

STILL A SHARED COMMUNICATIVE SPACE? THE ONGOING FRAGMENTATION OF EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Maximilian Conrad and Saul Newman

The article discusses the state of the public sphere in Europe in the context of concerns over a possible fragmentation brought about by presumably increasing ideological and affective polarization in European societies. If confirmed, such a fragmentation of the public sphere would be detrimental to the functioning of democratic deliberation in European representative democracies and could constitute an important ingredient in the further development of post-truth political cultures. The fragmentation of the public sphere is here understood as the process through which the public sphere gradually loses its status as a shared and inclusive communicative space for deliberation on matters of public concern and is replaced by a multitude of competing semi-public spheres of the likeminded. To evaluate claims about such a fragmentation, we analyze available data on the development of media consumption and trust in media at the European and national levels. Our analysis shows that despite certain concerning developments, many European public spheres are still integrated around key leading media. However, developments in recent years also highlight a need for political theorists to reflect on ways to reinvigorate the public sphere beyond the level of deliberation in the forums of the mass media.

KEYWORDS public sphere; fragmentation; post-truth; media consumption; media trust; polarization; populism

Introduction

Despite its many critics, the Habermasian ideal type of the public sphere—imagined as a shared and inclusive communicative space for collective opinion and will formation—remains an important point of reference and normative yardstick in discussions about the interplay between civil society and institutional decision making in representative democracies. Even in the digital age, where developments in information technology have fundamentally reshaped the conditions for the formation of publics and for public deliberation, the existence of a shared and inclusive communicative space is still considered by many democratic theorists to be an important, even *indispensable*, infrastructural requirement for modern representative democracies. As such, it is an integral ingredient in

deliberative understandings of representative democracy that emphasize the crucial role of day-to-day public debate as an effort in both truth seeking *and* collective self-determination (Trenz 2023).

In the early 2000s, the lack of such a shared communicative space played a central role also in debates on the European Union (EU)'s democratic deficit (e.g., Eder and Kantner 2002; Risse 2004; Trenz 2005; Eriksen 2005). Although the prospects for the emergence of a shared European public sphere were constrained by the union's linguistic diversity and the absence of an integrated media system (and European leading media), it was argued that the *democratic functions* of a European public sphere could be achieved, under certain conditions, by transnational debates in a set of Europeanized national public spheres (e.g., Risse 2004; Eder and Kantner 2002; Kantner 2004; Conrad 2014). Over the last decade, the state of the public sphere has been particularly prominent in debates on the rise of post-truth politics and its implications for liberal democracy (McIntyre 2018; Newman 2019; Newman 2022). This debate has addressed, inter alia, the transformative role of the internet—and especially of social and other digital media—in reshaping the conditions for public communication, the constitution of publics, and ultimately also the public sphere as such (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Møller Hartley et al., 2023; Ojala and Ripatti-Torniaainen 2024). Some scholars have even abandoned the idea of the public sphere as a shared communicative space capable of integrating societies, arguing that “scholarship in the digital era paints a picture of *fragmented public spheres* where bringing together a scattered audience is becoming increasingly challenging” (Eisenegger and Schäfer 2023, 65). Indeed, Cass Sunstein famously argued that the rise of social and other digital media has created the conditions for the emergence of online echo chambers that would fundamentally undermine the status and integrative role of the public sphere (Sunstein 2017). If confirmed, the assumption of a fragmentation of the public sphere would be detrimental to the functioning of democratic deliberation in European representative democracies and could constitute an important ingredient in the further development of the post-truth condition (Conrad 2025).

However, debates on the state of the public sphere in the digital age are marked by a hitherto only insufficiently addressed tension: on the one hand, a good number of leading public sphere theorists—especially within media and communication studies, and less so in political and democratic theory—consider the public sphere to be doomed as a unified (and *unifying*) communicative space (Bruns 2023). In part, this may be because the echo chamber thesis is widely considered to be refuted (Guess 2021). However, European public spheres are also characterized by a striking level of heterogeneity regarding the continued role of traditional media sources in the media diets of their citizens (Newman et al. 2025). The fact that traditional media sources continue to play a central role in many public spheres warrants further analysis in discussions on the fragmentation of the public sphere in increasingly “hybrid” media systems (Chadwick 2017). Moreover, this heterogeneity is also key in informing debates on the presumed post-truth transformation of political cultures in Europe and elsewhere. This article contributes to filling this gap by discussing the state of the public sphere in Europe in the context of its ongoing profound structural transformation (Habermas 2022; Seeliger and Seignani 2022). It does so by considering two key indicators of the presumed fragmentation of European public spheres: media consumption patterns and trust in news in general as well as in specific media sources in particular.

Following this brief introduction, the next section provides the theoretical and conceptual context by spelling out why representative democracy, even in the digital age, requires a shared communicative space along the lines of the ideal-typical deliberative

public sphere. This section highlights the crucial distinction between the public sphere as a normative concept and the challenging empirical conditions that it faces due to the rise of the internet and the associated transformation of publicness in the digital age (Brüggemann and Meyer 2023). The third section discusses these challenging empirical conditions, before the fourth section addresses conceptual and methodological aspects, arguing that any analysis of the fragmentation of public spheres—whether in Europe or elsewhere—requires a careful consideration of trends in media consumption as well as in (dis-)trust in news in general and in specific media sources in particular. Such trends provide important insights as to the degree to which public spheres can still be considered to be integrated around key leading media and, conversely, as to the degree to which signs of a (beginning) fragmentation into a multitude of smaller, competing and potentially self-isolating semi-public spheres of likeminded people (Habermas 2022) are already observable. The final section presents a short concluding discussion on the state of the public sphere in Europe.

Key Features of the Deliberative Public Sphere

Political and democratic theory has generated contrasting accounts of the structure of the public sphere and its role in democratic governance. The discussion in this article is largely premised on the deliberative understanding that sees the public sphere, ideal-typically, as an abstract *communicative space* emerging out of the interactions of private individuals coming forward to discuss matters of shared concern in public (Habermas, 1962/1989; 1992). This ideal-typical communicative space is evidently an abstraction rather than a concrete physical space, but it is an abstraction that is clearly inspired by the idea of the ancient Athenian agora as a meeting place for citizens' deliberation on matters of shared concern.¹

In modern mass democracies, the idea of exchanging arguments about matters of shared concern *in public* has lost nothing of its significance. We argue that this is so despite the evident structural transformation that has occurred in the wake of the rise of the internet and, subsequently, the emergence of digital and social media (Habermas 2022; Seeliger and Seignani 2022; Eisenegger and Schäfer 2023). As a shared communicative space, it plays a *systemic* role in deliberative democracy (García-Gutián 2024) and is therefore closely connected to strong *normative* expectations regarding its *inclusivity* and *rationality*. But by extension, this inclusivity and rationality is also connected to strong expectations regarding the epistemic value-added of public deliberation (Habermas 2022). Regarding its systemic role, the public sphere plays a fundamentally different role than the institutions of the political system. While the latter possess the administrative power to make collectively binding decisions (Habermas 1992), the public sphere's "essential but limited role" (Habermas 2022) is the generation of communicative power through processes of public deliberation. Precisely because deliberators are compelled to provide good arguments—based on the common good as opposed to private interests—and to revise them in light of potentially better counterarguments, the communicative power generated in public deliberation is an important ingredient in challenging the democratic legitimacy of institutional decision making. This interplay forms a hallmark of the conceptualization of democratic legitimacy in deliberative accounts of representative democracy. Arguably, this normative expectation towards the public sphere's systemic role is valid *also* in the changing empirical conditions that characterize the digital age.

The public sphere's epistemic role—which is due to the consensus *orientation* of public deliberation (Habermas 2022)—is contingent upon its ability to meet the twin

normative requirements of inclusivity and rationality: all relevant perspectives on a given matter must be heard (inclusivity) and deliberators must adhere to the normative obligation to provide argumentative justifications for their position's (rationality). In fragmented public spheres, both of these twin normative requirements are significantly impaired, thus fundamentally undermining its essential systemic role as "the sole locus where public opinion and political will are formed in a manner that in principle includes *in corpore* all adult citizens who are eligible to vote" (Habermas 2022, italics in the original). As discussed in the following section, this makes the presumed emergence of echo chambers (Sunstein 2017; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022) a systemic problem facing representative democracies in the digital age, and the severity of this problem is perhaps not properly understood by empirical approaches alone. In assessing the role of the normative ideal of the public sphere in the digital age, it is essential to keep in mind its systemic role—as the deliberative track of democratic politics—in holding institutional decision making accountable to the general public. After all, this is the important mechanism that allows citizens, as the famous formulation goes, to regard themselves not simply as the *addressees*, but indeed as the *authors* of the law (Habermas 1992).

The Public Sphere in the Digital Age: A New Structural Transformation?

The communicative conditions of the digital age—which for many observers amount to a new structural transformation of the public sphere (Habermas 2022; Rosa 2022; Seeliger and Seignani 2022)—challenge commonly held assumptions about the viability of the public sphere imagined as a shared communicative space (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Bruns 2023; Schlesinger 2024). Furthermore, a substantial body of literature attests to the implications of the rise of digital technologies for the emergence and constitution of publics. In the digital age, publics are increasingly fragmented and are imagined, inter alia, as "networked publics" (Boyd 2010), "personal publics" (Schmidt 2014), "calculated publics" (Gillespie 2014), or even as "algorithmic publics" (Bucher 2016; for an overview see also Møller Hartley et al. 2023). Accompanied by a broader transformation of communication ecosystems, this increasing fragmentation has also resulted in a declining significance of the institution of journalism as a force integrating the public sphere (Eisenegger and Schäfer 2023; Schneiders et al. 2023).² Some authors have therefore concluded that what is left is merely a "post-public sphere" (Schlesinger 2020; 2024), and that what may once have been "the public sphere is now *irretrievably* fractured into a multiplicity of online and offline, larger and smaller, more or less public spaces" (Bruns 2023). The rise of social media has fundamentally reshaped not only the type of media-audience relationships that have long characterized the public sphere, but in a broader sense also the—increasingly "*dissonant*" (Pfetsch 2018, 61)—public sphere as such. The fact that virtually everyone now has the means to publish "content"—at virtually no cost—via a whole variety of platforms is precisely why many, Habermas included, speak of the advent of the internet as a new structural transformation of the public sphere.³

This creates a significant challenge to conceptualizations of the public sphere, but it does not undermine the fundamentally *normative* expectation that the public sphere has to approximate, as closely as possible, the deliberative ideal of an inclusive, rational, and more or less integrated communicative space. It is important to emphasize that this does not, at least not inherently, mean that this communicative space can only be integrated around the role of leading traditional media. Neither does it mean that publics, as imagined by the diverse scholarship that has emerged in relation to the digital transformation of information ecosystems, cannot make an essential contribution to the shared communicative

space of the public sphere – quite the contrary. But from this normative perspective, giving up on what many perceive to be an outdated concept—the very idea of a public sphere that is rooted in civil society and forms a communicative counterweight to the institutions of the political system—is not an option. This point is heavily emphasized in the political-theoretical and sociological traditions of public sphere theory, it has been remarked that it tends to be overlooked in the literature on networked publics (Ojala and Ripatti-Torniainen, 2024). From the democratic perspective, the key question is indeed whether this normative ideal type can be reconciled with the empirical realities of the digital age. In order to answer such questions—which are key in assessing the prospects of democracy in post-truth contexts—it is crucial not simply to assert, *a priori*, the fragmentation of the public sphere as a hallmark of the digital age, but to analyze empirically to what extent and under what conditions processes of public sphere fragmentation occur. Similarly, as will be done in the last part of this article, it is important to consider ways to renew or reinvigorate the public sphere beyond the forums created and upheld by traditional mass media. First, though, it is necessary to look at some of the dysfunctional features that are assumed to characterize fragmented public spheres.

To begin with, early assumptions about the democratic benefit of increased connectivity were fairly quick to give way to more somber analyses emphasizing the polarizing dynamics that have accompanied the profound transformation of the information ecosystem (e.g., Pfetsch 2018; Bennett and Pfetsch 2018). More recently, this interplay between fragmentation and polarization has also been considered to play a key role in the emergence of post-truth politics (MacIntyre 2018; Newman 2019) and/or truth decay (Kavanagh and Rich 2018), i.e., the changing status not only of facts and analysis in politics (and public life more broadly), but also the increasing reluctance to engage in public deliberation with members of opposing political camps. In particular, it has been observed that populist post-truth politics has been characterized by a distinctively *anti-deliberative thrust* that is expressed, *inter alia*, by an outright refusal to answer questions from critical journalistic outlets that are actively delegitimized as “fake news” (Conrad and Newman 2026).

The much-debated notions of “echo chambers” and/or “filter bubbles” are important in this context, in particular as regards the seemingly increasing tendency to avoid—whether consciously or not—exposure to information as well as direct engagement with opposing political camps and worldviews. Echo chambers are assumed to be a result of the increasing importance of algorithmic selection and personalized media diets in the digital age, along the lines spelled out also by work on algorithmic and personal publics (Gillespie 2014; Schmidt 2014). Cass Sunstein’s idea of echo chambers (Sunstein 2017)—understood predominantly as semi-public forums of likeminded people who use the same information sources, predominantly exchange opinions among themselves, and whose views are consequently not challenged by opposing perspectives, is as relevant here as it is contested. While the concern for the shared and inclusive public sphere is quite commonly shared among political and democratic theorists drawing on Habermasian frameworks, empirical studies have disputed the significance of echo chambers in liberal democracies. Such empirical studies have certainly added nuance to the debate by showing only a relatively small group of people—“who may nonetheless exert disproportionate influence and visibility” (Guess 2021; see also Guess et al. 2018)—tend to “inhabit” echo chambers. Other researchers have argued that echo chambers are not as hermetically sealed off as initially assumed and that they may indeed have “windows, but they mostly provide distorted views of an unpleasant neighbor” (Brüggemann and Meyer 2023).

This has important implications both in terms of the integrative force of the shared public sphere—or, alternatively, its contribution to social cohesion (Schneiders et al. 2023)—and in terms of the ability of the public sphere to expose factually incorrect claims. In this context, the link between the fragmentation of the public sphere and polarization—and more specifically *affective* polarization (Iyengar et al. 2012)—needs to be addressed explicitly. The digital transformation of the media environment has created opportunities for the “systematic construction of parallel online realities that enable citizens to live within ‘filter bubbles’ co-produced by social networks, platform algorithms, and affordances” (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018, 245). This is precisely because of the impact of technological developments on the very constitution of publics in the digital age, as captured by notions such as algorithmic, calculated, or personal publics. Specifically, and as also pointed out by Sunstein (2017), it is the “absences of linkages and ties between diverse publics [that] rather emphasizes *anti-communication* dispositions that breed intolerance, apathy and hatred” (Pfetsch 2018, 62, *italics added*). Such dynamics clearly call for a “a public sphere perspective on polarization” that considers “discursive polarization” in order to understand the intimate link between polarization (ideological *and* affective) and the fragmentation of the public sphere (Brüggemann and Meyer 2023). This perspective is indeed needed in a constellation where fragmented publics ultimately would “no longer regard each other as *adversaries* in a common debate but as *lunatics* that are not worth talking to” (*ibid.* 133, *emphasis added*). In this sense, the reconstitution of publics in the digital age has the detrimental effect of reinforcing existing divisions, thereby diminishing the potential for meaningful argumentative exchange across ideological divides. In such a scenario, the public sphere subsequently loses not only its inclusivity, and ultimately also its epistemic purpose and is ultimately degraded to the status of merely *one* communicative space among others (Habermas 2022). With this, the stage is set for the post-truth condition in which alternative facts can no longer be discredited as such. The next question, then, is how to analyze patterns of public sphere fragmentation.

Conceptual and Methodological Perspectives

Choosing suitable indicators for an analysis of the fragmentation of the public sphere is complicated by the fact that the public sphere is by necessity to some extent fragmented: as an *abstract* communicative space that is created through public communicative interactions, it needs to be conceptualized not as a singular forum, but rather as a whole network of forums. Nevertheless, the public sphere also needs to be recognized as such, and this recognition is intimately linked to the publicity as well as the visibility of the communicative interactions occurring within it. In other words, the perception of a shared communicative space is contingent on the degree to which these interactions are visible to an audience (i.e., the public).⁴ In the digital age, this is complicated by the fact that publics themselves are increasingly fragmented along the lines spelled out above, thus undermining the existence of the public sphere as an integrated communicative space. Especially from a normative point of view, this highlights the central—and *possibly* indispensable—integrative role of leading media in the public sphere. But this role is facing a fundamental challenge as traditional leading media appear to be losing ground to social and other digital media, not least because they increasingly need to adapt to the “foreign logic” of social media to be able to compete with the latter for audiences’ attention (Schneiders et al. 2023). This undermines also the traditional agenda-setting and information-provision roles of leading media, with clear implications for the inclusivity of the public sphere. Leading media can only

play this crucial integrative role if they also enjoy significant levels of popular trust. Consequently, our analysis focuses on two key indicators of the possible fragmentation of the public sphere: media consumption patterns and trust in news in general as well as in specific media sources in particular.

First, *media consumption patterns* are a useful indicator for examining whether a given public sphere is integrated around key leading media. Collectively, such leading media need to cover different ideological positions on the political spectrum but also play a central role in the media diets of large parts of a given population. Second, an integrated public sphere also finds expression in the existence of certain media that enjoy sufficiently high levels of trust so that people to look to them for information on and contextualization of political events. Therefore, our analysis considers data on trends in media consumption and trust in media at the European and national levels, drawn predominantly from the Reuters Digital News Reports, but complemented with data from the Eurobarometer News & Media Survey. By analyzing the trajectory of traditional leading media as well as of potential alternative media sources, we aim to show whether, to what extent and, not least, *where* signs of an ongoing fragmentation of the public sphere can be observed in the increasingly “high-choice” media environments (Van Aelst et al. 2017) that characterize public spheres in the digital age.

Analysis: Trajectories of European Public Spheres

Our first finding is that media consumption patterns in Europe are still highly heterogeneous, underscoring the notion that European public spheres continue to be fragmented along national lines. In this sense, there are no clearly identifiable European-wide patterns regarding the media sources that European citizens prefer to use to access information about political or other public events.

However, one striking phenomenon can be observed across national public spheres: while many national public spheres are still to a considerable extent integrated around a certain number of key leading *offline* media (which are often public-service media, as shown below), media consumption patterns are considerably more fragmented with regard to *online* media. This is worth noting in particular because of the increasingly central role that digital media—and not least social media—play as a source of news in many European countries (see discussion below).

Media Consumption Patterns Offline

One of the items surveyed in the Reuters Digital News Report is the weekly reach of the most prominent online and offline news sources in the participating countries, including twenty of the EU-27 member states.⁵ Offline, legacy media—including public broadcasters—continue to play a central role in people’s media diets more or less across the board. In eight of the surveyed countries (of the EU-27), the leading offline medium has a weekly reach of 50% or more (see figure 1 below), in addition to another five countries where the respective media’s weekly reach is between 40% and 49%. Conversely, not a single country in this group has a leading offline medium with a weekly reach below 30% of the population. The strong role of public broadcasters is particularly noteworthy: they are still the outlets with the highest weekly reach in more than half of the surveyed twenty member states of the EU-27.⁶

Nonetheless, there are also clear discrepancies between different groups of EU member states. While some public broadcasters reach well over 60% of the population on

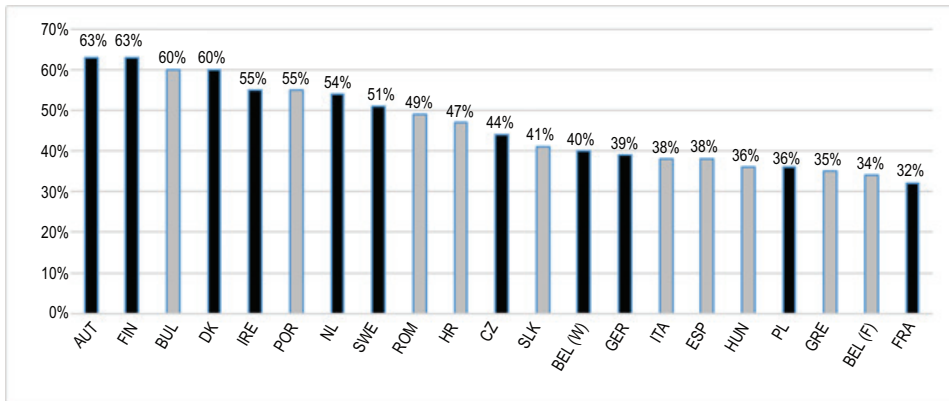


Figure 1. Highest weekly reach of offline media (public media in black). Data from the 2025 Reuters Digital News Report.

a weekly basis (as in Austria and Finland), the weekly reach of the most prominent public broadcaster drops to as low as 15% in Romania and 11% in Hungary (see figure 1). The (normative) assumption that public broadcasters play an integrative role as leading media in the public sphere can therefore be confirmed at best partially: their prominence differs significantly between different (groups of) countries, and part of the picture is clearly also that public-service media play virtually no role at all in a considerable number of the surveyed countries. These differences are correlated with questions of media (dis-)trust, as discussed in more detail in the section on media trust below.

Despite the relevance of the integrative role played by leading media, this analysis also needs to consider the (normative) need for media pluralism. Excessive fragmentation is clearly a threat; but so is also the risk of excessive integration in the sense of a lack of media pluralism. Consequently, the next part of this analysis considers the extent to which European public spheres in the digital age are (still) characterized by a plurality of media outlets that reach significant parts of the respective populations.

Table 1 provides an overview of the number of news outlets with a weekly reach above given thresholds, highlighting also the position of public broadcasters within the respective media landscapes. A few countries stand out as having highly integrated offline public spheres, including countries such as Austria, Denmark and Finland, but also Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden, all of which have leading offline media with a weekly reach beyond 50% and where the leading news source is a public broadcaster. By contrast, countries whose offline public sphere is *not* integrated around key leading media are characterized by a higher number of outlets with a lower weekly reach.⁷ And while every single country in the surveyed group has at least one offline medium with a weekly reach above 30%, the public spheres that are least integrated around leading media are also the ones that are most fragmented in terms of the number of news outlets with a fairly limited reach.

Consistent with this finding, public spheres that are integrated around several leading media are fairly exceptional. The public sphere in countries such as Greece, Poland and Hungary stands out as highly fragmented, as not a single offline news source reaches more than 36% of the population per week. In addition, the most prominent news sources are all

TABLE 1

Number of offline media with a weekly reach above a certain threshold (by country – sorted by country with medium with highest reach)

Country	10%+	20%+	30%+	40%+	50%+	60%+
Austria	13	2	0	0	0	1*
Denmark	2	1	0	0	1	1*
Finland	6	1	0	0	1	1*
Ireland	7	3	0	0	1*	0
Netherlands	4	2	0	0	1*	0
Sweden	2	1	1*	1	1*	0
Bulgaria	4*	2	1*	0	1	1
Portugal	4	5	3*	0	1	0
Belgium (Wallonia)	9**	1	1	1*	0	0
Croatia	5	1	0	3*	0	0
Czech Republic	5*	2	1	1*	0	0
Slovakia	5	2	2*	1	0	0
Belgium (Flanders)	8**	1	2*	0	0	0
France	7**	2	2*	0	0	0
Germany	4*	3	2**	0	0	0
Italy	8*	1	2*	0	0	0
Spain	7*	3	1*	0	0	0
Romania	11**	3	1	1	0	0
Greece	4	6**	2	0	0	0
Poland	7	3*	2	0	0	0
Hungary	6*	1	1	0	0	0

* including one domestic public broadcaster

** including two or more domestic public broadcasters

** no public broadcaster 10% or higher

private TV channels. This is combined with a weak reach of public broadcasters: even the top public broadcaster reaches considerably less than 30% of the Polish and Greek populations, and only 11% in Hungary. This also correlates with low trust in news overall, as we will see in the section on media trust in the final section of this analysis. In sum, the findings on media consumption are quite mixed: while the public sphere is (still) highly integrated around—in some cases a *plurality* of—key leading media in *some* countries, clear signs of fragmentation are observable in a whole range of other countries. The latter have no clearly identifiable leading media, but instead a considerable number of outlets that only reach smaller parts of the respective populations.

Media Consumption Patterns Online

While the *offline* public sphere is still fairly integrated in many of the analyzed cases, this image stands in stark contrast to the considerably more fragmented landscape of *online* media consumption. By and large, there is no online equivalent to the strong role played by leading media in the offline sphere. Among the twenty-one analyzed cases, only Finland features an online medium that reaches more than half the population on a weekly basis, i.e., the tabloid newspaper *Ilta-Sanomat* with a weekly reach of 60%. Public broadcasters play—at best—a much more subordinate role in people's *online* media diets. Figure 2 below illustrates not only the fairly modest weekly reach of the most prominent

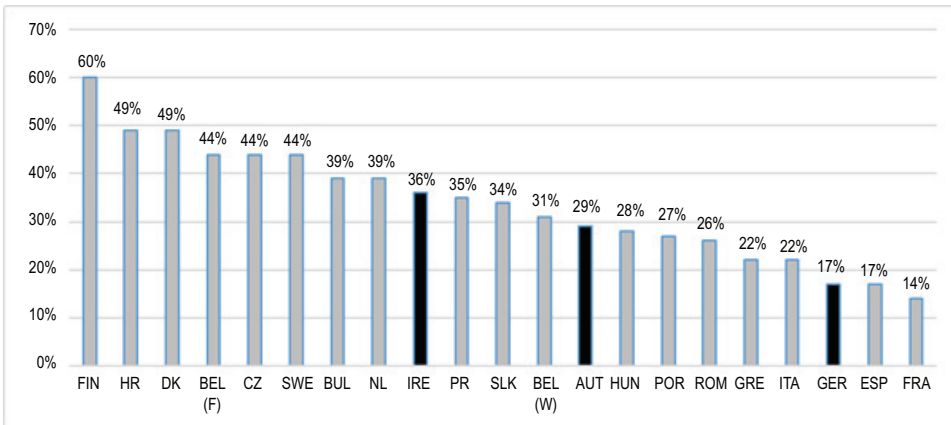


Figure 2. Highest reach of online media, 2025 (public media in black). Data from Reuters Digital News Report.

online media but also shows that public broadcasters are the leading online news source in only *three* of the twenty-one cases studied here, i.e., Ireland, Wallonia/Belgium, and Germany.

If public-sphere fragmentation is understood as the absence of clearly identifiable leading media (with a considerable weekly reach), it becomes relevant to ask whether there are any online media that have at least a modest following in the various analyzed states. For the purposes of this analysis, we look at online media with a weekly reach of at least 20%. Table 2 below shows that although online media play a significant role in many public spheres, this is clearly *not* the case across the board. Strikingly, the online public sphere is highly fragmented even in some of the countries/regions where the *offline* public sphere is still strongly integrated (e.g., Germany or Austria). On the other hand, this does not apply to countries such as Denmark, Sweden, Ireland or the Netherlands, all of which are characterized *both* by strong public broadcasters *and* a high number of online media with a considerable weekly reach.

Table 2 presents a comprehensive overview of the number of online media above certain thresholds in terms of weekly reach in the various countries. Finland stands out in the sense that although the most prominent online news source is a tabloid newspaper, the Finnish online public sphere features three online news outlets with a weekly reach of 40% or higher, including the public broadcaster (41%). Similarly, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands feature integrated online public spheres, also as regards the role of the respective public broadcasters. By contrast, Germany, Spain and France have highly fragmented online public spheres where no online media reach even 20% of the population on a weekly basis, also underscoring the marginal role that public broadcasters play in online media diets in these countries. In the cases of Spain and France, this reflects the fragmented character of the offline public sphere, but the fragmented nature of the German online sphere may be more difficult to explain. Overall, however, the data suggest that public spheres that are strongly integrated *offline* (especially around the leading role of public broadcasters) are also more integrated *online*.

TABLE 2
Number of online media with a weekly reach above a certain threshold (by country – sorted by country with medium with highest reach)

Country	10%+	20%+	30%+	40%+	50%+	60%+
Finland	3	2	0	1*	1	1
Denmark	1	2	0	2*	0	0
Croatia	6	4*	2	2	0	0
Sweden	5*	1	2*	1	0	0
Netherlands	4	1	2*	0	0	0
Czech Republic	5*	1	2	1	0	0
Bulgaria	7*	4*	2	0	0	0
Belgium (Flanders)	0	1	1*	1	0	0
Ireland	7	3	1*	0	0	0
Belgium (Wallonia)	4	2*	1	0	0	0
Poland**	8	3	1	0	0	0
Slovakia**	10	1	1	0	0	0
Hungary**	8	4	0	0	0	0
Greece	13*	3	0	0	0	0
Portugal	14*	2	0	0	0	0
Romania**	12	2	0	0	0	0
Austria	6	1*	0	0	0	0
Italy	6*	1	0	0	0	0
Germany	9*	0	0	0	0	0
Spain	9*	0	0	0	0	0
France	7*	0	0	0	0	0

* including one public broadcaster
** no public broadcaster 10% or higher

Social Media as a Source of News

Data from the Reuters Digital News Reports (2013-2025) show that social media have over time become an increasingly important part of the European citizens’ media diets. This is so despite the fact that legacy media and, in particular, public-service media still play a central role in Europeans’ media diets. In fact, much of the increase in social media use for news has come at the expense of more traditional sources of news and information, in particular the printed press (see below). The significant differences that can be observed between countries regarding the use of social media as a source of information⁸ go hand in hand with the decline of leading media, both in terms of consumption *and* trust (see below): social media are an important source of information particularly in countries where trust in news in general or in specific news sources is low.

Already in 2023, Eurobarometer News & Media Survey data showed that in sixteen of the EU-27 member states, more than half of the sampled population had used social media “to follow the news and current events” in the seven days preceding the survey. These figures were highest in Cyprus, Lithuania, Greece, Malta and Poland (all over 60%), while the average for the whole EU-27 was 47%. But even in countries where this was least common, close to 40% of the population had used social media as a source of news and current events. However, there are also indications that the fear of a fragmentation of the public sphere due to the increasing role of social media *across the board* may be

TABLE 3

Trust in different media sources (data from Eurobarometer News & Media Survey 2023)

Country	Public TV and radio	The written press	Private TV and radio	People, groups or friends followed on social media	YouTube or other video platforms	Other online news platform, blogs or podcasts	Influencers
Finland	71	56	25	13	9	9	9
Portugal	65	54	53	11	9	9	5
Sweden	63	53	16	13	13	13	8
Denmark	61	44	17	13	8	7	7
Netherlands	60	56	25	12	8	11	7
Estonia	59	47	21	17	15	13	8
Luxembourg	59	54	27	13	10	10	6
Belgium	56	50	23	13	10	9	7
Ireland	56	44	21	24	15	17	12
Germany	54	39	22	13	12	6	8
Lithuania	54	30	23	25	23	15	13
Latvia	50	22	19	20	22	12	19
Austria	50	43	27	16	12	8	7
Bulgaria	49	20	21	22	25	20	11
Spain	48	41	40	16	11	14	9
Slovenia	48	26	21	18	11	14	7
France	46	43	30	11	13	15	8
Croatia	46	25	29	23	13	7	6
Slovakia	46	24	24	19	12	15	8
Czech Republic	45	21	27	22	15	16	11
Italy	45	39	28	13	13	22	10
Cyprus	45	33	39	24	19	22	7
Romania	43	25	38	20	22	19	12
Greece	39	34	31	25	23	29	8
Malta	39	35	26	16	10	25	6
Poland	26	21	41	29	24	15	10
Hungary	25	22	18	28	24	28	14
EU-27	48	38	29	16	14	12	9

exaggerated. In fact, the increasing role of social media as a source of information *may* already have passed its peak. Over the period from 2018 to 2025, social media use to obtain information has *decreased* significantly in most of the twenty countries covered by the Reuters Digital News Report, in some cases by over 20 percentage points (Romania and Poland). Overall, there are now only four countries in the survey where *more* than half the population use social media as a source of information. And even in the three countries where social media use as a source of information has gone up, the increase has been very modest: one percentage point in France and two percentage points in Germany and Finland, respectively. Figure 3 illustrates that the gap is evidently closing, at least for the time being, between countries regarding the share of the population using social media as a source of information about political events. Moreover, the data suggest that this is not because social media use is *increasing* in countries where this has been less prominent, but because it is *decreasing* in countries where it has been more prominent. However, it is worth noting that social media were a stunningly prominent

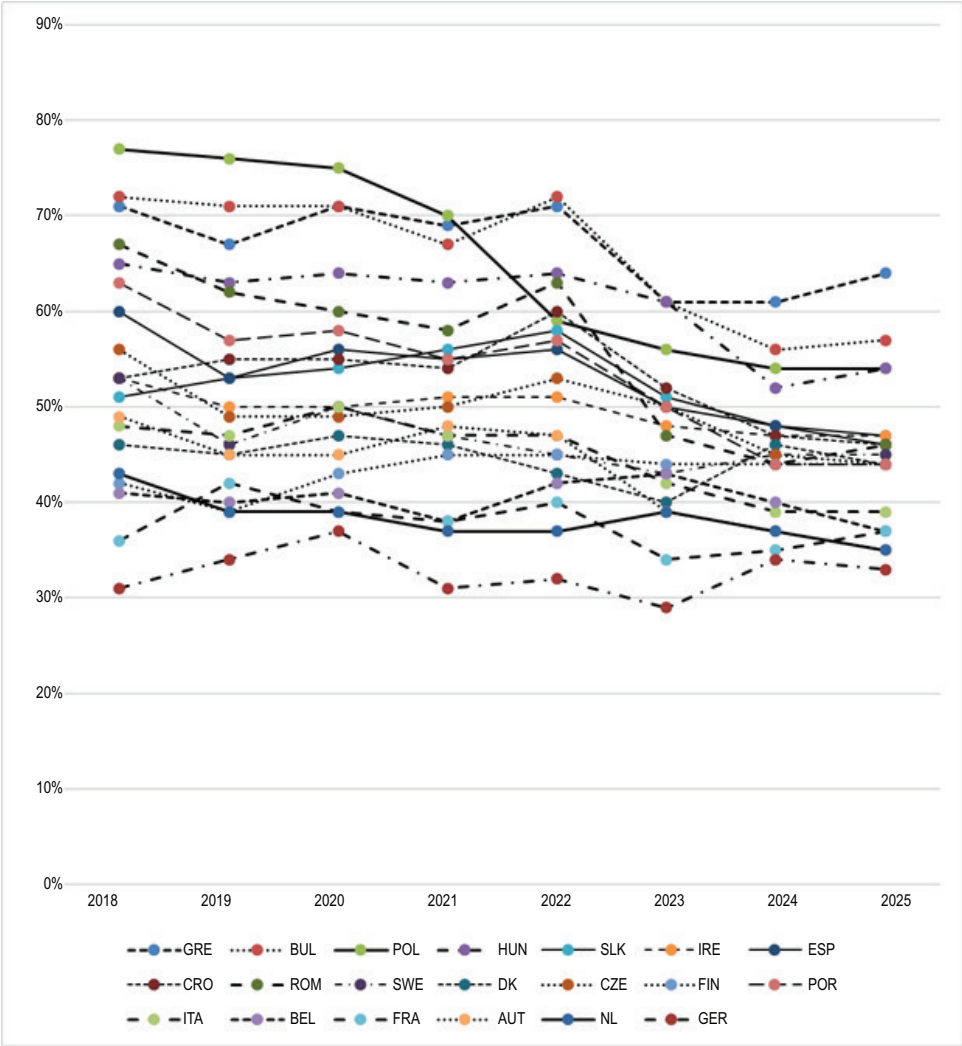


Figure 3. Share of the population that uses social media to find information on news and current events, 2018-2025. Data from the Reuters Digital News Report.

source of information in countries such as Poland (77%), Bulgaria (72%) and Greece (71%) as recently as 2018. And despite this decrease, these countries are still “leading” in terms of social media use as a source of information.

Trust in Different Media and Sources of Information

The country-specific differences within the EU-27 draw attention to an apparent link between media (dis-)trust, media diets/consumption, and the role of social media as a source of information about political events. If confirmed, this would make public-sphere fragmentation also a matter of trust in media. Data from the Eurobarometer News &

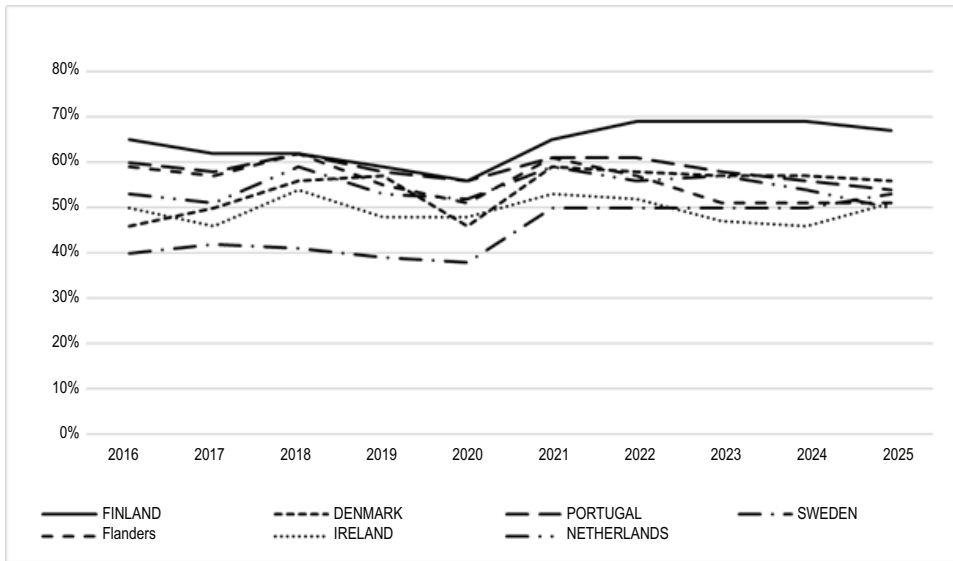


Figure 4. Countries with trust in news 50% or higher (RDN, 2025).

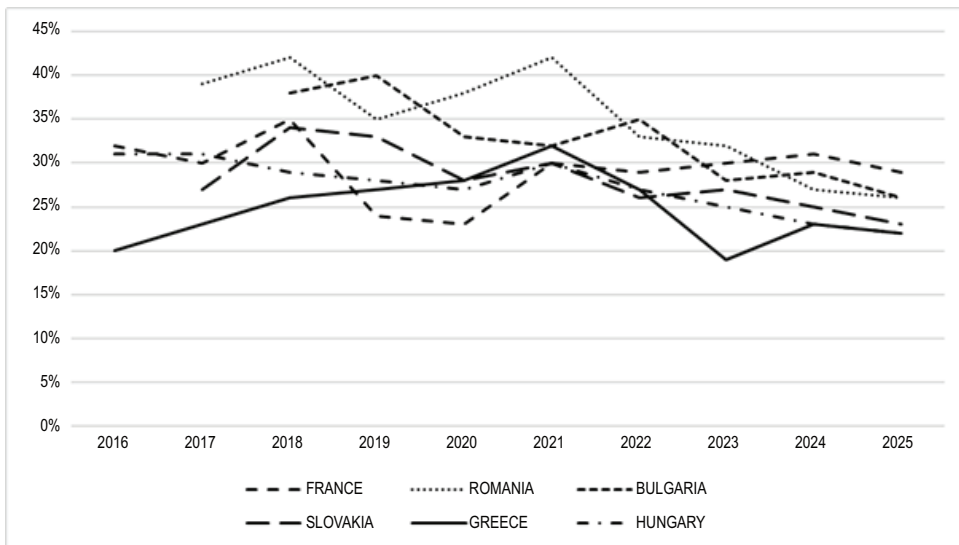


Figure 5. Countries with trust in news below 30% (RDN, 2025).

Media Survey, available for 2022 and 2023, indicate that trust in legacy media is still solid in the EU-27 overall as well as in many of its member states. At the aggregate level in the EU-27, public TV and radio (48%), the written press (38%), and private TV and radio (29%) are the media sources that respondents identified as their three most trusted categories (see table 3).⁹ In addition, public TV and radio are mentioned as one of the three most

trusted media sources in almost all member states, the only exceptions being—perhaps unsurprisingly—Hungary and Poland (see below). However, similar to media consumption, trust in news in general as well as in different (categories of) news sources varies considerably across countries.

Trust in news has consistently been highest in the EU's Nordic member states Finland, Denmark and Sweden, but also in Ireland, Portugal as well as in the Netherlands and the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (see figure 4). In Sweden, it has even gone up considerably over the last few years.

Conversely, trust in news is strikingly low in a number of other countries. According to data from the most recent Reuters Digital News Survey, there are currently six countries where less than 30% of the population trust the news in general (see figure 5). In these six countries, trust in news has been either consistently low (e.g., in Greece and France, despite certain fluctuations) or declined fairly sharply (most evidently in Slovakia, but also in Hungary).

Strikingly, these countries are also among the ones where social media is a common source of information on political events. Hungary, Greece, Slovakia and Bulgaria are among the five countries at the top of the table in terms of the use of social media as a source of news/information. In Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria and Greece, more than half the population (ranging from 54% to 64%) use social media for this purpose. This pattern goes hand in hand with low trust in news. In the Eurobarometer News and Media Study, Hungary and Poland are at the bottom of the EU-27 in terms of trust in public-service media (at 25% and 26%, respectively). In Poland, private TV and radio has largely taken over the role of the most trusted media source (41%). Hungary, on the other hand, stands out as the only country in the EU-27 where two *non-journalistic* media categories¹⁰ are among the most trusted sources of information: “people, groups or friends I follow on social media” (28%) and “other news platforms, blogs or podcasts” (also 28%).

Along the same lines, the Hungarian case highlights that social and other alternative media may become an important source of information in conditions where trust in news and in specific news sources—including public-service broadcasters—is low. Hungary is a case in point precisely because—matching the fragmented character of media consumption—no single media category is considered to be among the most trustworthy for more than 28% of the population. This suggests not only a highly fragmented public sphere, but also underlines the link between media (dis-)trust and the use of social media as a source of information. A similar pattern can be observed in Greece, where both consumption of and trust in journalistic sources (i.e., public TV and radio, private TV and radio, and the written press) are fairly low, but where trust in video platforms, blogs/news platforms, and people followed on social media ranges is fairly high (between 23% and 29%).

Conclusion

The public sphere is at a crossroads. Considering the profound changes that have occurred in the information environment since the emergence of social and other digital media, it is indeed an open question whether the idea of the public sphere—as a shared and inclusive communicative space that is central to deliberative understandings of representative democracy—is still feasible. The rise of social and other digital media has already had a profound impact on the media diets of European citizens, albeit with the qualification that there are wide-ranging differences between the member states.

The same can be said about trust in traditional legacy media. Although trust is still high in such legacy media and, in particular, public-service media, it is also undeniable that trust in media (or in the news more generally) is changing. A significant part of the population in many member states of the EU-27 no longer consider legacy media to be among the most trustworthy outlets that they would consult for information about news and current events. Newspapers furthermore appear to be a lost cause in the digital world, but some consolation may be found in the fact that their online versions continue to form an important part of citizens' media diet in most of the analyzed EU member states. These developments have clear implications for the public sphere, whose status as a shared communicative space is challenged both by the emergence of smaller semi-public spheres of likeminded people *and* by the accompanying unwillingness to engage in an exchange of arguments with differently minded people.

But the survival of the public sphere as a shared communicative space is not simply a matter of media consumption and trust in media. Liberal democracies in the EU (and elsewhere) also need to ask themselves more fundamental questions about the trajectories of their political cultures—not simply in terms of the value they ascribe to the importance of collectively shared facts as the basis of public deliberation, but also about the apparently declining status of the norm of civility in the public exchange of arguments. The fragmentation of the public sphere is characterized by the emergence of semi-public spheres of the likeminded that is, in turn, facilitated by the rise of social and other digital media. But at a more fundamental level, we also need to come to terms with the observation that affective polarization is a result, but also a key driver of the fragmentation of the public sphere. Political theory therefore needs to seriously consider the importance of overcoming affective polarization as a step towards reclaiming the very idea of civil and rational public deliberation through which the public sphere emerges as a shared communicative space.

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NOTES

1. Habermas sees the mass media only as the most abstract level of the public sphere, but this should not be misunderstood as downplaying the relevance of public face-to-face encounters or what Habermas refers to as *event publics*. The relevance of the latter will be discussed in more detail in the last section of this article.
2. It has been pointed out that this declining role of journalism is due in large part *also* to the increasing pressure on the institution of journalism to conform to social media logics rather than traditional news logics, and thus to compete for attention rather than to inform (Schneiders et al. 2023).

3. For Habermas (2022), the advent of the internet and the emergence of social media constitutes a revolution *equivalent* to the invention of the printing press: while the latter revolutionized access to printed books and thus allowed large numbers to become *readers*, the former has given people the opportunity to generate and disseminate their own content and thus to become *authors*.
4. Counterpublics (Fraser 1992) are not in and of themselves problematic for the existence of the public sphere as a shared communicative space. They are spaces where voices that are otherwise not heard in the wider forums public sphere can exchange arguments and formulate their collective will. This contributes to the public sphere because (a) members of counterpublics do not withdraw from the wider public sphere altogether, and (b) the perspectives developed in such forums are ultimately channeled into the forums of the wider public sphere.
5. The Reuters Digital News Report includes twenty of the EU-27 member states, including separate data for Belgium and the Belgian regions of Flanders and Wallonia, respectively. Not included in the survey are the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) as well as Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta, and Slovenia.
6. In addition to ten states where a public broadcaster has the biggest weekly reach offline, the same is case in the Belgian region of Flanders, not however in Wallonia.
7. Even in Austria, which has a dominant public broadcaster with a weekly reach above 60%, but not a single offline medium with a weekly reach of more than 30%, the fact that there are thirteen offline media with a reach in the 10-19% range indicates a certain level of fragmentation.
8. In the Eurobarometer News & Media Survey, this includes all countries of the EU-27, while the Reuters Digital News Report—despite its global scale—unfortunately only includes twenty EU countries.
9. The names of these categories are adopted directly from the Eurobarometer News & Media Survey.
10. The Eurobarometer News & Media Study survey distinguishes between seven different categories of media: (1) public TV and radio; (2) the written press; (3) private TV and radio; (4) people, groups or friends I follow on social media; (5) YouTube or other video platforms; (6) other news platforms, blogs or podcasts; and (7) influencers on social media.

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Maximilian Conrad (corresponding author) is Professor of Political Science at the University of Iceland. E-mail: mc@hi.is

Saul Newman is Professor of Politics at Goldsmiths, University of London.