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Relational mechanisms in media-audience interaction under controversy: Public perceptions of media performance in Lithuania

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we look at public opinion formation as a mutually integrating process that treats media and audiences as an amalgamated whole – something that emerges from the relationship between media and people, rather than from two separate worlds. The outcome of such "relational dynamics" – an interaction between media "supply" and audience information choices, i.e. "demand" features – may lead to "relational polarization", a process in which divisions become embedded in social ties and media interaction patterns, rather than only in issue understandings. The presented study draws on a 2024 representative survey of Lithuanian residents ($N = 1000$). The analysis compares media perceptions between two groups with opposing opinions on selected issues: supporters and opponents. The results indicate that polarization of society is closely tied to how people relate to the media and perceive its coverage, rather than to general trust or distrust of the media. The study contributes to contemporary scholarship on public sphere fragmentation, the role of the media in today's hybrid environment, particularly reporting on polarizing issues, and the audience studies that place greater emphasis on people's lived experiences in media identifications.

KEYWORDS

Hybrid media; media trust; public opinion formation; relational dynamics; societal polarization

Introduction and background

Recent analyses of public sphere transformations often treat information integrity problems as a major outcome of changes in today's media ecosystem (Fischer & Jarren, 2023; Mansell et al., 2025). Anything that weakens the reliability of public information – an abundance of content of unclear origins and authority, algorithmically managed manipulations of people's attention – undermines social cohesion in society. These challenges are a result of big structural shifts in the modern media environments, which have produced

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conditions where reliable and verifiable information is very hard to sustain. They feed into broader processes of societal polarization – a phenomenon that is often addressed by various scholars as the key outcome of the transformed "knowledge order" in contemporary societies (Neuberger et al., 2023). Because the system of public knowledge organization has changed, including the ways societies produce, distribute, and validate knowledge, people's relationships with media – how they use, perceive, judge, and trust the media – have also been transformed. As a result, societal polarization today is increasingly understood not just as disagreements among people over specific issues, but in divergent media loyalties, community relations, and belonging (Esau et al., 2025; Schedler, 2023).

In a changed media environment, even if media organizations and journalists do everything right – work transparently, verify facts – that does not automatically ensure people trust the media. In today's hybrid media, a growing range of actors with diverging aims and ambitions compete for public attention, while professional journalists have become only one group among many shaping public communication (Fischer & Jarren, 2023; Mayer, 2025). Researchers still do not fully understand how audiences come to trust these content providers, especially when many influencers are actively pushing their own opinions and agendas. For example, a study by Tsfati et al. (2022) reveals that audiences tend to "selectively" trust media information, depending on the topic, particularly when issues are politicized, emotionally charged, or closely related to people's personal experiences. In fact, trust serves as a central mechanism by which "relational boundaries" are established: audiences endorse media narratives that confirm their preconceptions on specific issues and distance themselves from those they perceive as not reflecting their positions. This differentiation of trust in the media according to different topics helps to explain how issues of information reliability contribute to the polarization of their relationships with sources: it is not the facts themselves that matter to the audience (whether the information is factually correct), but the topic under discussion that determines the different relationships established with media. Trust and loyalty ("this media is for people like me") foster engagement with some media channels, and hostility and avoidance shape relations with others, contributing to what may be described as people's communication repertoires (Hasebrink et al., 2023).

Today's media environment is highly fragmented, comprising a wide variety of channels and information producers and intermediaries. In such a system, the effects of both information production ("supply" side) and the ways people select and engage with media ("demand") can only be understood when analyzed together, because social dynamics and media technologies jointly shape what information circulates and how people respond to it. Viewed from such a combined perspective, the socio-technologically defined factors – algorithmically managed visibility and information flows – shape how people cognitively process thematic issues and how their previous

experiences and learned behaviors shape which media channels they choose and how they engage with them. As will be shown in the following sections of our paper, divergences in opinions and views do not exist only in people's heads. Opinion polarization is also a "structural" process – divergent opinions are sustained by communication and information exchanges, and by people's mediated interactions, including their form, direction, intensity, and dynamics, which are strongly shaped by the surrounding media environment and its communication conditions (Esau et al., 2025; Steppat et al., 2021).

The messy, mixed, and hybrid media sphere requires studying audience perceptions of how media operate, including people's trust in media, rather than focusing only on the messages that media transfer. For that task, a "human-centered" view is needed – a view that explores how people actually encounter, choose, and interpret the media. Precisely such aspects are not sufficiently conveyed in contemporary policymaking when shaping and promoting specific programs and frameworks for informed citizenship and information integrity (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2020; Siapera, 2022). In policy documents, audiences are indeed mentioned, yet they are treated mainly as recipients of training and programs, i.e., as people to be educated, not as people whose views, experiences, and actions help shape the learning process itself (Balčytienė et al., 2025). Our paper's contribution is to address that missing piece: it primarily examines and explains how groups with divergent opinions interpret and trust media performance and coverage, particularly when media report on controversial, polarizing issues. Such an approach follows an analytical trend already visible in communication research, which is often described as an "inclusive turn" or a human-centered perspective (Swart et al., 2022). Hence, for us, the underlying logic is that media and audience choices should be analyzed in relation to one another. In this way, our study helps fill an important gap in the available knowledge by showing how people form identifications with media.

To test these observations in practice, in this paper, we will focus on Lithuania, analyzing people's assessments of three controversial topics, and investigating how people think, what their opinions and concerns are, and also their views on media's portrayals of that specific issue (its accuracy, thoroughness, audience inclusion, media's attempts to seek dialogue, etc.). As will be shown, the interplay between the media environment and people's individual information choices is not based just on people's diverging opinions on that specific issue. Many additional trust-related factors in the media-audience "relational dynamics" matter, shaping how people encounter and interpret mediated information and how they develop social and media attachments and forms of identification.

Lithuania provides an analytically rich context for this task. Although the population of the country is 2.8 million, and a national language is spoken mainly within the country's borders, which makes the news market relatively

closed and linguistically bounded, structurally, the media landscape is rich and varied. Television continues to occupy an important place in popular culture and mass communication, whereas Internet media has increasingly become associated with innovation, genre experimentation, and investigative work. Since the restoration of independence in 1990, Lithuania has undergone profound political, economic, and social transformations, facing these challenges with resilience and pragmatism. Today, geopolitical tensions, and especially Russia's war in Ukraine, constitute one of the most significant recent contexts of uncertainty and public concern. These developments are reflected in journalistic work, media agendas, and public debates. They also provide a relevant illustration of the issues selected for analysis in this study.

Public opinion formation as a relational process

The technologically advanced and socially fueled transformations of the public sphere (Habermas, 2022; Seeliger & Sevignani, 2022; Splichal, 2021) present unprecedented opportunities for both content creators and users to produce and disseminate ideas and to form opinions. While certainly advancing information access and expression, hybrid media systems, offering new ways of organizing knowledge, have also created fertile conditions for toxic discourse and processes of radicalization.

Obviously, societal polarization is an ecosystemic phenomenon. It does not arise from one single cause. Understanding how opinion divergence and public controversies evolve into polarization requires a macro approach – a broader, holistic analysis of the social context and the forces that shape it. Though technological impacts on public sphere transformations are fairly similar across various countries, differences are shaped primarily by local conditions, which are influenced by each country's communication and conflict-resolution traditions (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Kreiss, 2017). There are also other drivers of growing country differences and divisions, stemming from institutional transformations, shifts in the economy, and labor market changes. Across different national contexts, societal polarization and information integrity deficits emerge as an interplay of multiple factors rather than a single cause (Baldassarri & Page, 2021; Metzler & Garcia, 2023).

With such a view, polarization can be seen as a reciprocal process in which social change and various uncertainties, including economic fluctuations, health and climate-related concerns, and geopolitical threats, shape people's media use, and, in turn, are further mediated through it. Among the external factors, information technologies play a significant role in shaping polarization processes. But these changes are also mediated by internal traditions and social tensions, such as people's perceptions (micro) of fairness and equality, as well as other principles of social organization, which together contribute to the development of in-group (mezzo) relationships and trust.

The opinion formation approach draws our attention to two facets in the processes through which information is selected and processed. The increased hybridization of media and communications (Chadwick, 2013), together with growing transmediality of discourse (Jenkins, 2006), raises questions about how information abundance and the changed logic of information provision and circulation – the "supply" side – shape opinion formation and knowledge acquisition. A further set of questions concerns the "demand" side and also requires closer examination: What specifically drives people to engage with media content? What determines how people relate to media – how they choose media sources, how they relate to them, and whether they trust and distrust media?

A substantial part of what people know about society is formed through mediated impressions drawn from various media sources (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). Thus, the sense of social cohesion and integrity, or, alternatively, the sense of deprivation and neglect, and, hence, an unequal position, cannot be understood without taking into account people's media use and its performance assessments. Evaluating people's relationships to media requires considering how they view, perceive, and trust media in practice. This approach also requires assessing whether – and how – media performance aligns with audience expectations, and how this alignment shapes audience perceptions of the overall media environment (Hasebrink & Hölig, 2020). Trust serves as an important marker here. However, scholarly understandings of trust remain uneven and contested (Daniller et al., 2017; Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020). For example, Strömbäck et al. (2020) raise questions about the clarity of the studies themselves that measure trust in the media. According to the researchers, it is unclear whether such studies analyzing how trust in the media is measured imply that there is no agreement on how trust in the media should be operationalized, nor is it clear whether trust means generalized trust in all media or in different types of media. Furthermore, it is unclear whether trust is measured in terms of the media as an institution, the people who work in it, or the content it produces.

When trust issues become contested, the media – and, broadly, all epistemic institutions, such as education and culture – are expected to support the restoration of public confidence (Miller, 2022). Here, the public sphere's quality – a sense of information integrity and social cohesion among various groups – is crucial. For that to function, a set of epistemic and democratic values and communication principles must be upheld, understood, and recognized by people within the public sphere. Traditionally, journalism has been one of the main institutions that society relies on to decide what is important and true, because it models standards by which credible knowledge is produced. However, these values and standards are being greatly challenged in a rapidly digitalizing and transforming hybrid media environment (Bartsch et al., 2025). With increased information abundance and media channels'

fragmentation, also because of changed people's media consumption habits and routines, the general practices on how to negotiate societal knowledge via journalism become weakened (Schneiders & Stark, 2025). The inherent risk associated with information abundance stems from the presumption that people with varied access to information may come to feel they lack a shared understanding of reality. Furthermore, people's perceptions of how they understand trustworthy information, as well as how it is produced, consumed, and corrected, may also vary, raising the following additional questions: On what factors are people's media selectivity and media use habits built? What role does trust play in shaping media and audience interaction? How do these contribute to the outcome of opinion divergence and societal polarization?

Looking at these questions, the human-centered perspective is especially helpful. Its underlying logic is evident: the more media is available, the greater the choices people have – therefore, the more selective they must be. Likewise, the more selective people must be, the more significant their preferences become. The more people's preferences gain significance, the greater attention must be drawn to people's lived experiences. According to classical media studies and audience analysis tradition, users' media choices are driven by their information tastes and gratification-seeking behaviors (Heath, 2005). In hybrid media environments where information circulation is driven by algorithmic recommender systems, however, user choices appear to be influenced by a different set of criteria, such as previous digital information use histories, which are tracked by data, or momentary attention preferences, all of which seldom rely on conscious trust but are directly exploited by social media logic (Esau et al., 2024). In short, "the supply" factor also imposes its own constraints in this context: the emergence of alternative channels and non-traditional actors producing content raises concerns about how they establish their authority and build trust with the audience (Juárez Miro, 2025).

All of the discussion above reveals that media-audience connectivity – or "relational" aspect – requires a more profound understanding of people's media choices and information selectivity analysis than previous research on opinion formation in hybrid media environments has suggested.

The analytical framework: a relational approach to the media-audience nexus

Democratic theory considers the pursuit of informed citizenship to be a fundamental element of democratic life. However, with the growing volume of media content and the expansion of news-seeking across hybrid media environments, concerns have intensified about the weakening of conditions for informed public judgment (Schneiders & Stark, 2025). There are often situations where people not only express doubts in the media but also take openly hostile action against information sources. The digitalization of media

and the prevalence of communication on social networks offer countless opportunities to find content of unclear quality and meaning. Furthermore, there is growing room for rudeness and bullying to manifest, while thoughtful criticism is marginalized (Chadwick et al., 2018; Russell, 2020; Suau Martínez & Miro, 2024).

To capture the complexity of societal interactions and opinion formation in modern media environments, it is essential to consider the dynamic interplay between hybrid media information and the audience's diverse perceptions of media and context-dependent responses (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023; Esau et al., 2024). Insights from communication science are especially valuable here. While communication studies on societal polarization have increased, clear definitions and empirically robust research methods remain limited, and most of the analyses are provided by political science scholars. Within political science, polarization is often understood as issue-based, affective, and ideology-driven societal fragmentation into socially diverging groups or opposing camps. Indeed, polarization is a constitutive part of any political system. It reflects the spectrum of disagreements. All healthy democracies require some degree of polarization. But especially the rise of the affective kind of polarization is critical as it signals a general shift from opinion-centered (thus, issues-focused), toward more individual-focused matters (Törnberg et al., 2021). Such a type of polarization is seen in favor of sentiments among in-group members, while negative sentiments are expressed to out-group members. Primarily leaning on emotions, affective polarization might drive negative and harmful acts, such as spill-over effects of hate speech, attacks, and rejection of political results. Hence, it is feared that affective polarization and value-based conflicts may have more serious implications, distorting the democratic way of life, than pure issue-based polarization and disagreements (Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019).

From a communication perspective, framing opinion formation and public communication interactions through a human-centered – and therefore identity-focused – lens means understanding them not as a simple transfer of messages, but as an ongoing relational process between media and audiences. When people form relationships – with other people or their mediated information sources – they do not do it only cognitively and neutrally. They bring lived experiences, personal values and concerns, and issues they deem important – thus, media-audience and social relationships are values- and experiences-infused, not just based on facts and information. When viewed from such a perspective, polarization must also be seen as an interactive process, where the strongest emphasis must be put not just on issue-based or affective aspects, but on the trust dimension (Schedler, 2023). Briefly, while polarization and controversy are often regarded as negative developments, they are better understood as phenomena produced and sustained through social relationships and communication (Esau et al., 2025).

Such a view also aligns with James W. Carey's conception of communication as culture and ritual (Carey, 1989), which underscores the importance of examining not only people's individual preferences and likes when choosing information but also broader life conditions and social relationships. Following such a line, research on opinion formations should focus not on information and its impact, but on people's understanding of the "meaning" that the media selection process gives to its participants (Coles et al., 2025). People's media choices and the relationships they form around media are intentional behaviors, shaped by how people think and feel about information and by the trust they develop in that media source (Reiljan, 2020). It is precisely here that the communicative linkage develops through how people understand the surrounding environment and their civic and participatory role within it.

Putting all things together, the above analysis reveals that the relational factor requires viewing contemporary interactions between media and audiences as a "connective process" of building mediated rituals. These, furthermore, should be viewed as sustained by various contextual factors – primarily technological media affordances, such as media accessibility and channel selectivity, but also "soft" features defining connectivity and action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), such as group attitudes and needs. When considered from this perspective, people's media choices in hybrid media environments reveal new features: individual-level selections and micro actions can become an "engine" for group formation at the mezzo level, enabling scattered views to converge into a shared social perspective or movement and potentially fostering a sense of belonging at the macro level.

In our analysis, we specifically examine how this tripartite arrangement provides a framework for media-audience interaction contributing to trust formation (see Figure 1). The tentative answers shown in our illustration are items answered individually by our study participants regarding the media, yet

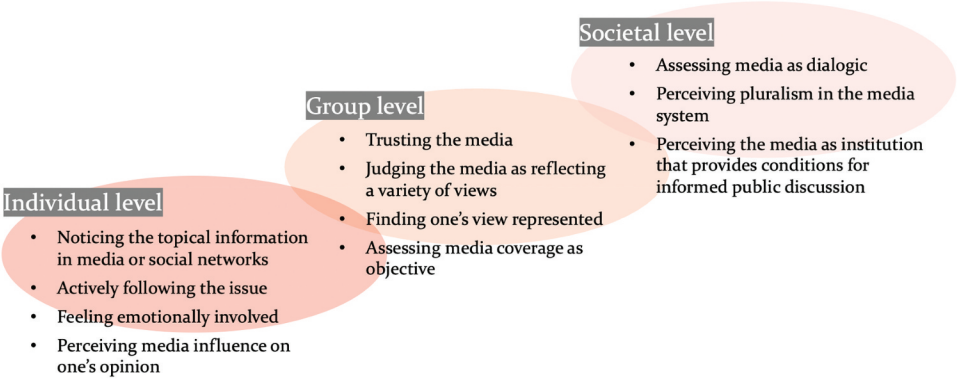

Figure 1. A three-dimensional model of media-audience interaction incorporating people's perceptions of the media.

they also refer to different analytical layers: the individual level captures personal orientations, the group level refers to media representations, and the societal level captures perceptions of broader institutional conditions.

Simply put, "relational" perspective indicates the preconditions for the formation of social ties between people, i.e., the extent to which there is room in society for a common ground between different views, and seeks to assess whether people from different social groups are prepared to communicate constructively and establish social ties (Conover et al., 2012). This new "relational power" does not primarily come from direct contact with technological and media authorities, but also from people's ability to organize networks of relations within the mediated public sphere (Boyd, 2010; Bruns, 2023; Friemel & Neuberger, 2023).

In the next sections, we evaluate how well media live up to audience expectations, specifically "how well it performs its function" in the eyes of media users. This means assessing media performance through a normative lens – evaluating its conduct against normative expectations of public communication, such as providing accurate information, enabling discussion, and ensuring pluralism (McQuail, 1992).

Pilot study: public opinion on three cases and assessments of media coverage

Media performance assessment is associated with a range of people's expectations. Earlier studies have focused on media trust as a primary, though hierarchical, factor in the media's role in opinion formation, examining what people believe, how their trust is distributed, and whether they accept media messages (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020). In our study, we adopt a processual view and conceptualize opinion formation as a relational process through which people form perceptions of media, draw symbolic boundaries, and develop attachments.

Three thematic cases were selected for testing in our pilot study, focusing on people's opinions and their media relations. All of them differ in how they are framed, perceived and responded by the public: the social aspect is prominent in the case of the Istanbul Convention,[1] the economic and political emphasis is recognizable in the issue of providing support to Ukraine, and the cultural-identity aspect is visible in the case of the monument to Justinas Marcinkevičius' work,[2] which we would classify under the broader theme of

[1] In 2013, Lithuania signed the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) but is still the only Baltic country not to have ratified it. Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Armenia have not ratified the Convention as well.

[2] Justinas Marcinkevičius (1930–2011) was a highly influential Lithuanian poet whose literary work contributed to the preservation of the Lithuanian language and cultural identity during the period of Soviet occupation. At the same time, he held official positions within Soviet cultural institutions and was a member of the Communist Party, which has led to ongoing debates about his accommodation and collaboration with the occupying regime. Contemporary controversies over erecting a monument to Marcinkevičius reflect broader tensions over how to evaluate and commemorate culturally significant figures whose influence was exercised under conditions of occupation.

cultural memory. In each case that was studied, the dimension that came to the fore – social, economic or political, or cultural – was shaped by how media sources framed the issue. This reveals that media reflect issues and express the dynamic contexts in which they emerge.

Therefore, in order to explore the relationship between individuals' issue positions – whether people express support or opposition to that specific issue, and their evaluations of news media performance in contemporary hybrid media environments, we raise the following research question: How do supporters and opponents of a controversial issue differ in their assessments of media performance, and which relational factors – such as perceived media performance and issue representation features – explain these differences?

Survey method

A representative survey was conducted among Lithuanian residents aged 18 and older. Respondents were interviewed face-to-face. A stratified probability sampling method was used to select respondents, controlling for proportions based on age, gender, and geographic location. A total of 1,000 participants were interviewed. The maximum margin of error is 3.1%. The survey was conducted between July 11th and 21st, 2024. The public opinion research company Vilmorus carried out the study.

Variables and measurement of individuals' issue position

To examine respondents' opinions and assess potential controversy across different issues, two sets of survey questions were employed: issue-based attitude questions and issue-based opinion questions.

Issue-based attitude questions asked respondents to indicate their position on specific topics, such as: (a) *Should or should not the Seimas of Lithuania ratify the Istanbul Convention?* (b) *Should Lithuania provide military, humanitarian, and financial support to Ukraine?* and (c) *Should a monument to Justinas Marcinkevičius be built in Vilnius?* Respondents could choose from the following options: yes, no, or don't know.

An analysis of the distribution of Lithuanian residents' opinions across the examined cases reveals the least divergence concerning Lithuania's aid to Ukraine. Specifically, 62% of respondents support Lithuania's provision of aid to Ukraine, while 14.6% oppose it (Table 1).

In contrast, the issue of ratifying the Istanbul Convention exhibits the highest degree of polarization, with 23.2% advocating for ratification and 30% expressing opposition. Similarly, regarding the erection of a monument to Marcinkevičius, 38.9% favor its construction, and 19.1% are against it. Notably, a significant proportion of respondents either expressed uncertainty or declined to provide an answer in the cases of the Istanbul

Table 1. Distribution of issue-based attitude questions.

	(1) Should or should not the Lithuanian Seimas ratify the Istanbul Convention?		(2) Should Lithuania provide military, humanitarian and financial support to Ukraine or not?		(3) Should a monument to Justinas Marcinkevičius be built in Vilnius or not?	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Yes	232	23,2%	620	62,0%	389	38,9%
No	300	30,0%	146	14,6%	191	19,1%
Don't know	410	41,0%	192	19,2%	397	39,7%
Refuse to answer	58	5,8%	42	4,2%	23	2,3%

Convention and the Marcinkevičius monument, with these figures reaching 46.8% and 42%, respectively. This observation underscores the substantial number of individuals who hold ambivalent or undisclosed views on these particular subjects. Such relatively high percentages could be explained by several factors. It could be assumed that people were less interested in specific issues and did not have a clear personal opinion. Alternatively, the cases themselves may be controversial (as for example in the case of ratification of Istanbul Convention), or the different opinions presented in the public sphere may not allow for a clear answer. It is also possible that people do not perceive the cases as being personally important enough to form a specific personal opinion on them. Finally, such results may be influenced by social desirability bias. In other words, if a respondent's personal opinion seems to contradict the socially acceptable opinion, they may choose a neutral answer or refuse to give their opinion to avoid being seen as different from the majority.

Corresponding opinion questions were posed following each issue-based attitude question. For this purpose, we developed two opposing statements for each case (with the exception of the question on support for Ukraine, for which three statements were used: one supportive and two opposing, reflecting economic and political concerns) that we identified as synthesized opinions expressed in the media, including both traditional channels and alternative sources, as well as on social networks (see Table 2). All statements were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale, where the minimum value (1) refers to total disagreement, and the maximum value (5) refers to total agreement with the statement.

Regarding the Istanbul Convention, respondents were asked to evaluate two contrasting statements. The first statement framed *the Convention as an international treaty obligating states to combat violence against women and domestic violence*. A majority of respondents expressed agreement with this statement, with 54.4% indicating agreement or strong agreement ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.97$) (see Table 2). The second statement reflected a contrasting perspective, suggesting that *the Istanbul Convention alters the concept of gender, legitimizes a third sex, and undermines the traditional family*. Agreement with

Table 2. Distribution of issue-based opinion question.

	Statements	I agree and totally agree	Neither agree nor disagree	I completely disagree and disagree	Refused to specify	Mean (Min-1, max −5) (SD)
(1)	a.The Istanbul Convention is an international treaty that obliges states to combat violence against women and domestic violence	54,4%	26,9%	7,8%	10,9%	3,73 (0,97)
	b.The Istanbul Convention changes the concept of gender, legitimizes a third sex, and destroys the concept of the traditional family	38,2%	29,4%	18,5%	13,9%	3,34 (1,20)
(2)	a.Ukraine is fighting for the freedom of all of Europe, therefore, by providing support to Ukraine, Lithuania is also protecting itself.	65,35%	20,55%	10,9%	3,3%	3,80 (1,02)
	b.Lithuania provides too much aid to Ukraine – more care should be taken of the Lithuanian people	48,45%	27,15%	20,85%	3,75	3,40 (1,16)
	c.Lithuania, by providing support to Ukraine, is angering Russia, which could backfire on Lithuania itself.	43,45%	32,25%	18,25%	6,25%	3,36 (1,05)
(3)	a.J. Marcinkevičius is one of the country's most famous poets, whose work awakened Lithuania during the Sąjūdis period.	65,75%	26,75%	2,95%	4,75%	3,91 (0,82)
	b.J. Marcinkevičius' past is controversial, as some of his work was favorably viewed by the Soviet occupation authorities.	18,35%	50,15%	22,45%	9,25%	2,93 (0,86)

this statement was lower, with 38.2% of respondents indicating agreement or strong agreement ($M = 3.34$, SD = 1.20).

Regarding Lithuania's support for Ukraine, respondents were asked to evaluate three statements reflecting differing perspectives. The first statement presented a supportive view, framing Ukraine's struggle as a defense of European freedom and, by extension, Lithuania's own security (*Ukraine is fighting for the freedom of all of Europe; therefore, by providing support to Ukraine, Lithuania is also protecting itself)*. A majority of respondents agreed with this statement, with 65.35% indicating agreement or strong agreement ($M = 3.80$, SD = 1.02) (see Table 2). The two opposing statements captured distinct rationales for skepticism toward support for Ukraine. The first emphasized economic considerations, suggesting that Lithuania provides excessive aid and should prioritize domestic welfare (*Lithuania provides too much aid to Ukraine – more care should be taken of the Lithuanian people)*. The second reflected political concerns, suggesting that supporting Ukraine could provoke Russia and have negative consequences for Lithuania (*By providing support to Ukraine, Lithuania is angering Russia, which could backfire on Lithuania itself)*. Agreement with these statements was lower, with 48.45% ($M = 3.40$, SD = 1.16) and 43.45% ($M = 3.36$, SD = 1.05) of respondents, respectively, indicating agreement or strong agreement.

In the case of Justinas Marcinkevičius, respondents were asked to evaluate two opposing statements reflecting contrasting perspectives. The first statement emphasized his significance to Lithuanian culture, presenting him as one of the country's most prominent poets whose work contributed to national

awakening during the Sąjūdis period (*Justinas Marcinkevičius is one of the country's most famous poets, whose work awakened Lithuania during the Sąjūdis period)*. A majority of respondents agreed with this statement, with 65.75% indicating agreement or strong agreement ($M = 3.91$, SD = 0.82) (see Table 2). The second statement reflected a more critical perspective, highlighting the controversial aspects of Marcinkevičius' legacy by noting that some of his work was viewed favorably by Soviet occupation authorities (*Justinas Marcinkevičius's past is controversial, as some of his work was favorably viewed by the Soviet occupation authorities)*. Agreement with this statement was considerably lower, with 18.35% of respondents indicating agreement or strong agreement ($M = 2.93$, SD = 0.86).

For subsequent analysis, and in order to identify respondents holding more polarized views across the examined issues, the variables discussed above were used to construct dichotomous indicators of support and opposition.

For each case, a "Supporter" variable was created and coded as "1" for respondents who (1) expressed a positive attitude toward the issue (Table 1, "Yes"), and (2) agreed or strongly agreed with the supportive statement (statement "a" in Table 2). All other respondents were coded as "0."

Similarly, an "Opponent" variable was constructed for each case. This variable was coded as "1" for respondents who (1) expressed a negative attitude (Table 1, "No"), and (2) agreed or strongly agreed with one of the opposing statements (statements "b" or "c" in Table 2, where applicable). All remaining respondents were assigned a value of "0."

Table 3 presents the proportion of supporters and opponents for each issue based on the newly created variables. The proportion of supporters and opponents of Istanbul Convention (further in the text IC) is quite similar, with around a fifth of all respondents having a categorically positive (20,5%) or negative (22%) opinion on the IC. The number of supporters of aid to Ukraine is significantly higher (56,2%) than the number of opponents (12,6% economic opponents and 10,3% of political opponents). The lowest implied controversy is seen in the case of the J. Marcinevičius. While 37,3% of respondents are supporters of the monument because of the great importance of J. Marcinkevičius' literary work, only 6,5% hold the opposite opinion.

Table 3. Distribution of supporters and opponents for each issue.

		N	Percent
Istanbul Convention	Supporters	205	20,5%
	Opponents	220	22,0%
Aid to Ukraine	Supporters	562	56,2%
	Economic opponents	126	12,6%
	Political opponents	103	10,3%
Monument of J. Marcinkevičius)	Supporters	373	37,3
	Opponents	65	6,5

Variables for assessment of media performance

To evaluate media performance, we adapted survey questions to align with our analytical model by distinguishing among specific layers (see Figure 2). Respondents were asked to evaluate identical statements corresponding to each layer of the model for each analyzed case. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated strong disagreement and 5 indicated strong agreement.

Finally, to determine how supporters and opponents of a controversial issue differ in their assessment of media performance, a correlation analysis (Pearson's correlation) was conducted between the newly created variables "Supporters" and "Opponents" and the variables designed to assess media performance. This method was chosen because it reveals the strength and direction of relationships between variables. Although correlation does not imply causation of the variables it can serve as a useful preliminary step for identifying variables that may warrant further investigation in more complex analytical models.

Perception of media performance

A preliminary examination of the correlation coefficients (Table 4) reveals distinct patterns in the relationship between media perception and issue stance. Generally, positive correlations between media perception variables and the "Supporters" group suggest that individuals who agree with statements indicating media visibility, engagement, trust, objectivity, influence, and dialogue-seeking are more likely to be supporters of the respective issue. Conversely, negative correlations with "Opponents" groups indicate that

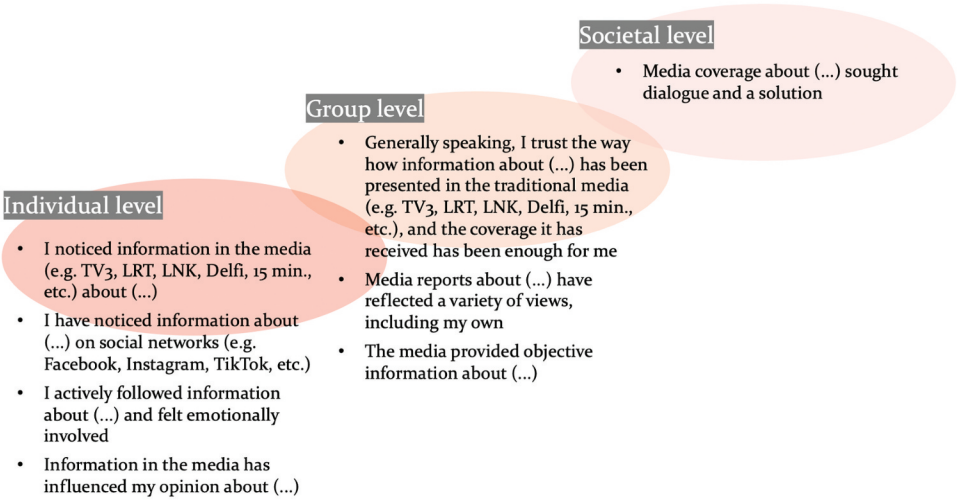

Figure 2. Public opinion survey items aligned with the analytical framework. TV3, LRT, and other media brands are names of media companies.

Table 4. Correlation between supporters and opponents of analyzed cases.

	Ratification of Istanbul Convention		Providing aid for Ukraine			Erection of the monument to J. Marcinkevičius	
Scale: 1 - strongly disagree; 5 - strongly agree	Supporters (0-no, 1-yes)	Opponents (0-no, 1-yes)	Supporters (0-no, 1-yes)	Economic opponents (0-no, 1-yes)	Political opponents (0-no, 1-yes)	Supporters (0-no, 1-yes)	Opponents (0-no, 1-yes)
I noticed information in the media (e.g. TV3, LRT, LNK, Delfi, 15 min., etc.) about (. . .)	,232**	,117**	,288**	-,110**	-,121**	,181**	-,010
I have noticed information about (. . .) on social networks (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc.)	,286**	,002	,172**	,012	,028	,083*	,007
I actively followed information about (. . .) and felt emotionally involved	,235**	-,044	,355**	-,258**	-,204**	,105**	,015
Generally speaking, I trust the way how information about (. . .) has been presented in the traditional media (e.g. TV3, LRT, LNK, Delfi, 15 min., etc.), and the coverage it has received has been enough for me	,301**	-,147**	,402**	**-,357****	**-,352****	,304**	-,003
Media reports about (. . .) have reflected a variety of views, including my own	,265**	-,051	,396**	-,336**	-,295**	,294**	,013
The media provided objective information about (. . .)	,266**	-,122**	,485**	-,311**	-,315**	,300**	,005
Information in the media has influenced my opinion about (. . .)	,254**	-,102**	,353**	-,303**	-,275**	,156**	,011
Media coverage about (. . .) sought dialogue and a solution	,246**	-,115**	,427**	-,276**	-,261**	,317**	-,035

Pearson Correlation, * - $p < 0,05$; ** - $p < 0,01$.

individuals who disagree with these media perception statements are more likely to hold opposing views.

Analysis of cases

Ratification of the Istanbul Convention

For this issue, positive and statistically significant correlations are observed between being a supporter and all measured aspects of media perception, including noticing information in traditional media ($r = .232$, $p < .01$) and social networks ($r = .286$, $p < .01$), active engagement ($r = .235$, $p < .01$), trust in traditional media coverage ($r = .301$, $p < .01$), perceived reflection of diverse views ($r = .265$, $p < .01$), perceived objectivity ($r = .266$, $p < .01$), media influence on opinion ($r = .254$, $p < .01$), and the perception that media sought dialogue ($r = .246$, $p < .01$). In contrast, the correlation with the general "Opponents" group shows weaker, yet still statistically significant, positive associations for noticing information in traditional media ($r = .117$, $p < .01$). Conversely opponents of Istanbul Convention ratification display significantly negative correlation in trust of traditional media ($r = -,147$, $p < .01$), perceived objectivity of media ($r = 122$, $p < .01$), media influence on opinion ($r = -,102$, $p < .01$), and the perception that media sought dialogue ($r = -,115$, $p < .01$). This suggests that while noticing media coverage is associated with both support and opposition, the other positive perceptions of media performance are more strongly linked to being a supporter of the Istanbul Convention's ratification. The dividing line seems not to be media attention as such, but relational evaluation of media performance.

Providing aid for Ukraine

The data regarding aid for Ukraine reveals a more pronounced divergence in media perception between supporters and opponents. Supporters exhibit strong positive correlations with all media perception variables, with particularly high correlations for trust in traditional media ($r = .402$, $p < .01$), perceived reflection of diverse views ($r = .396$, $p < .01$), and perceived objectivity ($r = .485$, $p < .01$). Conversely, both "Economic opponents" and "Political opponents" groups display statistically significant negative correlations across several media perception measures, including trust in traditional media ($r = -.357$, $p < .01$ and $r = -.352$, $p < .01$, respectively), perceived reflection of diverse views ($r = -.336$, $p < .01$ and $r = -.295$, $p < .01$), perceived objectivity ($r = -.311$, $p < .01$ and $r = -.315$, $p < .01$), active engagement ($r = -.258$, $p < .01$ and $r = -.204$, $p < .01$), and media influence on opinion ($r = -.303$, $p < .01$ and $r = -.275$, $p < .01$). These findings suggest that supporters of aid for Ukraine tend to have a positive view of media coverage, perceiving it as trustworthy, objective, and reflective of various perspectives, while economic and political opponents hold the opposite view.

Erection of the monument to J. Marcinkevičius

For the erection of the monument, supporters show positive and statistically significant correlations with most media perception variables, particularly trust in traditional media ($r = .304$, $p < .01$), perceived reflection of diverse views ($r = .294$, $p < .01$), and perceived objectivity ($r = .300$, $p < .01$). In contrast, the general "Opponents" group shows weak and non-significant correlations with media perception variables. This indicates a lack of a strong linear relationship between being an opponent of the monument and their perceptions of media coverage. However, supporters consistently demonstrate a positive association between their stance and positive evaluations of media performance.

Lessons learned from this study

The observed correlations (Table 4) highlight a potential link between individuals' preexisting opinions on thematic issues and their perception of media coverage related to those issues. Supporters tend to perceive the media as providing more information, reflecting diverse viewpoints (potentially including their own), being objective, trustworthy, influential in shaping opinions, and seeking dialogue. The perception of news media performance is positive across all different layers, integrating individual, group-level, and social dimensions.

When discussing media perceptions and relational connection, an additional word on trust must be said. The identified patterns are consistent with research demonstrating that trust in media is often issue-specific rather than generalized. As Tsfati et al. (2022) and Arceneaux et al. (2012) show, audiences tend to evaluate media performance differently across concrete societal issues, particularly when topics are politicized or morally contested. In this sense, supporters' positive assessments reflect topical alignment with media coverage, while opponents' more critical evaluations indicate a breakdown of issue-specific trust rather than a uniform rejection of media as an institution.

The results of our study partly support the assumption made by Strömbäck et al. (2020) that when answering questions about trust in the media, the audience may evaluate it selectively, rather than the media as a whole. Our study reveals that the topic is crucial in determining how the media will be evaluated. Moreover, as our three analyzed examples show, if the topic is less divisive, then opponents' distrust of the media may be lower. Conversely, opponents, particularly in the case of providing aid for Ukraine, exhibit a contrasting pattern, indicating lower trust in traditional media and a perception of bias or a lack of diverse representation. The weaker correlations observed for the opponents of the Istanbul Convention and the monument to J. Marcinkevičius might suggest a less uniform or intense negative perception of media coverage among these groups compared to the opponents of aid for Ukraine. This could be attributed to various factors, such as the

specific nature of the issue, the intensity of public discourse surrounding it, and the degree to which different opponent subgroups feel their perspectives are represented (or not) in the media.

All in all, the correlation used in the analysis does not indicate causality, which makes it impossible to determine the trajectory of the relationship between polarizing opinions and the role of the media, or the extent to which traditional media increases or decreases such polarization. Nevertheless, it could be argued that polarized opinions are linked to attitudes toward the media institution's role.

Discussion

The results indicate that societal polarization is shaped less by general trust or distrust in the media and more by how people relate to specific media coverage and the issue itself (Mepham et al., 2025). In other words, polarization is associated with people's issue-specific perceptions of media performance, not just their broad attitudes toward the media – hence, the understanding of societal polarization cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy of opinions of two opposing groups. Societal polarization isn't just disagreement. Instead, it must be viewed as a complex, multidimensional construct – a broad relational process where social identifications and media choices become mutually reinforcing, thus deepening divisions. In the same manner, these dynamics also leave room for reconnections, as they can create opportunities for dialogue and new social ties.

By revealing relational aspects to media performance assessments and trust, we can discuss the intensity of this polarization, which becomes influenced by several factors, including the nature of the issue being discussed, its perceived significance, its personal impact on individuals, how it resonates with fundamental values, and its relationship to the socio-economic standing of the population. As revealed in our analysis, individuals holding a favorable position toward the specific thematic issue hold a more positive view of institutional media's role. In contrast, those in opposition tend to be more critical of its contribution to covering contemporary social, political, or economic issues.

All this leads us to conclude that the contemporary media sphere is not just a sphere of representations. It turns into a structural platform for creating connections, visibility, and relational dependencies. Our study contributes to contemporary scholarly debates on public sphere fragmentation (Coles et al., 2025; Fletcher et al., 2025; Mansell et al., 2025), information integrity, and the role of the media in today's hybrid media environment, particularly in reporting on controversial and polarizing issues. Our insights also advance the human-centered approach in audience studies, which places greater emphasis on people's lived experiences and relationships with media.

All things considered, the relational ties – which are often invisible – hold groups together and make them rely primarily on their own sources, so they end up living in self-referential information blocks or "bubbles." Our argument suggests that the public sphere's structural features and media-sustained "connectivity," together with people's needs, form a mutually reinforcing ecosystem. Therefore, a national media policy must address people's social and information-related vulnerabilities in a more structured and coordinated manner, taking into account people's experiences, worldviews, and individual capacities that shape information demand. Societal polarization also should be viewed as an evolving relational process where media and audiences interact, where groups continuously interpret information through their own frames, draw boundaries around "their own" views and views of "others," or, alternatively, reinforce cohesion, and engage with other groups from that position.

Overall, in such a mutually integrating context, the fundamental question for news media and professional journalism is not just "reporting facts" but creating and maintaining relationships across differences and figuring out how to build relational ties among divergent views to seek integrity, understanding, and trust in basic information. Knowledge and practice are already available, for example, with new studies showing journalists' growing attentiveness to implementing conciliatory strategies, constructive journalism, and being more attentive listeners. Educational programs for journalists are also shifting toward greater emphasis on self-efficacy training, encouraging them to understand diverse perspectives, including their own (Balčytienė, 2025). Many such calls for journalism are defined as a turn toward greater "inclusiveness" (Swart et al., 2022; Verhoeven, 2025) – the shift we have noted in the introductory section of this paper. On the audience side, media policy and various educational and media literacy programs should not treat people only as receivers who need more media knowledge, but also as active agents who can reflect and evaluate their own reactions to media. In general, these recommendations highlight that all decisions are made by people, making greater awareness of human-centered features. Yet, acquiring awareness and changing mind-sets toward greater inclusivity is not easy, and policymakers, along with other stakeholders, should invest more in incorporating research-informed thinking into policy strategies.

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