

Social networks are the main source of information for Spaniards compared to Europeans

Redes sociales principal fuente de información de españoles frente a europeos

Redes sociais como a principal fonte de informações para os espanhóis em comparação com os europeus

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Abstract

This paper identifies the main trends and possible cultural and socio-demographic differences that influence news consumption habits among the European countries that use social media the most: Germans, French, Spanish, Dutch and Portuguese. A quantitative methodology is used based on the data provided by the “Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023” from a sample of 10,153 subjects. The results show disinformation to be a complex problem within European democracies involving concepts such as post-truth, single editorial lines, information disorder or media literacy. It also highlights how Spaniards and Portuguese use social media as a source of information more than the Germans, French and Dutch do, and are consequently exposed to content with less journalistic rigour. Moreover, significant differences have been found in terms of the frequency of access to, interest in, and trust in the news according to nationality and age. As users age, their interest in news increases, they consult the information more frequently and also show greater trust in the content they receive. By gender, men are more interested and consume more frequently, however, there are no significant differences in terms of the trust they place in the information received. There is a clear need to carry out national and international campaigns that encourage citizens to seek and receive quality information to exercise responsible citizenship, outside their comfort zone.

Keywords

Disinformation; media consumption; Europe; trust; post-truth

Resumen

El artículo identifica las principales tendencias y posibles diferencias culturales y sociodemográficas que influyen en el hábito de consumo de noticias entre los países europeos que más utilizan las redes sociales: alemanes, franceses, españoles, neerlandeses y portugueses. Se utiliza una metodología cuantitativa a partir de los datos ofrecidos por “Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023” con una

muestra de 10.153 sujetos. Los resultados evidencian la desinformación como un problema complejo dentro de las democracias europeas en el que intervienen conceptos como posverdad, líneas editoriales únicas, desorden periodístico o la alfabetización mediática. Además, destaca como españoles y portugueses utilizan las redes sociales como fuente de información por delante de alemanes, franceses y neerlandeses, en consecuencia, están expuestos a contenidos de menor rigor periodístico. Además, se han encontrado diferencias significativas en cuanto a la frecuencia de acceso a las noticias, el interés y la confianza hacia éstas atendiendo a la nacionalidad y la edad. A medida que los usuarios envejecen se incrementa el interés por las noticias, consultan esta información con más frecuencia y también confían más en el contenido que reciben. Por género los hombres se muestran más interesados y consumen con más asiduidad, sin embargo, no existen diferencias significativas en cuanto a la confianza que depositan en la información que reciben. Se aprecia la necesidad de desarrollar campañas nacionales e internacionales que promuevan que los ciudadanos busquen y reciban información de calidad para ejercer una ciudadanía responsable, más allá de su ámbito de confort.

Palabras clave

Desinformación; consumo de medios; Europa; confianza; posverdad

Resumo

O artigo identifica as principais tendências e possíveis diferenças culturais e sociodemográficas que influenciam os hábitos de consumo de notícias entre os países europeus que mais utilizam as redes sociais: alemão, francês, espanhol, holandês e português. É utilizada uma metodologia quantitativa baseada em dados fornecidos pelo Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023 com uma amostra de 10 153 indivíduos. Os resultados mostram que a desinformação é um problema complexo nas democracias europeias, envolvendo conceitos como a pós-verdade, as linhas editoriais únicas, a desordem jornalística e a literacia mediática. Os resultados mostram que a desinformação é um problema complexo nas democracias europeias, envolvendo conceitos como pós-verdade, linhas editoriais únicas,

desordem jornalística e literacia mediática. Além disso, foram encontradas diferenças significativas em termos de frequência de acesso às notícias, interesse e confiança nas notícias em função da nacionalidade e da idade. À medida que os utilizadores envelhecem, o seu interesse pelas notícias aumenta, consultam estas informações com mais frequência e também confiam mais nos conteúdos que recebem. Por género, os homens têm mais interesse e consomem mais frequentemente; no entanto, não há diferenças significativas em termos da confiança que depositam na informação que recebem. É necessário desenvolver campanhas nacionais e internacionais que incentivem os cidadãos a procurar e a receber informação de qualidade para exercerem uma cidadania responsável, para além da sua zona de conforto.

Palavras-chave

Desinformação; consumo dos media; Europa; confiança; pós-verdade

1. Introduction

The media are configured as the primary element of transmission and source of news, as instruments of control and influence over social life and as the main mirror of the reality, culture and changing values of society (McQuail, 1994). Their social significance is evident, therefore, the concentration in large communication groups where different television channels, radio stations or newspapers are clustered under the same editorial group carries the risk of tending towards “single-news sourcing” that may endanger the pluralism in journalism characteristic of healthy democracies (Román Portas, 2006).

Technology has made it possible to modify the traditional model of communication, turning information into the main axis on which power processes are built in today’s society (Castells, 2008). Its high penetration in Europe, estimated at 91.4% of Europeans (Eurostat, 2024a), with 59.2% as social media users (Eurostat, 2024b), establishes it as a gateway to the emancipation of citizens, with them being able to participate in the control and production of cultural content (Tascón & Quintana 2012; Fuente Cobo et al., 2014).

The expansion and consolidation of the Internet has changed and expanded the way people communicate and access current events. Although television remains the preferred medium for citizens of the 27 member countries of the European Union (71%), other digital sources (42%), including social media (37%) are attracting increasingly greater attention. In fact, among younger age groups (15-24 years of age), such platforms are already the main source of news, chosen by 59% compared to television's 49% (European Parliament, 2023).

The new media diet contributes to the potential access to more information, a situation that initially favours access to news, but opens the door to censorship, to news coexisting with unverified, unreliable or deliberately manipulated information, this being done for a variety of reasons. In this sense, disinformation emerges as a complex phenomenon to address in the face of unverified or unreliable information (Wardle, 2018; García-Marín 2020, among others).

Disinformation permeates all layers of the public sphere and polarises it, which means that the same news item may be interpreted in contradictory ways and is associated with institutional and democratic instability (Labarca et al., 2022; Magallón Rosa, 2019b). Therefore, disinformation rocks the very pillars of democracy, since democracy requires informed citizens who do not make decisions based on dubious, false or partisan information (Tuñón Navarro et al., 2019).

This idea of the media makes evident the need for a quality, plural media environment that offers truthful content. It is therefore necessary to analyse the media and news panorama facing Europeans, especially in those countries that consume most social media.

2. Theoretical framework

This study is based on theories that position media consumption as transactional, that is, consumers and producers exert reciprocal influences on each other (Valkenburg & Beth Oliver, 2020). It is contextualised within Web 2.0 in which users are positioned at the nexus of communication. They not only consume but produce content which is in turn consumed by their peers (Jenkins, 2003; O'Reilly, 2007; Scolari, 2013), performing the work of journalists.

It is in this informational context that the theory laid out by Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) comes into play. The theory speaks of users' consumption of media content in accordance with their beliefs and ways of understanding life. Technology enables each recipient to access the information that really interests them, which, together with the option of interaction, turns these people into managers and creators of the information society (Carrera, 2017; Novoa Montoya, 2019; Soengas et al., 2015).

2.1 Trust and misinformation in the media

Disinformation has become a major issue and many actors are seeking a solution: the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) is trying to achieve recognition of the usefulness of news-checkers, alternative media defend the pluralism they provide, while associations of traditional media advocate for classic journalism under the umbrella of large companies that guarantee the rigour, ethics and quality of journalists' work (García-Marín, 2020; Tuñón Navarro et al., 2019). But there does not seem to be an easy solution given the increase in the number of European initiatives to curb disinformation: incentives for media literacy, and the creation of groups of experts and good practice codes (Reynolds, 2023).

These facts place the phenomenon of disinformation as a key problem for contemporary democracies. Even more so taking into account the ubiquity of information and that anyone can easily create and disseminate news without it passing any prior verification filter (Castillo-Riquelme et al., 2021; Magallón Rosa, 2019a). Furthermore, some studies show information disorders, within the consolidated media itself, with sensationalist, low-quality content, which is close to infotainment where the importance of getting information out quickly and attracting clicks is paramount (Gómez-Mompart et al., 2015; Lotero-Echeverri et al., 2018; Bazaco et al., 2019). That may be difficult to eradicate in the context of the culture of immediacy where the journalist cannot contrast the news and the user does not have the time or the initiative to consider the content's veracity (Martín-García & Buitrago, 2023).

Misinformation leads to inaccurate beliefs, even concerning basic facts (Pennycook et al., 2021). Users feel the large amount of contradictory information

they receive, which leads to distrust of the media, and to the search for and delimitation of trustworthy sources (Magallón-Rosa 2019b). Therefore, trust in the news depends on the credibility that the user accords to the media. In general, traditional media with an established track record of journalism gain greater trust, though they do not generate the most traffic (Vázquez-Barrio et al., 2021).

Fact-checkers such as Matilda.es, Newtral or Pagella Política, among others have emerged to mitigate disinformation. They are independent organisations, not forming part of any media outlet, that verify data and contrast information. They are signed up to the IFCN, and some studies have them as tools that future communication professionals need to master (Herrero- Diz et al., 2022). Their labour requires that they work in a community and, apart from verifying, they have to take charge of the dissemination of the checked elements in the same media and ways in which disinformation spreads (Abuín-Penas, 2023). However, on occasions, the hoax is more viral than the debunking (Magallón-Rosa, 2018). García-Marín (2020) points out that the average time for verification is 5.4 days and warns about the difficulty that fact-checkers come up against in labelling all the information flying around on social media and especially on WhatsApp, as it is a private and closed messaging system.

However, these tools do not always succeed in debunking the hoaxes and therefore quality information is needed to maintain a healthy democracy, information based on self-demanding journalism (Pérez-Curiel & Velasco Molpeceres, 2020); and media literacy and research are proposed as the best antidote to fight disinformation (Comisión Europea, 2018a; Rodríguez-Fernández, 2019; Sádaba & Salaverría, 2023).

We are facing a paradigm shift with respect to previous approaches, since, instead of being educated by the media, it is necessary for the user to be trained before consuming media (Sádaba & Salaverría, 2023).

2.2 Fake news within information disorder

Fake news is “content that is intentionally false and appears to be true, designed to deceive citizens and publicly disseminated through any platform or social media” (Salaverría et al., 2020, p. 4). A review of the literature relates it to three

contexts: humorous, fabrication of news with the intention of deceiving, and propagandistic content (Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2018).

García Vivero & López García (2021) point to social media as the main source, means of dissemination and creation of false information, since 58% of the false content analysed comes from these platforms. Among them, WhatsApp and Facebook are the chief media for spreading hoaxes (García Vivero & López García, 2021; Pérez Escoda & Pedrero Esteban, 2021). Pennycook et al. (2021) see the main reason being the rapid and thoughtless use of these social media, which they relate more to a lack of critical attitude and poor media literacy.

The spread of fake news is nothing new and affects all areas: politics, science and health, the economy, events, etc. (García Vivero & López García, 2021). Pérez-Curiel & Velasco Molpeceres (2020) point to disinformation as an institutional feature used by heads of government such as Donald Trump or political interests such as Brexit, among others. The spreading of hoaxes intensifies during election campaigns seeking benefit for one candidate by circulating untruths that harm the others (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Other authors find hoaxes in issues as critical to health as vaccines, mental health or supposed “miracle” drugs (Do Nascimento et al., 2022; Salaverría et al., 2020).

Finally, impersonated and anonymous sources spread information more frequently, in around 75% of cases, while the sources are real in other cases (for example, institutions or media outlets) (Salaverría et al., 2020).

2.3 Access to information in the countries studied. Post-truth and information bubbles

Internet consumption in the countries analysed is very high. It reaches 99.1% of citizens In the Netherlands, 95.5% in Spain, 92.8% in France, 92.5% in Germany and 85.8% in Portugal (Eurostat, 2024a). Social media are among the most visited websites, the highest percentages of use being in Portugal (98%), Spain (95%), Germany (93%) and France (92%) according to Hootsuite (2024).

The inhabitants of the territories under study use the Internet as their main means of accessing information (Hootsuite, 2024), the highest values coming from the Dutch (76%), Spanish (74%) and Portuguese (74%). Likewise, the highest

percentage of citizens paying to access news is in the Netherlands (17%), compared to 13% of Spaniards and 11% of Germans, French and Portuguese (Newman et al., 2023).

When identifying the social media most commonly utilised to access news, all the countries, except Germany, have Facebook as their principal information source, being used by 40% of the Portuguese, 36% of the French, 30% of the Spanish and 17% of the Dutch (Newman et al., 2023); the Germans, on the other hand, prioritise YouTube (46%) as their main social media for news. The same study by the Reuters Institute finds WhatsApp is among the top 4 social media used to obtain information, especially in Spain (27%) and Portugal (24%) (Newman et al., 2023).

Another key element when selecting a news medium/platform is its editorial line, which users perceive as being intrinsic to the journalistic process itself and, therefore, inevitable (Vázquez-Barrio et al., 2021). This means a self-imposed limitation to access information from a particular perspective, something which, depending on the media consumed, can lead to an “information bubble” or “glass cage” (Vázquez-Barrio et al., 2021). Ipsos (2018) finds a higher percentage of users who access the news under this premise than is recognised; for example, while only 30% of Spaniards identify the limitation of accessing a single source of information, fully 62% put it into practice; the situation is similar in France and Germany where it is a practice for 57% and 55% but is only recognised by 25% and 22%, respectively.

It has been shown that people forward stories to their contacts even when they know the news is fake, as demonstrated in an American study by Littrell et al. (2023) when they found this behaviour in 10% of the sample under study. Therefore, the debate ceases to be about truthfulness, to position itself rather on another plane where ideology and emotion prevail (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). When objective facts begin to be less influential for generating public opinion than emotions and personal beliefs some authors speak of “post-truth”, because respect for the truth is lost (McIntyre, 2018). Living in a post-truth world implies justifying and accepting lies in order not to face reality (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2019). Such a scenario of limited news fosters misinformation and the polarisation of the population, situations that occur more easily in environments such as social media (Nikolov et al., 2015).

3. The situation of trust and fake news in the countries studied

57% of Europeans do not trust the media. Suspicion is more acute among European men, 58% of them compared to 56% of women; among individuals over 25 years old compared to those between 15 and 24 years old; and among those who experience some financial difficulty, 70% compared to 53% among those who do not (Comisión Europea, 2023).

The trust that citizens show in the media is uneven amongst the countries studied, ranging from the most trusting, the Dutch (80% of whom show trust), Portuguese (79%) and Germans (71%), to the least trusting, the Spanish (46%) and the French (48%) (Comisión Europea, 2023).

Only a minority of Europeans fully trust all media outlets: 15% of users fully trust radio, 12% trust television, 10% trust print media (newspapers and magazines), 5% trust the online version of traditional media and 2% trust social media (Comisión Europea, 2018b). This pattern repeats itself in the Netherlands, Portugal and Germany, but not in Spain and France, where print media is the second most-trusted medium, ahead of television. As in Europe, social media is not particularly trusted in the countries analysed, with only 1% to 3% fully trusting them (Comisión Europea, 2018b).

Considered by media type; social media and the internet have the highest levels of distrust, with 68% and 54% of European users not trusting these media, 7 and 9 percentage points more than in 2015, respectively (EBU, 2016, 2023). Radio, newspapers and television have a higher number of trusting users than non-trusting ones, with 56%, 49% and 49% of trusting users respectively (EBU, 2023).

It can be understood that in such a climate of distrust towards the traditional media, citizens seek and satisfy their information needs in the social media environment, even if such media lack reliable references (Romero-Rodríguez et al. 2021). Europeans see fake news as news with incorrect information (56% of responses) or facts chosen by politicians or media outlets to support a particular version of an issue (44%) (Ipsos, 2018); they are considered a problem for democracy, with the Spanish and the Dutch being the most supportive of this position (87%) and the Portuguese the least (64%) (Comisión Europea, 2023).

83% of French and 80% of Spanish people say they frequently encounter fake news, compared to 58% of Dutch, 56% of Germans and 53% of Portuguese (Comisión Europea, 2023). 36% of Europeans do not feel confident about detecting fake news (EBU, 2023). The most skilled among the countries analysed are the Germans (14%) and the least skilled are the Dutch (10%) (Comisión Europea, 2018b).

Europeans point to journalists (45%), authorities (39%), media managers (36%) and citizens themselves (32%) as the main culprits for spreading fake news (2018). The countries analysed also consider journalists to be the main cause of hoaxes, which leads to questions about their professionalism.

In short, with the consolidation of the digital medium, and especially social media, a space of informational disorder has been legitimised, where confirmed news items coexist with other false, misleading news stories, which are spread quickly and massively (Pérez Escoda & Pedrero Esteban, 2021). A review of the literature, in descriptive terms, shows, on the one hand, the change in access to news content and, on the other hand, the importance of the lack of trust in the media, as that leads to problems related to freedom and democracy.

All this calls for the drawing up of a general overview of news consumption in those European countries with the largest number of social media users, since it seems that these platforms are the main source of information disorder, and for an analysis of the media that these Europeans use to inform themselves.

4. Objectives

In a digital environment in which subjects create their own information diet and social media are configured as an element for the creation and propagation of erroneous information (García Vivero & López García, 2021), it is essential to know the media consumption of the European countries that have the most social media users.

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism produces an annual global report, which in its 2023 version raises concerns about news consumption from three perspectives: interest in information, trust in the news and criticism of journalism. Its analysis is however descriptive, and although it is quite valid for

observing global trends, not every country is always compared, and it does not allow statistically significant differences to be established between countries. Therefore, this study focuses on analysing the effect of the socio-demographic variables of nationality, gender and age on consumption, interest and trust in the news. To this end, the main sources used by citizens of the countries analysed to obtain information are studied and a response is offered to the 3 hypotheses of this study:

H1: Nationality influences the frequency of news consumption (a), interest in news (b), and the trust that users place in that content (c).

H2: Gender influences the frequency of news consumption (a), interest in news (b), and the trust that users place in that content (c).

H3: Age influences the frequency of news consumption (a), interest in news (b), and the trust that users place in that content (c).

4.1 Methodology

The study has been carried out using secondary data drawn from the global study "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023" which used a survey on news consumption in more than 46 markets. For the purpose of this study, 5 countries and a series of questions have been selected to test the hypotheses as detailed below.

First, the selection of European countries for the analysis was done by choosing the countries with the highest frequency of news consultation and, within these, those that most use social media. The top ten scores for news consultation frequency show 16 countries whose citizens see the news daily or several times a day: Finland (79%), Portugal and Luxembourg (77%), Greece (76%), Italy (74%), Cyprus, Lithuania, Sweden (72%), Germany and the Netherlands (71%), Spain and Romania (70%), Belgium (69%), Denmark (68%) and France (67%) (European Parliament, 2023). The five countries from the above list that accumulate the most identified users on social media versus internet users are: Germany (87.3%), Spain (87.1%), the Netherlands (85.9%), Portugal (84%) and France (83.4%) (Hootsuite, 2024).

In the second phase, seven relevant questions were selected to achieve the objective of the study. The first three correspond to socio-demographic indicators, which act as independent variables: (1) nationality: German, Spanish, French, Dutch and Portuguese; (2) gender: male and female; and (3) the interviewee's age, which was categorised into 6 age ranges for the analysis: 18-24 years, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64 and over 65 years. The fourth question refers to the sources that users have employed to access the news over the last week. There are twelve response options: two refer to TV (news programmes or 24-hour channels), one to radio, two to print media (newspapers or magazines), four to websites or applications (traditional media in their digital version), another to social media, the penultimate to blogs and the last item "none of the above". The fifth, sixth and seventh questions act as dependent variables and refer to the frequency of access to news, the degree of interest, and the trust that users place in it. The frequency of access to news measures the regularity with which users access any news, be it local, national or international, measured on a scale of 8 response options ranging from "more than 10 times a day" to "never". For comparisons, the variable was dichotomized into two groups: *high* and *low* news consumers. Interest in news was measured with a Likert scale question with 5 points ranging from "extremely interested" to "not at all interested", with the possibility of answering "I don't know". Again, two levels of interest were established: "not very interested" or "very interested". The statement "I trust most of the news I receive" was employed to measure trust, and responses are collected using a 5-point Likert scale between "do not agree at all" and "strongly agree", which has been divided into two groups for comparisons into "very trusting" and "not very trusting".

The third phase of the analysis corresponds to the coding and data analysis, which was carried out using SPSS version 26 on a sample of 10,153 subjects. 47.8% of these were men and 52.2% women. As regards nationality, 19.8% were German, 20% Spanish, 20.5% French, 19.9% Dutch and 19.8% Portuguese. The average age of the sample was 48.9 years, and the mean deviation was 16.1. The Chi-square test was utilised for analysis of the association between nominal or categorical variables, the ANOVA and Student's *t*-tests for the comparison of mean scores on dependent variables, and the Pearson correlation to test the association between two interval variables. Statistical contrasts were carried out with a significance level of 95%.

5. Results

The source from which the subjects in the sample access the news was compared in order to answer the main objective of the study. At a descriptive level, 32.1% utilise online versions of offline media such as TV, radio or the press, 30% use television, 15.4% social media, 10.6% radio, 7.1% newspapers and 2.3% of the sample use none of the above.

Looking more deeply into the data's degree of significance, the distributions of each of the sources have been compared in relation to nationality through the Chi-Square test that allows us to statistically contrast nominal variables. As can be seen in Table 1, the test yields statistically significant differences for all the items analysed.

The corrected residual (Cr, hereinafter) allows the establishment of differences between the categories, highlighting the fact that the Dutch and Germans are

Table 1. *Access to news from the countries analysed*

Source of access to information	% users	X ²	P (value)
Television news bulletins or programs.	Total TV: 30%	247.063	0.000
24-hour news television channels		1177.991	0.000
News programs or radio bulletins	10.6%	201.785	0.000
Print newspapers	Total <i>print</i> : 7.1%	180.77	0.000
Print magazines		52.284	0.000
Websites/Apps or Newspapers	Total for online version of traditional media: 32.1%	160.219	0.000
Websites/Apps or News Magazines		310.854	0.000
TV and radio company websites/apps		149.642	0.000
Websites/apps or other news outlets		89.196	0.000
Social media	15.4%	304.489	0.000

Source: created by the authors.

above the average in their preference for news programmes, while the Portuguese and Spanish are below it (Cr 9.8, 5.3, -13.4 and 2.4 respectively). The Portuguese and French choose the 24-hour news channel above the expected distribution compared to the rest of the countries (Cr 29.8 and 5.5). The radio is chosen more frequently by Germans, the Dutch and the Portuguese; and, less by the French and the Spanish (Cr 7.9, 6.3 and 2.7 respectively). The Dutch and the Spanish prefer the printed media above the set (Cr 6 and 4.2). The Dutch also use the online version of traditional media more frequently (Cr 11.8 %) and the French less frequently (Cr -9%). As for social media, the Spanish and Portuguese use this option as a news source to a greater extent than the other countries, as Figure 1 shows.

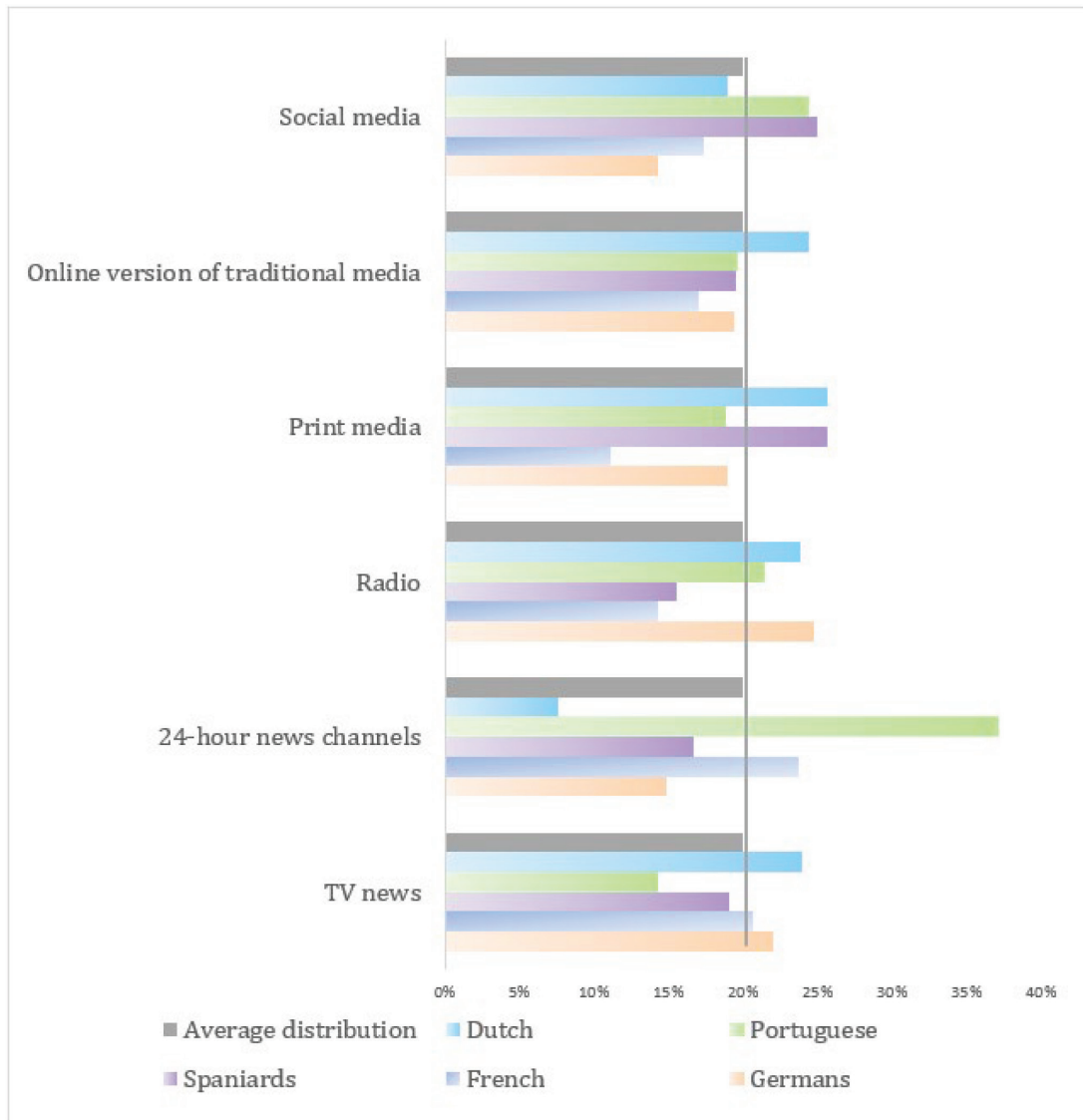
The first hypothesis (H1) with its respective sections is tested in the following analysis. H1a compares the relationship between nationality and news consumption using the Chi-Square test, obtaining statistically significant differences ($X^2 = 155.3$; $p = 0.00$). To further examine the differences, the observed and expected frequencies between nationality and the dependent variables are compared using residual correction, which establishes significant differences between the real and expected distribution. It is observed that Portuguese and Dutch access news more frequently in the *high* consumer option (Cr 8.9 and 2.3 respectively), while the French and Germans do so less frequently (Cr 4.3 and 3.5 in the *low* consumer option).

Variance analysis (ANOVA) is employed to identify differences in interest and trust by nationality, this allows significant differences to be established when there are more than two groups. The test yields $F = 32.7$ ($p=.000$) for interest in the news (H1b) and $F = 168.3$ ($p=.000$) for trust in the news (H1c). The differences are statistically significant, therefore, nationality influences interest and trust in the news (Table 2).

Interest in news is high for all nationalities, except for the French, who have a higher percentage of users who are “not very interested” (Cr 12.3 for this response option). As for trust in news, the Portuguese and the Dutch are more ingenuous, while the French and the Spanish are less trusting (Cr 13.8, 12.5, -15.2 and -11.2 respectively for the “very trusting” option).

The second hypothesis on gender differences in consumption, interest and trust in news is now tested. The comparison of the frequency of news consumption by

Figure 1. Average distribution of media consumption by country



Source: created by the authors

Table 2. Summary of hypothesis testing

Independent variables	Nationality (H1)		Gender (H2)		Age (H3)	
	Chi-Square (X^2)		Chi-Square (X^2)		Pearson correlation	
	Statistic	P (value)	Statistic	P (value)	Statistic	P (value)
Frequency of news consumption (a)	155.3	0.000	212.8	0.000	0.178	0.000
	ANOVA (F)		Student's <i>t</i> -test		Pearson correlation	
Interest in news (b)	32.7	0.000	13.225	0.000	0.184	0.000
Confidence in news (c)	168.3	0.000	0.948	0.343	0.131	0.000

Significance level: 95%

Source: created by the authors.

gender yields statistically significant differences ($X^2 = 212.8$ $p = .000$), therefore, gender does influence the frequency with which subjects consult the news. 54% of men are *high* news consumers, above the entire distribution (Cr 14.6), compared to 46% of women.

Regarding interest in the news, a comparison of averages by gender is carried out using Student's *t*-test. A value of 13.225 is given for this variable ($p=.000$) which confirms the differences by sex, with the average score being higher for the group of men than for the women, men scoring 3.61 and women 3.36 on a 5-point scale from least to greatest interest.

Finally, the average level of trust placed in news content is 3.15 for men and 3.13 for women. In this case, the contrast statistic does not show statistically significant differences (Student's *t*-test = 0.948; $p = .343$). Therefore, gender does not influence the perceived trust in news content.

To test the third hypothesis, the relationship between age and the three dependent variables is analysed utilising the Pearson correlation, after checking the homogeneity of the variables with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ($p = .000$ for all variables). The results shown in Table 2 demonstrate a significant relationship between age and frequency of access to news (0.178), interest in news (0.184) and trust in news (0.134); in all three cases the relationship is

positive but weak, indicating that the older the subject, the more frequently they access news and the greater the interest shown and trust in this type of content.

6. Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this study is to provide an overview of media and news consumption in those European countries with the most social media users. A systematic review of the literature and exploratory analysis have been employed to establish statistical differences between countries.

The main conclusion is that misinformation is a complex process, and users face four elements in overcoming it. First, post-truth, that is, they face their own emotions and points of view about wishing to know the truth or adhering to the opinion that best fits their feelings. Second, “single-news sourcing”, which hides a single editorial line under the appearance of different media/formats. Third, the information disorder itself that offers incomplete, dubious or false news due to lack of time or excessive sensationalism. And, finally, their critical capacity in the face of the content they receive from the media, that is, their media literacy.

It is clear that the Internet and social media have become real sources of access to information. This scenario is a hurdle to citizens receiving quality news, since, as we have seen, social media concentrate a high percentage of fake news stories and, in many cases, generate misinformation (García Vivero & López García, 2021). In addition, citizens in the countries analysed do not pay to be informed and only 24.9% verify news from the Internet and social media (Eurostat, 2024c).

Statistical analysis shows that the Dutch have a wide and varied media diet when it comes to news. They use TV, radio, print and digital media above all, however, they leave social media aside as a source of information. On the other hand, the Portuguese and French prefer specialised news channels, rather than general channels with specific spaces, unlike the Germans who choose these over other options. The Spanish and Portuguese stand out for their high consumption of news on social media.

This fact places these two countries at a disadvantage when it comes to being informed with quality news, since the literature has shown how social media and especially WhatsApp are hotbeds of misinformation and fake news (García Vivero & López García, 2021; Sanders, 2023).

Three hypotheses were put forward to further examine the relationship between these European citizens and the news. Statistically significant differences were found that lead to the conclusion that nationality influences the habit of consuming news, this being most marked in Portugal and the Netherlands, while at the same time these two countries trust the news more, compared to the French who are less active and more sceptical regarding news, as are the Spanish. Men are more interested and more active regarding current affairs. Age is positively associated with interest in news, with news habits and with trust. The direction of this relationship points to the need to further research the role of information disorders in trust of the news.

In this scenario, journalistic rigour becomes essential to avoid misinformation (García-Marín, 2020 and Vázquez-Barrio et al. 2021). Furthermore, media literacy must focus on social media and private messaging platforms; on individuals under 24 years of age, who are more trusting and make greater use of digital platforms; and on countries where social media is the main source of information.

Finally, it is considered essential to develop national and international plans that help citizens receive and demand quality information in order to exercise responsible citizenship. That is, contexts that foster a broad, plural information diet, where the subject can draw his or her own conclusions, beyond personal interests, and polarisation is avoided in order to maintain healthy democracies.

Authors' contributions

Ana Pastor-Rodríguez: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, resources, writing- original draft, and writing- review and editing. **Belinda de Frutos-Torres:** Conceptualization, formal analysis, supervision, methodology, writing- review and editing. The authors have read and approve the published version of the paper.

Conflicts of interest

The authors hereby declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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