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# A STRATIFIED AND SEGMENTED CITIZENRY? IDENTIFICATION OF POLITICAL MILIEUS AND CONDITIONS FOR THEIR COMMUNICATIVE INTEGRATION

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*Integration through public communication is challenged by the parallel tendencies toward the stratification and segmentation of the citizenry. The milieu concept takes up this notion: According to this meso-level approach, basic political orientations and political efficacy are aligned with specific information repertoires and modes of communication. Aggregations of individual data display group-specific patterns of heterogeneous political communication practices. First, this paper aims to characterise milieus within the German citizenry. Based on an online survey (n = 1488) and a hierarchical cluster analysis, we identified 12 distinct milieus. Second, we analyse the status of two citizen-level conditions of political integration. These include overlapping information repertoires and milieu-specific issue agendas. Overall, we argue for using social groups' lifeworld-specific contexts to explain patterns of political and communicative behaviour. Our typology serves as the basis for future projects on lifeworld-shaped political media use, the processing of media content, and its effects.*

KEYWORDS   integration; social heterogeneity; public sphere; milieus; media use

In a recent review article, van Aelst et al. (2017) summarise current changes in the political information environment that constitute challenges to democracy. Their main concerns are trends towards (a) increasing polarisation and fragmentation and (b) increasing inequalities in public knowledge. These trends, they note, might "undermine the degree of inclusiveness and social cohesion" (19). Our study builds on this assessment and uses the public sphere's function of political integration as a starting point: By providing diverse audience groups with a common basis of issues and knowledge, the public sphere of the mass media establishes the basis for the self-perception of a heterogeneous society as one social community. If issues are discussed in a pluralistic and discursive manner, mass media constitute a shared perception of political reality and can even encourage the mutual tolerance of diverse viewpoints in society. In this way, public communication also serves as the basis for identity-building and for citizens' political participation (political integration). More generally, shared issues and knowledge are necessary for basic modes of social communication (e.g. Dahl 1989; Ferree et al. 2002; Friedland 2001; McQuail 2005).

Apart from the democratic performance of the mass media, we also need to look at a nation's political culture and its citizenry's heterogeneity (i.e. the demand side of high-

choice information environments) (van Aelst et al. 2017). The success of an integrative public sphere depends upon the willingness of politically and socially diverse groups to participate in public discussion and to be aware of and to accept others' viewpoints. Research on audience fragmentation questions in which parts of society these requirements are still met. In fact, social heterogeneity is perceived as a challenge to an integrated public sphere as we find tendencies of "stratamentation," that is, processes of parallel stratification and segmentation across the citizenry (Bennett and Iyengar 2008).

Most commonly, research explains diverging patterns of political communication in terms of methodological individualism and the micro-macro link (e.g. Shehata and Strömbäck 2011, 2013). On the macro level, researchers discuss media system factors and a range of determinants seems to be influential on the micro level (e.g. personality traits, socio-economic status, political attitudes) (e.g. Peiser and Jandura 2010; Fletcher and Nielsen 2017; Ksiazek 2011). Our approach argues for the integration of a meso-level into this model, as fragmentation studies implicitly assume there to be social entities on this level of analysis. However, individual level characteristics do not thoroughly describe these entities. With this in mind, we suggest applying the meso-level milieu concept. Milieus are defined as social groups in which basic political orientations, and their degrees of political efficacy, accompany specific information repertoires[1] and modes of political communication. These groups are also known as "(political) lifestyle groups" (Bourdieu 1984; McQuail 2005; Scherer 2008; Vyncke 2002). The milieu concept is quite useful, as it not only allows for the description of media use and political participation within social groups, but also offers theoretical explanations of the complex interplay between predispositions and information repertoires in lifeworld-specific contexts.

In this study, we argue for a milieu-centred theoretical approach to describe diverging patterns of political communication and its relationship to the public sphere's integrative function. This first involves the deduction of a typology of milieus within the German citizenry. Moreover, we use the approach to examine the state of two citizen-level conditions of political integration across the heterogeneous citizenry. On one hand, this refers to overlapping information repertoires. On the other hand, we discuss milieu-specific issue agendas. Both are prerequisites for a communicative cross-linkage of politically diverse social groups. We investigate these tasks via an online survey ($n = 1488$) of the German population. For the purpose of comparative research, our study offers recent empirical results from Germany in the otherwise mostly US-dominated research on audience fragmentation (van Aelst et al. 2017).

In the following, we begin with an introduction to the theoretical preconditions of political integration through mass media as well as to the phenomenon of stratamentation. Then, the milieu approach is defined more narrowly. Subsequently, we provide information on our data set and methods. In the first part of the ensuing findings, we contrast and interpret the main characteristics of selected milieus. In the second part, we refer to findings on the state of two conditions of integration. Finally, we discuss limitations of the study and provide recommendations for future research projects.

## Preconditions and Challenges of Political Integration through Mass Media

Mass media serve a socially inclusive function through various mechanisms and on different levels of analysis. From a collective perspective, mass media support the

construction of social reality and mediate common basic norms and values of societies (Couldry and Hepp 2016). In this paper, we focus on the establishment of a public sphere through mass media as a means to the political integration of inherently heterogeneous societies. According to this understanding, mass media can bring together politically diverse individuals and social groups by setting a common agenda of relevant issues. Thereby, mass media support the self-perception of heterogeneous societies as one coherent social community (Friedland 2001; McQuail 2005). Ideally, news reporting can even promote the mutual tolerance of diverging political stances in society. This requires an essentially democratic media performance (Christians et al. 2009). Only in the case of pluralistic and discursive news reporting, citizens find support in orienting themselves within society because they are enabled to validate their own political positions against the viewpoints of others. However, the idea of a single "unified public sphere" with a "unified audience" is unrealistic. The development towards fragmented media environments with corresponding groups of audiences reinforces this assessment. McQuail (1997) illustrated the dynamics of fragmentation in high-choice media environments with the help of ideal types. His break-up model describes the scenario of potential social disintegration: In this model, there is no longer any unified interconnecting public sphere. Instead, several smaller "sphericules" (Gitlin 1998) or "media arenas" (Ferree et al. 2002) with different, more or less integrative, media content for each corresponding audience group are present. It appears to be a fundamental question of whether the media content needed for their members' political integration still reaches large parts of society. Against the background of fragmented media environments, the different media arenas should at best exhibit a certain degree of resemblance (in terms of common issue agendas and similarly high degrees of plurality and deliberation) in order to unfold the public sphere's integrative potential for the whole of society.

Nevertheless, the democratic performance of the mass media is not the only prerequisite for the political integration of heterogeneous societies. In this paper, we shift the focus towards the demand side of political communication environments, i.e. a nation's political culture and its citizenry's heterogeneity. The diverse groups in society should ideally be willing to participate in public discourse as well as to be aware of and to accept others' political viewpoints (Dahl 1989; Gastil 2008). Whereas differences in the degree of citizens' political involvement come as no surprise, research assumes that the fragmentation of media environments might have increased these differences and the potential to situate oneself within rather seclusive spheres of (mass media and interpersonal) communication. Bennett and Iyengar (2008) conceptualise these tendencies with the idea of a "stratamentation" that involves two parallel processes: First, the citizenry is stratified in terms of diverging degrees of political engagement and political media use. Certain social groups avoid news media altogether, or their exposure to political content remains rather incidental and infrequent (Lee 2009; Prior 2007; Trilling and Schönbach 2013). Such groups might lack the substantial basis needed for opinion-building and expressing their political positions. Consequently, growing political knowledge gaps, as well as diverging degrees of political participation, are to be expected. Second, those who are highly engaged are segmented in terms of diverging belief systems (Converse 1964). In such groups, specific worldviews guide the selection and processing of media content (Stroud 2011; Yeo, Cacciatore, and Scheufele 2015). In this context, and as a negative equivalent of an integrated public sphere, fragmentation researchers fear the evolvement of hermetically sealed, politically homogeneous spheres of communication, which they describe as "echo chambers"

(Garrett 2009; Sunstein 2007) or "media enclaves" (Webster 2005). The situation of some groups in such secluded spheres of mass media and interpersonal communication may explain biased or polarised attitudes (Binder et al. 2009; Mancini 2013; Prior 2013).

In order to examine the status of political integration across heterogeneous societies, two basic citizen-level conditions should be considered. First, this refers to overlapping information repertoires (Taneja et al. 2012). The argument here is that the likelihood of a communicative cross-linkage of heterogeneous social groups increases, if at least to some degree the same news outlets are used. Thus, similar knowledge and information is mediated into social groups that diverge in other ways. Second, we discuss group-specific issue agendas, because a shared issue agenda serves as a necessary condition for a common understanding of political reality and for the crosscutting exchange in interpersonal communication networks. Furthermore, shared issues are the basis for the mutual recognition of society's diverse viewpoints in political discourse (Katz 1996).

### Considering the Meso-Level: The Milieu Approach

Heterogeneity is a characteristic trait of the citizenry in pluralist societies. The milieu approach takes up this notion. At present, this approach still is rather uncommon for descriptions of audience groups—especially in English-speaking academia. The concept of politico-communicative milieus applied here is rooted in research on social milieus that combines sociological approaches of social class (vertical differentiation of society) with horizontal segmentations based on distinct value orientations. Different from traditional models of social class, the milieu approach aims to explain how specific configurations of social predispositions generate individual and group-specific logics of action expressed through value orientations (Bourdieu 1984; Feldman 2003; van Deth and Scarbrough 1995). One of the most frequently cited definitions of social milieus is as follows:

> Social milieus are groups of like-minded people who share value orientations, life principles, relations to fellow human-beings and mentalities … hence, those who belong to the same milieu interpret and organise their surrounding world in a similar manner and therein diverge from others. (Hradil 2006, 4, own translation)

The formation of guiding value orientations depends upon economic, social, and cultural resources unequally distributed across society and upon the attachment to a certain age cohort and experiences of socialisation (socio-demographic background). Moreover, everyday experiences strongly influence milieu-specific worldviews. For example, Kitschelt (1994, 1995) points to the importance of formative experiences in the labour market. He argues that certain occupational positions are typically associated with particular (political) value orientations.

In order to express the diversity and inequality of society, milieu theory uses a typological approach. Still, milieus are understood as dynamic and fluent, meaning that their compositions and sizes might change over time, and overlaps between certain types are possible. Moreover, the typological attribution of citizens to a milieu is not meant to be deterministic. In fact, individual citizens themselves cultivate memberships in milieus as a "product" of their particular worldviews and principles (Hradil 2006).

Research in political sociology builds on sociological milieu theory and describes citizens' heterogeneity with the help of political factors. Political milieus are characterised by the intersection of basic political value orientations, everyday experiences, political

attitudes, and modes of political participation. Individual members of a milieu resemble each other concerning their political belief systems; that is, they share ideas on the basic principles that should be applied in concrete policy decisions. Here, political value orientations relate to conceptions of a desirable society. Citizens structure various, conflicting orientations hierarchically, so that single orientations are preferred, while others are devalued.

> The basic notion that value structures are the key to understanding human behaviour … remains a central component of most analyses. People are rarely affected by single values, in isolation from other values. Instead, values are arranged into personal preference rankings. (Jacoby 2006, 70)

In contrast to the mere approval of single general values (e.g. freedom or justice), individual preferences are revealed as soon as citizens are confronted with the task of positioning themselves in a value conflict (Jacoby 2006). Ensuing from such positioning, single milieus are therefore defined by characteristic value syntheses. To determine a nation's typical political value conflicts, the traditional cleavage approach by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) gains importance. Our project is oriented towards the understanding shared by several authors, according to which two main cleavages predominantly characterise political competition in Germany (Kriesi et al. 2012; Warwick 2002). Referring back to Inglehart and Flanagan (1987), and to Kitschelt (1994), these include both socio-economic and cultural cleavage. The end-poles of the two dimensions focused on here are "welfare-state egalitarianism" and "market liberalism" for the socio-economic conflicts and "libertarianism" and "authoritarianism" for cultural conflicts.

Political value orientations display the core of what Dahlgren (2005) describes as "civic cultures," that is, distinct types of citizen roles. Certain orientations (such as a post materialistic-libertarian stance) imply an active and participating role in democracy. Moreover, the configuration of a citizen's role towards the political sphere strongly depends upon individual perceptions of demands and opportunities for participation. For example, personal demands might evolve due to a marginal representation of one's own viewpoints in the political realm. These considerations suggest including another constitutive attribute of political milieus, namely the individual closeness to politics (political efficacy). This idea can be linked with the concept of stratamentation discussed above. On the vertical dimension, the citizenry is stratified in terms of diverging degrees of political efficacy. On the horizontal dimension, the citizenry is segmented along distinct combinations of value positions.

Finally, Weiß (2009) extended studies on political milieus by integrating elements referring to (political) communication. He argues that information repertoires and modes of political communication, such as routines of information processing, differences in perceived media performance (hard vs. soft news), or interpersonal communication practices, are systematically intertwined with the core dimensions of political milieus. He refers to this extension of the traditional milieu approach as "politico-communicative milieus" and recommends a stronger integration of the concept into political communication research. Primarily, the concept enables to describe social groups with distinct worldviews and patterns of political communication. Linking the concept to challenges to the public sphere's function of integration discussed above, milieus moreover move within specific environments of political communication ("sphericules" or "arenas") due to their patterns of media use and interpersonal communication. Depending upon these distinct patterns and basic political orientations, the potential of political integration differs between milieus.

Taken together, the consideration of the coherent interplay of single factors within a milieu's lifeworld allows for a deeper understanding of the subjective principles of media selection and processing. Milieu-specific guiding principles and practices moreover affect if, and how, media content can shape political participation. Here, milieu theory differs strongly from the commonly used approaches that focus on the impacts of single independent variables (e.g. sociodemographic background) and which might obscure important differentiations within groups of citizens (e.g. diverging attitudes towards the political sphere within the highly educated population). In general, milieu-theoretical differentiations of the citizenry enable researchers to ask more precise questions concerning media use and media effects and to obtain meaningful findings regarding group-specific linkages between media use and political participation.

### Research Questions

Against this theoretical background, and in order to examine the status of communication-based political integration in parts of German society, we address the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: What are the main characteristics of politico-communicative milieus in Germany?
- Research Question 2: Which patterns of overlapping information repertoires exist between milieus?
- Research Question 3: In which ways do milieu-specific issue agendas overlap?

### Method

#### Data

For the purpose of representative statements about the distribution of milieus across the total population, standardised measures are most suitable (see also Mahrt and Begenat 2013). In May and June 2016, we conducted an online survey ($n = 1488$, quota sample, data weighted by education and age, respondents' ages between 18 and 69) to examine the current distribution of stratified and segmented citizen groups in Germany. Two groups of items were included in the questionnaire. These groups comprise (1) key typological variables (internal and external political efficacy; political value orientations) and (2) descriptive variables. We used the former to identify types within the dataset and gathered the latter for the purpose of uncovering closer descriptions of a milieu's main politico-communicative facets (see online appendix for an English translation of our survey questions).

#### Typological Variables

For the first typological variable, we rely on the validated measure of political efficacy. Political efficacy itself is split into two dimensions, internal and external efficacy, both representing the relation of citizens to politics. Internal political efficacy reflects an individual's feeling of competence in political issues. External efficacy describes an individual's trust in political responsiveness or, vice versa, the degree of political alienation (Moy 2008). We applied a short scale of political efficacy (GESIS 2017), including four items with two

four-point scales for each dimension. Taken together, both dimensions are adequate to measure a citizen's closeness to politics in a differentiated but still economic way (internal dimension, $\alpha = 0.78$; external dimension, $\alpha = 0.76$).

For the purpose of a nuanced differentiation of single milieus, we covered each value conflict dimension with three items. In a pre-study ($n = 165$; convenience sample), we tested a selection of items from previous surveys gathering citizens' value orientations, such as the World Values Survey (2013). We chose the most adequate items based on a reliability analysis. Each item in the main survey was introduced by the short comment "There are different viewpoints concerning our society. In the following, we present two people with opposing opinions. Which of the two most represents your personal viewpoint?" The respondents adjusted their own position on a 6-point scale between two key arguments representing opposing value conflict positions. To prevent response bias, we randomised the items' sequence. Both conflict dimensions could be condensed with the help of a factor analysis (KMO = 0.57, explained variance of 44 per cent, PCA, varimax rotation). As the basis for further calculations, we generated an index variable representing each of the three items attached to one value conflict (cleavage) dimension.

In preparation, we created four indices based on ten survey questions. For the typologisation procedure, we first z-standardised the variables and then applied a hierarchical cluster analysis (Ward method, Euclidean squared distance), a statistical tool that helps to define similar groups within a dataset. In order to evaluate the results, we defined a set of criteria, which are commonly used for such purposes: (1) the cluster's increase in heterogeneity, (2) the quotients of F-values (<1), and (3) the correct reproduction of clusters based on a discriminant analysis. From a statistical point of view, a 12-cluster solution appeared to be the best choice. A high heterogeneity increase was observed between Clusters 11 and 12, the quotients of F-values stayed below 1, and 89 per cent of the respondents were attributed correctly by the discriminant analysis. Therefore, we continued to work with 12 separate clusters.

### Descriptive Variables

We divided those variables aiming at a closer characterisation of milieus into five sections. The first section comprises items that specify a milieu's political position:

- Party preference (nine dichotomous items; a factor analysis revealed a four-factor solution representing four political camps in Germany)
- Political attitudes towards three prominent social conflict frames (four-point items, two items for each conflict; "social top vs. social bottom" index, $\alpha = 0.72$; "EU vs. nation-state" / "political integration vs. demarcation" index, $\alpha = 0.72$; "cultural mainstream vs. minorities" / "cultural integration vs. demarcation" index, non-satisfying $\alpha$-value)

Items in the second section refer to the milieu's closeness to the political and communicative sphere:[2]

- Political interest (five-point item, *M = 2.76, SD = 1.05*)
- Political participation index (three-point item, $\alpha = 0.73$, *M = 1.95, SD = 0.81*)
- Satisfaction with democracy (four-point item, *M = 2.79, SD = 0.82*)
- Feelings of being politically represented in the media (four-point item, *M = 2.45, SD = 0.71*)

The next section comprises statements about the participant's socio-demographic background. Here, we considered the following items:

- Age
- Gender
- Education level
- Income
- Occupation

The fourth section concerns the milieus' communicative practices:[3]

- Intensity of media use (eight items for traditional media, a five-item set for online media; four-point scale)
- Intensity of interpersonal communication about politics (five-point item, $M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.12$)
- Political heterogeneity of interpersonal communication networks (four-point item, $M = 2.09$, $SD = 0.45$)

With regard to RQ3, the last section entails the validated "most important problem" item to determine milieu-specific issue agendas. We coded responses to this open question with the help of an updated coding scheme from the German Longitudinal Election Study (2013).

## Results

The 12 identified milieus can be structured according to the idea of a stratamentation (see Figure 1). Concerning the vertical stratifying dimension, we subsumed the milieus as five types of citizens. In this regard, the typical combination of degrees of internal and
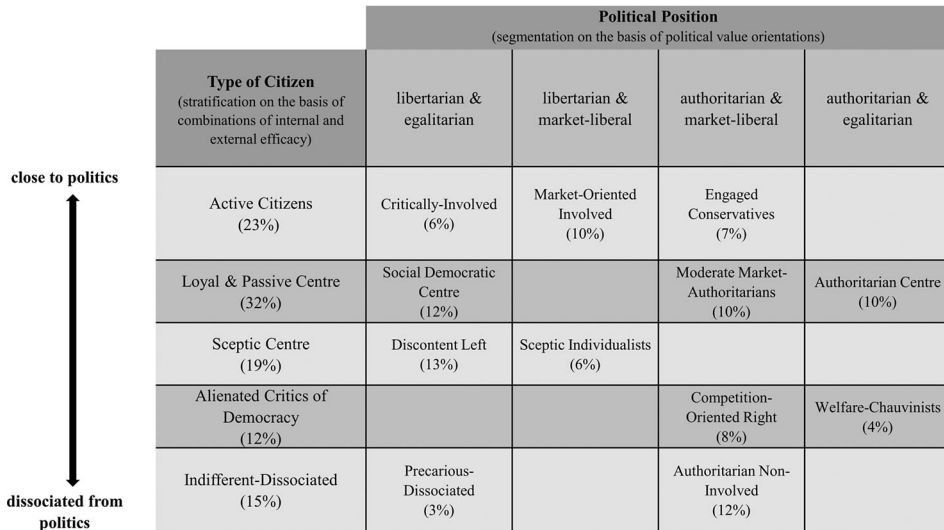
| Type of Citizen (stratification on the basis of combinations of internal and external efficacy) | Political Position (segmentation on the basis of political value orientations) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | libertarian & egalitarian | libertarian & market-liberal | authoritarian & market-liberal | authoritarian & egalitarian |
| **close to politics** ↑ Active Citizens (23%) | Critically-Involved (6%) | Market-Oriented Involved (10%) | Engaged Conservatives (7%) | |
| Loyal & Passive Centre (32%) | Social Democratic Centre (12%) | | Moderate Market-Authoritarians (10%) | Authoritarian Centre (10%) |
| Sceptic Centre (19%) | Discontent Left (13%) | Sceptic Individualists (6%) | | |
| Alienated Critics of Democracy (12%) | | | Competition-Oriented Right (8%) | Welfare-Chauvinists (4%) |
| **dissociated from politics** ↓ Indifferent-Dissociated (15%) | Precarious-Dissociated (3%) | | Authoritarian Non-Involved (12%) | |

**FIGURE 1**
Stratification and segmentation of the citizenry (Typology)

external political efficacy is crucial: In the *Active Citizens* group, we found high levels in both dimensions. In the *Loyal & Passive Centre*, the level of trust in the political elite's responsiveness is high as well, whereas the internal dimension of efficacy is merely average or below-average. Quite similarly, the evaluation of one's own political competencies is also at an average level in the *Sceptic Centre* group. The defining characteristic for this type is its low or very low trust in the political actions of the elite. The two groups with the greatest distance from the political sphere are both characterised by low levels of external political efficacy. What sets them apart, in turn, is their internal political efficacy. Whereas the group of the *Alienated Critics* evaluates itself as politically proficient, the internal efficacy is quite low in the group of the *Indifferent-Dissociated*. One striking finding is that about 46 per cent of the sample population exhibited more or less strong tendencies towards political alienation (comparatively low levels of external efficacy). Without a minimum level of trust in the elite's responsiveness, the legitimacy of a representative democracy is, at the very least, threatened. By contrast, more than half of the sample still trusts the political elite.

On the horizontal segmenting dimension, the milieus are differentiated based on their positioning towards the two value conflicts of Germany's political culture. All together, the idea of stratamentation appears to be a helpful heuristic for describing the fundamental differentiation of groups of citizens that move within certain political communication environments. Across the citizenry, we found that processes of political segmentation are especially strong within the group of *Active Citizens* and within the two milieus alienated from the current state of democracy in Germany, namely the *Competition-Oriented Right* and the *Welfare-Chauvinists*.

### Characterisations of Distinct Types

Table 1 lists the main characteristics of four selected milieus along five key dimensions. For a clear and parsimonious illustration, we included those facets that distinguish one milieu from the others. Here, we refer to milieu characteristics in which remarkable deviations from the total sample are present (see online appendix). In short, each milieu represents a certain type of citizen role. For the Active Citizens group, we take the milieu of *Engaged Conservatives* as an example. Yeo, Cacciatore, and Scheufele (2015) note that we must not neglect "moderate" (seemingly unappealing) political groups in future research; in response, we included the milieu *Social Democratic Centre*. Furthermore, our study also elaborates on two "extreme" milieus (the *Competition-Oriented Right* and the *Authoritarian Non-Involved*).

In general, the results corroborate a basic assumption of milieu theory, that is, the configuration of single characteristic factors within milieus displays a coherent overall pattern. Due to limited space and regarding RQ1, we subsequently discuss two distinct types in more detail. We chose to give a description of the *Competition-Oriented Right* and the *Authoritarian Non-Involved* as these milieus demonstrate the above discussed issue of stratamentation in an impressive manner. While examining the Competition-Oriented Right, practices of potential seclusion, polarisation, and non-discursivity become apparent. While citizens attached to this milieu feel politically alienated but are still highly engaged, the Authoritarian Non-Involved are exemplary for a strong stratification and tendencies of a general dissociation from political communication.

Generally, the Competition-Oriented Right are elite-critical (also towards the supranational level of politics), dissatisfied with democracy, and do not see their political positions

**TABLE 1**
Characteristics of Four Milieus

| Dimension | Engaged Conservatives | Social Democratic Centre | Competition-Oriented Right | Authoritarian Non-Involved |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Political Position** | | | | |
| Value orientations | rather market-liberal and authoritarian | rather egalitarian and libertarian | market-liberal and authoritarian | rather market-liberal and rather authoritarian (but inconsistent positioning) |
| Party preference | Christian Democrats (55%), Social Democrats (50%) strongest preference for conservative parties across all milieus | Greens (63%), Social Democrats (56%) strongest preference for Social Democrats across all types | Alternative for Germany (AfD) (53%), CSU/SPD (25% each) strongest preference for Nationalist Party across all types | Social Democrats (40%), Greens (36%), Christian Democrats (31%) no clear party preference |
| Attitudes towards social conflict frames | relatively low approval of "social top vs. social bottom" | highly concerned with respect to growing resentment of refugees | patterns of right-wing populism: anti-EU, anti-elite, welfare chauvinism, resentment of refugees | welfare-chauvinistic attitudes towards refugees |
| **Closeness to Politics** | | | | |
| Internal & external political efficacy | high internal efficacy and very high external efficacy | internal efficacy below average and high external efficacy | high internal efficacy and low external efficacy | low internal efficacy and average external efficacy |
| Political interest | relatively high level of political interest | relatively strong medium level of political interest | – | low level of political interest |
| Political participation | above-average level of political participation | – | – | low level of political participation |
| Satisfaction with democracy | second-highest satisfaction with democracy | – | relatively high dissatisfaction with democracy | – |
| Feeling of media representation | high level of feelings of media representation | – | very low level of feelings of media representation | low level of feelings of media representation |

| Dimension | Engaged Conservatives | Social Democratic Centre | Competition-Oriented Right | Authoritarian Non-Involved |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Social Background** | | | | |
| Gender | – | – | – | high percentage of females |
| Age | – | rather young | older (mostly 45+) | – |
| Education | higher education degrees | higher education degrees | low and medium levels of education | rather low level of education |
| Occupation | rather employed status | high levels of trainees low levels of retirees | highest number of workers | second-highest number of workers highest number of homemakers very high number of low-skilled processing jobs |
| Income | high amount of white-collar employees and university-trained professions | rather low levels of income | – | – |
| **Communicative Practices** | | | | |
| Media use & information repertoires | above-average importance of all kinds of news sources, especially public-service TV very broad information repertoire | above-average preference for public-service TV and online hard news | above-average importance of soft news (commercial TV and tabloid newspapers), regional newspapers, online portals, and Facebook | infrequent use of informational sources except for private TV and Facebook |
| Interpersonal communication | relatively heterogeneous networks of interpersonal communication | – | very homogenous networks of interpersonal communication | infrequent interpersonal communication |
| **Issue Agendas** | | | | |
| Most important issues (May/June 2016) | 1. Immigration 2. Pensions 3. TTIP & CETA 4. EU 5. Health care | 1. Immigration 2. Pensions 3. TTIP & CETA 4. Education policy 5. Distributional justice | 1. Immigration 2. Pensions 3. TTIP & CETA 4. Foreign policy & security 5. Social policy | 1. Immigration 2. Old-age poverty 3. Pensions 4. Unemployment 5. Poverty |

represented in the media. The perception of a non-representation of its own political position on the level of politics and media in the intended extreme way might explain the milieu's disaffection. Even though members of the milieu feel politically competent, they do not show high levels of engagement. Still, the milieu exhibits a strong preference for right-wing extremist or populist parties. With the view towards its sociodemographic background and political positioning, the type corresponds with regard to the "winning formula" (Kitschelt 1995) for right-wing parties. As previously mentioned, everyday experiences, such as occupational dependencies, might, according to Kitschelt, transfer to political orientations. The high number of workers among the Competition-Oriented Right indicates a social group whose occupational environment is characterised by a hierarchical organisation and orientations towards authorities that give manufacturing orders and monitor the execution of the orders. This occupational logic might also express itself through strongly authoritarian political positions. Here, authoritarianism is combined with market-liberal orientations. In accordance with an elite-critical stance, these could be interpreted as an expression of a general anti-state attitude. Otherwise, market-liberal positions could result from concerns about the employers' standing in the increasingly competitive and globalised market environment. The employers' success might be endangered by governmental restrictions or tax burdens (Kitschelt 1994). This type's support of welfare-chauvinist attitudes and strong resentments towards refugees point to another possible explanation of both its competitive and authoritarian orientations: Concerning the labour market, this type seems to take up an ostracising position towards minorities. In the view of this milieu, minorities do not have "permission" to find jobs or to draw social benefits. Concerns about the milieu's own market position are so strong that ethnicity seems to function as an exclusionary argument. When it comes to the milieu's communicative practices, the focus on soft news is remarkable. The often emotionalised, scandalised, personalised, and negativist style of tabloid news reporting might reinforce sceptical attitudes towards the political system and its representatives. Further, two factors might promote tendencies towards political polarisation. First, media outlets with a non-integrative and polarising potential are successful among the members of this type. When we asked for those media outlets within which the milieu's members feel represented, the type favoured newspapers with extreme political leanings, political blogs, and online sources such Facebook—outlets where the likelihood of receiving content related to one's own worldviews is comparatively high. Second, a confirmation, or even polarisation, of existing attitudes within this milieu is highly probable, as it is situated within politically homogeneous networks of interpersonal communication.

Milieu theory highlights the importance of sociodemographic background variables for the formation of basic political orientations and corresponding communicative practices. Concerning its cultural and economic capital, the Authoritarian Non-Involved represent a type with a very low social status. Hence, the necessary requirements for active participation and trust in one's own political competence are missing here. The milieu's social background might affect its dissociation from politics in another sense as well. Due to its precarious social situation, other more urgent problems and challenges are central in its members' everyday experiences, such as the earning of a livelihood. The milieu's issue agenda hints at this interpretation; here, the top issues are "poverty" and "unemployment", for example. Moreover, potential long-term experiences of low social status within this type might foster feelings of resignation about politics. The milieu's political apathy is important for its (partly diffuse) value-related positioning. Due to deficiencies in basic

political knowledge and a subsequent lack of understanding of survey questions, such positioning poses a challenge to the Authoritarian Non-Involved (Begenat 2016). In addition to the main conflict dimensions, we still find welfare-chauvinistic attitudes towards refugees within this milieu. The reinforcement of fears of losing social status and the comparatively easy reasoning of this social conflict frame might promote such hostile attitudes. Furthermore, the main characteristics described above are expressed by the milieu's communicative practices. This milieu comes into contact with politics incidentally, or within the context of soft news or rather private information (e.g. Facebook). Due to its low salience, members of this milieu seldom talk to others about politics. Against this background, we expect that the substantial requirements for democratic opinion building and the mediation of basic political knowledge are missing in this milieu.

With a view towards RQ1, the previous empirical-based milieu descriptions clearly reveal that separate segments defined by coherent patterns of basic political orientations and corresponding communicative practices exist in German society.

### Conditions for Integration: Shared News Sources and Common Issues

This section addresses RQs 2 and 3 and focuses on shared news sources and common issues as important conditions for the integration of a heterogeneous citizenry. We begin by looking at the media use of the four selected milieus. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate potential overlaps of information repertoires, as illustrated with the help of net graphics.
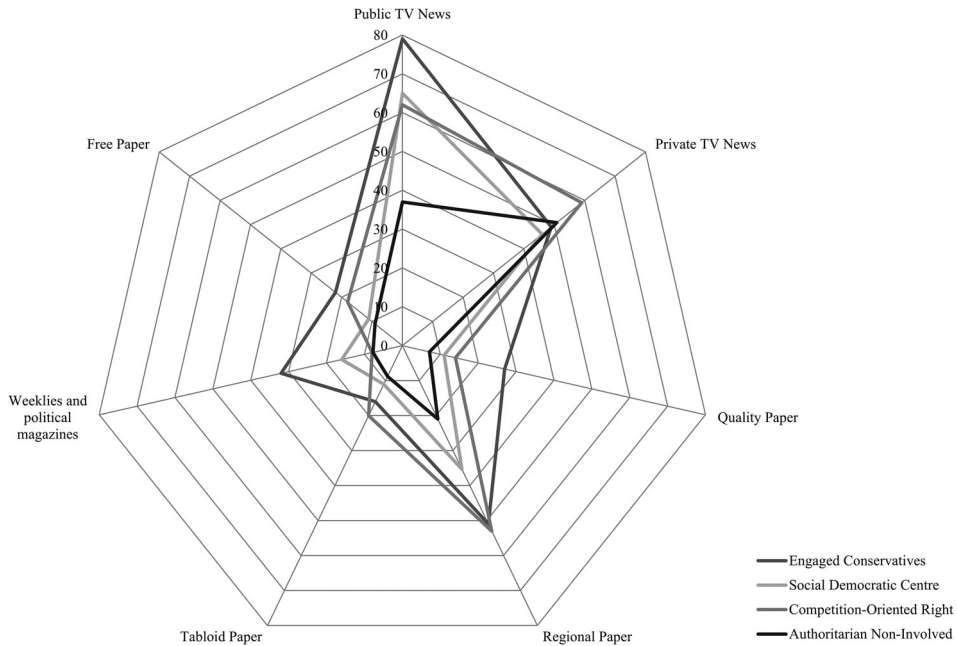


**FIGURE 2**
Traditional media use of four distinct types. Percentage share, aggregated values for "daily" use and "several times per week"
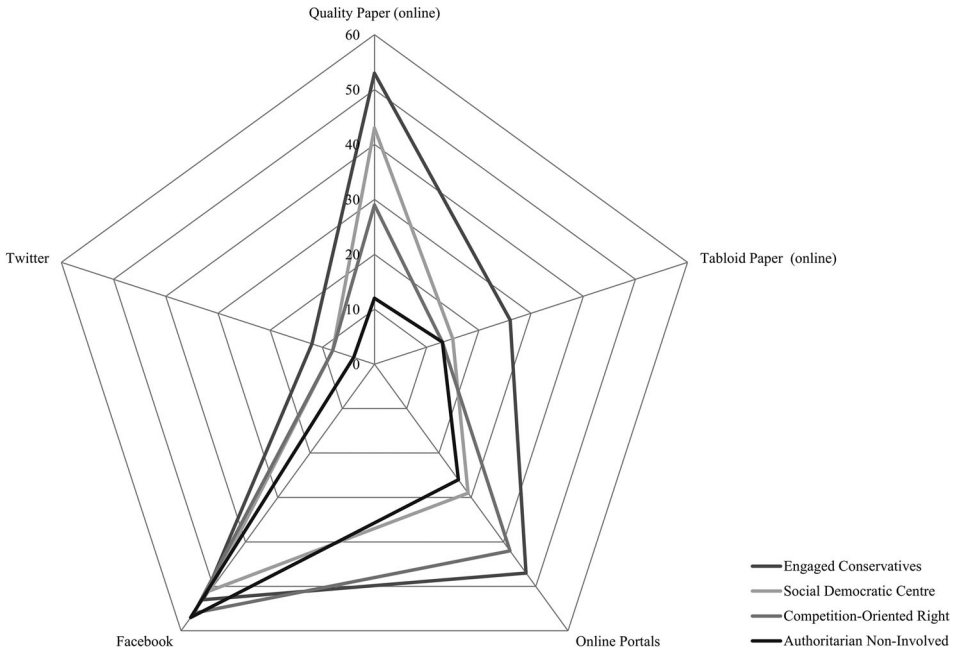
**FIGURE 3**
Online media use of four distinct types. Percentage share, aggregated values for "daily"
use and "several times per week"

*Shared news sources.*   As an overall result, we find many shared news sources across
the citizenry. In particular, various milieus intensively watch news on public-service televi-
sion. This even holds true for the elite-sceptical Competition-Oriented Right. Their negative
attitude towards the state does apparently not result in an avoidance of public-service
broadcasting.[4] Unsurprisingly, due to their low level of general political news media, the
Authoritarian Non-Involved only exhibit medium levels of public-service TV use. Due to
its wide reach across almost all milieus, and its guideline of following internal diversity,
public-service broadcasting can thus function as an integrative factor and counterweight
to polarisation. Especially in times of stratamentation, public broadcasting can enable a het-
erogeneous citizenry to learn about the same agenda, and potentially about the worldviews
of other members of society.

About half of the milieus consume private TV news at least several times a week. There-
fore, this type of news also entails an integrative potential, albeit to a lower degree than
public-service TV news. For hard news outlets, such as quality papers, weeklies, and political
magazines (online and offline), there are clearly visible milieu-specific differentiations. These
outlets are primarily important for milieus in the Active Citizens group (such as the Engaged
Conservatives). In addition, these outlets reach parts of the Loyal and Passive Centre (Social
Democratic Centre). In case that hard news outlets are still oriented towards classic standards
of journalism (e.g. diversity, objectivity, civility), they display a key source of political infor-
mation for those milieus willing to participate in public discourse.

For two other types of sources, regional papers and online portals, we find a milieu-
overarching relevance, again to a lesser degree for dissociated milieus. Lastly, we found a

noticeable overlap concerning the use of Facebook—even for milieus with otherwise low levels of political media use.

*Common issues.*    Turning to RQ3, we finally discuss the issue agendas illustrated in the last dimension of Table 1. Generally speaking, we found common issues are present across the heterogeneous citizenry. For this reason, we cannot corroborate the fear of heavily diverging, milieu-specific issue agendas leading to the erosion of social communication's common basis. During the period of investigation, "immigration" was, by far, the most relevant issue across all milieus. In addition, the issue of "pensions" was also prominent. For those milieus that are politically engaged, the TTIP and CETA free trade agreements were also group-linking issues. Below these top issues, we found differentiations coined by milieu-specific worldviews and social backgrounds; for example, the issues "education policy" and "distributional justice" correspond to the high number of trainees in the Social Democratic Centre and with the egalitarian political position.

## Discussion

In this study, we used a milieu-theoretical approach to describe current patterns of "stratamentation" on the demand side of the political communication environment. The approach allows us to make differentiated statements about which parts of society participate in public discourse, and in which manner they do so, based on their distinct political and communicative practices. In addition, we applied the milieu approach to the analysis of two communication-related conditions of political integration. At least with regard to our indicators (i.e. shared news sources and common issues), we cannot declare a crisis scenario of the public sphere's disintegration. We found that socially and politically clearly distinct milieus still use various mainstream media outlets, especially public-service television. Therefore, public-service broadcasting could function as a main driver of integration through a corresponding media performance (e.g. by representing diverse issues and viewpoints in society). Furthermore, we discovered that common political issue agendas exist across the citizenry, at least for the top issues. Beyond these issues, milieu-specific differentiations are clearly visible. Still, two aspects are causes for concern. First, among our typology, we found two milieus that have more or less resigned from public discourse, or which may never have been a part of it at all. These pose a major challenge to the idea of an integrated society. Their dissociation not only involves the danger of increasing knowledge gaps and deepening inequalities in participation, but because of their status as extremely passive groups, their viewpoints might be unheard in the public sphere, leading to a potential disregard in political decision-making. In turn, this could lead to a reinforcement of members' feelings of political alienation. Second, we identified one milieu in which tendencies towards political polarisation and seclusion within politically homogeneous media environments are manifest. However, we can only determine whether or not polarised and non-democratic attitudes exhibit an irreversible state in this milieu by more detailed (long-term) analyses.

Our study should be perceived as a first step in exemplifying the fruitfulness of milieu theory as a meso-level concept in (political) communication research. We make the case for using social groups' lifeworld-specific contexts to explain differentiated patterns of political and communicative behaviour. The detection of more or less problematic segments within society discussed here is the result of an approach that contextually analyses political

orientations and communicative practices. Still, our results should not be overrated, as several extensions via future research projects are necessary.

Generally, the evaluation of fragmented information environments and consequences for social (dis-)integration requires comprehensive analyses of the reciprocal interplay of phenomena situated on four closely related levels (Bennett and Iyengar 2008); these are: (a) media content, (b) media use, (c) the processing of media content, and (d) media effects. With regard to the interplay of the first two levels, milieu typologies could be used to define media outlets with particular relevance for certain social groups. In this case, typological approaches serve as a pre-study of content analyses. By following this procedure, we can conduct detailed analyses of social groups and their degree of received media performance. To address the problem of politically homogeneous media arenas, the distinct political orientations of milieus might be used as a media external benchmark (for a similar approach, see Downey, Mihelj, and König 2012). The political diversity mediated through media content within milieu-specific information repertoires could then be compared to a milieu's defining orientations. Then, we could evaluate if particular milieus stay in their own "political echo chambers." Concerning specific news outlets, it is hard to determine whether an integrative potential addressing society as a whole can be assigned to these outlets. Future research should therefore analyse if, for example, locally or regionally focused news reporting also reflects the heterogeneous viewpoints of diverse groups of citizens. With a view towards online portals (such as news sections on e-mail providers' websites), content analyses are also rare. Still, previous research suggests that these portals are open to personalisation scripts and user customisation, which might affect the degree of individually received media performance (e.g. Beam and Kosicki 2014; Sundar and Marathe 2010). Hence, for these outlets, the integrative potential is also difficult to evaluate, given the current state of research.

Another line of research should focus on the levels of media content processing and media effects against a milieu-theoretical background. It is crucial, for example, to understand how milieus' lifeworld-specific contexts and worldviews shape the perception and processing of political issues. Even though we found overlapping issue agendas in our study, we assume the milieus' framings of common issues are strongly informed by corresponding value orientations ("audience frames," Aarøe 2017). To which degree milieus are open to other viewpoints, and which groups tend to adhere to their own (polarised) perspectives, remain pertinent research questions. Survey items capturing the respondents' knowledge or understanding of positions towards a certain policy issue could tackle these questions.

Finally, we turn to the methodological limitations of our study. To start with, our quantitative survey data only allow for relatively superficial interpretations of milieu-specific lifeworlds. Qualitative studies on politico-communicative milieus (e.g. Begenat 2016) are beneficial for tracing and explaining the subjective meaningfulness of typical combinations of basic orientations, political stances, and communicative and participatory practices. Furthermore, to determine actual trends of fragmentation, polarisation, or increasing inequalities in knowledge and participation, only longitudinal studies and at best also comparisons between countries will be clarifying (van Aelst et al. 2017). These should also include several items to survey the actual degree of political knowledge across the citizenry. Until now, research has often relied on variables that do not explicitly address political knowledge. Furthermore, our study did not test the de facto explanatory potential of the meso-level milieu approach in comparison to other established explanations on the micro- and macro-levels.

In this regard, multilevel analyses constitute another avenue for future research (e.g. Elvestad and Blekesaune 2008). Overall, we based our study on self-reported measures, which are heavily criticised for being prone to errors (Knobloch-Westerwick 2015; Prior 2009). As an alternative, we look forward to studies using more precise tracking data on media use and combining these with typologisation methods such as cluster analyses (Ksiazek 2011; Prior 2013; Webster and Ksiazek 2012). Concerning social media use, our platform measurement is too rough to make statements on its integrative potential; nevertheless, one could assume that social media platforms tend to foster citizens' heterogeneity. In this regard, some fragmentation researchers suggest that the algorithm-based personalisation of individual news feeds on Facebook might promote the issue- and worldview-related homogeneity of individual and social groups' "filter bubbles" (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2012; Webster 2014). In contrast, other empirical studies query the occurrence of extremely polarised web use (Mukerjee, Majo-Vazquez, and González-Bailón 2017; Nelson and Webster 2017).

Lastly, future analyses should refine the items that survey citizens' value orientations. Here, we see potential for improvement concerning item comprehensibility across groups of citizens with varying degrees of previous knowledge and in terms of the item's independence from current political contexts. Considering the unresolved issues listed in this section would allow for a more precise and comprehensive discussion of the current state of communication-based political integration within high-choice media environments and its implications for the inclusiveness and cohesion of heterogeneous societies.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## SUPPLEMENTAL DATA

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1554845

## NOTES

1.   According to Hasebrink and Domeyer (2012, 758), "the media repertoire of a person consists of the entirety of media he or she regularly uses." Information repertoires are, in turn, those media outlets used by individual citizens for the purpose of political information (Reagan 1996).
2.   Low values indicate the respondents' approval. For example, a value of 1 represents a high level of satisfaction with democracy or a high level intensity of interpersonal communication.
3.   An overview of all items' mean values and standard deviations are attached to this paper (see online appendix).
4.   Still, based on our research design we are unable to determine whether such alienated groups use mainstream media merely in order to seek affirmation of their hostile worldviews (hostile media effect).

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