Democracy and Media Transformations in the 21st Century: Analysing Knowledge and Expertise

Edited by Epp Lauk and Peter Berglez

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Can Media Enhance Deliberative Democracy? Exploring Media Monitoring Capabilities in 14 EU-Countries

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Abstract

The editorial introduces the topic of this thematic issue, which is the important role of society's media monitoring capabilities, i.e., to produce information about what media "do" to society, and more precisely for democratic development both the here and the now and in the longer term. The theoretical and methodological aspects of the thematic issue are presented according to the approach of an EU-funded project Mediadelcom, which aims to explain interconnections between the news media transformations and the risks and opportunities for deliberative communication. One of the stages of the project investigates media monitoring capabilities in different countries. The eight articles introduced in the editorial contribute to deepening the perspectives on the capabilities of media monitoring in the 21st century, and to understanding their function in detecting potential risks and opportunities for democratic public deliberation.

Keywords

deliberative communication; deliberative democracy; news media; media monitoring capabilities; risks and opportunities

1. Introduction

One of the most important ways to reinforce democracy across Europe is "protecting and promoting meaningful participation of citizens, empowering them to make their choices in the public space freely, without manipulation" (Vice-President of European Commission for Values and Transparency, Věra Jourová; European Commission, 2020). The "meaningful participation of citizens" presupposes the existence of

favourable conditions for deliberation in the public space and the raising of deliberative communication to the focal point. The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2) defines deliberative communication as "mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values and interests regarding matters of common concern." A deliberative communication culture and citizens' ability of decision-making require an informed media policy, ensuring the production and availability of relevant and truthful information. In turn, this means that in contemporary "media societies," the challenges and opportunities for deliberative communication need to be examined in relation to different media transformations (technological, economic, legal, and professional, as well as media users' preferences and competencies). Although social media is increasingly important in news exchange, from the viewpoint of deliberative communication news media and "journalists have the capacity to foster and moderate debate, to enhance the transparency of public affairs, and to make sure that relevant issues and voices are heard" (Brüggemann, 2017, p. 57). To develop an informed media policy discussion based on facts and evidence, it is essential to be aware of *what is, and is not, known* about the changes in professional journalism; the implementation of freedom of information and freedom of speech; citizens use of news media; and the development of media competencies in various segments of society.

The volume of existing research on the aforementioned issues is enormous and is rapidly expanding. At the same time, the research is fragmented and dispersed, and largely inaccessible internationally by virtue of being published in national languages. Moreover, there are no studies that would offer a comprehensive review of national and cross-national studies focusing on media changes from the perspective of how these changes influence deliberative communication. Therefore, there is a good reason to ask whether the knowledge and expertise about media transformations is sufficient and helpful for fostering public deliberation and avoiding unexpected backlashes. Are all relevant issues covered? Is the lack of such knowledge becoming a specific risk factor for democracy? The aim of the current thematic issue is to seek some answers to these questions, focusing on the capability of European countries to monitor and analyse the development of the news media during the first decades of the 21st century.

2. Background: The Mediadelcom Project

The articles in this issue are the first outcomes of an EU-funded project called Mediadelcom (Critical Exploration of Media Related Risks and Opportunities for Deliberative Communication: Development Scenarios of the European Media Landscape; Grant no. 101004811, project duration 2021–2024). The first step of this project was to carry out an inventory of the studies and data sources informing about the capability of 14 EU countries to monitor their news media development throughout two decades (2000–2020). The 14 countries represent a range of historical, economic, and cultural mediascapes, and various media research practices. The sample follows three criteria: geography (countries from North, Eastern, Southern, and Western Europe); the size of the media market (according to population size); and the political-historical background (the CEE countries with the legacy of the communist regimes, and Western established democracies). The sample of 14 consists of five Western European (Austria, Germany, Italy, Greece, and Sweden) and nine Central and Eastern European (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) members of the EU. Each country compiled a national database of publications and data about the research related to the impact of media changes on the conditions of deliberative communication. The consolidated database consists of over 5,600 entries and is searchable by 20 variables (available at https://datadoi.ee/handle/33/515). In addition, each of the

14 countries produced reports on national monitoring capabilities (available at http://hdl.handle.net/10062/89296).

3. The Concept of "Monitoring Capability" and Mediadelcom Methodology

Mediadelcom defines "media monitoring capability" as the abilities, possibilities, and motivations of various agents to observe and analyse the developments of the media and the changes in society emanating from the media transformations, as well as related risks and opportunities (ROs) for deliberative communication. Monitoring comprises both—the ROs related to the media changes, and those ROs related to journalism and media research. As the conceptual basis, after conducting a sizable literature review, the project worked out a four-domain model containing the dimensions of news production and usage where the discourses of both ROs are most clearly identifiable.

The four domains and their key elements are: (a) journalism (news production and dissemination), profession, news business, and agency of news media as the "watchdog" of power holders; (b) legal and ethical regulation of the media and the use of data (freedom of information and expression, data protection legislation, accountability); (c) media related competencies of citizens; (d) media usage patterns. Conceptual and operational variables for the four domains were formulated to provide the model with a toolbox.

4. The Contributions

The article by Halliki Harro-Loit and Tobias Eberwein (2024), titled "News Media Monitoring Capabilities in 14 European Countries: Problems and Best Practices," presents the monitoring capability concept in detail with the ambition of developing a framework of extensive cross-national comparisons. The authors formulate six general challenges of monitoring that are the reason for the broader problem of insufficient knowledge and wisdom in European media and journalism research.

The next three contributions—from the Czech Republic, Poland, and Sweden—assess the monitoring capabilities from the perspectives of accessibility and sufficiency of the data for monitoring and of relevant research and knowledge to be able to identify ROs for deliberative communication.

Lenka Waschková Císařová, Iveta Jansová, and Jan Motal (2024) in their article titled "Delayed Reflections: Media and Journalism Data Deserts in the Post-Socialist Czech Republic" examine the availability, continuity, and accessibility of data about media in the Czech Republic, during the period of 1989–2020. They identify the periods of post-socialism, transition, and post-transition, in which availability, continuity, and accessibility of data are central comparative aspects. The process is very much described in terms of delay (of production of relevant data and discussions about them) and several cases of data deserts, which are to a great extent explained by the long-term lack of internal media monitoring actors and the reliance on international research.

In their article, "Researching Media and Democracy Researchers: Monitoring Capabilities in Poland," Michał Głowacki, Jacek Mikucki, Katarzyna Gajlewicz-Korab, Łukasz Szurmiński, and Maria Łoszewska-Ołowska (2024), focus on conditions of media and democracy discourses in the Polish context. In what ways has media research in Poland responded to social changes during the period 2000–2020? Based on the Polish publications database ($N = 1,000$), they examine the areas of technology, politics, and society, and identify

critical junctures, such as the year 2015 with increasingly critical assessments of Poland's democracy decline. As a possible risk, they point out the lack of empirical newsroom studies and the dominance of overall analyses of media system transformations.

Mart Ots, Peter Berglez, and Lars Nord (2024) have authored the contribution "Who Watches the Watchdog? Understanding Media Systems as Information Regimes." Assessing the media monitoring capability in Sweden, they argue that there is no lack of actors producing data and knowledge about the role of media in society and for democratic processes. However, there is a need for mapping, categorising, and analysing all these actors (public authorities, academia, commercial measurement institutes, journalists, media firms, etc.) in terms of their data profiles, motives, and underlying values. They introduce and elaborate a novel concept of "information regimes" to systematically analyse relations between all these actors, as well as their internal power relations.

The next three articles focus on aspects related to the media's ability to advance deliberative communication: people's trust in the media (Italian contribution), various models of media accountability (German contribution), and the impact of media's legal regulation on the development of deliberative communication (Slovakian contribution).

Sergio Splendore, Diego Garusi, and Augusto Valeriani (2024) have written the article "A Deliberative Democracy Framework for Analysing Trust in Journalists: An Application to Italy." The media can only support deliberative democracy if journalists are trusted by the citizens. This highly important topic is examined statistically in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy. A central result is that people's use of social media platforms, and reliance on politicians' own media channels tend to reduce trust in journalists, while the use of traditional media increases trust in journalists.

Markus Kreutler and Susanne Fengler's (2024) article, "Media Accountability: Global Trends and European Monitoring Capabilities," maps the existing research about media accountability using data from the 14 Mediadelcom countries and also the conditions of monitoring this field. They depict various models of media accountability monitoring including national variations. They conclude that much material focuses on normative dimensions rather than examining actual conditions and that data is seldom comparable longitudinally or cross-nationally. Several problems are associated with weak professional culture among media workers, which negatively affects scholars' ability to examine levels of media accountability in the media sector.

Ľudmila Čábyová, Peter Krajčovič, Magdaléna Švecová, Jana Radošinská, Andrej Brník, and Juliána Mináriková (2024) contribute with the article "Legal and Ethical Regulation in Slovakia and Its Relation to Deliberative Communication." This national case study examines to which extent and in what ways Slovak media regulation secures the ability of the media to do their job in the name of deliberative communication and democracy. The results suggest that the legal and ethical mechanisms of the Slovak media system only feebly support freedom of expression and free access to information. Media autonomy based on the possibility of self-regulation is undeveloped. The lack of transparency is also a problem, as well as media concentration.

The last article "Media and Journalism Research in Small European Countries" by Ragne Kõuts-Klemm, Tobias Eberwein, Zrinjka Peruško, Dina Vozab, Anda Rožukalne, Ilva Skulte, and Alnis Stakle (2024) compares four

small nation states with various media systems (Austria, Croatia, Estonia, and Latvia), and demonstrates that smallness matters in several ways and is not by necessity a negative factor. For instance, in terms of scarcity of resources, smallness might encourage scholars to collaborate internationally. An apparent problem is securing a sustainable infrastructure for knowledge production and exchange. This exploratory study demonstrates several interesting national differences. In Croatia, Latvia, and Estonia, journalism and media studies as "soft sciences" lack recognition and have a weaker position in competition for research grants than "hard sciences," while this is not so prevalent in Austria.

5. Conclusion

The articles in this issue of *Media and Communication* have one common trait—They all aim at advancing the knowledge about positive or negative consequences of news media transformations on societies' ability to develop deliberative communication culture in support of democracy. Monitoring the state of the media research from various perspectives and comparing the participating countries helps to find the knowledge gaps and the problems in research governance. The secondary analysis of the content of the existing studies reveals potential dangers to the democratic public deliberation rooted in media developments. The articles also demonstrate the potential of Mediadelcom's novel approach for assessing the countries' capability of monitoring news media from various perspectives.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

News Media Monitoring Capabilities in 14 European Countries: Problems and Best Practices

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Abstract

Social acceleration has been a catalyst for rapid changes concerning the mediascapes of European societies. Democratic societies need deliberation, but what kinds of journalism and communication cultures are supported by different stakeholders and structural possibilities? The aim of this article is to conceptualise and analyse the risks and opportunities concerning the monitoring capabilities in key domains of the media field. This includes the performance and normative regulation of news media (journalism) as well as media usage patterns and competencies of different actors, all of which influence the quality of deliberative communication across cultures. The monitoring potential is related to various stakeholders who gather data and information on media and media usage, transform the information into knowledge, and use this knowledge to create evidence-based media policy. What interests and values are served by which stakeholders and how does this actual monitoring serve the media policy in different European countries? What is the role and resources of media researchers? These questions are answered with the help of an extensive literature review and a synoptic analysis of the monitoring capabilities of 14 European countries, based on original case studies. The article will, thus, broaden the conceptual understanding of risks and opportunities for deliberative communication in democratic societies—and at the same time offer an initial inventory of typical problems and best practices for monitoring deliberative communication across Europe.

Keywords

deliberative communication; Europe; media monitoring; monitoring capabilities; risks and opportunities; structure and agency

1. Introduction

Social and technological acceleration has been a catalyst for rapid changes concerning the mediascapes of European societies. Media and journalism research has been trying to capture and analyse the impact of these changes for social communication. However, in data-saturated societies, it is worthwhile to ask: What is the actual knowledge about the diachronic changes concerning the news media? Is media governance based on acquired wisdom relying on data and analysis? What could be a reasonable and effective monitoring system that allows to reveal important changes, but at the same time is flexible enough to respond to changes?

With this study, we hope to provide answers to these questions by pursuing two aims: First and foremost, we intend to develop a concept of *monitoring capabilities* concerning media-related risks and opportunities (ROs) for deliberative communication. Second, based on desk research conducted within the framework of the Horizon 2020 project Media-Related Risks and Opportunities for Deliberative Communication: Development Scenarios of the European Media Landscapes (Mediadelcom), we also provide initial insights into the monitoring capabilities in 14 selected European countries. The analysis of typical problems and best practices of media monitoring draws on a collection of systematic country studies that has been compiled during the project, in order to evaluate academic publications and other data sources relevant to ROs for deliberative communication (Mediadelcom, 2022b).

However, before the results of the analysis can be presented in more detail, some theoretical reflections are required to provide a conceptual background. For the aim of monitoring deliberative communication, it is important to consider ROs *for* the news media as well as the ROs arising *from* the media. Besides, to allow for a holistic view on ROs, it is necessary to differentiate between structures and agents supporting deliberative communication. In the context of the present study, we will offer an analysis of the monitoring capabilities related to the ROs for deliberative communication. Accordingly, the following sections are supposed to offer a theoretical starting point for an assessment of relevant research infrastructures across Europe, but not an evaluation of the state of deliberative communication itself which is reserved for another phase of the Mediadelcom project.

2. Monitoring Media-Related Risks and Opportunities

Monitoring media transformations around the globe has been a popular objective of media and journalism researchers for a long time, and there is a considerable number of media-related monitoring projects offering international comparisons, which are repeated at specific time intervals. These studies make it possible to analyse different aspects of media change both diachronically and comparatively between countries—many of them based on annual reports. Their points of focus, however, vary considerably.

For example, the World Press Freedom Index, compiled by the NGO Reporters Without Borders, publishes an annual ranking of, currently, 180 countries worldwide to compare levels of press freedom enjoyed by journalists and the media (for the most recent edition, see Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Similarly, Freedom House offers an annual survey and analysis of internet freedom around the world (Freedom House, 2022). The International Research and Exchanges Board's Media Sustainability Index provides an in-depth examination of the conditions for independent media in 80 countries across the world, making it possible to study "how media systems change over time and across borders" (International Research & Exchanges

Board, n.d.). The Media Pluralism Monitor presents a tool to assess different weaknesses of media systems that may hinder media pluralism in, currently, 32 European countries, based on indicators covering areas such as fundamental protection, market plurality, political independence, and social inclusiveness (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2023). The Worlds of Journalism study conducts recurring waves of surveys among journalists in more than 120 countries to examine perceptions of the profession around the globe and to distinguish a range of journalism cultures (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2019). The Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists provides annual reports on serious threats to the safety of journalists and media freedom in Europe to reinforce the Council of Europe's response to the threats and member states' accountability (Safety of Journalists Platform, 2023). The Media for Democracy Monitor, although only repeated irregularly so far, scrutinises the democratic performance of leading news media in Europe (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021). Developed by the same network of researchers, the Euromedia Ownership Monitor is a pilot project to examine media ownership transparency in 15 European countries (Euromedia Research Group, 2022). The prototypical Media Accountability Index allows for an assessment of the international diffusion of varying practices of media self-regulation (Eberwein et al., 2018). The Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report* reveals insights about the usage of news in a digital media environment (Newman et al., 2023). The Media Literacy Index assesses the resilience potential among media users to withstand the impact of fake news (Open Society Institute Sofia, 2023).

In addition to these media-focused monitoring projects, various international studies related to neighbouring academic disciplines also grant relevant insights concerning media change. These include, to name just a few examples, the Varieties of Democracy study that describes characteristics of political regimes around the world—inter alia by measuring indicators like media censorship, media corruption, harassment of journalists, or internet penetration (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2023). Similarly, the Eurobarometer surveys commissioned by the European Parliament regularly look at the media habits of EU citizens, their trust in different media sources, as well as attitudes towards the threat of disinformation (European Parliament, 2022). The European Social Surveys also include indicators relating to media use, internet use, and social trust—among many other things (European Social Survey, n.d.). Taken together, all of those and the aforementioned international monitoring projects compile important data for tracking media change processes in Europe and around the world, even though their methods of data collection differ considerably.

Moreover, national data sources can help to broaden the perspective. Indeed, several European countries have various monitoring projects that either focus on news media directly or include media-related factors alongside other issues. These types of sources include, for example, national media statistics, annual reports by media organisations and other institutions related to media and journalism, but also regular research projects carried out by academic actors at national universities, research units in the media industry, or independent monitoring units. However, only small portions of these sources are directly accessible to international researchers because they are mostly available in only the respective national languages. Besides, the data quality also varies significantly from country to country.

The empirical part of the study presented in this article enables us to provide an evaluation of the news media monitoring capabilities in 14 European countries. However, a critical analysis of existing monitoring projects demonstrates that only a few of them are directly focused on the discourse related to ROs of deliberative communication. Consequently, to serve as a functional basis for our study (and for the Mediadelcom project in general), the monitoring approach as such needs to be revisited: Which aspects are

essentially monitored and how far are they relevant for the observation of deliberative communication? Which methodological approaches can be considered well-established and efficient? How can the quality of the collected data be assessed?

As shown by the examples of international monitoring projects mentioned above, there are certain traditional topics that have been considered important to trace, which include freedom of expression and freedom of the media, media pluralism and media independence, as well as general trust in the media, etc. In recent years, various other issues have moved into the focus of comparative media and journalism research. These issues include transparency of media ownership, the role perception and accountability of journalists, the safety of journalists, conditions of media usage in the online world, more specifically the spread of disinformation, and different aspects of media literacy, particularly digital competences of children and young people. Most of these issues are noteworthy for a debate about risks concerning deliberative communication in democratic societies, but the various monitoring projects are usually not connected, and in some cases—as already mentioned—the methodology invites critical scrutiny. Existing monitoring projects concerning freedom of the press and that of expression can illustrate this claim. Most studies on freedom of expression focus either on existing legislation (e.g., Media Pluralism Monitor) or use (expert) interviews in which different individuals subjectively assess, for instance, the degree of media freedoms in their own countries (e.g., World Press Freedom Index). Such methodological approaches have limitations. Assessments based on legal documents are unable to take into consideration everyday communication practices, because in EU countries, freedom of expression is generally guaranteed by law, and it is the daily implementation of these laws that matters. In the case of expert interviews, however, limitations arise from readers of the study being unaware the interviewees' personal experiences can influence the reliability of the results. In contrast, a systematic collection and analysis of national cases (ideally including document analysis and additional interviews) would reveal the motives and power balance regarding different agents.

To bypass any limitations of previous monitoring projects, our study uses a conceptual basis that is both integrative and dynamic. To address the problem of a missing connection between previous monitoring initiatives and include upcoming issues in comparative media and journalism research, we apply a four-domain model, as proposed by Mediadelcom, including those dimensions of news production and usage in democratic societies where the discourse about ROs for deliberative communication is most visible. The four domains are: (a) legal and ethical regulation of the media; (b) journalism; (c) media-usage patterns; and (d) media-related competencies (Mediadelcom, 2022a; see also Lauk & Berglez, 2024). One important idea behind the four-dimensions approach is that each of these domains includes elements of structure and agency (see Section 3). To address the specific methodological challenges discussed above, we proceed from the notion that national media systems—particularly in Central and Eastern Europe (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019)—have responded to the transformations of the 21st century in a variety of ways and therefore cannot be properly assessed by a universal matrix of variables alone. Hence, our study additionally draws on a collection of national worst and best-practice cases that may exemplify the challenges of monitoring deliberative communication in the countries studied—thus offering a possibility to understand relevant practices beyond legal documents and expert opinions.

3. The Interconnection Between Structure, Agency, and the Implementation of Relevant Values in Daily Practices

Democratic societies need deliberation. However, deliberation—as a form of "mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values and interests regarding matters of common concern" (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2)—requires several structural prerequisites (institutional, political, normative, etc.) that support specific values. If such structures do not exist in certain media systems or are transformed as a result of political, economic, or technological disruptions, societies are likely to face risks that may threaten the ideal of deliberative communication. At the same time, change processes may also open windows of opportunities for deliberative communication. The identification of such ROs is the ultimate aim of the monitoring approach conceptualised in the sections that follow.

Traditionally, the structures of media and journalism have been the focus of comparative media systems research. For example, Hallin and Mancini (2004) provide a systematic approach to analyse the relationship between media and politics in different Western democracies. Their typology of three ideal models of media systems (liberal, democratic-corporatist, polarised-pluralist) gained a lot of popularity and has later been advanced and modified (e.g., Brüggemann et al., 2014; Castro Herrero et al., 2017; Dobek-Ostrowska et al., 2010; Hallin & Mancini, 2012). Yet, some authors also point out that a comparison of media systems could better explain the differences between countries if it would take into consideration the notion of journalism culture (see, among others, Hanitzsch, 2007; Lauk & Harro-Loit, 2017), which includes professional values and ideologies, journalistic role perceptions, and professional and media education.

However, social structures and culture depend on individuals who fill them with life. In other words, we argue that media-related ROs concerning deliberative communication in democratic societies to a large extent revolve around groups of individuals who act and interact according to their own motivations and agendas. Margaret Archer provides a useful concept that relates agents and structure. In developing a *Realist Social Theory* (Archer, 1995), she models "structure," "culture," and "agency" as distinct strata of social reality—each element possessing distinctive emergent properties which are real and causally efficacious but irreducible to one another. While agency is used as a generic term describing the "people" that constitute parts of society, structure includes certain roles and positions in institutional and systemic settings, and culture comprises the values, beliefs and ideologies behind them. Within this view on social reality, Archer also differentiates varying forms of agency (see Archer, 2017). For example, she defines Corporate Agents as organised interest groups that are actively involved in forming and reforming structures (Archer, 2017, p. 25). They are conscious of certain strategic aims and coordinate their activities to make them real (e.g., journalists' unions, media organisations, etc.). Primary Agents, on the other hand, lack these qualities. They "neither express interests nor organize for their strategic pursuit" (Archer, 2017, p. 25). This does not mean, however, that collectives of Primary Agents have no influence on social structures at all. Primary Agents also react on their structural context, and every passive Primary Agent can become an active Corporate Agent, based on its relationships with other collectives.

Such conceptualisations offer a fertile ground to understand processes of news media monitoring. To assess the ROs for deliberative communication, it is necessary to analyse if and to what extent the assumptions created by the structure as well as by the action of certain agents support norms and values necessary for deliberative communication (see also Nord & Harro-Loit, 2022). These include:

- Universal values—or "protonorms"—such as respect for human dignity and truth/truthfulness, which form a necessary precondition for trust between individuals, organisations, and institutions (Christians, 2019);
- Basic human rights such as freedom of expression and free access to information, which, however, need to be balanced against human dignity, privacy, and the like (Cohen-Almagor, 2001);
- The protection of journalistic autonomy as a prerequisite for professional impartiality (Waisboard, 2013);
- Demands for pluralism and diversity at the level of media contents, media outlets, media ownership, or any other level of media practice (Karppinen, 2007);
- Differing forms of media accountability, which can be directed towards the profession, the market, political actors, or the public (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Fengler et al., 2022);
- The more recently established ethical principle of transparency in journalism, which has increasingly been spurred during the digital transformations (e.g., Koliska, 2022).

The Mediadelcom project seeks to provide a model for the assessment of media-related ROs that allows us to ask whether and to what extent the existing structures in a particular country and the agents operating in that structure—(news) content creators and consumers, politicians, regulators, educators, etc.—implement the above-mentioned values in their daily practice. What are their motives? Which options for action do they have? How far do their actions influence the trajectory of media development in their respective structural contexts?

To answer these and adjacent questions, we propose to use Archer's theoretical differentiation between structure, culture, and agency (SCA) as a starting point and draw on the Agent-Oriented Modelling approach (e.g., Railsback & Grimm, 2011; Sterling & Taveter, 2009) to develop an analytical model. Agent-based models offer possibilities for understanding how complex social (and other) systems arise from the characteristics and behaviours of making up these systems. Typically, such models consist of three elements (Macal & North, 2010): (a) a set of *agents*, their attributes and behaviours; (b) a set of agent *relationships* and methods of interaction; and (c) the *environment* in which the agents are situated.

To synchronise the theoretical assumptions discussed above, we suggest a model that distinguishes each kind of agent involved in news media monitoring, enables us to focus on their interactions, and considers the role of the structure and culture around them as drivers of ROs for deliberative communication:

1. Agents: The analysis will identify both Corporate Agents and Primary Agents (including their knowledge of and motivation to implement norms and values of deliberative communication), as well as the lack thereof;
2. Relationships: The analysis will examine the relationships and the interactions between these agents, if they exist;
3. Environment: The analysis will consider the structural context (e.g., media system, political system, economic system, but also relevant institutions) as well as the cultural context (e.g., journalism culture, legal environment, and other normative influences).

The key elements of our understanding of news media monitoring in the context of SCA model are summarised in Figure 1.
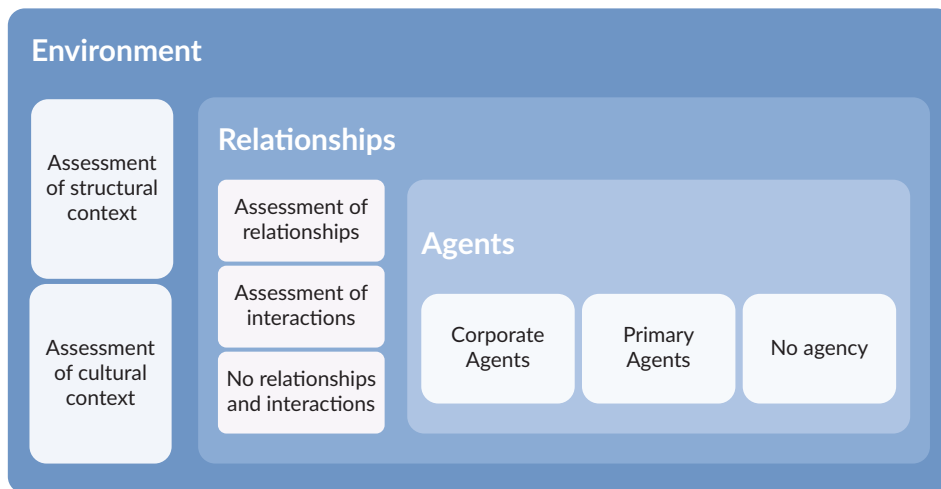
Figure 1. SCA model for news media monitoring.

4. Assessing Media Monitoring Capabilities

In line with the requirements of the Mediadelcom project, we understand the idea of a media monitoring capability as the abilities, possibilities, and motivations of various agents to observe and analyse the developments of the media and the changes in society emanating from the media transformations as well as related ROs for deliberative communication. This involves a regular examination of all kinds of sources, such as: (a) academic research in media and journalism studies and adjacent disciplines; (b) data producers and knowledge users in the private sector and NGOs; (c) public authorities responsible for data collection and knowledge production. Ideally, used data and obtained knowledge can be applied in the processes of political decision-making.

To assess media monitoring capabilities, it is necessary to determine the quality and usefulness of different sources for monitoring purposes. For this aim, it is helpful to distinguish between data, information, knowledge, and wisdom, as proposed by the well-known DIKW model (see, e.g., Ackoff, 1989; Frické, 2018; Rowley, 2007) that has found wide application within information science and knowledge management. This hierarchical model, that has also been presented in the form of a "knowledge pyramid" (Kitchin, 2014), exemplifies that data always precedes information, which precedes knowledge, which precedes understanding and wisdom (see Figure 2). We have modified this conceptualisation to the needs of our analysis:

- Data: Examples of useful data can be found in all instances of automatically recorded statistics on media usage;
- Information: When this data is processed and logically linked (e.g., to show an editorial board which media products were consumed for how long), it becomes information;
- Knowledge: The organisation of such information (e.g., in in-house reports by media organisations or in academic media and journalism research) creates knowledge;
- Wisdom: The level of wisdom indicates the extent to which the acquired knowledge is applied and leads to evidence-based decisions in media policy-making.

Figure 2. The "knowledge pyramid." Source: Adapted from Kitchin (2014, p. 10).

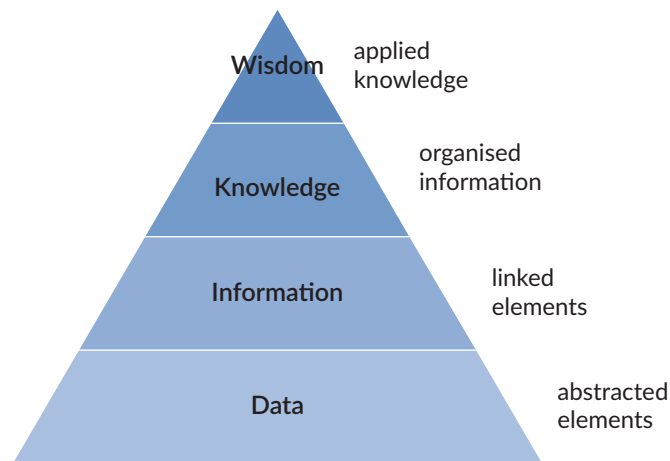In other words, for an assessment of media monitoring capabilities, knowledge and wisdom have critical importance. The capability of media monitoring concerning the ROs of deliberative communication depends on whether and to what extent information can be collected and processed in a given country to generate knowledge about changes in the structure and the activities, competences, and interactions (relationships) of different agents. In many cases, the availability of information depends on the public access to data and the motives of data owners. It is very important that media governance is eventually based on wisdom as a form of applied knowledge. However, the acquisition of wisdom usually takes time—and deliberative communication. Ideally, each type of agent needs to be motivated to be actively involved in this process.

Research has for years addressed the problem that academic knowledge is insufficiently applied in media governance processes and, more general, in the development of democratic societies (e.g., Jensen, 2012). Quite often, a better dissemination of academic research results has been proposed as a recipe to solve this problem (e.g., European IPR Helpdesk, 2015). However, with a view to the empirical analysis of the country case studies compiled within the framework of the Mediadelcom project (see Section 6), we put forward the argument that better dissemination practices are by no means a sufficient cure to solve the underlying problem of the increasing fragmentation of media and communication studies into various sub-fields with ever-growing amounts of data and knowledge (see, e.g., Buhmann et al., 2015; Corner, 2013).

Another critical issue concerning media monitoring seems to be related to the ability to trace media-related changes over time. The diachronic dimension of media monitoring is particularly demanding because it requires repeated studies and analyses to be carried out at specific time intervals. However, repeated studies not only need stability and resources, but they also have to address specific methodological challenges. As the mediascape changes, the research methodologies also need to be adapted (Stanyer & Mihelj, 2016). These and further obstacles of effective news media monitoring processes can be discussed more systematically based on the empirical study summarised in Section 5 and following sections.

5. Methodology

To address the problems and open questions, we conducted a secondary analysis of 14 country reports on national research and monitoring capabilities, which were produced for the Mediadelcom project (Avădani,

2022; Berglez et al., 2022; Eberwein et al., 2022; Gálik et al., 2022; Głowacki et al., 2022; Harro-Loit et al., 2022; Kreutler & Fengler, 2022; Peruško & Vozab, 2022; Polyák et al., 2022; Psychogiopoulou & Kandyla, 2022; Raycheva et al., 2022; Rožukalne et al., 2022; Splendore et al., 2022; Waschková Císařová et al., 2022). They cover a broad variety of countries and media systems from all parts of Europe including Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Sweden. This selection represents a range of historical, economic, and cultural media landscapes, as well as varying practices of media and journalism research across the European continent. The selection adheres to the criteria of geography (by including countries from Northern, Western, Southern, and Eastern Europe), size of the media market (according to the population size), and political-historical background (comprising both established democracies and countries with a communist past). In each of the countries covered by our study, national research teams compiled systematic case studies that aimed to provide an overview of the extant literature and other data sources relevant to an analysis of ROs for deliberative communication in the four research domains covered by Mediadelcom (i.e., legal and ethical regulation of the media, journalism, media-usage patterns, and media-related competencies). Each country report consists of four parts: (a) an introduction with general remarks on the national situation and short explanations of structural peculiarities relevant to the country; (b) an annotated bibliography describing the most relevant literature and other data sources in the four domains, with short descriptions focusing on what each specific source allows researchers to evaluate; (c) an analysis of the research and monitoring capabilities in the country; (d) conclusions that evaluate the national situation in order to highlight specific gaps or unavailability of existing data that are relevant to the four domains (for further background information on the country selection and the general methodological approach by Mediadelcom, see Lauk & Berglez, 2024).

In the Section 6, we attempt to summarise the key results of a secondary analysis of the country studies. Our study is designed to highlight both the main problems associated with existing initiatives to monitor deliberative communication in the countries covered by the project, and the opportunities and best practices among these initiatives. The analysis followed a two-step procedure: In Step 1, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of the 14 reports, using techniques of summary and structuration (see, e.g., Mayring, 2014). Drawing on the basic conceptual approach described above, this part of the study helped to identify key agents in news media monitoring, their relationships, as well as their structural and cultural contexts in each country, which were then summarised in brief country profiles. Step 2 of the analysis enabled us to make a comparative assessment of the country profiles by application of the analytical model of the "knowledge pyramid." A differentiation between available data, information, knowledge, and wisdom in the cases of the previously collected material made it possible to identify the best (and worst) practices of news media monitoring. This analytical procedure not only proved helpful to understand recent trends within media and communication studies across European countries, but also generated valuable new insights for media policy-makers.

6. Results of the Empirical Study

6.1. Problems and Challenges of News Media Monitoring

ROs for deliberative communication can be understood as a matrix of interrelated factors, some of which may increase risks when combined, while others may change from risks to opportunities under certain circumstances. The dynamic character of our research object makes it difficult to lay out a conclusive and

comprehensive set of answers referring to questions about the capabilities of news media monitoring. Nonetheless, based on a systematic secondary analysis of 14 country case studies, we can identify at least six general types of monitoring-related challenges that are the ultimate cause of the broader problem of insufficient knowledge and wisdom in European media and journalism research. The six are: (a) information fragmentation; (b) information overproduction; (c) lack of consistency in studies or interruption of repeated or longitudinal studies; (d) low or uneven information and knowledge quality; (e) missing research competencies; and (f) very little evidence that acquired wisdom is used for media governance.

As the Mediadelcom country studies show, information fragmentation is a multifaceted problem. All analysed reports collect considerable numbers of (academic and non-academic) publications in each of the four research domains covered by the project. In sum, national research teams evaluated more than 5,600 relevant texts and other data sources (Mediadelcom, 2023). Each of the countries can name specialised journals or other periodic publications for certain issue fields (yearbooks, regular conference proceedings, etc.)—even the smaller ones in the sample, such as Austria, Croatia, Estonia, and Latvia (Eberwein et al., 2022; Harro-Loit et al., 2022; Peruško & Vozab, 2022; Rožukalne et al., 2022; see also the contribution by Kõuts-Klemm et al., in press). Such sources are easily traceable with the help of library databases and search engines. However, contemporary academic publication metrics (and the well-known pressure to "publish or perish") as well as the increasing importance of project-based research planning seem to favour piecemeal publications in short articles over coherent long-term dissemination strategies for media-related research. Furthermore, there is an obvious lack of strategies that motivate researchers to supply relevant databases with the necessary metadata to support information aggregation (see, e.g., Harro-Loit et al., 2022). Such trends often complicate the aim of drawing a coherent picture of ROs concerning deliberative communication.

Closely related is the issue of information (and knowledge) overproduction: In some of the Mediadelcom countries—particularly those with a longer history of empirical media and journalism research, such as Sweden or Germany—the problem is usually not the lack of information, but rather an overabundance (Berglez et al., 2022; Kreutler & Fengler, 2022). In those cases, monitoring initiatives not only have to face the task of identifying relevant sources in a mass of fragmented publications (see above in this section), but also of assessing their quality and usefulness for application in, for example, international comparisons. Sometimes, this task is aggravated by the uneven quality of available data, as reported, for example, in the Bulgarian case study (Raycheva et al., 2022; see also below in this section).

A further recurring problem is the lack of consistency in studies or the interruption of longitudinal studies. According to our analysis, this issue is related to a lack of continuous funding. Large-scale diachronic studies with a consistent methodology need resources—and, as several country studies show, a solid financial basis for such undertakings is rather an exemption than the rule (see, e.g., Eberwein et al., 2022; Psychogiopoulou & Kandyla, 2022). Exceptional cases like the reference week analysis by German press statistician Walter Schütz depend on the personal commitment of individual actors, which is necessarily discontinued when they retire or die (Kreutler & Fengler, 2022). Some countries (e.g., Estonia and Latvia) also report a detrimental influence from higher education and research policy (Harro-Loit et al., 2022; Rožukalne et al., 2022).

Several reports also note a low or uneven quality of information and knowledge. This problem is quite often related to issues of precarious career paths in the scientific community—and consequently, some countries have limited amounts of well-qualified researchers and analysts (see, e.g., the cases of Romania and Bulgaria:

Avădani, 2022; Raycheva et al., 2022). However, current challenges to academic freedom in Hungary, obviously related to the transformation of the higher education system driven by the right-wing Fidesz government, demonstrate that this issue may also have political reasons (see Polyák et al., 2022).

Additionally, several country studies highlight the problem of missing research competencies—at least in some knowledge areas. While most countries report a broad bandwidth of studies and a sound institutionalisation of research initiatives in the domains of journalism and media usage, the fields of media law, media accountability, and media literacy are comparatively underdeveloped from an international perspective—resulting in insufficient expertise about pressing issues (see, e.g., Harro-Loit et al., 2022). Again, this question may be related to varying national traditions in higher education, but it also raises concern about the precarious career paths that some countries offer to young academics with a doctoral degree.

Eventually, the analysed country reports hint at a communication problem, becoming apparent in the observation that very little acquired wisdom is used for media governance. This deficit accompanies the recurring complaint that a lively public discourse about the results of media and journalism research is hardly perceivable at the national level and across Europe, sometimes also due to language barriers (see, e.g., Głowacki et al., 2022). Some notable exceptions are highlighted in Section 6.2.

6.2. Opportunities and Best Practices of News Media Monitoring

Despite the various hints at problematic developments, the analysed country studies also make it possible to identify relevant opportunities and best practices for news media monitoring in Europe. It may not be surprising that such opportunities are mostly related to resources. Obviously, the wealthier countries in our sample (such as Sweden, Germany, to some degree also Italy and Austria) have more resources to monitor media and journalism (see Berglez et al., 2022; Eberwein et al., 2022; Kreutler & Fengler, 2022; Splendore et al., 2022), while in the case of low-resource countries, favourable development prospects depend on the clever and efficient use of available financial backing. At any rate, the analysis makes it clear that successful monitoring initiatives often build on interaction between participating agents (e.g., research groups, journalists, politicians, civil society actors, etc.). The more heightened the cooperation is, the better the opportunities for efficient monitoring. On the other hand, however, it seems noteworthy that the post-socialist countries in our sample often report a lack of cooperation or even division between participating agents (see, e.g., Głowacki et al., 2022; Polyák et al., 2022). Possibilities for optimising such shortcomings may be illustrated by means of several best-practice cases which were highlighted in the Mediadelcom reports.

Among the various best practices showcased by the Swedish study (Berglez et al., 2022), the media research centre Nordicom stands out. Located at the University of Gothenburg, Nordicom has been collecting and publishing statistics as well as books, reports, and newsletters relevant to all domains of the Mediadelcom study since the 1970s—although with a specialisation in the field of media usage. Most research results are available in a vast database; Nordicom also publishes the leading academic journal for media and communication researchers in the Nordic countries (*Nordicom Review*). With its NordMedia Network, the institution can be seen as a hub that connects researchers across countries and disciplines. Recently, increasing attempts at coordination and collaboration with other national actors (such as the Swedish Media Authority) have been noted.

In Austria, a similarly inclusive role is played by the Public Value Competence Centre of the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation ORF (see Eberwein et al., 2022). As an internal unit of the public broadcaster, it realises a continuous evaluation of the quality of the ORF's media contents (e.g., through annual expert hearings) and also publishes regular reports and a book series. All these initiatives are characterised by a notable ambition to create a dialogue between media actors, academic research, and other experts.

The Ministry of Culture of Latvia offers an example of how state actors can also function as a motor for research-based media monitoring. As the Latvian case study (Rožukalne et al., 2022) reports, several key studies on recent media developments in the country would not exist without financial support from the ministry. This funding in the field of media literacy has spawned important networking activities.

Mertek Media Monitor, which is also the Hungarian partner of the Mediadelcom project, is an instance of an influential non-governmental media research organisation (see Polyák et al., 2022). It provides media law and media market analysis, engages with the industry through journalism research and content analyses of Hungary's media outlets, and regularly conducts media consumption surveys. The example of Mertek shows that there is a greater media monitoring potential in the civil sector in Hungary because small watchdogs and think tanks can offer great added value for the study of media.

This list of best practices seems disparate at first sight, and is by no means conclusive. However, the selected cases share the characteristic that they draw on extensive networks of participating agents that increase the potential of their media monitoring endeavours. All of them stress the motive of cooperation, which can be understood as a deliberate strategy to overcome fragmentation of relevant information and increase knowledge and wisdom in the sense of the DIKW model described in Section 4. Therefore, successful attempts to institutionalise such cooperative practices are not simply an illustration of our attempt to conceptualise media monitoring capabilities as a structure-agency process that strongly emphasises the importance of relationships and interactions between types of participating agents (see Section 3). These attempts may serve also as a stimulus for policy-makers in those countries that could not yet exploit the opportunities of their monitoring capabilities.

7. Conclusions: Suggestions for Enhancing Monitoring Capabilities

The key intention of this article was to develop a concept of monitoring capabilities concerning media-related ROs for deliberative communication. To this end, we discussed the shortcomings of existing monitoring projects in media and journalism studies and introduced the holistic research approach selected for the Mediadelcom project, by focusing on four domains in which the ROs discourse is most clearly visible—i.e., legal and ethical regulation of the media, journalism, media-usage patterns, and media-related competencies. We then used Archer's differentiation between SCA to develop an SCA model of news media monitoring that promised to be helpful for gaining a better understanding of media-related ROs. Subsequently, we elaborated our specific approach for assessing news media monitoring capabilities that draws on the "pyramid of knowledge" and distinguishes between data, information, knowledge, and wisdom. With this conceptual basis, it became possible to give an initial overview of current trends in Europe by analysing 14 country studies on national research and monitoring capabilities related to media and journalism that were compiled within the framework of Mediadelcom. The synoptic analysis highlighted general problems of media-related monitoring processes—such as information overproduction, information

fragmentation, the lack of both longitudinal studies and application in media governance processes—but also collected noteworthy best practices that may exemplify opportunities.

We are convinced that the results of this research do not only contribute to the academic discourse about ROs for deliberative communication, which is still characterised by considerable knowledge gaps. Above all, we also hope that it may serve as a starting point for practical applications, which could help to enhance media monitoring capabilities across Europe, and beyond. In fact, our analysis implies multiple suggestions on how current challenges in this field could be minimised and how relevant research could eventually be applied in media governance processes. Most possible solutions sound quite simple. Of course, it would be beneficial to ensure consistency in key areas of media and journalism research—for example, by providing continuous funding for essential diachronic data collection. It would help a lot to provide better access to media usage data—for example, by making open access policies a mandatory standard for all publications based on publicly funded research. The aim should be to make media and journalism research easier to distinguish in national statistics—not only by recognising the discipline as a research field, but also by harmonising relevant keywords and other metadata that are required to retrieve available insights from national and international databases. Finally, it would be necessary to reflect more systematically on academic knowledge production in general and develop clearer strategies for knowledge governance. This would imply the will of legislative authorities to improve the conditions of employment for early and mid-career researchers—an issue that is by no means restricted to the academic field assessed in this article. However, our study pinpoints one key recommendation that comes to the fore in almost each of the analysed reports: the need to strengthen interaction and cooperation between agents involved or interested in monitoring media-related ROs, both within academia and society at large. The country studies collected by Mediadelcom provide manifold suggestions and encouragement in this regard. While an in-depth comparative analysis of these studies is a task reserved for future publications (Oller Alonso et al., in press), the study presented here may at least offer an initial inventory of typical problems and best practices for monitoring deliberative communication across Europe. Naturally, this can only be a first step.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Delayed Reflections: Media and Journalism Data Deserts in the Post-Socialist Czech Republic

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Abstract

One of the key obstacles to the normative development of post-socialist media systems, in general, and the Czech Republic in particular, is the deferral of the thoughtful reflection and critical examination of the evolution of the media industry by academics and professionals. In the early years of post-socialist development, there was a lack of collected data and relevant analysis of the state of the media and journalism. It was foreign researchers who provided the first studies of the post-socialist media systems. Plus, the commercial industry, which systematically collected data, but made it inaccessible and/or expensive. This lack of domestic contemplation and transparency led to the existence of data deserts, which made it difficult to effectively reflect upon the development of the media and its role in the transition society. This article is based on a comprehensive literature review and expert interviews with witnesses of the media industry development. These sources—academia, industry, and NGOs—make it possible to highlight specific areas that were overlooked and to propose reasons that data deserts are created in post-socialist media systems. Analysing the data through the lenses of availability, continuity, accessibility, and topicality, we delimit three eras for the general reflection of the development of the media environment, setting a distinguishable timeframe for the post-socialist media data reflection's evolution.

Keywords

Central European media; Eastern European media; data desert; media research; post-socialist media system; post-socialist transition

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1. Introduction

One of the key obstacles to the development of post-socialist media systems, in general, and the Czech Republic in particular, is the delayed reflection and critical examination of the evolution of the media industry by academics and professionals. The expectations could be based on a normative assumption following the symbolic social contract between journalism and democracy about the mutual respect of freedom of speech, expression and information, and the independence of media from the state (Strömbäck, 2005).

In the early years of post-socialist development, through the 1990s, there was an undeniable lack of data collection, critical reflection, and relevant analysis of the media (e.g., Coman, 2000). There were rapid changes (e.g., in legislation) and fast development of the post-socialist media landscape, but without the capacity and will to capture it in data or to reflect it at the time. Therefore, it was first the foreign researchers to provide analytical studies of the post-socialist media systems (e.g., Gross, 2002). Plus, the commercial industry, which later systematically collected data, but made it inaccessible and/or expensive. This lack of domestic contemplation and transparency led to the creation of data deserts making it difficult to effectively reflect upon the development of the media and its role in the transition society.

Analysis of these data deserts is important for several reasons: It concerns the current state and the development of a field in society that can be a problem for (a) the development of the field itself (i.e., there is no evolution without reflection); and (b) for the transition of the whole society, particularly in terms of knowledge-based decision-making, setting new frameworks, establishing regulations, defining standards, and encouraging informed policy-making. As Thier et al. (2021, p. 1) state: "Any research field benefits from periodic examination of the body of literature produced within that discipline."

Because we aim to define a data desert in research in a specific time and place, our lenses are logically narrowed. Nevertheless, we believe our article contributes not only to the European media development research but also to the global one. As suggested by Hallin and Mancini (2004), it is not possible to divide European and "world" media systems simply and strictly, as some principles are more universal (or vice-versa) than others. Following that, with the help of a comprehensive literature review and expert interviews with media professionals, we will reflect upon the problem of the delayed contemplation about media and journalism in a post-transition country. In this article, we first define the data desert concept and depict the specifics of the post-socialist, transition, and post-transition media reflection. Then we describe our methods and present the data.

2. Data Deserts

The terms "desert" or "gap" are used in communication and information research to refer to the lack or absence of something—there are information deserts and data deserts (Lee & Butler, 2019), news deserts (Abernathy, 2018), knowledge gaps, and information gaps (Jeffres et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, the meanings and definitions of these concepts vary in context and time. For example, a "knowledge gap" is mostly used in research on media effects (Gaziano, 1983; Jeffres et al., 2011; Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996). "Data desert" may refer only to the lack of information linked to the digitized data (Lee &

Butler, 2019), while a "news desert" is defined as "a community without a local newspaper" (Abernathy, 2018, p. 16).

In our view, the most fitting concept for the analysis of the lack of relevant research information in a certain field is that of the data desert, which is defined as a specific time (cf. Gaziano, 1983) and space where information—and particularly research data—is scarce (cf. Lee & Butler, 2019).

But this is not just about the availability and continuity of data. The (non)existence of data deserts is important for various reasons related to access to information. Data deserts can be a precondition for information inequality (Lee & Butler, 2019) because "power is based on the spread and possession of knowledge and information" (Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996, p. 187). They can further impact the policies, political decisions, and even the functioning of a democratic society (Abernathy, 2018).

Although we take it as an argumentative premise, that there is no evolution without reflection as part of the post-socialist transition, it must be acknowledged that our normative expectations (Strömbäck, 2005) are based on predominantly Western European practices about the availability of data on media in democratic societies (Lee & Butler, 2019). Therefore, we understand that from the broader, more global point of view, this approach to data collection and media monitoring is not universal and is just specific to certain temporal and spatial settings of societies and media systems. However, there are certainly systems that evolve without a formal record of their development (cf. Janssen et al., 2012) and where specific media benefit from the informality of their existence—from their point of view, our data desert can be seen as the norm, and efforts to monitor the media as rain or even a devastating flood.

The opposite of a data desert is continually available and accessible data, although the ideal is more than simply the openness of data. Janssen et al. (2012) summarized both the benefits of open data and the barriers to its adoption. Their typology of the benefits of open data is based on three categories—political and social, economic, and operational and technical. The political and social category includes: more transparency; more democratic accountability; more participation and public engagement; the scrutinization of data; equal access to data; the improvement of policy-making processes; more visibility for the data provider; and the stimulation of knowledge. The economic category includes: economic growth; the stimulation of competitiveness; the stimulation of innovation; and the availability of information for investors and companies. The operational and technical category includes: the ability to reuse data without the need to re-collect the same data, thus counteracting unnecessary duplication and associated costs; the improvement of public policies; easier access to data and the discovery of data; the creation of new data based on the combination of data points; external quality checks for data; the sustainability of data; and the ability to merge, integrate, and mesh public and private data (Janssen et al., 2012).

Similarly, Janssen et al. (2012) summarize the adoption barriers for open data in six categories: institutional (e.g., making public only non-value-adding data and revenue system based on creating income from data); task complexity (e.g., no access to the original data, no explanation for the meaning of data, and duplication of data); use and participation (e.g., frustration at having too many data initiatives and having to pay a fee for the data); legislation (e.g., no license for using data and limited conditions for using data); information quality (e.g., lack of information, obsolete and non-valid data, too much information to process, and similar data stored in different systems); and technical (e.g., absence of standards and no defined format).

Moreover, Janssen et al. (2012) bridge the gap between the promises and barriers of open data, like the following, which they consider myths: that publicising data will automatically yield benefits; that the publication of all information should be unrestricted; that it is a matter of simply publishing public data; that every constituent can make use of open data; and that open data will result in open government.

3. Specifics of the Post-Socialist, Transition, and Post-Transition Media in the Czech Republic

Focusing on the time and place for the (non)emergence of data deserts, we first describe the specifics of the development of both the society and the media system of the Czech Republic between 1989 and 2020. We can systematise this development with three time periods: post-socialist, transition, and post-transition (cf. Jakubowicz, 2006; Jebril et al., 2013; O'Neil, 1997; Surowiec & Štětka, 2020).

First, the post-socialist period (1989–1993) was the time between the Velvet Revolution in 1989, which precipitated the fall of communism, and the split up of Czechoslovakia in 1993. As O'Neil (1997, p. 1) sums up, "The absence of communism does not alone lead to democracy by default. Rather, open societies must be built (or re-built), pulling down old state structures that served to centralize political power….One of these structures is obviously the media."

This was a time of rapid changes that influenced the development of society and the media. It included the establishment of the dual market and the emergence of public service media; the creation of new (media) laws; the privatisation of the state media; and the entry of foreign investors and owners of media organisations (Waschková Císařová & Metyková, 2015).

Second, the transition period (1993–2004) was framed by the establishment of the Czech Republic and its membership in the EU 11 years later. Jebril et al. (2013, p. 9) consider the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE):

> To represent a more or less "complete" case of democratisation. We have witnessed the beginning, middle, and end of transition as many of the countries of this region have not only moved away from authoritarianism towards democracy but have succeeded in doing so (e.g., with membership in the EU).

In this period, the transition established by the decisions of the first period was realized. This led to the concentration of media ownership, the establishment of foreign media owners, and media commercialisation (Stetka, 2010, 2012, 2013). Nevertheless, it took time to reflect on the "specifics" of the CEE transition of the media (Coman, 2000; Sparks, 2000).

Third, the post-transition period is the period after 2004. Its first part was shaped by the transformation of media ownership—from foreign to domestic and its oligarchization (Stetka, 2010, 2012, 2013; Waschková Císařová & Metyková, 2015). Later, in the 2010s, authors began to point out democratic backsliding in the CEE region, including the rise of authoritarian political parties; growing right-wing populism; societal polarisation; and the deterioration of media freedom. This led to an illiberal democracy (Surowiec & Štětka, 2020, pp. 1, 2).

The relevant data sources focusing on CEE media development were scarce at the beginning, even though Coman (2000, p. 35) considered "the amount of research-based information about media transformations has increased considerably, and the number of books and articles published on this topic has grown apace." In his opinion, "it is still unrealistic to present a definitive view about mass media in post-communist countries." He has several reasons for this, besides the quick evolution of said media systems:

> Information about these changes is incomplete...sometimes excessively partisan. Systems for monitoring the press are barely established, and information related to media economics, distribution systems, audience demographics for specific broadcast programs, and media personnel's social and professional status is scarce and unreliable....Research on media development...can be difficult to obtain or, sometimes, inadequate for definitive analysis. Studies based on field research are published in the language of the countries where the research was conducted and are usually inaccessible to foreign researchers. Moreover, articles edited in a few books and numerous academic journals with wider circulations reveal a partial vision because of their focus on "exotic" aspects of a topic. (Coman, 2000, pp. 35–36)

Later, during the post-transition period, the Czech media system was addressed in comparative research from the European perspective (Dobek-Ostrowska et al., 2010; Głowacki et al., 2014; Jakubowicz, 2006; Rantanen, 2013).

Nevertheless, as several authors point out (Jebril et al., 2013; Waschková Císařová & Metyková, 2015), after 2010, there was still a lack of research data and literature on the changes in journalism and media in post-communist countries. Plus, some topics were, according to Jebril et al. (2013, p. 10), covered more than others within particular periods:

> The fact that more than two decades after the beginning of a transition in Central and Eastern Europe, the very question about the contribution of the media to the process of democratization remains very much unanswered—or answered in a way that is far from unequivocal—could possibly also be attributed to the shift in research orientation of a large part of CEE media scholarship in the course of the last decade.

Aware of (a) the specifics of the post-transition media system development and (b) the existing criticism of the lack of relevant information and data about media in the Czech Republic, we decided to formulate our aim with the following research questions: What is the availability, continuity, and accessibility of the data about media in the Czech Republic between 1989 and 2020? What is its format, and who are the producers?

4. Method

The article stems from a combination of a comprehensive literature review (Mediadelcom, 2023) and expert interviews with witnesses of media development in the Czech Republic—media professionals. Due to the small size of the Czech academic field and the media industry, our literature review data gathering was carried out in an "everything we can find" manner (cf. "a bird's-eye view," Thier et al., 2021). We included published academic texts (i.e., articles, books, and reports); student theses; media industry data; and NGOs data. We aimed to audit all (even non-peer-reviewed) literature about media in the Czech context (cf. Thier et al., 2021).

A total of 709 sources were analysed (see Mediadelcom, 2023, for more detailed information). The search was conducted through the databases (i.e., library databases, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar) and professional online sources (i.e., publicly accessible online repositories of media industry data), with keywords and the names of relevant organisations and experts for the time frame of 1989–2020. Academic texts dominated (370), with student theses next (256). The media industry and NGOs data (83) were the least publicly available.

From January to February 2022, we collected 11 semi-structured online expert interviews. The interviewees were significant in the historical development of media studies, the academic field of journalism, and professional journalism. The rich palette included: media ethics experts, journalism and media studies researchers, leaders of the journalism and media studies departments, media industry specialists, NGO representatives, and journalists themselves (for more, see a list of interviewees in the Supplementary Material). Since we conducted expert interviews, most interviewees are cited under their real names; however, several representatives asked for anonymisation.

The interviews focused on mapping the development of the Czech media landscape after 1989 and the local history of the media studies and journalism field. Four key areas were considered: risks and opportunities (from the point of view of laws and ethics, journalism and journalists, and users and their competencies); critical junctures in the development; key actors; and the future prognosis based on historical knowledge. The data desert indicators, the issues of availability, continuity, accessibility, and topicality, emerged as recurring themes from both types of analysis.

The interviews, conducted in Czech, lasted 60 to 90 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed, translated, and a thematic analysis was conducted. Three coders coded the data inductively. The researchers first familiarized themselves with the data. Then they coded the text manually, searched for themes with broader patterns of meaning, and defined and named them. A continual revision of codes ensured intercoder reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5. Findings

After analysing the data through the lenses of the introduced concept of data deserts, we can delimit three eras for the general reflection of the development of the media environment, setting a distinguishable timeframe for the post-socialist media data evolution, which corresponds to our typology of the post-socialist media system development (see above). We coined each era by its most typical characteristic. This temporal periodisation also corresponds to our interviewees' descriptions of the development of media reflection (Burgr, Jirák, Academic 1, and Industry Representative 1 and 2).

5.1. Starting From Scratch Era

The first period of media reflection began in the early 1990s after the democratic establishment replaced the old regime in 1989. We symptomatically coined this era as starting from scratch. It lasted until the early 2000s. As such, the modern evolution of the media system in the Czech Republic could begin, including thoughtful contemplation and data gathering. In this period, everything developed from scratch, including the major actors—the academy, industry, and NGOs.

If we look at academia, Burgr pointed out that the Prague department was "the only faculty during the [socialist] regime" doing media research, and it was later transformed into its current shape. The field was also developed in Olomouc, the first department to teach journalism in the Czech Republic, Brno joined later on.

The initial trend affecting the development of media reflection was explained as "Westernisation" by Academic 1: "There are two important influences at the beginning—Westernization and the effort to resist it, completely in vain." That may have taken the form of an international development program funded by the Council of Europe, where Western European universities advised Prague-based journalism academics on how to create a relevant curriculum (Osvaldová and Šmíd). Ironically, this was labelled by Academic 1 as "the development programme for the humanisation of Central and Eastern Europe." Later, Westernisation was manifested in the publishing of translated textbooks and dictionaries (Jirák and Academic 1). Academic 1 labelled this time as a "period of textbooks." Jirák adds: "Quite logically, we turned abroad, and the first steps were the translation of literature....But it had one huge disadvantage...that it still suggests to students today that knowledge about media is universal."

Scholarly research publications were scarce: rarely written by foreign researchers (e.g., Wachtel, 1996) continuing with the Westernized point of view brought to the local reflection. On the other hand, the work published by Czech authors was rather descriptive (e.g., Jirák, 1997; Kaplan & Šmíd, 1995) and did not include relevant data to allow for a meaningful reflection on media. Interestingly already during this period, Czech academics participated in foreign data collection on post-socialist media systems for foreign grants and the EU. These were much better funded and had more stable financial sources than research in Czechia (Šmíd).

For the industry, the most important actor in the media sector was the Publishers' Union, (founded in January 1991), which initiated the beginning of media data collection in the Czech Republic (Industry Representatives 1 and 2). However, less and less of the data entered the public sphere and it was only available to paying customers.

The development of a civil society and the related emergence of non-profit organizations was still in its infancy in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, the Centre for Independent Journalism, which was founded by Americans, contributed to the development of the local field by educating journalists and publishing two publications (cf. Westernisation) that focused on the basic normative assumptions of democratic journalism (Boyd, 1995; Mallette, 1994).

The first period was, thus, a search for a way to adopt foreign models which brought its own challenges as mentioned above. The collection of relevant data and analysis was uncommon, which may be related to the speed of the changes and the inability to get a wide enough perspective for meaningful reflection. At the same time, there was a strong emphasis on the evolving teaching of journalism at universities (Burgr), which meant less time for research and nascent research funding (the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic was established in 1993).

5.2. Searching for Direction Era

After the first decade of development, the second period of stabilization—that we coined as searching for direction—followed between the early 2000s and 2010. The Westernization trend continued, with the

hegemony of foreign reflection until approximately 2010, after which Czech actors started to produce their own data.

In academia, foreign authors established a more systematic reflection on Czech media (e.g., Gross, 2002; Gulyás, 2001; Jakubowicz, 2007). Interviewees depicted this period in two ways. One was as a "period of hunches and despair" when "we knew there was research and a scholarly article, but we didn't know how to do it, and there was a lack of connection with the international academic community" (Academic 1). The other was as a "period of original Czech textbooks" that "was essentially a retelling of foreign sources. What was not much there, or rather appeared only marginally, were the original texts on the Czech situation" (Jirák). These original data about the Czech media were mostly theoretical and descriptive (e.g., Köpplová & Jirák, 2001; Šmíd, 2004). The situation was deemed critical enough that *Media Studies*, a domestic media studies journal, was established in 2006. Academic 1 describes the establishment of the journal, which was to be a platform for the academic field's criticism, as the product of frustrated academics in an era of desperation. The journal editors formulated the need for research and data-oriented texts (Macek & Reifová, 2008).

This period is also the beginning of the gradual divide between academia and the industry, both in terms of the approach to data gathering and data openness. The academy had slowly established itself and continues to be small and further threatened by tensions between the practical field of journalism and the "proper academic field" of media studies (Orság, Burgr, and Jirák). Contrary to this, industry research produced systematized and continuous data. However, they became monetized and inaccessible (Industry Representatives 1 and 2).

The NGO approach to development was similar to that of academia. The foreign-funded actors gradually withdrew (e.g., the end of Centre for Independent Journalism in Czechia) and a network of Czech NGOs focused on media and communication was established (e.g., People in Need with the One World in Schools project). However, NGOs started to substitute for the inadequacies of the media reflection of other actors and the state. An NGO representative speaks about a "big failure" of the system, as both the state and academia have been insufficient in offering relevant data: "As a nongovernmental organisation, we felt, and still do...that the state does not fulfil its obligation in media education....In 2005 we saw the unpreparedness...to teach media-related topics and...the breath-taking illiteracy of young people...and we took it as a challenge" (Strachota).

5.3. Everything, Everyone, All at Once Era

The third period (starting in 2010) is ongoing. We coined it everything, everyone, all at once. On one hand, it is typical by its boom of empirical research "on all fronts" and, on the other, it has high thematic fragmentation. Instead of media research becoming more systematized and thematically coherent, a topical disintegration took place and made the field ultimately opaque.

In the academic field, Academic 1 labels this "a period of demands—a rigorous science assessment system on which university funding was based." Jirák sees two sides. There is a positive development: "It was a period of, let's say, a partial victory. The topic was established, and the interest of experts from various fields in the media was obvious but not very enlightened sometimes." And there is also fragmentation: "I can't help but see that the contours of the field, which were given primarily thematically, not methodologically, are dissolving a bit into such a vagueness."

With regards to topical fragmentation in academia, the current Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism at Charles University, Prague, mainly covered theoretical and descriptive work with a focus on general information about the media landscape, history, and the post-socialist transformation of the media. Only later did researchers begin to reflect on political communication, media literacy, etc. The Department of Media Studies and Journalism at Masaryk University, Brno, established itself (after 2010) in audience research. The core research also reflects on media history, journalistic professional roles, and local journalism. The last player in the academic realm—the Department of Media and Cultural Studies and Journalism at Palacký University, Olomouc—manifests more of a theoretical approach, with dominant topics in history and media literacy in recent years (cf. Jirák, Burgr, and Orság).

The industry approach to gathering and analysing data developed similarly in terms of the non-openness of information and the strict commercialism, but the individual media (not only the umbrella organisations, like the Publishers' Union) collect data gradually, independently, and longitudinally (Industry Representatives 1 and 2). Nevertheless, the Syndicate of Journalists has failed to reflect the field in a relevant way since the early 1990s (Jirák, Burgr, and Osvaldová). The dispersion of the Czech media system after the change of ownership structure (see Section 3) led to the creation of the NGO Foundation for Independent Journalism in 2016, which started to critically assess the quality of Czech media.

NGOs continued their parallel but only scarcely cooperated with other actors in media data gathering and analysis. To sum up, we observe two trends to be closely related to the potential emergence of data deserts, which characterize the third period: dispersed topicality and accessibility, and the related lack of cooperation.

5.4. Data Deserts as a Symptom and a Consequence

The data we analysed, came from three different areas—academia, the media industry, and NGOs. This material clearly highlights specific topics and reveals data deserts created by certain focuses. The academic publications were narrowly aimed at analyses of the media system in the Czech Republic, journalism education, journalists, and journalistic work. This was a direct result of the expertise of the academics working in the three main media studies and journalism departments. This, inevitably, influenced the student theses, contributing to the hegemonic topical venues of academic texts.

The dispersion of data topics leads again to the growing importance of foreign observations of the Czech media, which offers "the big picture" and a longitudinal approach with comparable data (e.g., Reporters Without Borders, European Federation of Journalists, and The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism).

With regards to accessibility, peer-reviewed and indexed articles are readily available and obtainable, but books, chapters, or reports are usually not. The accessibility for industry/business material is almost non-existent (with few exceptions, like data from the Czech Statistical Office). Most often, the material is behind a paywall, while freely accessible documents vary in quality. This problematic system for accessing scholarly or business data poses questions about how many documents from the researched period truly exist and how successful one can be in collecting all the relevant data.

Previous information highlights yet another problem—varying data quality. It is impossible to identify a systematic strategy for both the academic field and the industry because of the deep thematic

fragmentation that was created by the individual interests of the workplaces. A side effect of this fragmentation in such a small academic field is that the coverage of fundamental disciplinary themes is not saturated.

Related and repeatedly pointed out mutual non-cooperation for data gathering and analysis is one of the foundational layers of the development of data deserts (cf. data openness). Understanding the media market as a competitive environment warrants the notion that not all information can be available. Still, the level of non-collaboration between academics and analysts (except e.g., public service media) is alarming. This leads to having only descriptive and mostly unavailable data. Other interviewees label the non-cooperation and fragmentation in such a small industry as problematic and they point out that foreign countries are more connected (Industry Representatives 1 and 2, Strachota, and Orság).

Others, however, observe that the collaboration between academics and praxis happens in the pedagogy. Burgr notes that many professionals (i.e., journalists) want to share their know-how. On the other hand, the same people do not believe that a scholarly reflection of the profession can ever capture the "real deal" and enrich either actor. Kubíčková argues similarly: "It is a problem of the praxis, when I read your studies….I can say they did a nice job, but it does not work inside of the industry."

It is obvious that the creation of data deserts in the Czech Republic has two forms of development that follow the evolution of the field itself. While the emergence of data deserts in the first two periods relates to the absence, or more precisely (non)existence, of locally produced data, it is caused by different aspects later on. What begins in the second introduced era and continues to the present, is the diminishing of accessible data from the industry actors which is reinforced by the topical fragmentation of the academic field. Both inaccessibility of existing data and hegemonic "academic topicality" causes crucial themes to not be properly addressed (or at all) thus once again leading to the emergence of spatially and temporarily specific data deserts.

6. Conclusions

In our article, we aimed to answer these research questions: What is the availability, continuity, and accessibility of the data about media in the Czech Republic between 1989 and 2020? What is its format, and who are the producers? Our findings show a timeframe with three consecutive periods that we coined to characterize each. The three periods reflected the societal changes and, in a way, followed the earlier introduced periods of post-socialism, transition, and post-transition societal development after 1989. Our overview of events taking place in each period provides a clear look at the delayed reflection of the development of Czech media, not only from the academic field but also from other actors (i.e., industry and NGOs), even though their situation was more complex.

Working our way through the areas of availability, accessibility, and continuity, we see that all those areas are problematic and partly responsible for the creation of data deserts. Availability of the sources was scarce until the third discussed era. Until then, research was supplemented by foreign researchers which ultimately meant that both the establishment and the reflection of the field were intensively impacted by Western influences. While in 2010 there was a boom of original Czech research in many areas of the media field, the non-cooperation and impermeability of the research among the crucial actors (academia, industry, and NGOs) caused impaired availability of the sources in the field. This is directly influenced by the worsened

accessibility of certain sources, and their varying quality caused by the inability to cooperate but also by restricting the data behind paywall as was the case of industry materials.

Continuous data are rather scarce. They either exist as a part of bigger international projects (e.g., Worlds of Journalism) or they belong to the (often unavailable) industry area (e.g., readership and viewership). As a result of all discussed, and obviously risk-related, issues, the development of the field led to the creation of data deserts with high intensity of topical fragmentation.

This situation may have serious implications for the normative level of the field (Strömbäck, 2005). The lack of interconnectedness of the data sources or the absence of certain segments of research makes it harder to test and contextualize the principles used to evaluate media performance in a particular national setting adequately empirically. This could be illustrated by the absence of empirical studies in the field of media evaluation in our sample. Under such conditions, not only media studies, journalists, but also policymakers may rely on normative categories imported from other cultural and historical settings, especially the West. Thus, the existence of data deserts puts an obstacle to the de-Westernisation (Curran & Park, 2000) of the field and makes the internationalisation of research, i.e., interregional cooperation, which is desirable in this respect, especially in the CEE region (Demeter et al., 2023), more difficult.

In summary, there are several reasons behind data deserts in the Czech Republic, same as there are several ways of their emergence/creation over the analysed timeframe. Firstly, the lack of cooperation between scholars, media professionals, the industry, and NGOs. This led to insufficient coverage of the core themes in the media field and an individualistic approach for each actor to reflect upon the methodological and topical incoherence. Secondly, the creation of data deserts is caused by both the limited size of the field and the deficient financing of the actors, which creates an insufficiently competitive environment for the data to be obtainable or for a substantial professional association to emerge. Thirdly, and repeatedly, the clear hegemonic thematic venues and the lack of topical diversity and density is the direct cause of creating clearly identifiable data deserts.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in DataDOI at https://doi.org/10.23673/re-384 and they are part of the EU financed project MEDIADELCOM (https://www.mediadelcom.eu)

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Researching Media and Democracy Researchers: Monitoring Capabilities in Poland

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Abstract

In this article, we look at the conditions of media and democracy discourses in Poland via the lenses of monitoring time-related capabilities. We are interested in how media–societal change in 2000–2020 has influenced the Polish researchers' responses to deliver applied research and further foster hyper-knowledge sharing between policymakers, media industries, and academia. Through an in-depth investigation of Poland's media researchers' publications database ($N = 1,000$), we aim to examine the crucial interest areas considering the critical cultural junctures in three highly related areas: technology, politics, and society. The critical junctures theory review follows the mapping of changes in related scholarly analyses to uncover three sides of Polish scholarship monitoring capabilities alongside cultural conditions of researchers' impact on democracy and the media. The overall hypothesis is that examining media and democracy in Poland reflects technological and political change, with the cultural research path dependencies in analyzing broader social context (see, for instance, a young democracy, illiberal turns and social polarization conditions, and so on). This corresponds to related tensions between the Western media's theories and practices concerning democracy.

Keywords

critical cultural junctures; media and democracy; media monitoring; media researchers; monitoring capability; Poland

1. Introduction

Researchers and scholars are essential agents in discussing and impacting media and democracy. Their knowledge, wisdom, and expertise serve as a reference point for policymaking and advising media industries on communications change and future scenarios. The societal role of science also calls for the continuity of research and engagement in actions on the conditions and quality of democratic media in a wide range of spheres, including media freedom, diversity, and inclusion, as a basis of the professional media and journalism culture. While the overall potential of scholarly impact is high, examining the practical side of scholarly contributions is much more complex regarding media research cultural conditions. On the one hand, one of the challenges is how scholarly interests reflect the current media and democracy change, alongside the quality and application of empirical studies and policy advice. On the other hand, understanding scholarly impact requires further examination of the cultural side of media and democracy research, with media scholars living through societal and media change.

On the surface, the existing studies on media and democracy in Poland have widely illustrated the systemic conditions as a response to the recently coined notion of illiberal and authoritarian turns (Democracy Index, 2022; Dzięciołowski, 2017; Freedom House, 2022) or societal and media polarization (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019; Kopeć-Ziemczyk, 2021). Accompanying scholarly contributions to research and policy advice, the focus has been on technological and political agents of change, with scant interest in non-governmental and bottom-up civic engagement. Moreover, while there have been studies on the history of Polish media and communication studies (Mielczarek, 2021), researching conditions for applied research has not become a systemic subject of cultural investigation. Bearing in mind the complexity of media and democracy knowledge-share relationships (and the methodological challenge), one goal is to look at media researchers, their scholarly interests, media–societal change experiences, and their contributions. Through the concept of monitoring capability, we aim to look at media research conditions alongside responsiveness to the dynamics of change.

In this article, we are interested in how media–societal change in 2000–2020 has influenced the Polish researchers' responses to deliver applied research and further engage with policymakers, media industries, and non-governmental organizations. Firstly, through an in-depth investigation of Poland's media researchers' publications database ($N = 1,000$) and their participation in research projects and policymaking, we examine the monitoring capabilities—crucial interest and scholarly response—in line with critical junctures in technology, politics, and society. The study conclusions also build on the critical cultural junctures theory to further investigate the cultural conditions of media scholarship, with the possible cultural path dependencies, as one of the critical conditions of scholarly impact, wisdom, and meaning (Greener, 2002; Neuberger et al., 2023; Page, 2006).

The overall hypothesis is that examining media and democracy in Poland reflects technological and political change, with the cultural research path dependencies in analyzing the broader societal contexts and related tensions between the Western media democratic theories and media and democracy practices. To this end, the critical cultural junctures of media theory adjusted to researchers' change to further explore the fabric of Polish scholarship via cultural conditions of researchers' impact on democracy and the media. Among the unvoiced questions are: How do researchers react to media and democracy change and critical cultural

junctures? In what ways do the media-societal turning points juxtapose with the existing conditions of democratic media research? What are the cultural conditions for impact and applied research?

2. Researching Media Researchers: Theory and Methodology

The Polish case study of scholarly engagement in media and democracy has foundations in the larger European research project entitled Critical Exploration of Media-Related Risks and Opportunities for Deliberative Communication: Development Scenarios of the European Media Landscape (Mediadelcom). The collaborative Mediadelcom (2021–2024) involves researchers from 14 European countries to look at risks and opportunities for deliberative communication with a wide range of media and democracy agents (policymakers, researchers, media industries, and non-governmental organizations), all producing and sharing wisdom and knowledge to support democratic media. The project uses the multilayered democracy agents modeling to explore the potential for checks and balances in four critical areas: media regulation and self-regulation, journalism culture, users' media experiences, and users' media literacy competencies. Looking at 2000–2020, Mediadelcom produced findings on the conditions of national scholarly expertise across various researchers' cultures, researching and experiencing media and democracy change over the last two decades.

Considering the broader research goals and cross-cultural contexts, this Polish study builds on selective Mediadelcom methodologies. It focuses on scholars and media research as stakeholders in the agent modeling theories (Harro-Loit, 2022). Examining researchers' expertise, followed by Polish research on cultural contexts' uses, the project's approach is one of monitoring capability, which is understood as:

> The ability, possibilities and motivation of various agents to observe and analyze the developments of the media and the changes in the society, emanating from the media transformations. (Harro-Loit & Lauk, 2022, p. vii)

The concept of monitoring capability offers a wide range of approaches to looking at people and institutions via national and local research systems. In this study, we take the time-related Mediadelcom criteria junctures understood as turning points that alter the course of societal transformations and change (Collier & Munck, 2017). The goal of uncovering the critical cultural junctures in 2000–2020 is to juxtapose researchers' interests with discussing the potential cultural path-dependencies of media and democracy in Poland. To this end, the findings presented in this article build on Mediadelcom's scholarly database of Poland's media and democracy research, with over 1,000 research items (such as academic journal articles, monographs, edited collections, and study reports) coupled with data on scholarly participation in national and international applied research and policy advice and making. The database ($N = 1,000$) was created and coded following the projects' guidelines for the bibliographical database; the overall focus was not to conduct the content analysis but rather to group the overall scholarly work focuses in terms of subjects, but also data recency, quality, accessibility, and findability (Głowacki et al., 2022a, 2022b; Mediadelcom, 2023).

3. Poland's Media and Democracy: The Critical Cultural Junctures

The critical cultural junctures context is used in this article as an umbrella term for highly interwoven media-societal changes, as experienced over the last two decades. The term has been adopted from the

overall Mediadelcom methodology to analyze turning points that alter the course of the evolution of society, with a particular focus on cultural change; media researchers' culture included. Figure 1 illustrates the critical technological, political, and societal turning points of 2000–2020 as Poland evolved.

Media technologies

Legacy media consolidation Turns	Going digital	High tech and mobile

Political change

Democratic Left Alliance United + Polish Peasant Party	Law and Justice + LPR and Samooborona	Civic Platform + Polish Peasant Party	Law and Justice (right)

Social and cultural lens

EU accession and consolidation	1st wave of societal polarisation	2nd wave of societal polarisation

2000   2005   2010   2015   2020

Figure 1. Critical junctures for media and democracy research in Poland. Source: Głowacki et al. (2022b, p. 401).

First, changes in technology, content production, and media management have widely reflected the global media trends and their implementation in Poland, starting with research on the dominant role of radio and TV broadcasters, which further evolved into adaption strategies to digital and data-driven technologies (Johansson & Nożewski, 2018; Splendore et al., 2016; Szpunar, 2018):

- 2000–2010: The phase of media market consolidation with the critical role of broadcasting and the decline of the print press;
- 2010–2015: The phase of adaptation for production and digital content combined with the consolidation of online services and platforms;
- 2015–2020: The strong growth of the high-tech and data-driven industries with the simultaneous dominance of online media, digital apps, software, video on demand, and broadcaster video on demand (Głowacki et al., 2022b, p. 402).

On the side of media-political relationships, Polish media and journalism studies have exposed the practical side of systemic parallelism, evidencing the high level of media-political parallelism and media policies in change (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012; Jakubowicz, 2004; Połońska & Beckett, 2019). For instance, the critical cultural junctures in policy and politics have recently been studied as an effect of political elections and the clash of conservative and liberal values and leadership. Another example, since 2005 and the first government of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (The Law and Justice Party) national and international research turned into broadcasting law change, referencing the decline of press and journalism freedom. In line with this, the most recent media-political studies have reflected regulatory and cultural journalism changes in the aftermath of the Law and Justice government returning to power in 2015. Since then, the overall researchers and media policy-makers focus has been on public service media financing, biased reporting, and

management appointments, pictured as threats to the liberal and normative theories of media, democracy, and pluralism (Donders, 2021; Reporters Without Borders, 2022; Węglińska, 2021).

Finally, the critical cultural junctures relate to the broader social context with various stages of media and democracy transformations. Polish media and democracy research has widely focused on societal democratic shifts in the late 1980s and early 1990s to follow democratic standards of media regulation and self-regulation further, following comparative media and accountability systems studies via the existing Western democracy criteria and systemic political and societal parallelism (Jakubowicz, 2008; Zielonka, 2015). While Poland's accession to the EU united society for the 2003 EU accession referendum, the post-transformation discourse on the division between former socialists and democratic alliances has recently transformed into the division of conservative and liberal media policies and minds. Media and democracy studies have plentiful evidence of the ongoing social polarization, with the first wave of conservative vs liberal media divisions in the aftermath of Poland's presidential plane crash in Smolensk (Russia) in 2010. The second media polarization wave resulted in media tribes and the Law and Justice government taking over the public service media (Gajlewicz-Korab & Szurmiński, 2022). For media researchers, the ongoing societal polarization has been seen as a systemic and cultural effect of traditionally weak media accountability and the lack of a journalistic united front (Głowacki & Kuś, 2019); something of critical interest in assessing monitoring capabilities of potentially diverse researchers' communities.

4. Poland's Three Sides of Media Research Monitoring Capabilities

Considering the study goals and hypotheses, the following paragraphs look at Poland's media and democracy research monitoring capabilities, both regarding scholarly interests and expertise alongside research dynamics and a set of potential cultural path dependencies via impact and applied research dynamics. Following the article's goals and design, the overall goal is to adapt the three related critical cultural junctures into the associated media and democracy researchers' culture.

4.1. Scholarly Interests in Media and Democracy

Figure 2 shows Polish research interests in academic publications in four of Mediadelcom's democratic checks and balances (2000–2020). On the surface, media and democracy research in the studied period focused on journalism, with a high level of interest in media-political and economic relationships. Beyond the quantitative estimations of the scholarly database, several international research projects have also contributed to the dominant role of journalism studies in exploring Poland's journalism culture. Among the subjects for empirical and comparative journalism quality evaluation have been ideal journalism roles, standards and practices as perceived by media professionals and researchers.

For instance, research publications and projects led by Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska (Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe, 2010–2013; Professional Journalistic Cultures in Russia, Poland and Sweden, 2011–2014) or Agnieszka Stępińska (The Global Journalist in the 21st Century, 2009; Journalism Students Around the Globe, 2012–2016; The Journalistic Role Performance, 2013–ongoing) have emphasized the mismatch between normative visions of media and democracy vs journalism practice in Polish newsrooms. While journalism visions, market conditions, and media's roles in society have become the central emphasis, there has been an evident research gap in qualitatively reflecting on organizational media conditions.
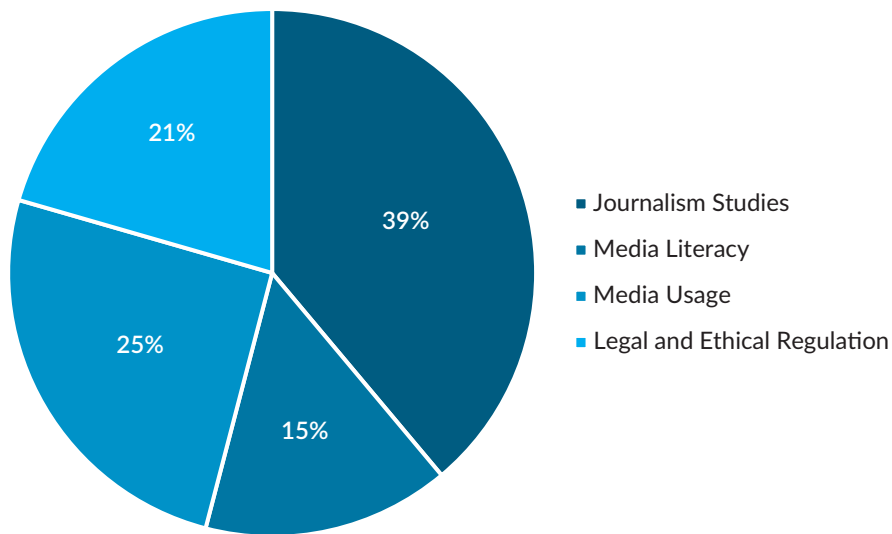
Figure 2. The scholarly interests of media and democracy researchers in percentage (*N* = 1,000). Source: Głowacki et al. (2022a, p. 366).

The Mediadelcom study has further noted that empirical validation of journalism conditions has focused on the holistic Polish media system, with only 6% of publications relating to journalists daily working conditions and 1% of scholarly publications on workforce diversity (e.g., gender, language, and social class; Głowacki et al., 2022a, p. 353).

Looking at the legal and self-regulation research interest, there is a focus on normative journalism standards, with the dominant theory and normative narrative, also across other checks and balances domains (Figure 3). The overall barrier to transforming scholarly expertise has been overcoming systemic theoretical challenges
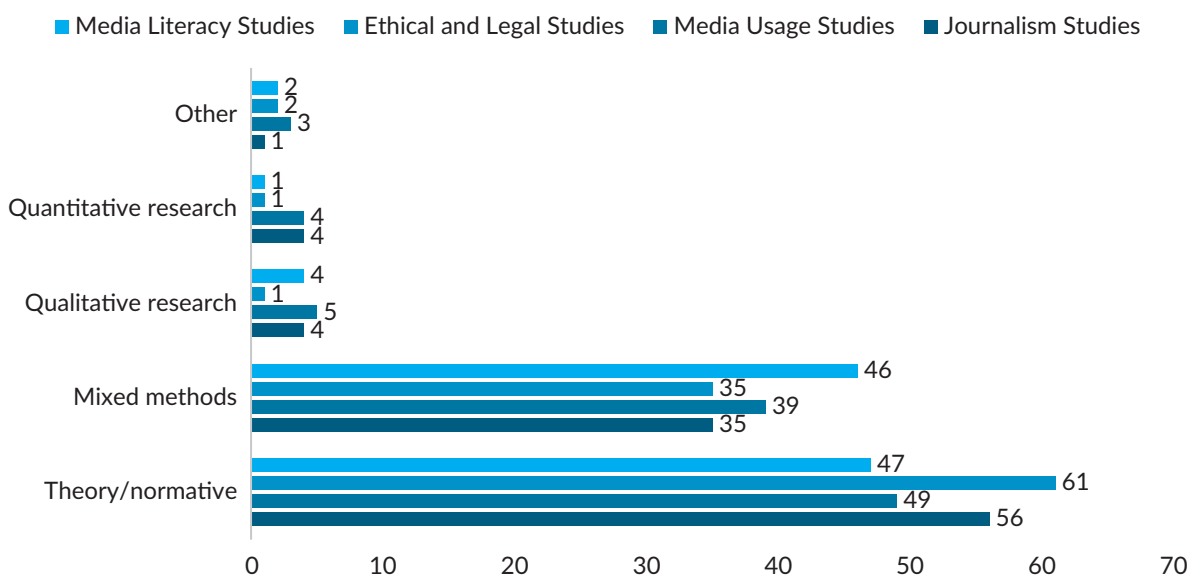
Figure 3. The scholarly orientations in percentage (*N* = 1,000). Source: Głowacki et al. (2022a, p. 369).

and engaging in qualitative methods research, which generates obstacles to accessing and understanding the factual newsroom processes. The scholarly database data identifies the importance of research and expertise beyond the intellectual work, with the highest number of applied research initiatives by researchers collaborating with regulatory bodies, public service media, and non-governmental knowledge/wisdom advice (Głowacki et al., 2022a, pp. 358–359). Scholarly advisors of critical policy advice include Karol Jakubowicz, Beata Klimkiewicz, Stanisław Jędrzejewski, Alicja Jaskiernia, Tadeusz Kowalski, and Jędrzej Skrzypczak.

4.2. The Dynamics of Media and Democracy Research

There are at least two ways to monitor research capabilities and related junctures in the countries studied. One data set aims to illustrate changing researchers' patterns of interest concerning the critical cultural junctures in three highly related areas: technology, politics, and society. Nevertheless, there is also a call for a more in-depth analysis of critical cultural moments as monitoring capabilities adapt and change. Firstly, the scholarly database of 2000–2020 publications shows quantitative evidence of the continuity of media and democracy research. Figure 4 illustrates the number of studies relating to Mediadelcom's bibliographical dataset for Poland, with an observable rise of media and democracy research with potential turning points in the aftermath of 2010 and 2015 onwards. On the surface, the increase in journalism studies and media competencies and regulation areas via turning points have widely been acknowledged because of media technology's changes towards digital media and the erosion of traditional broadcasting and the press. The number of new theories and communications shifts toward more participatory and engaged media has become the center of researchers' interest from 2010 onwards (Hofman, 2016; Mielczarek, 2007). Another visible trend in the period studied
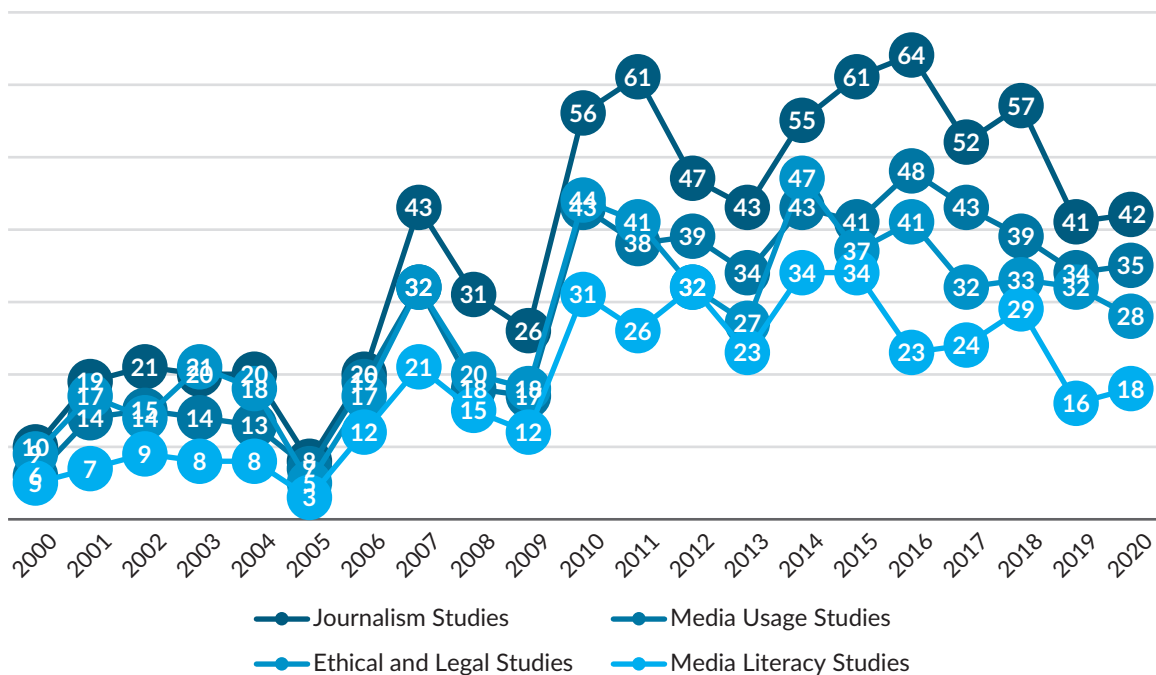
Figure 4. Dynamics and continuity of media and democracy research in Poland (*N* = 1,000). Source: Głowacki et al. (2022a, p. 370).

has been researchers' reactions to democratic media law and strong media-political relations, with studies reflecting insufficient public service media independence alongside regulatory and cultural threats to media pluralism and inclusion (Castro Herrero et al., 2017; Jaskiernia & Pokorna-Ignatowicz, 2017; Klimkiewicz, 2015; Węglińska, 2021).

While the critical cultural junctures in politics and society have explained communications and media trends, the overall contributions have been reactive. Only a few studies of applied research and policy recommendations are identified primarily in the journalism and media literacy domains. Journalism studies have focused mainly on market trends, changes in media competencies, and public service media conditions (Kononiuk, 2019; Kowalski, 2014; Szot, 2010), but there has been a research gap in exploring the historical divisions of the journalistic communities and the systemic qualitative investigation of media polarization and media's organizational culture (Donders, 2021; Mellado, 2021). Similarly, the dynamics of research interests in media accountability systems have shown the dominant role of normative views on journalism ethics and communications rights, constituting approximately 70% of Poland's database of scholarly publications. At the same time, there has been low scholarly engagement in establishing press councils, establishing media ombudsman-like institutions, and generating support for the online tools and practices of monitoring the media (Głowacki et al., 2022a, p. 353; Kurkovski & Sidyk-Furman, 2022).

4.3. The Living Cultural Path Dependencies

Looking at conditions for media and democracy research dynamics and interests, we argue that Mediadelcom's data needs further explanation from the side of critical junctures and cultural changes in media and democracy studies over the last two decades. To this end, the conditions of democratic media research go beyond the scholarly database with a potential set of cultural dimensions, for which we coin the phrase "the living cultural path dependencies" across Poland's research and monitoring communities.

On the surface, Poland's communications and media scholarship has gone through lengthy processes of fragmentation across various socio-political theories and methodologies, which are still in the theoretical and methodological stabilization stage (Jabłonowski & Jakubowski, 2014). Before the recognition of media and communications research as an autonomous discipline in 2011, there had been an observable integration of academic centers across the country which resulted in the creation of the Polish Communication Association with an English Scopus-based, open-access, biannual journal entitled *Central European Journal of Communication* (Głowacki et al., 2022). The Polish Communication Association activities have further contributed to research growth across a wide range of working and networking research sections and the rise of international meetings and conferences, such as the Central and Eastern European Media conferences and the Polish Communication Association congresses (2008 onwards) alongside several members becoming involved in the activities of the International Communication Association and the European Communication Research and Education Association.

In addition to recent autonomy and scholarly communities' integration, higher education policies and reforms have reflected on media and democracy research conditions alongside shifts in communications and media paradigms (Hofman, 2016). Looking at the last two decades, one can identify systemic reforms associated with the Ministry of Science and Higher Education to increase Polish researchers' competitiveness globally. The policies of the Civic Platform and the Polish People's Party political coalition

were discontinued after the political elections of 2015 with the new guidelines of research quality and excellence evaluation by the Science and Education ministers. The Law and Justice governments have established a new list for scholarly journals evaluation, with low support for media and communications journals, as compared to other social science disciplines such as political studies, linguistics sociology, and Catholic religion studies. In line with recent political change and societal liberal vs conservative polarization, uncovering these conditions for media and democracy research would require more in-depth systemic and content-based scholarly journal evaluation.

One of the most potentially critical cultural path dependencies in the periods and critical junctures studies has been the funding of media and democracy research. Regardless of the government's policies and liberal vs conservative orientations, the turns of the 2010s research internationalization and scholarly integration have resulted in Poland's participation in the first significant European study with a comparative, systemic, and technological change nature, funded by the European Commission. Since media and communications became autonomous, there has been an observable rise in the number of research funds by Narodowe Centrum Nauki (the National Science Center), Narodowy Program Rozwoju Humanistyki (the National Program for the Development of the Humanities), Narodowe Centrum Badań i Rozwoju (the National Center for Research and Development), and the Ministry of Education and Science, in the areas of digital and political communications, media policies, media and religion, alongside public service media technological transformations.

While the rise of research project experiences has on a large scale potentially influenced media scholars' skills and knowledge of new media research methodology, open-access policies have yet to become the dominant publishing practice. Scholarly journals are becoming available online free of charge; yet, most research outcomes in all four media and democracy research areas are functional as paid content: 67% of journalism studies, 62% of media users' studies, and 65% of academic publications in media literacies and regulation. On top of that, the analysis of scholarship across the critical junctures further addresses the ongoing trends in sharing academic works in scholarly publications rather than semi-academic reports for policymakers and the industry. While the evaluation of science excellence from 2015 onwards has resulted in a noticeable shift from academic book publications towards scholarly journals, most available national journals are not indexed in the international scholarly database, such as Scopus, the Web of Science, and the Social Science Citation Index. At the same time, the data shows a decline in scholarly expertise offered to—and funded by—the National Broadcasting Council (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji, 2023).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article aims to look at and critically overview the monitoring capabilities of media and democracy research in Poland. Looking at the monitoring capabilities concepts, the goal has been to position researchers as critical agents in deliberative communication's knowledge share, wisdom, and applied research (meaning). By applying the foundations of monitoring capability methodologies, we use time-related frames, understood as the critical junctures and potential cultural path-dependencies, in researching Polish media and democracy. On the surface, the methodology of Mediadelcom has offered ground for mapping the checks and balances measures concerning journalism studies, media regulation, accountability alongside users, and journalism competencies and literacies. This has revealed research gaps in studies of media literacies and qualitative studies of media organizations (daily work practices, the social

and local contexts, mindsets, and rituals). The database of publications ($N = 1{,}000$, from 2000 to 2020) provided quantitative findings on researchers' interests and changes experienced through technology, media-political relationships, and the cultural clash of Western values and methodologies.

The findings from Mediadelcom's study of Poland have been grouped between the three sides of media and democracy research monitoring capabilities to address the quality criteria alongside the dynamics, adaptation, and practical (policymaking and advice) side of scholarly engagement. With most studies associated with the journalism studies approach, the dataset has proven the overall focus on ideal media standards and roles as perceived by scholars and journalists interviewed within national and comparative international studies (surveys and semi-structured interviews). At the same time, the potential of journalism culture understanding has focused on journalism theories concerning key relative characteristics of media systems rather than empirical studies of media organizations and organizational values and the newsrooms' daily strategies and cultures. Similarly, other normative democratic checks and balances have reflected the systemic external changes in media economics adaptation and the global shifts towards digital and data-driven practices and technologies. The rise of scholarly interests in line with critical technological junctures followed research interest evolution in examining communications patterns change and socio-political contexts. While Poland's Mediadelcom data filtered via the critical junctures has shown a high number of academic publications as a response to the global media and technology change, there has been only limited evidence of scholarly resources responding with advice for online media accountability literacies as the online media and user-generated criticism practices evolved. The same challenge has been in the media regulation research domain, with the clash of regulatory and cultural implementation of media pluralism and public service media innovation and independence. The monitoring capability of media policy shifts in the aftermath of the 2015 political change has resulted in critical assessments of Poland's democracy decline. These have been highlighted by non-governmental international and national media freedom monitoring organizations, with rather reactive and normative researchers' response to technology and politics alongside the systemic decrease in scholarly media regulation and self-regulation applied research and expertise in the ongoing media and democracy debates.

While this article has explored the dynamics of media and democracy research across critical cultural junctures, the dataset has further called for a critical reexamination of Poland's media and communications research and science conditions. Among the potentially relevant cultural path dependencies have been the division and fragmentation of media and democracy theories and methodologies, typical for newly recognized communications and media research as a separate research discipline. Media and communications studies in Poland became autonomous in the corresponding shifts of legacy media going digital with rapid researchers' integration via the Polish Communication Association, the *Central European Journal of Communication*, and the professionalization of other scholarly journals. Observing new media and communications tendencies in the related critical junctures came during the initial large international research projects alongside the intellectual engagement in international conferences and associations, focusing on Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. While evaluating scholarly quality and excellence has become a subject of systemic policy change at the government level, scholarly publications on media and democracy are mostly academic sources with only a few emerging practices of open-access journals and indexation in international scholarly databases. The Polish case study has proved that there are key challenges to finding, accessing, and making the meaning of media and democratic discourse. The main two are the reactive nature of media and communications studies as a whole and cultural path dependencies, as

typified by limited academic engagement in the knowledge shared with other democratic stakeholders (policymakers, media managers, and non-governmental organizations).

Researching researchers via monitoring capabilities is critically important in countries where democratic discourses and traditions have been challenged by illiberal turns, socio-political polarization, and public service media's governmentalization. The multiplication of democratic discourses in Poland and the ongoing tensions between liberal values and conservative thinking create a complex research environment, with the researchers standing up actively for human, media, and democracy rights, and positioning themselves in evaluating the academic potential of wisdom and applied research. The analysis of critical cultural junctures and the view of researchers' cultural path dependencies call for more in-depth investigations of the fabric of media and democracy research. This is especially true considering the potential social and ideological polarization of scholarly communities in connection with the quality evaluation and funding of research projects at the national levels. There is also an interrelated ongoing call to fill in the research gaps, especially in the context of providing more findings that are based on empirical (quantitative, mixed) data, and more collaboration with media and related high-tech industries (in studying people in organizations, digital and data-driven strategies). Finally, the future's key challenge might be to look at scholarly communities and their own systemic and cultural adaptation, emphasizing researchers' mindsets and generational shifts in creating impact and the meaning of future media and democracy research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in DataDOI at https://doi.org/10.23673/re-392 and they are part of the EU financed project MEDIADELCOM (https://www.mediadelcom.eu)

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Cogitatio

Who Watches the Watchdog? Understanding Media Systems as Information Regimes

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Abstract

This article explores institutions that monitor news media performance. It opens up critical inquiry into how knowledge about media systems is shaped, shared, and bounded in society. Using Sweden as an illustrative and data-rich case, we first map the overall media monitoring structure in Sweden. Second, we examine the kind of knowledge and data about media that monitoring institutions produce, including their motives and the underlying values they support. Third, we extrapolate questions about implicit and explicit motives to participate in an "information regime." Fourth, by means of media system theory, we discuss the international relevance of the Swedish case to understand media monitoring systems in other parts of the world.

Keywords

democracy; governance; media development; media monitoring; media regimes; media systems; Sweden

1. Introduction

How well news media fulfils its democratic roles to inform citizens, provide diversity of opinions, and act as a watchdog is one of the oldest questions in media studies. Therefore, media monitoring is regarded as a central activity that enables societies to govern the media system and hold media accountable for its performance (e.g., Tomaz & Trappel, 2022). However, despite recognizing the centrality of the monitoring role, the actors who monitor media and produce information about media's conduct and performance are rarely discussed.

"Governance" is commonly defined as mechanisms put in place to organize media systems in accordance with media policy debates (Freedman, 2008). In the academic debate, the issue of media governance has

been related to various aspects of regulation and policy (Puppis, 2010)—that is, the monitoring bodies, press and advertising councils, and public service value tests—that are used to ensure media complies with "good citizenship" (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004). The challenges associated with media monitoring include globalization and digitalization, affecting "who" and "what" is being monitored.

In this article, we do not study mechanisms of governance, but rather take a closer look at the institutions that produce information about the media, hence rendering the media and its performance visible. There is a growing recognition that a wide range of actors (beyond the central media policy institutions) participate in media monitoring activities (Ali & Duemmel, 2019). This includes a range of organizations that contribute to upholding a commercial market (Peters & Pierre, 1998) by producing reliable information about media's performance and its product quality (e.g., circulation numbers, subscriptions, page views). It concerns not just news media's own powers to produce and disseminate information (Ali & Puppis, 2018), but also the increasing presence (and potential bias) of commercial consulting agencies in the monitoring of industry performance and policy effects (Collin et al., 2021). Collectively, we can characterize these information producers as the "information regime" (Anand & Peterson, 2000) of the media system, effectively contributing to an infrastructure of media accountability that may differ in design across countries and political traditions (Eberwein et al., 2017).

Therefore, the "forms" of information production and control can vary, ranging from legally regulated instruments of governance to ethical codes of conduct and "the disciplines of the market" (McQuail, 2003, p. 96). In an increasingly digitalized media market, one could also acknowledge the affordances of digital publishing platforms and proprietary tools for online data analytics that dictate what type of metrics on media conduct can be created. While news production traditionally was a geographically bounded concern, recent discussions include how algorithmic news dissemination on social media platforms should be monitored (Meese & Bannerman, 2022; Meese & Hurcombe, 2021; Napoli, 2015; Stockmann, 2022), and there is a general concern that monitoring methods and capabilities of regulatory bodies lag behind the technological development (Ots, 2014).

Previously, media scholars have shown an interest in the structure of media information regimes, yet they have focused on the intricate functioning of commercial advertising markets, which is dependent on a constant feed of standardized user data (Kosterich & Napoli, 2016; Webster, 2010). However, we argue that "journalism" and news production are not merely subject to the pressures of the advertising markets and dominant audience measurement standards. In its role in societies and media systems, news media is connected to the expectations of a broad range of more loosely organized actors that to various extents evaluate the performance of news organizations on specific parameters and to certain expectations and standards. The monitoring activities of these actors make the media's performance transparent, allowing society to watch the watchdog and hold it accountable.

In this line of reasoning, using the case of Sweden as an example, the purpose of this article is to map and qualitatively explore monitoring institutions in the media information regime. While the objective is not to provide an empirically exhaustive inventory of all monitoring institutions in the media system, this effort allows us to conceptually widen the outlook on media monitoring and critically reflect on the breadth of media monitoring institutions as well as their motives and focus in making news media performance visible. We discuss the coherence and risks in this information production and how it enables society to govern

news media performance. Identifying the main monitoring institutions, as well as the types of information produced and with which purpose allows this article to contribute to a broader discussion about media governance and the boundaries of stakeholder cognition of the media market and its democratic function.

2. Emergence and Structure of Information Regimes: Theory and Literature Review

To describe and analyze the ecosystem of actors monitoring media society, we draw upon the notion of information regimes. The concept of information regimes is drawn from sociology, where scholars have taken considerable interest in how organizational fields emerge and are constituted. Many of these studies have specifically focused on media and cultural industries, including studies on museums (DiMaggio, 1991), art markets (Becker, 1982), commercial radio (Leblebici et al., 1991), and contemporary music (Anand & Peterson, 2000). Common to these studies is the recognition of a shared institutionalized cognition emerging among actors, enabling them to efficiently collaborate and compete within an industry or sector. In the media field, for instance, this could manifest as any shared notions about features that characterize "good" or "valuable" news content.

Anand and Peterson (2000) pointed out the production of market information in accordance with agreed-upon standards. These standards are central for a shared cognition to emerge on what the industry is about and how the practices of its actors should be evaluated. Such information could include measures of "quality," "quantity," and "performance" produced by content producing firms or external organizations, for instance auditors. The resulting "web of information" (Anand & Peterson, 2000, p. 271), which enables actors to navigate fields of mutual activity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), is referred to as the "market information regime." Market information allows actors to observe and understand a joint playing field, to observe each other, to evaluate the performance of themselves and others, to understand the explicit and implicit rules of the game, and to direct their priorities.

It is crucial to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of the information regime. Rather than being objectively "important" or even necessarily "accurate," information tends to be produced in ways that primarily maintain the structure of the field. Once mutually accepted, the information regime also sets boundaries for actors' selective attention (Rao, 1998). Hence, aspects that fall outside the established information regime may be disregarded. The word "regime" suggests that institutionalized structures for information tend to dominate the understandings, practices, and priorities of actors at a given time. For example, in their study of the American music industry, Anand and Peterson (2000) demonstrated how the Billboard chart, the measurement of record sales, radio station rotation, genre classification of songs, and other information sources (including the used methods and measuring institutes) have long dictated the functioning of the music industry and the actions of actors involved therein.

Subsequently, media scholars have found information regimes useful to describe the emergence, structure, and rigidity of commercial media markets, particularly those relying on complex routines for audience measurement (e.g., Napoli, 2011). This includes studies on book publishing (Andrews & Napoli, 2006), television broadcasting (Kosterich & Napoli, 2016), social media (Webster, 2010), and cross-media measurement of audiences (Taneja & Mamoria, 2012) or the adoption of user "engagement" as a media content metric (Nelson, 2021).

Audience metrics are a core component of the functioning of commercial media markets. Yet, if we broaden the perspectives of media performance and value from the advertising market to the monitoring of journalistic news production within media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), there are numerous potential stakeholders, monitoring institutions, and value dimensions that may capture the functioning and performance of media in a broader societal context. The "media regimes" concept by Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) looks beyond metrics to the "institutions, norms, processes and actors that shape the expectations of media producers and consumers" (p. 16), where legal and regulatory pressures also play an important role. Like studies of the evolution of organizational fields, such as that of Leblebici et al. (1991), Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) took a specific interest in how media systems evolve in their constitution over time, particularly how traditional formats of news and newsworthiness have given way for new forms of commentary in entertainment or social media. The question of how this changes the information regime within the media regime remains unanswered.

Our view of information regime(s) borrows the systemic perspective of Williams and Delli Carpini (2011). Herein, monitoring functions (e.g., audience measurement technologies and standards) play a part in shaping the field (Nelson, 2021). If information production about media is the performative glue that holds the system together, we know surprisingly little about the monitoring of the media regime in its entirety and how it helps media firms set and negotiate their goals and accountability in relation to different groups of stakeholders.

Due to its commercial and democratic relevance, journalistic media operates in a demanding environment that requires constant production of information regarding its commercial legs; audience, advertising, finances, and other aspects that may be required by professional ideals; its organizational sense of purpose; and its legal or political consequences. Therefore, in our study on the monitoring capabilities in the field of Swedish journalistic production, the information regime is a useful lens to observe what is currently being emphasized (and considered important) in the functioning of the news media system, what is currently omitted, and what the consequences are from the perspective of a critical assessment of media's role for democratic development.

3. Method and Analytical Process

With the intention to map and qualitatively explore key monitoring institutions in the media information regime, a single case study (Yin, 2018) was conducted using Sweden as the context and the news media information regime as the focal case. Our approach was based on the method of the EU-funded project Mediadelcom (Szávai, 2023) for examining knowledge-based media governance and, more precisely, its tools for meta-analyses of existing data (Berglez & Ots, 2023; Oller Alonso & Splendore, 2023). The epistemological point of departure for this method (see Kitchin, 2014, p. 10) is the intertwined relations between *data* (abstracted elements), *information* (logically linked elements of data), *knowledge* (organized information), and *wisdom*, wherein applied and relevant knowledge is ideally extracted, not least for policymakers (Eberwein & Harro-Loit, 2023, p. 14). A single case study was suited to conduct exploratory work on social phenomena using multiple data sources (Ozcan et al., 2017) and Sweden represented a promising site for a single case study approach due to its rich availability of data (Berglez et al., 2022).

We operationalized the concept of information regime as the ecosystem of actors producing information as well as assessing, evaluating, or valuing the performance of the news media. Based on an empirical initiative to identify actors monitoring the news sector in Sweden (Berglez et al., 2022; Ots et al., 2023), we first

identified and classified the most important information-producing stakeholders, following the analytical processes used in prior studies of industries as social fields (e.g., Becker, 1982). Using a snowballing technique, we scanned academic institutions, public authorities, market research agencies, media, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for institutions whose core objective included regularly collecting and disseminating data about news media performance. We analyzed the monitoring institutions' implicit and explicit tasks in society, categorizing their institutional character. Given our exploratory purpose, a snowballing technique allowed us to identify the central actors of the field. In Sweden, a small country with 10.5 million inhabitants, the examples of active information producers are not unlimited, so there is a good possibility that a process of snowballing can achieve a relatively "complete" mapping of central actors. Prior studies of media systems have drawn links between categorizations of actors and the underlying political structures (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Consequently, we aimed to identify (a) overall categories of actors (e.g., public authorities, etc.); (b) particular (central) actors within these categories, associated with information production *impact*, in terms of material resources, reputation, and/or communicative efficiency (ability to reach out to target groups); and (c) subcategories of actors, in which minor actors, as they are potentially manifold, were instead clustered (see Table 1).

Second, we examined the information content of monitoring institutions' web pages and complemented this with database searches to classify each organization's data production, along with the dissemination, target audience, and public *accessibility* of these data. This allowed us to better understand the political, cultural, ethical, commercial, educational, and professional functions of different types of data (i.e., their knowledge/data *profiles*). Third, we interpreted the motives of monitoring institutions to perform certain roles in the information regime, including serving target groups, influencing societal processes, or gatekeeping governmental functions. Fourth, we explored the underlying *value system* (i.e., the normative ideas and knowledge being represented). These steps allowed us to analytically capture the Swedish "media monitoring field." Thereafter, we examined the field as "a totality" in terms of its *completeness*, the degree of internal and external *interaction* of the actors, and the existing *power relations*. Power relations in the media regime illuminate the blurring between monitoring and governance. While producing intelligence about media, intelligence (or lack of intelligence) may also influence and guide news media's and other stakeholders' behaviors, attention, and understanding.

4. Findings: Monitoring of the Swedish Media System

Our data collection allowed us to identify the most central producers of information regarding news media performance in Sweden. These firms collectively make up the backbone of monitoring media performance. They were sorted into five generic categories with different interests in their production and dissemination of information on news media performance, namely: (a) public authorities; (b) academic institutions; (c) commercial measurement institutes; (d) associations, interest groups, and NGOs; and (e) journalists and media firms (see Figure 1). All these categories of stakeholders can also be found at a transnational level (f) with EU institutions or international auditors compiling information on Swedish media development that is comparable with the situation in other member states.

Figure 1. Categories of information producers.

4.1. Public Authorities

A range of public authorities are interested in news media performance (see Table 1). Some are specifically assigned to collect information on and monitor certain aspects of media, including media market development (e.g., MPRT), digital market infrastructures and public access (e.g., PTS), or media literacy and protection of minors (e.g., MR). Others are only concerned with the media sector as one industry of many. The KKV monitors the risks of market concentration and market distortion, while the MSB monitors risks to civil society, including threats to journalists and the media sector's ability to handle fake news and disinformation. Public authorities use their own staff, academic experts, commercial consultants/auditors, and/or market research firms in information collection, analysis, and dissemination.

Since there is a multitude of objectives within and across authorities, the information collected, produced, used, and/or distributed may look very different. All authorities tend to monitor the production of intelligence from other information producers, such as the reports of academic institutions, legislative bodies, and international monitoring bodies. Some public authorities (e.g., MPRT and PTS) are regulatory bodies responsible for monitoring certain standards ensuring that legislation is properly implemented—for example, guaranteeing subsidies are provided to the right beneficiaries, and distribution/broadcasting permits are granted on the right basis and their requirements are met. This makes such public authorities more deeply intertwined in an information regime with structures and direct reporting links to and from other stakeholders—including media firms, measuring institutes, and research institutions. The media industry needs vital resources that the public authorities control, thus they need to participate in the information regime. Other authorities (e.g., KKV and MSB) are less structured and standardized in their data

production but strive to continuously expand their understanding of the media, for instance, by funding relevant research initiatives.

According to the principle of public access, institutions under the administrative jurisdiction of the state, region, or municipality are generally obliged to make their data and documents accessible to the public on request. Beyond that, several authorities active in the media and communication area have a specific task to disseminate their insights about media developments to stakeholders in society.

Table 1. Dominant institutions per category (examples).

Public authorities	Academic institutions and consortia	Commercial measurement institutes	Journalists and media firms	Industry associations, interest groups and NGOs
Swedish Press and Broadcasting Authority (MPRT) Swedish Post and Telecom Authority (PTS) Competition Authority (KKV) The Swedish Media Council (MR) Swedish Agency for Accessible Media Statistics Sweden Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) Swedish government/ Ministry of Culture	Swedish universities Academic research institutes (e.g., Nordicom, Fojo Media Institute)	Media measurement institutes (e.g., Kantar Sifo, MMS) Media auditors (e.g., KIA index, Tidningsstatistik) Market analysts (e.g., IRM Institute for Advertising and Media Statistics) Consultancy firms (e.g., PwC, Deloitte) ech platforms (e.g., Meta, Alphabet, Hubspot)	Trade press (e.g., Dagens Media, Resumé) News media houses (e.g., Schibsted, Bonnier) Public service media (e.g., SR, SVT, UR)	Swedish Union of Journalists and Journalisten (media union) Think tanks (e.g., Arenagruppen, Timbro) Social media groups with a media purpose Institute for Media Studies (IMS) Publicistklubben Association of Advertisers Association of Investigative Journalists Swedish Internet Foundation
International				
European Platform of Regulatory Authorities (EU institution) European Audiovisual Observatory (EU institution) European Parliament's Public Opinion Monitoring Unit	Media Pluralism Monitor Reuters Institute Euromedia Research Group			World Association of News Publishers

Public authorities' mission is typically to safeguard the implementation of Swedish law in various areas, including competition law, media law, and telecommunications law, where information collection about news media is essential to, for instance, understand aspects of market concentration, monitor the use and eligibility for media subsidies, and allocate broadcasting licenses. However, the assessments are quite different. Some regulatory bodies (e.g., MPRT and PTS) have strict quantitative indicators of media quality—for example, percentage of own editorial production in a newspaper, economic industry performance, household coverage in an area, or share of population with broadband access in an area. Other institutions active in research financing, risk assessment, or media literacy (e.g., KKV, MSB, Media Council) apply more qualitative, opaque assessments and indicators on a case-to-case basis. In short, the quality of information is determined by the extent to which it allows the institution to perform its assigned task.

The overall values are grounded in the Swedish constitution: accessibility (e.g., PTS, MR), diversity (e.g., MPRT), fair competition (KKV), consumer protection (e.g., MR, MSB), and impartiality (e.g., MPRT). The general principle is that information should be made publicly available, unless it contains personal data or is classified for other reasons.

4.2. Academic Institutions and Academic Consortia

Important monitoring stakeholders are outlined in Table 1 and include universities, university colleges, and semi-academic institutions as important monitoring stakeholders. These stakeholders provide Swedish society with relevant data about media and its performance. While we explicitly mention academic institutions focusing on journalism or media and communication sciences, other academic institutions also conduct important monitoring work—for instance, in the fields of business, law, informatics, and data science—as well as an increasing number of cross-disciplinary research initiatives.

The production of data and knowledge mostly takes place within the scientific discipline of media and communications, which could be part of the humanities and social sciences. However, relevant knowledge about media in society is also produced by scholars from other disciplines, such as history, sociology, informatics, management, or linguistics. These data are produced through scientific practice. While "doing research" is becoming a wider concept for collecting and analyzing data, universities' and university colleges' research activities are supposed to represent the most advanced forms of research. As in many other countries, the approaches to media studies at various universities might differ in terms of different sub-fields, theories, or methods—for example, the tradition of statistical research, discourse studies, or whether the focus is on national or international media developments.

Whereas some research data are publicly accessible, such as reports and research publications, other data are not. This access is blocked due to paywalls and a lack of open access. Academic researchers' interest in monitoring media needs to be understood in relation to research funding. In Sweden, this relies to a large extent on individual researchers' ability to compete for grants from external funding agencies (Fagerlind Ståhl, 2021). Most of these agencies are set up to allocate research funding from the Swedish state. Traditionally, media and communication research would be associated with fundamental research—that is, research that is primarily relevant to other scholars and thus stays within the academic system. This kind of research is either funded directly by the state (which provides the universities with resources for research) or through various bodies, such as the Swedish Research Council and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond. In this

context, the most important quality indicator of whether the produced knowledge about media in society has made an impact is dissemination through peer-reviewed journals and/or books. Other tasks are increasingly encouraged by employers (universities), such as public outreach activities, where the results are supposed to be disseminated to the public and/or particular target groups outside academia. However, success in the peer-review system is what best paves the way for career development and/or different forms of influence in the university system.

To mobilize academic researchers to solve grand societal challenges, the Swedish government has geared funding towards more delimited research areas and specialized funding agencies (Swedish Government, 2020b), including innovation (e.g., Vinnova), industry-academic collaboration (e.g., Knowledge Foundation), and sustainability (e.g., Formas). Several EU research programs are geared towards similar goals, namely the practical relevance of the produced data and knowledge. Here, the "quality indicators" refer to the ability to put the produced data into practice for the sake of innovation and/or to implement it in some kind of industrial production.

In most academic research activities—not least those associated with fundamental research in media and communication sciences—the information generated about news media performance in society is connected to some idea about *democratic ideals* (e.g., deliberative democracy, equality, individual rights versus the state). Nevertheless, this value is challenged by other values, such as innovation power (e.g., Vinnova), practical relevance (e.g., Knowledge Foundation), and economic growth. Another increasingly important value is that research should be good for sustainable development and internationalization (Swedish Government, 2020a).

4.3. Commercial Measurement Institutes

The commercial market research sector (see Table 1) has been well documented in studies of information regimes. In Sweden, several national research agencies (e.g., MMS, Kantar Sifo, and IRM Institute for Advertising and Media Statistics) populate the field of audience measurement. Tech companies such as Meta and Alphabet, are also monitoring bodies, as they provide data collection and analysis of for instance media usage patterns, website performance, and social media engagement. Other stakeholders take more of an auditing role, verifying the authenticity of reported digital traffic figures (e.g., KIA index) or physical newspaper circulation figures (e.g., Tidningsstatistik). Their monitoring data predominantly consist of statistical survey or panel data. Common data concern media usage—that is, newspaper readership, TV and radio program ratings, web page visitors, their duration, and levels of engagement. However, there are also other types of studies of media usage, including more long-term analyses of transitions between media forms and willingness to pay for news media products.

Concerning accessibility, as these are commercial enterprises, data on media performance are their products, and access to data detailed statistics and analyses is predominately restricted to paying clients. However, to some extent, some of these companies disseminate results in overview to the public primarily as a form of PR. One concrete example is Kantar Sifo's quarterly review of its measurement of Swedish politicians' social media activities (i.e., Mediemätaren).

The primary motive for commercial agencies to produce data on media performance is the demand from advertisers for unbiased and verified audience figures. This information determines the value of the news

media product to advertisers. However, this does not exclude other motives of commercial agencies, which are more about contributing to society in a broader sense.

Commercial values dominate media auditors and measurement institutes, who primarily produce the type of information for which they believe there is a sufficiently large and profitable demand. While these institutes have no specific aim to monitor the media's democratic performance, the demand for their services will always, to some degree, overlap with the media's role as the fourth estate. Measurement institutes generally trade in trustworthiness—that is, the information they produce is reliable, accurate, and accepted by media industry stakeholders. Commercial institutes can also evolve media monitoring by their innovation in data collection methods, or the type of reports and analyses offered to buyers.

4.4. Media Firms

Media firms include companies and/or media houses active on the Swedish media market. Media organizations produce a myriad of information about themselves. To function and run their own operations, they need to know how production and sales plans are followed; how the media products are appreciated, viewed, clicked, and commented on; who is working and when; how costs of operation are amounting; and how budgets are met and profits (or losses) compounding. Some of this eventually reaches the market as financial information that all stock-listed firms need to deliver. Media firms are a bit peculiar, as they also conduct substantial journalistic monitoring and information production about themselves and their industry peers. News producers regularly publish news and commentary about their achievements (e.g., economic results, audience development, industry awards, and other recognition) and reflect on leaked information about their shortcomings (e.g., organizational issues and adherence to ethical standards). Furthermore, they monitor the performance of their industry peers by producing cultural critiques and information about their products and ethical conduct. In addition, a whole industry segment—the trade press—has made its business idea to monitor and comment on media industry developments and performance.

While some data (e.g., annual reports) are publicly accessible, a great deal of monitoring data is not public but is used privately among media houses. In some cases, researchers could access these data, but the media actors decide what data could be accessible, how, and the cost. Yet, to some extent, the rules differ for public service companies.

The motives behind some of these information-producing activities are linked to participation in financial markets (e.g., annual reports) and adherence to accreditation standards (e.g., sustainability reports). The primary audience for this information is the *financial market*, which requires information that enables the assessment of financial performance, value, and risk. Financial reporting is required by law.

Moreover, media firms participate in the markets for audiences. Consequently, audience numbers, characteristics, and actions are continuously gathered and registered via analytics interfaces (e.g., Google or other systems depending on the media channel). The users of this information are advertisers (if audiences are sold directly), authorities (if the media receives subsidies), tech firms like Google, or advertising networks that may resell the audiences to advertisers. A traffic auditor (here, Kantar Sifo) may be assigned as an external party to verify the accuracy of the audience figures.

Information may also target readers or viewers through a media firm's editorial work. Op-eds and cultural analyses have the ambition to exercise critique—that is, to assess other publishers' quality (or lack thereof) in reporting, political arguments, and cultural productions. Investigative journalism may scrutinize the ethical standards of other organizations and expose moral/ethical transgressions (often related to professional codes of conduct) or legal convictions (in all industries, but particularly in the media industry). However, while the media conducts self-monitoring within the industry, it is also criticized for what it omits to report. Repeated failures by news organizations to show transparency and hold themselves and their peers accountable to the same ethical standards they demand from others have been named as a possible explanation for why public trust in journalists is relatively weak compared to other vocational categories (Huitfeldt, 2023). As discussed, the information production by media firms is guided by a mix of the commercial logic of the financial markets, advertising markets, and the professional ideals of investigative journalism and commentary.

4.5. Industry Associations, Interest Groups, and Non-Governmental Organizations

NGOs and industry associations are institutions closely connected to the news media industry that sustain some degree of independence and autonomy. Some are well organized—such as institutes (e.g., Institute for Media Studies [IMS]), unions (e.g., Swedish Union of Journalists), trade organizations (e.g., Swedish National Association of Advertisers), NGOs (e.g., Swedish Internet Foundation), and think tanks (e.g., Timbro, Arena Group)—while others primarily operate as networks and social media groups.

The data produced could be diverse, involving reports/report series (e.g., unions, institutes, NGOs, and think tanks), books (e.g., think tanks and NGOs), journalistic material (e.g., unions), and awards for journalistic excellence (e.g., NGOs). Some of these have a broad remit, including studying how media acts, works, and functions, and stimulating a fact-based debate about media's role in society (e.g., IMS). Other institutions produce information to draw attention to their particular sphere of interest, such as labor market issues and journalists' working conditions (e.g., Swedish Union of Journalists), or promoting and facilitating certain practices, including investigative reporting (e.g., FSJ). In this category of media monitoring, a rather broad interpretation of the concept of "research" can be found, guaranteeing that the actions uphold acceptable quality.

In the context of accessibility, for most actors, the production of data and making it publicly accessible is part of their own objectives, promoting certain perspectives, or setting their interests on the public agenda. The motive for producing data about media transformation is commonly to promote and protect the interests of a particular group within the media system, to influence policymakers, or to shape public opinion on an issue. Altogether, this makes the monitoring-focus of these stakeholders often selective or ideologically driven.

5. Discussion: Scope, Interaction, and Power in Media Monitoring

Through this article, we set out to understand how knowledge about media development is formed in society using Sweden as an illustrative example. More specifically, we sought to explore the media monitoring institutions and their motives and focus when making news media performance visible. Our overview of the main monitoring actors shows the width of current information production and assessment, indicating that there are many parallel objectives and cognitions regarding what constitutes quality in media conduct.

With our broad mapping of Swedish monitoring institutions as a point of departure, we now discuss the implications regarding how information producers and the information produced structure our cognition of the media system. Previous studies (e.g., Kosterich & Napoli, 2016; Taneja & Mamoria, 2012) have made deep dives into narrowly defined, quantified, data-rich, and closely standardized media monitoring verticals that represent interactions between closely interconnected groups of stakeholders for certain defined purposes. However, our overview depicts a much more eclectic, unstandardized, and uncoordinated execution of monitoring exercises. Using the Swedish case, in the subsections that follow, we point out three areas of importance in the monitoring of media systems.

5.1. The Scope of Information

Illustrated by our empirical outlook on the case of Sweden, we see the collective monitoring capability not as being the output of a deliberate and coherent design, but rather as a patchwork of overlapping or complementary interest areas, along with monitoring practices that emerge and evolve along with the industry. Some actors' motives are to guard the state's/society's interests, whereas others are to target the commercial markets, although collectively they set the cognitive boundaries for what aspects of media's performance will be made visible to stakeholders within the media system.

According to previous research, the audience measurement industry is well developed. Yet, from a societal view, where media is tasked to inform, educate, investigate, and stimulate democratic debate, it is highly relevant to ask what we know or should know regarding media's performance. Despite the Swedish case's richness of information, the available scope of information does not provide a clear answer.

Besides the commercial audience market, authorities are traditionally concerned with monitoring the market functioning as well as ensuring the economic conditions for media to be published, for media to be accessed by the public, and risks associated with, for instance, disinformation. Nevertheless, authorities are reluctant to monitor or grade the quality of journalistic performance and academic institutions have not shown an extensive interest in trying to assess journalistic quality in Sweden. Qualitative aspects of news content and journalistic conduct instead rely to a large extent on the publications, debates, and awards of NGOs (e.g., IMS, Association of Investigative Journalists, the Swedish Union of journalists, and the Media Ombudsman). The critique raised on news media's reluctance to report and reflect on negative aspects of its social performance and the consequences of its journalistic reporting (Huitfeldt, 2023) is not unique to Sweden (see, e.g., Loit et al., 2017) and has been named a weakness in the accountability infrastructure of the media (Eberwein et al., 2017).

5.2. The Coexistence of Parallel Logic and the Level of Interaction Between Monitoring Bodies

Our mapping of the Swedish case also illuminates the coexistence of parallel logics in the media system (Berglez et al., 2022). We use this term to illustrate that varying monitoring tasks are conducted with different users in mind and serving different purposes—some information may target advertising markets, while other information could target financial markets, regulators, politicians, audiences, or journalists. This may include input for the design and evaluation of regulatory measures, for the functioning of commercial media markets, for the objectives of news organizations, and for the values and ideals of journalists. These logics may not necessarily be conflicting, but do not align and may serve different functions within the

media system. This means that the overall information regime of the media system does not align to a single standard and does not have a dominant owner or coordinating body.

Previous studies have taken an interest in specific types of media information (Kosterich & Napoli, 2016; Taneja & Mamoria, 2012), illustrating a high division of labor between information producers. Therefore, it is relevant to discuss the interaction across monitoring bodies and the triangulation of information.

Within media monitoring categories, we identified relations between different media and communication or journalism research departments across Sweden in terms of joint research projects, seminars, conferences, etc. For example, the TRAIN collaboration for young researchers involves most media and communication departments in Sweden. In the category "industry associations, interest groups, and NGOs" (Table 1), there is interaction between the political think tanks (Timbro, Arena) in terms of ongoing debates.

Across media monitoring categories, we identified established relations between academic institutions, consortia, and public authorities. A natural reason is that some of the public authorities (e.g., MSB) fund academic research. Another form of interaction is the recruitment of academics as experts in public authorities' projects. Public authorities with the purpose of funding research and innovation have a mission to strengthen cross-sector collaboration, communication, and activities between academics and industry.

Furthermore, there is a temporal dimension of interaction. While some audience metrics may cause immediate and direct effects on the actions of media firms (e.g., whether a particular news article is moved to the top page of a website or not), others (e.g., certain academic studies) may shape the media system indirectly and in the long term by incrementally adjusting the academic discourse or influencing legislators. Viewing the entire media system as a meta-level information regime allows us to detect how different logic evolves over time and influences stakeholders' actions.

5.3. The Power and Influence of Monitoring Bodies and Their Information

Our final reflection concerns the links between (a) the production of information and associated analyses; and (b) institutions that exercise governance in the sense that they have the authority to control, guide, or, in other ways, hold media and journalists accountable for their performance. From a governance perspective—many information producers in the media system have no jurisdictional power—they are merely information providers to, for example, legislators, authorities, media firms, and advertisers. In fact, academics, polling institutes, market research agencies, consultants, and other information producers often base their trustworthiness on a position independent from the exercise of power and from the commercial interests or legal consequences of their analyses. Nevertheless, when put into the hands of others, the information exerts various degrees of pressure on news media performance.

The media monitoring field, in terms of a field of power relations, could be understood metaphorically as a front and backstage space. On the front stage, actors are clearly visible, transparent, and willing to share their information with society as this is part of their mission. These actors are mainly public authorities and academic institutions. Backstage, we find organizations and individuals who may desire to be part of front stage activities but remain unsuccessful due to a lack of strategic skills, communication resources, or relevant

monitoring data. Moreover, backstage, we find actors who deliberately seek to operate in the "shadows" and who contribute to what Pasquale (2015) referred to as "black box society."

6. Concluding Remarks

While media *governance* is traditionally portrayed as a deliberate, rational, and planned process driven by media policy objectives and studied from policymakers' perspectives (e.g., Puppis, 2010), this article used the case of Sweden to illustrate that *monitoring* adheres to a diverse and less deliberate set of actors and practices. The article thereby aligns with the notion that governance work is conducted by a wider set of actors (Ali & Duemmel, 2019; Ali & Puppis, 2018), some of whom may not even consider their work as "monitoring." It thereby broadens the idea of an accountability infrastructure (Eberwein et al., 2017) beyond functions designed solely to hold media accountable to all the information production that contributes to making media performance transparent. It asks comparative media monitoring efforts (e.g., Tomaz & Trappel, 2022) for additional critical reflection on how cross-country differences in monitoring capability and data availability shape the results. To grasp the totality of monitoring capabilities, we need to reflect on how the information regime shapes our cognition of the news media industry and our ability to monitor and understand its complex societal role from multiple perspectives.

Consequently, this study contributes to the governance discussion with two important illustrations. First, information production is sometimes dictated by the specific information needs of institutions assigned to govern the public interest (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004). At other times, governing bodies design their tasks based on the secondary sources available. By making certain aspects of media performance observable, the media information regime sets the cognitive focus and attention of governing institutions. Regarding media governance, our study highlights the need not only to study what information is made visible, but also to critically assess the assumptions, purposes, and values underlying the data and blind spots that may be overshadowed by existing data sources and methods.

Second, if broadly accepted, measurement, monitoring, and evaluation have a performative impact (Anand & Peterson, 2000; Kosterich & Napoli, 2016). This means that even if certain data are not directly used by those who govern the news media industry, they may still affect the democratic performance of the media, for instance, if the standards for defining internet browsing sessions make news media favor and encourage certain types of audience behaviors. Finally, the Swedish case may be relevant from an international perspective, as it explains the challenges posed by extensive media monitoring regimes in mature democracies. The Swedish media model is grounded in a mixture of commercially based liberal ideals of a free and independent press, and at the same time accepting state policy interventions. This model allows diverse stakeholders to partake in media monitoring activities based on their own interests. The Swedish media monitoring landscape, with its rich data produced by numerous actors, could be perceived as a role model of sorts for other countries. However, as this study indicates, the massive and varied data production is no guarantee for effective examinations of media and journalism quality. Lessons learned from the Swedish case are that it is not enough with extensive monitoring executed by different stakeholders, but that the monitoring system also needs to focus more on filling existing gaps of knowledge and on activities related to the democratic functions of media.

According to our preliminary results, Sweden could be seen as a data-rich country with strong actors and robust infrastructures (inside and outside academia) contributing to data on a long-term basis. This makes Sweden a relevant case to study from an international perspective, in terms of a potential best practice example. Nevertheless, this might also generate certain challenges, such as information/knowledge overload and data duplication.

Conflict of Interests

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ARTICLE

A Deliberative Democracy Framework for Analysing Trust in Journalists: An Application to Italy

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Abstract

In the current public sphere, the "deliberative model of democracy" may represent both the necessary benchmark and the best lens through which to view developments in the public debate. Democracy can never become really deliberative without the active participation of news media. The assumption of this article is that if news media are to disseminate knowledge, trust in them is crucial. This article examines an aspect neglected by studies on media trust: trust in journalists. It presents the results of a longitudinal survey carried out in May and September 2020 in Italy, right at the end of the first mass Covid-19 lockdown (Wave 1) and after the first pandemic summer (Wave 2), therefore a time when there was a great need for quality information. The main findings reveal that the use of social media decreases trust in journalists; furthermore, those who mainly rely on political institutions' social media accounts for information place less trust in journalists than those who mainly rely on journalistic sources on those platforms. Instead, the use of traditional media (radio, television, newspapers) increases trust in journalists.

Keywords

deliberative democracy; information crisis; media trust; news consumption; trust in journalists

1. Introduction

An established, but often contested, academic tradition links news media and democracy by relying on the idea that the news is "the stuff which makes political action…possible" (Park, 1940, p. 678). Basically, according to this research strand, news media are meant to "aid citizens in becoming informed" (Holbert, 2005, p. 511) so that they can be "free and self-governing" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 12). This makes trust in news

media a pivotal factor at a societal and political level (Coleman, 2012; Van Dalen, 2020). Nevertheless, even when the link between news media and democracy is contested, especially because journalism studies tend to rely excessively on (Western) democratic frameworks, critics admit that journalism has been historically necessary for democracy, while it is more critical assuming that democracy is necessary for journalism (see Josephi, 2013; Zelizer, 2013).

We argue that, in the contemporary media environment, the "deliberative model of democracy" may be both the necessary benchmark and the best lens through which to view current developments of the public debate. The starting point of this article is that trust in journalists implies (is a proxy for) the trust that people have in the good quality of public debate and, consequently, in its deliberation-enhancement ability.

Our article deals with trust in Italian journalists with a particular focus on its relationship with media consumption choices. To remedy the deficiency of research on news media trust conducted using longitudinal data (see Fawzi et al., 2021), our analysis relies on an original panel survey administered to a representative sample of the Italian adult internet user population. Data collection started immediately after the lockdown due to the Covid-19 global pandemic, a period in which the need to be (well-)informed increased the public appetite for reliable news. Italy is a suitable case with regard to trust and deliberative democracy because it has traditionally recorded low levels of media trust (Newman et al., 2023), high levels of political parallelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and it also went through a severe "information crisis" during the Covid-19 pandemic (Lovari, 2020).

2. Why Deliberative Democracy?

What notoriously weakens the bond between journalism and democracy is the fact that there is no agreement on what is meant by "democracy," and thus on what is normatively expected from journalism. Indeed, by identifying four models of democracy (procedural, competitive, participatory, and deliberative), Strömbäck (2005, p. 332) states that "what might be considered to be high quality news journalism from the perspective of one model of democracy might not be the same when taken from the perspective of another."

The current public sphere is being severely affected by various threats, such as its fragmentation and polarisation (Van Aelst et al., 2017), institutional scepticism (Waisbord, 2018), and ideologically coherent "information cocoons" in which other voices are regarded as intrinsically untrustworthy (see Nguyen, 2020), to name just a few. In such an environment, the "deliberative model of democracy" may be both the necessary benchmark and the best lens through which to view current developments of the public debate.

Deliberative democracy implies that "when citizens or their representatives disagree morally, they should continue to reason together to reach mutually acceptable decisions" (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, p. 2) while no one has the right to dominate and coerce other participants (Strömbäck, 2005). Deliberation, in fact, can be defined as "mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern" (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2).

3. Deliberative Democracy and News Media

Deliberative discussions should take place among different actors, such as individual citizens, politicians, or citizens and their representatives, but democracy can never become really deliberative without the active participation of news media (Strömbäck, 2005). Indeed, by acting as *super partes*, it is journalism that should provide the arena necessary for deliberative discussions to successfully take place (Strömbäck, 2005). To achieve this goal, it is important for journalism to contribute to raising people's awareness of issues that are of public concern. It should act as a watchdog and preserve media independence and integrity from external influences of power (Gastil & Black, 2018). Clearly, these are more ideal types of journalism practices than feasible goals to achieve. However, the pivotal issue is to what extent external and partisan influences do undermine deliberative processes.

This issue may be addressed in different ways; this article faces it from the news media trust perspective: Its assumption is that for news media to disseminate common knowledge, trust in them is crucial (see Strömbäck et al., 2020). When news media cannot be trusted to deliver common knowledge, the idea of the public—understood as a collective entity possessing shared concerns—and, therefore, the preconditions of deliberation, fall apart (Coleman, 2012). Research has shown that distrust in the news media is related to the disruption of a shared reality by increasingly active news avoidance (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020) as well as polarisation (Van Dalen, 2020), and a marked preference for attitude-consistent news sources (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022).

We thus assume that trust in journalists implies (is a proxy for) the trust that people have in the good quality of public debate and, consequently, in its deliberative-enhancement ability. While we acknowledge that very high levels of trust may be problematic for a critical evaluation of information (see Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023; Usher, 2018), we maintain that journalists have to be trusted if they are to be able to set a minimally stable, common ground for public deliberation.

4. Trust in Journalists

Broadly speaking, news media trust can be defined as "the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5). When people trust news media, they are taking a risk because they are not able, or it is too expensive, to verify the received information on their own (Coleman, 2012; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005).

The above-mentioned current worrisome trends in the public sphere are closely connected with issues of trust. Features of the contemporary media environment arguably represent the greatest challenges ever to news media and news media trust because "like never before, news media today face competition for people's attention from a myriad of other sources of information" (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 140; see also Zelizer et al., 2021). Moreover, while attempts to delegitimise journalism are nothing new, they are becoming increasingly frequent in online spaces (Waisbord, 2020); in particular, they have been routinely made by populist politicians, parties, and movements (see Carlson et al., 2021; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Therefore, news media trust in the contemporary media environment is particularly fragile (Strömbäck et al., 2020), so the ability of news media to enhance deliberation becomes even more important, but also more difficult to achieve.

Although news media trust has been extensively investigated, and some broad agreement has been reached (e.g., the importance of news media consumption choices as correlates), empirical findings regarding it are far from being coherent. Among other factors, the richness and diversity of the results depend also on the granularity of the measurement used (see Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020). In this regard, it can be argued that one important aspect of research on news media trust is the definition itself of news media, which in the literature ranges from news media in general to the content of media coverage, passing through several levels of granularity (Strömbäck et al., 2020). How news media trust at these different levels of analysis is related to each other remains unclear, however. For example, a person's high level of trust in their favourite news media outlet may be entirely compatible with a very low level of trust in news media in general.

In the body of research on news media trust, there are very few studies on trust in journalists (see Fawzi et al., 2021). Williams (2012) shows that trust in news reporters, trust in news institutions, and trust in news information are differently related to news media attention across different media: While trust in news reporters is significantly associated with newspaper attention, the same does not apply to television news.

Analysis of trust in journalists makes it possible to more accurately capture citizens' judgements regarding the ability of the professional system of journalism to (still) perform a service of public utility in enhancing deliberation (see Section 3). Delving into trust in a particular unknown group of people and not in an institution means investigating whether citizens recognise journalists as professionals who perform "distinct activities charged with certain normative and functional duties…to identify a news story as an account of something that happened somewhere" (Carlson, 2017, p. 100). In other words, a citizen may distrust news media in general because they are too profit-driven or include too much entertainment. They may also distrust a specific media outlet because it is too biased or slanted. But whether a citizen distrusts news media in general or a particular media outlet, if they distrust (also) journalists, this means that they doubt the capacity of the professional system to convey reliable information useful for building a decent public debate upon stable bases. Taking trust in journalists into consideration therefore means considering the basis of social capital (see Williams, 2012). Thus, (dis)trust in journalists is a crucial—yet understudied—phenomenon to be understood.

Times of crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic—in which higher stakes and uncertainty generated a cacophony of voices (Lovari, 2020)—constitute a privileged observatory from which to examine people's perceptions of the journalistic professional system (Nelson & Lewis, 2023). While sudden and acute crises typically make immediate information necessary, and while slowly evolving ones call instead for in-depth information (Westlund & Ghersetti, 2015), the Covid-19 pandemic constituted a distinctive scenario because it created the need for both (Van Aelst et al., 2021). Conditions of information uncertainty made the element of risk—which is constitutive of news media trust (Van Dalen, 2020)—more and more salient; several studies show that the strong impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on people's everyday lives increased the need and the search for trustworthy information (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2021; Vermeer et al., 2022). This leads to our first, descriptive research question:

RQ1: To what extent do citizens trust journalists during crisis times?

5. News Media Diets and Their Deliberative Implications

Especially in times of crisis, considering trust in journalists is not enough to gauge the strength of deliberative democracy. An equally important factor needs to be considered: which citizens' media consumption choices are associated with trust in journalists. The current high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017) provides both new opportunities and challenges.

Current research shows that exposure to mainstream news media (television, radio, and newspapers) is positively correlated with news media trust, whereas exposure to online news is negatively correlated with it, although the literature is inconsistent on the matter (see Fawzi et al., 2021). It has been extensively claimed that the lack of professional gatekeepers as well as the symmetry of communication fostered in online spaces has created fertile ground for the spread of conspiracy theories, as well as dis- and misinformation (see Theocharis et al., 2021; Xiao et al., 2021); and it is widely known that these phenomena are related to the decrease of trust in mainstream actors and institutions (Waisbord, 2018). However, it can be also argued that the closeness with journalists that social media and the internet make possible can increase trust in them (see Tucker et al., 2018), although this kind of trust may be ideologically driven (see Curini et al., 2023).

Contradictory results may be explained by the heterogeneity of information content and actors existing on the internet and social media, which hamper a straightforward understanding of which kind of information users actually consume online (Fawzi et al., 2021). For this reason, besides controlling for the frequency of use of different media types (i.e., offline-born newspapers, digital-born newspapers, radio, television, and social media), in our analysis, we also control for the main sources used in each of these different media types. This novel approach allows for a more granular understanding of the link between citizens' media diets (i.e., media use patterns) and trust in news media at different levels (see Strömbäck et al., 2020), such as that in journalists. That said, our second research question is:

> RQ2: How do citizens' media diets—in terms of frequency and preferred sources—influence trust in journalists during crisis times?

6. Method

6.1. Samples

This study draws on an original panel survey self-administered with a computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) method to a representative sample of the Italian internet user population in the 18–74 age bracket. The survey was conducted by a commercial provider (SWG S.p.A), and the sample was derived from an opt-in online community directly managed by the same provider, with quotas for gender, age, education, employment situation, and region of residence. Survey participants were rewarded with non-monetary incentives.

A self-administered CAWI method (also known as web surveying) with panel respondents has some limitations that have been widely discussed in the literature: for example, self-selection of respondents and less precise representativeness (Pasek, 2015), reduced attention of respondents due to the setting, and the absence of an interviewer (Prior & Lupia, 2008).

However, web surveys with panel respondents have become very common in social science research because they have multiple advantages. For example, they are less expensive than other survey methods and, at the same time, it has been observed that they provide data whose quality, albeit lower than that of probabilistic samples, is not excessively far from that of "gold standard samples," so that CAWI surveys can be useful tools for researchers in social sciences (Zack et al., 2019, pp. 225–226). Moreover, research has shown that self-administered CAWI surveys can reduce the effects of social desirability biases (Kreuter et al., 2008). This latter advantage is germane to the specific goal of this study since both trust in social and political institutions and a lack of it may be perceived as normatively desirable (see Nelson & Lewis, 2023; Smallpage et al., 2023).

Regarding Wave 1 (W1), fieldwork was conducted from 18 to 28 May 2020. From an initial sample of 1,923 individuals, after the implementation of a rigid protocol of data-cleaning aimed at excluding speeders and negligent respondents, 1,563 participants provided complete and valid data (response rate 34%). Wave 2 (W2) data were collected between 31 August and 13 September 2020, when information was gathered from 1,353 cases (with a very satisfactory retention rate of 86.6%; see Watson & Wooden, 2006). In Italy, those two timeframes correspond to periods when the need for quality information was very strong: the end of the first mass Covid-19 lockdown (W1) and the end of the first pandemic summer (W2). The broader research project with which this study is associated comprised also a Wave 3, which is not considered here given the specific goals and research design chosen.

6.2. Statistical Analysis

To address our research questions, descriptive and regression analyses were conducted. In regard to the regression analyses, first applied was an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model based on cross-sectional data (W1), to which were added a lagged (dependent variable measured at W2) and an autoregressive (controlling for the value of the dependent variable at W1) OLS regression model in order to assess more accurately the effect of citizens' media diets on trust in journalists. The rationale here is that although cross-sectional and lagged models may aid understanding of how variables are related to each other, both may be biased when addressing causal inference. Autoregressive models help mitigate this bias (see Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Maxwell et al., 2011).

Considering the ordinal nature of the dependent variable, the most appropriate regression model would be the ordered logistic regression. Thus, the same analyses were conducted using ordered logistic regression models for robustness check. The results are consistent across models. For ease of interpretation, OLS models will be reported and discussed in what follows.

6.3. Dependent Variables

According to the model employed, the dependent variable is the level of trust in journalists found in W1 or W2. In both cases, the question asked was: "How much trust do you place in the following public institutions and actors?" The relevant item was "journalists." Answer options were no trust at all, low trust, some trust, high trust, and complete trust.

6.4. Independent Variables

The same independent variables were added to all models (excluding, of course, the autoregressive models, in which the dependent variable at W1 was added to right-hand variables).

Regarding the frequency of use of the different media types, the question asked was: "In the last two months, how often have you used the following channels to inform yourself about political and public interest issues?" Among the displayed items, those that have specific relevance to the present study are: Offline-Born Newspapers, Digital-Born Newspapers, Radio, Television, and Social Media. For each media type, respondents could select from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*multiple times per day*).

As far as the use of particular sources is concerned, three different questions are asked as follows: "Thinking about television/newspaper/social media information, which of the following sources of information have you used most frequently in the last two months? Please select the source you consider most important." A list of sources was provided separately for each of the media types considered.

As regards newspapers, the list included: *Il Corriere della Sera*/corriere.it, *La Repubblica*/repubblica.it, *La Stampa*/lastampa.it, *Il Sole 24 Ore*/ilsole24ore.com, *Il Giornale*/ilgiornale.it, *Libero*/liberoquotidiano.it, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*/ilfattoquotidiano.it, *Il Post*, and *Fanpage*. Considering a substantial strand of the extant literature (e.g., Galantino, 2017; Mazzoni et al., 2022), these categories were recoded as follows: *Il Corriere della Sera*/corriere.it, *La Repubblica*/repubblica.it, *La Stampa*/lastampa.it, and *Il Sole 24 Ore*/ilsole24ore.com were recoded into the category Mainstream Newspapers; *Il Giornale*/ilgiornale.it, *Libero*/liberoquotidiano.it, and *Il Fatto Quotidiano*/ilfattoquotidiano.it were recoded into the category Partisan Newspapers; while *Il Post* and *Fanpage* were recoded into the category Digital-Born Newspapers. Ownership was not considered a relevant variable with which to group these newspapers because—like most Italian newspapers—all of them are owned by private corporations and entrepreneurs, with the sole exception of *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 30% of whose shares are owned by the newspaper columnists themselves (see Colombo & Quassoli, 2022).

Regarding television, the options were: RAI newscasts, Mediaset newscasts, LA7 newscasts, Sky newscasts, RAI political talk shows, Mediaset political talk shows, LA7 political talk shows, Sky political talk shows, entertainment and information talk shows, and satirical and entertainment TV programmes. In this case, categories were created as follows: RAI newscasts and Mediaset newscasts were recoded into the category Mainstream Newscasts; LA7 newscasts and Sky newscasts were recoded into the category Alternative Newscasts; RAI political talk shows and Mediaset political talk shows were recoded into the category Mainstream Political Talk Shows; LA7 political talk shows and Sky political talk shows were recoded into the category Alternative Political Talk Shows; and entertainment and information talk shows and satirical and entertainment TV programmes were recoded into the category Infotainment. The reason for grouping together information programmes broadcast by RAI—a licence-fee-funded public broadcaster—and Mediaset—a commercial player—separately from those of LA7 and Sky—commercial players as well—is that the former two constitute the so-called "iron duopoly" (Ciaglia, 2013, p. 424; see also Cornia, 2016) which still dominates the television information market (Newman et al., 2023). Moreover, the Italian public service broadcaster RAI has traditionally been strongly affected by political and market influences (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009; Mazzoleni et al., 2011).

As regards the main sources of information on social media, the list included: journalists, news media, politicians or parties, social movements, institutions (e.g., ministries, municipality/mayor, region government, etc.), experts and scientists, political satire pages, YouTubers and Instagrammers with profiles dedicated to information, influencers with profiles not dedicated to information, and pages dedicated to identifying and exposing hoaxes and fake news. We then recoded journalists and news media into the category Journalism; politicians or parties and institutions into Political Institutions; and political satire pages and pages dedicated to identifying and exposing hoaxes and fake news into Watchdog, non-Institutional Pages.

Regarding the main sources for newspapers, television, and social media, in the list provided, there was also the category "I do not remember." Although it is common practice to treat these answers as missing values (and we employed this strategy for the other variables considered in our models), the particular context of the research made it interesting to also consider those respondents who pay less attention or give less importance to the specific sources from which they inform themselves. We thus included "I do not remember" answers for these specific variables, labelling those respondents as Unattentive to Information Sources.

Some control variables that the literature has shown may be associated with trust in the media (see Dabbous et al., 2021; Fawzi et al., 2021; Lee, 2010) were included. In order to control for the verification habits of the respondents, a dichotomous variable considering whether in the last two months respondents had ever fact-checked information received via a messaging app was included (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*). Interest in politics and perceived influence on government decisions (as a proxy for external political efficacy) was also controlled for through a Likert item ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*). Political leaning was measured on the usual 11-point scale (0 = *left*, 10 = *right*). The questionnaire also offered the possibility to select the answers "I cannot position myself on this spectrum" and "I don't know." These answers were recoded as missing values. Trust in political institutions and trust in health institutions were also considered. The former was calculated through a factor analysis of four items arranged along a five-point scale (1 = *no trust at all* and 5 = *complete trust*): trust in the Italian government, trust in Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, trust in the President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella, and trust in the Italian parliament (alpha = 0.77). The variable measuring trust in health institutions was a factor constituted by three items organised along the same five-point scale: trust in doctors and nurses, trust in experts and scientists, and trust in the World Health Organization (alpha = 0.77).

As is common in news media trust research, models also included socio-demographic controls such as gender, age, education, employment situation, and monthly income. Considering the importance of the family situation during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Rump & Zwiener-Collins, 2021), marital status and the presence of school-age children in the household were also considered.

More information on survey design and quality, as well as on question-wording and descriptive statistics in relation to the main variables of the study is available in a dedicated section of the project website (https://www.ipolhys.it/dashboards), which features interactive data dashboards.

7. Results

The first descriptive result is that the level of trust Italians accord to journalists is quite low in both the periods considered (W1: M = 2.29 and SE = 0.02; W2: M = 2.27 and SE = 0.03).

On considering only respondents who answered the question about trust in journalists in both waves, it emerges that their level of trust decreases over time (see Figure 1). Although continuous and processual analysis is required to best track the evolution of social phenomena (see Ruspini, 2008), it can be conjectured here that the spectacularisation and politicisation of medical voices by (also) Italian journalists (see Lovari, 2020) generated growing distrust in the journalistic professional system.
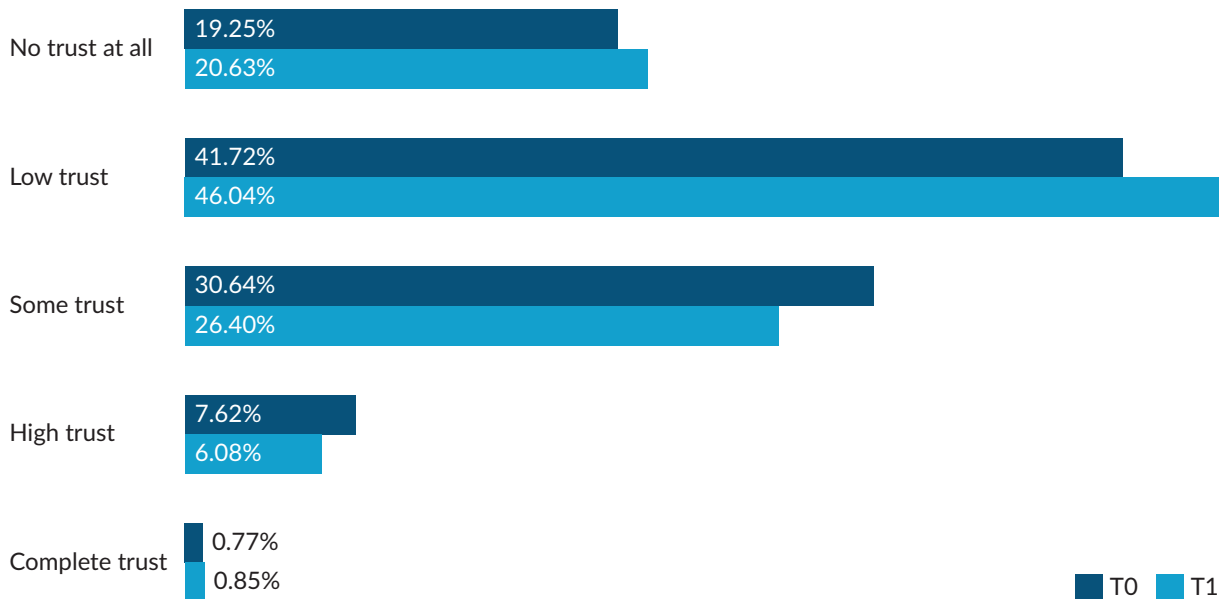
Figure 1. Trust in journalists at T0 and T1.

Regarding RQ2, as can be observed in Table 1, all three models (cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive) consistently show that those respondents who mainly rely on social media accounts of political institutions for information place less trust in journalists than those who mainly rely on journalistic sources on those platforms. There could be two complementary explanations as to why journalistic disintermediation on the part of political institutions negatively influences trust in journalists (see Section 8). The lagged and autoregressive models also highlight that unattentive social media users place less trust in journalists in comparison with those who mainly rely on the social media accounts of journalistic actors for information. Interestingly, the preferred sources of information in the traditional media are, with few exceptions, not significantly related to trust in journalists.

The cross-sectional and lagged models highlight that the frequency of traditional media use (offline-born newspapers, radio, and television) is positively associated with trust in journalists, while the frequency of social media use is negatively associated with it. The frequency of digital-born newspapers use is not significant. This result is consistent with the above-mentioned lower trust in journalists expressed by unattentive social media users, whom we regard as immersed with low cognitive effort in the always-on ambient media system constituted by social media (see Hermida, 2010). This provides support for concerns about the growing distrust in the mainstream media due to the high reliance on social media information sources, and it of course has strong implications for a deliberative democracy (see Section 8). It is important, however, to underline that since the latter results derive solely from cross-sectional and lagged models, they must be interpreted with greater caution because they cannot reveal the direction of the relationships.

Table 1. OLS models predicting trust in journalists.

Variables	Cross-sectional model Trust in journalists (W1)	Lagged model Trust in journalists (W2)	Autoregressive model Trust in journalists (W2)
Offline-born newspapers frequency	0.0742* (0.0290)	0.0732* (0.0334)	0.0259 (0.0282)
Digital-born newspapers frequency	0.00216 (0.0241)	−0.0160 (0.0270)	−0.0123 (0.0228)
Television frequency	0.0650* (0.0312)	0.0789* (0.0351)	0.0356 (0.0295)
Radio frequency	0.0504* (0.0208)	0.0555* (0.0234)	0.0251 (0.0197)
Social media frequency	−0.0509* (0.0211)	−0.0483* (0.0235)	−0.0254 (0.0198)
Main newspapers (Reference category: Mainstream newspapers)			
Partisan newspapers	−0.0611 (0.0725)	−0.00416 (0.0827)	0.0679 (0.0695)
Digital-born newspapers	0.0207 (0.0922)	0.172 (0.107)	0.182* (0.0894)
Unattentive to sources	−0.0508 (0.104)	0.0517 (0.121)	0.0625 (0.101)
Main television programmes (Reference category: Mainstream newscasts)			
Alternative newscasts	−0.000802 (0.0615)	−0.00803 (0.0691)	−0.000797 (0.0580)
Mainstream talk shows	0.279* (0.119)	0.143 (0.147)	0.0508 (0.124)
Alternative talk shows	0.0337 (0.127)	0.198 (0.146)	0.109 (0.124)
Infotainment	−0.142 (0.143)	−0.131 (0.163)	−0.0532 (0.137)
Unattentive to sources	−0.155 (0.116)	−0.118 (0.133)	−0.0487 (0.111)
Main social media source (Reference category: Journalism)			
Political institutions	−0.159* (0.0704)	−0.280*** (0.0790)	−0.165* (0.0668)
Experts and scientists	−0.165 (0.0903)	−0.190 (0.104)	−0.0713 (0.0875)
Watchdog, non-institutional pages	−0.257* (0.131)	−0.189 (0.146)	−0.0236 (0.123)
YouTubers and Instagrammers with profiles dedicated to information	0.256 (0.149)	−0.0357 (0.166)	−0.198 (0.139)
Social movements	−0.0771 (0.186)	−0.106 (0.222)	−0.0796 (0.186)
Influencers with profiles not dedicated to information	−0.338 (0.548)	−0.427 (0.579)	−0.247 (0.485)
Unattentive to sources	−0.133 (0.0925)	−0.310** (0.106)	−0.258** (0.0889)

Table 1. (Cont.) OLS models predicting trust in journalists.

Variables	Cross-sectional model Trust in journalists (W1)	Lagged model Trust in journalists (W2)	Autoregressive model Trust in journalists (W2)
Trust in political institutions	0.155*** (0.0372)	0.178*** (0.0426)	0.0972** (0.0361)
Trust in health institutions	0.346*** (0.0382)	0.161*** (0.0436)	−0.0354 (0.0384)
Fact-checking (1 = *yes*)	−0.269*** (0.0581)	−0.166* (0.0653)	−0.0566 (0.0552)
Political interest	−0.00503 (0.0401)	0.0254 (0.0457)	0.0299 (0.0384)
Political leaning	0.0365*** (0.0102)	0.00999 (0.0119)	−0.0102 (0.0101)
Perceived influence on government	−0.0565 (0.0316)	−0.0514 (0.0355)	−0.0124 (0.0299)
Gender (1 = *female*)	0.00207 (0.0565)	0.00239 (0.0641)	0.00488 (0.0538)
Age	0.0424 (0.0242)	0.00302 (0.0282)	−0.0288 (0.0237)
Unemployed (1 = *yes*)	−0.0721 (0.0603)	0.00107 (0.0680)	0.0359 (0.0572)
Education	−0.0156 (0.0417)	−0.0121 (0.0468)	−0.0174 (0.0393)
Marital status (Reference category: Celibate/nubilate)			
Married	−0.0525 (0.0839)	−0.0623 (0.0963)	−0.0468 (0.0809)
Cohabiting	0.00601 (0.0909)	−0.00273 (0.106)	0.00516 (0.0885)
Widowed	−0.315 (0.193)	−0.453* (0.221)	−0.194 (0.186)
Separated	−0.147 (0.167)	−0.0812 (0.183)	−0.0357 (0.153)
Divorced	−0.117 (0.152)	−0.164 (0.169)	−0.0742 (0.142)
Children (1 = *yes*)	0.0169 (0.0667)	0.0615 (0.0755)	0.0621 (0.0635)
Income	−0.0267 (0.0142)	0.00827 (0.0162)	0.0270* (0.0137)
Trust in journalist (W1)			0.574*** (0.0329)
Constant	2.466*** (0.307)	2.059*** (0.361)	0.771* (0.312)
	Observations = 870 $R^2 = 0.255$	Observations = 758 $R^2 = 0.185$	Observations = 755 $R^2 = 0.429$

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Some noteworthy results also emerge from the control variables. In particular, trust in political institutions is positively associated with trust in journalists (coefficients are significant in all three models). Hence, the link between trust in journalists and political institutions (see Hanitzsch et al., 2018) is maintained also at this level of analysis. This suggests that citizens still share an institutional view of journalists, overlapping the two concepts of journalists and news media institutions. Moreover, the cross-sectional and lagged models show that trust in health institutions is positively associated with trust in journalists, highlighting that the link between trust in journalists and institutions goes further than political institutions (see Gronke & Cook, 2007; Zelizer et al., 2021). Furthermore, from the cross-sectional and lagged models also emerges that those respondents most inclined to verify the information they obtain via messaging apps are those who show less trust in journalists. This result is not surprising because it is evidently linked to the tendency of people with low trust in journalists to see every piece of information they receive as inherently untrustworthy (see Garusi & Splendore, 2023; Nelson & Lewis, 2023).

8. Discussion and Conclusion

Considering the current rise of institutional scepticism and the fragmentation and polarisation of the public sphere, we started this article by claiming the necessity for deliberative democracy to arise. In this particular model of democracy, journalism plays a pivotal role in raising people's awareness of issues that are of public concern. It serves as a watchdog and preserves media independence and integrity from external influences (Gastil & Black, 2018), so trust in news media is a necessary precondition. The starting point of this article was precisely that trust in journalists implies (is a proxy for) the trust that people have in the good quality of public debate and, consequently, in its deliberative-enhancement ability.

Our article has focused on trust in Italian journalists by considering media consumption choices as its main predictors. The panel data were collected right at the end of the first mass lockdown (W1) and after the first pandemic summer (W2), and therefore in periods when there was a great need for trustworthy information.

First, the results highlight that trust in journalists is rather low among Italians in both the periods considered, matching results obtained at different levels of analysis (i.e., trust in news media in general and in specific media outlets; Newman et al., 2022, 2023). This seems to be in line with Sztompka's (1999) argument that manifestations of trust at different levels of analysis are not to be considered mutually independent. Further research should investigate how patterns of trust at different levels of analysis are related.

Furthermore, all the regression models employed show that trust in political institutions is positively associated with trust in journalists, and people who mainly rely on political institutions' social media accounts for information place less trust in journalists than those who mainly rely on journalistic sources on those platforms. Unlike previous studies based on cross-sectional data, the longitudinal data we used allows us to suggest that attitudes towards political institutions exert a causal effect on trust in journalists.

What these results indicate is that the deliberative potential in Italy is generally low. One of the reasons seems to be a general distrust in institutions, which extends to include information professionals. Moreover, the role played by political actors on social media influences trust in journalists. Indeed, it seems that when journalistic practices are effectively replaced by politicians and political institutions on social media, trust in journalists is eroded. These results complement those of previous analyses carried out in the Italian—and, more

generally, Mediterranean—context, which highlight that both news consumption (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and trust (Curini et al., 2023; Splendore & Curini, 2020) are often ideologically driven.

This may be very problematic because social media make political actors less and less dependent on news media to reach the public, enabling them to bypass the news media and avoid accountability challenges. But also, and even more critically, they provide channels for attacks on the news media. Indeed, social media have given political actors new and bigger platforms on which to express their criticism of the news media directly to the public. Hence it is necessary to take account of the fact that the relationship between journalists and politicians/political institutions is not always characterised by a reciprocal acknowledgement of legitimacy (see Van Dalen, 2021). In particular, modern populist communication strategies are characterised by an anti-elitism directed at the news media that aims to challenge their legitimacy (see Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019); and social media have certainly increased the resonance of their messages.

Moreover, this study contributes to the broad debate on social media information consumption. While some scholars were excited about the deliberative enhancement brought by social media, our results tend to dampen such enthusiasm. Indeed, it has been pointed out in the literature that unintentional exposure to news information made possible by social media is linked to positive outcomes, such as information seeking, better use of diverse news sources for information assessment, and civic engagement (see Xiao et al., 2021). However, while our results do not explicitly preclude these possibilities, they show that the high frequency of social media use for information and unattentive rather than journalism-based news consumption on these platforms are negatively associated with trust in journalists, thus undermining one of the bases for a well-functioning deliberative democracy. By contrast, the high frequency of traditional media use and trust in journalists are positively associated.

Many explanations for those results are possible, but we support the idea of so-called "epistemic democracy" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1870). As Waisbord (2018, p. 1874) explains:

> Whereas journalism served as a social connector across difference during the heyday of mass communication, digital news and information flows may connect communities of belief more than publics with fundamentally different notions of truth-telling. Truth as a common public effort is elusive when news organizations and social media connect like-minded communities.

Considering that people tend to use the peripherical route (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) when they encounter information on social media (see Pennycook et al., 2018; Van Dalen, 2020), the above quotation strikes us as providing a convincing explanation of the negative association between high and unattentive use of social media and low trust in journalists.

While our analysis was carried out in the distinctive context of the Covid-19 crisis in Italy, which generated a severe "information crisis" at national and regional levels (Lovari, 2020), our results may be indicative of the underlying relationship between media consumption and trust more generally. Indeed, a perceived information overload—which is not restricted to crisis situations—may produce cynical and distrustful attitudes (see Valeriani et al., 2021).

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, a possible shortcoming concerns the fact that we sought to capture trust in journalists by using a general single-item measure (see Kohring & Matthes, 2007). More in-depth questions about the perceived ability of journalists to enhance deliberation should be applied in future research. Also, in the formulation of the question about trust in journalists, the definition of "journalists" was not specified. This may have created a bias in the results due to the different concepts that categories of respondents had in mind when they talked about journalists (see Daniller et al., 2017). Finally, as media environments and patterns of news media use have become increasingly complex, relying on separate measures for the consumption of different media types may be considered outdated. Following Castro et al. (2022), future studies should employ more sophisticated analytical techniques to explore the combinatory use of different channels and sources and their relations with news media trust.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on the website of the project I-POLHYS (Investigating Polarization in Hybrid Media Systems https://www.ipolhys.it/en/project) at https://www.ipolhys.it/dashboards

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Media Accountability: Global Trends and European Monitoring Capabilities

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Abstract

This article summarises the global state of the art of research into media accountability, using this overview as a framework for an analysis of 14 European countries' structures and the possibilities for monitoring their media accountability landscapes. The first step shows that a model developed purely in the context of liberal Western democracies struggles to explain the diversity of media accountability instruments, actors, proceedings, and the effectiveness of these systems in different countries. When a broad understanding of media accountability is applied, different models of media accountability frameworks can be identified globally, and even within Europe. These findings on structures and actors in the field function as guidelines for the second part of the article, which analyses monitoring capabilities in Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Sweden—with a special focus, not only on the status quo, but also the capability to monitor changes and trends over time. Even in countries with generally well-developed monitoring and research structures in the media sector, much of the available literature focuses on normative questions, and available data is not necessarily comparable longitudinally or cross-nationally. International efforts have inspired key publications in a number of countries, but they are rarely followed up by continuous monitoring of developments in the field. Several cases describe a common reason for monitoring deficits: Weak professional culture among journalists leads to ineffective and often neglected media accountability measures, which in turn limits research activity and funding opportunities.

Keywords

co-regulation; journalism ethics; media accountability; monitoring capabilities; self-regulation

1. Introduction

Media accountability has been an emerging topic in the first two decades of the century in Europe and beyond, both regarding journalistic or social practice and research. Going beyond a normative understanding of journalism ethics, media accountability includes the question of the implementation of ethical rules and feedback from outside journalism. Bertrand (2000, p. 107) defines it as "any non-state means of making media responsible towards the public." However, monitoring structures of the field have so far not been analyzed in a consistent way. The research question is twofold:

> RQ1: First, it must be established which actors, instruments, and fields of media activity need to be taken into account in different national contexts. An attempt to map monitoring capacities requires defining the reach of the concept in order to know what to include.

> RQ2: Only then, secondly, can we meaningfully map and compare monitoring capacities for media accountability in different countries.

Consequently, this article aims to answer these questions by building on and combining two perspectives, each focusing on one of the tasks outlined above: In a first step, it shows trends in media accountability from a global perspective in order to describe a comprehensive framework of instruments and their interplay in different social settings. This framework guides the second step, a study into monitoring structures, by defining the variety of possible media accountability activities. This study focuses on the EU context and addresses the question of monitoring infrastructures based on case studies of the situation in 14 EU countries. Both perspectives (the first on global trends in the field and the second on monitoring capacities in Europe) can then be combined to identify strengths and weaknesses of academic, professional, and institutional monitoring activities.

Analyzing monitoring capacities of media accountability in EU member states is a topical endeavour: While the discourse on media accountability is older in many Western European states, in several newer member states in Central Eastern Europe, both accountability practices and professional, social, or academic discourse on the topic have intensified. With the European Commission's proposal for a "media freedom act" for the EU and its central references to self-regulation instruments as important tools for safeguarding journalistic integrity and independence (European Commission, 2022a), the area might see a completely new dynamic. In the related recommendations, the preference, but also the call for journalistic self-regulation becomes even more evident (European Commission, 2022b, p. 3): "Media self-regulation and standards of journalistic ethics are effective tools to empower journalists and help them to resist undue pressure, including of a political and commercial nature, thus enhancing public trust in the media." However, when media accountability is increasingly recognized as a central factor for media freedom at large in the European context, the question of monitoring and measuring self-regulatory practices in the media becomes pertinent. When media accountability systems face interest and demand not only from the professional community but even from European legislators, what do we actually know about these activities in the different member states of the EU?

However, while the concept of media accountability has long been discussed from the point of view of—and with regards to—Western or Western European countries, the different historical paths of media systems

within the EU require a holistic understanding of what instruments and fields of action may be relevant. Applying a global perspective of self-regulatory practices ensures such a broad approach, including instruments and practices that may be uncommon in Western Europe.

2. Trends in the Media Accountability Discourse: A Literature Review

Before 2010, research on accountability in journalism focused mainly on theoretical and normative aspects and, to a lesser degree, on empirical studies. Laitila (1995) and Bertrand (2000) pioneered the comparative analysis of media accountability instruments (MAIs) by comparing the content of European press codes. Bertrand (2000) additionally studied the existence of further "media accountability systems," as Bertrand terms it, such as press councils and ombudspersons in Europe. Nordenstreng (1999) analyzed structures and practices of media self-regulation in several European countries. Hafez (2002) compared press codes in European and Arab countries. For a number of countries, empirical and internationally comparative data is available on journalists' views and perceptions: The MediaAcT project conducted in-depth survey research on the practical impact of MAIs and the context factors for accountable journalism in twelve European countries as well as Jordan and Tunisia (Fengler et al., 2014), and the Worlds of Journalism project included four questions on perceptions of ethics in its 67-country survey of journalists (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Wiedemann (1992), Bertrand (1978, 2000), Pöttker and Starck (2003), Puppis (2009), and Fielden (2012) analyzed the structures and functions of (Western) press councils from a comparative perspective. Most recently, Trappel and Tomaz (2021) discussed media accountability as an indicator to assess media performance across countries. Apart from the studies highlighted here, nearly all other studies in the field of media accountability analyze the issue from a national perspective. García Avilés et al. (2009) and Karlsson (2010) studied media transparency instruments comparatively. The EU-funded FP7 project MEDIADEM compared media policies across EU member states and candidate countries (Psychogiopoulou, 2012). The Media Pluralism Monitor (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2022) compares media independence and pluralism across EU and candidate countries and provides a highly relevant dataset to be considered. Based on data from European case studies, Eberwein et al. (2018) generated the first European Media Accountability Index, in which Norway, Finland, Sweden, Austria, and Germany ranked highest.

An extensive view of media accountability practices and their interplay is best based on a large variety of country cases. In particular, it is advisable to look beyond the borders of European or Western societies and accountability discourse: *The Global Handbook of Media Accountability* (Fengler, Eberwein, & Karmasin, 2022) delivers such a perspective based on a study of 44 countries across world regions and political regime types. Besides several country cases from Asia, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, the MENA region, and the Anglo-Saxon world, the diversity of European political and social contexts is represented by EU member states Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain, and Sweden, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, and Russia. Country studies were based on desk research analyzing a variety of secondary data and existing literature; in a few cases, authors drew on interview or survey data. In terms of scope, the study built on Bardoel and d'Haenens' (2004) work on the various fields potentially involved in the accountability process. Besides the profession of journalists, they mention the market, the political sphere, and the public. This framework facilitates a debate about the role of media accountability beyond Western democracies. Fengler, Eberwein, Karmasin, Barthel, and Speck (2022) revise this approach with a special focus on actor groups and suggest adding a fifth frame covering international accountability to integrate activities by foreign actors (e.g., foreign donor organizations).

Based on the country reports collected in Fengler, Eberwein, and Karmasin (2022), Fengler's (2022) comparative analysis retrieves eight models of media accountability: (a) the Professional Model, (b) the Company Model, (c) the Public Model, (d) the Dysfunctional Variant of the Professional Model, (e) the Foreign Donor Model, (f) the Statutory Model, (g) the "Mimicry" Model, and (h) the Regulation Model.

The Professional Model (a) dominates in countries featuring many different MAIs on the professional level, including press councils, codes of ethics, broadcasting commissions, media journalism, media-critical blogs, and social media, complemented by a variety of instruments on the media-organizational level. The Company Model (b) is prevalent in countries characterized by local media accountability dominated by MAI initiated by individual news outlets: ombudspersons, company codes, media journalism, and social media. The Public Model (c) is found in countries featuring elements of the professional model (journalists' federations, codes of ethics, and ethics committees), which, however, appear rather weak and less institutionalized. Journalists are often challenged by political, economic, and even physical pressure. At the same time, NGOs, academics, and civil society exert pressure for greater media freedom, pluralism, and accountability—most notably, media observatories following up on media issues and thus "augmenting" the deficits of self-regulation. The Dysfunctional Professional Model (d) is observed in countries following regime change and subsequent deregulation of media markets, which allowed foreign investors to buy considerable shares in these markets without giving sufficient thought to media accountability. Journalistic organizations have adopted codes and established ethics councils or committees, but the professional model exists only on paper, as there is no ethics body with broad acceptance across the profession. Also, the divide between journalists with differing political alignments or economic interests opens the door for government actors to define what media "accountability" means, especially for broadcast journalism. The Foreign Donor Model (e) describes countries where the establishment of MAIs is largely dependent on foreign donor support. This is often the case in the aftermath of a democratic transition when journalists and media companies are ill-equipped to handle their new freedoms responsibly due to a lack of professionalism or simply due to economic pressure. Without widely accepted professional associations or a culture of professional self-criticism, foreign donor organizations or media companies try to implement MAIs, although with mixed practical results. The Statutory Model (f) describes a situation in which statutory bodies have been initiated in the context of political transformation phases, which have not yet resulted in full democracies or established press freedom. Statutory councils are not the outcome of self-regulation but are established by government decree or by law, and their budget comes from public funds, with different degrees of public or indeed government control over who is represented in them. The "Mimicry" Model (g) applies to several countries that have established statutory councils as well, but the label "council" seems purposefully misleading when these examples have to be considered cases of "media capture" as practised by "competitive authoritarian regimes." These councils clearly do not meet the normative criteria laid out by UNESCO (2008) or the Council of Europe (Parliamentary Assembly, 2008) but serve as government tools to control (access to) the profession and exert strict sanctions. In most of these countries, press and media "councils" can impose fines and have, in some cases, legal powers even to close media entities, regulate entry to journalism, or impose sanctions for breaches of "standards." Finally, Iran and China are examples of the Regulation Model (h), countries with *media regulation* in its "purest" form, not allowing for any form of media accountability, and not even engaging in "mimicry" or "gardening" activities to cover up authoritarian practices. Instead, media and journalism are under full government control, and no form of accountability practice is possible apart from informal and non-public dialogue between trusted individuals. Otherwise, all media accountability activities can only be performed from exile, and even exiled actors face repression.

It needs to be stressed that these eight models of media accountability are descriptive categories, and hybrid forms of media accountability exist. Also, political changes may immediately impact the structures of media accountability.

What deserves to be highlighted for the European context is that even within this region of supposedly rather well-established and well-researched systems, stark contrasts become obvious upon closer analysis. Seven EU countries have been part of the study for the *Global Handbook of Media Accountability*, which aimed to classify the different media accountability systems on a continuum between highly regulated and highly self-regulated media accountability systems; various context factors impacting media (self-)regulation practices in the specific countries are extensively discussed in the book. More than 30 years after the start of the fundamental transformation process in 1989, the study still sees a divide between Northern and Western European countries on the one hand and Southern and Central Eastern European countries on the other. Estonia, Germany, Spain, and Sweden are classified within the Professional Model, Italy within the Company Model, Poland within the Dysfunctional Variant of the Professional Model, and Hungary within the Mimicry or Gardening Model (Fengler, 2022, pp. 572–574). Consequently, further study into the European landscape of media accountability, including monitoring structures, calls for a similarly wide approach to the topic. Section 3 focuses on the capabilities in place to perform this task, but for a higher number of EU member states.

3. Monitoring Capabilities in Europe

The results presented here are part of the Mediadelcom project's aim to map and evaluate monitoring capabilities in different sectors that are relevant to media and public communication. Results are based on country case studies of the monitoring situation in Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Sweden (Mediadelcom, 2022). The term "monitoring capabilities" is understood as the capacity to collect, communicate, and interpret data provided by academic research and public authorities, the private sector, or NGOs. The research effort took a range of questions into account: data availability, recency, and continuity, as well as the complexity of accessing data for researchers, stakeholders, or simply interested citizens. Moreover, the institutionalization of the different fields and the availability of experts was assessed. In the larger context of the project, this inventory of monitoring capabilities also serves as the background to further analyze the key developments in the sector in the 2000–2020 time frame. Before exploring "what is," it is necessary to find out what kind of data is actually collected in the different countries, and in which areas.

To achieve a holistic view of the field, this research was conducted not only for the field of media accountability but also for journalism as a market and a professional activity, media usage, media-related competencies, and legal regulation. Compared to these areas, it is important to note that media accountability differs in that institutionalization, significance, and instruments of media accountability vary considerably between countries, as described in Section 2. Consequently, monitoring activities in a country can be expected to focus on those frames and those particular instruments of media accountability that are actually in use in a given national setting. While the "journalistic job market" or "audience trust in news" exist in any country and monitoring them is important to map the state of these areas, different frames of media accountability and their respective instruments are just not relevant in certain countries, making monitoring activities of such instruments rather pointless: There is little sense in conducting empirical research on

"media ombudspersons" in a country where this instrument of media accountability is not relevant. Because of this special feature of media accountability, it is necessary to contrast findings on monitoring activities with the overall situation of media accountability in a given country.

As there is no established state of the art of how to monitor monitoring activities, it is still largely unclear to what extent different countries generate data on accountability activities in their media systems. To define the scope of the country case studies in terms of instruments and actors of media accountability, the study drew on the conceptualization described in Section 2 (model based on Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004, amended by Fengler, Eberwein, Karmasin, Barthel, & Speck, 2022). Case studies evaluated the situation in each country, both with regard to the relevance of the frame and monitoring activities: As there is no established state of the art of how to monitor monitoring activities, it is still largely unclear how far different countries generate data on accountability activities in their media systems. To define the scope of the country case studies in terms of instruments and actors of media accountability, the study drew on the conceptualization described in Section 2 (model based on Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004, amended by Fengler, Eberwein, Karmasin, Barthel, & Speck, 2022). Case studies evaluated the situation in each country, both with regard to the relevance of the frame and monitoring activities:

- Professional accountability: Activities by the journalistic profession, e.g., non-statutory press or media councils, codes of ethics, professional discourse;
- Market accountability: Activities by media companies, e.g., company ombudspersons, organizational codes of conduct, journalism as a topic in the media, (online) transparency tools;
- Public accountability: Activities by members of the public and the audience, e.g., media-critical initiatives and publications;
- Political accountability: Activities initiated based on political/legal mandates, e.g., statutory press/ broadcasting commissions, government media commissions;
- International accountability: Activities initiated by international actors such as donor organizations or investors, e.g., foreign companies "importing" their codes of conduct into media they invest in, media development activities by NGOs or states to establish MAIs in a country.

In addition to this evaluation by accountability frames, country case studies focused on the general establishment of monitoring infrastructures for media accountability by academic, public, and private actors. This was done with three main focus points: institutionalization of monitoring activities; developments over time since the year 2000; and the impact of international research and cooperation.

This focus on different actors in the monitoring landscape, the role of international cooperation, and developments over time allows us to map the dynamics involved in monitoring media accountability in the studied countries, highlighting both explanations for strong or deficient monitoring of media accountability activities and current trends.

Data collection was conducted by researchers native to the countries under study and mostly relied on desk research and complementary expert interviews. Accessed documents included academic literature, reports by public and private actors, case databases of institutions of media accountability, and data on the existence, funding, and capacities of monitoring institutions, covering a time frame from 2000 to 2020.

3.1. Instruments of Media Accountability

While the study was guided by a broad understanding of media accountability, there is a clear focus on data-gathering and interpretation of traditional accountability instruments—mainly codes of ethics and press or media councils. These instruments may fall in both the professional and political accountability frame as they may be set up by members of the profession, with or without the inclusion of other stakeholders (e.g., media companies), or because of statutory requirements frequently found in the broadcast sector. All case studies show at least some academic discourse on these instruments. Moreover, self-regulatory councils often produce data themselves, although with different levels of access and usefulness. The press councils in Austria and Germany publish case data on their websites and additional annual reports with explanations and some statistical overviews of their work (Eberwein et al., 2022; Kreutler & Fengler, 2022). Similarly, the Swedish Press Council (since 2020, the Media Ombudsman and Media Ethics Council, now also covering audiovisual media) explains its rulings and positions in regular reports (Berglez et al., 2022). Such publications may be valuable sources both as an overview on their own or as a starting point for further research. Unfortunately, these reporting practices tend to lack reliability in countries that lack an undisputed central council to regulate a large proportion of journalistic output. In Estonia, two different councils are in competition (Pressinõukogu and Avaliku Sõna Nõukogu/ASN), so both bodies' reporting only covers a part of the media landscape. While this particular situation has inspired research on the differences and relations between these councils, their case reporting obviously follows different proceedings and reporting patterns (Harro-Loit et al., 2022).

The above-mentioned examples of press/media councils with favourable reporting practices all stem from countries associated with the Professional Model, where these councils are well-established. Given the lack of multipartite press councils in some other countries under study, journalists' unions and syndicates sometimes have ethics committees attempting to encourage ethically sound conduct of their members. Such a situation can be associated with the Public, Dysfunctional, Professional, or even the Mimicry Models; the instruments are comparable but less institutionalized or may even be controlled by political interests or stakeholders outside the profession. Such a situation seems to negatively affect the possibilities for monitoring the cases processed by these bodies. For example, the ethics committee of the Czech syndicate of journalists reports on its work. However, beyond being only an internal instrument, it is also selective in terms of cases it accepts; most importantly, it excludes tabloid journalism from its work, so the boards' publications can only cover a rather small fraction of problematic journalistic conduct in the country (Waschková Císařová et al., 2022). While such publications are obviously incomplete, the least favourable situation regarding access to case data is present when transparency on council or committee work is completely lacking. In Hungary, no less than four journalists' organizations function as co-regulators with the assistance of the state's media authority, and none publish details on their casework (Polyák et al., 2022). In Greece, where a central council is missing, disciplinary committees belong to regionally organized journalists' unions, and only one of them (the Union of Journalists of the Athens Daily Newspapers) publishes its processed cases transparently (Psychogiopoulou & Kandyla, 2022).

The existence or lack of an established press or media council also seems to be relevant for academic research and public discourse on media accountability. The Austrian case is especially instructive: an older council ceased to exist in 2002, leaving the country without an effective press council until the current Presserat was established in 2010. This re-foundation is described as a starting point for stronger institutionalization of

academic research structures as well as networks of academic and professional actors (Eberwein et al., 2022). In Croatia, where there is no press or media council, the potential of such an institution was nevertheless discussed in academic literature (Peruško & Vozab, 2022).

Data and discussion on other instruments in the remaining frames are comparably scarce. Many of these instruments are only relevant in some of the countries studied, and even when they do exist, they suffer from a monitoring focus on council or committee work, resulting in very little data being produced about them. Media journalism has been researched mostly in Germany, although not necessarily focusing exclusively on its possible self-regulatory function; in Austria, the field is covered at least by master's theses and trade publications. The German-speaking countries are also the only ones to report academic research into media watchblogs (Eberwein et al., 2022; Kreutler & Fengler, 2022). Within the market accountability frame, media ombudspersons have seen rather limited academic and professional discourse in Austria, Germany, Latvia, and Italy—in the latter case mostly as a hypothetical instrument since the position was only ever created and later abolished by two Italian newspapers (Splendore et al., 2022). The international frame as a means of "importing" accountability practices into a country only became visible in one specific Hungarian publication (Polyák et al., 2022), focusing on a possible influence of German publishers who had invested in the Hungarian market (Galambos, 2008). For the Estonian case, the import of self-regulatory mechanisms has also been described, but only for the early 1990s (Lauk & Harro, 2003).

3.2. Institutionalisation

In terms of the institutionalization of data gathering and research into media self-regulation, country case studies overall reveal different levels of deficit. In the broader context of this research project, monitoring capabilities in the field of media accountability were analyzed in conjunction with the corresponding capabilities in the area of legal regulation, thus allowing for a comparison between the two fields. Results show a rather complete continuum ranging from country cases where monitoring capabilities are clearly more established in the domain of legal regulation, such as Austria, Bulgaria, or Greece (Eberwein et al., 2022; Psychogiopoulou & Kandyla, 2022; Raycheva et al., 2022) to two cases with the opposite situation of a monitoring focus on self-regulation rather than legal regulation: In Slovakia, noticeably more publications can be registered on media accountability and self-regulation than on legal regulation (Gálik et al., 2022). While the output in terms of publications is more balanced in Estonia, the field of self-regulation is considered analytically more advanced compared to a rather fragmented legal discourse (Harro-Loit et al., 2022). While Italy and Czechia share a bias towards legal proceedings for solving problems of journalistic conduct, the Czech case is characterized by a lack of monitoring activities in both areas (Waschková Císařová et al., 2022). In Italy, however, media ethics and responsibility have at least a normative-theoretical tradition besides a well-institutionalized legal discourse (Splendore et al., 2022). In the Greek case, where legal regulation is decidedly the more institutionalized field, available scholarly literature on self-regulation criticizes both the lack of established accountability instruments (beyond the mere existence of codes) and their lack of effect on the print and broadcast media. Even though there are only a few studies, the country can be described as a case of relatively well-researched practical deficits of media accountability (Psychogiopoulou & Kandyla, 2022).

3.3. Development 2000–2020

Even with the deficits described above, both in terms of institutionalization and the coverage of different frames of media accountability, the trends over the 2000–2020 time frame are generally positive. This is especially the case for Central Eastern European countries, where the field has only been established for around 20 years. Beyond the role that the existence or foundation of an independent council may have, several case studies mention the role of journalism or communication students and their interest in raising awareness of the field as such or specific instruments and cases (Eberwein et al., 2022; Harro-Loit et al., 2022; Waschková Císařová et al., 2022). For example, students' final theses provide qualitative case studies on different aspects of media self-regulation, especially journalists' perceptions (Estonia) and ethical problems in specific fields of coverage (Czech Republic), but also on specific instruments (Austria) that had not previously been covered. While the Czech situation overall is characterized by several monitoring deficits, this interest in the field on the students' part might start to affect structures in education and research. The first media studies course with specific consideration of media ethics was established in 2020, and the first research team dedicated to the topic was established in 2021 (Waschková Císařová et al., 2022). In neighbouring Slovakia, albeit without reference to a possible student role in the process, a marked increase in publications on journalistic self-regulation over the course of 20 years can be seen (Gálik et al., 2022). While the status quo of monitoring capacities in the field of media accountability clearly shows very different levels of institutionalization, none of the studied countries has reported a decrease in discourse, publications, or structures.

3.4. Impact of International Research and Cooperation

Over time, international cooperation in comparative research projects has played an important part in building monitoring structures and competencies in several countries, especially within Central Eastern Europe. From Estonia, Latvia, and Romania, efforts such as the EU-funded projects MediaAcT (specifically on media accountability), MEDIADEM (on media policies), and AntiCorrp (on anti-corruption policies) have been reported as key initiatives with a sustainable impact on the national monitoring potential (Avădani, 2022; Harro-Loit et al., 2022; Rožukalne et al., 2022). On the part of media and press councils, Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, and Sweden cooperate in the Media Councils in the Digital Age project. However, even outside specific projects, international exchange and activities have a place. For Poland, the normative perspective on media accountability has been shown to be strongly influenced by Western concepts—but lacks practical implementation (Głowacki et al., 2022). In Hungary, there is an awareness of international interest in the media situation in general, although not necessarily focusing on media self-regulation as the most pressing topic (Polyák et al., 2022). As Austria and Germany share a common language, they profit from common research projects and publications covering both countries (as well as German-speaking Switzerland), shared networks, and personal exchange of researchers pursuing career opportunities on both sides of the border. Against the overall diagnosis of widespread deficits in the national monitoring capabilities and professional/academic discourses on media accountability, intensification of internationally collaborative projects and exchange of experts could be a fruitful strategy to further establish the field.

4. Conclusions

Overall, monitoring capacities of media accountability in the countries covered by this effort are lacking to different levels and degrees. Some country cases even seem to imply a vicious circle of under-institutionalization: A limited practical interest in media accountability leads to low visibility or simply the lack of accountability instruments, which leads to a lack of academic, professional, and public resources. Without such resources or practical interest, it is difficult to establish a discourse that could also demand certain innovations in the field.

Empirical research, especially showing developments over time, is often limited to journalists' perceptions of professional ethics—sometimes produced in the context of internationally comparative projects. Where independent press or media councils produce case reports, this is another relevant source, although a more advanced analysis of these publications is rare. Overall, press or media councils and journalistic codes of ethics form the clear focus of monitoring activities on practical instruments of media accountability. This limited monitoring focuses mainly on the professional frame, which contrasts with the variety of accountability-related activities described in Section 2 of this article. Other frames and the wealth of possible instruments associated with them are scarcely covered by national monitoring efforts in most of the EU countries analyzed in the third section.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to classify all 14 EU countries under study within Fengler's (2022) eight models of media accountability, it is striking that more comprehensive monitoring capacities can be found in two of her original examples for the professional model, Estonia and Germany, and in Austria, which could be argued as close to this model since the re-foundation of its central council in 2010. The German-speaking countries also show at least some activities of monitoring public or market-based accountability, so monitoring in these countries is not limited to MAIs mainly associated with the Professional Model. In contrast, monitoring attention for the international accountability frame seems to have become extinct together with the foreign donor model in the EU, probably also a consequence of the re-nationalization of private media in CEE countries after a phase of Western-European investment (Hajek, 2015; Stetka, 2012).

Of course, and in partial defence of existing monitoring activities in EU countries, it must be noted that a monitoring system covering all instruments in all frames presented in the first part of this article is not only missing but also not realistic. It is in the nature of self-regulation that not all of these mechanisms actually exist in each country. Instead of establishing the existence and quality of data and interpretation on fixed pre-determined aspects of a media system (e.g., market data or media usage data), media accountability requires first the analysis of what practices are actually in place in order to be able to analyze the monitoring capabilities of these specific instruments. The five-frame model applied here ensures that the whole landscape of possible instruments is considered. However, when a particular instrument is not implemented or relevant in each national context, research on it is consequently limited or missing. Still, in countries with various accountability instruments in different frames, monitoring seems to lag behind this diversity and focus on the more traditional instruments.

Strong self-regulation practices in the overall regulation framework and the media system seem to also lead to the establishment of analytical capabilities—the growing Austrian discussion after the re-establishment of the press council is a topical example. But this might work in both ways. It is promising to further analyze cases in

which new accountability instruments have been successfully established to see how academic, professional, and public discourse, possibly also international exchange, fostered these innovations. The references to media accountability found in the European Commission's proposal for a Media Freedom Act might draw additional attention to existing deficits in monitoring capabilities, giving this debate an unprecedented dynamic. Suppose this initiative brought about some kind of international influence on national media accountability systems in the EU. In that case, it might well revive the debate on donor-based media accountability practices and its monitoring, just in a new, EU-driven variant.

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Legal and Ethical Regulation in Slovakia and Its Relation to Deliberative Communication

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Abstract

The offered social-scientific analysis is based on a critical discussion of key problems present in the Slovak media environment, such as the ethical self-regulation of the media, freedom of expression, the right to obtain information, or the legal protection of the sources of information. The study also refers to available scholarly sources and the previously published body of knowledge to assess the development of the media system in Slovakia over the past 30 years, outlining the country's (in)ability to foster deliberative communication and democracy. The results suggest that the legal and ethical aspects of the Slovak media system do support some of the principles of deliberative communication, specifically freedom of expression and free access to information; however, free speech is not sufficiently confronted with the boundaries of protecting privacy and human dignity to prevent defamation and hate speech. Media autonomy based on the possibility of self-regulation is not sufficiently developed either. A serious problem is the lack of transparency in the media.

Keywords

deliberative communication; media; media accountability; media ethics; media legislation; Slovakia

1. Introduction

Slovakia's recent history is marked by the authoritarian structure of the media system, in which state media were ideologically influenced by political authorities and no private media ownership was allowed. The adoption of a dual broadcasting system (i.e., the co-existence of privately owned media outlets and public service broadcasters) is generally seen as the breaking point and basic precondition of establishing

freedom of speech and expression in Slovakia (Višňovský et al., 2022). Slovakia witnessed the rapid development of private media ownership and gradual penetration of the media market by foreign investors and international media companies in the 1990s. These circumstances have resulted in massive economic changes in terms of media entrepreneurship, as well as in new legal and ethical challenges following the country's ambition (or rather struggle) to strengthen its emerging ties to the Western cultural framework.

The study works with the assumption that the legal and ethical mechanisms regulating and forming the Slovak media environment are crucial factors that influence the state of democratic discourse and public communication in Slovakia. As we believe, many key opportunities and risks which obviously support or, in turn, limit deliberative principles in the country, have resulted and continue to result from the national legislative regulation and ethical elements of media communication.

Offering a theoretical overview of the most important aspects shaping the Slovak media system in terms of its legal and ethical configuration, the study focuses on a range of issues. To explore the role media legislation and ethics play in the processes of advancing deliberative communication and democracy in the country, we refer to the existing body of knowledge and research, as well as to a number of legal documents and practical examples. Our aim is to thoroughly discuss the development of the Slovak media system in relation to progressively emerging legal and ethical issues. Section 2 offers various scholarly perspectives on the term *deliberative communication*, explaining its associations with the existing knowledge on media systems and the ways in which they are regulated. In Section 3, our ambition is to consider the essential legislation constituting Slovak media law, its positive aspects and shortcomings. Furthermore, we offer insight into various types of regulatory and self-regulatory mechanisms and ethical codes applied by media outlets operating in Slovakia. The study identifies key problems associated with legislative and ethical challenges tied to the Slovak media environment, outlining to what extent current Slovak legal regulation of the media supports or does not support the ideal preconditions for and values of deliberative communication.

The article employs a legal analysis of regulatory documents and a wider generalisation to discuss relevant topics and explain the connections between them. These are used to better outline the historical framework of the topic and the contemporary situation. The study is largely theoretical, aiming to comment on data obtained by Gálik et al. (2023) on the current state of deliberative communication in Slovakia, as well as available domestic academic and professional reflections on the issues in question.

2. Theoretical Framework

The contemporary situation within the Slovak media system does not comply with the general scholarly understanding of the terms "deliberative democracy" and "deliberative communication." Even though the concepts seem to be interconnected with a variety of current society-wide problems, their essential roots were explained decades ago by Habermas (2015) in his seminal work on the structural transformation of the public sphere. Habermas's model of deliberative democracy, in which democracy is developed and protected within the public sphere and civil society, was further elaborated and clarified by Benhabib (1991), who adapted the concepts to the cultural and political realities of the 1990s, explaining Habermas's utopianism evident in his understanding of communication ethics. Healy (2011) acknowledges that deliberation represents the noble ideals of achieving inclusiveness, responsiveness, transparency, and accountability of

sociopolitical decision-making that seem to be crucial in terms of revitalising democracy. These principles must also apply to the ways a country's (media) legislation is created and ethical standards are formulated and practically realised. We examine the ideals defined above to find out how they are (or are not) supported by media legal and self-regulation in Slovakia.

In Slovakia, the concept of deliberative communication is neither well-known nor widely used to discuss the principles of democratic public discourse. If we consider the work published by Ferree et al. (2002) on four models of the public sphere in modern democracies, the country's public sphere could be best defined as representative-liberal, based on the belief that ordinary citizens are poorly informed and generally ill-equipped for political participation:

> Citizens need policy makers [sic] who are ultimately accountable to them, but they do not need to participate in public discourse on policy issues....Hence, it is both natural and desirable for citizens to be passive, quiescent, and limited in their political participation in a well-functioning, party-led democracy. (Ferree et al., 2002, p. 290–291)

Harro-Loit et al. (in press) define four ideal preconditions for deliberative communication to develop and thrive. These include mutual respect in communicative interactions, i.e., participants' readiness and willingness to listen to and understand each other's opinions (respect towards human dignity and non-violence). Moreover, the absence of power should grant these participants the freedom to express their differing opinions without fearing any sanctions or threats—this principle is closely related to trust in the media and their autonomy in terms of self-regulation and public accountability. The third precondition is equality; everyone should be equally free and able to express their stance (impartiality and diversity should be granted). Another important precondition to consider is the idea of reasoning-based arguments not disrupted by persuasive communication acts and hidden agendas (commitment to telling the truth, freedom of expression, media transparency).

The current political and sociocultural situation in Slovakia does not support many of the basic principles of deliberative democracy. The desirability of a public sphere is generally accepted, but public participation is seen as a process which should be limited and largely indirect. This lack of transparency and openness has serious consequences. Školkay and Ondruchová-Hong (2012) explain that Slovak laws are often drafted within specialised, but isolated ministry departments, without consulting new legislative norms with the wider professional public and other interested actors. New legal acts "frequently contain severe inconsistencies and shortcomings and need to be amended shortly after, and sometimes even before they come into force" (Školkay & Ondruchová-Hong, pp. 193–194).

Moreover, in domestic academic circles, theoretical reflections or empirical inquiries specifically focused on deliberative (media) communication in the country are scarce and none of them were published prior to 2021. The meta-analysis conducted by Gálik et al. (2022) is the first focused attempt to adapt the concept of deliberative communication to Slovak reality and assess the state of deliberative democracy in Slovakia. The obtained results suggest that even though Slovakia has recently taken important steps towards strengthening deliberative communication, the existing scientific discussions on deliberative media communication are vague, scattered across various disciplines, largely theoretical and descriptive, limited to studies on partial problems which are directly or indirectly connected to, above all, media related competences and journalism in general. According to Gálik et al. (2023), from 2000 to 2020, Slovak authors

published only 267 academic, non-academic, and professional information sources and publications which are specifically related to legal and ethical regulation of the media. This number also represents the considerably lower level of interest of Slovak scholars and professionals in the given topic in comparison with numerous academic and non-academic outputs addressing media usage patterns (292), journalism (376), or the often-discussed media related competences (416). However, this uneven distribution of scholarly and professional attention towards topics associated with deliberative communication has not been so evident over the last two years. For example, Škarba and Višňovský (2022) warn of serious threats to domestic deliberative communication, not only from disinformation chaos but also from authoritarian sentimentality in the country.

Each national media system is, in a way, unique and culturally specific. In the field of media law, we may mention a number of Slovak publications interested in specific topics and the country's particularities. For example, Drgonec (2008) provides essential scholarly understandings of media law and relevant terminology in domestic contexts, considering the latest legislative developments. Kerecman's publication (2009) includes a collection of practical advice for journalists, PR specialists, or spokespersons. Lincényi (2017) offers a rare attempt to explain and assess both legal and ethical aspects related to publishing daily newspapers in Slovakia. The work establishes a critical debate on the consequences of the limited extent to which media ethics is applied in Slovakia. Although erudite commentaries explaining individual regulatory mechanisms and legal acts associated with the media were long overdue and still do not cover all relevant norms, there are specialised publications written in order to examine the strengths, weaknesses, and widely disputed aspects of the 2000 Act on Broadcasting and Retransmission (Kukliš & Tarabčák, 2016) or the 2008 Press Act (Vozár et al., 2021). The latest addition to the available scholarly literature is Višňovský et al. (2022) monograph on multiple Slovak media industries (the press, radio, television, and internet) and their economic status and legal regulation.

The problems discussed in Section 3.2 are closely associated with the notions of media regulation and self-regulation. Chandler and Munday (2011) explain that media regulation can be defined as control and supervision of (media) organisations which is exercised by external authorities, predominantly by government bodies. This process is complex and includes both direct interventions and the measures taken by government-appointed regulators. In contrast, self-regulation occurs within the media industries or specific media outlets. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (n.d.) declares that self-regulatory mechanisms are independent from government control and designed to increase the quality of media. These mechanisms consist of codes of ethics, press, and media councils, complaints commissions, and in-house ombudspersons. Government regulation is typically understood as the imposition of restrictions (Chandler & Munday, 2011), but its purposes reach far beyond these boundaries, from stimulating domestic media production, through strengthening content diversity, to increasing programme quality. Matei et al. (2021) claim that (media) regulation cannot be perceived as "a narrow set of limiting rules or enforceable laws" (p. 2).

Unlike legislative regulation of the media, media ethics is based on varying sets of ethical standards and rules that individual media outlets and journalists often follow voluntarily, not because they are legally binding. Regarding the systematic analysis of the ethical aspects of media production, the body of academic literature published in Slovak (or focused on Slovakia) is, again, quite modest. We may mention Remišová's (2010) work which is generally considered as the first comprehensive attempt to address media ethics in Slovakia and the ethical standards Slovak media professionals should respect. The author defines media

ethics as a complex phenomenon, analysing its functions and micro- and macro-levels. Hajduk (2016) discusses normative media theories and the ethical and philosophical principles of media institutionalisation in Slovakia. According to him, media institutions need to develop functional sets of ethical principles in order to strengthen their own social responsibility and ability to contribute to social justice and recognition. Švecová and Kukumbergová (2020) apply the general principles of media ethics to the digital environment, especially in relation to digital gaming, presenting a unique perspective on new ethical challenges driven by digital entertainment. The publication written by Gáliková Tolnaiová (2022) is especially important as the author reflects on a range of current problems related to ethical and philosophical contexts of communication, media, and information in relation to the domestic media environment. The author is focused on the most advanced media technologies and new ethical challenges they pose, trying to anticipate which ethical principles will have to be revised and reassessed in the near future.

Even though we have to acknowledge that Slovakia currently cannot be perceived as a young democratic country able to fully explore the possibilities of deliberative democracy, some of the mentioned sources might serve as the necessary foundation for making Slovak media space more participatory and deliberative.

3. Risks and Opportunities for Deliberative Media Communication in Slovakia: Legal and Ethical Considerations

The rather short history of the contemporary media system in Slovakia started to unfold after the dissolution, i.e., the self-determined, peaceful split of the Federal Republic of Czechoslovakia and the consequent formation of the autonomous Slovak Republic, defined basic operational variables related to media law, such as freedom of expression, prohibition of censorship, and (private) media ownership. According to Brečka (2002), legislators interested in the field of media law faced many challenges between 1989 and 1993, striving to create democratic mechanisms regulating media based on the principles of a pluralistic society.

Freedom of expression and the right to obtain information, i.e., the pillars of the principle of reasoning-based arguments in communication, were guaranteed by the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms. We may also mention the most relevant legal acts such as Act No. 468/1991 Coll. on Operating Radio and Television Broadcasting (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 1991d), Act No. 254/1991 Coll. on Slovak Television (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 1991b) and Act No. 255/1991 Coll. on Slovak Radio (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 1991c). These legal norms heavily contributed to achieving a plurality of opinions in the media environment and eliminating the state media monopoly. In this context, a transformation of the already existing media outlets into independent and pluralist media institutions was also essential. However, denationalisation, privatisation, and deregulation of their ownership were complicated; this gradual process is still not finished. In this third section, we mention the media legislation that influences the current shape of the media environment.

3.1. Slovak Media Legislation

It is necessary to mention Act No. 308/2000 Coll. on Broadcasting and Retransmission and on Amendment of Act No. 195/2000 Coll. on Telecommunications (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2000) that defined specific legal conditions related to broadcasting and retransmission in Slovakia, outlining the status and competence of the newly established Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission, an administrative body

meant to execute nationwide regulation of TV and radio broadcasting and outline their accountability. Thanks to that, the principle of absence of power in communicative relations was addressed partially. In contrast, the highly anticipated 2008 Slovak Press Act (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2008) did not avoid criticism from the journalistic community. The NGO Public Policy Institute saw this piece of legislation as "settling the score," i.e., as an attempt by political elites to eliminate public criticism of the political situation in Slovakia initiated by journalists and publishers (Slovenská informačná a tlačová agentúra, 2008). Publishers of periodicals, as well as the professional public, criticised the ways the right to correction, right to reply, and right to additional notice were formulated and warned against possible attempts by politicians and oligarchs to abuse these new obligations of publishers and news agencies (Ďuračková & Stahovcová, 2008). The legislation was supposed to eliminate any threats associated with mutual disrespect in communicative relations (such as attempts to compromise one's dignity through defamation and hate speech); on the other hand, some of the aforementioned expert opinions saw it as a possible menace interfering with the principle of reasoning-based arguments in communication (i.e., truth, freedom of expression).

In 2010, Act No. 532/2010 Coll. on Radio and Television of Slovakia (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2010) amended the mission, functioning, and legal status of the Slovak public broadcaster, Radio and Television of Slovakia, which was established in 2011 following the merger of Slovak Television and Slovak Radio. This merger aimed to improve financial and organizational efficiency.

In 2022, Act No. 264/2022 Coll. on Media Services (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2022b) replaced Act No. 308/2000 on Broadcasting and Retransmission (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2000). The former Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission was succeeded by the Council for Media Services with new competences and authorities (Rada pre mediálne služby, n.d.), especially over internet-distributed broadcasting, streaming, and content-sharing platforms. All media outlets operating in Slovakia, public and privately owned alike, have to register as partners of the public sector, regardless of how they are financed. This update is meant to strengthen the principle or reasoning-based arguments in communication, especially media transparency.

Furthermore, Act No. 265/2022 Coll. on Publications (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2022c) replaced the heavily criticised 2008 Press Act. Unlike its predecessor, this legal norm recognises and regulates not only print newspapers, magazines, and agency news, but also web portals and other digital platforms publishing news and opinions. Applying advanced regulatory elements including self-regulation, the act addresses issues of transparency of media ownership and financing more thoroughly than its predecessor. It thus enables the general public to obtain concrete information on media ownership and financing in Slovakia, also supporting the aspect of truth by establishing clear, efficient measures to separate advertising from editorial content such as news.

3.2. Ethical Standards Applied in the Slovak Media System

The state of media legislation in Slovakia has recently improved, but ethical standards in media production, which regulate the principle of power in communication relations, still remain problematic. Gálik et al. (2023) identify 123 academic and non-academic sources published between 2000−2020 that are interested in journalistic ethics and 48 publications which address codes of (media) ethics in a more general manner. The level of attention paid to this topic is, by far, higher than in terms of other serious problems persisting in

the Slovak media system such as the protection of personal data (18 sources published from 2000 to 2020) or access to information/documents (10 sources), which obviously remain overlooked (Gálik et al., 2023).

Probably the most known and well-established industry-level ethical standard in Slovakia is *The Code of Ethics for Journalists* defined by the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists (Slovenský syndikát novinárov, 2011). Its previous version was elaborated in 1990, defining how the absence of power in communication relations should work in practice. However, the Syndicate has been experiencing financial problems and internal conflicts, which seriously undermine its former moral authority and sociocultural importance in the eyes of both the professional and general public. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the Syndicate established the first set of media ethics standards of the post-communist era in Slovakia and later worked on adapting them to digital media. *The Code of Ethics for Journalists* is also shared and promoted by the Press and Digital Council of the Slovak Republic which is the executive body of the Association for the Protection of Journalistic Ethics (Tlačová rada Slovenskej republiky, n.d.). The Council is an important influence in terms of the ethical self-regulation of journalists in Slovakia, addressing complaints that report violations of the principles of journalistic ethics. Scholarly interest in press and media councils has been low, with 15 publications by Slovak authors published from 2000 to 2020 (Gálik et al., 2023).

In Slovakia, there are multiple non-profit organisations which publicly discuss and analyse unethical practices utilised by the media. We may mention NGOs such as the Institute for Public Affairs, Transparency International Slovakia, the Fair Play Alliance or the Open Society Foundation. However, their authority in terms of correcting these ethical failures is little to none. The largest professional association active in the Slovak digital market, Interactive Advertising Bureau Slovakia ([IAB Slovakia], 2015), applies its own code of conduct related to downloading content on the internet. IAB Slovakia has its own ethics committee (IAB, n.d.) consisting of media professionals and experts on ethical online behaviour and the association's most notable achievements in terms of media ethics also include *The Ethical Code for Electronic Media* (IAB Slovakia, 2010) and *Influencer Marketing Code* (IAB Slovakia, 2022). This suggests that the notions of trust, autonomy, and accountability, tied to the principle of absence of power in communicative relations, have recently been redefined and successfully applied to specific fields of media practice.

However, Školkay and Ondruchová-Hong (2012) remind us that various attempts to establish co-regulation and self-regulation of Slovak journalists have been rather unsuccessful, stating historical memory and business pressures as the main reasons why. The logical disadvantage of ethical codes is that they are voluntary. However, practically all established and relevant Slovak media respect some codes of ethics and modify them according to their current needs. Several media organisations do not have their internal codes of ethics publicly available, with the exception of the daily *SME* ("Etický kódex denníka," n.d.) and the publishing house News & Media Holding (n.d.). Many other publishing houses (e.g., N-Press, 2022) apply the *Journalist's Code of Ethics* as defined by the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists (2011).

The modifiability of ethical codes might be perceived as a risk because some of the originally formulated ethical principles could be omitted or changed based on the given media outlet's objectives and philosophy. On the other hand, it is positive that practically all established and relevant Slovak media respect some ethical codes and modify them in accordance with their current needs. In contrast, disinformation producers and conspiracy media rarely respect any codes of ethics and do not even acknowledge their existence, ignoring the principles of reasoning-based arguments in communication and mutual respect in communicative interactions.

The decisions and commentaries published by the Press and Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, or NGOs are only of a recommendatory nature. A possible solution could be the establishment of a media ombudsman's office, similar to the one in the Czech Republic, or another executive body that would be independent of government structures and would possess not only the ability to comment on media codes of ethics and their suspected violations, but also to confront these violations with specific sanctions defined in media legislation. However, this suggestion would be hard to implement, given that between 2000–2020, not a single academic or professional information source on ombudspersons was published by Slovak authors (Gálik et al., 2023).

3.3. Sources of Risks and Opportunities for Deliberative Media Communication in Slovakia

Considering the legal aspects of the Slovak media environment outlined above, there are multiple shortcomings that require both professional reassessment and scholarly attention. Firstly, these include the previously non-existent, fairly recent adoption of legal measures which should improve the public availability, comprehensiveness, and accuracy of the information on media ownership and financing media outlets, i.e., media transparency. Secondly, the Slovak public sphere has witnessed multiple attempts by political elites to restrain freedom of expression. Thirdly, which has not been discussed enough in Slovakia, is the protection of information sources (or its long-term lack thereof). These problems mostly limit fulfilling the principle of reasoning-based arguments in communication, especially in relation to the fundamental values of freedom and transparency.

3.3.1. Media Ownership Concentration and Lack of Plurality

The media market in Slovakia exhibits a degree of concentration, primarily attributed to the country's small size, which enables larger media companies to operate with greater efficiency and productivity (Čábyová & Krajčovič, 2022; Radošinská et al., 2020). Prior to the adoption of Act No. 264/2022 Coll. on Media Services (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2022b), there was no adequate legal regulation regarding cross-ownership in the media sector. Urbániková's (2022) research report claims that the concentration of news media in the country achieves a high-risk level (79%). The category of media market plurality reached an unsettling score as well (high risk—68%). The author also argues that in 2021, data on market shares (based on revenues) within specific media sectors was neither published nor collected. The effectiveness of legal countermeasures was thus unclear. However, the concentration of the press, audio-visual production, and radio communication was obviously substantial; the combined market share of the four largest media groups active in Slovakia reached 60%. Data on online content providers and their market shares and revenues was entirely unavailable.

The public still exerts only limited pressure on publishers and broadcasters to act transparently and disclose potential conflicts of interest. The Slovak media frequently published vague reports regarding their owners and donors without adequately disclosing pertinent information about their interests or personal connections. Considering this, it is quite surprising to find out how little scholarly and professional attention has been paid to these problems over the last 20 years. Gálik et al. (2023) identify just nine information sources published in Slovakia which are interested in media ownership and its transparency. This lack of academic interest only makes achieving the principle of reasoning-based arguments in communication (media transparency) harder and less probable.

Until 2000, there was no legislation addressing the concentration of media ownership. In 2000, legislation on cross-ownership of media was adopted, prohibiting the simultaneous ownership of radio or television and the publication of newspapers or magazines. However, horizontal ownership of media was still permitted, enabling individuals to own multiple radio stations or television channels. The problem persists in the new Act. No. 264/2022 Coll. on Media Services (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2022b) which concerns digital content providers and sets rules regarding their position in the media market and obligations. All publicly funded and private media must be registered in the list of public sector partners. The aim is to ensure diversity of information and transparency of media ownership. The regulator monitors the ownership links and employment relationships of media registered in Slovakia and their content providers. The Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (2022) noted an improvement in the transparency of media ownership in Slovakia, changing it from high risk to medium risk.

3.3.2. The Influence of Politicians and Lack of Trust

Školkay and Ondruchová-Hong (2012) explain that the personal involvement of Slovak prime ministers has become "a typical feature of media regulation in Slovakia" (p. 194), especially when the country's governments were led by illiberal and populist politicians. This trait has led to "a spread of authoritarian ad hoc policies" (Školkay & Ondruchová-Hong, p. 192). Moreover, Štětka (2012) points out that Central and Eastern European democracies have observed a growing trend wherein local tycoons have invested in media outlets not primarily to generate profit, but rather to advance their business or political agendas. Urbániková (2022) specifically mentions the Speaker of the Slovak National Council and media mogul Boris Kollár who owns two out of the four radio stations with the highest audience share in Slovakia.

The current legislation does not address such conflicts of interest in the media sector, which means that there are no legal restrictions to prevent political interest groups from engaging in media entrepreneurship either directly or indirectly. According to Transparency International Slovakia (2022), another concerning fact is that many local and regional media financed and operated by self-governing bodies and local authorities lack political independence. Their content is often heavily distorted in order to support the current political representation. The Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (2022) sees these aspects as the main reasons why Slovakia scores a concerning 56% in the sub-indicator associated with conflict of interest. These facts undermine the principle of equality in communicative freedom, as well as the principle of desired absence of power in communicative relations.

Chlebcová Hečková and Smith (2023) define the Slovak media scene as turbulent, being marked by continued attacks on journalists by politicians. However, incidents resulting from the professional and ethical misconduct of journalists are not rare either. The trust of the Slovak people in news is indeed very low (27%), and the authors claim it is an inevitable result of business and political leaders' interference blocking the healthy and independent development of the country's media environment.

3.3.3. Freedom of Expression and the Right to Access Information

Related to the principle of reasoning-based arguments in communication, freedom of expression and the right to access information are among the fundamental rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution of the Slovak Republic (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 1991a). Any interference with the media

content provider's right to freedom of expression is exercised by the state only in order to ensure the aforementioned protection of the rights and freedoms of others or in legitimate public interest, based on strict criteria. However, it would be optimal to increase the extent to which some of these topics are discussed by Slovak scholars and professionals. From 2000–2022, access to information/documents was rather overlooked; there were only 10 sources to consider. This number is in sharp contrast with the five times larger amount of attention paid to freedom of expression (Gálik et al., 2023).

As discussed in Section 3.3.1, Slovak media legislation has partly addressed the previous lack of transparency regarding media ownership ties in the country. However, the mentioned shortcomings of the 2008 Press Act are closely associated with this issue. Specific parts of this legal norm were formulated in ways which encouraged or maybe even invited politicians and other public figures to exercise certain rights excessively. For example, the right to reply was granted to natural persons and public/government officials alike; the problem was that this particular right ordered the media to publish "replies" even if the initially published information was truthful, complete, and accurate, but also related to honour, human dignity, or privacy and the good name of a legal or natural person. This questionable measure was amended in 2011; the right to reply was granted to natural persons only, excluding active politicians. However, during the politically turbulent period marked by the murder of the young investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, the following public protests and inconvenient media criticism of the then-ruling political parties, the right to reply was amended again, in favour of politicians. However, it was granted only in cases when the initial information was inaccurate or otherwise incomplete and distorted, associated with a person's honour, dignity, or privacy and good name.

According to Beláková (2013), manipulating legislation to suppress media criticism is always risky. The case of the re-editing of the right of reply shows how Slovak politicians use management strategies in the media to deflect criticism. The main objection to the inclusion of public officials in the right of reply is their position of power and their obligation to be accountable to the media and the public. Especially if applied to politicians and other public figures, this particular right shows how unclear and thin the boundaries separating truth and free speech from privacy invasions and expressions of hate speech truly are.

3.3.4. The Right to Additional Notice and the Right to Statement

The right to additional notice, preserved in the current Act on Publications, follows a situation when a news outlet or news agency issues a factual statement about a person being investigated by a public authority, based on which the person can be precisely identified. Later, when this probe is closed by a final decision, the person concerned has the right to request the publication of an additional notice clarifying the final outcome of this procedure, e.g., in case the allegations raised against them have not been proven. Its main purpose is to serve in favour of the principle of reasoning-based arguments in communication—specifically truth and transparency.

In the 2022 Act on Publications, the newly established right to statement replaced the right to correction and the right to reply, both included in the previous legislation. The right to statement is applied if a false or incomplete statement/fact that interferes with the honour, dignity, or privacy of a natural person or endangers the good reputation of a legal person, on the basis of which the person can be accurately identified, is published by a news outlet or news agency. This person has the right to publish their own statement. Publishers of print or online news media or press agencies are obliged to publish the statement as requested, free of charge. Once again, politicians and public and government officials are included as eligible requesters.

Regardless of their potentially problematic application in relation to political elites, the right to statement and the right to additional notice can still be considered important tools that represent the basic principles of deliberative communication. Surprisingly enough, despite the widespread public criticism associated with the 2008 Press Act, closely associated topics such as defamation and hate speech are not frequently discussed by Slovak scholars and/or professionals. In fact, Gálik et al. (2023) identify only six publications centred on defamation and 25 sources addressing hate speech. This scarcity of focused academic and professional discussions during the previous two decades is probably why there are no relevant data or research inquiries that would document the extent to which these rights have been exercised by politicians and regular citizens. The lack of knowledge means that any critical remarks on political elites abusing these rights are purely hypothetical.

3.3.5. Protection of Information Sources

Protection of information sources, associated with principles of truth and the freedom of expression, but also with issues of privacy protection and data protection, was insufficient prior to the adoption of the Act on Media Services (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2022b) which defines the obligations of content providers and individuals involved in obtaining or processing information from confidential sources, such as whistleblowers, protecting their identity. The content containing such information must be publicly presented in a manner that preserves the anonymity of the source. Only the individual who provided the information can release the party maintaining confidentiality from this obligation by giving their consent. This protection extends to courts, public authorities, public administration bodies, and local government authorities unless disclosing the source of information is required by law to prevent criminal acts. The same principles are also defined in Act No. 265/2022 Coll. on Publications (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2022c).

Whistleblowers may face (cyber)bullying or threats posed by their employers, supervisors, colleagues, or third parties after they decide to publicly uncover otherwise confidential information obtained within their work obligations. Their legal protection is now ensured by Act No. 54/2019 Coll. on Protection of Whistleblowers (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2019), aiming to eliminate harmful practices and support courageous, responsible employees. More than half of the Slovak population perceives whistleblowers positively (Kovanič & Chovancová, 2022); 90% of publicly funded organisations have established whistleblowing systems, complying with the legislation, yet the culture of not reporting frauds and criminal activities prevails (Kovanič & Chovancová, 2023). Many Slovak people obviously believe they will not receive the necessary protection after becoming whistleblowers. Zuzana Hlávková's case is mentioned quite often as a frightening example. Hlávková, who reported dubious practices related to public tenders at the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs where she was employed, was publicly threatened by a top government official (Šípoš, 2016).

It does not help that domestic academic and professional debates on the problem of protecting information sources (and specifically whistleblowers) are practically non-existent. From 2000 to 2020, Slovak scholars and professionals published just eight outputs on the protection of information sources and only one focused on whistleblowers in particular (Gálik et al., 2023). The academic and professional indifference towards this problem poses a considerable threat to the development of deliberative media communication in the country.

3.3.6. Lack of Transparency While Eliminating Harmful Online Content

In response to the increase in false information during the armed conflict in Ukraine, Act No. 231/2022 Coll. on Cyber Security (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2022a) was adopted. The law granted the National Security Office the right to block harmful online content or activities in cyberspace on its own initiative or at the request of an authorised entity. As a result, four questionable web portals were temporarily blocked. However, some of them started publishing again after several months. This particular case highlights the importance of an impartial assessment of the evidence relating to disinformation and harmful web content in order to preserve the principle of viewpoint neutrality. In such assessments, it is necessary to consider whether the content may threaten the constitutional order, the security of the state or the fundamental rights and freedoms of the citizens of the Slovak Republic. According to The European Court of Human Rights (2020), the complete blocking of a website is an extreme measure and may be comparable to banning a newspaper or a television station. Such a measure does not consider the distinction between legal and illegal content on a website, making all published information inaccessible.

The entire case was perceived negatively because initially, the National Security Office did not disclose the reasons why it had blocked these websites, presenting the measure as a matter of national security. Even though the media in question are considered a conspiracy, this lack of communication made the process non-transparent in the eyes of the professional and general public. An amendment which would make the whole legal procedure more efficient and transparent is needed urgently. To date, only partial clarifications have been approved. Such decisions have to be ordered by the court. However, content providers cannot express their arguments during court proceedings and the court's decision is final, followed by no appeals (Struhárik, 2022).

4. Conclusion: Legal Regulation of Slovak Media Confronted With the Basic Preconditions of Deliberative Communication

Regarding the principle of reasoning-based argumentation in relation to Slovak media regulation, several notable achievements tied to truth, freedom and transparency can be identified. Freedom of expression and the right to obtain information became constitutionally guaranteed human rights and freedoms three decades ago, which is positive. In contrast, legislation addressing the protection of information sources and whistleblowers is fairly new, but it does exist. Still, a considerable number of Slovak citizens are afraid to become whistleblowers, certainly due to a legitimate lack of trust in official authorities expected to protect whistleblowers. Even though media regulation covering the protection of information sources, whistleblowers and regulation of digital content providers is already in force, which might be considered a step in the right direction, it should have existed a long time ago. This means that we do not yet possess enough information to assess whether this new legislation is effective and to what extent it is possible to avoid or undermine the current legal restrictions and obligations.

Nevertheless, the communicative principle of reasoning-based argumentation cannot be fulfilled without these measures, as it is the only way to transparently protect people who are afraid to publicly share concerning information related to public affairs. As it seems, however, specific pieces of media-related legislation tied to reasoning-based argumentation are often adopted without any prior professional consideration, even ad hoc, usually reacting to heavily covered affairs able to provoke emotional

society-wide debates (the previously-mentioned whistleblower case of Zuzana Hlávková is just one of many possible examples).

As for the issues that remain unaddressed properly, the country's representative-liberal public sphere has so far failed to increase its transparency, i.e., to include the professional and general public into the legislative processes. Citizens are not sufficiently informed about how, why, and when (media) legislation changes will take place; the general public then, quite understandably, questions the transparency, necessity, and legitimacy of such changes. Excluding the professional public also means that scholarly expertise, needed to better adapt the prepared legislation to real, everyday media practice, is notably absent. Thus, some of the principles of reasoning-based argumentation (and also those associated with the absence of power in communicative relations) are widely ignored. Legal changes such as adopting the right to statement in the new Act on Publications or the existence of the Cybersecurity Act able to protect national security in the online environment are fitting examples of the lack of transparency, even though they can generally be perceived as positive. It is certain that they will need multiple reconsiderations and amendments that would consider rapidly evolving communication technologies and digital platforms, but these must be discussed more transparently.

Moreover, Slovakia has failed to adopt the EU Directive 2019/790 of 17 April (2019) on Copyright and Related Rights in the Digital Single Market. This means that digital content providers in Slovakia are still not obliged to negotiate with media companies and financially compensate news media which have originally produced news content shared online. This weakens Slovakia's position in the European media market and indicates the country's lack of interest in media transparency, the sometimes vague, shallow attitude to European media legislation and surprising indifference towards obligations arising from international relations.

As stated by Harro-Loit et al. (in press), the principle of absence of power in communicative relations is related to multiple values, including autonomy, trust, and accountability. Slovak media legislation's compliance with this principle seems to be rather limited. Even though the public broadcasting service Radio and Television of Slovakia is nowadays one of the most trusted media organisations in Slovakia, this does not mean that the institution's former inability to offer impartial domestic news is over (Chlebcová Hečková & Smith, 2023).

Another problem is that the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists, which should be perceived as a respected organisation able to truly connect media professionals and content providers, does not possess a good reputation either in relation to the general public or within the journalistic community itself, even though, paradoxically, many news media outlets and publishing houses claim to respect *The Code of Ethics for Journalists* created by the Syndicate. In any case, established and relevant Slovak media (this does not include conspiracy media) follow their own ethical codes or codes formulated by other organisations, even though the extent to which they work with their own self-regulatory mechanisms is questionable and hard to assess. The problem which seems to be impossible to solve is that any self-regulation standards related to ethics are non-binding and voluntary; thus, their full adoption requires a high level of integrity and a media organisation's willingness to represent a clearly defined set of values. It does not help that the field of ethical (self)regulation remains overlooked and marginalised even by Slovak academic circles. However, multiple ethical codes are able to react to the development of the online environment and specific area of media entrepreneurship such as digital marketing, which can be perceived as a positive factor.

Discussing equality in communicative freedom, especially media impartiality and diversity in Slovakia, political interference must be mentioned. Cases of politicians using their own media outlets for marketing purposes are not rare and occur at national, regional, and local levels. Therefore, the current media legislation may do its best to address the long-term problems of unclear media ownership ties and non-transparent media financing (i.e., some aspects of the principle of reasoning-based argumentation associated with transparency), but it still does not solve conflicts of interest associated with merging media entrepreneurship and one's political ambitions. Another risk is posed by media market concentration reflected in audience and market shares, which endangers media diversity and heterogeneity at the levels of both offered content and ownership. In Slovakia, concentration of multiple media segments (the press, audio-visual production, and radio communication) remains substantial.

Chambers (2023) poses a question of whether digital media are the primary cause of the fragmentation and privatisation of the public sphere, therefore threatening deliberative democracy, or whether authoritarian political elites who themselves abuse the power of digital communication platforms (and largely focus on online privacy and content moderation, but not so much on legal regulation of fragmentation and privatisation, because this task is much harder to fulfil) are responsible instead. In Slovakia, the latter seems to be true; the notable lack of accountability accompanying state officials' apparent reluctance to discuss or even admit the true extent of their own ownership ties within the media industry is a fitting example. This results in politicians being too involved in enforcing authoritarian media policies and avoiding wider public debates.

The range of problems associated with the principle of mutual respect in communicative interactions (specifically represented by preserving human dignity and promoting non-violence) often collides with some of the issues included in the previous discussion on reasoning-based arguments in communication. The first fact worth mentioning is that some fairly recent legislative measures (such as the Cybersecurity Act) might have been publicly presented as an answer to otherwise unsolvable issues concerning hybrid threats and national security, but those who initiated them failed to persuade the general public that such restrictions are useful or even necessary due to the nation's notable lack of trust in public authorities and the media.

Applying legislative measures able to eliminate or at least restrain disinformation seems to be the biggest challenge, however. In this particular case, we cannot talk about a lack of academic and professional knowledge on disinformation. Gálik et al. (2023) identify 50 Slovak information sources addressing disinformation published between 2000 and 2020, i.e., even prior to the pandemic, which has worsened the situation considerably. For example, Krajčovič (2022) underlines the fact that in Slovakia, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the market positions of most elite, tabloid, and conspiracy media outlets available on Facebook (and other social media as well); unfortunately, in favour of spreading disinformation. The current state largely favours conspirators and so far, any legislative measures meant to solve this issue have been inefficient. Slovak citizens being susceptible to disinformation and deliberate manipulation is a considerable risk to deliberative communication, as these communication strategies ignore the principles of human dignity and often resort to socially pathological phenomena such as inciting hate speech or even physical violence towards migrants, humiliating minorities or people of a different race, religion, or ethnicity.

Future solutions to many of the above-mentioned legal and ethical challenges rely on the results of the parliamentary election scheduled for September 2023. The current government crisis might lead to the prevalence of right-wing conservatives. These political subjects may initiate unwelcome legislative changes

related to the media environment to pose restrictions on the freedom of expression and therefore to retaliate for harsh media criticism of practically the same political elites following the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in February 2018.

The previous data suggests that some problems are addressed by scholars quite extensively (e.g., journalistic ethics, codes of ethics, media accountability, disinformation, and freedom of expression). However, little to no attention has been paid to more complex issues influencing how the general public perceives the media environment and its functioning (such as defamation, hate speech, copyright protection, media ownership and its transparency, access to information/documents, protection of information sources or, more specifically, protection of whistleblowers). Any focused discussions on ombudspersons and other instruments of media co-regulation and self-regulation are practically missing, which only deepens the problem of insufficient distinction between different tools and strategies of media regulation and self-regulation.

This apparent lack of focus is further complicated by the fact that multiple academic and non-academic information sources published by Slovak authors address a wider spectrum of different topics, but only generally (Gálik et al., 2023). Given that, focused debates that would offer deeper explanations and understandings of specific problems are quite rare. The obvious dominance of theoretical publications has its undeniable advantages; however, practical frameworks which would seek solutions and suggest specific strategies are, in most cases, limited. These knowledge gaps thus pose a risk to the further development of the legal and ethical aspects of the Slovak media environment just as much as the systemic issues outlined in this article.

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Media and Journalism Research in Small European Countries

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Abstract

Big and small states all function as comprehensive entities: they require state apparatuses, the ability to provide services for citizens, the capacity to protect themselves, and appropriate media systems to guarantee a deliberative communication space for democratic processes. Investigating media, in turn, is important since it informs us about risks and opportunities for media transformations. To examine the impact of smallness on monitoring and research capabilities in news media and journalism, we have compared four small European countries with contrasting historical backgrounds and different types of media systems: Austria, Croatia, Estonia, and Latvia. While earlier research has mainly focused on Western European countries, the current study broadens the perspective to Central and Eastern European countries. The analysis shows that smallness can influence research capabilities in different ways, with advantages and disadvantages for media and journalism research. Fewer national resources can foster internationalisation, with the side effect of less attention to country-specific problems. In the situation of growing specialisation in media and journalism research, small countries may be less capable of providing sufficient infrastructure for knowledge exchange. The article builds on research performed within the framework of the H2020 project Mediadelcom.

Keywords

Austria; Croatia; Estonia; journalism; Latvia; media; media research; monitoring

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1. Introduction

This study aims to compare news media and journalism research in four small European countries in terms of media monitoring capabilities. News media play a central role in the emergence and functioning of a public sphere that enables citizens to participate in democratic processes. The analysis of media monitoring capacity is relevant because it highlights gaps in our knowledge of media transformations. With better knowledge, it is possible for policymakers to develop appropriate, well-informed media policies. We assume that size matters when we ask about the capacity and efficiency of research and monitoring in a country. Size is a multifaceted issue and needs to be examined alongside other contextual factors. For example, Lowe and Nissen (2011), the authors of *Small Among Giants: Television Broadcasting in Smaller Countries*, assess size in relation to a country's territory, population, media market, industry, and economic and cultural dependence on a larger, same-language neighbour. Relative size is sometimes more important than absolute size. On the one hand, it can hinder the performance of some functions in an increasingly complex world due to a lack of resources; on the other hand, it can lead to ingenuity in finding appropriate and flexible, country-specific solutions.

In our study, we examined the capacity of small countries to produce knowledge about media regulation and its effectiveness, patterns of media use and audiences' competences, developments in the field of journalism, agents of knowledge production, and so on. Few such inventories have been carried out. Our aim in this study is to examine the capacity of four small European countries (Austria, Croatia, Estonia, and Latvia) to carry out such inventories. We examined four areas of media and journalism research: legal and ethical regulation, journalism, patterns of media use, and media competences. These four research areas are the focus of the H2020 project Mediadelcom.

The discipline of media and communication (Donsbach, 2006), and journalism studies as a field under this disciplinary umbrella (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009), covers a wide range of topics and draws on a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches (Günther & Domahidi, 2017). There are reports on the disciplinary development of specific subfields, such as science communication (Chang & Tai, 2005; Walter et al., 2018), field logic (Cushion, 2008; Maares & Hanusch, 2022), and trending research topics. Media and communication research is increasingly internationalised (Cushion, 2008; Hanusch & Vos, 2020), although in a global context, only a few countries receive major attention in the most important scientific journals. Smaller countries with their specific problems are hardly visible at the international level (Cushion, 2008; Domahidi & Strippel, 2014; Walter et al., 2018; etc.). Holistic and comparative analyses of the state of news media and journalism research in different countries are rare (Hanusch & Vos, 2020). We are interested in the state of media and journalism research in small countries in Europe.

2. Smallness as a Research Concept

The concept of smallness has not often been the focus of media research (see Puppis, 2009). Media systems research does not distinguish between large and small. Media systems and their contributions to democracy are considered equally important for large and small countries. For example, Peruško et al. (2015) clustered the media systems in European countries based on democratic, social, economic, and cultural factors. Austria, for instance, was grouped in the same cluster as the significantly larger UK; Croatia was grouped in the same cluster as the significantly larger Poland (Peruško et al., 2015, p. 353). However, other findings show that

the size of a country's media system does have an impact on media performance. Puppis (2009), for example, points to the structural peculiarities of small countries and their media with limited resources to produce good journalism. From a media policy perspective, competition in small media markets tends not to work without state intervention and "small states tend to adopt an interventionist regulatory approach" (Puppis et al., 2009, p. 105). As a result, small countries can make the media more vulnerable and threaten editorial independence (Ravn-Højgaard et al., 2021).

There are many definitions of small. Attempts have been made to define it by the size of the population or the economy of a country (Katzenstein, 1985). In the early 1960s, analyses set the population threshold of a small country at 10 million, but this threshold is arbitrary (Shareef & Hoti, 2005). Smallness has also been defined in terms of language, in cases where a small country has a much larger same-language neighbour (e.g., Meier & Trappel, 1992). The label "small" was also used to describe countries not close or connected to centres of global economics and power (Rahkonen, 2007). Some authors connect smallness to a perceived lack of power, suggesting that smallness manifests itself negatively in terms of not only possessing low power but also in the lack of opportunity to exercise power (Kurecic et al., 2017; Mouritzen & Wivel, 2005). Puppis et al. (2009, p. 106) suggest using relational and attributive features of smallness and, according to them, in the EU only seven countries can be defined as big: France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, and the UK. However, taking into account global trends in the media industry, it can be argued that even these countries are small in the era of platformisation. The emergence of global platforms has created new asymmetries in the media market (Ihlebæk & Sundet, 2023; Iordache & Livémont, 2018). To counterbalance the uneven competitive environment for tech giants and local publishers, small states often implement protective media policies (Iordache & Livémont, 2018). Research shows that "small states with giant neighbours sharing a language might sacrifice media diversity in order to preserve a domestic media landscape of their own" (Puppis et al., 2009, p. 105).

Moreover, small size may affect a country's ability to monitor media. Limited R&D funds are spread thinly over many topics (Amanatidou & Cox, 2022) or a more precise selection for funding is made on the basis of agreed-on research policy priorities. This means that not every media-related topic can be researched. Another option, international funding, can mean that researchers work on topics that are globally trendy but irrelevant to their own media systems. Many calls for proposals specify research problems and there is a trend towards research that has practical value for societies (Bührer et al., 2023). A project is expected to find solutions to societal problems. A comparable research design is expected to fit many national contexts. This is another argument against the sustainability of research at the national level. In the case of a small research community, the exchange of ideas and knowledge is limited (Vanderstraeten, 2010). Research is a collaborative endeavour with procedures and a quality assurance system that only works with the effort of many researchers.

In addition to the above conceptualisations, which highlight disadvantages, smallness can also have some advantages. Innovation studies have shown that small countries are more dynamic and able to respond quickly to the changes taking place in the world (Edquist & Hommen, 2009). Especially in economic studies, there is a great deal of discussion about small open economies that are highly flexible (Puppis, 2009, p. 9). Small does not necessarily mean powerless; small industries can find their own ways to respond to global asymmetries, developing specific action logics (Ihlebæk & Sundet, 2023, p. 2197). In research, the advantage of a small media market can be that a small number of objects are sufficient to gain an overview of the research problem and to make generalisations.

We aim to show the ability of small countries to produce relevant knowledge about news media and journalism to assess the risks and opportunities for media development. The study is guided by three research questions:

RQ1: What similarities can be observed in the sub-fields of media and journalism research in small countries that can be applied to assess risks and opportunities for news media and journalism?

RQ2: Who are the main actors in these fields of research?

RQ3: What is the balance between national and international research?

Answers to these and similar questions are provided after a discussion of the methodological approach developed for our study.

3. Research Approach

The study presented in this article is based on the broader work of the Mediadelcom research project (http://mediadelcom.eu). The guiding question of Mediadelcom has been: "In which domains and in which ways do existing research projects depict the risks and opportunities regarding the agency of news media" (Mediadelcom, 2020). Fourteen country teams from new and old EU members participated in the project, which included several research stages. In addition to the development of the theoretical framework for the analysis of the four risk and opportunity areas, this article draws on national case studies on research capacity and institutionalisation. The case studies were accompanied by a collection of country-specific research (from domestic and international sources) corresponding to the four domains mentioned above.

Of the 14 participating countries, we selected four to analyse the state of research in more detail: Austria, Croatia, Estonia, and Latvia, all of which can be labelled as small countries (see Puppis et al., 2009, p. 106). Following our selection criteria, the countries differ historically, culturally, and economically. Austria and Croatia both belonged to the Habsburg empire, while Estonia and Latvia share a Soviet and Russian empire legacy. Croatia and both Baltic countries went through the socialist experiment in the 20th century and all three regained independence and started their democratic development during the early 1990s. Croatia differs from the latter two because it was not a part of the Soviet space, but of the self-managed socialist Yugoslavia, in which it maintained its status as a federal republic with a degree of autonomy, especially in regard to media (Peruško et al., 2020). Austria, on the other hand, is grouped with old European democracies and is the wealthiest of the four countries studied, as well as having a population that is several times larger than the other three; the German language links it strongly to its giant same-language neighbour. Estonia and Latvia are located on the eastern border of the EU, distant from European economic and power centres and with significant Russian-speaking minorities that have strong connections to neighbouring Russia. The selection of the countries was thus exploratory, guided by the aim of looking for similarities and differences that might be related to their smallness and *longue durée* histories.

Table 1, which presents key statistics of the selected countries and their media markets, shows that smallness involves both similarities and differences. Latvia and Estonia have significantly smaller populations than Austria and Croatia; the characteristics of Latvia's and Estonia's media audiences are also influenced by the fact that both countries have large Russian minorities (24%), who, as a Soviet legacy, live in foreign-language media spaces. According to the Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM), the risks for media

pluralism are highest in Croatia (43%), despite having a larger audience and a better economic situation than Latvia and Estonia. The Austrian purchasing power parity is 10 times higher than in Estonia, and the gross domestic product even greater. The Latvian gross domestic expenditure on R&D is only half of the Estonian one, and one-third of the Croatian; the Austrian research budget is considerably larger than in the other three countries.

Table 1. Characteristics of selected countries and their media markets/systems.

	Austria	Croatia	Estonia	Latvia
Population size[a]	8,979 million (↑)	3,879 million (↓)	1,332 million (↑)	1,876 million (↓)
Largest minority	Germans (2.4%)	Serbs (4.5%)	Russians (24%)	Russians (24%)
GDP per capita (EUR)[b]	406,148.7	57,199.5	31,444.9	32,866.5
Purchasing power parity (PPP)[c]	216,392	59,477	21,976	28,221
Human Development Index value[d]	0.916	0.858	0.890	0.863
Gross domestic expenditures on R&D (EUR)[e]	12,143 million	626 million	481 million	208 million
Number of journalists[f]	5,350	2,800	1,200	1,150
Media pluralism monitor risk level[g]	31% (low)	43% (medium)	28% (low)	27% (low)

Sources: [a] = Eurostat (n.d.) database, January 2022, online data code—TPS00001 (in brackets the tendency toward growth or decline in the last five years); [b] = Eurostat (n.d.) database, 2021, online data code—NAMA_10_GDP; [c] = Eurostat (n.d.) database, 2021, online data code—PRC_PPP_IND; [d] = United Nations Development Programme (2022), Human Development Index value, the higher the score, the more developed the country; [e] = Eurostat (n.d.) database, 2020, online data code—RD_E_GERDSC; [f] = Kaltenbrunner et al. (2020), Peruško et al. (2016), Kõuts-Klemm et al. (2019), Šulmane and Uzule (2018); [g] = Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (2022), Media Pluralism Monitor data, based on the estimation of risks in four categories—fundamental protection, market plurality, political independence, and social inclusiveness.

The countries selected for comparisons are small, although this is not usually emphasised in their analysis. The research investigating the development of media and journalism studies as a field in Austria has critically discussed its relationship to international studies, suggesting that a common identity of the academic discipline within the country does not yet exist, although the institutionalisation of the field started as early as 1939, with the foundation of the first department of communication at the University of Vienna (e.g., Karmasin & Krainer, 2013; Melischek & Seethaler, 2017; Thiele, 2017). Croatian media and journalism research has not focused on the issue of smallness. Studies show growing variety and quality over the whole gamut of the discipline, although with a prevalence of some topics over others (Peruško & Vozab, 2016, 2017). Analysing Estonian studies, the notion of smallness is also usually disregarded, although it has sometimes been mentioned as a reason for some disadvantages in the development of the field (Herkman, 2008; Loit, 2018; Salovaara-Moring & Kallas, 2007). Similarly, there have been no studies on the scope and scale of media and journalism research in Latvia. Only a few studies have included research capability and influence on the professional sphere regarding certain aspects, for example, media diversity, claiming low quality and a lack of financial support as a result of no priority being given to media-related issues in the science policy of Latvia (Zelče, 2018).

This article is based on national case studies of Austria (Eberwein et al., 2022), Croatia (Peruško & Vozab, 2022), Estonia (Harro-Loit et al., 2022), and Latvia (Rožukalne et al., 2022), which assessed the monitoring

capability of media developments in the respective countries. The case study reports were structured according to the four domains of news media and journalism research: legal and ethical regulation of the media, journalism, media usage, and media-related competences. According to the conceptual framework of the project, these domains most clearly indicate the risks and opportunities related to media's role in democratic societies (Mediadelcom, 2020; see also Harro-Loit & Eberwein, 2024). In the legal and ethical regulation domain, the research deals with the legislative context and accountability mechanisms for media; in the journalism domain, the research concentrates on the characteristics of the profession and its relations to other sub-systems of society; in the media usage domain, the studies analyse the habits and behaviour of media audiences; and in the media-related competences domain, the ability to use media and to produce media receive attention on the very micro level of research.

The country case studies were based on academic publications and other research reports, and also incorporated the expert knowledge of media scholars and professionals gathered through semi-structured interviews. The data cover the period 2000–2020 and follow a common matrix for all participating countries. Although a common matrix of keywords was used to identify the publications, the selection in each country is not representative in a statistical sense, as only those texts were selected that were considered by the national researchers to be relevant to the research questions. For the same reason, the data are not comparable between countries, except in a broad sense to indicate trends in the topics and publishers. Data are also summarised in a bibliographic database, which provides a systematic overview of topics, languages, availability and types of publications, as well as other relevant characteristics (Mediadelcom, 2023). All sources have been evaluated to indicate different degrees of usefulness for the purpose of monitoring the risks and opportunities of recent media transformations, according to a conceptual differentiation between data, information, knowledge, and wisdom (see Harro-Loit & Eberwein, 2024).

In summary, the four selected cases (the most common sample size for comparative journalism studies, according to Hanusch & Vos, 2020) provide rich material for a qualitative analysis of the main topics, institutionalisation, and the scope of research in monitoring the media's role in society. The sample provides us with information on countries that are small in different ways: Austria in comparison to its giant neighbour; Estonia having the smallest population size; Latvia having, in addition to its small economy, a peripheral position to power centres; and Croatia as experiencing the loss of size due of its historical transformations. The country case studies thus enable us to show different types of smallness as explained in the Section 2.

4. Research Interests in the Four Domains of Risks and Opportunities

As indicated in Table 2, the journalism domain has contributed to a great extent to the analysis of risks and opportunities related to media developments in the selected countries during the last 20 years. The domain of media-related competences seems to be the newest and the least studied.

4.1. Journalism

The journalism domain seems to be the most studied field in all four countries. The topics of research cover a wide variety of developments in media and exhibit a high diversity of research methods. Research on journalism is rooted in sociology, with influences from the humanities in Austria, Estonia, and Croatia, and

also from political science in Croatia. Most of the studies have been dedicated to developments in the media market or journalistic content. Less studied topics are working conditions, the professional development of journalists and—as a comparatively new topic—stress factors in journalistic work.

Table 2. Number of publications (%) in four research domains reflecting the risks and opportunities for news media and journalism in a country.

	Journalism	Legal and ethical regulation of media	Media usage patterns	Media competences
Austria (*N* = 197)	57	30	16	6
Croatia (*N* = 449)	56	21	13	11
Estonia (*N* = 165)	60	25	20	17
Latvia (*N* = 302)	55	24	49	23

However, the research topics differ from country to country. In Austria, the journalism domain is covered by a large variety of empirical sources, and research initiatives are highly specialised. In recent years, the complexity of different data collection procedures seems to have increased, and there is a discernible trend towards internationally comparable research settings. Several large-scale journalists' surveys have been repeated and refined over the past two decades (most recently, Kaltenbrunner et al., 2020). In Croatia, journalism research is related mainly to topics of media market conditions, diversity and pluralism in the market, concentration tendencies in the television market, and the autonomy of public service media. Publications dealing with the journalistic profession and journalists' working conditions are rare, except in relation to international comparative studies. In Estonia, the journalism domain is also relatively well studied, as nearly all possible aspects have been covered to some extent. However, the policies of the owners and managers of media outlets have received virtually no attention. Academic research is typically critical-analytical. In Latvia, regular monitoring of the field is almost completely missing. In 20 years, there has been only one longitudinal research project (Šulmane, 2011) that covers journalists' professional identities. Although the largest number of studies have been in the field of journalism (42%), they mainly reflect the results of the analysis of current contents or market structures.

Research in all four countries is linked to international research projects, at least to some extent. All of the countries are covered, for example, by the comparative MPM (most recently, the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2022), and all of them participate in the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS; e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2019).

4.2. Media Usage

The data on research on media usage collected for the present study probably represent only the tip of the iceberg. Media usage research by private companies is often not made public and rarely grants open access: "In countries where 'media has become a huge business,' media-related research is also big business, and the role of academic media and communication research has remained marginal from the point of view of the media industries" (Herkman, 2008, p. 152).

Media usage research has been driven by diverging interests. In Austria, data quality in the area of media usage is still impaired by the interests of commercial research institutions and their continuing struggle to

synchronise the established "currencies" to measure audience reach in different media sectors. In Estonia, the academic monitoring of media usage is rather fragmented; most of it is related to trending topics and international comparative projects dealing with digital media, e.g., EU Kids Online. The financing of broader original academic research has decreased since 2014. The main interest in media usage for policy planning is related to the integration of the Russian-speaking population. In Latvia, media usage and audience research have formed one of the relatively popular research directions, making up a third of the analysed publications for the current study. A significant number of media usage studies have been carried out for commercial purposes, and there are two main directions of data gathering: public opinion polls on media consumption and media usage data. In Croatia, most academic publications about media usage have been published during the last 20 years, and this attests to the late development of media usage research in the country, though this research is of high quality and is often comparable to international research.

4.3. Legal and Ethical Regulation of the Media

In the legal and ethical regulation domain, there are clear interests related to deliberative communication and democracy that derive from belonging to the common value network of Europe. The dominant topics have been press freedom, freedom of expression, and the regulatory context for granting these freedoms. Nevertheless, we found significant differences in the specialisation and status of the research among the countries. The field of law is traditionally considered significant at Austrian universities and, consequently, key legal texts concerning media, as well as critical commentary (both by academic actors and NGOs), are easily accessible, although empirical research is under-represented. In Croatia, the legal dimension, with its focus on freedom of expression and the legal transformations of the media field after socialism, made up about one-third of relevant texts in the four areas of the discipline. In Estonia, there is currently a lot of data concerning the domain, but little information on the legal environment or tendencies concerning freedom of expression and especially freedom of information. In Latvia, the issues of media and journalism regulation have not been sufficiently analysed, and there is a lack of high-quality research on both basic issues (freedom of expression, protection of journalistic sources, professional ethics, etc.) and such issues as the digitisation and regulation of audio-visual services. Research on legal regulation and ethics is interdisciplinary, and it certainly requires cooperation between communication and law scholars. Still, such cooperation seems to be rather rare, and practically non-existent in Estonia and Latvia.

4.4. Media-Related Competences

The youngest research domain, where the risks and opportunities discourse is increasing, focuses on media-related competences. In Austria, research in this field is clearly less differentiated than in the other domains, presumably a result of either weak institutionalisation or its typically interdisciplinary character, which makes it difficult to identify a clearly defined canon of literature. In Croatia, the sub-field has started to develop in the past 10 years, due to EU media literacy policies and international projects with the participation of Croatian researchers. Several NGOs have been very actively pursuing the goals of media literacy, but these efforts are mainly centred on children and adolescents, to the exclusion of other vulnerable populations. The issue of education curricula has also received research attention. In Estonia, research has been sporadic and done by individual enthusiasts. The interests of researchers have focused on media and information literacy and digital skills. Specific groups, e.g., children and students, have received more attention due to international research funding (e.g., EU Kids Online). In Latvia, the main developments in the

research field started in the 2010s. Researchers of media literacy have focussed on a broad range of topics, covering structural changes, which are necessary to include media literacy competences in different stages of education, as well as pedagogic methods and the content to be included in a set of media competences.

5. Institutionalisation of Media and Journalism Research

To understand the differences described above, it is important to take a more systematic look at the actors and infrastructures (including relevant publications and associations) that drive media and journalism research in the countries studied.

5.1. Actors and Institutions

Considering the small size of the analysed countries, all four of them report comparatively broad ranges of actors involved in media research and monitoring initiatives. However, the degrees of institutionalisation and, consequently, their contribution to public discussions vary greatly.

In Austria, there are three big university-based institutes that focus comprehensively on communication studies, with other specialised programmes on different aspects of journalism and communication at other universities. The Institute for Comparative Media and Communication Studies at the Austrian Academy of Sciences is an example of a supra-university research institution with a specialised focus on comparative approaches. Besides a variety of actors from the media, the political and economic sectors and civil society also contribute to the research and monitoring capabilities related to news media and journalism. Examples include the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF), with its internal Public Value Competence Centre; the private Medienhaus Wien (Media House Vienna), an independent research and education company financed by funds from shareholders; and a broad range of commercially oriented market research and contract research institutions that collect, among other things, key data for the analysis of media usage patterns.

In Croatia, academic departments that run programmes in journalism, communication, and media at the BA and MA levels exist at five universities, while doctoral studies in media and communication are offered in four. The Centre for Media and Communication Research at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Zagreb is the only university centre that combines international comparative research with academic teaching and training. There are a host of private higher education organisations that also offer courses or degrees in communication with a more professional orientation. Domestic and international market research organisations also conduct media audience research. The number of academic staff members in the discipline grew with the establishment of new university departments in the field.

In Estonia, the main actors in data and knowledge collecting are commercial research enterprises, academic research groups, and individual researchers at the University of Tartu and Tallinn University. Both universities offer doctoral programmes. Other relevant institutions that monitor media and journalism include the Data Protection Inspectorate (concerning the freedom of information), Statistics Estonia, and the Ministry of Culture, which has been collecting data on broadcasting (within the last few years), e.g., the number of employees and employment contracts, the financing of different channels, as well as the content, type, and number of programmes. The most important private company collecting data about media usage has been Kantar Emor (since the 1990s).

In Latvia, there are three main institutions of higher education hosting permanent study programmes and research activities focused on communication, media, and journalism. The Institute for Social and Political Research at the University of Latvia is one of the leading institutions in the field. A host of private institutions are also active. Other actors involved in media monitoring include the Ministry of Culture, regulatory bodies and the Latvian Journalists Association.

5.2. Associations and Journals

Even though the number of institutions and individuals involved in research on media and journalism may seem significant in all four countries, there are certainly differences regarding the importance the countries attribute to this field of study. The differences are visible by looking at the different forms of organised representation of available experts. In Austria, for example, media and communication research is organised under the aegis of the Austrian Society of Communication (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Kommunikationswissenschaft), which deals with both academia and media practice. Among other things, this organisation is in charge of publishing the quarterly *Medien Journal* (Media Journal) and also hosts a bi-annual conference. There is also a Croatian Communication Association, although information on its membership etc. is not available, and it appears that its only activity is publishing two journals. In contrast, Estonia and Latvia do not have similar associations at the national level, which certainly limits the public visibility of experts in this field.

Similar differences exist regarding the number of specialised journals. In Croatia, a total of six academic journals are devoted to media and communication research: *Informatologia* (since 1969), *Medijska istraživanja* (since 1995), *MediAnali* (from 2007 to 2018), *Medijske studije* (since 2010), *In Medias Res* (since 2012), *Media, Culture and Public Relations* (since 2012), and *CM—Communication Management Review* (since 2016). All academic journals are required to be available in open access. Austria also has a broad range of different journals, most of them with very specific focuses. The *Medien Journal* (published since 1977) is the only journal which includes all kinds of questions related to media and communication in society; the publications *Medienimpulse*, *medien & zeit* and *Medien und Recht* cover issues of media education, media history, and media law. In Latvia, on the other hand, there is no academic or non-academic journal of media and communication research. Previous research periodicals, such as *Daudzveidība*, *Agora*, and *Domino*, were not peer-reviewed and only published a couple of issues. Estonia has one annually published academic periodical: the *Yearbook of the Estonian Academic Journalism Society*.

6. Integration Into the International Research Community

The globalisation of science (Stichweh, 1996) is a trend that characterises modern societies. Increasing specialisation means that in smaller countries there are only a few researchers working on certain topics and thus only the international research community can provide infrastructure for the exchange of ideas (Vanderstraeten, 2010). The growing internationalisation and "journalisation" of German-language communication research has been analysed in detail by Domahidi and Strippel (2014). Our case studies show that processes of internationalisation have developed in all four countries since 2000. However, each country has its own specific elements. Table 3 shows the direction of publishing efforts towards international and national audiences, and also highlights the availability of information for a wider audience.

Table 3. Research publications (%) reflecting the risks and opportunities for news media and journalism in English and in national languages and their availability, i.e., open access.

	Publications for international audiences (in English)	Publications for national audiences (in national languages)	Publications available via open access
Austria (N = 197)	45	54	39
Croatia (N = 449)	25	75	84
Estonia (N = 165)	77	18	58
Latvia (N = 302)	40	60	61

In Austria, the country with the longest and strongest tradition of internationalisation, less than half of the publications dealing with risks and opportunities for media are available in English, although this number is growing with increased membership in international research associations (International Communication Association, European Communication Research and Education Association, etc.). The internationalisation process is also clearly visible at Austrian universities, where the chairs of media and journalism studies have increasingly been filled with international scholars. While Austrian scholars participate in European comparative projects and networks, the increasing internationalisation also has drawbacks because it tends to obscure specific characteristics of the Austrian media system. An evaluation of the Austrian research and monitoring capabilities demonstrated that many international scholars at Austrian universities have little or no interest in doing research on Austrian media.

Croatian researchers also participate in the field of media and communication and a growing internationalisation is visible. A quarter of the Croatian publications in the four analysed areas were published internationally, over 90% of them in English. Croatia is among the rare CEE countries with previous research on the intellectual history of media and journalism studies (for histories of the CEE, see Jirák & Köpplová, 2008; Peruško & Vozab, 2016; Splichal, 2020). The pioneering analysis by Slavko Splichal of communication in socialist Yugoslavia (1989) found a distinctly "Western" paradigmatic approach to the discipline (i.e., the Soviet media theory was not known or used) and different schools of thought: Critical theory, Functionalism, and "Productive Inclusivism" (Splichal, 2020, p. 355).

Estonian academic research is strongly integrated into international research. This trend was encouraged by the need to break away from the Soviet scientific system. At present, it is quite common in the field of media and journalism to have comparative international research grants rather than national ones. The scarcity of national funding has led to the need for international competitiveness among scholars (Estonia has the largest share—80%—of project funding as R&D funding among EU countries; Reale, 2017, p. 38). Most publications are written in English, and new findings in the field rarely receive attention in popular forms in national journalism.

In Latvia, with significantly lower funding for R&D in the country, less visibility and competitiveness have been achieved. A small number (7%) of publications on media and journalism are indexed in international scholarly databases, and less than half are peer-reviewed. The international research community has limited opportunities to become acquainted with research on Latvian media and journalism, as more than half of the publications are only available in Latvian. In the absence of resources for longitudinal research, individual

researchers tend to focus on current issues at the national level. Longitudinal and comparative data are mostly available when researchers become involved in EU-level research projects and have the opportunity to contribute national data in support of current EU research objectives.

The different historical backgrounds of countries make it possible to describe different stages of internationalisation. Austria and Croatia were on the Western side of the Iron Curtain for most of the 20th century. Although a part of socialist Yugoslavia, Croatian and other Yugoslav researchers had open intellectual exchanges with the West and "Western" theoretical paradigms. Although Estonia and Latvia, as former parts of the USSR, have both lagged behind in the internationalisation process, the development of internationalisation has moved at different rates in the two countries: Estonia's encouraging policies have led to quite significant success, resulting in large numbers of international projects and English-language publications. At the same time, the smallness of the country and its media and journalism research community contributes to both international (in)visibility and the lack of capability of self-reflection of this community vis-à-vis international media research. Internationalisation without balanced, adequate, and attentive monitoring of national phenomena by the community of researchers is an increasing risk for the development of media systems in small countries.

7. Conclusions

The study presented here is exploratory in nature. Our main question was whether small countries have the capacity to carry out media monitoring to identify the risks and opportunities of media transformations. Although there are some similarities, we found more differences.

Despite the relatively small size of the country, the research and monitoring capacities in Austria are based on a comparatively wide range of publications and other sources, especially in the field of journalism research. However, the national discourse in media and journalism research is strongly influenced by international trends (especially from Germany). The result is a constant struggle between "Austrification" and internationalisation, with some observers expressing concern that expert knowledge about the specific conditions of the Austrian media system might eventually be lost (see also Thiele, 2017).

A relatively long history of media and communication research gives Croatia an advantage over most CEE countries. The quality of theoretically designed empirical research still leaves much to be desired. The number of research articles has increased in each decade since 2000. The language of most publications in this study is Croatian, reflecting the national policy of giving priority to publications in the national language. The publication of journals in Croatian (many are now in English) is also linked to the need to develop the national vocabulary in the discipline. This may be a problem specific to small states.

In Estonia, media and journalism research is fragmented and sporadic, but well integrated into the international research community, though less visible domestically. The contribution of research to societal self-reflection is minimal (academic journals and respective institutions are lacking).

In Latvia, due to the lack of a tradition of media research and the scarcity of resources, not all issues included in the four areas have been sufficiently studied. This also explains the "smallness" of ideas and data of existing research. The studies depend on the individual interests of a small number of researchers, who depend on

project-based opportunities and have not been able to contribute to the development of a scientific school or communication theory.

Despite the differences, an examination of the development of media and journalism research shows that the late 1960s was a time of renewed interest in communication in all four countries. This was followed by what can be described as a period of consolidation. Today, the discipline is characterised by internal diversity and growing fragmentation in all countries. However, only Austria, the largest country in terms of economy and population, has a national infrastructure for knowledge exchange. In the other three countries, academic associations in communication and media studies do not exist or are unable to function. In this sense, media and journalism research for small countries should be international.

In all four countries, the coherence and systemic development of the field of study still needs to be improved. In Austria, the process of differentiation is driven by universities of applied sciences and non-university research institutions as new actors in the field. In Croatia, the lack of independence of the discipline of media and journalism studies and its subordinate position in "information and communication sciences" have limited cooperation between researchers and departments and have hindered integration in the field. The same can be said of Latvia and Estonia, both of which lack the resources to create strong institutions that can systematise and promote the development of media and journalism studies.

This has both positive and negative implications for the development of the discipline. Small economies have fewer economic and human resources to develop diverse and sophisticated media and journalism research. The low level of national funding can lead to fierce competition among researchers, which can be seen as a risk for the field. As an opportunity, it can also stimulate the search for international cooperation. If there are few media and journalism scholars in a country, they are not able to cover all relevant research topics. For smaller economies, the right level of institutionalisation can be seen as an opportunity, as in Austria, where all of the necessary institutions exist and their functions do not overlap. In countries with fewer resources, institutionalisation is insufficient to develop and coordinate an appropriate and balanced research policy.

Moreover, based on the relational nature of the concept of smallness, the stronger and more prominent national monitoring and research initiatives are, the more they provide an operational basis for self-reference that can turn smallness into an asset. Conversely, where the historical background and the development of an institutional base have had little or no positive influence, media monitoring and research is dependent on external funding. Our country cases show that the smallness of the country can create tensions between national and international focal points; this undoubtedly encourages the search for coping strategies to deal with smallness and explains the discontinuity and lack of long-term monitoring initiatives. However, this trend can also be seen as providing flexibility in the selection of the most timely research topics.

Some limitations of the study should be mentioned. The data collection on the state of media and journalism research and its impact was clearly focused on four specific research areas and is not representative of all media and journalism research. Another limitation of the study is the accessibility of the data: it represents only easily accessible, i.e., publicly available data. Limiting the analysis to accessible data was a deliberate choice: data and publications that are hidden or unavailable cannot contribute significantly to the self-reflection of the media system or society.

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Media and Communication is an international, peer-reviewed open access journal dedicated to a wide variety of basic and applied research in communication and its related fields. It aims at providing a research forum on the social and cultural relevance of media and communication processes.

The journal is concerned with the social development and contemporary transformation of media and communication and critically reflects on their interdependence with global, individual, media, digital, economic and visual processes of change and innovation.

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