

Preface

This volume completes the book trilogy of the 2021 edition of the Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM). This social science-based monitoring instrument follows the compelling logic suggested by Kaarle Nordenstreng (2001): In a democracy, media have influence, media enjoy freedom, media should be responsible and accountable, and thus, media need monitoring and criticism. Johan Galtung (1999: 23) valued media monitoring as essential for democracies: “To monitor the media is to make them transparent, a basic condition for democracy to function”. And Denis McQuail (1999: 27) inspired this research by suggesting that social sciences should be “concerned with assessing the quality of what the media do according to standards derived from theories of democracy, often in association with projects of media policy and regulation”.

The 33 authors of this volume are united in their belief that democracy is a fragile form of people “lawfully governing themselves”, following John Keane’s (2009: xv) captivatingly simple definition of democracy. Contemporary democracies, Keane argues, are best described as monitory democracies, characterised by an abundance of monitory institutions skilfully trading in the “business of stirring up questions of power, often with political effect. [...] These public monitors thrive within the new galaxy of communicative abundance” (Keane, 2013: 47).

Within this framework of digital communication abundance and the fragility of mature contemporary democracies, the key object of the MDM constitutes a systematic and indicator-based instrument to map and evaluate the performance of leading news media in contemporary democracies.

The empirical approach is based on 30 indicators (defined and described in a research manual) equally applied to all participating countries (for information on the methodology and indicators, see Tomaz & Trappel, Chapter 1). The 2021 edition includes 18 countries from around the globe, the majority being European. Findings have been published in two Open Access volumes by Nordicom (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a, 2021b), as well as on the website of the Euromedia Research Group, the academic host of the MDM. Results are reported in individual country reports, allowing users to select countries or indicators and compare them one by one (The Media for Democracy Monitor, 2021).

After completing the country reports, and based on the results, the research team selected salient items and issues of particular relevance for further inves-

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tigation. Team members and country report authors took up these issues and elaborated them further in comparative chapters, presented in this volume.

These selected issues fall into four categories: First, there are burning, prominent issues on the public agenda. Chapter 2, “Countering misinformation in and from the newsroom”; Chapter 3, “Protecting journalists from harassment”; Chapter 4, “Gender inequalities in and through the media”; and Chapter 5, “Investigative journalism and the watchdog role of news media” fall into this category. Results show that digitalisation in conjunction with cyclical crises of capitalist economies resulted in aggravating deterioration of journalistic working conditions, and leading news media are still searching for the best strategies with which to tackle them.

Second are critical issues of continuity. Here, the following chapters are subsumed: Chapter 6, “Comparing news media reach”; Chapter 7, “Soaring media ownership concentration”; Chapter 8, “Commercial influence in newsrooms”; Chapter 9, “Public service media”; Chapter 10, “Ethical codes of conduct in journalism”; and Chapter 11, “Media accountability”. In general, findings confirm that digitalisation did not solve any of the preexisting problems, but created a plethora of new ones.

Third, we address underresearched issues of growing relevance. Chapter 12, “Media transparency”; Chapter 13, “Journalistic practices contesting the concept of internal pluralism”; and Chapter 14, “Practising democracy in the newsroom” fall into this category. In short, seemingly simple solutions and concepts become complex when applied to democratic requirements.

Finally, issues on the rise include Chapter 15, “The professionalisation of journalism”, and Chapter 16, “Innovation in journalism”. Here again, additional challenges are to be expected, rather than simple solutions for democracy-related problems.

All chapters are informed first and foremost by the comparative results of the MDM country reports (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a, 2021b), but they also include other relevant sources and reflect the state of the art in social sciences on the topic under scrutiny.

This 2021 MDM research project addresses a number of stakeholders. The qualitative approach provides scholars, students, journalists, editors, media owners, politicians, and the interested public with best practices from countries around the globe. It appears that leading news media, irrespective of language, culture, size, and location of the country, share rather similar problems when it comes to their role in democracy. Solutions, however, differ considerably. It has been fascinating to discover that countries scoring high in their democratic performance are not necessarily those with the most advanced and creative problem-solution strategies – and vice versa; much can also be learned from countries generally not performing that well.

As editors and coordinators of this two-year research endeavour, we are deeply impressed by the enduring motivation of team members to not only deliver country reports, but also to engage in the horizontal analysis of relevant issues. We tremen-

dously enjoyed the collaboration with so many colleagues across so many borders, but we would have enjoyed it even more if we could have met in person for our research coordination meetings. The Covid-19 pandemic did not allow this; however, it provided us all with a new research topic (“media for democracy in times of crisis”) and also new ways and means of digital collaboration. Because of this, the ecological footprint of our research turned out to be much smaller than expected.

We express our deep gratitude, once again, to the fabulous editorial team at Nordicom, namely Karin Hjorthen Zelano, Kristin Clay, Josefine Bové, Per Nilsson, and director Jonas Ohlsson. Their kind and well-tempered support carried us safely across the many perilous cliffs of such a voluminous publication project. The opportunity to have all results published fully Open Access is a major achievement and a sign of great generosity by Nordicom. Finally, we thank the Dutch Journalism Fund (SVDJ) for their support in presenting and disseminating our findings.

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