Hostile territory

Explaining stigmatization of US president Donald Trump in news media in 12 western countries

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Hostile Territory: 
Explaining Stigmatization of US President Donald Trump in News Media 12 Western Countries

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Abstract

Stigmatization is a common way for news media to punish politicians for undemocratic behavior, such as sexism, racism or democratic misconduct. While it is plausible that stigmatization varies in accordance with the characteristics of media landscapes, a cross-national investigation is still lacking. Drawing on a systematic content analysis of news coverage of controversial right-wing United States president Donald Trump (2013-2018; N= 35,485) in twelve Western countries, this study maps and explains cross-national in stigmatization. We find that stigmatization is most common in countries with low levels of journalistic professionalism. The ties between parties and press do not matter, with the difference in stigmatization between right- and left-leaning newspapers being roughly the same in all countries. Stigmatization is also more prevalent former authoritarian countries, but this does not affect the relation between newspapers’ political leaning and stigmatization. Together, our study reveals substantial cross-national differences in opportunity structure for controversial politicians.

Keywords: stigmatization in news media; political communication; media systems; authoritarian legacies; Trump

Introduction

On August 11 2017, a white supremacists rally in the American city Charlottesville turned violent when a protester drove his car through a crowd of counter-protesters. Later that day, United States president Donald Trump expressed his grief over the incident. In his speech, Trump condemned the hatred and violence of both sides and underlined that both groups consisted of some "very fine people". Ultimately, this response backlashed and Trump faced widespread stigmatization among the public
and in news media, accusing him of siding with racists. Although Trump’s ability to spark controversy is exceptional, his behavior is indicative for numerous politicians in other countries pushing the envelope of democratically acceptable behavior. However, whether or not these politicians experience a similar ‘media backlash’ in the form of stigmatization may very well depend on the characteristics of the media landscape. Does stigmatization in news content vary between countries? And if so, what explains these differences?

The purpose of the present study is to map and explain stigmatization in news media in twelve Western countries. We take advantage of the extensive attention for United States president Donald Trump, to assess how two historic characteristics of media landscapes influence stigmatization in news content. Inspired by Shoemaker and Reese’s seminal work Mediating the Message, we argue that countries’ media and political history affects to what degree journalists believe it is appropriate to use stigmatizing terms. Drawing on Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) conceptualization of media systems, we first contend that stigmatization is strongest in countries with low levels of journalistic professionalism, where neutrality is not a prevailing journalistic standard. The second explanation is grounded in the literature on authoritarian legacies (de Leeuw, Rekker, Azrout, & Van Spanje, 2018; Dinas & Northmore-Ball, 2017). According to this account, democratically unacceptable behavior is more likely to be met with stigmatization in countries where this behavior is more easily associated with historic examples of authoritarianism.

Given its comparative angle, our study plays well to some widely debated topics in the fields of journalism and political science. For instance, our study theoretically and empirically contributes to the question how contextual factors influence journalistic practices (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991, 1996). From a political science perspective, this study furthers our understanding with respect to the differential media or "discursive" opportunity structures shaping electoral competition (Golder, 2016; Koopmans & Statham, 1999). It tells us why news media respond the way they do when politicians break fundamental democratic norms such as gender equality, racial equality or abidance to democratic institutions. Even more so, it reveals whether some media landscapes are more accommodative of undemocratic behavior of politicians than others.
In spite of the overwhelming availability of comparative frameworks, no study has systematically assessed cross-national differences in stigmatization. The two studies that have analyzed stigmatization in news coverage were limited to the Dutch far-right Party for Freedom (van Heerden & van der Brug, 2017; Van Spanje & Azrout, 2018). In addition, only a limited number of studies has investigated to what degree country characteristics influence journalistic practices. Of the studies that have, some focused on cross-national differences in journalists’ role conceptions (see, e.g., Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Köcher, 1986). Other studies showed that these conceptions subsequently affects the production of news content (Tandoc, Edson, Hellmueller, & Vos, 2013; Van Dalen, De Vreese, & Albæk, 2012; Van Kempen, 2007). Notwithstanding the important advancements these studies have made, they lack the systematic approach to explain cross-national differences in function of deeply rooted journalistic practices, transcending deliberate choices of individual journalists.

Therefore, this study adds to the existing literature in two ways. Theoretically, it advances a new thesis to understand cross-national variability in stigmatization of politicians, which takes into account the historic reputation of the ideology the politician represents. This adds a theoretical novelty to comparative scholarship on media coverage, where countries’ media system has long dominated explanations for cross-national differences in coverage. Methodologically, we contribute by presenting a systematic automated – and manually validated – content analysis of news coverage of Trump in twelve Western countries between 2013 and 2018 (N= 35,485). By doing so we are able to resolve the recurring problem of cross-national comparability, a problem that is characteristic for this field of research. By studying the same topic in twelve different countries, we hold the characteristics of the object of coverage constant, allowing us to study the effect of country characteristics. Combined, our study sheds a new light on the different opportunity structures in which norm breaking politicians are operating today.
Theory

Stigmatization in News Media

Scholarship has long acknowledged the importance of abidance to democratic norms. This normative framework consists of a broad variety of written and unwritten rules that may vary between cultures. However, it is commonly agreed that two norms prevail in all established democracies. This idea builds on the works of Popper (1945), Dahl (1971) and others, and holds that a democracy needs (1) public abidance to democratic institutions and (2) a widespread belief in the fundamental equality of people. Although most politicians subscribe to these norms, they are not fully uncontested. It is not uncommon that politicians break these norms, for instance by disrespecting the rule of law, or by making sexist or racist remarks. Such behaviors transcend the division between extreme and mainstream parties, and left- and right-wing parties. For instance, the right-wing Dutch Reformed Party (SGP) has a history of promoting gender inequality, systematically refusing women to serve as their representatives in parliament. Likewise, several politicians of the Democratic Party in the Unites States have faced allegations of sexism or racism.

When politicians break these democratic norms, or are believed to have done so, they risk being punished by news media, most notably in the form of stigmatization. This is because news media tend to defend prevailing societal norms and because politicians are held to higher moral standards than ordinary citizens (Hatier, 2012). Stigmatization may vary in extend and intensity, but import is that news media emphasize that politicians’ behavior or rhetoric goes against core democratic values. This can be achieved, e.g., by (1) implying a politician is antidemocratic, (2) drawing comparisons with historic examples of authoritarianism (3) implying he or she denies the fundamental equality between people or (4) by scolding him or her for being populist (see Reinemann et al. 2016). By doing so, news media mark an actor unclean for participation in democracy (Downs, 2012).

To our knowledge, only two studies have assessed stigmatization in news content (van Heerden & van der Brug, 2017; Van Spanje & Azrout, 2018). Both focusing on

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1 Robert Dahl coins the idea of “equal consideration of interests”, which is an interpretation of a more abstract principle of equality between citizens.
2 see for instance the ‘Virginia Crisis’ in February 2019.
the Dutch far-right Party for Freedom (PVV), these studies demonstrate (1) that the democratic norm breaking behavior of this party has resulted in stigmatizing news content and (2) that this has an impact on the party’s electoral appeal. Whether this varies between countries has not yet been researched. In the following section, we develop two frameworks to explain cross-national differences in stigmatization.

Explaining Stigmatization: The Hierarchy of Influences Model

Whether or not democratic norms have been broken may be subject to controversy. In addition, even when a particular norm is clearly violated, news media still have a considerable discretion when it comes to reporting undemocratic behavior. That is, it is one thing to describe the hard facts, but it is another to call a politician out for being antidemocratic, sexist or racist. Why do news media respond the way they do? This is the core question Shoemaker and Reese (1996) address in their seminal work Mediating the Message. In this work, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) advocate the "hierarchy of influences model". The objective of this model is to explain media content in function of five factors: individual characteristics, media routines, organizational characteristics, extra media influences and contextual influences.

Cross-national explanations for media coverage are situated at the highest level of analysis, i.e. contextual influences. In Mediating the Message, Reese and Shoemaker argue that cross-national differences in coverage can be attributed to the prevailing ideological paradigm. This paradigm encapsulates a societal agreement on what is deemed acceptable and what is not. Following the logic of this model, stigmatizing news content is produced when media practitioners operate in a context where it is acceptable to do so. In the following sections, we argue that whether or not this is the case depends on two historic contextual factors, namely countries’ media and political history. We contend that these factors influence how news media deal with internal and external pressures to produce stigmatizing content. The arguments are summarized in Table 1.

Media History

The prevailing explanation for cross-national variability in coverage is discussed in Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) book Comparing Media Systems. In their work, they contend
Table 1: Overview Theoretical Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Shoemaker &amp; Reese</th>
<th>Media History</th>
<th>Political History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Contextual</td>
<td>Ideological Paradigm</td>
<td>Professionalism, Political Parallelism, Pluralism</td>
<td>Experiences with Authoritarianism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Extramedia</td>
<td>Government, Advertisers, Interest Groups, Audiences, etc.</td>
<td>Political Parties</td>
<td>Public Opinion Climate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Organizational</td>
<td>Roles, Structure, Goals, etc.</td>
<td>Code of Ethics, Springboard to Politics</td>
<td>Consensus with respect to Political Deviance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Media Routines</td>
<td>Role Routines, News Values, Gate-keeping, etc.</td>
<td>Processing Cycle</td>
<td>Watchdog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Individual</td>
<td>Professional Background, Attitudes and Beliefs, Role Conceptions, etc.</td>
<td>Professional Background, Role Conceptions</td>
<td>Role Conceptions, Attitudes and Beliefs, Socialization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Based on Shoemaker & Reese (1996) "Hierarchy of Influences Model" as discussed in their book Mediating the Message. The last two columns depict the adjustments to their theory made by the researchers.

that journalistic practices are an outcome of historic interplay between society, politics and news media. One such outcome is the prevalence of the journalistic standard neutrality. Among other things, this standard prescribes that news practitioners should refrain from using stigmatizing terms. In this section, we argue that whether or not this standard prevails depends on (1) the degree of journalistic professionalism and (2) the strength of the ties between parties and press within a particular country.

The degree to which this ideal prevails arguably first and foremost depends on the professional development of journalism. In most countries located in Western Europe and Northern America, press catered to a broad and diverse public. These favorable market conditions encouraged the rise of a neutral style of journalism for two reasons (Schiller, 1981; Schudson, 1981; Wilke, 1987, 2013). First, the financial security allowed media organizations to retain independence from parties. Second, the abundance of financial incentives caused journalism to take on the characteristics of a profession, with its own educational, organizational and normative framework, all promoting the standard of neutrality (Wilke, 2013). Combined, these two historic
conditions resulted in the institutionalization of a normative framework emphasizing
the distinction between news and opinion (McQuail, 1994).

By contrast, in Southern European countries press catered to a small and elite
public. As such, there were no market conditions to encourage the rise of a professional,
neutral style of journalism. News organizations in these countries were sustained
by political parties and served to stimulate partisan competition (Gunther, Montero,
& Wert, 2000). Due to the absence of financial incentives, journalism relied on the
contributions of skilled writers and politicians, practiced in the art of rhetoric. As a
result, the style of journalism remained fairly similar to that practiced in literary arts,
with – as Hallin and Mancini (2004, p.98) argue – "a substantial emphasis to commentary
[... and representation of] distinct political tendencies". The outcome of these historic
conditions was that strongly opinionated and eloquent pieces were standard practice.

Tied back to the Hierarchy of Influences Model, it is not difficult to discern how jour-
nalistic professionalism translates to a lower degree of stigmatization in news coverage.
First, professionalization greatly reduces the 'extra media' influence politics has on
press. This makes news organizations less sensitive to political pressures to stigmatize
ideological opponents. On an organizational level, professionalization translates to
the implementation of a code of ethics, which often includes a dedication to accuracy
and objectivity (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p.93). This serves as an encouragement to
refrain from using stigmatizing terms. These values are also embedded in the media
routines, meaning stigmatizing terms are likely to be removed by an editor. Finally,
professionalization contributes to individual journalists' adherence to the standard of
neutrality. This is not only because the code of ethics requires them to do so, but also
because they conceive themselves as detached observers (Cohen, 1963; Donsbach, 2008;

While there is no empirical research demonstrating a direct link with stigmatization
in coverage per se, several studies have shown that journalistic professionalism influ-
ences the role conceptions of individual media practitioners as well as their dedication
to providing neutral coverage. Drawing on a survey conducted among journalists in
Britain, a country with high levels of professionalization, Köcher (1986) demonstrates
that 90% of the journalists agreed that their job is to provide neutral coverage. The
same survey conducted in Germany, a country with lower levels of professionalization,
showed that only 81% of the journalists agreed with this statement. Likewise, a study conducted by Donsbach and Patterson (2004) reveals that journalists in the United States, a country with high levels of professionalization are less willing to advocate opinions than their counterparts in countries with lower levels of professionalization, i.e. Germany and Italy.

Building on this literature, it is plausible that stigmatization varies alongside the prevalence of professional journalistic standards. We therefore expect that:

**Hypothesis 1a:** Stigmatization is more prevalent in countries with low degrees of journalistic professionalism than in countries with high degrees of journalistic professionalism.

Media systems also differ with respect to the relation between parties and press. First coined by Seymour-Ure (1974) to describe the close alignment between parties and press in Great Britain, party-press parallelism refers to the alignment between news organizations and particular parties. This idea was later adopted by Hallin and Mancini (2004), who use the concept “political parallelism” to describe general bonds between press and parties or ideologies. Parallelism, they argue, is strongest when news organizations cater to the needs of one specific party. This is for instance the case in most Southern European countries. Inversely, parallelism is weakest when news media operate independently from political pressures. This is the case in, e.g., Canada and Ireland.

When stigmatization is concerned, parallelism is an important factor to consider, because it greatly determines how news media handle their political loyalties. This idea is captured by the notions of internal and external pluralism. Internal pluralism denotes a situation in which newspapers are dedicated to providing balanced access to different ideological voices. Internal pluralism is high, when parallelism is weak. When parallelism is strong, newspapers only represent a limited set of ideas, often favoring the ideology and party they are aligned with. Pluralism in such a context is achieved “externally”. This means that balance is achieved at a system level with different newspapers representing different ideologies.

Parallelism is present in all levels represented in the Hierarchy of Influences Model. Like professionalization, parallelism is strongly linked to the extra-media influence
of political parties. This also translates to an organizational level, where poorly paid jobs in journalism serve as a springboard to a career in politics (Ortiz, 1995). In effect, it is often in the journalists’ personal interest to provide coverage that appeals to the party. It is at the level of media routines that ideological orientations start shaping news content. If parallelism is high, stigmatizing content of right-wing politicians is unlikely to be removed in left-leaning newspapers. Likewise stigmatizing content of left-wing politicians is unlikely to be removed in right-leaning newspapers. Finally, parallelism also affects role conceptions of the journalist as a political advocate. Journalists are therefore more likely to treat opposing views as illegitimate (Hallin, 1986). Democratic norm-breaking behavior of right-wing politicians is therefore more likely to be met with stigmatization in left-leaning newspapers, while this is less so for right-leaning newspapers.

Although scholarship agrees that countries’ media system affects role conceptions of individual journalists (e.g., Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Van Dalen et al., 2012), whether or not these conceptions subsequently affect the content they produce has remained a matter of debate. On the one hand, Van Dalen (2008) and Van Dalen et al. (2012) demonstrate that when journalists perceive themselves as partisan, content tends to be filled with political slant, while this is less so among journalists who perceive themselves as impartial. On the other hand, Tandoc et al. (2013) find no clearly defined relation between role conceptions and content.

In spite of the inconclusive empirical evidence, the large body of theoretical literature on political parallelism leads to the expectation that left-leaning newspapers would be more likely to report stigmatizing content of right-wing politicians in countries with high parallelism, while right-leaning newspapers would be more likely to report stigmatizing content of left-wing politicians. Conversely, in countries with low degrees of parallelism, the political orientation of newspapers does not matter that much. We therefore expect that:

**Hypothesis 1b:** Compared to countries with low levels of parallelism, in countries with high levels of parallelism left[right]-leaning newspapers are more likely to stigmatize right[left]-wing politicians and right[left]-leaning newspapers are less likely to stigmatize right[left]-wing politicians.
Political History

Whether or not media practitioners deem stigmatization appropriate is not solely influenced by the prevalence of the journalistic standard of neutrality. Even when this standard is widespread in a particular media landscape, it may still be used when politicians clearly display unacceptable behavior. In other words, the standard of neutrality does not apply when politicians fall outside the ‘realm of legitimate controversy’ (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p.218). Against this background, it is important to consider a contextual factor that determines the scope of this realm, namely countries authoritarian past. Scholarship on authoritarian legacies argues that the authoritarian past creates a frame of interpretation (Art, 2005; Bobbio, 1996) based on which citizens judge the legitimacy of a political actor or behavior. One implication is that the behavior of right-wing politicians is more easily associated with authoritarianism in former right-authoritarian countries. Inversely, the behavior of left-wing politicians is more easily viewed as undemocratic in former left-authoritarian countries.

The argument that countries’ authoritarian past influences media coverage is grounded in two strands of literature. First, some studies discussed in the previous section (Gunther et al., 2000; D. C. Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Van Dalen et al., 2012) hint that some relation exists between democratization and the prevailing journalistic reporting style within a country. For instance, Gunther et al. (2000) contend that the late democratization of Spain encouraged the role conception of journalists as advocates of democratic values. This also involved the deliberate discrediting of political actors who were associated with the prior regime or were disloyal to core democratic values. Moving beyond the Spanish case, studies situated in the field of political science provide a more generalizable argument. These studies (de Leeuw et al., 2018; Dinas, 2017; Dinas & Northmore-Ball, 2017) argue that it is not the late democratization per se, but prior experiences with authoritarianism that causes the left or the right to acquire an antidemocratic reputation. Because the label right-wing is associated with the authoritarian past, democratic norm-breaking behavior of right-wing politicians may therefore be more easily deemed as undemocratic in former right-authoritarian countries. The same holds true for left-wing politicians in former left-authoritarian countries.

Following the logic of the Hierarchy of Influences Model, the prominence of these ‘frames of interpretation’ may also influence media content. First, it is plausible that the
authoritarian past helps shape an important extra-media source of influence, namely the public opinion climate. That is, previous experiences with right-authoritarianism create a negative public opinion climate for right-wing politicians. Inversely, in former left-authoritarian countries this public opinion climate is biased against left-wing politicians. Since news media strive to provide coverage that resonates with the broader public (Snow & Benford, 1988), this serves as an additional extra-media pressure to stigmatize politicians that are associated with the authoritarian past. Second, these historic associations also influence the organizational understanding of the ‘realm of legitimate controversy’. In former left(right)-authoritarian countries, statements and behaviors of left(right)-wing politicians are more readily marked as illegitimate, resulting in an inapplicability of the standard of neutrality. This idea is subsequently embedded in media routines, where the journalist’s function as "watchdog of democracy" is heightened. Finally, a history of right-authoritarianism may also foster journalists’ inclination to stigmatize right-wing politicians. A history of left-authoritarianism fosters the stigmatization of left-wing politicians. This is because journalists perceive their role as defenders of democracy and have been socialized in an environment that views the "left" or the "right" as a threat to democracy.

Several noteworthy contributions may help corroborate this argument. First, a few studies demonstrate that previous experiences with authoritarianism causes the label ‘right-wing’ or ‘left-wing’ to acquire an antidemocratic reputation. For instance, Dinas and Northmore-Ball (2017) find that compared to other countries, citizens in former right-authoritarian countries are less willing to identify as ‘right-leaning’. They also find that citizens in former left-authoritarian countries are less willing to identify as ‘left-leaning’. In addition, de Leeuw et al. (2018) show that when citizens do identify with the ideology of the authoritarian predecessor, this is because they are less supportive of democratic government. Within the field of political communication, once again the study of Köcher (1986) provides a useful handle. She finds that journalists in Germany, a former right-authoritarian country, are almost twice more likely to agree that it is their task to oppose an antidemocratic parties than their British counterparts.

Combined there are strong theoretical reasons and some empirical evidence to believe that stigmatization is strongest in countries with prior experiences with right-authoritarianism, or that:
Hypothesis 2a: Stigmatization of right-[left]-wing politicians is more prevalent in countries with prior experiences of right-[left]-authoritarianism than in countries without such a legacy.

If journalists indeed abandon the standard of neutrality when politicians are situated outside "the realm of legitimate controversy", then the authoritarian past may also influence how left-leaning newspapers respond to ‘illegitimate controversy’, compared to their right-wing counterparts. Continuing the argument discussed above, it is plausible that once a particular politician is associated with the authoritarian past, the political leaning of (mainstream) newspapers matter less. This is because both left-leaning and right-leaning papers are equally likely to discredit the authoritarian past. In countries without such a legacy, by contrast, the ideological alignment of newspapers will prevail, with left-leaning papers being more likely to stigmatize right-wing politicians than right-leaning papers and right-leaning papers being more likely to stigmatize left-leaning politicians. Combined we expect that:

Hypothesis 2b: The difference in stigmatization between left-leaning and right-leaning newspapers is less pronounced in countries with a history of left- or right-authoritarianism than in countries with a democratic legacy.

Methods

Data

The purpose of this study is to explain cross-national variation in stigmatizing news content in function of deeply rooted journalistic practices. To this end, we need data that can be compared across various countries. In this study, we address this difficulty by collecting coverage on the same topic in twelve Western countries. In particular retrieved all news articles with Donald Trump as the primary topic. 3 By doing so, we are able to hold the characteristics of the object of coverage constant, thereby eliminating the recurring problem of incomparability.

3 We retrieved all articles mentioning Trump in the title or the United States in the title and Trump in the body of the text.
Two criteria guided the data collection. First, we ensured that our country selection facilitated considerable variation in media systems as well as political history. Second, within each country we collected all available national, quality newspapers. The focus on quality newspapers increases the cross-national comparability, since tabloid newspapers are virtually absent in Southern Europe due to the limited commercialization of news media in these countries. In the selection of countries and newspapers, we were constrained by the online availability of news sources in the news databases Lexis-Nexis Academic and Go Press Academic. This resulted in the collection of 35,485 articles in 35 newspapers in twelve Western countries (see Annex A). The monthly aggregates per country are visualized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Average Monthly Coverage of Trump per Country**

![Graph showing average monthly coverage of Trump per country across different countries.](image)

**Notes:** The vertical lines denote the start of Donald Trump’s campaign on July 16 2016 and his election date on November 8 2016. The monthly aggregates were calculated as the average of the total number of articles about Trump per newspaper.

**Dependent Variables: Stigmatization**

The dependent variable is the presence of stigmatizing terms in an article. Following the distinctions made in the theory section, we distinguish between four types of stigmatization. Antidemocratic stigmatization entails labeling politicians, their behavior or speech as antidemocratic. Historic stigmatization encapsulates comparisons
with or accusations of sympathies for historic examples of authoritarianism and their legacy. Stigmatization is illiberal when it implies that politicians deny the fundamental equality between people. Finally, we include a measure for ‘populist stigmatization’, because this is often used as a "swearword by politicians, journalists, and citizens to compromise parties and politicians by associating them with actors on the fringes of the political spectrum (extremism, radicalism)” (Reinemann et al., 2016). To assess whether these types of stigmatizing content were present or not, we first conducted a systematic automated content analyses. This was then followed by a manual validation process, in which all false positives were recoded.

**Systematic Automated Content Analysis.** The first step in this process consisted of an automated content analysis on the basis of a tailored dictionary of stigmatizing terms. The original dictionary was written in English and translated by native speakers to seven languages (see Annex B). The dictionary departed from a "catch-all" logic, with the purpose of catching all articles that contained some type of stigmatization. This greatly reduces the risk of articles being coded as negative, while they are in fact positive (false negatives). Stigmatization was considered present when the name of Trump co-occurred as one of the words in the dictionary within the same paragraph.

**Manual Validation.** The downside of this catch-all logic is that it increases the chances of articles being coded as positive, while they are negative (false positives). To reduce this risk, in a second step we hired seven graduate students at the *Amsterdam School of Communication Research* (University of Amsterdam). All of these students were native speakers. These students were presented with short text fragments (snippets) of all positively coded articles. To ensure a uniform interpretation, we asked students whether this term could have a stigmatizing impact or not. By doing so, we subverted discussions revolving whether or not stigmatization was the deliberate choice of a journalist, or whether it should or should not be presented as an attribute of Trump. If this was not the case, these so-called ‘false positives’ were recoded as negative.

**Reliability.** In a third step, we tested the reliability of the two-step systematic content analysis. This was done by taking a random sample of 100 English articles. These articles were subsequently coded by two coders as to calculate the inter-coder reliability (ICR) of the content analysis.
Table 2: Country Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Professionalism</th>
<th>Parallelism</th>
<th>Auth. Past</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Independent variables

We studied these variables in function of country’s media and political history. We use the work of Hallin and Mancini to classify countries in accordance with two characteristics of the media system, namely journalistic professionalism and political parallelism. For all countries in our sample we determined whether the level of these two variables was (1) low, (2) medium or (3) a high. To investigate the influence of countries’ political history, we use the typology outlined in de Leeuw et al. (2018), which distinguishes between countries with and without prior experiences with right- or left-authoritarianism. All country-level data is summarized in Table 2. On the level of the news outlet, we are only interested in the political leaning of the outlet. For this reason, newspapers were classified into three categories: (1) left-leaning, (2) centrist and (3) right-leaning. Finally, we control for the year in which an article was published and the length of the publication.

Analysis Strategy

One of the prime methodological challenges in this study is the focus on cross-national differences, with a relatively limited number of countries (N= 12). The standard frequentist approach for multilevel data is to conduct multilevel analyses, which corrects for the underestimation of the standard error by estimating a separate intercept for each country. The problem with this technique is that when the number of countries is
low, estimates of the intercept variance will be biased. Various studies have therefore advocated the use of Bayesian analysis techniques when the number of clusters is low (Baldwin & Fellingham, 2013; Hox et al., 2012; Ferron et al., 2009). These studies show that Bayesian models produce unbiased estimates of intercept variance with as little as three clusters. This technique therefore allows to draw valid inferences, with only a limited number of clusters. Although the interpretation of Bayesian analyses is simple, they depart from a fundamentally different logic and vocabulary than frequentist analysis. Frequentist regression analysis (1) assumes a the predictor parameter $\beta X$ to be a fixed point estimate for the dependent variable $\hat{y}$ and (2) its estimation is only informed by the data:

$$\hat{y} = \hat{\beta} X$$

By contrast, Bayesian models do not assume parameters to be fixed, but assume that parameters are probabilistic in nature. Bayesian analysis techniques therefore do not produce one estimate per parameter, but a series of estimates. Based on these estimations, these techniques construct a so-called posterior distribution, which contains the likelihood that a particular parameter is found. These estimations can therefore be understood as a probability distribution $N$ of an unknown parameter $\beta$, with a measure of variance $\sigma^2$:

$$\hat{y} \sim N(\beta^TX, \sigma^2I)$$

The model is then summarized by, e.g., the mean of the posterior distribution (the average value of the coefficient) and its standard deviation. Core to the interpretation of Bayesian analyses are the confidence intervals. These confidence intervals denote the probability that the parameter will fall between those two values. This ‘credible interval’ tells us whether positive or negative effects are most plausible. This study uses Bayesian logic to evaluate whether the prevalence of stigmatization varies in function of countries’ media and political history. More specifically, address the multilevel structure by estimating a country-clustered Bayesian logistic Regression analysis. In the discussion of the results, we focus on the 95% credible interval, which allows us to asses (1) how probable it is that there are differences in stigmatization between groups and (2) how substantial these differences are.
Results

Mapping Cross-National Differences in Stigmatization

When politicians break democratic norms, or are believed to have done so, they risk being stigmatized in news media. In this section, we evaluate whether and to what degree stigmatization varies between countries. To answer this question, we calculated the amount of stigmatizing coverage as a percentage of the total coverage of Trump within a country. Figure 2 shows the prevalence of stigmatizing news content of Donald Trump within each country. Darker colors denote a higher prevalence and lighter colors a lower prevalence. The color white indicates that data for that country is not available.

Figure 2: Mapping Stigmatization in News Media

Based on this Figure, two conclusions can be drawn. First, stigmatizing news content appears to be relatively prevalent, ranging between 22.37% of total coverage in Ireland to 47.84% in France. In other words, Trump’s ability to spark controversy is clearly not confined to the American context. Second, this Figure reveals substantial differences between countries. These differences seem to follow a geographic divide, with stigmatization being more prevalent in Southern European countries than in their Northern European counterparts. However, this distinction does not capture all

4 All results presented here are solely based on the automated content analysis. The data still needs to be validated and conclusions are therefore preliminary.
variation between countries. For instance, 25.5% of Dutch news coverage contains stigmatizing terms, while in Germany this equals 34.97%. Since both of these countries are in Northern Europe and have democratic corporatist media systems, it is clear that this distinction does not suffice to explain the full extend of cross-national variation. The purpose of the following section is therefore to explain this variation.

Explaining Cross-National Differences in Stigmatization

Stigmatization varies substantially between countries. In this section, we evaluate whether stigmatization varies in accordance with countries’ media history and their political history.

Media History

The first explanation for cross-national differences drew on the notion of ‘media systems’. We argued that in countries where journalism developed high levels of professionalism, stigmatization would be less prevalent than in countries with high levels of professionalism (H1a). Figure 3 shows the average percentage of stigmatizing news

Figure 3: Stigmatization According to Journalistic Professionalism

Notes: The percentages were calculated as the unweighted average of the percentage of stigmatization per country within each group. The vertical whiskers indicate a 95% credible interval around the predicted percentage.
coverage in accordance with countries’ level of journalistic professionalism. The vertical whiskers indicate a 95% credible interval around the predicted percentage. The lower bound indicates the lowest plausible value and the upper bound the highest plausible value. In keeping with Hypothesis 1, stigmatization is systematically lower in countries with high levels of journalistic professionalism. This holds true, regardless of whether it concerns antidemocratic, historic, illiberal or populist stigmatization. This difference ranges between 3.62 percentage points for antidemocratic stigmatization to 19.91 percentage points for illiberal stigmatization.

Although these descriptives provide convincing evidence for our hypotheses, it is possible that other variables may account for these observed differences. For instance, stigmatization may be higher in countries where news articles are longer, leaving more room for stigmatizing content. A similar argument can be made for the year in which it was published: if news media in countries with low levels of professionalism pay more attention to certain controversial behaviors and statements than elsewhere, then it is the year that accounts for the variation and not the level of professionalism. To be sure, we included these two variables and the political leaning of the newspapers as control variables in a clustered logistic regression analysis (Model 1a, Table 3). The negative values of the credible interval of the effect of professionalism, tells us that the chances that stigmatization is higher in countries with low levels of professionalism than elsewhere are over 97.5%. The sole exception to this rule is comparisons with historic authoritarian leaders. In this case, the credible interval of the estimate for high levels of professionalism includes a broad range of positive as well as negative values. This means that we are unsure about whether historic stigmatization in these countries is higher or lower than in countries with low levels of professionalism. 

A second expectation we derived from the literature on media systems, the political leaning of newspapers would matter more in countries where they are more strongly tied to political parties or ideologies than elsewhere. Compared to countries with low levels, we expected that in countries with high levels of party-press parallelism...
stigmatizing content would be more prevalent in left-leaning newspapers and less prevalent in right-leaning newspapers (Hypothesis 1b). We test this by estimating an interaction between the degree of political parallelism and the ideological alignment of the newspaper. We limit our sample to left- and right-leaning newspapers, since centrist newspapers are not present in countries with low levels of parallelism. The results presented in Model 1b (Table 3) provide no evidence for this hypothesis. The positive values of the lower bound of the credible interval suggests that right-leaning newspapers are more likely to produce stigmatizing content in countries with high levels of parallelism, rather than the other way around. This contradicts the expectation formulated in Hypothesis 1b, which is clearly not supported by the data.

Political History

A second explanation for cross-national differences in stigmatization departed from the idea that the behavior and statements of politicians are more easily interpreted as undemocratic if their ideological orientation has a historic reputation of authoritarianism (Hypothesis 2a). Since Trump is a right-wing politician, we therefore expected that stigmatization is higher in countries with historic experiences of right-authoritarianism. Figure 4 shows the percentage of stigmatization in countries with and without a right-authoritarian legacy. In keeping with our expectations, stigmatization is systematically higher in former right-authoritarian countries. This difference ranges between 2.41 percent points for populist stigmatization to 4.90 percent points for historic stigmatization.

To ensure that these differences can indeed be attributed to countries’ political history, we estimated a series of Bayesian clustered logistic regression analyses, which controls for the length of the article, year of publication and the political leaning of the newspaper. The results of these analyses are displayed in Model 2a, Table 3. The analyses provide unequivocal support for Hypothesis 2a. The positive values in the credible intervals for each type of stigmatization confirm that the chances that stigmatization is higher in former authoritarian countries is over 97.5%. This means that even when we take into account article and newspaper characteristics, stigmatization
is still highest in former right-authoritarian countries. In short, the data fully support Hypothesis 2a, namely that stigmatization is higher in former-authoritarian countries.

Finally, we expected that past experiences with authoritarianism would decrease the tendency of newspapers to favor politicians of a similar ideological affiliation. In other words, the difference in stigmatization between left- and right-leaning newspapers would be smaller in former authoritarian countries, because both sides wish to disassociate themselves from anything that could be interpreted as authoritarian (Hypothesis 2b). To test this, we estimated a model with an interaction term between countries’ past experiences with authoritarianism and the political leaning of the newspaper (Table 3, Model 2b). In this model, the main effect of ideology denotes the difference in stigmatization between left-leaning newspapers and center and right-leaning newspapers for countries without an authoritarian legacy. The interaction term, then, shows how much this pattern differs in former authoritarian countries. The analyses provide no support for this hypothesis. For illiberal and populist stigmatization, it is almost equally

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6 To disentangle the effects of authoritarian legacies from that of journalistic professionalism, we also ran models with the level of professionalism as a control variable. These analyses reveal the same systematic patterns, with stigmatization in former right-authoritarian countries being more prevalent than elsewhere.
Table 3: Explaining Stigmatization Using Media and Political History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Antidemocratic</th>
<th>Historic</th>
<th>Illiberal</th>
<th>Populist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model 1a: Media History</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism: Medium</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-0.095 (0.028)</td>
<td>-2.075 (0.311)</td>
<td>-0.879 (0.111)</td>
<td>-0.472 (0.063)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>-0.551 (0.068)</td>
<td>0.684 (0.630)</td>
<td>-1.043 (0.053)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-3.665 (0.153)</td>
<td>-3.222 (0.081)</td>
<td>-3.185 (0.031)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Number of Articles       | 30,751         | 30,751  | 30,751   | 30,751   |

| **Model 1b: Media History** |                |         |          |          |
| Parallelism: Medium       |                |         |          |          |
| 0.573 (0.106)             | 0.276 (0.064)  | 0.246 (0.016) |
| High                     | 0.184 (0.049)  | 0.603 (0.048) |
| Ideology: Right-Leaning   | 0.081 (0.022)  | -0.175 (0.048) |

| Number of Articles       | 26,675         | 26,675  | 26,675   | 26,675   |

| **Model 2a: Political History** |                |         |          |          |
| Legacy: Yes               |                |         |          |          |
| 0.519 (0.066)             | 1.104 (0.137)  | 0.404 (0.020) |
| Intercept                 | -3.158 (0.081) | -4.803 (0.097) |

| Number of Articles       | 32,148         | 32,148  | 32,148   | 32,148   |

| **Model 2b: Political History** |                |         |          |          |
| Legacy: Yes               |                |         |          |          |
| 0.397 (0.0267)            | 0.333 (0.055)  | 0.384 (0.026) |
| Ideology: Right-Leaning   | 0.070 (0.036)  | -0.077 (0.032) |

| Number of Articles       | 26,675         | 26,675  | 26,675   | 26,675   |

Notes: Entries are the result of country-clustered Bayesian logistic regression analyses, with Random-Walk Metropolis-Hastings Sampling. Model is based on 12,500 Markov Chain Monte Carlo iterations and non-informative priors. Models control for year of publication, article length and left-right alignment of the newspaper.
plausible that stigmatization in former authoritarian countries is higher as that it is lower. Even more so, the two remaining variables suggest that the opposite might be true: for antidemocratic and historic stigmatization the difference between left- and right-leaning newspapers appears to be substantially bigger in former authoritarian countries.

**Discussion**

Throughout his term, Donald Trump has faced repeated accusations of sexism, racism and anticonstitutionalism. His reputation is therefore indicative of a growing number of politicians worldwide, who are pushing the envelope of democratic tolerance. When these politicians break fundamental democratic norms, or are believed to have done so, they risk being stigmatized in news media. In the present study, we demonstrated that the chances of experiencing such a ‘media backlash’ (1) varies between countries and (2) depends on countries’ media and political history.

Our study reveals that there is a clear geographic divide in the prevalence of stigmatizing news content. Stigmatization is substantially less common in countries in Northern Europe and Anglo-Saxon countries than in Southern Europe. Moving beyond this descriptive account, our analyses demonstrate that these differences can be attributed to countries’ media and political history. We show that stigmatization is most prevalent in countries with low levels of journalistic professionalism, where the standard of neutrality is not rooted in journalistic practices. However, we find no evidence that the strength of the ties between parties and press matter when it comes to stigmatization in news content. That is, it is unclear whether left-leaning newspapers are more or less likely to produce stigmatizing content when they have strong partisan alignments than when they do not. Inversely, there are some indications that right-wing newspapers are more likely to produce stigmatizing content when they are closely aligned with right-wing parties. The analyses also show that countries’ historic experience with authoritarianism influences stigmatization in news media. Even when taking the degree of professionalism into account, stigmatization is more common in former authoritarian countries than elsewhere. We find no evidence that this common inclination to discredit the authoritarian past reduces the contrast between
left- and right-leaning newspapers. Instead, antidemocratic and historic stigmatization appear to be even more prevalent in right-leaning newspapers in former authoritarian countries than elsewhere. This may be attributed to the fact that right-leaning newspapers with strong right-wing political alignments have a greater interest in discrediting controversial right-wing politicians, as to avoid a possible contagion for the mainstream parties they support.

Although not all our expectations were confirmed, our study plays well to recurring debates in the fields of journalism studies and political science. Within the field of journalism studies, several studies have asked whether and to what degree state-centric conceptualizations of media systems have retained their relevance in today’s context of globalization. These studies argue that state-centric conceptualizations, such as the two deployed in this study, are inappropriate in an age of global communication (Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Steger, 2017). The findings of this study suggests otherwise. In spite of today’s context of globalization, our study clearly demonstrates that the remnants of countries’ media and political history are still visible in contemporary media landscapes. This is in keeping with another strand of research, which argues that traditional classifications of media systems have maintained their relevance (Flew & Waisbord, 2015) and that the prevailing cultural paradigm within a country affects news coverage (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). A second contribution to this field of research is that it meets another recurring criticism of Hallin and Mancini’s conceptualization of media systems, namely their inability to empirically validate their classification (Norris, 2011). The systematic approach of this study meets this criticism. Our focus on the same topic and the same measurement in each country, has enabled us to take an important step toward the validation of a conceptualization that has dominated the field of comparative political communication for over twenty years.

From a political science perspective, our study meets the growing demand to understand cross-national differences in the discursive opportunity structure in which political parties and politicians operate (de Jonge, 2018; Golder, 2016). Our findings suggest that politicians who have or acquire a reputation of being sexist, racist or undemocratic may experience more difficulties in countries with low levels of journalistic professionalism and in former right-authoritarian countries. These observations satisfy the recurring argument in studies about the relation between news media and far-right
parties challenging the rule of law, namely that some media landscapes are more accommodating of these parties than others (de Jonge, 2018; Ellinas, 2010). However, the implications of these findings are not limited to the far-right. They may be extended to all politicians who push the envelope of what is democratically acceptable. This is especially important in times where the legitimacy of mainstream politicians may also be challenged by scandals surrounding sexist or racist behavior.

One limitation of our study is that it is confined to media coverage in twelve Western countries. This means that our findings cannot be generalized to Eastern Europe. This is an important shortcoming, given that East European countries are arguably less resilient to contemporary challenges to democratic order. A possible avenue for future research is therefore to assess how news media in these countries hinder or facilitate undemocratic behavior of politicians in a period of time that they first started gaining electoral ground. A second shortcoming is that we have been unable to assess how specific instances of undemocratic behavior affect news coverage of politicians who have not yet been subject to controversy. While it is plausible that similar mechanisms apply as discussed in this paper, the impact of accusations of sexism, racism or democratic misconduct provoke a stronger negative response than politicians who are notoriously controversial. Ultimately, this requires the study of undemocratic behavior on the part of politicians from whom you would least expect it.

In spite of these shortcomings, our study sheds a new light on how historic contextual factors influence contemporary journalistic practices. In addition, our findings suggest that countries’ media and political history still play an important role in shaping the political opportunities of politicians who are pushing the envelope of democratically acceptable behavior. As such, our study constitutes an important stepping stone to further our understanding of the discursive opportunity structure in which parties operate, in a time that the boundaries of democratic tolerance are often contested by fundamentally undemocratic behavior of democratically elected officials.

References


populist radical right parties: A temporary effect. Electoral Studies, 47, 36–45.
# Appendix

## A Newspaper Selection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Leaning</th>
<th>N</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Die Presse</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Der Standard</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Left</td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Morgen</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Left</td>
<td>818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Standaard</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Post</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>1,852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Globe and Mail</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>2,283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto Star</td>
<td>Canada</td>
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<td>3,002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politiken</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
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<td>1,126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Figaro</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>1,623</td>
</tr>
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<td>L’Humanité</td>
<td>France</td>
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<tr>
<td>Le Monde</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Left</td>
<td>1,687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Parisien</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libération</td>
<td>France</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Die Tageszeitung</td>
<td>Germany</td>
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<td>Die Welt</td>
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<td>Irish Independent</td>
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<td>ABC</td>
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<td>El Mundo</td>
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<td>Tages Anzeiger</td>
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<td>Daily Telegraph</td>
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<td>The Guardian</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Times</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>4,604</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B  Dictionaries

This list only contains the English dictionary. All translations were generated and carefully reviewed by native speakers, before conducting the automated content analysis.

(1) **Antidemocratic Stigmatization**

- absolutis [m/tic]
- antidemocratic
- autarchy
- authoritarian
- autocra [cy/tic]
- decline of democracy
- democratic decline
- democratic deconsolidation
- democratic dismantling
- democratic regression
- democratic threat
- despot [ic/ism]
- dictator [ial/ship]
- dismantling of democracy
- extrem [e/ist]
- extreme right
- fascis [m/t/tic]
- far-right
- fundamentalist
- neofascis [m/t/tic]
- oppressive
- totalistic
- totalitarian [ism]
- tyrann [ical/y]
- undemocratic

(2) **Historic Stigmatization**

- auschwitz
- carmona
- castro
- concentration camp
- cromwell

(3) **Illiberal Stigmatization**

- aggression
- animosity
- anti-constitutional
- anti-foreign [er/ism]
- anti-islam
- anti-jewish
- anti-muslim
- apartheid
- chauvinist
- constitution hostil [e/ility]
- criminal
- bigot [ry]
- antisemiti [c/sm]
- discriminat [e/ion/ory]
- enmity
- felonious
- illegal
- illegitimate
- illicit
intolerant
islamophobia
hostility towards
hate
hatred
homophobia
not legal
outlawed
prejudice
prohibited
prosecutable
unauthorized
unconstitutional
unlawful
racism
segregation
sexism
skinhead
supremacy
social Darwinism
xenophobia

(4) **Populist Stigmatization**

- Alternative für Deutschland
- Dansk Folkeparti
- Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs
- Front National
- Rassemblement National
- Lega Nord
- Movimento Cinque Stelle
- Partij voor de Vrijheid
- Populis
C  List of Languages

- Danish: Denmark
- Dutch: Belgium, Netherlands
- English: Canada, Ireland, United Kingdom
- French: France, Switzerland
- German: Austria, Germany, Switzerland
- Italian: Italy
- Spanish: Spain