

# You Are What You Read or Whom You Trust?

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## Extended Abstract

During the past decade, many member states of the European Union have witnessed a surge in anti-immigration and anti-EU sentiment, the latter of which culminated in the United Kingdom's referendum to leave the EU. Concomitant with this development has been a shift towards a high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017), in which citizens are at liberty to consume news from a multitude of different outlets and social media platforms rather than having to rely on particular print newspapers or television programmes, and a marked decline of trust in the news media and political institutions (Flew, 2019). A major concern among scholars in light of these developments is that the lower barriers of entry for news producers have facilitated the spread of misinformation and hyperpartisan news (Hameleers and van der Meer, 2020), which in turn might have contributed to declining trust levels and the rise of anti-immigration and anti-EU sentiment.

Whilst the literature examining the impact of news consumption on political attitudes and outcomes is vast, the impact of news consumption on attitudes towards immigration and the EU is relatively underexplored. The few studies that do touch upon the link between news consumption and attitudes towards the EU rely on self-reported measures of news consumption obtained in surveys (Marquart et al., 2019). However, these measures do not accurately reflect the news content that individuals have actually consumed, as they tend to distinguish only between different types of media such as television, radio or digital news consumption rather than distinguishing different categories of news content or even differentiating between specific news outlets. In the case of immigration attitudes, Štětka et al. (2021) combined web-tracking with survey data and found that exposure to news about immigration increases the likelihood of voting for populist parties yet does not alter attitudes towards immigration, but the study focuses only on the Czech Republic, where anti-immigration sentiment is particularly prevalent.

This paper attempts to fill these gaps by empirically investigating across five countries whether (1) citizens' exposure to news can predict their attitudes towards immigration and the EU, (2) whether citizens' trust in public broadcasters affects their attitudes towards immigration and the EU and (3) whether the impact of news exposure is contingent on citizens' trust in public broadcasters. It does so using a data set that links web-tracking data, which provides a granular account of each participant's news consumption, with two waves of survey data that capture their political attitudes, trust in the news media and sociodemographic characteristics and implementing a quasi-experimental research design, which enables a comparison of immigration and EU attitudes before and after a three-month period of news consumption (March – June 2019). The data set contains  $N = 7,500$  participants in total from five different countries: Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. We analyse several different features of news consumption, including the overall amount of news consumed online, salience and sentiment of immigration- and EU-related content consumed respectively using natural language processing techniques and exposure to hyperpartisan news using manually identified hyperpartisan news domains. While the data set is very rich in that it provides granular information about participants' views and news browsing habits, the sample is unlikely to be representative of the general population, casting doubt on its external validity. Encouragingly however, the privacy attitudes of the study's participants only exhibit minor differences in relation to the population distribution.

Preliminary findings suggest that the direct impact of news exposure on attitudes towards immigration and the EU is limited: the overall amount of news consumed online cannot explain the differences in political attitudes observed; being exposed to more immigration-related content only slightly increases the likelihood of developing anti-immigration stances, whereas exposure to more EU-related content does not significantly affect EU attitudes; and exposure to hyperpartisan news is associated with a modest increase in the likelihood of anti-immigration and anti-EU attitudes. On the other hand, trust in public broadcasters appears to be a strong predictor of immigration and EU attitudes, with low levels of trust considerably increasing the likelihood of anti-immigration and anti-EU attitudes. Interestingly, the effects of news exposure appear to be more pronounced for those who exhibit higher trust levels in public broadcasters initially. However, changes in trust over time moderate this relationship, suggesting that the effects of news exposure on political attitudes may largely occur indirectly by altering trust in the news media.

If these preliminary findings hold up to further investigation, they indicate that attempts to restore trust in public broadcasters and quality news outlets might prove more successful in mitigating anti-immigration and anti-EU sentiment than solely focusing on countering misinformation. Besides these practical implications, this paper contributes to an enhanced understanding of how the trust in and consumption of news shapes political attitudes on divisive contemporary issues across several European countries and, from a methodological perspective, how combining web-tracking and survey data and using natural language processing techniques to analyse the content consumed online can help to address these knowledge gaps.

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