Journalistic Production and Its Role in Democratic Participation: Report on Media and Democracy in the European Union

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Deliverable 4.7 presents a draft book manuscript combining results of the research conducted both at the national and comparative level for the MeDeMAP project. The manuscript's main axis is the evolving relationship between media and democracies, and in particular journalists' strategies to maintain democratic structures of power and facilitate political participation. The Deliverable 4.7. brings together ten chapters, eight of which offer a national or binational accounts on news production from the perspective of the legal and regulatory framework in which journalists operate, audience participation and feedback, as well as external conditions which strengthen or hinder pro-democratic media functions. The manuscript explores conditions and practices that support democratic participation in news media production; strengths and weaknesses of these practices and standards that can be distinguished at the national and binational levels and similarities and differences, observed in a cross-national comparative setting.

The analysis shows that the relationship between news production and democratic participation can be seen as a complex and evolving interplay between legal conditions, professional journalistic standards and practices, systemic structures as well as perceptions of media freedom, pluralism and democracy across Europe. As regards legal conditions, these are not merely a collection of legal statutes, but a relational ecology where the alignment of discursive values – such as professional autonomy and civic engagement – needs to be met with enabling and transparent regulation as well as material support. In terms of journalistic standards and practices, most interviewed professionals agree that their primary responsibility in terms of protecting democracy is to provide true, accurate and impartial information to the people, rather than facilitate democratic participation through audience's involvement in news production or managerial decisions.

Regarding the systemic structures, the Deliverable 4.7. shows an importance of all three basic media sectors, including the PSM, commercial and non-profit sectors. The PSM, despite remaining a cornerstone of the informational and representational roles, have experienced recently a visible struggle to maintain relevance and independence in the face of digital convergence and populist political pressure. Finally, pointing to perceptions of media freedom, pluralism and democracy across Europe, interviewed journalists and media professionals are convinced that democracy can hardly survive without independent media

and quality journalism. The problems and threats that undermine democracy are not perceived any more as nationally specific – they revolve around such issues as disinformation, epistemic crisis, dependency on digital platform operators, financial difficulties and erosion of journalism as a highly esteemed profession.

1. BETWEEN FACILITATING AND GATEKEEPING: JOURNALISTIC PRODUCTION AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Beata Klimkiewicz, Josef Seethaler and Jeffrey Wimmer

1. Introduction

For many decades, professional and independent journalism has been seen as a fundamental element of liberal democracy. The last ten years have witnessed a number of critical trends affecting both news journalism and democracies. Scholars pointed to such trends as: a surge of populism threatening the very structure of liberal democracy (Galston 2018), the rise of a post-truth political paradigm resulting in the assault on the institutions, norms, and procedures of liberal democracy (Newman, Conrad 2026) and a combination of the technocentric paradigm and the institutional restriction of popular participation undermining democratic structures (Bennet, Livingstone 2025). With regard to the media, professional news outlets have been exposed to attacks on their credibility, and journalists have found themselves under threat from numerous parties, including their own governments in certain states (Horton, Assersen-Skadberg 2025). Newman and Cherubini (2025) also pointed to the growing power of an alternative news ecosystem, built around partisan personalities, podcasters and influencers, often "operating outside journalistic norms". In contrast, traditional media organisations have experienced a rise in attacks on the press and various actions undermining their legacy, credibility and autonomy including SLAPPs and media capture (Holcomb 2024; Deacon, Smith, Wring 2024; CMPF 2024; RWB/RSF 2024). Such an open delegitimation of mainstream media has created an increasingly hostile climate, leading to an attempt to silence the voice of critical journalism (Newman, Conrad 2026).

A decline in trust has already been in place for some time, but for traditional media the last few years have proved to be particularly difficult. This not only applies to the United States of America, where polling from Gallup carried out in 2024 showed that "the news media is the least trusted group among 10 USA civic and political institutions involved in the democratic process" (Gallup 2024). According to the Reuters' Digital News Report, trust in the media has also been declining for years in most European countries or has stabilised at a low level – in some Eastern and Southern European countries, but also in France, it is below the level in the USA (Newman et al. 2024). Several studies already detected declines in users' engagement with the news and political participation (Benton

2019; Altay, Fletcher, Nielsen 2024). At the same time, easier access to news does not automatically translate into enhancing one's knowledge of politics and political participation. Lee and Valenzuela (2024), for example, argue that the increase in political participation, driven by social media news consumption, often arises from "illusion of knowing" (when the users are actually uninformed or misinformed) and from "the animosity towards opposing viewpoints".

All these developments show a need to understand the changing relationship between media and democracies, and in particular journalists' strategies to maintain democratic structures of power and facilitate political participation. This book aims to bring together a reflection on media production in 10 EU countries, including Austria, Czechia, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia, from the perspective of the legal and regulatory framework in which journalists operate, as well as external conditions which strengthen or hinder pro-democratic media functions. This volume aims at answering questions that will help to explore these aspects: What conditions and practices support democratic participation in news media production? What strengths and weaknesses in journalistic production can be distinguished at the national level? What similarities and differences can be observed at a cross-national comparative level?

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2. Media and Democratic Participation

Hannah Arendt's seminal work on the human condition (1958) exposes participation as a key quality of democracy. In her view, democratic participation rests on shared commonalities, and at the same time, on respected diversity, possibility to be seen and heard, and to see and hear from different perspectives (1958: 57). Participation comes to being through what people have in common, through involvement in active life and "in deliberations about what is best for their society" (Pinto 2021). For Arendt, democratic participation is direct and inseparable from human freedom; in other words, freedom flourishes through participation, it is made possible by convening, exchanging opinions and making decisions.

In this sense, the role of the news media in mediating participation may be seen both as facilitating and gatekeeping. A relationship between these two qualities depends on how news media respond to expectations of their users. Choi's study (2024) shows that, on the one hand, media users "hold high expectations for news to be fair, accurate and

objective" and value the role of news in democracy. On the other hand, news media users have negative assessments of journalistic performance, seeing news media as falling short of the democratic ideal. This ambivalent observation points to the importance of connecting citizens' expectations with "real" power of journalism. Jeffrey Alexander (2016: 10) argues that in order for professional of journalism to reclaim its cultural power as a civil institution, professional standards and accountability should be linked with the democratic aspirations of the broader society.

> "The reputation of news media—their ability to represent the public to itself—depends on the belief by their audiences that they are truly reporting on the social world, not constructing it, that they are describing news factually rather than representing aesthetically or morally".

An institutional dimension of journalism and news production comes to the forefront also with its validating capacity as public trust is institutionally embedded. It is this institutional setting where journalism as a performative profession is forged through standards, principles, routine, a collective struggling with meaning and it is also the institutional context that leads to differences in how the role of news and journalism in democracies is understood (and carried out in practice) from country to country.

The role of the media in either facilitating or gatekeeping democratic participation goes beyond the mere channelling and standardising of information. It embraces interpreting, contextualising information in such a broad, often universalising manner (Alexander, 2015) that it leads to opinion-forming, representation of 'enlarged mentality' (Arendt, 1969) and distillation of 'enlightened understanding' (Dahl 1979). For Dahl (1979) 'enlightened understanding' implies adequate and equal opportunities for citizens to discover and validate their preferences are on the matter to be decided. When applied to the news media, this would entail that the newsrooms position themselves as spaces where participation (and thus also freedom of expression) manifests through the conversation, debate, exchange of opinions and a fertile ground for enabling well-informed decisions. Arendt's (1969) 'enlarged mentality' potentially involves a common representation of the actual views of those who look upon the public realm from different perspectives. Thus, the capacity for an 'enlarged mentality' validates the opinion: the very quality of an opinion as a judgement depends upon careful consideration of other people's standpoints, on imagination of their preferences, and thus, ultimately, upon its degree of representativeness and impartiality (Arendt 1969). Again, when applied to the news media, participation is to embrace inclusiveness and representativeness of topics, groups, interests portrayed, as well as justification and validation that integrates genuine differences in an impartial manner. And it is not just a case of mainstream news media

outlets, but also alternative media serving smaller communities such as community media, which still subscribe to professional standards and normative expectations.

Yet, there is a question how these postulates and aspirations resonate in post-populist realities of divided, polarized and cacophonic information environments, where institutional role of the media competes and attempts to reinvent itself against other epistemic authorities, not necessarily being expected to produce correct information. Still, effective participation depends on how citizens' concerns are incorporated into the policymaking process and how they are reflected in decisions on binding rules (Friedrich 2006). This requires that these are based on certain epistemic qualities, reliable information, knowledge, discussion, optimal trust, and necessary criticism. In practical terms, democratic participation as facilitated by the media, translates into creating news media spaces for participation, where news media users can engage in the everyday practice of "being informed"; get involved in commenting and discussion; contribute to news production themselves; inform, be informed and become engaged in various forms of activism, including protests; create alliances, councils and other self-governing forms; build collective fronts around common interests, issues and problems, and finally receive support in information, orientation and practical issues concerning elections at various levels (national, local, European).

3. Functions Facilitating Democratic Participation

Media functions supporting democracies have usually been referred to as information provision, the control of power holders, the creation of a forum for the debate, reflecting diversity representation and channelling participation (McQuail 1983, 2002; Curran 2002; Habermas 2006; Voltmer 2013; Dahlgren 2016; Carpentier 2011; Rauijmaekers, Maeseele 2015; Schudson 2017; Carpentier, Wimmer 2025). For the purpose of this volume, it is, however, important to distinguish between these different categories with regard to professional journalism as an institutionalised practice. In this sense, three groups of functions can be distinguished and described:

- The first of them – *primary functions* – reflect the functional differentiation of the news media and journalism as a unique social system dealing with the production and dissemination of information through everyday journalistic routines. In other words, the main raison d'être of the news media is to inform society and about a society as long as they can do it independently and autonomously. The primary pro-democratic functions include: providing accurate and reliable information, scrutinising government and other powerful political, economic and social actors, and creating a forum for the

public debate. By ensuring information provision, the media assist users in building their knowledge of facts, form their own views and orientations and basing their choices and decisions on all these. It also helps to locate facts and expertise in public discourse in the post-truth politics era (Craufurd-Smith et al. 2021). The watchdog function results from media power to expose information on failures, wrongdoing and abuses of power by the state or other actors and might eventually lead to correction of abusive practices. In this way, the media can be seen as agents of transparency for the public sphere. Finally, the deliberative function is exercised through constituting a forum for the public debate, where shared social and political meaning is constructed and social reality defined. Moreover, the exchange of information and views on matters of common concern is conducive to the formation of public opinion that can act as a political will (Habermas 1996).

- The second group – *secondary functions* - incorporates journalistic practices that are instrumental to the participatory qualities of democracies, but are not primary goals of the news media. These include the representation of societal and cultural diversity and political participation. The representational dimension refers to the ability of the news media to reflect in an open manner various social actors, groups, their needs and interests, and also fundamental views on social and political reality. The participatory dimension manifests in news practices through which media users can become or stay politically active and contribute to democracy-in-making. Thus, news media create "meaningful ports of entry into political life, where citizens have the opportunity to enact democracy through their practices" (Dahlgren 2016).
- Finally, the third group includes – *signifier functions* - showing how media perceive democracies and the more general conditions that support or hamper media freedom and pluralism. The news media's role in democracies is also about noticing differences in perceptions of "what is democratic" and "the values one attaches to democracy" (Przeworski 2024). This would also imply a searching for some common ground of non-negotiables in democracies and on the other hand, observing support for alternatives to democracy and the role of the media in this process. With regard to perceptions of media freedom and pluralism, the important contexts are: legal and regulatory (e.g. guarantees for media freedom, protection of journalism, state intervention, etc.), economic (e.g. media viability, influence of VLP on how news is monetised), technological (e.g. growing media dependency on VLP's infrastructures) and social (e.g. fragmentation and polarisation of the public, (dis)trust, exposure to disinformation, and the level of media literacy).

4. Redefining Gatekeeping and Facilitating: Chances for News Production and Future Democracies

This volume brings together eight chapters that address the relationship between the news media and democratic participation from different angles, including in particular: legal conditions, systemic perspective (reflecting different media sectors), journalistic standards and practices and audience participation in news production. As regards the legal conditions, the second chapter (authored by Nuno Cintra Torres, Alessandro Nanì, Andres Jõesaar, Arko Olesk, Tatiana Chervyakova and Manuel José Damásio) explores a potential impact of regulatory measures not only on perception of media freedom in Estonia and Portugal, but also explains how this might lead to different results in press freedom rankings. A systemic perspective resonates in the fifth chapter (authored by Morgane Le Guyader, Inna Lyubareva and Romain Billot) studies how different media actors interpret and implement principles of political pluralism and social and cultural diversity. The findings offer a critical perspective on the scope and limitations of existing regulatory frameworks. The seventh chapter (authored by Karolína Šimková and Jeffrey Wimmer) examines the potential of community media for revitalising the democratic media system in the Czech Republic. The authors explore various contexts (including regulatory attempts) that have affected a slow and uneven development of the non-profit sector. Journalistic standards and practices are covered in the fourth chapter (authored by Josef Seethaler, Barbara Thomass, Maren Beaufort and Helmut Peissl) that examines the transformation of journalistic standards and strategies in Germany and Austria as a result of changing media ecosystems. This analysis reveals a fundamental tension between gatekeeping control (over fact-checking and verification) and facilitating the participation of socially and culturally diverse audiences. A perspective of audience participation as seen through the eyes of media professionals is examined in the third chapter (authored by Rosemary Day and Jude McInerney). The authors discuss the impact of structural conditions such as increasing financial instability on the generation of reliable, objective and trustworthy news. The authors observe that Irish journalists and news editors believe their primary function is information provision, instead of providing a platform or forum for public debate. With the exception of community media, they see their role as ‘reporting to’ rather than ‘reporting with’ citizens.

The sixth chapter (authored by Anastasiia Iufereva, Elisabetta Risi and Andrea Miconi) examines the strategies of Italian media to maintain democratic function by facilitating the audience’s political participation in Italy. The authors compare three media sectors (PSM, commercial and non-profit media) in order to identify key approaches through which

Italian media professionals communicate with their audiences and encourage democratic participation.

Finally, combining all of these perspectives and elements of analysis, the eighth chapter (authored by Brankica Petković Tjaša Turnšek and Lori Šramel Čebular) studies the journalistic standards, practices and structural conditions that reveal the pro-democratic potential of professional journalism in Slovenia. The authors focus on strategies employed by various newsrooms and media initiatives, including collective mobilisation, alternative funding models, and a sustained professional commitment to journalistic values. The ninth chapter (authored by Beata Klimkiewicz, Monika Szafrańska and Katarzyna Vanevska) examines the relationship between the news media and democracy in Poland focusing on structural factors at the systemic level, the analysis of conditions for news production and practices that support pro-democratic functions. The analysis has identified three trends: at a systemic level - growing structural polarisation; at a level of news production – transition from passive reporting towards active political engagement, and at the level of editorial practices - prioritising electoral participation of an audience over participation of users in content production and editorial strategies.

A common denominator for all of these highly divergent perspectives is that the news media and democracies remain profoundly connected. Like communicating vessels, they depend on each other and are mutually affected by conditions targeting one or the other. Also, importantly, news media production practices and standards seem to oscillate between forces facilitating and gatekeeping democratic participation. Most commonly, journalists and editors prioritise information provision, fact-checking and careful sourcing at the expense of participation of audiences in content production or opening a forum for the debate to larger and more representative audiences. While these choices might result from pragmatic prerequisites and attempts to protect news media's reputation as epistemic authorities against distrust, declining economic viability and growing structural pressure from Big Tech platforms, more inventive participatory forms of audience involvement might prove necessary to reverse the trends and redefine future of professional journalism. Various angles of empirical analysis presented in this volume have shown that journalists and media professionals are well aware of this problem and a necessity to link media performance with epistemic grounding. Ultimately, power of professional journalism as a counterweight to misinformation, AI news feed, growing dissonance and geopolitical uncertainty rests on rebalancing gatekeeping strategies with facilitating audience participation.

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2. MEDIA FREEDOM AND THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF THE JOURNALIST PROFESSION: COMPARING PORTUGAL AND ESTONIA

Nuno Cintra Torres, Alessandro Nanì, Andres Jõesaar, Arko Olesk, Tatiana Chervyakova and Manuel José Damásio

Abstract:

This article presents a comparative analysis of the legal frameworks for journalism and media freedom in Portugal and Estonia. Despite both countries' commitment to freedom of expression, their regulatory approaches differ significantly. Through qualitative legal analysis and interviews within the framework of the MeDeMAP research project, the study explores how these differing institutional models affect journalistic practice, professional identity, and perceptions of accountability. Portugal exemplifies a corporatist and accreditation-based system, characterised by formal regulation of access to the profession and extensive statutory oversight. Conversely, Estonia adheres to a liberal model, characterised by minimal statutory intervention, professional self-regulation, and robust constitutional protections. Through an examination of case law, legislative developments, and journalists' testimonies, the analysis reveals that regulatory density alone does not determine levels of media freedom or professional autonomy. Instead, the findings underscore the significance of historical trajectories, newsroom cultures, economic conditions, and judicial balancing in shaping contemporary journalism. While Portuguese journalists often view regulation as a source of legitimacy and professional trust, Estonian practitioners emphasise ethical autonomy and editorial responsibility. Ultimately, the comparison posits that media freedom emerges as an ecosystem outcome, shaped by the interplay between law, professional norms, and market pressures, rather than by regulatory models alone.

Keywords:

Journalism Regulation; Professional Accreditation; Self-Regulation; Portuguese Media; Estonian Media; Comparative Media Law

1. Introduction and Objectives

The constitutions of Estonia and Portugal both guarantee freedom of expression as a universal right, allowing individuals to express, receive, and disseminate information without discrimination. However, the regulations governing journalism differ significantly. In Estonia, there are no legal restrictions on who can engage in journalism; anyone performing journalistic functions is recognised as a journalist, and official accreditation is optional. Conversely, Portugal has stringent regulations, requiring journalists to be remunerated professionals, complete a formal internship, and obtain a professional card from the Accreditation Commission. Foreign journalists must acquire a Portuguese professional card or have their qualifications formally recognised. Thus, despite both countries endorsing similar constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, their approaches to regulating journalism differ significantly.

Both Estonia and Portugal rank highly in the RSF World Press Freedom Index, reflecting strong formal protections for freedom of expression in both nations. Estonia currently ranks second globally, while Portugal – where freedom of expression is generally regarded as robust – has recently declined to eighth place.

This divergence presents a central question for the present study: why does Portugal, despite its more tightly regulated journalistic profession, score lower than Estonia, where regulation is comparatively minimal? Part of the explanation lies in country-specific circumstances, including the precarious economic situation of much of the Portuguese media sector and a few isolated, non-generalisable incidents of aggression by extreme-right sympathisers against journalists. Beyond these contingent factors, the contrast between Estonia and Portugal highlights deeper structural and historical differences. The lightly regulated Estonian model and the highly regulated Portuguese framework are rooted in distinct national trajectories in the development of freedom of expression and media governance. Against this backdrop, the analysis turns to a broader normative question: whether increased regulation is indeed necessary – or desirable – to ensure journalistic accountability, professional responsibility, and adherence to deontological standards.

2. Methodological Approach

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design, integrating documentary legal analysis with semi-structured interviews involving media professionals.

The initial methodological component examines the constitutional and legal frameworks governing journalism in Portugal and Estonia. This includes constitutional provisions on freedom of expression, media legislation, professional statutes, regulatory instruments, and relevant judicial decisions. The focus is on how each system defines journalism, regulates access, and balances accountability with freedom of expression. This legal analysis sets the stage for a comparative discussion in the conclusions, contrasting Portugal's corporatist, accreditation-based model with Estonia's liberal, self-regulatory approach, allowing for the contextualisation of professional practices within historical regulatory trajectories.

The second component involves semi-structured interviews with journalists, editors, and media managers in Portugal and Estonia as part of the Horizon Europe, MeDeMAP research project. Interviewees were selected to represent various media types (public, commercial, national, local, minority) and roles. Using a shared thematic protocol, interviews focused on media freedom, professional autonomy, regulation, accountability, and journalism. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and thematically analysed. Coding highlighted recurring patterns in journalists' perceptions of legal regulation, professional accreditation, ethical standards, and external pressures (economic, political, judicial). These insights help explain the differing assessments of regulation by journalists in Portugal and Estonia, despite similar constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression.

The integration of legal analysis and interview data facilitates a contextualised comparison. Rather than normatively evaluating regulation, the study examines how journalists experience and interpret different regulatory configurations.

3. The Portuguese Media Context: Historical Background

The historical trajectory of journalism and freedom of expression in Portugal reflects the nation's political evolution: absolutist monarchy, constitutional monarchy, corporativist dictatorship, and liberal democracy. A pivotal moment occurred with the Liberal Revolution of 1820, which enshrined freedom of expression within the new Constitution. This era witnessed the expansion of the press to 112 periodicals, most political in nature. The Press Law of 1821 abolished prior censorship, recognised freedom of thought and expression, and guaranteed the right to print and publish. These freedoms were not absolute. Bishops retained the authority to censor texts concerning dogma and morals, and the liberal system itself could not be questioned. In 1823, a military absolutist coup abolished the Constitution, reinstating restrictive legislation. Political instability

culminated in a civil war between absolutists and constitutionalists and, eventually, in the restoration of the Constitutional Monarchy in 1834 (Tengarrinha 2013).

Journalism evolved from a political activity into a recognisable profession. Until the mid-nineteenth century, political and party-affiliated periodicals dominated, and journalists were commonly identified as politicians or publicists rather than as professionals. From the 1860s onwards, the industrialisation of news production demonstrated the economic viability of profit-driven journalism, increasingly independent of political control. This shift in journalism led to the emergence of new professional identities, distinguishing "journalists by occupation" from political writers. Elite "newspaper politicians" formed journalist associations, while professional journalists created a union. This professionalisation occurred amid significant political upheaval, including the double assassination of King Carlos and his heir in 1908 and the Republic's proclamation in 1910 (Sousa and Lima 2020). The Republican experiment was undermined by persistent political violence, which facilitated the military coup of 1928 and the subsequent establishment of the corporatist dictatorship, the Estado Novo.

A new Constitution in 1933 guaranteed "freedom of expression of thought", but on the same day, prior censorship was imposed. Journalism was restructured under a corporativist model, leading to the dissolution of the independent Union. In 1934, the Sindicato Nacional dos Jornalistas was established, a state-controlled union requiring all paid journalists to join. While the profession received formal recognition and material protections, its value was mainly judged by its alignment with the regime's propaganda goals, a situation that continued until 1974 (Baptista 2008).

The April Revolution of 1974 marked a rupture from the past and initiated a new democratic era. The first general assembly of the Sindicato post-revolution expanded its scope to include professionals from radio, television, press, and cinema, and was renamed as the Journalists' Union (SJ). The democratic Constitution of 1976 enshrined freedom of expression and media independence, though Portugal only became a consolidated Western liberal democracy with the 1982 constitutional revision, abolishing the Council of Revolution. The institutional framework of journalism was further clarified in 1979 with the adoption of the Statute of the Journalist and the regulation of professional accreditation. Portugal's accession to the European Economic Community (1986) reinforced the democratic and regulatory standards. A further reform (1997) established the Journalist Professional Accreditation Commission (CCPJ), transferring accreditation powers from the SJ to this new institution composed of journalists and presided over by a jurist/journalist. There are more than four thousand accredited journalists.

4. Present Legislation Applying to Social Communication

Journalism in Portugal operates within an extensively regulated legal framework. The legislation encompasses seventeen laws, decree-laws, and ordinances. The Portuguese Constitution, comprising 296 articles, enshrines freedom of expression, outlines the principles of media regulation, the establishment of newspapers without prior authorisation and mandates the State to ensure media freedom from political and economic influence.

The Constitution prohibits censorship, safeguards journalists' rights to access information, protects their professional independence and confidentiality, and promotes their participation in editorial governance. Subsequent laws expanded these guarantees, establishing accountability standards for journalists and media organisations. Many media laws reiterate constitutional rights, resulting in a complex, sometimes redundant regulatory framework. Additionally, some legislation, such as the Press Law adopted in 1999, was obsolete from the outset because it did not account for the emergence of online media in the previous decade. The Law reaffirms the right to freedom of the press, subject to constitutional and legal constraints to ensure the accuracy of information, protect personal rights, and uphold public interest and the democratic order.

A media regulator, Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social (ERC), was established in 2015. It oversees the framework governing individual journalists and media entities across all platforms. ERC protects the right to information and press freedom, promoting journalism's integrity, pluralism, non-concentration of ownership, co-regulation and self-regulation, and the effective exercise of rights like airtime and political response.

Journalists must also comply with the Civil and Penal Codes, which safeguard individuals against unlawful acts that affect names, images, privacy, and reputations. The Penal Code criminalises offences against honour, defamation, insult, privacy crimes such as invading personal life and misusing data, imposing penalties of imprisonment.

The Statute of the Journalist defines a journalist as an individual whose primary, ongoing, and compensated occupation involves the investigation, collection, selection, and processing of facts, news, or opinions for dissemination through the media. Entry into the profession requires a professional qualification and a card from the CCPJ after a compulsory internship. The Statute emphasises that the freedom of expression and creativity of journalists should not be opposed by obstacles, discrimination, or censorship. The CCPJ evaluates and sanctions violations of professional duties with penalties and fines that accrue to its budget. However, several journalists in leading positions are known not

to be accredited. The card is necessary to attend government press conferences, but this requirement is apparently loosely enforced.

The Code of Criminal Procedure imposes constraints on journalism within the context of criminal investigations. It permits a judge to enforce judicial secrecy during the investigative phase, where publicity may compromise the rights of those involved. This obligation binds all participants, prohibiting the disclosure of procedural acts. The Code aims to balance the right to a fair trial and the social interest in the relevant information. The legal framework often fails to prevent media interference. Comprehensive legislation to regulate investigative secrecy in criminal proceedings is missing (Inchausti 2013). Journalists must adhere to a wide array of sector-specific legislation, including the Television Law, Radio Law, Public Service Broadcasting Law, media registration rules, laws governing the financing of public service media, state subsidies to social communication, electronic communications, access to administrative documents, and state secrets. These norms illustrate the intensity of the regulatory environment influencing journalism in Portugal.

5. Case Law: The Missing Journalist Accreditation

Journalist Maria João Avillez began her career in 1973, at the age of 28. She specialised in interviewing Portuguese and international politicians and opinion-makers, becoming a respected media figure. In 2006, Avillez handed over her journalist accreditation following a CCPJ notification (SJ, 2006/07/14). The notification concerned publicity to a bank in a text by Avillez published in the magazine Única. The offence involved Avillez discussing her relationship with money in footnotes referencing the bank's products, a promotional practice not permitted in journalism.

Avillez continued her journalism in various media despite lacking accreditation. Years later, in 2024, the CCPJ made public that it was considering filing a misdemeanour case against Avillez with the Public Prosecutor's Office “for possible crime of usurpation of functions” (RR, 2024/09/09). The imputed misdemeanour was the label “journalist” under the Avillez name displayed on the TV screen during a prime-time interview with the prime minister on the major TV channel SIC. The editor of SIC said that it had been a mistake. Avillez argued that she "never remembered" the missing accreditation. The then president of CCPJ said that “someone who identifies as a journalist, but is not one [because her card had been handed over], and not being one means not being qualified as required by law, under the terms of the Statute of the Journalist –, this person is subject, and the body

itself, to the eventual opening of an administrative offence procedure”. It is unclear whether the procedure was ever enforced.

The lack of active accreditation is not uncommon. Several top journalists at TVI, CNN and CMTV, at dailies and weeklies Correio da Manhã, Expresso, Público, Diário de Notícias, Jornal de Notícias, and Observador do not have one. Notably, some primetime anchors haven't had active cards since 2021; likewise, a former chief editor at daily Público (Página Um, 2024/10/09).

6. MeDeMAP Interviews with Journalists (Portugal)

Unanimously, journalists consider themselves rigorous, impartial, truthful, and compliant with ethical standards. They show great esteem and appreciation for their own work, although some acknowledge that emotion can sometimes impair judgement and affect impartiality.

Rigour, credibility and factuality are sought through different methods, including fact-checking, most often conducted by individual journalists and, rarely, by a separate department or the editorial hierarchy.

Journalists consider that they do not endure political pressure: “We are in a good position. We do our journalism in peace” (PT-C.2-3). Journalists report without restrictions but face economic, legal, and security challenges from media concentration and from the EU-designated gatekeepers. One said: “We are not the gatekeepers anymore; democracy is at stake” (PT-C.2-3).

The fragility of the business environment is considered the greatest risk to media pluralism. “There's no real freedom for journalistic companies if they are not financially independent, stable, profitable” (PT-C-3). Strategies are failing to halt the decline of legacy media. “We don’t have enough resources and enough money to fund the journalism that is needed in a democratic society” (PT-J-6). “Most media groups are basically broken in Portugal or living with huge financial difficulties” (PT-C-3) is a common lament. Several major brands are on the brink of bankruptcy. “Shareholder restructuring led to a fairly large reduction in human resources. There were no collective redundancies, but people ended up leaving because of the instability” (PT-J-2). Newsroom morale is affected by staff shortages, long working hours, low pay, dismissals, litigation, and burnout: “Journalists work hard and are underpaid” (PT-J-2). The lines between news, analysis, and opinion are increasingly blurred, with original reporting overshadowed by cheaper formats and non-journalist commentators mixing facts with opinions, undermining trust in the

profession. Journalists agree on their vital role as the “backbone” of democracy, but face time and funding constraints, as well as legal pressures to withhold investigative journalism on corruption or other misdeeds.

Interviewees considered accreditation essential for professional integrity, despite the entry barriers. Many considered that the institutionalisation of journalism and the restricted access to the profession do not lead to a reduction in pluralism but rather serve as a quality guarantee and foster trust between journalists and the public. One explained in detail investigative work that allegedly only accredited journalists can perform: “Many stories are not exclusively based on leaks but start from there. Data and documents, sometimes provided through means that can be questioned, may include information protected by privileged confidentiality. We are sure that we are on the right side, defending public interest. There are many risks here. Whenever these strong stories turn out to be wrong, which can happen sometimes, it's hard to deal with because those lines of investigation are basically coming from the prosecutors. They're not investigative journalists themselves” (PT-J-3).

The rise, albeit timid, of citizen journalism, a notion absent in the legal framework, has been noticed by accredited journalists. It is argued that the lack of formal training of citizen journalists does not guarantee the distance and detachment that journalists must have from facts, and that they are oblivious to journalism’s legal obligations. But not all journalist union leaders agree on the absolute need for accreditation and propose deregulation of the profession, as one union leader told us.

Media professionals agree that national regulators struggle to enforce effective solutions against the extraterritorial large platforms affecting media plurality. The Portuguese government, journalists, and lawyers demand a comprehensive new EU media act that encompasses and expands the existing legislative package, leading to an EU Media Union and inscribing new areas, such as common journalistic regulatory standards to prevent, e.g. branded content disguised as news. An updated common framework is possible, desirable and necessary, they argue.

The Government issued an Action Plan for Social Communication (October 2024) with 30 measures, one of them addressing the limits of national regulatory power. Measure 13 is about “the integration of digital platforms in solutions for the sector in dialogue with digital platforms and sharing of content, in line with the definition of public policies in this matter at the European level involving the technological sector and digital operators”. This

vague formulation nonetheless recognises the State's inability to negotiate with platforms at the national level and advocates integration into EU policy.

7. Portugal Conclusions: A legal Conceptualisation Continuum

For the past 50 years, journalists have operated in a “robust” legal environment in which freedom of speech is respected. After the 1974 democratic revolution, Portugal established a framework that promotes media pluralism. Freedom of the press became a constitutional right, protected by the courts.

However, since the liberal Constitution of 1820, stringent conditions to practice journalism have prevailed. The 1933 dictatorship ended press freedom, enforcing prior censorship and regimenting journalists into a corporatist labour union, with accreditation restricted to authorised media employees. Corporatism was abolished in 1974, yet the conditions for becoming an officially recognised journalist remain largely unchanged. A long-standing legal concept dictates that only accredited individuals can be considered journalists.

The main professional procedural difference now lies in the accreditation process, managed by the semi-independent CCPJ, which grants, renews, suspends, revokes professional titles for journalists, or imposes penalties. Most journalists believe official accreditation is necessary and useful for promoting and maintaining public trust in the news media.

The refusal to accept that “citizen journalists” can be considered journalists is common among accredited journalists. It is argued that non-accredited citizens lack professional training and are allegedly not obliged to follow professional standards and regulations. Similarly, "community media" are often dismissed, even if they follow standard ethical and deontological guidelines designed to ensure quality, invoke constitutional rights and common law to protect against lawsuits.

Journalists view journalism as the essential foundation of democracy. However, media concentration resulting from bankruptcies and the emerging control of the advertising market by the gatekeepers has created a funding shortage and deteriorated the decades-old media economy and business models, posing a significant risk to media pluralism and to the working conditions of journalists.

There is a consensus among journalists, media managers, and politicians that national regulators are unable to enforce effective solutions to the challenges posed by the extraterritorial platforms. Coordinated action at the EU level to protect and sustain media pluralism and democracy is needed, they argue.

8. The Estonian Media Reality: From Liberalisation to European Media Governance (1992-2025)

Following Estonia's restoration of independence in 1991, the media system underwent a significant transformation as policymakers dismantled the Soviet-era structure. This led to the abolition of censorship and the establishment of a democratic dual media system. State-controlled broadcasting was restructured into public-service media, and newspaper ownership shifted to the private sector, fostering a private media market. Journalists who had faced Party censorship strongly supported the idea that the press should be free from statutory intervention, a principle enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, adopted in 1992. While guaranteeing freedom of expression, the Constitution does not define "journalist" or "periodical", leading to the absence of comprehensive press laws. Regulation instead focused on public-service broadcasting and audiovisual media services, with the press largely functioning under self-regulation.

During the initial phase of liberalisation in the 1990s, the Broadcasting Act of 1994, amended in 1999 and 2000, established competitive licensing for private broadcasters, set limits on foreign ownership, and mandated minimum news quotas. Newspapers and magazines were excluded, supporting the view that the press should not be statutorily controlled. By the end of the decade, a dual broadcasting system emerged, combining advertising-funded private broadcasters with public-service institutions, Eesti Raadio and Eesti Televisioon, overseen by a Broadcasting Council. Meanwhile, the press sector relied mainly on self-regulation.

The prospect of European Union accession accelerated regulatory reform and market consolidation. Protectionist measures restricting foreign ownership were removed, and advertising rules were aligned with EU standards. Amendments to the Broadcasting Act lifted foreign capital restrictions, set a 51 per cent quota for European works, and required some commissioning from independent producers. These changes coincided with rapid ownership concentration, as Nordic media groups expanded into the Estonian market: Sweden's MTG acquired EVTV/RTV (TV3), while Norway's Schibsted took control of Kanal 2 and Postimees. Newspapers, still lacking sector-specific legislation, were subject only to general competition law. Tensions between public and private broadcasters culminated in a 2001 compromise banning commercial ads on public TV from 2002 and radio from 2005.

The reform phase was driven by technological convergence and the digital transition, marked by the 2010 switch-off of analogue television. This led to the Media Services Act, adapting the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive into Estonian law and extending

regulation to on-demand services and video-sharing platforms. It also introduced source protection for journalistic information, partly compensating for the absence of a press law. Additionally, the 2007 Estonian Public Broadcasting Act merged Eesti Raadio and Eesti Televisioon into ERR, establishing its governance and funding structures.

In the absence of statutory regulation, Estonia developed ethical standards through industry-led self-governance. Media organisations adopted the Estonian Code of Journalism Ethics in 1998, enforced by a voluntary Press Council. This has contributed to Estonia's high rankings in press freedom indices, with the Ministry of Culture's Cultural Development Plan emphasising responsible self-regulation.

Since the mid-2010s, Estonia has combined liberal media regulation with resilience measures. Fiscal tools have supported journalism sustainability, notably through amendments to the Value-Added Tax Act reducing VAT on print periodicals in 2009 and extending it to digital subscriptions in 2020. Geopolitical challenges intensified after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In March 2022, the government blocked Kremlin-controlled TV channels and websites and supported the creation of Russian- and English-language content (ERR 19.04.2022; ERR 25.02.2022). It also allocated 1 million euros annually for local Russian-language media outlets (Kultuuriministeerium 2025). These measures reflect efforts to balance media freedom and self-regulation with security and democratic protection in a changing media landscape.

9. Laws, Regulation and Ownership Transparency in Estonia

Over the past three decades, Estonia has developed a media governance model combining a predominantly laissez-faire approach to press freedom with an EU-aligned regulatory framework for audiovisual media. Shaped by a small media market, concerns for linguistic and cultural preservation, and reliance on voluntary professional ethics, this model generally protects journalistic autonomy while keeping regulation targeted. The future of media pluralism will depend on how EU-level instruments and domestic funding reforms reinforce self-regulation.

The 1992 Constitution firmly establishes media freedom. Article 44 guarantees access to public information, and Article 45 protects freedom of expression and publication, prohibiting prior censorship. The Constitution neither defines journalism as a profession nor imposes specific duties on journalists, reflecting a commitment to negative freedom and limited state interference. Estonia has ratified key international instruments, including the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and

Political Rights, without major reservations. National jurisprudence recognises freedom of expression, and the GDPR derogation for journalism aligns with ECHR standards.

Formal regulation has developed mainly in the audiovisual sector. The Media Services Act (2015) is the central legislative instrument governing audiovisual media services. It regulates licensing, editorial responsibility, and source protection, promotes media literacy, and ensures compliance with EU audiovisual policy. Its scope is largely confined to broadcasting and video-on-demand services; the press is only marginally affected, notably through Article 15 on source protection. The forthcoming implementation of the European Media Freedom Act may extend EU-level oversight to both audiovisual media and the press.

There are no professional licensing requirements for journalists. Status is determined by employment and editorial affiliation rather than legal recognition, reflecting a preference for institutional trust and self-governance. Although the Professions Act (2015) establishes a general framework for qualifications, journalism is not subject to a specific vocational standard, and media organisations define competency requirements autonomously. Ethical accountability operates through self-regulation, particularly the Estonian Press Council and the Code of Ethics for Journalists.

Estonia lacks a centralised media regulator comparable to Portugal's ERC. Audiovisual compliance is supervised by the Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority; ethical complaints are handled by the Press Council; media policy falls under the Ministry of Culture, which does not exercise editorial control. Journalists are subject to general civil and criminal law. Defamation was decriminalised in 2002 and moved to civil law, although imprisonment remains possible under Article 275 of the Penal Code for defaming state officials or symbols; no journalist has been prosecuted under this provision. Civil defamation claims are governed by the Law of Obligations Act, with generally moderate damages. Additional relevant legislation includes the Public Information Act and the State Secrets and Classified Information Act.

While freedom of expression is well protected, the growing number of SLAPP cases and the absence of a dedicated anti-SLAPP framework raise the risk level to medium-low. The Ministry of Justice is consulting on the implementation of the SLAPP Directive, with the Estonian Association of Journalists acting as the contact point and advisor. Overall, press freedom is constitutionally robust, legally constrained mainly through general law, and ethically governed through self-regulation.

Ownership transparency is regulated through general company law rather than media-specific rules and is comparatively stringent. All companies registered in Estonia must

disclose their owners and ultimate beneficial owners (Riigikogu 1995; 2017). Media companies are listed in the e-Business Register, which provides public access to ownership data, beneficial ownership, and financial statements for recent years. Additional transparency obligations apply to broadcasting under the Media Services Act. Section 16 (§ 16 (1) p 41) requires audiovisual media service providers to make publicly accessible information on their ownership structure, including the name of the beneficial owner, personal identification code and issuing country (or, where absent, date and place of birth and country of residence), as well as verification details (Riigikogu 2010).

10. Case Law: Supreme Court Decision on Publishing Pre-Trial Information

In January 2023, the Estonian Supreme Court ruled on a case that sparked widespread debate over the boundaries of journalistic freedom and the protection of secrecy in criminal investigations. The case involved investigative journalists Sulev Vedler and Tarmo Vahter, along with Delfi Meedia AS, who had published an article in Eesti Ekspress revealing details of a criminal investigation into Swedbank. The article included the names of individuals allegedly under investigation, without prior authorisation from the Prosecutor’s Office.

The Prosecutor’s Office requested that the journalists be fined under the Code of Criminal Procedure, arguing that the publication violated the confidentiality of the pre-trial investigation. Harju County Court initially imposed fines of €1000 on each journalist, but the Tallinn Circuit Court overturned the decision. The case was then brought before the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled that journalists may be fined for publishing confidential pre-trial information without permission if the Prosecutor’s Office proves it harmed the investigation or participants' rights. Such fines do not violate the European Convention on Human Rights. Journalists cannot be fined for independently obtained information and can challenge refusals to publish in court. This decision clarified the limits of journalistic activity and emphasised the need for proportionality in restricting press freedom.

11. MeDeMAP Interviews with Journalists (Estonia)

Interviews conducted with Estonian journalists and editors reveal a widely shared perception of journalism as a professional practice grounded in strong ethical standards, considerable autonomy, and a liberal regulatory framework. Respondents from public service, commercial, national, local, and minority outlets consistently highlighted adherence to the Estonian Code of Journalistic Ethics as central to their work. As one interviewee stated, “The Code of Journalistic Ethics is the foundation of journalism” (EE-J-

5). Even when not explicitly referenced, journalists invoked principles such as truthfulness, fact-checking, balance, the distinction between facts and opinions, and ensuring all parties are heard. These standards were described as stable and sufficient, explaining why neither the state nor media organisations have sought further legal codification.

In practice, larger newsrooms employ structured workflows and multiple editorial layers to ensure quality. One editor explained: “We have different layers of editors, there are people who proofread first, there are day editors who come in later, then there are language editors” (EE-C-1). Editorial routines include rigorous source verification, particularly for emotionally charged stories originating on social media. As one journalist recounted, “I immediately instructed him to ask the same person, the police, the vet. (…) And the bottom line was that things were not quite as they had been propagated in some kind of social media sound bite” (EE-J-5). In smaller newsrooms, these responsibilities fall largely on individual journalists.

Investigative journalism has emerged as a field marked by both commitment and constraints. Respondents agreed that investigative work is resource-intensive and difficult to reconcile with daily news production. One editor remarked, “investigative journalism is very expensive because it is time-consuming and in-depth” (EE-C-4), while another stressed the need for investigations to progress gradually and discreetly. Some newsrooms integrate investigative elements into routine reporting, reflecting different organisational approaches. Local journalism poses additional challenges due to limited anonymity. As one journalist observed, “first of all, people are not anonymous (…) even if something does leak out, it is still pretty easy to guess who the whistleblower was” (EE-J-5). This heightens ethical responsibility, particularly in small communities. These constraints are not incidental but constitutive of investigative journalism in Estonia. The case study in Section 10 demonstrated how the Court’s proportionality-based reasoning recognises these conditions, affirming that investigative reporting, even when intersecting with procedural secrecy, should be assessed in light of its democratic function rather than through automatic legal sanctions.

Overall, the interviews portray a media environment characterised by high professional autonomy, limited direct political threats, and growing economic pressures. Global digital platforms, declining advertising revenues, and sustainability concerns were frequently mentioned. As one editor cautioned, “If this is not the case, then media freedom is at risk” (EE-C-6). Despite these challenges, Estonian journalists consistently frame their democratic role as providing verified, balanced information rather than educating or directing the public. As one public service journalist noted, “we cannot be some kind of

people's educators" (EE-J-1). The shared objective remains to enable citizens to make informed decisions in an increasingly complex information environment.

12. Estonian Conclusions

The jurisprudential developments analysed in Section 9 provide a concrete entry point for understanding the broader conclusions. The Supreme Court's ruling on the publication of pre-trial information shows how Estonia's regulatory model relies on ex post judicial balancing rather than ex ante licensing or administrative oversight. By requiring public authorities to demonstrate concrete harm and justify restrictions on journalistic activity, the Court reinforces a system in which accountability is grounded in general law and constitutional principles, complemented by professional self-regulation. The case links legal doctrine with journalistic practice, illustrating how conflicts between press freedom and other protected interests are resolved within Estonia's lightly regulated yet institutionally robust media environment.

The Estonian media system represents a distinctive European model, marked by strong protection of freedom of expression, limited statutory regulation, and extensive professional self-regulation. Since regaining independence in 1991, Estonia has refrained from adopting comprehensive press laws, relying instead on constitutional guarantees and ethical frameworks. This reflects both historical distrust of authoritarian control and a commitment to safeguarding journalistic autonomy through self-governance.

At the same time, Estonia has developed a more detailed regulatory framework for audiovisual and digital media, shaped by EU integration and technological convergence. Public service media has been consolidated and clearly mandated, while EU-aligned legislation, including the Media Services Act, has extended oversight to on-demand and platform-based services and strengthened source protection. This asymmetric approach – minimal press regulation, more structured governance of private broadcasting and audiovisual services, and targeted regulation of public service media – has remained compatible with high levels of media freedom and public trust.

Interview findings underscore the resilience of this model in practice. Journalists across sectors share a strong ethical orientation anchored in the Estonian Code of Journalistic Ethics and emphasise accuracy, balance, and independence as core democratic functions. Investigative journalism and the facilitation of public debate remain key ideals, despite constraints stemming from limited resources, market concentration, and the structural limits of a small media market. Economic pressure – particularly the dominance of global

digital platforms and declining advertising revenues – emerges as the most significant long-term risk to pluralism and sustainability.

Recent geopolitical developments have prompted targeted resilience measures, including restrictions on foreign propaganda outlets and support for Russian-language media, reflecting efforts to balance openness with security. Overall, the Estonian case shows how a system grounded in constitutional protections, professional ethics, and selective regulation can sustain democratic journalism, while highlighting the growing influence of economic and geopolitical factors on media freedom.

13. Comparative Conclusions (Portugal-Estonia)

This comparative analysis of Portugal and Estonia illustrates that similar constitutional commitments to freedom of expression can support markedly different regulatory and professional configurations, without yielding linear or predictable effects on press freedom. The findings indicate that regulatory density alone is an inadequate explanatory variable. Instead, what is significant is the structure of regulation, the location of accountability, and the interaction of legal, economic, and professional norms in practice.

Portugal exemplifies a corporatist-professional model in which journalism is formally defined, access to the profession is regulated, and accountability is institutionalised through licensing and disciplinary mechanisms. Many journalists interviewed regard this framework as a source of professional legitimacy and public trust. However, the Portuguese case also highlights the tensions inherent in such systems: accreditation disputes and selective enforcement reveal boundary struggles over who qualifies as a journalist, potentially undermining the credibility of professional gatekeeping itself. These dynamics demonstrate how regulation can simultaneously protect journalistic standards and generate symbolic and practical exclusions.

Estonia, in contrast, follows a liberal model rooted in historical resistance to state control of the press. The absence of a comprehensive press law and journalist licensing reflects a deliberate preference for negative freedom, with accountability primarily embedded in ethical self-regulation and newsroom routines. Interviews emphasise the centrality of editorial processes, peer norms, and reputational mechanisms in ensuring quality and responsibility. This model has coincided with very high international press freedom rankings, but it is also more vulnerable to indirect pressures, particularly those arising from market fragility and legal uncertainty.

Across both cases, the analysis underscores that contemporary constraints on journalism increasingly arise not from overt censorship but from economic precarity and legal risk. Strategic lawsuits, the costs of legal defence, and declining revenues – especially in small media markets – affect journalists' ability to perform watchdog functions regardless of the formal regulatory model. Court decisions in both countries show a growing reliance on proportionality and harm-based reasoning, indicating that freedom of expression is often determined in practice through judicial interpretation rather than constitutional abstraction.

The comparison suggests that media freedom should be understood as an ecosystem outcome rather than solely a function of regulation. Professional licensing may enhance accountability but also create legitimacy challenges; self-regulation may preserve openness but depends heavily on economic sustainability and strong institutional cultures. As European-level instruments such as the European Media Freedom Act gain prominence, both systems will face new forms of convergence pressure, though starting from different institutional logics. The Portuguese–Estonian contrast thus underscores that safeguarding journalistic freedom requires attention not only to legal frameworks but also to several other conditions of possibility: professional practices, market conditions, and the broader political economy of the media.

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3. "THE EYES AND EARS OF THE PUBLIC": THE CHALLENGES OF PERFORMING DEMOCRATIC ROLES IN THE MEDIA IN IRELAND TODAY

Rosemary Day and Jude McInerney

Abstract:

This chapter discusses research conducted into how Irish producers of the news, journalists and editors, view their role as protectors and promoters of democracy as part of the HORIZON funded MeDeMAP project. It shares their concerns about how things have changed and what this means for the future.

Drawing on Carpentier and Wimmer's (2025) identification of five roles or functions of the media in protecting democracy, it presents the observations and discusses the reflections of those working in news production in Ireland in relation to media. These may be summarised as the media operating as providers of information; as a watch-dog; as a forum for public debate, as representing diversity and as facilitating participation.

Irish journalists and their editors are found to be concerned primarily about financial sustainability; the challenges of supplying news on digital platforms; defamation and disinformation. They were not overly concerned about decreasing plurality in terms of ownership but they were aware that they needed to do better in terms of their representations of diversity. Apart from those working in community media, they did not see generally a role for themselves in facilitating public participation in the media.

Keywords:

Irish Journalism; Media and Democracy; Representation; Participation; Watchdog; Information

1. Introduction

> "…fair, balanced and I have, you know, been the eyes and ears of the public and I've written about something that OK, may not please everyone, but it's for the greater society".

This comment by the editor of a regional newspaper in Ireland captures many of the points made by most of the journalists and editors interviewed for this research and discussed in this chapter. The idealistic belief that their role is to bring accurate, unbiased information to the public, even when that is not welcomed by those in power, is still strongly held by Irish journalists and their editors. They believe that they perform an important function for society, protecting them by giving them the power of information that would otherwise be withheld from them, and by acting as a watchdog on behalf of citizens, ultimately protecting the democratic system and the public.

Carpentier and Wimmer (2025) identify five main democratic roles of media. These are: providing information; acting as a watchdog; facilitating a public forum; representing diversity and facilitating public participation (Carpentier, Wimmer 2025: 53). These provided a useful basis for five of the questions posed to twelve working journalists and editors in Ireland and their responses are analysed and discussed here. Further questions probed the conditions necessary to protect freedom and professional journalism and the relationship between media and democracy. Some of the responses to these other questions are included here but, the focus in this chapter, is on these five democratic roles of the media and it discusses the extent to which Irish journalists and editors perceive these to be part and parcel of their roles and responsibilities.

The interviewees were selected to represent a broad sweep of the entire field of news production. This was the case in all ten countries in the study and the methodology facilitates crosscomparison. While the sample was small, it is significant, as all types of media ownership that exist in Ireland were represented in these interviews, from public service, to independent commercial to community media. Representatives from all types of news dissemination platforms were also included, from digital natives to television and radio and from the national to the local printed press. This provides a set of perspectives and insights from the broad range of news providers operating in Ireland and the decision to include equal numbers of journalists and editors also provides for the viewpoints of news staff at different levels of hierarchy and at different stages in their careers to be shared.

Some interviewees were happy to be identified but most appeared to be reassured, even relieved, when informed that their contributions would be anonymised and they contributed generously and honestly. Consequently, no names are attributed to respondents or to their employers. The reader may identify the role and sector of each contributor by understanding that "IE" indicates that these were all respondents working in the Irish media; that "J" indicates a journalist, "C" an editor and that the numbers indicate which sector of the media each respondent is working in i.e. 1 = public service media; 2 = private television or radio outlets 3 = Press (national) 4 = Digital native news media; 5 = local/regional media 6 = community, not for profit or minority media.

2. Issues of Concern to Editors and Journalists in Bringing the News to the People

Providing Accurate Information

Providing accurate information is seen as a primary function of their job for the journalists and editors interviewed. Carpentier and Wimmer (2025) tell us that the media support democracy by "by facilitating the free and transparent formation of individual political positions – or identifications with particular discourses – by gathering, selecting and disseminating news on matters of general importance, thus satisfying citizens' information needs" (Carpentier, Wimmer 2025: 53).

Respondents were very aware that they were the eyes and ears of the public that felt that they had a duty to bring factual information in unbiased, objective reports to people so that they could make up their own minds about situations be they political, economic, social or cultural. They believed that this earned them the people's trust and this was important to them. They stressed the importance of retaining this trust by being careful to check everything for accuracy and by providing a balance or impartiality in their reporting. They all mentioned the importance of fact-checking and of the verification of sources of information. They were keen to stress the need for vigilance and care in this regard, and this did not vary across platforms. Only one online journalist (IE-J-4) took a slightly different stance, calling mainstream media too "risk-averse". They were referring to the custom of journalists waiting a few days, or even weeks, for politicians to exercise their unofficial "right to reply" before publishing because of the risk of legal action, and they believed that this runs the risk that stories and outcomes can be managed by the politicians who are under scrutiny.

The need to know who was providing the information and of being able to stand over that source and to trust the source were also important to them. For example, the public service broadcaster's journalist said:

> "Then it's about getting trusted sources and having two of them to verify what's happening. So it's ideally a document but that's not always possible. Then it's the two independent sources" (IE-J-1).

All other interviewees stressed the importance of verifying sources, of using two sources to cross-check information and of consulting with colleagues and frequently the legal team in house or even external lawyers.

All respondents said that they always try to provide fair and impartial reports, giving 'both sides of the story' and that they actively try to find people with a range or diversity of opinions to contribute to their stories. They understood that the public trust them to provide accurate and objective reports and they were all adamant that they need to ensure that this trust is not eroded by sloppiness or lack of care.

Almost all interviewees mentioned Ireland's defamation laws and the high payments made to complainants as a constraint to reporting as honestly and as freely as they would like to do. As the editor of a regional newspaper explained:

> "We would look at any of those legally sensitive stories and we'd have discussion about them, and we'd be looking for pitfalls for where you know we could be open legally to any problems and all the journalists, are trained in terms of you know, legalising for illegally sensitive articles" (IE-C-5).

Some interviewees were concerned about the quality of the news that people are accessing.

The digital editor explained that people who can afford to pay for news are getting great content, but they were concerned that people who could not afford to buy a newspaper or those who had poor literacy were not getting good quality news and were badly served with misinformation on social media. Others in the legacy media were concerned that standards were being driven down by competition from digital media, in particular from news that is not professionally produced on social media. As the editor of a local newspaper explained, the constant need to keep refreshing a live news feed to stay ahead of the competition means that more thorough investigations or more rigorous research into stories are no longer possible (IE-C-5). The same editor noted the difficulty of dealing with social media posts about events where no fact-checking is conducted. This means that members of the public often complain that their newspaper and online feed are not bringing the real news to people. However, the editor was adamant that everything has to be fact-checked and verified and that a single tip off or a single video posted by a bystander online is not sufficient for them to run a story, they need to check it out for themselves, even if this means that they are "late" with the news.

Most journalists and editors expressed concern about Generative AI and algorithms leading to the proliferation of fake news and disinformation on social media. They noted that this was a problem for the general public but also for journalists who need to be vigilant and to check everything and they felt that this adds to the difficulties that they have always faced. Several journalists and editors, across all platforms and ownership models, expressed concern about the lack of fact-checking in much of what passes as news on social media and were worried about misinformation and disinformation when citizens were the originators of or commentators on a story. A community media manager believes that attempts to counter disinformation in the mainstream media have been very poor (IE-C-6) and that journalists have a responsibility to facilitate debate and use storytelling to ensure that people get the true story. Three editors and one journalist recommended that legislation should be introduced so that online media are treated with the same stringent policies as broadcast and print media to encourage more accountability of journalists and outlets online (IE-J-6, IE-C-6, IE-C-4, and EI-C-5).

Almost all interviewees mentioned lack of funding as a major constraint in performing their work to the highest standards. This was more in terms of not being able to investigate as deeply and as thoroughly as they would have wished, rather than being in any way less than rigorous in terms of accuracy and reliability. Lack of money means a shortage of journalists to actually do the work. Journalists are reported as leaving the profession due to poor pay and working conditions, and this was lamented by all interviewees. One editor put it starkly when they explained the impact the loss of experienced staff has on the newsroom, saying:

> "So the sector as a whole is kind of haemorrhaging staff. And then if you don't have experienced staff to train in the incoming staff, the standards go down for people working in the newsroom, they don't know the backstory to things, and if you don't know the backstory, you don't know the right questions to ask" (IE-C-2).

The need to check out the bone fides of a source, to cross check between at least two sources and to fact check the information uncovered were cited by all journalists and editors as being really important in their work. Almost all of those interviewed complained that they had less time and less staff to do this work today in comparison to former times. Most put the blame on social media for increasing the rate and speed of competition and for falling income and they all complained of the lack of time and of resources to cover stories as well as they would like to and as well as they felt that they should. For example, this regional journalist said: "The big barrier is time and resources, like to do any investigation requires a huge amount of time" (IE-J-5).

Controlling Power Holders/acting as a Watchdog

Carpentier and Wimmer (2025) describe the watchdog role as being aimed at institutionalised politics, but not exclusively. When the media act as a watchdog, they can also turn the lens on big business and on other powerful interests using the tools and traditions of investigative journalism in particular to do this (Carpentier, Wimmer2025: 55). Those interviewed agreed but tended to draw on examples from stories they covered about politicians, local and national, rather than on any examples from other spheres.

Irish journalists and editors were highly aware and very proud of their role in holding powerholders to account. This function of the fourth estate, to act as a watchdog, was one they took seriously. One digital journalist explained that this is what gives professional newsrooms the lead over the noise of social media, declaring:

> "I suppose that's what's giving journalism a strength in this modern day and age. Against all the noise on social media and the allegations of fake news. I think if we can continue to hold political parties and political representatives to account on their actions, and we are making everything transparent across the board and making sure that the readers are aware of everything going on at all levels, I think that's what's holding journalism at a certain standard above the chatter on social media at the moment" (IE-C-4).

Most of those interviewed were proud of their record in this regard and believed that it was of primary importance to hold those in power to account. One regional journalist put it well when they explained that they would tell a story if it was for the greater good, even when put under pressure not to do so. They said:

> "I mean fair, balanced and I have, you know, been the eyes and ears of the public and I've written about something that OK, may not please everyone, but it's for the greater society. It's for the greater good and that's what we're employed to do. And I do try and drill that home to the younger reporters as well that, you know, you have to do your job and be able to stand over even if there's pressure being put on you from different elements. I've had people come to my own house, knock on my door, asking me to keep stories off, particularly court stories" (IE-C-5).

Every individual interviewed believed that they were doing their best to do report honestly and fearlessly and each of them was proud of doing so. However, some of them expressed a worry that not everyone else in their profession was as ethical or as diligent in this regard as they were. Many journalists were concerned about the number of their colleagues who were leaving the profession to go to work for politicians and found this practice questionable.

There were differences of opinion regarding the relationship between journalists and politicians. Some journalists believed that there needed to be a distance between the two and others described how cultivating a relationship with politicians bears dividends in

terms of access and investigation. The digital native journalist believed that there can be too much deference shown to politicians in the mainstream media, but the majority of legacy media journalists believed that a close working relationship with politicians was useful to them in pursuing stories and getting information. The public service broadcast journalist highlighted changes in communication patterns between politicians and media outlets with contributors questioning the flow of information from government sources (IE-J-1). There was a general distrust of politicians' handlers or spin doctors and a belief that these put a barrier between public representatives and those trying to hold them to account. Some journalists felt bombarded by politicians and their PR staff. They were also concerned that politicians are now able to get their own messages across directly to the public on social media, without going through the traditional channels of professional newsrooms.

Concerns of bias were raised by most interviewees and all were highly aware of politicians contacting the media to push their own agendas (IE-C-5; IE-J-6; EI-J-2; EI-C-6). They felt it was part of their job to get to the truth or 'the real story' but they specifically mentioned the fear of litigation being a barrier to revealing as much they knew on occasion. The large amounts awarded to politicians and others for defamation cases taken to court in Ireland

were cited as a constraint to investigative journalism. Newsrooms were wary of the costs involved and often self-censored, allowing politicians time and the right to reply to allegations, even when this meant losing immediacy in reporting stories. Some journalists were comfortable with a close, friendly relationship with politicians, as they saw that this gave them direct access to those in power, for example this older, print editor who was relaxed about it and said:

> "Journalists have always been friends with politicians, but I think as long as you're still holding people to account, you know you can have that relationship knowing that it's symbiotic and that if you're a solid journalist and you're, holding people to account, then you know, that's your protocol, really. Like, that's your priority, you know?" (IE-C-3).

Others were not happy to be too close to those they needed to hold to account believing that there needed to be a distance between the two, for example this younger, regional press journalist who put it like this:

> "I think media would always need to separate themselves from those in power and continue to strive to all them account, which can be difficult because some people want to be maybe friendly" (IE-J-5).

Overall, however, Irish journalists and editors report good working relations with politicians and believe that they hold them to account on a daily basis.

Relations with media owners were not as freely discussed, but it did not appear to be a problem for most of those interviewed. Only a few journalists were concerned about the concentration of media ownership and the power that this can give the ultimate owners. Irish journalists consider themselves to be independent, but much of the media that employ them are owned by foreign corporations (Klimkiewicz et.al. 2024) and a few journalists expressed concern about the number of outlets in the hands of large corporations, including their own (IE-J-2). The growing lack of pluralism in terms of media ownership was of concern to those not employed by these corporations, as was a concern that many of these companies are not indigenous to Ireland. For example, the manager of a community media outlet highlighted the fact that over a quarter (27%) of Irish media are owned by companies and chains based outside of Ireland (IE-C-6).

The biggest constraint mentioned by most journalists and editors was the lack of funding available to conduct investigative journalism or in-depth reporting. The understanding that journalists' time costs money and that money was in short supply was a common complaint across all outlets. The issue of money leaving traditional broadcasters through the loss of advertising was highlighted by a number of those interviewed (IE-C-6; IE-C-2; IE-C-3). Advertising was seen as moving to digital providers, but digital providers were also concerned about not having enough money to hire journalists to do the work the way they felt they needed to do. However, the digital editor believed that partnering with tech giants like Google to provide news would be a good way to counteract this and that it provide funding for journalism (IE-C-4). This may seem naïve and counter to the need for editorial autonomy and freedom of expression traditionally held as important, almost sacred, values in the press. However, in Ireland as elsewhere, media ownership is increasingly in the hands of a few, mainly international businessmen already and ownership by a tech company could be viewed in the same light as ownership by any other multi-national conglomerate.

All journalists and editors interviewed were proud of their role in bringing news about serious matters to the attention of the public. They believed that it was their duty to hold powerful people, in particular politicians, to account. They were very clear in their descriptions of how they went about executing this role of being a watchdog for citizens and they firmly believed that it was of benefit to society and to democracy.

Forum for Public Debate

All outlets welcome public comment. However, most journalists and editors interpreted questions about providing a forum for public debate in terms of issues surrounding coverage of national and local elections rather than facilitating actual debate and

discussion by members of the public themselves on their channels. While all outlets have social media channels, some encourage more participation from members of the public than others. These use their engagement to generate stories, as the digital news editor explained, they use social media to publish online opinion polls and use their results as a guide for coverage of a topic and to reach groups they would not normally reach (IE-C-4). So, in general, those interviewed interpreted the issue of public participation in a forum in terms of information given to the public, for example on election issues or topical, political "hot" issues rather than as the provision of a space for actual debate and discussion on the issues mentioned. They use engagement on social media or elsewhere as a way of eliciting citizens' opinions about the news and then possibly sharing these generally with their audiences. This is in line with Carpentier and Wimmer's discussion of the democratic function of the media in providing a forum, seeing this as:

> "More closely related to the deliberative models of democracy, the forum role transcends the informational role through its emphasis on the representation of a diversity of – possibly contradictory – perspectives on particular matters and on the confrontation of these different perspectives (and the underlying discourses) with each other" (Carpentier, Wimmer 2025: 56-57)

This appears to be the understanding of those working in Ireland's news rooms – presenting debates between different people chosen by them. The idea of public participation in news production being facilitated in some way was not mentioned, and must therefore be seen as inconceivable to almost all professional editors and journalists. The only exceptions to these were community media who base all of their output on this form of engagement and, to a limited extent, the local press and the digital media editor. This editor explained that they had used a type of 'reverse journalism' where public participation in on-line discussions was used to counteract fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic. The outlet invited the public to relay 'online news stories' or media content of concerns via social media, and the journalists went and researched the topics using reliable resources and published the verifiable truth (IE-C-4).

Ironically, the advances in digital technology that have led to so many opportunities for citizens to comment on the news that is produced and disseminated is also seen as a constraint on journalists. Interviewees reported that they feel under pressure to deliver news constantly and immediately. This leaves them little time to investigate stories fully and to engage with more members of the public (See IE-C-6; IE-C-3; IE-J-1; IE-J-3) as they spend most of their time "feeding the beast" as the regional newspaper editor described it (IE-C-5). Almost all interviewees highlighted the danger this poses to public debate because social media is faster than the news cycle and the spread of fake news is instantaneous. Not surprisingly, digital natives seem more aware of this role but this may

be partly due to the nature of their platforms in that the technology allows, and audiences expect, to be able to post comments.

However, many journalists did not believe that there was much appetite amongst members of the public to participate in public debates or in a public forum. Some felt that ‘ordinary people’ might feel intimidated, for example this print journalist who wondered if “maybe people would be afraid to stand up and express an opinion that might be against the status quo of the time” (IE-C-3). The digital editor who was in favour of people commenting on stories also believes that the dangers of going online have pushed people away from public fora in recent years and explained:

> “I think that’s been the biggest shift in the last two years. People don’t give their opinion publicly. They give it in smaller groups, safer groups, say on WhatsApp for example. Don’t blame them for one second” (IE-C-4).

Community media provided the only type of newsroom where there was a concerted effort to provide a forum for public debate. This is to be expected, as community media are established to be an outlet for people to participate in the media. The community media manager explained how they take this role of facilitating debate beyond the airwaves and into the community by organising seminars twice a year that are not broadcast. They gave some examples, including organising a husting for local politicians campaigning in elections and a debate on how the station should deal with The Far Right (IE-C-6). The better paid, the more professional and the closer to operating at a national level the respondents were, the less they understood the media’s responsibility to act as a public forum as something that ordinary people could participate in (See section *Facilitating Public Participation* below) and the more they seemed to understand it as their responsibility to bring issues into the public domain and for them to conduct a balanced and debate on these issues, for example this broadcast editor who said:

> “Being a talk radio station, the focus there is literally, the tagline is “conversations that count”, so I suppose there’s a huge focus on engaging the listener and involving them in the conversation and discussing for the most part issues that affect them. There’d be a great emphasis on making sure not to alienate the listener” (IE-J-2).

“Involving them in the conversation” did not mean inviting them on air or providing them with access to a public forum facilitated by the station however.

Most journalists and editors interviewed believed that providing “good facts”, accurate information and the opportunity to hear politicians with opposing views was what a forum for the public entailed. They relegated citizens to their traditional role of being members of the audience, reacting to the news that they had sourced, interpreted and provided for

them. Digital natives and community media were more aware of their audience's interest in being actually involved in debates than other outlets were, and they encouraged these more than the other types of media did too.

Representing Diversity

Carpentier and Wimmer (2025) discuss the democratic role of media in providing socially responsible or ethical representation of different groups in society and they expand the areas that need to be covered to include what may be termed the economic and cultural spheres (Carpentier, Wimmer 2025: 59). In general, Irish news staff perceived the job of presenting cultural, societal and political diversity in terms of the provision of a variety of topics and samples of reported opinions rather than employing or using the voices of those who are generally underrepresented in society in their output. In line with the understanding of the provision of a public forum described above (2.3), those employed in news media in Ireland seem to understand their role as 'reporting on' and 'reporting to' rather than 'reporting with'. As the regional press editor put it "we are the eyes and the ears of the public" (IE-C-5). This is very different to giving a voice to different sectors of society by providing for participation, see 2.5. section *Facilitating Public Participation*.

Most journalists and editors mentioned the "pale, male and stale" nature of the composition of their newsrooms, in other words most of their staff were older, white men. A further constraint, in terms of representing diversity, was the overwhelming middle-class background of staff. The blame for this lack of diversity was placed, by almost all working journalists and editors interviewed, in the realm of class. Almost all reported disgust or disappointment that journalism has become the domain of the children of those who are wealthy enough to sustain them throughout low or unpaid internships and, of course, a college education. This, they pointed out, sustains a mainstreaming effect of middle class, centre or centre right opinions and perspectives. The absence of the working class and of new immigrants in newsrooms was noted and lamented by many, with the digital editor highlighting that the working-class community are poorly served by mainstream media and are receiving information from "bad actors or unreliable sources" (EI-C-4).

One female journalist, and most editors, highlighted gender as an issue. They recounted the problems women in the industry face when they have children, citing childcare as an issue for female journalists only (IE-C-5). The digital news editor said they would welcome supportive policies for work-life balance (IE-C-4) and they also mentioned the need for child care funding across the board to encourage female representation, not only in media but also in politics. Many journalists reported that women were still under represented in their newsrooms, although some were proud to report that they had overcome this

problem. This reflection by the national newspaper editor illustrates some of the difficulties that journalists traditionally excluded from the mainstream may experience and how managers find it hard to accommodate them:

> "So, constraints, women and minorities, I would say first of all, probably the first thing that comes to my head, would be availability to work on a story. I think, in our newsroom, we're conscious, it really is the women that are, you know, working and going home to parents and not every woman can stay on late or, you know, or sometimes they'd have the constraints of childcare, that they have to call us from a story at four in the afternoon and say 'I need to leave, to mind my children or pick up my children'. We don't get those calls from men on the news desk.
>
> It's not just women, so I would say from a gender point of view, women, it would be availability, 100%. I think minorities, I would say constraints that I would say,
>
> I wonder really sometimes for people of a minority, whatever it is, ethnicity or background, or I think, sometimes, especially online, it can be the potential of abuse. People who put their names to stories and then end up getting abused on social media afterwards for whatever reason, whether it's their take on a social issue. So, I think possibly, the two would be availability to work on stories and maybe that potential of vitriol online" (IE-C-3).

The digital natives, who tended to be younger than the others interviewed, had a wider understanding of diversity than heterosexual gender classifications or the socio-economic backgrounds of their journalists. For example the digital editor reported that their newsroom had people from a wide range of backgrounds, specifically mentioning the LGBTQ community and people of different ethnicities (IE-C-4). Some of those interviewed looked to themselves as examples of representing difference. This print editor was proud of the diversity, as they saw it, of the composition of their newsroom, explaining that:

> "At our news desk, we'd be conscious of including the voices of a minority in Ireland.
>
> Everyone's coming from a different place in life anyway. Like you know, not everyone is, you know, a perfect family of four at home. There's a lot of us that are single parents or some of us that come from rural Ireland have a different take on things to those who've been born in urban centres. We've international interns here, which we're always going to make an effort to include because they bring a different perspective as well. I think age is another thing, like newsrooms have a danger of becoming quite old. I don't know what the average age is here in the newsroom, but we always welcome the younger reporters because they're bringing in a different perspective on life again" (IE-C-3).

To a large extent, it is only community media who provide regular representation of diversity as a rule and this is because they have a mandate to 'give a voice to the voiceless'. That said, most of those who were interviewed were aware that their newsrooms lack social, cultural and political diversity, and they consciously try, in their own daily work, to address the gaps that this leaves in their coverage. The main gaps they

identified were lack of representation of new immigrants; Travellers [indigenous Irish ethnic minority]; people of colour; the working class and women generally.

Newsmen and women were conscious of the need to represent diverse groups in society not because it was the right thing to do but also because society has become diverse and there is no longer a homogenous audience. In order to reach audiences, news outlets need to target different groups. For example this print journalist said:

> "You have to be able to tailor your content to appeal to very diverse and very different audiences. That's another feature of kind of the modern media landscape that a single organisation will be producing different iterations of story and different emphasis within stories or within articles or within its reportage to reflect the interests of different demographics and different age groups" (IE-J-3).

Others held a different but pragmatic view and this regional editor said that, while they attempted to cover the minorities in their area, they were conscious that these were not the people who were buying their newspaper (IE-C-5).

While gender balance was reported to be less of an issue than it once was, it was still cited as problematic. The lack of diversity in class, colour and political orientation were mentioned by most of those interviewed. Editors and journalists believed that they ought to be doing more to represent the diversity of Irish society and culture and claimed that they tried to address the issues but they were defensive about their capacity to do so.

Facilitating Public Participation

Carpentier and Wimmer (2025) offer a discussion of how the media can facilitate participation both in the democratic system and in the media itself (Carpentier, Wimmer 2025: 63). For Irish editors and journalists this was not seen as an important part of their work. In many cases, it was not even recognised as a potential function or role that their newsroom might be able to undertake. They tended to see their role more in terms of providing information (See section *Providing Accurate Information*) than in the facilitation of participation. For example, this journalist, on a national commercial broadcaster, said:

> "We'd be mindful of keeping our audience informed of anything that was coming up, including public consultations or that kind of thing, making sure they're at least aware that they can have their voices heard" (IE-J-2).

But they were unable to provide any examples of where the audience's voices were to be heard in their broadcasts or on their live feed. Where journalists did see a role for themselves, it was in terms of bringing news of elections, instructions on how to vote and discussions of issues, rather than in terms of promoting or facilitating participation in these elections or bringing people from diverse backgrounds on air. There was almost no

evidence of Irish journalists and editors seeing the facilitation of participation in the production and dissemination of news as being their responsibility.

Where it was recognised that a diversity of voices on air should be facilitated, journalists and editors pointed to the lack of female and minority community politicians to draw from. The journalist from the public service broadcaster stated the obvious in terms of the participation on air of those at the top of the tree politically when they said that these were mainly male (IE-J-1). However, this held true right down through the hierarchy of elected politicians with most journalists and editors interviewed lamenting the lack of suitable interviewees and participants when seeking contributors to programmes. The same journalist explained:

> "Well, I think it again, it comes back to what people have been elected to political office, whether it's at council level or whether it's at the national level and the constraint is finding different voices, finding new voices, and often they're just aren't enough for them" (IE-J-1).

Some of those interviewed believed that having representatives of different demographics in their newsrooms, on staff was evidence of their facilitation of participation in the media.

The pressures of lack of resources, time, staff and money were mentioned as reasons why public participation was not facilitated to any great extent in most of the Irish news media. The pressure to constantly update the digital feed of the outlet's news website was cited as consuming every second of staff's time and energy. In a seeming contradiction, the opportunity digitisation provides to do more and do it more often, has actually led to journalists going into less depth in their stories and limiting the time they have to reach out to members of the public or include them.

As expected, community media, set up to provide opportunities for people to participate on the air, were the only outlets that really saw a role for themselves with regard to the facilitation of participation. The community media manager explained that they are established to provide social benefit and that they receive funding to do this, citing examples of seven different minority groups that their station was working with in 2025 (IE-C-6). They expanded on this, giving details of different groups that they had trained and who were now on air and involved in their station including asylum seekers; Travelers, Ireland's indigenous ethnic minority and prisoners recently released who were trying to re-integrate into society (IE-J-6).

One barrier to participation recognised by most interviewees is the toxicity of the internet, with journalists believing that this has put people off commenting or entering into any

debate online. One editor said that X (formerly Twitter) has driven members of the public away from making public comments and onto personal messaging services and more closed groups, although Instagram was mentioned by others as being less aggressive and toxic than X. This editor believed that this was even more true in the case of women and certain minorities who would fear being exposed to abuse if they were voicing their opinions publicly online (IE-C-3). Those working in community media were also aware of people's fear of vitriol and toxicity on social media. They believed that offline communication, particularly opportunities for face-to-face communication, were actually the best antidote to people's fears and the best way to counter the problem.

In general, Irish editors and journalists did not see the provision of a space for members of the public to participate in debate as part of their function or role. The provision of a balanced range of information about issues and ensuring that diverse communities were reported on in their coverage of topics from time to time seemed to be as far as they were prepared to go.

3. Conclusions and Reflections

Irish journalists and news editors believe their primary responsibility in terms of protecting democracy is to provide true, accurate and impartial information to the people. They were proud of their role of acting as a watchdog, holding powerholders, particularly politicians, to account. They did not see their role as providing a platform or forum for public debate or for the sharing of news by members of the public. They see their role as 'reporting to' rather than 'reporting with' citizens.

Most of those interviewed saw the need to provide more stories representing the diverse nature of Irish society today. While they identified the need to employ journalists from more diverse backgrounds, only community media saw a role for their outlets to facilitate participation by members of the public in the generation and dissemination of news. Most other editors and journalists did not consider facilitating the participation of members of the public in news gathering, reporting or dissemination at all.

A number of constraints that impact on their freedom to operate were mentioned by the editors and journalists interviewed. These were primarily due to declining revenue, digitisation and fear of defamation suits.

The biggest threat to freedom of the press and to the professionalism of journalists was the lack of funding and this was mentioned as a constraint in performing almost every one of the five democratic roles of media explored. Interviewees said that they had not enough resources to investigate stories and issues sufficiently deeply. Across the board, all

interviewees reported falling income and the impact that this is having on the generation of reliable news. They blamed this mainly on advertising revenue migrating to social media platforms and they explained that this was having an impact on staffing levels. They complained that they were losing experienced staff, having to manage with less staff and, at the same time, they were being asked to do far more on a daily basis in order to constantly update their outlets' digital feeds.

The digitisation of news and news platforms has brought challenges for legacy media as the public expect news to be immediately available. This has made the necessary work of fact checking and of the cross verification of information extremely difficult for journalists. Many interviewees expressed disappointment that this meant they no longer had the time or other resources to go deeper into investigating stories.

The lack of legislation for and the consequent lack of accountability of social media outlets were also reported as affecting news reporting in Ireland. Journalists and editors had little faith in the public's ability to distinguish between 'real truth' and fake news but felt that they were in competition with social media for audiences. All interviewees felt that the integrity of journalism was threatened by online social media, in particular by the creation of silos of fast, fake news.

Fear of expensive defamation court cases has led to many editors and journalists being extremely cautious, allowing time for subjects of those reports to exercise a right to reply often leading to delays in reporting a story and self-censorship.

Irish journalists and editors were frustrated by these constraints but they believed that their work was important for the greater good of society and ultimately for democracy itself.

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4. DIVERGENT PATHS WITHIN A SHARED TRADITION: THE ROLE OF JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS IN GERMANY'S AND AUSTRIA'S CHANGING MEDIA ECOSYSTEMS

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Abstract:

The chapter compares the evolving media ecosystems of Germany and Austria, challenging the long-standing assumption that both belong to a uniform Democratic-corporatist media model. While sharing language, history, and normative commitments to democratic communication, the two countries are shown to be diverging in structurally and culturally significant ways. Germany's media system remains characterised by federalism, institutional pluralism, and comparatively strong safeguards for journalistic independence. In contrast, Austria's has a smaller and more concentrated media market, susceptible to political influence, but with relatively strong public service and community media.

Drawing on interviews, surveys, and focus groups with media professionals and citizens, the chapter highlights both convergence and divergence in normative role perceptions. The monitorial role is strongly valued in both countries, but differences emerge in deliberation, representation, and participation. German journalism emphasises pluralistic debate and political control, while Austrian journalism places greater weight on visibility and empowerment. Citizens' expectations mirror these patterns, reflecting differing understandings of democracy – more institutionally oriented in Germany, more participatory in Austria.

Overall, the analysis shows that platformisation, economic pressures, and political contexts are reshaping media systems in distinct ways even within shared cultural regions, underscoring the need for more dynamic and differentiated media system theory.

Keywords:

Democratic-Corporatist Model; Journalistic Roles; Audience Expectations; Democracy; Comparative Research

1. Introduction

Germany and Austria are frequently treated as closely aligned media systems due to their shared language, cultural proximity, and historically similar institutional arrangements. Both are regularly placed within the Democratic Corporatist Model as defined by Hallin and Mancini (2004), a model characterised by robust public service broadcasting, a strong newspaper tradition, well-established journalistic professionalisation, and a symbiotic but moderated relationship between media institutions and political actors. Nevertheless, the assumption of inherent similarity has become increasingly difficult to sustain. Contemporary pressures – including digital disruption, political polarisation, economic contraction, and shifts in audience behaviour – seem to affect each system differently and reveal fractures that challenge the long-standing portrayal of these countries as close neighbours not only geographically but also in media structures, journalistic cultures, and audience behaviour.

When the internal perspectives of media managers and journalists are placed alongside citizens' evaluations of democracy and media performance, an even more nuanced picture emerges. While both countries share a strong normative commitment to democratic public communication, the experiences of journalists and citizens suggest that these systems are evolving along increasingly distinct trajectories. Therefore, understanding contemporary media ecosystems requires not only a comparison of supply structures and journalistic practices but also attention to how citizens perceive and engage with democratic life and the media's role.

The chapter proceeds by establishing the theoretical and methodological underpinnings necessary for such a comparison, exploring the historical paths that shaped each media system, analysing journalists' normative role perceptions and citizens' expectations of the media, assessing how journalism and audiences conceptualise and operationalised political participation, examining challenges to the media's democratic functions, and evaluating the impact of political economy and platformisation. The chapter concludes by synthesising these findings into a broader reflection on the shifting nature of media ecosystems within a shared cultural region.

2. Theoretical Considerations

To situate the comparison of the German and Austrian media ecosystems within the broader discourse on media systems theory, democratic communication, and the normative roles performed by and expected of journalism, Hallin and Mancini's typology provides an important starting point. Their 'Democratic Corporatist Model' identifies several defining features: institutionalised self-regulation, strong public broadcasting sectors, high levels of

professionalisation, and close relationships with political actors that historically have provided favourable conditions for the press. Yet critiques of the model argue that the digital era has destabilised many of these features (for a discussion, see Seethaler, 2025a). The once-dominant print sectors in corporatist countries have weakened; political parallelism has taken new forms through social media; and public service media face both financial pressures and ideological challenges. Moreover, when the model is viewed in light of citizens' concerns – ranging from changing media use patterns to declining trust in democratic governance – it becomes clear that the institutional features captured by the model interact with broader societal perceptions.

Normative journalism role theory provides another lens for comparison. Carpentier (2011) argues that journalists' societal functions can be grouped into informational, watchdog, deliberative, representational, and participatory roles. These roles provide taxonomy for exploring differences in how journalists in each country articulate their democratic responsibilities and citizens develop their expectations of the media's democratic tasks. Particularly in the German-speaking academic tradition, the deliberative role of providing a forum for public debate has a strong normative foundation in public sphere theory. Habermas (1989) conceptualises the public sphere as a communicative space in which diverse voices can deliberate on matters of common concern, with journalists serving as crucial mediators who facilitate the constitution of publics. Other scholars, such as Fraser (1990), however, argue that access to this sphere is profoundly unequal, thus emphasising that journalists not only constitute publics but also decide which groups and perspectives receive visibility. Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) reinforce this dual role by distinguishing between a more empowering role, aimed at engaging the audience in public conversation, and journalists' more active and assertive role, aimed at direct intervention in political discourse.

Finally, political economy theories illuminate the structural constraints under which journalists operate (Baker 2002). As advertising revenue shifts to global technology companies, traditional media struggle to sustain revenue streams, staffing levels, and investigative capacity. Political economy perspectives highlight how market size, media ownership concentration, and state funding regimes shape not only journalistic autonomy but also public trust. Taken together, these frameworks form a dynamic theoretical foundation that acknowledges both historical continuity and contemporary upheaval.

3. Methodology

This chapter argues that while Germany and Austria continue to share a deep normative foundation, their media ecosystems have begun to diverge in meaningful and theoretically

significant ways. The examination of this claim requires not only theoretical frameworks but also detailed empirical findings drawn from a rich set of survey data, interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, illuminating the values, pressures, and obstacles affecting media houses, journalism, and audiences in both countries.

The comprehensive database on which the analysis is based has been compiled through research conducted in three work packages of the Horizon Europe project "Mapping Media for Future Democracies (MeDeMAP)". The work packages dealt with:

- the legal and regulatory conditions under which media organisations and journalism operate,
- the structure of the media markets, the democratic roles that journalists play, and the practices they prefer to promote political participation,
- the various ways and configurations people use the media and what functions they expect from the media in a democratic society.

To understand how democracy is lived on the ground, the research relies mainly on qualitative methods. In the first two work packages, semi-structured interviews were conducted with at least one representative of a regulatory authority, a journalistic association, and an audience council or a civil society initiative in each country, on the one hand, and with media managers and journalists, on the other. The first interviews were accompanied by a literature review, the latter were supplemented by an online survey among the same target group on participatory journalistic practices. Participants were selected from six types of media outlets: public service media (PSM), private TV or radio outlets with a significant audience share, leading national dailies, digital native news media (leading news portals), local media (newspapers, radio or TV stations with news provision), and community, non-profit and minority media. Altogether, 135 journalists were included in the study. In the third work package, four focus group discussions, each with eight participants, were conducted in each country. The diverse samples captured varying backgrounds, political interests, and media habits. The discussions followed a uniform guideline but allowed for inductive adjustments[1].

4. Historical and Structural Trajectories of the German and Austrian Media Ecosystems

In the rankings of the Varieties of Democracy Project (Coppedge et al. 2025) and the World Justice Project (2024), Germany and Austria are placed in the upper third of EU Member

[1] MeDeMAP Deliverables 3.2, 4.3, 4.5, and 5.4, which contain the data on which this synthetic analysis is based, are available at www.medemap.eu. The authors would like to thank Eva-Tamara Asboth, Andreas Schulz-Tomančok and Ernest Thaqi for conducting interviews with media professionals in Austria and Germany and organising journalists' participation in an online survey. Thanks also go to Tania Napravnik for co-conducting the focus groups with Austrian and German citizens.

States in terms of the protection of freedom of expression, with Germany consistently ahead of Austria. After a long and dark history, their corporatist heritage has finally turned into democratic strongholds, albeit not free from threats and attacks on the hard-won social order. Nevertheless, the institutional developments of the media sector are not identical.

Germany's media system was reconstructed after the Second World War with federalism and decentralisation embedded into its design (Vowe 2021). Public service broadcasting was intentionally fragmented across the Länder to prevent centralised state control, and print media diversified into a rich regional landscape. This structure has contributed to Germany's enduring pluralism. Interviewees from media houses strongly emphasised the significance of journalism to safeguarding democracy, noting the need to provide reliable information and uphold a diversity of social voices. On the other hand, focus group discussions indicate that citizens recognise and value this pluralistic environment, even as they express concerns about polarisation, algorithmic bias, and disinformation. Both groups' comments reflect a journalistic culture deeply shaped by Germany's historical confrontation with propaganda and authoritarianism, as several respondents explicitly connect journalistic responsibility to the contemporary threat posed by right-wing populist parties and anti-democratic rhetoric.

Austria's trajectory, while paralleling Germany's in many respects, diverges in key structural ways. The Austrian media system has historically exhibited strong party influence through the system of "press-party-parallelism", i.e., close ties between the media and political parties at the organisational level or through loyalty to party goals (Seymour-Ure 1974). Although this system has receded, political proximity continues to shape media governance and journalistic practice. Austria's significantly smaller market size has also produced a more concentrated media landscape, making outlets more financially vulnerable and more dependent on subsidies and state advertising (Seethaler 2025b), which is almost inconceivable in Germany. Participants in Austrian focus groups frequently expressed concerns about political influence, not only regarding attempts to secure favourable coverage through advertising contracts but also regarding the appointment of senior management positions at the public broadcaster ORF, whose editorial independence, sustained by legally established measures regarding content quality and a strong editorial statute, is nevertheless highly valued (Gadringer et al. 2025). These concerns reflect a structural vulnerability that remains far less pronounced in Germany, where the so-called socially relevant groups in the broadcasting councils, which are composed of a high degree of diversity, elect the CEOs of the PSMs (Thomass 2016).

Furthermore, the Constitutional Court is a strong defender of the independence of public service media (Dupuis, Thomass 2013).

This (short) historical comparison thus reveals a foundational difference: Germany's media system is built on decentralised, institutionally protected pluralism, whereas Austria's system has long been characterised by centralised influence, smaller scale, and more porous boundaries between media and political power. These differences form the backdrop against which contemporary challenges and pressures are experienced and negotiated.

5. Normative Roles of Journalism in Germany and Austria

Examining journalists' perceptions of their normative role reveals both convergence and divergence. The informational or monitorial role, cantered on providing accurate and verified information, remains strong in both countries – and a shared point of convergence between journalists and citizens. Journalists in both countries emphasised verification and accuracy, while citizens expressed a strong desire for impartial and high-quality information. This media function is supported in both countries by robust legal protections for journalistic activities and sources. Yet both groups noted the increasing difficulty of fulfilling these expectations under digital and economic pressures.

German journalists emphasised their responsibility to counteract "fake news" and uphold truthfulness, often referencing established press codes and editorial guidelines. They spoke of the importance of verifying information through multiple sources, including diverse perspectives. Austrian journalists similarly stressed the importance of verification, often invoking the motto "check, recheck, double-check", and attributed this responsibility to the need to counter the rise of politically motivated disinformation on social media platforms (see also Mitterstainer et al. 2025). Several Austrian respondents highlighted the increasing difficulty of maintaining shared factual ground when political actors strategically label unfavourable coverage as "fake news" and when segments of the public disengage entirely from news consumption.

The watchdog role, again strongly supported by legal provisions, shows a clear divergence, at least in practice. German journalists expressed commitment to scrutinising power but emphasised growing challenges, including algorithmic suppression of high-quality content and reduced time for investigative work. Both aspects – the media's essential watchdog function, and the concerns of marketing-driven political manipulation on online platforms – were acknowledged by citizens, perhaps because they appreciated the media institutions' efforts to maintain investigative departments, cross-editorial collaborations, and mechanisms such as whistleblower portals that support investigative reporting: all this

meets citizens' expectations of political accountability. In Austria, journalists acknowledged that investigative reporting often remains a normative ideal rather than a daily practice due to significant staff reductions, intensifying production cycles, political pressure, and the growing PR capacity of political actors. Citizens' perceptions reflect this gap: while they valued controlling the powerful as a journalistic standard, they frequently expressed dissatisfaction with political accountability.

The deliberative role also differs across systems. German journalists integrate deliberative practices into a wide range of formats, including public debates, citizen hearings, podcasts, commentary pages, and community-level discussions. They described their role as enabling exchange across political differences, even in a polarised environment, which resonates with citizens' aversion of polarisation and their desire for constructive debate. Austrian media, by contrast, shaped by closer political ties, adopts a more elite-driven model of deliberation. Public debate is frequently mediated by experts, commentators, or invited guests rather than grounded in direct public participation. While some formats encourage audience engagement, Austrian journalists often reported that such deliberative initiatives are constrained by resource limitations or perceived risks of escalating online hostility. Contrary to this cautious journalistic approach, citizens were calling for greater social inclusivity, proximity, and more accessible democratic processes.

In Germany, the representational role, which concerns journalism's responsibility to make social groups, identities, interests, and political positions visible in public debate, corresponds to a long-standing professional commitment to pluralism. This aligns with the decentralised and federal structure of the German media system, which historically supports diversity of viewpoints and institutional safeguards against political or market dominance (Hallin, Mancini 2004). Empirical findings support this: German journalists frequently emphasised the importance of including multiple perspectives and ensuring comprehensive coverage (Brüggemann et al. 2014). They particularly accentuated the importance of including migrants' perspectives into journalistic coverage, even when they see many hurdles to do so. Such practices reflect a journalistic culture oriented toward deliberative democracy, in which representation is achieved through inclusive framing, systematic sourcing, and the integration of contrasting viewpoints into public debate – which is valued by citizens as a hallmark of traditional media, especially public service broadcasters and newspapers, and as a necessary counterweight to algorithmic-driven echo chambers. On the other hand, Austrian journalists linked representation more explicitly to visibility and empowerment, and less to public debate, which is, again, largely in line with citizens' expectations. As Hallin and Mancini (2004) noted, systems with smaller markets and closer ties between media and political institutions often face heightened vulnerability

to influence over visibility. Therefore, particularly representatives of community media emphasised efforts to portray cultural, political, and social diversity, ranging from targeted recruitment strategies to partnerships with NGOs and community organisations. Even Austrian media law seeks to counteract visibility bias by prescribing, at least for PSM, a framework to actively ensure gender equality in the media, including a gender mainstreaming plan and a requirement that the ORF continuously assess the status quo of gender equality within the organisation. The target of a 45% share of women was achieved in 2019. A similar, albeit less precisely formulated, programme mandate pertains to the legally recognised minorities (Seethaler et al. 2025).

The participatory role remains limited in both countries, although again with distinctive emphases. German journalists tend to resist audience involvement in core editorial processes, citing concerns about hate speech, misinformation, and editorial sovereignty. Austrian journalists express similar reservations, though the Austrian community media sector offers genuine participatory opportunities through citizen-produced programming and even participation in managerial processes, consistent with Carpentier's (2011) conceptualisation of media participation as a democratic resource – an exception not widely present in Germany. Still, in both systems, the participatory role remains the least developed of the normative roles. However, since it is essential to the relationship between media and democracy but also overlaps with other roles, particularly the deliberative and representational roles, next section adopts an integrative approach to media-enabled participation.

6. Political Participation and Audience Engagement

Political participation supported or enabled by journalistic work takes on multiple forms. Basically, we can distinguish between participation *through* the media and participation *in* the media. Participation through the media refers to "the opportunities for mediated participation in public debate and for self-representation in the variety of public spaces that characterise the social", while participation in the media "deals with participation in the production of media output (content-related participation) and in media organisational decision-making (structural participation)" (Carpentier 2011: 67-68).

Regarding participation *through* the media, *minimalist* forms aim to promote an informed citizenry prepared to make well-founded decisions at the ballot box: this is an essential function of the media in a representative democracy and the most prevalent understanding of participation among German and Austrian journalists. Most of them want to encourage their audiences to participate in national elections and referenda, and, in Germany, also in European elections, which play a comparatively minor role among Austrian journalists.

Local elections are somewhat less promoted in both countries. This basic attitude is evident across all types of media. Somewhat less emphasis is given to democratic processes beyond voting (such as activism, community engagement, demonstrations, and citizens' initiatives), and this declines further when it comes to empowering citizens to engage in self-organised forms of collective action. The latter form of support for democratic participation is particularly prevalent among public service and community media, but in Austria also to some degree among journalists working for regional and local commercial radio stations and newspapers.

Looking at more *maximalist* forms of participation *through* the media, which emphasise dialogue, consultation, and discussion of topics of general relevance, the representation of social diversity and different groups in the news is the most relevant approach, but only to about half of the interviewed German and Austrian media people. Organising public debates with audience participation is even less common in journalistic practice. Clearly, professionals seek to retain control over the processes and outcomes of these forms of participation, even in formats that directly involve the audience, such as call-in broadcasts and moderated online forums. Nevertheless, the audience's involvement in news coverage, by giving people the opportunity to express their views on air or comment on published content, can be understood as a *minimalist* or "controlled" (Day 2009: 126) variant of participation *in* the media. Compared to other forms of direct audience participation, it is relatively widespread in Germany. *Maximalist*, i.e., autonomous forms of citizen participation in the production of media content are very unpopular in German and Austrian journalism, with the exception of some newsrooms in the community media, PSM, and commercial radio sectors. In this context, it is noteworthy that the European Court of Human Rights is ahead of general developments in journalism, as, since 2005, it has based some of its case law on a functional understanding of media freedom by granting journalistic privileges to civil society actors and "citizen journalists" provided they report on matters of public interest and adhere to certain standards of conduct (Rowbottom 2018: 30).

There is greater agreement on involving the audience in content-production decision-making processes (as traditional audience research does), which can be considered as *minimalist* version of structural participation. However, the *maximalist* version, i.e. the participation of the audience – or rather, the "people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen 2006) – in strategic planning or management of the media organisation, finds, not surprisingly, less approval.

When relating results from quantitative and qualitative research, it can be assumed that, in Germany, participation is often associated with deliberative engagement. Public broadcasters that are most open to forms of audience participation, along with some commercial outlets, host citizen hearings, audience discussions with political representatives, and events intended to make editorial processes more transparent. These practices reflect journalists' self-perception as mediators between citizens and political institutions, fostering informed debate even amid polarisation. Nevertheless, German journalists also described significant challenges, particularly in digital spaces where hostile discourse, hate speech, and algorithmic strategies undermine constructive participation. As a result, some outlets restricted comment sections or shift participatory efforts to more controlled formats.

Austrian journalists approach participation through a somewhat different conceptual framework, linking it with representation rather than deliberation. They noted the importance of ensuring that marginalised voices are included in public discourse, and often described participatory initiatives in terms of outreach to underrepresented groups. While traditional media rely on online forums, letters to the editor, and occasional public events, Austria's digital natives sometimes experiment with tools such as "mood barometers" and NGO-coordination initiatives. Yet true co-production within mainstream newsrooms remains rare. The notable exception is Austria's community media sector, which offers low-threshold access for citizens to produce their own programs, thereby enabling a participatory model that is far closer to the collaborative ideal outlined in journalism role theory (Biringer et al. 2022).

The differences in how journalists in both countries defined their role are partly reflected in citizens' different views of political participation and the media's role in society. Based on historical lessons that underscore the dangers of authoritarianism and concerns about the effects of increasing polarisation, focus group discussants from Germany recognised the importance of voting and institutional participation. The media are therefore expected to be neutral, independent, reliable, and committed to informing the public, while being vigilant and critical of politics and political actors. On the other hand, Austrians viewed participation more broadly, encompassing not only voting but also community involvement, civic engagement, and volunteer work. Accordingly, they wanted the media to focus more on accessibility, inclusiveness, and the facilitation of meaningful participation, thus calling, for example, for more community-level discussions and opportunities for direct interaction with political actors in order to "humanise" politics (as one participant called it).

Despite some congruences, the interplay between journalists and the public regarding political participation is far from optimal. Austrian citizens articulated strong concerns about barriers to political participation in a socially inclusive sense; Germans expressed resignation about the limits of individual influence on politics (that elections should ideally guarantee). Since citizens in both countries agreed that traditional media are distant from the people and do not promote participation, while social media platforms promote only superficial, easily manipulated participation, many felt disconnected and demotivated, which may undermine trust in the media and politics and fuel news avoidance and political apathy. Nevertheless, journalists in both countries consistently considered deeper participatory involvement in core editorial functions, including strategic planning and content production rather critically. There seems to be a widespread attitude that audience participation is beneficial only up to the point at which it does not interfere with editorial judgment or journalistic autonomy.

7. Democratic Challenges

The democratic challenges facing journalism in Germany and Austria are shaped by each country's political environment and the perceived threats to democratic stability. German journalists frequently framed their commitment to professional journalism as a response to the intensifying threat posed by right-wing populism, which they described as undermining trust in the media and promoting anti-democratic agendas. Several interviewees articulated journalism's responsibility to counteract polarisation by providing factual grounding and enabling constructive debate. The rise of digital disinformation further strengthens their self-understanding as democratic guardians.

Austrian journalists voiced different pressures, with political influence emerging as a central concern. Many described how political actors attempt to pressure or interfere with editorial autonomy, particularly by manipulating ORF governance structures or by allocating state advertising, which has become a crucial revenue source in Austria's small media market. These patterns are consistent with long-standing scholarly observations that Austria's media system maintains closer ties to political institutions and greater vulnerability to political patronage. The interviews illustrate how such pressures can inhibit critical reporting and create self-censorship pressures.

The research results on political participation, however, reveal an even more fundamental democratic challenge. Evidently, citizens have different notions of political participation, which, in principle, correspond to two different, but overlapping understandings of democracy (Held 2006): representative democracy, which is based on the principles of elected bodies and institutions representing the interests of all citizens and protecting

their rights, and participatory democracy, which aims at the direct inclusion of citizens in the processes of will-formation and decision-making by taking part in the “common work” of keeping an eye on issues affecting communities and society as a whole. The most recent wave of the “European Values Study” reveals that at least 39 per cent of the Austrian population, but only 28 per cent of the German population tend to a participatory understanding of democracy (EVS/WVS, 2024) – a difference that is confirmed by the results of our study and explains the differing manifestations of dissatisfaction, which can be basically characterised by as lack of social inclusion in Austria versus limits of individual influence on politics in Germany.

In any case, the ongoing, albeit varying in speed, changes in the understanding of democracy imply that any conceptualisation of democratic journalistic roles must recognise that earlier notions of a single public sphere must be dismissed in favour of multiple public spheres with different perceptions of how a society should be governed (Bennett, Pfetsch 2018) – and different expectations of the citizens towards the social functions of the media (Beaufort 2020, 2025; Loosen et al. 2020). As the “baseline norms for assessing media and communication vary considerably” across the various notions of democracy (Davis 2019: 19), long-accepted normative standards of public communication must be re-evaluated and diversified, while maintaining a shared commitment to fundamental democratic values (Seethaler 2025c).

8. Aspects of Political Economy

Political economy perspectives help explain the economic effects that the challenges described above may have. Germany’s larger media market, extensive regional media system, and diversified public broadcasting landscape provide a buffer against the economic instability generated by digital disruption. While German journalists acknowledged resource constraints – especially in local journalism and within some commercial sectors – they nonetheless retained more institutional scaffolding to support professional practice. For instance, German public broadcasters still maintain relatively stable funding models that enable them to fulfil informational and deliberative roles even as audience behaviour changes.

Austria’s smaller media market, by contrast, magnifies the economic crisis facing journalism. Shrinking advertising revenues, the migration of audiences to global platforms, and the need to maintain multiple digital channels with reduced staffing have placed Austrian outlets under acute strain. Interviewees described shrinking newsrooms, limited time for research, and persistent difficulties in funding investigative reporting (see also Mitterstainer et al. 2025). This vulnerability is exacerbated by Austria’s historically high

dependence on state subsidies and state advertising, which creates a structural incentive for political actors to exert influence (Aleksevych, Trappel 2025; Seethaler et al. 2025). When combined with platform competition, these pressures diminish Austria's capacity to sustain a robust investigative culture or to protect journalistic independence in times of political conflict.

Although investigative reporting is normatively valued in both countries, journalists highlight persistent constraints. Time pressure, shrinking newsroom resources, and digital fragmentation create obstacles to systematic inclusion. These concerns echo international research showing that economic contraction and platform competition undermine journalism's capacity to represent diverse publics (Humprecht, Esser 2020). Respondents also noted risks associated with "false balance" – the professional dilemma of giving equal visibility to unequal claims – a risk well documented in public-sphere critiques (Fraser 1990). Digital platform logics further complicate representational work: as Van Dijck, Poell and De Waal (2018) argue, algorithmic systems tend to amplify majoritarian or emotionally charged content, potentially marginalising minority voices unless journalists actively counterbalance these dynamics.

In general, the platformisation of news distribution presents challenges in both countries but seems to have more destabilising consequences in Austria. German journalists discussed algorithmic suppression of public interest content, but they operate within a broader institutional ecosystem that can partially compensate for reduced visibility. Austrian journalists, facing weaker organisational support, described a more precarious situation in which digital competition exacerbates economic fragility and further undermines editorial work.

9. Concluding Remarks

The findings suggest that media system typologies such as the Democratic Corporatist Model must be understood as historically contingent rather than static. The pressures of platformisation, political polarisation, economic contraction, and changing audience behaviour have begun to reshape media systems even within shared linguistic and cultural regions. Germany and Austria, despite their shared history and long-standing placement within the same media system category, are now moving along distinct paths. Germany's system, grounded in federated pluralism and institutional stability, continues to exhibit strong institutional safeguards, a commitment to deliberative engagement, and the capacity to sustain investigative journalism even in the face of digital disruption. Austrian journalism exhibits structural fragility, intensified political pressure, and diminished

resources, which constrain its watchdog role and limit its capacity to support robust public debate.

The divergence between these systems underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of how media ecosystems evolve amid shifting political and technological landscapes. The comparison also highlights the importance of market size, political culture, and regulatory frameworks in shaping journalism's democratic capacities. These differences have significant implications for democratic participation, public trust in journalism, and the evolving nature of the public sphere in both countries. Yet both countries maintain strong commitments to informational accuracy, democratic accountability, and professional identity, and both confront the contemporary challenges of digital fragmentation and political distrust.

Integrating journalistic perspectives with citizens' voices reveals a shared tension that has been underestimated in research to date: while democratic aspirations remain high, everyday democratic experiences increasingly fall short. Recognising this gap – and understanding how institutional histories, market structures, journalistic roles and public expectations interact – is crucial for explaining the evolving nature of media ecosystems and democratic life in Germany and Austria. This gap does not necessarily signify democratic decay but rather a phase of transformation. Research indicates that citizens are no longer passive recipients. Many compare sources, check information, and trust specific journalists rather than entire outlets. This critical attitude toward media use reflects both persistent uncertainty and democratic vigilance. When accompanied by civic engagement, this can strengthen democracy by pushing institutions and media to reform.

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5. FROM REGULATION TO REALITY: IMPLEMENTING MEDIA PLURALISM IN FRANCE

Morgane Le Guyader, Inna Lyubareva and Romain Billot

Abstract:

Media pluralism is a normative cornerstone of democratic theory yet a perennial challenge for democratic practice. Despite being enshrined in elaborate regulatory frameworks across Europe, its implementation is often hindered by gaps between institutional rules and journalistic realities. France offers a critical case: a strong state role, constitutional recognition of pluralism, and a dual regulatory system separating press and audio-visual media. This article asks: How far does France's pluralism framework translate into newsroom practice? We combine a two-level analysis of law/policy and professional practice, drawing on 19 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024 with regulators, unions, community-media representatives, journalists and managers. We find a double asymmetry: socio-cultural pluralism (*diversité*) is promoted through soft law and voluntarism, with weak measurement under the republican ban on ethnic statistics. Upstream homogeneity in journalistic recruitment, routinised notions of "competence", and territorial hierarchies further narrow the spectrum of legitimate voices. Beyond compliance, systemic pressures - concentration, fragile funding, political pressure, legal harassment, and disinformation erode pluralism. France exemplifies performative pluralism: strong normative commitments undermined by discursive-material misalignment. We propose coupling anti-concentration and conditional subsidies with inclusion pipelines, newsroom metrics for sourcing diversity, and epistemic initiatives to rebuild demand for plural information.

Keywords:

Political Pluralism; Regulation; Socio-Cultural Pluralism; Diversity; Journalism; Democracy

1. Introduction

Pluralism sits at the heart of democratic communication, yet its enactment is persistently difficult. Despite robust legal codification across Europe, implementation is often constrained by the gap between institutional rules and newsroom realities. France crystallises this tension: the state plays a strong regulatory role (Rebillard, Loicq 2013a: 12), pluralism is constitutionally recognised (Bougerol 2023: 160), and a historically specific separation persists between press and audio-visual regulation, shaped by a legacy of opinion-driven press and republican universalism.

To what extent does France's complex pluralism framework translate into practice, and how do media professionals navigate the gap between binding political pluralism and largely voluntary socio-cultural pluralism? We move beyond institutional description to examine pluralism as a discursive-material process linking rules, production conditions, and representation. Drawing on 19 interviews (24 interlocutors) with regulators and practitioners in 2024, we show how binding audio-visual rules incentivise formal balance during elections, while socio-cultural pluralism remains soft, uneven, and hard to measure under the republican ban on ethnic statistics. We further identify upstream professional homogeneity, routinised notions of "competence", and territorial hierarchies as key practice-level constraints. Conceptually, we extend discursive-material approaches (Carpentier, Wimmer 2025) by theorising performative pluralism – strong normative commitments that falter in translation due to misaligned material conditions.

2. Conceptualising Pluralism: From Theory to the French Context

Media pluralism is a foundational yet notoriously elusive concept, often conflated with "diversity" (McQuail 2013: 26) and characterised by a multidimensional nature (Lyubareva, Rochelandet 2021; Lyubareva, Rochelandet 2017). In media and communication studies, it has been critically theorised via conceptual work on its dimensions (McQuail 2007; McLennan 1995), Habermasian public sphere theory (1989, 2006), and ongoing debates about journalism's democratic function. Radical pluralist and agonistic perspectives (Mouffe 2005; Fraser 1992) have further challenged deliberative models for underestimating social inequalities and power relations (Karppinen 2018). Drawing on this critical tradition, Carpentier and Wimmer's discursive-material approach defines media pluralism as essential to the media's democratic roles, preventing one-sidedness and supporting the circulation of counter-hegemonic discourses (2025: 66).

This democratic imperative is deeply embedded in the European tradition. Within this framework, media pluralism emerged as the essential structural precondition for realising freedom of expression, ensuring it is a practical reality for a diverse citizenry. Consequently, European policies are often analysed through the lens of pluralism's multiple dimensions - system, source, content, channel, and audience diversity (McQuail 2013: 27) as well as exposure diversity (Napoli 1999).

The French case represents a significant incarnation of this European tradition. France is distinguished by a strong state role in regulating the media sphere and a constitutional recognition of media pluralism (Bougerol 2023). Historically, its foundations trace back to the 1881 Press Law and were reinforced in 1944 through measures to limit concentration post-World War II (Lyubareva, Rochelandet 2017: 11). The concept was formally introduced into French law with the 1982 *Loi sur la communication audiovisuelle* and consolidated by the 1986 *Loi relative à la liberté de communication* (Bougerol 2023: 164). A distinctive feature is the separation of regulatory frameworks: audio-visual media, overseen by the independent authority Arcom, are monitored for both external and internal pluralism, whereas the press is primarily regulated through external pluralism by public administrative bodies. This dual system reflects the historical legacy of a "press of opinion", which has shaped a specifically French professional model (Neveu 2024: 14; Charon 2013: 12). Another key feature is the conceptual separation between "pluralism" and "diversity" (*diversité*), the latter being rooted in the republican egalitarian model (Rebillard, Loicq 2013a: 8).

3. Research Design: A Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approach

Against this backdrop, our study investigates how pluralism is understood and enacted in contemporary France through a two-level qualitative design. We conducted 19 semi-structured interviews (24 interlocutors). Six top-down interviews included representatives from media regulatory authorities, a national journalists' union, and community radio networks. The Bottom-up approach included 13 interviews across six media types (public TV/ radio, private TV, print, online-only outlet (pure player[1]), regional/local press/ radio, and community media), interviewing both managers and journalists. Topics covered include reliability practices, investigative journalism, deliberative formats, and guarantees of political and socio-cultural pluralism. These dimensions were selected not as discrete journalistic functions, but as sites where pluralism is practically enacted, negotiated, and limited – through decisions about source legitimacy, agenda-setting, editorial balance, and

[1] In France, the term "pure player" is typically used to refer to online media. In this article, we will use both terms.

the organisation of public debate. Interviews were thematically coded using a hybrid deductive-inductive approach. Although based on predefined themes – pluralism, routines, incentives, systemic pressures – the coding remained open to empirical insights through "observation, comparison, and interpretation of multiple interaction processes" (Crozier 1977: 24) with a discursive-material reading and triangulation between institutional and professional accounts enhancing the analysis's validity.

Fieldwork coincided with the European elections and the dissolution of the *Assemblée nationale* on June 9, 2024 which shaped access and interview availability.

4. The Regulatory Architecture of Media Pluralism in France

Conceptual Foundations: Political and Socio-Cultural Dimensions

Media pluralism is commonly conceptualised as operating through dual regulatory pathways: external and internal pluralism (Klimkiewicz 2009). Our analysis seeks to reconnect the socio-cultural dimension (*diversité*) – the representation of the public in its full heterogeneity – into the broader framework of media pluralism, examining how it is recognised and operationalised beyond the more established political dimension (Rebillard, Loicq 2013b: 79). In France, these two notions – political pluralism and *diversité* – are treated in fragmented silos, creating what practitioners describe as a "two-speed pluralism": one auditable and binding, the other aspirational and diffuse.

Whereas the political dimension is incorporated into binding legal mechanisms, the socio-cultural dimension is normatively recognised but legally ambiguous. The notion of "minority" in France conflicts with the republican conception of the nation (Cervulle 2021: - 45), rendering its institutionalisation particularly intricate (Cervulle 2021; Macé 2009; Guénif-Souilamas 2007; Fassin 2002). Although diversity debates only entered the media agenda in the late 1990s (Cervulle 2021; Stetka 2010) and because the collection of ethno-racial data is prohibited (Simon 2005), measurement relies on subjective "perceived origin" metrics (Macé 2009: 238). Consequently, the socio-cultural dimension of pluralism differs markedly from political pluralism, which gives rise to quantifiable and enforceable policies.

Regulating the Press: A Focus on External Pluralism

The print sector in France has a long history of state support. Press pluralism is primarily safeguarded through external mechanisms, with publishing companies benefiting from public subsidies to sustain title diversity. One regulator estimated that "roughly 20 million euros in annual subsidies" are explicitly earmarked for pluralism of press titles (National Institution 1). Since the print press is outside internal-pluralism oversight, no specific rules govern political or socio-cultural content. The Ministry of Culture regards external pluralism as sufficient to ensure diversity across outlets. However, debates are emerging regarding the potential introduction of conditionality for press subsidies, linking them to diversity criteria, signalling a potential shift for a sector historically free from internal pluralism requirements (National Institution 1).

This sectoral asymmetry – binding internal pluralism in audio-visual media versus external pluralism in the press – structures how pluralism is enacted downstream.

Regulating Audio-visual Media: Binding Rules and Soft Incentives

The institutionalisation of media pluralism regulation is most evident in the audio-visual sector with the establishment of Arcom. Unlike the press, Arcom is an independent regulator empowered to monitor and audit compliance. For political pluralism, Arcom enforces strict, time-bound rules – especially during elections- linking airtime allocations to party representation. A public-service radio journalist illustrates: "From Saturday morning (…) I no longer had the right to give any political element (…) There are super-strict conditions not to influence the vote". Compliance is quantitatively monitored, making political pluralism a *de facto* legal obligation.

By contrast, no binding obligations govern socio-cultural pluralism. Arcom promotes gender parity and diversity through soft measures, such as an annual barometer. A regulatory asymmetry persists: public-service radio must "reflect the diversity of French society", while private operators face no such rule. Thus, socio-cultural pluralism relies on voluntarism, though parity indicators show modest progress (Managers, public and private radio).

Supporting the Third Sector: Subsidies for Community Media

Two public subsidies (FSER and FSMISP[2]) support associative and community outlets that provide local information securing their sustainability (Cheval 2006). These mechanisms extend pluralism beyond commercial and public-service ecosystems, though recipients stress stagnating budgets and bureaucratic delays that threaten continuity.

The Ethical Framework: Pluralism as Professional Ethos

Beyond legal frameworks, journalists often regard pluralism as central to their ethos, grounded in ethical charters and safeguarded by *Sociétés des Journalistes* (SDJs). The late creation of the *Conseil de Déontologie Journalistique et de Médiation* (CDJM) in 2019 underscores a professional identity rooted in "opinion journalism" (Neveu 2024: 14). This tradition builds on the early foundations of pluralism established during the French Revolution and enshrined in the Declaration of Human Rights, including the principle of freedom of expression (Charon 2013: 11-12).

The overview of regulatory instruments indicates a relatively high level of institutionalisation. A key finding is the stark contrast between the audio-visual sector, where political pluralism is a binding legal requirement, and other sectors, where it remains a discretionary ethical norm. Socio-cultural pluralism is not legally enforced in any sector but is promoted through soft policies and unevenly implemented.

Analysis of professional codes reveals that while pluralism is consistently invoked, it is rarely clearly defined or operationalised, described by one journalist as "a bit of wishful thinking" (Journalist, audio-visual public-service media). Furthermore, most mechanisms intervene downstream, after content production, creating a gap between subsidies and evaluation.

Taken together, these instruments depict a "layered" pluralism regime: high legal institutionalisation, strong political monitoring, but weak socio-cultural enforcement and limited integration between sectors. This imbalance shifts the burden of pluralism from structural regulation to individual professionalism, creating the conditions for the implementation gap analysed next.

[2] The *Fonds de soutien à l'expression radiophonique* (FSER) supports radio expression. The *Fonds de soutien aux médias d'information sociale et de proximité* (FSMISP) supports local media outlets that foster relationship-building with local residents.

5. The Implementation Gap: Structural Constraints and Systemic Threats

The implementation of media pluralism in France cannot be reduced to the top-down enforcement of regulatory norms; it emerges instead from a fractured and contingent process shaped by negotiations between journalists, managers, and regulatory authorities. This process unfolds within a dense web of economic, political, social and organisational constraints that frequently neutralise or distort the intended effects of regulation. Such tensions highlight a persistent structural gap between the constitutional norm of media pluralism and its effective realisation. This section will therefore analyse both the structural conditions of media production and the strategies of the actors who navigate, resist, or reproduce them.

The Homogeneity Trap: Social and Professional Constraints on Producers

Upstream recruitment and career pipelines reproduce socio-economic and ethno-racial homogeneity, narrowing the horizon of legitimate speakers before stories are assigned.

The limited pluralism of French journalism, well established in sociological research, originates upstream, within the educational and professional pipelines that reproduce elite social profiles. The country's 14 journalism schools form a hierarchy (Neveu 2024; Chupin 2018; Lafarge, Marchetti 2011) and recruit disproportionately from privileged backgrounds: more than half of the students (52%) are children of executives or intellectuals, while the sons and daughters of workers (16%) and employees (15%) – despite making up 67% of the active male population – barely account for a third of entrants (Neveu 2024: 24). Journalists thus reflect a socially narrow segment of society. Gender divisions deepen this imbalance: women, despite greater numbers in the profession, are concentrated in magazines and socio-cultural reporting (Neveu 2024), while men dominate financial and economic coverage, alongside enduring pay gaps (Damian-Gaillard et al. 2010). As two journalists underline, this lack of internal diversity remains a major obstacle to media pluralism:

> "I'm the only black woman on my editorial staff. (…) On the air, [you hear] people from Tunisia, Algeria, who are French but of Maghreb origin. But I am the only black woman. (…) The only African men I meet on the radio are those who are cleaning or who are in security. But that is not necessarily linked to [our radio]. I worked at [another private radio] for two months and it was the same thing. There were two black women on the air. But all the African guys I met were people who were cleaning" (Journalist, private radio).

> "The journalists are still generally white, mostly of French origin etc. [A few years ago, we implemented a program that] allows us to have different profiles of young people who enter journalism schools straight after the baccalaureate through a work-study scheme and are therefore paid. This makes it possible to reach young people who do not necessarily have family support. And we are now seeing different profiles of young reporters arriving: we really hear them on air, with names we did not hear 10 or 20 years ago – foreign-sounding names, young people from North African immigration. If we do not have editorial teams that reflect the image of society, we will not succeed. (…) I think there is a real willingness among journalists. [Some] journalism schools also try to [facilitate access] notably with [the organisation] *La Chance*, which offers free preparatory courses for students who cannot afford standard preparation and who often think, 'journalism is not for me'. We help them prepare for entrance examinations" (Journalist, public-service radio).

Such testimonies underscore how pluralism deficits are not merely discursive but embedded in recruitment infrastructures. Programs like *La Chance* attempt to diversify access, showing incremental but insufficient change.

Beyond gender representation, both excerpts highlight how journalistic pluralism is constrained by intersecting structures of class, race, and inter-ethnic relations (De Rudder 1991; Balibar, Wallerstein 1989) which can only be fully understood through an intersectional framework (Dorlin 2009; Collins 1993; Crenshaw 1991). Such dynamics draw attention to the institutional mechanisms that regulate entry into the profession, notably journalism schools and recruitment practices, which tend to reproduce existing social hierarchies rather than diversify them. From this perspective, the limits of media pluralism are inscribed upstream of news production itself: they are embedded in the processes that decide who is authorised to become a journalist.

From the journalistic coverage angle, the pursuit of pluralism inevitably collides with entrenched social structures that restrict the range of voices invited to speak as experts. This tension is particularly evident in the persistent underrepresentation of women and ethnic minorities among commentators. One significant barrier is the prevalence of imposter syndrome and lack of confidence among women, which media professionals acknowledge and attempt to counteract. As a public-service radio journalist explains: "a woman will always tell you: 'no, I don't really work on that'. [So], you have to convince them, you always have to tell them 'You're legitimate'. So, it requires more work". Pressed by time constraints, however, journalists often revert to familiar male sources: "Sometimes, we don't have time so we'll always call the same guy we know". This difficulty is further rationalised through a perception of structural inevitability. As a manager from public broadcasting put it: "there are fewer women business leaders, there are fewer women political leaders. So, we do the best we can [but] we cannot reinvent the world completely either". While framed as realism, such reasoning risks sliding into passive

acceptance, whereby media do not challenge but rather reproduce existing gendered and ethnic hierarchies. This inertia is even more pronounced regarding ethnic diversity, where the absence of monitoring tools serves as a convenient alibi for inaction.

The Invisible Cage: Professional Routines and Epistemic Constraints

As Neveu contends, news storytelling is governed by rhetorical mechanisms –frame selection, narrative structure, and word choice (2024: 63) – that inherently shape representation. While journalists anchor their work in factual reality, their narrative construction remains an interpretive act bound by specific epistemic frames (Charaudeau 2006; Champagne 1991).

Interviews reveal that most journalists regard socio-cultural pluralism as a potential by-product of reporting guided by principles of neutrality and the pursuit of the most “competent” interlocutor:

> “I’m going to interview someone competent, not someone based on gender [or minorities]” (Journalist, national daily).
>
> “I’m looking for skills. (…) For me, it’s mainly the level of competence that interests me” (Journalist, regional private radio).
>
> “What interests us is having the right interlocutor, in the right place, representative” (Manager, regional print).

Here, “competence” becomes an implicit hierarchy privileging institutional voices and marginalising experiential knowledge. Such selective recognition not only sustains processes of stigmatisation against particular groups (Sedel 2009) but also reinforces hegemonic narratives.

This “right interlocutor” bias operates as symbolic gatekeeping under the guise of professionalism. Cases such as the coverage of the Yellow Vests illustrate how non-elite voices were framed as incoherent (Neveu 2024: 66) or, in the case of riots, as overly emotional, producing what Macé termed “mediatic orientalism” (2009), and thereby narrowing pluralism.

Territorial hierarchies compound the effect: regional and associative journalists emphasise giving “everyone a voice”, while peripheral territories (e.g. overseas departments) struggle for visibility unless crises erupt. In sum, the pursuit of media pluralism is constrained not only by who produces the news but by the very structures and practices that govern its production. Professional rituals that conflate neutrality with competence,

discursive norms privileging certain modes of expression, and territorial hierarchies that dictate visibility collectively operate as mechanisms of symbolic power. These dynamics reproduce social hierarchies, creating an invisible cage that determines which experiences are deemed legitimate, marginalises others, and limits the media's ability to reflect social diversity, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities.

The Flawed Scaffolding: Political and Economic Incentives

Electoral arithmetic, opaque subsidy regimes, and unmeasurable 'diversity' produce a scaffolding that formalises pluralism where it is easiest to count and neglects it where it is hardest to enact.

Both economic support mechanisms and political conjunctures – such as the electoral cycle and the strategic investment of politics on the "mediacratic space" (Darras 1995) – interact with, and often undermine, the original objectives of the regulatory framework. This section explores how these political and economic dynamics shape and constrain journalists' ability to enact pluralism in their reporting.

Politically, Arcom's fairness rules tie airtime to electoral performance, reducing pluralism to arithmetic. A public-service journalist noted: "People criticise us, for example, for giving the *Rassemblement National* (RN)[3] too much of a say, we say 'we're sorry, we're obliged". Arcom's strict fairness rules, which tie airtime to election results, risk reducing pluralism to a mechanical redistribution of speaking time among established political forces. A public service manager further observed: "We consider that we must make all the candidates heard, and we expose the big candidates a little more". While this system ensures formal balance, it amplifies major parties and marginalises emerging voices. This effect is reinforced when print and online media, though not legally bound, voluntarily adopt similar practices. As one online media manager noted, "the representativeness of politicians (…) is above all linked to the political reality of the territories".

Beyond regulation, political actors' strategic refusals to debate further limit pluralism. A private radio journalist observed that left-wing figures declined invitations to right-wing media, and vice versa, noting "that is an obstacle to the debate". This pattern was also highlighted by a regional print manager, who recounted how the RN consistently refused debate invitations despite extensive efforts. These external constraints – largely beyond media control- demonstrate that pluralism depends not only on institutional rules but also on the willingness of political actors to participate in public discourse and of their strategic

[3] The *Rassemblement National* (RN) is the main far right party in France.

choices regarding which media spaces to occupy (Darras 1995), illustrating how politics continuously adapt to media forms (Neveu 2000). Hence, pluralism depends not only on journalistic will but on political participation itself -a dependency the law cannot rectify.

In terms of socio-cultural pluralism, a fundamental tension stems from France's republican model, which prohibits ethnic statistics in the name of indivisibility (Cervulle 2021). While this constitutional principle is grounded in ideals of equality, it makes the measurement – and consequently the regulation – of socio-cultural diversity exceptionally difficult. Regarding television representation, Cervulle notes that "the prohibition of 'diversity statistics', and thus the absence of data on the ethnoracial composition of the French population, makes it impossible to quantify the precise level of representation of any given group" (2021: 143). Media professionals consistently emphasised this epistemic challenge. A public radio journalist remarked: "We do not have ethnic statistics. So, how do you represent something which is not measured?", while a private audio-visual manager highlighted the definitional ambiguity: "We would need to define [minorities] to know what is meant". In response, Arcom's diversity barometer relies on perceived origin – an imperfect proxy that many find operationally vague and politically sensitive. Moreover, temporal limitations of monitoring, such as snapshot studies conducted in specific months, can distort findings. A manager noted that coverage monitored in October 2023 was dominated by the Israel-Hamas conflict, which inherently featured more male experts on military and geopolitical issues, thus skewing gender representation data. These methodological and legal constraints reveal a deeper contradiction: the state cannot effectively regulate what it refuses to measure. Without robust, consistent, and legally permissible metrics, efforts to improve representational diversity remain largely symbolic, dependent on voluntarism rather than enforceable standards. Despite the regulatory authority's efforts since the late 1990s, the republican model in France continues to obscure the management of public policies aimed at enhancing diversity (Cervulle 2021).

Economically, while the audio-visual sector is governed mainly by internal pluralism requirements, the press relies largely on external supports – especially direct and indirect subsidies – that are plagued by structural weaknesses in their design and distribution.

A primary concern is the opaque and unambitious criteria governing subsidy distribution. As a syndicate member argues, "[Public aids] are not transparent", and should include stronger conditionalities related to employment conditions, ethical standards, and representational goals – such as gender balance in sourcing. Moreover, subsidies often flow disproportionately to large, established players rather than supporting innovative or diverse outlets. This imbalance is starkly illustrated by a community radio representative

who notes that his station – with over 110,000 listeners – receives only 38,000 euros in operational support, while a nearby print title with half the audience receives over 1.2 million. The opacity surrounding the allocation of public subsidies raises serious questions about the effectiveness of external pluralism mechanisms in the press sector. Some subsidies are awarded to large daily newspapers that do not consistently maintain fair working conditions for journalists, and in some instances, implement staff reductions that exacerbate the precariousness faced by media professionals (Ouakrat, Sklower 2024: 16). This imbalance sustains a “subsidy paradox”: funds meant to diversify the field reinforce concentration.

Together, these three dimensions – the political straightjacket, the impossibility of measurement, and the subsidy paradox – constitute fragile and problem-laden scaffolding that shapes the conditions of media production. Rather than fostering genuine pluralism, they operate as mechanisms of symbolic and structural power, reinforcing hierarchies and limiting legitimate voices, showing that regulations alone cannot ensure pluralism.

The Existential Threats: Systemic Risks to the Pluralist Ecosystem

Beyond regulatory shortcomings, pluralism faces interconnected systemic threats – economic, political, and technological. This last section examines them through the lens of media professionals themselves, offering a detailed account of a system under significant strain and “tension” (Bassoni, Lukasik 2023: 83-87).

Ownership concentration has deepened (Benson et al. 2025; Smyrnaios 2023; Cagé 2016). Journalists highlight subtle editorial pressures within conglomerates, where cross-media ownership concentrates “opinion power”. The political clout of large media conglomerates is, as a public-service manager observes, inherently threatening to editorial independence: “when there is a large private group that wants to impose this or that law, that is a threat to press freedom”. A public-service journalist elaborates, noting that while journalists within these groups may not be at the direct “behest of their shareholders”, the existence of powerful conglomerates like those of Vincent Bolloré, Rodolphe Saadé and Bernard Arnault “inevitably poses a problem”. This risk lies in a single entity promoting a unified editorial line across television, radio, and print media with “incredible clout”. Proposed remedies include structural reforms of anti-concentration laws to impose stricter limits on audience reach and cross-media ownership. This critique is sharpened by a national daily manager, who frames the issue as a profound political failure: the state has neglected to legislate for genuine independence, allowing financial powers to shape public information. Drawing a direct parallel to the transformation of X (formerly Twitter), under Elon Musk,

he states, “It is the owner who has an obvious impact on what will be produced”. The conclusion is stark: the fact that “a few billionaires own most of the major French media” constitutes a “democratic catastrophe” (national daily manager), where moneyed interests have an undue influence on public debate. These empirical observations are corroborated by the 2024 Media Pluralism Monitor, which classifies France as facing an increased risk due to an “oligopolistic hold and persistent ideological polarisation” exemplified by the cases of Bolloré and Saadé (Ouakrat, Sklower 2024: 8). This situation underscores the importance of media ownership which can translate into “opinion power” and affect pluralism (Carpentier, Wimmer 2025: 66).

Moreover, public-service and associative media face financial asphyxiation: the 2022 abolition of the license fee and stagnant FSER subsidies erode pluralism’s institutional pillars: “If we make the FSER disappear, our voice goes out”, warns a community-radio journalist. The disappearance of this subsidy would not just reduce their resources; it would silence a crucial vector of local, participatory pluralism in France. For media professionals, the dual pressures of oligarchic concentration and the erosion of public and alternative media constitute a central threat to journalistic practice, significantly impeding the effective guarantee of pluralism.

Politically, populist movements and judicial harassment heighten fear and self-censorship. The rise of populist movements across Europe has fostered a climate in which the foundational democratic principle of freedom of expression is increasingly under assault,. This pressure manifests both as a tangible fear of institutional dismantling and as a more insidious increase in self-censorship and judicial harassment. A pervasive concern among media professionals is the potential for an illiberal government to systematically dismantle public-service media. A public-service radio journalist points to the Italian RAI model as a cautionary tale, reflecting the profound anxiety within French public media. The abolition of the hypothecated license fee is particularly regretted, as it had previously provided a buffer against political interference; its integration into the general budget makes funding a discretionary tool of the government. The prospect of a government led by the RN, which has openly advocated for privatisation, heightens this uncertainty. A national daily manager frames this starkly, predicting that such a government would pursue the “privatisation of all French public broadcasting”, an act equated with ushering in an era of “fascism”. This anxiety is further compounded by what is perceived as a broader “hardening of public freedom” and a “rightisation of political life” across Europe (Lefébure et al. 2024), producing a chilling pre-emptive effect on journalistic work.

In this climate, a public-service radio manager asserts that “freedom has to be taken”, highlighting self-censorship – the conscious decision *not* to test the boundaries of permissible reporting – as one of the most insidious threats.

Legally, the strategic weakening of legal protections further undermines journalistic practice. While France's press laws, notably the 1881 law, are praised as an “excellent framework” (regional press manager), powerful interests systematically circumvent them, exposing their structural fragility. A regional press manager notes that legal attacks “are never based on press law”; instead, journalists face general-law charges, including national security or commercial confidentiality, which Ouakrat and Sklower (2024: 13) confirm as abusively used to block access to information of public interest. A journalist notes that the protection of sources – a cornerstone of investigative journalism – “is no longer guaranteed” with judges able to seize phones and compel disclosure. The result is a tangible “rise in the number of legal actions”, evidenced by the increasing summons of journalists for hearings, as noted by a regional manager. These legal pressures are not necessarily intended to win cases, but to drain resources, intimidate reporters, and foster the very self-censorship that journalists fear. Together, the illiberal turn, the threat of privatisation, and the weakening of legal safeguards significantly complicate journalists' professional practices and their mission to sustain pluralism.

Finally, platformised disinformation corrodes trust and attention. The digital revolution has fundamentally altered the relationship between journalists and the audience. Media professionals identify a triple crisis fuelled by digital platforms: the proliferation of disinformation, the corrosive erosion of trust in traditional journalism, and growing public disengagement from rigorous news- all of which jeopardise the reception of pluralist content.

The primary vector of this crisis is the largely unregulated digital ecosystem. A manager from a private audio-visual company identifies disinformation as “perhaps the first threat”, noting how platforms amplify unfounded claims of media manipulation and propaganda. This fosters a damaging false equivalence placing professional journalism “at the same level, if not below, as an anonymous account on X” (manager, private media). Consequently, journalists are forced into a perpetual defensive posture. A private audio-visual journalist describes social networks as “hell” precisely because; while valuable as reporting tools, they demand enormous resources to “deconstruct a rumour or deconstruct conspiracies”, diverting energy from original reporting.

This environment generates a self-reinforcing cycle of distrust and disengagement. The algorithmic amplification of disinformation actively shapes audience behaviour. A regional radio journalist expresses doubt: “I don’t know if [the audience] is really looking for pluralism”. They argue that algorithms confine users to filter bubbles - a “single school of thought” – making them “not necessarily interested in pluralism”. This culminates in what a pure player manager calls a “disinterest of our fellow citizens in information”, a state of “information fatigue” in which the public withdraws from the news agenda entirely.

As a result, the struggle for pluralism extends beyond production to reception, becoming a societal challenge shaped by disinformation and erosion of trust. The media are forced to compete in a “war that is not necessarily equal” as the regional journalist notes - a war “not with the same tools, the same rules, or the same ethics” as the platforms that distribute their content and shape their audience's expectations. The ultimate threat is a fractured public sphere, in which citizens - whether by choice, fatigue, or algorithmic design-are no longer willing or able to engage with the diverse and verified information that underpins democratic discourse.

Together, these forces – oligarchic concentration, state retrenchment, legal intimidation, and algorithmic distortion – form a perfect storm that endangers the very material conditions pluralism requires.

6. Discussion and Conclusion: Safeguarding Pluralism in an Age of Systemic Threats

Our analysis demonstrates that France combines a dense and legally codified system of media-pluralism regulation with fragile translation into everyday practice. The result is a dual asymmetry:

1. A legal-sectoral asymmetry, where political pluralism in the audio-visual field is binding, auditable, and regularly enforced, while socio-cultural pluralism remains soft, voluntary, and weakly measurable.
2. A discursive-material asymmetry, where normative commitments to representation encounter upstream homogeneity, constrained production routines, and eroding economic infrastructures.

France’s paradox is stark: despite one of Europe’s most interventionist regulatory frameworks, Reporters Without Borders (2025) ranks it only 25th worldwide in press freedom. This underscores that pluralism cannot be reduced to formal rules. A robust framework – monitored by Arcom and embedded in newsroom ethics – now coexists with structural fragilities that hollow out its democratic intent.

Theoretical implications

We conceptualise pluralism as a dynamic equilibrium between normative principle and material practice – a balance that is continuously disrupted by economic, political, and technological pressures.

This study advances that pluralism fails not primarily through the absence of norms but through a misalignment between regulatory discourse and production conditions. Counting airtime and titles is administratively feasible; cultivating epistemic diversity, newsroom heterogeneity, and public exposure to difference is materially demanding.

In this sense, France illustrates what we call performative pluralism: a system where compliance metrics substitute for substantive diversity. The concept extends Carpentier and Wimmer's (2025) framework by emphasising how institutional performativity sustains legitimacy while concealing structural inequality. Safeguarding pluralism requires coupling legal guarantees with material reforms.

Policy and Practical Implications

Empirically, the study identifies an ecosystem under compound stress: oligarchic ownership, the financial strangulation of public and associative media, illiberal political pressures, judicial harassment, and algorithmic disinformation, as well as journalism schools and modes of journalistic production, both of which are subject to a homogeneity trap. These forces interact synergistically to erode journalist independence and weaken citizens' access to diverse information.

Safeguarding pluralism therefore requires coordinated interventions across legal, economic, professional, and educational levels.

1. Structural reform: strengthen anti-concentration laws by imposing cross-media caps; audience-share limits, ensuring no owner wields disproportionate influence.

2. Conditional subsidies: tie public-aid eligibility to transparent commitments on ethical standards, gender parity, and representational diversity; ensure FSER and public-service budgets are indexed to inflation and protected from discretionary cuts.

3. Upstream inclusion: expand initiatives such as La Chance and apprenticeship routes to democratise access to journalism schools and diversify recruitment.

4. Professional accountability: encourage internal newsroom dashboards tracking diversity in sourcing and authorship, adapted to the republican framework that limits ethnic categorisation but still allows gender and socio-economic indicators.

5. Legal protection: reinforce safeguards against Strategic lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and expand collective defence funds to preserve source confidentiality.

6. Civic and Epistemic capacity: integrate media-literacy curricula at school and community levels to rebuild public demand for reliable, plural information.

European and Comparative Perspective

At a European scale, the French case epitomises the paradox confronting liberal democracies: pluralism is codified yet materially undermined by market concentration and platform power. The emerging European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) and Digital Services Act (DSA) provide an enabling framework, but their effectiveness will depend on domestic enforcement and political will. Information production and circulation form a multi-actor system; regulating its components independently risks limited impact, so integrated, conditional approaches are needed to address their combined effects. . Comparatively, France's centralised tradition produces distinctive vulnerabilities: while the state enforces formal fairness, it has been slower to foster socio-cultural representation and local autonomy. Bridging this gap requires coupling regulation with participatory governance involving journalists, citizens, and associative media networks.

Conclusion

France's model of media pluralism stands at a crossroads. Its future hinges on three actors: regulators capable of enforcing beyond compliance, owners willing to prioritise democratic legitimacy over profit, and journalists empowered to exercise autonomy within precarious structures. Ultimately, defending pluralism in France -and in Europe- means re-embedding journalism within the social and material conditions that make genuine diversity possible. Without such reinvestment, pluralism risks remaining a beautifully written principle rather than a lived democratic practice.

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6. BETWEEN STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS AND DIGITAL INNOVATION IN JOURNALISM:
HOW ITALIAN NEWS MEDIA FOSTER DEMOCRATIC AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

Anastasiia Iufereva, Elisabetta Risi and Andrea Miconi

Abstract:

In recent years, news media organisations have experienced a profound crisis due to the decline of their legacy, independence, and public trust. These threats are recognised as a significant challenge for journalism and its pro-democratic role in society, and they undermine political participation through and in the media. This study aims to examine the strategies of Italian media to maintain democratic function by facilitating the audience's political participation. A two-stage design was used based on survey and qualitative interview data collected between 2024 and 2025 from journalists and editors of Italian media representing three media sectors: public service media, commercial media, and non-profit/community media. Based on the findings, this research identifies, on the one hand, the structural and organisational factors that enable democratic participation within media systems and journalistic production, with particular attention to the strengths and weaknesses of different media sectors in the Italian media landscape; on the other hand, the results highlight a set of approaches through which Italian media engage with their audiences and foster forms of citizen participation that underpin democratic processes.

Keywords:

Democratic Participation; Italian Media System; Audience Engagement; Contemporary Journalism; Political Participation; Audience Trust

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Italian media system has been experiencing a protracted crisis related to general global trends, which include declining trust in news sources, growing political pressure, and intensifying market competition (Splendore 2024; Hastuti 2025; Park et al. 2024). Reports from European and national observers document the deterioration of press freedom, increasing concentration of ownership, and government interference in the work of public service media services, which threatens their autonomy and independence (Media Freedom Mission Report on Italy's Democratic Drift 2024; Media Pluralism Monitor Italy 2024; Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom Italy 2025). These processes are taking place against the backdrop of a broader transformation of information consumption, characteristic of the entire European media landscape: traditional media channels are losing their central position in presenting the news agenda (Fletcher, Nielsen 2023; Schneiders 2025). Therefore, news organisations need to maintain public trust and fulfil their democratic function – enabling citizens' informational participation in the political process and providing an arena for debate and dialogue. For example, recent studies emphasise that audience participation extends beyond simple news consumption and includes practices such as interactive formats, feedback, content co-production, and participation in public debate (Martin et al. 2024; Greber 2024; Shin 2025; Eskiadi et al. 2025). Against this backdrop, there is growing interest in how different segments of the Italian media landscape – public broadcasting, commercial and non-commercial media, and community media – develop and implement strategies for engaging audiences in political life and supporting civic participation in policy debates.

As to the general framework, we moved from Hallin and Mancini's classical model, which includes Italy in the so-called polarised pluralist system, characterised by a relatively low literacy rate, high level of political parallelism, and overall, a modest degree of professionalisation in the news industry (2004: 95-142), particularly affected by a specific problem of Italian journalism, we use to refer to as clientelism (Hallin, Mancini 2012: 282). In the last twenty years, a twofold process has taken place, combining a fragmentation of the news ecosystems at the level of local or niche markets – regional newspapers and the radio, for instance – and the concentration of media outlets in the hands of a few families, at the national level (Papathanassopoulos, Giannouli, Archontaki 2023: 147). Additionally, the lack of a shared "bipartisan" approach to the regulation and reformation of media systems - due to the political polarisation of the country at both the institutional and the societal level – resulted in a state of uncertainty of the overall media ecosystem (Tonello 2008: 245). Needless to add – in this case, not differently from other countries – the so-

called platformisation process and the diffusion of social media have impacted the news system as well, producing a very complex ecosystem, which requires an in-depth investigation.

2. Methodology and Research Design

Democratic participation at the level of media systems manifests through a set of qualities and functions that include fostering well-informed citizenship, enabling public discussion on matters of collective concern, supporting democratic values, and generating forms of "common ground" that rely on both social trust and critical engagement. Systemic factors enabling these outcomes span economic, professional, regulatory, political, and sociocultural conditions (Klimkiewicz, Szafrańska, Vanevska 2024). Empirical quali-quantitative research was designed to explore the systemic and organisational factors that enable democratic participation within media systems and journalistic production, with particular attention to assessing the strengths and weaknesses of different media sectors and national-level dynamics in supporting these democratic functions.

The above categories (economic, professional/journalistic, regulatory, political, and cultural) were selected on the basis of the conceptual framework used both in the qualitative interview guide for journalists and in the survey form.

3. Data Collection

The empirical core of the research is based on semi-structured interviews conducted between July-August 2024 in Italy. Twelve respondents were selected based on purposive sampling, with the selection criteria focusing on their professional experience across different types of media. The journalists were selected from diverse media outlets, aligning with established media studies classifications: public service media (PSM), private television, print media (leading dailies), digital-native news media, local/regional media, and community/non-profit media (Tab. 1). The sample consists of 12 media journalists from the most prominent Italian news outlet: RAI, Mediaset, La7, La Repubblica, Domani, Follow Up News, FanPage, Il Mattino di Padova, 7 Giorni, Il Manifesto, Internazionale. The selection of the qualitative sample was based on qualification requirements such as higher education and experience in the field of media.

The interviews, averaging 60-100 minutes each, were conducted online in the respondents' native language (Italian) to ensure depth of expression. The data processing followed a four-stage protocol:

1. Audio recording of oral sessions, transcription and translation into English.
2. Thematic coding, where the key themes were organised into a few groups.
3. Qualitative analysis aimed at synthesising the experts' perspectives on the contemporary Italian media system.

Type of news outlet	News outlet	Position
Public service media	RAI	Editor-in-chief
	RAI	Journalist
Private television	Mediaset	Editor-in-chief
	La7	Journalist
Print media	La Repubblica	Editor-in-chief
	Domani	Journalist Freelance
Digital-native news media	Follow Up News	Editor-in-chief
	FanPage	Journalist
Local/regional media	Il Mattino di Padova	Editor-in-chief
	7 Giorni	Journalist Freelance
Community/non-profit media	Il Manifesto	Editor-in-chief
	Internazionale	Journalist Freelance

Tab. 1 Sample of Italian News Outlets for qualitative inquiry (Horizon MeDeMAP Project).

The second part of the research was conducted through a survey, through the distribution of an online questionnaire using the Microsoft Form platform. The process of data collection on the Italian media market took place from April 1st to May 31st. Invitations to complete the questionnaire were sent to 145 journalists and editors-in-chief. A total of 109 responses were collected. The sample was gender balance, average age 45. Overall, 10 types of different media outlets are represented in a sample (Tab. 1). In Italy, the term "tabloid media" is not widely used, and therefore the category included newspapers (especially online) that cannot be considered "quality press" due to their focus on news related to leisure, gossip: a specificity of Southern media systems that, with the partial exception of France, had been already observed by Hallin and Mancini (2004: 97). However, to maintain consistency with other European reports (of Horizon MeDeMAP Project), the following document uses the term "national tabloid" (Tab. 2).

Type of media	N. of responses	Journalists	Editors-in-chiefs
Public service medium	22	17	5
Commercial TV station	12	9	3
Commercial radio station	11	6	5
Daily national newspaper	13	9	4
Weekly national newspaper	6	6	0
National *tabloid*	5	5	0
News portal	17	10	7
Local / regional newspaper	5	2	3
Local / regional radio / TV	8	6	2
Community / non-profit / minority media	10	3	6
Total	**109**		

Tab. 2 Number of survey responses in a correlation with the type of media (Horizon MeDeMAP Project).

4. Overview of Key Findings

Structural Conditions Shaping Democratic Participation: Insights from Italian Journalists

The analysis of interviews with media experts from 12 Italian news outlets revealed that the media environment shaped by intertwined economic and professional pressures. Economically, public service media benefit from relative insulation from market fluctuations, while private outlets face acute financial vulnerability. These constraints limit the capacity for in-depth reporting and investigative journalism, reinforcing structural imbalances in media access whereby well-resourced political actors dominate visibility. Journalists also highlighted how economic lawsuits, low salaries, job precarity, and concentrated ownership further undermine editorial autonomy and pluralistic representation. Economic precarity, audience metrics, and political parallelism interact to shape journalistic autonomy and democratic media performance (Hallin, Mancini 2004).

At the professional level, respondents emphasised adherence to verification practices, multi-sourcing, and fact-checking as essential safeguards against misinformation. Digital native outlets were described as particularly active in triangulating conflicting sources, whereas PSM were perceived as less engaged in investigative work. Efforts to promote transparency, ethical standards, and media literacy coexist with strong audience-driven pressures, especially in private television and community media, where ratings significantly shape editorial choices. While many journalists expressed a commitment to cultural and political diversity – reflected, for instance, in inclusive election coverage and initiatives such as the “No Woman, No Panel” rule – professional practice remains constrained by censorship, political pressure, legal threats, and pervasive social polarisation. The rise of online misinformation, including AI-generated content, and the

involvement of community media in civil rights movements further illustrate the complex professional landscape.

Polarisation, they noted, tends to frame debates in binary terms, limiting nuanced dialogue and constructive engagement. As one interviewee observed regarding political alignment within partisan outlets: "[In] a newspaper with a fairly precise political stance, I might indicate as a risk the fact that on certain topics there is a bit of alignment of opinions" (Italian Press – Editor-in-Chief).

From a regulatory perspective, journalists described an environment characterised by the absence of codified rules governing diversity coverage. This absence was interpreted by some as enabling genuine openness: "We don't have codified strategies or standard procedures. (…) We try to portray cultural and political diversity as it is. (…) We have never placed any veto on any political culture, except for fascist culture" (Italian TV Journalist).

Italian interviewees reported efforts to include journalists from diverse backgrounds to ensure that audiences encounter a plurality of perspectives. Some described a relatively supportive environment for promoting diversity and inclusivity, with frequent coverage of minority viewpoints, political diversity, and cultural pluralism. Diversity was said to "naturally" emerge in reporting on conflicts and civil rights issues, even in the absence of formal institutional strategies.

However, several journalists emphasised persistent limitations. Editorial teams are often composed of individuals from homogenous backgrounds, restricting the range of experiences represented in newsrooms. Formal policies on gender or cultural diversity are largely absent, and the need for structured journalism education was frequently mentioned. Financial constraints and tensions linked to watchdog functions further complicate efforts to broaden representation. As one interviewee noted: "(…) there are editorial teams composed only of white, bourgeois men. It is difficult to achieve cultural diversity. In Italy, there is only one diversity manager, who is still a white, able-bodied, gay man. It seems a bit lacking" (Italian Newsmedia – Journalist).

These findings resonate with Carpentier and Wimmer's (2024b) observation that the depth and scale of democratic participation depend on whether media roles remain confined to a minimalist understanding – limited to informational and watchdog functions combined with a narrow conception of the forum as a "marketplace of ideas" – or whether media

structures and production routines succeed in activating broader forms of participation and representation.

Italian Media Strategies for Facilitating Citizen Political Participation from Empirical Data

According to the statements of Italian journalists, the professional community sees its role in media landscape as an active participant in the democratic process. A key strategy identified is establishing the information verification as an essential condition of democracy. The journalist from the local news outlet "7 Giorni" emphasised the critical role of journalism in supporting democratic accountability: "Journalists are crucial figures for democracies (…) a fundamental and socially responsible role (…) what you write… shapes public opinion". For Italian journalists, fact-checking is not just a technical professional standard but a necessary condition for maintaining democratic processes. As the editor-in-chief of La Repubblica noted, it is massively important to "have procedures and processes to ensure that what is published is indeed verified". Without this, according to the editor of Il Manifesto, it is impossible to create a "shared environment for debate", since "no debate… is possible if there is no shared understanding of the facts". Hence, the journalist's task is presenting only reliable facts that form the basis for discussion and unite journalists and citizens. At the same time, the journalists interviewed also pointed to the problem of the spread of disinformation as a source of "pollution" in the public space: "The biggest problem of our times is fake news, false information (…) it is essential for me to verify the source of the information, but most importantly, to cross-check sources" (journalist, RAI). In this case, the difficulty arises in "distinguishing authoritative information from (…) false information". (editor, La Repubblica). Therefore, the journalist's role often becomes that of a "gatekeeper", ensuring the purity of discussion by "Verifying fake news requires time" because "a regular citizen does not have the time (…) A journalist (…) is committed to this process" (journalist, 7 Giorni).

The second significant strategy is the strategy of "mediation" between citizens and the authorities. This means that journalists take on the role of interpreters of messages conveyed by the authorities – whether parliamentary proceedings or institutional speeches. This strategy involves contextualising and interpreting institutional policies and holding power to account: "Journalism (…) the 'fourth estate' (…) monitoring and balancing other powers" (journalist, Internazionale). Moreover, journalists do not simply recount speeches or the content of a law but rather provide a detailed explanation of "what it means", and additionally consult other sources for verification. In particular, the journalist from private TV channel indicated that their task is to decode official speeches (e.g. those of President Mattarella) and parliamentary procedures in order to explain to citizens how legal changes

will impact people's lives: "Without journalism, there is no democracy (…) journalism is a check on power (…) journalism must (…) contextualise them to give the public as complete information as possible".

The strategy of actively pursuing "agenda setting" is closely linked to journalists' role not only in identifying trending topics but also in maintaining interest in complex and controversial issues, thereby engaging audiences in discussions. This stems from the fact that audience often focus more on sensational topics that evoke negative emotions such as fear or anger. In addition to this redistribution of attention, other psychological shifts are also observed: the intensive consumption of information on social media leads to a shortened attention span, which leads to decreased concentration when reading long texts. The journalist from Fanpage, for example, noted that to maintain interest in complex topics such as the climate crisis or military conflicts abroad, it is important to constantly seek out "new angles" and thereby attract audience attention: "I try (…) to choose topics that I believe deserve significant public attention (…) What I try to do is always find new interpretative angles and perspectives to keep the focus on these issues".

One of the most pronounced trends is the Italian media's shift toward multiplatform, interactive approach, which can be seen as an effective tool for engaging audiences in political discussion. The dissemination of information through traditional channels – print, TV, or radio – is complemented by a wide range of digital tools, including social media. These platforms allow not only for the dissemination of content but also for the creation of additional platforms for political discussion among citizens, the measurement of public sentiment, and the search for new newsworthy topics. The journalist from Internazionale noted that "social media (…) are the primary tools for stimulating debate today. Any article that doesn't reach social media doesn't generate debate". The editor of RAI emphasises that "the cultural relationship with the public is mostly connected to social media". The use of instant messaging also takes communication with the audience to a new level: "We recently opened the WhatsApp channel, and we see that the public is not only growing very quickly but also interacting. (…) WhatsApp is the one that helps us better understand if people like the types of information we provide". In addition to social media (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok) and chat services (WhatsApp, Messenger), Italian news outlets are introducing more participatory formats for citizens such as news quizzes, live streams, and others. As the journalist of Internazionale underlined, participatory debates are unimaginable without these tools, as they directly engage the audience in the discussion. The journalist also believes that "responding to comments on social media is crucial", since it facilitates an open dialogue between journalists and the public. In

comparison to the previous allusion to the attention span allowed by social media exposure, and interestingly enough, we observed a limited concern about the possible negative effects of social media on the structural relationship between news agency and their audiences. For instance, Dvir-Gvirsman and Tsuriel interviewed 18 social media editors and 24 journalists, narrowing down the discourse to a subtle problem: with anyone cultivating "semi-autonomous relationship with audience members", tensions are introduced in the newsroom, showing how platformisation bears effects in terms of restructuring of professional routines (2022: 11-14). Despite moving from a basic definition of platform – "journalism has become a multi-platform environment" (2017: 1574) Hanusch adds a layer to the previous investigation, by individuating the web analytics as the main factor impacting the hierarchies within the newsroom (2017: 1579-1581).

A key element in the range of strategies is the shift from passive information to direct political mobilisation. The journalist of Internazionale emphasised that her materials have repeatedly prompted real action and mobilised the public. For instance, topics about labour exploitation, environmental issues, and inequality not only raised awareness of these issue but also encouraged people to protest or join organisations to provide assistance or support to these categories of people: "I don't deal directly with politics, but by addressing other issues, if people become more aware, they might feel motivated to make change. This could include voting, participating in demonstrations, joining an association, or a political party. Participation increases in this sense, indirectly". Another illustrative case of such a strategy was presented by the editor of Il Manifesto. Unlike most news outlets, which limit themselves to the role of a "forum for debate", Il Manifesto demonstrates the organisation of a major national demonstration (e.g. the April 25th march in Milan), rather than simply reporting on them: "Il Manifesto (…) launched the idea of a major national demonstration for April 25th in Milan (…) We directly proposed it, promoted it, supported it, and contributed to organising it".

Descriptive Insights on Audience Participation in Italian Media: Selected Survey Evidence

Unless otherwise specified, the quantitative analysis aggregated data on media outlets by sector (public service media, commercial, and non-profit), without distinguishing between press, television, radio, and digital markets.

The majority of the respondents claimed their newsrooms allow for public views being expressed in their content (64% responded positively, including almost 38% stating "very often") and more than three fourths of respondents showed a support for promoting inclusiveness (55% claiming this tactic is a priority). However, the audience is much rarer

invited to participate in direct debates organised by the Italian media. Around 56% of the journalist/editors admit this kind of event never or rarely takes place in their newsrooms.

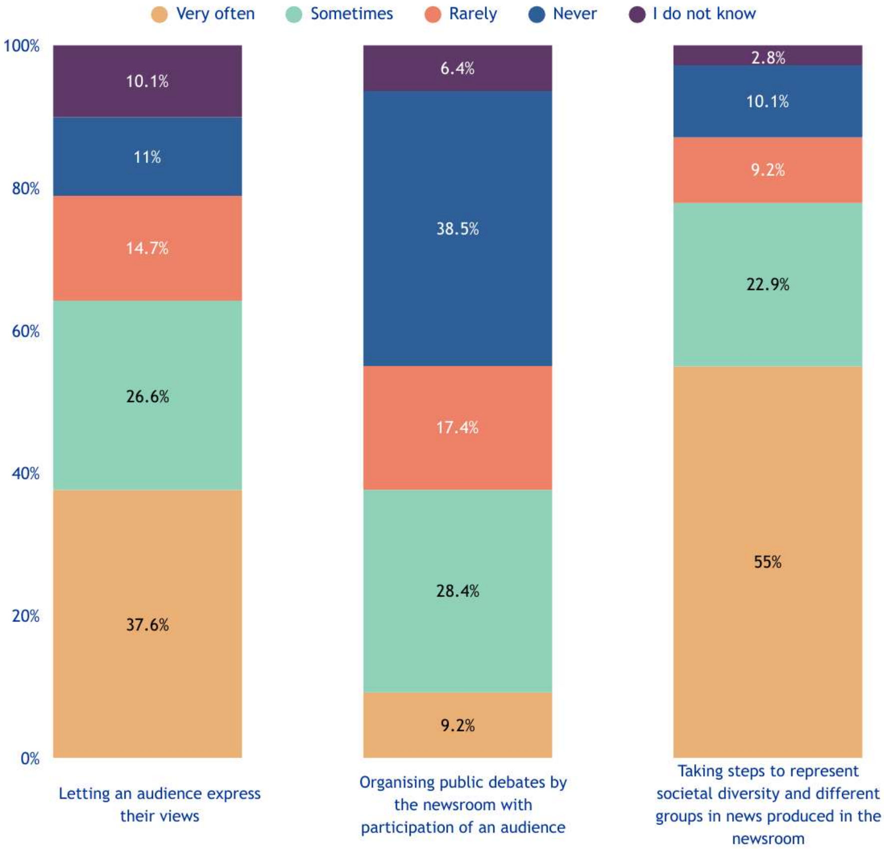

Fig. 1 Distribution of responses in the category: Providing a voice in the debate and representation (Source MeDeMAP Project, deliverable 4.4 – own reworking)

Audience-expression practices are relatively widespread across Italian media, though the extent of diversity representation varies across sectors. News portals and community or non-profit outlets report the highest levels of audience expression, with more than half indicating that they allow audiences to voice their views very often or sometimes. This aligns with qualitative interview findings, where journalists described using social platforms and messaging services – particularly WhatsApp – not only to disseminate content but also to facilitate interaction with their publics. Overall, 41 outlets (38.7%) report enabling audience expression very often and 29 (27.4%) sometimes, while only 12 (11.3%) state they never do so.

Organising public debates with audience participation is less institutionalised: only 10 outlets (9.4%) report doing so very often, whereas 42 (39.6%) never engage in this practice. News portals and community media are again the most active – 10 of 17 portals and 6 of 10 community outlets use debates with audiences at least sometimes – yet even within these

groups, “sometimes” dominates over “very often”, indicating that debates remain peripheral to newsroom routines. Qualitative interviews corroborate this pattern, noting that private outlets tend to prioritise expert-driven debates rather than citizen-centred ones.

In contrast, efforts to represent societal diversity in newsroom output seem more established. A majority of outlets (56.6%) report doing so very often and about a quarter (23.6%) sometimes. Only tabloids diverge from this trend, with most respondents indicating that their newsrooms rarely or never adopt diversity oriented practices. Local and regional newspapers stand out positively, with all respondents reporting that they represent societal diversity very often. Overall, these patterns suggest that Italian media organisations privilege representational forms of participation – integrating diverse voices into content – over more interactive or deliberative formats such as public debates.

Level of participation		**Letting an audience express their views**					**Organising public debates by the newsroom with participation of an audience**					**Taking some steps to represent societal diversity and different groups in news produced in the newsroom**				
Frequency / Type of media	**Total (n = 109)**	**Very often**	**Sometimes**	**Rarely**	**Never**	**I do not know**	**Very often**	**Sometimes**	**Rarely**	**Never**	**I do not know**	**Very often**	**Sometimes**	**Rarely**	**Never**	**I do not know**
		Number of responses														
Public service media	**22**	4	6	5	4	3	1	3	3	12	3	10	9	2	1	0
Commercial TV stations	**12**	6	4	1	0	1	3	4	1	2	2	6	1	1	3	1
Commercial radio stations	**11**	4	4	2	1	0	2	3	2	4	0	5	4	2	0	0
National daily newspapers	**13**	5	2	1	2	3	1	3	3	4	2	7	2	0	3	1
National weeklies	**6**	0	2	0	2	2	0	2	1	3	0	4	0	0	2	0
National tabloids	**5**	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	1	0	3	1	0
News portals	**17**	10	2	3	2	0	2	8	3	4	0	10	6	0	0	1
Local / regional newspapers	**5**	1	2	0	0	2	0	1	2	2	0	5	0	0	0	0
Local / region al radio / TV	**8**	2	2	3	1	0	0	2	1	5	0	5	2	1	0	0
Community / non-profit / minority media	**10**	7	2	1	0	0	1	5	3	1	0	7	1	1	1	0
Other	**0**	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Tab. 3 Frequency of level of participation in a correlation with type of the media. (Source MeDeMAP Project, deliverable 4.4 - own reworking)

In general, Italian media outlets provide consistent coverage of electoral issues, particularly during campaign periods, and journalists frequently report encouraging citizens to vote (Fig. 4). Support for participation in European and national elections is similar, with around 60% of outlets indicating that they do so very often or sometimes. Engagement at the local level is slightly lower but remains substantial (57%). By contrast, coverage of democratic processes beyond voting – such as activism, community initiatives, demonstrations, and other forms of civic engagement – is considerably less frequent, with only about 40% of outlets reporting such coverage with any regularity. This is even more evident in the case of European politics, as the interest of the national audiences in the EU only peaks in very specific circumstances, directing impacting local affairs, among which the elections (Sifft et al. 2007: 143). The least common practice concerns reporting on citizen organisations, associations, and collective initiatives, which receives approximately 36% of positive responses. Across all forms of participation, the most frequent answer is "sometimes", suggesting that although Italian media recognise the importance of fostering political and electoral engagement, these topics do not constitute a consistent editorial priority.

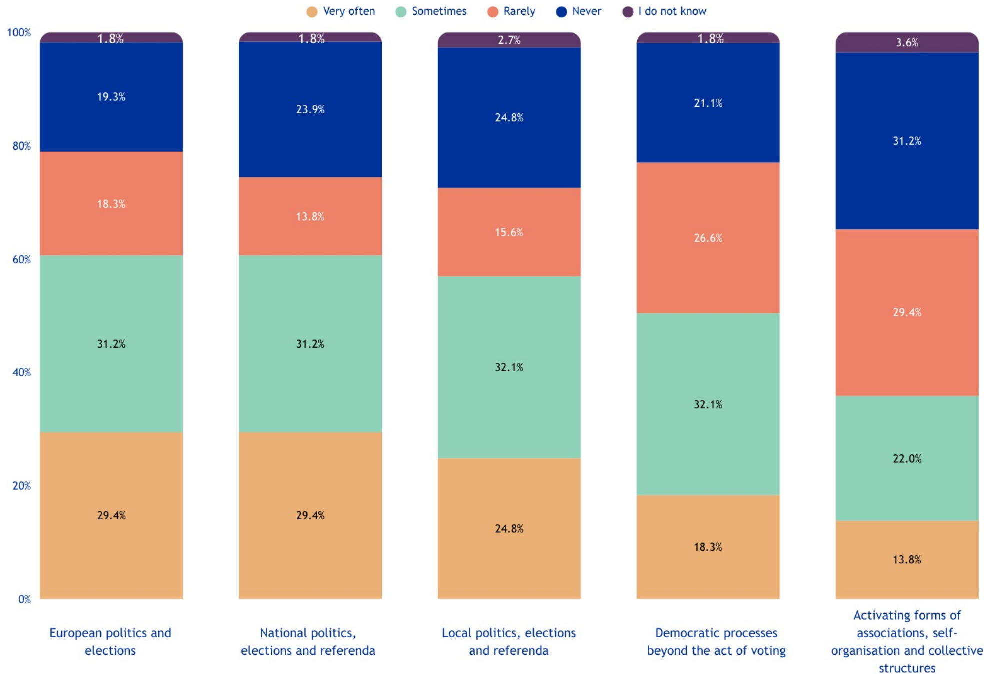

Fig. 2 Distribution of responses in the category: Electoral Participation and Activism (Source MeDeMAP Project, deliverable 4.4)

Across the sample, engagement with democratic processes beyond the act of voting is generally moderate: 20 outlets (18.3%) report doing so very often, 35 (32%) sometimes, while 29 (26.6%) do so rarely, and 23 (21.1%) – never. Community, non-profit and minority media, together with news portals, account for the largest share of "very often" responses

(4 each), followed by local and regional outlets. By contrast, daily and weekly newspapers, tabloids, and several commercial broadcasters are over-represented in the rarely and never categories. A similar but slightly more negative pattern emerges for activities aimed at activating associations, self-organisation and collective structures: only 15 outlets (14.2%) report doing this very often and 24 (22.6%) sometimes, whereas 32 (30.2%) rarely and 34 (32.1%) never engage in such practices. Here again, community and non-profit media, along with some local/regional outlets and news portals, contribute most of the "very often" responses, indicating that more intensive support for collective democratic engagement is concentrated within a relatively small subset of actors with explicit public interest or community-oriented missions. Local media – particularly local newspapers – also emerge as comparatively active in covering other forms of political engagement, including activism and demonstrations, a pattern shared with community, non-profit and minority media, which consistently stand out as the most participatory sectors.

Form of democratic participation		**Democratic processes beyond the act of voting**					**Activating forms of associations, self-organisation and collective structures**				
Type of media / **Frequency**	**Total (n = 109)**	**Very often**	**Sometimes**	**Rarely**	**Never**	**I do not know**	**Very often**	**Sometimes**	**Rarely**	**Never**	**I do not know**
		Number of responses									
Public service media	**22**	1	9	2	8	2	1	2	8	9	2
Commercial TV stations	**12**	3	3	4	2	0	1	4	1	5	1
Commercial radio stations	**11**	2	4	4	1	0	2	4	2	3	0
National daily newspapers	**13**	1	1	6	5	0	1	2	4	5	1
National weeklies	**6**	0	4	1	1	0	1	2	1	2	0
National tabloids	**5**	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	3	2	0
News portals	**17**	4	5	6	2	0	2	3	8	4	0
Local / regional newspapers	**5**	2	2	0	1	0	1	2	1	1	0
Local / regional radio / TV	**8**	2	2	3	1	0	2	2	3	1	0
Community / non-profit / minority media	**10**	4	4	1	1	0	4	3	1	2	0
Other	**0**	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Tab. 4 Frequency of responses in the category: Electoral Participation and Activism (Source MeDeMAP Project, deliverable 4.4 - own reworking)

5. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the findings of an exploratory empirical study of the Italian media system, situating them within broader debates on the democratic functions of

media and the organisational conditions that enable or constrain audience participation. Overall, the results are consistent with recent scholarship highlighting how systemic features, newsroom practices, and platform dynamics jointly shape the capacity of media to support democratic engagement. In particular, the Italian case illustrates the coexistence of innovative participatory practices – especially within digital native and community-oriented outlets – and enduring structural limitations rooted in political parallelism, economic fragility, and uneven professional autonomy. In this respect, our findings are in line with Hallin and Mancini's, as they noted that Italian journalists – even in comparison to other Polarised Pluralist markets – are "substantially more likely to report" significant pressures from the management, and limitations to their autonomy (2004: 118; see also Donsbach, Patterson 1992).

A substantial body of research shows that in politically polarised media systems, such as Italy's, the key determinant of democratic participation is not exposure to partisan content per se but the level of trust audiences place in news organisations. When scepticism toward media institutions is high, deliberative engagement tends to decline, although transparency and structured interaction mechanisms can partially counteract this effect (Fletcher, Nielsen 2020). Our findings resonate with this dynamic: while many Italian newsrooms report enabling audience expression and promoting inclusiveness, these practices often coexist with limited opportunities for meaningful deliberation.

Italian media also employ a range of strategies to stimulate political participation, particularly through digital tools. These include e-petition campaigns, hybrid broadcast-online protest coverage (Vaccari 2011), and the use of social media platforms for mobilisation (Casteltrione, Pieczka 2018). Italians have shown comparatively high levels of Facebook-based political participation, especially during the rise of the Five Star Movement, when dissatisfaction with traditional media pushed citizens toward digital alternatives. At the organisational level, participatory practices such as user-generated content integration, interactive storytelling, comment moderation, and civic co-production models have become increasingly common, although they are often shaped by commercial and algorithmic imperatives rather than democratic goals (Masip et al. 2020).

Our empirical results also confirm findings from comparative media systems research showing that digital media partially dilute political parallelism but do not eliminate the structural vulnerabilities of the Italian media system, particularly its economic precarity and concentration of ownership (Hallin, Mancini 2019). Political parallelism remains a defining feature, with strong ties between media outlets and political actors, limited

journalistic autonomy, and elite-oriented communication cultures. Weak regulation of the commercial broadcasting sector and the migration of high-quality content to pay-TV platforms further restrict pluralism. While the Mediterranean/Polarised Pluralist model remains a useful framework for interpreting these dynamics, recent scholarship emphasises that European media systems should be understood as historically contingent and continuously evolving configurations shaped by digital transformation, political realignments, and European integration (Papathanassopoulos, Miconi 2023).

Despite these systemic constraints, some areas of democratic innovation are emerging. Regional online journalism shows increasing autonomy and experimentation (Mancini 2020), a trend that also appears clearly in our data. Moreover, watchdog and civic roles – traditionally weaker in highly politicised systems – are gaining strength within digital investigative networks, particularly among non-profit investigative outlets that enhance accountability journalism (Splendore, Brambilla 2022). Public service media remain central to democratic participation: well-funded and politically independent broadcasters can significantly enhance civic engagement, although in Italy RAI's fluctuating independence continues to represent a structural vulnerability. We recall here that Italian public service radio and TV broadcaster is characterised by a very specific feature, commonly called *lottizzazione*, or the partition of strategic roles, managers and directors, among the major parties: at the same time, an extremisation of the polarised pluralist approach to the media, and an informal version of the pillars as foreseen by some countries, which rather belong to the Democratic Corporatist pattern (Mancini 2013). Nonetheless, participatory digital initiatives within public service media show promise in fostering more inclusive forms of civic dialogue (Ferreira 2021).

In conclusion, our results (although exploratory research) – supported by evidence from the literature – suggest that the democratic effectiveness of the Italian media system depends on the specific participatory functions examined (institutional vs. non-institutional), the populations considered (digitally engaged vs. traditional audiences), the platforms analysed (social media vs. broadcast television), and the historical period under scrutiny. While platform-specific and temporally bounded gains are evident – particularly within digital native, regional, and non-profit sectors – structural constraints continue to limit the broader democratic potential of the system. At the same time, the Italian case reinforces the need to conceptualise media systems not as fixed typologies but as dynamic formations shaped by ongoing technological, political, and institutional transformations.

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7. THE INVISIBLE RHIZOME:
THE CHARACTERISTICS, ROLES, AND CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY MEDIA IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Jeffrey Wimmer and Karolína Šimková

One, you are doing it for yourself, for your own skill set… and the second one is doing it for the community because you will find friends here. You are, it's so cliché, but one big family (Participant 3)

Abstract:

This article examines the characteristics, democratic roles, and challenges of community media in the Czech Republic – within a media environment marked by ownership concentration, evolving democratic uncertainty, and the platform-driven reconfiguration of communication spaces. Drawing on qualitative interviews and focus groups with journalists, experts, and citizens, the study analyses how community media actors conceptualise their missions and practices. Guided by a rhizomatic framework, which understands community media as civil-society-embedded practices rather than fixed organisational forms, the findings show community-centred missions, participatory production, and commitments to inclusion, training, and local accountability, alongside persistent challenges such as financial precarity and regulatory exclusion. Conceptualising community media as an "invisible rhizome" highlights the paradox between their democratic contributions and their structural marginalisation.

Keywords:

Community Media; Czech Republic; Democratic Roles; Participation; Regulation; Rhizome

1. Introduction

For decades, community media have been acknowledged for providing a fundamental contribution to a diversity of media ecologies, as participatory, civil-society-based forms of media that operate outside dominant commercial and state-driven logics, particularly at the local and grassroots level. Community media can be understood as independent, non-profit-oriented media initiatives that are embedded in civil society and oriented towards serving specific communities rather than mass audiences (Carpentier et al. 2003; Carpentier 2016). Unlike public service media and commercial media, community media emphasise participation in media production and governance, enabling citizens not merely to access content but to actively shape communicative processes. Their participatory nature also implies that community media embody democratic values, such as inclusion and horizontal decision-making (Saeed 2009; Vatikiotis 2009). As Carpentier et al. (2003) argue, their democratic value lies not merely in their output, but in their capacity to open media structures to non-elite actors and to foster forms of mediated participation that are otherwise marginalised in market-driven media systems.

This participatory and civic orientation gives community media particular relevance in times when the democratic states in Europe are under duress (Coyer, Hintz 2010). In contemporary media ecologies, community media have long been recognised for expanding participatory spaces and strengthening civil-society-based communication. Yet their relevance becomes even more pronounced in periods marked not by a uniform democratic crisis, but by heterogeneous and evolving forms of democratic uncertainty (Dimova 2024), in which public trust in media and institutions shifts across Europe (Kompatsiaris et al. 2024) and communicative spaces are increasingly shaped by the platformisation and fragmentation of the public sphere (Fischer, Jarren 2024). Community media complement established media by amplifying marginalised voices, facilitating local debate and strengthening media literacy (Carpentier 2016; Lievrouw 2011). At the same time, they face structural vulnerabilities, including financial precarity, regulatory marginalisation and competition with both mainstream platforms and right-wing extremist alternative media.

In the Czech Republic, these dynamics unfold in a particularly ambivalent manner. While a diverse landscape of independent and community-oriented projects has emerged since 1989, the country lacks a formal policy framework recognising community media as a distinct third sector alongside public service and commercial media (Carpentier 2012). Moreover, the Czech term *alternativní media* has become increasingly associated with disinformation and far right-wing outlets, especially since the mid-2010s, complicating the public perception and legitimacy of democratically oriented community media. This is part

of a global transformation where the concept of alternative media is no longer a quasi-synonym of community media (with alternativity articulated as alternative-to-the-mainstream, but where alternative media became disconnected from community media and alternativity now also refers to an alternative-to-democracy) (Haller et al. 2019).

Against this background, the present study investigates the characteristics, democratic roles and challenges of existing community media in the Czech Republic from the perspectives of journalists, experts and citizens. The central research interest is twofold: first, to empirically identify how community media actors conceptualise their missions, roles and constraints; and second, to analyse how these understandings are shaped by the specific historical, regulatory and market conditions of the Czech media system.

The analysis is guided by a rhizomatic approach[1] to community media, developed by Carpentier based on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome (Deleuze, Guattari 1987; Carpentier 2016, 2017). This framework allows community media to be conceptualised as relational, contingent, and materially embedded practices rather than fixed organisational forms. Rather than treating community media as isolated organisations, the rhizomatic perspective foregrounds connectivity, heterogeneity and the tensions between participatory ideals and structural constraints, but also community media's resilience.

Methodologically, the study draws on expert interviews and focus groups conducted within the MeDeMap[2] research project, analysed through the above-outlined rhizomatic approach to community media, further contextualised by a discursive-material lens (Carpentier, Wimmer 2025).

2. The Importance of Community Media

Established mass-media outlets and platforms continue to play a decisive role in setting socio-political agendas – especially from the perspective of media quality, and social media. Mainstream media do offer opportunities for self-expression, even though their participatory capacities have considerable limits (Carpentier 2020). Citizen participation cannot be reduced to the internet anyhow, and community media do offer significant contributions to the democratic media landscapes, as they remain central to realising the fundamental right to freedom of expression, translated as the right to communicate.

[1] Carpentier (2016) distinguishes four approaches to community media. These are: The serving-the-community approach, the alternative media approach, the civil society approach and the rhizomatic approach.
[2] See https://www.medemap.eu/

Community media's specific roles include revitalising local, regional, or even national communication spaces and fostering media literacy.

Yet community media face a series of challenges (see Carpentier et al. 2003). As positioned between market and state, their financial backbone is often weak. Organising maximalist participatory processes, involving one or more communities, is also far from easy. Embracing the participatory potential of the digital world finds itself in contradiction with the digital world's commodification. And gaining socio-political recognition for their work, while maintaining their independence and preventing incorporation, is yet another difficulty they have to deal with.

Still, as media of expression and self-presentation, community outlets can meet the communication needs of local and regional, social, and cultural groups and can serve as important democratic hubs. By offering partly multilingual programming, they promote social and intercultural dialogue. Community media are thus gaining even more significance for integrating migrants and other disadvantaged groups (Chapman et al. 2020). Not only do they "give a voice to the voiceless", but, aligned with critical pedagogy, they provide dialogue-oriented learning spaces that enhance the critical and self-determined agency of disadvantaged groups and individuals (Wimmer 2009; Peissl et al. 2018). They thereby perform a grassroots public-service function or, as Peissl (2012: 124, own translation) puts it, "public service from below", greatly contributing to local diversity of opinion and media. Imhof (2012) even speaks of a failure of citizenship – a gap that community media attempt to fill for traditional and established mass media. From the perspective of civic education, they play an important role, among other things, "as a projection screen for citizens' opinions, as a thorn in the side, as a gateway to other realities, as a voice among the voices of the large synchronisation and attention machines of the 'traditional' mass media" (Krüger 2015: 12).

3. Community Media as Rhizome

The concept of the rhizome, derived from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*, serves as a productive analytical framework in community media studies. Rather than defining community media through fixed organisational, technological, or normative criteria, the rhizomatic approach foregrounds contingency, relationality and multiplicity, enabling a non-essentialist understanding of media practices embedded in civil society. The rhizomatic approach does not replace earlier frameworks but rather radicalises and integrates them, insisting that community media practices always materialise as context-specific constellations of these different logics (Carpentier et al. 2003; Carpentier 2016).

Carpentier develops the rhizome as a heuristic for understanding community media as fluid, non-linear and non-hierarchical networks that connect heterogeneous actors, practices and discourses (Carpentier 2016; 2017). Drawing explicitly on Deleuze and Guattari's principles of connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity and a-signifying rupture, he argues that community media should not be analysed as isolated organisations but as embedded in broader civil society assemblages. From this perspective, community media function not merely as actors within networks but as crossroads of civil society – spaces where different movements, organisations and struggles intersect, negotiate, and collaborate. Crucially, it can be argued that rhizomes are not necessarily fully democratic or emancipatory; they can still contain hierarchies, exclusions, and moments of arborescent stabilisation. Of course, rhizomes can also be non-, or anti-democratic, as the far right-wing rhizomes (Griffin 2003) demonstrate. This anti-romantic stance differentiates the rhizomatic approach from celebratory grassroots narratives.

Community media are not confined to a purely counter-hegemonic position vis-à-vis state and market but frequently establish pragmatic and strategic linkages with both. Funding arrangements, regulatory frameworks and resource dependencies draw community media into complex negotiations with state and market actors, producing both opportunities for survival and risks of co-optation (Carpentier 2017). These relations underscore the material dimension of rhizomatic media practices, which Carpentier conceptualises through the idea of the discursive-material knot: an assemblage, in which discourses of participation, democracy and alternativity are inseparable from material resources, technologies, bodies and infrastructures.

Vatikiotis and Milioni (2019) provide one of the most systematic empirical operationalisations of the rhizome metaphor to date. Their study maps the Greek alternative mediascape, moving beyond single-case studies to examine patterns of entry, heterogeneity, counter-hegemonic practice, and interconnection across diverse projects. Their findings reveal a highly heterogeneous field shaped by different biographical, political and professional trajectories, ranging from social movements and moments of unrest to disillusionment with mainstream journalism and institutionalised civil society. These media projects challenge hegemonic power in diverse ways, including the production of new political subjectivities, the experimentation with alternative production models, and more partial, issue-specific interventions. Importantly, however, the study shows that rhizomatic connectivity does not automatically translate into cooperation or collective action. Instead, the Greek alternative mediascape is characterised by weak,

selective, and informal connections, with many projects remaining isolated or forming only small topical or ideological "micronodes", as they phrase it.

Persistent research gaps can be observed. First, despite growing empirical work, the crossroads role of community media remains underexplored: there is limited ethnographic and organisational research on how, under what conditions, and with what outcomes community media facilitate encounters and collaboration across civil society. Second, the material dimension of rhizomatic assemblages – particularly infrastructures, labour, affect and funding regimes – poses methodological challenges that have yet to be fully addressed. Third, most studies remain temporally limited, offering snapshots rather than longitudinal analyses of how rhizomatic networks emerge, stabilise, fragment, or institutionalise over time. Finally, the tension between ideology and de-ideologisation identified in the Greek case raises broader comparative questions about the future of community media politics in increasingly hybrid media environments.

4. Media Transformation, Rhizomatic Dynamics and the Limits of Community Media in the Czech Republic

Before the collapse of state socialism in 1989, the media system in Czechoslovakia was characterised by centralised party control, censorship and a rigid, arborescent structure of communication. In rhizomatic terms, this system exemplified a highly territorialised media order, marked by hierarchical organisation, fixed roles and limited participation. Independent journalism survived largely outside official structures, most notably through samizdat networks that circulated uncensored texts via informal, decentralised and relational modes of distribution (Skilling 1981; Kind-Kovács, Labov 2013). While operating under repression, these networks already displayed several characteristics later associated with rhizomatic media practices: non-linearity, multiplicity, and the absence of a single organisational centre.

The Velvet Revolution of November 1989 constituted a moment of profound deterritorialisation. State control over media was dismantled within a short period of time, censorship was abolished, and new actors entered the public sphere. In the early 1990s, a plurality of newspapers, magazines and broadcasting initiatives emerged, many of them drawing directly on dissident networks and samizdat experience (Bednařík et al. 2019). Titles such as "Respekt" and "Lidové noviny" illustrate this continuity between underground and post-socialist media cultures, as former samizdat producers re-entered the public sphere as recognised journalistic actors (Kind-Kovács, Labov 2013). This phase can be understood as a period of intense connectivity and multiplicity, in which

heterogeneous actors, practices, and discourses intersected and temporarily destabilised established media hierarchies.

A similar dynamic could be observed in broadcasting. After 1989, the liberalisation of the airwaves enabled experimental and semi-formal initiatives such as the student-driven projects Radio Stalin and Radio 1, which introduced alternative music, participatory formats, and a conscious break with state-socialist broadcasting routines (Perkner, Kent 2001). These early private stations also cultivated new cultural and activist milieus, functioning as civil society nodes within the emerging post-communist media landscape (Blüml, Šrajer 2023).

However, rhizomes are not immune to reterritorialisation. From the mid-1990s onwards, the Czech media system became increasingly shaped by market logics and ownership concentration. Privatisation and foreign investment led to the consolidation of media ownership, particularly in the print sector, while commercial chains came to dominate broadcasting (Štětka 2010; Wyka-Podkowka 2014). Many small and experimental outlets disappeared or adapted to mass-market expectations. This process reflects a shift from an initially fluid and heterogeneous mediascape towards more stabilised, arborescent formations, in which commercial imperatives constrained participatory practices.

Crucially, Czech media policy institutionalised a dual broadcasting system consisting of public service and commercial operators, without establishing a distinct regulatory space for non-commercial community media. In contrast to media systems that recognise a formally defined third sector, Czech non-commercial initiatives lacked access to dedicated licences, reserved frequencies, or sustainable public funding. Carpentier's (2012) policy-oriented analysis of the Czech case explicitly frames this absence as a structural limitation on the development of community media understood as participatory, civil-society-embedded, and non-profit oriented. Although policy debates in the early 2010s produced a detailed roadmap for introducing community media, these proposals were not implemented, leaving the dual system intact (EPRA 2012; Šimková 2024).

The Internet opened new lines of flight for independent and alternative media practices. Early digital initiatives such as "Neviditelný pes" or "Britské listy" demonstrated how online publishing could bypass the material barriers of print and broadcasting and create spaces for critical commentary outside mainstream institutions. In rhizomatic terms, digital platforms facilitated new connections and entry points into the media field, allowing individual journalists, NGOs and small collectives to participate in public communication with relatively low infrastructural costs. Yet, as research on alternative

and activist media consistently shows, these projects tended to remain economically fragile, relying on volunteer labour and unstable funding arrangements (Lievrouw 2011; Waschková Císařová 2013). Their rhizomatic openness was thus accompanied by material precarity.

A further reconfiguration occurred in the 2010s with the increasing concentration of media ownership in the hands of politically and economically powerful domestic actors. The acquisition of major media groups by oligarchs, most notably Andrej Babiš's takeover of the MAFRA group in 2013, intensified concerns about media capture and the erosion of journalistic autonomy (Hanley, Vachudova 2018; Vojtěchovská 2017). In response, departing journalists from these acquired outlets, often former editors-in-chief, journalists launched new independent print or digital projects, particularly in investigative and opinion journalism. These initiatives can be interpreted as renewed rhizomatic offshoots – attempts to re-establish autonomous nodes within a media environment perceived as increasingly territorialised by political-economic power.

Despite these developments, community media in the narrower sense – understood as participatory, non-commercial, and community-embedded institutions – have remained weakly institutionalised in the Czech Republic. From a rhizomatic perspective, this does not imply an absence of alternative or independent media practices (see Hroch 2022) but rather highlights the lack of material and regulatory conditions necessary for sustaining community media as stable crossroads of civil society. As the conceptualisation of community media as rhizome suggests, participatory media cannot rely solely on discursive openness or technological affordances; they require supportive and respectful policy frameworks, access to resources and recognition within the media system. In the Czech case, the persistent absence of such conditions has limited the translation of rhizomatic potentials into durable community media institutions, resulting in a media landscape where independent journalism has flourished primarily online, while community media remain structurally marginal.

5. Method

This study, conducted within an EU Horizon project, employs the rhizomatic approach to community media, further strengthened by the discursive-material framework developed by Carpentier and Wimmer (2025). This framework enables attention to the materialist dimensions of democracy and media without neglecting discursive aspects (Carpentier 2017). We focus on the perceived democratic roles of community media and their challenges from the perspectives of regulatory institutions, established news organisations, and the community media themselves.

Twelve semi-structured expert interviews were conducted in summer 2024 with editors-in-chief and journalists from leading Czech news outlets (print, TV, radio, online, and community media)[3]. Four additional interviews were held with representatives of the main national media authorities. Interviewees were selected according to the principle of theoretical sampling (Glaser, Strauss 1967) to capture both typical and atypical journalists with varying levels of experience, positions, and attitudes. Additionally, four focus groups were conducted with Czech citizens (N=38) from heterogeneous socio-demographic backgrounds. Particular attention was paid to gender and age differences, and political engagement. The participants were selected based on a survey.

The interview guide comprised nine main questions and nineteen follow-ups, addressing, among other topics, media roles in democracy, conditions for media freedom and professional journalism, and the relationship between media and democracy. Interviews lasted on average just under an hour. Following grounded-theory procedures, we engaged in open and axial coding to derive categories that describe the characteristics, the roles of community media, and their challenges. Each interview and focus group statement was paraphrased into short content units, which were iteratively merged into thematic clusters. Each final category had to (a) recur across the data or articulate a distinctive perception and (b) be exemplifiable by a coherent answer segment.

6. Results

Characteristics of Community Media

A defining characteristic of community media in the Czech Republic, according to the interviewees and focus group participants, is their community-centred mission. Rather than prioritising profit, audience maximisation or professional status, these outlets ground their existence in the creation and maintenance of a close-knit collective. This

[3] Three journalists were from Czech community media, but all the experts were asked about the role of community media.

understanding is particularly evident in student-run and local civic projects, where interviewees described the community not as an audience but as the social infrastructure that sustains production and motivation. As one interviewee emphasised, building a community is essential precisely because participation is unpaid: “And the community is crucial for us because, as I said, no one gets paid. So, you need super-strong community. People need to want to do it, to (…) be part of it” (interviewee 1). Communities thus sustain production, motivation, and continuity.

Closely related is the volunteer-driven nature of these organisations. Unpaid labour is not an exception but a defining structural feature. Interviewees consistently described their involvement as additional to paid employment elsewhere: “this is not even my job (…) everyone is a volunteer in the radio” (interviewee 2). While this reliance on voluntarism enables editorial autonomy and low barriers to participation, it simultaneously produces precarity and limits organisational capacity. In rhizomatic terms, volunteer labour constitutes both a line of connection and a point of vulnerability.

Another core characteristic is the emphasis on training and learning-by-doing. This role is especially pronounced in student-oriented community media, repeatedly described by interviewees as an informal training ground compensating for the lack of practical infrastructure in formal journalism education. Several interviewees highlighted the absence of practical training opportunities within formal journalism education and described community radio as filling this gap: “There was a lack of support for training projects for the students. (…) There was no studio, no one to guide the students. And there was no practice medium to get to the microphones before going to work or internships” (interviewee 2). Community media thus function as informal educational spaces or “schools of practice”, where participants acquire technical, editorial, and ethical skills through direct involvement. This reinforces their role in reproducing journalistic competencies outside commercial and public-service institutions.

Finally, community media are seen as characterised by their commitment to diversity and inclusion. Minority-oriented projects such as Romea.cz illustrate how community media actively support Roma self-representation and skills development, moving beyond symbolic inclusion towards participatory production. Interviewees stressed that additional effort is invested in supporting marginalised groups, including Roma communities in the Czech Republic, migrants, people with disabilities and international students: “we have a new Roma podcast (…) and for blind people – so of course we are giving more support to them” (interviewee 2). This proactive inclusivity distinguishes community media from mainstream

outlets, where representation is often constrained by market logics or dominant news values.

Potential Democratic Roles of Community Media

Community media in the Czech Republic perform a range of interconnected democratic roles that extend beyond mere content production. A first central role lies in discursive correctives to mainstream journalism. By offering alternative perspectives and topics, community media broaden the spectrum of public debate and compensate for the selectivity of commercially driven media. As one interviewee stressed, community outlets deliberately position themselves as spaces for discussion and verification in contrast to dominant media logics: “to be a place for public debate by publishing opinions (…) maybe to be opposite to the social media, which are spreading a lot of information you don’t know if you can trust” (focus group respondent 22). In this way, community media counteract the marginalisation of socially and politically relevant issues.

Second, community media enable “media by the community for the community” through participatory production structures. Members of the community are not merely audiences but active producers who shape content and editorial agendas. Interviewees repeatedly emphasised the low-threshold nature of access: “we are able to give everyone who doesn’t have a political platform the platform here. They can do it here for free” (interviewee 8). This low-threshold participatory openness strengthens citizens’ involvement in public communication and supports civic engagement. Community outlets thus act as catalysts for civil society organisations and grassroots initiatives, facilitating networking and mobilisation beyond formal political arenas.

Third, community media play an important educational and capacity-building role. They provide safe spaces for learning-by-doing and compensate for gaps in formal journalism education. One respondent described how community radio emerged as a response to the lack of practical training opportunities. Student-run and volunteer-based projects therefore have the role as informal schools of journalism. At the same time, they empower individuals who would otherwise lack access to media production. As interviewees noted, additional support is intentionally given to marginalised groups. Through such practices, community media promote media literacy and a sense of self-efficacy.

Fourth, community media fulfil a watchdog and accountability function, particularly at the local level. Local platforms such as Písecký svět[4] were repeatedly mentioned as exposing

[4] Písecký svět is a non-profit organisation and a community website focused on supporting civic life in the Písek region of the Czech Republic.

abuses in municipal governance and providing spaces for citizen-led accountability largely absent from national news coverage. While mainstream outlets often prioritise national politics, community projects monitor municipal governance and everyday decision-making. One interviewee explicitly articulated this normative mission: "the first [goal] is providing reliable, independent, verified information to our readers; to be a democracy watchdog, keep an eye on politicians, people in power" (interviewee 10). By offering platforms to citizens' initiatives and exposing local abuses, community media strengthen transparency and accountability in local public life.

Fifth, community media foster inclusion and representation. Interviewees highlighted their commitment to amplifying voices that are often marginalised in mainstream discourse, including ethnic minorities, migrants, and people with disabilities. This inclusive orientation enables communities to articulate their own narratives and participate more actively in public debate, while also addressing wider audiences through bilingual or cross-community publishing strategies.

Finally, community media could act as laboratories of innovation within the media system. Hybrid outlets such as A2larm[5] illustrate how community-adjacent media can function as spaces of journalistic experimentation, even when they do not fully conform to a narrow definition of community media. Their relative independence from market pressures allows experimentation with formats, genres, and journalistic approaches. Interviewees described deliberate efforts to engage audiences through new formats: "nowadays we are very eager to attract young audience (…) we try to attract them by podcasts or programmes on demand" (interviewee 3). From a theoretical perspective, these experimental practices reflect the rhizomatic capacity of community media to generate new ideas and practices that may later diffuse into mainstream journalism.

In sum, from the viewpoint of the interviewees, community media could contribute to democratic culture by amplifying diverse voices, enabling participatory communication, fostering skills and literacy, and sustaining deliberative spaces. Whether these roles can be fully realised, however, depends on the broader structural environment.

Current Challenges of Community Media

Despite their democratic potential, community media in the Czech Republic face persistent and interrelated challenges. Financial fragility emerged as the most pressing concern across interviews. This vulnerability affects different types of community media

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[5] A2larm *is* a Czech independent online media outlet known for its progressive and pro-democratic orientation.

alike, from volunteer-based radio projects to minority platforms, which depend heavily on project funding and donations. Community media operate with minimal resources and rely heavily on volunteer labour, donations and short-term project funding. One respondent described the situation bluntly: "there's a really big issue – the problem with money. Because honestly, this (form of) journalism (…) is expensive" (interviewee 1). Limited funding affects the regularity and quality of content production and restricts investments in technology and investigative work. In some cases, financial pressure has led to the closure of projects.

Legal and regulatory barriers further exacerbate economic vulnerability. Czech media law recognises only public service and commercial broadcasters, offering no dedicated licence category or reserved frequencies for non-commercial community media. As a result, community broadcasters remain largely excluded from terrestrial broadcasting and must meet commercial requirements that are unrealistic for volunteer-based organisations. Compared with neighbouring countries that have introduced targeted funding schemes or legal recognition for community media, the Czech regulatory framework provides little structural support.

Market dominance by a small number of large media corporations also limits the visibility and sustainability of community outlets. Advertising markets are concentrated around high-reach television stations, radio networks and major online platforms, depriving smaller actors of revenue. Even when audiences are dissatisfied with mainstream media, community outlets struggle to gain reach in a highly competitive digital environment.

Community media additionally face political pressure and legal risks. Investigative initiatives report difficulties in accessing public information and experiences of intimidation by local politicians or powerful actors. Strategic lawsuits and defamation claims may be used to discourage critical reporting, increasing the costs and risks of watchdog journalism for small organisations.

Finally, declining trust and the proliferation of disinformation complicate the environment in which community media operate. Interviewees identified trust as a central challenge for all Czech media: "the first problem is trust (…) people trust public media more than commercial media" (interviewee 8). At the same time, disinformation websites branding themselves as "independent" exploit public scepticism towards mainstream journalism, blurring boundaries between community media and non-democratic alternative outlets. This forces reputable projects to continuously demonstrate transparency and professional standards to maintain credibility. Declining interest in news among younger audiences

further intensifies these challenges, even as community media experiment with digital formats to remain relevant.

Overall, community media in the Czech Republic occupy a paradoxical position. They fulfil essential democratic functions, yet remain structurally marginalised by financial precarity, regulatory exclusion and market concentration. From a community-media perspective, this imbalance underscores the need for a more inclusive media policy framework that recognises public, private, and non-profit media as complementary pillars of a democratic communication order.

7. Discussion: Structural and Contextual Differences between the EU and the Czech Republic

Read against a European baseline, the Czech cases diverge in ways that are both structural and practice related. Organisationally, we observe three recurrent configurations – student-centred stations, minority/self-representation outlets, and local watchdog platforms that also appear in other EU settings, yet the trajectory between them is less buffered in the Czech Republic because of missing third-sector recognition and scarce stabilising resources. In EU contexts where platform pressure is similar, public policy instruments and public service media ecosystems occasionally provide indirect cushions (e.g. through remit and innovation funding), whereas EU-level regulatory responses to platform power (DSA/DMA/EMFA) have not fully addressed public service funding and independence dilemmas. This leaves smaller actors exposed to platform logics even in supportive systems and much more so in settings like in the Czech Republic without tailored third-sector scaffolding (Fischer, Jarren 2024). Conceptually, all initiatives mobilise "community" in three overlapping senses – audiences to be served, producers who co-create, and members who co-govern – but the relative weight differs by outlet type, with student-centred projects prioritising low-threshold co-production and training, minority-oriented outlets foregrounding representational sovereignty, and local watchdog platforms concentrating decision-making for investigative throughput. These orientations exist across Europe but are refracted through different trust ecologies and platform conditions: pan-European data indicate that trust in news and institutions varies substantially by country and medium, whereas the Czech pattern is unusually marked by scepticism toward political actors and by heightened sensitivity to information disorders, which amplifies the cost of continuous credibility signalling for small, participatory outlets (Kompatsiaris et al. 2024; Štětka 2024).

Participation is widespread at the content layer across our cases but becomes fragile at the governance layer, where time- and skill-intensive routines (e.g. assemblies, rotating

editorial councils) are hardest to maintain under volunteer conditions. This asymmetry exists EU-wide, yet it is sharpened in Czech Republic by a resource ecology of short project cycles, limited access to legal/technical support, and weak institutional pathways into broadcasting or public funding, which together narrow the feasible horizon for durable governance participation relative to Western (Coyer, Hintz 2010) and Nordic contexts (Nordicom 2022) with more formalised non-profit community media.

Boundary work against non-democratic “alternative” actors is now a baseline condition in the EU information space, but in the Czech Republic it is unusually laborious and visible. Country-specific monitoring shows a dense, largely Czech-language disinformation ecosystem that recycles narratives about Ukraine, EU environmental policy, migration, and revisionist readings of the communist past; public perceptions of being in an “information war” exceed a third of the population, and pre-election periods see spikes in volume and velocity of malign content (EU DisinfoLab 2024). In parallel, representative Czech surveys register exceptionally high scepticism toward political actors, which constitutes a distinct vulnerability pathway compared to many EU peers. Where baseline political trust is higher, community outlets can leverage local embeddedness into credibility gains more quickly, while in the Czech Republic they must first differentiate themselves from both mainstream scepticism and adversarial “independent” branding (Štětka 2024).

Taken together, the EU and the Czech Republic comparison clarify why Czech community media resemble a patchwork of micronodes with high civic value but limited bargaining power and stability. At the EU level, trust is uneven but not uniformly eroding, and platformisation pressures are increasingly problematised in policy debates. In the Czech Republic, pronounced political scepticism and an insular language ecology intensify the “cost of being participatory”, raising the threshold for converting proximity, inclusion, and learning-by-doing into durable institutional recognition. At the level of theory, these differences reaffirm the utility of treating community media as rhizomes whose democratic promise depends less on ideals than on the material and regulatory conditions under which connectivity can stabilise in hostile or fragmented information environments marked by heterogeneous democratic uncertainties.

8. Conclusion: Community Media as an Invisible Rhizome

The findings of this study clarify that community media in the Czech Republic, at least according to the interviewees and focus group participants, share many core characteristics, democratic roles, and challenges with community media in other national contexts, while also reflecting specific historical and regulatory conditions. In line with international research, Czech community media are characterised by a strong community-

centred mission, volunteer-based labour structures and an emphasis on participation, learning-by-doing and inclusion (Carpentier et al. 2003; Lievrouw 2011; Vatikiotis, Milioni 2019). Their democratic roles – as platforms for marginalised voices, facilitators of public debate and local watchdogs – closely resemble those identified in other studies from Europe, where community media similarly compensate for the retreat of mainstream journalism from local and minority-oriented reporting (Chapman et al. 2020; Gulyas 2023; Verza et al. 2024).

Our case illustrates both shared transnational dynamics and country-specific constraints. In the Czech Republic, these constraints are shaped by pronounced political scepticism and historically rooted tensions within the information environment. Recent data show that distrust in political actors is exceptionally high (CEDMO 2025). At the same time, the Czech information space is characterised by a dense and insular disinformation ecosystem, in which more than one-third of the population perceives the country to be in an 'information war', with widespread false narratives linked to Ukraine, EU environmental policy, migration, and revisionist interpretations of the communist past (EU DisinfoLab 2024).

These structural conditions shape the limits of rhizomatic potential. The absence of a legally recognised third media sector and stable funding mechanisms constrains the institutionalisation of community media, echoing findings from other post-socialist contexts but standing in contrast to countries with more supportive policy environments. In this sense, Czech community media resemble the fragmented and weakly connected "micronodes" described by Vatikiotis and Milioni (2019) in the Greek alternative mediascape, where rhizomatic connectivity does not automatically translate into sustained cooperation or political leverage.

Social media and emerging AI technologies play an ambivalent role in this configuration. On the one hand, digital platforms enable community media to bypass traditional distribution barriers, reach younger audiences and experiment with formats such as podcasts and on-demand content. Interviewees in this study clearly perceive social media as essential gateways to visibility and relevance. On the other hand, platform dependency reinforces asymmetries: algorithmic logics privilege high-reach commercial actors, while small community outlets struggle to convert digital presence into sustainable resources: "Social networks are doing everything to keep people on their platforms… When we post a link, the platform blocks it from showing up fully" (Interviewee 2). AI tools may further intensify these inequalities, offering efficiency gains in production and translation but also raising new challenges related to trust, authenticity, and labour substitution – issues that are particularly acute for volunteer-driven media.

A critical challenge identified by interviewees concerns boundary work vis-à-vis far right-wing media. This competition is asymmetrical: while these non-democratic alternative media often benefit from sensationalism, platform amplification and external funding sources, community media rely on slow, verified, and participatory journalism. The need to defend credibility and transparency thus becomes an additional burden for community media, even as they seek to counter disinformation and polarisation.

Importantly, the study shows that interviewees and focus group participants articulate converging but not identical expectations. Journalists emphasise participation, education, and watchdog functions, while regulators tend to frame community media primarily in terms of marginal relevance or policy risk. Citizens, by contrast, value trustworthiness and local relevance but often remain unaware of community media as a distinct sector. This divergence helps explain why community media continue to occupy a precarious position: widely praised for their democratic ideals yet insufficiently supported in practice.

From a theoretical perspective, findings underscore the analytical value of the rhizomatic approach. Czech community media are horizontally organised, heterogeneous and adaptive, spreading through informal networks and experimental practices rather than through stable institutions. Their rhizomatic connectivity, linking volunteers, civic initiatives, local publics, and digital platforms, rarely translates into institutional visibility or political recognition. Despite their democratic contributions, community media operate at the margins of the media system, constrained by chronic financial precarity, the absence of a legally recognised third sector and intense competition for attention in platform-dominated environments. As a result, community media often remain hidden from policymakers, advertisers, and even audiences, despite being deeply embedded in everyday communicative practices at the local level. Rhizomes are difficult to sustain – they require material, legal and symbolic conditions to stabilise participatory practices. Without such support, the democratic promise of community media risks remaining episodic and peripheral.

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8. A PARTICIPATION ECOLOGY OF MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN SLOVENIA

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Abstract:

This chapter examines democratic participation in and through Slovenia's media using an analytical model developed for the purpose – the chain of participatory conditions – which integrates regulatory structures, media system features, production routines, participatory mechanisms, citizen experiences, and deliberated reform proposals. Drawing on Carpentier and Wimmer's theoretical framework (2025) and multiple MeDeMAP datasets, the analysis shows a persistent gap between strong discursive commitments to democratic media and weak material supports. Informational depth, watchdog capacity, and public debate role are constrained by regulatory fragmentation, opaque ownership, and resource-strained newsrooms. Structural participation remains the weakest democratic-media role: apart from a regulation-driven governance role for civil society representatives in public service broadcasting, opportunities for citizens to influence agendas or decisions are rare and largely symbolic. Citizens report engagement but low efficacy, while the Citizens' Parliament articulates a maximalist vision of co-governance, transparency, and inclusion. The Slovenian case illustrates how misaligned discursive and material conditions produce a participation ecology that is expressive but underpowered.

Keywords:

Discursive-Material Approach; Media and Democracy; Minimalist-Maximalist; Participation, Citizens' Parliament, Participation Ecology; Slovenia

1. Introduction

While Slovenia's constitutional and legal frameworks establish strong protections for freedom of expression and the public interest in the media, the functioning of the media system reveals structural constrains that limit democratic participation in and through media, in Carpentier's (2011) terms. These constrains arise from regulatory fragmentation and inadequate enforcement, market concentration, shrinking newsroom and production resources, and a declining reservoir of public trust. Together, these factors create an environment in which participation is possible, but rarely stable or impactful.

This chapter integrates evidence from multiple components of the MeDeMAP research project, conducted between 2023 and 2025: regulatory analysis comprising a review of media legislation and three expert interviews (assessing legal and self-regulatory guarantees, rights, protections, and transparency duties), media-system mapping covering more than one hundred outlets (examining ownership patterns, financing models, institutional mandates, distribution channels, and transparency indicators), twelve semi-structured interviews with journalists and editors across all major media types (focusing on production routines, constraints, newsroom standards, and perceptions of democratic roles), a national survey on participatory practices among journalists and editors (N = 62), four focus groups with citizens (probing views on democracy and media, trust, media repertoires, and participation), and four deliberative sessions of the Citizens' Parliament on Media and Democracy (CP) on media systems, participation, and representation.[1] These datasets were purposively sampled to capture sectoral diversity (public service, commercial, print, digital-native, regional/local, and community/non-profit media) and variation in citizen experiences. The aim of the chapter is not to present each dataset in isolation, but to synthesise their insights into a coherent account of how democratic participation is supported or constrained at different levels of Slovenia's media system. Because participation operates across multiple layers – from regulatory structures to everyday media practices and citizens experiences – these findings are best understood through a holistic analytical model.

The chapter is organised around one guiding question: What enables or constrains democratic participation in and through Slovenia's media? Answering this question requires

[1] The Citizens' Parliament on Media and Democracy in Slovenia brought together 22 participants recruited through an open public call, selected to reflect diversity in age, education background, gender, region, education, employment status, and minority backgrounds. They met across four six-hour deliberative sessions held in Ljubljana between March and May 2025. The organisation of the Citizens' Parliament and the research design guiding its process and analysis were based on the theoretical and comparative overview of citizens' parliaments in Europe by Monnot et al. (2025) and on the common MeDeMAP CP design elaborated by Monnot and Sedlaczek et al. (2025).

examining participation not as a single act, but as a chain of interrelated conditions that begin with regulatory structures and media system structures and extend through news production, audience experience, and deliberative visions of media reform. Together, these interconnected layers provide the structure of the chapter.

2. Analytical and Theoretical Framework

Democratic participation in and through the media can be understood only by conceptualising media as institutional actors embedded within a broader democratic ecology. Following Carpentier and Wimmer's (2025) discursive-material approach media are not merely channels for information but are simultaneously arenas of representation, platforms for public deliberation, and sites where power is exercised, shared, or withheld. Democratic participation is therefore shaped not only by what media do (their democratic roles) but also by the structural conditions that shape what media can do (their regulatory, economic, and organisational environments), and by how citizens encounter, interpret, and seek to influence them.

At the centre of this framework is a set of five democratic media roles (Carpentier, Wimmer 2025) – informational (provide contextualised, accurate, comprehensible information), control/watchdog (scrutinise power and expose wrongdoing), forum (provide spaces for public debate and multiple viewpoints), representational (ensure visibility and fair representation of diverse groups), participatory (enable citizens to influence agendas, content, and decisions) – which provide the normative foundation against which Slovenia's media environment can be evaluated. These five roles define what citizens need from media to act effectively within a democratic system and provide the criteria guiding the analysis in the chapter.

However, identifying democratic roles is insufficient without recognising that participation itself varies in depth and intensity. Participation ranges along a continuum from minimalist forms (expression, feedback, and consultation) to maximalist forms, where citizens share decision making power, shape media agendas, or influence organisational practices (Carpentier 2011: 69; Carpentier, Wimmer 2025).

To account for the interaction of these roles, levels and intensities, this chapter adopts a chain-of-participatory-conditions analytical model. At its core is the idea of a participation ecology – a configuration of discursive norms and material arrangements that jointly structure citizens' ability to participate in and through media. In this model, democratic participation is conceptualised not as an isolated outcome but as the result of an interconnected sequence of enabling or constraining conditions distributed across multiple

levels of the media environment. These six levels are: regulatory conditions; media system and market conditions; production and organisational conditions; institutionalised participatory mechanisms; citizens' reception and experience; and citizens' deliberated visions and demands. A weakness at any level – a regulatory gap, an opaque ownership structure, precarious journalistic work, superficial participatory mechanisms, or low citizens' trust and engagement – creates cascading constraints at subsequent levels, while improvements at one level can enable participation at others. This ecological model allows the diverse research materials of the project – regulatory analysis, expert interviews, newsroom interviews, surveys with journalists, focus groups with citizens, and the Citizens' Parliament – to be integrated into one coherent analytical account. Each empirical section that follows corresponds to one link in this chain and examines how that layer of the Slovenian media environment supports or constrains democratic participation.

This understanding of participation as ecological builds on Carpentier and Wimmer's discursive-material model, which conceives democratic communication as dependent on the alignment of regulatory frameworks, market structures, production conditions, participatory mechanisms and citizens' communicative agency (Carpentier, Wimmer 2025). It also resonates with Dahlgren's multidomain model of civic engagement, situating participation within interconnected cultural, social and communicative domains (Dahlgren 2009), and with public sphere theory – from Habermas's emphasis on communicative infrastructures to Fraser's critique of their unequal and exclusionary dynamics (Habermas 1974; 1989; Fraser 1992). Similarly, it aligns with Held's systemic analyses of democratic models and institutional design (Held 1996). Together, these perspectives underscore that democratic communication is fundamentally systemic and relational: conceived as ecology, participation becomes less a property of individuals or outlets and more a function of the coherence or fragility of the system as a whole.

3. Regulatory Conditions

Slovenia's regulatory environment – the first link in the chain-of-participatory-conditions – combines robust formal guarantees with fragmented oversight and uneven implementation, producing a structural ambivalence for democratic participation. The legal framework provides constitutional protection of freedom of expression and media, and sector-specific laws (public broadcasting, mass media, audiovisual services). Yet, in practice, competences are split across numerous regulators, creating gaps where enforcement falters and accountability blurs. This fragmentation matters for participation because institutional incoherence weakens the very preconditions – independence, transparency, predictability – on which citizens' trust and influence depend.

At the foundation, the Constitution and the Media Act establish the right of reply and correction, while courts apply a public-interest standard that gives wider latitude to watchdog journalism. Journalists benefit from source protection, access-to-information rules, and narrowly framed defences for publishing sensitive material in the public interest, although the persistence of criminal defamation and frequent administrative delays – especially in parts of local government and the judiciary – may undermine timely reporting and deter journalists from covering issues that matter for public participation (Petković, Detiček 2024). Recent Media Act reform, aligned with the European Media Freedom Act, introduced stronger anti-surveillance safeguards for journalistic work.

Pluralism tools exist but have thin effects for participation. Must-carry obligations ensure carriage for public service broadcasting and "programmes of special importance" (local, regional, student and some non-profit radio and television programmes), and annual state subsidies co-finance public-interest content. Yet the scheme's 50% co-financing cap, its mixing of non-profits with conglomerate-linked local outlets, and its short-term, politically variable outcomes mean the policy often sustains survival rather than enabling multi-annual, participatory formats or innovation.

There is a distinct participatory component in the governance of public service broadcasting. The public broadcaster's main governing body includes civil-society representatives formally nominated through state bodies, giving organised civil society a role in decisions on management appointments and on annual programme-planning and financial frameworks. This represents a rare instance of institutionalised participation within Slovenia's media system.

Direct citizen-influence mechanisms are otherwise scarcely incentivised: funding criteria only ambiguously reward formats such as public forums, call-ins, or online community engagement, leaving most participatory practice to outlet culture (notably community radio) rather than to regulation. At the same time, transparency obligations – disclosure of political affiliations, revenue sources, and state-advertising flows – are weak; covert advertising and limited voluntary disclosure undermine participatory trust, with the recently reformed Media Act shifted disclosure to both state spenders and media themselves. Inclusion rules are similarly sparse: there are no quotas for women or minorities in management or newsrooms (beyond statutory representation of Italian and Hungarian communities in the public broadcaster's governance), so participatory parity relies mainly on editorial norms. Community and non-profit media – among the most participatory actors – lack a distinct legal status and dedicated and stable funding (digital non-profits are especially disadvantaged), leaving the sector that most directly

operationalises participation under-recognised and under-resourced. Finally, while the regulator of audiovisual media services is formally insulated, appointment safeguards and capacity are limited, and ministerial discretion in subsidy allocations exposes pluralism support to political cycles, constraining the stability required for citizens' sustained voice and influence.

Overall, Slovenia's law supplies a strong procedural floor – reply and correction, public-interest jurisprudence, source protection, access rights – but framework flaws in funding, transparency, inclusion, and independence convert much of that promise into prevailing minimalist participation (voice without durable influence).

4. Media System and Landscape

Slovenia's media system and landscape – the second link in the chain-of-participatory-conditions – concentrates agenda-setting power in a small number of dominant cross-platform actors, sustains a financially vulnerable public service media sector, and features de facto conglomerate networks with limited ownership transparency – conditions that together narrow the channels through which citizens access information and influence public communication (Petković et al. 2024a).

In television and online news – the country's most widely used news sources – one major commercial broadcaster and its associated digital platform command a large share of audience attention, while the public broadcaster's digital services typically takes third place. This configuration compresses agenda-setting power into only a few leading outlets. Additional commercial broadcasters with shifting ownership profiles add politically salient, although smaller-reach, nodes. For participatory conditions, such clustering produces both enabling and restrictive effects: concentrated reach can amplify mobilising content during elections or crises, but it also reduces source plurality, strengthening dependence on a narrow set of editorial filters.

Public service media remain central to the participation ecology. Public service television services, multiple public service radio programmes, minority-language channels, and widely used digital portal constitute the country's most consistently inclusive and geographically dispersed information infrastructure. In addition, the national press agency supplies foundational news to many smaller regional and digital outlets. Yet a long-frozen PSB licence fee, inflationary pressure, and periodic political contestation force public service media to assume more responsibilities with fewer secure resources. Precisely those formats that sustain democratic participation – explanatory journalism, regional and local reporting, minority programming, and moderated deliberative spaces – are the most

exposed to resource attrition. The governance-level participation of civil society on institutional level of the public service broadcasting is only weakly reflected in other layers of public service media practice: participatory programme formats, participatory production opportunities and structured public consultations and influence on strategic development remain limited. The public broadcaster maintains an Ombudsman for audience complaints and proposals, and its news portal hosts extensive comment sections, but these interfaces provide primarily reactive rather than decision-shaping influence. As a result, governance participation remains a meaningful yet isolated institutional channel within an otherwise rather minimalist participatory environment. For citizens, this means that the strongest potential node for democratic participation – public service media – remains fragile, constrained by shrinking resources and limited avenues for deeper participatory engagement beyond governance.

The print press, though still anchoring quality commentary and investigative reporting, faces declining circulation, shrinking newsrooms, and short-term, project-based public support. Cross-ownership linkages between print, radio, and digital outlets reduce internal plurality, with many regional newspapers, radio stations, and digital portals absorbed into a single commercial network with shared content and marketing strategies. This consolidation places much of the local information space under one actor, weakening independent scrutiny at the level of local governance where citizens most directly encounter public authority. As local public spheres shrink, the spaces for debating everyday community issues and sustaining participatory formats correspondingly diminish.

Radio illustrates a tension between reach and participatory depth. Large commercial networks achieve broad listenership through fast, standardised news bulletins, offering high reach but limited interaction in terms of democratic participation. Public radio continues to serve as a trusted forum for news and discussion, although its capacity to sustain participatory formats is constrained by resource pressures. Community-oriented and student radio stations maintain genuine co-production cultures – training new contributors, offering open editorial access, and serving minority or subcultural communities – but their scale and financial fragility prevent these participatory islands from rebalancing the system as a whole. The sector thus displays a participation paradox: the outlets most open to citizen co-creation are least able to scale such practices.

Digital-native news outlets have diversified the media landscape, introducing new formats and professional models, including several outlets focused on investigative or explanatory journalism funded through grants or donations. Alongside these, a politically aligned digital ecosystem – linked to broader partisan networks across multiple media types – plays an

important mobilising role. This configuration complicates democratic participation: professional non-profit outlets deepen informational and watchdog roles but struggle with scale; politically aligned networks excel at mobilisation but tend to reinforce selective exposure and polarisation rather than shared deliberative spaces.

A cross-cutting challenge is ownership opacity. Multiple outlets operate as part of loosely organised groups with interconnected content production, staffing, and editorial decisions, yet without clear public disclosure of beneficial ownership. Where public funds, including municipal advertising or indirect subsidies, intersect with these networks, citizens' ability to evaluate conflicts of interest or hold media to account is weakened. This lack of transparency is not merely a market anomaly; it constitutes a barrier to democratic participation, since citizens cannot meaningfully assess or influence actors whose structures remain opaque.

The publication of editorial standards and organisational transparency also varies significantly across the system. Public service media, quality print outlets, and non-profit investigative organisations generally disclose their standards, governance, and financing, aligning their practice with participatory accountability. By contrast, many commercial radio stations and smaller local outlets provide limited transparency. Where standards are absent or non-public, the feedback loop between audience critique and editorial response is weaker, reducing citizens' sense that their engagement can influence media practice.

5. Production Conditions for Media's Democratic Roles

The third link in the chain-of-participatory-conditions – production and organisational conditions – shows how regulatory framework and media landscape are reflected in the newsroom practices that either enable or inhibit democratic participation. Interviews with editors and journalists across public service broadcaster, commercial television and radio, leading print dailies, digital-native news outlets, regional and local media, and community or non-profit outlets depict a production environment shaped by scarce resources, time pressure, precarity, and varying levels of owner or funder interference (Petković et al. 2024b). These conditions translate directly into the five democratic media roles and, by extension, into citizens' opportunities to participate through and in the media.

A core theme emerging from the interviews concerns informational depth under time pressure. Across media types, interviewees emphasised that trustworthy reporting requires verification, cross-checking, and contextual follow-up, yet these are increasingly difficult to sustain under hyper-production and shrinking staff. An editor at a commercial broadcaster stated bluntly that reliability must outweigh speed (even at the cost of being

“beaten” by competitors), while others underlined how rising output quotas leave “less time to check or upgrade” core facts. The result is a drift toward short, event-driven pieces and away from continuous, contextualised coverage, precisely the informational conditions citizens say they need to engage meaningfully in public life.

Another recurrent pattern concerns the erosion of watchdog capacity. Interviewees consistently described the decline of investigative journalism in public and commercial newsrooms: dedicated teams dissolved, multi-week investigations replaced by shorter segments, and regional outlets too understaffed to assign reporters for sustained inquiries. One regional journalist summarised it starkly: “we cannot do investigative journalism (…) we are few”. An editor of a daily newspaper connected the decline to owner-driven commercial logic: “The conditions for journalists to have the time, the room for manoeuvre, the editorial support, and the financial support … have deteriorated dramatically … The mantra of the owners is clickbait journalism and quick-buck journalism”. Only non-profit investigative outlets reported growth tempered by the reality that reporters must also write grants and manage reporting obligations. Additional friction comes from restricted or delayed access to public information, with some interviewees perceiving a trend toward tighter disclosure rules. Cumulatively, these factors erode the watchdog role that underpins accountable participation.

Interviewees also highlighted capacity constraints on the forum role. Many newsrooms strive to host debate such as live thematic specials outside the capital or public forums. But interviewees repeatedly cited understaffing and budget limits as obstacles to sustaining such formats. Participatory shows that once connected citizens’ “everyday problems” to public authorities have been discontinued as a journalist of public radio recalled, “People used to say to bureaucrats ‘I’ll put you on that show’ because it solved problems – but it was cancelled. I fought with all my might to keep it”. This illustrates how resource attrition can shutter precisely those formats that turn attention into collective problem-solving and civic agency.

A further theme relates to pressures on representational fairness. Editors and journalists affirmed commitments to political balance, especially during elections, and public service media described structured practices for including non-parliamentary actors. Yet representational fairness is undermined by tight timeframes, small newsrooms, and, in some cases, owner directives. A journalist of a regional commercial outlet reported explicit instructions to suppress or promote particular parties ahead of elections. By contrast, foreign ownership and public service contexts were more often associated with

editorial autonomy. The result is that visibility depends more on ownership and resources than on public relevance, weakening the representational basis for participation.

Interviewees further described the limits of participatory practices within production structures. Opportunities for audiences to contribute exist, especially in community radio and non-profit digital outlets, where co-production is embedded in editorial practice. A non-profit digital outlet's editor noted, "We try to open up public debate in physical space with public editorial meetings two or three times a year (…) we present the topic and open the floor to the people who are present". In most commercial and some public service settings, however, participation remains minimalist: comments, letters, and occasional call-ins without decision influence. Decisions on guests, formats, and topics often reflect availability, audience metrics, or newsroom networks, which can systematically sideline less-resourced voices. Even when citizen-facing formats succeed, continuity is vulnerable to cuts. In short, production structures largely determine whether "participation" is a meaningful co-creative practice or an expressive add-on.

Finally, interviewees emphasised the growing risks to safety. Harassment, public attacks, and demoralisation were cited as growing threats to professional autonomy. Editors reported a rise in threats and discreditation campaigns that corrode newsroom morale and can disincentivise contentious, participatory reporting. As an editor of a daily newspaper explained, "it's not even about criticism of journalistic work anymore, it's about political and other attacks on the journalistic team (…) a lot of people in the media have lost some of the joy or the basic loyalty to the profession… we have filed police reports for threats because things have gone too far". This reminds us that "production conditions" are not only financial and organisational, they are also affective and safety-related, with direct implications for whether journalists can keep open the spaces citizens require for democratic action.

6. Participatory Mechanisms and Institutional Practices

The fourth link in the chain-of-participatory-conditions – institutionalised participatory mechanisms in the newsrooms – reveals a clear pattern: Slovenian media outlets have normalised voice but rarely share influence. Survey responses from journalists and editors indicate that newsrooms routinely support expressive participation (comments, letters, call-ins) and election-related information, yet rarely allow agenda-setting, planning, or strategic co-control by the public (Čebular Šramel, Petković 2025).

A first theme that emerges concerns voice and expression. A majority of respondents report that their outlets very often or sometimes enable audiences to express views. This

is strongest in community/non-profit media, with public service outlets and digital native news outlets also reporting frequent opportunities. While such mechanisms are normatively valuable, they are usually non-decisive: they make voice audible but rarely consequential for agendas or formats.

A second recurring pattern involves public debates, which tend to be episodic rather than routine. Over 40% of respondents say their outlets never organise public debates; about a third do so rarely. Exceptions cluster among digital native news outlets ("very often" in a handful of cases), daily newspapers ("sometimes"), and community/non-profit media ("very often/sometimes"). Where debates exist, they are typically tied to elections or crises, not embedded as standing participatory infrastructures, limiting their role in sustained democratic deliberation.

A third strand of the findings concerns representation, which functions as a necessary but uneven precursor to participation. Most outlets report taking steps to represent social diversity "sometimes", but systematic efforts are concentrated in community/non-profit media; tabloids underperform markedly. Because representation is a precondition for meaningful participation, since communities must be visible before they can co-shape agendas, the unevenness here helps explain why structural participation remains rare outside a few sectors.

Another prominent theme is the gap between voice and influence. The starkest finding concerns planning and decision participation. Only 1.5% of respondents report that audiences are very often involved in strategic planning or management; 63% say never, 23% "rarely". For content scheduling and planning, affirmative responses stand at 18%. In short, the middle layer between expression and governance, where citizens might co-shape content flows, is largely absent. Even autonomous user content is limited: about half of outlets never enable it; those that do are clustered among daily newspapers (publishing user diaries and op-eds) and community/non-profits, with occasional youth-oriented strands in PSM.

The results also reveal a distinction in how newsrooms approach electoral versus civic participation. Newsrooms demonstrate greater comfort with institutional participation (voting) than with grassroots participation (activism, association building). Approximately 29% encourage national political participation "very often", but only 16% report "very often" encouraging participation in associations and collective structures. Once again, community/non-profits are the exception, engaging more actively across civic forms, while commercial segments remain least supportive.

7. Citizens' Perspectives on Participation

Citizens' accounts from the focus group discussions provide insight into the fifth link of the chain-of-participatory-conditions: how people actually experience the Slovenian media environment, and how these experiences shape their sense of democratic agency. The discussions reveal an ambivalent dependency: citizens rely heavily on the media to participate in democratic life, but they simultaneously distrust the very institutions they depend on (Petković, Pajnik in review). This tension between dependence and scepticism is central to understanding the demand-side dynamics shaping democratic participation in Slovenia.

Citizens consistently emphasised that the media – especially television, online portals, and, for older participants, radio – are indispensable for navigating political life, including elections, referendums, and public debates. Many respondents described using multiple outlets and regularly cross-checking information across sources, including foreign media, to compensate for perceived bias or superficiality. As one participant put it, "You have to watch two channels at the same time (…) one side and the other side, and then maybe you make a story yourself". This practice indicates high levels of critical reflexivity yet also reveals a structural fragility of trust (Pajnik 2025). Participants described frequent exposure to sensationalism, misleading headlines, and polarised framing, which prompted them to treat news as raw material to verify rather than a stable informational foundation for participation.

Underlying these informational concerns is a pervasive sense that media independence is compromised. Participants cited direct political pressures on public service media in recent years, commercial pressures in private outlets, and the perceived influence of media owners' interests. One participant captured this widely shared view concisely: "The media are somebody's property, and that one has influence, whether you want it or not". These dynamics led to widespread doubts about objectivity, with several participants suggesting that media "support certain actors" or "push certain stories" for political or economic reasons. The result is a communicative environment marked by structural suspicion, which reduces citizens' willingness to trust public information and to see themselves as effective participants within mediated democracy.

Citizens also described experiences of participating through media – for example, sending tips to journalists, writing comments or letters, or engaging with local outlets. Some recounted instances where journalists helped uncover wrongdoing or resolve grievances, demonstrating that media can still function as effective intermediaries of democratic

accountability (Miconi et al. 2025). One participant explained: "I would also go to a journalist (…) because you have a feeling that if you tell the journalist, it will go ahead". Yet these positive experiences were exceptions. More common were accounts of ignored messages, selective publication, or online hostility. Many described comment sections as "toxic", dominated by extreme voices, hate speech, or personal attacks, making them unsuitable for reasoned debate. Several participants said they withdrew from digital participation because they felt unsafe or because their contributions "made no difference".

This sense of low efficacy extended to more formal arenas of participation. While many citizens reported voting and signing petitions, they expressed doubts about whether these actions produce meaningful change. Institutions were often perceived as distant or unresponsive, and the media as amplifying polarisation rather than mediating constructive dialogue. At the same time, citizens valued local media for their closeness and responsiveness, particularly in exposing municipal problems or representing community voices. Yet they recognised that these outlets are structurally weak, lacking the resources to sustain impactful public interest journalism.

Across all focus groups, participants highlighted the need for media literacy, critical thinking, and transparent journalism to rebuild trust. Many believed that younger people rely too heavily on social media feeds shaped by algorithms, and some worried that older generations struggle to identify disinformation. Citizens thus framed media literacy as a collective need, not only for youth but also for adults navigating an increasingly polluted communicative environment. They frequently voiced frustration with the volume and tone of contemporary news, as one participant said: "The less I watch, the happier I am (…) because I realised that I am not going to change anything on my own".

In short, citizens' experiences reflect a participation ecology marked by strong desire for engagement, high effort to navigate information, but limited perceived influence. They value media as essential democratic intermediaries but are frustrated by perceived partiality, superficial coverage, and unsafe participatory spaces.

8. Citizens' Visions and Demands (Citizens' Parliament)

The Citizens' Parliament on Media and Democracy (CP) represents the sixth link in the chain-of-participatory-conditions: the citizens' deliberated vision of how the media system should be organised to support democratic life. Unlike the focus groups – in which citizens voiced scepticism, frustration, and ad-hoc suggestions – the CP reflects what citizens propose when given time, information, moderation, and collective deliberation (Čebular

Šramel et al. 2026; Peace Institute 2025). The resulting 30 adopted demands constitute a structurally coherent proposal for shifting Slovenia from rather minimalist to maximalist democratic participation.

At the centre of the CP's vision is the belief that democratic participation in and through media requires high-quality, contextualised, and ethical public information. The CP demands that media "publish more international news that is diverse, placed in a broader context, and more in-depth", and calls for less sensationalism, fewer misleading headlines, and stronger editorial responsibility to reveal the interests behind information flows. This reflects citizens' lived experiences of superficial or distorted news and indicates a desire for conditions that support autonomous judgment, not reactive news consumption.

But the CP moves decisively beyond content expectations to institutional design. A defining feature of its resolutions is the creation of structural avenues for public influence, transforming participation from episodic expression into co-governance. The CP calls for civil society to have a meaningful role in shaping thematic priorities and demands that every media outlet provide "a clear and accessible process for lodging complaints", that the state establish a national media ombudsman, and that media outlets organise public editorial meetings, where citizens and civil society can propose topics, question editorial decisions, and articulate concerns. Importantly, the demand stresses that such encounters must be systemically supported (with venues and infrastructure) while preserving editorial independence. These proposals directly confront the "voice without influence" dynamic described in the survey and focus groups.

The CP also reconceptualises representation as a participatory right, adopting the principle: "Nothing about any social group without that group". Its demand stipulates that "when reporting on or discussing a particular social group or minority, the media should be required to include representatives of that group, their voices, and perspectives". Additionally, it proposes gender-balance requirements (50% female experts across programming) and participation quotas for minorities in content relevant to them. These measures reflect a belief that visibility and voice are preconditions for substantive participation and that representation cannot be left to market or newsroom discretion.

Another central pillar of the CP vision is media literacy as structural empowerment. Citizens call for a nationwide, lifelong media-literacy architecture. One adopted demand states: "The state should ensure comprehensive media literacy education for the population (…) beginning at preschool and continuing through all stages of formal education". They further propose EU-funded initiatives to scale these efforts, specifying

that “the European Union should fund media-literacy education for all generations, especially younger and older people, with the aim of strengthening skills for identifying false or misleading news”. Citizens also emphasise institutional responsibility: “Both public and private media … should take responsibility for media literacy and enabling the participation of citizens”. This represents a sophisticated understanding that participation relies not only on the system design but also on citizens’ ability to navigate complex information environments.

Crucially, the CP addresses the system-level preconditions without which production and participation cannot flourish. Citizens demand a single cross-media regulator, transparency requirements for all public funding and beneficial ownership, legal accountability for media owners, and a special status for public-interest media supported by stable funding and professional standards. The CP also links systemic reform to newsroom labour conditions. Citizens demand that “the state legally ensure dedicated funding for media organisations to enable the regular and sustainable employment of a sufficient number of qualified journalists”, as well as EU-level investment in journalist training: “The European Union should establish and fund Erasmus exchange programmes for professional journalists”. These demands respond directly to the production-side vulnerabilities highlighted in earlier chapters – precarity, understaffing and professional degradation.

Finally, the CP addresses safety as a democratic prerequisite. One adopted demand states that the state should “legally guarantee full protection for whistleblowers and credible sources”. This reflects participants’ recognition that participation requires not only opportunities to speak but protection from retaliation.

What distinguishes the CP from the focus groups is its institutional imagination. Where focus-group participants describe distrust and limited efficacy, the CP participants produce actionable institutional proposals that bind together regulatory, structural, editorial, and civic dimensions of participation. Their proposals target every link of the chain-of-participatory-conditions: coherent oversight, owner accountability, stable production capacity, structural participatory mechanisms, representational fairness, media literacy, and participant safety. In doing so, the CP demonstrates how citizen deliberation can upgrade the participation ecology, transforming participation from symbolic expression into shared governance.

9. Discussion and Conclusion: Re-assembling the Participation Ecology

This chapter examined democratic participation in and through Slovenia’s media by applying the chain-of-participatory-conditions analytical model. Reviewing regulatory

structures, media-system characteristics, production conditions, participatory mechanisms, citizens' experiences, and their deliberated visions, it interpretated Slovenia's media environment not as a collection of separate deficits or strengths but as a relational ecology, consistent with Carpentier and Wimmer's discursive-material perspective. According to this framework, media democracy emerges only when discourses (norms, expectations, professional values) align with materials (institutional, organisational and infrastructural conditions). The empirical evidence across all datasets reveals a persistent misalignment: normative ambition is high, yet material support is rather weak, resulting in a system where democratic participation is possible but partial, uneven, and fragile.

Slovenia's media practices largely cluster at the minimalist end of Carpentier's continuum. Expressive mechanisms (comments, letters, call-ins, voting information) are widely available, and journalists uphold professional norms that support public voice. Yet structural participation, defined as the redistribution of decision-making power within media production and governance, remains limited. A regulation-driven governance role for civil-society representatives exists in public service broadcasting, but this role remains largely confined to governance and is not mirrored in structured opportunities for citizens to influence programme development or in wider co-decision and co-creation practices. Survey data confirm that audience involvement in agenda-setting, editorial planning, or strategic decisions is rare – even in the public broadcaster's newsrooms – while symbolic forms of participation dominate. Production conditions marked by resource scarcity, commercial pressures, and political sensitivities further reinforce low-cost, low-impact formats and discourage deeper involvement. Against this backdrop, the Citizens' Parliament articulates a markedly different orientation: a maximalist vision of institutionalised co-governance through public editorial meetings, national ombudsman structures, and guarantees that "nothing about any social group" is produced without including representatives of that group. These proposals imagine citizens not only as speakers but as partners in shaping media agendas and democratic discourse. The contrast between minimalist practice and maximalist aspiration is one of the clearest findings of the chapter.

The five democratic media roles provide an additional lens on this ecology. Pockets of high-quality journalism (the informational role) persist across PSM, non-profits, quality press and some digital-native news outlets, yet systemic pressures degrade informational depth, contextualisation, and continuity. Investigative journalism (the watchdog role) is under the greatest strain, sustained consistently only by some non-profits, while resource-stretched newsrooms elsewhere face cuts, discontinued teams, or political

interference, compounded by restricted access to information. Debate formats (the forum for public debate role) reflect similar constraints: they exist but are episodic, tied to elections or crises, and dependent on limited newsroom capacity, leaving citizens with few safe or substantive deliberative spaces. Representational performance (the representational role) is mixed: PSM and community media perform well, especially for minorities, but structural biases across commercial and partisan ecosystems produce perceptions of partiality and selective visibility. The participatory role remains the weakest. Existing participatory initiatives, such as civil-society involvement in PSB governance, community and student media enabling co-production, occasional public editorial meetings of non-profit media, are meaningful but isolated, lacking the structured and sustained presence needed to form a wider media-democratic culture. Citizens report lack of structured, continued, system-wide opportunities for participation and influence. Taken together, Slovenia performs partially across the informational, watchdog, forum, and representational roles, while the participatory role remains underdeveloped.

A discursive-material framework helps explain why Slovenia's participation ecology unfolds in this way. Discursively, Slovenia exhibits strong professional journalism norms, critical and democratically oriented citizens, robust expectations of independence and fairness, and a model of deliberative process (the CP) capable of generating sophisticated democratic demands. Materially, however, key supports remain inconsistent or insufficient: regulatory oversight is fragmented and inefficient; ownership transparency is incomplete; funding mechanisms and labour conditions strain production; participatory infrastructures are minimal; safety risks inhibit both journalists and citizens alike. This imbalance produces a system where democratic expectations are frustrated not for lack of legitimacy, but for lack of institutional and economic conditions capable of sustaining them. Weaknesses at the regulatory and market levels translate into newsrooms practices and shape citizen experiences.

Citizens' accounts further highlight structural distortions of the public sphere. Information is abundant but unevenly reliable; argumentation appears but episodically; deliberation is possible yet overshadowed by polarisation and emotional risk. Fraser's notion of participatory parity clarifies how women, minorities, and marginalised groups face barriers to visibility, reinforcing asymmetries that depress democratic participation. The Citizens' Parliament illustrates what becomes possible when a counterpublic space is institutionally enabled: citizens articulate coherent reform proposals that directly address the structural deficits identified across all datasets, targeting regulation (unified oversight, transparency), media-system structures (public-interest status, stable funding), production

(secure employment, resources for socially relevant journalism), participatory mechanisms (public editorial meetings), representation (inclusion rules), civic capacities (media literacy), and safety (whistleblower protections). Crucially, these proposals form a coherent institutional logic that mirrors the analytical model: repairing the first link strengthens all others. When given deliberative space, citizens become architects of democratic infrastructure.

The Slovenian case therefore validates and extends the analytical framework. It confirms that participation is systemic: weaknesses at upper levels cascade downward, while improvements require coordinated repair. It demonstrates the minimalism-maximalism continuum: minimalist participation is routine, maximalist participation appears only in exceptional contexts. And it reveals the costs of discursive-material imbalance: strong democratic norms constrained by weak enabling structures create a participation ecology that is dynamic but underpowered, expressive but rarely influential. Strengthening democratic participation requires aligning democratic ambition with democratic capacity. As captured by the CP's reform demands, this means coherent oversight and transparency to rebuild trust; stable, public-interest-oriented funding to bolster production; institutionalised participatory mechanisms; representational fairness; and media-literacy ecosystems that empower citizens as co-creators of public communication.

Slovenia shows that media democracy advances not through isolated acts of expression but through structural coherence across the participation ecology. When discursive and material layers align, when democratic values are backed by sustainable funding, transparent ownership, coherent regulation, inclusive participation, and robust civic capacities, participation can expand from symbolic voice to substantive influence.

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9. THREE TRENDS:
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN POLAND

Beata Klimkiewicz, Monika Szafrańska and Katarzyna Vanevska

Abstract:

Based on interviews and surveys data, the article explores relationship between media and democracy as seen by journalists and editors across different media types. There are five main strands the analysis revolves around: the overpowering role of the Big Tech and newsrooms' dependency on their infrastructures; epistemic role of journalism; political and economic pressures; the role of the state; and relationship with users. The analysis cuts also across national/global dimension and threats/strengths in the relationship between media and democracy. The results reveal interviewees' perception of "fragility" and "impermanence" of democracy which seem to be a major concern. The problems and threats that undermine democracy are not perceived any more as nationally specific – they are certainly handled in national and cultural contexts, but cross-national boundaries and include such issues as disinformation, dependency on the Big Tech, financial difficulties, erosion of journalism as a highly esteemed profession. Particularly disinformation, information disorder and inability of media users to direct attention to important issues are counted for red flags.

Keywords:

Polish Media System; Big Tech; Disinformation; Information Disorder; Media's Pro-Democratic Role

1. Introduction

The relationship between the news media and democracies has long been viewed as fundamental, causal, constitutive and mutually-dependent (Baker 2002; Curran 2002; Williams, delli Carpini 2011; Voltmer 2013; Schudson 2017; Carpentier, Wimmer 2025). Recently scholars have focused on this relationship from a perspective of platform societies and growing crises, both in terms of declines of democracies and geopolitical uncertainties as well as structural decomposition of the public sphere and news media environment (Habermas 2022; Schneiders, Stark 2025; Wunsch et al. 2025). Poland has been one of those countries, that has experienced a process of democratisation and rapid development of a pluralistic news media environment over the last four decades, but also a political backlash and the struggles of the media to rebound themselves amid of post-pandemic economic realities and new forms of political and Big Tech pressures. This chapter aims at a complex exploration of systemic and news production conditions and factors that shape the relationship between media and democracy in Poland.

As a point of departure, this exploration goes beyond a minimalist approach to democracy, traditionally built around the arrangement of competitive and free elections. Instead, we adopt an approach to democracy perceiving it as a structure of power and collective experience rather than a procedure or scrutiny (Ringen 2007; Keane 2009). Such a collectively-built structure and experience require common exercise, inclusive participation, trust and real impact of citizens on decisions made with respect of their interests. As regards the role of the news media in shaping democracies, we distinguish several pro-democratic functions on the basis of vast research (McQuail 1992; Habermas 2006; Voltmer 2015; Rauijmaekers, Maeseele 2015; Schudson 2017; Schrijvers et al. 2026) that may be perceived and practiced in more passive or advocacy-based ways. These include: information provision (providing accurate and reliable information), watchdog (scrutinising government and other powerful political, economic and social actors), deliberation (creating a forum for the public debate), representation (representation of societal and cultural diversity) and participation (encouraging democratic participation). We would like to test to what extent these functions both at declarative and practical levels contribute to a minimalist (election-centered) model of democracy or a more participatory model based on collective structure of power and experience.

Our analysis combines three dimensions: structural factors at the systemic level (audience share and sectoral analysis), the analysis of conditions for news production (interviews with journalists and media professionals) and the analysis of existence of practices that support pro-democratic functions (the survey among journalists and media professionals).

The first aspect of the study seeks to understand systemic trends that shape three major sectors of the media system: Public Service Media (PSM), commercial and non-profit sectors. The analysis examines structural diversity of different market segments intersecting with these sectors: press, radio, the audiovisual segment and online news providers. In addition to brief assessment of audience shares and concentration, this part reflects on political orientation of news media outlets and policy and regulatory developments. Secondly, the analysis explores through the semi-structured interviews how are five basic pro-democratic media functions viewed and exercised by news media professionals representing PSM, commercial and non-profit sectors, and print, audiovisual, radio and online media. Finally, the analysis seeks to understand how frequent and widespread practices that facilitate various forms of audience involvement in political processes and media production are. This part is based on the survey conducted among media professionals representing above mentioned media types and sectors.

2. Towards Polarisation: Structural Diversity of a Polish Media Environment

The Polish news media environment has been profoundly structured by media reform and transformation following 1989, including privatisation, liberalisation and deregulation. The regulatory approach has evolved towards a minimalist policy in terms of financial support for both the commercial and non-profit sectors with a growing role of the state in financing PSM (Public Service Media). Currently the Polish news media system is composed of strong and concentrated TV networks; newspaper groups with declining print sales but important opnion-forming influence; growing news portals and start-ups offering journalistic commentary, investigations and analysis. In addition, the PSM undergoing a major crisis and revamping still occupy a quite significant, though declining audience shares. The non-profit sector is relatively weak, but some segments (e.g. student media, fact-checking and investigative initiatives) have been relatively thriving.

A key element of structural diversity that supports pro-democratic functions, but most importantly the deliberative function is a diversity of players reflecting various points of view, cultural expressions and representations, and offering different ways of interaction and use. This also implies an existence of diverse ownership, as well as different mandates and roles of the news media such as public, commercial, non-profit. In terms of audience shares, the Polish press market is characterised by a high concentration in the commercial sector. The largest publisher - Bauer controls 43.4% share in the number of copies of the printed press distributed in 2025 (Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa 2026a). The publisher offers mostly life-style and advice weeklies and monthlies. Regarding the news press, in the third quarter of 2025, the two most frequently read newspapers in Poland were the

tabloids: “Fakt” (owned by Ringier Axel Springer Poland) and “Super Express” (owned by the Polish company United Entertainment Enterprises). Quality daily newspapers occupied the third and fourth place. These included: “Gazeta Wyborcza” (owned by Agora – held mostly by Polish shareholders) and “Rzeczpospolita” (owned by Gremi Media with a dominant share of Dutch company Pluralis B.V.) These four titles alone stood for 60% of the general dailies’ readership (PBC, 2026b). Moreover, the regional market continues to be dominated by the Polska Press Group that was acquired in 2021 by the state-owned oil concern ORLEN. This led to a loss of editorial independence, particularly in between 2021 – 2023. In 2025, the newspapers published by the company reached a share of 10% in an overall press distribution (Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa 2026a), and around 20% share in a sell of dailies alone (Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa 2026b).

On the audiovisual market, the concentration of audience seems to similarly high. Regarding the television, in 2023, over three-quarters of the total viewership was divided between three groups. Public TV (TVP) channels combined reached nearly 27% of the market share. TVN Discovery Polska channels reached 22.28%, and Polsat Group accounted for 22.16%. These three actors also dominate on the news channels market: TVN24 was the most watched channel (40.81% share in the audience of programs with this specialisation), followed by the public TVP Info (34.96%) and commercial Polsat News (12.62%) (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji 2025).

The radio market is dominated by two commercial media companies: RMF Group, which is a part of Bauer Media Group, and Eurozet Group, owned by Agora. Channels belonging to the former held a 34.5% share in the total radio listening in 2023. RMF Group owns the most listened radio station in Poland, RMF FM, which gathers 29.6% of the total radio audience. The Eurozet Group boasts 18.8% of the listening share, and its flagship project is the station Radio ZET with a 13.8% of the listening share. While both RMF FM and Radio ZET are music-oriented radio stations , they provide news every hour, conduct political interviews and debates, and are active in the field of investigative journalism. The only news talk radio in Poland is TOK FM (held by Eurozet) with a 3.1% share in the listening time in 2023. Stations owned by the public broadcaster (Polish Radio) accounted in 2023 for 13.3% market share, which includes both national and regional stations (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji 2025).

On the digital market, two main types of outlets can be named: news portals linked to the legacy media and digital natives. In general, the second group of online media attracts more users, in particular in a form of three horizontal news portals having their roots already in the 1990s. As of July 2025, the most visited website is Onet.pl (owned by Ringier

Axel Springer Polska), followed by WP.pl (Wirtualna Polska Holding) and Interia.pl (Polsat Plus Group) (Wojtas 2025). News users in Poland also use a vibrant space of regional and local news websites. Some of them are connected to legacy media like websites of Polska Press's daily newspapers delivering instant news from the neighbourhood. There are also many independent news initiatives taking a form of online radio services and podcasts, which are financed mostly by the crowdfunding, for example Radio Nowy Świat (Radio New World), Radio 357 and Raport o stanie świata (Report on the State of the World).

Despite significant concentration, the plurality of political orientation within the Polish media is overall high. Yet, over the course of the last 30 years, the news media environment has become structurally polarised with growing divides between left and right leaning media outlets. The leading quality daily "Gazeta Wyborcza", the weekly "Polityka", Radio ZET, TOK FM radio and TVN maintain left and liberal orientation in their reporting on politics and sociocultural issues. On the other hand, the right-wing include outlets such as the newspaper "Do Rzeczy", "Sieci", "Gazeta Polska" and Republika TV. These are also being described as "identity media" (*media tożsamościowe*) by rightwing journalists who coined the term to describe a growing shift towards "identity-based" journalism, based on strengthening relations within particular communities rather than providing well-resourced information based on verified facts (Klimkiewicz 2021).

Most importantly, deepening polarisation and politicisation have affected the PSM. Although after 1989, the Polish PSM was declared as independent and politically impartial, there were ongoing attempts from the political elites to control the broadcaster to force their own agenda and discredit the opponents (Połońska 2019). In particular between 2016-2023, PSM's partisanship has reached an unprecedented scale. In 2016, the PSM appointment procedures underwent legal changes that strengthened political influence, especially by the newly established National Media Council, which was controlled by active politicians of the then governing-party.

These changes led to protests across Poland and criticism by human rights and international institutions, including the European Federation of Journalists and the European Broadcasting Union, as well as the European Commission (Chapman 2017).

In October 2023, the democratic opposition led by the Civic Coalition won the parliamentary elections. The new government announced its plans to depoliticise the PSM and abolish the National Media Council (which has not been implemented so far). In December 2023, the then-Minister of Culture dismissed the heads of TVP, Polish Radio and the Polish Press Agency in order to reinstate professional journalism after a period of

unprecedented partisanship. The minister used commercial law for this move, however some legal experts saw his decision as controversial. Moreover, facing problems with PSM funding (blocked initially by the President and later by KRRiT), the minister put TVP, Polskie Radio as well as the Polish Press Agency (PAP) into the state of liquidation explaining that these radical steps were determined by the President's veto. In terms of news performance, a number of professionals agreed that TVP's news programmes became less polarising and more decent, but full impartiality has not been achieved (Senkowski, 2024). A journalist from the daily Rzeczpospolita, Estera Flieger points to a problem of integrating the polarised society in difficult geopolitical situation:

> "I am very deeply concerned that we still do not think of public media as a strategic resource of the state. We have a problem with Russian disinformation, hybrid warfare. At the same time, one or the other part of society alternately does not trust public media. In the event of a serious crisis, public media, whose signal reaches the largest number of citizens, will have a very important role to play. But how are they supposed to do this when half of Poles do not trust them?" (Senkowski 2024).

The Ministry of Culture is currently consulting a new media bill that will most likely change procedures of PSM management appointment and governance structure.

3. Towards Active Facilitation: Pro-democratic Functions in News Production

The relationship between democracy and the media in Poland is undergoing constant transformation, driven both by the complex interplay of domestic political forces and a challenging geopolitical and technological environment. These evolving dynamics constitute a process, in which the media serve as both a primary catalyst and a vulnerable subject.

Based on a series of interviews conducted within the framework of the MeDeMAP project, data were obtained from twelve media professionals; it should be noted, however, that the invitations distributed via phone, email and social media significantly outnumbered the final cohort of participating journalists and editors. The sample comprised of representatives of the most influential national news outlets, as well as stakeholders of critical importance to the Polish media landscape – namely, local and regional media. Drawing upon the substantive responses provided, it can be concluded that according to interviewed professionals, the relationship between media and democracy in Poland is defined by a rigorous, almost defensive commitment to professional integrity, a systematic attempt to represent a polarised spectrum of political voices, and an increasingly precarious operational environment. Central to this dynamic is the tension between the

media's normative role as the "fourth power" – a watchdog holding the state accountable – and the material realities of a market-driven, politically contested sphere.

An analysis of the interviews has shown that a provision of reliable and accurate information is seen as principal among the pro-democratic functions. In an era marked by a credibility crisis in traditional institutional benchmarks, journalistic integrity is perceived by journalists as a foundational pillar of institutional accountability. Across all sectors, media professionals identify the rigorous verification of data as a functional necessity rather than a mere ethical guideline, "Those who go climbing on walls know that two points [sources] is a minimum, and three is best" (PL-C-1). This commitment to double or triple-sourcing is framed as a critical counterbalance to a political environment where actors frequently seek to "obscure certain things" or "make it quieter" (PL-C-2) to evade public scrutiny.

Furthermore, the strategic application of citations serves as a clear indicator of divergent institutional priorities within the Polish media landscape. In the commercial sector, citations are primarily leveraged as a metric for prestige and market positioning, dictated by competitive citation rankings. Conversely, non-profit media utilise these references to shift the burden of reliability onto the audience, thereby encouraging a more critical and discerning consumption of news. In the case of PSM, the practice of citing sources functions largely as a mechanism of self-protection (PL-C-1), shielding journalists from the dual pressures of accelerated production cycles and rigorous political oversight.

Investigative journalism is generally considered the "crème de la crème" of the profession (PL-J-3). There is a broad consensus that investigative practice offers the most potent tool for real influence on those in power. However, an investigative journalism is currently facing a structural crisis. While a decade ago, an investigative exposé could lead to shifts in government, interviewees suggest that its strength is waning (PL-C-3).

One reason of this trend may be found in scarcity of attention among news users, but a decline, as observed by interviewees, stems also from financial and legal constraints. Investigative work is described as a "luxury" that fewer newsrooms can afford, requiring the long-term payment of specialists who may spend months on a single story that might never reach fruition. Moreover, the rise of Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and a potential; threat of criminal defamation under Article 212 of the Criminal Code has created a "climate of intimidation" (PL-C-4). Editors are now forced to allocate significant funds for constant legal support and defensive archiving.

The efficacy of the "fourth power" is further compromised by the tactical deployment of "throw-ins" – selective and frequently biased leaks provided by officials intended to undermine their adversaries. This phenomenon includes instances where "officials frequently bring materials to journalists to 'harm their political opponents'" (PL-C-2), a practice that effectively attempts to instrumentalise the media for a partisan conflict. Consequently, maintaining a high degree of professional independence is essential for journalists to avoid being reduced to mere instruments within the internal political warfare. To combat the shortage of high-calibre specialists, the local press has turned to a "master-student" educational model (PL-C-5) to preserve institutional memory and investigative skills in a market where talent is often bought out by larger, wealthier entities.

The media's role as a platform for public debate is perceived through divergent professional lenses. PSM representatives emphasise a structured framework of "programmed pluralism", where diversity is mandated by law. This includes specific quotas for religious minorities, cultural programming, and proportional airtime for parliamentary parties; the distribution of airtime is strictly "related to the support that these parties received in the last elections" (PL-J-1).

In contrast, the representatives of national press and digital native outlets define the public forum by excluding discourse that promotes "hate speech". They strive for ideological diversity by featuring voices from across the spectrum, while maintaining a clear boundary against anti-democratic sentiments. For representatives of community and non-profit media, the priority is depth over breadth. These outlets reject "title obsession" (PL-J-6) and the high velocity of the 24-hour news cycle to provide the contextual background necessary for citizens to comprehend complex changes.

However, the efficacy of this forum is increasingly challenged by political boycotts. The refusal of some government or political officials to participate in debates hosted by commercial channels creates an "incomplete picture" (PL-J-2), forcing journalists into the assertive role of explaining these structural absences to the public. Digital native journalists argue that "asking politicians difficult questions" is more vital than ever because social media allows leaders to bypass traditional gatekeepers and "communicate directly with citizens without intermediaries" (PL-J-4).

The relationship between media systems and democratic stability is intrinsically linked to the representation of cultural and social diversity. Research indicates a profound structural divide in how, in the view of interviewed journalists, the public and commercial sectors

approach this responsibility. According to the interviewees, PSM operate under a framework of statutory requirements, ensuring a formalised inclusion of diverse perspectives as a matter of legal mandate. In contrast, commercial media outlets navigate this terrain through the lens of internal "journalistic missions" or "internal convictions". This subjective approach results in divergent editorial philosophies: while some newsrooms institutionalise gender equality as a fundamental organisational pillar (PL-J-3), others adopt a colour-blind or gender-neutral professional meritocracy. In the latter case, tolerance is viewed not as a codified requirement but as an organic byproduct of high professional standards (PL-J-2).

Furthermore, local and regional media serve a vital integrative function that underpins the broader democratic infrastructure. By synthesising "historical complexities" with localised cultural nuances (PL-C-5), these outlets bridge the gap between abstract national policy and the lived experience of citizens. The democratic implications of this role are significant; as noted by industry practitioners, the marginalisation of provincial voices in the media landscape risks fostering systemic alienation. As observed by an interviewed journalist, if residents of smaller communities feel excluded from the national discourse, their propensity to participate in democratic processes, such as elections and referenda, diminishes (PL-C-2). Consequently, the inclusivity of local media representation emerges as a critical determinant of national electoral health and the overall vitality of the democratic mandate.

Facilitating public participation is viewed by media professionals as a primary democratic responsibility. The 2023 Polish parliamentary elections reached a record turnout of 74.38%, a result frequently attributed to various media initiatives. These included both technical voter-alignment tools and broader mobilisation campaigns designed to encourage electoral participation.

However, there is a professional divide regarding advocacy. While many journalists take pride in encouraging citizens to vote, some digital native representatives maintain a stricter distance, arguing that the role of a journalist is to provide information about the candidates, but "calls to go to the elections themselves" fall outside their professional remit (PL-J-4). Despite these differences, there is a shared commitment to holding politicians accountable during the electoral process. Journalists see themselves as navigators who must prevent politicians from "throwing in distraction topics" of reality (PL-C-2).

Despite these robust efforts, systemic barriers persist. Journalists express deep concern over "information bubbles" (PL-J-1), where high-quality analysis fails to penetrate beyond a self-selecting, already-convinced audience. The rise of disintermediation via social platforms has fundamentally altered the power dynamic, requiring journalists to shift from being mere transmitters of quotes to active interrogators who "confront politicians with reality" (PL-C-1; PL-C-6).

In summary, the Polish media landscape is navigating a transition where professional standards are being recalibrated against political pressure, economic instability and technological challenges. The commitment to truth and honesty serves as an essential counterbalance to political obscurity, allowing the media to act as a navigator that provides the "context and background" (PL-J-3) necessary for citizens to assess reality better. The move toward a "generational change" in journalism and a renewed focus on local nuances suggests a resilient, albeit strained, relationship between the media and the maintenance of democratic norms in Poland. The transition from passive reporting to active democratic facilitation remains the central, defining challenge for the contemporary Polish media landscape.

4. Towards Electoral Participation: Practices Supporting Audience Participation

The relationship between media and democracy in Poland is fundamentally defined by the extent, to which newsrooms facilitate a platform for public discourse and ensure the authentic representation of societal diversity. Furthermore, it should be noted that the democratic vitality of a media system is frequently appraised by the depth of audience participation in the production process. However, it is essential to highlight the functional relationship between media institutions and democratic consolidation in Poland, particularly within the spheres of electoral mobilisation and civic activism.

The following conclusions were derived from data gathered during the MeDeMAP project among representatives of the Polish media. The data collection, conducted between February 24 and June 10, 2025, yielded a diverse sample of 83 responses from over 200 initial inquiries, ensuring representation across all media sectors, including public service, commercial, local and non-profit outlets.

The gathered information shows, to a certain degree, a contrast between high declarative commitment to audience involvement and a practical reluctance to cede the control to grass-root forms of public deliberation. At a fundamental level, Polish media outlets exhibit a strong tendency toward inclusive rhetoric. An overwhelming majority of

respondents (84%) report that they allow their audience to express its views “very often” or “sometimes”. This commitment extends to the concept of societal representation, with 88% of newsroom representatives claiming to take active steps to reflect diversity within their content. However, a significant disconnect emerges when transitioning from passive feedback to active deliberation. Only 30% of newsrooms frequently organise public debates with audience participation, while 60% admit to doing so “rarely” or “never” (Fig. 1). This evidence suggests a dichotomy within the Polish media landscape: whereas “voice” is integrated via informal audience input, “engagement” remains underdeveloped, leaving a gap in the deliberative frameworks necessary for robust democratic discourse.

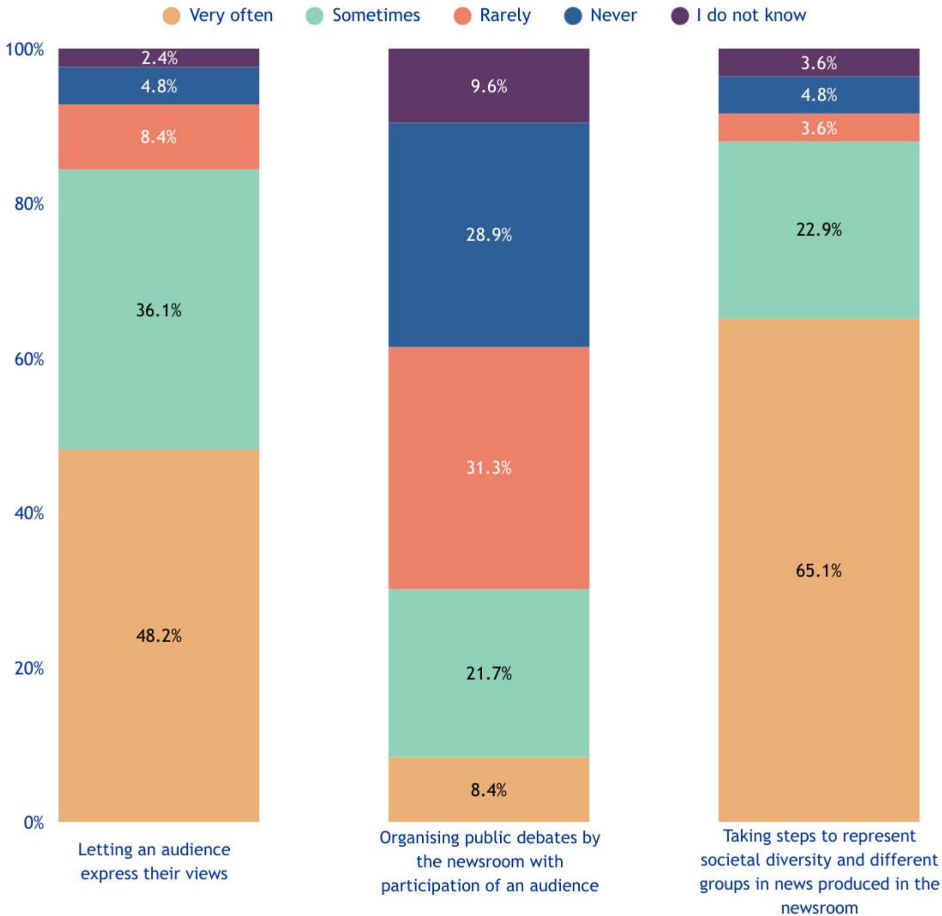

Fig. 1 Distribution of responses in the category: Providing a voice in the debate and representation

The data highlights a notable paradox within the PSM. Despite a legal mandate under Article 21 of the Radio and Television Act to foster users’ participation, PSM demonstrate a noteworthing lack of engagement in organised debates. Specifically, 10 out of 16 PSM respondents reported that their newsrooms “rarely” or “never” organise such events. While the PSM remains relatively active in declarative representation – with 10 out of 16 respondents claiming to represent diversity “very often” – their failure to facilitate direct

public deliberation exposes problematic enactment of their role as a primary pillar of democratic discourse.

In contrast, commercial audiovisual sectors and digital platforms show higher agility in audience interaction. As declared by respondents commercial TV stations and news portals lead the way in allowing public expression, with news portals standing out as the only sector where the organisation of actual debates is a dominant practice. In the sphere of audience interaction, digital-native platforms exhibit significantly greater institutional flexibility and technological agility than their counterparts in the traditional press or broadcast sectors. This inherent modernity facilitates a more seamless integration of participatory mechanisms, allowing these outlets to optimise interactive interfaces in ways that legacy and state-mandated broadcasters are unable to replicate.

Efforts to represent societal diversity appear more consistent across the board, though the intensity varies. Representatives of the PSM, commercial radio and local newspapers report the highest frequency of these efforts. For example, 6 out of 8 commercial TV professionals and 5 out of 6 commercial radio representatives declare frequent actions toward representing diverse groups.

Evidence derived from the 2025 MeDeMAP study indicates that audience participation within the Polish media landscape remains predominantly superficial. While newsrooms frequently offer declarative support for incorporating the audience's "voice", they simultaneously maintain rigid institutional barriers that preclude meaningful public involvement in structural decision-making, strategic planning and content management.

The data demonstrates that audience participation is systematically restricted to external communicative channels, failing to reach the actual levels of newsroom decision-making.

Only 13% of respondents indicated that their newsrooms allow audiences to participate in scheduling or planning programming, with a negligible 1.2% doing so "very often". This exclusion is even more pronounced at the level of strategic planning and organisational management, where a mere 2.4% of respondents reported any level of audience involvement (Fig. 2).

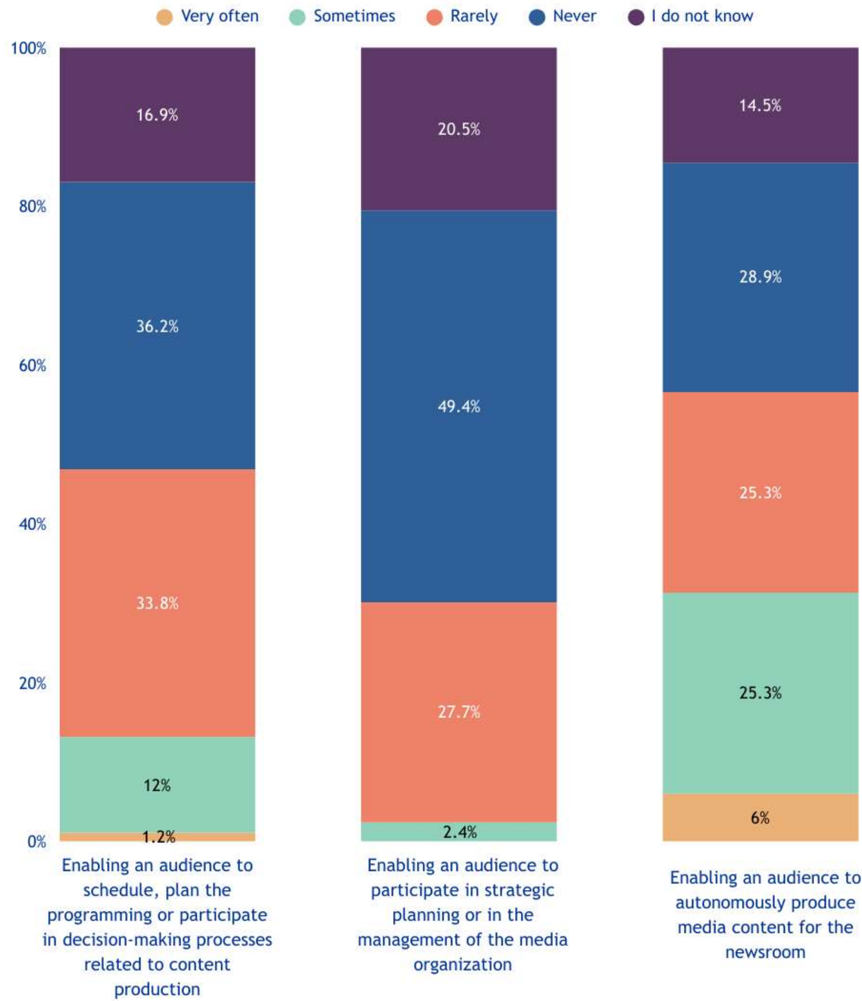

Fig. 2 Distribution of responses in the category: Participation in the Production

The PSM and national weeklies exhibit the highest levels of institutional closure; in the PSM, 8 out of 16 respondents explicitly stated that audiences "never" participate in content decision-making, and 9 out of 16 reported a total lack of participation in strategic management. These findings highlight a significant democratic deficit, particularly for the PSM, which, in theory, is accountable to the public. News portals emerged as the sole outliers, showing a relatively higher – though still modest – propensity for editorial collaboration.

In views of respondents, users' participation in autonomous content production seems slightly more frequent. In contrast to strategic management, which remains an exclusive professional domain, approximately 32% of respondents indicate that their newsrooms allow the public to produce media content either "very often" or "sometimes". This suggests that while Polish media organisations are increasingly open to cooperation with their public and willing to act as platforms for user-generated content, they maintain a clear separation between creative contributions and institutional control. Consequently,

the public is granted a role in the production of information but continues to be excluded from the high-level processes that determine the organisation's direction and policy.

This trend is most visible in local and regional newspapers, where 4 out of 6 respondents admitted to allowing such participation "sometimes", and in commercial radio, where 50% of respondents (3 out of 6) reported frequent or occasional autonomous production. Even within the PSM, 6 out of 16 representatives reported allowing public content production, suggesting that "citizen journalism" has found a foothold in the Polish media ecosystem, even as executive control remains centralised.

A noteworthy aspect of the data is the high rate of "I do not know" responses regarding participation policies, reaching 20% in the context of strategic planning. This lack of internal transparency is not limited to junior staff; it includes several editors-in-chief and managers. This suggests that in many Polish newsrooms, the mechanisms for public engagement – if they exist at all – are poorly defined, inconsistently applied or entirely opaque even to those leading the organisations.

MeDeMAP study reveals that representatives of Polish newsrooms perceive themselves as active facilitators of political engagement rather than passive observers.

The commitment to fostering voter turnout remains a cornerstone of the Polish media's democratic mission. Support for public engagement in national politics is particularly robust, with nearly 80% of respondents claiming to encourage participation "very often" or "sometimes". This proactive stance extends to local politics (75%) and European elections (72%) (Fig. 3).

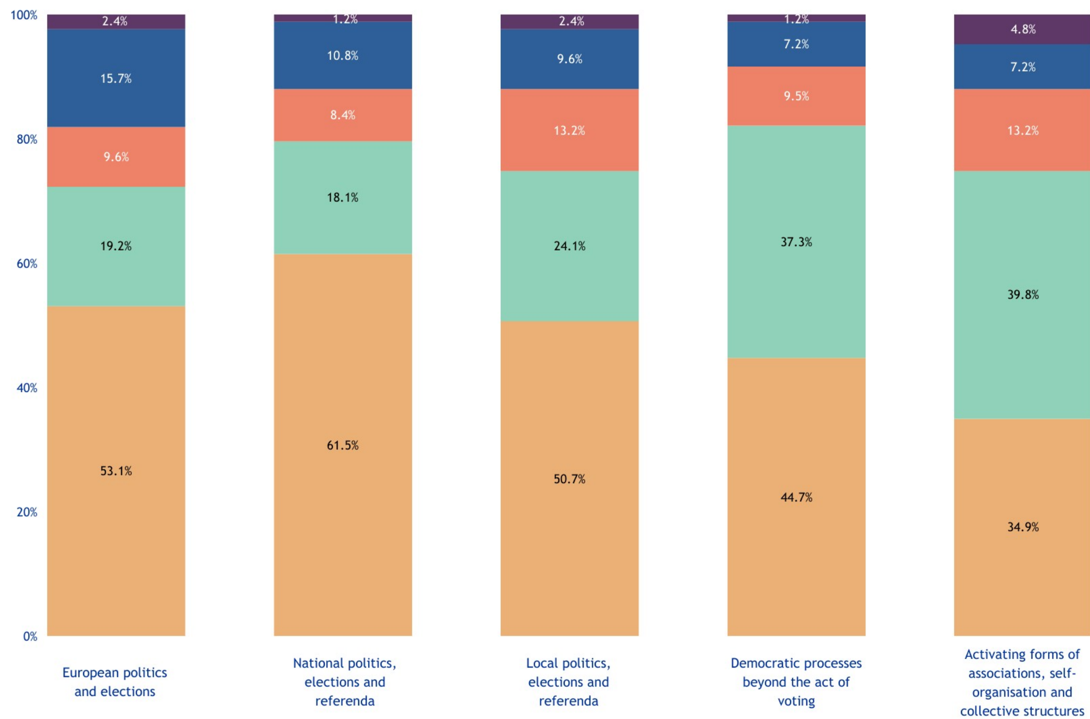

Fig. 3 Distribution of responses in the category: Electoral Participation and Activism

The PSM serve as a primary driver in this category, with 13 out of 16 respondents reporting that they “very often” encourage participation in both European and national elections. Similarly, news portals demonstrate high engagement, with 7 out of 8 representatives frequently activating their audience to take part in national-level political processes. This suggests that across different technological platforms, the Polish media maintains a traditional gatekeeper responsibility focused on legitimising the democratic process through voter turnout.

The democratic vitality of the media landscape is heavily dependent on participatory activities that occur outside the framework of traditional elections. Polish media outlets show a surprising level of support for non-electoral democratic activities, such as community activism, demonstrations and citizen initiatives. A substantial 82% of respondents declare support for these activities, while 75% favour the activation of associations and collective structures. However, the intensity of this support is more nuanced; unlike the “very often” dominance seen in electoral questions, newsrooms are more likely to support social activism “sometimes”.

This distinction is particularly evident in commercial sectors. For instance, while representatives of commercial TV stations are highly active in electoral mobilisation, only 1 out of 8 respondents “very often” encourages democratic processes beyond voting.

Furthermore, national daily newspapers show a relative reluctance toward fostering self-organisation, with 3 out of 4 respondents indicating they “rarely” engage in activating collective structures. This may reflect a strategic preference for institutionalised forms of democracy over more spontaneous or grassroots social movements.

The study identifies a counter-intuitive trend regarding Polish community, non-profit and minority media. Despite their normative role in empowering marginalised groups, representatives of these outlets report the lowest rates of political and electoral encouragement. In the case of European politics, 8 out of 14 representatives of this sector admit to “never” encourage participation. This suggests that these outlets may prioritise specialised, niche content or community cohesion over broader political mobilisation. Additionally, representatives of local and regional newspapers – otherwise strong in their pro-democratic declarations – show internal friction, with one-third of respondents admitting they “rarely” or “never” encourage participation in local politics, potentially indicating localised apathy or political pressures.

While media professionals in Poland frequently articulate a commitment to democratic values and standards, the implementation of participatory tools remains relatively limited. On the one hand, newsrooms seem to successfully integrate low-threshold forms of engagement, such as allowing audience commentary and representing societal diversity, they remain notably reluctant to facilitate deeper, structured participation reaching a level of editorial decisions and strategies.

Interestingly, this rift is particularly pronounced within thePSM, where a significant discrepancy exists between legal mandates to foster public dialogue and the actual frequency of organised debates. Furthermore, while the media act as a robust catalyst for electoral mobilisation, they maintain a rigid institutional barrier against audience involvement in strategic production. Audiences are increasingly invited to contribute with content creation, yet they remain systematically excluded from the levels of organisational power, such as strategic planning and programming decisions. Consequently, the Polish media function primarily as a powerful mechanism for electoral legitimacy, consistently pushing the public toward the polls to reinforce institutional democratic processes. However, while there is a broad declarative commitment to activism and civic self-organisation, the media’s approach to these non-institutional forms of democracy remains cautious and infrequent. This hierarchy preserves professional autonomy, but limits the transformative potential of the media as a truly participatory democratic institution.

5. Conclusions

The relationship between democracy and news media in Poland is dynamic and actively shaped by forces of both domestic and international volatility, economic instability and drive towards reinstating journalistic autonomy and professional standards that support it. The analysis has identified three trends: at the systemic level of news environment - growing structural polarisation; at a level of news production - transition from passive reporting towards active facilitation of political activism in media production, and at the level of editorial practices - prioritising electoral participation of an audience over participation in content production and editorial strategies. As regards the systemic level, structural diversity of the Polish news environment is affected by a high degree of ownership concentration, growing polarisation and the institutional crisis of the PSM. Particularly the fragile position of the PSM negatively impacts its capacity to counteract contemporary challenges linked with epistemic crisis and platformisation. Commercial media, despite enjoying greater financial and organisational autonomy, face many systemic challenges, including SLAPPs, high market competition and difficulty to attract bipartisan audiences.

As regards the level of news production, the Polish media professionals, regardless of the sector, are aware of their role in shaping and protecting democracy, and use multiple means to increase political participation and improve the quality of public debate. Journalistic and editorial accounts suggest that Polish newsrooms are navigating towards a greater recognition and reaffirmation of professional standards that are contrasted with political pressure, economic instability and technological challenges. Editorial commitments leading to a more engaged and active style of journalism seem to serve as an essential counterbalance to the epistemic crisis and viability concerns. Economic realities, however, impact particularly the watchdog role and investigative journalism.

Finally, at the level of editorial practices, newsrooms seem to widely encourage electoral participation among their users and integrate low-threshold forms of audience participation, such as sharing audience commentary, opinion and representing societal diversity. Still, media outlets remain relatively reluctant to facilitate deeper, structured participation reaching the levels of structured public debates, editorial decisions, strategies and more frequent content production by users. Particularly notable in this respect is the low involvement of the PSM in these forms of participation.

All these trends expose the limits of news media in shaping a participatory model of democracy, at the same time they underline the institutional importance of the newsrooms

in epistemic guidance and navigation of a highly polarised and post-truth political space. This also opens up a new potential for redefining the assets of professional journalism and its role in forthcoming democracies.

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10. CONCLUSIONS

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By synthesising studied evidence from the research in the ten nations participating in the MeDeMAP project, this research offers an insight into the dynamic relationship between news production and democratic participation through the complex interplay of legal conditions, professional journalistic standards and practices, systemic structures as well as perceptions of media freedom, pluralism and democracy across Europe.

As regards the exercise and perception of the *primary* news media functions (information provision, watchdog, forum for a debate), journalists and media professionals across several studied countries tend to prioritise the first and most fundamental of them. For example, Irish journalists and news editors believe their primary responsibility in terms of protecting democracy is to provide true, accurate and impartial information to the people. Similar trends could be observed in other countries, including Poland, France and others. At the same time, the informative role of the media is also under pressure from the focus on rapid reporting over in-depth analysis of digital newsrooms, where systemic pressures degrade the contextualisation and continuity necessary for a well-informed electorate. Interestingly, across the ten-country study, the primary threat to the “watchdog” function has shifted from overt censorship to economic precarity, legal risks and the dominance of large digital platforms. In particular, the rise of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and the prohibitive costs of legal defence, act as a significant deterrent to investigative journalism, regardless of the formal regulatory model. In addition, the exercise of *primary* functions is affected by concentration of media ownership (e.g. Italy, France and Poland) and the control of advertising markets by global Big Tech. This suggests a trend where legal risk, economic precarity and technological dominance serve as a form of “soft censorship” that bypasses traditional democratic protections. Furthermore, the watchdog role of journalism is being redefined by technological and geopolitical developments. In Estonia and Czechia, recent geopolitical tensions have prompted targeted resilience measures, such as restrictions on foreign propaganda and support for Russian-language media. This reflects a broader trend of balancing the “openness” of the media system with national security concerns. However, the analysis warns that such measures, if not grounded in transparent and well-based judicial reasoning, could inadvertently weaken the very autonomy they seek to protect.

Concerning the *secondary* news media functions (representation, participation), the role of the PSM provides a noteworthy comparative lens. In the more established institutionalised media systems like Germany and Austria, PSM remains a cornerstone of the informational and representational roles of the media. However, even in these contexts, there is a visible struggle to maintain relevance and independence in the face of digital convergence and populist political pressure. In Ireland and France, the mandate of the PSM has been consolidated to address technological shifts, yet the challenge remains to foster participation – moving beyond treating citizens as mere consumers to seeing them as partners in shaping media agendas. The Slovenian "Citizens' Parliament" serves as a unique example, articulating a vision where institutionalised co-governance, public editorial meetings and national ombudsman structures create a space that addresses the structural deficits found in traditional media systems. The comparative data also highlights a shared concern regarding the representational role of other media sectors, particularly concerning marginalised groups. While the PSM and community media often perform better in this regard, structural biases within commercial and partisan ecosystems frequently produce perceptions of partisanship. In Poland and Slovenia, this is exacerbated by political polarisation, which transforms the media from a forum for deliberation into a space of emotional risk and selective visibility. This asymmetric representation deeply affects democratic participation, as citizens who do not see themselves reflected in the media are less likely to engage with it as a trustworthy institution.

Finally, as regards *signifier* functions, journalists and media professionals from most of the MeDeMAP countries generally agreed that democracy can hardly survive without independent media and quality journalism. Important is also the realisation that media democracy is not merely a collection of legal statutes, but a relational ecology where the alignment of discursive values - such as professional autonomy and civic engagement - with material supports, including stable funding and transparent regulation, is essential for the survival of the media realising pro-democratic functions. The problems and threats that undermine democracy are not perceived any more as nationally specific – they revolve around such issues as disinformation, dependency on digital platform operators, financial difficulties, erosion of journalism as a highly esteemed profession. These once again reveal imbalance between public expectations and practical realities: while normative democratic ambitions are high, economic sources are increasingly fragile. The analysis also shows the necessity of viewing media freedom as an ecosystem outcome. The efficacy of any legal framework is contingent upon its alignment with enabling conditions such as sustainable funding, ownership transparency and a robust civic culture. The findings from Slovenia for example suggest that when material supports like secure employment and

stable public-interest funding are missing, journalism defaults to low-cost, low-impact formats that discourage deeper civic involvement.

An emerging trend across all ten countries is the push for coordinated European actions to address the extraterritorial power of digital platforms. There is a consensus among journalists, media managers and politicians that national regulators are increasingly unable to enforce effective solutions to the challenges posed by the Big Tech platforms that have monopolised the advertising market.

In conclusion, the contributions in this volume confirm that the relationship between media and democratic participation is dynamic and structural: weaknesses at the level of regulation, market structure or technological determinants cascade downward, shaping newsroom practices and ultimately the citizen experience. Professional journalism facilitating rather than gatekeeping democratic participation remains a principal element of this setting.