

THE PUPPET MASTER: DOES NEW MEDIA LEAD TO A CHANGE IN THE PERCEIVED TRUSTWORTHINESS OF POLITICAL LEADERS IN CENTRAL EUROPE?

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ABSTRACT: *Trust in political leaders is influenced by a panoply of factors, but one that is gaining ground as a result of the digitization of our society is new media. It is, therefore, worthwhile analysing if and how new media and trust are linked; knowing this could greatly shape political strategies in the future and could make new media users more aware of how their behaviour influences them, thus granting them a stronger feeling of control in their day to day lives. Through an interdisciplinary methodology, including the crafting of a survey and the examination of the data arising therefrom, this study centres on five countries: France, Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands. Survey questions were chosen to measure trust in political leadership and possible correlations associated with new media. The results illustrate that new media could be a useful avenue in the future which should not be taken lightly.*

KEYWORDS: New media and society, social media, politics and media, trustworthiness, central European politics.

INTRODUCTION

Public opinion data from the last decades reveal that Europeans' confidence in their political leaders has dropped precipitously since the onset of the Euro-crisis in 2009 (Foster, 2017). But to what extent are variations in political trust a function of the increasing new media use? This paper examines the interrelations between new media and trust in political leaders in Central Europe, while focusing on the popular platforms Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube and Netflix.

Firstly, this paper examines previous literature regarding trust in leadership, the influence of social media on trust, the underlying economic factors of this phenomenon and the relation to the respective legal perspective. Secondly, it defines the exact research question and the relevant hypothesis. Thirdly, it describes the methodology applied to the research and, fourthly, the results are presented and thereafter analysed.

Finally, the research is concluded and limitations and insights for further research are presented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trust in Leadership

In recent years, political leaders have been making the most out of limited regulations for online political advertising and have been using social media and personal data to target individuals in order to gain voters (Taras & Davis, 2020); marketing is not the only economic phenomenon at play, however, there have also been major stock market fluctuations after breaking political news (see Toyota stock on January 5, 2017 after Tweet of President Trump). Additionally, many companies endorse a political leader to convey a certain image, which leaves us with predetermined connections between politicians and these images. Even though the given examples are not very numerous, they illustrate how colossal the impact of new media on the perceived trustworthiness of political leaders can be.

It is difficult to gain a solid grasp on what exactly trust means. Hupcey et al. (2001) conducted an interdisciplinary analysis of this concept and were able to find a set of essential characteristics that define it. To begin with, trust is something an individual places on a trustee; their reason to do so is that they have a need they cannot meet on their own. Choosing whom to trust requires prior knowledge or expectations of the trustee, which in turn allows them to assess the risk associated with trusting that individual. If an individual is willing to take the risk and decides to trust someone, they rely on that person to fulfil their specific need; they form a set of specific expectations for the trustee to meet. Trust also involves a behavioural scan on the individual to ensure that their trust is not misplaced. Finally, the individual may evaluate the outcome of the relation based on whether their expectations were met or even exceeded.

In a modern democracy trust is essential for any leader to be elected. They are expected to represent the people's interest and to lead competently. Therefore, the effect of new media on their perceived trustworthiness is highly important for the modern political landscape. Elad Klein and Joshua Robison (2019) found, in their research, that American citizens with partisan attachments to the governing party reported a higher level of trust in the government and its leader as their levels of social media use increased. On the other hand, those with negative views of the governing party reported less trust.

Social Media Influences on Trust

In the age of social media, political leaders are able to communicate directly to the population via platforms like twitter (Brady et al., 2019). It seems reasonable to assume that exposure to political leaders on social media influences an individual's knowledge of that person which, in turn, also influences their likelihood to trust that individual. Research has shown that social media communication from political elites spreads across social media if the content is both morally and emotionally loaded (Brady et al., 2019). This means that political figures who tend towards more moral and emotional

appeals in their political communication on social media are likely to be exposed to more people.

Paravati et al. (2019) hypothesized that social media exposure to political figures would lead to the forming of parasocial relationships with them. These relationships are psychologically very similar to normal two-way relationships even though they are one-sided. They found that when the political views of the politician were in line with those of participants, they would like that politician even more, while the opposite was true for opposing participants. Exposure to political figures, consequently, polarizes people's views of that figure. They further found that people were usually unaware of these parasocial bonds and their effects on their attitude (Paravati et al., 2019).

Underlying Economic Factors

There are numerous economic factors that explain this behaviour. On an individual level, it can be observed that, if job security is low, people will be less satisfied with the government and will project this dissatisfaction on the respective leader. This phenomenon has come to the surface in recent years (after the debt crises in 2012, when unemployment rose to high levels within central Europe) and was strongly influenced by the way in which it was portrayed in new media. Besides, income and status play an important factor in the perceived trustworthiness of political leaders. Catterberg and Moreno (2006) found that while financial satisfaction was positively and significantly associated with institutional trust, household income deciles behaved differently across the country groups. The relative measure thus contrasts with the subjective assessment of one's financial situation (Medve-Balint & Boda, 2014). Furthermore, since education has been thought to be inversely related to trust, explained by a greater social awareness, better educated people are suspected to be more sceptical regarding new media posts. This phenomenon is called the theory of cognitive mobilisation (Fuchs & Klingemann, 1995, p. 334). Taking on a more general view, Mishler and Rose [1997] found that subjective evaluations of the state's global economy is a much stronger determinant of institutional trust than a person's own financial situation. When the economy experienced a boom, the perceived trustworthiness of the head of the country increased and vice-versa. This is exacerbated by new media, as it serves as a means of polarization (Medve-Balint & Boda, 2014).

Legal Dimension of Trust and Media

The foregoing raises a number of interesting topics which, due to their nature and implications, can be analysed through a legal lens. Firstly, as a result of the increased digitalization, new media is gaining more ground and prominence. However, this has come with notable drawbacks, namely the fact that it results in a decrease in political knowledge and media consumption, compared with traditional media (Mann 2013, Westlund & Weillull 2013). Another negative aspect is that there is less accountability in new media, as the need for self-control or "self-regulation", as Eberwein calls it, is not as high. In these cases, it is much easier to adopt critical views of the government, with language that plays to people's emotions. These companies are also more likely to succumb to pressure from advertisers, manifestly impacting, in some cases, the quality of the output (Eberwein 2014). A hypothesis that can be drawn is, therefore,

that individuals who primarily consume new media are less likely to trust political leaders.

Secondly, media pluralism and concentration play an important role. It is only through the coming together of different views, that one's opinions and values can be called into question and, if they don't hold up, abandoned. If they do hold up, conversely, this strengthens our views in that they are now rationally justified. Media pluralism is a core value of the European Union, and it strives to promote a multitude of views that can contribute to the democratic dialogue. All of the countries covered by this paper ensure a far-reaching protection of pluralism and freedom of expression, ranking among the highest in Europe (EUI Centre for Media Pluralism and Freedom, Media Pluralism Monitor 2020). However, according to this Monitor, they are considered countries with very high media concentration. In this view, Prior [2007] makes the case that an increased media choice results in less political knowledge and, consequently, in less trust. He describes the increased consumption of new media, whose outlets can consist of shorter attention-grabbing coverage, as opposed to traditional media, which requires better literary skills and time devotion. That was in relation to the US, but it can be argued that the European playing field is considerably different, in that it is not as polarised. Intuitively, a panoply of opinions should be better in producing more informed individuals because of the aforementioned effect of pluralism. The hypothesis that arises is that high plurality results in more trust in political leaders.

Research Question

Current political events show that new media plays a prominent role in modern politics. Therefore, the authors decided to investigate the connection between new media and trust in political leaders. To keep the scope of the paper manageable, this paper focuses on five countries of Central Europe (France, Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands); overall, this region provides an illustration of the broader European experience, and its diversity leads to some interesting results. This led to the research question:

Does new media lead to a change in the perceived trustworthiness of political leaders in Central Europe?

Hypotheses

The main hypothesis of this paper is that new media has a significant influence on the perceived trustworthiness of political leaders in central Europe. Examining previous literature, it can be found that new media is becoming an ever-growing instrument of power to the benefit of political leaders. Voters are nowadays looking for specific qualities, for a certain image. Thus, political leaders have started to share this desired image online, where it can be easily shared and made public on different social media platforms (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017). From the previous literature review, the following relevant hypothesis arise:

Hypothesis 1: Central European Citizens with partisan attachments to the governing party consider the political leader of the governing party as more trustworthy when new media consumption is high.

Hypothesis 2: Central European Citizens not in favour of the governing party consider the political leader of the governing party as less trustworthy when new media consumption is high.

Hypothesis 3: The more new media content of a given political leader Central European Citizens are exposed to, the more likely they are to have an extreme evaluation of their trustworthiness or untrustworthiness.

Hypothesis 4: Central European Citizens are likely to have formed para social bonds to leaders they agree with and already know well and therefore evaluate them as more trustworthy.

Hypothesis 5: Central European citizens who primarily consume new media are less likely to trust political leaders.

Hypothesis 6: High media plurality in Central European Countries results in more trust in political leaders.

METHODOLOGY

The following section covers how the authors conducted the research. After recognising the need to construct quantitative research to find out about peoples' trust in political leaders, the authors established a survey, that was made available online to participants.

To measure the relevant aspect of trust, participants were asked directly about their trust in the political leaders of their country and for each of the included central European leaders separately. To assess the effect of prior exposure and familiarity on trust, participants were asked to also indicate how recently they read about each leader and how well they know them in general.

To be able to assess whether participants would agree or disagree with the ideological tendencies of both their government and specific leaders they were asked to indicate their own political ideology on a scale from 1 (far right) to 7 (far left). Subsequently these scores were compared with values selected for the governing parties of the five countries included in this study. If the values were within one unit of difference to each other the participant was considered to be in agreement with the ideology of a given leader or their government.

To assess the frequency of new media consumption, participants were asked to indicate how often they would use specific old or new media sources. They were able to indicate the amount between once a week and every day of the week for the media platforms Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Netflix as well as for Television and traditional newspapers.

To hold other relevant interconnections regarding personal preferences constant, the following section covers the demographic variables and their respective influence on the dependent variable 'the perceived trust in political leaders in Central Europe'. Aarts and Fladmoe (2012) declared that in the 21st century, peoples' attitudes towards politics are no longer based solely in the political realm. These orientations can thus be

strongly influenced by the allocation of citizens along the socioeconomic stratum. To those ends, the demographic variables controlled during the research were education, gender, age, job/ status, satisfaction with the personal financial status, nationality, fear of fake news, political ideology and the interest in politics.

RESULTS

This section examines how political trust is influenced by the independent variables.

SUMMARY OUTPUT								
Regression Statistics								
Multiple R	0,24956666							
R Square	0,06228352							
Adjusted R Square	0,01966004							
Standard Error	1,03543645							
Observations	139							
ANOVA								
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F			
Regression	6	9,39988203	1,56664701	1,46124909	0,19635995			
Residual	132	141,520981	1,07212865					
Total	138	150,920863						
	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95,0%	Upper 95,0%
Intercept	2,06502334	0,5156316	4,00484246	0,00010305	1,04505306	3,08499362	1,04505306	3,08499362
Are you scared of fake news?	-0,0224847	0,07333374	-0,3066085	0,75962451	-0,1675461	0,12257664	-0,1675461	0,12257664
interest in politics	-0,0168273	0,08873005	-0,1896457	0,84987805	-0,1923441	0,15868953	-0,1923441	0,15868953
satisfaction with financial stat	0,17973725	0,08559692	2,09980964	0,03764905	0,01041807	0,34905642	0,01041807	0,34905642
age	0,15994192	0,10880383	1,47000262	0,14394059	-0,0552828	0,37516665	-0,0552828	0,37516665
degree	0,04233126	0,09616145	0,44021023	0,66050484	-0,1478856	0,23254812	-0,1478856	0,23254812
gender	-0,0921837	0,16954841	-0,5437016	0,58756391	-0,4275673	0,24319977	-0,4275673	0,24319977

Figure 1. Regression of independent variables.

It can be observed that the average trustworthiness level is moderate with a value of 2.065 out of 5. The only significant factor in our model is the satisfaction with the personal financial status which seems to influence political trustworthiness in a positive way. The other variables appear to be insignificant, having a confidence level of 5%. The signs indicate that people who are scared of fake news or interested in politics seem to trust the political leaders in Central Europe less. Besides age, degree and being a woman raises the perceived trustworthiness slightly. Next, this section engages in examining the hypothesis we set up earlier.

Hypothesis 1 states that Central European Citizens with partisan attachments to the governing party consider the political leader of the governing party as more trustworthy when new media consumption is high. Given that the countries considered all have middle to right wing orientated leaders, the results were accordingly filtered. The hypothesis then predicts a positive trend in the results which indeed can be perceived in the scatterplot below (Figure 2). However, the R-squared turns out to be very low. The results thus show no significant relationship between the factors of media consumption on the horizontal axes and perceived trustworthiness on the vertical axes, given that the political orientation is centre-right orientated.

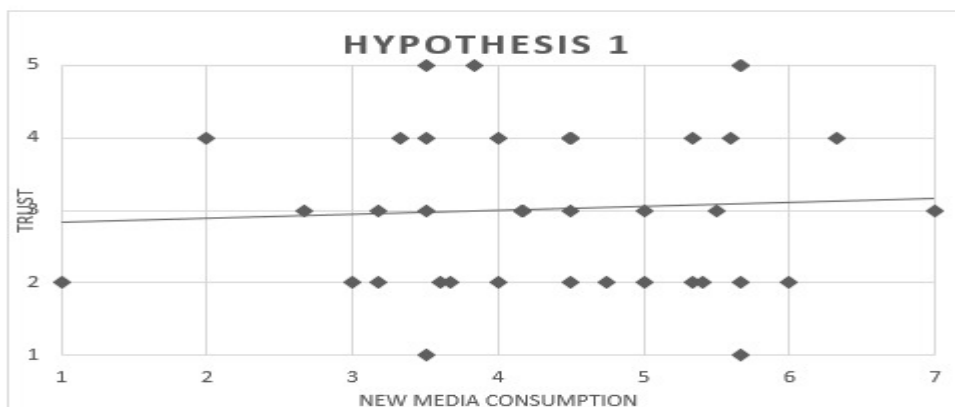


Figure 2. Scatterplot of trust on new media consumption taking people with partisan attachment to the ruling political leaders into account.

Hypothesis 2, in contrast, states that Central European Citizens not in favour of the governing party consider the political leader of the governing party as less trustworthy when new media consumption is high. This hypothesis demonstrates the need to filter the results according to a left wing orientated political ideology. As the hypothesis predicts, the model shows a negative trend which can be observed in the scatterplot after accounting for the respective political ideology. But once again this trend is not significant, as the model shows a low R-squared.

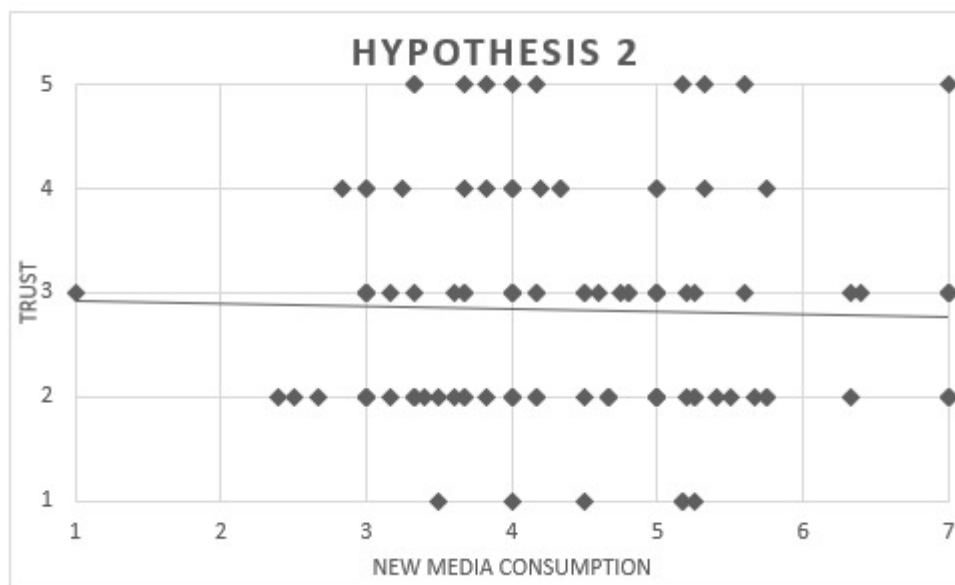


Figure 3. Scatterplot of trust on new media consumption taking people with an averse political ideology to the ruling political leaders into account.

Hypothesis 3 states that the more new media content of a given political leader Central European Citizens are exposed to, the more likely they are to have an extreme evaluation of their trustworthiness or untrustworthiness.

Germany:

Descriptives

Please answer the following questions. – Do you consider her trustworthy?

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Definitely yes	70	1.79	1.020	.122	1.54	2.03	1	5
Probably yes	42	2.17	1.010	.156	1.85	2.48	1	5
Might or might not	14	1.86	.864	.231	1.36	2.36	1	4
Probably not	14	2.14	1.027	.275	1.55	2.74	1	5
Definitely not	4	2.75	1.500	.750	.36	5.14	2	5
Total	144	1.97	1.027	.086	1.80	2.13	1	5

Figure 4. Descriptive statistics for the trustworthiness level of Angela Merkel with “Have you recently heard about her” as an independent variable.

ANOVA

Please answer the following questions. – Do you consider her trustworthy?

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	7.029	4	1.757	1.699	.154
Within Groups	143.798	139	1.035		
Total	150.826	143			

Figure 5. ANOVA table with trustworthiness as the dependent variable and “Have you recently heard about her” as an independent variable.

Belgium:

Descriptives

Please answer the following questions. – Do you consider him trustworthy?

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Definitely yes	12	2.92	1.165	.336	2.18	3.66	2	5
Probably yes	14	2.86	.949	.254	2.31	3.41	2	5
Might or might not	19	3.11	.459	.105	2.88	3.33	3	5
Probably not	30	3.20	.714	.130	2.93	3.47	2	5
Definitely not	55	3.02	.623	.084	2.85	3.19	2	5
Total	130	3.05	.725	.064	2.92	3.17	2	5

Figure 6. Descriptive statistics for the trustworthiness level of Alexander De Croo with “Have you recently heard about him” as an independent variable.

ANOVA

Please answer the following questions. – Do you consider him trustworthy?

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.521	4	.380	.718	.581
Within Groups	66.202	125	.530		
Total	67.723	129			

Figure 7. ANOVA table with trustworthiness as a dependent variable and “Have you recently heard about him” as an independent variable.

France:

Descriptives

Please answer the following questions. – Do you consider him trustworthy?

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Definitely yes	25	2.60	1.118	.224	2.14	3.06	1	5
Probably yes	45	2.82	.886	.132	2.56	3.09	2	5
Might or might not	31	3.03	.752	.135	2.76	3.31	1	5
Probably not	26	2.88	.909	.178	2.52	3.25	1	5
Definitely not	17	3.24	1.091	.265	2.67	3.80	2	5
Total	144	2.89	.940	.078	2.73	3.04	1	5

Figure 8. Descriptive statistics for the trustworthiness level of Emmanuel Macron with “Have you recently heard about him” as a dependent variable.

ANOVA

Please answer the following questions. – Do you consider him trustworthy?

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.964	4	1.241	1.423	.230
Within Groups	121.258	139	.872		
Total	126.222	143			

Figure 9. ANOVA table with trustworthiness as dependent variable and “Have you recently heard about him” as an independent variable.

Netherlands:

Descriptives

Please answer the following questions. – Do you consider him trustworthy?

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Definitely yes	37	2.43	1.214	.200	2.03	2.84	1	5
Probably yes	21	3.19	.873	.190	2.79	3.59	1	5
Might or might not	30	2.90	.403	.074	2.75	3.05	2	4
Probably not	23	3.04	.706	.147	2.74	3.35	2	5
Definitely not	25	3.36	.757	.151	3.05	3.67	3	5
Total	136	2.93	.916	.079	2.77	3.08	1	5

Figure 10. Descriptive statistics for the trustworthiness level of Mark Rutte with “Have you recently heard about him” as a dependent variable.

ANOVA

Please answer the following questions. – Do you consider him trustworthy?

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	15.529	4	3.882	5.204	.001
Within Groups	97.736	131	.746		
Total	113.265	135			

Figure 11. ANOVA table with trustworthiness as a dependent variable and “Have you recently heard about him” as an independent variable.

Luxembourg:

Descriptives

Please answer the following questions. – Do you consider him trustworthy?

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Definitely yes	8	1.50	.756	.267	.87	2.13	1	3
Probably yes	8	3.13	1.126	.398	2.18	4.07	2	5
Might or might not	29	2.97	.325	.060	2.84	3.09	2	4
Probably not	26	2.96	.528	.103	2.75	3.17	1	4
Definitely not	62	3.21	.656	.083	3.04	3.38	2	5
Total	133	3.00	.728	.063	2.88	3.12	1	5

Figure 12. Descriptive statistics for the trustworthiness level of Xavier Bettel with “Have you recently heard about him” as dependent variable.

ANOVA

Please answer the following questions. – Do you consider him trustworthy?

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	20.924	4	5.231	13.643	.000
Within Groups	49.076	128	.383		
Total	70.000	132			

Figure 13. ANOVA table with trustworthiness as dependent variable and “Have you recently heard about him” as independent variable.

Based on the results, it can be seen that the differences in the trustworthiness of political leaders do not differ significantly in the individual subgroups for Germany, Belgium and France. This means that the exposure of political leaders in new media does not have a significant effect on the trustworthiness level in these countries. However, it can be seen that for the Netherlands and Luxembourg the differences are significant. In these countries, the higher the number of people who have read about the political leader, the higher the trustworthiness.

Hypothesis 4 states that people form para social bonds with political leaders they share an ideology with and know well, leading to more trust being placed in them. As all the leaders included in our survey slightly lean to the right side of the political spectrum, one would assume a negative correlation between trust and the political ideology of the participant (as higher values indicate a more left leaning ideology). Additionally, one would assume a correlation between reported familiarity with a given leader and the trust toward that leader.

Overall, these correlations were only significantly present for Angela Merkel (Germany, $r^2=0.12066$, $F=0.00016$) and Xavier Bettel (Luxembourg, $r^2=0.10163$, $F=0.00068$) and in all cases quite tenuous. For Angela Merkel, familiarity was a three times stronger predictor of trust than ideology ($b_{ideology}=-0.16562$, $p_{ideology}=0.02278$; $b_{familiarity}=0.64209$, $p_{familiarity}=0.00331$). For all other leaders, both factors were about equally predictive. For Emanuel Macron, only ideology was a statistically significant predictor of trust ($b_{ideology}=-0.13347$, $p_{ideology}=0.04608$).

Hypothesis 5 concerns the use of new media and its correlation with trust in political leaders. In terms of frequency, Instagram and YouTube were the most used, each reporting a use of 25%. This is followed by Netflix with 16%, Facebook with 15%, LinkedIn with 11% and, reporting the lowest figure, Twitter with 8%. The data as depicted below entails the result that our model fits the observed data with almost 13%. This R squared thus indicates that 13% of the data fit the regression model. Out of the 6 new mediums selected, only the use of Facebook appears to positively impact trust. However, this impact is rather not significant given its high P-value; this insignificance is also the case for Twitter and YouTube. Conversely, the negative impact on trust of

Instagram and LinkedIn can be considered significant. In short, it can be observed that use of new media has more of a significant negative impact on trust than a positive one. Interestingly, a similar result is present as regards old media (newspaper and television).

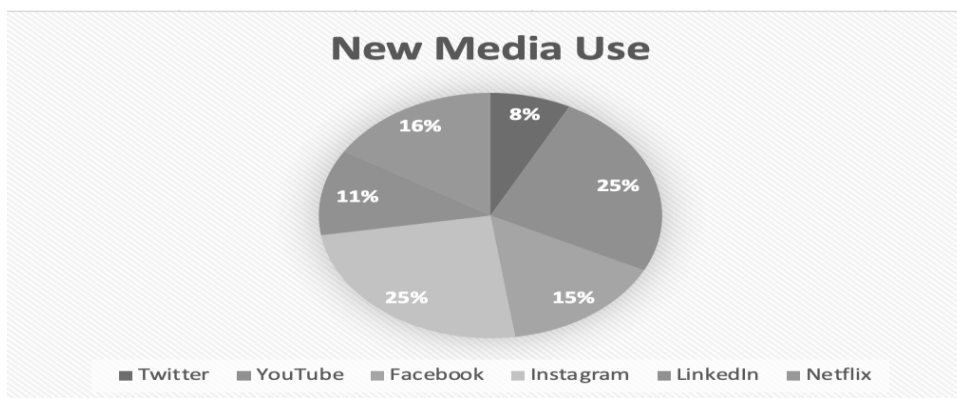


Figure 14. Use of new media platforms.

SUMMARY OUTPUT

Regression Statistics

Multiple R	0,36794768
R Square	0,1353855
Adjusted R Sq	0,07492295
Standard Error	1,00981993
Observations	154

ANOVA

	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	10	22,8335555	2,28335555	2,23916279	0,01863575
Residual	143	145,822289	1,01973628		
Total	153	168,655844			

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95,0%	Upper 95,0%
Intercept	2,88113612	0,29779994	9,67473716	2,4256E-17	2,29247731	3,46979493	2,29247731	3,46979493
Twitter	-0,00341924	0,03738296	-0,09146514	0,92725101	-0,07731384	0,07047537	-0,07731384	0,07047537
YouTube	-0,00648573	0,03724253	-0,17414853	0,86199503	-0,08010275	0,06713128	-0,08010275	0,06713128
Facebook	0,04529919	0,03149215	1,43842792	0,15249768	-0,0169511	0,10754947	-0,0169511	0,10754947
Instagram	-0,06602791	0,03453647	-1,91183148	0,05789796	-0,13429588	0,00224006	-0,13429588	0,00224006
LinkedIn	-0,07937183	0,03466778	-2,28949887	0,02351432	-0,14789936	-0,01084431	-0,14789936	-0,01084431
Netflix	-0,02163676	0,03637886	-0,59476182	0,55294261	-0,09354657	0,05027306	-0,09354657	0,05027306
How many ne	0,40475758	0,11875055	3,40846925	0,00084892	0,17002431	0,63949086	0,17002431	0,63949086
How often do	0,01399024	0,09446035	0,14810699	0,88246697	-0,1727288	0,20070928	-0,1727288	0,20070928
Television	-0,00725868	0,04115884	-0,17635771	0,86026244	-0,08861705	0,07409969	-0,08861705	0,07409969
Newspaper	-0,05134792	0,0406644	-1,2627243	0,20874348	-0,13172892	0,02903307	-0,13172892	0,02903307

Figure 15. Regression of variables.

Hypothesis 6 puts forth a positive influence between media plurality and trust. In other words, it purports to suggest that, when a variety of mediums are consulted, the individual is more likely to showcase trust. The data indicates that such a correlation is present, given the clear positive influence of news sources consulted on trust. This is not mitigated by the P-value, as it is extremely low. Related to this question, the impact

of the frequency with which sources was sought, the conclusion is that this aspect has no significant impact on trustworthiness. Similarly, these results can be stated with confidence, with reference to the relatively high R Square value.

DISCUSSION

In the following section, an in-depth interpretation of the data will be given. Figure 1 showed that the average trustworthiness level in our sample has a value of 2.065 out of 5. This, in other words, means that given that no demographics have an influence, the trust level is below the 50% mark. The population in the 21st century seems to have lost trust in their political leaders. According to the OECD, this result calls for action, because ‘a decline in trust can lead to lower rates of compliance with rules and regulations. Citizens and businesses can also become more risk-averse, delaying investment, innovation and employment decisions that are essential to regain competitiveness and jumpstart growth’ (OECD, 2013). This could result in an increase in criminality in Central Europe, and the region may fall further behind the economic and technological frontier. This research also revealed that the perceived level of trust in the respective political leaders is significantly related to the independent variable of ‘satisfaction with the personal financial status’, which is putting upwards pressure on this very low average estimate. In other words, this paper reveals that people who are satisfied with their monetary status seem to question the leaders less and to have a high perceived trustworthiness level. This result is in line with the results of Catterberg and Moreno (2006).

Figure 2 and 3 discussed the first two Hypothesis. As mentioned earlier, the results revealed that, even though the direction of the interactions between trustworthiness and media consumption given the respective political ideology showed patterns as suggested by the hypothesis, the model showed a high degree of volatility. This may be traced back to a too simplified reasoning in the hypothesis. A political leader stands nowadays for more than just their broader ideology. In Central Europe values such as honesty, grace, realism and gratitude are factors that influence the perceived trustworthiness, to an appreciable extent. Elad Klein and Joshua Robison’s (2019) findings can thus not be taken over in a European context without first accounting for the broader range of political leaders in the executive branch of Central Europe. One possible explanation for the insignificant but consistent result is that the political system in America, which is based on only two parties, seems to differ greatly from the rather complex European system. While the American system is built on the difference of the political ideology between the Democratic and the Republican parties, Central Europeans are exposed to a larger range of parties, each standing for different views and objectives. Europeans thus not only have to choose a broad indication of what they believe in, but they also have to select among parties within this specific ideology. In addition, this means that a political leader is more easily replaced when the perceived trustworthiness decreases. Concluding, it is not enough as a Central European Leader to stand for a political ideology, they also have to stand for different values and to keep track of their image, if they want to remain in power.

According to Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2006), news about political leaders, especially negative ones, have a considerable effect on the perceived trustworthiness of the political leader. In this sense, the third hypothesis was based on the assumption that Central European citizens have an extreme opinion regarding the trustworthiness of political leaders that are extensively covered in new media. This hypothesis can be tested by looking at whether notorious political leaders are rated as significantly untrustworthy or significantly trustworthy in comparison to other political leaders. If we now consider the results of our study, it can be observed that, for Germany, Belgium and France, there are no significant differences in terms of trustworthiness; the Netherlands and Luxembourg, on the other hand, have significant differences. Focusing on Germany, we can see that people who have recently heard of Angela Merkel rate her as more trustworthy in contrast to people who have not. However, the differences in trustworthiness levels are not significant, so no statistical validity can be drawn from the differences. A similar trend can be observed in Belgium. In general, it can be seen that people who have recently heard of Alexander de Croo tend to rate him as slightly more trustworthy. However, the trustworthiness levels are very close to each other in all categories and, with a p-value of 58.10%, not statistically significant. It is interesting to observe that compared to Angela Merkel, where 77.78% people have heard of her recently, only 20% have heard of Alexander Croo recently. A similar statistical insignificance can be observed for France, as it has a p-value of 23%. In relation to the Netherlands, the statistical significance is shown by the p-value of 0.1%. If one looks at the trustworthiness ratings for the different media coverage levels, Mark Rutte is rated as significantly more trustworthy by people who have recently heard of him than, for example, people who have definitely not heard of him. For Luxembourg, more extreme results can be observed. There, Xavier Bettel has, among people who have heard of him recently, the highest trustworthiness rating of all political leaders with a mean of 1.50. On the other hand, the trustworthiness rating among people who have not heard of him recently is rather low with a mean of 3.36, which is the worst rating of all political leaders in this study. Furthermore, the differences between the groups are statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.00%.

The fourth hypothesis was based on the assumption that people form parasocial bonds with politicians they are very familiar with and agree with. The assumption is that interacting through new media with celebrities, and by extension politicians, makes them appear closer and more familiar. This then enables the formation of para-social bonds. These are like regular social bonds but only extend in one direction. To the individual, the connection still feels like a regular social connection to a familiar person. With such a bond, politicians may seem less distant and more like everyday people, and thus easier to trust. However, just like with usual bonds between people, trust in parasocial bonds still depends on personal opinion, which may be related to political ideas and views regarding politicians (Paravati et al., 2019).

To test if this is true for modern politicians in central Europe, the authors investigated correlations between participants' reports of perceived trustworthiness for specific politicians and their pre-existing knowledge of them as well as their ideological agreement. In this, it was assumed that prior knowledge of a politician in the age of

new media is correlated with the kind of exposure that provides the familiarity that enables para-social bonding.

Interestingly our data only sufficiently supported this hypothesis for two cases, namely that of Xavier Bettel and Angela Merkel. For the other three (Alexander DeCroo, Mark Rutte, and Emanuel Macron), the correlation was not significant. Additionally, the correlation was significantly higher for Angela Merkel than all the other politicians. Overall, these results might still give some support to our hypothesis, as our data seems to indicate that at least in the case of Angela Merkel, trust is predicted by familiarity and agreement. The reason behind this divergence, might be that Angela Merkel is more familiar and important in the public eye, especially for our sample of participants in which Germany was the most common country of residence (63 out of 139 participants). This leads us to believe that the effects of para-social bonding are only significant for very well-known political leaders that are ubiquitous in the public eye. This seems to be the case for at least Angela Merkel in our sample of participants. To what extent this might be true for other politicians that are more well-known might be the subject of future research.

If this turns out to be a reproducible finding for politicians with prominent presence in the public's mind, it could have important implications for the way politicians may use new media channels at their disposal. Para social bonds that get enabled through strong social media presence might be an important factor in gaining the trust of potential voters. The potential importance of such bonds can easily be discerned from the impact of former US president Trump's social media use during the 2016 US presidential election and his term thereafter (Paravati et al., 2019). If the impact of a strong social media presence is in fact this impactful it seems inevitable that European leaders will also start to utilize new media to form closer connections to and establish more trust with their voters. It remains to be seen whether this will ultimately affect democratic processes in Europe in a positive or negative manner.

Returning to hypothesis 5, it was found that overall new media does have a negative impact on trust; this conclusion raises a number of interesting points. Knowing this information, users could become more self-aware whilst scrolling through these apps. Our decisions are influenced by a myriad of factors but being aware that the apps we use can have an impact on trust, reduces the number of "hidden" factors which can pull the strings behind the veil. One could, therefore, speak of regaining control and this should lead to a more mindful use. Related to this, it is interesting to note that, out of the medium selected, LinkedIn has the most severe negative impact on trust. At first glance, this fact is hard to explain given that this platform appears to be the least political; LinkedIn is used primarily to announce career changes, to provide and receive career and professional tips, and to find jobs. Perhaps it is this very fact that can masquerade the impact that it has. As people are exposed to political content on that platform, it could be argued that, because this content is few and far between and because they don't readily associate LinkedIn with that type of content, the influence of that content is thus larger. The negative impact of Instagram also warrants its own discussion, as it has a unique content-displaying feature. Most, if not all of its content,

is displayed by way of photographs and images, which confirms the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. In other words, it is in this way easier to evoke emotional reactions and influence the audience. It is also interesting to note that the apps more associated with politics such as Facebook and YouTube appear to have no significant impact on trust. In the news, when we hear about regulating media, the outlets that speak of regulating LinkedIn over Facebook or YouTube don't seem to exist. In relation to the audio-visual media, namely YouTube, Television and Netflix, the high P-value would suggest that individuals are not aware that they are being influenced. This could be explained with reference to the fact that one does not consume information on these platforms as actively as one does in the others; in many cases, they are played in the background or listened to in conjunction with another activity. Furthermore, it could also be the case that, given the panoply of types of information available on these platforms, the impact of the political content is mitigated, at least when it comes to associating the said platforms to trust. However, it must be borne in mind that it could simply be that they don't influence trust.

Given that only two mediums have a noteworthy negative impact, it could be argued that the public at large should not fear new media and that the transition from old to new media should be embraced. Change is inevitable and inexorable, and the sooner we accept the arrival of new media, the sooner we could close the divide between the digital world and the reality that prevailed for many centuries. The seemingly unexpected results analysed suggest that the impact of media on trust is hard to quantify and measure, so any research which sheds light on this issue should be a priority before considering its regulation. This new digital media world has often been the object of legislation and regulation, as many governments feared that an open digital environment would foster distrust and suspicion towards them. Contrary to what Ebelwein argued, this research finds that this lack of self-regulation is not as problematic. It should be pointed out that free speech has seldom been absolute, and companies have a certain proclivity towards filtering out and outright banning certain type of views. These are opinions which are deemed to be radical and against which the entire European population stands united (e.g. racism). In this view, regulation of more moderate views should not be often carried out, because central European countries are founded on the freedom of speech and on the plurality of views.

Moreover, the findings of this research paper confirm hypothesis 6. As opposed to the idiosyncrasy of the US which was considered in Prior's research, central European countries are not characterised by a two-party system. As a consequence, there is not as big a need to demonize the leader of the "other party" and there is no comparable "us versus them" mentality. A multitude of viewpoints achieved by consulting more news sources indeed results in more trust in political leaders. Conceptually, this flows naturally and results in more informed individuals who are able to question their own beliefs and have a better opinion on political leaders. The previous remark that the central European countries in question have high media concentration is not as concerning as it may seem, due to the fact that the open world created by new media exposes the individual to a multitude of perspectives. It has been argued that the transition from old to new media could create less politically informed individuals who

are less likely to trust the government. In this view, because traditional media tends to consist of better researched stories and opinions and less attention-grabbing headlines and stories, the prevalence of new media could diminish political knowledge. To this point, this research would suggest that trust is more influenced by the variety of news sources consulted (whether they be from new media or traditional media) than the use of new media. As long as individuals would seek numerous news sources, even if this would solely be from new media, it is reasonable to argue that their trust in political leaders would not vary tremendously. From the foregoing, some concluding remarks can be drawn.

CONCLUSION

Our results highlight the potential impacts, pitfalls and opportunities the advent of new media presents to the political landscape in Europe. Trust is an important component in any democratic process where leaders have to represent the public's interest. Without trust, the direct link shared between voters and their representatives is weakened and the validity of their power undermined. Our findings show that, at least in our sample, trust in political leadership in Europe is running rather low, which is not surprising given the turmoil of both the current global pandemic and the political quarrels of the last years. However, there might be opportunity in the seemingly so far ignored, new media. While there was no evident impact of new media on trust so far, it seems inevitable that they will play an ever-larger role in the future. If utilized correctly, they can be an invaluable tool to strengthen the connection a leader has to their voters. It was found that leaders with a strong public presence can gain trust more effectively. To maintain and expand this trust, new media will be essential. The closer and more direct para social bonds that can be knit through new media should not be dismissed. Especially in the current times, one might be inclined to forget that our leaders are humans too. While there may be concern about undermining political status and authority, it might be beneficial for our democracies if leaders were to appear less distant. By making politics more accessible, new media might even be beneficial in bolstering political engagement from the general public in addition to strengthening trust. Overall, new media appear to hold unused benefits to both voters and leaders in central European democracies, if utilized responsibly.

Limitations and Future Research

The key goal of this research was to provide important insights into the relationship between new media and the perceived trustworthiness of political leaders in Central Europe. However, this study may lack some generalizability with regard to the application of findings to a broader scope.

First, the study was based on an online survey shared by Maastricht University, the authors and their close surroundings. The overall participants are thus assumed to be well educated and to enjoy a high financial status. Second, the survey was published and mainly shared through social media, which is a likely indicator of biased results. Third, the variable trust was only a personal indication of the participants, there is neither an objective truth behind it nor was it measured directly within the scope of this

paper. Fourth, the political leaders' pictures and names shown in the survey are no direct measure of familiarity nor do they measure the degree of exposure to news of the respective leader, in an objective sense. Here again, the paper relies on human cues instead of found measures of the variable 'familiarity with leaders' and 'exposure to specific leaders. Lastly, during the process of this research, it became evident that new media rarely addresses European politics; In other words, individuals are less exposed to European news and, thus, the influence on trust is hard to measure and evaluate.

Nevertheless, the research showed interesting patterns within Central Europe. Further research could be conducted on other factors influencing trust that come into play in conjunction with media use: what role the perceived trust in political leaders play in the choice of the media, or how media do influence the perceived trustworthiness indirectly. Moreover, great value would be added to European politics if the interaction of perceived trustworthiness and media consumption would be re-examined on a larger scale from a general European perspective. Since the interplay between both variables will be a prevalent topic in the future, possessing this knowledge would be a great asset in the fight for political power, economic growth and safety of the population.

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