News media in European democracies and beyond: stable structural conditions but notorious deficits

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1. The problem (Introduction)

Not only in times of political or economic crisis, but also during times of prosperity and welfare, news media provide information, give voice to people and attempt, at least, to hold the powerful to account. To what extent and in what quality news media fulfil these fundamental tasks in contemporary democracies of all kinds have been part of the scholarly debate since decades. When scrolling through the theoretical literature, there seems to be (or has been) a general agreement that news media are supportive to democracy and their performance helps to advance and improve democratic values and decision-making processes. However, claims of failing "mainstream media" challenge this assumption, coming in different flavours that range from serious academic critique to aggressive right-wing accusations of bias. This means that there is demand to not only observe, but also monitor the news media's performance towards the achievement of democratic values. Academic and non-academic (NGO) institutions have undertaken this task with high aspirations: to contribute to the improvement of democracy by monitoring the public discourse organised and delivered by (leading) news media. Within this tradition, social science scholars have developed the project "Media for Democracy Monitor" in the first decade of the 2000s and applied it empirically in three waves thereafter. In the following we explain the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this instrument, as well as the most relevant results for EU democracies, which show that news media still fulfil relevant democratic roles.

2. The approach (theory and background)

According to Bertrand (2003), Galtung (1999), and Nordenstreng and Griffin (1999), normative expectations about the media require regular monitoring. The concept of the MDM closely follows Galtung's definition of media monitoring:

> Monitoring is much more than trend watching: To monitor is to understand in order to act in an informed, well-reasoned way. Monitoring is beyond mirroring what happens in the fourth pillar of society (in addition to State, capital and civil society). To monitor the media is to make them transparent, a basic condition for democracy to function. (Galtung 1999: 23)

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As Nordenstreng (2001) suggests, media have influence, media enjoy freedom, media should be responsible and accountable. Accountability in this context refers not only to the output of the media, but also "to the willingness of the media to answer for what they do by their acts of publication, including what they do to society at large, and refers as well to the feasibility of securing accountability where there is unwillingness" (McQuail 2009: 132).

Most monitoring initiatives focus on the media content. However, this broader concept of accountability implies the need to pay special attention at the changing structures of the media, which set the framework for the content and media use (Nordenstreng 1999: 11; Pickard 2020: 9–10).

2.1 Normative expectations in news media

Media structure is monitored in the MDM considering the normative roles that historically have been ascribed to journalism and news media with regard to democracy, especially in the Western context. As Christians *et al.* (2009: 135) summarise, the media must make some "commitments to their own audiences and to many others with whom they have dealings" in order to successfully operate, giving rise to expectations of public service.

The report of the US Hutchins Commission, published in 1947, is considered a milestone in the history of these normative approaches by consolidating the vision that mass communication should contribute to the education of people in public affairs. The report argued for creating better conditions for the operation of a "free and responsible press", seen as a requirement for "the preservation of democracy and perhaps civilization" (The Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947: 106).

This tradition of assigning a role to the media in democracy has generated diverse accounts on which specific responsibilities these companies or their professionals should bear, ranging from classicals such as *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert et al. 1956) to more dynamic models such as Denis McQuail's (2009) roles, which provide an elegant synthesis of normative requirements to journalism. The MDM follows mostly McQuail's account. According to him, news media are expected to play four different roles: monitorial, facilitative, radical and collaborative. The monitorial role refers to "all aspects of the collection, processing, and dissemination of information of all kinds about current and recent events, plus warnings about future developments", which provide the basic points of reference to the people (McQuail 2009: 125). In the facilitative role, journalism should promote debate, participation, and the inclusion of marginalised groups, helping to develop "a shared moral framework for community and society, rather than just looking after individual rights and interests" (McQuail 2009: 126). The radical role "focuses on exposing abuses of power and aims to raise popular consciousness of wrongdoing, inequality, and the potential for change", *i.e.* the media should point out wrongdoings by powerholders and remember that social order could be different (McQuail 2009: 126). The collaborative role refers to the collaboration between the media and the state, for example, during times of crisis – such as the Covid-19 pandemic (McQuail 2009: 127).

The scholarly efforts to underscore the public service mission of the media, especially in journalism, have been followed by several institutions and researchers, especially in the US. Some recent trends highlight investigative journalism as a public good (Hamilton 2016) and non-commercial professional news as the remedy against contemporary mis- and disinformation (Pickard 2020). In common, normative accounts acknowledge that news media bear some duty for safeguarding and harnessing democratic processes, and that a well-functioning media system is an essential component of a thriving liberal democracy.

However, this connection between media and democracy, which assigns to them public roles, is contested. Critics argue that it is Western-centric (Zelizer 2013), draws on specific market conditions of the American journalism from the end of the 19th century (Nerone 2013), and overstates the importance of the political sphere at the expense of the domain of everyday life (Hanitzsch, Vos 2018).

This criticism is legitimate and, to a certain extent, relativises the question on the fulfilment of normative expectations by the news media. At the same time, it does not invalidate the question. Even if these roles are generated in a specific sociocultural environment, even if they rather serve the sustainability of a business model, they continue to be widely used by news organisations and professionals as justification for their service and for the freedoms they are granted with (Kovach, Rosenstiel 2007; Trappel 2011).

Therefore, investigating the normative roles of news media, especially with regard to their contribution to democracy, continues to be a relevant effort. Actually, this is even more necessary as commercial journalism undergoes severe economic crises, and media owners, scholars and activists increasingly request policy intervention to provide public support to the professional production of news.

2.2. Models of democracy and media roles

If the contribution of the media to democracy is to be analysed, it must be clear which concept of democracy this analysis relies upon. The theoretical framework of the MDM considers that there are two major traditions of democracy: the liberal and the republican (Cunningham 2002; Glasser 2009; Held 2006).

Liberal theories of democracy come from the Anglo-American world. This tradition sees democracy as "a system of rule embracing elected 'officers' who undertake to 'represent' the interests and/or views of citizens within the framework of 'the rule of the law'" (Held 2006: 4). For this reason, it is often called "representative democracy", and representation stands for a mechanism to aggregate and express the individual preferences. Schumpeter (1976) illustrates a more radical development of the liberal concept of democracy by arguing that democracy means government *for* the people, but not necessarily *by* the people. In this sense, informed and competent elites elected by the people should take the governance decisions, whereas the role of population is to hold these elites accountable in elections. For this reason, scholars usually characterise liberal models of democracy as "elitist" (Baker 2004).

On the other hand, the republican tradition depicts democracy as "a system of decision-making about public affairs in which citizens are directly involved" (Held 2006: 4). As such, public decisions are not expected to be made exclusively – or independently – by elected officials, but should be an open process of dialogue, debate, and activism, in which as many citizens as possible could and should take part. Such models of democracy expect that speakers with the better arguments will succeed over the others. There are plenty of alternative models of republican democracies. Glasser (2009) suggests characterising three of them: pluralist, civic, and direct. The pluralist one underscores competition among different groups in societies. The civic model argues for democracy as a space of cultivation of different voices and perspectives. Finally, direct democracy rejects any delegation of decision-making resources and expects each citizen to take their part in society. There are many other accounts of republican democracies, such as participatory, deliberative, developmental, and agonistic (Cunningham 2002; Strömbäck 2005; Mouffe 1999). In any of these accounts, expectations on citizens are higher than in liberal models of democracy. That is why Dahlgren (2007: 59) argues that the most characteristic element of republicanism is "its insistence on the active participation of citizens in democratic self-governance. […] Republicanism asserts that democracy requires civic virtues from its citizens".

Both democratic traditions bring their own requirements to the media. In liberal democracies, the role of journalism is to identify and make public the wrongdoings of elected representatives. This way, it contributes to public awareness and raises the chances that elections "reward effective elite response to popular needs" (Baker 2006: 114). Political reporting should be restrained to crucial problems, as people have limited attention and knowledge to follow the daily routine of power holders. This places a considerable burden on journalists: "Journalists cannot talk about every potential problem because their audience would ignore them; it is the job of reporters – in cooperation with political and interest groups – to decide what requires attention and bring it to the public" (Zaller 2003: 121).

In republican democracies, news media face different expectations, well-illustrated by Baker:

> [In complex democracies, the] media should support varying types of discourses – bargaining discourses of the liberal pluralist, discourses aimed at the common good emphasised by republicans, and smaller self-definitional as well as minority cultural discourses especially important to the fairness of the democratic participation of smaller or otherwise marginal groups. (Baker 2006: 119)

Journalism has the obligation not only to inform about crucial issues, "but also to act as a forum for the debate" (Trappel *et al.* 2011: 18). By giving voice to disadvantaged citizens and groups, the media are expected to inspire them to participate in the public discourse, mediating the different, sometimes contradictory, interests in contemporary societies.

The question, then, is how to deal with these different traditions of democracy and the different normative roles of news media derived from them. In the MDM, it is

understood that all these models and roles reflect mostly legitimate, even if sometimes contradictory, expectations in contemporary democracies. As suggested by Bühlmann and colleagues (2012), combining these different models might provide resources to grasp the subtle variations in advanced democracies. Diamond and Morlino (2004) similarly argue that liberal and republican elements of democracies actually complement one another. The liberal element protects the rights of individuals and groups under the law, and the republican element provides a contextualised understanding of the public interest, to which public officials should serve (Diamond, Morlino 2004). Furthermore, both traditions draw upon the same three basic constituents – *freedom*, *equality*, and *accountability* –, and mature democracies should make progress in the direction of these values (Diamond, Morlino 2004: 7). In summary, democracies are understood as political systems with solid institutional support for the progress of three main goals: freedom, equality, and accountability (which in the MDM we decided to simply call "control").

The normative roles discussed above can be related to this triple dimension of contemporary democracies. In the MDM, freedom translates into the mandate for the media to freely impart information, to which McQuail's (2009) monitorial and facilitative roles correspond. Equality refers to the mandate to mediate different interests in an existing society, what reflects the facilitative and the collaborative roles of the media. Control can be translated as the imperative to report wrongdoings by power holders, a demand in the monitorial and in the radical roles (see figure 1).

Figure 1 - Triple mandate of news media to uphold democracy
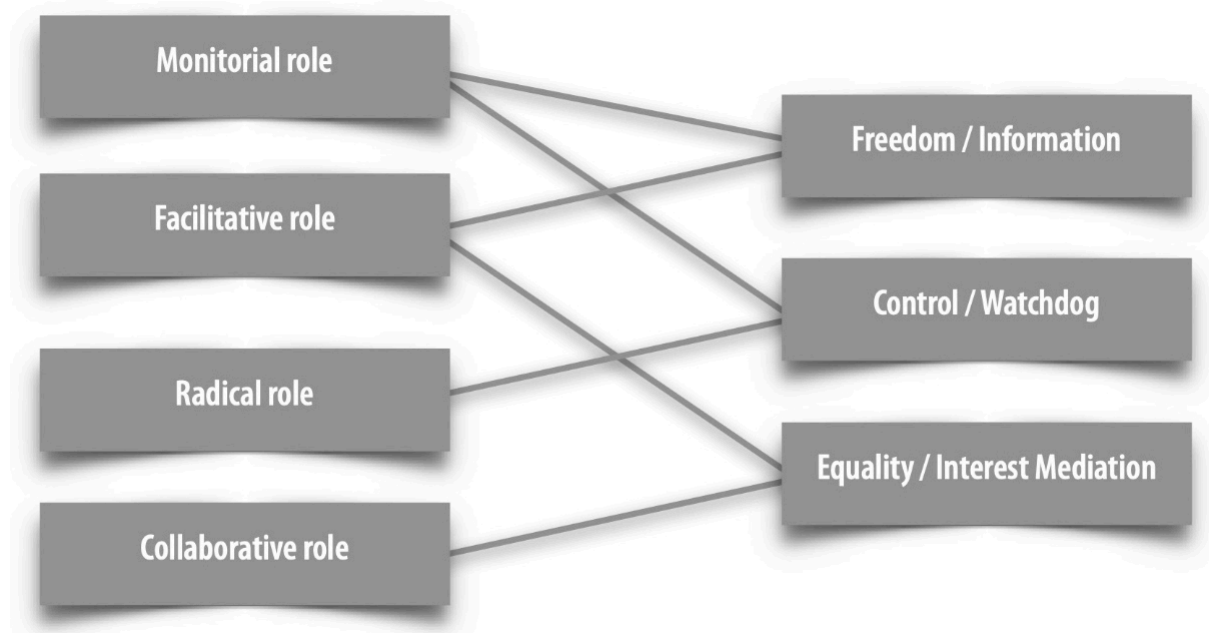
Source: Elaboration of the MDM research team based on theories of democracy and McQuail's (2009) roles of news media. Boxes to the left show the roles assigned to news media, while boxes to the right depict the corresponding three dimensions of democracy. For a detailed explanation, see Tomaz, Trappel 2022: 22-24.

3. The process and methodology (conduct of research)

While the theoretical background of the MDM mostly resembles mature scientific endeavours, its empirical operationalisation has undergone a rather unconventional journey. It started traditionally back in 2006 when the Swiss Science Foundation (SNF) allowed for additional projects within the *National Centres of Competence in Research* (NCCR) framework "Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century". Supported by SNF funds and operated at the premises of the University of Zurich those days, the MDM concept has been developed by much the same team that continued to operate the project over the two decades to follow.

At the time of the project's development, and seen from a Swiss perspective, leading news media were experiencing an economic and editorial heyday before the global financial crisis hit the world economy and the mass media in 2008. Before that crisis, mass media were powerful political actors, digitalisation had not yet hatched digital platforms in the large scale but offered efficiency gains to newsrooms. Within that context, the research proposal argued that only a few media companies respond to formal democratic requirements, while the majority of mass media publishers follow other imperatives, such as commercial considerations, efficiency gains and technological innovation temptations. Given the importance of the mass media for the functioning of modern democracies, the 2006 proposal argued, it would be essential to ask what mass media actually contribute to democratic governance – and where mass media fail to meet these expectations. Clearly following the tradition of normative approaches describe above, the underlying general hypothesis was that democracy works better when mass media contribute more and more relevant services.

In a first research working package, existing monitors and initiatives were screened by the research team, such as the "Freedom of the Press Survey" by Freedom House, the "Media Sustainability Index" by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), the often quoted "State of the News Media Report" by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), the "Press Freedom Index" by Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) and the "World Press Freedom Review" by the International Press Institute (IPI). All those initiatives were useful at the time, but they lacked a theoretical foundation and operationalisation by social science standards. The MDM, thus, strived to fill that gap.

From the outset in 2006, the MDM was designed as international and comparative research project. The initial funding allowed for including five countries: Germany, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal and Switzerland. For a full and comprehensive understanding of national developments, it was essential to refer not only to journalistic and anecdotal evidence (as most other initiatives were based on) but to the scientific work of national teams of researchers in the field. To this end, the Euromedia Research Group[1], founded back in 1982, provided fertile ground for recruiting national research teams.

Scholars from the five participating countries met in November 2007 at Lake Zurich to discuss the set of indicators to be applied and tested in each country for the

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[1] For more information on this group see www.euromediagroup.org

first time. This scholarly debate resulted in 19 indicators organised in dimensions reflecting the triple mandate of the media mentioned earlier, namely *Freedom / Information*, *Equality / Interest Mediation*, and *Control / Watchdog*. The list of indicators grew in the subsequent MDM waves and their final form, which is relevant for the results discussed in this article, will be discussed in detail below. For each indicator, MDM researchers formulated a research question and criteria for empirical observation. Data would come from (1) secondary sources – media surveys or national reports – and (2) interviews with relevant stakeholders, mostly reporters, editors, publishers, union representatives and academics.

Although the MDM was to be considered a qualitative monitoring, its initiators developed a quantitative grading system to facilitate comparison. All indicators have been graded as follows:

- 3 points: when all or almost all criteria are fulfilled;
- 2 points: when the clear majority of criteria or the most important ones are met;
- 1 point: when there is poor fulfilment, such as less than half of the criteria
- 0 point: when no major criteria are met.

The pilot study was completed in November 2008 and published in two corresponding articles in *Communications* in 2009 (d'Haenens *et al.* 2009; Trappel, Maniglio 2009). Subsequently, the Swiss Centre for Studies on the Global Information Society (SwissGIS) invited scholars and professionals to contribute to an edited volume published by Peter Lang (Trappel, Meier 2011). This volume includes not only findings from the first MDM wave, but also texts on the experience of other monitoring initiatives, such as Freedom House (Deutsch Karlekar 2011).

The positive academic responses, but also the rewarding collaboration within and between these research teams inspired the group to extend this first pilot project into a second wave of research, including more countries, with the ambition to improve and strengthen comparative learnings from different countries. Although seed money by the Swiss Science Foundation had dried out by that time, members of the Euromedia Research Group and friends outside this group were so convinced by the concept that they decided to participate in the second wave on their own expenses or looking themselves for national funds.

The national teams from the five initial countries and the newly recruited collaborators from Australia, Austria, Finland, Sweden and the UK gathered in November 2009 on the Goldenberg in Winterthur (Switzerland) for an evaluation and planning workshop, amending the instrument with additional indicators.

One year later, in October 2010, the group of MDM scholars met in Hamburg for what they called the "grading meeting", whereby the teams reported their findings and adapted their grading in the light of the experience of the other countries. In 2011, Nordicom published the findings of this second, extended, MDM wave (Trappel *et al.* 2011).

In 2018, the members of the Euromedia Research Group again addressed the issue of media monitoring in their twice-yearly meetings. They had published a

volume on European media in crisis (Trappel, Steemers, Thomass 2015) and proposed to conduct another wave of the MDM, with a view to monitor the changes in the performance of the leading news media after one decade of fast and ubiquitous digitalisation, and within another media crisis from 2018 forward, triggered among other factors by the stupendous rise of digital information platforms and the aggressive anti-mainstream media campaign by the then US president Donald Trump.

After spreading the word of plans to conduct another MDM wave, scholarly teams from nine additional countries – Belgium (Flanders), Canada, Chile, Denmark, Greece, Hong Kong, Iceland, Italy and South Korea – committed to contribute country chapters, thereby extending the range of comparative learning well beyond Europe. Only one country (Lithuania) from the first and second wave did not participate in the third wave.

Country participation should represent a variety of geographical location and degrees of resemblance to Western liberal democracies. Thus, younger liberal democracies such as Chile, Greece and Portugal were welcome, together with long established democracies such as Canada, Sweden and the United Kingdom. This "most different system design" approach (Anckar 2008, 2020) allowed for a good deal of comparative learning about media performance within this model of democracy. To be sure, this does not mean that the MDM rejects models of democracy outside of the Western framework, but that the instrument cannot grasp the contribution of the media in alternative arrangements, often called developing democracies, or defective or flawed democracies[2]. The justification for choosing this admittedly Western-centric and elitist research perspective is that in other media systems, there is no guarantee that leading news media will have enough freedom to organise and conduct their editorial and journalistic output, and their performance is to various degrees determined by political constraints, which are beyond the scope of the MDM.

Therefore, the MDM 2021 ended up covering 18 countries. EU member states are Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Sweden. Among non-EU member states were Australia, Canada, Chile, Hong Kong[3], Iceland, South Korea, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. In each of these countries, local teams of scholars affiliated with the project defined their sample of relevant (leading) news media. They were instructed to select around ten media outlets, covering all market sectors (print, TV, radio, online), although the size of the national market could influence the size of the sample. Relevance – to be a "leading" news media – should be assessed by the national team taking into consid-

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[2] See glossary of the ECPS (European Center for Populism Studies) on flawed/defective democracies: https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/flawed-defective-democracy/ (retrieved 5 March 2022).

[3] By the time the project was concluded, it was clear that Hong Kong did no longer meet the criteria for contemporary democracies, as interventions from the Chinese government undermines their democracy claim. Countries were selected in 2019. At that time, the protest movement in Hong Kong had started, but elections still prevailed as a core instrument of political participation and decision-making. Furthermore, press freedom was largely respected by the authorities, and the research team from Hong Kong confirmed unfettered working conditions of journalists. However, conditions have dramatically changed, and the press has lost much of its free and independent status. The empirical research on the leading news media in Hong Kong took place before and partly during the dismantling of journalistic freedoms. Therefore, the Hong Kong analysis documents the status quo ante.

eration the market share or agenda-setting potential of the publication. In this last case, a media outlet with lower market share figures would be considered relevant if it is often cited by other media, this way shaping public discussion.

Representatives from participating countries met for two workshops (Roskilde, Denmark, in August 2019, and Lecce, Italy, in September 2019) for revising the instrument. The teams decided to pay tribute to current developments, as well as underrated perspectives from the past waves. They increased the number of indicators to 30, thus a maximum of 90 achievable democracy points. As such, the MDM reaches its maturity measuring media performance alongside the following criteria: In the dimension *Freedom / Information*, indicators refer to reach and consumption of leading news media, autonomy of editorial staff from political and commercial interference, access to the means of production by historically marginalised groups, and conditions against abuse in online communications, such as the spread of misinformation and hate speech. The indicators of the dimension *Equality / Interest Mediation* refer to the quantity of different media outlets, diversity of news formats, availability of minority and alternative media, costs of access to the media, existence of self-regulation mechanisms, and levels of popular participation in media governance and content. In the third dimension, namely *Control / Watchdog*, the indicators assess the existence of independent media councils, the level of independence of news media, transparency of data, journalists professionalism, training and security, and financial resources for investigation. (For an explanation of each indicator and their theoretical grounding, see Trappel, Tomaz 2021a: 18-52).

Data collection and interviews were undertaken just before and during the first months of the global Covid-19 pandemic, thus reflecting the state-of-the-art before this major disruption sent shock waves across the globe, massively affecting the news media. Nonetheless, the "grading workshop" to adjust and discuss preliminary findings took place in a hybrid meeting in Salzburg, Austria, in June 2020. There, the teams decided to add a section in each country report on implications of the pandemic on leading news media.

Because of the increased number of participating countries, Nordicom published the findings and country reports along the 30 indicators in two volumes (Trappel, Tomaz 2021c; 2021d). In 2022, finally, country authors discussed in mixed teams salient issues identified during the process of the third MDM wave and published the latest book of this longitudinal research project (Trappel, Tomaz 2022).

What makes the MDM unconventional is, first, the high degree of intrinsic commitment by this large number of national teams (up to 60 scholars have been involved in third wave), without any external funding incentives (except for minor contributions to cover dissemination cost[4]). All teams delivered their national research findings according to schedule and in the agreed quality. Instead of peer-reviews, all published chapters have been openly discussed by this heterogeneous group of scholars, with personal comments allowing for an academic debate about strengths

and weaknesses of the texts (which is not possible in the case of blind peer-reviews). This process is a fine example of academic freedom at its best: no funding institution, no institutional pressure, but the free choice of scholars working on a self-determined topic.

Second, all teams agreed to make the research and its findings known beyond academic circles, thus beyond scholarly journals. To this end, the group developed a joint dissemination strategy and elaborated three press releases addressing most pressing issues, such as the impact of Covid-19 on the news industry and the precarisation of the journalistic profession, translated into local languages and synchronically published on the same days (Sept 1st, 2020; Nov 11th, 2020, and Dec 21st, 2020). The impressive press and media resonance created by this joint effort documents the high relevance of the MDM. Furthermore, the team launched the publications in three public and widely promoted and well attended video conferences.

Third, all publications of the third MDM wave have been published full open access. The three volumes (entire books and single chapters) are downloadable from the publisher's website, as well as from the website of the Euromedia Research Group. Given the documented high interest by circles beyond the academy, this publication strategy helps increasing visibility of communication research in the general public. Of course, interviewed journalists helped to increase public dissemination. Consequently, the publisher Nordicom reported unprecedented high download numbers for the MDM book chapters, compared to their many other publications.

Finally, the smooth process of rolling out the MDM in three waves created strong bonds between researchers in the national teams and prepared this group for further joint research projects. The high visibility of the efforts of this group becomes advantageous when applying for transnational comparative research projects in the future, as the efficiency of the group is so well documented.

4. Key findings

After outlining the theoretical background and the unconventional journey of empirically operationalising it, we move now to the discussion of the most important findings, according to the data from the third MDM wave, with a special focus on the EU countries. The main overall finding is that, despite the disruptive digital transformations of the entire news business, leading news media remain surprisingly stable in their democratic performance measured by the indicators of this research. In its quantitative assessment, news media of the nine countries that appeared in the latter two MDM editions performed even slightly better in 2021, reaching 68% of overall points against 66% ten years ago (for the full quantitative results, see Trappel, Tomaz 2021b: 490–491). Findings show that in most countries leading news media are still highly relevant for national democratic deliberations.

The inclusion of both member states of the European Union and non-EU states also allows for a comparative view on these groups of countries. Both groups include large (Germany and Italy on the EU side, Australia, Canada, and the UK on the non-EU

side) and small, northern (North Atlantic) and southern (Mediterranean or further South) countries. The findings show that leading news media in European countries generally come closer to the normative requirements for Western democracies than non-European countries. In the quantitative assessment, EU member states reached 67% of the overall points, whereas non-EU states scored 62% of them.

Extending the range of participating countries from ten to 18 allowed for clustering countries along their characteristics. For example, countries with a strong tradition of public service media generally perform better than countries that rely mainly on private, commercial broadcasting systems. The same applies in the case of gender equality (see below). Newspapers – both printed and online – remain cornerstones of democratic deliberations. Non-editorial digital media (such as digital platforms, so called "social media") have indeed contributed to the erosion of the business model of news media but have not yet jeopardised newspapers' democratic contributions.

4.1 Weaknesses in media performance

However, this general finding should not disguise the various weaknesses identified by the research teams. Actually, substantive challenges prevail, such as gender inequalities in the news business (Padovani *et al.* 2022). In quantitative terms, news media scored only 59% of the points regarding "rules and practices on internal gender equality", *i.e.* how prepared organisations are to promote gender balance in newsrooms. EU countries do not perform significantly better in this indicator than non-EU countries (60% vs. 58%), which is surprising due to the European focus in gender-balanced governance. There are nearly no gender equality policies or codes of conduct related to gender equality in any news organisations. In some cases, male journalists are not even aware of the existence of the problem. This is the case in Greece, where an interviewed journalist affirmed that "there has not been an issue of equality between men and women. Each journalist has the same treatment regardless of gender." Some Greek male journalists even argued that their female colleagues are more privileged, notwithstanding the complete absence of measures to ensure parity throughout the hierarchy of the profession. Although Greece is an extreme case, it pretty much reflects the lack of structure for gender parity in newsrooms. Among the few exceptions is the Austrian public broadcaster ORF, which has a gender-balance plan aimed at promoting gender equality in employment conditions (Padovani *et al.* 2022: 86; Grünangerl *et al.* 2021). Imbalance is even bigger in leading positions, with public service media both in European Union member states (Portugal, Austria, and Denmark) and non-EU countries (South Korea and Chile), again, representing the exception. Furthermore, gender pay gaps are still a reality in most media, again cutting across EU and non-EU countries. The gap persists especially in higher positions, being the case even in highly developed EU countries such as Denmark and Sweden. However, it is worth mentioning that the few countries reporting significant improvements are European, such as the Netherlands, where reportedly equal pay is the practice, and Finland.

With regard to "gender equality in media content", the results are even more dramatic, as news media score only 41% of the total points, the worst score for a single indicator in the entire monitor. Women are systematically mis- or underrepresented in media content, excluded from hard news and rarely featured as experts (Padovani *et al.* 2022: 90). EU countries perform somewhat better here (43% vs. 38%), and the best non-EU examples are actually European countries (Iceland and United Kingdom). The BBC has projects, such as the "50:50 – The Equality Project", aiming at reaching fair representation of men and women in media content. But apart from some isolated initiatives such as this one, women remain mostly absent of media content. It is striking that, after 25 years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, gender inequalities persist to such an extent.

Another pertaining core problem concerns media ownership concentration. During the decade of digitalisation ownership concentration at the national level remained stable at 57% of the total points (2011: 56%) and was rated at 56% at the regional level in 2021. In only two countries (Netherlands and Portugal) researchers found a satisfactory score for this indicator. Thus, media ownership concentration continues to control editorial boards and newsrooms, curtail content diversity, marginalise less popular and consequently expensive content, and commodify cultural industries altogether (Trappel, Meier 2022). Standardised metrics undeniably demonstrate continuous growth of ownership concentration. Regardless of these strong evidences, concentration of media ownership remains one of the least-regulated media policy issues. The situation is even worse in non-EU countries, which scored 54% of the points both at national and regional levels (against 60% and 57% respectively in EU countries), as concentration is especially high in Australia, Chile, and Hong Kong.

A further critical finding in the third MDM wave is that news media face increasing pressure from advertisers (Tomaz *et al.* 2022). While newsrooms are still relatively separated from owners, the erosion of the advertising-based business model has come to a point in which news media are highly dependent on a few major sponsors. Some managed to reduce their dependence by adopting other business models, such as subscriptions, or by heavily relying on public subsidies, as in most Nordic countries (Tomaz *et al.* 2022: 180). However, most of the media in the 18 MDM countries are fiercely fighting for the remaining revenues from advertisers, making them more susceptible to disturbing practices such as sponsored content.

However, this is one of the few results in which leading news media from non-EU member states perform better (60% EU vs. 67% non-EU concerning protection against pressure from advertisers). This is due to the fact that two Anglo-Saxon countries in our sample, Australia and Canada, have a remarkable performance in this indicator, scoring three points alongside Iceland, which also follows a rather liberal model of the media (Jóhannsdóttir *et al.* 2021). This is surprising, as one would expect that the media in dual systems such as the European ones, with a much stronger role of public service media, would be less subject to commercial interference. On the other hand, Australian and Canadian markets are already highly concentrated in

private brands, making survival of the few influential media companies easier and less dependent on single advertisers (Dwyer *et al.* 2021; Taylor, DeCillia 2021).

Furthermore, new challenges such as journalists' harassment (Baroni *et al.* 2022), misinformation (Mayerhöffer *et al.* 2022) and eroding funds for investigation (Karadimitriou *et al.* 2022) characterise the state-of-the-art of leading news media.

4.2 Major differences between EU and non-EU leading news media

Finally, we break down the finding that leading news media in EU countries tend to perform better by analysing in which areas these differences are most remarkable. The most striking divergence is exactly in the indicator that addresses protections against harassment of journalists (83% EU vs. 54% non-EU countries). European news organisations seem to be much better prepared to deal with this kind of attack, which became more common in the last decade. The Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) reached the maximum score, alongside Austria and the Netherlands. As an example, Dutch journalists report full support by the media company's legal department, and the Dutch Association of Journalists endeavours collaboration with the police and the Public Prosecutor's Office to ensure that journalists can report threats and are protected (Vandenberghe, d'Haenens 2021: 276). In the EU, only Italy has a low score (1 point), because of the non-existence of any specific mechanism to protect journalists from harassment, especially women (Padovani *et al.* 2021). Non-EU countries, on the other hand, often report little to no protection against this threat. This is especially the case in Australia, Chile and Hong Kong, scoring only 1 point in this indicator.

The leading news media in EU member countries also outperform their non-EU counterparts in indicators directly related to the journalistic professional culture. This is the case in the indicators about the existence and applied relevance of code of ethics (83% vs. 58%), journalists' job security (57% vs. 38%), and journalism professionalism (77% vs. 63%). The European labour market is historically better regulated than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, and this seems to reflect in more stable conditions for the journalistic practice and clear professional standards. In a similar vein, EU news media have scored better regarding the existence of internal rules for practice of newsroom democracy (57% vs. 50%) and rules and practices on internal pluralism (63% vs. 54%), showing that the news business in Europe still preserves rules associated with the Western journalistic normativity in a much stronger way than non-EU media. Evidently, these results do not come as a surprise. If normative approaches reflect mostly Western-centric values, as acknowledged both by proponents and critics, European leading news media are expected to perform closer to these norms than those from non-EU countries.

5. Conclusions

The Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) 2021 instigated a debate on the performance of leading news media fostering democratic values in times of digital dis-

ruption and the emergence of digital communication infrastructures that compile and curate news according to algorithmic selections principles, rather than journalistic news values. Despite these fundamental challenges, leading news media in the 18 countries participating in the MDM 2021 remain core actors both in terms of media use and in support of democratic values. Three research waves allow for longitudinal, as well as geographical comparison. While leading news media from EU member states outperform their counterparts external to the European Union with regard to most of the 30 democracy indicators, leading news media in all countries maintained by and large their performance standards during the decade of digital disruption – at least up to the time when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the economy and primarily advertising-financed news media. This general finding should not conceal the severe and persisting weaknesses with regard to gender inequities, economic imbalances regarding ownership concentration and the high level of commercial rather than editorial and journalistic command. If news media are to be considered cornerstones of the liberal democracies of the future, these issues have to be addressed both by media governance and public policy.

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