Into the Looking-Glass World? Media Use and Its Social Ramifications

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Making Minds Matter

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Inaugural lecture

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Erasmus University Rotterdam
Making Minds Matter

Dear Rector Magnificus of the Erasmus University,

Dear professors, colleagues, students, family, and friends,

In December 1871 – that is one hundred years before I was born, and also a couple of years before the Internet – a little girl called Alice was bored, just like many of today's children are often bored. In the Looking Glass – today we would call it a mirror – she sees a world that very much resembles her own, but in which things are going "the other way" (Carroll, p.19). She decides to go through. And then something extraordinary happens: the Looking-Glass World is not just the mirrored version of her own world, but turns out to be a universe in which her fantasy has come alive. Alice meets talking flowers, characters from nursery rhymes and living chess-pieces who are constantly criticizing her or providing her with the "best advice". Overall, the *Looking-Glass World* is actually a pretty grim place. It appears as one giant game of chess, divided into Red and White factions competing with each other. Meanwhile time goes backwards, and "it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place" (p.42). Of course, in the end Alice wakes up, and it all seems like some kind of dream.

The story of Alice and her adventures in the *Looking-Glass World* is obviously just a piece of fiction created by the English writer Lewis Carroll. But perhaps we can use this work of imagination as a metaphor for how media are used and exert influence in contemporary society. What happens when we interact with and step into the world of the media?

Traditionally, media show us what is going on in the world. One could say they are the *Looking-Glass* through which we see society. Particularly in its journalistic function, news media reflect events in the larger world, with the specific aim of highlighting those developments that are considered important for all citizens to be aware of. News media report, but also give background, make analyses, ask critical questions to those in power. To be sure, these reflections are always incomplete and (often) distorted, and there are many biases often related to the point of view of the media producer (McQuail, 2005: 357-358). For example, news media report mostly on national matters and politically powerful countries; and the people in the news often come from the political and social elites (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

But over time, media have become more all-round. Nowadays media provide entertainment, offer self-help, are shopping centers, answer any questions you may have (just ask Google), and are also places where you can meet like-minded people. The media as your local pub, dating site, sanctuary, or fan club convention. Most of these media functions are relatively new and linked to the rise of the Internet and social media platforms in the past two decades. We started to use the *Looking-Glass* in a different, more personalized way: we want to see ourselves reflected. Media have become a hyper reality in which we look at our own image, we look at our own group or tribe, and how it is depicted or represented, and our critical stance is turned towards the imperfections of ourselves and others that prevent us from reaching the idealized state (see Marwick & boyd, 2011).

But what happens if we, just like Alice, – in an effort to absolutize our identity or simply out of curiosity or boredom – stand so close to the *Looking-Glass* of the media that we actually fall through? If we only want to see our own reflection in the mirror, can we still be open to alternative viewpoints?

If media are also increasingly a place to meet like-minded people, this also means that persons who have radicalized political or societal ideas can meet up online (Caiani & Kröll, 2014). The logics of right-wing and left-wing extremists sometimes seem radically at odds with those of our "regular" world, since they almost exclusively collect their information on websites and platforms where they find confirmation of their ideas (so-called echo chambers) (e.g. Ernst et al., 2017; Schulze, 2020). Examples concern the rise of conspiracy theories, like QAnon, a loose online network which spreads false stories including, amongst other things, Satan-worshipping politicians, and pizza restaurants as centers of child trafficking (Guardian, 2020; Hannah, 2021). During the Covid-19 pandemic conspiracy theories became more popular than ever and coalesced with existing anti-establishment sentiments (e.g. Bodner et al., 2021). But alternative online realities arguably also include single influencers such as Andrew Tate who expresses a world view that systematically propagates toxic masculinity and misogyny, which puts a spell on quite a few young male adolescents (Wescott et al., 2023).

How big a concern is this development? What can we say about the societal impact of media use in the digital age? This is what I would like to discuss today. Media have moved to the heart of our society. Some examples of impact.

Some groups in society blame the mainstream media for social problems (Fawzi, 2019). In the pandemic years the slogan "Media=Virus" graffiti was found on Dutch highway flyovers (Brabants Dagblad, 2022) and various NOS reporters were threatened in this period.

Others criticize social media and the companies behind them (Meta, Twitter or X, etc.) for privacy violations and allowing hate speech on their platforms (Aral, 2020; Zuboff, 2019).

Given these social developments, I will start with explaining why a more sociological perspective is in my opinion fruitful for studying media use and its social ramifications. In the second part, I will take this sociological angle to focus on the puzzle of the *Looking-Glass*: the relationship between media use, institutional trust, and polarization that I want to put central to my Chair. To clarify: I use the *Looking-Glass* only as a metaphor, not as a theoretical concept, and I have no intention to refer to the psychological theory of the Looking-Glass Self (O'Connor & Dyce, 1993). Finally, I will wrap up with some research plans and preliminary conclusions.

A more sociological perspective on media influence

Examining how media influence or shape society has in the past decades mainly been done by specialized academic disciplines such as communication science and cultural studies. One of the most dominant approaches has arguably been media effect studies, which tend to focus on how use of the media by individuals leads to changes in their behavior and/or attitudes. This is then extrapolated to make claims on how media impact society. Yet the emphasis on experimental research that aims to establish causal effects in a controlled environment has received serious criticism over time (e.g. Livingstone, 1996), and is more and more difficult to uphold in the year 2024. Many media users are nowadays part of online social networks and continuously exposed to algorithms which has complicated the notion of "social influence". It is difficult to show causality if – in reality – media users are constantly bombarded by all kinds of stimuli, distractions, and counter-narratives. As Todd Gitlin already wrote in 2002: "[...] it is clear that the media flow into the home – not to mention outside – has swelled into a torrent of immense force and constancy, an accompaniment to life that has become a central experience of life" (p.17).

The growing presence of media in the lives of so many people is reflected by the rise of mediatization theory, which essentially states that the media and their logics have infiltrated all spheres of society and social life (Hjarvard 2013). Most of us carry the media with us 24/7 on our cell phones, imagine the world based upon television and film impressions, and let algorithms guide our consumption behavior and information searches. However true this claim may be, it isn't much help in furthering our understanding of how media use influences society. Being everywhere, it influences all aspects of life. Mediatization theory is therefore very much a macrolevel theory, but more difficult to apply to individuals.

Given these considerations, I would like to call for more empirical sociology in the study of media. To make myself perfectly clear, my argument is not to dismiss or replace current approaches, but merely that a sociological perspective – which seeks to explain human behavior by the social contexts that individuals share (Van Tubergen, 2020) – would be a relevant addition that should become more prominent. Also note that there have been sociologists, such as David Morley, Stuart Hall and Todd Gitlin, who made significant contributions in the realm of how people use media texts in their daily lives, but we need more in the current age of mediatization.

A more sociological approach has at least three advantages that can enrich the study of media and society. First, sociologists are very aware of the interactions between individuals and social contexts. Sociologists tend to integrate the study of collectives (meso and macro level) with the study of processes at the individual level (micro level). I argue that such perspective also helps to understand how media influence works.

Second, sociologists recognize the relevance of culture and symbolic distinctions. They look at status differences, meaning-making, and group inequalities. Third, sociologists have a rich

methodological toolkit, and are – in my experience – less inclined to orthodoxy when it comes to research designs or methods.

So how can we apply this sociological lens to our puzzle of the *Looking-Glass World*?

I distinguish three key themes in my research agenda for understanding the role of media use: first, the recognition that there are societal inequalities in media use; second, the symbolic power of media and its relationship with institutional trust, and third, rethinking how individual media use can lead to outcomes at the society level, in particular polarization.

Let's start with a very basic yet often underestimated or neglected fact about media use: there are huge inequalities in how people use media.

Social inequalities in media use

It is important to realize that media use is still highly socially stratified, in the sense that individuals from various layers in society show quite distinctive patterns of media use. Probably one of the best theoretical road maps to understand these differences, can be found in the work by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1984) sees society as a social space in which individuals occupy positions depending on their access to material and symbolic resources. Having a high social status is generally associated with highly paid jobs, and owning expensive goods (economic capital), but also with showing refined taste and knowing how to behave in various social settings (cultural capital). Lifestyles are related to specific social classes, and are used to emphasize one's class identity and draw boundaries between social classes. Media are – also in the current day and age – part of such lifestyles, and therefore inevitably connected to social positions.

Recent studies in Sweden, Belgium and also my own analysis of the Netherlands have shown the continuing relevance of this Bourdieusian approach to media use (Lindell & Hovden, 2018; Picone & Vandenplas, 2022; Verboord, 2023). Your social class, your position in society, your resources or capital predict which media you use and how well you are informed on current affairs (see also Morley, 1980).

Media use thus influences society simply through the audiences who use them, or refuse them.

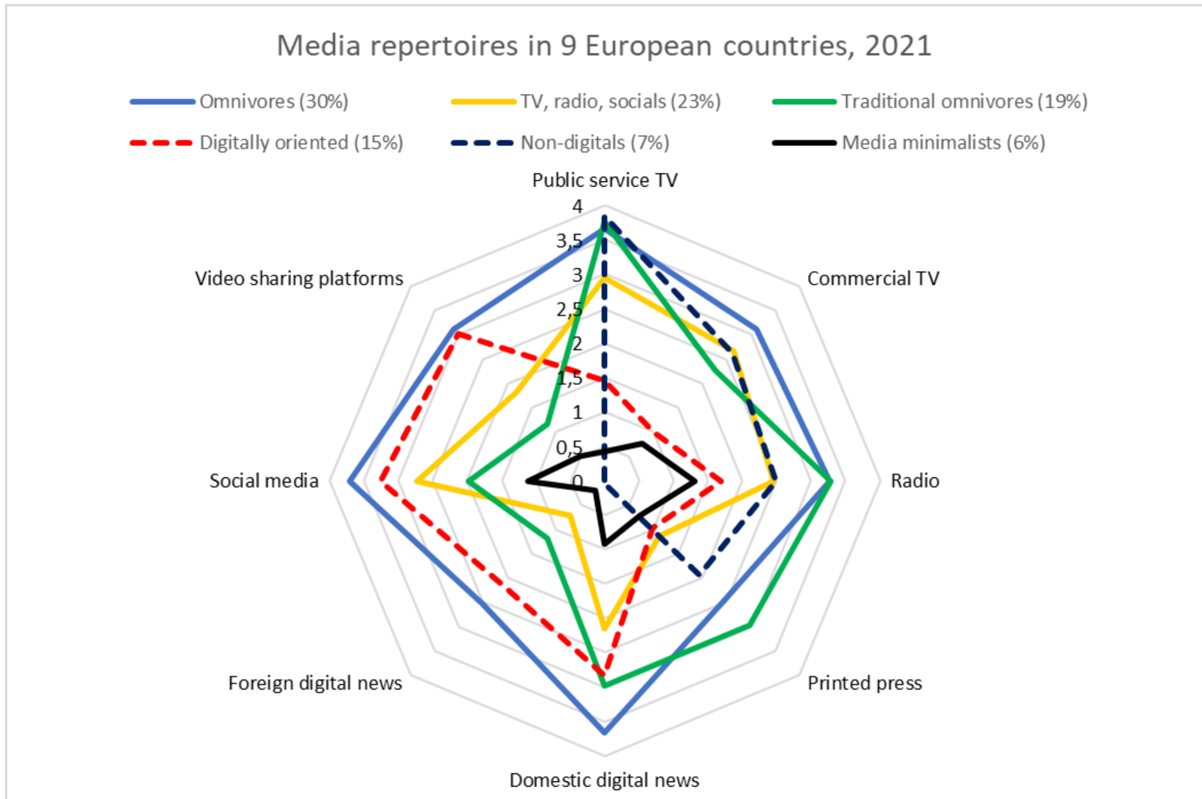
One way to examine this further is by analyzing how individuals combine various types of media use into so-called "media repertoires" (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006). The emergence of the internet, and all the websites, platforms, channels, social media accounts, and so on has created a high-choice media landscape. The larger variety of media types and outlets in contemporary society implies not only that there is more to choose from, but also that the patterns of media use have changed. People mix and match, accessing different outlets and different formats. Some old (television, newspapers), some new (websites, social media, YouTube).

Media repertoires basically signify how individuals combine various media types into a single practice. It can disclose who uses multiple types of sources and who only relies on a limited number (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006). Thinking about our Looking-Glass World: the fewer the sources, the higher the risk of becoming trapped in some kind of echo chamber.

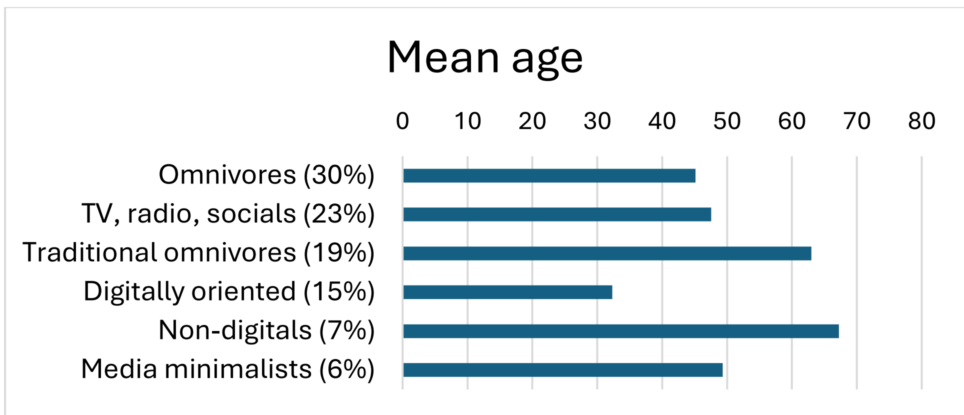
Besides these theoretical considerations, the development of new statistical methods such as Latent Class Analysis has spurred the study of media repertoires. I was lucky to be around in the late 1990s when my thesis supervisor Kees van Rees collaborated with statistician Jeroen Vermunt to apply this then newly developed methodology to find patterns in reading behavior which was the topic of my 1996 MA thesis (Van Rees, Vermunt & Verboord, 1999). This is not the place to discuss technical details of statistical methods, but the attractive feature of Latent Class Analysis is that it can simultaneously find patterns among media items (which media are often combined in one repertoire?) and individuals (what is the predominant repertoire that one adheres to?). It allows us to

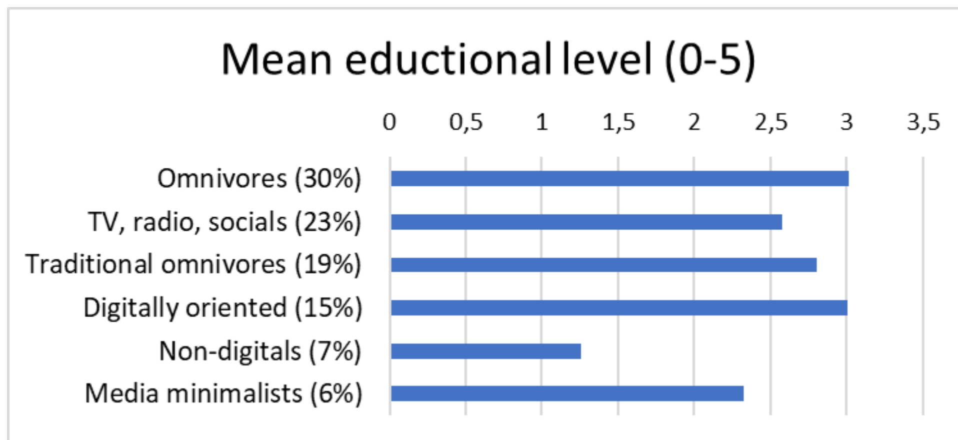
see the degree to which symbolically similar but also distinctive media outlets are combined by individuals. The results of this research are relatively consistent, also when newer types of media are added to the mix.

As an illustration, let me share a research finding with you which analyzed survey data collected in nine European countries in 2021. The data were collected in a large European research project – INVENT – that I was involved in during the past four years. The countries included the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, Croatia and Serbia. The survey asked respondents for 8 types of media how often they used these to stay informed about current affairs on a scale from 0 (never) to 4 (almost daily). Looking at how citizens in Europe combine various types of media usage, my analysis shows that these represent 6 different clusters.[1] Each cluster is a group of people consisting of individuals that have the same type of media repertoire. The graph here shows at the top the 6 repertoires, and below how they are compiled. You can read this by looking at the line of the specific repertoire and how it links to a medium type. The nearer the line is to the outside (category 4 – daily use), the more important that medium type is for the repertoire. The largest repertoire – 30% of the survey respondents – can be described as omnivores. This is the blue line: it shows that this group uses many media, both online and offline. In contrast, in the middle – the black line – we see a group that hardly uses any media. This is 6% of our sample. Two other repertoires stand out. About 15% has a repertoire mainly relying on online media: the dotted red line which is more on the left side of the picture; the black dotted line, more to the right, represents the non-digitals, a small group of about 7%.



If we then examine which social background these groups have,[2] we find that they mainly differ in terms of education – which is often seen as an indicator of cultural capital – and age. Results from a multivariate analysis gives the corrected average educational level and age per category. Clearly the non-digitals and media minimalists have the lowest level of formal education. The omnivores are highly educated, but this also applies to the digitally oriented. This latter group is – not surprisingly – the youngest group.





These results are confirmed in other studies. There are clear differences in media use between demographic profiles, where particularly the lower educated tend to use smaller sets of media sources (e.g. Lindell, 2018; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Younger age groups are moving away from traditional and institutionalized media.

Analysing the media use of individuals is relevant because inequalities in society are connected to information supply and communicated values. Yes, many individuals still rely on different types of media, and the number of people who have turned away from the mainstream media – television, radio, press – is relatively small. But especially individuals who report lower levels of life satisfaction – due to unemployment or poverty – do not use many media at all.

But if different media use orientations (or repertoires) are indeed related to different ways of thinking and looking at the world, we need to look further than just the social stratification of using media. In line with the sociological tradition of studying meaning-making, we also need to examine how individuals make sense of the world and the way that information on social issues is being mediated. One approach is to see how much trust individuals place in institutions such as politics, science, and the media themselves. This takes me to my second key theme.

Trust in the media and other institutions?

There is a long tradition of studying media trust and its relationship with using media (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Media trust is generally seen as a form of institutional trust. it relates to the confidence citizens have that a specific institution – be it the government, science, or the media -- performs in a competent and satisfactory way and will continue to do so. More specifically, media trust is in the literature often interpreted in terms of credibility ("do you believe the news?") and subdimensions thereof: do you think the media report is fair, accurate, unbiased?

What is less emphasized in this literature is that institutions also exert a legitimacy claim to competence, knowledge, and expertise. The implicit assumption of many communication scholars is that audiences judge performance in a rational way. Often the focus is on what media exactly write or speak about, and that is linked to fine-grained distinctions between source credibility, message credibility and medium credibility. However, as personal values gain in importance, and audiences have a much wider range of options to select when looking for news, information, or media entertainment, the key question might be more about legitimacy. That is, do we accept the medium as a valid or relevant source of information? (Carlsson, 2017). Legitimacy is about making certain symbols and ideas acceptable in society. But, of course, journalists need to be accepted themselves in order to exert this influence (see also Bourdieu, 1980; Verboord, 2010; Janssen & Verboord, 2015). In the past, most news media outlets followed institutionalized workflows which were meant to guarantee high quality information. Journalists were trained to apply criteria regarding newsworthiness, source checking, listen to both sides of the argument, editorial checks. This gave them authority and made them – for many people – trustworthy (see Shoemaker & Reese, 2013; Carlsson, 2017).

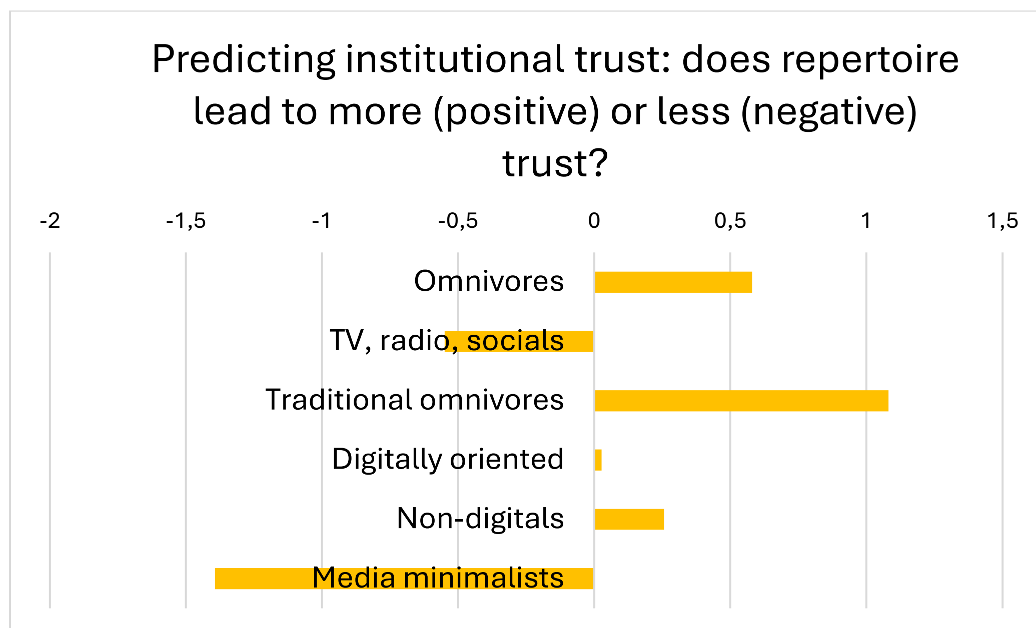
However, particularly the younger generation appears to be less inclined to accept the legitimate authority of traditional news media. An American interview study among young adults (aged between 18 and 30) conducted in 2020 showed that they expressed skepticism to mainstream media in general, and were not impressed by factual information or source checking (Cotter & Thorson, 2022). Often, they considered relationships – including social media connections – more important than information quality. For this group, media credibility seems less important than symbolic aspects, such as personal beliefs, pragmatic considerations, and world-views (see also Schwarzenegger, 2020).

The symbolic aspects of media use – that is the meaning people attach to their information sources and the people producing these – hint at the importance of culture. On the one hand there is the role of cultural capital – already mentioned – as structuring force that provides the mindset which helps people to navigate the media. People who value recommendations by "quality" newspapers tend to have more cultural capital and have more trust in institutions (Verboord, 2022).

Another element of culture that matters are the socio-cultural values that individuals hold. Sociologists have been documenting the rise of so-called post-material values since the 1970s: more and more people across the globe shifted their value orientations in life from religion and materialist narratives to placing more emphasis on non-material goals such self-expression, freedom of speech and gender emancipation (Norris & Inglehart 2009). But this development has perhaps come to a halt. In the US they call this the "culture wars" to indicate conflict on cultural issues. And also the concept of "cultural backlash" against progressive-liberal ideas has been launched to describe what is happening (Norris & Inglehart 2019).

Is this relevant for thinking about media? Well -- who can decide on what cultural values we find worthwhile has the power to shape the stories that glue our society together.

Let us look at trust and culture in more detail by going back to the survey I mentioned earlier.[3] We also asked all participants of that survey about their trust in institutions (we combined national government, EU, news media and science). The graph shows how the repertoires predict levels of trust: positive (on the right) means more trust, negative (on the left) means less. We see that omnivores and traditional omnivores are most trustful, and media minimalists least trustful. The group who combines TV, radio, and socials is also less trustful. Is there a worrying pattern regarding individuals only using digital media? No, but it is also not positive -- it seems to be a mixed group.



Some of you will perhaps say: but isn't it the mistake of institutions themselves? Politicians, scientists, journalists: perhaps they should perform better to deserve our trust? There is no doubt that the trust in politics has declined in recent years because of major mistakes like the *Toeslagenaffaire*. But it would be important to know more about how trust is being produced. Is the decline of trust because of poor performance of institutions (people are unsatisfied about developments in society),

or is performance irrelevant and have citizens simply become more cynical? For example, citizens may have certain value orientations that remain the same no matter what politicians, or scientists or journalists do.

In the INVENT project, we were able to study this further (Verboord et al., 2023). We used survey data on 9 European countries and compared how much trust audiences place in the four institutions mentioned before: national government, the European Union, science, and news media. The results are – as usual – more nuanced than one would perhaps expect. Trust in national government is mostly affected by the perception of its performance: being negative about changes in society is associated with less trust. But trust in science and the EU is explained better by the socio-cultural values that people hold: being more progressive – for example regarding gender and climate change – leads to more trust. For trust in media, it is a bit of both: performance and values. Another important finding here: if you take into account the values and satisfaction of individuals, media use actually only offers a small additional explanation of institutional trust. And back to the *Looking-Glass*: Is there a difference between traditional media and digital media? Yes, there is: both using social media and using video platforms is associated with lower institutional trust (regardless of one's values and satisfaction).

Table 1: Explained variance of selected types of predictors per trust type

	Socio-cultural values	(Dis)satisfaction performance	Media use
Trust in national government	2.7%	14.6%	1.6%
Trust in EU	23.5%	9.2%	0.8%
Trust in science	11.8%	3.7%	0.9%
Trust in news media	6.9%	6.7%	4.0%

Source: Verboord et al., 2023.

Individual media usage and its influence on society

So, we have seen that media use is still highly stratified. And we have discussed how traditional ideas on what constitutes high quality information – being objective, balanced, based on facts (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) – is being contested or simply ignored by certain groups in society. But many of the alleged consequences of media use are situated at the societal level. Social cohesion, polarization, social divides are all outcomes of individual behavior yet arguably manifest themselves at the macrolevel. This brings me to my third key theme.

Influence of media use is more than an aggregation – simply adding up – what individuals do. There is a long tradition in sociology to think about the micro-macrolevel, going all the way back to Durkheim's claim that society is more than the sum of its parts. (And some sociologists in the audience might refer to the Coleman boat). In the mediatized world, thinking about this relationship in the study of media and institutional trust seems more important than ever because of the online social networks, algorithms, and 24/7 attention economy (which I mentioned earlier). These developments should make us rethink the concept of social influence and more specifically social learning.

Social influence means that opinions and behavior of individuals can be affected by others (Van Tubergen, 2020: 153). Social learning theory explains the formation of attitudes and behavior by observing models of relevant others, imitating those behaviors that seem to lead to positive outcomes, and thus learn lessons from experiences (Bandura, 1977). An example is how reading socialization by parents works, as I studied in my PhD thesis: children from parents who read a lot and who stimulate reading behavior tend to read more later in life than children who lacked this type of social learning (Verboord, 2003).

Social learning can work differently depending on the situation and who is involved. Scholars have identified various types of biases that can moderate learning. One example concerns status bias: people may conform more strongly to a certain opinion if this is voiced by a high-status person, like a celebrity (Cialdini, 2007). Another example concerns popularity bias: copying opinions which are already very popular. These types of bias have arguably become more and more important due to the rise of internet and social media (e.g. Salganik et al. 2008; Muchnik et al., 2013). In the online attention economy, status and popularity may distort how individual opinions and behaviors translate to the macrolevel: we follow algorithms and look at the number of downloads or likes or followers, and change our behavior, consciously or unconsciously.

But don't mistake this influence for straight-forward media effects. Sociologist Damon Centola (2022) showed that so-called influencers only have limited power. Most social online influencers only influence people for very simple topics (spreading cat videos, recommending beauty products). Making people change their mind on, for example, politics or stimulating more sustainable behavior is more difficult (Centola, 2022).

And yet we do see how social media have affected society. Scholars such as Sinan Aral (2020) discuss the connection between social media use and political polarization (see also Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021), which brings us also back to the *Looking-Glass* metaphor.

Despite alarm bells about political polarization, in most Western societies the majority of people have relatively moderate viewpoints on most social issues. American studies show that there has hardly been any real political polarization in the last decades (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Aral, 2020: 239). But there is "affective polarization": dislike and distrust among members of political parties, such as the Democrats and Republicans in the United States (Gidron et al., 2020). Affective polarization increases when groups develop distinctive identities, different lifestyles, or cluster together in different neighborhoods – avoiding contact. Also here, the Bourdieusian approach remains important.

Now enter social media. They have provided platforms for lay people to make themselves heard. Most scholars were originally very optimistic: the Internet would lead to a better public sphere with more diversity in voices. And yes, online a highly diverse "marketplace of ideas" has come into existence (Webster, 2014: 147ff), but this also includes political extremists who like to provoke, insult or spread lies (recall QAnon and Andrew Tate), or threaten politicians which has led to high profile resignations in recent months. Extremists thrive on social media, since the structure of social media platforms facilitates moral outrage and angry messages. Platforms were structured to be attention-grabbing and make addictive. After all, social media companies earn their money by keeping their users engaged as much as possible. That's why they invented the like button and the retweet, and designed their platforms using techniques from the gambling industry (Seymour, 2019; Aral, 2020: 56ff). Triggering emotions keeps people active on social media: angry messages are more likely to spread (Brady et al. 2017; Crockett, 2017). People are more likely to share messages that give rise to a certain moral outrage, particularly if these appeal to their group identity. These are very primary reactions that reflect tribal tendencies deep inside of us. At the same time, the extremists who produce angry content become more radical if they see they receive likes, new followers, and other types of social cues (Bail, 2021: 66). This acts as doping.

The consequence is false polarization: we think that there is a lot of conflict, but it only concerns a relatively small group (Wilson et al., 2020). On the one hand, extremists think their ideas are normal and keep doing what they do and more (echo chamber effect). On the other hand, the moderate majority do not raise their voice. If the extremists keep shouting on social media, it leads to an overestimation of their importance, and at the same time it intimidates the more moderate people. There is also a dubious role of legacy media like television and newspapers: they report about what is going on Twitter/X, as if this medium is representative of public opinion (Oschatz et al., 2022). It is not. Political extremists like Donald Trump and Geert Wilders know that causing a commotion on social media will fuel emotions, strengthen identity bonds of their followers, and weaken the middle ground (see Guardian, 2023).

But as we already saw when explaining differences in institutional trust, the explanation lies more in the social context (values, lifestyle) than in the media. Yet, as Christopher Bail (2021: 101) argues: “social media has sent false polarization into hyperdrive”. The overall result could be that individuals adopt different ways of looking at the world. This has also been called “identity-protective cognition” (Kahan, 2017). If Donald Trump states the world is flat, his followers agree, because they want to be part of his tribe. They protect their identity, even if it means that they ignore generally accepted truths.

Ultimately, it can lead to lack of “common ground”. If citizens of a highly developed democratic country can no longer agree upon how real or true the outcomes of an election are, and extremists can steer their minority followers to use violence to get what they want, democracy is in trouble. Social media may offer the tools to communicate, but the problem lies deeper.

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Where to go next?

Now -- how can we summarize all of this? The social ramifications of media use are complex. Depending on one's social background, individuals have very different media use repertoires, which influences the information they encounter. Next, there is disagreement on how information should be evaluated, and the symbolic power of media has declined among certain groups. And, last but not least, the ways in which our individual behavior translates to the societal level has become more complicated, and can be manipulated by using the full arsenal of the internet. I hope that I have shown you that it is difficult to disentangle media influence, and that multiple approaches and research agendas are needed.

In the coming years I will endeavor to connect these agendas. It remains highly relevant to examine how social inequalities in media use emerge and perhaps can be undone. The increasingly complicated media landscape forms one of the key challenges here. Understanding and overcoming inequalities in media use also implies that we need to study the resources people have at their disposal. Economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital have become – again (see Morley, 1980) – highly relevant in the new media ecology (Lindell, 2018; Verboord, 2022).

Another goal is to get a better understanding of the circumstances under which individuals find mediated sources trustworthy and authoritative. In other words, examining the institutional context of media use. For example, the PhD project by Rian Koreman studies how authority of cultural mediators is shaped as interaction of how journalists write and how audiences perceive this (Koreman et al., 2023). Another project that is underway is the PhD study of Kaixin Cheng that looks at the use of Immersive Journalism in news reporting, and asks whether this can be used to win back audiences of mainstream news media.

The third focus area concerns examining how media use and media trust are related to socio-cultural value orientations and broader forms of institutional trust. This requires more methodological plurality which seeks a balance between quantitative and qualitative methods, new and old data sets, and classic and innovative methodologies. For example, vignette studies – which combine survey and experiment – can be applied to the field of media, to study attribution of value to media outlets. Another example is Experience Sampling Methodology – which I together with colleagues applied in the INVENT project to study the relationship between subjective wellbeing and cultural participation (Verboord et al., 2024). In this design participants install an app on their telephone through which they receive multiple ultra-short questionnaires about what is going on at that specific moment. This offers the possibility to examine how media use is related to moods, perceptions, and situations in daily life (e.g. Beyens et al., 2021).

Finding a balance between examining the large patterns in society, as well as being able to zoom in on small but influential groups is important. This is one of the big challenges of social scholars in the current age: individuals who have turned away from fact-checking media, and who express serious

distrust towards all institutions – one could say, who have stepped through the *Looking-Glass* – are difficult to reach. Also for scholars, because we are also part of an institution. In that sense, I find it worrying that within academia extreme left-wing opinion-making sometimes seem to threaten the freedom of expression. If we allow tunnel vision to take over, the legitimacy of our institution will be at stake.

Finally, as some of you may have already spotted, there is the elephant in the room.

Of course, I refer to AI -- Artificial Intelligence. [And no, this lecture was not written by ChatGPT.]

Social scientific research on AI and its impacts is still in development, so it is difficult to say much (and I am also running out of time). One potentially dangerous form of influence is the outward spread of disinformation. Deep fakes – manipulated videos in which faces of people are replaced by those of others via deep generative methods – may be funny when used in satirical TV shows such as *Even Tot Hier* – but have the potential to further undermine the very notion of truth. With these kinds of manipulations, we have moved far from our starting point of media as the Looking-Glass through which we see society. It is a scenario where persons with bad intentions can literally create a Looking-Glass World in which the exact opposite of reality is presented in order to destabilize society for their own benefit.

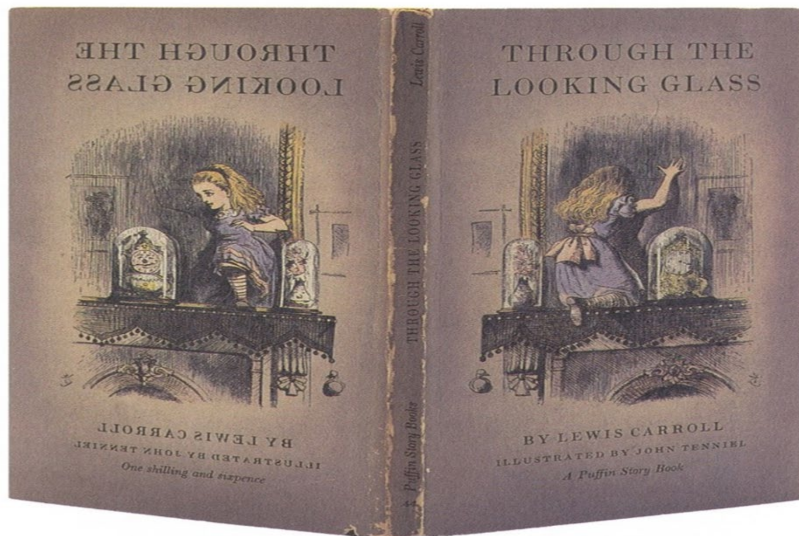
Of course, whether such scenario will come true, we don't know. I do not want to make future predictions here; I am not a visionary; I am a researcher. I am looking forward to collaborating with colleagues Nirvi Maru, Vivian Chen and Joao Ferreira Goncalves on studying the impacts of AI further.

So – coming to a close – what can we say about the metaphor of going Into the Looking-Glass World through media use? Allow me a one-two-three at the end.

One: it is good to realize that only a limited group of people has disconnected from the real world. Most people in our current society have healthy diverse media repertoires. Still, if digitally oriented media repertoires become more popular, there is the risk that indifference to evidence-based reporting will become more normal. And if identity-protective cognitions further diffuse this could lead to more affective polarization in society.

Two: the Looking-Glass is not necessarily the screen; much of the lack of institutional trust is related to larger societal problems. "Media effects" tend to be modest. Still, social media can amplify social divides.

Three: It doesn't hurt to read a book every now and then. It stimulates your mind (Buttrick et al., 2023).



Original illustrations in Through the Looking Glass by John Tenniel.

Words of Thanks

It is time for some words of thanks (some of them in Dutch).[4]

I first want to thank the University's Executive Board, and the Dean of the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Martine van Selm, as well as her predecessor Frank van der Duijn Schouten, for the trust they have placed in me.

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In Utrecht was het Harry Ganzeboom – die er vandaag niet bij kan zijn, maar nog wel alive and kicking is – van wie ik de fijne kneepjes leerde van het doen van empirisch sociologisch onderzoek. Ik werd geen stratificatie-socioloog, maar profiteerde wel dankbaar van zijn enorme kennis en ervaring.

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"Team work" vindt ook plaats in de succesvolle Research Master samen met Sociologie van ESSB. Jarenlang heb ik fijn samengewerkt met Peter Achterberg, en nu alweer vele jaren met Willem de Koster. Ik hoop dat dat ook in de komende jaren wordt voortgezet.

Ik wil alle vrienden en familie bedanken die hier gekomen zijn. Van mijn Beekvliet tijd, tot de ICS jaren, tot de Brutta Figura. Heel bijzonder.

I specially want to thank my extended family who came over all the way from Italy, UK, France, and The Hague: Caroline, Amanda, Alan, Peach, Fabrice, Sara, and Zé. Thank you, grazie, merci, obrigado.

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Maar dat ik hier sta is natuurlijk vooral te danken aan mijn ouders. Zij hebben me altijd gesteund en gestimuleerd, en daar ben ik ze ongelooflijk dankbaar voor. Mam, het is fijn dat je er bent. Mijn vader kan er door ziekte helaas niet meer bij zijn, maar mijn eerste bezoek aan de Erasmus Universiteit was met hem – een voorlichtingsavond ergens eind jaren 80 – dus: hij was gewoon wat eerder dan jullie.

Alla fine, Amanda, thank you for always believing in me. Your love is like Kusama's infinity room: magical, inspirational, and always there.

IK HEB GEZEGD.

Notes

[1] Own analysis of INVENT survey data: multilevel Latent Class Analysis (LCA) using Latent Gold. 6-Cluster, 3-Gclass model.
[2] Own analysis of INVENT survey data: LCA Step 3 approach with covariates in Latent Gold.
[3] Own analysis of INVENT survey data: LCA Step-3 approach with distal outcomes in Latent Gold.
[4] I also want to thank Tonny Krijnen and Amanda Brandellero for giving feedback on earlier versions of this lecture.

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