

Chapter 14

Practising democracy in the newsroom

Comparing practices of news processing, conflict resolution, and hiring

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Abstract

Newsroom democracy, defined as the exercise of fundamental democratic principles and practices in generating and processing news within professional news organisations, is rarely addressed in communication studies. Yet, the topic contains an interesting paradox: While newsroom journalists are expected to guard democracy, newsrooms themselves are often hierarchical in organisation and practices. In this chapter, the development of the concept of newsroom democracy is discussed, up to today's contemporary integrated newsrooms. Empirical findings show that public service media are more advanced in terms of internal democracy than private media, and some younger democracies outperform long-established and venerable democracies in this respect. We conclude by arguing that democratic newsroom practices best serve both the public and private interest.

Keywords: newsroom democracy, newsroom autonomy, democratic governance, journalistic watchdogs, media ownership, monitory democracy

Introduction and theory

Think, for a moment, if environmentalist role model Greta Thunberg arrived at a Fridays For Future student strike on a heavy motorbike; if public health officials during times of a virus pandemic were deliberately and demonstrably not vaccinated themselves; if an activist organisation called Transparency International refused to disclose its financial supporters and board members – they would all be accused of hypocrisy. Trust and legitimacy of their causes would suffer, and public support would rightly wane.

A similar case could be made for (leading) news media in mature democracies, the object of scrutiny in this book and for *The Media for Democracy Monitor 2021* (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021b, 2021c). In research as well as practice, leading news media are often held as champions of democratic governance, holding the

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powerful to account, being fearless watchdogs of society, providing fora for deliberation, examining the exercise of power and protecting the public from wrongdoings, providing a platform for open debates, giving voice to the people, and representing the citizens (see Curran, 2005). While supposedly providing these crucial services to the democracies they are part of, leading news media rarely allow insight into newsroom operations. Little is known or publicly communicated about the practices within newsrooms, how decision-making on news framing comes about, and the level of participation by newsroom staff when editors-in-chief or other leading personnel are hired.

Newsroom democracy, defined as the exercise of fundamental democratic principles and practices in generating and processing news within professional news organisations, is also sidelined in communication studies. Even comprehensive handbooks on journalism studies – such as the seminal *Handbook of Journalism Studies* (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019) and the *Handbook of Digital Journalism* (Witschge et al., 2016) – emphasise the democratic role of journalism in society over the role of democracy within newsrooms. The place of newsroom democracy in the scientific literature is marginal. In the 1970s and 1980s, some attention was paid to the issue of how news media organised their work. Dreier (1978: 75) recalls the so-called long march through the institutions of society during the students' movement of the 1960s: "Beginning in the late 1960's, however, journalists around the nation began to talk about 'newsroom democracy'. [...] Journalists, too, realized that their own powerlessness on the job created obstacles to aggressive and responsible journalism". The perceived contrast between giving voice to powerless groups in society and their own powerlessness within their organisations ultimately lead journalists to create a "newsroom democracy movement" (Dreier, 1978: 84).

Later, in the 1980s, when the scientific debate on global communication equalities surged following the publication of the landmark UNESCO report by MacBride (1980), *Many voices one world: Towards a more just and more efficient world information and communication order*, Picard (1985: 78) suggested a "staircase of press freedom needs", including newsroom autonomy and democracy as a distinct step: "This requirement [...] helps insulate journalists from the biasing influences of newspaper publishers and owners and the causes that they support". This concept of newsroom autonomy and democracy was inward-looking towards freedom and autonomy from media owners. Much later, Clifford G. Christians addressed the outward component towards the accusation of hypocrisy in his contribution to the centrepiece of normative communication study literature as follows:

If hardly anyone today disputes democracy as a worthy goal, not everyone expects it to apply to their own decisions and activities. Newspaper editors [...] often champion democratic values on their editorial pages but seldom

apply those values in their own newsrooms. And editors usually see no irony in the gap between what they preach and what they practice, because for them democracy denotes a form of government and not a set of requirements aimed at private persons and their private enterprises. (Christians et al., 2009: 92)

Thus, newsroom democracy has been somewhat recognised in the literature on media and democracy, but never discussed in detail. One reason might be that newsroom democracy is hard to imagine in the prevailing capitalist setting of the media industries. In this mindset, media ownership seemingly comes naturally with the right to appoint leading newsroom staff and to define the editorial line. Without questioning these ownership privileges any further, McQuail, author of six editions of *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory* since 1983, concedes the following: "There is no doubt that owners in market-based media have ultimate power over content and can ask for what they want to be included or left out" (McQuail, 2010: 291). His successor as author of this highly valued volume on media and communication theory, Mark Deuze, upheld this view in the seventh edition (McQuail & Deuze, 2020).

Against this background, contemporary democracies and communication practices require a revision of these mass media-based approaches. Both contemporary forms of democracies and news media organisations find themselves under transformative pressure, seeking adequate responses to new challenges.

First, representative democracies – the successful model of the nineteenth and twentieth century – have come of age. Following the ancient Greek assembly-based democracy built upon the spoken word, representative democracy intertwined with print culture. In John Keane's reading, communicative transformations along digitalisation, the Internet, and "communicative abundance" require thinking of contemporary democracies as "monitory democracies". According to Keane (2009: 688), "monitory democracy is a new historical form of democracy, a variety of 'post-parliamentary' politics defined by the rapid growth of many different kinds of extra-parliamentary, power-scrutinising mechanisms". Next to and in addition to mass media, a plethora of unelected representatives has emerged with the purpose of holding the powerful accountable, in the form of public integrity commissions, judicial activism, public interest litigation, think tanks, participatory budgeting, bloggers, fora, summits, regional parliaments, human rights watch organisations, conflict-of-interest boards, consumer councils, online petitions, democracy cafés, global watchdog organisations, expert councils, public scorecards, public consultations, and so forth (Keane, 2009).

Within this form of contemporary democracy, unelected representatives – both individuals and organisations – are "champions of public causes and values, public figures whose authority and power base are located outside the boundaries of electoral politics" (Keane, 2013: 13). Numerous both in number and causes, unelected representatives provide valuable input to the public debate,

thereby strengthening democracy. The legitimacy of such individuals and interest groups is based on representation. In relation to their cause, interest groups are “agents capable of addressing democratic deficits in governing institutions [...] in large part because they are assumed to contribute democratic legitimacy to policy processes” (Fraussen & Halpin, 2018: 23).

Thus, within contemporary monitory democracies, interest groups, unelected representatives, and concerned individuals provide legitimacy to policy, based on their own interest. Their legitimacy is based on representation of a sufficiently large number of citizens. The more important the cause, the higher the number of represented citizens; and the more democratically the cause is negotiated within the interest group, the higher the relevance in the political process.

Second, news media organisations are subject to transformation as well. Along the representative paradigm of democracy, news media developed an identity as an estate in its own right in the political realm. The famous metaphor of the fourth estate, however, is slanted in several directions. The term originates in the *ancien régime* in pre-revolutionary France, with clergy, nobility, and commoners (everyone else) representing the other three estates. Attributing the press and other news media a similar position in society as the reigning powers of the eighteenth century somewhat overrates the media’s contingencies. In other European languages (among others, Spanish, Italian, and German), the same metaphor labels media as the fourth power, next to parliament, government, and judiciary. Again, the metaphor is inappropriate; contrary to the other “powers”, the press and news media cannot claim any democratic legitimacy for themselves, as they are unelected, mostly private organisations.

In the age of the “network society” (Castells, 2000), characterised by individuals linked by networks (van Dijk, 2020), networked individuals armed with information and social support are supposed to hold politicians and mainstream institutions accountable. Dutton (2007, 2009, 2013) baptised these networked individuals the “fifth estate”, and argues that this additional estate holds the promise for opportunities of even greater social accountability compared with the media (Dutton, 2013).

Hence, editorial news media are confronted with a vast array of additional watchdogs in the age of networks and within monitory democracies. In order to remain relevant, news media must find and define their place within this plethora of networked individuals, interest groups, and unelected representatives – all driven by individual causes and values – being legitimised by those whom they represent (in the terminology of digital platforms, their followers).

Most news media do not claim to represent a specific interest, cause, or group, apart from a larger or smaller readership or audience. Their “followers” are diverse, and news media (most of the time) do not follow a specific agenda or advance a specific cause. In this respect, they lack legitimacy compared with Dutton’s fifth estate. Instead, editorial- and newsroom-based media could en-

hance their legitimacy by strengthening their internal democracy. In this respect, public service media are not much different, although they operate with a public mandate providing them with some authority and legitimacy. In fact, for public service media, newsroom democracy is often a requirement.

Newsroom democracy is in the interest of both the news media companies and the public. Newsroom democracy is in the best interest of media owners and journalists, as democratic structures establish and enhance legitimacy of the media in the political process, similar to interest groups (Fraussen & Halpin, 2018). While the latter create legitimacy through representation (“who and how many do we represent?”), news media create legitimacy through reach (“how many use our news?”), without representing anybody. Therefore, democratic decision-making and conduct has the potential to substitute representation and increase the legitimacy of news media. Newsroom democracy is in the public interest too, as higher-quality content can be expected if newsrooms provide for the most developed decision-making procedure with regard to democratic values such as participation, representation, inclusiveness, equality, voice, minority rights, and so on.

In this chapter, we ask the following question: To what extent can newsroom democracy provide legitimacy for leading news media’s role in contemporary monitory democracies?

MDM Indicator and related research question addressed in this chapter:

(F4) Internal rules for practice of newsroom democracy

To what extent do newsroom journalists practise internal democracy? (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 22)

Within the 2021 Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) research project, newsroom democracy has been operationalised for the participating countries and their respective news media along four strands (for more details, see Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 21–22):

- Internal news processing: How democratic is the process of daily news processing? Who has voice in the editorial meetings?
- Conflict resolution: How is conflict mediation organised in newsrooms?
- Decisions on staff recruitment, in particular, recruitment of leading personnel such as editors-in-chief: Who has a right to participate in these decisions? Are those affected by the decision participating in the decision, and in what way? What provisions are in place for gender balance in staff selection?
- Representation: How is representation of different staff categories organised and applied?

Newsroom democracy in the digital age

The above list shows how democracy in the newsroom refers to the level of autonomy enjoyed by journalists in their daily task of reporting the news as well as in co-forming the functional components of the editorial environment. Traditionally, conflicts between journalists' professional values and the editorial policies of news organisations have drastically affected the practices of journalists who had to comply with their employers' wishes (Altschull, 1996).

Over the last two decades, news production and dissemination have undergone major changes in terms of technological and economic conditions influencing newsroom professionalism (Ornebring et al., 2014; see also Ruggiero et al., Chapter 15). Contemporary journalism has resorted to digital data reporting in its considerable task of holding power to account, regarded as an efficient investigative method enforcing the accountability mission of journalists while also enhancing audience engagement (Felle, 2016).

Furthermore, in digital newsrooms, the introduction of audience metrics reflects a "new paradigm" (Anderson, 2011) that permits managers to monitor journalists more efficiently, thus rendering audience metrics as an important factor in newsroom discipline. Indicative is the example of the Reuters bureau in Nairobi, Kenya, where the dissemination of audience metrics about the attractiveness of stories and the promotion of journalists to higher positions changed the perception of who is a "good" journalist (Bunce, 2019).

The Internet age has given rise to integrated newsrooms, where cross-media journalism presupposes multitasked journalists who are confronted with the challenges of quality news storytelling corresponding to the demands of the online environment. The expansion of traditional media to multimedia enterprises, characterised by demanding rhythms in news cycles, expectedly poses challenges to the organisation of daily news processing, and thus the decision-making procedures that lie behind it. When there are fewer journalists investigating stories – with less time to produce more news stories, and working for multiple platforms – newsroom democracy in terms of internal news processing, conflict resolution, and deliberation on staff recruitment becomes even more challenging, but not less relevant.

The advances in technology have also renewed the composition of newsroom power hierarchies, identifying the concept of the accepted and successful media professional, with editors or reporters highly engaged in a round-the-clock digital culture with a wide range of digital skills (Robinson, 2011). This demanding working environment lays the foundation upon which the maturity of newsroom democracy can be judged in the context of a growing space of networking individuals (as fifth estate), who have set the ground for a new source of accountability pertaining to all sectors of society (Dutton, 2009).

Empirical findings

In its empirical approach, the 2021 MDM research project devotes one indicator to newsroom democracy (F4). Country teams were requested to collect information on practices and routines in newsrooms of the selected leading news media which can be associated with newsroom democracy. The indicator itself assumes that effective rules on internal democratic practices enhance democracy at large and provide democratic legitimacy to the news media. Internal democratic practices are appropriate measures against accusations of hypocrisy and for the enhancement of quality output. In operational terms, this research indicator had the following criteria (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 22):

- newsroom journalists have a formal and equal say in how to portray and frame political issues
- newsroom journalists must arrive at a consensus on how to frame political issues
- newsrooms have clear editorial guidelines for impartiality, with sanctions attached
- existence of a newsroom council
- internal rules for electing or appointing editors-in-chief, other positions, etc.
- journalists choose their editor-in-chief
- existence of internal rules to support and promote women journalists' careers and their access to managerial positions
- existence and implementation of a system of monitoring and evaluation of the presence and participation of women in decision-making at all levels

The main source of information was interviews with members of the newsrooms of the pre-selected leading news media. In cases where respondents claimed that formal rules regarding democracy in the newsroom exist, respective documents such as guidelines or commitments were collected. In order to avoid socially desired answers from editors-in-chief and journalists, interviews with representatives of journalistic trade unions were conducted in addition. Furthermore, research reports and other sources were recommended as suitable material for further input. Of course, this methodological approach provides some room for interpretation. Nonetheless, gathered information in most country studies was straightforward with clear-cut answers. During the collective debate among all researchers from the 18 participating countries, no controversies occurred with regard to this indicator.

Newsroom democracy in news processing

Empirical findings on how news are processed in newsrooms demonstrate a high degree of trust in professional norms. In most of the newsrooms under scrutiny, interviewed journalists reported some kind of “open debate culture” and “flat hierarchies”, which includes all newsroom members (to be found in the Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden – as well as in Flanders/Belgium and the Netherlands, and also in South Korea). Often, no written rules govern this process (e.g., in Finland), but rather routines and traditions. Decisions on news selection as well as on topic framing happens collaboratively and collectively – with Canada as the prime example of this. Canadian journalists also have the right to refuse putting their name under news stories (Taylor & DeCillia, 2021).

The kind of relaxed practices in internal newsroom debate is probably best practice only as long as there is a wide consensus among newsroom journalists. Were this consensus to be challenged (e.g., by new staff or new issues), newsrooms would need some kind of mechanism to handle such disruption. Results show that the majority of the countries participating in the 2021 MDM research project lack such preparedness.

However, there are notable exceptions to this rule of “professional self-conduct”. In South Korea, most leading newsrooms operate along written editorial guidelines (Kim & Lee, 2021). In Italy, a set of national and internal rules are in place that guarantee equality, impartiality, objectivity, and internal democratic practices in newsrooms (Padovani et al., 2021). Similarly, in Portugal, the law requires rules for newsroom democracy; however, an important gap exists between the rules and daily practice (Fidalgo, 2021).

In a few countries in the 2021 MDM research sample, a strict hierarchical order prevails in the newsroom. In the United Kingdom, seniority is an important element that provides weight in newsroom coordination meetings (Moore & Ramsay, 2021). Chile (Núñez-Mussa, 2021) and Greece (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021) are united in the powerlessness of ordinary newsroom journalists: Editors-in-chief make decisions, while journalists lack an equal say (Greece), and processing power, as journalists may only suggest, not decide, topics (Chile). As observed by Hughes (2012), such a hierarchical newsroom order contains the risk of a journalistic culture of self-censorship and a mere instrumental exchange of information.

Overall, countries scoring high in the ranking for indicator F4 in the 2021 MDM research project apply relaxed professional rules and flat hierarchies in their newsrooms; rules do exist, but they are in most cases informal and not notified. At the other end of the scale, countries scoring low in the overall ranking maintain strict hierarchical rules, again not necessarily notified, but applied in practice by editors. The scale assumes that an open debate culture for newsrooms, with equal voice for all members, is the superior model for leading news media.

Newsroom democracy in conflict resolution

Newsrooms are not free of conflict, and discussions about topic selection and topic framing are frequent and part of the daily routine. How newsrooms settle disputes and reconcile internal conflicts is another measurement for the maturity of newsroom democracy. In the interviews with newsroom members, some interviewees had reservations about discussing conflict resolution. Nevertheless, statements gathered more or less echo contradictory yet interesting findings with regard to news processing. Countries fall into two camps: One camp practises collaborative conflict settlement over hierarchical decisions by editors, while the other does the opposite.

What unites the two camps is the general pattern of the editor-in-chief having the last say in editorial matters. Also in flat organisations, editors make the final decision in the case of conflict in daily editorial matters. In such cases, the editor is both member of the disputing parties and the final judge. Different procedures apply when it comes to conflicts with regard to employment matters. In these cases, formal or informal reconciliation committees are in place in several countries (e.g., Austria, Germany, and Portugal), most often, but not exclusively, within public service media organisations.

Conflict avoidance is another strategy which is applied, for example, in Hong Kong, where in the most extreme cases, political news framing is rarely discussed. In other cases, permission to discuss framing depends on the political sensitivity of the news story and the political stance of the media outlets (Lo & Wong, 2021).

With the reluctance of participants to share internal conflict resolution procedures, too little information is available to draw robust conclusions. However, it appears that conflict resolution in day-to-day editorial matters is rare, as newsroom members know well the informal “red lines” and do not deliberately cross them. Editors have the final say in cases of disputes. Different procedures apply in cases of employment matters, where formal rules exist in most cases. Overall, the strategies in place to resolve conflict in the newsroom largely comply with the requirements for democracy in the newsroom.

Newsroom democracy in hiring and internal pluralism

That newsrooms participate in the appointment of editors-in-chief is more of an exception than a rule in the news media covered by the 2021 MDM research project. This example from an interview presented in the report concerning Greece is representative of most of the 18 participating countries:

For privately owned media, [the appointment of the editor-in-chief] is clearly a decision of the ownership. We do not have a self-governing system; the

owners decide and appoint who will take charge. (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021: 189)

Portugal is partly an exception to the rule of editors-in-chief being chosen without the newsroom staff participating in the process. Here, senior-level appointments are required by law to be preceded by a consultation of the elected newsroom council. Some years ago, no editor-in-chief in any Portuguese medium was allowed the position against the vote of the council; but the law was amended, and now the newsroom council has only a non-binding opinion about the appointment of the editor-in-chief (as well as about the appointment of other editors and deputy editors) (Fidalgo, 2021). In most countries participating in the 2021 MDM research project, there is a practice of informal consultations of the newsroom to ensure that the leadership is not opposed by the journalists. That the support of affected journalists is important is illustrated by the following quote from an interview in Finland: “Reporters cannot affect the selection of an editor-in-chief. Should there be a really incompetent editor-in-chief, if necessary, they can march out to demand having him relegated from his position” (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021: 162). In other cases, as in the Netherlands, newsroom editors’ editorial statutes give them a say in the nomination of a new editor-in-chief. The democratic participation in the newsroom only goes up to a certain point, as is summarised in the Dutch country report: “Staff decisions are taken by the owners and executives, but in connection with newsroom staff” (Vandenberghe & d’Haenens, 2021: 269).

When it comes to the gender balance in newsrooms, most countries participating in the 2021 MDM research project agree that some progress has been made in this regard in recent years, but there is still a lot to do, mainly with respect to equal pay, equal opportunities for “hard news” reporting, or equal chances to get a leading position in the company. Countries like Austria, Canada, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom have an almost 50:50 distribution between female and male journalists (on the contrary, in Chile, Belgium, Iceland, Portugal, South Korea, and Switzerland, there is still a clear majority of male journalists, although the trend among young professionals points in the opposite direction). However, there is no gender balance when considering managing positions in the newsroom. Most leading news media clearly suffer from gender imbalances, either in terms of persistent pay gaps between male and female employees or because of the much-referred-to glass ceiling that makes it difficult for female journalists to progress in their careers after a certain point. There are also frequent complaints of gender-biased stereotypes influencing editors’ decisions about who to send to implement a certain job: Hard news on politics or economy and reporting from conflict situations abroad are still topics assigned more often to male journalists, while female journalists are more commonly given soft news regarding issues of society, education, travel, or leisure. “Patterns of inequality

persist”, as pointed out in the Italian country report, following examples of such topic-related “horizontal segregation” between male and female reporters (Padovani et al., 2021: 337; see also Padovani et al., Chapter 4).

In addition, many news media managers don’t seem to acknowledge the existence of gender inequalities: A number of the editors-in-chief interviewed for the 2021 MDM research project insist that men and women are treated and paid equally and that no one is subject to discrimination. But female journalists do not agree. The fact is there are still very few media companies where formal rules or special committees are in place to promote gender equality. Examples of such a proactive attitude appear in news media companies in Germany, South Korea, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, while in Finland and Iceland, gender equality – for example, in employment conditions – is protected by law. Moreover, some civic associations are being created in order to monitor (and publicly denounce) gender inequality, thus calling attention to and fostering awareness of the problem in the media; for example, Pro Quote in Germany (Horz-Ishak & Thomass, 2021), Donne in Quota or Si non ora quando in Italy (Padovani et al., 2021), and Korea Women Journalists Association in South Korea (Kim & Lee, 2021). In summary, there is an increased focus on gender balance in newsrooms, outside and inside media organisations, but much is still to be achieved.

Staff representation in media organisations

The existence of a newsroom council allows journalists to be formally represented in the debate and management of the editorial department. A number of countries participating in the 2021 MDM research project lack newsroom councils (Chile, Denmark, Finland, and Switzerland), while others (Australia, Belgium, and South Korea) have mixed councils that are somehow related to journalists’ unions and deal more with labour-related issues than editorial issues. Among national contexts that have newsroom councils, the cases of Portugal (Fidalgo, 2021) and Italy (Padovani et al., 2021) stand out, as Portuguese and Italian councils are based on a legal rule for all the news media employing at least five (in the Portuguese case) or ten (in the Italian case) journalists. This representative structure of journalists is considered so important in the case of Portugal that their existence is inscribed in the highest law of the country – the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic. Newsroom councils also exist in Austria, the Netherlands, and South Korea, for instance, while in other countries, the presence of a council varies much according to the news medium in question. Another instrument that establishes and regulates democracy in the newsrooms of some countries (e.g., Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands) is the editorial statute, thus giving some formal framework to the demand for journalists’ participation in editorial decisions and daily life in the newsroom.

The fact that various news media do not have formal instruments for democratic participation in the newsroom (such as a council) does not mean that journalists are absent from editorial discussions and decision-making processes affecting the newsroom. Several country reports in the 2021 MDM research project refer to the importance of the daily editorial meetings, such as the Canadian report highlighting that at these meetings, “journalists, editors, and newsroom leaders collaboratively discuss their coverage of issues and events. [...] Most journalists interviewed for this study talked about the synergy and collective decision-making that happens at these meetings” (Taylor & DeCillia, 2021: 55). Something similar is reported from Germany:

All interview partners agreed that decisions on subjects and framing of covered issues are debated in the daily editorial meeting, in which all journalists have an equal say. However, it is often the managing editor who makes the final decision. (Horz-Ishak & Thomass, 2021: 207)

In general, some degree of informal participation and freedom to make decisions is granted to journalists. Examples come from Finland, where participation is “ensured more effectively through journalistic culture and professional norms, rather than written guidelines” (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021: 162); Belgium, where “journalists report no signs of a lack of formal democracy in newsrooms [and where] editors(-in-chief) tend to be readily available to discuss and (re)negotiate the portrayal and framing of (political) issues in news articles” (Hendrickx et al., 2021: 16); Denmark, where there is “a strong, but informal democratic culture in newsrooms that grants individual journalists veto rights, flat hierarchies, and participation in decision-making processes” (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2021: 154); Greece, where “guidelines and rules [for democratic participation] exist at an informal level” (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021: 188); Sweden, where “daily news selection and news value processes are transparent, and the framing of political issues is openly discussed in the newsrooms” (Nord & von Krogh, 2021: 361); and Switzerland, where there is “an informal democratic practice, but no formal bottom-up democracy [in the newsrooms]” (Bonfadelli et al., 2021: 399).

Contrary to these regular interactions in the newsroom, there are signs of increasing difficulties in debating and reflecting upon things, such as high-speed procedures and requirements of immediacy exacerbated by the online environment. An interviewee from a Portuguese news medium commented that “[newsroom] meetings are reduced to a minimum and time to discuss or reflect on what is being done has almost disappeared” (Fidalgo, 2021: 312).

Summarising, some degree of journalists’ democratic participation exists in many newsrooms covered by the 2021 MDM research project, mostly at an informal level and on an individual basis. Many journalists interviewed expressed that they usually feel free to do their work autonomously, choosing which news topics to cover and the angles with which to frame them. Structures

(and norms) that ensure representation of journalists and allow journalists to participate in decision-making processes on a collective basis are rather absent. Democracy in the newsroom thus depends more on the good will of those who run editorial teams than on a permanent, structured commitment to have all journalists involved in the editorial project. The truth is that “when effective rules exist to guarantee internal democratic practices, democratic freedom is more likely to be safeguarded, and democracy promoted”, as is stated in the Italian report (Padovani et al., 2021: 329).

Cross-country trends of practising newsroom democracy

Across all 18 participating countries, scores for the newsroom democracy indicator F4 were modest. Only the Netherlands received the highest possible score, mainly because of the presence of editorial statutes in practically all leading news media. Nonetheless, the Netherlands too suffered from a lack of provisions for ensuring equal representation of men and women (Vandenberghe & d’Haenens, 2021). All other countries received modest scores. In eight countries, newsroom democracy scored 1 point (in a 0–3 scale). In these countries, leading news media are vivid examples of the “gap between what they preach and what they practice” (see Christians et al., 2009: 92).

A common pattern, being fulfilled in most countries, is that one of the core requirements of newsroom democracy – that either formal or informal democratic deliberation rules in news processing are in place, or participatory statutes allow for participation of journalists in decision-making. Fully democratic elections for selecting editors-in-chief are rare and found only in self-governed media organisations, such as *Der Spiegel* in Germany, *The Guardian* in the United Kingdom, and *Efimerida ton Sintakton* in Greece. In all other news organisations, at the most, journalists are granted veto-right against top-down appointments (e.g., in selected news media in Austria and Germany).

As pointed out above, public service media organisations generally score higher than private commercial media for this indicator. Legal mandates often require public service media to implement newsroom councils, and in some countries (e.g., Austria and Italy), these councils endorse member nominations to the governing boards where, again, top-down decisions are taken on leading positions in the newsrooms.

Conclusions

The concept of newsroom democracy is neglected in the literature and in public debate. However, the 2021 MDM country reports show that in some countries,

internal news processing allows for ample participation by all newsroom members, regardless of status, age, gender, or experience. Although the editor-in-chief has the final say, debate cultures are well developed.

In contrast, apart from notable exceptions, leading news media are hierarchically organised, and newsroom members have little input in decision-making. Exceptions are in place at public service media organisations which, as a rule, include journalists on the deciding board, as well as a few self-governed news media and even fewer news media owned by the journalists themselves.

Not much representation occurs within news organisations, thus reinforcing the newsroom democracy paradox. While the profession is well trained to defend their rights and position against outside forces in editorial matters, less emphasis seems to be on representation and democratic governance within newsrooms.

In digital newsrooms, where web metrics are influencing the traditional gatekeeping role of the media (Vu, 2014), a new set of editorial roles related to transferring the voice of the audience to the news organisation have emerged (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc Edson, 2018). In light of these changes, the paradigm of strict hierarchical order or absolute professional practices needs to be revised, since decision-making processes may vary among media organisations, depending on a number of factors.

These findings demonstrate that there is room for improvement both in editorial practices and staff recruitment procedures in leading news media around the world. As a consequence, the leading news media miss out on the potential legitimacy that could be generated from routines and processes ensuring internal democracy.

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