Media Production in Ten EU Countries – Country Reports and Preliminary Takeaways

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Table of Content

INTRODUCTION

The task 4.2. explored media production in 10 EU countries from a particular angle of political participation. A main aim was to get a more complete picture of the production conditions, routines and business models that support or limit political participation. For this purpose, interviews were designed with media representatives. According to the Grant Agreement (p. 13):

> "[…] interviews will be conducted with representatives of relevant public bodies, particularly national regulatory agencies, industry representatives (e.g. from PSM, commercial broadcasting, press, digital native news media, social media channels) and those media organizations that are often underrepresented in international reports and studies".

The description of Deliverable 4.3. in the Grant Agreement (p. 24 of Part A) states that the document is to consist of "Country reports from all partners, combining national results of Task 4.1 and Task 4.2.".

The results of Task 4.1. were already presented in the Deliverable 4.2. in a form of country reports and a short comparative analysis, thus Deliverable 4.3. focused solely on Task 4.2. A methodological framework and design were developed in co-operation with other WPs, particularly WP2 and WP3 in months 13–15. The research protocol was discussed with country teams through a series of online meetings. This provided an opportunity to clarify uncertainties concerning anonymization, problems with an involvement of available journalists and chief editors, as well as time constraints. Country teams conducted interviewees in months 16–20 and completed transcriptions and translations of interviews in months 19–20. Country reports were accomplished in months 20–21 and the final report in months 21–22.

One of the greatest challenges faced by WP4 in general and addressed by several country teams were difficulties with enrolling interviewees. Particularly difficult proved to be a situation in Germany and Austria (due to the regional elections held in three German federal states amid September, and the Austrian national election held at the end of September 2024, putting considerable demands on newsrooms' staff). In the case of some other countries, invitations to interviews had to be sent several times in various ways and through various channels.

A brief comparative analysis has shown some patterns of similarities particularly in the area of basic pro-democratic media functions (mainly information provision and watchdog function). On the other hand, differences emerged from political participation and representation of diversity. The differences seemed to be largely informed by ways how democratic participation, diversity and the role of the media is understood in different countries. The results of research under the Task 4.2. will be further used for a comparative analysis with the results of Task 4.1. This analysis will be elaborated in the next, Deliverable 4.4.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The news media production provides an important institutional space for linking professional standards and accountability with the democratic aspirations of the broader society. Democratic and political participation manifests through engaging users with an everyday practice of being well-informed, getting involved in commenting and discussion and acting in various ways in order to influence a process of policymaking and political decisions. The Deliverable 4.3. presents theoretical considerations, methodological framework and results of data collected and analyzed by country teams in the form of country reports. This research explores media production in 10 EU countries from a particular angle of political participation and is structured according to three basic thematic parts: basic pro-democratic media functions, representation and participation, and conditions for media freedom, pluralism and democracy. A brief comparative analysis identifies patterns of similarities and differences among the countries. The results of the Task 4.2. will be further compared with the results of Task 4.1., and contextualized with socio-cultural, geographical and political factors in the next Deliverable 4.4.

PART I:

A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

1. NEWS PRODUCTION AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Recent years have witnessed some declining trends concerning users' engagement with the news and political participation (Benton, 2019). A study conducted by Altay, Fletcher and Nielsen (2024) observed that participation with news has declined from 2015 to 2022 in 46 countries, including most forms of participation such as liking, sharing, commenting on news on social media and talking about the news offline. Also, interestingly, "increases in political polarization were associated with lower participation" (Ibidem). At the same time, researchers traditionally argued that there is a positive association between news media exposure, enhancing one's knowledge of politics and political participation (Jung, Gil de Zúniga, 2011; Oser, Boulianne, 2020). This link has also been recently questioned by some scholars. Lee and Valenzuela (2024) 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 trends captured by recent scholarly works point to a necessity of better understanding the role of news production in political participation. The news media are still perceived as important sites of political knowledge and participation. Equally, strong are voices identifying crisis in news media and journalism. 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 reveals a potential of news media production to which Jeffrey Alexander (2016) refers as a "cultural power" of journalism, a quality that needs reconsideration in face of the multiple crises news media are undergoing recently. In this sense, much of journalism's power lies in linking professional standards and accountability with the democratic aspirations of the broader society, thus reclaiming journalism as a civil institution. In Alexander's words:

> "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 esthetically or morally" (2015, p. 10).

An institutional dimension of journalism and news production comes to the forefront also with its validating capacity as public trust is institutionally embedded. Ultimately institutions, not technologies will verify content produced by AI (Harari, 2024). 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 ways how the role of news and journalism in democratic participation is understood (and carried out in practice) from a country to country, from culture to culture.

A 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; it comes to being through what people have in common. For Arendt, democratic participation is inseparable from human freedom; in other words, freedom

flourishes through participation, it is made possible by convening, exchanging opinions and making decisions. The role of the media in facilitating democratic and political participation goes beyond mere channeling and standardizing of information. It embraces interpreting, contextualizing information in such a broader, often universalizing manner (Alexander, 2015) that it leads to opinion-forming, representation of 'enlarged mentality' (Arendt, 1969) and distillation of 'enlightened understanding' (Dahl,1979). Normatively speaking then, participation based on "illusion of knowing", "misinformation", "animosity" lacks some important prerequisites that can be derived from epistemic rights of media users and epistemic expectations associated with professional news media. For Dahl (1979) 'enlightened understanding' implies adequate and equal opportunities of citizens for discovering and validating what their preferences are on the matter to be decided. When applied to the news media, this would entail that the news media and journalism position as spaces where participation (and thus also freedom of expression) manifests through the conversation, debate, exchange of opinions and a fertile ground for taking 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 of an 'enlarged mentality' validates the opinion: the very quality of an opinion as of 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 (Ibidem). 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 that still subscribe to professional standards and normative expectations.

Democratic participation is usually defined in terms of acts undertaken by those who are not formally empowered to make decisions and intended to influence the behavior of those who have such decisional power (Verba, 1967). At the same time, participation in order to succeed should be built from actions with intended effects (Ibidem). In other words, participation does not only involve the presence of the citizens, but should ensure that citizens' concerns are incorporated into the policymaking process and are reflected in decisions on binding rules (Friedrich, 2006). As observed above, journalism and news production has a great potential to facilitate citizens' involvement in political and democratic life. It shapes civic involvement through stimulating knowledge, promoting discussion, fostering democratic values, generating optimal trust, but also necessary criticism; it provides "meaningful ports of entry into political life, where citizens have the opportunity to enact democracy through their practices" (Dahlgren, 2016). In practical terms, this translates into creating news media spaces for participation, where news media users can engage in an everyday practice of "being informed"; get involved in commenting and discussion; contribute with 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 get support in information, orientation and practical issues concerning elections at various levels (national, local, European).

The theoretical underpinnings presented above informed further methodological choices used for completing the task 4.2. Exploration of media production in 10 EU countries from a

particular angle of political participation aimed at a better understanding of the news production conditions, routines and business models that support or limit democratic participation. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were chosen as a principal method of collecting data and providing further guidance in qualitative analysis. Interviewees represent media outlets from different media sectors, described according to the template used in the Deliverable 4.2. These include both mainstream news media (e.g. PSM, private broadcasting, press, digital native news media) and those media organizations that are often underrepresented in international reports and studies (e.g. local media, community media).

A selection of thematic areas for the analysis is based on the Deliverable 4.2., work of WP2, WP3 and WP5 as well as theoretical underpinnings presented above. Most importantly, it builds on theoretical consideration of media's democratic roles by Carpentier and Wimmer (2024a, 2024b)[1]. In general, democratic and political participation as facilitated by the news media production is directly linked with basic pro-democratic media functions (primary functions), practices supporting diversity, representation and participation (secondary functions) and overall perceptions of media's role by journalists. These can be divided into three groups.

The first of them deals with an everyday journalistic routine and includes three types of practices that manifest three basic pro-democratic media functions as echoed in a number of scholarly works (McQuail, 1983, 2002; Curran, 2002; Habermas, 2006; Voltmer, 2013; Carpentier, 2011; Rauijmaekers, Maeseele, 2015; Schudson, 2017): providing accurate information, scrutinizing government and other powerful political, economic and social actors, and creating a forum for the public debate. These functions and practices can be seen as "primary" in a sense that the main raison d'être of the news media is to inform the society as long as they can do it independently and autonomously. The news media inform, discuss and monitor and through these activities other secondary functions. including representation of diversity and participation in politics or culture, come to shape.

The second group incorporates two types of practices aiming at representation of societal and cultural diversity and political participation. A representative 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. A participatory dimension manifests in news practices through which media users can became or stay politically active and contribute to democracy-in-making.

Finally, the third thematic group is linked with more general conditions that support or hamper media freedom and pluralism, and also, the role of news media in democracies as they are seen by journalists themselves. In this sense, the assessment takes into account political conditions that potentially support/hamper media freedom and pluralism (e.g. state capture of media ownership, unfair distribution of state advertising, political bias of media regulators, etc.), economic conditions (e.g. crisis in sustainable media business models, influence of VLP on how news is monetised), technological conditions (e.g. growing dependency on VLP in all steps of a news production and distribution process) and social

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[1] Hereby, we would like to thank Jeffrey Wimmer for his help and kind assistance in developing the questionnaire.

conditions (e.g. political and socio-cultural polarisation, growing fragmentation, disenchantment, distrust, exposure to disinformation, low level of media literacy).

Finally, a better understanding of 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. Such trends can include e.g. media support for centralization of executive power and justifications for bypassing the legislature.

Conceptualisation of these three thematic groups and dimensions served as basic structure offering key categories that helped to frame questions for the interviews.

2. A METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN FOR DATA COLLECTION AND COUNTRY-BASED ANALYSIS

2.1. Research Steps

Research on media production consisted of three basic steps: selection of media outlets and interviewees, conducting interviews and completing country reports. Media outlets and interviewees were selected according to a template below. Each country team conducted a minimum of 12 interviews in an oral form, in person or online. All interviews were anonymized (following a common instruction) and recorded. Interviews were carried out in national languages or in English, transcribed and (if needed) translated into English. At the third stage, country teams selected extracts from the interviews according to an Excel file provided. This helped to focus on relevant statements of interviewees and organize material for country reports. The country reports were prepared according to a common template (presented below).

2.2. Selection of Media Outlets and Interviewees

Interviewees were selected from six types of media outlets:

1. Public Service Media (PSM) (TV, radio or online news services);

2. Private TV or radio outlets (TV news service, or radio news services with a significant audience share);

3. Press (leading dailies);

4. Digital native news media (leading news portals);

5. Local/regional media (press, radio or TV with news provision);

6. Community, non-profit or minority media (outlets with news provision, e.g. one community-oriented, one in minority language).

Two representatives were selected for each of these categories, while the aim was to include one representative for each organization. For example, one editor-in-chief was selected to represent a quality daily, and one journalist to represent a tabloid newspaper. Two invited interviewees represented two different positions in a given media organization in order to reflect two different production perspectives: managerial/decision-making and journalistic. Suggested positions included:

- one representative of management, but directly linked to journalistic practice – editor-in-chief in most cases, or a manager responsible for news strand/services in a given organization;
- one journalist involved in: political reporting, investigative journalism or cultural/diversity journalism, depending on the outlet.

Thus, in the case of each country, 12 interviews were conducted.

2.3. A Questionnaire

Questions for the interviews are grouped according to 7 basic themes/categories reflecting various aspects of political participation in the media.

I. Providing accurate and reliable information

Q1. What journalistic standards ensuring reliability and accuracy of information are most fundamental in your work?

Q2. Can you give some examples how these standards are implemented in practice?

Note: If an interviewee has difficulties with answering these questions, you may help with some suggestions of journalistic standards on: sourcing, evidence and corroboration, avoiding misrepresentation and manipulation of stories or narratives, etc.

II. Controlling power holders

Q3. What role does investigative journalism play in your newsroom? What is its condition in comparison with the past?

Q4. What are, in your mind, conditions that support and hamper investigative journalism in your newsroom?

Note: If a representative of community, non-profit or local media mentions that investigative reporting is missing in their performance, you can avoid this question.

III. Providing a forum for the public debate

Q5. Can you provide some examples/good practices how you encourage the debate/ forum about important issues of public interest in your coverage?

Note: You can ask a follow-up question if you do not get enough information: what actors usually take part in the debates/exchange of opinions present in your coverage?

Q6. What are, in your view, conditions that hamper and support the debate or exchange of opinions in your news coverage?

Note: You can omit this question if an interviewee states that "debate or exchange of opinions" is not targeted in news coverage.

IV. Representing cultural, societal and political diversity

Q7. Do you have any strategies or standards to reflect cultural/societal and political diversity in your news coverage/journalistic performance? Can you mention some examples?

Q8. What are, in your view, conditions that support and hamper cultural/societal and political diversity in your news coverage?

Note: Please pay attention that there are two types of diversity in question: political and cultural/societal, so make sure that an interviewee answers to both of these.

V. Facilitating public participation

Q9. Can you mention some examples of your news coverage or journalistic performance that, in your view, facilitate political participation (e.g. electoral reporting, public consultations, cooperation with non-profit organisations representing various groups of citizens)?

Q10. How do you facilitate participation and representation of women and minorities? Can you mention examples?

Q11. What conditions, in your opinion, hamper and support political participation, in particular of women and minorities, in your news coverage?

VI. Conditions for media freedom and professional journalism

Q12. Please, tell me, what are the greatest risks to media freedom and pluralism in your country and globally? Do you pay attention to these in your news coverage?

Q13. What conditions, in general, hamper and support professional and political journalism in your newsroom?

Note: Once an interviewee has answered the question and has not mentioned any of political, economic or technological conditions or only some of them, use a follow-up question to learn more on these conditions.

Q14. How do you/your newsroom deal/s with some social trends that might be detrimental to democracies, namely polarization, growing distrust and exposure to disinformation?

VII. Relationship between media and democracy

Q15. Please tell me, in your own words, what is the most important role of journalists in your country and contemporary democracies? Are still news media necessary for democracies? If yes, in what ways?

Q16. Would you like to add anything at the end?

Field notes

F1: Please, describe briefly how easy/difficult it was to arrange an interview - e.g. did a journalist/editor-in-chief need a special approval from higher management structures?

F2: Please, describe any additional information from the interview – e.g. how many times (if at all) a journalist/editor-in-chief wanted to address certain issues off-the-record?

Explanatory comments

The questions are arranged according to the key themes, reflecting theoretical conceptualization. Some questions have follow-ups. For example, Q1 "What journalistic standards ensuring reliability and accuracy of information are most fundamental in your work?" is linked with "Can you give some examples…?". Other questions may also be developed in this way if it contributes to the quality and quantity of information collected. It is important that an interviewer gets as much information as possible on cases of good practices or limitations. At the same time, it is necessary to control timing and not extend unnecessarily time devoted to interviews.

In principle, questions refer to a particular newsroom or media outlet, but can be calibrated to include additional levels (e.g. a national, country level or EU/international level). In terms of time frame, most important are answers referring to the present situation, however some reflection on future (or past) problems may also be instructive.

In some cases, it might be worth explaining in a few words, how an interviewer understands political participation. For example: political participation refers to voluntary and intentional activities undertaken by people to participate in decision-making or influencing public policy (e.g. through voting, public consultations, opinionating, protests, statements, creating networks or groups supporting common issues of public interests, etc.). While the ultimate goal of the 4.2 task is to understand how media supply contributes to political participation, it is worth to add that information collected from the interviews will in principle show interviewees' perception of political participation in their media coverage. Nevertheless, concrete examples shared – e.g. on electoral coverage can provide some objective information. For example, during the last electoral campaign in Poland, five newsrooms decided to organize electoral debates with female candidates only. This happened for the first time in such a scale.

2.4. Country Reports Template

Country reports were prepared according to the following template:

> 1. Introduction

> This section describes a selection of media outlets and interviewees.

> 2. Providing Accurate Information

> This section offers a summary and brief analysis of interviewers' answers to the Q1 and Q2. It focuses on similarities and differences between standards on reliable and

accurate information across various media types. The section also points to good practices showing the implementation of identified standards.

3. Controlling Power Holders

This section aims at a summary and brief analysis of interviewers' answers to the Q3 and Q4. Focus is on similarities and differences between interviewees' accounts on investigative journalism across various media types. The section also summarises conditions that in interviewees' views support and hamper investigative journalism.

4. Forum for the Public Debate

This section brings a summary and brief analysis of interviewers' answers to the Q5 and Q6. Focus is on good practices encouraging discussion in news coverage. Limits and factors threatening the debate and exchange of opinions in the news coverage are also briefly covered as well as similarities and differences between various media types.

5. Representing Cultural, Societal and Political Diversity

This section offers a summary and brief analysis of interviewers' answers to the Q7 and Q8. Focus is on most characteristic strategies or standards that support or hamper cultural/societal and political diversity. Similarities and differences across various media types are also covered.

6. Facilitating Public Participation

This section provides a summary and brief analysis of interviewers' answers to the Q9, Q10 and Q11. This is a key section of the report. It includes examples that facilitate political participation in general and participation and representation of women and minorities. Similarities and differences between various media types are also covered. Conditions that in the interviewees' opinions hamper and support political participation, in particular of women and minorities, are identified.

7. Conditions for Freedom and Professional Journalism

This section provides a summary and brief analysis of interviewees' answers to the Q12, Q13 and Q14. The section identifies greatest risks to media freedom and pluralism in interviewees' opinions, as well as offers examples of strategies that counteract the risks in the newsrooms. Focus is also on most characteristic conditions (political, economic, technological, social) that according to interviewees hamper or support professional and political journalism. Similarities and differences between various media types are covered as well.

8. Relationship Between Media and Democracy

This section brings a summary and brief analysis of interviewers' answers to the Q15 and Q16. Similarities and differences between various media types are also covered.

9. Conclusions

Are there any patterns that emerge from the analysis? What are the trends (rise/decline) addressed by the interviewees? The last sections aims to answer these questions and define visible links between aspects of production and structural factors (e.g. concentrated ownership, lack of transparency or politically controlled PSM).

2.5. Coding Template

Transcriptions of interviews were anonymised, and interviewees' personal data were replaced with codes, which enabled the distinction between media category, interviewee's position, and a country, as presented in the Table 1. If a Participant mentioned the name of a particular media outlet that could possibly identify the person interviewed, it was advised to use "a leading daily" or "a leading tabloid". If an interviewee wanted to be identified, their name could be revealed with a footnote that permission for disclosure was given to the country research team.

The interviewees' codes were used in the country reports presented in the next part.

Table 1: Coding Template

Media category	Person	Country Code	Interviewees' codes (examples)
1. PSM	J – Journalist	Poland – PL	PL-J-1
	C – Chief Editor	Austria – AT	AT-C-1
2 Private TV and radio outlets	J – Journalist	France – FR	FR-J-2
	C – Chief Editor	Ireland – IE	IE-C-2
3. Press	J – Journalist	Portugal – PT	PT-J-3
	C – Chief Editor	Germany – DE	DE-C-3
4. Digital natives	J – Journalist	Italy – IT	IT-J-4
	C – Chief Editor	Slovenia - SI	SI-C-4
5. Local / regional media	J – Journalist	Estonia – EE	EE-J-5
	C – Chief Editor	Czech Republic - CZ	CZ-C-5
6. Community media	J – Journalist	Ireland – IE	IE-J-6
	C – Chief Editor	Austria – AT	AT-C-6

PART II:

COUNTRY REPORTS

COUNTRY REPORT: AUSTRIA

Josef Seethaler

based on the interviews conducted and extracted by Eva Tamara Asboth, and
Andreas Schulz-Tomančok

with contributions by Helmut Peissl

1. Introduction

Like in Germany, obtaining interview partners in Austria was extremely difficult—partly due
to the holiday period but most of all due to the national elections held at the end of
September 2024, which were expected to restructure the political landscape and, therefore,
placed considerable demands on the editorial staff. Nevertheless, we managed to interview
people with high-ranking editorial or management positions in their organizations.

The selection of interviewees followed the parameters set out in the guidelines: one
representative with a managerial function (C) and one journalist (J) from a public service
broadcaster, a commercial broadcaster, a national newspaper, a digital native news
medium, a local/regional media outlet, and a community media outlet. Beyond this
selection, recruitment was based on willingness and availability.

Throughout the report, the following rules of anonymisation (proposed by the *Guidelines for
transcripts of interviews and country reports*) are used:

	Media category	Journalist	Chief editor or any other managerial function
PSM	AT-1	AT-J-1	AT-C-1
Private TV or radio stations	AT-2	AT-J-2	AT-C-2
Press	AT-3	AT-J-3	AT-C-3
Digital natives	AT-4	AT-J-4	AT-C-4
Local/regional media	AT-5	AT-J-5	AT-C-5
Community media	AT-6	AT-J-6	AT-C-6

2. Providing Accurate Information

Regarding the informational function, almost all interview partners mentioned (or described)
the motto "Check, Recheck, Double-check" as the ultimate benchmark for conveying
information. As an exception, "pre-checked" information is mentioned, which is generally
assumed to be correct information. This mainly applies to information the Austrian Press
Agency (APA) provides because the APA editorial team thoroughly checks any information
before dissemination (AT-C-1).

The second rule concerns the reliability of the sources: "the most important thing is always
source criticism. Where does the source come from? Who is the source? Who is the author?
What intentions might he have?" (AT-C-3) In many cases, efforts are made to consult several

sources (AT-C-1, AT-C-2, AT-C-4, AT-J-5) and to obtain statements from independent experts or researchers (AT-C-1, AT-J-6). The perspective of the representatives of private-commercial TV, which is mainly focused on talk shows, makes the complexity of programme preparation clear, not only to be able to substantiate one's own questions with sources but also to be able to correct the answers of the interviewees' ad hoc if necessary (AT-J-2, AT-C-2). For digital natives and community media, however, including multiple sources also takes place against the background of not discriminating against any group involved in a topic and, thus, avoiding the reproduction of stereotypes (AT-J-4, AT-J-6).

Transparency is a big issue for the editorial teams of digital natives: "We make it clear in our articles which sources we work with" (AT-J-4). Therefore, all sources are "cited and linked where possible" (AT-C-4). A similar understanding can be found in local media, which have a much closer relationship with their audience: "In other words, we want our readers to be able to understand where we got our information from and, for example, why we are reporting on certain things" (AT-C-5). On the other hand, community media use in-depth interviews and reports to reveal background information (AT-C-6). Transparency is one of the criteria for independent journalism frequently mentioned in the European Media Freedom Act.

To continuously monitor compliance with these standards, all media have established internal processes such as editorial conferences, the most elaborate of which can be found in the PSB, where someone is assigned daily to "watch the previous day's broadcasts" (AT-C-1).

The statements usually mention journalistic standards as the backbone of editorial work. Only the public service broadcaster's representatives refer to the ORF's editorial statute (besides the Federal Act on the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation), and the community media representatives refer to the Charter of Free Radios and the Code of Ethics of the Austrian Press Council, of which they have recently been allowed to be members. In this context, it is important to know that only TV and radio stations with at least five editorial staff members are obliged to have editorial statutes; all other media are allowed to establish such statutes but are not required. On the other hand, TV and radio stations (except community media) and digital native media are not allowed to become press council members (Seethaler, Beaufort, 2024).

3. Controlling Power Holders

Except for a national daily newspaper journalist (AT-J-3), all interview partners see a low significance of the 'watchdog' function in contemporary Austrian journalism due to a lack of financial and time resources. Even a PSB journalist states that "limited personnel capacities […] naturally leads to less investigative reporting" (AT-J-1). Others concede that journalists with the necessary capabilities and knowledge are hard to find (AT-C-4). While the necessity of investigative journalism is undoubtedly recognized in times of excessively expanding PR activities of political and economic actors ("I feel that everyone now has a press spokesperson, right?"; AT-C-5) and the spread of "unreliable information" (AT-C-3), there is, however, no agreement on the importance of investigative journalism. On the one hand, such reports are expected to "receive a high level of attention and are also in high demand from the audience" (AT-J-1), while others fear that "it has little relevance for readers" (AT-C-4).

A few interviewees pointed to some ways to put more emphasis on controlling the powerful, ranging from close cooperation within the editorial department (AT-J-5) to partnership with international research networks (AT-J-3). Interestingly, the answers given by people who work for digital natives and community media, i.e., for non-traditional media, suggest a change in journalists' self-perception from exercising a control function to a generally critical attitude expressed throughout their work. "We may not see ourselves as watchdogs but as critical observers and critics. […] Since we come from different communities, we also have access to people who traditional media outlets might not otherwise reach, and then we also have access to people who can provide information." (AT-J-4) Or, to put it in a nutshell: "critical design is very much investigative" (AT-C-6).

4. Forum for the Public Debate

The media's forum function is intended to initiate and promote public debate on generally considered relevant issues. Austrian news media, however, more or less restrict this function to the debate between public figures. According to our interview partners, public debate is usually mediated by political representatives, experts, guest commentators, or the journalists themselves. Only a few formats of direct audience participation promoting dialogue and discussion are mentioned in our interviews. The most widespread are moderated online forums hosted by national newspapers (AT-J-3, AT-C-3). Private-commercial media are transferring these types of forum activities to "the entire field of social media," organizing "Twitter debates or forums on Facebook and Instagram" (AT-J-2). Only digital native media has expanded formats with direct audience participation in the sense of "debates with comment and voting functions" (AT-C-4).

Some traditional media still rely on letters to the editor (AT-C-5) and offline events where journalists act as moderators or discussants (AT-C-1). When community media organize discussion events, they broadcast them and, in this way, pass on the discussed issues to their broadcast journalists (who are laypeople): "So, of course, there are always docking points for many people who then pick up on them in their own broadcasts and are also part of the discourse" (AT-J-6).

5. Representing Cultural, Societal and Political Diversity

The media's representational function, which strives to make visible the diversity of different social groups' concerns, practices, and identities in different political, societal, and cultural contexts, is strongly anchored in the Austrian journalists' view of their public role. In the case of PBS, it represents a legal obligation *and* a societal one (AT-J-1), but to private commercial broadcasting, it is an issue simply because a radio show "has to be a melting pot. Otherwise, it's not good" (AT-C-2). The same is true for digital natives: "more diversity means tapping into new target groups and reaching a broader audience. […] Every reader should be able to find themselves in the reporting." (AT-J-4) Interestingly, a private commercial radio station's representative argues that the audience is only less likely to form a disinformed opinion if they see the "bigger picture," even if it includes "points of friction" (AT-C-2).

Diversity is primarily understood as cultural diversity (AT-J-1, AT-J-2, AT-J-3, AT-J-4, AT-C-6), political diversity (AT-C-1, AT-C-2, AT-J-5), and in terms of social background and age

(AT-J-3, AT-C-4, AT-C-5). Community media especially try to appeal to people who might otherwise be less able to make themselves heard (AT-J-6). These various perspectives require specific journalistic approaches, such as including critical voices (AT-C-1) and confronting opposing opinions (AT-C-2), which can be primarily found on the main TV and radio programmes, telling and picturing stories differently, and using simple, and uncomplicated language, which the interviewees mentioned as a vital feature of digital native media (AT-C-4). Community media outlets aim to provide low-threshold media access – also in terms of going beyond mere representation and empowering people to actively participate in public discourse and as radio broadcasters (AT-J-6).

To offer a diverse programme in any of the aspects listed above, most media outlets rely "on a broader background when recruiting and making new appointments" (AT-J-3). This includes employing people with different thematic focuses (AT-C-3) but also with different life experiences (AT-C-4), different social (AT-C-5) and cultural backgrounds (AT-C-6), and different histories of migration (AT-J-4).

As much as journalists and managers in all media types appreciate the media's representational function, some are aware of the problems associated with its implementation. On the one hand, it is expected to incur high costs (AT-C-5), which can be best met by PSM thanks to the household fee (AT-J-1). On the other hand, conflict can arise with other journalistic criteria, for example, when journalists much too often "invite people who were good in the debate" but do not represent diversity (AT-J-2), or the confrontation of contrary positions turns into a 'false balance' (AT-C-1).

6. Facilitating Public Participation

The media's participatory function can be understood in two ways: as participation *through* and participation *in* the media. Participation through the media refers to "the opportunities for mediated participation in public debate and self-representation in the variety of public spaces that characterize the social". In contrast, participation in the media "deals with participation in the production of media output (content-related participation) and in media organizational decision-making (structural participation)." (Carpentier, 2011, p. 67–68).

Regarding participation *through* the media, the media are expected to enable people to participate not only in public debate but also in political processes. Among the interview partners from the press and the public service broadcaster, the focus is mainly on processes of representative democracy, such as elections and referendums. They stress that they are "trying to increase political participation among our entire audience" by placing "emphasis on it in our reporting" (AT-J-3), particularly on "the importance of going to vote" (AT-C-3) and "topics such as equality and diversity" (AT-C-1, AT-C-5).

On the other hand, the answers of the representatives of private-commercial broadcasting and digital native media point to a different approach, mixing dialogue and discussion as more maximalist forms of participation *through* the media with minimalist variants of participation *in* the media, i.e., participation in the production of media output. The interviewees mentioned, for example, TV formats such as so-called "summits" (for example "education summit" or "labour summit"), where people could send in videos with questions, or "citizens' forums", "where citizens are called upon to participate actively in the political debate with their questions […] to politicians on various topics from their perspective, from

the reality of their lives" (AT-J-2). Similar formats to "get people to vote" can be found in the radio sector (AT-C-2).

The interview partners from digital native media have a different understanding of this "mixed" approach because they aim at involving non-profit organisations and, thus, focusing on topics that are usually not represented in public debate, such as "violence in the workplace or education and training opportunities for girls, sex work, and femicides": It is "important for us to promote these organisations and show people where they can turn to or where they can get involved or participate" (AT-J-4). By implementing website tools such as "mood barometers" and using "simple, precise language and entertaining presentations", different target groups should be addressed and integrated (AT-C-4).

Full participation in the media is only realised by community media, where "cultural associations or individuals create their own programme. So, this is actually the basic mission of our free radio per se." (AT-J-6) The breadth of programmes autonomously produced by citizens ranges from urban development and queer voices to contemporary history. "I think it's very much a way of encouraging people to get involved." (AT-C-6) While participation in the media is not restricted by law, it requires specific organisational structures that can hardly be financed commercially (and depend on state support).

Despite this variety of approaches in facilitating political participation, the credo of the interviewed PSB journalist to "actively approach minorities and actively encourage women" (AT-J-1) is not that much reflected in the private commercial sector. A similar commitment to "topics that are in the area of women's interest" (AT-J-4) and a kind of reporting that aims to involve women – and especially migrant women – "more into public life" (AT-J-5) can be found in the interviews with representatives of digital native media and local newspapers, and, to some extent, of the national press (AT-J-3).

7. Conditions for Freedom and Professional Journalism

When asked about freedom and professional journalism conditions, most interviewees expressed concerns regarding sufficient resources, the dangers posed by digitalisation and global platforms, and political influences. The respective perspective from which the various threats are viewed, depends on the position of the media outlet in the media system.

From the viewpoint of journalists who work for big TV stations, whether public service or private commercial, the difficult economic situation is particularly evident in the lack of personnel. Despite a massive reduction in staff in recent years, the same (AT-J-2) or even significantly more output via more channels must be produced (AT-J-1). Consequently, "in-depth research and the development of critical questions is difficult" (AT-J-2) and investigative journalism "that may hurt politics" becomes less relevant while the PR departments of political actors are steadily growing (AT-J-1) – so, "they [the politicians] no longer need us" (AT-J-2; see also Chapter 3: *Controlling power holders*). A journalist from a national newspaper puts it straightforwardly: It is "not easy for professional journalistic organisations to finance their work" (AT-J-3).

From a leading position at the PBS, "the greatest danger comes from politicians and political parties who try to restrict free media. In the case of ORF, this can happen through changes in funding, changes in the composition of the supervisory bodies, changes in the composition of the management, and influence on appointments in the organisation" (AT-C-1). An editor-

in-chief of a national newspaper toots the same horn: "Politicians need to reduce dependencies." They should "not immediately try to intervene in the ORF or immediately threaten newspapers with power or an advertising boycott" (AT-C-3).

On the contrary, a producer at a private radio station perceives the "unequal competition" between traditional and social media as the biggest threat because the latter "are in no way subject to the same regulations as traditional media, and we cannot expect consumers to differentiate." Competition, however, requires "rules that apply to everyone"; otherwise, there is "dysfunction in the media market" (AT-C-2). A similar view is expressed by the editor-in-chief of a national newspaper, who attributes the downward spiral from declining sales and fewer subscriptions to lower revenues and staff cuts, and ultimately to the impact on reporting, to the kind of dissemination of information by social media platforms: "Content is based on algorithms tailored to satisfy your profile, so you often do not know who is behind it. Some groups, especially on the right-wing spectrum, use Facebook or WhatsApp to spread content in a very targeted way. In other words, anyone can be their own medium, and there is little control. As a newspaper, you are subject to certain control bodies. You can quickly be sued if you do not adhere to certain rules." (AT-C-3) While economic pressure seems to be "not quite as extreme for us as it is for other media companies", regional newspapers experience growing competition with social media because "the internet means that everything always has to be faster and more immediate, and you have to be present on more and more platforms." This speed "is certainly not conducive to professional, high-quality journalism" (AT-C-5).

Interestingly, the representatives of digital native media, which are rather small in Austria, do not focus solely on their specific situation but try to see the whole picture: "Populism, external pressure from above (advertisements), pressure from the 'powerful', economic issues and the lack of cooperation between media outlets." (AT-C-5) Concerning one's own situation, characterised by enduring "financial risks", the summary sounds quite sarcastic: "We do not currently have any funding; hence we can hardly be cut off." Contrary to this, community media are aware that state funding supports their kind of participatory citizen journalism and guarantees their independence (AT-C-6; see also Chapter 6: *Facilitating public participation*). Accordingly, they see the "greatest risks for restricting press and media freedom [...] primarily outside the community media. This concerns both the political influence of governments and commercial influence in the mainstream media." (AT-J-6)

Two significant factors are mentioned in the interviews to improve the conditions for freedom and professional journalism in Austria: a high level of editorial independence and sufficient and fairly distributed state subsidies. Editorial independence can be best guaranteed through internal mechanisms that defend journalists "from political attacks" (AT-J-5), "keep their backs free even under more difficult conditions" and protect them from making "too many concessions" to the powerful (AT-J-2), thus securing "freedom in reporting and according to exclusively journalistic criteria and not economic criteria" (AT-J-3). In this respect, there is a consensus between the representatives of the various media types.

However, the proposals regarding the (re-)distribution of state funding are less unanimous. National newspaper journalists would like to see the awarding of subsidies more focused on supporting "professional political and independent journalism and, above all, high-quality journalism" (AT-J-3); regional newspapers are particularly in need of resources that help operating on several platforms (AT-C-5); and community media expect funding policy to

maintain "democratic political diversity" (AT-C-6). Private commercial broadcasters call for distributing the household levy (which is the financial basis of the PSB) "among the media makers in Austria". They argue, "Why is it not possible to solve it similarly to the climate ticket for the ÖBB [the Austrian Federal Railways], where I can travel on all means of transport? I could imagine that many people would be prepared to pay 365 euros a year in exchange for being able to read every newspaper in Austria online. I do not have to log in 18 times with any other names" (AT-C-2).

Only occasionally reference is made to the protection of journalistic sources, research and investigations (including the protection of journalists from interception of communications, surveillance, search and seizure; AT-C-4) as an indispensable prerequisite for any journalistic work and, in particular, for the existence of small-scale undertakings in the digital natives sector (AT-J-4), and the importance of state-funded programmes to promote "media literacy, to explain why media is important, why diversity is important, and to accept that criticism can help us move forward" (AT-C-3).

8. Relationship Between Media and Democracy

When asked about the relationship between media and democracy, the answers mainly reflect two roles of journalism: the informational function and the watchdog function.

The significance of the informational function is widely recognised and nowadays fuelled by the defence against disinformation and fake news, which are considered "weapons to destabilise social systems and democracy" (AT-J-3): "We need someone who checks facts or news for truthfulness" (AT-J-5) and to "keep the public informed, based on different sources and a well-researched basis" (AT-C-5) because "if we can no longer agree on common facts, but everyone believes in their alternative facts, then there is a problem" (AT-J-1).

On the other hand, the term 'fake news' must not be watered down because that would make people even more uncertain about what is a fact and what is not: "I also believe that the political parties are not doing themselves any good when they scream 'fake news' every time journalists report something they do not like because they're somehow dissatisfied with the reporting. Of course, this also undermines the credibility of journalism. And we see that there is already a not insignificant number of so-called news avoiders." (AT-J-1) As it is the task of professional journalism in a democratic society to "report on facts and organise them" (AT-C-3) or – to put it more bluntly – to "report on what happened, not what one would like to have reported" (AT-C-2), it has become "increasingly important to refute these statements [of politicians on social media platforms] if they are not true and to point out certain contradictions between reality and appearance." (AT-J-2) However, the PBS journalist admits that "in journalism, especially in tabloid journalism, every conflict is fuelled because a lot of things are presented in black and white and not in shades of grey when it comes to negotiations and the political balancing of interests." (AT-J-1) Thus, certain topics can be "radicalized very quickly and discourse can escalate" (AT-J-5).

The problem addressed here primarily concerns the use of the watchdog function, which is given a prominent position in the answers of the interviewees across the various media types: "It is important for the media and journalists to point out grievances and criticise where it is important to do so." (AT-C-1) "I believe that the most important task is still the core task of controlling politics as the fourth pillar of the separation of powers." (AT-J-2) "I think the

media are important because they are […] the fourth pillar in the separation of powers. In a democracy, it must be possible to criticise those in power […]." (AT-C-3) "I do believe that a classic watchdog task is a very important one." (AT-J-4) "Yes, [news media are still necessary for democracies] for various reasons, precisely because someone is needed to keep an eye on those in power" (AT-J-5). "Without the media or journalism, it would not be possible for certain abuses to be uncovered, where politicians or other powerful people would perhaps have no interest in this being publicised and the population being informed" (AT-C-5). Contrary to all these commitments to the control function of journalism; however, it must be remembered that, in everyday journalistic work, it plays only a subordinate role due to a lack of resources (see Chapter 3: *Controlling power holders*).

Among journalists' contributions to safeguarding democracy, some interviewees point to tasks such as analysing, enabling representation and access, and empowering citizens, which Hanitzsch and Vos (2016) subsume under analytical-deliberative roles aiming to provide means for political participation through the media (Beaufort, 2021). To an editorial manager at the PSB, it is even "the most important task is to provide a basis for understanding in an increasingly complex world" and "to keep pointing out when there are solutions to problems so that people do not lose heart" (AT-C-1). Similarly, the representatives of a widely read national newspaper see it as part of professional quality criteria not only "to present what is happening" but "also to promote social debates about it" and "to give a voice to people who otherwise would not be able to defend themselves or have problems or make problems an issue" (AT-C-3).

Digital native media go one step further and see themselves in "a mediating role, to understand what the issues are that people are concerned about and to address them and open up a space for discussion. But then also to do translation work. So, what does that actually mean now? What do political decisions mean, what impact can they have? […] And to create media attention for this or perhaps to create the discourse, i.e. this discursive space." (AT-J-4) From the perspective of community media, any democratic discourse must be characterised by diversity, and it is the main task of community media "in combination with public broadcasting" to "preserve diversity and create framework conditions where this can happen" (AT-C-6). However, to do this and collect "the best possible quality information" (AT-J-6) "requires independent journalists" (AT-J-5, AT-C-4). "The more independent, truly independent journalism there is in a country, the higher the democratic standards of that country usually are." (AT-J-6)

Only one interview partner addresses in no uncertain terms the risks the Austrian media system is exposed to: "How will the media of the future be financed? With newspapers, print, you can see that sales are declining. There are fewer subscriptions, less money is coming in. This naturally leads to fewer staff and that naturally has an impact on reporting. And a worldwide and national challenge is content from the Internet" (AT-C-3): A third of all advertising expenditure in Austria already goes to global platforms (Seethaler, Beaufort, 2024).

9. Conclusions

At first glance, there is a high degree of congruence between the answers of journalists and those in leadership or management positions. This may be due to the fact that, in Austria, most media houses and editorial offices (except for the PBS) are not very large. Major

differences can only be observed with regard to the conditions for freedom and professional journalism. Here, journalists tend to see the effects of austerity measures and shrinking resources in the face of growing demands to produce content for multiple platforms. People in leadership or management positions tend to focus more on the competitive pressure in the media market and the political pressure from outside. However, both sides point to the limited resources available as one of the reasons why the control of the powerful and the representation of cultural, societal and political diversity cannot be implemented to the extent considered necessary.

The gap between claim and reality is particularly wide when it comes to the watchdog function. This may be related to the fractured relationship between journalism and politics described by Hallin and Mancini (2004) for Central and Northern European media systems. This relationship has its roots in the simultaneous emergence of the mass press and modern political parties, which eventually led to tensions between professional autonomy and proximity to political actors – tensions that continue to this day (Seethaler, 2025). Not surprisingly, in the interviews, journalists emphasised the importance of political independence, for which media owners are held responsible.

The interviews also confirm previous research results, according to which media and journalists in Austria stand out internationally for their pronounced claim to be impartial providers and mediators of information, while the willingness to offer a forum for public debate ranks at the bottom of an international ranking, as it is only supported by half of the journalists (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). The importance of the information function is underpinned by the need to counter disinformation and fake news – which is seen as a crucial aspect of the legitimisation of today's professional journalism. On the other hand, a different understanding of journalism is gaining ground, which aims to allow for various forms of participation through and in the media.

The most remarkable differences between the views of the representatives of the various media genres concern the role of state funding and the criteria for its allocation. However, the global challenges that particularly a relatively small national media market like Austria faces are hardly mentioned in the interviews.

COUNTRY REPORT: CZECH REPUBLIC

Karolína Šimková, Jeffrey Wimmer

1. Introduction

For the twelve interviews, we targeted the most important news media (or 'leading media') in each media area (online, radio, television, printed newspaper, regional and community media) in the Czech Republic (CR), which we succeeded in doing. Only the largest tabloid daily newspaper did not take part, but some of the interviewees from other media outlets referred to this newspaper in their interviews.

The majority of those interviewed are from the areas of news media management and/or editors-in-chief. This is mainly due to their longer professional experience, but also to the relatively small sizes of editorial teams. The majority of the interviewees are men, with the women who were interviewed not mentioning any major aspects of disadvantage.

All interviews were characterized by the fact that the respondents were happy to provide information. They also often referred to other media, which shows that they pay considerable attention to other media. One reason for this is the size of the country and the importance of the capital city, Prague. Almost all the interviews were also characterized by a critical view on the financing of editorial departments by companies, even if most of those interviewed denied that there was a direct involvement of the financiers.

The Czech political landscape is susceptible to several potential crises. Key among these is the ongoing debate about the Czech Republic's role in the European Union, especially concerning its response to the Ukraine conflict and energy dependency on Russia. Additionally, the economic challenges of rising inflation and energy prices could strain the ruling coalition, potentially leading to fractures within the government. The Czech case is seemingly paradoxical, which looks very respectable on some social and political indicators but, at the same time, there is a public perception that the political system is dysfunctional.

The relationship between democracy and the news media in the Czech Republic is therefore important and contingent. The diversity of media, constituting the Czech media landscape, has a central role in contemporary democracy. The Czech Republic's media landscape is a blend of traditional and digital platforms, with public broadcasters maintaining a strong presence alongside a competitive private sector. The influence of media ownership by powerful business figures with political ties remains a significant issue, affecting public trust and media independence. In the Czech Republic, the level of trust in the news is among the lowest in the world (Eurobarometer, 2023). Parallel to that, working conditions for Czech journalists are currently deteriorating. A current journalistic report shows that journalists experience insecurities about their jobs at different stages of their careers (e.g. Honc, 2024). In a former study Volek (2010) pointed out, that:

> "Newspaper editors feel a strong inner professional conflict concerning the following professional dilemma: to be a moral agent focused on serious problems of society or a

27

craftsman who has generally given up on higher standards of journalistic work and tries to conform to the popular standard of the general audience".

2. Providing Accurate Information

Perspectives on the role of the media were discussed in substantial detail by all interviewees. Of course, there were some differences in the formulations, depending on the attitude of the interviewees and the type of medium. A prototypical answer is from press media, where you can clearly see the connection to quality assurance and the implementation of identified standards:

> "The most important thing is to keep your finger on the pulse of the times—sorry, I know that's a bit of a cliché term. To monitor all events, think critically about them, act quickly, but always verify the information. That's one aspect, but of course, in the end, there must be verification and an excellent outcome—meaning a perfectly written article, ideally with multiple sources" (CZ-C-3)[1].

From our point of view, another exemplary example also comes from the press sector. The emphasis here is not only on the specific and information-relevant news selection but also on quality assurance:

> "So, this is the thing, you don't really write an article because you've read something on Twitter which was important, interesting, or you heard someone out. You just to, you know, you just try to get to know what's going on. That's the first thing. […] Second, we still […] do have a pretty strict editorial system. So, an author wrote an article, and then here comes the editor, and he reads it and tells you […]" (CZ-C-3).

The only exception to the rule can be found in a local community media organization, located outside the capital, which focuses more on cultural issues and tends to downplay the traditional information role:

> "It's not really important any more. It used to be, I think 6 or 7 years ago, but right now, with how broadcasting changed, it's mostly a podcast, everyone is doing their own thing, are informing about the topics they are interested in. And when we are writing articles, it's usually about some exhibitions happening or concerts and stuff. We don't do news reporting" (CZ-C-6).

3. Controlling Power Holders

All interviewees relate to investigative journalism. Most of them consider it a good practice, except for one respondent (from a private broadcaster) who does not consider this a good and important journalistic role. Interviewees from public service media, press media, and from one online media are proud of their investigative offerings and actually want to expand them, if, on the one hand, financing is secured, but also if journalists with investigative skills

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[1] Seven of the twelve interviews were in Czech; translations of these interviews into English were handled by the Czech MeDeMAP team.

can be recruited for this position. The latter is considered to be a specific problem in the CR.

However, investigative journalism is sometimes viewed very critically by private media because of its high costs and limited translation in increases in circulation, reach, etc. One interviewee explains this position as follows:

> "Without a doubt. The pressure for clicks, the pressure for readership. Large media houses basically have no reason to support what you call investigative journalism because they are built on the business model running this way" (CZ-C-4a).

But it has to be noted that two Czech media houses (Hlidacipes and Okraj) are focusing largely on investigative journalism on the other hand.

4. Forum for the Public Debate

The importance of the forum function is not shared by all interviewees from the different media organizations, and it is implemented very differently. A more superficial form of the forum function is used by an interviewee from a regional media:

> "It's a project that basically… provides a plurality of opinions in the form of a yes/no debate. For example, should the death penalty be reinstated in the Czech Republic? We usually present three arguments for yes and three arguments for no. So, it captures the plurality of opinions. This is handled by the head of our opinion section. And I think he's doing a pretty good job, and it's quite well-read. People read it because they find… well, this format doesn't seek the truth. It simply offers a plurality of opinions on a controversial issue" (CZ-C-5).

An interviewee from public broadcasting points out that the forum function is also clearly linked to the selection and diversity of those involved (see also the next section):

> "Of course, there are various ways. It's sometimes a choice of respondents. Sometimes we invite a large audience to say their ideas, their point of views, and then we can use and discuss it. And we are very open to people who want to say anything. Of course, you must always be selective" (CZ-C-1b).

5. Representing Cultural, Societal and Political Diversity

What might come as a surprise, interviewees from all media mention political diversity as the first and most obvious diversity-related role. From their point of view, they all implement it, even if the social desirability effect could be high. A local media interviewee mentioned the problem that political diversity could not really be achieved if right-wing extremist politicians/parties in particular refused to make statements (which also jeopardized the role of information journalism). A private regional media interviewee who, as outlined above, has a more restrictive approach to the forum function, also sees problems here:

> "We don't focus too much on balance in that regard. I'll explain why. If you look at our website or in our newspapers, we have a section about citizen journalism. And we try to… it's actually an integral part, right, an integral part of our activities or our portfolio of operations. We need external collaborators" (CZ-C-5).

But aside from the understanding of diversity as an important mechanism in the representation of political opinion, most respondents had difficulty answering questions in this domain. With some support and additional questions, references were also made to gender and minority diversity. The latter is only seen as explicitly achieved in the case of one broadcaster when looking at their presenters. This can also be attributed to the fact that there are some well-known presenters with a different ethnic background. A community media is dedicated to, and maintained by, a specific minority. Gender diversity is acknowledged as a goal but considered to be far removed from being achieved by all media. Public service media are considered to be leading here, as one interviewee describes it:

> "Another question is gender equality. I'm old enough, so I know it's a slow process. But now our staff is half women, half man. In fact, we are very feminized" (CZ-C-1b).

6. Facilitating Public Participation

This role, and the questions addressing it, were the most difficult for the interviewees to answer. Most of the time, when asked repeatedly (and after explaining this role), the answer was that they basically acknowledge the importance of this role or even claimed to have fulfilled it. But concrete examples were only rarely given. Only a regional media interviewee mentioned (a modified form of) citizen journalism. Interestingly, one press media interviewee pointed to exactly the opposite process:

> "Quite the opposite way. I think we are being read by active people and because they are active, they read us" (CZ-J-3).

7. Conditions for Freedom and Professional Journalism

The mood of those interviewed is relatively melancholic and can be described as discouraged. Three overarching trends can be identified from the perspective of the respondents, who understand all three trends as crisis phenomena: the business model crisis, the concentration crisis of media (with media being in the hands of a small group of investors), and the populism crisis with, in particular, the attacks on public service media. The economic crisis is translated primarily in an ever-decreasing availability of financial resources and associated with fewer and fewer jobs, which is seen as further reinforced by technical innovations such as AI. One of the interviewees responds to the question about how they see the future, as follows:

> "Not very bright. I see further budget cuts and a reduction in the number of journalists in newsrooms who are key journalists for me. Artificial intelligence will bring this about—it's already happening. Everyone's acting like we can provide news services without people, and soon there will be even fewer of them" (CZ-C-4a).

The takeover of the media by businessmen is seen as critical by all those interviewed, but they see the situation is not-yet-serious because these owners—at least in the cases of the media whose staff we interviewed—stay out of day-to-day business. The interviewees acknowledge that this could change quickly:

> "I think one of the biggest risks is probably who's in charge. It depends on how tied that person is to political circles, for example. I think we're lucky that we have Czech owners who don't have any specific interests, so they push us to maintain objectivity and not to favour anyone. […] But I do believe it could become a problem if someone with specific interests took control. Unfortunately, we've seen this happen around the world. Media can be used to push certain political agendas or support certain individuals. So that could be a big issue" (CZ-C-2b).

In relation to this, some negative developments related to reporting – especially in the field of regional and local media – are denounced, without becoming specific:

> "Here, I think, in our region, the role of the media is such that they bring non-confrontational information so that you don't upset anyone. Whether it's from those businessmen or those politicians. I think that's what's happening here right now. Unfortunately, I also have it from another side, but it's a reliable source. Even how the local journalists behave towards respondents is just strange" (CZ-J-5).

The only exception is a community media respondent (who works at a university radio), who openly criticized the university management for being too close to the government.

Several interviewees are suggesting greater government funding as a solution:

> "So, states should step in, just as they support films or national cinema, and create a journalism fund based on clear and transparent principles to support the spectrum from left to right. That way, everyone can find relevant information that still operates within the democratic framework" (CZ-C-4a).

One interviewee, from an online media that was initially publicly funded, describes how they have specifically decided against advertising funding:

> "Money would definitely help. That ties into our business model and our commitment to independence. We decided not to have ads because we believe that the connection to advertisers can compromise independence. Ads bring in money, but they also create a dependency on who is advertising with you" (CZ-J-5).

8. Relationship Between Media and Democracy

The concentration of media in the hands of a small group of people who are connected to Czech financial and political elites is viewed by the most respondents – except for public service media – as an underlying problem. The interests of these small groups are not considered to be related to maintaining democracy or to enhancing civil liberties. In particular, the interviewees distinguish a substantial potential for misusing media to serve business interests. Democracy is therefore constantly being put to the test.

In addition, but still related to this area: reference was often made to the political situation in Slovakia, to which the Czech Republic has a close cultural and political proximity. The situation for Slovak journalists is particularly worrying, as the struggles there are fierce: The illiberal and authoritarian tendencies in Slovakia are perceived as attempts to incorporate media in an anti-pluralist agenda, also reducing media freedom and freedom of expression. Moreover, many journalists view the role of the so-called social media as negative for democracy:

> "Let's acknowledge that in this case, social media plays a certain role, and in my view, not a very good one. And it's not just about social media itself, but the way all these platforms function. Essentially, you surround yourself with people who share similar views. Few people have a social media network that's super diverse, with everyone holding different opinions and doing different things. I think, [the situation is] quite the opposite, social media tends to unite people around shared beliefs, and that often includes political views or societal positions, etc." (CZ-C-1a).

Journalists find it especially difficult to counteract this because it is such a comprehensive trend in political communication and because it also affects the foundations of journalism in its entirety. One interviewee responds to a question about the relationship with social media as follows:

> "Our main competitor today, as a regional media outlet, isn't regional or national media, like it used to be. Our biggest competitor is social media. Regional news or information spreads so quickly on social networks that it's sometimes hard to keep up. Today, we have alerts thanks to artificial intelligence, notifications that flag interesting things on Facebook groups or local community websites, […] AI is actually helping us in that way. But social media is still our competitor. The challenge we face is that we need to keep up with the times and use robots or modern communication technologies to turn this competitive environment into a source of information. It's not about blindly publishing everything that appears on social media, but rather taking that information, verifying it—which isn't always easy—and then publishing it in context" (CZ-C-5).

An interviewee from an online media mentions a strategy to counter these problems, by tapping into a different form of journalism to revitalize democratic discourse, even though they immediately add the obstacles to implementing this strategy:

> "As for *slow journalism* or *solution journalism*, that's not being done here in the regional media. These outlets are focused on daily news, so they don't have time for investigations or in-depth analysis and context. It's logical—they don't have the time or the money. And that's another issue: the underfunding of regional media" (CZ-J-5).

9. Conclusions

In the interviews, we can identify various prototypical positions regarding the journalists' role(s). One position can be understood as the "professional information provider", a self-image especially used by interviewees from private and regional media. The representatives of the public service media can be understood as enthusiasts who do not want to underestimate the role of their media for the CR. Community and online media interviewees describe these media (and their roles) as highly diverse and very different, especially in

terms of internal structure and perceived roles, so that it is difficult to classify community and online media under the respective term.

From the perspective of those interviewed, a very important factor is the role of the so-called social media and social network platforms. In the CR, Seznam search aggregator (https://www.seznam.cz), as the only significant competitor to Google, plays an important role, especially in the media sector, a role which is viewed very critically by all media interviewees.

The respondents also point to the material dimension, and the resources they have at their disposal, with a discussion about the role of technology, but also the organizational infrastructures that harbor them. A similar point can be made for the regulatory role of the state, but here we can acknowledge a discursive element through the respondent's emphasis on its legitimacy, especially in contrast to the situation in Slovakia or Hungary. The role of technology is seen by some (especially those in the online, local and regional sectors) as very beneficial, as it supports innovation and enables them to do better reporting. A prototypical answer is:

> "Technologies certainly support us significantly. We're an electronic medium, and the possibilities we have today are incomparable to what they were ten or twenty years ago. One aspect is the ability to broadcast live, using 'minimized' technologies. Nowadays, what used to require a massive broadcast truck, which had to be driven to a location and parked, can now be handled by technology that fits in a pocket or backpack. That's just one example. Then there are many other advancements in content processing. The digitalization of formats—today, you can shoot footage, and send it wirelessly, and the entire newsroom can work on that material in no time. In the past, material had to be physically transported on tape. The ability to edit non-linearly, for example, has been a huge step forward in our work, speeding things up but also, I believe, improving the quality. This process hasn't ended; it's still ongoing and enables all sorts of improvements" (CZ-C-1a).

One interviewee, from a private radio organization, is optimistic because of the potential of generative AI:

> "Honestly, even speaking personally, thanks to tools like ChatGPT, I can get much more work done than I used to. It's just about knowing how to use these tools to make your job easier and focus on more important things" (CZ-C-2b).

In contrast, a representative of public broadcasting expressed that there is kind of lagging behind in the Czech sector, which she viewed as a great shame, especially in the Czech context:

> "We must be very much aware, that we must use more and more so-called modern platforms. That probably after some years, these old ways, how to go to the audience, they are being lost or [become] very marginal. I don't remember it, but I know that we were very often on the first place of technologies. I don't think that, for us, it's just important and we try to use modern technologies as much as possible" (CZ-C-1b).

Most of the journalists do not know or appreciate community media, and they often become confused with local or regional media. The community media interviewee themselves report that they have little connection to each other and to the established media. Finally, one

area of conflict stands out. It is the competition between national media based in Prague and regional media, which is a competition for prestige, people and resources. During the interviews, the latter see themselves at a disadvantage but consider themselves self-confident enough to emphasize their advantages and democratic role.

COUNTRY REPORT: ESTONIA

Alessandro Nanì, Andres Jõesaar, Arko Olesk, Kristiina Raud

1. Introduction

Estonia's media landscape is characterised by a high level of media freedom and light media regulation, yet highly concentrated ownership.

In terms of plurality, Estonia, with its significant Russian-speaking minority, faces potential susceptibility to Russian propaganda, particularly in its eastern regions. The Kremlin has historically used disinformation campaigns to sway public opinion and foster divisions in neighbouring countries. While Estonia's government actively counters propaganda through media literacy programs, this challenge remains significant, especially in communities with closer cultural or linguistic ties to Russia. Moreover, the war in Ukraine has made the government step-up efforts to reduce the role of the Russian language in society, for example, by starting to eliminate the use of Russian in education. Russian-language media is still seen as a necessary part of the media system to counter Russian propaganda.

In this context, three private groups (mostly with domestic owners) and one public broadcaster dominate the market. Their portfolios include daily and weekly papers, local media, news portals, and radio and TV stations. Nine of the twelve interviewees worked for these four media groups, either directly or as subcontractors. The remaining represent local and minority media.

The selection of outlets and channels sought to include the most prominent ones in each category, while maintaining a balance between the media groups and types of media. Almost all the major channels and outlets are represented in the sample. Because of the sample selection guidelines, we needed to omit weekly papers, although they hold a prominent position in the national journalistic landscape. We also observed a regional balance between the local and minority media.

Only one outlet qualified for the category of digital native media, although with some reservations, as they also publish articles from print papers and magazines owned by the same group. However, as the news portal is not the primary channel for digital publication of these articles and the editorial team of the portal exclusively publishes in digital format, they were considered a fit for the category.

In the selection of individuals, age and gender balance were affected by the lack of women in leading positions in Estonian media companies. This was, in part, mitigated by including interviewees not only from general editorial management, but also from news desk management.

We had no trouble recruiting interviewees (only one manager did not respond to requests). Interviewees spoke openly and did not avoid topics or certain types of information. All of them considered the topics discussed important.

2. Providing Accurate and Reliable Information

Media regulation in Estonia is liberal, with only the most important aspects, such as freedom of expression, protection of sources, privacy, etc., being regulated by law. There is no press law in Estonia.

It is clear from the responses to all the interviews that all newsrooms, regardless of size, orientation, ownership, and type of media, work according to the principles of journalism as formulated in the Estonian Code of Journalistic Ethics. One interviewee remarked: "The Code of Journalistic Ethics is the foundation of journalism" (EE-J-5).

Respondents who did not explicitly mention the Code in their answers also emphasised the truthfulness of facts, fact-checking, balance, giving all parties a say, and keeping facts and opinions separate as firm standards of journalistic work. The standards of journalistic excellence set out in this self-regulatory document, adopted by media organisations in the late 1990s, have proved to be universal and have remained unchanged over time to the present day. Thanks to the adequacy of this document, there has been no need for the state or media organisations to duplicate the provisions of the Code of Ethics.

However, representatives of the major media houses referred to more detailed requirements for the work of journalists that are still laid down within the organisations. Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR) has a Code of Good Practice in this respect. Similar rules have been established in private media groups. Other rules on the use of artificial intelligence were mentioned in the interviews, as well as the requirements for rapid correction of errors in texts published online. The need to separate journalistic content from content marketing and avoid pressure on editors from advertising revenue was specifically mentioned. This is already the case at the level of separation between the editorial and advertising departments.

In large newsrooms, workflows are standardised to ensure high quality journalistic content: "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). One respondent provided an example of an internal editorial requirement when implementing source-checking.

> "There was a recent case in Hiiumaa where animal rights activists posted a picture on social media of a dog that had been left to die. It got quite a lot of coverage in Estonia. And of course, I also had a journalist who immediately came in with great emotion and said, look what they are doing, and that everything is bad and everything is evil. 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 small newsrooms, all responsibilities lie with journalists.

3. Controlling Power Holders

Regarding investigative journalism, a recurring theme across the statements emphasises the time-consuming nature of investigative journalism. For instance, one editor from digital

native media notes that "investigative journalism is very expensive because it is time-consuming and in-depth", suggesting that even in well-resourced environments, time and depth are typically not abundant in journalism (EE-C-4). This sentiment is echoed in the statement, which expresses a need for "good long" projects to be conducted quietly to maintain their quality and potential impact. When rushed, the essence of investigative reporting is often compromised, indicating that editorial pressure on quick stories may jeopardise thoroughness (EE-J-1).

Conversely, some respondents highlighted the need to balance investigative efforts with daily reporting responsibilities. One interviewee remarked that their editorial office engages in "investigative journalism in daily news," illustrating that deep dives can coexist with timely reporting, particularly on current affairs (EE-C-4). This dual approach reveals a difference in strategy: some prioritise prolonged investigative processes, while others effectively meld them with routine news coverage.

Local context also plays a significant role in shaping investigative journalism. Several statements reflected the challenges faced by smaller communities. For instance, one journalist from a local outlet noted that the lack of anonymity in small towns makes whistleblowing difficult, stating: "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). Fear of retribution can stifle potential sources, creating a challenging atmosphere for reporters attempting to uncover critical issues. An editor from a local media acknowledges the duality of small community dynamics, where everyone knows each other, allowing for some insights but also potentially leading to exaggerations or misunderstandings that complicate the investigative landscape (EE-C-6).

Furthermore, both journalists and editors recognise the ethical responsibility that accompanies investigative work. The same local editor who mentioned the challenges of anonymity also emphasised the need to critically assess sources, pointing out that local narratives can be manipulated for personal gain (EE-C-6). This awareness of the ethical implications affirms that while investigative journalism often aims to shed light on wrongdoing, it necessitates a sceptical approach to maintain credibility and integrity.

Despite these challenges, there is a sense of community expectation and demand for investigative journalism. Being part of a smaller environment means that journalists are acutely aware of local issues and can potentially respond more effectively to community needs. For instance, one journalist believes that if the editorial office were "more active and did more of the stories ourselves", people would be more inclined to come forward with information (EE-J-5).

In summary, the interviews revealed a multifaceted view of investigative journalism, marked by an understanding that while time and resources are paramount, the context in which journalism is conducted significantly shapes its effectiveness. The balance of thoroughness and urgency, alongside the ethical complexities involved, illustrates a landscape in which investigative journalism can flourish if navigated carefully. The very nature of minority journalism can act as both a support system and a barrier, depending on how issues are addressed and reported.

4. Forum for the Public Debate

In general, journalists have two understandings of the kind of debate they can facilitate. The most common type is the debate that takes place in the media between different spokespeople. The other kind of debate takes place among the audience based on what they see in the media. This relates to how different forms of journalism are viewed and what their tasks are said to be. As one journalist explained: "either there is something already going on, and we talk about it, or we have an original story coming out on an important topic, and so we amplify it, we make it public" (EE-C-4).

Regardless of their aims, there are some general principles and practices that support journalists in their efforts to promote public debate in and via the media. One key factor is the relevance in terms of topics and people discussing them. Moreover, journalists also want spokespeople to be competent, interesting, and diverse, such as politicians, experts, those in charge, or those directly affected. Another factor pertains to journalists themselves. Collaboration between journalists, both within an organisation and between different ones, is said to foster varied and more comprehensive discussions and their wider distribution. Furthermore, regional correspondents and Russian-language newsrooms are said to contribute to the quality of the debate.

There are also some more specific practices and opportunities utilised by certain types of publications, departments, or individual journalists. For instance, local newspapers specifically focus on local issues to offer content that is not available elsewhere and engage their specific audiences. PSM, on the contrary, is legally tasked with covering a wide variety of topics to represent the diversity of national audiences. Some journalists are more inclined to engage in outreach, advocacy, direct contact, and discussions with their audiences.

Despite their goals, efforts, and obligations, journalists encounter multiple obstacles in facilitating public debate. As with other issues, these are also broadly related to resources, such as people, money, and time. For one, people often do not want to speak publicly to the media because they are afraid of backlash for their opinions, or they are worried about their anonymity, especially in smaller places. While this is mostly evident among 'regular' people who are not used to publicity, there are also business owners who wish to avoid the attention of the public or the state.

Moreover, there is a growing lack of contacts for regional publications because many state institutions are no longer physically present in these areas and there are no representatives to speak to. Furthermore, social media has affected the media's ability to engage people in discussions. For one, social media algorithms limit the spread of news. In addition, social media users seem to prefer to express themselves on these networks because they receive immediate, mostly positive, feedback from their echo chambers. Finally, discussions on social media do not require the same level of writing skills as opinion pieces in newspapers. Technical aspects also affect radio as an audio format that requires the use of specific, in this case Estonian, language and suitable speaking capabilities. Finally, the number of journalists available for any coverage sets limits on their capacity to strategize, prepare content, plan outreach, and manage audience feedback.

5. Representing Cultural, Societal and Political Diversity

In the eyes of the interviewed journalists, the key elements in the media's ability to represent cultural, societal, and political diversity are the adherence to journalistic principles and the diversity of the editors. It appears that there are no explicit, written strategies, or standards to achieve this representation. Rather, it is the result of professionalism, individual experience, and collaborative discussions, and representation is seen as including all groups related to, involved in, or affected by an issue in media coverage. However, this diversity is sometimes balanced by or in tension with the quality of the content that the chosen spokesperson can provide. This also relates to the representation of political diversity, which is seen as a professional given, although whoever is currently in power inevitably receives more attention from the media. Finally, as representation is also an editorial choice, journalists see value in working in diverse teams and consistently build trust with their audience. As mentioned in the previous section, this also pertains to having Russian-language departments and regional correspondents with access to local people.

Despite their efforts to represent diverse groups, journalists encounter multiple obstacles. As previously described, 'regular' people often do not want to speak publicly in the media. At the same time, due to a lack of time or choice, journalists often rely on the same public figures as spokespeople, who are reliable in that they speak well and are easy to reach. Another issue is related to gender. Journalists find that men are significantly more likely than women to speak to or in the media. One journalist described how they were looking for columnists: "I wrote to five men. […] Three agreed immediately, one wanted to think, one said he did not have time. And I think I wrote to and called and talked to over thirty women. The result was zero" (EE-C-3). Additionally, there is a gender imbalance in favour of men in positions of power.

Other hindrances concern journalists and their publications. For instance, it is not always possible to consider diversity when hiring journalists because of the small number of applicants. Some journalists may also encounter issues when covering socially sensitive or polarising topics, as either audiences or their colleagues may disagree with the need to have those discussions. Furthermore, journalists may be limited by the specificities of their genres and publications. For example, because, as one journalist said: "news depends on the criteria of newsworthiness" (EE-J-1) and so diversity is not the main requirement, whereas an opinion editor is freer to choose who and what they present. Meanwhile, investigative journalists often deal with political topics, potentially focusing less on social or cultural diversity. Journalists also admit that editorial choices are influenced to some extent by the chief editor.

6. Facilitating Public Participation

Estonian journalists generally view their role as facilitators of political participation through information provision rather than direct activism. While some take proactive approaches to ensure diverse representation, others maintain a more neutral stance. The public broadcasting system plays a particularly important role in supporting political participation, while local media focus on community-level engagement.

A fundamental belief of Estonian journalists is that informed citizenry forms the backbone of democratic participation, with one journalist explicitly stating that sharing information

supports people's participation in political processes by helping them understand the actions of their representatives.

The public broadcasting system has emerged as a significant player in this landscape. According to one of the PSM interviewees, commercial media has stepped back from some aspects of political coverage, and the public broadcaster is the only one that has maintained comprehensive election coverage, ensuring that even smaller political parties and candidates receive airtime.

Estonian journalists demonstrate creativity and commitment in election coverage. They develop special formats and debates. Local media outlets organise public debates in their communities, while national broadcasters travel across the country to facilitate regional political discussions. Some have embraced innovative approaches such as creating YouTube channels with interactive question formats aimed at engaging younger voters.

Beyond elections, journalists support political participation through various initiatives. Examples include interactive tools such as maps, where citizens can mark problematic roads and create direct channels for public input on infrastructure issues. One leading daily described commitment to covering examples of civic activism, such as environmental protests, as a way to facilitate participation.

At the local level, giving voice to local community leaders and activists is seen as a way to broaden participation and representation organically. One local journalist said that they occasionally train local people on how to make their activities more attractive to media.

The approach to facilitating the participation and representation of women and minorities varies significantly among Estonian journalists. Some take an active approach, consciously ensuring gender balance in their coverage. A TV journalist said: "First it is important to make the voice of the women heard, then, as it has happened elsewhere, other minorities will gain a stronger voice as well" (EE-J-2). Others maintain what they describe as a neutral stance, emphasising equal treatment without specific consideration of representation. Existing equal opportunities are also claimed to be the reason for not making special efforts.

Other factors that hamper the facilitation of political participation are limited resources for comprehensive coverage and a shortage of female opinion leaders.

As a supporting factor, an investigative journalist mentioned that media attention still has the capability to initiate political processes to solve societal problems. He provided an example of better regulations for savings and loan associations.

7. The Conditions for Media Freedom and Professional Journalism

Given the high level of media freedom in Estonia, the interviewees did not identify any real direct threats at the national level. Examples of totalitarian countries and Hungary where the rise of populism and disinformation, including the use of deepfake, media polarisation and radical politicisation, were mentioned when discussing restrictions and threats to media freedom in other countries. The damaging economic impact of large digital platforms (taking advertising revenues out of the Estonian market) and the impact of social media algorithms

on the availability of professional journalistic content were also mentioned. The emergence of artificial intelligence was viewed ambivalently as an opportunity to improve the efficiency of day-to-day operations but also as a threat to the potential loss of importance of original, human-generated journalistic content.

Economic threats were cited as the greatest threat to journalism. The number of subscribers to printed newspapers has fallen sharply, while subscriptions to digital content are growing strongly, but this is not enough to compensate for the loss of advertising money being taken out of Estonia by global digital platforms.

> "One thing is the onslaught of the digital giants, which still largely determines the behaviour of this content and media and people's willingness to pay for it. In my view, the fundamental value of independent media and the possibility of its existence lies in the willingness and ability of consumers to pay for it. If this is not the case, then media freedom is at risk" (EE-C-6).

The threat of silencing journalists was mentioned as a theoretical threat to Estonia, but it was acknowledged that this does not exist in Estonia, either at the national or local level.

Restrictions on access to official documents, including the files of pending court cases, were mentioned as aspects that could affect journalists' work. They refer to changing institutional practices and proposed changes to relevant laws, including the currently very permitting Public Information Act, as serious obstacles to investigative journalism and journalism's ability to control power holders.

The indirect influence of the owners of media companies on the selection and coverage of topics by the press, which could lead to self-censorship, was mentioned as a real internal threat to the press. Such rules restricting press freedom were not directly imposed by owners.

> "Journalism is a business. On the other hand, it should be independent. So where is the balance? I can safely say that we do not have this problem. But I have worked for another newspaper where there was this problem. […] The problem is that nobody goes around putting up a list on the wall saying this, that and the other is not to be written about. It is like there are things in the family that you do not talk about. We all know that we do not talk about it, and we just do not do it" (EE-J-5).

Another internal threat to journalism was the distancing of journalists from the basic rules of journalism: checking sources and balanced reporting. It was warned that if issues are reported from only one angle because of the emotional charge of the journalist, this could damage the credibility of journalism as a whole.

Respondents did not mention any significant threats to professional political journalism. The editors are free in their reporting. The only obstacle mentioned several times was limited resources; there is no additional funding to hire more journalists.

Dealing with social trends that are detrimental to democracy, in particular, the polarisation of society, growing mistrust, and the spread of disinformation, is a routine activity for all respondents. To defuse tensions in society and find solutions to problems, the media provides opportunities for debate between different actors, involves experts, and mediates between stakeholders and communities. Fact checking and source verification are particularly

important. Larger newsrooms with international links have more resources to engage in investigative journalism in depth, whereas smaller newsrooms focus primarily on the local community.

8. Relationship Between Media and Democracy

When it comes to the relationship between the media and democracy, the central theme in the various answers is the importance of providing verified and adequate information. One PSM journalist remarked: "Sharing adequate, verified information" is essential, highlighting that the foundational role of journalism is to ensure that the public receives accurate content to make informed decisions (EE-J-1). This commitment to fact-based reporting is echoed by an editor that remarks that journalism must reflect "local life in the most authentic and balanced way possible" (EE-C-6). This indicates that journalists recognise their duty not only to report major events but also to give voice to local issues, ensuring that communities remain informed about matters that directly affect them.

However, there is also acknowledgement of journalism's limits concerning education and influence. One PSM journalist asserts that "we cannot be some kind of people's educators", emphasising that the media should not dictate or manipulate public opinion, but rather equip individuals with the information necessary to make their own choices (EE-J-1). This perspective underscores the core tenet of democratic journalism, allowing the public to engage with and interpret information independently, rather than stepping into a more prescriptive role. The emphasis is on empowering citizens to participate actively in the democratic process, rather than acting as authority figures who instruct the public on how to think or behave.

In terms of engagement, several answers emphasised the need for active audience participation. For example, one editor from the press notes that journalism serves to "keep people communicating and to keep people informed", suggesting that the role of the media extends to fostering dialogue among citizens. They emphasise that, while people may not agree with everything presented to them, "they do have to be active participants" in their consumption of news (EE-C-3). This idea reinforces the importance of critical thinking in democracy: citizens must not only receive information but also engage with it, reflecting on its implications and contributing to civic discourse.

Moreover, the sheer volume of information available in the digital age raises challenges for journalists and the public. One journalist highlights the overwhelming nature of contemporary information, asserting that the most important role is to tell people what is important to help them navigate this flood (EE-C-4). This role involves distilling complex issues into accessible narratives, enabling citizens to understand and prioritise what matters in the political landscape.

Finally, the principles of balance and objectivity are critical to journalism's democratic function. Statements emphasise the importance of a media system that provides "a more or less objective cocktail" rather than reflecting a singular political or interest group (EE-C-6). This commitment to balance is crucial, as it helps prevent misinformation and partisanship from dominating public discourse, thereby preserving the integrity of the democratic debate.

The answers collectively illustrate that journalism plays a critical role in contemporary democracies by providing accurate information, fostering public engagement, and maintaining reporting balance. The necessity of news media in democracies lies not only in the obligation to inform but also in its capacity to empower citizens to actively participate in shaping their societies. As democracy continues to evolve, journalistic commitment to these principles will remain essential for ensuring that the public is well-equipped to navigate an increasingly complex information landscape.

9. Conclusions

The Estonian media landscape is characterised by high levels of media freedom and light regulation, coupled with concentrated ownership among a few major media groups. Despite this concentration, journalistic standards and ethics remain strong across outlets, guided by the Estonian Code of Journalistic Ethics and internal organizational policies.

Investigative journalism faces challenges related to time and resource constraints, particularly in smaller communities where anonymity is difficult. However, there is still a demand for in-depth reporting, with some outlets integrating investigative approaches into the daily news coverage.

Estonian journalists view their role primarily as facilitators of public debate and political participation through information provision rather than direct activism. They strive to represent diverse voices and perspectives, though face obstacles in engaging "regular" people and balancing representation with content quality. Public service media plays an especially important role in supporting political participation and diverse representation.

While direct threats to media freedom are minimal in Estonia, economic pressure from global digital platforms and declining print revenues pose significant challenges. Internal threats, such as potential self-censorship and deviation from journalistic principles, are also concerns.

Overall, Estonian journalists emphasise the critical importance of providing verified and balanced information to support democracy. They see their role as empowering citizens with accurate information rather than dictating opinions. Challenges remain in helping audiences navigate the overwhelming volume of available information and maintaining objectivity in reporting.

Sustaining quality journalism in Estonia will require addressing economic pressures, continuing to uphold high ethical standards, and finding innovative ways to engage audiences and represent diverse perspectives in an evolving media landscape.

COUNTRY REPORT: FRANCE[1]

Morgane Le Guyader, Inna Lyubareva, Romain Billot

1. Introduction

Inquiry Conditions:

The political context described below is one factor contributing to the widespread unavailability of professionals during selection of interviewees. Despite repeated phone calls, emails, and text messages, 18 of our 30 contacts did not express their willingness to take part in an interview. To improve the likelihood of securing interviews, we employed an iterative "snowball sampling" technique (Olivier De Sardan, 2008, p. 83). WP3 interviewees were particularly helpful, connecting us with a public service manager (FR-C-1) and a pure player manager (FR-C-4). As interviews for WP4.2 progressed, we asked interviewees to recommend additional contacts within other media outlets in our sample. Of the professionals interviewed, 30% were women, and one of the media outlets is based in a French overseas department (FR-J-5). Regarding the community media: in many countries, non-profit media and community media are placed in the same institutional category. However, in the French context, community and non-profit media are not necessarily linked. Rather, the term "associative" is used instead and usually makes reference to the radio sector (Ricaud, 2008). In the context of our study, the term "community media" is indeed representative of an associative radio (FR-J-6). Yet in alignment with our established research protocol, the second media type associated with this category is a minority-language online media (FR-C-6). Additionally, although we distinguish between the two professionals interviewed, it is common for the roles of manager and journalist to be combined in this sector. For pure players, both interviewees serve as editors-in-chief and journalists, and this role overlap may cause a limitation in the empirical data. Among the interviewees, one journalist from a private media outlet expressed concern about how participating in the interview might affect their career trajectory (FR-J-2). The decision to proceed was influenced by our assurances of anonymity. Finally, we have observed that it was easier to make contact with managers and journalists involved in the ethical issues surrounding journalism.

A National Context:

From May 2024 onwards, three significant factors shaped the national context. First, the European elections resulted in a victory for the far-right Rassemblement National party (RN), which was followed by the dissolution of the National Assembly and, consequently, the organization of legislative elections at the beginning of July. These recent political upheavals have dominated the media landscape, making it challenging to make contact with the editorial teams, who were particularly occupied during this period. On the other hand,

the public media sector has been destabilized by the proposed reform of public broadcasting, scheduled for debate in the National Assembly on May, 23. This issue has been raised by the two professionals from the public service. Additionally, the issue of financial concentration in the media, exemplified by the case of the Bolloré Group, has been extensively discussed in the media and is frequently referenced explicitly or implicitly in interviews.

2. Providing Accurate Information

Cross-checking sources is the first standard mentioned by all respondents, regardless of their position or the type of media. Different practices and questions arise from this standard. For example, according to FR-J-1, among these standards is the issue of the contract of trust with press agencies. The level of acuity achieved through cross-checking depends on the journalist's address book (for FR-J-2) and is also based on an ability to preserve the dialogue with sources (FR-C-2). As described by the latter: "There is a real work of relational, but [also] of trust that will be established with the sources who will provide us with information. [...] that is what allows us to differentiate ourselves". Finally, access to the field, which is part of the sources verification, can depend on the journalist's identity, as may be the case in Martinique (FR-J-5). In practice, over and above the written rules, journalists also work on the ability to 'qualify the source': "For me, it is a fundamental rule [...]. From the moment a source tells me something stupid, incorrect information, it will no longer be a source for me" (FR-J-3). Ensuring the accuracy of information also means not trading the duty of transparency for competitive pressure: "So, we check, we double-check. Too bad if we are not the first on deck, but the only thing I do not forgive is false information" (FR-C-4-2), "[...] the worst enemy of verifying information [...] is speed" (FR-J-1).

The principle of transparency and honesty is referenced by all the editors-in-chief, who highlight the responsibility of the media to rectify, correct, and issue an apology in instances of error, as evidenced by numerous high-profile cases[2] (FR-C-4, FR-C-5, FR-C-1, FR-C-2). The plurality of perspectives, according to FR-C-4, is ensured by an honest approach and respect for difference of opinion: "we do not do objective journalism, but we must do honest journalism, [...] seek out all points of view, not limit ourselves only to one point of view" (FR-C-4).

According to the other pure player dedicated to news from a gender perspective, the reliability of the news also depends on the choice of facts, which will be clarified by the editorial team:

> "If I take, for example, what is happening at the moment around the murder of the young woman in Boulogne[3], [...] they are doing research to find out whether laws should be toughened to send foreigners back to their countries. While we are going to focus attention on whether the justice is sufficient, [and on] the application of laws on the issues of sexist and sexual violence and femicide" (FR-C-4-2).

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[2] Bygmalion & Dupont-de-Ligonnès cases (FR-J-1, FR-C-2).
[3] In September 2024, a young woman has been murdered by a man who is from Morocco and who had been subjected to an OQTF (Order to Leave French Territory).

In the case of FR-J-5, the ability to adapt, demonstrate social intelligence and exhibit flexibility are fundamental to the practice of journalism:

> "You have to be able to integrate yourself into the demonstration while doing your job, while continuing to question people, even if you agree or disagree with what they say. The idea is to know why they are there and what they are doing, and to have a fairly neutral posture. [...] in fact, well, in the morning I can interview a minister, in the afternoon I can interview a farmer" (FR-J-5).

In the context of major national daily newspapers and one community media, the mobilization of actors and scientific knowledge is a crucial element in ensuring the veracity of the information disseminated: "I work with scientific literature, that is to say with sources of information which have already undergone a certain level of expertise through peer review, formal publication in scholarly journals, [...] or from expert reports" (FR-C-3).

To provide accurate information, community media outlets (FR-C-6 and FR-J-6) refrain from covering certain news stories due to a lack of resources: "We choose not to cover the news because we are aware that if we made mistakes, no one would detect them and it would not be corrected. We could, in spite of ourselves, disseminate inaccurate information. As opposed to that, we choose to deal with substantive subjects" (FR-J-6). This vigilance is also to avoid lawsuits that could weaken community media, which are already fragile financially (FR-C-6).

FR-C-1, FR-C-5 and FR-C-2 present two key considerations regarding the handling of sources: according to FR-C-5, sources are not always available for direct quotation. However, they can provide journalists with valuable insight and understanding of a situation before it arises. According to FR-C-1, it is sometimes necessary for journalists to refrain from disclosing information in order to safeguard the identity of the source. The question then arises as to whether the source is worth the risk of being 'burned': "If it puts people in danger, will I reveal all the information? Am I not going to keep this to myself because I consider that, if I go that far, it could endanger people?". In the same vein, FR-C-2 insists on the importance of protecting sources by guaranteeing their anonymization when necessary: "That is something essential in our professions because there can be very serious issues behind it. It could be death threats, [for example]".

3. Controlling Power Holders

Investigative journalism and the newsroom's watchdog role are essential to democracy, exposing wrongdoing and holding the authorities accountable. According to public service media and national dailies (FR-C-1, FR-C-3, FR-J-3): "All journalism should be investigative" (FR-C-1) and "The very term investigative journalism has a sort of tautology" (FR-C-3).

It is noteworthy that all interviewees concur on the distinctive nature of investigative journalism. First of all, this approach requires time: "You have to be detached from the vicissitudes of everyday work" (FR-C-1). Furthermore, it necessitates the allocation of economic and human resources. The public service radio differs from other media in this respect due to the specific resources allocated to investigative journalism. According to FR-C-1 and FR-J-1, unlike the private sector, they are not subject to economic pressure because

they rely on public funding. Indeed, FR-J-2 observes: "In the private sector, we rarely have the means to have an investigation cell […] financially, and in terms of personnel […] it is not feasible". Private FR-C-2 shares, however, a more nuanced view:

> "We have long formats. In particular, a long format called [name of the program], which offers reports over time. And that is where we are going to have a little more time to dig into a subject in depth […]. There is a dedicated editorial team. We did a long investigative report […] that was rewarded, awarded, praised by the profession, because it is true that these are things that we are more used to seeing on public service, or on channels that have a different vocation".

FR-C-3 and FR-C-4 set out the requirement for financial independence from power holders:

> "To have the right to do [investigative journalism], it is necessary to guarantee that the media […] are not owned by interests that hinder the conduct of these investigations. If Vincent Bolloré owns all the media, there will be no investigation [regarding] the presence of France in Africa".

FR-C-4 also believes that investigative journalism can be linked to solution journalism. In the same vein, FR-C-2 also emphasizes the need for time free from economic pressures and conflicts of interest, insisting on that what investigative journalism needs most is time and money.

FR-C-4-2, FR-C-6, and FR-J-6 also confirm that the lack of financial resources necessary for investigative field surveys undermines the possibility of conducting such investigations:

> "We are not following an investigative journalism approach, in the sense that we are not going to seek out facts of which we are not aware. When there are sensitive subjects, citizens who are not happy because there is going to be the opening of an industrial site, waste poses problems, we do not consider ourselves capable of dealing with this type of information" (FR-J-6).

Beyond being time-consuming and financially costly, investigative journalism, as FR-C-5 and FR-J-2 point out, also requires specific skills: withstanding pressure, taking legal risks, accepting uncomfortable situations, etc. The socio-political and geographical conditions of a society may also act as constraints upon the scope of investigation: "I have the impression that it is more difficult to do an investigation in the Antilles than in mainland France, […] because there is a great proximity, and people are afraid to talk" (FR-J-5). FR-J-2 adds that whether or not to conduct investigative journalism is primarily under the control of the media management.

4. Forum for the Public Debate

Radio and TV programs that allow audience participation through interactions with invited guests, as well as debates involving editorialists, journalists, and other specialists, are identified as exemplary practices that foster public debate. In particular, this applies to both public and private radio.

However, when discussing their interactive broadcasts, public service media highlight a limitation to the diversity of the public debate they facilitate: the relatively homogeneous

nature of their audience, which may impede the intended exchange of opposing viewpoints. "The limit is that it is our listeners who call, so you have an expression which necessarily reflects our listeners who are, rather teachers, professors, rather CSP+[4], [...] those who hate [our radio], they do not listen to us" (FR-J-1). Another limitation mentioned by the same media concerns the format of the debates it organizes between editorialists and journalists: "It is a fairly short debate, it is on around ten minutes, it encourages a bit of invective and not necessarily very verified information. We are really in the opinion, we find that it is not diverse enough in terms of political point of view" (idem.). Finally, FR-J-1 highlights that when editorialists address topics raised by the public, the ability to organize a debate on these subjects may be limited by the range of topics mastered by the specialists working with the media: "We have [name of the guest], [from an organization] which will take on feminist subjects, but we have limits". It also underscores the importance of mediators in fostering public discourse and ensuring its effective functioning.

FR-J-2's observations converge on the similar critique as these discussion forums are often more conducive to division than debate, and the diversity of viewpoints is not always represented: "On a media like ours, I find that the diversity of columnists is not enormous. I find that the questions are often a little biased" (FR-J-2). According to FR-J-5, the ongoing debate remains complex due to the disparate levels of knowledge among the participants and the public's reluctance to change their opinion:

> "We experienced it during COVID. We felt, in our editorial office at least, that not all words are equal, that I am not going to put a vaccine expert in front of a general practitioner. Do we just want to put on a show because, in fact, we are going to put two roosters in an arena? Or do we really want to oppose two ideas, two concepts so that the citizen, the listener or the viewer can make their choice?" (FR-J-5).

The viewpoint of pure players diverges from those presented earlier:

> "A few years ago, we had a debate on nuclear power. This followed an investigation into [a French city's] power plant. We had the director of the plant, but also a representative from the nuclear phase-out. I remember, at the end of this debate, these people who, in fact, are constantly opposed, who send press releases in your face, who hold demonstrations against each other and everything, for once, managed to discuss together" (FR-C-4).

Another pure player, FR-C-4-2 mentions additionally, that the editorial staff's adherence to gender-equitable norms in the presentation of the news, in itself, fosters public debate.

Private TV (FR-C-2) specifies that interactive programs can differ along the day depending on the type of audience:

> "In the morning, we will encourage this dialogue of 'come, ask us your questions' [...] it is the start of the day. We have sections, [our media] answers your questions. There is a journalist who comes to the set and who addresses five or six themes, and who answers the questions that our viewers ask on the set [...]: will the price of gasoline increase tomorrow? Is inflation, is the worst of it behind us?".

A specific practice developed during elections to encourage debate is also mentioned by this media:

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[4] Higher social classes.

"We organize what we call the forum, we have an assembly of citizens who have registered, who show an interest in wanting to come and participate, who come from different social and economic backgrounds, and who have the opportunity [in direct live] to challenge representatives, candidates for the European elections, candidates for the legislative, presidential elections, etc. And the questions which then lead to the debate between political figures come directly from the problems of the citizens" (FR-C-2).

According to this media outlet, despite security concerns – especially following the terrorist attacks in 2015 – there remains a desire to allow public access to television sets. Finally, technological aspects can contribute to opening special forums for the public debate, thanks to, for instance, QR codes on smartphones (FR-C-2).

The conditions of the debate are at risk of being compromised by the failure of guests to honor their commitments at the last minute, as evidenced by FR-C-5 and FR-J-2: "The willingness of actors to participate in debates, or in this case the unwillingness, can hinder public debate, even though the media provide everything necessary for actors to come" (FR-J-2).

In the case of national dailies, FR-C-3 explains that the extent of space allocated for public debate also depends on the editorial choices of the media:

"In 2013-2014, we had [a quite ephemeral] management of the newspaper which was climate-sceptical, in general, which was very hostile to the coverage of environmental issues and which assimilated this coverage as a form of activism or […] over-investment in subjects that were not very important" (FR-C-3).

In the daily newspaper, FR-J-3 highlights that disagreements within the media can influence the structure and quality of public debate:

"So there is also the everyday science and medicine department, of which I am a part. We tend to say that alcohol in high doses, even in small doses, if it is regular, it is not necessarily a good idea. But regularly, there is a branch of the newspaper, supplements called [name of the supplements], for example, which will say, it is good to have a little drink, it does not do any harm, etc. That is to say, there are conflicting interests" (FR-J-3).

Private FR-J-2 points out that some selection is necessary in working with audience propositions, opinions and viewpoints: "They call in advance, they give their point of view […] it is true that there is a selection because otherwise, you have everything and anything on the air. So, you have to make a kind of filter".

Regional media outlets (FR-C-5 and FR-J-5) and community media (FR-C-6 and FR-J-6) exhibit a notable degree of similarity in terms of openness and transparency in public debate, which is fostered by the proximity-based accountability of local stakeholders. FR-C-5 refers to press conference: "you still have a community which is somewhat obliged to be transparent and which still plays the game of transparency. And interlocutors who, at a given moment, are confronted with facts [that] have been made public" (FR-C-5). Community media outlets – and that is what seems to make their specificity – prioritize the inclusion of underrepresented voices in their reporting. This is achieved by interviewing local parastatal and public figures, as well as other individuals and groups that may not otherwise have a platform to express their views: "this is how a radio station like ours can create debate by

giving voice to people whose comments will perhaps provoke reactions from outside" (FR-J-6).

Among the threats to public debate, the question of economic resources was raised by FR-C-4-2. Finally, FR-C-3 identifies social media – with its tendencies for harassment and smear campaigns – as a significant challenge to healthy public debate.

5. Representing Cultural, Societal and Political Diversity

The representation of political and socio-cultural diversity is presented as one of the standards integrated into journalism training by many professionals (e.g. FR-C-1, FR-C-5, FR-C-2): "In general, it is an integrated reflex. Let us take the very basic example: if we invite an Israeli, we will then invite a Palestinian and so on" (FR-C-1).

Political Diversity

In terms of political diversity, the regulations established by Regulatory Authority for Audiovisual and Digital Communication (ARCOM), such as the necessity for balance [of speaking time] during election periods, are identified as a fundamental and rigorous framework that the audiovisual media have a legal and ethical obligation to adhere to: "We have obligations of balance of speaking time which are defined by the scores that the parties made in the last elections […]. So, people criticize us, for example, for giving the RN too much of a say, we say we are sorry, we are obliged" (FR-J-1); "we do not really have a choice because you know that you have ARCOM watching over you" (FR-J-2). FR-J-1 puts forward that this regulation "is likely to encourage debate because it forces us not to give the floor to one side" and adds: "Now there is the decision which was taken by the council of state (Conseil d'Etat) on the fact that now we must count everything, it is because of CNews obviously". FR-J-1 notes that the same regulation will also apply to editorial programs. According to this media, currently:

> "Since it comes from editorialists, it is not supposed to be submitted to ARCOM. We should be obliged to count the people who take sides with a candidate or with one side […] but hey, it is still very blurry in the way in which it will be counted but we do not really like anything on [our radio] that leads to a debate that is too polarized" (FR-J-1).

The press is not subject to the regulations established by ARCOM. However, FR-C-5 emphasizes the fundamental requirement to uphold the representation of political diversity in a manner consistent with the prevailing national political context and, more specifically, with the electoral outcomes of political parties.

In practice, journalists from public, private, community and digital media, whether audiovisual or written, express certain conditions and limitations regarding the representation of 'extremes' or political orientations that diverge from the political tradition of the media in question and its audience: "I do not want to give voice to the extremes" (FR-J-3); "There are not really any far-right elected officials in our immediate territories. We would not necessarily want to interview them, especially about the [reasons] of their orientation" (FR-J-6). FR-C-6 states that there are deliberate editorial choices: "On the agricultural level, it is the point of view of the peasantry which is defended by our

political friends. So, as I told you, we do not interview the FNSEA[5]". In the case of this community media dedicated to a regional minority in France, the effort to ensure a plurality of actors and points of view also responds to an editorial strategy of the media: "Plurality of actors and points of view can be, in this case, a political strategy. In my opinion, the acuity and perhaps how violent the adversary's point of view [is interesting to know]" (FR-C-6).

Social and Cultural Diversity

Social and cultural diversity are understood by several respondents as being reflected in the gender-equal treatment and coverage of information.

The two managers of public and private audiovisual media (FR-C-1 and FR-C-2) have stated that they are obliged to submit reports to ARCOM concerning the degree of parity achieved on air: "We report to ARCOM the percentage of women on the air, the percentage of women invited. [within our staff], it is 50-50, and without a glass ceiling. There are women, like the men, with equal responsibility" (FR-C-1). "We intend to submit a number of statements to ARCOM pertaining to a range of issues, including those related to women's right, environmental concerns, and disability" (FR-C-2). FR-J-1 presents an alternative perspective and points out that the degree of parity within the staff is far from being achieved: "We are in a battle, as well very much led by the [intern organization] of equality between men and women because we are not there" (FR-J-1). According to FR-C-4-2, the editorial project is predicated on the representation of socio-cultural diversity, which is achieved through the gender-equal treatment of information.

Among the conditions that can hinder gender-equal information, FR-J-1 notes that it is more difficult to identify female experts, as they often lack a sense of legitimacy and the need to persuade them can contribute to an increased workload:

> "For the guests, it is a real problem that all of the media know: we have more men in our address book. [While] men […] are ready to answer even if they are not exactly specialists on the subject, a woman will always tell you, 'no, but I do not really work on that'. [So] you have to convince them [they are] legitimate. So, it requires more work, sometimes we do not have time, so we will always call the same guy".

Furthermore, the dearth of journalists within the newsroom who represent cultural diversity is mentioned. According to FR-C-4-2, a patriarchal reality in which men dominate women is the primary obstacle to achieving this representation.

FR-J-2 characterizes its media outlet as Franco-centered:

> "The only socio-cultural diversity that interests media like mine is very French. […] We are going to cover a church service, for example, we are not going to cover Aïd[6]. I am the only [non-white] woman on my editorial staff. 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 BFM TV for two months and it was the same thing. There were two black women

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[5] Fédération nationale des syndicats d'exploitants agricoles, main organization which represents the agricultural unions in France.
[6] Eid El Kebir is an annual celebration of Muslim worship.

on the air. But all the African guys I met were people who were cleaning. It is a question of editorial factory. We are very *franchouillards*[7] because that is our style".

The specific characteristics of the territory are also part of the conditions that can contribute to or hinder the representation of socio-cultural diversity: "Sometimes, we have certain constraints due to the fact that it is a small territory, we do not necessarily have so many experts or specialists on certain subjects. And for convenience, we will fall back quite easily on the same people" (FR-J-5). In addition to the aforementioned territorial conditions, there are also economic conditions, as illustrated by FR-J-6: "After all, we are not in town. It is true that we are not necessarily going to make [some sound recordings in the working-class districts]. If we had unlimited means, we could have equipment that would allow us to do many more things […]".

6. Facilitating Public Participation

Inductively, the semi-directive conduct of the interviews revealed connections between the questions on public debate, the representation of political and socio-cultural diversity, and political participation. In this regard, it is notable that the majority of media outlets associate their approach to facilitating political participation with the subjects treated in the journalistic work, and with the composition of their journalistic team as well as the guests and other citizens included in their work.

FR-C-1 says that public participation depends on whether people are concerned about the subjects being discussed: "Where we can arouse interest, we can arouse a form of mobilization, it is when we look for subjects which concern people: education, health, environment, in certain countries, agriculture or public services". FR-J-2 gives the example of coverage of demonstrations and 'election nights' while FR-C-2 mentions the journalistic work that involves representing NGOs as does FR-J-3 who, on environmental issues, observes this reflex to go and interview NGOs. However, FR-C-2 clarifies that highlighting these initiatives depends on current events and the prioritization of issues to be addressed. Furthermore, FR-C-2 emphasizes the value of local journalism, which is firmly rooted in the communities it serves.

As posited by FR-J-1, the manner in which news is disseminated results in the representation and political participation of society being confined to the domain of reporters: "They [reporters] are really the voice of the people". FR-J-1 specifies in this respect: "It would be complicated to invite […] someone who represents the yellow vests [rather than having a reporter] for 10 minutes at 8:20 a.m. […] Finding someone who has a speech sufficiently articulated to express a well-constructed thought and respond [is] complex".

According to FR-C-3, journalism produces information that should bring people into the debate: "I have the feeling that after each paper, normally, if I have done my job well […], [that] should encourage or incline readers to take part in all these decision-making mechanisms or this commitment".

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[7] This term denotes a conservative, French-centric vision of society.

FR-C-4 talks about how having a dialogue with readers and getting them involved in certain activities can help to boost political participation:

> "We told our readers, 'You too, take up this subject. If you find that it is not normal that the president of your region is not being transparent on this, challenge them, also challenge Wauquiez[8] directly, by sending him an email, etc.' And so, there were more than 150 readers who took the time to copy and paste".

FR-C-5 takes the example of readership studies: "We are tackling a subject that is not very fun with only experts, technicians and elected officials who will talk to you about hyper-descending stuff [...]. So, we reinvested in that. [...] It is still interesting to do readership studies from time to time [...]". FR-J-5 makes mention of the analysis of electoral outcomes at the polling station level, classified according to the typology of the surrounding neighbourhood or community.

Similarly, as with FR-C-4, FR-C-5 and FR-J-5, FR-J-6 elucidates that the editorial team engages in uninterrupted collaboration with the local community network:

> "We work with associations all the time. We invite people to join associations. Sometimes we make them work together. This could have happened to neighboring associations who are invited at the same time, on the set, on the same subject. After the show, the meeting continues. It leads to other things, to projects".

The two public service professionals posit that the media must reflect the society: "[...] If we [really] do not have an editorial team that reflects the image of the society, we will not succeed" (FR-J-1); "There is a real link between the image that you send back, how your teams which embody you are composed and the way in which people will perceive you" (FR-C-1). FR-C-1 demonstrates that parity is upheld to the greatest extent possible at the team level and among individuals engaged in journalistic coverage: "And on the air, it is the same, it is half-and-half, [...] there are fewer women business leaders, there are fewer women political leaders. So, we do the best we can, but we will arrive at 40% rather than 50. We cannot reinvent the world completely, either". In the case of FR-J-2's media, there is a general adherence to the principle of parity, although this is more evident in the contributions of the team than in those of the guests.

FR-C-4 has introduced a practice whereby readers count the number of women and men interviewed in the articles, and uses this data to encourage women to speak out in debates. FR-C-4-2 points out that the entire identity of the pure player is based on the representation and participation of women. FR-C-6 facilitates women's access to publications and FR-J-6 sees an increase in the number of women radio members: "When I arrived [at the radio], whether it was the members, the employees, it was predominantly male. It was 70%, 30%. Now, it is reversed".

FR-J-1 outlines an initiative which aims to facilitate employment opportunities for young individuals from North African immigrant communities:

> "So, it allows young people who do not necessarily have a family behind who helps them even if they are on scholarships [...]. And we see different profiles of young reporters arriving, we really hear them on the air, we hear names that we did not hear 10 years, 20

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[8] President of the Rhône-Alpes French region.

years ago, so that is very good, foreign-sounding names, young people who come from North African immigration".

FR-C-4 associates the category of minorities with urban issues and working-class neighbourhoods, and indicates an attempt to be present in all types of areas. FR-C-6 explains that the editorial team does not work so much on issues relating to sexual minorities, but rather on national minorities: "For example, […] we did an article, a bit of analysis, synthesis, on the situation in New Caledonia, we follow Ireland. There is a very clear position and clearly in favour of immigrants who arrive from the south, from Africa, in particular". Then, FR-J-6 considers that the people invited to the radio are those who are directly involved in the subjects:

> "For example, we even did topics on sex workers. They came. It is the same, it is a more urban subject, even though… It is the militant side that will express itself. But these people are very present on the air. […] My colleague recently spotted an association which is from Brest, but which works with street children in Morocco. As Finistère[9] is extremely rich, this leads to subjects which highlight people we would not have thought to talk about".

Among the conditions hindering the representation and participation of women and minorities, in reiterating the media's commitment to ARCOM, FR-C-2 nevertheless identifies two limitations. Firstly, there is an over-representation of male experts in certain fields, such as military and geopolitics. Secondly, there is a sense of illegitimacy expressed by women who are nevertheless solicited (FR-C-2). FR-J-2 asks whether the subjects covered are of interest to women: "Macron, is he or is he not going to appoint a prime minister? The prime minister, when is he going to find a government? Finally, we are really on small 'popole[10]' things. I do not know if women are very interested in this". Furthermore, FR-J-2 states that it can be difficult to persuade the editorial team to accept the treatment of subjects pertaining to ultra-marine territories. In conclusion, with respect to the subject of minority groups, FR-J-2 primarily considers migrant populations when discussing minorities. The media posits that they are often represented in a condescending manner:

> "Minorities, no. We discuss immigrants, but we seldom employ laudatory terminology without simultaneously denigrating them. So, sometimes, we try to be good Samaritans by saying, 'But smugglers, they are scandalous; they hurt [the migrants]', we call ourselves humanists. But in reality, the underlying question is always: are we going to get rid of all these migrants?" (FR-J-2).

FR-C-2, FR-C-3, FR-J-3, FR-C-5 et FR-J-5 indicate that the representation and participation of women and minorities depend on the kind of subject: "We will have the opportunity to address these subjects [through] the current events [which] guide us" (FR-C-2); "So, simply by questioning them, and putting them on the same footing as men. To me, it is more the neutrality that counts. I do not care about the gender when I go to question someone. I am going to interview someone who is competent. Afterwards, talking about minorities, […] it is a bit like men and women, I try not to talk about them because they are minorities, I try to talk about them because they have something specific to tell" (FR-J-3); "What interests us is having the right interlocutor, in the right place […]. We do not talk about a minority just to talk about a minority" (FR-C-5); "To me, it is mainly the level of competence that

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[9] French department.
[10] Meaning "political issues".

interests me. We do not make pretext subjects for a woman or for the LGBT community" (FR-J-5).

Despite the team's thorough preparation in these areas, FR-C-4-2 observes that they are not "aware enough about diversity". In the case of the media run by FR-C-1, there is a difficulty in getting the team of journalists to represent the African diaspora: "I do not have enough people of dual Franco-African culture in the teams, so we have a working group on this to improve that".

In conclusion, FR-J-1 poses the question of how to represent and work on public participation of an entity that is not subject to measurement, given the prohibition of ethnic statistics in France. Despite a number of programs that enable women and minorities to be better represented and participate, FR-J-1 adds that "It still remains in boxes which remain a little too confidential".

7. Conditions for Freedom and Professional Journalism

As posited by FR-C-1, the threats to media freedom originate from the influence exerted by authoritarian regimes on democratic ones. According to FR-C-1, this deterioration of the democratic system can lead to the risk of self-censorship, which is one of the threats to the freedom of journalistic expression. FR-J-6 also mentions the issue of self-censorship but it "is more linked to social media, [and] the fear of being tarnished, of being harassed". According to FR-C-6:

> "We feel the phenomenon of hardening of public freedom that is denounced, by lots of people, by the Ligue des droits de l'Homme (LDH[11]) [...]. There is also a kind of rightization of political life, in any case, in France, as in Spain, it is specific to many European countries. This right-wing and the emergence of the extreme right, obviously, it worries us in terms of public freedoms".

As evidenced by FR-C-4 and FR-C-4-2, social media have been observed to impede the advancement of media freedom and pluralism, particularly through their moderation activities. This is despite the fact that they initially facilitated these very principles: "Social media are not the same as 10 years ago or even 5 years ago" (FR-C-4); "Social media [...] now also restrict the visibility of newspapers. If we back down as an online newspaper, Facebook removes us, and since we talk about gender inequality, [when we write the word 'sex', Facebook removes us]" (FR-C-4-2).

As set forth in FR-J-3, the potential for job insecurity poses a significant risk to the pluralism of information. The conditions for professional journalism also depend on the territory. To illustrate, it is more straightforward to conduct an interview with those holding opposing views in Martinique than in other Caribbean countries (FR-J-5). Additionally, FR-J-3 highlights that while technological tools have enhanced access to information, they have simultaneously impoverished the quality of his working conditions. Another potential threat, as identified by FR-C-5, is the possibility of an attack on the legal framework that protects the practice of journalism:

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[11] French NGO dedicated to human rights.

> "The first risk is that they attack this building. And we can clearly see, moreover, that it is a building […] which annoys some circles of power. There is a lot of concealment of the secret of the instruction coming out. We published a column, we still have 5 colleagues in the local press who were summoned for free hearings on different subjects. 5 in one year. It is the slow collapse of our profession".

FR-C-5 identifies a further threat in the conflation of information and communication, which is facilitated and disseminated by 24-hour channels. According to FR-C-4, information fatigue and public disinterest are also a threat.

Ultimately, the economic threat is the often referenced. Both public service media professionals perceive the risk of privatization of the public media as the main threat: "If the money is budgeted, you depend on the willingness of the power in place. Therefore, you will necessarily have to not displease too much if you want your budget to be renewed, it is a real problem of independence of information in relation to the executive power" (FR-J-1). In this respect, FR-C-3 draws a parallel with social media:

> "We have seen that Twitter, X today, has completely changed its appearance since its shareholder changed. It is the same thing, actually, with mass media, with mainstream media. It is the owner who has an obvious impact on what will be produced, what will be presented, the way in which it will be presented".

FR-J-5, FR-J-2, FR-C-2, FR-C-4 et FR-C-4-2 all exhibit a common concern regarding the potential for shareholder interventionism:

> "You have billionaires who come and put marbles in the media. So, it is practical because it gives us a job. So, it is good. Afterwards, the disadvantage is that these billionaires who come to put in their money also come with their ideas, their visions and the way they want us to deal with the news. […] Every time we say 'Hamas', we have to say 'Hamas terrorist'. Every time we talk about this subject, at the beginning, we give the figures of the number of deaths in Gaza cited by Hamas. Since it is Hamas that gives [this data], [the radio] considers that it is not verified, that it is not reliable, and therefore we do not give [it]. So, we no longer give the number of deaths in Gaza" (FR-J-2).

However, while emphasizing the importance of ensuring that shareholders do not intervene, FR-C-2 introduces a new dimension to the discussion as he reminds that journalism cannot be achieved without solid economical means: "It is complicated to talk to you about media concentration because [on one hand], if it is not these big billionaires, then who? If it is not them, will we disappear tomorrow?". Furthermore, the issue of public subsidies in the media industry is also addressed by FR-C-4, FR-C-4-2 and by FR-J-5. According to FR-C-4-2, one of the threats to pluralism is caused by the allocation of public press subsidies to major dailies without parity criteria. In FR-J-6's opinion, the disappearance of the FSER (the main form of public support for community radio stations) would be a major threat to media freedom.

For the majority of the media, the emergence of disinformation and the growth of social media have posed a significant obstacle to the practice of professional and political journalism. In recent years, public service radio has introduced a scientific training program for journalists with the objective of combating disinformation (FR-J-1). The time devoted to this fight has been questioned by several professionals, who have highlighted the potential for it to have a perverse effect, namely the promotion of false information rather than the production of accurate information: "We are tackling divisive topics. Does addressing them

reinforce divisions? Um… I was going to say sometimes yes, sometimes no" (FR-C-4); "We sometimes say to ourselves, by debunking we also give it publicity, so we do it in a fairly limited way" (FR-J-1). FR-C-5 and FR-J-2 explain that they spend a lot of their time debunking: "We regularly have to debunk CNews topics in Rennes, I mean once every three months" (FR-C-5); "[Many times], we found ourselves doing subjects where we have to deconstruct a rumour or deconstruct conspiracies or deconstruct false information" (FR-J-2). The rapid dissemination of disinformation, particularly in regions distant from mainland France, such as Martinique, is impeding the efficacy of the implemented measures: "We started, in fact, to do anti-fake news subjects, to do Internet articles. Before, we did not do rebuttals or things like that. It was going around, but in fact, today, it is going so fast that it is coming from everywhere" (FR-J-5). FR-J-5 concludes that, in this context, journalists are essentially working to counteract disinformation, which is not necessarily the reason they chose to pursue this profession.

As set forth in FR-C-3, the objective of combating disinformation is to enhance transparency, provide explanations, and disseminate information to the general public: "I am trying […] to give an epistemic value to journalism, at least to scientific journalism. The answer lies both in the clarification of controversies, in the popularization of science, by explaining how things work". FR-C-2 shares this vision: "On a daily basis, it is about doing the most rigorous work possible to speak in a more concrete way, it is about knowing how to sometimes recognize a mistake. It is this challenge of taking the time to explain to people how we work". FR-J-6 is aligned with this recommendation, as evidenced by its stated objective to maintain proximity to the sciences and to refrain from allocating airtime to pseudo-sciences. Finally, FR-C-6 views the understanding of the local political context in which the media operates as a strategy for addressing disinformation.

8. Relationship Between Media and Democracy

According to FR-C-1, the national and international context is characterized by instability, which gives rise to doubts regarding the foundations and practices of pluralist democracy. From FR-C-1's perspective, public media are afforded greater freedom than private media, largely due to the fact that, in France, there is a political alternation.

FR-J-1 sees the protection of journalists' sources as the cornerstone of democracy: "The media are absolutely essential for the collection of the citizen's words as a relay. As media, we are to make society heard and to reveal information which without the media and in particular the guarantee of the secrecy of sources, could never be revealed, as someone can speak to a media because they know that they will be protected".

The prevailing view among the professionals interviewed is that journalism serves to illuminate matters of general and public interest within society: "To me, my job is really to give people keys, and they figure out how to open the door with them" (FR-J-2); "If you do not have any more information about your most important environment, [which] is where you live. [Imagine], [y]ou drink water from here. But afterward, I do not know, maybe you will drink fleet with lead or arsenic in it, you will not know it" (FR-C-5). Furthermore, both FR-C-3 and FR-J-3 emphasize the function of the media in representing and facilitating access to reality: "We must have the independence to say that yes, when total exploits

prospecting in this or that place, it is a catastrophe for the climate for the next 20, 30 or 40 years. […] There are a lot of territories for which no adaptation will be possible. If there is no water, there is no water. So, for me, this is the social utility of journalism today" (FR-C-3); "It is fundamental to tell when someone lies […]. It seems obvious for that, to denounce what is unique, but also to provide reading keys to help people understand" (FR-J-3).

Several professionals (FR-C-2, FR-C-4-2, FR-J-2, FR-C-5, FR-J-5) emphasize the need to ensure the media's democratic function, adopt a pedagogical approach, and promote media literacy: "We need to educate people more about the media – that is what we do at school, but I do not know if it is enough – so that everyone can have the reflex to listen to different media, to complete their offer, to complete their information" (FR-J-2); "We need to re-educate the public a little to explain what is a media with professional journalists versus social media that spread anything. I think there is a lot of educational work to be done to say that the media are necessary" (FR-C-4-2).

FR-C-5 emphasizes: "[…] the media also have a huge responsibility for the situation in which we find ourselves. Because when things go wrong, you have to say that you screwed up. It must be rectified". FR-C-5 also reiterates the ambiguity between the conventional practice of professional journalism and the evolving function of commentators, which presents some problems in delineating the boundaries between editorial commentary and space for information.

FR-J-6 notes that journalists used to be mediators:

> "Now, there are people who are starting to fulfil a mediation function even though they do not have the training. I go there from time to time and listen to YouTube interview channels. The problem is that when you are a professional interviewer, you see the limits that these people have in relation to… They have difficulty… I do not know what they are looking for. I cannot judge them, but we see that there are limits in the way they ask questions, even in the management of their ego".

FR-C-2 shares the same view on the necessity to differentiate between professional journalism and non-journalism.

FR-J-5 shares its concern about the decline of general-interest media: "I find that the fact that there are fewer general media is also dangerous for democracy, the polarization of the media". FR-C-4 shares this point of view:

> "Finally, there should not only be media like us. There must also be media that provide good information to the public, where we can find exhaustive information. There is a part of the local press which knows how to reinvent itself. And which also has its role to play, particularly in terms of social ties, in terms of the vitality of social and democratic life, which is important, at the same time, by not being in a role of counter-power".

The editors-in-chief/journalists of the two pure players agree on the direct link between democracy and the independent financing: "We want to do journalism, and we have our noses in the accounts all the time. It is terrible, but frankly, the key to this question of democracy is money" (FR-C-4-2). Lastly, according to FR-C-6, the relationship between democracy and the media is exemplified by the capacity to create a platform for amplifying the voices of the marginalized.

9. Conclusions

In the case of France, this inquiry demonstrates that the media's capacity to fulfill their democratic role is significantly constrained by the economic cross-compliance. For example, the majority of professionals acknowledge the significance of investigative journalism, while also underscoring its considerable financial investment. According to them, economic stability, economic independence and the non-interventionist ideology of investors are prerequisites for the practice of professional and political journalism. Furthermore, time is frequently identified as a crucial factor in the accurate production of information. All media point to social media as an important threat to media freedom and professional journalism, and as a problematic link between media and democracy. The experience of pure players is more nuanced. In the beginning, social media were a beneficial instrument for the advancement of these concepts. Nevertheless, both pure players' professionals express regret at the negative evolution of social media.

According to the interviewees, the crux of the relationship between the media and democracy hinges on citizens' access to information, which serves as the foundation for the effective functioning of a democratic system. From this perspective, the majority of editors-in-chief also place considerable emphasis on the epistemic and educational aspects inherent to journalism as a significant solution to the trust crisis facing the media.

When discussing three specific themes – 'Forum for Public Debate,' 'Representing Cultural, Societal, and Political Diversity,' and 'Facilitating Public Participation' – all professionals highlighted similar challenges and examples. This suggests that, in the French context, these topics are closely interrelated, with overlapping issues influencing each area.

When asked about the way media facilitate the representation and political participation of women and minorities, the responses predominantly reflect a specific relationship to the concept of minority in France, particularly given that the country does not constitutionally recognize any minority groups. It is nevertheless notable that two professionals have pursued these questions with greater depth than others. Both are journalists (PSM and private) and women; one is non-white.

Finally, beyond the category of media and the position of the professional, it becomes evident that the scale (local/national/international) on which the media is anchored has significant implications with regard to the discussed questions.

COUNTRY REPORT: GERMANY

Barbara Thomass

based on the interviews led and extracted by Eva Tamara Asboth, Helmut Peissl, Andreas Schulz-Tomančok, and Ernest Thaqi

1. Introduction

Obtaining interview partners in Germany was extremely difficult—partly due to the holiday period and the upcoming important elections in three federal states, which placed considerable demands on editorial staff, and also because journalists appear to be overused for scientific interview purposes, often leading them to decline such requests. The interviews were conducted in German and later translated into English for the country report.

The selection therefore followed the parameters set out in the guidelines: one representative with a managerial function (C) and one journalist (J) from a public service broadcaster, a commercial broadcaster, national press, local/regional newspaper, community medium, and a digital native news medium. Beyond this selection, recruitment was based solely on willingness and availability.

Throughout the report, the following rules of anonymization (proposed by the *Guidelines for transcripts of interviews and country reports*) are used:

	Media category	Journalist	Chief editor or any other managerial function
PSM	DE-1	DE-J-1	DE-C-1
Commercial TV or radio stations	DE-2	DE-J-2	DE-C-2
Press	DE-3	DE-J-3	DE-C-3
Digital natives	DE-4	DE-J-4	DE-C-4
Local/regional media	DE-5	DE-J-5	DE-C-5
Community media	DE-6	DE-J-6	DE-C-6

A National context:

The interviews in Germany were conducted at a time when the right-wing populist AfD party was enjoying great electoral success. Elections were held in three federal states in September 2024, from which the AfD emerged as the strongest party in two states with more than 30 per cent in each case. As a result, and due to the commitment of the other parties not to work together with the party, which the Federal Constitutional Court has labelled as right-wing extremist in parts, it became apparent that it would be difficult to form a government.

A second context, which is certainly relevant for some of the respondents and necessary for understanding the evaluation, is the pressure that has been exerted on the public service media for several months and which has been inscribed in the efforts to introduce a new media law for public service broadcasting with intensive cost-cutting efforts. At the same time, it is associated with questionable interventions by media policy players in the independence of public service media funding.

A third development that characterises the media landscape and is particularly relevant for the press is the increasingly difficult economic situation of national and regional newspapers, which are suffering from the migration of advertising business to the large digital groups. The consequences are the closure of editorial offices and a reduction in the number of employees.

2. Providing Accurate Information

In their answers to the question about standards of accurate information, most of our interviewees referred to the German Press Code and its standards, in particular independence (DE-1), truth, fairness and comprehensiveness (DE-2), while the representatives of the commercial broadcasters also referred to their own guidelines and predefined procedures. The head of the digital native news medium (DE-C-4) also mentions the catalogue of standards of two other journalistic NGOs that they fulfil. It is striking how much emphasis is placed on the solidity of the sources and on the practice of applying the two eyes principle – also labelled as collaboration. Almost all representatives cite at least two sources for a piece of information, some of which are supplemented by plausibility texts (DE-1), the fact-checking department (DE-3), the use of reliable sources and the use of footnotes (DE-5). The great importance of sources is also emphasised in the effort to obtain different perspectives on a process (DE-6, DE-5). The representative of the local/regional medium (DE-J-5) also emphasises the use of social networks when researching the right-wing extremist milieu.

Subjective factors play a role in the responses concerning the requirements, the temptations of the digital attention market and its trend to scandalisation (DE-1) and training (DE-2), trust in lay journalists (DE-6). The reference to quality management and editorial teams (DE-2) refers to structures that are considered necessary to ensure accurate information.

3. Controlling Power Holders

The answers to the question of the factors that promote or hinder investigative journalism in order to control the powerful vary widely. The representatives of the commercial broadcaster (DE-C-1 and DE-J-1) hardly address this issue; their answers here are aimed at emphasising real-life topics that are close to the recipient, and also include constructive journalism, which in turn is geared towards individual solutions. This medium also emphasises the importance of other investigative platforms and public service media. The editor-in-chief of the digital native news medium (DE-C-4) also takes an economic view, lamenting the lack of profitability of investigative articles compared to other journalistic pieces.

For the national press, local, and community media, resources are the decisive factors in enabling investigative journalism: human resources, i.e. competent employees who can conduct investigative research (DE-C-5), an investigative department (DE-C-3), which is viewed critically by employees because they see themselves as investigative journalists and consider this work the DNA of their medium. The time factor is also particularly emphasised because investigative research is time-consuming, and in some cases, involves time invested in vain, which an editorial team must be able to afford. The establishment of whistleblower

portals, which has also been observed in media other than their own, is emphasised as an important practical example.

In contrast to specialized investigative departments, the possibility of being able to conduct investigative research without designated teams is also highlighted because the digitalisation of work processes has created new time and research opportunities (DE-J-1).

The journalist from a local/regional newspaper is ambivalent about the prevailing obligation of official bodies to provide information in Germany, as this has closed off other channels of research that journalists had previously used, and the bodies providing information have become more professional, albeit less well staffed. For the community medium, legal uncertainty due to a lack of legal expertise and advice is a particular problem, compounded by the low frustration threshold of non-professional journalists, who may find it difficult to abandon a story that cannot be reliably investigated.

4. Forum for the Public Debate

While the editors-in-chief and managers of public service broadcaster, commercial broadcaster, the national press and the digital native news medium explain with emphasis the forms used to promote debate, the journalists from these editorial offices tend to take a critical view of these opportunities because they are hampered by various problems. A second line along which many of the responses can be arranged relates to the question of whether analogue face-to-face formats are placed at the centre of the practices presented or whether digital dialogue formats are addressed.

The following details illustrate how debate is promoted. Public service media organise hearings at which citizens discuss issues with politicians at local level in individual districts, while commercial companies have similar formats on a national level. The main objective for both is to provide citizens with a direct channel to express their concerns to politicians. This connection between politicians and citizens is also covered in their reporting. Such formats are supplemented by background discussions in which editorial teams (DE-1) explain their working methods. The editor-in-chief of the national press (DE-C-3) also presents their medium as one that actively promotes debate, offering commentary reporting, a dedicated commentary page with guest contributors providing diverse opinions, a podcast with discussions, salons, digital talks, and public conferences, with over 100 events.

From a journalistic perspective, concerns are raised as to whether promoting debate should be the media's responsibility or if politicians should better fulfil their own (communication) duties. Dialogue offerings could be too easily perceived as an educational mandate.

From the perspective of the editor-in-chief of a local/regional newspaper (DE-C-5), the possibilities and negative factors emanating from social media algorithms are also problematised. They cause a dependency on externally controlled algorithms that arbitrarily delete comments or promote problematic ones. A lack of staff capable of moderating online debates due to age or staff numbers further complicates this issue. The editor believes that using AI to solve this problem is only partially promising, as personal contact—even in the digital world—is essential. The problems of hate and aggressive postings in digital debates have also led one newspaper to close its comment function on particularly controversial topics (e.g. the wars in Gaza and Ukraine), which some users perceive as limiting the debate. The digital native news medium in our sample also temporarily closed a debate forum

because political fringes exerted too much pressure on opinions; however, they continue to use incoming comments as material for articles and for raising controversial issues.

One journalist (DE-J-2) emphasises the communication of experiences from abroad to the German audience as a contribution to the debate (using the example of start-ups in the USA and criticism of Orban's measures to restrict democracy in the media and courts).

Both representatives of the community medium address the factors that hinder the stimulation of debate: the low frequency of programming, which limits audience engagement; the limited focus on the audience among editorial teams, who also do not sufficiently discuss content internally; and the lack of time resources to digitally publish all content for on-demand listening. Events when the medium and its editorial team engage directly with the audience remain the most effective for fostering debate.

5. Representing Cultural, Societal and Political Diversity

In their answers to the question about representing cultural, societal, and political diversity, it is clear that diversity is an issue that editorial teams—except for commercial broadcasters (DE-2)—struggle with or see as a process that needs advancement. They recognise the necessity, but also many hurdles. The editor-in-chief of the digital native news (DE-C-4) medium justifies the need to reach all groups in society with the fact that almost all of these groups are online, i.e. potential recipients, even if they receive the medium to a much lesser extent. Apart from that, political diversity, with the exception of interviews with representatives of parties that are monitored by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, is a central component of the comprehensive set of rules designed to ensure diversity.

The representatives of commercial broadcasting (DE-2) only point out that the journalistic standards of ensuring balanced reporting are adhered to. It is the responsibility of the company to provide the editorial offices with the personnel and financial resources to enable appropriate reporting. A journalist from a commercial broadcaster (DE-J-2) also commented here without any reference to measures because he believes it is hardly possible for practised and recognised diversity to be disseminated by the media anyway; even the groups of Italians, Spaniards and Portuguese known as 'guest workers' who have come to Germany since the 1960s have not succeeded in fully integrating.

The responses from the commercial TV and radio (DE-1) representatives are the most differentiated here, which suggests that the topic has been dealt with intensively. The diversity of employees is a priority in order to achieve social, cultural and political diversity in reporting. To do so, even recruitment criteria—which may exclude certain migrant groups—are scrutinized. Sensitization training for employees to identify biases against diversity and awareness projects are additional approaches intended to foster a corporate culture that is open to diversity. A journalist from (DE-J-1) points out how important it is to have well-trained people in an editorial team who have the time to pay attention to diversity aspects, even if they do not belong to the groups in question. A separate (DE-1) channel that addresses migrant groups and has appropriate staff is a good practical example.

The topic of diversity is also the subject of intensive, albeit more problematising, consideration among representatives of the national (DE-3) and local/regional (DE-5) press. The editor-in-chief of a national newspaper (DE-C-3) presents his/her medium as highly

active in diversity measures, with a 50 % quota for women that has been in place since the 1980s (today 65 % of editorial staff are women) and a soft quota, whereby vacant positions are to be filled with migrant applicants, along with support programmes, such as a trainee scholarship, are also set up for this purpose. These programmes support young people with a non-typical journalistic background for a career in journalism. These are measures that are also emphatically demanded by NGOs that are campaigning for 'more diversity in the media' in Germany.

A journalist from the same medium emphasises the open climate of opinion in the editorial office for political diversity, and also the encouragement given to gender and migrant diversity. The perspectives of these groups should also be heard increasingly. But even more effort could be done by hiring more people with diverse backgrounds to include even more perspectives. At the digital native news medium, a community editor ensures that topics raised by the commenting community, which might otherwise go unnoticed, are considered in reporting.

The head of a local newspaper (DE-C-5) points to the homogeneous background due to similar professional socialisation that the leading baby boomers have, who are currently dominant in the media, as an obstacle to diversity. Their mindset contrasts with the realities of many people, especially in Eastern Germany, which is why mainstream journalism is often criticized. He perceives this mainstream as being trapped in a right-left framework, with most media leaning toward the centre. This socialisation, he argues, prevents journalists from reflecting the full breadth of social reality and embracing political diversity. However, it is helpful, he claims, that this generation now understands that diversity in terms of cultural and social diversity is a much broader topic that is a huge issue today and that the responsibility to address this has been taken on. The journalist from a local newspaper (DE-J-5) that must cover a large reporting area, where travelling to the reporting locations alone is costly, sees obstacles in terms of time and personnel resources to cover diversity as an important factor. This affects the selection of topics and locations, thereby limiting diversity.

In the community medium (DE-6), one manager (DE-C-6) sees attempts by individual employees to push through a particular line of argument as a hindrance to diversity. Another factor is that the town where the medium is located has high living costs, and the limited time resources of the student employees in the community radio limit the opportunities for voluntary work. They often want to get involved in the station but have time constraints due to their studies and have to earn money. The financial pressure that the station feels is also experienced by the individual employees and prevents diversity in the team. A journalist from a community medium (DE-J-6) in a midsized city also refers to the time constraints that prevent employees from capturing the diversity of the various groups in society that are not actively involved in media work. The station also broadcasts in languages other than German. However, the composition of the editorial team is such that language is an obstacle to reaching other social groups.

6. Facilitating Public Participation

The answers to the questions on 'Facilitating Public Participation' are similar to those in section 4 ('Forum for Public Debate'). The focus is on the importance of debate formats that are organised or broadcast in various forms – this applies to representatives of both public (DE-1) and commercial broadcasters (DE-2). Focussing on specific topics, careful reporting,

addressing real-life issues in order to appeal directly to the audience are the fairly general answers to the question of political participation. The nature of the answers makes it rather obvious that the media's own contribution to political participation is hardly problematised beyond the contribution to the public debate, which the interviewees have already addressed. One (DE-J-1) journalist virtually denied this possibility, especially regarding the participation of women, pointing out that despite gender parity in the German government, decisions were ultimately made by the men in the (now broken) coalition government.

The (DE-1) representative reports on debate formats in which citizens are brought into direct contact with politicians. Dialogue programmes with pros and cons are another form in which, for example, very different representatives with very contradictory opinions were brought together on the issue of the legality of actions by climate protesters. The organisation of participation in such debates—4000 participants from the young audience were mobilised on the topic of bullying—is another example.

The head of the commercial broadcaster (DE-C-2) also refers to the participatory formats of their medium, as well as to the focus on controversial topics, which are broadcast in so-called theme weeks, and which are played out cross-media with print, online, TV and radio across the entire media spectrum of the company to which the broadcaster belongs. Examples of such topics include sustainability, LGBTQ, social cohesion and optimism. Here, too, the practising journalist—especially as a foreign correspondent—remains somewhat sceptical about these possibilities and instead relies on the reliability of his reporting and the trust his medium is supposed to generate. He points to the problem that no medium or group of media, such as public (DE-1) or commercial broadcasters (DE-2), reaches the entire breadth of the population and that polarisation is therefore already a given. Without going into the role of women and migrants, the head of the digital native (DE-C-4) news medium only mentions the thematization of individual problems as a contribution to the public debate. And the journalist (DE-J-4) from the same media group says that reporting on minority issues is of little economic benefit.

The journalist from a national newspaper (DE-J-3) sees the fact that seemingly private topics, such as raising children, need to be taken up and made tangible in their political dimension to promote participation as a favourable factor, particularly for the participation of women and especially female migrants. These considerations are also shared by the head of the local newspaper (DE-C-5), who sees it as a problem that, due to language barriers, his/her editorial team knows too little about the living conditions of migrants to give them an appropriate voice; this is all the truer, the shorter the period since they have been living in Germany. The journalist from a local newspaper (DE-J-5) emphasizes the need to identify causes when women are not given a voice on a topic in the media, to raise awareness of such discrimination. Ultimately, however, having enough women on the editorial team would be the only way to ensure the female perspective is adequately represented.

The journalist from the community medium (DE-J-6) again emphasises the lack of time and resources, which, in addition to the greater difficulties of the lay medium in obtaining information, hinder the work in the station and thus the opportunity to contribute to participation. Women's participation—as the journalist from a community medium reports (DE-J-6)—is attempted in particular in a lesbian radio station with its own editorial team by recruiting female interview partners in the majority.

7. Conditions for Freedom and Professional Journalism

The most consistent answers regarding the conditions for freedom and professional journalism relate to the wider political framework (in this case the development of the right-wing populism), the question of sufficient resources and the dangers posed by unbridled digitalisation. The range of answers is very broad and varies depending on the interviewees' position in the media system, which is why the individual aspects will be presented here.

Populist parties that want to restrict media freedom and DE-1 are the most serious threat mentioned by the director of the DE-C-1, as well as the dominance of global telecommunications providers for whom media freedom is not a criterion and who do not work based on values and human rights. Their market power, she claims, is so great that national media providers, both public and commercial, are less competitive, which poses a major threat to the commercial sector. The head of a national newspaper (DE-C-3) also emphasises the danger of right-wing populist parties and their threat to media freedom as the greatest danger, but also demands that colleagues should use their freedom even more to defend journalism against right-wing authoritarian tendencies. The danger from the right is also an important issue for the local journalist (DE-J-5), who has observed that some people no longer want to speak out to the newspaper out of fear.

The head of the local newspaper (DE-C-5) also identifies digitalization as a major issue, as the acquisition of information via social media raises unrealistic expectations among readers. These expectations may involve false reports, which the newspaper cannot or does not want to fulfil due to concerns over accuracy. He sees social media as problematic because it can render journalistic media redundant when many organizations communicate directly via social media, presenting their own narratives. The head of the community medium (DE-C-6) sees the oversupply of information on the internet as a hindering factor for his employees because they often lack the time and orientation to find and process what is relevant, even if the internet and the digitalisation of workflows make work easier in many cases. He points to the challenges that the advent of AI in journalism will pose for his older employees in particular. AI and the fuelling of misinformation that it causes is also the biggest concern of the head of the digital native news medium.

In contrast, the DE-J-1 journalist sees the clear mission of the DE-1 broadcaster and its maximum journalistic freedom as fundamentally favourable factors, while the lack of resources hinders professional work. His opinion on the entrenched structures, also due to the strong position of trade unions in the public media sector, are on the side of hindrance. In fact, he reports, trade unions in DE-1 have achieved income and working conditions that are unattainable for new employees due to a lack of resources in the system.

For the representative of the commercial broadcaster (DE-C-2) and the digital native news medium (DE-C-4), the lack of money that can be earned in the market and invested in journalism is also the main obstacle to professional journalism in combination with the loss of its credibility. The second major obstacle the former mentions is the findability of content and the impact of algorithms, which prevent well-researched journalistic content from reaching its audience. For the journalist from commercial broadcasting (DE-J-2), it is the power of the owner that hinders his professionalism to create content independently, and only his financial independence, including the risk of being sacked, if the case, that allows him to resist the impositions that may come from the owner or editor-in-chief.

The economic solidity of his medium is an important factor for the journalist of the national press (DE-J-3) to be able to defend professionalism with the given resources. The downside of not having enough time for solid research is lamented by the local newspaper journalist (DE-J-5) as an obstructive factor, as is the journalist from the community medium (DE-J-6), who also sees the disadvantage of late information from official bodies as a considerable obstacle to reporting in his medium.

8. Relationship Between Media and Democracy

When asked about the relationship between the media and democracy, all respondents emphasise the importance of journalism, which provides serious and reliable information and allows the diversity of voices in a society to be heard. Accordingly, the need to maintain this freedom to provide information through reputable journalism is also emphasised as an important contribution to safeguarding democracy.

The DE-C-1 representative not only emphasises the central role of DE-1 in promoting democracy and safeguarding democratic processes, which is achieved through information, but also stresses that entertainment formats offer emotional content that strengthens the connection to the audience.

Regarding journalism, the DE-J-1 journalist points out how endangered the profession already is and that the preservation of DE-1 also serves the preservation of journalism. He sees the role of journalists as more important than ever in view of the abundance of information of unclear origin and relevance. He also emphasises the forum function, which is necessary for the exchange of opinions and can counteract the polarisation of society.

The independence of the media, their services for information and opinion-forming and this in the face of disinformation, platforms, algorithms and hate speech are the most important arguments for the head of the commercial broadcaster (DE-C-2) in this complex of issues, similar to the journalistic employee of a commercial broadcaster (DE-J-2), who emphasises the comprehensiveness of information and the diversity of perspectives for securing democracy. However, he also considers it necessary to highlight the anti-democratic endeavours of some parties and media.

Controlling the powerful and creating a democratic public that wants to participate are the most important concerns for both managers and journalists of the national press in order to work in a way that promotes democracy.

While the head of the local newspaper (DE-C-5) argues in principle with the constitution to promote democracy through reliable information, with the best possible research and the greatest possible care, the local journalist (DE-J-5) speaks above all of the need to protect democracy, to name what is anti-democratic, how valuable democracy is and to counter right-wing extremist narratives. He does not see the journalistic media primarily as competitors, but rather as sharing the task of contributing to the formation of opinion through a variety of viewpoints.

Seeing information as a human need is also important to the head of the local newspaper (DE-C-5), which is why naming problems but also reporting on solutions to problems is important – a perspective that the head of the community medium (DE-C-6) relates to the local level. The community journalist (DE-J-6) supplements this idea with the consideration that democratic processes can be explained at the local level in particular.

9. Conclusions

What stands out in many statements is the observation of the anti-democratic development towards the right-wing positions, the concern about the preservation of democracy and the complaint that the resources for this task are insufficient in terms of personnel and funding. This sentiment is reflected across many responses and in all types of media.

Another tendency is that managing and ordinary journalists differ in how they view normative descriptions of their tasks and activities. Managing journalists tend to be more emphatic and demanding in this regard, while ordinary journalists focus more on the practical challenges involved in meeting these expectations.

It also became clear that community media (DE-6), whose content is strongly characterized by the voluntary work of laypeople and their competence (or lack of competence), take on a somewhat different significance, namely that of activating citizens, but also of the local, small-scale thematization of issues, which larger-scale media cannot (or can no longer) focus on – also due to a lack of resources.

In view of the fact that several journalists underline the important role of journalism as arbitrator, mediator and orientator in the overwhelming abundance of information on the internet, the question arises, whether journalism was hitherto able to convey this function to its users and how it can do so in future.

Overall, the findings of previous studies are confirmed: journalists surveyed in Germany maintain a relatively high standard of professionalism, can reflect on and articulate their democratic role, and view their professionalism as being increasingly threatened by the constraints of a media landscape that no longer sufficiently finances journalism. Additionally, the changing political climate in Germany, which has led to a significant growth of a right-wing populist party, is reflected in the respondents' concerns about the preservation of democracy. The following quote is therefore the only one to appear here: "Whether we can preserve democracy is an open question", states the journalist from a commercial broadcaster.

COUNTRY REPORT: IRELAND

Rosemary Day, Jude McInerney

1. Introduction

Twelve interviews were conducted with journalists, editors and senior managers and these were selected to represent a broad sweep of the entire field of news production (Klimkiewicz, Szafrańska, et al., 2024). The range of political orientation in Ireland is quite

uniform, being primarily in the Centre, with some outlets leaning more to the Centre Right rather than to the Left. As of November 2024, there is very little news production from either the Far Right or from the Far Left.

All types of media ownership that exist in Ireland were represented in these interviews (from public service, to independent commercial to community media) and all types of platforms for news dissemination (from digital natives to television and radio and from the national to the local printed press).

Initially, the recruitment of participants was easy, with members of the community media and the local press being willing to talk to the researcher. After this, as we climbed the hierarchy of status through privately owned national commercial media to public service media, it became more difficult. Editors and journalists were not quick to return calls or e-mails and personal contacts had to be used to establish a line of communication. Once introduced to the researcher in this way, all of these outlets were happy to participate and did so with great generosity and interest. However, representatives of the oldest form of news media, the printed press, were extremely difficult to pin down. Multiple attempts to get the more prestigious and long-established newspapers to participate were thwarted as journalists and editors, even when known personally to members of the team, simply did not respond to phone or e-mail attempts to engage them. This was overcome eventually through dogged persistence, but it seems to be significant that the original medium for news production, one that depends on interviews itself primarily to generate a deeper or more investigative approach to its own news reporting, should prove to be so resistant to assisting with this important research about media and democracy today.

Some interviewees were happy to be identified but most seemed happier when reassured that their contributions would be anonymous, and they proceeded to engage openly, honestly and generously in the process.

The media landscape in Ireland is changing. The Irish section of Reuters' Digital Media Report for 2024 found that, for the first time, the main source of news for the Irish public is online rather than television. The public service broadcaster, RTÉ News [Radio Teilifís Éireann] is the most used news source across all platforms, and it retains very high trust levels amongst the public (Murrell et al., 2024). The report found that 88% of respondents are interested in news and 46% of the public trust the news they are accessing, although 71% of them report having real concerns about what is real news and what is fake. The report highlighted an increase in the number of Irish news consumers paying to access news in 2024 (from 15% in 2023 to 17% in 2024) and this was even higher in the 18 – 24-year-old age group (up to 26% from 19%). This may indicate a trend where people are prepared to pay for news that they can trust.

A recent scandal within the public service broadcaster, RTÉ, has tarnished its reputation and consequently, its revenue and the level of trust the public has in it as an institution. The initial scandal related to non-disclosure of payments made to a celebrity broadcaster, and further revelations of poor accountancy practices and poor governance issues followed. Income from television licence fees dropped by 13% in 2023 as a result of the scandal (Reuters, 2024) and RTÉ has also complained of a loss of advertising revenue to digital media. Questions about the need for RTÉ and about the value of an expensive public service

broadcast institution, were raised by the press, by members of the public on social media and also by media analysts and politicians in many fora. Private, commercial media have been vocal in pointing out that they also produce public service content, and they are staking a claim on any state supports that may be available for public service content, including for the provision of news and current affairs.

A recent government commission tasked with reviewing RTÉ's funding mechanisms and reflecting on the future of media in Ireland (The Future of Media Commission, 2024) proposed six funds to support the work of the media in Ireland. These schemes will fund local democracy journalism; reporting on courts; support for digital transformation for media; a community media scheme and a scheme for media access and training. The first two of these schemes that fund journalism to the tune of €6,000,000 were established in 2024 and attracted huge interest (Burns, 2024).

2. Providing Accurate Information

Most journalists and editors mentioned the importance of fact checking and of the verification of sources and 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.

All 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 (e.g. IE-J-2; IE-J-5). The need to know who was providing the information and of being able to stand over that source and trust it were mentioned by most interviewees, too. For example, the public service broadcaster's journalist said that it was essential to use "reliable, tried and tested sources" (IE-J-2).

All respondents said that they always try to provide fair and impartial reports, giving 'both sides of the story' (e.g. IE-C-4; IE-C-6; IE-J-1 and IE-J-2) and that they actively try to find people with a range or diversity of opinions to contribute to their stories.

It was interesting that no one mentioned the Press Ombudsman or the standards of the NUJ (National Union of Journalists) as either a help or a hindrance in their work. Although both public service and community media representatives mentioned the regulator, Coimisiún na Meán [The Irish language version of The Commission for the Media] and said that they were always careful to abide by its codes and regulations.

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, legalizing for illegally sensitive articles" (IE-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. A number of new funds administered by Coimisiún na Meán (2024) to support independent journalism in Ireland were broadly welcomed although independent, commercial radio stations did not believe that the first two schemes to be rolled out were relevant to or useful for them (Burns, 2024). These two funds, launched in 2024 are to support court reporting and reporting on local democracy (i.e. the meetings and work of local government authorities) and will bring €6,000,000 to the sector. Future schemes will further support journalism in Ireland across all three sectors through funding Digital Transformation; News Reporting; Community Media and Media Access and Training (see: Country Report: Ireland, MeDeMAP, Work Package 4: 2023).

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 very starkly when they explained the impact the loss of experienced staff has on the newsroom:

> "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.
>
> I think that will have an impact on how you cover something that's happening and then as well, if you don't have a fully staffed newsroom, then you can't spend as much time on various issues that you would otherwise" (IE-C-2).

Some interviewees were concerned about the quality of the news that people are accessing. A digital editor (IE-C-5) 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 who had poor literacy were not getting good quality news and were badly served with misinformation (IE-C-5).

3. Controlling Power Holders

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 cost 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 participants (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 and to do the work the way they felt they needed to. However, one digital editor believed that partnering with tech giants like Google to provide news would be a good way to counteract this and provide funding for journalism (IE-C-4)

The large amounts awarded to politicians and others for defamation cases taken to court were also cited as a constraint to journalism, as newsrooms were wary of the costs involved.

One regional journalist was concerned that a number of high profile investigative and political journalists have gone on to work for politicians and political entities, and believed that this close relationship was questionable. One 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. However, one journalist highlighted changes in communication patterns between politicians and media outlets with contributors questioning the flow of information from government sources (IE-J-1). Others mentioned a change in access to politicians, lamenting the disappearance of the type of arrangement in the past when journalists would have a phone number for a politician's office and could have a quick chat, as opposed to nowadays when they find they have to send a number of emails requesting access to the politician before they can talk to them.

One regional journalist (IE-C-5) also highlighted a change in behaviour from politicians visiting rural areas. Historically, journalists were informed of oncoming visits and allotted time for questions, now politicians are not announcing their arrival in a rural area and are going unquestioned by their local media. The ease with which politicians can now send out their own messaging via social media was also raised as an issue in terms of controlling power holders. The same journalist put it this way:

> "What we've noticed as well, in recent times, is politicians getting out ahead almost of the press in terms of Facebook, X, Instagram, and we're almost doing a little bit of catch up" (IE-C-5).

Concerns of bias were raised by most interviewees, who were highly aware of politicians contacting the media to push their own agenda (IE-C-5; IE-J-6; EI-J-2; EI-C-6).

Some journalists and editors were concerned about the funding and ownership of the Irish media. Irish journalists consider themselves to be independent but much of the media that employ them are owned by foreign corporations (See: Country Report, Ireland, in: Klimkiewicz, Szafrańska, et.al., 2024) and some 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 also, as was a concern that many of these companies are not indigenous to Ireland. For example, a manager of community media outlet highlighted the fact that over a quarter (27%) of Irish media are owned by companies based outside of Ireland (IE-C-6).

Others were concerned that "group think" and consensus can be too easily arrived at in their newsrooms, particularly as time and money constraints mean that they are not able to investigate, corroborate, verify and craft legally robust stories as well as they believe they

should. Those who expressed these concerns were clear that this "group think" or lazy way of dealing with issues needs to be challenged.

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 this may be due to journalists not perceiving a problem or to there not actually being a problem. As noted above, only a few journalists were concerned about media concentration of ownership and the power that this can give the ultimate owners.

4. Forum for Public Debate

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 also constrains journalists. Interviewees reported that they feel under pressure to deliver news constantly and immediately and 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). 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.

All outlets welcome public comment. However, most journalists and editors interpreted these 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 a 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 e.g. on election issues or topical, political "hot" issues rather than actual debate and discussion on the issues mentioned using engagement on social media or elsewhere as a way of eliciting citizens' opinions about the news and sharing these generally with their audiences.

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 one digital media editor. This editor explained that they had used a type of 'reverse journalism' where public participation in on-line discussions were 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).

5. Representing Cultural, Societal and Political Diversity

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 was the overwhelming middle-class backgrounds of staff and the loss of experienced journalists being replaced with younger journalists straight out of college without any experience of the job or even much experience of life.

While gender balance was reported to be less of an issue than it once was, the lack of diversity of class, colour and political orientation were seen to still be problematic. 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 a digital editor highlighting that the working-class community are poorly served by mainstream media and as a result are receiving information from bad actors or unreliable sources (EI-C-4).

In general, 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 actually employing or using the voices of those who are generally underrepresented in society. In line with the understanding of the provision of a public forum described above, those employed in news media in Ireland seem to understand their role as reporting on and reporting to rather than reporting with. As a 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. However, the same editor was concerned that many people were excluded from receiving the news their paper could provide because management prioritised the production of content for the people who pay for the paper, essentially the native born, wealthier and better educated Irish members of the local population (IE-C-5). To a large extent, it is only community media who provide a public forum for participation, 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 identified were lack of representation of new immigrants; Travellers (indigenous Irish ethnic minority); people of colour; the working class and women generally. One female journalist and most editors highlighted the gender issue and the old adage of the problems women in the workplace encounter. They highlighted the problems women in the industry face when they have children, citing childcare as an issue for female journalists only (IE-C-5). A digital news editor said they would welcome supportive policies for work-life balance (IE-C-4) and they highlighted the need for child care funding across the board to encourage female representation, not only in media but also in politics.

Some interviewees mentioned their own "unconscious bias" as a possible block to the better representation of minorities and of minority issues. This is hard to interpret but seems to point to an awareness that may go some way towards addressing these gaps. Others said that they expect that the 'natural selection' of the new Irish [immigrants] through the educational system will eventually provide a way of bringing minorities into the news work force (IE-J-3).

6. Facilitating Public Participation

One barrier to participation is the toxicity of the internet, with one journalist believing that this has put people off commenting or entering into any debate online. Another believes 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 as being less aggressive and toxic than X.

One journalist 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). Community media were also aware of people's fear of vitriol and toxicity on social media and believed that offline communication, particularly opportunities for face-to-face communication, were actually the best antidote to people's fears and this problem. They also believed that this was the best way to counter misinformation and disinformation.

The same 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 so again, conversely, the opportunity to do more and do it more often has actually led to journalists going into less depth in their stories and not reaching out to members of the public. One print editor referred to their online digital publishing as 'feeding the beast' and explained their outlet was publishing online stories from 7.00am to midnight every day (IE-C-5). This editor also explained that their preference would be to write for print but that the drop in sales of newspapers and the constant demand for online content is the reason that their staff are under constant pressure and cannot engage as much or as deeply with their communities as they would wish.

Some journalists and editors believed that providing "good facts" and accurate information was what a forum for the public entailed. Commercial radio, digital natives and community media were far 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 platforms. 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. A community media journalist agreed and proposed more engagement from mainstream media outlets, in particular from the public service broadcaster, to inform the public of facts during times of unrest surrounding 'hot topics' such as immigration and the creation of moral panics (IE-J-6). Three editors and one journalist recommended legislating 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).

7. Conditions for Freedom and Professional Journalism

In general, Irish journalists and editors when asked were adamant that media freedom was of paramount importance. However, many of them remarked on how lucky they are to live and work in this jurisdiction, noting that the freedom to work, to investigate and to report as independent actors is not always the norm across the world. They declared solidarity with those who do not enjoy these freedoms (IE-C-4) and some wondered if they were a little removed from or relaxed about the threats to media freedom that others face. They were aware that threats to media freedom could arise in the future in Ireland but were not actively worried about it.

Some of those interviewed mentioned that they had received threats from people they were investigating. For example, one editor talked about criminals arriving at their home (IE-C-5). They also mentioned criminals they were researching appealing to their court reporter not to publish stories about them. This poses a real threat here in Ireland after the killing of a journalist (Veronica Guerin) in 1996.

The questioning by Gardaí (Irish police) over, among other things, particular sources used was mentioned as a potential block to journalists doing their job, but generally journalists believed that they were well-supported and defended by their outlets and by public opinion. For example, the public service broadcaster journalist described an instance where the Gardaí interviewed them requesting the name of their source for a news item, but they were reassured when their outlet stood by them and defended their right to not name a source, and they expected this to be a matter of course (IE-J-1).

The biggest threat to freedom of the press and to the professionalism of journalists was the lack of funding that was mentioned in nearly every category. Interviewees said that they had not enough resources to investigate stories and issues sufficiently deeply. A regional newspaper editor intimated that at times it felt like journalists were only scratching the surface of news items in comparison to past investigative journalism (IE-C-5). They also lamented the loss of experienced journalists due to the poor pay of journalists (IE-C-2). A lack of a pay increase in 20 years was mentioned by an editor of a commercial radio station's newsroom and a community radio journalist (IE-C-2; IE-J-6). The trend of people leaving after training and going into other professions because of salary and workload were mentioned by several respondents (see above).

This loss of experienced journalists was also lamented by many (e.g. IE-C-5 and IE-C-4) with a number of journalists citing the loss of mentorship for new or young journalists as being a particularly bad side effect of this. Journalists with years of experience are being replaced

by journalists who have come straight from college, getting on the job or in-house training for a couple of weeks (IE-J-2; IE-C-5). Their lack of experience on the job and even of life itself exacerbates the difficulty of training up these new, younger journalists to replace older journalists on a constant basis.

The role of the journalist has also changed and has made the job itself more difficult. For example, journalists need to multitask and need to juggle between the old job of researching and writing for publications with managing social media, creating video content, podcasts and blogs to supplement their publications (EI-C-6, EI-C-5, IE-C-5, IE-C-4).

Irish defamation laws were cited as a consideration by the majority of interviewees as standing in the way of publishing "good stories". The problem of not only having to wait hours or weeks to publish stories because of fact checking, but also having to write 'explainers on social media' to justify the reason behind the delay in telling the news (IE-C-5) was given as an example of time-wasting. Some journalists reported the difficulty of getting people to go on record as a difficulty when pursuing a story, particularly politicians who would "refuse to comment" (IE-C-3). Others have highlighted that politicians are using social media to 'get ahead' of media outlets (IE-C-5; IE-J-4; IE-J-6). One online editor (IE-J-4) described how 'the right to respond' afforded to politicians has been used by a political party to manage a political scandal prior to publication (IE-C-5) basically ensuring that the news was manipulated.

Most respondents did not suggest ways of protecting journalists or media freedoms, but this may be because they did not believe themselves or their freedoms to be threatened in any major way.

8. Relationship Between Media and Democracy

Transparency and telling the truth were considered to be the most important elements in the relationship between the media and democracy.

Generally, journalists and editors believed that the key way to manage the relationship between the media, politicians and the public was to tell the truth. A criticism of how politics is covered was highlighted by an editor and a journalist from the community media sector. Both believe that mainstream media outlets have pushed the topics of concern of the public to one side and focus instead on political parties as news (EI-C-6; EI-J-6). An online journalist agreed and said that this harms democracy and limits democratic debate to narrow channels. Quoting Chomsky, they said:

> "You know, there's a famous kind of quote from Noam Chomsky, where you know, he said something like, 'when it comes to public debates, you know, issues of national importance, whatever else, what media tends to do is allow fairy lively debate, but within very narrow parameters', and I certainly agree with that. I think when you look at, as I said, I'm not as critical of RTÉ [Raidió Teilifís Éireann, Irish public broadcaster] as others on the Left would be. If you look at an RTÉ panel show, or even just, you know, some of its news on investigative […] and I put equally the equivalent in Virgin Media [Ireland's commercial television station, owned by Liberty Global Ltd] there's a certain level of, you know, 'lively debate' allowed for both, within very, very narrow parameters" (IE-J-4).

Being independent of political parties and not being specifically tied to a particular political orientation, be that Right or Left, were generally considered to be important for the media and democracy. Some respondents strongly believed that journalists should neither take sides nor push their own agendas or opinions (e.g. IE-C-5; IE-J-5). However, a contributor from a digital media outlet (IE-J-4) identified as being a journalist activist with far-left leanings and was proud of their headlines from publications being used in protests. Those interviewed from community media tended to advocate for citizen power and agency also.

The majority of interviewees believed that it was very important to hold politicians to account and to tell the public the truth about what is going on (EI-C-5; EI-J-1; IE-J-2; IE-C-2). So, they believe that while it is necessary for journalists to have a relationship with politicians in order to get information and stories, it is also necessary to be able to stand back from them. Consequently, they reported that the relationship between politicians and journalists is a tricky one but bringing the truth to the public should be the guiding factor in managing the relationship at all times.

Having a plurality of media outlets, media ownership types and diversity of orientations/perspectives was also considered really important for media and democracy (see: IE-C-1; IE-J-6; IE-J-2 and IE-J-4)

One of the threats to the media and democracy that was highlighted by the majority of editors and journalists was the issue of media literacy. Some highlighted the need for media literacy to be introduced in primary schools for all students. Many described the need to adapt news for different demographics and to present stories in 'bite size portions' with different emphases on aspects of the story for different people and pointed out that this required extra work to tailoring the stories for their audiences (IE-C-3; IE-J-1; IE-J-3).

9. Conclusions

The most important issue for editors and journalists in terms of how well they are able to do their jobs is that of finance. Across the board, all interviewees reported falling income and the impact that this is having on the generation of reliable news. Staff are leaving, staff are not being replaced while, at the same time, staff are being asked to do more e.g. provide on-line material constantly and immediately.

The loss of income from advertising and the movement of advertising to online platforms has hit all outlets with huge repercussions. This, combined with the lack of adequate government funding, has seen the loss of valued experienced journalistic staff across the board. These are being replaced by educated young people, just out of college, but these are inexperienced journalists and inexperienced in life itself. A profile of younger, white, predominantly middle class, male journalists is emerging across the media landscape and this was a concern for almost all of those interviewed.

Production practices are also changing, with journalists now required to 'cast an eye' over other people's work or do the job of subeditors without having this job description, title or pay. They are required to produce video content for social media or to produce podcasts and blogs on top of their traditional work.

The next most important constraint that impinges on editors' and journalists' freedom to work was Ireland's defamation laws. All outlets were wary of publishing news that might land them in court, as the payments made in defamation cases are very high in Ireland. A parliamentary bill to address the complex issues around defamation, in particular the size of awards made when plaintiffs are successful, was introduced in 2024 but this had not passed all stages in the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) before an election was called at the time of writing. Fact checking, verification, use of multiple sources were the main tools employed to ensure that a story was 'safe' to publish. This was backed up by the practice of consulting with colleagues, the editorial team, internal legal staff and sometimes external law firms. However, all of this caused the publication of stories to be delayed at best and not published at all at worst.

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. This, in turn, interviewees said has audiences questioning the motives behind the lack of reporting and is putting mainstream media under even more pressure to produce more online content that explains the news to different demographic types in the audience rather than spending their time investigating the news further. Irish journalists and news editors believe their primary function in society is to provide true, accurate and impartial information to people. They did not see a role for them or for their outlets to provide 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.

All interviewees felt the integrity of journalism was threatened by online social media, in particular by the creation of silos of fast, fake news. This was even more worrying, they said, in the case of working-class and of immigrant audiences where some journalists and editors felt media literacy and also access to the media were more limited than in other sectors of the audience. The constant demand of refreshing news websites and social media and the need to be immediate in delivering every small update to be ahead of competitors were seen as a huge pressure. This was referred to as "feeding the beast" (IE-C-5) by one editor. Many interviewees expressed disappointment that this meant they no longer had the time or other resources to go deeper into investigating stories, and this also meant that they did not engage meaningfully with the public in terms of generating stories or getting opinions.

Most of those interviewed saw the need to provide more stories dealing with diversity issues. 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.

The growing concentration of ownership of news outlets and the international nature of these owners was raised by a number of interviewees, who were worried about the lack of plurality in the ownership and therefore control of the Irish media.

Media freedom was not a major issue for the Irish journalists and editors interviewed in the course of this research. Some were very grateful to work in a free environment that allows

them independence and reasonably good working conditions. However, the issue of media freedom was not really a concern for those involved in Irish newsrooms.

COUNTRY REPORT: ITALY

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1. Introduction

In the pursuit of understanding the evolving dynamics of media and democracy, the research initiative "MeDeMAP: Mapping Media for Future Democracies" undertook a deep dive into Italy's media supply landscape. This investigation was anchored by carefully curated interviews with seasoned Italian journalists, each bringing a wealth of experience and insight from various sectors of the media industry.

Selecting the interviewees was a meticulous process, ensuring that the sample reflected the diverse requirements of the study. The journalists, representing a cross-section of public service media, private outlets, press, digital-native platforms, and community media, offered a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities faced in modern journalism. From the outset, the importance of anonymity emerged as a theme. For some,

particularly those from public and private television sectors, anonymity allowed candid responses, circumventing organizational bureaucracy.

2. Providing Accurate Information

Across various media types, several shared principles emerged, underscoring the foundational ethics of journalism. Source verification was universally acknowledged as a cornerstone of journalistic integrity, reflecting a collective commitment to ensuring accuracy. Additionally, the pervasive challenge of fake news, particularly within the digital realm and on social media platforms, was a consistent concern among journalists and editors. To counter this, a shared emphasis on cross-checking information through multiple sources further highlighted the profession's dedication to credibility and reliability.

However, distinct differences in approaches and priorities became apparent when comparing specific media sectors. Public service media, particularly television, prioritized objectivity, especially when reporting on politically sensitive issues such as the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas conflicts. In contrast, private TV outlets and the press placed greater focus on practical considerations like access to sources and the mechanics of verification.

Another notable divergence lay in the balance between speed and accuracy. Public service broadcasters exercised caution, often delaying publication to avoid inaccuracies, particularly in the fast-paced online environment. Conversely, digital-native outlets emphasized the importance of synthesizing conflicting sources to provide a comprehensive perspective, even when speed was a critical factor.

Differences also emerged in the scope of coverage. Digital-native and public service media tended to prioritize global narratives, offering broader perspectives on international conflicts. Meanwhile, local and regional media concentrated on in-depth coverage rooted in local legal and cultural contexts, emphasizing precision and relevance to their immediate audience.

Technological advancements further delineated practices between sectors. Print media, for instance, increasingly relied on tools like automated verification systems to authenticate multimedia content, whereas other media types continued to favour traditional methods, such as on-ground correspondents and manual checks.

Lastly, the issue of funding independence revealed another layer of variation. A press journalist highlighted the value of working within platforms insulated from financial pressures, allowing for a degree of editorial freedom that might otherwise be compromised in media influenced by external funding dynamics.

3. Controlling Power Holders

Investigative journalism, a cornerstone of in-depth reporting, faces numerous challenges across all media types, highlighting both commonalities and sector-specific differences in its practice. A prevailing similarity lies in the significant financial and resource constraints that investigative journalism imposes. Public service media, local outlets, and community or non-

profit organizations consistently emphasized that this form of journalism demands financial investment and personnel resources that are often scarce. Shrinking newsrooms exacerbate this issue, as respondents across local, regional, and press outlets pointed to diminished staff numbers as a key barrier to producing thorough investigations.

Political and legislative pressures further complicate the landscape. A journalist from digital-native outlets and an editor from community and non-profit media described the pervasive influence of censorship and political interference, all of which stifle their ability to pursue investigative stories freely. Another obstacle is legal threats. According to editors from community media, in Italy, there is a persistent issue, one that's deeply ingrained in the culture—frivolous lawsuits: 'so it is very easy for those who find themselves involved in journalistic investigations to file a complaint, ultimately presenting a criminal complaint, but then also a civil compensation claim for damages against the authors of the article and the editor responsible. It is such an evident phenomenon that for years there has been talk of legislative intervention to protect journalists from these risks, but unfortunately, it has never arrived '. Nonetheless, public and publisher support emerged as a vital enabling factor. Digital-native and local media respondents stressed that financial backing and audience engagement often provide the necessary foundation for conducting impactful investigations, even in the face of systemic challenges.

Divergences in the role and perception of investigative journalism underscore sector-specific priorities. Public service media and private television outlets, for instance, tend to deprioritize investigative reporting, focusing instead on current events. Conversely, press organizations and digital-native outlets champion investigative journalism as central to their mission. Editors from prominent outlets highlighted their capacity to send journalists into the field, reinforcing the belief that investigative reporting epitomizes the depth and satisfaction of their craft. Local and regional media, while engaged in investigative work, often limit their scope to community-specific issues, such as regional infrastructure problems. In contrast, community and minority-focused media largely deprioritize investigative efforts, often due to resource limitations and a narrower editorial scope.

Public interest in investigative journalism also varies. Private television outlets reported limited audience engagement with this format, suggesting it holds less appeal in comparison to other content. In contrast, press and digital-native media view investigative journalism as highly compelling to the public, considering it an integral part of their offering.

Technology's dual-edged impact on investigative journalism was another point of divergence. Press outlets recognized that while technological advancements enable faster access to remote information, they can also foster a false sense of thoroughness when journalists are not physically present at the events they cover. *La Repubblica's* editor stressed the indispensability of on-ground reporting for effective investigations. Public service media shared similar concerns, noting that while technology facilitates rapid information dissemination, it simultaneously contributes to misinformation, thereby complicating investigative work.

Finally, censorship and external threats remain critical. In particular, the editor of digital-native media notes that censorship in journalism often comes from multiple levels of influence, starting with those directly involved in the news. It can be subtle, like legal action, usually in economic or criminal lawsuits, meant to intimidate journalists into

retracting or altering their stories. In extreme cases, this has even led to journalists facing imprisonment. Intimidation can also happen on a personal level, with threats or harassment. Ultimately, the pressure to remove or modify news often comes from both legal and personal threats, making it a complex and pervasive issue in many public-facing professions.

Conditions supporting and hindering investigative journalism

The landscape of investigative journalism is shaped by a delicate interplay of supportive and hindering conditions, which collectively define its feasibility and impact across various media sectors. Among the enabling factors, public and publisher support stands out as a critical driver. Digital-native and local media emphasized that sustained audience interest, coupled with strong backing from publishers, creates the foundation necessary for successful investigative efforts. This support not only validates the importance of such work but also ensures its continuity in the face of external pressures.

Resource availability further delineates the potential for investigative journalism. Large media organizations, such as *La Repubblica*, possess the capacity to allocate dedicated staff and financial resources to this demanding genre. This resource allocation enables them to undertake more extensive and impactful investigations, demonstrating the advantages of scale and institutional commitment in fostering in-depth reporting.

Conversely, the barriers to investigative journalism present a formidable challenge. A pervasive lack of financial and human resources emerged as a common obstacle across all media types. Respondents frequently cited time constraints, insufficient funding, and dwindling newsroom staff as significant impediments to pursuing investigative stories with the rigour they demand.

Political and legal pressures compound these difficulties. Digital-native media, in particular, highlighted the prevalence of censorship and threats—both legal and political—that often obstruct investigative efforts. These pressures not only hinder journalistic freedom but also impose an environment of caution and restraint, limiting the scope and ambition of potential investigations.

Shifting journalistic priorities have further constrained the practice of investigative reporting, especially within the public and private television sectors. Here, the focus has largely shifted towards covering immediate events or producing infotainment content, leaving less room for the resource-intensive and time-consuming nature of investigative journalism. This deprioritization reflects broader trends in media consumption and organizational strategies, underscoring the complex challenges investigative journalism must navigate to remain viable and relevant.

4. Forum for the Public Debate

The role of fostering public debate is a shared priority across various media types, with similarities in methods and tools accompanied by distinctive approaches that reflect each sector's unique characteristics. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have emerged as critical channels for engaging audiences and facilitating discussion. Public service media, digital-native outlets, and community or non-profit media

consistently highlighted the importance of these platforms in disseminating content and encouraging interaction. For instance, public service media emphasized the rapid growth and interactivity of their WhatsApp channel, while digital-native media and press organizations underscored social media's capacity to generate meaningful discussions through the distribution of articles and commentary.

Public engagement extends beyond digital tools to more traditional methods such as talk shows and public events, particularly in private TV outlets and community media. These formats provide a space for diverse viewpoints, allowing audiences to engage directly with expert opinions and participate in discussions on contentious or topical issues. However, polarization and misinformation present significant challenges across all media types. Journalists from public service outlets noted how societal polarization tends to frame debates in binary terms—either for or against—stifling nuanced dialogue and limiting constructive engagement.

Despite these shared elements, each media sector exhibits unique approaches to facilitating debate. Public service media rely heavily on innovative social media use, such as WhatsApp and Instagram, to attract broader and younger audiences. Interactive formats like news quizzes further enhance engagement, yet societal polarization remains a significant hindrance, making balanced discussions difficult.

Private TV outlets prioritize debates within the framework of talk shows, where experts and pundits present differing opinions. Audience ratings strongly influence the choice of topics, favouring those that generate larger viewership. While this ensures wide participation, it risks limiting the scope of discussions to sensational or trending topics, often overshadowing more substantive issues.

The press, particularly politically aligned outlets like *La Repubblica*, naturally fosters political debate through editorials and opinion pieces. Internal newsroom discussions enrich this discourse, ensuring diverse viewpoints are represented. However, strong editorial stances can create echo chambers, potentially restricting the range of perspectives presented to the public.

Digital-native media emphasize presenting multiple perspectives in their reporting, aiming to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of issues. Their editorial support for complex, nuanced reporting encourages robust public debate. Nonetheless, certain topics, such as foreign policy, may struggle to capture audience interest, posing challenges to broader engagement.

Local and regional media focus on issues of immediate relevance to their communities, using editorial commentaries and public events to spark conversations. Their credibility, rooted in localized reporting, fosters trust and encourages open dialogue. However, the proliferation of fake news and the influence of unreliable sources pose significant obstacles, often diverting attention from more substantive discussions.

Community and non-profit media create opportunities for public debate through workshops, live streams, and online discussions, often centering on niche issues such as minority rights or international conflicts. Cultural activities, such as exhibitions and forums, further enhance engagement. Yet, these media face hurdles like censorship, self-censorship, and

the trivialization of debate on social media, which can drown out meaningful conversations with superficial content.

Across all sectors, the interplay between supportive and hindering conditions defines the effectiveness of their efforts to foster public debate, reflecting the dynamic and multifaceted nature of media's role in contemporary discourse.

Good practices encouraging debate: the media landscape offers a range of effective practices for fostering public debate, showcasing innovative and targeted strategies across different sectors. Public service media have embraced interactive platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram, leveraging their broad reach and real-time capabilities to engage diverse audiences actively. Similarly, digital-native media's commitment to presenting varied perspectives enriches discussions, offering readers a more comprehensive view of complex issues.

Traditional formats also play a significant role in facilitating discourse. Private television outlets utilize talk shows as a central medium for presenting divergent opinions, creating spaces where contentious topics are examined and debated. Local media complement this approach through public roundtables, which encourage community participation and spotlight diverse viewpoints. Meanwhile, community and non-profit media emphasize niche cultural and political issues, enhancing audience engagement through targeted public events that resonate deeply with their specific constituencies.

However, these practices exist within a context of notable limitations and threats. Polarization and misinformation represent pervasive challenges, distorting the quality and balance of public debate. The influence of ratings and editorial trends further complicates the landscape. As noted by private TV editors, the pursuit of high ratings often prioritizes sensational or trending topics, overshadowing more substantive and nuanced discussions. These dynamics illustrate the delicate balance between fostering meaningful debate and navigating the structural and societal pressures inherent in contemporary media.

5. Representing Cultural, Societal and Political Diversity

Across diverse media types, a shared commitment to representing a broad spectrum of voices underscores the collective effort to promote inclusivity, particularly in politically and socially sensitive contexts. Respondents highlighted the importance of ensuring multiple viewpoints are reflected in coverage, especially during conflicts, where balanced representation is crucial for informed public discourse.

Despite this shared commitment, achieving full diversity remains a persistent challenge. Structural barriers within editorial teams often hinder progress. As one journalist from a press organization noted, editorial teams are frequently composed of individuals from homogenous backgrounds—described as "*white, bourgeois men*"—which limits the diversity of perspectives and experiences brought to the newsroom. Financial constraints exacerbate these challenges, particularly in digital-native and local media, where limited resources restrict the ability to amplify underrepresented voices.

Political and cultural diversity, however, remains a clear priority for certain media types. Public service media emphasized their dedication to featuring politicians from across the political spectrum and covering international issues with a multiplicity of perspectives. Similarly, community and non-profit outlets, such as *Il Manifesto*, prioritize pluralism as a core value. Rooted in their leftist origins, these outlets actively champion inclusivity in their coverage, extending this commitment to cultural and gender representation within their content and organizational practices.

The approaches to promoting diversity vary significantly across media types, reflecting their differing strategies, standards, and structural constraints. Public service media, for instance, demonstrate a clear commitment to political diversity. While they acknowledge that governing parties often receive more coverage due to their activities, efforts are made to include politicians from across the spectrum and to feature journalists from diverse backgrounds. This approach ensures that the public encounters a range of perspectives, especially in politically sensitive contexts. Public service journalists, notably, reported few significant obstacles in their efforts to advance diversity, highlighting a relatively supportive environment.

In contrast, private TV outlets lack formal policies on gender or cultural diversity, suggesting these issues are not central to their editorial mission. Nonetheless, diversity naturally emerges in their coverage of conflicts and civil rights issues, though without a strategic effort to institutionalize these values. While the inclusion of varied perspectives in news stories supports representation, the absence of explicit editorial strategies limits broader achievements in this area.

Traditional press outlets, particularly politically aligned ones, face distinct challenges in reflecting political diversity. The editorial direction is often shaped by the outlet's political stance, leaving limited room for differing perspectives outside specific sections, such as letters to the editor. Internal homogeneity in newsroom composition, particularly in terms of class and background, further restricts efforts to promote cultural diversity, as highlighted by respondents.

Digital-native media adopt a more flexible and open approach to diversity, emphasizing their editorial freedom to represent political and cultural pluralism without formal constraints. This openness allows them to engage with socially significant issues, such as violence against women. However, economic inequalities pose a considerable barrier, as wealthier political parties and organizations often dominate media access, sidelining smaller or marginalized groups. This imbalance underscores the structural challenges inherent in fostering equitable representation.

Local media, by their nature, often reflect political and cultural diversity through interviews and stories that capture a range of community perspectives. While some outlets maintain transparent political stances, they still provide space for opposing views. Economic sustainability and the influence of publishers can, however, pose challenges to balanced representation, often limiting the scope for extensive coverage of diverse voices due to resource constraints.

Community media prioritize political and cultural diversity as a foundational element of their mission. Their deep involvement in civil rights movements and advocacy for gender equality

is evident in their editorial content and newsroom composition. Examples include active participation in feminist demonstrations and dedicated coverage of minority voices. Despite their strong ideological commitment, community media face barriers such as the need for formal journalism education, financial constraints, and tensions arising from their role as watchdogs in politically charged environments. These challenges reflect the broader struggles faced by outlets committed to representing underrepresented groups in a complex media landscape.

Promoting diversity in media coverage is supported by several effective practices, with various outlets adopting strategies to ensure a range of voices and perspectives are represented. Public service media, local media, and digital-native outlets demonstrate a strong commitment to inclusivity, frequently featuring diverse political factions, minority viewpoints, and cultural perspectives. This approach is particularly evident in their coverage of international issues, where reflecting global plurality is vital.

Community and minority-focused media go further by actively participating in civil rights movements and advocating for underrepresented groups. Their engagement in public demonstrations and feminist campaigns exemplifies their dedication to societal change, using their platforms to amplify marginalized voices and promote equality.

Another key strategy for enhancing diversity lies in diversifying editorial teams. Press and community media, in particular, have highlighted the importance of increasing representation within newsrooms as a practical measure to reflect societal diversity more accurately. For instance, the press journalist draws attention to the challenge of achieving true diversity in editorial teams in Italy: "Diversity is achieved by doing it; 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". Many professionals from diverse backgrounds struggle to break into these teams, which are often made up of the same people. True diversity, in my opinion, is achieved by hiring people with different identities. By incorporating new perspectives and experiences into the editorial process, media outlets can create richer, more inclusive content that resonates with broader audiences. In community media, editorial meetings are always filled with lively discussions, where every editor, from the director to the most junior member, is treated as an equal. The editor emphasized that it is a space where pluralism, diverse opinions, historical and traditional differences, and political perspectives are not simply assumed; they are actively engaged with and valued in every conversation.

Despite these promising practices, several factors continue to hinder diversity in media. The homogeneity of editorial teams remains a significant challenge, particularly for press and private TV outlets. These teams are often composed of individuals with similar backgrounds, limiting the breadth of perspectives available to address issues affecting minorities. This lack of internal diversity constrains the media's ability to engage effectively with diverse audiences.

Additionally, political and editorial biases pose obstacles to fostering inclusivity. The strong political alignments of certain press outlets, often shape the scope of their discourse, restricting the range of perspectives included in their coverage. These biases can inadvertently reinforce existing power dynamics, reducing the visibility of alternative voices and limiting the media's role as a platform for comprehensive public dialogue.

6. Facilitating Public Participation

Media outlets across various sectors have adopted a range of practices aimed at promoting political participation, with notable efforts to ensure diverse representation and encourage public engagement in political discourse.

Public service media, particularly television, have demonstrated a strong commitment to political participation through comprehensive coverage of elections, including live debates and collaborations with institutions like the European Parliament. Specific initiatives, such as the "No Woman, No Panel" protocol, have been implemented to ensure the representation of women in public discussions, further emphasizing their dedication to inclusivity. This protocol was introduced in Italy as part of an initiative to address the underrepresentation of women in public speaking roles and on professional panels. The protocol has been adopted by several conferences, events, and organizations (e.g. the media outlet RAI) across the country to ensure more balanced gender representation in discussions, panels, and conferences. The main aim of the protocol is to raise awareness about the gender imbalance in professional and public settings, where women are often excluded from key discussions despite their expertise and contributions. By implementing the "No Woman, No Panel" rule, organizers commit to not holding any event or panel discussion without at least one woman involved as a speaker or participant. The protocol encourages event organizers to actively seek out and include female voices in their programming, thus contributing to greater gender equality in professional and academic environments.

Private television outlets also promote political participation, particularly during election periods, through advertisements and coverage of key political events. The presence of women in management positions, coupled with regular discussions on civil rights issues such as LGBT rights, signals a broader commitment to inclusive representation within their programming.

The press, particularly "La Repubblica", focuses heavily on political discourse. While efforts are made to achieve gender equality in their coverage, challenges remain in adequately representing minorities, highlighting a gap in fully inclusive reporting.

Digital-native news outlets exhibit a strong commitment to political diversity, particularly through their investigative journalism. Their editorial teams are often characterized by gender balance, fostering coverage of women's rights and related issues, thus supporting more inclusive political participation.

Local media engage their audiences through online debates and targeted reporting, which can directly inspire political action. For example, the journalist of local media posted his article on Facebook and asked his followers for their opinions, trying to stimulate interaction: "I invited readers to comment with their views because it is useful to understand how people perceive the problem and how they are educated to address it". Moreover, initiatives aimed at increasing female representation in leadership positions, as well as attention to linguistic minorities, further demonstrate their commitment to inclusive journalism.

Community media play an active role in promoting public participation, organizing significant national demonstrations and ensuring that their predominantly female editorial team fosters gender representation in both their reporting and activism.

Several supportive conditions for political participation have emerged across these media types. Active engagement with the public, through platforms such as live coverage of political events, online discussions, and special reports, is a key strategy for encouraging debate and discourse. Furthermore, media outlets that prioritize gender equality within their editorial teams, like public service and community media, tend to foster more inclusive reporting, facilitating greater political participation for women and minorities. Commitment to covering marginalized issues, such as civil rights and gender representation, is also a common feature of both public service and private media, highlighting their role in supporting political engagement for underrepresented groups.

Despite these efforts, significant hindrances to political participation persist. Limited representation of minorities remains a challenge, particularly in traditional press environments, where editorial teams may lack the diversity necessary to represent a broad spectrum of viewpoints. Economic constraints, including financial pressures on media outlets, often limit their ability to cover critical issues comprehensively, which can disproportionately affect marginalized groups whose stories may not receive sufficient attention.

Structural barriers, such as institutional biases and cultural dynamics within media organizations, can also hinder a fully inclusive environment. The cultural backgrounds of editorial teams can influence how diverse viewpoints are represented, further perpetuating gaps in coverage. Additionally, public perceptions and biases, particularly regarding issues such as immigration, can impact how effectively local media facilitate participation from diverse groups. These factors contribute to the ongoing challenges faced by media organizations in ensuring truly inclusive political participation.

A comparative overview of media types reveals both commonalities and notable differences in their approach to fostering political participation, particularly regarding gender and minority representation.

Similarities across media types include a shared recognition of the importance of facilitating political participation, especially in relation to gender and minority issues. Most media organizations emphasize the need to provide platforms for diverse voices and promote public engagement, reflecting a collective commitment to inclusivity in journalism. Additionally, many outlets acknowledge the pivotal role of women in leadership and reporting, signaling a broader movement towards achieving gender equality within the media industry.

However, **differences** in approach are also evident. Public service media (TV) and community media are often more proactive in implementing structured protocols to promote inclusivity. For example, public service television has introduced formal initiatives like the "No Woman, No Panel" protocol, ensuring the representation of women in public discussions. In contrast, private TV, local media, and press outlets may rely more on informal practices or express a need for improved policies to address these concerns.

Digital-native media further distinguish themselves with more flexible and less hierarchical structures, enabling them to adapt more rapidly to promote political participation. This

flexibility contrasts with the often more rigid structures found in traditional press outlets, where changes to promote inclusivity may be slower and less institutionalized. This agility in digital-native media allows them to more quickly embrace new opportunities for broadening political engagement, highlighting the structural contrasts between newer and more established forms of media.

7. Conditions for Freedom and Professional Journalism

The media landscape faces several significant risks, which are broadly recognized across various types of media. Economic pressures emerge as one of the greatest challenges to media freedom. Public service media, particularly TV, identify the influence of larger economic groups on editorial decisions as a major concern, with the struggle for financial sustainability potentially compromising the independence of journalism. Similarly, private TV outlets highlight the risks posed by economic interests, especially when media owners have political ambitions. The consolidation of media ownership among a few powerful groups creates conflicts of interest, threatening press independence. Local and regional media editors echo these concerns, emphasizing the necessity of economic sustainability for maintaining pluralism and high-quality journalism.

Political interference is another major risk. In the press, political pressure is perceived as a key threat, as it can undermine the integrity of news coverage and lead to the homogenization of viewpoints. Digital-native media also face unique challenges, with journalists pointing to the role of misinformation and artificial intelligence as exacerbating political biases, further complicating the media landscape.

Also, technological challenges are a common concern across all media types. Misinformation online, the rise of artificial intelligence in generating false narratives, and the emotional polarization fuelled by social media were identified as critical issues. All respondents emphasized the need for rigorous information verification to combat these challenges and maintain journalistic credibility.

Censorship remains a significant threat, particularly for digital-native and community or non-profit media. Journalists in these sectors highlighted censorship as a critical obstacle to journalistic freedom, further complicating their ability to report independently and impartially.

To address these risks, strategies to counteract them have emerged within newsrooms. A key strategy is maintaining independent reporting by resisting pressures from advertisers and political influences. Promoting transparency through ethical guidelines to combat misinformation and ensure reporting accuracy is also seen as crucial. Media outlets are increasingly investing in training and development to help journalists navigate the rapidly changing technological landscape, ensuring that high standards of journalism are maintained. Furthermore, encouraging diverse perspectives within editorial teams is recognized as an important strategy to ensure that a range of viewpoints, especially those of marginalized groups, are represented.

Despite these efforts, certain conditions continue to hamper journalism. Consolidation of media ownership remains a significant barrier, as the concentration of ownership limits

pluralism and reduces the diversity of perspectives available to the public, creating potential conflicts of interest. Additionally, economic instability remains a critical issue, as precarious economic conditions for journalists increase their vulnerability, resulting in a decline in the quality of journalism.

A comparative overview of media types reveals both similarities and differences in their approach to these challenges. Across all media types, there is a consensus on the significance of economic and political pressures as primary threats to media freedom. There is also widespread acknowledgment of the impact of misinformation and the need for ethical reporting standards, with concerns about the influence of artificial intelligence on the quality and credibility of information.

However, differences in response to these pressures are evident. Public service media are generally more insulated from economic pressures due to their funding models, whereas private outlets are more vulnerable to financial risks. Community and non-profit media focus on grassroots activism and local issues, prioritizing marginalized voices, while digital-native outlets tend to embrace more innovative approaches to engage audiences and expand their reach.

In response to social trends, many newsrooms are actively working to counteract misinformation through fact-checking, media literacy training, and content creation that addresses public concerns directly. Editors across various outlets also highlight their efforts to promote civic engagement by facilitating discussions on pressing political issues and creating participatory journalism that empowers citizens. Additionally, steps are being taken to foster trust in journalism by prioritizing transparency, ethical reporting, and clear communication about the role of journalism in supporting democratic processes. These efforts aim to rebuild public trust and reinforce the importance of journalism in modern democracies.

8. Relationship Between Media and Democracy

Key insights on the relationship between media and democracy reveal important perspectives across various types of media, each emphasizing the fundamental role journalism plays in democratic societies.

The essential role of journalism is universally recognized across media sectors. Public service media, particularly television, emphasize the vital role of journalism in times of crisis, underscoring the importance of providing high-quality, context-rich information. Editors and journalists argue that synthesizing information from multiple sources is crucial to offer comprehensive coverage. Private TV outlets also assert that journalism is indispensable for democracy, with an emphasis on pluralism as a core value. These journalists emphasize that without journalism, democracy would not exist, acknowledging the ongoing societal changes and technological advancements that continuously reshape the media landscape. In the press, the watchdog role of journalism is seen as essential, with journalists highlighting the importance of holding governments accountable and acting as a bridge between public opinion and political institutions.

Accountability remains a critical theme across media types. Digital-native media journalists emphasize the role of the media in overseeing power structures, advocating for the protection of citizens' rights. While recognizing the potential for citizen journalism, they also stress the importance of adhering to journalistic standards. Local media view motivated and capable young journalists as a positive aspect for democracy, crucial in ensuring that democratic processes remain informed and robust. Community and non-profit media also see journalism as integral to democracy, equating it with voting rights and advocating for a media environment that upholds the principles of fairness and transparency.

The challenges facing journalists are widespread and multifaceted. Economic pressures are significant, with many journalists reporting low salaries and stressful working conditions that impact their ability to deliver in-depth reporting. The influence of political relationships is also a concern, particularly in community and minority media, where editorial independence can be compromised due to editors' ties to political figures. Additionally, the rise of misinformation, fuelled by digital platforms, presents a challenge, as journalists increasingly compete with non-professional sources, which can undermine their credibility and effectiveness.

A comparative overview of media types reveals both shared values and differences in approaches to journalism's role in democracy. Similarities include a general consensus on the importance of journalism in maintaining democratic processes. Across all media types, there is agreement that journalism must hold power to account, providing truthful and accessible information to the public. All media sectors also recognize the need to address societal changes and technological developments that affect journalism practice.

Differences emerge in how different media types approach their responsibilities. Public service media focus on providing context and comprehensive coverage, while private outlets emphasize the significance of pluralism and the necessity of competitive news environments. Digital-native media stress the benefits of new technologies and citizen journalism but also underscore the need for quality journalism as a priority. In contrast, traditional press outlets place a stronger emphasis on established journalistic standards and balancing new tools with traditional practices. Community and non-profit media provide a unique perspective, emphasizing their essential role in fostering public debate and representing marginalized voices, framing their mission as a broader social responsibility.

9. Conclusions

The analysis of interviewees' responses reveals several patterns and trends that shape the current media landscape.

Patterns include a consistent recognition of journalism's importance across all media types. Interviewees universally acknowledge the essential role of journalism in safeguarding democratic values, emphasizing that a free and independent press is crucial for maintaining democracy. Additionally, the watchdog role of journalism is highlighted in the responses, with journalists underscoring their responsibility to scrutinize power and provide a platform for public concerns. This function remains a fundamental aspect of journalistic work. Another pattern is the widespread challenge of combating fake news. As fake news has

become a prominent feature in the information space, it influences the behaviour of journalists and shapes their approaches to selecting and verifying facts, making accuracy and reliability essential in news production. Finally, the active use of social media for various purposes is a common thread. Media outlets are increasingly using social media platforms to interact with their audiences, receive feedback through comments, and encourage debates, reflecting the growing role of social media in fostering public discourse.

Trends observed in the interviews further illuminate the evolving media environment. Technological development is one of the most significant trends, with many interviewees noting the dual impact of digital tools and citizen journalism. On the one hand, these innovations offer opportunities for broader participation in news production and engagement with diverse audiences. On the other hand, they also present risks, particularly related to misinformation and a decline in professional journalistic standards. Economic pressures also emerge as a prevailing theme. Many respondents discussed the economic challenges media organizations face, including low salaries, job insecurity, and the influence of concentrated ownership. These pressures threaten the sustainability and independence of the press, with economic constraints also limiting the ability to conduct investigative journalism. Lastly, political pressures are a significant concern. Interviewees frequently pointed to the conflicts of interest created by concentrated media ownership and political affiliations, which can undermine journalistic integrity. This trend is especially pronounced in environments where media outlets are owned by large corporations with vested interests in politics, leading to potential censorship and a lack of diverse viewpoints in media coverage.

COUNTRY REPORT: POLAND

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1. Introduction

Our sample was composed of twelve respondents, while invitations distributed by phone, email and social media highly outnumbered the final group of journalists and editors. The respondents included representatives of the most influential nationwide news media in the country, as well as those particularly important for the Polish media landscape – local and regional media. The invitation was most willingly accepted by editors-in-chief of individual editorial offices, but the researchers encountered a much greater problem when contacting journalists. In the case of large media corporations, some journalists were required to obtain special consent to participate in the study issued by the Compliance Department. This procedure proved to be so complicated and time-consuming that some journalists, despite their positive attitude toward the study, declined to participate. Unfortunately, editors from right-wing media[1] did not respond to repeated invitations in various forms.

In general, interviewees showed their interest in the project. Editors-in-chief from various sectors demonstrated greater confidence and freedom in sharing their observations. A greater reserve, on the other hand, could be observed in conversations with some journalists (both commercial and public media), who seemed to be more cautious in presenting their own views. We experienced twice a request for sharing their view off the record (once in the case of a TV journalist, once in the case of a print journalist).

A major difficulty in conducting the interviews were time constraints – some interviewees repeatedly rescheduled the meeting at the last minute or cancelled the interview without indicating another date or even contacting the researcher. Only intrusive, repeated attempts to renew contact prompted many of them to carve out time for our study. The most successful interview scheduling was when the journalist was directed to the interview with the researcher by his or her boss (this situation occurred three times: public media, online sector, commercial broadcaster).

Community and non-profit media representatives were keen to emphasize in their statements their independence, autonomy in selection of relevant topics and directions of the team's work (including in the context of relying on and subordinating messages to specific values). PSM journalists pointed to their obligations under statutory provisions, but also to the specific challenges resulting from efforts to regain the trust of the audience after being freed from political influence. Journalists of the commercial media tried to emphasize their efforts to report impartially and maintain a central position vis-à-vis all political forces, despite the polarization and politicization of social life in Poland.

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[1] In 2015–2023 the right-wing coalition governed Poland with the Law and Justice party majority and remaining under the influence of the party's leader, Jarosław Kaczyński. The government worked closely with right-wing media, especially a group of Catholic media group Lux Veritatis Foundation.

All interviews were conducted either online (using a camera) or by telephone. The language of all the conversations was Polish. Interviewees had full information about the study, prior to being interviewed, and were aware of the need to sign consent in order for the researchers to use the collected material. Nonetheless, in two cases there was a problem with getting a signed consent and the process extended up to three weeks until it was finally resolved.

A National Context:

Structural and regulatory changes in the news media landscape following the October 2023 election and victory of the Civic Coalition seem important in order to understand collected data. During 2016 – 2023 PSM in Poland largely served as a tool of political influence by the previous Law and Justice government. In December 2023, PSM were put formally into liquidation that allowed in practice the PSM to offer their service under a new leadership. A number of independent journalists (previously dismissed or those who left on their own) returned to work. News editors faced a serious challenge not only to report fairly, but also to regain a good reputation and the trust of their audiences. This basically involved also reaffirming standards of journalistic ethics. Similarly, in the case of local and regional media, owned by the Polska Press media group, a large chain of newspapers and online portal required principal editorial revamping. Since 2020, Polska Press group was controlled by the state-owned company PKN Orlen - in 2020 – 2023 under the influence of the Law and Justice Government, since 2023, 20 of Poland's 24 regional dailies and 120 regional weeklies faced editorial restructuring in order to rebuild readers' trust and reputation. Moreover, with the restoration of the independence of individual editorial offices, the Law and Justice politicians – formerly controlling the network - have initiated criticism and even boycott of Polska Press outlets.

2. Providing Accurate Information

In terms of providing accurate information, representatives of the selected media, almost unanimously, point to journalistic integrity as a fundamental element of their work. It is mainly expressed in always relying on a minimum of two, and preferably three sources. The person in the managerial position in the Polish Radio states:

> "That is why the standard is always – I think, and I want to believe that it is a standard for everyone – to check sources. It is a bit like climbing. Those who go climbing on walls know that two points is a minimum, and three is best" (PL-C-1).

Nearly all interviewees also stress the importance of verifying the source of information, and even taking into account the motives a particular source because unreflective reporting of even truthful information, can put the journalist in the position of a tool of someone' political interests. The interviewees also mark the need to keep a distance, even from established sources of information. Public television journalist concludes:

> "There was a time when we were taught that if something appears in the Polish Press Agency, it is verified information. Unfortunately, the example of the last 8 years has shown that unverified information was also published there […]" (PL-J-1).

Interestingly, three interviewees serving as Chief Editors indicate a diversified approach depending on the importance of information (PL-C-1, PL-C-3, PL-C-5). In this sense, some

types of information even released earlier, after only preliminary verification, will not do "much harm". On the other hand, the information of sensitive importance to the interests and even security of the state or with legal risks needs to be thoroughly verified. As stated by the editor-in-chief in the press sector:

> "These are minor things where public opinion can be misled. There are more serious things where you can mislead and at the same time expose yourself to a lawsuit […]" (PL-C-3).

Journalists themselves do not express similar views, often stressing the categorical necessity of verification. Newspapers journalist states: "I like to have a piece of paper for everything and be like a doubting Thomas. I only write what I can prove and nothing more" (PL-J-3).

In each of the media sectors, there is also the conviction of the need to cite the sources of quoted statements, although in this case, the motives guiding interviewees vary. In the commercial media, the topic of competition in the so-called citation rankings, which determine the prestige of journalists and editors, has emerged. From the point of view of a non-profit media, citing sources of information transfers part of the responsibility for assessing the reliability of news into the hands of the audience. In the PSM, on the other hand, this phenomenon has been described as, a tool of self-protection for journalists. In this way, issues hard to verify (due to time pressure or difficult access to informants), are linked to a particular sources, thus responsibility for accuracy of information lands in the hands of its primary provider.

An important element of this section is impartiality, or in other words, a principle of presenting "both" sides of the conflict. This rule appears in almost all of the statements analysed, regardless of position or type of the medium. In the case of PSM, it is related, in addition to journalistic ethics, to the quota system contained in legal regulations, which oblige PSM, for example, to provide equal airtime to all political parties. In the case of commercial media, this activity reflects good practice and professionalism. Interviewees, regardless of the type of medium, stress the need for inquisitiveness and perseverance in reaching representatives of the other side of the issue, frequently this is not an easy task, and sometimes proves impossible. In the absence of a response or boycott by either side, journalists feel obliged to inform the public about a reluctance to make a statement. Interestingly, even this dimension of journalistic integrity may have end with "burning the topic". A chief editor from the online sector comments:

> "[…] before publishing our main material, our topic was given [by the entity that was supposed to respond to the problematic information] to 'friendly' media with completely different political sympathies […]" (PL-C-4).

Both editors-in-chief and journalists also emphasize the importance of journalistic diligence/accuracy – captured in the form of various descriptions or terms - but often boiling down to complete, truthful and interesting material, responding to the needs of the audience and maintaining a healthy balance between clickbaits and specific information. In the case of local media, the perspective of the citizen, the resident of the region, becomes particularly important.

3. Controlling Power Holders

All interviewees relate to investigative journalism, recognizing this form of activity as the most noble form of journalism: "[…] investigative journalism is the crème de la crème of journalism, the cherry on the cake" – summarizes a journalist from one of the commercial newspapers (PL-J-3). Regardless of the function or the medium represented, interviewees agree that investigative practice has the greatest impact on reality, and is also a tool for real influence on those in power, as it enables the fourth power to function effectively. At the same time, most interviewees confirm that conditions of investigative journalism are steadily deteriorating, and the practice itself is becoming superficial. Moreover, the influence of investigative journalism is waning, and while a decade ago it could have led to changes in the government, now it is definitely losing strength (PL-C-3).

The editors-in-chief agree that investigative journalism is professionally demanding and can only be adequately carried out by journalists of the highest calibre, with very specific competencies. Unfortunately, there are few of them on the market. Thus, staff shortages contribute to crisis in investigative journalism, which is further amplified by a quite devastating competition between editorial offices focused on the buying of best specialists (PL-C-6). Community and local media face the greatest challenges in this regard as their financial opportunities are significantly smaller. In the case of the local media, a drastic shortage of staff basically makes it impossible to carry out more complex investigations and hence, investigative journalism is rather replaced by intervention journalism (PL-C-5).

Respondents' answers are also almost unanimous when it comes to the costs and financing. Investigative journalism is one of the most expensive forms of editorial activity, requiring the constant payment of an employee who contributes little to the team's work over a long period of time. What is more, the arranged funds may not pay off at all, as a topic may not be supported with sufficient evidence or may simply resolve. The vast majority of interviewees' statements include two categories as determinants of effective investigative journalism – time and money. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer editors can afford this "luxury".

An element that is also repeated is the attention paid to ensuring the safety of investigative journalists (PL-J-1, PL-J-3, PL-J-6, PL-C-3, PL-C-4). Due to the increasing amount of SLAPP-s, editors-in-chief are forced to pay simultaneously for legal support of their journalists in case of lawsuits. The interviewed journalists observed that while conducting investigations they have to be prepared for lawsuits (e.g. on grounds of defamation), thus their job also includes collecting documents and archiving them for eventual legal actions.

Respondents point out that the foundation of investigative work is the independence of the medium and its management, the broad-mindedness of the bosses, who understand and accept the complexity of activities involved, and the full independence of journalists free of self-censorship. A quality of the staff is crucial, as persons under investigation often try to influence journalists (e.g. by tossing them selected information, according to their interests). An interviewee in a managerial position in commercial radio explains it in the following words:

> "Very often, various officials, when they want to harm their political opponents – whether from another party or from their own party as this also happens, especially in coalitions –

bring various materials, various throw-ins, as we used to call it, to people who consider themselves investigative journalists" (PL-C-2).

The editors-in-chief also add that investigative journalism is most resilient in teams with an established tradition in the field. It is the media that have been building and supporting their investigative teams for years that now have a chance to survive in the competitive "investigative market". Among other things, their great asset is a mentorship, i.e. the creation of an opportunity for young journalists to learn and benefit from the experience of the best professionals in the field. The importance of this relationship is reiterated in the editors' statements. The editor-in-chief of the local press sector explains: "[…] a certain educational rule plays a significant role, which can be summed up in the term 'master-student'" (PL-C-5).

4. Forum for the Public Debate

In this section, most of the interviewees expressed their need to be a provider of a platform for the discussion between different groups, while avoiding support of any side of the political stage. Some differences may be noticed in terms of the target groups of particular media. For instance, the manager of the commercial radio station states that: "We are listened to by people ranging from extreme liberals or extreme left wingers to probably the extreme right wingers as well" (PL-C-2), meanwhile the journalist of the quality daily referred to "loyal and core readers" (PL-J-3). The deputy editor-in-chief of the non-profit medium speaks, in turn, about her newsroom's attempts to break through the information bubbles so that the content does not reach only those "who are already convinced" (PL-C-6).

A significant activity that was repeatedly mentioned includes organizing debates, in particular before elections. It was discussed not only in the case of broadcasting media (TV and radio, both public and commercial), but also by the representatives of newspapers (the editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper, as well as both interviewees from the local media) who claimed they use online tools to broadcast such events. The editor-in-chief of the press group owning local newspapers (PL-C-5) notes, however, that organizing the debates is expensive. Another important aspect is querying the politicians and holding them responsible for their words. The digital native journalist (PL-J-4) says that the importance of asking politicians difficult questions rises significantly in times of the social media that enable politicians to communicate directly with citizens without intermediaries.

The interviewees often mention the competition between the media as a threat. Interestingly, the representatives of PSM do not agree on an importance of audience shares. The person in a managerial position in the Polish Radio states:

> "I believe that in this aspect, the public service media are a bit different from the commercial one. I know it is cliché that public service media do not have to compete. They have to because they should be attractive" (PL-C-1).

At the same time, the journalist of the public TV says the limitations hampering the public debate:

"are much weaker on public television, which of course wants to be watched. Yet it is not a priority that viewership should stand in the first place. It seems to me that, especially now, it is about maintaining the appropriate level and journalistic standards" (PL-J-1).

The former concludes, however, that PSM has more freedom to back out the competition and publish more in-depth materials than the commercial media.

5. Representing Cultural, Societal and Political Diversity

In terms of representing cultural, societal and political diversity, the difference is visible between representatives of PSM and other media sectors. Both interviewees from the public service media (PL-C-1, PL-J-1) point to some specific legal obligations to reflect the diversity of the political stage and society in general. A detailed answer is given by the person in the managerial position on the Polish Radio, who explained that the PSM have a duty to report every month about the amount of time devoted to, among other things, political parties represented in the Parliament, cultural institutions, religious groups, NGOs, etc.

Other interviewees mostly do not refer to any specific documents containing standards or obligations in this respect. Five persons (PL-C-3, PL-C-4, PL-C-5, PL-J-4, PL-J-6) informed us explicitly that their newsrooms have no kind of codified rules regarding reflecting the diversity. Apart from the representatives of the public media, only the journalist of the daily newspaper points to "a number of internal regulations on how to write and how to address sensitive issues related to sexuality, sexual life, issues of faith, gender identity or issues related to nationality, origin, religion" (PL-J-3).

In other cases, the interviewees share general rules like organizing the debates, giving the voice to female experts or allowing all sides of the political spectrum to express their views. The latter is most often discussed in a response to the question about the factors hampering the reflection of diversity. Many interviewees mention a decreasing will of politicians to speak with the media, as well as the media themselves becoming involved in political conflicts (although the interviewees never referred to their own media as being politicised).

An interesting perspective is presented by the editor-in-chief and the journalist of the digital native news media (PL-C-4, PL-J-4). According to both of them, the media have no duty to support the cultural diversity, but rather to reflect the reality and inform whether there is diversity or not, allowing the public to draw their own conclusions. Most of the interviewees, however, speak positively about representing the diversity and, when asked about the supportive factors, they refer to the journalistic mission and inner conviction that it is an important part of their work. The journalist from the non-profit sector concludes:

"We do not have written standards, we do not have some kind of regulations, but I have the impression that in us as journalists, there is something that simply could be called a standard written somewhere in us, that we want to show the diversity" (PL-J-6).

An important issue that emerges from the interviews with representatives of the private TV and radio concerns a reach of users from the areas outside the big cities. The manager from the private radio station links this with facilitating the participation: "[…] if a person from a tiny town thinks that no one will ever hear about their problems, no matter what happens,

their willingness to participate in elections and referenda will eventually be smaller" (PL-C-2).

As one might guess, a similar view is presented by the local/regional media representatives (PL-C-5, PL-J-5), who also discuss more broadly the integration function of their work. The editor-in-chief of the press group owning local newspapers notes that the newsrooms operating in a smaller area have a better understanding and a greater sensitivity for the local conditions and nuances:

> "I have the feeling that in local journalism we recognize quite well certain historical complexities, which are later transferred to various traditions related to cultural, historical and ethnic differences" (PL-C-5).

The deputy editor-in-chief of the non-profit media (PL-C-6) approaches the topic differently, referring rather to the internal diversity of her newsroom, which is reflected in its content. The interviewee gives an example of journalists who formerly worked in NGOs or had a sex transition and now write articles based on their own experience.

6. Facilitating Public Participation

The form of participation reflected in nearly every interview is coverage of the electoral processes. Once again, it is evident that the media representatives make an effort to be perceived as non-partisan and holding politicians accountable for their actions. The the manager from the private radio station says, for instance:

> "Very often, politicians try to throw in distraction topics or obscure the image [of reality]. So, our role is to show exactly what these elections are about but, importantly, without giving the smallest sign that we are taking sides, this is absolutely the key" (PL-C-2).

A similar reflection is presented by the journalist of the local newspaper:

> "[The key thing is] informing about the elections, but also about the election program, about the visions of the candidates, and sometimes also explaining, if there are frauds, honestly exposing it so that people do not fall into the trap" (PL-J-5).

Another activity that is frequently mentioned, are pro-turnout campaigns. Two journalists (PL-J-2, PL-J-5) express even a hope that their activities contributed to the record turnout in the 2023 parliamentary elections[2]. An opinion opposing such campaigns is, however, presented by the digital native journalist, according to whom media should not encourage people to vote: "We give them all the information about how the elections are held, who is running and what the candidates represent. But such calls to go to the elections themselves? I believe that this is not my role as a journalist" (PL-J-4).

When asked about public consultations, the interviewees say they do not organize such types of activities. Some of them, however, note that they tend to inform about consultations

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[2] The turnout was 74.38%, which was the highest result in any elections held in Poland since the collapse of communism in 1989.

(e.g. PL-C-2, PL-J-3, PL-C-6). A most comprehensive answer in this regard is provided by a journalist of the daily newspaper who lists the following examples of participation:

> "[…] encouraging citizens to engage in local public activities, i.e. participation in civic budgets, participation in debates, meetings organized by cities which, for example, concern the spatial planning, participation in demonstrations such as the June 4 holiday or other marches such as the European Union or equality marches" (PL-J-3).

As for supporting the participation of women, the interviewees do not point to any specific hampering factors. Many mention the same tactic as with the question about reflecting the diversity, which rests on inviting female experts in a similar number as with their male colleagues. Another frequent topic focuses on women's problems, including their rights and health (e.g. PL-C-2, PL-C-3, PL-J-6). Some interviewees (PL-C-2, PL-J-3) also draw attention to the need for female topics to be covered by female journalists. An important point is also made by the editor-in-chief of the group of local newspapers (PL-C-5), who – when asked about the factors supporting women's and minorities' participation – mentioned the "generational change in journalism" that leads to better understanding of the social dynamics.

Noteworthy, there are different opinions on whether facilitating women's participation should be an important part of media activities or not. The journalist of the daily states:

> "This element concerning gender identity and gender equality, equal opportunities for women and men, equal treatment, is one of the foundations of the functioning of my editorial office" (PL-J-3).

On the other hand, the journalist from the private TV says that "It is not relevant at all who is of what gender or what orientation they have", stating that in his newsroom, tolerance is simply something natural (PL-J-2). Yet another view is expressed by the journalist of the non-profit media, whose weekly has no special standards for supporting women, but it covers this topic "If there is an event, a special occasion" (PL-J-6).

When it comes to minorities, the interviewees are rather reluctant to talk about this issue. As concluded by the manager from the private radio station:

> "Looking through the social and demographic structure of our nation, there is no such huge pressure, such as in Western countries, regarding racial or religious participation" (PL-C-2).

A minority that is discussed most often is LGBTQA+ community. Except the statement of the deputy editor-in-chief mentioned in the previous section, also the editor-in-chief of the digital native news portal notes that his medium often covers the rights of sexual minorities, adding that "This in itself increases participation" (PL-C-4). As for the local level, only the journalist (PL-J-5) discussed the topic of supporting and promoting a visibility of the ethnic minorities present in the region where his newspaper is published. What may seem surprising, though, is that the second representative of local media (PL-C-5) does not refer to this topic.

7. Conditions for Media Freedom, Pluralism and Professional Journalism

Media freedom and freedom of expression are generally respected in Poland, but interviewees identify several problem areas that impose limits and even constraints on professional journalism.

In view of most interviewees, the greatest risk for media freedom and pluralism in Poland is an unprecedented scale of disinformation. This stems from a permissive approach of the Big Tech and lack of appropriate and effective regulation. In the words of one chief editor: "without regulation [of Big Tech] at the EU level, the future of the media is very much in question" (PL-C-3). It is worth to add that an abundance of misinformative content grows exponentially with fast development of AI. Some interviewees shared their concerns about almost impossible task of fact-checking:

> "It is a matter of months when we will have indistinguishable – photos, films, audio recordings, which used to serve as tangible evidence, and now we cannot trust them, unfortunately" (PL-C-2).

Neither users nor journalists are sufficiently prepared to deal with AI-produced information or disinformation, and learning some skills in a compressed time horizon can prove hard. Also, disinformation produced and disseminated by foreign agents (most often by Russia) seems extremely difficult to counteract as journalists and users "unknowingly circulate" this content (PL-C-6). Moreover, media professionals are not only challenged by growing demands of more complex and sophisticated fact-checking, but they are also victims of discretisation as there are a number of false accounts of known journalists on social media platforms such as X (PL-J-1).

Almost all of the interviewees mentioned an overpowering role of the Big Tech and asymmetric dependency on their infrastructures and algorithms as an issue of media freedom. In the view of one chief editor, a threat to media pluralism and to the media in general is "certainly the fact that they have to adapt to algorithms at all" (PL-C-6). Others observe that the algorithms are not transparent and media workers have to "blindly adapt to them" in order to get visibility and share their content (PL-J-5). Moreover, not only is there a lack of transparency, but also news media are deprived of any forum or dialogue between them and platform operators, despite the fact that the government drafted several legal initiatives that aim to implement DSA, DMA and EMFA. As put by one journalist: "We have no influence on Google or Facebook (PL-J-5)". Several interviewees describe difficulties to reach a copyright agreement, while "there is also an issue of using our content, for example, to provide information, to train their algorithms" (PL-J-4). Monopolisation of content distribution by platform operators practically leads to unfair competition and disruption in advertising markets with particular vulnerability of local media in this process (PL-J-5).

Economic problems seem to be another frequently discussed threat to media freedom and pluralism. Lack of appropriate funding and poor working conditions force young, talented journalists to leave the profession at an early stage because they are unable to support themselves and their families. Irregularity and low wages that do not compensate for a highly volatile working style, impact shortages of human resources, and in consequence, the condition of the whole industry (PL-J-4). Interestingly, insufficient funding also constrains operations of PSM. In view of one editor representing this sector: "public media have certain

obligations, they have to do certain things, but they do not always receive money for them” (PL-C-1). The senior editor is also concerned about expecting

> “[…] journalists to constantly do something for free in a country that functions honestly and in a healthy way. Volunteering is good for a while, but not for life” (PL-C-1).

According to several interviewees, economic weakness also directly affects the lack of editorial independence:

> “Media that are economically weak are dependent either on politicians who decide about state-owned companies, or are dependent on private Polish or foreign entities […] because they need advertising funds” (PL-C-3).

Another respondent adds: “The smaller is the medium, the bigger is the problem” (PL-C-5).

For some journalists and some media, political pressure continues to pose an ongoing problem. Much of such political pressure was attributed to the previous Law and Justice government (2016-2023) (e.g. PL-J-2). At the same time, journalists and editors point to unresolved legal or procedural issues that facilitate political or economic pressure. One of them is the Article 212 of the Polish Criminal Code that criminalises defamation and eventually allows an imprisonment of journalists up to one year. As one interviewee puts it:

> “Politicians have always emphasized the role of free media or mass media as a factor in controlling of power. In reality, the politicians have done a lot to limit this role. An example is the famous Article 212 of the Criminal Code, which has been discussed for so many years” (PL-C-3).

Moreover, newsrooms are flooded with SLAPP – strategic lawsuits against public participation – that seriously harm everyday newsroom work and may pose also an existential threat. As put by one chief editor: “Excessive threat of criminal liability and excessive threat of financial responsibility hamper media freedom” (PL-C-1). Another adds: “Lately, I have not experienced a single day without a lawsuit. You have to get used to it. But it is not just about politics, it is about everything” (PL-C-4).

A significant role of the state in the media market is also of concern. For some interviewees, a risky impact on media pluralism comes with state media ownership (PL-C-4), others emphasise a destructive role of unfair distribution of state advertising. Reliance on state advertising affects a selection of topics (PL-J-6) and selective and arbitrary financing from the state budget impacts market conditions (PL-C-4). Again, local media are most vulnerable to these pressures (PL-C-5). In addition, the local media suffer from the existence of ‘municipal media’ – outlets published by local authorities and sustained with the public funding. In a description of one interviewee:

> “This is not competition, this is killing the independent regional press with distorted pseudo-journalism […] Almost all local governments have [their own media], it is only a question of whether it is monthly or quarterly. And then the photo of the mayor or the president is on every other page – he opened something here, closed there, and so on” (PL-J-5).

Finally, some interviewees (PL-C-1, PL-C-3, PL-J-5) mentioned that supportive policies are needed from the government such as an exemption from VAT (currently it is 8% for the press) to stimulate press and professional journalism.

What newsrooms do and should do to mitigate the risks described above? One strong thread of explanation builds on "ordering a disorder". This seems necessary as media users need to be supported in navigation towards important issues. A journalist from the large quality newspaper puts it in the following words:

> "How in such chaos, to put it mildly, is a reader supposed to understand what is important, what determines his or her life, what has significance in the world, in the country, in his or her city, village, town? [...] His or her brain after three hours of feeding and staring at the smartphone screen is no longer able to absorb really important content" (PL-J-3).

Important issues covered in news should crystallise through weighing, conscious considerations and newsroom discussions. The journalist of the daily newspaper says:

> "In my opinion, the media's task today is to organize the world we live in, to organize the chaos, to always ask ourselves questions like 'Why am I writing and what will be the result of this text?'" (PL-J-3).

To conclude later:

> "Thus the point is not only to inform, but also to show the context, background, carefully consider what do users really need, what the news is telling about a city, Poland, the world, China, economy, oil prices, etc. (PL-J-3)".

In other words, ordering helps to generate meaning:

> "Our brains really like order. [...] Today, the task of real media, real journalists is precisely to provide people with an orderly, aesthetic, true and reliable accounts [...]" (PL-J-3).

Other interviewees emphasise responsiveness to media users and a kind of reciprocal relationship that helps them to make journalism preferred by audiences. The chief editor of non-profit news portal (PL-C-6) observes that:

> "People do not pay us for the news they have everywhere [...] but for research, fact-checking and investigative pieces. This is what supports us in writing such texts" (PL-C-6).

The role of the media as seen by editors is also to convey socially important information, including those on elections or other forms of participation in social or political life (PL-C-3). Bringing people's problems to decision-makers is equally important (PL-C-2). Media should also create "an informal coalition for good" (PL-C-1).

8. Relationship Between Media and Democracy

Literally, all interviewees acknowledge that the news media are absolutely essential for democracies. A media's role in democracy has not changed, while most of other things transformed, including audience reach (PL-J-1). At the same time, this role is to be seen as a dynamic one as democracy cannot be taken for granted (PL-J-5). In the words of the Public Radio' manager: "[...] the media is freedom and freedom is democracy, and these are things that are not given once and for all" (PL-C-1). Journalism also, in view of interviewees, is principal in sustaining 'a belief in democracy', in other words in shaping the image of democracy in public and collective imagination. As the same interviewee puts it:

> "The most important role of the media in a democratic world is to maintain the belief that a democratic world is all good that we have. […] Democracy lives as long as we believe in it. […] If for any reason […] the pendulum of social belief swings towards a loss of faith in democracy, then democracy will soon fall over. The media must look at the indicator of social mood, control it and shout loud when something is wrong" (PL-C-1).

Thus, the role of journalists is both to reflect and shape the perception of democracy and its usefulness for the society. Other interviewees claim that the news media are necessary for democracies because they make sense of very complex political, economic and cultural lives in information spaces flooded with unimportant and misinformative contents. In words of the leading daily journalist: "We face a production of hundreds, thousands of news stories about nothing and with no relevance. We live in times of news inflation, it is hard to find anything sensible there" (PL-J-3). In addition, a media user alone has not the same possibilities and tools as institutions to select and check relevant information:

> "Someone who is not a professional, someone who does not have time, does not have money, does not have human resources – is not able to verify individually what is true and what is not true. For this, editorial offices are needed" (PL-C-2).

The journalists are definitely aware of different qualities of "being informed". An interviewee from commercial media refers to words of Roger Ailes, a former Fox News executive, who suggested that people do not really need information, they should only feel informed (PL-J-3). For journalists from mainstream media, one of the important aspects of being informed is "keeping an eye on government" (PL-J-2) and maintaining a capacity to criticise and countering the power (PL-J-4). The journalists and editors from local and non-profit media sectors pay more attention to representation and integration: "I still believe that the role of reliable journalism in modern democracies is – or should be – to create a certain mirror in which society can look at itself" (PL-C-6). Integration on the other hand is about helping to:

> "understand each other on certain fundamental issues, concerning democracy, for example, the division of power, understanding local governments […]. Please look at how important it is with the latest threats […] war, cyberwar, all the stories that we are facing today, and which 10 years ago seemed like science fiction to us. Here, the integration function and integrating people around some idea, seems critically important" (PL-C-5).

Interestingly, in times, when communication patterns are becoming less mass and more in-group oriented, the media's role in democracies also encompasses a strong collective component. The manager from the Public Radio believes that "the media is about taking care of others, it is about taking care of all of us" (PL-C-1). This sometimes requires being loud about certain issues and mobilise people against harmful trends, and sometimes toning down and cooling emotions (PL-J-3). Journalists, through their profession, also find themselves in model roles to represent sanity and reason:

> "It is important to simply stand guard over normality, decency, humanity and democracy. Because if there is no democracy and the polarization wins, and bad people are in power, then we will be destroyed, too. Besides, in many countries it starts with the judiciary, the media, and ends with the cleaning lady. It always starts with the intelligentsia, scientists – we know the mechanisms of building totalitarianism" (PL-J-3).

Finally, most interviewees reiterate that democracy has to be constantly reaffirmed – particularly through offering the content that would facilitate understanding of "elections, candidates, visions, development, programs and so on" (PL-J-5). Simply, defending strong and independent media is defending democracies.

9. Conclusions

A picture of democratic participation that emerges from the interviews seems in some ways elusive and cloudy. The interviewees are keener to share their general views on democracy and a pro-democratic role of journalism than on small everyday steps and practices that could exemplify it.

In general, the interviewees unanimously agree that democracy can hardly survive without independent media and quality journalism. At the same time, the fragility and impermanence of democracy was a major concern. 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. Particularly disinformation, information disorder and inability of media users to direct attention to important issues are counted for red flags. The remedy for those threads should be a proper internal fact-checking and educating the public on how to recognize and react to fake news and other forms of manipulation. The role of a journalist is not any more to describe or mirror political and social world (although some interviewees still hold that this also matters) but rather "ordering the informative disorder". In other words, the news media are to be involved in a sort of large scale sense-making in a world where big, important issues compete with trivial or harmful ones for users attention. This closely links news media performance with epistemic grounding and epistemic rights of citizens, but also with a down-to-earth concern about national and global security as the interviewees recall repeated cases of hybrid attacks on the newsrooms (e.g. in the case of PAP - Polish Press Agency) or journalists being discredited with false profiles on social media.

In terms of more practical matters, the interviewees seem to appreciate an institutional embeddedness of journalism – especially as regards more demanding practices, such as investigative journalism. Stronger, bigger media and those with experience in internal mentorship are more likely to sustain the declining condition of investigative journalism that is widely seen as crème de la crème of a watchdog journalistic practice. Journalism is hard to practice outside of institutions also because of growing legal (mainly SLAPPs and defamation cases under the controversial Article 212 of the Criminal Code) and financial pressures (mainly with regard to dependence on Big Tech).

As regards political participation, the interviewees refer mainly to electoral processes and only exceptions have a more complex and broader view encompassing such activities as co-deciding about local budgets, protests, debate forums in cities, etc. Interestingly, some of the interviewees prove to be sceptical about a more proactive and interventionist role of the media in such matters as the election turnout campaigns or diversity representation in newsrooms or coverage. At the same time, some journalists share conviction that problems of certain communities could be better described by journalists from these groups, having

personal experience or interest in these – e.g. topics concerning women rights or LGBTQA+ communities.

Regarding differences between the media sectors and media types, the financial factor seems more important than the mandate. An issue of financial constraints and staff shortages resonates across a number of statements, also including those from the representatives of PSM. Also, interestingly, most interviewees (in this case PSM is an exception) signal an absence of codified standards, some of them acknowledging the lack of written guidelines but acting more spontaneously according to certain unwritten values. Local and non-profit media representatives confirm more direct relationship with users.

Finally, some structural issues are defined by interviewees that can support news media and journalists in Poland across the all sectors: legal changes in decriminalizing defamation (in particular abolition of the Article 212 of the Criminal Code), regulation of SLAPP (currently on the way), transparent and fair distribution of state advertising, regulation of a relationship between the Big Tech and news providers (mainly with regard to copyright, but not only) and reformulation of public support policies (such as tax exemptions).

COUNTRY REPORT: PORTUGAL

Tatiana Chervyakova, Nuno Cintra Torres

1. Introduction

The aim of this Country report is to provide the supply side's (journalism professionals) understanding of the quality of media performance and the conditions for journalism dominating in the Portuguese context. The Portuguese team conducted 13 interviews, all except one were online. The extra interview complements the managing perspective of one of the media types. The sample aimed to represent the balance of major media groups in the market and to pay attention to all media types that are impactful and paramount in the Portuguese media landscape, a small media market. One commercial group that owns one of the two leading TV channels and one cable news channel is not represented in the sample due to the absence of a response from several of its leading journalists to interview requests. Representatives of the other major media groups were interviewed, as well as media projects that are part of smaller groups or one-brand projects.

The team did not experience any particular issues during the interviewing process, as nothing was asked to be mentioned out of the record or removed. However, some difficulty with recruitment was faced while approaching two categories: regional media, specifically representatives from local radio stations, and private TV and radio channels. The geographical remoteness of some outlets, such as local radio stations, posed an unexpected challenge, revelatory of conceptual and informational remoteness regarding research projects. Nevertheless, the aim was achieved. The country's criteria for geographical remoteness and the representation of different media types (press and radio) were complied with.

The commercial broadcasting sector presented challenges to recruiting as well. The team aimed to avoid the over-representation of a particular media group in the sample. Since those participants were the most challenging to involve in the research, it caused the repetition of the chief/managing perspective in the local/regional media and the journalist perspective in private commercial broadcasting. In the latter, the participant had previously held a leadership position in another outlet.

Some participants expressed the will to stay anonymous; hence, their respective brands are not mentioned. Some participants explicitly stated no need for anonymity. The outlet's brand name or specificity can be mentioned if relevant to the country report.

The data collection process started on the 24th of May 2024 and concluded on 18th of October 2024. The participants were offered a choice between the language of the interview. Seven interviews were conducted in English and six − in Portuguese, which were

further translated using the Deepl Pro and double-checked with the members of the team. All transcriptions were done with Nvivo and checked by a member of the team[1].

2. Providing Accurate Information

Answers of the professionals from the sample to the question of which principles and standards are fundamental in their journalistic work reveal two main categories that coexist and support each other. The first is moral/ethical notions, such as rigour, credibility, honesty, truth, open-mindedness, and independence. The idea of rigour was vividly expressed and repeated in most interviews as a starting point for further answers from journalists from different types of outlets. The need for independence and credibility of journalism were forcefully mentioned by the public service media participants, most vividly expressed by those that are supported by license fees. Honesty in reporting was also frequently mentioned as a personal standard motivating professional choices, but one that could lead to an ethical dilemma. As put by one interviewee:

> "The basic standard that I follow, on the principle side of doing journalism, is honesty. I try to be honest. [But] this means that when we are being honest in our work, not always are we correct" (PT-J-3).

As for accountability, several (PT-J-3, PT-C-4, PT-C.2-5) participants mentioned the outlet's code of conduct, the Journalists Union deontological code, or journalism's ethics. The PSM representative mentioned the role of institutions in maintaining accountability:

> "In some formats, we try to meet people directly. We also have questions put to us because has a viewers' ombudsman and an opinion council. A series of bodies question us – the regulators, etc. And we are accountable to them, so there is constant monitoring of what we do. It also helps us, in some way, to correct or improve certain aspects of our work" (PT-C-1).

One more concept bridging the first (moral/ethical) and second (practicalities) categories is the concept of public interest when applying the fundamental standards of journalism that guide the decision-making process of journalists on what to publish, how to tackle the informational "grey zone", whether the information complies with the right of citizens to know.

The second category of standards is practicalities, for which moral notions serve as grounds and justification. This category provides more practical knowledge on how professionals try to reach their moral objectives. The first and widely shared principle in this category is factuality obtained by different methods of fact-checking conducted either by a separate department, which is mentioned only once as a separate entity inside the newsroom, or by the editorial hierarchy through chains of editors or journalists themselves. The most precise description of the fact-checking process was presented by the non-profit slow-journalism type of media, which is focused on investigative journalism in podcast series. After noticing

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[1] Quotes are edited to avoid repetitions and colloquialisms, for brevity and clarity

several mistakes in their works, the outlet wanted to make their journalism "bulletproof" (PT-J-6) following this procedure:

> "It's always a work in progress. Whenever we interview someone, we usually fact-check the interviews. At the very end of the process, we write each episode. Then we edit collectively. Once we have the scripts finalized in terms of the narrative, in terms of the story, it goes to fact-checking. We take all the sentences from the script and put them on an Excel sheet. It is a process of confirming every single sentence that is written in a script. It's a time-consuming process. Then the whole team joins to listen to the episode. But we wouldn't do it any other way because we know better" (PT-J-6).

The importance of cross-checking, double-checking and contradicting the information from different angles and perspectives were iterated throughout the interviews. A specific emphasis was placed on sources of information: direct access to the primary source of information, whether it is documents, judicial sources, or openly speaking people, is explicitly admissible. These are the "good" sources. "Bad" sources are people speaking anonymously and require extra attention. Several approaches to people speaking off-the-record were mentioned. An effort to make the interviewed person speak openly is first tried. There is a manifest concern that anonymity becomes the established practice affecting the perception of the content's veracity by the audience:

> "We, journalists, started giving people the opportunity to speak anonymously even when it's not required. The public started to get used to seeing it on television or in newspapers, like a fictional name or speaking anonymously. It has become harder to try to convince people that they should speak on the record. Once the public realizes how important it is to see a story with anonymous sources or a story with people speaking on the record, they understand the difference" (PT-C-3).

> "In political journalism, it is very usual these days to use anonymous sources, perhaps more than is desirable" (PT-J-2).

In the age of disinformation, the "transparency approach" that describes how information was obtained, the conditions, stages and settings of getting the data, was considered a must-do to maintain the trust of the audience. Another approach is the rejection of anonymous sources and publishing only information that can be confirmed from public sources. A third approach is enveloping the anonymity of the testimonies with evidence to establish a pattern through multiple interviews with different people, especially when it comes to serious statements or allegations, as is explained by non-profit sector participant:

> "Police officers don't have permission to speak freely to the press, and the police administration never gets the heads-up. So, we have a lot of anonymous sources. What we do is to have one person saying this and then we have another person telling a story that is kind of similar. So, similar perspective, similar story. Then you have a third, a fourth, a fifth person. We ended up talking to almost 40 police officers. And then you begin to see a pattern" (PT-J-6).

Several times in interviews (PT-C-5, PT-J.2-2), when answering questions about standards, the importance of how the information is presented was mentioned. The regional newspaper representative mentioned the need to avoid sensationalism, their specific care about the

headlines and clarity of the expression. The journalist from a private TV channel expressed the need for simplicity of approach to be understood by "regular people":

> "You have to be very simple in the way you put information out there. My news organization does print and TV journalism for the regular people. What I mean by regular people is everybody. This is not an elitist channel or an elitist newspaper. We take time to make every sentence, and every word simple in terms of 'okay, I'm hearing this news story, and I understand every idea, every context, every word'" (PT-J.2-2).

A unique approach to the need for contradicting perspectives in reporting was expressed by a media addressing the interests of the black community. Giving the example of the case when a black actor became a victim of racist murder, the founder explained why the perspective of the killer was absent from the reporting. As a representative of the black community, her stated intention was to counteract the campaigns against the victim, exposing conflicting facts about his life and the narrative of justification for violence "that doesn't normally happen when the victim isn't black":

> "I take on board this disagreement with a series of journalistic rules because I believe it is extremely important to bring in narratives to promote a space of balance in a context that is so unbalanced" (PT-C-6).

The speed and intensity of news coverage as a factor influencing the quality, or lack thereof, of journalism was intensely expressed in most interviews. Speed was mentioned as a threshold to deliberate reporting influencing journalistic choices, the often harsh work conditions sometimes lead to burnouts. Bad pay was another common refrain. The competitive environment created by the social media platforms that provide instant information and the fast rhythm of publications are presumed to be inevitable factors of contemporary reporting that must be complemented by the scarce time dedicated to profound, slow journalism reporting. However, staff and financial shortages are major obstacles to more investigative journalism or quality reporting in general, as well as the continuing loss of older experienced journalists and the guidance they could provide to their younger substitutes.

3. Controlling Power Holders

Only one medium specialised in investigative slow-journalism was included in the sample and only one professional from the sample worked explicitly with investigative journalism. However, the importance of the investigative role of journalism was commonly shared among all the participants. It is noteworthy that conditions for performing investigative journalism are highly interlaced with the overall national conditions that may put pluralism and media freedom at risk.

There was no explicit statement from any interviewee about the lack of editorial freedom or pressure from the government regarding conditions influencing investigative journalism, although there are rare cases of political pressure from past governments on PSM and private media leading to dismissals. Some journalists mentioned their experience with court cases initiated by persons under their investigations.

The participants divided their opinions about the current state of investigative journalism compared to the past: some mentioned improvement, while most saw the worsening of the situation or stated now it is different, mostly as a consequence of decreased staff and financial constraints. The representatives of the press sector highlighted a differentiating role for investigative journalism as it creates additional value and acts as an audience puller, in competition with the media with more instantaneous reaction to events:

> "Investigative reporting is one of the pieces that the newspapers can give to their readers to add value to their proposition of journalism. If you don't have good reporters who know how to do that work, you'll probably be a newspaper, alike a fast news journal. To make sure that our kind of journalism survives, you have to give a really good reason to the readers that they pay you and not just Netflix or Spotify or another newspaper" (PT-C.2-3).

> "As a weekly news magazine, we don't do several things that a daily paper does, like press conferences. We try to distinguish ourselves for our original reporting. Throughout the years, has been involved in revealing the biggest stories in Portuguese democracy. Investigative reporting is one of the things that distinguishes. We don't have it every week because it takes time, and it's expensive. But we try to have at least one story once a month the story" (PT-C-3).

The conflicting answers from journalists of the private commercial broadcasting sector are vivid. One journalist gave a pessimistic evaluation of the environment for investigation, not because journalists are not ready, but due to a lack of resources and attention from management to the journalism problem. However, the participants mentioned increased attention to the situation. At the same time, the representative of another commercial medium shared that his outlet has a dedicated department of eight to ten people and one to two investigative reporting stories per week, highlighting that the outcomes of the work of the media influenced the demission of several governments.

The description of a critical situation permeates most interviews. The limitations for investigative journalism were mostly ascribed to time and financing scarcity. They exist in inversely proportional dynamics with the shrinking of newsrooms and the increased speed of news delivery. Most participants mentioned that the financial sustainability crisis was influencing the outlet's investigative work. Lack of available time is considered a barrier to developing investigations. Some participants highlighted that journalists are performing many functions at the same time due to the small size of newsrooms. The number of professionals who can dedicate only to investigative journalism is small. The outlets usually do not have investigative journalism departments. Different roles are merged, leading to dissatisfaction with working conditions. Demands for structural support for journalism, for national and cross-border investigations, are current. Moreover, investigative journalism does not always guarantee a successfully published or broadcasted story. In the circumstances of scarce newsrooms, the time allocated to it means not paying attention to other day-to-day work:

> "It's time-consuming. And you are never sure about the result. Because you can spend like two months working on something and in the end, it gets you nowhere" (PT-C-3).

The technologies are seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, participants acknowledged the importance of embracing the technologies and perceived the advancement they created for the investigative process, like information storage and online

access. However, the technologies are also envisioned as business model disrupters, enhancing the speed of the process, the competition and the financial model of the outlets.

As for the best practices, several (PT-C-1, PT-J-3, PT-C.2-3) participants mentioned the excellent influence of the collaborative approach to investigative journalism and the attribution to transnational organisations as an instrument to participate in influential projects with teams worldwide. Collaboration between national and regional outlets was suggested as a way for the regional media to share the expenses and expertise.

Some participants mentioned audience support as an encouraging factor for investigative journalism as the audience expresses the interest in such reporting, which puts into question the lack of investment.

4. Forum for the Public Debate

The answers on encouraging public debate are interlaced with the answers to facilitate political participation and are sometimes envisioned as a single journalistic mission. According to the answers, the interviewees envisioned the public debate in their work from two perspectives: 1) discussions in the newsroom of strategic choices and topics development; 2) debate on the production of contents and formats and their putative effect in generating audience engagement, and on the interplay of the medium with the audience.

Promoting public debate is seen as a journalistic goal, and its development is identified by three touchpoints alongside the pipeline of journalistic production. The first, as noticed by some participants, envisions the audience as the source of information contributing to initiating the debate through contact with the newsroom. The second is about the quality of content production and formats. Stories with the potential to generate a debate result in more profound reporting and not just instant coverage and agenda replication. Several (PT-C.2-3, P-C-4, PT-J-6) journalists said that a high-quality and contextualised piece generates the debate by itself:

> "It's quite immediate if you have a good story that gives the country a discussion about it. That's kind of our objective in this kind of journalism. You reach a story that you have good reasons to think that it has national importance (PT-C.2-3)".

> "The subject is free from the present moment. It's well-written. It has a lot of people, information, good pictures. Slow journalism still is something that people value (PT-C-4)".

The third element in the pipeline required for enhancing the debate is the dissemination of the story. Many participants see the use of cross-media instruments as a vehicle for expanding the public debate on their reporting. All the representatives of the press mentioned their reporting interactions with TV:

> "You can investigate further, make conferences, and a podcast about your investigation that reaches out further than the newspaper story. Today, there are millions of opportunities to

expand your story differently. To question things [on TV] that are beneath the story that is being written" (PT-C.2-3).

"We try to make a consequential story. We have to do follow-ups, to pressurize, to organise TV debates on the issues. We broadcast the story and then talk to the channel editors: We now have to create a debate, call the specialist about the issue and go live TV. To discuss the story, ask the president or the minister about it" (PT-C-3).

"Stories that I published had the effect of having a TV show or of becoming a TV talking point" (PT-J-3).

The audience's attention and community-building factors were considered meaningful instruments to facilitate public debate. The representative of the press mentioned that their paid community members had access to the comments section and even contributed to investigations with their findings. Community media go beyond the written medium, organising offline discussion events, such as joint listening of the podcasts.

"How to publish our next podcast series about policing in the so-called "problematic" neighbourhoods? You have two perspectives, the police officers and the residents' perspectives. We wanted to bring this series to these audiences so that they hear each other's perspectives. It's very rare for a police officer to hear someone who lives in one of those neighbourhoods talk about their daily life. On the other hand, these people rarely hear the police officer's story. We want to bring these audiences closer to the journalism we produce, to step out of the bubble and encourage a conversation" (PT-J-6).

The black community media participant stated that the barriers to the public debate are the lack of recognition of the importance of issues and a common language, welcoming the collaboration with civil society organisations for offline events that are taking place. The importance of such organisations for journalists was noted several (PT-J-3, PT-J-2, PT-C-6) times as collaborators and enhancers of their work. However, the weak societal impact of such organisations is regretted.

The lack of financing, the consequent shortage of professional staff and the unsatisfactory working conditions are barriers to enhancing public debate through journalistic reporting. The interviewee from the digital media mentioned that hate speech on social media is difficult to moderate. The issue of political polarisation emerged as an adverse topic for public discussion. One suggestion was for journalism to focus on potential solutions to problems. A similar proposition was made by the representative of a commercial TV channel:

"If our reporting creates questions in the listeners' minds, in the viewers' minds, in the readers' minds, we are not doing the job. We have to provide answers and not questions" (PT-J.2-2).

5. Representing Cultural, Societal and Political Diversity

The professionals in the sample see diversity from two perspectives: diversity inside the organisation associated with the staff and diversity of the groups represented by the coverage of the outlet. Participants noted the lack of diversity and representation inside the media organisations – ethnical, gender, age, etc. — which is explained by the scarcity of

resources and the fact that media organisations cannot hire more people or change their approach. However, some participants mentioned that many women are working in journalism, sometimes even the majority in newsrooms. However, they have not achieved parity in leading positions. One journalist mentioned that the problem is not specific to journalism but to society in general:

> "It's the maintenance of a system in place over the years in societies. I don't think we can get away from the fact that we are part of a system that is still very much influenced by patriarchy and the role of men. Leadership positions are markedly male. There is no gender diversity or little gender diversity in top management positions. It's more of a sociological question than a journalistic one" (PT-J-2).

Regarding the immigrant communities, good practice was mentioned by the representative of the press sector: the outlet is providing journalistic education to several immigrant journalists living in Portugal and the possibility to publish. Another journalist from the same sector mentioned the joint work with journalists outside of Europe as a positive practice.

One of the participants from the digital sector highlighted the emotional load in journalism working with diversity issues. Emotions are seen as both encouraging and discouraging factors because of the desire to promote social change but the lack of visible improvements.

Most professionals mentioned they do not have a specific regiment to follow when deciding on diversity issues. However, different strategies to approach diversity were presented. The only reference to a document on diversity was made by the PSM journalist: the PSM remit mandates diversity. The representative of a private regional medium outlet defined diversity as "a social contract of our action." (PT-C-5).

Political diversity is seen as a more practised branch of diversity. The representative of the public service broadcaster stated:

> "Portugal is probably the country that holds the most TV debates at election time. Dozens of debates, some from pooling the most important television channels" (PT-C-1).

The balance in the representation of all political powers is secured by providing voice, media space, coverage and debating rights to all the parties. The voice from the "right" is balanced by the voice from the "left". Outlets mentioned that despite the care taken to ensure political balance, they are still accused of supporting a given party. Another representative of the press sector envisioned diversity as a "catch-all" strategy that does not cut the market share of an already small market:

> "If we have a story about the government, centre-right, it's not mandatory that we also have a story about centre-left. It's the story of interest in that week, a matter of common sense. We don't have strict diversity guidelines (PT-C-3)".

The appropriateness of the choice of experts invited to discuss certain issues is criticised by the representative of the private commercial sector. The manageable and current way to access an expert is to look for an expert who is already collaborating with the outlet. This may be interpreted as "availability bias" that can be explained by the dearth of resources and the contemporary speed of media production. This easygoing praxis may lead to the

exclusion of voices that ought to be heard, such as disadvantaged people or from minorities that are underrepresented in the power structures.

> "Take the issue of historical reparations that was put on the table by the President of the Republic. Most of the people who were heard were mostly white men political commentators. We are talking about an issue that concerns black people, people from Africa, these voices must be represented. And often they're not" (PT-J-2).

Most mentioned were the Brazilian community, the largest in Portugal, followed by black communities. Airtime dedicated to them exists in different ways in every type of media. However, not every media from our participants is capable of dedicating the resources to do more than what they are already producing and covering. Diversity is envisioned as a combined effort of the media industry as an institution, that the media landscape can in its versatility follow the missing voices:

> "Pluralities do not have to do with what each newspaper is doing, but with what all the newspapers of the country are doing" (PT-C.2-3).

Notably, the same logic is shared by the representatives of community media. One of the participants is the outlet that his founder claims was born to "combat discrimination" and "counteract *invisibility*", representing the interests of the black community. He sees the potential of alliances with the mainstream media. Another representative of the non-profit sector shared a similar position. These media have a clearer focus than the mainstream and can concentrate for a longer period on a topic, a practice difficult to fit into the business models of the major media. The non-profit community sector, because of its specific operational model, can add to this combined effort of diversity by accompanying the instant coverage of day-to-day events with more targeted slow projects.

One more issue of diversity concerns the centralisation of journalism in Portugal, with a focus on Lisbon, the capital and largest city. Citizen journalism is legally not recognised in Portugal, the digital native outlet, however, expanded its brand to cover the agenda outside of Lisbon with the contribution of "citizen journalists".

> "We are trying a project in other parts of the country. People taking our brand and doing fact-checks on topics that they can relate to. That is important and means cultural diversity" (PT-J-4).

6. Facilitating Public Participation

The media's role in the public's political participation is envisioned by media professionals in two ways: by the journalism remit itself or/and through certain targeted interactions.

Firstly, the professionals see the possibility of facilitating public participation through unprompted debate emerging from published journalistic pieces. Often repeated was the idea of all media providing a public service as a public good embedded in the profession, pursuing journalistic standards and providing the widest spectrum of information about the world as possible. "The information is a right" was pronounced in the interviews, and the provision of access to information is a journalistic day-to-day duty. Information creates

knowledge. Using the knowledge transmitted by the media, organisations and journalists citizens are empowered to make informed choices. This approach was shared among many participants.

> "We are in essence a factor, or try to be a factor, of social articulation, of cohesion, of uniting the various fields, the various interests of society, of trying to make them clearer, more understandable to viewers" (PT-C-1).

> "What we're doing is providing people with enough information, ensuring that they have tools to decide about their own lives" (PT-C.2-3)".

> "A newspaper, as an informative activity in itself, ends up being a way of boosting participation by its very nature" (PT-C-5).

Hence, the facilitation of political participation is envisioned as a possible outcome of their work, exposed by public awareness and discussion, even though the impact of the outcome is hardly measurable. However, the representatives shared different personal considerations on how political participation was generated.

The PSM representative related the growth of turnout in the last parliamentary elections and the debate that was started by the broadcasters. The press representative recalled when his investigation of malpractice by a candidate to one of Lisbon's 24 parishes (freguesia) may have contributed to changing the outcome of the election for city mayor: the incumbent lost the mayoral election at that parish.

> "The story had a huge impact online. We could see the numbers rising. On the day of the elections, we saw that he had lost the election for mayor. And when we saw the results on that particular parish, we realized that he had lost around 20,000 votes compared with the previous election. The opposition candidate got those votes and won the election. I believe that exposing the malpractice in that particular parish influenced the way people voted leading to the incumbent's loss. I think that it was consequential in terms of political participation, reflected in the election's results" (PT-C-3).

The second way of looking at political participation is specifically targeted interactions with the audience via different formats that can connect the outlet directly with the audience: events — as in the case with community media; comments on the platforms or other social media instruments; vox pop materials; specific formats inviting the audience to participate on air or even a regional media outlet publishing the editorial written by a member of the audience. Debates or interviews also lead to increased political participation.

The media professionals addressed issues emerging from the complexities of contemporary citizenship as both encouraging and discouraging factors influencing participation. Crisis and pivotal points in politics may increase the voting turnout or political interest of specific groups of people, while trends like polarisation, populism, weak civil society movements or politicians themselves were mentioned as discouraging political participation.

7. Conditions for Freedom and Professional Journalism

The conditions for freedom and professional journalism are divided into three groups: political, financial and technological. Starting with politics, the media professionals are not

concerned with the political pressure on journalism in Portugal. Some said that the freedom of speech in the country is "total", and the lack of censorship is acknowledged by experience. One leading journalist said: "We do our journalism in peace". The investigative journalist mentioned that investigative stories can be more easily published in Portugal than in some other countries and noted the high ranking of the country in the Freedom of Press index.

> "We are in a good position. We do our journalism in peace. So we're not that bothered with political powers, and that gives you room to do your job" (PT-C.2-3).

Despite the relative freedom and peaceful environment, several (PT-C-3, PT-J-2, PT-C-1, PT-J-3) journalists recalled litigation against authors by people covered in their stories. The court actions may be used as an instrument of financial pressure, particularly effective during the financial crisis, against weakened journalistic organisations, namely an expensive court case started in the US against a journalist in Portugal. The representative of the public service broadcaster referred to the European Media Freedom Act as a potential tool to protect journalists.

Another widely discussed risk at the political level was polarisation. The debate often migrates to the extremes, and journalists admit their coverage has the potential to impact the growth of polarisation. The professionals expressed their concerns about the excessive number of commentators, especially on TV, who negatively influence the quality of journalism. These formats abound because they are easier and cheaper to produce than original reporting. The drawback is that they can blur the boundary to quality journalism replacing the journalistic work with comments and mixing up facts with opinion. Politicians can use social media to speak directly to the audience, and that changes the dynamics between journalists and the audience. To solve this problem, which is wider than journalism, to maintain the connection to the audience, the interviewees advocate following professional standards such as putting the event in context, contradicting and questioning the news and being aware of the interests of political parties when reaching to the media as a means of lobbying.

> "I do believe that polarisation is bad for democracy. What is the difference between a party platform and a media platform if journalists don't fulfill their role as mediators?" (PT-J-2).

The absolute majority of the participants acknowledged the lack of financing as the greatest risk to media pluralism in Portugal. The lack of sustainable financial models and strategies created a "vicious circle" (PT-C-5) of problems influencing the quality and independence of the industry. The financial pressure holds back the development of quality products. The harsh working conditions nudge professionals to leave the profession because of financial precarity and mental health hazards. When the more experienced staff quit the profession, the newcomers have less senior comrades to learn from, which potentially can lead to a decrease in standards. The narrative of "journalism was left behind" was constantly invoked throughout the interviews, with claims of the need for attention from the State to the problems affecting the media. The problem, they claim, is not excessive State interference but rather its inaction. The absence of State supporting measures, besides the long-established media postal shipping costs paid by the State, is of concern and may lead to the economic unsustainability of the media. A failing media can imperil pluralism. Most journalists support structural universal funding mechanisms via tax reductions, subsidising

subscriptions, and setting up a national media financing fund. But they are against direct aid to specific outlets. Despite inefficient measures enacted by often incompetent shareholders, the industry maintains its plurality partially due to the individual will, love of the profession and socially conscious values espoused by most journalists. In some rare cases, sustainability is assured by the owners of companies that publish loss-making and editorially independent media, which is seen as the provision of a service to democracy and a prestige-enhancing tool.

The interviewed professionals acknowledge two consequences of technology use in the media. On one side, the utilitarian convenience of digital tools, like easier storage, files transmission and accessibility of information. On the other, some journalists from public service media and the private sector, are particularly concerned with the power and influence that large technological organisations have on their own organisations' business models. One participant mentioned that journalists have lost the monopoly status of gatekeepers and are now sharing it with other players.

> "I think they are making millions at our expense. Our produced content goes online and they use it for profit. They do not share profits as they should. We are dependent on Google and Meta in terms of web traffic. Every time they change the algorithm, our traffic goes up or down. They get the biggest amount of advertising instead of us. So they will probably kill journalism" (PT-C-3).

Besides the technological impact on the business models of established media organisations, technologies also impacted trust in the media. The increased rhythm of the journalistic process, the production of instant information and the prevalence of sensationalism all contribute to disinformation, fake news and the consequent distrust of the media. The risks and impact of AI now and in the future are also acknowledged. Several (PT-J-4, PT-J-2, PT-C.2-3, PT-J.2-2) journalists mentioned that different players try to discredit journalism, accusing them of bribery, corruption, protection of interests of certain parties and dishonesty. The lack of preparation of the audience to absorb the media torrent and lack of media literacy are diagnosed as the root causes of distrust.

8. Relationship Between Media and Democracy

> "Now we know that poor-quality journalism leads to poor-quality democracy" (PT-J-1).

Unanimously, journalists from all types of outlets agreed on the vital role of journalism as democracy's "backbone" (PT-C-4). A similar vision of the future of journalism is noticeable among the participants. The performative function of journalism was acknowledged in some cases. It is assumed that journalism can influence the political outcome of specific events. Journalism collects knowledge about the present and keeps memories about the past. The mediating function was explicitly stated. The journalist is responsible for providing context, and nuance (PT-J-6), to transmit knowledge about complex issues of contemporary societies and to spark the debate. Journalists should offer audiences the opportunity to make better-informed decisions. Information empowers citizens and without an informed society, democracy is unsustainable.

The interviewed journalists are aware of the power of their profession. One participant revealed the belief in journalism's capability to combat contemporary problems, like polarisation and disinformation, if done right and thoroughly by the standards. Journalism is capable of enlightening society and holding power accountable. However, the industry is undergoing a harsh period. The trust crisis and lack of attention to the problems of journalism require revitalising actions from everyone involved, all moving in the same direction to pursue the goal of preserving a good quality democracy.

9. Conclusions

The research sample unanimously shares a similar understanding of a perceived serious financial and economic crisis threatening the sustainability of the Portuguese media industry, consequently imperilling democracy itself. In the context of a benign pressure-less political environment, underfinancing and fragile business models are hard to overcome barriers to the development of quality and investigative journalism. The weak financial position of almost all the media is seen as a mortal risk for political pluralism.

The sample considered that there has been a degradation of the journalism practice, not because of the sudden imposition of censorship which is absent, but emanating from a pleiad of other antagonistic internal and external factors. The forming of extreme economic professional dependencies, the lack of financial resources to invest in deeper reporting, the need to deliver fast information and the breaking news format necessary to compete with news (and fake news) delivered by internet platforms, are some of the constraints that complicate the journalistic media efforts to comply with the needs of quality journalism fully. The gatekeeping monopoly previously enjoyed by the media has been lost and taken over by powerful transnational actors, the "gatekeepers" as per the DMA Act definition. The burden of flawed business models is further complicated by digital technology, both an ally of journalists with the opening of new opportunities and an enemy that disrupts or destroys business models, contributing to an increase in public distrust of the news production itself of journalists and media organisations.

Journalists lament that they are not understood by audiences despite an expressed commitment to the profession's deontological and ethical principles, to self-perceived rigorous and balanced reporting and that they strive to keep to the highest journalistic standards in dissatisfactory working conditions. An adverse context of social problems has wounded the vital trust relationship between journalists and audiences. Difficult to explain is the need to conflate commercial business models with journalistic standards, aggravated by perennial illiteracy, which is itself an outcome of deficient education and results in little spending on media. The sector demands government actions to help guarantee the survivability of the media, such as co-financing subscriptions and tax relief measures.

In conclusion, the MeDeMAP research revealed that journalists unanimously have high regard for their professional performance and acknowledge working in a benign political environment: they can do their journalism "in peace". However, financial, economic and organisational fragilities, flawed business models, incipient State support for independent

journalism, and competition from online platforms have colluded to disrupt, hamper or imperil the fulfilment of the media's social remit as "the backbone of democracy".

COUNTRY REPORT: SLOVENIA

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1. Introduction

Through the selection of media outlets and interviewees, we ensured strong representation of major news content producers in Slovenia across all six media categories outlined in the methodology. In the commercial television and radio category, we have not included commercial radio since there is no significant news production within this type of media. In selecting media outlets and interviewees from the commercial television category, we focused on the news service provider with the largest audience share. We excluded television channels characterized by excessive political bias and frequent violations of professional standards in their news services, having also small audience share. In the category of community, non-profit, and minority media, we selected a community radio and a non-profit investigative online media outlet. Both serve as a key reference point in the country for non-profit journalistic production. Additionally, one of these outlets produces a certain amount of its content in minority languages.

To gain insight into the perspectives and experiences of interviewees and media outlets across the political spectrum, we included a right-wing media outlet and an interviewee affiliated with it. This selection was made despite the fact that no right-wing media outlet in any of the six media categories would have qualified for the sample based solely on the leading position in audience share.

The interviewee representing the right-wing media outlet stood out by extensively discussing political developments and critically evaluating the policies of the current centre-left government in nearly every response, including those not directly relevant to the interview topics.

Several interviewees clearly expressed fear of being recognized, particularly when they critically discussed the excessive commercial interests and political connections of their media outlet owners, which often lead to commercial and political pressures on editors and journalists. To address these concerns, we ensured through anonymisation and, in one particular case where an interviewee expressed such concerns throughout the interview, we obtained authorisation.

The small size of the country and its news media landscape influenced the selection of media outlets and interviewees, but also poses challenges for effectively anonymizing both the media outlets and the interviewees. This limitation required extra care in our approach to confidentiality to protect the identities of those involved.

In Slovenia, the response rate to interview invitations was a hundred percent, including participation of individuals in top editorial decision-making roles across all media categories. This high response rate can be attributed to the professional culture among editors and journalists, who prioritize values of responsibility and participation in broader discussions

about their profession. It may also reflect a respect for the researchers and the research organisation actively engaged in defending and advocating for media freedom, pluralism, and independence in the country.

All twelve interviews were conducted in Slovenian, with ten held in person and two conducted via online video conferencing tools. The timing of the interviews, conducted during the 2024 European Parliament election period, frequently influenced interviewees' references to the media role in covering the elections. This context provided valuable insights into how media outlets prioritize political coverage during major electoral events.

2. Providing Accurate Information

Adherence to journalistic standards in providing accurate and reliable information is highly regarded by all interviewed editors and journalists of the media in Slovenia. They frequently made references to the **Slovenian Journalists' Code of Ethics** and internal guidelines as key documents guiding journalistic practices across public and commercial media, ensuring credibility and ethical rigour. The Journalists' Code of Ethics was explicitly mentioned by editors and journalists of public broadcaster, community media and also commercial media outlets. "I have it on my wall so that I remind my colleagues this is the main standard that guides us in our work", said an editor of a commercial media outlet (SI-C-4).

Verification processes are central for all interviewees, including the preference for credible and reliable sources, cross-checking facts from multiple sources and angles, and distinguishing between primary and secondary sources. A journalist of a non-profit investigative media outlet provided a detailed account of the rigorous fact-checking process. The mechanisms of verification vary: the use of search engines and public data basis was often cited by the interviewees, followed by reviews by colleague journalists and editors, while some also visit archives and libraries, particularly for longer and more in-depth stories.

> "For every single thing that we publish [...] there are journalists who are committed to the professional standards and editors who check these stories" (SI-C-1).

> "For every story, before it goes to publication... the journalist after it is been editorially checked [...] goes through a fact-checker. [...] We have at least two unconnected sources that confirm the same story" (SI-J-6).

While verification of information is prioritized across all media, **challenges arise from time constraints and the growing volume of content**. Despite the pressures to publish quickly, editors of both public and commercial TV news programs emphasized that **commitment to accuracy and reliability remains central to credible journalism**.

> "We always have the rule that reliability comes before speed. That is to say, if we do not have some things verified, if we do not have the papers to prove it, the documents to prove it, the testimonies to prove it, we just do not publish it" (SI-C-2).

> "Until we had all the information, so until the journalist had also got the other side and the information, we did not go public with the story. And he waited for ten days until everything was verified, and some of the media beat us to it" (SI-C-1).

The importance of credibility of a national news agency was particularly emphasized by editors of regional and local media, and of a digital native media, which have small newsrooms and largely rely on the news production of the national news agency. For these outlets, the reliability of the national agency's reporting is essential to maintaining their own journalistic standards and public trust.

Both journalists and editors underscore the importance of **critically assessing sources**. Scepticism is particularly highlighted by the editor of a community media, where journalists are encouraged to question the origin, position, and intent of information.

> "The essence of the method of journalism, I think, is scepticism. To be sceptical of any information that we use in our articles […] To check it, to question from what position it was actually given, in what context, who said it, and to check it to the best of our ability" (SI-C-6).

While several interviewees underscored that a single mistake can seriously damage a journalist's or outlet's reputation and erode public trust, one interviewee, who had served as an editor in various media outlets, highlighted the importance of promptly **correcting mistakes** when they occur. This interviewee noted that transparent and timely corrections can help restore credibility and demonstrate accountability to the public.

The importance of teamwork, collaboration, trust and joint commitment of journalists and editors in the newsrooms as a precondition for ensuring high standards in journalistic output **despite crisis, redundancies, financial cuts and pressures** from owners, was highlighted by an editor from a newspaper exposed to such circumstances. In contrast, another editor from a similarly affected media outlet noted that they are slowly succumbing to owner's pressure, with adverse consequences for the quality and credibility of their reporting.

3. Controlling Power Holders

The decline of investigative journalism emerged as a major concern in most interviews. The negative trend was explained by **financial cuts and largely reduced number of journalists** in the newsrooms of the public and commercial media. Journalists and editors indicated that high costs and time necessary for in-depth investigations often mean that newsrooms cannot sustain it. This includes the biggest newsroom in the country at public television, where the investigative TV show based on a special team of investigative journalists has been discontinued. They still keep producing shorter investigative stories for the weekly polemical talk show, providing to several journalists more time and better salaries, but the time is measured in weeks and not months, not allowing lengthy and complex investigations.

> "[…] there are also three journalists who are well paid, better paid, even in this position of investigative journalists, who have time for a week, two weeks, even three weeks more to dig into a topic. But in the daily news programme […] there is such a shortage of staff that we do not have the luxury of having a person for two, three weeks on a topic which then turns out to be a failure and someone is taken out of the work process" (SI-C-1).

Similarly, the newsroom of a big commercial TV under foreign ownership has been able, according to the editor, to keep producing periodical sections of the main news show with elements of investigative journalism, based on shorter investigations.

Editor of a daily newspaper reported drastic deterioration of the conditions for investigative journalism in his media outlet, referring to the commercial pressure exerted by the owners:

> "The conditions for journalists to have the time, the room for manoeuvre, the editorial support, and the financial support to… check things out on the ground have deteriorated dramatically over the last 15 years […] The mantra of the owners is clickbait journalism and quick-buck journalism" (SI-C-3).

Clearly, **the most evident cuts were made in the newspapers**, particularly on regional and local level and within the same big media group, owned by the Slovenian businessman. As journalist of a regional media in this media group said: "Here in my media, unfortunately, we cannot do investigative journalism. There are several reasons for that because we are few, there are fewer and fewer [of us journalists]" (SI-J-5).

The only media category reporting **improved conditions for investigative journalism** was community and non-profit media. A community media outlet recently organized training sessions to enhance the investigative journalism skills of its journalists, while a non-profit investigative outlet expanded its newsroom by increasing the number of journalists. However, a journalist from that outlet also pointed to **financial obstructions stemming from the mode of financing** and the need for journalists to be involved in applying for grants and reporting on the results:

> "Comparing it with the past, I think it has strengthened quite a lot, but purely on account of the fact that somehow we as a team have strengthened now in numbers, but also we have gained some knowledge. […] But it is obstructed, on the one hand financially, there is never enough money, […] We are a non-profit media, which means that you have to apply for calls, which means that you have to report, which means that journalists do all of that as well" (SI-J-6).

Restrictive access to public information was reported in several interviews as a major obstacle limiting investigative efforts of the media in Slovenia. The trend of further restrictions was described by an editor who pointed out that recent legislation changes further complicate journalistic investigations, effectively obstructing media from accessing information critical to public interest.

Several journalists of commercial media expressed **doubts whether investigative journalism truly exists in Slovenia**, with particular scepticism voiced by a journalist from a right-wing media outlet:

> "I am very sceptical about this talk of investigative journalism in Slovenia. […] There is a great deal of talk about the existence of investigative journalism, but behind it there is usually relatively undisguised propaganda by political parties or by important people who have money, who have passed on certain information to journalists, who then disseminate it as a kind of investigative journalism. This is not investigative journalism" (SI-J-4).

The journalist, however, recalled the significant impact of his past investigations, noting that his persistent reporting had once led to the annulment of a referendum and a change in legislation. He emphasized that this level of impact was achievable when opposition

parties in parliament used his investigative findings to challenge government actions. Several other journalists suggested that investigative journalism occasionally progresses only when **political actors have a vested interest in revealing certain information**.

The pressures on newsrooms not to investigate misconduct of the funders was reported by the editor of a community media outlet, illustrating their vulnerability when funders, by threatening with budget cuts, attempted to influence editorial independence and investigative priorities.

> "And there is a very, very palpable pressure that they are threatening to cut funding if we do not act [in a certain way], if we are supposed to… I do not…, I know it is risky enough… I do not even want to talk to my reporters about it because I do not want them to… Because I want them to… not to be under pressure […]" (SI-C-6).

Despite the challenges, investigative journalism remains seen by media professionals across all media categories as a **valued practice, essential to credibility and their role in holding power accountable**, even if they cannot always commit resources to it.

4. Forum for the Public Debate

Across the sample, journalists **reported examples of good practices that encourage public debate**. A crucial point emphasized was the **importance of being present directly within communities**, among people, with a strong focus on being embedded in the local environment.

> "One of the fundamental functions of the media is to provide a space in which society discusses with itself, about itself, about its problems, about the most exposed issues, the dilemmas of our time. About the community in which we live" (SI-C-3).

> "Because our work is irrelevant if there are no people around, if we do not trigger discussions, we are wasting our time. We have no value" (SI-J-4).

The selection of participants in these public debates is, according to the interviewed editors and journalists, typically based on criteria such as **professionalism, competence, and a diversity of viewpoints**. Despite diversity criteria, there is editorial policy of several big media outlets, including the news program of a major commercial television, not to give space to the individuals deemed to be "hateful, intolerant, and completely incompetent" (SI-C-2). This policy acknowledges the editorial responsibility for facilitating respectful and rational debate in the media.

Interviewees have reported efforts to encourage public debate in **physical spaces through events organized by their media**. For instance, commercial television hosts **special live thematic shows** filmed in various locations across Slovenia, outside of Ljubljana, **providing opportunity to the citizens for active involvement** on relevant topics. A newspaper organizes public events, such as **forums and roundtables,** and arranges discussion events on specific topics, where **members of the public can engage directly with authorities**. These events are open to the public, invited to participate and pose questions to decision-makers. The newspaper has also incorporated into its editorial policy a commitment to widely open

its platform for guest columnists and for public letters from various groups, offering, for example, a space for public debate and diverse opinions on military support to Ukraine.

The regional media outlet also reported on **participation in local citizens' assemblies**, where interested members of the public, associations, and civic initiatives contribute to public debate. According to the editors, these **events have a significant impact**, including from the perspectives of municipal authorities and officials, with the media playing an essential role in reporting on issues raised in these local citizens' assemblies. A non-profit media outlet has introduced an innovative approach to fostering public debate through **"public editorial meetings",** actively engaging the community in discussions.

> "We try to open up this public debate also in the actual physical space with public editorial meetings that we have two or three per year, which are usually thematically linked to something that we are doing at the time, a topic that we are dealing with. We have a short presentation or something like that, and then we try to open up a debate with the people who are present there" (SI-J-6).

Regarding **public debate in digital space**, the editor of a digital native media outlet reported their decision to **disable comments on the website's articles**. While this channel had served as an important avenue for public engagement and participation in certain debates, the editor noted that discussions in the comment section often deviated in unexpected and unproductive directions.

> "This public debate, instead of promoting a public debate that is relevant, with some relevant positions on the issues that we have written about, had basically gone into insults, personal fights, even hate speech" (SI-C-4).

A few interviewees highlighted the importance of shows and media formats that **address "everyday problems of people"**. The editor of a digital native media outlet reported that they **offer legal advice**, which garners significant public interest. They select a few cases, and their legal experts provide responses. Regional and local media play a crucial role in this area, as **citizens are more willing to share information** than in the past. Consequently, the media are receiving more information from locals about emerging issues and topics. It seems that **when other institutions fail, people decide to turn to the media for assistance.** A journalist from public radio reported that they had a show which **addressed and resolved specific problems reported by listeners.** The show was very popular, but it was **cancelled**.

> "And the title became […] a saying. […] people used to say to somebody who was not fulfilling his duties, like a bureaucrat or whatever, 'I will put you on Val 202 in the 'Where is your shoe blister?' show'. But that show has been cancelled. I fought with all my might to keep it because I thought it was important that people had some feeling of having a message to send to the media" (SI-J-1).

The primary conditions that **hinder the encouragement of public debate**, as frequently reported in the interviews, are **financial constraints and understaffing**. Organizing events and producing specialized shows require significant time, planning and resources – assets that many media outlets often struggle to secure. Financial limitations hinder staff recruitment for community engagement, and logistical costs for public events. Understaffed newsrooms, especially smaller or regional ones, struggle to allocate personnel beyond core reporting duties. Consequently, promoting public dialogue and addressing local issues are

often deprioritized, reducing the media's capacity to serve as a forum for community voices and limiting citizen participation in meaningful discussions.

5. Representing Cultural, Societal and Political Diversity

Across all media categories in the sample, editors and journalists report a strong commitment to representing political diversity, particularly in the election period. However, there are certain conditions hampering realisation of this commitment in practice.

Public service media adhere to a **strict obligation of balanced reporting**, specified in the legislation and self-regulatory documents, routinely hosting both government and opposition representatives, as well as inviting representatives of smaller, non-parliamentary parties during election campaigns. The public service media, therefore, play a key role in the Slovenian media landscape in **representing views of smaller political parties** and groups not represented in the parliament.

> "We [the public television] are the only TV channel that had an election debate of the non-parliamentary parties in the programme and invited all the candidates for the European elections, even the smallest representatives, to the last TV election debate. We have not seen or heard this anywhere else [...] Also, we have a rule that whenever we invite the Prime Minister for a longer conversation, we follow it up with a conversation with the opposition" (SI-C-1).

The **requirement of balanced political representation** in the public service media has occasionally been **misused for justifying political pressures**, including through daily monitoring conducted by the government communication office under the previous right-wing government[1]. The journalist of public radio therefore referred to this requirement with concern:

> "In our country, the painful word 'balancing' has been used. And it was that mathematical balancing of how many left-right, how many for and against. And we also came to some very extreme situations which were heard in the program" (SI- J-1).

The news program of a private commercial television also follows a policy of presenting opposing views from the government and the opposition in its daily news programs, particularly in pre-election debate shows. However, when deciding whether to include non-parliamentary parties in these pre-election shows, they prefer to base their **decision on the parties' ratings in opinion polls**.

Some editors noted that some of the **journalists encounter personal and institutional barriers when reporting about particular political figures**. For instance, some reporters, due to personal convictions, avoid engaging with particular politicians. Additionally, the editor of a community media reported difficulties in attracting high-level representatives of

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[1] The Slovenian government led by Janez Janša, from 2020 to 2022, was marked by a strong right-wing stance and encountered considerable controversy. Janša's administration faced criticism for its approach to media freedom and alleged attempts to exert control over public service media. See the Media Freedom Rapid Response report "Press freedom deteriorating in Slovenia under latest Janša government" (2021) and the Memorandum on freedom of expression and media freedom in Slovenia by the Council of Europe & Commissioner for Human Rights (2021).

the largest right-wing party to participate in their news program. As the editor pointed out, **the party prioritizes appearances in media outlets with larger audience share, particularly during election cycles**. Additionally, media outlets face difficulties when political representatives decline to respond to questions or accept invitations to news shows, leading to gaps in coverage or reliance on repeat guests who are willing to appear.

In several interviews, journalists reported receiving instructions from **media owners to limit coverage of specific political figures or parties**. For example, a regional media outlet, belonging to a large **media group owned by a Slovenian businessman**, was instructed before the 2022 parliamentary elections not to report or present views of the then ruling right-wing party, Instead, they were directed to support a specific (centre-left) political group in order to assist it win the elections and take over the government.

> "One example was the pressures before the elections. [...] I do not know how much was said about it, but I can say that we have been instructed that we must support a specific political option to come to power, and must not make a mention of the other option" (SI-J-5).

This reveals significant obstacles to fair representation of political diversity, arising from owner pressures to serve particular political interests. Such practices are reportedly **difficult to resist, especially in small, regional and local media outlets**. In our sample of interviews, these pressures were primarily attributed to a large media group owned by a prominent Slovenian businessman. In this context, **foreign ownership** is **seen as supportive condition for ensuring fair representation of political diversity and acting as a check on power**, as emphasized by a journalist from a major print media owned by another Slovenian businessman: "It is definitely easier to work in the media outlet with a foreign owner" (SI-J-3). It is also important to note that our sample did not include propaganda media controlled by the right-wing political party (Media Freedom Rapid Response, 2021; Splichal, 2020), which routinely disregards professional standards and provides blatantly biased political representation.

As for the representation of cultural diversity, interviewees from **public service media and community media outlet** reported making greater **efforts to include a wide range of cultural and social groups** in their news content and production. A journalist from a major commercial media outlet noted a lack of strategy regarding representation of cultural diversity:

> "Compared to the public media, we are quite behind, and we do not really have a strategy. At least not to my knowledge as a member of the editorial board. I would say that there is a certain amount of attention being paid to this, even editorial. But we do not have a strategy to refer to [...]" (SI-J-2).

Public service media are legally obliged to provide programming for minorities, including not only the constitutionally protected Italian and Hungarian national minorities, but also the Roma and communities from the nations of former Yugoslavia. However, an editor at public television noted that **these segments are often neglected or relegated to off-prime hours, which limits their visibility** to a broader audience. Limited timeframe and resources are reported as the conditions hampering more adequate representation of cultural diversity in the prime-time news shows of public television:

> "There is not enough of that because, with the flood of events and with the limited timeframe, these are the things that we still take off the agenda first. And we put them in off-prime time, where we then cover these topics. And that is also something that we are trying to do - to become more conscious" (SI-C-1).

At the major **commercial media** outlet, a journalist noted that **prioritizing content likely to attract a larger audience** is an important factor imposed by "higher levels" within the organisation. Although they cover cultural diversity in "soft news" and feature positive stories, the attention of commercial media toward minorities is particularly paid "when there are events that have negative connotations," […] **"when something happens, and usually, it is something bad"** (SI-J-2).

Effective inclusion of minority voices requires **media and journalists to nurture contacts with these communities**. Most of the interviewed editors and journalists from public, commercial and community media reported having good contacts with various minority communities and with NGOs advocating for their rights. **Having journalists in the newsroom who are sensitive to cultural and social diversity**, and who maintain these community connections, was described by a newspaper editor as a key asset and condition for providing representation of these groups in his media outlet:

> "We are fortunate here because we have quite a number of people in our journalistic team who are sensible and very journalistically empathetic. […] We have a number of topics and speakers that we have covered on a very high level" (SI-C-3).

Journalists and editors also emphasized that community members' desire for representation alone is insufficient without reliable **contacts willing to engage with the media**. A journalist pointed out that community-based reporting requires **consistent, trusted relationships** that are challenging to establish, particularly in more isolated communities. The communication practices of some minority communities were criticized by an editor from commercial television: "The minorities themselves approach us very poorly" (SI-C-2).

Community media outlet prioritizes inclusivity by providing to various cultural and social minority communities the opportunity to produce their own shows under common editorial and ethical guidelines. However, **financial constraints limit the ability to compensate minority representatives for their participation in production.** As a result, the possibility to produce their own shows is provided to those community representatives who can devote their time to production without being properly paid. Such conditions **limit possibility, even for community media, to represent some of the most deprived communities, such as Roma.**

> "I think it is a good way to give them a voice directly. To give broadcasts to these communities. It is just kind of a privileged position here because [to have these shows] you need people who are financially independent and have the time. Exactly with the Roma community, there was such an issue. We had a show, but the problem was that we should pay them more so that they could afford to do it" (SI-C-6).

Editors and journalists acknowledge that while efforts are made to secure diverse voices, a **lack of available sources** often leads **to repeated reliance on certain groups or individuals, hindering diversity efforts**. Consequently, when time is limited, they often resort to familiar contacts when minority perspectives are needed but harder to find. As the editor of the commercial television explained:

> "It is often the case that we invite guests who either do not want to respond or do not have the time. And then it happens that there are guests on the screen who were not our first choice, but our second or third choice. You have to do a show every day, you need a guest and then when you have a first choice who does not want to do it, a second choice…, or does not have time, then you go to the third choice. Sometimes some guests never say no and then they always come. So they were not necessarily our first preference" (SI-C-2).

Several editors and journalists from commercial and community media in our sample emphasized that providing representation of cultural diversity is one area in which their owners and funders do not interfere or exert pressure. This autonomy allows them to pursue diverse and inclusive content without facing external constraints, enabling a more genuine engagement with minority perspectives and cultural representation in their programming.

The majority of editors and journalists in our sample acknowledge that **participation and representation of women in the media in Slovenia is not adequate**. They identify obstacles not only within media practices, but also within women themselves, who often decline invitations to participate.

An editor from private commercial media pointed out that, even when several female experts are available, in the end men are the ones participating. **Hesitation among women to accept invitation to talk to the media** is in contrast with male counterparts, who reportedly accept such invitations more readily, often due to greater self-confidence or fewer personal constraints, such as concerns about public scrutiny or balancing professional and personal responsibilities. The editor of commercial television was straightforward in explanation:

> "A woman either does not have a haircut, or does not have a babysitter, or is something. So, we often invite female guests who do not respond, and then we invite someone else" (SI-C-2).

However, this narrative might also serve as a convenient excuse for media not to invest more effort into securing women's representation. While editors and journalists acknowledge the need for gender diversity, the explanation that women are simply more hesitant may deter the media from actively pursuing or cultivating environments where women feel comfortable and encouraged to participate.

Several media outlets – public and private commercial – have made **explicit commitments to improve the representation of women** in their news content in response to advocacy of the women association "Ona Ve" (She Knows). Some editors reported **tracking the proportion of women in their media and purposefully inviting female speakers**, though achieving a 50% female representation remains challenging. One editor explains that even when they request a female representative from an organisation or public institutions, the final decision is not in their hands, which can hinder gender balance efforts.

Some editors and journalists, however, refrain from actively committing to gender balance, explaining that their primary priority is to feature sources and speakers who are the top experts in their fields, with demographic factors, including gender, considered secondary. These editors and journalists prefer to focus on expertise as the main criterion when selecting sources, viewing gender as a lesser factor in these decisions. To [include] someone just because she is a woman, nobody ever even thinks about that." (SI-J-5) This approach,

while pragmatic, may inadvertently perpetuate gender disparities, as it overlooks the broader value that diverse representation brings to media coverage and public understanding.

Regarding women's participation in newsrooms, some interviewees referred to the trend of feminisation within the journalism profession. However, a community media editor explained that **redistributing power positions in the media towards gender equality requires deliberate steps in that direction**. After many years of all-male newsroom responsible for reporting current affairs and politics in their community media, having central place in the internal hierarchy, they intentionally recruited female journalists in the newsroom and gradually improved gender balance. Today, the newsroom is led by a female editor who previously produced a feminist show. The interviewed editor said: "That is one thing I am very happy about" (SI-C-6).

It should be noted that gender equality goes beyond quotas and biological sex; it involves a critical examination of who holds influence in decision-making and a commitment to actively shifting these dynamics. Gender equality is not merely a numbers game but requires a deeper understanding of power hierarchies and gendered dynamics within the organisation – an aspect that many editors have yet to fully recognize (Pajnik, Luthar, 2019).

6. Facilitating Public Participation

Most of the interviewees actively **encourage political participation** and feel a **sense of responsibility** towards promoting it. In this context, they primarily cited **examples related to the recent European Parliament elections**, as the interviews were conducted shortly after these elections.

The editor of the public broadcaster noted that they set themselves the objective that, as a public media outlet, they must present issues comprehensively to the public and, in some way, **encourage them to vote**. In the run-up to the European Parliament elections, podcasts **targeted at young people** were produced, featuring young journalists who posed questions about the European Union. Moreover, the emphasis on engaging young audiences is also evident in print media.

> "We are always trying to engage with young people in a very systematic way. To raise young people's democratic awareness in particular, to educate them, to in a sense 'force' them to debate publicly, to ask questions that concern their lives and their future" (SI-C-3).

Additionally, podcasts featuring debates with leading candidates from various parties were produced by one of the digital native outlets. However, the editor noted that this content **did not attract a wide audience** but rather appealed to a specific, more limited public. Similarly, a commercial television channel aired at least ten short debate segments on its evening news program covering the European elections.

> "Because that is exactly what we wanted to do – basically to get people interested and [...] that it is very important that people are, that they are active citizens" (SI-C-2).

Examples from a non-profit medium include a special fact-checking program of the investigative outlet before every election. Additionally, a community media outlet organized

"election marathons", a series of pre-election debates featuring candidates in numerous municipalities. This approach highlights the **importance of engaging with the local environment in facilitating public participation**, even in smaller communities. However, a journalist of **a regional media** outlet reported that organizing or facilitating any form of public participation process on local level is **challenging** for their outlet.

Several editors and journalists, including those from commercial media, reported openness of their media for **civil society organisations**. They actively **provide coverage of their views and advocacy actions, either through interviews or articles detailing their ideas and efforts**. The editor of a digital native media emphasized that they have raised numerous relevant issues, such as the right to abortion and the recognition of the Palestinian state, which have subsequently gained traction in the public sphere through their publications. This approach of giving space to civil society is also evident in a regional media outlet.

> "We are quite sympathetic to civic initiatives. If civic initiatives emerge, we give them space to express their views. […] And this seems to me to be an essential element of the media in the 21st century. […] So that these groups are given the space to have a say. We know that these groups are always in a subordinate position. To capital, to the economy, to state policy or, even higher, to multinationals" (SI-J-5).

7. Conditions for Freedom and Professional Journalism

Editors and journalists identified **several significant risks to media freedom and pluralism** in Slovenia, some of them are common and others vary depending on the media category and type of the media outlet. The most often reported risk in the interviews is the **reduction or lack of financial resources**, which is evident in all media categories and particularly affects **cuts of staff**, thereby weakening newsrooms rather than strengthening them. There is a "lack of resources for people to go out and find out that they have first-hand news" (SI-C-1). Moreover, it is evident that **local correspondent networks across all media outlets are either disappearing or being reduced** precisely at a time when they should be significantly strengthened. Furthermore, the editor of a digital portal highlighted **the essential role of the Slovenian Press Agency** (STA), noting that its reporting enables other media outlets to function with relatively small editorial teams, as a significant portion of their content is based on STA's coverage.

> "If we wanted to have the current amount of production without STA, I think we would need at least twice as many people, somewhere around 75–80 journalists" (SI-C-4).

Another hampering aspect is that **younger generations are reluctant to pursue careers in journalism**, while older journalists are retiring without being replaced. A journalist at a public service media noted that due to austerity measures at that media, the crucial practice of mentoring students has ceased. In contrast, a major commercial television is adopting more positive strategy:

> "So, we also have the habit of taking some interns, students. And then we try to educate them. And we are very happy to see anybody who shows any kind of desire, and a sincere desire, to be a journalist. But there are fewer and fewer of them" (SI-C-2).

A notable challenge identified in the Slovenian media sector relates to **media ownership**, particularly the concentration of media ownership and an ownership model that enables media owners to **use media outlets as their side activity and instrumentalise them for political and economic interests**.

> "And these owners still, despite thirty years of tradition, use the media as a token in some other political or capitalist games and see it neither as a fourth branch of power nor as a supervisor, as an ally of the public, as a watchdog, as a fundamental democratic standard of a democratic society, as a corrector. But they see it as a pure business activity that must provide high returns every year" (SI-C-3).

Prevailed commercial interests of media owners disregarding specific role of media in democracy were exposed as a subject of concern by an editor of a big commercial media:

> "I think that what is very important here is the awareness of the owners of the media that this is not just a profit-making enterprise, that it is not a shoe factory or something, but that it is a company that has a specific social role. And it seems to me that we should have a little bit more, whoever it is, debate on the fact that the owners need to be aware of their responsibility. Just as we who create this media are aware of it" (SI-C-2).

Journalists have expressed concerns regarding excessive **media concentration**, which they argue undermines media freedom, adversely affects journalists, and limits public access to diverse information. In relation to media pluralism, significant criticism has been directed towards the Slovenian businessman who is an ultimate owner of a big media group. This media conglomerate, built up over recent years, is often cited as an especially troubling example of media concentration in Slovenia. Additionally, the journalist of digital native media outlet identifies the predominant issue in the country as the **extensive state ownership of media**. In his opinion, such ownership, coupled with substantial state co-financing, creates significant challenges for private enterprises to compete effectively, as they are fundamentally disadvantaged.

In the digital media environment, **hyperproduction**, combined with the constant competition for clicks to generate advertising revenue, presents an additional challenge that affects the quality of professional journalism.

> "As the demands are increasing, for more and more production, and if there is more and more production, there is less time to check or upgrade certain primary or basic information" (SI-C-5).

Social media plays a significant role in shaping public perception, particularly among younger generations, who increasingly rely on these platforms for information. Taking that into account, many of the interviewees highlighted the critical need for credible journalism to support democracy. Moreover, **X** serves as an **effective tool for politicians** to avoid answering questions from journalists, enabling them to **communicate in a highly unidirectional manner** and to disseminate their messages without accountability. Additionally, recent years have seen a sustained effort by certain political factions to **undermine the credibility of the media and discredit the journalistic profession**.

> "I have noticed a significant increase in the radicalisation of discourse when it comes to discussions on our media, on us. It is not even about criticism of journalistic work any more, it is about political and other attacks on the journalistic team. […] I have noticed that a lot

of people in the media have lost some of the joy or the basic loyalty to the profession of journalism because it sometimes seems that it is not worth it to have all this 'manure' flying at you for doing your profession […] I am very concerned about that. […] We have filed quite a few police reports recently for threats or discrediting of the journalistic profession because we feel that things have gone too far" (SI-C-3).

In terms of print media, **circulation is declining**, and printed editions of newspapers are being discontinued. Consequently, media outlets are compelled to provide content that is paid for, where **fewer readers are actually willing to pay** for that content.

"People who read newspapers are dying. On the other hand, the new generations are not prepared to invest even a few […] amount [of money] in some quality and verified information produced by professional journalists" (SI-C-3).

A journalist from local media emphasized that if print media had a larger readership, both the media and journalists would enjoy **greater autonomy**. But, however, their **dependency on advertisers imposes significant economic pressure**.

"We used to get most of our money from selling the newspaper and our freedom was also much greater and there was no pressure. Not at all. And because of that, it seems to me that we have become ordinary production workers who have to fill so many pages every week. It does not matter what it is, as long as you do not offend anyone who gives us money. That, unfortunately, is the current situation" (SI-J-5).

8. Relationship Between Media and Democracy

Interviewees put **significant emphasis on the importance of journalists and the media for the functioning of democracy**. They view the survival of journalism as fundamental to the survival of democracy itself. Journalism is often referred to as the **Fourth Estate, and its watchdog function is considered crucial for upholding democratic principles** by holding those in power accountable.

"Not only are they necessary. They are urgently needed. And they are needed more and more. Especially because of the strained political relations, where ideologies that, we thought, had ended somewhere in history are coming back from the margins of the political space or from underground, from some 'dark streets', and the mainstream of politics is adapting to these political groups. And I see journalism here as the most democratic space where it is necessary to raise exactly these issues" (SI-C-3).

The primary role of the media is seen to **provide context to the vast influx of information**, particularly online, where an overwhelming amount of data is constantly accessible – described by one editor as "one huge tsunami." (SI-C-6) By offering this contextualisation, journalists do not merely disseminate information, they organize and interpret it in a manner that enables citizens to understand and navigate critical issues.

"I think that ignorance, not knowing and not being informed is the worst thing that can happen to you and that is why I think it is very important that there are media that put events in context and not just say the news and the current events, but explain to people what it means for them, how it will affect their lives" (SI-J-2).

Several editors emphasized the role of professional journalists as crucial in **combating the spread of disinformation by debunking fake news and scrutinizing biased articles** produced by multinational corporations, economic entities, and various interest groups within the media landscape. They highlighted that responsible journalism involves not only fact-checking but also providing context and transparency around sources, enabling the public to better understand and critically evaluate the information they consume.

Editors of both **public and commercial** television **underscored the media's responsibility in refraining from providing a platform for extreme or offensive views**, highlighting their commitment to responsible content dissemination.

> "We never cover these anti-abortion rallies because for us abortion is a constitutionally guaranteed right, and we do not debate things that are constitutionally guaranteed" (SI-C-2).

They stressed that while diverse perspectives are essential to balanced reporting, it is equally important to filter out content that could incite hatred, spread misinformation, or polarize public opinion without constructive purpose. This commitment involves careful editorial decisions to ensure that aired content contributes positively to public discourse, fostering a media environment that respects democratic values while promoting informed and respectful debate.

Several journalists of commercial media outlets highlighted the **media's role in promoting active citizenship**. Despite the often-repulsive nature of politics, there remains an imperative for media outlets to stimulate public interest in political participation. This engagement is crucial for cultivating a society where individuals understand the importance of their roles as active citizens. Essentially, the media must strive to enhance their efforts in promoting active citizenship within the constraints they face. While smaller **regional media** face significant economic and political pressures, a journalist from this outlet emphasized the **critical need for their survival, as they provide essential local information and address specific citizens' needs** that larger media organisations often overlook.

9. Conclusions

The interviewed editors and journalists across all six media categories in Slovenia clearly acknowledge the significance of their role in providing accurate information, controlling the power, ensuring diverse cultural and political representation, and fostering public debate and public participation. They often refer to professional norms and the Code of Ethics of Journalists in Slovenia as a key guiding tool. However, most of them, in public and commercial media, see tendencies of financial restrictions and staff cuts within newsrooms as main obstacles for pursuing these normative roles and responsibilities. In commercial media, interviewees particularly refer to the pressure of media owners on newsrooms either to follow their commercial interests (as one of the editors said: "The mantra of the owners is clickbait journalism and quick-buck journalism.") or, in some of these media, also to serve the political agendas of the owner's patrons. Media ownership concentration was identified by several interviewees as a key structural issue in Slovenia, undermining both the quality of news production and the democratic function of the media. Despite difficult circumstances and various pressures, the interviewed editors and journalists in big,

traditional public and commercial media appear to remain committed to quality news production and engaged in resisting the pressures. At the same time, the editors and journalists of the commercial digital native media outlet and smaller regional commercial media outlets taken over by a big media group are clearly more despair about maintaining the level of professionalism and quality required to fulfil their democratic role.

Financial constraints have clearly contributed to the decline of investigative journalism, including within public television. Newspaper editors, in particular, express nostalgia for the past when they could afford to have investigative journalists in the newsroom and allocate resources for investigations. Only the non-profit investigative media outlet, financed through grants, donations and subsidies, fully practices investigative journalism, including cross-border projects.

The commitment to providing a forum for public debate and facilitating participation is notably strong among editors and journalists from all media categories. Including voices from civil society in public debate and developing various formats of media content to inform and mobilize citizens for voting at elections and referendums are widespread strategies of editors in public, commercial and community media in Slovenia. These strategies reflect a clear sense of responsibility among media professionals to enable and encourage political participation among citizens during electoral events. With similar responsibility argument, most of them openly explain editorial policies that prevent radical voices from participating in public debates. Such voices are excluded to avoid their use in campaigns that undermine human rights, constitutional norms, and values.

However, it is important to note that no media outlet with a right-wing political orientation qualified for inclusion in the research sample based on their leading market position in any media category. Nevertheless, we included one interviewee from a media outlet with such an orientation, despite these criteria. Therefore, the characteristics of editorial policies described above do not represent the full spectrum. In terms of left or right political orientation of the media in Slovenia, several interviewees emphasized a need for both as long as they are committed to professional standards. One of them explained the lack of quality news media of right-wing political orientation in Slovenia with complete political capture of these media:

> "[…] on the right [political side], some good journalists cannot develop because they do not have a chance, because they are working in that septic tank. That is a very nasty thing to say, just… […] Because I think there should be left and right media in a country, so the readers, the consumers of media content are left and right. But I think that in this situation, as it is, when Janša [a right wing political leader, former PM] has set up a media network, which he has, basically in this media network good right-wing journalists cannot be developed, and Slovenia would need them" (SI-J-3).

Political pressure, particularly on public media, and attacks on media and journalists orchestrated by political actors are highlighted in several interviews as a major threat to media freedom and professional journalism in Slovenia. While reference to the detrimental role of the right-wing party leader and the previous right-wing government is often mentioned in the interviews in this regard, there are claims of the journalists in several commercial media about pressure from the owners to serve political interests of the current centre-left government, particularly in the big media group under ownership of the Slovenian businessman. At the same time, a journalist from the right-wing media outlet described the

new governing model and the consequent changes of the management and editorial personnel at public service media RTV Slovenia introduced after the centre-left government replaced the right-wing government, as a "relatively brutal political purge." This view is widespread in the communication of the right-wing opposition parties and in the media of right-wing political orientation. At the same time, the interviewees from the public service media described the circumstances after the new governing model has been introduced as a "relief" and "returning to normality." The public service media editor explained it:

> "Earlier we had direct pressure from politics, especially on the news programme, which is the most politically exposed here. […] And now, the depoliticized governing council is a firewall between this kind of independent public media and politics trying to interfere. It seems to me that the composition of the Council and the whole management structure of the public service broadcaster has helped to bring some relief. That there is no political pressure directly also from the members of the Council who were [in previous composition/model of the council] appointed by the political parties. And there is a very, very big relaxation with regard to that" (SI-C-1).

The major differences in the assessment of the political independence of the public service media remind on the particular threat to media freedom and professional journalism arising from antagonistic divisions in media and journalists' community in Slovenia fuelled by political actors and their clientelistic connections with media owners.

PART III:
A BRIEF COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

1. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: AN INTRODUCTION

At this stage (a deeper comparative analysis is foreseen to be delivered in the next Deliverable 4.4.), the data were compared through an issue-focused analysis. Data under each theme distinguished by the questionnaire and research design were sorted and integrated through a process of essential summarizing. The results are presented in tables and description below.

A brief comparative analysis has shown that three slots of questions demonstrated different patterns of similarities and differences among the countries. The second slot encompassing questions about political participation and representations of diversity displayed most evident differences, largely informed by ways how democratic participation and the role of the media in this process is understood in different countries. The first and last slots showed a mixture of commonalities and differences, stemming on the one hand from ways of how professional journalism is understood, on the other hand from a variety of national conditions and some common global determinants.

2. THREE PRO-DEMOCRATIC MEDIA FUNCTIONS

2.1. Providing Accurate Information

Most interviewees emphasized a crucial role of source verification and fact-checking, in some cases underlining a need to verify sources' credibility and cross-checking (France), importance of using multiple sources (Germany, Italy, France), or importance of critical evaluation of sources (Austria, Slovenia, Poland) as well as indication of a primary source of information (Portugal, Poland) and a need to promptly correct mistakes (Slovenia). Interviewees in some countries referred to a guiding role of self-regulatory codes of conduct or ethics (Germany, Estonia, Slovenia). Respondents in Germany and Ireland emphasized also a high importance of guidelines imposed by external regulatory institutions. Among the obstacles that hamper information, provision many interviewees mentioned a fear of lawsuits (Ireland, France, Italy, Portugal). Another issue included the speed of reporting dictated by digital platforms (Portugal, France, Slovenia) and an avoidance of journalists by politicians, with exception of situations in which they want to push their own agenda (Ireland).

2.2. Controlling Power Holders

There is a broad agreement among interviewees from all media types on a significant role played by investigative journalism. It is seen as a primary and fundamental journalistic practice for democracy (France), a source of pride for journalists (Czech Republic), as a tool for real influence on those in power and great impact on reality (Poland), a valued practice, essential to credibility and controlling power (Slovenia). Some interesting practices include public financial support for court reporting and reporting on local democracy in the case of Ireland, a presence of whistleblower portals in Germany and endorsement by the audiences to carry out investigative reporting in digital-native media in Italy.

Almost most interviewees at the same time admitted that investigative journalism is at risk due to financial and employment constraints. Most importantly, investigative journalism is economically demanding, costly and time-consuming (Austria, Estonia, France, Germany, Italy). Journalists with the necessary capabilities and knowledge are hard to find (Austria), competition for good journalists has significantly grown (Poland). Moreover, restraining conditions in which investigative journalism is conducted significantly shapes its effectiveness (Estonia). Interestingly, in some countries, PSM despite their mandate are not interested in investigative journalism (Italy) and journalists experience restrictions on access to public information (Slovenia). Also, obstacles include political pressure and censorship (Italy) or attempts of political actors to influence investigative journalism in line with their interests (Slovenia). These challenges are amplified in regional and local markets (Poland, Slovenia).

2.3. Forum for the Public Debate

As regards generating a forum for the public debate, there was a significant recognition of the importance of selection of participants for mediated debates. The interviewees pointed to the relevance of selection and diversity of those involved in public debate (Czech Republic), the selection of participants based on professionalism, competence, and a diversity of viewpoints (Slovenia). Interviewees repeatedly mentioned various activities on social media such as Twitter debates, forums on Facebook and Instagram organised by - private-commercial media (Austria) or the use of live streams and online discussion by non-profit media in Italy. Factors supporting the role of forum and debate include co-operation with journalists from other media outlets (Estonia) and contribution of newsrooms in minority languages (e.g.in the case of Russian minority in Estonia). Organizing debates, particularly before elections, resonated in several cases (e.g. in Poland) and some interviewees also noted special media formats giving opportunity to the citizens for active involvement (Slovenia). In terms of obstacles and limitations, as much as social media extend opportunities for debates and exchange of opinions when associated with the news media and news production, they also stand for competition as users seem to prefer expressing themselves on these networks directly in order to get immediate, mostly positive, feedback from their echo chambers (Estonia).

Table 1: A country-based comparison of strengths and weaknesses concerning three media functions

COUNTRY	THREE MEDIA FUNCTIONS	
	Strengths	Weaknesses
Austria	Fact-checking and transparency as the ultimate benchmark for conveying information in all media Reliability of the sources, including "source criticism" A crucial role of internal fact-checking	TV and radio stations (except community media) and digital native media are not allowed to become press council members Low significance of the 'watchdog' function due to a lack of financial and time resources. Journalists with the necessary capabilities and knowledge are hard to find The public debate more or less restricted to the debate between public figures

	Disinformation and fake news as a crucial aspect of the legitimization of today's journalism Transferring public forum activities to the field of social media (Twitter debates, forums on Facebook and Instagram) by - private-commercial media	
Czech Republic	Importance of the information and sources verification, relying on multiple sources Strict editorial system Investigative journalism in the editorial office as a source of pride for journalists Selection and diversity of those involved in public debate in the media strengthens the forum function Fact-checking and transparency as the ultimate benchmark for conveying information in all media	The declining importance of news reporting in local media Lack of resources (professional journalists and money) as a limiting factor for the investigative journalism
Estonia	Work according to the principles of journalism as formulated in the Estonian Code of Journalistic Ethics Fact-checking, balance, giving all parties a voice, keeping facts and opinions separate as firm standards of journalistic work The relevance in terms of topics and people discussing them (spokespeople to be competent, interesting, and diverse) Collaboration between journalists, both within an organization and between different ones Russian-language newsrooms contribute to the quality of the debate.	Investigative journalism being costly and time-consuming The lack of anonymity in small towns makes whistleblowing difficult Narratives can be manipulated for personal gain, which forces to critically assess sources The context in which investigative journalism is conducted significantly shapes its effectiveness People, money, and time as main obstacles in facilitating public debate by media Social media algorithms limit the spread of news Social media users seem to prefer to express themselves on these networks because they receive immediate, mostly positive, feedback from their echo chambers
France	A strong standard of honesty, transparency, fact-checking and verification of sources' credibility Cross-checking and using at least two sources to confirm information Investigating as a fundamental role of journalism for democracy	The vigilance to avoid lawsuits – both in terms of news and investigative journalism Speed as a factor negatively affecting the quality and accuracy of news coverage Investigative journalism being costly and time-consuming

Germany	High importance of guidelines imposed by the outside regulatory institution and (in case of commercial broadcasters) own internal standards Importance of using multiple sources Presence of whistleblower portals	Lack of resources and time as a limiting factor for the investigative journalism
Ireland	Importance of fact checking and of the verification of sources and of information Impartiality as an ideal inscribed in journalism's nature Public financial support for court reporting and reporting on local democracy (it is, however, perceived as irrelevant by many)	The vigilance to avoid lawsuits A low importance of standards or guidelines imposed by the outside regulatory institution Staff and financial shortages as a limitation for reporting and investigative journalism Avoiding contact with journalists by politicians, unless they want to push their own agenda
Italy	Use of multiple sources and sources verification A strong role of fact-checking and attempts to combat fake news Gathering information from conflicting sources by digital native outlets The endorsement of the audiences as a supportive factor for digital-native media and local media to carry out investigations	Lack of resources and time as a limiting factor for the investigative journalism Censorship, political pressure, and legal threats as common obstacles to investigative journalism Low interest in the investigative journalism by PSM
Poland	Journalistic integrity as a fundamental element of work The importance of source verification and critical evaluation of sources Indicating a primary source Need to be a platform for the discussion between different groups, while avoiding support of any side of the political stage Investigative practice as a tool for real influence on those in power and great impact on reality Independence of the medium and its management as a foundation Organizing debates, in particular before elections Importance of asking politicians difficult questions	Relativism in assessing the need to thoroughly check information in the case of less important news The weakening position of investigative journalism due to lack of funds, time and staff shortages. A particularly difficult station in the local media Media competition for professional journalists Competition between the media as a threat

Portugal	The need for ethics, independence and credibility of journalism Importance of guidelines and standards imposed by the outside regulatory institution A crucial role of internal fact-checking Transparency of sources: reaching a primary source of information and cross-checking	Speed of reporting and competition with social platforms as a factor negatively affecting the quality of content Staff and financial shortages as a limitation for reporting and investigative journalism, financial sustainability crisis Presence of lawsuits and court cases initiated by persons under investigations
Slovenia	Verification processes, commitment to accuracy and reliability remain central Referring to the Slovenian Journalists' Code of Ethics in your work as standard Importance of promptly correcting mistakes and critically assessing sources Investigative journalism seen as a valued practice, essential to credibility and controlling power The importance of being present directly within communities The selection of participants in public debates based on professionalism, competence, and a diversity of viewpoints Special media formats giving opportunity to the citizens for active involvement	Challenges arise from time constraints and the growing volume of content Redundancies, financial cuts and pressures Restrictive access to public information Political actors influencing investigative journalism in line with their interests (revealing certain information) The pressures on newsrooms not to investigate misconduct of the funders Especially smaller or regional newsrooms struggle to allocate personnel beyond core reporting duties

3. REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION

3.1. Representing Diversity

In the views of respondents, institutional arrangements clearly help in a fair representation of social diversity. For example, as observed by many interviewees, representing diversity is a legal and societal obligation in the case of PSM (Austria, Czech Republic). At the same time, community media appeal to people who might otherwise be less able to make themselves heard, in particular unrepresented social groups and minorities (Austria, France). Moreover, community media facilitate public participation through news production (Ireland), targeted public events (Italy) or engagement in civil rights movements (Italy). Estonian interviewees pointed to an importance of diverse workforce and work in diverse teams, which manifests e.g. through Russian-language departments in Estonian newsrooms and regional correspondents with access to local communities. German interviewees referred to internal obligations for diversity of employees in the private media. Diversity is also supported by media openness for civil society organizations, staff sensitive to cultural and social diversity (Slovenia) and targeted journalistic workshops for immigrant communities (Portugal).

Interviewees mentioned a number of obstacles hampering diversity. First and foremost was lack of staff diversity inside media organisations. In this regard, respondents addressed: Franco-centered newsrooms and absence of journalists representing cultural diversity in France; lack of gender equality in the Czech news media; a dominance of male professionals in newsrooms, as well as an absence of the working class, immigrants, people of colour in Irish media; a dominance of male journalists and limited representation of minorities in the Italian press and insufficient ethnic, gender, age, etc. diversity and representation inside the Portuguese media organisations. Interviewees also referred to lack of specific standards for representing diversity in some media (Germany), or lack of clear strategies to achieve diversity standards (Estonia). Insufficient resources were mentioned in the case of Germany, Austria and in Slovenia, where financial constraints result in a repeated reliance on certain groups or individuals, hindering diversity efforts. Finally, prioritizing content that is likely to attract larger audiences constitutes a structural condition that is further amplified by financial circumstances.

3.2. Political Participation

Most interviewees tended to associate political participation with elections, vote turnout and electoral campaigns. For example, in the case of Austria, interviewees mentioned concentration on elections and referendums and saw these as part of democratic processes. Estonian interviewees pointed to special electoral formats such as organizing public debates in the local communities and travels of national broadcasters across the country aiming at facilitating regional political discussions. High coverage of elections, including debates, with a strong emphasis on involving women, marked practices of Italian media. German respondents underlined meetings between the candidates and the citizens before elections at both local (PSM) and national (private media) level. Polish interviewees shared information about active coverage of the electoral processes, in which holding politicians accountable for their actions played a principal role.

Other most frequent examples of political participation included innovative approaches exercised on digital platforms, such as creating YouTube channels with interactive question formats (Estonia). In general, political participation seemed to benefit from legal and ethical obligations imposed on audiovisual media in order to balance time given to particular parties during election periods (France, Slovenia) as well as from news media encouraging the public to participate in the debate on social media (Ireland). In terms of obstacles or limitations, interviewees mentioned relying on the same public figures or spokespersons due to lack of time or choice (Estonia), diminishing interest of commercial media for politics (Estonia) or low willingness of actors to take part in the debate (France).

Table 2: A country-based comparison of strengths and weaknesses in the area of political participation.

COUNTRY	POLITICAL PARTICIPATION	
	Strengths	Weaknesses

Austria	Representing diversity as a legal and societal obligation in the case of PBS Community media especially try to appeal to people who might otherwise be less able to make themselves heard The emphasis on democratic processes (elections, referendums), through the concentration on these issues in the coverage, emphasizing the importance of participation	High costs or conflict between journalistic criteria (inviting people good in the debate but not representing diversity) as main obstacles in diversity implementation While participation in the media is not restricted by law, it requires specific organizational structures that can hardly be financed commercially (and depend on state support)
Czech Republic	Introducing political diversity, even if the social desirability effect could be high The awareness of the media's role in facilitating public participation Representing diversity as a legal and societal obligation in the case of PBS	Refusing to make statements by right-wing extremist politicians/parties in particular, so political diversity could not really be achieved Gender diversity is considered to be far removed from being achieved by all media
Estonia	Working in diverse teams, which also continues to have Russian-language departments and regional correspondents with access to local people, is crucial The belief that sharing information supports people's participation in political processes by helping them understand the actions of their representatives Developing special formats in connection with elections, organizing public debates in the local communities, national broadcasters travel across the country to facilitate regional political discussions Innovative approaches such as creating YouTube channels with interactive question formats	Lack of clear strategies to achieve diversity standards Whoever is currently in power inevitably receives more attention from the media Due to a lack of time or choice, journalists often rely on the same public figures as spokespeople The commercial media has stepped back from some aspects of political coverage. The public broadcaster is the only one that has maintained comprehensive election coverage Limited resources for comprehensive coverage and a shortage of female opinion leaders
France	Presence of debates between editors, journalists, and other specialists (public and private radio) Private broadcasting media organizing meetings between the candidates and the citizens before elections Community media as representatives of unrepresented social groups/minorities Legal and ethical obligation for audiovisual media to balance time given to particular parties during election periods and to report the percentage of women invited to the air	Fragmentation of the audience Low willingness of social actors to take part in the debate Less will from female experts to contribute to reporting, over-representation of male experts Franco-centered newsrooms and dearth of journalists representing cultural diversity

	Media's high will to report on elections and on NGOs	
Germany	Organizing meetings between the candidates and the citizens before elections at both local (PSM) and national (private media) level Internal obligations for diversity of employees in the private media	Polarized audience, leading to aggressive postings on particularly controversial topics in the media's channels Low frequency of programs with the audience engagement Lack of specific standards for representing diversity in some media Lack of time and resources
Ireland	Some media encouraging the public to participate in the debate on social media Community media facilitating public participation in news production	Informing on election or political issues rather than eliciting actual debate and discussion Lack of resources and time to facilitate the public participation to any great extent
Italy	Using social media platforms to interact with their audiences, receive feedback, and encourage debates Private TV and community media organising debates between experts and the public Community and non-profit media emphasizing niche cultural and political issues, enhancing audience engagement through targeted public events A declared commitment to cultural and political diversity (i.e., inviting politicians and journalists from across the spectrum) Community media participation in civil rights movements High coverage of elections, including debates, with a strong emphasis on involving women ("No Woman, No Panel" rule)	A strong influence of audience ratings on the choice of topics and guests A strong social polarization and high level of misinformation A dominance of male journalists Lack of time and resources Private broadcasting media lacking policies on gender or cultural diversity Press journalists being limited by the medium's political stance Limited representation of minorities in a press a decreasing will of politicians to speak with the media, as well as the media themselves becoming involved in political conflicts
Poland	Specific legal obligations to reflect the diversity of the political stage and society in PSM (monthly emission quotas) The importance of organizing the debates, giving the voice to female experts or allowing all sides of the political spectrum to express	A decreasing will of politicians to speak with the media / media becoming involved in political conflicts High costs of debates and campaigns

	The journalistic mission and inner conviction as an important part of work. Integration function of local media work. Active coverage of the electoral processes (non-partisan media, able to hold politicians accountable for their actions). Tactic of inviting female experts in a similar number as with male.	
Portugal	Perceiving the audience as a source of information Using other media (foremost TV) to promote own materials Attempts to provide immigrants with the journalistic education and the possibility to publish Pro-turnout content, electoral debates and political reporting before elections Facilitating interactions with the audience via social media or formats inviting the audience to participate on air	Lack of financing, shortage of professional staff and unsatisfactory working conditions Insufficient collaboration with civil society organisations Lack of ethical, gender, age, etc. diversity and representation inside the media organisations Small diversity in terms of invited experts (availability bias)
Slovenia	Public service media adheres to a strict obligation of balanced reporting, specified in the legislation and self-regulatory documents A policy of presenting opposing views from the government and the opposition Foreign ownership is seen as a supportive condition for ensuring fair representation of political diversity Having journalists in the newsroom who are sensitive to cultural and social diversity Mission to encourage people to vote (especially young people, e.g. using podcasts) Importance of engaging with the local environment in facilitating political participation Media openness for civil society organizations	Decisions to include non-parliamentary parties in pre-election shows, based on their decision on the parties' ratings in opinion polls Emission quotas used as a political tool by those in power Instructions from media owners to limit coverage of specific political figures or parties The right-wing party prioritizes appearances in media outlets with larger audience share, particularly during election cycles Prioritizing content likely to attract a larger audience rather than responding to the needs of a minority Lack of available sources often leads to repeated reliance on certain groups or individuals, hindering diversity efforts Hesitation among women to accept invitation to talk to the media

4. MEDIA FREEDOM, PLURALISM AND DEMOCRACY

4.1. Conditions for Media Freedom and Professional Journalism

Many interviewees mentioned an overpowering role of the Big Tech and asymmetric dependency on their infrastructures and algorithms as an issue of media freedom (Austria, Poland, France, Germany). Also, some interviewees referred to an absence of a dialogue between news media and platform operators (Poland), an ability of social media algorithms to limit or even remove the media's visibility (France) or block the media's access to the audience (Germany). Disinformation, and its unprecedented scale, is seen as another principal threat to professional journalism (France, Poland) or a weapon of destabilization of social systems and democracy (Austria). At the same time, paradoxically, disinformation was coined as a major justification for journalism's very existence (Austria, Slovenia). While AI is perceived as a fuelling factor in spreading misinformation (Germany, Italy), it also creates a new opportunity for professional journalism that can take leadership in navigating media users towards important and critical issues (Slovenia), offer a sort of "ordering a disorder" (Poland) or promote active citizenship (Slovenia).

Another frequently pronounced problem revolved around economic problems and shortage of resources (Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia) which some interviewees clearly linked with the impact of Big Tech on the advertising market (Estonia, Poland and Ireland). Lack of appropriate funding and poor working conditions in view of some interviewees force young talented or experienced journalists to leave profession, as they are unable to support themselves and their families (Ireland, Poland). Financial pressures seemed to be particularly strong in the sector of regional media (Czech Republic).

While political pressure has not been exposed as a dominant threat to media freedom and pluralism in all of the countries, in some of them or with reference to some media sectors it resonated strongly. For example, political interference seemed to affect the press sector in Italy, PSM in Austria or through media ownership in Slovenia. In the case of Poland, interviewees mentioned a significant role of the state as a concern, particularly in the area of state media ownership and unfair distribution of state advertising. Interviewees in the Czech Republic and Germany pointed to a detrimental impact of populism on professional journalism.

Table 3: A country-based comparison of strengths and weaknesses in the area of media freedom, pluralism and democracy.

COUNTRY	MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY	
	Strengths	Weaknesses
Austria	Crucial aspects of media activity in this context are: the informational function (the defence against disinformation and fake news) and the watchdog function (the core task of controlling politics as the fourth pillar of the separation of powers) – whereby the latter plays a subordinate role in practice due to a lack of resources	Main concerns regarding sufficient resources, the dangers posed by digitalization and global platforms, and political influences Unequal competition between traditional and social media, the latter are in no way subject to the same regulations as traditional media

	The task of professional journalism is to report on facts and organize them Digital native media in a mediating role, responsible for understanding what the issues are that people are concerned about, to address them and open up a space for discussion	Disinformation and fake news are considered "weapons to destabilize social systems and democracy"
Czech Republic	Regulatory role of the state, which protects journalists, but with emphasis on its legitimacy, especially in contrast to the situation in Slovakia The role of technology seen as very beneficial, as it supports innovation and enables better reporting	Three trends as crisis phenomena: the business model crisis, the concentration crisis of media (with media being in the hands of a small group of investors), and the populism crisis with, in particular, the attacks on public service media Social media negative for democracy, as it tends to unite people around shared beliefs The underfunding of regional media The competition for prestige, people and resources between national media based in Prague and regional media
Estonia	High level of media freedom Dealing with social trends that are detrimental to democracy (polarization, growing distrust, spread of disinformation) as a routine activity of journalists Providing verified and adequate information as support for democracy The emphasis on empowering citizens to participate actively in the democratic process, rather than acting as authority figures who instruct the public on how to think or behave Balance and objectivity in informing help prevent misinformation and partisanship from dominating public discourse	Limited resources The damaging economic impact of large digital platforms (taking advertising revenues out of the Estonian market) and the impact of social media algorithms on the availability of professional journalistic content Economic threats (e.g. falling number of subscribers to printed newspapers, the loss of advertising money being taken by global digital platforms) Restrictions on access to official documents The indirect influence of the owners of media companies
France	Paying more attention to debunking fake news spread on social media and by traditional media Promoting media literacy Media as a key to explaining and facilitating access to reality	Emerge of the far-right and extreme movements Social media algorithms being able to limit or even remove the media's visibility Information fatigue and public disinterest Disinformation
Germany	The role of journalism as a contributor to safeguarding democracy through access to information perceived as being more important than ever	Right-wing populism as a danger for media freedom

	Contributing to the formation of opinion through various viewpoints and counteracting anti-democratic narratives	Unrealistic expectations towards journalism among social media users and oversupply of information Social media algorithms limiting the media's access to the audience A limited role of journalism due to organizations and politicians communicating with citizens directly via social media Lack of proper funding of the media AI as a fuelling factor in spreading misinformation
Ireland	Enjoying freedom of work and referring to the risks as distant and relatively unrelated to Ireland A sufficient level of support and defence by the public opinion and media outlets Being independent of political parties as the most important feature of journalism in democracy	Journalists receiving threats from investigated actors Lack of funding for conducting, i.e., investigations by the media Loss of experienced journalists due to the poor pay Lack of proper media literacy in the general population and poor access to
Italy	Maintaining independent reporting by resisting pressures from advertisers and political influences by the media Promoting transparency, ethical guidelines, fact-checking and media literacy	A struggle for financial sustainability (foremost non-PSM media) Conflicts of interest due to media concentration among a few powerful groups Political interference, especially in the press sector Online misinformation and the use of artificial intelligence in creating it as sources of polarization Journalists reporting low salaries and stressful working conditions
Poland	Media as navigator towards important issues Journalistic mission - not only to inform, but also to show the context, background Responsiveness to media users and a kind of reciprocal relationship that helps them to make journalism preferred by audiences The key task of journalists - both to reflect and shape the perception of democracy and its usefulness for the society The mobilizing and integrating role of media Defending strong and independent media is defending democracies	An unprecedented scale of disinformation as the greatest risk Role of the Big Tech and asymmetric dependency on their infrastructures and algorithms as an issue of media freedom Lack of sufficient preparation to deal with AI-produced information Lack of appropriate funding and poor working conditions discourage entry into the profession Unresolved legal or procedural issues that facilitate political or economic pressure

		A significant role of the state in the media market
Portugal	Lack of restrictions or censorship for journalists The role of journalism as enlightening society through information and holding power accountable The essential role of the Slovenian Press Agency (STA), as a significant portion of content is based on its coverage.	Polarization caused by extreme movements and an excessive number of commentators (especially on TV) A limited role of journalism due to politicians communicating with citizens directly via social media Lack of proper funding of the media by the state Lack of proper media literacy
Slovenia	The essential role of the Slovenian Press Agency (STA), as a significant portion of content is based on its coverage The key role of journalism as the Fourth Estate, and its watchdog function for upholding democratic principles Provide context to the vast influx of information Organizing and interpreting information in a manner that enables citizens to understand and navigate critical issues Combating the spread of disinformation by debunking fake news and scrutinizing biased articles Media's role in promoting active citizenship	Reduction or lack of financial resources and cuts of staff Local correspondent networks across all media outlets are either disappearing or being reduced Younger generations reluctance to pursue careers in journalism Media ownership - instrumentalise media for political and economic interests Media concentration - the extensive state ownership of media Hyperproduction, combined with the constant competition for clicks Social media enabling to communicate in a highly unidirectional manner and to disseminate messages without accountability

4.2. A Relationship Between Media and Democracy

Almost all interviewees acknowledged that the news media are essential for democracies. Without a well-informed society, democracy is unsustainable (Portugal). A media's role in democracy remains a constant value, despite ongoing transformations, including declining audience reach (Poland). At the same time, a relationship between media and democracy is to be seen as a dynamic one, as democracy cannot be taken for granted (Poland). This dynamics also manifests through promoting active citizenship via news media production (Slovenia). In addition, journalism reinforces epistemic qualities of democracies that build on comprehensiveness and synthesizing knowledge (Italy). Media also contribute to democracies when they are transparent and their performance based on "telling the truth" (Ireland). Respectable journalism responds to human needs for information and may be undermined by anti-democratic forces (Germany). The relationship between media and democracy is also shaped by an international context that is characterized by growing

instability and doubts regarding the foundations and practices of pluralist democracies (France).

5. CONCLUSIONS

To summarise: an assessment of news media production in ten EU countries focused on three dimensions of media's role in democratic participation: three pro-democratic media functions, representation and participation, and conditions for media freedom, pluralism and democracy.

As regards the first theme, the preliminary comparison of data shows that there is a broad agreement among interviewees on standards concerning information provision (multiple sources, critical assessment) and the importance of investigative journalism is widely recognised. At the same time, in some countries overall journalistic standards and associations play a crucial role in influencing professional practices (Austria, Germany, Slovenia, Estonia). Respondents in Germany also emphasized a significant role of guidelines imposed by external regulatory institutions. Surprisingly, a frequent obstacle hampering information provision that many interviewees mentioned was a fear of lawsuits (Ireland, France, Italy, Portugal).

Within the second theme, views on representation of diverse social groups, their opinions, concerns, practices across different political, societal, and cultural contexts depended much on national differences - journalists' perception of their public role, available standards, regulatory obligations and empirical conditions – in some countries e.g. certain ethnic or national groups compose significant part of the population in others an ethnic structure seems to be more fragmented or homogenous. With regard to political participation, the interviewees referred mainly to electoral processes, while other mentioned activities or forms of participation revolving around debates, often on social media or digital platforms. There was also a strong recognition of the role of community media and the non-profit sector in general as sites enabling representation and direct participation of communities that are generally underrepresented in a broader society.

Finally, the last theme pointed to some shared key concerns. Interviewees generally agreed 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, dependency on digital platform operators, financial difficulties, erosion of journalism as a highly esteemed profession. At the same time, interestingly, some conditions that are sources of threats (e.g. disinformation) were at the same time seen as opportunities or justification of journalism.

An issue of financial constraints and staff shortages resonated across a number of statements, together with concerns about uncertainty of funding journalism in the future. At the same time, interviewees clearly linked news media performance with epistemic grounding, in a sense of building a more comprehensive and synthesized understanding of current events that potentially empowers citizens. Professional journalism, often put in contrast with disinformation and social media content, was also seen as a counterweight to growing dissonance, political uncertainty and concerns about national and global security.

Table 4: Summary of main conclusions by a country.

COUNTRY	THE MAIN CONCLUSIONS
Austria	There is a high degree of congruence between the answers of journalists and those in leadership or management positions. The gap between claim and reality is particularly wide when it comes to the watchdog function. The need to counter disinformation and fake news is seen as a crucial aspect of the legitimisation of today's professional journalism. The most remarkable differences between the views of the representatives of the various media genres concern the role of state funding and the criteria for its allocation.
Czech Republic	The influence of media ownership by powerful business figures with political ties remains a significant issue, affecting public trust and media independence. In the Czech Republic, the level of trust in the news is among the lowest in the world (Eurobarometer, 2023). Most of journalists do not know or appreciate community media, and they often become confused with local or regional media.
Estonia	The media landscape characterised by high levels of media freedom and light regulation, coupled with concentrated ownership among a few major media groups. Journalistic standards and ethics remain strong across outlets, guided by the Estonian Code of Journalistic Ethics and internal organizational policies. While direct threats to media freedom are minimal in Estonia, economic pressure from global digital platforms and declining print revenues pose significant challenges. Internal threats, such as potential self-censorship and deviation from journalistic principles, are also concerns. Sustaining quality journalism requires addressing economic pressures, continuing to uphold high ethical standards, and finding innovative ways to engage audiences and represent diverse perspective.
France	Lack of sufficient financial resources and independence as a main challenge for performing democratic functions by the media. Social media as an important threat to media freedom and professional journalism (speed, disinformation, fragmentation of the audience, etc.). A growing significance of fact-checking and media literacy.
Germany	The growing influence of extreme right-wing narratives perceived as one of the greatest concerns in the German media landscape. Journalism as arbitrator, mediator and orientator in the polarized and information-overloaded society. Insufficient funding of the media.
Ireland	Financial problems and lack of resources as the main risk for the media integrity.

	The importance of using multiple sources and fact-checking as a protection against lawsuits, although at the same time – increasing a speed of publication to stay ahead of the competition.
	Poor media literacy and limited access to "good media". The growing influence of social media in spreading fake news, especially in the case of working-class and of immigrant audiences.
	Lack of plurality in the ownership and a little diversity in the Irish media.
	Pressure to keep up to date on online sites leading to lack of time and resources to do more investigative journalism.
	Journalism becoming the preserve of the middle class.
Italy	Combating fake news and holding authorities accountable as one of the main tasks of the media.
	Low salaries and job insecurity as well as the influence of concentrated ownership (including conflicts of interest and censorship) leading to a decline in professional standards and less interest in investigative journalism.
Poland	Democracy can hardly survive without independent media and quality journalism. At the same time, the fragility and impermanence of democracy is a major concern.
	Particularly disinformation, information disorder and the inability of media users to direct attention to important issues are counted as red flags.
	Growing legal (SLAPPs and defamation cases under the controversial Article 212 of the Criminal Code) and financial pressures (dependence on Big Tech) are a threat to journalists.
	As regards differences between the media sectors and media types, the financial factor seems more important than the mandate.
	Local and non-profit media represent a more direct relationship with users.
Portugal	Media enjoying lack of censorship, although suffering from financial and organizational crisis while having to compete with other outlets in terms of publishing speed.
	A strong imperative of both internal standards (fact-checking, verification of sources, electoral reporting) and external standards (collaboration with other media, engaging the public).
	Insufficient diversity of both minorities and experts.
Slovenia	The interviewed editors and journalists across all six media categories in Slovenia clearly acknowledge the significance of their role in providing accurate information, controlling the power, ensuring diverse cultural and political representation, and fostering public debate and public participation.
	The significance of the role of the media in providing accurate information, controlling the power, ensuring diverse cultural and political representation, and fostering public debate.
	Media ownership concentration was identified as a key structural issue in Slovenia, undermining both the quality of news production and the democratic function of the media.
	Political pressure, particularly on public media, and attacks on media and journalists orchestrated by political actors are highlighted as a major threat to media freedom and professional journalism.
	The major differences in the assessment of the political independence of the PSM remind of the particular threat to media freedom arising from antagonistic divisions in the media community fuelled by political actors and their clientelistic connections with media owners.

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