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Profiles of News Consumption in a High-Choice Media Environment: Evidence from Romania

ABSTRACT

During the last two decades, media and information environments have changed in a fundamental way. Generalized low levels of trust in media sources, incidental news exposure, and higher probability to be exposed only to views similar to their own and echo chambers are just some of the most important challenges within the current, high-choice media landscape. All of them have major ramifications for the information environment as a whole and, particularly, for the way in which they could influence people in becoming informed citizens. In this paper, we explore how news consumption patterns of mainstream and social media are associated with trust in media sources and other news consumption related phenomena, such as incidental news exposure and echo chambers. Theoretically, this study starts from the idea that today, within the current media environment, people tend to consume cross-media information¹. In other terms, people's news media diet consists of different media sources and media content². Some recent research studies investigating people's media diets put forward "profiles" showing how people consume media content, in an attempt to find out patterns of news consumption and how they might affect various democracy related aspects.³ Drawing on a news repertoires approach, the presented study aims at investigating news media consumption patterns among Romanian people. By means of a national survey (N=1,000), this study explores the main characteristics of news media consumers in Romania, in an attempt to shed more light on people's media diets (what they actually consume) within the current, high-choice media landscape. The main findings from our study reveal that minimalist news users are the most prevalent category among the investigated sample. Compared with all the other types of news users, minimalist news users have the lowest levels of trust in both mainstream and social media sources. At the same time, they are less prone to be accidentally exposed to news stories, but more prone to be stuck in echo chambers, in environments where they encounter information that reflects or reinforces their own views. From a socio-demographic point of view, all types of consumers share more or less the same characteristics, with an age-related significant difference. These results offer important insights into the way in which news consumption patterns are associated with certain perceptions and attitudes that might result in letting citizens be less informed or even uninformed. Implications for democracy are further discussed.

KEY WORDS

High-choice Media Environment. News Consumption Patterns. News Profiles.

¹ See: ANDERSEN, K. et al.: Maintenance and Reformation of News Repertoires: A Latent Transition Analysis. In *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2022, Vol. 99, No. 1, p. 237-261.; DVIR-GVIRSMAN, S.: Understanding News Engagement on Social Media: A Media Repertoire Approach. In *New Media & Society*, 2020, Vol. 22, No. 1, p. 1-22. [online]. [2022-03-03]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820961349>>.

² DIEHL, T., BARNIDGE, M., GIL DE ZUNIGA, H.: Multi-platform News Use and Political Participation Across Age Groups: Toward a Valid Metric of Platform Diversity and Its Effects. In *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2019, Vol. 96, No. 2, p. 429.

³ See: CASTRO, L. et al.: Navigating High-choice European Political Information Environments: A Comparative Analysis of News User Profiles and Political Knowledge. In *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2021, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 1-33. ISSN 1940-1612. [online]. [2022-03-03]. Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/19401612211012572>>.

1 Introduction

Today's media environments, characterised by the access to myriad sources of information and increasingly diversified media contents, provide both opportunities and challenges for information consumers and the societies they live in. In this paper, the media environment is conceptualized based on the high-choices media consumers are confronted with, the level of trust in media sources and more recent phenomena, such as the incidental exposure to information and the probability to be exposed only to similar opinions and worldviews.

Over the past decennium, the media landscape has gone through dramatic changes with consistent implications for media usage. The rapid technological advances, mainly the proliferation of smartphones and social media, have changed people's news habits and diets, offering an unprecedented amount of information and media choices. This saturation with information has proved, however, detrimental to media trust⁴, with people's trust in mainstream media declining in many countries.⁵ Less discerning information consumers, with increasingly personalised news diets, and the tendency to be exposed only to certain interpretations of reality are unsurprisingly correlated with malfunctioning democracies and low levels of citizens' civic and political engagement.⁶

In this context, it is important to understand the nature of people's news habits. Therefore, this study aims to: a) examine how people's news habits influence their level of information (i.e., whether the availability of a high diversity of media content and sources truly makes them open to this abundance of information); b) assess the level of trust in media sources and how this impacts people's media habits; c) explore the patterns of news exposure, whether this is accidental or incidental, and d) analyse whether the multiple choices people can make in terms of media consumption encourage them to be exposed to a plurality of opinions and worldviews or, on the contrary, trap them in informational echo chambers.

To examine people's news habits in today's complex media environment, we take a news repertoires approach and examine people's patterns of news consumption across media, traditional mainstream news media, as well as social media. Recent studies have indicated that a consistent proportion of news consumers have a surprisingly low-source, low-frequency news media diet.⁷ Moreover, consuming news from a broader range of news sources does not necessarily lead to more informed citizens, on the contrary, it may have the opposite effect.⁸ Thus, we also examine the key covariates related to news repertoires, focusing on media consumers' profiles and the roles played by news exposure, probability to consume diverse information and trust in news media in addition to socio-demographic factors. Examining the specificities of news repertoires requires more fine-grained data. Therefore, this study advances a typology of user profiles, or news diets, constructing four news users' repertoires: *mainstream media consumers* (scoring high on mainstream media news consumption and low on social media news consumption), *social media consumers* (scoring low on mainstream media news consumption and high on social media news consumption), *all-media consumers* (scoring high on both types of news consumption), and *minimalists* (scoring low on both types of news consumption).

⁴ See: YUAN, E.: News Consumption Across Multiple Media Platforms: A Repertoire Approach. In *Information, Communication & Society*, 2011, Vol. 14, No. 7, p. 998-1016.

⁵ See: VAN AELST, P. et al.: Political Communication in a High-choice Media Environment: A Challenge for Democracy?. In *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 2017, Vol. 41, No. 1, p. 3-27.

⁶ See: STRÖMBÄCK, J., FALASCA, K., KRUIKEMEIER, S.: The Mix of Media Use Matters: Investigating the Effects of Individual News Repertoires on Offline and Online Political Participation. In *Political Communication*, 2018, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 413-432.

⁷ ANDERSEN, K. et al.: Maintenance and Reformation of News Repertoires: A Latent Transition Analysis. In *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2022, Vol. 99, No. 1, p. 255.

⁸ See: CASTRO, L. et al.: Navigating High-choice European Political Information Environments: A Comparative Analysis of News User Profiles and Political Knowledge. In *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2021, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 1-33. ISSN 1940-1612. [online]. [2022-03-03]. Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/19401612211012572>>

By applying an audience-oriented perspective to the study of media environments, the purpose of this paper is to map the prevalent media repertoires and the factors that influence them. Implications of our findings for comparative research and the impact media diets have on society and democracy are discussed in the conclusion.

2 Literature Review

Various models of democracy share the idea that media do play an active role in influencing politics, in informing citizens, and, thus, in making democracy work.⁹ Nevertheless, this active role has been highly debated within the contemporary, high-choice media environment.¹⁰ The debates centred around the main changes and trends within the contemporary information environments. Information overload, homogeneity of information, selective exposure to ideologically-driven news, news avoidance, decreasing trust in the media as an institution and in media sources, incidental news exposure or higher probability of encountering similar viewpoints in the media and get stuck in echo chambers (i.e., lower diversity of media diet) are just some of the changes brought about by the technological advancement and high use of social networking sites. All these media-related phenomena have significant implications for people's news consumption habits.¹¹

One possible way of investigating people's news consumption habits within the current media environment is to adopt a news repertoires approach¹² and explore people's news consumption patterns across media. The repertoires approach suggests that nowadays people's news consumption patterns are, most probably, cross-media, mainly because people "consume" information from multiple media sources at the same time.¹³ This approach (i.e., the channel repertoire) was first introduced with reference to television news use¹⁴ and further used to examine news consumption patterns in other different contexts.¹⁵

⁹ See: STRÖMBÄCK, J.: Four Phases of Mediatization: An Analysis of the Mediatization of Politics. In *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2008, Vol. 13, No. 3, p. 228-246.; STRÖMBÄCK, J.: In Search of a Standard: Four Models of Democracy and Their Normative Implications for Journalism. In *Journalism Studies*, 2005, Vol. 6, No. 3, p. 331-345; VAN AELST, P. et al.: Political Communication in a High-choice Media Environment: A Challenge for Democracy?. In *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 2017, Vol. 41, No. 1, p. 3-27.

¹⁰ ANDERSEN, K. et al.: Maintenance and Reformation of News Repertoires: A Latent Transition Analysis. In *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2022, Vol. 99, No. 1, p. 242.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² See: EDGERLY, S.: Red Media, Blue Media, and Purple Media: News Repertoires in the Colorful Media Landscape. In *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 2015, Vol. 59, No. 1, p. 1-21.; MANGOLD, F., BACHL, M.: New News Media, New Opinion Leaders? How Political Opinion Leaders Navigate the Modern High-choice Media Environment. In *Journal of Communication*, 2018, Vol. 68, No. 5, p. 896-919.; STRÖMBÄCK, J., FALASCA, K., KRUIKEMEIER, S.: The Mix of Media Use Matters: Investigating the Effects of Individual News Repertoires on Offline and Online Political Participation. In *Political Communication*, 2018, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 413-432.; ANDERSEN, K. et al.: Maintenance and Reformation of News Repertoires: A Latent Transition Analysis. In *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2022, Vol. 99, No. 1, p. 237-261.

¹³ See: STRÖMBÄCK, J., FALASCA, K., KRUIKEMEIER, S.: The Mix of Media Use Matters: Investigating the Effects of Individual News Repertoires on Offline and Online Political Participation. In *Political Communication*, 2018, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 413-432.

¹⁴ See: HEETER, C.: Program Selection with Abundance of Choice: A Process Model. In *Human Communication Research*, 1985, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 126-152.

¹⁵ See: BOS, L., KRUIKEMEIER, S., DE VREESE, C.: Nation Binding: How Public Service Broadcasting Mitigates Political Selective Exposure. In *PloS One*, 2016, Vol. 11, No. 5, p. 1-11. [online]. [2022-03-3]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0155112>>; EDGERLY, S.: Red Media, Blue Media, and Purple Media: News Repertoires in the Colorful Media Landscape. In *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 2015, Vol. 59, No. 1, p. 1-21.; HASEBRINK, U., POPP, J.: Media Repertoires as a Result of Selective Media Use. A Conceptual Approach to the Analysis of Patterns of Exposure. In *Communications. The European Journal of Communication Research*, 2006, Vol. 31, No. 3, p. 369-387.; YUAN, E.: News Consumption Across Multiple Media Platforms: A Repertoire Approach. In *Information, Communication & Society*, 2011, Vol. 14, No. 7, p. 998-1016.

Research adopting a news repertoire approach was widely used in several contexts. For example, in a German sample, Hasebrink and Popp¹⁶ found out six different medium-oriented news repertoires: low overall use, high overall use, radio and newspapers, newspapers and TV, TV only, and newspapers only. In 2014, Lee and Yang¹⁷ identified three news repertoires, namely low use of all media, use of new media only, and high use of all media. Later on, Edgerly¹⁸ identified six news repertoires, including several repertoires that were based on usage of a specific medium (e.g., online news only) and others that were more attribute-focused (e.g., conservative news use across TV, radio, online). Wolfsfeld et al.¹⁹ found four types of political information repertoires in Israel, which they labelled news avoiders, traditionalists, social, and eclectics. In studies belonging to Bos et al.²⁰ and Strömbäck et al.,²¹ latent class analysis was performed to identify individual news profiles in the Netherlands and Sweden, finding four and five news user repertoires, respectively. Specifically, with reference to the Netherlands sample, Bos et al.²² found a group of news minimalists, popular news consumers, users of public media, and omnivores (i.e., people who watch and read all sorts of news and current affairs media). On the other hand, with reference to the Swedish sample, Strömbäck et al.²³ identified a rather similar typology of users, namely minimalists, public and popular news users, as well as local news consumers and users of social media news. Both studies found the largest group to be news minimalists (i.e., people consuming little news compared to the other user profiles). More recently, in a comparative study in 17 European countries (N=28,317), Castro et al.²⁴ identified five news user profiles: “news minimalists”, “social media news users”, “traditionalists”, “online news seekers”, and “hyper news consumers”. Although these studies of news repertoires are based on data from different contexts and countries, they show striking similarities. Specifically, all of them make the distinction between “how often and how many” and “what” people actually “consume”. These consistent patterns illustrate how news consumption habits seem to cut across different media systems.²⁵ Among the most consistent findings of the above-mentioned studies is the identification of a news avoiders or minimalist repertoire (i.e., users who have a low overall news use) and a news omnivore or hyper news consumers repertoire (i.e., users who have high overall news use).

¹⁶ See: HASEBRINK, U., POPP, J.: Media Repertoires as a Result of Selective Media Use. A Conceptual Approach to the Analysis of Patterns of Exposure. In *Communications. The European Journal of Communication Research*, 2006, Vol. 31, No. 3, p. 369-387.

¹⁷ See: LEE, H., YANG, J.: Political Knowledge Gaps among News Consumers with Different News Media Repertoires across Multiple Platforms. In *International Journal of Communication*, 2014, Vol. 8, No. 21, p. 597-614.

¹⁸ See: EDGERLY, S.: Red Media, Blue Media, and Purple Media: News Repertoires in the Colorful Media Landscape. In *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 2015, Vol. 59, No. 1, p. 1-21.

¹⁹ See: WOLFSFELD, G., YARCHI, M., SAMUEL-AZRAN, T.: Political Information Repertoires and Political Participation. In *New Media & Society*, 2016, Vol. 18, No. 9, p. 2096-2115.

²⁰ See: BOS, L., KRUIKEMEIER, S., DE VREESE, C.: Nation Binding: How Public Service Broadcasting Mitigates Political Selective Exposure. In *PLoS One*, 2016, Vol. 11, No. 5, p. 1-11. [online]. [2022-03-03]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0155112>>.

²¹ See: STRÖMBÄCK, J., FALASCA, K., KRUIKEMEIER, S.: The Mix of Media Use Matters: Investigating the Effects of Individual News Repertoires on Offline and Online Political Participation. In *Political Communication*, 2018, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 413-432.

²² See: BOS, L., KRUIKEMEIER, S., DE VREESE, C.: Nation Binding: How Public Service Broadcasting Mitigates Political Selective Exposure. In *PLoS One*, 2016, Vol. 11, No. 5, p. 1-11. [online]. [2022-03-03]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0155112>>.

²³ See: STRÖMBÄCK, J., FALASCA, K., KRUIKEMEIER, S.: The Mix of Media Use Matters: Investigating the Effects of Individual News Repertoires on Offline and Online Political Participation. In *Political Communication*, 2018, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 413-432.

²⁴ CASTRO, L. et al.: Navigating High-Choice European Political Information Environments: A Comparative Analysis of News User Profiles and Political Knowledge. In *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2021, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 2. [online]. [2022-03-03]. Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/19401612211012572>>.

²⁵ See: ANDERSEN, K. et al.: Maintenance and Reformation of News Repertoires: A Latent Transition Analysis. In *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2022, Vol. 99, No. 1, p. 237-261.

In this context, our challenge is to adopt a news repertoires approach and explore news media consumption patterns among a Romanian sample, by investigating both media-related phenomena and socio-demographic variables that might be associated with or even influence these consumption patterns. Thus, the following sections will focus on three media-related phenomena that have the potential to correlate with news consumption patterns within the current media environment, namely trust in media sources, incidental news exposure, and diversity of media diet. At the same time, we will explore the theoretical assumptions regarding the role the socio-demographic variables could have on news media consumption patterns.

2.1 Trust in Media Sources

In contemporary, high-choice media environments, trust in news media sources, especially the traditional ones, is facing a continuous decline.²⁶ This explains why the issue of media trust and how it influences patterns of news use have received consistent attention. Scholars point to the fact that, from a democratic perspective, one of the most important functions of the news media is to inform citizens.²⁷ In other terms, to fulfil this function, it is important that the media offer people the kind of information they really need to be free and self-governing.²⁸ At the same time, it is important that people trust the news media they use.²⁹

On a theoretical level, Tsfati and Cappella³⁰ suggest that trust in news media is linked to actual news use, in the sense that people tend to turn to news in order to get accurate information about the world and, thus, obtain a proper picture about what is going on at some point. At the same time, they suggest that the audience is rational and wants to achieve the highest levels of utility from the news media they use. However, the audience cannot attend all the available news on a certain topic. Thus, given these assumptions, and the definition of trust as “*the expectation that the interaction with the trustee would lead to gains rather than losses*,”³¹ it is highly probable that people follow the news media they trust. In other terms, “*a correlation between news media trust and exposure can be expected*.”³²

The above-mentioned definition of trust implies that trust leads to an increased likelihood of engagement, whereas mistrust reduces the likelihood of such cooperation. Those people with lower levels of trust in something are less willing to interact with that specific issue/person they do not trust. For example, the lower the trust in one’s teammates, the lower the teamwork; the lower the trust in democratic institutions, the lower the civic participation. Therefore, when applying these principles of general trust to the news media context, one can expect people who are sceptical towards a specific news source to consume less news from that source as part of their media diet. As an example, people with lower levels of trust in mainstream media

²⁶ See: STRÖMBÄCK, J. et al.: News Media Trust and Its Impact on Media Use: Toward a Framework For Future Research. In *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 2020, Vol. 44, No. 2, p. 139-156.

²⁷ See: HOLBERT, R. L.: Back to Basics: Revisiting, Resolving, and Expanding Some of the Fundamental Issues of Political Communication Research. In *Political Communication*, 2005, Vol. 22, No. 4, p. 511-514.

²⁸ See: STRÖMBÄCK, J.: In Search of a Standard: Four Models of Democracy and Their Normative Implications for Journalism. In *Journalism Studies*, 2005, Vol. 6, No. 3, p. 331-345.

²⁹ See: STRÖMBÄCK, J. et al.: News Media Trust and Its Impact on Media Use: Toward a Framework For Future Research. In *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 2020, Vol. 44, No. 2, p. 139-156.

³⁰ See: TSFATI, Y., CAPPELLA, J. N.: Do People Watch What They Do Not Trust? Exploring the Association between News Media Skepticism and Exposure. In *Communication Research*, 2003, Vol. 30, No. 5, p. 504-529.

³¹ TSFATI, Y., CAPPELLA, J. N.: Do People Watch What They Do Not Trust? Exploring the Association between News Media Skepticism and Exposure. In *Communication Research*, 2003, Vol. 30, No. 5, p. 505.

³² STRÖMBÄCK, J. et al.: News Media Trust and Its Impact on Media Use: Toward a Framework For Future Research. In *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 2020, Vol. 44, No. 2, p. 145.

are more prone to seek alternative news sources compared with their trusting counterparts.³³ The same conclusion can be found in more recent research, pointing to the fact that trust in news media influences news choices; lower trust in mainstream sources drives people to choose alternative, non-mainstream news sources.³⁴

Given the context, we assume that audiences are rational and that they seek accurate information when turning their attention to a specific source of news. At the same time, we believe that people do not have the ability to attend all the available information. In such a context, we posit that:

H1. People tend to trust more the types of media sources they consume more.

2.2 Incidental News Exposure

Generally speaking, incidental news consumption is a phenomenon described as getting exposed to news when not looking consciously for it.³⁵ Studies refer to incidental news consumption as a particular type of consumption that “long predates social media,”³⁶ giving the examples of people reading the headlines of a publication while waiting to pay at the supermarket, or watching a short story being displayed at an electronics store while wondering across the streets.³⁷ Nevertheless, the prevalence of the Internet and the emergence of digital platforms have provided new opportunities for incidental news exposure.³⁸ In the current media landscape, consuming news incidentally has “moved from the periphery to the centre”³⁹ or, in other terms, this rather limited practice of the past has become very common among current social media users.

Tewksbury et al. were among the first scholars who discussed the Internet’s “ability to provide a typical user with an array of information choices that extend far beyond what he or she intentionally seeks”.⁴⁰ Their main discovery was that Internet users accidentally come across news while being engaged with other news-related and non-news-related online activities. More recent research suggests that interactive and media-rich websites, applications that facilitate social interaction, content creation and sharing, and production of collective intelligence⁴¹ have

³³ See: TSFATI, Y., CAPPELLA, J. N.: Do People Watch What They Do Not Trust? Exploring the Association between News Media Skepticism and Exposure. In *Communication Research*, 2003, Vol. 30, No. 5, p. 504-529.

³⁴ See: FLETCHER, R., PARK, S.: The Impact of Trust in the News Media on Online News Consumption and Participation. In *Digital Journalism*, 2017, Vol. 5, No. 10, p. 1281-1299.; KALOGEROPOULOS, A., et al.: News Media Trust and News Consumption: Factors Related to Trust in News in 35 Countries. In *International Journal of Communication*, 2019, Vol. 13, p. 3672-3693.; VOZAB, D. et al.: Generational Patterns of Digital News Consumption: From Traditionalists to Millennial Minimalists. In *Medijske studije*, 2019, Vol. 10, No. 20, p. 107-126.

³⁵ See: AHMADI, M., WOHN, D. Y.: The Antecedents of Incidental News Exposure on Social Media. In *Social Media + Society*, 2018, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 1-8.; MATTHES, J., et al.: Processing News on Social Media. The Political Incidental News Exposure Model (PINE). In *Journalism*, 2020, Vol. 21, No. 8, p. 1031-1048.

³⁶ BOCZKOWSKI, P. J., MITCHELSTEIN, E., MATASSI, M.: “News Comes across When I’m in a Moment of Leisure”: Understanding the Practices of Incidental News Consumption on Social Media. In *New Media & Society*, 2018, Vol. 20, No. 10, p. 3524.

³⁷ See: TEWKSBURY, D., WEAVER, A. J., MADDEX, B. D.: Accidentally Informed: Incidental News Exposure on the World Wide Web. In *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2001, Vol. 78, No. 3, p. 533-554.

³⁸ See: YADAMSUREN, B., ERDELEZ, S.: Incidental Exposure to Online News. In *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 2010, Vol. 47, No. 1, p. 1-8.

³⁹ BOCZKOWSKI, P. J., MITCHELSTEIN, E., MATASSI, M.: “News Comes across When I’m in a Moment of Leisure”: Understanding the Practices of Incidental News Consumption on Social Media. In *New Media & Society*, 2018, Vol. 20, No. 10, p. 3524.

⁴⁰ TEWKSBURY, D., WEAVER, A. J., MADDEX, B. D.: Accidentally Informed: Incidental News Exposure on the World Wide Web. In *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2001, Vol. 78, No. 3, p. 534.

⁴¹ See: YAMAMOTO, M., MOREY, A. C.: Incidental News Exposure on Social Media: A Campaign Communication Mediation Approach. In *Social Media + Society*, 2019, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 1-12.

opened new opportunities for such exposure.⁴² Specifically, as social media have become more and more ingrained in people's everyday life, they now serve as important sources of information.

There are some important reasons why incidental news exposure occurs more on social media platforms compared with other news media channels. One is related to the "scalability of content,"⁴³ in the sense that social media platforms make news items more readily visible and bring them to people's attention. Even if people do not actively seek certain pieces of news, when other people from their online social groups post, like, and share news and comments, there is a high probability for those people to be exposed to that news as well (i.e., via their newsfeeds and other types of notifications). The other one is related to the role of algorithms, especially recommendation algorithms, which are used to "curate" the content that social media users see within their networks.⁴⁴ At the same time, research indicates that social recommendations, such as posts recommended by online connections and indications about users' engagement metrics (i.e., shares, comments, and reactions) serve as heuristics of content importance and popularity.⁴⁵ Such social recommendations generate curiosity about news items, influence people's preferences on what content to consume, and facilitate information seeking behaviours.⁴⁶ In other terms, these characteristics suggest that social media have the potential to enhance incidental news exposure. Given this background, we posit that:

H2. All media users and social media users tend to experience incidental news exposure more often than mainstream media users and minimalists.

2.3 Diversity of News Media Diet

Researchers suggest that the current media environment offers almost infinite choices regarding the types of information to consume and the type of people to engage with.⁴⁷ Therefore, unlike their offline counterparts, online media environments are largely influenced by the choices of the people inside. The "fluidity" of these environments has attracted a lot of attention.⁴⁸ One specific point here is referred to as the "echo chamber" thesis. It suggests that current online conversations are typically divided into a variety of sub-groups, that are oftentimes ideologically-driven (i.e., people are exposed to limited series of viewpoints, most of the time to ideas that are congruent to what people already know or believe, thus reinforcing their existing opinions). One relevant reason why this thesis attracted so much attention so far is because living in echo chambers limit the diversity of opinions people are exposed to, thus having a severe impact

⁴² See: BARNIDGE, M., XENOS, M. A.: Social Media News Deserts: Digital Inequalities and Incidental News Exposure on Social Media Platforms. In *New Media & Society*, 2021. [online]. [2022-03-30]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211059529>>.

⁴³ YAMAMOTO, M., MOREY, A. C.: Incidental News Exposure on Social Media: A Campaign Communication Mediation Approach. In *Social Media + Society*, 2019, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 2.

⁴⁴ See: AHMADI, M., WOHN, D. Y.: The Antecedents of Incidental News Exposure on Social Media. In *Social Media + Society*, 2018, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 1-8.; SCHEFFAUER, R., GOYANES, M., DE ZÚNIGA, H. G.: Beyond Social Media News Use Algorithms: How Political Discussion and Network Heterogeneity Clarify Incidental News Exposure. In *Online Information Review*, 2021, Vol. 45, No. 3, p. 633-650.

⁴⁵ See: YAMAMOTO, M., MOREY, A. C.: Incidental News Exposure on Social Media: A Campaign Communication Mediation Approach. In *Social Media + Society*, 2019, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 1-12.

⁴⁶ See: TURCOTTE, J. et al.: News Recommendations from Social Media Opinion Leaders: Effects on Media Trust and Information Seeking. In *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2015, Vol. 20, p. 520-535.

⁴⁷ BRIGHT, J.: Explaining the Emergence of Echo Chambers on Social Media: The Role of Ideology and Extremism. In *SSRN*, 2017, p. 1. [online]. [2022-03-30]. Available at: <[10.2139/ssrn.2839728](https://ssrn.com/abstract=3083972)>.

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

on the democratic debate, open-mindedness, and a healthy public sphere.⁴⁹ Possible effects attributed to echo chambers are group polarisation, audience fragmentation, and the circulation of fake news and misinformation.⁵⁰ Other scholars suggest that this segregation by interest or opinion has the potential to exacerbate the gap between those who are informed about politics and those who are not, and, consequently, threaten democracies by limiting political information and discussions.⁵¹

Social media activity is oftentimes characterised by attitude-based “homophily,”⁵² taking place within small communities of like-minded individuals. Specifically, especially with regards to controversial topics, when people are exposed to conflicting information, there is a high probability that social media users gather into homogenous echo chambers.⁵³ At the same time, social media users tend to selectively expose themselves to and engage only with content and sources that are in line with their ideological orientation, while letting apart possible content and sources that contradict their pre-existing thoughts. As a result, the potential for cross-cutting exposure and interactions is severely limited.⁵⁴

Other research studies⁵⁵ with specific reference to the current, high-choice media environment suggest that what people actually consume (i.e., their media diet) plays an important role when assessing the threats associated with echo chambers. The authors found out that the number of media sources an individual chooses to incorporate into their media diet is related to the likelihood of becoming stuck in an echo chamber. In other terms, the more diverse the media diet of a person, the lower the chances to get caught in an echo chamber. Thus, their research found evidence that media diversity predicts acts that might help individuals to avoid being stuck in an echo chamber.

In this context, we assume that social media users and people having low levels of news consumption (i.e., low media diversity) are more prone to be stuck in echo chambers than people consuming information from mainstream media sources (which could be more diverse) and people consuming information from all media sources. Thus, we posit that:

H3. Social media users and minimalist users are more likely to be exposed to similar content than mainstream media users and all media users.

⁴⁹ See: CARDENAL, A. S., et al.: Echo-chambers in Online News Consumption: Evidence from Survey and Navigation Data in Spain. In *European Journal of Communication*, 2019, Vol. 34, No. 4, 360-376.

⁵⁰ See: ALLCOTT, H., GENTZKOW, M.: Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. In *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 2017, Vol. 31, No. 2, p. 211-236.; DEL VICARIO, M., et al.: The Spreading of Misinformation Online. In *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 2016, Vol. 113, No. 3, p. 554-559; BENNETT, W. L., IYENGAR, S.: A New Era of Minimal Effects? The Changing Foundations of Political Communication. In *Journal of Communication*, 2008, Vol. 58, No. 4, p. 707-731.

⁵¹ See: KSIAZEK, T. B., MALTHOUSE, E. C., WEBSTER, J. G.: News-seekers and Avoiders: Exploring Patterns of Total News Consumption across Media and the Relationship to Civic Participation. In *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 2010, Vol. 54, No. 4, p. 551-568.; PRIOR, M.: *Post-broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. New York : Cambridge UP, 2007.

⁵² TERREN, L., BORGE-BRAVO, R.: Echo chambers on social media: a systematic review of the literature. In *Review of Communication Research*, 2021, Vol. 9, p. 101.

⁵³ See: JUSTWAN, F. et al.: Social media echo chambers and satisfaction with democracy among Democrats and Republicans in the aftermath of the 2016 US elections. In *Journal of elections, public opinion and parties*, 2018, Vol. 28, No. 4, p. 424-442.; SCHMIDT, A. L., et al.: Polarization of the vaccination debate on Facebook. In *Vaccine*, 2018, Vol. 36, No. 25, p. 3606-3612.

⁵⁴ See: JACOBSON, S., MYUNG, E., JOHNSON, S. L.: Open media or echo chamber: The use of links in audience discussions on the Facebook pages of partisan news organizations. In *Information, Communication & Society*, 2016, Vol. 19, No. 7, p. 875-891.

⁵⁵ See: DUBOIS, E., BLANK, G.: The Echo Chamber Is Overstated: The Moderating Effect of Political Interest and Diverse Media. In *Information, Communication & Society*, 2018, Vol. 21, No. 5, p. 729-745.

2.4 Socio-demographics

In terms of socio-demographic variables that have the potential to influence news consumption patterns, previous studies suggest that gender, age, and education matter.⁵⁶ In this respect, Cohen⁵⁷ found out gender gaps in news use for television, print, and online. Specifically, women in Germany, Switzerland, Taiwan, and the United States are less likely to watch TV news than are their male counterparts. The same conclusion, that women tend to consume less news than men, was reached by Benesch⁵⁸ and McCombs et al.⁵⁹

On the other hand, age has also been found to have a notable influence on news consumption across country borders. According to Cohen,⁶⁰ older people tend to consume more traditional mass media (television and newspapers), whereas younger people prefer online news. More recent research⁶¹ suggest that younger people tend to consume less news than their older counterparts.

As far as education is concerned, studies show it is a relevant yet complex predictor of news consumption.⁶² While it appears that education has a negative effect on TV-watching time (i.e., people with high education watch TV less than people with lower levels of education) and a positive effect on newspaper-reading time (offline and online) (i.e., people with high education read more newspapers than people with lower levels of education),⁶³ there seems to be agreement among researchers that people with less education consume less news than more educated people.⁶⁴ These studies refer to the way in which socio-demographic variables are related or predict general news consumption patterns. Nevertheless, we could not find specific evidence about how such variables are related to news users' profiles (i.e., which are the main socio-demographic characteristics of each news profile). At the same time, apart from few exceptions regarding age,⁶⁵

⁵⁶ See: ESSER, F., STEPPAT, D.: *News Media Use: International Comparative Research*. In *The International Encyclopaedia of Media Effects*. Hoboken, New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons, 2017, p. 1-17. [online]. [2022-03-30]. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313895437_News_Media_Use_International_Comparative_Research>; KARLSEN, R., BEYER, A., STEEN-JOHNSON, K.: Do High-choice Media Environments Facilitate News Avoidance? A Longitudinal Study 1997–2016. In *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 2020, Vol. 64, No. 5, p. 794-814.

⁵⁷ See: COHEN, A. A. (ed.): *Foreign News on Television: Where in the world is the global village?* New York : Peter Lang, 2013.

⁵⁸ BENESCH, C.: An Empirical Analysis of the Gender Gap in News Consumption. In *Journal of Media Economics*, 2012, Vol. 25, No. 3, p. 147-167.

⁵⁹ See: MCCOMBS, M., et al.: *The News and Public Opinion: Media Effects on Civic Life*. Boston : Polity Press, 2011.

⁶⁰ See: COHEN, A. A. (ed.): *Foreign News on Television: Where in the World Is the Global Village?* New York : Peter Lang, 2013.

⁶¹ See: BAKKER, T., et al.: The Context of Content: The Impact of Source and Setting on the Credibility of News. In *Recherches en communication*, 2013, Vol. 40, p. 151-168; CHYI, H. I., LEE, A. M.: Online News Consumption: A Structural Model Linking Preference, Use, and Paying Intent. In *Digital Journalism*, 2013, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 194-211.; MCCOMBS, M., et al.: *The News and Public Opinion: Media Effects on Civic Life*. Boston : Polity Press, 2011.

⁶² See: ESSER, F., STEPPAT, D.: *News Media Use: International Comparative Research*. In *The International Encyclopaedia of Media Effects*. Hoboken, New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons, 2017 p. 1-17. [online]. [2022-03-30]. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313895437_News_Media_Use_International_Comparative_Research>.

⁶³ Ibidem.

⁶⁴ See: BERGSTRÖM, A., STRÖMBÄCK, J., ARKHEDE, S.: Towards Rising Inequalities in Newspaper and Television News Consumption? A Longitudinal Analysis, 2000-2016. In *European Journal of Communication*, 2019, Vol. 34, No. 2, p. 175-189.; MCCOMBS, M., et al.: *The News and Public Opinion: Media Effects on Civic Life*. Boston : Polity Press, 2011.

⁶⁵ See: ANDERSEN, K., et al.: *Generational Gaps in Political Media Use and Civic Engagement: From Baby Boomers to Generation Z*. London : Routledge, 2020. [online]. [2022-03-30]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003111498>>; DIEHL, T., BARNIDGE, M., GIL DE ZUNIGA, H.: Multi-platform News Use and Political Participation across Age Groups: Toward a Valid Metric of Platform Diversity and Its Effects. In *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2019, Vol. 96, No. 2, p. 428-451.; LOADER, B. D., VROMEN, A., XENOS, M. A.: The Networked Young Citizen: Social Media, Political Participation and Civic Engagement. In *Information, Communication & Society*, 2014, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 143-150.

we could not find solid academic literature that could help us to advance hypotheses regarding the relationship between these three main socio-demographic variables and patterns of news consumption within the current media environment. In such a context, we are interested in exploring the main socio-demographic characteristics of each news users' profile. Thus, we formulate the following research question:

RQ. Are there any socio-demographic characteristics that would make people prefer a certain pattern of news consumption?

3 Methodology

3.1 Method

In order to explore the profiles of news consumption among the Romanian population, we conducted a national survey using an online panel (N=1,000), representative of the population of Romania that has access to the Internet and is aged 18 or higher, using quotas for gender, age, and geographical region. The main characteristics of the sample are the following: the mean age is 42,89 years (SD=14,53); the sample consists of 50% women and 50% men; the sample consists of 2% people with low education, 61% people with medium education, and 37% people with high education; people living in urban areas account for 79,3% of the sample. The national survey was conducted by Daedalus New Media Research and the data were collected during October 6-18, 2021.

3.2 Measurements

The *four types of profiles* were constructed in two steps, by combining people's scores of mainstream media consumption and social media consumption. First, mainstream media consumption was measured using a 4-item scale, each measuring the number of days in a week that people follow the news on four specific types of media outlets, namely TV, radio, online and printed newspapers, and Internet websites, social media excluded. The items grouped in one factor, with loadings ranging from .647 to .750 ($\alpha=.656$, $M=3.60$, $SD=1.74$). Social media consumption was measured using a similar wording, for 5 most widely used social media and instant messaging platforms in Romania (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook messenger), which grouped in one factor, with loadings from .734 to .852 ($\alpha=.852$, $M=2.39$, $SD=2.03$). Second, people were categorized into light/ heavy mainstream media users and social media users, respectively, using the mean score of each variable to define the group ($M=3.60$, and $M=2.39$ respectively). We then cross-tabulated these groups and obtained four basic profiles: *mainstream media consumers* (scoring high on mainstream media news consumption and low on social media news consumption), *social media consumers* (scoring low on mainstream media news consumption and high on social media news consumption), *all-media consumers* (scoring high on both types of news consumption), and *minimalists* (scoring low on both types of news consumption).

Trust in media sources was measured for both mainstream and social media sources, using the same types of media outlets as for news consumptions (see above). The four items that measured trust in mainstream media sources loaded on one factor (loadings from .752 to .838; $\alpha=.821$, $M=3.98$, $SD=1.43$). The five items in the social media trust scale loaded also on one factor (loadings from .855 to .905; $\alpha=.922$, $M=3.26$, $SD=1.64$).

Incidental news exposure was measured using an 8-item scale adapted from Kim, Chen and de Zuniga.⁶⁶ We asked people how often they stumbled upon news and information about current events, public problems or politics, when they navigated the following channels, for other purposes than news seeking: search engines (such as Google), online portals (such as Yahoo), personal emails, forums, blogs, social networks (such as Facebook or Instagram), online advertising, instant messaging platforms (such as WhatsApp or Facebook messenger). Items loaded on one factor (loadings from .720 to .791; $\alpha=.888$, $M=3.43$, $SD=1.47$).

For *diversity of news media diet (echo chambers)* we used a 4-item scale adapted from Dubois and Blank,⁶⁷ asking people how often (from 1 “never” to 7 “very often”) they do four different actions, when looking for political or public affairs related information: “Read/see things you do not agree with.”; “Check other sources than the one you usually use.”; “Try to confirm the information, searching for a different source.”; “Try to confirm the information, searching for an important offline source (TV, printed press, radio)”. Items loaded on one factor, with loadings ranging from .749 to .908 ($\alpha=.882$, $M=4.41$, $SD=1.61$).

We investigated three *socio-demographic* variables. Sex was measured binary (50% males, 50% females of the sample). Age was measured continuously (years of age: $M=42.89$; $SD=14.53$). Education was measured on an 8-item scale (following the International Standard Classification of Education⁶⁸ scale).

4 Results

Results offer support for H1, in the sense that people who consume mainstream news media more (all media and mainstream media profiles) tend to trust more mainstream media than people who consume less news coming from mainstream media sources. Specifically, One-Way ANOVA showed significant differences ($F(3,992)=69.34$, $p<.01$); post-hoc Bonferonni test showed the differences are significant between any two pairs of profiles (see Descriptives in TABLE 1).

At the same time, results show that people who consume social media more (all media and social media profiles) tend to trust more social media as a source for news ($F(3,967)=122.59$, $p<.01$); post-hoc Bonferonni test showed significant differences between each profile of heavy social media news users and each profile of light social media news users (see Descriptives in TABLE 1).

		Trust in mainstream media	Trust in social media
All media news user	Mean	5.12	4.89
	N	132	132
	SD	1.19	1.48
Mainstream media user	Mean	4.56	2.89
	N	167	165
	SD	1.25	1.36
SNS news user	Mean	4.00	4.20
	N	171	171
	SD	1.33	1.53

⁶⁶ KIM, Y., CHEN, H. T., DE ZÚÑIGA, H. G.: Stumbling upon News on the Internet: Effects of Incidental News Exposure and Relative Entertainment Use on Political Engagement. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2013, Vol. 29, No. 6, p. 2610.

⁶⁷ DUBOIS, E., BLANK, G.: The Echo Chamber Is Overstated: The Moderating Effect of Political Interest and Diverse Media. In *Information, Communication & Society*, 2018, Vol. 21, No. 5, p. 736.

⁶⁸ ISCED. 2011. [online]. [2022-03-30]. Available at: < https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_%28ISCED%29#Implementation_of_ISCED_2011_-_28levels_of_education.29%3E>.

Minimalist user	Mean	3.49	2.63
	N	526	503
	SD	1.34	1.34
Total	Mean	3.98	3.26
	N	996	971
	SD	1.43	1.64

TABLE 1: Descriptives of trust in media sources for each profile

Source: own processing, 2022.

As far as incidental news exposure is concerned, results offer support for H2, in the sense that all media news users and social media news users are more prone to be accidentally exposed to news, compared with the other news profiles. Specifically, One-Way ANOVA showed significant differences ($F(3,996)=77.68, p<.01$). Post hoc Bonferonni test showed significant differences between all media and mainstream media news users; between all media and minimalists news users, between SNS and mainstream news users, and between SNS news users and minimalists (see Descriptives in TABLE 2).

		Incidental news exposure	
All media news user	Mean	4.80	
	N	133	
	SD	1.36	
Mainstream media user	Mean	3.26	
	N	167	
	SD	1.31	
SNS news user	Mean	3.92	
	N	171	
	SD	1.31	
Minimalist user	Mean	2.97	
	N	529	
	SD	1.32	
Total	Mean	3.43	
	N	1000	
	SD	1.47	

TABLE 2: Descriptives of incidental news exposure for each profile

Source: own processing, 2022.

H3 was partially validated in the sense that minimalist news users and social media users are more likely to be exposed to similar content than users of mainstream media and all media sources. One-Way ANOVA showed significant differences ($F(3,996)=27.31, p<.01$). However, post-hoc Games-Howell test showed significant differences between all media news users and minimalists, between all media news users and social media users (at $p<.05$), and between mainstream media users and minimalists (see Descriptives in TABLE 3). There was no significant difference between mainstream media users and social media users.

		Diversity of news media diet (high scores – more diverse media diet)
All media news user	Mean	5.10
	N	133
	SD	1.41
Mainstream media user	Mean	4.93
	N	167
	SD	1.48
SNS news user	Mean	4.61
	N	171
	SD	1.43
Minimalist user	Mean	4.01
	N	529
	SD	1.64
Total	Mean	4.41
	N	1000
	SD	1.61

TABLE 3: Descriptives of diversity of news media for each profile

Source: own processing, 2022.

Additionally, there is a significant difference between social media users and minimalists, in the sense that the more news one consumes the more diverse their media diet.

Summing up, we could conclude that echo chambers tend to occur only for minimalists, i.e., for people who have a general low consumption of media content, irrespective of its source – mainstream or social media. Furthermore, results prove that this effect is not related to political ideology; we tested possible ideological differences between profiles and they did not prove significant.

In terms of socio-demographic characteristics that would make people prefer a certain pattern of news consumption, results showed statistically significant differences between profiles in regard to age, small differences in terms of gender, while education did not significantly differ across news profiles (see Descriptives in TABLE 4).

		gender (males)	age	education
All media news user	Mean	51.9%	43.25	5.70
	N	133	133	133
	SD		14.68	1.19
Mainstream media user	Mean	58.7%	49.01	6.01
	N	167	167	167
	SD		12.09	1.28
SNS news user	Mean	41.5%	38.64	5.71
	N	171	171	171
	SD		16.21	1.18
Minimalist user	Mean	49.5%	42.24	5.88
	N	529	529	529
	SD		14.02	1.29

Total	Mean	50.0%	42.89	5.85
	N	1000	1000	1000
	SD		14.53	1.26

TABLE 4: Descriptives of socio-demographics for each profile

Source: own processing, 2022.

Specifically, main results show that female users tend to be dominant among SNS users, while males tend to use more mainstream media sources. Chi square test showed significant differences between groups ($\chi^2=10.19$, $df.=3$, $N=1000$, $p<.05$).

Furthermore, as far as age is concerned, results show that younger people prefer SNS, whereas older people prefer mainstream news sources. One-Way ANOVA showed significant differences ($F(3,996)=15.81$, $p<.01$). Post hoc Bonferonni test showed significant differences between all media news users and mainstream media users, between all media news users and SNS news users (at $p<.05$), between mainstream media users and SNS users, between mainstream media users and minimalist users, and between SNS users and minimalist users (at $p<.05$). However, there was no significant difference between all media users and minimalists (see Descriptives in TABLE 4).

5 Discussion

The four news repertoires that we have depicted (*mainstream media consumers*, *social media consumers*, *all-media consumers*, and *minimalists*) align with previous research⁶⁹ but also provide new insights in terms of the underlying drivers of the identified news repertoires. Our research showed that access to information, news exposure patterns and trust in news media are key correlates for the identified news repertoires.

Our findings are in line with recent studies,⁷⁰ which argue that news use is more ritual than instrumental. People cope with the abundance of choice offered by the current media environment by relying upon relatively small “repertoires” of their preferred media. Furthermore, people have habitual patterns of media consumption and, instead of constantly selecting information sources, they are attached to their preferred media. While previous research on news repertoires has provided valuable insights into the general characteristics of people’s news habits, little is still known about how the dynamics of news repertoires impact the level of media trust or the formation of echo chambers that prevent citizens from being exposed to different opinions than their own. Our study shows that media diets are not only a form of habit, but they influence also the way people evaluate the trustworthiness of the sources that provide information. The more people consume mainstream news media, the more they trust them and, respectively, the more people are exposed to social media, the more they find them trustworthy.

Another insightful finding of our study was that minimalist news users and social media users were more likely to be exposed to similar content than users of mainstream media, which implies that the formation of echo chambers depends also on the type of media one consumes. However, our study has isolated a significant difference in terms of media diets and the type of information included in these diets. Specifically, echo chambers (i.e., exposure only to similar opinions and worldviews) had a tendency to occur only for minimalists (a low diet of both

⁶⁹ See: VAN AELST, P. et al.: Political Communication in a High-choice Media Environment: A Challenge for Democracy?. In *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 2017, Vol. 41, No. 1, p. 3-27.

⁷⁰ See: ANDERSEN, K. et al.: Maintenance and Reformation of News Repertoires: A Latent Transition Analysis. In *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2022, Vol. 99, No. 1, p. 237-261.

mainstream and social media), while for people more exposed to social media this consequence was reduced. Additionally, this effect seems to be mainly related to the information environment people are engaged in and not to their political ideologies, which did not prove significant for differentiating the audience profiles we have employed.

As far as incidental news exposure is concerned, our research indicates that all-media news users and social media news users are more likely to be accidentally exposed to news, compared with mainstream media users and minimalists. This is possibly due to the fact that all-media and social media users have a social media-centric diet (i.e., the largest proportion of their information comes from social media), which makes them more prone to incidental news exposure due to social networks algorithms and news feeds. Social media platforms not only customise their users' news feeds, but they also actively expose them to the most engaging and visible information within their networks. This implies a certain pattern of consumption, which might also be a coping mechanism in regards to the abundance of information disseminated by social media. People who consume more social media do not seek information actively, on the contrary, information is curated for them. Furthermore, social networks news feeds make them more likely to be accidentally exposed to information shared by their groups of friends.

In this context, it is also important to note that recent data⁷¹ indicate certain country characteristics for news repertoires. The share of news minimalists is, for instance, larger in high-income countries, such as Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. These countries are characterised by stronger democratic structures, economic openness and a higher social mobility, which might explain the large proportion of news minimalists, who select their media diets more attentively. Limiting the exposure to information and actively selecting its content seems, therefore, to indicate a pattern of more sophisticated media users, who consciously curate their information diets. On the other hand, online news seekers and social media consumers are best represented in four European countries: Italy, Spain, Poland, and Romania.⁷² These media usage patterns seem to be explained by three main factors: a) the accessibility of online/social media-based sources; b) their low price, and c) because traditional media is generally less trusted due to a history of political partisanship and instrumentalization.⁷³

Our study presents a different image of the Romanians' news diets, with a high proportion of news minimalists (52.9%) and similar percentages of SNS news users (17.1%) and mainstream media users (16.7%). These variations in results might be due to the different granulation of the media type consumption, and to the moment of the study. Castro et al.⁷⁴ gathered data at the beginning of the pandemic, a time of crisis when people's need for orientation becomes unusually high,⁷⁵ and media consumption in general increased significantly in Romania. In terms of users' profiles, we have identified four main profiles (*mainstream media consumers*, *social media consumers*, *all-media consumers*, and *minimalists*), while other similar studies have

⁷¹ See: CASTRO, L. et al.: Navigating High-choice European Political Information Environments: A Comparative Analysis of News User Profiles and Political Knowledge. In *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2021, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 1-33. ISSN 1940-1612. [online]. [2022-03-03]. Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/19401612211012572>>

⁷² Ibidem.

⁷³ See: STRÖMBÄCK, J.: In Search of a Standard: Four Models of Democracy and Their Normative Implications for Journalism. In *Journalism Studies*, 2005, Vol. 6, No. 3, p. 331-345.

⁷⁴ See: CASTRO, L. et al.: Navigating High-choice European Political Information Environments: A Comparative Analysis of News User Profiles and Political Knowledge. In *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2021, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 1-33. ISSN 1940-1612. [online]. [2022-03-03]. Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/19401612211012572>>.

⁷⁵ LOWERY, W.: Media Dependency During a Large-Scale Social Disruption: The Case of September 11. In *Mass Communication and Society*, 2004, Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 339.

employed different labels for depicting media diets. Castro et al.⁷⁶ have differentiated between five categories of news users in order to measure political knowledge and participation: news minimalists, social media news users, traditionalists, online news seekers, and hyper news consumers. For the purpose of our study, this fragmentation of media users' profiles was not necessary. The categories do not measure, therefore, exactly the same thing.

Our data have also pointed out some differences in terms of socio-demographics. While education does not seem to play a role in the choice of media diets, age and gender do seem to matter to some extent. Our results show that female users tend to be dominant among SNS users, while males tend to use more mainstream media sources. As expected, when it comes to age, our data indicate that younger people prefer SNS, whereas older people prefer mainstream news sources.

In brief, our study contributes to the field of media studies by highlighting the prevalence of people who are news minimalists, meaning that they seldom use the media to get news. Such news consumption pattern raises a concern for democracy and for the role of informed citizens in actively getting involved in civic matters. Apart from political apathy, the today high-choice media environments can more easily create knowledge gaps and disinterest towards societal issues in general. The digital and social media foster inequalities not only in media use, but also in vital information about public interest issues, which amplifies the current media malaise. If citizens lack the relevant information to engage with politics and societal issues, they cannot monitor the well-functioning of the societies they live in.

As recent studies indicate,⁷⁷ media environments are becoming more fragmented and polarized, and people tend to prefer attitude-consistent information. While there might be a cross-channel proliferation of partisan biased and fake information, our study shows that social media seem to facilitate the phenomenon of polarising opinions to a larger extent than mainstream media. News minimalists are another trend in high-choice media environments confirmed by our study. Based on our data, 53% of the population consume news to a low degree, which makes them not only disengaged with political and social issues, but also possibly misinformed and more prone to polarisation. On a societal level, these media habits pose a serious threat to democracy.

In terms of limitations, the survey approach comes with the risk that the identified news repertoires are based on relatively simple measures. Thus, future research on news repertoires should consider both cross-platform consumption patterns and the increasingly individualized and fragmented media environment. Secondly, adding specific brands of news sources used by respondents in our sample would have offered a more nuanced image of media repertoires, by providing a better understanding of the messages people are exposed to and the actual impact of information habits. Additionally, the sample is only representative for gender, age, and geographic region.

The combination of survey and unobtrusively collected observational data enables researchers to understand better whether, for instance, high levels of incidental news exposure among minimalists are indeed due to their tendency to opt-out of news consumption, or are instead motivated by patterns of underreporting news consumption. Similarly, the study of social media-centric repertoires should analyse their resonance with other sources of information or interpersonal communication and the possibility that respondents might be prone to cognitive biases, such as the third person effect, etc.

⁷⁶ See: CASTRO, L. et al.: Navigating High-choice European Political Information Environments: A Comparative Analysis of News User Profiles and Political Knowledge. In *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2021, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 1-33. ISSN 1940-1612. [online]. [2022-03-03]. Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/19401612211012572>>.

⁷⁷ See: VAN AELST, P. et al.: Political Communication in a High-choice Media Environment: A Challenge for Democracy?. In *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 2017, Vol. 41, No. 1, p. 3-27.

6 Conclusion

Our examination of news repertoires provides a useful contribution to audience research within journalism and mass communication. The study also contributes to a better understanding of media diets by highlighting the important role played by trust and information exposure in some news repertoires. It is important to detect these new patterns of media consumption (mainstream or social media) in order to shed more light on current issues, such as echo chambers and misinformation.⁷⁸ Our study supports the hypothesis that news repertoires foster the creation of echo chambers for some people more than for others. News minimalists and social media users are exposed to a more homogenous information environment in terms of opinions, compared to mainstream or all-media users. This suggests that, if people consume news mainly from social media or opt-out of consuming news altogether, they are deprived of the plurality of views necessary for developing informed opinions.

The topic of media repertoires has recently drawn more academic interest and valuable attempts have been made to measure the stability of media repertoires.⁷⁹ In this context, our study has provided valuable insights by showing how people navigate the today high-choice media environment by constructing their own media diets, which reflect their attitudes towards news and their trust in information sources. As social media become an increasingly important source of information, exploring the impact of social-media based information diets is crucial for communication sciences. Future studies should also use longitudinal designs in order to explore how changes in media environments influence knowledge acquisition and inequalities and if there is a difference in terms of political knowledge among people who predominantly use social media, compared to the use of traditional media.

To conclude, our study illustrates how news repertoires impact trust in media sources and other media-related phenomena, such as incidental news exposure and echo chambers. Results from this study could be further used to inform evidence-based policies aimed at raising awareness about the important role the media sources and content play in democratic societies.

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