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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the role of Czech public service television in a polarized society. The research on public service media (PSM) is salient concerning their specific role; however, it is increasingly questioned in a fragmented and polarized environment. The paper builds on data from 27 semi-structured interviews and a survey conducted in 2019–2020 (N = 3,251). While for some audiences, Czech television is a trustworthy medium protecting exemplary sets of values, for others, it is biased and hostile. The study reveals the deeper interplay between political attitudes and media practices, potentially endangering PSM's role and position in polarized settings.

Introduction

In the current media environment, characterized by increasing affective polarization (i.e., emotional distance between groups with differing worldviews; McCoy and Somer 2019) and evolving dynamics of media consumption influenced by political attitudes, the position of the public service media (PSM) has become more vulnerable. While ideological polarization may foster healthy debate and diversity of opinions, affective polarization can poison the well of public discourse, eroding trust in institutions (Schulz, Wirth, and Müller 2018), fueling social conflict, and impeding constructive dialogue. This puts PSM in a challenging position: on the one hand, their integrative and curative function (e.g., Donders 2012) makes their existence more important than ever, but on the other hand, they face trends in the media environment that are in direct contrast to this function. In the light of these challenges, this research seeks to explore the role of Czech Television (CT), a successful, credible, and independent PSM within the European context, and to focus on how CT is perceived by its audience.

We contend that CT, like other PSMs in the region, faces increasing challenges, including political interference and rising media politicization (Cunci and Curran 2021). We address the discrepancy between the normative requirements for PSM, emphasizing their role in providing objective, verified, comprehensive, and balanced information for free opinion formation, as outlined in the Act on Czech Television (1991), and the trends of expansion of media alternatives and polarization.

Our study accesses the recent vulnerability and fragility of PSM through the attitudinal divide of the citizens. It contributes to an understanding of the relationship between media practices and political attitudes by examining the factors influencing trust and distrust in CT and its viewership. We address the current academic discourse (McLeod, Wise, and Perryman 2017) on how individual characteristics and political attitudes shape media practices and attitudes toward the media (and, conversely, how media consumption may impact societal attitudes, such as political polarization) (Fawzi et al. 2021). Moreover, in a polarized media environment, we explore attitudes toward PSM, whose role and position are fragile and questioned, as is particularly evident in recent events concerning Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS). Additionally, amid the polarization of the media landscape, where various media target distinct audiences based on individual characteristics and attitudes, PSM is expected to serve all citizens. We assume that polarization can threaten the existence of PSM due to hostile attitudes toward the medium in a polarized society (Schulz et al., 2020). At the same time, in a polarized society, the necessity for robust PSM becomes all the more crucial and desirable, as they have the potential to unify society. Therefore, we investigate the connection between trust, affective polarization, and the attitudes underlying perceived societal divisions. Furthermore, we examine the divergent attitudes among CT audiences, highlighting the attitudinal gap between those who rely on CT as a news source and those who actively avoid it.

The case study demonstrates that the medium meant to serve an integrative function, defined as "upholding national culture, its values, and norms and supporting people's role in the community" (Holtz-Bacha 2015, 37), is a reflection of perceived conflict about the dominant values and worldview in society. The pronounced divide becomes particularly evident in the context of the west–east orientation and the contrast between liberal and conservative values. In the case of the Czech Republic, the traditional

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left–right political divide represents a unique and somewhat counterintuitive challenge compared to other countries. While, for some, CT embodies an objective, professional, and essential medium that promotes desirable liberal and pro-European values, others perceive it as a biased platform influenced by specific political elites, both liberal and right-wing, and elitist journalists who are openly hostile to more conservative perspectives. We show that trust in and the assessment of CT are closely linked to individuals' political attitudes and worldviews (Smejkal et al. 2022), creating a fertile environment for further affective polarization. This polarization manifests between liberal supporters and audiences of CT, and the poorly represented worldviews of more conservative (also left-wing, in the Czech case) groups of citizens, who may potentially avoid PSM. Consequently, this group of misrepresented and staunch avoiders could be more susceptible to alternative media, including disinformation and conspiracy sources.

Researching CT in the Context of Affective Polarization

Current Polarization of Society

Affective polarization is the emotional divide and animosity between individuals or groups with differing political affiliations or worldviews. Unlike ideological or opinion-based polarization, which primarily revolves around differences in beliefs or policy preferences, affective polarization is characterized by intense feelings of dislike, distrust, or even hostility toward those holding opposing political views (e.g., Orhan 2022; Reiljan and Ryan 2021; Iyengar et al. 2019). Citizens are affectively polarized toward political parties worldwide (Orhan 2022; Reiljan and Ryan 2021). However, recent affective polarization goes beyond party sympathies. Such affectively based polarization reinforces the "us" against "them" view of the political world (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). As the polarization stems from animosity driven by distinctions between social identities and groups (Mason 2018; Shanto, Yphtach, and Matthew et al. 2019), it is necessarily connected to social distance and stereotypes about "them," hostility and discrimination toward political opponents and to politically distinct groups (Reiljan and Ryan 2021).

According to evidence, the recent conflict in society is arranged around a liberal–conservative divide and the rise of illiberal tendencies and populism, combined with technocracy bringing an alternative vision of regime to the dominant liberal democratic paradigm (e.g. by denying political pluralism, anti-partyism etc.; Havlík 2019), as the consequence of recent societal trends (e.g., the migration crisis, social inequalities). We have been witnessing a cultural shift toward the divide between a group of cosmopolitan people with liberal and global attitudes and a more static and socially conservative group that feels threatened by globalization and immigration (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Specifically, in the Czech Republic this conflict has been visible since the presidential election in 2013, when the electorate split into the supporters of the former leader of the Czech Social Democratic Party, Miloš Zeman, who attracted more conservative citizens, and his more liberal/progressive opponent(s). The divide in Czech society was further deepened during the migration crisis in 2015, which continues to be exploited by radical and populist parties (Kluknavská, Bernhard, and Boomgaarden 2019). Moreover, this divide can be seen in other areas, especially in attitudes toward the European Union (EU) and, more generally, pro-Western attitudes, the evaluation of the country's development since 1989, and the role of the social state and egalitarianism. These issues draw a line between people who saw profit from the Czech transformation in the 1990s and those who were more insecure about the societal changes (Buchtík et al. 2021).

McCoy and Somer (2019) argue that affective polarization can be driven not only by former partisan, political, and social cleavages but also by discursive processes and rhetoric based on constructing the "other" group's antagonistic identity. Thus, the recent diversification of the media and the success of populist parties can feed conflicts and contribute to polarization (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Focusing on the Czech case, a typical example is the parliamentary party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), known for its far-right populist rhetoric, including open nationalism, Euroscepticism, anti-immigration attitudes, and media criticism.

As a result, conflict over dominant values and worldviews is also inevitably represented in the contemporary fragmented media environments (e.g., through the growing supply of different media alternatives) and, consequently, in media routines and divergent attitudes to the media and its content (e.g., through media selectivity). The above-mentioned polarization of society can be thus projected upon the tensions among audiences as a conflict about media performance, worldviews, and the "us" or "them" that media should represent. We are particularly interested whether and how this conflict is present concerning PSM (respectively CT) and their specific role (with an emphasis on the integrative role of PSM in society); in other words, how is an indicated affective polarization and divide between conservative and liberal worldviews in the Czech Republic projected into perception (trust and distrust) and actual reception (or rejection) of CT.

Trust in PSM in a Polarized Society

In contemporary information environments, media audiences base their news selection on their preferences, characteristics, and attitudes. Although the evidence varies, academics draw attention to the implications of media and news selectivity (e.g., Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Skovsgaard, Shehata, and Strömbäck 2016). Ideological selectivity may constitute a form of polarized rejection of certain media outlets as biased and hostile, thus deepening the differences in the audience's attitudes (Shanto and Hahn 2009; Matthes 2013). Conversely, audiences may have higher trust in media (i.e., "the individual's willingness to be vulnerable to media objects, based on the expectation that they will perform satisfactorily for the individual and/or according to the dominant norms and values in society"; Nayla et al. 2021, 156) that match their opinion preferences.

Tension has become especially apparent between the mainstream media and the broad range of alternative

media outlets and their audiences (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019), as many argue that low trust in mainstream media is associated with higher trust in media alternatives and vice versa (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; Schulze 2020). Since media research focused on trust in PSM is rare, our aim is to investigate the differences among the audiences of PSM. We address the sources of trust or distrust in PSM, targeting especially perceived media performance, audiences' expectations, and satisfaction. In our first research question (RQ1), we ask: Why do people trust or distrust Czech Television?

According to research (e.g., Kohring and Matthes 2007; Nayla et al. 2021; Smejkal et al. 2022), trust and distrust in media stem from *evaluations* of the media and their *performance* based on previous experience, and at the same time, from the future *expectations* with respect to the media and their role. Moreover, it can encompass an emphasis on the *satisfaction* of the individual and/or the fulfillment of the democratic function in society (by performing reliably according to dominant values) (Nayla et al. 2021). Additionally, distrust in media is often perceived more broadly than lack of trust; it is also linked to media avoidance, skepticism, or cynicism.

Regarding media evaluation, performance, and audience expectations, current research highlights the importance of media independence (Van-der-Wurf and Schoenbach 2014), as well as quick reporting on relevant topics and related objectivity (Sehl 2020). When media fail to meet audience expectations for independence and objectivity, then satisfaction and trust decline (Steppat, Herrero, and Esser 2020). Smejkal et al. (2022) introduce a distinct expectation influencing media trust: the portrayal of group identity and worldview. This expectation gains prominence for PSM, which are mandated to integrate society and foster cohesion (Holtz-Bacha 2015). Drawing on the definition of Fawzi et al. (2021) and Smejkal et al. (2022), we assert that media trust is rooted in two expectations. The first centers on the above-mentioned normative journalistic standards – objectivity, impartiality, and independence (normative trust). The second anticipates trustworthy media reflecting imagined communities and representing in-group identities (cohesive trust). We delve into both dimensions of trust.

In the realm of a fragmented and polarized media landscape, independent PSM hold a distinctive role, tasked with strengthening societal integration, embracing diverse perspectives, and promoting national culture, values, and norms (Donders 2012; Holtz-Bacha 2015). Despite the unique position of PSM, research on audience expectations of they performance remains scarce. Existing studies acknowledge a general expectation of neutrality on political issues, objectivity, and balance (Campos-Rueda 2023). Sehl's (2020) cross-country analysis reveals that PSM, while generally perceived as performing better than other media, face skepticism about independence from the state, politics, and business. In polarized environments, diminished trust in media reflects broader skepticism toward institutions and political elites (Fawzi 2019; Reiljan and Ryan 2021). Trust in PSM faces significant challenges, especially in countries where they have been transformed into state-controlled media (Poland, Hungary), leading to low trust and associations with illiberal attitudes and conspiracy beliefs (Štětka, Mihelj, and Tóth 2020). Conversely, in democratic nations with independent PSM, trust, and engagement with PSM should correlate positively with institutional, political, and social trust, aligning with the role of PSM in fostering democratic values (Curran et al. 2009; Newton 2016, 36; Tsfati and Ariely 2014).

The relationship between political distrust and skepticism about media independence and objectivity, coupled with the negative appraisal of media performance, is fueled by a growing public aversion to elite groups (Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2020; Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018). Political hostility toward knowledge-producing elite institutions seems to accompany the surge in populist and radical right-wing communication (Cushion 2019). Within populist discourse, established media are often branded as purveyors of liberal propaganda (Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019), while PSM are painted as biased in favor of the establishment and a pro-immigration and politically left-wing elite (Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2020). Existing research underscores that individuals with populist or more radical right-wing attitudes exhibit lower trust in PSM, especially when they feel that these media are failing in the cohesive dimension of trust (Smejkal et al. 2022) and not echoing anti-system views in their broadcasts (Urbániková and Smejkal 2023).

In exploring the foundations of trust and distrust in the context of CT, we pose the second research question: "*How is trust or distrust linked to political attitudes and affective polarization?*" (RQ2). CT serves as a unique case, maintaining high trustworthiness amidst considerable pressure from populist and far-right politicians – a common occurrence in Central and East European countries. In addition to political attitudes, our inquiry delves into affective polarization as a societal divide. We aim to unravel the dynamics behind Czechs' trust or distrust in CT, exploring the interplay between political attitudes and the evaluation of media performance and satisfaction with regard to the perceived dominant values and group identities represented (or omitted) by CT (Nayla et al. 2021).

Who Are the Audiences, and Who do Avoid PMS?

Considering the debate on the democratic implications of PSM utilization mentioned earlier, a more nuanced exploration of PSM audiences and their attitudes is necessary. Equally crucial is an examination of individuals actively avoiding PSM for various reasons (targeted by RQ1 and RQ2). Specifically, we ask: *How do political attitudes and trust differ among the strong audience of Czech Television, the avoiders of Czech Television, and the occasional and indifferent audience? (RQ3).* Considering the act of avoiding PSM and the individuals who engage in such avoidance is crucial, as it may have implications for the reinforcement of undemocratic or antisystem attitudes, along with the adoption of alternative media promoting these perspectives. Therefore, we pose the question to identify the most influential factors contributing to the avoidance of CT: *What are the key determinants of avoidance of Czech Television? (RQ4)*

Political Attitudes of Audiences and Avoiders of PSM

Our focus is to discern differences among PSM audiences in several variables targeted by previous research, including political interest, trust in politicians, social trust, and political attitudes reflecting their place on the conservative–liberal spectrum.

Limited research evidence suggests that PSM audiences tend to be older, more educated, and politically diverse, with Czech PSM aligning with these patterns (James et al. 2009; Newton 2016; Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019). On the other hand, it is anticipated that individuals not consuming/ avoiding PSM are likely to be male and have a higher interest in politics. As the use of PSM appears to be primarily associated with pro-democratic and pro-institutional attitudes, the avoidance of PSM should, conversely, be linked to opposing viewpoints, anti-establishment attitudes, and distrust in political institutions. The avoidance of PSM is expected to be correlated with lower overall trust in politicians (Tsfati and Ariely 2014; Reiljan and Ryan 2021) and a lower level of social trust (Nielsen et al. 2016).

We also anticipate that the utilization of PSM will correlate with more liberal attitudes. Examining further political attitudes, while PSM audiences are perceived as pro-immigration and politically left-wing and liberal (Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2020), it is hypothesized that PSM avoiders maintain a more critical stance toward migration and generally adhere to more conservative views compared to PSM audiences (Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2020; Štětka, Mihelj, and Tóth 2020; Štětka, Mihelj, and Tóth, 2021).

Media Attitudes and Trust of Audiences and Avoiders of PSM

We examine two types of media trust (normative and cohesive) as the expectations regarding PSM linked to trust seem to differ among audiences (Smejkal et al. 2022), along with trust in journalists per se, as it appears that satisfaction with their performance may represent a significant source of trust in the media (Urbániková and Smejkal 2023), particularly when people with populist attitudes perceive them as aligned with biased elites (Fawzi, 2021).

While some of the most recent research on media repertoires and the use of alternative media problematize the clear distinction between the audiences of mainstream media and alternative media (e.g. Steppat, Castro, and Esser 2023), many argue that higher trust in mainstream media (including PSM) is associated with lower trust and propensity to media alternatives (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; Schulze 2020). As such, the use of PSM in democratic countries may be associated with resilience to disinformation, higher trust in journalists, and higher cohesive trust in professional media, as there is a greater chance that these media will be more in line with their worldview. On the contrary, avoiders exhibit a general distrust and skepticism toward media presentations, exhibit lower trust in journalists and media, and display greater receptivity to media alternatives (Steppat, Herrero, and Esser 2020; Fawzi 2019; Nielsen et al. 2016; Schulze 2020).

Czech Public Service Television in the Media System

Although trust in the media has been declining in the Czech Republic since the 1990s, trust in the independent PSM (i.e., Czech Television, Czech Radio, the Czech News Agency) stays high (i.e., more than half of the population trust PSM) and it remains the most trusted media type (Štětka 2023). Additionally, CT is the most-watched television outlet (Nielsen Admosphere, 2023) and the most important news source (Štětka 2020, Fig. A1 in Supplementary Information). According to an expert survey (Štětka et al. 2021), CT is evaluated mostly as an independent, slightly liberal medium that is neutral to the government. According to the latest analysis of the balance of news stories, 97.7 percent of news stories were balanced, while the remaining 2.3 percent were found to have low-severity errors (Bartalosová and Lindovská 2023).

To put CT in a broader context, since the 1990s the Czech media system has consisted of strong PSM, several commercial broadcasters, and several publishing houses. Nevertheless, several changes have occurred recently. The first change was the development of online media, including outlets for mainstream news brands that are linked to broadcasting and print media, small online news outlets, opinion outlets, and alternative, disinformation media and conspiracy websites (e.g., *AC24.cz, Sputnik, Aeronet, Protiproud*), and news aggregators (Eberle and Daniel 2023; Charvát, Jirák, and Köpplová 2023; Štětka, Mazák, and Vochocová 2021) The alternative and disinformation media were founded at the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015 and they are focused on ultra-right-wing, anti-Islamic, anti-Western, and anti-European topics (Štětka, Mazák, and Vochocová 2021). Moreover, these media have been characterized by pro-Russian and anti–Covid-19 tendencies. The second change came when media ownership shifted toward more concentration (Jirák and Köpplová 2020; Kotišová and Waschková Císařová 2021). It induced a critique of the oligarchization and politicization of the media and brought fears about their independence (Štětka and Hájek 2021) because the key owners were businessmen involved in politics (e.g., the former Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš was until September 2023 an owner of one of the biggest Czech media groups, Mafra).

Despite the strong position of CT regarding viewership trust, its performance and independence have been constantly questioned by political groups and politicians characterized by populist or ultra-right-wing ideology (Štětka and Hájek 2021). They have suggested shutting the PSM down, taking more control, threatening to abolish the license fees, or transforming them into state or pro-government media (Połońska and Beckett 2019). Admittedly, in the region, such political pressure on independent PSM is not unique; currently there are similar tendencies in Austria and Slovakia (Urbániková 2021; Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2020). In the European context, CT has been perceived as a successful and trustworthy independent PSM. At the same time, it has been facing growing pressures, including political interference and growing politization (Cunci and Curran 2021). Thus, on the one hand, the trustworthiness and independence of CT are close to the

position held by PSM in Western Europe (typically in the United Kingdom, Germany, or Belgium) (Picone and Donders 2020; Horowitz et al. 2022; Sehl 2020). On the other hand, CT operates in Central and Eastern Europe, where governments have tended to undermine PSM autonomy. In the case of Poland and Hungary, PSM have even been transformed into government media (Połońska and Beckett 2019), and their independence has been reduced. In this regard, CT stands out in the context of other PSM in the region, even though it is relatively young compared to West European PSM.

Methods: Qualitative Interviewing and Survey Research

This study proceeds in two steps with a mixed-methods design. The first study, "a qualitative analysis of sources of trust and distrust in CT," builds upon research streams about media trust, media performance, and audience expectations to explore the sources of trust and distrust (RQ1) in CT with a focus on the perceived divide in society as addressed by our informants (RQ2). The qualitative approach (see below) allows us to investigate the actual perspectives of participants and to explore the experiences and attitudes of individual participants in the context, ensuring better validity and deeper understanding. In the second study, "quantitative analysis of differences among audiences," we test the differences among audiences and examine whether the attitudinal divide articulated by informants in Study 1 and within the academic debate (e.g. Norris and Inglehart 2019) is present in actual media practices related to CT (RQ3 and RQ4).

Study 1: Qualitative Analysis of Sources of Trust and Distrust in CT

Our results stem from 27 semi-structured interviews with representatives of the adult Czech population. The data were collected in 2018 by a trained interviewer. The interviews covered the topic of trust in media with questions aimed at general trust in media, trust in news media, trust in media practices in everyday-life contexts and in the perception of identity representation from the informant`s point of view. Ages ranged from 20 to 82 with participants predominantly holding university or secondary education credentials. The sample was balanced gender-wise and we ensured that it varied with regard to type of residence, marital status, household structure, occupation, and party preference. Specifically, 12 informants voted for the populist ANO 2011 or SPD movements in the last elections to the Chamber of Deputies. Two informants did not vote, and the remaining 13 informants voted for other political parties. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and coded by trained coders using ATLAS.ti software. The process of coding and analyzing data followed a grounded-theory procedure, specifically with three stages of analytical work (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The inter-coder reliability was carried out through ongoing consultations and constant revisions of codes and contents.

Study 2: Quantitative Analysis of Differences among Audiences

The survey (N = 3,251) was conducted by a research agency (i.e., FOCUS, Marketing & Social Research) in December 2019–February 2020. The sample is based on quotas (i.e., gender, age, education, type of residence, region; and their combinations) to represent the Czech 18+ population. It combines computer-assisted personal interviewing (35 percent), and computer-assisted web interviewing (65 percent). The average interview length was 43 minutes, as the survey covered detailed descriptions of media practices, news reception, attitudes toward individual media, trust in media, values, and political attitudes of the participants. The general aim of this survey in the project was to capture media trust and to test measures of media trust (normative and cohesive) and their relationship to political attitudes (see Hrbková, Macek, and Macková 2024; Smejkal et al. 2022). This study represents a case study focused on CT based on secondary data use; therefore we use only several variables. The data were analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics (version 27) and JAMOVI. In the initial phase, differences among three news media audiences in relation to CT were tested. In the first step, one-way ANOVA was used to examine whether significant differences exist between examined groups. Subsequently, the Gabriel Post Hoc Pairwise Comparisons Test and Cramer's V for categorical variables were utilized to compare pairs of groups, with the aim to identify where the differences specifically occurred. We subsequently ran a multinomial logistic regression to test the determinants for three news media audiences in relation to CT in the full model.

Variables

We divided the Czech news audiences according to the position of CT in relation to their news reception practices (Figure 1). Thus, our dependent variable was created by combining two questions: *What professional media are the most important source of information for you? Specify a maximum of three;* and

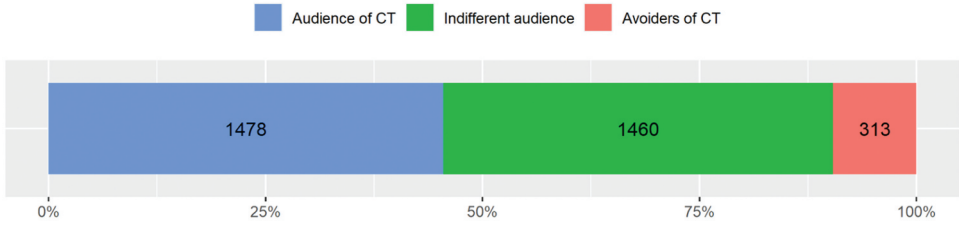

Figure 1. Three types of audiences in relation to CT. Source: Authors.

Which professional media do you think are good to avoid? Specify a maximum of three. The respondents who mentioned CT in the first question created the group labeled *Strong audience of CT* (45.5 percent), while those who mentioned it in the case of the second question formed the group labeled *Avoiders of CT* (9.6 percent). The rest of the sample (possibly including both less-frequent viewers and non-viewers of CT who did not report CT as one of the most important/ avoided news sources) formed the group labeled *Occasional audience and indifferents* (44.9 percent).

The Supplementary Information file (Table A1) reports the independent variables. We tested the set of attitudes that indicated the position on the conservative–liberal continuum: attitude about gender; attitude about the EU; and attitude about migrants. Political interest was measured on an 11-point scale. Trust in politicians, trust in journalists, and social trust were measured by an agreement with a single item. Trust in media was assessed as trust in outlets that are considered to be the important sources of news by the participant, and it is measured by two variables that addressed distinct expectations of the media: cohesive trust in professional media draws on the expectation that media should perform in line with our interest; and normative trust in professional media draws on the expectation that media should stick to professional standards. Measuring media trust was taken from the study by Smejkal et al. (2022), which substantiates the validity of this measurement approach. Lastly, we assessed news sources and general sociodemographic characteristics: age, gender, education, and household income.

Results: Distrust in Czech Television as a Consequence of the Liberal–Conservative Divide

Study 1: Qualitative Analysis of Sources of Trust and Distrust in CT

In the first study built on semi-structured interviews, we were interested in trust and distrust in CT and their sources in evaluating previous performance as well as expectations about the role and position of CT (RQ1). Moreover, we emphasize the role of affective polarization and divide in opinion (RQ2). Even though CT is the most trusted medium in the country, the trust seems fragile and cautious. Even for those informants who trusted CT, it often represents a lesser evil among even worse news sources. The (dis)trust is dichotomic at its core, based on the presence or absence of "us" or "them" (see below) in the media content that indicates the strong role of one's in-group identity. According to interviews, it seems that CT finds itself on the precipice of political conflict, not only as an intermediary of conflicting topics (as is their expected role), but also as a perceived actor within the conflict (e.g., due to hostility toward certain values and their holders, see below).

Trust as a Habit and PSM as a Normative Ideal

Looking at sources of trust in CT, we see that trust seems to be rather fragile as it is "taken for granted" because CT was "always" there and it was merely a "habit" to watch and trust it [Informant 1, 2, 11, 15, 16].

Informant 15 (male, 46): Well, historically, it was the first one. Moreover, it is public service TV.

Trust in CT is taken for granted also because it appears to be "more official" [Informant 8] than commercial channels. This is derived from the fact that PSM is paid for by compulsory television fees that symbolize a commitment to serve all citizens while representing a certain assurance of objectivity and seriousness without the need to pursue tabloidization. Conversely, the duty of serving all is the precise argument for people not trusting the medium, as they did not feel served accordingly.

Informant 27 (male, 76): It's one-sided, [Prime Minister] Babiš obviously bothers them. They were as much as grilling him over there.

Evaluation of Objectivity as a Source for Both Trust and Distrust

Evaluation of objectivity is a crucial issue that draws a line between informants who trust and informants who do not trust CT, and generally points toward both the divide in political attitudes of citizens and affective polarization. On one hand, those who trust CT consider it to be *mostly objective* (i.e., "unbiased" [Informant 11], "not embellished" [Informant 18], "fair" [Informant 1], "truthful" [Informant 18], "professional" [Informant 10]). However, in many cases they perceive objectivity as an unattainable ideal that, as such, might be violated by CT at times [Informant 4, 6]; Informant 25, for example, concludes that it is not realistic to think that all media are free from the influence of any political party. On the other hand, distrust in CT seems to be strongly connected to *a perceived bias* and the influence of third parties (i.e., the EU and Czech right-wing parties, such as the Civic Democrats and TOP09 [e.g., Informant 6, 26]), associated with pro-Western, liberal attitudes and right-wing political parties and elites. More importantly, the distrust was implicitly articulated as the distance between CT, including both the identities and the worldviews and attitudes it represents and their viewers, and a substantial part of the citizenry which asserts political identities in different ways and makes allegiances to different parties – mainly the radical right-wing (e.g. Freedom and Direct Democracy party) and left-wing parties (the Communist Party [Informant 1, 6, 26]), and center populists (especially Prime Minister Babiš [Informant 1, 2, 6, 12, 14, 26, 27], and leftist conservative politicians (especially President Zeman [Informant 2, 5, 6, 12, 18, 22, 27]). CT is subsequently perceived as not only biased against those representatives and parties but even hostile toward them and the worldviews they are representing [Informant 1, 12]. Hostile behavior, as described by Informant 12, is, on the other hand, not directed toward other political actors whose political narrative and worldview are more similar to the one that CT presents.

Representation of Society in CT Based on a Distinction between "Us" and "Them"

Regarding the issue of the integrative role of PSM, the idea of "serving all," there is a remarkable consensus among informants who trust CT and informants who distrust CT about the worldviews and identities that CT represents and

those that it neglects. While trust in CT is associated with the perceived objectivity mentioned above and its *realistic representation of society*, which also represents particular worldviews, i.e., liberal, pro-European; distrust is associated with the perception of a biased and hostile CT that *produces a representation of society that is "beyond reality"* [Informant 1]. However, the "real" representation seems to be the one that aligns with the informant's "own truth" – that is, conforming to their more conservative worldview [Informant 1, 6, 26, 27]. Furthermore, the difference is obvious in the evaluation of the richness of the presented information, which non-trusting informants find lacking, and not comprehensive or balanced enough (e.g., all the parties are not included and given equal space and treatment [Informant 1, 6]). The perceived bias of the journalists and the presence of the liberal journalists' worldviews were also noted by non-trusting informants [Informant 1, 6].

Informant 6 (male, 62): Klepetko [journalist in CT] invites Civic Democrats, TOP09, and a Communist to oppose them, then he is barely allowed to speak while the other two can feely lament. What is that?

Informant 22 (female, 82): No, I do not like [Václav] Moravec [a political journalist on CT], … if someone has a different opinion, he cuts him off and moves to the next one … The only ones he allows to finish are the Civic Democrats but in cases when there is, for example, a Social Democrat or a Communist, he cuts them off.

Additionally, the (dis)trust is also influenced by how particular topics are processed and presented. While informants highlighted that the formal aspect of CT's conduct is "top quality" [Informant 15], "professional" [Informant 8, 10, 26], and "serious" (i.e., a fundamental trait for trust in the medium according to informants) [Informant 3, 7, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 18, 23], themes such as economics and politics [Informant 3], are perceived as a breaking point between trust and distrust. Despite those topics being important for most informants, those who distrusted CT's news felt that their representation was convenient for the right-wing, liberal, pro-European, and "very much Western-oriented" [Informant 27] audiences and one-sided reporting. Informant 26 reflects that CT often repeats opinions represented by the EU and Brussels, and there is a lack of objectivity and other voices on these topics.

To sum up, in the qualitative study, the representation of group identity creates a robust foundation for trust and/or distrust in the medium. Moreover, the perception of "us" and "them" is strongly connected to conservative–liberal political orientation and certain political attitudes. While the cautious trust in CT stems from tradition and normative expectations to have (and protect) PSM, and from the perception of its own political identity in positioning itself as liberal and pro-European, any distrust is connected to the perception of CT as a biased liberal medium, hostile to oppositional (more conservative or extreme) voices and worldviews and their holders. Thus, in the case of distrustful informants, dissatisfaction with the fulfillment of the cohesive dimension of trust (i. e. expectation that media should perform in line with one's opinion) in the media emerged. In fact, dissatisfied informants strongly referenced that CT did not reflect their in-group identities.

Study 2: Quantitative Analysis of Differences among Audiences

Building upon the results of previous research and our qualitative study (study 1), we used the data from a representative survey to test the differences among audiences distinctly for the role of CT in their news reception (RQ3 and RQ4). We considered the discrepancies between the three groups: the Strong audience of CT, the Avoiders of CT, and Occasional audiences and indifferents (Figure 1). The Strong audience of CT is proving to be younger, more educated, and more liberal. At the same time, the Avoiders scored significantly lower in gender liberalism, attitudes toward the EU, and attitudes toward migrants. Moreover, the Avoiders tend to be more interested in politics. Regarding trust, the Strong audiences of CT generally tend to express more trust, especially compared to the Avoiders. Except for social trust (trust in other people), where there are no differences among the groups, the Strong audiences of CT scored high in all types of trust, including for professional media, politicians, and journalists. The most extensive difference was between the Strong audience of CT and the Occasional audiences and indifferents, on one side, and the Avoiders, on the other.

To seek the predictors for Avoiders of CT (RQ4) while controlling the socio-demographic variables, we ran a multinomial regression with the Strong audience of CT as the reference category (the full model is in the Supplementary Information file, Table A2). The model suggests that Occasional audiences and indifferents are 14 percent less likely to hold a positive attitude toward the EU (OR = .86) than Strong audiences of CT. The Avoiders are then 52 percent less likely to hold a positive attitude toward the EU (OR = .48). Avoiders of CT also differ from Strong audiences of CT by being 9 percent less likely to have positive attitudes toward immigrants (OR = .91). Gender liberalism was found to be a non-significant predictor.

In addition, Avoiders of CT are also 46 percent less likely to trust journalists (OR = .54) and 16 percent more likely to be interested in politics, compared to Strong audiences of CT (OR = 1.16). However, while the probability of a respondent being a CT Avoider increases with increasing interest in politics, a similar, albeit more gradual, probability also emerges for Strong audiences of CT. Conversely, as interest in politics decreases, the likelihood of being classified as Occasional audience and indifferent increases (Figure 2).

We also found that Occasional audiences and indifferents are 36 percent less likely to score in normative trust in professional media (OR = .66) than the Strong audience of CT. Avoiders, when compared to the Strong audience of CT, are 23 percent less likely to have cohesive trust (i.e. expectation that media should perform in line with one's interest) in professional media (OR = .77). Social trust (trust in others) and trust in politicians were found to be non-significant

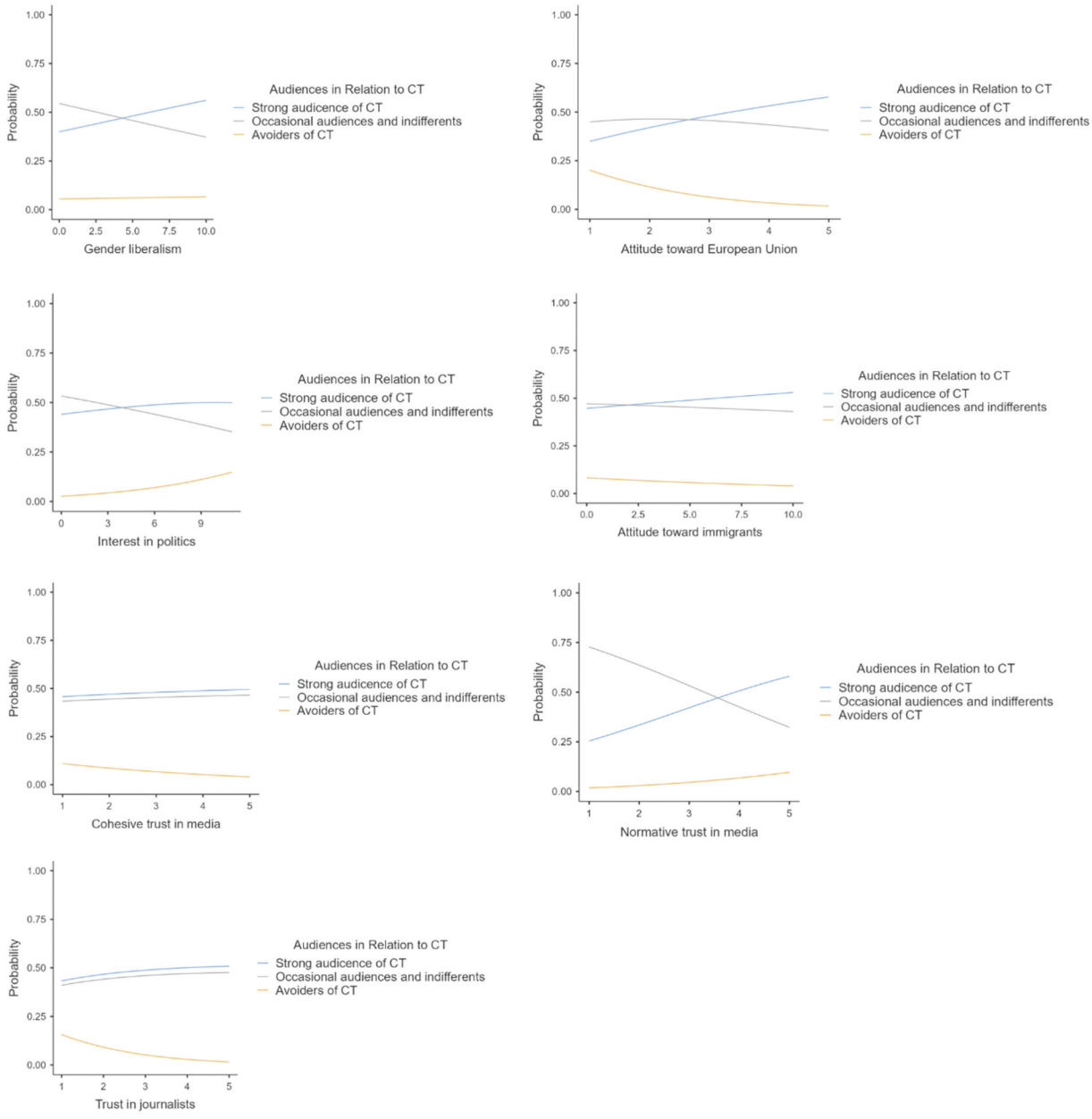

Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of three types of audiences. Source: Authors.

predictors for both Avoiders and Occasional audiences and indifferents.

These results can be explored in more detail through the figures of predicted probabilities (Figure 2).

Discussion: Relationship to Czech Television as a Mirror of a Divide in Czech Society

The study aimed to investigate the role of PSM in a polarized society through a deeper examination of the attitudes and practices of audiences. Specifically, we addressed the theoretical conflict between the normative expectations linked to performance and the role of PSM and their integrative and cohesive role in a democratic society (Donders 2012; Holtz-Bacha 2015) on the one hand, and the pervasive divide and ongoing polarization among citizens indicated in many countries, including the Czech Republic (Orhan 2022), on the other. In other words, we examined how a theoretically impartial and unbiased medium performs in a polarized society and how audience attitudes are reflected in their media practices. The case of the Czech PSM is highly relevant considering the strong position of CT in the country and the positions and current changes regarding PSM in other countries in the region, where the independence of PSM is significantly impaired or completely absent. First, using the data from qualitative interviews, we explored the sources of trust and distrust in CT and investigated the relationship among them, political attitudes, and affective polarization. Second, we used survey data to test the differences among audiences, focusing on the attitudinal divide.

This study sheds light on the relationship between media and political attitudes, providing insights into the difficulties

faced by PSM in a polarized media environment. We found that trust in and assessment of highly trusted CT is closely linked to individuals' political attitudes and worldviews (Smejkal et al. 2022). Czech citizens seem strongly divided in their perception of CT performance and fulfillment of the role of independent and unbiased PSM. Consequently, substantial differences exist between those who perceive CT as an important news source and those who avoid it. These differences are linked to the current form of political polarization, which can potentially weaken the position of PSM. However, the share of "critics" of this medium in society is still rather low.

The limits of the paper and its findings are linked to the character of self-reported data. We can assume that CT could be perceived as a desirable or appropriate medium and thus possibly reported as an important source for less engaged audiences. It could lead to blurring of the lines among the audiences of CT and the Occasional audiences and indifferents. Similarly, we admit that the middle group of Occasional audiences and indifferents can be more diverse than the other two audiences. Also, we cannot explain the role of PSM in opinion formation – it was not the aim of this research. Though we show that in the Czech Republic, the (dis)trust in public service television and the (dis)use of CT as a source of news are both strongly related to political attitudes, we cannot say whether the use of CT contributes to affective (or ideological) polarization (or vice versa). However, it seems that the existence of a strong, independent, and impartial PSM helps to limit audience polarization (Štětka, Mihelj, and Tóth 2020), which is, in the Czech Republic, rather low, thanks to a varied media diet and no strong partisan media (Štětka, Mihejl, and Tóth 2021; Tóth et al. 2023). It should also be added that our study focused only on CT, as the most watched and best-known PSM in the Czech Republic. Therefore, we are aware that the results may not 100 percent correspond to the general perception of the Czech PSM. However, we know from a previous study that audiences tend to perceive CT more than Czech Radio (Urbániková and Smejkal 2023).

Moving to key findings, the initial objective of the study was to uncover the sources of trust or distrust in CT (RQ1) with a focus on the potential connection to polarization and political attitudes (RQ2), to examine the position of CT in a polarized society. Through the qualitative phase of our research, we uncovered a robust interconnection between (dis) trust, the evaluation of media performance, and expectations tied to norms and worldviews, also documented by Nayla et al. (2021), Smejkal et al. (2022), and Kohring and Matthes (2007). The divergence in worldviews and resulting polarization emerged as crucial elements shaping attitudes toward CT and trust – both normative (the belief that media should adhere to normative standards of journalism) and cohesive (the belief that media should be in line with opinions of the respondent) trust in media (Smejkal et al. 2022). Participants in interviews exhibited a consensus regarding the worldviews and identities – such as being pro-democratic, pro-Western, pro-European, and leaning toward a liberal (although in the Czech context, this designation is rather problematic when CT audiences often sympathize with conservative parties), albeit right-wing orientation – that CT represents (or vice versa). Consequently, those aligning with more liberal worldviews, forming a cohesive trust, tend to express higher normative trust, emphasizing CT's performance and journalistic quality. Even among the trusters, some criticism exists. Still, their inclination to overlook shortcomings stems from the belief that CT embodies the abstract ideal of PSM dedicated to serving the entire democratic (liberal) society (Donders 2012).

Conversely, there are citizens for whom the dominant worldviews and identities represented by CT are alien or hostile. The affectively based distinction between themselves and the CT-represented others, is the deep-rooted source of their distrust in CT. The articulated distinction between in-group and out-group is connected to political attitudes – particularly those established as part of the conservative–liberal divide. They perceive CT to be generally biased (due to liberal, pro-migrant, and pro-Western attitudes), as influenced by right-wing political elites and the EU, and biased against certain (i.e., more conservative, populist, leftist) political actors. Thus, it disrespects the plurality of opinion and consequently fails in its role as PSM in the eyes of the distrusters (see Štětka, Mihelj 2021). In summary, the sources of both trust and distrust seem strongly influenced by individual attitudes, the identities that CT allegedly represents, and the individual's ascription to the represented "us" versus the underrepresented "them" linked to affective polarization (McCoy and Somer 2019).

Consequently, following the in-depth findings from the interviews, representative survey data on the Czech adult population confirm significant distinctions in attitudes among the audiences concerning CT (RQ3). In line with the previous research, theoretical assumptions (Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2020), and informants' perception from the qualitative study, Strong audiences of CT are more liberal compared to other groups. Conversely, the CT Avoiders are more conservative – especially in the context of topics such as the EU and migrants – which is in line with both qualitative interviews, previous research (Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2020; Štětka, Mihelj, and Tóth 2020, 2021), and the cultural-backlash argument (Norris and Inglehart 2019). But the link between the use of PSM and liberal attitudes seems not to be universal. It does not apply to countries like Poland and Hungary (Połońska and Becket 2019), where we could probably come up with opposite results because PSM there are primarily influenced by politicians with strongly conservative views (Holtz-Bacha 2021; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Finally, as the use of PSM in democratic countries is generally associated with fostering democratic values and vice versa (Tsfati and Ariely 2014, 36; Newton 2016; James et al. 2009), we found it crucial to target those who actively avoid and refuse PSM. Therefore, we examined the most important determinants of avoidance of PSM (RQ4). Regarding trust, while the Strong audiences of CT express more trust (for the media and institutions), the Avoiders (as expected) express less trust in journalists and cohesive trust in the professional media (similar to Fawzi 2019; Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019; Steppat, Herrero, and Esser 2020); and in politicians (similar to; Reiljan and Ryan 2021). Despite expectations, there is no difference in social trust (see Nielsen et al. 2016; Newton 2016; James et al. 2009). Aside from conservative attitudes, the

Avoiders also express the highest interest in politics. Based on the qualitative and quantitative studies results, we assume they harbor specific political opinions that CT does not adequately epresent. The avoidance might result from perceived ideological biases within CT, leading politically engaged individuals to seek alternative sources that align more closely with their views. On the other hand, the lower cohesive trust signals dissatisfaction with the identities and worldviews represented by most professional media. However, the supplementary analysis of the data shows that the media diet of the Avoiders varies and covers different types of media ranging from mainstream to alternative media. Additionally, considering the media literacy and reflexivity of Avoiders is essential as higher political interest could indicate a more informed and engaged audience, as in findings from studies on alternative media (Macková, Hrbková, and Macek 2023; Schwarzenegger 2021; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2022). Yet, it is crucial to discern whether this political interest translates into a more discerning media consumption pattern or rather contributes to the consumption of polarized and potentially misleading information, as the avoidance is linked to low political and institutional trust and pro-democratic attitudes (Newton 2016; James et al. 2009). Importantly to the general goal of the study, the fact that individuals with a keen interest in politics actively avoid CT poses a challenge for the broadcaster. Understanding the specific reasons behind this avoidance is crucial for PSM to address concerns and to face pressures with respect to biases or gaps in their representation of diverse political perspectives.

To put the findings into a broader context, despite a relatively small proportion of PSM Avoiders in the population, the recent public and political pressure on CT highlights growing scrutiny of its position fueled by media politicization and the rise of populism. Populist narratives framing a binary "us" versus "them" dynamic and anti-elitist sentiment contribute to affective polarization. Our interviews during a politically intense period, post parliamentary and presidential elections, complement intensified debates about politicization and pressure on PSM, particularly concerning balanced representation. Efforts to control CT so far culminated in 2021 and were likely to wane as populists and radical-right parties lost their majority in the parliament. Yet, despite substantial support from pro-democratic citizens, CT's position remains fragile. This underscores the case's relevance to global trends, especially in West European countries and in the regional context where Poland and Hungary (currently also followed by attempts in Slovakia) have witnessed transformations of PSM into government-controlled media, lacking obligations for impartial, comprehensive, and balanced information dissemination.

To conclude, the study points out the fragility concerning the performance and position of PSM in a polarized society. While Czech Television's position may appear strong, the close link between political attitudes and media practices amidst polarization (seen through the reflection of the conflict about worldviews in attitudes and actions toward the medium) underscores the vulnerability of PSM in times of lack of trust and growing differences among groups, where reliable PSM can be crucial.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the role of Czech public service television in a polarized society, focusing on audience attitudes and media practices. Using data from interviews and a survey, the study explored how political attitudes influence trust in and perceptions of Czech Television. Findings reveal a significant divide: while some view CT as a trustworthy and value-protecting medium, others perceive it as biased and hostile. Moreover, trust in CT is closely tied to individuals' political attitudes, reflecting a broader societal divide. This polarization underscores the challenges faced by PSM in maintaining its role and position in fragmented and polarized environments.

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