

# WITTEN LAB MAGAZINE #05

MEDIA  
&  
DEMOCRACY

Witten/Herdecke  
University

MEDIA LIFE & INFORMATION WAR | MEDIA CRISIS MEETS DEMOCRACY CRISIS | TRUST IN NEWS AT ALL-TIME LOW | INTEREST IN NEWS STILL FALLING | NEWS DESERTS ON THE RISE | MEDIA CAPTURE IN EUROPE | ALMIGHTY IMAGES | VOTING IN BIASED MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS | JOURNALISM VS. ACTIVISM | AFFECT CONTROL AND AI | STAND UP FOR JOURNALISM AS A PUBLIC GOOD | ART AS 5TH ESTATE | INDEPENDENT MEDIA CREATORS AGAINST AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES | UNDERSTANDING MEDIA | MEDIA AS BRIDGES

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**“Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media.”**

# What do you know about *MEDIA*?

Every day, we are flooded with a constant stream of news, information, and opinions by the media. The media we receive every day feels familiar, as part of our lives, seamlessly woven into our daily routines, often going unquestioned as it shapes how we understand and navigate the world. But how much do you really know about the media that so profoundly influence your worldview and your understanding of the world?

With ten questions you can find out what you know about the developments in the world of media...



\*You can find the answers to this quiz at page 160.

**01** What percentage of all the news you read every day comes from the three major international press agencies: Associated Press (AP), Reuters and Agence France-Presse (AFP)?

**02** How many of the 26 regional newspapers in Poland are owned by the 49.9% state-owned oil company ORLEN?

**03** By what percentage has the news media industry's revenue from advertising declined in the last 20 years due to the rise of social media platforms?

**04** What has been the percentage reduction in staff at U.S. newspapers over the past 15 years?

**05** How many more SLAPP cases (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) did the Coalition against SLAPPS in Europe (CASE) register in 2023 compared to 2022?

SLAPPs are legal actions typically initiated by powerful entities, such as businesses or politicians, to intimidate and silence critics, especially journalists and media outlets, by burdening them with costly and lengthy legal defenses until they abandon their criticism or opposition.

**06** How many newsroom staffers are already using generative AI for journalistic content production despite ethical concerns?

**07** What percentage of people in Germany believe they can trust most of the news most of the time?

**08** What percentage of people still go to news media websites for news?

**09** How many people think that having stories selected by an algorithm based on their previous consumption is a good way to receive news?

**10** In the U.S., who garners more attention—mainstream news brands or alternative voices from political influencers or politicians?

# Editorial

**“Media have never been as pervasive as they are today. They flood the planet daily with billions of pieces of information, exerting a profound influence on the consciousness and thinking of billions of people. Because of this influence, a critical understanding and appreciation of the media is more important today than ever before. The reason is that the information we receive from the media is often shaped by factors other than the need to inform.”**

Luis V. Teodoro

## Nothing is simple when it comes to media...

The media landscape has undergone dramatic shifts over the last two decades. In our complex, fragile, and crisis-prone societies, the diversity, freedom, and independence of the media are increasingly under threat. The rise of social media and artificial intelligence has introduced new power dynamics, influencing not just the media itself but also the broader society in significant ways. At such a critical juncture, is it not more important than ever to understand the structures, influencing factors, and effects of the media that shape your worldview? And to imagine different ideals of tomorrow by identifying what kind of media we truly desire, taking ownership of our role in ensuring they offer the integrity and transparency needed for the democracies we wish to protect.

### MEDIA CRISIS MEETS DEMOCRACY CRISIS

The media have always been fiercely contested, but perhaps never as fiercely as they are today. Those striving to gain or maintain power in democratic systems inevitably seek to shape or dominate public opinion, and wage their battles in the media. Traditional news media and independent journalism have been severely weakened for these fights—their business models, newsrooms, correspondent networks, and resilience to influence eroded, along with public trust. Unfortunately, there is little good news for us to offer you on this issue. Media disruption will continue as changes in our media ecosystems are fundamental. The battle for your

opinion is now being fought mainly on new digital platforms, which operate under opaque and largely invisible rules. Meanwhile two thirds (63%) of young people aged 18 to 34 globally no longer trust most media most of the time.<sup>1</sup> Even worse, more and more people are losing interest in or avoid political news altogether. With the media faltering in their role as pillars of democracy, attempts to address this—whether through regulation, censorship, or other controls—are fraught with danger, as all such measures come with vested interests. And all this in a year when half the world's population faces crucial elections, where in many countries, the essence of democracy is at stake.

### DO YOU KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT THE MEDIA?

“Everything we know about the world, indeed about the society in which we live, we know through the mass media.” Reflecting on this statement by Niklas Luhmann, you must ask yourself: Do you know enough about the media? You are not present at the events that affect your life—you learn about them through the media. But how can you trust that they are acting in your best interests?

The truth is, most people know far too little about the media. Be honest—did you know the answers to the quiz at the beginning of this issue?

“We do not live with the media; we live in the media. Media has become to us what water is to fish,” as media scholar Mark Deuze says. Media surrounds you, usually imperceptibly, as you navigate through it—informing yourself, seeking entertainment, communicating with others—often without considering the media itself. Until the water becomes murky, polluted, or toxic. Then you are in serious trouble, especially if you cannot see the causes and effects of that pollution anymore.

### UNDERSTANDING MEDIA

What can you do? The key to addressing these critical issues lies in education: You must equip yourself with the skills to critically engage with the media ecosystem. What is happening in the media? What is changing? What is important? And what can you do to better understand the structures, connections, and vulnerabilities of the media systems in which we all live?

The UNDERSTANDING MEDIA alumni initiative—presenting itself at the end of this issue—has brought together a multitude of strong voices from the media world at the Witten Lab Studium fundamentale of Witten/Herdecke University—a unique learning space that allows young students of all disciplines to gain insights beyond their fields of study and reflect on urgent questions of our times. And which will open up its educational programme to strengthen a broader understanding of media and democratic capabilities to more and more students at European universities.

These are voices of people who, through their work, expertise and experience, constitute the vanguard of our European media reality: representatives of the majority of journalists in the EU, prominent figures in EU media politics, media scholars and experts in media innovation, representatives of NGOs advocating for press freedom and media diversity, and renowned journalists. This choir of voices is joined by artists who work at the interface of media and democracy, making things visible and tangible in their own unique ways, as well as by members of our university. They are united by the urgent need to provide young people with deep insights into the reality of our media ecosystem and to engage in discussions about it.

Recognising fake news is just not enough to preserve democracy. You need to delve deeper and explore the hidden structures of our media systems behind your screens.

### LEARN TO THINK LIKE A JOURNALIST!

If you want to learn to think critically about media systems, start by asking the same probing questions that good journalists would: Who owns the media? Who influences them? Who regulates them? What are the conditions journalists face? And what can we do to protect press freedom, support independent journalism, hold platforms to account and prevent governments and special interest groups from exerting hidden influence? Only by collectively embracing this approach can we ensure access to thorough, impartial, and diverse information about the world around us. This is a difficult task, no question about it. But no one ever said it would be easy to preserve democracy.

## Understanding media starts with you—they will not explain themselves.

We would like to thank all contributors, designers, and sponsors for making this issue possible, and we hope it provides you with insightful perspectives on the evolving world of media.

Johannes Wiek, Head of Editorial  
Sebastian Benkhofer, Publisher  
Max von Abendroth, Co-editor

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**1 For more insights, read “The Changing News Habits and Attitudes of Younger Audiences” by Kirsten Eddy, based on data from the Oxford Reuters Institutes’ Digital News Report 2022.**

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### AI GENERATED TEXT

In keeping with the evolving media landscape, some of the texts in this issue have been written by generative AI. Look out for this label, which makes transparent what is becoming increasingly difficult—if not soon impossible—to differentiate.



### AI-GENERATED IMAGES

Many of the images in this issue have been created using AI. In line with our commitment to transparency, we believe in pointing out non-human-generated content, so all AI-created images have been clearly marked with this label.



### UNDERSTANDING MEDIA LECTURER

Authors who have served as guest lecturers in our UNDERSTANDING MEDIA seminars, part of the Studium fundamentale, and engaged in discussions with students are identified by this symbol. We are honoured to welcome such distinguished figures from the media world to our university.

**“You live in media. Who you are, what you do, and what all of this means to you does not exist outside of media. Media are to us as water is to fish. This does not mean life is determined by media—it just suggests that whether we like it or not, every aspect of our lives takes place in media.”**

Quote by Mark Deuze  
Media Life, Polity Press 2012

In today's internet-driven world, there are countless ways to stay updated—from quick social media scrolls to leisurely newspaper reads over breakfast. We asked students at our university about their media habits and what makes them trust certain sources. What are their daily go-to's for news and information? And how do they decide which media to rely on? Join us as we explore their responses and gain insights into how today's young adults interact with media. In the next article, we explore the rapid and sweeping changes shaping the media landscape that these young people navigate daily in their...

# MEDIA LIVES

Interviews by Linda von Velsen, student editor Witten Lab Magazine

## LENA JAKOBI, 23, Management

With podcasts, language is an important factor in distinguishing trustworthy from untrustworthy sources. If the tone is too slangy or casual, I become suspicious and take a closer look at who is behind it. However, a look at the description usually reveals a lot, too: Does it have technical terms in it? Does the podcaster state their sources? If the podcast leaves me with a positive first impression in this regard, I am also more willing to trust the knowledge that is being disseminated. There are a few ways to protect yourself from false information. I don't think I've ever really fallen for fake news. I think what happens more often is that in the flood of information available to you, you no longer get certain points completely right and then perhaps have to do more research. For example, I listen to a few podcasts that are not related to my field of studies, so this has definitely happened to me before. But I also generally like to read through one or two more articles when I come across a topic that interests me through podcasts or Instagram. I also like to use Instagram for short updates, although I realize that the content displayed in the feed is somewhat filtered. Sometimes I don't get everything, or only with some delay, unless I go directly to the accounts.



## VIKTORIA HOFFMANN, 21, Psychology

A few years ago, I took a complete break from Instagram, only returning to it a year or two ago. During my hiatus, I realized the emotional toll social media can take, so I meticulously curated the pages I follow. Now, I use Instagram sparingly for information, preferring sources like the Tagesschau app or podcasts. My sister also has various magazine subscriptions, which I also like to check out from time to time. I think these formats influence my opinion even more than Instagram—I particularly like podcasts where informed people are given the space to share their knowledge and views.

When I do scroll through Instagram and am confronted with news, pictures and videos, I often realize that it brings me down—not to mention the comment section, which can be rife with extreme and even threatening remarks—especially because a healthy exchange of opinions can be really enriching and important.

Algorithms tend to encourage people to stay in their political bubble. I think it would be great to have a platform that allows people to respectfully exchange views with others outside their usual environment.



## LARA WERDEHAUSEN, 22, Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE)

As part of my morning routine, I like to put on the “Apokalypse & Filterkaffee” news podcast to catch up on recent events. While I am waiting for new episodes to come out, however, I listen to something else, check Instagram, or read selected articles on the Tagesschau website. What makes podcasts particularly convenient for me is that I can listen to them while I am driving, working out, or cooking, for example. I think that if this format did not exist, my news consumption would be considerably lower. However, I feel like a lot of news appear on my radar thanks to my circle of friends—especially since I am politically active in my free time. When it comes to news in general, transparency is also super important to me. I think that media professionals who produce podcasts or commentaries should make it clear that they are throwing in their own opinion. When I listen to “Apokalypse & Filterkaffee”, for example, I want to find out where topics that I am only vaguely familiar with fit in, whereas I expect neutral reporting from the Tagesschau. With podcasts, it can be quite refreshing to consciously listen to the opinions of people who have a completely different view on topics in order to develop a more comprehensive picture for oneself. I would consider cutting down on my podcast hours a little if publishers were to provide the option to buy individual online articles instead of having to take out a full subscription. It really bugs me that I cannot do that.



## RAMONA SZYMCZAK, 31, Human Medicine

I almost feel uncomfortable admitting this, but Instagram is one of my sources of information. I follow various news portals, and my feed summarizes news updates, thanks to the algorithm. I also enjoy listening to podcasts from time to time or watching the news. When I want to delve deeper into a subject, though, I prefer reading detailed articles or conducting direct research online.

Yet, what sometimes really annoys me about Instagram reporting is that the slides or tiles are filled with headlines that are often taken out of context. I find that misleading. Clickbait headlines lure you in, only for the full story to unfold several slides later, sometimes altering your initial perception completely. I wouldn't accuse the publishers of spreading falsehoods outright, but I do believe there should be a more nuanced approach. Relying solely on these brief headlines poses significant risks. While, from the publisher's point of view, I can understand the need for relevant headlines to a certain extent—it's an easy way to gain attention, which is unfortunately how social media works nowadays—I feel like there should be more education about this in schools. Many students today have early access to mobile phones and social media.

## LUKAS KNOBLOCH, 27, Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE)

Whenever I find the time, I consume media. As my classes and leisure activities keep me rather busy, developing a routine of catching up on information at the same time every day would be challenging. I usually get my information from YouTube, mostly through channels such as Arte or the Tagesschau. At the moment, I am particularly interested in the war in Ukraine; I follow a couple of military bloggers: a reservist from Estonia and a Ukrainian. I am aware that war situations are often very opaque and complex, and it can be difficult to recognize the true intention of a person who disseminates information via their own channel, which is why I decided to take a closer look at the two YouTubers to see what they are currently doing, what they have done in the past, and whether there are any specific collaborations. If there are reports about fairly recent or unsourced events, I remain skeptical at first and treat the coverage as more of a rumor than real news. I think that due to the use of artificial intelligence, we will have to deal with more media opacity in the future. Deepfakes, for example, will make it increasingly difficult for us humans to discern whether a piece of news is true or not. Any use of artificial intelligence should have to be mentioned, but unfortunately, any such rule would be difficult to implement and enforce.



## PAAVO SCHIMRIGK 29, Philosophy, Culture and Cultural Practice

Every morning, I start my day by watching the previous day's news program. For me, these 15 minutes are the minimum amount of time I want to spend on staying informed. But sometimes, I like to delve deeper into topics, read scientific papers or do some online research. Major newspapers and public broadcasters are my primary sources, and while I generally trust them, I remain critical of their wording at times. There is also some radio content I find exciting, especially when journalism is presented in a less obdurate manner. Creative approaches to factual, dry topics can be highly effective, especially for younger audiences. Experimenting with new formats can be rewarding, and taking the risk that it might not be as well-received as one had hoped might pay off. Radio, for example, does a great job by keeping explanations relatable, youthful, and well-referenced. I appreciate their openness to criticism and view this as a strength, fostering a dialogue within their reporting.



## JENNY ROSARIUS, 25, Dentistry

I often have a lot going on during term time: Besides working and studying, I also want to maintain my social life. In these stressful phases, I find less time to stay informed compared to the semester break. Engaging with major political issues can be particularly taxing, especially when it involves several hours of research. In-depth reports, often featuring personal stories, can be emotionally overwhelming, particularly when they cover matters beyond my control. Nevertheless, I make a conscious effort to stay informed. I don't think avoiding the debate completely is a viable solution. Ultimately, I think it's about finding a balance between your own desire to know about what's going on in the world and your own well-being. However, when it comes to complex topics, I often feel the need to delve even deeper into the subject. It's not enough for me to read a single article or a brief Instagram post to really form a well-rounded opinion. I want to inform myself as comprehensively as possible, so that I can develop an appropriate attitude or reflect on my political views if necessary.

Linda von Velsen, 24, is studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Witten/Herdecke University.

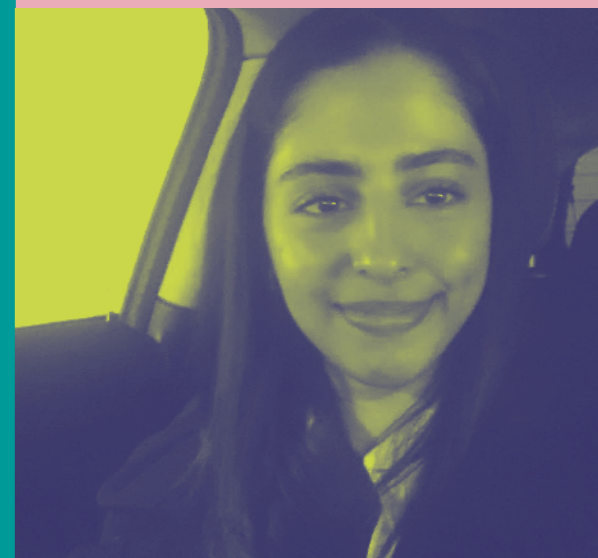


## SABREN AL ADELI 22, Human Medicine

In today's digital age, the avenues for publishing information, especially through social media, are endless. We can publish a vast amount of information incredibly quickly; that calls for a healthy dose of skepticism. It can sometimes be difficult to discern the intentions behind a publication or to identify who is promoting it. When reading reports, I sometimes ask myself whether the reporter has a personal connection to the topic. This doesn't necessarily have to be bad or good—but it does help me better understand the context of the report.

I also appreciate transparency in journalism. I like it when journalists show a certain vulnerability, when they open up about the situations in which they have reached their limits, the moments that made them reflect or be self-critical. Talking to people who have been personally affected by something or dealing with relevant reports helps me to develop a different perspective, although I have to admit that dealing with all this information can sometimes take up quite a lot of time.

I think this is also a problem when it comes to combating fake news: Consumers have so much information available to them these days that it can be difficult to fulfil one's personal responsibility of verifying facts and assessments—it can feel annoying and exhausting.





# A WILD RIDE THROUGH OUR CHANGING DIGITAL MEDIA ECO-SYSTEM

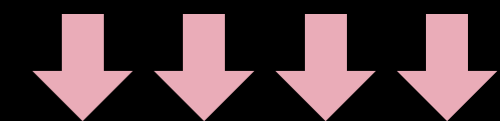
THE NEWS INDUSTRY IS UNDER PRESSURE AS NEVER BEFORE.

This summarizes the latest insights from the world's largest ongoing news survey. **ATTENTION LOSS, NEWS AVOIDANCE, NEWS FATIGUE... AND TRUST IN NEWS AT AN ALL-TIME LOW.**

**Globally, 60% of the public does not trust most news most of the time,** despite living through an era of polycrises, wars, global power shifts, and pivotal elections for nearly half of the world population.

**HAVE A LOOK AT SOME DRASTIC CHANGES IN GLOBAL MEDIA ECOSYSTEMS—AND ASK YOURSELF WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH NEWS FOR YOU...**

All information here is taken from the **DIGITAL NEWS REPORT** by Oxford University's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. The annual report is regarded as the most important source of information on media consumption and is based on a survey of over 95,000 online news users in 47 markets across 6 continents, representing about half of humanity.



## PEOPLE ARE LOSING INTEREST IN NEWS

Online consumers are accessing news less frequently and showing less interest. Despite the political and economic threats many people face, fewer than half now say they have a strong interest in news, down from 63% in 2017.

Traditional media, like TV and print, continue to decline, and online/social news consumption is not bridging the gap.

### INTEREST IN NEWS

2017: 63%



2024: 48%

(-15% across all countries)

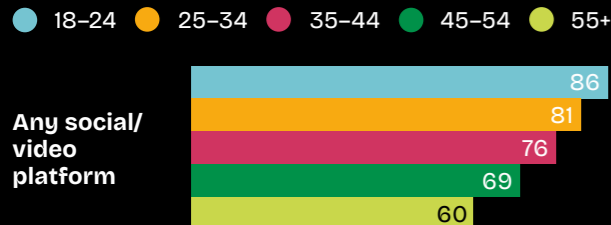
### ELECTIONS HAVE INCREASED INTEREST IN THE NEWS IN A FEW COUNTRIES,

including the United States (+3%), but the overall trend remains a downward one. Interest in news in Argentina, for example, has fallen from 77% in 2017 to 45% today. In the United Kingdom, interest in media coverage has almost halved since 2015. In both countries, the change is mirrored by a similar decline in interest in politics. In Germany, interest in news has fallen by almost 20%, down to 55%.

ARE YOU STILL INTERESTED IN NEWS?

# MOST PEOPLE ARE SEEING NEWS AS VIDEOS ONLINE ▶

Proportion that say each is their main online news video platform by age group—all markets



# 72%

of all people say their main locus of news consumption is on social media or video platforms.

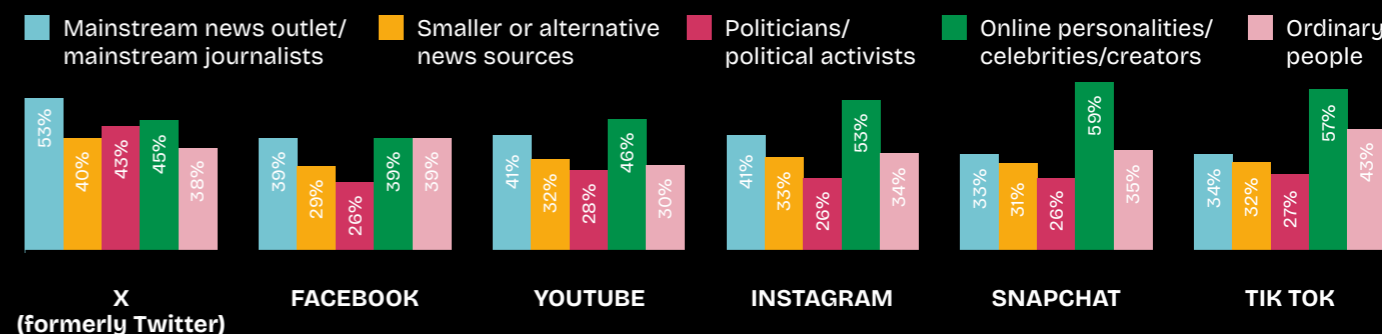
The analysis showed three core reasons for audiences to be attracted to video, shorts and reels.

- 1 SEEING IS BELIEVING**  
"You can trust it more."
- 2 CONVENIENCE**  
"Aligns with my interest."
- 3 DIVERSE PERSPECTIVE**  
"Variety of opinions. Not just mainstream media."

# Growing Influence of Influencers

Audiences pay more attention to partisan commentators, celebrities, social media personalities, and young news creators than journalists, especially on Youtube, Instagram and TikTok. But on social networks such as Facebook and X, traditional news brands and journalists still tend to play a prominent role.

Where do we pay most attention when it comes to news via platforms?



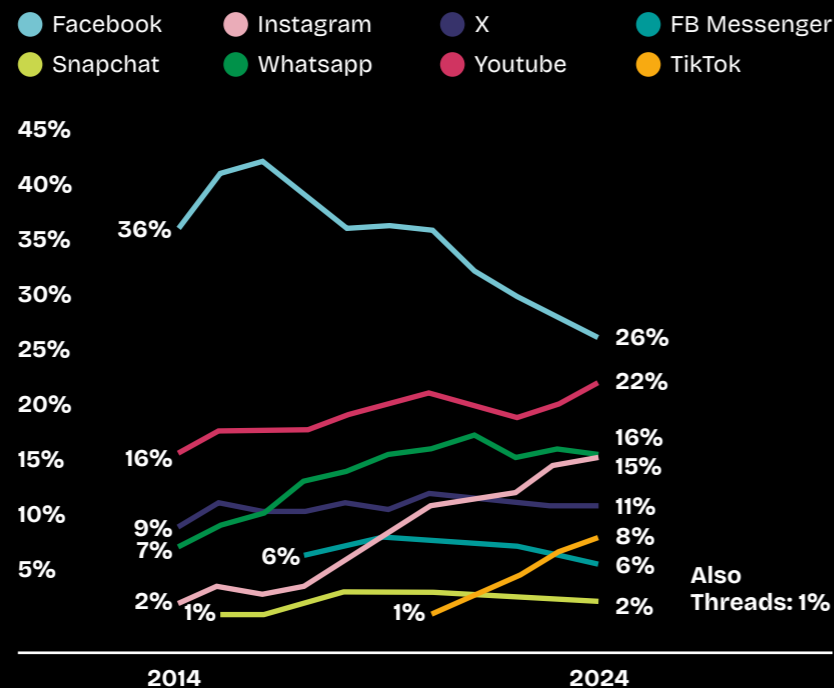
# NEWS CONSUMPTION IS FRAGMENTING MAINLY ACROSS SIX NETWORKS

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR NEWS?

FACEBOOK has changed its algorithm, de-prioritising news in favour of more engaging content. YOUTUBE is used for news by almost 31% across all markets, WHATSAPP by around a fifth (21%), while TIKTOK (13%) has overtaken X (10%) in usage for the first time.

## FURTHER DECLINE IN FACEBOOK, RISE OF VIDEO NETWORKS FOR NEWS

PROPORTION THAT SAY THEY ACCESS EACH NETWORK FOR NEWS WEEKLY—AVERAGE OF 12 SELECTED COUNTRIES



## RISING USE OF TikTok FOR NEWS

Among 18-24-year-olds,

# 23% USE TikTok FOR NEWS

— with a rapid increase in the last 5 years, but with significant variations between countries, from up to 30% in Thailand down to only 3% in Germany and 2% in Denmark.

# THE GOLDEN AGE OF PODCASTS?

News podcasts are attracting younger, well-educated audiences. Across 20 countries, just over a third (35%) access a podcast monthly, though...

# only 13%

listen to news-related content.

## PEOPLE ARE WARY OF AI IN NEWS- ROOMS

The news industry  
is poised for a wave  
of disruption from  
AI TECHNOLOGIES.

DO YOU  
TRUST AI IN  
NEWS?

PROPORTION SAYING THEY  
ARE UNCOMFORTABLE  
WITH NEWS BEING PRODUCED  
WITH THE HELP OF AI

**USA:**  
**52%**  
**EU:**  
**47%**

## Journalistic uses of artificial intelligence

News organisations have started to adopt AI for automating behind-the-scenes processes such as transcription, copy-editing, and layouting, substantially reducing costs, and also for personalising content with varying degrees of human oversight. Nordic publishers, including Schibsted, now include AI-generated “bullet points” at the top section of many of their stories to increase engagement. One German publisher uses an AI robot named Klara Indernach to write more than 5% of its published stories. Others have deployed tools such as Midjourney or OpenAI’s Dall-E for automating graphic illustrations. In Indonesia, South Korea, Slovakia, Taiwan, and Mexico, amongst others, experimental chatbots and avatars now present the news.

## MORE CONCERN ABOUT WHAT’S REAL

MISINFORMATION CONCERN IS UP IN MANY COUNTRIES.

**59%**

say they are  
concerned about  
what is real  
and what is fake  
on the internet  
when it comes to  
online news.

...with higher figures in countries like South Africa (81%) and the United States (72%)—both countries currently in a pre-election phase.

**81%** SOUTH AFRICA (+6)  
**72%** UNITED STATES (+8)

## FEARS AROUND AI AND MIS- INFORMATION

AI-generated images and videos are increasingly appearing across social platforms—with a rising number of AI-generated so-called “deep fakes”. Qualitative research suggests that while most people do not think they have personally come across these kinds of synthetic images or videos, some younger, heavy users of social media now think they see them regularly.

“Across the world, much of the public does not trust most news most of the time.”

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Quote by Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

Director of the Oxford University’s Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

→ In: “Public perspectives on trust in news” (June 2024)

# TRUST IN NEWS AT AN ALL-TIME LOW

## TRUST IN NEWS GLOBALLY HAS FALLEN TO ONLY

**40%** —with Finns having the highest trust (69%), while Greeks and Hungarians rank lowest (both 23%). In Germany, only 43% (down from 60% in 2015) feel they can trust the news most of the time.

### SUSPICION OF MEDIA OWNERS AND MANAGERS

Many people suspect that news coverage is influenced by media managers and owners with their own agendas. Most of the people surveyed in Brazil, India, the UK and the US as part of Reuters Institute's Trust in News Project place blame for problems in news coverage on the management and ownership level, with individual journalists often being perceived as doing the bidding of the higher-ups.



# PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO PAY FOR NEWS

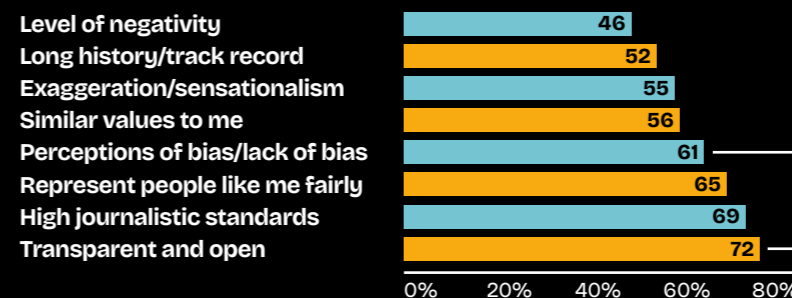
WHAT IS YOUR NEWS WORTH TO YOU?

## Who is paying for news?

Those who pay regularly for online news are mostly men with high incomes who say they are very or extremely interested in politics.

## What people think makes news trustworthy

PROPORTION THAT SAY EACH IS VERY OR SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT WHEN DECIDING WHAT NEWS OUTLETS TO TRUST—ALL MARKETS



# Only 17%

of people are willing to pay for online news, with higher subscription rates in Nordic Countries. Germany ranks slightly below the average (13%).

NORWAY	40%
USA	22%
UK	8%
FRANCE	11%
GERMANY	13%
SWEDEN	31%
DENMARK	17%
SPAIN	11%

## PERCENTAGE WHO THINK JOURNALISTS ARE FORCED TO COVER STORIES ACCORDING TO THE NEWS ORGANISATIONS' WISHES:

USA 59%    UK 54%    BRASIL 65%    INDIA 42%

DO YOU TRUST YOUR NEWS MEDIA?

DO YOU AVOID NEWS?

CONSISTENTLY ACROSS DEMOGRAPHICS, THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO AVOID NEWS IS INCREASING WORLDWIDE.

# 39%

(up from 29% in 2017) say they often or sometimes scroll past news, change channels when the news comes on, or avoid certain topics.

### AVOIDANCE OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE IS WIDESPREAD

Amongst avoiders, 39% say they had avoided news on the war in Ukraine, followed by national politics (38%), and social-justice issues (31%).

People avoiding news about the war in Ukraine:

FINLAND: 75%  
 CZECH REP.: 60%  
 GERMANY: 52%  
 HUNGARY: 47%  
 UK: 40%  
 POLAND: 35%  
 USA: 32%

# Rise in News Avoidance

# 60% MEN

with high incomes (79%),

though many of them pay reduced prices for their subscriptions. In Poland, up to 78% pay less than full price; in France, that number is as low as 21%. Germany ranks mid-table, with 46% paying less than full price.

All over the world and across age, gender, educational, income, and political divides, most people feel that transparency in news production is crucial for maintaining or regaining trust in the news media.

WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU WHEN IT COMES TO MAINTAINING TRUST IN THE NEWS MEDIA?

digitalnewsreport.org



Source: DIGITAL NEWS REPORT by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford



uni-wh.de



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und Gesellschaft.

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KANN MAN DIE  
WELT STUDIEREN.  
BEI UNS  
KANNST DU SIE  
VERÄNDERN.**

**HIER GIBT ES MEHR ALS UNI.**

### BACHELOR & STAATSEXAMEN

Global Sustainability: Climate, Justice, Transformation (B. A.)

Management (B. Sc.)

Management & Psychologie (B. Sc.)

PPÖ – Philosophie, Politik und Ökonomik (B. A.)

Social Data Science (B. Sc.)

Wirtschaft, Politik und Recht (B. A.)

Modellstudiengang Medizin (StEx)

Psychologie (B. Sc.)

Zahn-, Mund- und Kieferheilkunde (StEx)

### MASTER

General Management (M. A.)

PPE – Philosophy, Politics and Economics (M. A.)

Strategy & Organization (M. Sc.)

Witten MBA – Leadership & Management (berufsbegleitend)

Psychologie (M. Sc.)

Ethik und Organisation (M. A.)

Community Health Nursing (M. Sc.)

Pflegewissenschaft (M. Sc.)

**“First, they came for the journalists. We don’t know what happened next...”**

#### Quote by Maria Ressa

Philippine Journalist and Nobel Peace Laureat Maria Ressa mentioned in an interview for The Guardian, UK, that the variation of the quote "When the Nazis came for the communists, I kept quiet ..." by Holocaust survivor Martin Niemöller became popular among the Filipino people in the wake of the devastating wave of state violence that swept the country after President Rodrigo Duterte took power in 2016.



→ [www.theguardian.com/books/2022/nov/12/nobel-peace-laureate-maria-ressa-how-to-stand-up-to-a-dictator](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/nov/12/nobel-peace-laureate-maria-ressa-how-to-stand-up-to-a-dictator)

# ...for Journalism as a Public Good

by Renate Schröder,  
Director of the European Federation  
of Journalists

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LECTURER 2022



# STAND UP

## ELECTIONS AND DISINFORMATION

In a year marked by many important elections including the upcoming European elections, independent journalism and access to accurate information are crucial for citizens to make a decision based on facts. However, throughout Europe and beyond, disinformation is on the rise. The fight against disinformation is vital to our fragile democracies, as disinformation is intended to increase distrust towards the political elites, towards academia and intellectual forces, towards minority groups, environmental campaigns etc. Foreign interference in election processes has become increasingly prevalent, exacerbated by new technologies, widespread social media use, and increased geopolitical rivalry. And threats from national actors, mostly from illiberal forces against EU values and fermenting the idea of a fraudulent election at EU level, succeed in convincing many eligible voters to either vote for anti-European parties or to not vote at all.

With the additional threat of deepfakes and generative AI-produced content, the amount of dis- and misinformation is threatening the fundamental values of our democracies. While populists and autocrats do everything to silence and smear independent journalists, the latter work under increasingly precarious and dangerous conditions. Yet, journalists' professional work is more important than ever.

It is in the DNA of journalists to debunk disinformation and hold the powerful to account, to report, analyse and conduct interviews with candidates for elections. Who else provides impartial information about them? But resources in the newsrooms are shrinking. Artificial intelligence is potentially a great tool, but only if all actors are trained and journalistic control is assured. And journalists are no longer

the gatekeepers of information and news. We are living in a fragile information ecosystem, in which the large online platforms, in short: Big Tech, have a dominant position and pursue their potent and pervasive attention-driven business model. People like to read content 'for free' and pay another high price instead: a huge data sale into a few hands and an increasingly poisoned social media in which facts do not matter. A much-cited study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) from 2018 found that social media is designed to spread lies six times faster than truth to keep users scrolling.

## EROSION OF MEDIA FREEDOM AT EUROPEAN LEVEL

Many international human rights bodies, including the Council of Europe, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) are concerned that the erosion of protections for freedom of expression and media freedom is a key factor in the wider democratic backslide that Europe has witnessed in recent years. The recently published report "Press Freedom in Europe: Time to Turn the Tide", the annual assessment of press freedom in Europe by the partner organisations of the Council of Europe Platform for the Safety of Journalists, focuses on issues which may determine the freedom and integrity of electoral processes. Lack of independence and inadequate funding for public-service media and media regulators, media capture by political or private interests, state surveillance and SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public participation) all constrain journalists' freedom to report on matters of public interest.

»Journalists are no longer the gatekeepers of information and news. We are living in a fragile information ecosystem, in which the large online platforms, in short: Big Tech, have a dominant position and pursue their potent and pervasive attention-driven business model.«

#### SPYWARE SURVEILLANCE

Journalists across Europe face threats, arrests, restrictive legislation, abusive lawsuits, and verbal attacks by politicians that may trigger violent acts. The unprecedented use of surveillance mechanisms, including spyware, intimidates journalists—as is its intent—and can deter them from investigating sensitive stories. The Pegasus scandal, exposed by a collaborative network of media outlets led by the international organisation **Forbidden Stories**, revealed in 2021 that nearly 200 journalists around the world had been targeted with the spyware of the same name, among others in Azerbaijan, France, Greece, Hungary, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

»The unprecedented use of surveillance mechanisms, including spyware, intimidates journalists—as is its intent—and can deter them from investigating sensitive stories.«

This was the main reason why the European Commission included an important article on protection of journalists' sources and restriction of the use of spyware in its proposal for a **European Media Freedom Act**. France fought to the very end for a 'national security' exemption in the act, demonstrating the lack of clear commitment by politicians to media freedom.

Thanks to intense advocacy by journalists, digital-rights, and other civil-society groups, however, this was not included in the final text adopted both by the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers. But the possibility of spyware being deployed against journalists will still need to be strictly monitored through transparency and judicial control.

#### PRECARIOUS CONDITIONS AND LOCAL NEWS DESERTS

While disinformation appears to be on the rise, the business model for independent journalism is withering, and the status of professional journalists has hit a low. Precarious working conditions, especially for freelancers, threaten the quality and independence of their work. According to the latest Media Pluralism Monitor from the European University Institute's Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF), only four European countries out of 32 analysed offer good working conditions for journalists: Denmark, Germany, Ireland and Sweden. This is not to say that everything is coming up roses for journalists in Germany, with self-censorship and attacks (online and offline) becoming mounting issues in recent years. According to a recent study by the European Center of Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), "Feindbild Journalisten", the number of physical attacks against journalists in Germany has increased in the last years. In 2023, there were 69 verified and registered incidents of physical attacks.

This precarious status is most apparent in local media. Although these outlets—especially local radio—are the most trusted and important when it comes to debunking disinformation and providing context to national and European news, a recent CMPF study highlights the increasing number of news deserts throughout the EU, where such media are no longer available, as well as the concomitant declining number of local journalists and the deterioration of their working conditions.

#### TRUST IN JOURNALISM

All this has a potentially devastating impact on trust in journalism, a crucial currency for the future of the profession. It suggests that all who defend democracy and the rule of law stand with professional journalists and support journalism in its entirety as a public good. Indeed, there may have never been a time when accurate reporting was more important.

We need a broad alliance of civil society—readers and listeners, students, media literacy experts, fact checkers, journalists' organisations and trade unions, journalism schools and academics, defenders of democracies and environmental groups—to sustain journalism and convince policymakers and politicians that, just as environmental protection is urgently needed to counter the climate crisis, protection of journalists and journalism is essential to resolving the information crisis. **Without citizens enjoying the right to know, without accountability and transparency—without ethical journalism, in other words—there is no democracy.**

The EU has done more than ever before to create a safer and more sustainable space for journalism, not least by pursuing the European Media Freedom Act. It has supported many projects linked to press freedom and journalistic self-regulation, media deserts, the safety of journalists, cross-border investigative journalism and freelancers, as well as social dialogue, skills, and training. Altogether, around €50 million per year has gone to media organisations under these rubrics. This is however not enough. Independent professional journalism, the best antidote to disinformation, is expensive. Audience engagement, new journalistic formats, support for media literacy and the right use of AI are crucial to make journalism a tool for citizens to connect, debate, learn and engage in public discourse in today's polarised societies. But that requires sustainable business models which guarantee decent working conditions and fair remuneration.

»We need a broad alliance of civil society to sustain journalism and convince policymakers and politicians that, just as environmental protection is urgently needed to counter the climate crisis, protection of journalists and journalism is essential to resolving the information crisis.«

The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), representing over 320.000 journalists in 45 countries, is calling upon EU policymakers and civil society to stand up for journalism and journalists in Europe. In the run-up to the European Parliament elections in June, the EFJ has drawn up an a manifesto to make journalism as a public good viable and safe, and to regulate AI.

The European Parliament elections will set the direction for the EU in the next term. We need a parliament and a commission resolved to work towards a fair Europe, respecting trade-union and human rights, the rule of law, media freedom and pluralism, and overseeing implementation of the crucial regulatory mechanisms accomplished in the last five years: the copyright directive, the Digital Services Act, the Artificial Intelligence Act, the anti-SLAPP directive and the European Media Freedom Act.

**For facts to thrive, we need to join forces to build a healthy information ecosystem. And yes, we need all of you, students, young people to stand up for journalists and journalism, whether by showing solidarity when they are harassed or attacked by other citizens or politicians; or by simply paying for journalistic content.** The premise is to understand what is behind journalistic work, how important it is to write investigative stories and to shed light on corruption and local, national and European governance but also on small or local projects that promote the good side of humanity—of which there is plenty!



→ The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)



→ The EFJ Manifesto for the 2024 Elections

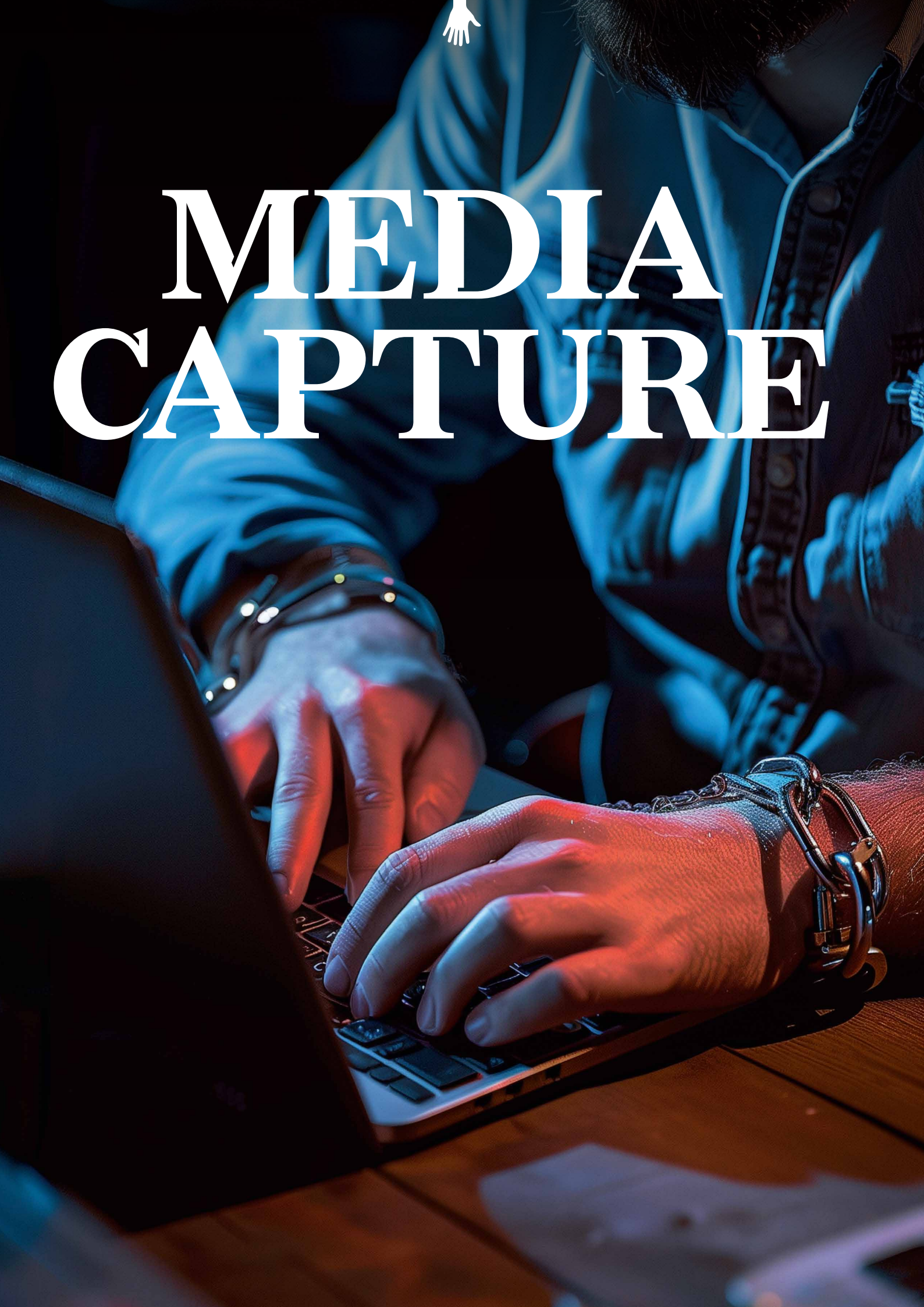


→ Media Pluralism Monitor



→ Forbidden Stories, the Pegasus Project





# MEDIA CAPTURE

## Where independent reporting ends and propaganda takes over

UW/H STUDIUM  
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LECTURER  
2022-2024

By Marius Dragomir,  
Director of the Media and Journalism  
Research Center

When government officials contact MTI, the state news agency in Hungary, its editors understand the importance of adhering to strict guidelines. According to an investigation by Budapest-based media outlet Direkt36, MTI editors are prohibited from altering the titles and lead paragraphs of any statements issued by ministries.

MTI is part of a public media group funded by taxpayers. Its primary purpose is to serve the public interest. However, its governing bodies are appointed by the government, and its funding comes from the state budget. As a result, the editorial coverage provided by this outlet tends to be biased towards promoting the interests of the authorities while discrediting its critics.

Nevertheless, this is not the only concern. Since winning the elections in 2010, Fidesz, the political party led by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, has solidified its control over the public media and extended its influence over most media outlets in Hungary. This unprecedented level of control has enabled Fidesz to maintain its hold on power, giving rise to a phenomenon known as media capture. Over the past decade, this specter of capture has rapidly spread across numerous countries.

Various forms of government and political control have long existed within Europe's media landscape. So, what sets media capture apart and makes it arguably the most significant threat to media freedom today?

### THE ANATOMY OF CAPTURE

Media capture occurs when those in power collaborate with private businesses to extend their control over the media through various means such as funding, regulation, and ownership.

Research by the Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC) identified four key elements that lead to media capture as part of a matrix designed to study the phenomenon. These elements include **control of media regulation, control of public media, use of state funds as a means of media control, and acquisition of private media outlets by businesses linked to the government.**

When political entities and businesses control these four areas, the majority of the media becomes what scholars refer to as "highly instrumentalized," meaning that they operate primarily to serve the interests of a specific group rather than the public. In practice, these media outlets function as a vast propaganda machine, marginalizing independent journalism.

One of the primary objectives in achieving capture is media regulation. In most European countries, media regulators are expected to act independently, as national legislation mandates. However, this is rarely the case, as the process of appointing and dismissing decision-making members of the media regulatory bodies is highly politicized in many European countries. Once political parties win elections, they exploit their position of power to gain control of media regulators by appointing their own personnel to the helm of these bodies. These institutions make crucial decisions regarding media licensing.

Similarly, upon assuming power, politicians also exert influence over public-service media as they possess the legal privilege to appoint the top leadership at these institutions. They populate these bodies with their supporters, who then wield the authority to alter the editorial stance of these outlets. Furthermore, in numerous European countries, public-service media receive funding through allocations from the state budget, which serves as another potent tool for governments to secure leverage and influence over public media.

In addition to funding for public service media, governments also exploit state finances to manipulate the coverage of private media, which constitutes the third aspect of capture. Governments often use funding in the form of state advertising to expand their control over privately owned media outlets as well. This source of financing often serves as a lifeline for many media organizations, especially in the context of a series of profound economic crises they have faced over the past decade.

The fourth crucial step in the strategy of capture involves the takeover of private media outlets. This is often accomplished through private businesses with close ties to the government or those reliant on government support for their operations.



**If you're an authoritarian, anti-liberal, or anti-democratic politician eager to crush media freedom and convert public and private media into your personal propaganda machines, here's your foolproof playbook for controlling the narrative:**

## HOW TO CAPTURE THE MEDIA

### 1. Legislative Changes

- Enact laws that instill a chilling effect on journalists such as mandating "balanced" content and restricting certain types of speech.
- Create or reform media regulatory bodies with political appointees.

### 2. Control of Media Regulation

- Politicize the process of appointing members to media regulatory bodies.
- Use regulatory bodies to grant or revoke media licenses based on political alignment.

### 3. Control of Public Media

- Appoint loyalists to leadership positions in public media organizations.
- Merge various public media entities to centralize control.
- Use state budget allocations to influence public media operations.

### 4. Manipulation of State Advertising

- Redirect state advertising funds to media outlets that support the government.
- Ensure financial dependency of private media on state advertising revenues.

### 5. Acquisition of Private Media

- Facilitate the takeover of private media by businesses with close ties to the government.
- Use state loans and financial support to enable these acquisitions.
- Replace critical journalists with government-friendly ones.

### 6. Expansion and Consolidation

- Gradually increase control over a broad range of media outlets, including television, radio, newspapers, and online platforms.
- Form media conglomerates that align with government interests.

## MEDIA CAPTURE: STEP BY STEP

Hungary serves as a prime example of how media capture can be executed with precision. The groundwork for Orban's tightening grip on the media was laid in the early 2000s with a right-wing alliance against perceived "left-wing liberal bias." Following their election victory in 2010, Orban's government wasted no time in strategically bolstering their control over the media landscape.

The first step involved adopting a new media law, which, in ambiguous and unclear terms, mandated media content to be "balanced" and prohibited the incitement of hatred "against any majority." Severe fines were introduced for non-compliance. Additionally, the law established the Media Council as a new media oversight body, with its members appointed by Parliament, where Fidesz had a two-thirds majority. By gaining control over regulation, the Fidesz government effectively oversaw the broadcast licensing process, thereby preventing new players from establishing themselves in the Hungarian market.

»Media capture occurs when political and business interests control media through funding, regulation, and ownership, turning media into a propaganda tool.«

The same 2010 law also established the legal framework for merging all public-service media in Hungary—including television, radio, and the MTI news agency—into a single holding known as MTVA. Critical journalists at the station were compelled to leave and were replaced by more loyal journalists.

The government then moved on to swiftly redirect its advertising spending, showing a clear preference for Hungarian businessmen who gradually began to acquire or exert influence over an increasing number of media companies. According to data from Mertek, a Hungary-based research organization, the majority of the 20 largest recipients of state advertising between 2006 and 2017 had ties to Fidesz.

Finally, with regulatory authorities and public service media under control and a new system of favor-based state advertising spending in place, Fidesz then focused its complete attention on acquiring ownership of the private media by using the companies operated by oligarchs supportive of Fidesz as investment vehicles. Most of the funding used to carry out these acquisitions originated from the state in various forms.

For example, one of those oligarchs, the late Andy Vajna, took a loan from a state-run bank to purchase TV2, a major broadcaster, in 2016. One year later, Lorinc Meszaros, a childhood friend of Orban, whose businesses have been significant recipients of state cash for large state investment projects, particularly in construction, bought Mediaworks, a prominent newspaper publisher. According to Atlatzo, a Budapest-based investigative journalism organization, by 2018, the media empire controlled by Fidesz-aligned companies and individuals encompassed nearly 500 outlets, including magazines, radio stations, television channels, and newspapers.

Media capture is not limited to Hungary. This model has spread across borders, and forms of media capture are now emerging in various countries worldwide, such as Turkey, Egypt, Nicaragua, and Cambodia. In Europe, independent journalism is threatened in several countries, primarily in Central and Eastern Europe. Poland followed Hungary's example, with the government of the conservative PiS party openly implementing a strategy aimed at the "repolonization" of the media by ousting foreign owners from the country's media and assuming control of those media assets through businesses connected with the state. Ever since PiS lost the 2023 elections, the new government has been working to reverse the effects of the capture. Similar tendencies of capture have been documented in several other countries, including Czechia, Slovakia, and Bulgaria. At the same time, threats to media freedom have also appeared in several Western European countries. In Italy, for example, the public service broadcaster RAI has recently come under critical scrutiny as political interference with the station has intensified. Attacks by right-wing or conservative political parties aimed at destabilizing the public service media, especially through financial pressures such as proposed cuts or changing the broadcasters' funding model, have intensified in countries like Austria and the U.K.

## HARD IMPACT

**Media capture is an extremely destructive phenomenon that has severe consequences for the health of democracy in Europe. It significantly reduces the space for independent journalism, which in turn limits societies' access to factual information. As a result, people are forced to make decisions based on the propaganda fed to them by government-controlled outlets.**

Therefore, it is crucial to understand the true impact of media capture and its effects on the journalistic profession and society as a whole. Journalism is one of the fields that is most heavily affected by media capture, and its effects are manifold and long-term.

In countries where the majority of media outlets are controlled by the government and are part of oligarchic structures, a process of de-professionalization within the sector has been noted. The dominant media segment, which relies on generous public support, is growing, while the independent media bubble, which survives on limited financial resources from donations or citizen support, is shrinking. As a result, norms and standards within journalism are being eroded.

The decline in journalistic standards leads to political polarization, extending to the news environment itself. This division within the media ecosystem is characterized by a stark contrast between outlets that support the government and those that criticize it. Consequently, the power and representativeness of the media field are weakened. In Serbia, for instance, where the government has gained control over a significant portion of media outlets, journalists face numerous challenges, such as job insecurity, editorial pressures, and low pay, which often force them to adopt a pro-government bias or engage in self-censorship.

»Media capture is an extremely destructive phenomenon that has severe consequences for the health of democracy in Europe.«

## THE IMPACT OF MEDIA CAPTURE

### ...on the journalistic profession:

- De-professionalization: Growth of government-supported media, decline of independent outlets.
- Political polarization: Division between pro-government and critical media.
- Structural instability: Job insecurity, low pay, and self-censorship among journalists.

### ...on the media sector:

- Erosion of competitiveness: Favoritism in regulations and state funding.
- Distorted advertising market: Private companies avoiding ads in independent media.

### ...on society:

- Propaganda influence: Limited access to factual information, skewed decision-making.
- Election outcomes as indicators of propaganda effectiveness.

## THE IMPACT ON JOURNALISM

However, capture also has implications for the media sector as a whole. Firstly, it erodes competitiveness, as government-controlled media players are granted a significant advantage through favorable regulations and financial support. This creates a distorted market, as set out in the Conclusions of the Joint International Press Freedom Mission to Hungary. For example, in 2018, TV2, a pro-government broadcaster in Hungary, received approximately 67% of all state ad funding allocated to the television sector. In contrast, RTL Klub, a German-owned television broadcaster with no government ties, received only 1% of the funding, according to data from the International Press Institute, a Vienna-based NGO. In Bulgaria, the government chose not to award state resources to government-critical media companies, which resulted in what Boryana Dzhambazova, a Bulgarian media expert, describes as “a pro-government media bubble.”

Media capture also has a significant impact on the dynamics of the advertising market, as private companies in certain countries refrain from placing ads in independent media due to concerns about potential repercussions from the authorities, as seen between 2017 and 2021 in Czechia during the regime of prime minister Andrej Babis, one of the wealthiest oligarchs in the country and owner of the leading newspaper publisher Mafra. Companies used to withdraw their ads from independent media out of fear that the authorities, tightly controlled by Babis at the time, would impose regulations or employ other tools to punish them.

Lastly, media capture also has profound consequences for society, the ultimate consumers of the content produced by the media. Although more research on this matter is needed, elections often indicate captured media's influence on decision-making, as seen with Fidesz's enduring power in Hungary.

## COMBATING MEDIA CAPTURE?

Fighting capture is challenging due to governments' stronghold on media. In Europe, two potential avenues to combat capture can be considered: an audience-focused funding model and policy solutions or support from the EU.

Audience-funded models include local media catering to community needs. In this vein, redefining the relationship between media and advertisers becomes crucial to redirect a portion of advertising funds toward independent media. In Romania, for example, a group of media experts and former journalists established the Ethical Media Alliance to encourage private businesses to allocate a small portion of their advertising budgets to support independent media, not for commercial purposes but for their societal role.

In terms of policy solutions, the EU's power to regulate media is limited, a constraint that various European governments have exploited to interfere with the media. However, the EU possesses a range of instruments to counteract governments that curtail media freedom, including legal action and linking EU funding to compliance with the rule of law. The European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), one of the latest legal initiatives at the EU level, specifically aims to address the spread of capture in Europe. Yet, although the EMFA has garnered praise as the EU's boldest move for media free-

dom to date, media experts express growing skepticism about its ability to combat capture effectively. The law fails to address key elements of capture, particularly the corrupt financial flow from the government to the private sector and lacks effective mechanisms for implementing its provisions. There may still be lingering hopes for the triumph of independent journalism. However, it is undeniably difficult to envision the future of media without taking into account the pervasive issue of media capture looming on the horizon.

**Marius Dragomir is the Founder and Director of the Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC), Professor at the Central European University (CEU) in Vienna and researcher at the University of Santiago de Compostela. He is the former Director of the Center for Media, Data and Society of the Central European Universities' Democracy Institute in Budapest.**



→ Media and Journalism Research Center

## HOW TO COMBAT MEDIA CAPTURE

### Audience-focused models:

- Community-supported local media
- Ethical media alliances promoting private sector support for independent media

### Policy & regulation:

- EU legal measures and funding tied to media freedom
- European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) targeting media capture, despite lingering doubts about its effectiveness
- Monitoring media ownership
- Preventing media concentration in the hands of a few
- Business strategies to guarantee diversity and sustainable funding
- Internet regulations ensuring journalists get a fair share of advertising revenue

# HOW TO CHECK MEDIA RELIABILITY

At the start of every UNDERSTANDING MEDIA seminar at Witten/Herdecke University, students often ask, “How can I know if I can trust a media outlet? How can I tell if I live in a free and functioning media ecosystem where journalists report independently?” Our response is clear: It is anything but easy. You need to think and research like a journalist. This is especially crucial if you live in a country where political or other interest groups try to influence the media to secure re-election, advance their agendas, or prioritize their interests over the common good—without you knowing. Controlling the media is a key tactic for these forces. Here are some steps you can take:

## EXAMINE OWNERSHIP AND FUNDING SOURCES

- Identify who owns the media outlet and how it is funded.
- Check for any government funding or affiliations with political parties.

## EVALUATE EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE

- Determine if the outlet is free to make editorial decisions without external pressure.
- Look for any policies or guidelines that restrict editorial freedom.

## ANALYZE REGULATORY CONTROL

- Research who appoints the media regulators and their relationship with political entities.
- Verify if the regulatory body is independent or politically influenced.

## ASSESS TRANSPARENCY OF INFORMATION SOURCES

- Ensure that sources of information are clearly cited and credible.
- Be wary of outlets that frequently use anonymous or unverified sources.

## REVIEW COVERAGE AND BIAS

- Check for balanced reporting and the inclusion of multiple perspectives.
- Be cautious of media that consistently supports a single viewpoint or discredits critics without evidence.

## INVESTIGATE THE USE OF STATE ADVERTISING

- Determine if the outlet relies heavily on state advertising.
- Assess whether state advertising is used to influence media coverage.

## CHECK FOR OWNERSHIP CONSOLIDATION

- Identify if the media outlet is part of a larger conglomerate with business interests tied to the government.
- Consider how ownership concentration might impact editorial independence.

## LOOK FOR SIGNS OF SELF-CENSORSHIP

- Be aware of journalists resigning or citing censorship pressures.
- Note any changes in editorial stance that coincide with political events or pressures.

## MONITOR FOR PROPAGANDA

- Evaluate if the outlet's content aligns closely with government propaganda.
- Check for frequent use of government press releases without additional analysis or critique.

## COMPARE WITH OTHER INDEPENDENT SOURCES

- Cross-check information with other reputable and independent media sources.
- Use fact-checking websites to verify the accuracy of reported information.

## RESEARCH THE MEDIUM'S HISTORY

- Look into the media outlet's history of ownership, funding, and editorial changes.
- Understand the context of how the outlet has evolved and its current standing in the media landscape.

## EVALUATE THE IMPACT OF MEDIA CAPTURE

- Be aware of the broader context of media capture in the region or country.
- Recognize the potential influence of media capture on the outlet's reporting and editorial decisions.



**“A free press can, of course, be good or bad, but, most certainly without freedom, the press will never be anything but bad.”**

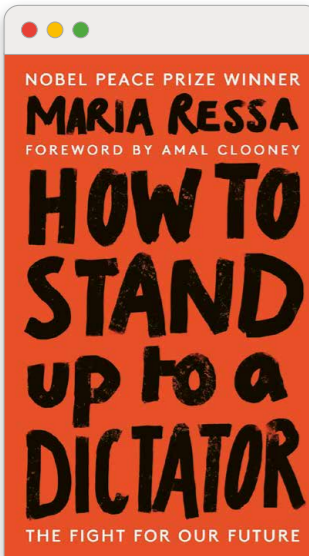
# TRIGGER POINTS

"Trigger points: Consensus and Conflict in Contemporary Society" by **Linus Westheuser and Steffen Mau** is a fascinating analysis of current social dynamics, in which seemingly small "trigger points" can set off major conflicts. "Social conflicts are never just there, they are also socially manufactured: ignited, fuelled, triggered." There is increasing talk of polarisation and division in society, with seemingly irreconcilable factions facing each other. The authors' analysis shows that there is a surprising amount of consensus on many of the major social issues or "arenas of inequality": poverty and wealth, migration, diversity and gender, climate protection. When certain trigger points are pressed, however, tensions can escalate.

# HOW TO STAND UP TO A DICTATOR



Books



In 2021, Philippine journalist **Maria Ressa** won not only the UNESCO Press Freedom Award but also the Nobel Peace Prize together with Russia's Novaya Gazeta editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov. They were the first journalists to be recognised by the Nobel committee since 1936. Back then, the German reporter Carl von Ossietzky was unable to accept his award due to being imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. Today, Ressa, the chief executive and co-founder of the online news platform Rappler, praised for exposing abuses of power and growing authoritarianism under the Philippine president, Rodrigo Duterte, is facing charges that could result in a 100-year prison sentence. Ressa was the target of a misinformation campaign, amplified by "patriotic troll armies", who flooded the discourse so that facts were contested, honest brokers bullied into silence, and regular, disinterested citizens were no longer able to separate facts from falsehood. In her book *How to Stand Up to a Dictator*, she describes these events and the path leading up to them. She also levels serious accusations at social media giants such as Facebook and at the way "our information ecosystem is corrupted." Nothing, she points out, has been done by these organisations to protect civil society as "the incentive structure of our information ecosystem rewards lying." And at the root of it all, she argues, is the elemental truth that lies are simply more interesting than facts.



Books

# DYING DEMOCRACIES

"Democracy no longer ends with a bang—in a revolution or military coup—but with a whimper: the slow, steady weakening of critical institutions, such as the judiciary and the press, and the gradual erosion of long-standing political norms."



"How Democracies Die" by **Steven Levitsky** is a captivating exploration into the vulnerabilities of democratic systems and the factors contributing to their downfall. Levitsky, alongside co-author **Daniel Ziblatt**, delves into the global landscape to unravel how democratic regimes can erode from within. Through analysis and case studies, the book illuminates the warning signs of democratic decay, from the erosion of political norms to the rise of authoritarian leaders. Levitsky argues that democracy's demise often occurs not through sudden upheaval but through a gradual erosion of democratic institutions and norms. With its timely insights, "How Democracies Die" serves as a wake-up call, urging readers to confront the threats facing democracies worldwide and to actively safeguard the principles of liberty and equality.



## Reluctant Audiences for Journalism

"Avoiding the News" is a deep-dive into the complicated reasons behind people distrusting the news. Since 2016, media scientists **Benjamin Toff, Ruth Palmer, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen** have been investigating why and how a growing number of people in many countries consistently avoids the news—despite an unprecedented abundance and convenient access. According to the authors, many people feel that they do not have time for it, believe it not to be worth the effort, find it irrelevant or emotionally draining, or do not trust the media, among other reasons. The authors find answers to questions such as which groups are more and less reluctant to follow the news, respectively, and in what ways news avoidance constitutes a problem.



## AVOIDING THE NEWS RELUCTANT AUDIENCES FOR JOURNALISM

BENJAMIN TOFF, RUTH PALMER, AND RASMUS KLEIS NIELSEN



# THREATS TO DEMOCRACY



## Social media as opinion markets

by Birger P. Priddat,  
Economist and Philosopher,  
Witten/Herdecke University

The digital economy has expanded significantly. Social media platforms are no longer just spaces for relentless advertising and private connections; they have become integral to the public sphere, acting as political arenas.

Criticism of social media often focuses on the ease with which anyone can publish their opinions, in contrast to traditional media with its editorial oversight. This criticism is especially relevant in the political public sphere of social media, where diverse groups, followers, and initiatives, rather than political parties, dominate. This new spectrum highlights society's diversity and fragmentation, with dynamic networks that do not ensure stable identities or participation.

Initially, it was believed that the internet, particularly social media, would support democracy. This assumption has proven incorrect. Platforms like Twitter often promote extremism, and polarisation goes viral, setting the tone of discourse. The impulsive, provocative, and ideological voices dominate, overshadowing thoughtful and deliberate discussion.

community: a collective opposition to various targets. This new political economy, driven by platform opinion markets, influences democracy without being subject to electoral accountability or political oversight.

For the past quarter-century, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Google, Instagram, and TikTok have blurred the lines between public and private communications. The internet has become a vast, unregulated repository of texts and topics. The public sphere is now inundated with mere opinions and hate. What seems like increased freedom of expression is actually a freedom where opinions masquerade as facts, creating a confused world where credibility and truth are suggested through constant, unreflected repetition.

The new political economy describes an asymmetrically developing public sphere. Today's internet participants live in an opinion society where individual opinions do not coalesce into collective action. Opinions clash without dialogue, mutual understanding, or democratic compromise.

»Today's internet participants live in an opinion society where individual opinions do not coalesce into collective action. Opinions clash without dialogue, mutual understanding, or democratic compromise.«

In the virtual space, the public audience fractures into numerous groups bound by special interests. This undermines national public spheres. The internet facilitates rapid, decentralised communication but cannot consolidate scattered messages into coherent narratives.

Social media communities represent a hypermodern form of communality. Contrary to claims of dissolving communal bonds in modern society, these bonds are merely shifting to digital networks. However, these new forms of community lack the 'moral institutedness' of traditional communities and are often fragile in their communication.

The platform industry has created opinion markets where social and political mobilisation occurs. This environment fosters a desire for evaluation and judgment, self-reinforcing mechanisms, rapid-fire communication, social clustering, and identity-political biases. This has led to the creation of conformisms that highlight social differences. Resentment has become both a business model and a new sense of

Democracy cannot be reduced to the demands and expectations of individuals towards the state and elected representatives. The issue is not only with political elites who refuse to listen but also with citizens who feel no obligations towards the political community. Such attitudes lead those in power to view citizens primarily as consumers, expecting the state to solve problems. The idea that citizens are moral actors with reciprocal obligations, essential in a democracy, is often ignored. In a 'consumer democracy,' people vote but expect the state to deliver, neglecting their own responsibilities to contribute to the democratic process.

**Birger P. Priddat, former Chair of Economics and Philosophy, currently Research Fellow at the Studium fundamentale at Witten/Herdecke University and regular columnist for the Witten Lab Magazine.**

A person wearing a dark green abaya and a light-colored headscarf is sitting on the sand in a vast, arid desert landscape. They are holding and reading a newspaper. The background shows rolling sand dunes under a clear sky. The overall tone is one of isolation and the search for information in a remote area.

# NEWS DESERTS

## The Over-looked Crisis

by Tijana Blagojev & Elda Brogi,  
Centre for Media Pluralism and  
Media Freedom at the European  
University Institute, Florence

### WHAT ARE NEWS DESERTS?

Due to severe challenges in the media sector, particularly affecting local media outlets, many of the latter have been forced to close or are unable to provide reliable news. Consequently, some communities are left without trustworthy local information sources. These areas, lacking quality and diverse information, are known as news deserts, media shadows, news holes, blank spots or drylands. According to the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF), a news desert is “a geographic or administrative area, or a social community where it is difficult or impossible to access sufficient, reliable, diverse information from independent local, regional and community media.”

### WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

Access to local news is crucial not only for staying informed but also for empowering citizens to actively participate in the life of their community. Without local news, people lose touch with local events, from infrastructure projects to public services and eventually struggle making informed political choices. Imagine living in a place where you cannot find out if a new highway will cut through your town, if your local school is closing, or what candidates are running in your local elections. This is the reality for some communities in Europe affected by the crisis of the local media sector.

### MORE THAN HALF OF U.S. COUNTIES FACE A STARK DECLINE OF LOCAL NEWS ACCESS

The most detailed study on this issue, conducted by researchers from the Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University, reveals that the rate at which local newspapers are disappearing accelerated in 2023, with an average of 2.5 closures per week. This decline has left 204 counties without any local news outlets and has severely limited access to reliable local news and information in over half of all U.S. counties. Additionally, 228 counties are at high risk of losing their local news sources altogether.

In today's digital age, it is easy to assume that access to news is universal. However, in many parts of Europe, entire communities are cut off from vital local news.

This phenomenon, known as “news deserts,” poses a significant threat to democracy and community well-being.

### NEW RESEARCH ON NEWS DESERTS IN EUROPE

The CMPF, in collaboration with local researchers from 27 EU Member States, conducted the first comprehensive study on news deserts across Europe under the project Local Media For Democracy. This project, a joint effort with the European Federation of Journalists, Journalism Fund Europe, and International Media Support, aimed to understand and address the complexities of local media in various countries.

### CHALLENGES IN ANALYSING NEWS DESERTS

Defining local media is particularly challenging in Europe due to the existence of diverse media systems across countries, and to a variety of languages and socio-political contexts. Another issue is that in smaller countries like Malta, Cyprus, or Luxembourg, national and local media often overlap. Finally, the advent of digital media has blurred geographical boundaries, complicating traditional notions of “local”. The study categorised local media as those operating at sub-national levels, covering events relevant to specific geographic areas and fostering a sense of “place and belonging.” Community media, often non-profit and focused on inclusivity, were also considered.

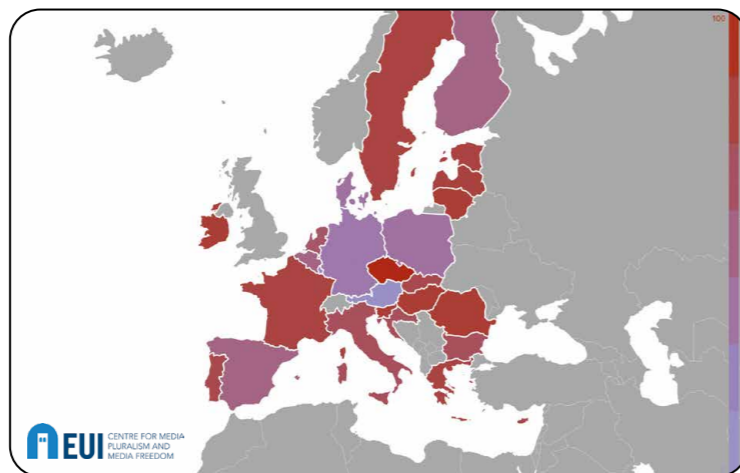
The challenges are compounded by a lack of financial and audience data at the local level in many countries, as well as limited research on the topic across Europe. While some studies have been conducted in specific countries like Slovakia, Portugal, and Croatia, none offer a comparative approach across multiple nations. The CMPF's study takes a holistic view of news deserts, assessing the situation through various indicators. Moreover, the study's definition of news deserts goes beyond the mere absence of media outlets to include the quality and independence of the available information.

# 5 key indicators of news deserts

## GRANULARITY OF INFRASTRUCTURE

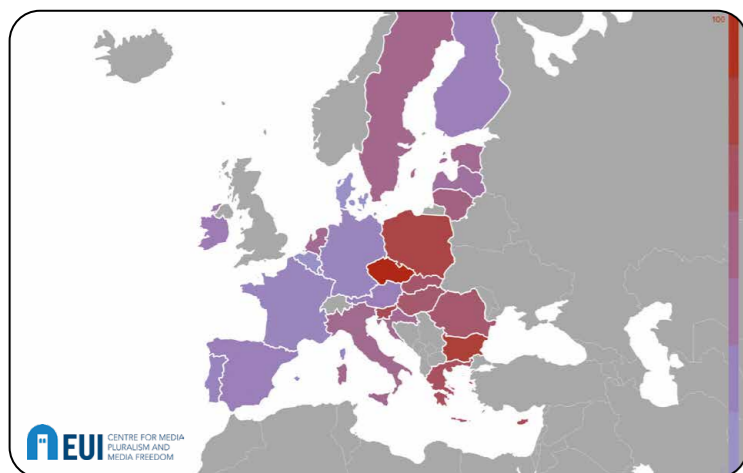
Investigates the number and structure of local outlets. Many rural areas lack local news outlets, and the centralisation of newsrooms reduces local coverage.

This indicator showed medium to high risk in most countries but had the lowest aggregate risk score among all indicators. Issues include the lack of news in rural areas, centralised newsrooms, and a declining number of local journalists. A good network of regional public service media (PSM) branches helps, but these are in some countries diminishing due to funding cuts. The main takeaway is that even the presence of a large number of local media on the ground does not equal good news offer (e.g. in Poland and Hungary).



Map 1: Risk for the indicator "Granularity of infrastructure of local media" in the 27 EU member states

»Access to local news is crucial not only for staying informed but also for empowering citizens to actively participate in the life of their community. Without local news, people lose touch with local events, from infrastructure projects to public services and eventually struggle making informed political choices.«

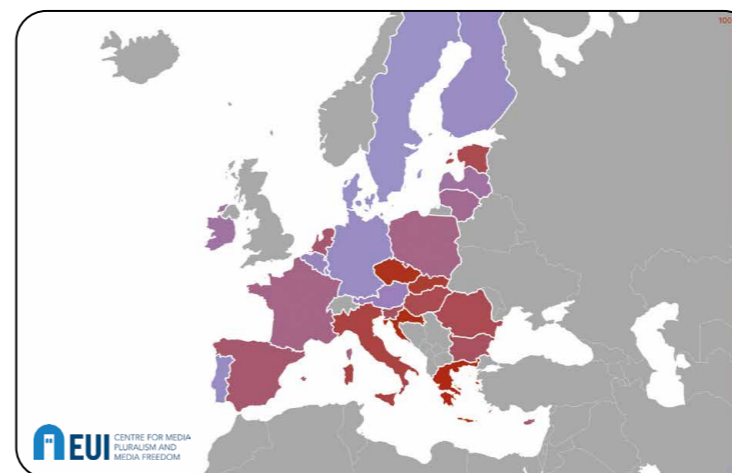


MAP 2: Risk for the indicator "Market and reach" in the 27 EU member states

## MARKET AND REACH

Assesses the market situation of local media. Declining revenues, high ownership concentration, and audience reluctance to pay for news are among the main threats for independent journalism.

This indicator had the highest aggregate risk score. Financial resources are declining, and available funding often lacks innovation and fails to address the specific needs of local media compared to national media. High ownership concentration leads to uniform coverage, disconnecting local media from their audiences.



MAP 3: Risk for the indicator "Safety of local journalists" in the 27 EU member states

## SAFETY OF LOCAL JOURNALISTS

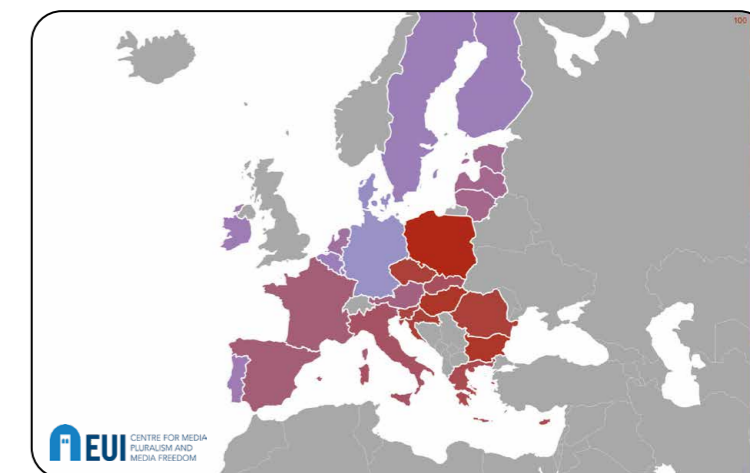
Looks into the safety and working conditions of local journalists. Low salaries, unstable working conditions, and increasing online threats undermine their safety and morale.

Threats are often more direct and less visible in smaller communities. Bad working conditions at the local level, particularly for freelancers and self-employed journalists have been detected. In addition, the threats of SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) are also worrying (with particularly high risks of SLAPPs in Croatia, Czech Republic, Cyprus, France, Greece, Ireland and Italy).

## EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE

Examines commercial and political influences on editorial independence. Non-transparent distribution of state advertising and political control through direct or indirect ownership pose significant risks, especially in Central and Southeastern Europe.

Local media often lack independence from local authorities and politics, and self-regulation is also lacking in some countries. Municipality-owned media create unfair competition with independent outlets, receiving direct state funding and offering biased coverage (e.g. in Poland and Slovakia).

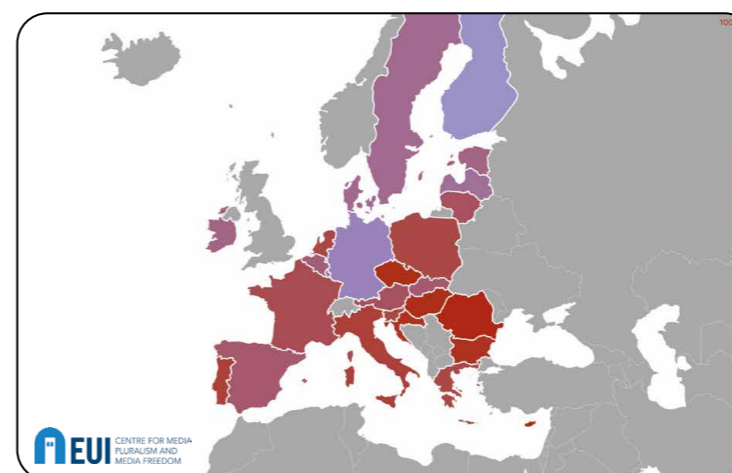


MAP 4: Risk for the indicator "Editorial independence" in the 27 EU member states

## SOCIAL INCLUSIVENESS

Assesses coverage of minority and marginalised groups as well as whether local media meet public information needs. Marginalised groups often lack adequate representation, and minority news programmes are scarce, particularly in private media outlets.

Many local media focus on "soft news" or replicate national news, failing to provide critical public-interest information at a local level. In some cases, this is linked to political interference (e.g. in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Lithuania and Slovakia) or clickbait tactics. However, higher levels of trust in local media rather than national ones were reported in some countries (e.g. in Greece, Croatia, Ireland), highlighting the important role of local media in fostering community connections.



MAP 5: Risk for the indicator "Social inclusiveness" in the 27 EU member states

»Even in countries with a stable local media situation, the threat of news deserts looms if proactive measures are not taken soon.«

#### DO YOU LIVE IN A NEWS DESERT?

The risk of news deserts varies across Europe. Northern European countries like Denmark and Finland generally fare better, while Central and Southeastern Europe are more affected by this phenomenon. Sometimes, news deserts can be found even in suburbs of major capitals such as Riga or Dublin. Even in countries with a relatively stable local media situation, the threat of news deserts looms if proactive measures are not taken soon.

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Despite the grim picture, there are some bright spots. Best practices include innovating the local media offer by proposing new formats—such as newsletters and podcasts—or fostering transnational collaborations. For example, VierNull in Düsseldorf, Germany, publishes news as an online newsletter, avoiding social media algorithms and retaining control over content dissemination.

#### Recommendations from the CMPF's research include:

- **A united front:** Local and community media should join forces to lobby for better conditions and support.
- **Government support:** Strategic, proactive government support for independent local journalism is crucial, with transparent monitoring of its impact and success.
- **Improved data collection:** Better collection of audience and financial data is essential to enhance research and understanding of local media markets.
- **Continuous monitoring:** Ongoing monitoring of the local media landscape is needed to track changes and identify emerging news deserts.

»By understanding the challenges and taking proactive steps, we can help prevent the spread of news deserts and ensure that all communities have access to the vital information they need.«

#### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

As a citizen, you can make a difference. Support trustworthy local media by subscribing, sharing their content, or participating in local journalism initiatives. Promote a healthy news diet among your peers and help safeguard the media landscape in your community.

Universities can play a role in combating news deserts. Students can contribute to local journalism, providing news content and developing new, accessible forms of journalism. By taking action, you can help ensure that your community remains informed, engaged, and democratic.

#### CONCLUSION

News deserts represent an overlooked crisis in Europe, threatening democracy and community life. The CMPF's research highlights the need for collective action to support local media. By understanding the challenges and taking proactive steps, we can help prevent the spread of news deserts and ensure that all communities have access to the vital information they need.



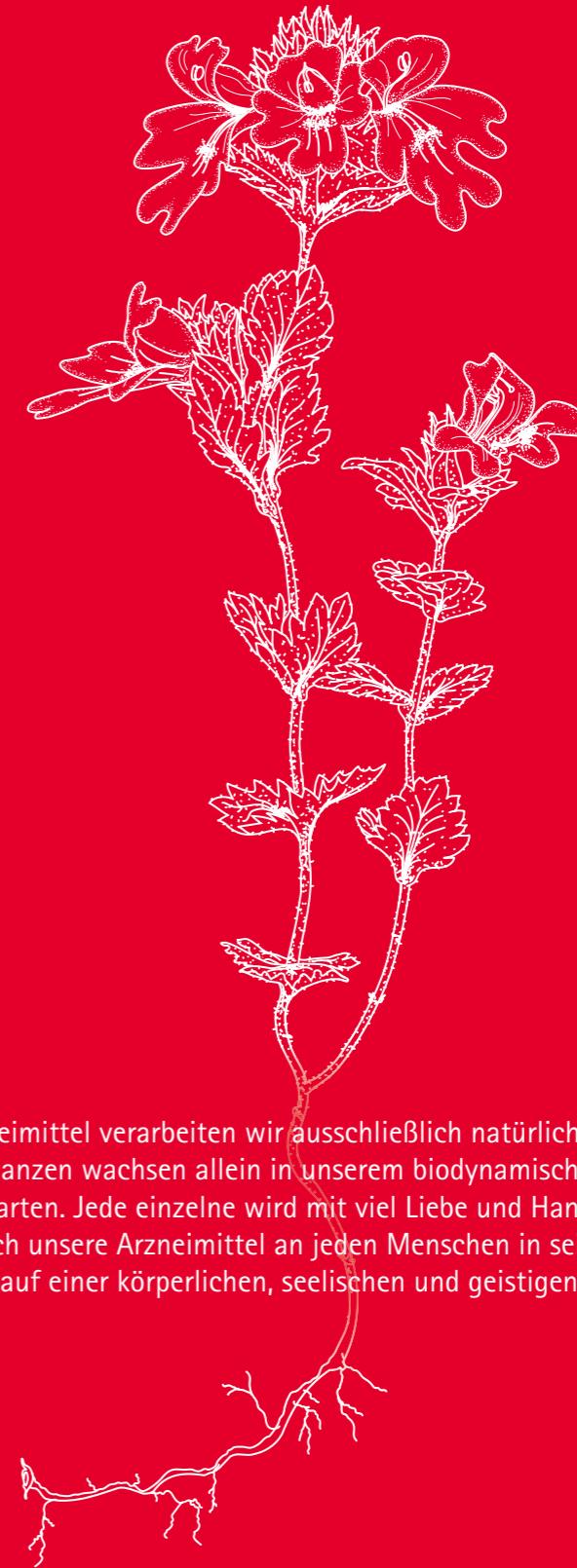
→ For more information about the study and its country results, visit the CMPF website.

Tijana Blagojev is a Research Associate at the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom at the European University Institute (EUI), Florence and one of the researchers of the LM4D—Local Media for Development Project.

UW/H STUDIUM  
FUNDAMENTALE  
LECTURER 2024

Elda Brogi is the Scientific Coordinator of the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom at the European University Institute (EUI), Florence

WALA  
Arzneimittel



Für unsere Arzneimittel verarbeiten wir ausschließlich natürliche Wirksubstanzen. Gut 150 Heilpflanzen wachsen allein in unserem biodynamisch bewirtschafteten Heilpflanzengarten. Jede einzelne wird mit viel Liebe und Handarbeit gepflegt. So wie sich auch unsere Arzneimittel an jeden Menschen in seiner Individualität wenden und ihn auf einer körperlichen, seelischen und geistigen Ebene ansprechen.

Wir erschließen Ihnen die Heilkräfte der Natur.



# INDEPENDENT MEDIA VS. AUTHORITARIANISM

On the fragility of democracy and  
the power of stories

By Helen Soares, Head of Philanthropic Development; Hollie Fifer, Director of Special Projects; and Zeena Starbuck, Project Coordinator at DocSociety.org

Independent media are a defining element of functioning and pluralistic democracies and are particularly effective in allowing publics to hold governments to account. It is unsurprising then that the media are one of the first things attacked when leaders seek to gain or retain power at the expense of democracy. Media capture is an early chapter in a clumsy, albeit effective, playbook wielded by authoritarians, populists, national libertarians and corporations. While the actors may vary, the goal is the same: keep and accrue power without care for citizens' rights.

We have seen this in Orbán's Hungary, Modi's India, Erdoğan's Turkey, Putin's Russia. The playbook they follow is alarmingly similar: from pro-government forces buying out independent media sources, governments regulating and controlling advertising to squeeze independent media dry, to lawsuits against (and imprisonment of) journalists. **The playbook of media capture has been used far and wide, and we are at a moment in time when we need to understand it and acknowledge that our media landscapes are all too vulnerable to capture. Where does this leave us? Where can we go from here? We may need to build an entirely new media and information ecosystem for the unique challenges of the 21st century.**

## DESTROYING PLURALISTIC MEDIA

Stories have always been in our public commons as much as the water in our rivers and the soil under our feet. They shape our worldviews, offering frameworks through which we can comprehend our responsibilities and the consequences of our actions. Understanding how citizens access, relate to, and believe stories is paramount to understanding how they participate in a functioning democracy.

With textbook and complete media capture, there is only one story. This can be seen with Putin banning words such as 'war' in reference to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, coupled with the escalating suppression of journalistic freedoms. These actions have compelled many journalists to shut down their newsrooms and go into exile faced with the grim alternatives of becoming instruments of propaganda or risking imprisonment. Once the state has created an all-inclusive worldview, citizens have no choice – there is only one story. In situations where maintaining a facade of democracy remains crucial, such as in Orbán's Hungary, we observe a similarly constricted public square. Jillian Stirk, Head of Mission for the ODIHR, who oversaw the independent observation of the 2022 Hungarian elections, remarked that "the consolidation of media as well as the prevalence of biased and unbalanced news coverage limited voters' ability to make an informed choice." Likewise, in India, the government's branding of journalists like Ravish Kumar as 'Anti-Nationalists' and the persecution of author Arundhati Roy on anti-terror charges pose significant threats to the plurality of public discourse.



## MIS-/DISINFORMATION IS A TOOL, NOT THE PICTURE

**Media capture means undermining the citizen's ability to choose whom to trust. Immense amounts of mis-/disinformation create a quagmire of stories in which citizens struggle to distinguish the loudest messengers from factual sources.** Steven Bannon, a nationalist, political strategist and former Trump advisor, spoke to this tactic when he said, "The Democrats don't matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit." It comes as no surprise that Americans are increasingly detaching from politics, as the research non-profit More in Common reports. Aside from that, when the media landscape is completely polluted, it is the media institutions themselves that end up losing the public's trust. This breaks the trust chain which is further preyed upon by those with a power or profit agenda—populists, the far-right, evangelists, and even wellness influencers who build audiences on social media, YouTube and podcasts providing 'the real news you won't hear anywhere else.' Corporate media capture follows a similar playbook. UN Secretary General António Guterres recently labelled the fossil fuel industry as the "godfathers of climate chaos" when calling for a tobacco-like global ban on fossil fuel ads in the media. Recently, The Verge reported "Google, Facebook, and Instagram rake in tens of millions of dollars each year from fossil fuel advertising", and The New York Times and Reuters topped a ranking of media companies enabling fossil fuel ad campaigns. This is critical, as studies by Michelle Amazeen and Bartosz Wojdyski found that more than 9 out of 10 US adult citizens are unable to tell the difference between an advertorial and real news.

## ANTI-INSTITUTIONALISATION IS ON THE RISE

Simultaneously, media platforms and distribution systems are increasingly distancing themselves from public-interest media, operating under the misguided belief that audiences only want entertainment. **For many legacy-media institutions with precarious financial situations, political risk aversion becomes a survival strategy. Many taxpayer-funded public broadcasters are increasingly chasing ratings to maintain relevance, often resorting to self-censorship to avoid political budget cuts. Even those media institutions adopting sustainable business models become subservient to metrics such as clicks, likes and ratings to attract advertising revenue, or they limit public access to information by placing content behind paywalls.**

With the media not just vulnerable but, in many countries, partially or completely captured, the future of democracy is up for grabs. If democracy is to survive, public-interest media and information need to be protected and rebuilt to ensure they can withstand political and corporate pressure. Understanding the media-capture playbook is half the battle. The other half is solutions. The good news for democracy is that there are plenty of solutions that have already been tried and tested by independent media makers.



→ An interesting read on what young people expect from their news is provided by the NEXT GEN NEWS Report, "Understanding the Audiences of 2030", from Northwestern University's Knight Lab and the Financial Times Strategy.

»Independent media creators have mastered the art of delivering information to the public by any means necessary. Their strength lies in their grassroots adaptability and focus on community and justice.«

### INDEPENDENCE AS RESILIENCE

Indeed, it is the independent media makers (the documentarians, the journalists, the storytellers) that work outside of the corporate system and refuse to succumb to political pressures who still hold the public's trust when the institutions are struggling. Citizens are hungry for the independent, beautiful, stirring, diverse works created by and for communities. Based on a research conducted by the JournalismLab at Hogeschool Utrecht, the European Journalism Centre (EJC) highlights that Generation Z, widely regarded as the critical voting bloc to prevent far-right takeovers in Europe, wants to engage with alternative media that broaden their horizons and address issues they care about. Studies consistently reveal that Gen Z desires media that is authentic, features diverse voices, is locally focused, and offers meaningful content. They are increasingly weary of content produced by large institutions. This demand for genuine, varied, and impactful narratives is precisely what independent media delivers.

Independent media creators have mastered the art of delivering information to the public by any means necessary. Their strength lies in their grassroots adaptability and focus on community and justice. They maintain trust with both contributors and audiences, embodying over 12 years of best practices in the field of impact producing. Public interest media goes beyond reaching audiences; it bridges trust gaps, strengthens communities, facilitates difficult conversations, and, in some cases, drives systemic policy changes and community dynamics. This exemplifies participatory democracy in action.

**Previously institutionalised storytellers, journalists, and opposition leaders who have been persecuted or silenced often turn to independent media as their last means of communication.** Examples include exiled reporters using Telegram in Belarus, feature documentaries like "While We Watched", and Rain TV broadcasting on YouTube, showcasing the enduring power of independent, open-access media.



### BUILDING A FUTURE WE CAN TRUST

With the magnitude of reality being questioned, we cannot leave public interest media to the vagaries of the marketplace or political funding mechanisms. We must remember that free independent public media access is a cornerstone of democracy, a human right. A new media infrastructure fit for the 21st century must reflect this.

Doc Society is diving headfirst into the possibilities—after launching the Democracy Story Unit in 2023, we held two labs in London (November 2023) and Rio (March 2024), where we convened a diverse group of academics, analysts, community organisers, film-makers, journalists, economists, lawyers, faith leaders, comedians and civil-society organisations to imagine and dream of what this future could look like. One key takeaway from this collective work was the need to build a flotilla, across sectors, to have creative conversations now about imagining and designing a new public-interest media platform fit for the challenges of the 21st century, one that is autocrat- and market-proof, and has a new relationship with the citizens. The future is yet to be written.

→ **Doc Society supports storytelling by artists, journalists, and filmmakers, who maintain full creative and editorial control, free from government, corporate, or algorithmic control. As a global non-profit with a team of 29 based in Europe, East Africa, the Americas, and Australia, they have been providing resources for creatives and championing a network of supportive partners since 2005. In addition to grantmaking and supporting the creative process, Doc Society helps artists and journalists develop impact strategies and connect with communities and allies beyond the media industry and across civil society.**

→ **The Democracy Story Unit from Doc Society is a cultural strategy initiative for transformative storytelling, supporting filmmakers and journalists who critique and interrogate the imperfect, and in some cases failing or harmful, institutions that comprise democracies and societies. The aim is to advance more just and inclusive societies and create better futures for all.**

“Most people are not misinformed, but uninformed.”

#### Quote by Hannah Metzler

According to Hannah Metzler, cognitive psychologist at the Complexity Science Hub and the Medical University of Vienna, most people do not believe too much misinformation, but trust science and the media too little. Many people's interest in the media, politics and science is declining. According to a study published in May 2024, news consumption (including on social media) fell by 25 per cent in 46 countries between 2015 and 2022.



→ **Only in German: Hannah Metzler, Mythos Fehlinformation—Warum soziale Medien weniger gefährlich sind, als wir denken. Spektrum der Wissenschaft, 22.08.2024**

→ **Altay, S., Fletcher, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2024). News participation is declining: Evidence from 46 countries between 2015 and 2022. New Media & Society, 0(0).**

# VOTING

## ...in Biased Media Environments

by **Lukas Stoetzer, Election Researcher and Professor of Quantitative Methods at the Department of Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Witten/Herdecke University**

Elections are the foundation of modern representative democracies. When you, as a citizen of a representative democracy, vote, you make sure that your opinions are considered in the democratic process. As campaigns progress, parties and candidates actively compete for your vote, promoting policies they promise to carry out. Your choice in the elections is critical, as it directly impacts how different opinions are represented and weighted in the political process. The media environment plays an important role in shaping democratic representation. Consider where you get your information about politics. A vast share of voters now finds their information online, through social media platforms and online newspaper outlets. Recent research shows that a majority of the content people see on these platforms comes from 'like-minded' sources, and people select online news outlets based on their prior convictions. This is likely the case for you as well. When you go online, you might find yourself in a biased media environment.

These media environments do more than neutrally inform you as a voter about politics. They provide arguments in social media posts, podcasts, and newspaper editorials about why you should support or oppose specific policies. Additionally, media environments focus on certain issues while neglecting others, guiding your attention and influencing the general debate.

These processes may have an impact on how you vote. The academic literature categorizes media effects on voting as processes of information, persuasion, and priming. Being informed about a party's positions might help you find a better match than you had initially considered. Exposure to arguments concerning an issue might persuade you to reconsider your stance, leading you to choose alternatives that align more closely with your views. Furthermore, priming can shift your focus towards specific issues while causing you to overlook others.

But does exposure to an unbalanced share of arguments about issues affect your voting decision at the ballot? To find out, we conducted a survey experiment where we presented respondents with a set of arguments about a specific policy. One policy we focused on during the last German Federal Election was the re-introduction of a wealth tax—which parties on the left supported (SPD, the Greens, Left Party), while parties on the right opposed it (CDU/CSU, FDP, AfD). There are valid reasons to support either side of the issue, and arguments from either side may shift one's views on the matter. However, it is not always clear how far these arguments shape decisions, not just opinions.

We randomly presented respondents with either arguments in favor of a wealth tax, counterarguments, or a balanced set of arguments on the issue. The arguments in favor contained statements from editorials on the issue, for example: "Currently, workers are disproportionately burdened while the rich and wealthy are not." Afterwards, we asked respondents to choose between two hypothetical candidates holding positions on a set of policy issues (introducing comprehensive school, allowing family reunification, maintaining a CO2 tax, re-introducing a wealth tax, and retaining the COVID mask requirement). Comparing the share of respondents who chose a candidate in favor of the reintroduction of the wealth tax among the different groups allowed us to study the influence of argument exposure on voting.

»Being wary of the distorting media effects on voting is important for you as a citizen. In addition to ensuring that your media environment is not too biased, digital tools can help you receive neutral information about politics.«

Exposure to a biased set of policy arguments can influence voting. In the case where respondents received only pro-arguments, 58% supported the candidate in favor of a wealth tax. In the counterargument case, it was only 51%. A 7%-point difference can have a decisive impact in a two-candidate race. The support among respondents who received a balanced set of arguments was 56%.

One result from our research is that a balanced media environment, where respondents read both sides of the issue, does not significantly influence voting decisions. We studied additional policy issues during the pandemic and the German federal election and found that while respondents in the confronted with arguments in favor of an issue are 3% more likely to choose a candidate who supports the issues, respondents in the counter-group are 3% less likely. We found no difference between respondents exposed to a balanced set of arguments compared to those who received no arguments at all.

These findings reveal the conditions for media effects on voting. In a biased media environment that presents a skewed sample of arguments on specific issues, people are more likely to support candidates that side with the position of the arguments because they are persuaded to take this side of the issue and also focus on the issue. For you, this process might be quite unconscious, but the discussions about policy that take place in these outlets can nonetheless affect the way you form your opinions and what issues you deem important.

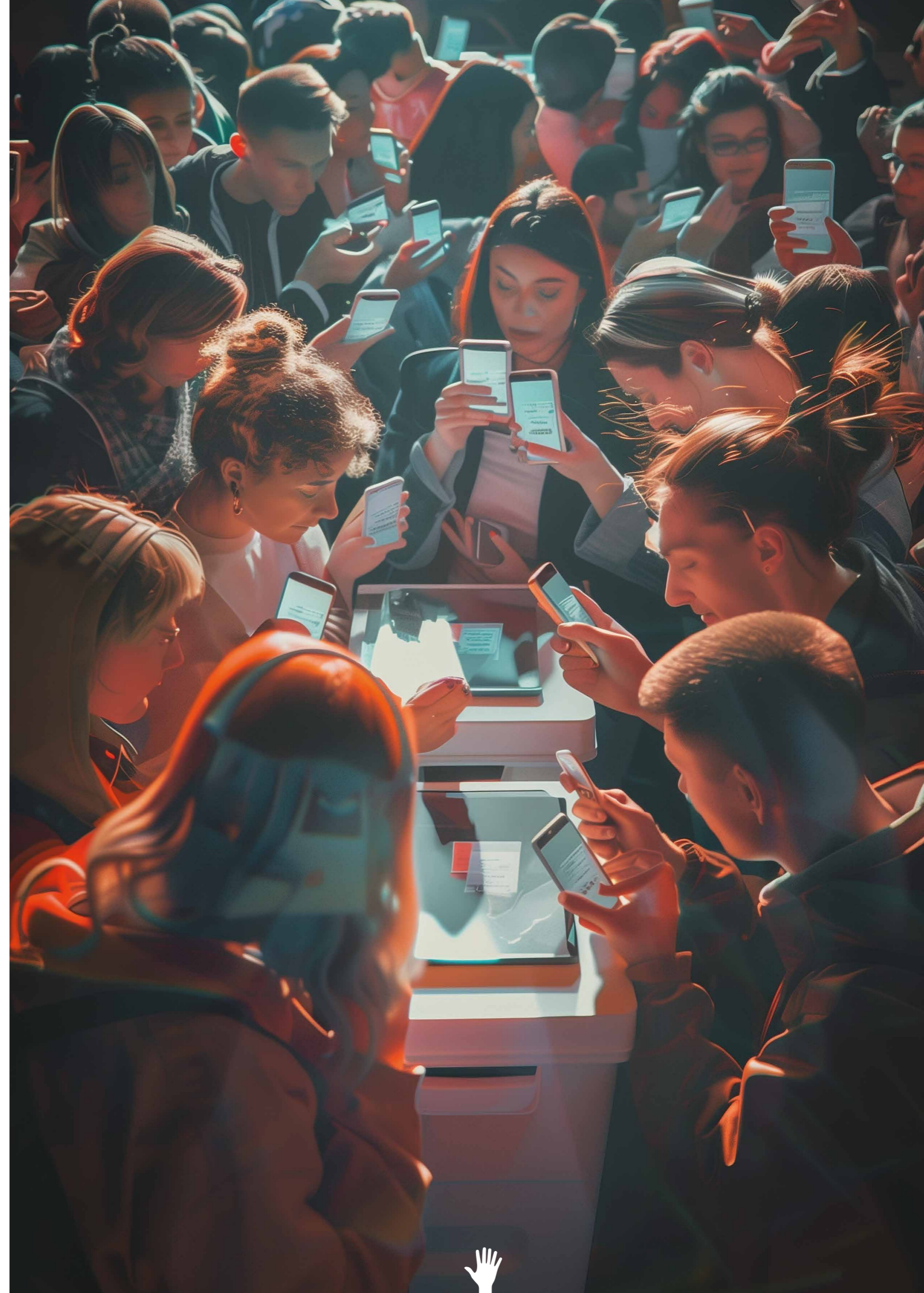
The insights from our research have far-reaching implications when we think about representation and media together more broadly. It is important to offer citizens the possibility to get a balanced view from media outlets about a variety of issues to make informed decisions. These aspects are particularly important in ever-evolving digital media environments, where algorithms decide about the exposure to different issues. Digital media platforms should be aware of the potential distorting effects algorithms have not just on user experience but also on the key institutions that link citizens' viewpoints to the electoral process.

Being wary of the distorting media effects on voting is important for you as a citizen. In addition to ensuring that your media environment is not too biased, digital tools can help you receive neutral information about politics. A useful digital tool to discover which parties match your viewpoints are Voting Advice Applications (VAAs), like the Wahl-O-Mat in Germany. You can go through a detailed list of issues and state your opinions on which policies should or should not be implemented. Based on your answers, the Wahl-O-Mat calculates which parties are most in line with your views—a great way to find the right party to represent your interests in the political arena. This approach essentially makes finding the right choice to have your opinions represented in politics a little simpler.



→ Wahl-o-mat (Germany)

Lukas Stötzer is Professor of Quantitative Methods at the Department of Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Witten/Herdecke University. His fields of research include political sociology and democracy research, political opinion formation, the positioning of political parties, and election forecasting.



**Concept:** Laura Moore,  
Head of Research and Evaluation,  
Deutsche Welle Akademie  
**Text:** Johannes Wiek

When it comes to media, nothing is easy. Behind the news that reaches you every day on your digital device lies an enormously complex and multi-layered media system driven by a multitude of divergent agents and their interests. This media ecosystem can become vulnerable, unstable, and untrustworthy very easily and quickly in ways and places you may not even see.

To protect the media system you inhabit and to preserve its independence – along with our freedom of expression and right to information as the cornerstone of democracy—you should understand its various dimensions and their interconnections, including their fault lines and breaking points.

To this end, researchers at the Deutsche Welle Academy, led by Laura Moore, have developed the MEDIA VIABILITY INDICATORS, a framework that helps you grasp the five key societal dimensions and factors influencing the functioning and quality of news media: economics, politics, content and expertise, technology, and the community they are serving.

Have a look at...

# ... the full scale of a viable media ecosystem behind the surface of your device.

## 01 Politics

- 1. RULE OF LAW**  
Government actions are determined by laws that are fairly applied and enforced.
- 2. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION**  
The country has a strong legal framework supporting freedom of expression.
- 3. ACCESS TO INFORMATION**  
Citizens and journalists can access public information.
- 4. LEGAL EQUALITY**  
Laws and regulations affecting news media organizations are comparable to those applied to other industries and are impartially enforced.
- 5. MEDIA WITHIN SOCIETY**  
Relations between government and news media organizations are mutually respectful and professional.

## 02 Economics

- 6. NATIONAL ECONOMY**  
The national economy is strong enough to make news media organizations financially viable.
- 7. FINANCIAL STABILITY OF NEWS MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS**  
News media organizations are financially stable.
- 8. FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE OF NEWS MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS**  
News media organizations' sources of capital do not constrain their editorial independence.
- 9. COMPETITION**  
Moderate competition among news media organizations exists, allowing for quality journalism.
- 10. AUDIENCE DEMAND**  
Audience demand for quality journalism content supports a strong news media industry.

# MEDIA VIABILITY

## 03 Community

11. **CITIZEN EDUCATION**  
Citizens are able to consume and evaluate the quality of news and information content across multiple platforms.
12. **SOCIAL COHESION**  
Society is generally cohesive and peaceful, with the majority of citizens sharing accepted political and social values across diverse ethnicities, political and religious affiliations.
13. **TRUST AND CREDIBILITY**  
Citizens have a generally high level of confidence in the credibility of news media organizations and their content.
14. **PARTICIPATION**  
Citizens contribute to the content produced and distributed by news media organizations.
15. **AUDIENCE DATA**  
News media organizations have regular access to reliable data about audiences and their media uses.

## 04 Technology

16. **PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION RESOURCES**  
News media organizations have access to the necessary production and distribution resources.
17. **NEWS MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS' ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGIES**  
News media organizations' access to production and distribution technologies is fair and apolitical.
18. **AUDIENCE ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGIES**  
Citizens can access and afford the technologies over which news media content is distributed.
19. **DIGITAL EXPERTISE**  
News media organizations have the technological expertise to optimize their use of digital production, distribution, and management technologies.
20. **CITIZENS' DIGITAL RIGHTS**  
The government, news media organizations, and private companies respect citizens' digital rights, allowing them to communicate freely and safely online.

## 05 Content & Expertise

21. **QUALITY CONTENT**  
The public has access to quality news media content.
22. **JOURNALISM EXPERTISE**  
News media organizations have the necessary structures as well as professionally educated and trained journalists to produce high-quality content that meets international standards.
23. **OWNERSHIP OF NEWS MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS**  
Ownership of news media organizations is transparent and does not prevent diversity of perspectives or quality journalism.
24. **BUSINESS STRUCTURE**  
News media organizations have the structures to be viable.
25. **BUSINESS EXPERTISE**  
News media organizations have the personnel and expertise to be strategically and financially viable.



→ Learn more about the Media Viability Indicators of Deutsche Welle Academy.



→ And don't miss out on getting to know the more detailed sub-indicators, which will give you an even more comprehensive understanding of the interrelationships within your media ecosystem.

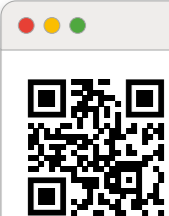
UW/H STUDIUM  
FUNDAMENTALE  
LECTURER 2024

Laura Moore is Head of Research and Evaluation at DW Academy, the media development branch of Deutsche Welle, Germany's international broadcaster, providing news and information in multiple languages to audiences worldwide, offering training and support for journalists and media professionals globally to promote free and independent media.

# THE JOURNALISM AI REPORT

Studies

UW/H STUDIUM FUNDAMENTALE LECTURER 2024



https://www.journalismai.info/research/2023-generating-change

## Generating Change

A global survey of what news organisations are doing with artificial intelligence

The 2023 JournalismAI Report, led by **Professor Charly Beckett**, a prominent media innovation expert leading the London School of Economics (LSE)'s Polis JournalismAI project and valued guest in the "Understanding Media" project at the University of Witten/Herdecke, explores the profound impact of generative AI (genAI) on journalism. Beckett, renowned for his deep insights into media trends, highlights how genAI is not only transforming newsrooms but also posing new ethical and editorial challenges. This comprehensive survey of over 120 media professionals from 46 countries sheds light on the opportunities and risks associated with AI, offering crucial guidance for the future of journalism.

# FREEDOM HOUSE

## SPECIAL REPORT 2023

As press freedom faces mounting threats across Europe, the latest report from Freedom House, "Reviving News Media in Embattled Europe," sheds light on the challenges confronting independent journalism and the potential paths to restoring its vitality. The report provides deep insights into the dangers posed by political interference and economic instability, as well as into the role of digital platforms. Discover the strategies that could strengthen journalism, and explore why a free press is more crucial than ever.



https://freedomhouse.org/research/2023/reviving-news-media-embattled-europe



# MEDIA PLURALISM MONITOR

## MAPPING THE RISKS TO MEDIA PLURALISM AND THE SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS ACROSS EUROPE

The Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) is a tool developed by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom to assess the potential vulnerabilities within national media systems that threaten media pluralism. Using 20 indicators and summarizing 200 variables, the MPM provides a comprehensive analysis across four key areas: **fundamental protection, market plurality, political independence, and social inclusiveness.**

As the flagship project of the CMPF, the Media Pluralism Monitor is a critical resource, with the latest 2023 report offering insights into 32 European countries (EU 27 plus Albania, Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey).



In addressing the **GLOBAL CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS**, we rely on journalism that is accurate, independent, and accessible to inform the public debate, clearly highlight the public interest, and protect those most affected by this crisis. Environmental and climate journalists shed light on corrupt practices and illegal activities linked to environmentally harmful businesses and expose the vested interests behind polluting industries. They report on state authorities that enable or tolerate these practices and call out those who sow disinformation and doubt about the science behind climate change for profit. However, this crucial journalism is at risk. This report—part of the **International Press Institute (IPI)'s initiative to defend and strengthen environmental journalism**—is the newest and most extensive overview of attacks on environmental and climate journalists. It reveals the alarming degree to which these attacks are endangering press freedom and impeding efforts to protect the environment and our climate.



# Press Freedom in Europe: TIME TO TURN THE TIDE

## TIME TO TURN THE TIDE

The 2024 report by the **Safety of Journalists Platform**, "Press Freedom in Europe: Time to Turn the Tide," reveals a sharp decline in press freedom across Europe, posing a serious threat to democracy. The report documents increasing attacks on journalists, particularly in countries with authoritarian tendencies, where state-supported efforts to silence the press are on the rise. It also highlights the unlawful deployment of spyware against journalists, the use of abusive lawsuits designed to stifle investigative work, and the precarious situation of many journalists in exile. The report calls for immediate action to protect journalists and uphold the independence of the media, both of which are vital to preserving democracy in Europe.

Read the full report:



# GENERATIVE AI IN JOURNALISM

The study "Generative AI in Journalism: The Evolution of Newswork and Ethics in a Generative Information Ecosystem" by **Nicholas Diakopoulos, Hannes Cools, Charlotte Li, Natali Helberger, Ernest Kung & Aimee Rinehart** explores the transformative impact of generative AI on journalism, highlighting both its potential and the ethical challenges it brings. Drawing on data from an Associated Press survey of 292 news professionals, the study reveals how generative AI is currently being utilized in the industry and what concerns exist about its application.



# New UNESCO Report Exposes Rising Dangers for Environmental Journalists

**UNESCO's report, "Press and Planet in Danger"**, reveals alarming trends in the safety of environmental journalists. The report documents a 42% surge in attacks over the past five years (2019-2023) compared to the previous period, underscoring an increasingly perilous environment for those reporting on climate issues.

Key statistics from the report highlight the growing threats faced by climate journalists and news outlets. With an average of 50 attacks per year, the review found that at least 749 journalists, groups of journalists, and news media outlets were targeted while covering environmental issues in 89 countries between 2009 and 2023. These attacks often occur in contexts of environmental protests, mining and land conflicts, and local issues such as logging, deforestation, and pollution.



Studies

“Despite ethical concerns, nearly 70% of newsroom staffers say they use generative AI to create content.”



→ Data from the Associated Press survey report “Generative AI in Journalism: The Evolution of Newswork and Ethics in a Generative Information Ecosystem” by Nicholas Diakopoulos, Hannes Cools, Charlotte Li, Natali Helberger, Ernest Kung, Aimee Rinehart. April 2024.

## AI n using AI in journalism

Idea & prompt:  
Martin Henrich

  ChatGPT ▾

  MH

Can you generate a fictional discussion between two editors of a magazine on generative AI, debating whether or not to let ChatGPT author several of their articles and whether or not it is their journalistic responsibility to indicate that an article was written by AI and to provide their readers with the prompts given to said AI?



**Editor 1:** Alright, so let's dive into this topic of using generative AI for our magazine articles. I've been doing some research, and it seems like ChatGPT could be a game-changer for us.

**Editor 2:** Interesting, but I have some concerns. Sure, using AI could speed up our content creation process, but doesn't it compromise the integrity of our journalism? Can an AI really capture the nuances and insights that human writers bring to the table?

**Editor 1:** Valid point. However, ChatGPT has been trained on a vast amount of data and can mimic human writing quite convincingly. Plus, we can always review and edit the output to ensure it meets our standards.

**Editor 2:** But what about transparency? If we start using AI to write articles, shouldn't we disclose that fact to our readers? And should we also provide them with the prompts given to the AI so they understand the context?

**Editor 1:** I see where you're coming from. Transparency is crucial in journalism. Perhaps we could have a disclaimer at the beginning or end of the article stating that it was written with the assistance of AI. As for providing prompts, I'm not sure if our readers would be interested in that level of detail.

**Editor 2:** I disagree. Our readers deserve to know how the content is produced. If we're using AI to generate articles, they should know the extent of its involvement. It's not just about transparency; it's about maintaining trust with our audience.

**Editor 1:** Fair point. So, it seems like we're in agreement that using AI for content creation could be beneficial, but we need to be transparent about its involvement and provide context to our readers. How about we start with a trial run of having ChatGPT author a few articles, and we can gather feedback from our audience on how they feel about it?

**Editor 2:** That sounds like a reasonable approach. Let's proceed with caution and keep our journalistic integrity intact while exploring the potential of AI in our content creation process.

  ChatGPT ▾



Message ChatGPT ...



ChatGPT can make mistakes. Check important info.



# ...MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY?

## The four paradoxes of media innovation

by Kristin van Damme, Floor Denecker and Lieven De Marez, Research Group for Media, Innovation and Contemporary Technologies, Ghent University and research hub imec

### A TIME TRAVEL THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA LIFE

For 15 years, our research group at the University of Ghent and imec has been observing the changing relationship to media and technology of a particular demographic group in the heart of Europe: the Flemish.

At a time of significant changes within the media and technology landscapes, we consistently monitored their media ownership and use, as well as their attitudes towards media and technology. Comparing the findings with previous data revealed several profound shifts.

Media are ubiquitous, with more content being produced by an increasing number of creators and made available to a global audience on a multitude of devices and platforms. In today's world, people live in media—as media scientist Mark Deuze put it in his book *Media Life*—, and they often move effortlessly between traditional and online media. This form of media nativity, however, comes with its own challenges.

### FROM TECHNO-OPTIMISM TO TECHNO-REALISM

We observed the emergence of four “technology paradoxes”, where people simultaneously experience both positive and negative consequences from the use of the new media and technologies. Over the years, (the majority of) the Flemish have shifted from an attitude of techno-optimism to techno-realism. While they mostly remain positive and enthusiastic about technology, they are also increasingly aware and (partly) more concerned with technological achievements. We detected their growing awareness that not everything that is technologically possible is also desirable from a personal or societal point of view. Also, being part of an expanding digital ecosystem can mean being pulled in opposite directions, as appears to be the case for the people of Flanders, observed over the past 15 years. Data drawn from the imec.digimeter survey yielded four pairs of oppositional poles—paradoxes, if you will. We would like to invite you to compare your own media experiences and perception to those of the Flemish:

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT...

## PARADOX 1

## The dependency paradox: connected, yet also reliant

**Katrien woke up and immediately reached for her smartphone, feeling a pang of anxiety until she checked her notifications. She spent hours scrolling through social media yet didn't feel it took up much of her time. One day, she decided to limit her use by setting screen time restrictions but found herself constantly overriding them. Despite her efforts, she still enjoyed the connection and entertainment her phone provided. Eventually, she realised she was stuck in a cycle of dependence, craving the very thing she wanted to control.**

**Never before have people spent so much time on their smartphones, nor have they attached so much importance to their mobile devices or to being connected via social media. At the same time, people have never been more worried about dependency and addiction.**

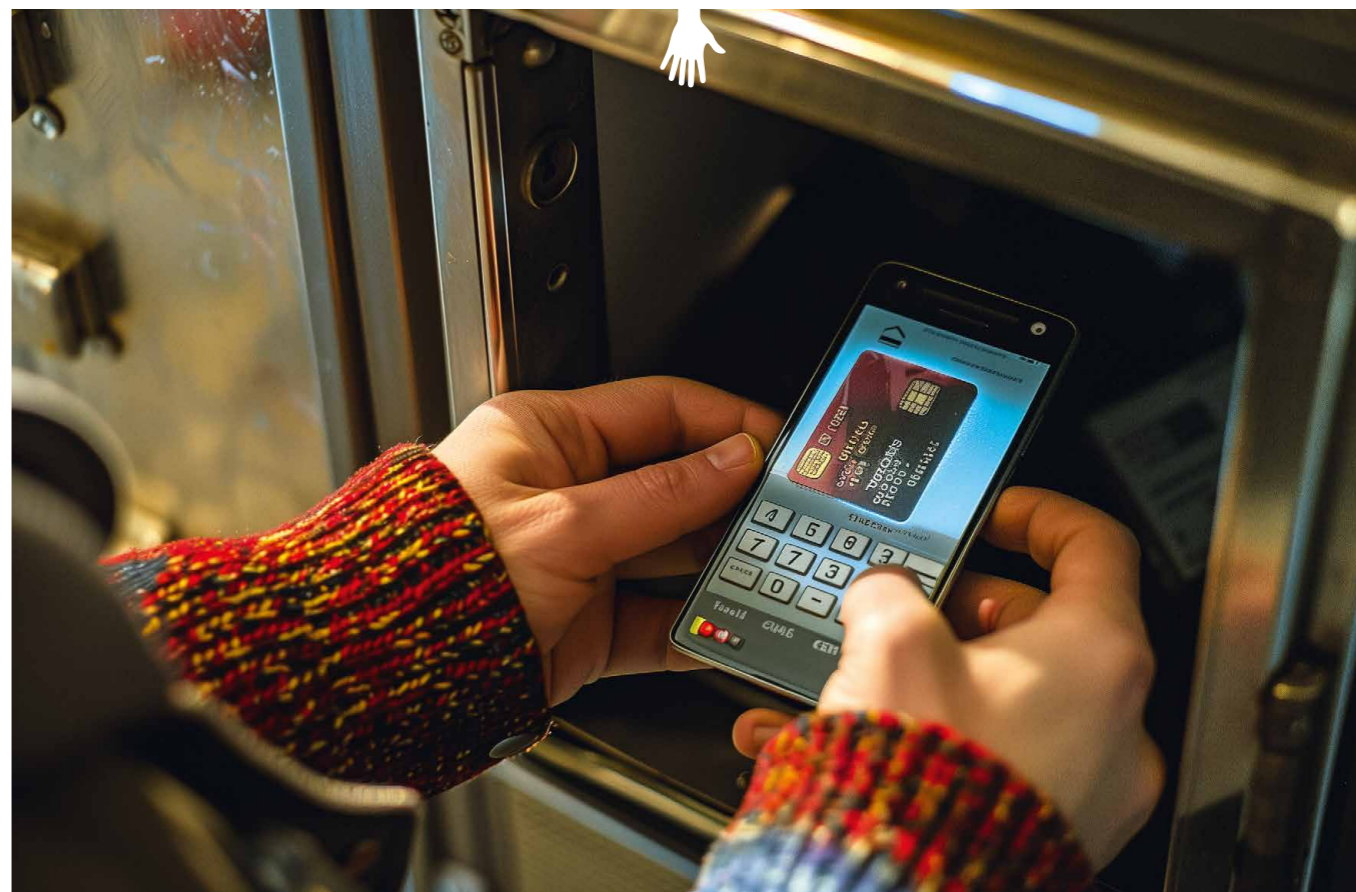
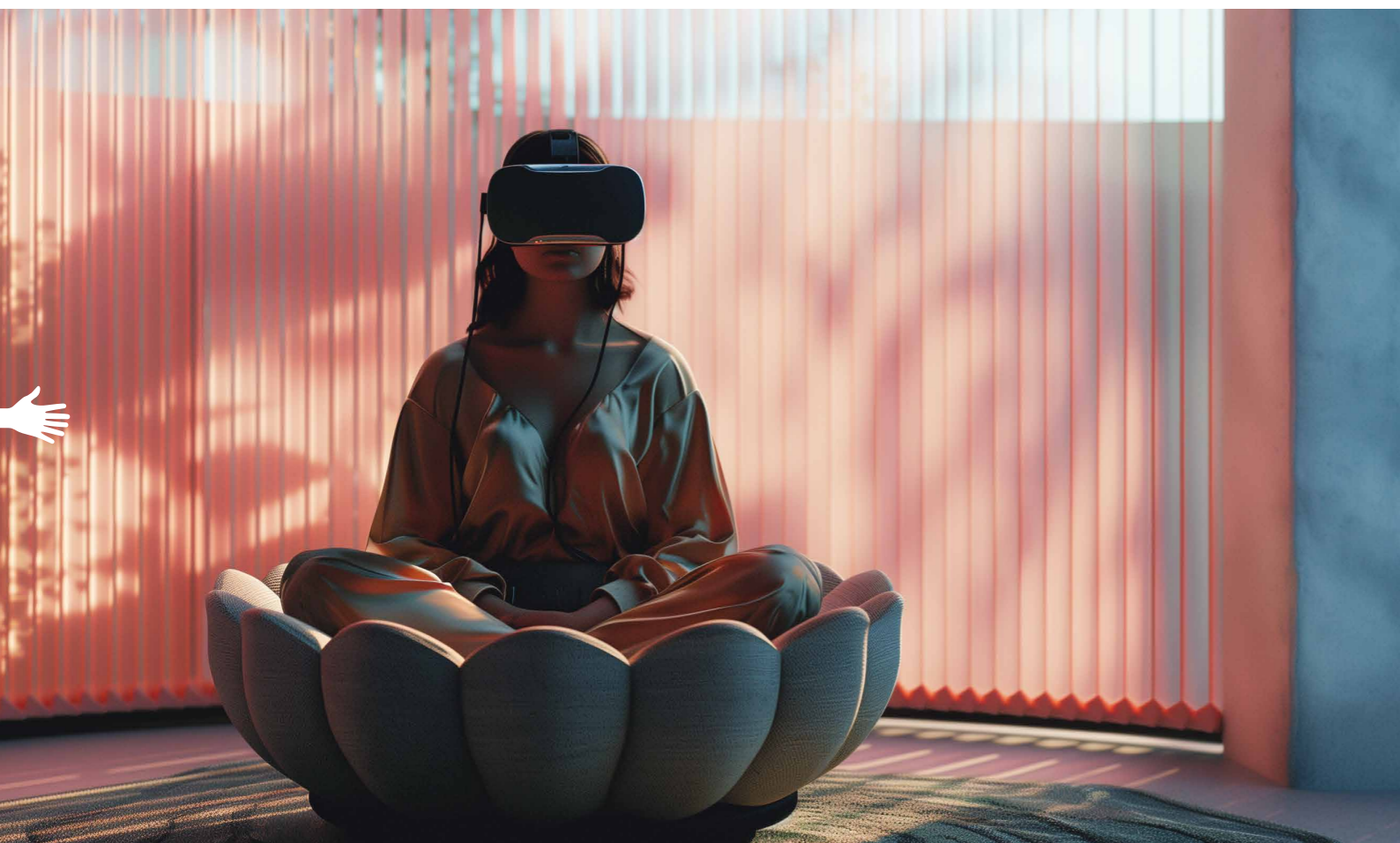
The dependency paradox refers to the balancing act of preserving digital well-being. As media and technology are increasingly integrated into individuals' daily routines, a corresponding sense of reliance on these tools has become apparent. In 2012, most Flemish social media users reported daily usage but did not see it as time-consuming.

By 2015, a dependency paradox emerged among Flemish users, influenced by smartphones and social media, leading some to seek distance from platforms like Facebook.

In 2016, 20% of Flemings felt dependent on their smartphones and 29% on social media. Despite this, many continued to enjoy these technologies. To manage dependence, they set self-imposed rules, striving to balance their usage.

By 2023, 80% of individuals used such rules, but only 40% found them effective. Enthusiasm for these rules waned, with people feeling less in control. Additionally, a quarter of Flemings felt addicted to their smartphones, and 40% worried about excessive use.

**The paradox highlights the struggle to balance digital well-being and connectivity.**



## PARADOX 2

## The data paradox: sharing data, yet also concerned

**Pieter loved the convenience of online banking and shopping, appreciating how apps remembered his preferences and made transactions smooth. However, he couldn't shake the nagging worry about his personal information being exposed. Even as he shared more data to get personalised recommendations, he grew increasingly anxious about privacy breaches. Pieter tried to manage his digital footprint by adjusting privacy settings, but the trade-off for convenience was always in the back of his mind. He found himself in a constant struggle between enjoying the ease of digital life and fearing for his online privacy.**

**Over recent years, people have (forcibly or not) embraced online platforms for close to all services (media in particular, but also banking, shopping, work, health, government interaction, etc.). Platforms whose constant availability people greatly appreciate, and whose convenience is due to personalisation based on data their users knowingly or unknowingly share. At the same time, however, we also see peaks in concerns about privacy and the extent to which companies are transparent about their data collection. Consistently, we can interpret this data paradox as a call for more control over personal data (on digital platforms).**

The rise of social media (and broader big tech companies, including Meta and Google) has been accompanied by concerns about personal data online.

In 2012, one in three Flemings believed social media violated their privacy.

By 2015, concerns about online privacy grew, even as people increased their social media use.

By 2023, the data paradox became more pronounced, with 56% worried about online privacy. This concern, initially driven by social media, now also relates to the digitisation of public services. The shift to an "online first" approach has led to the disappearance of physical counters and a reliance on app-based authentication, such as ItsMe.

**The paradox underscores the need for greater control over personal data amidst digital shifts.**

## PARADOX 4

## The AI paradox: curious, yet also concerned

Raheem was fascinated by the capabilities of AI, particularly the way it could streamline his work and offer personalised recommendations. He eagerly explored new AI tools, hoping to enhance his productivity. However, he also worried about the implications of AI on privacy and job security, especially as chatbots and automation became more prevalent. Despite his curiosity, Raheem found himself unsettled by the idea that he might not be able to distinguish between human and machine interactions in the future. His excitement was tempered by a growing sense of unease about the potential downsides of AI.

2023 was the year of generative artificial intelligence (AI). In addition to the three existing paradoxes (dependence, truth and data), we witnessed a fourth paradox emerge. We observed a clear divide between passionate supporters and staunch opponents of AI. Meanwhile, more than half of the population remains undecided, still seeking to form a definitive stance on the issue.

On one hand, AI sparks significant curiosity and admiration among Flemings. Seven in ten are impressed by AI's capabilities, and three out of five are eager to explore its applications (61%) and learn more about it (57%). Initially, this interest stems from the belief that AI will enhance professional efficiency, with about half (48%) convinced of its productivity benefits. Additionally, one in three is interested in AI's broader applications in daily life.

On the other hand, concerns about AI have surged this year. AI's role in spreading disinformation has heightened the truth paradox. Two-thirds (64%) worry about AI's negative impacts, a significant increase, and over half are concerned about privacy (56%) and distinguishing humans from chatbots (51%).

Thus, people are caught in a paradox: AI evokes both curiosity and concern. This shift from techno-optimism to techno-realism is evident as the number of unwaveringly positive individuals declines (-9). Currently, one in three (31%) believes AI's benefits outweigh its drawbacks, but this optimism wanes as AI becomes more tangible, exemplified by ChatGPT.

Conversely, there has been a notable rise in those strongly negative about AI (21%, up 11 points), with fears about job impacts (35%). Meanwhile, about half (51%) remain undecided or have no opinion on AI. The future acceptance of AI will depend on their experiences in the coming years.

**The paradox reflects a shift from techno-optimism to techno-realism, with increasing skepticism. Future acceptance of AI will depend on personal experiences and tangible outcomes.**

## EMPOWERING THE PARADOXES

The four identified paradoxes highlight the need for an inclusive digital transformation. I Mec.digimeter categorises people into five segments based on their relationship with technology, ranging from "passionate supporters" to those with "no relationship." These segments vary significantly in how they grapple with the paradoxes.

To achieve an inclusive transformation, we must empower all people to feel 'in control' of today's technology, ensuring they can fully embrace future advancements. Without this, we risk widening the digital divide, with a leading group pulling further ahead—i.e. creating a new digital divide instead of closing a gap towards inclusivity. Empowering and convincing people of their control over technology is a crucial task for the government and media sector.

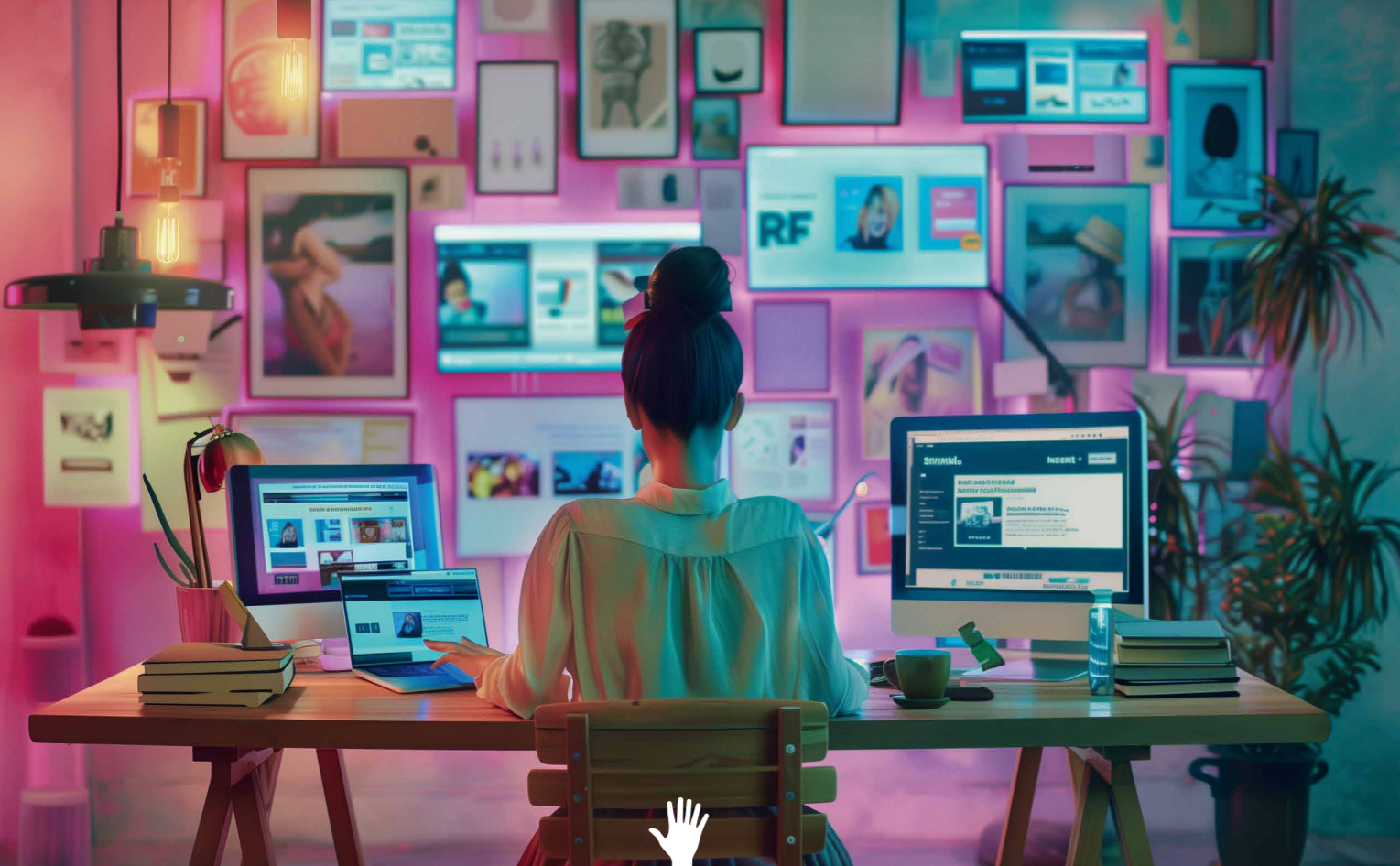
**Lieven de Marez is a Professor of Media, Technology, and Innovation, and Research Director of the Media, Innovation, and Communication Technologies (mict) group at Ghent University's Department of Communication Sciences.**

**Kristin van Damme is a Researcher at the Center for Journalism Studies at Ghent University's Department of Communication Sciences.**

**Floor Denecker is a Junior Researcher at the mict group within Ghent University's Department of Communication Sciences.**



→ The imec.digimeter Reports "Digitale trends in Vlaanderen" 2009–today



## PARADOX 3

## The truth paradox: better informed, yet also concerned about disinformation

Sofie felt more informed than ever with news apps and social media updates at her fingertips. She loved reading the latest articles and watching live news streams, believing she was staying on top of current events. Yet, as stories of fake news and misinformation spread, she began to doubt the reliability of her sources. During the pandemic, she turned to trusted local news, but the influx of conflicting information online made her wary. Sofie grappled with the challenge of discerning truth in a sea of information, feeling both empowered and confused.

The Truth paradox results from the rise in online and social-news use. From 2018 onwards, there appeared to be increasing concern about the possible influence of "fake news" and disinformation on themselves and society. The truth paradox highlights the complex relationship between individuals and the digital information landscape. While they have unprecedented access to information, people must also grapple with the challenges of discerning truth from falsehood and navigating a space in which misinformation can proliferate.

In 2019, over half of Flemings enjoyed digital news channels and felt better informed, yet worried about their reliability.

In 2020, at the start of the Corona crisis, Flemings faced a wave of disinformation, making fake news feel immediate. Traditional news sources saw increased trust during the pandemic. Local news brands were seen as beacons of trust during times of disinformation.

By 2023, 51% of the population still struggles with the truth paradox.

The truth paradox, however, also extends beyond disinformation to include concerns about phishing and AI, where people fear they are unable to distinguish between human and machine-generated content. The challenge remains to empower people to regain control over online information and maintain trust in digital sources.

**The paradox highlights the need to empower individuals to trust and control digital information.**

# NAVIGATING MEDIA PARADOXES: *Practical Tips from Ghent University Experts*

The research team at Ghent University has crafted some practical advice on handling the four media paradoxes. Take a look and see how these tips can work for you...

## 01 COPING WITH THE DEPENDENCY PARADOX

- Set realistic screen-time limits: Use apps to monitor and limit your screen time but be honest with yourself about sticking to these limits.
- Create no-tech zones: Designate specific areas or times of day as tech-free, such as during meals or an hour before bedtime.
- Appreciate being disconnected: Engage in screen-free activities like reading, sports, or spending time with friends in person.

## 02 COPING WITH THE DATA PARADOX

- Adjust privacy settings: Regularly check and update your privacy settings on social media and other online accounts to manage the information you share.
- Be selective with apps: Only download apps from trusted sources and be mindful of the permissions they request.
- Educate yourself: Stay informed about data privacy and understand the benefits and potential risks of sharing personal information online.

## 03 COPING WITH THE TRUTH PARADOX

- Verify sources: Check the credibility of sources before believing or sharing information. Look for reputable news outlets, fact-checking websites, or respected knowledge centres.
- Be critical: Question sensational headlines and stories. If something evokes a strong emotional reaction or seems too good (or bad) to be true, the information might be misleading or even fake news.
- Diversify your news: Follow multiple news sources to get a well-rounded view of events and avoid being misled by a single narrative.

## 04 COPING WITH THE AI PARADOX

- Stay informed: Keep up with the latest developments in AI to understand its capabilities and limitations.
- Balance curiosity and caution: Explore AI tools and technologies but be aware of potential risks like privacy concerns and content hallucinations.
- Participate in discussions: Engage in conversations about AI ethics, share your perspective, and learn from others to form a balanced view of AI's role in education and society.

## JOIN THE TEAM

### Wo gibt es denn so etwas?

Arbeit, die Dich herausfordert, Dich beflügelt, Dich beruflich und persönlich voranbringt. Die Sinn und deshalb Spaß macht. Die gleichermaßen Deine Expertise und Kreativität erfordert. Und das gemeinsam mit Kolleg\*innen, die gerne arbeiten, nicht nur weil das Arbeitsumfeld keine Wünsche offenlässt.

### Bei uns!

Für uns sind alle Mitarbeitenden wertvoll, denn jede\*r Einzelne trägt zum Gelingen unserer Projekte und damit zum Erfolg des Unternehmens bei. Deshalb haben alle bei uns die gleichen Chancen – egal woher Du stammst, für welche Identität Du Dich entschieden hast und welche Handicaps Du mitbringst. Hauptsache, Du arbeitest mit Energie, Enthusiasmus und Teamgeist! Denn am stärksten sind wir im Team.

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ÖFFNUNGSZEITEN

MONTAG - SAMSTAG 10.00 - 19.00 UHR

# Securing democracy's primacy over technology

by Paul Nemitz, Principal Advisor at the EU Commission

Artificial intelligence (AI), much like nuclear power, has the potential to transcend borders, bringing both enormous benefits and significant risks. As Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom of Oxford University warns, AI could be humanity's last invention if it leads to catastrophic outcomes. Yet, if developed and used responsibly, AI can serve the public interest and benefit all of humanity. This requires stringent regulations to ensure safe and beneficial development, something the market alone cannot guarantee. Recognising this, the G7 leaders even invited the Pope to their meeting in Italy to discuss AI. On the 57th World Day of Peace, January 1, 2024, the Pope addressed the global community on "Artificial Intelligence and Peace."

The European Union, with the AI Act coming into force in August 2024, acknowledges that democracy cannot rely solely on the ethics or self-regulation of private tech giants like Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft (GAFAM), Elon Musk's ventures, or Chinese companies like Tencent, Alibaba, and Baidu to establish AI rules. Democracies share a common interest in agreeing on rules and institutions for the international governance of AI, not only when strong AI surpasses human intelligence across multiple domains, as posited by **Howard Gardner**<sup>1</sup>.

The EU's AI Act is the world's first legal regulation for AI, following the precedent set by the 2016 **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)**<sup>2</sup>. These instruments demonstrate that innovation occurs not just in technology but also within the political system of democracy. Technical innovations that pose risks to individual rights, democracy, and state sovereignty must be accompanied by democratic, innovative, and binding regulations. Only the law, with its binding nature and enforceability, can guarantee a level playing field for competition and the protection of fundamental rights. Ethics, self-regulation, and non-binding political declarations cannot achieve this.

Without the AI Regulation, Europe could have faced 27 different national AI regulations. A unified European law is thus a programme of less regulation, serving business interests by reducing regulatory fragmentation.

Negotiations on a **multilateral agreement for AI regulation are nearing completion in the Council of Europe**<sup>3</sup>, with participation from the USA and many other non-European countries. While non-European states can join Council of Europe conventions, the direct protective effect of the AI Convention will be limited due to exclusions of key areas and the lengthy implementation process in member states.

1

**Howard Gardner** is an American psychologist and educator best known for his theory of multiple intelligences, which he introduced in his book *Frames of Mind* (1983). The core idea of *Frames of Mind* is that intelligence is not a single, unified ability but rather a set of distinct types, including linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, and interpersonal intelligences, among others. This theory challenges traditional views on intelligence and has significantly influenced education practices.

2



→ The 2016 **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)** is an EU law that

sets strict guidelines on how personal data is collected, stored, and processed. It aims to protect individuals' privacy and data rights, with significant penalties for non-compliance, and applies to all organizations operating within the EU or handling EU citizens' data.

3



→ The **Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence**

focused on ensuring that AI respects human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. It was adopted on 17 May 2024 by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, and will be opened for signature on the occasion of the Conference of Ministers of Justice in Vilnius (Lithuania) on 5 September 2024.

# THE EUROPEAN AI ACT



It is essential to remember that technological innovation and its regulation by law, along with supervision by public authorities, are not unusual. This parallel is evident in the regulation of nuclear power, which saw international and national supervisory authorities established before commercial nuclear reactors were connected to the grid. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was founded on July 29, 1957, with the ratification of its statute by President Eisenhower.

Within a decade of producing electricity from an experimental reactor in the USA, legal and administrative structures were in place to protect against nuclear risks. Similarly, the European Commission and the AI Office, established by Commission Decision on January 24, 2024, bear great responsibility. The AI Office within the Commission will be a centre of excellence for enforcing the AI Regulation, protecting fundamental rights and democracy in the technological age. The knowledge gained here and across the AI Act's governance system must be utilised for democratic control of technological power.

The implementation of the AI Regulation will present European and national courts with challenging interpretation questions. Courts must consider the power and information imbalance between citizens and AI actors when interpreting the law. The introduction of a fundamental rights impact assessment in the AI Regulation underscores its focus on protecting fundamental rights and democracy. This new law, designed to safeguard democracy and fundamental rights in technology, presents new tasks for courts and engineers alike.

We need engineers who, in the spirit of **Eugen Kogon**<sup>4</sup> and **Hans Jonas**<sup>5</sup>, take responsibility for the consequences of their AI developments and actively contribute to creating human-centred AI that respects and strengthens fundamental rights and democracy. Additionally, courts must guide and contain new AI technology through law, considering constitutional principles and the **EU Charter of Fundamental Rights**<sup>6</sup>.



4

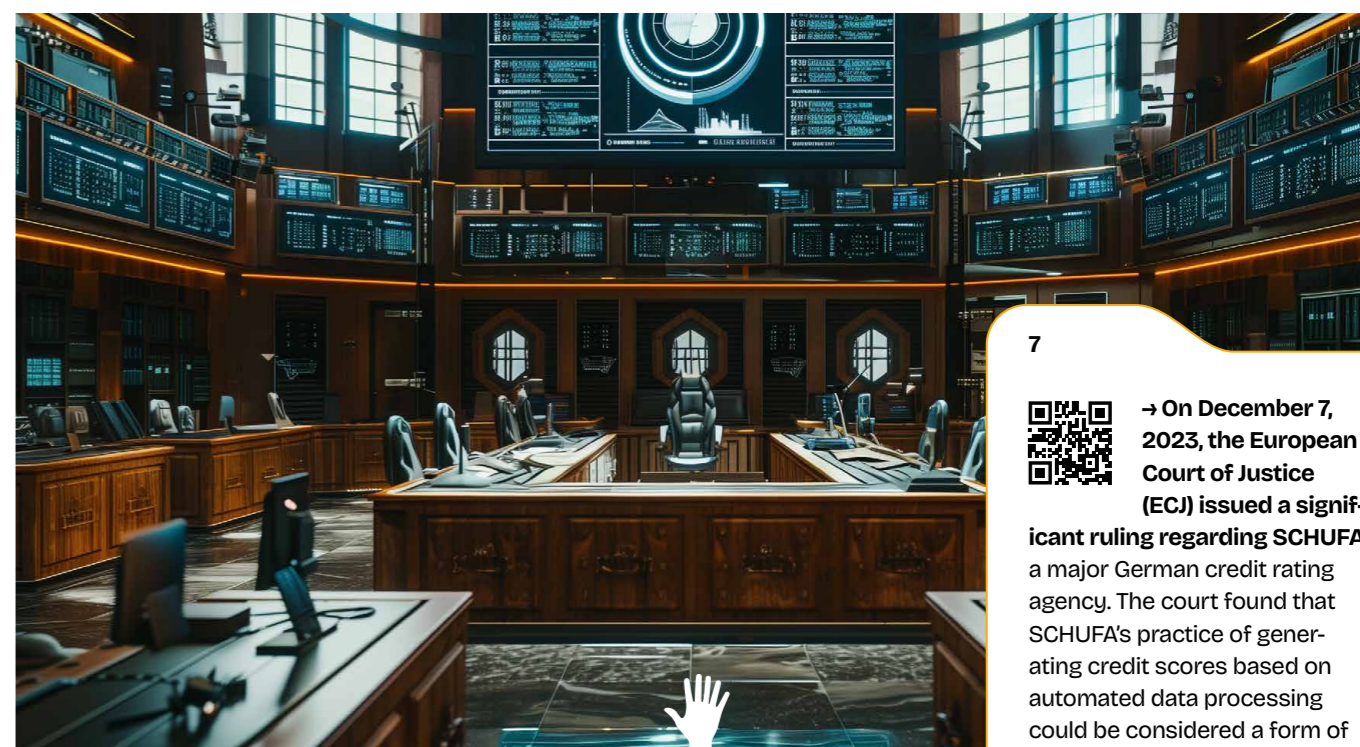
**Eugen Kogon** was a German political scientist, sociologist, and Holocaust survivor, known for his work on the analysis of totalitarian regimes and his influential book on Nazi concentration camps, "The Theory and Practice of Hell". He was also a prominent advocate for European integration.

5

**Hans Jonas** was a German philosopher known for his work in ethics, particularly in bioethics and environmental philosophy. His most influential work, "The Imperative of Responsibility", argues for a moral duty to protect future generations in the face of technological advancements.

6

→ The EU is currently considering how to adapt the interpretation of the **Charter of Fundamental Rights**, which enshrines the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals in the European Union, to the challenges and opportunities posed by AI. While no formal amendments have been made, there is ongoing debate on how to ensure that AI technologies respect fundamental rights like privacy, non-discrimination, and fairness. The European Commission and other bodies are working on guidelines and potential regulations to ensure that AI development aligns with the Charter's principles.



7



→ On December 7, 2023, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) issued a significant ruling regarding SCHUFA, a major German credit rating agency. The court found that SCHUFA's practice of generating credit scores based on automated data processing could be considered a form of "automated individual decision-making" under Article 22 of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This type of decision-making is generally prohibited if it significantly affects the individual, as it does in the case of credit scoring, where a low score can lead to the denial of credit.

A critical question in the age of AI is whether individuals have enforceable rights against those who develop, market, and use AI systems, as well as against supervisory authorities. In data protection, this is undoubtedly the case, as confirmed by the **European Court of Justice (ECJ) Schufa**<sup>7</sup> ruling on December 7, 2023. A similar discussion is now emerging regarding the AI Act. The European Parliament strengthened the AI Act's fundamental rights orientation by adding a fundamental rights impact assessment. It remains to be seen if individuals can hold authorities accountable for failing to implement the AI Act.

Other authorities, such as consumer protection or data protection agencies, might also enforce the AI Act more effectively. The **ECJ's Bundeskartellamt/Facebook ruling on July 4, 2023**<sup>8</sup>, has paved the way for modernising the enforcement of economic administrative law. In a world dominated by AI and multi-sided platforms, we need a platformisation of enforcement, where authorities assess facts holistically and consider various legal bases.

Democracy requires openness to change, reflected in electoral outcomes. This means AI systems used for administrative tasks must be evaluated for their adaptability to democratic changes. If humans can implement necessary changes more flexibly and cost-effectively, AI should not be used. AI, working with data from today and yesterday, lacks the critical attitude towards the present, dissatisfaction with routine, and the imagination for a better future—qualities essential for democracy and innovation. Philosopher Kant's insight that one cannot derive what should be from what is remains a guiding principle in evaluating AI's potential.

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**Paul Nemitz** is a Principal Advisor at the EU Commission and co-authored "Prinzip Mensch: Macht Freiheit und Demokratie im Zeitalter der Künstlichen Intelligenz" with **Matthias Pfeffer**. The updated English edition, titled "The Human Imperative. Power, Democracy and Freedom in the Age of Artificial Intelligence" was released in 2023. The views expressed here are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the EU Commission.

8



→ On July 4, 2023, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) issued a landmark ruling in the case between Meta (formerly Facebook) and the German Federal Cartel Office (Bundeskartellamt). The court confirmed that national competition authorities, like the Bundeskartellamt, can assess compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as part of their investigations into abuse of dominance under competition law. This decision underscores that violations of data protection laws can be considered as evidence of anti-competitive behavior, particularly in the digital economy where access to and processing of personal data are critical factors.

# HOW TO...

## detoxify our media and information ecosystem



by Dennis Reineck, Lead Author of the Paper "Detoxing Information Ecosystems" at Deutsche Welle Akademie

**In the age of artificial intelligence (AI), the cost of producing and disseminating disinformation is becoming negligible. How can we curb the tide of misleading content on social media?**

**A holistic approach to our media and information ecosystem is essential. This article takes a closer look at the problem, explains how disinformation works, and suggests a proactive, comprehensive strategy for detoxifying our ecosystem.**

One day in August of 2023, a colleague shared a picture with me. It showed an article claiming that the pilot of the ill-fated flight that crashed with oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin on board had suffered a heart stroke because of Covid-19 medication. The article had the "RT" logo displayed above it. "Oh, it's obvious that Russia Today would be spreading this kind of disinformation", I thought. As it turned out, the article itself had been tampered with. The original article did not contain any such claim. I had fallen for a "fake fake".



Fake



Original

### THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY IN SPREADING DISINFORMATION

Creating disinformation today is easy. A simple picture-editing programme will do, and social-media platforms lower the cost of distributing fake news, hate speech and other forms of malicious content. Their algorithms promote such content, and AI is set to lower the cost of high-quality deepfakes. Already, social media are flooded with AI images, most of which are relatively harmless like "Shrimp Jesus". But it does not take a very imaginative mind to predict that more sinister things are around the corner once bad actors manage to fully harness its capabilities. This will constitute yet another downward spiral in what Claire Wardle, former head of the NGO "First Draft", has termed the "information disorder" of our age. Indeed, Maria Ressa, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, has compared what is happening to our information ecosystem to an "invisible atom bomb".

»An invisible atom bomb exploded in our information ecosystem, and the world must act as it did after Hiroshima.«

Maria Ressa, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

### HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY AND INFORMATION DISORDER

Technology is only one part of the equation. Psychology plays a crucial role as well. One reason I fell for the "fake fake" is "confirmation bias", where people believe information that aligns with their preconceptions and shy away from things that do not align with their beliefs, something Leon Festinger called "cognitive dissonance". Often, falling for disinformation has less to do with rational reasons (being factually convinced), but more with emotions and feelings of belonging. Because I identify as a member of a different faction, I did not trust the source (RT), and I expected the article to be real. Partisanship is a major driver of people sharing and believing false claims.

### THE COMPLEXITY OF INFORMATION DISORDER

Addressing information disorder requires acknowledging its complexity. It is a problem with no simple solution, and piecemeal efforts can sometimes worsen it. For example, fact-checking can alert users to circulating disinformation, but it can also contribute to spreading that fake news if audiences distrust fact-checkers. And media-literacy initiatives can help people develop a critical attitude towards disinformation, but that attitude might cause them not to trust any information anymore. This in turn would enable bad actors to sow the seeds of distrust in public institutions. This effect is known as the "liar's dividend".

### A HOLISTIC, PROACTIVE APPROACH

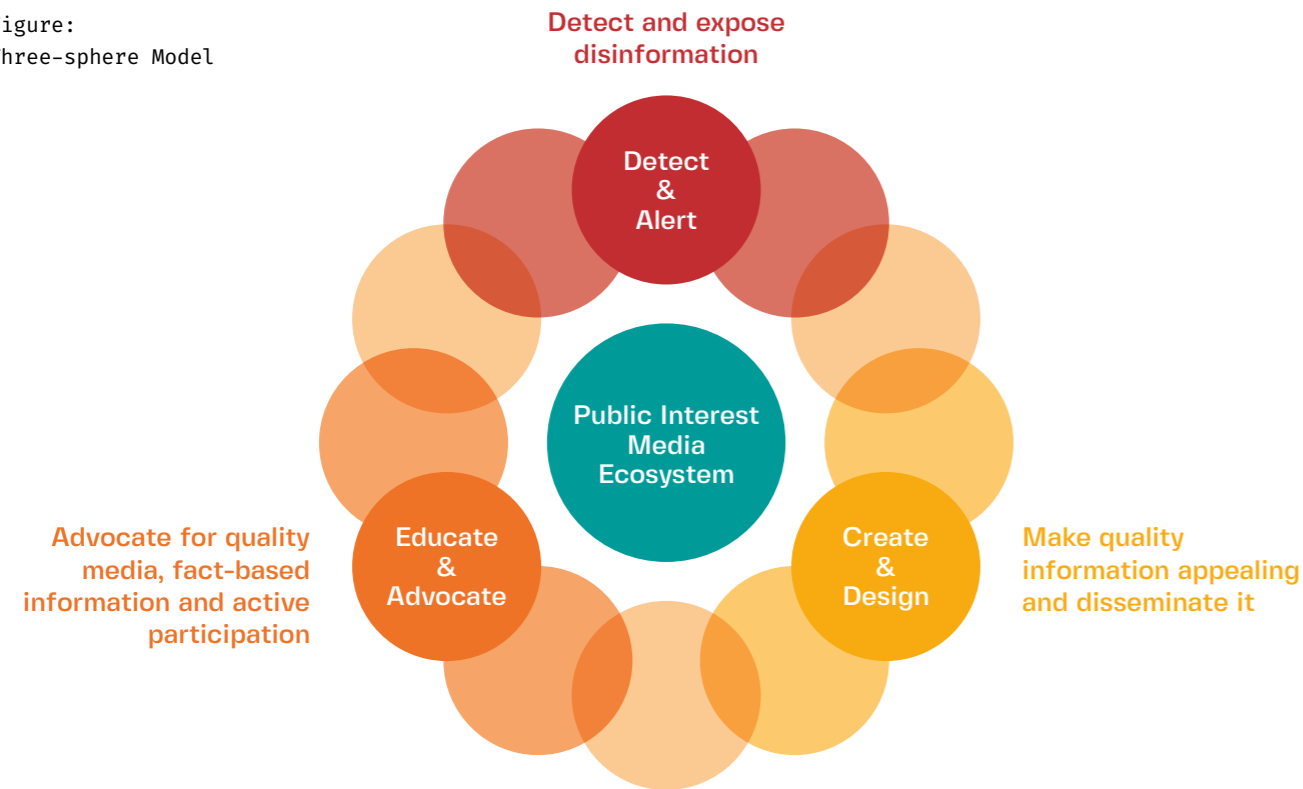
Our best bet for making a meaningful contribution to combatting information disorder is to take a holistic approach, tackling the issue at production, dissemination, and consumption points. But it is also key that societies do not take a reactive, short-term, "whack-a-mole" approach. The most effective antidote to information disorder is ensuring information integrity—providing safe, transparent, reliable, and accurate information. In other words, offering engaging, high-quality content is just as important as eradicating malicious content.

# 8 PRINCIPLES

## FOR EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES AGAINST INFORMATION DISORDER

- 1. Human rights-based approach:** Safeguard freedom of expression and access to information.
- 2. Consider consumers and local context:** Understand the psychology and local drivers of disinformation.
- 3. Conflict sensitivity:** Ensure interventions do not exacerbate existing conflicts.
- 4. Political sensitivity:** Be aware of the potential misuse of disinformation regulation.
- 5. Transparency and independence:** Make intentions clear and avoid stakeholder capture.
- 6. Do no harm:** Mitigate risks to those involved, like ensuring fact-checkers' safety.
- 7. Tech-sensitivity:** Consider the impact of technological solutions on democracy and media.
- 8. Open source and digital security:** Use open-source tools that ensure digital safety and data protection.

Figure:  
Three-sphere Model



We need to adopt a holistic and proactive strategy to 1. detect disinformation and alert society, governments and platforms to take action; 2. create and design engaging public-interest media to act as a counterbalance; and 3. educate citizens and advocate information integrity, and, in doing so, (re-)establish trust in the institutions we depend upon for our well-being. Only if we manage to reduce the pollution of our information ecosystems, safeguard diversity and freedom of expression, and provide the fertile ground on which relevant and reliable information can prosper, will citizens be empowered to make informed choices and play an active role in transforming their societies toward an equitable future.

Dennis Reineck is a Senior Consultant at Deutsche Welle Akademie, specialising in media and information literacy, media resilience, and combating disinformation. This discussion paper and learning guide are drawn from his work with the DW Akademie Taskforce on Disinformation

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→ Discussion paper "Detoxing Information Ecosystems: A proactive strategy for tackling disinformation"



→ Tackling Disinformation: A Learning Guide

## DW AKADEMIE'S THREE-SPHERE MODEL

**Detection and alerts:** The first sphere focuses on detecting malicious content and alerting institutions and audiences. Fact-checking and prebunking are essential, alongside investigative journalism that exposes disinformation funders and leads to them being deplatformed.

**Creation and impact:** The second sphere supports high-quality information, enhancing innovation in content production and distribution. Approaches aim at winning back the attention and trust of audiences and include explainer journalism, gamification, data journalism, and generative AI.

**Advocacy and education:** The third sphere emphasises raising awareness of the importance of reliable information and advocating for a legal environment that supports free information flow. Community-driven journalism, media literacy, and advocacy for free media are key approaches here.

## TAKING ACTION

Effective action is needed to regain information integrity. Technology is not the biggest threat to democracy; powerful people spreading deceptive narratives are, as Rasmus Kleis Nielsen of the Reuters Institute stresses:

»Misinformation often comes from the top; elite cues are more consequential than more misinformation added to what is already a vast ocean of content.«

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen,  
Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism





# Misinformation accounts for only 0.1% to 6.7% of news consumption.

→ Scientists state that contrary to popular belief, misinformation on social media is not as widespread as often claimed. A comprehensive review of various studies published in *Nature* in June 2024 reveals that misinformation accounts for only a small percentage of news consumption—ranging between 0.1% and 6.7%, depending on the platform, country, and time period.

Budak, C., Nyhan, B., Rothschild, D.M. et al. Misunderstanding the harms of online misinformation. *Nature* 630, 45–53 (2024).

→ Adding to this, research published in *Science* in July 2023 highlights that very few people engage with news content at all. In the United States, political news represents a mere 3% of all posts shared on Facebook, and only a tiny proportion of these contain false information.

Sandra González-Bailón, David Lazer, Pablo Barberá, Meiqing Zhang, and Joshua A. Tucker + 22 authors, Asymmetric Ideological Segregation in Exposure to Political News on Facebook. *Science*, Vol. 381, Issue 6656, pp. 392-398 (27 Jul 2023).



# In the 2016 US Presidential election, only 1% of Twitter users were responsible for 80% of unreliable news. In the subsequent election in 2020, there were only 2,107 “supersharers”, who reached 5% of all registered voters on the platform.

Research led by Nir Grinberg from Northeastern University reveals that in the United States, only a few users are responsible for the majority of misinformation. These “supersharers” are disproportionately women, older adults, and registered Republicans. Unlike automated bots, these individuals generate a high volume of misleading content through manual, persistent retweeting. These findings highlight a vulnerability of social media for democracy, where a small group of people distort the political reality for many. But it also suggests that the vast majority of social media users encounter far less misinformation than the average figures of 0.1–6.75% might suggest.



→ Nir Grinberg, Kenneth Joseph, Lisa Friedland, Briony Swire-Thompson, and David Lazer, Fake News on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, *Science*, (25 Jan 2019), Vol. 363, Issue 6425, pp. 374-378.



→ Sahar Baribi-Bartov, Briony Swire-Thompson, and Nir Grinberg, Supersharers of Fake News on Twitter, *Science* (30 May 2024), Vol. 384, Issue 6699, pp. 979-982.



→ All information on pages 80 and 81 is from: Hannah Metzler, Mythos Fehlinformation—Warum soziale Medien weniger gefährlich sind, als wir denken. *Spektrum der Wissenschaft*, 22.08.2024 (see p. 51)

# Two Truths One (L)AI



One of three articles was created by us using generative AI. The other two were published on online news portals. Can you find out which two were true and which one is a L(AI)?

Quiz developed by Ronja Winkelmann & Giulia Weiß, UNDERSTANDING MEDIA Seminar Students 2023–24

## FOOD INSECURITY, THE FORGOTTEN CRISIS OF COP28



1 When it comes to climate change, the world's food system is a double-edged sword. Food production is both one of the biggest emitters of global greenhouse gases and one of the sectors hardest hit by the effects of climate change. To reconcile these two issues, on Sunday, the UN's Food and an unprecedented roadmap for solutions. But the topic rarely makes it to the negotiating table.

## COP 28 REVEALS SHOCKING DISCOVERY: CARROTS HARBOR CLIMATE-DAMAGING TRACE ELEMENTS



2 At the 28th UN Climate Change Conference (COP 28), scientists have made a groundbreaking discovery that has shaken the global environmental community. Carrots, a staple food around the world, contain a newly discovered trace element that can have a negative impact on the climate. This revelation, announced during a high-profile session at COP 28, has raised urgent questions about the unforeseen environmental consequences of everyday foods.

## THE CLIMATE COST OF FLOWN ASPARAGUS: TIME FOR MORE CAREFUL FOOD CHOICES



3 Delegates at this week's UN Climate Change Conference (COP25) will once again try to implement measures to halt our march towards disastrous global warming. And as new plans and goals are announced at the end of these conferences, the rest of us will continue with our daily routines, making only piecemeal changes in our lifestyles and feeling a bit helpless given the size of the problem.

## NEW "SAN" SOLAR TECHNOLOGY DEMONSTRATES IMPROVED EFFICIENCY AND ENVIRONMENTAL FRIENDLINESS



1 Scientists have recently presented a new solar technology called Solar Amplification Nexus (SAN), which shows promising progress in solar energy efficiency and environmental considerations. This development has potential implications for addressing climate change by making solar energy more sustainable.

## SCIENTISTS DISAGREE ON THIS CLIMATE CHANGE ARGUMENT, WHICH WILL DECIDE OUR FUTURE



2 Getting to net zero emissions by mid-century is conventionally understood as humanity's best hope for keeping Earth's surface temperature (already 1.2°C above its pre-industrial level) from increasing well beyond 1.5°C—potentially reaching a point at which it could cause widespread societal breakdown. At least one prominent climate scientist, however, disagrees.

## WIND AND SOLAR POSE CLIMATE THREAT TOO, OIL GIANT SAUDI ARABIA ARGUES



3 Oil-rich Saudi Arabia is urging nations to take action on what it suggests is a growing threat to the Earth's climate—wind and solar power. The pitch from the world's biggest oil player includes a Saudi government document, obtained by POLITICO's E&E News, expressing concern about the "lifecycle" greenhouse gas emissions of wind, solar and other renewable energy sources, whose popularity has grown as countries look for alternatives to planet-heating fossil fuels.



Answers: L(AI): 1 | Truths: 2 & 3  
1) ChatGPT, Prompt: Write a factual news article about a new solar technology called "SAN" and its impact on climate, 2. rewrite the article in a less emotional manner. Image: imagine art, prompt: solar panels in production  
2) greenqueen.com.hk, Scientists Disagree on This Climate Change Argument, Which Will Decide Our Future, by Sonalie Figueras, 12 Dec. 2023. Image: NASA  
3) politico.com, "Wind and solar pose climate threat too, oil giant Saudi Arabia argues", by Corbin Hair, 12 Dec. 2023. Image: Fotografia oficial de la Presidencia de Colombia (Public Domain Work), source: www.flickr.com/photos/197399771@N06/65368655045/  
© Wikimedia Commons/Muffet  
3) Honk Kong Free Press, "The climate cost of flown asparagus: time for more careful food choices", Paul Stapleton, 11 Dec. 2019, updated, 31 March 2020. Image: world climate. Image: imagineart, prompt: Carrots on a table  
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© Wikimedia Commons/Muffet  
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**“The artist is always engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present.”**

# UNDERSTANDING MEDIA THROUGH THE VISUAL ARTS

by Renate Buschmann

## MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S INSIGHTS INTO MEDIA

In 1964, media theorist Marshall McLuhan turned "Understanding Media" into a slogan when he published his eponymous book. McLuhan's insights were groundbreaking, considering the rise of electronic communication and automation that were beginning to reshape the workforce and daily life. He was among the first scholars to dissect the structural features of media and their profound impact on societal reality. For McLuhan, "understanding media" went beyond their technical construction and usage, extending to a media-anthropological perspective that examined the long-term social ramifications of expanding technologies. Today, McLuhan's observations seem prophetic, encapsulating many principles that now underpin our networked and digitised world. His insights, which were condensed into the now slogan "The medium is the message" (and later modified by himself to "The medium is the massage"), have inspired generations of artists to think about media affinity in conjunction with media criticism. Art that incorporates contemporary technologies often reflects both, seeking to sensitise viewers to the unique phenomena and characteristics of each medium while prompting reflections on the social implications of media use.

## MEDIA-AFFINE AND MEDIA-CRITICAL ARTISTS

For the past 60 years, however, artists have quite naturally gravitated towards emerging technologies. Since then, there appears to be no technical innovation that has not been artistically explored. Artists frequently adopt new media early, pushing the boundaries of conventional usage to probe their potential.

In particular, when technical processes are used to record, edit, produce, reproduce and display static and moving images, they soon attract the attention of artists. This is because a new visual culture is beginning to emerge, the potential of which artists want to help shape a digitality in which images have a different material nature, achieve broader distribution, and are subject to completely different reproduction, appropriation, and manipulation techniques.

## PIONEERING ART WORKS REFLECTING MEDIA

Artists, independent and non-conformist, engage with new media to express their observations and insights through artistic means in order to draw attention to the extent and impacts of the respective media development. Fiddling around, experimenting and even programming are part of their research-based artistic practice that aims to explore visionary goals and critically addresses misgivings and doubts. Art remains an eye-opener for ethical and social issues caused by technological media. The following pioneering works reflect emerging media of their respective time:



With television emerging as a mass medium, artists began to both critique and explore its impact. The way in which television sets broadcast visual stimuli into the homes day after day with news reports, adverts and entertainment was so fundamentally different from the tradition of perceiving images that it inevitably aroused the interest of artists from the 1960s onwards.



**Nam June Paik**, whose flickering TV sculptures can now be found in museums all over the world, elevated television sets and their visual aesthetics to objects of artistic exploration. As early as in 1963, Paik concentrated on the manipulation of electronic television images, eventually creating vibrant audio-visual worlds. He foresaw television as a new visual language, echoing McLuhan's prediction of the "Global Village" (1962) as an appeal to make television a field of action for artistic videos.

Nam June Paik, "Brandenburger Tor"  
© Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln mit Rheinischem Bildarchiv, (rba\_c015840)

© Dara Birnbaum, "Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman", 1979, © Dara Birnbaum  
Courtesy of Stiftung IMAI - Inter Media Art Institute, Düsseldorf

**Dara Birnbaum** began working with video technology as it entered the consumer market. The ability to record television programmes was brand-new and inspired the artist to visually comment on contemporary American television culture and its influence on society. The artist isolated key scenes and remixed them using the sampling method, which later became popular in music videos.

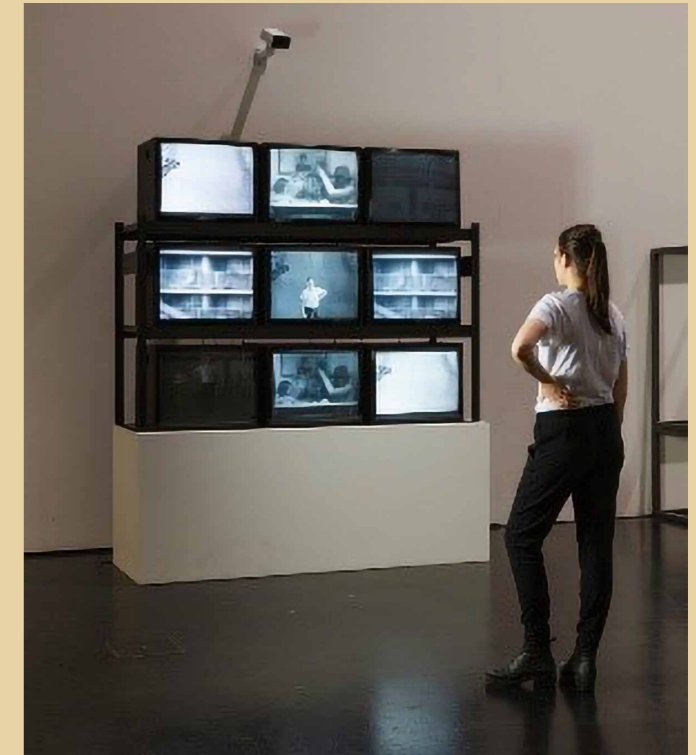
Birnbaum's video "Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman" (1979) is a critical appropriation of the prominent entertainment series of the same name and exposes traditional female role models by highlighting the magical transformation into the heroine.



© Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider, Foto © ZKM Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, Foto F. Wamhof

In 1969, the artist duo **Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider** amazed an unsuspecting exhibition audience with the installation "Wipe Cycle", which allowed visitors to see themselves in real-time amidst commercial TV broadcasts. Watching oneself on a screen was something out of the ordinary, as television at that time was produced exclusively by official broadcasters. Very few visitors were aware of what the new video technology could do. "Wipe Cycle" was a vision of future self-broadcasting capabilities.

**Frank Gillette und Ira Schneider,**  
"Wipe Cycle" / 1969, Reconstruction 2017  
→ [zkm.de/en/artwork/wipe-cycle](http://zkm.de/en/artwork/wipe-cycle)

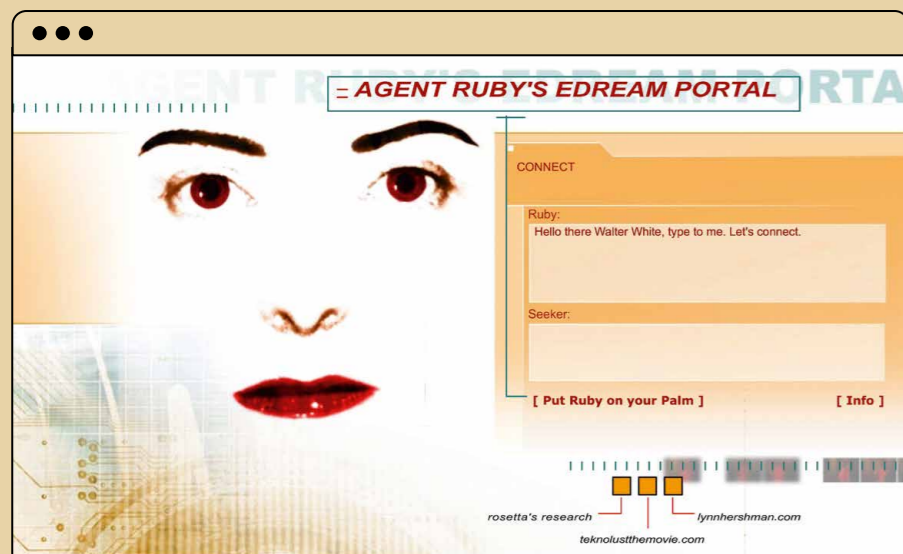


© Julia Scher, "The Schürmann House", 1991,  
Museum Abteiberg Mönchengladbach, Foto: Renate Buschmann

**Julia Scher** highlighted the dual nature of video technology—its role in self-expression and surveillance. The general public enjoyed the advantages of recording videos and renting copies for home cinema but ignored the downside of constant surveillance in public spaces. Scher's installations evoke the creeping discomfort of being watched by mechanical eyes, questioning the implications for personal privacy and security.



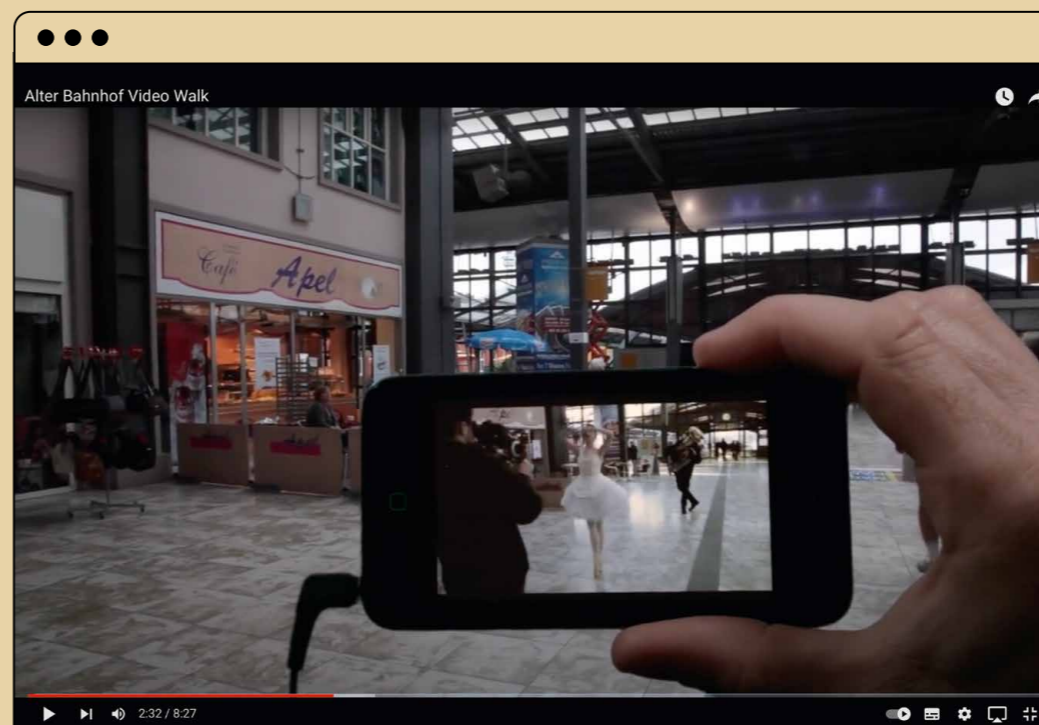
With the public debut of the World Wide Web, artists embraced global networking and the new, initially unregulated and commercial-free space by creating art in the form of websites, soon dubbed net art. Learning to understand online spaces in their dimensions of communication and interaction was coupled with a desire to create something new and to explore possibilities for global interaction.



© Lynn Hershman-Leeson

With "Agent Ruby", **Lynn Hershman Leeson** put the willingness of internet users to communicate with a programme to the test. In 1999, long before virtual assistants such as Siri or Alexa, the artist uploaded the female avatar, which to this day invites visitors to the website to chat and dream together while flawlessly mimicking facial expressions. The initial fear of chatting with "Agent Ruby" has long since vanished, and the website serves as a reference point for tracking the development of online media.

→ [agentruby.sfmoma.org](http://agentruby.sfmoma.org)



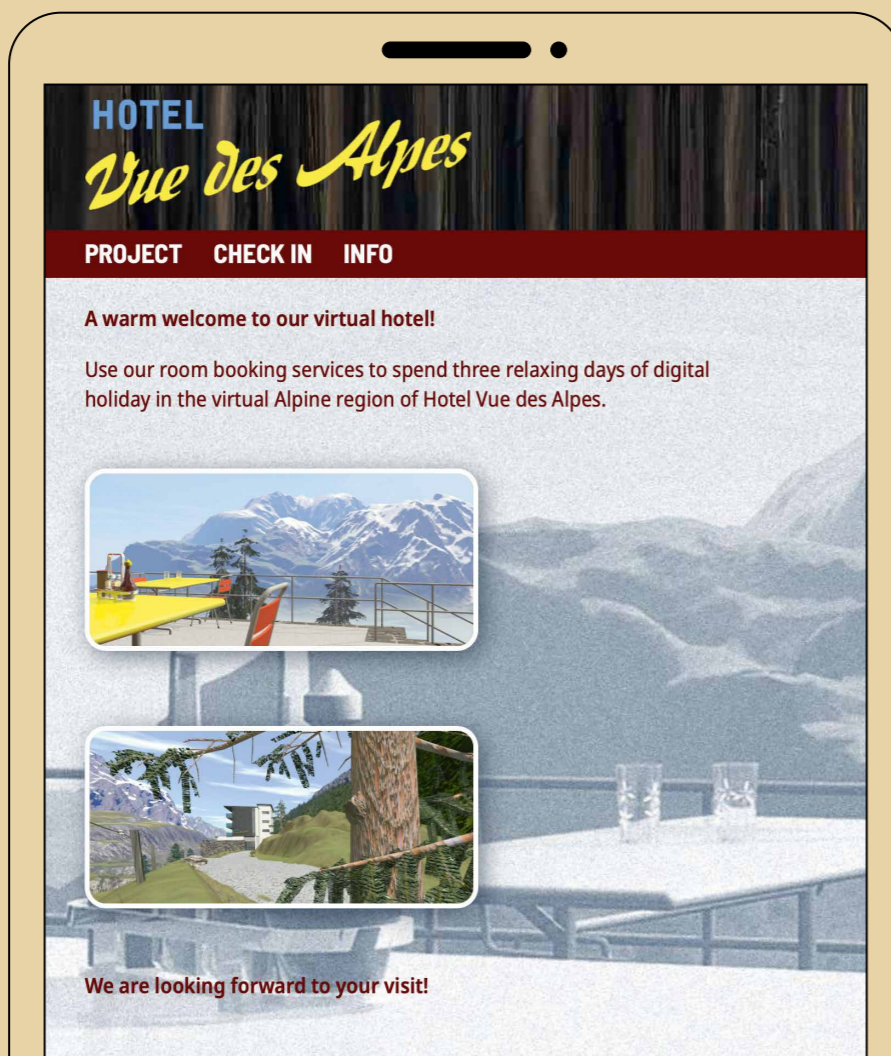
Video still from the documentary, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0kQE7m31Pw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0kQE7m31Pw)

For about 10 years now, there have been more and more attempts to break down the strict separation between physical and digital spaces. An early augmented reality project was created by the artist duo **Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller** at documenta 13 in Kassel in 2012. With the help of borrowed iPods, visitors to the "Alter Bahnhof Video Walk" were able to experience the superimposition of digital storytelling onto a real environment. The novelty has since given way to the problematic expectation of apps to provide participatory access to everyday life and art.

→ [cardiffmiller.com/walks/alter-bahnhof-video-walk](http://cardiffmiller.com/walks/alter-bahnhof-video-walk)

In 2000, the collective **Monica Studer & Christoph van den Berg** opened a mountain hotel without physical location when "virtual travelling" was not yet a concept. Since then, the website [www.vuedesalpes.com](http://www.vuedesalpes.com) has made it possible to explore the cosy hotel and the alpine landscape as if in a video game. This virtual mountain hotel project allowed for exploration of an idyllic, non-existent space, prefiguring the digital world's role as a surrogate for real experiences.

→ [vuedesalpes.com](http://vuedesalpes.com)



© Monica Studer Christoph van den Berg

Just recently, the artist collective **Blast Theory**, in collaboration with scientists, conducted the twelve-day project "Cat Royale", which explored AI's impact on life quality through observing cat interactions with their robotic pet-sitter. During the project, the public had the opportunity to watch the project via video streaming. The project is only of secondary importance for zoological studies, as it primarily raises questions about human trust in machine learning.

→ [blasttheory.co.uk/catroyale](http://blasttheory.co.uk/catroyale)



© "Cat Royale" by Blast Theory. Image credit: Ruler

# Resonating Spaces: Oleg Yushko's Acoustic Intervention at Witten/Herdecke



by Renate Buschmann

In 2023, Witten/Herdecke University launched a new artist-in-residence programme, inviting artist Oleg Yushko for an extended stay. This innovative initiative aims to encourage artists to become involved in academic research and teaching and, conversely, scientists to incorporate artistic practice in their future research.

During his residency, Yushko was intrigued by an unusual sound emanating from a slide near the university. In his imagination, the slide became an oversized resonating body reminiscent of the alpine musical instrument alphorn. Inspired, Yushko conceived an ambitious project: to transmit the university orchestra's end-of-semester concert through the giant tube, turning the playground into a unique acoustic space. For those who missed the June 2024 performance, Yushko created a small-scale model of the slide using digital measurements and 3D printing, complete with sound. This model was displayed for public viewing. Like several of his earlier works, the "Wittenhorn" performance was characterised by the use of state-of-the-art media technology and the endeavour to create an artistic intervention in a public space. Should we take Yushko's work as an opportunity to reflect on the university's self-image and public impact?



**Oleg Yushko, born in Belarus, lives and works in Düsseldorf.**

For more information on his work, visit → [olegyushko.com](http://olegyushko.com)

The artist-in-residence programme "Open Studio—more than Close Study" is run by the Chair of Digital Arts and Culture Communication and funded by the **Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach-Stiftung**.



Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach-Stiftung

# TAKE OVER

**It is becoming easier to create illusions than to recognise them as such...**

by Renate Buschmann

"IN FREEDOM ONE THINKS (FREEDOM) DIFFERENTLY." This is the translation of the inscription of the work by the artist Roland Schappert, who has been working for years with typographical images that challenge the juxtaposition of visuals and text and break with what we take for granted when we see and read. Schappert's art intricately weaves letters into complex ciphers, demanding a detective-like effort to decipher their meaning. The non-linear, cryptic writing emphasises the ambiguity as to how the text content is to be created. The powerful word "FREEDOM", which can be identified in the centre of the image, can only be superficially applied to the principle of reading, as it primarily triggers a reflection on what freedom—in individual and socio-political terms—means for each and every one of us through the variants of the subsequent text.

Writing within pictures introduces risk; it reduces an image's inherent ambiguity as written words stipulate a specific interpretation. It is tempting to interpret the image according to the words. If you have the words in your head, your approach to perceiving the image is predetermined, and your interpretation of the content is no longer unbiased. In advertising, the guided perception through the synthesis of image and text is intended; in art, on the other hand, the complexity of interpretation is a value in itself.

Amidst today's technological upheavals, where people increasingly outsource the production and circulation of images and texts to AI systems trained for efficiency and adherence to standards, the question inevitably arises as to whether this will result in homogenisation. At the same time, AI systems surprise us with results that are rich in variation and could not have been predicted. How would a chatbot decode this text? Will AI be able to see through the signs in the intermediate area of image and text and recognise the ambivalence of the statement? How will AI categorise and evaluate this image, and which prompts will establish a connection to the content?

When, in a further step, Roland Schappert virtually carves the statement in stone, so to speak, and erects a monument to it in artificial mountain landscapes, the plaque appears as both admonishing and obsolete. The illusion of vastness and freedom finds its perfect, albeit artificial, counterpart in the romanticised, deserted landscape, while the plaque, with its intended impenetrability, appears like a relic. It is becoming easier to create illusions than to recognise them as such.

**An Artist Takeover  
by Roland Schappert**

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Dr Roland Schappert, a Cologne-based freelance artist, musician, and author, blends analogue and digital media to conceive a unique visualisation of writing that promotes a diversity of dialogue. As an author, he regularly publishes hybrid text forms, poetry and essays in the journal "Kunstforum International", among others. Musically, Schappert pursues an organic digitality oscillating between melos, sound and rhythm.

From 2007 to 2010, he was a visiting professor for painting at the Braunschweig University of Art. He has since continued to teach and engage in numerous projects addressing AI, digital transformation, and socio-political issues in art. His most recent publications are: *Coronasehnsucht* (DCV Contemporary, Berlin 2021), *AKTUALITÄTSJETZT*, 14 dialogues with Wolfgang Ullrich about typefaces by Roland Schappert (DCV Contemporary, Berlin 2022), the artist book *WAITING FOR NOTHING* (Salon Verlag & Edition, Cologne 2022), and the LPs *ROUTE 1* and *ROUTE 2* (R-ecords.com, Distro at a-musik.com).



For more information, visit → [roland-schappert.com](http://roland-schappert.com)

**Page 94-95:** IN FREIHEIT DENKT MAN (FREIHEIT) ANDERS, 2020, digital printing on aluminium, 102,9 x 183 cm, © R. Schappert and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024

**Page 96-97:** IN FREIHEIT DENKT MAN (FREIHEIT) ANDERS, 2017, Project of a concrete relief, picture montages based on designs by Roland Schappert: Sebastian Krauss, Nuromedia GmbH, © R. Schappert and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024

THE BANK OF AMERICA





# REALLY?

## Art as the 5th Estate

The Fourth Estate is (as good as) dead.  
Long live the Fifth Estate!

by Aude Bertrand-Höttcke,  
Researcher at Witten/Herdecke  
University's Witten Lab

### THE AGONY OF AGON?

**The Fourth Estate is on its deathbed.** In the modern age, the press was regarded as the central instrument of a functioning public sphere, fostering political discourse and debate. Journalism's mission was not to chase sensationalism or sales but to dig deep, expose truth, hold power to account, and empower citizens. The ideal of reason and modern citizenship was upheld by the conclusive compulsion of the best argument. However, as early as 1962, Jürgen Habermas warned of a "feudalisation" of the press and media world. In 2022, the Frankfurt philosopher upped the ante, describing a "new structural transformation of the public sphere" in the digital age, posing a threat to democracy. This may sound alarmist, but he is not alone in his concerns.

### FOLLOW ME!

At a time when professional journalists are increasingly constrained by limited resources and time, and press freedom is eroded by media concentration and political and economic lobbying, real-time narratives are flourishing. Instead of thoroughly researched reports, images are spreading as memes—seemingly authentic stories "made by me". The paradox: The more immediate and unpolished the information, the more credible, impactful, and sensational it appears. An elaborately edited cover story is no longer necessary if the Instastory or shaky video tutorial is perceived as first-hand. Surely, it must be true, right? This development leads to disorientation: (Dis)information and pseudo-knowledge become the flipside of a deeply felt lack of meaning. The pitfall: Many people no longer know whom to trust and what to believe. The public sphere is fragmenting into small, isolated echo chambers, irrelevant and inaccessible to the wider public. Formerly unchallenged authorities such as science and traditional media now find it difficult to be heard.

### MILO RAU – International Institute of Political Murder

Drama unfolds: Following the rules of the "Unst" (without K), Milo Rau's International Institute of Political Murder staged and filmed a trial as impartial and polyphonic as possible under the title "The Congo Tribunal."

Scene from the documentary film "The Congo Tribunal" by Milo Rau © Fruitmarket Kultur und Medien GmbH.



### THE THING ABOUT ART. AMBIGUITY TOLERANCE AS AN OPPORTUNITY?

Art often thrives on a balance of proximity and distance, drawing attention while remaining enigmatic and unsettling. When it comes to verification, art should not be taken too literally: it is not about right or wrong. Nor is it about fake or real.

**CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF**

Agent provocateur: A quarter-century ago, Christoph Schlingensiefel toyed with elements of reality TV, as popular then as it is today. For the 2000 Vienna Festival Weeks, he invited Austrian citizens and theatre-goers to gradually "vote out" asylum seekers in a staged show, with the winner being granted asylum in Austria. This provocative action took place in front of the Vienna Opera House, shortly after the right-wing populist FPÖ came to power—a Europe-wide horror scenario at the time.

© Christoph Schlingensiefel, "Please Love Austria". Wiener Festwochen 2000, Foto: David Baltzer

**"POST-FICTION" VS. "POST-TRUTH"**

Christoph Schlingensiefel, Forensic Architecture, FRAUD, Pyotr Pavlensky, the Centre for Political Beauty, the Radical Daughters, and Milo Rau's International Institute of Political Murder are just a few examples of artists intervening in today's media and political landscape. These artists often act as a corrective: recovering forgotten or distorted narratives, conducting investigative research, using collective data to reconstruct cases, disrupting political campaigns, or prompting us to rethink our relationship with new media, digital data, archives, and institutions through playful, exaggerated scenarios.

Art claims innovative, transdisciplinary research and knowledge-production methods. Art theorist Claire Bishop (Artforum, April 2023) highlights how artists navigate the "information overload" and become researchers in the process. Similarly, literary scholar Ester Houser notes that artist collectives carve out new narrative paths amidst "infowhirl" (2020)—a state of overload and uncertainty.

Art experiments with anarchic, decentralised, and unconventional forms of knowledge production, challenging the "methodological constraints" (Paul Feyerabend) of conventional science. The boundaries between fiction and fact are reimagined: Distorted facts are restored, skewed narratives exposed, and incomplete legal investigations supplemented, confronting us with our often contradictory, irrational, or emotional responses to media, crises, and our shared existence.

Art does not claim to present the truth; perhaps it is enough if it sharpens our senses, creates new meanings, and blends facts, data, and diverse narratives into a form of "augmented fiction."

**This movement has only just begun.  
Long live the Fifth Estate!**

**FULLDEMO.cracry**

Democracy is no game: In the realistic live-theatre game FULLDEMO.cracry, theatre-goers become active participants. Against the backdrop of an extraordinary climate-crisis summit, the achievements and challenges of democratic processes are put to the test. "The countdown starts now!"

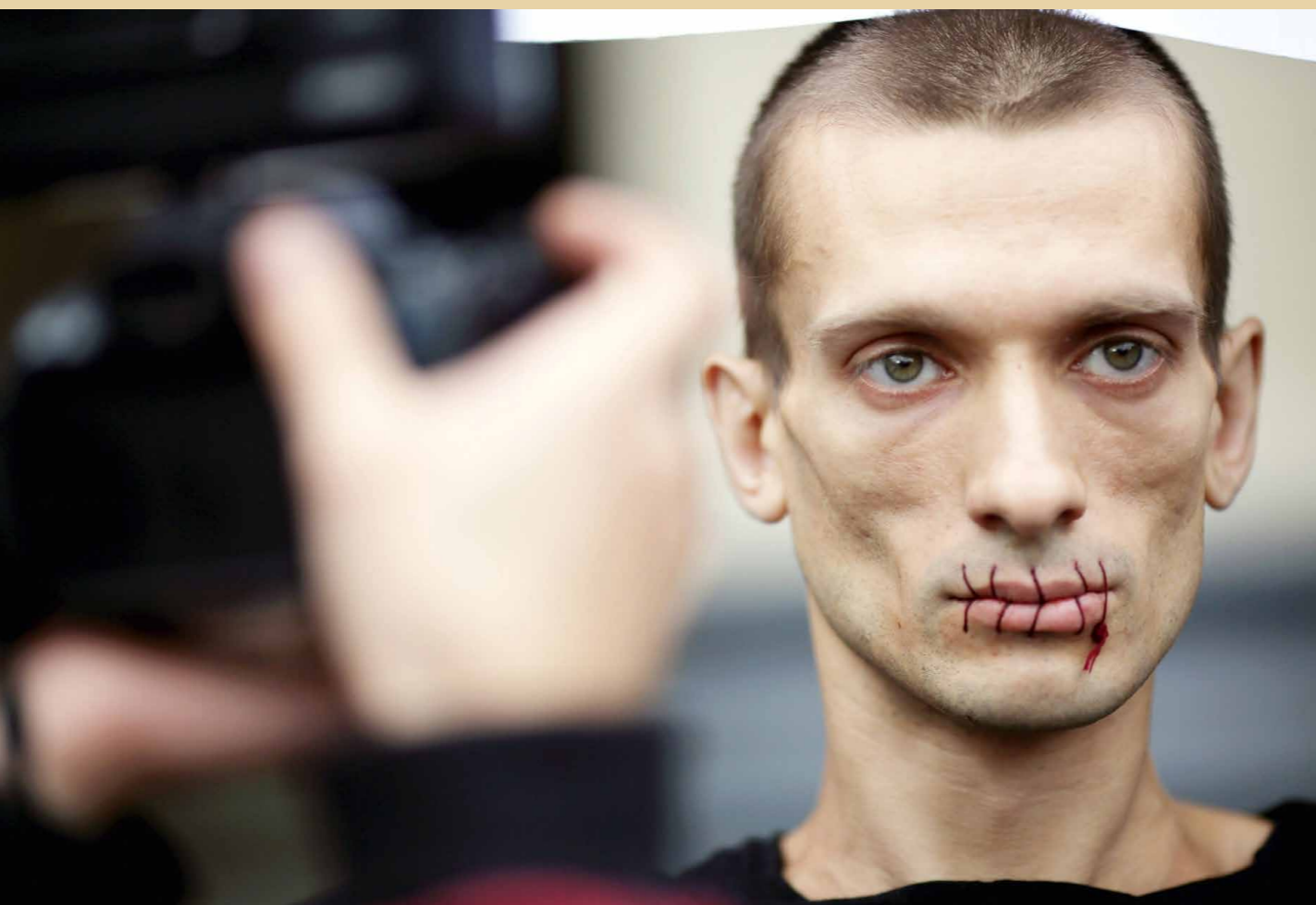
© Peter Ritter

**PUBLIC MOVEMENT: "Performing Politics for Germany"**

Aesthetics of Politics: The performance collective Public Movement deconstructs traditional ideas and choreographs contrasting positions. In the eye of the beholder, new codings and unfamiliar associations emerge.

© Public Movement, "Performing Politics for Germany". Berlin, 2009. Foto: David Schmidt.

**Dr Aude Florence Bertrand-Höttcke is a research associate at the Witten Lab of the University Witten/Herdecke. Since 2008, she has been working as a freelance cultural worker on projects at the intersection of contemporary art and urban life. She writes about contemporary cultural forms and the philosophy of art as well as art and society and is currently working on new concepts of organisation and living.**

**Pyotr Pavlensky**

With heart and soul: Artist-activist and avowed Putin opponent Pyotr Pavlensky became infamous for his radical actions, such as nailing his testicles to the Red Square in front of the Kremlin, embarrassing the security forces, who had to quickly remove him from public view. In exile in France, he once again caused a stir when he managed to persuade the Macron supporter and frontrunner for the latest mayoral election in Paris to resign. The carefully cultivated image of the respectable family man clashed too strongly with compromising video footage leaked to the press in collaboration with Pavlensky's partner. Although punished for this, Pavlensky considers the court case itself a part of his art.

© IMAGO / eastnews



# IVY TOUCH

## Affect Control and AI

by Freya Hattenberger

Feelings are an inner matter. Organic, intertwined. Hidden beneath layers, growing under the ivy. They are processes within our bodies that help us to be in touch with the world—even without words. Ivy, too, cannot exist without clinging on. While AI excels in many areas, emotions that guide and direct us are at the heart of our humanity.

Currently, AI is primarily used to automate routine tasks, generate ideas, and enhance creative processes. We think of AI as a means to simplify our everyday concerns—a modus operandi of “no need”. No need to do the dirty jobs, so we can focus on the more enjoyable or important tasks in life. Well, all magic comes at a price.

AI systems that are capable of recognizing, interpreting, and reacting to human emotions can lead to a scenario akin to a science-fiction novel. And yet, it is moving ever closer to the realm of possibility: affect control through artificial intelligence.

With the development of GPT-4 and specifically the addition of visual capabilities (GPT-4V), an even more powerful platform for potential manipulation is emerging. GPT-4V can expand the possibilities for emotional manipulation significantly. By combining text and image analysis, GPT-4V and subsequent systems with implemented generalized emotion recognition (GER) can generate targeted emotional messages. Multimodal AI can also be used in political communication to subtly and effectively influence public opinion.

The visual component enhances the emotional impact and increases the potential for manipulation at both individual and societal levels.

Social-media platforms and AI systems already collect and analyze vast amounts of intimate and personal data to compile emotional profiles of users. AI’s ability to interpret and generate text and images increases the risk of misuse.

Social-media algorithms are designed to prioritize content that evokes strong emotional responses to boost user engagement, often promoting posts that evoke or amplify specific emotional states to an extreme. The loss of control over one’s own feelings and decisions poses a fundamental threat to personal autonomy. There is a growing concern that people might become emotionally dependent on AI systems, relying on them to regulate their emotions, which could lead to alienation from their own feelings and impair their ability to self-regulate and develop emotional resilience.

It is crucial for us to regularly ask ourselves what we are actually doing and how we feel about it. Such questions cannot be answered by a black mirror. AI has no consciousness; it lacks a level of reflection. Creativity, deeply rooted in human experience, emotion, and intuition, remains beyond AI’s grasp. The word creativity is derived from the ancient Roman goddess of agriculture, Ceres, and the word “crescere”, meaning “to come into being, to be born, to multiply, to grow.” In a world in which machines seem to be able to imitate and even surpass more and more abilities, human creativity is more important than ever.

Art does not aim to mirror reality; it transcends it, weaving realms beyond the confines of convention. One of its defining aspects is to transcend the real, the actual, and to create worlds

beyond given paradigms. It delves into the depths of the psyche, giving expression to hidden images. Artistic processing of the world is grounded in the real experience of the sensory world. Art has the power to embody. This creative process distinguishes us markedly from AI’s mechanistic approach to generating images.

»In a world in which machines seem to be able to imitate and even surpass more and more abilities, human creativity is more important than ever.«

The real world in which we meet, in which we touch and feel, remains inaccessible to AI. Pure utilitarian thinking is intelligence without depth. It knows no freedom of mind. It will never touch the ivy.

**Freya Hattenberger, a media artist based in Cologne, works across various mediums including photography, video, performance, installation, and auditory art. Her art explores the intersection between everyday life and artistic expression, challenging conventional social structures. Additionally, she has a keen interest in human-animal relationships and ecology. Freya Hattenberger also teaches art in the Studium fundamentale program at Witten/Herdecke University.**

→ [freyahattenberger.de](https://www.freyahattenberger.de)



2 pictures of the series "Ivy Touch",  
©Freya Hattenberger/VG BildKunst  
The photos were taken without AI. Still images from  
the video featuring two dancers were projected  
onto a wall covered in ivy and photographed by the  
artist. The choreographed actions revolve around  
touch, relationship and emotional contact: Just like  
ivy needs to hold on in order to grow, we humans  
need contact and touch in order to grow both  
internally and externally.

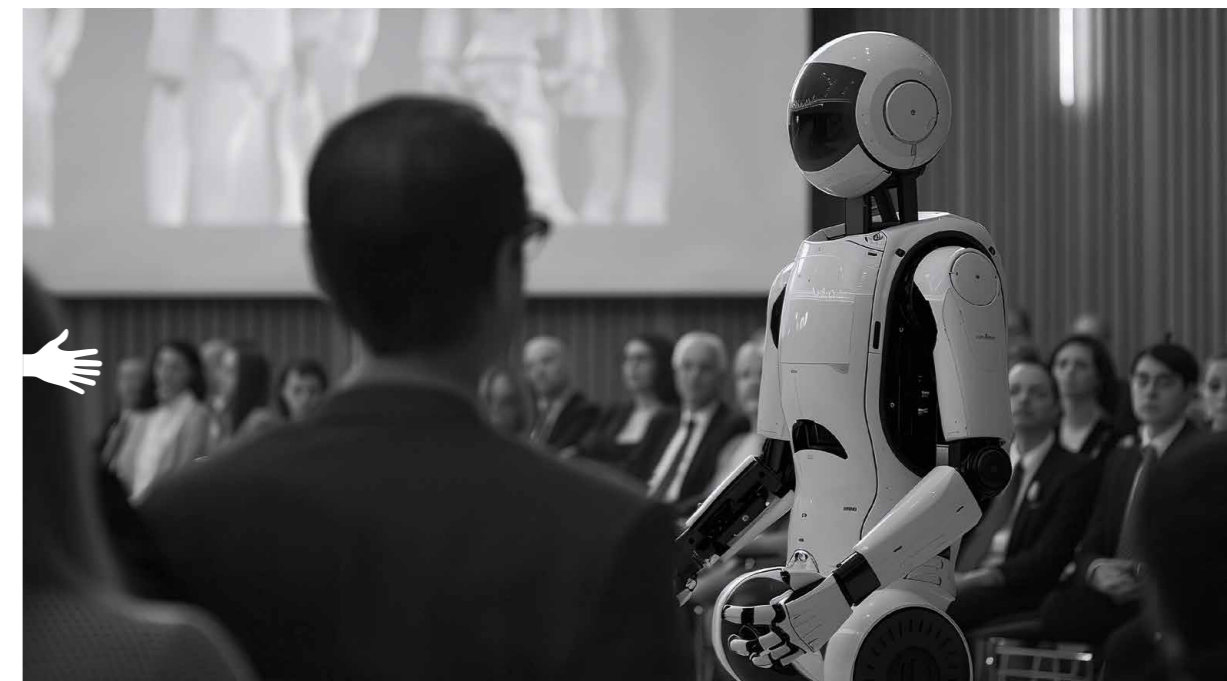


Laura Hagenschulte "modern trad wives" | IG: @laurahagenschulte | AI Generator: Midjourney  
Prompt: A black and white photo in the style of Robert Frank, showing people in New York  
in the 1950s staring at their smartphones, mesmerized, --ar 5:7 --v 6.0

# MEDIA CRISIS MEETS DEMOCRACY CRISIS

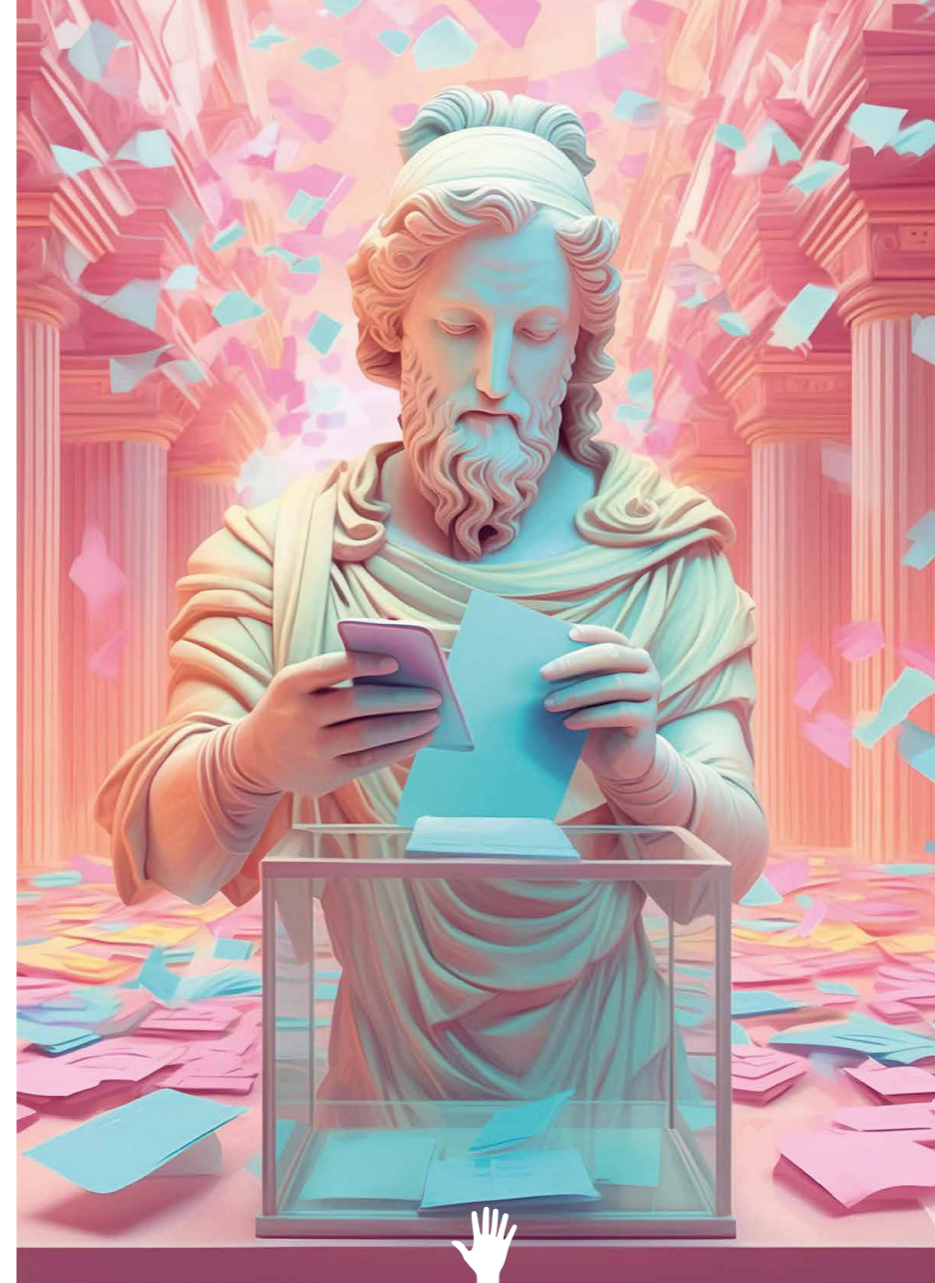
First, social media revolutionized the media landscape, and now artificial intelligence is driving an even more profound transformation. For this year's issue, **WITTEN LAB MAGAZINE** issued an **Open Call**, inviting participants to use AI to visualize their personal connection to media. The resulting artworks offer a radical, inspiring, surprising, and reflective exploration of the intricate relationship between media and democracy.

**OPEN  
CALL**



Jonathan Harth "World Peace Treaty" | Web: jonathanharth.de | AI Generator: Midjourney v6  
Prompt: official press conference of the world peace treaty between all humans and robots, shot by Rainer Werner Fassbender --ar 16:9

Stephanie Schade "no title" | IG: @schadeleider | Web: stephanieschade.de/ | AI Generator: Midjourney  
 Prompt: a super secure looking cabinet in which hundreds of smartphones are locked as if they were dangerous weapons, located in a surrealistical meadow, in the style of David LaChapelle, editorial photography, cinematic --ar 5:7 --v 6.0



←  
 Lisa Fernández Karlsson "Social Media Voting" | IG: @952design |  
 AI Generator: Adobe Firefly  
 Prompt: marble greek statue voting looking at the phone and introducing a ballot paper in a transparent ballot box with ballot papers, concept, pastel colors



→  
 Bartholot "Glut 1" | IG: @robertbartholot,  
 Web: bartholot.net | AI Generator: Midjourney  
 Prompt: layered and fragmented canvas texture, photography, 3D, frontal view, asymmetrical, weird, strange, minimal coherent pastel color palette, volumetric light, hyper realistic, highly detailed --s 999 --c 30 --iw 2 --ar 4:5 --v 6.0



←  
 Tobias Brandner "no title" |  
 AI Generator: Image Creator by  
 Microsoft  
 Prompt: Create an image that  
 highlights the drastic effects of  
 surveillance and oppression by the  
 state security in the GDR. Use  
 historical photos of surveillance  
 operations, interrogations and  
 arrests by the Stasi. Incorporate  
 newspaper articles that document  
 the repression, as well as propa-  
 ganda posters designed to intimi-  
 date the population. The image  
 should dramatically and frighten-  
 ingly depict the atmosphere of  
 fear and oppression, intensified  
 by the manipulated media land-  
 scape, in order to emphasize the  
 importance of free media for democ-  
 racy. (translated from German)

→  
 Sabine G. "Conspiracy theories" |  
 AI Generator: Canva  
 Prompt: Reptilians ruling over a flat  
 Earth (translated from German)



Laura Hagenschulte "modern hell" | IG: @laurahagenschulte | AI Generator: Midjourney  
 Prompt: A painting in the style of Hieronymus Bosch, depicting a surreal scene in hell in which people,  
 entangled in their torment, stare spellbound at their smartphones as if modern devices were another element  
 of their damnation, --ar 5:7 --v 6.0



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Science Meets Art at UW/H:

# Data Poetics / Data Politics

How does data shape our perception of the world and ourselves? Join us at the University of Witten/Herdecke (UW/H) to explore this question through the lens of media art and research.

In an era where data drives our social and economic environments, from attention economies to Big Tech, this event examines the impact of data on our lives and delves into the questions of data sovereignty and new perspectives offered by art in the age of AI.

KEYNOTE:

Dr Gemma Galdón-Clavell, an internationally renowned AI policy advisor.

CONTRIBUTORS:

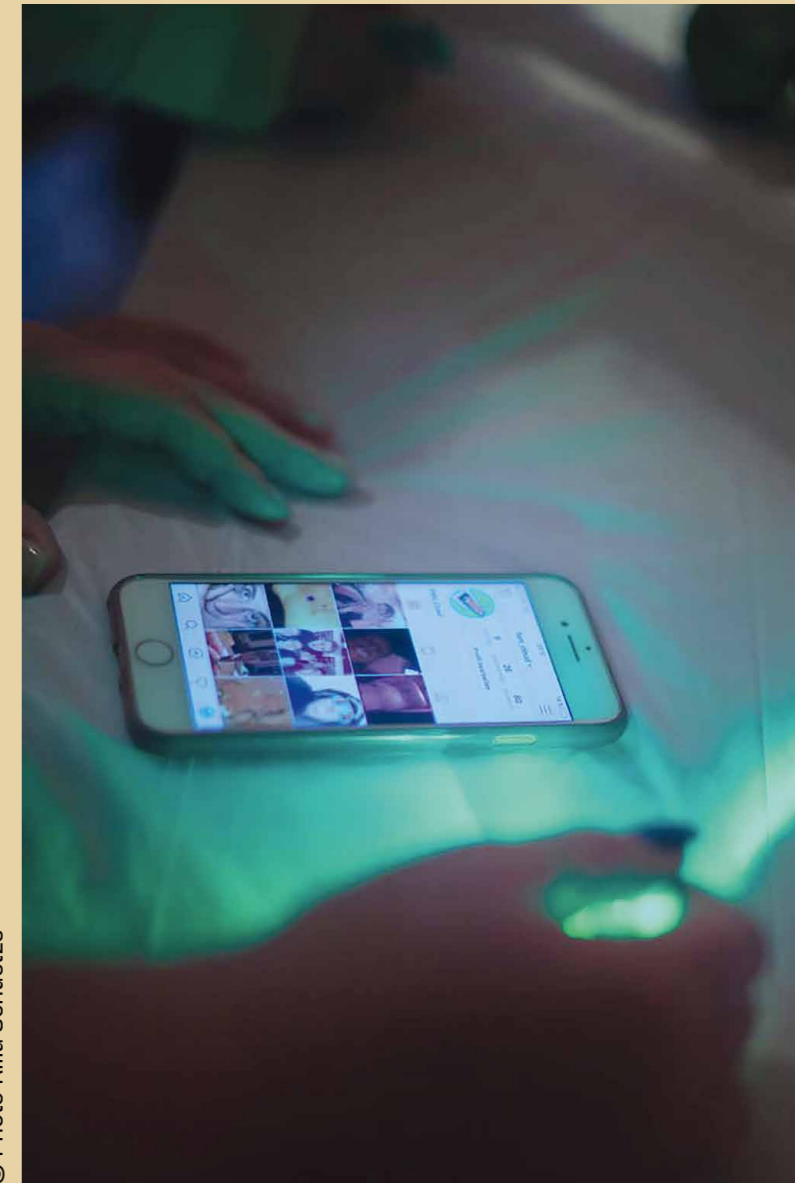
Prof. Paul Feigelfeld, Mediengruppe BITNIK, Audrey Samson (Goldsmiths College, University of London, FRAUD collective), Prof. Sven Meister, Prof. Matthias Kettner, Prof. Kerrin Jacobs, Dr Michael Klippahn-Karge, Dr Jonathan Harth, and more.

EVENT DETAILS:

- **Date:** Thursday, 28 November 2024, from 11:00 am to 7:30 pm.
- **Location:** University of Witten/Herdecke Campus, Witten—Main wooden building
- **Admission:** Free and open to the public. Registration is required via email at → [data@uni-wh.de](mailto:data@uni-wh.de).

A unique co-operation between Witten Lab, MEDIENWERK.NRW, and Fraunhofer ISST, this event brings together science, art, and critical thought on the future of data and AI. Do not miss your chance to be part of the conversation!

© Photo Killa Schuetze



# Thanks

The Witten Lab Zukunftslabor Studium fundamentale would like to thank the Werner Richard—Dr Carl Dörken Foundation for its generous support of artistic practice over the years.  
→ [doerken-stiftung.de](https://www.doerken-stiftung.de)



Events

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WITTEN/HERDECKE UNIVERSITY

Uwe Krüger

WITTEN LAB MAGAZINE #5

# VOICES

## THE EUROPEAN FESTIVAL OF JOURNALISM AND MEDIA LITERACY

Free registration:



Voices isn't just another festival—it's a pioneering event that redefines our relationship with information. From tackling journalism's evolution in a rapidly shifting media landscape to empowering citizens with the tools to navigate these changes. **The two-day European Festival of Journalism and Media Literacy will be hosted in Zagreb, Croatia, from 28 February to 1 March 2025** and feature discussions, workshops, screenings, and award ceremonies centered on journalism, democracy and education. The festival is curated by a consortium of media-freedom and media-literacy organizations, including the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF), the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the European Association for Viewers Interests (EAVI), Journalisme et Citoyenneté, Lie Detectors, and Savoir\*Devenir. Voices is co-funded by the European Union.



# OPINION POWER

## The influence of elites on leading media and alpha journalists

Journalists rely on access to the powerful to stay informed, joining politicians on international trips, attending confidential briefings, and participating in exclusive events hosted by business elites. While this access is crucial for gathering information, it raises important questions: Does it blur the line between independence and influence? Does the proximity to elites compromise journalistic objectivity and critical thinking? And, conversely, to what extent do elite opinions shape news coverage and commentary? In his book "Meinungsmacht", **Uwe Krüger** of the University of Leipzig's Institute of Communication and Media Studies conducts an in-depth network analysis to uncover the connections between journalism, politics, and business. Using frame analysis, he identifies notable biases, omissions, and taboos in media reporting. **(In German only:)** Uwe Krüger, *Meinungsmacht: Der Einfluss von Eliten auf Leitmedien und Alpha-Journalisten – eine kritische Netzwerkanalyse*. Herbert von Halem Verlag, 2019

# MEINUNGSMACHT

Der Einfluss von Eliten auf Leitmedien und Alpha-Journalisten – eine kritische Netzwerkanalyse

2. Auflage

09 Institut für Praktische Journalismus- und Kommunikationsforschung / IPJ

Books

# POLARIZATION

Articles

In "When Debates Break Apart," **Matthias Brüggemann** examines how polarization evolves within media content. He introduces the concept of **Discursive Polarization**, where growing divergence in public communication can disrupt the public sphere. Brüggemann explores both ideological polarization (differences in opinions on key issues) and affective polarization (growing hostility between opposing groups) in journalism and digital networks. His study suggests that societal divisions are often preceded by fractured debates and offers insights into the roots of social division.

# WHEN DEBATES BREAK APART

Find the article here:



Michael Brüggemann is Professor of Communication Research, Climate and Science Communication at the University of Hamburg. In 2023/24 Brüggemann joined THE NEW INSTITUTE as Chair for the program "Depolarizing Public Debates: Developing Tools for Transformative Communication."

# MEDIA LIFE

MARK DEUZE

## Mark Deuze on media

In 2012, media scholar Mark Deuze from the University of Amsterdam introduced the idea that "media are to us as water is to fish" in his groundbreaking book "Media Life". Deuze argued that media are so embedded in our daily lives that they shape our reality, much like water defines a fish's environment. His book became a cornerstone for understanding how deeply media influence every aspect of our existence. Now, Deuze builds on this concept in his latest book, "Life in Media", where he delves into how we live in and with media. He explores how our identities, relationships, and experiences are not merely influenced by media but are co-created with it. For anyone looking to grasp the full impact of media on modern life, these two works by Mark Deuze are essential reads. **Media Life, Polity Press, 2012**  
**Life in Media, MIT Press, 2023**

# FROM MEDIA LIFE TO LIFE IN MEDIA

LIFE IN MEDIA  
A GLOBAL INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA STUDIES  
MARK DEUZE



UW/H STUDIUM FUNDAMENTALE LECTURER 2023

**“We’re not living through a crisis about what is true, we’re living through a crisis about how we know whether something is true.”**

**Quote by Cory Doctorow**

Science-fiction author, journalist and blogger

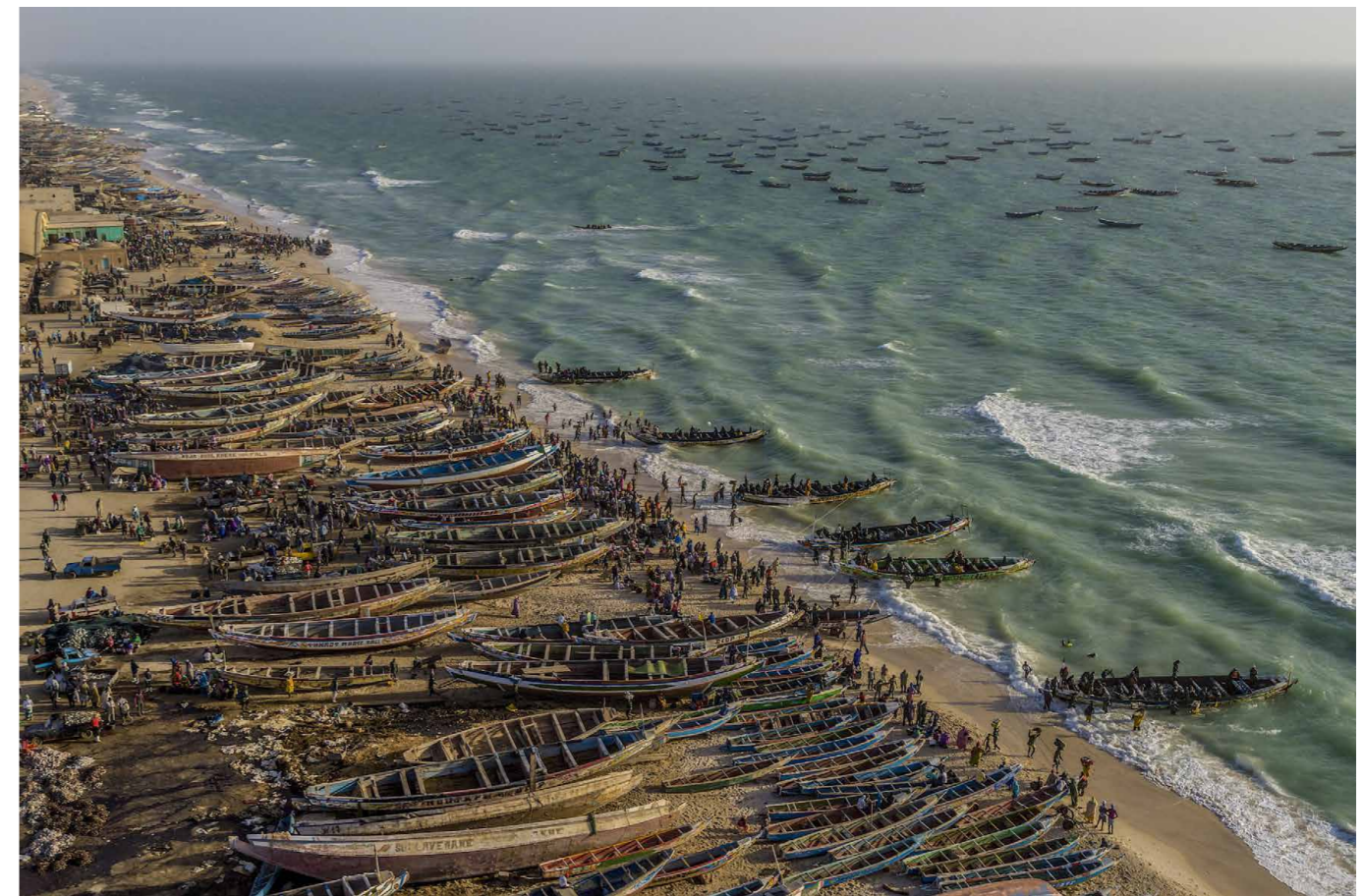
“Three kinds of propaganda, and what to do about them” (2017)

# ALMIGHTY IMAGES

by Lars Boering,  
Director of the European  
Journalism Centre,  
former Managing Director  
World Press Photo  
Foundation



## Public trust amid the rise of AI-based images



© 2018 George Steinmetz. Artisanal fishing boats offloading their catch on the beach of Nouakchott, Global Fisheries series. [www.georgesteinmetz.com/gallery/Global-Fisheries/G0000gaIqCOWoGT0](http://www.georgesteinmetz.com/gallery/Global-Fisheries/G0000gaIqCOWoGT0)

### Reality is the new fiction.

Reality is described as the state of things as they exist, while fiction is described as invented or untrue. A University of Waterloo experiment revealed that only 61% of participants could differentiate between AI-generated and authentic images, despite expectations of 85%. This underscores a growing confusion between reality and fiction. What is real and fiction seems to be blurry. I recently asked my keynote audiences if they could identify real photographs from generated ones. A stunning photo by George Steinmetz from his "Global Fisheries" series was often mistaken as AI-generated, highlighting how spectacular reality can sometimes be mistaken for fiction.

With the rise of visual-driven platforms like Instagram and TikTok, communicating through images seems to have become the norm. The shift of legacy media from paper to digital has made the visualisation of journalism and stories more compelling and layered. However, the question that arises is whether we understand images. Unlike reading and writing, we have never been formally trained to interpret visuals.

While global literacy has improved dramatically since the 19th century, visual literacy remains an uncharted territory.

The use of imagery is deeply ingrained in human-kind. The first cave paintings were made 45,000 years ago, and ever since, visuals have played a role in understanding the world and communicating with others. It was not until 1826 that Niepce managed to fix an image captured with a camera. Still, photography did not become more accessible until 1888 when George Eastman's Kodak camera, using film, started to become famous: 'You press the button, we do the rest'.

Fast-forward to now, and almost all of us create images without giving them any thought and effortlessly share them online. We forget, or maybe most do not know, that the first image was not published on the web by its inventor until 1992.

Even without the formal training we undergo when it comes to reading texts, our brains are wired for visuals, processing them in split seconds. Yet, as we navigate an era of sophisticated image manipulation, the need for visual literacy has never been greater.

In 1984, when photographers were still using film and digital imaging was in its infancy, Fred Ritchin predicted in an article for the New York Times Magazine that “in the not-too-distant future, realistic-looking images will probably have to be labelled, like words, as either fiction or nonfiction, because it may be impossible to tell them apart. We may have to rely on the image maker, not the image, to tell us which category certain pictures fall.”



© Michael Christopher Brown. Image from 90 Miles, an AI reporting illustration experiment exploring the decades long story of Cuban's crossing the “90 Miles” of ocean separating Havana from Florida. michaelchristopherbrown.com/90miles

Forty years later, his words ring true. AI models have made it nearly impossible to distinguish between camera-captured and AI-generated images. Michael Christopher Brown, a well-respected and experienced conflict photographer, caused confusion with his story “90 Miles”, which he dubbed “a post-photography, A.I. reportage illustration experiment”. Despite him being clear and outspoken about the nature of this work, it was met with great concern by the photojournalistic community.

The rise of AI has further eroded our trust in photographs. Midjourney v5, released earlier this year, received much attention, particularly after Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins used it to create images prior to Donald Trump's arrest this summer. The images spread like wildfire across social and traditional media.

As manipulation techniques become more sophisticated and accessible, we must prepare for a new normal where scrutinising online images is second nature. Fred Ritchin advocates for new standards to distinguish between photographs and synthetic images.

The initiative “Writing with Light” aims to create a community of photographers committed to fair and accurate representation. The point is to establish trust in the photographer as an author rather than in what appears to be a photograph.

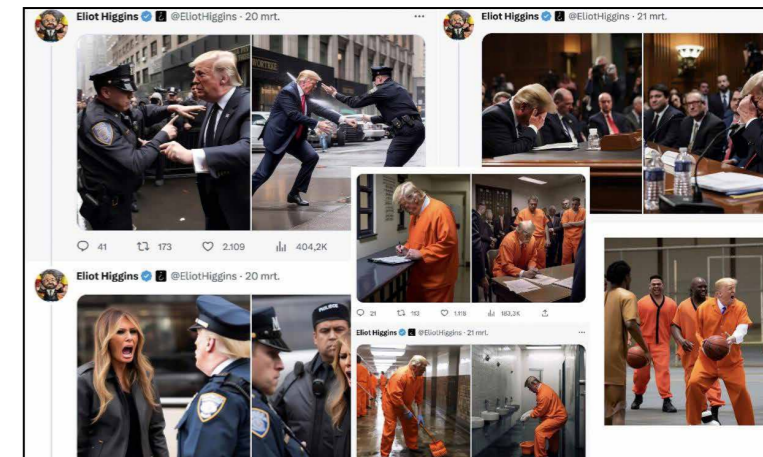
Similarly, the Content Authenticity Initiative (CAI) seeks to ensure the provenance of digital content through open-source tools and content credentials, akin to nutrition labels for digital media.

Future transparency in content creation will likely rely on digital signatures, content credentials, and AI labels.

Building media wisdom is crucial, teaching the public to critically and consciously participate in our media society. Transparency in image editing should be emphasized, ensuring that any modifications are clear and honest.

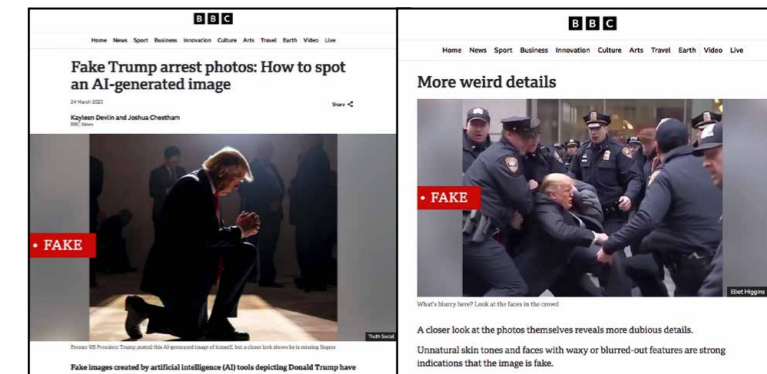
The best conditions for generating trustworthy images will come from those with visual competence. As we continue to paint with light, we must ensure that what we create can be trusted by our audience.

»Diminishing trust in information, particularly in images, is deeply problematic in a world where the fight against misinformation and disinformation is a significant challenge. Losing confidence in photographs is part of that.«



Screenshots from the X Page of Eliot Higgins, founder and creative director of Bellingcat, “Making pictures of Trump getting arrested while waiting for Trump's arrest”, 20 March 2023.

[x.com/EliotHiggins/status/1637927681734987777](https://x.com/EliotHiggins/status/1637927681734987777)



Screenshot from the BBC News Article “Fake Trump arrest photos: How to spot an AI-generated image” by Kayleen Devlin and Joshua Cheetham, 24 March 2023, showing AI generated images made by Eliot Higgins. [www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65069316](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65069316)



Lars Boering is the Director of the European Journalism Centre and the former Managing Director of the World Press Photo Foundation. During his tenure at World Press Photo, he was responsible for organising the prestigious World Press Photo Award, one of the most renowned competitions in visual journalism. → European Journalism Centre

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LECTURER 2024

# The reality of foreign interference and disinformation in election times

by Paolo Cesarini, Director of the European Digital Media Observatory

Concerns about foreign interference have grown steadily in Europe since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. A European Parliament resolution of March 2022 unveiled different forms of foreign meddling, notably by Russia and China, targeting EU member states. Information manipulation was identified as a high-level threat to security and sovereignty, especially in the context of elections, along with covert donations to national political parties and other hybrid forms. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, 81% of European citizens believe that foreign interference constitutes a serious problem.<sup>1</sup>

The European Commission's Democracy Action Plan (December 2020) established a framework to combat foreign and domestic disinformation. This includes new EU legislation, international collaborations, and support for independent fact-checking, research, and media literacy organizations.

In the lead-up to the 2024 European elections, coordinated efforts at the EU and national levels played a crucial role in mitigating disinformation threats. According to the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), systematic debunking of false or misleading information has made it increasingly difficult for threat actors to operate. Despite Kremlin propaganda aiming to undermine the integrity of the elections and discourage voter turnout, the 2024 elections saw the highest voter participation in two decades, with the integrity of all 27 national electoral processes intact.

However, the battle against disinformation is far from over. EDMO's analysis reveals that disinformation proliferated during the final phase of the campaign, building on pre-existent disinformation narratives and targeting key themes such as climate change, immigration, support for Ukraine, EU economic policies, and fundamental rights.<sup>2</sup> In the Netherlands and Ireland, these efforts were coupled with cyber-attacks on political party and government websites. Considering such a mixed picture, three main reasons advise against letting the guard down now.

# INFORMATION WARS

1



→ Answers to the Statement (% EU27) in the Flash Eurobarometer 528

"Citizenship and democracy" (Fieldwork: April-May 2023, Publication December 2023) "Foreign interference in our democratic system is a serious problem that should be addressed":

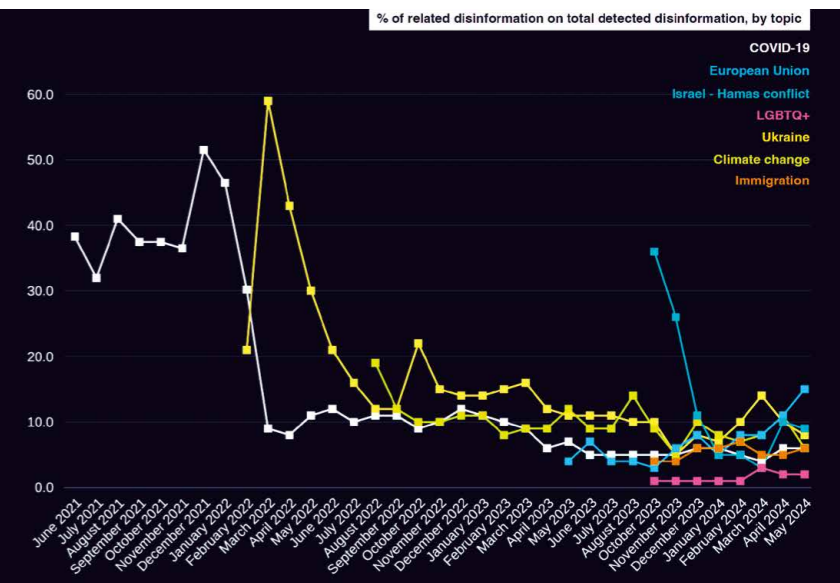
- 52% strongly agree
- 29% tend to agree
- 10% tend to disagree
- 6% strongly disagree
- 2% don't know (not read out)

2



→ The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) by Paolo Cesarini is the EU's largest interdisciplinary

network dedicated to countering disinformation, particularly by monitoring and analyzing it to safeguard the integrity of EU elections. The graphic from the EDMO's June 2024 Report illustrates the percentage of disinformation related to various topics detected over time.





## GEOPOLITICAL INSTABILITY AND DISINFORMATION

Firstly, growing geopolitical instability continues to provide strong incentives for **foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) attacks**. Sophisticated actors exploit the online information space with advanced tactics. As the conflict in Ukraine continues, the Kremlin's attempts to undermine Western governments' support for Kyiv go on undeterred. The Russian **Operation Doppelgänger**,<sup>3</sup> which cloned European news outlets to spread pro-Russian narratives, remains active, particularly in Germany.

To counter persistent attacks, Europe needs to develop and maintain long-term response capabilities. Enforcing the **Digital Services Act**<sup>4</sup> and the **Code of Practice on Disinformation**<sup>5</sup> is essential for ensuring digital platforms implement proper security measures. Additionally, long-term funding and support for independent fact-checking, research, and civil-society organizations are crucial to provide continuous oversight and enhance citizens' threat awareness and media literacy.

## THE RISE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN DISINFORMATION

Secondly, the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence (AI), especially generative AI like ChatGPT and DALL-E, introduces new challenges. These tools can create highly persuasive synthetic content, often misused for disinformation. Recent cases include deepfake videos and synthetic audio in Moldova and Slovakia, misleading the public with false narratives. For example Facebook ads with deepfakes of Moldova's pro-Western president, Maia Sandu, falsely showing her in a hijab and claiming she would step down, and viral synthetic audio on social media mimicking Michal Šimečka, leader of Slovakia's progressive party, falsely announcing a beer price hike just before the legislative elections.

The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2024 warns of the long-term consequences of synthetic content. Addressing this requires not only strict AI regulations through **the European AI Act**<sup>6</sup> but also the development of pro-social AI systems to aid fact-checkers and researchers.

4



→ The **Digital Services Act (DSA)** is an EU regulation aimed at creating a safer and more transparent on-

line environment. It establishes clear rules for digital platforms, particularly large ones, to combat illegal content, protect users' rights, and ensure transparency in content moderation. The DSA also requires platforms to manage risks related to disinformation and to provide greater transparency in how they handle user data and advertisements. Supporters hope it will enhance accountability and reduce the spread of harmful content, while opponents fear it could lead to overregulation and stifle free speech.

5



→ The **2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation** is a voluntary EU framework to combat online disinformation. It builds on the 2018 Code and involves commitments from digital platforms and stakeholders to improve transparency, reduce harmful content, and protect elections. The Code focuses on better fact-checking, cutting financial incentives for disinformation, and fostering cooperation between platforms and authorities.

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3



→ **Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)** attacks are deliberate actions by foreign actors aimed at disrupting or influencing democratic processes within the EU. The Russian influence operation Doppelgänger, unmasked in September 2022, is a symptomatic example. Many European news outlets and press agencies, including Bild, Der Spiegel, the Guardian, ANSA and 20 Minutes, were cloned to promote pro-Russian narratives.

are deliberate actions by foreign actors aimed at disrupting or influencing democratic processes within the EU. The Russian influence operation Doppelgänger, unmasked in September 2022, is a symptomatic example. Many European news outlets and press agencies, including Bild, Der Spiegel, the Guardian, ANSA and 20 Minutes, were cloned to promote pro-Russian narratives.

6



→ The **European AI Act** is a key regulation that establishes rules for AI development and use in the EU,

categorizing systems by risk levels—unacceptable, high, limited, and minimal. It imposes strict requirements on high-risk AI to ensure safety, transparency, and alignment with EU values. While aimed at protecting citizens and promoting innovation, critics argue the Act may stifle innovation and burden businesses, potentially affecting the EU's AI competitiveness. For more on the significance of the EU AI Act, see the contribution by Paul Nemitz on page 68 in this issue.

7



→ The **European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)** is a proposed EU regulation aimed at protecting media

freedom and pluralism across member states. It seeks to ensure the independence of media outlets from government and corporate interference, enhance transparency in media ownership, and protect journalists from surveillance and intimidation. The Act also promotes cross-border cooperation and sets standards to safeguard the editorial independence of public service media. Critics fear that the EMFA could lead to increased regulatory control over the media and potentially limit press freedom instead of protecting it.

## BLURRING LINES BETWEEN FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC DISINFORMATION

Lastly, the distinction between foreign and domestic disinformation is increasingly blurred. Not all disinformation originates abroad; domestic actors, including politicians, are often involved. The European Parliament's resolution condemning MEPs' participation in the pro-Russian site Voice of Europe, whose declared aim is to "undermine European support for Ukraine and influence the 2024 European Parliament elections is a stark reminder. To combat this, fostering professional and ethical journalism is crucial. The **European Media Freedom Act is essential**<sup>7</sup>, but supporting independent media to deliver high-quality journalism is equally important. The EU must create an enabling environment for the media sector to thrive and innovate. Its long-term sustainability depends on industry's capacity to innovate, empower ethical journalistic practices, nurture and retain technology-savvy journalistic talents. The EU should provide an enabling framework for the media sector to benefit from the single market and the digital transformation.

## A CALL TO ACTION

The integrity of our public sphere is vital for a resilient democracy. The European Council's Strategic Agenda 2024–2029 rightly prioritizes democracy. As the new mandate begins, the Commission must seize the opportunity to address these challenges and uphold democratic values. By continuing to fight disinformation, supporting ethical journalism, and leveraging technological advancements, Europe can safeguard its democratic processes and ensure a robust, informed public sphere.

**Paolo Cesarini is the Programme Director of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) and the European Media and Information Fund (EMIF) projects at the European University Institute (EUI).**

»During the next EU mandate, most independent media will die or shrink, one way or another. But, if EU leaders do their jobs right, plenty can be reborn in a more resilient form.«

→ Find out more about Paolo Cesarini's ideas on how the EU could tackle the risks confronting Europe's media sector in his recent article "Europe Needs a Democracy Commissioner", written together with Christophe Leclercq, and Maria João Rodrigues.



**“Seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act indeperndently, be accountable and transparent.”**





## TWO EXPERT POSITIONS ON THE BALANCING ACT BETWEEN NEUTRALITY AND ENGAGEMENT

In today's increasingly polarised media landscape, the boundaries between journalism and activism are becoming more and more blurred. While journalists are traditionally supposed to act as neutral reporters, activists use the media to fight for their cause and initiate change. But what happens when journalists become activists? And how does this affect the credibility and objectivity of reporting?

We asked two renowned experts on journalism ethics to share their views on what goes too far—and on where activism is an essential driver of good journalism:

**Barbara Trionfi**, former Executive Director of the International Press Institute in Vienna and currently Senior Adviser to the OSCE Representative on Media Freedom. **Lutz Kinkel**, former Head of European Center for Press and Media Freedom in Leipzig and Lecturer for ethics in journalism at the Akademie für Publizistik in Hamburg.

### POSITION 1

# Exposing those who don't pursue democratic standards and human rights is not activism— it's a fundamental duty!

Interview: Johannes Wiek

**Barbara Trionfi**, Senior Adviser  
to the OSCE Representative on  
Media Freedom

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**JW:** To start off, can you tell us about a notable figure in journalistic activism? Maybe someone whose story highlights both the risks and the importance of this field?

**BT:** The first journalist that comes to mind is Dom Philips. He spent many years covering environmental stories in the Amazon rainforest and often travelled into the rainforest to see how indigenous communities protect their land. Sadly, he was killed on June 5, 2022, alongside indigenous rights activist Bruno Pereira, during a trip to understand the strategies used by indigenous people to protect their lands from illegal activities like fishing, mining, and logging.

**JW:** What exactly happened during that trip that led to their tragic deaths?

**BT:** Dom and Bruno were allegedly killed by fishermen who thought they were investigating their illegal fishing activities. Then Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro immediately blamed the victims, which sent a clear message that their killing would not be investigated. Like many environmental defenders before them, their killers seemed to be escaping justice, as if indigenous activists didn't deserve it.

**JW:** This sounds rather grim. I would assume that there was some form of public reaction to these murders.

# JOURNALISM VS. ACTIVISM

**BT:** Dom was a foreign journalist freelancing for The Guardian in the UK, and his murder attracted international attention. This led to extensive coverage, which put pressure on Brazil to bring justice. Nearly two years after their murder, three alleged perpetrators are behind bars waiting for trial. There is now a faint hope that this case might become one of the very few crimes against journalists and activists in Brazil that doesn't go unpunished.

**JT:** Environmental journalism clearly involves significant risks. How widespread are these dangers?

**BT:** Journalists covering the Amazon forest, the Congo basin, the Niger delta, Papua New Guinea, and other dangerous environmental stories face serious risks. A UNESCO report found that 70% of journalists surveyed had faced attacks due to their environmental journalism, and at least 44 environmental journalists were killed in the past decade. Recent International Press Institute's research showed that attacks against climate and environmental journalists are on the rise, resulting in a huge loss of information vital to the public interest.

**JW:** Given these risks, what measures do environmental journalists take to protect themselves?

**BT:** Many environmental journalists emphasize the importance of performing risk-assessment analyses before going on assignments, adopting strict safety protocols, carrying safety equipment, and taking hostile environment training. These measures are essential, though not always sufficient, to keep journalists safe. Unfortunately, most journalists, especially those working for small or local news outlets or as freelancers, don't have access to these resources.

**JW:** The stories they cover are often crucial. Can you elaborate on the types of stories environmental journalists focus on?

**BT:** They often cover stories of indigenous people fighting to protect their land from exploitation by corporations seeking mines, fossil fuels, logging, monocultures, or real estate projects. They also report on communities living near coal mines, garbage dumps, or chemical plants that pollute their environment. For indigenous people and activists, this is a fight for survival and a clean environment. Their success is essential for all of us, as it represents a chance to slow down the climate emergency.

**JW:** How important is the role of journalists in these contexts?

**BT:** Journalists play a key role in exposing corruption, documenting environmental crimes, and giving a voice to those on the frontlines. Their coverage amplifies struggles that might otherwise go unnoticed, helping to garner the attention needed for these battles to succeed. However, this often puts them up against powerful players involved in environmentally damaging businesses, including private and state actors working with organized crime groups.

**JW:** With such dangerous assignments, do journalists risk becoming activists themselves?

**BT:** One of journalism's core principles is independence. Information must be independent to avoid becoming propaganda, advocacy, or opinion. Public interest journalism upholds democracy and human rights because that's where the public interest lies. Despite being mission-driven and passionate about their work, journalists are not activists. They don't pursue a single specific cause but aim to serve the public interest, democracy, and human rights.



→ The International Press Institute (IPI) is a global network of editors, media executives and leading journalists representing leading digital, print and broadcast news outlets in nearly 100 countries. IPI's mission is to defend media freedom and the free flow of news wherever they are threatened. It was founded by 34 editors from 15 countries gathered at Columbia University in 1950. Today's secretariat of the Network is based in Vienna.



→ The activities of the OSCE Representative on Media Freedom can be divided into two groups: observing media developments to detect early warning signs and helping participating states abide by their commitments to freedom of expression and free media. The current representative is Teresa Ribeiro.

Read more about Forbidden Stories' Bruno and Dom Project, which continues the work of Bruno Pereira and Dom Phillips in the Amazon, on page 154.

**JW:** What are the consequences of blurring the line between journalism and activism?

**BT:** Treating journalists as activists undermines their perceived neutrality and objectivity, which are crucial for public interest journalism and their protection from attacks. Campaigns to silence critical journalists often portray them as biased or corrupt to undermine their credibility and legitimize attacks against them. It's important to remember that exposing wrongdoing and advocating for democratic standards and human rights is not activism; it's a fundamental duty.

**JW:** Thank you for sharing these insights. It's clear that environmental journalism is both vital and fraught with challenges. Your perspective has been invaluable.

## POSITION 2

# Only autocrats conflate journalism with activism

After the revelation of the meeting of right-wing extremists in Potsdam, the AfD claimed that the non-profit research organisation "Correctiv" was spreading government propaganda—one example among many of how journalism is often discredited as activism.

No-one will be shocked to hear this: Journalists are human beings, too. They have views, values, political orientations. They vote, they have children. They are subjects, incapable of being objective. But journalists have learnt to manage their attitudes. These can be articulated loudly and clearly in opinion pieces, commentaries, columns, glosses, editorials, or reviews. They have to be put aside when necessary. Critical distance as well as incorruptible judgement are indispensable for professional journalism. To this end, journalists follow a series of rules and procedures, including the separation of commentary and reporting, as well as fact-checking. This is part of their professional ethics.

Lutz Kinkel, Journalist and former Head of the European Center for Press and Media Freedom

UNDERSTANDING  
MEDIA DEVELOPMENT  
TEAM



## ERDOĞAN'S (MIS)UNDERSTANDING OF JOURNALISM

There is no doubt that many journalists are motivated by the desire to make the world a better place. But their commitment has limits: Journalists uncover grievances, activists try to remedy them. Journalists describe and evaluate politics, activists make politics. They use different means and methods to fulfil their tasks (see below). Fulfilling the respective roles consciously and transparently is central to the credibility of either side. However, when journalism and activism are conflated, alarms go off in my head—as happened when I read the interview that Giovanni di Lorenzo, editor-in-chief of Die Zeit, conducted with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, published July 2017. Here is a short extract:

**Die Zeit:** Mr President, you have not agreed to an interview with a foreign newspaper in a long time. Are you trying to send a signal by talking to a German medium—at a time when relations between your country and Germany are at a low?

**Recep Tayyip Erdoğan:** (...) When we ask ourselves why our relations with Germany in particular have become strained, I say quite clearly: The German media are running a smear campaign against us. For example, by talking to terrorists.

**Die Zeit:** What would be the point of the media, which are independent in Germany, engaging in propaganda against Turkey? What would they have to gain?

**Erdoğan:** I do not believe that there is any such thing as independent media anywhere in the world. Somehow, they are all dependent, whether print or visual media, either ideologically—or they pursue their own interests. (...) We see it all very clearly: They turn their coats. German media are no different. Nobody can deny that.

At the end of 2023, Giovanni di Lorenzo told the Kölner Express that the interview with Erdoğan was "terrible" and a "70-minute battle". Erdoğan met him with aggression and a lack of understanding, Di Lorenzo expected to be thrown out at any minute. "He did not believe I was a journalist, but a representative of the German government, and claimed that we were all in cahoots."

»What makes activist framing so dangerous is that parts of the population can relate to it. This is hardly surprising, as it legitimises intellectual convenience, political dogmatism, and conspiracy narratives and invites people to cherry-pick their reality.«

## DISCREDIT FIRST, CRIMINALISE LATER

Di Lorenzo, acting on behalf of the German government? Erdoğan claims as much. He accused the journalist of political activism, even if he did not use the word "activism" explicitly. In Erdoğan's view, independent journalism does not exist. Rather, he considers all media to be biased. It is obvious to him that only the most powerful actor in the country, the government, could possibly control these media activists. By this "logic", Erdoğan is trying to lend credibility to his construct of a cross-media campaign by the "German media" against Turkey.

It is possible that Erdoğan is actually incapable of imagining a different media landscape because his domestic reality has become the norm for him. His regime has suppressed journalism so brutally that Turkey has dropped to 158th place in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom ranking. When Erdoğan speaks, he can hear the echo of his words a thousand times over in the state-controlled media. They do not practice actual journalism, but propaganda. Erdoğan's assessments in the interview with Di Lorenzo might therefore be mere projection.

However, it is more likely that Erdoğan is imputing activist interests to journalists for two other reasons.

Firstly, this framing can be used to declare every (government-)critical journalist a lobbyist. From this perspective, journalism is just a fraudulent vocabulary to sell a hidden agenda. This description undermines trust in journalists and the media—which is entirely intentional. This makes it all the easier for the government to impose its narrative.

Secondly, the accusation of activism makes it possible to criminalise journalists when necessary. Erdoğan's henchmen have had hundreds of media professionals arrested for allegedly spreading propaganda in favour of "terrorism". All it takes is for the media to give "terrorists" the floor, i.e. to interview them. The Turkish state decides who is a terrorist, thus creating an instrument of censorship for themselves to wield.

## READERS TURNING INTO FOLLOWERS

Erdoğan is not the first to employ this strategy in dealing with media professionals: Russia's president Vladimir Putin has media professionals categorised as "foreign agents", Donald Trump calls them "enemies of the people", Slovakian prime minister Robert Fico describes journalists as "dirty prostitutes", the AfD portrays Correctiv's research as state propaganda, and Pegida whines about the "lying press". In their "Feindbild" studies, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) warns that the mistrust-turned-hostility towards journalists increasingly manifests itself in acts of violence.

What makes activist framing so dangerous is that parts of the population can relate to it. This is hardly surprising, as it legitimises intellectual convenience, political dogmatism, and conspiracy narratives and invites people to cherry-pick their reality. In the worst case, readers, listeners and viewers turn into political followers—who choose ignorance and blind faith in the authorities they endorse.

The most common approach to seemingly substantiate the accusation of activism is media funding. Whoever provides the money has the editorial say, so the simple formula. Yet, it is more complicated than that: Sometimes, the rule applies, sometimes it does not. There are countless politicians and oligarchs in Europe who shamelessly exploit the media they own: Andrej Babiš, former prime minister of the Czech Republic, may serve as a study subject: According to a September 2022 report by The Guardian, Babiš faced accusations of using his own newspapers to undermine the credibility of other media outlets. On the other hand, there are financiers and investors who contractually promise not to exert any influence. One example that I can vouch for is the IJ4EU programme, which is largely funded by the European Commission. More than one million euros per year are channelled into research grants for investigative journalists. They often use the funds to publish critical pieces about the EU administration, for example about its migration policy. Here we have a sponsor paying to have a mirror held up to themselves, for better or worse.

## FINANCING AND EDITORIAL FREEDOM

In countries with a high level of press freedom, cash flows are more complex. Private media usually finance themselves through a mix of distribution revenue, advertising revenue, and the sale of services. Individual donors, such as advertising customers, only have a relative influence in this setup, as revenues are diversified.

### JOURNALISTS

- usually have journalistic training, for example a traineeship
- work for publishing houses, radio stations, or television stations or have set up their own media outlets
- communicate in journalistic formats, including articles, features, and news
- follow the press code of the Press Council in their work
- are bound by the respective state media laws
- see themselves as observers of social life and value neutrality
- do not represent an overt or covert political agenda
- are paid from distribution revenues, advertising revenues, or broadcasting fees
- regard democracy as a basic prerequisite for their full professional fulfilment

Regarding public broadcasters, there are major differences in Europe. Some are paid for by citizens' licence fees, while the respective national government decides on the budget for others. The question of how influenceable the broadcasters are depends largely on political will. The former Polish PIS government turned the public broadcasters into a propaganda machine; the British Tories forced the BBC into a "he said/she said" journalism, which opened the door to unsubstantiated views. In Germany, public service editorial offices are (still) largely free to operate.

In short: Ownership structures and cash flows can be decisive editorial influencing factors, but they do not have to be. The national framework conditions play a crucial role: the appreciation of press freedom, media law, the (self-)understanding of journalists, the industry's ability to self-regulate, and the strength of the trade unions, to name a few key aspects. This is why quality journalism exists where, according to Erdoğan, none can exist: Der Spiegel reveals economic scandals despite advertising money; ARD and ZDF take on politicians even though they are politically regulated; organisations such as Correctiv criticise state bodies even if ministries provide part of the budget.

## TWO PROFESSIONAL SPHERES

In fact, journalists and activists belong to different professional spheres that are clearly distinct from one another:

### ACTIVISTS

- have usually acquired specialised subject expertise, for example during their studies
- work in civil society for non-governmental organisations, social partners, or grassroots organisations
- mobilise through journalistic and activist formats, including flyers, protests, and petitions
- ideally follow the communication code of the German PR Council in their public-relations work
- are bound by the laws governing their forms of action
- see themselves as shapers of social life and value getting involved
- pursue an open political agenda with clearly defined goals
- are paid from donations, membership fees, public project funds, or grants from philanthropists
- regard democracy as a basic prerequisite for their full professional fulfilment

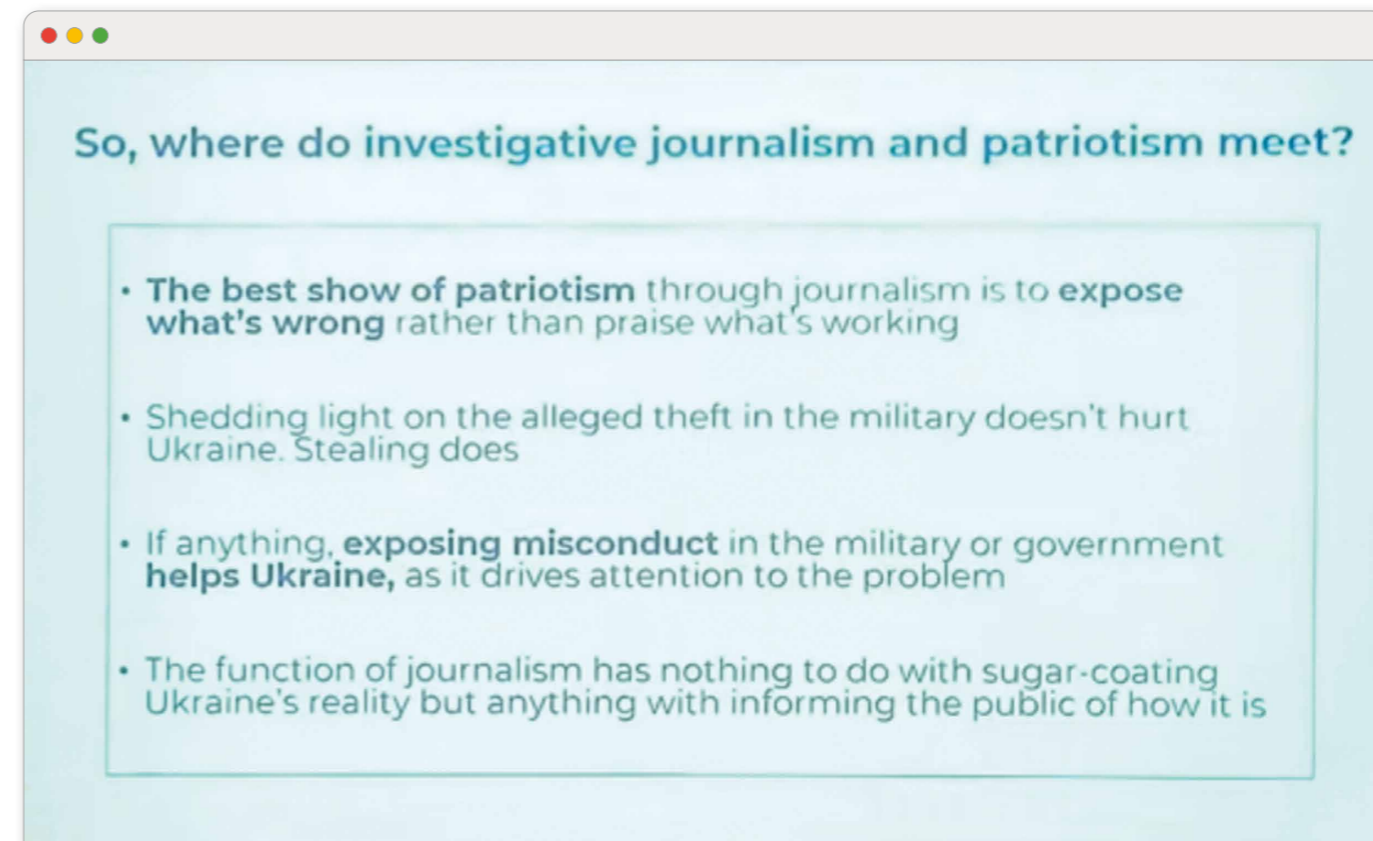
If both sides are aware of their roles and functions, collaboration can be very fruitful. Christopher Hird, Chairman of the Ethical Journalism Network, provides several examples in his book "Investigative Journalism Works: The Mechanism of Impact", which were also discussed at the re:cover conference in Krakow 2023. A recording of the conference panel in question has been uploaded to the ECPMF YouTube channel.

## JOURNALISM UNDER MAXIMUM PRESSURE

One of the most impressive presentations at this conference was given by Anna Myroniuk, Head of Investigation at the Kyiv Independent. Myroniuk described journalistic action in the midst of Russia's war against Ukraine. Together with her colleagues, she uncovered leadership failures, abuse of power, and theft in the Ukrainian army, which led to her being labelled "unpatriotic" by compatriots. She also had to expect that this information would be exploited in Russian propaganda. Journalism, activism?

On the last slide of her presentation, Anna noted why Kyiv Independent decided to publish the findings anyway.

**That is the essence of journalism, the source of its credibility. This is what autocrats like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are afraid of.**



Screenshot from the livestream of Anna Myroniuk's presentation at the re:cover conference in Krakow 2023. © Anna Myroniuk 2023

**Journalist and lecturer Lutz Kinkel previously served as the Managing Director of the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom in Leipzig. He studied history in Hamburg and has over two decades of experience in journalism. Before joining the NGO, he co-led the Berlin office of the magazine Stern.**

50

journalists and other media actors killed in European member states since 2015

24

cases of impunity for the murder of journalists

68

journalists currently in detention

285

alerts on serious threats or attacks on media freedom in 2023



→ Since 2015, the **Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists** has facilitated the compilation and dissemination of information on serious concerns about media freedom and the safety of journalists in Council of Europe member states, as guaranteed by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

**“There is not a crime, there is not a dodge, there is not a trick, there is not a swindle, there is not a vice that does not live by secrecy. Get these things out in the open, describe them, attack them, ridicule them in the press, and sooner or later public opinion will sweep them away.”**

**Quote by Joseph Pulitzer**

Hungarian-American politician and newspaper publisher; 1847–1911  
In: Denis Brian, Pulitzer: A Life, John Wiley & Sons, 2001, p. 377

# A glimpse into the work and life of Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Mar Cabra

by Johannes Wiek

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FUNDAMENTALE  
LECTURER 2023

On April 8, 2024, eight years after the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and over 100 media partners worldwide broke the tax evasion exposé known as "The Panama Papers," a landmark money-laundering trial linked to the revelations began in a Panamanian criminal court. Twenty-seven people faced charges, including Jürgen Mossack and Ramón Fonseca Mora, the founders of the now-defunct law firm Mossack & Fonseca, which was at the heart of the scandal.

The 2016 Panama Papers investigation, built on a massive leak of more than 11.5 million financial and legal records, remains one of the most significant cross-border journalistic collaborations in history. It has become synonymous with financial misconduct and political corruption, shedding light on a system that facilitates crime, bribery, and wrongdoing, all concealed by secretive offshore companies. The investigation exposed the offshore financial secrets of world leaders and other powerful public figures and sparked protests, government investigations, and even the resignation of Iceland's prime minister.

Mar Cabra, an investigative journalist and former head of the Data & Research Unit at the ICIJ, shared her experiences at the Understanding Media seminar at UW/H during the summer semester of 2023. She discussed the challenges of transnational investigative journalism and the immense pressure she and her colleagues faced. Her team had previously set up the technical infrastructure for groundbreaking investigations like "Offshore Leaks", "Lux Leaks" and "Swiss Leaks" making the Panama Papers documents accessible and searchable for journalists globally.

In 2017, Cabra's work on the Panama Papers earned her the Pulitzer Prize. However, in the seminar, she revealed the immense toll that the investigation took on her well-being. She spoke candidly about the constant pressure and fear that she and many of her investigative colleagues endure as they work to expose societal injustices and hold perpetrators accountable. The strain of the workload, the high demands for secrecy, and the ever-present danger from concrete threats created an environment of intense stress. Cabra also highlighted the widespread issue of underfunding in investigative journalism and the pressing need for support and financial backing for independent investigations.

The grueling demands of the Panama Papers investigation eventually led to Cabra's burnout, forcing her to leave journalism shortly after receiving the Pulitzer Prize. During her recovery, she co-founded **The Self-Investigation**, an organization dedicated to promoting healthier work practices in newsrooms around the world. The organization addresses the mental health challenges faced by journalists under intense pressure.

A sobering conclusion to this chapter: On September 28, 2024, all 28 individuals charged with money laundering in connection with the Panama Papers scandal (of whom Ramón Fonseca died on 8 May 2024 at the age of 71) were acquitted, bringing the case to a close. This outcome underscores the ongoing complexities and challenges faced by those who strive to hold power to account in the pursuit of truth and justice.



→ Learn more about the Panama Papers investigations and the money laundering trial on these ICIJ Websites.



→ Listen to Mar Cabra talking about the challenges of working across borders and in countries that lack transparency, as in her native Spain.



→ The Self Investigation



# BURNING PRESSURE

UNDERSTANDING  
MEDIA DEVELOPMENT  
TEAM

by Katrin Käufer,  
Director of the Just  
Money Program at  
the Massachusetts  
Institute of Technology, Co-founder  
of the Presencing Institute and  
UW/H alumna.

# MEDIA AS BRIDGES

## From ego- to eco-system awareness—building the collective capacity for societal transformation

### THE PERCEPTION GAP

The 2024 UN Human Development Report features an interesting set of numbers. Titled "Breaking the Gridlock," the report finds that 69 percent of people around the world are willing to sacrifice some of their income to contribute to climate-change mitigation. But only 43 percent of people believe that others would do the same.<sup>1</sup>

This 26 percent perception gap is a significant indicator of how we perceive each other in today's world. Although a majority are willing to tackle environmental challenges, many believe they are alone in this effort, doubting their neighbours would do the same.

This disparity in perception affects our identity as citizens and shapes our understanding of our society. It also influences our collective assumptions about the future we are heading towards. Wilhelm Ernst Barkhoff, a co-founder of GLS Bank in Bochum, stated, "We can only overcome our angst of a future we fear, with a vision of a future we want." However, if our collective vision of the future is distorted by misperceptions of those around us, we risk moving in the wrong direction.

### DIVIDING VOICES POLARIZING PUBLIC SPACES

Where are these images of our current reality and possible future shaped? One important arena are the public spaces we inhabit, including different social media channels built by a trillion-dollar industry, much of which is located on the West Coast of the US. The public spaces these media giants create operate on a business model that actively engages in polarization and division to capture our attention. Fear and hate are important psychological drivers in keeping our eyes on posts and leaving us engaged. While sensational and fearful news have always been a source of profit for media outlets, social media accelerates its impact by creeping into our personal and private spaces to a degree unimaginable just a few decades ago. The consequences of these negative public engagements are profound, leading not only to serious mental health issues, particularly among younger users, but also to a perpetuation and amplification of societal polarization. The aforementioned 69 percent of people who are willing to give some of their income to address the environmental challenges we are facing are becoming invisible in these arenas while extreme and dividing voices take the center stage.



**1 UN Human Development Report 2023/24:  
Breaking the Gridlock—Reimagining Coopera-  
tion in a Polarized World**

## A DIFFERENT SOCIAL REALITY— LESS LOUD AND LESS VISIBLE

At the same time, the figures in the Human Development Report reveal a quieter, less visible social reality. This alternative narrative aligns with our experiences at the Presencing Institute. Each day, we collaborate with inspiring change agents worldwide who develop innovative solutions that remain outside the public spectacle. This narrative represents a movement of individuals who are less prominent on social media but are dedicated to creating positive change, addressing some of the most pressing challenges of our time, and envisioning a different relationship with the planet and each other. We describe this movement as a shift from ego- to eco-system awareness.

»Bridging the gap between our societies' potential for collective action and the current reality of individualism and polarization is one of our greatest challenges today. To this end, we must innovate public spaces for collaboration, dialogue, and awareness.«

## CHANGE AGENTS

One example is our work with the Global Alliance for Banking on Values (GABV), an association of over 70 banks around the world that use finance as a tool for addressing social and ecological challenges. Founded in 2006, member banks of the GABV successfully demonstrate that a bank can operate as a for-profit business while being a vehicle for positive change. These financial institutions align profitability with a positive social and ecological impact. Take, for instance, BRAC Bank, ranking third in Bangladesh today. Founded by the world's largest NGO, BRAC, this bank serves small businesses whose owners are often illiterate. Loan officers are trained to step into a small market or shop and provide financial services designed for individuals who never had an account. This allows them to grow, to hire and to thrive. Or Quipu Bank in Colombia. Aiming to help the informal economy in Latin America, Quipu Bank developed an AI-based credit scoring tool that allows small business owners excluded from the mainstream economy to access the financial means they need to build their business. Yet another example: Xac Bank in Mongolia, which formed an alliance between non-profits and heating-product businesses and reduced the carbon emission in the coldest capital in the world, Ulaanbaatar, by upgrading housing units in low-income communities.

And these are just some of many examples that we have seen across sectors, from agriculture to health, education, or business. Over the past seven years, we have created an activation platform for change agents, with free access to tools and methods of transformation and a community of other change agents. Over 260,000 users have signed on with the intent to apply these tools to the local challenges they are facing.

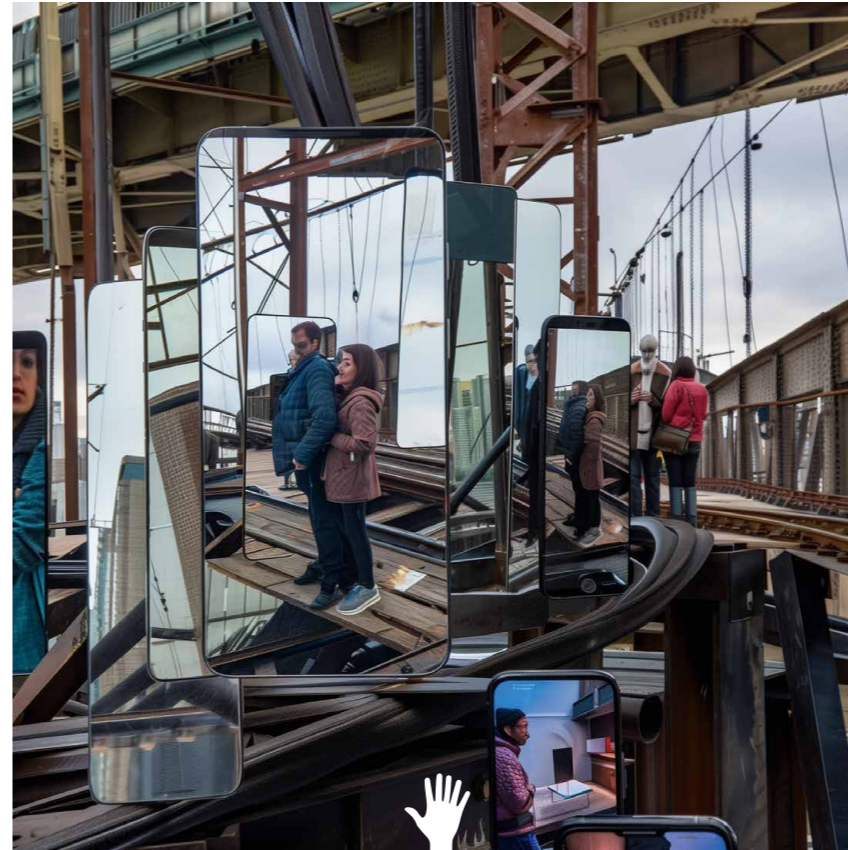
## PUBLIC SPACES FOR COLLECTIVE TRANSITION AND TRANSFORMATION

But a movement that does not see itself as a movement cannot become a historical force. What is missing are spaces that allow these change agents to articulate the future that they want to see and help co-create.

The difficulties in meeting today's global challenges are not caused primarily by a knowledge gap. For example, many of the technical solutions for addressing the climate crisis or inequality are known. What is missing is our ability to collectively act on this knowledge. This is sometimes referred to as the "knowing-doing gap". In most societal systems, we collectively create results that (almost) nobody wants. Most people do not get up in the morning with the goal to destroy the planet or make other people's lives miserable. So, why are we unable to address these challenges collectively? It appears that one missing piece are public spaces of resonance that allow us to see our collective possibilities.

In his 1927 book "The Public and Its Problems", John Dewey argues that democracy is not merely a technique of governance but requires continuous citizen engagement. A democracy evolves with its citizens; how they learn, grow, and engage directly impacts the quality of governance. Democracy is a collective project of engagement and co-creation. This raises critical questions about where this engagement occurs and who provides the necessary public spaces. Moreover, it prompts us to consider how these spaces can be designed to foster meaningful, co-creative participation.

If democracy requires its citizens to engage, grow, and learn, the quality of public spaces becomes crucial. Do these spaces facilitate engagement and listening, or do they, as is often the case with many digital interactions, foster toxicity and conflict driven by profit-oriented business models? The quality of listening, dialogue, and the underlying relationships in these public spaces profoundly affects the health of our societies and potentially the survival of our democracies.



**Dr. Katrin Kaeufer is Director of the Just Money Program at the Community Innovators Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Co-founder of the Presencing Institute. Her research focuses on leadership, organizational change, mission-based banking as well as on participatory action research. Her 2013-book co-authored with Otto Scharmer is titled "Leading from the emerging Future: From Ego-system to Eco-system Economies". Her 2021 book that explores the role of mission-driven banking for addressing societal challenges "Just Money. Mission-driven Banks and the Future of Finance." (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021) was awarded the 2021 AXIOM Prize. Her upcoming book co-authored together with Otto Scharmer: "Presencing. Seven Practices for Shifting from Ego- to Eco-societies" is set to be published by Berrett-Koehler in March 2025.**



→ The Community Innovators Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology



→ Presencing Institute



→ Katrin Kaeufer and Lillian Steponaitis: Just Money. Mission-driven Banks and the Future of Finance. Cambridge: MIT Press 2021.

## MEDIA AS MIRRORS AND BRIDGES FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

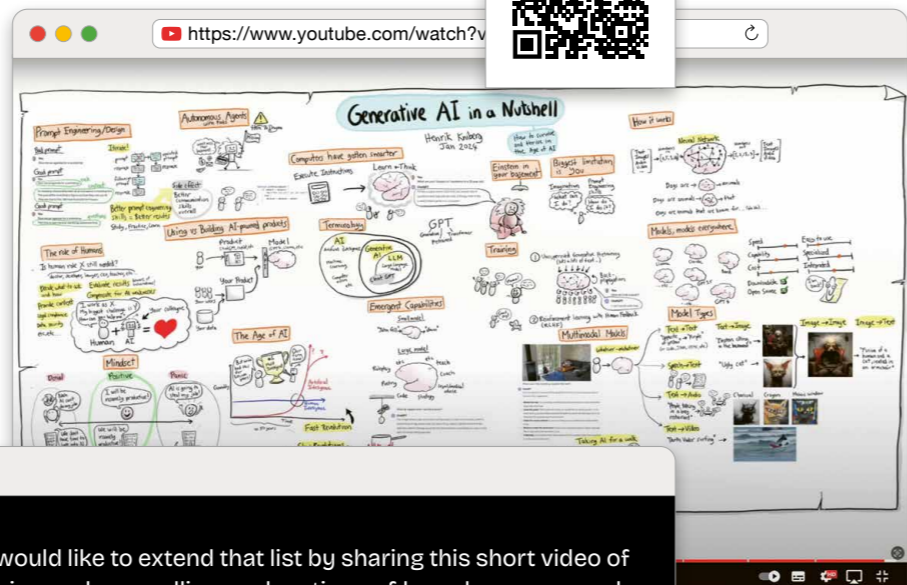
Media, in all its forms, chronicles the events within our societies, creating a resonant space that allows us, as citizens, to gaze into a collective mirror. This mirroring process influences how we define our roles as citizens and, consequently, impacts our actions. Thus, it is crucial whether the media is diverse, trusted, and transparent, or whether it operates through lies, fear, and division. In this context, media literacy emerges as an essential skill for citizens in a democracy, enabling them to navigate and critically engage with the information landscape.

In times of crisis, such as when floods endanger our neighbors' and our own homes, we instinctively know how to respond, collaborating and stepping up to the challenge. The key to this response lies in our awareness of our surroundings and the needs that arise, forming a bridge we call "action confidence." This confidence emerges when we see ourselves as part of a larger whole, when we experience the system we are co-creating and enacting. Bridging the gap between our societies' potential for collective action and the current reality of individualism and polarization is one of our greatest challenges today. To this end, we must innovate public spaces for collaboration, dialogue, and awareness. These spaces require social infrastructures and technologies that foster the quality of relationships necessary for co-creation. Media plays a central role in this endeavor. Shifting from an ego-centric to an eco-centric awareness requires the development of these social infrastructures for public spaces characterized by high relational qualities.



# GENERATIVE AI IN A NUTSHELL

1. "One of the most clarifying, comprehensive, helpful, insightful videos I've seen on this topic. Really excellent."
2. "I've worked in and around AI since the mid-90s, and this is one of the best explanations of the current state-of-the-art I've seen. It's a semester course crammed into eighteen minutes. I'm sharing this with a long list of people. Thanks!"
3. "The best explanation of Generative AI on YouTube. Thank you for sharing."



And we would like to extend that list by sharing this short video of entertaining and compelling explanations of large language models and generative AI by **Henrik Kniberg**:  
**What is generative AI? How does it work, and how do I use it? What are some of its risks and limitations?** It also covers concepts like autonomous agents, the human factor, prompt-engineering tips, AI-powered product development, the origin of ChatGPT, different types of Large Language Models, and some tips about the mindset around this whole thing.

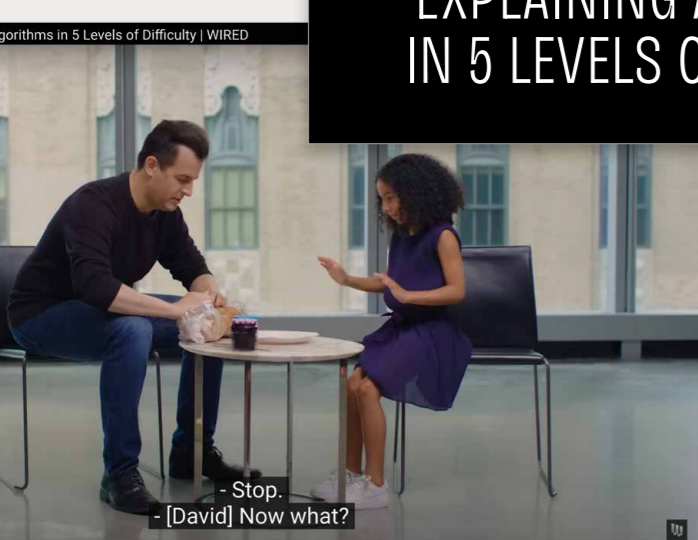


Videos

## WHAT IS AN ALGORITHM? EXPLAINING ALGORITHMS IN 5 LEVELS OF DIFFICULTY



Nothing and nobody influences your life in your digital ecosystem as much as algorithms. They determine the news you see and don't see, the feeds you scroll through, the opinions you hear, and the products you see. But do you actually know what an algorithm is? How it works? And what it can do? From the physical world to the virtual world, algorithms are seemingly everywhere. **David J. Malan**, Professor of Computer Science at Harvard University, explains the science of algorithms to 5 different people; a child, a teen, a college student, a grad student, and an expert. Whoever you are—have a look and learn a lot!

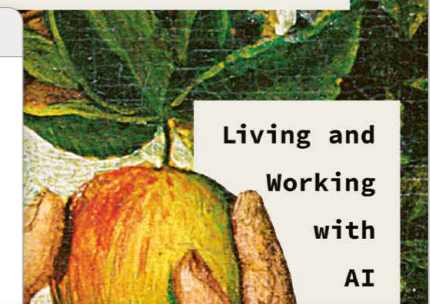


- Stop.  
- [David] Now what?

## CO-INTELLIGENCE



Something new entered our world in November 2022—the first general-purpose AI that could pass for a human and do the kinds of creative, innovative work that only humans could do previously. Wharton professor **Ethan Mollick** immediately understood what ChatGPT meant: After millions of years on our own, humans had developed a kind of co-intelligence that could augment, or even replace, human thinking. Through his writing, speaking, and teaching, Mollick has become one of the most prominent and provocative explainers of AI, focusing on the practical aspects of how these new tools for thought can transform our world. In *Co-Intelligence*, Mollick urges us to engage with AI as co-worker, co-teacher, and coach. He assesses its profound impact on business and education, using dozens of real-time examples of AI in action. *Co-Intelligence* shows what it means to think and work together with smart machines, and why it's imperative that we master that skill. Mollick challenges us to utilize AI's enormous power without losing our identity, to learn from it without being misled, and to harness its gifts to create a better human future. Wide-ranging, hugely thought-provoking, optimistic, and lucid, *Co-Intelligence* reveals the promise and power of this new era.



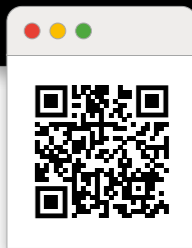
Books

# CO-INTELLIGENCE

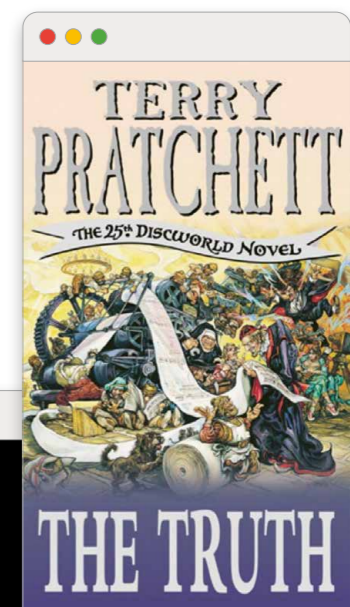


ETHAN MOLLICK

Mollick is also the author of the popular One Useful Thing Substack newsletter—a useful playbook for working, learning, and living in the new age of AI.



A truly fantastic story by one of the most highly acclaimed fantasy authors—"The Truth", by **Terry Pratchett**, is the 25th book out of the author's Discworld universe—where everything is different but fundamentally the same as in our "Roundworld", allowing us to see our mannerisms and shortcomings from the perspective of another universe. In "The Truth", the reader learns about the introduction of the newspaper into society by journalistic genius Willem de Worde and later his equally gifted reporter Sacharissa Cripslock. Together with a bunch of dwarfs as printers (and later inventors of the rotation press), de Worde establishes the 'Ankh-Morpork Times'.



# THE TRUTH

**“What we do in and with media has consequences for reality and our world offline. That gives us power. The question now is what we will do with this power.”**



Quote by Mark Deuze

From “10 Tips for a Good Digital Life”  
on [medium.com/@markdeuze](https://medium.com/@markdeuze)

**“A broad, critical understanding of the media should become a fundamental knowledge base for all people who want to take on social responsibility and stand up for freedom and democracy.”**

**Quote by Luis V. Teodoro**

Luis V. Teodoro (1941–2023), founding Chairperson of Altermidya—People’s Alternative Media Network—and former Dean of the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication, where he used to teach journalism. Learn more about his life and work on page 155.

# UNDER- STANDING MEDIA

## A new educational programme beyond media literacy for students of all disciplines

**What you know about the world, you know through media. But do you really understand how the media work today? Do you know who influences them? Who owns them? Who regulates them? And under what conditions is the news you receive produced?**

**by Johannes Wiek & Max von Abendroth**

This quote from Luis V. Teodoro captures an essential educational need in today’s world, where media pervade nearly every aspect of our lives. As societal upheavals grow and threats to democracy mount, it becomes ever more critical to understand the role and impact of the fast-evolving media—and the associated changes in media-consumption habits.

Media possess the power to either repress or liberate, to promote or obstruct societal change. This is why we believe that every student, regardless of their field of study, should engage with the central questions of how media shape and influence our individual and collective consciousness, thinking, and decision-making—and to consider who holds this immense power.

In a world defined by rapid technological change, shifting global power dynamics, and increasing threats to democracy, the role of the media has become central. Media not only inform but can also manipulate, polarise, and either divide or unite societies.

As part of the next generation of responsible decision-makers, what do you need to know about the media? How deep must your understanding of media structures, processes, and effects be if you wish to make independent, reflective, and impactful decisions? What must you comprehend, see through, and be able to assess in order to preserve a democratic social order in a value-driven, self-determined, and responsible way?

The journey of UNDERSTANDING MEDIA began three years ago with a foundational seminar on journalism, led by UW/H alumnus Johannes Wiek, a seasoned journalist and media expert, as part of the Studium fundamentale at Witten/Herdecke University. The response from students was overwhelming. What became clear was how little young people knew about the radical and far-reaching changes happening behind the media and news systems they use daily. The focus of the course shifted from practical journalism to a deeper exploration of the media landscape itself.

Max von Abendroth, another UW/H alumnus and Senior Advisor at the Media Development Investment Fund, joined the initiative, bringing with him access to a network of leading international media experts. The development team continued to grow, with Katrin Kaufer, Co-Founder of the MIT Presencing Institute and also a UW/H alumna, and Lutz Kinkel, former Director of the Center for Press and Media Freedom in Leipzig. Their collective expertise, combined with the enthusiastic student response, underscored the need to scale up this educational effort into a comprehensive UNDERSTANDING MEDIA programme.

Based at the Witten Lab Studium fundamentale as its development hub, and with the cooperative support from the Deutsche Welle Academy, the programme aims to expand across Europe. Our goal is to offer students from universities across Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Central Europe the opportunity to participate in this innovative study programme. Accredited within various degree courses, this initiative will connect students with international media experts to discuss the most crucial developments and necessary actions in eight key areas.

## 8 PERSPECTIVES FOR UNDERSTANDING MEDIA

1. **Media—What They Are and How They Work**
2. **Media Structures and Ownership**
3. **Media Manipulation, Information Selection, and Disinformation**
4. **Media Independence, Press Freedom, Investigative Journalism, and Data Journalism**
5. **Media Policy and the Influence of Media Regulation**
6. **Digitisation, Algorithms, and the Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Media**
7. **The Power of Images, Visual Journalism, and the Impact of AI on Image Manipulation**
8. **Media Detoxification and the Viability of Media Ecosystems**

At the heart of the UNDERSTANDING MEDIA programme is a growing network of dedicated European and international media experts from academia and civil society. These experts are eager to share their knowledge and insights with students from diverse backgrounds and nationalities through an interdisciplinary approach.

The four-semester pilot programme, "Understanding Media = Understanding the World" (2022–2024), featured a remarkable line-up of participants, including:

## UNDERSTANDING MEDIA GUEST LECTURER

- **Lars Boering**  
Director of the European Journalism Centre and former Director of the World Press Photo Award [The Netherlands]
- **Charlie Beckett**  
Director of Polis and the Polis/LSE JournalismAI project at The London School of Economics and Political Science [UK]
- **Mar Cabra**  
Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist (Panama Papers) and Co-Founder of The Self-Investigation [Spain]
- **Mark Deuze**  
Professor of Journalism and Media Culture at the University of Amsterdam [Netherlands]
- **Marius Dragomir**  
Founding Director of the Media and Journalism Research Centre and former Director of the Center for Media, Data and Society at the Central European University in Budapest [Austria & Spain]
- **Paul F. Nemitz**  
Principal Advisor in the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers of the European Commission [Belgium]
- **Laura Moore**  
Head of Research and Evaluation at the Deutsche Welle Academy [Germany]
- **Javier Luque Martinez**  
Leader of the Decoding the Disinformation Playbook Initiative at the International Press Institute (IPI) [Austria]
- **Christian Mihr**  
former Managing Director of Reporters Without Borders and recent board member of Amnesty International [Germany]
- **Renate Schröder**  
Director of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) [Belgium]
- **Barbara Trionfi**  
Senior Adviser to the OSCE Representative on Media Freedom and former Executive Director of the International Press Institute (IPI) [Italy]

These distinguished experts bring a wealth of experience and knowledge, ensuring that students gain a comprehensive and critical understanding of the media landscape. By engaging with these leaders, students are empowered to explore the intricate connections between media, society, and democracy, equipping them with the tools to actively participate in and shape public discourse across Europe.

# Student voices from the seminar

*"Simply a great course, thank you very much! I would go so far as to wish that this course would become a compulsory module so that we all understand, in our responsibility as future bearers of this democratic society, how important independent journalism and its safeguarding are—and how we all contribute to shaping this world with our media consumption."*

**"THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR THE GREAT SEMINAR. I HAVE THE FEELING THAT I WILL DEAL MORE INTENSIVELY WITH MEDIA STUDIES IN THE FUTURE."**

**"I VERY MUCH HOPE THAT THE COURSE WILL BE OFFERED MANY MORE TIMES FOR FUTURE STUDENTS AS WELL."**

**"You can feel the lecturers' enthusiasm for their subject—it's infectious..."**

**"THIS ISSUE SHOULD BE DISCUSSED MORE WIDELY."**

*"The input from external experts on various topics and the opportunity to exchange ideas with them and ask questions were particularly valuable for me."*

**"THE MEDIA SEMINAR IS EXTREMELY VALUABLE FOR THE STUDIUM FUNDAMENTALE AND SHOULD BE CONTINUED."**

*"It's a reality check on what it's like with media capture in real life and that such issues are actually happening. You might think that they can only be conspiracy theories, but when you think about Poland, for example, you realise how urgent it is."*

**"THE DISCUSSION ROUNDS WITH MEDIA PROFESSIONALS OFTEN MADE ME THINK."**

*"The course provided an in-depth understanding of the value that free and independent journalism should have in our democratic world. We must value and support it, and recognise that a great deal of responsibility lies with us consumers. We should always and repeatedly scrutinise what we are shown in the media and pass on this critical, yet so important, way of thinking. I think this course should be mandatory for every student at this university because in this course, you really learn and understand what democracy and its protection mean for all of us."*

\*Extracts from anonymous evaluations by students attending recent seminars 2024/25



As a UW/H student, you can easily enrol in the UNDERSTANDING MEDIA seminar through **My UW/H (meine-uw.h.de)**. Students from other universities interested in participating can reach out to **johannes.wiek@uni-wh.de**. Interested in supporting the UNDERSTANDING MEDIA initiative? We'd love to hear from you!  
→ **Follow our UNDERSTANDING MEDIA seminar on Instagram for key insights and updates.**

**“A broader understanding of the structures, influencing factors, and effects of media is often reserved for those studying media, journalism, or political science. Our approach is different: We believe that students from all fields should be equipped to critically analyse how media shape their perceptions and worldview. This idea is at the heart of the UNDERSTANDING MEDIA programme.”**

Quote from the Understanding Media Concept by Johannes Wiek and Max von Abendroth.

**Johannes Wiek**, Witten Alumnus, journalist, media- and communications expert, leads the strategic programme development and the implementation of this programme at Witten/Herdecke University. He oversees the curriculum development and leads the pilot programme, working closely with various faculties.

**Max von Abendroth**, a Witten alumnus and authority on European media and EU public affairs, plays a key role in co-designing and implementing pilot projects. He is also crafting a concept for an international visiting faculty. Von Abendroth is instrumental in cultivating a network of media scientists and experts across Europe, and in forging partnerships with sponsors and supporters to secure the project's long-term success.

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structures  
determine the  
success of your  
business -  
more than your  
ideas!**



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# FORBIDDEN STORIES

DON'T MISS!

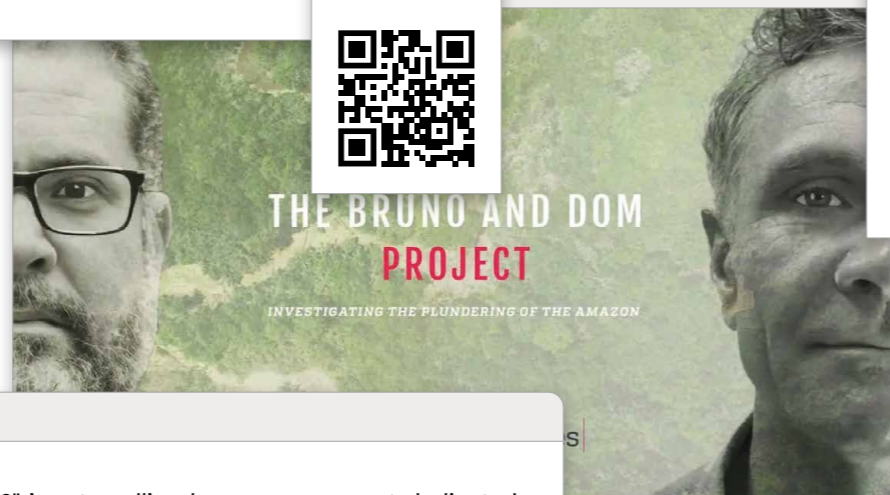
"Killing the journalist won't kill the story." This powerful message lies at the heart of **Forbidden Stories**, an international network of journalists committed to continuing the work of silenced reporters. Founded in 2017 by Laurent Richard, who spent years reporting from conflict zones and under oppressive regimes, Forbidden Stories protects and perpetuates the investigations of threatened or killed journalists. As Richard explains, "Our nonprofit organisation protects the work of threatened journalists and pursues the investigations of those silenced. In the face of increasingly organised enemies of the press, collaboration is our strength." The message is clear: Killing a journalist will only amplify their story. Forbidden Stories ensures that critical information reaches the public and aims to deter crimes against journalists, safeguarding the press in exposing corruption, organised crime, and human rights violations.

One notable effort is the Bruno & Dom Project, where over 50 journalists from 16 news organisations have continued the work of **Bruno Pereira and Dom Phillips** on the Amazon (see the article by Barbara Trionfi on page 124)—ensuring their story lives on despite their tragic murders.



## Killing the journalist won't kill the story

Learn more about the Bruno & Dom Project here:



# ANYTHING TO SAY?

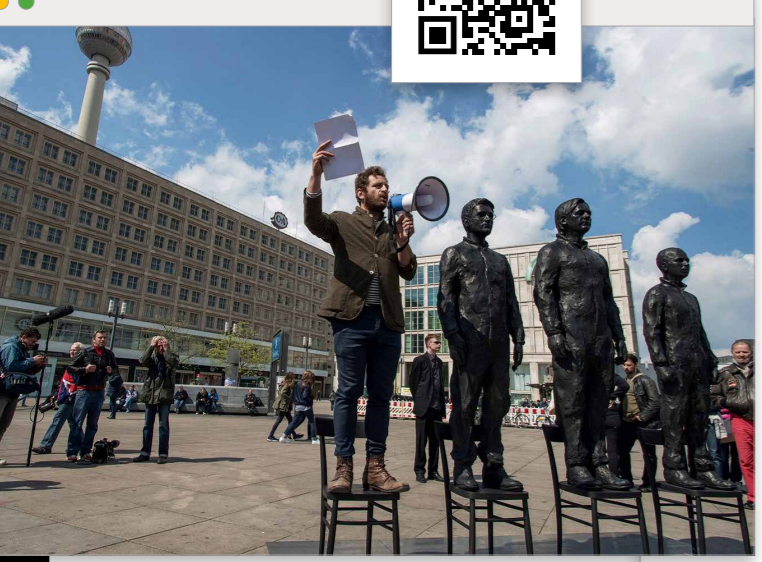
Projects



"Anything to Say?" is a travelling bronze monument dedicated to the principle of free expression. Unlike traditional statues fixed in public spaces, this **work by Davide Dormino** journeys from city to city, encouraging reflection and engagement with its message. The sculpture features **Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, and Edward Snowden**—figures renowned for exposing war crimes and human-rights violations through the WikiLeaks platform, actions that have had significant global repercussions.

The idea, developed by author and journalist **Charles Glass** and brought to life by Dormino, explores the role of public art in prompting reflection. The three figures are depicted standing on chairs, representing the courage required to act in the face of personal risk. A fourth chair remains empty, symbolising an invitation for the public to consider their own willingness to stand up for their beliefs.

Since 2015, "Anything to Say?" has been exhibited in cities such as Berlin, Paris, Geneva, Sydney, and London, offering viewers a chance to reflect on the importance of free expression and the personal costs associated with speaking out. The empty chair challenges onlookers with a poignant question: If you had something important to say, would you be willing to stand up, and what price would you be prepared to pay?



# PROMPTOGRAPHY

German artist **Boris Eldagsen** made waves in the photography world when he used AI to create an image that won the 2023 Sony World Photography Award—only to reveal later that it wasn't a photograph at all. By rejecting the award, Eldagsen sparked a debate about the ethical and artistic challenges posed by AI. "AI isn't a threat," Eldagsen told The Guardian. "I love photography, but I've realised they're not the same. One is writing with light; one is writing with prompts." He views AI not as a dehumanizing force, but as a liberating tool that breaks down material and financial barriers. However, Eldagsen also warns of AI's potential dangers, especially to democracy and photojournalism, in an era rife with fake images. He proposes a traffic-light system to label images as authentic, manipulated, or generated, but he emphasizes that this is only part of a much larger conversation about forcing distinctions between photography and AI-generated images. Giving the intersection a name, Eldagsen says, would be a start: "promptography".

Learn more about Eldagsen's image series PSEUDOMNESIA (Fake Memories), 2022—ongoing:



Read the interview in The Guardian, "AI Isn't a Threat.", by Zoe Williams:



Boris Eldagsen, "PSEUDOMNESIA | The Electrician", promptography, 2022, courtesy photo edition berlin

People

For more insight into his work, watch: "The Political Economy of the Media: A Critical Perspective"



## A CHAMPION OF ETHICAL JOURNALISM

**Lois V. Teodoro** (d. March 2023) was a leading Filipino journalist, editor, and academic who was deeply committed to ethical journalism and press freedom. As a former dean and professor at the University of the Philippines Diliman, Teodoro was known for his incisive critiques of the media's susceptibility to political and corporate influence in the Philippines. He was a staunch advocate for journalism that serves democracy and social justice. Teodoro's legacy lives on through his role as the founding Chairperson of Altermidya, a network of independent media organizations that amplifies the voices of marginalized communities. Despite facing significant challenges, including threats and harassment from both state and non-state actors, Altermidya remains a respected platform for independent journalism, recognized for its commitment to ethical standards, transparency, and journalistic integrity. In an era where media freedom is increasingly under siege, Altermidya stands as a testament to Teodoro's enduring legacy in the fight for free and fair journalism.





**MEHR ALS ENERGIE FÜR WITTEN.**

Natürlich.



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# QUIZ ANSWERS:

## *What do you know about MEDIA?*

01

**What percentage of all the news you read every day comes from the three major international press agencies: Associated Press (AP), Reuters and Agence France-Presse (AFP)?**

**ANSWER: 80–85%**

Leading media research institutes estimate that around 80% to 85% (70 to 90%) of all news content—whether text, photos, videos, or multimedia—that we consume daily in mainstream media originates from the three major international news agencies: Associated Press (AP), Reuters, and Agence France-Presse (AFP). These agencies play a pivotal role in providing raw news content, which is then republished by various media outlets around the world, sometimes with minimal alterations. This dominance highlights their significant influence on the global news landscape, as they are the primary source for the majority of news stories.



→ [reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/news-agencies-and-social-media-relationship-future](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/news-agencies-and-social-media-relationship-future)

02

**How many of the 26 regional newspapers in Poland are owned by the 49.9% state-owned oil company ORLEN?**

**ANSWER: 24**



→ [www.pewresearch.org/topic/news-habits-media/news-media-trends/state-of-the-news-media-project](https://www.pewresearch.org/topic/news-habits-media/news-media-trends/state-of-the-news-media-project)



→ [www.ecpmf.eu/poland-media-capture-fears-confirmed-in-new-report-examining-pkn-orklen-takeover-of-polska-press](https://www.ecpmf.eu/poland-media-capture-fears-confirmed-in-new-report-examining-pkn-orklen-takeover-of-polska-press)

03

**By what percentage has the news media industry's revenue from advertising declined in the last 20 years due to the rise of social media platforms?**

**ANSWER:  
United States: 80%, European Union: 60%, Germany: over 50%**

This decline in advertising revenue across all these regions highlights the broader challenges faced by traditional media in the digital age. Despite growth in digital advertising, the revenue generated often fails to compensate for the losses from traditional sources, resulting in financial strain and the closure or downsizing of many media outlets.

04

**What has been the percentage reduction in staff at U.S. newspapers over the past 15 years?**

**ANSWER: More than 70%**

Total newspaper employment in the U.S. has plummeted by more than 70% in the past 15 years, with the number of newsroom journalists dropping more than 50%, from 75,000 to less than 32,000 by 2022.



→ [localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/explore/#/localnewslandscape](https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/explore/#/localnewslandscape)

Waves of redundancies continued in 2023 and 2024, with roughly 2,700 layoffs tracked in 2023, prompting media observers to warn of an impending "extinction-level event" for journalism.



→ [www.nytimes.com/news/the-weekend-essay/is-the-media-prepared-for-an-extinction-level-event](https://www.nytimes.com/news/the-weekend-essay/is-the-media-prepared-for-an-extinction-level-event)

The start of the 2024 presidential election year has also been described as a "brutal start for the new industry", as mass layoffs devastate publishers, raising questions about the future of journalism.



→ [edition.cnn.com/2024/01/25/media/news-industry-future/index.html](https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/25/media/news-industry-future/index.html)



→ [styli.medium.com/news-industry-meltdown-market-failure-or-creative-destruction-6e7fe334f317](https://styli.medium.com/news-industry-meltdown-market-failure-or-creative-destruction-6e7fe334f317)

05

**How many more SLAPP cases (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) did the Coalition against SLAPPS in Europe (CASE) register in 2023 compared to 2022?**

**ANSWER: +44%**

SLAPPs are legal actions typically initiated by powerful entities, such as businesses or politicians, to intimidate and silence critics, especially journalists and media outlets, by burdening them with costly and lengthy legal defenses until they abandon their criticism or opposition.

In 2023, the Coalition against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE) recorded over 820 SLAPP cases (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), a sharp increase from the 570 cases

reported in 2022. This trend reflects a growing threat to freedom of expression and public discourse across Europe. Most of these lawsuits are based on national defamation laws or similar provisions and primarily target journalists, activists, and NGOs. The number of unreported cases is probably higher, says Uwe Krüger from the Institute of Communication and Media Studies at Leipzig University. "The legalisation of journalism has been increasing for more than ten years. For example, it has become increasingly commonplace for political television programmes to receive press law warning letters from well-known law firms during their research."



→ [www.the-case.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/20230703-CASE-UPDATE-REPORT-2023-1.pdf](https://www.the-case.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/20230703-CASE-UPDATE-REPORT-2023-1.pdf)



→ [www.uni-leipzig.de/newsdetail/artikel/studie-einschuechterungsklagen-bedrohen-presse-und-wissenschaftsfreiheit-2024-02-22](https://www.uni-leipzig.de/newsdetail/artikel/studie-einschuechterungsklagen-bedrohen-presse-und-wissenschaftsfreiheit-2024-02-22)

06

**How many newsroom staffers are already using generative AI for journalistic content production despite ethical concerns?**

**ANSWER: Nearly 70%**

According to the April 2024 study by Nicholas Diakopoulos, Hannes Cools, Charlotte Li, Natali Helberger, Ernest Kung, Aimee Rinehart, "Generative AI in Journalism: The Evolution of Newswork and Ethics in a Generative Information Ecosystem", nearly 70% of newsroom staffers surveyed by the Associated Press report using generative AI to create content (text), despite ethical concerns. Only 21.5% say they are using it for information gathering & sensemaking, and just 7.7% utilize it for working with data.



→ DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.31540.05765



07

**What percentage of people in Germany believe they can trust most of the news most of the time?**

**ANSWER: 43%**

The Oxford Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2024 reveals the lowest level of trust in news since the question was first included in the study in 2015—a 20% decline.



→ [reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024)

08

**What percentage of people still go to news media websites for news?**

**ANSWER: 22%**

According to the 2023 Digital News Report from the Oxford Reuters Institute, the majority of people consume most of their news as videos on online and video platforms (72%). Across markets, only 22% of respondents now say they prefer to start their news journeys on a news website or app—a decline of 10 percentage points since 2018. The shrinking numbers are causing publishers and news media increasing financial difficulties due to reduced advertising revenues.



→ [reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/dnr-executive-summary](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/dnr-executive-summary)

09

**How many people think that having stories selected by an algorithm based on their previous consumption is a good way to receive news?**

**ANSWER: 30%**

Based on the results of the 2023 Digital News Report by the Oxford Reuters Institute, much of the public is skeptical about the algorithms used to curate content on search engines, social media, and other platforms. Less than a third (30%) consider it a good approach to have news stories selected based on their previous consumption, 6 percentage points lower than in 2016. Despite this, on average, users still slightly prefer news selected this way to that chosen by

editors or journalists (27%), suggesting that worries about algorithms are part of a wider concern about news and how it is selected.



→ [reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/dnr-executive-summary](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/dnr-executive-summary)

10

**In the U.S., who garners more attention—mainstream news brands or alternative voices from political influencers or politicians?**

**ANSWER:  
42% of Americans say they pay attention to mainstream news brands. 58% of Americans cite other accounts including alternative media, influencers, politicians.**

In the U.S., the most frequently mentioned news brands are CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, ABC News, and the New York Times. According to the Digital News Report 2024, the biggest news brand, CNN (62.7 million followers on X; CNN Politics 4.5 million on X\*), was mentioned five times more than the most referenced individual account (Tucker Carlson with 13.6 million followers on X\*). Influential figures making political commentary, such as Elon Musk, who regularly discusses topics like free speech, AI, and the shortcomings of mainstream media to his 194.6 million followers on X, have up to 14 times more followers than some news accounts.

(\*Figures updated by the editorial team in August 2024)



→ [reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/rise-alternative-voices-and-news-influencers-social-and-video-networks](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/rise-alternative-voices-and-news-influencers-social-and-video-networks)

# Imprint

## WITTEN LAB MAGAZINE

### PUBLISHED BY

WittenLab. Zukunftslabor Studium fundamentale Private University of Witten/Herdecke gGmbH  
Alfred-Herrhausen-Straße 50  
58448 Witten—Germany  
+49 (0)2302-926-816  
→ [uni-wh.de/wittenlab](https://uni-wh.de/wittenlab)

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### ADVERTISEMENTS

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### ART DIRECTION & DESIGN

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Alexanderstrasse 56  
70182 Stuttgart  
→ [thekitchen.love](https://thekitchen.love)

### PRINT

Druckstudio GmbH  
Professor-Oehler-Straße 10  
40589 Düsseldorf  
[druckstudiogruppe.com](https://druckstudiogruppe.com)



### PRINT RUN

3500

### ISSN NUMBER

2941-0304

Our magazine contains links to external third-party websites over whose content we have no influence. All links have been checked for up-to-dateness (as of 24 September 2024).

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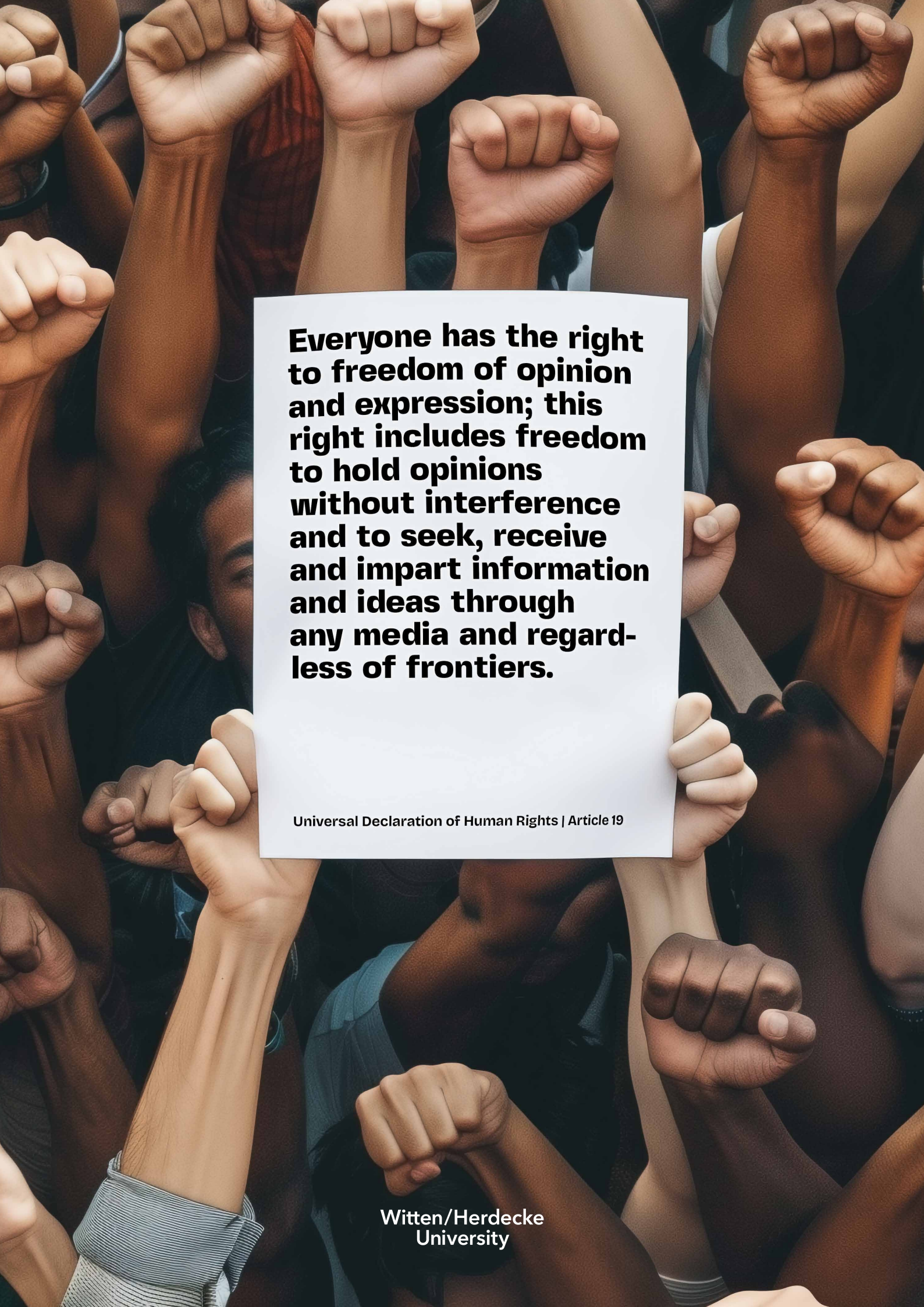
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