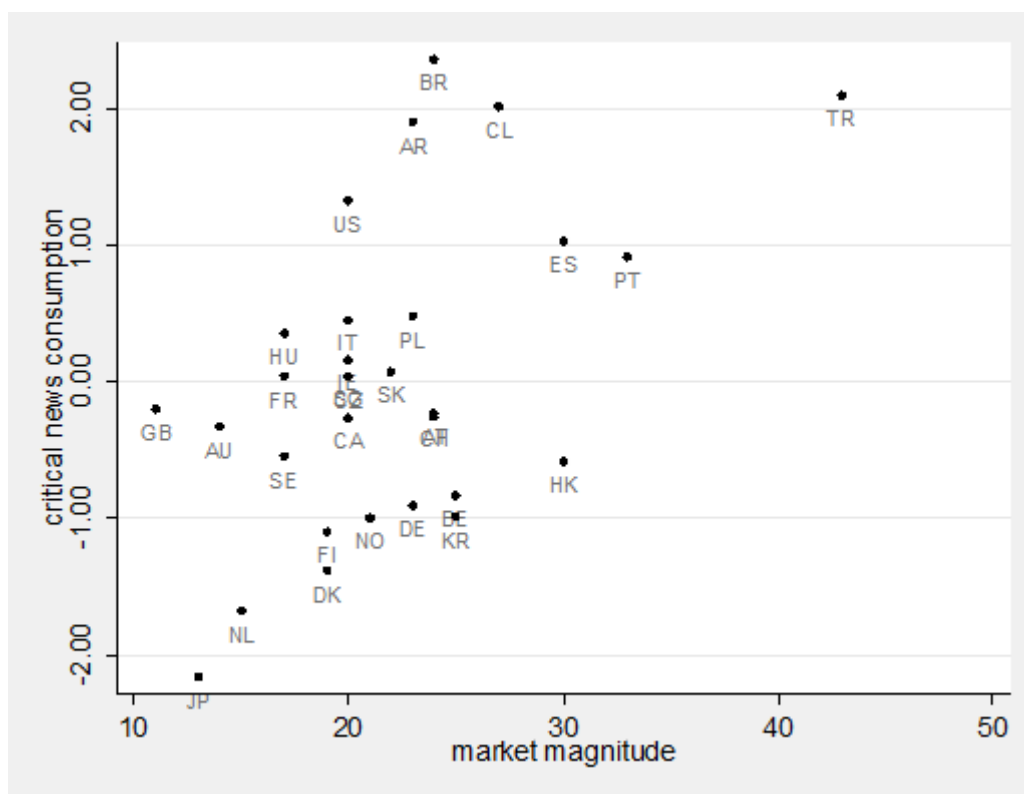


Figure 4. Two-way plot of critical news consumption and market magnitude

4.2.2 Divergence within critical news consumption indicators

Beyond the main model and hypotheses, I separated the index back to questions originally building it, to see if any statement indicating critical news consumption differentiates itself from the aggregate model. There were six questions asked to participants to observe their behavior towards presence or threat of inaccurate and unreliable news supply. Participants were asked to answer yes or no questions on whether the statements provided at the operationalization section are appropriate for them. Using these answers as dependent variables, I ran six multilevel logistic

regression tests. The results may be seen at Table 7. While the significance levels of level 1 and level 2 predictors mostly follow the main model, there are some differences to be mentioned.

Table 7. Results on the Relationship between Critical News Consumption Statements and Predictors

	Model 2 (S1)	Model 3 (S2)	Model 4 (S3)	Model 5 (S4)	Model 6 (S5)	Model 7 (S6)
Level 1 Predictors						
<i>age</i>	-0.0033*** (0.0006)	-0.0055*** (0.0006)	-0.0039*** (0.0006)	-0.0079*** (0.0007)	-0.0143*** (0.0007)	-0.0064*** (0.0007)
<i>gender</i>	0.1284*** (0.0186)	-0.1063*** (0.0174)	-0.1812*** (0.0190)	-0.2450*** (0.0196)	0.0989*** (0.0196)	-0.1500*** (0.0200)
<i>education</i>	0.0524*** (0.0053)	0.1154*** (0.0050)	0.0698*** (0.0054)	0.0807*** (0.0056)	0.0617*** (0.0056)	0.0746*** (0.0057)
<i>digital medium preference</i>	0.1179*** (0.0197)	0.2815*** (0.0185)	0.0261 (0.0202)	0.1665*** (0.0208)	0.0429* (0.0206)	0.0814*** (0.0212)
<i>mainstream exposure</i>	0.0031*** (0.0008)	0.0072*** (0.0007)	0.0093*** (0.0008)	-0.0034*** (0.0008)	0.0039*** (0.0008)	-0.0007 (0.0008)
<i>repertoire magnitude</i>	0.0679*** (0.0030)	0.1437*** (0.0035)	0.0936*** (0.0031)	0.0760*** (0.0030)	0.0824*** (0.0030)	0.0618*** (0.0030)
Level 2 Predictors						
<i>GDP per capita</i>	-0.0001*** (0.0001)	-0.0001*** (0.0001)	-0.0001 (0.0001)	-0.0001** (0.0001)	-0.0001** (0.0001)	-0.0001** (0.0001)
<i>state pressure</i>	-0.0006 (0.0091)	-0.0036 (0.0078)	0.0097 (0.0069)	-0.0016 (0.0076)	-0.0038 (0.0069)	-0.0064 (0.0078)
<i>digital dominance</i>	0.0236* (0.0119)	0.0083 (0.0103)	0.0022 (0.0091)	0.0071 (0.0099)	0.0181* (0.0091)	0.0136 (0.0103)
<i>market concentration</i>	-0.0283* (0.0128)	-0.0353** (0.0111)	-0.0317** (0.0099)	-0.0317** (0.0107)	-0.0287** (0.0098)	-0.0263* (0.0111)
<i>market magnitude</i>	0.0147 (0.0138)	-0.0031 (0.0119)	0.0103 (0.0106)	0.0151 (0.0115)	0.0148 (0.0105)	0.0076 (0.119)
Constant	-0.0763 (1.1487)	1.4820 (0.9937)	0.0132 (0.8816)	0.7883 (0.9602)	0.0964 (0.8751)	0.2071 (0.9900)

N = 61789. Standard errors are in parentheses; *<.05, **<.01, ***<.001.

Model 1 was showing digital medium preference, one's main source of news being one of online or traditional mediums, as a strong predictor of critical news consumption. Model 4 and Model 6 indicates that out of six statements constituting the index, one of them (S3: "I started relying more on sources of news that are considered more reputable") has no significant relationship with this preference. The absence of relationship for Statement 3 implies that online and traditional news consumers do not diverge on their repertoire enhancement behavior. I suggest that this is an expected outcome, since this statement is less related to the difference between the misinformation capability of mediums than the motivation of individual to improving his news diet.

Mainstream exposure predictor, which unexpectedly have a negative relationship with the critical news consumption score, shows the same effect for four of the statements. Only Model 5 supports the related hypothesis, while Model 7 shows that there is no relationship between this predictor and the Statement 6 ("I stopped paying attention to news shared by someone because I am unsure whether I trust that person"). As the overall effect of mainstream exposure is not in line with my initial expectations, it is not possible to explain the difference between sub-models in more detail.

Digital dominance variable, which measures the percentage of individuals who mainly use online sources for news consumption at the country level, did not show a significant effect in predicting the overall critical news consumption score. When we observe its effects at separate consumption behaviors, we see positive relationships at Model 2 and Model 6. At my argument on H2, I was expecting media systems with strong online market to lead people to be more concerned of the reliability of their news use, due to the unfiltered and crowded character of the online

environment. This seems to be accurate on only these models, where dependent variables are statements of “I decided to not share a news story because I was unsure about its accuracy” and “I discussed a news story with person I trust because I was unsure about its accuracy”. As the hypothesis was refuted at Model 1, the predictive power of digital dominance over these statements may be related to the interactive capabilities social platforms offer. High digital dominance indicates that high percentage of people in a country use mainly online sources where they have more frequent opportunities to share a news story or discuss the news they received with another person. These actions may be more effortful for people who mainly use traditional sources.

4.3 Limitations

The problems I met building the research design were mostly due to the use of RDNR dataset, which are obviously not collected specific to my research question. Structural dimensions of news repertoires might be operationalized differently. For example, digital medium preference variable was coded binarily, which overlooks how individuals diverge in their online-traditional news use ratios and the level of their exposure to each medium. Moreover, mainstream exposure variable gives us an idea on the involvement of mainstream sources in one’s repertoire, yet it is not the most direct way of measurement.

At media systems operationalization, similar problems occurred. Digital dominance variable uses the same question digital medium preference was coded with. There may be a more detailed measurement of this variable, possibly by comparing the overall reach of online and traditional news sources. On the other

hand, market concentration and market magnitude dimensions were operationalized with subjective thresholds. While I aimed to define these thresholds in line with the literature, different decisions, such as using methods like Laakso & Taagepera's (1979) 'effective number of parties' formula, might have offered different results.

Lastly, the number of countries observed in the study severely affected the predictive power of media systems variables. Working on the research design, it was expected that some outlier countries or some regions with specific historical developments would disrupt to the overall trend. This was the case at the measurement of some dimensions, as the regression results were heavily bound to the presence or absence of some specific countries.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Before passing to the discussion on the ultimate findings of the study, we should firstly visit the general results of the regression analysis. Results of the testing of main model were successful in confirming three hypotheses, while four hypotheses were refuted. Overall, results showed that media systems do not have a strong influence over audience behavior as expected. Within the scope of the tests, the power of the state over media, the popularity of online news consumption and number of effective sources in the market (covered respectively by H1, H2 and H4) were not found to be effective determinants on critical news consumption. H3, covering the dimension of mainstream presence, was the only dimension to be found meaningful at the level of national media markets. Outside of these hypotheses, GDP per capita data were put into the analysis, which showed very strong effects, implying that country-level variation can still lead to a variation on news consumption behavior of individuals. However, the mixed results of four hypotheses tested at this level do not support this possibility in the context of political information environments, which contrasts with field studies confirming the argument.

At the level of news repertoires, the results are more meaningful. Preference of online mediums and the magnitude of repertoires (covered respectively by H5 and H7) showed strong effects determining the level of critical news consumption, which provided a clear support for studies defending the necessities of trans-media approaches and the repertoire framework. At this level, only H6, covering the level

of mainstream exposure, found no support. As it is not meaningful that H3, corresponding to the same dimension at the level above, showed results contradicting with H5, it has to be questioned separately for possible conceptual and methodological shortfalls. Leaving this aspect aside, it can be argued that in the context of the new dynamics of political information environments, the news repertoire level has to be observed more closely than country-level media systems.

Analyses of the empirical support and refutation of hypotheses, together with more detailed observation of country level patterns, bring us back to the initial research question: In which ways political information environments, at the levels of media systems and news repertoires, affect people's perception and consumption of news? These perceptions and consumption behavior were defined under the concept of critical news consumption, which was argued to be a symptom of widening epistemic crisis, declining collective trust and increasing difficulty of accessing factual information. Over this behavioral transformation, structural characteristics of media systems and news repertoires have some clear effects, along with some issues that are not concluded.

5.1 Online and fractionalized news diets as definite triggers of critical news consumption

The most definite conclusion of the analysis is at the repertoire level, where we see that the medium type individuals prefer and the quantitative magnitude of the diet are significantly related to those individuals' attentive attitudes towards the information they access.

In line with the major discussion on literature, it is confirmed that the digitalization of news environments is a heading force of the age of misinformation. Individuals who situate themselves in these environments, where news are being produced and consumed at every moment, are exposed to substantially different media logics than we experienced at previous decades. In a few words, the standard process of an online news flow can be basically described as the rapid and barely refined production of the information, followed by its consumption at the same manner, and finally to be redistributed to the environment with a context added. Contrasting with the traditional news flow, this pattern requires more effort identifying the facts and filtering them from the social context. Consequently, we see that online news audiences are more critical of their news use than traditional news audiences.

The influence of these new mediums over individual behavior cannot be argued to have the same effect on the level of media systems. Even some media systems are more digitalized than others, we do not see any aggregate effects related this. One reason of this inconsistency may be the latency between the direct effect of repertoires and more stable yet slow establishment of media systems. As people can quickly select the news sources they will follow and start to behave accordingly, the system and established modes of news production cannot be replaced with new forms at the same pace, due to factors such as institutional persistence. Another reason may be the diminishing control power of media systems over individuals' news consumption. If this is the case, the phenomenon we observe is the convergence of media systems, implying that historically developed national characteristics are becoming less and less visible with the globalization of news production practices.

Fractionalization of news sources, another phenomenon we experience at the current environment, is also a significant contributor to critical news use. The results of the analysis confirm that individuals who include many news sources to their repertoires behave more attentive against the threat of misinformation. The cross-country confirmation of this relationship indicates that regardless of different political contexts and how diverse these repertoires actually are within themselves, overall, multitude of news sources itself makes people more skeptical of the news. As the number of sources increase, it becomes more likely that they would focus on setting the agenda over different news topics. Even if the topic is the same, frameworks as perspectives of truth would be many. This type of an arrangement inevitably leads people to be observers of epistemic contestation, therefore not being passive consumers of information.

Similar to the discussion on the influence of online mediums, the question of overchoice is mostly an issue of news repertoires. At the level of media systems, presence of many sources does not seem to be of concern. The gap between the effects of two layers raises a question: Why the diversity of viewpoints in a news diet makes people conscious of the threat of misinformation, while the diversity within the national media systems do not? Is it possible that while people selectively add sources to their diets, they also perceive sources outside to not have any epistemic authority? This gap might be the indicator of the presence of echo chambers, which is another important focus of post-truth discussions, details being outside of the scope of this thesis. Whether this line of thinking is accurate or not, the weakness of country-level effects of this dimension refers back to the possibility that at the current environment of political communication, media systems are not distinct from each other as before.

5.2 Decline of mainstream media and environments of distrust

In each day, increasing number of news sources offer people alternative routes and perspectives to be informed. This expansion inevitably weakens the power of mainstream media as the center of information flow. In countries where this phenomenon is more severe, meaning that their media systems are not really concentrated and not many people get their news from the same sources, we see that audiences are more likely to be critical news consumers. Country level confirmation of this argument implies that the most important characteristic of media systems in the age of misinformation is the presence, or absence, of shared information environments.

Decline of mainstream media is a phenomenon mostly discussed in the context of the degradation of news content. When professional newsrooms with established news production routines are replaced by unfiltered news flow of non-institutional actors, it is expected to deal with questionable information. While this concern over quality is definitely valid, it is not the sole and most important outcome of the transformation. The concern conceptualizes mainstream media as corporate media, which may not be the case all the time, as many independent or online-born actors also have the power to reach major parts of audiences. If we would consider mainstream as less of an issue of the content and more of the structural role, we would see that its presence is mostly important for another reason. It is the fact that when common sources of information supply are weak, it is more challenging for audiences to develop a common sense over truth. Compared to other structural dimensions of digitalization and market magnitude, the state of shared media

environments seems to be the most significant characteristic at the media level, defining people's news consumption behavior at the age of misinformation.

5.3 Stability of regional characteristics

Beside the effects of market concentration, news repertoires in overall are found to be more influential on news consumption behavior than media systems. This does not mean that media systems are dissolved or converged into a global model, as we still see countries from a single region to have systemic attributes different from others. In addition to Hallin & Mancini's models of Anglo-Saxon, Central European and Mediterranean media systems, East Asian, American and Scandinavian countries also seem to have some regionally definitive characteristics. Although these ties seem to be loose at some dimensions, it is conclusive enough to argue that media systems are not completely irrelevant for current political information environment.

Considering that characteristics borne of distinct historical developments of regions still prevail at a certain level, it is not wrong to suggest that media systems may not follow similar patterns on their effects over the behavior of audiences. While this thesis does not focus on cases but follows the overall trend, comparative studies may be needed to observe how different media systems interact with audiences differently.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Analyses and discussions up to this point allow us to define a general form of political news environment, which can be used to identify the news consumption behavior of post-truth era audiences. It was already given that epistemic crisis of the era pushes people to actively change their news consumption routines against the threat of misinformation. In general, we see that these individuals contact with the news flow through crowded and digital repertoires, nested within media systems where mainstream media is not strong enough in terms of audience reach. Subject to nuances arising from historical and developmental gaps between countries, this structure ultimately defines the distinct mode of news production and consumption in the post-truth era. My thesis demonstrates that this type of an arrangement has significant influence in making people doubtful of their news use, furthering the insecurity over media's role as the provider of facts. When media is not capable of convincing audiences that they are being informed accurately, we have to talk about a political information environment that is substantially different than expected.

Other than the structural dimensions highlighted, what this environment entails? Although they are not discussed in this thesis, we observed several actions in the last years. 'Fact checkers', as institutions solely focusing on identifying false or misleading information circulating at media systems, became actors claiming the position of epistemic authority journalism once had. Moreover, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter began putting warning tags on content suspected to be misleading or inaccurate. News and individual contents on 2020 US

presidential elections and COVID-19 pandemics were the most important subjects of these policies, arguably for these companies to avoid responsibility over negative repercussions of misinformation. In both examples, we see that the deficiency of the information market results in new methods to respond the changing audience behavior. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that the adaptation is enough to overcome the threat of misinformation over democratic systems.

As the structural dimensions we discussed stay as impactful as they are, meaning that supply of information is fractionalized, independent and easily (re)producible as it is, it is not likely that we will return to mostly secure information environments once present. Technological developments enabling these environments, consequently critical news consumption behavior, presumably cannot be reversed. This means that even if phenomena such as populism and polarization would lose their power within the political system of today, we can assume that their media-level enablers will endure. If this is the case, discussions on the post-truth era should be more focused on the structural impossibility of obtaining factual information than the political actor's appeal to emotions. Political actors were always trying to attract people with emotional references to various social identities or events, yet, media environments were not always in the forms they are right now. For this reason, it can be argued that the latter consist of the ultimate accelerating dynamics of being distrustful (and critical) against news, consequently leading to the apathy towards claims over facts, the increasing relative importance of ideas and emotions, politicians' increasing referrals to them, and finally the transformed landscape for democratic politics.

Describing the aspects of political information environments furthering the age of misinformation, the findings of this thesis offer two perspectives to be adopted

for further studies on the relationship between politics, media and society. Firstly, it is argued that modes of news consumption should be the center of interest, if the aim is to understand why people's political attitudes and ideas are shaped different than the previous decades. This argument is mostly in line with McLuhan's (1964) essential thesis, "medium is the message". Secondly, it is argued that these modes of consumption should be investigated not only on individual level, but on national and global levels too. Conceptualizing news repertoires and media systems as two layers arranging people's use of news, it is more likely to reach conclusions that are not entirely based on individual differences; national and global political and developmental contexts are also mediating dynamics that cannot be overlooked.

Further studies should also be more exploratory on the side of methodology and conceptualization. Since the politics-media-society complex I took as a contextual basis is relatively recent, there are no established ways to understand how people navigate as information seekers in the new era. Defining measurable and universally applicable standards and building refined research designs are necessary actions to be taken, to have a better picture of the relationship between the behavior of news consumers and the information environment they are surrounded with.

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