

## **Media and media users, and their challenges**

### **An overview**

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Concern over the rise of radical and anti-systemic political forces in Europe calls for media to play an active role in promoting democratic solutions, disseminating democratic values, propagating fact-based information, countering xenophobia, racism, misogynist attitudes, homophobia, etc. In other words, media is expected to reassert its role as the fourth pillar of democracy. Can media meet these expectations?

It depends on the country and the solidity of its democratic institutions. In the United States, for example, the election of Donald Trump has prompted a sharp rise of subscriptions for reputable legacy media, like *The New York Times*. Even millennials have joined the trend. However, does the desire for quality news translate into changing political attitudes of the whole society? While the NYT, *Washington Post*, *New Yorker* and *The Atlantic* increase their subscribers' base, the ultra-conservative company Sinclair has incremented investment into buying local radio and TV stations across the country and spreading its ideology. Sinclair may soon monopolize the market of local broadcasters. Its ultra conservative editorial policy stands to the right of the pro-Trump TV channel Fox News. As media developments currently stand, both sides of the political spectrum, democratic and conservative/populist are reinforcing their media trenches.

In Europe, so far, neither tendency has been registered: legacy outlets have not experienced the rise in subscriptions and there is no tradition, for the moment, of the influential local radio and TV channels.

Can media counterbalance what political forces have already achieved on the ground? Media alone cannot turn the political tide. However, as an ally in the struggle for democratic values, together with other political and social forces, media is a fundamental tool.

Although it is common to speak of media in general, for both positive and negative reasons, media situation and media role varies a great deal even within the European Union. Media outlets, legacy and digital, function in specific sociopolitical and economic settings. They reflect the environment where they operate. While broadly speaking, media and journalists face similar challenges in most countries, their local circumstances vary a great deal.

### **Media Challenges: economic, technological, professional and political**

#### Media ownership

In the European Union, each country has a different media landscape and comparisons can be deceitful. The same concepts can have different meanings. For example, most privately

owned media in old democracies tend to function in the name of public interest, at least on paper; in Central, Eastern and South East Europe, tycoons own media in order to exert direct political or economic pressure. The right of the public to know does not play a crucial role.

### Economic challenges

Internet and social media have created huge economic challenges for media outlets in their quest for economic survival. Until now, very few have found a business model that guarantees a profitable existence.

The demise of legacy media and the decline of advertising revenue influenced business models: journalists were dismissed, data specialists, developers and engineers employed. Content personalisation and fragmentation, combined with the need to engage the users as long as possible in order to attract advertisement, contributed to a new form of journalism, based on catchy titles, shorter texts, lighter content, simpler explanations and multimedia production. Journalists feel the consequences: the increased pressure to constantly produce leaves little room for fact-checking or investigative journalism. Even reputable media make more and more mistakes.

### Facebook and Google select the Rules

According to the 2017 Reuters Digital News Report, based on a survey of 70,000 people in 36 countries, a growing number of digital users gets its news from social media and has problems identifying the original source. Among the younger users, this percentage is well above 50%. This pattern creates a big challenge for media: Google and Facebook dictate what people read through their choice of algorithms and these two companies capture a large chunk of the advertisement revenues. According to *The Guardian*: "Google and Facebook attracted one-fifth of global advertising spending last year (2016), nearly double the figure of five years ago."

Media companies have multiple challenges: find a business model and guarantee quality while constantly providing new products; investing in new platforms and trying to build trust. While serious media outlets do believe in quality and trust, some digital media opted for volume as the main source of income. They aggregate news from different providers, recycle credible and false news, package and repackage whatever they find and try to attract as many user as possible. Many readers cannot distinguish these news products from quality news; sponsored articles from journalism.

"Journalism is a small subsidiary activity of the main business of social platforms, but one of central interest to citizens. The internet and the social Web enable journalists to do powerful work, while at the same time helping to make the business of publishing journalism an uneconomic venture. Social media and platform companies took over what publishers couldn't have built even if they wanted to. Now the news is filtered through algorithms and platforms which are opaque and unpredictable," writes Emily Bell from the Columbia School of Journalism.

According to recent news, Facebook may limit the feed of news providers and give priority to friends' recommendations. Currently, this approach is tested in several countries. In Slovakia, media outlets noted a 60 decline in the number of readers, according to *The Guardian*.

### Subsidies and public broadcasters

In some EU countries media subsidies play an important role in promoting quality journalism; in others public subsidies are missing, but political and economic control is exerted through government advertisement. Studies show that even public broadcasters in Europe, often promoted by reputable press freedom organisations as essential components of quality journalism landscapes, vary significantly from country to country: their financial base (through mandatory fees or direct government budget allocation) varies as well as their editorial independence. Can one compare the BBC with the Hungarian MTV or German ARD with the Spanish RTVE? Currently, the Spanish public broadcaster is demonstrating an inadmissible partiality in reporting on the crisis in Catalonia. In Austria, the coming months will show if democratic institutions are strong enough to resist the far right influence and meddling in the work of the public broadcaster ORF. All residents in Austria pay radio and television licence fees.

### Journalists' Challenges

Local conditions are not uniform. While full time journalists in some EU countries have professional contracts and salaries, in other countries, like Spain, Italy or South East Europe, freelance journalists receive meager payments, endure constant pressure to produce in order to survive, and suffer political, economic, religious or mafia threats. In these conditions, are journalists able to provide quality journalism and fact-check information?

Both fully employed and free-lance journalists are expected to write news for different platforms, report, analyse, comment and be credible in a very fast paced environment. They have to be technologically savvy, compete with citizen journalists, while checking the veracity of information, sometimes face hostile readers, resist online harassment (especially women), counter online misinformation or lies produced by anonymous citizens and politicians. Are these the ideal conditions for promoting democratic values? Can journalists counter their politicians when working under constant pressure? Do audiences want to hear impartial reporting in times of polarization?

Angelina Kariakina, editor in chief of Hromadske TV, a Ukrainian internet TV founded by a group of journalists who aspired to provide an impartial coverage of the Ukrainian Russian conflict wrote in the monthly journal *Transit*: "our audience was not looking for impartiality as we thought it was." The audience wanted to hear what they believed it.

Do journalists form part of the elite that fails to understand the people on the ground, as some politicians and citizens say?

In some Western European mainstream media, it is apparently the case. Suffice to look at the educational background of the top BBC journalists: most of them graduated from Oxford or Cambridge. According to the 2012 Sutton Trust Survey of the print media in the UK, 54% of senior print journalists attended Oxford or Cambridge and 51% went to private school.

In 2016, Klaus Brinkbäumer, editor in chief the German weekly *Der Spiegel* explained during a debate in Vienna that the Hamburg-based publication did not have enough journalists in East Germany who were fully familiar with the local situation. Therefore, the publication did not initially grasp the importance and the impact of the rise of the far right movement Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) or understand citizens' concerns. The result was that citizens in the East developed outright animosity towards the mainstream media. In Dresden, where Pegida movement was particularly strong, some journalists covering the Pegida demonstrations had to use body guards. In France, mainstream media journalists are hardly a sociological reflection of the wider society. Do quality media outlets in Eastern Europe know about their country's countryside and small cities?

The fragmentation of the media market and the ongoing search for news personalisation, in order to engage as long as possible, is not conducive to democratic dialogue: "We now get our news in real time, on-demand, tailored to our interests, across multiple platforms, without knowing just how much is actually personalized. It was technology companies like Google and Facebook, not traditional newsrooms that made it so. But news organizations are increasingly betting that offering personalized content can help them draw audiences to their sites—and keep them coming back," writes Adrienne Lafrance from Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard University. She further underlines: "As data-tracking becomes more sophisticated, voice recognition software advances, and tech companies leverage personalization for profit, personalization will only become more acute. This is potentially alarming given the growth of websites — news-oriented and otherwise —inhabiting the political extremes, which on Facebook are easy to mistake for valid sources of news. When users can customize their news, and customize to these political and social extremes, civic discourse can suffer."

In other words, news fragmentation does not contribute to the establishment of dialogue across different ideological and societal divides. The use of social media and Twitter by politicians, aimed at bypassing journalists, creates additional challenges for media and journalists. Citizens feel that politicians talk to them and news/messages are received without any filter. The US President Trump openly threatens media outlets. While the US democratic institutions, including powerful media outlets, may be capable, for the time being, to withstand this pressure and hostility, media in some parts of Europe may not have the same resilience. Media are more fragile in Central Europe and South East Europe: they can be easily pressured by politicians, businesspeople, religious leaders and mafia bosses. Different independent media may exist, but they usually fail to reach the audience that follows populist leaders.

US and Russian Factor

The consequence of Donald Trump's relationship with media extend far beyond the US borders. While citizens in Western Europe, and some politicians, observe political events across the ocean in disbelief, many politicians and media owners in the European East feel empowered: their feeble democratic views are indirectly legitimised by what is done and said in the US. This aspect of the US influence on public opinion in some European countries is underestimated, while the influence of the Russian propaganda is overstated. US media, like Fox News, is often quoted in South East Europe as a credible source of information. Journalists in the European East use media outlets in English as the main source of international news. Anglo-Saxon news sources are usually not questioned.

While US media influence is underreported, the Russian influence is overstated: pro-Russian views are not always created in Moscow. As Milena Iakimova and Dimitar Vatsov wrote in their article *Co-opting Discontent: Russian Propaganda in the Bulgarian Media*, a lot of information is home grown. They point out: "... propaganda (as well as 'post-truth') is not simply lying: it is a regime of partial truth, half-truth, truth out of context, which is packaged, mobilized and used to play on existing stereotypes and resentments."

Considering that state-sponsored Russian media like RT and Sputnik have uneven success- in Finland they even closed their operations- one can observe that Russian media influence has impact when: a) democratic convictions are weak; b) social cleavages are wide, and c) local media are too poor to produce their own material.

Is there a way out of this situation? Yes, finding a business model that would enable media to function profitably while producing quality material for the audience. As Edwin Plenel, Mediapart, France, wrote: "Reader must be convinced that information has a price as well as its independence." Apparently, only the high end media outlets, like *Financial Times*, *Der Spiegel* or Mediapart, have managed to create a good subscription base. Neither FT nor *Le Monde* target mass readership. Strengthening the public broadcasters through the provision of independent budget and professional reporting could be a solution for the majority of citizens.

Numerous studies show that the number of people ready to pay for information is rather low, although it is higher in Scandinavia, where media enjoy high level of credibility, and lower in Central Europe where credibility index is low.

People pay for Internet and cell phone providers and often do not understand why they need to pay anything extra for information. Most users do not know how media function nowadays, and many have neither time nor interest to know. It suffices to find free information on the Internet or free papers in the street.

### Media Education

Finland is apparently one of the few countries where Moscow - sponsored *Sputink* did not prosper. Fins claim it is due to their successful media literacy preparation and citizens' trust in the institutions. Media literacy in schools and among adults may be the starting point in the struggle for educating people in the use of media. Why is this education necessary? The

type of skills that are necessary to have while consuming different media products are new and unique. Decades ago, when one TV channel transmitted the evening news and one daily satisfied the information needs, there was no need for those skills.

Today, one has to learn the skills of checking and identifying credible information sources and understanding what is what: news, information, advertorials, native advertisement, opinion and analysis. All of these categories are blurred and few media identify them. On computer screen they all appear at the same time.

Quality journalism still exists but one has to learn to recognise it. Even educated readers need additional skills in order to understand how it works.

How can one influence the change of attitudes through media in a particular country?

First of all, by knowing the country and its citizens, identifying the source of discontent, and knowing how people consume their information. Knowing the target audience is the first step in the struggle for democracy.

Media can be an ideal ally in spreading democratic values but only in alliance with other social factors. Journalists cannot fight for democracy on their own, but they are fundamental allies.

\*All views expressed in this article are personal.