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An integrative literature review on democracy and media in Europe: Theory driven re-analysis of existing empirical data

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DELIVERABLE 2.3

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Executive Summary

The objective of this deliverable (D2.3 henceforth) is to enhance the theoretical framework of the project and to further support the efforts of other work packages. It builds upon the groundwork laid out in the theoretical framework deliverable (D2.1), entitled "Democracy and Media: A Discursive-Material Approach", by integrating additional analytical data.

D2.3 consists of two parts, reviewing empirical research on European democracy and media, respectively, and documenting the contemporary (21st century) articulations produced by academic and policy-oriented research, as well as institutionalised activist groups (NGOs). More specifically, and following the structure outlined in D2.1, the report is divided into 9 sections (S) and presents an overview of research on the following topics:

(1) Core components of democracy and media (S1 and S5);
(2) The role of media in democracy (S6)
(3) Struggles over democracy and media's democratic roles (S2 and S7);
(4) Conditions of possibility of democracy and democratic media (S3 and S8);
(5) Threats to democracy and media's democratic roles (S4 and S9).

This deliverable identifies prevailing strands of existing research on democracy and media within the European context. It particularly highlights conceptual and methodological patterns in the reviewed literature, including the predominance of quantitative approaches, while also acknowledging the presence of alternative methodologies.

Furthermore, D2.3 presents a key entry point into Task 2.4, which consists of the continuous theory-driven reanalysis of the project's interventions.

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Introduction

This report concerns a literature review in the broad field of democracy and media in Europe, of output and publications produced in the discipline of media and communication studies and related disciplines, such as political studies. The aim of this comprehensive report is not to offer an exhaustive literature review of this broad field, mapping the entire volume of research conducted in the areas under study, but to systematically and thoroughly reflect on empirical work using the lens of an earlier-developed theoretical framework.

Out of the different types of literature review and the different techniques that have been developed that guide their composition, we applied an adjusted version of the integrative review method (Cronin & George, 2020; Torraco, 2016), which best serves the purposes of our project. It is a method that is driven by systematicity and thoroughness still allowing for a conceptual reflection of the material reviewed. As it is explained, integrative reviews "seek to review, critique, and synthesise 'representative' literature to generate new theoretical frameworks and perspectives" (Fan et al., 2022, p. 173). In our case, we did not seek to develop a new theoretical framework but use an existing one in a conceptually guided reflection on the empirical research conducted within the broad area of democracy and media in/about Europe. This theoretical framework was developed by Carpentier and Wimmer (2023) as part of the MeDeMAP project and bears the title "Democracy and Media: A Discursive-Material Approach". Hence, this exercise allows us to systematically review the empirical work in the field of democracy and media guided by the conceptual lenses of this theoretical framework, challenging it through a confrontation with research practice.

The development of this conceptual and reflective literature review followed a series of steps and criteria, aiming to protect the thoroughness and systematicity of the collection and evaluation of literature and empirical work, and synthesis of the literature review. These steps and criteria can be summarised as follows:

- The search for literature was guided by the main structure and contents of Carpentier and Wimmer's theoretical framework "Democracy and Media: A Discursive-Material approach".
- The literature considered for the review was relevant to Europe. Hence, it had to address Europe, the EU, parts of Europe or specific countries in Europe. Literature that had a global scope or focused on comparative research in some European and non-European countries was considered, only (or primarily) in relation to the parts that referred to Europe. Literature outside this scope was not included in the review.
- The literature considered for the review had an empirical focus. Hence, it focused on empirical analyses, surveys, reports, case studies and any other published work presenting (the analysis of) empirical data. Purely theoretical material/publications were not considered. In the very few cases where mainly theoretical literature is used, it is done so only if deemed necessary to, for instance, briefly introduce a concept.

- Three main types of material (referred to generally as literature) were considered for the literature review: i. academic publications (books, book chapters, research articles, academic journal thematic issues); ii. surveys, indexes and their outputs (data, reports, etc.); iii. European research projects and their outputs (data, deliverables, reports, publications, etc.). In several cases the types of material examined fell in two of these categories (e.g. a survey report being part of a European research project).
- The literature considered for the review was published/released from the year 2000 onward, as it concerns academic publications. Published work related to surveys and reports covered a five-year period (from 2018 onward). In both cases, there are very few exceptions (i.e., including publications older than the set period) that were legitimated on the basis of relevance.

The collection of literature followed three main steps:

- The two authors of this report searched manually for literature in main search engines, databases and websites (Scholar Google, Scopus, Web of Science; library repositories and databases; major academic publishers; major academic journals).
They searched using keywords pertinent to each main section of the theoretical framework "Democracy and Media: A discursive-material approach", (using e.g., the keywords democracy + media freedom), always filtering the content with the extra filters of 'Europe' and 'empirical focus'.
The manual search was preferred over an automated one, given the literature review's specificities (guidance by a given theoretical framework, empirical focus and focus on Europe). Manual search allowed to use also a conceptually guided 'snowball method' looking for relevant literature through the use of synonymous concepts. Furthermore, it allowed to apply criteria of diversity, targeting research pertaining to different parts of Europe, applying a variety of methods and conceptualisations.
- An invitation was addressed to the MeDeMAP work package leaders (of WP3, WP4 and WP5) to suggest literature for each of the main sections of the theoretical framework "Democracy and Media: A Discursive-Material Approach", applying the additional criteria of 'Europe' and 'empirical focus'. A collaborative form was used for this purpose, where the WP leaders (and their collaborators) added their suggestions, briefly describing the relevance of each suggested reference.
The literature suggestions were filtered by the authors and were accordingly integrated in the report.
- After a first draft of the deliverable was compiled, it was presented to the partners at the third consortium meeting in Lisbon, Portugal (March 2024). During this workshop all partners present at the meeting were given the opportunity to suggest topics, issues and literature, using the Miro platform.
Again, the literature suggestions were filtered by the authors and were accordingly integrated in the report.

As already mentioned, the synthesis of the literature review followed the theoretical framework "Democracy and Media: A Discursive-Material Approach", developed by Carpentier and Wimmer (2023) and the contents of the literature review are presented around a similar

structure, as it concerns its main parts, still allowing for some variations in the subsections, depending on the specific outputs of each section.

More in detail, the report is composed of two main parts. The first part focuses on democracy, presenting the core defining elements of democracy (in Section 1), the areas of struggle over the articulation of democracy (in Section 2), the conditions of possibility of democracy (in Section 3) and the threats to democracy (in Section 4), as they are addressed in empirical research pertaining to Europe. Part two focuses on the relationship between media and democracy, following a similar structure: presenting the core defining elements of media (in Section 5), the roles that media play in supporting and enhancing democracy (in Section 6), the struggles over media's democratic roles (in Section 7), the conditions of possibility of democratic media (in Section 8), and the threats to media's democratic roles (in Section 9), again, as they are presented and debated in empirical research pertaining to Europe.

The report is concluded with some overarching remarks concerning the observed preferences and absences in empirical research pertaining to democracy and media in Europe today, in terms of areas of study, themes, concepts and methodologies. Finally, a general observation that can be made out of this theoretically guided literature review is that the empirical research points out to both the fragility and resilience of democracy, and the persisting societal relevance and importance of media as pluralistic, democratic institutions.

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Part I: Democracy

1. Core components of democracy

Carpentier and Wimmer (2023) approach democracy through the discourse-theoretical notion of the empty signifier, see (Laclau, 1996). That is to say, rather than being a concept with an established and stable meaning, democracy is open to articulations from various political and social actors. This does not imply that democracy can be filled with *any* meaning; rather, it is an object of discursive struggles between a series of definitions which seek (and never fully succeed) to attain a universal recognition. While our inquiry in the next section will delve into these struggles, this opening section provides an overview of existing classifications of democracy derived from reports and indices, along with the data upon which they rely.

These definitions permeate, often invisibly, numerous attempts to quantitatively measure democracy. Freedom House publishes widely mediatised annual reports on the state of democracy entitled *Freedom in the World*, classifying countries as full democracies, partial democracies and "not free". Methodologically, *Freedom in the World* distinguishes between political liberties, with a heavy focus on the electoral process and opportunities, and civil liberties, which single out the freedom of expression, belief and assembly, the rule of law, and individual rights including the protection of minorities. On the basis of these variables, which are further unpacked through a series of qualitative questions, the index assigns points to rank countries. A somewhat similar approach may be found in the index entitled *The Global State of Democracy* by International IDEA (2023) which evaluates the representative government, the state of human rights, public participation, and the rule of law.

Another influential annual report by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *The Democracy Index,* adds to this list the functioning of the government and political culture. This results in a rather broad - "thick", in EIU's (2023, p. 6) own words - definition of democracy. In the governance criterion, it evaluates countries on the basis of checks and balances, accountability, corruption, public confidence, and freedom of the government from "undue influence" from the military, security services, foreign powers, and special economic and religious domestic interests. The "democratic political culture" criterion brings in even more complexity, measuring parameters such as the degree of societal consensus, preferred political leadership style, and even public perceptions of technocratic governance. The results of such analysis lead to a four-category classification of "full democracies", "flawed democracies", as well as hybrid and authoritarian regimes. Interestingly, despite attempts to fixate the meaning of democracy through the attribution of scores and points, *The Democracy Index*'s rather detailed and reflexive methodological note acknowledges the discursive struggles with which this endeavour

is confronted, arguing: "There is no consensus on how to measure democracy. Definitions of democracy are contested" (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023, p. 63).

A different methodology is proposed by the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) based at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. V-Dem collects data by consulting five experts per country, drawing from a pool of over 3,700 experts globally. V-Dem tackles the obvious challenge of subjective judgement through a measurement model, which aggregates expert assessments and converts them into a continuous latent scale, estimating concept values while considering expert reliability and scale perception differences. V-Dem (Nord et al., 2024) uses four indices: liberal democracy (equality before the law, as well as judicial and legislative constraints on the executive); deliberative democracy (focus on respective dialogue for common good); egalitarianism (equality of protection, power and resources distribution); and participation (the strength of civil society and local/regional governance).

To obtain data for some of these variables, the reports often resort to public opinion surveys. One of the best-known examples is the World Values Survey, which measures attitudes such as popular support for democracy, the military or expert rule. Alternative variations of *vox pop* polls encompass questions about citizens' satisfaction with democracy and their everyday experiences of democracy (Decker et al., 2023; Wike et al., 2024), views on representative versus direct democracy (Wike et al., 2024), their trust in government (Wike et al., 2017) or perceptions of political ideologies, immigrants and minorities (Decker et al., 2022; Decker & Brähler, 2020), as well as different demographic and professional groups, such as women, young adults or union members, in power (Wike et al., 2024).

Political studies offer numerous points of critique of the abovementioned indices, especially on the levels of conceptualisation, measurement, and aggregation (Boese, 2019; Bühlmann et al., 2011). Swiss scholars Bühlmann et al. (2011, p. 520) posit that

> "existing measures are based on a conception of democracy that is too simple. In addition, they lack a sound conceptual logic and suffer from problems of redundancy and conflation. Furthermore, the measurements used to create previous indices do not demonstrate high validity or reliability and some cannot be replicated. Finally, researchers who have used existing measures neither discuss nor justify their aggregation level or their aggregation rules".

Also, Copperidge et al. (2011) challenge the indices on a series of fronts, including methodological imprecision, insufficient scope, and vague coding criteria. In their impactful article, they proposed an approach that included historical data gathering to enhance contextualisation of democratic development. In addition, they added a focus on six "key" conceptions of democracy (electoral, liberal, majoritarian, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian), further unpacked in 33 components including sovereignty, judicial independence or party strength (Copperidge, 2011, pp. 255-256). Bühlmann et al. (2011) suggest their own *Democracy Barometer* based on over 100 indicators, which avoids expert assessments altogether—as these are considered to be too untransparent—and evaluate democracy on the

basis of nine "functions": individual liberties, rule of law, public sphere, competition, mutual constraints, governmental capability, transparency, participation, and representation. Seven iterations of the analysis have been published since (the latest one being Engler et al.'s, 2020).

In sum, while there is some degree of consensus on the core components of democracy, we also find profound disagreements on how to operationalise them in an empirical reality. We do not, however, problematise these debates in the expert and academic milieus or approach the ultimate definition of democracy as a finite process. Instead, we argue that these tensions are indicative of democracy remaining in the epicentre of discursive struggles, whose various parties seek to achieve dominance of their perspective, to little avail.

2. Struggles over democracy

To clarify the purpose of this section, a conceptual precision needs to be made. While discussions often frame democracy in terms of struggles, it is not our intention to delve into conflicts between actors of the political process, such as parties or politicians. Nor will this section centre on the struggle for democracy against competing forms of societal organisation. Instead, our entry point into this literature review is the recognition that democracy is inherently dynamic, subject to ongoing contestation from within. These efforts to shape democracy constitute "an intrinsic part of the democratic process itself" (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 11). The diverse articulations of democracy inform various perspectives on democratic mechanisms, practices, and applications. Consequently, our literature review will commence with an examination of one of democracy's fundamental dilemmas: the balance between representation and participation. Within this framework, we will explore empirical studies, evaluations of existing democratic experiments, and efforts to formulate policy recommendations.

2.1. The balance between participation and representation

Examination of empirical research reveals that much of the struggle concerning democracy centres on the nature of citizen participation, which oscillates between direct and representative models. These models are not inherently oppositional; rather, empirical studies tend to explore practices that address the shortcomings of the institutionalist framework through more immediate citizen involvement, thereby aiming to strengthen the democratic system. This discussion is also linked to a theoretical distinction between *politics*, understood in the sense of "practices and institutions through which an order is created" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 9), and the *political*, which "cannot be restricted to a certain type of institution, or envisaged as constituting a specific sphere or level of society. It must be conceived as a dimension that is to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition" (Mouffe, 1993, p. 3). Direct democracy, characterised by multidirectionality (Carpentier, 2011) and oriented towards grassroots and quotidian politics, encourages an expansion of the analysis of power struggles,

arguably aligning more closely with the understanding of a society permeated by conflict as proposed by the notion of the political.

Following this broadened interpretation of democracy – in many loci of social life rather than within institutional politics only – empirical and policy-oriented research has investigated power struggles in areas as diverse as healthcare (Lester et al., 2006), cultural production (Sol, 2019) or education: UNICEF has long emphasised the significance of involving children in the political process, cultivating spaces for critical thinking within educational environments. The discursive understanding of democracy is clearly visible in their early report which states:

> "[L]ittle is done in the schools beyond presenting children with a history of the struggle by which their government was originally formed. Consent to the political system is manufactured, rather than springing spontaneously from critically self conscious individuals" (Hart, 1992, p. 36).

The discussion that addresses the forms and instruments of enhanced participation in democratic practice gives examples such as the organisation of referenda, which are considered as instruments "of popular decision-making and participation in political life" (Uleri, 2016, p. 1). The referenda are seen as capturing the popular will on specific public issues, being a practice of direct democracy and direct governance by the people (Gallagher & Uleri, 1996; Hollander, 2019; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2005). The organisation of referenda can take place at the local, regional or national level. At the broader level they may involve issues of national relevance, e.g., the referendum on Scottish independence from the UK in 2014 (which did not get the majority of the vote), or the 'Brexit' referendum, concerning the UK leaving the EU, in 2016 (which was voted for, by the majority of the British electorate). In some countries, for instance in Switzerland, referenda are used as a common way of capturing the citizens' will on issues of local or regional governance (Ladner, 2002).

Among the criticisms that are addressed concerning the organization of referenda is the lack of enhanced engagement by the citizenry during the stages prior to voting. As critics argue, the decision on both the issues that the electorate is called to vote on and the election procedure are neither organized nor controlled by the people, limiting in practice what is seen as a "direct popular action" (Uleri, 1996, p. 1). Regardless of the limitations, research has shown that there is support for referenda as a participatory decision-making instrument in Europe. A survey by Schuck and De Vreese (2015) conducted on a large sample in 21 EU countries showed that "referendum support is highest among citizens who are critical of traditional party politics but committed to democratic practices" (p. 149).

Other forms of enhanced participation in democratic practice are considered the citizen parliaments or assemblies, which have been used in a series of participatory experiments conducted in Europe. For instance, in 2016, Ireland organised several citizen assemblies, featuring randomly selected members, to deliberate on a wide array of issues, ranging from abortion rights to climate change (Farrell et al., 2019). In 2019-2020, similar citizen assemblies were established in France and the U.K., tasked with deliberating and offering

recommendations to experts on mitigating greenhouse gas emissions (Climate Assembly UK, 2020) and assisted dying (Convention Citoyenne, 2023). Also, in Catalonia, the organisation of citizen assemblies is widespread, involving a wide range of issues pertaining, for instance, to the environment, culture, economy, education, youth, migration, etc., and engaging citizens from a broad spectrum of profiles. Based on the information available on the local government's website[1], 79 assemblies were organised, by April 2024, that involved 54,542 participants and which produced 10,507 proposals.

Empirical research followed this interest in expanded citizen participation, mainly relying on quantitative data sets. Overall, citizens' interest in participation remains high, with low withdrawal rates from assemblies (Fournier, 2011). Walsh and Elkink (2021) particularly emphasise the importance of affect, noting that dissatisfied citizens tend to be more willing to participate in assemblies (though willingness in Ireland was generally high). Citizen assemblies have also proven effective in boosting public support for specific policy issues (Muradova et al., 2020). Suiter et al. (2016) find that citizens indeed may change their opinion as a result of deliberation, but this holds true for younger and less knowledgeable participants, i.e. those in lower power standing.

Empirical studies also offer critique of citizen assemblies, pointing at their deficiencies and limitations. Based on their interviews of stakeholders of two British citizen assemblies, Wells et al. (2021, p. 4) note that "the recommendations were too broad or vague to provide useful insights for specific and complex policy issues". Fournier (2011) finds that while citizen assemblies contribute to creating more informed and engaged citizens, they often fail to significantly alter participants' attitudes, are perceived as too slow, and cost too much.

At the level of the EU, a similar push for direct citizen engagement in deliberation followed, as a large majority of respondents express a wish to "have a bigger say in EU decision-making" (Hierlemann & Ennanoulidis, 2022, p. 2). Based on its own data, Germany's independent Bertelsmann Foundation posits: "More and better citizen participation must not be a nice political add-on. It is an essential building block in a collective effort aiming to defend and develop democracy at the European level" (Hierlemann & Emmanouilidis, 2022, p. 1). The Bertelsmann Foundation has proposed its own model for organising the process, from topic selection to implementation of policy recommendations, in a recent detailed policy report on EU citizen assemblies (Abels et al., 2022).

Beyond citizen assemblies, the environmental agenda features prominently in recent empirical research on citizen participation, such as climate change adaptation (Mees et al., 2019) and anti-waste activism (Hajek, 2023). In particular, green energy is one area chosen by the EU as a locus for direct citizen participation, in order to "contribute to increasing public acceptance of renewable energy projects and make it easier to attract private investments in the clean energy transition" (European Commission, n.d.). In 2019, the EU incorporated energy communities into its legislative framework, which entailed the recognition of so-called renewable energy

[1] See https://participa.gencat.cat/?locale=en

communities (RECs). Studying RECs in the Dutch context, Teladia and Van der Windt (2024) identify transparency, strong social capital, clearly structured process and embeddedness of the projects in local agendas as enabling factors in shaping successful participatory practices. A more critical cross-country analysis by Standal et al. (2023) emphasises that struggles for democracy are inherent in the development of RECs: it is pointed out that local collectives often lack adequate understanding of diversity issues, thereby impeding the inclusivity envisioned by this initiative.

2.2. Struggles over procedures

Whether political decisions should be based on delegation or direct involvement is one question. The specifics of arrangements for either model is another challenge: "How the 'rule of the people' is exactly organised can vary in numerous ways, and is, in itself, object of political struggle" (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 18). One challenge concerns the roles of the actors of the democratic procedures, particularly when participatory procedures involving 'ordinary' citizens are intermeshed with the presence of elected officials, creating specific expectations. Exploring the participatory dynamics within Vienna's Seestadt Aspern, Europe's largest city development project, Butzlaff (2023) underscores a deficiency in resident initiative and an expectation that politicians should simply 'do their jobs' and manage the process. The resulting imbalances hinder power redistribution: "Participation in the realm of the Seestadt remains restricted to voicing preferences and choosing between predefined alternatives" (Butzlaff, 2023, p. 352).

Another facet of empirical evidence underscores the challenges inherent in implementing decisions made by participatory citizen bodies. A comprehensive report analysing polling data on citizen participation within the EU (Hierlemann et al., 2022) sheds light on two critical gaps: a "political commitment gap" (wherein citizen participation lacks the necessary political will to flourish) and an "awareness gap" (with less than half of Europeans believing their voices carry significance). On one hand, it is observed that "the drive for increased participation often emanates from a small cadre of participation enthusiasts within EU institutions and is not widely embraced by the Union's broader political establishment" (Hierlemann et al., 2022, p. 12). On the other, citizens themselves "perceive a disparity between their own inclination to engage in EU politics and the ambiguous impact their vote, opinions, insights, and participation have on the EU" (Hierlemann et al., 2022, p. 9). Additionally, the somewhat disillusioning experience of policy decisions bypassing the preferences of panel participants is also brought up in academic literature (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019; Lindeman, 2002).

3. Conditions of possibility of democracy

As a major framework for collective organisation, democracy garners considerable attention as an attribute that can be cultivated, evolved, and sustained. The dominant institutionalist framework focuses on established practices and procedures that support the system of checks

and balances, political inclusion, and citizen participation. With a strong methodological focus on measurements, this research cluster prioritises particular tenets of democracy, where trust and knowledge/education are two particularly important examples. Studies within this paradigm focus on the macro-level and tend to consider citizens in the subject position of voters, aspiring to understand their attitudes and motivations at the ballot box – or those views and beliefs that preclude political participation in the first place.

A less prominent strand of research extends its focus to grassroots practices. This line of research remains important as it enables the analysis of resistance practices in autocracies and illiberal democracies. This grassroots-oriented approach may intersect with institutionalist perspectives, particularly as grassroots organisations evolve into integral components of the political establishment, as seen with Greece's SYRIZA, Spain's Podemos, or Italy's Five Star Movement (see Section 3.3). By integrating insights from grassroots-oriented research into the literature review, we advocate for the necessity of looking beyond institutionalist frameworks to fully grasp the conditions of possibility of democracy.

3.1. Trust

Trust, alongside distrust (towards a governing elite), plays a vital role in the co-construction of the democratic state and citizenship (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023; Levi & Stoker, 2000). Empirical research has explored the axes along which trust displays unequal distribution patterns in Europe.

The first cluster relates to regional distinctions. Notably, the Nordic countries stand out for their high levels of trust in national institutions such as the police, legal system, government, and parliament; conversely, Eastern and Southern Europe traditionally demonstrate relatively lower levels of trust (TRUEDEM, n.d.). This division also extends to satisfaction with democratic institutions, although recent polls indicate an increase in satisfaction in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in Lithuania and Hungary (Wike et al., 2019).

Trust has also been explored with regard to different demographic groups. More highly educated, older and/or better-off Europeans tend to display higher level of trust in political institutions (Bengtsson & Brommesson, 2022; Christensen & Lægreid, 2005; Kołczyńska et al., 2020; Wike et al., 2019). At the same time, there is a delicate balance between acceptance and dissent, where a certain level of "healthy distrust" vis-à-vis the political system is deemed necessary for democracy (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005).

In regard to the European Union, Arrighi et al. (2022) have identified a division between the Northern and Southern regions. Respondents in the North, particularly in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Germany, show greater trust in their national governments compared to European institutions. In contrast, Eastern Europeans, particularly the Lithuanians, Bulgarians, and Romanians, express a higher appreciation for the EU. It has been argued that these findings point to internal social cohesion, rather than an inherent Euroscepticism within the European North: "Far from showing that citizens in Northern countries have less trust in European Union

institutions (this trust being, in many cases, higher than that observed in the South), these figures above all attest to the high perceived efficiency of these countries' national institutions" (Arrighi et al., 2022, para. 17). The report underscores that, especially during crises, European authorities emerge as viable alternatives to national governments. Another study suggested that (dis)trust in national political systems is extrapolated to the EU as a whole (Karp et al., 2003).

Research tends to draw conclusions on the determinants of trust by analysing extensive survey data. Caasa and Andriani (2021) highlight civil participation as a trust determinant, noting a correlation between low trust levels and significant power distance. Analysing data from a survey encompassing over 85,000 respondents across 25 European countries, Charron and Rothstein (2018) find that institutional quality is the primary determinant of regional trust variations within European nations, rather than economic inequality, civic participation, or ethnic heterogeneity.

3.2. Knowledge and education

Knowledge and education are articulated as key conditions for democracy in both policy and academic research. At the level of the EU institutions, it is stipulated that "education and training systems are required not only to anticipate, adapt and respond appropriately to the new challenges, but also to contribute to the future of our democracies and the EU, by shaping active, engaged and creative citizens who are aware of their shared values and able to improve their living environment" (Council of the EU, 2023). A similar approach is observed in the Member States – for instance, when the Swedish government explicitly declares that "education must communicate and reinforce respect for human rights and fundamental democratic values upon which the Swedish society is founded" (Kulturdepartementet, 2018, p. 51, our translation).

In empirical academic literature, the tradition of associating knowledge/education with democracy can be traced back to Almond and Verba's seminal study (1963). It is widely recognised that education cultivates attributes such as political trust and efficacy (i.e., the belief that one's actions will yield meaningful results), thereby motivating individuals to actively participate in politics; conversely, lower levels of education tend to have the opposite effect. For instance, there is evidence indicating a sustained and significant decline in voter turnout in Germany within neighbourhoods characterised, among other factors, by lower income and educational attainment (Blaeser et al., 2016). Similarly, disparities in political participation have been observed between less-educated and well-educated citizens in the Netherlands (Bovens & Wille, 2010), as well as educational discrepancies in citizens' electoral preferences across Western and Northern Europe (Stubager, 2010; Wille & Bovens, 2019).

Education level, along with cognitive skills, access to political information, and efficacy, also matter for the specificity of the type of democracy, further contributing to the ongoing struggles over democracy discussed in the previous section. Quantitative measurements in empirical research demonstrate that less educated and less politically informed European citizens tend to favour more direct forms of engagement (Dalton et al., 2001; Donovan & Karp, 2006). Offering a slightly nuanced perspective within the Dutch context, Coffé & Michels (2014) suggest that

while representative democracy and education level are not inherently correlated, lower-educated citizens tend to prefer direct or stealth (i.e., expert-based) models when contrasted with representative democracy.

3.3. Social movements and grassroots activism

With trust and knowledge/education emerging as two crucial conditions of possibility of democracy in empirical literature, the third element connects us to the civil society as represented in activism studies. Often overlooked in quantitative approaches, the research on social movements further unpacks the dynamic of representation and participation. Grassroots activism resides on the participatory side of the spectrum, critiquing the representative system for its elite-driven, hierarchical parties where ordinary members have minimal influence on decision-making. This position has prompted a wealth of empirical studies that looked beyond the political mainstream to find examples of democratic movements on the margins of the institutionalised political process. Some of these movements, which began as social movements would later become part of the political establishment, on the left (Della Porta et al., 2017) as well as on the right (Caiani & Císař, 2018; Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2019).

Methodologically, research on grassroots movements diverges significantly from studies on the "objective" conditions for democracy discussed in Sections 3.1 and 3.2, and emphasises affect as an underlying political condition. With its interest in the dynamics of power and resistance, discourse analysis is a frequently chosen analytical framework. Considering the studies of activist groups in real-world settings, ethnography is not uncommon; in-depth interviews is another widely employed method of data collection.

One research area on social movements as a condition of democracy was inspired by the anti-austerity protests in Europe in the mid-2010s (della Porta, 2015). Two particularly well-studied cases are Greece (Kapsali, 2023; Malamidis, 2020; Roussos, 2019) and Spain (Carvalho, 2022; Gerbaudo, 2012; Romanos, 2017; Romanos & Sádaba, 2022; Sola & Rendueles, 2018). Research highlights the dynamics of solidarity within these movements, for instance through the creation of solidarity economy (Arampatzi, 2018; Giovannini, 2020).

Complementing institutionalist frameworks, grassroots activism remains an important condition of democratic practice (della Porta, 2020). This is particularly echoed by scholars in Central and Eastern Europe, who analyse the post-socialist democratic transition through civil society protest and low-level organisation (Jacobsson, 2015; Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2017; Miszlivetz & Ertsey, 2020; Pixová, 2019). The ongoing importance of grassroots communities, not least in media, is still highlighted in research, as they foster autonomous spaces where democratic practices can be enacted (Filimonov, 2021; Filimonov & Carpentier, 2023). These enactments, however, often have to face significant pressure from powerful forces, which invariably threaten to thwart the already fragile democratic process.

4. Threats to democracy

Having discussed the definitions and conditions of democracy, as well as struggles and conditions of possibility pertaining to it, we move on to revisiting empirical literature on the threats to democracy. Carpentier and Wimmer (2023) point at two types of threats: from within and from the outside. The very unbalance between elites and citizens tends to produce undesirable tendencies of power centralisation. Democracy also faces the double challenge of citizen apathy and an arbitrary, inherently political delineation of borders between those who are deemed capable and worthy of full-fledged participation, and those who remain on the outside of the political process. Finally, democracies are characterised by diversity, leading to conflicts which in turn are prone to escalation into violence. The empirical explorations of the fragility of democracy will be the focus of our discussion here.

4.1. The centralisation of power

Arguably, the most significant threat to democracy in contemporary Europe stems from the centralisation of power and the subsequent democratic backsliding, dubbed by some as an "authoritarian" (Kreuder-Sonnen, 2018) or "illiberal turn" in the EU. Within academic research, the dominant strand has looked into authoritarian tendencies in Central and Eastern Europe, with its long shadow of authoritarian past (Pinto & Morlino, 2013). Studies have looked notably into Hungary (Buzogány, 2017; Fabry, 2019), Poland (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016; Klaus, 2017; Ślarzyński, 2022) – sometimes considered together (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Lendvai-Bainton & Szelewa, 2021; Pirro & Stanley, 2022; Sata & Karolewski, 2020) – but also, for instance, the Czech Republic (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Havlík, 2019), Latvia (O'Dwyer & Schwartz, 2010), and Romania (Sedelmeier, 2014). Here, institutional factors, such as the stability of courts, media and the civil society, were analysed (Bugarič, 2015); as well as alternative conceptions of nation compared to Western Europe (Rupnik, 2016). Although Central and Eastern Europe dominate the empirical literature, also Southeast Europe has received attention (Dolenec, 2013; Kapidžić, 2020).

The authoritarian tendencies have not escaped the attention of the various indices of democracy, which were already considered in the first Section of this document, when addressing the core components of democracy. In recent years, the tonality of these documents has taken a pessimistic turn. Freedom House (2024) proclaims that "[g]lobal freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year" (p. 1). V-Dem's report (Nord et al., 2024) stated that "[t]he level of democracy enjoyed by the average person in the world in 2023 is down to 1985-levels" (p. 6). Still, Europe shows a strong democratic performance globally, with 8 out of 10 Europeans living in fully "free countries" (Freedom House, 2024), and a shrinking gap between the West/North and the Centre/East (International IDEA, 2023, p. 118). Even amid the tendencies of democratic backsliding, there are glimpses of hope: Slovenia, for instance, has drastically improved its standing (Freedom House, 2023; International IDEA, 2023), and gender equality has been said to improve across several European countries (International IDEA, 2023, pp.

108–109), as well as progress on the protection of rights of LGBTQ+ people (Freedom House, 2024, p. 28). Also the new government of Poland, elected at the end of 2023, has received praise for taking "swift steps to dismantle its illiberal predecessor's political control over public media, which could lead to a more free and diverse information environment" (Freedom House, 2024, p. 28). Some reasons for concern in Europe include the rise of the far right and continued illiberal tendencies in Hungary and Serbia (Freedom House, 2023, p. 28).

4.2. Non-participation

The disinterest of citizens and voters in the political process is also frequently understood as an internal threat to the democratic process, as it brings repercussions for both the representative and participatory components of democracy (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 28). As the Economist Intelligence Unit's report (2023, p. 65) bluntly puts it, "apathy and abstention are enemies of democracy". Nevertheless, the extent of citizens' involvement in the political process remains a contested subject in the democratic theory, as the post-WWII tradition in political science has been wary of a too broad public engagement, which could disrupt the system (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 29). Democratic elitists in the ranks of Schumpeter and Dahl argued for competition among already privileged actors, where ordinary citizens have only a limited influence on the political process. Contemporary incarnations of this position take the form of epistocracy (Brennan, 2016), which seek to protect democracy from the supposed ignorance of voters. It is within this theoretical puzzle that the empirical concern with voter disengagement is embedded.

As we have discussed in the previous section, research tends to analyse democratic participation through the lens of demographic groups which are traditionally associated with lower levels of inclusion in the political process. Empirical focus has been placed on the abstention of youngsters (Deželan, 2023; Kitanova, 2020; Pini, 2009; Sloam, 2013; Stanojević & Gvozdanović, 2022; Thijssen et al., 2015), immigrants (Gidengil, 2013; Pettinicchio & de Vries, 2017), and voters with disabilities (Kirbiš et al., 2023). Research has also explored the factors of abstention, such as political dissatisfactions and distrust (Valgarðsson et al., 2022) and electoral fatigue (Nonnemacher, 2021; Northmore-Ball, 2016). In particular, low participation in elections to EU institutions remains a focal point of empirical inquiries.

Compulsory voting, which is observed in several European countries, is one practice that seeks to combat non-participation. It usually entails fines for voters who refuse to come to the polls. Research has looked into the effects of compulsory voting in Europe (Birch, 2008); but also the results of its abolition (Miller & Dassonneville, 2016). For instance, evidence from compulsory voting in Austrian regions points to some improvements in voter turnout (Gaebler et al., 2020; Hoffman et al., 2017). Contemplating a similar measure in Poland, Czesnik (2013) found that it would also increase electoral participation.

The question of whether higher voter turnout (either via compulsory voting or not) favours any specific political force (e.g., the left of the right) remains an unsolved puzzle as the empirical evidence in Europe is equivocal (Bechtel et al., 2016; Czesnik, 2013; Fisher, 2007). For

instance, Fisher (2007), based on his longitudinal study that included several European countries and types of election, argued that "the idea that higher turnout benefits the left appears to be largely mythical" (p. 598). In another longitudinal study focusing on the general elections in Austria, it was argued that "the extreme right gains are related to the poorer performance of center parties (especially the right) and, to a lesser degree, high voter turnout" (Stockemer & Lamontagne, 2014, p. 39). A careful reading of these empirical findings points to the fact that hasty interpretations based on causal relationships might be misleading, given that voting decisions and behaviour are the outcome of rather complicated sets of factors.

4.3. Delimitation of the political community

The co-articulation of democracy and stateness makes citizenship one of the key mechanisms of inclusion into and exclusion from the political community (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, pp. 16-17). The latter is a complex notion in its own right, whose reading ranges from an individualist notion (i.e. aggregated citizens forming a nation) to the communal one, which takes into account the diversity of (sub)communities within nation-state, which is most prominently fostered by the politics of multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 2016).

The research has highlighted the rise of the European far right and the resulting shift of the political mainstream to the right, where the notions of citizenship and political community become triangulated with ethnicity and, often, religion (Howard, 2010; Yilmaz, 2016). A frequent feature of empirical research that seeks to evaluate and predict the trajectory of this trend have been pollsters that measure citizens' concerns about immigration, within particular European countries (Vehrkamp, 2021), cross-nationally (Mieriņa & Koroļeva, 2015) or across regional clusters (Hajdu & Klingová, 2020).

Another phenomenon pertaining to narrowing down on the community, described as denizenship (Hammar, 1989, as cited in Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 33), relates to the status of a resident non-citizen excluded from the political community. One example is the discursive struggle around the significant Russian minority in Latvia and Estonia. As the reversal of Russification, imposed under the Soviet-era occupation, was taking place in the 1990s, the two Baltic states introduced the policy of naturalisation for Russians who moved to the republics in the Soviet era (that is, in the preceding 50 years). A considerable part of the Russian Latvians and Estonians are considered as individuals with "undetermined citizenship" in Estonia or as "non-citizens" in Latvia (Carpinelli, 2019), limiting their electoral rights and the freedom of movement in the EU, although naturalisation procedures exist (focussing on language skills). A number of reports addressing this denizenship case (e.g. Järve & Polishchuk, 2019; Paparinskis, 2018) highlight the discursive nature of citizenship, which is embedded in political struggles rather than obvious legal definitions.

Exclusionary practices affecting the political community are further facilitated through the discourse on securitisation, where the recent security-based deprivation of citizenship in several European countries is one example that has received significant attention, both in reports by the EU institutions and think tanks (Strik, 2019; Van der Baaren et al., 2022) and academic research (Bolhuis & Wijk, 2020; Mantu, 2018; Reyntjens, 2019; Wautelet, 2016; Zedner, 2016). These

examinations present a critical perspective on these practices, arguing about both their relative inefficiency as a counter-terrorism measure and warning that they may compromise democratic citizenship through the practice of its involuntary revocation. These debates do, however, evoke another important threat to democracy, which comes from forcible modes of political action.

4.4. Violence

Since Weber, the monopoly on legitimate use of violence is exclusively co-articulated with the state. Democracy, with its checks and balances and the rule of law, is paramount to preventing the abuse of this power. Even so, as Carpentier and Wimmer (2023) note, this does not preclude contestations of state-sanctioned violence in democracy as is evidenced in numerous cases of excessive police brutality, from which Europe has not escaped (Pichl, 2014; Schneider, 2008, 2018).

On the opposite side of the spectrum lie the illegitimate (from the statist point of view) forms of violence, which fall under the labels of extremism and terrorism, and the threats to democracy from within. These remain significant concerns in Europe and are addressed by multiple strategic research centres, such as the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Such institutions regularly publish reports on threats of radicalism within democratic systems, covering areas such as social movements (Pollack Sarnecki, 2021) and religious groups (Strindberg, 2021).

When it comes to externalities, wars remain the most potent violent threat to democracies. On the one hand, wars may prove detrimental to democratic systems from the inside, as exemplified by Howarth (2000) in his analysis of the temporary annihilation of diversity in the British parliament during World War II, through what he calls a discursive logic of differentiation. On the other hand, war threatens democracies from the outside, particularly when understood within a discursive framework of a civilisational antagonism – in other words, under an existential threat from non-democratic regimes, as is exemplified by the discourse on the EU-Russia relations following the (second stage of the) invasion of Ukraine (Bajor et al., 2022; International IDEA, 2022).

At the same time, from a discourse-theoretical perspective, military conflicts paradoxically strengthen the discourse of democracy through the logic of equation. That is to say, the emergence of a united front against an antagonistically articulated regime reinforces the sense of belonging to common (democratic) values (Chueri & Törnberg, 2022; Klymak & Vlandas, 2024; Steiner et al., 2023), thereby contributing to the discursive construction of the European identity (Carpentier & Doudaki, 2023). As the digital age saw the emergence of the so-called hybrid warfare, cyberspace has created ample vulnerabilities for democracy in the context of information wars, which we will return to in Part 2.

Part II: Media and Democracy

5. Core components of media

5.1. Defining media

Carpentier and Wimmer (2023) identify media as "the technological-institutional assemblages that we as humans use to communicate across place and time" (p. 37). These assemblages being discursive and material incorporate communication technologies, organisational and institutional (infra)structures and objects, and cultural practices, and function as "signifying machines (Carpentier, 2017, p. 62), that allow to circulate signifying practices inside and outside their organisational boundaries, which, in turn, allows for the circulation of discourses, but also for their validation and (potential) modification" (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 38).

Institutions
Research that addresses media's institutional aspects and functions is prolific, even if it is not always driven primarily by a media-as-institutions definition. In any case, research that addresses the institutional roles and functions of media focuses on their economic, organisational, technological, cultural and regulatory dimensions, and will be addressed further-on in the following sections of the deliverable. Still, it is worth mentioning here that a large part of the research addressing implicitly or explicitly news media's role as the Fourth Estate or other normative considerations connect directly with the apprehension of media as an institution safeguarding democracy (see, e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2016; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Standaert, 2022; Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a, 2021b).

Technology
The approach that sees media primarily as technologies is not new, but rather as old as the first discussions on what media are. There is a rich body of empirical research seeing media primarily as technologies, and evaluating the impact of these technologies in social organisation, politics, human behaviour, etc.

Research, for instance, has been focusing on media-as-technologies facilitating or obstructing citizen participation, expression of opinion and democracy at large (Enikolopov et al., 2020; Margetts et al., 2016; Trechsel et al., 2023; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016); media technologies enabling surveillance and restricting people's freedoms (Broeders, 2007; Doudaki et al., 2023; Topak & Vives, 2020); authoritative regimes imposing enhanced surveillance through media (Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019; Yesil & Sözeri, 2017).

The diverse debates related to the technological affordances facilitating or obstructing the media's democratic role will be addressed in the following sections on struggles, conditions of possibility and threats. What can be argued here is that research in these areas is sometimes

driven by technocentric or mediacentric approaches or even by technological determinism, overemphasising the potential of technological artefacts as drivers of societal change (see e.g. Winner (1999 [1980], on technological determinism).

Some more refined areas of research combine the institutional, cultural and technological aspects of media. For instance, research under the umbrella of mediatisation, which still tends to be mediacentric, argues that "media as institutions, spaces of experience and staging apparatuses are not only tools and channels of mediation, but always also offer mechanisms for socialisation and for identity construction", as Carpentier and Wimmer (2023, p. 40) explain, referring to the work of scholars such as Krotz and Hepp (Hepp & Krotz, 2014; Krotz, 2017). Empirical research engaging in the mediatisation debates and concepts, has been focusing, e.g. on understanding processes and challenges of democratisation in the EU using the lenses of mediatisation (e.g., Meyer, 2005; Trenz, 2006) or the mediatisation of social phenomena and struggles such as migration in Europe (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018; Mészáros, 2019).

Audience

One important element in the constitution of media, apart from their technological, institutional, and cultural dimensions, is the audience. As Carpentier and Wimmer (2023) write, "[a]s media are driven by the practice of communication, as signifying practices, they need an audience to complete their identity" (p. 38).

Empirical research in this area has been focussing on audience measurements, on perceptions, practices and experiences of audiences, and on research concerning passive, active and elusive audiences. These research topics and strands assume or address explicitly different understandings and conceptualisations of the audience, apprehending it as consumer, as political actor and as citizen, as public, as community, as user, as producer, as 'produser', etc. (Carpentier et al., 2013; Das et al., 2013; Guerrero-Pico et al., 2019).

Large-scale audience research is often performed through surveys that capture audience's media use across countries and/or demographics (Bonfadelli et al., 2023). For instance, the Eurobarometer is a regular survey of the Europeans' use of their preferred media, and their perceptions and attitudes towards the media of their countries. These findings, show among others that television continues to be the most commonly used medium, that radio is proven to be a resilient medium, and that print media continue to face challenges with shrinking readerships, while there are significant variations across the 27 EU Member States in the level of trust in the media, not fully captured in the North-South distinction (see e.g. Eurobarometer, 2023a; Eurobarometer, 2023b; Eurobarometer, 2022). Also, Reuters Institute's yearly international reports, which include 24 European countries, focus on digital news consumption patterns (see., e.g., Newman et al., 2022, 2023).

There is also a long history of market-driven audience measurements in Europe and globally, with commercial companies developing sophisticated tools quantitatively 'measuring' the audiences of newspapers, radio, television, films, music, etc. (Taneja & Mamoria, 2012). For instance, major companies in television audience measurements, such as AGB-Nielsen, TNS

(Taylor Nelson Sofres) and GfK Telecontrol have been measuring, since the 1980s, the television audiences' viewing behaviour 'in real time' using devices located in viewers' households, known as 'peoplemeters' (Estibals, 2000). Audience measurement companies have adjusted to the conditions pertaining in digital and multi-platform online media environments, developing increasingly sophisticated multi-media or crossmedia measurement tools, measuring 'in real time' TV, radio, print, digital and mobile platforms use (Taneja & Mamoria, 2012).[2] These measurements are largely used as the basis of how advertising revenues are distributed among the companies operational in these media and platforms.

Academic research has also tried to explore audience behaviour taking in consideration demographic or other factors. For instance, Elvestad and Blekesaune (2008) used survey data and examined the correlation of main demographics to reading patterns across Europe, pointing to national differences. Their findings showed that "[a]ge, gender, education level and household income explain differences in newspaper reading, but these variables do not have the same effect in all countries" (Elvestad & Blekesaune, 2008, p. 425). Other researchers have been using commercial ratings data, to e.g., explore through statistical analysis viewing trends in specific types of programmes and specific age groups across European countries, replicating the audience demographic categories constructed by the commercial companies (see, Lehmkuhl et al., 2016). There are also studies concerning e.g., the organisational models of audience measurement systems in selected European countries, from a company perspective (Ognjanov & Mitic, 2019).

Other researchers have focused on the types of relationships between the state and television audience measurements, and how these relationships reflect different apprehensions of the audience (as commodity, public, etc.) and different approaches concerning the role of the state. Within the role of the state as media regulator, in countries such as France or UK, the state "is a user of the measurements and directly integrates them into its activities. The data become points of reference in legislation and regulation, and the public authorities rely on them to build and justify decision making" (Bourdon & Meadel, 2015, p. 2251).

The longstanding and very prolific in terms of tools, methods and produced data audience measurement research has been constructing particular definitions of the audience, largely as a (passive or active) consumer. These constructions are connected also to a series of assumptions and expectations of what media are and what their roles in society, are. Several scholars have been conducting critical research on these constructions of the audience. For instance, Bourdon and Méadel's (2011) case study of Médiamétrie, the organisation that manages television audience measurement in France, included fieldwork, analysis of the company's archives and interviews with some of its professionals. In their analysis, Bourdon and Méadel refer to Latour (1987), to reflect about how such measurements "remain a black box […] that is, a techno-social mechanism that produces things routinely agreed upon and (almost) never questioned" (Bourdon & Méadel, 2011, p. 792).

[2] see e.g. https://www.tvkeyfacts.com/news/innovations/the-status-of-cross-media-measurement-across-europe-and-the-us/

One main strand of research centres around how audiences create meanings while interacting with media texts. Qualitative research in the form of focus groups, in-depth interviews, diary-keeping and ethnography offers nuances about people's perceptions and meaning-making processes, and avoids the dichotomisation of powerful media-weak audiences that drove research in the past. Reception studies focussing on news include for instance Madianou's (2005a, 2005b, 2007) ethnographic research on news consumption in Greece; Van Brussel's (2018) audience receptions of Belgian media representations of euthanasia using qualitative focus groups and face-to-face interviews; and Scammell and Bielsa's (2022) focus group study on the reception of translated news. Also, the themed section 'News consumption across Europe' edited by Adoni et al. (2017) includes a series of studies on news consumption repertoires in Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Portugal, Croatia, Estonia and Poland using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Finally, a research area that has attracted interest since the 2000s onwards concerns the online audiences. Assumptions about audience construction and behaviour, and about what constitutes media, were tested, challenged or reconfigured with the advances in digitalisation, online communication technologies, social media, the rise of algorithms and artificial intelligence. One aspect concerns the active role of audiences in selecting the contents of their preferences, and their abilities as curators, commenters, producers (Carpentier, 2009; García-Avilés, 2010, 2012; Livingstone, 2009; van Zoonen & Farida, 2011; van Zoonen et al., 2010). This is coupled with the increased commercialisation and fragmentation of the online space, together with the multiplication of filter bubbles, toxicity and extremism online (Cammaerts, 2009; Makhortykh & Wijermars, 2023; Paz et al., 2020).

Another aspect concerns the monitoring of online audiences' behaviour for commercial or other purposes. Today, audience behaviour online is monitored using website, search engine and social media analytics which are becoming increasingly sophisticated with the assistance of algorithms and artificial intelligence (Batrinca & Treleaven, 2015; Kalinová, 2022; Rathore et al., 2017). Researchers have addressed concerns regarding the ethical implications of harvesting online audiences' data and of using these monitoring tools to influence people's behaviour, raising concerns also for the dangers these practices may pose for democracy (Battista & Uva, 2023; Brkan, 2020; Mahoney et al., 2022; Mavriki & Karyda, 2020).

5.2. Public sphere and civic culture

For Carpentier and Wimmer (2023), "the public sphere represents a constellation of communicative spaces in society" (p. 41). These spaces "allow the circulation of information, ideas, debates, etc … and … the formation of public opinion" (p. 42). While the public sphere is not to be equalised with the media, still, the media's role today is vital, as they establish and maintain "the public communicational space" (p. 40), facilitating and institutionalising "the connection between citizens and the political system" (p. 42).

In its early configurations, the public sphere was expected to function within national geographic spaces and frameworks. Soon after, research opened up to explore whether transnational, and particularly European, public spheres can exist (e.g. Machill et al., 2006; Peters et al., 2005). There are different trends in this research area; one sees the potential of a European public sphere above and beyond individual states, another approaches the European public sphere as the aggregation of national public spheres, and another one sees it "as a result of a Europeanization of national publics" (Machill et al., 2006, p. 59).

Empirical work often focuses on mediated deliberation about national or European issues, in national or transnational media (Bärenreuter et al., 2009, p. 10; Brüggemann & Schulz-Forberg, 2009; Heinderyckx, 2015), based on the premise that (news) media in contemporary societies largely function as spaces where the public opinion is formed. These studies engage often in content analysis of news texts, in most cases through quantitative methods (e.g., Kevin, 2001, 2004; Peter, 2003; Peters et al., 2006; Walter, 2017), while there are also some qualitative analyses, including discourse analyses (e.g., Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2006).

Some studies explore processes of Europeanisation, i.e., the strengthening of Europeanness, which can be manifested, among others, in the existence of a European public sphere. Within this logic, Europeanisation may be "indicated by an increase in the reporting of European topics in the national media" (Machill et al., 2006, p. 63), which can then be studied by identifying measurable dimensions and variables of analysis.

Empirical findings in this thematic area, across countries and across time, tend to show "that the public spheres of the EU states continue to exhibit a strong national orientation" (Machill et al., 2006, p. 57; Trenz, 2004) and that there is a domestication of the European public sphere, using national prisms in the construction of Europe (see e.g. Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2006). These analyses tend also to point to a parallel democratic deficit in the EU and a deficit in European media reporting (Machill et al., 2006, p. 80). Other scholars, however, see a coexisting domestication of European affairs and Europeanisation of domestic politics (see e.g. Kantner's (2014) large corpus analysis of newspaper articles in several countries, concerning humanitarian military interventions).

One issue concerning the study of national or European public spheres is that they often focus on periods of elections, studying formal or procedural aspects of democratic practice (de Vreese, 2009; Grill & Boomgaarden, 2017; Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022), or times of crisis (e.g., EU economic crisis (Monza & Anduiza, 2016; Picard, 2015); Brexit (Krzyżanowski, 2019); etc.), while day-to-day activities or issues of broader political relevance attract less attention.

The focus on mediated deliberation and the attempts to measure national and European public spheres through quantitative methodologies reflect a top-down understanding of rather homogenised public spheres dominated and controlled by elite institutional actors. Some scholars point to the problematisations that shall drive research in this field, arguing for the

need to engage in bottom-up approaches to explore the multiplicity and fragmentation of both national and supranational (e.g., European) public spheres (Bärenreuter et al., 2009).

From 2000s onward researchers started exploring whether the online spaces of communication can function as unmediated public spheres, with citizens deliberating in an unrestricted fashion on issues of shared public concern (Barisione & Michailidou, 2017). Findings in this research area have been pointing to both a democratising potential and a hijacking or polluting of the public communicative spaces with voices, actors and dynamics damaging inclusive deliberation and democratic dialogue (Barisione & Michailidou, 2017; Margetts et al., 2016). For instance, large-scale or large-corpus research on online platforms tends to point to fragmentation, increasing polarisation and algorithmic mediation, that temper or significantly limit the potential of inclusive democratic dialogue. Fletcher et al.'s comparative survey research (2020) showed that in most European countries news audience polarisation is higher online than offline. Research also shows that the existing elites and power hierarchies do not disappear on online platforms and social media. For instance, research in ten countries concerning the role of social media (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) in processes of Europeanisation, showed the domination of elite institutional actors and media addressing European issues, the domestication of European issues, and the replication of elite-oriented institutional approaches on European governance and democracy, by non-institutional actors (Cardoso et al., 2023; Miconi et al., 2022).

At the same time, research points to the existence of a multiplicity of public spheres, at the national or European levels, which is not necessarily and only an indication of fragmentation. These coexisting or intersecting public spheres are not exclusively elite-dominated, and are formed through the dynamic coexistence of institutional and non-institutional actors, media and claims, online and offline (Barisione & Ceron, 2017). Researchers in this area have been studying cross-national publics and social movements (e.g., opposing austerity or globalisation, and striving for environmental protection or peace), exploring the possibilities of, for instance, Europeanisation from below (Della Porta & Caiani, 2007; Pešić & Vukelić, 2022), and the role of media in facilitating these movements (Barisione & Ceron, 2017; Casero-Ripollés, 2019; Van de Donk et al., 2004).

Barisione and Ceron (2017) talk about 'digital movements of opinion', "a conceptual combination of public opinion and social movements as manifested in the social media sphere" (p. 77), which, according to the authors "emerged in the post-2009 anti-austerity cycle of protest across Europe" (p. 77). For Haug (2008), who talks about 'public spheres within movements', transnational social movements are among the actors in the formation of a European public sphere, creating arenas within the movements. In Hänska and Bauchowitz's (2019) study on Twitter during Greece's 2015 negotiations for economic support by the EU, the researchers argued that "Twitter activity showed clear signs of Europeanization. Twitter users across Europe tweeted about the bailout negotiations and coalesced around shared grievances" (p. 1). The researchers argued that the case they examined could be seen as "an *ad hoc*, issue-based European online public sphere", as "users from across the continent tweeted about the bailout negotiations, and that their activity aligned cross-nationally, […] providing evidence of

supranational and weak horizontal Europeanization" (p. 10). At the same time, such examples raise questions regarding the "continuity and persistence of public spheres" (p. 12) and whether "the spontaneous emergence of issue- or event-based publics" (p. 12) may be raised to the level and extent of public spheres.

One of the other concepts that researchers use when studying social movements and civic engagement is that of civic cultures, which addresses nuanced dimensions of engagement in the public sphere as it concerns spaces, issues and actors involved. The concept of civic cultures, as, for instance, developed by Peter Dahlgren (2005; 2009) relates to the "dimensions of everyday life that have bearing on how democracy actually functions" (2005, p. 319). It is sometimes used to study people's connection to the political, engaging in bottom-up or grassroots approaches to politics and the political. The argument that Dahlgren (2004) and other scholars have been using is that the online space

> "offers possibilities for those citizens who are at least somewhat motivated, to develop and participate in …civic cultures. Civic cultures … can be seen as providing the preconditions for citizen identity and engagement in public spheres. In the context of the EU, this means euro-relevant civic cultures can pave the way for involvement in transnational European public spheres" (pp. 1-2).

For instance, Sloam's (2014) study on the organisation, communication and mobilisation of youth-oriented movements in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Germany, and on the role of digital communication affordances, analysed forms of civic engagement through connective action. For the author, "'digitally networked action' has enabled a 'quickening' of youth participation – an intensification of political participation amongst young, highly educated citizens in search of a mouthpiece for their 'indignation'" (p. 217). Also, Sõmersalu's (2022) study on the media and communication practices of Estonian civil society organisations uses the civic cultures framework to study the ways the "civil society organizations navigate the highly-mediated everyday through their routine media practices and the spaces in which these practices are situated" (p. 5).

It shall be noted that empirical research addressing civic cultures is less frequent than that of the public sphere. Moreover, while public sphere empirical research engages mainly with large-scale research employing quantitative methods, civic cultures research tends to engage in small-scale research, often through the analysis of case studies employing qualitative methods.

6. The roles of media in democracy

The extended body of literature identifies a broad range of the roles that media (shall) play in the service of democracy. As Carpentier and Wimmer (2023) note, these expected roles feed into or are closer to either more proceduralist and minimalist models of democracy, addressing, e.g. "the supportive role that media can play in democratic elections [by] informing the citizenry

so that they can optimize their choices" (p. 44), or to more substantive and maximalist approaches to democracy, articulating "media as one of the realms of democracy" (p. 44). The authors identify five main roles for media serving democracy: the informational role, the control/watchdog role, the forum role, the representational role, and the participatory role. As in the identified and studied empirical literature the representational and participatory roles and struggles of media serving democracy were heavily intertwined, they have been integrated here as well, and they will be presented in the next section of media struggles.

6.1. Informing citizens

A key role that media are attributed to, in order to ensure well-functioning democracies, is their informational role. This role focuses on media "supporting the free, individual and public formation of opinion by gathering, selecting and disseminating news on matters of general importance as well as information that every individual needs to find their way in society" (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 45).

In empirical research, this role is located closer to proceduralist and minimalist models of democracy, focusing on the supportive function that media can play in democratic processes such as elections. At the same time, even implicitly, this role is seen as a precondition for serving more substantive and maximalist functions of democracy.

Informing the citizenry is consistently registered as journalism's fundamental role, across countries and time, in normative, policy-oriented and empirical bodies of work, by academic scholars, policy actors and news media professionals. It is also the role (or function) that is examined by all organisations, projects or instruments monitoring journalism and/or media performance (in democracies) in Europe. Such organisations (or projects) that extend single-country boundaries, include, for instance, the Freedom House, the International Press Institute, the International Research and Exchange Board (IREX), the Media Freedom Rapid Response, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), the Media Pluralism Monitor, and the Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM), to name a few. While these organisations and their related projects may partly cover different areas or issues using different instruments or different operationalisations, their activities are founded on quite similar basic normative standards concerning media's democratic roles, among which 'informing the citizenry' is primary.

For instance, the Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) published in 2011 (Trappel et al., 2011) and 2021 (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a, 2021b) measures democratic performance in a series of 'mature democracies' across three main indicator clusters, namely freedom/information, control/watchdog, and equality/forum (Trappel et al., 2011). As it concerns the diptych of freedom/information, it is connected with the monitorial and facilitative normative roles. According to the authors, the democratic media mandate in this dimension is to serve as a guardian of the flow of information (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a, p. 16), which is related with deliberation-based models of democracy. In its operationalisation, a cluster of indicators were developed, designed to collect information concerning the "structural conditions for receiving

and imparting information" (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a, p. 18), based on the assumption that "news media play an important role in upholding the right of freedom of expression in democratic societies" (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a, p. 18).

The research methods involved the collection of empirical evidence from secondary sources such as the series of 'Reuters Institute Digital News Reports', national statistics, audience research, public opinion surveys and interviews with journalists and other media professionals and experts (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a, p. 7). Despite the differences between the 13 monitored European countries in 2021, with countries in the North scoring better and in the South worse, a general finding was that "leading news media are serving democracies rather well" (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021b, p. 426), and that "media managed to cope with the digital challenge and found ways to maintain their performative strengths despite economic, political, and technical challenges" (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021b, p. 426).

One area that has attracted the attention of researchers concerns the special role that public service media play in educating the citizens by keeping the citizenry informed about current affairs and political information. Research shows on the one hand the major importance that public service media are still attributed in Europe, and on the other the varying degrees of trust they enjoy in fulfilling their role (Aalberg et al., 2010; Aalberg & Curran, 2011; Jõesaar et al., 2022; Markov & Min, 2020; Połońska & Beckett, 2019; Thomass et al., 2022).

A considerable body of academic empirical research concerns how news professionals themselves see their roles. Even if this research area does not always address democracy explicitly, it is heavily based on, or influenced by, the normative theories on media's democratic roles (see, e.g. the Worlds of Journalism Study project[3]). The findings of these studies consistently point to the prominence of the informational role, across time, countries and media (e.g., Doudaki & Milioni, 2014; Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Standaert et al., 2021; Terzis, 2014), which is described among others as "making the public aware of (new) facts" (Standaert, 2022, p. 66), as bringing news/ facts/ information, informing, keeping people informed, and producing news (Standaert, 2022, p. 66).

A lot of these studies are conducted through interviews, using a combination of 'closed' survey questions (Hanitzsch et al., 2011) and a limited range of 'open-ended' questions, asking journalists and media professionals to elaborate openly on their answers (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Statham, 2008, p. 401). These studies to a large extent invite journalists to reflect about their roles within predetermined normative categories. Still, some of these studies create some space for open reflection, inviting journalists to explain in their own words journalism's main expected or aspired roles. For instance, a comparative study in 27 European countries, as part of the Worlds of Journalism Study, performed a content analysis of qualitative interview responses of more than 10,000 journalists. The results confirmed "the primacy of the informer role" showing that "the informational-instructive roles (informer, explanator reporter, disseminator, mirror, gatekeeper, storyteller, contextualizer) come first" (Standaert, 2022, p.

[3] https://worldsofjournalism.org

67; see also Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Interestingly, in this study, the informational role is correlated with an instructive role, pointing to rather minimalist approaches to democracy.

Some of the studies in this area explore how the media and the media professionals in different European countries perform their informational roles, engaging in both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (e.g., through surveys and interviews) involving normative/deontological indicators and media systems analyses, but also conducting ethnographic newsroom studies and analysing news content (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; 2019; Kotišová, 2019; Pagiotti et al., 2024; Schultz, 2007; Van Dalen et al., 2012).

Part of these studies focus on the reconceptualisation of the journalists' and media's informational role in digital/online environments (Fortunati et al., 2009; Henkel et al., 2020; Kalender, 2024; Meier, 2007; Schmitz Weiss & Higgins Joyce, 2009), and the broader implications of the observed changes for media's societal/democratic roles (Levy & Nielsen, 2010; Nielsen et al., 2013; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2016). There are abundant studies on media and journalists in Europe being in a state of flux, as it concerns the news organisations' viability, and the journalists' professional identities and roles. A number of these studies address the potential of technology for fulfilling media's informational function in a less mediated fashion, "empowering audiences as active participants in the daily news" (Deuze & Dimoudi, 2002, p. 85), engaging in either mainly optimistic or pessimistic approaches in their evaluations, while some, fewer, studies address some more balanced considerations regarding the role of technologies (Domingo et al., 2008; García-Avilés et al., 2014; Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015; Steensen, 2011).

Some of these empirical studies address media's and journalism's institutional dimension, trying to counter the techno-centric or determinist arguments that see technology as the primary or single factor of change for the media and the journalistic profession. They argue, for instance, that the journalistic profession still operates on the basis of enduring news values, norms, and routines that have not yet fundamentally changed. For instance, Tandoc and Oh's (2017) content analysis of big data journalism stories from The Guardian, the British news organisation that is seen as a pioneer in contemporary big data journalism, showed "new trends in terms of how sources are used, but [journalists] still generally adhere to traditional news values and formats such as objectivity" (p. 997).

Similar arguments are drawn from studies focussing on digitalisation and practices of automated journalism in local media, addressing the importance of human agency, while not underestimating the shift in journalistic practices (e.g., the study on UK local media - Thäsler-Kordonouri & Barling, 2023), and news audience consumption habits (Olsen, 2020). Such studies argue that "the combination of traditional shoe-leather epistemologies of on-site reporting with data-driven practices can add to the independence and neutrality of local journalism" (e.g., the study on German local media - Stalph et al., 2023, p. 1882).

6.2. Controlling power holders

A second key democratic role media (are expected to) adhere to, is their 'watchdog role', which relates to "the consistent exercise of control over the power holders" (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 47). The watchdog role, together with the informational role discussed earlier comprise the two key functions consistently addressed, across countries, in empirical evaluations of media and journalism, driven by normative considerations.

While the focus on the "consistent exercise of control over the power holders" (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 47) appears at first sight to be clear, the constituents of 'consistency', 'control' and 'power holders' may take on diverse meanings, delineations and operationalisations. For instance, in Standaert's (2022, p. 67) large-scale study of journalists in 27 European countries, the watchdog role falls under the critical-monitorial set of roles which includes the roles of the watchdog, investigator, monitor, detective, revealer, verifier, and critic. For Standaert (2022), following the classification of journalistic roles proposed by Hanitzsch and Vos (2018), "[t]he critical-monitorial function calls on journalists to act as 'Fourth Estate', holding powers to account and, in so doing, creating a critically minded citizenry" (Standaert, 2022, p. 62). More broadly, approaches that focus on the monitorial dimension of the watchdog role are connected with a more detached perspective of journalistic practice, while the ones that prioritise an interventionist function in the watchdog role, are closer to a more engaged perspective of journalistic practice (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020).

The empirical research on the norms and practices which allow media and their professionals to 'control the power holders' focuses among others, on the emphasis on factuality, fact-checking and cross-checking information, transparency, the independence of media and journalists from political and economic interests, the protection of their sources but also their own independence from their sources (maintaining a 'healthy' distance), etc. (Ferracioli et al., 2022; Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020; Vobič & Poler Kovačič, 2015; Žuffová, 2023).

An issue of consideration, as already mentioned, is who shall be considered 'power holder' and thus in need of consistent control by the media. There is sometimes a narrow approach to power, focusing mainly or exclusively on political power/elites, and not paying equal attention to other forms of power, such as economic power or media power itself. Still, there is increasing empirical evidence showing how the political-economic-media intersections may undermine democracy (Dragomir, 2018, 2019; Maragoudaki, 2024, Nielsen et al., 2019).

There is also considerable critical academic research in this area, based on empirical analyses, on how the financial and the banking sectors were treated as privileged sources of information concerning the economic and the housing crises in Europe, during 2008-2018, while they were hardly treated as power holders and thus in need of scrutiny and control. The news coverage of the economic crisis across Europe by established news organisations is seen as an example of media falling short of maintaining a critical distance from the sources of power they are expected to control. Instead, the news media were found to be echoing the power holders' views, positions and interests, not holding them accountable and failing to serve the public interest (see, e.g., studies on the economic or housing crisis in the UK, Ireland, Spain, Greece

and Cyprus, mostly conducted through qualitative analyses of published news - Arrese & Vara-Miguel, 2023; Basu et al., 2018; Berry, 2012; Doudaki & Boubouka, 2020; Doudaki et al., 2016; 2019; Mercille, 2014; Rafter, 2014; Schechter, 2009).

Still, the role of investigative journalism is crucial in this regard, and has produced important results in exposing corruption and abuse of power, but also showing in a factual manner, how the political-economic connections of power structures work, and what their broader repercussions for democracy and social justice are. Investigative journalism is a sub-field where the watchdog role of media and journalists is connected with an oppositional (media and journalists as adversaries of the powerful), advocative (advocating for societal values, causes or groups), or interventionist role (influencing public opinion, influencing policy and promoting social change - Hanitzsch et al., 2016; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020; Mellado, 2020) and it is generally considered more impact-oriented than other forms of journalism (Konieczna & Powers, 2017).

Research in this area addresses the practices, values and constraints of investigative journalists in different European countries or parts of Europe (Brown et al., 2014; Cancela et al., 2021; Di Salvo, 2021; Gerli et al., 2018; Karadimitriou et al., 2022; Olesen, 2023; Stetka & Örnebring, 2013). Of special attention has been the role of technological affordances in facilitating investigative journalism, particularly in the case of international networks of investigative journalists, who, assisted by digital technologies and big data methods and tools, develop forms of collaborative investigative journalism that extend national boundaries (Carson & Farhall, 2018).

The case of Wikileaks, in particular, which according to the organisation itself "specializes in the analysis and publication of large datasets of censored or otherwise restricted official materials involving war, spying and corruption"[4], aroused the research interest during the late 2000s. In parallel with the attention that its founder Julian Assange's ongoing detention and the WikiLeaks legal cases have been attracting, the discussion by media professionals, analysts and scholars has focused on whether the Wikileaks practices and the use of its material by the media supports or undermines democracy (see, e.g., the works of Christensen (2014), Thomass (2011) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2014), in relation to how the European media and journalists have been using data made available by Wikileaks and what the professional and ethical implications are).

More recent examples of internationally networked journalism include the Panama and Paradise Papers (2016/2017) and the Pandora Papers (2021). These major investigative projects which were led, or coordinated by, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), showed that collaborative investigative reporting is possible on a global scale (Carson & Farhall, 2018), engaging networks of independent investigative journalists in collaboration with established news organisations. The Panama/Paradise Papers, for instance, were based on "several million documents documenting tax evasion among financial and political elites"

[4] https://wikileaks.org/What-is-WikiLeaks.html

(Olesen, 2023, p. 2425) that were handed over by anonymous whistle-blowers to journalists at ICIJ and to the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung.

Konieczna and Powers' (2017, p. 1542) discourse analysis of ICIJ's own presentation of some of its high-profile investigative reports on global tax evasion, showed that ICIJ sees its main role as impact-oriented, which is served through a series of linked functions: "informing the public, spurring conversation in media outlets and among the general public, changing opinions, and, ultimately changing policy" (p. 1555). This echoes ICIJ's general strategy to present in a fact-based manner what the impact of its work is, as it is exemplified, for instance, in its strategy to produce reports and news items after the release of its investigative campaigns (see e.g., news items such as "Panama Papers helps recover more than $1.2 billion around the world" (Dalby, 2019)).

The case of international investigative reporting shows that access to, and releasing of, information and data is very important in serving transparency and accountability in societies, and how the networked and data-supported journalism can facilitate the exposure of the transnational nature of corruption, exploitation and social injustice. At the same time, it shows that data need to be transformed into meaningful information for specific publics, attesting to the (institutional) role of media organisations and professional journalism in doing so (Di Salvo, 2022; Starkman, 2024; The Guardian, 2021). For instance, in the case of the Panama, Paradise and Pandora Papers (2016, 2017, 2021), the released data concerning specific countries, companies, and political actors were then used by journalists and media in the respective countries to produce news reports that were meaningful to their publics showing how these forms of corruption influence the quality of democracy at the national level.

At the same time, the role of watchdog and investigative journalism at the regional or local levels is equally valuable, as international journalistic networks cannot fully cover the regional and local aspects of democratic practice. However, as Carson and Farhall (2018) note, even in countries like the UK, which are considered large media markets, "there are fewer investigations that focus on local politics and industrial relations issues from 2007 to 2016", which "might be indicative of the shrinking state of newsrooms and the loss of specialised reporters" (Carson & Farhall, 2018, p. 1905). These trends, registered in other parts of Europe as well (Karadimitriou et al., 2022)—coupled with the shrinking presence of local and regional media in Europe (Gulyas, 2023; Verza et al., 2024) which are vital for monitoring local governance—are sources of concern for the overall health of media landscapes and media's democratic functions in Europe.

6.3. Facilitating societal debate and democratic struggle

Media are seen also as a forum that strengthens democracy by facilitating debate and agonistic struggle over societal issues (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 48). This role is linked to the idea of media being the main space that hosts contemporary public spheres, and in its ideal form is the curated space where citizens are facilitated to deliberate and reach consensus about the optimal solutions to societal problems.

This role is performed largely through processes and practices of curation, operationalised via selection processes driven to a great extent by the objectivity norm. Empirical research on how objectivity is practised in the different European countries focuses, among others, on how media systems impact the operationalisation of objectivity. While this strand of research does not often address democracy explicitly, it is driven or heavily influenced by the normative theories of the role of news media serving democracy. For instance, a large-scale and longitudinal content analysis of newspaper articles examined the ways in which "the hard-news paradigm" (Esser & Umbricht, 2014, p. 229) was applied in Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy (and the United States), throughout a period of four decades (1960s – 2000s). Based on the study's operationalisation, the "hard-news paradigm" is served primarily through the reporting conventions of facticity, balance, transparency, and authenticity, which over time have been complemented by interpretative analysis and expression of opinion. The researchers argue that overtime "a widening in the understanding of what kinds of elements fall under the rubric of news coverage", is observed (Esser & Umbricht, 2014, p. 243). The researchers also identified different news cultures, connected to the distinct Western media systems. Using univariate and multivariate statistical analyses of opinion-orientation, objectivity and negativity, as key indicators, the researchers identified "three approaches to newsmaking: a US-led model of rational news analysis, an Italian-led model of polarised reporting, and a Germanic model of disseminating news with views" (Esser & Umbricht, 2013, p. 989).

Other researchers identify differences in journalistic cultures without explicit connection to media systems, still relating these differences to distinct 'schools of journalism'. For instance, Pounds's (2010) linguistic analysis of 'hard news' published in UK and Italian newspapers found "culturally based differences between 'objective' and 'interpretative' journalistic styles and different views of 'objectivity'" (Pounds, 2010, p. 121). For Pounds (2010), "[t]he 'objective style' favours 'impartiality' and a traditional view of objectivity as 'fair representation'", while "[t]he 'interpretative style' favours 'advocacy'" based on which objectivity is "understood as uncovering bias and promoting a critical stance towards the prevailing values represented by the political establishment" (p. 121). Based on the study's findings, the British reporters tend "to distance themselves to a larger extent from the reported facts while the Italian reporters show a deeper involvement […] and refer more frequently to the emotive impact of the events on the participating parties" (Pounds, 2010, p. 121). Also, in a comparative analysis of English, French (and also Japanese and Indonesian) news reports, by Thomson et al. (2008), the researchers found similar findings of basic structural elements – for instance, the inverted pyramid, but also some variations, such as a stronger interpretative function in French news reporting compared to the English one.

Another area of research addresses journalistic cultures, which according to some (comparative) analyses, impact on the performance of professional roles and the implementation of objectivity in unique ways (Mellado et al., 2018, p. 250). For the researchers, these variations are observed not only across different news systems but also in "countries expected to display similar traits due to their historical and cultural affinities but which show very distinctive patterns" (Mellado et al., 2018, p. 250). These findings point to the complexity and richness of journalistic cultures,

which might not always be possible to be fully explored through 'media systems' frameworks of reference.

Studies that focus on how journalists themselves perceive and practice objectivity show that journalists prioritise the adherence to 'hard evidence' and to reliable and verifiable sources when reporting on the news, as well as the ability to remain impartial in their work by not letting personal beliefs and convictions influence their reporting (Doudaki & Milioni, 2014; Hanitzsch et al., 2011, 2019; Terzis, 2014). These findings are stronger in Western and North European countries. The adherence to these standards, journalists argue, allows them to serve the public interest in the best way possible, adhering to the principles of balance, impartiality and factuality.

Some critical studies point to the often-restrictive nature of the adherence to the objectivity norm, addressing also the ideological implications of the journalists' professional practices pertaining to objectivity (see e.g., Basu et al., 2018; Doudaki & Boubouka, 2020; Ruigrok, 2008), the struggles between objectivity-as-a-value and objectivity-as-a-practice (Carpentier & Trioen, 2010), and the tensions "between ideals of impartiality and objectivity and ideals of active reporting oriented towards action and problem-solving" (Møller Hartley & Askanius, 2021, p. 860).

These critiques open up the discussion on the limitations and ideological implications of the broader practices of curation performed by journalists and media in the public debates over important societal issues. These scholars argue that the objectivity norm is often reduced in presenting the 'two sides of the story', while complex societal issues are hardly ever reduced to two sides. Through the journalists' practices of gate-keeping and framing and the selection of news sources that fall within the power and institutional elites, journalists and news media limit considerably the range of views, opinions and perspectives that circulate in the public sphere, failing to facilitate debate over the main issues of societies in a fair and inclusive fashion.

Among the implications of the elitist practice of journalistic curation is a failure to maintain a critical distance from the elite institutional sources and rather sustain an ideological affinity with them (Doudaki & Boubouka, 2020), with media and journalists functioning as 'lap dogs' rather than as watchdogs (Połońska, 2019). As mentioned earlier, research has shown how these practices led to fairly limited and even biased reporting of the news of the economic crisis in Europe. This was done by reducing the public debate to the political and economic elites' perspectives and interpretations of the causes, effects and solutions regarding the economic crisis, not allowing much space for the perspectives of the ones who were mostly affected by the economic policies leading to the crisis and the measures taken to deal with it (Arrese & Vara-Miguel, 2023; Basu et al., 2018; Berry, 2012; Doudaki et al., 2016; 2019; Fenton & Freedman, 2022; Mercille, 2014; Rafter, 2014; Schechter, 2009).

Hence, scholars argue for the importance of alternative and community media, which are seen as independent, not attached to specific political or economic interests, bringing to the fore views, perspectives and voices that are not given visibility by mainstream news media (Akser

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& McCollum, 2019; Aslan Ozgul & Veneti, 2021; Biringer et al., 2022; Carpentier et al., 2021; Carpentier & Doudaki, 2014; Doudaki & Carpentier, 2020; Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2017; Stiernstedt & Kaun, 2021; Van Leeckwyck, 2019; Vatikiotis & Milioni, 2019; Voniati et al. 2018). Still, as scholars argue, given the interest of alternative, community and niche media in specific issues, the latter might be characterised by partisanship (McDowell-Naylor et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2018, pp. 21-23, 45-47; Rae, 2021), and by limited diversity as it concerns the range of news they cover. Another issue raised is that these media might not feel the need to adhere to the journalistic principles of accuracy, fact-checking and inclusion of diverse sources and perspectives, because they might not be functioning as professional media or because they see themselves as alternative to the mainstream or systemic media which they oppose or directly attack (Cushion, 2023; Klawier et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2018, pp. 21-23, 45-47). Relatedly, as scholars note, there is an increasing number of (self-proclaimed) independent and alternative media that promote the views and support the causes of the far-right (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Haanshuus & Ihlebaek, 2021; Haller et al., 2021; Heft et al., 2021; Nygaard, 2019), which are present in most, if not all, European countries.

These arguments and concerns are strengthened also by the abundance of non-curated and in principle free spaces on social media, where silenced voices, stories not covered by mainstream media, personal views, unsubstantiated claims, misinformation, but also organised propaganda and disinformation, find their way (Guess & Lyons, 2020; Fletcher et al., 2018; Georgiou, 2018; Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2020; Szakacs & Bognar, 2021; Willem & Tortajada, 2021).

These findings, taken together, highlight the relevance of the meaning-making function of media, showing that ethically and principle-based driven curation is still needed, arguing hence for the relevance and importance of media as pluralistic, democratic institutions.

7. Struggles over media's democratic roles

The normative roles that drive societal expectations, policy, regulation and professional practice as it concerns how media shall serve well-functioning societies, feed into a series of struggles over the signification and performance, or implementation of these roles in actual practice. Carpentier and Wimmer (2023) identify four main areas of struggle, pertaining to the degrees and forms of: media freedom and freedom of expression, media pluralism, media representation and media participation. As mentioned earlier, empirical research concerning the struggles of media around representation and participation integrate to a large extent the normative discussions on media roles in these two dimensions, hence the sub-sections that address representation and participation have incorporated the dimensions of both role and struggle.

7.1. Degrees of media freedom and freedom of expression

Media freedom and freedom of expression remain objects of struggle, as Carpentier and Wimmer (2023, p. 57) note, despite being recognised across the world as fundamental rights.

The struggles around freedom concern on the one hand the degrees of individual or personal freedom of communication and expression, and on the other, the (institutional) freedoms the media organisations enjoy to fulfil their expected roles in society (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 57).

Empirical research involving surveys evaluating the degrees of freedom of expression, journalistic and media freedom internationally and/or in different European countries, is prolific, employing quantitative methods and comparative research with similar methodologies and instruments in the countries under study. Organisations and projects that monitor media freedom and freedom of expression include, for instance, the Freedom House series of surveys, that issues annually the Freedom in the World reports focusing on the state of democracy around the world, which includes a section on the freedom of expression and media, as integral components of well-functioning democracies. Additionally, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index measures a set of indicators on freedom of expression and media freedoms under its 'civil liberties' category. Both Freedom in the World and EIU, in their 2023 reports paint a rather worrisome image for media freedom and freedom of expression in the world. In the first case it is argued that of all the indicators tracked by the index, the media freedom and freedom of personal expression indicators, which are considered fundamental components of democracy, were the ones that declined the most over the past 17 years, internationally (Freedom House, 2023, p. 15). Similarly, EIU registers "a significant decline across all regions of the world over the past decade" (EIU, 2024, p. 8) adding that in the past years "freedom of expression and media freedom have been under attack by both state and non-state actors in developed democracies and authoritarian regimes alike. This remains one of the biggest threats to democracy" (EIU, 2024, p. 8).

Other organisations that focus on media freedom include, for instance, the World Press Freedom Index, compiled annually by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), which compares the level of freedom journalists and media enjoy in the different parts of the world (covering in 2023 180 countries and territories). The World Press Freedom Index applies a rather broad definition of press freedom, defining it "as the ability of journalists as individuals and collectives to select, produce, and disseminate news in the public interest independent of political, economic, legal, and social interference and in the absence of threats to their physical and mental safety".[5] Its findings as it concerns Europe point to the severely worsening situation in Russia, in Belarus and Ukraine, within the context of the ongoing war. "Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, almost all independent media have been banned, blocked and/or declared "foreign agents" or "undesirable organisations". All others are subject to military censorship" (2023 World Press Freedom Index).[6]

Research focusing on Central-Eastern Europe and countries with a communist past has been examining the degrees of media freedom and the role of media in strengthening democratic culture and democratic governance. Scholars have been studying the state– or the government–

[5] See https://rsf.org/en/methodology-used-compiling-world-press-freedom-index-2023?year=2023&data_type=general
[6] https://rsf.org/en/region/europe-central-asia; https://rsf.org/en/country/russia;

media relations (Bairett, 2015; Bajomi-Lázár, 2015; Jakubowicz, 2020) and how the experiences of the past of a too-powerful state controlling all institutions including the media have fed a distrust towards the state and a preference for market freedom. At the same time, the culture of the controlling state seems to be feeding into how state-media relations develop today, as government efforts to control the media are still common practice. Several of the countries of the region are reported as showing a deficit of media freedom (Balčytienė et al., 2015), which in some cases worsened after these countries joined the EU. While a general improvement in press freedom in registered in these countries from the early 1990s to the early 2000s, "since then, experiences have diverged and in 2017 only Estonia and the Czech Republic showed better scores on press freedom than when they first joined the EU" (Zhuang, 2021, p. 2). Zhuang also argues that "[t]his pattern of backsliding is not confined to the media, but is also evident in other measures of democracy" (Zhuang, 2021, p. 2).

Examining more broadly the current situation as it concerns media freedom in Europe, researchers note that while threats to physical safety are not common practice (not considering countries such as Russia or Ukraine), still, they are not inexistent (as the murders of investigative journalists in Malta, Slovakia and Netherlands, while investigating political corruption and organised crime have shown in the recent past (Delia, 2021; Geerdink, 2021)). Moreover, orchestrated efforts to create an asphyxiating environment for media and journalists are not limited to Russia or Belarus. Media and journalists in countries such as Hungary, Slovenia, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania are faced with considerable restrictions, ranging from direct government control of public service media, economic suffocation of critical media, and firing of critical journalists (Delić, 2020; Gimson, 2019; Polyák, 2019; Połońska, 2019; Trifonova-Price, 2019).

Moreover, diverse struggles around media freedom continue to take place in different parts of Europe, not restricted only in countries 'indexed as 'problematic'. For instance, according to the Media Pluralism Monitor 2023 report, online attacks against journalists continue to be on the rise, often coming from the political elites. While the physical safety of journalists is not often jeopardised, digital safety was ranked as high-risk (while being in medium risk in 2022) in the big majority of the countries studied, with female journalists receiving more digital threats than male journalists (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023, p. 39-40).

The World Press Freedom Index and the EIU reports point also to the aggravation of the situation in several European countries, which have been taking legal and unlawful action restricting journalistic work under the pretext of 'national security'. More generally, the pressures on journalists and media to avoid covering 'sensitive' issues as their work threatens national security (Costa-Kostritsky, 2016; McChrystal, 2017) are ongoing. As it is mentioned in the Freedom House report, "the EU was plunged into spyware scandals in 2022 after journalists and politicians came under surveillance in Spain, Greece, Hungary, and Poland" (Freedom House, 2023, p. 29). These countries, as mentioned, include Greece, where the state intelligence was spying on journalists using the Predator spyware, the UK, where "investigative

journalism is threatened by a national security bill that lacks protective measures", and Sweden, where new legislation jeopardises the confidentiality of journalists' sources.[7]

Furthermore, systematic strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) targeting journalists and media when covering issues of corruption and abuse, are not uncommon in Europe (Fierens et al. 2023; Kerševan & Poler, 2023; Ní Mhainín, 2020; Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2024). It is worth noting that in 2022, and despite an EU recommendation, none of the Media Pluralism Monitor studied countries "adopted a legal framework against strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), despite an increasing number of SLAPPs being filed by the political and business elite to intimidate journalists and civic activists in many of the countries assessed" (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023, p. 3). In such conditions, it is not surprising that while freedom of expression and diversity of independent media are registered, in countries, such as Greece, still,

> "journalists are not entirely free to investigate some stories, and they can face criminal penalties if convicted under libel, defamation or slander laws. There is also censorship on issues related to the police, the army and the church, and journalists have sometimes faced harassment, threats and violence from non-state actors and the police" (EIU, 2024, p. 38-39).

A specific area of struggle pertaining to media freedom addresses the institutional support and unobstructed operation of certain types of media that are considered vital components of democratic systems, such as the public service media and community media (Hintz & Coyer, 2010; Połońska & Beckett, 2019; Psychogiopoulou et al., 2017). Their struggles for freedom and independence are addressed further-on. Very briefly, it may be mentioned here that these struggles concern their remit, governance, funding and operation often in environments of political or commercial pressures that jeopardise their public and community role and function.

One other dimension of freedom, not attracting equal attention in studies of media freedom and freedom of expression, is the freedom of academic and cultural expression, which is surveyed by the Varieties of Democracy Institute. In its Democracy Report 2023, it is mentioned that "[t]here is a global shift toward less academic freedom for the average global citizen. Substantive declines span all regions and affect not only autocracies but even liberal democracies […] that have traditionally been academic powerhouses" such as the United Kingdom (Papada, et al., 2023, p. 37). There are also notable declines in Eastern Europe, which "are clearly related to autocratization, notably in Belarus, Hungary, Poland, and Russia" (Papada, et al., 2023, p. 37).

7.2. The organisation of media pluralism

[7] See: https://rsf.org/en/country/greece; https://rsf.org/en/country/united-kingdom; https://rsf.org/en/country/sweden

The media's duty to represent the diversity of opinions, groups, positions, approaches and interests, in societies (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 50), is considered one of their main democratic roles. This role is largely served through pluralism, which, as Carpentier and Wimmer argue, "is a prerequisite for the media to be able to fulfil their public task of contributing to the formation of public opinion and will" (2023, p. 55). A media landscape that is characterised by pluralism is expected to provide "as complete and balanced an overview as possible of the discourses, arguments and opinions existing in society and its groups" (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 55). The struggles around pluralism relate to all democratic media roles that are mentioned by Carpentier and Wimmer (2023), and mainly those of 'facilitating societal debate and democratic struggle' and 'representing the pluriformity of the social and the political'.

Literature identifies two main types or dimensions of pluralism; one is internal, concerning the inclusion of different positions, views, opinions and societal groups, by the media organisations in the news they produce. The second is external and concerns the entire media landscape in a region, country, etc. (Ciaglia, 2013; Czepek et al., 2009; Klimkiewicz, 2010). Hence, on a basic level, if there is a high number of media outlets in each main news media type (e.g., newspapers, television, radio, etc.) in a country, this is a sign of a healthy or balanced media landscape in terms of media pluralism. The argument that is built on this hypothesis is that in a pluriform media landscape, the higher the number of media available in a given market, the greater the diversity of voices, opinions and positions made available by these media to the public.

Both internal and external pluralism have quantitative and qualitative aspects and features. Quantitative features involve, e.g., the numbers of media that are operational in a region or country or the number of views or positions the news media include in each news item they cover. Qualitative features address more refined aspects of plurality and diversity, such as the existence of a diversity of media outlets, of different types, organisational and economic models, addressing different issues and voices, or the inclusion of the perspectives of the less privileged parts of society in public discourse (Christensen, 2010; Czepek et al., 2009; Just, 2009; Karppinen, 2007).

Pluriformity—as the diversity of voices and views—is expressed through two main intertwined ways. The first, which is twofold, concerns the representation of, in principle all, societal groups and positions in a fair, that is, in a non-discriminatory and non-distorted way, together with the representation of the diversity of voices within these groups, in ways that foster multivocality and avoid reduction and homogenisation. The second aspect of pluriformity concerns the attribution of voice, that is the provision of spaces and opportunities to the diverse societal groups to articulate their arguments and positions in their own voice and language (Karppinen, 2013). This second component is served also through the interconnected roles of 'facilitating societal debate and democratic struggle' and 'facilitating public participation'.

Empirical research on media pluralism focuses on the study of various media environments, approached as media systems or as media landscapes, operational at the national level, examining also the political, legislative and economic conditions in these environments and

their role in supporting or obstructing media pluralism (e.g., Ciaglia, 2013; Klimkiewicz, 2005). A big part of empirical studies is conducted through surveys, where information is collected through indirect (e.g., already existing data and rankings of economic performance, advertising revenue, numbers of media operational in a country, legislation, etc.) and direct sources (e.g., survey questions and interviews with media professionals and experts), and the countries in question are ranked according to predefined ranking scales, given pluralism scores. For instance, the Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) has been studying the degrees of, and risks to, media pluralism and freedom in Europe since 2013/2014. Its last wave issued in 2023 included 32 EU and EU candidate countries. It takes a rather broad approach to pluralism, composed of fundamental protection, market plurality, political independence and social inclusiveness (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023).

As it concerns the area of political pluralism in the media, which is often studied as an indicator of pluralism, it

> "enables the representation of diverse political perspectives, ensuring that citizens have the opportunity to engage with a broad range of ideas and ideologies. By encompassing various viewpoints within the political spectrum, political pluralism promotes inclusivity, encourages public discourse, and enables individuals to make informed decisions in the democratic process" (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023, p. 6).

Empirical research in Europe, often driven by Hallin and Mancini's (2004) media systems models, shows that in media systems characterised by high political parallelism and close ties between political elites and media, political independence of media and journalists is under pressure, as they find it difficult to adhere to the principles of internal diversity in their reporting, by maintaining a critical distance from the sources of power they cover and by bringing in a diversity of sources or voices in the news they report on (Ciaglia, 2013; Dobek-Ostrowska & Kleut, 2023; Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002; Herrero et al., 2017; Papathanassopoulos & Miconi, 2023). According to the MPM, Central and South-Eastern European countries appear to be susceptible to "the politicisation of media ownership, political influences in editorial autonomy, political interference with the public service media, and the politicisation of the distribution of State managed resources to the media" (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023, p. 6). Moreover, editorial autonomy in Europe, overall, "continues to be the most fragile aspect of ensuring newsroom autonomy, political independence, and political pluralism in the media" (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023, p. 7).

Another research area that addresses external pluralism concerns the characteristics of the media markets under question (Ciaglia, 2013; Iosifidis, 2014; Just, 2009; Klimkiewicz, 2005). Market pluralism relates to the existence of different media providers and their distribution in the media market, the degrees of transparency of media ownership, the editorial and journalistic autonomy from business influences and the media's economic sustainability (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023, p. 4). The MPM findings for 2023 are rather troublesome as it concerns the risks on media pluralism related to market diversity, as none of the 32 examined European countries is at low risk, whereas a large majority of countries (21) is ranked as high-risk. These data

consolidated the findings from the previous MPM waves (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021, 2022), and empirical research in most European countries, showing increasing market concentration in the 'traditional' media market combined with the enhanced presence and increasing power of a few digital intermediaries (Doyle, 2002; Peruško & Popović, 2008; Verza et al., 2024).

One area of research that relates to both the struggles around freedom and pluralism, focuses on 'media capture', examining "the use of legislative, regulatory and financial powers of the state by the dominant political force to capture media to advance its political interests" (Maragoudaki, 2024, p. 4). Research has pointed to increasing trends of state capture of private and public media in several EU member states (Dragomir, 2018, 2019; Nielsen et al., 2019). The International Press Institute (IPI) has been documenting different forms of media capture in Europe, publishing a series of reports for different European countries in 2022-2024. Its areas of 'capture' cover private media, public media, media funding and media regulation. According to IPI, "[m]edia capture is most entrenched and systemic where all four indicators are achieved by the ruling party in cooperation with business interests" (Maragoudaki, 2024, p. 4). The country where media capture is most developed in the EU, according to IPI, is Hungary.

Apart from Hungary, media capture is registered in several EU countries and appears to be stronger in some of the post-communist countries of Eastern and Central Europe (Horsley, 2021; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2012; Mungiu-Pippidi & Ghinea, 2012), but also some other South European countries as well. For instance, IPI's latest report identifies increasing media capture in Greece, a country that is characterised by close ties of the economic and political elite with media owners. "These intertwining interests have become ever more pronounced during and since the financial crisis intensified the media's economic dependence on state support" (Maragoudaki, 2024, p. 6) which "has historically been used as a weapon from the government to influence the media" (Maragoudaki, 2024, p. 37). According to the report, which points to a number of issues pertaining to the struggles and threats of both internal and external pluralism, "[t]he ownership of private media by vested interests is the most acute form of media capture in Greece" (Maragoudaki, 2024, p. 13) creating multiple dependencies. In particular,

> "High levels of concentration of legacy media in the hands of wealthy families and ship owners with varying political connections to political parties, and the New Democracy [current government] party in particular, have contributed significantly to a media ecosystem in which, although there is a high number of media titles, real media pluralism is weak and independent journalism which fulfills its watchdog role has been pushed to the fringes" (Maragoudaki, 2024, p. 37).

Such an environment leads to high levels of self-censorship by Greek journalists and media outlets, in a context of limited resources and frequent legal threats, lawsuits and strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), "which mostly target journalists who report on corruption at government-critical outlets" (Maragoudaki, 2024, p. 34).

One other area of interest concerns the public service media (PSM) sector and its role and struggles, in promoting both internal and external pluralism. Public service broadcasters are

expected, and are legally bound, to fulfil their public remit by presenting the different societal and political groups and their positions, in their programmes and overall content (Donders, 2021; Iosifidis, 2010; Karppinen, 2007) Still, they are often critiqued for the lack of independence from the state and the government. For the Media Pluralism Monitor, "[i]nability to ensure the Independence of public service media […] is one of the key problems in achieving the PSM mission and relevance for the contemporary information environment and as a means through which to tackle the information disorder" (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023, p. 7).

Empirical research shows that in Central and South-Eastern European countries public service media are characterised by closer connections with the government or more broadly with the political system than in other parts of Europe (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023). The struggle to keep PSM under state or government control in these countries is ongoing and does not belong to the past. For instance, a 2019 law in Greece put the national broadcaster ERT and the public news agency ANA-MPA under the prime minister's direct supervision (Papada et al., 2023, p. 17), not facilitating the broadcaster's pluralistic role.

7.3. Roles, degrees and forms of media representation

The capacity of the media to represent the diversity of opinions, groups, positions, approaches and interests, in societies (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 50), is considered one of their main democratic roles. It is based on the premise that "all people and all social groups must be able to make their opinions visible, so that the different positions are represented and can engage in a societal dialogue" (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 58). For Carpentier and Wimmer (2023), this is an area of struggle, given the power imbalances of the different societal groups which lead to unequal opportunities in access to media and (self)representation.

Empirical research in this area examines the degrees in which the different societal groups have (opportunities for equal) representation in the media realm, and is largely driven by normative theories on the roles of media in democratic societies, which were discussed in the previous sections. For instance, for the Media Pluralism Monitor "social inclusiveness is a key aspect of a participatory media system, and is a core element of media pluralism" (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023, p. 118). It "examines the representation in the media, both in terms of media production and media content, of diverse groups, including cultural, ethnic and linguistic minorities, local and regional communities, and women", as well as "groups with special needs, such as people with disabilities (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023, p. 118).

Out of the abundant research in this field, three areas in which the role of media has been tested or questioned, and are worth being mentioned here. They concern migration, gender and minorities (in/through European media). When it comes to migration, empirical research across Europe has shown that, despite considerable differences between media, cases and time periods, there are some persisting patterns concerning its representation in European news media. More in detail, migrants tend to be underrepresented in comparison to non-migrants (proportionally to their population) (ter Wal, 2002); selectively represented (Muslim migrants are presented more often than other religious migrant groups (Bleich et al., 2015), or refugees and asylum

seekers attract more media attention than labour migrants (Eberl et al., 2018)); or negatively portrayed as delinquents, perpetrators or criminals, largely through conflict-centred frames (Eberl et al. 2018; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Schlueter & Davidov, 2013; van Gorp, 2005).

Research concerning gender shows that "[w]omen are still underrepresented in management positions in public service media, as well as in commercial media, and their representation in the news tends to be less frequent than that of men and is also stereotypical" (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023, p. 120). These findings are confirmed by an abundance of studies pointing to underrepresentation, and stereotypical representations portraying women as less competent, as weaker, as victims or associated with traditional family roles more often than men (Amores et al., 2020; Di Piano et al., 2014; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021). Moreover, the Media Pluralism Monitor findings for 2023 showed that gender equality in the media has worsened since its 2022 wave, whereas several South-Eastern and Central European countries are associated with a high risk pertaining to gender-related social inclusiveness in the media (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023, p. 119).

Similarly, research concerning the representation of different types of minorities or disadvantaged societal groups (e.g. Roma (Erjavec, 2001; Kroon et al., 2016; Messing & Bernáth, 2017), homeless people (Devereux, 2015; Pospěch, 2022), or disabled people (Briant et al., 2013; Ciot & Van Hove, 2010; Goethals et al., 2022)) points to high frequencies of stereotypical representations, simplifications, or homogenisations, portraying these groups as threats, perpetrators, delinquents, or as victims and deficient individuals, hence as non-worthy citizens and not as equal members of the polis, but rather as 'denizens' with limited rights (and duties) (Doudaki & Carpentier, 2020).

At the same time, it shall be noted that there are considerable differences in how different types of media tend to represent migrants, gender and minorities. Generally, public broadcasters (Statham, 2002), established newspapers (Masini et al., 2017) and certain types of (online) independent media tend to be more careful and/or diverse in their representations, while tabloid media tend to be more biased, negative, discriminatory, racist, misogynist or homophobic in their representations of migrants, femininities, or minorities (Berry et al., 2016; Farkas & Neumayer, 2020; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008, Marron & Brost, 2021; Pickering, 2008).

Moving beyond media types, there is a multitude of mainstream and independent professional media across Europe that offer a considerable diversity of representations concerning societal groups, voices and positions, serving pluriformity and inclusivity. These are complemented by a broad range of non-profit, alternative, community, migrant and diasporic media, which give, in addition, the opportunity to the less prominent voices and positions to be expressed, through ways of self-representation but also of self-organisation which will be further addressed in the following section concerning media's participatory roles and struggles (Bellardi et al., 2018; Carpentier, et al. 2021; Doudaki & Carpentier, 2019, 2020; Stiernstedt & Kaun, 2021; Van Leeckwyck, 2019; Vatikiotis & Milioni, 2019; Voniati et al., 2018).

When it comes to online media, research indicates that online media spaces on the one hand appear to be offering more opportunities for unmediated representation (Barisione &

Michailidou, 2017; Coleman, 2005; Margetts et al. 2016; Moffitt, 2018). On the other hand, the content that circulates on mainstream social media by regular users (i.e., not media organisations) is increasingly polarised, conflict-centred, toxic, or monothematic. Relatedly, research findings show that the content shared by regular users offers a more limited range of aspects, voices and opinions than professional media organisations that publish news and share content online (Cardoso et al., 2023).

Furthermore, there is empirical evidence that the far-right is becoming increasingly visible on online spaces and social media, through both institutionalised media channels and seemingly informal networks (Baele et al., 2023; Caiani & Kluknavská, 2017; Castelli Gattinara & Bouron, 2020; Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Kluknavská & Hruška, 2019). What is equally important is that migration, gender and minority issues are used extensively by nationalist, populist right and far-right media through discriminatory, toxic, fear-driven, xenophobic and racist representations, not offering the space for a diversity of voices and opinions, but reversely closing down this space significantly or entirely (Berry et al., 2016; Haanshuus & Ihlebæk, 2021; Padovani, 2008; von Nordheim et al., 2019; Wodak, 2015, 2020).

7.4. Roles, degrees and forms of media participation

One of the main democratic roles of media is offering to all groups in society equal "opportunities for participation in the public sphere" (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 52), which involves participation in the fields of institutionalised and non-institutionalised politics, but also participation in the media field itself.

Empirical research on media's role as facilitators of participation in institutionalised politics focuses on formal and procedural aspects of decision-making such as on elections and voting, while research concerning non-institutionalised politics, involves, for instance, activism, horizontal organisation and co-decision processes and practices by civil society. Of course, both institutionalised and non-institutionalised politics involve formal, procedural and substantive aspects, across the minimalist-maximalist dimension of democratic practice.

While for a lot of the theoretical literature and empirical research, the dimensions of media representation and media participation often overlap, for Carpentier and Wimmer (2023) they need to be addressed in a distinct fashion, still acknowledging their interconnectedness, so that their democratic functions become visible. For this, they return to Carpentier's (2011) distinction between participation *through* and participation *in* the media.

Participation *through* the media "describes the possibilities for participation in public debates and for self-representation in a variety of publics that characterise the social. The media sphere becomes the place where citizens can express their voices and share experiences with each other" (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 61). It relates to the function of media as facilitators of and mediators in the public sphere, where the struggle concerns, among others, the norms and routines of media curation and moderation, and the degrees and practices of participation afforded to the publics. Mainstream media organisations (commercial and public-service media) are seen as offering minimal or moderate opportunities for participation to audiences,

which is connected to the participation *through* the media dimension (Carpentier, 2009, 2011; Klaus & Lünenborg, 2012).

Participation *in* the media, on the other hand, relates to the "participation in the production process of media content (content-related participation), but also in organisational decisionmaking contexts of the media (structural participation)" (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 61). Community, citizen and alternative media (the not-for-profit, grassroots and largely self-organised types of media that often address specific audiences, communities or minorities) tend to create more opportunities for maximalist forms of participation, providing the space for more genuine forms of unmediated self-representation, but also participation in decision-making and management of the media organisations (Carpentier et al., 2015; Filimonov, 2021; Voniati et al., 2018). Important in this regard is their role "in facilitating participation in the media field itself, which shifts the mechanisms of participation and democracy to a broader social reality, beyond institutionalised politics" (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 53). The main strength of the self-organised media is direct voice attribution and visibility, offering opportunities for participation *in* the media. The limitation is that these media often stay at the fringes of society or function as, still important, not highly visible hubs of inclusion, not interacting broadly with other fields of society.

Community media, in particular, these types of media that serve the interests of, and are managed by, their communities, are seen to "have important functions in a democratic society and are seen as a valuable part of a pluralistic media ecology" (Gulyas, 2023, p. 18). For instance, as research shows, access to community media for minority groups is among the indicators of social inclusiveness in a pluralistic system (Seethaler et al., 2016). Their importance for social cohesion, in Europe's multi-ethnic and pluralist societies, has also been addressed, especially for minority ethnic communities and refugee and migrant communities (Lewis, 2008). Relatedly, community media have been valued as channels that can address the refugees' and migrants' human right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to information in the new and unfamiliar environments of their host countries in Europe (Bellardi et al., 2018).

Research shows that the situation varies considerably in terms of size and vibrancy of operational community media in the different European countries, still what is important is that there are community media organisations operating in all European countries (with their numbers ranging from a handful to several hundreds, operating either officially or unofficially) (Gulyas, 2023). The main struggles community media in Europe are faced with are "legal recognition, insufficient long-term funding model, and lack of shared understanding and definition of what community media means in the digital age" (Gulyas, 2023, p. 21). As Gulyas (2023, p. 21) notes in the 2023 Media Pluralism Monitor report focusing on local and community media: "in general community media are in a worse state where it is not recognised legally and where media freedom and pluralism are under threat". The contribution of community media in a pluralistic environment is also shown in Gulyas's (2023, p. 19) finding that in countries where community media are not legally recognised there are reported problems concerning the access of minorities to media. As it is mentioned in the report, community media are not recognised legally in ten EU countries, but there are also differences in the countries

that offer legal recognition, on what the law covers and stipulates (Gulyas, 2023, p. 18). In any case, the struggle for legal recognition of community media in Europe as the 'third media sector' alongside the private and the public sectors, is vital, as it is related to their sustainability, their protection, and to the opportunities to the diverse publics for genuine media participation (European Parliament, 2007).

Moving beyond community media, digital and online communication technologies and media in general are often addressed within the context of increased opportunities for participation in the public sphere and political life, and are associated with opportunities for participation both *through* the media and *in* the media.

For instance, research results based on surveys and statistical analysis, as well as meta-analyses of previously conducted studies, suggest a positive correlation (often through causal analysis) of digital media use and political participation in various European countries (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). These studies tend to study political participation through a minimalist approach, confined, for instance, to voter turnout. They also often engage in a media-centric or techno-centric approach, focusing mainly or exclusively on the role of news media or digital technologies in fostering political participation. For instance, Poy and Schüller (2020, p. 18) provide causal empirical evidence from their study in Italy that "broadband availability in the social media era can influence political behaviour, especially voter turnout". Similarly, an earlier study in Germany suggests "a positive association between DSL availability and voter participation across German municipalities" (Czernich, 2012, p. 52).

Another body of research, which is connected to the apprehension of media as the public space for the circulation of political news and exchange of opinions, argues that people's participation on social media has the potential to increase their interest in politics, through their association with other users and encounters with political information (see, e.g., Valeriani and Vaccari's (2016) survey research in Germany, Italy, and the UK).

However, following the initial enthusiasm for internet's democratising potential, empirical research increasingly shows the complexities, inconsistencies and contradictions pertaining to the connections of online media use and social, cultural, political and economic practice. For instance, in the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023, is mentioned that "[d]espite hopes that the internet could widen democratic debate, we find fewer people are now participating in online news than in the recent past", while in countries like the UK, "the proportion of active participators has fallen by more than 10 percentage points since 2016" (Newman et al., 2023, p. 10). The findings reflect also social stratification and cultural capital in communication online about issues of shared public concern, as the group participating in online news "tends to be male, better educated, and more partisan in their political views" (Newman et al., 2023, p. 10).

Relatedly, a growing body of research shows increasing polarisation, toxicity and disinformation in online spaces and on social media (Guess & Lyons, 2020; Lessenski, 2023; Miconi, et al., 2022), news avoidance (Newman et al., 2023) as a strategy of stress reduction in

conflict driven political and social realities (Toff & Nielsen, 2022; Villi et al., 2022), together with a multi-layered fragmentation and compartmentalisation of the online space. These findings appear to be countering the uncritical enthusiasm for the internet's democratising affordances. More in detail, the development of rather isolated ad hoc 'communities', the so-called 'filter bubbles', which confirm already existing beliefs, or the appearance of narrow-range and short-time-span public spheres that bring together 'ad hoc publics' whose interest declines quickly do not appear to be opening up the space for a diversity of opinions and agonistic dialogue.

Also, fears of state and corporate surveillance online and offline, coupled with—as already mentioned—increased toxicity and polarisation, hate speech and attacks online, seem to be limiting people's willingness to express themselves freely, and demotivate them to participate in public discussion and deliberation online, as they feel exposed, threatened and unsafe. This reluctance is not registered in autocracies only, but also in western democracies. As it is stated in the Freedom House report (2023), "the proliferation of spyware has made electronic surveillance potentially ubiquitous; even the presence of an internet-connected device can be enough to deter uninhibited discussion" (p. 14). For instance, as mentioned earlier, the Pegasus spyware has been found in the past years on devices in European countries including France, Hungary, Poland and Greece, targeting journalists, politicians and civil society actors, while the perpetrators have remained largely unaccountable for their abuses (Freedom House, 2023, p. 15). These conditions do not contribute to the creation of a safe environment for people to participate freely in public discussion or to engage in community building with other members in society.

At the same time, there is a body of research that addresses (online) media's potential for political mobilisation and activism (Barisione & Ceron, 2017), taking a broader approach to political participation, not restricting it to institutionalised politics. Research in this area has focused on the curated or non-curated opportunities and spaces (offline and online) the media offer for (unmediated) citizen participation, dialogue and political expression, fostering a civic culture of active citizenship (Dahlgren, 2015; Papa, 2017; Papa & Dahlgren, 2017).

For instance, Chadwick and Dennis's (2017) study on aspects and practices of internet-enabled activism focuses on the citizens' movement '38 Degrees' in the UK. The researchers employed a case study analysis, combining ethnography, interviews, and analysis of campaign emails, news articles and social media content to explore the specific ways in which such civil society efforts may boost individuals' political efficacy but also what their limitations are.

There are examples of similar studies in different parts of Europe, that engage in single-case analyses, or focus on a small number of cases they analyse (Papa, 2017; Papa & Dahlgren, 2017; Pickerill, 2013; Stephansen & Treré, 2019). Such studies have the capacity to point to organisational networks developed both online and offline, to the interdependencies with professional news organisations and the importance of "organisational capacity and leadership" (Chadwick & Dennis, 2017, p. 54) in seemingly decentralised and online citizen movements. Their limitations concern the uniqueness of the selected cases, reducing the possibilities to draw broader conclusions. At the same time, their strength lies also in their uniqueness, which allows

for in-depth analysis through a variety of sources and material, showing in a concrete fashion the diversity, nuances and multiplicity of communicative practices performing democracy, and the embeddedness of these initiatives in broader societal networks and struggles. Focussed case studies, apart from allowing to trace their online and offline networks, allow also to study the discursive and material dimensions of their operation and their struggles in supporting democracy.

8. Conditions of possibility for democratic media

As Carpentier and Wimmer (2023) note, "a series of conditions of possibility need to be fulfilled" (p. 64), so that media can perform their democratic roles. These conditions of possibility are anchored, among others, in material (e.g., technological or financial), cultural and regulatory resources and affordances.

8.1 Communication technologies and financial resources

Availability of, and access to, resources is a main condition of possibility, allowing or disallowing media's democratic roles and functions. A major part of these resources concerns technological means and infrastructures.

Empirical research in this area has been focusing on the potential of online technologies to enhance media's democratic capacity. Especially in the early days of the internet, researchers would argue for the affordances of this new medium to democratise participation in the public sphere, by providing easy and affordable access to communication spaces and offering opportunities for unmediated or non-curated expression of opinions and deliberation on issues of shared concern. This enthusiasm was countered later, as it is mentioned also in other parts of this literature review, due to the high commercialisation of the online space, the intensification of concentration and consolidation tendencies in the media industries that have been accelerating in the internet era, and the increasing polarisation and toxicity online (Bonfadelli & Meier, 2021; Doyle, 2002; Van Bavel et al., 2021).

At the same time, even though the commercial online platforms (e.g. Facebook, X [former Twitter], YouTube, etc.) and their companies appear to dominate the online space, still there are alternative efforts, as materialised, for instance, by applying the principles and practices of digital commons, which are driven by the logics of free internet and open sharing: "Digital commons can be defined as intangible resources shared among a community which are freely accessible to all; used and reused by 'commoners' engaged in collective 'commoning practices' for managing open data, source codes, and standardisation" (Frion, 2022, p. 3). The digital commons practices and arguments are observed in several fields and domains in Europe, such as in education, research, culture, business, economy and administration (Bloemen et al., 2019; de Groot &

Bloemen, 2019; Engström, 2002). There are also efforts at the EU level to create a European framework for digital commons (see, e.g., Euractiv, 2022; Guadagnoli, 2022).

Another area that offers examples where the affordances of technology may serve as a condition of possibility for media to perform their democratic role, is that of community media. These types of media have a long history as 'democratic' media, not only as it concerns their focus on topics and issues oftentimes neglected by mainstream media, as discussed in previous sections, but also as spaces where the democratising potential of technology is materialised. This is performed in three interconnected ways, based on the principles and practices of easy access, easy use and a DIY approach to technology. The first way concerns the organisational logics of these types of media, that are managed and operated by the communities themselves, democratising thus participation through the use of communication technology and infrastructures, for interested members of their communities. The second way in which community media democratise technology is related to their limited economic resources, leading to the purchase and use of affordable and simple to use technological equipment. The third way concerns the training of their members in not only operating but also in repairing, maintaining and producing technology and technological solutions, while actively participating in content production (see, e.g., Carpentier et al.'s (2015) study on a student community radio in Cyprus).

The case of community media highlights the importance of economic resources for media's viability. Economic sustainability, as indicated in numerous projects and reports (Doliwa & Rankovic, 2014; Gulyas, 2023), is the biggest challenge that community media face. More broadly, persisting economic pressures, as empirical research shows (Carson & Farhall, 2018; Karadimitriou et al., 2022), also have severe consequences for professional news media as they lead them to gradually abandon costly news reporting–e.g., in the form of investigative journalism, or news correspondence–which is however crucial in performing their watchdog role. Also, economic viability is connected to the ability of media to cover issues and topics not of interest to larger audiences, and to address minority societal groups which is not profitable in a narrow market-driven logic. Applying mainly or strictly market-driven criteria of infotainment in covering the news -which admittedly is not always related with media's shrinking revenues- implies in practice, for journalists and news media, not prioritising or even abandoning their role of serving the public. Given that it is how minorities are addressed in public discourse and policy that shows the quality of democracy in societies, not serving pluralism is a main concern for the media's democratic performance.

What is crucial, and still difficult to address, as is shown in the studied literature, is that while citizens generally agree on the importance of media to fulfil their watchdog role and their other main societal roles, the tensions of news as product or/and public good, and the public's reluctance to pay for news, have not been resolved (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).

8.2 Democratic media culture

A second main terrain that provides the conditions of possibility for media to perform their democratic roles, is the presence of a democratic (media) culture. Given that media do not

function in a social vacuum, but are products of their environment, which they co-construct, a strong democratic socio-political culture feeds into how media are organised and operate, and allows media to contribute in the protection of the democratic values of freedom, equality and pluralism. As previously discussed, they do so with the content they publish and the opportunities they create for inclusive and pluralistic public discussions on issues of shared societal concern.

Empirical research in this area shows that in European countries with stronger democratic cultures there is higher media pluralism (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023), and higher support for public service media (Thomass et al., 2022; Trappel & Tomaz, 2022) and for community media (Gulyas, 2023). Moreover, there are registered connections between general media use, trust and democratic culture (Anderson et al., 2023; Gross, 2002). For instance, research concerning social media use in central and eastern Europe argues that "social media use correlates with higher satisfaction with democracy when their country's democracy is more robust" (Placek, 2024, p. 6).

A key consideration in such explorations is the element of trust, on the basis of the premise that news media in Europe function as major mediators of trust relationships in democracies (Otto & Köhler, 2018; Trenz et al., 2022). Still, it should be noted that the results on trust are dependent on how trust is conceptualised and measured, and the numerous surveys measuring trust by quantitative indicators do not always unpack what is meant by 'trust'. Research shows that generalising trust in media can be misleading, as different media sectors enjoy different levels of trust (see, e.g., EBU, 2021; Eurobarometer, 2020/21, 2021/22, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Trenz et al., 2022).

Also trust in media and state institutions and support for democracy shall not be considered identical (Trenz, et al., 2022). As research shows, a balance between trust and distrust in institutions can be a sign of well-functioning democracies (Sztompka, 1998). Moreover, as it concerns news media,

> "low trusting segments of the audience might have developed high critical capacities to interpret media performance and content […]. Such 'critical public' would be different from other segments of the population, who have developed generic attitudes of distrust towards the political system and democracy" (Trenz et al., 2022, p. 6).

Hence, more nuanced research is likely needed to address issues and dimensions of trust and distrust as conditions of possibility for media's democratic roles.

Moreover, it shall not be assumed that media can perform their democratic roles only in countries and cultures with strong democratic traditions. In this regard, media's potential to foster democratic practice in challenging conditions needs to be addressed, seeing media as co-creating the conditions of possibility for well-functioning democracies. For instance, as mentioned earlier, the role of democratic alternative media and community media in fostering polyphony, democratising participation and educating their members in democratic practice is important and has been addressed by several researchers (Bellardi et al., 2021; Seethaler et al., 2016).

Moreover, research has shown community media's potential for conflict transformation (see, e.g., Carpentier, 2017; Carpentier & Doudaki, 2014) which feeds directly into the debates of how to enhance cultures of agonistic pluralism and how to address difference and diversity in conditions of increasing polarisation and intolerance.

Also, in countries strongly affected by media capture, some trends of healthier media environments are documented, which albeit not dominant, are still important to be registered, and made visible. For instance, in Greece, which has been facing the consequences of the severe economic crisis in the 2010s and the long-lasting intertwining of business-media-political interests, the emergence of independent media, not affiliated to government or business interests is registered in empirical research. As it is stated in Maragoudaki's report on media capture in Greece, these media try to preserve their financial independence, through "grants by organisations that support independent journalism and guarantee that funding will not be made conditional on the exercise of any control or influence over the editorial process", or employing subscription models (Maragoudaki, 2024, p. 21). As it is also mentioned in the report, these media "try to gain the public's trust through investigative reporting, despite intense political and economic pressure, but lack visibility and influence" (Maragoudaki, 2024, p. 37).

Finally, as was mentioned in an earlier section of the literature review, researchers have been studying aspects of democratic (media) culture by using the concepts of 'critical publics' (Trenz et al., 2022) and 'civic cultures' (Dahlgren, 2015) to address more nuanced dimensions of the public sphere and citizen engagement (Bartoletti & Faccioli, 2016). For Dahlgren (2015), "[c]ivic cultures refer to cultural patterns in which identities of citizenship, and the foundations for civic action, are embedded. They serve as resources for citizenship" (para. 31), and "are necessary prerequisites for viable public spheres and thus for a functioning democracy" (para. 32). Research concerning "the cultural and subjective dimensions of civic engagement" at the national or European level (Dahlgren, 2015, para. 35) has been moving beyond top-down considerations of the public sphere, examining the material, intangible and cultural affordances of communicative processes, media, and public opinion (Sükösd & Jakubowicz, 2011).

8.3 Democratic regulation

This domain of conditions of possibility addresses the balance between, on the one hand the legitimacy and need for state regulation of the media landscape, and on the other hand the need for restraint by the state as it regards its intervention in the media landscape (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, pp. 68-69).

A complication, as it concerns media regulation, involves the rise of global communication and media systems, which creates regulatory challenges for national governments and for the EU (Fukuyama & Grotto, 2020), driven by the resistance by the global media conglomerates, the

internationalisation of the economy and the "borderless nature of the internet" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2018, p. 530, as cited in Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 69).

A part of this discussion concerns the recognition of the special role of public service media (Thomass et al., 2022), but also community media (Doliwa & Rankovic, 2014; European Parliament, 2007; Lewis, 2008), in performing the democratic roles of serving the public, of pluralism and diversity, through protective legislation and the provision of (financial) support (Kammer, 2016). As it is argued by Thomass et al. (2022), well-functioning and strong public service media are relevant for democracy also for their broader impact "on the general media ecology", in the countries in which they operate (p. 187). Community media, as already mentioned, are seen as serving democracy by giving voice to marginalised groups and by training their members in democratic practice (Bellardi et al., 2021; Carpentier & Doudaki, 2014).

As it concerns commercial media, legislation controlling concentration, which is seen as a threat to pluralism, is suggested by different authors (Bonfadelli & Meier, 2021; Iosifidis, 2014; Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021; Trappel & Meier, 2022). This is coupled with suggestions on regulation and self-regulation promoting media ownership transparency and transparency in journalistic practice (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021; Craufurd Smith et al., 2021; Fengler & Speck, 2019; Meier & Trappel, 2022). There are also arguments in favour of legislative and other provisions supporting print media, as pillars of democracy, at the state and European level (KEA, 2021; Miconi et al., 2024). Further arguments are addressed concerning the self-regulation of journalists and news media (Fengler et al., 2015; Fidalgo et al., 2022) through more updated and binding collective deontological agreements and instruments, adhering to the principles of a journalism serving genuine democratic practice in contemporary digital environments.

One related area where the regulatory role of the state is called upon, in relation to the protection of the public sphere, is digital platforms. In particular, the European Union has been preoccupied with containment of the increasing (negative impact of) platformisation, aimed at protecting pluralism. In September 2023, the European Commission designated for the first time six digital gatekeepers – which comprised Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, ByteDance, Meta, and Microsoft – under the Digital Markets Act (DMA). The Act established a set of criteria to identify digital gatekeepers, as well as a framework for their regulation, with an eye to promote fair competition and consumer rights within digital platforms. Gatekeepers are required to enable third-party interoperability, allowing businesses to access and utilise data generated on their platforms. Additionally, they must provide transparency and tools for independent verification of advertisements, as well as allow businesses to conduct transactions outside the platform.

Conversely, the regulations prohibit gatekeepers from prioritising their own products over third-party offerings, restricting consumer access to external businesses, preventing the uninstallation of pre-installed software, and tracking users across platforms for targeted advertising without explicit consent. In essence, these regulations seek to balance the power dynamics within digital ecosystems, ensuring fair treatment of third-party businesses and

promoting user autonomy. By mandating interoperability, data access, and transparency while curbing discriminatory practices and invasive tracking, the DMA aims to foster a more competitive and consumer-friendly digital environment. Critique of the regulation points out that the regulation may instead hinder competition, reduce innovation, and harm consumers (Bentata, 2021).

Literature also suggests that a condition of possibility for democratic media is a state/regulator that shows restraint and does not intervene directly in media's performance, but rather that creates the protective conditions for media's independence, which allows media to perform their democratic roles (also promoting and protecting self-regulation) (Miconi et al., 2024). A related area of research concerns the need for independence of public service media from state control (Psychogiopoulou et al., 2017; Šimunjak, 2016), showing among others that state controlled public service media are associated with low levels of public trust and thus lower levels of societal legitimacy and support.

Such concerns are echoed in the arguments for coordinated regulation at the EU level providing for the democratic functioning of the media. An example is the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), recently approved (January/March 2024) by the European Council and the European Parliament, which aims to promote media pluralism and independence across the EU, by increasing protection against political interference in editorial decisions and against surveillance of media and journalists (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2022; Brogi et al., 2023; Reporters without Borders, 2024; Tambini, 2023).[8]

Related are the provisions that are addressed by the anti-SLAPP Directive (which has still not entered into force), which aims to create a binding European legal instrument protecting those targeted with strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), journalists and news media being often among them (see, e.g. Bayer et al., 2021; Fierens et al., 2023; Ravo et al, 2020).[9]

9. Threats to media's democratic roles

The final aspect of our discussion pertains to the existing threats to the democratic roles of the media. The core challenges, which were discussed also in the previous sections, are partly connected to the rapidly changing digital environment, which alters the relationship with the audience and creates new complexities for media's financial sustainability. Some of the related challenges are deeply embedded in political, economic, cultural and social transformations that spread through the social tissue and the organisation of societies. On one level, journalism is an

[8] See https://www.media-freedom-act.com ;
https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2022)739202 ;
https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/739202/EPRS_BRI(2022)739202_EN.pdf
[9]See https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_6159

increasingly precarious profession (Ruggiero et al., 2022), and the resulting commercial pressures can compromise journalistic integrity and independence. Secondly, another threat is the colonisation of the public sphere by powerful individuals, groups and interests, such as technological corporations or (in the case of centralisation of power, see Section 4) government authorities. Furthermore, declining public trust in the media erodes the credibility of media, making it more challenging for journalists to fulfil their democratic roles of watchdogs and critical change actors (Hanitzsch, 2011). Lastly, polarisation, most commonly unpacked in research as echo chambers and filter bubbles, exacerbates social divisions, weakens democratic norms, and hinders constructive dialogue and decision-making.

9.1. Economic unsustainability

The economy of media production remains a key concern for the successful enactment of democratic media roles: "legacy revenues continue to erode, and digital advertising revenues increasingly go to large technology companies like Google and Facebook who are able to offer advertisers unduplicated reach, targeted advertising, and low rates" (Cornia et al., 2017, p. 1). Part of the problem stems from the abundance of free content online, discouraging the audience to pay for the news (Hayes & Felle, 2016): among Europeans who access news online, 70% only use only free news content or news services online (Eurobarometer, 2022). A comparative study between Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the UK (Cornia et al., 2017) reported that most newspapers rely on paid subscriptions, offering a so-called freemium model, which means that parts of material are free of charge and others are exclusively available to paying subscribers. This is different for most broadcasters and a considerable part of digital-born news media, which remain free for viewers and readers (Cornia et al., 2017).

The economic hardships of media production have resulted in increasingly precarious labour conditions for journalists, disruption of stable employment, and a growing dependency on freelance (Gollmitzer, 2014; Norbäck, 2023; Örnebring, 2018; Waisbord, 2019). According to findings from research conducted by the National Council for the Training of Journalists in the UK, the number of freelance journalists surged from 4% to 12% between 2002 and 2012 and remained stable throughout the 2010s, while the share of permanent contracts in journalism dropped from 81% in 2002 to 74% in 2018 (Spilsbury, 2018). In other European countries the conditions of precarity are more aggravated.

This financial predicament in turn threatens autonomy as a key pillar of professional journalism (Carpentier, 2005; Deuze, 2005). The reliance on metrics may imply that stories deemed less 'viral' are given less resources (Blanchett Neheli, 2018; Lamot & Paulussen, 2020; MacGregor, 2007). As Brennen et al. (2021) show in the study of British newsrooms, media reliant on subscription or donation revenue are significantly less concerned with "metrics pressure" than their counterparts dependent on advertising, who are largely driven by traffic targets.

9.2. Colonisation of the public sphere

Empirical research has explored the tendencies of the colonisation of the public sphere, i.e. an accumulation of power over media in the hands of a handful of actors. The threat itself is hardly new; much ink has been spilled on the dangers of the takeover of the market by privately owned media, although the empirical evidence largely comes from a highly commercially saturated American media market. In Europe, democratic states have partially attempted to balance these tendencies by lending a helping hand to public service media with financial support intended to correct media market failures (Harrie, 2013; Kammer, 2016). However, also in Europe public broadcasters increasingly resort to economic arguments to justify their value (D'Arma, 2018). On the other hand, European public service media have been critiqued for taking an undue advantage of public financing, pushing commercial competitors out of the market or forcing them to search for additional funding (Sjøvaag et al., 2018).

Based on a series of empirical investigations, scholars (e.g., Shiffrin, 2021) use the notion of media capture to denote various practices of digital platforms and governments controlling news media. Media capture was addressed in an earlier Section discussing the struggles of media, focussing on the role of the state and the threats of the executive branch to media autonomy. Here, the role of technological infrastructure deserves some attention. Empirical studies offer insights into the concrete ways in which the 'big tech' penetrates journalism, whether through education for media producers (Bell, 2021) or "infrastructural capture" (Nechushtai, 2018), i.e. creating "circumstances in which an overseeing institution becomes incapable of operating sustainably without the physical or digital resources provided by the organisations it formally oversees" (Nechushtai, 2018, p. 1052).

One other aspect pertaining to the algorithmic colonisation of the public sphere concerns the 'audience capture' by algorithmic moderation and control. Scholars point to the increasingly intrusive role of algorithms in allowing or disallowing free speech online through the creation of 'algorithmic audiencing', by organizing "speech on social media with the aim to increase user engagement and marketability for targeted advertising" (Riemer & Peter, 2021, p. 409). For Riemer and Peter (2021),

> "amplifying or suppressing speech for economic gain […] distorts the free and fair exchange of ideas in public discourse. When black-boxed algorithms determine who we speak to the problematic for free speech changes from 'what can be said' to 'what will be heard' and 'by whom'" (p. 409).

9.3. Disenchantment and lack of trust

Similarly to the threats to democracy (see Section 4), the lack of trust is commonly seen as a challenge for the successful enactment of democratic journalistic roles. The profound digital transformations of the European mediascape have altered and mutually integrated the traditional relationships between media producers and the audience (Osburg & Heinecke, 2019).

News disenchantment, or news avoidance, has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years, mainly by drawing conclusions from large datasets, such as the World Values Survey (WVS), the Eurobarometer, and the European Values Study (Damstra et al., 2023; Karlsen et al., 2020; Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2023; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). However, frameworks for interpreting the data vary (Fawzi et al., 2021; Otto & Köhler, 2018). These may include trust in media as an institution (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019), types of media such as television or internet (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Kõuts et al., 2013), media coverage, which is mostly directed towards specific topics such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Neureiter et al., 2021; Ravenelle et al., 2021) or immigration (Brosius et al., 2019), and particular media outlets such as the BBC or The Sun (Smith, 2023).

Trust in media as an institution is typically juxtaposed against trust in other institutions, such as the national government, its various agencies, or the EU. According to Eurofound, the EU's social policy agency, trust in media scores somewhat higher than national governments, but lower than the police and the EU (Ahrendt et al., 2022). At the same time, research emphasises the discursive aspect of media trust: media are not simply another link in the chain of public institutions, but an active (co-)producer of meaning with the power to amplify existing distrust in other institutions. In particular, "respondents who chose social media as their preferred news source have lower trust in established institutions than respondents who use traditional media" (Ahrendt et al., 2022, p. 13), with the deepest trust gap manifesting in relation to the government and news media.

When it comes to trust 'in the source', empirical findings show that trustworthiness is not always the primary criterion of news selection. For instance, based on the Eurobarometer findings, traditional broadcast and print media are favoured by European citizens as reliable sources of news compared to online platforms (Eurobarometer, 2022). Still, an increasing number of citizens rely primarily on articles or posts shared within their social networks for accessing online news content. Similarly, while public television and radio stations (including their websites) emerge as the most trusted news sources in the EU (Eurobarometer, 2022), and while on average, radio remains a more trusted source than television, still citizens, on average, do not use these media as their primary news sources (private television is the most popular medium for accessing news, especially among older citizens). Irrelevance of trustworthiness and credibility as selection criteria by the audience may undermine the quality of information citizens look for, and the quality of information offered by (news) media.

In relation to content, research points to the characteristics of news values: by prioritising, for instance, bad news and magnitude (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017), news media may inadvertently turn off their audience. As Reuters Institute Digital News Report posits, "[n]ews avoiders are more likely to say they are interested in positive or solutions-based journalism and less interested in the big stories of the day" (Newman et al., 2023, p. 11). Between 2017 and 2023, the number of respondents who admit they are very or extremely interested in the news went down from 63% to 48%. As a result, the report concludes, it "is extremely challenging for the news industry and for those who believe the news media have a critical role in informing the public as part of a healthy democracy" (Newman et al., 2023, p. 23). This tendency is further

amplified by the proneness of the audience who nonetheless continue to prefer content that matches their existing views.

9.4. The increase of symbolic violence and polarisation

Polarisation has gained significant traction in recent literature, with the number of academic articles on the subject steadily rising. Also symbolic violence in its various forms and shapes, such as hate speech and harassment (Siegel, 2020) remains an issue in democracy, rendering both journalists and audience members unsafe (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, pp. 79-80), as was addressed also in the previous Section on media struggles.

Polarisation, following Iyengar et al.'s (2012) seminal study, is understood as "the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group" (p. 406). While our literature review shows that most scholarship on affective polarisation originates from the United States (and is thus unsuited, given our focus on Europe), recent research has increasingly turned towards Europe (Borbáth et al., 2023), albeit with added complexity. This complexity arises from Europe's prevalent multi-party systems, which obscure the distinctions between opposing camps compared to the two-party dynamics. Studies have looked into cleavages and polarisation in Southern Europe (Bosco & Verney, 2020; Lorenzo-Rodríguez & Torcal, 2022; Padró-Solanet & Balcells, 2022; Rodon, 2022; Splendore & Piacentini, 2024), the Netherlands (Harteveld, 2021; van Elsas & Fiselier, 2023), and Switzerland (Traber et al., 2023), among others. Thematically, research has focused on the correlations between affective polarisation and voter turnout or electoral influence (Harteveld & Wagner, 2023; Reiljan, 2020), as well as dynamics beyond institutional politics (Hutter, 2014), and the role of media in flaming or pacifying political polarisation (Koc-Michalska et al., 2024; Macková et al., 2024).

Kubin and Sikorski (2023) unpack the relationship between polarisation and media on three levels: people who access media (their misperceptions, individual differences, identities and group dynamics), the media themselves, and interaction between the two, which consists of selective exposure, media diets, and particular ways of processing information. Social media have been another focal point of research on polarisation in Europe (Van Bavel et al., 2021; Wakefield & Wakefield, 2023). While the dominant strand of research accepts the position about the amplifying effect of social media on echo chambers and filter bubbles (Nikolov et al., 2015; Seargeant & Tagg, 2019; Williams et al., 2015), other empirical studies have critiqued this idea as inaccurate and deterministic (Enjolras & Salway, 2023; Karlsen et al., 2017).

In relation to symbolic violence, the obvious challenge for media is the risk of being a platform for channeling anti-democratic discourse. Empirical research has therefore focused on the normalisation of far-right populism (Krzyżanowski & Ekström, 2022; Padovani, 2022) and generally discriminative attitudes towards minority groups that manifest themselves in media discourse (Serafis & Assimakopoulos, 2023). At the same time, journalists themselves are facing criticism from the far-right who challenge their legitimacy (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Ihlebæk & Holter, 2021). Furthermore, threats faced by European media producers are covered in recent empirical literature (Björkenfeldt & Gustafsson, 2023; Rees, 2023), with a

particular attention to online harassment (Cheruiyot, 2022). Within this focal point in literature, gendered aspects of online harassment – i.e. female journalists being more exposed to intimidation – are especially prominent in reports and academic studies (Antonijević et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2020; Ivask, 2020; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016).

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Discussion and concluding reflections

This reflective literature review followed the structure of Carpentier and Wimmer's (2023) theoretical framework "Democracy and Media: A Discursive-Material approach" developed to support the theoretical needs of the MeDeMAP project. It addressed the diptych of democracy and media, maintaining the autonomy and in parallel interconnectedness of the two main parts, to allow for the adequate development of both.

Our review served as an opportunity for a theoretically guided reflection on the empirical research conducted within the designated area of democracy and media in/about Europe. This reflection is driven by criteria of diversity, as it concerns (thematic and geographic) areas of study, theories, concepts, and methodologies. It hence brings in examples of research conducted in different parts of Europe, addressing different aspects pertaining to democracy and media, using different theoretical angles, methodologies, and operationalisations, rather than exhaustively mapping all research conducted in the areas under study.

This reflective exercise allowed us to draw some conclusions as it regards empirical research in the broad field of democracy and media pertaining to Europe, as it has been elaborated throughout our report. A general observation that we can make here is that the empirical research points out to both the fragility and resilience of democracy, and the persisting societal relevance and importance of media as pluralistic, democratic institutions.

This review also allows us to formulate some general remarks as it regards the observed preferences and absences in empirical research; put differently, what are the commonly met concepts, themes, issues and methodologies, and what seems to be less present in empirical research pertaining to democracy and media in Europe today?

Firstly, while the theoretical framework by Carpentier and Wimmer introduces the interconnectedness of the discursive and the material, empirical research is heavily focused (usually implicitly) on the discursive while there is a lack of analytical consideration for the material dimensions of struggles, threats and conditions of possibility of democracy and the contribution of media in these struggles, threats and conditions of possibility.

Also, Carpentier and Wimmer's theoretical framework clearly identifies core components of democracy/media, roles of media in democracy, struggles over democracy/media's democratic roles, conditions of possibility of democracy/for democratic media and threats to democracy/media's democratic roles. Empirical research on media and democracy tends to focus more on struggles and threats, incorporating to a large extent normative expectations and assumptions about media's roles but not always addressing them explicitly. Hence, Carpentier and Wimmer's theoretical framework could be used as a starting point for the further theoretical grounding of the disentanglement of roles, struggles, threats and

conditions of possibility in empirical research, and be expanded upon, driving research in this area.

Relatedly, while empirical research explores struggles extensively, it still tends to focus on successes and failures, measuring good or bad performance of democracy and of its particular models, or to what degree media/journalists perform well or fail in a given time, based on normative frameworks and expectations. Less attention is paid to the contestations of/within these well-established frameworks in real-world settings, and to the nuances or the continua of struggle; those discussions are typically confined to theoretical literature.

Moreover, the body of research addressing conditions of possibility is not vast. Research on media takes usually the form of recommendations, still not always considering the tangible and intangible cultural, political, economic, technological, social environments for which the designed recommendations for improvement, are intended. A framework considering conditions of possibility could potentially shed more light in existing or underexplored cultures, infrastructures and societal networks that can be activated further in the service of democracy (without limiting them to a list of 'good examples' or 'best practices' that are often found in recommendations).

Research in the area of media and democracy focuses mainly on (online) news media and social media, while other media formats and genres are rather neglected. An exception might be the self-organised, alternative and community media that do not always fall under the 'news media' category; still the research interest in these cases tends also to focus on these media's informational or journalistic capacities (when addressing democracy). Hence, research can expand the scope by studying other media, formats and genres (e.g., fiction, art), for instance, insofar as it concerns their contribution to democratic literacy and culture through participation in communicative practice.

A general observation is that research on media tends to be more tangible (and more thoroughly operationalised) than that on democracy, keeping a macro perspective on larger patterns of institutions and processes, which are often more challenging to analyse and/or evaluate. A related observation is that some of the empirical studies that focus on media do not explicitly address democracy or its constituents, still, their design and reporting of the findings is heavily influenced by the (rather well-established) theoretical models of democracy and the normative theories concerning media's democratic roles. Therefore, these studies could profit from a more explicit or systematic connection with democratic theory, driving the research design in a conceptually informed fashion. In turn, there is a need to subject continuously emerging theoretical models to empirical scrutiny, in order to bridge the apparent gap between theory and hands-on analysis.

We have identified a vast body of research, often global or pan-European, conducted through surveys and using quantitative methodologies and instruments measuring levels of freedom, pluralism, representation, (non)participation, etc. This body of research allows for comparisons in space and time – in different parts of the world, in different countries and in

different moments in time in the same regions and countries. These comparisons, albeit very useful, have their limitations, as allocating scores of performance conceals to a certain degree, the qualitative aspects of discursive and material struggles. Our report has highlighted the critique and possible alternatives that we find, for instance, in the field of political studies (see Part 1).

While quantitative methodologies dominate, there is still a non-negligible body of research employing qualitative or mixed-method approaches. Qualitative approaches can be found for instance in the studies of low-level or grassroots democratic practice, and on research focusing on social movements and civic cultures, examining also the role of media and communicative practices.

Reflecting on methodologies, it may be argued that research measuring performance on the basis of normative standards might be inclined to identify deficiencies or lacks. Having as a starting point the normative ideal, what is often measured is how far from reaching this ideal democratic performance or the media are. These measurements fail to somehow capture the nuances and the varying intensities in the identified performances, while qualitative analyses that focus on the element of struggle, studying intensities—and not successes or failures—might allow sketching more nuanced pictures. Of course, as has been pointed out, qualitative research is often small-scale or even based on single cases, which limits the possibilities to draw broader conclusions. At the same time, the strength of qualitative research lies in the depth and thoroughness that it allows, offering the conditions of possibility to better comprehend the diversity, nuances and multiplicity of communicative practices performing democracy, and the embeddedness of these initiatives in broader societal networks and struggles. We would argue that large-scale and in-depth research are equally needed to study the complexities, inconsistencies and struggles around democratic practice. They may be applied in methodological processes of zooming in and out, in order to study the general and the specific and to explore their connections and how one informs the other.

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