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## Journalistic practices contesting the concept of internal pluralism : Mapping strategies for internal diversity in and through the news

Núñez-Mussa, Enrique

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## Chapter 13

# Journalistic practices contesting the concept of internal pluralism

### *Mapping strategies for internal diversity in and through the news*

Enrique Núñez-Mussa, Kari Karppinen,  
& Hanne Vandenberghe

#### Abstract

The concept of internal pluralism is employed in this chapter to delve into how journalists and editors from 18 countries worldwide understand and practice internal diversity in their newsrooms. The results reveal a tension between normative expectations of pluralism and the representation of society in news media, professional journalistic standards, and how aspirations to pluralism are taken into action through sourcing routines. Although the sample is diverse – not least in terms of political and media systems – there is a common trend of increasing awareness about the need for pluralism in the newsroom, and a shared lack of structures for incorporating this ambition in internal journalistic routines.

**Keywords:** internal pluralism, newsroom diversity, pluralism in journalism, source pluralism, media pluralism

## Introduction

When considered as a core value in journalism, the notion of internal pluralism opens a tense dialogue between different normative perspectives about how journalists should represent society and the diversity of newsrooms with the conditions in which journalists and editors practice pluralism. In this chapter, we analyse the structural conditions and understanding of internal pluralism in the news media of 18 countries worldwide to map the diversity of interpretations of the concept in different national contexts and the related practices.

Each section of this chapter explores a particular aspect of internal pluralism in journalism, with examples from the 18 countries participating in the 2021 Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) research project (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021b, 2021c). Considering the different understandings of diversity, more or less polarised political contexts, and varied journalistic cultures and

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routines, we first review the foundations of the concept of internal pluralism and related scholarly discussions. We present the contradictions and conflicts that arise from the ideal role of journalism as a mirror of society, on the one hand, and journalism as an activity that constructs an image of society for the public, on the other.

MDM Indicators and related research questions addressed in this chapter:

**(F3) Diversity of news sources**

How diverse are the sources used by the leading news media? (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 21)

**(F7) Procedures on news selection and news processing**

What rules are implemented and practised in the leading news media regarding the selection and in-house processing of news items? (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 25)

**(F9) Gender equality in media content**

To what extent do media outlets acknowledge and address challenges to gender equality in media content and promote free expression and inclusion of diverse voices? (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 28)

**(E4) Minority/Alternative media**

Do minority and alternative media exist? Are all sorts of minorities served by media? Do minorities have their own media? (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 35)

**(E10) Rules and practices on internal pluralism**

How do media organisations ensure different views and perspectives are being reported? (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 41)

In this chapter, we examine the structural organisation inside newsrooms and the extent to which media outlets acknowledge and address challenges to gender equality in media content and promote free expression and inclusion of diverse voices. We describe the challenges related to the homogeneity of media teams regarding gender, ethnicity, and background and how journalism's views and opinions are incorporated in newsroom decision-making in the sample countries with hierarchical media organisations.

We also report journalists' awareness of incorporating internal pluralism into their daily work. We detected a level of agreement on the relevance of journalistic news values that guide decision-making on sourcing and framing. There were also common limitations to this ambition of most newsrooms, such as limited time for reporting, pressing deadlines, and more structural aspects, such as the partisan stance of a particular media house.

## Definitions and dilemmas of internal pluralism

Definitions of the role of media in a democracy all acknowledge that journalism ought to represent a diversity of voices and perspectives in society. Academic conceptualisations (e.g., Karppinen, 2018) and journalists' perceptions (Vandenbergh et al., 2020) of what this means and what makes journalism pluralistic or diverse can vary. As for the former, both media pluralism and diversity have been conceptualised in various ways in different parts of the world. Similarly, journalists' perceptions of these concepts and their implications for journalistic work can vary across media systems, journalistic and political cultures, and different types of media outlets.

In this chapter, we are primarily concerned with the idea of internal pluralism, which refers to fostering a diversity of perspectives within one media outlet in terms of political views, gender, ethnicity, and other social and cultural differences. In contrast, external pluralism typically refers to the diversity of different outlets across the media system (e.g., Karppinen, 2013).

Though there is a general agreement that journalism should include a variety of voices, the implications of pluralism as a normative principle for journalism and news media remains controversial (Karppinen, 2013, 2018; Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2015; Valcke et al., 2015).

The controversies about the nature of internal pluralism mirror some fundamental questions about the role of news media and journalism as the gatekeepers of the public sphere (see, e.g., Christians et al., 2009). A lasting question is whether journalism should reflect the balance of existing identities and differences in society, or whether it should question the existing sociopolitical status quo, promoting critical voices and views that challenge the prevailing structures of power and might otherwise be silenced in public debates (Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2015; see also Karppinen, 2018). It is also important to investigate the extent to which journalism contributes to constructing these differences (Karppinen, 2018).

These normative questions have implications for several practical issues in journalism, including the selection of sources, judgments of newsworthiness, framing of individual news stories, and the inclusion of different perspectives within the newsroom, which all impact whose voices are heard in the public sphere. While these choices are often constrained by journalistic routines and organisational factors, such as time and resources, they also reflect different normative assumptions about the role of journalism in society (Karppinen, 2018).

According to Denis McQuail (2007), the aim of journalism to promote society's diversity in their reporting can be approached from at least four normative standpoints: 1) reflection, that is, journalism should mirror the balance of existing political, cultural, and social differences in society; 2) equality, which means journalism should provide equal access to various perspectives and

groups in society, regardless of popularity; 3) choice, which means there is a diverse range for individual consumers to choose from; and 4) openness, that is, fostering innovation and difference and valuing new ideas and various voices.

In journalistic practices, these normative assumptions may sometimes conflict and even contradict one another and raise questions about identifying the groups or perspectives that need representation, and deciding which are to be considered underrepresented (Karppinen, 2018). In addition, the differences that journalism ought to represent can range from different political viewpoints to gender, ethnic, and cultural diversity in the content that is published and inside the media organisation where the content is produced.

In previous studies on internal and external news pluralism and diversity, the community structure theory of media coverage has indicated that journalistic reporting tends to be shaped, at least to some extent, by existing demographic and community characteristics and patterns in public opinion (e.g., Pollock, 2013). On the other hand, journalism never only “mirrors” social reality but also constructs and selectively frames the issues covered by the news. Furthermore, critical scholars have often criticised mainstream journalism for offering a plurality of views “within the box” – that is, providing plurality within certain ideological limits that maintain the status quo of existing social consensus (e.g., Glasser et al., 2009; Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2016).

In some cases, decisions concerning internal pluralism may be subject to formal rules regarding, for example, election reporting or equivalent coverage of political candidates. In most cases, however, the range of views represented by a media outlet is governed by informal journalistic routines and practices associated with the ideals of objectivity and balance.

One mechanism noted in many canonical journalism theories that support the media’s purported elite orientation is the news media’s reliance on official and expert sources. Stuart Hall and colleagues’ (1978) theory of “primary definers”, for example, highlights how the media tend to reproduce existing elite consensus, not because of an unconscious bias, but because of professional norms and practices that help reinforce a relationship of reciprocity and interdependence with policy elites. Similarly, Herbert Gans (1979) established an influential hierarchy of sources: from “knowns”, which already occupy prominent positions, to “unknowns”, such as ordinary people or protesters. The selection of sources by news organisations has a significant impact on pluralism if one considers expert sources who interpret issues for the public as exercising power in framing journalistic coverage (e.g., Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2009; Manninen, 2017; Vandenberghe et al., 2020).

It is also evident that different types of media outlets interpret the normative standpoints of pluralism differently. Public service media, for example, is often tasked with the explicit aim of fostering internal pluralism and serving all groups in society, including minorities. In contrast, media outlets with a

political stand or a party affiliation would interpret their role differently and more in line with the idea of external pluralism.

## Method

Differences in media systems, political and journalistic cultures, and media market size could also be expected to produce different challenges and journalistic self-perception concerning internal pluralism in countries characterised by different journalistic cultures and traditions of consensual or polarised politics (e.g., Hallin & Mancini 2004; Hanitzsch et al., 2019). In this chapter, we review the data from the 2021 MDM research project (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021b, 2021c), guided by existing conceptualisations of internal pluralism. We performed an in-depth reading and thematic clustering of the MDM indicators addressing the diversity of news sources (F3), procedures on news selection and news processing (F7), gender equality in media content (F9), minority and alternative media (E4), and rules and practices on internal pluralism (E10) (for further details about the indicators, see Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a). Based on the clustering, we derived a variety of understandings and interpretations of pluralism and diversity issues found in newsrooms across the world.

The first category is internal diversity as a reflection of society, referring to its cultural, political, social, and demographical composition. A heterogeneity in terms of gender, age, language, ethnic origin, social class, and ideological viewpoints should be reflected both in news content and newsroom staff. Conversely, a lack of diversity within newsrooms is seen as the main problem for reflecting society accurately in news content. Diversity of political opinions is also a recurring aspect. Although news media are primarily impartial, a balanced representation of political standpoints and parties is sought, especially within the opinion or editorial pages of newspapers. This category is elaborated in the section discussing signs of a growing awareness of the need for internal diversity.

A second category derived from the MDM data is the view that professional journalistic standards is the primary condition for ensuring internal pluralism, which means that those standards are what journalists declare guide their decision-making (see the section below, “Decision-making in the newsroom”); although, a precondition for that is editorial freedom and autonomy. Moreover, budget cuts resulting in fewer journalists in general, and specifically fewer foreign correspondents, is indicated as one of the most significant risks for not providing internal pluralism, especially in the variety of information and sources that can be used to produce news stories.

This last issue relates to the third understanding of diversity, namely that of diversity due to sourcing practices (see the section below, “Sourcing practices as a diversity issue”). One aspect of source diversity is the type of sources used in

the news, especially in television news, the variety of voices from so-called vox populi to experts. The second aspect is the type of primary sources used in the newsrooms. News agencies, public relations material, and Internet search engines are primary sources in the general newsroom. National news agencies remain an essential source in the daily journalistic business; however, more prominent news media tend to use it more often as a secondary or tertiary source, whereas smaller or online-only news organisations use the news agencies more frequently as the primary source. The use of public relations material increases, although those interviewed for the MDM project did not address the interdependence of their journalistic work.

Lastly, interviewees in the MDM address (ownership) concentration as an increasing issue, making pluralism more compelling than ever before (see also Bonfadelli et al., Chapter 6). A few major (commercial) brands are setting the news agenda, which endangers the diversity of news stories and opinions. There is an increase in content exchange between platforms of the same owners. Although the concentration issue can impact the space and time given to diverse voices in the news content, for example, with more hierarchical newsrooms, overall, it is more an issue at the external level of pluralism, which is not within the scope of this chapter.

### Explicit awareness of diversity

There are clear indications in the 2021 MDM country reports of an explicit awareness of diversity issues related to journalism. Internal pluralism is recognised as a central goal in most mainstream media outlets. Most interviewees acknowledge that they have a strong newsroom commitment to diversity-related goals, such as gender equality and a range of viewpoints.

The MDM results also tell of internal debates concerning the theme of diversity, and at times, tensions between different generations of journalists or different conceptions of the role of journalism. In Germany, for example, it is reported that issues related to the selection of sources that reflect societal diversity in terms of gender, age, and ethnic origin have become a sensitive topic in newsrooms (Horz-Ishak & Thomass, 2021).

Awareness regarding gender equality is evident (see also Padovani et al., Chapter 4), and projects like the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) have produced academic information on women's presence as journalists and news sources, gender bias, and stereotypes in the news. News media in several countries also report that they regularly track the proportion of women as news subjects and sources. While news media in Sweden have succeeded in increasing the share of women sources to around 40 per cent, in most cases, the share remains below 30 per cent (in the 2015 GMMP report, the European

and global averages are 25% and 24% of women subjects). In some countries, such as the United Kingdom, policy-makers have also specifically urged news media to take steps to ensure that they better reflect society by providing a gender balance (House of Lords, 2015).

Despite these apparent land winnings, not every country in the 2021 MDM sample shared the commitment to improving gender balance. Interviewees in some countries reported no awareness of gender sensitivity. In Greece, for example, it is reported that there is a lack of culture relating to gender equalities in news and “a lack of an understanding that this is a problem in the first place” (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021: 196). Similarly, editors interviewed in Flanders, Belgium, failed to indicate the existence of, or the need for, explicit mechanisms to monitor and guarantee gender balance in news subjects.

In addition, attention to gender diversity does not ensure that similar awareness extends to other aspects of diversity, such as ethnic, cultural, or social diversity. In many countries, we could confirm relatively little attention to minorities in the mainstream media. Various minorities, because of their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, (dis-)ability, ethnicity, and others, were often under- or misrepresented in mainstream media. In countries that have experienced sudden increases in immigration, such as Chile, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, and Iceland, the media faces challenges and criticism on covering these new populations. Usually, immigrants tend to have low visibility as actors, and that coverage of immigrants is often associated with negative frames, such as crime or political unrest. This mirrors existing research on how immigrants and refugees are represented in the media, revealing established framing patterns and systematic biases (e.g., Berry et al., 2015; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017).

In contrast to gender, there are fewer mentions of attempts to increase the share of groups, such as ethnic minorities or immigrants, as sources or subjects in the news. Instead, ethnic minority media is often explicitly conceived as its own niche “sector”, or at most, something that falls within the mandate of public service media, which in many countries is mandated to produce specific minority programming.

A more general issue raised in the interviews was whether journalism is collectively able to cover all layers of society when most journalists themselves are middle-class professionals living in metropolitan areas. Particularly in countries that have experienced large migration, such demographic homogeneity concerns journalists who would like a more heterogeneous newsroom: This was the case in Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland. In many cases, the representation of ethnic minorities also remains marginal in the workforce of mainstream media houses. Besides public service media, some news media (e.g., *de Correspondent* in the Netherlands) have also begun initiatives to improve the diversity of their editorial staff by purposively hiring journalists from different backgrounds (Vandenbergh & d’Haenens, 2021).



In some countries, respondents identify a specific social mobilisation or event as having triggered the discussion of internal pluralism in some newsrooms. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement awoke a concern in Canadian journalists from CBC about regulations that had the potential to restrict journalists' voices (Taylor & DeCillia, 2021). In Chile, the political and social turmoil experienced in 2019 revealed a generational gap among reporters and editors on how to cover the protest, exposing contending notions of impartiality and professionalism (Núñez-Mussa, 2021).

In the countries participating in the MDM research project, there are no formal procedures to ensure internal pluralism in the media outlets, apart from general journalism professional and ethical standards. However, in many countries, the public service media (PSM) has an explicit mandate to represent society. For instance, the Austrian public broadcaster ORF must represent all crucial voices in society and scouts for new experts in various fields, coaching them in how to perform in front of the camera (Grünangerl et al., 2021). The Danish public broadcaster DR has a Director of Pluralism and Diversity, whose job is to recruit staff that can add diversity to teams, journalist positions, and participants in programmes (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2021). VRT, the Dutch-language Belgian public broadcaster, is considered one of the leaders in diversity policy-making within Western and Northern Europe (d'Haenens et al., 2018) and has a diversity policy document establishing quotas of 40 per cent women both in the staff and on-screen, and 7 per cent people with a foreign origin (outside EU-15) in the staff and 7.5 per cent on-screen. That said, it is not always the case that PSM is more diverse than other news media; for instance, only 12 per cent of the Canadian public broadcaster's staff is a visible minority (CBC, 2018). Also, the political circumstances affect how the stated purpose of the national PSM is interpreted, as in Greece and Portugal, where some audiences perceive public media as mouthpieces for the government.

Regarding political pluralism, respondents in some countries consider polarisation and partisan press as obstacles to internal pluralism. Far-right parties are gaining parliamentary representation, as in Belgium and Germany, challenging journalists' ideals about how news should be and the notion of representing all relevant voices in the political agenda. This is particularly conflicting considering that journalists from several European countries state that news values such as independence, objectivity, conflict, and impartiality are their primary reference in sustaining their arguments in newsroom discussions.

Despite the aim to represent all views in society, the journalists interviewed for the MDM project made it clear that there are limits to political pluralism within mainstream media. They mainly refer to the exclusion of fringe views, which supports the idea of mainstream media offering plurality only within certain ideological limits deemed within "a sphere of legitimate controversy" (Hallin, 1986; see also Raeijmackers & Maesele, 2016).

## Decision-making in the newsroom

MDM results also show how respondents perceive the voices of journalists to be represented inside the organisation. In most contexts, decision-making inside the newsroom takes the form of an oral culture of daily discussion. Usually, the editorial meeting is the central instance for story proposals, news selection, and framing – in some countries, such as Chile and Finland, more than once during the day. In Australia, it was considered an opportunity for guaranteeing accountability in the journalistic decision-making process, making them open, so visitors can attend the meetings (Dwyer et al., 2021). Although informal, journalists and editors in several countries (like Belgium, Chile, Germany, and South Korea) recognise editorial meetings or newsroom debates as a relevant occasion for reporters to voice their opinions and build the media's agenda. They also stress the relevance of conversations during the day, where they negotiate the framing of the stories.

These instances are deliberative and a propulsor of internal pluralism, depending on the country and the hierarchical structure of the newsroom. The most common scenario is that reporters can propose stories and editors have the final word, with nuances between countries regarding reporters' autonomy (see also Trappel et al., Chapter 14).

According to the MDM findings, Canada, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland are exceptional cases for journalists' autonomy. In Canada, reporters can refuse to sign an article (Taylor & DeCillia, 2021), and in Denmark, journalists have the opportunity to say no to an assignment or an editor's instruction if they consider that the assignment in some way goes against their principles (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2021). In Iceland (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2021) and Finland (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021), journalists are responsible for proposing stories and their frames, so they do not depend on assignments and can intervene in their news organisations' agenda and message.

Greece is different, as editorial meetings are between editors and editors-in-chief. The political view of the media organisation is the most relevant criterion in deciding what is covered (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021). Another example is Italy, where journalists do not have a say on the stories they are asked to cover and must respond to assigned topics and deadlines from their editors, with journalists declaring little autonomy (Padovani et al., 2021).

Seniority and expertise are recurring arguments to support the practice of allowing journalists to propose and incorporate stories into the news agenda. In the United Kingdom, where newsrooms have a vertical structure, roles and seniority influence discussion (Moore & Ramsay, 2021). In Chile, it depends on the editor's trust in the individual reporter (Núñez-Mussa, 2021). Across the sample, investigative journalists tend to be more independent and have more opportunities to pitch stories, because they also have more specific skills. Experi-

ence, as well, influences the editing process. In Belgium, for example, articles by less-experienced journalists are edited with more caution (Hendrickx et al., 2021).

### Sourcing practices as a diversity issue

Respondents mentioned professional routines as sometimes being a limitation for internal pluralism. Journalists in Austria, Chile, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Switzerland agree on the difficulties of thinking strategically about daily coverage due to time constraints, tight deadlines, and breaking news. Therefore, journalists tend to answer to the daily agenda and seek out the sources and experts they know will give a proper quote for their stories.

Some answers indicate that, in some contexts, online media outlets contribute more to internal pluralism than legacy media. This was the case in Belgium, where online-only media contributed more viewpoints to the public agenda (Hendrickx et al., 2021). In South Korea, online journalists stated they have more autonomy; therefore, they can present more voices (Kim & Lee, 2021). In contrast, in Chile, digital media tends to republish, follow up, and cover content introduced in the agenda by legacy media, so they replicate the sources and voices already part of the mainstream agenda (Núñez-Mussa, 2021).

Respondents in Finland, Iceland, and Sweden are concerned about finding a more heterogeneous group of expert sources to interview. In Iceland, it is an ongoing discussion in newsroom meetings (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2021). In Finland, some news organisations keep a statistical record of their interviewees' genders (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021). Canada and the Netherlands share a similar situation, but it depends on the individual initiative of each journalist. A Canadian reporter “stressed the importance of ‘getting the best sources’ while acknowledging an effort to avoid filling stories with ‘old white guys’” (Taylor & DeCillia, 2021: 72).

Despite good intentions and genuine efforts, time was a recurrent limitation to finding newer, reliable sources who can provide an adequate answer, especially in television, where experts require stronger communication skills. Journalists from Austria, Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Switzerland mentioned that experts with more media experience could give more efficient answers and probably get a new call to appear in the media. In addition, as small countries, Finland and Iceland have a limited number of reliable experts.

Another topic relevant to the issue of sourcing is journalists' autonomy and the media's political stance. A noticeable case of the first situation happens in Switzerland, where only editors, and not reporters, can evaluate sources (Bonfadelli et al., 2021). In Hong Kong, the political stance of the media is so influential that journalists tend to practice self-censorship, or their interview invitations get rejected by sources who disagree with their media outlets. An

extreme example from that country is one media that keeps a blacklist of pro-democracy experts (Lo & Wong, 2021).

In Greece, Hong Kong, and South Korea, the media coverage depends on the political perspective of the reporting media, which also conditions the availability of sources willing to speak with a specific outlet. This phenomenon could also be observed in the United Kingdom during the Brexit election (Moore & Ramsay, 2021).

## Conclusions

The 2021 MDM country reports and the interviews broadly reflect a consensus around the general expectation that the news media should represent the prevailing differences of backgrounds, opinions, and social conditions of the population (McQuail, 1992). The country reports also indicate an awareness of diversity issues and internal pluralism as problems that must be worked upon within media organisations and the profession. In concrete terms, this included issues such as diversifying the range of expert sources used and increasing the diversity of the journalistic workforce.

Several difficulties arise in putting the ideals of internal pluralism into practice. These were both practical in nature, such as entrenched journalistic routines and lack of resources, and more principled, such as varying understandings of internal pluralism as an aim. The MDM project has no clear definition or shared understanding of internal pluralism. Many journalists and editors understand the concept (and ideal) of pluralism differently, reflecting the academic understanding of these concepts as essentially contested and difficult to define objectively or measure empirically (Karppinen, 2015).

Although we have not attempted to produce a systematic comparison of countries or the factors that explain differences across countries, apparent differences between countries arise from, for example, the role and status of public service media as the institution that is most explicitly linked to internal pluralism; different journalistic cultures and norms; and varying levels of political polarisation and multiculturalism. The fact that news content should constitute a reflection of society is a well-accepted normative point of view in the academic context.

In most cases, there are no formal guidelines on internal pluralism for media organisations. Instead, journalists and editors primarily rely on their professional competence and implicit norms of the newsroom.

The results of this chapter show that despite journalists' shared awareness and expectations about internal pluralism, there are no universal or standardised practices, which adds to logistical, cultural, and political constraints to incorporate the ideals of pluralism in day-to-day editing and reporting routines.

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