News Consumption in Spain: The Interplay of Ideology, Pluralism, and Socioeconomic Factors on Media Engagement

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Consumo de noticias en España: La interacción de ideología, pluralismo y factores socioeconómicos en el compromiso con los medios de comunicación

ABSTRACT

Objectives. This study aims to investigate the evolving news consumption patterns in Spain, focusing on the interplay between ideological predispositions, perceptions of media pluralism, and socioeconomic factors within an increasingly fragmented audience landscape.

Methodology. A mixed-methods approach is employed, combining qualitative focus groups with quantitative surveys. This methodology explores how personal beliefs, economic status, and media diversity influence news consumption habits.

Findings. The findings reveal that ideological orientations significantly shape media preferences, with progressive individuals favouring digital news platforms and conservatives preferring traditional media. Participants who perceive greater media pluralism are more likely to engage with digital subscriptions and personalized news systems. Additionally, higher-income individuals show a greater willingness to pay for news, indicating a financial capacity to access varied and reliable news sources. Focus group discussions highlight emotional dimensions of news consumption, ranging from feelings of control and empowerment to exhaustion and scepticism, particularly concerning misinformation and media bias.

Value. The study provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics between financial capability, access to information, and media engagement. It offers a nuanced understanding of how ideological, economic, and pluralistic factors influence news consumption, which is crucial for media organizations navigating a fragmented audience landscape.

RESUMEN

Objetivos. *Este estudio tiene como objetivo investigar los patrones en evolución del consumo de noticias en España. Se centra en la interacción entre las predisposiciones ideológicas, las percepciones acerca del pluralismo mediático y los factores socioeconómicos dentro de un panorama de audiencia cada vez más fragmentado.*

Metodología. *Se emplea un enfoque de métodos mixtos, combinando grupos focales cualitativos con encuestas cuantitativas. Esta metodología explora cómo las creencias personales, el estatus económico y la diversidad mediática influyen en los hábitos de consumo de noticias.*

Hallazgos. *Los resultados revelan que las orientaciones ideológicas moldean significativamente las preferencias mediáticas. Mientras los individuos progresistas prefieren las plataformas de noticias digitales, los más conservadores siguen prefiriendo los medios tradicionales. Los participantes que perciben un mayor pluralismo mediático tienen más probabilidades de participar en suscripciones digitales y sistemas de noticias personalizados. Además, las personas con ingresos más altos muestran una mayor disposición a pagar por las noticias, lo que indica la importancia de la capacidad financiera para acceder a fuentes de noticias variadas y confiables. Las discusiones de los grupos focales destacan las dimensiones emocionales del consumo de noticias, que van desde sentimientos de control y empoderamiento hasta sentimiento de agotamiento y escepticismo, especialmente en lo que respecta a la desinformación y el sesgo mediático.*

Valor. *El estudio proporciona información valiosa sobre las dinámicas complejas entre la capacidad económica, el acceso a la información y el compromiso con los medios. Ofrece una comprensión matizada de cómo los factores ideológicos, económicos y pluralistas influyen en el consumo de noticias, lo cual es crucial para las organizaciones de medios que trabajan en un panorama de audiencias fragmentadas.*

KEYWORDS

News consumption; Media pluralism; Ideology; Media fragmentation; Spain.

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Consumo de noticias; Pluralismo informativo; Ideología; Fragmentación mediática; España.

Consum de notícies a Espanya: La interacció entre ideologia, pluralisme i factors socio-econòmics en el compromís amb els mitjans de comunicació

RESUM

Objectius. Aquest estudi té com a objectiu investigar l'evolució dels patrons de consum de notícies a Espanya. Es centra en la interacció que es dona entre les predisposicions ideològiques, les percepcions sobre el pluralisme mediàtic i els factors socioeconòmics, en un panorama d'audiències cada cop més fragmentades.

Metodologia. Es fa servir un enfocament de mètodes mixtos, combinant grups focals qualitatius amb enquestes quantitatives. Aquesta metodologia explora com les creences personals, l'estatus econòmic i la diversitat mediàtica influeixen en els hàbits de consum de notícies.

Troballes. Els resultats revelen que les orientacions ideològiques modelen significativament les preferències mediàtiques. Mentre els individus progressistes prefereixen les plataformes de notícies digitals, els més conservadors continuen preferint els mitjans tradicionals. Els participants que perceben un pluralisme mediàtic més gran tenen més probabilitats de participar en subscripcions digitals i sistemes de notícies personalitzats. A més, les persones amb ingressos més alts mostren més disposició a pagar per les notícies, cosa que indica la importància de la capacitat financera per accedir a fonts de notícies variades i fiables. Les discussions dels grups focals destaquen les dimensions emocionals del consum de notícies, que van des de sentiments de control i empoderament fins a sentiment d'esgotament i escepticisme, especialment pel que fa a la desinformació i el biaix mediàtic.

Valor. L'estudi proporciona informació valuosa sobre les complexes dinàmiques entre la capacitat econòmica, l'accés a la informació i el compromís amb els mitjans. Ofereix una comprensió matisada de com els factors ideològics, econòmics i pluralistes influeixen en el consum de notícies, cosa que és crucial per a les organitzacions de mitjans que treballen en un panorama d'audiències fragmentades.

PARAULES CLAU

Consum de notícies; Pluralisme informatiu; Ideologia; Fragmentació mediàtica; Espanya.

1. Introduction

Since at least 2018, the concept of news consumption—or news diets—has become central in communication studies (Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen, 2018). This is a problem that has not only affected how the people get the news from the Internet, and it is an aspect some scholars have studied for other media (Bergström et al., 2019). Nevertheless, in the digital environment, users have adopted a variety of alternative news consumption practices, including incidental exposure (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Park & Kaye, 2020) and serendipitous encounters with news content (Bergström & Jervelycke-Belfrage, 2018; Van Damme et al., 2020; Goyanes & Demeter, 2020).

Today, news is accessed through multiple devices and channels, with social media playing a particularly prominent role among younger audiences (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014; Molyneux, 2018; Klopfenstein-Frei et al., 2024). Instead of actively seeking out news or visiting news websites, many users rely on a passive mode of consumption often described as "news finds me," which some scholars identify as a precursor to intentional news avoidance (Goyanes et al., 2023). Traditional pathways to news, such as visiting legacy media outlets, are increasingly being replaced by algorithmically mediated exposure via social platforms (Thorson & Battochio, 2023).

This behaviour is believed to have significant implications for democracy since it affects decision-making processes, participation, and civic engagement (Ohme et al., 2023), and may also contribute to polarization (Levy, 2021). According to this approach, citizens must be well-informed to make their choices consciously. It is thought that legacy media offered accomplished information, albeit biased by ideological alignment, which needs to be explicit and transparent.

Although this raises broader questions, including the issue of misinformation, it remains closely connected to patterns of news consumption. For example, users who engage only superficially with news—such as reading headlines without delving into full articles—may be more susceptible to misinformation or low-quality content (Tandoc & Kyung-Kim, 2023). In response, several initiatives have emerged to counteract news avoidance. In Germany, for instance, Burda Forward launched an app in 2023 titled *News to be Good*, specifically designed to address the concerns of individuals who perceive news as "a burden" or associate it with "alarmism."

As a result, some people have decided to avoid the news, and news avoidance has become one of the most pressing challenges for the media industry, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Abuín-Vences et al., 2020; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). It has also attracted increasing scholarly attention, including a recent book dedicated to the phenomenon (Toff et al., 2023). This widespread trend particularly affects younger

demographics and is often linked to declining trust in news, or more broadly, in journalists and media institutions (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Li et al., 2024), a topic mentioned in our research.

There are multiple reasons why individuals deliberately avoid news, particularly hard news. As Edgerly (2023) points out, this behaviour may seem paradoxical given the ubiquity and accessibility of news in digital environments. Yet, purposeful avoidance still demands a degree of effort, which suggests underlying cognitive, emotional, or normative motivations. In addition to individual-level factors such as ideology, income, or trust, structural and territorial inequalities also shape access to information. Recent research on news deserts in Spain reveals that more than 75% of municipalities lack regular local news coverage, raising serious concerns about social cohesion and democratic participation, particularly in depopulated or rural areas (Negreira-Rey, 2025).

In general terms, changes in how people get and consume the news, and how people settle their news diet, are influenced by many factors, including age, education, gender, or socio-economic status. Some scholars have connected the shifting patterns of news consumption to broader social class division (Lindell, 2020, see also Schwarzenegger, 2023). It is crucial, thus, to understand the habits of the new audiences, so several attempts have been made to get a deeper insight into it. Even though the "news is not going away" and "will remain an essential part of young people's lives in 2030", it is equally clear that "the needs and preferences of the next generation have evolved," requiring the media industry to adapt its production strategies accordingly (Itzkowitz et al., 2023; see also Edgerly, 2017).

Another factor to be considered is that, especially from 2020 onwards, at the same time that a huge pandemic confined people at home in a several months lockdown, many media (especially legacy media, and especially newspapers) decided to try to monetize their content, after decades of releasing it for free in their Web editions, behind a paywall. For some users, this was likely perceived as an additional barrier to accessing news, prompting them to seek alternative, cost-free sources.

In this scenario, we conducted a mixed-methods study in Spain to explore how people consumed news in the period following the pandemic and the widespread implementation of paywalls (although not all digital outlets adopted them). Our analysis considered several variables, including demographic factors such as place of residence, age, gender, and education. While political ideology appears to play a significant role in shaping patterns of news consumption in the digital environment, it is far from the only factor influencing these behaviours.

2. News consumption in the hybrid media system

This study adopts a comprehensive theoretical framework (Beldad et al., 2011) to explain a complex social phenomenon using the methodological approaches outlined in the following section. News avoidance is not simply the result of individuals choosing to disengage from certain types of news content for various reasons. Rather, it is shaped by a constellation of factors—such as age, education, and ideological alignment—and is deeply intertwined with other broader issues.

The thing is that news avoidance itself is not an isolated issue, instead, it is closely related, as a consequence or cause, to some other ones. Probably the most salient one is the lack of trust in the media – a question that has generated a huge amount of scholarly reference (to mention just a few, see Lee, 2010; Knudsen at al., 2022) – even more evident in the polarised democratic countries (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2021). We have tried to introduce an, in our opinion, important nuance here: do people who avoid the news distrust the media as institutions (Schudson, 2002, to mention a classical approach to it; Schulz et al. 2022, for the digital environment), or do they distrust journalists? It is also related to the general question of news media companies as a way of institutionalizing journalism, to journalism as presented as a public service -although served, to a great extent, by private companies, with legitimate economic, social, and even political interests-, and to the role of journalists as social agents to catalyse information and act as mediators between sources and the audience. In a time in which audiences increasingly claim to play a more active role in the information process, and not just merely consume it passively, the question of why so many people put aside the consumption of news, as we knew it at least (Anderson et al., 2014), how it has eroded the trust not only in media and journalism, also in our society and democracy, and how people show us the way out, pointing out the problem inherent to the reasons why they opt out the news. In this respect, we think that we have enough evidence, so far, of a changing information diet (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2015; Aslett et al., 2022; Angelucci et al., 2024). A perception of inequality in the news supply, and the reflection of inequality in mainstream news, can also be a cause of this media and political disaffection, which is neither a recent nor an exclusive problem caused by the Internet (Pinkleton & Weintraub-Austin, 2001; Luengo &Coimbra-Mesquita, 2013; Fierro et al., 2022).

In the current media environment, we are witnessing a critical shift from post-industrial journalism to a hybrid media system, where traditional and emerging forms of media coexist and interact. This transformation requires journalists to navigate multiple platforms strategically in order to engage audiences

effectively, offering new opportunities for innovative story-telling techniques, as emphasized by Chadwick (2013).

The urgency of media digitalization is further highlighted by Costera Meijer et al. (2021), who argue that journalists must adapt to reach broader and more diverse audiences. Likewise, Anderson at al. (2014) underscore the necessity for media organizations to rethink and redesign their business models in order to remain sustainable in this evolving media landscape.

In this context, incidental news exposure has become increasingly significant in hybrid media environments. With the proliferation of social media platforms and other digital channels, users are now more likely to encounter news content unintentionally while engaging with unrelated content—a phenomenon explored by Boczkowski et al. (2018). For instance, individuals scrolling through social media feeds may come across news articles or headlines without actively seeking them out.

As Boczkowski (2021) notes, the sheer abundance of information characteristic of hybrid media systems plays a significant role in shaping patterns of news consumption, including news avoidance. The proliferation of digital platforms and devices has granted individuals unprecedented access to vast quantities of content from a wide range of sources. This informational overload not only alters how users engage with news but also influences their decisions about which content to consume—or to avoid altogether.

The research questions for this study are crafted to methodically examine the multifaceted aspects of news consumption. The questions aim to uncover the underlying dynamics between personal ideologies, economic factors, and perceptions of media diversity. They include:

- **RQ1**: In what ways do personal beliefs and ideological predispositions shape individuals' news consumption habits?

- **RQ2**: To what degree do participants' views resonate with the ideological biases in their chosen news sources?

- **RQ3**: How do participants perceive the diversity and representativeness of viewpoints within the media landscape?

- **RQ4**: How do socioeconomic factors, specifically income brackets, influence the patterns of news consumption?

3. Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, specifically an exploratory sequential design (Leavy, 2023), to investigate news consumption patterns among adults in Spain, since this is a group that, all over the world, shows their own attitudes and patterns towards how the news is consumed (Antunovic et al., 2018). Initially, the research explores the topic through

qualitative methods, utilising focus groups to gather detailed participant insights and understandings. These qualitative findings then inform the development of a quantitative survey designed to further investigate these patterns on a larger scale. This methodological approach is particularly effective in ensuring a robust foundation for the quantitative phase of the study.

In the qualitative phase of the study, conducted in October 2021, focus groups were utilised to delve into the complexities of news consumption among adults in Spain, a topic explored in some countries by relevant scholars (Bergström, 2020). Drawing on the foundational insights of Morgan, who highlighted that focus groups "provide direct evidence about similarities and differences in participants' opinions and experiences2 (2009, p.10), this method was chosen for its effectiveness in capturing diverse perspectives. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the various viewpoints on news consumption and enabled an exploration of the nuanced dynamics of participants' attitudes and experiences. Such depth was instrumental in conducting a comprehensive analysis of our research questions, enhancing our exploration of the intricate patterns of news consumption.

Six discussions were held evenly between Spain's two most populous and influential cities, Madrid and Barcelona. The discussions were designed and implemented in partnership with GESOP, a company specialising in opinion and market research. Each focus group comprised seven to eight participants, chosen to reflect a spectrum of ages, professions, and geographical locations within Spain. The sessions, each lasting approximately two hours, were meticulously designed to elicit rich, in-depth responses on personal news consumption habits, preferences, and the perceived impact of news on daily life.

Participants for the study were carefully selected based on various factors, including gender, age, level of education, and use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. To ensure the discussions were comprehensive and representative of the broader population, the groups were balanced in gender across three age brackets (20-29, 30-49, and 50-65 years) and were evenly split regarding educational attainment. This comprehensive selection process assures the audience of the study's representativeness.

After the qualitative phase, a questionnaire was used as the data collection tool in the quantitative phase. The questionnaire was administered via Computer-Aided Web Interviewing (CAWI) by GESOP from March 10 to March 16, 2022. The sample comprised 1,003 participants, selected to ensure a proportional representation of demographic characteristics, including gender, age, place of residence, and income. This phase was built on the insights the focus group discussions

provided, demonstrating a clear and confident progression in the study's methodology.

The sampling technique employed was stratified sampling with equal allocation. Strata were formed based on the intersection of gender and age, with 125 interviews conducted within each of the resulting eight strata. Within each stratum, interviews were proportionally distributed across autonomous communities and the dimensions of the municipality of residence.

The questionnaire used in this study aimed to evaluate news consumption habits and the perception of pluralism in the media system. It contained several questions regarding accessing the news in the digital space, the platforms participants use the most to keep up with the news, and the perception and trust in the Spanish media system.

The dependent variable in the quantitative analysis is *news consumption*, operationalized through the frequency and type of use across various platforms and formats. The main independent variables include ideological orientation, measured on a left–right self-placement scale; perception of media pluralism, captured through agreement with statements regarding diversity of voices in the media landscape; and income level, grouped into categorical brackets.

To explore the relationships between *news consumption* and these key independent variables, we conducted bivariate correlation analyses. Following recent reflections on data visualization in communication research (Pérez-Montoro, 2024), heatmaps were selected as an effective method for representing complex relationships in a format that is both accessible and analytically meaningful. This type of visual representation helps make large volumes of data more interpretable, facilitating the identification of patterns that might be less evident in traditional tabular formats. This approach aligns with the exploratory nature of the study, offering an intuitive representation of the strength and direction of the observed relationships.

4. Results

This section presents the primary outcomes from the focus groups and the survey, illustrated through a heatmap format to represent data patterns. The primary objective is to elucidate news consumption patterns among participants across various critical dimensions. These include:

- **Ideological predispositions**: Understanding how personal beliefs align with news consumption habits.

- **Alignment with media ideologies**: Exploring participants' concordance with the ideological slants of their preferred news sources.

- **Perceptions of media pluralism**: Assessing views on the diversity and representativeness of viewpoints in the media landscape.

- **Income brackets**: Analyzing news consumption trends across different economic segments.

Each dimension is analysed to reveal trends and insights that help understand the complex dynamics of news consumption. The heatmap format enables an intuitive grasp of dense data, highlighting significant variances and patterns that merit further discussion.

4.1. Navigating the Ideological Spectrum: How Beliefs Shape News Preferences

Analysis of the survey data (Figure 1) reveals significant variation in news consumption across the ideological spectrum. Left-leaning individuals tend to favour free digital platforms: for example, 13.86% of centrists access free news websites, indicating a preference for content that is both accessible and cost-free.

Centrist participants also show the highest engagement with recommendation systems—such as newsletters and media apps—at 16.15%. This suggests a tendency to value curated, personalized news, which may reflect trust in algorithmically tailored content.

The highest willingness to pay for digital subscriptions is observed among respondents on the left, with 42.22% expressing a readiness to financially support digital outlets. This could indicate both a perceived value in reliable news and a greater affinity toward independent journalism.

In contrast, right-leaning respondents show stronger attachment to traditional formats. Between 15% and 18% of participants in conservative ideological columns subscribe to print newspapers. Broadcast media (radio and television) are also more commonly used by respondents on the right, particularly in columns 6 and 7. These figures suggest a reliance on legacy media formats among more conservative users, possibly due to trust, habit, or lower engagement with digital transformation.

These patterns demonstrate how ideological orientation shapes not only the content people prefer, but also the platforms and formats through which they access information.

By delving deeper into news consumption patterns linked to political and ideological affinity (Figure 2), we uncover unique insights into how individuals choose their news sources. The data reveals varying degrees of engagement across different

	Left	Moderate Left	Center Left	Center	Center Right	Moderate Right	Right
Accessing free news websites	1.79%	5.97%	6.81%	13.86%	10.75%	6.45%	7.53%
Using free recommendation systems (newsletters, apps, Alexa…)	1.11%	6.67%	13.33%	42.22%	22.22%	6.67%	7.78%
Paying for a digital news subscription	1.54%	7.69%	16.15%	21.54%	11.54%	9.23%	32.31%
Actively searching on Google	0.94%	2.58%	3.16%	11.01%	9.66%	3.86%	5.33%
Accidentally encountering news on digital platforms (Google, social media, WhatsApp…)	0.64%	2.44%	5.09%	8.48%	9.28%	5.73%	5.57%
Buying or subscribing to a print newspaper	2.00%	10.00%	15.00%	28.00%	20.00%	18.00%	7.00%
Tuning in to radio or TV news broadcasts	0.75%	3.68%	7.20%	8.55%	10.69%	5.18%	4.73%
Accidentally encountering news on TV or radio	0.41%	1.15%	2.47%	5.60%	4.12%	2.96%	2.30%
Trying to avoid the news	0.52%	1.04%	2.34%	7.29%	5.21%	3.13%	3.65%

Figure 1. News Consumption habits and ideology. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

news consumption methods based on individuals' perceptions of political alignment with media sources.

Among those who prefer news sources that align with their own political and ideological views, there is a notable inclination towards using digital subscriptions, with the highest percentage observed at 31.43% among those who consume news from ideologically similar sources. This suggests a substantial trust and willingness to invest in media outlets perceived as sharing similar political orientations.

Conversely, individuals who actively avoid news sources they perceive as ideologically opposed show a significant reliance on traditional media, such as print newspapers, with 47.76% subscribing to or purchasing print media. This indicates a preference for more established and perceived as more credible news formats among those wary of ideological opposition in newer media forms.

Interestingly, recommendation systems, including newsletters and media apps, see higher engagement from those open to consulting news from ideologically diverse sources.

Approximately 35.29% of individuals in this category utilize such systems, pointing to an openness to explore a variety of viewpoints facilitated by personalized content delivery that recommendation systems offer.

The lowest engagement columns reflect those who prefer to refrain from engaging deeply with political or ideological content in their news consumption. These people tend to rely less on any specific news consumption method, indicating a more sporadic or less engaged pattern of news interaction.

Finally, by examining the interaction between ideological influences and perceptions of media plurality, we observe that individuals with centrist ideologies who perceive a high degree of plurality are the most engaged with recommendation systems like newsletters and apps (35.29%). This suggests a synergistic effect where ideological centrality and a positive view of media diversity enhance the willingness to explore varied news sources.

Focus group discussions provide a deeper understanding of the emotional dimensions associated with news consumption

	News from like-minded outlets; avoid opposing ones	Mostly like-minded outlets; sometimes opposing ones	Like-minded outlets + social media for alternative views	Prefer opposing political/ideological views	No political/ideological bias
Accessing free news websites	4.38%	13.72%	13.14%	3.50%	8.03%
Using free recommendation systems (newsletters, apps, Alexa…)	6.72%	35.29%	25.21%	3.36%	29.41%
Paying for a digital news subscription	14.29%	31.43%	30.00%	17.14%	7.14%
Actively searching on Google	4.23%	13.06%	16.32%	3.87%	15.11%
Accidentally encountering news on digital platforms (Google, social media, WhatsApp…)	1.62%	4.72%	7.66%	2.16%	6.63%
Buying or subscribing to a print newspaper	4.48%	47.76%	13.43%	11.94%	22.39%
Tuning in to radio or TV news broadcasts	1.46%	6.45%	6.39%	1.34%	6.54%
Accidentally encountering news on TV or radio	1.44%	5.49%	5.88%	2.09%	7.84%
Trying to avoid the news	0.00%	1.40%	1.57%	1.40%	9.62%

Figure 2. Ideological affinity. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

patterns. Participants expressed that high media engagement fosters a sense of control over the quality and type of news received. This is particularly evident among young individuals and those with high media engagement who value an active role in their information consumption, emphasizing the importance of forming opinions, actively seeking news, and the ability to verify and select their news sources.

Moreover, as highlighted by participants in the focus groups, the mode of news consumption is evolving. Consequently, the multiplicity of channels and moments for consuming information now encompasses a variety of settings, including at home or in public spaces like public transportation. The level of attention and simultaneity of media engagement can be complete but is often divided, for example, between a news feed and another communication channel. Accordingly, the role of the consumer oscillates between active and passive; information may be actively sought or incidentally encountered, primarily through social media. Furthermore, the intent behind media consumption varies from being narrowly focused on staying informed to broader aspirations such as seeking entertainment. Importantly, the context in which news is received may range from purely informative to a hybrid format that blends information with entertainment.

However, the ubiquity of news access and the diversity of available channels can lead to feelings of fatigue and saturation, particularly among women and those with lower levels of media engagement. This saturation is often exacerbated by the prevalence of fake news and perceived media subjectivity, particularly in political contexts, which can foster a sense of distrust. For some, particularly older men, news consumption transforms into a form of entertainment, both in how they search for and engage with content on social platforms or entertainment-focused programs. This kind of engagement sometimes surpasses their conscious desires, primarily through mobile devices, suggesting a pattern of passive overconsumption.

4.2. Pluralism Perception: Its Impact on Diversity in News Engagement

Figure 3 presents news consumption patterns according to respondents' perceptions of media pluralism, ranging from "There is no pluralism" to "All viewpoints are represented." The data show a clear correlation between perceived media diversity and the adoption of multiple, often digital, modes of news access.

Engagement with both free-access websites and personalized recommendation systems (e.g., newsletters and apps) increases consistently as perceived pluralism rises. Notably, digital subscriptions reach 22.85% among respondents who believe the media represents a broad range of views (column 4). This suggests that those who view the media as inclusive and representative are more inclined to pay for quality journalism, possibly due to greater perceived credibility and trust in the system.

Similarly, the use of recommendation systems peaks at 33.78% among those with moderately high perceptions of pluralism (column 5). This may reflect a belief that algorithmically delivered content can serve as an efficient way to access a balanced and diverse set of perspectives, reinforcing user confidence in the system's representativeness.

Print newspapers and broadcast media also show slightly higher engagement among respondents who perceive at least some degree of pluralism. While these increases are modest, they point to a traditionalist segment that sees mainstream formats as still capable of representing a range of views.

Interestingly, accidental or incidental news consumption—via platforms such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook—registers its highest engagement (14.08%) among those with moderate perceptions of pluralism. This highlights the role of serendipity in news exposure, particularly when users feel the media landscape offers varied voices.

	No plurality	Very little plurality	Little plurality	Moderate plurality	Good plurality	Very good plurality	All viewpoints represented
Accessing free news websites	0.56%	1.11%	2.34%	12.01%	22.25%	17.35%	11.68%
Using free recommendation systems (newsletters, apps, Alexa…)	0.45%	0.00%	4.05%	30.63%	33.78%	21.62%	9.46%
Paying for a digital news subscription	0.57%	1.14%	1.71%	4.57%	22.86%	41.14%	28.00%
Actively searching on Google	0.96%	1.40%	2.62%	18.15%	19.20%	13.61%	9.77%
Accidentally encountering news on digital platforms (Google, social media, WhatsApp…)	0.41%	0.82%	2.45%	11.42%	15.15%	11.19%	6.93%
Buying or subscribing to a print newspaper	0.00%	0.62%	0.92%	4.92%	16.92%	7.38%	8.62%
Tuning in to radio or TV news broadcasts	0.57%	0.73%	2.82%	11.10%	19.99%	14.44%	6.28%
Accidentally encountering news on TV or radio	0.42%	0.00%	1.69%	9.58%	14.08%	11.83%	6.90%
Trying to avoid the news	0.64%	0.85%	1.91%	5.93%	3.18%	2.54%	1.48%

Figure 3. Pluralism perception of the media system. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

In contrast to the survey findings, the focus group discussions reveal a generally negative valuation of Spanish media outlets, particularly the traditional ones like print, television, and radio. Participants strongly distrust these media sources, citing concerns over bias, lack of objectivity, and heavy ideological slants. There is a prevalent perception that media are sensationalist, engage in derogatory tactics to attract viewers, and are manipulative, prioritizing influence over information. This scepticism extends to the depth of coverage, with criticisms highlighting a tendency towards repetitive and monothematic content that aligns with right-leaning ideologies and lacks technical quality.

Integrating these findings, it is evident that while some individuals perceive and engage with the media as diverse and representative, leading to increased investment in various news formats, a broad segment of the population remains critical of media integrity. This dichotomy underscores a complex relationship between perceptions of media pluralism and actual news consumption habits. Those who view the media positively tend to embrace digital and traditional formats fully.

In contrast, those with critical views may engage differently, possibly turning to alternative or independent media sources, as seen in the focus groups.

4.3. Exploring the Influence of Income on News Access and Preferences

Figure 4 displays news consumption preferences segmented by income, ranging from the lowest bracket ("0€ to 1,000€") to the highest ("more than 2,500€"). The data reveal that economic status is a key determinant of both access to and choice of news sources.

Individuals in the lowest income bracket show limited engagement across most news formats. Their highest reported activity—searching for information on Google (2.62%)—suggests a preference for free, on-demand access to specific topics, likely driven by financial limitations. This group shows minimal participation in paid or subscription-based services, underscoring barriers to accessing premium content.

	Less than €500 net/month	€501−€1,000 net/month	€1,001−€2,000 net/month	€2,001−€3,000 net/month	More than €3,000 net/month
Accessing free news websites	1.45%	5.27%	26.09%	11.07%	3.95%
Using free recommendation systems (newsletters, apps, Alexa…)	1.77%	8.85%	33.19%	12.39%	0.00%
Paying for a digital news subscription	1.30%	1.04%	9.35%	7.27%	3.90%
Actively searching on Google	2.62%	7.14%	22.35%	11.75%	4.20%
Accidentally encountering news on digital platforms (Google, social media, WhatsApp…)	2.61%	3.66%	12.15%	3.55%	1.11%
Buying or subscribing to a print newspaper	1.71%	3.43%	24.00%	11.43%	2.86%
Tuning in to radio or TV news broadcasts	1.78%	4.09%	17.48%	9.91%	2.17%
Accidentally encountering news on TV or radio	1.19%	3.88%	14.33%	5.97%	0.75%
Trying to avoid the news	3.11%	8.70%	13.04%	7.45%	6.21%

Figure 4. Income and news consumption preferences. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

As income increases, a shift is observed toward more structured and financially committed forms of news consumption. The use of recommendation systems (newsletters, mobile apps, voice assistants like Alexa) peaks at 33.19% in the 1,500€–2,000€ bracket. This suggests that individuals in this segment are more inclined to explore personalized, tech-mediated news experiences, possibly due to greater digital literacy and disposable income.

A more marked transition occurs in the 2,000€–2,500€ group, where 24% of respondents subscribe to digital news services. This signals a growing willingness to pay for reliable and comprehensive information, possibly reflecting a perception that paid sources offer higher credibility or added value.

Traditional formats—print newspapers and broadcast news—also correlate with income. In the highest bracket, 12.15% report subscribing to print newspapers and 24% regularly consume radio or TV news. These figures suggest that higher-income individuals not only diversify their news sources but also retain trust in legacy formats. Interestingly, 14.33%

of respondents in this bracket also report encountering news incidentally through these channels, pointing to a pattern of passive yet frequent exposure.

Overall, the quantitative data demonstrate a clear pattern: higher income levels are associated with broader and more active news consumption. This includes both intentional behaviours (e.g., subscriptions, curated services) and incidental exposure across platforms. Financial resources thus appear to expand not only access but also the willingness to engage more deeply with news.

When cross-referencing these findings with ideological alignment, we observe that higher-income individuals who identify strongly with either left- or right-wing ideologies are more likely to pay for digital news—31.43% compared to just 1.30% in the lowest income group. This suggests that financial means and ideological engagement reinforce one another in shaping news behaviour.

These quantitative patterns are complemented by the quali-

tative insights from the focus groups, which reveal a general reluctance to pay for news, driven by the belief that information will eventually be accessible without direct payment. The perception of information abundance bolsters this sentiment; many feel that the sheer volume of available information renders paying for news unnecessary, mainly when advertising already funds much of the media. Additionally, some view the requirement to pay for news as a potential infringement on the right to access information. However, there are notable exceptions to this trend: men aged 20 to 29, particularly those with left-leaning ideologies, show a distinct preference for subscribing to alternative news outlets in both print and digital forms, demonstrating a commitment to supporting independent media. Similarly, men have a marked preference for subscriptions to economic-focused newspapers, underscoring an interest in financial news. On the other hand, women are more inclined to purchase newspapers that offer promotions and gifts, suggesting a value-added approach to their news consumption.

Together, these insights confirm that income not only shapes what types of news individuals can access, but also the rationale behind their media decisions—whether ideological, practical, or economic.

5. Conclusion

This study has investigated the complex interrelations between ideological predispositions, perceptions of media pluralism, and socioeconomic status in shaping patterns of news consumption in Spain. By employing an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, we have been able to combine the breadth of a representative survey with the depth of qualitative insights from focus group discussions. This combination has yielded a nuanced understanding of how individuals engage with news in a fragmented and ideologically polarized media landscape.

The first research question focused on the role of ideology in shaping news consumption habits. As the data from Figure 1 demonstrate, ideological orientation significantly conditions not only the type of content preferred but also the channels through which users access news. Progressive individuals in our sample were more likely to subscribe to digital platforms, which suggests an active and financially committed relationship with news that is often associated with younger, urban, and digitally literate audiences. In contrast, conservative respondents showed a stronger attachment to traditional formats such as print newspapers and television or radio broadcasts, a finding aligned with previous research on legacy media trust among older or right-leaning demographics. These preferences are not neutral: they are filtered through ideological frameworks that influence the selection, interpretation, and credibility attributed to news content. The focus group data confirmed these patterns and provided additional

emotional nuance: progressive participants expressed a desire to support independent or alternative outlets, while conservative users emphasized stability, familiarity, and trust in legacy institutions.

The second research question examined the extent to which participants seek ideological alignment with their preferred media sources. As shown in Figure 2, respondents who identified a strong ideological affinity with their news outlets were more likely to pay for access to those sources, reaching 31.43% in some categories. This suggests a willingness to invest in what they perceive as ideologically trustworthy journalism. Conversely, those who rejected content from ideologically opposed outlets often favoured traditional formats, potentially viewing them as more neutral or less algorithmically filtered. The qualitative data confirmed the importance of ideological resonance: many participants stated that they actively avoid content that challenges their worldview, perceiving such exposure as stressful, polarizing, or manipulative. This insight reinforces the growing concern about filter bubbles and ideological echo chambers in contemporary news consumption.

The third research question explored perceptions of pluralism in the media landscape and how these influence consumption patterns. As illustrated in Figure 3, those who perceive a high degree of pluralism are more engaged with a variety of formats, particularly digital subscriptions and recommendation systems. This suggests that a belief in the representativeness and diversity of viewpoints correlates with both active and financially committed news behaviours. However, the focus group findings temper this optimism: participants, especially those critical of legacy media, expressed deep scepticism about the objectivity and pluralism of mainstream outlets. Many associated the Spanish media system with political partisanship, editorial monotony, and sensationalism. These perceptions were particularly strong among younger participants and those with higher levels of media literacy, who often turned to non-traditional or alternative sources. The contrast between perceived pluralism (in the quantitative data) and expressed distrust (in the qualitative accounts) points to an important dissonance that warrants further investigation.

The fourth and final research question addressed the influence of socioeconomic factors, particularly income, on news consumption. The results shown in Figure 4 reveal a clear stratification: individuals in higher income brackets are significantly more likely to subscribe to digital services, use recommendation systems, and engage with diverse news sources. In contrast, lower-income participants tend to rely on free access (e.g., Google searches or social media) and express greater reluctance to pay for news, often citing the abundance of free information and the belief that news should be a public good. Focus group participants from lower-income backgrounds also described news consumption as exhausting or

emotionally taxing, especially when associated with political conflict or sensationalism. Meanwhile, a subset of younger, left-leaning men expressed a willingness to support independent journalism financially (especially if it aligned with their values) while other segments, such as women, valued promotional offers and added incentives in their consumption choices. These patterns reflect not only economic constraints but also differences in motivation, trust, and perceived value of journalism.

Taken together, our findings reveal a multifaceted and stratified media landscape in which ideology, perceptions of pluralism, and economic resources interact in shaping how people consume, evaluate, and support news. News consumption is not only a behavioural choice but also a reflection of deeper attitudes toward society, trust in institutions, and personal values. The integration of qualitative data has been particularly useful in uncovering the emotional and normative dimensions of this phenomenon, ranging from empowerment and control to fatigue, distrust, and disengagement.

These insights have practical implications for the media industry and policymakers. First, addressing news avoidance and scepticism requires not only changes in content production but also rebuilding trust through transparency, representativeness, and editorial independence. Second, the economic divide in access to reliable news raises important concerns about information inequality and democratic participation. Finally, further research should explore how personalization algorithms, platform dynamics, and emerging formats (such as podcasts or influencer-led journalism) reshape these patterns—particularly among younger audiences navigating an overwhelming and often contradictory media environment.

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