

Preface

At the time when the Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) set sail back in 2008, the financial market crisis had hit not only the world economy but reset the advertising-based media companies. Newsrooms were downsized or integrated. In retrospect, this crisis initiated the upcoming structural transformation of the entire news business, which is best characterised by the gradual erosion of the advertising-based business model of many leading news media.

Subsequent to the MDM's pilot phase with five countries (see Trappel & Meier 2011), the first edition of the monitor was researched in 2010 and published by Nordicom in 2011. Ten country teams delivered their analysis and observations along 26 indicators, which had been developed jointly by the team of participating scholars and researchers. Firmly grounded in normative media and journalism theories, indicators were grouped along the triad freedom/information, control/watchdog, and equality/forum (Trappel, 2011: 23). For each indicator, the country teams researched empirical evidence, based on the best available secondary sources as well as a series of interviews with journalists, editors-in-chief, representatives of journalists' unions, and other experts. Nine European countries and Australia were covered by this joint research, focusing exclusively on developed contemporary democracies. Excluding democracies in transition and states representing defect forms of democracy of any kind enabled this research to focus exclusively on the performance of leading news media under "free" circumstances (to borrow the terminology of *Freedom House*).

The results were widely positive. In the overall score, Sweden, Finland, and the UK reached more than 75 per cent of the maximum score, and no country reached less than 50 per cent. In qualitative terms, the leading news media showed a great deal of capacity to fulfil their basic democratic function.

A monitoring instrument lives up to its genuine assignment only if it is repeated. Ten years later, in 2019 and early 2020, country teams gathered again to scrutinise the performance of leading news media for democracy. The decade between has turned out to be the roll-out decade of digitalisation. Not only had leading news media transformed their operations into fully digital mode, but also powerful digital intermediaries emerged which revolutionised content distribution of news. Simultaneously, these platforms turned into highly effective and efficient competitors in the advertising market by providing personalised advertising services. Legacy media did not manage to master this erosion of income from their accounts to this small group of global giants, sometimes called GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft).

Furthermore, during this decade, media-use patterns and habits of primarily younger people converged from incumbent media towards digital platforms, as the results of the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* demonstrate, annually delivered by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford (Newman et al., 2020). Ironically, news content is still provided by legacy media, but used and received by the audience on social media platforms. What implications, then, did this structural digital transformation have on the performance of the leading news media for democracy?

Nine out of the ten countries that participated in 2011 and an additional nine countries constitute the 18-country sample of the 2021 edition of the MDM. From Europe, Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Greece, Iceland, and Italy joined the group already composed by Austria, Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The sample was completed by countries beyond Europe: Australia (again), Canada, Chile, Hong Kong, and (South) Korea.

Before the field work started, the research team carefully revised the indicators. In order to allow for longitudinal, as well as cross-country comparative research, existing indicators were maintained (with updates and polishing to the extent necessary), and four new indicators were added. These new indicators refer to gender equality and representation on the one hand (Indicators F8 and F9) and to contemporary forms of nuisance for journalistic work on the other (F10 and F11). The following chapter introduces and summarises all 30 indicators, constituting the operational and empiric backbone of the MDM 2021. In a joint workshop in June 2020, between the first and the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, representatives of the 18 country teams assembled (partly virtually) to discuss and adjust the scores given to each indicator for each country. Similar to ten years ago, this collaborative exercise allowed not only for coherent scoring, but also for cross-cultural learning from one another.

The group of authors and researchers decided to publish the indicator reports country by country, both as printed book volumes, Open Access with Nordicom, and as searchable and dynamic online versions available from the website of the academic host of the MDM, the Euromedia Research Group.¹ Furthermore, cross-country and longitudinal findings inform an edited volume on key issues, which the research teams identified as most significant along the way of the research. The Dutch Journalism Fund [Stimuleringsfonds voor de Journalistiek] has supported the group's research work and contributed to the publication cost of the project.

Research and most of the field work for the 2021 edition of the MDM has been conducted shortly before the outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The findings reflect, therefore, flaws and achievements of leading news media during the recovery years after the 2008 financial market crash and before the Covid-19 crash hit them. This way, and completely unanticipated, the MDM

2021 covers the period framed by two paramount crises. As the pandemic had immediate and severe consequences on the performance of the media, we decided to complement each indicator report with a first critical assessment of its consequences on the media in each country. At the time of writing, neither the magnitude of the pandemic nor its implications on the media and society at large were visible.

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Note

1. www.euromediagroup.org/mdm

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