

## Chapter 1

# Democracy at stake

## *On the need of news media monitoring*

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### Abstract

In this chapter, we discuss why news media monitoring is needed and propose a theoretical and methodological framework to implement it, which underlies the Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) research project. The framework is derived from normative theories of the roles of news media and journalism in liberal democracies. These roles are related to core dimensions of democracy, namely freedom, equality, and control, which reunite elements from liberal and republican theories. The context of this discussion is the increasing popular suspicion regarding liberal democracy and the crisis around news media as institutions. We conclude with a brief reflection on the results of the 2021 MDM research project, which identified some worrisome developments in news media performance but, overall, stability in the last decade, despite the disruption caused by digitalisation.

**Keywords:** democracy, news media, journalism, media monitoring, digital media

## Introduction

As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, democracy as a system of governance does not seem to enjoy its highest popularity. Research by the recently created Centre for the Future of Democracy at the University of Cambridge analysed thousands of surveys from the last 50 years in several countries and concluded that dissatisfaction with democracy has steadily risen, reaching now an all-time global high (Foa et al., 2020). Since the mid-1990s alone, the share of dissatisfied individuals increased by 10 per cent.

It is not simply a matter of popular support. There are more countries becoming authoritarian regimes than adopting liberal democracy, as measured by the Varieties of Democracy Institute in their democracy report (Alizada et al., 2021). In a similar vein, the influential political scholar Larry Diamond (2015) coined the term “democratic recession” to describe what he sees as a halt in the expansion of freedom and democracy in the world since the mid-2000s. The

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second half of the twentieth century saw an increasing number of countries adopting fair and regular elections, more political accountability, transparency, and restraint of power. However, breakdowns of democracies, the decline of freedom and rule of the law, and the resurgence of authoritarianism are, for Diamond, evident signs that the benign postwar wave is over.

In most accounts, Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America are the most affected regions. They display a higher number of recent democracies, whose immature political systems have never actually reached a point of stabilisation. Their economic shortcomings are known to make populations more prone to authoritarian alternatives. But scholars also warn of developments in the so-called stable, liberal democracies of the West, namely North America and Europe. No one could imagine, 20 years ago, that the United States of America would elect a populist outsider such as Donald Trump for president. In their already classic *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) argue that Trump's election is an alarming sign that American democracy is in decay. It perfectly illustrates how stable democracies are currently being threatened. Instead of classic military intervention as depicted in traditional textbooks, the primary risks come from abuse of power and violation of democratic institutions and norms by democratically elected rulers mobilising populist sentiments. Western Europe faces its own challenges as well. In 2017, for the first time since the 1930s, a radical far-right party gained representation in the German parliament. Many other countries, including the Nordics, are dealing with a similar far-right wave, whose most characteristic trait is the permanent scapegoating of immigrants for the stagnation of living standards for the working class. It is true that with the EU, Europe is pursuing the greatest project of economic integration ever. However, some scholars argue that as this economic integration was not accompanied by social integration, it has undermined public trust and participation in democratic processes, and ultimately civil society (Busschaert, 2016). That is why this integration is felt by many throughout the continent not as a sign of healthy and democratic governance, but as an elitist project at the expense of ordinary people.

However, not all scholars consider democracy to be under siege. While Pew Research surveys observe worldwide dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working (Wike & Schumacher, 2020), they normally exhibit much lower support for autocratic regimes (Wike et al., 2017). Furthermore, Erik Voeten (2016) argues that abstract preference for democracy or other regimes is not a good indicator for measuring popular support. Instead, we should be asking about their confidence in actual democratic institutions, which can be more concretely perceived by citizens. Applying this methodology, Voeten (2016) concludes that there is no evidence that popular support for democracy is actually diminishing. Finally, there is a lack of consensus about the actual reach of the democratic recession or whether consolidated Western democracies are really in danger of

collapsing. Simply calling “populism” a danger is not a thoughtful response. According to Francis Fukuyama (2016: 68), populism is often “the label that political elites attach to policies supported by ordinary citizens that they don’t like”. Populism is often a reaction triggered when masses feel they are losing power to elites, and arguably, it can even mean that democracy is vibrant. In this sense, broader conceptions of democracy regard disaffection and apathy as forms of political acts as well, and citizens have been looking for new routes of engagement and participation outside of the electoral system (Dahlgren, 2013).

Nonetheless, even those who dispute the extent of the democratic crisis or its causes agree that liberal democracy is struggling to keep its ascendant pace. Though it is questionable to say that people want an authoritarian system, it is clear that many are not satisfied or confident with the current state of liberal democracies. There is a feeling that elites are co-opting governments for their own benefit. Because of this, “there is an increasing disconnect between citizens and government” (Kundnani, 2020: 8).

### News media’s role in democracy and current threats

One institution that historically has been closely related to democracy is journalism. In its traditional narrative, particularly the one developed in the United States, professional journalism plays a crucial role in democracies by providing reliable political knowledge and holding the powerful accountable. Democratic societies need news media for information and continuous observation; therefore, news media are granted freedom to operate without interference by political, economic, or social interest.

There is empirical evidence that news media indeed can improve the quality of liberal democracies. Analysing data from more than a hundred countries, scholars Aymo Brunetti and Beatrice Weder (2003) found that independent press is a strong factor behind reduced corruption, hence contributing to make societies function under the rule of the law. Corroborating these findings, Stanford economist James Hamilton (2016) conducted an exhaustive study about the economic costs and benefits of investigative journalism, analysing several stories in the United States. Hamilton shows that, although news outlets are not able to monetise the whole value of investigative journalism, society benefits greatly from it. In many cases, one dollar invested by a newspaper in an investigation “can generate hundreds of dollars in benefits to society from changes in public policy” (Hamilton, 2016: 10). Because of this, Hamilton argues, investigative journalism should be seen as a public good.

Local news media are especially crucial for a healthy political debate. Kübler and Goodman (2019) researched the relations between media coverage and local politics in Switzerland and found that much of the variation in turnout

in local elections can be explained by the level of activity of the municipal newspaper market. The larger the share of newspaper readers in a municipality, the higher the rate of electoral participation in that municipality. Similar results are also found in other democracies. Small, but relevant, news outlets increase the likelihood that citizens will vote and express their opinions about local candidates (Hayes & Lawless, 2015). Lee Shaker's (2014) study about the closure of newspapers in American cities confirms that civic engagement wanes without local news coverage. In sum, both political participation and knowledge are stronger in cities and regions with active news outlets.

Additionally, local news counter political polarisation. When cities lose news outlets, their citizens turn instead to national coverage of politics and begin to use partisan heuristics to deliberate on local politics instead of issue-based reasoning, increasing polarisation (Darr et al., 2018). Not only voters tend to polarise; representatives from less-covered localities are more likely to follow partisan orientations, found a study by Snyder and Strömberg (2010) in the United States. According to these findings, low standards of local press coverage result in politicians working less for their constituencies, evidenced by partisan voting records, low participation in hearings, and lack of engagement in getting federal money to flow to their districts. Hence, quality press coverage is crucial for electoral accountability.

Findings like these sustain the journalistic credo that news media are important for strengthening democracy. But the issue is more complex. News media must grapple with a troublesome financial scenario. In fact, news productions are facing a continuous decrease in funding, leading to whole neighbourhoods, cities, and regions falling outside the coverage of professional reporters (Abernathy, 2018; Pickard, 2020). Even established news media have fewer resources than before, resulting in cutting jobs in the newsrooms, shortening time and money for coverage, and burdening remaining staff with a multitude of tasks. Subsequently, journalists must rely much more on either official statements or information provided by agencies, performing less in-depth, independent investigation. In other words, a core function for holding the powerful accountable – investigative journalism – is being undermined, largely due to decreasing revenues (Curran, 2011).

Global advertising spending – a major revenue source for most news media in liberal democracies – has been stagnant on a per capita basis (Winseck, 2019). However, the market share of legacy media is shrinking compared with online media, whose share amounted to more than half for the first time in 2019 (Enberg, 2019). In theory, television and print news outlets could transition online and recover their funding. And they are trying. However, digital publishers struggle to make money. In fact, a survey found that nearly 40 per cent of digital publishers see either a drop or a stagnation in their ad revenues (Simpson, 2015). This is not only the case for small and less relevant publishers.

Despite continuous growth in online reading, the British leading news company Guardian Media Group, which operates *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, wrestles with continuous losses in digital revenues (Hammett, 2016).

The main reason for the lack of funding for online news media is that most of online ad spending does not flow to publishers; advertising intermediaries capture between 55 and 70 per cent of every dollar spent on online ads (Iwańska, 2020). These are tech firms which provide services from targeting and trading to verification for digital ad placements. Although this tech supply chain is crowded with numerous players, Google and Facebook receive the dominant share of the revenues, making up half of the digital ad spending at the global level. The duopoly share is even bigger in rich countries (Enberg, 2019; Winseck, 2019). In this sense, the ad spending that used to flow to news media and legacy publishers is now concentrated to digital media in general, and a few tech firms in particular.

Besides financial-economic crisis, news media have to deal with other factors undermining their role in democracies, such as a lack of trust. The *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* has found that trust in the media has fallen year after year – until the Covid-19 pandemic, which seemed to remind many of the importance of professional news (Newman et al., 2021). The main reason for distrust has been that the media “are not considered to be sufficiently independent from political or business elites” (Newman et al., 2019: 20). On a similar note, Van Aelst and colleagues (2017: 3) list several concerns with regard to the contribution of news media to democratic societies in current times:

- (1) declining supply of political information, (2) declining quality of news,
- (3) increasing media concentration and declining diversity of news, (4) increasing fragmentation and polarization, (5) increasing relativism and (6) increasing inequality in political knowledge.

Many of these concerns are not new. Media concentration and declining diversity of news, for example, are long-standing issues. American scholar Robert McChesney (2008: 427) identifies media concentration as a deadly threat to democracy: “This concentration accentuates the core tendencies of a profit-driven, advertising supported media system: hyper-commercialism and denigration of journalism and public service. It is a poison pill for democracy”. Much along the same lines, Edwin C. Baker (2007) considers media concentration a multidimensional challenge for democracy. For James Curran (2011), hyper-commercialism is the very reason we see a loss of news media quality in the United States.

In fact, establishment media tend to see themselves primarily as a business, networked into economic and political power structures, confounding freedom of the media with freedom of trade (Christians et al., 2009). Most democratic societies do not challenge this conception. Not by chance does much of the media coverage simply reproduce the status quo, which favours established and

powerful actors, particularly economic elites (Maesele & Raeijmaekers, 2017). Recent research indicates that even legacy news media agents and traditional formats can play a central role in spreading disinformation, in spite of reasoning that seems to justify their contribution to democracy (Benkler et al., 2018).

Looking at this scenario, some scholars claim that the legacy news industry is dead: “Journalism is transitioning from a more or less coherent industry to a highly varied and diverse range of practices” (Deuze & Witschge, 2018: 166). These practices go beyond a traditional newsroom-centred practice towards a post-industrial, enterprise-oriented way of practising the profession. Self-employed journalists work on project-based contracts in allegiance with other professionals, in collaboration with but independent of news organisations, ascending in their career as they are able to monetise specific content. Others see journalistic practices expanding to other formats and languages, such as entertainment, which are sometimes considered more decisive than the legacy news media industry in connecting the audience with public issues (Jones, 2010; Peters, 2013).

### Why media monitoring is needed

In the context of news media crisis, many placed hope in digital technology to ultimately provide what democracies need in terms of information. Early on, the Internet was heralded as a full-fledged – and an even better – substitute for journalism regarding the nurture of a healthy public sphere. Networked communication could provide the information necessary for democracies (Benkler, 2006), and legacy news media seemed unnecessary, since technology allows each citizen to be a “local journalist”, reporting what happens in their neighbourhood and freely expressing themselves in social media. Digital technology was generally seen with optimism, although critical voices have always been present (Miller & Vaccari, 2020).

Two decades later, the optimism has vanished. Public discourse abandoned its original faith in the democratic benefits of networked communication to the point that even tech experts no longer believe in the potential of digital technology for strengthening democracy. On the contrary, they are rather concerned that “the use of technology will *mostly weaken core aspects of democracy and democratic representation in the next decade* [emphasis original]”, according to a Pew Research survey (Anderson & Rainie, 2020: 4).

There are many reasons for the contemporary scepticism. First, the business model underlying the recent developments of the Internet has brought up an ecosystem of data collection that has facilitated the most sophisticated surveillance system ever created (Zuboff, 2019). By following the online behaviour of billions of users, large tech companies such as Google and Facebook are able

to offer advertisers extremely segmented profiles of potential consumers. One possibly problematic application of this strategy has been in political campaigns, as politicians can reach citizens based on their specific interests and vulnerabilities, almost at an individual level, identifying both the voters more likely to be convinced and the issues that would make them vote, a strategy extensively used by Trump (Wong, 2020). No journalists, no researchers, no prosecutors, no critical citizens to voice enquiries; such ads go straight to susceptible people. Holding political communication accountable is extremely difficult under these circumstances.

The possibility of reporting independent of a news organisation, which was earlier celebrated as “citizen journalism”, might sound like an interesting idea as long as the citizen does not need to put much effort – money, time, and knowledge – into it. But in situations that require these resources, an industry with an established structure and means is needed. Furthermore, access to direct communication opens up possibilities for citizens, but authoritarian politicians also increasingly benefit from this technical possibility, speaking directly to their followers (Krämer, 2017). In this way, they avoid contact with the press. Again, there are no skilled journalists to scrutinise their messages, contest arguments, or filter propaganda.

Nor is technology helping democracy when it allows a rapid spread of mis- and disinformation. Most research on disinformation rightly acknowledges that there are many aspects contributing to this unwelcome trend in contemporary communication, ranging from economic incentives for producing misleading content to radicalising right-wing movements (Benkler et al., 2018; Farkas & Schou, 2018). However, the specific role of the Internet and digital media as technological infrastructures should not be downplayed. The decentralised communication provided by digital media, and its very platform design, are key factors for the success of disinformation campaigns (Krafft & Donovan, 2020).

Democracy is also endangered by algorithmic-driven decisions in digital media. Social media’s business model relies on algorithmic personalisation, which tends to be homophilic, making users interact with others who have similar ideological preferences and political views (Barberá, 2015). Additionally, algorithmic-driven decisions have enabled the creation of “social robots”: automated accounts in social networks that generate content in a similar way as humans, inflating arguments regarding specific public issues. Findings confirm that, although their effects on populations are uncertain, botnets have heavily distorted public discussion on digital platforms about Brexit and the American presidential elections in 2016, ultimately representing a threat to democracy (Bastos & Mercea, 2017; Bessi & Ferrara, 2016).

Of course, digital technologies have sparked interesting developments as well; for instance, online communication seems to increase voter turnout (Bond et al., 2012). In addition, many studies find evidence that using social media

for informational purposes has a significant effect on both online and offline political participation (Dennis, 2019; Dimitrova et al., 2014; Kahne & Bowyer, 2018), especially in countries without a free and independent press (Boulianne, 2019). Findings suggest that even casual conversation in non-political online communities is likely to develop into more civic engagement and political mobilisation (Graham et al., 2016). The major stance, however, is that, instead of being an unequivocal driving force for democracy, the Internet brings many challenges and contributes to putting more pressure on public communication (Hardy, 2014; Hindman, 2018; McChesney, 2013; Trappel, 2019).

However, the most striking issue for an increasing number of social theorists is the persistent centrality of legacy news media in public discourse. Citizens are still highly interested in news coming from a traditional information industry. The *Digital News Report* finds that 59 per cent of the global population affirm to be either “extremely interested” or “very interested” in news (Newman et al., 2021: 13). This interest is primarily directed to news produced by legacy media outlets. Although use of social media increases over time, including for news-related activities, people still rely mostly on television to be informed. Even considering specifically digital consumers, people tend to get their news from known brands, most of them predating the Internet, and most of the content circulating in social networks actually comes from these legacy publishers (Hardy, 2014; Jakubowicz, 2015; Newman et al., 2021). Despite a tendency for trust to decline in the last years, people still trust news from mainstream media more than news from social media and digital aggregators of news, a gap which increased during the Covid-19 pandemic (Newman et al., 2021).

Not only is interest and trust in mainstream journalism greater than that in news on social media and other forms of networked communication. After exhaustive analysis of the causes of “information disaster” in the US, Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018: 386) conclude that although much attention is drawn to new technologies, “professional journalism continues to play a critical role in anchoring public debate in facts and evidence-based norms”. This means that, despite the hype surrounding the Internet, public discourse is still shaped more by the editorial work of paid professionals than the opinions, sharings, and likings of social media users.

Therefore, even though being in crisis, leading news media still play the most important role in the information ecosystem of mature democracies. They enjoy popularity and influence and can use their clout to hold the powerful accountable. This also means, however, that they can abuse their power and harm democracy. If leading news media do not abide by normative standards for journalistic and editorial work, they are more likely to side with the powerful, undermining democracy. News media too must be held accountable.

One of the methods that democratic societies developed to hold news media accountable is monitoring their performance. Many scholars consider that the

normative expectations of the news industry and their shortcomings require regular media monitoring (Bertrand, 2003; Galtung, 1999; Nordenstreng & Griffin, 1999). Galtung (1999: 23) summarises what media monitoring ultimately is:

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

Accountability in this context refers not only to the output of the media, but also “to the willingness of the media to answer for what they do by their acts of publication, including what they do to society at large, and refers as well to the feasibility of securing accountability where there is unwillingness” (McQuail, 2009: 132).

Sharing this concern, many projects have arisen with the objective of monitoring media performance and holding them accountable (for a list of successful initiatives in the US and Europe, see Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 12). The Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) is one of these projects, conducted by researchers from the Euromedia Research Group in partnership with colleagues from academic institutions around the world. The MDM aims to provide theory-led comparative research on leading news media focusing on production and distribution structures, within which media use and content consumption occurs.

However, any project with the purpose of scientifically monitoring media performance regarding its role in democracies must first deal with the normative expectations placed upon news media in democratic theory. These expectations, in turn, require a clear concept of democracy as a framework. In fact, democratic theory comprises a vast array of concepts, providing several aspects of great relevance to the debate about the role of the media and journalism in democracy. In the following, we present the aspects considered by the MDM project to be the most relevant. This theoretical discussion closely follows the original version published in 2011 (Trappel, 2011), but considers further scholarly developments in this last decade.

## Models of democracies and normative expectations for the media

Democracies are usually divided into two models or traditions: the liberal and the republican (Cunningham, 2002; Glasser, 2009; Held, 2006). Liberalism originates from the Anglo-American world, based especially in John Locke’s and Thomas Hobbes’s thinking, and considers democracy as an “essentially procedural mechanism designed to facilitate the expression of individual preferences”

(Glasser, 2009: 94). In a further development of this model, Schumpeter (1976) argued that democracy means government *for* the people, but not necessarily *by* the people, with decisions made by informed and competent elites elected by the people and held accountable during the electoral periods. According to Glasser (2009) delegating power to elites is justified by citizens' lack of interest – and the necessary expertise – to govern themselves. Scholars have good cause to characterise this model of democracy as elitist (see Baker, 2004).

The role of journalism and the media in this model of democracy is to identify and make public the wrongdoings of elected representatives. By doing this, news media increase the chances for elections to “reward effective elite response to popular needs” (Baker, 2006: 114). The essential role of the press in elitist liberal democracies is therefore acting as a watchdog to bring possible misconduct to public attention. Little importance is placed on continuous routine information, as people typically lack both the time and interest to follow their elected representatives' day-to-day business. Consequently, Zaller (2003) claims that limiting political reporting to crucial problems demanding attention would be sufficient. Journalism would then foster the public interest to focus on a limited number of important public issues. The idea of limiting political coverage, however, places a considerable burden on journalists: “Journalists cannot talk about every potential problem because their audience would ignore them; it is the job of reporters – in cooperation with political and interest groups – to decide what requires attention and bring it to the public” (Zaller, 2003: 121). According to this ideal, citizens would thus have a critical dependence on the restricted choices of journalists, who must be skilled and responsible and able to identify issues that may become important enough to be brought to the public's attention.

The republican model of democracy, on the other hand, brings different expectations. It is inspired by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and considers democracy as “a system of decision-making about public affairs in which citizens are directly involved” (Held, 2006: 4). Republican concepts rely on dialogue, debate, and activism within a democratic society, rather than decisions made by elected, though elitist, representatives. In a republican democracy, “the epistemological hope is that those speakers with better arguments will prevail over those without – and this hope presumably requires that these better arguments ultimately gather larger audiences” (Baker, 2007: 11). Therefore, the most characteristic element of republicanism in this sense is “its insistence on the active participation of citizens in democratic self-governance. [...] Republicanism asserts that democracy requires civic virtues from its citizens” (Dahlgren, 2007: 59).

Glasser suggests three models of republican democracies: pluralist, civic, and direct. The pluralist model is characterised by different groups competing in society, and the civic model depends on the cultivation of different voices and perspectives in society – journalism is tasked with accommodating these

differences. The most radical is the direct model, which rejects any distribution of resources “that would have the effect of creating unequal opportunities for political participation” (Glasser, 2009: 104). Thus, according to Glasser, in the direct model, “freedom of the press exists to serve the interests of the community, not the interests of journalists and their managers” (Glasser, 2009: 104).

Baker offers an alternative by suggesting a complex model as the most sophisticated form of democracy, where decisions are based on exhaustive deliberation processes:

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

Further exploring republican variations, Strömbäck (2005: 336) speaks of a participatory democracy, which thrives on people engaging and putting forth effort to advance their own causes: “The stronger civil society is, and the more social capital a society has, the more democracy thrives”. The most challenging model of democracy Strömbäck offers is the deliberative model, which, in the same vein as the complex and direct models, depends on public discussions based on rationality, impartiality, and intellectual honesty and equality, with the goal of agreement or better understanding (Strömbäck, 2005).

In these dialogue- and deliberation-based models of democracy, journalism has not only the obligation to inform about potentially crucial issues (as in the elitist model), but also to act as a forum for the debate; the media should inspire people to participate in the public discourse, and journalism should give voice to groups that need to express themselves in public to make their cause heard. (Trappel et al., 2011: 18)

Recently, pluralist variations of the republican model are making a comeback, such as so-called radical democracy, which welcomes widespread participation but rejects the possibility of an ultimate consensus from this dialogue. This model highlights the persistence of conflict, dissent, and irreconcilable demands in society (Cunningham, 2015). For radical pluralists, democracy is a system designed to provisionally settle this ineradicable antagonism by accepting the contingent, and hence, political nature of any social order. “Not only is conflict an unavoidable fact of social and political life, but recognition and institutionalization of this fact within democratic culture, practices, and institutions is a necessary bulwark against autocracy”, according to Cunningham (2002: 184). In this notion of democracy, the forum provided by news media should not consider the conclusions of any deliberation as definitive, contesting the universality of

hegemonic views of society and underscoring whose interests are favoured by competing ideas (Karpainen, 2013; Ræijmaekers & Maesele, 2015).

In sum, there are different models of democracy, and each of them implies specific roles for the media. Denis McQuail (2009) nicely summarises the normative demands coming from both liberal and republican traditions in four journalistic roles: the monitorial, the facilitative, the radical, and the collaborative. The monitorial role requires news media to provide information about current and recent events to the general public. The facilitative role prescribes the provision of a deliberative public space where the media helps to develop a shared framework for society. The radical role refers to the exposure of abuse and wrongdoing, as well as contesting hegemony in the social order. The collaborative role relates to the cooperation between the media and state in times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, providing reliable information to citizens.

## Theoretical concept and methodology of the MDM

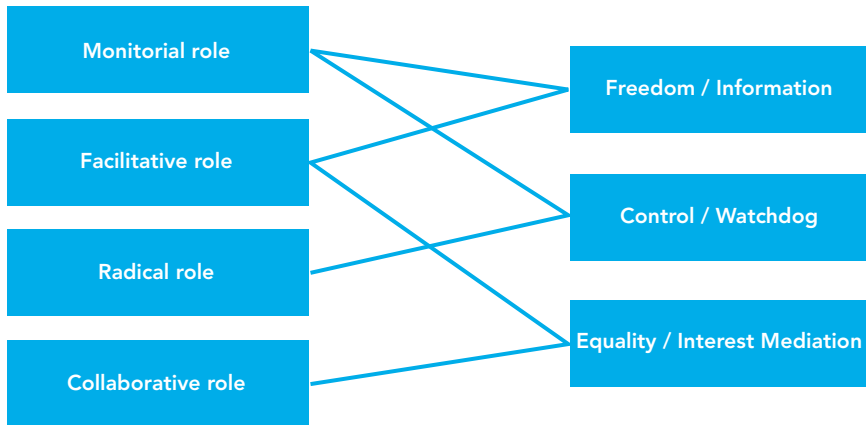
In the MDM, we are aware of the differences and contradictions of these democratic frameworks and the respective normative roles for news media, but we also understand that the analysis of existent mature democracies might require both liberal and republican aspects. This is indeed the argument by Bühlmann and colleagues (2012), who affirm that a strategy combining these different models is more suitable for grasping the rather subtle variations in advanced democracies. In this respect, Diamond and Morlino (2004) provide an interesting synthesis. For them, the liberal and the republican elements of democracies complement one another: The liberal element ensures that the rights of individuals and groups are protected under the law, while the republican element enforces the law and provides a contextualised understanding of the public interest, which public officials should serve (Diamond & Morlino, 2004).

Furthermore, even if relying on different logics, both models revolve around two basic constituents of democracies, namely freedom and equality. Irrespective of the way they are embraced in liberal and republican models, these values are also “necessarily linked to accountability and responsiveness”, a third value that can be simply called control (Diamond & Morlino, 2004: 7). Hence Diamond and Morlino’s (2004: 4) conclusion that mature democracies have to make progress in these three dimensions of freedom, equality, and control: “A quality or good democracy [should] be one that provides its citizens a high degree of freedom, political equality, and popular control over public policies and policy makers through the legitimate and lawful functioning of stable institutions”.

In the MDM research project, we take these three democratic dimensions as a legitimate theoretical arrangement of elements from both the liberal and

republican models. In the first volume of our 2021 MDM trilogy, we discuss in detail how we apply freedom, equality, and control to the roles of the news media (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a). In short, freedom refers to the conditions of receiving and imparting information, to which McQuail’s (2009) monitorial and facilitative roles correspond. Equality involves the mediation of different interests in society, ensuring that conflicts are fairly expressed and represented, reflecting the facilitative and collaborative roles of the media. Control refers to the capacity of acting as a watchdog, monitoring power-holders, and calling them to account, including the media themselves, a demand in the monitorial and radical roles (see Figure 1.1).

**Figure 1.1** Triple mandate of news media to uphold democracy



*Comments:* The boxes to the left show the news media’s roles for responding to the normative demands coming from both liberal and republican traditions. The boxes to the right depict the corresponding three dimensions of democracy.

*Source:* Elaboration of the MDM research team based on theories of democracy and McQuail’s (2009) roles of news media (for more details, see Trappel, 2011; Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a).

Following this theoretical framework, monitoring the performance of the media with respect to their contribution to democracy entails upholding freedom, equality, and control, which for the news media means serving as 1) an information provider, 2) a forum for mediating interests, and 3) a watchdog against power abuse.

In order to properly assess the fulfilment of this triple mandate, it is necessary to rely on corresponding empirical criteria. In the MDM, we have developed 30 indicators that cover structural conditions in the three dimensions. The indicators within the *Freedom / Information (F)* dimension address the reach and consumption of leading news media, the autonomy of editorial staff from political and commercial interference, access to the means of production by historically

marginalised groups, and conditions against abuse in online communication, such as the spread of misinformation and hate speech. In the dimension *Equality / Interest Mediation (E)*, indicators refer to the quantity of different media outlets, diversity of news formats, availability of minority and alternative media, costs to access the media, existence of self-regulation mechanisms, and levels of popular participation in media governance and content. Finally, performance in the dimension *Control / Watchdog (C)* is assessed by means of indicators such as the existence of independent media councils, the level of independence of news media, transparency of data, journalists' professionalism, training and security, and financial resources for investigation. (For a full list of indicators and the chapters where they are discussed in this book, see the Appendix; for a detailed explanation of each indicator, see Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 18–52).

For each indicator, we have developed a research question and corresponding criteria that must be observed. Data was gathered from secondary sources – such as broad media surveys (e.g., the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*) and specific national reports – and interviews with relevant stakeholders of leading news media or associations related to them, such as journalists' unions, media councils, and academic departments. The fulfilment of these criteria within each indicator is scored as follows (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 17):

- 3 points: all or almost all criteria are fulfilled
- 2 points: the clear majority of criteria or the most important criteria are met
- 1 point: some criteria are met, but poorly
- 0 points: no major criteria are met

In accordance with our theoretical framework, these indicators should be applied to *leading* news media, not to every information provider available in a country. As aforementioned, trusted brands of editorial news production still occupy the core of the information ecosystem, even in countries with high penetration of digital media and networked communication. This does not mean focusing exclusively on national media; in many news markets, regional and local media are also influential forces in public discourse and must be part of the sample.

Furthermore, these indicators should only be applied to advanced, mature democracies. Here, we mean countries where the political system displays solid institutional support for those three main democratic goals: freedom, equality, and control. Historically, this description resembles so-called Western (North American and European) political systems, which have been called liberal democracies because of the prevalence of the representative system, even if also displaying many republican elements (Diamond & Morlino, 2004). Therefore, these indicators are not appropriate to survey the performance of journalism in countries without the governmental and political institutions committed to the promotion of those three goals or where these institutions have been

systematically undermined by relevant political forces. We do not want to say that there is no democracy outside of the established Western framework, only that our instrument is limited in scope to grasp any alternative arrangement.

Following these theoretical and methodological assumptions, a pilot MDM project was conducted in 2009 (d’Haenens et al., 2009; Trappel & Meier, 2011). In 2011, the MDM research teams performed a full monitoring exercise in ten countries: Australia, Austria, Germany, Finland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The country reports were published in the book *The Media for Democracy Monitor: A Cross National Study of Leading News Media* (Trappel et al., 2011). Ten years later, we repeated the monitoring in nine of these countries (Lithuania did not participate again) and included nine others: Belgium (Flanders), Canada, Chile, Denmark, Greece, Hong Kong, Iceland, Italy, and South Korea. The full country reports were again published, in two book volumes (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021c, 2021d). By the time of publication of this book, Hong Kong does not meet the criteria for our 2021 monitoring exercise, as intervention from the Chinese government undermines their claim to a liberal democracy. The decision to include Hong Kong occurred in 2019, when it still shared decisive characteristics of Western democracies (for a detailed explanation in this regard, see Trappel & Tomaz, 2021b: 425).

While the 2021 monitoring was coordinated at the University of Salzburg, Austria, local teams were established in each country, composed of both emerging and experienced scholars affiliated with higher education institutions (see the list of researchers and affiliations in the contributor’s list at the end of this book). Each country team defined their own sample of relevant leading news media (that is, relevant in the formation of public opinion), taking reach, market share, and mention frequency in the national information ecosystem as criteria for their sampling. Data gathering occurred in 2019 and 2020, mostly before the Covid-19 pandemic began. In this period, each country team conducted between six and fourteen semi-structured interviews with media stakeholders (on average, eleven interviews per country), in addition to collecting and analysing as much secondary data as possible. Country teams exchanged initial findings in a hybrid meeting in Salzburg in June 2020, when they presented their first scoring proposal and had the opportunity to learn about the performance of other countries. This provided for a fine-tuned comparative scoring.

Each country report, published in June 2021, provides details about the news media sample and the data sources, including the interviewees (though mostly anonymised). These first two volumes detail the performance of leading news media in the 18 countries for each indicator (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021c, 2021d). In this third volume, our challenge was to select the indicators that brought the most interesting or important results and undergo cross-country and, when possible, longitudinal comparisons, searching for patterns and tendencies after a decade of digitalisation. Our exercise confirms most of the public and

scholarly discourse about the structural crisis of news media, both concerning economic conditions and trust from society. The advertising-based business model seems to struggle everywhere. Digital platforms (alias social media) are increasingly becoming the main source of news for many news seekers, especially for younger generations. Old poisons, such as media concentration and hyper-commercialisation, continue to haunt media systems of many countries. And 25 years after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, gender inequalities in the media are strikingly persistent, both at the organisational and the news content level. Therefore, news media perform poorly in many aspects, and civil society, politicians, and media stakeholders have reason to worry. But we also find that, in general, performance is similar to what it was in 2011 (in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis). The Covid-19 pandemic reinforced trust in professional news in many countries, and media reach remains high. News media also seem to be even more aware of their unique role as watchdogs, seriously shouldering the responsibility of upholding investigative journalism, albeit with a lack of resources. Public service media have upcoming challenges regarding their presence in digital media, but have so far survived the ideological attacks of the 1990s and 2000s and, according to our data, mostly contribute to enhance the overall quality of media performance.

Also, in a highly digitalised world, democracies need media monitoring, because news media still play a pivotal role in the information ecosystem. The flaws of the news media can be harmful to a democratic society, by entrenching power relations, sustaining inequality, and restricting freedom. Normative theories of the news media's role in democracy provide conditions for countering these harms, and, in the best of cases, news media can instead nurture freedom, equality, and accountability. The application of these theories allow for the assessment of media performance, and this chapter presents theoretical and methodological frameworks to carry out such monitoring. In the following chapters, we provide journalists, managers, academics, policy-makers, and civil society as a whole with an up-to-date picture of developments in leading news media according to this normative framework. By doing so, we expect to contribute to the discussion and implementation of policies, regulations, and practices that improve the quality of our information ecosystem and, ultimately, our democracies.

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## Appendix 1.1

**Table 1.1** 2021 MDM Indicators and chapters with cross-country findings

Dimension	Indicators	Chapter
<b>Freedom / Information (F)</b>	(F1) Geographic distribution of news media availability	–
	(F2) Patterns of news media use (consumption of news)	6, 9
	(F3) Diversity of news sources	9, 13
	(F4) Internal rules for practice of newsroom democracy	9, 14
	(F5) Company rules against internal influence on newsroom	8, 9
	(F6) Company rules against external influence on newsroom	8, 9
	(F7) Procedures on news selection and news processing	9, 13
	(F8) Rules and practices on internal gender equality	4, 9, 15
	(F9) Gender equality in media content	4, 9, 13
	(F10) Misinformation and digital platforms (alias social media)	2, 9
	(F11) Protection of journalists against (online) harassment	3, 9
<b>Equality / Interest Mediation (E)</b>	(E1) Media ownership concentration: national level	7, 9
	(E2) Media ownership concentration regional (local) level	7
	(E3) Diversity of news formats	9, 16
	(E4) Minority/Alternative media	9, 13
	(E5) Affordable public and private news media	–
	(E6) Content monitoring instruments	9, 11
	(E7) Code of ethics at the national level	10
	(E8) Level of self-regulation	11, 15
	(E9) Participation	–
	(E10) Rules and practices on internal pluralism	13
<b>Control / Watchdog (C)</b>	(C1) Supervising the watchdog “control of the controllers”	11
	(C2) Independence of the news media from powerholders	–
	(C3) Transparency of data on leading news media	12
	(C4) Journalism professionalism	15
	(C5) Journalists’ job security	15
	(C6) Practice of access to information	–
	(C7) The watchdog and the news media’s mission statement	5, 9
	(C8) Professional training	15
	(C9) Watchdog function and financial resources	5, 9

Source: Trappel &amp; Tomaz: 2021a

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