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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 Mediadecom, 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 Mediadecom Project

The articles in this issue are the first outcomes of an EU-funded project called Mediadecom (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 Łoszevska-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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