



Working paper on the quality of the European news ecology

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The answers to the four guiding questions are more complex than it may first appear. They require comprehensive knowledge about the past and present state-of-affairs in different contexts, as well as a matured reflection about the best ways forward. My research work has been focused on the role of different types of media in democracy and how political discourses are communicated and covered in different media, contexts, and countries, and therefore, does touch upon some of the issues addressed in these questions, but it does not deal with all of them directly. My views are thus inevitably incomplete. Putting forward solutions for the issues addressed in these questions requires new models of thinking and new policies which should draw from evidence-based and academically informed knowledge. Considering the impact that digitalization, platformization and algorithmization have on democracy, the timing of such new approaches and policies is already overdue. Digitalization, platformization, and algorithmization have dramatically changed content production and distribution, including the supply and consumption of news, and have caused new challenges related to the reliability, quality and diversity of news. These shifts have given rise to new practices and new models of *gatekeeping*, which have strong impacts on society and politics. The debate is thus pressing. My answers to the four questions are my small contribution to it.



Question #1: How do the recent developments digitalization, platformization and algorithmization relate to plurality, and to what extent do news media and journalism react to serve citizens' information needs?

News production and distribution have been highly affected by digitalization, platformization and algorithmization. Theoretically, these technological developments entail the potential for improving plurality (e.g., new means of expression, inclusion of new actors in debates, etc.), but the potential has not been duly fulfilled. Following a monetization logic, the selection of information is often based on what provokes reactions, which has been contributing to the normalization of extremes and to whitewashing non-democratic ideas, as well as all kinds of hateful and false content. Overall, access to diversity and quality news remains a challenge, as the selection that algorithms do of the available content and business models have been guided by profit instead of public interest.

Journalists now operate in particularly complex information ecosystems. As facts do not speak for themselves, particularly considering the available tools to create alternative realities (e.g., fake news, deepfakes, etc.) and that media literacy policies have not been enhanced, journalists are key players in interpreting reality. Nevertheless, news organizations no longer hold control over the selection of content, this gatekeeping role is now shared with social media platforms that have growingly become determinant not only in the production, curation, and distribution of content, but also in shaping these new models. The social media platforms have been using their gatekeeping power without transparency and accountability (often blocking access to data for independent research).

All this makes it urgent to consider public service alternatives that prioritize quality and ensure plurality in the news. The blur that social media platforms have created between what is information and what is not, needs to be addressed, by openly displaying and emphasizing the differences between information and other kinds of content, which include entertainment, but also dis/misinformation. The goal should be that any common citizen is able to identify reliable information and discern what is and what is not information.

Question #2: Which strategies could news media adopt to fulfil public interest expectations in the age of platformisation? Distinguish larger and smaller (language) areas.

Journalism has changed (e.g., the way that news is covered and reported) in the past few years. These changes occurred not just because of mergers, ownership, job insecurity,

but also due to Google Search, social media, and other types of newsfeeds. Facebook, for example, changed its algorithm based on the idea that people should only see the news they want to see. The fact that many mainstream media companies struggle financially is key in this equation and has influenced the way in which journalism has reacted to the new media environments. So, one of the main challenges is to ensure that news companies that are orientated towards public interest are also financially viable.

I would like to highlight two important developments in the journalistic practices that have potential to influence the relation of journalists with audiences. Journalistic interpretation could be seen as an added value in today's information ecology. Provided that all kinds of biases are always clearly stated, journalistic interpretation contributes to make sense of the information available and reaffirms the role of journalists. A more recent trend, which I will call 'Substack' here, also reveals potential in reaffirming the role of journalists in today's information ecologies. Substack is the name of a growingly used online platform (there are other platforms created with the same purpose) by journalists that provides publishing, payment, and design infrastructure to support subscription newsletters. In these newsletters, journalists control both production and distribution and the logic behind is to provide information to readers that is curated and interpreted by journalists and not based on metrics and algorithms.

As some audiences have started to look for individual journalists rather than the media publications that employ them, as a way to bypass the lack of trust in some news organizations, this type of approach has potential to bring journalism closer to audiences. Although such trend cannot fully replace the algorithm-powered newsfeeds, and it also raises concerns related to the increase of fragmentation, it demonstrates how 'proximity' could be an important value to consider moving forward. The general goal would be to bring journalism closer to its audiences and their needs (e.g., concerns, languages, etc.), by interpreting complex information and engaging in fact-checking.

Question #3: Should the concept of public service media be extended to platform communication? How to create the political conditions for it?

Provided that regulation is strictly designed to ensure that products/services are in full compliance with the legal framework and values of the societies in which they operate, I personally do not see it as a suppressor of free expression, but rather as a tool to correct imbalances and prevent problems. In this logic, both extending public service media to

platform communication and integrating mechanisms to ensure the transparency of social media platforms and all news providers in general are key measures.

All companies (including social media platforms, news aggregators) that deal with content, production and/or distribution, should be accountable for harmful content, and for ensuring not only balance (opposed to the logic that algorithms pursue now), but also that it is the reliable information that is emphasised and given priority. Such content should also be easily recognizable by all audiences. There should thus be an emphasis on regulation that takes into account several elements: new logics behind how algorithms select and present information, to prioritise reliable information; content removal and concrete sanctions for platforms that spread hate and disinformation; full transparency about how platforms select information and operate in general.

Currently, there is already some recognition that self-regulation has proven ineffective, but the existing EU legal framework is not sufficient. There were a few improvements with new orientations: the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) in 2020, by the European Commission, has included measures to combat disinformation, both through the Digital Services Act (DSA) and specific measures to address sponsored content online. But these are still insufficient and an open debate about other difficult issues is still missing: for example, how to regulate harmful content that is legal and thus fit within the fundamental right of freedom of expression?

The developments needed should be planned as part of a model of multi-stakeholder governance, as this guarantees the involvement of the different types of stakeholders in discussions, decision-making proposals and in the implementation of the ensuing policies and measures.

Question #4: What further political responses would you propose considering the hyper-commercial platforms in order to expand democracy-oriented news media and responsive journalism?

Different actors have noted the need of changes. UNESCO has just recognized information as a public good, in the sense that it needs public support and is a key issue for the functioning of democracies (Joseph E. Stiglitz). But the free, universal access to reliable information should be further emphasised, because the lack of access to reliable information has created the conditions for harmful and misleading content to spread more easily, as now virtually everyone can share and thus be an active disseminator of content. This has direct



implications in the ways in which the news media are funded. And I wonder whether there should be a comprehensive system of subsidies to quality, reliable journalism, or whether The Guardian model could be used as inspiration. Whatever funding model, it should foster the production and distribution of reliable information.

A global vision is thus missing, one that encompasses not only production and distribution, but also reception of information:

- The economic viability of news media needs to be considered in ways that ensure more independence;
- News that are reliable need to have more visibility and public access needs to be ensured (they have to reach everyone freely, as some groups might not be able to pay for quality information);
- There should be also information and media literacy programmes to ensure that everyone has the necessary tools to distinguish reliable news from fake news, or at least to consume more critically the news.