

Media diversity and epistemic expectations of journalism

Public service media's responses to alternative media and the challenge of democratic integrity

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ABSTRACT

In an era marked by the spread of mis- and disinformation via social media and alternative online platforms, public service media are tasked with safeguarding democratic values by delivering reliable, truthful information. In this chapter, we explore how journalism's epistemic obligations are often caught between achieving balanced coverage and maintaining objectivity, emphasising one or the other depending on the media's perceived role in democracy. We connect this tension to discussions on democratic media pluralism, distinguishing between liberal, deliberative, and agonistic models of democracy, each attaching different weights to objectivity and balance in media reporting. By highlighting examples of Belgian and Dutch public broadcasters, we illustrate how their practices align with these different visions on democracy. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the implications of maintaining a quality information landscape that is increasingly threatened by alternative media and disinformation.

KEYWORDS: public service media, alternative media, online platforms, disinformation, epistemic expectations of journalism, democracy

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Introduction

Over the past decade, concerns about the role of social media in undermining democracy and distorting our collective sense of truth have gained significant attention (e.g., Ecker et al., 2024; McIntyre, 2018). Though simplified, the prevailing argument in this discourse is that social media and other digital platforms enable bad actors to manipulate large groups into believing falsehoods and half-truths. This, it is argued, poses a threat to democracy, as a shared understanding of basic facts is crucial for effective policymaking (e.g., Ecker et al., 2024; Mahl et al., 2024). While it is true that alternative media thrive on social media platforms and challenge the epistemic authority of traditional news media, their impact on democracy may be more complex than is often assumed.

In much of this discourse, the link between democracy and truth is taken for granted, and journalistic theory frequently overlooks deeper epistemological issues (with exceptions, e.g., Ward, 2018). However, in the context of these epistemic challenges, it is critical to consider how journalists navigate contested information. Journalists are bound by certain professional values, such as holding those in power accountable. Their primary epistemic responsibility is to foster an informed citizenry by providing accurate coverage of current events, enabling people to form their own opinions on matters of public interest (Christians et al., 2014). Two key principles underpinning reliable journalism are objectivity and balance, but these principles can often be at odds.

What is missing in current discussions on news media's epistemic challenges is the recognition that commitments to journalistic truth are inherently ambivalent. There is a tension between accurately presenting differing viewpoints (balance) and reporting factual information (objectivity). For instance, in covering climate change, journalists often struggle between presenting the scientific consensus on climate change and offering space for alternative policy solutions or even contestations of the issue. The line between legitimate policy debates and illegitimate climate change denial can be less clear-cut than is often assumed. As gatekeepers of public knowledge, journalists face the difficult task of deciding which perspectives to include, thereby gatekeeping the types of knowledge that contribute to democratic debate (Urkens et al., 2025). Instead of reducing these complexities to a simplistic true/false binary, we argue for examining this issue through the lens of media pluralism. This approach is particularly relevant because many discussions on media pluralism fail to account for the fact that alternative media challenge prevailing institutional practices (Ihlebak et al., 2022; but see Peeters & Maesele, 2023; Urkens et al., 2025).

The types of knowledge that *should* be included in a democratic public sphere depend largely on how that democratic sphere is envisioned. Broadly, three main schools of democratic thought can be identified: liberal, deliberative, and agonistic (Karppinen, 2013; Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2015). Each of these schools has different expectations regarding the role of journalism in

providing reliable information (Urkens et al., 2025). Given the significant role that public service media (PSM) play in informing the public, in this chapter we draw on examples from the Belgian (i.e., Flemish and Francophone) and Dutch public broadcasters, showing how each one aligns with one of these three democratic ideals. This alignment reflects their ability to function in an information environment where their epistemic authority is increasingly challenged through social media platforms.

Finally, it is important to clarify that the case illustrations in this chapter serve an illustrative, conceptual purpose rather than providing systematic empirical analyses. The examples drawn from Belgian and Dutch PSM are based on a theoretically informed selection of media content and related publicly available policy documents (such as charters and regulatory guidelines). As such, they merely serve to illustrate theoretical points. We have not conducted systematic fieldwork; instead, our case descriptions synthesise existing sources to spotlight key normative questions related to how PSM navigate epistemic challenges to news media's authority. Consequently, we do not claim exhaustive empirical proof from these cases; they function as focused vignettes to open up a conceptual lens on journalism, diversity, and epistemic expectations. This illustrative approach is intended to provoke reflection and identify patterns that warrant further empirical investigation. While limited in scope, the cases indeed help reveal broader tensions and possibilities in media practice that a more extensive empirical study could explore in depth. Grounding the discussion in concrete PSM contexts thus makes our abstract normative arguments more tangible, while encouraging future researchers to further hold these insights to empirical scrutiny.

The chapter is structured as follows: First, we explore how online platforms enable challenges to the traditional authority of journalism. In the next section, we discuss how journalism's epistemic role is often caught between providing objective information and offering a balanced presentation of diverse viewpoints. Then, we argue that the relationship between objectivity and balance shifts depending on the preferred democratic model. Next, we examine how public broadcasters, given their unique societal role, embody different epistemic expectations tied to these democratic models, using examples from public service broadcasters in Belgium and the Netherlands. We conclude with practical guidelines for media practitioners to help them navigate the challenges they face in today's complex information landscape.

Exploiting platforms: Alternative media, conspiracy theories, and truth

In recent years, traditional media have lost their exclusive role in informing the public and, with it, their privileged epistemic authority (Birchall & Knight, 2022; Harambam, 2023b). The rise of the Internet, and more recently, the ease

with which users can generate content on social media platforms, has made it possible for ordinary people to contribute to the dissemination of information. With these new communication technologies, virtually anyone can position themselves as an alternative media channel. Initially, this democratisation of information sharing was celebrated for its potential to empower and liberate (Aupers & de Wildt, 2021). Indeed, grassroots alternative media initiatives were – and still are – broadly welcomed for their bottom-up approach (Fuchs, 2010; Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010).

However, the flip side of this media democratisation is that it has also made it easier to challenge the authority of traditional journalistic organisations (Urkens et al., 2025). While some alternative media outlets continue to provide valuable critiques of mainstream perspectives, others are now viewed with growing suspicion for promoting extremist, antidemocratic, or conspiratorial content (de León et al., 2024; Harambam, 2023b; Staender et al., 2024). Holding journalists accountable for their epistemic responsibilities can sometimes contribute to a healthier information landscape (Harambam, 2023b; Harcup, 2016). Yet, in other cases, alternative media disseminate falsehoods, distort reality (Reinemann et al., 2024; Staender et al., 2024), and contribute to increasing public scepticism toward traditional media (de León et al., 2024). Once considered niche, these alternative news sites are now becoming a more prominent part of the media diets of disillusioned audiences (de León et al., 2024; Harcup, 2016). In this context, some scholars have argued that we live in a post-truth era, where objective facts are less influential than appeals to emotion and personal belief (McIntyre, 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Before looking into the challenges to traditional media's authority, it is worth reviewing the recent changes in the alternative media landscape. What qualifies as alternative media has evolved significantly over the past few decades and remains a debated topic within media studies (Holt et al., 2019; Ihlebæk et al., 2022). Historically, alternative media referred to outlets that challenged the political and ideological dominance of what they viewed as capitalist or conservative mainstream media (Peeters & Maesele, 2023; Rauch, 2021). Accordingly, Christian Fuchs (2010) developed a typology that defines alternative media as critical media, providing oppositional content that counters dominant narratives shaped by forces such as capitalism, patriarchy, racism, sexism, and nationalism. In this view, only leftist, progressive alternative media are considered legitimate critiques of political hegemony (Fuchs, 2010). Alternative media, then, are defined by their production of critical content, regardless of whether it comes from grassroots organisations or professionals, arguing that professional production processes can enhance social transformation and raise public awareness (Fuchs, 2010; Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010). Perhaps unsurprisingly, critics have argued that this one-sided normative approach overlooks the rise of far-right channels, which have gained significant popularity in Western societies, particularly since 2016 (Rauch, 2021).

Maria Rae's (2021) concept of hyper-partisan media is useful for understanding this rise of far-right channels. Unlike traditional media, which are expected to remain neutral, these channels occupy a distinct partisan and politicised position in the media landscape. Ironically, outlets like Breitbart and Infowars claim to offer a more neutral perspective, accusing mainstream media, such as CNN, of being too left-leaning. Much can be said about the discrepancy between their claimed and practiced neutrality and their (lack of) adherence to journalistic deontology: Alternative media such as Breitbart are, perhaps unsurprisingly, found to paint a distorted picture of reality (Staender et al., 2024). That being said, while the idea of hyper-partisan media may apply to the bipartisan polarisation in the US, it does not fully capture the complexity of European political ecosystems, which extend beyond this binary (Urkens et al., 2025).

In Europe, we indeed also see the rise of media channels that challenge the authority of traditional outlets, not necessarily from an ideological standpoint but from a self-proclaimed epistemic one (Urkens et al., 2025). While leftist and rightist alternative media have typically presented themselves as ideological correctives to mainstream political hegemony, these new players (often illegitimately) claim to offer a more neutral, fact-based perspective, allegedly free from state influence. As such, they invoke a modernist ideal of objectivity (see also Urkens & Houtman, 2023), contrasting sharply with the idea that we live in a “post-truth” era where facts and objectivity are allegedly devalued (McIntyre, 2018).

The ease of creating (or mimicking) news websites allows anyone to disseminate information, often bypassing established journalistic standards (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; de León et al., 2024; Harambam, 2023b; Rauch, 2021). While alternative media outlets may rightly criticise mainstream media for overlooking issues such as the pharmaceutical industry's influences on public health policies (Goldenberg, 2021), they have nonetheless been shown to present a distorted view of reality (Staender et al., 2024). Despite that, they still present themselves as grounded in truth, frequently offering their own “alternative experts” to support their claims (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Thus, rather than offering a diversity of viewpoints, these platforms often present a narrow, anti-institutional narrative (de León et al., 2024; Reinemann et al., 2024), regularly claiming that to be the only legitimate one. Given the growing influence of these conservative and conspiracy-driven outlets, they are perhaps unsurprisingly seen as undermining shared standards of truth and factuality (McIntyre, 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

In some cases, they disseminate falsehoods that are easily debunked, such as the “Stolen Election” narrative after the 2020 US presidential election. However, other issues are more difficult to verify with certainty, like the contested Covid-19 lab leak theory of which the public legitimacy has repeatedly shifted (Birchall & Knight, 2022). The complexity deepens with

topics such as climate change, where outright denial may be rare, but debates about the severity of the problem and proposed solutions remain contentious (Kantack & Paschall, 2022; van Eck et al., 2024). In instances where facts and political measures intersect, a purely verificationist approach may prove insufficient (Farkas & Schou, 2024; Marres, 2018). Reducing the legitimacy of these voices to a true/false dichotomy (e.g., Ecker et al., 2024) often oversimplifies the complexity of their claims. A more productive approach is to examine these challenges through a media pluralism lens that also integrates epistemological considerations (Urkens et al., 2025).

Given the increasing focus on epistemology within misinformation studies (Uscinski et al., 2024), we argue that alternative media's role in democracy should also be assessed through this lens. This raises critical questions: What kinds of knowledge are considered legitimate in a democracy? To what extent should challenges to that knowledge be permitted? How should mainstream news outlets navigate such challenges? The answers to these questions depend on one's expectations of media pluralism, which are themselves shaped by differing visions of democracy (Ihlebak et al., 2022; Ræijmaekers & Maesele, 2015; Urkens et al., 2025). Rather than dismissing these alternative media channels outright, they can be understood as "counter-epistemic communities" (Waisbord, 2018: 1870), whose legitimacy ultimately depends on how one envisions democracy.

Media torn between balance and objectivity

In a well-functioning democracy, a diverse and reliable media landscape is crucial. Media outlets serve various purposes, from informing the public about local and global events to holding government officials accountable (Christians et al., 2014). In an age where people have unprecedented access to information, the media's commitment to truth is arguably its most crucial contribution to democracy. Although we often assume that the media simply report the truth, the notion of truth is more complex, particularly in today's era of rapidly advancing scientific progress. Unlike science, which seeks to establish facts, the media's primary role is to *represent* those facts and what they may mean. This requires providing accurate and balanced coverage of current events. While traditional media have long held a privileged position as trusted sources of important information, their relationship with truth has always been fraught with tension, particularly between striving for balance and upholding objectivity. This pursuit of balance has sometimes famously led to the unintended consequence of sacrificing objectivity by amplifying falsehoods, such as when covering climate change (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004).

To understand contemporary epistemic expectations of media, it is helpful to briefly trace their historical roots. As highlighted by Ward (2018), truth has been central to journalism since its emergence in sixteenth-century London,

where partisan viewpoints were often disguised as neutral reporting to either support or challenge the monarchy. Publications with names like “A True and Perfect Informer” or “Impartial Intelligencer” reflected this approach (Ward, 2018). The advent of the printing press in the eighteenth century, during the Enlightenment, led to a rise in literacy and the popularity of newspapers. Enlightenment journalism emphasised factual reporting over opinion, laying the groundwork for the commitment to objectivity that would shape journalism for centuries to come (Ward, 2018). However, by the 1960s, influenced by counterculture and postmodern movements, journalism began to move away from rigid positivism, embracing a more nuanced, perspectivist understanding of truth, which acknowledged that truth could be subjective and context-dependent (Waisbord, 2018).

The tension between balance and truth in media reporting became a focal point in the early 2000s. Boykoff and Boykoff’s (2004) influential study on climate change reporting revealed that American newspapers often gave equal weight to both proponents and critics of anthropogenic climate change, creating a misleading sense of balance. Similarly, during the Covid-19 pandemic, news organisations were globally criticised for giving airtime to anti-vaccination activists and conspiracy theorists alongside leading virologists, despite the lack of scientific backing for the former’s claims. However, while there is broad scholarly consensus on the reality of climate change, the science surrounding the newly emerging Covid-19 virus remained far more fluid. In hindsight, media coverage of the virus has been critiqued as overly scientific (Gaj & Lo Dico, 2021), claiming that science seemed the sole legitimate basis for policy decisions, even when scientific understanding of the virus was still evolving and contentious.

Such scientific understandings overlook that the relationship between science and policy is inherently complex. Indeed, during the Covid-19 crisis, media were criticised for amplifying a “follow the science” narrative in support of government measures (Russell & Patterson, 2023), overlooking the fact that specific scientific findings can be translated into policy in multiple ways (see Houtman et al., 2021). News media’s commitment to truthful reporting can as such sometimes lead to a resurgence of naïve realism, where truth is assumed to be straightforward and unproblematic – a purely detached and objective god-like view. This reinvigoration of a positivistic understanding of objectivity is apparent in several contemporary media practices. In Germany, for example, journalists have been found to adopt a “let the facts speak for themselves” approach (Post, 2015). Additionally, in response to the rise of fake news, many media organisations have positioned themselves as arbiters of truth through rigorous fact-checking processes (Waisbord, 2018). Such fact-checking practices align with liberalism’s emphasis on decision-making based on expertise and evidence (Goldenberg, 2021; Waisbord, 2018). However, these efforts are critiqued for their problematic verificationist conceptions

of facticity, which have been said to oversimplify the truth and ignore its social construction (Altay et al., 2023; Marres, 2018; Uscinski et al., 2024).

Acknowledging the political ambivalence of scientific findings might even bolster public support for science and politics. Honest, transparent reporting that distinguishes between knowledge claims and policy implications has been found to foster trust in science (Post & Bienzeisler, 2024). Similarly, the perceived uniformity in the reported political consequences of scientific findings can drive some individuals toward conspiracy theories, as they feel that the science is being presented as speaking for itself without room for interpretation (Harambam, 2023a). It should, however, be acknowledged that different audiences may have different expectations of the media. While some may seek more open reporting that allows them to form their own views on the matter, others welcome a more authoritative form of science communication where political alternatives are omitted (Post et al., 2021). This means that in uncertain situations, journalists face the challenging task of determining which information should be included or excluded from public debate. Indeed, while journalists are expected to avoid amplifying false balances when reporting on anthropogenic climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic showed that balance might sometimes be necessary to maintain credibility in journalism, science, and politics.

A closer examination of reliable journalistic truth and knowledge reveals the delicate balance journalists must strike between the ideals of balance and objectivity. Traditional journalistic practices often aim to present both sides of an issue to achieve balance. Still, there is growing criticism that this approach may unintentionally legitimise unsubstantiated claims or fringe viewpoints. Increasingly, there is a call for a more refined understanding of objectivity, where factual accuracy and evidence-based reporting take precedence over false equivalence. However, this shift must also be approached with caution, as it risks falling into a simplistic form of positivism (Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2017), where facts are detached from their broader social and political contexts and uncritically instrumentalised.

Ultimately, achieving journalistic truth requires navigating the tension between balance and objectivity while remaining mindful of the challenges posed by both. Importantly, how this balance ought to be struck depends largely on the underlying democratic model one subscribes to (Urkens et al., 2025), as different democratic perspectives shape expectations about the epistemic role of media in society.

Epistemic expectations of media in democracies

The role of media in democracy, particularly their epistemic commitments, depends on how democracy itself is conceptualised, which ties into debates about media pluralism (Urkens et al., 2025). Despite the rise of alternative

media, most discussions on pluralism focus on mainstream outlets (Ihlebak et al., 2022). Yet, alternative media that challenge the perceived lack of diversity in established news have grown in influence and should therefore be included in broader media debates (Ihlebak et al., 2022). Different democratic theories – liberal, deliberative, and agonistic – shape expectations of media and the types of knowledge they should promote (Urkens et al., 2025). In doing so, they put a different emphasis on balance and objectivity.

In liberal democracies, media are expected to inform the public based on expert knowledge, focusing on objectivity and fact-checking. Media in liberal democracies may either emphasise a “marketplace of ideas”, assuming competition between viewpoints leads to the best outcomes or prioritise political liberalism, where objectivity is key and information is filtered through epistemic authorities (Harjuniemi, 2022). This latter approach, as argued before, risks turning into a form of scientism, where only facts are instrumentalised to solve political debates, ignoring their inherent normativity (Gaj & Lo Dico, 2021; Ward, 2018). In sum, epistemic expectations of media in liberal democratic theory align with scientific realism (Urkens et al., 2025).

Deliberative democracy, influenced by Habermas, envisions media as facilitators of rational discourse, helping citizens engage in constructive deliberative debate. Here, the media should represent diverse viewpoints, avoiding market-driven bias and encouraging participation to build consensus (Habermas, 2022; Karppinen, 2013). In a deliberative democratic model, media aim for a balance between objectivity and inclusivity. All voices are welcome in the debate as long as they adhere to rational standards based on agreed-upon facts. Irrational voices, lacking this objectivity, are excluded to maintain a rational public discourse. Journalists, therefore, focus on providing balanced, objective coverage to foster consensus (Benhabib, 2021; Ferree et al., 2002), aligning with perspectivist epistemic expectations (Urkens et al., 2025).

In contrast, the agonistic model, as proposed by Chantal Mouffe (1999), accepts the inevitability of conflict in a pluralistic society. Here, media emphasise inclusivity over objectivity, allowing diverse, often irreconcilable viewpoints. Journalists are encouraged to include emotional and subjective voices, especially from marginalised groups, without prioritising expert opinions. The goal is to foster debate by recognising that no single perspective holds the ultimate truth (Maesele & Raeijmaekers, 2020). Instead of seeking consensus, the agonistic model values the coexistence of differing viewpoints and the importance of open democratic debate. Here constructivist epistemic expectations reign (Urkens et al., 2025). In what follows, we highlight how these different epistemic expectations – that is, liberal, deliberative, and agonistic – reflect themselves in the Belgian and Dutch public broadcast systems.

Media and democracy in action: Public service media in Belgium and the Netherlands

PSM are embedded in structural constraints that shape their ability to fulfil lofty normative ideals. They depend on public funding, while market pressures and competition for audience attention further complicate their mandate, forcing PSM to balance popular appeal with high-quality, civic-minded content. Even as they reaffirm commitments to inform the public, these organisations must continually justify their relevance and resist external pressures, from shifting government priorities to commercial influences (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2008). In short, the political economy of media provides the structural backdrop that both enables and delimits what public broadcasters can do in practice, reminding us that institutional context is inseparable from journalistic ideals. Nevertheless, PSM organisations play a crucial role in safeguarding democratic societies from potential epistemic threats (d’Haenens, 2021).

In today’s fragmented news landscape, where media outlets often prioritise economic interests, the informative and watchdog functions of PSM have become increasingly important. This paradox stems from media fragmentation caused by social media platforms, combined with the centralisation of content in commercial news outlets (d’Haenens, 2021). As a result, media consumption has become disjointed, threatening democratic discourse. Moreover, the commercial logic driving many media organisations prioritises clickbait and engagement over fulfilling democratic responsibilities, raising concerns about balancing responsiveness to commercial demands with the need for high-quality information. In this context, PSM are vital in promoting media pluralism, ensuring that a healthy public sphere is maintained and diverse perspectives are represented (d’Haenens, 2021). Their epistemic role in contemporary media landscapes is particularly pronounced, as the hegemony of mainstream media faces growing challenges.

In Europe, PSM organisations such as the Flemish broadcaster VRT and the Dutch broadcaster NPO, both members of the European Broadcasting Union, exemplify the important democratic role of PSM. The European Broadcasting Union upholds principles of editorial independence, accuracy, and impartiality in reporting. VRT, as part of this network, emphasises objectivity in its journalistic efforts. Meanwhile, NPO focuses on balanced representation, ensuring that multiple perspectives are represented in its reporting across outlets. These differing approaches highlight the range of strategies within public broadcasting, each aiming to fulfil its democratic mission while addressing the complexities of today’s media environment. Different PSM organisations thus take different democratic approaches to navigate these challenges.

The Flemish Radio and Television Broadcast Organisation (VRT), Flanders’s PSM, addresses the ongoing epistemic crisis by firmly reinforcing its commitment to objectivity. VRT operates a range of networks, including VRT

NWS (news), VRT 1 (general audience), Ketnet (children), and VRT CANVAS (current events and culture), each adhering to this principle. VRT NWS, in particular, stands out with its dedicated fact-check category, “nws check”, a proactive effort to combat false information. VRT’s commitment to objectivity, however, extends beyond news. VRT 1’s popular show, *Iedereen beroemd* [*Everyone Famous*], includes a frivolous segment debunking fake news by exploring historical misinformation, encouraging critical engagement with information through humorous examples. Moreover, Ketnet’s programme, *De raad van Soekie* [*Soekie’s Council*] introduces children to media literacy, exploring concepts like electoral manipulation through a simulated class election, where the protagonist has to navigate a disinformation campaign against her name. The aim is to help young viewers develop critical thinking skills to discern fact from fiction in the digital age by relating it to their life worlds. Additionally, VRT’s podcast, *Mysteries van Vlaanderen* [*Flanders’ Mysteries*], further exemplifies its commitment to factual inquiry, by subjecting topics like religious beliefs to empirical scrutiny, and in doing so promoting a rationalistic understanding of even faith. Overall, VRT’s multifaceted approach to objectivity positions it as a guardian of fact-based journalism, aligning with the liberal democratic ideal of promoting truth and accountability in the media.

The *cordon médiatique* of the Francophone public broadcaster in Belgium (RTBf; Radio-Télévision belge de la Communauté française) presents a notable contrast to the Flemish approach to threats against democracy and truth. While the Flemish public broadcaster emphasises objectivity and reliable facts against circulating falsehoods, its Francophone counterpart has a history of excluding voices it deems dangerous or undemocratic – particularly those considered irrational. This practice arose in response to the rise of the far-right party Vlaams Belang [Flemish Interest], known for its nationalism and xenophobia. Francophone media, including RTBf, collectively agreed to exclude content promoting racist ideologies as it undermines pluralistic democratic principles (de Jonge, 2019: 197; see also de Jonge 2021). RTBf does not make these decisions lightly; rather, it follows a formal procedure, including the analysis of party programmes, before determining exclusion (de Jonge, 2021). This approach aligns closely with deliberative democratic principles, where gatekeeping journalists carefully evaluate voices to ensure they rationally contribute to the democratic public sphere. Nationalistic and xenophobic discourse, failing to meet these rational standards, is excluded to prevent the pollution of public discourse.

In contrast, the Dutch public broadcasting system emphasises balance over objectivity. Unlike the more centralised Flemish model, the Dutch broadcasting landscape is fragmented, with various broadcasters each maintaining independent newsrooms and editorial policies. NOS, the Dutch equivalent of VRT NWS, is just one of many broadcasters within this pluralistic system. Dutch public broadcasting reflects a commitment to societal diversity, with

broadcasters like AVROTROS (liberal), PowNed (youth), MAX (seniors), KRO (Catholic), NCRV (Protestant), and VPRO (progressive) all catering to different segments of society. This external pluralism ensures that multiple perspectives are represented, even those critiquing mainstream news outlets, reflecting the complex social fabric of Dutch society.

In 2022, the Dutch public broadcaster (NPO) received attention for allocating airtime to Ongehoord Nederland! (ON!), a broadcaster that positioned itself as a corrective to mainstream news media, which it accused of left-leaning bias and elitism. However, ON! quickly found itself in the eye of the storm for spreading disinformation and violating journalistic ethics. In July 2022, following a critical report from NPO's ombudsperson, the board of directors imposed a 2.5 per cent reduction in ON!'s annual budget as a penalty. The ombudsperson's report cited a lack of distinction between facts and opinions, inadequate questioning of inaccuracies, failure to issue corrections for false claims, and a lack of transparency regarding studio guests' interests. ON!'s lawyers argued that freedom of speech applies to everyone, making it difficult to exclude controversial statements in an open and rational society. However, the issue with ON! lies in its status as part of a publicly funded media organisation, which has a responsibility to enrich the pluralistic media debate. It is inconsistent with the public broadcasting mission, which inherently promotes diversity, to provide a platform solely for right-wing views, especially if deemed conspiratory (Hins, 2023). As a result, in April 2023, the secretary of state requested the revocation of ON!'s broadcasting licence. However, by November 2023, the recognition of ON! was maintained, as there was insufficient legal basis to revoke its licence (Government of the Netherlands, 2023).

ON! claims to promote independence and pluralism, yet its mission statement reveals a clear right-wing focus. The issues it covers – such as the EU, mass migration, climate change measures, direct democracy, and Dutch culture – are aligned with a particular ideological stance. Yet, while ON!'s internal diversity may be limited, its presence in the Dutch media landscape may contribute to overall balance by offering perspectives often marginalised in mainstream public broadcasting. Despite accusations of bias, ON! provides a platform for voices that challenge dominant narratives, potentially enriching the media ecosystem with diverse viewpoints that do not necessarily adhere to the liberal and deliberative expectations of rational discourse. In this sense – and contrasting to ON!'s own rejection of agonistic pluralism – its inclusion in Dutch public broadcasting aligns more closely with an agonistic view of media in democracy, which values the representation of conflicting perspectives without making claims to conclusive truths.

In sum, the differing approaches of VRT, RTBf, and NPO reflect the broader tension in journalistic practices, shaped not only by principles of journalism but also by varying democratic ideals and preferences for types of

knowledge. VRT's emphasis on objectivity informs its programming across various platforms, while NPO's commitment to balance is evident in its diverse range of broadcasters, each serving different segments of Dutch society. RTBf, though open to a variety of viewpoints, carefully gatekeeps the quality of public debate. These examples illustrate that there is no single solution to addressing platformed threats to democracy and truth, as responses depend on the underlying vision of democracy and the media's respective epistemic role.

Conclusion

The future of PSM in Europe, while not as dire as previously predicted (Tracey, 1998), continues to face significant challenges in adapting to the twenty-first-century media environment. As European governments embrace more market-driven models, PSM organisations have undergone critical reassessments of their roles (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2008), attempting to balance popular appeal with high-quality programming. However, they struggle to maintain strong public support, particularly among younger generations and marginalised groups, who are increasingly disengaged. Efforts to enhance public accountability and reach these audiences are underway but face the persistent challenge of balancing quality with accessibility.

At the same time, PSM organisations face existential threats from neoliberalism, populism, autocracy, and rising consumerism, which risk undermining their essential role in fostering open societies. It is crucial that PSM resist capitulating to populism, while also addressing legitimate concerns raised by it. Populism's influence extends beyond fragile democracies, affecting even well-established states. Thus, while PSM faces unprecedented challenges, it remains indispensable for nurturing open and informed societies.

As scholars and societies grapple with alternative media spreading disinformation, there is a need for caution to avoid undermining democratic principles. Harmful content should be monitored and flagged, and in clear-cut cases, brought before the judicial system. However, the line between content moderation and censorship is thin and often unclear (e.g., Birchall & Knight, 2022; Farkas & Schou, 2024). Policymakers should be careful with preventive bans on content unless there is concrete evidence of previous violations, such as repeated hate speech or climate denialism. Overreach could fuel suspicion toward all information and further alienate the public from democratic institutions (Hameleers, 2024). A public detached from democratic decision-making may arguably pose a more significant risk to society compared to that of alternative conspiracy outlets.

The case of RTBf demonstrates that excluding voices can be a legitimate strategy when done responsibly, with clear evidence showing how certain voices harm democratic principles (de Jonge, 2021). Conversely, including radical voices, as seen with the Dutch public broadcaster NPO, allows legal

violations to be addressed after public participation, preserving open debate. The approach taken by the Flemish public broadcaster, which focuses on educating the public and debunking falsehoods, can be another productive way to address the current epistemic challenges facing journalism. Ultimately, fostering a healthy and transparent information landscape, encouraging the public to engage with reliable sources, may prove more effective than exclusions (be them arbitrary or informed) or inflating the dangers of misinformation.

The future of PSM in Europe depends on a multifaceted approach that addresses both immediate challenges and long-term structural needs. Central to this effort is the enhancement of public accountability mechanisms. PSM must be transparent, regularly reporting on their editorial decisions, audience engagement initiatives, and use of public funds. This transparency is critical for reinforcing their legitimacy as trustworthy institutions aligned with democratic values. Simultaneously, media literacy initiatives, such as those of VRT, should remain a top priority, particularly for younger generations and marginalised groups, who become increasingly disengaged. Programmes focused on critical media consumption will equip these audiences with the skills needed to assess information, detect disinformation, and understand the value of quality journalism. The success of PSM hinges on their ability to maintain strong connections with all segments of society. In terms of content moderation, a careful balance must be struck between protecting free speech and combating disinformation. Policymakers should resist preventive bans unless there is clear evidence of prior harm, ensuring that legal actions are taken only when necessary and after malpractice. Similarly, legal frameworks against disinformation should be refined, targeting those responsible for spreading harmful content while maintaining the integrity of free speech.

An equally important goal, as NPO shows, is to diversify programming to engage younger and marginalised audiences. PSM must move beyond traditional formats and embrace digital-first initiatives, such as podcasts, interactive platforms, and youth-centred programming. Such diversification is essential for re-establishing PSM's relevance among disengaged groups. At the structural level, protecting public funding is crucial for ensuring PSM's independence from political and commercial pressures. Establishing independent oversight bodies can safeguard these institutions from undue influence, allowing them to focus on serving the public interest rather than capitulating to external forces like populism or market pressures.

It is also worth reflecting on the epistemic limits of journalistic “factuality” itself. Standards of objectivity and balance are not absolute ideals but products of institutional routines and societal expectations (Raeijmackers & Maesele, 2017). What counts as an objective fact or a balanced report is shaped by prevailing norms and perspectives. Well-intentioned demands for strict objectivity or neutrality may inadvertently marginalise alternative voices,

excluding perspectives that fall outside conventional “rational” discourse (Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2017). Thus, calls for balance may reinforce existing power dynamics by defining which viewpoints are deemed credible or relevant. Moreover, while inherently critical toward the power relations in society, even bottom-up efforts and agonistic critiques may be constrained by the prevailing power structures (Harambam, 2021; Riofrancos, 2018) – that is, effectively voicing critiques against the status quo can happen only within the boundaries established by “the mainstream”, which may partially perpetuate precisely that status quo. However, here PSM actually have the power to alleviate such constraints so that critiques are genuinely possible. Acknowledging this underscores the need for reflexivity: Media institutions must remain aware of how their epistemic standards might silence certain experiences and strive to broaden the range of voices included in the democratic conversation. With this chapter, we have tried to highlight the epistemic strengths and shortcomings of each democratic model, which ultimately allows policymakers and media professionals to better navigate threats to media’s epistemic authority.

In terms of day-to-day operations, PSM must continue to foster open, transparent debate by including diverse voices in their programming, including controversial ones. However, these voices should be held accountable through rigorous scrutiny and public discussion. Additionally, fact-checking initiatives, like VRT’s “nws check”, should be expanded to ensure disinformation is systematically addressed – if remaining reflexive toward the underlying epistemic assumptions guiding fact-checking efforts (Marres, 2018; Uscinski et al., 2024). To maintain relevance, PSM should seek regular audience feedback and actively engage the public through surveys, interactive programming, and community outreach. These mechanisms will allow PSM to stay attuned to audience needs and preferences, ensuring that they remain responsive to changing public concerns. Lastly, collaborations with online platforms are crucial for expanding the reach of PSM content and ensuring it reaches a broader audience. Partnerships focused on curating factual content and promoting media literacy can help combat disinformation and establish PSM as a reliable source of information in the digital age.

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