



Older Persons Media Usage During a One Month Election Campaign: A Bulgarian Case Study

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Abstract. Modern families are characterized by heterogeneous media preferences, which are determined by age, gender, social status, cultural identity, etc. In order to achieve a more reliable information awareness of content, hybridity is often observed in media usage. This notion substantiated the aim of the undertaken study to analyze the daily use of media among different members of a Bulgarian family. The study was undertaken within the framework of the MEDIADELCOM research project of the Horizon 2020 program. The methodology is based on semi-structured questionnaires in media diaries of 50 students about the media use on a particular day in the life of their families, including data for: age, gender, and educational level of the respondents; purpose, type, and temporality of media usage; media trust, particularly during election campaigns, etc. A one month period of data collection has been set up: October 14 – November 14, 2021. The period coincides with the one-month election campaign in media, related to the regular vote for president and vice president and the early one - for Parliament. In addition, cross-combining technique for data collection and analysis was applied in order to compensate some of the inherent limitations. The information obtained is summarized in order to be analytically compared with the results of the other 13 EU participating countries in MEDIADELCOM project.

Keywords: Media Diary · Family · Media Usage · Trust in Media

1 Introduction

Modern societies are characterized by hybrid media context [1] and ubiquity of the media in the social sphere [2]. The digital environment poses significant challenges to media studies. Researchers are looking for innovative ways to measure the role, which media are playing in people's lives [3–8]. In analyses of the audience's behavior certain difficulties arise, based on the variety of platforms that users can integrate in their media menu, as well as on the function attributed to the media content they consume. The limitations of the most common quantitative (measurable data) and qualitative (interpretation of specialized texts, interviews, and observations) methods can be supplemented by developing advanced approaches in order to improve in-depth the reasoning of the groundwork.

The rapid development of information and communication technologies in recent years has created the need in audiences to acquire new skills and continuously to improve

them. Media and digital literacy have grown from specific professional competencies to a mandatory condition for adaptation and orientation in the modern digital world. This situation creates a disturbing trend of permanent alienation of certain social groups. Elderly people are seriously at risk of “digital isolation”, especially those well beyond their active working age, who have not had to work in a high-tech environment and who have not acquired the habits of using new technologies and the Internet.

The undertaken study targets the situation in Bulgaria. According to the National Statistical Institute data, the share of people between the ages of 65 and 74, who have regularly used the Internet in 2021, is 30.8 percent. In comparison, regular Internet users between the ages of 55 and 64 comprise 63.1 percent, and those between 45 and 54 - 82.1 percent. Among young people, the share rises to over 90 percent. The characteristics of Internet consumption between the different age groups are notable. Statistics show that the use of the Internet by Bulgarians over the age of 65 has increased significantly over the last ten years. Thus, in 2011, only 6.2 percent of elderly people in the country used the Internet regularly, and in 2004 they were only 0.6 percent. The share of Internet users in the third age group is gradually increasing, but the gap with younger age groups remains drastic [9].

The digital gap between the generations is also evident from the sources of information that the representatives of the different age groups use. Traditional media and especially - television is still the dominant source of information for Bulgarians over 50, and especially for those over 60, according to a survey conducted by the Open Society Institute. In all other age groups, the majority prefers mainly Internet-based information sites and social media. New technologies, albeit slowly, are already finding a place in the everyday life of people of the third age. Social networks, however, are not particularly popular among people over 65 in Bulgaria – 44 percent of respondents use them vs. 55.56 percent of non-users. The main issues that those who enter social networks are looking for are curious information (16.67 percent) and communication with friends (22 percent). Not a single respondent relies on social networks to get informed about news and current events [10].

Eurostat’s comparative data show that the digital activity of the elderly in Bulgaria is lower compared to the average levels in the EU, although a generational difference while accessing the modern information society is noticeable in the EU as well. Thus, in 2020 88 percent of people aged 16–74 in the European Union reported that they had used the internet in the last 3 months, compared to 61 percent of those aged 65–74. Although internet usage remains high among young people in the EU, it varies considerably among older people. In 2020, Denmark recorded the highest proportion (94 percent) of people aged 65–74 who had used the Internet in the last 3 months, followed by Luxembourg and Sweden (both 91 percent), the Netherlands (90 percent), as well as Finland (88 percent). In contrast, in 2020 only 25 percent of people aged 65–74 in Bulgaria used the Internet in the last 3 months, in Croatia – 28 percent, and in Greece – 33 percent. Almost 9 in 10 among younger people in the EU aged 16 to 24 have participated in social networks (87 percent). In comparison, among seniors aged 65 to 74, over a fifth (22 percent) have done so. This share varies from 10 percent in Croatia, 12 percent in Bulgaria to 60 percent in Denmark [11].

The world of media is dynamic and changing at an unprecedented pace. The lives of the new generations radically differ from the ones of their ancestors, and they perceive media from a different perspective. Indeed, technological progress facilitates access to

information, but definitely, this vast flow hampers the public to make reliable choices about various important issues on everyday life. On one side, there are more information options that are beneficial for those who are media literate inside the diverse group of older people [8, 12, 13], but on another, they further deepen the generation gap caused by the inertia of those older people who are not so media savvy and less able to adapt to the digital environment.

In this regard, the aim of the present study is to collect data about the “usual” media day among different Bulgarian family milieus. The study focuses mainly on the role that media play in people’s lives in hybrid media contexts.

2 Research Methods

The study is non-representative and is based on the methodological framework developed by the University of Tartu, Estonia: a written diary with semi-structured questionnaires for each member of the observed family (including the interviewer) on a particular day and an explanatory essay about the media preferences of Bulgarian family members. It has been anonymized and has been carried out on a voluntary basis by BA students during their first admission year at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication of the St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University, who have signed an informed consent to participate in the research. A one month period of data collection has been set up: October 14 – November 14, 2021. The period coincides with the one-month election campaign in media related to the regular vote for president and vice president and the early one - for Parliament. This period has been chosen, because in less than eight months in 2021, the country has faced one regular election for MPs of April 4, and one early – of July 11.

In addition, cross-combining technique for data collection and analysis was applied in order to compensate some of the inherent limitations.

The study raises three main research questions:

1. For what purpose did people use media during the one month national election campaign?
2. Which media do people prefer most often as a source for information?
3. Why people prefer certain media for information during the election campaign?

The voluntary interviewers have been asked to choose a particular day to spend with their family. Family is interpreted in a broad sense - it could be the interviewers’ own birth family, or the family of their friends, relatives, etc. Each interviewer has been required to observe for 24 h the normal life of the family, without disturbing it, to take notes on the media consumption of each family member, and on the next day to conduct a brief interview with the family members about their media preferences during the previous day. Media preferences refer to: listening to the radio; consumption of music streaming services; watching TV, films and videos (including on demand); reading newspaper and online news; reading magazines; reading books; usage of social media. Three main aspects have been described in the essays: access to media, characteristics of a particular day (media-related activities, their character and amount), and personal data about family members.

In structuring the essays, the following points have been taken in consideration: main socio-demographics of every family member (age, gender, and occupational status); description of the media environment and access to media (possession of media devices; newspaper and magazine subscriptions; individual or collective usage of media; media content serving as a basis for conversation between the family members; explanation of media preferences for each family member with regard to age, gender, education, role in family, personal hobbies, occupation, stage on the life-cycle topical interests, media habits, media trust, etc. The age group option was set to 18, 19–30, 31–50, 51–64, and 65 +. The short interviews were important to explain the reasons why a family member prefers particular channels/contents and is it rather usual or non-usual for him/her to do so.

For the purpose of the study, 50 in-depth interviews have been conducted with students and their families, and the responses have been received and analyzed. The results are to be used for comparing with the results of the academic teams from the other 13 EU member states, participating in the MEDIADELCOM research project of Horizon 2020 program, initiated by the University of Tartu, Estonia.

3 Results

The age groups have been relatively equally represented in the conducted survey. The fewest are persons under the age of 18 (10 percent), while the largest number of respondents is between the ages of 19 and 30 (32 percent). Persons aged between 31 and 50 years old are 29 percent. Respondents aged 51 to 65 (15 percent) and over 65 (14 percent) are relatively evenly distributed. Of the respondents, 1 percent are with primary education, 62 percent – with a secondary education, 35 percent possess a university degree, and 2 percent have a doctorate. By occupation, heterogeneity is observed, with 40 percent of students and 12 percent of pensioners predominating among the respondents (Fig. 1).

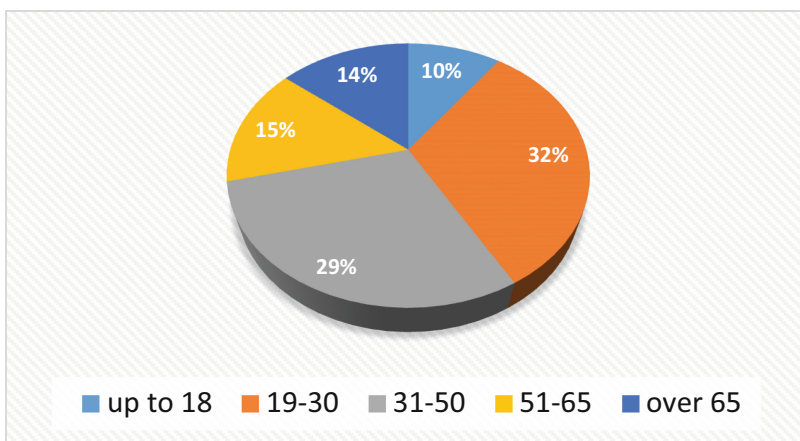


Fig. 1. Age groups

When describing the media environment and access to media, it is noteworthy that, regardless of the age group, almost every home has a TV set (98 percent), but only 31 percent of the respondents possess radio receiver. The age group of 51–65 and over 65 have radio receiver (83 percent), while young people under 18 and between 19–30 listen to the radio mostly in their car when they are on their way to work or to university (only 19 percent of them claim that they have a radio receiver at home). The trend for personal computer ownership is reverse. 74 percent of the under-aged own a personal computer or have access to a shared one at home, and 95 of the respondents aged 19–30 possess such a device. For the age group 31–50, the percentage is 83, for 51–65 – 61, and for the oldest over 65 years it is only 6. Smartphone ownership is similar - up to 18 years – 78 percent, 19–30 years – 94 percent, 31–50 years – 59 percent, 51–65 years – 61 percent, and over 65 years – 5 percent.

One of the respondents explained what devices are using the two grandparents in the family:

“For many years, the two main sources of media content for the older family members was radio, followed by television, which was not watched for more than one hour a day, but since the beginning of 2021, television has started to be used more and more often and for a longer time. TV has become their only source of media information and radio is no longer turned on. They also have access to other devices, such as a personal computer, laptop and smartphone, but they do not show any interest in them.”

Only 6 percent of all age groups subscribe to electronic publications, and only 4 percent subscribe to print publications (mostly monthlies such as the National Geographic magazine).

Depending on the type of device (desktop computer, laptop, smartphone) is its usage – at home, outside or mixed.

Another respondent shared:

“We collectively use the TV set and sometimes we have a disagreement about which channel to choose to watch. This happens mostly in the evening. We spend most of the time accessing media when we are at home, less outside of it.”

From the observations made, it seems that each member of the family has a different media consumption and to a large extent it depends on the age group to which he/she belongs.

One of the respondents – a student, says:

“While my grandfather listens to the radio and still prefers mostly print media, my parents have adapted to technologies and boldly use electronic media. My sister and I belong to Generation Z, and for us print media is rather old-fashioned, while communication on social networks, online learning and the Internet is completely normal”.

The survey asks whether news in the media serve as a topic of conversation among family members (which topics and how often). Among the most discussed topics are those about the political situation in the country and abroad (53 percent), the special military operation of Russia in Ukraine (24 percent), economics (10 percent), sports events (5 percent), as well as other topics (8 percent altogether), such as secular events, pandemics (COVID 19), lifestyle news, etc.

One respondent shared:

“News take up a large part of the family’s conversations, with political news at the fore, both nationally and globally. At the moment, the most attention is paid to the news related to the situation between Ukraine and Russia. Non-political news, such as accidents and robberies, for example, is less frequently commented on”.

The frequency of the topics discussed varies from every day in 54 percent of the cases, to twice or thrice a week. 31 percent and 15 percent answered respectively “rarely” or “almost never”.

The study focuses also on the most frequently used media (Fig. 2). Online media is the most preferred by 71 percent of the respondents. 54 percent prefer watching TV, while 34 percent use social media. The number favoring print publications and video platforms such as YouTube is negligible.

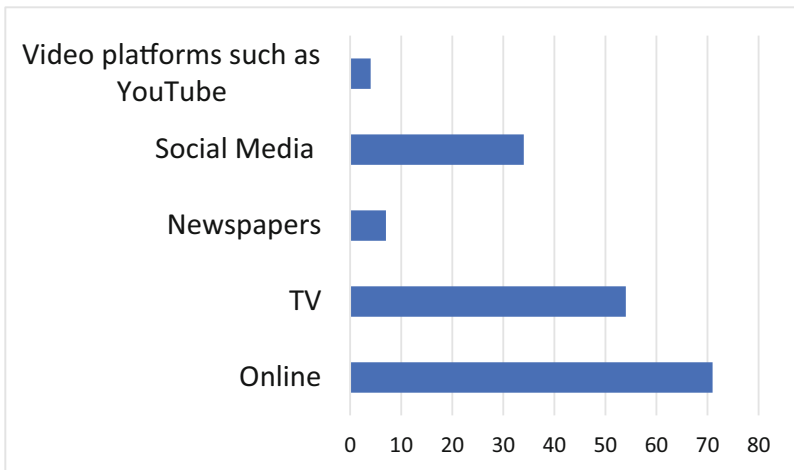


Fig. 2. What media do you use most often?

One of the respondents describes the media day in the family in this way:

“My grandparents mostly watch TV because it’s what they have been used to and it’s easy for them to use, while I (a student) and my sister use online media because of the freedom it provides and the opportunity to tap into more diverse perspectives”.

When asked why they use these media more often, 78 percent answered that they are looking for the information they need on certain topics that interest them. A significant percentage – 49, of people said that they use certain media for entertainment. Among the remaining responses (Fig. 3) were those for easy access/timely information, convenience and communication.

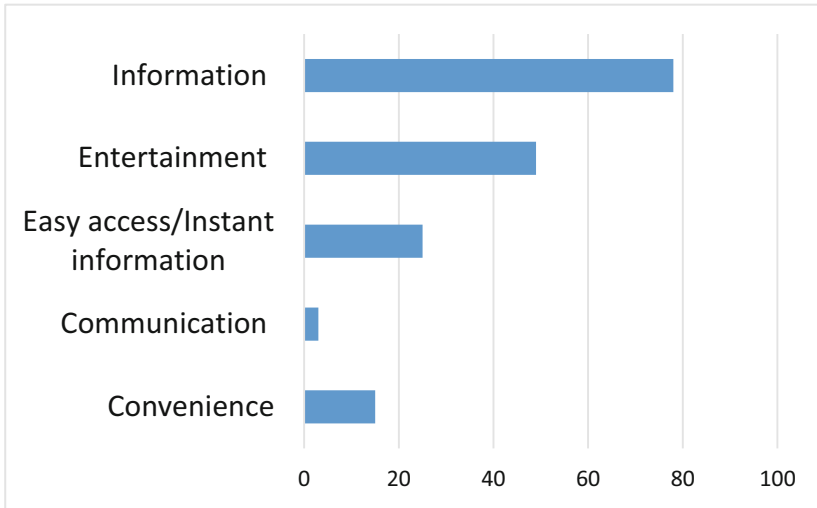


Fig. 3. Why do you use these media more often?

One of the respondents shared observations about the grandfather's (over 65) media preferences:

“The oldest member of the family does not want to rely on modern methods of information such as websites and social networks. He has no desire to learn how to handle them and prefers to watch TV and to read newspapers. These media are used for both information and entertainment. The person finds everything he is interested in and does not need other media”.

According to the observations of one of the respondents, the grandparents in the family mainly use two television channels, both of which are watched for entertainment and information.

“On the day of my observation, BNT (the public service broadcaster) was the entertainment channel and bTV (largest commercial TV station) was the news channel. I (a young student) listen to the news of Darik radio ((largest commercial radio station) to get information, while for fun and socializing I mostly use Facebook. My brother often visits Youtube, both for information and for fun and entertainment. We both use Facebook and Instagram to communicate”.

The most used device is TV set (48 percent of respondents), followed by laptop (26 percent), smartphone - 21 percent, and a minor percentage is allocated to radio receiver (4 percent) and printed publications (1 percent).

The answers regarding the frequency of use of these media are heterogeneous. They are accessed on a daily basis predominantly at home, but also between lectures, in free time, in cases when the respondents are purposefully looking for certain information or wish to learn more about a particular current topic of social life in the country and abroad.

The mother of one of the respondents said:

“Intensive periods of media use for my elderly parents over 65 years old are mostly during news broadcasts, while for the parents themselves, who belong to the age group of 31-50 years, any time when are free enough is an intense time to use media. Therefore, the busier they are, the less they access media content. The media-free moments for adults are when they are reading a book, while for us (31-50) there are almost no such moments. No matter the activity, there is always a chance to glance at the smartphone.”

The largest share of respondents answered that they prefer to be informed by the programs of the commercial national TV channels bTV (38 percent) and NOVA TV (29 percent). The public service Bulgarian National Television (BNT) holds the third place with 14 percent. The share of the Dnevnik Daily is almost insignificant – 2 percent of the respondents indicated it as a source of information.

Radio stations, including the public service Bulgarian national radio (BNR) have not been preferred.

Surprisingly, social media or social networks have not been selected by the observed respondents as a reliable source of information (Fig. 4).

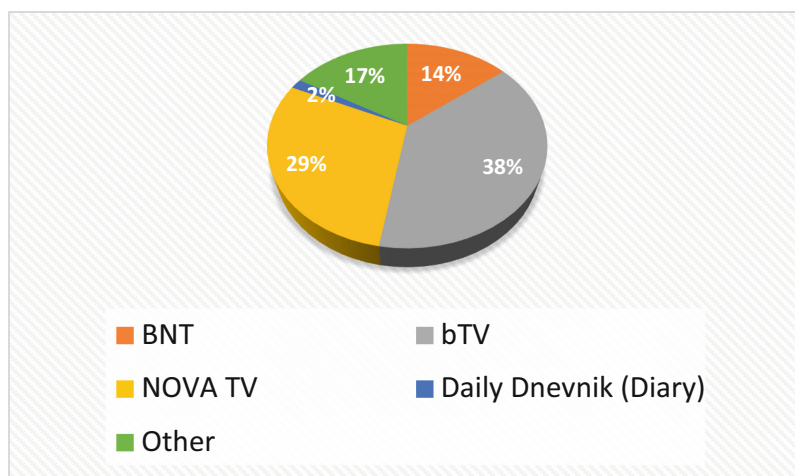


Fig. 4. What is the preferred traditional media for information?

The poll also pays serious attention to media preferences during election campaigns.

The interviewees, when asked whether they receive the necessary information in media in order to make an informed choice about: the presidential candidates and the parliamentary candidates, 84 percent of them answered positively, while 16 percent gave a negative assessment.

According to one of the respondent’s observations:

“My grandparents prefer BNT and bTV, but they claim that they didn’t pay much attention this year to the election campaign because they feel that they are already too old to vote. For my brother, there is no preference or a channel, neither for the presidential nor for the parliamentary elections, because he has decided for a long time who he will vote for and does not intend to burden himself with additional information. I usually follow the daily newspaper "Dnevnik" for both the parliamentary and presidential elections, because it seems the most objective, but it may also be so because it leans more towards my political credo”.

When asked why they prefer particular information channels, the respondents gave mixed answers. (Fig. 5).

Most of the interviewees - 40 percent, answered “To choose who to vote for”, and 36 percent indicated that they trust the channel. Other responses included: “Convenience”, “More information and more detail”, “Synthesized information”, etc.

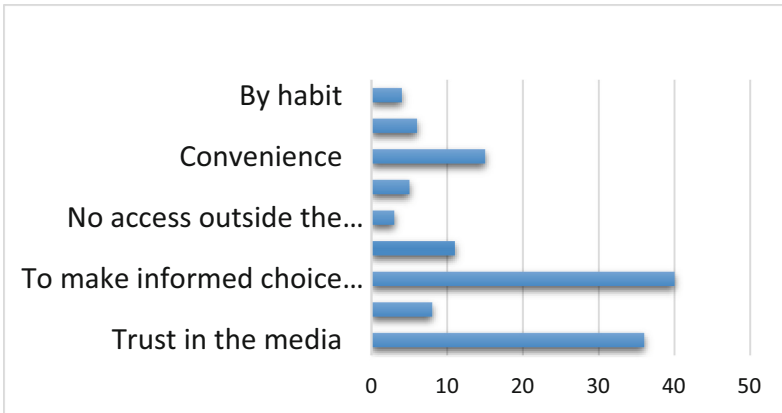


Fig. 5. Why do you prefer this channel for information during election campaigns?

Significant questions regarding disinformation in modern communication have also been put by the observing pollsters. They are related to the credibility of the information and whether family members are able to distinguish between reliable facts and fake news. 60 percent of the respondents answered that they can filter out fake news, while 40 percent admitted that they cannot distinguish between fake and credible facts. It is noteworthy that according to young people, their parents and especially grandparents (over 65 years of age) are more vulnerable to fake news [14].

One of the interviewers noted:

“The oldest person in the sample I presented is radically different from the other participants. With him, the consumption of the Internet is reduced to zero and he trusted most the so-called “classical media” - newspaper, radio, television. For this generation it is more difficult to sift through fake news, since in the past years there was not such a large information influx, and even if there was forgery, it has not been commented extensively”.

Another pollster shared that the lack of higher education and the reluctance to new technologically among older people has a negative impact on their formation of a personal opinion.

“They feel that they have reached a period in their lives when they no longer need to technologically develop their knowledge and skills. They rely solely on other people’s opinions or on what they see on television, which is the main source of information for them. Computer illiteracy affects them as it restricts them from searching for additional information online. Reading newspapers and books has long ceased for them and they are completely not aware with the specifics of new media. With younger people, it is just the opposite - they feel that the information they are “flooded” with should be verified, as they are getting information mainly online. The digital environment they are in allows them to interact with more people, listen to different opinions and distinguish between fake news”.

Of the elderly (over 65 years old), 100 percent of the students observing them – (mostly their grandchildren), are of the opinion that they do not have the skills and knowledge to distinguish fake news from reliable information.

4 Discussion

In today’s world, information and entertainment dominate media choices. Contemporary computerized people are increasingly looking for the news that actually interest them with regard to the most convenient time and format. When the consumers are flooded with information and entertainment, their choice becomes difficult [15].

It is important to note the increasingly minor role of the print media, even during election campaigns. The audiences prefer TV channels or online platforms for information, looking for the most suitable channel to confirm their choice to match their personal political partialities. From a psychological point of view, the needs, because of which the respondents in the undertaken survey choose a certain type of media can be described as: cognitive - to acquire information and knowledge about the world; affective - to provoke emotions in themselves through the media content; personal-integrative, related to the social trust, stability and social status of the individual; socially integrative - for inclusion in conversations with family, friends, colleagues; escape from reality and from the burden of their own social roles [16]. To these needs could be added the need to search for information and arguments to cast the vote for certain candidates in parliamentary or in presidential elections, characterized by the desire for social responsibility and social integration of electors in their role as responsible citizens.

Most theories of media preferences rely predominantly on psychological predispositions to explain preferences through individuals' behavior and are consumer-focused. Structural characteristics of surrounding environment play a very important role in forming media choices. By expressing their preferences, people can change and shape the very structures of the environment which surrounds them [17].

5 Conclusion, Limitation, Implications for Future Research

The survey exploring the media habits in a Bulgarian family on a particular day brought about to some interesting results.

With regard to the first research question: "For what purpose did people use media during the one month national election campaign", 78 percent of the respondents answered that they are looking for the information they need on certain topics that interest them. A significant percentage – 49, of people said that they use certain media for entertainment. Among the remaining responses were those for easy access/timely information, convenience and communication. Each member of the family has different media consumption and to a large extent it depends on the age group to which he/she belongs. The majority of the elderly prefer information.

When answering the second research question "Which media do people prefer most often as a source for information?", the opinion of the largest share of respondents (especially of the elderly) tend to national commercial and public service TV channels, followed by a tiny preference of dailies. Radio stations, social media or social networks have not been selected by the observed respondents.

Interesting answers have been obtained when answering the third research question: "Why people prefer certain media for information during the election campaign?" Most of the interviewees - 40 percent, answer that they need to that in order to choose who to vote for, and 36 percent indicate that they trust the channel. It is noteworthy, however, that according to young people, their elderly parents and especially grandparents (over 65 years of age) are more vulnerable to fake news.

Based on the conducted observations in the media diaries, some conclusions could be drawn.

For the purpose of information and entertainment respondents mostly use online media, with television also being a preferred media. Young interviewees and middle-aged ones access online media using personal computer and smartphone, while elderly mostly watch television and the trust in their preferred media, especially during election campaign, is high. Radio, as well as printed publications, is used less and less at home. On the other hand, an intergenerational gap exists where young people consider their ancestors to be people with outdated views of the world surrounding them, unprepared for modern technologies, unable to distinguish between fake and credible news, thus becoming subject to political manipulation. Young respondents are confident in the correctness of the information they have chosen, thus displaying the so-called "cognitive dissonance" – they are convinced that they can successfully distinguish fake news from correct data. It is noteworthy that the members of the observed families, although accessing different media, freely discuss important topical issues of the public agenda.

The conclusions that emerge are that generational differences in usage of information sources, Internet consumption and social networks are serious. The rapid development

of digital technologies and the significant role of the Internet and social networks in disseminating information create a risk of social isolation for the elderly in an increasingly digitally oriented world.

Bulgaria is among the EU countries where the digital activity of older people is low, but even in countries with a higher standard of living, where adults using the Internet and social networks have a higher share, there is a huge gap in media consumption between them and their young compatriots. This shows that the financial factor is not as important for digital activity as other reasons related to attitude and digital skills.

Another trend, which is visible from the data, is that in recent years, elderly people in Bulgaria, as those throughout Europe, have become more active users of the Internet and social networks, although they do not reach the level of the younger generations. In this sense, it is necessary to pay more attention to training for the people of the third age in terms of digital and media literacy, which would help them to better integrate in the modern world.

A limitation of the conducted study is that the sample is somewhat biased, since the students from the education-oriented family-backgrounds are overrepresented. Nevertheless, the experiences of the researchers from the Tartu University of Estonia, who initiated the frame of the research, indicate that the main concerns are mostly related to the variety of roles/habits and meanings media can have for the respondents. Future empirical studies may address this point (for example by conducting a controlled experiment) and enlarge the sample's characteristics.

The results of the conducted study are indicative to those interested in contemporary media developments and especially in the role that media play in people's lives in hybrid media contexts.

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