MANIFESTO ON THE QUALITY OF EUROPEAN NEWS ECOLOGY

A call to foster the quality of European news ecology in the future
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THE PROBLEMS

Corporate news media and digital information intermediaries fail in producing economic sustainability, trust and societal legitimacy for the European news ecology. This news scenario is characterised by abundant content production, algorithmically shaped content distribution, news-deprived users, opinion presented as fact, dis- and misinformation as well as a decreasing trust in news media and journalism. Democracy is potentially undermined by these developments. This Manifesto calls key stakeholders to take on their responsibility in improving the conditions for news production, distribution, and consumption. It was elaborated by students and scholars during the EuromediApp Winter School 2022, held in Strobl (Austria), based on a week-long debate that included seminars, lectures and working groups. In this process, we identified **media companies**, **journalists**, **digital information intermediaries**, **research** and **politics** as the five core groups which shape news provision in Europe and that should use their power to increase its quality.

Each of them faces multiple contemporary challenges.

For **media companies**, these include time compression, increasing use of digital technologies including personalisation algorithms by media companies, responses to contributions by 'citizen journalists', changes in journalism professional values and practices, increasing market concentration and the financialisation of the media industry. Media companies are in an asymmetrical power relationship with the major digital information intermediaries (aka digital platforms like search engines, social media, and news aggregators). Increasing dependence on these platforms for aggregating news content and a declining share of total advertising revenue are destabilising media industry business models. The result is declining investment in news production. This is substantially challenging values of media plurality and diversity as media production is concentrated among a small number of large companies. In addition, the independence of public service media from state, commercial and other financing models is contested in many countries.

In this context, **journalists** not only had to learn and re-learn skills, but also face increasing economic pressures and job insecurity. As a result, news values and content framing have turned to favour soft news rather than investigative journalism. Furthermore, digitalisation has made it easier to spread disinformation and fake narratives, hate speech and related 'dark' phenomena which specifically affect the working of journalists. Attacks against journalists (especially women), in particular when protecting their sources, and fact-checkers have intensified in the last few years.

Digital platforms become hosts of content of news organisations. They organise, steer, and control the reach of news items through their algorithms. Moreover, they capture by far the majority of the

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AND PLATFORM POLICY
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advertising revenue that used to finance news production. The platform architecture also makes it hard to distinguish professional news posts from non-professional news organisations and popular online-only outlets in terms of look and feel, thus diminishing the strategic advantage of well-known news media. To attract as much traffic as possible to their own websites through click-throughs, news media are increasingly aligning their selection and design with the social media logic of the platforms, resulting in more emotionality in the headlines.

While these three stakeholders are active in the news provision, further two shape decisively these developments.

Research generates empirical evidence in terms of defining and measuring news quality. Science communication has recently become more practical, applied, and strategic. One public that has become particularly relevant for researchers, besides policy makers, are journalists and news media. This has also triggered more academic engagement in terms of collaborations with news media through initiatives that build bridges between journalism and academia. This development is crucial as intermediaries have individualised communication, contributing to the erosion of legacy news media and public communication.

Finally, **politics** plays a central role in governance. Steering digital futures requires not only adequate understanding of the inner working of digital technologies and platform operations, but also the capacity to prefigure the broader socioeconomic and cultural consequences of technological developments. Communication governance finds itself at a crossroads where different and contrasting dynamics are at play: dynamics of access and restriction, dynamics of freedom and control, and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. There is a need to reimagine how fundamental principles – of pluralism and freedom, alongside openness and transparency, equality and inclusion – may be re-articulated in relation to current configurations of power relations and different forms of inequality, old and new. In this context politics is mandated to develop normative frameworks that should provide guidance to different actors; and to define the rules and standards according to which they may be implemented. Intergovernmental organisations, state actors, public institutions and independent agencies as well local administrations all have major roles to play in articulating and actualising more democratic digital futures that foster quality of news.

OUR DEMANDS

1 WE CALL FOR MEDIA ORGANISATIONS TO BE MORE TRANSPARENT ABOUT THEIR FINANCIAL MODELS

Lack of transparency regarding media ownership and funding is one of the key reasons why public trust in news media organisations has been declining. We call for media organisations to be more transparent about their financial models, which in turn would allow them to increase the current quality of news ecology.

News media organisations, mostly on a local level, often rely on a limited number of financial sources in order to offer their services. Because of such dependence, those media organisations might be more susceptible to "underlying bias or strategic omissions" which reflect the interests of the funders, such as political or economic actors (Craufurd Smith et al., 2021: 548). As a result, the framework of news changes, frequently in favour of those actors. Being fully transparent about media ownership and funding is an important factor in building individual trust in news (Knight

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Foundation, 2018). The public deserves to know that the coverage of certain topics is highly influenced by those financial relationships. The openness regarding where news media companies get their funding would not only allow the audience to assess the objectivity of information presented but would also establish the sense of mutual respect and trust. By disclosing this quite "uncomfortable" information, news media organisations would clearly show their users that those companies care about maintaining a high quality news ecology, where all actors can get a clear understanding of how journalistic products are produced and what are their intentions in addition to informing the public. We believe that this strategic move would in turn prevent the public from looking for news elsewhere, such as social media platforms, not necessarily designed for news of high quality. We suggest that this information be clearly stated on the online and print versions to ensure full disclosure.

2 We call for media companies to rethink the short-term benefits of using platforms as distribution channel and to develop a long-term strategy

Digital platforms provide news media organisations with an opportunity to share their products with a larger audience, but it does little to build a loyal readership. We call for media companies to rethink the short-term benefits of using platforms as a distribution channel and to develop a long-term strategy of community-building through multiple means.

Since digital platforms attract billions of users on a daily basis, news media organisations perceive them as a way to get closer to their target audience. Although platforms indeed help media companies to achieve bigger engagement, we believe that news media overstate the benefits provided by digital platforms. The majority of quality news media still receive most of their traffic directly through their website, and referrals from digital intermediaries represent a small portion of this traffic (Myllylahti, 2018). Quality news comprises only a small portion of all the content used in platforms and accessing them is in a way an accidental phenomenon. In addition, digital platforms are not stable and reliable means of building a loyal audience. Having journalistic products reach more people on platforms does not necessarily mean that those people will actually use news and stay for more. Therefore, we suggest that media companies be more critical and realise that digital platforms is not the only way of distributing news and reaching the audience.

Investing in a loyal community is a long-term communication strategy, crucial especially for regional and local media companies. A solution to building a loyal readership is diversification of three aspects: distribution channels, content, and revenue sources. In terms of distribution channels, it involves using multiple mediums to share news in order to fulfil users' preferences and, consequently, to be less reliant on a single one. When using multiple channels for news sharing, news media organisations must ensure that the content is diversified as well, producing specific content for specific formats (Picard, 2014). In addition, diversification is a necessary step concerning revenue sources. Having multiple independent revenue sources, such as public funding from governments, crowdfunding, memberships or subscriptions, scholarships, and advertisement would ensure that news media organisations can stand their ground without being scrutinised and side tracked if one of the sources decreases.

Giving the audience's various choices of accessing multiple kinds of news and allowing them to support news production through multiple sources would ensure that every user feels appreciated, and their preferences are considered. In turn, such long-term communication strategy would allow

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news media organisations to build a loyal readership and maintain a stable functioning regardless of struggles in one area.

3   WE CALL FOR MEDIA COMPANIES TO PROVIDE ENRICHING WORKING CONDITIONS FOR STAFF IN DIVERSE NEWSROOMS

Technical innovations have always guided journalism in developing its industry, but journalists are currently expected to multitask and perform many different jobs to produce a large quantity of content, in which immediacy provokes a disproportionate favouring of quantity over quality. We call media companies to provide enriching working conditions for staff in diverse newsrooms.

Enriching working conditions encompass many services that are essential for a higher quality in news ecology that are currently not being met. We suggest to, first, employ experts in different news formats who can dedicate their time in developing news media designed specifically for one format. This would avoid distributing the same story multiple times using different formats. For example, some stories require visual features, whereas others are better told in a written format. These differences should be respected and used to their advantage instead of (re)producing the same content across their channels. Having divisions in staff in terms of the content they produce would ensure the highest quality of each type of content.

Secondly, with the increasing diversification of societies in many areas of the world, newsrooms should reflect this trend as well. Representing different social backgrounds, religions, skin tones, genders, and sexual orientations can create a huge impact on the audience's perception of the news reality. Having these voices heard across the board is extremely important in creating a more informed and involved society.

Lastly, stable salaries for experienced and young journalists should be provided by media companies to give employees the opportunity to invest time in quality production (Foster & Bunting, 2019). With the continuous breaking news updates, we risk drowning in a sea of information (Belt & South, 2015). This financial stability would provide a more relaxed working environment that would create the freedom for deeper investigative journalism of greater quality.

4   WE CALL FOR JOURNALISTS TO COMMIT WITH KEY JOURNALISTIC VALUES

The challenges emerging by the deep transformation of the media ecosystems, namely by the increasingly predominance of digital platforms as moderators and shapers of the public sphere, demand for a strengthening of the journalistic role in society. We call for journalists to commit strongly with the key journalistic values, including freedom and accountability; independence and loyalty to citizens; autonomy, transparency, public service orientation and responsibility towards social equilibria (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021).

Digital platforms come with specific norms and values inscribed in their architectures – they are "neither neutral or value-free constructs" (van Dijck et al, 2018: 3). Content moderation and curation, data-driven mechanisms, and non-transparent business models became a part of an ecosystem that is constantly evolving and changing. Therefore, the European media ecology is being challenged by a

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new level of value confrontation based on platforms mechanisms. Multiple value confrontations additionally challenge journalists to commit to their role as a key institution of public sphere. Re-codification of journalism as community and profession provides common ground for all who are involved in the crafting and distribution of socially significant news and discussion (Vos, 2018). Journalistic community is open and inclusive for the range of different cultural practices of journalism. However, ethically grounded value base provides principle-driven adaptation to new challenges, diversified community and heterogeneous journalism in Europe.

5 WE CALL FOR JOURNALISTS TO SEEK LIFELONG EDUCATION, LEARN NEW SKILLS WHILE RETAINING CORE NEWS VALUES AND ENGAGE WITH THEIR COMMUNITIES

There is the need for raising the quality of the practice through awareness, expertise, participation and inclusion. We call for journalists to cultivate transparency of their routines and decisions, to be technologically wise and seek lifelong education, to engage with their communities within and beyond digital arenas, actively seeking the inclusion of minorities and other voices less or hardly heard in the news.

The platformisation and datafication of society and journalism (Jurno & D'Aandréa, 2020; Opgenhaffen & Scheerlinck, 2014) creates dilemmas, challenges and opportunities for news production, among them the need for journalism to become more trustable, accountable and engaged with its communities. We can point to phenomena such as the reconfiguration of newsrooms and working relationships, with the increasing fluidity of the working space and the growing of freelancing journalism taking place; the hegemony of platform logic over the practice; the acceleration of routines; and the pressure of the business in crisis. On the other hand, we point to the need for journalists to be up-to-date in technological skills (in order to be aware of the forces they face and to make them become opportunities instead of threats, as well as to become partners in the new digital tool making (Gutierrez-Lopez et al., 2019). Journalists need to hold on to the core discipline of verification to be the most reliable source of news. There is also the need to highlight the postulate of plurality of visions within the set of core news values, encompassing both the variety from inside (the journalism practitioners) as well as the community perspectives, establishing their effective participation on the agenda setting and news-making.

6 WE CALL FOR JOURNALISTS TO COLLABORATE MORE WITH ACADEMIA AND AUDIENCES AS PARTNERS IN THE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

Challenges of journalism are multidimensional, while new media ecosystem is dynamic in various ways. We call for journalists to collaborate with academia as a key source of assessment of journalistic work and values, as well as a resource of knowledge; but also with audiences as a key partner in news production, dissemination, and reception of news in the digital ecosystem.

It is important for journalists to involve different perspectives in their work. Academic insight would provide normative and evidence-based assessment and further recommendations for their work. Collaboration with scholars is crucial, because together they are able to "detect, analyse, prevent" new obstacles in news ecosystem (Digires, 2022). Furthermore, the emergence of digital platforms altered the relation between journalism and the public in digital media into more active and

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collaborative (Tandoc, 2014; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). In spite of that, there is still the challenge to consider journalism as a networked practice (Deuze and Witschge, 2018) which would include other actors in a broader journalistic community. Audiences are not passive, but active in their feedback and assessment in news ecosystem. Journalists should perceive audiences not only as sources and recipients, but as partners in news production and dissemination – relevant actors in digitalised journalistic community.

7 WE CALL FOR PLATFORMS TO DISCLOSE THEIR ALGORITHMIC CRITERIA TO NEWS PRODUCERS AND RESEARCHERS

In an increasingly complex world, dominated by digital platforms, media organisations often do not know what the mechanisms are behind the regulations and moderation of their content, so we call for algorithmic criteria and content guideline transparency.

We demand this because researchers and journalists have expressed concern over the lack of clarity regarding content moderation and algorithmic guidelines in platforms (Nielsen & Ganter, 2017). The lack of clarity on the above also limits the ability of news organisation to keep their audiences informed as they are unaware of the content prioritised by their audiences. Hence, we propose digital platforms to define their content moderation and algorithmic criteria guidelines so that journalists and researchers are able to understand how these work and help to better inform the public.

Platforms should have a collaborative mechanism with independent boards of professional stakeholders to assess the dangers, abuses and non-democratic biases existing within them and find solutions to it for greater transparency (Pickard & Pickard, 2017; Winseck, 2020). We propose the creation of external support groups, one for human content moderation and one for algorithmic moderation, consisting of stakeholders with a varied background expertise such as journalists, lawyers, engineers, civil society experts and social scientists. In addition, we are aware of already existing programs such as Facebook Open Research and Transparency Home (FORT). We ask for them to be more open, publicised and connected to other similar initiatives. Presently, these initiatives are scattered across countries and institutions. We ask for more collaboration and more dialogue between the existing programs. We also propose platforms to invest in specific information programs for journalists and professionals, to better inform them about the specific guidelines and how the algorithms work. These assessments should be done under programs like FORT or similar ones. In doing so, platforms do not risk losing their business plan completely disclosing their algorithms. We know that Facebook is already collaborating and opening itself up to academia, but what we ask for is furthering existing collaborations and connecting them together. This will not only improve perception amongst the general public but also help to improve platform's services.

8 WE CALL FOR MORE COOPERATION BETWEEN MEDIA RESEARCHERS AND JOURNALISTIC PRACTITIONERS

There is a mission of public service shared both by researchers and journalists. However, the gap between media research findings and their implementation in the journalistic practice is ever-growing. Therefore, we call upon scholars to be more cooperative with journalists by offering interdisciplinary training to enhance their technological and communicative skills.

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As part of their profession, scholars are encouraged and even required to take a more active role in the media (Claessen, 2014). Usually, their involvement in news production is taking the role of commentators and experts in reporting (Wien, 2014). However, we ask for another kind of fostered relationship between the parties, focusing on implementing research findings in journalism and communication studies in the newsroom and its practices.

An inclusive learning environment for everyone in the news reporting field is essential for an enhanced quality of news ecology. All practitioners and organisations from the public, private, and hybrid sectors should be offered equal training opportunities. No limitations nor discrimination should take place in terms of media institution size or resources.

Since it is two-way communication, journalists shall also communicate the most prominent topics and challenging gaps they oversee from a professional perspective and share them with the researchers.

This initiative might grow later to be established as an institution with academic and practitioner members from different member states to achieve more sustainable cooperative communication, taking into account possible collaborations with existing entities such as the European Federation of Journalism. Aforementioned forms of collaboration function as a partial solution responding to the obstacles with lack of funding.

9   WE CALL FOR RESEARCHERS TO CLOSELY WORK WITH DIGITAL GIANTS IN ORDER TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF NEWS DISSEMINATED

Although the ultimate goal must be a future where the news ecology is less constrained by digital giants, we acknowledge how researchers today ought to be involved in the improvement of the existing platforms. Any social scientist undertaking research using corporate social media platforms will acknowledge the incredible complexity in getting access to data, even if the intricacies of research ethics have been adequately addressed (Langlois & Elmer 2013). All scholars' efforts should be directed to serving the citizens' digital rights and protecting minorities.

Policy-makers can intervene to coordinate this communication process and work towards creating incentives by issuing laws or reducing taxes or both. The core idea is not to know how algorithms operate, but to make sure that they primarily operate in favour of citizens, not profit. This access agreement can help scholars also in advancing their research findings by being aware of developments at the forefront of innovation.

The use of new technology techniques such as machine learning, eye-tracking and artificial intelligence as innovation can make the quality of news ecology better. The knowledge researchers have about these techniques take media further. When we combine the assets of digital giants with the knowledge of scholars, healthier results will emerge.

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10 WE CALL FOR THE ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF RESEARCHERS IN ENVISIONING AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE EXISTING PLATFORMS

On the advent of the next frontier of the internet – the metaverse – we stress the pivotal role of researchers in the digital transformation of society. In line with the existing call for a Public Service Internet and Media (D'Arma et al., 2021), we envision a future with an alternative to the consumerism-focused platforms, that would put citizens at its centre. Tax-funded research is accountable to the citizens and works in their service. Therefore, researchers must be at the forefront of digital innovation in constructing an alternative to existing platforms in the form of a healthier environment, where news can thrive. The driving force is the vision of creating a space for a more just, diverse and democratic public sphere.

Building an alternative must however be accompanied by great scepticism; the risk of inventing the wheel again – with all the failures of the digital platforms such as harmful biased algorithms and data-harvesting practices – is looming. Thus, we believe that researchers serving as carriers of informed insights are crucial in the quest for designing technological innovations favouring a just and diverse news ecology.

11 WE CALL FOR MEDIA CONGLOMERATES AND PLATFORMS TO BE SEEN AS BIG ECONOMIC ACTORS THAT MUST BE REGULATED AS SUCH

The global news media market is increasingly dominated and shaped by large media conglomerates and digital intermediaries. We call for the recognition of their role not only as cultural but also as economic actors and the need to regulate them as such.

Media companies have traditionally been seen, and portrayed themselves to the public and regulators, first and foremost, as cultural and democratic actors deserving special rights and treatment when it comes to market regulation. While we agree with the importance of the role they play in liberal democracies and the need to protect the institutions of journalism, media freedom and freedom of speech, the trend towards global media market concentration and its negative effects on journalistic output and the media landscape have been identified and pointed out by many media scholars (e.g., Hallin & Mancini, 2017; Winseck, 2016).

Therefore, we believe it is important to acknowledge that media companies are cultural and democratic as well as economic actors in need of market regulation and oversight. Several of these actors have managed to leverage their economic and bargaining power in neoliberal market systems to achieve unprecedented growth and market domination. This has created international media conglomerates and is threatening diversity and pluralism both within the media sector and media output. While the majority of media brands exclusively produce and distribute their content locally or nationally, in many cases ownership is organised transnationally, making these media companies undoubtedly subject to internal market rules (e.g., McChesney, 2001). In formally recognising the role economic factors play in today's and tomorrow's global news ecosystem by the creation of an independent oversight institution, the European Union could continue following the trailblazing precedent it has set by putting in place and enforcing the GDPR starting in 2018.

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12   WE CALL FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INDEPENDENT EUROPEAN MEDIA INSTITUTION CONTROLLING CORPORATE MEDIA POWER

Transparent rules are the prerequisite of a democratic media environment, but transparency does not solve the problem of an unequal distribution of power in the media market. We call for the establishment of an independent European Media Institution controlling the corporate power in the media sector and improving the quality of European democracy.

Transparent criteria as the substance of news (Salgado, 2021) and the declaration of the ideological orientation of the media should be considered as minimal conditions to promote a democratic environment, but transparency does not automatically bring equality and plurality of the market.

The European Union should create a media institution to monitor and improve the quality of information. Since this media institution should have the role of allocating funding and evaluating the accountability of media, it should be independent, and its board should include qualified experts from journalist organisations, unions, universities, and NGOs. While politicians and representatives of the private companies may be involved as external auditors during the evaluation of the single market, they should not be involved in the process of decision-making in order to preserve the institution's independence.

After a two-year evaluation period to analyse the structure and the failure of the media market, the EU agency should produce a formal recommendation. Moreover, the role of the board should be to assess the media that operate in the European single market, to impose obligations to the news actors not respecting the EU fundamental rights, and to suggest a legal intervention to the European Parliament and to the European Commission.

The European media institution should establish a mandatory public register of media agencies, linking the public funding and the capability to operate in the single market to the compliance of European law, including both media companies and platforms, to be checked annually. Media actors and platforms should be subject to proportionally high requirements according to their economic power and their influence.

13   WE CALL FOR POLICY-MAKERS TO ELEVATE MEDIA LITERACY AS A PRIORITY BASED ON INPUT FROM RESEARCHERS

There has never been a more urgent time for government to improve media literacy and we need to take a moment to consider that this initiative offers hope to the future European news ecology. We call for policy-makers to elevate media literacy as a priority and that policy should be based on input from researchers.

Improving public media literacy is frequently identified as a major answer to the difficulties presented by the current information crisis, and the need to increase media literacy is the one policy area on which everyone agrees. A better society can make a better use of Public Service Media and Internet. The best protection against harms of profit-oriented media owners or even manipulation by powerful actors is a society that can defend itself, with wise and critical news users. Therefore, media

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literacy should be incorporated into the government's priority plan of developing well-behaved, self-regulating 'citizens/news users'.

At the European level, there have been many signs that media literacy is becoming a priority for policy-makers. There is rhetorical support for media literacy but less concrete steps yet for how to deliver a change in policy. To date, government actions have been hesitant. Owing to that fact, we must prioritise what we refer to as policy marketing (Buckingham, 2009). This policy marketing strategy is based on selling media literacy with several other attractive commodities. Therefore, European Union should develop a plan to raise awareness for media literacy by positioning it as an important and tempting offer.

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