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AGON: Constructions of Democracy is an academic film essay that combines theoretical argumentation and arts-based research to reflect on contestations over the meaning of democracy as a product of discursive-material constructions. At a time of rapid and complex change in the political and media landscape, it utilises these two approaches to communicate these reflections not only to the academic community but also to make them salient to the public at large.

The film essay forms a composite whole with the book by Nico Carpentier and Jeffrey Wimmer, *Media and Democracy: A Discursive Material Approach* (2025). It follows the first part of the book, dealing with the core components of liberal democracy, the conditions of possibility for democracy, political struggles for hegemony within democracy, and threats to democracy (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2025, p. 4).

Just like the book, with which the film essay forms an integral whole, the audiovisual work itself fully shows its discursive-theoretical and new materialist underpinnings. The discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe provides its main conceptual tools for addressing the discursive-political construction of democracy and its components (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 106). This is especially true of conceptualising democracy as an empty signifier (Laclau, 2007, p. 36).

Additional attentiveness to the material and its relation to the discursive comes from new materialist philosophy, which outright rejects the view of material as passive and stable (Bennett, 2010, p. 20). New materialist philosophy is theoretically combined with discourse theory through the deployment of the notion of a discursive-material knot proposed by Carpentier (2017, p. 4). This notion posits the entanglement of the discursive and the material, thus calling attention to their co-enabling and co-restrictive, and therefore productive relationship.

The film essay distinguishes itself from the book, delivering additional value by being situated within the arts-based research paradigm. Thus, the film is not only an ancillary to the written work but also generates new insights. As explained by Patricia Leavy (2020, p. ix), the arts-based research paradigm represents: "a set of methodological tools used by researchers across the disciplines during any or all phases of research, including data generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation." The meeting point between research and artistic methods is that both are conceptualised as practices or crafts (Leavy, 2020, p. ix). What this combination of the discursive-material approach with the arts-based approach achieves is the cross-fertilisation of theorisation and evocation, the immediate visibility of the co-dependence between cognition and emotionality, as well as the questioning of the taken-for-granted differentiation between the real and the fictional. All this results in a discussion of struggles over democracy and the construction of knowledge that is not "only" said, but quite literally done (which includes saying as an action that is likewise done).

As previously stated, the film is situated within Part I of the book *Media and Democracy: A Discursive Material Approach* (2025) by Nico Carpentier and Jeffrey Wimmer. The structure

of this part is followed quite closely. The film starts by explaining the contested nature of democracy, and then proceeds to deal with its core elements, struggles over its meaning, conditions of possibility, and threats to democracy. The film ends on an optimistic note, showing the possibility of democratic perseverance, even as this model is continuously threatened. The parts themselves are divided and announced by title cards reminiscent of the silent film era. Meanwhile, sound design and visual representations are used to evoke the meanings of the notions spoken of by the characters. Thus, throughout the film, visual, auditory, and textual elements come together to create an experience that utilises both argumentation and emotionality to convey its messages.

The opening shot of the film introduces the 'woman with the balloons' as a representation of democracy. This character proceeds to introduce the core themes, which are developed throughout the film. The choice of a young female actor might immediately evoke the tension between fragility and strength, the offer of care and the need for protection. The viewer follows this character as she moves through everyday environments, surrounded by the noise of the everyday urban environment. The character is immersed in this environment, taken for granted and invisible to everyone but the viewer, dressed distinctly in red, in contrast to her grey surroundings.

The first section, "The Core Elements of Democracy", brings the 'woman with the balloons' and the viewer to an institutional setting. The character of the 'narrator' introduces the notion of the simultaneous presence of participation and representation, and it is noted that the representative democratic model occupies a hegemonic position in Western democracies. As the 'woman with the balloons' enters a parliament building, the 'narrator' introduces the notion of the state, institutionalised politics, and mediatisation, as elements intersecting with democracy as a model of collective decision-making. A multitude of almost unintelligible voices are heard talking over one another, evoking many interests shaping and being shaped within the political institutions.

As the 'woman with the balloons' exits the building, voices are heard chanting: "We are the people!" As she enters the courthouse, the voices of the people fall silent, and two people can be seen discussing. The 'narrator' then explains the hegemonic position of the liberal democratic model and its goal of protecting individual and collective rights, as well as the central importance of the rule of law. Addressing the 'woman with the balloons' as 'Miss Democracy', the 'judges' pronounce that democracy should be free everywhere in the world. Thus, from the mouths of the 'judges', a strong normative statement is given. As the action moves to a public setting, the section closes with the explanation that the existence of a political community is also a core component of democracy.

A military march introduces the second section, titled "Struggles Over Democracy". A drastic change happens as the viewer follows the 'woman with the balloons' into a private home, thus announcing a discussion on maximalist and minimalist discourses on democracy, while evoking the work of Anthony Giddens and the call for the democratisation of personal life, arguing for the existence of symmetry between this place of privacy and global politics (Giddens, 1992, pp. 195–196). The 'narrator' explains the struggles internal to democracy. The discussion then shifts to the reach of democracy. A distinction is made between the minimalist models, which confine the notion to institutional politics, and the maximalist ones, which call for its spread into broader societal fields, including the family. A 'clown in a suit' enters the room holding a sign that says "power to the people".

The 'narrator' proceeds to explain the struggle over the nature of the balance between representation and participation.

A knock is heard on the door, and standing in front of it is an older man, seemingly unknown to the father of the family. Eerie music plays as the stranger is let in. The scene is contextualised by explaining the struggle over the extent of the political community. Everyone, including the stranger, then proceeds to cast votes on the choice of food. The mother of the family explains the struggle over the material procedures that democracy is using. The son and the stranger join in discussing different methods of organising the material democratic procedures. The 'narrator' introduces the notion of substantive democracy, as the family is shown fully embracing the newcomer. Here, the more strictly procedural model is set aside, but it is also evoked through the absence of its mention, while at the same time being evoked through the memory of the voting procedure.

Dramatic music introduces the third part, titled "Democracy's Conditions of Possibility", as the scene shifts to a building site. The 'narrator' explains the notion of the conditions of possibility. These may be understood as elements forming the necessary context for democracy, while at the same time limiting, enabling, and situating it (Deleuze, 2015, p. 31). The workers are shown handing bricks over to one another, evoking the constructed nature of democracy resting on the conditions of possibility. The scene of multiple workers joining in together opens the discussion on collaborative democratic culture. The motif of physical labour is used to posit the necessity of people's willingness to actively participate. Adding to this, the need for a legitimate state as a necessary requisite for democracy's existence is stated. To this is added the need for decentralisation of the societal structures to prevent the concentration of power. The workers then proceed to enter a large building. Stating that the structure is stable, the workers proceed to explain the final condition of possibility, namely the need for social and economic stability. The scene closes with the 'woman with balloons' entering the building and observing it in complete silence.

The silence is abruptly cut by the sound of army drums announcing the next section, titled "Threats to Democracy". Ominous music introduces the character of the 'masked dancer', shown as a red-faced demon. The loud noises, sharp camera cuts, and fluidity of the characters' movements evoke a sense of juxtaposition between this and the previous scene. The 'narrator' explains this by stating that the perseverance of democratic rule is not assured.

The 'woman with the balloons' is then shown walking through a tunnel. A pedestrian explains the unfulfillment of democratic promises to be a threat embedded within the structure of democracy itself. The monologue cut short by a 'masked dancer' stealing one of the balloons. The pedestrian explains how frustrations such as unfulfillment of promises can structurally destabilise democracy.

The scene then cuts to a shot of the woman with balloons' standing on the street, in a cordoned-off area. This motif of restrictiveness is immediately explained by positing the policing of the political community as a potential threat to democracy. The central question here is that of membership. The film shows this by showing the 'masked dancer' tackling a pedestrian on crutches as he desperately tries to take the hand of the 'woman with balloons'. Sad music plays as the 'woman with balloons' is shown kneeling on the street and handing balloons to passers-by who ignore her. This shows the threat of non-participation and political apathy. The 'narrator' proceeds to pronounce violence as a

decision-making tool, the fourth threat to democracy. The camera shows two masked men in military uniforms leading away the 'lady with balloons'. The imperfections of the state's monopoly over violence are problematised, as are political violence and the externalised use of violence by democratic states.

The culmination of the film comes as the 'narrator' pronounces re-centralisation of power to be a threat to democracy. Dissonant, fast-paced music begins to play as the reliance of democratic rule on the idea of an empty place of power is explained, and the wish of political actors to occupy this place is posited. The text is supplemented by a shot of two figures facing each other in front of a monumental building. There, the empty place, or seat of power, is situated. One of them, the demon-like 'masked dancer', proceeds to sit on the throne and is brought a crown with which they proceed to crown themselves.

However, the 'woman with the balloons' then enters the scene as celebratory music begins to play. The scene cuts to a shot of two characters holding hands and walking away. Struggles are proposed to be an integral part of democracy, to be celebrated instead of problematised. However, attention is called to threats to the existence of democracy, and a call is issued for engagement with these threats and the frustration of their objectives. As the 'masked dancer' proceeds to take off the crown, the shot of the two characters holding hands and walking away closes the film.

The particular contribution of this work comes from its being an academic film essay rooted in the arts-based research paradigm. As Leavy (2020, p. 4) mentions, the arts-based research emphasises disseminating the scientific insights both to academic communities and to the public at large. This film makes the notions of discourse theory and democratic theory more accessible. It does this by using sound and image to inspire imagination and emotion, which resonate with the theoretical subject matter narrated. In this way, notions which appear in academic works of varying complexity are put into terms which the viewer might relate back to everyday life or popular culture.

A notable characteristic of the film is that it stimulates interpretation. Much is shown through events on the screen, and the possibilities of different interpretations are multiplied. At times, the language and concepts used demand some familiarity with discourse theory to be fully understood. At other times, complex theoretical notions are put in simple terms, and the film manages to strike a balance between the need for precision and accessibility.

The same is true of the imagery. It may evoke associations and emotional responses that encourage a more complex and nuanced approach to the questions raised. However, due to the increasing multiplicity of possibilities of interpretations, some messages may remain hidden. It must be said that this is not only the case with arts-based research approaches but may arguably be turned into a strong point if utilized to advance reflection.

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Mirela Holy i Nikolina Borčić

PROPAGANDA SLAVNIH

Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 295 stranica

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Knjiga *Propaganda slavnih* autorica Mirele Holy i Nikoline Borčić u izdanju Školske knjige sadržajno je podijeljena u šest velikih poglavlja, a posebne cjeline čine Predgovor, Pojmovnik, Popis izvora fotografskih priloga te Bilješka o autoricama.

Slavne osobe oduvijek su intrigirale javnost i medije, no shvaćanje koncepta *slavne osobe* značajno se promijenilo. I dok se u slavne osobe nekada ubrajalo dominantno političare, sportaše ili pojedince koji su svojim radom zadužili društvo i svijet, danas taj koncept obuhvaća *influencere*, utjecajne osobe, pa čak i počinitelje teških kaznenih djela koja se glorificiraju, navode autorice u *Predgovoru*. Dodaju kako je knjiga nastala kao odgovor na postojeći jaz u literaturi, ali i za potrebe kolegija koji zajednički izvode na Sveučilištu Vern'. Kako stvaramo parasocijalne interakcije sa slavnima, kako oni postaju roba s kojom se uspješno trguje, koja je uloga medija, odnosa s javnošću i marketinga u cijelom procesu – to su ključna pitanja na koja ova knjiga nastoji odgovoriti. *Predgovor* donosi sadržaj svakog poglavlja, a na kraju svakog poglavlja nalazi se studija slučaja, pitanja za raspravu te popis korištene literature (usp. str. 11–12).

U prvom poglavlju *Uvod u studije slavnih* autorice objašnjavaju koncept *slavne osobe*, upozoravajući kako se slavne osobe često pogrešno poistovjećuje s poznatim osobama. Analiziraju i klasifikacije slavnih osoba koje su uspostavili Chris Rojek i David Giles, kao i obilježja prema kojima se oni razlikuju od „običnih” ljudi. Postati slavnom osobom zahtijeva i ispunjavanje određenih kriterija, kao što su: posjedovanje talenta, upravljanje javnom slikom, nametanje kontroverznih ili polarizirajućih tema te podrška publike (usp. str. 32). Zanimanje za slavne u središtu je interesa brojnih psiholoških teorija (teorija privrženosti, koncept dramaturške analize, teorija prezentacije ega, teorija socijalnog identiteta, teorija utjecaja medija) koje autorice predstavljaju i povezuju s učincima medijskog djelovanja. Poglavlje završava studijom slučaja pop-ikone Madonne koja se desetljećima uspješno transformira i polarizira javnost svojim djelovanjem.

Propaganda slavnih: proizvodnja i potrošnja slavnih osoba naziv je drugog poglavlja u kojem autorice istražuju proces komodifikacije, ističući kako je njegova svrha ekonomska i politička propaganda. Nadalje, objašnjava se koncept *celebrity endorsement*, koji podrazumijeva korištenje ugleda ili slave za reklamiranje određenog proizvoda koji je postao

unosan način zarade za slavne (usp. str. 55). Najbolji primjeri takve suradnje danas su Beyoncé i David Beckham. Mediji proizvode slavne i omogućuju njihovu potrošnju. Riječ je o uzajamno korisnom odnosu koji sve više preuzimaju stručnjaci za odnose s javnošću, nastojeći kontrolirati medijske narative, ali i vidljivost klijenata koje zastupaju. Posljedica je toga porast udjela *infotainment*a (hibridnih oblika informativnog sadržaja koji spajaju informacije i zabavu) i *infomercial*a (hibridni oblici oglašavanja koji spajaju informacije i zabavu). Istodobno, raste popularnost i *reality show*ova u stvaranju slavnih zbog lakoće identifikacije publike s televizijskim zvijezdama, kao i nove kategorije slavnih – *influencera*. Poglavlje završava studijom slučaja Donalda Trumpa, opisujući njegov put od uspješnoga poslovnog čovjeka, zatim *reality* zvijezde do aktualnoga američkoga predsjednika.

U trećem poglavlju *Povijest fenomena i discipline istraživanja slavnih osoba* autorice donose komparativni prikaz poimanja slavnih osoba od antičkih vremena, racionalizma i prosvjetiteljstva, zatim industrijskog doba u 19. stoljeću, pa sve do 20. i 21. stoljeća, analizirajući povijesni razvoj i doprinos medija u stvaranju slavnih. Poglavlje podsjeća na ulogu kulturnih studija i popularne kulture u istraživanju slavnih, kao i pojave znanstvenih časopisa (*Celebrity Studies* i *Journal of Popular Culture*) koji su doprinijeli akademskom proučavanju te tematike.

Kreiranje imidža slavnih često se oslanja na arhetipove (junaka, žrtve, mučenika). To su „univerzalni simboli ili uzroci ponašanja koji su duboko ukorijenjeni u ljudskoj psihi i kulturi te se koriste za prepoznavanje i povezivanje s određenim vrijednostima, idejama ili osobinama” (str. 139). Upotreba arhetipova prisutna je kod filmskih zvijezda, ali i u marketinškoj komunikaciji, ističu autorice u četvrtom poglavlju *Arhetipske matrice i imidž slavnih osoba*. Temelje proučavanju toga fenomena postavili su psiholozi Carl Gustav Jung i Sigmund Freud, motivirajući mnoge na razmišljanje o ulozi arhetipova kod slavnih. Osim toga u propagandi slavnih koriste se i arhetipski događaji koji se ponavljaju u snovima, mitovima, pričama (usp. str. 146). Poglavlje donosi dvije studije slučaja u primjeni arhetipova u stvaranju imidža slavnih osoba – ugledne britanske dizajnerice Vivienne Westwood i japanskoga modnog dizajnera Yohjija Yamamotoa.

U petom poglavlju *Produkcija imidža u svijetu politike* autorice navode kako je politika postala medijski spektakl, a karakterizira je i rastuća personalizacija. Nadalje, političari sve više koriste populističke obrasce u retorici kako bi privukli širu publiku, a to često podrazumijeva korištenje stereotipa i predrasuda. Strateška upotreba jezika, poruka i simbola postaje ključ izgradnje osobnog imidža, ali i osvajanja pozicije političke moći. Pritom veliku ulogu ima i neverbalna komunikacija, posebice odjeća kao snažan alat za predstavljanje identiteta. Poglavlje donosi usporedbu modnog stila hrvatskih državnika Franje Tuđmana, Ive Sanadera, Jadranke Kosor, Zorana Milanovića, Andreja Plenkovića, kao i odabrane primjere iz međunarodnoga političkog okružja (Angela Merkel, Madeleine Albright). Također, prikazani su primjeri produkcije imidža iz perspektive političara i perspektive komunikacijskih stručnjaka.

Medijski konstruirana stvarnost i analiza narativa naziv je šestog poglavlja koje sintetizira doprinos lingvističkih, književnih i semiotičkih teorija u stvaranju medijskih prikaza. Nadalje, analizira se uloga mitološke naracije u tekstu i podtekstu, te *storytelling*a u kreiranju imidža slavnih osoba. Kako upotreba stilskih figura doprinosi komunikacijskoj razmjeni i uključenosti publike te kakva je povezanost između personalizacije i narativa, samo su neka pitanja na koja šesto poglavlje nastoji odgovoriti. Na kraju autorice donose studiju

slučaja najstarije modne *influencerice*, Iris Apfel, čiji su modni odabiri i životna filozofija često spajali nespojivo i tako joj osigurali medijsku pažnju. Istaknimo i napomenu autorica o poglavljima, petom i šestom, koja se temelje na doktorskoj disertaciji Nikoline Borčić, a dopunjena su za potrebe ovoga izdanja. Na kraju knjige nalaze se *Pojmovnik*, *Popis izvora fotografskih priloga* te *Bilješka o autoricama*.

Knjiga *Propaganda slavnih* vrijedno je djelo koje uspješno spaja teorijske pristupe proučavanju kulture slavnih (komunikološki, psihološki i sociološki aspekti) s brojnim studijama slučaja javnih osoba za koje medijski interes ne prestaje. Pisana u formi sveučilišnog udžbenika, knjiga je metodološki vrlo precizno strukturirana (snažan teorijski okvir, pitanja za ponavljanje gradiva, upućivanje na dodatne izvore, pregled ključnih pojmova) te grafički odlično oblikovana i uređena za upotrebu u nastavnom procesu. Knjiga će biti neizostavni priručnik studentima komunikologije, medija, novinarstva, odnosa s javnošću, komunikacija, ali i zanimljivo štivo svima onima koji su zainteresirani za razumijevanje fenomena slavnih osoba, tehnike održavanja njihova imidža u javnosti te konačno ulogu medija i društvenih mreža u informiranju i održavanju njihova statusa.

Tanja Grmuša

Elda Brogi, Iva Nenadić, and Pier Luigi Parcu (Eds.)

MEDIA PLURALISM IN THE DIGITAL ERA:

Legal, Economic, Social, and Political Lessons Learnt from Europe

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Media Pluralism in the Digital Era: Legal, Economic, Social, and Political Lessons Learnt from Europe, edited by Elda Brogi, Iva Nenadić, and Pier Luigi Parcu, brings together researchers, journalists, and policy experts from twenty-seven European countries and offers a comparative and longitudinal view of how media pluralism in Europe has evolved over the past decade. The volume's central value lies in its refusal to treat pluralism as an abstract democratic ideal or merely as a market outcome. Instead, it approaches media pluralism as a multidimensional "health record" of the media ecosystem, one that must be read simultaneously through legal, economic, political, and social indicators. This approach is explicitly anchored in the Media Pluralism Monitor, a research instrument implemented periodically to identify risks across European media systems, including European Union Member States and candidate countries. The book therefore speaks directly to the contemporary reality of platformisation, intensified economic vulnerability, politicised regulatory environments, and shifting patterns of information consumption. This volume is organised into thirteen chapters that align closely with the four main areas of the Media Pluralism Monitor (Fundamental Protection, Market Plurality, Political Independence, and Social Inclusiveness). Across these sections, the book maintains a consistent analytical logic: pluralism is not reducible to the number of outlets or the diversity of content alone but emerges from the interaction between institutional safeguards, market structures, political pressures, and the capacities of audiences, most notably media literacy and resilience to manipulation. The introductory chapters clarify

how the Media Pluralism Monitor operationalises pluralism through indicators and variables, while also emphasising that the instrument itself has been updated to capture digital-era threats more systematically, particularly after 2020 and emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

In practice, the chapters could be described as falling into four interconnected clusters: first, a conceptual and methodological framing of media pluralism under digital conditions (Chapters 1 and 2); second, the pressures on the public sphere and the sphere of fundamental safeguards (Chapters 3 and 4); third, the political economy of the media market – ownership, concentration, and sustainability (Chapters 5 through 7); and fourth, the modalities of political control and the social dimensions of pluralism (Chapters 8 through 12), before the volume closes with a conclusion and outlook (Chapter 13).

One of the most interesting chapters is Chapter 3, titled “Towards a Resilient Public Sphere: Fighting Disinformation and Promoting Media Literacy”. Konrad Bleyer-Simon, Ville Manninen, and Aukse Balčytienė introduce the concept of disinformation risk awareness as a prerequisite for societal resilience. The chapter’s main academic value is its operational clarity: resilience is framed as a combination of policy design and implementation capacity, with media literacy positioned as an enabling condition rather than a symbolic add-on. Its comparative logic is persuasive because it is grounded in concrete national configurations. Finland is presented not only as a case of institutional preparedness, but also as an example where broader contextual conditions, such as social trust and trust in legacy media, plausibly reinforce resilience. At the same time, the authors note that this resilience is likely to be tested under new geopolitical conditions after 2022, including Finland’s accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Hungary serves as a contrasting example, marked by limited coordination, weak institutional capacity, and a polarised context in which disinformation is frequently understood as politically instrumental. This chapter also offers a particularly transferable comparative datapoint: according to the Media Pluralism Monitor 2023, only seven European Union Member States had integrated media literacy into the mandatory school curriculum, while most countries relied on partial and uneven initiatives. This kind of empirically grounded observation makes the chapter directly usable in both academic research and policy analysis, that is policy-making.

Another interesting chapter from this book is Chapter 6. Titled “Sustainability of the European Media Market(s)” (Konrad Bleyer-Simon, Paško Bilić, and Franck Rebillard), this chapter provides one of the volume’s most empirically tangible contributions by examining how news organisations navigate sustainability pressures across three countries with markedly different market sizes and political contexts: France, Croatia, and Hungary. The chapter maps the shift toward reader-revenue strategies, including subscriptions, donations, and, more rarely, membership models, typically combined with advertising and sometimes supplemented by philanthropy or grants. Importantly, it also offers comparative figures that place these strategies within clear structural constraints, most notably the reported share of audiences willing to pay for online news, which remains relatively low across all three cases (France 11%, Croatia 8%, Hungary 9%). Most importantly, the chapter does not romanticise subscriptions as a universal solution. Instead, it pinpoints a core normative dilemma: paywalls may stabilise newsroom revenues while simultaneously restricting access to information and, by extension, narrowing the public

sphere. This risk is especially pronounced in smaller and lower-income markets. Croatia is presented as a structural illustration of the scale problem, where limited purchasing power makes widespread conversion of audiences into paying subscribers difficult and constrains the viability of subscription-driven models. Hungary, in turn, demonstrates how financing strategies adapt in more restrictive political environments, with increased reliance on donations and diversified income streams to keep content accessible, particularly where advertising markets are distorted or politically influenced.

But if the aforementioned chapters demonstrate how media pluralism is strained by disinformation pressures and structural market constraints, Chapter 8 shifts the analytical focus to a third, equally decisive dimension: political power. In "Tools and Strategies of Political Capture of the Media in Europe" (Matteo Trevisan, Václav Štetka, and Marko Milosavljević), the authors move beyond the entrenched assumption that political interference in the media is primarily a problem of a limited group of "usual suspects". Based on comparative evidence drawn from the Media Pluralism Monitor, political capture is conceptualised as a risk that cuts across European media systems, manifesting itself through recurring and structurally similar patterns rather than remaining confined to post-socialist contexts. This chapter calls attention to indicators pointing to growing vulnerabilities even within parts of the older European Union membership, including developments consistent with increased political influence over editorial autonomy in countries such as Spain and France. From this vantage point, the authors argue for preventive, resilience-oriented policy responses aimed at reinforcing institutional safeguards before capture dynamics become normalised, rather than relying on reactive measures once interference has already taken root. The chapter's main strength lies in its ability to connect political capture to concrete mechanisms and policy levers, most notably the strategic deployment of state advertising, opaque ownership structures, and regulatory pressure, while situating these dynamics within the evolving European regulatory landscape. References to ongoing debates surrounding the European Media Freedom Act further link monitoring-based diagnosis to the practical question of how capture risks might be constrained through enforceable standards and institutional design.

Beyond questions of political independence, the book also turns to social inclusiveness as an integral component of media pluralism, approached not primarily through the lens of content diversity but through the distribution of authority and visibility within media institutions themselves. In Chapter 10, "Far from Gender Balance: The Persisting Underrepresentation of Women in the Media" (Marie Palmer and Marína Urbániková), gender inequality is examined not as a rhetorical or advocacy-driven concern, but as a persistent structural risk embedded in European media systems. Rather than relying on normative claims alone, the chapter draws systematically on Media Pluralism Monitor indicators to trace longitudinal trends and cross-national variation in women's participation in media governance and senior leadership. The analysis documents, for instance, a measurable increase in women's representation on the management boards of private television companies, rising from 18% to 30% by 2022, while simultaneously demonstrating that sustained higher levels of representation remain limited to a relatively small number of countries over time. Notably, strict parity at 50% is recorded only in a handful of cases, among them Croatia. The chapter further examines women's presence in top editorial positions and shows how parity frequently erodes even where

formal progress is registered, thereby exposing the gap between headline indicators of improvement and the deeper institutional dynamics that continue to shape (gendered) decision-making power across European media systems.

Looking beyond the European Union's borders, Chapter 12, "The Role of Alternative News Media Online for Media Pluralism in Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey" (Sofia Verza, Daniela Brkić, Tirse Erbaysal Filibeli, Irina Milutinović, Snežana Trpevska, and Kristina Voko), addresses a set of dynamics that complicate standard accounts of digital pluralism. The authors balance two arguments that are often treated separately in discussions of alternative and digital-native media. On the one hand, they show how such outlets frequently emerge as responses to censorship, tabloidisation, and political-economic pressure, often through the movement of professional journalists from mainstream newsrooms into new organisational forms. On the other hand, the chapter offers a sober assessment of the structural constraints shaping their everyday viability, including weak editorial infrastructures, small and saturated markets, and a strong reliance on project-based funding, grants, and foreign donors, all of which undermine long-term sustainability. One of the chapter's most analytically relevant contributions concerns the paradox of regulation. In the examined candidate countries (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey), digital-native outlets are often under-regulated, a condition that simultaneously creates space for opaque and partisan actors, including disinformation producers, and complicates the development of fair and transparent public support mechanisms for outlets that provide public-interest journalism. In response, the authors call for updated media policies that formally recognise non-profit and community-oriented digital media and establish transparent support models capable of strengthening pluralism without reinforcing political dependency.

Overall, the book's strongest feature lies in its ability to move across levels of analysis without losing coherence: from normative claims to indicators, from indicators to national cases, and from empirical variation to regulatory implications. In this sense, this work functions as a comprehensive "bridge" between academia and policymakers. It maintains conceptual consistency through the Media Pluralism Monitor framework, while remaining perceptive to the regulatory and technological pressures currently reshaping European media systems.

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