

Mapping political information environments: Country Report Austria

Leif M. Tietz Media and Politics Final Essay

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Teacher: Prof. dr. sc. Zrinjka Peruško

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Introduction

In their study on the emergence of a high-choice media environment, Van Aelst et al. (2014) lament the lack of comparative research about the globally changing political information environments. The political information environments are defined as “as the supply and demand of political news and political information within a certain society” (van Aelst et al., 2017, p. 4). Peruško (2025) presented an overview of the current state of research concerning political information environments in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). She emphasised the limited availability of research, especially for CEE countries. The present essay aims to facilitate comparative research by conducting a review of existing literature on the political information environment in Austria. The six dimensions that have been employed by van Aelst et al. and Peruško to map political information environments form the underlying structure of this essay. Firstly, this paper investigates the amount and supply of political information as well as the demand side, which is represented by research on news avoidance. Secondly, the quality of news within the Austrian information environment will be investigated. The third chapter presents the findings of research conducted on the highly concentrated media landscape of Austria and its news diversity. The current state of media fragmentation and polarization in Austria is subject to chapter 4. Risks posed by fake news and its public perception in Austria are highlighted in chapter 5. Last, this essay investigates the degree of inequality in political knowledge.

1. Amount of political information

Van Aelst et al. (2017) are concerned with a declining amount of political news. They justify their findings by differentiating between a true increase of the absolute amount of political news and the often to be seen relative decrease of political news in overall media supply as well as – with the demand side considered – the potential rise of news avoiders in western democracies. The amount of political information is important, because citizens tend to be better informed in information rich environments and it is also pointed to the fact that the strength of public service broadcasting (PSB) has an impact on supply and use of news (van Aelst et al., 2017). As will be shown in this chapter, the dominance of PSB in the Austrian TV and radio landscape therefore indicates a relatively high degree of readily available news content.

1.1 Television

Television usage in Austria lies above the EU average, with 94% Austrians that watch TV at least once a week (European Commission: Directorate-General for Communication [European

Commission] & Kantar, 2023). It can still be considered the most important news media source in Austria, although its importance is in decline (Gadringer et al., 2024).

The Austrian PSB (*ORF*) dominates the media landscape of Austria, with its main competitors not being private Austrian, but mostly public and private German TV stations (Birkner, 2024; Pensold, 2019). In 2024, both *ORF* channels together roughly achieved one third market share, while the German stations of the RTL-group and the ProSieben-Sat.1-Group, each had a market share of roughly 15 % (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Teletest [AGTT], 2025).

1.2 Radio

Radio is of higher importance in Austria than in most other European countries. In the latest Media Use report of the European Commission, only Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Germany reported higher shares of daily radio listeners. 51 % of respondents in the European Commission's report claimed to listen to radio every day or almost daily, with an additional 20 % of respondents listening to Radio multiple times a week (European Commission & Kantar, 2023). Within the Austrian media landscape, Radio is the second most important source of news (Gadringer et al., 2024).

Even more than in the TV sector, Austria's radio landscape is being dominated by the Austrian public broadcaster *ORF*. According to recent audience measurement data *ORF*'s national and regional radio services collectively reach 55.5 % of daily audiences, amounting to a total of 4.5 million listeners residing in Austria. Among individuals aged 14 to 49, the daily reach is 46.1%. Consequently, *ORF* radio boasts a daily audience size that exceeds the collective viewership of all private radio stations operating within Austria (ORF, 2025; Radiotest, 2025).

1.3 Print

Austria has the third highest share of daily written press readers in the European Union, with 39 % of Austrian respondents reporting to daily read the written press. That puts Austria 20 percentage points above the EU average (European Commission & Kantar, 2023). However, the reach of printed newspapers has steadily declined over previous years, from 60 % in 2016-2018 to only 34 % in 2024 (Gadringer et al., 2024). A trend, that cannot merely be explained by a potential switch to digital newspaper offerings, since fewer people reported weekly use of newspaper apps or websites in 2024 than in every year before (Gadringer et al., 2024).

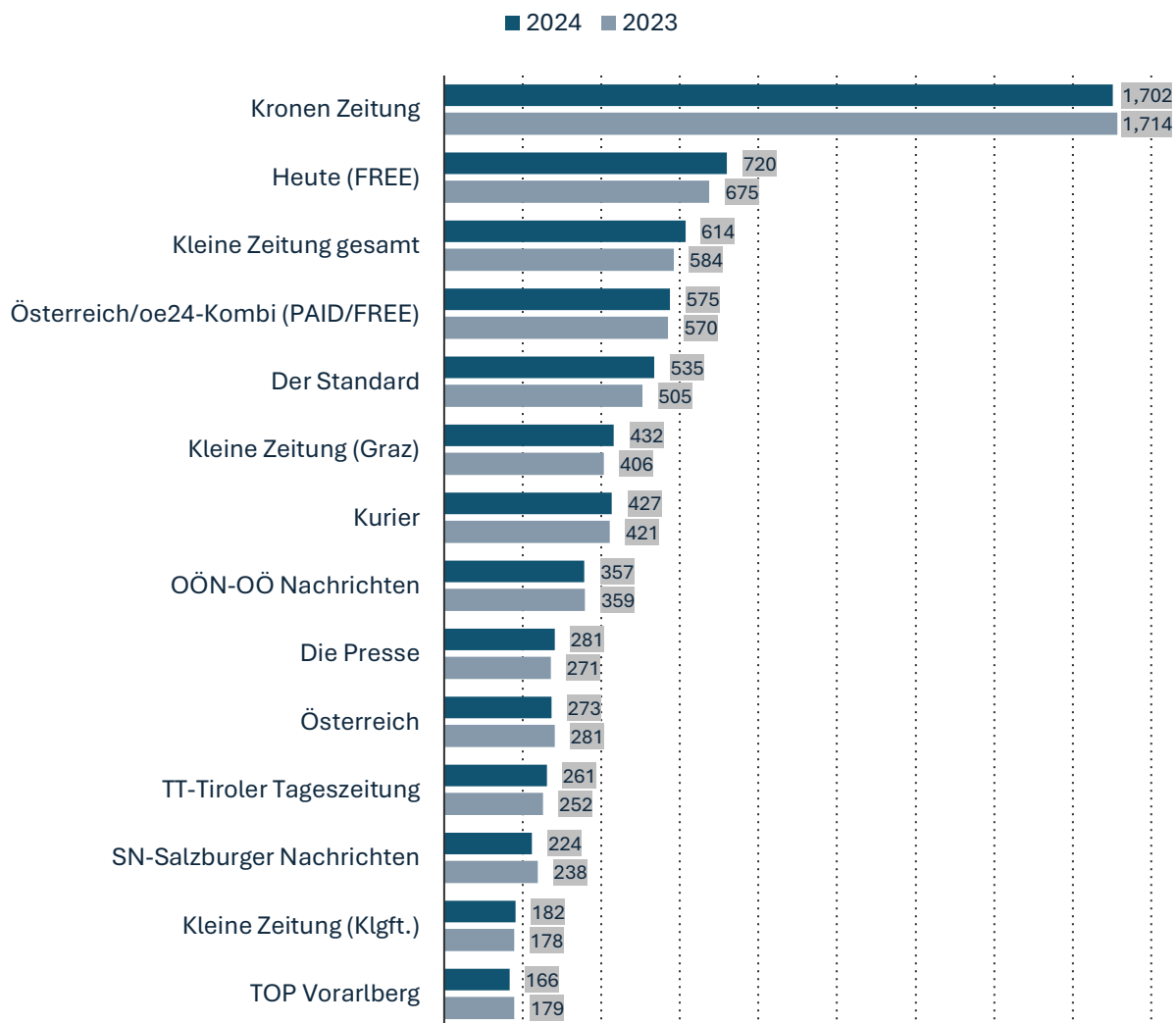


Figure 1: Reach of individual daily newspapers in Austria in 2023 and 2024 (in 1,000).

Source: Statista, 2025

The *Kronen Zeitung* has the largest readership among Austrian daily newspapers in 2024 with an average of 1.7 million readers per issue (22.3 % reach). The free edition of *Heute* follows in second place with around 720,000 readers per issue (8.8 %; Statista, 2025). Figure 1 shows other influential outlets in Austria such as *Kleine Zeitung* (7.6 %), *Österreich* (including its free version oe24; 7.4 %), and *Kurier* (5.5 %, but roughly 10 % reach in three states / Bundesländer) (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Media-Analysen, 2024b; Kontrast.at, 2024; Statista, 2025). The overall dominance of *Kronen Zeitung* is regionally contested by different regional newspapers (Kontrast.at, 2024). Issues regarding the lack of media diversity and problematic ownership structure will be further discussed in section 3 of this essay. However, according to some literature, Austria can still be considered a ‘newspaper-centric society’ (Norris, 2000; Russmann & Hess, 2020).

1.4 Online / Digital Media

Austria finishes just below the EU-average of daily internet usage for news, with 41 % of Austrians reporting to read news online every day or almost every day (European Commission & Kantar, 2023). Surprisingly, the explicit use of social media for news consumption has been declining in the past four years (Gadringer et al., 2024). Still, when asked for their main source of news, 15 % of Austrians claimed to use social media, ranking second behind those who use TV as their main source of information (Gadringer et al., 2024). While Gadringer and colleagues note a decrease in social media use as news source, the European Commission Report on the Eurobarometer survey found an increase of general social media use of six percentage points between 2022-2023 (European Commission & Kantar, 2023, p. 25). Austria has been comparatively slow in adapting social media use, also in political communication. With the only major exception being the far-right party FPÖ (Schwarzenegger, 2019). The most popular social media platforms that are being used for news are YouTube (21%), Facebook (20%), WhatsApp (18%), Instagram (11%), followed by TikTok, Facebook Messenger and X (formerly Twitter, all 4%) (Gadringer et al., 2024). Prandner and Glatz (2020) found an ‘additive effect’ of digital media adoption in Austria, that serves more as an addition to traditional media, rather than its complete substitution.

1.5 News avoidance

In their comparative analysis using European Election Study data, Gorski and Thomas (2022) showed that the share of absolute news-avoiders in Austria has increased between 2009 and 2014. Schäfer et al.’s (2023) investigation into news avoidance in the early phases of the pandemic in 2020 revealed that several factors involved in news-avoiding behaviour. They measured the impact of media trust, political attitudes and emotional distress on intentional news-avoidance of COVID-19 related news. Their findings suggest that COVID-19 related distrust significantly impacted news avoidance, while general media trust showed no significant impact. However, a combination of low trust in media and low trust in politics indicate a higher prevalence of news avoidance (see also: Lecheler & Aalberg, 2020). The authors relate these findings to a possible connection to anti-elitist and populist attitudes. Furthermore, being emotionally overwhelmed by negativity of news has been identified as the most important predictor of news avoiding by Schäfer et al. (2023). Other political attitudes as well as political trust alone did not show significant influence on news avoidance in their study. More recent findings suggest that after the COVID-19 period, the share of Austrians that ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ avoid news has mostly remained stable. Accordingly, over 40 % respondents in the 2024 Digital News Report indicated, that they feel drained by the amount of available news, an increase of ten percentage points compared to 2019 (Gadringer et al., 2024).

2. Quality of News

Defining what “high” or “low” quality news is, is subject to a complex and potentially controversial assessment. Building on Jandura & Friedrich’s (2014) view of different news quality standards derived from different ideal types of democracy, Van Aelst et al. (2017, p. 8) conclude that political news should at least be “substantial, factual and diverse”. Diversity is subject to chapter 3 of this essay. News quality in Austria seems to be under-researched, especially if looked for more recent research that accounts for the disruptions of the past years. Therefore, older but conclusive research will be highlighted in this section. Afterwards, people’s perception of quality and trust in Austrian news will be highlighted in second section of this chapter.

In 2014, Seethaler (2015) conducted a comprehensive cross-media study on news quality in Austria, commissioned by the Austrian Regulatory Authority for Broadcasting and Telecommunications (RTR). The study evaluates media offerings based on different models of democracy, using criteria such as transparency, diversity, relevance and professionalism. Significant variations between news quality across print, radio, TV and online platforms as well as between popular and elite outlets were found. Similar to Jacobi et al. (2016), Seethaler found the quality gap to be wider online, often to the disadvantage of popular / boulevard media. Online media also showed the highest source transparency despite lower authorship transparency for specific sites like *oe24.at* or PSB’s website *orf.at*, while diversity in cited actors was generally low across all media. The relevance of ‘Hard News’ was generally high, exceeding 70 % in most outlets, although it was less prominent in certain online platforms. *ORF* radio and TV scored the highest for professionalism (Seethaler, 2015).

Jacobi et al. (2016) compared the quality of political news in online and print editions of Austrian popular and elite newspapers during the 2013 National Election Campaign, using electoral democratic standards. Overall, online editions were found to score better than print regarding the amount of political news, and diversity, but worse on leader focus. Yet the study concludes that the quality gap between elite and popular newspapers is larger online, to the disadvantage of popular outlets. Interestingly, they found that online news were less emotionalized than their print equivalent (Jacobi et al., 2016). However, it can be questioned whether that finding could be replicated today, with more than a decade of increasing importance of algorithmic emotionalization on social media.

In a qualitative evaluation study for *ORF*, Oberhuber and Heinz (2018) assessed the ‘TV Information Quality Profile’ by examining audience perceptions of criteria such as Trust, Orientation, and Diversity. The evaluation found that key quality criteria, especially trust and

orientation, were considered highly important by the audience and largely perceived as being met by *ORF* programs, resulting in high overall satisfaction and a perceived superior position compared to commercial broadcasters. However, audience feedback highlighted deficits including concerns about perceived political bias in individuals and the institution's independence, a desire for more diverse guests and content for younger audiences and noted that some participants preferred foreign PSBs for international coverage and background information (Oberhuber & Heinz, 2018).

2.1 Trust in News

Important factors for (dis-)trust in news are transparent presentation of news production, high journalistic standards, fair representation of people and possible bias (Gadringer et al., 2024). Looking at different trust ratings in media, there is an interesting difference between publications. The report of the European Commission, using Eurobarometer data from autumn 2023, reports very high rates of Austrians that tend to trust 'the media' (56 %; third highest approval, 17 percentage points above EU average; European Commission & Kantar, 2023). The Austrian country report for the Digital News Report however shows 35 % of Austrians having general trust in news. When asked for trust in their media sources of choice, trust rates show 50 % (Gadringer et al., 2024). After an increase of trust in news during COVID, the share of Austrians having trust in news has reached a new low, both for general and own media trust (Gadringer et al., 2024).

Regarding specific media brands, the highest trust has been reported for *ORF's* news programmes (59.6 %), yet with a significantly decline compared to previous years. Among the highly trusted are furthermore press outlets *Der Standard* (58.4 %) and *Die Presse* (56.3 %), as well as the private TV broadcaster *Servus TV* (52.4 %). Regional and local newspapers also have relatively high rates (53.8 %) and, interestingly, the lowest rate of distrust (21 %). The highest reaching press outlet *Kronen Zeitung*, has almost equally high rates of trust (40.2 %) and distrust (40.1 %) (Gadringer et al., 2024). For digital media, users find it hardest to distinguish trustworthy from untrustworthy information on platforms like TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and Facebook. In contrast, Google Search and WhatsApp are perceived as the most reliable for assessing news credibility. Overall, social media platforms are generally seen as less trustworthy compared to search engines and messaging apps (Gadringer et al., 2024).

In their qualitative study on media trust, Russmann and Hess (2020) investigated information behaviour of young adults. Based on findings of ongoing decline of trust in news media by young adults (see also: Gadringer et al., 2023). Interestingly, within the qualitative sample of their study, they were unable to find meaningful differences in media usage between different levels of

education. Similar to the aforementioned findings on trusted media outlets, the young adults interviewed also named *ORF* and *Der Standard* as their most trusted media outlets, including their respective online offerings. For *ORF*, among the reasons for its trustworthiness were its public mandate, perceived independence and its long-standing presence in interviewees' lives since childhood. In general, young adults named objectivity – by showing multiple perspectives, including facts and figures and well-researched and fact-checked content – as markers of trustworthiness. A significant finding is the lack of importance placed on individual journalists as sources of trust. Instead, recommendations and shared links from peers on social media are highly influential in determining which news content is consumed and trusted. This is accompanied by young adults in the study often not perceiving the content they encountered on social media platforms as problematic. Especially the latter issue led Russmann and Hess (2020) to call for improvement in media literacy education.

3. Media concentration and diversity of news

3.1 Media Concentration

The lack of media market plurality in Austria has been an ongoing debate for the past decades (e.g.: Knoche, 1997; Melischek et al., 2005; Steinmaurer, 2002; Trappel, 2019). In the most recent Media Pluralism Report on Austria, the Austrian media system is considered to be at medium risk in the dimensions of social inclusiveness and political independence, while market plurality is seen to be on edge to become at high risk. Only the dimension of fundamental protection is on a low risk level. Looking at on the digital news market of Austria however, market plurality already is considered to be at high risk, while social inclusiveness and political independence both are close to becoming high risk as well (European University Institute [EUI] et al., 2024).

With regard to market plurality, the subdimension of plurality of media providers scores the worst, with a horizontal concentration being between 70 and 92 % (Balluff et al., 2024)¹. At the beginning of 2018, six of the 14 remaining Austrian daily newspapers were at least intertwined with a second newspaper at owner level. Newspaper publishers operate the most successful private radio stations and - together with ORF - also dominate Austria's online media (Trappel, 2019). Furthermore Trappel (2019) claims that on a regional level, only Vienna can be considered to have media diversity, due to several media companies located there. He furthermore highlights how

¹ A visualisation of Austrian media ownership structure made by Tomaz et al. (2022) can be found in the Annex of this essay (Figure 3A).

economic advantages, particularly in advertising and publishing markets, drive concentration, which is further amplified by network effects in digital media (for a more recent analysis on commodification dynamics in Austrian media see also: Theine & Grabner, 2023). Globalization also plays a role, as Austrian media companies compete with global corporations for attention and advertising revenue. Despite periods of media diversity, media policy in Austria has consistently failed to adequately address the resulting loss of diversity and quality. The internet, while opening new avenues for expression, has ultimately reinforced existing power structures and created new forms of concentration among global intermediaries.

With regard to the political independence dimension, the Media Pluralism Report for Austria (EUI et al., 2024) indicates a high risk to editorial autonomy due lack of information on appointment procedures of editors in chief and an underdeveloped framework for transparency self-reporting. Also, recent political influence scandals involving, among other, former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, editors in Chief of *ORF* and *Die Presse*, daily newspapers *Heute* and *Kronen Zeitung* as well as an opinion research company, were mentioned in the report. Academic engagement with these scandals is illustrated below. Additionally, looking at the digital environment of Austria only, risk to political independence is even higher (EUI et al., 2024).

Birkner (2024) criticises the lack of research on the proximity of politics and media in Austria, the so-called “Verhaberung”. His arguments especially rely on the impressions of the recent political advertisement scandal, where the Austrian government advertising scheme has allegedly been used by Chancellor Kurz to buy beneficial press coverage from media outlet *oe24*. With a historical perspective and using the concept of medialisisation (“Medialisierung”), Birkner shows how the relationship between chancellors and the media has evolved, influenced by generational changes, media socialisation and the particularities of the Austrian, i.e. the strength of *ORF* coverage, having a high influence on government action as well as the dominance of the tabloid press, explicitly naming *Kronen Zeitung*. In addition to that, the aforementioned highly concentrated ownership structure of the Austrian media system in combination with the rising financial independence of media on government advertising have potentially all contributed to the recent scandal (Birkner, 2024).

Balluff et al. (2024) investigated the news coverage patterns in Austria in context of the aforementioned political advertisement scandal, using a quasi-experimental approach. They found a statistically significant and substantial increase in Sebastian Kurz’s visibility in *oe24* starting in 2016, aligning with the alleged timeline of the arrangements. While *oe24* did not show a significant increase in favourable reporting for Kurz, it did report significantly more negatively on

other top-ranking politicians compared to other outlets from 2016 onwards, supporting the concept of “paying positive to negative” (Balluff et al., 2024, p. 17).

3.2 Diversity of News

When asked for their perception towards whether media provide a diversity of views and opinions, 71 % of Austrians agree, which is a little above EU average of 69 % (European Commission & Kantar, 2023). Trappel (2019), renders a different judgement on media:

With a few exceptions (e.g. Dossier.at), the Internet in Austria has so far not enabled any relevant market entries by journalistic media that do not belong to a media association. Apart from the immense number of blogs, forums and other small formats, which have so far only been able to constitute a public sphere in rare individual cases and then only with the help of the existing media, the Internet in Austria has not brought about any increase in diversity of opinion. (Trappel, 2019, p. 210, original in German; translated by the author)

Other scholars also critiqued the lack of diversity in media, such as the underrepresentation of women (EUI et al., 2024; Riedl et al., 2022) or lack of representation of minorities (EUI et al., 2024). In a comparative analysis of news diversity in German, Swiss and Austrian PSBs, researchers found that *ORF* largely met diversity norms, even though they pointed to a strong executive focus that sometimes can limit party diversity and deviate from proportionality criteria (Udris et al., 2023).

4. Fragmentation and polarization

As already outlined, especially in section 1, traditional media in Austria are comparatively strong and stable. However, there is a slow but ongoing trend in Austria towards an increasing digital media related information behaviour. This trend is mostly driven by younger audiences, that at the same time seem to be generally less interested in news more prone to news avoidance (Gadringer et al., 2024; Grossegger, 2020).

Analysing interest in news for gender differences, Gadringer et al. (2024) show that high level of interest in news (extremely/very interested) is 17.6% higher among men. However, for general interest in news (extremely/very/somewhat interested), there is still only a moderate difference between the genders (men: 85.8%; women: 79.6%). Furthermore, there seems to be no evidence for significant differences in interest in news among political attitudes. However, as Figure 2 shows, trust in media varies highly between different political attitudes. With (far-)right voters

having the least trust in news (24 %) and centre-left voters showing the highest rates of trust in news (41.6 %; Gadringer et al., 2024). There is no linearity among the political left-right dimension of views.

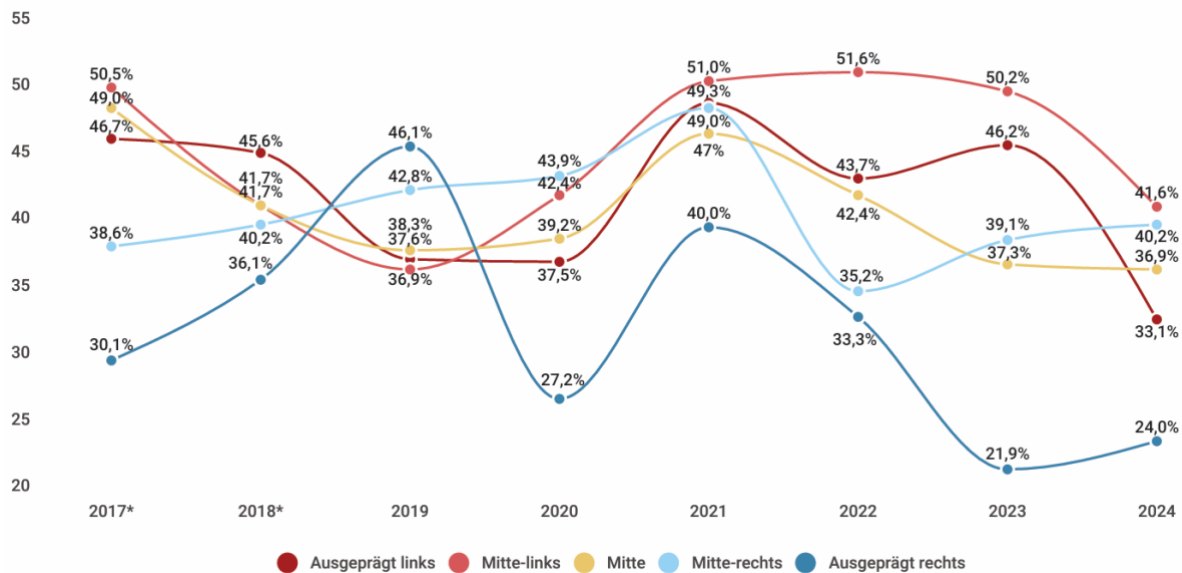


Figure 2 Trust in news (share of people that generally trust in news) and political attitudes.

Translation: Ausgeprägt links: left; Mitte-links: centre-left; Mitte: centre; Mitte-rechts: centre-right, Ausgeprägt rechts: right.

Source: Gadringer et al., 2024

In a study on audience fragmentation in the online news environment, Kleinen-von Königslöw (2016) empirically investigated whether online media leads to a fragmentation of the political public sphere using data from a population survey on information media usage before the Austrian National Council elections in 2013. The key finding, derived from a network analysis of audience overlaps across 38 Austrian media outlets, is that the thesis of fragmentation of the political public sphere at the audience level can be clearly denied. This is because even those who use online sources more frequently, continue to heavily utilize the most popular traditional media sources in Austria, specifically the news broadcasts of *ORF* and the *Kronen Zeitung* and their respective online versions. A later study by Prandner and Glatz (2020) confirmed this finding of an ‘additive effect’.

5. Relativism in News

An overwhelming majority of Austrians consider Fake News to be a threat to society (82 %; Arbeitsgemeinschaft Media-Analysen, 2024a). However, only half of the respondents feel confident when trying to validate information for their truthfulness (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Media-

Analysen, 2024a). Furthermore, 39 % of Austrians questioned in the digital news report stated that they could hardly distinguish between false reports and facts on the internet. If false or misleading information could be identified, the information covered a wide range of topics, particularly with regard to information on COVID-19, the war in Ukraine or migration issues (Gadringer et al., 2024). Also a majority of Austrians (53 %) reported to come across misrepresenting or fake news often, one of the lowest reported numbers for the EU countries (European Commission & Kantar, 2023).

The Media Pluralism Monitor sees 'Protection against disinformation and hate speech' almost at high risk, criticising, among other things, the lack of a "comprehensive political strategy" (EUI et al., 2024, p. 27) and the small number of fact-checking organizations, with most of them being too young to properly assess their work.

6. Degree of inequality in political knowledge

The latest Media Pluralism Monitor for Austria sees Media Literacy in Austria at 'medium risk' (EUI et al., 2024). Biringer (2022) points out that social inequality and educational poverty itself causes inequality in media socialization. Inequality of political knowledge therefore already is embedded in and structurally influenced by the wider picture of social inequality. Prandner and Glatz (2020) found a significant impact of social inequality on news consumption patterns. Higher educational attainment and income are strongly associated with more diversified news repertoires. Also, employment led to a higher probability of a more diverse repertoire, while respondents that did not actively participated in the job market relied on online-only repertoires more often. Their findings aligned with previous research suggesting a "knowledge gap" or "information gap" where individuals with higher socioeconomic status are better equipped to access and process information from a variety of sources. The authors also stress the fact that media usage and information patterns are heavily intertwined with Austrias existing media landscape (Prandner & Glatz, 2020).

Conclusions

The political information environment of Austria is rather traditional and is characterised by strong PSB, particularly due to *ORF*'s dominant role in both television and radio. The print market is of significantly higher importance in Austria than in other different European countries. The national market is dominated by the *Kronen Zeitung*. While traditional media such as TV, print and radio continue to be the predominant news sources, their relevance is gradually declining, particularly among younger demographics. Digital news consumption is increasing at more gradual rate than

in other EU countries, and while social media remains relevant, its use for news purposes has declined. Despite the relatively high availability of political information, rising levels of news avoidance, driven by emotional fatigue and distrust, pose challenges to informed citizenship.

News quality as general concept remains under-researched, particularly in the context of recent transformations and shifts in media consumption. While earlier studies have revealed consistent gaps between elite and popular outlets, especially in online formats, recent data also point to declining public trust in news. Despite the fact that *ORF* and quality press outlets maintain relatively high levels of trust, there has been a decline in overall trust, especially among younger audiences. Social media platforms are perceived as being less reliable, with users encountering difficulties assessing the trustworthiness of content. In contrast, search engines and messaging apps are regarded more favourably. Factors such as transparency, professionalism, and the perceived independence of the media remain central to trust. In some of the mentioned studies on media quality, criteria such as media concentration and diversity, fragmentation and relativism / fake news, have been looked at, that were subject to closer investigation in this essay.

Austria's media environment faces significant challenges regarding market plurality and political independence. High levels of horizontal concentration, especially in the digital news sector, combined with close ties between media owners and political actors, as seen in the Kurz advertising scandal, underline structural risks to editorial autonomy and diversity. Despite the internet's potential, it has largely reinforced existing imbalances rather than enabling new, independent journalistic voices. While public perception of media diversity remains relatively high, academic assessments draw a more nuanced picture, pointing to limited opinion diversity, underrepresentation of minorities and women, ongoing dominance by a few key players but still scoring well in comparative analysis.

Austria's media use is slowly but increasingly adopting digital platforms, especially among younger audiences. Furthermore, young adults also have been observed to show a higher rate of news avoidance and a reduced interest in news. While gender differences in news interest are evident, these differences are considered moderate. Political attitudes correlate with varying levels of trust in media, which is particularly low among (far-)right voters.

Despite increasing use of digital media, studies show no clear evidence of fragmentation in the political public sphere. Audiences continue to mostly rely on established outlets like *ORF* and *Kronen Zeitung*. These insights suggest that while signs of differentiation and polarization exist, especially between age cohorts, these have not led to a fragmented media landscape.

While the majority of Austrians recognise fake news as a threat to democracy, many encounter difficulties in verifying information and distinguishing between fact and misinformation, especially online. Disinformation is particularly prominent around polarising topics such as

COVID-19, migration, and armed conflicts. Institutional responses remain limited, with few established fact-checking initiatives and no overarching political strategy in place.

Media literacy in Austria is assessed as being at medium risk but is closely linked to broader patterns of social inequality. Educational attainment, income, and employment status significantly shape news consumption and political knowledge. These inequalities are reinforced by and embedded within Austria's existing media structures.

Austria's media landscape is characterized by strong traditional structures, especially public broadcasting and print. Structural issues such as high media concentration, political influence, declining trust, and persistent social inequalities challenge the diversity and quality of political information. While signs of decline are visible, particularly among younger audiences, the overall media environment remains marked by continuity, with fragmentation and polarization limited.

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Annex

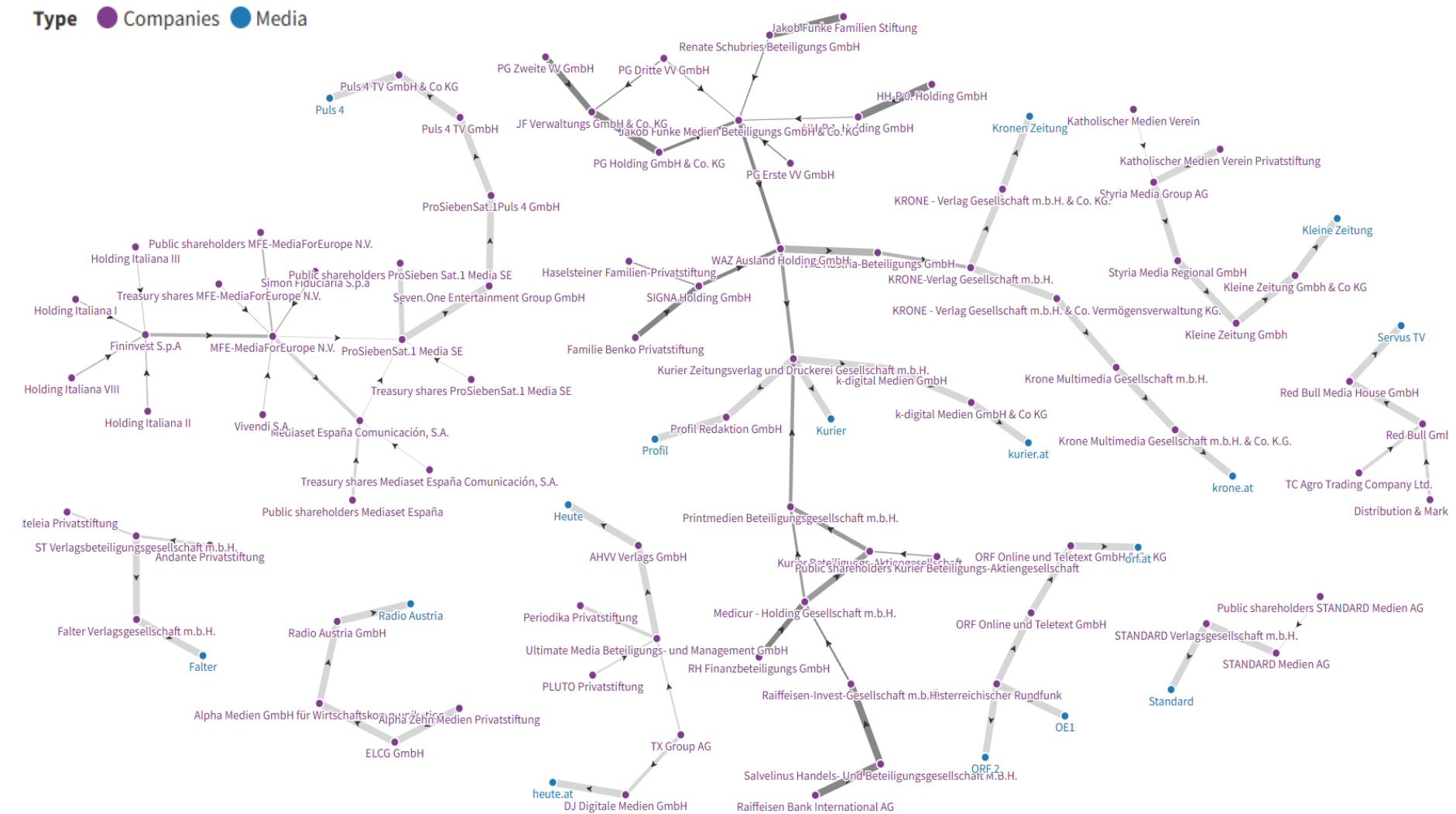


Figure 3A Media Outlets and their owners.

Source: Euromedia Ownership Monitor. <https://media-ownership.eu/findings/countries/austria/>