Graphical user interface, text, application

Description automatically generated **Research Plan**

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**Faculty**

Law and Criminology

Economic and Social Sciences and Solvay Business School

Psychology and Educational Sciences

Arts and Philosophy

Sciences and (bio-)Science Engineering

Medicine and Pharmacy

Engineering

Physical Education and Physiotherapy

**Department (= ‘vakgroep’):**

NUSE (News: Users, Strategies, and Engagements) Unit, imec-SMIT, Department of Communication Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

**Doctoral School**

DSh (Human Sciences)

NSE (Natural Sciences and (Bioscience) Engineering)

LSM (Life Sciences and Medicine)

**Doctoral degree to be obtained:**

Doctor of Media and Communications Studies

**Joint or double PhD**

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**Supervisor**

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**Academic year of first enrolment**

2023-2024

**Target date or academic year of public defense**

01/01/2027 or 2027-2028

**RESEARCH PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

**Title of the PhD Research**

**Pygmalion: Exploring the Relationships between Social Class and Civic Duty Norms in the Social Co-construction of Source & Topic Legitimacy in Political News Habits (…and misinformation beliefs?)**

**Abstract**

[…]

**Introduction**

Over the years, the literature diagnosing the possible futures of “liberal democracies” has concerned itself with the relationships between political news consumption and overall democratic health. This concern is, of course, not new to political media research – in fact, academic attention on political news media’s role in acting as a catalyst for producing discursive publics spans a rich strand of research that highlights several outcomes of news media exposure and its political affects (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; Prior, 2007). These investigations into the intersections of politics and new media are somewhat proverbial, drawing from a ‘deliberative conception of democracy’ (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020) i.e., situating political (news) media consumption and/or its habits inside a democratic apparatus driven by mainly rationalist political participation (Habermas, 1991). Here, political media is expected to perform duties that ensure “active” citizenship connected to conventionally desirable democratic outcomes such as voting (Dewenter et al., 2019), civic (McCombs & Poindexter, 1983), and overall political engagement. Towards the imaginations of “liberal democracies”, the social messaging surrounding political news use and information has indeed remained constant i.e., guaranteeing its cohesive role in ensuring and safeguarding democratic citizenship (for overview, see: Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

To this effect, the recent alarm sounded by academic scholarship on news avoidance is warranted. Indeed, if the foundational element of a deliberative democracy based on equal access – and consequently, the outcomes dependent on the regular usage of these accesses – is not guaranteed, it may pose significant risks to the underlying fabric of democracy itself. Despite the validity of the question, there exists a conceptual ambiguity that is typical of news avoidance literature (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). Based on these conceptual ambiguities, the operationalization of “news avoidance” in these studies continues to vary, with various approaches using often conflicting methodologies to describe an understandably complex social phenomenon. Here, an extensive library of recent literature has focused on an emotional turn in news avoidance (Toff & Nielsen, 2022; Wagner & Boczkowski, 2021), on information overload within contextual environments (de Bruin et al., 2021), or in producing absolute and relative cut-off limits to characterize news avoidance in specific societies (Bos et al., 2016; Wolfsfeld et al., 2016). More interestingly, a majority of news avoidance literature has focused on ‘individual-level factors’ that may mediate people’s news ‘repertoires’ and habits – in effect, these include such variables as political interest (e.g., Strömbäck & Shehata, 2019), political efficacies (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017), motivation and ability (Aalberg et al., 2013; Strömbäck et al., 2013), and various other *agential* factors at the psychological level that dictate people’s ‘desire’ for consuming news. These approaches have been celebrated as part of the OMA Framework (Luskin, 1990) wherein *opportunity*, *motivation*, and *ability* function as preliminary variables to gauge the breadths of individuals’ associations with political news content. The OMA Framework supposedly offers a way of making sense of high-choice media environments, wherein individuals will be required to stabilize their preferences for seeking and consuming political news media more than before, due to an overall saturation of all ‘genres’ (e.g., Webster, 2014). Here, people with higher ‘intentions’ (for overview, see: Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020) for news content regardless of ‘genres’ (Webster, 2014) will be consciously driven towards consuming news content based on stabilized habits of political news consumption, with the option of ‘non-news’ content (e.g., entertainment) more pervasively available for those who are motivated to seek out such alternatives. This preferential model of political news consumption dominates the current state-of-the-art in understanding why and how people seek out the news, disregard it, or develop long-term affiliations such as ‘news diets’.

**Caveats of Functionalist Approaches**

***A1****: Positivist Bubble*

In referencing the current literature, we observe a functionalist approach toward political news consumption (or its avoidance) that tends to take several covariates for granted. Since a sizable number of these studies draw from the OMA framework and Luskin's (1990) conceptualization of an “informed, politically sophisticated” electorate, they almost unanimously assume the (supposed) erosion of first-level digital inequalities (e.g., access-related) to uniformly mobilize populations towards consuming political news in high-choice media environments, so long as they possess some key pre-requisites of political and civic agency, i.e., agencies associated with desirable democratic roles such as being a “good, informed citizen”.

Of course, some studies have addressed this gap and rightly questioned whether confounding variables within the greater information environment – such as press and political freedom – may play an auxiliary part in how people end up perceiving the news altogether, and consequently develop attitudes towards it (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). Notwithstanding, limited attention has been drawn to asking more fundamental questions about why individuals within democracies would be differentially predisposed to political news consumption “habits” or “motivations” in the first place, beyond the normative recognition that these preferential resources may indeed play a role in political news consumption and the acquisition of political knowledge. For instance, while it is indeed novel to note that samples that would score high on a specific dispositional variable (e.g., political interest) may end up consuming “more” political “news” than those with lower quantities of the same variable, the more interesting question would try to document similarities and differences between samples that consistently score low on such pre-dispositional variables, and observe their socio-economic, socio-cultural & socio-political positions within so-called “liberal democracies” that may mediate the gestation and rounded development of the pre-dispositional variables that positively predict political news appetites in high-choice media environments.

*A2: News Perceptions, Perceived Benefits*

The current literature also leaves several developments in journalism studies research virtually unaddressed – the biggest pitfall being in how it operationalizes “news” across contexts. On the one hand, the literature recognizes an increasingly hybridized media environment, but on the other hand fails to adapt people’s ***affective* experiences** (Swart & Broersma, 2023) of “news” or “news-ness” to these newer media environments that are being continuously recreated. Additionally, a hybridized media environment that can differentially impact perceptions of “news” may also contain actors who do not typically qualify as “news sources” in a traditional sense, but produce similar outcomes regarding political knowledge, efficacy, and overall political information acquisition as that of conventional news sources (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Feldman, 2013). Therefore, it is unclear how the OMA framework would seek to operationalize “news” and “non-news” genres at a time when not only audience perceptions regarding these distinctions are consistently fading (for e.g., infotainment), but also when conventional news sources seem to be strategically adapting to platform-specific trends of news consumption habits (Klug & Autenrieth, 2022). This is especially concerning when audiences seem to recognize “traditional” sources of political news media such as legacy, print, or radio (Swart & Broersma, 2023) but choose “non-traditional” sources as legitimate sources of political news nonetheless – not necessarily as an “alternative” to classical sources of political news media (Martin & Sharma, 2022) but as their primary points of acquiring political information.

Here, it is important to note that news perceptions may not necessarily be a standalone process that is independent of individuals’ (perceived) benefits of news consumption. While the associations to being an “informed/active citizen” may be associated with many cases of perceived news benefits, they may not necessarily reflect the broader continuum of reasons why individuals access, form preferences, and indulge in news consumption habits in the short- or long-term. Since research has already documented news perceptions in high-choice media environments to be independent of legacy media, we must also expect people’s (perceived) benefits upon selectively choosing variable sources of political news to be associated with a diverse set of options that are socially and culturally shaped.

**Scientific research goals**

**The Ignored Role of Social Class**

Upon reviewing the literature, it may be concluded that the existing literature on (selective) news avoidance – or indeed, the antecedents and consequences of political news “repertoires” – is not only vast, but often self-conflicting. Among the latest developments in the field is the introduction of an “information utility” (IU) approach to gauge selective news avoidance (Andersen et al., 2024) through better representing audience’s perceived costs and benefits to consume news as a commodity. However, the conceptual difference between the IU and traditional opportunities and motivations frameworks is unclear. Additionally, recording news consumption patterns within extraneous circumstances (i.e., the coronavirus pandemic), although novel, may not necessarily be a generalizable model outside of such extraneous contexts, and certainly not reproducible in an international context. For instance, we can expect people’s news consumption habits to be irregularly mediated by impeding social and psychological factors during the pandemic that would otherwise be minimized/stabilized in non-extraneous circumstances. All such factors call for an approach to studying political news media consumption that is holistic and sociologically bound.

***C1****: Political Socialization and Perceived Source-Topic Legitimacy*

Here, this project seeks to provide an alternative approach through the introduction of *social class* as a mediator of political news consumption. When we mention ‘class’, we do not simply refer to the normative conceptualization of class as a socio-economic indicator that may vary as per the possession of material resources. Instead, we focus on the **materialization of objective socioeconomic status** through differential processes of **political socialization** processes that different individuals on the socioeconomic and social class spectrum undergo **both within- and between-groups**, which may impact not only their political news consumption habits as a broader phenomenon, but also how they learn to prioritize **specific news topics** and **sources** over others in **high-choice media environments**. Adjacently, we also expect these patterns of political news consumption to variably affect the acquisition of political knowledge, with a probable risk of exacerbating social inequalities into second and third-level digital inequalities (for overview, see: van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014), and further aggregating the so-called knowledge gap phenomenon (Prior, 2005).

Sociologically, these aforementioned materalizations of socioeconomic capitals broadly refer to a specific kind of capital that may be associated with various “news”-like (i.e., comprising “news”-ness) media agents and elements. **Bourdieu’s field theory method** on culture and politics refers to such capitals as cultural capital, which can be further divided into three kinds – **institutionalized**, **objectified**, and **embodied** capitals (Bourdieu, 1984). When media elements that occupy different dispositional characteristics are unequally appreciated within a largely positionally-oriented population, there is a likelihood that the process of acquisition of these various capitals would be accompanied by variable ways of social sense-making and prioritizing tendencies of specific capitals i.e., of specific news media elements and agents over others. In involving class as a possible mediator of political news consumption patterns, we are especially interested in the *materialization* of socio-economic resources into the acquisition of symbolic social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989), and the degrees of attachment of various political news media elements and agents within high-choice media environments.

Specifically, the project would seek to investigate various dispositionalattributes that are associated with the act of consuming political news and to specific political topics themselves, and whether the acquisition of such attributes is mediated by perceived *embodied capital* within the social class spectrum. Here, when the project refers to dispositional attributes, it specifically borrows from the recent sociological turn in political communication (Lindell, 2020; Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2023; Lindell & Sartoretto, 2018) to indicate the presence of **existing social attitudes** and **behavioral choices** that would culturally predispose specific segments of a wider population to **differentially navigate, choose, and consume political news**. We expect these attitudes to be shaped by, and relative to the embodied capital possessed by individuals within various sections of the society. Following the same theoretical approach, we expect embodied capital to play a role in the ***objectification***of various news sources and topics towards specific values of cultural capital i.e., objectified capital, that could variably mediate political news navigation and consumption patterns across the social class spectrum. Therefore, objectified capital would be assessed as resultant of various dispositional attributes that are actively sought for and contested within social classifications.

For instance, this approach would consider the traditional status of being an “**active political news consumer**” to be a dispositional hallmark that may be ascribed to a specific positional status via objectified capital (Lindell & Danielsson, 2017; Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2023), and would check whether such dispositions are frequently and differently pursued by people in variable positions in the class hierarchies. Therefore, the project would assess how embodied capital through objective social class may play a role in the (1) identification and categorization of such dispositional units, and (2) the struggle for acquisition of perceived positional spaces within a hierarchical class apparatus.

However, there is a necessity to incorporate these sociological theorizations into the political communication literature that would inevitably require contextualizing these phenomena into appropriate vocabularies and variables within the field. **To facilitate this bridge**, the project pays attention to the news sources that audiences perceive as ***legitimately* “newsworthy”** according to their processes of **political socialization**, along with the **(a) political topics**, and **(b) news sources** they identify as necessary to political news consumption diets. We expect these attitudes to be shaped by, and relative to the embodied capital (Lindell & Danielsson, 2017) possessed by individuals within various sections of the society, which may in turn, be adequately mediated by the **patterns of political socialization** that they have been exposed to. Following the same theoretical approach, we expect these socialization patterns to play a role in shaping of **perceived legitimacy** towards **specific news sources** and **political topics** relative to the socially ascribed values of cultural capital i.e., objectified capital, to the news sources and political topics

*(here, include a bit on the cross-sectional design of the study and how these attitudes and behaviors are pre-existing. Therefore, the project will not use any stimuli packages to generate any behaviors or attitudes that may be born out of exposure to such stimuli, which can help provide a better understanding of these systems that already exist and are utilized in the day-to-day)*

This project is by no means the first to devise this conceptual model, and is in fact partially inspired by the work by other Bourdieusian scholars (Hartley, 2018; Lindell, 2020; Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2023). For instance, that Swedish youth often employ dispositional characteristics to news for the acquisition of “cosmopolitan capital” (Lindell & Danielsson, 2017) has been thoroughly studied, along with youth engaging in a concept of *exclusionary strategies* (“othering”)towards those who do not share similar perceived dispositions towards news media elements. Lindell & Danielsson (2017) classify this as a sort of symbolic class violence, where people who associate themselves with a subjective or objective class position tend to share unfavorable attitudes towards those who do not share similar reconversion strategies (see: C3). Writing about such symbolic struggles between people within a population, Bourdieu notes, “[…] *choose, in the space of available goods and services, goods that occupy a position in this space homologous to the position they themselves occupy in social space. This makes for the fact that nothing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies*” (Bourdieu, 1989).

Therefore, in employing such a framework, the project establishes its first research questions:

***RQ1******(a)****: What do individuals in various social class positions define as (1) political “news”, and (2) perceive the benefits associated with consuming such political news?*

***RQ1******(b)****: How do individuals differently socialized via objective social class positions designate various (1) news sources, and (2) news topics with perceived legitimacy?*

***C2****: Civic Duty Norms and Political Knowledge Acquisition*

Here, it is important to acknowledge that while RQ1 provides a theoretical foundation for gauging the social and cultural environment (for e.g., see: Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020) surrounding political information-seeking behaviors, it is still necessary to gauge how such capitals are **operationalized or communicated** socially and culturally **both** **between and within groups**.

In other words, the project will seek to gauge the manifestations of legitimacy through hypothesizing the presence of **civic duty norms**, and hypothesize its reflexivity with (a) **social class**, or (b) its **perceived attainment**. Some topical literature has considered the role of cultural elements that may dictate political information-seeking behaviors (for e.g., see: Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020) respective to the societies in which they function. In a similar vein, auxiliary research has investigated both the social roles that civic duty norms may fulfil and the affective impact of these norms on people’s news habits in comparative media markets (Palmer, 2020). A recent study on this phenomenon by Betakova et al. (2024) also managed to quantitatively gauge civic duty perceptions among low news users, reaffirming the impact that such norms continue to play in people’s engagement with political news.

While all such approaches have greatly furthered our understanding of civic norm-oriented political news navigation, the **ontological relationship** between **social class and civic duty norms** is hitherto lacking. Extant research on political behaviors and civic duties in non-news contexts highlight **social variance in the ways civic duties are presented, internalized, or enacted** (for overview, see: Mullinix, 2018) – here, it is reasonable to test whether the implicit or explicit occurrence of civic duty norms regarding political news would be differently imbibed by those belonging to different class positions in society. Building from RQ1(a, b), the project further investigates how these civic duty norms are defined, communicated, and socially operationalized vis-à-vis habits of political news consumption by people belonging to different positions of social class.

Therefore, building on RQ1(a, b), we establish the following research questions:

***RQ2 (a)***: *How are implicit or explicit civic duty norms towards political news consumption collectively and relatively upheld across the social class spectrum?*

Additionally, since some documentation exists on certain civic duty norms requiring socializing resources for enactment, it is worth investigating if the possibilities and limitations regarding the aspect of socialization affects such enactment behaviors despite the presence of (a) typically investigated psychological variables such as ‘political interest’ or ‘political motivation’, or (b) first-level hurdles related to access. For instance, it is yet unclear if different social classes are **further exacerbated** from the information environment when they may be motivated to consume political news but simultaneously **unaware of or unable to pursue existing civic duty norms** that imply social legitimacy of different news sources and topics.

***RQ2 (b)***: *How are different social classes socially and culturally predisposed to politically socializing resources that may underline adherence to civic duty norms regarding political news consumption about specific topics and from specific news sources?*

***RQ2 (c)***: *Which political news topics and political news sources are ascribed legitimacy across different social classes through civic duty norms?*

Since the breadth of OMA literature uses individual motivation to explain people’s affinities to political news habits, it routinely fails to account for the individual as a unit of association between themselves and a greater social and cultural framework i.e., their role as both a social and socializing agent belonging to a specific class position. Therefore, it is possible that what is construed as individual motivation towards consuming political news is shaped by ascribed social and cultural expectations and norms surrounding the individual agent to perform ostensible civic acts of engagement to affirm their role as a legitimate member of the social class to which they belong (Bourdieu, 1984, 1989).

If civic duty norms are unequally recognized, appreciated, and implemented by people belonging to different positions on the social class hierarchy, it is reasonable to assume that people’s political news diets – including both political news source choices and political topic choices – vary greatly as a **covariate of social class**. The final research question of this PhD project looks at the tangible political learning effects of such unequal information-seeking behaviors on the levels of political knowledge acquisition of individuals belonging to different social class positions. If civic duty norms do indeed mediate the news-seeking patterns of different sociodemographic groups, the project hypothesizes the Information Gap Hypothesis that would unequally benefit the information-rich (and therefore, social upper classes) and the information-poor (and therefore, social lower classes):

***RQ2 (d)***: *How do perceived legitimacies regarding specific political news sources and political topics affect the political knowledge acquisition and learning effects of individuals belonging to different social class positions?*

***C4:*** *Misinformation Beliefs*

[…]

**Research methodology and work plan**

The methodological apparatus for this project is embedded within the work packages of the larger *INEQNEWS* project, comprising four primary working packages that employ a mixture of computational and typical statistical models for uncovering various digital inequalities related to the political news use within four comparative media markets in the Global South (Brazil, Chile) and the Global North (Spain, UK). Naturally, the PhD project will be directly involved with all four working packages to identify, categorize, and alleviate various digital inequalities and how they play out in comparative contexts. Of the four working packages, this PhD project will be particularly relevant in WP1, WP2 and WP3. The INEQNEWS project will passively track multi-modal political news consumption practices of 2,000 respondents in each media ecosystem, followed by detailed analysis of their news navigation patterns within high-choice media environments.

In WP1, a survey rolled out to participants will be instrumental in gauging *RQ1(a,b)*, where we can effectively develop a detailed understanding of not only individual-level perceptions of various news sources, topics, and ideologies, but also their dispositional (cultural) capital within the larger social class framework in the respective countries. It is important to note that although cultural capital and perceived positional statuses may potentially mediate political news navigation patterns in each context, the manifestations of such capitals and positions may greatly vary across contexts. With an understanding of such perceptions, we can deduce a sense of capitals closely associated with social desirability of positional space-taking, and therefore whether they would likely act as subjects of individuals’ dispositional re-orientation. This data can potentially be converted into a comprehensive codebook of reconversion frames most likely to statistically reoccur within populations that possess high volumes of cultural capital.

WP2 can potentially further thicken the data obtained from WP1 through conducting trace interviews on the passively tracked data of multi-modal political news navigation patterns. Here, the interviewer(s) will have the opportunity of asking questions about selectively chosen news source preferences and topics, as well as gauge interviewee’s self-reported affinities to specific political ideologies as a result of such news source preferences and/or topics. Through such interactions, we can deduce RQ2(a) and RQ2(b1). For RQ2(b2), the project may potentially be able to gauge perceptions of positional mobility through interviewee’s answers about their preferred news sources, topics, and ideological preferences. Alternatively, perceptions of mobility may be operationalized using a scale for measuring perceived social desirabilities to belong to desirable positions in the social class structure (for e.g., Browman et al., 2017).

Continuing from the data obtained from WP1 and WP2, RQ3(a) would seek to establish relationships between perceptions of cultural capital and prosocial behaviors. To the project’s knowledge, no other study has previously measured prosocial behaviors vis-a-vis cultural capital, although various studies have operationalized scales on measuring pro-sociality within people belonging to variable social class positions (Caprara et al., 2005; Rao et al., 2022). Here, the project may borrow previously established scales measuring pro-sociality and operationalize and validate a new scale for the purposes of RQ3(a) to the benefit of the project’s objectives. Consequently, for RQ3(b), system justification theory would be used to operationalize items that could explain affirmative beliefs associated with prosocial behaviors upon political news consumption. Finally, regression models may be employed to assess relationships between prosocial intentions and political news consumption habits.

The data gathered from WP1 and WP2 alongside the analyses in RQs (1), (2), and (3) could help provide a panoramic view of the antecedents of political news consumption patterns when mediated by a struggle for class positions in the social space. The entire process of such news consumption may be further contextualized in RQ4 through heuristical re-categorization of these actions as reconversion strategies.

**Project positioning**

This PhD project is situated within the larger *INEQNEWS* project funded by the European Research Council Starting Grant (ERC-StG), and would comprise members of the team of Prof. Dr. Antonis Kalogeropoulos, as per further decision. The entire *INEQNEWS* team comprises of Prof. Dr. Antonis Kalogeropoulos (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium), Prof. Dr. Patricia Rossini (University of Glasgow, Scotland), Prof. Dr. Ike Picone (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium), Prof. Dr. Tom Nicholls (University of Liverpool, United Kingdom), and two postdoctoral researchers of imec-SMIT, Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

Due to the international positioning of both the team and the ERC, the PhD project would look favourably upon optimal collaboration with the various units throughout the course of the dissertation process. In an organizational context, the project is situated within the NUSE (News: Users, Strategies, and Engagements) Unit of imec-SMIT, Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

**Publication strategy**

**Ethics**

**Research Data management**

**DOCTORAL TRAINING PROGRAMME**

Keep in mind that you need to fulfill the compulsory doctoral training programme: 30 credits of which 5 credits for each of the following quadrants in the [PhD Portfolio](file://sites/PUB_PhD/SitePages/PhD-Portfolio.aspx): (1) research output (including research papers and presentations); (2) teaching and societal outreach (including supervision of BA/MA thesis); (3) domain-specific skills training (i.e. following specialist courses, workshops and summer schools, etc.) and (4) transferable skills training (including organization of events and taking part in working groups). You can use up to 4 wildcard-credits to fill gaps in these quadrants. Use the [credit table](https://vub.sharepoint.com/sites/PUB_PhD/Lists/Test%20formulieren%20PhD/DispForm.aspx?ID=6&e=6msHPV)to find out what activities will earn you credits in your PhD Portfolio and plan some of these trainings ahead (in preparation of writing your first article for example, or your first presentation on a conference…) in consultation with your supervisor(s).

**Research output**

**Teaching & Societal Outreach**

**Domain specific skills training schedule**

**Transferable skills training schedule**

**Overarching wildcards**

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