

**Accepted version of article published OnlineFirst:**

Sehl, A., Simon, F. M., & Schroeder, R. (2020). The populist campaigns against European public service media: Hot air or existential threat? *International Communication Gazette*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048520939868>

## **The Populist Campaigns against European Public Service Media: Hot Air or Existential Threat?**

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### **Abstract**

Right-wing populists are gaining ground in Western democracies. Surveys show that they often distrust established media and public service media (PSM) in particular, claiming that they are biased against them. This paper examines how they have challenged PSM and proposes some potential responses to these challenges. The paper is based on an analysis of a number of recent and long-standing surveys of public attitudes towards the media, combined with an analysis of support for right-wing populists. It focuses on three purposively sampled national case studies: Austria, Germany and Sweden. We show several commonalities among PSM in these three countries, including similar right-wing populist attacks on PSM. The findings crystallise around two points: First, the impartiality and objectivity of news media

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has generally become less taken-for-granted in a ‘high-choice’ media environment offering various news products of different quality. Secondly, historical left-right distinctions have become less clear-cut, also because right-wing populists challenge them. Consequently, the role of PSM in creating a shared national conversation which represents the diversity of society has also come under siege. At the same time, partisan websites and social media platforms enable certain groups to showcase content that is more aligned with the perspectives of right-wing populists. The paper concludes by asking if right-wing populists are a growing threat to PSM and whether this threat is isolated or potentially indicative of a broader and more sustained pattern.

**Keywords:** Public Service Media, Populism, Europe, Trust in media, Digital media, Austria, Germany, Sweden

### **The Populist Campaigns against European Public Service Media**

Right-wing populists continue to gain ground in Western democracies. They are often critics of the establishment, including of its media. Recent studies show that they distrust public service media (PSM) in particular. They argue that PSM constitute an inappropriate use of taxpayers' money, and that they are biased towards ruling parties and sitting governments and/or towards a pro-immigration and a politically left-wing cultural elite which is allegedly overrepresented among (especially public service) media professionals. Terms like 'System media' ('Systemmedien') (John, 2018) in Austria, 'politically correct mafia' ('PK Maffian', Sweden) (Holt, 2016) or 'state broadcaster' ('Staatsfunk', Germany) (Niemeier, 2018) are used by them as synonyms for PSM---catchphrases to summarise their criticism and distinguish it from positive discussions about the public value of PSM.

This paper examines how they have challenged PSM, and potential responses to these challenges. The paper is based on an analysis of a number of recent and long-standing surveys in Northern Europe of public attitudes towards the media and opinion polls of support for right-wing populists. One problem here is that surveys and political opinion polls follow different methodologies and are also hard to compare across countries. This paper seeks to overcome this problem by examining longer-term trends and comparing three cases---Austria, Germany and Sweden---in depth and within the scope of a broader comparison of trust in media, shifts to digital news media, and right-wing populist criticisms of PSM.

The countries have been purposively selected to allow for comparison of this topic: In Austria, the right-wing populist Freedom Party (FPÖ) temporarily gained power in a right-wing coalition government and threatened to privatise and so abolish PSM altogether.

Germany, when all of its PSM are taken together, has the most well-funded PSM in Europe, and, for the first time in its post-war history, with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) a right-wing populist party in the parliament which has also specifically attacked the media and PSM. Sweden, finally, has a tradition of strong and highly trusted PSM, and yet PSM have been under attack in recent years from the right-wing populist party Sweden Democrats (SD).

Our analysis shows that there are many commonalities among PSM in the changing political environment of our three cases that are impacting debates about the value of PSM, including similar right-wing populist attacks on PSM. The findings crystallise around two main points: First, the impartiality and objectivity of news media has generally become less taken-for-granted in a high-choice- media environment offering various news products of different quality. Second, historical left-right distinctions are no longer so clear (Mounk, 2018), also because right-wing populists in our three countries challenge them. As a consequence, the role of PSM in creating a shared national conversation by representing diversity of society has also come under siege from right-wing populists who oppose these ideals. At the same time, partisan websites and social media enable certain groups to showcase content that is more aligned with their socio-political perspectives.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we set out the three main components of our analysis, defining terms and providing background on: right-wing populism, PSM, and trust. We begin by defining what we understand by populism and analyse its current rise in the US as well as several European countries. Next, we describe the role of PSM, especially in Europe. Then we present findings about trust in media from several cross-national surveys. Following this broader discussion, we go into detail for the three countries examined here; Austria, Germany and Sweden. We analyse their most important news sources, including the role of PSM and partisan media, trust in media and---most importantly---the attacks on media

and PSM specifically by right-wing populists. The paper concludes by asking if right-wing populists are a growing threat to PSM, whether this threat is isolated or potentially indicative of a broader and more sustained pattern, and offers some potential remedies going forward.

## **Background**

### *Populists and Media*

In this paper, we understand the definition of populism as having three facets. First, a distinction between a ‘good or virtuous people’ and a ‘corrupt or venal establishment or elite’ (Mudde, 2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Second, populist parties argue that ‘the people’ should be more fully represented in government. Thus, as Mueller (2016) puts it, populists claim that ‘we are the 100%’, or that virtuous ‘people’ alone represent the ‘true’ people. A third and final element is that populists argue for the socio-political exclusion of certain groups, in the case of left-wing populists a wealthy elite that favours global economic forces, and in the case of right-wing populists ‘others’ that are not part of the nation such as religious or ethnic minorities. There is thus a horizontal and vertical dimension to both varieties of populism; horizontally, there is nationalism against other economies (for both left- and right-wing populists) and against ‘other’ peoples (right-wing); vertically against economic elites (left-wing) and political and cultural elites (right-wing) (Brubaker, 2017). Populism of all stripes entails a ‘my nation first’ politics, mainly economically on the left and culturally on the right (for a classification of our party cases, and others, along these lines, see <https://populism.byu.edu/Pages/Data>).

The relationship between populism and the media has been widely discussed (Moffitt, 2017), but most research has focused on how populists use the media. Far less is known about their critical stance against traditional media, and especially how they criticise the media for allegedly being biased against them (e.g., Dell, 2019). The focus of this paper, however, is on a topic that is even less well-known; namely, how right-wing populists have attacked public service media (PSM), arguing that they are at the service of left-wing cultural and governing political elites. Since PSM are publicly funded, they have often been regarded as operating at the behest of political parties. Right-wing populists add to the traditional accusations of alleged political bias the idea that PSM are controlled by establishment elites and ignore ‘the people’.

Some have argued that the populist style is to communicate directly with the people, outside conventional journalistic formats and traditional communication channels (Moffitt, 2017). This direct style fits the person-centric nature of populist politics. However, there is considerable variation to the extent of person-centric-ness of populists and in their uses of digital media to circumvent traditional media. The example of Donald Trump is instructive here, since, in Western democracies, he is the politician who has most recognisably taken person-centric direct communication with the public to an extreme. He has also taken attacks on the media to unprecedented levels, e.g., by accusing them of (being) ‘fake news’. Yet his communication is mostly not directly with the people; instead, the public is exposed to how his tweets are translated into traditional media where they gain a large share of media attention (see Schroeder 2016, 2018: 32--44, 67--70). As we shall see, in Austria and Germany and Sweden, too, there is considerable variation in how populists use traditional and digital media, and it is not just leaders but parties that attack media and PSM.

Populists make two key arguments against PSM: one is that they constitute an inappropriate use of taxpayers' money, and the second that they are biased towards ruling parties and sitting governments and/or towards a pro-immigration and politically left-wing cultural elite which is overrepresented among (especially public service) media professionals (e.g., Wendt, 2020). As we shall see, the evidence for bias towards ruling parties and governments is scant, as is the evidence about biased news in PSM.

### **Public Service Media**

Public service broadcasters (PSB)---or public service media (PSM) in the digital age---in Western countries have traditionally been required to fulfil public service obligations. These include universality and diversity in access and coverage, as well as high-quality national programs grounded in an independent, impartial, and accountable approach (Schweizer and Puppis, 2018: 114--15). Despite these shared obligations, PSM differ widely. There are, for example, huge differences between the relevance, funding and governing of PSM in the US and in Europe, but also between European countries. Generally, in countries with a strong democratic tradition, PSM usually develop a higher level of professionalization and autonomy from political control. On the other hand, in countries where this democratic tradition is less strong or among those following an authoritarian regime, political clientelism and state paternalism are seen as more prevalent (Brevini, 2015).

Trust in PSM depends on the circumstances under which PSM operate. Cross-national data from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report show that PSM score best in countries where they are perceived as independent from the government (Newman et al., 2018: 18). In



many European countries, this means high trust, also in comparison to other media brands (Newman et al., 2018: 41), but in countries that have brought their PSM in line with governments, such as Poland and Hungary, these media enjoy comparatively little trust, again in absolute terms and relative to other media brands (Newman et al., 2019: 90, 101).

Various studies on the political impact of PSM (for a literature overview see Nielsen et al., 2016) found that they tend to broadcast more news and current affairs programs at peak times (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2010; Esser et al., 2012), and among those programs, more hard news than private sector media (e.g., Curran et al., 2009; Aalberg et al., 2013). As a consequence, both direct individual exposure to PSM news or even only living in a country with a strong PSM is associated with increased knowledge of a variety of hard news topics (e.g., Curran et al., 2009; Aalberg et al., 2013). It can also be mentioned in this context, however, that there is an extensive and well-founded body of scientific literature on selectivity and cognitive dissonance in media use that shows that people prefer to consume news that are consistent with their values over those that runs against their views (for an overview on selective exposure and cognitive dissonance see Donsbach and Mothes, 2017).

All PSM are characterised by a special funding situation compared to private sector media, although funding arrangements and levels of funding vary between countries. In European countries, PSM are traditionally funded through a license fee, taxes, or direct government funds and in many cases supplemented by commercial revenues (e.g., through advertisement or sponsorship). In general, public funding per capita and with it a stable funding situation for PSM is higher in the Nordic and Central European countries than in Eastern and Southern Europe (European Audiovisual Observatory (EAO), 2016).

PSM in many European countries once had a very strong position – also after transitioning from monopolies to dual systems – and in some cases leading markets in radio

and TV for decades. Yet this situation has been challenged in the digital age. PSM still enjoy a wide reach for their news offline, but their online reach is often less pronounced (Newman et al., 2018: 25). Consequently, many feel pressured to adapt as a means to ensure continued audience reach and to legitimise their existence and focus to varying degrees on strategies for digital, mobile and social media (Sehl et al., 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). However, PSM also face external obstacles, such as political or legal limitations (Brevini, 2013). One frequent narrative is the ‘crowding out’ argument by commercial media, whereby it is argued that PSM could lead to unfair competition as they are publicly funded and could reduce the revenues of commercial players. However, there is little empirical support for this argument (e.g., Barwise and Picard, 2014; Sehl et al. 2020; for an overview see also KPMG, 2015; Nielsen, 2016).

PSM in several countries are also confronted with debates about their legitimacy, partly from a liberal perspective, partly from a populist perspective. A recent example was the referendum about the public funding of the Swiss PSM SRG (Schweizerische Radio- und Fernsehgesellschaft) in March 2018. The No Billag initiative---a reference to the Billag firm that collects the media licensing fee---that called for the abolition of the public service license fee was supported by the youth wing of the libertarian Free Democratic party (PLR), which argued against the unfair market competition. In addition, the referendum was backed by the nationalist and anti-migrant Swiss Peoples Party (SVP) (Agence-France-Press, 2018). We will analyse such cases with regard to populist attacks in the country sections of this paper below.

## **Trust in Media**

Trust in the media is vital, for without trust media are neither able to hold power to account, nor to inform the public and support the vigorous public deliberation on which democracy relies. Yet recent years have seen a widespread crisis of confidence in news media among great parts of the public in many countries (Nielsen and Graves, 2017: 2). According to the latest Reuters Digital News Report, for example, only 42 percent of all respondents worldwide said they trust news overall (Newman et al., 2019: 21), with 39 percent in Austria and Sweden and 47 percent in Germany (Newman et al., 2019: 71, 111, 87). These findings are corroborated for Western Europe in a recent Pew Survey: Comparably high trust in the media in some countries (64 percent of respondents in Germany and Sweden) was offset by very low levels of trust in France (35 percent), the UK (32 percent), Italy (29 percent), Denmark (47 percent), and Spain (31 percent) (Simmons et al., 2018: 42). Data for Austria is not available from this survey.

In light of the focus of this paper, the question can be asked whether people who espouse populists' views have differing levels of trust in mainstream media from the rest of the population. So far, the available evidence seems to support this assumption. According to Pew data, European populists on the left and the right trust mainstream news media less than centrist voters. Gaps in trust in the media between those with populist views and more conventional centrist views tend to be significantly larger and more consistent than those between the ideological left and right (Mitchell et al., 2018: 4, 18). Pew further found that European PSM generally receive the highest levels of trust from the public, but that, again, those with populist views trust them significantly less (Mitchell et al., 2018: 68, 69).

Given these findings, it is perhaps not surprising that people with low levels of trust in mainstream legacy news media tend to prefer non-traditional news sources like social media,

blogs, and digital-born providers, and are more likely to engage in various forms of online news participation (Fletcher and Park, 2017). Newman et al., for instance, show that users of alternative or partisan websites in a number of countries tend to have low trust in the news in general and in mainstream media outlets in particular, ‘which they think fail to tell the truth on issues like Europe and immigration’ (Newman et al., 2018: 48). But it is also important to note that young people (below 35 years old) in general are more reliant on social media platforms for news than older generations (Newman et al., 2018: 48).

Immigration, including the alleged criminality of immigrants and welfare chauvinism against them, has been the most important single issue for all three right-wing populist parties examined here. Questions that will therefore play a large part in our analysis is how trust in (public service) media and attacks on the bias or otherwise in dealing with immigrants and refugees, have recently developed, especially since the 2015 refugee ‘crisis’. Against this background, we can turn to our cases.

## Cases

### *Austria*

*Patterns of news consumption.* Austria is still in some respects a traditional news environment (Newman et al. 2018: 64). Despite high internet penetration (88 percent), online news (including social media) has only recently become the most popular news source (75 percent), followed by TV (70 percent) and print (56 percent) (Newman et al., 2019: 71). PSM, in this case the ORF (Österreichischer Rundfunk), still has the largest single offline (76

percent) weekly audience share, followed by Austria's largest tabloid Kronen Zeitung (37 percent), and German public broadcaster ZDF (24 percent). The ORF also dominates online. ORF News online has become the most popular online weekly news source (34 percent), followed by the website of the Kronen Zeitung (25 percent) and digital-only GMX News (17 percent) (Newman et al., 2019: 71). Populist online 'alternative media' like Unzensuriert, Kontrast, and Alles Roger?---all of them far-right and often anti-EU---have only a small audience, between 1--4 percent (Newman et al. 2019: 71). In terms of audience reach, they also fall short of comparative 'alternative media' in countries like the US and Sweden---perhaps a result of Austria's strong tabloid press which often pushes populist topics into the mainstream (Simon and Figl, 2017; Trappel, 2018).

*PSM among other media.* PSM is in a strong position in Austria: the ORF is still Austria's most trusted news brand (Newman et al., 2019: 71). While private operators have been able to broadcast TV since 2001, the ORF has overall maintained strong audience ratings with 40 percent general market share in 2017. In comparison, the three main private national channels only had a market share between 2--3 percent (ORF Medienforschung, 2018). So far, Austria's PSM has successfully shifted its offerings to digital channels, with ORF News online the most widely used news source (Newman et al., 2019: 71) and the news provider with the most unique monthly users (OEWA, 2018; Trappel, 2018).

*Trust in media and PSM in particular.* According to Eurobarometer data, media trust in Austria has been above the EU average over the past two decades and remained largely stable, although trust in both the press and TV has declined after the 2013 general election, from approximately the same time as the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) started to surge in the polls (Eberl, 2019: 11), with a low point reached in 2015-16 at the height of the European

migration crisis. The reasons for the decline, however, are difficult to establish (Bacher et al., 2019: 420) and the coincidence with these events should not imply causation.

However, a more nuanced picture emerges if we look at how Austrians perceive bias in their country's media. As Eberl (2019: 14) finds, Austrians generally perceive the public broadcasting television programs as the least biased (34 percent) and tabloid newspapers as most biased (e.g., 60 percent for the Kronen Zeitung). Yet, if we look at voting intentions, 'respondents who lean towards the radical-right FPÖ are likely to perceive Austrian media generally as more biased' (Eberl, 2019: 17) against them and against their views. Eberl further finds that party preferences drive perceived outlet biases: Supporters of the FPÖ perceive the PSM as more biased and are 'less skeptical of tabloids' than other voters (2018: 22).

Trust can also be measured by comparing whether someone trusts news in general or trusts the news that they themselves use, which are trusted more (Newman et al., 2019). Here, the 'brand' that Austrians trust most is the ORF with a trust score of 6.67 out of 10 (Newman et al., 2019: 71). The gap between higher scores for news that people themselves use versus those they trust generally is very small for the ORF and Austria's quality broadsheets, but largest for tabloids like Kronen Zeitung and Heute (Newman et al. 2019: 71), with these tabloids generally deemed more trustworthy by FPÖ supporters (Eberl, 2019).

*Populist attacks on media and PSM in particular.* The far-right FPÖ has been among the most popular Austrian parties in the polls for some time. In the 2017 election, it received almost 26 percent of votes and subsequently entered into a coalition with the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), although this coalition and the government broke apart in the

summer of 2019 as a result of the so-called ‘Ibiza affair’.<sup>2</sup> The modern Freedom Party attacks---often with the help of favorable tabloids, ‘alternative media’ and right-wing Facebook pages and networks (Maan and Schmid, 2016)---what they see as a left-wing, politically-correct establishment which is opposed to ‘the people’. The Freedom Party also promotes a strongly nativist Austro-nationalism (Pelinka, 2019).

The political establishment (as the FPÖ sees it) consists of the two major parties, the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and ÖVP which have governed Austria by turns since 1955, plus various smaller parties on the left plus ‘left-wing’ media and cultural elites---as well as the public broadcaster. As with other nativist right-wing populists, this ‘establishment’ is regarded as being opposed to the ‘real people’, permissive towards immigration, and Islam in particular, and a general dilution of Austrian culture and weakening the Austrian welfare state and the ‘Heimat’ (the people’s home) (Aichholzer et al., 2014; Pelinka, 2019; Rheindorf and Wodak, 2018; Wodak, 2018). In 2017, the Freedom Party often set the tone of the public debate and the election campaign by focusing on nativist and jingoistic notions and fears of radical Islam and immigration (Simon, 2018)---topics that a majority of Austrians are concerned about (Reynié, 2017).

The FPÖ has long had a fraught relationship with the ORF which it accuses of having a left-wing bias. The ORF is seen as an integral part of the ‘establishment’ and is frequently touted as being part of the ‘Systemmedien’ (system media) or as a ‘Rotfunk’ (red broadcaster) (John, 2018). In the past, FPÖ members and politicians have repeatedly claimed that journalists are members of a ‘left-wing hunting party’ (Kaltenbrunner et al., 2010: 115) which tries to smear the FPÖ. The ORF, in particular, has been the subject of this criticism, leading

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<sup>2</sup> The scandal was triggered on 17 May 2019 by the publication of a secretly recorded video of a meeting in Ibiza, Spain, in July 2017, which shows the then opposition politicians Heinz-Christian Strache and Johann Gudenus (both FPÖ) discussing their party’s underhanded practices and intentions.

some FPÖ politicians to call for a ‘neutralisation’ of the ORF, even ‘at the risk of being accused of an ‘Orbánisation’” (AfD-Landtags-TV, 2018). During the 2017 electoral campaign, ÖVP and FPÖ frequently accused the public broadcaster of partisan journalism. Freedom Party leader Strache even took to Facebook after the election to accuse the ORF, and its most famous news anchor Armin Wolf, of lying. Wolf and the ORF sued and the case was settled out of court after provoking a scandal (Simon, 2018).

More evidence of the party’s hostile attitude towards the press and the ORF emerged during the ‘Ibiza affair’. In the secretly recorded footage from 2017 involving, amongst others, Strache and a woman pretending to be the FPÖ-friendly niece of a Russian billionaire, Strache openly mulled about an ‘Orbánization’ of the Austrian media landscape. After first discussing how Austria’s largest tabloid, the Kronen Zeitung, could be bought by the fake niece in order to have the influential paper on his party’s side, the then opposition leader brings up the ORF which would be, as he says, ‘the only competitor’ to the Kronen Zeitung newspaper. In the video, Strache ended on a promise. ‘If we become part of the government, we could imagine privatising the broadcaster [...] We could imagine completely restructuring the ORF.’ (Al-Serori et al., 2019).

Traditionally, major shifts in Austria’s political landscape have been followed by reforms of the ORF, and the FPÖ had signalled as much in its government programme (ÖVP/FPÖ 2018) and public speeches (Reuters, 2018). One target was the mandatory licence fee, the ORF’s main source of funding (Simon, 2018; Weinberger, 2018). The FPÖ has called the licence fee a ‘Zwangsgebühr’ (coercive fee) and has repeatedly talked about eliminating it (Münch, 2018). It has proposed instead that the ORF should be financed directly by the government which could thus exert direct pressure on operations. While in power, the FPÖ was able to extend its reach over the ORF (Weinberger, 2018), which was made possible



because of the governance structure of the ORF (Trappel, 2018). Weakening the ORF would likely strengthen Austria's tabloid press which is known for publishing misleading information and which has strong ties to Austria's conservative and right-wing political scene (Simon and Figl, 2017; Bacher, 2019).

### *Germany*

*Patterns of news consumption.* Like Austria, Germany is traditional in its media use compared to other countries, although digital media news consumption is increasingly popular. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, TV is still the most widely used source of news (72 percent weekly use in 2019) even if viewership continues to decline. The internet is used by 68 percent as a source of news and one third (34 percent) of respondents use social media for this purpose (Newman et al., 2019: 87). Two PSM, the national ARD (54 percent weekly use) and ZDF (44 percent), remain the most widely used offline media for news in Germany, followed by local or regional newspapers (34 percent). For online, however, the picture looks different: Here, Spiegel Online (18 percent, legacy) and t-online (15 percent, digital-born) are on top of the list, before Focus online (14 percent, legacy) and Bild.de (legacy), Web.de (digital-born) and ARD Online News (13 percent each). The other nationwide German PSM, ZDF, reaches only 7 percent of Germans with news online. Partisan anti-establishment websites like Junge Freiheit, Politically Incorrect (PI), and Breitbart Germany are used by only a small fraction of German internet users, between 2--3 percent (Newman et al., 2019: 87).

*PSM among other media.* German PSM are in a strong position: They are well-established, enjoy comparatively high public funding, and at least offline, they have strong audience ratings (European Audiovisual Observatory (EAO) (2016), and see Reuters Institute data above for news specifically). However, their primary challenge is to adapt to the increasingly digital, mobile, and social media environment (e.g., Sehl et al., 2016). At the same time, several commercial publishers have tried to restrict PSM's online activities. They argue, for example in a court case against the ARD's Tagesschau app (the app of the flagship news programme), that public service news online would crowd out commercial activities by making it difficult or impossible to charge for content. A court ruling at the end of 2016 found that the Tagesschau app was too similar to the press on a sample day in 2011 as it contained too much text (ARD, 2017). Hence it was ruled that PSM must focus more on audio and video, which is not necessarily in line with users' news consumption habits online (Hölig and Hasebrink, 2018: 80).

*Trust in media and PSM in particular.* Germans have comparatively high trust in the news. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 shows that about half of Germans (47 percent) trust the news overall and 60 percent trust the media they use (Newman et al., 2019: 87). Similarly, a survey at the University of Mainz conducted in 2018 found that 44 percent of Germans trust the established media on important issues. 22 percent express fundamental mistrust and 34 percent express an opinion in between – a slightly positive trend compared to previous years (Jackob et al., 2019: 214). Trust in PSM TV is especially high with 65 percent of Germans believing it is very trustworthy or trustworthy, 25 percent partly think so and 8 percent express mistrust. These values have been relatively stable since the migration 'crisis' of 2015 (2016: 69 percent and 2017: 72 percent very trustworthy or trustworthy) (Jackob et al., 2019: 212). In contrast, only 11 percent of respondents think the internet in general is

very trustworthy or trustworthy, whereby 4 percent state this for news on social media platforms and 12 percent for news on alternative news websites (Jackob et al., 2019: 212-213). Also, the Reuters Institute survey shows that only 16 percent of Germans say they trust the news they see on social media (Newman et al., 2019: 87). Similarly, the Edelman trust barometer found a gap (of approximately 22 percentage points) between average trust in traditional and online-only (61 percent) for general news and information and average trust in search engines and social media platforms (40 percent), the largest gap among 28 countries (Edelman, 2018: 20). Meanwhile, the two public service broadcasters, ARD and ZDF, are (among) the most trusted media organisations, along with local and regional newspapers. Tabloid newspapers, digital-born media as well as commercial broadcasters are less trusted for news (Newman et al., 2019: 87; see also N.N., 2017; Jackob et al., 2019: 212).

However, despite the overall trust levels, a significant proportion of Germans do not feel well represented by established media. Almost three quarters (43 percent) say that they perceive the social conditions in their direct environment differently from how the media present them. In addition, about a quarter (27 percent) say that the topics that are important to them are not taken seriously by the media (Jackob et al., 2019: 216). Further, Jackob et al. show that people who are dissatisfied with politics, democracy, and their own economic situation feel especially alienated from the media, which is also the case for those with high sympathy for the right-wing populist AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) (2019: 217). In addition, in a study commissioned by the WDR, the largest German regional PSM, while on average 66 percent of respondents stated they have very high or high trust in PSM, this is only the case for 31 percent of AfD-supporters. 68 percent of them have little to no trust in PSM, but on average only 34 percent of respondents say the same (WDR, 2018: 18).

*Populist attacks on media and PSM in particular.* In Germany, journalistic trust has been the topic of a highly controversial public debate in recent years, despite overall trust in news, as we have seen. A few topics in particular triggered this debate (see Hölig and Hasebrink, 2016: 36): One was the reporting on the Ukraine conflict in 2015 which led to accusations of the media being one-sided and biased towards the government's position. Another topic were the sexual assaults on New Year's Eve in 2015/2016 in Cologne that prompted accusations that the media were suppressing facts and reporting was biased. Furthermore, coverage of refugees arriving in Germany resulted in suggestions that the media are controlled by the political elite. During the demonstrations, the slogan 'Lügenpresse' (lying press) was used which harks back to the Nazi era. And while these accusations were directed broadly at all elite media, PSM were singled out for alleged closeness to the government.

The emergence of the AfD which gained 12.6 percent of the votes in the 2017 national election and entered the parliament for the first time and became the third-strongest party, has presented a particular dilemma for PSM. The AfD has, for example, called the PSM 'Staatsfunk' (state broadcaster) or 'Schweigekartelle' (cartels enforcing silence) and accused them of suppressing debates over immigration or distorting the views of their party (Niemeier, 2018). This is in line with the lesser trust that their supporters have in German PSM (see above). At the same time, the AfD has argued for reducing PSM by abolishing the licence fee (Niemeier, 2018). In addition, the AfD announced in February 2018 that it would build up its own independent 'newsroom' or news channel. As a reason for this, party co-leader Alice Weidel singled out the bad relationship between the party and the 'mainstream' media: 'As long as the AfD is ignored by many media or badly targeted with fake news, there can only be this solution', said Weidel. The journalists of the AfD's newsroom, according to

Weidel, should focus on topics that are allegedly ‘swept under the carpet’ and deliver content specifically for social media (Die Welt, 2018; Neff, 2018).

### *Sweden*

*Patterns of news consumption.* Online sources have recently become the largest source of news in Sweden as measured by weekly audiences. PSM, in this case SVT, still has the largest single offline (56 percent) weekly audience share, but online sources include Dagens Nyheter (14 percent) and Svenska Dagbladet (13 percent) (the last two are the two main quality daily newspapers) (Newman et al., 2019: 111). However, if we look at the weekly readership of the Swedish populist online ‘alternative media’ or partisan websites, these include Nyheter Idag (11 percent), Fria Tider (10 percent), Samhällsnytt (9 percent), Ledarsidorna (7 percent), and several others between 4 and 6 percent (Newman et al., 2019: 111). As these figures indicate, these are not so far behind the other online sources just mentioned, and they are higher than the German and Austrian equivalents that were mentioned above. A different comparison could be with the US which has a more fragmented news market, where the populist right supporting ‘alternative media’ website Breitbart reaches six percent of users weekly (while in Germany, the German-language version of Breitbart reaches one percent weekly). In short, in Sweden, the Sweden Democrat supporting partisan or ‘alternative media’ reach a comparatively large share of news audiences.

*PSM among other media.* In Sweden, the PSM organisations SVT (Sveriges Television) and SR (Sveriges radio) are in a strong position: they are well-established, held in high regard by the public, and have maintained strong audience ratings despite the challenges they have

had since the 1980s when commercial television started to gain audience share. More recently, the threat to the future of PSM has come from digital media, especially as Swedes are among the most advanced nations worldwide in shifting to an online and mobile digital media diet (Westlund and Weibull, 2013; Newman et al., 2019). Yet PSM in Sweden have also been successful in shifting their offerings to digital channels and gaining online audiences (SVT News online 31 percent and SR News online 12 percent weekly reach) (Newman et al., 2019: 111).

*Trust in media and PSM in particular.* It is worth recalling the overall landscape of trust in media in Sweden: newspapers have enjoyed the least trust because they were traditionally tied to Sweden's main parties (in a corporatist media system, Hallin and Mancini, 2004), with PSM broadcast TV and radio trusted more. This landscape, as mentioned, became more complex when commercial TV and radio were added in the 1980s. Yet trust in PSM has held steady in them being regarded as especially trustworthy (Andersson and Weibull, 2018: 72). Among Sweden Democrats (SD), however, trust in media as institutions is lower: for newspapers, among SD supporters, it was 17 percent in 2017 as against 31 percent among the population-at-large, and for TV and radio 37 percent as against 56 percent (Andersson and Weibull, 2018: 77, 78). The same applies to media not as institutions but as individual organisations: Sweden Democrats have lower levels of trust in PSM (SVT and SR) than supporters of other parties, and the same applies to levels of trust in other individual TV channels and newspapers (Andersson and Weibull, 2018: 83). It can also be shown that distrust of media is highest among Sweden Democrats who most strongly support the party, whereas among other parties this is not the case, and that distrust is especially high concerning reporting on crime and immigration (2018: 86, 87). And it can be mentioned that

Sweden Democrats are just as reliant as others on PSM (2018: 88); in other words, it is not the exclusive reliance on ‘their own media’ that generates this distrust.

As already mentioned for the Austrian case, another way to measure trust is to compare whether someone trusts news in general with trust in the news that they themselves use, which are trusted more. Here, again, the ‘brand’ that Swedes trust most is SVT and SR. However, the gap between higher scores for news people themselves use and those they trust is largest for those using partisan sites like Fria Tider and Nya Tider, where, according to Reuters Institute data (Newman et al., 2019: 111), ‘users are almost twice as likely to trust the brand compared to those who have just heard of it’.

*Populist attacks on media and PSM in particular.* In Sweden, the SD and the ‘alternative media’ that support them both attack what they see as a ‘politically correct mafia’ (‘PK Maffian’) (Holt 2016). Swedish PSM are seen as an integral part of this ‘mafia’, criticised in particular on the partisan websites that support the SD. This ‘mafia’ is said to consist of parties and politicians on the left plus ‘multicultural’ media and cultural professionals who are part of the ‘establishment’. As among other right-wing populists, this ‘establishment’ is regarded as being permissive towards immigration and crime and a general dilution of Swedish culture.

The SD have always been critical of their portrayal in the media, but apart from attacks via partisan websites, these criticisms are now raised in parliament, where they been represented since 2010. They gained 5.7 percent of votes in 2010, 12.9 percent in 2014, and 17.6 percent in 2018 and they have put forward motions in parliament since at least early 2014 calling for more oversight of PSM, arguing that a large part of the public does not believe in the political impartiality of PSM (Sveriges Riksdag, 2014). Their argument is also based on a selective reading of some of the same sources used here, and research by

Gothenburg University about the political sympathies of PSM journalists, which Sweden Democrats argue are biased towards the left and the Green party. This call for more oversight has continued to this day, recently extended to a call for more oversight over the web content of PSM on the party's website (Sweden Democrats, 2018), under the heading 'More oversight of the public service to strengthen the peoples' trust!'. Yet as we have seen, it is mainly the SD supporters who do not trust media generally and public service in particular, while the population-at-large continues to trust the media.

The attack on PSM partly reflects the SD's political position: until very recently all other Swedish parties agreed not to work with them. This 'cordon sanitaire' has been in place even though the SD was in a potential 'kingmaker' position after the most recent elections in 2014 and in 2017. The 'outsider' status of the Sweden Democrats no doubt partly accounts for their sense of being left out of the public debate, though, as Rydgren and van der Meiden have shown (2016), they receive just as much attention in the media as other parties, even if much of the coverage they receive is negative.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have examined how right-wing populists have challenged PSM in three Western European countries. As we have seen, there are many commonalities among PSM in the changing environment of our three cases, including similar right-wing populist attacks on PSM. We can put these findings into two larger contexts. The first is that the impartiality and objectivity of news media – the mission and core values of PSM – have become less taken-for-granted. That is understandable in view of the recent change towards a 'high-choice'



environment in which there are more media from which to obtain information about politics. Some of these choices, and populist partisan websites in particular, have become more prominent only in the last few years, so: can they be seen as reliable or should they even be counted as news media? Should news consumers check sources or do research themselves? However, a more media literate audience, in the sense of checking sources, would not necessarily mean that users with populist views change those. In that case, it is also understandable that a part of the population and a political grouping that seeks to change the status quo---the right-wing populists---might feel more aggrieved, especially as their positions are regarded as outside of the mainstream by the majority and regarded as particularly controversial by the elites whose project of globalisation (among other things) the populists challenge.

The second context are new political cleavages. The perception among some scholars is that old left-right distinctions are no longer so clear (Mounk, 2018; Schroeder, 2019), also because right-wing populists in our three countries do not clearly fall into left-right divides since, for example, they seek to strengthen welfare states but curtail its benefits for refugees and immigrants. Hence the old models of PSM which was aimed at creating a shared and inclusive national conversation, and which had a set of relatively stable left and right coalitions to represent and to balance as evenly as possible, is thrown out of kilter. If, furthermore, there are now more alternatives to this shared media conversation available in the form of partisan websites and social media, and these are accessible (without paywalls) and seem for certain groups to be more aligned with their views, then it is clear where the right-wing populist attacks on PSM come from. In case their accusation that the shared conversation excludes them, is true (for example, as we saw for Sweden, the coverage is mainly negative – perhaps rightly so, but the perception of Sweden Democrat supporters

would lead them to perceive this as exclusive), it becomes important for right-wing populists to chip away at the institutions that sustain it. These institutions, apart from PSM (though PSM is a central pillar), also include supranational bodies, bodies that uphold human rights and obligations towards diversity, independent legal institutions and plural powers in government. These institutions are furthermore aligned with the values of openness and diversity that are becoming more globally accepted---yet in this way they therefore block the idea of a unitary peoples' will---recall that populists are 'my nation first' anti-globalists.

Within these similarities, there are mainly differences of degree, depending on the conditions in the three countries, in terms of the vehemence---or success and its limits---with which PSM are attacked. These attacks can be expected to continue, unless right-wing populist parties become the sole majority party (at which time they would become responsible for PSM, and would either seek to weaken or abolish PSM, or perhaps use PSM to their own advantage), or they will fade away. In the meantime, citizens need greater awareness of a complex shift taking place. So do PSM, which can nevertheless rely on the good will and trust of a majority of the population, especially if they studiously maintain a reputation for fair and objective and balanced. They can also maintain and enhance their reputation by promoting the transparency, openness and professionalism which is, to date, conspicuously lacking in online-only partisan or alternative media on which right-wing populists disproportionately rely. Transparency, understood as 'embedding in the news report a sense of how the story came to be and why it was presented as it was' (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 83), can also help the audience to understand journalistic processes better, in this way potentially fostering greater accountability and credibility (e.g., Karlsson and Clerwall, 2018) while countering false assumptions, including those often spread by right-wing populists. Put differently, PSM can thrive if they maintain or even strengthen their

institutional autonomy and their role as neutral arbiters in challenging and uncertain times. PSM are singularly well-equipped to do this, with their resources of professional norms and expertise, funding base and technological and organisational capability and less pressure to gain attention by means of sensationalism or otherwise lowering standards. This is especially true as PSM move online, where they can carve out a niche as islands of objectivity and impartiality in a sea of growing uncertainty and competition for attention.

We have pointed to tensions in the contemporary political and wider climate concerning PSM. Among the potential ways forward are, first, that a wider debate needs to take place concerning the role of PSM, in the digital environment and more generally. This debate needs to include a transparent stance, perhaps including guidelines, regarding how populist parties and indeed all parties, are treated by PSM. Of course, in many respects these guidelines already exist in the form of PSM and general broadcasting regulation, but populists (and indeed the wider public) are unlikely to be aware of them: hence they need to be foregrounded.

Second, as right-wing populists perceive themselves unfairly excluded from the common PSM conversation, rooted in ideals of diversity and impartiality, they have to challenge it, and will continue challenging it lest their ideas are seen as illegitimate. Consequently, PSM should integrate right-wing populists' perspectives into the conversation, but only---and this is important---as long as they are democratic and respecting of human rights and democratic institutions, including the institution of the media. By doing this, PSM need to strike a balance in being impartial or even-handed in their representations of right-wing populists: Even-handed, in so far as reporting needs to convey the concerns or interests of populist supporters and their representatives, including elected ones, in a fair way.

Impartial, in also representing the interests and concerns of all parts of the population, especially those who are perhaps less served in other media.

Continuing to adapt to a changing media environment against internal resistance (Sehl et al., 2016) while maintaining a coherent, reliable national conversation, with all its diversity, and gaining more news audiences among those who are increasingly consuming news online, will become the mainstay of PSM's future role. Whether they will succeed in this, only time will tell.

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