

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE: NEW EUROPEAN MEDIA AND PLATFORM POLICY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF NEWS

Special Issue Editors

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For more than four decades, since the late 1980s, European media policy has been exclusively audio-visual policy. What started out with the “Television Without Frontiers” directive in 1989, along with the MEDIA programme in various editions, experienced significant acceleration in the 2020s, when hegemonic control by digital media platforms over the media sector became increasingly evident and difficult to ignore. The European Union has made a significant return to the forefront of media policy discourse through the adoption of a comprehensive regulatory package, consisting of the *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR), the *Digital Services Act* (DSA), the *Digital Markets Act* (DMA), the *AI Act* and the *Media Freedom Act* (EMFA), among others.

In order to better understand the implications of this policy package, we focused the call for this special issue on an overarching area of longstanding interest in communication studies, which integrates the objectives of two European research projects. The Horizon project ReMeD, *Resilient Media for Democracy in the Digital Age*, aims at addressing challenges to the relationship between media and democracy, with a specific focus on the interactions between citizens, professional journalists, and alternative media content producers in technologically mediated configurations. EurOMo, *Euromedia Ownership Monitor*, creates a database and an index covering all 27 EU member countries, on ownership of opinion-shaping news media.

Both research projects address the delicate balance between ownership of media and editorial freedom. Seen from the perspective of critical political economy – an approach chosen by authors of this special issue – power materializes not only in control over media structures but also over resources and staff decisions. We argued in the call for this special issue that ownership matters, whether public or private, family-owned or publicly traded.

We asked for contributions addressing the following questions: To what extent are changes instigated by the EU media policy package impacting the political economy of news production, distribution and consumption? Should we expect changes in EU countries in terms of ownership concentration, funding of public interest content or the balance between profit and non-profit news production? Does the new regulatory framework favour the promotion of public interest content? Should we expect EU influence in middle powers, which are often “policy followers”, shaping their regulation and political economy of news as well?

We were aware that these are difficult questions. From the many proposals we received, we selected five for publication that either best reflected the state of the art in research and/or contributed best with findings from original research. We were happy and satisfied to realize that the call motivated scholars from even beyond Europe to contribute to the debate.

The first three contributions address a specific topic in greater detail. Konrad Bleyer-Simon looks at fact-checking institutions in Europe and carves out their relevance

and importance in shaping the public sphere. The process of fact-checking, which is understood to involve the verification of facts, statistics, and quotations, has been established within the European Union in an attempt to detoxify the public debate. Bleyer-Simon models fact-checking along Bourdieu's concept as a field in its own right. His interviews with representatives of fact-checking organizations revealed that there is enough symbolic capital to "influence the neighboring fields of policymaking and platform operation." However, recent developments since the second inauguration of President Trump have created existential challenges to fact-checking institutions, given the obedience of large US platforms in discontinuing their support for them.

The second contribution, by Bruno Lefèvre, Aina Errando, Adelaida Afilipoaie, Heritiana Ranaivoson and Louis Wiart, attempts to bridge the gap between regulation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and ethical considerations. Based on the analysis of key documents and 41 interviews with media professionals and regulatory experts across French-speaking Belgium, France and Spain, they establish that the discourse within media organizations on the ethics of AI is limited and that clear and actionable regulatory guidelines for the use of AI-driven news content are largely missing. Therefore, the authors propose the establishment of a comprehensive and robust oversight mechanism as a concluding recommendation.

Michael Pakvis, Tim Raats and Catalina Lordache focus their contribution on the delicate challenge of defining the key concept of impartiality for public service media. By comparing policy documents as well as editorial guidelines of three leading public service media in the UK (BBC), Ireland (RTÉ) and Belgium (VRT), they conclude that clear definitions are lacking. Although impartiality can be considered a key value alongside fairness, accuracy, independence, and accountability, the authors recommend avoiding strict definitions. They argue that "increasing political emphasis on impartiality paradoxically risks undermining the editorial independence it seeks to protect."

The contribution by Lizete Barbosa da Nóbrega and Rodrigo Pelegrini Ratier provides this special issue with a view from outside Europe. The authors undertake a critically examination of the so-called "Brussels effect", a term used to describe the impact of the digital media and platform regulation package beyond Europe. Obviously, Brazilian legislators closely monitor regulatory initiatives and their outcomes within the European Union and discern clear indications of cross-fertilisation. Nevertheless, endeavours to replicate European legislation in the Brazilian context often prove unsuccessful because of the ideological composition of the Brazilian parliament on the one hand, and of the prioritization of other pressing contemporary issues on the other. The "Brussels effect" can thus be regarded as limited.

Finally, Ana Tešić describes the process of the evolution of media ownership regulation in Croatia. She starts out by discussing the concepts of pluralism and diversity in the scholarly debate in order to establish whether Croatian ownership legislation has supported the promotion of media pluralism over time. She concludes that, at the end of

the long journey, Croatia managed to release legislation that provides information about all legal and natural persons who have direct or indirect ownership of stocks or shares in the capital.

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