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DIGITAL MEDIA SHADOWING DEMOCRACY

Technology, Communication, and Power

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DIGITAL MEDIA SHADOWING DEMOCRACY: TECHNOLOGY, COMMUNICATION, AND POWER

Digital Media Shadowing Democracy: Technology, Communication, and Power

Auksė Balčytienė, Péter Bajomi-Lázár, & Helena Sousa (Eds.)

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Preface

The nature, scope, and extent of the societal, political, economic, and environmental changes brought about by the advance of digital communication technologies in general and of social media platforms in particular have been studied by media scholars and policymakers for nearly two decades now. The growing number of uncertainties associated with the new information environment, further enhanced by the rise of information warfare waged by both radical domestic actors and geopolitical powers in recent years, has become a reason for concern in liberal democracies. Yet policy responses to the challenges of the new media landscape lag behind technological transformation.

The central issue of this volume is that a secure and safe information environment, where people are protected from disinformation and threats and can access trustworthy information, remains key to democratic processes: political elections, public debates, accountability, and participation. The current state of communication infrastructures calls for an agile regulatory framework for both legacy media and digital platforms, seeking policy solutions that, grounded in a human-centric approach, ensure platform diversity and transparency of operations, secure free speech, and protect citizens. Fundamental political decisions must be taken on both the national and the supranational levels. Regulatory institutions must have more powers and real authority to act, not just a title and formal responsibilities. They need clear legal powers and enough financial resources to protect accurate information and set transparency rules, to enable meaningful exchanges among citizens by supporting media literacy initiatives, and to fight disinformation by investigating coordinated manipulation and applying sanctions. Only informed and critical-minded citizens can defend democracies.

This volume appears at a time when risks to information integrity and democratic resilience are exceptionally high. The threats are too real to be devalued. Awareness and action are needed.

As editors, we would like to thank all contributors to this collective volume. Representing the Euromedia Research Group (euromediagroup.org) and having worked for several decades as a collaborative body, we also thank all members of the group who have generously taken their time and given advice and support to make this volume possible. Initially, the core idea

of platformisation, which is a connective thread across all chapters, emerged from an ERASMUS+ Programme–funded Jean Monnet Network project, "EuromediApp – European Media and Platform Policy" (euromediapp.org) – thus, we feel indebted to these activities and discussions. We are especially grateful for the informative comments of the two external reviewers and the enthusiastic Nordicom staff – especially the director, Jonas Ohlsson. A special thanks goes to Magnus Fredriksson, a scientific editor at Nordicom and of this volume, whose careful supervision assisted us not only when we needed help but also inspired us to anticipate potential key issues.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Platformisation as a systemic challenge

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ABSTRACT

This introductory chapter offers a brief overview of the macro-level effects of digitalisation and platformisation observed in recent decades by scholars. We note that the academic community and the public have assessed these impacts differently, with the former stressing negative outcomes and the latter framing innovations in communication technology as "progress". Further, we suggest that recent distortions in the public sphere have attributed new connotations to old concepts such as free speech, media diversity, and participation. Finally, in search of strategies to safeguard and advance human rights, democratic institutions, and the ideal of the common good in contemporary digital societies, we introduce the three main sections of the volume, including the foundations and context, diversity, engagement and governance, as well as platform power and artificial intelligence.

KEYWORDS: artificial intelligence, digitalisation, information revolution, platformisation, public sphere

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Introduction

The digitalisation of communication technology has fundamentally transformed all areas of life, from the home via school to the workplace and from politics via entertainment to business. The societal impacts of digitalisation only compare to those of the industrial revolutions. Yet, unlike the revolutions of steam and of electricity, beginning in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively, the revolution of information, starting in the late twentieth century, has taken place globally (Castells, 2009). And, unlike the industrial revolutions, the radical transformation of communication technology unfolded swiftly, within the lifespan of just one generation, making adaptation a challenge for many.

The impacts of digitalisation seem to fundamentally differ on the micro and the macro levels (Boldog, 2023). On the micro level, one may benefit from new communication technologies, as they can now more easily and cost-effectively access information, keep contact with family and friends, find a new job, attend an online class, complete a bank transaction, buy a used car, and so on. On the macro level, by contrast, the same person may be the loser of the ongoing transformation. The potentially adverse society-level effects of new communication technologies seem to be numerous and far-reaching, including a variety of overlapping and interdependent phenomena such as the computational dissemination of disinformation (Bradshaw et al., 2021), the emergence of digital hate speech (Vasist, 2024), the decline of traditional news organisations and professional journalism (Splichal & Dahlgren, 2016), the advent of populist politics (Castells, 2019), increasing political polarisation (Bail et al., 2018; Wojcieszak et al., 2021), and the surveillance of online communication (Ash, 2016), coupled, on the global level, with the high environmental costs of digital technology. Digitalisation has also enhanced and accelerated the blurring of the line between the public and the private spheres as well as the fragmentation of the public sphere (Habermas, 2023). Of course, innovations in communication technology have also had positive effects, such as easy access to a variety of information sources (Wojcieszak et al., 2021) and the opportunity for repressed groups to communicate their views to both in-group members and the world outside in authoritarian regimes (Steel, 2021; Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). In fact, the same innovation in communication technology may have both positive and negative impacts, depending on the perspective of the observer. The use of artificial intelligence, for example, may help traditional news organisations save costs while at the same time raises concerns of authenticity and ethics among readers (Ward, 2020).

In short, digitalisation is a significant driver of change due to the highly decentralising and hybrid nature of the technology involved (Chadwick, 2013), leading to genuine societal transformations. In recent years, the term platformisation has emerged as a standard term across various disciplines,

denoting the rise and global expansion of a few digital platform companies and the central role they play in how people access and use information (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023), a process that involves institutional and business transformations as well as the reorganisation of social and cultural habits and imaginaries resulting from social media platforms' applications in various spheres of everyday life (Poell et al., 2019).

The implications of platformisation can be observed in at least two domains. First, it expands global reach, accelerates information accessibility, diversifies content and representation, and creates new channels for political expression. Second, the digitalisation of communication – together with platformisation – introduces new ways and forms of digitally mediated organisation of social life, which in turn transform institutional structures and routines. Social media platforms – also referred to as "social networks" – possess an inherent power to algorithmically elevate new authorities, foster the creation of spaces for marginalised groups, and politically mobilise the disadvantaged and the voiceless (Corsi, 2024; Haochen, 2023; Helberger et al., 2017; Van Dalen, 2023). These developments also challenge the normative foundations and values of contemporary societies, impacting the understanding of ideals, including those of truthfulness, the common good, social cohesion, responsibility, respectful communication, and accountable political expression, which are undermined by social media platforms whose curation processes lack transparency (Barnoy et al., 2025). Platformisation reshapes the public sphere by shifting agenda-setting, visibility, and accountability from democratic institutions to opaque, commercially governed digital information infrastructures – placing democracy in their shadows. Unsurprisingly, the decline of trust vested in the institutions of liberal democracy has coincided with the rise in manipulation, radicalism, populist politics, and polarisation, which have become some of the most defining features of contemporary societies (Schlesinger, 2024).

We live in an era of profound, overlapping, and far-reaching transformations – an emerging new reality – which raises several key questions:

- What changes have been brought about by the transformative nature of digital information technologies in general, and what did digitalisation change and who did platformisation empower in particular? Furthermore, what public values and institutional conditions were lost in the process?
- What kind of epistemic frameworks and forms of communication are needed to develop efficient policy strategies and ways of governance to sustain and promote cohabitation in this context of technological, social, and cultural change?
- What exactly do we mean by new reality and uncertain futures, and with which concepts shall we describe them?

Digital media: A shift in thinking is needed

To address these challenges, the chapters in this edited collection suggest developing a new understanding of responses, evolving communication practices and media management styles, and establishing governance rules in the digital public sphere. The contributors to this volume examine the emergence of digital media and social networks – popularly defined as platform-based services that enable users to share and exchange information with other individuals also using the network (Marique, 2021) – and their broader impacts among the many innovations in communication technology. There is also a special section with discussions of some other recent developments, including the advent and potential consequences of artificial intelligence – understood, according to one definition, as the attempt to make computers do the sorts of things that human and animal minds can do (see Frankish & Ramsey, 2014).

Although the benefits and drawbacks of platformisation have attracted sustained academic attention only in the past two decades, one may recall that the actual history of social media precursors (message boards and user forums of various kinds) goes further back in time. The first-ever "online community" emerged in the second part of the nineteenth century when, during the silent hours of night service, operators used the telegraph network (also known, retrospectively, as "the Victorian Internet") for sharing stories, gossip, and jokes without ever meeting in person (Standage, 1998/2007). In the digital age, one of the first experimental dial-up bulletin boards was the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (abbreviated WELL), established in 1985 and allowing its few users to socialise, share photos, and express their thoughts while creating a virtual community (Kovarik, 2015). Certainly, these early "social media platforms" did not have any implications for the wider social environment, yet they were a sign of existing popular demand for such experiences.

Beginning around the turn of the millennium, the accelerating, irreversible, and open-ended trends of platformisation have affected nearly all forms of social organisation, including in both the private and the public spheres. In April 2024, Facebook, the largest platform, had over three billion monthly active users, followed by YouTube with two and a half billion and Instagram with two billion (Statista, 2024). The primary platforms owned by Meta alone – Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, Oculus, Threads, and WhatsApp – had a total of 3.48 billion users in the second quarter of 2025 (MacroMicro, 2025). While the public, seeing only the micro-level impacts of the digitalisation of communication technologies, seems optimistic about platformisation and tends to frame it as "progress", the academic community, preoccupied with macro-level developments, has turned increasingly pessimistic in recent years (e.g., Allcott et al., 2020). The general audiences seem to be largely unaware of the concerns of researchers and analysts. While some of the adverse effects of digitalisation and platformisation on the macro-level have been highlighted

by scholars in recent years, policymakers are still slow to react, lagging behind technological innovations and changing consumption habits.

Increasing scepticism within the academic community reflects a paradigm shift that is taking place in both normative media theory and public policy research, marked by the emergence of new connotations for some of the most frequently used terms, and leading to new research agendas.

Perhaps most importantly, *free speech* has been traditionally believed to be a prerequisite for democracy and has been held as a prominent media-policy objective. Yet, the abundance of fake news and hate speech on social media platforms challenges the traditional tenets of free speech theory. Contrary to expectations, the unmoderated and unfiltered "free marketplace of ideas" brought about by platformisation in most countries does not seem to foster mutual understanding but rather undermines democratic cohesion (Fukuyama, 2022). Abuses of free speech rights are widespread among populist politicians who eagerly disseminate disinformation in an effort to undermine democratic institutions and political stability as they like to fish in troubled waters – and can easily do so, as they can now bypass, via social media platforms, professional journalists who could ask questions on behalf of citizens and debunk lies. Other abuses of free speech rights such as online trolling, bullying, and character assassination may have a chilling effect and discourage people from voicing their views in public, thereby undermining, once again, democratic ideals.

In a similar vein, *citizens' active participation in public deliberation* was long praised as a precondition for democracy and a prominent policy goal. Yet, as Judit Bayer (2019: 128) has observed,

> social media allow everyone – without filters and mediation – to express their views in writing, pictures and videos […] cyber-optimists indeed dreamt of a global participatory democracy without central governance […]. The reality is sobering: there are many voices, but there is not one big audience […]. The scope of attention is limited […]. The voices that are already popular will be amplified, while others may vanish.

Considering all this, *media diversity* alone does not seem to improve the public's chances of accessing the information necessary for rational decision-making on political matters but leads to an increasingly fragmented and dysfunctional public sphere. Too much noise and pluralism may harm democracy, as it may contribute to a post-truth world where people no longer share a common ground with the same agendas, experiences, and values, including democratic ideals. Certainly, the diversification of the media did not begin with digitalisation but other technological innovations such as FM radio in the 1950s and cable and satellite television in the 1970s and 1980s. Still, the proliferation of digital communication technologies, platforms, channels, and outlets in the 1990s and the new millennium accelerated the pace of change, and a result of this is that media to date play a centrifugal, rather than centripetal, role in society (Hodkinson, 2017). There are too many

outlets but too few professional journalists (Pew Research Center, 2021), as digitalisation has also undermined the business models of traditional news organisations, especially as social media platforms consume huge parts of the advertising pie without, however, providing content of their own. The pitfalls above are, of course, overlapping and interconnected.

Platformisation also challenges the ideal of *informed decision-making*. While there are numerous examples of people efficiently using platform-managed algorithmic communication to access information, the main concern is that individuals and groups must be equipped with skills to efficiently discern manipulations, radicalism, and polarisation in the digital sphere. As it turns out, in the face of accelerating information abundance, trusting institutions of epistemic vigilance – those of media, education, and the creative industries – is the most rational approach (Harambam, 2021; Szegőfi & Heintz, 2022).

What do we know about platformisation? Insights from scholarship

Summarising the impact of global digitalisation on political and cultural life in contemporary Europe is a challenging task. With this volume, developed by the Euromedia Research Group and published by Nordicom, we aim to identify some of the most concerning issues of digitalisation and platformisation in search of regulatory and self-regulatory responses to the challenges of public communication in order to sustain democracy in a rapidly changing information environment.

The goal of this book is not to find exact solutions or fixes for the social and political effects of digitalisation and platformisation. Instead, it serves as a guide to transformations that, in different ways, either reinforce or erode the core democratic principles – basic norms and values on which the democratic way of life is sustained. As already noted, these shifts are reshaping media practices, the organisational work of democratic institutions, and individual spheres alike.

The views presented here address the democratic implications of social media platforms from multiple perspectives. Some of these adopt a historical view aimed at revealing what digitalisation and information innovations have brought into people's everyday lives. Others take a more conceptual approach by examining the implications of technological impact on people's changed media repertoires and the emergence of new forms of media functionality, such as individual agenda-setting and interpersonal communication.

The questions this volume addresses are varied:

- What strategies can safeguard and advance human rights, democratic institutions, and the ideal of the common good in contemporary digital societies?

- How should we address the negative impacts of dysfunctional communication such as disinformation, hate speech, discourse toxicity, and radicalisation? What methods should be employed?
- Who should initiate proactive efforts to counteract prevailing power asymmetries in modern digital communications?

Regardless of the chosen path, the overall aim of this volume is to establish a new research and policymaking agenda that is informed not only by perspectives that follow risk awareness approaches. Instead, we aim to offer analyses of the observed characteristics of the digitalisation and platformisation phenomenon, and to argue for responses that are based on a good understanding of the issue, critically framed and guided by evidence.

Although the major social media platforms have business bases elsewhere, this book focuses on what is relevant for Europe and Europeans. The arguments are grounded in the theoretical lenses of the political economy of communication and other academic traditions that critically examine arising power asymmetries, inequalities, democratic governance, new forms of digital citizenship, and human rights. Another crucial aspect to consider here is the platformisation phenomenon's multifaceted nature. This complexity includes its technological and politico-economic aspects, along with the various conceptual definitions applied by scholars that relate to global information networks, digital media infrastructures, and social media platforms.

This book covers these topics in three broadly defined sections. We begin with democratic foundations and human rights, move on to digitalisation dynamics and challenges to public opinion formation, and then turn our attention to the specifics of artificial intelligence (AI) and the demands it places on governance and accountability.

We conclude the entire journey of this book with a chapter that situates diverse forms of platform power into a matrix that, by addressing this complexity, calls for a holistic approach to the interests of multiple actors – platforms, AI companies, the media, political parties and groups, citizens, and governments.

The first section – *Foundations and context* – comprises four chapters, setting the tone for analysis by applying a historical approach to the diffusion of innovations and concluding with chapters on governance choices geared towards informed and resilient civic engagement.

Tales Tomaz and Josef Trappel, in their chapter "From technologies of liberation to democracy-harming platforms – and why we need better communication structures", establish the tone for the overall debate of the book by directly addressing the issues related to the business operations of global social media platforms. Their message is clear and straightforward: Focused efforts are required to discover noncommercial operational models if we wish to achieve the desired democratic outcome. Among the pressing current issues, they underscore information abundance, the influx of hate

speech and disinformation, the destruction of media businesses, and the emergence of a fragmented, divisive, and polarised public sphere. Their analysis concentrates on the discursive move from "technologies of liberation" to "democracy-harming platforms" and provides a normative perspective in the debate over the tension between the "moral panic" and the "limited effects" approaches. Tomaz and Trappel critically look at what is known about the influence of global digital platforms in general and of the consequences of the unexpected fragmentation and polarisation of societies in particular, questioning what is valid and what is overstated in these concerns.

In the next chapter, "The rise and fall of journalism", Péter Bajomi-Lázár and Dalma Boldog take a historical perspective to reveal the nuances of societal transformations that go hand in hand with each innovative technological development. Their argument is based on the idea that technologically driven causality is far from linear; thus, a more subtle implications assessment is required. Relying on the tradition of differentiating between the primary, secondary, and tertiary impacts of emerging information and communication technologies, Bajomi-Lázár and Boldog use this framework to uncover societal outcomes by illustrating that none of the technological interventions are context-free and that all technology applications entail social and cultural consequences, while at the same time noting that innovations in communication technology also react to and mirror societal changes. They focus on the implications for journalism, examining it as both a profession and a discourse, and look at its transformation that results from the technological revolutions of the telegraph and the Internet. From a political implications perspective, they argue that digitalisation has led to the destabilisation of knowledge, associated with the deprofessionalisation of journalism and a gradual neglect of epistemic virtues. "Knowledge destabilisation", it seems, is a conceptual state emblematic of contemporary societies, where uncertainty and lack of trust are dominant features.

In her chapter, "European approaches to disinformation and public discourse: The policy framework to regulate the digital platform environment", Judit Bayer offers an overview of the recent regulatory efforts of the EU aimed at maintaining a diverse information environment and at fighting disinformation and hate speech with a focus on social media platforms or, as the Digital Services Act (DSA) calls them, "intermediaries". She stresses that the DSA and related laws aim to create a regulatory framework that could support a more transparent and diverse information environment. Bayer notes, however, that European-level regulation faces several hindrances, owing in part to the limited powers of the EU vis-à-vis member states. Also, misinformation and disinformation are particularly difficult to regulate, as freedom of expression protects all statements regardless of their truth value as long as they do not violate other people's rights. Furthermore, the EU cannot directly tackle content governance without interfering with the fundamental rights of platforms and their users. For these reasons, rather than focusing on human rights issues directly, the EU attempts to create an

information environment that fosters human rights and promotes democratic public discourse. For example, it calls for co-regulation and encourages the use of recommender systems – that is, algorithms that give prominence to authoritative information over disinformation. Bayer observes, however, that the enforceability of these policies is constrained. Moreover, with the current pace of technological development, policy and regulation often lag behind, as demonstrated by the recent emergence of AI technologies.

Tarlach McGonagle's chapter, "Eternally vigilant: Protecting freedom of expression and media freedom in the age of digital platforms", assesses why freedom of expression and media freedom are at risk – and perhaps more than ever – in platformised European societies. Recognising traditional threats such as political censorship, ideological and religious restrictions, and market-driven constraints, McGonagle examines the impact of transformed technology-driven communicative contexts on these fundamental freedoms. The platformisation of societies has taken the potential for communication restrictions to a new level based on private censorship, control of distribution of content, and market-based recommendation systems. Analysing the global and the European legal frameworks, McGonagle argues that the concretisation of these fundamental rights in different contexts requires a never-ending effort by legislative powers, media regulatory authorities, academics, civil society, and committed citizens.

The following four chapters in the second section – *Navigating diversity, engagement, and governance* – refer to matters of epistemic integrity. These chapters provide varied perspectives on how media organisations and the public navigate changing media environments and social media platforms, including ways to turn disruptions into new insights.

Jolan Urkens, Leen d'Haenens, and Jaron Harambam start by highlighting the problematic aspects of platformisation, explicitly addressing the fundamentally desirable trend of media diversification in their contribution, "Media diversity and the epistemic expectations of journalism: Public service media's responses to alternative media and the challenge of democratic integrity". They highlight the epistemic challenges that digitalisation poses to journalism and argue that current discussions on journalism's epistemic challenges lack recognition of the inherently ambivalent commitments to the truth. There exists a tension between accurately presenting differing viewpoints (balance) and reporting factual information (objectivity). By constructing their argument around the various visions and functions of the relationship between democracy and media – namely the liberal, the deliberative, and the agonistic models , each advocating for a different balance between objectivity and fairness in media reporting – Urkens, d'Haenens, and Harambam conclude that there is no single solution for addressing the platformed threats to democracy and truth. The responses depend on the underlying vision of democracy and the epistemic role of the media.

The focus on public service media is sustained in the following chapter, "Public service media and entertainment: The challenge of engaging younger

audiences", presented by Alessandro D'Arma, Andrea Esser, Matthew Hilborn, and Jeanette Steemers. In their analysis, the authors explore questions frequently addressed in policymaking, yet often from a traditional, so-called protectionist approach. Essentially, they investigate the experiences of young media users and their responses to entertaining content. For researchers, young media users represent an intriguing group of audiences, primarily due to their focused interest in social media content and engagement – behaviours and practices that frequently provide a new perspective on conventional outlets like public service media. In this contribution, D'Arma, Esser, Hilborn, and Steemers's analysis of young audience preferences and search strategies provides clues about what is missing from public service entertainment and how entertainment can connect with public service values.

In their analysis "The role of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as sources of information about Europe", Barbara Thomass, Andrea Miconi, and José Moreno examine social media repertoires and ask whether a European digital public sphere exists. Based on a comparative analysis of ten EU member states, the authors suggest that salient European issues such as public health, the economy, and the environment are rarely discussed by citizens on social media platforms. Even when raised, these issues are presented in national frames and used as leverage for internal political struggles. This suggests that the EU is not experienced by citizens in their daily lives, and Europe as such is primarily associated with the establishment. Europeanisation "from below" does not exist – at least not on social media platforms. Based on this evidence, Thomass, Miconi, and Moreno conclude that the platformisation process does not work in favour of Europeanisation, and that the early hopes about transnational social media platforms establishing a common "European public sphere" have not been fulfilled. Finally, they call for a permanent instrument to measure the concentration of social media platforms in order to counter the rise of information monopolies.

Auksė Balčytienė, in her chapter, "Engaging in civic dialogue or opinion battles? The epistemic risks informed approach to platform governance", discusses the epistemic crisis brought about by disinformation, hate speech, and the resulting polarisation of European societies. She identifies three key vulnerabilities brought about by platformisation: the capture of citizens' private data, the manipulation of public opinion, and growing public distrust in democratic institutions. In search of a holistic policy approach to foster society's resilience, Balčytienė suggests that the reasons underlying the radicalisation of public discourse include, in addition to the digital transformation, various unresolved social issues and inequalities. In particular, she argues that meaning-making is affected by both individual capacities and sociocultural factors. Underprivileged groups such as migrants, minors, the poor, and the elderly are particularly prone to epistemic vulnerabilities. Additionally, based on the European Social Survey findings, she identifies significant variations across EU

member states in factors that shape societal resilience, including social trust, media freedom, and satisfaction with democracy, which suggests that the epistemic challenges European countries encounter also vary. It follows that the current epistemic crisis is a complex issue that the traditional media policy instruments, such as fostering public service journalism and media literacy education, cannot counter alone. Social inequalities must also be addressed in order to improve the resilience of the underprivileged.

The chapters in the third and last section of the volume – *Platform power and artificial intelligence* – provide insights into the disruptive nature of technological innovations, focusing on how these reshape and redistribute power dynamics.

In "Governing AI innovation under EU-style capitalism", Robin Mansell takes a historical and holistic approach to the EU's attempt to seek a world-leading position in the AI space through legislation aimed at securing innovation and market leadership as well as fundamental human rights. Mansell critiques this ambition, arguing that the prevailing imaginary of a technologically mediated future – shaping current EU governance approaches – conflicts with the ideal of governing for justice and the protection of human rights. Putting forward the EU contradictions and ambiguities, Mansell's analysis highlights how the prevailing imaginary of technologically mediated progress works to normalise recourse to risk mitigation governance strategies that align "AI systems" principally with capitalist ambitions for profit, even as they champion the protection of human rights.

Helle Sjøvaag and Maximilian Eder, in their chapter "Ecosystemic AI: Local media systems and the challenge of artificial intelligence", reveal that challenges brought about by innovations in media extend beyond technological infrastructures. Power arrangements arise from various imbalances implicit in the logic of new operations, creating the symbolic power of the networks and enabling them to plan and design societies and institutions around the digital infrastructure. How news media respond to these developments becomes a matter of growing concern. Sjøvaag and Eder study how structural conditions – such as ownership and geography, globalisation, digitalisation, algorithmisation, and platformisation – influence the news production process. They also look into the content-related conditions of journalism in the digital age, asking how datafication, algorithmisation, and metrics have impacted the news stories that professional journalists publicise. Furthermore, they examine the reception of the news, reflecting upon how audiences get acquainted with news stories and how they use the diversity of communication technologies.

The next chapter, "Competitiveness and artificial intelligence in the EU's future strategy", written by Hannu Nieminen and Maria Michalis, focuses on the latest EU high-level reports that aim to address the role of AI in promoting European competitiveness and upholding European values. They develop three main arguments. First, the analysed reports seem to endorse techno-solutionism,

with AI portrayed as the main driver for growth and competitiveness. This technological focus, however, is at odds with the EU's stated aim to strengthen European values, notably prosperity, equity, democracy, and environmental sustainability, all of which are paid lesser attention in the reports. Second, the reports compare and contrast the EU with the US and China, overlooking the rest of the world and the much more complex and interdependent global context. And third, the reports portray the EU as a single entity and disregard the internal dynamics and relations among its member states, particularly what the proposed strategies will mean for smaller member states.

In the section's final chapter – which also serves as the concluding analysis of the story told in this book – "Anatomy of platform power capitalism: Faces, forms, and regulation", Werner A. Meier and Josef Trappel bring the power structures of digital super-platforms to the fore. They argue that, due to the extraordinary importance of super-platforms, they deserve a more comprehensive power analysis. Meier and Trappel aim to consistently foreground the multiple dimensions and faces of platform power, which are, in their perspective, in the process of institutionalising a new corporate power architecture. They aim to demonstrate that the super-platforms with new, scalable business models and network effects are the movers and shakers of our time, having successfully established the oligopolistic privatisation of social spaces. According to Meier and Trappel, super-platforms have, with their expansive business strategies, successfully exercised platform power control on the commercial Internet. Moreover, with their industrial digital platforms, the leading tech companies have not only institutionalised the creation and appropriation of value on their marketplaces, but they also dominate large parts of the state and society. Meier and Trappel are critical of the political and regulatory reaction to this obvious market failure and believe that, despite the institutionalisation of self-regulation, the identified economic and social power asymmetries are unlikely to change any time soon.

Responding to pressing problems

Although we critically assess digital platforms for their power asymmetries, the chapters also point toward opportunities for action. By examining policy frameworks that address outcomes of platformisation, such as the dominance of dysfunctional content, increasing polarisation, and fragmentation, we identify dimensions of a new reality that require concrete steps to safeguard core democratic values, including freedom of expression. We also argue that this moment can be used to shift mindsets by fostering a more accurately framed understanding of how digital platforms and AI operate (including the fact that digitalisation and AI are not "intelligence" in the human, conventional sense). Furthermore, we also propose guidelines for how democratic institutions, especially media and journalism, can become more

inclusive and better address vulnerabilities in digital public spheres at both the national and the European levels.

Taken together, the insights and observations presented in this volume highlight issues that warrant urgent attention for democratic governance in a platformised environment. Meeting the democratic challenges imposed by digitalisation, understanding the views of different actors (businesses, the media, citizens, and governments), finding workable responses, and rethinking our epistemologies require an analytical approach that balances the need for change and renewal with the sustainability of tradition and shared democratic values. For this purpose, various approaches combining regulatory instruments and educational interventions, and governance strategies and collaborative partnerships development between different stakeholders, must be further explored to foster the development of content, discourse types, linguistic forms, and binding and non-binding rules that are adjustable to the ideals and norms of resilient and accountable digital public spheres.

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Section I

Foundations and context

CHAPTER 2

From technologies of liberation to democracy-harming platforms

– and why we need better communication structures

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we examine the growing concerns surrounding digital platforms' impact on democratic communication and how they have spurred demand for better governance, which has been translated into diverse proposals for regulation. This scenario is presented as a departure from the early belief in the liberatory role of the Internet, as issues such as the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and increasing polarisation gain momentum in the public debate. We consider these speech problems to be much more a consequence, rather than a cause, of the hypercommercialisation of the contemporary digital communication systems. As such, even if speech regulation can play a role in tackling these issues, we argue that effective solutions should focus on structural measures, restructuring communication to prioritise publicly managed content production and distribution over market-driven technologies and companies.

KEYWORDS: Internet, platforms, platform regulation, commercialism, media systems

Tomaz, T., & Trappel, J. (2026). From technologies of liberation to democracy-harming platforms – and why we need better communication structures. In A. Balčytienė, P. Bajomi-Lázár, & H. Sousa (Eds.), *Digital media shadowing democracy: Technology, communication, and power* (pp. 25–44). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. https://doi.org/10.48335/9789189864290-2

Introduction

In August 2024, Elon Musk launched a crusade against "censorship" in Brazil after the country's court system decided to block X, formerly Twitter, for not complying with legal requirements, including the suspension of accounts calling for a coup against Lula's government (Falcão, 2024). This episode drew the ire of far-right supporters around the world who activated their playbook of "free speech" as a safe conduit to spread ressentiment, hate, and lies. Obviously, Musk's position had nothing to do with freedom of expression. He complied with more than 80 per cent of censorship requests by allied governments, such as Erdogan's in Turkey or Modi's in India, and eventually capitulated in Brazil, accepting the country's court decisions (Nicas & Ionova, 2024; Sánchez-Vallejo, 2023). It was, instead, a strategic position to advance far-right coalitions and his own businesses.

Nonetheless, there are serious free speech scholars and activists who are concerned and divided: To what extent can such harsh judicial decisions be justified? This question arises amid a wider debate about the role of digital platforms like X in contemporary democracies, and how governments should respond – the very subject of this book. Far from being an issue only in the Global South or countries like Brazil, Turkey, or India, the convoluted relationship between digital platforms and democracies has become a central concern globally. In the 27 pages of the European Democracy Action Plan, launched by the European Commission in 2020 to strengthen the resilience of EU democracies, digital platforms are mentioned 31 times, most of them as a risk (European Commission, 2020).

Critical communication scholars have long held that an informed citizenry is crucial for democracy to thrive (for an overview of the debate, see Tomaz, 2024). This assumption laid the foundation for a rich normative debate about how to facilitate the formation of this public that democracy requires. While the field of analysis was more or less stable until the 1990s, structural changes have since led to a very different scenario. Rapid developments in digitalisation, coupled with a loss of legitimacy for greater political intervention, have spurred growing uncertainty about what kind of communication governance would lead to a democracy-enhancing outcome. Moreover, much of the imaginary around the issue has been captured by either techno-solutionist or techno-dystopian discourses, two sides of the same coin called techno-determinism. The future of communication seemed to belong to technology, not to bureaucrats in public offices – but also not to journalists or editorial decision-makers.

In this chapter, we aim to contribute to this debate by summarising the main concerns about digital platforms and assessing which of them are far-fetched or based on weak evidence and which are legitimate or genuinely urgent. In doing so, we take risks. Without saving the best for last, we argue that hypercommercialisation is the most important concern about digital platforms for democratic communication. Our societies can manage

technological resources for communication in the public interest, but this requires reining in the commercial incentives behind current platforms. We do not intend to disregard policies that deal with specific problems such as misinformation, hate speech, or polarisation, as well documented in several chapters throughout this book. But politics is about priorities, and we argue that communication in the Digital Age needs, first and foremost, an infrastructure that is clearly separated from commercial imperatives.

Our argument begins with a revision of how digital technologies went from "technologies of liberation" to "democracy-harming platforms" in the public discourse, highlighting some key points that are sometimes overlooked and are important for our overall hypothesis. In the second half of the chapter, we organise these concerns within the "content–structure" duo and discuss the shortcomings and risks of overemphasising content issues. Accordingly, we suggest some policy directions for creating better structures for communication in the Digital Age.

From the hope of digital liberation...

The Internet had a very different reputation in the 1990s, when its commercialisation started to attract the attention of journalists, book authors, and academics. What had been primarily a US defence goal in the 1970s, and later a business application for real-time control of information in the 1980s, suddenly began to be celebrated as major progress for freedom of expression and democracy. Perhaps the manifesto par excellence of this spirit was John Perry Barlow's (1996) declaration of the "independence of cyberspace", celebrating the Internet's ability to spread the "virus of liberty". Musk's recent self-anointed role as a crusader for free speech echoes this founding myth of the Internet.

The basic argument for the "revolutionary" imaginary spreading, then, was that the technical infrastructure of the Internet, engendering a decentralised network, would make it impossible to disrupt communications by taking control of (or destroying) one or several nodes of that network (Galloway, 2004). This would mean that the Internet had "liberal and anti-hierarchical values" baked into its own infrastructure, and that no one would be able to control the flow of information, not even governments or large media corporations (Miller & Vaccari, 2020: 337).

Even if some enthusiasts could envision potential risks such as commercialisation and surveillance (Rheingold, 1993), this narrative saw the Internet mostly as year zero, a radical discontinuity with media, economy, and politics as they had previously functioned. The ossified, highly concentrated legacy media would constrain freedom of expression, while the Internet would allow "everyone to have a voice". There was far less concern about whether it would make a difference which voices could be heard, or more precisely, which rules would henceforth determine the voices to be amplified or demoted.

In the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the self-proclaimed victory of the liberal democracy as the only way forward, techno-determinism – or even better, techno-utopianism – proved a useful response. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, many enthusiasts saw their liberating theses confirmed, for example, in the alleged role of online platforms in enabling Obama's campaign in the US to grow from a grassroots organisation into a massive movement, making him the first Black president of a country where racism was explicitly enshrined in law until a few decades ago. The so-called Arab Spring in 2010 and 2011 seemed to prove that these liberating effects were not circumscribed to the Western world (Aouragh & Chakravartty, 2016; Farrell, 2012).

The earlier liberation discourse emphasised dispersal of power – in terms of communication, this meant "everyone's voices" replacing the editorial choices of a handful of media barons. This was also the heyday of bloggers and citizen journalists, the so-called Web 2.0, when new affordances made publication on the Internet easier for the general public, and the idea spread that anyone could become a media producer (Jenkins, 2008). However, the Internet soon showed incredible rates of concentration – with legacy media brands holding astonishing market shares in online content consumption, as Hindman documented as early as 2009. In addition, by that time, a few digital intermediaries were already concentrating much of the activity on the Internet. In 2005, three search engines, including Google, together held almost 80 per cent of the market share in the US (Manning, 2014). Google's growing power allowed it to spend billions of dollars between 2001 and 2010 acquiring smaller companies – for example, the advertising agency DoubleClick and the video-streaming platform YouTube – to expand its business and eliminate competitors. One can also think of the role of Microsoft, which has been integral to almost every personal computer throughout the entire phase of techno-utopianism. These facts are hard to reconcile with any notion of "dispersal" of power.

This suggests a silent shift in the locus of digital liberation, namely from everyone's voices to benevolent corporations. Google's older slogan summed up this spirit: "Don't be evil". While the imaginary of power dispersal remained deeply ingrained in the narrative, the reality revealed large corporations – a fact as old as capitalism itself – carefully rebranding and portraying themselves as disinterested guardians of freedom of expression. Here, too, Musk is an eerie late arrival.

Highlighting this optimism does not obscure the fact that techno-enthusiasm has always been met with critical voices. Miller and Vaccari (2020) have documented very well the criticism that has *always* existed. In any case, the prevailing position among economic, political, and cultural elites, including in Europe, was that this technological development would drive emancipatory effects, more or less independent of politics.

Nonetheless, any discourse of depoliticisation conceals the very politics underlying it. Contrary to the libertarian myth espoused by Barlow and others,

the conflation of military, economic, and political goals was not accidental, but a development actively overseen and guided by the US government, which has shaped the entire governance of the Internet since then and ultimately forged the framework in which the current digital platforms have emerged (Chenou, 2014). The US Department of Commerce took a leading role in promoting the "information superhighway" and supporting the development of the US e-commerce policy. But Chenou (2014) was careful to add that American political and economic interests were supported and endorsed by non-American political elites, such as the European Commission and the Australian government, which also contributed significantly to the liberation myth surrounding the Internet. It is telling that the main European Union regulation on the Internet for years has been the e-Commerce Directive of 2000. Therefore, far from a neutral, apolitical communication tool, the Internet has been actively funded and promoted by elites seeking economic advantages from opening new markets in and beyond their own countries.

...to digital disillusion and techlash

Since then, however, a tide of change has produced a new mood in the public opinion about the Internet. In the Western world, the Brexit campaign and the election of Trump in 2016 became turning points in the reputation of the network (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). A wide range of actors, from media professionals to scholars to policymakers, came to believe that the unanticipated outcomes of these events resulted from the manipulation of the masses through *digital* platforms, such as Facebook and Google. The Cambridge Analytica scandal offered a grim scenario in which the Trump campaign was able to advertise perfectly tailored messages to vulnerable target groups, without any external accountability, with the intent of gaining the necessary votes to win elections (Flew et al., 2019).

Misinformation is indeed the most popular and prominent face of this "techlash". The spread of fake news through digital platforms could lead people to make poor decisions, such as electing populists, rejecting health-protective vaccines, or denying human-made climate change. Early research suggests that falsehood spreads faster than truth on digital platforms, increasing the severity of the problem (Vosoughi et al., 2018). A 2021 study from the Oxford Internet Institute found evidence of organised social media manipulation campaigns in elections in more than 80 countries in the Global North and Global South, growing in professionalisation over time and contributing to the "decline of democracy" (Bradshaw et al., 2021: 21). Automated accounts, popularly called bots, spread and amplified conspiracy theories about Covid-19 on Twitter, polluting the public debate on the platform and raising concerns about how governments will handle public health campaigns in future emergencies like a pandemic (Ferrara, 2020). Deepfakes and the most recent hype of AI-generated content have caused

even more anxiety, raising the risk of complete erosion of trust in media and undermining journalists' capacity to counter misinformation (Lundberg & Mozelius, 2025).

In addition to misinformation, hate speech has become an issue especially for more vulnerable groups such as women, people of colour, queer people, and migrants. In an episode that was revealed only a few years later, Facebook deliberately manipulated its algorithm to push more emotional and provocative content, "including content likely to make [people] angry" (Merrill & Oremus, 2021: para. 2). Violence and conflict in several poor countries have been attributed to social media's inadequate policies against hate speech, dramatically illustrated by the massacre of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar (Sánchez-Vallejo, 2023).

Social media platforms are also blamed for causing or increasing polarisation. While still in the techno-utopian phase of the network, researchers such as Eli Pariser (2011) and Cass Sunstein (2009) began to raise concerns about the emergence of filter bubbles and echo chambers that isolate people from different perspectives and alienate them from outgroup members. More recently, research has suggested that the contrary can also be true: Platforms increased exposure to content with opposing views, leading to more radicalisation and, as such, polarisation (Tóth et al., 2023). During the campaign for the 2016 US election, the Internet Research Agency in Russia appears to have created Facebook pages impersonating nativist Americans, reaching over a hundred million users and fomenting division. McKay and Tenove (2021: 709) have concluded that, even if these people were already polarised, it is reasonable to speak of "mutually reinforcing interactions between affective polarization and social media behaviour".

In addition to content issues such as misinformation and hate speech, it has become clear that – against the original openness and generativity of the Internet – now a few corporations dominate the online sphere. Digital intermediaries were able to create "walled gardens" on the network to encourage user interactions *within* their boundaries. They control the data generated by their users' interactions and hand it over to advertisers (Poell et al., 2019). However, unlike traditional forms of advertising, such as newspapers or television, the granular user data that these platforms possess enable advertisers to place targeted ads according to individuals' interests, preferences, and attitudes, which has increased the value of this service to sellers.

This business model is a powerful incentive for companies to grow as big as possible, amassing a very large user base, and to use nearly any method to provoke interaction, for which outrageous content can be instrumental. After all, when confronted with misinformation, polarising content, or hate speech, people are prompted to interact even more with the platform, generating even more data. The risk for digital platforms is that their users will leave these spaces out of disgust; however, in doing so they would lose some benefits, such as staying easily connected to family and friends, being

exposed to useful new products, or receiving relevant information. All in all, platforms have succeeded in offering this trade-off, which creates the perfect environment for speech such as misinformation and hate speech to flourish at large scale (Rahman & Teachout, 2020). This does not seem to be a development conducive to an "informed citizenry".

The business models of digital platforms also represent a privacy violation. Ordinary people, and even experts, have little understanding of how their data are produced, combined, and manipulated by platforms. As the privacy paradox has extensively shown, most people would never consent to their data being used in this way, but they feel unable to prevent it due to asymmetric information about the phenomenon and asymmetric bargaining power between them and the platforms (Kokolakis, 2017).

These surveillance capacities have made the fortune of digital platforms. They have become the main destination for advertising and account for more than 70 per cent of all global spending, an industry of roughly 1 trillion US dollars. In 2023, Alphabet, Meta, and Amazon alone attracted 60 per cent of the whole advertising market excluding China (Magna, 2024). The GAFAM tech companies (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft) have occupied for 15 years five of ten positions in the global rank of companies with the highest market capitalisation. They also have a strong record of revenues, even if the figures are more modest. Only Amazon and Apple retain a position among the biggest ten, but even Meta, which has the worst performance among digital platforms, has more than 160 billion US dollars in annual revenues. Some scholars have gone so far as to see a new form of capitalism based on platform surveillance (Zuboff, 2019).

Big Tech's market power has been reinforced by aggressive merger and acquisition strategies, translating into political power in practices such as lobbying. Tech companies dominate lobby expenses in the EU with four companies among the six biggest players (Meta, Apple, Google, and Microsoft, with the other two being Bayer and Shell). Considering a conservative calculation, digital technology companies are spending at least 113 million euros every year, more than any other industry sector (Leyendecker, 2023). Their lobbying is not restricted to politicians but also reaches journalists and academics. Big Tech rarely attempts direct manipulation in the sense of silencing "dangerous research" or buying "favourable views", but their power manifests in the amplification of work and voices that can be instrumental for entrenching their power (Kayser-Bril, 2021).

Taking the lion's share of ad revenues, digital platforms have also created a problem for journalism, undermining a powerful resource for democracy. Historically, the main business model of professional journalism in many parts of the world has been based on advertising. As early as 2011, Curran (2011: 4) argued that the Internet was "contributing to the decline and increased uniformity of old media journalism" because it was "being partly

decoupled from advertising". Platformisation increased the woes. While non-digital media was the destination of less than 30 per cent of global advertising in 2024, the ratio was still 50/50 five years earlier, signalling the trend (Magna, 2024).

It is true that advertising was never exactly the best friend of the public interest, with ad-based media tending to favour advertisers, business owners, and wealthy consumers (Baker, 2004). But at least the monopoly that editorial media had on advertising gave them a certain bargaining power against single advertisers, allowing even private news media to pursue some expensive fact reporting and investigation in the public interest (Woodcock, 2024). With the concurrence of platforms, the media are a much less valuable venue for advertising. In addition, the negative effects of advertisement become even worse, as platforms deliver tools that increase advertisers' control over content. For this reason, advertisers increasingly shape the content that will be amplified and the content that will be forgotten on digital platforms, undermining "the ability of marginalised groups to participate in public debate" (Griffin, 2023: 71).

News media have gone digital, but they are unable to earn enough revenues independently. In fact, in many cases, especially for the least established brands, news media organisations depend on platforms (e.g., referral traffic, ad infrastructure). Under fire from the media, Google and Facebook have launched initiatives to improve the conditions for digital journalism, but the results have never met news organisations' expectations or led to any structural improvements in the industry (Poell et al., 2023).

Online news media have experimented with alternatives like paywalls or subscription programmes. Again, these solutions have worked for a handful of organisations, especially large national media, partisan outlets offering cheap opinion-based reporting, and niche media covering highly marketable topics. But local news outlets dedicated to cross-ideological fact reporting are struggling to find a stable footing, and there are no good signs on the horizon (Myllylahti, 2024; Woodcock, 2024). The shock has been greater in highly commercialised news media systems, such as the US, but signs of deterioration are everywhere.

This non-exhaustive list of concerns depicts how the Internet evolved along very different lines from the initial "hope of digital liberation". The new perception triggered a revival of policy debates and concrete governance measures in Western countries, ranging from changes in the liability regime of platforms to attempts at breaking up tech companies to mandatory negotiations between platforms and news outlets. From the perspective of communication policy studies, these debates express a tension between *content* and *structural* measures. In the second half of this chapter, we provide an overview of these two major groups of reactions and why democratic societies should go beyond content regulation towards stronger structural intervention.

Content regulation and its discontents

Content regulation focuses on direct measures against illegal and/or harmful speech on digital platforms. The regulations develop along a spectrum with two extremes: 1) strengthening the liability regime under which these platforms operate, making them liable for the content they disseminate (as editorial media outlets have always been), or 2) increasing the accountability of their moderation choices.

These models of speech regulation can be illustrated by two attempts in Europe. In 2017, Germany pioneered the legal developments to curb harmful content on platforms by passing the Network Enforcement Law (NetzDG), a hate speech law that requires social media companies to resolve user complaints related to existing categories of the German speech law within 24 hours. The law attracted attention as "the first major law to fine American-based social media companies for not adhering to national statutes" (Tworek, 2021: 106). This is a typical example of legal development that increases the liability of platforms with respect to their content.

The other model can be exemplified by the Digital Services Act (DSA). In force in the EU since 2023, it offers a more comprehensive approach to platform regulation, focusing on accountability and transparency in platforms' speech procedures. It introduces due diligence obligations that make platforms responsible not for monitoring content, but for putting in place systems that reduce the risk of abuse (Husovec & Roche Laguna, 2022). This is intended to encourage platforms to make sound choices, like designing algorithms that do not amplify misinformation, since they would be held accountable for such a system.

Content regulation can be well or poorly designed, and it is not the purpose of this chapter to assess the quality of these specific measures. We want to address a more fundamental question about some weak premises on which the content approach rests and the risks it entails. The main premises are 1) we now face a unique situation of poor quality content, 2) it is caused or exacerbated by digital platforms, 3) this communicational disorder is at the root of many poor decisions in Western societies in recent years, and 4) speech law can solve these problems. Yet, these are highly controversial statements.

The issue with misinformation

Consider the issue of misinformation. Platforms have surely made it more visible and documented than ever before. However, there are good reasons to believe that it is not as prevalent in our communication systems as is often assumed, even considering only the Internet or platforms. Trustworthy content is accessed much more frequently than fake news, and the spread of information from unreliable sources remains extremely concentrated among a small minority of the population – people who are already inclined towards

the political positions of that ideological camp (Altay et al., 2023). As an example, Grinberg and colleagues (2019) have conducted an analysis of fake news exposure and sharing on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election and found that only 1 per cent of users were exposed to 80 per cent of fake news. This small minority consisted almost entirely of people who were conservative, older, and highly engaged with political news, and therefore likely to vote for Trump anyway.

Furthermore, there is no strong evidence that misinformation translates into changes in attitudes or behaviour, particularly in terms of political outcomes. Persuasion is tough (Coppock et al., 2020). This does not rule out other effects of misinformation, like overall decline in trust in media actors, but acknowledging this effect should actually lead to other kinds of policies rather than speech regulation, for example, measures to increase the reach of and trust in reliable sources (Acerbi et al., 2022; van der Meer et al., 2023). Often, studies that have found evidence of misinformation on social media have been conducted with weak methodologies, lacking definitions (e.g., what exactly can be regarded as "fake news"?), relying on more convenient data sources (e.g., Twitter has long been over-researched, even if marginal in people's use, only because its data was easier to extract), or employing inadequate data collection tools for the stated goals (e.g., surveys to infer misperceptions, leading to high positive bias) (Altay et al., 2023). Policy debate focused on speech regulation may therefore have an exaggerated view of the problem and its effects.

Moreover, where these problems are indeed widespread, they can have other causes that the content regulation perspective – fixated *only* on platforms – does not grasp. Digital platforms are not actors isolated from the broader communication environment and, more importantly, from social, political, and economic contexts. It is possible that the problems encountered on and exacerbated by digital platforms come from elsewhere. This observation matches with the point made by Humprecht and colleagues (2020), whereby a politically and economically fraught society and a highly commercialised communication system are the main structural conditions for the spread of misinformation. The US, the source of most of the scare about harmful speech, features both a uniquely commercial media system (Pickard, 2020) and an extremely divided society, with "a historically constituted political (and often racial/ethnic) problem" precipitating into "conflicts over social status, power, capital, and identity that drive electoral outcomes" (Kreiss, 2021: 507).

Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) have noted that only the active role of the television channel Fox News was able to bring fringe topics and misinformation from the Internet to the centre of the American public debate. But even non-aligned media can inadvertently play a role in disseminating misinformation by relying on standard journalistic practices such as elite institutional focus ("if the President says, it's news"), headline seeking ("if it bleeds, it leads"), and norms such as balance and neutrality, which risk

actually creating a *false* balance (Benkler et al., 2020; Nerone, 2013). In Germany, "media coverage itself may have helped the AfD and far-right extremists to prominence, even more than social media", with the tabloid *Bild* playing a role similar to that of Fox News in the US (Tworek, 2021: 120).

This is a good time to reflect on the role of traditional media. In the fight against the evils of contemporary communication systems, it is important not to idealise a past of well-functioning mass media and well-informed citizens. It is not so long ago that mainstream media in Western democracies were heavily criticised by communication scholars for various reasons, especially for the influence of commercial interests in their coverage. Hypercommercialised media systems have been considered a major threat to democracy (Murdock, 2008; Pickard, 2020). Among other pernicious consequences, they systematically end up in monopoly industries, entrenching opinion power (Trappel, 2024). Moreover, while the advertising-based system may provide some independence from governments, it ties the content production sphere to the wishes of powerful corporations and thus to a particular model of society that favours privileged groups, as anticipated above. There is no evidence that any of these problems in the editorial media have disappeared, so there is no reason to dream of a return to an idyllic past.

When traditional media have worked, this has been due to several conditions in place. Century-long development of professional standards and norms helped to limit harmful practices stimulated by the profit motive. Competition laws – where sufficiently enacted and enforced – have kept opinion and political power in check. The strong presence of public and non-profit media has helped to raise quality standards, as non-commercial media organisations tend to outperform their commercial counterparts in quality reporting, news, and current affairs provision (Aalberg et al., 2010; Cushion, 2022). These facts should not be forgotten in a general idealisation of legacy media; actually, they may shed more light on where the problem with digital platforms actually lies.

Other types of harmful content

In this discussion about the actual relations between digital platforms and harmful content, we have focused on misinformation, but a similar story can be told about other speech problems. It has been difficult to definitively prove a causal relationship between platforms and polarisation as well, with conflicting results: Some authors have indeed found a strong link between platforms and political polarisation (Allcott et al., 2020), but in some cases, social media have even been found to "depolarise" users (Beam et al., 2018). When there is polarisation, many experts point to other causes – like already existing historical divides – or argue that radicalisation of conservatism has been the actual reason why it is difficult to manage cross-party conversation (Benkler et al., 2018; Kreiss, 2021). While most people

do seek out information that supports their beliefs, Hutchens and colleagues (2019) have argued that interpersonal communication has an even greater power in polarising discussants than any media-related content.

In terms of effectiveness of content regulation, the German hate speech law (NetzDG) is probably the only example that could be fairly assessed so far, as it has been in place for a few years. However, without independent research into the social media figures, it is difficult to gain meaningful insights about the positive impacts of such a law: Companies boast about the number of content removals, but these figures are often flawed, lacking transparency about how the decisions were made and what kind of content was indeed affected (Tworek, 2021). In any case, only a small minority of the expected societal actors are making use of the possibilities offered by the NetzDG, and most of them prefer other strategies against hate speech that they consider more effective (Stockmann et al., 2023).

In addition to relying on contested premises, content-focused solutions may also carry some unintended risks. By going down this road, policymakers and platforms themselves become more vulnerable to accusations of "censorship", a strategy that free speech absolutists like Elon Musk eagerly use to avoid any constraints on discourse, but also on market-driven communication structures.

Indeed, the principle of free speech has been hijacked by libertarians and the far right in this first quarter of the twenty-first century, but freedom of expression is not enshrined in the idea of human rights by accident. This liberal approach to speech has shaped Western societies, and it is difficult to justify to an increasingly disaffected section of the population that measures that restrict discourse are the best way to protect freedom of expression and democracy. Even leftists who are highly critical of liberal values should fear becoming unable to criticise oppression that is accepted by the status quo, such as wars waged by allies of the Western powers.

In fact, attempts to tackle the problem with speech laws like Germany's NetzDG can backfire, increasing authoritarianism. This law has inspired several nation states, most notably and explicitly Russia, to pass their own bills to combat false information and hate speech, actually curtailing freedom of expression and increasing the power of ruling elites (Tworek, 2021).

Another risk of pursuing this path – expecting platforms to play a central role in curating speech – is the platforms' poor track record in their moderation efforts. These companies systematically fail to follow their own speech policies. In 2020, Facebook introduced several new rules to improve discourse on the platform, but when *The Wall Street Journal* reported over 150 examples of content that violated these rules (which were later confirmed by the company), Facebook failed to take down more than 75 per cent of them (Horwitz, 2020). On the other hand, social media frequently overreact and threaten freedom of expression in topics ranging from sex education to political opposition to genocide (Amarasingam & Nandakumar, 2021;

Madison, 2015; Norton, 2020). Cotter and colleagues (2021: 12) have argued that Facebook's classification system for ad targeting actually reflects the company's commercial interests and, as such, favours the powerful:

> As a result of human choices embedded in datafication processes, the system represents those who have been historically marginalized not on their own terms, but on the terms of those occupying more privileged positions.

The question is whether our societies want to delegate even more of the task of curating the public debate to these companies.

It can be argued that this poor performance is due to the platforms' over-reliance on automation, implying that investing in the human workforce would solve moderation problems. However, this solution is unrealistic, given the scale at which major commercial platforms operate and the demand for ever quicker reaction towards harmful or illegal content (Gorwa et al., 2020). Moreover, while more human moderation would certainly improve the quality of the decisions and make them more accountable, it is unlikely that all users would be happy with them. In fact, without the fallacy of algorithmic neutrality, many users could be even more outraged by moderation decisions, leading to more fragmentation and polarisation.

Once again, this is not to say that content moderation is useless or that we should give up on requiring platforms to improve the quality of the content they manage. Nor does it mean that platforms are innocent in the woes of current communication problems. This is rather to argue that, if we expect a real game changer in the quality of the public debate in the Digital Age, we must look beyond specific platform content measures towards the root causes of the disorder. This brings us back to the discussion of structural features.

Time to change the structures

There are many ideas on how to create better structural conditions for communication in the Digital Age. Not all structural proposals are well designed and adequate to address the situation, but they often rely on a deeper understanding of the real problems and deserve more attention so they can mature in the policy debate.

An increasingly popular idea has been to enforce pro-competition policy on platforms. After decades of minimal intervention in digital markets, antitrust measures against Big Tech companies are on the rise. The EU has sued platforms like Google and Apple for abusing their market power, crushing competition, and avoiding taxation (Espinoza et al., 2024). In the US, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has also become active in the attempt to enforce antitrust law against digital platforms, particularly under the administration of Lina Khan. A court case against Meta for monopoly power and anti-competitive mergers is ongoing since 2020 (Emmanuel, 2025).

Such efforts in the US are facing a setback under the Trump administration, though. In addition, it is unlikely that pro-competition policy alone would improve the communication ecosystem. If the business model of platforms is not challenged at all – namely advertising provided by surveillance – this approach can lead to a race to the bottom, with more digital actors encouraged to collect as much data as possible from people or promote any other harmful practice that increases profitability (Pickard, 2020: 132). At a bare minimum, competition policy must be driven alongside regulation on the ways platforms make money.

Hence the need of better regulation of how platforms deal with personal data and of their advertising practices. Indeed, the EU pioneered the fight for privacy in the Digital Age with the approval of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which since then has been copied by various countries. The DSA and its twin sibling the Digital Markets Act (DMA) establish some limitations to targeted advertising, prohibiting the targeting of minors and the use of sensitive data such as race, ethnic origin, and political opinions as categories for personalised advertising. Finally, the Regulation on the Targeting and Transparency of Political Advertising (TTPA), whose provisions have been in force since October 2025, adds specific transparency requirements and restrictions to advertising related to politics, although there has been controversy regarding the extent to which civic campaigns could be harmed (Civil Liberties Union for Europe, 2025).

These are developments in the right direction. Here, the main problem is effectiveness. The GDPR has suffered for years from lack of enforceability; the DSA and the DMA provisions are limited in scope and do not capture more subtle forms of advertising that are increasing, such as hybrid ads promoted by influencers (Duivenvoorde & Goanta, 2023). A complete ban on surveillance advertising, in turn, would be more effective in disabling the main mechanism whereby platforms harm democratic discourse. This has been considered in platform regulation in Europe and beyond, but has never made it to the final texts, facing strong lobbying from the tech sector (EDPS, 2021; Leyendecker, 2023; Tomaz, 2023).

Nonetheless, even privacy regulation has its limits. At the end of the day, platforms are companies that, in the current capitalist structure, will seek profit by either abusing personal data or in other forms. As explained above, there is no reason to believe that market-driven communication will meet the public interest. This was true in the era of mass media communication and remains true now. Without challenging the commercial ownership and governance models of communication companies, we are doomed to see the increase of private political power (platforms shaping regulation and politics) and opinion power (business interests deciding which content gets amplified or not) (Griffin, 2023; Helberger, 2020).

Accordingly, a bolder approach would be a concerted effort to reduce commercialisation across the whole communication ecosystem, including

digital platforms. This would not be an entire novelty in the media and communication industries, as already indicated. In the twentieth century, Europe has pioneered the idea of public service broadcasting. By removing the production of content from commercial interests and, at the same time, creating governance structures that protected them from government interference, most public service broadcasters have been able to improve the quality of their national media system. We should remember that countries with strong public service media have also been more resilient to misinformation in the time of digital platforms (Humprecht et al., 2020).

Acknowledging the potential of non-commercial communication, it is possible to envisage at least two further developments. The first would be to strengthen the production of non-commercial content. Whereas many policy ideas solely address platforms, whose main role in today's communication systems has been to *distribute* content, we have seen that content *production* by editorial media remains crucial. Therefore, it is necessary to provide good conditions for the creation of content in the public interest.

Funding can come from the digital platforms themselves. In this sense, the Australian News Media Bargaining Code has attracted much attention by requiring platforms to strike financial agreements with news publishers for the right to distribute their content (Bossio & Barnet, 2023). The code aims to support the production of journalistic content, but there are no provisions for prioritising non-commercial or local media, which have been hit hardest by the decline in advertising revenues. Eventually, only major news brands were able to negotiate their positions with Alphabet and Meta. But even their prospects under the code are uncertain: Meta has not renewed these deals, dropping news publishers' content altogether, as it makes up a relatively small part of their content, and now the government feels the pressure to amend the code (Edwards, 2025).

A better alternative could be to channel taxes on digital platforms into dedicated funds for content creation. Administered by independent governance bodies, with representatives from different sectors of civil society, such funds could elaborate their own criteria for supporting certain types of content producers (e.g., being non-profit or focusing on local content).

The complex and transnational operations of digital platforms have made their taxation a challenge. Since the techlash, however, some initiatives show that it is possible. Austria has introduced a digital sales tax of 5 per cent on advertising services paid to platforms; part of the annual revenues of 120 million euros goes into a digital transformation fund, which supports dozens of projects, including the creation of journalistic content (Szigetvari, 2025). At the international level, the introduction of a global minimum tax of 15 per cent on corporate profits will reduce tax competition between countries and generate significant revenues from digital platforms (Torkington, 2024). Again, at least some of this revenue could be channelled back into national content funds.

Finally, the second possible development is the transformation of digital platforms into public service companies themselves, following the logic of public service media. This is, to be sure, the boldest structural change that policymakers could dare. The global nature of these companies and how they operate across so many different market sectors complicates the design of such a measure, but there are already some attempts at specific models (D'Arma et al., 2021; Rahman & Teachout, 2020).

Conclusions

The main point to recognise is that digital platforms are first and foremost companies (Gorwa, 2019). As such, they operate within the rules and frameworks decided by policymakers, and publicly-driven models of ownership and governance can be imagined and executed to ensure that the rules governing public discourse are also publicly decided. Much of the reluctance to interfere with their structures derives from the techno-determinism that captured our imaginary and somehow obscured the nature of these tech companies, as if digital platforms would be special entities that demand a unique, "softer" treatment.

It is also important to stress that we are focusing here on the reality of the EU, which is a player with significant power in the current geopolitics and governance of technology and communications. Such a privileged position is shared by only a few international actors, such as the US and China. On the other hand, most countries in the Global South have much less room for manoeuvre, possessing less capital for promoting their own industries and being more constrained by international rules shaped by richer nations (Griffin, 2023; Tomaz, 2023). For example, African states tried for years to shift decisions on global tax policy to the United Nations, where poorer countries have a greater say, but the US lobbied hard to keep this discussion within the OECD, a body dominated by rich countries, to avoid greater competitive losses to their digital giants (Isaac, 2022). Eventually, the global minimum tax was designed and enforced by the OECD. The EU can play a leading role by using its relevant position and promoting public digital communication infrastructure.

In a nutshell, our argument is that there are many legitimate concerns about the impact of digital platforms on democracy, but while all of them deserve serious scrutiny and appropriate remedies, we believe that the biggest problem is the commercial imperative that underpins digital platforms in particular and the whole communication ecosystem in general. This must be reined in if we are serious about making communication more democratic. Only a digital communication ecosystem that is firmly structured against commercial influence can guarantee protection from the private interests of a few, who are hiding behind a narrative of "free speech" to steer huge communication industries and advance their own agenda against the public interest.

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CHAPTER 3

The rise and fall of journalism

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we study how the electronic revolution marked by the telegraph system and the digital revolution marked by the Internet impacted journalism and the public's access to information. We suggest that the former network contributed to journalistic professionalisation and made factual and contextualised information widely available, while the latter enhanced journalistic deprofessionalisation and made access to reliable information difficult for the public. Currently, citizen journalists producing and sharing content on social media, including YouTubers, TikTokers, vloggers, and podcasters, fail to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information, do not check their sources, and are often unable to provide background information. Big Tech companies such as Meta and Google do not produce any public interest content yet absorb a huge portion of the advertising revenues. A policy solution may be to tax them and to channel the revenue thus generated to traditional news organisations.

KEYWORDS: access to information, citizen journalism, influencers, professional journalism, telegraph

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Introduction: Communication technology and social change

When studying the impact of communication technologies upon societies, media scholars often seek historical analogies. Comparisons of the electronic revolution marked by the telegraph network and of the digital revolution marked by the Internet are particularly popular because of the similarities between the two information systems (e.g., Kovarik, 2015; Standage, 1998/2007). This chapter follows this tradition. Taking a historical perspective and offering a critical review of the literature, we compare the societal impacts of these two binary and global networks. While finding some similarities, we also suggest that the two greatly differ in their impacts on journalism and the public's access to information. We argue that the rise of the telegraph network in the mid-nineteenth century contributed to journalistic professionalisation and hence indirectly eased access to factual, verified, and contextualised information for the public, while the Internet, and in particular the Web 2.0 in the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, enhanced journalistic deprofessionalisation and thus indirectly hampered access to reliable information. We also suggest that the telegraph network stabilised knowledge, while the Internet destabilised it, hampering informed political decision-making.

What is the nature of the impact that communication technologies in general may exert upon societies? Kovarik (2015) argued that caution is needed when describing historical cause-and-effect relationships. He warned of the pitfalls of monocausal "technological determinism" and observed that communication technologies and societies develop in interaction, mutually shaping each other, and that changes in communication technology are at best *contributory* causes, as they do not explain, in and by themselves, the complex transformations of societies, also owing to changing economic, political, and regulatory contexts. Further, Kovarik distinguished between the primary, secondary, and tertiary impacts of communication technologies. For example, the primary impact of the invention of printing was the (relatively) massive publication of the Bible; its secondary impact was the standardisation of written language; and its tertiary impact was the Protestant Reformation enhanced by printed religious pamphlets and treatises.

Hodkinson (2011) noted that a distinction must be made between the intended and the actual impacts of technology. For example, when inventing the phonograph, Thomas Edison envisaged recording human speech, yet society opted to use his device as a means to store and share music. Media are born twice – first in a technological and then is a societal sense – and sometimes they are continually reborn. In fact, many communication technologies are never complete but, as Chadwick (2017: 23) observed, undergo "continuing evolution", adapting to new demands and offering new uses; for example, the black-and-white television of the 1950s was quite

different from the interactive television of our day. Hodkinson (2011: 31) also suggested that, despite the widely held view that communication technology is neutral and may be used for both virtuous and evil purposes depending on the societal context, it is plausible to maintain that "communication media such as newspapers, radio and television also have particular capacities and constraints – sometimes referred to as affordances", favouring certain social uses over others.

Following Kovarik's approach, one may suggest that the invention of the telegraph was, among other factors, a contributory cause for journalistic professionalisation. To be more precise, the primary impact of the telegraph was immediate communication over long distances, its secondary impact was the professionalisation of journalism, and its tertiary impact was the stabilisation of knowledge, including information on public matters. Of course, the telegraph has had many other societal impacts as well, such as the development of the railway systems (Briggs & Burke, 2009), the rise of multinational companies (Carey, 1989/2009), and the consolidation of the British Empire (Barbier & Lavenir, 2004). One might add, in line with Hodkinson's above-cited observation, that Samuel Morse, the inventor of the electronic telegraph, did likely not envision the professionalisation of journalism as an impact of his telegraph, which came about in a specific societal setting. In a similar vein, the rise of the Internet – "the network of networks" – was a contributory cause for journalistic deprofessionalisation; this was one of its many secondary impacts, unforeseen by its developers. In this angle, the primary impact of the rise of the Internet was the immediate transfer of greatly increased quantities of data over long distances, and its tertiary impact was, among other things, the destabilisation of knowledge.

The comparison of the electronic telegraph system and the Internet is warranted by the number of similarities between the two – so much so that Standage (1998/2007) called the telegraph system "the mother of all networks" and "the Victorian internet". Both the telegraph system and the Internet were created as collaborative projects, involving several inventors from a variety of countries; both were initially accompanied by both optimistic and pessimistic predictions regarding their impact upon society; both were based on the common carrier model; and both have contributed to the rise of information monopolies (Kovarik, 2015). Further, both networks enhanced the globalisation of communication (Putnis, 2008; Sterling, 2003) and the economy (Carey, 1989/2009; Castells, 2009). Also, both gave rise to virtual communities, generated problems of data protection, contributed to information overload, and blurred the line between the public and private spheres (Standage, 1998/2007).

Differences between the two networks are, of course, also numerous and important, including the scope of the people personally accessing and using the two communication technologies, the quantity and format of the information delivered, and the physical length of the infrastructures. Of the various

differences, in this chapter we focus on the impact of the two communication systems upon journalism and the public's access to information, studying industry-level developments and illustrating them with historical examples.

It is noteworthy that on the eve of both the electronic and the digital revolutions, mainly optimistic predictions were voiced, suggesting that the new communication technologies would improve and democratise access to information. Samuel Morse himself suggested in 1838 that,

> the whole surface of this country would be channeled for those nerves which are to diffuse, with the speed of thought, a knowledge of all that is occurring throughout the land. (as cited in Czitrom, 1982: 11–12)

Likewise, Vannevar Bush, who first outlined the future Internet in an essay published in 1946, suggested that,

> wholly new forms of encyclopedias will appear […]. The applications of science […] may yet allow [mankind] truly to encompass the great record. (as cited in Kovarik, 2015: 504)

We argue that the former prediction has largely come true, whereas the latter has failed to do so. In the first instance, the intended and the actual uses of the new communication technology were largely identical; in the second, the new technology has had a reverse impact upon society.

The professionalisation of journalism

In the early nineteenth century in England and the US, and later in the rest of the Western world, the press became an industry addressed to a mass market (Høyer & Lauk, 2003). The industrialisation of the press was triggered by a series of developments described as the bourgeois and the industrial revolutions (Splichal & Dahlgren, 2016).

Owing to the bourgeois revolutions, England's expiring Licensing Act was repealed in 1695, and the US Constitution's First Amendment was adopted in 1791, marking the beginning of the rise of the free press. Political changes also enabled journalists to sit in on Parliament and Congress; the first outlet to have a team of parliamentary reporters was the *Morning Chronicle* in London at the end of the eighteenth century (Chalaby, 1996). Journalists began to give up the idea that they were to speak for the government or political parties and increasingly associated themselves with the public, that is, taxpayers who have the right to know what the government spends their money on. As Thomas Paine put it in 1792,

> in the representative system, the reason for everything must publicly appear. Every man is a proprietor in government and considers it a necessary part of his business to understand. It concerns his business because it affects his property. (as cited in Peters, 1998: 62)

The new philosophy of journalism is illustrated by Joseph Pulitzer's oft-quoted words, published in the *St. Louis Post and Dispatch* in 1878:

> The Post and Dispatch will serve no party but the people; […] will not support the "Administration," but criticize it; […] will advocate principles and ideas rather than prejudices and partisanship. (as cited in Ibold & Wilkins, 2008: 85)

The idea that journalists were to represent the general public instead of particular interest groups was corroborated by the introduction of self-regulatory mechanisms such as ethical codes that established an "invisible contract" with the audiences, making the news production process transparent and accountable and thus establishing trust; the first newspaper ever to have a code of its own was the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, with 24 rules published in the 1860s.

The industrial revolution has contributed in many ways to the rise of the mass press, including the construction of roads and bridges, canals, and railway lines that accelerated the delivery of news and the distribution of newspapers (Briggs & Burke, 2009). Industrialisation, coupled with the rise of capitalist economy, also established massive working and middle classes that came to constitute "the public" (Carey, 2003/2007), whose demand for news could be satisfied owing to the introduction of steam printing in 1814 and wood-based paper in 1835. The first outlet to use steam printing was *The Times* in London, which almost quadrupled its circulation (Innis, 1950/1986).

The industrial revolution was also instrumental in bringing about an advertising market. Urbanisation established geographically condensed audience markets for newspaper distribution: At a busy traffic hub in an urban centre, a newsboy could sell hundreds of copies in an hour. The number and circulation of newspapers grew exponentially. In 1800, there were 235 newspapers in the US; a hundred years later, there were approximately 16,000 (Czitrom, 1982). At the end of the nineteenth century, some of the New York papers sold a million copies a day (Høyer, 1998). In Europe, there were about 2,400 titles in 1820, as opposed to about 12,000 in 1900 (Kovarik, 2015).

The industrialisation of the press was coupled with a process of journalistic professionalisation whereby,

> the journalistic field developed their own discursive norms and values such as objectivity and neutrality. The journalistic mode of writing became characterized by particular discursive strategies and practices, neither literary nor political in character. (Chalaby, 1996: 304)

Among the innovations of the industrial revolution, the establishment of the telegraph network in the middle of the nineteenth century was especially instrumental to the rise of the mass press. The news no longer focused on local

events; for example, *The Times* in London hired 19 foreign correspondents (Chalaby, 1996) and some of the New York papers jointly established the wireless agency Associated Press in 1848 (Boorstin, 1961/1992). The new communication technology allowed for near real-time reporting: Some outlets such as *The Evening Bulletin* in Philadelphia had as many as seven editions a day (Sterling, 2003). The telegraph turned the news into "a saleable commodity" (Boorstin, 1961/1992: 13). For example, in the first week of 1848, *The New York Herald* printed 79,000 words of telegraphic content (Czitrom, 1982). On 30 October 1878, the foreign news page of *The Times* offered 32 news items from almost as many countries (Chalaby, 1996).

But why stress the importance of the telegraph among so many different factors contributing to the industrialisation and professionalisation of the press? It is no accident that several papers referred to the new communication device in their titles, including, among others, *The New York Telegraph* (New York, 1845), *The Daily Telegraph* (London, 1855), and *The Telegraph* (Brisbane, 1872). The telegraph was a reason behind and a symbol for a new reporting style and business model. As correspondents had to pay for every single word delivered via cable, it inspired reporters to use economical language:

> The telegraph reworked the nature of written language. […] It snapped the tradition of partisan journalism by forcing the wire services to generate "objective" news. […] The wire services demanded […] something closer to a "scientific" language, a language of strict denotation […] language had to be flattened out and standardized. (Carey, 1989/2009: 162)

As a result, the "news paradigm" was born:

> The news paradigm consists of several related journalistic techniques. First the news interview to collect information, then balance and objectivity in reporting, and the fact-condensed "inverted pyramid" in production [abandoning the convention of the chronological description of events in favour of the "outcomes first" approach]. The combined product became the "omnibus newspaper" which catered for a wide variety of different readers. […] Objectivity was obtained by using many different sources and authorities to a story, quoting the contending parties to an issue. […] Part of this strategy for larger circulation and larger audiences was the common denominator equation. Topics and programs should appeal to the largest possible number, even if that meant that no one got what they most wanted. (Høyer, 1998: 57–58)

In other words, owing mainly to the telegraph, a new business model was established: Professional journalism was no longer based on the idea that the content produced should please as many people as possible, but that it should displease as few people as possible. Partisan journalism had driven away

those who did not share the same convictions, while, under the new business model, partisan considerations were increasingly ignored, offering a reporting style acceptable for all. This change was of course largely facilitated by the advertising and audience markets established by the industrial revolution: A precondition for professional journalism is political independence, which may only be guaranteed by economic self-reliance.

Of course, it was not only the telegraph that has enhanced the industrialisation and the professionalisation of the press; newspapers also contributed to the rise and development of the telegraph network (Innis, 1950/1986; Schudson, 1978). In particular, an increasing demand for news was a key factor behind the development of the cable system, the demand for which was at least in part generated by the war between the US and Mexico (1846–1948). But the competition for news had begun earlier. In the 1820s, the *Journal of Commerce* and the *Courier and Enquirer*, both based in New York, established pony express services between New York and Washington so that they could deliver political news first; then they used carrier pigeons; finally, they switched to the telegraph (Standage, 1998/2007). Newspapers had a vested interest in establishing and developing an efficient communication system: About one third of the total costs of the 1866 trans-Atlantic cable were covered by the newspapers constituting the Associated Press. William Swain, the owner of the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, invested heavily in the Magnetic Telegraph Company and later became its director and president (Czitrom, 1982). The demand for a fast information system was generated by the rivalry among competing newspapers. Profit was a main motivation for innovation.

A professional model of journalism pursuing the "social responsibility" or "public service" ethos was thus born around the end of the nineteenth century (Siebert et al., 1956/1963), albeit with some researchers suggesting that it did not consolidate before its institutionalisation in the first half of the twentieth century, marked by the establishment of the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1927 in the UK and the introduction of the Fairness Doctrine in 1949 in the US (Chadwick, 2017). Even so, there were considerable national variations (Høyer & Lauk, 2003). According to the 2016 Worlds of Journalism Study, the Anglo-American standards of professional journalism have been exported to other parts of the world and have a normative appeal even in the Global South, where the technological, economic, and political conditions for its realisation are often missing (Hanitzsch et al., 2019).

Professionalism includes aspirations to gain and preserve autonomy vis-à-vis political and business powers while serving the public's "right to know" – that is, by "enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self-government" (Siebert et al., 1956/1963: 73–74). For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, professional journalists were distinguished by their specific education, participation in professional organisations, disinterested

approach to the topics covered, and commitment to accuracy (Høyer & Lauk, 2003). Journalists came to play a key role in setting an agenda in line with the public interest, checking facts, presenting information in a meaningful way, and moderating public discourse by eliminating extremist voices. They used a factual language and hence provided joint references, meanings, and shared understandings of the world. Professional journalism was instrumental to establishing common values shared by most of the democratic community (Schulz, 2000), making an important contribution to societal cohesion. It has stabilised the public's knowledge of the world.

Hence, most researchers suggest that the telegraph had a positive impact on journalism and on the public's access to information; some, however, think otherwise. Czitrom (1982) observed that by the end of the nineteenth century, most of the American telegraph network came to be owned by Western Union, a company that had a quasi-monopoly and was therefore capable of manipulating the information publicised. Chadwick (2017: 28) argued that while the history of the press has often been described as "the victory of reason and informed debates", it has in reality always featured "a hybrid blend of entertainment and information [...] including fictional storytelling and sensationalism". Postman (1985/2006: 76, 78, 85) suggested that the telegraph and the mass press jointly paved the way for a great deal of irrelevant, incoherent, and context-free information to emerge, which does not serve "social and political decision-making and action", as "in a sea of information, there was very little of it to use", and the information thus provided had "no genuine connection to our lives". While acknowledging that some accounts of the professionalisation of journalism have been over-optimistic, one may object to Postman's view that in the rapidly globalising world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people's lives were increasingly influenced by distant events, which events therefore came to be perceived by the public as relevant for decision-making. Arguably, it was only the Digital Age, beginning fifteen years after the first edition of Postman's oft-quoted book, that an undisputable overload of fragmented and decontextualised information began to emerge – as the next chapter demonstrates.

The deprofessionalisation of journalism

The digital revolution at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, marked by digitalisation, computerisation, platformisation, and the advent of the smartphone, had, once again, a thorough impact on journalism and hence on the public's access to information – not only in the Anglo-American world, but globally. It is important to recall, however, that the current state of professional journalism, often described as a crisis (see Zelizer et al., 2022), may not be explained by technological change alone. As Tófalvy and Vobič (2025) have noted, it is also explained by changing

perceptions of the societal role of journalists, as well as hostile political and business environments.

The rise of Web 1.0 and especially that of the interactive Web 2.0 gave birth to a new breed of journalist: the citizen journalist who produces and shares content via blogs and social media without regard to professional considerations. Splichal and Dahlgren (2016: 6–8, 12–14) described this phenomenon as the "de-professionalisation of journalism", noting that,

> the Internet has […] given rise to more participatory communication by people who are not professional journalists, such as bloggers and citizen journalists. ... Citizen journalists are largely avocational. […] Also, citizen journalism is more likely to reach smaller, specialised audiences and is often socially engaged in some way. It thus tends to adhere less to traditional norms of fairness and balance and renders the distinctions between fact and opinion less sharp. […] There is little or no accountability.

As a general rule, citizen journalists have their own agendas. They do not distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information, nor do they check their sources, provide context for their stories, or moderate the public discourse to keep extremist views away. Not bound by ethical codes and collective contracts, citizen journalists' news production processes lack both transparency and accountability. Misreporting entails no consequences of any kind. (One might add, though, that citizen journalism emerged well before digitalisation; the authors of fanzines of the 1970s alternative music movements or those of the samizdat publications in the former communist countries were not professional journalists. Also, arguably, the boundaries between professional and citizen journalism are sometimes blurred, owing to the convergent nature of the digital eco-system; see Tófalvy, 2015). Citizen journalists' influence has been steadily growing in recent years, so much so that the latest *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* available at the time of writing refers to social media influencers, vloggers, podcasters, and other social media personalities as constituting an "alternative news ecosystem" (Newman et al., 2025: 5).

Social media give voice to everyone, but "without filters and mediation" (Bayer, 2019: 128). Platforms may have a huge impact upon public opinion, while they do not behave as publishers or editors (Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2019). They are lacking transparency and, as relatively new and global communication platforms, are largely unregulated, albeit recent years have seen several efforts by nation states and supranational organisations to regulate them, especially as they tend to abuse their quasi-monopoly positions (Bayer, 2019; see also the last section).

In recent decades, owing to the information revolution, professional journalism has encountered multiple other challenges, too, none of which seem to improve people's informed political choices. These include the following:

First, news consumption patterns have changed. Newspaper circulation has been dropping, and television viewership figures have been falling, especially among the younger generations. The reach of traditional news organisations has been declining for years, albeit with temporary changes (Newman et al., 2021, 2022). An increasing number of people access professional news sites via social media platforms (Wojcieszak et al., 2021). In the 48 countries covered in the latest *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, accounting for more than half of the world's population, 36 per cent of the sample use Facebook and 30 per cent use YouTube for news each week, followed by Instagram (19%), WhatsApp (19%), TikTok (16%), and X (12%) (Newman et al., 2025). The online versions of the traditional news organisations have been increasingly exposed to the algorithms of social media platforms, which lack transparency and are changed unilaterally by the platforms. For example, Facebook has deliberately hindered access to political content, with Meta, its parent company, announcing this in July 2022:

> Our tests have concluded and demonstrated that placing less emphasis on shares and comments for political content is an effective way to reduce the amount of political content people experience in their Feed. We have now implemented these changes globally.

The advent of social media platforms has exponentially increased the quantity of information available, but the quality of information seems to have worsened.

Second, in the online environment, automated disinformation campaigns have grown in numbers, including in democratic countries. Global studies have found evidence of organised disinformation campaigns in 28 countries in 2017, 48 countries in 2018, 70 countries in 2019, and 81 countries in 2020 (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Bradshaw et al. 2021). As a general trend, false news travels faster and farther online than accurate news stories do (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Online propaganda is arguably more efficient than offline propaganda, as several disinformation sites may be operated simultaneously and at virtually no cost, and the echo-chamber effect created by cross-references between those sites may make disinformation more believable for the public. Also, before digitalisation, the links between legacy propaganda outlets and political interest groups were fairly transparent. Since digitalisation, however, the link between online propaganda sites and political interests has often been hidden from the public eye. To date, disinformation sites may claim independence while serving political agendas, and faked independence may enhance the perceived credibility of the disinformation publicised. While some of the traditional news organisations are also known to have delivered fake news, it is to date arguably more difficult to determine fake from accurate stories; hence, the knowledge of the public has been destabilised, rendering it difficult for people to make informed political decisions. This is also including, in addition to downright political

disinformation, pseudo-scientific information. A sad example of the impact of the latter is the number of those who died of Covid-19, having believed online rumours about the harmful effects of vaccination.

Third, in the Analogue Age, there was a modus vivendi, or co-dependence, between professional journalists and politicians. Politicians needed journalists to reach out to voters; in exchange, they shared information with them. This is no longer the case. In the Digital Age, politicians have the ability to directly communicate with voters via social media platforms, bypassing traditional news organisations (Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2019), a phenomenon often referred to as disintermediation (Giacomini, 2023). Professional journalists, no longer in the position to ask questions, are losing their ability to set and frame the public agenda. As politicians do not need them anymore, they are often denied access to information. It is no accident that some senior politicians such as Donald Trump are known to have excluded leading journalists from press events while in office.

Fourth, digital platforms in general and Big Tech companies such as Facebook and Google in particular have in recent decades driven advertising revenues away from traditional news organisations without, however, producing any public interest content that would facilitate voters' political choices. In 2024, for example, the digital media's share of the total advertising revenue was 72.7 per cent globally, and that of social media platforms within the total online advertising spending was 30.8 per cent (We Are Social, 2025). At the same time, most people are reluctant to pay for online news. In 2025, the proportion of digital subscribers was highest in Norway at 42 per cent among the 48 countries studied by the Reuters Institute (Newman et al., 2025); the same figures in most of the Western markets were between 12 and 22 per cent. Online sites have lost significant parts of both their advertising and audience markets.

It follows that traditional news outlets have increasingly less to re-invest into content production. Unsurprisingly, then, the number of professional journalists has been falling steadily. In the US, for example, there were 85,000 newsroom employees in 2020, as opposed to 114,000 in 2008, marking a 26 per cent decline in their numbers (Pew Research Center, 2021). Job cuts continued after the Covid-19 pandemic, albeit at a reduced pace; in 2021, 1,500 newsrooms employees lost their jobs, followed by 18,000 in 2022 and 3,000 in 2023 (Statista, 2025). At the same time, an increasing number of people have turned away from the news media or have been disconnecting from the news altogether, and the trust vested in traditional news organisations has been falling in many countries (Newman et al., 2022). In recent years, though, the level of trust has stabilised: In the OECD countries, currently around 39 per cent of the audiences have high or moderate levels of trust in traditional news organisations, as opposed to 44 per cent with low or no trust at all (OECD, 2024). The reasons may be manyfold, including a

perceived decline in the quality of the news produced by fewer journalists. Also, some politicians attempt to discredit critical media, calling them "fake news" with a possible impact on their followers (Chadwick, 2017). This is a vicious circle: Fewer journalists produce poorer content which drives away some of the public, enhancing further the financial problems of traditional news organisations.

What may cause frustration among audiences? Zelizer and colleagues (2022: 21, 14) have argued that a "massive exodus" from legacy media to online platforms is owing to journalists being "disconnected from the everyday realities of everyone who matters". The Reuters Institute (Newman et al., 2021: 36–37), in a similar vein, has suggested that some of the audiences, including, among others, Black and Hispanic Americans in the US and the people in the states that were formerly parts of East Germany, think that their lives are often misrepresented or are lacking adequate and fair coverage, and hence the research organisation suggests that "journalists and the news media are elitist, out of touch with people". Arguably, professional journalism has been too focused on ideological issues such as the "woke" movements, while ignoring some of the more concrete problems of their readers.

To be sure, there is a lot of discussion going on about the origins of the deprofessionalisation of journalism. Splichal and Dahlgren (2016) suggested that it began well before the digital revolution, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the telegraph accelerated the routinisation of news production, turning journalism from an intellectual into a technical occupation. To this view, however, one might object that in the age of the telegraph, the actual use of the communication technology and its application to content production were two different work phases, with the telegraph machines being handled by dedicated operators – at least until the 1870s, when the automatic telegraph machine was invented and newsrooms began to use it. Arguably, the technologisation of the profession began much later, with the advent of social media platforms whose journalistic uses requested more complex technological skills. To date, journalists are expected to produce, in addition to textual and audiovisual content, multimedia products, including video, podcast, and hypertext content – that is, "mobile journalism" or "multimedia storytelling" (Burum, 2016). The time pressures and the commercial logic of platforms also encourage journalists to bypass the traditional editorial practices and favour immediate and live news publication. Furthermore, artificial intelligence is to date widely used in the production of editorial content, including by traditional news organisations such as the Associated Press, Bloomberg, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post* (Tölgyes, 2023). The use of artificial intelligence in the newsroom may of course save costs for the outlets facing financial challenges, yet it is still unclear whether, or how, it can observe the standards of ethical journalism. Contemporary communication technologies turn some of the skills traditionally needed for professional journalism obsolete.

In sum, the proliferation of communication technologies, channels, platforms, and outlets at the turn of the millennium has led to the fragmentation of the audiences, as digitalisation has been "reducing the number of media experiences that national populations share with one another" (Hodkinson, 2011: 183). Professional news organisations are no longer able to provide joint references, meanings, and shared understandings that bind societies together. The advent of the Internet may have eased direct access to information but, increasingly lacking mediation by professional journalists, it has undermined factual and contextualised information and destabilised knowledge. Postman's "sea of information" has turned into an ocean with, of course, some islands of reliable information in it.

While most researchers are sceptical about the impacts of the rise of citizen journalism, some welcome it. For example, Keane (2022: 6, 139) has argued that digitalisation has brought about the new era which he calls "monitory democracy" and is,

> tied to multimedia-saturated societies – whose structures of power are continuously tracked and resisted by citizens and representatives acting within the digital media ecosystem. […] We know about the organized manipulation of information by hidden algorithms, corporate data harvesting, political gaslighting, state surveillance, and other decadent trends, yet equally striking is the way the decadence breeds stiff public resistance. Communicative abundance feeds the restless spirit of monitory democracy […] the age of monitory democracy witnesses constant spats about power, to the point where it seems as if no organization or leader or area within the government and civil society is immune from political trouble. Every nook and cranny of power becomes the potential target of "publicity" and "public exposure.

Keane's argument may be an indication that an overall consensus is still lacking among scholars when it comes to assessing the societal impacts of digitalisation, yet his remains a minority position with little evidence to support it.

Conclusion: Policy recommendations

Is there a way out of the current crisis of journalism? And who is to act so that the challenges journalism is now facing may be overcome: journalists, media owners, or the state?

Some scholars and practitioners in search of answers focus on journalists' role and call for a thorough revision of the standards of journalism developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Zelizer and colleagues (2022) have argued that journalism is at a crossroads and must choose either the "reformist" or the "revolutionary" path to meet a changing public demand.

The former would mean that "the elites that journalism would prioritize would no longer be high-status elites, but those representing the voices of historically disenfranchised groups" (Zelizer et al., 2022: 96), and the latter would include "creative acts of resistance" (Zelizer et al., 2022: 102), coupled with a revolt against the authority of elites, including those within the newsrooms, along with a more active audience participation in the news-making process.

Either way, the authors' view that journalism ought to give up its "elitist" aspirations of leading the public and to expand the set of voices in the news may raise some concerns. Should professional journalists really not seek to maintain their agenda-setting and framing roles in the age of fragmented audiences and destabilised knowledge? To be sure, the audiences must be given what they want. But journalism must also continue to lead the public, not just follow it; a common agenda is much needed to counter the ongoing disintegration of societies. That said, there is little doubt that current *modus operandi* of journalism should be revisited and the "invisible contract" between professional news organisations and the public should be reinstated. Trust must be regained.

One way to do this is to better ensure the transparency and accountability of the news production process by redesigning self-regulatory mechanisms, including codes of ethics, ethical commissions, complaint mechanisms, press ombuds, and professional fora such as blogs and journals for the discussion of ethical issues. This should, of course, be done in dialogue with the representative bodies of the public, not in isolation.

The owners of traditional news organisations might also need to act. Digital subscription rates are still low and will likely remain so as long as at least some of the online news sites continue to offer news free of charge, as some of the audiences migrate to free digital outlets once they hit paywalls. This is a problem of collective action. Publishers may need to consider acting jointly and establishing a consortium that collects online subscription fees collectively and redistributes them within the industry. This, however, seems to be an impossible mission as long as the market is distorted by public service media that provide free news online. It follows that public service media should also join the initiative and charge those who access their online platforms, which, however, would likely raise criticisms. That said, the fact that people are willing to pay for streaming platforms such as Netflix, Disney Plus, HBO Max, and Spotify on a massive scale is promising to the extent that it is an indication that they might also be willing to pay for high-quality online news services.

The state should also engage in regulatory action, which in fact has been on the agenda for years now, as several governmental reports have looked at how Meta, Google, and other Big Tech companies monetise traditional journalism. For example, the Australian Competition and Consumer

Commission (ACCC) started an investigation into the impact of platforms upon competition in media and advertising markets and especially upon the supply of news and journalistic content (ACCC, 2019), recommending that Big Tech companies pay for news media content accessed through their ecosystems (Birch & Cochrane, 2022). Likewise, the US Federal Trade Commission has sued Facebook to roll back its anticompetitive conduct and to restore competition (FTC, 2020). Also, to counter power imbalances, foster quality journalism, and improve citizens' access to information, the European Copyright Directive has introduced the right for press publishers to enter into licensing agreements with platforms for the publication of their news content. As a result, in 2023, Google announced that it had signed agreements with various publishers, covering over 1,500 publications across 15 countries (Rozgonyi, 2024). The rationale underlying these regulatory efforts is that Big Tech should make their algorithms transparent and accountable and that they should pay for the news produced by professional journalists and mediated via their platforms.

The example of Austria is particularly noteworthy. While being a small country, it played a pioneering role in 2020 by introducing a 5 per cent tax on online advertising for Big Tech companies such as Meta, Google, and Amazon – that is, companies with a global turnover of at least 750 million euros and a domestic turnover of at least 25 million euros a year. According to a 2023 recommendation by the Minister of Finances, the income thus generated may be used to subsidise online journalism, including digital content production and journalism education. In 2022, for example, the tax collected amounted to 96 million euros (Der Standard, 2023). In that year, 115 projects were granted a total of 20 million euros from the tax collected (OTS, 2023). There is also a press subsidies scheme supporting the daily and weekly print press, and another fund subsidising the broadcast media, managed by the media regulatory authorities KommAustria and the Austrian Regulatory Authority for Broadcasting and Telecommunications (RTR), respectively. In early 2024, RTR set out to redistribute another 20 million euros in support of quality journalism (RTR, 2023). The redistribution scheme is based on applications, to be evaluated in line with objective criteria, which is to exclude the preferential treatment of some outlets for political reasons. Outlets with extremist views, however, are denied support – a criterion in line with the efforts of professional journalists to keep extremist views away from public discourse and to enhance democratic cohesion, albeit controversial from a free speech perspective.

The taxation of digital media revenues in support of traditional news organisations would not be without precedent. Since the introduction of television advertising starting in the mid-1950s and especially in the 1960s, several European countries have established press subsidy schemes to make up for the losses of printed newspapers (De Bens & Østby, 1998; Humphreys,

1996). In the Netherlands, for example, television advertising was directly taxed, and the revenues thus generated were channelled via a press fund to loss-making newspapers, the underlying rationale being that traditional news organisations deliver content that most commercial television channels do not, yet without public interest content, voters may find it difficult to make informed decisions (Brants & McQuail, 1997). As Carey (2003/2007: 13) put it – "no journalism, no democracy".

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CHAPTER 4

European approaches to disinformation and public discourse

The policy framework to regulate the digital platform environment

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I introduce the reasons for and the challenges of creating a framework regulation for digital service providers in the EU. I analyse the rules passed in 2022–2024, including the Digital Markets Act, the Digital Services Act, the Code of Practice on Disinformation, and the European Media Freedom Act's rules on the relationship between digital platforms and media. I point out that this complex set of rules is aimed at creating and fostering a diverse information environment rather than directly regulating content. Instead of curtailing the privileges of the platforms, the law furnishes them with more responsibility and the expectation to exert due diligence to preserve the values of democracy and fundamental rights.

KEYWORDS: digital rights, disinformation, European regulation, platform regulation, social media platforms

Bayer, J. (2026). European approaches to disinformation and public discourse: The policy framework to regulate the digital platform environment. In A. Balčytienė, P. Bajomi-Lázár, & H. Sousa (Eds.), *Digital media shadowing democracy: Technology, communication, and power* (pp. 63–84). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. https://doi.org/10.48335/9789189864290-4

Introduction: Social media platforms in the context of public discourse

The necessity of regulating global social media platforms was and still is far from undisputed. As described below, the reasons are rooted in social and political values and legal traditions but have also been triggered by current events in global politics. As the roles and services of online platforms have rapidly changed and transformed in the past decade, both policymakers and researchers had to aim at a "moving target". Previous chapters in this volume discuss in detail how social media platforms play a key role in the democratic public discourse. Gatekeepers[1] hold the power to exert control over the exercise of rights by masses of people, including the right to freedom of expression, the right to information, and the freedom of the media, but, at the same time, they also facilitate the exercise of these freedoms. Their informational power is considerable, even from a historical perspective (De Gregorio, 2021b). Even though platforms merely mediate third-party content and do not provide content of their own, they shape how content is presented. The content-ranking algorithms of social media and search engines determine the audiences' exposure to content and, therefore, its perception, as discussed below in more detail. As a result, the public discourse is formed by these algorithms, with implications for democratic functioning (Helberger, 2020).

In the past decade, social media platforms were found to play a meaningful role in the spreading and amplifying of disinformation around the globe. Even though a causal link between this and the spreading populism and extremism through various countries cannot be proven, the concern for democracy within the EU triggered an action plan (the European Democracy Action Plan) aimed at reframing the information landscape. Besides political and security considerations, a commerce-driven regulatory necessity also informed the need for digital regulation. For this reason, the Platform to Business Regulation was passed in 2019, which regulated the relationship between digital platforms and business users, and introduced the principles of fairness and transparency (P2B Regulation). The two regulatory incentives were joined in the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and, to some extent, in the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act, which regulate online platforms and algorithms as powerful actors for both economic and public interest. The changes that platformisation has caused in the public sphere were addressed by two further acts: the Regulation on Political Advertising and the European Media Freedom Act. These were primarily informed by the values of the EU as laid down in Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty and in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. At the same time, especially the former three regulations were more influenced mostly by digital platform stakeholders, foregrounding economic freedom over public-interest safeguards.

Digital platform owners have claimed their own freedom of expression as understood in American jurisprudence. This American understanding of

platform privilege has two pillars: the First Amendment, which formulates a purely negative freedom; and the US law Communications Decency Act (CDA) 230, which provides unconditional immunity for intermediaries (for third-party content), regardless of whether they moderate the content. This liability has been re-examined as a result of court cases debating whether unconditional immunity should be lifted and retained only for cases where the platform is not actively involved in content governance through its algorithms (*Tamiz v. Google*, 2013; *Vargas v. Facebook*, 2023). The evolving judicial practice sustains immunity for third-party content (*González v. Google*, 2023). In *Twitter v. Taamneh* (2023), the US Supreme Court found that Internet service providers are not liable for aiding and abetting terrorist action, regardless of the nature of their algorithmic recommendations.

The European constitutional approach to freedom of expression, in contrast to the American, places greater emphasis on the value of public discourse and is more inclined to endorse regulation aimed at correcting imbalances and creating a more level playing field within the information landscape. And, most distinctively, in the EU logic, digital platforms are not primary subjects of freedom of expression, because they are not considered speakers themselves – only mere intermediaries.

While digital platforms are clearly not liable for illegal third-party content, according to the DSA, they *are* responsible for ensuring that the systemic risks of their services are well managed and mitigated. This means that they could become liable for failures in their content curation if their algorithmic recommendations systemically amplify terroristic content.

As a result, the European law retains platform immunity but imposes the obligation to ensure a safe environment through built-in co-regulation, which means an official obligation to self-regulate their rules of transmission and amplification. What looks like an obligation on paper is at the same time the legitimisation of a privilege: Digital platforms get to say how they curate content as long as they adhere to some basic principles of fairness, such as transparency, respect for human rights, and so on. The meaningful penalties apply only if the European Commission finds that a platform has violated its systemic obligation to diligently safeguard its informational services.

At the time of writing, no investigation or decision was taken on the basis of the systemic risk mitigation obligation, or other specific issue relating to disinformation or a similar anomaly that could cause a risk to the public discourse and democracy. While the European Commission has been conducting investigations and imposed a fine on X, those were related to transparency obligations, and the due process requirements in the notice-and-action procedure, which are hard obligations. A preliminary finding was published regarding TikTok and Meta, and a fine of 120 million euros was imposed on X for non-compliance in October and in December 2025, respectively. Below, said legal instruments are analysed in the light of media theories to assess their impact on the public discourse.

The DSA defines digital platforms as intermediaries, reinforcing their role as mere transmitters of information, as opposed to publishers and other media operators. This was an important clarification of their role, which was not entirely covered by the previous legislation (the E-Commerce Directive). After having experimented with various content offers such as a support fund by Facebook in 2019 called "Journalism Project" (Ingram, 2022) or "Facebook News", and in 2021, "Bulletin", social media platforms are now also legally incentivised to refrain from providing their own content, including the selection and active sharing of content, as that could qualify them as publishers. After the DSA was passed, Facebook terminated these threads and even stopped using the term "news feed" in order to avoid the word "news", calling it only "feed" now. In 2023, Google also stopped carrying news, disabling the "news" tag in Canada and disallowing users to share news in order to avoid having to pay for news content (Ryan, 2023; Woolf, 2023). A similar move finally led to an agreement in Australia (Gollom, 2023).

Algorithmic ranking and recommending

Media effects research has repeatedly examined the cognitive reception of media content by audiences and its impact on their psyche. Following the initial findings (Lasswell, 1927/1971), it has been established that the interpretation of received content by audiences is influenced by the surrounding society, including friends, relatives, and other influential figures (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). With digitalisation on the rise, our perception of this surrounding social environment has been increasingly shaped by algorithms. Friends, family, colleagues, influencers, and celebrities are often encountered through social media platforms, and the information they share is filtered through the same algorithms as other content. Additionally, this traditionally private sphere has become intertwined with the public sphere in the social media environment, which presents a mixed feed of news, advertisements, and information on public matters with private posts about, for example, cats, children, holidays, or food (Calhoun, 2010; Seeliger & Sevignani, 2022). All of these are filtered and ordered by the opaque logic of algorithms. Thus, the societal environment that had once exerted a moderating effect on media perception has itself been captured by the same algorithms that govern public content. Friends and family, once considered a balancing factor in the process of information formation, have become drivers of polarisation in the social media environment.

Similarly, the agenda-setting function of the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) has increasingly been taken over by social media algorithms. Some posts become viral, others get forgotten. What is prioritised and what gets suppressed is defined by self-learning algorithms, which are designed by IT experts and then released to do their "own job". The departments that create those are often unaware of their exact activity because of the black-box nature of machine learning (Council of Europe, 2021).[2]

This should be weighed with the fact that giant social media platforms dominate the advertising market and reach an unprecedented number of people globally (CMPF, 2020). Meta investor reports confirmed 3.07 billion monthly active users and 2.11 billion daily active users (Jaimes, 2025). This is incomparable to any media concentration on the traditional media market, where Japan's *Yomiori Shinbun* has the largest subscriber base with approximately 10 million readers, followed by the *Wall Street Journal* with 2.2 million subscribers. Admittedly, traditional news organisations provide their own content while digital platforms merely transmit third-party content, but still, platforms can shape the content offered through their algorithmic ranking and recommendations. Moreover, the network effect (Barabási, 2003: 409–410; Barabási, 2014; Katz & Shapiro, 1994) causes big actors to get bigger and pushes small actors further to the peripheries (Barabási, 2016).

In sum, digital platforms shape information consumption through their opaque algorithms, which are hidden from public, academic, and official scrutiny. Their market and opinion power, as well as their regulatory actions, rival those of nation states (De Gregorio, 2021b). In fact, any attempt by a state to exert similar control over opinions would not be tolerated in any democracy. So, what factors contribute to the tolerance of such control by private enterprises?

Microscopic violations

The ways in which digital platforms interfere with the rights and capabilities of individual users is currently in the shadows. Several rights may be identified that are regularly and systematically interfered with by platforms, particularly the rights to privacy and freedom of expression, as well as the rights to receive information, dignity, equality, and others. The interferences are so common, and often so minor if considered individually, that they remain below the threshold of attention (Smuha, 2021).[3] Even *users* do not often perceive these constraints as a problem; and if they do, the tiny relevance of each individual case seems unworthy of a costly lawsuit.

Occasionally, non-governmental organisations make the effort and initiate court procedures, relying on mass-level violations of concrete legal provisions rather than human rights directly (noyb, 2023). These lawsuits are successful and effective, but they change neither the general dynamics of the infringing habit nor the systemic legal attitude of how these microscopic human rights infringements are regarded. Another complication arises when harmful actions are perpetrated by a chain of numerous actors, such as a network of disinformants or providers of targeted manipulative advertising. In such instances, the responsibility for harm is diffused among the "many hands" involved.

Additionally, this responsibility often falls upon private companies that are not directly obligated to uphold human rights, raising the question of the horizontal effect of human rights. Moreover, harm frequently occurs with the individual's consent, owing either to their lack of awareness of the

risks or their willingness to waive their rights in exchange for immediate benefits (Mühlhoff, 2022).

In summary, the prevailing human rights framework regards human rights as inherently attached to individuals and subject to individual claims for remedy. Several human rights regimes, especially international ones, require that substantial significance be proven to initiate a lawsuit (McGregor et al., 2019). However, the normative premises of human rights remain significant in the context of changed realities (Hoffmann-Riem, 2022). In situations like this, state regulatory policy is a usual response, imposing obligations on companies to respect the interests of individuals, as it occurred in the fields of labour law, telecommunication law, and other sectors (Trebilcock, 1997).

In European regulatory culture, the rights of individual people prevail over corporate rights, which is reflected in nation states' positive obligation to create a regulatory environment in which those individual rights are protected. This state obligation extends beyond showing respect towards rights, passively refraining from interfering with those. It also includes taking positive actions to protect and, in some cases, even to ensure, that those rights can be exercised. This is the path that the EU has taken, albeit it has severe limitations.

Limitations of the European legislative policy

European legislation is loaded with more than one burden, which hinders the efficient treatment of the problem.

Limited competences

First, as the EU is not a state, its legislative competencies are limited. It may adopt legislative acts only in the fields that have been explicitly conferred upon it by the member states. Neither human rights nor media are among these areas, therefore, strictly speaking, the EU is not empowered to regulate these fields. However, transmitting and providing content is a service that falls under the principles of the common market. Harmonising the common market constitutes a legitimate legal basis for the EU to enact specific regulations for this purpose. In addition, the Lisbon Treaty has enacted the European Charter of Fundamental Rights as a binding document for the EU. It binds all actions of the EU institutions, which encompass the legislative function as well. Thus, whenever the EU adopts a law, it must respect, protect, and ensure that the rights incorporated in the Charter are protected.

The presence or absence of the legal basis has continually been a matter of dispute during the legislative process of the laws that have regulated the operation of online platforms. In particular, the justification of the provisions intended to protect fundamental rights, democracy, and the public discourse was subject to intense discussions.

Definitional issues

Second, tackling disinformation has been a challenge since its emergence. Freedom of expression protects all opinions and statements of facts, regardless of their value or their truth, as long as they do not violate other persons' rights. For statements that discuss political opinions or matters of public interest, the scope of freedom is even wider (see ECtHR decisions Jersild, Lingens, Handyside). Disinformation – that is, content that is intentionally designed to be manipulative and misleading – does not violate specific rights to individual reputation, privacy, or public morals. Any existing legal restriction (such as defamation) would consume the category of disinformation. Thus, disinformation, as a term, consciously addresses an existing regulatory gap (Bayer et al., 2021).

In recent regulations, disinformation has been circumscribed as content that may have an adverse impact on democracy, influence the outcome of elections (AI Act, Political Advertising Act), or is manipulative, impacting public health, public security, political participation, or civil discourse (DSA). The Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation (SCOP) of 2022 does not define disinformation but leaves it up to the signatories to define it. Signatories decided that they cannot distinguish between intentionally untrue or manipulated and unintentionally untrue or misleading information (i.e., disinformation and misinformation), and they refer to both with the broader term of "misinformation".

The EU's European Democracy Action Plan, which is the basis for the SCOP, defines misinformation and disinformation as follows:

> Misinformation is false or misleading content shared without harmful intent though the effects may still be harmful, e.g. when people share false information with friends and family in good faith; disinformation is false or misleading content that is spread with the intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain and which may cause public harm. (European Union, 2020: §4, para. 1).

The challenge of detection and identification

A third reason lies in the difficulty of distinguishing the truth from falsity: Determining with certainty whether content is disinformation is nearly impossible in several cases. For example, during the Covid-19 crisis, information that was first identified as disinformation turned out to be true. Notably, true but misleading information disseminated with the intention of manipulating the audience may also qualify as disinformation (Bayer et al., 2019). In addition, epistemic uncertainty also undermines stable identification: No news item is ever completely true or false. According to Bajomi-Lázár (2023), the truthfulness of journalistic content is to be defined on a gradual scale rather than with binary values. For these reasons, a direct state restriction of disinformation would not only be unreasonable but also illegitimate. Therefore, while platforms are obligated to remove illegal content, the removal or downranking of disinformation is merely "recommended", while

the obligation includes due diligence to prevent its amplification. In automatic detection applications, besides content detection, suspicious dissemination patterns also allow for the recognition of manipulative content (Bayer, 2022).

The seemingly equal status of actors

Finally, neoliberal economy and political representation frown upon any restriction that might curtail the rights of entrepreneurs. From the perspective of regulation, giant platforms and individual users have the same status: They are all private entities, none of which may be directly obligated to respect the rights of others, which is a state duty. Microscopic violations are not currently acknowledged, nor are they represented in legal argumentation.

For all these reasons, the European legislation, rather than addressing the impact on human rights directly, intended to create an information environment that is more likely to foster human rights and, as a result, a balanced public discourse and democracy.

Setting the framework: The Digital Markets Act

The Digital Markets Act (DMA) (European Union, 2022b) complements traditional competition law instruments (Vestager, 2021) with a specific focus on digital markets (Fernández, 2021; Petit, 2021). Acknowledging the vast size and influence of the "digital giants" (also called "gatekeepers" under the DMA), it regulates their actions along the principles of fair market behaviour and for the benefit of consumers and business partners. The requirements such as interoperability, sharing access, and the principles of fairness and non-discrimination align with the idea of net neutrality, a principle of fairness and equality that had dominated the policy discourse on Internet access providers – the earlier gatekeepers of the network infrastructure, before platforms occupied the centre of attention (Marsden & Brown, 2023).

By regulating the structure of the digital environment, the DMA exerts an indirect regulatory effect on the information landscape. Most benefits can be expected from the prohibition of discrimination and the protection of users from targeted content without their explicit consent. While this principle does not stretch beyond the rules of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), detailed rules have been added to prevent circumvention of those. For example, the acquisition of personal data sideways without users' consent, such as "preying" on data acquired by business users to which platforms gain access through their intermediating services, is ruled out. Similarly, it is prohibited to use personal data inferred from the commercial activities of business users or the end users of those business users, including click, search, view, and voice data. Further, it is also prohibited to repeatedly ask for consent once it was rejected (within a period of one year). Along with the DSA's rule

that provides for equal representation of rejection and consent (European Union, 2022c),[4] these may provide a better protection of personal data.

On the other side of the seesaw, business users of gatekeeper platforms are entitled to get free access to the personal data provided to them by their customers through the platform infrastructure. The gatekeeper may use such data only in the event they originate directly from the end user who opted to share such data (European Union, 2022b: §6.1, 6.10). This rule practically obliges gatekeepers to provide their intermediary services in a neutral manner, also adding that the conditions of ranking should be non-discriminatory and fair.

Additional rules on interoperability[5] and access obligations address the structural market balance between gatekeepers and other service providers. A flatter market structure is expected to incentivise platforms to pay more attention to human rights and better serve their customers as citizens (Rowe, 2022). The DMA's advertising transparency rules are expected to bring some competition within the advertising market (Brown, 2020; Eifert, 2021: 1015; Stuart, 2021; European Union, 2022b: §5–6, Recital 45).

Platform rules: The Digital Services Act

The DSA's primary mission is to harmonise the common market rules for a seamless free movement of platform services across borders (European Union, 2022c: §1.2a). Its secondary aim is more progressive: to provide uniform rules for a safe, predictable, and trusted online environment where the fundamental rights enshrined in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights are effectively protected (European Union, 2022c: §1.2b). Although the approach may appear revolutionary, the regulation hardly extended beyond codifying the existing state of affairs and creating a legal and regulatory framework for its enforcement. By acknowledging the role of platforms as de facto market regulators, the DSA introduced rules for supervision and transparency to monitor and mitigate any events that could potentially have systemic significance (Eifert et al., 2021).

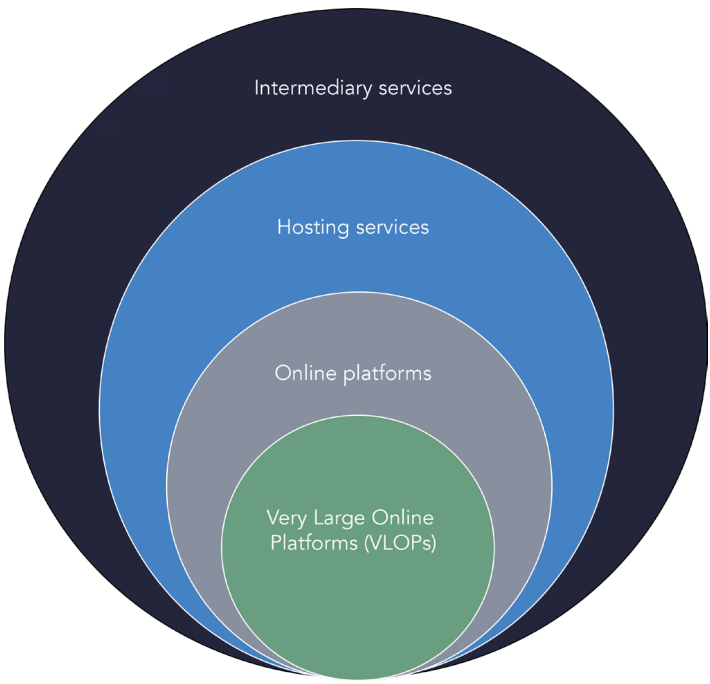
Defining platform providers has been a long-overdue task for legislators. These actors emerged after the millennium and were not covered by the scope of the previous laws that governed Internet service providers (the E-Commerce Directive and the national laws passed on its basis). The DSA has defined platform providers as a type of hosting provider that disseminates information to the public, a definition that does not grasp the core service of platforms, which is to make order out of the chaos of information and to decide which information item is presented to each user as well as to decide which items are left in the "long tail". The actual activity of content governance (as opposed to content moderation) is still only marginally addressed by the DSA.

By setting the aim of installing safeguards to protect fundamental rights, the legislator endeavoured to enter "uncharted regulatory waters" (Eifert et al., 2021: 994). As noted in the previous section, tackling content governance directly was not possible without interfering with the fundamental rights of

platforms and their users. Therefore, the legislator applied the due diligence framework; this is used by the EU as the new "magic wand" to deal with corporate superpowers. Due diligence is increasingly being introduced in areas where corporate actors interfere with human rights and the environment, leaving microscopic traces which together generate meaningful adverse effects. Beyond the DSA and the AI Act,[6] the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive has been passed and entered into force on 25 July 2024.

Rather than being liable for the content they carry (Riordan, 2020), platforms are responsible for applying due diligence to prevent harms (Naughton, 2018). The due diligence obligations include a wide range of measures (European Union, 2022c: Chapter III). Some of them, such as the clear and transparent wording of the terms and conditions, must be applied by all services; others, such as the transparency obligations regarding the notice-and-takedown procedures, apply only to hosting services. Refraining from dark patterns applies to all online platforms; and some specific obligations apply to very large online platforms (VLOPs). The more specific a service provider is, the more obligations it has (see Figure 4.1.).

Figure 4.1 The types of intermediary services in the Digital Services Act



Not all measures of due diligence are defined by the law; platforms are entitled to design their own measures and policies, as long as they fulfil the expectation of mitigating the systemic risks arising from their services.

Among the several requirements, two specific obligations directly address content governance. First is the traditional media ethics standard of separating advertisements from organic content (European Union, 2022c: §26). Platforms are now obligated to label advertisements as such, enabling users to immediately identify the advertiser and the sponsor. Second, online platforms that use recommender systems must disclose their main parameters and any options if offered. The main parameters must include the most significant criteria in determining the information that was suggested to the user, as well as the reasons for their relative importance. VLOPs and very large online search engines (VLOSEs) are further obliged to offer at least one additional option. The SCOP recommends that relevant signatories should commit to offer more options (European Commission, 2022: Commitment 19).

This responsibility is completed with the accountability of platforms for their diligence efforts. Insufficiency of the diligence may result in sanctions imposed by the Digital Services Coordinator or the Commission. VLOPs must employ an annual independent audit at their own cost (European Union, 2022c: §37).

The risk-based regulation has several downsides, one of which being the vagueness of what counts as systemic risk (Peukert, 2021). Overly broad terms raise doubts about the appropriateness of the rules, such as the wording "*any* negative effects" (European Union, 2022c: §34.1b, c, d). For example, reporting on matters of public interest is often likely to exert a negative effect on certain public figures (Barata, 2021; Peukert, 2022), whereas the removal of any critical content would have a negative effect on the civil discourse. Deciding between conflicting values is beyond the competence of platform moderators.

Enforcement

Accountability for the due diligence obligations is provided by the annual independent audit by which platforms are required to review and report on their compliance with Chapter III of DSA and with the Codes. In addition, the Commission is entitled to order independent monitoring through external experts. The text of the DSA makes no direct connection between a negative audit report and the Commission's ensuing investigation or sanctions. The Commission decides based on all information collected (European Union, 2022c: §65.2). In addition to the positive and negative opinions, an audit report can also contain a "positive opinion with comments", in which the auditor includes remarks that "do not have a substantial effect on the outcome of the audit" (European Union, 2022c: Recital 93). The need for a binary (positive/negative) decision deprives the auditing process of its complexity and degrades the risk-management and due-diligence framework into a checklist. The purpose of auditing should rather be to provide a qualitative and quantitative analysis of measures used by VLOPs to fulfil their obligations, ensuring that the assessment reflects the complexity of the obligations (De Gregorio & Dunn, 2022).

Auditors scrutinise both adherence to the law and the voluntary commitment under the SCOP. However, only the violation of the law may entail a fine. While violating individual commitments under the SCOP falls outside the sanctionable scope of obligations, a systemic violation would mean non-compliance with the due diligence obligations and, as a behaviour contrary to the rules in Chapter III of the DSA, may result in a non-compliance decision imposing on VLOPs fines of up to 6 per cent of their total global turnover (European Union, 2022c: §35).

The soft power of the codes

The previous Code of Practice on Disinformation (European Commission, 2018) lacked benchmarks for evaluation and reporting, as well as any oversight mechanisms (Brogi & Bleyer-Simon, 2021). Platforms were observed to portray their efforts in a more positive light than actual reality.

The new Code, the SCOP, incorporates quantifiable measures and performance indicators formulated in collaboration with the Commission and the European Board for Digital Services (European Commission, 2022). Signatories must regularly report on their compliance. In addition to evaluating the attainment of goals, the Commission and the Board publish their findings on the Codes. In addition, the Commission and the Board may "invite the signatories [...] to take the necessary action" (European Union, 2022c: Article 45.4). Nevertheless, this did not impede the withdrawal of Twitter (X) from the SCOP (Krukowska, 2023). While X is the first platform to be fined by the Commission, the non-compliance is based on the due diligence obligations and not on the systemic risk mitigation, which is augmented by the DSA. In other words, the fine is not related to X's withdrawal from the Code.

The Code of Conduct against Illegal Hate Speech that had been originally issued in 2016 has been revised and integrated into the DSA. Other codes of conducts, such as the Code of Conduct for Online Advertising and the Code of Conduct for Accessibility, were planned to be developed during 2025, but no apparent signs of their preparation are visible at the time of closing this manuscript (European Union, 2022c: §46–47).

The Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation: Reordering the information landscape

The SCOP (European Commission, 2022) aims to tackle not merely disinformation but the entire systemic operation of the platform-dominated information environment by creating and maintaining a more transparent landscape. Therefore, its content is broader than just disinformation. It includes topics such as political and issue advertising, the integrity of services, the empowering of users, and cooperation with researchers and the fact-checking community. It comprehensively addresses the main elements of

the platform communication environment: key actors and behavioural subsystems. The SCOP identifies users, researchers and fact-checkers as key actors. The described policies focus on content management, although content moderation is also part of the set. The removal of "harmful" disinformation, while mentioned incidentally, is not in the centre point of the SCOP. The definitions of disinformation and misinformation are left to the signatories.

As a great difference to the previous Code of Practice (European Commission, 2018), each Commitment in the SCOP is followed by various (facultatively applicable) measures, which are followed by Qualitative Reporting Elements and Service Level Indicators. These support monitoring and auditing and help to come to a conclusive decision regarding compliance, which may have financial consequences. A task force is established by the SCOP which aims to adapt measures to the changing technological, societal, market, and legislative developments. It consists of the signatories' representatives, as well as those of the European Regulators' Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA, which has been now replaced by the European Media Board), the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), and the External Action Service (EEAS), with the European Commission acting as chair.

The scope of membership to the SCOP has also been widened. Beyond platforms of all sizes, fact-checkers, researchers, and players from the advertising ecosystem and civil society organisations are also welcome to join. The signatories have the flexibility to pick measures from the list and ignore others according to their discretion.

One of the key measures to reduce the traffic of disinformation is to deprive it of its funding (demonetisation). The subjects of this measure are not merely advertisers but also actors throughout the value chain of advertising: online e-payment services, e-commerce platforms, and crowdfunding or donation systems (European Commission, 2022: Chapter II, Commitment 1).

The role of users in the fight against disinformation

The second part of the SCOP is concerned with empowering key actors. This relies on the observation that users are active agents in the social media environment, contributing to the formation of the landscape. In addition to the content they provide, their likes, shares, and other actions or reactions train the underlying algorithm in various ways.

Two competing views on the role of users are present in the discourse on platforms: In the liberal school of thought, they are viewed as rational, moral beings making conscious decisions. This was the original stance taken by early Internet optimists (Barlow, 1996) and has a strong representation among contemporary scholars as well (Napoli, 2011; Helberger et al., 2015, 2018; Möller et al., 2018). The other, risk-averse attitude regards users as vulnerable victims of a malfunctioning system. Research shows that users' cognitive predisposition and other traits are diverse (Grinberg, 2019; Van Bavel et al.;

2021) and bring about a variety of patterns (Anthony & Moulding, 2019; Georgiou et al., 2019; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018; Klebba & Winter, 2021; Pierre, 2020; Poon et al., 2020). Rather than taking a position in this debate, it is reasonable to say that the user community is anything but homogeneous (Tan, 2022; Bayer et al., 2021), merely by the fact that it also includes political, commercial, and criminal actors. The anomalies of the information environment can be viewed as conflicts between users' interests, amplified by technology and AI applications. The ethical perspective on users' moral responsibility remains under-researched (Mühlhoff & Ruschemeier, 2022). The empowerment of users, similar to that of platforms (discussed below), also includes a desire that users assume greater responsibility for their online conduct. For example, the required measures to increase media literacy, support critical thinking and transparent policies, and better equip users to identify disinformation, among others through flagging, are clearly meant to urge responsible decisions by users. At the same time, platforms including vulnerable groups, safe design of the architecture, and the recommender system design (see below) are on the more protective side.

The role of algorithms

Among indicators for trustworthiness, the safe design of recommender systems is the most far-reaching element of the SCOP (European Commission, 2022: Commitment 18). This means that algorithms should automatically give prominence to authoritative information and *reduce the prominence* of disinformation (Measure 18.1). Further policies should be designed to prohibit, *downrank*, or not recommend harmful, false, or misleading information (Measure 18.2.). This kind of activity is similar to a public service obligation. If these measures are consequently realised, they may exert a massive impact on the structuring of the public discourse. However, the definition of what is authoritative and harmful is a huge responsibility subject to debate, especially when it comes to socially controversial issues. Therefore, this recommendation further increases, rather than curtailing, the autonomy and power of digital platforms. This policy strategy resembles the philosophy of Eastern martial arts: Rather than resisting power, the regulator added leverage and direction to this power.

Making this responsibility explicit is an acknowledgement of the fact that platforms are *not neutral* intermediaries, that they indeed *shape* the public discourse and public opinion with their algorithmic governance. This activity is subject to minimal transparency requirements by law, without explicit limitations. The DSA places emphasis on fairness towards users, integrating a limited number of safeguards within the broader rules outlined in the DSA such as the obligation to inform users even when their content is demoted (rather than removed), while giving the reasons for demotion (European Union, 2022c: §17). The SCOP requires that digital platforms take action only if actors *persistently* violate their policies (European Commission, 2022: Measure 18.2).

Beyond these rules on procedural fairness, providers are free to decide what they interpret as harmful and what as trustworthy or "authoritative", and neither the DSA nor the SCOP rule out systematic content-based discrimination or discrimination between users, provided that it is not part of the terms of services.

The European Media Freedom Act's platform perspective

The European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) is a milestone in EU media policy. It relies on the recognition that opinions and ideas influence the EU's economic and social processes. Just like goods and services flow, and people move across borders, opinions and ideas are also transmitted and exert an impact on democracy, security, and other important values. Maintaining a robust media market is of crucial interest for the EU as a democracy and as a market economy. In addition, the isolated national markets are unable to compete against the giant global platforms which have dominated the advertising market (Turow, 2012).

Efforts to regulate media pluralism emerged in the previous millennium but were dismissed for lack of a perceived problem (Bayer & Cseres, 2023). However, the High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism reported problems in 2013, and a new perspective was added (Vīķe-Freiberga et al., 2013). Deficiencies in media freedom or pluralism within member states can have spillover effects at the EU level through the free flow of services and persons, the common opinion market, and the democratic processes such as the European elections (European Parliament, 2023; see also European Union, 2022a). Democratic shortcomings at the national level can stain the entire European process, because national elections shape the constituency of the European Council, thus influencing EU institutions (Bárd et al., 2016; Bárd & Bayer, 2016; Blokker, 2021; Pech & Scheppele, 2017).

The EMFA, similar to the previously discussed laws, aims at regulating the information environment in its complexity. It contains concrete regulations applying to several types of actors, including media providers, advertisers, political parties, member states and their authorities, as well as online platforms.

The purpose of regulating the relationship of media service providers and platform providers is to grant established media privileged treatment and thereby more prominence on social media platforms (European Union, 2024: §17). However, being an established media provider does not guarantee high-quality and trustworthy content: Media content can be just as biased or inaccurate as user-generated content. Although there are some attestation mechanisms provided by journalistic associations (Reporters Without Borders, 2023; Husovec, 2022), these have not been incorporated into the EMFA rules. VLOPs are merely required to get a self-declaration from the media service provider; although they also have the option to ask for confirmation

from the relevant regulatory authority, self-regulatory body, or through a machine-readable standard by an authorising association. Reporters Without Borders has created an ISO standard, the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI), which allows media outlets to self-assess and certify themselves.

According to this rule, media service providers must be informed before their content is removed by a platform for violating its terms and conditions, and they have the possibility to respond within 24 hours, except for crises that may cause the time frame to be shorter. If the platform deems the content to be illegal, harmful to minors, or constituting hate speech, the privilege does not apply. However, any complaints by media service providers have priority and should be decided without delay. In case of dispute, they may use mediation or out-of-court dispute settlement mechanisms, and the platform must engage in the dialogue in good faith. The media service provider is entitled to report to the European Board for Media Services, which also has the right to regularly organise a structured dialogue between media service providers and platforms, with the possibility to involve civil society actors.

The so-called privilege is, in fact, nothing more than a fair procedure that would ideally be granted to every user. Just like with other laws, especially those with the due diligence framework, the key lies in enforcement. In the case of the EMFA, however, enforcement faces even more political risks and potential controversies than in the case of the other acts.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has outlined the main features of the European regulatory environment of online platforms and introduced the technique of regulation which combines due diligence, co-regulation, and statutory obligations with financial penalties.

The result is a combination of light-handed regulation with close supervision and the possibility of harsh penalties. The framework character leaves considerable flexibility (or uncertainty) for the precise content of the regulation, to be elaborated in the practice, largely by the stakeholders, and eventually in jurisdiction. In the past year, the Commission has started formal proceedings against some of the largest online platforms, such as X and Meta for the suspected violation of the DSA (European Commission, 2024a, 2024b) and Apple and Google for the suspected violation of the DMA (Tar, 2024a, 2024b; Gkritsi, 2024).

The aim of this regulatory package was set high. In addition to market regulation, it also aimed at creating a new balance in the public discourse that is so necessary for democracy. The risks are manifold. First, the risk-management and due diligence framework recommendations might be only superficially applied, among other reasons, because of their resource-intensive nature for both the regulatory subjects (platforms) and the controlling bodies. An enormous amount of technical information should be collected and processed, and numerous decisions must be taken by the authorities,

the various Boards, the Commission, and ultimately the Court of Justice in the course of interpretation. Currently, the willingness of platforms to provide in-depth information on a voluntary basis is "moderate" at best, as shown by the Commission's investigations against Meta and X for their failure to provide access to publicly available data to researchers (European Commission 2024a, 2024b). The number of eligible experts for auditing and monitoring is also limited.

Second, a too-rigorous application might lead to over-censorship with non-illegal content also being removed or downranked. While this appears to be a proportionate intervention to shape public discourse, the mechanism to guarantee user rights has not yet crystallised. Reporting all instances of moderation may impose a gigantic burden on platforms, yet a systematic and non-transparent suppression of user content would interfere with users' rights to free expression.

The current speed of technological development, especially with the advent of generative AI, is unprecedented; therefore, public communication is bound to change further. New services and new communication structures will emerge, for which these rules may be less fitting. The flexibility of the co-regulatory technique promises to withhold several changes. It addresses power relations and systemic patterns rather than individual actions, but even systemic patterns or power relations may change as generative AI allows new actors – in this case, content providers – and new mechanisms of content creation, as well as control, to emerge.

Endnotes

1. Gatekeepers are defined by the Digital Markets Act (DMA) as providers of core platform services that have a significant impact on the internal market and enjoy an entrenched and durable position. The terms in this definition are further specified extending approximately two pages in length (Article 3, DMA).
2. An intergovernmental committee under the authority of the Committee of Ministers that has collected the harms that are presented by intransparent ranking and lists the potential directions of solution (Council of Europe, n.d.).
3. Smuha describes three categories: the "knowledge gap", the "threshold problem", and the "egocentrism problem".
4. Article 24 (1a) DSA prescribes that "refusing consent shall be no more difficult or time-consuming to the recipient than giving consent. In the event that recipients refuse to consent, or have withdrawn consent, recipients shall be given other fair and reasonable options to access the online platform".
5. Interoperability ensures that two services can work together in a way similar to how it is possible to initiate a call from one telecommunications provider to the network of another, or to send an e-mail from a Gmail account to a Yahoo account.
6. The AI Act does not use the words "due diligence", but applies the responsibility framework of "risk management", which is in principle very similar to the due diligence framework.

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CHAPTER 5

Eternally vigilant

Protecting freedom of expression and media freedom in the age of platforms

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ABSTRACT

The right to freedom of expression and its corollaries, media freedom and media pluralism, are under constant pressure. Threats to the right and to the pluralistic public debate it nourishes come from all quarters, targeting public debate at different levels: its epistemic underpinnings, its participants, its structure and modalities, its scope and content, and its overall ecosystemic health. In this chapter, I examine those threats, in particular Big Tech's power to control the flow of information and ideas online. I recall that the first principles of human rights protection of freedom of expression, developed by the European Court of Human Rights, form the matrix for EU regulation of media and platforms. Those principles must constantly prove their resilience, not least in fierce narrative battles over the nature and scope of freedom of expression. The vast array of threats targeting freedom of expression and public debate call for eternal vigilance.

KEYWORDS: freedom of expression, media freedom and pluralism, public debate, platform regulation, Big Tech

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Introduction – freedom of expression and eternal vigilance

Discussions and debates about the scope of the right to freedom of expression and its limits may seem as old as time itself, yet they never seem to lose their urgency. Technological breakthroughs, ideological flashpoints, political scandals, societal controversies, and other factors ensure the perpetual and prominent presence of freedom of expression on political agendas. The emphases vary at different moments, but the broader discussions remain constant. The important roles of "the media" in a democratic society are a recurrent focus in such discussions.

In this chapter, I set out to examine regulatory and policy dimensions of the constant assailing of freedom of expression and media freedom. The effective exercise of the right to freedom of expression is curtailed by an array of familiar measures such as political censorship, ideological and religious intolerance, and market-driven constraints. These limitations on, and threats to, freedom of expression are part and parcel of European communications and media history and they are as acute as ever today. So, what has changed?

The familiar threats remain, but in an utterly transformed multimedia ecosystem in which new threats have also come to the fore. This transformation has been caused by the development of new information, communication, and media technologies; the rapid and wholesale uptake of those technologies; and the resultant societal dependency on them. More specifically, the platformisation of societies (van Dijck et al., 2018) has raised the potential for restricting freedom of expression and media freedom to new levels. The dominant global position of so-called Big Tech – the giant digital intermediaries – has created new conditions for private censorship, control of distribution of content, surveillance capitalism, and personalised recommendation systems (Moore & Tambini, 2018, 2021). Most recently, generative AI – the newest opaque and unaccountable technology – is being rolled out largely unchecked, paving the way for a full-blown epistemic crisis.

This array of new technology-driven threats is shaping the narrative of the latest chapter in the long history of the right to freedom of expression. In the face of such a massive concentration of power in a tech broligarchy (Cadwalladr, 2024), it is proving very difficult to regulate effectively for freedom of expression and its corollaries, media freedom and media pluralism.

The right to freedom of expression can empower individuals, groups, and entire societies. When misused or abused, however, it can just as easily lead to the disenfranchisement, repression, and even oppression of individuals, groups, and entire societies. This leads to a regulatory conundrum: How do we calibrate regulatory measures that provide robust protection for the effective exercise of the right, while also putting in place adequate safeguards against the misuse or abuse of the right?

I attempt to answer these questions in broad strokes, focusing on European regulatory and policy frameworks. The chapter opens with a functional, summary overview and analysis of the multitude and magnitude of threats to freedom of expression in the multimedia ecosystem. I then make the case for a return to the first principles of freedom of expression, arguing that the right to freedom of expression, as conceptualised in the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1950), remains the authoritative legal model for contemporary Europe. These first principles continue to guide the regulation of media and online communications through uncharted waters. I posit that a sharper understanding of the first principles could help to fortify fundamental rights protection in media and platform regulation. In the final substantive part of the chapter, I underscore the need for eternal resilience of human rights principles in democratic societies, as well as the need for eternal vigilance towards the growing threats to those principles in practice.

Multitude and magnitude of threats to freedom of expression in the multimedia ecosystem

The big-picture view of threats to freedom of expression, media freedom, and pluralism is overwhelming. Many of the threats are all too familiar. Some are new and spawn from shifting dynamics of power in the multimedia ecosystem and the systemic digital disruption of democratic systems and processes. These threats target the values underpinning public debate, participants in public debate, the structures and modalities of public debate, the substance and quality of public debate, and the ecosystemic health of public debate. It is important to differentiate between the different levels at which these threats operate in order to devise tailored strategies to counter them effectively. At the same time, it is also important to keep sight of the overall picture and to develop the counterstrategies at each level in a coherent way.

Threats targeting the underlying epistemic values of public debate

Public debate, as nourished by freedom of expression, rests on firm epistemic foundations, including a shared societal commitment to the sharing of knowledge, facts, truthful, accurate and reliable information, and the development of opinions based on such knowledge and information. In recent years, rising populist tides have caused waves of aggressive disparagement of journalists, the media, and public service media, involving accusations (without basis and in bad faith) of being dishonest, biased, or corrupt, or of peddling "fake news", disinformation, or (foreign) propaganda. Smear campaigns and fabricated charges against journalists and other media actors (e.g., for tax evasion or for being foreign agents) are designed to undermine the reputation and credibility of public watchdogs. While such verbal attacks especially target the individual and institutional actors in public debate,

they also erode the epistemic underpinnings of public debate. When plain facts are twisted as a matter of course, when accurate, factual information is aggressively and routinely discredited, and when lies and disinformation are turned into common currency in political discourse, then the essential epistemic fabric of public debate becomes ruptured (Baehr, 2000: 568).

Threats targeting participants in public debate

The most egregious threats to freedom of expression are those directed at the safety and security of journalists, the media, and other actors participating in public debate. Censorship by violence and killing are the most extreme examples. The impact of threats of violence and acts of violence is exacerbated when those responsible for such crimes go unpunished, creating a culture of impunity. Threats of violence, and acts of violence, are typically perpetrated by criminals and criminal organisations, but also – as monitoring shows – by private individuals and public figures, and even by state authorities and officials. A growing body of research draws attention to the scale and severity of threats, hate speech, and other abuse that is gender-related or that targets individuals specifically because they (are perceived to) belong to the LGBTQIA+ community, ethnic, or other minority groups.

The different types of threats personally targeting public watchdogs can have a chilling effect on their contribution to public debate. That is why protection is increasingly understood as a 360-degree concept and is no longer solely focused on physical safety and security.

Threats targeting the structures and modalities of public debate

Robust, pluralistic, and inclusive public debate requires strong structures of pluralistic and independent media, but those structures are also under sustained threat. Concentration of media ownership across different media sectors is the antithesis of the pluralistic media offer that ought to characterise public debate, according to European human rights and media law. A regime of transparency concerning the ownership and beneficial ownership of media companies and media-related interests is an important step towards effective monitoring and regulation of media concentration.

Public service media are a structural feature of pluralistic media environments, but they, too, are confronted with sustained threats and challenges. To effectively fulfil the public service remit, public service media must have editorial independence, operational autonomy, and financial stability. Governments should therefore remain "at arm's length", but they often fail to respect that distance in practice.

Recent years have seen the growth of media capture – the control of the media by governments and vested interests aligned with governments (Shiffrin, 2021) – in different EU member states. The problem is exacerbated

when there is also political capture of independent national media regulatory authorities, notwithstanding well-established legally-binding guarantees for their independence in EU law. When political capture spans both the media (public service and commercial) and the regulatory authorities, we can speak of a complete capture of the entire media sector. And as we will see presently, the super-imposition of Big Tech capture, which has been dubbed "The Tech Coup" by Marietje Schaake (2024), creates added complexity and risks.

Threats targeting the scope and content of public debate

Another set of threats concerns restrictions on the ability of media to disseminate information, ideas, and opinions, thus affecting the scope and content of public debate. They manifest themselves in general contexts, but also in specific contexts when objective and accurate information is at a premium, for example, during election periods, in war and conflict situations, and in crisis or emergency situations. Such threats often arise from legislation that regulates what can be said about particular topics, or how such legislation is applied in practice. Examples include laws on defamation, privacy and data protection, hate speech, counterterrorism, anti-extremism, national security, and disinformation. In these cases, the threats are often enabled by legislative deficiencies. There is a very real risk that legislation will be politicised and exploited when it contains loopholes or key terms are vaguely delineated. Such drafting shortcomings can leave legislation susceptible to discriminatory or overzealous interpretation and application, resulting in a chilling effect on freedom of expression.

Threats targeting the ecosystemic health of public debate

The platformisation of public debate, facilitated by earlier digital developments, is the source of a new generation of threats. Online platforms have been described as "programmable digital architecture designed to organize interactions between users" and which are "geared toward the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetization of user data" (van Dijck et al., 2018: 4). When they operate at scale (as they typically do), they wield enormous influence over their users and their content. This influence has led to the platformisation of society, a process by which online platforms have become an integral part of society. This has enabled platforms to "shape *every* sphere of life, whether markets or commons, private or public spheres [emphasis per original]" (van Dijck et al., 2018: 46). Specifically in the context of public debate, platformisation has led to the dislodging of the mass media as the central institutional actors (Baker, 2009: 654). Digital platforms have become the new gatekeepers of freedom of expression online; controlling the flow of information and ideas that irrigate public debate. They set the rules for access to and use of their fora and they moreover enforce

those rules, making them both "governors" and "police" of speech (Kaye, 2019; Klonick, 2018).

The dominant positions enjoyed by several leading Big Tech companies with flagship platforms such as Amazon, Apple, Google, Meta, Microsoft, TikTok, X, and so on, intensify the impact that their activities can have on their users' freedom of expression and information. Content moderation policy decisions for a particular platform at the global level are quick to percolate down to concrete decisions at the hyperlocal level. Big Tech CEOs moreover wield immense power within their corporations and largely determine platforms' policies.

After Elon Musk purchased Twitter, he proclaimed that Twitter should be preserved as "a common digital town square, where a wide range of beliefs can be debated in a healthy manner, without resorting to violence" (widely quoted, e.g., in Garrity, 2022). Instead, he orchestrated the further toxification of Twitter, turning it into X, a virulent online cesspool, or the kind of "free-for-all hellscape" he had declared it could "obviously" not become (quoted in Garrity, 2022). He bent Twitter/X to his own will and his own ideological design.

Mark Zuckerberg described the November 2024 presidential election in the US as "a cultural tipping point towards, once again, prioritising speech" and made very clear that Meta would be going with this particular flow (widely quoted, e.g., in Booth, 2025). In January 2025, he announced that Meta would abolish its fact-checking programmes in the US; "dramatically reduce the amount of censorship" on its platforms by "get[ting] rid of a bunch of restrictions on topics like immigration and gender that are just out of touch with mainstream discourse"; and "work with President Trump to push back on governments around the world that are going after American companies and pushing to censor more" (quoted in Booth, 2025). These are just two examples of how Big Tech CEOs have voluntarily aligned their platforms' policies with the political policies and priorities of the day.

As Big Tech dominance is concentrated in a coterie of mega-corporations, any collective alignment of platform and political policies – whether concerted or not – can have a huge impact on the entire online environment.

A return to the first principles of free expression

As we watch on while the right to freedom of expression is being bruised and battered from all sides, we should return to basic human rights principles and refresh our understanding of how the right to freedom of expression is conceptualised. In the next two sections, I explain the primacy of these first principles, and then I explore their content and the context in which they have been developed.

A clarification of the primacy of first principles

There are myriad definitions and visions of freedom of expression, born in different religious and philosophical traditions; shaped by different political worldviews; and analysed through different academic disciplines (for a synthesis of the main rationales for freedom of expression, see Barendt, 2005).

The definitions that must be staunchly defended are those provided for by, or derived from, international and European human rights law. This body of law is binding in nature: It recognises and articulates obligations for states towards individuals; it guarantees rights for individuals against (the power of) states. This means that definitions of rights elaborated under international and European human rights law are legally consequential, thus impacting how we organise our societies. It is of utmost importance that the authoritative judicial interpretation of rights contributes to legal consistency and predictability, under the doctrine of legal certainty. While the meaning of terms necessarily evolves, such evolution must take place within a complex set of legal, hermeneutic, and epistemic parameters. Treaties are living instruments; they are to be interpreted in an evolutive manner (ECtHR, 1979b), based on the doctrine of precedent.

European and international legally binding definitions cannot be bent to national political wills that are not consistent with the purpose, spirit, and letter of the human rights treaties ratified by states. Nor can they be modified to expediently match the views of new presidents or governments. If that were the case, it would undermine the agreed baseline of universal protection for human rights – the common standard of achievement which the community of nations has avowed to uphold. The playbook of anti-democratic or populist leaders cannot trump the rulebook of European and international human rights law.

In the same vein, it is not for any individual, however rich and influential or politically and commercially powerful, or however large their platform is, to authoritatively designate the meaning of rights. Such an approach would leave law susceptible to the vagaries of arbitrary interpretation, viral dissemination, and pounding amplification.

Yet, that is what is happening in plain view and in real time. Political leaders and platform leaders are overtly seeking to claim and frame free speech in narratives that serve their own worldviews. They tend to style free speech as being about more speech and fewer (or no) restrictions or responsibilities.

So, when Mark Zuckerberg prophesised after the 2024 US presidential election that speech would once again be prioritised, it is important to critically question how he was framing free speech. It is important to measure his brand of free speech against the legally authoritative standards of international and European human rights law and also the European regulatory framework for platforms that Zuckerberg and other leading figures in the tech broligarchy are actively lobbying to undermine (Ryan, 2025).

The examples discussed reveal that these are not theoretical concerns. They have real-life and concrete consequences in a democratic society. There is both inherent creative and censorial power in the ability and authority to name and frame (Curry Jansen, 1991: 20). When political and platform power are closely intertwined, platforms can propel and amplify political ideologies, harnessing informational and opinion power in the process. Such a concatenation of power can influence which definitions or frames will become best-sellers in the online marketplace of ideas. When political and platform leaders pummel the public with their self-shaped interpretations of freedom of expression which are at odds with legal reality, any ensuing discussion becomes skewed, with deleterious effects for democracy.

A clarification of the content and context of the first principles

The individual arguments sketched above coalesce into an overall case for the primacy of the definitions and visions of the right to freedom of expression that have been developed under international and European human rights law. But what do those definitions and visions actually entail in substantive terms, and what is so distinctive about them? Five observations can help to answer these questions and unpack the completeness and nuance of the right to freedom of expression under European human rights law: 1) the right to freedom of expression is a compound right with different constitutive elements; 2) the exercise of the right is governed by duties and responsibilities and may be subject to limitations, when necessary in a democratic society; 3) the contours of the right are also shaped by interplay with other rights; 4) the right is interpreted in a dynamic way; and 5) states have negative and positive obligations to protect and promote the right, and to ensure a safe and favourable environment for its exercise.

A compound right

The right to freedom of expression is a composite right with several distinct, but complementary, component freedoms. Simply stated, under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (the central guarantee of freedom of expression in Europe), the right comprises the freedom to hold opinions, the freedom to impart information and ideas, and the freedom to receive information and ideas without interference by public authority.

There is no general hierarchy between the different constituent freedoms of the right. The freedom of one person to impart information will not ordinarily or without good reason override the freedom of another person to receive information. If two or more of those freedoms are implicated in the circumstances of a given case, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), through fair balancing, assesses all of the facts of the case and determine which freedom should prevail in those particular circumstances.

Duties, responsibilities, and limitations

The right to freedom of expression enjoys strong protection under Article 10 of the Convention, but it is not unconditional or unlimited (ECtHR, 1976). The exercise of the right is accompanied by duties and responsibilities. The nature and scope of those duties and responsibilities vary, depending on the role or position of the speaker in society and on the technical means used to disseminate their message. Thus, a journalist will have heightened duties and responsibilities to provide accurate, fact-based reporting than ordinary individuals (ECtHR, 1999a, 1999b). This is a logical consequence of the roles of journalists as public watchdogs and purveyors of information and ideas to the public (ECtHR, 1979a), and the freedoms they enjoy in order to fulfil those roles. The particular duties and responsibilities accompanying the use of different media or communications technologies will vary (ECtHR, 1994), depending on factors such as reach, amplification, dissemination, and impact. The greater the expected or actual impact, the more exacting the duties and responsibilities will be.

The exercise of the right to freedom of expression can, moreover, be limited in certain circumstances. A limitation on the right must always be prescribed by law and be necessary in a democratic society to achieve one or more of the purposes enumerated in Article 10.2 of the Convention. A limitation should thus be necessary, for example, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity, or public safety, or for the protection of the reputation or rights of others.

Interplay with other rights

The scope of the right to freedom of expression is also shaped by its interplay with other human rights, such as the right to private life, guaranteed under Article 8 of the Convention. Both rights carry equal weight, and should friction arise in practice between the freedom to disseminate or to receive information pertaining to someone's private life, both rights will have to be fairly balanced in the particular circumstances of the case (ECtHR, 2012a).

The interplay between the right to freedom of expression and other human rights is also important, as freedom of expression often performs an enabling role for other rights. Freedom of expression enables freedom of religion, freedom of assembly and association, the right to vote, and educational and cultural rights. The ability to receive information is an essential component of the right to health and the right to a healthy environment (ECtHR, 2021b).

Dynamic interpretation

The European Convention on Human Rights is a "living instrument"; it is interpreted by the Court in a dynamic and evolutive manner (Mowbray,

2005). This enables it to grow with the times and to retain its relevance in changed societal and technological contexts. Such an approach helps to ensure that the rights enshrined in the Convention are not merely theoretical or illusory but practical and effective (ECtHR, 1979b). It helps to ensure that rights formally formulated in the aftermath of the World War II can hold their own in the contemporary online world.

Negative and positive obligations

Many of the rights guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights create negative obligations for states – that is, obligations to *not* take measures that would interfere with rights. But in order to ensure that rights are exercised in an effective manner, it is not always enough for the state to simply refrain from interfering with individuals' human rights: Positive or active measures will often be required as well. Under Article 10 of the Convention, the Court has recognised that states have positive obligations to ensure the safety of journalists and other public watchdogs contributing to public debate (ECtHR, 2000) and to guarantee true and effective pluralism in the (audiovisual) media sector (ECtHR, 1993, 2022).

The Court has progressively developed and expanded its positive obligations doctrine in relation to freedom of expression. This has culminated in the Court's affirmation of a positive obligation for states to create a safe and favourable environment for participation in public debate by everyone and to enable the expression of opinions and ideas without fear (ECtHR, 2010; McGonagle, 2015). In terms of a safe environment, this entails putting in place legislative frameworks to prevent and punish crimes against journalists and other media actors and to ensure that those frameworks are implemented effectively. In terms of a favourable environment, the positive obligation implies far-reaching measures to create epistemic and structural conditions that facilitate free, inclusive, and pluralistic public debate through a range of media.

This marks a discernible shift from regulation *of* freedom of expression to regulation *for* freedom of expression. This shift may seem subtle in semantic terms, but its impact is palpable and growing (McGonagle, 2022). The shift is driven by the realisation that securing the effective exercise of the right to freedom of expression is not just about ensuring non-interference, it is also about ensuring the broader contextual conditions in which the right can flourish.

From first principles to derivative principles

Having set out in the previous section how important the first principles of free expression are, as well as what they entail and how they are shaped, the present section traces the further development of those principles. I show how the influence of Article 10 of the Convention extends centrifugally throughout

other Council of Europe instruments and activities, and beyond the Council into EU regulation and policy. I also show how more specific principles have been derived from the first general principles.

The centrifugal influence of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights

Legally speaking, the conceptualisation of the right to freedom of expression under Article 10 of the Convention is the touchstone for all European (and national) regulation of media and digital platforms. It is not only the central legal standard for the Council of Europe; its referential value extends to the EU. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (European Union, 2012) is the EU's primary legally binding instrument for the protection of human rights; it binds the EU institutions and EU member states when applying EU law. Insofar as the rights enshrined in the Charter correspond to those enshrined in the Convention, and which have been further developed by the Court in its case-law, the latter are carried over into the Charter regime.

Article 11 of the Charter focuses on freedom of expression and is the equivalent provision to Article 10 of the Convention. It should therefore be interpreted consistently with this and relevant ECtHR case law. Article 11 of the Charter is a more modern and succinct articulation of the freedoms set out in Article 10 of the Convention, but unlike Article 10, it makes explicit reference to media freedom and pluralism.

In its case law interpreting Article 10 of the Convention, the Court has elaborated a body of principles on media freedom and pluralism. A core principle is that the public has the right to be informed on matters of general interest and the media have the corresponding task of informing them (ECtHR, 1979a, 1991). The media, journalists, and other public watchdogs benefit from various freedoms and privileges in order to effectively fulfil the roles ascribed to them in democratic society (ECtHR, 2005). Those roles are to disseminate information and opinions on matters of general interest widely, thereby contributing to opinion-forming processes; act as public watchdogs, holding governmental and other powerful actors to account; and provide shared fora for public debate (ECtHR, 2009). The functional freedoms include editorial and presentational freedom (ECtHR, 1994), protection of confidential sources (ECtHR, 1996), and recourse to a degree of exaggeration and provocation (ECtHR, 1995). The enjoyment of those freedoms is subject to the condition that journalists, the media, and other public watchdogs fulfil their duties and responsibilities – that is, that they abide by the (criminal) law (ECtHR, 1999a), adhere to professional ethics (ECtHR, 1999a), strive to provide information that is accurate and reliable (ECtHR, 1999b), and engage with different sides to a story (ECtHR, 2008).

Another core principle is that states are the ultimate guarantors of pluralism, especially in the audiovisual media sector (ECtHR, 1993). The

emphasis on the audiovisual media sector reflects the Court's long-standing position that audiovisual media are more powerful than the printed press, even if this rough distinction feels increasingly dated in an Internet-dominated world (as in ECtHR, 2013).

The above principles primarily concern the right to freedom of expression and media freedom and reflect the instrumental role of the media as actors in, and facilitators of, public debate. These principles formed the backdrop to the Court's later engagement with freedom of expression in an online context. Some of the principles remain relevant in the online multimedia ecosystem, whereas others have been adapted to make them relevant in a process that I have called "adaptive replication" (McGonagle, 2020). The Court has also had to develop new principles to reflect technical features of the Internet and societal use of Internet-based services and applications (ECtHR, 2012b, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2021a, 2023, 2025). This extensive array of principles governs how media and platforms should conduct their activities in accordance with the right to freedom of expression.

EU regulatory frameworks for media and platforms

The media and digital platforms are also subject to comprehensive and detailed specific regulation at the EU level. Within EU regulatory frameworks, human rights values and objectives are an important thematic focus, but not the only one. I now consider three key pieces of EU regulation from the perspective of their contribution to freedom of expression and/or media freedom, including in the online context: the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), the Digital Services Act (DSA), and the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA).

The Audiovisual Media Services Directive

The AVMSD (European Union, 2018) evolved from the former Television without Frontiers Directive (European Union, 1989). It covers traditional television broadcasting, on-demand audiovisual media services, and since the last major revision of the Directive in 2018, video-sharing platform services.

The AVMSD seeks to ensure a minimum level of harmonisation across the EU of national legislation governing audiovisual media services, with a view to removing obstacles to the free movement of such services within the EU's internal market. The directive's central principles – the country of origin principle (Article 2) and the freedom of reception principle (Article 3) – help to obviate the need for double regulation and double supervision of cross-border audiovisual media services within the EU. To achieve its main aims, the directive coordinates a number of areas: general principles; jurisdiction; incitement to hatred; accessibility for persons with disabilities; major events; the promotion and distribution of European works; commercial communications; and protection of minors.

The AVMSD is heavily conditioned by the goals and logic of the internal market. While it contains several provisions that support or contribute to freedom of expression and/or media freedom, those provisions are incidental to its overall purpose. Across its coordinated areas, the AVMSD seeks to ensure access for the general public to certain public-interest content (e.g., events of major importance for society in Article 14 and short news reports on events of high interest to the public otherwise broadcast on an exclusive basis in Article 15), and specifically for persons with disabilities to programmes and services (Article 7). Furthermore, it seeks to ensure protection for minors and consumers, and it creates transparency obligations for providers of audiovisual media services (Article 5.1).

These provisions in the AVMSD are best summarised as provisions which can contribute to freedom of expression and media freedom, insofar as they strengthen access to certain types of information and offer protection against harmful content, but which are not expressly concerned with ensuring freedom of expression and media freedom.

The Digital Services Act

The main aim of the DSA (European Union, 2022) is to contribute to the proper functioning of the internal market for intermediary services. It sets out harmonised EU-wide "rules for a safe, predictable and trusted online environment that facilitates innovation" while protecting fundamental rights enshrined in the Charter, including consumer protection (Article 1.1). The DSA sets out a framework for the conditional exemption from liability of providers of intermediary services (Chapter II, Articles 4–10). This framework is built on the premise that the providers of intermediary services should not, in principle, be held liable for illegal content of third parties on their services, provided they lack knowledge of the illegal nature of such content, and upon obtaining such knowledge, act expeditiously to block access to it.

The DSA contributes to the overall regulatory shaping of freedom of expression online in Europe. It includes various references to the EU Charter, sometimes explicitly underscoring freedom of expression and media freedom and pluralism.

The mainstay of the DSA is Chapter 3, which focuses on due diligence. The obligations apply to different types of service providers, with additional obligations applying cumulatively to all providers of intermediary services (§1), providers of hosting services, including online platforms (§2), providers of online platforms (§3) and providers of online platforms allowing consumers to conclude distance contracts with traders (§4), and providers of very large online platforms (VLOPs) and of very large online search engines (VLOSEs) to manage systemic risks (§5).

All providers of intermediary services are required to: provide points of contact for 1) national and EU authorities (Article 11) and 2) recipients of

their service (Article 12); indicate in their terms and conditions any restrictions to the use of their service and information on policies, procedures, measures, and tools for content moderation, as well as information on their internal complaint-handling system (Article 14); and conduct (annual) transparency reporting (Article 15). All providers of intermediary services, when applying or enforcing their terms and conditions, must have "due regard to the rights and legitimate interests of all parties involved, including the fundamental rights of the recipients of the service, such as the freedom of expression, freedom and pluralism of the media" (Article 14).

Hosting service providers, including online platforms, have an additional obligation to put in place "notice-and-action" mechanisms: easy-to-access, user-friendly, electronic mechanisms to allow anyone to notify them of (suspected) illegal content (Article 16.1). Hosting service providers must process notices received via these mechanisms and take decisions on the information to which the notices relate in a timely and diligent manner (Article 16.6).

VLOPs and VLOSEs – that is, the largest digital services, which have an average of more than 45 million monthly active users in the EU – must comply with the most detailed and far-reaching due diligence obligations. This is because of the sheer scale of their operations and the systemic nature of their influence on the online environment. VLOPs and VLOSEs are required to "diligently identify, analyse and assess any systemic risks" in the EU arising from "the design or functioning of their service and its related systems, including algorithmic systems, or from the use made of their services" (Article 34.1). They must conduct such risk assessments at least once a year. The envisaged systemic risks include, first, the dissemination of illegal content via their services (Article 34.1.a) and, second, "any actual or foreseeable negative effects for the exercise of fundamental rights" (Article 34.1.b), such as freedom of expression and information, including the freedom and pluralism of the media. The third systemic risk is "any actual or foreseeable negative effects on civic discourse and electoral processes, and public security" (Article 34.1.c). The fourth and final listed example concerns "any actual or foreseeable negative effects in relation to gender-based violence, the protection of public health and minors and serious negative consequences to the person's physical and mental well-being" (Article 34.1.d). VLOPs and VLOSEs must use their risk assessments to devise "reasonable, proportionate and effective mitigation measures, tailored to" the identified systemic risks, while having particular regard for the impact of strategies on fundamental rights (Article 35).

The risk-centric approach is one of the major legal innovations of the DSA. It is more circumspect than the expansive safe and favourable environment approach embraced by the ECtHR and the Council of Europe.

The European Media Freedom Act

The EMFA (European Union, 2024) was born into a media regulatory environment that had already been largely shaped at the centre by the AVMSD and at the edges by the DSA. Even though the short title of the regulation frames it as such, the regulation is not in point of fact a full-fledged "European Media Freedom Act". Its actual ambition is more modest and specific: it "lays down common rules for the proper functioning of the internal market for media services [...] while safeguarding the independence and pluralism of media services" (Article 1.1).

The EMFA provides a regulatory response to various challenges and problems for media freedom within the EU, such as concentrations of media ownership threatening media pluralism, media capture, and regulatory capture (Cole & Etteldorf, 2024).

The EMFA's specific focuses include the right of recipients of media services to a plurality of independent media content (Article 3); editorial freedom and independence (Article 4) and the independence of public service media providers (Article 5); transparency and other duties of media service providers (Article 6); the independence (and modalities of cooperation) of national media regulators (Articles 7 et seq.); and the transparent and fair allocation of public funds for state advertising and procurement (Article 25). There are also specific provisions on the protection of journalistic sources and confidential communications, including a prohibition (with derogations) on using intrusive surveillance software (e.g., spyware) (Article 4).

Article 18 is noteworthy for the privileged position it instates for self-declared media service providers which use the services of VLOPs. The provision allows media to declare that they, inter alia, are media service providers; comply with the transparency duties under Article 6.1; are editorially independent of member states, political parties, third countries, and entities controlled or financed by third countries; are subject to regulatory requirements for the exercise of editorial responsibility in (at least) one EU member state; and do not provide AI-generated content without human or editorial review. When media service providers meet these cumulative requirements, they are entitled to preferential treatment whenever VLOPs intend to or actually do suspend services for, or restrict visibility of content from, a media service provider.

Like the AVMSD, the EMFA protects specific parts of a more comprehensive vision of media freedom. Its most salient focuses are, however, more readily identifiable as relating to media freedom than the relevant focuses in the AVMSD.

Self- and co-regulatory codes

Various self- and co-regulatory instruments and mechanisms operate in the penumbra of legally binding frameworks. For present purposes, the Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online + (European Commission, 2025) and the Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation (European Commission, 2022) are most relevant. They, too, reference and follow European human rights law. The code on hate speech was initially developed in 2016 under the auspices of the European Commission and signed by leading tech companies; it was revamped in January 2025. The code on disinformation was developed in a similar fashion in 2018 and was revamped in 2022. Both codes comprise extensive lists of commitments for signatories, designed to effectively counter illegal online hate speech and disinformation, respectively. The code on hate speech was integrated into the DSA regulatory framework in January 2025 and the strengthened code on disinformation in February 2025. This means that, amongst other things, adherence to the codes may be considered an appropriate risk mitigation measure for signatories which have been designated as VLOPs or VLOSEs under the DSA.

The resilience of principles and the need for eternal vigilance

So far, I have documented and analysed the vast range of threats to the safe and favourable environment for freedom of expression and public debate that states are obliged to ensure. Those threats play out at different levels and they emanate from different quarters. Traditionally, the foes of freedom of expression have been overbearing and repressive governments, and other powerful – political, commercial, religious, and criminal – actors with vested interests in muzzling the media. Their ranks have now been swollen by a new adversary – Big Tech. The dominance of a coterie of Big Tech multinational corporations has created sharp tensions between the public character of debate on matters of general interest and the private nature of the platforms and services through which that debate is increasingly conducted. This has led to new pressure points for freedom of expression in the multimedia ecosystem. With their dual roles as online gatekeepers and arbiters of public debate, Big Tech actors can block, disrupt, and redirect the (free) flow of information and ideas online. They have in effect usurped public debate.

It stands to reason, then, that democratic societies should be eternally vigilant when determining the outer limits of the right to freedom of expression. When users agree to the terms of service of VLOPs, they entrust a large measure of their freedom to the platform providers. They allow those platforms to shape the discursive environment in which matters of public interest are debated. This is a game-changing reconfiguration of power. This is not just about giving away little drops of our freedom – Big Tech actors have

become the custodians of users' freedom. As the Big Tech CEOs' collective kowtowing to US President Trump shows, it is about the would-be custodians of our freedom offering our freedom wholesale to repressive leaders. This is what Timothy D. Snyder (2017: 18) has called "anticipatory obedience" – when individuals pro-actively relinquish their freedom in anticipation of what a repressive government or leader will later demand. Snyder has found this behaviour particularly dangerous (it is his first lesson in *On Tyranny*), as it teaches power what it can do (Snyder, 2017: 17).

As Thomas I. Emerson (1970: 724) has noted: "repression has no stopping place"; "once begun, it can quickly move all the way to a totalitarian system". The Big Tech broligarchy (Cadwalladr 2025) is a catalyst in this process, helping repressive leaders undermine the epistemic foundations of public debate at scale and with force. The broligarchy espouses and is aggressively pushing a version of freedom of expression that is anathema to how the right to freedom of expression has been shaped under international and European human rights law. The former version is narrow and speaker-centric, whereas the latter is open and other-regarding. Big Tech's dominance and control of the discursive online environment enables norm-twisting to be carried out across different platforms.

In the face of all these threats to freedom of expression, the ECtHR's principles for the protection and promotion of freedom of expression and media freedom must continue to prove their mettle and resilience. The Court has developed a set of robust principles, which it has adapted and built upon for a multi-media ecosystem increasingly shaped by (very large) online platforms. The lynchpin of those principles is the positive obligation of states to ensure a safe and favourable environment for effective participation in public debate by everyone, without fear. The principles open up a vast space for states to fill, but the Court is not prescriptive about how states should fulfil their positive obligations in particular. The principles also form the matrix of human and fundamental rights protection in which specific regulation of media and platforms operates, including at the EU level.

In the EU regulatory framework, these principles are a clear, but not the only key, reference point. They have been shoehorned into other regulatory objectives, especially the strengthening of the internal market. This has conditioned how the principles have been articulated within the EU regulatory framework. Specific aspects of freedom of expression, media freedom, and media pluralism are protected in piecemeal fashion, like in the AVMSD and the EMFA, but that is very different to a comprehensive system of protection for freedom of expression, media freedom, and media pluralism. The AVMSD, the DSA, and the EMFA all show an awareness of the need for media content to be available and prominent in the online environment, which is important for sustaining pluralistic public debate. The DSA is committed to making the online world safer and draws explicitly on fundamental rights standards. But

all in all, the ECtHR's principles make for a more holistic approach to the protection and promotion of freedom of expression than the EU's approach, which is largely concerned with harm.

The tentative conclusion that the Court's principles have not been fully incorporated into the EU's specific regulatory framework for media and digital platforms merits further probing. First, it is important to understand that the ECtHR, being the judicial organ of the Council of Europe, did not develop its principles with EU regulation in mind. Second, the very different contexts in which the principles were initially developed (the authoritative interpretation of a legally binding treaty) and subsequently incorporated into regulation (the qualified reflection of the principles in a different legal order) must be borne in mind. If some of the coherence, comprehensiveness, and specificity of the ECtHR's principles have been lost during their unofficial translation into EU regulatory instruments, that can largely be explained by differences of emphasis in normative values and regulatory goals. This could be considered an inter-institutional gap, which has proven difficult for the principles to cross.

One more part of the story of the ECtHR's principles still needs to be told, in order to provide a more complete regulatory picture. The Court's main task is determining whether the rights enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights have been violated in specific cases. It is not the task of the Court to draft or direct policy for states. However, the principles that the Court develops in its reasoning can and do offer valuable insights into the positive obligations of states under Article 10 of the Convention. The principles are not self-executing and they ideally require further operationalisation by states at the national level.

The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers – the organisation's decision-making body – also contributes to the operationalisation of the Court's principles. The Committee of Ministers drafts and adopts political recommendations directed at the 46 member states. The recommendations address different themes, such as freedom of expression, and offer detailed guidance to the member states on how to engage with those themes at the national level. Over the past decade, the Committee of Ministers has adopted various recommendations dealing with different aspects of freedom of expression, media freedom and pluralism, and the roles of digital platforms. The recommendations address the various threats to freedom of expression and public debate examined in this chapter (see Table 5.1 for a brief and selective overview). They tease out what states could and should do to fulfil their positive obligation to ensure a safe and favourable environment for freedom of expression and participation in public debate.

Table 5.1 Connecting targets of threats to freedom of expression with focuses of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers recommendations

Targets of threats	Focuses of Committee of Ministers' recommendations
Participants in public debate	Protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors (Council of Europe, 2016)
Underlying epistemic values of public debate	Protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors (Council of Europe, 2016) Promotion of a favourable environment for quality journalism in the digital age (Council of Europe, 2022)
Structures and modalities of public debate	Media pluralism and transparency of media ownership (Council of Europe, 2018a)
Scope and content of public debate	Protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors (Council of Europe, 2016)
Ecosystemic health of public debate	Roles and responsibilities of Internet intermediaries (Council of Europe, 2018b)

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to set out and critically evaluate the detailed guidance offered in the Committee of Ministers' recommendations mentioned above, it is nevertheless important to flag them, their purpose, and their scope. They underscore the dynamic relationship between regulation and policy in relation to states' positive obligation to ensure a safe and favourable environment for freedom of expression and participation in public debate. They moreover serve to fill some of the gaps between different regulatory instruments and provisions. They seek to convert the "generative" power of the Court's principles into a range of measures to fortify freedom of expression and media freedom online (McGonagle, 2022). The pathways set out by first and derivative principles, regulation and policy, will have to be patrolled with eternal vigilance in order to ensure protection against the ever-increasing number of threats targeting freedom of expression at different levels.

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Section II

Navigating diversity, engagement, and governance

CHAPTER 6

Media diversity and epistemic expectations of journalism

Public service media's responses to alternative media and the challenge of democratic integrity

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ABSTRACT
In an era marked by the spread of mis- and disinformation via social media and alternative online platforms, public service media are tasked with safeguarding democratic values by delivering reliable, truthful information. In this chapter, we explore how journalism's epistemic obligations are often caught between achieving balanced coverage and maintaining objectivity, emphasising one or the other depending on the media's perceived role in democracy. We connect this tension to discussions on democratic media pluralism, distinguishing between liberal, deliberative, and agonistic models of democracy, each attaching different weights to objectivity and balance in media reporting. By highlighting examples of Belgian and Dutch public broadcasters, we illustrate how their practices align with these different visions on democracy. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the implications of maintaining a quality information landscape that is increasingly threatened by alternative media and disinformation.

KEYWORDS: public service media, alternative media, online platforms, disinformation, epistemic expectations of journalism, democracy

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Introduction

Over the past decade, concerns about the role of social media in undermining democracy and distorting our collective sense of truth have gained significant attention (e.g., Ecker et al., 2024; McIntyre, 2018). Though simplified, the prevailing argument in this discourse is that social media and other digital platforms enable bad actors to manipulate large groups into believing falsehoods and half-truths. This, it is argued, poses a threat to democracy, as a shared understanding of basic facts is crucial for effective policymaking (e.g., Ecker et al., 2024; Mahl et al., 2024). While it is true that alternative media thrive on social media platforms and challenge the epistemic authority of traditional news media, their impact on democracy may be more complex than is often assumed.

In much of this discourse, the link between democracy and truth is taken for granted, and journalistic theory frequently overlooks deeper epistemological issues (with exceptions, e.g., Ward, 2018). However, in the context of these epistemic challenges, it is critical to consider how journalists navigate contested information. Journalists are bound by certain professional values, such as holding those in power accountable. Their primary epistemic responsibility is to foster an informed citizenry by providing accurate coverage of current events, enabling people to form their own opinions on matters of public interest (Christians et al., 2014). Two key principles underpinning reliable journalism are objectivity and balance, but these principles can often be at odds.

What is missing in current discussions on news media's epistemic challenges is the recognition that commitments to journalistic truth are inherently ambivalent. There is a tension between accurately presenting differing viewpoints (balance) and reporting factual information (objectivity). For instance, in covering climate change, journalists often struggle between presenting the scientific consensus on climate change and offering space for alternative policy solutions or even contestations of the issue. The line between legitimate policy debates and illegitimate climate change denial can be less clear-cut than is often assumed. As gatekeepers of public knowledge, journalists face the difficult task of deciding which perspectives to include, thereby gatekeeping the types of knowledge that contribute to democratic debate (Urkens et al., 2025). Instead of reducing these complexities to a simplistic true/false binary, we argue for examining this issue through the lens of media pluralism. This approach is particularly relevant because many discussions on media pluralism fail to account for the fact that alternative media challenge prevailing institutional practices (Ihlebæk et al., 2022; but see Peeters & Maeseele, 2023; Urkens et al., 2025).

The types of knowledge that *should* be included in a democratic public sphere depend largely on how that democratic sphere is envisioned. Broadly, three main schools of democratic thought can be identified: liberal, deliberative, and agonistic (Karppinen, 2013; Raeijmaekers & Maeseele, 2015). Each of these schools has different expectations regarding the role of journalism in

providing reliable information (Urkens et al., 2025). Given the significant role that public service media (PSM) play in informing the public, in this chapter we draw on examples from the Belgian (i.e., Flemish and Francophone) and Dutch public broadcasters, showing how each one aligns with one of these three democratic ideals. This alignment reflects their ability to function in an information environment where their epistemic authority is increasingly challenged through social media platforms.

Finally, it is important to clarify that the case illustrations in this chapter serve an illustrative, conceptual purpose rather than providing systematic empirical analyses. The examples drawn from Belgian and Dutch PSM are based on a theoretically informed selection of media content and related publicly available policy documents (such as charters and regulatory guidelines). As such, they merely serve to illustrate theoretical points. We have not conducted systematic fieldwork; instead, our case descriptions synthesise existing sources to spotlight key normative questions related to how PSM navigate epistemic challenges to news media's authority. Consequently, we do not claim exhaustive empirical proof from these cases; they function as focused vignettes to open up a conceptual lens on journalism, diversity, and epistemic expectations. This illustrative approach is intended to provoke reflection and identify patterns that warrant further empirical investigation. While limited in scope, the cases indeed help reveal broader tensions and possibilities in media practice that a more extensive empirical study could explore in depth. Grounding the discussion in concrete PSM contexts thus makes our abstract normative arguments more tangible, while encouraging future researchers to further hold these insights to empirical scrutiny.

The chapter is structured as follows: First, we explore how online platforms enable challenges to the traditional authority of journalism. In the next section, we discuss how journalism's epistemic role is often caught between providing objective information and offering a balanced presentation of diverse viewpoints. Then, we argue that the relationship between objectivity and balance shifts depending on the preferred democratic model. Next, we examine how public broadcasters, given their unique societal role, embody different epistemic expectations tied to these democratic models, using examples from public service broadcasters in Belgium and the Netherlands. We conclude with practical guidelines for media practitioners to help them navigate the challenges they face in today's complex information landscape.

Exploiting platforms: Alternative media, conspiracy theories, and truth

In recent years, traditional media have lost their exclusive role in informing the public and, with it, their privileged epistemic authority (Birchall & Knight, 2022; Harambam, 2023b). The rise of the Internet, and more recently, the ease

with which users can generate content on social media platforms, has made it possible for ordinary people to contribute to the dissemination of information. With these new communication technologies, virtually anyone can position themselves as an alternative media channel. Initially, this democratisation of information sharing was celebrated for its potential to empower and liberate (Aupers & de Wildt, 2021). Indeed, grassroots alternative media initiatives were – and still are – broadly welcomed for their bottom-up approach (Fuchs, 2010; Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010).

However, the flip side of this media democratisation is that it has also made it easier to challenge the authority of traditional journalistic organisations (Urkens et al., 2025). While some alternative media outlets continue to provide valuable critiques of mainstream perspectives, others are now viewed with growing suspicion for promoting extremist, antidemocratic, or conspiratorial content (de León et al., 2024; Harambam, 2023b; Staender et al., 2024). Holding journalists accountable for their epistemic responsibilities can sometimes contribute to a healthier information landscape (Harambam, 2023b; Harcup, 2016). Yet, in other cases, alternative media disseminate falsehoods, distort reality (Reinemann et al., 2024; Staender et al., 2024), and contribute to increasing public scepticism toward traditional media (de León et al., 2024). Once considered niche, these alternative news sites are now becoming a more prominent part of the media diets of disillusioned audiences (de León et al., 2024; Harcup, 2016). In this context, some scholars have argued that we live in a post-truth era, where objective facts are less influential than appeals to emotion and personal belief (McIntyre, 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Before looking into the challenges to traditional media's authority, it is worth reviewing the recent changes in the alternative media landscape. What qualifies as alternative media has evolved significantly over the past few decades and remains a debated topic within media studies (Holt et al., 2019; Ihlebæk et al., 2022). Historically, alternative media referred to outlets that challenged the political and ideological dominance of what they viewed as capitalist or conservative mainstream media (Peeters & Maeseele, 2023; Rauch, 2021). Accordingly, Christian Fuchs (2010) developed a typology that defines alternative media as critical media, providing oppositional content that counters dominant narratives shaped by forces such as capitalism, patriarchy, racism, sexism, and nationalism. In this view, only leftist, progressive alternative media are considered legitimate critiques of political hegemony (Fuchs, 2010). Alternative media, then, are defined by their production of critical content, regardless of whether it comes from grassroots organisations or professionals, arguing that professional production processes can enhance social transformation and raise public awareness (Fuchs, 2010; Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010). Perhaps unsurprisingly, critics have argued that this one-sided normative approach overlooks the rise of far-right channels, which have gained significant popularity in Western societies, particularly since 2016 (Rauch, 2021).

Maria Rae's (2021) concept of hyper-partisan media is useful for understanding this rise of far-right channels. Unlike traditional media, which are expected to remain neutral, these channels occupy a distinct partisan and politicised position in the media landscape. Ironically, outlets like Breitbart and Infowars claim to offer a more neutral perspective, accusing mainstream media, such as CNN, of being too left-leaning. Much can be said about the discrepancy between their claimed and practiced neutrality and their (lack of) adherence to journalistic deontology: Alternative media such as Breitbart are, perhaps unsurprisingly, found to paint a distorted picture of reality (Staender et al., 2024). That being said, while the idea of hyper-partisan media may apply to the bipartisan polarisation in the US, it does not fully capture the complexity of European political ecosystems, which extend beyond this binary (Urkens et al., 2025).

In Europe, we indeed also see the rise of media channels that challenge the authority of traditional outlets, not necessarily from an ideological standpoint but from a self-proclaimed epistemic one (Urkens et al., 2025). While leftist and rightist alternative media have typically presented themselves as ideological correctives to mainstream political hegemony, these new players (often illegitimately) claim to offer a more neutral, fact-based perspective, allegedly free from state influence. As such, they invoke a modernist ideal of objectivity (see also Urkens & Houtman, 2023), contrasting sharply with the idea that we live in a "post-truth" era where facts and objectivity are allegedly devalued (McIntyre, 2018).

The ease of creating (or mimicking) news websites allows anyone to disseminate information, often bypassing established journalistic standards (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; de León et al., 2024; Harambam, 2023b; Rauch, 2021). While alternative media outlets may rightly criticise mainstream media for overlooking issues such as the pharmaceutical industry's influences on public health policies (Goldenberg, 2021), they have nonetheless been shown to present a distorted view of reality (Staender et al., 2024). Despite that, they still present themselves as grounded in truth, frequently offering their own "alternative experts" to support their claims (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Thus, rather than offering a diversity of viewpoints, these platforms often present a narrow, anti-institutional narrative (de León et al., 2024; Reinemann et al., 2024), regularly claiming that to be the only legitimate one. Given the growing influence of these conservative and conspiracy-driven outlets, they are perhaps unsurprisingly seen as undermining shared standards of truth and factuality (McIntyre, 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

In some cases, they disseminate falsehoods that are easily debunked, such as the "Stolen Election" narrative after the 2020 US presidential election. However, other issues are more difficult to verify with certainty, like the contested Covid-19 lab leak theory of which the public legitimacy has repeatedly shifted (Birchall & Knight, 2022). The complexity deepens with

topics such as climate change, where outright denial may be rare, but debates about the severity of the problem and proposed solutions remain contentious (Kantack & Paschall, 2022; van Eck et al., 2024). In instances where facts and political measures intersect, a purely verificationist approach may prove insufficient (Farkas & Schou, 2024; Marres, 2018). Reducing the legitimacy of these voices to a true/false dichotomy (e.g., Ecker et al., 2024) often oversimplifies the complexity of their claims. A more productive approach is to examine these challenges through a media pluralism lens that also integrates epistemological considerations (Urkens et al., 2025).

Given the increasing focus on epistemology within misinformation studies (Uscinski et al., 2024), we argue that alternative media's role in democracy should also be assessed through this lens. This raises critical questions: What kinds of knowledge are considered legitimate in a democracy? To what extent should challenges to that knowledge be permitted? How should mainstream news outlets navigate such challenges? The answers to these questions depend on one's expectations of media pluralism, which are themselves shaped by differing visions of democracy (Ihlebæk et al., 2022; Raeijmaekers & Maeseele, 2015; Urkens et al., 2025). Rather than dismissing these alternative media channels outright, they can be understood as "counter-epistemic communities" (Waisbord, 2018: 1870), whose legitimacy ultimately depends on how one envisions democracy.

Media torn between balance and objectivity

In a well-functioning democracy, a diverse and reliable media landscape is crucial. Media outlets serve various purposes, from informing the public about local and global events to holding government officials accountable (Christians et al., 2014). In an age where people have unprecedented access to information, the media's commitment to truth is arguably its most crucial contribution to democracy. Although we often assume that the media simply report the truth, the notion of truth is more complex, particularly in today's era of rapidly advancing scientific progress. Unlike science, which seeks to establish facts, the media's primary role is to *represent* those facts and what they may mean. This requires providing accurate and balanced coverage of current events. While traditional media have long held a privileged position as trusted sources of important information, their relationship with truth has always been fraught with tension, particularly between striving for balance and upholding objectivity. This pursuit of balance has sometimes famously led to the unintended consequence of sacrificing objectivity by amplifying falsehoods, such as when covering climate change (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004).

To understand contemporary epistemic expectations of media, it is helpful to briefly trace their historical roots. As highlighted by Ward (2018), truth has been central to journalism since its emergence in sixteenth-century London,

where partisan viewpoints were often disguised as neutral reporting to either support or challenge the monarchy. Publications with names like "A True and Perfect Informer" or "Impartial Intelligencer" reflected this approach (Ward, 2018). The advent of the printing press in the eighteenth century, during the Enlightenment, led to a rise in literacy and the popularity of newspapers. Enlightenment journalism emphasised factual reporting over opinion, laying the groundwork for the commitment to objectivity that would shape journalism for centuries to come (Ward, 2018). However, by the 1960s, influenced by counterculture and postmodern movements, journalism began to move away from rigid positivism, embracing a more nuanced, perspectivist understanding of truth, which acknowledged that truth could be subjective and context-dependent (Waisbord, 2018).

The tension between balance and truth in media reporting became a focal point in the early 2000s. Boykoff and Boykoff's (2004) influential study on climate change reporting revealed that American newspapers often gave equal weight to both proponents and critics of anthropogenic climate change, creating a misleading sense of balance. Similarly, during the Covid-19 pandemic, news organisations were globally criticised for giving airtime to anti-vaccination activists and conspiracy theorists alongside leading virologists, despite the lack of scientific backing for the former's claims. However, while there is broad scholarly consensus on the reality of climate change, the science surrounding the newly emerging Covid-19 virus remained far more fluid. In hindsight, media coverage of the virus has been critiqued as overly scientistic (Gaj & Lo Dico, 2021), claiming that science seemed the sole legitimate basis for policy decisions, even when scientific understanding of the virus was still evolving and contentious.

Such scientistic understandings overlook that the relationship between science and policy is inherently complex. Indeed, during the Covid-19 crisis, media were criticised for amplifying a "follow the science" narrative in support of government measures (Russell & Patterson, 2023), overlooking the fact that specific scientific findings can be translated into policy in multiple ways (see Houtman et al., 2021). News media's commitment to truthful reporting can as such sometimes lead to a resurgence of naïve realism, where truth is assumed to be straightforward and unproblematic – a purely detached and objective god-like view. This reinvigoration of a positivistic understanding of objectivity is apparent in several contemporary media practices. In Germany, for example, journalists have been found to adopt a "let the facts speak for themselves" approach (Post, 2015). Additionally, in response to the rise of fake news, many media organisations have positioned themselves as arbiters of truth through rigorous fact-checking processes (Waisbord, 2018). Such fact-checking practices align with liberalism's emphasis on decision-making based on expertise and evidence (Goldenberg, 2021; Waisbord, 2018). However, these efforts are critiqued for their problematic verificationist conceptions

of facticity, which have been said to oversimplify the truth and ignore its social construction (Altay et al., 2023; Marres, 2018; Uscinski et al., 2024).

Acknowledging the political ambivalence of scientific findings might even bolster public support for science and politics. Honest, transparent reporting that distinguishes between knowledge claims and policy implications has been found to foster trust in science (Post & Bienzeisler, 2024). Similarly, the perceived uniformity in the reported political consequences of scientific findings can drive some individuals toward conspiracy theories, as they feel that the science is being presented as speaking for itself without room for interpretation (Harambam, 2023a). It should, however, be acknowledged that different audiences may have different expectations of the media. While some may seek more open reporting that allows them to form their own views on the matter, others welcome a more authoritative form of science communication where political alternatives are omitted (Post et al., 2021). This means that in uncertain situations, journalists face the challenging task of determining which information should be included or excluded from public debate. Indeed, while journalists are expected to avoid amplifying false balances when reporting on anthropogenic climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic showed that balance might sometimes be necessary to maintain credibility in journalism, science, and politics.

A closer examination of reliable journalistic truth and knowledge reveals the delicate balance journalists must strike between the ideals of balance and objectivity. Traditional journalistic practices often aim to present both sides of an issue to achieve balance. Still, there is growing criticism that this approach may unintentionally legitimise unsubstantiated claims or fringe viewpoints. Increasingly, there is a call for a more refined understanding of objectivity, where factual accuracy and evidence-based reporting take precedence over false equivalence. However, this shift must also be approached with caution, as it risks falling into a simplistic form of positivism (Raeijmaekers & Maeseele, 2017), where facts are detached from their broader social and political contexts and uncritically instrumentalised.

Ultimately, achieving journalistic truth requires navigating the tension between balance and objectivity while remaining mindful of the challenges posed by both. Importantly, how this balance ought to be struck depends largely on the underlying democratic model one subscribes to (Urkens et al., 2025), as different democratic perspectives shape expectations about the epistemic role of media in society.

Epistemic expectations of media in democracies

The role of media in democracy, particularly their epistemic commitments, depends on how democracy itself is conceptualised, which ties into debates about media pluralism (Urkens et al., 2025). Despite the rise of alternative

media, most discussions on pluralism focus on mainstream outlets (Ihlebæk et al., 2022). Yet, alternative media that challenge the perceived lack of diversity in established news have grown in influence and should therefore be included in broader media debates (Ihlebæk et al., 2022). Different democratic theories – liberal, deliberative, and agonistic – shape expectations of media and the types of knowledge they should promote (Urkens et al., 2025). In doing so, they put a different emphasis on balance and objectivity.

In liberal democracies, media are expected to inform the public based on expert knowledge, focusing on objectivity and fact-checking. Media in liberal democracies may either emphasise a "marketplace of ideas", assuming competition between viewpoints leads to the best outcomes or prioritise political liberalism, where objectivity is key and information is filtered through epistemic authorities (Harjuniemi, 2022). This latter approach, as argued before, risks turning into a form of scientism, where only facts are instrumentalised to solve political debates, ignoring their inherent normativity (Gaj & Lo Dico, 2021; Ward, 2018). In sum, epistemic expectations of media in liberal democratic theory align with scientific realism (Urkens et al., 2025).

Deliberative democracy, influenced by Habermas, envisions media as facilitators of rational discourse, helping citizens engage in constructive deliberative debate. Here, the media should represent diverse viewpoints, avoiding market-driven bias and encouraging participation to build consensus (Habermas, 2022; Karppinen, 2013). In a deliberative democratic model, media aim for a balance between objectivity and inclusivity. All voices are welcome in the debate as long as they adhere to rational standards based on agreed-upon facts. Irrational voices, lacking this objectivity, are excluded to maintain a rational public discourse. Journalists, therefore, focus on providing balanced, objective coverage to foster consensus (Benhabib, 2021; Ferree et al., 2002), aligning with perspectivist epistemic expectations (Urkens et al., 2025).

In contrast, the agonistic model, as proposed by Chantal Mouffe (1999), accepts the inevitability of conflict in a pluralistic society. Here, media emphasise inclusivity over objectivity, allowing diverse, often irreconcilable viewpoints. Journalists are encouraged to include emotional and subjective voices, especially from marginalised groups, without prioritising expert opinions. The goal is to foster debate by recognising that no single perspective holds the ultimate truth (Maeseele & Raeijmaekers, 2020). Instead of seeking consensus, the agonistic model values the coexistence of differing viewpoints and the importance of open democratic debate. Here constructivist epistemic expectations reign (Urkens et al., 2025). In what follows, we highlight how these different epistemic expectations – that is, liberal, deliberative, and agonistic – reflect themselves in the Belgian and Dutch public broadcast systems.

Media and democracy in action: Public service media in Belgium and the Netherlands

PSM are embedded in structural constraints that shape their ability to fulfil lofty normative ideals. They depend on public funding, while market pressures and competition for audience attention further complicate their mandate, forcing PSM to balance popular appeal with high-quality, civic-minded content. Even as they reaffirm commitments to inform the public, these organisations must continually justify their relevance and resist external pressures, from shifting government priorities to commercial influences (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2008). In short, the political economy of media provides the structural backdrop that both enables and delimits what public broadcasters can do in practice, reminding us that institutional context is inseparable from journalistic ideals. Nevertheless, PSM organisations play a crucial role in safeguarding democratic societies from potential epistemic threats (d'Haenens, 2021).

In today's fragmented news landscape, where media outlets often prioritise economic interests, the informative and watchdog functions of PSM have become increasingly important. This paradox stems from media fragmentation caused by social media platforms, combined with the centralisation of content in commercial news outlets (d'Haenens, 2021). As a result, media consumption has become disjointed, threatening democratic discourse. Moreover, the commercial logic driving many media organisations prioritises clickbait and engagement over fulfilling democratic responsibilities, raising concerns about balancing responsiveness to commercial demands with the need for high-quality information. In this context, PSM are vital in promoting media pluralism, ensuring that a healthy public sphere is maintained and diverse perspectives are represented (d'Haenens, 2021). Their epistemic role in contemporary media landscapes is particularly pronounced, as the hegemony of mainstream media faces growing challenges.

In Europe, PSM organisations such as the Flemish broadcaster VRT and the Dutch broadcaster NPO, both members of the European Broadcasting Union, exemplify the important democratic role of PSM. The European Broadcasting Union upholds principles of editorial independence, accuracy, and impartiality in reporting. VRT, as part of this network, emphasises objectivity in its journalistic efforts. Meanwhile, NPO focuses on balanced representation, ensuring that multiple perspectives are represented in its reporting across outlets. These differing approaches highlight the range of strategies within public broadcasting, each aiming to fulfil its democratic mission while addressing the complexities of today's media environment. Different PSM organisations thus take different democratic approaches to navigate these challenges.

The Flemish Radio and Television Broadcast Organisation (VRT), Flanders's PSM, addresses the ongoing epistemic crisis by firmly reinforcing its commitment to objectivity. VRT operates a range of networks, including VRT

NWS (news), VRT 1 (general audience), Ketnet (children), and VRT CANVAS (current events and culture), each adhering to this principle. VRT NWS, in particular, stands out with its dedicated fact-check category, "nws check", a proactive effort to combat false information. VRT's commitment to objectivity, however, extends beyond news. VRT 1's popular show, *Iedereen beroemd* [*Everyone Famous*], includes a frivolous segment debunking fake news by exploring historical misinformation, encouraging critical engagement with information through humorous examples. Moreover, Ketnet's programme, *De raad van Soekie* [*Soekie's Council*] introduces children to media literacy, exploring concepts like electoral manipulation through a simulated class election, where the protagonist has to navigate a disinformation campaign against her name. The aim is to help young viewers develop critical thinking skills to discern fact from fiction in the digital age by relating it to their life worlds. Additionally, VRT's podcast, *Mysteries van Vlaanderen* [*Flanders' Mysteries*], further exemplifies its commitment to factual inquiry, by subjecting topics like religious beliefs to empirical scrutiny, and in doing so promoting a rationalistic understanding of even faith. Overall, VRT's multifaceted approach to objectivity positions it as a guardian of fact-based journalism, aligning with the liberal democratic ideal of promoting truth and accountability in the media.

The *cordon médiatique* of the Francophone public broadcaster in Belgium (RTBf; Radio-Télévision belge de la Communauté française) presents a notable contrast to the Flemish approach to threats against democracy and truth. While the Flemish public broadcaster emphasises objectivity and reliable facts against circulating falsehoods, its Francophone counterpart has a history of excluding voices it deems dangerous or undemocratic – particularly those considered irrational. This practice arose in response to the rise of the far-right party Vlaams Belang [Flemish Interest], known for its nationalism and xenophobia. Francophone media, including RTBf, collectively agreed to exclude content promoting racist ideologies as it undermines pluralistic democratic principles (de Jonge, 2019: 197; see also de Jonge 2021). RTBf does not make these decisions lightly; rather, it follows a formal procedure, including the analysis of party programmes, before determining exclusion (de Jonge, 2021). This approach aligns closely with deliberative democratic principles, where gatekeeping journalists carefully evaluate voices to ensure they rationally contribute to the democratic public sphere. Nationalistic and xenophobic discourse, failing to meet these rational standards, is excluded to prevent the pollution of public discourse.

In contrast, the Dutch public broadcasting system emphasises balance over objectivity. Unlike the more centralised Flemish model, the Dutch broadcasting landscape is fragmented, with various broadcasters each maintaining independent newsrooms and editorial policies. NOS, the Dutch equivalent of VRT NWS, is just one of many broadcasters within this pluralistic system. Dutch public broadcasting reflects a commitment to societal diversity, with

broadcasters like AVROTROS (liberal), PowNed (youth), MAX (seniors), KRO (Catholic), NCRV (Protestant), and VPRO (progressive) all catering to different segments of society. This external pluralism ensures that multiple perspectives are represented, even those critiquing mainstream news outlets, reflecting the complex social fabric of Dutch society.

In 2022, the Dutch public broadcaster (NPO) received attention for allocating airtime to Ongehoord Nederland! (ON!), a broadcaster that positioned itself as a corrective to mainstream news media, which it accused of left-leaning bias and elitism. However, ON! quickly found itself in the eye of the storm for spreading disinformation and violating journalistic ethics. In July 2022, following a critical report from NPO's ombudsperson, the board of directors imposed a 2.5 per cent reduction in ON!'s annual budget as a penalty. The ombudsperson's report cited a lack of distinction between facts and opinions, inadequate questioning of inaccuracies, failure to issue corrections for false claims, and a lack of transparency regarding studio guests' interests. ON!'s lawyers argued that freedom of speech applies to everyone, making it difficult to exclude controversial statements in an open and rational society. However, the issue with ON! lies in its status as part of a publicly funded media organisation, which has a responsibility to enrich the pluralistic media debate. It is inconsistent with the public broadcasting mission, which inherently promotes diversity, to provide a platform solely for right-wing views, especially if deemed conspiratory (Hins, 2023). As a result, in April 2023, the secretary of state requested the revocation of ON!'s broadcasting licence. However, by November 2023, the recognition of ON! was maintained, as there was insufficient legal basis to revoke its licence (Government of the Netherlands, 2023).

ON! claims to promote independence and pluralism, yet its mission statement reveals a clear right-wing focus. The issues it covers – such as the EU, mass migration, climate change measures, direct democracy, and Dutch culture – are aligned with a particular ideological stance. Yet, while ON!'s internal diversity may be limited, its presence in the Dutch media landscape may contribute to overall balance by offering perspectives often marginalised in mainstream public broadcasting. Despite accusations of bias, ON! provides a platform for voices that challenge dominant narratives, potentially enriching the media ecosystem with diverse viewpoints that do not necessarily adhere to the liberal and deliberative expectations of rational discourse. In this sense – and contrasting to ON!'s own rejection of agonistic pluralism – its inclusion in Dutch public broadcasting aligns more closely with an agonistic view of media in democracy, which values the representation of conflicting perspectives without making claims to conclusive truths.

In sum, the differing approaches of VRT, RTBf, and NPO reflect the broader tension in journalistic practices, shaped not only by principles of journalism but also by varying democratic ideals and preferences for types of

knowledge. VRT's emphasis on objectivity informs its programming across various platforms, while NPO's commitment to balance is evident in its diverse range of broadcasters, each serving different segments of Dutch society. RTBf, though open to a variety of viewpoints, carefully gatekeeps the quality of public debate. These examples illustrate that there is no single solution to addressing platformed threats to democracy and truth, as responses depend on the underlying vision of democracy and the media's respective epistemic role.

Conclusion

The future of PSM in Europe, while not as dire as previously predicted (Tracey, 1998), continues to face significant challenges in adapting to the twenty-first–century media environment. As European governments embrace more market-driven models, PSM organisations have undergone critical reassessments of their roles (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2008), attempting to balance popular appeal with high-quality programming. However, they struggle to maintain strong public support, particularly among younger generations and marginalised groups, who are increasingly disengaged. Efforts to enhance public accountability and reach these audiences are underway but face the persistent challenge of balancing quality with accessibility.

At the same time, PSM organisations face existential threats from neoliberalism, populism, autocracy, and rising consumerism, which risk undermining their essential role in fostering open societies. It is crucial that PSM resist capitulating to populism, while also addressing legitimate concerns raised by it. Populism's influence extends beyond fragile democracies, affecting even well-established states. Thus, while PSM faces unprecedented challenges, it remains indispensable for nurturing open and informed societies.

As scholars and societies grapple with alternative media spreading disinformation, there is a need for caution to avoid undermining democratic principles. Harmful content should be monitored and flagged, and in clear-cut cases, brought before the judicial system. However, the line between content moderation and censorship is thin and often unclear (e.g., Birchall & Knight, 2022; Farkas & Schou, 2024). Policymakers should be careful with preventive bans on content unless there is concrete evidence of previous violations, such as repeated hate speech or climate denialism. Overreach could fuel suspicion toward all information and further alienate the public from democratic institutions (Hameleers, 2024). A public detached from democratic decision-making may arguably pose a more significant risk to society compared to that of alternative conspiracy outlets.

The case of RTBf demonstrates that excluding voices can be a legitimate strategy when done responsibly, with clear evidence showing how certain voices harm democratic principles (de Jonge, 2021). Conversely, including radical voices, as seen with the Dutch public broadcaster NPO, allows legal

violations to be addressed after public participation, preserving open debate. The approach taken by the Flemish public broadcaster, which focuses on educating the public and debunking falsehoods, can be another productive way to address the current epistemic challenges facing journalism. Ultimately, fostering a healthy and transparent information landscape, encouraging the public to engage with reliable sources, may prove more effective than exclusions (be them arbitrary or informed) or inflating the dangers of misinformation.

The future of PSM in Europe depends on a multifaceted approach that addresses both immediate challenges and long-term structural needs. Central to this effort is the enhancement of public accountability mechanisms. PSM must be transparent, regularly reporting on their editorial decisions, audience engagement initiatives, and use of public funds. This transparency is critical for reinforcing their legitimacy as trustworthy institutions aligned with democratic values. Simultaneously, media literacy initiatives, such as those of VRT, should remain a top priority, particularly for younger generations and marginalised groups, who become increasingly disengaged. Programmes focused on critical media consumption will equip these audiences with the skills needed to assess information, detect disinformation, and understand the value of quality journalism. The success of PSM hinges on their ability to maintain strong connections with all segments of society. In terms of content moderation, a careful balance must be struck between protecting free speech and combating disinformation. Policymakers should resist preventive bans unless there is clear evidence of prior harm, ensuring that legal actions are taken only when necessary and after malpractice. Similarly, legal frameworks against disinformation should be refined, targeting those responsible for spreading harmful content while maintaining the integrity of free speech.

An equally important goal, as NPO shows, is to diversify programming to engage younger and marginalised audiences. PSM must move beyond traditional formats and embrace digital-first initiatives, such as podcasts, interactive platforms, and youth-centred programming. Such diversification is essential for re-establishing PSM's relevance among disengaged groups. At the structural level, protecting public funding is crucial for ensuring PSM's independence from political and commercial pressures. Establishing independent oversight bodies can safeguard these institutions from undue influence, allowing them to focus on serving the public interest rather than capitulating to external forces like populism or market pressures.

It is also worth reflecting on the epistemic limits of journalistic "factuality" itself. Standards of objectivity and balance are not absolute ideals but products of institutional routines and societal expectations (Raeijmaekers & Maeseele, 2017). What counts as an objective fact or a balanced report is shaped by prevailing norms and perspectives. Well-intentioned demands for strict objectivity or neutrality may inadvertently marginalise alternative voices,

excluding perspectives that fall outside conventional "rational" discourse (Raeijmaekers & Maeseele, 2017). Thus, calls for balance may reinforce existing power dynamics by defining which viewpoints are deemed credible or relevant. Moreover, while inherently critical toward the power relations in society, even bottom-up efforts and agonistic critiques may be constrained by the prevailing power structures (Harambam, 2021; Riofrancos, 2018) – that is, effectively voicing critiques against the status quo can happen only within the boundaries established by "the mainstream", which may partially perpetuate precisely that status quo. However, here PSM actually have the power to alleviate such constraints so that critiques are genuinely possible. Acknowledging this underscores the need for reflexivity: Media institutions must remain aware of how their epistemic standards might silence certain experiences and strive to broaden the range of voices included in the democratic conversation. With this chapter, we have tried to highlight the epistemic strengths and shortcomings of each democratic model, which ultimately allows policymakers and media professionals to better navigate threats to media's epistemic authority.

In terms of day-to-day operations, PSM must continue to foster open, transparent debate by including diverse voices in their programming, including controversial ones. However, these voices should be held accountable through rigorous scrutiny and public discussion. Additionally, fact-checking initiatives, like VRT's "nws check", should be expanded to ensure disinformation is systematically addressed – if remaining reflexive toward the underlying epistemic assumptions guiding fact-checking efforts (Marres, 2018; Uscinski et al., 2024). To maintain relevance, PSM should seek regular audience feedback and actively engage the public through surveys, interactive programming, and community outreach. These mechanisms will allow PSM to stay attuned to audience needs and preferences, ensuring that they remain responsive to changing public concerns. Lastly, collaborations with online platforms are crucial for expanding the reach of PSM content and ensuring it reaches a broader audience. Partnerships focused on curating factual content and promoting media literacy can help combat disinformation and establish PSM as a reliable source of information in the digital age.

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CHAPTER 7

Public service media and entertainment

The challenge of engaging younger audiences

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ABSTRACT
In a world dominated by digital platforms, this chapter examines the ongoing role of legacy public service media (PSM), originally designed to promote the common good and societal cohesion through information, education, and entertainment. Focusing on younger audiences and PSM's contribution to screen entertainment, we highlight clear shifts among younger audiences in Europe regarding favoured platforms (global streaming services), genres (scripted over non-scripted), country-of-origin preferences (US rather than domestic shows), language settings (watching more in English), and discovery methods (platform algorithms and social media). These shifts render PSM content less visible, as global streamers increasingly become the default gateway to screen content. When encountered, domestic content is often perceived by young people as less relevant and of lower quality. Such perceptions circulate and tend to become self-reinforcing. Understanding young audience perceptions of domestic shortcomings offers insights into how PSM might better engage younger audiences despite platformisation, so that entertainment and fiction continue to serve as "a central reference point of knowledge and shared emotions in a fragmented society" (Biltereyst, 2004: 343).

KEYWORDS: cultural proximity, public service media, social media, video streaming, video-on-demand

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Introduction

In this chapter, we examine public service media (PSM) as an intervention designed in the twentieth century to promote the common good, societal cohesion, and democracy. Yet PSM now struggles as audiences, particularly younger ones, shift their allegiances to video-on-demand (VoD) and social media experiences (Channel 4, 2025). PSM face significant financial, competitive, and political challenges in fulfilling their democratic function to inform and educate (Ranaivosen et al., 2023). These challenges also extend to a third, often overlooked pillar of their mission: to entertain.

The chapter focuses on young audience experiences with screen entertainment and the implications of global VoD and social media platforms on PSM's ability to connect with younger audiences. Our premise is that if we are to consider PSM's contribution to the common good, we cannot ignore entertainment as a contributor to social cohesion and national identity. PSM refers to a distinctive set of media institutions with a mandate to contribute to democratic life and citizenship through information, education, and entertainment. We emphasise the crucial role of entertainment in securing young audience engagement and fulfilling PSM's universal mission, and we reflect on the provision of PSM entertainment and how this forms an intrinsic part of both their contributions to contemporary digital societies and their responses to digital challenges.

First, we ask how and to what extent young people's viewing of screen entertainment is shifting in terms of favoured platforms, genres, country-of-origin, language, and discovery. Second, we explore the extent to which these shifts impact PSM, with potential implications for PSM's normative contribution to the common good founded on democratic values.

The chapter presents new research data from a larger research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council that explores how transnational VoD services like Netflix and YouTube affect the nature and extent of young audiences' digital encounters with British screen content in Denmark, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. First, drawing on literature about PSM, we consider why entertainment is still important for PSM, before outlining our comparative and mixed-method approach. Next, through the lens of engagement with British screen entertainment, we highlight screen content shifts in media platform, genre, country-of-origin, and language-setting preferences among audiences aged 16–34 in the four countries, before paying special attention to the role of social media as a source of entertainment discovery. Finally, we explore young people's attitudes towards domestic and public service entertainment. In the concluding section, we draw together findings to tentatively address what might be missing in public service entertainment and why this still matters in fragmenting digital societies. While this chapter presents empirical findings from an *audience* study, our analysis is informed by theories of platform and global streaming power (Chalaby,

2022; Jin, 2015; Poell et al., 2022). These frameworks help elucidate how structural conditions, including the economic, cultural, and infrastructural power of transnational corporations – not merely audience choice in a vacuum – are reconfiguring media ecosystems to the detriment of national and public service providers.

Why entertainment still matters for public service media

"Long-form" screen content (> 20 min.) is still an important source of entertainment for young people aged 16–34. Three quarters of our survey respondents in Denmark, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands watch either daily or 3–5 times a week for relaxation, comfort, and repeat viewing of their favourite shows (Esser et al., 2025: 6). Entertainment, interpreted broadly, is also core to the public service remit, underpinning a wider definition of universality, that encompasses a range of content as well as geographical and technical reach (Born & Prosser, 2001; BRU, 1986; Collins et al., 2001; Garnham, 1990), thereby contributing to "enhancing, developing and serving social, political and cultural citizenship" (Born & Prosser, 2001: 671). As Biltereyst (2004: 342) has argued, entertainment should not be considered the "odd man out in theories underpinning PSB" or a sign of levelling down, but essential for underpinning PSM legitimacy, because it allows PSM to appeal to all, including underserved sections of the audience, such as younger audiences, with popular screen content functioning as "a central reference point of knowledge and shared emotions in a fragmented society with changing symbolic powers" (Biltereyst, 2004: 343). More instrumentally, entertainment aligns with strategies to maintain PSM prominence and its ability to connect with audiences, especially younger audiences who use legacy (and news) media increasingly less.

In practice, however, while news remains central to the PSM remit, driving high levels of trust (Cushion, 2012; Newman et al., 2020), the role of entertainment is more complex, often seen as an awkward fit within the Enlightenment traditions underlying its ethos (Palokangas, 2007), a "necessary evil" critically undervalued in comparison to the other Reithian pillars of information and education. Early scholarship was disapproving of entertainment (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947/1997; Thompson & Leavis, 1933), and even more recent studies have deemed it negative and diversionary (Postman, 1985; Putnam, 2000).

However, this disparaging view has been critiqued by the cultural citizenship tradition, which identifies the social and affective dimensions of engagement with popular culture (Askanius, 2017; Hermes, 2005; Van Zoonen, 2005) that stimulate civic belonging. This school of thought, supported by a long tradition of cultural studies research, argues that engagement with popular

fiction and entertainment plays a crucial role in shaping identities, developing critical awareness, fostering community belonging, and facilitating a critical understanding of the complexities of the world (Ang, 1991; Ellis, 2000; Liebes & Katz, 1994; Naerland, 2019; Street et al., 2013).

As far as the nation is concerned, domestic entertainment makes a vital contribution to the creation and maintenance of national identity, and to making people feel part of the wider national community. According to Anderson (1991), the mass media were critical in "imagining" the national community by standardising national languages, addressing audiences as citizens, and providing national, local, and regional news. Importantly, the media also contribute to "banal nationalism" with visualisations of national symbols (flags, iconic buildings, politicians, etc.) and other reminders of the nation and one's place in it (Billig, 1995). Even popular entertainment shows like *The Voice of Holland* (RTL4, 2010–2022) can be effective reminders of the nation by providing shared experiences. As Sunstein (2001) argued, the mass media allow people who do not know each other personally to regard one another as fellow citizens with shared hopes and goals. Ongoing media fragmentation, he warned, endangers this achievement. It also makes European PSM's remit of supporting national identity and social cohesion more difficult to fulfil.

PSM's youth challenge in the age of global streamer dominance

Recent studies have revealed a profound "generation rift" (Rotermund, 2017) as PSM organisations rapidly lose relevance for younger audiences (Horowitz & Lowe, 2019; Sehl, 2020; Schulz et al., 2019), whose changing media habits, including a preference for social media platforms, pose a significant challenge (Andersen & Sundet, 2019). In respect of entertainment, European PSM are increasingly struggling to attract and maintain younger audiences against transnational US-owned VoD platforms like Netflix, Disney+, and Prime Video, which benefit from larger budgets and larger catalogues dominated by US content (see Bengesser et al., 2025; Esser & Steemers, 2023; Iordache, 2022). Global streamers' perceived ubiquity is a direct function of the structural advantages underpinning what Jin (2015) termed "platform imperialism". Unlike nationally bound PSM, global streamers operate on a logic of radical scalability, leveraging vast capital, global data harvesting, and vertically integrated operations (Chalaby, 2022). This creates a self-reinforcing cycle, thereby marginalising domestic platforms not through competition on content alone, but through an overwhelming asymmetry of economic and technological power (Davis, 2021). As discussed below, our audience study provides strong support for political economy analyses highlighting the power asymmetries between global platforms and national

providers, even if only indirectly, reflected in young European's viewing preferences and consumption patterns.

PSM responses include running their own VoD platforms (Bruun, 2021), moves towards online-only or digital-first production (Kelly, 2021; Michalis, 2022), and greater emphasis on online branding and personalisation (Hildén, 2022; Sørensen & Van den Bulck, 2020) to enhance discovery and prominence (D'Arma et al., 2021, 2024). However, despite these strategies and the home and language advantages they can leverage, our research shows that Danish, German, Italian, and Dutch PSM struggle to attract younger viewers in competition with global platforms that predominantly feature English-language content. As we show later, the strong appeal to young people of both US content and the English language is an important factor in reducing the appeal of domestic entertainment and domestic platforms (see Mast et al., 2017). In short, our findings show that younger audiences are increasingly preferring English-language productions on global streaming platforms over domestic entertainment because they are perceived as omnipresent, numerous, easy to find, and more relevant.

A note on methodology

In this chapter, we analyse engagement with PSM entertainment in four countries through the lens of young audience encounters with British films and television shows in Denmark, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. While all these countries have a long history of public service provision, they also exhibit significant differences. Denmark and the Netherlands are smaller countries that have long imported considerable amounts of English-language content from the UK and the US (see Bengesser et al., 2025), and audiences in both countries are used to watching English-language entertainment with English or local-language subtitles. Germany and Italy, by contrast, are larger countries whose broadcasters have traditionally produced and scheduled mostly domestic content and dubbed US fiction (Esser, 2007).

Findings are based on an online survey with audiences aged 16–34, translated and adapted for each country, and carried out between August 2022 and April 2024 in Denmark (2022, n = 423); Germany (2023, n = 426); Italy (2024, n = 555); and the Netherlands (2023, n = 409). Exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling was employed in different regions and weighted for age and self-identified gender to reflect national demographic breakdowns. A screener survey in each country was then used to recruit 102 participants (20–28 per country), balanced for age, gender, education, occupation, frequency of long-form screen consumption, and degree of interest in the UK, who participated in digital activities over five days after the survey. The diaries were used to recruit twelve interviewees per country, balanced in the same way (48 in total), supplemented with focus groups (3–4

per country, n = 38) for hard-to-reach 16–19-year-olds (see Bengesser et al., 2022, 2023 for a more detailed discussion of methodology).

Industry analysis of viewing trends in each country was compared with our survey findings but revealed only limited and selective industry-sourced statistical data on younger audiences, often focused on monthly or annual "reach" rather than time spent viewing, "market share", or more revealing shorter "reach" periods. Additionally, detailed catalogue research was undertaken to identify what British content was available on key VoD services in each country (see Bengesser et al., 2025). Landing-page research of three platforms, including Netflix, the local PSM platform, and one domestic commercial platform, was used to pinpoint where shows specified by interview respondents appeared (Bengesser et al., 2025). The social media accounts of at least six platforms in each country were examined to establish which British content VoD services had promoted during the survey. The research also included interviews with 56 cultural intermediaries (sales executives, programme buyers, festival organisers, influencers, and teachers), providing further insights into the cultural and market specificities of each country. As with all self-selecting surveys, some caution is necessary to account for respondents who overstate their preferences. This was counterbalanced by diaries (of what had been watched) and interviews, which largely confirmed survey findings.

Shifts in viewing preferences – platform, genre, country of origin, and language

Our survey research shows that younger audiences are generally watching little public service content (channels or VoD) and little linear content, favouring global VoD streamers instead (see Table 7.1). Linear television channels are used by 13–26 per cent of survey respondents across age groups in Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, and significantly less in Denmark (2–10%), the most digitalised television market of all. PSM VoD platforms (DRTV in Denmark, the ARD and ZDF Mediatheken in Germany, RaiPlay in Italy, and NPO Start/Plus in the Netherlands) rank higher than their domestic commercial counterparts (TV 2 Play in Denmark, RTL+ in Germany, Mediaset Infinity in Italy, and Videoland in the Netherlands). However, use of PSM VoD platforms is weighted more heavily towards older 30–34-year-olds, except in Italy. Across all four countries, Netflix, YouTube, and Disney+ are consistently the top streamers, with some variations: (Amazon) Prime Video is more popular in Italy (second) and Germany (third) than in the Netherlands (fourth) or Denmark (tenth).

Table 7.1 Platforms used by survey respondents by country and age group (per cent)

Country	Platform	16–19	20–24	25–29	30–34
Denmark (*n* = 422)	Netflix	90	91	87	89
	HBO MAX	43	69	75	67
	Disney+	53	59	55	63
	DRTV	26	59	53	74
	YouTube	61	46	40	23
	TV 2 PLAY	42	48	33	47
	Viaplay	43	37	35	33
	Cinema	19	18	42	35
	TV Channels	10	10	4	2
	Prime Video	1	5	7	10
Germany (*n* = 421)	Netflix	87	87	94	84
	YouTube	74	83	69	61
	Prime Video	60	66	69	67
	Disney+	51	52	53	35
	Cinema	40	45	46	36
	ZDF Mediathek	17	34	37	41
	ARD Mediathek	13	31	31	43
	TV Channels	17	13	20	26
	RTL+	4	13	15	10
	Joyn	7	6	6	11
Italy (*n* = 546)	Netflix	83	84	79	82
	Prime Video	71	68	77	71
	YouTube	61	60	47	40
	Disney+	37	39	44	51
	RaiPlay	35	31	47	34
	Cinema	34	35	43	31
	TV Channels	17	21	18	15
	Sky Go	13	14	16	11
	Mediaset Infinity	11	16	9	5
Netherlands (*n* = 408)	Netflix	90	88	86	76
	YouTube	65	79	64	42
	Disney+	43	48	47	37
	HBO Max	28	39	36	39
	Prime Video	30	34	33	37
	NPO Plus/Start	8	17	44	46
	Cinema	21	35	33	16
	TV Channels	20	16	15	23
	Videoland	12	12	18	20
	RTL XL	3	1	3	7

Comments: Refers to use of "long-form content", defined as content > 20 minutes. Survey question: "Where do you usually go when you want to watch long-form content? (pick all that apply)". The top 10 platforms in each country are listed.

Source: see Esser et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b

Interviews confirmed the dominance of global streamers in all countries, with domestic television channels, including PSM channels, barely appearing on the radar of most young viewers. For example, Mads (DK, 27) stated that "Danish television just isn't really on the menu", while Lotte (DE, 19) claimed to watch "Not really any live broadcast television", and Piero (IT, 17) only watched linear television "when I visit my grandma".

With domestic channel consumption in decline and domestic streaming services often disregarded, most interviewees look first at their favourite global streaming service (usually Netflix) when deciding what to view. Younger viewers are getting out of the habit of turning to PSM unless there is a specific reason. For Gabriele (IT, 23), Italian PSM platform RaiPlay was viewed "always knowing that a [specific] programme I wanted to watch was on there", but it was not the first place to go to. Equally for Didier (DE, 29): "I would first look at Netflix, Amazon, Disney and then afterwards ZDF or ARD […] because I don't even see it [ZDF] as a competitor for my attention, because the others are so omnipresent".

Survey, digital diary, and interview data revealed limited desire among younger audiences to engage with domestic television in any form, whether public service or commercial, linear or on-demand. As a result, young people are habitually less exposed to domestic entertainment as a group, except for some 16–19-year-olds who might watch with family, often at mealtimes or for major entertainment or sports events. This is more prevalent in Italy, where 15 of our 22 interviewees lived with their parents, in keeping with official statistics indicating that almost 70 per cent of 18–34-year-olds were still living with parents in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024).

PSM platforms and/or television channels remain relevant for some, primarily as sources of news, for domestically focused documentaries, and for a limited selection of the country's most popular light entertainment shows. For Martijn (NL, 27), Dutch PSM VoD platform NPO Start/Plus was a destination for "more documentary-style things" rather than fiction. Helle (DK, 17), while expressing a dislike for "the Danish stuff", conceded that linear television was still the place to go for lifestyle shows in Danish "like Buying Houses Blind or decorating shows and baking shows". In Italy, young people reported using PSM platforms occasionally for Italian films, but less for domestic serialised drama.

Genre preferences for fiction reinforce predilections for English-language entertainment, usually from the US, over domestic content. Favoured genres include Fantasy/Sci-fi, Comedy/Comedy-Drama, and Action/Adventure (see Table 7.2), precisely those where US platforms have larger catalogues. For example, Netflix has 6,000–7,000 titles on offer at any one time in each case study market compared to its public service counterparts: DRTV (849), ZDF (215), RaiPlay (2,542), and NPO Start (621) (JustWatch, as cited in Bengesser et al., 2025: 1522). By contrast, reality-TV and talent shows – domestically produced entertainment often promoted as appointment-to-view by domestic

outlets including PSM – are no longer as popular as they were in the 2000s and early 2010s (see Table 7.2). Survey results were replicated in project digital diaries, which showed that scripted episodes comprised 80 per cent of episodes viewed, compared to 20 per cent for non-scripted shows.

Table 7.2 Genre preferences (per cent)

Genre	Denmark (*n* = 422)	Germany (*n* = 426)	Italy (*n* = 555)	Netherlands (*n* = 408)
Fantasy/Sci-fi	47	47	41	45
Comedy/Comedy-drama	52	44	41	37
Action/Adventure	46	43	43	48
Drama	52	38	38	24
Crime/Thriller	40	42	35	33
Sitcoms	32	35	45	33
Animation	26	30	37	32
Historical drama	30	30	19	33
Romance/Romantic comedy	26	28	29	30
Documentaries	36	28	19	31
Stand-up comedy	13	12	23	15
Reality-TV	15	12	7	14
Talk shows	9	11	10	12
Talent competitions	9	7	17	4
Lifestyle & factual entertainment	19	6	3	7
Other	3	6	3	8

Comments: Percentages refer to respondents aged 16–34. Survey question: "What type of screen content do you like best?" Up to five responses were allowed, percentages hence add up to more than 100 per cent.

Source: see Esser et al., 2025: 19

Interviews and digital diaries in all four countries confirmed genre preferences for fiction, including a shift away from domestic light entertainment formats. Interviews suggested that younger viewers have outgrown non-scripted formats, that they watch them less with family members, and that appointment-to-view shows no longer fit lifestyles more attuned to on-demand viewing. For Kenny (NL, 18), "we're just not the age of that [*The Voice of Holland*] anymore".

Lifestyle and factual entertainment, valued in Denmark (19%) as a favourite genre, and talent competitions (17%) and stand-up comedy (23%), favoured in Italy, provide pointers about why *some* local entertainment shows appeal. Usually, this relates to familiarity because these genres are transmitted in the local language, reflect local culture, feature recognisable local celebrities, and crucially generate connections among friend groups. According to Helle (DK, 17), Danish reality formats allow you to "talk to almost all your friends about it", creating a sense of community. Similarly,

Ellen (NL, 33) referred to the shared experience of Dutch reality shows "because sometimes they become trending in the Netherlands, and then friends and colleagues are talking about it, and then I'm, like, triggered to also watch it".

However, preferences for fiction genres are much stronger, and this partly explains audience preferences for US content. Survey respondents placed the US in pole position in all four countries as a favoured top 3 country-of-origin (see Table 7.3). Looking at first choices only (see Table 7.4), the US ranks first by some distance, with Italian (20%) and Danish (24%) domestic shares falling some way behind the US, while still outranking German (8%) and Dutch domestic shares (13%), which ranked third. Preferences for US programming were also reflected in digital diaries, with the US achieving a 58 per cent share of viewed episodes over five days compared with 15 per cent for domestic entertainment.

Table 7.3 Country-of-origin preferences (per cent)

Country	Denmark (*n* = 413)	Germany (*n* = 380)	Italy (*n* = 530)	Netherlands (*n* = 386)
US	91	88	91	90
Domestic	80	51	75	52
UK	78	63	58	79
Japan	5	14	15	17
France	8	11	9	2
Spain	4	6	14	3
South Korea	4	7	7	7
Germany	5	n/a	2	4
Italy	2	3	n/a	2
Nordics	2	3	0	3
Sweden	3	5	0	1
Norway	3	1	1	1
Canada	1	2	1	3
Australia	1	2	1	2
Asia	1	0	1	0
Belgium	0	0	0	2
Europe	1	1	3	0

Comments: Percentages refer to respondents aged 16–34. Survey question: "Which countries (national or international) are your favourite sources when it comes to screen content? Please write your answers starting with your most favourite". Three fields for ranked responses were provided. First, second, and third ranked choices are combined in this table. Countries with 1 per cent or less across all four countries are not listed.

Source: see Esser et al., 2025: 25

Table 7.4 No. 1 country-of-origin choices (per cent)

Country	Country of origin for content	Age group				
		16–19	20–24	25–29	30–34	All (16–34)
Denmark (*n* = 413)	US	71	43	59	45	55
	Denmark	18	30	16	40	24
	UK	6	25	21	13	18
Germany (*n* = 380)	US	62	61	58	47	57
	Germany	8	8	5	11	8
	UK	12	17	24	23	20
Italy (*n* = 530)	US	62	62	61	61	61
	Italy	19	27	20	14	20
	UK	5	4	12	15	9
Netherlands (*n* = 386)	US	64	49	52	43	52
	Netherlands	10	8	16	17	13
	UK	21	27	22	31	24

Comments: Survey question: "Which countries (national or international) are your favourite sources when it comes to screen content?" The table shows the share of respondents placing the US as their first country-of-origin choice.

Source: see Esser et al., 2025: 24

As shown in Tables 7.3 and 7.4, the UK fares well in survey rankings as a country of origin, either second before domestic content (Germany and the Netherlands) or third (Denmark and Italy). It should, however, be noted that interviews revealed that its more recent success among young people (16–34) in Germany and Italy, and among the youngest (16–19) in all four countries, is based mostly on a small number of heavily promoted "transnational" youth-oriented shows that appear largely on Netflix (*Sex Education*, 2019–2023; *Heartstopper*, 2022–2024; *Peaky Blinders*, 2013–2022), or occasionally on (Amazon) Prime (the BBC's *Fleabag*, 2016–2019). Some British comedy shows (e.g., *Cunk on Earth*, BBC/Netflix, 2022; *Derry Girls*, Channel 4, 2018–2022) defy the odds because of their status as memes on social media (see below). Some older film franchises (*Harry Potter*, various, 2001–2011) and older films such as *Notting Hill* (Roger Mitchell, 1999) are favoured as classics that are frequently shown and therefore remembered.

Watching in English represents another shift in viewing preferences, driven by the language options available on VoD platforms. High and rising levels of English language proficiency (EF EPI, 2023) boost the global trend for watching in English. This is particularly evident in countries like Denmark and the Netherlands, where viewers have long viewed content in English, but also in traditionally dubbing-oriented markets like Germany and Italy, where, as our research suggests (Esser et al., 2025: 81), watching in English is becoming increasingly common.

The reasons why viewers in these countries choose US over domestic content are complex. A key factor is the greater quantity and variety offered by

transnational streamers, particularly in the fiction genres most sought after by young audiences. However, other factors relating to promotion and discovery, as well as perceptions about domestic content, also play a role, as outlined below.

Social media and streaming services as sources of discovery

The dominance of English-language content is sustained by its promotion on global streaming platforms (Iordache, 2022; Johnson, 2020; Lobato, 2020; Lotz, 2022). Interface designs on all VoD platforms constrain, limit, and direct the flow of content through personalised recommender algorithms and by prioritising certain content over others. However, individual platforms differ in how they manage content discovery, and these differences tend to be linked to their business models and service types (Chalaby, 2022; McKelvey & Hunt, 2019; Park, 2019). For PSM VoD services, remits such as content universality or the focus on national culture and society are not always easy to align with trends towards content personalisation (see D'Arma et al., 2024; Kelly & Sørensen, 2021; Sørensen, 2020). This challenge, combined with smaller catalogues and concerns over data collection, makes it harder for PSM to compete with global VoD services.

The sheer quantity and availability of appealing English-language content on transnational VoD platforms raise issues around prominence and discovery (Bengesser et al., 2025; D'Arma et al., 2024), as well as broader concerns about media and platform power (Jin, 2015). These dynamics manifest in a variety of industrial practices, including vertical integration within proprietary platforms, rapid transnational scaling up of production, and corporate practices that disregard regulation (Davis, 2021). Consequently, analysis of how young audiences discover and access screen entertainment provides clues about why PSM may feature less in younger audiences' consciousness. Our survey data shows that recommendations from streaming services, friends and family, and social media clips are the most important ways of finding out about British and other screen content (see Table 7.5). The importance of recommendations from streaming services confirms what many interviewees stated about going straight to their favourite global streaming platforms to check what they want to watch.

Clips and trailers on social media, chiefly Instagram and TikTok, are also key in raising attention for shows, particularly among 16–19-year-olds. For this age group, they are the top route to discovery in Italy (77%) and the Netherlands (66%), the second most important in Germany (62%), and the third in Denmark (47%). Social media platforms are important for determining viewing, but mostly for shows on transnational platforms like Netflix and (Amazon) Prime Video. PSM lacks the capability to deliver timely personalised social media recommendations (D'Arma et al., 2024). Finding content by looking at what is offered on television channels, including PSM linear channels, comes much lower down on the list of discovery sources (11–19%).

Table 7.5 Content-discovery drivers (per cent)

Country	Discovery driver	Age group				
		16-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	Total (16-34)
Denmark (*n* = 374)	Recommendations from the streaming services I use	57	76	64	51	64
	Recommendations from friends or family	50	63	70	72	64
	Clips and trailers on social media like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, etc.	47	53	39	29	44
	From film and TV reviews in podcasts, blogs, news outlets, etc.	18	37	50	48	39
	I look at what is offered on TV channels	12	17	12	19	14
	Other	8	4	6	10	6
	Influencers	9	1	1	0	2
	Recommendations on fan websites or groups	3	0	2	6	2
Germany (*n* = 349)	Recommendations from the streaming services I use	68	75	72	75	73
	Recommendations from friends or family	55	47	62	73	61
	Clips and trailers on social media like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, etc.	62	52	50	32	48
	From film and TV reviews in podcasts, blogs, news outlets, etc.	14	22	27	41	27
	I look at what is offered on TV channels	16	6	9	14	11
	Other	6	9	2	6	5
	Influencers	2	1	2	0	1
	Recommendations on fan websites or groups	2	2	5	3	3
Italy (*n* = 423)	Recommendations from the streaming services I use	51	43	58	71	56
	Recommendations from friends or family	51	38	38	54	44
	Clips and trailers on social media like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, etc.	77	71	62	37	61
	From film and TV reviews in podcasts, blogs, news outlets, etc.	26	39	35	30	33
	I look at what is offered on TV channels	8	15	14	11	12
	Other	1	4	1	2	2
	Influencers	6	3	3	0	3
	Recommendations on fan websites or groups	2	0	6	4	3
Netherlands (*n* = 378)	Recommendations from the streaming services I use	41	69	70	73	65
	Recommendations from friends or family	54	52	63	47	55
	Clips and trailers on social media like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, etc.	66	68	47	35	55
	From film and TV reviews in podcasts, blogs, news outlets, etc.	16	18	23	27	21
	I look at what is offered on TV channels	28	16	13	28	19
	Other	5	8	7	14	8
	Influencers	4	3	1	0	2
	Recommendations on fan websites or groups	12	6	6	7	7

Comments: Survey question: "How do you usually find out about the British screen content you watch? [pick max. 3 options]".

Source: see Esser et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b

Interviews conducted after the survey confirmed that Netflix is the most heavily used source of recommendations, with few interviewees browsing television channels or PSM platforms. Barbara (IT, 31) was fairly typical in heading for Netflix first because "there is a vast catalogue, or perhaps because it offers more things that fit my taste". When interviewees head straight for their favourite streaming service, usually Netflix, this reinforces the visibility of non-domestic shows. Interviewees were aware that some shows were more heavily promoted by Netflix, which often sparked conversations among friends and increased visibility on social media platforms. This, in turn, reinforced the desire to watch those shows, creating a sense of community. For example, Emilia (DE, 24) noted that shows recommended to her were "also shows that are kind of talked about a lot". When British historical drama *Peaky Blinders* (BBC, 2013–2022) was recommended to her, she watched it because "everyone was talking about it" online. Similarly, Kris (NL, 26), was drawn to British teen comedy-drama series *Everything Now* (2023) on Netflix after seeing a trailer for it on Instagram.

The more frequently younger viewers use global services to locate what they want to watch, the less likely they are to encounter domestic content. VoD recommendation algorithms play a central role in shaping viewing choices and cultural circulation. As several scholars have noted, these systems tend to privilege content from their own, often US-affiliated catalogues, which can limit the visibility of non-Anglophone and domestic productions (Davis, 2021; Sørensen, 2020). Interviewees confirmed that young audiences rarely encountered domestic shows because there were fewer of them, or, if they did, it was not the type of content that appealed to them. In this respect, Eduard's (NL, 21) behaviour was fairly typical:

> On Netflix, I really only see American or other types of content. And nothing Dutch really gets recommended to me either, so then I don't really go out of my way to search for Dutch content.

Interviewees agreed that TikTok and Instagram are the most influential social media for discovering entertainment. For Elisa (IT, 26), TikTok worked "better" than other social networks because "it shows me things that maybe I haven't watched, but which are very much in line with other series I watch, or other films, and so I start from there". The viewing choices of 16–24-year-olds are also significantly influenced by online comments from friends, which, according to Elodie (NL, 26), added "trust on the recommendations that the algorithm gives me". TikTok was a key influence on what Lena (DK, 17) watched on streaming platforms. She commented, "I didn't know about *Ginny & Georgia* [US–Canadian comedy drama series on Netflix, 2021–2025] until I went on TikTok and saw the premiere. That's when I thought that I really would like to watch that". Paolo (IT, 17) saw UK drama *Peaky Blinders* on Netflix's landing page but decided to watch the series only after seeing "some scenes on Instagram Reels".

Social media and viral user-generated memes can also bring shows into the limelight that might be deemed less likely to succeed transnationally. This was clear for British comedy shows *Cunk on Earth* – a mockumentary parodying history documentaries through absurd interviews and questions – and *Derry Girls* – a sitcom about a group of teenagers navigating adolescence against the backdrop of Northern Ireland's Troubles. Featuring distinctive humour and strong British accents, from Lancashire and Northern Ireland respectively (see Esser et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b), neither show was heavily promoted on Netflix. Yet both became surprisingly popular through humorous and memorable user-generated clips that increased viewer interest. Anders (DK, 28) found *Derry Girls* through "a funny clip" on Instagram. Emilia (DE, 24) saw "bits and pieces [of *Cunk on Earth*] on social media" and found it "so funny" that it prompted her to watch it. Gabriele (IT, 24) also discovered *Cunk on Earth* "thanks to social media" and "the popularity at some point was such that I almost certainly came across unofficial clips as well". This spurred him to watch with friends.

Where does this leave public service media?

Since many young viewers neither seek out PSM content nor encounter it on global streaming platforms, where US entertainment and popular fiction are abundant, it is not surprising that they perceive PSM content as less relevant. Ignorance of domestic productions and lack of interest persists despite efforts by some PSM to harness digital platforms and social media for distribution, as well as attempts to create innovative and interactive formats tailored for young audiences on youth-oriented platforms like the ZDF Neo channel and Funk VoD platform in Germany (see Stollfuß, 2021). Perceived lack of PSM relevance for younger audiences was evident in low agreement rates for the survey statement "Danish/Dutch/German/Italian content feels more relevant than British content". In Italy, 31 per cent agreed, followed by Denmark with 20 per cent. In the Netherlands and Germany, this was even lower, at 15 and 7 per cent, respectively.

Interviewees tended to perceive US content as being more entertaining with higher production budgets, better acting talent and scripts, and an approach that "gets you hooked" (Margherita, IT, 27). With low appreciation of local entertainment offerings, there was also little appreciation of PSM's wider offer. In Denmark and Italy, there was recognition of excellence in some areas. Danes (especially older interviewees) highlighted the quality of Danish crime drama; Italians highlighted Italian feature films and some statement drama series. This may be reflected in higher survey rankings for domestic content in Denmark and Italy compared to Germany and the Netherlands (see Tables 7.3 and 7.4).

What emerged strongly throughout the study was not just ignorance about domestic entertainment but outright dislike of domestic fiction, criticised for lower-quality acting and storytelling than US productions. Entrenched perceptions about the superiority of US (and, to a lesser degree, British) fiction occur in a "self-perpetuating cycle of English-language dominance" which works against domestic productions (Esser & Steemers, 2026: 19; Mast et al., 2017: 2579).

Except for Italy, domestic fiction was often described, without any prompting, with the same English-origin word – "cringe" or "cringy" – used particularly by the under-25-year-olds. Reasons for this were grounded on a lack of authenticity, exacerbated by perceptions of "bad" acting and scriptwriting that was not "always as fleshed out" (Floor, NL, 20) as English-language productions. Further examination reveals that respondents like Max (DE, 17) are also influenced by an everyday discourse about domestic content being "bad across the board", reinforcing "this very bad stigma against German entertainment". In Italy, except for Rai's *Mare Fuori* [*The Sea Beyond*] (2020–2023), a series set in a youth detention centre in Naples, interviewees did not mention any domestic youth-oriented shows. This suggests a deficit, borne out in interview responses across all four countries that highlighted the lack of acting quality, often linked to a "lack of authenticity". For example, Anders (DK, 28) watched "very little Danish TV" because the writing was "very stiff" and the actors seemed like "theatre actors", which made it seem "not realistic, the way they talk". Max (DE, 17) disliked German films because they were "a bit *cringy*, but also not really interesting, and the humour doesn't really fit". These views were shared by his circle of friends ("I don't really know any of my friends who really like German television or German shows"). For Karl (NL, 18), Dutch television programmes were "not really well-made productions, so you see that there's not a big budget. And the acting most of the time is just wooden". For Elisa (IT, 26), acting in Italian series was also perceived as being of "a low standard and I can sense it much more, compared to when I watch shows that are non-Italian".

The effect of these sustained low expectations is the continued perception that domestic fiction is lower in quality. As Didier (DE, 29), talking about the German series *Babylon Berlin* (Sky/ARD, 2017–2022), which at the time had the highest production budget of any German television series ever (Schneider, 2017), recalled:

> I've heard from people that it isn't bad at all, but I still haven't [watched it]. That's like for me – maybe it's prejudice, I'm not sure – but there's, like, again a little barrier to watch something like this, to giving something like this a chance. It's maybe also because I don't have it on my mind. I'm not really aware of it, that it might be a competitor for my attention…

While our analysis acknowledges the structural disadvantages faced by PSM, insights into the appeal of British content, the primary focus of our study, may offer guidance on how PSM, within their limited means, could enhance the attractiveness of domestic fiction for young audiences (Esser et al., 2025: 48). Humour, as well as characters and stories, seem to be a major draw for watching British content. While the surveys do not provide strong quantitative evidence for the higher quality of British stories, corresponding interview statements around successful British "coming-of-age" narratives on Netflix (*Sex Education*; *Derry Girls*; *Heartstopper*) suggest that a focus on relationships, sexual identity, and humour are relevant and seen as notably lacking in domestic fiction, which does not spark the same emotional engagement. For Lene (DK, 17), Danish series "don't really trigger your emotions" in the same way as "coming-of-age stories" like *Heartstopper* on Netflix. Kris (NL, 26) was drawn to youth-oriented shows "based around romance and sex", such as *Heartstopper* and *Sex Education* on Netflix, but "I don't find that in Dutch shows or movies".

Humour was identified as a notable characteristic of British shows, spanning both fiction and non-fiction, because it featured even in more serious genres, something interviewees did not perceive in domestic productions. For Max (DE, 17), the focus on humour in British content was,

> a contrast to German television, where if you watch a normal show – like, for example, crime drama or something like that – it's very serious. There are no jokes in it. […] I think it's more enjoyable if you can sometimes laugh about it.

Finally, the low appreciation or growing disinterest in domestic programmes, both fiction and entertainment generally, can reinforce prejudices against domestic programming. The issue is exacerbated by the deluge of English-language recommendations on social media. This creates a vicious circle that perpetuates the low ranking and appreciation of native-language entertainment (see Mast et al., 2017) and affects other genres within PSM offerings, such as information and news, which were previously embedded and promoted between more popular offerings to attract viewers.

Conclusion

The structural advantages of global streamers, including their vast budgets and sophisticated recommender systems (Chalaby, 2022; Jin, 2015), often mean domestic content is simply not on young people's radar. When encountered, it is often perceived as of comparatively lower quality and less relatable. Such perceptions circulate discursively and become self-reinforcing. This dynamic, combined with growing preferences for English-language screen fiction viewed in English, has serious implications for national legacy media because it

signals and reinforces reduced engagement with domestically produced media over time. As part of the justification for PSM, the entertainment remit may seem, at times, secondary to the news-led information and education remit. Yet fiction does play an essential role in reflecting society, serving not only as a space for social and political discourse but also as a means of creating and fostering national identity, community belonging, social cohesion, and legitimacy for PSM. Our research suggests that among younger audiences, "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991) are moving from a sense of "national community" to a more complex, multifaceted set of identities that often transcend national and local imaginings, particularly around coming-of-age themes in fiction that are clearly important for younger audiences. Global streamers, with their vast offer of popular entertainment, unmatched marketing budgets, and promotional power, are driving this trend, with the English language becoming "second nature" for a growing number of young people through global media and social networks. The challenge for PSM of connecting with younger audiences through domestic entertainment and fiction is very difficult. To address it, PSM must develop a deeper understanding of the preferences and behaviour of younger audiences, informing strategies that offer appealing entertainment while also reflecting the cultural diversity and social pluralism that connect communities.

The empirical findings presented in this chapter provide insights into the entertainment experiences of young people across different parts of Europe and the importance of providing entertaining experiences as part of PSM. Clues about what may be lacking domestically give some pointers about how PSM might engage younger audiences more effectively, notwithstanding the difficult financial and political pressures they face. Solutions that some PSM are already following include establishing a stronger and more engaging presence on social media platforms; making more targeted investments in (youth-oriented) audience research and data analytics; prioritising youth issues and humour in fiction; and acknowledging the essential role of entertainment as well as news and information in maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of PSM in the digital age. These difficult but essential adjustments are necessary if PSM is to survive generational shifts in screen consumption and continue serving as a vital safeguard for democratic values – doing so in inclusive ways that recognise the role of entertainment in shaping public opinion.

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CHAPTER 8

The role of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as sources of information about Europe

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we provide insights into the platformisation of media content by examining how news professionals communicate about European issues on major social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) across ten European countries and how the public engages in discussions about these issues on these platforms. The results provide essential information about the digital public sphere with respect to the most relevant European issues (health, the climate, and the economy, according to the Eurobarometer), published by both professional news producers and non-professional actors over three months (September–November 2021). However, the results only reveal a few references to the dimensions of Europeanisation in social media posts, as institutions, law, and governance are the most frequently mentioned dimensions in the analysis, demonstrating that Europe is primarily associated with the establishment. By contrast, no trends of Europeanisation from below were found. We discuss these findings with respect to the potential impact of platforms on public sphere failures.

KEYWORDS: content analysis, digital public sphere, Europeanisation, European identity, social media platforms

Thomass, B., Miconi, A., & Moreno, J. (2026). The role of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as sources of information about Europe. In A. Balčytienė, P. Bajomi-Lázár, & H. Sousa (Eds.), *Digital media shadowing democracy: Technology, communication, and power* (pp. 149–170). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. https://doi.org/10.48335/9789189864290-8

Introduction: Europe and social media platforms

Historically, Europeanisation was seen by the political actors who created the EU and its forerunners as the integration of many states into one more or less homogeneous entity. In media and communication studies, this approach gave birth to the idea of the Europeanisation of the public sphere, which, however, developed into a very contested notion.

In this chapter, we take a perspective that looks at the content of social media platforms with a focus on the Europeanisation of the public sphere and its changing status. We ask if we can find this notion in the communications that populate the social media platforms.

As part of the EU-funded research project "EuMePlat – European Media Platforms: assessing positive and negative externalities for European Culture", we analyse how the key preoccupations of European citizens are played out by the news media and ordinary citizens on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube). These key preoccupations refer to the economy, health, the environment, the climate, and Europe. We assume that the content that users find on these platforms has an implication for the project of European democracy and European integration and that it may be an indicator of the state of the Europeanisation of the public sphere.

Our research is based on a cross-country comparative analysis of ten countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Turkey). We conducted a content analysis of the most important social media publications to assess their impact on the societal level. In this part of the overarching project, which was methodologically grounded in a quantitative content analysis of several social media platforms, the coding of Europeanisation relied on five dimensions – political, economic, scientific, legal, and cultural – inspired by the European cultures and values approaches and by the European (capitalist) industries, political institutions, and law approach. Thereby, we aim to contribute to the part of this volume that assesses the impact of social media platforms upon the creation of European news, news consumption, and the overall state of the public sphere.

Europeanisation and the European public sphere

Since our research relies on the concepts of Europeanisation and the European public sphere, a few considerations on how we understand these will be outlined here. The literature on these notions is extremely rich and broad, and an important step in the theoretical foundation of our project was to capture this diversity of meanings in an understanding as comprehensively as possible.

Following Carpentier and colleagues (2022), we depart from a complex understanding of Europeanisation that includes various dimensions. As the

main categories to grasp the complexity of Europeanisation, Carpentier and colleagues (2022) distinguished between the material and the discursive aspects of the concept. While the material aspect focuses on structures and institutions, as well as practices, the discursive aspect is related to the meanings allocated to Europe. Both components are entangled and hence should not be considered a dichotomy, given "the capacity of the discursive to produce meanings about the material, and for the material to invite for particular meanings and to dislocate others through its own materiality" (Carpentier et al., 2022: 106).

Discourses about Europe can either claim a fixed, essential meaning or stress shifting, unstable meanings, while the material side focuses on Europe as a social space or as a political space shaped by institutions and practices. Europeanisation has many dimensions and meanings, and all of them can be "more" European in the sense of being more important, more acknowledged, more present, and more practiced.

The European public sphere is at the heart of the material-discursive dimension, understood in this chapter as public communication, which takes place in defined spaces with general access and with reference to common subjects mainly imparted by the media. With the foundation of the EU, the project of European integration has migrated from the status of a primarily economic project to a comprehensive political and social one. With the enlargement of the political aims and the increasing dislocation of national competencies to the European level, the connection of the European population to the policies of the EU via a public sphere has become a vital question, relevant from both a theoretical and a practical perspective (Thomass, 2011: 119). This is where the question of the state of European public spheres has long been intensely debated.

Social media platforms as sources for information on Europe

The state of the European public sphere has been of concern to political actors and researchers ever since it became clear that the project of European integration is not solely driven by economic integration, but that the population of Europe must also be able to exchange ideas in a communication space – and actually do so. The European public sphere, and more comprehensively the European identity, are key to this integration process, in which media play an important role. Based on a normatively highly charged and homogeneous concept of the public sphere, and in the light of numerous study results, research has come to the conclusion that the Europeanisation of the public sphere is not an exceptional situation but rather an ongoing process of transnational communication of the same topics and patterns of interpretation in the media of the European countries (Benert & Pfetsch, 2022: 364).

For a long time, media theorists were predominantly optimistic about the potential social impacts of computer networks. They assumed that the digital public sphere would provide everyone with better access to political information, facilitate public debate, and improve political participation (Kovarik, 2015). The expansion of the spectrum of actors would increase the degree of deliberation (Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002). These hopes have been countered by sceptical considerations suggesting that this expansion would result in the fragmentation of the public sphere, which was assumed to be homogeneous in the age of mass media.

However, the current media systems in the industrialised Western societies are more likely to produce what could be described as cacophony, borrowing a term from music theory. Pfetsch and colleagues (2018: 479) noted that communication in digitalised public spheres has led to diversity but also to a state in which "the synchronicity of voices and messages that are not necessarily related to each other can be described as a characteristic of public spheres [translated]". They coined the term "dissonant public spheres [translated]" to describe this phenomenon. Dissonances in public spheres are understood as situations,

> in which diverse actors synchronously and asynchronously articulate topics, information and opinions between which tensions, contradictions or ruptures exist. Dissonance encompasses both an unrelated juxtaposition of different public contributions as well as explicit counter-speech to the (supposedly) hegemonic perspective [translated]. (Pfetsch et al., 2018: 479)

The assumption of fragmentation is supported by the characteristics of the platform economy. According to Srnicek (2017), the platform economy is based on a business model that is driven by monopolistic companies and is based on the utilisation of data. Platforms are large companies that collect, utilise, and control data en masse to achieve dominance in the economy. The dramatic consequences in the areas of information, communication, and entertainment can be summarised by the term "disruption". Platform providers are creating new media formats that are changing user expectations and behaviour. The resulting reality of digital media services is a world of multiple realities that exist side by side. Misinformation has increased, half-truths and quarter-truths are circulating, one emotional uproar is replaced by the next seemingly even more scandalous one, conspiracy theories are spreading virally at great speed, prejudices and hasty judgements are replacing reliable knowledge. The networks falsely labelled as social are fuelling this smouldering fire that is eating into solid information with ever new offerings and functionalities that are constantly being reinvented by powerful intermediaries with large research and development budgets (Thomaß, 2020: 208).

As the platform economy has given rise to the oligopoly of gigantic network companies, highly monopolised structures have emerged whose

business models are ultimately based on Big Data: "Facebook is not run so that we can all share our ideas. It's so that advertisers can obtain more data about us. That's the primary function. Everything else is a by-product [translated]", stated Srnicek (2018). The algorithms that control the respective services place users in separate digital realities if they do not become active themselves and search for commonalities. There is a growing risk of alienation between individual social groups and between elites and broad sections of the population. Under these conditions, the public arena becomes a battleground over divergent truth claims – the common ground is missing. Moreover, conflicts, separations, and arising inequalities are contributing to social fragmentation and the lack of cohesion.

The economic power of platforms is therefore relevant to democracy because it jeopardises the prerequisites of a democratic public sphere without any social control capable of containing this power. While the debate on the social control of public media has taken on a sharp form in many European countries, the control of Big Tech platforms has so far been a topic only for media research and regulatory experts in the EU.

The issue of the power of Big Tech platforms is relevant for the idea of Europeanisation as well. Benert and Pfetsch (2022) have argued that the Europeanisation of the political public sphere is a process that is dependent on political and media infrastructures. Two key developments have led to a gradual increase in the Europeanisation of national public spheres over time: First, political and economic crises promote politicisation and, as a result, an increased visibility of European issues in the national media. Second, the Internet and particularly the social media platforms are creating new communication infrastructures and the possibility of transnational networking. Despite increasing politicisation and digital networking opportunities, the European public sphere does not function as a democratic arena, but rather as a communication space for mutual observation and reference between actors from different national contexts (Benert & Pfetsch, 2022). This is backed by the observation that a national framing of EU-related issues has been primarily detected by comparative studies of European media (Bee & Chrona, 2020; 871–872; de Vreese, 2003: 99–116; de Vreese et al., 2001: 116–118; Koopmans & Erbe, 2003: 115–118; Machill et al., 2007: 188–189; Peters et al., 2005: 148).

But to what extent is this happening? One relevant aspect of political communication on digital communication platforms is the question of which actors are active on which topics. Do the same media outlets and politicians dominate here as they did in broadcasting, or do ordinary citizens have a share in the public discourse, as the hope for more participation would suggest? What do the actors talk about? What relative impact do their posts have? Do they have conversations across borders or across the entire continent? And what does empirical evidence tell us about the state of platformisation and

Europeanisation and, therefore, about the state of the democratic, European, digital public sphere?

Recent studies point to the potential impact of digital platforms upon political polarisation and public sphere failures (Allcott et al., 2020; Bail et al., 2018; Schuessler et al., 2026; Yarchi et al. 2021).

While traditional mass media constitute gatekeepers controlling who can speak publicly and what is spoken about, social media allow everyone with Internet access to address a potentially global audience. How much of that potential is realised depends to a large degree on the algorithms controlling the news feed (in case of Facebook and Twitter/X) and the recommendations (in case of YouTube). Hence, the publications of the actual mix of agents – media, politicians, public intellectuals, and ordinary citizens – on social media and what they talk about will have an impact on public discourse, which needs to be assessed. Do we see a rational discourse about the best outcome for the biggest possible number in solidarity and fairness, or a cesspool of hatred, populism, self-righteousness, me-first, disinformation, propaganda, and porn? What does the state of the digital social public sphere tell us about the state of democracy in Europe?

We wanted to address these questions through the study of publications on social media platforms. The next section explains how we proceeded with the analysis.

Methodology: An analysis of social media publications

As already mentioned, the data for this chapter come from the EuMePlat project, which aimed to empirically research the interplay of two major concepts: platformisation and Europeanisation. The research questions addressed publications about Europe and European citizens' concerns on social media and explored the intersection between top-level professional content and bottom-level non-professional content on social media platforms (Cardoso et al., 2023). The units of analysis were the media objects published on social media platforms.

To address those issues, a research framework was devised to implement the research in the ten countries involved in the project and to assure the comparability of the results (Cardoso et al., 2021). Following the guidelines of the EuMePlat project, all of the social media publications collected for analysis were about Europe and about the three main concerns of Europeans in relation to Europe (according to the Eurobarometer 93 study): Health, Economy, and Climate (European Union, 2020). With regard to social media platforms, our choice was to collect social media publications on Facebook, Twitter (now X) and YouTube, following the overall data presenting those platforms as some of the most used in the ten participating countries (Kemp, 2021; Newman et al., 2021).

To collect social media content referring to Europe and to one of the other three dimensions – Health, Economy, and Climate – we constructed a query that was translated and adapted to each of the ten countries (and eleven languages) of the project. The goal was to collect all the social media publications – Facebook posts, Twitter tweets, and YouTube videos – referring to those issues during a period of three months: September–November 2021.

We also wanted to compare the presence of news media on social media platforms to that of the general users of the platforms. To that end, we developed lists of mainstream news media with significant presence on social media platforms for each of the ten countries and eleven languages (Cardoso et al., 2021).

With these criteria for including social media publications, we were able to compare media and non-news media content on different social media platforms in different countries, referring to four dimensions: Europe, Health, Economy, and Climate.

This research used a digital methods approach (Rogers, 2013), combining quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data. From all the social media publications collected in all datasets for all countries and all dimensions, the most relevant were selected for categorisation and analysis, according to their metrics. The criteria for that selection were based on the metrics that better express the attention that each publication had garnered from its audience on each platform: "total interactions" on Facebook, "reach" on Twitter, and "relevance" on YouTube. Facebook "Total interactions" express the sum of all interactions that users had with a Facebook post: shares, comments, and all reactions (like, love, care, haha, wow, sad, and angry); Twitter "reach" expresses the total number of people estimated to have seen the tweet; and YouTube "relevance" orders the videos according to the most relevant responses of the search algorithm to a given search query, in this case, the precise search queries mentioned above (Cardoso et al., 2021).

In the end, our global sample included 6,233 social media posts, tweets, and videos. These media objects were then categorised and coded by the research teams in each country (trained for the purpose) according to a codebook similar for all countries and subject to an intercoder reliability check whereby two independent coders coded 20 per cent of the first-month sample data (Krippendorff, 2011; Lombard et al., 2002). The codebook included the following six key categories: on- or off-topic; the inclusion/exclusion criteria; the format of the publication (text, image, video, link); the agent who posted, either individual or organisational; the subject, person, or organisation mentioned or addressed in the publication; and the dimensions of Europeanisation, resulting from the semantic map developed for this purpose (Carpentier et al., 2022).

Findings: Europeanisation on social media platforms

When looking at the data, we first noticed a significant amount of off-topic content, that is, social media publications that used some of the keywords referring to Europe (or Europe and Health, Economy, and Climate) but did not meet the inclusion criteria to be part of our sample. In particular, a lot of off-topic content was relative to performances in European sports competitions, and thus not relevant for the analysis of Europeanisation, but presenting a significant use of European keywords in the content shared and discussed on social media platforms.

From the 6,233 social media publications included in our sample (1,577 about Europe; 1,558 about Europe & Economy; 1,552 about Europe & Climate; and 1,546 about Europe & Health), 3,091 were posts from Facebook pages, 2,197 were tweets from Twitter accounts, and 945 were videos from YouTube.

The main level of analysis is relative to the agents who published the total 6,233 publications included in our sample: 52 per cent (3,315) of those total publications are from media organisations, but that derives from the fact that some datasets are exclusively populated by media organisations (those related to professional content). When we analyse the part of the sample that is open to all users of social media platforms (n = 3,081), we see that 1,252 of the social media publications (41%) are published by media organisations, whereas 963 (31%) are authored by political agents – either politicians or political parties and groups. But there are variations across the platforms. On Twitter and YouTube, media organisations are dominant (41% and 63%, respectively), but on Facebook, political agents (mostly politicians) are the most significant source of publications (48%). To some extent, although there are differences from country to country, these data present Facebook as the most significant platform for political agents on social media when considering the overall sample. That correlates with the fact that this is also the most popular social media platform in most countries. On the other hand, political agents are mostly politicians (both on Facebook and on Twitter) rather than political parties or groups, which suggests the personalisation of the connection with audiences as a key driver of interactions and reach on social media platforms. This is visible in the data: Considering all platforms, politicians account for 80 per cent of all publications by agents in our social media sample, whereas political parties represent only 15 per cent.

Furthermore, the data also indicate that the most relevant political actors in our social media sample are different on Facebook and Twitter. Considering all countries, on Facebook far-right populist politicians (e.g., Tomio Okomura from Czechia, Theo Franken from Belgium, and Alice Weidel from Germany) stand out as those who amass more interactions – and attention – with their social media posts. Inversely, on Twitter the publications that register the most reach – and, again, attention – are those of institutional actors such as

presidents, prime ministers, and ministers (e.g., the official account of the Greek prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Alena Schillerová from Czechia, or Alexander de Croo from Belgium).

When we categorised the political agents in our sample according to their EU groups allegiance – which was part of the coding process – we got the results shown in Table 8.1, which support the analysis above. Far-right populist politicians are dominant in the overall sample of most relevant social media posts, but that dominance is particularly notorious on Facebook, where 186 (33%) of the publications with the most interactions are made by political agents pertaining to that political allegiance. On Twitter, in contrast, the reach of far-right populist politicians' publications (9%) does not stand out and is second to more centrist and moderate political allegiances such as Christian democrats (21%) or liberals (19%).

Table 8.1 Distribution of publications on social media platforms according to political agents' allegiance (per cent)

Political allegiance	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Total
Christian democrats & Conservatives	10	21	19	14
Socialists & Democrats	7	11	13	9
Liberals & Centrists (Renew Europe)	9	19	4	12
Eurosceptic conservatives	9	10	6	9
Greens & Regionalists	6	8	4	7
Communists & Left	13	7	26	11
Far-right nationalists (Identity & Democracy)	33	9	15	24
Independents (not integrating any EU group)	5	5	6	5
Non-aligned (in the case of Turkey)	1	0	0	0
Not coded	8	12	6	9

Comments: "Political allegiance" is attributed according to the political groups in the European Parliament.

When we look at the data correlating the agent of the most relevant publications with the dimensions of Europe and Europe plus Health, Economy, and Climate (see Table 8.2), we see that media agents drive the conversation in most of the dimensions and platforms, but political agents are significantly more prominent on Facebook than on Twitter. On the one hand, these data present news media as still a pivotal player within the relevant publications about Europe and about Europe and Health, Economy, and Climate on social media, either as agents of those publications or as sources of raw material for the publications of other agents, especially political agents. On the other hand, the same data also show that a significant part of those political agents focus mostly on economic and European issues, in most cases using those issues to leverage internal political struggles.

Table 8.2 Distribution of all users' publications on social media, according to the dimension and the platform (per cent)

Dimension	Platform	Agent			
		Political agent	Media agent	Any other organisation	Non organisation
Health (+ Europe)	Facebook	33	38	11	18
	Twitter	16	51	9	24
	YouTube	4	69	18	9
Climate (+ Europe)	Facebook	46	24	13	17
	Twitter	19	51	13	17
	YouTube	2	45	28	25
Economy (+ Europe)	Facebook	61	21	1	18
	Twitter	30	41	6	23
	YouTube	11	43	19	27
Europe	Facebook	54	23	5	18
	Twitter	51	19	5	25
	YouTube	11	51	23	15

Comments: "Political agent" refers to political parties, politicians, and EU political groups; "Media agent" refers to any news media outlet; "Any other organisation" refers to organisations that are not political agents or media agents but have a presence outside social media (e.g., a website); "Non-organisation" refers to individuals or groups that have no media existence outside social media, such as an influencer or a page or account the has no existence or website outside social media.

When comparing the presence of news media on social media platforms to that of all users, we notice that the news media included in our sample (n = 2,076) display a large number of followers but a relatively low number of interactions, resulting in a comparatively low interaction rate (see Table 8.3). Considering all publications collected in our sample of Facebook pages operated by news media outlets (n = 1,054), the interaction rate (percentage of total followers of the pages that interacted with the publications) is 0.18 per cent, whereas the same metric, when considering all users' pages, is 1.43 per cent. The same phenomenon can be seen on Twitter, where, considering the total reach and total interaction, news media Twitter accounts (n = 1,022) register an interaction rate (percentage of people reached that interacted with the content) of 0.09 per cent. Again, when considering all accounts, that percentage is 0.15 per cent. Facebook groups – similarly to all users' pages – also register an engagement rate that is higher than that of news media pages – 1.46 per cent – and YouTube videos (published by all users) gather an engagement rate of 2.7 per cent on its views.

Table 8.3 Comparison of the engagement rate of media and all users' publications on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube

	Followers (*n*)	Interactions (*n*)	Engagement rate (%)
Facebook media pages	1,247,237,805	2,290,305	0.18
Facebook pages, all users	663,057,919	9,469,567	1.43
Facebook public groups	48,182,735	702,262	1.46

	Reach (*n*)	Engagements (*n*)	Engagement rate (%)
Twitter media accounts	120,025,189	103,460	0.09
Twitter accounts, all users	274,286,367	400,960	0.15

	Views (*n*)	Engagements (*n*)	Engagement rate (%)
YouTube channels, all users	57,900,970	1,563,053	2.70

Comments: Facebook interactions include reactions, comments, and shares; Twitter engagements include likes and shares; YouTube engagements include comments, likes, and dislikes.

This is an indication that other users of social media platforms, notably political agents and particularly far-right populist politicians, are better at taking advantage of the affordances of the social media platforms – and particularly its distribution algorithms – to reach larger audiences and get more interactions. Two observed publishing behaviours may explain that: On the one hand, far-right populist politicians tend to publish more frequently, putting them in a better position to control the narrative on social media; on the other hand, far-right populist politicians tend to use a more emotional and charged discourse, also reinforcing their position to control the narrative vis-à-vis the algorithms of social media platforms that favour that type of content. The counterpart to that is that news media are confronted with the challenge of having to fight for the attention of users on social media platforms with a plethora of other, less constrained, agents.

A further level of analysis to approach this data is about the subject (who or what those publications were about, directed at, or discussed within them) of the publications.

When looking at the subject of the 3,081 publications considered (subjects addressed in those publications being $n = 6{,}095$), we find that 33.6 per cent (2,043) talk about organisations other than political agents or news media, and 22.4 per cent (1,364) are directed at politicians or political parties and groups. Organisations other than political agents or news media as the main subject addressed in the publications include public institutions such as governments and governmental bodies, as well as private organisations. News media, by contrast, are seldomly the subject of the conversations:

559 publications, or 9.2 per cent of the total 6,095 subjects identified. Non-organisations such as influencers or common people are addressed in 1,142 (17.7%) of the publications by all users.

Also of note, non-organisational agents – mostly common citizens – are more frequently a subject on Facebook than on Twitter or YouTube. Likewise, politicians are not only more of an agent on Facebook than on Twitter or YouTube – they are also more of a subject. These data suggest that Facebook is the preferred terrain for popular content and far-right populist politicians, whereas Twitter seems to be more of a micro-cosmos for news and mainstream politics.

Regarding the territorial scope of the social media publications collected and analysed, the European scope is dominant (51%), as would be expected, but the national scope (31%) is a prominent second, relative to global (12%), regional (4%), or local (3%). This feeds into the observation above that European content is used mostly to leverage national content and political struggles.

The last level of analysis for the data collected is related to the dimensions of Europeanisation that can be inferred from the social media publications included in our sample. Those dimensions of Europeanisation, as mentioned before, were derived from the semantic map developed by Carpentier and colleagues (2022).

The first observation to make is that, although all social media publications categorised were on-topic about Europe, only a small part refer to those dimensions of Europeanisation. This seems to indicate that Europeanisation is not an issue on social media, even when Europe is the topic (or part of it). Also, considering that those dimensions of Europeanisation are often addressed by political or media agents and not by common users, we cannot find traces of Europeanisation from below in our data.

The dimension of Europeanisation we called European institutions (for publications that contained any reference to one of the several European institutions, like the Commission, the Parliament, or the Central Bank) was the dimension that was included the most times in the publications (n = 1,774, or 16%). The Political dimension of Europe comes next (12%), followed by the Economic dimension (12%) and European Law & Governance (11%). Conversely, European interactions & dialogues, European culture(s), European (media) content, and European new social movements are the dimensions of Europeanisation that are less present in the publications in our sample (see Table 8.4).

Table 8.4 Distribution of references to the dimensions of Europeanisation across all samples (multiple choice)

Europeanisation dimensions	All publications	
	n	%
European institutions	1,774	16
Political	1,328	12
Economic	1,298	12
European law & governance	1,239	11
Scientific	766	7
European (media) industries & capitalist economies	764	7
European territory	738	7
European people ("Europeans")	544	5
European public sphere	477	4
European democratic model(s)	455	4
European values	437	4
European interactions & dialogues	399	4
European culture(s)	379	3
European (media) content	255	2
European new social movements	155	1

This suggests a strong focus on the normative side of Europe, not only considering references to the institutions and laws of Europe but also to its political and economic dimensions. The economic side of Europe, for instance, is most frequently associated with European funds and relief efforts for (or from) European countries. And the political dimension is most often used as leverage for internal political struggles. Seldomly, issues about Europe seem to be debated on social media platforms as European in their own right, and when they are, that debate is almost always associated with some related national issue.

On the other end of the spectrum: The low attention provided by Europeans to new social movements and European media content or European culture(s), for instance, suggests less interest in the social side of Europe and Europeanisation.

Theoretical discussion of the findings: A modest interest in European issues

When discussing our findings, we observe that – in principle, at least – the problem of the agency has always been with us Europeans, and the same holds for its connections to the media field. As the *Tindemans Report* (Tindemans, 1976: 12) read, back in the mid-1970s,

> no one wants to see a technocratic Europe. European Union must be experienced by the citizen in his daily life. It must make itself felt in education and culture, news and communications, it must be manifest in the youth of our countries.

As we have seen, this goal has not been accomplished, if not partially and locally, due to several criticalities: the modest interest in EU-related issues in national media cultures; the scarcity of references to Europe in online public debate; the predominance of professional content in the social media discussion on European issues; and in sum, the weakness of Europeanisation from below.

As to what people actively produce online, we noticed that the reference to European affairs is rare in social media discussion across Europe. This is the most relevant, apart from the limitations of our study, considering that we focused on the most impactful posts. In this sense, it is not simply that there was not much discussion about Europe and European issues, but even more, that "references to Europe were not about European issues themselves but rather as a leveraging of European issues for use on internal national political and social struggles" (quotation from the WP2 note provided by the ISCTE team).

In this respect, our findings confirm the evidence delineated by means of the literature review. First, a national framing of EU-related issues has been largely detected by comparative studies of European media, usually with no remarkable differences between the considered countries or outlets (Bee & Chrona, 2020: 871–872; de Vreese, 2003: 99–116; de Vreese et al., 2001: 116–118; Koopmans & Erbe, 2003: 115–118; Machill et al., 2007: 188–189; Peters et al., 2005: 148). In a few cases, some exceptions stand out, with a few media outlets providing a properly European narrative: such would be the occasional circumstance of newspapers in Denmark (Sifft et al., 2007: 139) or in the Netherlands (de Vreese, 2008: 136–140). It has also been empirically observed that the attention devoted to European issues increases, in terms of media coverage, when those issues directly intersect national interests or political themes (Barisione & Ceron, 2017: 95; Trenz, 2004: 293). No all-embracing generalisations should be allowed, but in this respect, we may doubt that the platformisation process per se is working in favour of Europeanisation.

A second insight to be highlighted is the marginal role ordinary users play in the discourse about Europe. This is particularly clear in our dataset, as the most impactful posts usually come from some kind of institutional actors – mostly political agents on Facebook, and in prevalence media agents on Twitter and YouTube. If anything, this speaks against the alleged democratic properties of Web 2.0 – an illusion perpetrated by some divulgators and market stakeholders, despite the early evidence of the power–law organisation of the Web, and attention clustering around a few selected nodes – based on

the statistical concentration measured by a number of authors in the so-called physics of complex networks (Barabási, 2011; Barabási & Albert, 1999), and eventually impacting also the distribution of attention in the online debate (Miconi, 2013).

A strong interpretation of the nexus between agency and social media in Europe has been put forward by Conti and Memoli (2016) in their elaboration on people's trust, which is the closest to the one that we realised for the EuMePlat project. The major difference is that, resulting from factor analysis, we obtained two macro-variables: the use of legacy media, taking together press, radio, and television; and the use of online media, including both the open web and social media platforms (Cannizzaro et al., forthcoming). Conti and Memoli (2016: 37–41), on their part, worked on three clusters as they separated Internet users and social media users, probably owing to the different datasets analysed: the 2011–2015 editions of Eurobarometer, compared to the 2019 report in our case. The common finding in both works is that strong users of legacy media are more easily engaged in European discussions and are keener to trust and generally be in favour of the EU, in comparison to strong Internet users. The Eurobarometer data, in this case, would confirm the indications of the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, which also shows an elective affinity between the use of traditional news outlets and trust in national and EU institutions (Newman et al., 2017). As an additional distinction, justified by the above-cited statistical difference, Conti and Memoli (2016: 93) found that social media users, on average, trust the EU even less than the "general Internet users". This would allow the authors to state an inverse relationship between Europeanness and people's agency, or "mobilisation": In the end, the more active the users are – the more they share on social media – the less they trust the EU. An additional research path to be explored, in the years to come, hinges on whether this trend is due to a deeper fracture in European societies, with media repertoires possibly being an indicator, if not a predictor, of the increasing polarisation between affluent citizens and mass audiences (Miconi, 2024: 135–136).

We already discussed the implication of this tendency for European identity, as it shows the weakness of what Della Porta has defined as "Europeanization from below" (Della Porta et al., 2006; Della Porta & Caiani, 2007) – or at least, it shows that social media are not serving this process (Miconi, 2024). Here, we address two explanations of people's limited participation in a properly pan-European debate, which relies on different aspects: the way such debate is organised on social media platforms and the possible changes in the set of values shared by Europeans.

As to social media debate, we already knew that all resources in the web ecosystem are distributed in a very uneven way and that – either measured in terms of links, followers, or traffic – such resources cluster around very few hubs, owing to the power–law organisation of complex networks (Barabási &

Albert, 1999: Barabási et al., 1999). When the academic community started mapping online mobilisation, though, there was space for native successes: The accounts destined to become hubs, in other words, used to be parts of the bottom-up stream of communication, as the well-known cases of the Arab Spring, Occupy America, or the Spanish 15M demonstrate (Lotan et al., 2011; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2011). Recent analyses rather isolated the role of the news media pages on Facebook, whose contents are easily reposted by common users and which can be defined as a new generation of gatekeepers (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018: 4743). Legacy media also played a decisive role in filtering and shaping the information related to the Covid-19 outbreak, as proved by a study on 200 million Twitter interactions during the early days of the pandemic (Sacco et al., 2021: 6–7). In the Italian case, the same findings can be inferred from a study on the 2018 electoral campaign (Bracciale et al., 2018: 373–374); from a cross-platform investigation on the overall polarisation of public debate (Pilati, 2021); and the Twitter discussion around the introduction of the Green Pass, or Covid-19 vaccine certificate (Pilati & Miconi, 2023). Even though these results do not allow for any generalisation, they are consistent enough to make necessary a reflection on what happened to define the "colonisation" of social media debate by influential figures – whether journalists, politicians, or legacy media (Pilati & Miconi, 2023). Such evidence is still in need of a theoretical explanation: If anything, though, it shows that the online debate is no longer animated only by bottom-up phenomena and that the mass diffusion stage has come with an increased level of centralisation.

A second explanation would rely, in a different vein, on a very social reason: people's possible withdrawal from the public discussion on European issues. That European affairs would not win the hearts of Europeans is not new, per se. As noted earlier, there is clear evidence in the literature of EU-related topics being mainly discussed within the member states when they directly impact national interests, particularly in the cases of public debt and bailout debates – and economic crises in general. An additional (yet complementary) hypothesis is that people's sense of belonging to the EU has been weakened by the recent crises, and in particular by the financial downturn, which have impacted both the societal structure and the moral economy of the area (Castells et al., 2012, 2018).

The interplay between the material and the ideological dimensions is more relevant when one recalls Inglehart's work on the values of Europeans. Already back in 1971, by means of a comparative survey in six European countries, Inglehart (1971) identified the shift of priorities, according to the new generations, from the material needs to what he first defined as post-bourgeois and later post-materialist values (Inglehart, 1977). It makes sense to highlight that the adoption of post-materialist values in Inglehart's work is a driver of the identification with Europe as a supranational community and form of government. Yet these same value choices also evince a relationship

with other political preferences that have no obvious similarity in terms of face content. For example, they are good predictors of attitudes toward supranational European integration (Inglehart, 1971: 996). A research path to be considered for future research, therefore, is whether the very material needs imposed by the recent traumas – unemployment, eviction, and poverty caused by the economic crisis, or healthcare and human liberties issues in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic – are reverting the set of priorities as perceived by the people, therefore impacting their willingness to embrace the typical post-materialist idea of supranational unification.

For our current purposes, it makes sense to discuss an additional point that has been raised by our colleague Vaia Doudaki during an EuMePlat meeting hosted by Bilkent University in September 2023. Yes, let us say that Europeans do not talk about Europe on social media platforms – but does this mean that they do not talk about Europe at all? Let us radicalise Doudaki's argument. As relevant as they might be for our research interests, the media – either legacy or social – are only a small piece of a bigger picture, and the idea that *any* or *most* human activity would take place online is, indeed, questionable. It is probably due to some accepted concepts that we take for granted the hegemonic role of mediated relations: for instance, the "new operating system" notion, which relies on a plain overlapping between online and offline social networks (Rainie & Wellman, 2012: 126), or Couldry's (2008: 377) mediatisation, defined as the "transformation of many disparate social and cultural processes into forms or formats suitable for media representation". *Many* processes, though, are not the same as *all* processes, and what we found may simply mean that there is no elective affinity between social media platforms and the European narrative – simple as that.

Hence, the follow-up question arises of why citizens use social media platforms for discussing any possible topics such as national politics, local chronicles, global crises, economy, sport, and more, and at the same time, *do not* choose them in the case of European affairs. In terms of the evidence, there is no elective affinity between Europe and social media – but whether this depends on the material configurations of the platforms or people's values is a pending research question.

Concluding remarks: Strengthening media pluralism

In our analysis of the publications on social media platforms and the attention each publication gets from its audience, we focused on the topics that, according to the Eurobarometer surveys, are among the main concerns of Europeans: Health, Economy, and Climate. We compared the publications of the traditional media with those of other users and differentiated the user groups. The analysis took place against the backdrop of the hopes once placed in the Internet; more precisely, we wanted to combine the concepts of

Europeanisation and platformisation to find out to what extent the relevance of platforms in digital communication promotes a Europeanisation in which civil society actors play a relevant role. The result is sobering: Social media platforms are not the place where Europeanisation takes place. This is the main finding of our empirical study. European issues are not high on the agenda, nor do those users who post refer to European institutional actors. Furthermore, European conflicts, of which there are many, are not negotiated on social media platforms.

There is no sign of a strong civil society component that was once associated with the rise of the Internet and the opportunity for everyone to have their voice heard. Instead, the publications are dominated by the familiar political players and legacy media. What is more, contrary to these initial hopes, is the realisation that, among the political actors, it is primarily those from the right-wing spectrum who make particular use of the algorithms and functionalities of social media platforms.

In the theoretical discussion, we analysed these findings from various perspectives. What these perspectives have in common is that we place the communication-related interpretations in a broader context and ask whether and to what extent the material experiences that people have – crises and associated fears, as well as the values that people follow – must be used to interpret the results mentioned. How this can be done must be the subject of further research.

The EuMePlat project, whose partial results have been presented here, aimed at analysing the role of media platforms and focused on the "platformisation" process and its positive and negative externalities. Based on the overall results, strategies for media policy were developed accordingly (Miconi et al., 2024), of which only excerpts of relevant considerations can be given here. As we consider concentration in the digital media sector as crucial for the state of the platforms, recommendations point to the establishment of a strong, permanent, informative instrument for monitoring concentration of media ownership and opinion power, possibly by taking together, or promoting synergy between, the Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) of the Center for Media Pluralism and Freedom (CMPF) and the Euromedia Ownership Monitor (EurOMo) launched by the EuroMedia Research Group.

In addition, we recommend strengthening the powers of the independent European Board for Media Services to take binding decisions on issues of media pluralism with a European dimension. We also encourage the development and deployment of tools throughout the news environment, both on legacy media and social media platforms, that make relevant ownership and risk metrics available to citizens (similar to the information panel on YouTube, where channels owned by a government or publicly funded news publisher provide context and a link to the Wikipedia page of that publisher). A further recommendation asks for the support of decentralised alternatives to global commercial platforms (Miconi et al., 2024: 21).

Ultimately, however, the undesirable developments of digital communication technologies can only be corrected or even contained by a whole bundle of media policy measures, which are also discussed in the other contributions to this volume, and which should be considered in their interaction.

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CHAPTER 9

Engaging in civic dialogue or opinion battles?

The epistemic risks informed approach to platform governance

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I examine the risks and consequences of platformisation through the lens of building societal resilience to information disruptions. The current epistemic crisis – driven by disinformation and the dominance of dysfunctional communication (e.g., hate speech and related antisocial online behaviours) – serves here as an illustration of key epistemic risks: uncertainty, distorted and false beliefs, and people's misdirected attention. These risks should be central when framing platform governance proposals aimed at fostering informed opinions and engaged digital citizenship. The argument suggests that digitally sustained "societal resilience" is inherently ecosystemic; therefore, national policies must address people's social and (dis)information-related vulnerabilities in a coordinated manner, focusing on structural and algorithmic features of platforms and information "supply", on the one hand, while also considering the life experiences, worldviews, and individual capacities of people shaping information "demand", on the other.

KEYWORDS: epistemic crisis, epistemic risk, (dis)information vulnerability, societal resilience, platform governance

Balčytienė, A. (2026). Engaging in civic dialogue or opinion battles? The epistemic risks informed approach to platform governance. In A. Balčytienė, P. Bajomi-Lázár, & H. Sousa (Eds.), *Digital media shadowing democracy: Technology, communication, and power* (pp. 171–194). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. https://doi.org/10.48335/9789189864290-9

Introduction and background: Epistemic challenges

European digital media policies depend heavily on a blend of "hard" and "soft" strategies when responding to the disruptive nature and all related ills of digital transformation, including the abundance of manipulative content and the radicalisation of public discourse. This dual approach involves regulatory measures alongside diverse stakeholder engagement strategies aimed at fostering societal resilience (Brogi et al., 2025; Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023; Papaevangelou, 2023). Especially in recent years, policymakers have favoured collaboration among various stakeholders when drafting policies to counter disinformation. Defined as a "whole-of-society" strategy, this approach aligns with the democratic principles of universalism, diversity, and inclusion, and aims for collaboration and good practice exchanges among organisations and individuals.

Indeed, the whole-of-society approach seems highly appreciated, especially when there is no agreed view on the risks imposed by digital transformation, and there is no clear consensus on how the digital public sphere affects the health of democracy. Such an approach also pays off when society's resilience development is treated as an ongoing project, especially in response to algorithmically driven pressures in opinion formation.

The abundance of disinformation and hate-laden discourse is just one of the broader challenges that the transformed media and information ecosystem poses to the public sphere (Üzelgün et al., 2024). A harmful effect on the functioning of everyday democracy comes from coordinated actions aimed at using information tactically and destructively, increasingly common within domestic malicious actors and foreign information operations, posing a threat to democratic well-being in particular. These result in a loss of social integrity, most evident through the increasing radicalisation and polarisation in small and large, older and younger European democracies. Some younger European democracies, such as Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Serbia, have been noted as extreme cases of rising political radicalism (Bustikova, 2019; Caiani, 2024). Populist politics and political extremism have also been observed as prevalent in classical liberal democracies. This has been exacerbated in Sweden, Germany, and Austria recently.

While in the early stages of digitalisation it may have seemed that technological advancements and innovations were to blame for information disruptions, most recent analyses reveal that various social causes – unresolved issues and entrenched inequalities affecting people's lives – are at the heart of social discontent, which is further amplified by platform logics and algorithms resulting in increased online conflicts and discursive clashes (Kreiss, 2017; Livingston & Miller, 2025).

In the most general sense, the phenomenon of platformisation is to be understood as a socio-technical process that feeds on the digital-technological and political-economic aspects of data infrastructures and

algorithmic features (van Dijck, 2021). Nevertheless, since user choices shape both the "supply" (content, frames) and "demand" (needs and values) sides of online information circulation, we need to study all these technological and social factors together. As is discussed in the other sections of this chapter, the latter element – predominantly the platform-shaped mechanisms of people's decision-making and the norms that guide their understanding (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2020; Siapera, 2022; van Dijck, 2020) – is not sufficiently conveyed when designing and promoting specific policy frameworks.

Overall, in this chapter, I now advocate for a holistic approach that considers both digital infrastructure and audience preferences and habits, replacing the currently dominant, highly fragmented policymaking that treats each component in isolation. I take a "processual approach" and examine how the process of platformisation reshapes social systems of knowing and the ways people build relationships and make sense of the world in a rapidly changing digital media environment. I reveal how technological affordances of platformisation – greater accessibility and both disinformation and information abundance – along with the public's motivation to engage in digital communication, shape opinion formation processes and fuel social uncertainties and unrest, and the rise of conflict and disagreement. These dynamics make informed and resilient citizenship harder to achieve.

A more integrated approach is needed

Along with the freedoms and uncertainties brought about by platform-driven communication, both online expression and the way public opinion is formed have changed. In digital media, public opinion is best understood as a discursive process of people's expression and negotiated acceptability within spaces shaped by media logic (Baden et al., 2024). A new perspective on public opinion also redefines the idea of digital civics (Dahlgren, 2018). As digital media use intensifies and content diversity accelerates – spanning trusted and fact-checked information, authentic content, as well as peripheral views – both well-informed and strategically cultivated opinions are proliferating, alongside variations in people's online expression and engagement that are used to mobilise the public on specific acts. Still, what is problematic is that the same information and patterns of online engagement can also be taken up by people for so-called "alternative reasons", leading to elevated levels of incivility and conflict.

Although numerous studies have investigated the norms of online expression (Gagrčin et al., 2022) and ways to assist users in forming an awareness of their media practices (Paciello et al., 2023; van Zoonen et al., 2024), there is a scarcity of theorisation about what constitutes "civic dialogue", "responsible communication", and "good citizenship" in information arenas sustained

by platform infrastructures (Üzelgün et al., 2024). Though deeper public engagement and interactivity levels are attainable in online environments (Zelenkauskaitė, 2022), online expression on social media rarely manifests extensive dialogue or informed conversation. In most cases, expressions and arguments centre on claims and statements, such as user posts, media excerpts, or assertions of momentary significance.

The opinion formation approach draws our attention to several facets of the digitally mediated discursive process, predominantly its "social" dimension. As rightly pointed out by the scholars from the Knowledge Resistance project, when taking the processual and socio-constructivist view and exploring the process of digital opinion shaping and the reasons behind it, it becomes crucially important to investigate the algorithmically managed supply side of information provision as well as its demand aspects (Strömbäck et al., 2022). Shifts towards greater media hybridisation (Chadwick, 2013) and discursive transmediality (Jenkins, 2006) prompt us to ask how AI agents and technological affordances, such as information abundance, interactivity, attention captures, and the changed and fragmented logic of information provision and circulation (the supply) (Munger & Phillips, 2020), influence demand features: people's intentions and needs. What drives people to engage with digital media content? What types of (dis)information vulnerabilities arise from this? Are citizens equally equipped to navigate the challenges of responsible information selection as they form and express their views?

Raising these questions widens the chapter's scope; however, I believe that only a broadened view can clarify the essence of the current epistemic crisis. Can an "informed public" persist in an era of algorithmic information management, intensifying fragmentation and expressive diversity? How should we handle the emergence of epistemic variations, "opinion battles", and ongoing disagreements about people's beliefs? What capacities should citizens be equipped with, and what roles must traditional news media and other epistemic institutions (education, culture) and communities fulfil in assisting citizens in their endeavours?

In an attempt to address some of the questions above, predominantly the aspect of opinion formation, in this chapter I present a conceptualisation that combines an information disruptions–focused analytical discourse with research on democratic civics. Several terminologies appear of particular significance here: most notably, "expressive civics" and "epistemic resilience". The idea of expressive civics is a relatively new conceptualisation developed in relation to changed civic acts and activism appearances in digital media environments (e.g., Baden et al., 2024; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). It mainly emphasises human-centred ("agentive") aspects of the expressive use of digital media affordances that combine rhetorical and technical features such as emoticons, hashtags, and memes to make one's voice heard and actions seen. Meanwhile, epistemic resilience puts more stress on one's ability to sustain

knowledge and beliefs and to control and self-regulate one's responses, which, again, are "agentive" features, despite uncertainties, information disruptions, and shifts in the information provision system.

As I argue in this chapter, this latter perspective – namely, the focus on the epistemic side of resilience development – appears problematic. The conventional policy approaches relying solely on people's epistemic skills, such as fact-checking and information verification, as strategies to strengthen the public's capacity for resilience are overly one-dimensional and thus restrictive, that is, assuming that it is possible to cure epistemic failures with epistemic means. Instead, I propose that coordinated social and communications policy efforts must collectively address social variations, precisely the individual (dis)information vulnerabilities linked to people's lived experiences and worldviews, their relations to media and information, which arise from traditions, principles, and values that are also infused through the process of platformisation.

Factors influencing public opinion development in digital media environments

Conceptually, media, publics, and the governance of public life are tightly interlinked (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004). In a representative democracy, the public has the power to elect its representatives. Hence, freely accessible, high-quality information is paramount for opinion-making and for reaching a state of informed citizenship. In essence, without accurately informed civics, democracy cannot effectively operate.

In all kinds of media environments – digital or not – the idealistic (normative) vision of well-functioning information circulation and informed civics is not without problems. Yet, the digital media ecosystem has distinctive specificities: It is relatively fluid and largely boundaryless, shaped by the infrastructural and algorithmic features of social media platforms, among which interactivity and the hybrid character of transmedial communication allow for collaboration and co-creation of various content by various actors. Under the combined influence of infrastructural power (Helberger, 2020; van Dijck et al., 2021), which operates under the auspices of digital platform capitalism (Kopecka-Piech & Bolin, 2023; Mansell, 2023), this serves as a foundation for a new kind of mediatised (or, in fact, platformised) actor – an active agent – who engages in various digitally managed content production efforts.

The concept of "actor mediatisation" (Hjarvard, 2008; Kantola, 2014) is not new. It emphasises that digital infrastructures and mediated communications environments – including both traditional news media and "peripheral" outlets (digitalised alternatives and digital content of essentially alternative character, as defined by Hanusch & Lohmann, 2023) – are deployed by

diverse actors as techniques of power and tools of hegemony in flexible opinion-making and digital capitalism.

Despite the extensiveness of research on online opinion formation practices and the detrimental effects this process might produce, such as populist polarisation and discursive radicalisation, researchers and policymakers still focus too much on digital content itself. My aim is to draw attention to a significant gap in available analyses and the scholarly understanding of how people's intentions, knowledge, and beliefs are formed or confirmed through the use of social media. Moreover, it also remains unclear how individuals uphold their beliefs in an environment where their opinions are constantly challenged and their views are contested.

At the same time, we know that the abundance of both information and disinformation can lead to detrimental changes in opinion formation and hinder the development of people's trust in sources. With increasing digital choice possibilities, the ability to make informed decisions and to choose wisely becomes of strategic significance. Likewise, the more critical the motivation and skills of users become, the greater the importance of differences between people's life experiences and worldviews (Strömbäck et al., 2022; Yarchi et al., 2021). Furthermore, the more significant people's life experiences become, the more substantial attention must be paid to their social positions in shaping their intentions and the relationships they form.

In this context, what appears specifically needed is to fully comprehend the implications of these experiences and beliefs for people's civic and digital behaviour, including both new digitally initiated political activities, such as accessing social media, "translating" that knowledge into their views and expressing political opinions online, or joining more conventional acts, such as taking part in interest groups and participating in elections or policy formation.

Against this background, today's representative democracy and its rapidly changing information system contribute to three epistemic problems, each determining vulnerability and perpetuating social inequalities (Kreiss, 2017). Each of these possesses a character shaped by technological and political-economic, as well as social factors within the platforms' sustained information environment:

- The first is the risk of citizens' private data and digital rights being captured (Bolin, 2023) by algorithmic content management systems and exploited by global techno-capitalist powers. The democratic challenge is defined by manifestations of "data poverty" and the exploitation of users' attention in their digital media practices: information reach, channel selection, user intentions management, and so on.
- The second is the risk of citizens being continuously misguided by manipulative content, which affects opinion formation processes and

results in the appearance of "factual belief polarisation" (Rekker, 2022) and epistemic divergence (Kosowska et al., 2023; Robertson et al., 2024), causing disagreements over facts and the radicalisation of public discourse. The democratic challenge resides in persisting clashes and opinion battles over people's varying perceptions of fact and truth.

- The third is the risk of citizens becoming ignorant and distrusting democratic institutions, and the democratic challenge results in the absence of social integrity and cohesion in society.

Overall, the potential for being disinformed, strategically misguided, and manipulated appears to be an undeniable aspect of digital opinion formation in algorithmically managed, information-rich, and fluid digital media environments (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Strömbäck et al., 2022). Therefore, the primary driving argument here is that structural features of platforms can shape individual thinking and beliefs in ways that could potentially trigger dysfunctional reactions such as hate speech and delegitimising opponents, as well as online behaviours leading to social conflicts and relational polarisation (Van Aelst et al., 2017; Yarchi et al., 2021). While exposure to online disinformation may cause confusion, its impact escalates into misguiding the focus of politics, when negativity seeps into broader public discourses, leading to dysfunctional reactions and responses. Thus, even small instances of confusion and public uncertainty should be handled with care.

(Dis)information vulnerability and epistemic resilience

When discussing the threats of online disinformation on democracy, the most commonly identified risks refer to disinformation's potential for the utilisation of specific claims to enforce attacks against the legitimacy of social and political institutions (Claudia, 2022; Jerónimo & Esparza, 2022; Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; Rodríguez-Pérez & Canel, 2023). Other studies refer to the negative aspect of populist discourses that feed on extreme language and manipulative claims to reinforce radicalism and "normalise" antisocial behaviours (Di Mascio et al., 2021; Tripodi et al., 2023). Through these disruptive actions, it is not only institutional trust that is affected. Since polarisation leads to radicalisation and extremism, disinformation directly undermines the societal sense of welfare, including the sense of togetherness, solidarity, security, and overall well-being.

Alongside European policy efforts and responses to online risks in informed opinion formation, the issue of (dis)information vulnerability emerges as a significant focal point of attention in developing societal resilience. Beyond analysing the scope of disinformation content and the selection of responses, the general emphasis in European policymaking on (dis)information vulnerability is to support traditional news media to enhance fact-checking

and to equip citizens with media literacy and information verification skills that are anticipated to play a significant role in rebuilding trust, both in institutions and among fellow citizens.

Though manipulative content has always existed, there is limited awareness of the factors contributing to digital (dis)information vulnerability. Namely, there needs to be more clarity about how algorithmic and AI-defined changes in communication architectures and conditions affect individual meaning-making and social relationships.

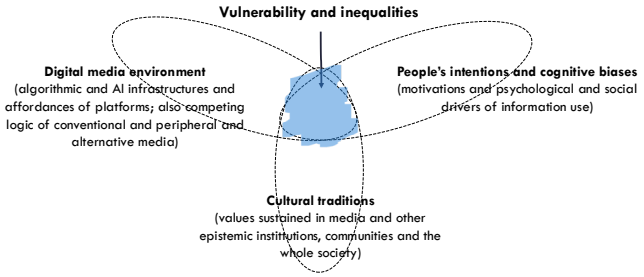
In European policy approaches and analyses, the achievement and sustainability of resilience are often used to guide strategic moves on several levels, including the individual, the organisational, and the societal dimensions. The most common argumentation in these writings rests on the idea that the resilience of societies and groups can be improved if (dis)information risk awareness is institutionalised in both policymaking and everyday practice (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2025). To achieve such an integrated practice, which resembles a whole-of-society approach discussed at the beginning of this chapter, adequate knowledge awareness and risk perception are required on all levels, including policymaking, organisational performance, and individual capacities. As revealed in several studies examining the role of media in fostering a cohesive view of society, the economic viability of the traditional media and adherence to quality standards appear to be of critical significance in cultivating both journalists' professional capacities and the citizens' civic skills (see, e.g., Humprecht et al., 2020, 2021; CMPF, 2023). This shifts the focus to a more social- and human-centred perspective (Balčytienė & Horowitz, 2023; Balčytienė & Imbrasaitė, 2023; Lang, 2014) that argues risk management must account for individual people's capacities, such as situational awareness, intentions and motivation, and willingness for a well-informed reaction and responses to disinformation.

By advocating for an integrated approach of platformisation-implications analysis, this chapter endorses that digital information-related epistemic risks and crises are not solely linked to physical phenomena and digital infrastructures, such as digitally accelerated communication and the overabundance of content. Additionally, these risks reflect upon connections to people's life experiences and the evolution of their worldviews, which are determined by specific agentive features influenced by intentions and dominant information processing strategies, but also by social and psychological factors, and cultural and social traditions (Harambam, 2021).

Therefore, broadening the conceptualisation of (dis)information vulnerability must incorporate all aspects of the functioning of the digital media ecosystem, including its socio-technical affordances and individual responses and social reactions. Furthermore, on the individual side, understanding (dis)information vulnerability should not be limited to factors traditionally seen as individually segregating, such as socioeconomic disparities like age,

gender, level of education, and income. Overall, when identifying digitally shaped vulnerabilities, it is essential to consider the intersecting factors (see Figure 9.1): 1) the entire media environment as a whole, including the effects of platformisation and algorithmically sustained digital media affordances; 2) communication cultures and traditions; and 3) individual characteristics – especially epistemic capacities, shaped by intentions, lived experiences and worldviews.

Figure 9.1 An assemblage approach to disinformation vulnerability with social- and human-centred focus



The backing of a social-human–centred view is especially significant here. In relation to challenges brought about by the evolving digital media environments, information users must, first of all, be considered mediatised actors – and thus active agents – whose intentions, information accessibility and attention, decision-making, and opinion expression (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017) are pressured by infrastructural power (Helberger, 2020; van Dijck, 2021) and digital information capitalism (Mansell, 2023), as well as their values and perceived roles in traditional media and journalism and alternative content circulation.

Based on the argumentation presented above, the main idea promoted here is that, essentially, the features of digital opinion formation and resilient civics do not arise as the linear product or aggregation of content that is accessed and shared on social media. Instead, these manifest as a result of an ongoing process of "internal negotiations" between digital media and the affordances of platforms (the supply side), on the one hand, and people's life experiences framed as epistemic resources that guide meaning-making practices and ideals about resilient citizenship (the demand side), on the other.

The following section examines these two dimensions and then I turn to the culture of communication (traditions and values).

Debates surrounding the supply and demand aspects in the digital realm

In this section, the supply (information content and frames) and demand (people's intentions and needs) dimensions are treated as analytical levers that reveal tensions among competing interests and logics in opinion formation processes.

When viewing the platformisation phenomenon in line with the theoretical conceptualisations of mediatisation research, deep-seated connections between domains of algorithmic systems (including AI agents), political economy, and knowledge production are revealed. As previously mentioned, the social-human aspect that implicitly shapes and defines the characteristics of each of these domains requires further exploration. As Bolin (2023) has illustratively explained, data (and AI agents) need social activity to exist in data capitalism, implying that "pure data" without human input is directionless. Put differently, this shifts an analytical focus from datasets and technologies to the social arrangements – thus, the "social-human" aspect – which treats individual engagement and participation as observable and traceable practices.

Similarly, the political-economic view on platformisation reveals potential power imbalances among participating agents, influencing digital communication and opinion formation. Digital power stems from the data used in algorithmic systems that track and manage people's intentions, attention, and responses. AI agents link users' data with the business logic that is integrated into algorithmic recommender systems to boost information circulation and people's traffic. The logic is relatively simple: More engagement generates more data, which platforms use to predict people's intentions, steer their attention, and shape media habits that guide the opinion-formation process.

As noted earlier, for individuals, relying on prior experience and available knowledge is crucial for forming opinions on online platforms. However, despite high engagement and interactivity features, social media fails on the supply side of offering knowledge integrity. Rather than integrating, digital media often disrupts the established knowledge hierarchy. The blurring of contexts, expanding actor involvement, and flattening of information hierarchies in digital media are primary features contributing to heightened uncertainty and, thus, epistemic crisis (Baden et al., 2024; Neuberger et al., 2023). It distorts classical understanding where communicative and constructive politics is understood as the goal to arrive at a rationally motivated consensus, which is possible only in ideal deliberation (Steenbergen et al., 2003). On online platforms, the uncontrollable rise and abundance of low-quality content and the dominance of manipulative claims disrupt organised reasoning in deliberative opinion-making processes. Furthermore, disinformation's detrimental character and uniqueness also stem from discursive characteristics: the imitation of serious genres and a distinct ideological agenda based on

a specific conflicting value system. In disinformation discourses, hostility is foundational: with claims cast in categorical, either-or terms. Hence, the "enemy" is consciously constructed and maintained, so manipulative discourses implicitly aim at confirming predefined statements and are not keen on responding or listening – capacities that are essential for dialogue and practical understanding.

Despite these challenges, one could foresee that traditional news media are attempting to be more representative online. By setting digital agendas and framing news, they seek to meet the common interest. However, it remains uncertain whether a linkage between the two differing logics – traditional news media and disinformation – can productively emerge (Strömbäck et al., 2022). There is a chasm between the two discursive groups regarding their overall goals and value systems based on, for example, trust in scientific evidence. Thus, deliberation seems possible only within each group but not between them, which is a primary challenge when dealing with opinion battles and discursive conflicts.

As social media and digital communication evolve, long-standing audience habits (and thus the demand side) face pressure from all directions. In today's globally connected and platform-driven information environment, characterised by algorithmic data management (Seipp et al., 2023; van Dijck, 2021), mass self-communication and individual expressions (Cardoso, 2023; Castells, 2009; Chadwick, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017), and diverging logics between reality-check production and propaganda (Strömbäck et al., 2022), the process of opinion formation or belief confirmation depends on individual capacities and self-perceptions, along with enduring vulnerabilities and values like interpersonal and social trust.

In a general sense, perceptions of vulnerability are linked to socially underprivileged groups such as migrants and minors or other groups whose distinct material or cultural features instigate injustice, which makes them susceptible to exploitation, leading to inequality. However, in digital media environments, people might be exploited differently. Since platformisation implies public engagement and interactivity, which are attention-driven and intention-generating acts, it can lead to various vulnerabilities and inequalities formed on highly varied matters – that is, formed on life experiences, where cognitive biases and competing motivations can become paramount (see Figure 9.1).

At large, vulnerability is socially constructed and dependent on power relations in a concrete social context (Limantė & Tereškinas, 2022). Likewise, in digital environments, a broader spectrum of factors, such as individual political and social preferences as well as media accessibility and reach and media-use skills, may contribute to the conditioning of digital disadvantages and vulnerability to information disorders (Ala-Fossi et al., 2019; Nieminen, 2019; Radechovsky, 2023). These factors can also affect digital platform-infused representations and online visibility, resulting in different levels of

attention provided and varying power arrangements between communicating participants (Helberger, 2020).

Furthermore, people possess different vulnerabilities and express variations in digital skills and information literacy, which can influence opinion formation. For example, as for the age dimension, research studies tend to have a consensus that older people are more vulnerable to information disorders, including disinformation (Boulianne et al., 2022; Claudia, 2022; Golob et al., 2021; Miyamoto, 2021; Rodríguez-Pérez & Canel, 2023); yet, young people also have their challenges, associated mainly with the extensive use of digital technologies (Miyamoto, 2021; Monteiro et al., 2022). Education has some positive effects (Golob et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pérez & Canel, 2023), but it is not always decisive (Boulianne et al., 2022; Claudia, 2022). Additionally, a higher income is often mentioned as a factor that correlates with resilience against manipulations. As for the gender question, there are very different findings among scholars.

However, if inequalities and vulnerabilities in social media are both structurally managed and socially constructed, then so too are collective feelings of togetherness and solidarity. Hence, the task is to cultivate infrastructures and conditions to sustain feelings of togetherness and not of confrontation, and unity over conflict.

To meet a challenge of this scale, we must focus scholarly efforts on the processes through which people form intentions and engage in critical reasoning, including key components of meaning-making: values and perceptions.

Back to the citizens!

One more helpful definition closely linked to the social-human side of the debate and notions of vulnerability and resilience (see Figure 9.1) is that of "human agency", which refers to the capacity of an individual to respond to practical situations that arise based on the individual's contact with reality, for example, with mediated and non-mediated messages. In digitally mediated confrontations with reality, such as accessing content on social media, the agentive aspect of one's mental actions is dependent on the association between intentions, motivation, and knowledge (arousal and other reactions), on the one hand, and changing information and digital conditions, on the other. Still, it bears noting that human responses are grounded on values and are norm-driven: Even when someone acts on a mistaken belief, their overall capacity and ability to make information choices is intact (O'Brien & Soteriou, 2009).

Human agency is constituted by one's capacity and responsiveness to reality by adjusting one's behaviour considering the evaluative judgments made by one's practical reasoning. Suppose we contend that agency is the capacity to

make decisions based on one's judgments (knowledge), beliefs, and values and to respond to digitally mediated situations. In that case, assessing how people reflect on such a capacity is critically significant. In other words, the key question is whether individuals feel empowered by the digitally rich media environment, motivating them to engage and to act responsibly in mediated situations, or if, instead, they feel deprived. In that case, responsibility for resolving the situation should be led by institutions and actors in media, education, and policymaking.

It is evident that apart from personal engagement with content and understanding digital threats, the overall circumstances of the digital information ecosystem, including sustainability and credibility of news media (i.e., its institutional trust), play a significant role in determining the quality of people's digital interactions. This factor is crucial for developing individual "self-efficacy", which, in social psychology and learning situations, refers to confidence and the ability to control one's motivation, behaviour, performance, and responses to the social environment (Bandura, 1991). The ability to self-control one's impulses, automaticity, and immediate responses refers to individual capacity and awareness, which develops within high-quality learning environments and everyday situations (including mediated responses). Briefly, self-efficacious performance includes the ability and willingness to notice one's impulses and self-regulate one's responses (Bandura, 2006). To reiterate, all these agentic capacities play a vital role, particularly in new and challenging public communication situations, which can be digitally mediated or happen in face-to-face interactions, when decisions must be made based on various life experiences and the knowledge gained about whom and what to trust.

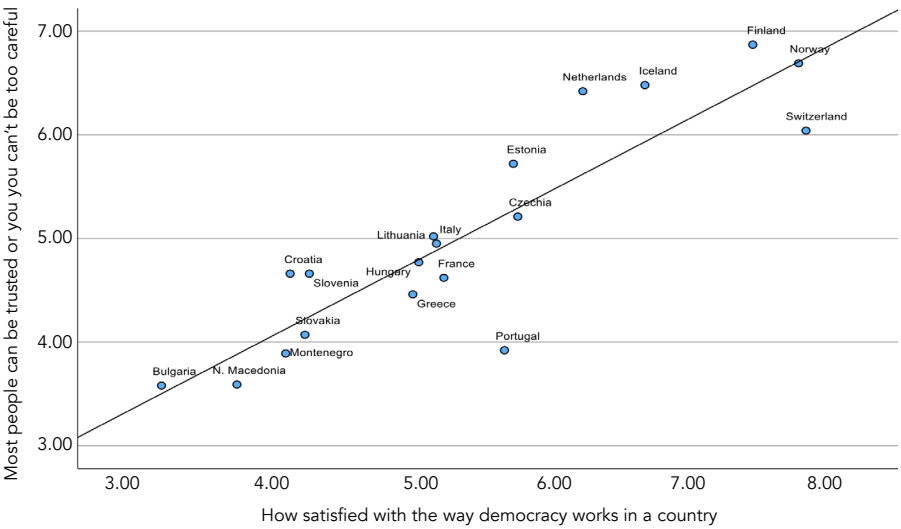
Therefore, the scholarly analysis of modern communication should focus on people's actions of accessing and sharing online information, recognising that such a process includes not only the spreading of content – such as knowledge and facts – but also the sharing of attitudes and worldviews as well as moral formations embedded within these acts and experiences. Hence, for contemporary opinion formation analyses in digital environments, it becomes critically important to learn how such an epistemic tradition and moral culture become locally embedded and institutionalised (eventually leading to the routinisation and normalisation of communication practices), what responsibilities and communication principles, such as transparency and accountability, they acquire, and how they are accepted, maintained, and shared by different groups of people.

Hence, a shift in thinking is needed to perceive the significance of values and to stress those on which the idea of "the public" and of digital civics is formed in digital media (Dahlgren, 2018). For that to occur, we must acknowledge communication's dependence on cultural and contextual traditions and historical and cultural repertoires and narratives (Carey, 1989) – dependencies that also carry over to digital media.

Generally, media environments are key sites for social trust-building and contests for identity formation, and both are ongoing processes. Likewise, nurturing societal resilience as a structurally and individually supported development should also be perceived as a contested, discursive process that is conversational, dialogic, and reflexive. As already noted, in new transmedial communication environments, the qualities of deliberation and dialogue are predominantly challenged by the infrastructural logic of social media platforms, as well as by the increasing need of individuals and groups to proclaim their own identities, ideologies, and ways of life. Likewise, in fast-paced, digitally mediated interactions, differences in people's value orientations toward a changing reality become paramount (Steinert et al., 2022) – a finding that underscores the importance of contextual traditions. A brief account of that aspect is provided in Figures 9.2–9.5.

As depicted by illustrations from the European Social Survey (European Research Infrastructure [ESS ERIC], 2023) analysis, people's prevailing attitudes are also evident in broader societal trends and differences among countries. They are reflected in people's expressions of trust, perceptions, and satisfaction with how democracy functions (or does not meet subjective expectations) in different European states (see Figure 9.2).

Figure 9.2 Linking people's perceptions of social trust with their satisfaction with democracy



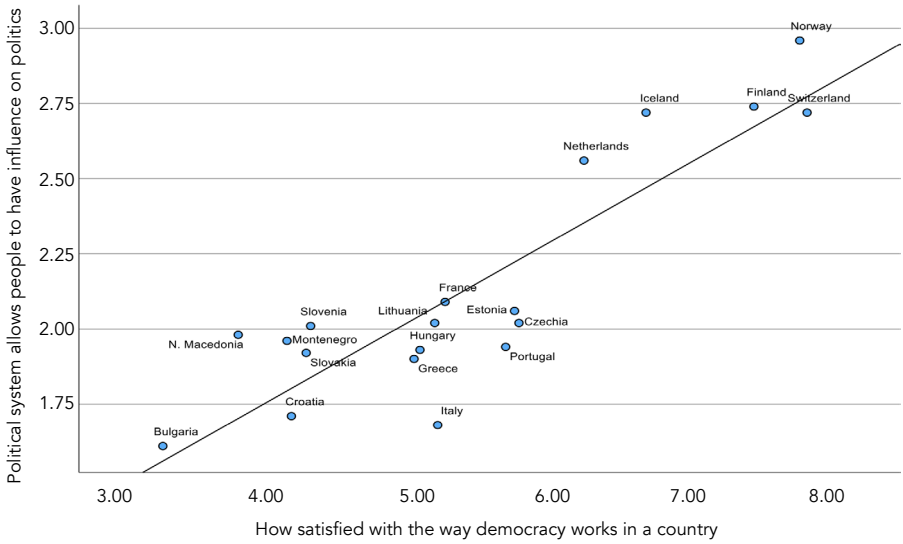
Comments: R2 Linear = 0.786. Survey question: "Would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" Responses are provided on a 10-point scale, where 0 refers to "you can't be too careful" and 10 refers to "most people can be trusted".

Source: ESS10, 2020

Some of the younger democracies are seen in the middle cluster, such as Estonia, Czechia, and Lithuania. The highest ranking is shown for the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, which are known for their policies' commitments to inclusiveness and universalism (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

Country group variations are also seen (see Figures 9.3–9.4) when systemic conditions and individual capabilities to influence politics are depicted. This indicates that greater social trust, inclusive policies (noted in universalist principles and the assessment of the political system's inclusivity), and a sense of satisfaction with democracy are essential safeguards of a sustainable democratic way of life (see Figure 9.3).

Figure 9.3 Comparing people's perceptions of the political system's inclusiveness to their satisfaction with democracy

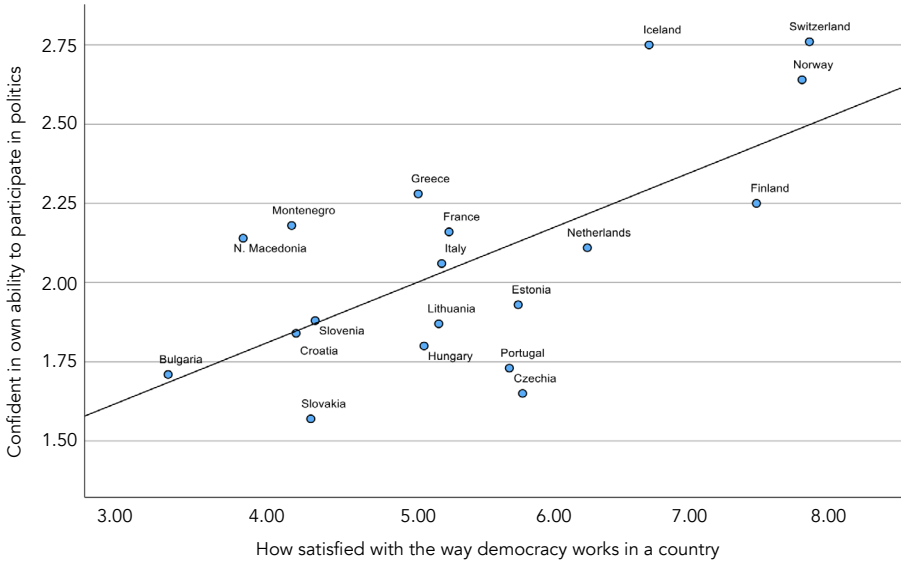


Comments: R^2 Linear = 0.777. Political system inclusiveness was measured by responses 1 (not at all) and 5 (a great deal).

Source: ESS10, 2020

Furthermore, confidence in one's ability to participate in politics is a sign of the earlier noted self-efficacious assessment, which is one of the fundamental characteristics contributing to the development of resilience (see Figure 9.4).

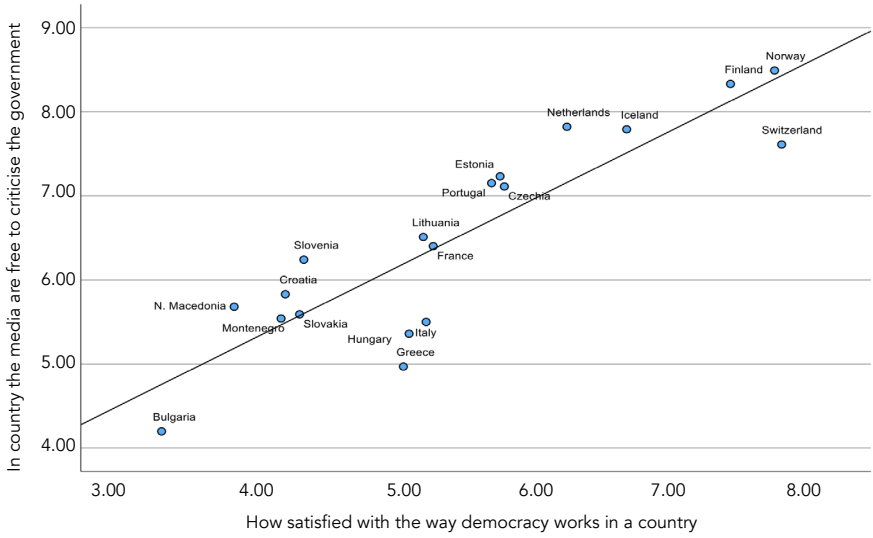
Figure 9.4 People's perceptions of their confidence to participate in politics compared to those of satisfaction with democracy



Comments: R^2 Linear = 0.442. People's confidence was measured with 1 (not at all confident) and 5 (completely confident).
Source: ESS10, 2020

Figure 9.5 illustrates a notable trend concerning communication rights and media freedoms. Implicitly expressing the feeling of being informed and trusting the media institution's freedom to fulfil its primary call – namely, to be free to perform the watchdog function and criticise the government – this assessment directly correlates with the perceived individual level of satisfaction in how democracy works in a country.

Figure 9.5 Assessment of media role by satisfaction with how democracy works in the country



Comments: R^2 Linear = 0.778. Survey question: "The media in country are free to criticize the government". Responses are provided on a 10-point scale, where 0 refers to "Does not apply at all" and 10 refers to "Applies completely".

Source: ESS10, 2020

The country-level value differences are evident in respondents' answers (see Figures 9.2–9.5), reflecting how individual agency is expressed, for example, in the assessments of individual capacities, satisfaction with democracy, and evaluations of the media. Indeed, this draws attention to the fact that, as epistemic community builders, news media and journalism have the potential to become even more inclusive and responsive – essentially "more democratic" – by addressing people's daily needs, intentions and expectations, thereby meeting their demands and increasing audience satisfaction.

Overall, the news media's internal "democratisation" could be considered an engaging process transcending the traditional functions of news media and journalists, namely information providers, agenda setters, fact-checkers, and watchdogs. Instead, it involves embracing the media's role as "sense makers" – helping people connect events to broader meanings. Following such an account, journalism should not only be socially inclusive in its contents by addressing issues of traditionally deprived groups, such as minorities or women, but also become more attentive, compassionate, and empathetic while listening to the perceptions and mindsets of various people (Wasserman, 2015).

Likewise, for citizens, fostering greater media awareness regarding the quality of represented issues is crucial for nurturing the required media responsiveness.

Discussion

This chapter's discussion centred on (dis)information vulnerabilities as foundations of epistemic risks in digital media environments. Disinformation, being a highly abstract phenomenon, sustains a far-reaching impact. False narratives and discourses are based on various claims that are changed and altered in an ongoing discursive process distributed over numerous digital channels and sites.

The social-human–centred approach (see Figure 9.1) addressed here appears to be a powerful strategy, considering the processual aspects of meaning-making in platform-sustained environments. With digital media, people form opinions over time, with varying content and in different social contexts. Algorithmically managed information flows coupled with various techniques of individually framing and shaping opinions, fuel ongoing negotiations of stances in the public discourse (Baden et al., 2025). All the participating actors seek to present, advance, and promote their claims by positioning themselves in the broader conversation. When confronted with conflicting narratives and generally dysfunctional communication and disinformation, individuals tend to rely on their biases and prejudices to confirm their pre-existing beliefs, thereby deepening divisions and increasing suspicions. As a result, relationships and trust also becomes a contentious issue, further contributing to societal disintegration and intensifying conflicts (Huurne & Gutteling, 2009).

Based on the previous section's insights, it appears that social conditions for (dis)information vulnerability will be most severe in contexts, societies, and communities where people's social rights are limited or unevenly distributed (see Figures 9.2–9.5). As known from earlier analyses, vulnerability is often connected to socially underprivileged groups: non-citizens, the disabled, the elderly, the poor, and so on. As could be hypothesised, all these socially determined traits of vulnerability are also reflected in digital communication contexts, affecting how people access information and the reasons why they use it. In digital media environments, demographic attributes like age, education, and social status also play a role in conditioning vulnerability to information disorders, including specific types of information content and thinking patterns, such as lies, conspiratorial thinking, rumours, and overall suspiciousness.

Identifying vulnerabilities is selective in all societies, yet it is unlikely that any polity could free itself of vulnerabilities. Considering that vulnerability is a dynamic and contested notion, it is crucial to recognise that individuals or groups can become vulnerable, depending on several factors, including individual (skills, experiences, and views), socio-structural (inequality and marginalisation), and situational conditions (emergencies and crises). Developing capacities and resilience to respond to detrimental features in the digital communication environment must consider all these levels. The integrated approach often refers to citizens' rights addressed on a policy level (Ala-Fossi et al., 2019), as well as being adept at individually controlling and organising awareness (e.g., Bandura, 1991). To excel in the latter

task, it is necessary to engage in continuous and informed reasoning and moral perceptions, to develop skills to navigate highly selective information environments, and to be attentive to the worldviews of the self and others. Beyond individual learning, information processing requires attention to the social practices through which capacities are acquired, including values and traditions shared among groups (Harambam, 2021).

Conclusion: What can be done, by whom, and how

In highly interconnected and hybrid media environments, where different mediatised actors, their intentions, and interests compete for attention, not only are the forms of democratic meaning-making and civic participation transformed towards manipulated, populist, and generally dysfunctional communication, but the process of informed opinion-making is also challenged, resulting in a transformation of the systems of belief.

Algorithmically managed abundance of information and disinformation, which exceeds people's ability to process it, will continue to deepen fragmentation in the public sphere and increase vulnerability to epistemic risks. The question persists of developing and sustaining the required systems and epistemic structures, as well as one's capacities to feel cohesion, coherence, and a consequent sense of security at the individual level, and a higher degree of social cohesion and integrity at the collective level.

Even with rising concerns about online disinformation and its harmful social consequences, such as the growth of populist polarisation, instigations to conflict, and the dominance of antisocial behaviours, the debates on how to respond often have no clear consensus on the definition of the "core problem", nor on viable and acceptable solutions to address it. As a single market, the EU aims to establish regulatory measures to tackle disinformation, which can have an impact even on the largest globally operating digital platforms. Likewise, it must be acknowledged that the region is not uniform, and that each country faces distinct challenges and applies different remedies to address disinformation and information manipulation.

Disinformation emerged as one of the most urgent political problems worldwide in the past decade, with different countries and contexts being impacted and addressing this challenge differently. Still, as illustrated in this discussion, it appears that societal resilience and democratic sustainability are most effectively attained as a society's ability to safeguard democratic structures (see Figures 9.2–9.5). The question then is how to support knowledge institutions that instil trust and reinforce citizenship by promoting democratic values, thereby augmenting people's capacity to recognise and apply principles of responsible and effective communication. As a universalist strategy or a "democratisation" perspective, it could be one way to address the epistemic risks outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

Nevertheless, the biggest challenge for the digital media environments (and, hence, for democracy) is making digital engagement, and thus individualism, a significant characteristic algorithmically sustained by digital platforms and media ecosystems, consistent with the ideals of social connectedness and community adaptation. This chapter suggests that paying closer attention to communication intentions, related vulnerabilities, and inequalities stemming from divergent agency and worldview characteristics could be an innovative strategy to address persistent social inequalities and epistemic differences that lead to opinion battles, conflicts, and eventually polarisation.

To address the question of what could be done, by whom, and how (if at all) to make the communications arena an engaging and pleasant place, a few additional points must be made.

Decision-making and opinion formation in digital technology-rich and information-saturated environments are much more complex than efficient information retrieval and facticity verification. Thus, the whole-of-society approach must aim to develop sound (i.e., responsible and effective) communication strategies that guide everyone. Traditional media organisations and journalists must take a more substantial role in responsibly explaining their roles and functions to citizens. Media must also understand, actively listen, and engage with their audiences to identify enduring problems. Also, shifts in media literacy education should be considered by drawing attention to people's self-efficacious learning (including those individuals representing epistemic professions: journalists, teachers, librarians) to proclaim the importance of individual capacities and life experiences. Specifically, instructional interventions should not focus just on the epistemic aspect of knowledge acquisition, such as checking facts, as people may have false prior knowledge and beliefs. Instead, the central focus must be on integrating people's life experiences with their individual awareness and self-regulatory capacities required to balance their responses. In the end, people decide – whether individually, in groups, or in policymaking situations. Therefore, assisting them in developing the capacity to understand how their relations and intentions are also defined by algorithms and AI agents may encourage them to question the currently dominant ways of thinking about digital media environments and to become more resilient within them.

Acknowledgements

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Section III

Platform power and artificial intelligence

CHAPTER 10

Governing AI innovation under EU-style capitalism

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ABSTRACT

In seeking a leading position in the artificial intelligence (AI) space through EU legislation aimed at securing innovation and market leadership and fundamental human rights, the European Commission's ambition is to ensure that AI systems benefit all. In this chapter, I critically assess this ambition by historicising efforts to govern digital technologies and examining the characteristics of the contemporary "AI industry" and the discourses of selected governing texts. I argue that the prevailing imaginary of a technologically mediated future that frames governance in this space clashes with governing in the name of justice and the protection of human rights. Current governance initiatives are likely to restrain some excesses of a capitalist-inspired "AI industry". If the prevailing imaginary of progress is not dislodged by resistance strategies, however, neither corporate-led technology innovation nor state-led governance measures are likely to yield a future consistent with their claimed support for human rights and greater equality.

KEYWORDS: artificial intelligence, digital governance, regulation, human rights, digital future imaginaries

Mansell, R. (2026). Governing AI innovation under EU-style capitalism. In A. Balčytienė, P. Bajomi-Lázár, & H. Sousa (Eds.), *Digital media shadowing democracy: Technology, communication, and power* (pp. 197–218). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. https://doi.org/10.48335/9789189864290-10

Introduction

It is always tricky to assess the likely outcomes of governance in the making especially when governance is understood broadly to encompass patterns of rules that underpin social orders (Puppis et al., 2024). The EU's Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act was transposed into law which became applicable in 2025 (European Union, 2024). In this chapter I interrogate the contradictory ambitions embedded in this approach to "AI system" governance. My aim is to assess the likelihood that respect for human rights, justice, and equality can be achieved in practice by the governance measures that are being put in place. "AI systems" are implicated along with the datafication practices of digital platforms in creating havoc in societies around the world, so much so that elite state and corporate leaders who frequent the World Economic Forum (WEF) are worried. The WEF's *Global Risks Report 2024* ranked spiralling mis- and disinformation as risk number one, noting that current and future digital systems are implicated in a "vicious cycle that could trigger civil unrest and possibly confrontation" (World Economic Forum, 2024: 88). Ranked first again in the Forum's 2025 report, the rise of digital platforms, growing volumes of AI-generated content, algorithmic biases, and the ease with which government surveillance can be conducted were all linked to risks associated with mis- and disinformation (World Economic Forum, 2025). The WEF has called for proportionate responses that do not stand in the way of the innovations that are key to "unlocking a multitude of the world's problems" (World Economic Forum, 2024: 88).

In the institutional political economy of media and communication tradition (Mansell, 2023; Winseck, 2024), my analysis highlights how the prevailing imaginary of technologically mediated progress works to normalise recourse to risk mitigation governance strategies that align "AI systems" principally with capitalist ambitions for profit, even as they champion the protection of human rights. These "AI systems" are progressively becoming embedded in digital societies and they are used to augment existing processes of datafication and platformisation, providing new means of surveillance, amplifying mis- and disinformation and threatening the very foundations of democracy.

I begin by renaming. The consensus definition of an "AI system", agreed by OECD member states and accepted by the EU, is "a machine-based system that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments" (OECD, 2023: 7). Instead, I employ the label systems for statistical propositions (SSPs) in this chapter (except when I refer to specific documents that use AI language). The term "SSP" was proposed at a UNESCO conference in 2024 as part of a glossary of terms to support discussion of the benefits and harms of technological advances more transparently (Frau-Meigs, 2024). The rationale for this renaming is that it draws attention to what large language models

(LLMs) actually do, and it signals that advances in "AI systems" have a long history of using anthropomorphic language to imply that these systems are approaching, or about to exceed, human cognitive abilities (Chokshi & Mansell, 2026; Natale & Ballatore, 2020). It might be argued that the language of AI or machine learning is indicative of an emergent science that must name its insights even if this results in "an impoverished reductionist view" of what "intelligence" is. It might also be suggested that "nobody can swim against" these namings once they take hold in policy discourse (Floridi & Nobre, 2024: 9–10). I suggest, however, that renaming can work as an essential act in destabilising the prevailing imaginaries that guide innovation and governance in this field.

In the face of claims that recent "accidental" SSP innovations might be "the Copernican trauma that shifts us from a design career as the authors of the Anthropocene to the role of supporting actors in the arrival of the post-Anthropocene" (Bratton, 2015: 365), scholars are exploring governance approaches – both state-initiated and local strategies – that might secure the accountability of SSP providers (Crawford, 2021; Katzenbach & Ulbricht, 2019; Mejias & Couldry, 2024; Zuboff, 2022). Most agree that "AI system" governance approaches are nascent and that how they are applied will influence the way societal, political, cultural, and economic conditions are mediated. My analysis is developed first by historicising SSPs and (Western) governance responses. I then briefly profile the marketisation of SSPs, attending to some of the characteristics of the market where SSP tools and applications are being deployed. This is followed by a parsing of contemporary SSP governance actions based on a critical examination of discourse emphasising the principal imaginaries about SSPs and the outcomes expected of governance measures. In the next section I address reflections on imaginaries and power and discuss why state-led governance measures may mitigate the excesses of capitalist profit-driven SSP innovation to some extent, but are not aligned with strategies aimed at reimagining a just and equitable technologically mediated future.

Historicising SSPs and (Western) governance responses

It is asked again and again whether it is possible to open technology "black boxes" to understand their embeddedness in societies. The imaginary of these technological systems as revolutionary and disruptive, and as requiring societal adaptation, flourishes with each innovation that makes its way to the market. This is especially the case for digital technologies. In the 1970s, the technologies of direct broadcasting, cable television, discs, cassettes, and the fax machine were touted as revolutionary. In the late 1980s, digital hardware and software were expected to yield transformative revolutionary AI expert systems. In the 1990s, major strides in natural language processing, computer graphics (virtual reality), and intelligent agents were acclaimed for their potential benefits. In 2005, it was envisaged that cybercrime "will often involve no human

interface, being completely automated" (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2005: 235). It was noted that security and trust concerns would have to be addressed if the full benefits of these innovations were to be realised (International Telecommunication Union, 2006).

There was discussion about what to do about malicious botnets and about the privacy implications of photo identification and, by 2010, cloud computing and "AI-as-a-service" were already being marketed. Whether designated as the future Internet, the Internet of Things, ambient computing, affective computing, bioelectronics, neuro-electronics, or human-computer symbiosis, risks to privacy and data protection, social justice and equity, safety, security, and trust were clearly on the policy agenda. EU official Gérald Santucci imagined in 2011 that "by year 2060, a biot (an object at the interface of cybernetics, biotechnology), and cognition" would enable Internet-aware "social objects" as facilitators of human interaction (Santucci, 2011: para. 5). In 2013, the WEF was "passionate" about the power of data analytics, and robots operating in unstructured environments were prominent in policy discourses, all raising ethical concerns (Bibao-Osorio et al., 2013: 79; Van Woensel et al., 2016). In 2016, the National Science and Technology Council (2016: 2) in the US strongly emphasised that AI would require "a data-literate citizenry".

As digitised SSPs spread through Western countries, guidelines on the protection of personal data and transborder data flows (1980) and on information system security (1992) were published by the OECD aiming to amplify privacy protection and the safety of computational systems. The Council of Europe agreed a convention on protecting individuals regarding the automatic processing of personal data in 1981. The EU had a regulation in place on the processing of personal data and the free movement of data in 1995 and on the security of information systems in 2002. Throughout these decades, the urgency of achieving control over these technical systems was repeatedly expressed. Thus, it is not credible to suggest that policymakers were caught off guard by more recent challenges presented by SSPs. Before turning to an assessment of current initiatives to govern SSPs, the unfolding marketisation of SSPs is considered.

The marketisation of SSPs

The SSP industry (known as the "AI industry") is highly concentrated, but it is difficult to draw a clear boundary around the actors in a complex value chain from chip producers to end users of these systems. An indication of the market power of key actors is suggested by focusing on semiconductors. These are the material substrate of an industry dominated by NVIDIA, US-owned, for chip design; ASML, founded by Philips and Dutch-owned, for semiconductor manufacturing equipment; TSMC, Taiwanese-owned, for chip fabrication; and a combination of Amazon Web Services, Microsoft Azure, and Google Cloud, plus others, for computing power. Large companies such as Meta, Alphabet/

Google, and Amazon have their own computing infrastructure, but many other system developers access computing power from infrastructure-as-a-service companies. Many developers of LLMs are subsidiaries of the largest technology companies, or they have partnership agreements with them, for example, Anthropic, Cohere, Google DeepMind, Hugging Face, OpenAI, and Stability AI. Based on various online sources, in 2024, Microsoft's market capitalisation was around 3 trillion US dollars, Alphabet's 1.8 trillion, Amazon's 1.8 trillion, Nvidia's 1.8 trillion, and Apple's and Meta's 1.2 trillion each.

The scale of investment in SSPs is huge. In 2022, private investment in AI companies was estimated at 92 billion US dollars, with the US in the lead (47 billion), followed by China (13 billion) and the UK (4 billion). The top EU country was Germany (2 billion) (Maslej et al., 2023). By 2024, global private investment had reached 130 billion US dollars (Our World in Data, 2025), and the investment profiles of countries and regions with AI start-ups and large companies continued to trend upwards (Ene, 2025). In 2025, OpenAI alone secured 40 billion US dollars in private financing commitments and was valued at 300 billion US dollars, although it was unclear just how much of this commitment will be met since the full amount is contingent on other companies' fund-raising efforts (Zitron, 2025). EU public investment pales by comparison. Between 2014 and 2020, the EU is estimated to have invested 10 billion euros through its framework programmes, with a further 20 billion euros committed by 2030. Much of this spending is allocated to technology development and a smaller amount to research on the social environment (Galdon-Clavell et al., 2023).

Some companies develop their own "generative AI" models, or they incorporate others' models into their services. Most of these models are proprietary, with companies actively promoting tools for content creation, design and art, software development, language translation, healthcare, and gaming and finance, to name only a few application fields. The news industry and the journalism profession are being reshaped by their increasing use of SSPs in the selection, production, and distribution of news and by new tools supporting audience analytics. The news industry is confronted with asymmetrical power between news organisations and the digital platforms, which threatens the former's traditional revenue streams and the sustainability of many news outlets, also raising concerns about the future of journalism independence and autonomy as the use of "AI system" tools becomes commonplace in the newsroom (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023; Simon, 2022).

As SSPs permeate all segments of societies, the high costs of developing the underlying LLMs means that the search is on for ways to monetise investments. Some companies offer model access to individuals (sometimes vetted) for free; for example, Microsoft based on OpenAI technology offers Bing AI and, from February 2023, started a subscription plan for ChatGPT Plus at 20 US dollars per month. Meta's LLM is open sourced for non-commercial open-science use, ostensibly transparently, but most models are

proprietary with licensing arrangements for use by other companies and states as well as through subscription arrangements. LLM developers have been found to engage in "open-washing", that is, "selective and self-serving forms of openness", when they claim to meet open-source criteria but fail to provide access to model training parameters, do not disclose the training data, or place restrictions on source-code modification (Liesenfeld & Dingemanse, 2024: 1776). From writing and coding assistants to image generation assistants, the market is expanding rapidly, with companies beyond the most prominent ones mushrooming. The SSP companies' market prospects depend upon huge datasets scraped from open web sources to create "data lakes", and copyright infringement cases brought against companies including Anthropic, OpenAI, and Google are making their way through the courts, leading to uncertainty about how long data will be free for the taking (Mishcon de Reya, 2024; Sookman, 2024). LLM developers are also dependent upon the quality of data they harvest, and some companies are using their own internal data sources (Zaharia & Bischoff, 2024). All these companies are expected to ensure that their data uses are compliant with legislation that has been in place for some time, for example, the EU General Data Protection Regulation, but this has not stopped LLM developers from securing data from online sources regardless of whether explicit permission has been granted (Mansell, 2025).

Scholars seeking to map corporate affiliations, ownership linkages, and, indeed, the market niches of companies using the "AI" designation run into difficulties. Reports on finance and ownership yield a messy and often inconsistent picture. Governing this industry is likely to be no less challenging than governing the digital platform market has proven to be, not only because of the growing complexity of SSP systems, but because of the capacity of companies to insist that the priority is rapid innovation to secure their business prospects and the economic growth of countries and regions. Thus, "if AI becomes one of the most economically and strategically important technologies of the 21st century [...], the geographic distribution of access to compute, and therefore the ability to develop and deploy AI without hindrance and oversight from other states" (Sastry et al., 2024: 46), will influence the global distribution of power and prosperity. Most market analysts expect the top-ranked technology companies to hold onto their leading status in the market, although there is speculation that new entrants will disrupt current rankings and the financial prospects of individual companies are likely to wax and wane (Gerard, 2025). In 2024, leading Big Tech figures – Thiel (Palentir), Bezos (Amazon), and Zuckerberg (Meta) among them – started selling off larger-than-usual tranches of their own shares (Temple-West & Kinder, 2024). This may signal that the road ahead is likely to be bumpy as the governance of platforms and the "AI industry" ramps up in Europe and the costs of monetisation increase in terms of both computational resources and mounting fines for departures from globally agreed upon ethical principles (Gibson, 2024; United Nations, 2024a).

What it is unlikely to signal, however, is a substantial change in the prevailing imaginary of a technologically mediated future in which power accrues to technology companies inversely to its accrual to users of their technologies. All these companies are expanding the capabilities of SSP systems and the "use cases" for generative AI. These developments are depicted as "game-changing" (United Nations AI Advisory Board, 2023: 1), with imaginaries of what SSP systems can "do" extending to their potential to ameliorate every crisis. In the case of the EU, for example, its circular economy action plan to respond to the climate change crisis calls for "innovative models […] powered by digital technologies, such as the internet of things, big data, blockchain and artificial intelligence", with a view to making Europe less dependent on primary materials (European Commission, 2020: 2).

Innovation policy and governance in this area – as in others – is dominated by supply-push thinking and funding (Borrás & Edquist, 2019). And as Helga Nowotny (2021: 20) has aptly observed, "when self-fulfilling prophecies begin to proliferate, we risk returning to a deterministic worldview in which the future appears as predetermined and hence closed". Designers and commercial owners of past and present SSP systems are guided by "the fundamental impulse that sets and keeps the capitalist engine in motion" – new goods, new methods of production, and new markets (Schumpeter, 1942: 82–83). The question is how to "incentivize powerful firms to 'do the right thing'" (Cusumano et al., 2021: 1280), when what the "right thing" is remains contested. Effective governance requires that companies are "hauled in from the unregulated wilderness in which they are free to roam to destroy as they, or rather those who own them, please" (Nowotny, 2021: 160–161). If the prevailing imaginary of SSP systems persists, as depicted by developer Yoshua Bengio, then we should be sceptical about claims that state-led governance will incentivise the larger and smaller technology players to do the "right thing":

> Superhuman AI could give unprecedented power to those who control it, whether individuals, corporations, or governments, threatening democracy and geopolitical stability. […] In the extreme, a few individuals controlling superhuman AIs would accrue a level of power never before seen in human history. (Bengio, 2023: paras. 12, 5)

Bengio, like others in the technical community, hopes that a combination of self-regulation and state-led governance will provide a counterbalance to the technology owners' ambitions. The next section explores the traction likely to be achieved in making the current and future SSP systems responsive to non-economic goals by critically examining the discourses of "AI system" or SSP system governance.

Parsing of contemporary SSP system governance

Given the EU AI Act's explicit aim of balancing corporate interests in market leadership with broader goals linked to human rights and safety, I start with

this Act and then profile some of the governance moves being taken elsewhere. The following is not intended as a legal analysis but as an opportunity to reflect on the principal imaginary of power relations between government and corporate governors and the governed.

The EU Artificial Intelligence Act

The EU's discourse about the governance of SSP systems is clear: "Trustworthy AI" should "serve to maintain and foster democratic processes and respect the plurality of values and life choices of individuals" (High-Level Expert Group on AI, 2019: 11). The AI Act now has the force of law. The Act's purpose is to "improve the functioning of the internal market and promoting the uptake of human-centric and trustworthy artificial intelligence" (European Union, 2024: 44), with a high level of protection for health, safety, and fundamental rights, and with ambitions for promoting innovation. A long list of rights is to be protected, with the expectation being that the regulation will curtail "reasonably foreseeable misuse" of AI (European Union, 2024: 19), including generative systems. A tiered approach – prohibited, high risk (including systemic risk for generative AI), and non-high risk – is adopted. The close reading of the discourse that follows confirms there is considerable room for judgement in this new governance text.

In the prohibited category is a list of SSP tools and applications, including subliminal techniques, that "materially" distort behaviour in a manner that "causes or is likely to cause" physical or psychological harm (European Union, 2024: 50). The use of "real-time" remote biometric identification systems in public spaces for law enforcement is prohibited unless it is "strictly necessary" (European Union, 2024: 52). Various forms of profiling are prohibited if this is the only basis for predicting human behaviours. Other conditional and subjective terms relate to whether the collection or generation of data leads to "unfavourable" treatment or treatment that is "disproportionate". Overall, systems with the aim of "materially" distorting behaviour, or those that are deemed "particularly" dangerous, are forbidden.

For SSP systems deemed to be high risk, effective risk management strategies are required. These are to be developed to ensure that the "relevant" residual risk associated with a hazard and the overall residual risk are "acceptable". SSP systems should be "effectively" overseen by humans, "as appropriate and proportionate" (European Union, 2024: 60). In the case of "general-purpose AI models", these are associated with systemic risk when a LLM involves a "cumulative amount of computation used for its training measured in floating point operations is greater than 10^{25}" (European Union, 2024: 83). This is a measure of the processing performance and complexity of an AI model which may be altered over time, but which neglects the fact that less complex models are also associated with risks. Third parties relying on tools, services, processes, or components under open licences are "encouraged" to implement

good practices. Systems for exclusively military, defence, or national security purposes are not covered by the Act, but when an AI system falls within the scope of the Act, organisations are not prevented from engaging in military activities. Military and security agencies are asking populations to "trust us on AI" (Scott, 2024). Thus, while companies such as Palantir and Clearview AI provide SSP systems for use in war zones, the aim is to achieve "responsible" military use through dialogue and voluntary controls (The White House, 2023).

Compliance with the Act requires judgements by numerous actors. Because standards have yet to be fully developed for advanced SSP systems, a General-Purpose AI Code of Practice, released in July 2025, has been developed by experts including AI providers, government and civil society representatives, and academics (European Commission, 2025). The code is voluntary for non-high–risk systems and addresses issues relating to transparency, copyright, and safety and security. At the time of writing, it had been signed by 27 AI companies, including the industry leaders. Codes of conduct are also being developed by the industry, albeit with the participation of relevant authorities, and they are voluntary for non-high–risk systems. And, new institutions are created by the Act: the European Artificial Intelligence Board, with high-level national supervisory authority representatives including the European Data Protection Supervisor and European Commission authorities; and the AI Office as a centre of expertise (European Union, 2024).

The AI Act calls for investment in "AI literacy", which is understood as the skills, knowledge, and understanding that allow providers, users, and others affected to "make an informed deployment of AI systems" (European Union, 2024: 49); but, providers are expected to enable literacy only "to their best extent" (European Union, 2024: 51). Literacy should enable individual users to be aware of "automation bias"; they should learn to interpret high-risk SSP system output "correctly" (European Union, 2024: 60). The prevention of harms is to be enabled by instructions for system use. If redress is sought, complaints can be made by SSP users, who should then receive "clear and meaningful explanations" of the role of the system in decision-making (European Union, 2024: 110), and, in line with other legislation, there is a variety of fines for non-compliance.

In summary, the Act's overall aim is "responsible innovation", which safeguards by mitigating risk while seeking to "accelerate" the development and marketing of high-risk systems. In complying, system providers should take account of the "generally acknowledged state of the art", and it is acknowledged that risk management can deal only with "reasonably foreseeable misuse" and "known or foreseeable circumstances" (European Union, 2024: 35–36, 55–56). In addition, new measures should minimise restrictions on international trade (European Union, 2024: 13). For SSP systems already on the market, public authority users have four years to comply and, in the case of "generative AI" models already on the market, they have several years. This account of the discourse signals substantial

opportunities for judgement and dispute. The Act also normalises certain commercial datafication practices – that is, "common and legitimate commercial practices" used in targeted advertising must comply with existing law, but should not "in themselves be regarded as constituting harmful manipulative AI practices" (European Union, 2024: 9).

There are additional ambiguities. Regarding "generative AI", the full range of capabilities is to be better understood after their release on the market. If innovative SSPs are deemed crucial for health and safety, environment protection, or "society as a whole", high-risk systems can be deployed without compliance or authorisation, provided requests are made during or after the use and "without undue delay" (European Union, 2024: 33). With these numerous conditionalities, the prevailing imaginary of progress is consistent with expansive commercial datafication, and there is considerable ambiguity around whether the governance regime can align with economic priorities and with the protection of human rights at the same time.

Other governance measures in and beyond the EU

The EU's SSP system governance initiatives are interwoven with multiple existing measures from the General Data Protection Regulation, applying to the processing of personal data to regulations concerning non-personal data processing and legislation on data security. The AI Act also comes on the heels of the Digital Services Act (European Union, 2022b) and Digital Markets Act (European Union, 2022a), with the former aiming to ensure that the largest digital platform companies provide a safe, rights-respecting digital space, and the latter at creating a level playing field to boost innovation, growth, and competitiveness. In a US context of increasing protectionism and geopolitical tension, the Biden Administration's Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights and an AI Risk Management Framework were accompanied by a National Artificial Intelligence Research and Development Strategic Plan. Like the EU's approach – with the distinction that all measures were voluntary – the aim was to evaluate "AI systems" using yet-to-be-developed standards and benchmarks with a risk mitigation strategy to ensure that investment would serve the public good. Again, there was ambiguity when it was acknowledged that risks are currently "difficult to quantify" (Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence of the National Science and Technology Council, 2023: vii, 17). Nevertheless, the presumption was that governance will ensure that these systems are "valid and reliable, safe, secure and resilient, accountable and transparent, explainable and interpretable, privacy-enhanced, and fair with harmful bias managed" (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2023: 12). Tougher measures were put in place to govern "industrial-scale compute" targeting the most advanced chips, largest data centres, and frontier "generative AI" model training. This was all still in line with efforts by the US to secure its dominance of the global market. Experts noted, however,

that more research would be needed before efforts to control "compute power" could be effective: "naïve or poorly scoped approaches to compute governance carry significant risks in areas like privacy, economic impacts, and centralization of power" (Sastry et al., 2024: 1).

The SSP governance landscape aligns with a discourse welcoming an imaginary of ever-expanding datafication overseen by risk mitigation measures. A risk mitigation approach is visible in the United Nations Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, which calls for audits and certification schemes to monitor the compliance of SSP systems with (yet-to-be-agreed) engineering standards (United Nations, 2020; see also United Nations, 2024a). Its report, *Governing AI for Humanity*, echoes an ahistorical view of innovation, insisting that "capabilities once hardly imaginable have been emerging at a rapid, unprecedented pace" and should "leave no one behind" as the imaginary of progress unfolds (United Nations AI Advisory Board, 2023: 2–3). When the UN General Assembly adopted its resolution on AI, it acknowledged that the risks and harms of "improper or malicious design, development, deployment and use" of these systems can occur without adequate safeguards (United Nations, 2024b: 3). Consistency with the prevailing imaginary of digitally mediated progress was signalled by the adoption of the text without a vote. The agreed text only "encourages" member states and other stakeholders not to deploy systems that do not comply with human rights law or that pose "undue" risk to people's enjoyment of their human rights. Similarly, OECD countries call for "responsible stewardship", respect for "the rule of law, human rights and democratic values", and safeguards "appropriate to the context and consistent with the state of the art" (OECD, 2023: 7–8). This is echoed in the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law (Council of Europe, 2024). The Council also updated its Convention on the protection of individuals and the processing of personal data and issued recommendations on media freedom, the right to freedom of expression, the roles and responsibilities of Internet intermediaries, and the protection of journalists. In the American context, with a new Trump Administration, risk mitigation measures seem to be abandoned as President Trump issues executive orders calling for a flexible AI regulatory environment and the removal of barriers to AI innovation at the federal level (The White House, 2025a, 2025b). US states are putting a variety of AI governance measures in the place, but the overriding ambition is to boost US-owned AI company prospects on the global market, and to do so by ramping up the application of SSPs in every facet of the lifeworld.

In view of aspirations for inclusivity and leaving no one behind in SSP use throughout the world, it is worth noting that in March 2024, of 55 African countries, only five had specific "AI strategies" in place. Of these 55 countries, 15 had introduced an AI task force, expert body, agency, council, or committee; some 37 had data protection laws, but only 29 had operational data protection authorities (Tech Hive Advisory Center for Law & Innovation, 2024). The next

section offers a critical evaluation of these multiple initiatives to govern SSPs within the confines of the prevailing imaginary of digitally mediated progress.

Reflections on imaginaries and power

The foregoing discussion amply demonstrates that it is misleading when policymakers seeking to govern SSPs claim to be taken by surprise by the speed of innovation. In practice, today's plethora of SSP governance measures aimed at risk assessment and mitigation bear many similarities to those adopted for earlier generations of digital technology. They embrace ambiguities, and their outcomes will be conditioned by power relations that influence judgements in contexts where the regulatory texts are open to interpretation (Mansell, 2023). The SSP governance instruments discussed in the preceding section are not the only ones, but my aim is to highlight common features of those discussed here.

One commonality is that SSP innovations are positioned as disruptive and inevitably risky because of the speed of change, which it is claimed could not be foreseen. This is so despite the fact that claims about the apparently unforeseen or "emergent" abilities of LLMs could be attributable to a change in the metric that is used to indicate the growing capabilities of these models. The measure currently being used conveys the impression that developments in computer processing performance are discontinuous, whereas earlier metrics might provide a profile of continuous change in LLM performance (Schaeffer et al., 2023). The former discontinuous profile is attractive to an industry agenda intent on promoting unprecedented technological progress as being beneficial to humanity. The logic of unprecedented disruptive and discontinuous progress aligns with economic explanations about the benefits of "disruptive innovation" for economic growth. When Big Tech firms argue that their "AI systems" will bring greater efficiency and increased productivity – and growth – their claims elide with the idea that this is the optimal pathway towards sustainability and global "developmental" equity (Acemoglu & Johnson, 2023). Another commonality is that governance initiatives such as the AI Act are positioned to operate in the context of corporate and state interests in data monetisation and market leadership with ambiguous emphases on individual rights protection and collective interests, since the latter struggle to be balanced with the priority given to attaining market leadership.

Differences in the *locus* of power are sometimes drawn between rights-driven, market-driven, and state-driven governance approaches in the EU, the US, and China (Bradford, 2020; Wang et al., 2024). In practice, these are differences of degree. In China, SSP system legislation explicitly privileges state interests in deploying advanced SSPs to maintain social order; but, arguably, the emphasis on preserving democracy in the EU and US implicitly has a similar intent. In the US, First Amendment speech rights condition governance measures, and there is a strong emphasis on the "free market", except when competitiveness in the global market is at stake. In the EU, human rights

protection is central, but protections, as indicated in the previous section, are conditioned by multiple ambiguities and must be balanced with the economic interests of the single market.

Notwithstanding these distinctions, they all aim to champion the prevailing imaginary of trustworthy SSPs. The universality of this imaginary was confirmed with the Bletchley Declaration on AI, signed by the EU, the US, the UK, China, and some Majority World countries (e.g., Kenya, Nigeria). They agreed to note the "potential for serious, even catastrophic, harm, either deliberate or unintentional, stemming from the most significant capabilities of these AI models", and they were happy to claim that "context appropriate" safety testing is the route to achieving market and non-market governance goals (UK Government, 2023: 3).

The prevailing imaginary underpinning SSP governance is that system developer and owner as well as state interests can be aligned with progress that is (ultimately) consistent with human well-being and flourishing. This is informed by a specific imaginary about the efficiency and productivity gains arising from techniques of optimisation and, more generally, the benefits of these gains for society. Critical scholarship, in contrast, finds that these techniques are key to discriminations and surveillance that are at the heart of the calculative practices which are also central to the political economy of capitalism (McGuigan, 2023). In critical scholarship, it is acknowledged that the drive to achieve optimisation is a choice, not a given. It is a choice to reconstruct human behaviour in line with an "assimilation to a transcendent ('virtual') order of mathematical formalism" (Agre, 1994: 107). The imaginary of successful reconstruction sits at the heart of the broader SSP project. But if systems could "think rationally" about the "best" action, "the commonsense information possessed by humans would be written as logical sentences and included in the database" (McCarthy, 1987: 1032). This is the aspiration, and it presumes that all forms of knowledge and experience of the everyday lifeworld are calculable and replicable in the digital lifeworld (Noller, 2025). Critical scholarship points out that, in fact, SSPs in practice embody a "mix of institutionalized codes, professional cultures, technological capabilities, social practices, and individual decision making" (Ananny, 2016: 96). Nevertheless, the optimisation imaginary sustains a race to control calculative means, sometimes claiming in the computational sciences to operate in "a non-ideological environment", eschewing normative or values-based judgements and, at other times, to operate in accord with social or political values, albeit within the parameters of computational models (Mansell, 2024). This imaginary is sustained by promoting epistemologies and methods with "vain pretensions [...] to understand mind as computation" (Winograd, 1990: 167).

The prevailing imaginary of SSP governance assumes that algorithms and LLMs can be assigned specific values and principles that they must adhere to in the expectation that a model will enact the norms of the constitution (Katzenbach, 2021). If it does not, guardrails can be deployed

to avoid outcomes that are harmful or discriminatory. This imaginary of technological "solutionism" recasts "all complex social situations either as neat problems with definite, computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized – if only the right algorithms are in place" (Morozov, 2013: 5). The political economy question is about where these objectives and values come from (Veale et al., 2023). They are certainly not simply informed by a scientific curiosity about whether "there are imaginable digital computers which would do well in the imitation game" (Turing, 1950: 442); they mainly come from the value preferences of companies and states with their contradictory interests in human rights, marketisation, and securitisation (Burton, 2023).

Investigations of the history of choices taken about technology innovation, markets, and governance are clear: "There is nothing automatic about new technologies bringing widespread prosperity. Whether they do or not is an economic, social and political choice" (Acemoglu & Johnson, 2023: 13), and it is typically the powerful elites that make those choices. Benefits undoubtedly accompany the deployment of SSPs when they contribute to market and organisational efficiency, to improved health diagnostics, or to environmental monitoring. But in the presence of power asymmetries, the biases and harms are rarely detected or reported until SSP developers and their owners are pressed to do so by regulators, the press, or whistle blowers – often after harms have occurred. This is despite efforts to prohibit certain tools and applications and to hold technology developers accountable through numerous voluntary and obligatory compliance requirements. The prevailing view is that the "mindset[s] of the government and people have not adjusted to view the future, even though technology is exploding" (Bill Gates, as cited in Preston, 2017: 101). This technocentric imaginary informs much governance discourse, making critical reflection on what the future holds very challenging because the "established order" is so deeply entrenched and,

> what looks like a crisis to an outside observer does not become historically generative until participants in the society see it *as* a crisis […] [and] they intuit that the pressing problems they experience arise not despite but precisely *because of* the established order and cannot be solved within it. (Fraser, 2022: 132)

How can an intuition that challenges the established order be broadly encouraged at the current juncture in the history of technologically inspired imaginaries?

A first move is to step back from the fixation on the latest SSP innovations, turning attention instead to the whole "data assemblage" (Kitchin & Lauriault, 2018) or to the stack of infrastructural components, including hardware and software and human input (van Dijck, 2020). This shift makes it easier to detect the dependence of SSP development on multiple power-infused

choices about relationships, legal and informal institutions, material objects, and ideas, all of which condition what systems are deployed to what ends under the varieties of capitalism operating around the world (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Griffin, 2023; Taylor et al., 2022). The SSP risk mitigation strategies are imbued with an imaginary future in which these technologies are to be "trusted throughout the world" (Paul, 2023: 1065). Power asymmetries and inequalities, "specifically differences in economic, social, and political status, and especially between different racial and ethnic groups" (Kreiss & McGregor, 2024: 558), are neglected as those in powerful positions use "trustworthy AI" to build "a chain of equivalences around an empty signifier" (Stamboliev & Christiaens, 2024: 44), which then underpins an imagined consensus around future SSP system development.

In this context, governance operates as "performative politics" (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022), conjuring the prevailing imaginary at every turn. This makes it acceptable to downplay the fact that neither state officials nor designers or owners of SSP technology are in a position to calculate "the probability and adverse impact of AI systems on [...] fundamental rights with any numerical measures or clear indicators"; instead, they rely on the "rule of thumb" dressed up as rational decision-making (Paul, 2023: 1066). Thus, computational authority is privileged, and technologies are treated as a "thing" to be governed (Suchman, 2023: 1), while the outcomes are misaligned with aspirations for the protection of fundamental rights (Mejias & Couldry, 2024). In this context, it is not feasible to undertake the meaningful scrutiny of SSPs that would protect people from harm (Taylor et al., 2022).

A second move calls for an "analytics of power" (Deacon, 2002), including a close examination of how companies claim to be acting responsibly while they work to evade democratic oversight (Caplan, 2023; Obendiek, 2024). They do so partly by diffusing responsibility: "Everybody recognizes that no one tech company, no one government, no one civil society organization is able to deal with the advent of this technology and its possible nefarious use on their own" (Nick Clegg, as cited in O'Brien & Swenson, 2024: para: 3). The technology companies may sign voluntary frameworks, for example, to respond to deepfakes, or Meta may announce a policy promoting improved transparency of digitally manipulated content, but the SSP world continues to be characterised by "creepy inclusion", and by technology developments inspired by the prevailing imaginary of trustworthy tools and services (Napoli, 2014; Pasquale, 2020). The reality is that these technologies are becoming "a more powerful force capable of perpetrating global violence" (Ricaurte, 2022: 726).

In this context, a rhetoric of objectivity, rationality, and certainty, combined with a governance discourse that is rife with ambiguity, leaves little room for an analytics of power. For this reason, a third move is agonistic resistance, which seeks change through public deliberation and novel practices better aligned with democratic outcomes (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2013).

Governance requirements and fines for regulatory infringements, as well as continuing efforts to reach consensus about appropriate trade-offs among opposing market and human rights goals, can mitigate some harms. But resistance requires not privileging digital technology as a "sentient" actor and, instead, treating it as the embodiment of "propensities" (Latour, 2005). It requires creating conditions for imagining that the non-linearity of innovation can be a basis for radical change.

Hence, novel imaginaries for SSP governance arrangements are emerging through dozens of practices aimed at resisting the power of the Big Tech companies deploying SSPs in the market. Resistance strategies may be present on the individual level when people adopt self-defence practices to minimise the extraction of their data: they may take a collective form, such as initiatives by Indigenous communities and municipalities to set their own norms and guidelines for governing how data is collected and used; they may adopt commons-based approaches, which privilege democratic values and human rights over commerce and profit; and new practices are emerging around decentralised frameworks for data governance, especially in countries in the Global South, and there are increasing instances of litigation by civil society organisations arguing that people's rights are being infringed (Mansell et al., 2025; Mejias & Couldry, 2024). Many of these initiatives are small-scale, but they illustrate that alternative imaginaries and practices are feasible. There is at least a potential for technological innovations in the digital landscape, and SSPs in particular, to follow norms and practices that are not shaped predominantly by corporate values and aspirations for profit.

Conclusion

Scepticism about the SSP-mediated future that is central to the prevailing imaginary is growing, even apart from those envisaging an existential threat to humanity. However, the predominant risk mitigation approaches discussed in this chapter remain products of a capitalist-inspired normative agenda (Manovich, 2020).

This chapter has highlighted the history of governance initiatives in the space where digital technology innovation has been fostered, demonstrating why struggles to uphold human rights in the face of technology marketisation must continue beyond the formality of state-led governance and implementation. These governance initiatives do not aim to reframe the technology innovation agenda in a way that departs from a fascination with optimisation and the notion that a more robust calculus of human behaviour in all its manifestations is the answer to human problems. Still, there is no basis for claiming that SSPs cannot be governed in line with a different imaginary to better align them with the interests of all. This is unlikely, however, if manifestations of SSP governance remain locked into the dominant imaginary and alternatives do not garner support.

In the light of the proliferation of corporate (and some state-owned) actors in the current "AI industry", a political economy analysis points to the need for an ongoing and detailed investigation of corporate structure, ownership linkages, investment patterns, and strategies to detect ways to avert, and sometimes accommodate, the state-led governance arrangements that are put in place. It also, crucially, requires a deep analysis of the norms, ideas, and values espoused by relevant actors. This is essential to bring to light variations and to assess which calculative practices potentially can serve the purposes of those engaged in agonistic resistance strategies. In the critical tradition, there are calls for inclusive deliberative governance and for different ownership and common interest governance arrangements for SSP tools and applications. These aim to promote a different imaginary of how digital innovation might serve the interests of adults and children who currently experience the harms of corporate algorithmic assemblages and SSPs that might inspire fairer practices. Missing is the substantial investment needed to sustain resistance activities.

It is relatively easy to call for inclusive consultation that embraces diverse views, but advocacy of alternative imaginaries and practices must be cognisant of asymmetrical power relations inherent in "data-driven consultation practices" (Powell, 2024). Inclusion in "high level" governance deliberations about SSPs with a view to achieving consensus is important to ensure diverse voices are heard. However, it is not likely to bring about a major shift towards an alternative imaginary of an SSP-mediated future that is aligned more closely with human rights protection or with accountable democracy. Instead, agonistic strategies and practices, such as the diverse movements against centralised and corporate controlled SSPs, are needed that "motivate people to act, to imagine alternative political arrangements, and to contribute to long-term collective action" (Crooks & Currie, 2021: 201).

Finally, in the face of an imaginary where the assumption is that "trustworthy AI" – with all its ambiguities – is (or will be) consistent with justice, equality, and human flourishing, proponents of agonistic resistance must search for opportunities to shift towards alternative imaginaries and practices. These will be context-dependent, and they need to favour equity and justice over commercial success and an SSP market growth trajectory that outstrips planetary energy resources. This will mean explicit clashes between proponents of contending imaginaries and, potentially, clashes among elites and others.

A small move is to rename "AI systems" as SSPs, so as to disrupt a discourse that anthropomorphises these systems. In the absence of small steps such as this, the chances of resistance to the prevailing imaginary, its ideology, and its practices, are slim because inequities of the established order "cannot be solved within it" (Fraser, 2022: 132). Relying on state-initiated legislation – such as the EU's AI Act, even if this and other legislative measures are enforced – leaves prevailing power asymmetries entrenched. Alternative imaginaries and practices of resistance conjured with the help of a different naming discourse are means

of countering prevailing power asymmetries. They also will require some form of mass mobilisation on a substantial scale (Chibber, 2025), if they are to scale up successfully and gain traction on an international scale.

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CHAPTER 11

Ecosystemic AI

Local media systems and the challenge of artificial intelligence

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we propose a theoretical perspective on the implications of artificial intelligence (AI) for local news media systems in Europe. As the technical protocols shaping web platformisation evolve into communication infrastructures in their own right, we ask: What dependencies does AI create for local news production? Drawing on previous literature, we contextualise AI adoption within local journalism as an ecosystem in which key civic and democratic infrastructures are subject to various forms of capture, specifically technological capture. Our primarily conceptual findings highlight the ecosystemic impact of AI on the political economy of local news structures in Europe. We conclude that the dominance of US-driven AI developments puts local European news media at risk of technological capture as they increasingly outsource production, management, dissemination, and audience relations to capitalise on AI, posing new challenges for regulators seeking to protect the autonomy of European news media.

KEYWORDS: artificial intelligence, ecosystemic AI, journalism, local news media, technological capture

Sjøvaag, H., & Eder, M. (2026). Ecosystemic AI: Local media systems and the challenge of artificial intelligence. In A. Balčytienė, P. Bajomi-Lázár, & H. Sousa (Eds.), *Digital media shadowing democracy: Technology, communication, and power* (pp. 219–238). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. https://doi.org/10.48335/9789189864290-11

Introduction

The accelerating trend of artificial intelligence (AI) is thought to hold a certain promise for journalism (Chan-Olmsted, 2019; Lin & Lewis, 2022), "as a form of technological assistance for editorial activities, decision-making, and boosting human intelligence" (Graßl et al., 2022: 6). At the same time, there are fears that journalists will be made obsolete by AI (Jamil, 2021). Ethical concerns have also been raised about the impact of AI on journalistic practices and audience news consumption (Helberger & Diakopoulos, 2023). In this shift towards AI, research tends to overlook two things in particular: the impact of AI on dispersed news structures where many smaller newsrooms generally lack the skills and resources to capitalise on these technological advancements, and the political-economic ramifications of introducing automation processes designed by large US-based technology companies into particular news cultures, such as the ones found in Europe. The ability of AI technologies to personalise content, target reach, and datafy editorial processes furthermore reflects the extent to which platform logics (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) are engendered by platformisation, or how the infrastructures, economics, and governance frameworks of platforms penetrate and reorganise different spheres of life (Poell et al., 2019) to make news organisations "platform ready" (Helmond, 2015). To that end, AI could be seen to shift the entire journalistic ecosystem, whereby news organisations outsource more and more of their data processing, content management, and audience relations to automation-driven technologies, putting local news media at risk of technological capture, a process whereby tech companies and their AI solutions become involved in every aspect of journalism to the point where it becomes impossible to operate sustainably without them (Nechushtai, 2018). The question we address is what kinds of dependencies AI creates for local news production. These dependencies include increasing reliance on AI across all aspects of news production, both accelerating existing reliance in content distribution to retain audience reach and creating new dependencies in news creation (Simon, 2024). Beyond this, we argue, AI also introduces dependencies at the level of data management and storage, further strengthening infrastructural control. Our discussion thus mobilises ecosystem theory to understand the ecosystemic impact of AI on journalism in general, and local media systems in particular.

News production, platformisation, and ecosystemic AI

The concept we refer to as ecosystemic AI describes a level of dependency whereby the entire news production chain – from information retrieval and research through organisational management to content production and dissemination – becomes ingrained in such technologies to the point where journalism cannot operate sustainably without them (e.g., Nechushtai,

2018; Simon, 2024). We argue that such a level of dependency entails a particular challenge to the sustainability of local news production, especially in the European context where local journalism constitutes a cornerstone of civic and democratic life (Firmstone & Coleman, 2014). Moreover, local journalism is already vulnerable to various forms of political and ideological capture (e.g., Ferruchi & Nelson, 2019) due to their precarious economic realities (Sjøvaag, 2022). Their entanglement with social media platforms for monetisation and audience reach (Cornia et al., 2018) furthermore speaks to how local media organisations are locked into the logic and economics of third-party providers of analytics and distribution (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). As platformisation centralises the technological foundations of the news value chain (Helmond, 2015; Nieborg et al., 2022), AI-driven processes contribute to further concentrate technological power away from media organisations and towards the global platforms, raising questions concerning the autonomy and independence of European local media systems to operate sustainably without the technological infrastructures provided by commercially driven, US-based technology companies.

Given that the terminology AI itself has been met with some criticism and is accompanied by the significant misunderstanding that AI-based technologies are truly intelligent (Jordan, 2019; König et al., 2022: 23–25), we describe AI as a multifaceted umbrella term for a range of technologies (Deuze & Beckett, 2022: 1914). Suchman (2023: 2) defined AI as "a label for currently dominant computational techniques and technologies that extract statistical correlations (designated as patterns) from large datasets, based on the adjustment of relevant parameters according to either internally or externally generated feedback", relevant for understanding how AI tools are appropriated in news organisations and in journalistic work, as the progress of machine learning and natural language generation makes the automatic production of content from digitally structured data one of the most frequently used application areas for AI (Anantrasirichai & Bull, 2022; Diakopolous et al., 2024; Newman, 2024; Rinehart & Kung, 2022).

Against this background, a growing number of studies have assessed the use of a wide range of potential applications in (local) media organisations for automation and optimisation (Sirén-Heikel et al., 2023: 355). The literature indicates three general application areas of AI throughout the journalistic production process (Shi & Sun, 2024), including for information research, in the production and preparation of content, and to support content distribution and engagement analysis. Hence, AI is thought to hold promise for journalism in the preparation, production, and dissemination stages of news production. AI could also be used to support editorial organisation and workflows or to verify non-journalistic text, image, and video content (Graßl et al., 2022). Furthermore, AI might also affect journalists' work directly, as the application of AI tools could require more active participation by journalists in identifying

news stories and encourage further contribution to AI-generated content (Túñez-López et al., 2021). However, the rise of AI and its subsequent normalisation in journalism present several challenges related to ethical and privacy concerns, both from technological and audience perspectives. To produce journalistic content and train algorithms, vast amounts of digital data are required. The use of AI and algorithms to better target the individual user for commercial and news consumption purposes is thus intertwined with concerns about privacy and data issues regarding the news platforms themselves or third parties (Monzer et al., 2020; Nielsen, 2016; Sehl & Eder, 2023). Hence, AI poses a risk of technological capture across the entire line of journalistic production – from business model development to content creation, facilitating personalisation and reach as well as data structuring and analytics, involving ethical concerns throughout every process where data management is involved. Here, deployment of AI systems in journalism entails the inclusion of AI technologies across the stack of infrastructure components (Kitchin & Lauriault, 2018; van Dijck, 2020), reflecting the extent to which journalism grows more dependent on these data infrastructure providers.

The actors involved in the research, development, and deployment of AI for media and journalism are primarily owned and operated by American technology companies such as Amazon, Google, and Microsoft. They have both the financial and technical capabilities to provide media organisations with large, scalable AI systems. The fact that news media have been shown to lack financial resources to develop and maintain such technologies on their own, not least because they can hardly afford the financial risk of innovation failure (Simon, 2024), leads them to collaborate with such platform companies. Concerns have been raised about systematic biases due to this dominance of technologies developed in the US, not least in the portrayal of gender, racial, and cultural stereotypes (Broussard et al., 2019). EU policies (e.g., the Data Act and the AI Act) emphasise ethics and responsibility in AI development, procurement, and deployment of these technologies – also in journalism (e.g., CDMSI, 2023) – and raise concerns over the competitiveness in European innovation capabilities at a market level due to competition from American technology companies. The dominance with which American platform players operate at the communication infrastructure level in Europe thus suggests that European media are also at risk of technological capture by AI developed in the US.

Overall, the issue of capture relates to concerns over the various forms of pressure that journalism is subject to in different contexts, from political and ideological capture that can impact the freedom of the press (e.g., Dragomir, 2018; Ferruchi & Nelson, 2019; Milosavljević & Poler, 2018), to how digital platforms, tools, and infrastructures tie journalism to specific technologies (Kristensen & Møller Hartley, 2023; Partin, 2020; Pickard, 2022), and how social media like Facebook make news media dependent on third-

party distribution to reach audiences (Nechushtai, 2018; Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). From a political-economic perspective, scholars have also asked how journalism's technological dependencies challenge the jurisdiction of states to ensure that citizens have access to news and information (Pickard, 2020). This strand of research acknowledges that technological infrastructures have the power to shape the conditions of communication systems (Winseck, 2017). As certain protocols, applications, and software become standardised in the industry, they create path dependencies that influence norms and practices (Edwards et al., 2007; Simon, 2022). Hence, technological infrastructures have the power to set the conditions under which others operate (Winseck, 2017) and to implement actions across territories (Munn, 2023), resulting in technological enclosure (Sadowski, 2020). While AI may hold certain promises in making news organisations more efficient, the dependencies that follow from such "enclosures" also suggest that AI may shift the news ecosystem towards more locked-in technological solutions, from which it may be difficult to retract, challenge, or oppose inherent cultural and operational biases embedded in technology (e.g., Constantinides et al., 2018; Jurgherr & Schroeder, 2023). It is from this position that we propose the concept of ecosystemic AI – a technological shift that impacts the entire news value chain, with particular risks to the sustainability of local news organisations across Europe. As technologies become embedded in production through path-dependent decision-making, the ubiquity that the ecosystem concept affords (Ruotsalainen & Heinonen, 2015) thus suggests that technologies are influential beyond their immediate use, whereby their ubiquity can afford contexts of capture (Nechushtai, 2018).

Media systems, path dependency, and the ecosystem of news production

Our theoretical framework integrates media systems theory with a wider ecosystem perspective, intending to substantiate the need to consider how technologies create dependencies with local media systems in Europe (Sjøvaag et al., 2019a). Combining the two allows us to consider the political-economic frameworks under which journalism operates as well as the processes of platformisation (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023; Poell et al., 2019) that highlight the material conditions of technology within media systems.

Media systems theories are theories of dependent relationships (Hardy, 2008). While criticised for being too deterministic about these dependencies (Flew & Waisboard, 2015), media systems also provide entry points to discover the factors that shape developments and the features that produce differences within and across these systems. Media systems are about the flow of power, typically from the state to the press (Ostini & Ostini, 2002), but dependencies also extend beyond the political realm. Few media system

theories consider the extent to which technologies and technological actors create dependencies. In general, path dependency connects decisions made through time, emphasised as how "the network externalities, the learning process of organizations, and the historically derived subjective modelling of the issues reinforce the course" (North, 1990: 99). However, path dependency theory tends to focus more on the path than on the dependencies. We thus aim to contribute to the application of path dependency theory by operationalising what these dependencies constitute when AI is introduced to local news processes.

Path dependency is furthermore relevant to media systems theory because it explains how dominant beliefs are largely defined by key actors in the field, influencing the norms that shape ideas about economic performance (North, 1990). While local news media systems can be said to constitute "microcosmos" expressions of dependencies (Guimerà et al., 2018), actors in local news media ecosystems are influenced by overall industry developments, also in technology acquisition and procurement, not least because local news media tend to be part of larger corporations or chains owned by a national player (Sjøvaag, 2022). Local news media are thought to be important in sustaining local democratic structures (Firmstone & Coleman, 2014; Hess & Waller, 2016), often referred to as "keystone media" (Nielsen, 2015) that connect people to political information. However, the financial strain on local news media, as they struggle to retain revenue in increasingly volatile markets (e.g., Neff & Pickard, 2023), has led to concerns over the ability of local news organisations to survive unless they can reduce costs and develop new revenue streams. As AI is seen to hold some promise in this regard (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023: 28), journalism seems to be moving onto a path of new dependencies on AI technology. While journalism has always been quick to embrace new technologies (Posetti, 2018; Nielsen & Ganter, 2018), and seems to do so in pack-like behaviour (Chyi, 2013), AI and generative AI, in particular, can be seen to create an ecosystemic shift that creates new dependencies, outsourcing data management, distribution, and production to technologies that are themselves highly data-dependent, capitalising on the production of news to feed its large language models (LLMs) and further fuelling the platformisation of the web (Poell et al., 2019).

Whereas media systems theory is largely about the relationship between the political system and the media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), an ecosystem refers to the overall conditions or environment under which the media operates (Postman, 1970). Deeply embedded in this understanding is the role of technology in communication (McLuhan, 1967) and its impact on society (Wiard, 2019). Often used in reference to a digital or new media environment (e.g., Gibson et al., 2016; Kosterich & Weber, 2018), an ecosystem is a relatively flexible concept (Kostovska et al., 2021) that can refer to both processes and networks of actors. Media ecosystems are shaped

in particular by networked relationships and conditions (e.g., Robinson & Anderson, 2020; Sjøvaag et al., 2019b) that influence how media evolve and survive (Scolari, 2012), how various actors relate to the media (Poell, 2014; Treré & Mattoni, 2016), and how different media sectors change and adapt as a result (Burgess & Bruns, 2012; Widholm et al., 2021). Capacities and values are thus created collectively as ecosystems coevolve, whereby large numbers of stakeholders act interdependently (e.g., Friederichs, 1958). Scholarship has, however, tended to limit consideration for the media ecosystem to its more or less immediate surroundings, for example, the professional workforce (e.g., Hatcher & Thayer, 2017) and their practices (Lowrey, 2012), communities and audiences (e.g., Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Nygren, 2019), locations (e.g., Anderson, 2010), and more recently, social media platforms (Rosa & Hauge, 2022).

While ecosystem perspectives have helped to expand the structural scope within which media is understood, scholarship has not yet considered the impact of AI on media systems. It is readily acknowledged that Internet technology has created an "ecosystemic society" (Ruotsalainen & Heinonen, 2015), whereby the Internet has become ubiquitous in all areas of life. However, the impact of AI on media and communication extends well beyond the web or platform level, and into the very data fabrics that travel through the digital communication infrastructure (see Andreassen et al., 2021). AI infrastructures entail interdependent networks of modular architectures where services are offered by a variety of actors (Sjøvaag & Ferrer-Conill, 2024; Star & Ruhleder, 1996), referred to as an ecosystem, for instance, by the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (BEREC, 2022). Infrastructures constitute forms of power and authority (Winner, 1988) that shape autonomy within the system (Huang & Mayer, 2023) through regulatory control, embedded in governance rules that regulate how data is accessed and processed. Communication ecosystems are thus shaped by complex interdependencies that connect AI ecosystem enablers, regulatory frameworks, and platform owners (e.g., Robinson & Anderson, 2020). Hence, while ecosystem perspectives have helped to expand the structural scope within which news organisations are understood, the full range of technologies involved in the political economy of communication in the "ecosystemic society" (Ruotsalainen & Heinonen, 2015) has yet to be considered. Mobilising the ecosystem framework thus requires that we consider how technology organises communication at the level at which journalism is produced and distributed. As AI moves into all facets of news production, we thus apply the "intraorganizational technical perspectives on digital platforms and the inter-organizational economic, business, and social perspectives on ecosystems" (Hein et al., 2020: 89) to analyse the dependencies brought on by ecosystemic AI.

AI dependencies in news production

We operationalise ecosystemic AI as a dependency in data management, production, and news dissemination. The Internet consists of material and physical infrastructure, protocols, and applications (see Crawford, 2006; Hesmondhalgh et al., 2023), much of which is organised by AI. Automated systems shift data around – often across borders – based on capacity and scale considerations, thus triggering jurisdictional issues, particularly regarding data surveillance (see Constantinides et al., 2018). Cloud services for the news industry constitute a relatively concentrated market, dominated by Amazon Web Services, Google Cloud, and Microsoft Azure (Sjøvaag et al., 2025), which host the applications used in news production (e.g., Kristensen & Hartley, 2023). Content Delivery Networks (CDNs) that distribute audio, video, and dynamic web content for news organisations also route traffic automatically (Sjøvaag et al., 2024). Cloud services and CDNs furthermore provide most of the analytics capacities needed for audience personalisation, programmatic advertising, and dynamic pricing that news organisations rely on for their digital business models. Hence, AI technologies are involved not only in data management processes but also in automating decision-making that impacts revenue strategies and agenda-setting through personalisation. Generative AI and LLMs that move in to shape news production (Ross Arguedas & Simon, 2023) are dominated by tools such as US-based OpenAI's ChatGPT and DALL-E. Finally, the social media platforms that help news media reach audiences are steered by popularity algorithms (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), generating fears of polarisation across European democracies (Helberger & Diakopoulos, 2023; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023; Trattner et al., 2022).

AI technologies are thus involved in the storage, access, and management of data for the news industries. Dependencies here amount not only to the black-boxed protocols that these outsourced services put on media data; the cloud services that news media rely on are also housed in data centres that remain unregulated and are thus non-transparent about their customers and data practices (Velkova, 2023). The threat of capture here amounts to outsourcing the storage of vast amounts of cultural heritage – constituting years of publicly funded media production within the film and broadcasting industries – to global cloud infrastructures owned by Google, Amazon, and Microsoft. While cloud storage is, of course, subject to data management contracts protecting news media's archives, and these services have systems of redundancy and backup, few media companies have full knowledge of where exactly their data is stored. As these networks are global, data is shifted around the globe automatically for efficiency reasons (Constantinides et al., 2018). Different states have different surveillance policies regarding data crossing borders. Hence, storage location is important for data protection (e.g., Determann, 2020). One example is Norway, where key actors in the news media industries in 2024 launched a lawsuit against the state over the

Data Surveillance Act, where the police security services have jurisdiction to survey data using AI, the moment it crosses borders (Bergens Tidende, 2023). News media are particularly concerned about how this may threaten journalism's right to protect its sources in cases of whistleblowing. Most of the American technology companies operating in the Nordics are based in the capital of Sweden, meaning most of the Norwegian news data stored by Google, Amazon, and Microsoft likely crosses borders. The same would apply to the rest of Europe, where Amsterdam is the main hub for data-centre capacity. By themselves, local news organisations rarely have the resources or capacity to mount such large-scale legal challenges, leaving them vulnerable to capture.

AI tools are also involved in the production of news, in analysing data, translating and transcribing audio, and generating text and images. In practice, this is perhaps the part of the news generation that is at least risk of capture – much of journalism still being contingent on old-school reporting techniques such as actually talking to sources. At this level, local news organisations without the resources to procure custom solutions are reliant on off-the-shelf AI tools such as ChatGPT. However, leading news organisations like *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* have refused OpenAI to crawl their news stories to power their AI, or demand payment from OpenAI for using their archives to improve their LLMs (Milmo, 2023; Stempel, 2023). Furthermore, there are limitations to the efficacy of such tools in certain languages, as most LLMs are developed in either English or Chinese. Dependencies here relate to the efficiency and cost savings provided by these tools for journalistic production, as the promise of AI may shift managerial strategies toward measures that automate more aspects of journalism. Capture can occur when procurement decisions made at the corporate level affect entire newspaper chains, resulting in local news media becoming subject to corporate-wide strategies that may not suit their specific needs for local news provision. The inherent biases and potential hallucinations of LLMs (Hicks et al., 2024) furthermore risk capture at a sociocultural level, shifting discourses towards ingrained historical preconceptions that may limit the diversity of perspectives in journalistic production.

In terms of distribution, news organisations are dependent on AI in the automation of content delivery, particularly through CDNs – important for video and dynamic web page delivery, particularly during peak events such as elections or major sporting events that require streaming and scaling capacities beyond what the origin servers of news media can handle on their own. CDNs are essentially scalable architectures with servers close to the end users that host copies of the most popular content that streaming audiences demand directly from the CDN (Benghozi & Simon, 2016; Stocker et al., 2017). This is particularly important for broadcasters and streaming platforms that do not have in-house CDNs of their own, which is most of

them (EBU, 2022). US-based companies Akamai, Lumen, and CloudFront are the market leaders in this domain, responsible for delivering an estimated 70 per cent of web content globally (Ghaznavi et al., 2021). CDNs also provide analytics to media organisations in terms of audience data and in facilitating dynamic and programmatic advertising (e.g., Ishmael, 2021). Furthermore, news media are also reliant on social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok), with their algorithmic selection and AI-automated content delivery through CDNs, to reach audiences and ensure quality of service. While algorithmic selection is about filtering content in distribution (Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020), automation in content delivery is about scaling and optimisation of resources (Stocker et al., 2017). For public service broadcasters in particular, who are responsible for ensuring quality information and cultural heritage, their universal service provision is thus subject to capture by a delivery technology beyond the reach of must-carry obligations from national regulators (Sjøvaag et al., 2024).

News organisations are thus dependent on AI technologies in the production and dissemination of news, and in the management of their data. It is safe to say that news media are on "the path" of AI, as core functions of the news industries are automated, not least beyond what we think of as journalistic production. Most of these services are designed, owned and operated by American technology companies. While this may constitute merely technology in the eyes of media managers (Sjøvaag et al., 2024), capture can occur when there is a lack of alternatives, when the threat of exit is strong, and when no regulation is present to hold actors accountable. While there are national and even public alternatives in some of these services (e.g., in the cloud market), in most cases, the default option among news media organisations seems to be Amazon Web Services, Google, and Microsoft for cloud storage, Akamai or Lumen for content delivery, and Facebook and Instagram (Meta) for audience reach. In particular, Meta has tested the reach of regulation in different parts of the world, threatening to leave Canada, Australia, and Europe when regulators have mounted challenges to their business model (Meta, 2023). CDNs like Akamai are exempt from regulation beyond general competition law, relieving them of the must-carry obligations that ensure that cable companies and digital terrestrial transmission operators are obligated to deliver public service media content universally. News media are thus bound to the services that these sectors offer, with few alternatives should they refuse service, leave the market, or exercise their power in some other way. The political economy of communication thus extends well beyond the national context to include major US-based companies whose technologies not only capitalise on the data that they store and process, but whose business models also shape the conditions under which information freedom is secured.

Technological capture by AI is thus manifested through the protocols that manage data, automation in the analysis and surveillance of data, and

in the application of generative AI in news production. All these processes are outsourced to US-based technology companies, without whose services it would be difficult for media companies to operate sustainably. Technology capture thus operates much like other forms of capture, with embedded assumptions, expectations, and pressures to conform to certain standards, protocols, and policies that, to some extent, also challenge democratic values such as inclusion, diversity, ethics, and transparency. AI thus creates new dependencies whereby news media become subject to increasing infrastructural control by the companies that host, manage, distribute, and surveil their data. The centralisation of technological capacity is furthermore a result of this outsourcing of essential functions in news production to third-party technology providers, enabled by the platformisation of the web. From here, AI assumes ubiquitous ecosystemic properties that influence the political economy of journalism towards new forms of power and authority, where new dependencies are likely to emerge unless they are sufficiently managed through ethical standards and regulations.

The political economy of ecosystemic AI for local journalism

Capture describes the various forms of power that journalism may be subjected to. In a political-economic context, power can amount to ideological pressures or influences as well as financial necessities or attractions that can shape action (see Dragomir, 2018; Ferruchi & Nelson, 2019; Milosavljević & Poler, 2018). When AI promises to improve efficiency, this amounts to economic power in the sense that AI tools could be perceived to lower the need for editorial, managerial, or journalistic resources needed to produce the news, and in turn lower the cost of news production. For local news organisations, AI tools may help to improve editorial processes by personalising content, increasing output, and facilitating data analysis and investigation. However, tool procurement can be costly, as can improving skills within the newsroom to use these tools responsibly and efficiently. For independent local news organisations, the legal, technical, and innovation requirements of using AI in journalism might be too steep, leaving them behind in the adoption of AI tools altogether. As of yet, local journalism seems to be less dependent on AI than larger news organisations. However, the bar for AI utilisation might be lower for corporately owned local news organisations, as news chains may have training programmes and centralised resources that facilitate innovation in local newsrooms. Corporatised news organisations are also subject to centralised decision-making, whereby decisions about AI for personalisation, dynamic pricing, programmatic advertising, data management and storage, as well as audience analytics, are made at the corporate level, removing local autonomy over many technical and economic decisions. In addition to an

economic logic shaping the rate of AI adoption in journalism, local news media are nevertheless subject to a technological logic (Hadida et al., 2021) whereby AI can be seen to influence institutional goals (Constantinides et al., 2018), shaping the overall conditions of the communications system (Winseck, 2017).

The dependent relationships that shape media systems (Hardy, 2008) thus extend beyond politics and economics and involve technologies that influence media industries and journalistic practices beyond the nation state. AI thus introduces a new form of power flow surpassing the state (Ostini & Ostini, 2002) and threatening to increase differences within national media systems. The media's ability to capitalise on AI depends on organisational resources, leaving local news organisations potentially lagging. Power is also exerted through the path-dependent properties of technology adoption. Once a technology is implemented, organisational adjustments to technology tend to ensure that practices remain bound to certain technologies. Just as the move to online publication, streaming, and social media has reinforced the path of further outsourcing of news distribution to third-party platforms (Sjøvaag, 2022), the shift to AI will embed journalism further with the processes of automation that chip away at the autonomy with which news media make editorial decisions and engage with audiences. Journalism thus not only becomes dependent on the path of AI, but dependencies on AI also reinforce the path. Media systems theory should thus lend more considerations to the dependencies created by technology in general and AI in particular, not least because the legacy, analogue media systems that Hallin and Mancini (2004) talked about had almost full national autonomy, as well as legal jurisdiction, over media distribution technologies, whether it refers to broadcasting transmission systems or postal delivery of local newspapers. Automation in data management, delivery, and audience reach facilitated by American technology companies challenges national sovereignty over media systems in a very real sense – as data storage, social media personalisation, and generative AI are difficult to locate. AI thus suggests a shift in infrastructural power, whereby the power to set the conditions under which others operate (Winseck, 2017) and the power to act across territories (Munn, 2023) result in technological enclosure (Sadowski, 2020).

The dependencies that shape media systems thus include technology. The global reach of AI suggests that journalism operates under an ecosystem (see BEREC, 2022; Postman, 1970) influenced by coevolving networked relationships (Robinson & Anderson, 2020) where independent stakeholders act interdependently (Friederichs, 1958), creating values collectively. How regulators act to safeguard AI, what journalists do in their use of AI, and how developers compete for market shares together shape the ecosystem (Robinson & Anderson, 2020), creating new dependencies (see Hein et al., 2020). The news media ecosystem thus extends beyond the immediate surroundings of

the newsroom (Arriaganda & Ibáñez, 2020; Anderson, 2010) to include the technologies that organise communication on the level at which news is produced and disseminated (Huang & Mayer, 2023).

To suggest that AI is *ecosystemic* is thus to suggest that it becomes ubiquitous (see Ruotsalainen & Heinonen, 2015) in all areas of news production. How subsequent stakeholders in the ecosystem react to this ecosystemic shift will not necessarily change the path-dependent nature of AI in the organisation of news, but regulators should at least consider how automated technologies in data management and distribution of news impact the principles of universalism, information freedom, and democracy that support diverse European media systems. Local media systems are crucial in this regard, as they constitute the core infrastructural element of information and deliberation in European democracies. Local news media are arguably already in a precarious position, subject to the economic power of owners, the volatility of advertising markets, and the threat of ideological capture by political interests (Dragomir, 2018). Regulators must acknowledge that AI is more than ChatGPT. Automation is becoming key to every part of journalistic production, the protocols for which are designed by computer engineers working for major American companies competing for global market shares. To protect local media systems in Europe, regulators should consider how the ecosystemic power of these AI actors influences the communication system in Europe at large.

We recommend two concrete measures in this regard. The first is to ensure that the surveillance jurisdiction of states enables news organisations to protect their data. The second and related recommendation is to ensure that there are public alternatives in the cloud and content delivery sectors that safeguard national jurisdiction over communication infrastructures. Here, regulators should continue to follow established legacy regulatory principles whereby communication infrastructures have been bound to universalist principles to ensure citizens' access to information.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we have proposed the concept of ecosystemic AI as a framework to understand the potentially ubiquitous impact of AI on journalism, particularly focusing on how it impacts local media systems as keystone media of European communities. We have argued that the dependencies uncovered by the media systems approach extend to the ecosystem level, whereby technology should be considered as a key component in creating path dependencies. We have described these dependencies as forms of capture at the data management, production, and distribution levels of journalism's organisation. As ecological systems carry with them an association of natural order, we have argued that we should consider how AI emerges as an ordering

principle that shapes the ecology at large. Finally, we suggest two measures that regulators should consider to ensure the infrastructure for communication in local media systems in Europe, safeguarding data from private as well as state surveillance and protecting universalist principles in media distribution.

News media should strengthen their capacities in this regard as critical institutions safeguarding democracy and citizen rights and consider technology owners and developers as powerholders in their own right. Likewise, they should stay aware of the ecosystemic impact of AI on all areas of life to increase citizen awareness of how technology shapes societies. Perhaps most importantly, while citizens are stakeholders in this context, they should not be held solely responsible for safeguarding their rights to a pluralistic and diverse media system. Too often, regulators put the burden of information freedom on the users, encouraging them to assume diverse media diets and undertake literacy programmes to boost their resilience against misinformation and polarisation. Safeguarding democratic media systems is the government's responsibility. The power to hold technology companies accountable is in their hands. They should regulate AI and the platform ecosystem accordingly.

Further research should consider more thoroughly the role of technology in shaping media systems at an ecosystemic level, analysing the impact of AI and the global platforms on media systems properties and the conditions for independent journalism across diverse settings. One key question in this regard is the extent to which ecosystemic AI contributes to increasing or decreasing differences between media systems, both at the national and local levels, how and to what extent platformisation processes create path dependencies, and how these dependencies manifest across different media systems contexts.

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CHAPTER 12

Competitiveness and artificial intelligence in the EU's future strategy

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we focus on the latest EU high-level reports that aim to address the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in promoting European competitiveness and upholding European values. Published before the current European Commission's appointment, the reports offer substantial guidelines for the upcoming EU policies. We concentrate on the Draghi report and discuss the Letta and Niinistö reports, all of which develop the political plans of the President of the European Commission presented in July 2024. The chapter provides a critical assessessment of their assumptions and solutions, and we develop three main arguments. One, the reports endorse techno-solutionism, portraying AI as the latest driver for growth and competitiveness; however, this clashes with the EU's aim to strengthen European values. Two, they focus on the EU, the US, and China, ignoring the broader global context. Three, they portray the EU as a single entity, disregarding the internal dynamics and what the proposed strategies will mean for smaller member states.

KEYWORDS: European values, artificial intelligence, EU digital strategy, Draghi report, EU Artificial Intelligence Act

Nieminen, H., & Michalis, M. (2026). Competitiveness and artificial intelligence in the EU's future strategy. In A. Balčytienė, P. Bajomi-Lázár, & H. Sousa (Eds.), *Digital media shadowing democracy: Technology, communication, and power* (pp. 239–258). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. https://doi.org/10.48335/9789189864290-12

Introduction

Today, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between strategies and policies that concern digitalisation in a general sense and digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) specifically. Although the history of AI dates back to the 1950s, it remains a contested concept, a quality that allows it to be invoked across a range of economic, political, and cultural narratives (e.g., Bareis & Katzenbach 2022; Suchman 2023). From its beginning, digitalisation has been based on different applications of AI (from the "weak" or "narrow" to "strong" or general AI). From the viewpoint of social media platforms, there is a strong link between platforms and general AI: On the one hand, AI needs data generated by and through the platforms to sophisticate and train its applications (e.g., ChatGPT and DeepSeek), and on the other, social media applications are increasingly dependent on AI when moderating content and improving their algorithms to be more addictive (e.g., X and TikTok). In short, digitalisation is about the development and expansion of AI; concomitantly, AI depends on data produced through and retrieved from social media platforms (Andersson Schwarz, 2022). Because of this interconnectedness, we need a holistic approach to digitalisation to understand European challenges in regulating social media platforms and AI.

In this chapter we concentrate on the most recent initiatives concerning the EU's digital strategy and AI policy. The EU has long been interested in AI's possibilities for promoting the Union's strategies. For example, AI is a central element in the EU's 2030 Digital Compass (European Commission, 2021a), which outlines the Union's general policy on applying digital technology in all its activities. On the other hand, the EU has been keenly aware of the problems involved in the non-regulated application of AI, which was the primary motivation behind the approval of the EU's AI Act (European Union, 2023). The Act's main stated intention was to increase democratic accountability for both the development and the use of AI, specifically addressing the leading US-based AI developers and service providers.

The EU's stated emphasis regarding AI has consistently been on promoting European values, defined in the Treaty on European Union as follows:

> The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail. (European Union, 2016: Article 2)

Following this, the AI Act stipulates that AI systems in the Union must,

> in accordance with Union values, […] promote the uptake of human centric and trustworthy artificial intelligence (AI) while ensuring a high

> level of protection of health, safety, fundamental rights as enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (the "Charter"), including democracy, the rule of law and environmental protection, […] protect against the harmful effects of AI systems in the Union, and […] support innovation. (European Union, 2023: Recital 1; see also European Commission, 2020, 2021b)

The requirement that "AI should be human-centric technology" is stressed again: "it should serve as a tool for people, with the ultimate aim of increasing human well-being" (European Union, 2023: Recital 6; see also European Union, 2023: Recitals 2, 4, 7–9).

Given that the EU AI Act has already been well analysed in other contexts (e.g., Gstrein et al., 2024), we concentrate on three recent EU high-level proposals regarding how AI should best be applied to solve Europe's main economic challenges and propagate Europe's values globally. As the reports were published before the appointment of the new European Commission for 2024–2029, they are highly significant in outlining the forthcoming EU policies concerning European digitalisation, platformisation, and AI, and the place of European values in them. All major EU regulations concerning platforms, digitalisation, and AI – the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), and the EU AI Act (see below) – are still in the early stages of their execution, and the new Commission will be instrumental in their practical implementation. In light of the recent transformations in the US policies – due to Donald Trump's second presidency and the strong influence of the representatives of the so-called Magnificent Seven (i.e., Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, Alphabet, Meta, Nvidia, and Tesla) in and over his administration – we can predict increasing pressure from both European digital industry and the American tech companies to loosen the democratic and social commitments embedded in EU regulation (see also The Economist, 2025).

Although the central elements of the reports were already adopted by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen (2024), for her political guidelines for the new European Commission (*Europe's Choice*), presented in July 2024, the reports flesh out the work of the new Commission that was inaugurated in November 2024. Specifically, we focus on three seminal documents: 1) *The Future of European Competitiveness*, by Mario Draghi (September 2024; former president of the European Central Bank and former prime minister of Italy), commissioned by von der Leyen; 2) *Much More Than a Market*, written by Enrico Letta (April 2024; also a former prime minister of Italy), commissioned by the European Council; and 3) *Safer Together: Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness*, written by Sauli Niinistö (October 2024; former prime minister of Finland), commissioned by von der Leyen. The influence of these documents is clearly reflected in the new Commission's strategic planning, which has informed our selection (see European Commission, 2025a, 2025b).

The main themes of these reports are not new. Weakened European competitiveness has been a recurring theme since the 1970s (see Michalis, 2007). In general, the numerous reports on the subject compare the EU primarily with the US within a changing geopolitical context, identify the same causes, and propose a broadly technology-inspired solution. The latest technological iteration is AI.

We ask two questions in this chapter:

- What solutions are presented in these three latest strategic reports for overcoming the existing European political and socioeconomic malaise?
- What role is allocated to AI and the so-called European values in these solutions?

Using textual analysis as a method, we compare the values articulated in the reports with the EU's core values as stipulated in the Treaty on European Union (2016) to identify tensions and gaps in their underlying argumentation and explore the "sociotechnical imaginaries" – imagined sociotechnical futures – that the reports present (Felt & Wynne, 2007; Jasanoff & Kim, 2015).

The reports are examined following a reverse chronological order, starting with the most recent and, for our purposes, most significant. Next, we offer a critical assessment of the assumptions and proposed solutions of the reports before our conclusion.

The Draghi report: EU challenges and opportunities in the evolving technological and geopolitical context

The so-called Draghi report starts by highlighting Europe's strengths, including its single market, which accounts for around 17 per cent of the global GDP; low levels of inequality compared to its main rivals, the US and China; democratic governance and high levels of social protection; and leadership in sustainability. Yet, it warns that Europe's economic growth is lagging behind the US and China, primarily because of diminishing productivity: During the two decades from 2002 to 2023, the EU–US gap in GDP widened from 15 to 30 per cent, with 70 per cent of this gap attributed to slower EU productivity (Draghi, 2024: 8).

The report states that three external factors have exacerbated this gap between the EU and the US. First, the decline in global trade relations and the rise of protectionism have weakened European companies, which, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, benefited from an open global economy. Second, the EU's reliance on cheap energy from post-Soviet Russia ended following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Third, the post-Cold War "peace dividend" that allowed for reduced military spending has eroded as growing geopolitical instability has necessitated a renewed focus on security and military spending (Draghi, 2024: 9).

To address Europe's sluggish economic growth, the Draghi report proposes three major transformations. First, Europe must accelerate innovation and

"find new growth engines", particularly in advanced technologies. It notes that the EU's share of global tech revenues dropped from 22 to 18 per cent between 2003 and 2023, while the US's share rose from 30 to 38 per cent (Draghi, 2024: 10). However, the report suggests that with AI driving the next "digital revolution", the EU has an opportunity to catch up by stimulating innovation and productivity and restoring its manufacturing potential (Draghi, 2024: 10).

The second transformation concerns the green energy transition and the shift to a circular economy. Europe faces significantly higher energy costs in the post-Cold War era of the 2020s than the US does. However, the report recognises that although the EU is on the way to taking the lead in decarbonisation and clean technologies, China's massive state-led investment and innovation in this space, together with the control of strategic raw materials and the benefit of scale, pose a significant competitive challenge (Draghi, 2024: 10–11).

Third, the EU must mitigate the high level of "strategic interdependence" whereby, for instance, the EU depends on China for critical minerals, and China depends on the EU's ability to absorb its industrial overcapacity. Reducing these interdependencies requires, among other things, the diversification of supply routes for critical raw materials and investment in Europe's security and military industries (Draghi, 2024: 52–57).

To improve on the EU's fragmented and uncoordinated response to these challenges, the report proposes a new industrial strategy as an overall goal for Europe based on four pillars:

- full implementation of the single market (further elaborated in Letta, 2024);
- close coordination between industrial, competition, and trade policies;
- development of an EU financing mechanism to meet the massive investment needs in the European ICT sector, estimated at around five percentage points of the EU GDP annually (approx. 750 to 800 billion euros); and
- governance reform to promote coordination and reduce the regulatory burden. The reform implies a shift of decision-making power away from the "Community Method" that requires unanimity in decision-making towards the European Commission and a more consolidated European market, consisting of "European champions" capable of competing with the US and China (Draghi, 2024: 13–14, 18, 67–69).

As demonstrated here, the report primarily focuses on economic growth and competitiveness. Almost as a footnote, Draghi's report acknowledges the need to preserve European social inclusion. It warns against following the US's example, where economic growth has come at the cost of growing inequalities. Stressing the vital need to safeguard European social values, the report calls for a new approach to labour skills and retraining. It suggests that the EU's cohesion policy must refocus on providing investment and reforms at the

subnational level, not just metropolitan regions, in areas such as education, transport, housing, digital connectivity, and planning (Draghi, 2024: 15).

Finally, the Draghi report warns against the experience during the "hyper-globalisation" phase before the 2008–2009 financial crisis, characterised by weak public support and increased inequalities. Instead, it advocates "empowering people" by encouraging proactive citizen involvement and social dialogue between trade unions, employers, and civil society (Draghi, 2024: 15). However, the report neither makes any concrete recommendations for meeting this goal nor offers any assessment of how the proposed changes would affect European social values and their practical implementation.

Digital technology and AI in the assistance of transformations

Having outlined the key themes in the Draghi report, we now turn to the role of digital technology and AI within it, as well as in other recent seminal EU documents, notably the reports by Enrico Letta and Sauli Niinistö, and the statement by von der Leyen.

The Draghi report and the problem with EU's productivity

The starting point of the Draghi report is the observation that the main explanatory factor of why the EU is severely lagging in productivity in comparison to the US and China is Europe's slow adoption of digital technology, including AI. More specifically, the report attributes the EU's innovation gap with the US primarily to its failure to capitalise on "the first digital revolution" led by the Internet (see Nieminen et al., 2023). In fact, discounting the tech sector, EU productivity over the past 20 years would have been comparable to the US's (Draghi, 2024: 20).

Other recommendations that more directly relate to digital technology and AI include enforcing the EU's strategic autonomy, strengthening Europe's research and innovation in digital technology, and relaxing EU regulations. These proposals correspond to an equal number of structural barriers. Next, we examine these barriers and objectives in more detail.

The report identifies three structural barriers hindering European productivity and innovation. At the root of Europe's weak performance is "a static industrial structure" whereby European investments have concentrated "on mature technologies and in sectors where productivity growth rates" are slowing, rather than innovative technologies and emerging sectors characterised by high-growth rates, as in the US (Draghi, 2024: 24). Besides, a focus on innovative technologies, including AI, links to EU's strategic autonomy, which is all the more crucial in the rapidly changing geopolitical context, as noted. While recognising the US lead in many digital sectors, Draghi's report proposes that Europe has opportunities to succeed in other areas by *applying* digital

innovation. For example, although it lags behind in cloud computing, the EU should continue developing its domestic tech sector and build a "sovereign cloud" solution for reasons such as security and encryption (Draghi, 2024: 20, 30). Other measures include safeguarding the supply of critical raw materials required for the European ICT industry, accelerating the shift to renewable energy sources, and making a massive investment in the European domestic defence industry (Draghi, 2024: 51, 55).

The report's most concrete reference to AI is its call for "vertical integration" of AI within European industry to boost productivity (Draghi, 2024: 21). Although more exact estimates of AI's effects on aggregate productivity are still unproven, the report proposes an "AI Vertical Priorities Plan" and sees substantial potential economic gains from accelerating the integration of AI in "strategic sectors" such as pharmaceuticals (gains of 60–110 billion US dollars in this sector alone), automotive, advanced manufacturing and robotics, energy, telecoms, agriculture, aerospace, defence, environmental forecasting, and healthcare (Draghi, 2024: 30). Indeed, in a few select segments, the EU can still take a leading position, such as in autonomous robotics (it hosts around 22% of the worldwide activity) and AI services (it holds around a 17% global market share). However, Europe's inability to scale up and attract financial resources has impeded growth and is reflected in the productivity gap between the EU and the US.

While the advanced application of AI is deemed vital for Europe's growth and competitiveness, it also poses a potential challenge to Europe's social model. The American experience showed that, unlike the earlier stages of computerisation, the deployment of AI appears to threaten the jobs of higher-skilled workers especially. Simultaneously, according to a study referenced in Draghi's report, although AI promises to increase the productivity of all workers, the group that benefits most are less-experienced or low-skilled workers (Draghi, 2024: 25; for a conflicting argument, see Sharps et al., 2024). The report recommends proactive policies, including adequate education and training, lifelong learning programmes, and measures to minimise any negative impacts on social inclusion.

A second related barrier is inadequate public support for European research and innovation. Such support has been too little, fragmented, and loosely focused on new, disruptive innovation. Moreover, again in contrast to the US and China, Europe is missing successful European innovation clusters – "networks of universities, start-ups, large companies and venture capitalists" – crucial for successful commercialisation in the high-tech sectors (Draghi, 2024: 25).

In response, one main recommendation that the report puts forward concerns the strengthening of Europe's research and innovation in digital technology. This comprises the need for considerable investments in the European ICT sector and support for the creation of European champions capable of competing for leading positions globally; re-directing the EU's research funding policy to support innovations that express commercial

potential by promoting the European equivalent of the US Advanced Research Projects Agency (pivotal for the development of the Internet from the 1960s to the 1990s; Draghi, 2024: 33); inviting a significantly higher number of private investments, especially for promoting innovation and ICT start-ups; and promoting the vertical integration of AI, particularly in the identified ten strategic sectors, mentioned above (Draghi, 2024: 34).

Finally, a third barrier concerns regulatory fragmentation and overload, which are particularly heavy in the ICT sector. With more than 270 regulators and around 100 tech-focused laws, the EU's overly cautious and ex ante regulatory approach creates obstacles, particularly for smaller companies, as exemplified by the much-criticised General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (see, e.g., Kuner et al., 2021; Mesarčík & Hamuľák, 2024). Regulatory fragmentation and overreach, combined with the absence of a truly single market, deprive EU companies of scale and put them at a disadvantage relative to the US and China, which do not have similar restrictions (Draghi, 2024: 26). Again, this suggestion is not new; large European companies, especially in the field of ICT, often cite the lack of sufficient scale and weak innovation as arguments to free themselves from regulation and advocate for market consolidation (Michalis, 2016).

Regulatory reform primarily relates to the relaxation of EU regulations, which hinder the competitiveness of European digital technology companies, particularly SMEs in emerging sectors. The report suggests that one crucial way to lighten the regulatory burden is to move the emphasis from bureaucratic and slow ex ante regulation to ex post regulation (Draghi, 2024: 31, 46). However, such a shift in regulatory governance seems at odds with the recent flagship Digital Services Package adopted in 2022, comprising the DMA (European Union, 2022a) and the DSA (European Union, 2022b). The aim of this package, currently being implemented, is precisely to move towards proactive (ex ante) regulation in order to provide more certainty (Michalis, 2024).

In addition, regulatory reform involves amending (relaxing) data rules, among other laws, to improve European competitiveness in the health, pharmaceutical, automotive, and energy sectors, as well as in the development of European AI training models – and equally the rules on EU state aid policy, which should be directed to speed up the creation of European champions instead of supporting domestic industries (Draghi, 2024: 13, 30, 32, 34–35, 58, 68).

In sum, the Draghi report analyses Europe's economic challenges. It stresses the significance of digital transformation, particularly AI, in boosting productivity and growth and bridging the gap with the US and China. Realising this requires a substantial shift and increase of (public) financial investment in the ICT sector as well as structural and regulatory reforms whereby the EU embraces digital technology and AI and relaxes restrictive rules, particularly regarding data guardrails and state subsidies.

The Letta report and the fifth freedom to the single market on research, innovation, and education

Enrico Letta's report, *Much More Than a Market*, published a few months before Draghi's, is organically linked to Draghi's analysis and proposals. Letta (2024) concentrated mainly on the problems blocking the full implementation of the European single market. From the viewpoint of European digital and AI industries, the deficiencies of the EU's economy, which the Letta report focuses on, are primarily caused by the lack of integration in the financial, energy, and electronic communication sectors. Most of the report's proposals, such as minimising the EU's regulatory and bureaucratic barriers and clearing the way for a closer European financial union, are included in Draghi's report. Recognising the social implications of the proposed measures, the Letta report warns that,

> the Single Market is a powerful engine for growth and prosperity, but it can also be a source of inequality and poverty if its benefits are not widely shared or, worse, if it leads to a race to the bottom in social standards. (Letta, 2024: 91)

Although the Letta report does not explicitly analyse AI's role in fully implementing the single market, it highlights AI's general significance. The role of digital technologies is indirectly included in Letta's proposal to add a fifth freedom to the European single market, addressing the obligation to advance European research, innovation, and education. However, AI is not given a central role similar to the role it plays in Draghi's report. The Letta report's eight mentions of the significance of AI end by equating it with other, more limited applications of digital technology. For example, in the chapter "An Effective Single Market for Electronic Communications Networks and Services", AI is mentioned as follows: "technologies such as 5G (6G in the future), Internet of Things, web3.0, edge-cloud computing or AI will create entirely new economic opportunities" (Letta, 2024: 55). What is missing are references to AI from the viewpoint of European democratic values, contrary to Draghi's report (Draghi, 2024: 5), as well as to the EU AI Act, which promotes "the uptake of human-centric and trustworthy artificial intelligence (AI)" in accordance with Union values (European Union, 2023: Recital 1; compare with Letta's report where European values are mentioned, but only in a general sense; Letta, 2024: 23).

The Niinistö report and the focus on security challenges

Sauli Niinistö's report, *Safer Together: Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness*, was published in October 2024, following the reports by Letta and Draghi. Niinistö's report focuses primarily on European security challenges. The report identifies three principal external vulnerabilities: the military threat against Europe created especially by Russia; European strategic dependence on external critical raw materials, creating a

geoeconomic risk; and global health hazards, as exemplified by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020–2022. Again, as with the Letta report, the Niinistö report does not present a separate analysis of the importance of AI in Europe's response to its security threats.

However, AI is mentioned in the report several times, with a more general characterisation: "disruptive and emerging technologies, such as AI, provide both new opportunities for building our security, as well as new vulnerabilities from the perspective of all hybrid domains" (Niinistö, 2024: 108). AI is presented here as mainly serving three roles: first, in combating disinformation and deepfakes, with an associated emphasis on promoting digital and media literacy (Niinistö, 2024: 74); second, in assisting the development of new drugs for preventing pandemics and other health crises; and third, in advancing the "dual use" of technology for both civilian and military purposes (Niinistö, 2024). Social media platforms are treated similarly: They are mainly credited with negative influence, and the EU's mission should be to mitigate the platforms' negative impact, as stipulated in the DSA and other documents (Niinistö, 2024: 74, 107). However, no concrete actions are proposed to improve the efficiency of the DSA, DMA, and EU AI Act.

The von der Leyen statement and the endorsement of AI in guiding EU strategy

Ursula von der Leyen's statement to the European Parliament, *Europe's Choice: Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024–2029*, anticipated many of the recommendations included in the three reports. From the viewpoint of the EU's forthcoming AI policy, von der Leyen's guidelines included a promise by the Commission to provide, within the first 100 days, to the EU business community "access to [a] new, tailored supercomputing capacity for AI start-ups and industry through an AI factories initiative" (von der Leyen, 2024: 10). Further commitments include a pledge to "develop with Member States, industry and civil society an Apply AI Strategy to boost new industrial uses of AI and to improve the delivery of a variety of public services, such as healthcare" (von der Leyen, 2024: 10). Another initiative is the creation of a European AI Research Council, following the approach taken by the European Organisation for Nuclear Research. Most of the promises were diligently included in the European Commission communication, *A Competitiveness Compass for the EU*, in January 2025 (European Commission, 2025c).

Assessing the documents: Competitiveness, AI, and democracy

The connecting theme in the four documents examined is the imperative to improve Europe's global competitiveness against the dominance of the US and

China while safeguarding democratic European values. This has been forcefully stressed by, among others, Mario Draghi (2024: 1) in the foreword to his report: "The only way to meet this challenge [of European competitiveness] is to grow and become more productive, preserving our values of equity and social inclusion. Moreover, the only way to become more productive is for Europe to radically change". This raises a few questions. One, can these two goals be balanced in the first instance: to achieve growth levels comparable to the US and China while maintaining and further strengthening the European social model? As this is not the focus of this chapter, we concentrate on the second question in the reports discussed: What role is planned for digital technology and AI in achieving these goals?

Our *first* critical observation pertains to how the documents address the EU's competitiveness. It is defined solely by contrasting Europe's industrial productivity and economic growth with similar data on the US and China. The terms "competitiveness" and "productivity" are frequently encountered in policy discourse but remain notoriously difficult to define, let alone measure (Michalis, 2007: 192–198). The Draghi report indicates that Europe's lacklustre performance can be attributed almost exclusively to the EU's failure relative to the effective application of digital technologies (Draghi, 2024: 20), adopting essentially a techno-solutionist view, suggesting that (advanced) technology is the answer to complex economic and societal problems (Morozov, 2013).

In seeking solutions, Draghi's report criticises the American model of industrial policy for its exclusive focus on corporate profits and its neglect of social responsibility. The report is also critical of the Chinese model because of its authoritarianism and centralised decision-making. This analysis resembles Bradford's (2023), whereby the EU's rights-based approach is compared to the US's market-driven and China's state-driven digital economy model (see also van Dijck et al., 2018). And yet, the advice the report offers to the EU appears, to a certain degree, to simulate the criticised American and Chinese models:

- One of the primary sources of growth in the US is public borrowing, which has led to a national debt equal to 123 per cent of its GDP. In comparison, the national debt for EU countries is 82 per cent of their GDP. The proposed increase in collective EU debt would mean adopting a similar approach to that of the US. However, there is concern that, as seen after the 2008–2009 financial crisis, potential new crises could result in EU member states being treated differently (consider the treatment of Greece, Portugal, and Ireland by the EU and financial organisations between 2009 and 2014; see, e.g., Filip et al., 2024).
- The relaxation of EU regulations on goods and services, aimed at boosting the success of innovative start-ups and fostering the emergence of European champions, could potentially harm the economies of

smaller EU member states and undermine European democratic and social values. As highlighted in the Draghi report, larger member states (France, Germany, and Italy) have greater resources to subsidise their companies, allowing them to grow and become European champions. Furthermore, relaxing the GDPR to benefit the European pharmaceutical and automotive industries, for example, could significantly weaken the European principle of privacy as a fundamental right.

- The projected reform of EU governance style and the proposed new industrial policy would significantly shift power from EU member states to the European Commission (Draghi, 2024: 67–69). Along with a more flexible regulatory approach, mentioned earlier, the Commission's enhanced authority would devalue the influence of the European Parliament, the only directly elected EU institution, as a law-making body. Such a shift would further complicate the already fragile structures of democratic accountability within the EU (von Ondarza & Stürzer, 2024).

In his foreword, Draghi (2024: 1) discussed how the proposed measures align with marketing the EU as a beacon of democracy and freedom: "European fundamental values are prosperity, equity, freedom, peace and democracy in a sustainable environment. The EU exists to ensure that Europeans can always benefit from these fundamental rights". Overall, Draghi's report does not seem to justify the notion of presenting the EU as a global role model for good governance and social values, especially when compared to the practices of the US and China (the so-called "Brussels effect"; see Bradford, 2022). This leads to a comment and two questions. First, prosperity is not mentioned as a fundamental European value in EU documents. Second, if the primary goal of the EU should indeed be economic growth, why does historical evidence indicate that the benefits of growth and digitalisation have not been shared equally among all members of society? In fact, despite economic growth and AI, the inequality gap has continued to widen in both the US and China (see Riddell et al., 2024). Finally, and most importantly, as Applebaum (2025) has considered, if the EU relaxes its regulations and is no longer (perceived as) providing a rights-based framework for the digital society, who, in the global context, would be powerful enough to create and enforce laws governing tech companies and social media platforms?

Second, the Draghi report's focus on exclusively comparing and contrasting the EU with the US and China suggests a world dominated by these three leading players. Such a perspective, however, overlooks most of the world's population. The combined population of the EU, the US, and China is around 2.2 billion, while the global total is approximately 8.2 billion (Worldometers, n.d.). Issues such as competitiveness, productivity, and growth – which the reports address – are understood quite differently when analysed within a framework that includes the majority of humankind living in the countries of South-East Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The narrow perspective of the Draghi report is evident in the way it approaches global sustainability. For instance, it presents the EU's decarbonisation goal primarily as a response to high energy costs caused by an external factor: The lack of European strategic gas and oil supplies from Russia following its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Draghi, 2024). Moreover, the report depicts European dependence on critical raw materials from the viewpoint of a potential threat from China, which could weaponise its supply to Europe as a tool for geoeconomic warfare. The EU's primary concern becomes finding and securing alternative sources of critical raw materials to meet its needs (see European Commission, 2024b). In all the reports, there is little discussion about the social and environmental costs associated with critical raw material extraction, an issue which has long been the focus of significant debate and political action in many countries (see Chagnon et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024; Zapp et al., 2022), or indeed the far more complex geopolitical dependencies embedded in global supply chains that extend beyond raw materials to include the design and printing of components critical to the most sophisticated AI models, with ASML (Netherlands) and the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) playing pivotal roles (Miller, 2022).

Our *third* observation relates to the internal dynamics of the EU and the relationships among its member countries. In several places, the report refers to the differences between the member states in terms of their economic and financial capabilities, as well as their geopolitical locations. Both factors significantly affect each state's ability and willingness to shape European policies on digital technologies.

First, the EU's history affords special roles to the six founding members (Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg) who, in 1951, established the European Coal and Steel Community, which is considered the origin of the EU. Following the laws of path dependency, these countries continue to host many of the EU's central institutions. Furthermore, five of them (France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands) have long histories as colonial states, potentially providing them privileged access to trade with their former colonies, particularly those supplying strategic raw materials.

Second, there are massive disparities in the sizes of EU members' economies, which divide the members into different groups. Germany still maintains the world's third-largest economy, with an annual GDP of 4.7 trillion US dollars (following the US with 29.2 trillion and China with 18.3 trillion, and preceding Japan, which has 4.1 trillion; International Monetary Fund, 2023; World Economics 2024). In contrast, the annual GDP of the smallest EU members ranges from 0.6 trillion US dollars for Cyprus and 0.7 trillion for Estonia to 0.91 trillion US dollars for Latvia. With their economic might, Germany, France, and Italy wield more weight in EU negotiations compared to countries with GDPs five to eight times smaller. The Draghi report indirectly indicates this problem regarding member states' resources for supporting their

domestic industries: The larger the national economy, the more resources a country has to support its domestic champions.

On the other hand, the big EU members are also divided based on their economic compositions: Germany is strong in traditional industries, such as the automotive sector; France relies less on industry and is stronger in services; Italy is strong in agriculture, notably as the EU's leading exporter of vegetables. These economic differences are also evident in digital technology. France appears to lead European AI development with its Mistral-Large foundational model. Meanwhile, Germany's SAP Company has a strong foothold in global business software (SAP Global Communications, 2024). In contrast, Italy's AI development lags behind the EU average.

Third, a country's location might create specific interest in certain sectors of the digital technology industry. For instance, countries on the eastern border of the EU may be more interested in the military applications of AI compared with member countries located farther away from the border. This is evident in the military expenditures among EU members: Countries neighbouring Russia spend substantially more on defence than those located farther from Russia. Specifically, the EU members who share a border with Russia or its close ally Belarus (Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, and Latvia) report defence spending ranging from 2.3 to 3.8 per cent of their GDP. In contrast, countries farther to the west allocate a much lower percentage of their GDP to defence, such as Italy (1.6%), Spain (1.5%), and Ireland (0.22%).

This uneven sharing of the military burden creates tensions within the EU. Furthermore, since most EU members are also members of NATO, some confusion exists regarding the sharing of the two organisations' obligations and allegiances. For example, following its departure from the EU, the UK has maintained close military cooperation with several EU members through defence alliances. One such alliance is the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, which includes the UK, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden (see Knighton, 2024). The coordination of this effort with the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy is unclear (see Ojanen, 2006). However, because the EU is not primarily a defence union, Central and Eastern European countries may be more interested in developing AI technologies within NATO collaborations rather than within the EU framework.

Our fourth observation pertains to the rather naïve understanding of AI reflected in all the documents. These texts treat AI as a single entity without recognising its nuances or qualifications. For instance, they lack classifications of the multiple developmental forms of AI, such as distinctions between narrow or traditional AI, which has already been deployed in everyday digital applications for some time, like chatbots, and search and recommendation engines. Also missing is an in-depth discussion of generative AI (GenAI) based on foundational large language models, like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Llama. In the Draghi report, the term "generative AI" appears twice, similar to the term "foundational" AI, but neither term is explained.

Also missing is a critical review of the present state of AI development and the targets the EU should set for AI's further advancement, based on its values and the European social model. This creates two problems:

1) As a technology, AI can provide trustworthy results only when based on relevant and reliable data. All major foundational AI models used in Europe are commercially produced and maintained by US-based companies. However, their algorithms are not optimised to align with European or social values, which require that AI services in Europe must always undergo critical scrutiny, as stipulated in the EU legislation. This problem is evidenced by the numerous violations that American platform companies have committed against the EU data regulations, including the GDPR, DSA, and EU AI Act (on AI biases, see Ferrara, 2023; Varsha, 2023; on the platforms' breaches of EU regulations, see Hill & Sharma, 2025).

2) From the perspective of AI digital infrastructure, Europe is critically dependent on American technology, as evidenced in the report. An analysis comparing European and American competence in AI revealed that American companies strategically dominate the AI value chain:

- All major GenAI models have been developed outside Europe, with the most successful ones being operated by American companies (OpenAI, Microsoft, Alphabet, Anthropic, and Meta). The only successful European GenAI, France's Mistral AI, is significantly smaller. For example, Microsoft's market valuation is 3.325 trillion US dollars, and OpenAI's valuation is 157 billion US dollars, compared to Mistral AI's valuation of 6.2 billion US dollars (Companies Market Cap, 2025; Hu & Cai, 2024; New York Times, 2024).
- The most advanced microchips necessary for GenAI are produced and controlled by American companies, with Nvidia holding a practical monopoly on the trade of the most popular chips. Although the company is US-owned, its chip factories are located in Asia, particularly Taiwan, which produces about 90 per cent of the world's most advanced semiconductors. The irony is that the machinery TSMC (Taiwan) needs to make the chips is manufactured by ASML, a European company based in the Netherlands (see Forbes, 2022 ; Kassam, 2024).
- As stated in the Draghi report, the data clouds at the core of GenAI are overwhelmingly owned by American companies (65% by the three leading cloud providers). In contrast, Europe's largest cloud operator captures only 2 per cent of the European cloud market (Draghi, 2024: 24). This means that a significant portion of critical European data – not only economic and financial but also diplomatic, private, and military – is stored in cloud services that are not subject to European democratic oversight. These risks are compounded by the proliferation of new and planned data centres worldwide, whose substantial energy and water demands for cooling are often decided upon without adequate consultation with local communities or consideration of environmental impacts (Zewe, 2025; Marrinan, 2025).

- The report overlooks the backbone of the digital economy – the physical Internet network formed by underwater cables that connect continents and countries. More than 95 per cent of all international communications travel through these cables. Given their strategic importance and physical vulnerability, highlighted by several recent incidents of cables being cut in the Baltic Sea, control and ownership of the cables have become important issues (European Commission, 2024a; Runde et al., 2024).

Conclusion

We started this chapter with two questions: What solutions are presented in the documents reviewed for overcoming Europe's economic backwardness and lack of competitiveness? What role is assigned to AI and the so-called European values in these solutions?

The principal tenor of all four analysed documents is the concern regarding Europe's economic decline compared to the US and China, alongside increasing security threats that combine military and economic vulnerabilities. Across the documents, a common conclusion highlights the primacy of speeding up Europe's economic performance and accelerating growth if the EU is to compete effectively with the US and China, while simultaneously reinforcing its security. Although all the documents stress the significance of safeguarding the European model – described in terms of social inclusion, democracy, and human rights – the exclusive focus on European competitiveness and economic productivity relegates European values to a secondary position. This appears to contradict the precise order of priorities outlined in the EU AI Act, according to which the Act,

> should be applied following the values of the Union enshrined as in the Charter, facilitating the protection of natural persons, undertakings, democracy, the rule of law and environmental protection, while boosting innovation and employment and making the Union a leader in the uptake of trustworthy AI. (European Union, 2023: para. 2)

The primary obligation is to support human well-being, which is served by boosting innovation and employment (see European Union, 2023: para. 6).

The contradiction between the documents analysed in this chapter and the value-based principles of the EU AI Act is evident in practice by the lack of serious assessment of the social implications and the impact on European values of the proposed solutions. Moreover, many of the remedies suggested for the European economic malaise appear to follow the models provided by the two competitors, the US and China:

- the Draghi report proposes that the EU embarks on massive collective public borrowing similar to the approach taken in the US to promote economic recovery and foster innovation through public debt. However,

this plan increases the fears of smaller EU members about a growing dependency on the three largest countries (Germany, France, and Italy);

- Draghi's and Letta's proposal to reduce EU regulations to pave the way for the fully functional single market risks weakening the democratic and social rights of EU citizens, which most regulations were originally established to protect;
- the proposals for the European Green Deal and the EU's Global Gateway strategy (see European Commission, 2021c) do not adequately address the harm that the extraction of strategic materials, including critical raw materials, can have on nature and society in the countries where most of these materials are sourced;
- the calls for a substantial increase in defence budgets across EU countries and the emphasis on developing AI programmes for dual-use (civilian and military) digital technology indicate the further securitisation and militarisation of Europe, compromising the social and democratic needs of society; and
- the proposed reform of EU governance, which involves renouncing the "Community Method", would concentrate executive power within the European Commission at the expense of individual EU countries and result in an increasing imbalance of power within the EU's structures.

Assessing the role of AI in proposed solutions for improving the EU's productivity and competitiveness, we concluded that AI and digital technology, in the broader sense, are approached from a relatively narrow perspective, which does not fully capture the potential and significance of AI. The reports consider AI's role only from an economic standpoint, emphasising its capacity to promote productivity and growth. While European values, social inclusion and democracy are mentioned, the potential to deploy AI to promote these values and alleviate the growing social concerns in Europe – such as poverty, inequality, immigration, protection of minorities, and prevention of child sexual abuse material – is not discussed.

In the political guidelines for the next European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen (2024: 10) claimed that "Europe is already leading the way on making AI safer and more trustworthy, and on tackling the risks stemming from its misuse". She committed, among other things, to develop an Apply AI Strategy and establish a European AI Research Council and European Data Union Strategy in collaboration with member states' industry and civil society. However, the relationship between these and other guidelines on AI to some other important pledges, such as "'putting citizens at the heart of our democracy' and the 'need to embed citizens' participation across the EU" (von der Leyen, 2024: 24), remains unclear, as there is no mention of how the pledged actions will be implemented.

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CHAPTER 13

Anatomy of platform power capitalism

Faces, forms, and regulation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the complex nature of platform power in the digital age and covers over 80 journal articles published between 2017 and 2025. Drawing from political economy literature and Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital, we identify ten distinct forms of platform power: capital, political, control, data, infrastructure, hegemony, exploitation, commercialisation, corporate, and monopoly. We explore how super platforms acquire, exercise, and expand their influence, and show how Big Tech corporations undermine state sovereignty and fight regulatory efforts. Our findings highlight the immense economic and political leverage of these platforms and their ability to shape the global order. We argue that an integrated perspective is essential to comprehend the static and dynamic architecture of platform power in its complexity.

KEYWORDS: platform power, Big Tech power, faces and forms of Big Tech platform power, platform power capitalism

Meier, W. A., & Trappel, J. (2026). Anatomy of platform power capitalism: Faces, forms, and regulation. In A. Balčytienė, P. Bajomi-Lázár, & H. Sousa (Eds.), *Digital media shadowing democracy: Technology, communication, and power* (pp. 259–282). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. https://doi.org/10.48335/9789189864290-13

Introduction

The acquisition of Twitter/X by Elon Musk and the politically charged repositioning that followed has highlighted how closely economic platform power and political influence are now intertwined. The case illustrates a wider structural shift of sovereignty: Key infrastructures of public communication are increasingly subject to private control and strategic instrumentalisation.

To analyse platforms as carriers of societal power, rather than neutral intermediaries or market actors, in this chapter we draw on Bourdieu's (1986) field and capital theory, Lukes's (2005) multidimensional understanding of power, and Foucault's (1975/1987) and Deleuze's (1990/1993) accounts of disciplinary and control societies. Together, these perspectives show that platform power in digital capitalism operates infrastructurally (through ownership and control of digital environments), behaviourally (through algorithmic steering and classification), and hegemonically (through the shaping of norms, expectations, and problem frames). Therefore, we proceed in two steps: We develop a conceptual anatomy of platform power across ten analytically distinguishable power forms, and we analyse the tensions and limitations of existing regulatory responses.

The objective is to make the power architecture of platform capitalism visible and, on this basis, reopen the question of democratic counter-power and transformative institutional alternatives.

The sociological foundations of power

Engaging with power theories or dealing with power from a scientific and disciplinary perspective is anything but self-evident. Some academic disciplines and discourses on platforms attempt to do without the power perspective and struggle when their peers urge them to incorporate it. Nevertheless, power is one of the most contested concepts in social sciences.

As an introduction from a social science perspective, Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of field and capital are suitable for exploring the power terrain of super platforms. In Bourdieu's view, a field is a structured and institutionalised social space – a structured battlefield or contested arena where actors, organisations, and institutions compete for dominance, shaping interests, norms, and ideologies through various forms of power and capital. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts offer an initial framework for understanding and analysing the complex power structures in the context of super platforms and the differentiated forms of platform power.

Michel Foucault's (1976/1988) concept of the "subjectivation of power" illustrates that power is not merely repressive, but also productive and constitutive for individuals. Peter Fleming and André Spicer (2014) demonstrated that modern organisations also rely on subtle forms of power exertion by shaping the self-identity and desires of their employees. Foucault

(1975/1987) introduced the concept of "disciplinary power", whereas Gilles Deleuze (1990/1993) coined the term "control power". Disciplinary power functions through surveillance, standardisation, and regulation of individual behaviour. Similarly, control power is based on continuous monitoring and modulation of behaviour within relatively open structures.

Probably the most well-known sociological theory of power is Steven Lukes's (2005) concept of the three dimensions of power conflicts: open, hidden, and invisible. In the first dimension, power conflicts are openly recognisable, making it relatively clear who holds power, exercises it, and enforces their interests despite resistance. In the second dimension, power holders can prevent apparent problems and conflicts that could threaten their interests. These latent conflicts are neither publicly articulated nor politically addressed through formal channels. Lukes (2005: 21) further distinguished between the exercise of power through influence, coercion, authority, violence, and/or manipulation. According to Lukes, the third dimension is the most comprehensive and lasting form of power, as it leads to fundamental transformations of values, rules, and standards at the individual, collective, and structural levels. This third dimension explores the complex and subtle manifestations of power, where economic, political, or cultural institutions appear as opaque or even invisible disciplining power structures, operating without overt influence, coercion, or manipulation. On the one hand, the three authors listed open up complementary approaches that enable a differentiated concept of platform power capitalism. On the other hand, however, there are also common grounds. Thus, power is understood not only as coercion, but also as embedded in social relationships, as structuring and productive. In short, power is usually situational, relational, contextual, and contested at the same time.

Building upon Barnett and Duvall (2005), Fuchs (2005), and Fleming and Spicer (2014), we expand the dimensions of power into the following six faces:

- Instrumental power: The focus is on the visible enforcement of corporate interests exercised by Big Tech companies in political, economic, cultural, or social contexts.
- Institutional power: Super platforms determine organisational structures, rules, regulations, contracts, and norms of punishment and reward, which apply to all stakeholders in a differentiated yet binding manner.
- Structural power: The focus is on the direct and indirect embedding of all stakeholders. The positions of power of super platforms in different contexts are recorded. Structural power turns out to be systemic and long-lasting, but often also subtle.
- Discursive power: It refers to the legality and legitimacy of companies. These actors position themselves in public discourses and shape opinions

and narratives. The focus is on the sovereignty of interpretation over corporate and social goals, terms, and narratives.

- Manipulative power: Super platforms influence stakeholder behaviour and perceptions by presenting information, decisions, or actions in a way that subtly directs people in a desired direction without their conscious awareness. This psychological and emotional control is carried out via "nudging" or recommendation systems.
- Invisible power: This form of power reaches its peak in opacity. Hidden or invisible power exertion occurs subtly, even insidiously. Particularly, the algorithmic power of super platforms is based on the ability to exercise more or less invisible power through corporate control of algorithms. Algorithmic power is not only invisible but also repressive or subversive. It can lead to the normalisation and habitualisation of asymmetries and dependencies.

What is missing in literature is a systematic, power-based debate that transfers concepts from Lukes, Bourdieu, Foucault, and others to platform dynamics, bringing together the multiple dimensions of platform power (economic, political, infrastructural, epistemic, hegemonic, etc.) in a consolidated analytical framework. Based on an initial analysis of power issues in the context of Big Tech corporations such as Amazon, Alphabet, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, Alibaba, Tencent, and ByteDance, we propose ten forms of platform power (see Table 13.1). The six faces of power are subsequently applied to the ten selected forms of platform power to provide a concrete theoretical frame of analysis. This selection is by no means exhaustive, as both political–economic perspectives and social science literature provide numerous other relevant concepts within the platform power discourse.

Table 13.1 Selected forms (dynamics) of platform power, and its faces (i.e., manifestations of how platform power is exercised)

Six faces of power	Ten forms of platform power
instrumental	capital
institutional	political
structural	control
discursive	data
manipulative	infrastructure
invisible	hegemonic
	exploitative
	commercialisation
	corporate
	monopoly

The diverse faces and forms of platform power

From the perspective of critical political economy, the platform power of Big Tech platforms comprises multiple central components that dynamically create and sustain structural power asymmetries. These dynamic mechanisms – the diverse forms of platform power, essentially, what platforms do – are integral to contemporary societal dynamics shaped by super platforms' pursuit of power, hegemony, dominance, colonisation, and exploitation. Critical political economy views the power of super platforms as a combination of societal hegemony, economic control, regulatory influence and cultural steering of social discourses. Super platforms instrumentalise their dominant power positions to dictate market conditions, suppress competition, and extract private profits from various societal spheres at the expense of civil society and democratic processes.

Capital power

Capital power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to mobilise and deploy financial resources in ways that shape market structures, competitive dynamics, and political options. High market capitalisation, stable cash flows, and privileged access to global capital markets provide super platforms with a degree of financial flexibility that fundamentally distinguishes them from other economic actors.

Additionally, super platforms pursue an active financialisation strategy, which aims to optimise returns and capital flows through share buybacks and dividend payments.

As of 31 December 2025, the combined market capitalisation of Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet, Amazon, and Meta amounted to about 15.7 trillion US dollars (statmuse, 2025). The exorbitant capital power of super platforms is also evident when they face financial penalties: In 2025, Alphabet (Google), Apple, and Meta were fined a combined 3.65 billion euros by the European Commission (2025).

In its most direct form, capital power is exercised through strategic investment decisions. Platform companies use financial resources to acquire potential competitors, secure start-ups with promising technologies, influence pricing structures, and control supply chains. Capital thus functions *instrumentally* as a means to expand market reach, neutralise competitive threats, and consolidate dominance within platform ecosystems.

Over time, this financial strength acquires *institutional* relevance. Capital-rich platforms are able to influence regulatory processes, standard-setting procedures, procurement logics, and governance arrangements. Their economic weight translates into privileged access to policy arenas, where financial capacity becomes embedded in formal rules and organisational frameworks.

The *structural* dimension of capital power lies in the asymmetric dependencies it produces. High market capitalisation and predictable revenue streams allow platforms to raise large volumes of capital under favourable conditions, enabling long-term investment strategies that competitors and public actors cannot match. These structural advantages constrain the strategic options of others, who must anticipate the reactions of financially dominant firms.

Capital power also stabilises itself *discursively*. Platform companies deploy media strategies, corporate communications, and economic narratives that frame financial scale as a prerequisite for innovation, efficiency, and digital progress. Market dominance is thus presented as socially beneficial or systemically necessary rather than as a concentration of power.

Manipulative capital power unfolds through the design of incentive structures and contractual arrangements. Platforms leverage their financial position to steer the behaviour of business partners, developers, and public institutions through funding dependencies, preferential conditions, and selective investment. Participation remains formally voluntary, yet is shaped by capital-induced asymmetries.

Finally, capital power becomes *invisible* where the growth-oriented logic of the platform economy is treated as a natural foundation of economic and political decision-making. Scaling, financialisation, and profit maximisation appear self-evident, while alternative economic arrangements recede from view. Capital power thus persists not only through active deployment, but also through its normalisation as an unquestioned condition.

However, structural, discursive, manipulative, and invisible forms of power are not immediately recognisable and must be regarded as hidden or even invisible. For this reason, these forms of power should be studied more intensively, rather than marginalised as a "black box" simply because empirical evidence is difficult or impossible to obtain through conventional academic research.

Political power

While capital power provides the material basis of platform dominance, its broader societal impact becomes visible where financial resources are translated into political influence. Thus, political power unfolds at the point where economic capacity enables platform companies to shape regulatory frameworks, public policy priorities, and state decision-making processes.

While social science research has heavily focused on the market power of tech corporations and often treated as synonymous with platform power, the political power of Big Tech is increasingly becoming the focus of social science research.

Political power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform

companies to influence political decision-making, regulatory frameworks, and public policy priorities without formally exercising state authority. Rather than operating through direct confrontation with governments, platform political power is exercised through layered mechanisms that gradually constrain democratic steering capacity.

At the most immediate level, political power is exercised through targeted intervention in political processes. Platform companies deploy lobbying activities, legal strategies, advisory roles, revolving-door personnel exchanges, and political donations to influence legislative agendas, regulatory drafts, and administrative decisions. In this *instrumental* form, political power appears as deliberate engagement within concrete arenas of policymaking.

As these practices stabilise, political power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Platform actors participate in expert committees, public–private partnerships, standard-setting bodies, and consultative processes that shape governance arrangements over time. Regulatory procedures and administrative routines increasingly adapt to platform business models, technological timelines, and organisational logics, allowing private interests to become sedimented within formal institutions.

The *structural* dimension of political power operates more indirectly. The economic, technological, and infrastructural significance of major platforms generates dependencies that narrow the range of politically feasible options. Public authorities often adjust decisions in anticipation of potential investment withdrawal, technological disadvantage, or infrastructural disruption. Political outcomes are thus shaped less by overt pressure than by preemptive accommodation.

Political power is further stabilised through *discursive* mechanisms. Platform companies frame regulation as a threat to innovation, competitiveness, or digital progress, while presenting themselves as indispensable partners in economic modernisation and technological development. These narratives shift the boundaries of what appears politically reasonable, legitimate, or realistic.

Manipulative political power unfolds through the strategic shaping of political decision-making environments. By exploiting information asymmetries, technical complexity, and selective expertise, platforms steer policymakers toward platform-compatible problem definitions and solution spaces. Decisions remain formally sovereign yet are substantively pre-structured.

Finally, political power becomes *invisible* where political systems tacitly adapt to the dominance of large platforms. The assumption that platform actors are unavoidable, systemically relevant, or beyond effective regulation becomes normalised. Democratic institutions increasingly adjust to platform power rather than actively contesting it, subtly reconfiguring political authority.

Control power

Political influence alone does not account for the depth of platform-based domination. Platform power deepens where companies not only shape rules and policies, but directly intervene in information flows and behavioural processes through algorithmic, intermediary, and surveillance-based mechanisms of control.

Control power in platform power capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to systematically monitor, steer, and predict behaviour, information flows, and decision-making processes. It integrates algorithmic control, intermediary power, gatekeeper functions, and data-driven surveillance into a form of power that operates directly on the conditions of digital interaction.

At the level of direct intervention, control power is exercised through algorithmic systems that regulate visibility, prioritisation, and access. Search rankings, recommendation systems, moderation tools, and automated decision-making processes determine what users see, which options are foregrounded, and which actions are constrained. Control thus functions *instrumentally* as a continuous, real-time modulation of behaviour and attention.

As these control mechanisms stabilise, they become embedded in organisational and regulatory routines. Platform-defined moderation standards, access conditions, and AI governance frameworks acquire a quasi-normative character and are frequently adopted by state agencies, firms, and civil society organisations. In this *institutionalised* form, private control architectures are normalised as legitimate governance solutions.

The *structural* dimension of control power arises from the central intermediary position that platforms occupy within digital ecosystems. Dependence on AI systems, interfaces, app stores, cloud services, and social networks limits the practical alternatives available to users, businesses, and public institutions. Control is exercised less through coercion than through the structuring of environments in which deviation becomes costly or impracticable.

Big Tech primarily exerts its influence through the control of information on digital platforms such as social media and search engines (Khanal et al., 2025), particularly considering that in some countries, more than half the population relies on digital platforms as their primary source of information.

Control power is further stabilised *discursively*. Platform companies frame algorithmic steering and surveillance as necessary for security, efficiency, personalisation, and user convenience. These narratives present control as a technical service rather than a political intervention, thereby depoliticising its societal effects.

Manipulative control power unfolds through the design of digital choice architectures. Nudging, adaptive interfaces, feedback loops, and personalised content subtly guide perception and behaviour without explicit enforcement.

Users remain formally autonomous, yet their actions are systematically channelled by platform-defined parameters.

Finally, control power becomes *invisible* where algorithmic monitoring and behavioural steering are accepted as ordinary features of everyday digital life. Control ceases to appear as an exercise of power and is reinterpreted as normal functionality, allowing it to evade sustained democratic scrutiny.

Data power

While control power operates through the continuous steering of behaviour and information flows, its effectiveness depends on the constant generation and processing of data. Therefore, data power constitutes the epistemic and operational foundation upon which algorithmic control, surveillance, and predictive governance become possible.

Data power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to collect, aggregate, analyse, and operationalise vast quantities of data in order to advance economic, political, and societal objectives. It does not rest on data ownership alone, but on structural control over data flows, access rights, and interpretive processes that render data actionable.

At the most immediate level, data power is exercised through the targeted use of data to optimise business models and steer behaviour. Platform companies employ data-driven analytics to manage prices, content visibility, advertising, recommendations, and work processes. By retaining exclusive control over collected data, platforms secure *instrumental* operational advantages while limiting access for users, regulators, competitors, and independent developers.

As data practices stabilise, they acquire *institutional* relevance. Platform-specific rules governing data collection, interfaces, usage rights, and proprietary formats are increasingly formalised and adopted by public and private actors. In this institutionalised form, private-sector data logics become embedded in governance arrangements and acquire legal and normative force.

The *structural* dimension of data power emerges from asymmetric dependencies. Super platforms accumulate data in volume, granularity, and timeliness that remain inaccessible to other actors. This concentration restricts the scope for innovation and action by competitors, public institutions, and civil society, as power derives from control over indispensable data infrastructures and, in some cases, exclusive access to critical data sources.

Data power is further stabilised *discursively*. Platform companies frame data-driven practices and decisions as objective, neutral, and evidence-based. By presenting analytics as rational and efficient, they obscure the normative assumptions, selection mechanisms, and power interests

embedded in data processing, thereby elevating data to the status of authoritative knowledge.

Manipulative data power unfolds through the personalised deployment of data to shape perception, preferences, and behaviour. Profiling, segmentation, and predictive modelling adapt decision environments at the individual level. Autonomy remains formally intact yet is systematically conditioned by data-driven interventions.

Finally, data power becomes *invisible* where continuous data extraction and processing are accepted as self-evident prerequisites of digital participation. The transformation of social practices into data appears normal and unavoidable, allowing data extraction to function as a naturalised basis of social organisation and power distribution.

Infrastructure power

Data power depends not only on the availability of data, but on the infrastructures through which data are generated, stored, processed, and circulated. Therefore,, infrastructure power shifts platform power to a prior level by shaping the material and technical conditions under which data-driven coordination and control become possible.

Beyond the concepts of market power and data power, infrastructure power is also widely discussed in the social science literature. Often, infrastructure power is implied within data power, just as data power is frequently included within infrastructure power. Julie E. Cohen (2024) has referred to data infrastructures and has described three co-constitutive processes: the datafication of infrastructure, the extraction and appropriation of data, and the infrastructuralisation of data. Similarly, Sophie Flensburg and Signe Sophus Lai (2023) have understood data infrastructures as an evolution of the concept of "infrastructural power", asserting that this perspective provides valuable insights into how digital power is acquired, exercised, maintained, and reinforced in modern communication environments.

Infrastructure power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to provide, control, and orchestrate core digital infrastructures upon which economic activity, social interaction, and public administration increasingly rely. It operates at a pre-conditional level, as it defines the technical environments within which other forms of platform power are exercised.

In its most direct form, infrastructure power is exercised through operational control over cloud services, data centres, operating systems, network services, application stores, and development environments. By granting, restricting, or withdrawing access, adjusting prices and performance parameters or discontinuing services, platform companies deploy infrastructure *instrumentally* as a strategic means of control.

As reliance on these infrastructures deepens, infrastructure power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Public administrations, firms, educational institutions, and research organisations adapt procurement practices, security standards, and organisational workflows to platform-provided infrastructures. Privately owned technical architectures thereby acquire quasi-public status and become integral to institutional functioning.

The *structural* dimension of infrastructure power lies in the dependencies produced by this embedding. High switching costs, lock-in effects, and the scarcity of interoperable alternatives limit the practical choices of users, organisations, and states. Infrastructure power stabilises itself through self-reinforcing dynamics that reduce the need for continuous intervention.

Infrastructure power is further normalised *discursively*. Platform infrastructures are framed as efficient, scalable, innovative, or unavoidable solutions to digital transformation. Public or cooperative alternatives are often portrayed as technically inferior or economically unrealistic, rendering infrastructure a neutral background rather than a contested political resource.

Manipulative infrastructure power unfolds through the design of technical architectures, interfaces, and standards. Decisions about interoperability, compatibility, and development pathways shape innovation trajectories and usage patterns without overt coercion. Control is exercised through design choices that privilege platform-centred ecosystems.

Finally, infrastructure power becomes *invisible* where digital infrastructures are perceived as a natural and taken-for-granted layer of social reality. Ownership structures, control mechanisms, and power relations recede from view, while dependence is reinterpreted as technical necessity. Infrastructure thus functions as a silent carrier of platform-based domination.

Hegemonic power

Where digital infrastructures become the taken-for-granted foundation of everyday social, economic, and political practices, platform power no longer operates primarily through access or control. At this point, hegemonic power emerges, stabilising platform dominance through normalisation, consent, and the internalisation of platform-specific conceptions of order.

Hegemonic power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of dominant platform companies to establish their economic interests, technical logics, and normative conceptions of order as socially legitimate and desirable. Rather than relying on direct coercion, hegemonic power operates through the production of consent and the normalisation of platform-centric worldviews that render existing power structures stable and resilient.

At an *instrumental* level, hegemonic power is exercised through sustained investments in public relations, research funding, education, think tanks,

and civil society initiatives. Platform corporations mobilise financial and organisational resources to disseminate interpretations, produce expertise, and occupy discursive spaces in politics, academia, and public debate. Hegemony is thus actively produced rather than passively acquired.

As these practices stabilise, hegemonic power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Platform-specific norms and values increasingly shape training programmes, administrative routines, media practices, standard-setting processes, and regulatory approaches. Through this institutionalisation, platform logics are reproduced across societal subsystems and generate durable dependencies that extend beyond market relations.

The *structural* dimension of hegemonic power lies in the systematic marginalisation of alternative ways of thinking and acting. The dominance of platform-based business models narrows the horizon of political, economic, and social imagination. Alternatives appear unrealistic, inefficient, or outdated, while platform capitalism is perceived as the only viable mode of digital organisation.

Hegemonic power is further stabilised *discursively* through the shaping of narratives, concepts, and problem definitions. Platform companies influence how technological progress, innovation, and social risks are discussed and evaluated. By setting agendas and framing debates, they prioritise corporate perspectives while sidelining questions of power, inequality, and social cost.

Manipulative hegemonic power unfolds through affective and cognitive guidance embedded in digital environments. Algorithmic curation, personalised recommendations, and selective visibility subtly shape perceptions, preferences, and evaluations. These mechanisms operate below the threshold of conscious awareness, reinforcing platform-aligned interpretations of social reality.

Finally, hegemonic power becomes *invisible* where platform capitalism itself is no longer recognised as a historically specific political–economic formation. Its norms, values, and asymmetries are internalised and reproduced without overt acts of domination. Power persists through acceptance rather than enforcement.

Exploitative power

The hegemonic stabilisation of platform-based orders provides the social conditions under which new forms of exploitation become widely acceptable. Exploitative power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to systematically transform labour, attention, creativity, and social interaction into economically exploitable resources. It extends beyond classical labour exploitation by embedding value extraction deeply within everyday digital practices.

The book *Data Grab* by Ulises A. Mejias and Nick Couldry (2024) focuses on the new colonialism enabled by data power and explains how super platforms institutionalise a four-stage form of exploitative power within data colonialism, encapsulated in the formula "explore, expand, exploit, destroy". In the first phase of the formula, super platforms explore new digital data landscapes to identify where and how they can extract data. They analyse behavioural patterns, user attention, and data from new user bases. After the exploration phase, they expand their sphere of influence to control an increasing number of lucrative data sources. They achieve this expansion through acquisitions, new services, or penetration into new markets and industries. In the exploitation phase, tech companies monetise the collected data for commercial purposes, generating enormous profits, while users – whose data is being exploited – remain unaware of how their information is monetised and receive no fair compensation. The final phase is destruction, in which super platforms eliminate competition and dominate their stakeholders before a counter-hegemonic force can emerge.

In its most direct form, exploitative power operates through the organisation and monetisation of work and user activity. Platform companies structure labour through algorithmic management, fragmented task allocation, performance monitoring, and variable remuneration systems. At the same time, users generate content, data, and social relations that are monetised without corresponding compensation. Exploitation thus functions *instrumentally* through continuous extraction rather than episodic employment relations.

As these practices stabilise, exploitative power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Platform-specific contractual arrangements, employment classifications, and terms of service externalise risks and circumvent established labour protections. Regulatory frameworks adapt slowly or incompletely, allowing exploitative arrangements to persist within legal grey zones.

The *structural* dimension of exploitative power lies in asymmetric dependencies. Platform-mediated work and participation become central sources of income, visibility, or social inclusion, while viable alternatives remain scarce. These dependencies weaken collective bargaining capacity and reinforce unequal power relations between platforms and workers or users, particularly across global value chains.

Exploitative power is further legitimised *discursively*. Platform labour is framed as flexible, entrepreneurial, or empowering, while precarity and insecurity are individualised. Structural exploitation is thus reinterpreted as voluntary participation in innovative labour markets rather than as a systemic power relation.

Manipulative exploitative power unfolds through incentive systems, rankings, gamification, and algorithmic evaluation. These mechanisms steer

behaviour, intensify performance, and align motivation with platform-defined objectives without overt coercion. Control is exercised through continuous feedback rather than direct command.

Finally, exploitative power becomes *invisible* where the ongoing monetisation of work, attention, and social relationships is perceived as a normal feature of digital life. Exploitation ceases to appear as an exceptional condition and is instead embedded in routine participation within platform environments.

Commercialisation power

While exploitative power concerns the concrete extraction of value from labour, attention, and social interaction, commercialisation power captures a broader and more far-reaching dynamic. It unfolds where increasingly more domains of social life are reorganised as markets.

Commercialisation power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to systematically transform previously non- or only partially market-based social practices, relationships, and infrastructures into goods, services, and monetisable markets. It expands capitalist logics deep into everyday life by reorganising social interaction, communication, and access as commercial transactions.

In its most direct form, commercialisation power operates through the active monetisation of social practices. In this *instrumental* form, platform companies convert communication, cultural production, and interaction into advertising spaces, subscription models, transaction fees, or data-driven sales opportunities. In digital advertising markets in particular, dominant platforms exercise significant control over access to valuable advertising space and the pricing of attention.

As these practices stabilise, commercialisation power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Public services, cultural activities, and social infrastructures are increasingly organised through private platform providers. Legal frameworks, procurement practices, and organisational routines adapt to platform-based market models, allowing commercial logics to permeate domains previously governed by public or collective principles.

The *structural* dimension of commercialisation power lies in the gradual displacement of non-commercial alternatives. Platforms construct ecosystems in which participation, visibility, and social interaction are tied to monetised access. Market mechanisms thus become preconditions for social participation, while platform companies shape the basic economic and social conditions under which commercial activity occurs.

Commercialisation power is further legitimised *discursively*. Market-based solutions are presented as efficient, innovative, and user-centred, while public or non-profit alternatives are framed as outdated or inefficient.

Commercialisation appears as a natural consequence of digital modernisation rather than as a contested political process.

Manipulative commercialisation power unfolds through the design of incentive structures, pricing models, and access conditions. Freemium systems, dynamic pricing, personalised offers, and recommendation cascades steer behaviour towards monetised pathways. These mechanisms create the appearance of individual choice while systematically channelling users into commercially advantageous decisions.

Finally, commercialisation power becomes *invisible* where the marketisation of social life is accepted as self-evident. The transformation of interaction, culture, and access into commodities is no longer perceived as a political intervention but as a normal feature of digital environments, allowing commercial expansion to proceed with limited contestation.

Corporate power

The expansion of commercial logics across ever more domains of social life is not a spontaneous market outcome. It is actively organised and stabilised through the internal organisational and epistemic capacities of large platform companies. Corporate power captures this organisational dimension by focusing on how platforms mobilise structures, knowledge, and strategic control to sustain and extend their dominance.

Corporate power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to organise, coordinate, and strategically deploy internal structures, governance mechanisms, and knowledge resources in ways that consolidate economic, political, and social influence. It bundles organisational control with epistemic power, understood as the capacity to produce, control, and legitimise knowledge that underpins platform dominance.

At an *instrumental* level, corporate power is exercised through the targeted mobilisation of internal organisational resources. Platform companies deploy management hierarchies, legal departments, research budgets, and strategic alliances to secure market positions, expand vertically along value chains, and neutralise actual or potential competitors. Organisational capacity thus functions as a direct means of strategic intervention across markets and policy environments.

As these practices stabilise, corporate power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Shareholder-value maximisation, continuous growth, and profitability are translated into organisational priorities that shape investment strategies, research agendas, and governance structures. Heavy investment in research and development supports technological leadership while simultaneously creating barriers to entry and innovation for competitors.

The *structural* dimension of corporate power lies in the ability of super platforms to define market access, technological standards, and

industry practices. Through their organisational scale and control over key infrastructures, platforms establish norms that other actors are compelled to adopt. These standards generate durable dependencies and information asymmetries that reinforce corporate dominance.

Corporate power is further stabilised *discursively* through the strategic production and dissemination of knowledge. Platform companies promote narratives of innovation, responsibility, and technological progress, while selectively funding research, conferences, and academic networks that frame their business models in favourable terms. Epistemic authority thus becomes a central resource for shaping public debate and preempting regulatory intervention.

Manipulative corporate power operates through opaque organisational practices and information asymmetries that are difficult to observe or contest. Algorithmic curation, selective visibility, and restricted access to knowledge resources allow platforms to influence social processes without assuming corresponding responsibility or accountability.

Corporate power becomes *invisible* where organisational and epistemic dominance are perceived as natural attributes of large technology firms. Corporate perspectives come to be treated as neutral expertise, while the political nature of organisational control and knowledge monopolisation recedes from view.

Moreover, algorithmic and epistemic power as expressions of corporate power are particularly prone to misuse. This includes automated, selectively curated, moderated, emotionalised, distorted, or invisibly suppressed news or search results, as well as restricted access to socially valuable knowledge resources. Additionally, the unilateral monetisation of knowledge – without public accountability or transparency – intensifies power asymmetries and dependencies in favour of corporate dominance.

Monopoly power

The organisational and epistemic capacities captured by corporate power do not remain internally confined to platform firms. Over time, their strategic bundling of capital, infrastructure, data, and knowledge translates into durable market dominance. Monopoly power describes the systemic outcome of this concentration process, where platform control becomes stabilised at the level of markets, standards, and competitive conditions.

Monopoly power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of dominant platform corporations to permanently control markets, standards, and competitive conditions, thereby systematically limiting alternatives. It does not arise from market share alone, but from the long-term consolidation of economic, infrastructural, data-based, organisational, and hegemonic power resources.

In its most direct *instrumental* form, monopoly power is exercised through the active enforcement of dominant market positions. Platform companies deploy aggressive pricing strategies, cross-subsidisation, exclusive contracts, and strategic acquisitions to crowd out, absorb, or preempt competitors. Acquisitions of start-ups, complementary technologies, and intangible assets allow platforms to strengthen core businesses while externalising entrepreneurial risk and securing monopoly rents.

As these practices stabilise, monopoly power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Market-dominant platforms increasingly shape competition and regulatory regimes through lobbying, litigation, and participation in standard-setting processes. Antitrust interpretation, enforcement practices, and regulatory time horizons adapt to the presence of structurally dominant actors rather than restoring effective competition.

The *structural* dimension of monopoly power operates through network effects, economies of scale, and lock-in dynamics. The concentration of users, data, and infrastructures generates self-reinforcing feedback loops that raise barriers to entry and render market access for new actors increasingly impracticable. Monopoly power thus stabilises independently of continuous intervention.

Monopoly power is further normalised *discursively*. Platform dominance is framed as efficiency, convenience, or natural market consolidation, while competition is portrayed as fragmentation or loss of quality. Large platforms present themselves as indispensable coordination infrastructures, recasting concentration as a social benefit rather than a political–economic problem.

Manipulative monopoly power unfolds through the strategic control of dependencies. By setting technical standards, interfaces, contractual conditions, and access rules, platforms bind users, firms, and complementors to their ecosystems. Formal freedom of choice persists yet is substantively undermined by switching costs and structural dependence.

Finally, monopoly power becomes *invisible* where monopolistic structures are no longer perceived as problematic but as functional solutions. Dominant platforms appear as a natural component of digital order, while competition is dismissed as obsolete. Monopoly power thus persists through normalisation rather than overt enforcement.

Summarising note: Typology as heuristic framework

The ten forms of platform power developed in this contribution are neither arbitrary nor exhaustive. They constitute an analytical instrument designed to capture the economic, political, social, cultural, and technological dimensions of platform power at a medium level of abstraction. Rather than forming a closed or canonical system, the typology is intended as a heuristic framework

that remains compatible with classical and contemporary concepts within and beyond critical political economy.

The typology deliberately departs from reduced, market-centred perspectives by foregrounding power relations that extend beyond price mechanisms, competition and efficiency. In doing so, it offers a political–economic analysis of digital societies in which platforms operate as central ordering actors.

Importantly, the analytical grid does not suggest that platform power consists of discrete or additive resources. Instead, it conceptualises platform power as a relational constellation in which different forms of power intertwine and mutually reinforce one another. These dynamics shift power to upstream levels, where it increasingly eludes conventional forms of democratic oversight. Platform power capitalism thus names a structural transformation of political economy with far-reaching implications for democratic self-determination, public institutions, and civil society agency.

Platform power capitalism as a relational constellation of power

Taken together, the ten forms of platform power analysed in this contribution describe a structured constellation rather than a collection of isolated mechanisms. Platform power in platform power capitalism emerges from the interaction of economic, political, infrastructural, data-based, organisational, and hegemonic dynamics that mutually reinforce one another across different levels of social organisation.

Capital power provides the material basis of platform dominance, which is translated into political power through influence over regulatory frameworks and policy priorities. Control power and data power operationalise this dominance within everyday digital practices, while infrastructure power shifts platform power to a pre-conditional level by shaping the technical environments on which societies depend. These dynamics are stabilised through hegemonic processes that normalise platform-centric orders and marginalise alternative imaginaries.

On this basis, exploitative and commercialisation power expand the scope of value extraction and marketisation into ever more domains of social life. Corporate power consolidates these dynamics organisationally and epistemically, enabling platforms to coordinate markets, knowledge production, and strategic decision-making. Monopoly power represents the systemic outcome of this process, where platform dominance becomes stabilised at the level of markets, standards, and competitive conditions.

Crucially, platform power operates less through visible confrontation than through structural, discursive, manipulative and invisible mechanisms that pre-structure options before democratic deliberation begins. Platform power capitalism thus describes a political economy in which democratic

governance is not simply challenged ex post, but systematically constrained at its foundations.

In conclusion: Regulation of platform power

We set out to analyse platform power capitalism as a relational constellation of power rather than as a collection of isolated market failures. Building on a typology of ten interrelated forms of platform power, the empirical literature reviewed in this concluding chapter allows for a systematic assessment of how contemporary regulatory approaches engage with the structural foundations of platform dominance.

Since our sample of journal articles focuses on the analysis of platform power and not its regulation, we cannot expect an elaborate debate on governance models. Nevertheless, 35 articles – published in the year 2024 and 2025 – talk about platform politics and its instruments for containing or overcoming platform power.

As expected, the existing or planned state control and regulatory measures are criticised as inadequate in view of a spreading platform hegemony. For example, for Andrea Coveri and colleagues (2025), traditional regulatory instruments such as antitrust law and data protection fail because they neither strive for nor implement the fight against platform power. James Muldoon (2025) has also considered the liberal economic regulatory approach of Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act to be necessary, but also absolutely inadequate. Angela Garcia Calvo and colleagues (2025) noted that none of the existing regimes in the US, EU, China, and India successfully attack the structural platform power. For Charis Papaevangelou and Eugenia Siapera (2025), the case of Greece exemplifies the limits of liberal, reformist regulation, because it leads to the instrument of deregulation. Hazem Ibrahim and colleagues (2024) concluded that regulation in its current form has a system-preserving and not system-changing effect. Shaleen Khanal and colleagues (2025) also noted a regulatory deficit because the Big Tech companies would de facto shape the rules themselves. Dovev Lavie (2024) has also considered the existing regulatory approaches to be necessary, but insufficient, as they would only target symptoms and would not have a systemic effect. Carlos Saura García (2024a) criticised the fragmentation and non-binding nature of existing regulations, which enable inadequate controls by the leading gatekeepers and data monopolists as well as the existing dependence on American and Chinese tech companies. Cecilia Rikap (2024) has also considered conventional regulatory approaches such as antitrust and data protection to be inadequate. Finally, Alexander Gleiss and his colleagues (2023) positioned platform power as a post-democratic form of power that successfully overcomes state, legal, and social control mechanisms.

Therefore, they consider platform power to be structurally and functionally a threat to democracy. On the basis of a meta-analysis, they listed five main reasons for this: first, Big Tech companies usurp market and regulatory functions of the state because "platforms have become serious challengers to the regulator in controlling market access, key conditions and resources" (Gleiss et al., 2023: 1); second, platform corporations are establishing corporate governance mechanisms that would replace public oversight (e.g., content moderation, employment relationships, tax avoidance); third, tech companies are able to systematically exploit regulatory shortcomings due to a lack of cross-border cooperation, a lack of enforcement or implementation, and legal loopholes; fourth, the large platforms succeed in creating algorithmic information asymmetries and lock-in effects that make citizens, consumers, and governments equally dependent; and fifth, Big Tech corporations wield discursive power by presenting themselves as "efficient intermediaries" when in fact acting as gatekeepers and infrastructure providers with quasi-state authority.

However, the somewhat surprising unanimity in the assessment of prevailing regulatory practice dissolves when it comes to formulating and demanding additions or alternatives. While Gernot Grabher (2025) has advocated realistic, pluralistic, sector-specific, and adaptive governance models, Anna Gerbrandy and colleagues (2025: 37) have called for a theory of harm of "protecting the digital public sphere as structure of democracy". They wanted to transform the economically oriented competition law from an economic to a political-democratic control instrument against platform hegemony. For Angela Garcia Calvo and colleagues (2025), integrated, state-official strategies are needed to ensure sovereignty, competition, and democratic control. Zoetanya Sujon and colleagues (2025) have called for ethical political accountability for the owners of digital infrastructures. For Fikile Masikane and Edward Webster (2025), future regulation must jointly address algorithmic, economic, and social sources of power. Papaevangelou and Siapera (2025) have called for a democratisation of infrastructure policy in terms of ownership and environmental responsibility. Carlos Saura Garcia (2024b) has advocated a democratic socialisation of data, a strengthening of public control bodies to prevent regulatory capture and the development of European alternative infrastructures. Carolin Ioramashvili and colleagues (2024) have recommended, in addition to competition policy interventions against monopolies and systemic structural policy, an orientation towards historical forms of regulation of former network industries such as rail, electricity, and telecommunications, including public control of network monopolies. Filippa Chatzistavrou (2024) expected platform regulation to primarily address democratic and sovereignty deficits with the aim of limiting the political mandate of private-sector Big Tech companies, introducing transparency obligations for lobbying and

revolving doors. In addition, she has called for a repoliticisation of the public sphere in order to initiate a counter-trend to tech public capitalism. While Vali Stan (2024) would have liked to see a structural democratisation of property and data infrastructure, Cecilia Rikap (2024) was heading for a structurally transforming knowledge regulation and called for a fundamental democratisation of knowledge production. These include transparency and disclosure obligations, regulation of academic-industrial dependencies, the promotion of public cloud and data infrastructures, and an anti-monopoly policy in the field of knowledge.

Even though the analysis of platform power and not its regulation was the focus of the selected contributions, some final observations can be formulated that support our power perspective.

When the 35 studies reviewed in this section are grouped along the ten forms of platform power developed in this article, several consistent clusters emerge. The literature shows a strong focus on control power, data power, and selected aspects of monopoly power, particularly in relation to competition law and content moderation. At the same time, capital power, infrastructural dependence, corporate–epistemic power, and hegemonic power receive comparatively less systematic regulatory attention. This imbalance suggests that regulatory efforts tend to concentrate on visible and contestable manifestations of platform power while leaving its less visible, structural foundations intact.

Across regulatory contexts, the literature reveals a striking convergence. Platform regulation predominantly targets downstream effects of platform power such as harmful content, unfair business practices or individual market abuses. By contrast, the upstream power resources that enable and stabilise platform dominance – capital concentration, infrastructural control, data asymmetries, organisational capacity, and hegemonic normalisation – remain largely untouched. As a result, regulation frequently addresses symptoms rather than underlying power relations.

Taken together, the empirical evidence corroborates the central claim of this contribution: Platform power is not primarily reproduced through regulatory gaps or enforcement failures, but through the continued protection of upstream power resources. Interventions that focus on platform behaviour, transparency, or procedural compliance may mitigate individual harms, yet they rarely alter the conditions under which platform power is generated and reproduced. In this sense, regulation often operates as a stabilising rather than a transformative force within platform power capitalism.

This pattern is evident across different political and regulatory models. In the EU, ambitious frameworks such as the Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act introduce important constraints on certain platform practices, but they largely remain within a paradigm of behavioural correction. In the US, fragmented regulatory approaches coexist with strong market concentration

and extensive corporate discretion. In China and in parts of the Global South, state intervention frequently reconfigures platform power rather than constraining it, sometimes reinforcing dominant actors through infrastructural dependence or regulatory alignment. Despite these differences, the empirical literature points to a common outcome: Platform power is reshaped, but rarely reduced.

From the perspective of platform power capitalism, these findings have implications that extend beyond regulatory design. If platform power operates primarily through upstream structural, infrastructural, and hegemonic mechanisms, then regulation cannot be understood as a purely technical or legal task. It becomes a question of democratic power and political economy. Regulation is not only about correcting market failures or disciplining corporate behaviour ex post; it concerns the capacity of democratic institutions to intervene in the preconditions under which digital markets, infrastructures, and forms of social coordination are organised.

Without addressing capital concentration, infrastructural dependence, data asymmetries, and organisational dominance, regulatory frameworks risk consolidating the very power relations they seek to contain. Platform power capitalism thus confronts democratic societies with a structural challenge of whether they are willing and able to reclaim political authority over the socio-technical foundations of contemporary digital life. Regulation, sovereignty, and democracy are therefore not separate policy domains, but mutually constitutive dimensions of a contested political–economic order.

The democratic reconstruction and repolitisation of platform power capitalism begins where it is possible to translate the prevailing platform power into institutional, epistemic, cultural, and social counter-power. In other words, it is important that alternative digital infrastructures are set up and governed democratically.

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The book's message is brief: Liberal democracies are at risk. Democratic decay has numerous causes, but technological innovations and profit-driven dynamics are shaping societal relations in ways that intensify disagreements and polarisation, undermining informed citizenship.

The growing number of uncertainties associated with the new communications order, further enhanced by the rise of information warfare waged by both radical domestic actors and geopolitical powers in recent years, has become a reason for concern in liberal democracies, yet academic analyses of and policy responses to the challenges of the new media landscape are lagging behind technological transformation. Policymakers seeking regulatory answers need to weigh and balance a range of considerations, including democratic standards such as media freedom and pluralism, sustainable financing strategies for media businesses, economic productivity, ecological implications, and security concerns. The harmonisation of the different interests at stake takes time, while inaction feeds public distrust in democratic institutions and processes.

This volume shows that the quality of digital media performance remains central to democratic life and to responsibilities that citizens and institutions have toward one another. The authors call for policy decisions to be taken on both the national and the supranational levels. Regulatory institutions must be granted the necessary legal tools and financial resources to protect accurate information and to fight disinformation, as only informed and critical-minded citizens can defend democracies. The risks are too real to be devalued. Awareness and action are needed.

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