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Social Media Help Me Distinguish between Truth and Lies': News Consumption in the Polarised and Low-trust Media Landscape of Greece

Antonis Kalogeropoulos , Lamprini Rori  and Dimitra Dimitrakopoulou 

ABSTRACT

How do citizens in countries with weak institutions and highly disrupted media landscapes navigate news? We examine a typical South European case, Greece, via cross-national data sets. Combining data from a pool of different surveys, we show that in Greece – unlike the other five countries of the sample – social media are more trusted than news media to help individuals navigate their news environment. A thematic analysis of open-ended survey answers indicates that Greek respondents embrace alternative news sources (social media, digital-born outlets) in record-high numbers because of their distrust of traditional news outlets. Taking into account the historic interplay of media and political institutions, we present Greece as a dystopian case for news organisations and the information environment in countries with weak institutions.


KEYWORDS

Mass media; new media; social media; news consumption; alternative news sources; political trust; trust in news; polarised pluralist system; media disruption

Digitisation has introduced ground-shifting changes across many aspects of contemporary life. Its participatory potential suggests that the world is being reorganised. Diffusion of new communication technologies has induced structural changes across the entire media ecosystem and its core actors. Recent reports (Newman et al. 2019; Pew Research Centre 2017) show that news consumption is gradually but steadily shifting away from broadcasting and print media to digital sources and social networking sites. On top of the widely documented crisis of the press (Siles & Boczkowski 2012), the dominance of TV as a news source has started to fade, particularly among the young (Nielsen & Sambrook 2016). This article examines attitudes towards news and digital news consumption patterns by focusing on Greece, a case of particular significance for the reasons outlined below.

As a typical country of the European South, Greece carries a tradition of a powerful state and a weak civil society (Sotiropoulos 2004; Jones et al. 2008), which throughout political polarisation and tension in the 20th century (Andreadis & Stavrakakis 2019) has developed a media system marked by evolving antagonisms in the nexus between media and politics (Hallin & Mancini

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2004, 2010; Papathanassopoulos 2013; Hallin & Mancini 2017). As the eurozone country most severely hit by the financial crisis, Greece implemented austerity measures for almost a decade after 2010, and consequently experienced emblematic societal radicalisation, immense polarisation, and electoral volatility (Dinas & Rori 2013; Teperoglou & Tsatsanis 2014; Rori 2016). Subsequent plummeting trust in institutions (Theocharis & van Deth 2015; Ervasti, Kouvo & Venetoklis 2019), tectonic changes in politics and society and institutional grievances drove voters to extreme and extremist choices (Lamprianou & Ellinas 2017).

In the media field, a large decline in advertising revenues and a weak propensity to pay for news resulted in the closing down of numerous conglomerates and individual outlets (Basille & Kourounis 2011). These developments have accelerated the effects of the global media business crisis, turning Greece into a critical case study. How do public perceptions affect news consumption habits in a country where relations between media and politics have been highly interwoven and which is experiencing significant economic, political, and societal upheavals? In this context, we ask two specific research questions about the attitudes of Greeks towards the news media and the adoption of alternative sources for news provision like social media.

At the intersection of institutional and behavioural approaches, this paper sheds light on both supply and demand for news consumption, by offering a path-dependent account which assesses the significance of past configurations in the nexus between media and politics and contingent dynamics related to the financial crisis. This paper contributes to the academic literature with new findings and data on news consumption and its relationship to trust in news, by taking into consideration the weight of systemic and institutional parameters in the *longue durée*.

In the first part of the article, we review the literature on the recent changes in news consumption worldwide, with a particular focus on the rise of digital technologies and social media. We then review trends in attitudes towards the news and their relationship with alternative news use across different countries. We then situate our case by exploring the historic context of the interplay between politics and media in Greece and close our theoretical discussion by developing our research questions. We proceed to present the data, the method, as well as the indicators used. This is followed by our results and a concluding discussion on the consequences of digitisation of news consumption for the Greek political and media system.

News consumption and trust in news

News consumption is central to political life. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) argue that news use is the currency of politics. It helps citizens hold politicians accountable and it influences the salience of issues that citizens think about (McCombs 2018), even in the current high-choice political information environment (e.g. Harder, Sevenans & Van Aelst 2017; Strömbäck & Kioussis 2010).

Information habits and preferences are associated with trust in institutions. The vast literature on political trust shows a strong link between the lack of trust and the lack of quality of democracy, across different eras and countries (Almond & Verba 1963; Crozier, Huntington & Watanuki 1975; Mishler & Rose 1997). The erosion of institutional trust is not a new trend (Citrin & Luks 2001). Its interpretation has ranged across reflections of democratic malaise (Norris 2011), a different style of politics supported by critical citizens (Dalton 2004) and systemic change within representative democracy (Klingemann & Fuchs 1998). However, its consequences have not been researched thoroughly (van der Meer 2017), especially with respect to more specific aspects of citizens' behaviour and habits.

In this study, we aim to offer a synthesised interpretation of the disruption in news media consumption habits. In the following sections, we develop relevant arguments concerning the dynamics created by structural (supply) and individual (trust) factors affecting news consumption in developed societies.

The disruption of the news consumption environment

While the contemporary media environment offers an overwhelming number of choices, the growth in digital media has resulted in deep audience fragmentation. We understand media convergence not just as a 'top-down corporate-driven' but also as a 'bottom-up consumer-driven' process (Jenkins 2009). The distribution, reception, and regulation of media have been realigned into a system that is simultaneously decentralised, global, interactive, and multi-media in character, deploying new workflow paradigms, production practices and social relations, while offering new products, services, consumption and transaction patterns for an evolving virtual community (Starkey et al. 2014).

First, news consumers have moved away from print newspapers, and this change is not only related to the prominence of digital technologies. Declining trends in newspaper circulation have been observed in every OECD country (OECD 2010). During the past years, while TV outweighed online news sources as the main source of news for citizens in countries from all media systems (Papathanassopoulos et al. 2013), the dominance of TV over online news sources is nonetheless less pronounced, mainly because younger audiences are largely getting their news from digital devices (Newman et al. 2019). Whereas it could be argued that young people may become more habitual TV watchers when they grow older, 'people's lifelong media habits also tend to reflect the media environment they have grown up in' (Nielsen & Sambrook 2016, p. 10).

While audiences are moving away from print and TV, online news is also changing. At first, online audiences visited the websites of legacy print and TV news organisations. This change did not come without a cost for publishers: the revenues from digital advertising do not make up for the revenues lost from

print and TV advertising (Pew Research Center 2017). Over the past few years, however, we have seen a second wave of disruption. More than half of news users say that their main way to access news is via third-party platforms like social media and search engines, while in some countries, digital-born news brands, like *Yahoo! News* and *The Huffington Post*, are very prominent (Newman et al. 2019). Migration towards distributed and alternative news sources is correlated with lower levels of trust in news (Fletcher & Park 2017), with this shift to distributed pathways news resulting in a weaker direct relationship between readers and publishers (Newman et al. 2019).

Trust in news media

Trust in the media influences how people select, access, and consume news. High levels of trust have been linked to a preference for traditional news sources (Tsfati & Cappella 2003). In a contemporary socio-political environment in flux, the news media have been experiencing decreasing levels of trust for over two decades, generating calls for a reinvention of professional journalism. Low trust in the core institutions of our modern democracies can be regarded along three dimensions: reliability, credibility, and responsiveness (Brants 2013).

Apart from the challenges posed to the media and the news industry itself, the decline of trust in the institutions on which our societies are founded, raises major concerns about their overall social cohesion (Brants 2013; Usher 2017). Trust entitles the news media to set the public agenda (Wanta & Hu 1994), influences media effects (Tsfati & Cappella 2003), and is ultimately the component that ties journalists and the public together (Gaziano 1988). The association between media trust and media consumption patterns has been widely researched (Kiousis 2001; Tsfati & Cappella 2003; Van Aelst et al. 2017; Elvestad, Phillips & Feuerstein 2018; Fletcher & Park 2017), with low levels of trust in news being linked with alternative or non-mainstream news consumption (Tsfati & Ariely 2014). Thus, low trust in professional journalism threatens the economic and existential values for legacy media organisations (Picard 2014), while the news industry is facing a severe crisis (Siles & Boczkowski 2012).

As a result of mistrust in professional journalism and legacy media, the public turns to online news and social media content and gives prominence to digital sources. The advent of digital interactive technologies has reinforced structural changes in professional journalism, thus altering the trustee model which was distinguished by a cultural-pedagogic logic of 'what the public needs to know' (Schudson 1999) to what the public can actively 'produce' (Bruns 2008). A cross-national survey found that, in spite of the wide variations in trust in mainstream media across the 38 countries studied, media mistrust is a key factor behind active news avoidance (Toff & Kalogeropoulos 2020). At the same time, recent findings suggest that relying on social media for news use correlates with lower levels of trust in news (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019; Fletcher & Park 2017). While

the correlation between the two should not be interpreted as direct causation, research establishes that people who demonstrate low trust in the news media will prefer to consume news from sources that promote alternative views and are often critical of professional media practices and institutions (Tsfati & Cappella 2003). A more recent study confirms that people with low trust in the news are more likely to say that their main source of news is either social media, blogs, or news outlets that do not have either a print or broadcast counterpart (Fletcher & Park 2017). Interestingly enough, the lack of trust in the press is deeply associated with the decline of trust in political institutions, especially in politically polarised societies (Hanitzsch, van Dalen & Steindl 2018). Hanitzsch, van Dalen and Steindl (2018) frame this link as ‘the trust nexus’, highlighting that the erosion of trust in the media is essentially tied to ailing trust in political institutions. In what follows, our case study of Greece unfolds how the weak bond between citizens and their state has resulted in a full disruption of their levels of trust.

Greece: news media in a polarised environment

Most research on news consumption and trust in news has been conducted in affluent Western democracies. In this study, we focus on Greece, a country marked by deep and enduring distrust in institutions, with a persevering crisis in the economy, society, media, and politics, which affected news media preferences. By tracing the historical trajectory of intertwined interests between media and politics, we offer a path-dependent account of the current news media landscape as a model outcome of collapsing news media consumption and withering trust in polarised environments.

The Greek media landscape has diachronically been defined by the leading role of an interventionist state, clientelistic relations and lack of clarity or regulation in the legal framework (Papathanassopoulos 2013, pp. 237–238). Throughout the twentieth century, the Greek press became a privileged terrain of political antagonism, with high levels of political parallelism when compared to many other countries since newspapers were strongly linked to political parties in power and in opposition (Hallin & Mancini 2004). In the aftermath of the democratic transition of 1974, the renovation of the political and social scenes brought a flourishing of democracy, the emergence of new political parties, a strong politicisation of public issues, as well as a new political generation, free from the conflicts and polarisations of the past (Voulgaris 2001). Even though the left was the only political power with an official partisan press in the Third Greek Republic (i.e. in the post-1974 period), newspapers remained highly partisan, identified with specific political traditions. In the late 1970s, while radio and television were no longer subject to the harsh control imposed by the military dictatorship of 1967–74, they remained a state monopoly and continued to serve the centre-right party then in power, ND (Νέα Δημοκρατία –

New Democracy), promoting its points of view and aspiring to gain public support. This practice of appropriation of state radio and television by the party in government for the purposes of political propaganda continued even after the electoral victory of the socialist party (PASOK) in 1981 (Papathanassopoulos 1997, p. 354). Thus, state paternalism and propaganda went hand-in-hand, favouring the interests of the party in power (Papathanassopoulos 1997).

The deregulation of the broadcasting landscape after 1989–1990 transformed the configuration of relations between the political class and media entrepreneurs and the balance between them (Rori 2015a, p. 204). Existing media owners expanded their enterprises in the sector and businesspeople bought media organisations to gain leverage *vis-à-vis* the government and, thus, to increase their activities in state-funded projects (Rori 2015a, p. 208). The equilibrium in the relationship between political and media entrepreneurs has progressively shifted in favour of the latter. To hinder the additional empowerment of the media *vis-à-vis* the political class, governments invested in state advertising and subsidies (Leandros 2000, p. 228; Papathanassopoulos 2001, p. 113), their latent goal being to provide an indirect reward for positive coverage and to ease critiques of complaint media by paying for state advertisements in their outlets. The interdependence between the political and the media worlds became even more complicated, while the mediatisation of political life was gaining ground. Hence, after an era in which the media were serving political antagonisms, in the 1990s and the 2000s political actors aligned with or even satisfied the entrepreneurial interests of media owners, who exchanged their services for news coverage favourable to the politicians (Rori 2015a).

Among the consequences of the country's economic model and the politics-media nexus was the disproportionate size of the media sector in comparison to the market. The supply of news provision exploded.¹ Despite declining profits, the political leverage of the press has maintained its size, with press subsidies serving 'as state instruments of appeasement and silencing' (Papathanassopoulos 2013, p. 238).

Greek news media during the economic crisis

The outbreak of the Greek sovereign debt crisis in 2009 revealed the weaknesses and practices of a truncated media market. The imperative for fiscal consolidation deprived governments of the opportunity to continue indirect subsidies to the media through advertising, bank loans to media outlets, and through doing business with public contractors, many of whom were also media entrepreneurs. This disruption jeopardised media companies and upset the balance of power between media and political entrepreneurs. Throughout the crisis, the abrupt and frequent change of political line of daily newspapers and newscasts

on key issues of the political agenda – such as positioning *vis-à-vis* the international bailouts or the country's eurozone membership – in reality reflected latent negotiations with governments over re-financing media loans (Rori 2015a).

On an aggregate level, the media sector suffered major losses in a number of different fields. Undercapitalised and artificially supported press and television groups crumbled or disappeared completely, as advertising expenditure, readership and sales shrank, and the financial capacity of media entrepreneurs weakened.² Unemployment among journalists and the number of media outlets which ceased functioning increased throughout the crisis.³ Media outlets massively reduced expenditures on wages and production, with precarious, freelance contracts and long delays in payments becoming common practice. This artificial resilience of the media has had alarming effects on the quality of journalism, as professionals lack the means and incentives to cross-check their sources and deliver properly, while precarity renders them more vulnerable to top-down influences. What is more, despite the unfavourable climate for investment or borrowing, old media outlets changed hands and new ones entered the sector,⁴ testifying that the significance of the media as an actor persists, dissociated from its profit and other financial characteristics of the media market.

Beyond its financial implications, the ongoing crisis in Greece has left its blueprint on the power structure between the media and political class. The new political division reshaping electoral competition and cutting across electorate and political elites – in favour or against the international bailout agreements and austerity – polarised society and politics into two distinct camps and after the double election of 2012 drastically altered the composition of parliament, increasing the overall fragmentation of the party system (Dinas & Rori 2013; Teperoglou & Tsatsanis 2014). Erstwhile marginal or irrelevant political parties of the radical left and extremist right multiplied their electoral strength, while new and splinter parties appeared (Teperoglou & Tsatsanis 2014). The large reservoir of anti-austerity protest (Karyotis & Rüdiger 2018) culminated in political violence stemming from both the radical right and the radical left, which in the post-2008 period reached unprecedented levels (Georgiadou & Rori 2019; Sotiropoulos 2018). Populism has spread widely in Greek society, with 71 per cent holding populist attitudes, the third highest proportion in Europe after Croatia and Portugal (Newman et al. 2019). The enduring radicalisation of Greek society and anti-austerity demand brought to power a unique and paradoxical coalition of the populists of both the radical left SYRIZA (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς – Coalition of the Radical Left) and the radical right ANEL (Ανεξάρτητοι Έλληνες – Independent Greeks) in 2015 (Rori 2016).

Polarisation in the public sphere was reproduced in the media, which was also often the target of the poisonous rhetoric employed. Constant opposition to the traditional media conglomerates, media owners and journalists – identified by politicians of the protest parties as 'spokespersons of the regime' or

'media strongmen' – unified the anti-bailout forces, encouraged conspiracy views in the public sphere and highlighted the already low levels of trust *vis-à-vis* mass media. The 2015 referendum on the extension of the bailout agreement, framed as an action of protest by the 'No' camp and as a potentially nationally disastrous decision by the 'Yes' camp (Manavopoulos & Triga 2017) further intensified tensions regarding the news media, as the government accused the mainstream media of backing the pro-bailout camp and leading a biased information campaign on the matter (Rori 2015b).

During the economic crisis, the relationship between media and politics was further marked by two events. The first occurred in 2013 under the pro-bailout government led by ND. Driven by the need to meet its international bailout commitment to dismiss 2,000 public sector employees, the government proceeded to a rather authoritarian move of abolishing overnight the public service broadcaster, ERT (Ελληνική Ραδιοφωνία Τηλεόραση – Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation). In the context of increasing polarisation and violent protest, this decision exacerbated social tension and political instability. The succeeding anti-bailout governments of SYRIZA and ANEL returned the public broadcaster to the *status quo ante*, re-hiring the redundant personnel and most employees amidst accusations of clientelism.

The second major event was the attempt by the SYRIZA-ANEL government to regulate the TV licencing landscape. Taking advantage of citizens' negative emotions towards the media, the government by-passed the constitutional prerogatives of the independent broadcasting authority, ESR (Εθνικό Συμβούλιο Ραδιοτηλεόρασης – Greek National Council for Radio and Television) and transferred its powers to a government ministry (the Ministry for the State), which prepared a bill which was voted through parliament in October 2016. Aiming to intimidate old media owners and to allow new players to enter the market, the law limited the number of licences for national private television channels to four – half the number of private channels existing at the time – and anticipated the closure of unlicensed outlets within five days of the conclusion of the licencing bid. In September 2016, with a decision by the supreme administrative court regarding the constitutionality of the reform still pending, the licences were sold through a controversial procedure resembling an auction. The reform was eventually declared unconstitutional, the licences which had been issued were cancelled and reallocated by the ESR, resulting in six media groups being licensed.⁵ While the miscarried reform failed to inaugurate a new balance of power in the relations between media and politics, the power game instituted around it and the overall populist accusations aggravated a generalised sense of non-transparent power-driven relations between media and politics.

Surveying the conditions which configured the relationship between media and politics in the Third Greek Republic indicates chronic partisan favouritism in the media, the use of media outlets as instruments of entrepreneurs in their bargaining with the political class and the misuse of state resources to secure

positive governmental media coverage by the parties in power. The financial crisis exacerbated these chronic biases and led to a deterioration in the employment conditions of journalists, whereas the need for financial consolidation deprived governmental actors of the opportunity to ease media criticism via state advertising. In the context of polarisation, populism and misinformation triumphed. Inasmuch as an impression prevailed of an imbalance in the number of mainstream media supporting the two polarised camps, a reverse imbalance set the tone for online and social media. This raises the question of how this social, political, and economic context affects popular perceptions and hence preferences for media in Greece.

Research design and methodology

Drawing from the recent developments in changing media news consumption and the established relationship between alternative news consumption and low levels of news media trust, our research questions are driven by the aim to interpret disruption in news media habits:

RQ1: In a polarised, pluralist and crisis-ridden media market, how do Greeks navigate the news?

RQ2: How do attitudes towards mainstream news media in Greece affect perceptions of alternative news use?

To address our research questions, we employ a mixed-methods approach combining findings from a number of quantitative surveys, with qualitative assessments of open-ended answers from one of those surveys. The primary data stem from our 2017 and 2019 Reuters Institute Digital News Reports, conducted by YouGov (Newman et al. 2017, 2019) and in which the first author of the current article participated. We use data from our 2019 report for the most recent findings on digital news consumption and trust in news. We also use data from the 2017 report for additional questions on trust and for open-ended questions that were only asked in that annual edition.

In each country, approximately 2,000 respondents from an online panel composed a representative sample of the online national population, weighted for variables such as age, gender and region. Common cross-country and cross-time (January/February 2017 and 2019) questions on trust in news form a consistent pool of data permitting comparative analysis and generalisation. The survey samples, the questions asked, the demographic profile of the Greek sample, as well as the rates of internet penetration per country can be found in the Appendix, available online at [<https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2021.1980941>]. An average share of users of three per cent per country who claimed

not to have used news during the month leading up to the survey were filtered out, since the main purpose of the survey was to identify patterns of online news use.

The Digital News Report surveys contain a series of questions about news use and attitudes towards news, asked at the same points in time across different countries. However, given that the Digital News Report surveys are web-based, the quantitative findings regarding attitudes towards news have been corroborated with survey findings from the Eurobarometer (2017 & 2019) and the Pew Research Center (2018). Both comparative surveys are nationally representative and based on face-to-face and telephone interviews, thus they naturally include offline segments of the population.

Country selection

To contextualise our quantitative findings for Greece, we compare them with those from five other cases. All six countries are high-income stable Western democracies with relatively high levels of Internet penetration compared to the global average. However, the countries belong to different media systems. According to the models developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), Greece and Spain belong to the *Polarised Pluralist* system, historically associated with high political parallelism, a weak press market and low journalistic professionalism. The high levels of clientelism in these countries, combined with low levels of journalistic autonomy and the lack of common ethical principles (Hallin & Mancini 2004, 2010; Brüggemann et al. 2014; Hallin & Mancini 2017) could be expected to mean that trust in media is lower and citizens in these countries would seek digital alternatives to legacy outlets.

Germany and Denmark are part of the Democratic Corporatist model, associated with high levels of newspaper circulation, a strong and independent public service broadcaster, strong state intervention in the form of state subsidies and high levels of journalistic professionalism (Hallin & Mancini 2004). Compared to the Polarised Pluralist model, countries belonging to the Democratic Corporatist model could be expected to present higher levels of trust in news and lower propensity to seek alternative news sources online. The US and the UK form the Liberal model, marked by strong private news media, without strong state intervention, and with high levels of journalistic professionalism (Hallin & Mancini 2004). Nonetheless, the UK has elements associated with the Democratic Corporatist model, particularly when it comes to the strong role of the public service broadcasters in the media system (Brüggemann et al. 2014). In addition, there are indications that the US has recently moved towards a polarised model when it comes to the increasing role of the state, and the politicisation of news content and of fragmented markets, as well as changing professional norms, among others (Nechushtai 2018).

Trust and alternative news use – Greece as an outlier

We start our analysis by comparing the answers of Greek respondents regarding their attitudes towards the news media to the answers of respondents from other countries. Greece is an outlier in all measures presented here (Figure 1). Only about one in four Greeks (27 per cent) tends to trust news most of the time according to Digital News Report data from 2019. Meanwhile, only six per cent of Greeks perceive their media to be free from undue influences, whether political or business (data from the Digital News Report 2017, the last time these questions were asked). Across all three questions, the polarised, pluralist Spain and the US – which, as mentioned above, is a liberal country that has moved towards the polarised pluralist model – register the lowest levels of trust in news after Greece, while the highest levels are seen in the Democratic Corporatists, Germany and Denmark.

When looking at survey questions on attitudes towards news from the Pew Research Center (2018) and the Eurobarometer (2019), we find similar patterns. Only about a fifth of Greeks agree that the news media does a good job of reporting news accurately (22 per cent) and a fairly good job (18 per cent), a far cry from the respondents from the other countries. Similarly, when looking at recent Eurobarometer data, we find that Greece, with only 20 per cent tending to trust the news, lags behind the other countries with the exception of the UK (21 per cent).

Greece also displays high rates of alternative digital news consumption (Figure 2). In a given week, Greek online news users are much more likely than respondents from other countries to use a digital-born news outlet (54 per cent), to use social media or blogs for news (78 per cent), and to use these sources as their *main* source of news (47 per cent). Again, Spain and the US follow Greece in terms of high rates of alternative digital news consumption, while Germany, the UK and Denmark lag behind. Indicatively, the largest online news outlet in Greece is digital-born (newsbomb.gr with 34 per cent weekly reach according to Newman et al. 2019) and frequently engages in misinformation and sensationalism,⁶ while the most used online news outlets include feisty anonymous blogs that propagate conspiracy theories about chemtrails or vaccines.⁷

Furthermore, as seen in Figure 3, Greek respondents score significantly lower than all other countries in stating that news media help them distinguish fact from fiction (19 per cent), whereas more valued the role of social media on the matter (28 per cent). Again, while only a minority of Greeks trusts the news media, it is the only country with higher trust in social networks than in media. Spanish respondents, while showing higher levels of trust in the news media to help them separate fact from fiction, are even more likely than Greeks to trust social media, a finding that highlights the similarities in digital news use between countries in the European South belonging to the polarised pluralist model.

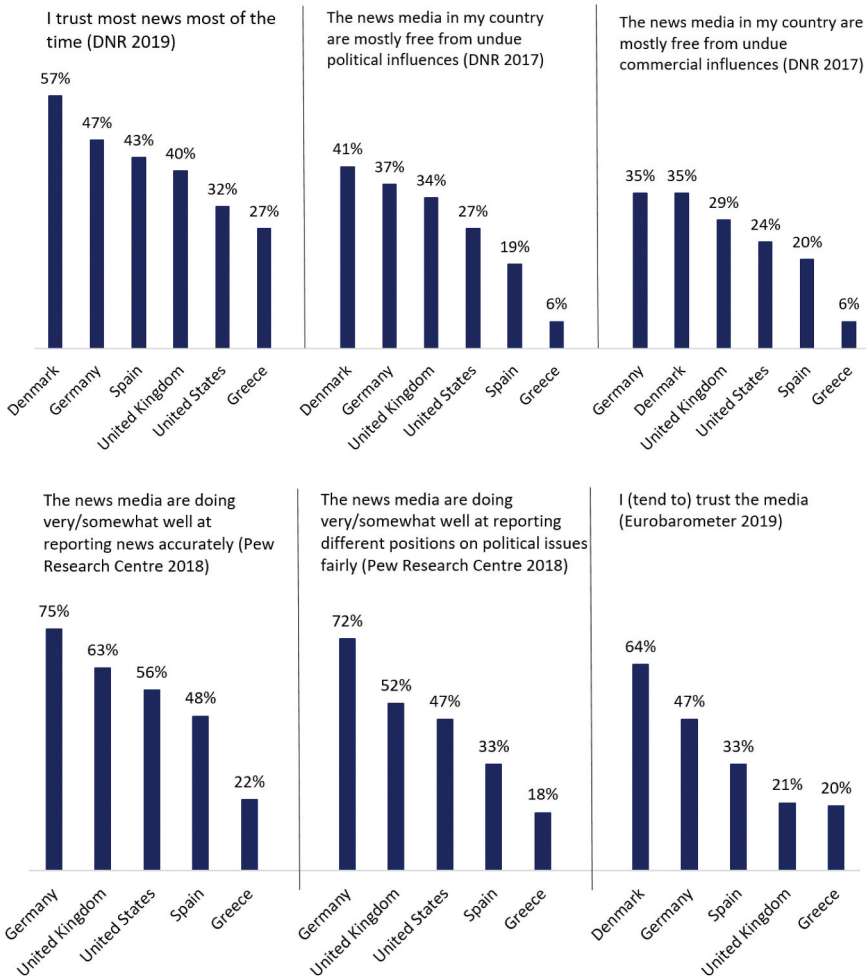


Figure 1. Attitudes towards news media: Greece in comparative context.

Source: (Newman et al. 2017, 2019; Standard Eurobarometer 91 (2019); Pew Research Centre (2018)).

Notes: (1) The figure shows the proportion of respondents that tends to agree/strongly agrees with the statements. (2) Denmark was not included in the Pew Research Centre sample and the US was not included in the Eurobarometer sample. (3) The share of Greek respondents that trusts the news media is significantly lower than in the other countries (difference from the US: $z = -3.19$, $p < .01$). The share of Greek respondents who agree that the news media is free from undue political and commercial influences is significantly lower than in the other countries (differences from Spain: $z = -2.6$, $p < .001$ and $z = -2.74$, $p < .001$, respectively).

Similar patterns appear when we look at Eurobarometer findings from 2017. Even though the questions asked were different when compared to the Digital News Report, a similar share (20 per cent) of Greeks indicated that they tend to trust the news media, whereas 27 per cent said they trusted online social networks, the highest among the six countries we examined. The Eurobarometer findings are useful, given that they capture both the online

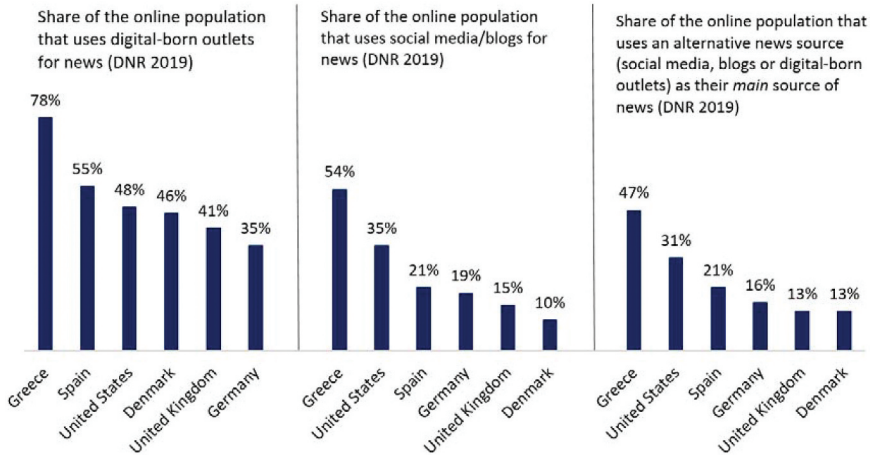


Figure 2. Alternative news consumption patterns: Greece in comparative context.

Source: (Newman et al. 2019).

Notes: (1) The share of Greek respondents that uses a digital-born outlet for news is significantly higher than in the other countries (difference from the US, $z = 11.8$, $p < .001$). (2) The share of Greek respondents that uses social media for news is also significantly higher than in the other countries (difference from Spain, $z = 8.14$, $p < .001$). (3) The share of Greek respondents that uses social media/blogs or digital-born outlets for news is significantly higher than in the other countries (difference from the US, $z = 3.03$, $p < .01$).

and the offline segments of the population. Despite the fact that Greece has lower levels of internet penetration (and as a result, lower levels of social media news users), the share of respondents who trust social networks is higher than in the other countries of the sample.

These findings illustrate that Greece is an outlier in terms of attitudes towards news and exceptional with respect to digital news consumption. To understand these dynamics, we will now delve into open-ended answers given by Greek respondents to the 2017 Digital News Report, who declared that they do not trust traditional media to help them separate fact from fiction and those who answered that they do trust social media to help them do so.⁸

Investigating mistrust in news media and trust in social media

Why don't Greeks trust traditional news media?

Respondents who do not trust the news media tended to be cynical when describing the reasons behind their scepticism. As seen in Table 1, the main theme emerging from the responses of those mistrustful of news, is a perception that the news media is biased, which is majoritarian among the responses (56 per cent of open-ended responses). Within this share, 11 per cent referred to political bias and 10 per cent discussed business or commercial bias. High levels of certainty over corruption go hand-in-hand with perceptions of the

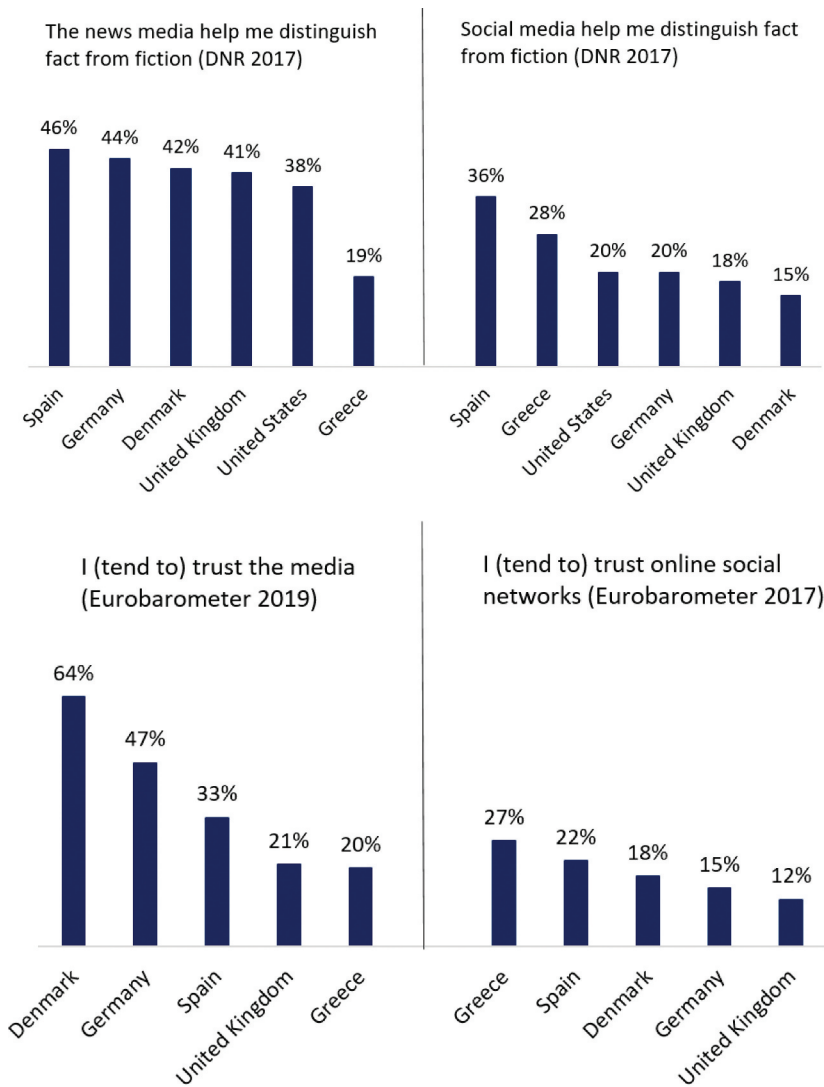


Figure 3. Attitudes towards news media and social media: Greece in comparative context. Source: (Newman et al. 2017; Eurobarometer 2017, 2019).

Notes: (1) The figure shows the proportion of respondents that tends to agree/strongly agrees with the statements. (2) The US is not included in the Eurobarometer study. (3) In Greece, the share of respondents that agree with the statement that the news media helps them distinguish fact from fiction is significantly lower than in the United States ($z = -3.19$, $p < .01$). (4) In Greece, the share of respondents that agree with the statement that social media helps them distinguish fact from fiction is significantly higher than in all countries (difference from the US ($z = 5.1$, $p < .001$), apart from Spain).

underlying process: *'There are strong political and financial interests behind the way news is broadcast. Journalists are paid large sums of money to manipulate reality'*.

Table 1. Reasons why Greek respondents do not trust news media and trust social media for news.

REASONS FOR NOT TRUSTING NEWS MEDIA		REASONS FOR TRUSTING SOCIAL MEDIA	
REASONS	FREQUENCY OF RESPONSES (%)	REASONS	FREQUENCY OF RESPONSES (%)
Bias (Political bias)	56	Broad range of political views	33
(Commercial bias)	-11	Authentic and independent political views	23
Circular Responses ('I just don't trust them')	-10	Other/Not intelligible/DK	23
Poor quality journalism	21	Circular Responses ('I like social media')	11
Other/Not intelligible	13	Self-correcting nature of these networks	10
N = 350	10	N = 221	

Source: (Newman et al. 2017)

Beyond the way in which news is reported, many respondents also believe that the news selection process is driven by political and financial interests: 'most of the news outlets are being used by political and financial centres, they serve their interests'; 'The news media serve interests that go against my interests' and 'The news media always engage in intentional misinformation by choosing what to report in order to manipulate the audience towards their interests'. Some respondents had elaborate comments about the mechanisms that the news media use to manipulate the public opinion: 'I believe that they control everything in order to shape our opinions. At other times, they tend to uplift or depress our mood so that we can be ready for whatever they want to serve us' or 'The news media are very sensationalist in their coverage of events. They impose strong emotions that do not allow us to separate what is rational from irrational, what is true from what is not'.

No respondent named a specific political or business actor as being identified behind the perceived corruption in the media, even though some responses referred to a combination of both political and ownership interests: 'Most news outlets are dependent on the political interests of their owners'. Except for a couple of respondents who recognised specific mistrusted outlets or left- or right-wing bias, the majority identified the traditional media as a collective entity. Almost all other responses referred to 'the media' or 'the journalists' in an undifferentiated way. Much of the blame was attributed to TV, with the news media being commonly referred to as 'broadcasts'. References to TV reflect its perceived dominance vis-à-vis digital news and the debate around the 2016 TV licencing initiative.

In these responses, conspiratorial reasoning about the relationship between politics, business and media was not associated with a specific ideology. No respondent mentioned a left- or right-wing bias or that a particular news outlet was close to a specific political party. This might indicate that in Greece,

attitudes towards the media are not interlinked with a specific partisanship, as is the case in the US. In Greece, cynicism about the media may cut across political lines, regardless of how polarisation is configured.

A second, but less prominent, theme focused on the perceived lack of quality in Greek journalism, prominent in about 13 per cent of the open-ended responses. The main concerns related to the perceptions of news as confusing and sensationalist: *'The news media exaggerate about events, often using an emotional tone that does not allow me to find the truth'*; or, *'The news is reported in such a confusing way that you struggle to find out what happened'*. The commercial bias manifested as 'clickbait' was also mentioned: *'I often see shiny titles but, when I read the article itself, I realise that they had chosen misleading words in the title'*. Again, many respondents mentioned opinionated news on TV as a reason for not trusting news: *'The debates descend into arguments. We have stopped watching TV news because it is in such bad taste'*.

Emotional tone figures as a common denominator to most responses. The most frequently expressed emotions are disappointment, indignation, or anger. Sometimes this even led to the use of profanity or extreme forms of expression, such as: *'The media are legal crooks. The journalists and the politicians have destroyed our beautiful country and are the worst pigs in our society. They make me want to vomit'*. Another respondent stated that *'in Greece the news media is a fraud!'*.

Reasons for trust in social media for news

Open-ended responses regarding trust in social media for news reveal a series of thematic patterns. The first is associated with a plural supply, indicating features and qualities of social media, such as a wide variety of sources, opinions, and views. A third (33 per cent) of responses revolved around this theme: *'I trust them because of the plurality of opinions deriving from different political and social groups'*; *'I can find different views and opinions, usually evidence-based, and reach my own conclusions and understanding'*.

The second theme is related to the perceived authenticity and independence of views seen on social media (23 per cent of responses). This authenticity is discussed in comparison with mainstream media that are perceived as corrupt: *'[I trust social media] because they allow me to read the opinions of ordinary citizens and not of corrupt journalists'*. Social media are perceived as allowing a more varied and bigger newsfeed than news media, offering the possibility to compare the provided content while being more analytical: *'One can find more news media sources online in comparison to the traditional media (television, newspapers, radio)'*. These perceptions go together with findings from the same dataset suggesting that populism is more widespread in Greek society when compared to most other countries (Newman et al. 2019).

These perceptions are again often associated, explicitly or implicitly, with minimal trust in the news media: *'[Social media] are not manipulated by anyone else, but the masses and how they understand reality'; 'They are not controlled by owners and politicians, and as a result the news report is true, free of corruption and interests!'*. Social media are credited with being independent news sources, objective, reliable and not driven by profit: *'News on social media is being filtered by people who experience events and not by journalistic interests'* or *'They [social media] allow you to expose yourself to many opinions that have nothing to gain'*. These perceptions demonstrate again the deep-rooted belief that news media have been corrupted by political and/or business people; a perception which was stated with certainty, as discussed in the previous section.

Another theme traced in the responses revolves around the self-empowering dimension of social networks which respondents perceive as allowing them to research topics thoroughly because of the perceived 'wisdom of the crowd' (10 per cent of responses). Thus, respondents argue in favour of the possibility to self-crosscheck, distinguish fact from fiction and evaluate the quality of the information: *'I can distinguish truth from lies, the hyperboles ... '*; *'They allow you to see different aspects of events. By searching and being critical there, you can find the truth'*. In general, users appear to play an active role as 'news-hunters' and may develop feelings of belonging to a wider online community that exchanges and shares varied views on news. One could argue that this sense derives from trust, grounded on the fact that news is circulating and being discussed among family members, friends and other peers: *'Communicating with other members of the community, friends, relatives, people I know but also don't know, allows me to verify whether some news is true or not'*.

The emotional tone of some responses reveals feelings of trust and faith in social media, whilst their empowering role is seen as allowing users to 'take back control' of the information.

Conclusions

This study posed two questions regarding online news navigation patterns in Greece (RQ1) and the relationship of alternative news use with trust in traditional news (RQ2). Our quantitative findings, responding to the first research question suggest that Greece is an outlier in online news use patterns. Online news users in Greece embrace digital-born outlets and social media for news use at significantly higher rates than online news users in other Western democracies.

Alternative news consumption is correlated with record low levels of trust in news. Only a small minority of Greeks believes that the news media are free from undue political and business influences. Open-ended answers on questions related to the users' attitudes towards traditional news media and social media reveal the association of lack of trust in news with alternative news

consumption. The findings mirror each other: the main reasons cited behind the lack of trust in traditional news media are used to justify trust in social media for the provision of accurate information. The technological affordances of digital platforms allow a significant portion of Greeks to use news sources that they perceive to be independent of media and political interest; to discuss their scepticism towards news coverage with each other; to use the large variety of news sources that are available on these platforms for comparing news coverage.

In an attempt to understand and contextualise the foundations of the lack of trust in news media in Greece, we traced the institutional trajectory and the latent dynamics which composed the power game between media and politics. We showed that lack of trust in news was the main reason cited by citizens who trust social media for their news consumption. Thus, the Greek case offers an insight into how the lack of trust in news media and journalism can push the audience to the extremes of alternative news consumption. In the context of an enduring financial, media and socio-political crisis, the vast majority of Greeks expressed mistrust in news and journalism, a stance which led them overwhelmingly to embrace blogs, digital-born outlets and social media for news provision when compared with other Western democracies.

As discussed, the rhetoric against the bailout programmes in Greece involved a powerful narrative against the media and a common strategy among populist parties in order to distance their electorates from the mass media and increase their influence among old and new media outlets (Mazzoleni 2014; Ernst et al. 2019). The extremely polarising conditions in Greece's financial and political life, increasing low levels of trust in news which already existed before the crisis and has worsened ever since, as well as the supply of a plethora of digital news sources in Greece, enabled this fragmented media landscape.

By highlighting the relationship between trust in news and social media news use, the contribution of this article is two-fold. First, we contribute to the discussion of trust in journalism, by showing how chronic distrust in news media meant that during the digital transition of news, a significant part of the population moved to alternative forms of news provision. Second, by placing Greece in a comparative context of news consumption in three media systems, we shed light on the significant similarities and differences which help us reflect on the implications of these trends for media systems at large. We examine these phenomena drawing from continuities and discontinuities in historical and political trends which currently configure the nexus of power between media and politics in Greece.

Our findings regarding the rise of alternative and social media news consumption in Greece suggest potential implications for the media and political environment. Social media news use is casual, and people are not likely to notice or remember which news brands they consume (Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher & Nielsen 2019), with potential implications for trust in news

organisations. Social media news use is further correlated with lower levels of political knowledge (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks & Ardèvol-Abreu 2017). Given that Greece is already very vulnerable to online misinformation, and that social media use is a key driver of this vulnerability (Humprecht, Esser & Van Aelst 2020), these dynamics can have strong implications for political polarisation and the quality of public debate.

The implications of our study go beyond Greece and beyond the Southern European countries that constitute the Polarised Pluralist media system (Hallin & Mancini 2004). A striking example is the United States, a country that was in the core of the liberal model, but is potentially moving towards a ‘polarised liberal’ system, having strong similarities with the Southern European media system, partly due to declining public trust, the polarised political climate, and the disruptive transition from print to digital media (Nechushtai 2018), similar to the phenomena identified in Greece in this study.

Notes

1. In 1995, 160 daily newspaper titles, 600 magazines, 150 television channels and 1,200 radio stations functioned for a population of 11 million people (Papathanassopoulos 1997). In 2010, there were 280 local, regional, and national daily newspapers (Papathanassopoulos 2013, p. 242).
2. In 2012, there were 15 national daily newspapers, 12 national daily sports newspapers, 4 national business newspapers, 17 national Sunday papers and 11 national weekly papers circulating (Papathanassopoulos 2013, p. 242).
3. The number of registered unemployed members of the Athenian Union peaked in 2015, reaching 926 (Source: Union of the Athens Daily Press Journalists). Since 2009, 83 press outlets in Athens and 4 in Thessaloniki, 13 TV stations, and 9 radio stations stopped functioning. Sources: EHIEA (Ένωση Ιδιοκτητών Ημερησίων Εφημερίδων Αθηνών – Athens Daily Newspaper Publishers Association); EITISEE (Ένωση Ιδιωτικών Τηλεοπτικών Σταθμών Εθνικής Εμβέλειας – Association of Greek Private Television Channels With Nationwide Coverage); EIIRA (Ένωση Ιδιοκτητών Ιδιωτικών Ραδιοφωνικών Σταθμών Αττικής – Association of Owners of Private Radio Stations of Attica).
4. According to the Union of Athenian Daily Press Owners (EHIEA), 10 new newspapers, 7 new TV outlets and 2 radio stations appeared from 2010 to 2018.
5. Of the six media groups that applied for TV licences in 2018, five did get them. Another media group applied successfully to ESR in February 2019.
6. For instance, a headline in [newsbomb.gr](http://www.newsbomb.gr) reads: ‘The end of the world is here: Which 7 cities will be destroyed FIRST on September 23.’ Published on [newsbomb.gr](http://www.newsbomb.gr) on 20 September 2017. Available at <http://www.newsbomb.gr/kosmos/news/story/822428/apokalypsi-oi-7-poleis-poy-tha-katastrafoyn-protos-stis-23-septemvrioy?>
7. The blog tro-ma-ktiko.blogspot.gr which has 10 per cent weekly reach among online news users in Greece has published stories with titles like ‘They are spraying us as if we are flies: Look at suspicious chemtrails in Trikala (photos)’ http://tro-ma-ktiko.blogspot.co.uk/2016/04/photos_53.html. Or ‘Shock: 2 million Greeks were vaccinated with a vaccine that causes tumours?’ (http://tro-ma-ktiko.blogspot.co.uk/2015/11/2_38.html).
8. The questions can be found in the Online Appendix, Table 2.

Note on authorship

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