Schibsted

Editorial media as **defenders** of democracies

An analysis of the relationship between free media and democracies in Europe

About Schibsted Media

Schibsted Media includes some of the strongest media brands in the Nordics, like VG, Aftenposten, E24, Bergens Tidende, Stavanger Aftenblad, Aftonbladet, Svenska Dagbladet, Omni, and Podme. Every day, nearly seven million people turn to our editorial media to stay informed, engaged, and entertained through text, audio, images, and video.

We are a forward-looking, data and technology driven company that puts freedom of expression and trust in editorial media high on the agenda. We are a leading voice in our sector and work with regulations that affect our business.

Our Public Policy team supports the company's policy agenda by advocating positions that drive the media sector forward and ensure that policymakers are aware of the challenges facing the media sector so they can make informed decisions impacting our businesses and our society.

In addition to our Policy Manifesto 2024-2029*, this report will be instrumental in our policy work as it brings a new perspective to the discussion about the role of editorial media in European democracies.

Group Editor and Senior Public Policy Adviser in Schibsted Media, Einar Hålien has written this report, except for sections 7.1.1 and 7.2.2, which were written by Agnes Stenbom, Head of IN/LAB and Trust Initiatives.
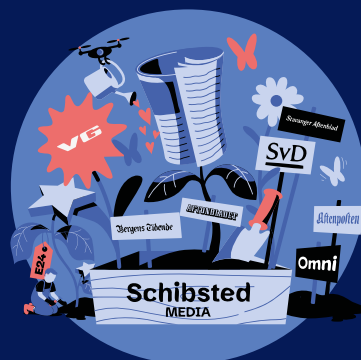
* schibstedmedia.com/about/public-policy

1.1.

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Words from CEO

Democracies do not arise on their own, nor do they sustain and develop themselves automatically. Whether one views democracy as a fundamental right, or just as a practical and effective form of governance, a conscious effort is required to make it work.

A prerequisite for liberal democracies to function over time is that the population possesses a minimum level of knowledge about how the society of which they are part operates. They must have access to verifiable facts and an understanding of how societal power is managed. Traditionally, this has been the primary role of the free and independent editorial media. The question now is whether this function has changed, in terms of how it operates today, and how it can function in the future. The desire to explore these questions is the reason why Schibsted Media has produced and published this report.

Several factors make addressing these issues particularly timely: we are in a 'super election year' affecting a large portion of the global population, EU countries have recently elected a new parliament, and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, argues that the pressures on EU democracies are intense enough to warrant launching what she calls a 'Democracy Shield'. This report is our attempt to contribute to this crucial debate and weigh in on the role of free and independent media in a strong democracy.

Our hope is that this report will contribute to an important discussion, both politically and within the media, especially on how the European editorial media can improve its efforts to defend liberal democracies.

Siv Juvik Tveitnes
CEO Schibsted Media

Photo: Martin Slottemo Lyngstad / Paragon for Schibsted

Journalism needs a **reinvention**

The risk to liberal democracies in the EU has steadily increased over the past 10 to 15 years, prompting the new EU Commission to launch a European Democracy Shield. In this report, we at Schibsted Media explore how Europe's editorial media contribute to democracies in these troubling times, whether this function has changed over the past 15 years, and what the potential might be going forward.

The situation for a large portion of the editorial media in the EU is challenging, and most likely weaker than commonly perceived. Editorial media have lost influence over the past 10 to 15 years, with many so diminished and outdated – especially in terms of digitalization and appeal to young people – that they are likely to disappear. It's probable that the journalistic function requires a restart or a reinvention, to make journalism more appealing and relevant for user groups that currently avoid or rarely engage with editorial media. However, this is only possible if the editorial media themselves are willing and able to invest in innovation that makes them more attractive and relevant, if the regulatory framework supports innovation, if media owners stop using media for their own private advantage, and if the next generation of journalistic start-ups, with their new ideas, are encouraged to take the leap into this market.

In the report, we analyze four available datasets, look for cor-

relations, and discuss possible causality. These are: 1) the Democracy Index from the V-Dem Institute[1], 2) the study Uncovering News Deserts in Europe[2] by the Center for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF) in collaboration with researchers from the 27 EU member states, 3) the Media Pluralism Monitor[3], also from CMPF, and 4) the Media Freedom Index[4] from Reporters Without Borders, supplemented with data from other sources on the same topic. We include the United Kingdom and Norway when data is available.

As far as we know, these datasets have not previously been compared, and as such, this report gives new insight to the debate on the role of media in democracy.

In addition to these datasets, we have interviewed 20 experts, who contribute to the uniqueness of this report. They are individuals with in-depth knowledge of the situation in specific countries, experts with insights into international affairs and comparisons, as well as media leaders from both new and established media organizations.

Media pluralism is decreasing

In all four of these datasets, we see a negative trend over the past 10 to 15 years. The Democracy Index shows that we are back to the 1986 level, news deserts in Europe are expanding, media pluralism is decreasing, and only three of the 29 countries we looked at have made progress on the Media Freedom

Index over the past 11 years. In other words, these reports paint roughly the same picture.

The main reasons why editorial media have weakened are: social networks, which compete for people's time and advertising revenue, low engagement from young users, a significant decline in the media economy leading to major cutbacks and fewer editorial resources, weakened independence as illiberal economic and political forces have taken control of editorial content in many cases, and the media's own lack of ability and/or willingness to innovate.

Start-ups are rethinking publishing

But there is also light in this dark description of the status of the media sector. There are interesting editorial start-ups emerging across much of the EU. These initiatives are often being led by relatively young people, who have clear views on what journalism's societal mission and contribution to democracy should be. These new players can be broad or niche-focused, and they largely seem to share the common trait of rethinking most aspects of publishing, including how to engage with their audiences.

Of course, many of the strongest legacy media companies are also engaging in significant innovation efforts. The publishing sector in Norway and Sweden, for example, is at the forefront of establishing a digital subscription economy, with continuous experimentation with new audio and video formats. Invest-

ments in AI-driven tools, to streamline journalistic workflows and create new publishing formats, have also made considerable progress in many media companies.

Although there is clear correlation between the different datasets, there does not seem to be a direct causality between weakened editorial influence and weakened democracies. Researchers and others we interviewed have different opinions on whether there is causality between these trends. Our interpretation suggests that one must study various forces at play simultaneously to understand what is decisive in specific cases where a population shifts in an illiberal direction and exhibits support for politicians presumed to have little respect for the fundamental characteristics of a liberal democracy.

A classic example of this would be that journalism with low public trust has limited ability to counter demagogic leaders who exploit strong emotions in the public, such as fear, anger, and deep concern for the future.

Holds power accountable

The most important contribution of editorial media to liberal democracies is conducting critical journalism that holds power accountable and provides reliable information essential for citizens to engage in societal issues. Widely accessible and credible journalism can contribute to a shared understanding of fundamental facts, which is necessary for constructive dialogue in a society.

Despite a challenging period in the history of free journalism, there is no indication that the journalistic function itself, with its fundamental characteristics, is any less relevant for contributing to liberal democracies now than it was 15 years ago. However, realizing this potential will require a great deal of effort.

[1] https://www.v-dem.net/
[2] https://cmpf.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CMPF_Uncovering-news-deserts-in-Europe_LM4D-final-report.pdf
[3] https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/
[4] https://rsf.org/en/index

Four fundamental prerequisits

As a follow-up to our analysis, we discuss four fundamental prerequisites that we believe must be present for editorial media to have significant positive impact on the degree of democracy:

1) Producing credible and relevant content
2) Ensuring reach
3) Being innovative
4) Creating an apt regulatory framework to protect editorial media

The first three of these refer to what the media themselves must do, while the fourth relates to regulatory conditions.

We looked into eight inspiring cases, drawn from both legacy media and start-ups. Several of these cases involve user engagement, both in the journalistic idea phase and in connection with the publication phase. Some cases focus on "solution-oriented" journalism, meaning journalism that not only describes problems but also discusses possible solutions. One of the cases describes how to engage high school students in journalistic work, while another case goes into how AI helps enhance the journalistic workflow.

The report concludes with recommendations for decision-makers on how to strengthen editorial media in Europe, both on national and EU level:

1) Ensure that regulations impacting the media sector
   and the digital market are implemented and respected
2) Introduce a "media assessment test" to ensure that
   upcoming digital regulations do not lead to unintended
   consequences for editorial media
3) Understand the need for innovation in new forms of
   publishing to create relevant and trustworthy news
   products

Editorial media is struggling in many parts of Europe, but with
the right conditions it can recover and reinstate its importance
in liberal democracies. For this we need decision-makers that
are curious, open and enthusiastic about what can be achieved,
in the service of journalism for liberal democracies.

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Chapter summary

- It is the societal role of journalism – its function within society – that primarily distinguishes free and independent journalism from other forms of mass communication. Most importantly, journalism should act in the best interest of the public and not be driven by other interests.

- Journalism should be balanced, meaning that different viewpoints should be heard, and those who are criticized or attacked should have the right to defend themselves at the same time.

- Independent editorial media must have a responsible editor. It is the responsible editor, and this editor alone, who decides what shall be published and how. Neither owners, politicians, nor other external stakeholders can override the decisions of the responsible editor.

- In this chapter, we explain the aim of this analysis, how it will be methodologically handled, and the topics we intend to illuminate.

1.3. Introduction

The work that led to this analysis began with two questions:

1) Has the impact of editorial media on European democracies changed in recent years, and if so, how and why?
2) How can the media be further developed and strengthened to form an even stronger defense for liberal democracies in an increasingly digital world?

These questions arise naturally from the ongoing public debate on the trends impacting liberal European democracies and the role of free media within this context. In addition, the reappointed EU Commissioner Ursula von der Leyen's launch of a European Democracy Shield gives further relevance to these questions.

Schibsted has long worked with issues related to freedom of expression and the role of media in society. As such, we wanted to write this report to engage in a more active and concrete political debate, and a debate within the media industry itself, about the prerequisites that must be in place to protect and strengthen the democracies in Europe. Within this scope, we aim to contribute to a better political understanding of what is, and what can be, the editorial media's role and what should be the right regulatory conditions to uphold this role. Secondly, we hope the report can stimulate the media's own development in strengthening its societal role, andspecifically, how it can more effectively reach young people.

Not a force of nature
It has long been assumed that free and independent journalism, produced according to the standards, norms, and ethical rules that apply to the profession, and conveyed through editorial media, is a prerequisite for well-functioning democracies. But the relationship between journalism and democracy is not a force of nature, and must be expected to evolve over time.

The world's democracies have been significantly weakened in recent years – becoming both fewer in number and less robust, globally and in Europe. This is evident from the Swedish V-Dem Institute's democracy index. At the same time, we know that editorial media are under strong pressure, due to external factors such as the fierce competition from global tech giants. This has led to significant cost cuts and reductions in editorial staff. Some have been acquired by larger media companies, gaining

access to resources that have assisted them in their digitalization efforts, while others have ceased to operate. The question is whether there is any causality between these developments, and what can be done to improve the situation. This is what we have set out to investigate further in our analysis.

1.3.1. Methodical approach

In Part 1 of this report, we analyze four sets of data: a democracy index, a study of news deserts at the local and regional levels in EU countries, a media pluralism index for EU countries and five candidate countries, and a combination of different media freedom indexes.

We will dive into this data, compare it, examine whether it correlates, and try to understand if there is any causality between the data points.

The economic strength of European media companies is naturally a very important factor for the analysis in this report. The development of this industry has been well known for many years, which is why we will not to go into detail on this matter. The major structural changes, with dramatic economic consequences, started during the financial crisis in 2008/2009. While the sale of print newspapers had been declining for many years before this point, it was generally not at a rate that caused significant financial strain for media companies. The financial crisis was then followed by major structural changes in media organizations, primarily driven by large tech companies making significant inroads into advertising revenues that had previously gone to editorial media. Nevertheless, economic factors are used both as causes and effects of current development trends. Media economics is also raised as a relevant issue by most of our interview subjects.

Part 2 looks at the prerequisites that must be in place for editorial media to be able to fulfill their societal role and contribute positively to democracy. Here, we build on the assessments from Part 1, as well as a number of interviews and discussions about specific improvement measures and innovative projects from the media industry itself.

1.3.2. What is editorial media and how does it differ from other mass media and social networks

In EU legislation, there are no definitions of either "editorial media" or "social networks." The closest we come are definitions of "editorial decision" and "editorial responsibility" in the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). Neither of these definitions get to the core of the special role of editorial media and the societal functions of media compared to other non-editorial mass media. To contribute to this clarification, Schibsted has, over the past five years, attempted to use the term "social networks" instead of "social media," well aware that the latter term is likely too well-established to realistically achieve a widely adopted name change. The purpose of using "social networks" instead of "social media" has been to emphasize that we do not view these entities as "media," primarily because they do neither finance nor produce their own content and they do not have editors.

Editorial media
We choose to define "editorial media" as a producer and provider of independent journalism, led by a responsible editor. This means that we include newspapers, radio, TV, and web-based editorial services. Streaming services and social networks without an accountable editor fall outside this definition of editorial media.

Journalism is defined in various ways. The following definition can be derived as a synthesis from several authoritative sources. Among these are Encyclopaedia Britannica[5], Pew Research Center[6], American Press Institute[7], and Society of Professional Journalists[8]:

This is our combination of elements from several different definitions:
"Journalism is the practice of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information. At its core, journalism aims to inform the public about current events, trends, and issues in a way that is both accurate and impartial. It plays a crucial role in maintaining democracy by holding those in power accountable and providing citizens with the information they need to make informed decisions."

It is the societal role of journalism – its function within society – that primarily distinguishes free and independent journalism from other forms of mass communication.

[5] https://www.britannica.com/search?query=Journalism
[6] https://www.pewresearch.org/search/Journalism
[7] https://americanpressinstitute.org
[8] https://www.spj.org

Most crucially, journalism should act in the best interest of the public/users/citizens and not be driven by other interests. Journalism should be balanced, meaning that different viewpoints should be heard, and those who are criticized or attacked should have the right to defend themselves at the same time.

It is clearly debatable whether journalism can truly be impartial and objective, as stated in the definitions above, but it must be a requirement that editorial media are transparent about their values and journalistic judgments.

The Norwegian "Ethical Code of Practice for the Press (printed press, radio, television and net publications)" includes initial provisions defining what journalism and editorial media are. Some of the most important formulations in our context.:

"1.2. The press has important functions in that it carries information, debates, and critical comments on current affairs. The press is particularly responsible for allowing different views to be expressed.
1.3. The press…[..] … cannot yield to any pressure from anybody who might want to prevent open debates, the free flow of information and free access to sources..[..].
1.4. It is the right of the press to carry information on what goes on in society and to uncover and disclose matters which ought to be subjected to criticism. It is a press obligation to shed critical light on how media themselves exercise their role.
1.5. It is the task of the press to protect individuals and groups against injustices or neglect, committed by public authorities and institutions, private enterprises, or others."

Social networks

Social networks platforms do not operate according to editorial principles. They do not, and they themselves consider that they don't, have editorial responsibility for the content they distribute. They have a different purpose than editorial media and do not produce or finance their own content. Social networks are primarily services for disseminating user-generated content and provide functionality for contact and organization within interest groups. Content is directed to users individually using algorithms that are typically programmed to prioritize what the user is presumed to be interested in and that typically creates most engagement in the content.

There are several similar definitions of social networks, but none of them seem to have gained an official status that would make them applicable, for example, in the EU's regulatory work. Some examples:

Merriam-Webster: "social networks are forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content like videos." [9]

Oxford Languages: "Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking." [10]

Pew Research Center: Social networks are "digital tools that allow users to create, share, or exchange information, ideas, and content in virtual communities and networks." [11]

It is only when delving into these definitions and descriptions that one sees why editorial, journalistic content must be expected to fulfill a special role in contributing the necessary knowledge to citizens for liberal democracies to function as intended. It is also essential to understand these differences between various forms of mass media in a political and regulatory context. In recent years, the EU has adopted several regulations, especially the Digital Services Act (DSA) [12] and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) [13], aimed to regulate online platforms and intermediary services such as social networks. These regulations do not apply directly to editorial media, but have certain rules that indirectly can impact media players, for example rules around advertising and recommender systems. It may be important to make a clearer distinction between editorial media and social networks in future regulations to avoid unintended consequences that risks weakening editorial media. This issue will be revisited at the end of this report.

1.3.3. A narrative

Why is it traditionally assumed that relevant, credible, and independent journalism is a prerequisite for functioning democracies?

One method to address this question is to construct a narrative in two variations: one with one or more editorial media and one without.

In a local community with about 10,000 inhabitants in a central European country, elections for the municipal council were approaching, and one issue in particular created significant debate and widespread engagement. Should the municipality prioritize building a new and safer road to a part of the community where about 3,000 inhabitants live, or should it focus on

building a new school, since the old one was too small and outdated? The municipality couldn't afford both in the short term.

One political bloc advocated for the road, while the other supported the school. In one variant of this narrative, this community had two editorial media; a traditional newspaper that was published both in print and digitally, and a smaller, much younger competitor that was only digital. Both media extensively covered this contentious issue in the community. They examined the calculations underlying the budgets for both proposed projects. One editorial team uncovered weaknesses in the projections that made it likely that the road project would be significantly more expensive than estimated. The other editorial team highlighted that the spouse of the sitting mayor was the principal of the school where there were plans of investing in a substantial new building. As a result, the mayor had to declare himself disqualified and hand over the case handling to someone else.

A heated debate

The debate on what should be prioritized was heated, both in the newspaper columns, at town meetings, and other places residents met. But in this version of the narrative, the population was largely in agreement about the facts of the case. Such as the approximate costs of the projects, the consequences for the residents, how long it would take the municipality to implement the project that was initially deprioritized, and so on. There were also politicians who proposed compromises after the debate became drawn out: What if the school project was divided into two construction phases and the money saved from this was used to improve a particularly dangerous section of the aforementioned road?

In the other version of the narrative, there was no editorial media in this local community. Commonly available and verifiable facts were replaced with information from sources the residents had little trust in, conspiracy theories, and rumor-mongering. One of the conspiracies suggested that a party leader in the municipality was campaigning for the road construction because one of his close relatives owned a large contracting firm that wanted this contract. This was demonstrably untrue, but it did not stop the spread of the conspiracy, and many turned a blind eye to attempts to correct the misinformation.

There were also rampant speculation and rumors about the cost calculations for the two projects. These suggested that the budgets were either overestimated or underestimated in an attempt to manipulate the voters before the election. This gradually led to a polarization of the local community, characterized by mistrust, rumors, and conspiracies. Old friends
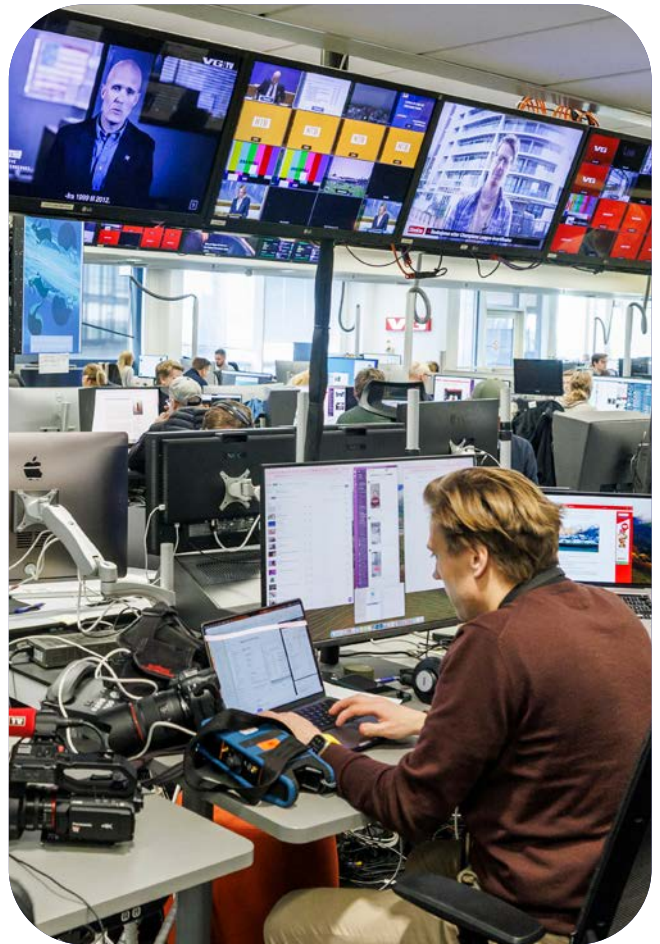
became enemies, and many of those who refused to join either camp became apathetic and said they would abstain from voting that year.

The narrative can be enriched and expanded – for instance, one can imagine that this local community is characterized by a class divide where some have significantly higher incomes and more property than others. The story can be expanded to apply to an entire country, or reduced to a small association. The fundamental mechanisms, and how democracy works, are more or less the same regardless of scope. But the complexity behind the negative development, and alternative consequences, will vary. Experience has shown that polarized societies open opportunities for extreme leaders who use the momentum to establish a power base founded on societal discontent.

We can probably envision the negative variant of this narrative even with editorial media present. The reasons for this may include low usage, low trust in these media, and low relevance. For example, media that primarily appeals to 50+ users will have difficulty being useful for young citizens and will therefore also have limited democratic influence. One could also imagine that strong mistrust between citizens and politicians, or between different groups of citizens in this society, will have as negative consequences that even highly qualified media are not able to counteract to any significant extent.

These connections go to the core of what this analysis is about.

⁹ https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media
¹⁰ https://languages.oup.com/dictionaries/
¹¹ https://www.pewresearch.org
¹² https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act_en
¹³ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-markets-act-ensuring-fair-and-open-digital-markets_en

1.4. How media bias, knowledge resistance and polarization can lead to lower trust in editorial media

It seems that when a country becomes highly polarized, with few, if any, spaces left for middle ground positions and moderate voices, public trust in the balance and independence of editorial media also fades – sometimes for valid reasons. The US is the most pertinent example of this situation. Hard fronts and deep chasms between the political and cultural camps seem to result in less balance and reduced trust in the media.

From 2005 to 2022, 3,000 American newspapers, mainly local publications, went bankrupt. This constituted one-third of all American newspapers. According to researchers at the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications at Northwestern University, there is a risk that an additional one-third of U.S. newspapers will disappear by the end of 2025. Other key figures show that newspapers in the country lost 66% of their circulation in the period 1990-2022, that 86% of advertising revenue disappeared between 2006-2022 (Pew Research Center), and that 57% of the country's journalists lost their jobs in the same period (Nieman Lab).

With reference to the U.S., we do not know to what extent the accusations of bias and partisanship are entirely or partly true and correct, but the perceptions that this occurs are widespread nevertheless. One hypothesis for this is that many people find it hard to believe that anyone can remain balanced in a social climate marked by irreconcilable differences.

1.4.1. How "bias creeps into the networks' coverage"

Uri Berliner, a senior business editor that has worked in the U.S.'s National Public Radio (NPR) for 25 years, writes in "The Free Press" about how "bias creeps into the networks' coverage". While his introduction is not the most critical part of the text, it is so eloquently formulated that we cannot resist quoting it:

"You know the stereotype of the NPR listener: an EV-driving, Wordle-playing, tote bag–carrying coastal elite. It doesn't precisely describe me, but it's not far off. I'm Sarah Lawrence–educated, was raised by a lesbian peace activist mother, I drive a Subaru, and Spotify says my listening habits are most similar to people in Berkeley."

He writes that NPR has always leaned in a liberal direction, but that "…an open-minded, curious culture prevailed." Until recent years. Now, Uri Berliner believes that what the audience gets from NPR is the distilled worldview of a very small part of the US population.

The article describes how NPR, in just the 12 years from 2011 to 2023, has lost most of its conservative listeners: "(In 2011…) 26 percent of listeners described themselves as conservative, 23 percent as middle of the road, and 37 percent as liberal. By 2023, the picture was completely different: only 11 percent described themselves as very or somewhat conservative, 21 percent as middle of the road, and 67 percent of listeners said they were very or somewhat liberal. We weren't just losing conservatives; we were also losing moderates and traditional liberals," Berliner writes.

According to Uri Berliner, the influence of opinions truly took over at NPR when Donald Trump won the election in 2016. He describes the non-professional atmosphere in the media house as characterized by "…a mixture of disbelief, anger, and despair." He further describes "…what began as tough, straightforward coverage of a belligerent, truth-impaired president veered toward efforts to damage or topple Trump's presidency."

Choises justified by attitudes
He continues his story by discussing NPR's choice of stories to focus on and sources to use, all justified by the station's preconceived attitudes. Trump's alleged Russia connections and the incriminating content on Hunter Biden's laptop are examples of stories that NPR chose to cover and not cover, respectively, though these decisions cannot be said to appear particularly professional from a journalistic standpoint.

The shift from a journalistic to a more political "North Star" in NPR is evident in Uri Berliner's description of the approach to covering George Floyd's killing in 2020:
"…it would have been an ideal moment to tackle a difficult question: Is America, as progressive activists claim, beset by systemic racism in the 2020s - in law enforcement, education, housing, and elsewhere? We happen to have a very powerful tool for answering such questions: journalism. Journalism that lets evidence lead the way. But the message from the top was very different. America's infestation with systemic racism was declared loud and clear: it was a given. Our mission was to change it."

Berliner writes, quite reasonably, that if one wants to understand the changes that have occurred at NPR over the past ten

years or so, one must look inside the organization. As mentioned earlier, it appears that a high degree of polarization leads to lower trust in the media's independence and balance as a result, whether based in reality or not.

Attention to the role of journalism

Uri Berliner's story suggests that, in NPR's case, reduced trust may be warranted – not merely as a result of broader societal polarization. This, in turn, directs attention towards the role of journalists and the professional standards in the field. Journalism is, of course, not the only profession in which professional codes, rules, and standards must always precede personal preferences and emotions. This is also true for researchers and judges, for example. What causes the occasional "slip-ups," as described by Berliner, is probably a matter for detailed investigation in itself. However, it is essential to highlight the importance of journalists and editors taking shared responsibility to uphold ideals, actively contribute to self-reflection and transparency, both internally and externally, and demonstrate the ability to learn from both successes and mistakes.

An additional lesson could be that it's not enough to merely accept internal critical voices, but to actively encourage open and constructive criticism. Uri Berliner's message is clearly controversial within NPR, yet he substantiates his viewpoints well and supports them with facts. However, he also has an ambivalent relationship with the role he has assumed: "So I've become a visible wrong-thinker at a place I love. It's uncomfortable, sometimes heartbreaking."

When one has to choose between the truth and belonging to a group one depends on

One of the phenomena that appears most challenging for journalists and researchers to understand is why people do not respond to strong evidence against their beliefs.

From a democratic perspective, this phenomenon is particularly problematic because a shared acceptance of basic facts is considered a prerequisite for an inclusive debate on societal development and political choices.

Åsa Wikforss is professor of theoretical philosophy at Stockholm University and a member of the Swedish Academy.[14] Wikforss has led an interdisciplinary research program on knowledge resistance, funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, and she has written, among other works, "Alternative Facts. On Knowledge and its Enemies" (our translation). Wikforss points out that the attention on knowledge resistance has primarily been focused on developments in the United States, but there are no fundamental human/psychological factors that make people in other countries less susceptible to similar phenomena.

Two different situations
"The new chaotic, anarchist, information landscape exists in all countries. In Sweden, there is a large spread of disinformation and science denialism is not uncommon. There are different degrees of disinformation in different countries, but the psychological mechanisms that make us vulnerable are the same across the world. The media is a bit stronger in Scandinavian countries, in particular public service, and the democracy is a bit stronger. But the psychological vulnerabilities are the same."

Åsa Wikforss explains that it is people in two quite different situations that resist the facts:

"In the first situation, we are dealing with people who take in the evidence, for example what the experts say about climate change, but use their reasoning capacities to skew or dismiss the evidence. This is called motivated reasoning. It's a kind of reasoning driven by desire instead of truth, and it typically has to do with strong emotions, such as fear. It can also be vanity, like in Trump's case, when he didn't want to believe the facts about how big his audience is at the inauguration in 2017 and the term 'alternative facts' was first coined."

Mark of identity
"But it's also about what researchers call 'identity threat', where certain factual claims become a mark of identity of "my group". Then, if researchers say we're wrong, I don't want to believe what the researchers say, because I would be going against the group, and risk being excluded. So this is emotional, and it's a mechanism that exists potentially within all of us. We all have some situations where we don't want to take in facts, like unpleasant facts about our children or our health. Evolutionarily, we have a great need for the group. We need to get along with the group, we don't want to stick out. It has a survival value, and so the threat of exclusion is a very serious threat that causes motivated reasoning."

"Then, there is the second type of situation, where people reject the evidence because they have been fed so much unreliable information, for example about researchers and traditional media. In such a situation it may be completely rational to think that you can't trust the reliable sources, for instance you may have been fed the disinformation that you can't trust the climate scientists because they all have a political agenda. Like "..I don't believe what Åsa Wikforss says, because she is a left-liberal researcher with an agenda..."
If you have been fed with much such incorrect information, you lose your trust. And if you don't trust reliable sources you won't

be able to gain knowledge from these sources.

That people resist facts in these two very different ways, makes it difficult to determine whether someone resisting the facts does this because she is engaged in irrational emotion driven reasoning, or because she has been exposed to disinformation. And it is a challenge to study this experimentally, to design an experiment where you can clearly say that people resist the evidence because of knowledge resistance rather than because of their prior beliefs."

Professor Wikforss uses the term "emotional polarization" to explain an important precondition for the spread of knowledge resistance in a society. This concerns how we feel about our political opponents, and when there are strong feelings of animosity this triggers tribal thinking and factual polarization. She believes that President Donald Trump is a master at triggering emotional polarization.

"This emotional polarization that Trump is so good at driving, it also drives fact-based resistance. He is a demagogue, a high class demagogue. He is very skilled at splitting, polarizing, politicizing facts, politicizing media trust, politicizing the trust in research. He is unique in that way, but the forces he represents as a right wing nationalist populist, they are in all countries."

Is there anything that can be done to regain broader support for basic facts – facts that are a necessary foundation for meaningful political debate?

"Yes, there are a few things, and as a starting point you have to adapt to the new situation. The first and most important thing is about trust. Human knowledge is social, and we get it from sources of different kinds. But to get knowledge we have to trust the source. So the main question you have to ask yourself, in the situation we're in now is, what can we do to strengthen the trust in the traditional media and research?
It's not typically people's fault that they're losing that trust, rather it's certain political actors who do what they can to undermine the trust. But we have to relate to that in some way. There's a lot of research around that, and different ideas on what to do to improve trust. Transparency is one thing - you have to talk about how you work as a journalist, what the difference is between professional journalism and alternative media. It's important that there's good journalism, too, of course. You lose trust quickly when things get messy and tendentious. So it's even more important than ever that the media keep the quality, and make sure to distinguish between facts and opinions. That's a crucial thing."

Åsa Wikforss is professor of theoretical philosophy at Stockholm University and a member of the Swedish Academy.

Do you think we will see the same development in Europe as we have seen in the US. regarding polarization and knowledge resistance?

"I think we're on the way, but at the same time as these forces are very strong, there's a lot of mobilization against it. More than half of the world's population will go to elections in 2024, and at the beginning of the year, many of us were worried about how this would turn out. In many of these countries, things were already a bit shaky, like in India. We knew that the disinformation problem would get even bigger because of AI. But still, 2024 has gone quite well. The EU-election went better than we thought. Probably the mobilization against anti-democratic disinformation has helped. France got away with a scare, at least right now. In India the far right populist leader Modi did not get the majority he was hoping for, despite there hardly being any free media left in India. This year will be a decisive year for democracy, it will determine whether the democratic decline will continue", says professor Åsa Wikforss.

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Chapter summary

● Decades of progress in global democracy levels have been erased in recent years, bringing us back to where we stood in 1985. As of 2023, 71% of the world's population lives in autocracies, up from 48% just ten years ago, according to data from the V-Dem Institute.[1]

● The level of democracy in EU Member States mirrors the global development. However, the EU countries began at a higher level of democratic development compared to the global average.

● Over the last 10 years in particular we have seen a clear negative development for democracies in the EU, coinciding with a period of significant reduction of the capacity of free, editorial media, and a setback for media freedom. However, the connection between these trends is far from certain and serves as a topic of discussion in this report.

2. The development of European democracies over the past 35 to 40 years

In this chapter, we will look at how democracies in EU countries have developed over the past few decades. This is one of the most important datasets for the analysis, as it will later be compared with studies that describe how editorial media in Europe have evolved over the same period.

Since "democracy" is not a straightforward concept, we will dedicate some space at the beginning to explain different forms of democracy and to argue why, in this context, we have chosen to focus on what is referred to as "liberal democracy".

2.1. About the V-Dem Institute, data foundation, organization, and methodology.[17]

The V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Institute at the University of Gothenburg is one of several academic institutions that monitors and regularly reports on the development of the democratic level in the world.

We have chosen to use V-Dem's data in this report for several reasons:
- Thoroughly tested methodology
- Use of several verifiable variables in measuring the degree of democracy
- Large and educated organization working full-time with democracy monitoring
- Collaboration with an extensive global network of research colleagues
- Source of reliable data that is also widely used by other researchers

V-Dem Institute adheres to five concepts of democracy: Electoral, Liberal, Participatory, Deliberative and Egalitarian. These concepts are defined and outlined in V-Dems codebook, Measuring High Level Democratic Principles using the V-Dem Data (page 4 and 5).[18]

15 https://www.v-dem.net/
16 https://www.v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/
17 https://www.v-dem.net/data/
18 https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/v-dem_working_paper_2015_6.pdf

The electoral component of democracy

…embodies the core value of making rulers responsive to citizens through competition for the approval of a broad electorate during periodic elections. In the V-Dem conceptual scheme, the electoral component is fundamental; without it, we cannot call a regime "democratic" in any sense. At the same time, we recognize that holding elections alone is insufficient, and also that countries can have "democratic qualities" without being electoral democracies.

The liberal component of democracy

…embodies the intrinsic value of protecting individual and minority rights against a potential "tyranny of the majority." This is achieved through constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, and effective checks and balances that limit the use of executive power.

In this report, we primarily focus on the concepts of liberal democracy, in some cases set against, and compared with, electoral democracies. The other forms of democracy can be read about on V-Dem's own pages.

Put simply, we understand the distinction between these two dimensions as follows: the "electoral" dimension primarily focuses on safeguarding majority interests through elections, while the "liberal" dimension also protects minority interests, even outside the electoral process.

In principle, this means that an electoral democracy exists so long as there are free elections, even if all other institutions in society, such as the judiciary and free media, are deconstructed. If one only measures the dimension of electoral democracy, countries such as Hungary and Poland meet the requirements, even though the principles of the rule of law and minorities are threatened in these countries. Therefore, we believe that the concept of liberal democracy provides a better understanding of what constitutes a well-functioning civilization, where human rights and minorities are protected.

Electoral or Liberal democracy frameworks are applied to a varying extent depending on the target groups for the reporting. According to the V-Dem Institute, there are some conservative leaders who believe the term liberal democracy lacks legitimacy and does not address what they consider the core of a democracy. This objection often arises from assumptions that measurements of liberal democracy place emphasis on the treatment of sexual minorities. However, this variable is not measured in V-Dem's methodology.

DEMOCRACY REPORT 2024
Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot

16

Methodologically, when examining democratic development across a group of countries, those with a large population carry more weight than smaller ones. There, it is prudent to study the democratic level per capita. This means that population figures can impact the statistical outcome for democratic development. If autocratic countries increase their population significantly more than democratic countries, this will have a negative statistical impact.

The V-Dem Institute reports that it records five components within each of the five categories of democracy, with 26 indicators measured under each of those five components. Altogether, this provides over 600 data points.

2.2.

Democratic development for the 27 EU countries, plus the United Kingdom and Norway

Overall, the level of democracy in the EU has evolved relatively slowly over time. Some countries have moved in a negative direction, while others remained static. This has resulted in an increased difference in the democratic level between the 29 countries we have studied.

Hungary, Poland, Greece, and Slovenia have had a particularly concerning development – a development that started in Hungary in 2008. Several other countries are likely at risk of moving in the same direction, primarily due to reduced trust in incumbent governments and a political shift towards the far right. On the other hand, some countries seem to be moving in a more positive direction, such as Poland after the latest Parliamentary elections. However, the political situation in Poland has not yet stabilized.

The figure shows the development for the period 1993-2023, and partially captures significant improvements in democratic levels following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the subsequent wave of democratization in several Eastern European countries in the years that followed.

The crisis began in 2008
For easier readability, the 27+2 countries in the graphs below are grouped based on their initial democracy index scores at the beginning of the period. We have chosen to focus specifically on the years after 2008, as this is when the crisis for editorial media truly began following the financial crisis of the same year. Later, this crisis transitioned into a prolonged phase of digital transformation, driven by competition with the global digital players, among other factors.

As seen in these graphs, the peak year for democracy in the EU was around 2010. Since then, the development has gone in a negative direction.

The vertical dimension is the value of the Liberal Democracy Index and it ranges from 0 to 1.

We zoom in on the period after 2008: If feelings of being left behind – along with the resulting frustration or apathy – are part of the explanation, then the next question is: how did we get here? And why are we witnessing deeper political divides and a greater polarization?

Explanations are two-fold
Professor Staffan I. Lindberg, Director of the V-Dem Institute, says the explanations are two-fold. The underlying basis for the anti-democratic movement has been shaped slowly over time. Research shows that individuals who fear for the future – as reflected in concerns about a bleak economic future, worries about children's prospects, and a feeling of being left out – are more likely to vote for anti-democratic parties and leaders. The increase in such sentiments have made people more vulnerable to political leaders who know how to exploit it.

"It is clear that for almost all countries in the world that have regressed in terms of democratic levels over the past 20 years, it is parties and leaders on the far right of the political spectrum who are behind this. They are nationalistic and reactionary. Underneath, they are anti-pluralistic and anti-democratic. They are often populists, but it's not populism that's dangerous. There are plenty of populist parties that are democratic, and many parties tend to be more or less populist. It is not dichotomous, not clearly one or the other. Historical data shows that about half of populist parties do not pose a threat to democracy. Historically, anti-democratic forces have also been found on the left side of politics. But today, this is now rare, such as in Mexico", says Professor Lindberg.

Lindberg discusses how the anti-pluralist leaders follow the same playbook and learn from each other. He also refers to their alliance with the leading religious undercurrents in their countries:

Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem) 1993-2023
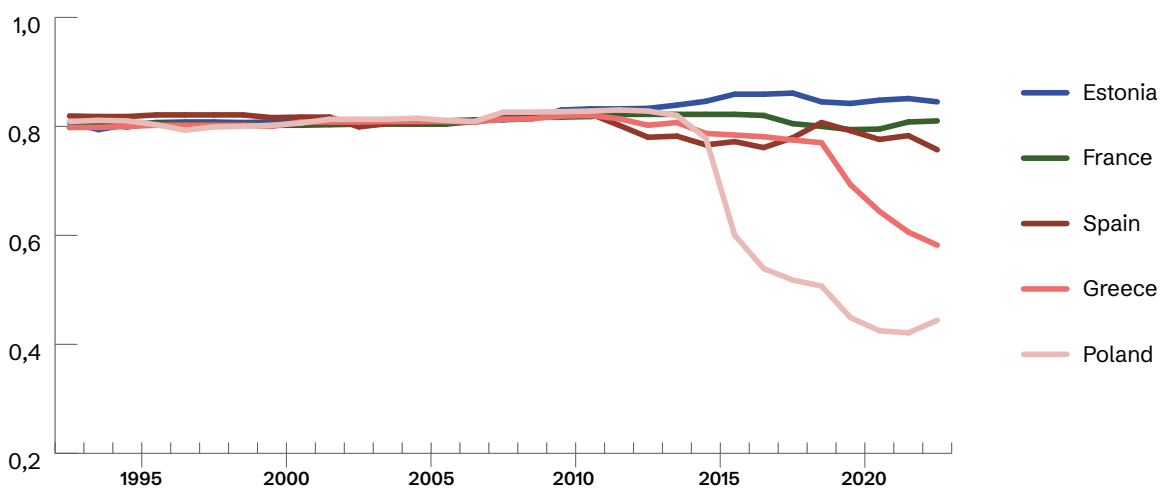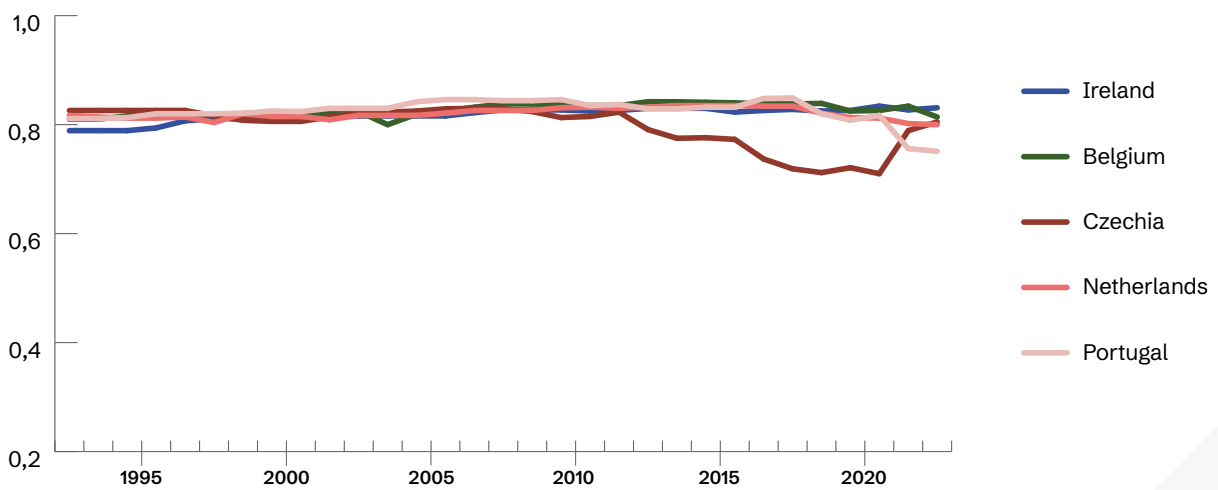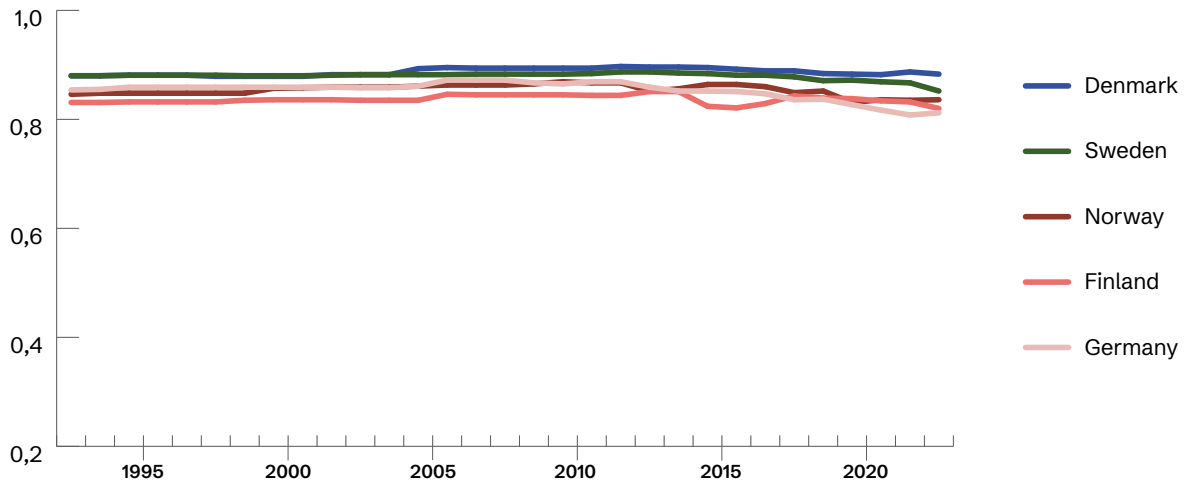
"Orbán in Hungary suddenly became a christian, but had probably never been to church earlier in life. The first thing Putin did in Russia was to ally with the Russian Orthodox Church. Erdogan in Turkey suddenly became very muslim and allied himself with conservative, reactionary muslim forces in Turkey. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi became a hindu nationalist. Trump formed a relationship in the USA with the Pentecostals, and Bolsonaro had close ties to similar religious groups. We can go down the line."

Lindberg talks about how far-right, nationalist political leaders emphasize creating common enemy images, for example, blaming immigrants for unemployment or crime.

"The far-right shift in politics is spreading everywhere. It's not only countries like Greece, India, Croatia, and Armenia, that are undergoing their de-democratization now, not to mention the USA. It's downright frightening. The Nordic countries also have rapidly growing far-right parties, and in Sweden, we are seeing a quite radical shift in norms", he says.

Democracy dies with the lies
When the January 6 Commission of the U.S. Congress invited Staffan Lindberg to share his reflections on the background of the attack, he summarized it with, "Democracy dies with the lies," and he spoke about the effect of social networks.

"Social networks are a double-edged sword. We all thought it would be good, but we know it isn't. China, Putin, and the right-wing parties, and their support groups, from Infowars to online "newspapers" and sources we also have in the Nordics. They flood the system with disinformation and conspiracy theories. It is extremely dangerous. The unlimited freedom of speech online is being used today to undermine the freedom of speech and democracy", Staffan Lindberg says.

Professor Staffan I. Lindberg, Director of the V-Dem Institute

Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem) 1993-2023
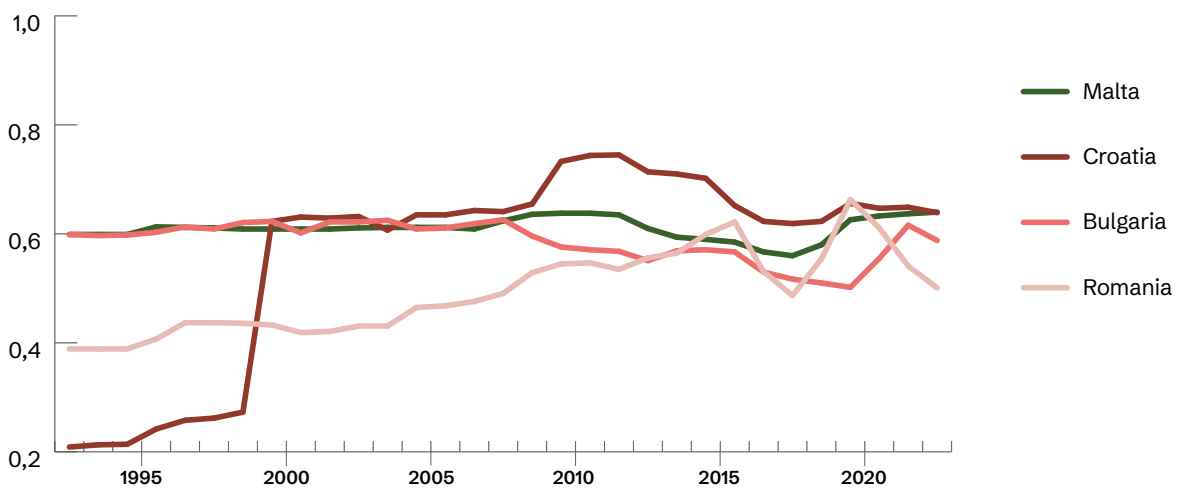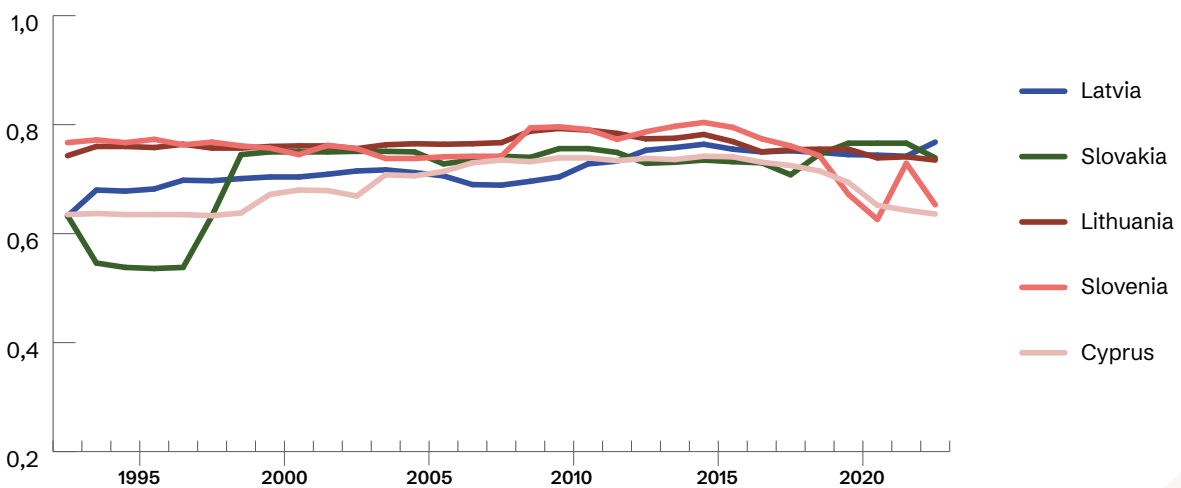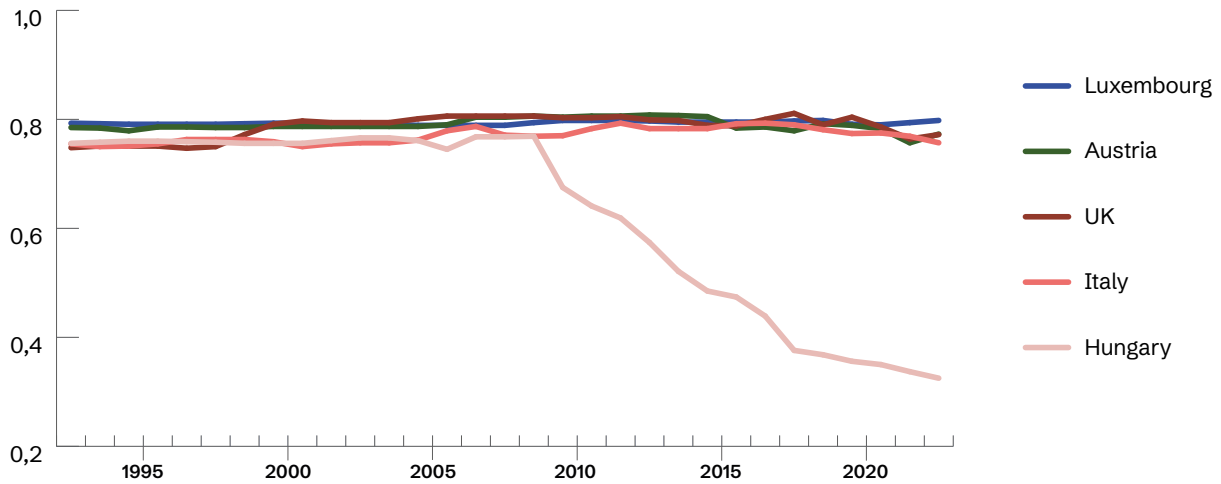
The spread of blind spots/ne related to local and co in the 27 EU countries in spring 2024

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- a study released

Chapter summary

- The lack of local media and community media is an increasing problem in many parts of Europe – not only in rural areas but also in densely populated regions, partly because local editorial coverage has struggled to keep pace with urban expansion.

- The number of local journalists has significantly declined, due in part to the centralization of news organizations' resources and the closure of newsrooms driven by reduced advertising revenue, a low willingness to pay for journalism among an aging population, and fewer points of sale for newspapers.

- Local media appear to be particularly vulnerable to political and commercial forces taking control of the publications, using them for propaganda rather than independent journalism.

- Examples of successful initiatives in local journalism include the establishment of hyper-local publications, news initiatives that proactively involve citizens in news dissemination, podcasts, newsletters, and what this report refers to as 'slow journalism'.

3. The spread of journalistic blind spots/news deserts

We are engaging in this study because it provides exceptional insight into the capabilities of editorial media at local and regional levels across the EU.

This type of study has not been previously conducted. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the health of European media, we examine this study alongside CMPF's annual Media Pluralism Monitor.[19] In chapter six, we will assess the development of media capability in relation to the data on democratic development and media freedom, examining correlations and possible causality.

The new study "Uncovering news deserts in Europe: risks and opportunities for local and community media in the EU" [20] was presented in March 2024. It is the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF)[21] who conducted this study in collaboration with 47 researchers from the 27 EU countries. The study is part of the more comprehensive program Local Media for Democracy (LM4D).[22]

National US media survives
While the U.S. has systematically tracked editorial media coverage for many years, only now are we gaining a comprehensive overview for EU countries. The U.S. has recorded a significant decline in local and regional publications over the past 15 years, while most large national news publications have survived – and, in some cases, even experienced positive development.

The theoretical introduction of the report references previous research, among other sources, to justify the importance of highlighting the phenomenon of "news deserts":

"Tackling and understanding news deserts is of utmost relevance since their existence contributes to cultural, economic, political and societal divides (Barclay et al., 2022), as there is a correlation between the consumption of local news and voter turnout and civic participation (Barthel et al., 2016)."

The lack of comprehensive records on the capacity of editorial media in EU countries over time has resulted in highly variable access to historical data. In other words, it is

19 https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor
20 https://cmpf.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CMPF_Uncovering-news-deserts-in-Europe_LM4D-final-report.pdf
21 https://cmpf.eui.eu/
22 https://cmpf.eui.eu/local-media-for-democracy-project

Uncovering news deserts in Europe
Risks and opportunities for local and community media in the EU

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difficult to say anything certain about the development over time for the EU as a whole. We will take a closer look at some specific countries with the aim to extract historical data that can show the development in recent years.

The EU study presented in spring 2024 focuses on the spread and capacity of local and so-called community media, rather than national media. However, the CMPF has created an annual Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) covering the last 10 years, which provides insight into the development of national media in the EU. At the end of this chapter, we will discuss the MPM to give a better overview of the development for both local and national media in the region.

3.1. The program that conducted this study - definitions, methodology and data foundation

The methodology and definitions have been thoroughly explained in the report[23], so we will limit ourselves to a brief explanation here. Methodology[24] and 55 variables that are considered for each individual country[25].

CMPF writes that they are interpreting the concept of news deserts "...as an area that is lacking sufficient, reliable and diverse information from trustworthy media sources."

The study has concluded with the following definition of 'local media': "...as outlets operating across various sectors (print, audiovisual, radio and digital) at different sub-national levels, and catering to local and more geographically circumscribed audiences."

Regarding the definition of Community Media:
"Our understanding of the difference between local media and community media is that local media are primarily defined by geography, while community media are defined by target audiences and/or themes, often in combination with geography."

Based on national researchers' responses to 55 questions, a description of each country's status across six different areas, or indicators, has been provided.

These indicators are described in the report:
- Granularity of the infrastructure of local media: This indicator assesses the presence and offer of local and community media services in a country [...]
- Market and reach: This indicator assesses the economic conditions, the viability, and sustainability for local and community media [...]
- Safety of local journalists: This indicator assesses the situation for local journalists when it comes to their working and physical safety, also assessing the presence of SLAPPs[26]...]
- Editorial independence: This indicator assesses the independence of local and media from political and commercial pressures [...]
- Social inclusiveness: This indicator assesses the extent and quality of news offered for and about minorities and marginalised communities [...]
- Best practices and open public sphere: This indicator assesses the actual existence of innovative practice for enhancing an open and thriving public sphere in specific communities [...]

The three indicators of "Granularity of the infrastructure of local media", "Market and reach" and "Social inclusiveness" are directly relevant to the theme of this analysis to assess editorial media's ability to influence the democratic level.

The indicator "Editorial independence" is already mentioned in chapter 3 on media freedom.

The report describes a particular methodological problem for the indicator 'Market and reach':

23 https://cmpf.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CMPF_Uncovering-news-deserts-in-Europe_LM4D-final-report.pdf
24 https://cmpf.eui.eu/local-media-for-democracy-project/local-media-for-democracy-methodology/
25 https://cmpf.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/questionnaire-final-05.6.23.pdf
26 SLAPP = Strategic litigation against public participation

"The most telling finding from this research is the lack of data in several countries, particularly concerning local and community media revenue and the lack of audience reach data. As such, the country experts assessed the situation, relying on sources such as interviews with experts and relevant stakeholders, as well as reports from various NGOs and research organisations."

For each of the six indicators, each country's situation has been assessed on a risk scale ranging from 'Very low risk' to 'Very high risk'. Here, 'risk' primarily reflects how satisfactory the current situation is, rather than serving as a predictive label, as risk gradings can sometimes imply.

The project coordinator for the study at CMPF, Sofia Verza, explains why it has been done in this way:

"The reason we have chosen to grade based on "risk" across the different measurement areas is because we did not want to create an index that is easily used to rank the countries. In our context, 'low risk' indicates that the situation in an area is relatively good, while 'high risk' suggests that the situation is problematic and, from a long-term perspective, has the potential to deteriorate further."

Verza explains how they use the responses from the questionnaire to nuance and enrich the situation descriptions, such as in the case of 'granularity of infrastructure of local media':

"When we are calculating risk in terms of local outlets' and journalists' presence on the ground, we must look at more than whether there is an editorial team covering an area or not. We must consider, for example, how many journalists they have, whether the number of journalists is increasing or decreasing, whether the editorial team sends journalists to the outer areas of its geography, and what the relationship between private media and public service media in the area is."

Methodology[27]:
55 variables that are considered for each individual country[28]:

3.2. Status 2023

The study explains that in some countries, challenges for local media are widespread, while in others, the problems are limited to specific areas.

The study also points out that the challenges faced by local media are complex and varied. Some are due to demograph-

ic shifts and changes in local community infrastructure, while others are attributed to declining advertising revenue and a lack of fair and balanced public support schemes.

Regarding the demographic and local infrastructure changes mentioned above, factors include population decline, an aging population, and fewer outlets for newspapers due in part to the closure of kiosks and stores, among other reasons. Regarding the declining advertising revenue and lack of public support schemes, factors include the inability to compensate for falling advertising revenues with higher subscription incomes, as willingness to pay for news is too low. Why the willingness to pay is so low and how this challenge can be addressed is a topic we will return to in Part 2, where we will look at possible improvements and solutions.

In the following section, we describe the aggregated results of the study, focusing primarily on the indicators 'Granularity of the infrastructure of local media', 'Market and reach', and 'Social inclusiveness', as explained in 4.1.2.

3.2.1. Granularity of local media infrastructure

This indicator addresses the presence of local and community media in rural suburban and urban areas, as well as journalists' local presence and whether they work for private or public service media.

As explained in the method section 4.1.2., each individual indicator is ranked on a scale from 'Very low risk' to 'Very high risk'. On the maps, the lightest colors signify low risk while the darkest colors mark high risk.

Austria and Denmark are the only countries where the national researchers do not report any news deserts and therefore assess the risk as very low. However, even here, researchers believe that areas without local journalistic coverage will emerge if the problems facing local media are not addressed relatively quickly.

In most other EU countries, the risk assessment ranges from medium to very high.
Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia evaluate the offer in rural areas as high risk, while seven countries - Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Poland - scored low risk, while Austria and Malta scored very low risk.

27 https:/cmpf.eui.eu/local-media-for-democracy-project/local-media-for-democracy-methodology/
28 https://cmpf.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/questionnaire-final-05.6.23.pdf

Risk score
0.00 ——————— 0.75
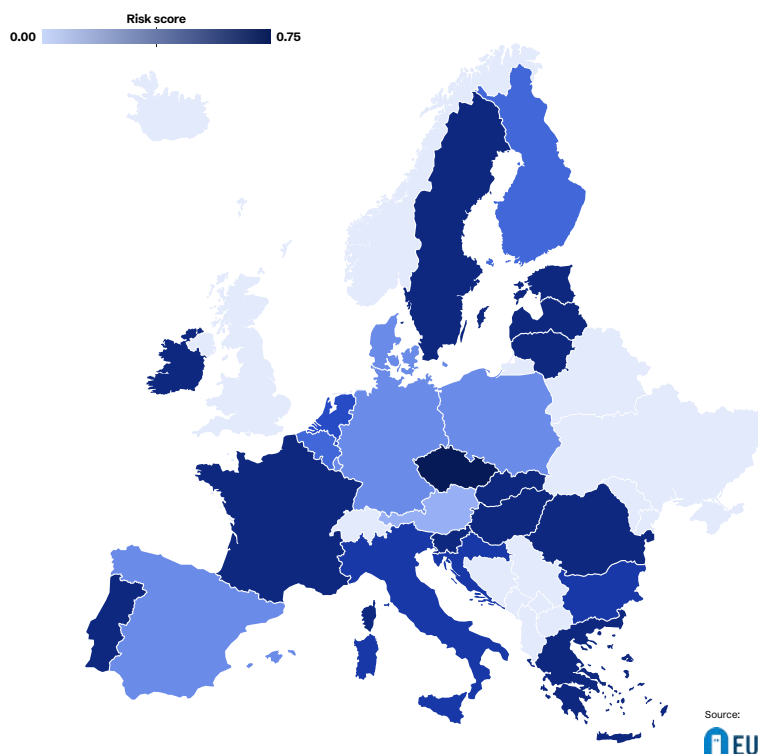
Source:
EUI CENTRE FOR MEDIA PLURALISM AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Sofia Verza

"The remaining countries (most of the EU countries) scored a medium risk, meaning there are local media outlets in rural areas, but their distribution is problematic (e.g., decreasing number of selling points, low Internet penetration)..." as summarized in the report.

Sofia Verza explains what surprised researchers about the indicator of Granularity:

"A significant finding, which we did not anticipate, is that the situation for local and community media is not ideal, even in urban areas. One explanation seems to be that as large cities grow, new local journalistic initiatives are not being established on the outskirts. Researchers in some countries report that coverage of these areas is limited to journalists 'from outside' covering crime or other negative phenomena in these new areas."

3.2.2 Market and reach

As Figure 2 shows, the highest levels of risk on this indicator are in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia, and lowest in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Luxembourg and Portugal.

Market and reach is the indicator that shows the highest risk, overall, of all the indicators.

In the study, it is argued that local and community media have been hit harder by the economic crisis, in light of digitalization, compared to national media:

"The crisis related to the digital transformation of news media has disrupted the media ecosystem, particularly at the local level, considering its inferior market size, limited audience reach, weaker bargaining power, and limited resources to adapt to digitalization compared to nationwide counterparts."

The economic challenges are primarily due to declining advertising revenue and a low willingness among users to pay for subscriptions. As a result, lower advertising revenue has not been offset by increased subscription income. The impression is that in Europe, only Sweden and Norway have largely succeeded with such a strategy.

Research teams in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Greece report a widespread shutdown of local news media in their countries. This applies to print newspapers, radio, and TV stations alike. In Bulgaria, a news agency has also been shut down.

On the other hand, Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, France, Germany, Luxembourg, and Malta report a stable local media market with few closures.

It is, however, specified that.. "... even in a context where no immediate issue of this nature is identified, as is the case in Austria, the current situation in the local media market may lead to the creation of news desert areas in certain parts of the country if nothing is done to face the issue."

3.2.3 **Social inclusiveness**

To what extent minorities are included in news dissemination is a question that significantly reflects on editorial media's ability to contribute to liberal democracies.

The highest risk levels for this indicator are reported in Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania, while the lowest risk levels are observed in Finland and Germany. The situation is generally less risky where Public Service Media (PSM) have a presence. However, even PSMs have limited impact in minority areas where political conditions prevent local recognition of minorities, as in Malta, where English is the only other language represented. In Greece, minorities – whether legally recognized and not – also lack their own editorial coverage.

There are a variety of complex reasons for the lack of coverage tailored to minorities. One factor is the way national media support is structured. For example, the report mentions Lithuania:

"The media support system, including the new model of media support, the Media Support Fund (Medijų rėmimo fondas), does not identify marginalised people as an audience group with specific needs."
Under this indicator, the national researchers are asked to answer the relatively complicated question:

"Do local media provide sufficient public interest news to meet the critical information needs of the communities they serve?"

A controversial question
This question is important and relevant, but will still be controversial, at least in a Nordic tradition and context. This is not necessarily due to the question itself, but rather based on who is asked to respond. Some will argue that questions of this nature should be left to the editors themselves, as part of editorial freedom and independence. However, in countries with press support schemes, including the Nordics, it is common to impose media content requirements for support eligibility. Opinions will likely differ, though, on how detailed such requirements can be without infringing on media freedom.

Another approach to answering this question is to consider what type of information best meets "Critical Information Needs" (CIN) – especially if we add "...in order to contribute to a liberal democracy."

The Swedish media researcher Elisabeth Stur, at Mid Sweden University, along with Asta Cepaite Nilsson from Lund University, delivered the Swedish contribution to the LM4D study.
Stur shares examples of good local journalism, such as local investigative projects, critical coverage of important issues for the local community, and interviews with people who have something significant to say.
At the same time, she is also concerned with the identity-creating effect of local journalism and emphasizes that local media have a function beyond thorough, often investigative, news journalism:

"You can think that news at a local level is a bit ridiculous. "Runaway cats" is a characteristic I have heard being used. But you shouldn't underestimate this type of local journalism, because it builds community."

Sense of belonging important factor
Elisabeth Stur believes that a sense of belonging, as in a common identity, is an important factor in preventing polarization and isolation.

In Part 2 of this analysis, we will take a closer look at the prerequisites for editorial media to strengthen their role as defenders of liberal democracies, and we will look at concrete initiatives for improvement. Here, we will also return to the EU countries' responses to the question: "Do local media provide sufficient public interest news to meet the critical information needs of the communities they serve?"

Figure 2
Risk for the indicator **Market and reach** in the 27 EU Member States

Risk score
0.88 — 0.94

Source:
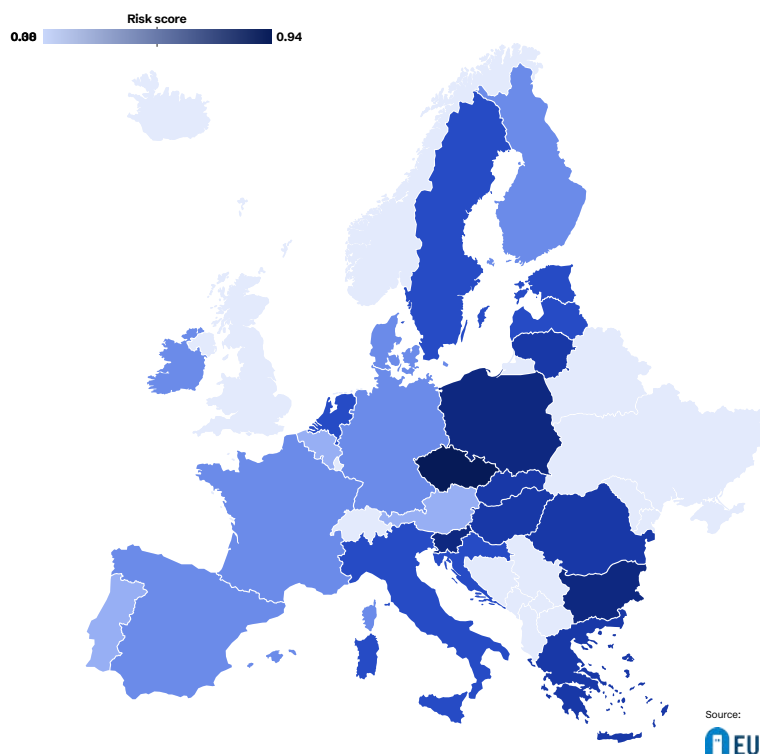
Figure 5
Risk for the indicator **Social inclusiveness** in the 27 EU Member States

Risk score
0.11 — 0.78

Source:
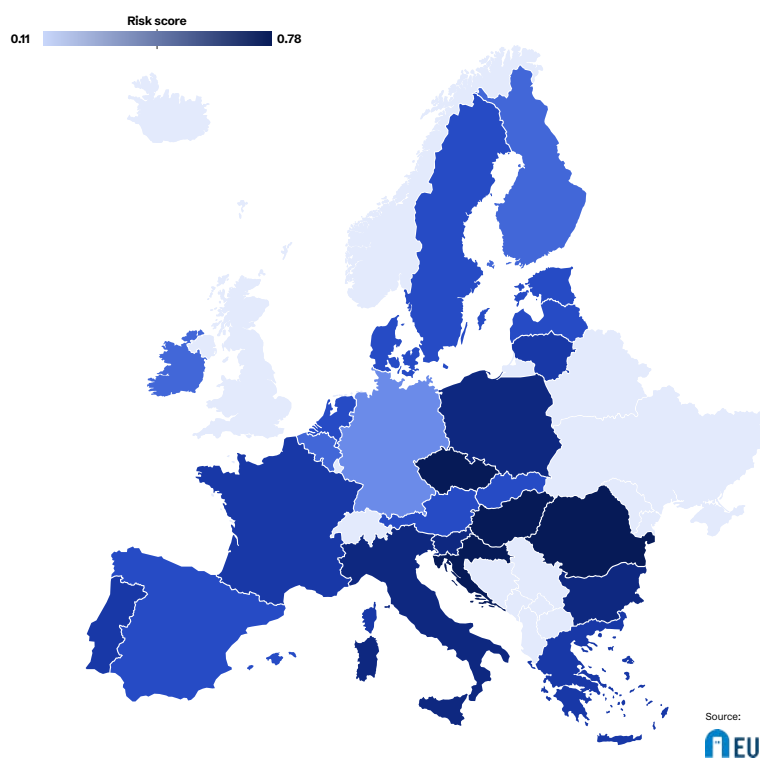
A closer look at six of these countries

A survey of blind spots and news deserts, both in a geographical and thematic sense, has never been done in the EU before. Therefore, we lack historical data to show how this has changed over time.

At the same time, we know that the past 10 to 15 years have been particularly challenging for most editor-driven media worldwide. This is largely due to digitalization, and heightened competition for advertising revenues from global tech giants.

To compensate for this lack of available data for the EU as a whole, we will take a closer look at six specific countries.

3.3.1.

Sweden
Hyper-locals – a possible game changer?

Level of democracy:	**Ranked number 2 globally**
Level of media freedom:	**Ranked number 3 globally**

(Liberal democracy Index/ V-Dem / RSF)

Sweden is one of the world's best-functioning liberal democracies, and the country is also among the very best in terms of living conditions, freedom of speech, and media freedom. When even a country like this begins to experience polarizing tendencies and growing support for extreme and illiberal forces, understanding the reasons behind this shift becomes especially interesting. Swedish editorial media do not enjoy a stable or secure existence, despite having stronger protections and support systems than in most other countries.

According to the report, about half of Sweden's local newsrooms have disappeared over the past 20 years. This does not mean that the areas that have lost one or more local newsrooms have lost all editorial coverage within their geographic area, but that it is now more often done 'remotely' from nearby cities and towns. Elisabeth Stur is critical of this development:

"The development over the last 20 years is dramatic. A key trend is that a few large owners have taken control over almost all local media in Sweden. They have rationalized, centralized,

and reduced costs. In this way, journalists have become further removed from the local communities they are meant to cover."

The report refers to statistics showing that daily consumption of local news, from newspapers and broadcasting, has decreased from 78 percent in 1986 to 61 percent in 2022.

The researchers are looking for explanations.

"You could say that there are three different trends that affect each other. One is the loss of the audience, or the audience moving somewhere else. The other thing is the loss of ads in Sweden. Advertisers are increasingly turning to tech giants like Facebook and Google. And the third explanation is the economic downturn, inflation, which means that people have less money and need to reduce their spending", says Elisabeth Stúr.

In recent years, since 2020, the decline in local news consumption appears to have been reversed, with a slight increase registered. One explanation is the growing interest in digital subscriptions. With this, it appears that the spread of Swedish news deserts has slowed, according to the report:

Growing interest in digital subscriptions
"Between 2017 and 2023, news desert areas, also called blank spots, have become more frequent, but have somewhat ceased to expand over the last few years."

It is especially interesting that the Swedish researchers attribute this, at least in part, to the increased focus on and interest in hyper-local news initiatives.

Elisabeth Stur says she has several examples of journalists leaving their permanent positions in larger newsrooms to start

small, local news initiatives.

"They're digging deeper. These are small and agile initiatives that are doing the deep reportage and news digging, which the ordinary newspapers can't afford, says Stur, who views this as part of a trend."

"We can start talking about how things have stabilized. And that's primarily due to these hyper-local initiatives. But you must also add that (the newspaper) Dagens Nyheter (DN) is making an effort. They're trying to do local, locally. They've seen that what has been done so far is a dead end. Mitt Media in Bonnier is also trying to do something at a hyper-local level. There are initiatives that are underway - they've realized that they have to focus on the local", says Elisabeth Stúr.

Elisabeth Stur

Lithuania
"We have an information crisis and a social crisis that mutually reinforce each other"

Level of democracy: **Ranked number 29 globally**
Level of media freedom: **Ranked number 13 globally**

(Liberal democracy Index/ V-Dem / RSF)

In the "news desert" report, Lithuania is described as a country where there is an active public and political debate about news deserts and the conditions of local media. The debate includes participants from various sectors, including academics, media organizations, minority organizations, and politicians. It is also interesting to note that Lithuania is one of the five countries that has performed relatively well on the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index over the past ten years.

In the Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM), under the Fundamental Protection indicator, the risk for Lithuania decreased by 12 percentage points from 2021 to 2022. No other EU or candidate country has experienced more positive development in this area during this period. The MPM2024, with data from 2023, shows that Lithuania is one of only seven countries, out of the 32 European countries analyzed, that has a satisfactory level of media pluralism.

A well functional media system
Professor Auksė Balčytienė from Vytautas Magnus University is one of the researchers that has authored Lithuania's chapter in the "news desert" report. She believes that one of the most important reasons why Lithuania performs relatively well, both in terms of analyses of media freedom and other indicators of a well-functioning media system, is the extensive political effort to impose much stricter transparency requirements on media owners.

"So, all media owners are obliged annually to report according to the media law, and to report all the changes that have taken place in their media business. This increased business transparency, and commercial aspect taken into consideration, makes it natural to view these new requirements as perhaps the most important media policy measure in Lithuania in many years", she explains.

The attention to media ownership and transparency must be viewed in the context of the problems Lithuania and other former Soviet republics faced with oligarch dominance in the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. There has been significant focus within the three Baltic states on avoiding the "oligarchization" of the media. However, Professor Balčytienė believes that the new rules imposed on Lithuanian media owners will not solve all the ownership issues:

"I wouldn't say that the situation is good, because there are many other ways to play around. And I would say that even though the media business side is doing okay, the journalistic side is not that comfortable."

She criticizes media owners for investing too little in journalism and in journalists.

A need for better conditions
"There's a need for better working conditions and improved possibilities for journalistic production. That side needs stronger input from the state, and also support for different independent journalists, such as stipends or scholarships to journalists producing investigative journalism."

Improvement is underway, she tells:

"A huge restructuring of the media support fund has recently been finalized, and new information is coming out about scholarships granted to journalists, on competition basis, of course, and there is even support for some of the cultural community media, according to different programs."

She believes that despite positive developments, Lithuania struggles with some of the same problems as many other countries.

Professor Balčytienė believes that news coverage at the national level is relatively good in Lithuania and that they have had a development over the past 20 to 25 years that is quite atypical.

"A few dominant Lithuanian news media started as purely online media in competition with major print newspapers. The online media won this battle, and today we have no daily newspapers in Lithuania. Print newspapers are published one to two days a week", she says.

Professor Auksė Balčytienė from Vytautas Magnus University

The report identifies three specific areas in the country as news deserts, without any clear link to particularly weak GDP per capita or to poorly developed digital infrastructure.

This is explained as follows in the report:
"...the risks in the decline of news affecting the local media landscape are more strongly linked to political and business alignments, a diminishing professional independence and infrastructural conditions (media viability and news distribution models), than being directly
attributed to purely regional-economic matters or to those relating to accessibility to digital-technological information."

Ambivilent about social media
At a general level, Auksė Balčytienė expresses ambivalence about the effects of the information explosion brought about by social networks:

"I think, of course, digital technologies and digitalization with its abundance of information gives increasing possibilities for people to access information and to express their views and opinions. We can say that this generally democratized this expressionism, but it has also challenged the kind of democratic understanding of core principles and core values of plurality. And then we see that this plurality of information is becoming a factor that in some ways works against democracy, because

we have to include all the views and even very extreme, radical, negativity and hate - and all that goes with dysfunctional communication. So, we end up in a situation where the information overflow goes against democracy and against human rights", she says.

Here's how she explains what she calls an "information crisis". The "social crisis" aspect of her model refers to socioeconomic conditions that leave people outside the stream of verified and reliable news. Instead, they pick up fragmented pieces of information from social networks and combine it with their own assumptions and fears. In this way, prejudices and unrest are amplified and grow.

Professor Auksė Balčytienė argues that information policy and social policy should be developed in conjunction:

"If people with lower education and lower income are unable to go to, for instance, the theatre, even cinemas, or don't allow their children to choose different kinds of channels...well, to participate and to get better education, that's already a trap. So, I think we need to think that new kinds of inequalities are emerging online, not only the classical ones, like segregating people by income, gender, education. I think polarization is taking ground also on the basis of how different knowledge and facts are being perceived."

Germany
No news deserts so far

Level of democracy: **Ranked number 11 globally**
Level of media freedom: **Ranked number 10 globally**

(Liberal democracy Index/ V-Dem / RSF)

The German media market is more heavily regulated than most other markets and is largely governed at the federal state level. This means that Germany has 13 different media laws that regulate local radio stations, and, in some areas, these also cover other types of local media.

"I just wrote my PhD thesis on local radio in North Rhine-West-phalia. And that's somehow a very special topic because it's very, very highly regulated, more than anywhere else in the world", says professor Jan Christopher Kalbhenn, Institute for Information, Telecommunications and Media Law, University of Münster and Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences.

He is responsible for Germany's contribution to the "News desert" study. And he continues…

"But so far it works, and there are 46 local radio stations in North Rhine-Westphalia and all of them have their own local editorial department."

A robust media landscape
The report states that Germany still has a robust media landscape, including the availability of local media. It describes a situation where local newspapers and radio stations are available in most areas.

"So, in theory, there's no news desert in Germany. But the trends might get us there, says Kalbhenn who is also quite critical of the German local media and believes many of them appear outdated. What content do they produce? What distribution ways do they choose? It's quite slow. In the local media, this is not empirically based, but my own observation is that these radio people are rather old and there is no fresh blood. These local radio stations are rather unattractive. It's a decline. It's old-fashioned. And it's not journalistically up-to-date."

Professor Kalbhenn describes a situation where the number of printed newspapers decreases year by year, with no new subscribers. The transition of media from analog to digital is underway but is progressing very slowly.

"There is a shift, but it's not one to one. Print goes down faster than digital rises up. As one of the results, you can see that there is a lot of consolidation of the media market in Germany, on the local press side. And they somehow work more and more centralized. They close the local editorial departments and focus on the more regional and national news, which they can produce centralized. So the real local journalism is in decline, slowly but steadily", he says.

The report says that the number of journalists in local newspapers has decreased by 17% from 2010 to 2020.

In Germany, like almost all other countries in Europe, there is a low willingness to pay for digital news subscriptions. In other words, it's the classic scenario: advertising revenue has largely disappeared, print circulation is declining, and there's an inability to offset losses from analog operations with new digital revenue. However, Kalbhenn sees some hope, as willingness to pay for digital editions is gradually improving.

Products need to improve
At the same time he believes that subscription products need to be improved, primarily to become attractive to young users.

"It's my personal view that these subscription services by the traditional local news publishers are not that attractive. They're not adapted to the young generation. It's still old-fashioned and it's as expensive as the print. It's always for 12 months or 24 months."

Germany has a very comprehensive system for Public Service Media (PSM) and spends 8 billion euros annually on it.

"The justification for the system was originally to be a counterbalance to the private media. Now we need the public broadcaster also as a counterweight to the big platforms. So, that's the new, how to say, theoretical approach."

Kalbhenn describes Germany's PSM as relatively well-functioning, ensuring the production of high-quality content that private media would not be able to provide. However, there is also a loud political debate about PSM's dominance. He believes that, from a media policy perspective, the future of PSM will be the most important issue in the coming years.

"There's high pressure for reformation of the public broadcasting system. It's really big. It's really slow. It's really old. It needs a remake", says professor Jan Christian Kalbhenn.

Jan Christopher Kalbhenn, University of Münster and Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences

Hungary

"Half of Hungarian journalists think that it is their role to be loyal to the government, not to act as watchdogs."

Level of democracy: **Ranked number 97 globally**
Level of media freedom: **Ranked number 67 globally**

(Liberal democracy Index/ V-Dem / RSF)

Hungary has gained notoriety over the past 14 years, both within and outside Europe, that many Hungarians would likely prefer to leave behind.

In 2010, the Fidesz party won the election in Hungary, and Viktor Orbán became Prime Minister. He has followed the playbook of illiberal leaders and likely expanded it, becoming an example of what can happen when democracy and its institutions are not adequately protected. Numerous organizations and political leaders have warned other countries against following Hungary's lead. This did not prevent Poland from electing the national-conservative Law and Justice party (PiS) to victory in the 2015 and 2019 elections. During this period, PiS followed Hungary's example by taking control of key societal institutions, including the judiciary and media, and maintained a relatively close relationship with Hungary. In 2023, Poland elected a more liberal government, called the Civic Platform, led by Donald Tusk.

No debate
The News Desert study's chapter on Hungary indicates that there has been no debate about local news deserts in the country. However, there was a political debate when Fidesz-friendly oligarchs took over all local newspapers in the country in 2016, making them part of Fidesz's media conglomerate, KESMA, from 2018.

The report emphasizes that the problem with news deserts in the Hungarian context is about one-party dominance and that citizens do not have access to independent journalism with diverse viewpoints and debate.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989-1990, many Hungarian newspapers were privatized and foreign investors entered the market.

Gábor Polyák, Professor of Media Law and Media Policy and Head of the Media and Communication Department at Eötvös Loránd University (and Head of the watchdog organization Mertek Media Monitor), is one of the two Hungarians responsible for the Hungarian portion of the news desert report.

He explains what happened with media ownership after 1990:

"The big problem was that in 2008, because of the global financial crisis, most of these investors decided to leave not only Hungary, but the entire region. Our bad luck was that this was the time when Orbán came. So there were several media outlets on the market to be sold, and there was only one buyer, and that was the economic circle of the ruling party, Fidesz. It was very, very easy to expand on the media market for businessmen connected to the ruling party. So, there were several weaknesses in the media system before 2010", he explains.

Serving political propaganda
In addition to privatized county newspapers, there are municipality-owned and financed newspapers in Hungary. Regarding this group of newspapers, the report states:
"...these are newspapers serving local political propaganda purposes, regardless of the political colour of the municipality concerned. Although their operation is financed exclusively or predominantly from public funds, there are no guarantees, either in law or in local regulations, that impartial local information can be provided. This does not mean, of course, that all municipal newspapers serve party-political purposes."

Despite this bleak backdrop, Hungary has also seen the rise of several new digital editorial establishments since 2016. Many of them have been founded by journalists who lost their jobs at county papers. These new ventures are largely funded by donations from individuals and organizations. The report states that this kind of support is not without problems:

"This project-based support is risky, and the implementation of projects can be to the detriment of the outlets' core activity. In addition, the media receiving these grants have been exposed for years to smear campaigns and were stigmatised by government communication as 'dollar media' representing foreign interests."

Gábor Polyák, Professor of Media Law and Media Policy and Head of the Media and Communication Department at Eötvös Loránd University

In 2023, eight of these digital newsrooms began collaborating to share content.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Professor Polyak's analysis is the change in Hungarian journalists' understanding of their own role and profession.

"No one thought before 2010 that journalists can be turned into this direction. Now the majority of the journalists are also taking part in the functioning of this regime. They don't think that they should be watchdogs. They think they should be loyal to the government and defend the interests of the government. This is not, how to say, the attitude of the journalists, what you want to see or what you can read in textbooks."

We will return to this issue when we "Gather the parts" in Chapter 6.

The following excerpt from the report summarizes the situation regarding news deserts in Hungary:

Under strong influence

"In the Hungarian local media, the phenomenon of news deserts is, therefore, not fundamentally the result of the lack of coverage of local news services in certain municipalities or regions but rather due to the fact that much of the local media is under strong political influence. This is true not only for the pro-government media but also for most of the local newspapers in opposition-led municipalities. Only in municipalities with an independent news portal, or where local government has created the conditions for the independence of the media it owns, can residents find a non-partisan source of information."

Italy
A challenging situation for both journalistic capacity and public trust

Level of democracy:	**Ranked number 24 globally**
Level of media freedom:	**Ranked number 46 globally**

(Liberal democracy Index/ V-Dem / RSF)

"I'm very pessimistic about the future in this context. Not primarily the future of the media industry, but the future of how people organize themselves to gather information, to elaborate this information, and to shape an idea of what is the reality - what is the truth."

These are the words of Associate Professor Andrea Mangani from the University of Pisa - the man responsible for Italy's contribution to the news deserts report.

Even weaker
The report, and the in-depth interview with Mangani, paint a picture of the media situation in Italy that has gone from relatively weak to even weaker over the past 15 years. This is primarily due to the diminished capacity of edited media and significant challenges in trust. It describes how the journalistic capacity has been significantly reduced since 2008/2009:

"The number of local media journalists has declined by approximately 50% since 2008/2009, following the global economic and financial crisis. Furthermore, there is a noticeable reduction in the presence of journalists in rural and small urban areas."

At the same time, the number of local newspapers, both in print and digital, has increased from 2001 to 2022. Andrea Mangani points out that this primarily reflects an increased supply, not increased demand, and he is highly skeptical of the ability of these newspapers to survive.

Mangani is primarily concerned with the journalistic quality as a consequence of this:

"The most important consequence of the significant reduction in the number of journalists relates to the quality of journalism, not the quantity. Problems arise when far fewer journalists try to cover as many stories as before, but now must do so in a multimedia format - in text, audio, and video", says Andrea Mangani with reference to the interviews he has conducted with journalists and editors.

According to Mangani, the reasons for this severely pressured economic situation are a combination of a sharp decline in advertising revenue and strong competition among various media players for the remaining advertising revenues. When 90% of private media revenue relies on advertising, print newspaper sales are declining, and people are reluctant to pay for digital subscriptions, you have a recipe for major challenges.

Andrea Mangani describes a situation in Italy where the use of, and willingness to pay for, editorial media has always been low – perhaps lower than in other countries.

"Broadly speaking, the readership has always been very low in Italy. People bought a few newspapers in the past and buy even fewer newspapers today. But in general, the willingness to pay is very, very low. People don't want to pay for news."

The report describes significant variations in media offerings in different parts of Italy. Generally, there is considerable pluralism in editorial media with relevant content for the largest cities, while access in rural areas remains critically weak in many regions.

Media concentration
The Italian report states that most cities in Italy have one or two dominant newspapers. This suggests that there is a relatively high degree of media concentration, the opposite of pluralism. In other parts of Europe, cities with two dominant and competing newspapers, along with a number of digital newcomers, would likely be characterized as quite well covered with editorial content. Of course, this depends entirely on the use of these media and the level of trust from their users.

In the introduction to the media situation in Italy, we noted that the main points are about reduced journalistic capacity and low trust. Andrea Mangani believes these challenges are more or less the same for both local and national media. He describes a situation in which low trust in the media effectively reduces the 'value' of a relatively high level of media pluralism in densely populated areas.

"In Italy, 70% of people believe that media content is biased in

some way, in terms of ideologically biased, politically biased. And people believe that this depends on the politics. So, Italy is a very special case. It's a special case in history."

He further describes how there is a somewhat dark tradition among some of the country's most powerful people, who take control of media to advance their own economic or political interests:

"Our public broadcasting system is called RAI, and RAI is controlled by the government in power. Every time that there is a change in the majority in the parliament, this also leads to changes in how RAI is managed. The sitting government deeply intervenes in what should be RAI's independent editorial decisions. It appoints leaders in RAI who are considered supporters and interferes with the types of programs and topics RAI should put on the agenda."

Berlusconi controlled public service

When Andrea Mangani describes Italy as a "very special case in history", he highlights the phenomenon of the long-serving Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, who, following a highly questionable tradition, controlled Italian public service media while also advancing his own interests through his private TV stations. It must be emphasized that Berlusconi formally relinquished all positions within Mediaset when he held official government roles. The Berlusconi family controls Italy's three dominant private TV stations through the company Mediaset. Although Silvio Berlusconi has passed away, his family continues to run the company in his spirit.

It's not only the largest media companies that struggle with a lack of editorial independence. The report also describes risks for local media - from both political and commercial forces. It emphasizes that the media's complete dependence on advertising revenue heightens the risk of editorial influence from local advertisers.

One of the major challenges facing the Italian editorial media – and media across the EU – is the lack of support from young people and cultural minorities, which impacts the media's ability to positively influence society. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter if the media are as relevant and reliable as can be if they are not used by a large part of the population. This is also the main reason for Andrea Mangani's pessimism:

"I used to ask students in my classes what their information sources are. Only one or two of 30-40 say that they have a subscription to an online media outlet. I think we know far too little about the young people's media habits and what kind of

content they consume. Of course, we know that they use a lot of time on social networks, that's obvious. But what they do consume, what they read, what they listen to, what they look at on social networks...I think we know too little about that", says Associate Professor Andrea Mangani.

In late May 2024, European Movement International (EMI), in cooperation with a group of media and journalist organizations, sent an open letter to Vera Jourová, Vice President of the European Commission, asking the EU to initiate an investigation into what they see as the Italian government's attempt to gain full editorial control over the Public Service Media company RAI. As a basis for an investigation, they referred to the new European Media Freedom Act and Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU).

The initiators justify their request as follows:

"The independence of media has come under immense pressure in Italy. Giorgia Meloni's government has been increasingly exerting its power over RAI, Italy's national broadcaster, by ousting managers and TV hosts from their posts and by censoring programmes that are critical of the government. Moreover, recently journalists and newspapers have been consistently attacked by members of the government, shutting down dissenting voices and hindering media independence."

Associate Professor Andrea Mangani, the University of Pisa

Greece
Greek media: Little criticism of power, and low trust in media

Level of democracy: **Ranked number 50 globally**
Level of media freedom: **Ranked number 88 globally**

(Liberal democracy Index/ V-Dem / RSF)

Greece is a vulnerable country according to several of the parameters that are significant for this analysis. It is one of the countries with the largest decline on V-Dem Institute's democracy index over the last five years, and it is the lowest ranking EU country on Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index in 2024, placing 88th.

Greece is also the EU country with the lowest trust in the media, and according to Reuters Digital News Report 2024, only 23% of Greeks trust the country's media.

Assistant Professor Lambrini Papadopoulou of the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies at National and Kapodistrian University of Athens attributes this to the fact that most traditional Greek media engage in minimal critical journalism against the government and the power institutions of society.

"Most of the media support the incumbent government, and this is a long tradition", she explains.

Poor conditions
The indicator with the highest risk assessment in Greece's news desert study is "Safety of Local Journalists." This high risk is due to a combination of poor employment and working conditions, along with widespread threats and strategic lawsuits (SLAPPs) targeting local journalists.

The indicator "Market and Reach" also carries a high risk assessment, partly due to the significant economic weakening of Greek local and regional media, with several closures in recent years. Ten local TV stations have shut down in the past five years, and 13 radio stations disappeared in 2021. The number of local newspapers has also declined. This has happened

despite the fact that Greece practices indirect media support, in the form of reduced taxes, and has offered direct support schemes in recent years, as indicated in the report:

"Regarding subsidies, the Greek state provides indirect subsidies for daily and weekly local and regional newspapers through reduced postal service rates. Print media (newspapers and magazines) enjoy a lower value-added tax (VAT) rate than standard goods. For many years there have been no direct state subsidies given to the media. Direct subsidy schemes for local/regional media were first introduced with Law 4674/2020."

On a positive note, the Greek reporting in the news desert study highlights that several local news services have been established online in recent years; however, there is no available data on this development.

Lambrini Papadopoulou discusses the emergence of new and independent news initiatives in response to a question about the most significant changes in the Greek media landscape over the past 15 years:

The same polarization
"Well, it's funny because I think that everything changed and then nothing changed. Meaning that after the economic crisis, there was a significant collapse in the Greek media ecosystem. Some major and well-known media outlets had to shut down, and there was hope that the ecosystem could be rebuilt under better conditions. However, what we had before was reconstructed, and the same polarized media landscape was restored. The "new" owners were more or less identical to the "old" owners. However, something positive did happen, and that was the emergence of independent, critical, and investigative media. They are not many, just a handful, but they have been behind some of the most important revelations in Greek history and build hope for better journalism in Greece. They are subjected to SLAPPs and threats, but they persevere."

Danai Maragoudaki is a journalist and works for Solomon, one of the challengers in the Greek media landscape that Lambrini Papadopoulou mentioned. She argues that it is necessary to go back in history to understand the development of Greek editorial media.

"When the dictatorship in Greece ended in 1974, two dominant parties emerged – a social democratic party and a right-wing party. These two parties dominated until 2011, when the economic crisis hit Greece with full force. During all these years, Greek editorial media were largely organized according to these two parties. Half supported one party, and the other half

supported the other. During this period, a mutual dependency developed between the political parties, banks, media groups, and the state, which in Greece means the sitting government. The government allowed banks to lend money to media groups, and in return, the media supported the government."

Maragoudaki argues that the media became economically dependent on the government and paid for this with their own independence. But this was not the only consequence. She explains that when the economic crisis hit Greece in full force in 2011, large media conglomerates had more debt than they could manage, leading to the collapse of many major traditional media companies.This, in turn, allowed Greek oligarchs to buy up the remnants of the old media companies.

Lack of editorial independence seems to be one of the most dominant problems for Greek editorial media, according to the report:

Close ties

"Similar to commercial influence on editorial content, local journalists believe that laws and self-regulation are ineffective in countering political influence. Research into the Greek media system has forcefully demonstrated the existence of political interference in news media, attributable to the close ties that have developed between established private media owners and political elites. Moreover, the absence of effective self-regulatory safeguards results in journalists being pressured by political and commercial influences."

Lambrini Papadopoulou says that Public Service Media in Greece also fail to contribute positively as independent news providers:

"Well, the situation is quite dire there as well, because there's also a debate whether it is actually public or state, meaning that it's not independent. On the contrary, it is criticized as functioning merely as a vehicle for reproducing the government's agenda, priorities, politics, etc. So it's not independent. And the same can be said for the country's news agency", she says.

Assistant professor Lambrini Papadopoulou, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
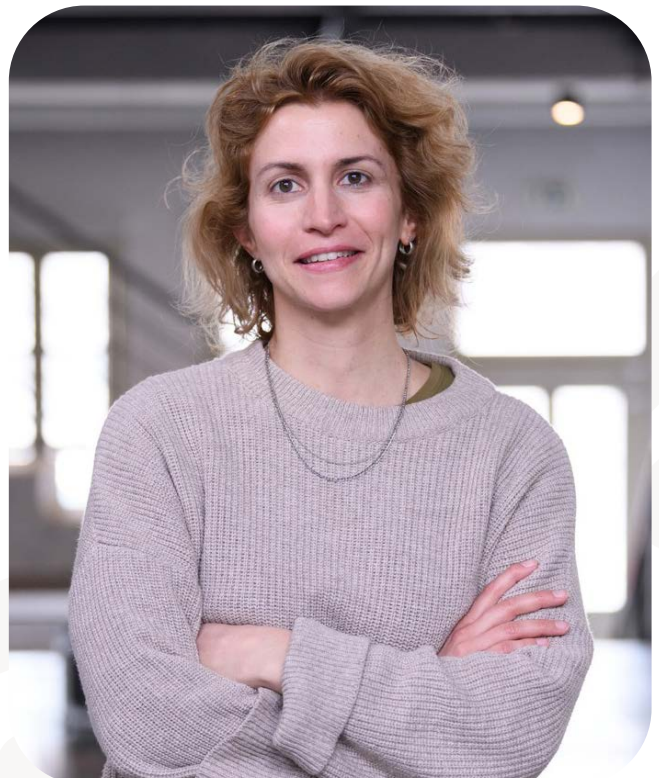
Danai Maragoudaki, journalist at Solomon

Media pluralism

27 EU-countries
+ five candidates

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te countries**

Chapter summary

● Media pluralism in the EU has significantly weakened over the past 10 years. Key reasons for this include:
– The weakened editorial media economy, due to long-term and intense competition from social networks, along with the short-term deterioration furthered by the COVID-19 pandemic.
– High levels of political and economic interference in media operations in many countries.

● In one of the areas measured, "Fundamental protection," improvements are expected in the coming years, resulting from new legislation both nationally and at the EU level, in areas such as:
– Media freedom (European Media Freedom Act)
– Legislation to strengthen the role of whistleblowers
– Legislation to limit the use of Strategic
– Legal Actions Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)
– The EU flagship regulations: Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act.

● Several of these new laws have been recently adopted and will go into full effect in the coming years.

4. Media pluralism in the 27 EU-countries

Data from Media Pluralism Monitor 2024 (MPM2024) and trends from the last decade, including comments from the MPM2023-report[29.]

To complement the insights on editorial capacity in EU countries provided by the report "Uncovering News Deserts in Europe", which focuses on local and community media, we should also consider the findings from the CMPF's Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) report. MPM tracks the entire media ecosystem, with regular assessments beginning in 2013/2014 and conducted annually since 2020, offering a perspecive on its development over time.

[29] https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/

4.1. Method and data foundation

CMPF presents its Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) in this way: The Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) is a tool developed by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom to assess the potential weaknesses in national media systems that may hinder media pluralism. Based on 20 indicators, summarizing 200 variables, it covers four areas:

- Fundamental protection,
- Market plurality,
- Political independence
- Social inclusiveness.

The MPM evaluates the state of these four areas, using five indicators for each. The method is presented as follows in the MPM 2023 report:

Fundamental protection	Market plurality	Political independence	Social inclusiveness
Protection of freedom of expression	Transparency of media ownership	Political independence of media	Representation of minorities in the media
Protection of the right to information	Plurality of media providers	Editorial autonomy	Local, regional and community media
Journalistic profession, standards and protection	Plurality in digital markets	Audiovisual media, online platforms and elections	Gender equality in the media
Independence and effectiveness of the media authority	Media viability	State regulation of resources and support to media sector	Media Literacy
Universal reach of traditional media and access to the Internet	Editorial independence from commercial and owners' influence	Independence of PSM	Protection against disinformation and hate speech

MPM covers 32 European countries. EU candidate-countries of Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey are included, in addition to the 27 EU countries. In the 2024 report, preliminary studies of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, and Ukraine have also been conducted.

4.2. Media Pluralism Monitor 2024

We focus on the MPM 2024 report, which shows results for 2023, and the parts of it that are most relevant to the themes in our analysis.

Fundamental protection is the broadest and most fundamental area evaluated in the MPM. This area analyzes the basic prerequisites for media freedom and media pluralism, protection of freedom of expression, and laws and regulations that ensure free access to information.

The MPM2024 shows a slight increased risk in this area between 2022 and 2023, with a risk assessment of 37% compared to 34% two years before. The term 'risk' is used in the same way in MPM as explained in the methodological review of the report 'Uncover news deserts' in section 4.1.2.

For 14 of the 32 countries, the risk is assessed as low, while 17 countries are considered to have medium risk. France moved from the medium-risk category in 2022 to the low-risk category in the 2023 report, due to new regulations protecting whistleblowers.

One of the indicators of Fundamental rights is Freedom of expression, and here the risk score is 35%, indicating medium risk, but still very close to the low risk area. According to the report, a primary reason for not achieving a clear low risk status on this indicator is the significant work still needed to decriminalize defamation. Additionally, there remains a significant lack of transparency concerning the platforms' moderation of content. All the surveyed countries have formal protections for freedom of expression, but there are challenges in how this freedom is managed in reality.

Increase in threats

One of the most serious concerns in this category is the increase in threats against journalists from the political elite in many countries. Those who should have the responsibility to protect media freedom and journalistic work are at the forefront of attacks in several regions. The MPM2023 report cites 'Carlini et al., 2023; Christophorou & Karides, 2023' as the source of this observation.

The report also states that working conditions for journalists are deteriorating in some of the examined countries. Uncertainty surrounding employment status and weak financial conditions are forcing many to leave the profession.

Figures 1a and 1b. **Fundamental Protecion, risk level**

37%
EU 27 + 5 Average risk

Low risk **14**
Medium risk **17**
High risk **1**

- Low
- Medium
- High
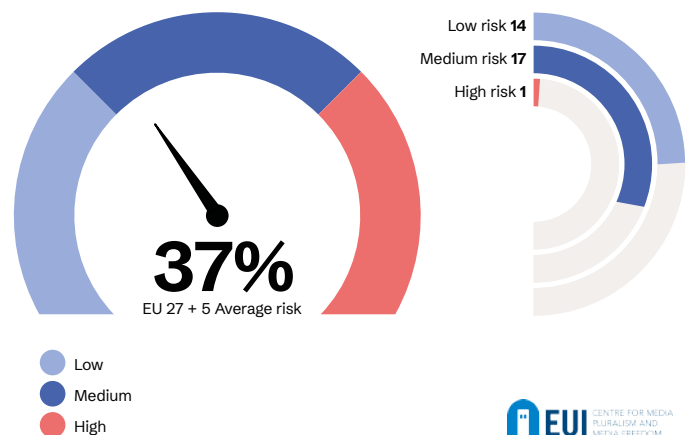
At the same time, there are signs of improvements in the area of Fundamental protection over the past two years, primarily as a consequence of new legislation both nationally and at the EU level. France's strengthened protection of whistleblowers has already been mentioned. Other examples include the Netherlands' new legislation to improve access to information from the public sector and Lithuania's progress under the indicator Universal reach of traditional media and access to the Internet. The latter primarily concerns improved broadband development and the strengthening of public service media.

Regulations with positive impact

New EU regulations, primarily the European Media Freedom Act and the legislation against Strategic Legal Actions Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), are expected to have positive impact on the area of Fundamental protection in the coming years. Flagship regulations such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) are also likely to yield similar positive effects.

The risk assessment for Market plurality, rated 69%, placing it within the high risk category – consistent with the score from MPM2023.

Market plurality is about the economic dimension of media plurality, as cited in the report:

The Market plurality area assesses the risks resulting from opacity of media ownership, from the concentration of the market, in terms of both production (media service providers) and distribution (digital intermediaries), from the economic

Figures 1c and 1d. **Market Plurality, risk level**

Low risk **0**
Medium risk **13**
High risk **19**

69%
EU 27 + 5 Average risk

● Low
● Medium
● High

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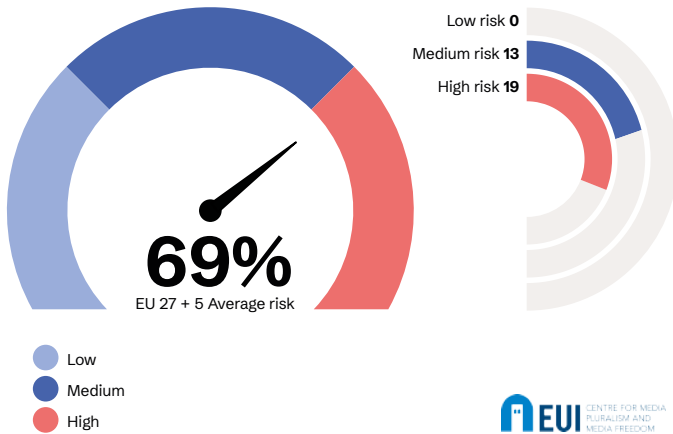
sustainability of the media, and from the influence of commercial interests and ownership on editorial content.

The illustration on page 54 shows the distribution of the 32 countries across the three risk classes. Here we see that no country is assessed as having low risk, 13 countries are classified in the medium risk group, while 19 countries are considered to have high risk.

The primary reason cited in the MPM2023 report for this high risk is increased market concentration, with fewer, larger media owners and a significant dominance of a few platform providers who largely control media content distribution.

The highest risk
Plurality of media providers is one of five indicators under the Market plurality measurement, and it holds the highest risk score among the 20 total indicators in MPM2023, rated at 85%. These evaluations indicate that markets with few, dominant media providers, i.e., media owners, pose a significant risk. The reasoning is that a major owner can render a substantial portion of a country's editorial media ineffective or effectively hold it "hostage" to serve the owners' economic or political interests. However, this remains a politically contentious issue, partly shaped by historical experiences.

The Vice President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency 2019-2024, Věra Jourová, has talked about the need to avoid the "oligarchization" of European media, in connection with the work on the European Media Freedom Act. The political debate on media ownership centers on finding a

balance between allowing media corporations to grow to benefit from economies of scale, without allowing them to become so dominant that they threaten media pluralism and freedom. In several countries, stronger requirements for corporates on ownership transparency and regular reporting on key parameters have served as a compromise, leading to positive results in the media freedom index previously mentioned, as is the case in Lithuania, for example. Requirements for transparency regarding media ownership are also included in the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), which was recently adopted by the EU.

The second key factor contributing to increased risk to media pluralism in MPM 2023 is the economic recession and high inflation in 2022, which has weakened the financial results for media companies.

The overall risk for Political independence is assessed at 48%. The sub-indicator Political independence of the media and the indicator Editorial autonomy, have risk scores of 55% and 61%, respectively, indicating a relatively high risk of illegitimate political interference in editorial independence.

Another interesting indicator under Political independence is Independence of public service media. This indicator is given a medium risk score of 53% overall.

In the unwritten playbook for illiberal leaders, Public Service Media (PSM) appears to be one of the first targets for taking control of the population's information. Leaders and journalists in PSM companies who are not government-friendly are replaced with pro-government staff, transforming it into an effective propaganda apparatus relatively quickly. The reason this is easier and quicker to achieve with PSM than other media companies is, naturally, that PSM companies are state-owned.

This is also why the EU has been eager to provide better protection for PSM companies and ensure their independence in the new European Media Freedom Act.

Figures 1e and 1f. **Political Independence, risk level**

Low risk **9**
Medium risk **16**
High risk **7**

48%
EU 27 + 5 Average risk

- Low
- Medium
- High
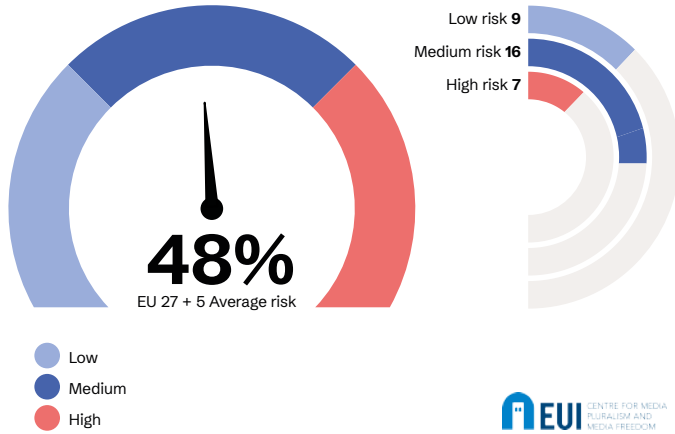
Figures 1g and 1h. **Social Inclusiveness, risk level**

Low risk **4**
Medium risk **19**
High risk **9**

55%
EU 27 + 5 Average risk

- Low
- Medium
- High
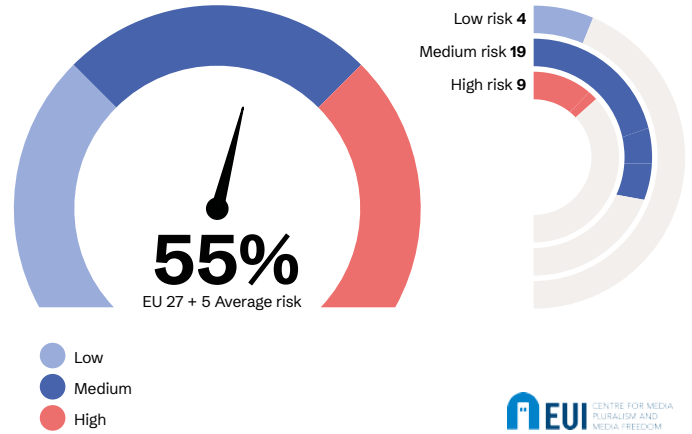
The risk score in the area of Social inclusiveness remains stable at 55% compared to the previous year. This area addresses the representation of various groups such as women, cultural and ethnic minorities, and local/regional communities in editorial media.

The report finds that the most significant decline is in the Gender equality indicator, highlighting poor gender balance in media leadership, where women are significantly underrepresented. Limited representation of diverse groups in editorial media is also believed to impact both media usage and public trust.

Figures 7 b **Comparison of MPM2023 and MPM2024 rankings**

Country	MPM Risk Score (%)	Difference (%)
Turkey		0
Hungary		−1
Albania		2
Serbia		2
Romania		2
Poland		−3
Bulgaria		2
Montenegro		4
Malta		3
Slovenia		−3
Greece		−1
Cyprus		3
Croatia		3
Spain		2
The Czech Republic		−1
Italy		0
North Macedonia		4
Slovakia		3
Luxembourg		2
Latvia		5
Estonia		0
Austria		2
Ireland		1
Finland		−3
Lithuania		1
Portugal		6
France		4
Belgium		1
Denmark		−2
The Netherlands		0
Sweden		−1
Germany		4

MPM**2023**
MPM**2024**

How media freedom developed in E countries from

eedom has
European
2013 to 2024

Chapter summary

- Only three of the 29 countries we surveyed (EU + 2) made progress in media freedom score during the period 2013 - 2024.

- The progress in the countries showing the most positive development during this period, led by Lithuania and Latvia, is much smaller than the decline experienced by those with the most negative development.

- Among the countries we selected, the EU countries plus the United Kingdom and Norway, Norway leads the global ranking in 2024, while Greece, the weakest of these countries, ranks 88th.

5. How media freedom has developed in European countries

Data on the status of media freedom differs from the other datasets in that it says more about the outcome of illiberal forces gaining greater influence in a country than about the possible causes of a weakening of liberal democracy.

However, we believe that declining media freedom can, in some cases, serve as an early indicator of a shift towards illiberal development.

In any case, the degree of media freedom is relevant for assessing the ability of free editorial media to fulfill their societal mission and, therefore, belongs in this analysis.

The map interface shows:

| RSF REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS | Map | List | + − 🖫 ⤓ ↗ | Find a country |

INDEX
2024
Global score
Analysis 2024
Methodology

BAROMETER

rsf.org EN

INDEX 2024		GLOBAL SCORE
1	Norway	91.89
2	Denmark	89.6
3	Sweden	88.32
4	Netherlands	87.73
5	Finland	86.55
6	Estonia	86.44
7	Portugal	85.9
8	Ireland	85.59
9	Switzerland	84.01
10	Germany	83.84
11	Luxembourg	83.8
12	Latvia	82.9
13	Lithuania	81.73
14	Canada	81.7
15	Liechtenstein	81.52
16	Belgium	81.49
17	Czechia	80.14
18	Iceland	80.13
19	New Zealand	79.72
20	Timor-Leste	78.92
21	France	78.65
22	Samoa	78.41
23	United Kingdom	77.51

0 40 55 70 85 100

5.1. Media Freedom Index - data foundation and method[30]

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has conducted an annual survey of the status of press freedom in 180 countries since 2002. RSF defines press freedom as "The ability of journalists as individuals and collectives to select, produce, and disseminate news in the public interest independent of political, economic, legal, and social interference and in the absence of threats to their physical and mental safety."

When the focus is on assessing the relationship between the prevalence of free, independent media and the level of democracy, as in this case, we expect to find a correlation between the degree of democracy and the degree of press freedom. However, the causality between these variables remains open to interpretation. Will reduced press freedom weaken the media's role to such an extent that its assumed positive impact on democracy will be reduced? Is this reasoning even relevant? Or rather, is freedom of the press first weakened when illiberal forces come into power and challenge democracy in various ways? These are the questions we aim to address.

Regarding the method used to assess the degree of press freedom, RSF writes:

"[…] the press freedom questionnaire and map are broken down into five distinct categories or indicators (political context, legal framework, economic context, sociocultural context and safety)."

RSF further explains that "[The] score is calculated on the basis of two components: - a quantitative tally of abuses against media and journalists in connection with their work; [and] a qualitative analysis of the situation in each country or territory based on the responses of press freedom specialists […]".

RSF has changed the method for mapping media freedom several times. In 2012, a major change was made, making it impractical to compare figures from before and after. In addition, a minor change was made in 2021.

We resolved this by displaying the numbers in two columns: one for the period 2013 - 2021 and another for 2013 - 2024. We chose to rank the numbers for the latter period. In this format, the 2013-2021 data shows a slight improvement in scores for six countries and a decline for 23 countries, while for the most recent measurement period, which incorporates the transition to the updated method, there is a slight improvement for three countries and a decline for 26.

30 https://rsf.org/en/2024-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-under-political-pressure

5.2. Development in the degree of media freedom in the 27 EU countries, plus the United Kingdom and Norway, in the period 2013 - 2024

Country	Global score 2013	Global score 2024	Global ranking 2013	Global ranking 2024	Ranking trend 2013-24	Score trend 2013-21	Score trend 2013-24
Latvia	77,11	82,90	39	12	+27	+3,63	+5,79
Portugal	83,25	85,90	28	7	+21	+6,64	+2,65
France	78,4	78,61	37	21	+16	-1,0	+0,21
Lithuania	81,76	81,73	33	13	+20	-1,19	-0,03
Norway	93,48	91,89	3	1	+2	-0,2	-1,59
Sweden	90,77	88,32	10	3	+7	+1,99	-2,45
Denmark	92,92	89,6	6	2	+4	-1,49	-3,32
Italy	73,89	69,8	57	46	+11	+2,72	-4,09
Spain	79,5	75,37	36	30	+6	+0,06	-4,13
Estonia	90,74	86,44	11	6	+5	-5,99	-4,3
Ireland	89,94	85,59	15	8	+7	-1,85	-4,35
Croatia	73,39	68,79	64	48	+16	-1,34	-4,8
United Kingdom	83,11	77,51	29	23	+6	-4,7	-5,6
Netherlands	93,52	87,73	2	4	-2	-3,19	-5,79
Germany	89,76	83,84	17	10	+7	-5,0	-5,92
Belgium	87,06	81,49	21	16	-5	+1,25	-5,57
Bulgaria	71,42	65,32	87	59	+28	-8,71	- 6,1
Slovenia	79,51	72,6	35	42	-7	-2,61	-6,91
Finland	93,62	86,55	1	5	-4	-0,61	-7,07
Romania	76,95	68,45	42	49	-6	-1,86	-8,5
Luxembourg	93,32	83,8	4	11	-7	-10,88	-9,52
Czechia	89,83	80,14	16	17	+2	13,21	-9,69
Slovakia	86,75	76,01	23	29	-6	-9,77	-10,73
Hungary	73,91	62,98	56	67	-11	-5,67	-10,93
Greece	71,54	57,15	84	88	-4	-0,55	-14,39
Malta	76,7	60,96	45	84	-39	-7,16	-15,74
Austria	90,6	74,69	12	32	-20	-6,94	-15,91
Poland	86,89	69,17	22	47	-25	15,73	-17,72
Cyprus	86,17	63,14	24	65	-41	-6,02	-23,03

Norway ranked highest on RSF's Press Freedom Index for the past seven years, and all ten of the top ranked countries are European, as of 2024.

However, the most striking finding is that 26 out of the 29 countries studied have declined on the press freedom index over this period. It is also of note that the weakest have regressed more significantly than the strongest have progressed. Latvia and Lithuania have made the most progress, by 6 and 5 points respectively, while Cyprus and Poland have experienced the greatest decline, by 16 and 17 points respectively.

The graph shows the development over the last 13 years for the countries with the highest and lowest scores. The blue line shows the average development for our 27+2 countries.

A simplified diagram illustrating the developments over the past 11 years:
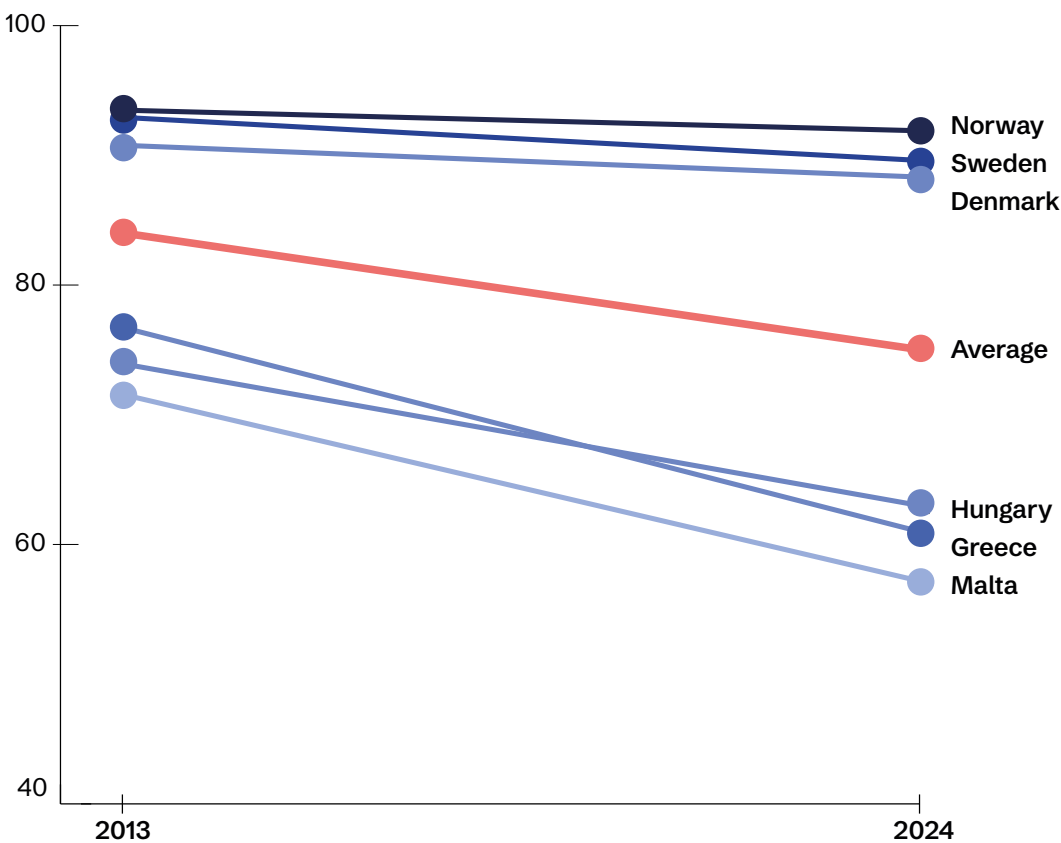
One of the most striking aspects, however, is the significant difference in scores and rankings among EU countries. Even though EU/EEA countries dominate the top ten list, there are also countries such as Hungary in 72nd place, Malta in 84th, and Greece, holding the weakest position in this group, in 107th place. Greece has dropped 23 places over the period studied, with Malta and Poland experiencing the largest declines, falling 39 and 35 places, respectively.

Among this group of countries, Lithuania has experienced the most positive development in the Press Freedom Index during this period, rising by 26 places, from 33rd to 7th.

5.3. Editorial independence in the report Uncovering news deserts in Europe

In spring 2024, the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPM)[31] presented the study Uncovering news deserts in Europe: risks and opportunities for local and community media in the EU"[32]. The survey, which is the first of its kind, focuses on the situation for local and regional media in all EU countries. We will return to this study later in this report, but here we extract the result for the indicator Editorial Independence in the CMPF study.

This indicator assesses the independence of local editorials from political and commercial actors, and the result aligns with RSF's Press Freedom Index, although the methodology and presentation differ to some extent.

The map below shows the degree of risk to editorial independence in the various EU countries. CMPF explains as follows: "Central and Southeastern Europe […] are the areas most affected by political and commercial control over the local media, with a deleterious effect on trustworthiness and diversity of information sources. Poland and Malta stand out as the
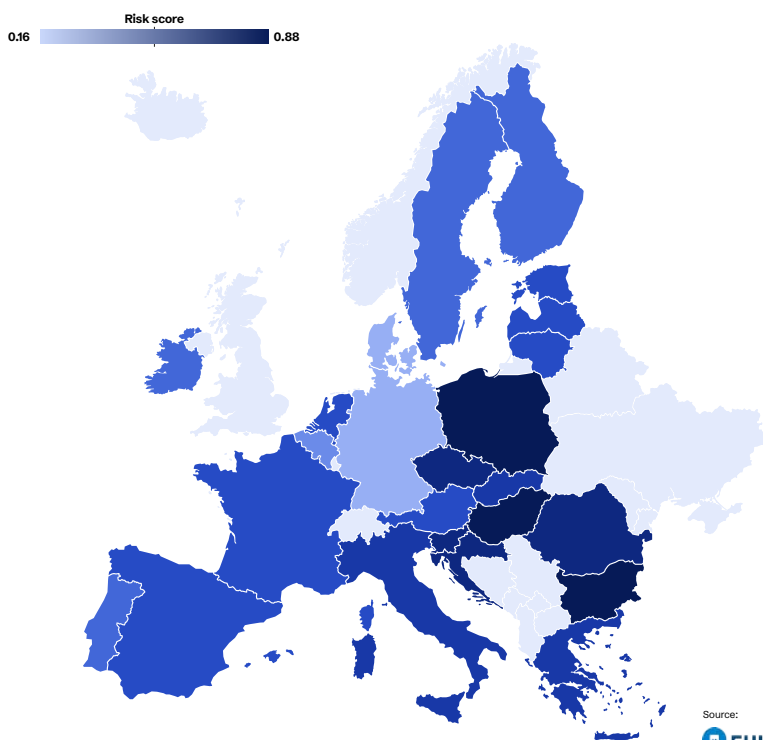
countries in most jeopardy in these terms, followed closely by Hungary and Bulgaria, which place at the highest margin of the high-risk band. The Czech Republic, Croatia, Slovenia, Romania, Greece and Cyprus also score an overall high-risk level, with peaks of concern under specific subdomains."

There are several methods that powerful political and economic interests can employ to control free media. By using public or semi-public companies, or in alliances with economically strong friends of the government, one can buy media outlets that illiberal leaders want to control, either fully or partially. One example of this was witnessed in Poland, when PKN Orlen, the Polish state-owned energy company controlled by the then-ruling PiS party, acquired Polska Press in 2020. This gave them control of more than 20 of the country's 24 regional newspapers.

Reduce income and increase costs
Economic measures can be used both to reduce media companies' revenues and increase their costs. For example, governments may allocate public advertisements – a vital source of revenue for media in many countries – preferentially to favored outlets that demonstrate loyalty, while withholding it from those that ask critical questions. On the cost side, authorities may impose higher taxes or new fees, as seen in recent initiatives across some EU countries.

Strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPPs) is frequently used to impose significant legal costs and the burden of extra work on troublesome media, without any ambition to win the cases brought forward.

The final category involves restricting access to public information, both written and oral. For example, politicians might refuse to be interviewed by media they do not like.

Some of these abuses of power are addressed in new EU legislation, especially the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) and a new directive aimed at protecting journalists (and others) from SLAPPs. EMFA includes both specific rules, such as against unreasonable criteria for allocating public advertisements, and more general rules intended to prevent illegitimate public interventions against free editorial media.

Figure 4
Risk for the indicator Editorial independence in the 27 EU Member States

Risk score
0.16   0.88

Source:
EUI CENTRE FOR MEDIA PLURALISM AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Schibsted
31 https://cmpf.eui.eu/
32 https://cmpf.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CMPF_Uncovering-news-deserts-in-Europe_LM4D-final-report.pdf

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6.1. Coinciding trends

We have now reviewed four datasets: a democracy index, a study of news deserts at local and regional levels in EU countries, a media pluralism index for EU countries and five candidate countries, and a combination of two different media freedom indexes.

The rise of social networks and digitalization, along with their impact on the traditional media economy and competition for users' attention, are well-known factors of significance for several of the trends analyzed. In all the datasets we reviewed, the role of social networks is frequently mentioned, to varying degrees and in different contexts. Our interview subjects also address these topics.

We have chosen to interview experts for their professional insight on the datasets discussed or the media industry in various countries. Some are from academia, while others are industry practitioners, and in selecting them we have focused on geographic diversity and familiarity with different political and socioeconomic contexts.

This report aims to provide reasonable speculations based on probable interpretations of facts, with the hope of contributing to a broader discussion of the issues raised.

After analyzing the four previously mentioned datasets, we observe a negative trend in each, although in distinct ways:

Democracy Index: The democracy index indicates that the level of democracy in the EU is weakening, mirroring global trends. This does not imply that a large number of countries in Europe have lost their liberal democracies over the last 10-15 years; rather, the political forces at play increase the likelihood that more countries may follow those that have already shifted towards illiberalism. Hungary has been on the illiberal side for many years, and Poland, following the recent election, is currently attempting to re-establish its liberal democracy.

Study of News Deserts: The recent study on news deserts in rural Europe – examining the development of local and community media in EU countries – shows that journalistic coverage in rural areas varies greatly between countries. However, this study generally indicates that increasingly larger areas are becoming news deserts. A surprising finding in this study is that there is a lack of local editorial coverage in several cities,

particularly in growing urban areas where editorial initiatives have not kept pace.

Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM): Data from the MPM shows that media diversity is weakening, largely due to a deteriorating media economy and increasing economic and politically motivated interference in media independence. On a positive note, there are signs of improvement in one measurement area of the MPM, likely due to new regulations against SLAPPs, better protection for whistleblowers, and the recently adopted European Media Freedom Act.

Press Freedom Index: Reporters Without Borders (RFS) Media Freedom Index shows that only three of the 29 countries surveyed (EU + 2) made progress in media freedom score from 2013 - 2024. The Editorial Independence indicator in the report Uncovering News Deserts in Europe is not an index but is based on risk assessments from experts in each country, which broadly confirms the trends seen in RSF's index.

The economic strength of European media companies is, naturally, an important factor for the analysis conducted in this report. The development has been well known for many years, and therefore we have chosen not to go into detail on this topic. Nevertheless, economic factors are used both as causes and effects of current development trends. Media economics is also raised as a relevant issue by most of our interview subjects.

The decline in the editorial media's economy began with the 2009 financial crisis and transitioned seamlessly into more structural changes. The most significant challenge for the media was competition for digital advertising revenues from the new global technology platforms, while at the same time, advertising and user revenues from print newspapers declined along with circulation. Norway and Sweden are among the few countries that managed to establish a functioning market for digital subscriptions, enabling compensation for some of the lost income. It's quite evident that the weakened media economy has led to reduced editorial capacity, measured in both money and number of journalists to produce journalism.

However, it is important to note that the weakened media economy and decreased media consumption across several target groups are not directly correlated. Other key factors include alternative offerings from social networks, competition for people's time, and the editorial media's own ability and willingness to innovate and engage with users to adapt to a changing landscape.

When all four factors show a negative trend over the past 10-15 years, we can observe a correlation in their development. The most compelling question, however, is whether there is also causality between the different datasets, which we aim to explore.

Schibsted is based in Norway and Sweden, the two most atypical countries in Europe in terms of media development and democracy. This is mainly due to the fact that these countries lead global rankings in democracy indexes, media freedom indexes, living standards indexes, and digital maturity. They also have well-developed public media support systems. Therefore, we aim to avoid placing too much emphasis on experiences from our own geography during our interviews.

When it comes to innovations and improvements in Part 2, we will discuss Nordic solutions that we believe are relevant for the rest of Europe.

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen - Head of Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

6.2. Assessment of the impact of editorial media on the level of democracy

6.2.1. Discussion on the relationship between reduced editorial capacity and the decline of European democracies

We have asked some of the interviewees to reflect on possible causality:

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen
Head of Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the time of the interview, is the most skeptical among those we interviewed about this causality.

"I think it's quite hard to establish that consistently, right? So, I'm just thinking of countries that are often held up as key examples of democratic backsliding. These would be Hungary, they would be Turkey, they would be, until recently, Poland. I think it's also important to recognize that several of these countries had comparatively robust and pluralistic media compared to many other societies. And that robustness and diversity was not enough to protect their independence once the governing parties began to really leverage the full power of the state to try to exercise media capture. So I'm not sure that it would have made much of a difference had they been a little bit stronger. I think it's very hard once a government starts deploying the full panoply of tools that unscrupulous political actors can use if they seek to control the media. So, would I have wished the Polish media to be stronger, or the Hungarian media to be stronger, or Turkish media to be stronger? Sure. But I'm not sure that would have prevented the backsliding that we're seeing."

Professor Gábor Polyák

The Hungarian Professor Gábor Polyák, of Media Law and Media Policy, Head of the Media and Communication Department at Eötvös Loránd University, and Head of the watchdog organization Mertek Media Monitor, has his own analysis of the strength and stance of the Hungarian media during and after Fidesz's takeover in Hungary.

To our question, he responds:

"Of course, the media system is embedded into the political and social system as a whole. And in 2010, there was no real social movement against the first anti-democratic measures of the Fidesz government. And that was also what you would experience in the media field. Public service media was one of the first organizations that announced loyalty to the Fidesz government. Even before the election in 2010, they started to be very friendly with Fidesz before the elections. And it means, of course, that the Hungarian media system, the media market, and the attitudes of journalists were not strong enough to defend or to resist this kind of attacks that started in 2010."

"For a period the media market seemed to be strong because it was mainly owned by Western European investors. The big problem was that in 2008, because of the global financial crisis, most of these investors decided to leave not only Hungary, but the whole region. Our bad luck was that this was the time when Orbán came."

"So, there were several media outlets on the market to be sold, and there was only one buyer, and that was the economic circle of the ruling party, Fidesz. It was very, very easy to expand on the media market for businessmen related to the ruling party."

Professor Polyak believes this illustrates the weaknesses in the Hungarian media market prior to the 2010 takeover. Notably, he also points out that a significant portion of Hungarian journalists have become uncritical and loyal to the Fidesz government.

"Yeah, and so no one thought before 2010 that journalists can be turned into this direction. Now the majority of the journalists are also taking part in the functioning of this regime. They don't think that they should be watchdogs. They think they should be loyal to the government and defend the interests of the government. This is not, how to say, the attitude of the journalists, what you want to see or what you can read in textbooks, says Gábor Polyák."

Professor Gábor Polyák, head of the Media and Communication Department at Eötvös Loránd University

Sofia Verza, project leader

Project leader Sofia Verza,

of the Center of Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF), emphasizes changes in political culture in her response.

"On a general level I believe there is such a causality. However, it's very difficult to prove. There are multiple factors at play, including the level of political polarization. Changes are happening in the political culture, citizens' trust in traditional political parties is decreasing in many countries."

Assistant professor Lambrini Papadopoulou,

Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, criticizes the attitude and professionalism of large parts of traditional Greek media:

"In essence, what we have is a media environment in which the majority of media are interwoven with the Greek government and support its strategies, its narratives, its visions, its politics in general, and do not criticize them. And they are also supported economically via the government to do so, so there is no critical reporting. And at the same time, there are a handful of critical media that are trying to survive economically, and also they are trying to hold those powerful accountable for their actions. But it is a struggle."

– Why is it this way, do you think?

"There are various reasons. First of all, this is endemic to Greece's media history. I mean, if you examine the way media used to function decades ago, they were very closely related to power itself. So, this is not a new trend. This has been a systemic issue for the Greek media. They have always been partisan.But once again, if we also take into consideration other factors, such as the economic crisis that made the media more vulnerable, then the government became the most important funder for some of them. So, it was like a necessity for them in order to survive, to embrace the government's narratives. There are a lot of factors that have contributed, but this is also a systemic issue. This is more or less how the media used to function, by exchanging favors with those in power. Because essentially, they could never really survive on their own powers. Their business model was not successful. So they had to look for other kinds of revenue."

Assistant professor Lambrini Papadopoulou, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

Renate Schroeder - Director of European Federation of Journalists

Director Renate Schroeder

Director of European Federation of Journalists, largely agrees with Kleis Nielsen, but believes there is an additional factor that must be considered for some of the countries he mentions.

"The historical background for these countries is so important. It's very clear that in new member states, as we still call them, even though they have been there for 20 years, countries coming from communism have a completely different view on media, on journalists, on public service media. We may not have acknowledged that enough. We have Slovakia, we have the well-known problems in Hungary and Poland. But I mean, if you look at Bulgaria, if you look at Romania, Czech Republic, or Croatia , you see there are common problems everywhere. And when I look at Germany, my own home country, the former GDR and the West, there are also big differences."

"It would be easy to say bad media, bad democracy, but it's not that easy. There are many other factors included, and we have to take a holistic approach. With globalization, digitalization, and the unprecedented power of big tech, the world is getting more complex and more polarized on all levels. Journalists at their best can play a vital role of connecting, explaining and engaging diverse audiences. For that, public support on all levels is crucial."

Associate Professor Andrea Mangani - University of Pisa

Professor Staffan I. Lindberg

Director of the V-Dem Institute, is not categorical when it comes to the causality between editorial capacity and democracy, however, he has strong opinions about the media's responsibility to make democracy work.

"It's huge. And when it comes to disinformation and all the lies that are being spread on the internet, it's the media who have been best suited to deal with this historically. Democracy dies with the lies. That was my main message to the American Congress when I participated in the January 6th hearing. Democracy can't survive in a situation where people are being flooded with lies that large segments of the populations start believing in. Even the simplest and most fundamental action in a democracy - casting a vote in an election - becomes meaningless if voters only have lies to contend with, Lindberg says."

Thus, he believes that editorial media are critically important for preserving democracy, but at the same time, he questions the media's current way of handling extreme political statements.

"I think the media sometimes seek "objectivity" to the point of absurdity. You have to stand up for democracy and the principles of democracy. When parties and leaders make anti-pluralist statements, the media should point this out. It must be within the framework of the journalistic code of ethics to speak truth to power and say that this proposal is anti-democratic. For this and for that. And when they present conspiracy theories and lies that are spreading on social networks, regular media must be clearer and harder on the side of the truth."

Associate Professor Andrea Mangani

University of Pisa, shares his view on the relationship between democracy and journalism, while also pointing out the increased distrust in politics, regardless of the media's actions.

"I'm convinced that there is a strong connection, a strong link between media freedom/media pluralism and democracy. At the same time, it is not possible to establish causality in the data you refer to. For Italy's part, this is partly due to a political crisis that could lead to a lower level of democracy in itself. People no longer believe in politics and seek simple solutions."

"It's probably fair to say that 90-95 percent of what people think about the world, they have learned from the media. So, the most important thing, the starting point for the establishment of liberal democracies, is to ensure a pluralist media system. And so, if we find that the media pluralism and media freedom has declined in the last 15 or 20 years, and then we observe a decline also in the estimated level of democracy in different countries, I'm inclined to believe that there is a strong connection between the two things."

"Media plurality/media freedom and democracy cannot work separately. I cannot imagine a democracy without media freedom, and I cannot imagine media freedom without democracy."

Professor Staffan I. Lindberg - Director of the V-Dem Institute

Marcy Burstiner, Editorial News Editor of News Decoder

Professor Jan Christian Kalbhenn, University of Münster and Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences

Marcy Burstiner

Editorial News Editor of News Decoder, responds by highlighting what she believes are the reasons behind the editorial media's weakened position as defenders of liberal democracies.

"Profit demands have led to significant resources being taken away from creative journalism. This has resulted in newsrooms becoming too small, leaving large thematic areas uncovered. Consequently, the audience doesn't find content that is relevant to them and turns their backs on the news media. It's a vicious cycle that further affects the funding of journalism and poses a real danger of journalism dying out. If journalism were properly funded, either through non-profit ownership or public media support, more topics and regions would receive better coverage, and the audience would see greater value and relevance in journalism. But that's not the case right now, and this needs to change."

Professor Jan Christian Kalbhenn

Institute for Information, Telecommunications and Media Law, University of Münster and Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences, is uncertain about the causality of the issue, like the others interviewed. However, he is confident that it is not coincidental that the democratic level in Europe and editorial capacity are declining simultaneously.

"No, it's not a coincidence. It's more like I would say that the internet or the digitalization or the platformization, the algorithmization, whatsoever, is maybe like a driving force for both trends. The old media system, from our perspective, seems to have been quite stable and quite solid and quite strong. It might somehow have also stabilized democratic values and institutions. But it's not fully adapted to the digital sphere. So, it needs more time to have this stabilization factor also on the digital side. The infrastructure is not fully developed, I would say."

Professor Auksė Balčytienė, Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania

Professor Auksė Balčytienė

Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania, believes that the reduced power of journalism is one of the crucial factors for analyzing the democratic backsliding. At a general level, she also argues that we should look more deeply and broadly to better understand the weakening of European democracies:

"I think in general, I would look at all epistemic organizations, schools, museums, libraries, and ask questions of epistemology in general. What is knowledge and do we value knowledge as such? And what kind of views or values do we have in our societies?"

Auksė Balčytienė's analysis largely revolves around the convergence of what she characterizes as an information crisis and a social crisis. The information crisis pertains to the way reliable and useful editorial information is mixed with conspiracies and disinformation in an enormous overflow of information. Vulnerable groups, who may not have the financial means nor the interest in consuming independent editorial products that seem irrelevant, can easily become susceptible to a blend of truths and lies.

Florence Hartmann

Head of the Media Intelligence Service of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), is accompanied by her colleagues Dorien Verckist, Senior Media Analyst, and Léa Hermen, Media Analyst, in the interview.

Florence Hartmann and her team are cautious about establishing causality between reduced editorial power and the weakening of democracies in the EU. The Media Intelligence Service produced a report[33] on Public Service Media (PSM) and democratic development in 2023. They used the term "associated with". For example, one of the chapter titles is "Strong PSM are associated with a healthy democracy."

The Media Intelligence Service is very focused on the conditions necessary for PSM to fulfill its public service mission in the future, says Florence Hartmann:

"It all starts with independence, really. Safeguarding the independence in the governance and in the funding of the public service media is really the cornerstone for the PSM to be trusted. And according to all the studies we've been doing about the connection between PSM, democracy, and polarization, trust is really the core element. It is all about the trust from the citizens. And that comes with independence from the political sphere."

It is easy to understand Florence Hartmann's emphasis on the independence of Public Service Media (PSM). These types of media are large and important players among editorial media. To illustrate, the total funding of PSM in EU27+UK+NO is EUR 36.03 billion, according to EBU. This includes both public and commercial sources of funding.

The significant influence of these organizations, combined with public ownership, makes controlling PSM one of the top action points in the unwritten playbook for illiberal leaders.

Public Service Media (PSM) is included in the studies and datasets we use in this analysis. For example, in the mapping of local news deserts in the EU, there are specific questions related to the presence of PSMs in the relevant geographies.

Dorien Verckist expands on Florence Hartmann's reasoning:

"I would say personal relevance is the next step, then. First it is independence and trust, then it's personal relevance. I think there's an interesting gap between the perceived personal relevance and relevance for society. It shows that PSM is known to be a useful institute. But then when you ask about the usefulness for your own life, you see that it's a bit less of a convincing idea."

Florence Hartmann - Head of the Media Intelligence Service of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU)

[33] https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/Publications/MIS/login_only/psm/EBU-MIS-PSM_and_Democracy_2023-Public.pdf

6.2.2. The capability of editorial media and their mindset

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen criticizes several media outlets for having a superficial and undocumented approach to the trends thought to drive democratic backsliding, and for their limited understanding of citizens' needs and behaviors.

"It seems to me that much of the public, and probably a growing part of the public, does not see actually existing news as valuable. And because they don't see it as valuable, they're not willing to pay attention. And in situations where they see it as even negative in their lives, because it leaves them anxious, depressed, and doesn't give them anything actionable or anything they can do about the problem being covered, they actually try to avoid it."

Kleis Nielsen criticizes the media for ignoring large target groups, specifically mentioning women and people with low income and low education.

"I mean, first of all, we need to be clear that both declining news consumption and increasing news avoidance are not unique to younger people. These trends are more pronounced among younger people who don't have a lifetime of socialization into habits of news consumption. In fact, we see many different groups, and often groups that I think we have reason to say are poorly served by established media historically, namely women, for example, but also people of lower levels of income and lower levels of education."

"I shouldn't say they're actually avoiding the news. And I mean, I would just say that our research on these issues paints a pretty clear picture. Generally, much of the public would like to have access to news that keeps them up to date, helps them understand the world beyond personal experience and tries to hold power to account. Much of the public is not convinced that that's what established media offer. And they often see established media as being not for people like them and not about people like them, not representing and respecting and reflecting people like them. And these concerns are not imaginary.
I mean, many of the groups that are more likely to be low news consumers and more likely to be active news avoiders have every reason to feel poorly represented in the news, which tends to have a sort of orientation towards more privileged parts of society, often sort of more middle-aged or older, heavily featured male voices, heavily featured voices of people who are at high levels of educational attainment. And in that sense, essentially part of the public have had a look at the news, not a thorough one, not a detailed one, not one exploring every possible source of news, but had a look at the news and concluded that they don't seem to care very much about me, so why

should I care about them?"

Renate Schroeder believes that it's more than just age and education level that determines whether people feel included in or excluded from ongoing political processes. She argues that it also involves class affiliation, to some extent.

"For me, the 90s were very progressive, with positive changes. We now have a rise of the right wing because many people, especially the young, feel isolated, alienated, full of angst for their future. Ecological fears, wokeness, complicated gender language and identity questions lead them to the quest for simple answers, nationalistic narratives against "foreign" people and back to conservative values. They don't see themselves anymore protected in today's societies. I'm sure this also has an impact on voting behavior, independent from the media. We have seen that in Sweden, we have seen that in Finland, and we have seen that in Denmark, all three countries where you still have very good independent media. However, I am convinced that the influence of social networks and their attention driven economic models play an enormous destructive role in dismantling our social contracts based on trust, confidence and social cohesion."

6.2.3. Growing bigger on a melting ice floe

Karel Verhoeven, Editor-in-Chief at the Flemish-language newspaper De Standaard in Belgium, describes a situation familiar to many editors. Newspapers of record, whether center, left, or right, tend to serve citizens with moderate political views and emotions – generally highly educated, relatively affluent, middle-class professionals, often urban residents.

"It is not so much the younger audiences we struggle with. We succeed in connecting with them, through very successful podcasts, and with accessible subscriptions for minus 26, for example. But there is an odd contradiction. At De Standaard, we have been growing in circulation and in subscriptions for the past 20 years. Yet the politics we discuss, and which our readers adhere to, is the moderate politics of the center parties, left or right. This is seriously challenged by populist and radical parties. Look at the Netherlands, France, Germany, and so many other European countries. In the Belgian and Flemish elections of June 2024, the far right became the second biggest party. Not the biggest. With local elections in October 2024, in the major city of Antwerp for example, the communist far left gained momentum. I sometimes have the impression that politically we are on a melting ice sheet. Doing well, but on a melting ice floe. Research indicates that once voters cross the bridge towards the far right, there's hardly any coming

back, because these voters also leave "our" sort of news, the moderate and critical news environment. You cross the bridge and you come into a different kind of information world. A place where we newspapers are no longer able to reach them. That is a bleak prospect, one we have to fight with all available journalistic means, tools, and media."

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen believes that class divides in news consumption have become more pronounced than before because there are so many more choices.

"It's important to think about what has changed. And I think that the main thing that has changed is that in the past, in a low choice media environment, a lot of people ended up getting a little bit of news along the way, even though they didn't think very highly of it, because news was part and parcel of media that they use for other purposes. I gave the example of utility and service information. These things are largely gone by now. People don't come across the news incidentally unless they do so on social networks and in a few cases search engines and the like. So, the concept has changed. People have more choices. And those who don't find it as valuable or even find it a net negative in their lives are exercising that choice."

6.2.4. Different forces pull in different directions… and the clock is ticking

Endres til Since we began working on this report in November 2023, the political landscape in the EU has shifted towards a partially illiberal far-right, though none have gained a majority in the EU Parliament. The extent of this shift largely depends on what one had anticipated. In our context, it's worth putting a spotlight on the relationship between voters' support for illiberal political forces and their relationship with editorial media.

Some interesting developments in this period:

- The Italian government has carried out replacements of leaders and TV hosts in the Italian Public Service Media company RAI.

- The government in Slovakia decided to shut down the country's Public Service Media (PSM) company Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS) and replace it with the newly established company Slovakia Television and Radio (STVR).

These changes in PSM in both countries are interpreted as measures to take full editorial control of the journalism in publicly owned media. This follows the playbook of illiberal re-gimes down to the smallest detail. The first step in these governments' efforts to control critical media is often to start with the PSM companies.

- In France, leading political groups have been accused of wanting to deconstruct public service media. A handful of billionaires have largely taken control of several of the country's major editorial media, allegedly to use them to promote their private interests.

- Another measure impacting media framework conditions is now emerging in the Netherlands, where the government is raising VAT on media subscriptions from 9 to 21 percent.

- In Norway, ranked highest globally on the media freedom index by Reporters Without Borders, the government has also removed the VAT exemption for audio and video-based media subscriptions.

The primary task of editorial media is to help the population make informed decisions and choices based on facts, and to expose abuses of power in all forms. In other words, the media's job is not to warn against supporting specific political parties but to shed light on what each party's policies would mean in practice. This is challenging in situations where parties have a vested interest in keeping their plans undisclosed until they have come into power. While public support for social institutions such as courts and editorial media may vary, there is typically little to gain from campaigning to deconstruct these institutions upon taking power. As a result, such intentions are often under-communicated, which can, in turn, lead the media into a minefield.

For example, the media can point out that parties with similar values and flagship issues in other countries have significantly weakened democracy after coming into power. However, doing so may invite intense criticism from those unwilling to address the potential consequences of a party's policies, leading to accusations that the "mainstream media" is campaigning for political opponents. This argument can strongly resonate with frustrated voter groups who feel that traditional media does not adequately represent their interests. Here, we see various forces pulling segments of society in different directions, making it uncertain which forces will prevail in each case.

6.3. Possible conclusions

In the first part of this analysis, we looked at and compared several different, relevant datasets. All datasets show a negative trend over the past 10-15 years. The trends show correlation, but causality remains uncertain.

So, the question is: Do we believe there would be a more positive development for liberal democracies in Europe if editorial media had been stronger?

We can conclude that both external and internal factors have influenced the strength and capacity of editorial media over the past 15 years. When trust in editorial media declines, for example, we must assume that this is due to both the media's own behavior and to the portrayal of the editorial media by external forces.

6.3.1. Economy, attention, digitalisation, and agenda

Factors contributing to what many call an editorial media crisis include intense competition from the social networks and search engines provided by global tech giants over the past 10+ years. The 2008/2009 financial crisis also hit the media hard, transitioning almost seamlessly into the structural changes driven by social networks. This competition drained traditional media of advertising revenue, with no possibility of replacing this loss with other income in most media companies. The new competition resides in the digital market, and as a natural result, the use of print newspapers has declined significantly. Digitalization, and the opportunities it has provided for on-demand services for both video and audio, has also reduced the consumption of linear TV.

As a result of this development, media finances have been significantly weakened, leading to repeated cost reductions and a reduction in journalistic capacity. Even in countries where the media have been more successful, primarily due to the rise of digital subscriptions and relatively well-structured media support schemes, resources are still far fewer than before, requiring tough prioritization. This may have resulted in journalism that is better than ever before. But at the same time, the resource situation has led to thematic and geographical blind spots in journalism and coverage gaps for major parts of society.

Another impact of social networks is the competition for people's time and the decline in young people's engagement with editorial media. This is likely the biggest strategic challenge facing traditional editorial media.

The competition from social networks is also a competition over who sets the agenda. Editorial media, long accustomed to being dominant agenda setters, have had to confront the reality that, over the past 10-15 years, entirely different institutions and individuals can now set the agenda by spreading content through networks. This has been positive, also from a demo-

cratic perspective, because it has made it possible for everyone to be heard and to create engagement. However, it also has negative side-effects when the opportunity is misused to spread lies, disinformation, and hate.

Digitalization and new technology have also provided important opportunities in the production of journalism. "Data-driven journalism" is a term that, among other things, means that technology helps journalists find and analyze large amounts of data, so that more journalism can be produced based on it.

6.3.2. Lack of political support

The degree of political engagement for free editorial media varies significantly from country to country. Our assertion is that the variation is greater than what should be acceptable for the EU as a political community. In some countries, there is a lively political debate about the media's ability to fulfill its societal role, accompanied by robust measures to protect and support editorial media. In other countries, the media appears largely left alone, with little awareness about media diversity and other indicators of the media's function in society.
In a final category, there is a deliberate dismantling of media deemed troublesome by authorities. We will revisit political challenges and opportunities at the end of this report.

6.3.3. The ability and willingness to innovate and adapt

IIt is not always easy to draw a clear line between external and internal factors. When competition from social networks causes a decline in much of editorial media's advertising revenue, it originates from what must be considered an external factor. However, the ability to address this challenge is largely an internal matter.

To what extent are European editorial media engaging in innovation that adequately addresses the strategic challenges they face? The answer to this question comes down to subjective judgment. What some may consider sufficient, others might deem far too little. Based on the available studies discussed in this report, in addition to insights from each EU country, and in comparison to what is recommended in other industries, there is much to suggest that the pace of innovation in established media is far too low. It appears that the financial situation for a large number of media houses is so weak that they simply cannot afford to engage in innovation efforts. Of course, there may be other reasons for their lack of activity.
At the same time, there appears to be significant variation. In-

dustry organizations tend to highlight those who drive the most innovation, which can present a somewhat skewed view of industry's situation as a whole.

A prime example of a fundamental and essential business model change is seen in Norway and Sweden, where building a digital subscription market has, to some extent, offset the declining advertising revenue. In most other EU countries, there remains a low willingness to pay for digital journalism.

It's striking when media researchers from two of the EU's most vulnerable countries, based on the studied parameters, indicate that a significant portion of traditional media companies and journalists in their countries do not view critical journalism against their governments as their duty. It is also notable that essential critical journalism in these vulnerable countries seems to be carried out mostly by quite small journalistic start-ups rather than by traditional media.

6.3.4. Lack of trust

Editorial media are continuously enveloped in criticism and debate. Examples include claims that they avoid covering topics they should cover or that they cover issues that are not important to anyone. They may be criticized for being too negative, that they overdramatize, or that their coverage is unbalanced. This type of criticism is, in most cases, positive, because it shows that the audience is aware, critical of sources, and engaged.

However, there are two phenomena that threaten the very foundation of the editorial media's ability to function as intended. In chapter one we took a closer look at the phenomenon of knowledge resistance. In short, this involves people, under certain conditions, ceasing to relate to facts—sometimes against their better judgment. The second phenomenon concerns the declining trust in editorial media. These two phenomena are also, to some extent, interconnected. The media can and should endure continuous debate about the work they do, but they cannot function if trust in them becomes sufficiently low or if a significant portion of the population stops relating to facts and knowledge.

Therefore, in our view, it is critically important that editorial media first make an effort to understand the driving forces behind knowledge resistance and declining trust, and then determine what they can do to address these issues. Strengthening user trust is essential and the mother of all improvement initiatives.

6.3.5. Competing forces

When we collect all the different threads in this analysis we must take into account that several different forces pull people and societies in different directions. Which forces "win" depends on the predisposition of the population and the nature of the relationship with, and trust in, the various forces at play.

Our starting point has always been that we believe people must have access to relevant, critical, and independent information about the society to which they belong to form their own opinions and actively participate in democracy. But this presupposes that such information (read: journalism) is readily available, that the information is being used, and that there is enough trust in this information to dare to use it.

It is unlikely that most supporters of extreme political forces do so because they want to weaken democracy; in some cases, the opposite may be true. Support for liberal democracy likely takes a backseat in people's minds to priorities such as security, personal finances, children's upbringing, and so on.

That said, there are reasons to be concerned about engagement when the deconstruction of democratic institutions starts to happen in practice. How is the majority's engagement when courts are undermined, when LGBTQ rights are significantly reduced, or when media are punished if they do not cheer for the government? Or, for that matter, if an outgoing president encourages people to storm a government building to obstruct the peaceful transition of power?

We have titled this section of the analysis "Possible conclusions" – and this choice is intentional. The datasets underlying our analysis are largely qualitative. While guidelines were provided on how scoring or risk assessments should be conducted, the evaluations still heavily rely on subjective judgment.

The data in focus was collected from the 27 EU countries, and a few additional countries. For the Democracy Index and the Press Freedom Index, the United Kingdom and Norway were included, and in the Media Pluralism Monitor, five candidate countries were added. Thus, approximately 30 countries in Europe have been assessed. The differences between the various countries, and sometimes even within each individual country, are relatively large. The combination of these factors, along with the difficulty of proving causality, means that it is practically impossible to prove and that the conclusions cannot be considered more than assumptions based on a reasonable interpretation of the data and interviews. When we suggest likely conclusions, these are based on assumptions about what applies to most of the countries referenced, and to a lesser extent – or not at all – to the remaining countries.

6.4. Our point-by-point summary of possible conclusions

- Editorial media have likely lost influence among citizens in the EU over the past 15 years, leading to a weakened role in shaping societal development.

- This seems to be particularly true among young people, socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, and people in rural areas.

- Trust in editorial media has weakened in the EU in recent years.

- It is very difficult to determine the exact impact this has had on the weakening of liberal democracies in Europe and the rise of illiberal forces, and the experts we interviewed have varying opinions. However, it seems likely that it has had some impact, particularly in areas with a combination of latent social/political unrest and a weak editorial media presence.

- Some of the strongest traditional, independent media have the capacity and willingness to innovate, enabling them to likely maintain, and perhaps strengthen, their role and contribution to societal development with their communities.

- Another significant part of the traditional media landscape appears so weakened that it is unlikely to have the resources needed for recovery.

- Few, if any, traditional editorial media can expect to regain the societal role they held before the internet. Even if some strengthen significantly in key areas, they are unlikely to regain the agenda-setting "monopoly" they once held in the pre-internet era.

- A crucial factor for the development of the editorial function in European societies may be the emergence of new editorial media. We see promising examples of new ventures – often hyperlocal or based on new formats and ideas – that emphasize strong user interaction and flexible formats such as text, audio, or video, as key components.

- There is still strong potential in the concept of editorial media as defenders of liberal democracies, provided they can successfully redefine and reposition themselves. Achieving this will require collaboration among media outlets, media owners, and authorities.

These are topics we will examine further in Part 2 of this report.
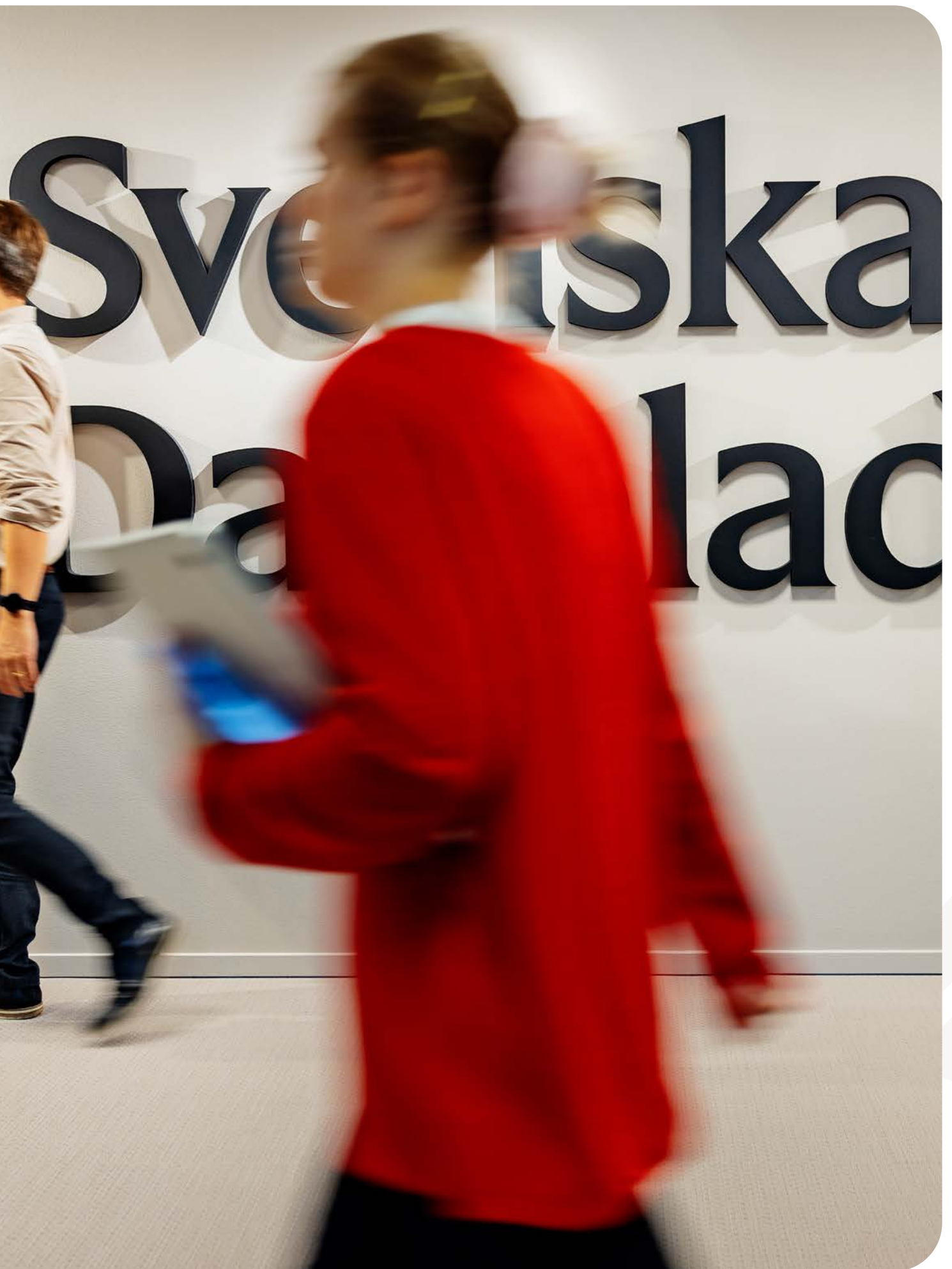
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Chapter summary

- In this section, we discuss four prerequisites that we believe must be in place for editorial media to regain a strong ability to defend liberal democracies. Three of them must be addressed by the media themselves, while the fourth involves political support.

- We believe that a stronger focus on understanding and improving trust in the media, along with a much greater emphasis on innovation, are the most important factors for strengthening media's position.

- We discuss eight cases stemming from both legacy media and start-ups. A defining feature of many is their rethinking of focus topics and their extensive efforts to improve communication with their users.

- Regarding regulatory conditions, we emphasize that political authorities must help remove obstacles that hinder the financing of the editorial mission in society. It is crucial to ensure that digital regulations, motivated by the need to rein in the tech giants, do not inflict collateral damage on editorial media.

7. Specific conditions in the relationship between the media and citizens that are crucial for the media's impact on democracy

The ambition in this section is to explore what can help strengthen editorial media in their role as active contributors to liberal democracies. We do this by introducing four prerequisites we see as necessary and drawing inspiration from eight concrete cases. In the final chapter, we assess the political framework conditions that we believe are needed for success.

In this part of the analysis, we discuss four fundamental prerequisites that we believe must be present for editorial media to have a substantial impact on the level of democracy. Only the media can address the first three conditions: relevance/trust, reach, and innovation, while political authorities must remove obstacles and ensure that media has the right conditions to succeed. This is why the first three points on our four-point list focus on the media themselves, while the fourth addresses the role of decision-makers in supporting the success of this massive transformation:

1. Producing credible and relevant content:
Editorial media must produce relevant, engaging, and high-quality content that builds trust. They need to demonstrate, in practice, the value of free, editorial media. Building greater trust by enhancing relevance for users, among other things, is a fundamental prerequisite for all other necessary improvements.

2. Ensuring reach:
The content must reach people, both physically and mentally. The greatest challenge is strengthening the relationship with young people. However, a significant portion of the media also face substantial challenges in reaching socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, regardless of age, who do not perceive the editorial media as relevant. Good content is useless if it is not consumed.

3. Innovation:
Editorial media must pursue greater innovation, including so-called radical innovation, especially given the rise of AI. They need a deeper, more fundamental understanding of their po-

tential audience, with the ambition to adapt to the changing media landscape and remain relevant.

4. Regulatory framework to protect editorial media:
There is a need for policies that support free editorial media. This includes ensuring media freedom, including the protection of journalists and editorial institutions from attacks, threats, and unacceptable interference. This also involves measures that incentivize both editorial start-ups and innovation within established media. Within the framework of this analysis, we focus on what is required at the EU level. This mostly involves removing obstacles and ensuring that digital market regulations do not unintentionally impact editorial media.

Further in chapter 7, we take a closer look at our four proposed prerequisites for a greater democratic contribution from editorial media. Regarding the first three prerequisites, we present specific editorial initiatives. The fourth and final point, "Regulatory framework to protect editorial media", will be covered under "Regulatory conditions" in chapter 8.

The four prerequisites for a strengthened democratic contribution constitute a model. When evaluating the category to which specific innovations belong, it quickly becomes apparent that most exhibit characteristics of multiple prerequisites. We mostly view this as a strength in the cases discussed.

7.1. Producing credible and relevant content

7.1.1. Insights from Schibsted's study on drivers of media trust

A unique Schibsted Media study highlights four key drivers of media trust, offering insights that are vital for sustaining trust and revenue in today's fragmented information landscape. The study shows links between trust, use, and willingness to pay, and stresses the importance of personal relevance.

Surveying 3,000 media users in Sweden and Norway using representative national panels, the Schibsted study, "Drivers of Media Trust" (2024), aimed to understand the drivers influencing trust in editorial media.

The four key drivers identified are:

1. **Credibility of process**
   Trust in how the content is created and in the people behind it.

2. **Credibility of content**
   The perceived reliability and accuracy of the information.

3. **Personal relevance**
   The degree to which users find the content useful and aligned with their needs.

4. **Selectivity**
   The choice of topics and facts covered (or omitted) by media outlets.

The study also examined how trust affects both usage of media and willingness to pay for content. Notably, the factors driving trust do not always correlate with those that drive usage. For instance, while attributes like "accountable editor" foster trust, it seems to have little impact on how frequently users want to engage with certain media. Conversely, "user-friendliness", which strongly influences media usage, appears less important for trust. These findings underscore the need for media companies to focus on different aspects depending on their goals—whether it be fostering trust or encouraging usage.

The link between trust and willingness to pay is more obvious: users who trust a media outlet are more likely to pay for its content. This highlights the importance of maintaining and evolving trust as a key strategy for securing user revenue.

Personal relevance stands out as a critical driver in our study, with a high impact on both trust, use, and willingness to pay. Interestingly, our study highlights how "content that aligns with my worldview" seems to drive trust, and especially among consumers aged 50 and above. This finding may not be surprising for an age group often associated with filter bubbles and polarization, but it is one that media companies must explore with caution. Schibsted's media strategy has long prioritized personal relevance, not least through algorithmic personalization of editorial content. However, we caution against relying solely on aligning with user perspectives, as this could undermine the broader social function of editorial media. Maintaining a balance between personalized content and coverage of shared, major stories is crucial to the role of editorial media in fostering a common understanding of current events.

On the topic of personal relevance – especially concerning young news consumers – the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2024 showed a growing audience interest in partisan commentators, influencers, and young news creators on social networks. The report describes how, in France, mainstream media faces challenges on social platforms from young news influencers, with particular emphasis on Hugo Travers (known online as Hugo Décrypte). With 2.6 million subscribers on YouTube and 5.7 million on TikTok, the 27-year-old has become a major news source for young French people, receiving more mentions than Le Monde, Le Figaro, and Liberation combined, according to the Reuters Institute study. Understanding how profiles like Travers' maintain relevance with their audiences will provide key insights for editorial media – if only to understand their new playing field.

Of all drivers, personal relevance stands out as important for trust, usage and willingness to pay

Factors ranked by impact on trust (#1 strongest impact	Impact trust	Impact usage	Impact willingness to pay
1. Credibility of process	1	8	3
2. Credibility of content	2	6	1
3. Personal relevance	3	1	2
4. Selectivity	4	4	4
5. Ethics	5	10	5
6. Societal role	6	11	6
7. Independence	7	9	7
8. Format	8	2	8
9. Diversity	9	5	9
10. Inspiration	10	3	10
11. Fame	11	7	11

Top 3 impact

Bottom 3 impact

'Personal relevance' is the only strong (top 3) driver of both trust and usage.

'Credibility of process' is the most important factor for building trust, and one of the most important for willingness to pay - while unimportant for usage.

'Inspiration' on the other hand is a strong driving factor for usage but unimportant for trust and willingness to pay.
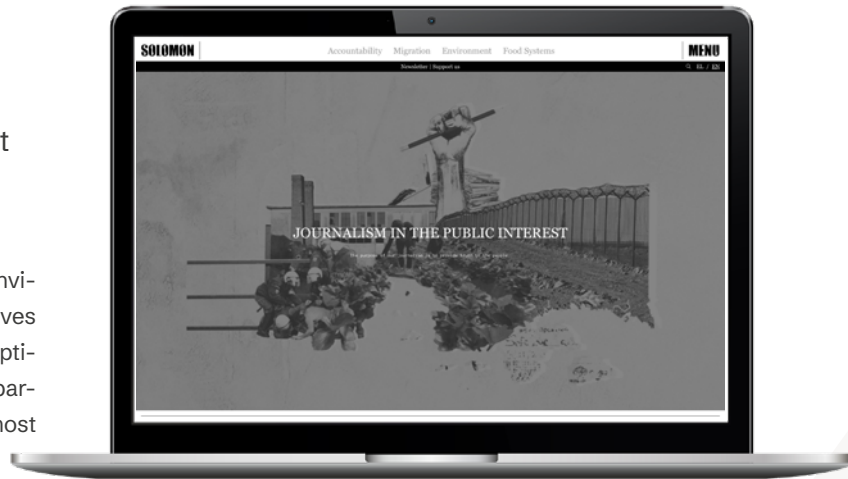
Two challengers
in the Greek
media market

Solomon[34] is an independent investigative outlet, established in 2015, around the same time as two or three other similar independent journalistic initiatives in Greece.

Focusing on transparency and accountability, migration, environment, and food systems, Solomon is one of the initiatives that Professor Lambrini Papadopoulou highlighted with optimism in chapter 4.3.6. What makes these new initiatives particularly interesting is their emergence in one of the EU's most challenging countries for independent journalism. Greece also has the lowest public trust in the media among EU countries.

We met Danai Maragoudaki, journalist at Solomon in chapter 4.3.6., where she explained what she believes is the history behind the challenging media situation in Greece. She notes that Greek oligarchs were poised to take over key parts of the Greek media industry after it was severely weakened by the financial crisis several years ago. However, this shift also opened up space for new ventures, she explains.

"The oligarchs and other major owners of Greek media use their outlets to promote their own private interests and to attack their competitors. It is known in Greek newsrooms that the media you work for will be serving someone's interests. So, no matter what you write, it has to be in favor of some party and negative towards their opponents. The journalists practice self-censorship - everyone has to adhere to this," says Maragoudaki.

The economic crisis in Greece led to significant political changes. The New Democracy party took power in 2019 and was re-elected last year. Maragoudaki says that this government is supported by four private TV channels and a public service channel, among others, and there is little to no critical journalism against the government.

This story has led Greece to become the EU country with the lowest trust in the media, and it also forms the backdrop for the establishment of several independent media outlets in 2015-2016. Solomon is one of these, established in 2015.

"We publish relatively infrequently—1-2 times a month—and use social networks, Facebook, Instagram and X(Twitter) and newsletters to distribute our content. This results in a limited audience, making it challenging to keep our own website active."

Maragoudaki shares that Solomon is financed by the users, preferably via regular monthly contributions, and that they do not publish ads as a matter of principle because they believe this could compromise their independence.

"However, the most important source of income remains grants from various funds, such as the European Journalism Fund, organizations, and charitable foundations. These small, independent startups are financially weak and have relatively little influence. At the same time, they are behind some of the biggest revelations in Greece in recent years, including the Greek surveillance scandal (revealed by inside story)[35], which involved the illegal surveillance of numerous public figures."

What do you think is the most important step for these small, independent Greek media outlets to grow in size and strength?

"I will give you both a personal and professional answer.… I believe the only ones who can effectively contribute to such development are the readers. The hope is that they will take their share of the responsibility, both by recognizing that independent journalism costs money and being willing to pay for it, and by speaking positively about the importance of the kind of journalism we produce", says Danai Maragoudaki, journalist in Solomon.

Danai Maragoudaki, journalist at Solomon

FYI News (https://fyi.news/) is another challenger in the Greek media landscape. Founded in December 2022 by CEO Irodion Savvakis, the platform aims to connect with an audience often overlooked by traditional news outlets.

What was your motivation for starting FYI News?

"I am a news junkie, with a background in political science and public policy, and I have always been frustrated when meeting people who aren't following any news at all. Over time, I realized that many of these people are actually socially engaged individuals – they just don't want to consume news from traditional news providers. This large group, ranging from around 18 to 45 years old, is the group we wanted to appeal to. The team as a whole is also motivated by our collective frustrations with Greek journalism, which tends to be overly polarized. There's no middle ground."

After a year-and-a-half, fyi.news has grown to 14 employees, and Savvakis explains that they remain true to their concept. Rather than chasing breaking news, the team focuses on curated, fact-checked news.

"We give them their daily 5 – the five news stories they need to know to stay informed and be an engaged part of society, and we do this in a user-friendly way. Social media are our primary channels, with Instagram and TikTok being our primary channels. Our ambition is to become the leading news source for our target groups."

The founder explains that they organize their content in the categories 1) General News (Politics & Society), 2) Science & Technology, 3) Economy & Business, 4) Culture, and 5) People (interviews, and soon, podcasts).

"On weekends, we offer explainers – in-depth explorations of topics that have come up during the week. For example, a "lexicon" clarifying the key players and conflicts in the Middle East. We use images, illustrations, and video interviews to make our content as accessible and engaging as possible for users.

Are there any particular socioeconomic characteristics of your target audience? For example, is fyi.news a service for the highly educated?

"No, we are focused on and committed to making all our content accessible and understandable for everyone – no one should be excluded. The only common trait of our users is that
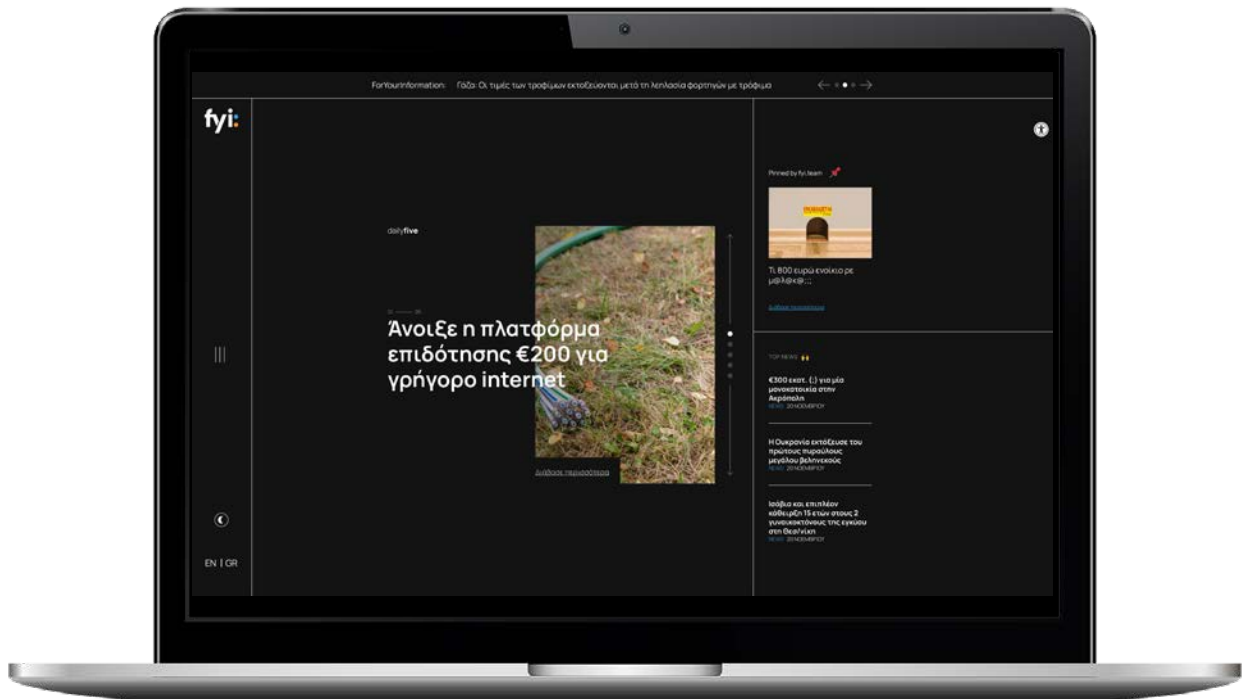
they have a mobile phone, and almost everyone has that", says Savvakis.

He emphasizes their significant investment in technology to optimize the user experience on fyi.news and underscores the importance of striking the right tone of voice.

"We aim for content that is easy to understand, presented in a friendly and often humorous style. However, accuracy is our priority. That's why we invest time and resources on fact-checking, and we would rather be correct, than first to report, explains Irodion Savvakis, CEO of the Greek news challenger fyi.news."


Irodion Savvakis, CEO, FYI News

"We've got you

The Belgium newspaper De Standaard's quest to be on the side of its readers

"The discussion started in our newsroom about two years ago. The news was all about war, inflation, the energy crisis, migration, and the threat to democracy, and we realized that in the midst of these multiple crises, we rarely broke away from negative newsframes. We had to acknowledge that we were good at describing and analyzing the threats, at pointing out all the dangers and the failures. But where in this gloomy world do we leave our reader? Is there a way to be on the side of the reader in her/his attempt first of all to make better sense of it all, to equip the reader to navigate the unsettled world and to deal with the practical and emotional fall-out? Could journalism, while not forsaking its truth speaking, also be a shelter?"

This is what Karel Verhoeven, Editor-in-Chief at De Standaard since 2010, says. De Standaard is a 106-year-old Dutch-language newspaper of record based in Brussels, politically centered, primarily focused on politics, economy, and culture. Verhoeven explains the newspaper's initiative.

"One afternoon early in the fall of 2023, we gathered with the heads of the newspaper sections for a lengthy seminar on how to invigorate our reporting. We came up with the slogan "We've got your back". This should define how we relate to our readers, we said. We're at your side. We'll first of all uncover the most important stories and facts that need to be brought to light. But we'll also help you to understand the world, and we'll find out what you can do, how we can act, and how some of the problems could be resolved. And we also wanted to listen better. Many of our readers are experts, as teachers, lawyers, nurses, politicians, artists, administrators. How could we tap into this collective wisdom and knowledge? So we built a new initiative that allows for readers to engage with other readers in a constructive way. Central to this endeavor is the quest for practical solutions to longstanding issues about which regular politics are out of breath, about which are too divided, or stuck in stereotypical debates."
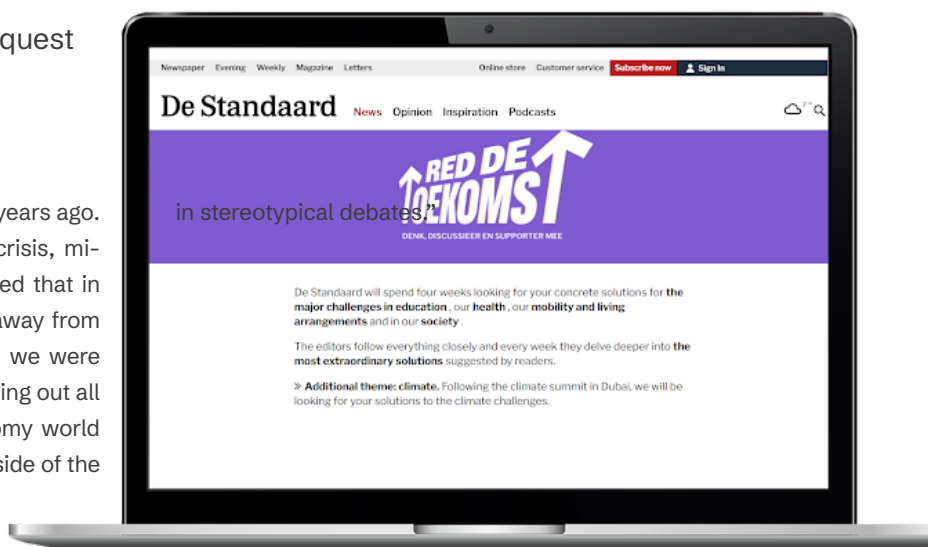
"In this tool, we launch, during five consecutive weeks, one debate per day, and support this debate with journalism. Then it is up to the readers to take up the debate, launch solutions, seek approval, discuss amongst themselves, and favor some of the solutions above other proposals. Every day we publish journalism in some form of a solution, and at the end of the week we select some of the more remarkable suggestions and publish them to all readers."

De Standaard launched this with a national advertising campaign in November 2023. We were then seven months away from the June 9, 2024 general elections for the regional, federal and European parliaments. They invited their readers to discuss topics like education, health, mobility, societal tensions, and climate. To ensure a respectful, coherent, and interactive discussion and organize the debate, the newspaper is using a newly developed digital, AI-based tool.

"To give you an idea of the engagement generated through the tool we use: we have had 3,500 readers who have submitted suggestions for specific solution-oriented news stories.

r back"

Karel Verhoeven, editor-in-chief at De Standaard

This has created reactions and engagement from 89,000 others, either in the form of a short comment or a vote. We are very pleased with that, Verhoeven says. DeStandaard reaches 400,000 readers on a daily basis."

The professional journalistic discussions about more solution-oriented journalism usually revolve around the role and credibility of journalism. One concern is that solution-oriented journalism should not stand in the way of the honest and un-varnished portrayal of reality as it truly is.

Verhoeven believes that there are no contradictions in this.

"Of course, you can't write daily about the war and bloodshed in Gaza in terms of what the solution could be of what readers themselves can contribute. But readers are at a loss, first of all in how to truly understand the bitterness of the conflict. One of the ways to do 'We've Got Your Back' is to make a podcast series on the history of the conflict, so that you tend to have a real profound insight into the politics and emotions that are at play both in Israel and in the West Bank and in Gaza. And this is a way of helping readers to deal with the world."

Verhoven says that politics in Belgium is stuck in the trenches of a linguistically and ideologically divided nation. Regional and federal politics are often at odds, and the squabbles of party politics paralyze governments.

"The initiative De Standaard undertook, was an attempt to free the discussion on important issues from this stalemate and bring about a positive political vibe in the face of three elections - regional election, federal and European. The polls indicated that in Flanders, the far right was on the rise and had a good chance of winning the elections and coming out as first party with close to 30 percent of the vote. This chilling prospect dominated the campaign from early on", he says.

A prominent survey conducted by De Standaard early in the campaign, in collaboration with a public broadcaster and two universities, indicated a deep mistrust in democracy.

"Only one percent of Flemish people think that democracy is functioning 'very well' in Flanders. One percent. A quarter of the population thinks democracy functions 'reasonably well'. That's really problematic and one of the reasons we launched the "Save the Future" campaign in November 2023. We selected five different themes and invited readers to suggest solutions - and they really did. They brought us to more original stories which were more solution driven, asked interesting questions and came with interesting reflections. And - this stories was very intensely read", says Karel Verhoeven at De Standaard.

Exploring news fu

39 percent of media consumers now report that they sometimes or often avoid the news, with countries like Brazil, Spain, Germany, and Finland showing significant increases compared to previous years.

In Sweden[36], 35 percent of people avoid the news due to its negative tone, with young people and women, in particular, avoiding the news as they feel that the content negatively affects them[37].

People with relatively lower cultural and economic capital are significantly more likely to avoid news, suggesting a link between news avoidance and social inequalities[38].

What can editorial media companies do about this? We turned to Agnes Stenbom, Head of IN/LAB and Trust initiatives at Schibsted, to learn more about these innovative programs. On IN/LAB's website, the trio that forms the core of IN/LAB define themselves as a "small team on a big mission." This is no exaggeration.

IN/LAB is just one of several big missions Agnes is involved in. She is also an industrial PhD candidate in AI and Journalism at KTH Royal Institute of Technology, and co-founder of the Nordic AI Journalism network consisting of 500 Nordic media professionals for shared explorations. Here, she tells the IN/LAB story in her own words:

A dedicated lab for inclusive exploration

IN/LAB, a joint initiative by Schibsted Media and the Tinius Trust, addresses issues related to low-to-no news consumption and trust. We prefer the term "news outsiders" over "news avoiders," recognizing that systemic factors, not just individual choices, contribute to disengagement. Since 2022, our work has focused on groups who find themselves and their needs overlooked in the mainstream news narrative and/or product offering. IN/LAB navigates news futures by listening to these communities and identifying solutions to make news more relevant, accessible, and representative – all with the aim of

supporting newsrooms to meet the needs of future consumers.

Co-creation is central to our work, involving people aged 15 to 30, who are often critical to how news media serves them. We've partnered with youth centers, tech hubs, and local influencers, working directly with target groups to imagine future news experiences.

Our co-creation outputs are speculative prototypes that highlight multiple possible futures for the media industry. Examples include a news service that adjusts sentiment in real-time and a chatbot that helps users manage emotionally challenging news. Artificial intelligence is often a key element in these imagined futures.

News as music: One possible future?

In our News Changemaker program, ten young innovators aged 15 to 18 worked with us to identify challenges and prototype solutions. One key insight was that traditional news formats, like long, text-heavy articles, don't always resonate with younger audiences. Our collaborators asked a straightforward question: what if news was shared through music?

In partnership with Aftonbladet, we explored this idea by using generative AI to convert written news into music, including rap songs and melodies. We live-tested an experimental feature and received positive feedback, particularly from younger users.

Is news as music the future? We don't know, but it is a possibility that media companies need to consider as they strive to engage future generations. As suggested by Kleis Nielsen et al., exploring non-traditional formats offers a chance to meet audiences where they are—culturally and technologically.

Personal reflections

After roughly two years of IN/LAB explorations, I find that a few key tensions keep resurfacing in our conversations about what journalism could and should be. Below are three areas where I believe there to be a considerable gap between the preferences and attitudes of our target group – young people with criticism about how media functions today – and the logic of traditional media companies.

Schibsted
36 Westlund, O (2024) Sweden, in Reuters Institute digital news report 2024
37 Andersson, U. (2024) Nyhetsundvikande, Betalväggar Och (O)Partiska Medier, SOM-Institutet
38 Lindell, J. and Mikkelsen Bage, E. (2022) Disconnecting from digital news: News avoidance and the ignored role of social class, Journalism
39 Ungdomsbarometern (2024).The Generation Report 2024: Swedish Youth

utures at IN/LAB

Agnes Stenbom, Head of IN/LAB and Trust initiatives at Schibsted

Wanting clarity in our mission

People in journalism often describe themselves as serving a democratic function. But to the young people I meet through IN/LAB, "democratic" means that everybody gets to have a say. Again and again, I hear our collaborators call for the public to be allowed to co-shape the news flow, with ideas not far from a "people's court" deciding what is and isn't trustworthy.

Our industry seems to take for granted that journalism speaks for itself; that the institution is self-explanatory and our working methods crystal clear to (and appreciated by!) the public. In my experience, that is not the case.

Questioning the idea of consequence neutrality

With a number of parallel global crises shaping their upbringing, Gen Z (born 1996-2010) are said to be more health and security-seeking than previous generations, and they put much greater emphasis on the individuals' responsibility to contribute to a more sustainable and just society[39]. With this as background, it is not surprising that many of our collaborators express concern about journalists not taking into account the consequences of publication, such as who it gains or hurts, or how it makes people feel. To a generation seeking security, mental health and contributions to a "better" world, this does not seem to find much relevance.

Assuming and trusting AI growth

Many of our collaborators express optimism regarding development in AI. They expect digital infrastructures like large language models to help them make sense of the sea of information that floods their lives. They talk about technology as neutral and journalists as biased. What if clarity in our mission could help instill the same degree of trust in human processes?

Overall, I believe we must take seriously the future audience's greater need to feel seen and be given agency. Gen Z is growing into adulthood during a time when issues related to identity and self-expression have shaped much of public discourse, and they have come to appreciate that there is value in their point of view.

Further exploring these tensions will be critical for publishers seeking relevance in the coming century. Safeguarding journalism and its function in democracies cannot solely rely on upholding traditions, but should also encompass daring to reconsider our ways of producing and disseminating news.

Educational ne young people N

News Decoder[40] is a nine-year-old program for high school students worldwide. It is run by the French non-profit organization Nouvelles-Découvertes, whose mission is to "inform young people about international relations with tolerance, objectivity and broad vision", as they describe themselves.

News Decoder has an ongoing partnership with between 17 and 23 high schools, in addition to running a professional journalistic service aimed at young users, supported by 50 affiliated journalists from around the world. They further describe the WHAT as: "Our educational services include mentoring by professional journalists, training workshops in pitching and interviewing, webinars on global issues, e-learning courses and handbooks on reporting and writing."

And the WHY: "By supporting young people to think like journalists – interrogating information sources, considering all sides of an argument and examining context and precedent – we help them to become critical-thinking, responsible media consumers and creators."

Marcy Burstiner is editorial news director of News Decoder, after having been a journalism teacher for many years, and before that, a practicing journalist. She explains how they work with the students.

"We help students get involved in journalistic projects, find stories, usually based on their own local environment, and

encourage them to connect this to what is happening in other countries and continents. The aim is to learn to see many different perspectives – different ways of looking at things."

News Decoder is a small organization with a team of eight people located in different countries across Europe. The schools they collaborate with are situated in both Europe and Africa, and currently, they also have partnerships with 36 schools in India as part of an editorial climate project.

What is it that you primarily aim to achieve?

"We can say that we have a dual mission: to teach/encourage global perspectives in journalism by working with young people and helping them build relationships with each other across borders and continents. Additionally, we have a news service with 50 journalists from various parts of the world who write for us, and we publish this content with a young audience in mind. These are topics that otherwise don't receive much attention, especially issues with cross-border implications and themes that focus on truly large and complex questions, which we break down and present in a way that makes them under-

ws service for
News Decoder

standable for young people. These stories from professional journalists are presented in the same environment as the stories created by the students", says Marcy Burstiner.

She is critical of much of today's journalism.

"We know that many young people "are moving away from journalism" – we are trying to find a way to bring them back by engaging them. As a journalist, I have always believed that you must write as if the audience knows nothing beforehand. I think many newsrooms are so focused on what they perceive as their core readers that they ignore those who fall outside this group, especially young people. Many young people don't find these stories engaging. Large parts of the press are telling the same stories in almost the same way – and then we wonder why young people are not paying attention...."

Burstiner explains that they hold the student-produced journalism to the same standards of accuracy as the journalism from News Decoder's professional journalists. She believes this is important, in part to give students a fundamental understanding of journalism.

Don't young people around the world know what journalism is?

"No, they don't. They haven't grown up with newspapers, and they don't know that credible journalists work according to ethical codes. They don't know that many journalists are highly educated and have undergone specialized training in journalism. That's precisely why we emphasize the fundamental qualities that turn information into journalism in our projects with young people. We teach them, among other things, why it's important to verify the information they want to use", says News Decoders Editorial News Director Marcy Burstiner.

Marcy Burstiner, editorial news director of News Decoder

"TED talk meets cabaret... It's a little bit of magic"

This is how Editor-in-chief, Lea Korsgaard, describes Zetlands live shows. On their website we read: "Zetland[41] is a digital publisher dedicated to journalism as a force for good. Guided by our members, we fight for a public conversation motivated by insight and curiosity. We reject the present-day cynicism and polarization that paint the world in black and white, that undermine our ability to overcome important challenges together."

"I'm a strong believer in fair and objective journalism, but I'm not a strong believer in the neutral voice. It doesn't exist. I want a human to tell the story in a tone of voice that's friendly and relaxed and funny also. So, we were like, okay, there's a need out there. Maybe we should actually, you know, solve that problem."

This is how Lea Korsgaard, Editor-in-Chief of Zetland and one of its three founders, describes the thought process behind the establishment of this new publication. She explains how the initial ideas formed while she was working as a journalist at the Danish newspaper Politiken, around 2010.

"And I could just see that the kind of journalism that I really love deeply, the in-depth stories, the narrated stories, the feature writing kind of journalism, where you can really sense there's a person with an intention behind the story - that kind of genre is going to die before I die. Right? Because at that point, that genre was closely linked to paper, and to paper only."

She reflects on how strange it is to think that, at that time—at least in Denmark—digital journalism mostly consisted of entertainment.

"So, that was the initial push. I was like... I need to help this industry reinvent itself. Otherwise, I'm not going to have a job when I'm old. And really, the kind of genre that I like, and the journalism that I think is fundamental in order to really get context, get perspective, really understand what's going on in society, that will die and everything will become super short breaking news, dumbing down the conversation, not enhancing the public conversation."

Zetland can be described as a radical innovation within the field of publishing and journalism. The risk was high, and the founders had to change their strategy multiple times to achieve their goals. Today, Zetland has 40,000 members, half of them under 35 years old, and the publishing house has approximately 60 employees.

Korsgaard says that Zetland is not a publisher only for intellectuals, and highlights that people in "ordinary" professions, such as nurses and police officers, are well-represented among their members.

Lea Korsgaard explains how journalism's primary task used to be delivering information to people that they otherwise would not have access to. Now, this role has changed:

"People who used our nonfiction stories say to us, 'I'm standing on this mountain of information, but I need context. I need an explanation on why the information is important. I'm drowning.' They also say, 'I'm sick and tired of everything being a scandal

Lea Korsgaard, editor-in-chief of Zetland

and a sensation. What about stuff that works? I also need hope and solutions."

Zetland operates according to six principles. One of these principles, "We explain without simplifying," focuses on giving users the opportunity to understand a topic from the ground up. Another principle is expressed as, "We fight cynicism and look for solutions."

Solution-oriented journalism is emerging as a clear trend in Denmark and has also garnered some interest in other countries. At the same time, this approach to journalism is controversial and raises questions about what journalism's role should be.

Zetland is committed to offering its content in the formats that users prefer. Initially, most of their content was based on written communication, but over time, audio has become increasingly dominant. Now, 75% of the Zetland content is consumed through the ears. In addition to delivering daily stories in various formats, personally narrated by Zetland's journalists, and fostering a community with its members, Zetland also regularly organizes events where stories are presented on stage in different ways.

The Editor-in-Chief explains:
"It's a 90 minute show on a theater stage, with 10 to 15 stories told. It merges journalism with theater. So, it's TED talk meets cabaret meets Danish Folk High School tradition. It's a little bit of magic. It could be a jazz band playing development in economics, based on economic curves. It could be me or our journalists telling a story, or one of our members telling a story about being a gangster and sitting in a wheelchair. And there's

always some kind of element of engagement with the audience, you know, that their body, their voices, or something play a part in that. So anyway, people really like that."

Lea Korsgaard is more concerned with the journalistic function in society than with the traditional institutions that have historically produced and disseminated journalism.

"People don't miss journalism, but journalism misses people."

This quote from Lea Korsgaard has been noted in media academia. It is hardly a bold guess to say that not everyone in the industry is equally enthusiastic about such a view, but Korsgaard explains what she means:

"The battle that we must fight is not about preserving the institutions that are now there. It's preserving the mission. And for instance, when you look at France, apparently the most known media in a sense today among young people is a guy called Hugo Décrypte, more known than Le Monde, more known than any other traditional legacy newspaper. And he makes fantastic journalism on a YouTube channel with 25 people around him. That's it. But he is huge and really doing an important job providing people with information. Journalism can look like that. So, it's not about preserving the institutions. It's really about making sure that the job of giving people information that they need to be enlightened is there, says Lea Korsgaard, Editor-in-Chief of Zetland."

AI improves journalism in JP/Politiken

The Danish media group JP/Politiken has gained international attention with its innovative focus on AI-supported journalism. Their AI concept, MAGNA (Monitoring and Assisted Generation of News Artefacts), can assist in many phases of journalistic work, from idea development to headline selection.

The examples below are taken from JP/Politiken's own presentation at the Nordic AI in Media Summit 2024:

The system is a chatbot tailored to journalistic needs, where, for example, during the research phase, you can ask a question like: "How can I find out how many electric cars were sold in Denmark in 2023?" or "Where can I find the annual report for…?".

More advanced research assistance is available if you upload a press release and ask what unanswered questions it contains that could be relevant for a journalist to follow up on. Another feature that can contribute to the idea phase is asking, for example, "What are FC Barcelona's most important highs and lows in the past year?" MAGNA can also offer more specialized services, such as finding the right tone of voice for headlines and similar tasks. So far, the tool is primarily used to improve texts, proofread, shorten articles, and retrieve information from the archives.

Kasper Lindskow is Head of AI at JP/Politikens Media Group, and he explains that their AI journey began as early as 2019.

"The transformation has come in waves over the past 20 years – first from analog to digital, then from web 1.0 to web 2.0, to cloud storage, to the shift from desktop to mobile, and so on. So, in 2019, we believed that the next wave to hit us in the transformation would be AI. A qualitatively new form of digitalization. As a result, we started working with machine learning already back then, but in a different way than what was common. We primarily focused on creating a better news experience that would be more informative, engaging, and relevant to users. We aimed to achieve this with AI systems aligned with our own values, under our full control."

Lindskow explains that the ambitions are changing along the way.

"From the idea that journalists, with the help of AI, should be able to do the job they've always done more efficiently, to now also getting assistance to do new things. In the first 2-3 years, it is about telling stories in various ways and simplifying versioning. In the medium to long term, 3-4 years, AI can take on a larger role in versioning, such as ensuring the right tone in different channels, while journalists can focus on telling the story in a basic format."

What are the key innovative steps that need to be taken for AI to contribute more to the creative part of the journalistic process?

"To enrich journalism, we need to experiment even more. In the long term – which is the truly interesting part – we need to reinvent journalism within a different information ecosystem. But for now, we have no idea what this information ecosystem will look like."

In the media industry, some refer to AI as potentially either the best or the worst thing that has ever happened to journalism. Kasper Lindskow comments:

"In a 5-7 year perspective, there are massive opportunities – both for efficiency and for the enrichment of journalism. The condition is that we manage to do this correctly…. We need to formulate good values and norms, and remain loyal to them. However, even if we do it right, AI could become the worst thing that happens to journalism if the large platform companies that we compete against use AI in a way that puts editorial media under destructive pressure."

What is the biggest mistake we can make?

"The biggest mistake is failing to align AI with our values – journalistic values and our mission. Because this is what makes us unique and defines our role in society."

You work for a media corporation with a very long history. Do you think it's easier to pursue AI initiatives within this type of corporation, or is it easier for a startup?

"It's easier for a startup, and that's why new players might win, but I believe it's right to do it in a legacy media company. We may not be as quick to adapt, but our history helps ensure that we ask the right questions along the way."

In which areas should editorial media collaborate, and where should they compete when it comes to further AI development?

" They should collaborate on value alignment – share knowledge and learn from each other, even while competing. We need to discuss what healthy values for AI are in our type of business, and we must do this together", says Kasper Lindskow - head of AI at JP/Politikens Media Group.

Kasper Lindskow, Head of AI at JP/Politikens Media Group

8.
Regulatory conditions

In an ideal world, there would be no need for any specific political intervention for editorial media. The media would be entirely politically independent, without concern over shifting political trends.

But in such a world, there would be no illiberal politicians more invested in consolidating their own power than in respecting the media's societal and independent role, supporting critical journalism, and maintaining a broad, open space for public discourse. There also would be no gigantic, technology-based companies – many times larger than any media company in the world – abusing their monopoly-like market power to pressure the editorial media both financially and in other ways.

Unfortunately, the world is not ideal, which means there is a need for some regulatory intervention to uphold the most important journalistic principles across Europe. This is why Schibsted supported the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). We did this out of solidarity with our peers in other markets that are in need of such regulations, but also because we believe that it is important to ensure that editorial media in Europe can be free from external influence from governments, owners and social networks.

Fundamental protection
According to the Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM), addressed in Part 1, Fundamental protection is key for upholding media freedom and media pluralism. It includes protection of freedom of expression, and laws and regulations that ensure free access to information. MPM2024 shows a slight increase in the assessed risk for this indicator over the past two years. However, the researchers behind MPM expect lower risk on certain parameters in the coming years, mainly resulting from new legislation, both nationally and at the EU level.

New EU regulations, primarily the European Media Freedom Act and the Directive on Strategic Legal Actions Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), are expected to have positive effects on "Fundamental protection" in the coming years. It's also expected that landmark regulations, such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA), will have a positive impact.

For these new rules to be impactful, they need proper implementation and efficient enforcement in all EEA Member States[42]. This view is shared by many others, such as the Greek media researcher, Associate Professor Lambrini Papadopoulou, in Part 1 of this report. When asked what she expects from EU politicians regarding the safeguarding of editorial media in a country facing significant challenges in democratic development and editorial media conditions, one might have expected proposals for comprehensive new measures from the EU. But her response is clear:

"This is about implementing the laws and regulations they have already adopted. At the moment, there is no need for new rules, but rather to ensure that the existing ones are being followed," Papadopoulou said.

Laws that are not enforced have no significance, and if more laws go unenforced, it becomes a systemic problem. When it becomes a systemic issue, it can undermine the authority and trust in the EU as a political system.

A European democracy shield
This report does not examine which editorial media policies should be addressed at the national level versus those best handled by the EU. However, many EU rules designed for the digital market also apply to the media sector. The EU also increasingly views protecting free and independent media as part of protecting democracy. This was the case with the EMFA and can now be seen in the political priorities of re-elected President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. According to Von der Leyen, the new European Commission will propose a European Democracy Shield to, among other things, "guarantee a reliable information framework". For this, the EU must support an independent press, continue to ensure rules are observed by digital giants, and further encourage media literacy programs. At the time of writing, it is unclear what measures the new EU Commission will take to support an independent press. However, it is crucial to understand that editorial media will play a unique role in society – a role fundamentally distinct from that of platforms.

Editorial media are responsible for producing and financing content that informs, educates, and provides critical analysis of events and issues. Platforms, on the other hand, serve primarily as intermediaries, facilitating the distribution of content but without the same obligations to journalistic integrity and societal oversight. Recognizing and preserving this distinction is essential in regulatory processes, ensuring that editorial

media are not inadvertently harmed by regulations aimed at tech platforms.

Based on this report's findings, and as a contribution to the upcoming discussion on the role of a free and independent press in the European Democracy Shield, we urge regulators to think carefully when introducing new rules to avoid unintentionally hampering editorial media. We see this as a matter that must be addressed at the EU level now.

The mechanisms to prevent unintended harm to editorial media in the process of regulating the digital market include:

Firstly, it is important to target regulations to more clearly address the perceived problems. As an example, the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) include rules that are based on size, dominance and behavior. This kind of risk-based approach is needed, which could also take into consideration elements such as the nature of the businesses and their societal importance.

Secondly, we propose to introduce an "editorial media assessment test", inspired by article 20 in the EMFA:

"1. Any legislative, regulatory or administrative measure taken by a Member State that is liable to affect the operation of media service providers in the internal market shall be duly justified and proportionate. Such measures shall be reasoned, transparent, objective and non-discriminatory."

This test would be a central part of any legislative proposal by the EU Commission and assess the impact of the proposal on free and independent media in Europe. The test would evaluate how the proposal would affect the above-mentioned prerequisites of relevance/trust, reach, and innovation, which are key to sustaining the societal role of media companies.

In addition, we refer to our own Policy Manifesto 2024-2029 that includes concrete measures for protecting a sustainable media sector in Europe.

Thirdly, we wish to highlight the importance of facilitating innovation and fostering engagement to support the emergence of a new generation of editorial media in Europe.

We can safely conclude that the editorial media in Europe is dominated by old, and in some cases very old, actors. Some of them are actively innovating at a relatively high level, while others lag. At the same time, we see new players emerging. To successfully revitalize the strength of the journalistic function in EU countries, it is essential to create conditions that enable both established and emerging players to succeed.

Many EU countries have reduced VAT on editorial products, but only a handful of countries have zero VAT, like Norway. Our experience is that this tax exemption is by far the most effective form of media support, primarily because it makes it possible to offer quality products at a reasonable price, even in small markets. We mention this with full awareness that VAT rates are a matter for member states, not the EU.

Any comprehensive plan to promote European journalism and strengthen liberal democracies should also consider various complementary measures. These could include removing barriers to establishment, and employing tax and fiscal policy instruments, such as payroll tax adjustments, media subsidies, and innovation grants.

In summary, we offer recommendations across three key areas:

1. Ensure that the regulations already adopted are implemented and respected
2. Introduce a "media assessment test" to ensure that digital regulations do not lead to unintended consequences for editorial media, and
3. Support innovation to stimulate a new generation of editorial media services

Ultimately, it is essential for politicians, media owners, and media leaders to collaborate and look for opportunities together. The EU's liberal democracies are foundational to our civilization, values, and security – deeply rooted in a long-standing cultural and historical context in some countries, and a relatively recent achievement in others.

A continued shift away from the principles of liberal democracy is a challenge not only for the countries that lean toward illiberalism but for all of Europe. In this context, ensuring citizens' access to free, independent, relevant, and reliable information is essential for progress. Few initiatives are as aligned with the ambition of the "European Democracy Shield" as this collective effort.