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Media, Democracy, and Citizen Perspectives in Contemporary Europe

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Introduction: Media, Democracy, and Citizen Perspectives in Contemporary Europe

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Abstract: This introduction examines the profound transformations affecting the relationship between media and democracy in Europe within a context marked by digitalization, information fragmentation, declining institutional trust, and multiple crises. Drawing on an audience-centered approach, it argues that democratic

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disruption cannot be attributed solely to digital media but results from complex interactions between structural constraints, economic dynamics, political cultures, and citizens' everyday practices. Based on the European MeDeMAP project, the studies presented highlight how citizens perceive both material threats (media ownership concentration, political and economic pressures) and discursive challenges (loss of trust, misinformation, and polarization) affecting democratic communication. Despite significant national differences, European citizens share expectations for more independent, transparent, and participatory media systems. The findings also emphasize citizens' potential agency as active actors in democratic communication through media literacy, civic engagement, and collaborative knowledge production.

Keywords: mediated democracy, media trust, citizen participation, political communication, MeDeMAP

Introduction : Médias, démocratie et perspectives citoyennes dans l'Europe contemporaine

Résumé: Cette introduction examine les transformations profondes des relations entre médias et démocratie en Europe dans un contexte marqué par la numérisation, la fragmentation informationnelle, la défiance institutionnelle et les polycrises. En s'appuyant sur une approche centrée sur les publics, elle soutient que les mutations démocratiques ne peuvent être attribuées aux seuls médias numériques, mais résultent d'interactions complexes entre contraintes structurelles, logiques économiques, cultures politiques et pratiques citoyennes. Les travaux issus du projet européen MeDeMAP montrent que les citoyens perçoivent simultanément des menaces matérielles (concentration de la propriété, pressions politiques et économiques) et discursives (perte de confiance, désinformation, polarisation) pesant sur la communication démocratique. Malgré des contextes nationaux contrastés, les études révèlent des attentes convergentes envers des médias plus indépendants, transparents et participatifs. Elles soulignent également le rôle potentiel des citoyens comme acteurs de la communication démocratique, capables de développer une véritable agentivité grâce à l'éducation aux médias, à la participation civique et aux pratiques collaboratives de production des connaissances.

Mots-clés : démocratie médiatisée, confiance dans les médias, participation citoyenne, communication politique, MeDeMAP

1. The Shifting Terrain of Mediated Democracy

Across contemporary Europe, the relationship between media and democracy is undergoing several transformations. Current changes constitute not merely incremental developments but a reconfiguration shift of communicative power relations in democratic societies (Carpentier et al., 2023). Traditional political and media institutions—once seen as guarantors of stable democratic life—are

increasingly challenged by digital platforms, shifting trust dynamics, economic pressures, and evolving forms of civic engagement (Bartsch et al., 2025; Carlson, 2017). These disruptions are accompanied by rising political polarization, overlapping polycrises, and a widespread sense that democratic institutions and information infrastructures no longer meet citizen expectations.

The relation between the widespread disillusion about democracy and the role of the media is ambiguous, if not twofold. On the one hand, social media and digital platforms are commonly told to *engender threaten* democracy, by walling people into self-referential bubbles (i.e., Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2018), favoring the consolidation of charismatic authorities, and triggering radicalization and hate speech. In the other way, building trust in the media is inevitably key to the reinvigoration of social capital and to the shaping of a common European public sphere (for a synthesis of our approach, see Miconi, Cannizzaro & Risi, 2023). While all these criticalities will be addressed in the articles included in this special issue (see the synthetic description below in this text), it makes sense to put forward a different consideration – that democratic disruption is certainly *made visible* by the omnipresence of digital platforms, while *not necessarily being caused by the media*. We refer here to the diagnoses of the crisis of democracy, as laid out by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The first one, in particular, traced back the (inevitable, in his view) spread of populism to the disconnection of the social reality itself – so that the constitutive vagueness of the populist ideology would be the direct reflect of the imbalances and emptiness of the world (2005a; 2005b), rather than resulting from an artificial discourse put in place by the media. Even more radically, Mouffe (1999; 2005) explains the crisis of democracy in terms of the structural incompatibility between democracy as a stabilized order, and politics as being based on the well-known friend/enemy juxtaposition theorized by Carl Schmitt. The same process can be interpreted in deeply pessimistic way, assuming that these trends can undermine the very fundamentals of democratic order, especially amongst young generations (Mounk, 2018, 122-123), with online communication playing a major role in the process (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). Whether the media will dismantle the democratic order or serve the possibility of a new social pact – in direction of what Mouffe herself called “the inversion between the political and the non-political” (1999, 39-40) – is still to be understood; and our in-depth research into audience practices in Europe can be, hopefully, a first step in that necessary investigation.

In this sense, audience-centered approaches offer a critical empirical lens for understanding this shifting terrain. Rather than focusing solely on normative expectations of what media should do for democracy, audience research foregrounds how citizens themselves experience, interpret, and evaluate media's democratic functions in their everyday lives (Schröder, 2015; Dahlgren, 2009). This perspective takes seriously the argument that democracy is not solely an institutional arrangement but a lived practice, enacted through continuous interactions between citizens and the communicative infrastructures that shape their social and political worlds (Carpentier et al., 2023).

Citizen's construct meaning, negotiate trust, and curate media repertoires based on pragmatic needs, ideological preferences, and democratic aspirations (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). It is precisely for this reason that studying the situated practices of citizens and users in contexts of interaction with the political sphere becomes essential: understanding how people actually engage with, navigate, and make sense of mediated political communication reveals the practical realities of democratic life beyond institutional prescriptions. In this perspective, we would keep some distance towards the recent critical vague in the Internet Studies, which too often simplifies the relation between people and platforms in terms of manipulation and passivity – as in the exemplary case of the Skinnerian model, invoked by Soshana Zuboff (2019), which would recall the times – ad somehow the psychosis – of the so-called bullet theory. Very differently, we agree with Peruško, Vozab and Čuvalo (2013, 140-141 in particular) on the need of making space for the classical structure/agency dyad, rather than *apriori* rejecting the hypothesis that audience activities can actually be a source of agency,

The contemporary European media environment presents a dual challenge: threats to democratic communication are both discursive—involving trust, legitimacy, and meaning-making—and material, pertaining to ownership structures, economic sustainability, and institutional autonomy. Economic instability, market dependence, and elite interference constitute material pressures that restrict media's democratic capacities, while declining trust, perceived bias, and the transformation of political knowledge represent discursive threats that shape how citizens interpret media's democratic legitimacy (Lee, 2010; Garusi & Leonhardt, 2026). These dual dimensions are tightly interwoven, shaping complex citizen perceptions that vary significantly across national, cultural, and historical contexts.

This complexity is particularly evident in what has been conceptualized as Mediated Democracy, a condition in which citizens encounter the political world primarily through mediation (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Since direct access to political reality is largely impossible, media play a central role in constructing political knowledge, shaping the boundaries of what citizens perceive as politically meaningful or knowable. In this subjectively constructed environment, people may disengage from information that contradicts their expectations, even when factually accurate—an issue rendered more acute by digital fragmentation, algorithmic curation, and the rise of alternative information spaces (Lee & Valenzuela, 2024).

In line with these dynamics, Miconi (2025) underscores how contemporary democracies are increasingly shaped by deep processes of mediatization, where communication infrastructures do not simply transmit political life but actively organize and constrain the conditions of public participation. He further highlights the progressive colonization of the public sphere by political and economic elites, whose structural influence erodes media autonomy and citizens' access to plural, trustworthy information. Moreover, the digital environment reinforces the paradox of disintermediation, amplifying user agency while simultaneously consolidating new algorithmic forms of gatekeeping that fragment and weaken democratic deliberation.

The theoretical distinction between liberal-representative and participatory democratic cultures further illuminates these dynamics (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). In liberal-representative models, media are normatively tasked with informing citizens through watchdog, disseminator, and intermediary roles. In participatory models, media are expected to facilitate access, connection, and mobilization, supporting empowered or networked citizens. In practice, these roles are shaped not only by normative ideals but also by empirical realities of information supply, usage patterns, and national media systems. The friction between these competing expectations—between the desire for professional, independent journalism and the demand for interactive, participatory communication—underpins many tensions in contemporary media-democracy relationships.

The Horizon Europe MeDeMAP (Mapping Media for Future Democracies) project provides a unique comparative framework for analyzing these issues across diverse European settings (Klimkiewicz et al., 2024). Through qualitative methods—focus groups, interviews, and discursive analysis—the project captures how citizens in Italy, Czech Republic, Ireland, Poland, France, Portugal, Austria, Estonia, and Slovenia perceive both discursive and material threats to democratic communication. These studies highlight the situated nature of citizen perspectives: while common patterns of mistrust, fragmentation, and democratic dissatisfaction appear across countries, each national context reveals its own trajectories shaped by historical legacies, political cultures, and media system structures.

2. Mapping Citizen Perspectives Across European Contexts

The collection of studies presented here offers a rich comparative perspective on how citizens across Europe understand the fragile relationship between media and democracy. These investigations employ qualitative methodologies that privilege citizen voice and lived experience, generating insights that complement and complicate larger-scale quantitative research on media trust and democratic attitudes. Three thematic clusters emerge from these contributions.

2.1. *Material Constraints and Elite Influence*

Several contributions highlight how material and institutional factors undermine media legitimacy, linking democratic deficits directly to perceived media autonomy.

The Czech study reveals that citizens perceive significant threats from media ownership by powerful business figures with political ties (Štětka et al., 2024). Beyond this material crisis, citizens express profound loss of trust in both social media and political actors, suggesting a confluence of material and discursive threats perceived during a state of polycrisis. Collective efforts to counter these threats are not actively sought, as citizens perceive no time or desire for them and no longer expect them to be successful. The role of social media and large online platforms is seen as extremely important, yet respondents find it difficult to define causes and implications, often ignoring the European or global dimensions of these threats.

Similarly, the Slovenian study shows that citizens uphold the normative ideal of media as watchdog yet frequently question its actual autonomy. They identify structural constraints including politicization of media ownership and pressures from political and economic elites, viewing media as entangled in political games rather than acting as agents of democratic oversight. Political-media parallelism is seen as a key factor diminishing media credibility, contributing to cyclical erosion of trust in both media and democratic institutions (Klimkiewicz, 2021).

The Estonian research confirms that while citizens generally trust the democratic system and media, concerns persist regarding deteriorating political culture and economic drivers influencing information quality. Varying levels of trust, combined with diverse life experiences and personal needs, lead people to curate differing media repertoires with motivations ranging from convenience and habit to ideological alignment (Schröder, 2015). Notably, people from marginalized and vulnerable social groups are most critical and able to identify issues directly affecting their sense of belonging in democratic society.

In the context of contemporary media and democracy, we can refer to "elites" in terms of powerful political and economic actors who compromise media independence by exerting significant material and structural pressure, notably through the influence of media ownership by powerful business figures with political ties (related to the colonization of the public sphere), the application of pressures from political and economic elites, and the presence of economic drivers behind content, leading citizens to perceive media owners and politicians as "master manipulators" or as institutions "entangled in political games".

2.2. *Crisis of Representation and the Search for Self-Reliance*

A prevalent theme is the deep-seated crisis of representation, marked by public disillusionment and the necessity for citizens to independently verify information. The French study reveals a significant crisis of representation where citizens feel disconnected from political and media institutions perceived as unresponsive to public concerns. This distrust is exacerbated by misinformation and perceived biases, reinforcing calls for more neutral, transparent journalism. The research exposes stark divergences in expectations regarding news content and general lack of awareness about constraints under which journalism operates (Choi, 2024). However, notable points of convergence emerge—particularly shared desire for more accountability and dialogue—though the absence of structured communication between journalists and the public hinders trust-building efforts.

The Portuguese case underscores challenges faced by small European countries with stringent regulatory prescriptions, including mandatory media ownership transparency and political party bans from owning broadcast media. Despite these regulations, financial pressure remains the primary concern for journalists, leading to content often perceived as partial or clickbait by the public. This low trust compels citizens toward self-reliance in searching for "truth" by comparing freely available headlines—a process they acknowledge as fallible and unnerving when complete

stories require subscriptions. The ad-based business model is not understood as necessary by audiences, and media owners and politicians are ill-judged as master manipulators, creating a media ecosystem tainted by mistrust from both content producers and receivers.

The digital environment simultaneously poses risks of fragmentation while fostering new forms of political participation aligned with participatory models. The Austrian study illustrates the theoretical distinction between democratic models and media usage: traditional mass media, especially public service broadcasting, remain the primary information source for those adhering to liberal-representative democratic understanding, while social networks play increasingly important roles among those aligned with participatory understanding (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). Trust in media correlates strongly with how well information content aligns with users' expectations shaped by their democratic orientation, highlighting the need for information ecosystems to adapt to evolving democratic expectations.

The Italian research emphasizes the growing influence of digital platforms and the necessity to promote clearer, more interactive communication aimed at critical public involvement. Citizens express strong preference for concrete, less sensationalist politics, rejecting dramatization that hampers perception of political issues. While traditional media seem increasingly distant from citizens' needs, there is growing interest in forms of digital collective participation such as discussion groups or bottom-up fact-checking, outlining social media's potential as virtual forums for future communication practices and democratic participation (Carpentier et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the articles in this Special Issue collectively illuminate the profound challenges facing European democracies, where media roles are simultaneously defined by conflicting normative expectations, material constraints - economic pressures and elite control - and the shifting landscape of digital platforms. We may add that, contrary to some widely accepted ideas, citizens do reveal a significant level of awareness and understanding of critical societal facts, including those related to how the media works, or should work.

Despite pervasive criticism and ambivalence, findings reveal shared democratic aspirations and points of possibility: citizens continue to value democratic ideals while demanding more inclusive, responsive, and accountable media systems (Dahlgren & Hill, 2022). Beyond the structural and institutional dimensions, several contributions in this issue also bring to the fore the perspective of citizens as potential agents of democratic communication — not merely as audiences to be reached or informed, but as individuals who can become active knowledge producers in their own right. In this sense, the research gathered here resonates with traditions of critical pedagogy and participatory inquiry (Freire, 1970; Carpentier, 2011), pointing to the need for wider spaces of critical awareness around the very processes through which media knowledge is constructed, circulated, and contested. Crucially, fostering such awareness — through co-research practices, media literacy initiatives, and bottom-up forms of civic engagement — emerges as a necessary complement to top-down

regulatory approaches. These studies underscore the urgent need for robust media policy frameworks that address both the discursive challenge of eroding trust and the material threat of compromised autonomy; yet they equally suggest that democratic resilience, from the citizen perspective, also depends on cultivating the conditions under which citizens can recognize and exercise their own communicative agency.

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