

# **Europeanisation and media trust and in the post-pandemic age of neo-globalization**

By Sara Cannizzaro and Andrea Miconi  
IULM Università di comunicazione e lingue, Milan (Italy)

## (1) Introduction

The recent socio-political ruptures (e.g. Brexit), public health crisis (e.g. the Covid-19 pandemics), environmental crisis (e.g. as evinced by the COP26 meeting held in Glasgow between Oct-Nov 2021), have inaugurated a new post-pandemic era of neo-globalization. This challenging context impacts on the long-standing process of European integration, Europeanisation and the ongoing formation and sustainment of a European identity. Europe's investment in science and technological innovation to solve some of these issues (e.g. the development of climate engineering to 'fix' climate) serves as a grid to interpret Europe in action (Cassata and Lorenzini (2019) and ultimately promotes a process of Europeanisation that capitalizes on the integration of transnational research collaboration efforts and the pursuit of scientific research excellence as its core value. However, as with all cultures, this European culture of scientific excellence relies on counter-stories, constitutive outsides, and contested areas, for example challenges related to the integration of peripheral countries, but even more so, to the representation of European citizens in policy as passive rather than as knowledge producers (Chakraborty & Giuffredi 2019). In other words, while technological and financial innovation advances neo-globalization processes at the supra-EU level, its citizens are excluded as key stakeholders.

## (2) Europeanisation as Framework

In this paper we explore some of the implications, particularly related to Europeanisation and media communications, of this striking contradiction. Europeanisation refers to what it means to become European and as a complex process, it has been mapped by Carpentier et al (2022), in order to capture, the diversity of approaches that it subsumes. A way to approach Europeanisation is through the study of European democratic models. Despite the European democratic practices' diversity, these are seen as characteristic for the entire continent. (Carpentier et al 2022: 10). Furthermore, the connection between democratization and mediatization – to put it in Nick Couldry's words [Couldry & Hepp 2016: 5] – seems also to be a stable trend in modern European history, hence, the media are

expected to fuel democratic life and sustain European integration. Trust in media is key to this process as it has been shown to have significant behavioral consequences e.g. elections or compliance to recommended behaviour during the 2009's pandemics influenza H1N1 (Prati et al., 2011; Strömbäck et al 2020,). The process of European integration in fact would require its citizens' trust rather than distrust.

### (3) The Data: Do Europeans trust their media?

In order to understand the role of trust in Europeanisation and Europeanity in the context of neo-globalisation and covid-19 pandemics, here are some of the facets of trust that have characterised European media communication in recent times. By focusing on data from the standard Eurobarometer report on public opinion in the European Union (Eurobarometer 20xx) and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2020), we investigate how trust in media in general aligns with trust in news media broken down by age group, and how this set of data relates to trust in European political institutions.

According to Eurobarometer data, 56% of citizens in the Euro 27 area “tend not to trust media”, compared to 41% which “tend to trust them”. In terms of regional patterns, though, some differences appear to be evident among three geo-cultural systems:

- Countries above average, where people “tend to trust media”: Austria [49%], Belgium [47%], Denmark [57%], Czechia [49%], Denmark [57%], Estonia [52%], Finland [75%], Ireland [53%], Netherlands [59%], Portugal [63%], Sweden [53%];
- Countries on average: Bulgaria [39%], Italy [40%], Latvia [40%], Lithuania [40%], Poland [42%], Romania [44%];
- Countries below average, where people “tend not to trust media”: Cyprus [28%], Spain [31%], France [26%], Greece [18%], Croatia [28%], Hungary [34%], Malta [25%], Slovakia [36%], Slovenia [37%].

Reuters data (2020), provide a confirmation of this tendency (Table 1).

**Table 1. Europeans trusting “most news most of the time”, 2020<sup>1</sup>**

Country	Percentage
Finland	56%
Portugal	56%
Turkey	55%
Netherlands	52%

<sup>1</sup> Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

Ireland	48%
Denmark	46%
Germany	45%
Norway	45%
Poland	45%
Belgium	45%
Switzerland	44%
Austria	40%
Croatia	39%
Spain	36%
Czechia	33%
Italy	29%
Greece	28%
Slovakia	28%
UK	28%
Hungary	27%
France	23%

At the generational level, table 3 proposes the results of a worldwide survey carried out by the Pew Research Center – which reports on the share of people significantly trusting news media, broken down by age group.

**Table 3. Trust in news media in Europe by age class, 2018: percentage of “a lot or somewhat” answers**

Country/Age Class	18-29	30-49	50+	Oldest/Youngest gap
Germany	54%	63%	68%	+14
Netherlands	59%	72%	72%	+13
Sweden	57%	64%	68%	+11
Denmark	41%	49%	49%	+8
Spain	26%	34%	34%	+8
UK	28%	31%	31%	+3
Italy	28%	28%	28%	0
France	37%	34%	34%	-3

[Source: Pew Internet Research Center]

## (4) Discussion

### 4.1 The relation between trust and media systems

Here we have a very clear and conventional pattern: trust in news media is high in Central and Northern European countries – Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, and to a lower extent in Denmark – whilst it is very low in the Mediterranean area (Italy, France, Spain), and in the UK as well. In actuality, data picture a dramatic situation, with Europe literally splitting into two different parts. On the one hand, we have the Protestant North, with its strong tradition of literacy and independent journalism – on the other hand, we have the South and the East, where a significant majority of people does not trust the media. Geographically speaking, there are only two exceptions: Portugal in the South, with 62% of respondents trusting their media, and Belgium in the North, as a possible consequence of some well-known national scandals.

These data may confirm some similarities between Eastern and Southern European media systems, due to late transition towards democratic stability. In Hallin and Mancini's theory [2004], late and problematic transition to democracy was actually a feature of the Polarized Pluralist system, including countries which came out of dictatorship during the 1970s, or underwent a turbulent post-War experience. To some extent, these data could confirm similarities between the post-Socialist and the Mediterranean case, as already noticed by a few scholars and even referred to as "Italianization" or "Mediterraneanization" of Eastern media systems [Jakubowicz 2008; Wyka 2008; Dobek-Ostrowska 2012]. These findings also reflect the analogous conclusions reached by Peruško and Čuvalo [2014, 149] in their analysis of post-Socialist Croatian TV, and by Örnebring in his field-work on media clientelism in ten Central-Eastern European countries [2012]; and what is more, Hallin and Mancini's theories themselves could explain these data [2013, 18-20].

Even though explicit reference is rarely made to his work, the association between Eastern and Southern European countries (as flagged up by the data) can probably be explained upon Samuel Huntington's idea of democratization cycles. Here history is made of a continuous alternance between waves of democratization and anti-democratic "reverses" – according to an alleged Schumpeterian regularity – which shape the contemporary landscape. Mediterranean and Eastern European countries tend to cluster around a specific pole – that of post-1974 "third wave" of democratization, starting with the Portuguese revolution, and then affecting all the continents and peaking in 1989 and post-1989 events in South Africa and in the former Soviet Union [Huntington 1991, 13-26].

### 4.2 The relation between trust, age and technical systems

In the case of the difference in trust according to demographics, the pattern is pretty clear, with the gap between oldest and youngest simply decreasing in countries where the overall level of trust is already low. For example, in Spain, UK, Italy and France where levels

of trust in media in general and in news are lowest, the gap between the younger and older age groups varies between +8 and -3; on the other hand, in Germany, Netherland, Sweden and Denmark, where trust in media and news is higher, the gap between the younger and older age groups varies between +14 and +8. What we have to keep in mind, here, is that distrust in news media goes hand in hand with distrust in other forms of mediation, and political actors and institutions, thus putting at risk the stability of EU [Castells 2012a; 2012b].

Furthermore, distrust in new technologies in general is a factor to consider. Typically, age has an effect in the adoption and use of new technologies, as it is generally more difficult for older people to adopt new technologies (Olson et al. 2011). This contextual factor – the relation between age and the adoption of technical systems, including media technologies - could be significant when it comes to media trust. The data from table 3 in fact shows that the lower the levels of trust in media and news media, the less important the effect of age on the adoption of technical systems may be (as shown by the shrinking of the oldest/youngest gap). For example, in Germany, 68% of the 50+ age group trusts news media, compared to 54% of the 18-29 age group. this latter group is the one likely to be most proficient in adopting new technologies, including media technologies; instead, for France, data show a reversed trend as 34% of the 50+ age group trusts news media, compared to 37% of the 18-29 age group. In other words, the demographic group likely to be most proficient in adopting new technologies, including media technologies is the one that trust news media less.

#### (5) Conclusion: some consequences for Europeanisation

Trust in media is supposed to be sharply declining, in Europe, in correlation with the legitimacy of political parties (Castells 2009). Distrust in EU institutions is thriving across European media, this issue being exacerbated by the weakness of a common European Public Sphere.

Hence, European societies are becoming increasingly polarized, with this process impacting many different fields: at the economic level, due to new imbalances in income distribution and Gini index; at the social level, with the opposition between space of flows and space of places [Ruggie 1993: 72; Castells 1996]; and at the political level, as a consequence, in terms of alleged opposition between a globalist, pan-European elite, and the national masses of working classes. With this respect, it appears that trust in media is both a major aspect and a possible predictor of the polarization tendencies we observe. Furthermore, data concerning the relation between trust and age, seem to suggest that it may not matter whether technology users are younger or older if both groups distrust

the media – low levels of trust may in fact impact on the gap in technology adoption by potentially decreasing the advantages (and the disadvantages too) brought by using new technologies for *everyone*, regardless of age.

Thus, low trust could weaken the benefits of the adoption of technical systems and can potentially undermine European technological innovation initiatives, including those geared at making the EU more competitive in the world economy. In other words, low trust may impact on dimensions of Europeanisation such as culture (which does include science and technology as one of its instantiations), media industries and democratic models. Thus, reflections on Europeanization, in this perspective, require the understanding of both cultural forms and technical platforms, by means of which people may also define their identity. Whether social media can help European citizens to build new, enduring and trustworthy democratic institutions is therefore a key question for future research, and remains a pivotal issue for the overall equilibrium of the European Union (Gerbaudo 2012; Dean 2016).

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