



Personal epistemologies of the media: Selective criticality, pragmatic trust, and competence–confidence in navigating media repertoires in the digital age

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Abstract

While the perils of social media, fake news, and an alleged distrust in legacy media have attained considerable public attention, the implications of these public narratives for their audiences have remained understudied. The aim of this article is to identify consequences of an emerged “fake news and post truth-era-narrative” for media users’ personal epistemologies, media beliefs, and news navigation practices from a media repertoire perspective. Forty-nine in-depth media-biographical interviews with people from three different age groups and with different media repertoires were conducted. Based on the study, the three interrelated dimensions (1) selective criticality, (2) pragmatic trust, and (3) competence–confidence were developed to analyze users’ media and news navigation. These three dimensions can be applied to other scenarios to investigate how people navigate their media repertoires and interact with the news in general.

Keywords

Alternative media, credibility, fake news, media repertoires, news navigation, verification

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Introduction

It did not begin with Donald Trump. However, the US President helped “fake news” rapidly become a “global buzzword” (Tandoc et al., 2018). The ambiguous term fake news was instrumentalized for a surfeit of causes in political struggle, including discrediting legacy media coverage of unpleasant facts as untrue. The recent ado about disinformation has not only sparked considerable academic output but also found prominence in public debate and intensive media reporting on the alleged “post-truth” era. In Germany, “Lügenpresse” (lying press) accusations led to a discussion on the growing distrust of legacy media as a threat to the public sphere and democratic life.

With so much persistent public noise regarding the perils of social media and fake news, in this article, I ask how—if at all—this public discussion resonates in the information-seeking and sensemaking behavior of “ordinary citizens,” as well as their verification strategies and selection of media diets in its aftermath. Thus, the aim of this article is to identify the consequences of an emerged “fake news and post truth-era-narrative” (Watts and Rothschild, 2017) for media users’ navigation of media and news repertoires, media concepts, and strategies to assess “truth,” “facts,” “falseness,” and “fake” in the context of news consumption and interaction with media and communication content. More specifically, in this article, I attempt to answer two interrelated research questions: first, how and based on what epistemological grounds do people navigate their media repertoires and interact with the news in times of alleged post-truth? Second, when and based on what reasoning do media users feel the need to challenge information and check its credibility, and what strategies do they apply for doing so?

In answering these questions, I propose the concept of *personal epistemologies of the media*. Personal epistemologies supposedly influence users’ navigation of media and news repertoires, as these epistemologies comprise their conceptions of knowledge of media and news sources. This concept, which will be further elaborated below, builds on the idea that people will act on media based on epistemological grounds. In other words, their understanding of, for example, the news production cycle, professional selection processes in news-making, their comprehension of technological affordances, the workings of media platforms, or individual experiences with certain media and related practices will influence their use of particular media, their rejection of others, and their evaluation of mediated communication in general. Thus, when examining users’ news navigation practices, it seems vital to gain detailed insight into their personal epistemologies regarding news and the media. To address the distinct ways in which individuals act in their transmedia engagement with media, this study adopts a media repertoire approach (Edgerly, 2015; Hasebrink and Popp, 2006; Taneja et al., 2012). In rich media environments, people do not make use of the “entire body of available media at any given time” (Hasebrink and Hepp, 2017), but use a subset of specific media, which they prefer for various tasks and purposes that are meaningful to them in their everyday lives. The repertoire approach further enables searching for changes in repertoires over time to explore potential alterations triggered by the emerging post-truth narratives.

To empirically ground my contribution, I build on data from 49 in-depth interviews with people from three different age cohorts, with regard to their communication repertoires, media usage, and information-seeking practices. The interviews also addressed

their knowledge and opinion regarding specific terms related to digital disinformation and misinformation (e.g. echo chambers, filter bubbles, algorithms, trolls, bots, fake news, and alternative media), and how these might affect their news consumption and evaluation of the information presented to them. In the course of data analysis, the three concepts of (1) selective criticality, (2) pragmatic trust, and (3) competence–confidence emerged as dimensions of personal epistemologies, which influence users’ navigation of media and news repertoires.

Literature review

Media and news navigation in the post-truth-era: an audience perspective

Public narratives evolving around fake news and questions of the media’s trustworthiness have resonated in academic discourses and led to considerable research output (Tandoc et al., 2018). However, thus far, academic research has predominantly focused on the contents of fake news and definitions of the term, while the audience’s perceptions of fake news and the role of these perceptions in their media and news navigation have been rarely addressed.

Academic research on media trust as well as credibility and objectivity/honesty of the media both have a long tradition in communication studies and are not new in public debate. Literature reviews demonstrate that the subject or the notion of fake news did not suddenly appear “like a flying saucer from Mars” (Schudson and Zelizer, 2017), but was addressed in public and academic discourse with a variety of meanings, which shifted over time and in various contexts. The existing conceptualizations and scholarly definitions of fake news are diverse. In their review article on academic operationalization of fake news in 34 studies, Tandoc et al. (2018: 3) found that current definitions differ from earlier ones. Earlier, but still prevalent in more recent studies, the term was applied to define types of content that would mimic (and thereby criticize) the style of news reporting, such as political satire or parody news shows. The most recent uses describe not just false stories spreading on social media but also the fabrication of disinformation, manipulation, misleading advertising, and propaganda (Tandoc et al., 2018).

As diverse as the academic definitions of fake news appear to be, what they have in common is that they are predominantly based on content criteria, and exclude the role of the audience beyond sharing and spreading what is fake. To comprehend the real-life consequences of public fake news narratives for the composition of news and media repertoires (e.g. resort to alternative news sources, be warier of the veracity of news), it is crucial to explore whether media users perceive fake news as a problem and whether their media practices are thereby affected. Thus, initial efforts have been made to examine fake news as perceived by the audience. For example, Nielsen and Graves (2017) adopted an audience-centric approach to understand fake news, and found that from an audience perspective, the difference between fake and real news is gradual. Furthermore, audience members tend to think of fake news as a term that is politicized for various ends. While displaying commonalities with the academic application of the term, the audience’s perspectives on real news, fake news, and other forms of misinformation do not differentiate clearly between truth and falsehood (Nielsen and Graves, 2017).

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018, which measures media users' perceptions of fake news in 37 countries, found that while concern regarding misinformation and disinformation indeed exists, people can rarely provide examples for encountering fake news. The perceived frequency of coming across fake news only slightly differs between those users whose news navigation predominantly occurs online and those who mainly consume information offline. Moreover, perceptions of fake news are strongly related to concerns regarding poor and biased journalistic work in general, with media users barely differentiating between these issues (Newman et al., 2018). In summary, audience perceptions indicate the fact that definitions of fake news, while crucial for academic conceptualization, are different and less relevant from the people's viewpoint. These blurred definitions between intentionally wrong or just poor quality information on the audience side are a resource for understanding how people make sense of content and navigate their repertoires in current media environments.

News navigation from a media repertoire perspective

Researching media repertoires and how people manage their transmedia practices is becoming increasingly important (Hasebrink and Hepp, 2017; Taneja et al., 2012). Edgerly (2015) describes media choice as arguably the most defining characteristic of the current media environment, and concerns regarding the democratic implications of the fragmentation of the public—or polarizing media diets—are also related to matters of media selectivity, choice, or avoidance (Edgerly, 2015). Media-centric single platform studies are criticized for wrongly generalizing patterns found on one platform for all the information-seeking and evaluation behavior of individuals (Dubois and Blank, 2018; Edgerly, 2017). On the contrary, the media repertoire of a person comprises the entirety of media they regularly use, and is a personalized blend selected from the totality of media, which are available at any given time (Hasebrink and Hepp, 2017). Furthermore, media repertoires are deeply entangled with the social context and individual lifestyle of a person, and form a complex interplay among social structures, routines, and personal traits on one hand, and features of media technologies and content, on the other hand. The composition of and relationality among elements in the repertoire can change over time and relative to different life stages, personal experiences, and availability of devices and technologies. The role, meaning, and significance of either medium in the repertoire are to be understood according to the relationship among different media, to how individuals make sense of the technologies, as well as to the practical meaning media has in their everyday lives.

When it comes to the navigation of news in current media environments, “people increasingly mix and combine their use of various news media into personal news repertoires” (Strömbäck et al., 2018: 413). However, the consumption of news or journalistic information is not something that sticks out from communicative routines but is to be understood in relation to other media in the repertoire used for different means. Studies in the context of news repertoires often focus on creating typologies of news media repertoires and categorizing users according to their patterns of news consumption (e.g. Edgerly et al., 2018; Swart et al., 2017). Within the current fake news and post-truth narratives, a prominent subject touching on people's news repertoires is alternative news

sources as a resort for those who distrust legacy media outlets or wish to complement their media diets (Newman et al., 2018). Research has long employed “alternative” as a label for media that is considered inherently progressive and set out to strengthen democratic culture (Atton, 2006), as well as something that contributes to how people make sense of the world and relate themselves to the larger cultural order (Rauch, 2015). “Little attention has been paid to right-wing media as alternative media” (Atton, 2006: 574), but it is not only in recent years that we have come to learn that “Counter Publics are not necessarily a progressive mold” (Dahlberg, 2007: 136). In particular, the ultra-right has learned to employ social media for propaganda and recruitment of new members (Lewis and Marwick, 2017), but why users tend to such services and whether they are critical when using them is an important but widely unanswered question (Haller and Holt, 2018). “Redpilling” (Lewis and Marwick, 2017), a reference to the movie *Matrix* and the choice to either take the red pill and see the truth or choose the blue pill and remain in a manipulative sleep, is employed as a term for far-right radicalization. In far-right circles, one is “redpilled” when they begin believing in a truth that is counterfactual to the “mainstream belief.” This is often related to a general distrust in legacy media and can mean actualizing one’s own media news repertoire by including (more) alternative sources. Therefore, it is essential to comprehend the consequences of redpilling with regard to its influence on the composition and potential reconfiguration of the media and information repertoire of a person.

How people approach specific (news) media in their repertoire and why potential changes in the composition occur must be fully understood only with regard to their beliefs and attitudes toward media in general. Thus, it is vital to not only examine the specific practices of news navigation but also the underlying beliefs and personal epistemologies of the media.

Personal epistemologies of the media: conceptions of knowledge, media trust, and critical media practices

To describe the individual sensemaking related to navigating personal media and news repertoires, I propose the notion of *personal epistemologies of the media*. Personal epistemology is a “construct that encompasses individuals’ conceptions of knowledge and knowing” (Hofer, 2008: 5); in this case, it is related to a specific domain—that is, media and their affordances and uses as a source of information. The personal epistemology of the media would then refer to questions of how and based on what grounds an individual develops an understanding of the media and media-related practices, and hitherto utilizes these conceptions in their sensemaking of media in the world. For example, if individuals learn that journalism cannot simply report events happening in the world as they are, but has to make informed choices and will ultimately report from a certain angle through which coverage is framed, this can then influence their future interaction with certain media. Moreover, learning that social media does not simply cater everything that is posted by any user they follow, but makes algorithmic choices in order to keep them engaged and presents what makes interactions more probable can have such an impact. In certain regards, the notion of personal epistemology of the media relates to Gershon’s (2010) work on media ideologies, which was recently paired with media repertoires by

Boczkowski et al. (2018a). Gershon (2010) focuses on media ideologies as a set of beliefs regarding media that enables an understanding of how and why people use media technologies for various communicative ends. According to her, people's perceptions of a medium influence their use of that medium, whereas the perception of one specific medium is shaped against the totality of media at an individual's disposal at certain times. The individual's beliefs about media will shape how they utilize particular media, while they decide to use other media differently or not at all.

Furthermore, media ideologies need not accurately reflect how media functions, because beliefs are propositions that are believed to be true (Hofer and Pintrich, 1997) and they can still shape people's premises about them and how they act upon them. This is also a difference between personal epistemology of the media and media literacy: even if beliefs are wrong, they can still have an influence on people's choices. If people believe that media is controlled by the powerful and information will be manipulated according to the agenda of the elites, this could impact how and which media they use, just as much as the fear of foreign powers intentionally spreading false information could increase caution when dealing with information obtained through social media. However, the notion of personal epistemologies of the media extends epistemic beliefs beyond attitudes toward the media. Personal epistemologies can also encompass prior experiences with topics, world-views, or political orientations and can be built on judgments of personal taste, aesthetics, values, and assumed truths regarding the social and physical world, which are then applied to make sense of experiences related to the media or content obtained through them. Trust in and perceived credibility of the media are crucial aspects in the epistemological grounding of media users, impacting the manner in which they navigate their media and news repertoires and employ strategies of authentication or verification.

Media trust and skepticism. News media depends on the trust of its audiences; it cannot fulfill its democratic duties and enable civic engagement if not trusted. Even though questions of credibility and confidence in the media are not new, the growing role of social media as a gateway to information has propelled the problem to new proportions. Digital media shapes the form and style of news, changes the ways in which people obtain information, and, importantly, obscure the origin of information (Tandoc et al., 2018). On social media platforms where editorial content, status updates by friends, and brand advertising reach users, the hierarchy of news/information dissolves because everything is presented as equal (Boczkowski et al., 2018b). The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018 showed that in Germany as well as in other countries, such as the United Kingdom or Japan, public service broadcasters constitute the most trusted source of information, whereas digital-born news brands are generally trusted the least (Newman et al., 2018).

Apart from studies on the role of media credibility, scholars have also focused on media skepticism, which refers to the "subjective feeling of mistrust toward the mainstream news media" (Tsfati and Cappella, 2003: 506). Fletcher and Park (2017) found a strong link between low trust in the media and a preference for alternative news sources. Moreover, those with high competence in news navigation reported lower trust in news stemming from social media and search engine sources (Newman et al., 2018). However, in both cases, this did not imply that sources that were trusted less were excluded from the respective media repertoires, but rather that they were perceived differently.

Fact checking, authentication strategies, and critical media practices. In the past, the heuristic of trust that media/journalism is dependable, competent, and has integrity was robust (Tandoc et al., 2017). Since the proliferation of digital media, media users must critically evaluate, more than before, the information they feel confident about (Edgerly, 2017: 369). The necessity for media users to check information and news sources was also emphasized in the public debates revolving around fake news and misinformation. Within academic discourses, user's practices of credibility assessment are discussed under various terms, speaking broadly of evaluation (Hargittai et al., 2010), verification process (Edgerly, 2017), or partially using authentication or verification interchangeably (Tandoc et al., 2017).

Tandoc et al. (2017) distinguish internal and external steps in individual's authentication practices: for internal acts of authentication, individuals would rely on their tacit sense of authenticity, a gut feeling about what is right or wrong. Apart from trusting themselves, they rely on their knowledge and prior experiences with particular sources. They would also refer to features of the message such as tone or style, which, to them, appear trustworthy or credible, and observations of how others have reacted to and interacted with content. Furthermore, external steps of authentication can include intentionally seeking information from trusted authorities in their social sphere or other institutional sources; however, these can also be incidental, that is, encountering information while browsing their media repertoire or interacting with personal contacts. Comparing the verification strategies of people who use or avoid news media, Edgerly (2017) found that verification can be sought either through using multiple sources to evaluate factuality or through looking for a single credible source to obtain appropriate information. However, the single source approach becomes increasingly problematic relative to the complexity of the issue discussed.

A recent study (Jang and Kim, 2018) found people to be highly confident that they would be sufficiently competent to detect "fake news." Not only do people appear to think highly of their ability to identify fraudulent information, but research has also observed a strong emphasis on the own role as critical thinkers (Freelon, 2017). Users' projected own criticality in challenging information online is also contested by findings that some people would cease their efforts to authenticate online information once they find information that confirms their own beliefs (Metzger et al., 2010: 423). Users know that it is essential and socially favorable to be critical of information, but they rarely invest the energy and motivation to actually criticize it. Moreover, awareness of the need for information skepticism does not equate to being competent in critical practices (Edgerly, 2017: 369). Low motivation or ability to judge trustworthiness will result in peripheral efforts (Metzger et al., 2010: 416). Thus, for studies on authentication strategies, it is important to aim for combining what individuals claim they do with an observation of actual practices (Hargittai et al., 2010).

In order to investigate how people navigate their media and news repertoire, it appears crucial to explore their personal epistemologies of the media and beliefs with regard to which sources to trust and when to challenge which information. Therefore, this study binds together perspectives on critical evaluative audience practices, navigation of news repertoires, and media interactions with perspectives on audience perceptions and media beliefs in the age of fake news and post-truth narratives. Thus, this

study contributes to studies on fake news by exploring the consequences of such narratives on individuals' perceptions and actual media practices, while simultaneously adding to news repertoire research by providing context and reasoning for their news navigation decisions and authentication strategies. In doing so, the article aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how people make sense of media beyond simple dichotomies of trust or distrust, fake or truth, as not all the media that is part of a personal media repertoire are approached and made sense of in the same manner. Finally, this study also aims to find common ground and a more detailed understanding of differences and strategies in media practices.

Method

This article is based on 49 in-depth media-biographical interviews with people from three different age groups (18–29 years, 35–55 years, and 65+ years). People were recruited according to a quota sample and differ in terms of sex, rural or urban dwelling, educational background, political activeness/interest, and experiences in the use of alternative media. Furthermore, 23 of the respondents belonged to the youngest age group of 18–29 years, 20 to the middle age group of 35–55 years, and the remaining six were over 65 years of age. The gender distribution of the sample was 26 women and 23 men; 22 of the interviewees resided in somewhat rural areas and 27 in rather urban or metropolitan regions; 25 participants had completed higher education or were currently studying; and the remainder had completed vocational training. Interviews focused on media repertoires throughout the life course, media-related conversations in their everyday, attitudes toward journalism, as well as knowledge and opinions regarding a series of terms associated with digital disinformation and misinformation (e.g. echo chambers, filter bubbles, algorithms, trolls, bots, fake news, and alternative media).

I further explored what criticality in media use meant to the interviewees, how they attempted to verify information, and what constituted “truth” according to them. Similar to a methodological design used by Menchen-Trevino and Hargittai (2011), I combined the self-report data from the interviews with an observation of the informants' actual news navigation. This procedure is also inspired using “thinking aloud” and “observation interviews” (Kuhlmann, 2009). Informants were not prompted to visit specific websites or highlight extraordinary practices, but to browse their media just as they routinely would and comment on their actions (e.g. why they would click “like” and share something, or why they would not). Their navigation was documented in observation protocols, and their explanations regarding the navigation were recorded and transcribed.

All interviews were conducted in Germany between April and July 2017 by the author and a team of student assistants in a research seminar. Meetings preferably took place at the interviewee's residence or, if this was not possible, a place of the interviewee's choice. The interviews were semi-structured and conversational, lasting between 40 and 70 minutes. With permission, each interview was digitally recorded in its entirety. Pseudonyms have been used for quoted material to protect the privacy of participants. Data analysis followed the grounded theory coding style of several rounds of inductively identifying patterns in interview transcripts until a theoretical interpretation could be condensed (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). In the cycle of the open coding, I

identified relevant broad categories of the phenomena before making connections among these categories in the axial coding phase. Subsequently, in the selective coding phase, the connections between those categories were condensed into the three theoretical key dimensions that formed the positioning system described below. For each participant, interview data were interpreted against the observation protocol and thinking-aloud transcript to explore consistencies and inconsistencies between self-reporting and actual navigation practices.

Regarding variation in the sample, it was imperative to include users of alternative media. The literature has shown that people with low trust in the media are more likely to recourse to alternative sources, and it seems plausible to assume that their personal epistemologies of the media are divergent. In a subset of the sample, those people were recruited who had added alternative sources such as *Russia Today* and *Sputnik News* or/and right-leaning digital platforms associated with the (German) ultra-right to their media repertoire. Six of them were recruited after they were found commenting on such media or referring to such outlets while commenting on legacy media; three more were identified in the interviews.

Findings

This study set out to answer two research questions: how and based on what epistemological grounds do people navigate their media repertoires and interact with the news? When and based on what reasoning do individuals actively challenge information or feel the need to check credibility? In the study, people's repertoires included those with a high share of news media (e.g. Paula who is in her mid-twenties and reads local as well as national newspapers and listens to the radio for information purposes) or almost entirely without intentional legacy media use (e.g. 23-year-old Tim who uses neither TV nor radio, but instead searches for information on YouTube and occasionally consumes audiovisual content in a public service broadcasting app) in all age groups, although the latter was scarce. Remarks regarding the spreading use of media in everyday life, now and as remembered, show a relative de-centrality of news consumption. Most participants refer to memories and current experiences regarding entertainment and interpersonal communication before actually addressing journalism.

Personal epistemologies of the media: a positioning system

The findings illustrate the importance of media beliefs, conceptions of knowledge, and prior experiences with media content and technologies (i.e. participants' personal epistemologies of the media) for participants' actual media navigation practices. In the course of the analysis, three interrelated dimensions emerged as part of people's personal epistemologies for interacting with the news, applying fact-checking strategies, and navigating media repertoires: (1) selective criticality, (2) pragmatic trust, and (3) competence–confidence. Importantly, these dimensions were identified across the different age groups under scrutiny and for various compositions of repertoires. Thus, the three dimensions in combination and their respective specifications can be used to position and explain media users' navigation practices through the lens of their personal epistemologies of the media.

Selective criticality. Participants selectively distinguish different areas of interest or topics in their repertoire where they feel comfortable and fit to evaluate quality and accuracy of information from others where they cannot or do not bother to do so. This can be described as *selective criticality*. Selective criticality can be found with regard to technological infrastructures (e.g. the Internet is dubious), media institutions (e.g. be more critical of tabloid media than public broadcasting), or specific content and areas of expertise or topics relevant in the lifeworld. While being critical was deemed a virtue in general, it was just not necessary for the numerous, yet individually different, parts of the repertoire. For example, several participants whose news repertoires are heavily impacted by public broadcasting services—such as 22-year-old Anna—emphasize the shadiness of Internet websites “that aren’t checked regarding their operators and the producers of the information” and state that they do not bother to check this information “but instead rely on well-known information channels.” Selective criticality also becomes obvious in a distinction between entertainment, particularly tabloid media, and information media, with the first being encountered with a generalized skepticism that deems fact-checking unnecessary. “I do not read the yellow press. I do read it at the doctor’s, but I know it is rubbish ... I do not waste my time with [checking on] something like that,” reports 45-year-old Marta whose news repertoire predominantly consists of print and online newspapers from various countries. On the contrary, she reports being highly critical when consuming news media, which she regularly does, by “filtering out” the biased opinions of “newspapers that are either too left or too right.”

Regarding criticism of news media, findings show that the public debate on fake news and media distrust rarely resonates with the audience’s news perceptions, verification strategies, and media repertoires. Instead, a general sense of decline of journalism exists independently from the fake news narrative and is shared by users of alternative media and legacy media alike. Participants articulate somewhat nostalgic sentiments toward the journalism of the past within a less sensationalist media landscape, when “one could trust journalism because they did proper research and it was not all about speed” (Lukas, 22). In general, fake news was considered “a politically weaponized term” as Felix, 27, described—not only instrumentalized by politicians but also by legacy media, which would use the topic to discredit competition, alternative sources, or viewpoints. The greatest impact of public narratives evolving around fake news was observable among the subset of alternative media users, but here it was typically directed toward legacy media. “I think Lügenpresse is accurate inasmuch as that the reality I perceive from different sources often does not match with what the press reports,” claims Jan, a 51-year-old user of alternative right-wing media. For him, the “biased and manipulative” reporting of legacy news media makes it necessary to include alternative sources, such as *Russia Today*, in his news repertoire. Interestingly, even though he uses both alternative and legacy news media, he only describes applying critical strategies regarding legacy media, while not questioning the contents of the alternative sources.

Pragmatic trust. The dimension of *pragmatic trust* describes that users pragmatically confide in specific news sources in their repertoire, even if skeptical of media to varying degrees. The analysis shows that people understand that after all, they need sources of information and that it is cognitively demanding to challenge everything all the time:

“You can’t question everything,” 21-year-old student Martin states while emphasizing that he confides in sources that “come across as serious journalism,” even though he describes himself as generally skeptical. Even if they have reservations against certain news and express vigilance, individuals will eventually resort to sources that they do not challenge or object to *a priori*, such as the aforementioned 51-year-old alternative media user Jan. Similarly, 51-year-old Barbara, another user of alternative media, reports that when consulting alternative sources she “saunter[s] through RT Germany and the links and cross-references there and also personal opinions on these sites.”

Therefore, the analysis shows that the dimension of pragmatic trust can range from naïve to informed. People with informed pragmatic trust reflect news as human made and driven by external forces, and can be critical of the conditions of news production. While people may criticize news content in several contexts (e.g. regarding supposedly biased news coverage or sensationalism), they will also clearly differentiate between various sources and be able to express reasons for or against trusting (e.g. quality papers vs tabloids, media perceived as leaning to the left or the right): “I do have trust, yes. I know about the weaknesses and how the style of reporting changed ... I observe that the commentators and the anchors speak faster and everything is due to the audience ratings and the money behind it,” Anne, a 69-year-old pensioner, explains. On the contrary, naïve pragmatic trust is characterized by a lack of understanding of the mechanisms of reporting, selection processes, and editorial routines; it is grounded in sentiment and strong opinions about good/honest and bad/deceptive sources: “I do assume that if it is an important topic such as a terroristic attack, there will be no false information,” explains Verena, a 23-year-old office clerk. Naïve pragmatic trust also builds on the hope that the media can be trusted, as people feel the compulsion to trust authorities and professionals. A 22-year-old Anna assumes that reputable news sources do not spread false information, “since they cannot afford it; if there were a scandal, it would be over for them.” Pragmatic trust can be institutionally or individually grounded, that is, refer to authority/reputation or personal experiences.

Furthermore, the repertoire perspective illustrates that only having trust in specific sources does not eliminate having other media in the repertoire. In line with previous research (Fletcher and Park, 2017; Tsfati and Cappella, 2003), participants reported frequently using specific media that they do not trust, partially precisely because they do not believe them but want to know their version of a story. Interestingly, the subset of interviews with alternative media users were among those with the broadest media news repertoires and strongest in the demand for solely fact-based reporting, for both legacy media and alternative sources. First contact with alternative news sources as a “gateway to a whole new world of information” (Ralf, 46) was typically incidental and through social media; consequently, mechanisms of “redpilling” (Lewis and Marwick, 2017) can be observed, as explained earlier.

Competence–confidence. The third dimension that emerged from the data, *competence–confidence*, does not reflect media literacy or actual skill, but describes how fit individuals believe they must be to identify false information, confirm trustworthiness, and filter the truth. Individuals with a high competence–confidence emphasize their ability to proficiently navigate the news and govern which information they receive. Jakob, 38, a user

of alternative media, was sure that he had “carefully curated my newsfeed over the years and I alone decide what I do or do not read.” Similarly, Manuel, 20, is confident that if he “really wanted to know something,” he would be able to “figure that out, because then I am becoming my own journalist, doing my own research.” High competence–confidence was often contrasted with the alleged incapability of others: “Mainstream or alternative, I question everything. I am always vigilant. However, of course, not all are like this,” explained Bernhard, 25, providing one typical example hinting to third-person effects as identified in other research (Jang and Kim, 2018). Contrarily, people with a low competence–confidence feel out of control and reliant on the information they encounter, such as 65-year-old Gertrude who states, “I hope that I can trust the media, the journalists who are at the scene. That is all I can say.” To a certain extent, levels of competence–confidence correlate with the prominence of respective sources in the media repertoires. For example, Tim, a 23-year-old paramedic, who mostly consumes information through YouTube videos and a particular app of a public broadcasting service, emphasizes his skills to “find out things through YouTube” while sorting out “unqualified opinions” on the platform.

Furthermore, beliefs of competence–confidence need not be accurate and reflect actual competence and ability. This is illustrated by the observation of actual news navigation, which highlights the discrepancy between self-reported ideas of being critical and actual practices. Practices of credibility assessment found in the interviews were pretty much in line with the “authentication strategies” identified by Tandoc et al. (2017) and similar to acts of verification described by Edgerly (2017). Users would strongly rely on *internal* strategies, trusting formal features of contents and a gut feeling based on previous experiences, personal beliefs, and the reputation of particular media: “A feeling in the gut; maybe also my own opinion and attitude, or the way some content is described or how it is written” (Cornelia, 52). *External* strategies comprise checking out other media sources and using Google. Credibility is, as research suggests, attributed according to the source, message, perceived intention, and social factors such as recommendations or warnings by other people that individuals trust. Monika, a 46-year-old business woman who has a low competence–confidence in navigating online newspapers, reports relying on personal contacts when verifying online information: “So then I spoke to my niece who said ‘Auntie, you shouldn’t believe [name of online magazine] because it isn’t a credible source’.”

Whereas literature treats verification and authentication as interchangeable (Tandoc et al., 2017), the findings suggest that they are two distinct layers of credibility assessment. Authentication refers to checking the form and actuality of a message received (i.e. does a source exist, was a claim really made, etc.). This is often done by a quick search if other websites share the same information or by the inclusion of additional offline sources: “Well, I then read other newspapers. I search in other online newspapers,” 51-year-old Rolf explains. On the contrary, verification refers to an even rarer strategy, where people attempt to probe the actual content and veracity of a message (i.e. is a presentation of facts accurate, an interpretation valid, or a conclusion sound?): “If something in the news is related to my job, I sometimes do look it up and check its accuracy,” says Verena, 23. Participants would also use insufficient cues or unsubstantiated claims made by others as grounds for verification: when Desiree, 40, aimed to verify a blog post

on refugees involved in a knifing in a German town, she took the blogger's claim to be a local as evidence for a high source credibility and did not inquire beyond that point.

The three categories described can be used as a positioning system for understanding navigation practices through personal epistemologies. The examples below illustrate how the three dimensions together can be used to analyze the news navigation of people with profoundly different media repertoires.

Manuel, 20, shows some understanding of the routines and workings of journalism, and has very high competence–confidence. He is convinced of his ability to check information and even describes himself as becoming his “own journalist when I want to know something.” Manuel uses legacy media almost exclusively online. He shows informed and individual pragmatic trust in legacy media; however, despite his critical rhetoric, he is not critical of the media. He does not bother to actively probe information, as he is positive that he would notice if “anything was wrong.”

On the contrary, Anne, 69, is selectively critical of various areas, where she has gained insight over her life course, including in politics. She is cognizant of and articulates about journalism, and says that she has realized over the years how journalism has been accelerated and driven by ratings and attention as the paramount principles of all reporting. Moreover, she shows informed pragmatic trust by reputation and considers public broadcasting and national broadsheets as credible sources. Nevertheless, she is aware that there is always more than one side to a story and that it is thus essential to receive information from different sources.

Ralf, 46, shows a partisan distrust toward “mainstream media” and is a passionate user of alternative media. He does not own a TV and uses neither radio nor newspapers. He consumes alternative media online, mostly through Facebook and YouTube. In keeping with literature (Freelon, 2017), Ralf considers himself a “critical thinker,” while other people would believe some “really wrong information” as they are “brainwashed by the media.” Ralf perceives legacy media as partisan and influential, so he is extremely critical of their coverage; nevertheless, he follows this coverage intensively as part of his social media consumption, often filtered through alternative media commentaries and mostly to see “how wrong they are.” He has high competence–confidence but shows naïve pragmatic trust in sources from far right to far left, as long as they reaffirm his beliefs.

Discussion

This article set out to discuss whether and how the “fake news and post-truth narrative” (Watts and Rothschild, 2017) would resonate in personal epistemologies and media practices, and affect how people make sense of the news. Based on the interviews, it appears that most people in the sample do not perceive the problem as such an urgent matter. Rather, they consider it as something that plays out in conjunction with a broader and more general skepticism against both democratic institutions and sources of information, as well as a perceived decline in the quality of journalism.

The repertoire approach in this article highlights that the role of specific media and dubious sources can only be understood against the full spectrum of media and the information sources used. Both media choice and refusal, selection of specific news and ignorance of others are not based only on the features and peculiarities of media, but the

composition of media repertoires is embedded in social contexts and based on beliefs and ideas as well as previous experiences with topics, world-views, or political orientations and assumed truths regarding the social and physical world. To understand how people compose and navigate their media repertoires, I proposed the notion of personal epistemologies of the media as a set of beliefs and attitudes toward media and regarding an understanding of how they function. However, these epistemologies are best researched in a non-media-centric perspective, as they are not shaped finitely in a single formative period but evolve over time and are influenced by experiences with and without media, which are then applied to make sense of and act in relation to the media.

While the tripartite dimensions identified in the findings also help to comprehend navigation of media repertoires at large, selective criticality, pragmatic trust, and competence–confidence are most relevant to processes, which are related to receiving and processing information. However, the broader concept of personal epistemologies reflects beliefs and ideologies regarding the entirety of media; accordingly, there are more layers to discover, which are important beyond news navigation. Future research, which should be less focused on news navigation, must aim to identify such additional dimensions of personal epistemologies and how they interact and relate to the three dimensions identified here.

The lens of the tripartite dimensions enables an understanding of how people with similar beliefs and expectations regarding news coverage can come to different conclusions in terms of which media outlets they consider to serve their expectations best. In particular, the comparison of people who mostly receive news through legacy media and users of alternative sources showed that simple dichotomies of trust/distrust or truth/post-truth fail to acknowledge the complexity of how people compose and navigate their media repertoire. Importantly, the findings show that both criticality and trust are not exclusive to one group of media users, neither when it comes to news repertoire nor when it comes to the age of the informants. Participants whose media repertoire is heavily informed by alternative sources pragmatically trust their sources or aim to verify them in a fashion that is similar to legacy media users. Acts of verification and expectations regarding fact-based reporting and calls for unbiased information were found to be surprisingly similar between the subsamples; it would be worth it to further investigate this to better understand the many nuances of the general skepticism found in previous research (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018).

Of course, several limitations of the study must be acknowledged. Methodologically, the interviews suffered from issues typical for self-report data. Furthermore, while the retrospection was important for positioning current practices and repertoires in a perspective of longer durations and developments, such media-related memories are never a mere recapitulation of facts but evaluate past practices and particular events against current debates and the current understanding of things. The interviews prompted participants with the need to reflect on matters of fake news, misinformation, digital media, and related vocabulary, which they often were not fully aware of or lacked an understanding of. Furthermore, numerous participants did not have a definite routine of news consumption that they could merely reproduce in the situation. Thus, an artificial situation was created rather than a real ethnographic insight into everyday practices. Future research must aim to get even closer to media use *in situ* and identify means for a continuous ethnographic observation over time. Nevertheless, the observational interviews allowed for some clarification of practices employed by users.

Contrary to existing typologies based merely on the prominence of sources within news repertoires, the dimensions proposed in this article can help identify commonalities of how people make sense of diverse media and enable locating their news navigation within a broader framework: selective criticality helps understand who is critical or indifferent to what parts of their media repertoire and for what reasons which parts do not find critical attention. Pragmatic trust and competence–confidence elucidate the ways people interact with news sources and information in a manner that is more nuanced than merely trusting or being skeptical.

Existing research focuses on media repertoires as they are and the role of specific media therein. Future studies must expand the scope of investigation to personal epistemologies and identify reasons and attitudes, and why certain media are absent or come to be integrated in the repertoire composition in the first place. We need to better understand how personal epistemologies and, accordingly, media repertoires evolve over time and throughout an individual's life course in order to grasp long-term transformations and consistencies in personal epistemologies of the media and how they resonate in media practices.


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