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Informing Europe

How news media shape political trust in the European Union

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Discussion

This dissertation investigated how the media and its content can influence political trust in the European Union. The starting point of the dissertation was the triad of drivers of political trust in the EU: cues from national politics, identity considerations, and utilitarian considerations. Most importantly, the dissertation shows that media reporting of the EU, immigration, and the economy, as well as cues from national politics, can impact political trust. However, these effects are often less straight-forward than one would expect based on the existing literature. Instead, multiple moderators and context effects have to be considered.

Chapter 1 shows that coverage of the EU itself can matter for political trust. Changes in the media information environment can dampen or amplify cue-taking from national politics. That means that the correlation between trust in the national government and trust in the EU changes depending on how (much) the EU is covered in the media.

Chapter 2 shows that, when exposed to more economic news, citizens lose confidence in the economy and trust in the EU. Exposure to more negative coverage of the EU economy, however, has a positive effect on trust in the EU, but a negative effect on confidence in the economy. This indicates that some citizens see the EU as a trustworthy actor in times of economic crisis and downturn.

Chapter 3 shows that changes in news coverage of immigration are related to trust in the EU in intricate ways: Only increased coverage of refugees, but not of general immigration, decreases trust in the EU. Furthermore, it does so only for right-wing citizens. Thus, there is no uniform effect of immigration coverage on EU attitudes of citizens – it depends on characteristics of both the content and its recipients.

Chapter 4 shows that citizens rely on cues from national politics, and particularly negative cues, when forming their trust in the EU. It provides novel experimental evidence for the extrapolation mechanism in the formation of EU public opinion. Besides the methodological implications that this chapter has for survey design, it also shows that very rudimentary cues, like simply naming the national government, can influence reported attitudes towards the EU. This could be an indication that media coverage of national politics – especially when it is negative – might also decrease trust in the EU.

These findings raise multiple points of discussion and have several implications for future research. First, the dissertation shows that media information can influence attitudes towards the EU, and that information about more specific policy areas like the economy and immigration matters. The findings imply that we have to consider the kind of information that citizens typically receive from the media. This is particularly crucial when connected to research perspectives on selective exposure and misinformation. Second, the multi-faceted findings of Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate that media effects on political trust in the EU depend on the specific media content as well as recipients' characteristics, suggesting intricate relationships between the news media and public opinion. The results also raise questions on the categorization of antecedents of EU opinions as more or less "rational". Third, the dissertation faces several methodological challenges in measuring media exposure, media content, and their effects. This is a reflection of broader challenges that Communication Science faces as a discipline. These three points – information quality, "rational" and "irrational" antecedents of EU attitudes, and measurement issues – will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

(Dis)-Informing Europe?

The main insight of Chapter 1 is that citizens rely less on cues from national politics and reduce their trust in the EU when there is more negative information about the EU in the media environment, whereas a positive EU information environment increases reliance on positive cues from national politics. In addition, Chapter 3 shows that higher media visibility of the EU and media coverage that is more favorable towards European integration is associated with higher trust in the EU. Generally speaking, these findings are intuitive – negative news leads to more negative evaluations, or in other words, citizens react "correctly" to new information.

From a normative democratic point of view, this is a desirable finding. We know that the media can inform citizens about recent events (Marquart et al., 2019) and that citizens are able to make sophisticated adjustments to their evaluations of institutions, for example when they are connected to political malpractice in the media (van Elsas, Brosius, Marquart, & de Vreese, 2019). Citizens with more political knowledge also rely less on cues from national politics when evaluating the EU (Armingeon & Ceka, 2014; Muñoz, 2017). Hereby, the media fulfils one of its most important roles in a democracy:

informing citizens and holding institutions accountable. These findings, however, also raise questions about the kind of information that citizens receive from the media.

Despite recent increases in EU media coverage (Boomgaarden et al., 2010; Kleinnijenhuis & Van Atteveldt, 2016), visibility of day-to-day EU politics in the media is still limited (van Noije, 2010). In addition, coverage is somewhat selective; for example, it increases when issues are more polarized and when journalists require fewer resources to cover an issue (de Ruiter & Vliegenthart, 2018). Furthermore, similar to most general news coverage (Soroka, 2006; Soroka & McAdams, 2015), EU coverage tends to be rather negative, as evidenced by three separate content analyses in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 as well as by previous research (Cross & Ma, 2015; de Vreese & Azrout, 2019; de Vreese et al., 2006; Peter et al., 2003).

Access to fact-based news, whether negative or positive, is vital for citizens' ability to inform their opinions about political institutions, and ultimately their vote choices. Therefore, negative news does not pose an inherent threat to democracy. However, scholars have also pointed out that fragmented media environments, as well as misinformation and disinformation (or so-called "fake news") could be reason for concern. Citizens can choose from a much broader range of online news sources, which go far beyond the online versions of traditional news outlets. Such alternative outlets are less committed to journalistic integrity and routines, and could consequently contain more false information (Tambuscio, Ruffo, Flammini, & Menczer, 2015; Van Aelst et al., 2017). The European Parliament (2019a) reports that there has been a steep increase in cases of disinformation in Europe between 2018 and 2019. If some citizens exclusively use such alternative sources, and assuming that these sources are predominantly negative towards the EU (see e.g. European Parliament, 2019a), this could foster dissatisfaction and ultimately delegitimize the Union. However, the question of whether disinformation about the EU actually reaches a significant number of citizens, and how vulnerable citizens are to its effects, remains yet unanswered.

Research shows that citizens themselves are concerned about the impact of mis- and disinformation and support policies combatting it. For example, 67% of citizens surveyed in 10 European countries believe that mis- and disinformation threaten democracy, and 59% support government agencies verifying the accuracy of online information (N = 6727, for details see

Goldberg, van Elsas, Marquart, Brosius, de Boer, & de Vreese, 2019). Potential policies could include funding for fact-checkers, which are effective at rebuffing misinformation and improving factual knowledge (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2019; Tambuscio et al., 2015; but see Nyhan & Reifler, 2010), yet do not change political attitudes and vote choices (Nyhan, Porter, Reifler, & Wood, 2017). Ahead of the 2019 Parliamentary Elections, the EU worked with online platforms, such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter, on improving transparency of the sources of political advertisements, as well as on removing "fake accounts" (European Commission, 2019). Any policy put into place by a political institution, however, faces challenges in correctly identifying mis- and disinformation. Most importantly, it cannot be tied to campaigning, as it otherwise risks becoming a propaganda organ. Policy makers must find ways to reliably distinguish between legitimate critical coverage and mis- or disinformation – a delicate task. In the EU context, the multitude of European languages and cultural contexts further complicate the identification of misinformation. Holistic solutions require collaboration between member states. It is important to ensure that citizens all across the EU have access to high-quality fact-based information, so they are adequately equipped to evaluate political institutions and their support and trust in them.

Rational or irrational?

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on media coverage of two major areas of EU policy responsibility: the economy and immigration. These two areas are related to two pillars of EU support, namely utilitarian and identity-based considerations. Chapter 2 focuses on utilitarian considerations, and specifically on how exposure to economic news coverage influences trust in the EU. It shows that exposure to a higher volume of economic news leads to decreases in both economic confidence and trust in the EU. While exposure to negative economic coverage decreases economic confidence, it actually increases trust in the EU. The opposite relationship is true for exposure to positive economic coverage. These nuanced results highlight the complexity of citizens' opinions towards the EU – it is not as simple as one may assume based on the economic voting literature. On one hand, citizens may blame the EU for economic decline, but, on the other hand, they could also see it as a savior in times of crisis (see also Koehler et al., 2019). Chapter 3 focuses on the impact of news coverage of immigration and refugees on trust in the EU. Similar to Chapter 2, one of the most important findings of this chapter is that it is necessary to

consider nuances of media coverage, even for issues that are related to each other. For example, this chapter shows that changes in the media environment regarding general immigration have different effects on trust in the EU than changes in the media environment surrounding refugees.

Chapters 2 and 3 also tie into a broader discussion about the distinction between "rational" and "irrational" considerations preceding EU attitudes. Rational political attitudes are based on knowledge about specific institutions, consistent with one's beliefs, and domain-specific (van Elsas, 2014). Utilitarian considerations are often referred to as "rational" (Hooghe & Marks, 2004; Harteveld et al., 2013) or "hard" (de Vreese et al., 2008), and contrasted with "soft" or affective, less rational concerns about one's (national) identity. Alongside this binary, many conceptualizations include cues from national politics as a third, distinct category. Cues are mostly used in low-information contexts (e.g. Anderson, 1998), which implies that they do not influence EU attitudes in a rational, informed manner. However, one may question to what extent these three categories actually reflect different degrees of rationality, or whether they mainly reflect different topics related to EU support – broadly speaking, immigration, (economic) performance, and national politics. The present dissertation shows that citizens can react to new information about these topics to a certain degree. This calls into question the assumption that considerations of some topics are, per se, more or less rational than others.

First, attitudes towards institutional performance or the economy are not *always* "rational". For example, previous literature shows that economic perceptions can be incorrect, and subjective perceptions of the economy predict trust in the EU (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014; van der Meer & Dekker, 2011), sometimes independent of objective economic developments. And while some citizens may base their economic evaluations on extensive analyses of the global economy, others may base their economic evaluations on group identities, prejudice, affect, or simple cues. In the European context, for example, one could think of the frequent use of stereotypes in the coverage of the Euro crisis (e.g. Capelos & Exadatyklos, 2015).

Second, attitudes towards immigration are not always "affective", but could also have more rational elements. Some citizens may base their (positive or negative) attitudes towards immigration on feelings of identity. Others, however, may base their opinions of immigration on their knowledge about the topic. The findings of the present dissertation show that citizens can, to an

extent, respond to domain-specific media information about immigration. If these considerations were based exclusively on relatively stable questions of identity (see De Vries, 2018), one would not expect new information to change attitudes towards the EU.

Third, considerations about national politics can influence attitudes towards the EU through more elaborate cognitive processes than cue-taking. In some cases, citizens may simply use their opinions of national politics as a proxy for their opinion on the EU (i.e. extrapolation). But in other cases, they might draw more informed comparisons between national and EU level politics, which subsequently influence their evaluations of the EU (see e.g. De Vries, 2018, who refers to this comparison as the EU differential).

In sum, any of these three groups of considerations could, in some cases, be based on informed (hence "rational") evaluations or, in other cases, be influenced by more affective considerations, group-identities, or cues. In other words, considerations of all three categories can vary in their degree of sophistication. Therefore, it may be worth refining the distinction between "soft" and "hard" (de Vreese et al., 2008; Van Klingeren et al., 2013) antecedents of opinions about the EU, by taking into account the degree of sophistication of considerations related to each of the three domains. This refinement could be particularly useful when exploring media effects, given that the degree of sophistication can have important implications for whether and how attitudes can change. Specifically, more sophisticated citizens tend to expose themselves to greater amounts of new information, while less sophisticated citizens are more likely to change their opinions when they do receive new information (Converse, 1962; Zaller 1992; Lachat 2007). However, it remains an open question for future research whether different degrees of sophistication of EU-related attitudes change how new (media) information is processed and how it is translated into political trust.

Measuring up?

In an increasingly fragmented and diverse media landscape, in which citizens can select their news sources more than ever before, it is intuitive that the real-world effects of mass media on public opinion are limited (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Minimal media effects can thus be a substantive finding. Furthermore, the media may have substantial effects in maintaining and

reinforcing ideologies (Slater, 2007, 2015). However, when there are changes in public opinion, small or non-existent media effects, such as the ones found in the present dissertation, also highlight several fundamental methodological issues that communication scholars face.

Measurement errors can occur while quantifying media content itself, both through manual and automated types of content analysis. Manual content analyses, as used in Chapter 3, are prone to reliability issues – coders can understand concepts differently, and subsequently code them discordantly, especially when these concepts are complex (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). Even when inter-coder reliability scores are sufficient and stable, there is always *some* measurement error. Automated methods of content analysis are more reproducible, but have issues of validity (Mahrt & Scharkow, 2013). Bag-of-words approaches, which were used in Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation, are often limited in detecting sophisticated frames and complex ideas. Different approaches can bias results, as was demonstrated by Boukes et al. (2018). Some of these issues can be remedied with manual checks of the performance of the algorithms used (see e.g. Chapter 2). In addition to measurement error, there are issues of data availability. The present dissertation focused mostly on newspaper coverage because other media content, like TV or online news, is often not systematically archived. Focusing on newspapers allowed for a more longitudinal and comparative perspective on changes in media content and public opinion throughout Chapters 1, 2, and 3. It remains an open question whether the inclusion of additional media outlets would change the conclusions drawn from this dissertation. However, a broader selection of media sources could certainly facilitate the exploration of other questions, for example studying the prevalence of mis- and disinformation in EU news coverage.

Errors can also occur when measuring respondents' exposure to the media. In Chapters 1 and 3, it was not possible to use any measures of individual media use, as they were not consistently included in the Eurobarometer or the European Social Survey. When such measures are included, as is the case in the LISS panel used in Chapter 2, they often do not provide details about the use of specific media outlets or the intensity of media exposure. Even in an ideal scenario, with extensive measures of media use on the outlet-level, survey respondents are typically not able to correctly recall their media use (Prior, 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Price & Zaller, 1993), which creates an additional source of measurement error. Scharkow and Bachl (2017) show that the

combination of measurement error in both content analysis data and survey data can lead to small effect estimates in linkage analyses.

This is a challenge for Communication Science at large: Media use and media content measures are flawed, difficult to improve, and hinder the discovery of media effects. All too often, we cannot distinguish between an effect that does not exist and one that cannot be measured. But new methodological developments offer potential remedies. Diary-like high-frequency mobile surveys (Ohme, Albaek, & de Vreese, 2016) improve recall and thereby self-reported measures of media use. Other methods do not rely on self-reports at all: Tracking respondents' media use on their devices allows for more accurate estimates of media use and more fine-grained linkage analyses. This includes TV meters, computer meters, and records of website visits (Araujo, Wonneberger, Neijens, & de Vreese, 2017; Webster, Phalen, & Lichty, 2013). Statistics about online news media consumption can also be provided by online platforms and companies, or by users themselves, in the form "data donations" (Thorson, Cotter, Medeiros, & Pak, 2019). Of course, there are caveats to these methods. It is unclear how much attention respondents pay to the various types of content that is tracked on their devices (de Vreese & Neijens, 2016). Furthermore, these micro-approaches cannot capture all traditional types of media use and incidental exposure, like watching TV news at the airport, walking past a newspaper stand, or reading a news story on a friend's phone. Nevertheless, new approaches can give us more insight into citizens' exposure to political news, especially when combined with established measures of media use and analyses of media content. These developments are important for Communication Science as it is a discipline that has media effects at its core. Future research may be able to shine a light on whether non-existent or minimal media effects on EU public opinion are a substantial finding or a symptom of insufficient methodology.

Conclusion

How do the media shape trust in the European Union? The present dissertation shows that media coverage of the EU itself, the economy, immigration, and cues from national politics all play a role in the formation and dissolution of political trust. Political trust is the consequence of citizens' evaluations of political institutions. In order to understand these evaluations, it is important to consider media content and exposure, as they can complement, explain, and interact with attitudinal antecedents of political trust. These findings tie in with literature on the nature and quality of information that citizens have access to. The dissertation provides a starting point for future research to further disentangle these nuanced relationships. One may speculate that understanding public opinion about the European Union will become more important than ever: The EU is facing unseen levels of contestation by Eurosceptics in the (at the time of writing) ongoing Brexit negotiations. At the same time, European integration continues, and pan-European parties like Volt have gained some limited traction among Europhiles in the most recent Parliamentary Elections of 2019. Driven by young voters (European Parliament, 2019b), the turnout in these elections was the highest it has been in 25 years. Europe becoming a more central issue in political discourse will go hand in hand with increased media coverage, making the media's effects on trust in the European Union all the more important.