

D10.5 – Report of Midterm Conference

Conference on Regulation & Journalism in the Postfactual Age 13th March 2024, WorkLounge Příkopy, Prague

RECLAIM Work Package 10 (Lead: IIR)

Due month: 24

Abstract:

The RECLAIM midterm conference, hosted on 13 March 2024 by IIR Prague, focused on the role of journalism and regulation in addressing post-truth politics and reclaiming liberal democracy. The event opened with discussions on the challenges posed by misinformation, populism, and political polarization, highlighting the need for empirical data to guide policy. Keynote speaker Professor Maximilian Conrad emphasized the decline of shared factual understanding and the rise of post-truth narratives, calling for collective efforts to restore trust in facts and support democracy. Two panel discussions followed, addressing the importance of quality journalism, media independence, and the role of regulation in combating misinformation. The conference stressed collaboration between journalists, policymakers, and educators to strengthen democratic values and improve media literacy. Recording from the conference can be found on the RECLAIM website, reclaim.hi.is.











Opening Remarks

Speaker: Mats Braun (Director, Institute of International Relations Prague)

Dr Mats Braun opened the conference, welcoming guests, and emphasised that this conference is the mid-point of the three-year EU-funded Horizon Europe project, Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age (RECLAIM). Furthermore, he explained the need for this ambitious project, which is capable of delivering empirical data in order to generate policy recommendations, stressing high-quality journalism as a solution, and focusing on the role of regulations on both NATO and EU level. The Director highlighted the importance of the project in the face of growing polarisation caused not exclusively by rising populism in Central and Eastern Europe, but also the full-scale war on the European continent. Knowing how to address these issues in such a context



is crucial for fostering increased cohesion in societies and reclaiming liberal democracy. Introducing the programme, Dr Braun explained that the first panel was to focus on the role that regulation can play in ameliorating the post-truth challenge, while the second panel would discuss journalism as a public good and the changing news consumption in Europe. Both panels would follow an initial keynote speech by Professor Maximilian Conrad, the principal investigator of the RECLAIM project.





Keynote Speech

Speaker: **Maximilian Conrad** (Professor of Political Science, University of Iceland; Principal Investigator of the RECLAIM project)



In a warmly received introduction, Professor Maximilian Conrad addressed the RECLAIM project's core mission of disentangling the phenomenona connected to the rise of post-truth politics and its ambition to make an active contribution to efforts to reclaim liberal democracy.

His keynote emphasised the importance of reclaiming the epistemic basis of liberal democracy, arguing that the rise of post-truth politics is intimately linked to an erosion of the shared understanding of facts and, indeed, of the methods through which facts are established. He highlighted how post-truth is manifested in public discourse, notably through the exploitation of sentiments suggesting that facts are little more than views imposed by elites, thus undermining the notion that facts are established through the provision of empirical evidence. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's notion that politics is the domain of exchanging arguments and thus requires a shared factual basis, he argued that the epistemic basis of such shared facts has eroded over the past decade.

Drawing connections between post-truth narratives and populism, Professor Conrad highlighted the propagation of "alternative facts" and the binary distinction between elite lies and popular truths as an illustration of this eroded epistemic basis for democratic deliberation. He also linked these phenomena to the idea of echo chambers and filter bubbles, which amplify affective polarisation in liberal-democratic societies.

Connecting to the themes of the following panels, Professor Conrad argued that despite populist efforts to discredit and silence critical journalists, the presumed epistemic crisis of democracy is also accompanied by an increased demand for reliable information and quality journalism, as was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the importance of citizenship education in navigating the evolving information





landscape plays a key role in the project of reclaiming the epistemic basis of liberal democracy. On this point, he argued that curricula must address media literacy, critical thinking, and digital skills to equip young citizens with the tools to discern factual information from mis- and disinformation.

In conclusion, the keynote underscored the urgent need to confront post-truth politics and reclaim the basis of liberal democracy through collaborative efforts. Recognising the interconnectedness of journalism, regulation, and citizenship education, Professor Conrad advocated for a multifaceted approach to addressing the challenges posed by post-truth narratives and fostering a resilient democratic society.







Panel 1: The Idea and Practice of Defending Democracy in the Era of Post-Truth in Europe

Speakers:

- Luis Bouza García (Associate Professor of Political Science, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)
- Elena García Gutián (Professor of Political Science, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)
- Jakub Eberle (Senior Researcher, Institute of International Relations Prague)

Moderator: Mats Braun (Director, Institute of International Relations Prague)









This panel set-out to discuss the following normative and conceptual debates: What does it mean to defend democracy, and from whom? How might this defence transform democracy and its regulatory implications? What is the balance between EU and national action? What are some examples of best practices, and in which areas is there a need for increased action or improvement? Following the introduction of the speakers, Professor García Gutián initiated the conversation by sharing her sentiment that in today's societies young people are starting to turn into citizens at a time when everything seems awful given the current state of the world and the future outlook. This compelled the authors of the project to help facilitate a better understanding of liberal democracy and the values and procedures behind our democracy.

She insisted that we should not speak about politics, but about democratic systems inhabited by values that must be rediscovered and enforced. The imperative to act is not solely the responsibility of journalists, but, from an epistemic standpoint, requires a cohesive effort from parliamentarians and leaders who must adhere to these democratic values and principles. There is a need to reconceptualise the complexity of our system while developing procedures to collectively decide on facts, the meaning attributed to them, and their use in political decision-making.

Professor García Gutián provided a recent example of government falsehoods from Spain, where officials misrepresented the Islamist attack in 2004, incorrectly attributing it to ETA. While this phenomenon is not new, she emphasised the necessity to address it at a European level, taking into account the contextual technological changes impacting our systems that facilitate dishonesty. The EU is generating ideas regarding the procedures of democracy, and while it isn't reinventing the democratic model, it aims to improve procedural aspects and maintain an overview of the associated normative goals and threats. The project observes the aspects the EU is currently prioritizing in this regard and the specific policies it is introducing to uphold related normative goals.

Moving on, Professor Bouza García began by explaining that the current crisis is not solely a democratic one, but rather a crisis of institutions and actors responsible for public debate. He emphasised the





transformation of the public sphere, which is being influenced by new modes of engagement due to technological change. The multitude of wicked problems present challenges that have no simple solutions. In cases where the erosion of trust is a result of technological shifts, even the most esteemed journalists may struggle to maintain credibility with certain individuals.

He highlighted the importance of quality journalism and the need for collective efforts to support it. However, he also noted that simply appealing to collective action wouldn't address the issue. The researchers had conducted interviews with the EU Commission and observed that the Commission was making significant progress on the issue, albeit with a systemic tendency towards short-term responses rather than a comprehensive masterplan. They stressed the urgency of addressing issues such as disinformation and hybrid threats, referring to events such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which have underscored the need for action since 2018. The EU's Democracy Action Plan was cited as providing a broad assessment of the risks democracy faces within the EU, including actions such as harassment, hate speech, and threats against journalists. However, it was noted that while the Action Plan identifies these challenges, it falls short in proposing effective solutions.

Four key points were highlighted by Professor Bouza García:

Firstly, in the Action Plan, there is an invitation for the member states to combat foreign interference in democratic processes, with a call for regulatory changes to make it more difficult for foreign powers to disrupt decision-making processes within member states. This marks the first incursion by the Commission into election processes beyond its competencies, as it now defines, for example, what constitutes a political advertisement and what does not. Secondly, efforts are required to promote and facilitate participatory civil spaces, although the relevant changes still need to be integrated into political discussions. Thirdly, he emphasised the importance of ensuring a free and independent media, noting the need for anti-SLAPP regulation and the adoption of a media freedom act, despite these not being explicitly mentioned in the Action Plan. Lastly, combating disinformation, particularly through the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA), was highlighted as crucial. These acts aim to hold social media platforms accountable for combating disinformation and promoting responsible behaviour. In the same context he also addressed potential misconceptions, clarifying that while the EU is transposing the NetzDG, the DSA establishes a code for platforms to follow, rather than having it take the form of a direct regulation by the EU. While these are valid responses, concerns were raised about the lack of transparency for EU citizens regarding how these platforms operate, and he used the example of account creation processes to explain this.

In his concluding remarks, Professor Bouza García emphasised the importance of trust, transparency, and critical citizen engagement. Noting that while EU law establishes a framework for all member states, individual states still have room for action in implementing and enforcing legislation. Then he drew attention to what the next steps should be, particularly the need for member states to effectively transpose and enforce the legislation at the national level.

Following these remarks, Dr Braun invited Senior Researcher Jakub Eberle to give his comments. Firstly, Dr Eberle lauded the researchers and expressed his appreciation for the EU-level approach. In response to the panel discussion, he highlighted several key points regarding the European Union's efforts to address challenges to democracy and media freedom. He began by expressing his agreement with much of the researchers' findings, highlighting the power grab by the Commission through redefining powers and competencies via regulations such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA).





He further praised the paper presented by the panel for elegantly defining the parameters of defending democracy and reflecting on the complexities of the current era.

One significant concern raised was the need to bridge the gap between epistemic analysis and political implications, as he emphasised the intertwining of disinformation with both technological advancements and political dynamics. Additionally, Dr Eberle emphasised the collective action problem, stressing the difficulty in implementing solutions effectively.

He made a distinction between merely defending liberal democracy, which adopts a conservative stance, and actively reclaiming and improving it. Dr Eberle argued that a critical approach to liberal democracy is necessary, acknowledging existing crises and the need for adaptation to contemporary challenges such as social inequality and climate change. Invoking the historical perspective, he went on to cite the necessity to evolve institutional frameworks to suit present-day contexts, drawing parallels with the current situation and the interwar period of the 20th century.

Focusing on Central and Eastern Europe, he noted the paradoxical nature of the current crisis where political participation is increasing, and people are going to protests more frequently. The hyperidealised version of a democratic sphere with perfect conditions as envisaged by Habermas is unattainable according to Dr Eberle, and yet democracy muddles through and lives on, precisely because liberal democracy is messy.

Dr Eberle praised specific recommendations within the EU Commission's democracy agenda, notably those concerning platform regulation and the bolstering of independent media. He emphasised the vulnerability of media in Central and Eastern European member states to both state suppression and market forces. He thus viewed the EU's approach favorably, seeing it as facilitating a form of liberalism characterized by interventionism aimed at safeguarding media freedom and countering what Yanis Varoufakis termed "technofeudalism."

Professor García Gutián echoed Dr Eberle's sentiment. She emphasized that a fundamental characteristic of our democratic systems and institutions is their status as ongoing works in progress, evolving over time into highly complex systems involving numerous actors and principles. While Dr Eberle referenced the historical perspective, Professor García Gutián highlighted that liberal democracy is relatively young, citing her own experience of being born in Francoist Spain. Therefore, she stressed the importance of continuously evaluating and rethinking our institutions. She argued that the most appropriate approach to understanding Habermas is a systemic view encompassing the notion that debate and conflicts have led to the development of a wide range of actors and processes, facilitating the discovery of the most compelling arguments. She argued that when discussing the relationship with truth, it's not a system that determines precisely what is truth. However, within a democratic system, it is essential to defend it because there exists a normative stance based on a shared understanding of the plurality of views and opinions, which necessitates collective solutions and inclusive participation.

Professor García Gutián went on to explain that while many systems have elections, they no longer work as democracies, because there is a lack of belief that the opposition is genuinely working toward the common good. The emphasis on consensus is exaggerated because Habermas' ideas assume that there is room for debate and infighting within democratic institutions. The panel highlighted that with liberal democracy we created complex institutions and systems, and the success of populism lies in pretending





that this complexity is unnecessary. As public discourse diminishes, it's crucial to recognize the context and complexity of our system. When advocating for new measures, we must fully grasp their potential effects.

Professor García Gutián concluded by claiming that there is currently an obsession with security among foreign actors, leading to the justification of the principle that we need protection from the sources of information. She pointed to Hungary as an example of an actor using the pretext of protecting the state to undermine liberal democracy. However, she stressed that as we initiate regulation, it's essential to comprehend the values we aim to safeguard.

Next, Professor Bouza García also commented on the remarks by Dr Eberle, agreeing that there may be an exaggerated obsession with foreign actors limiting debates. For instance, not every pro-peace proponent in the debate about the war in Ukraine acts according to the rationale of being a Russian agent. Only considering the geopolitical origin of this phenomenon in the form of hybrid threats and a Cold War rhetoric shows a misalignment of democracies.

He went on to explain that the EU Commission had chosen the path of defending liberal democracy and that it showcases the limits of their political imagination. He argued that the EU's response is somewhat mismatched with the perceived threat, although it follows the typical trial-and-error approach of EU regulations.

Finally, Professor Bouza García criticized the EU's efforts to co-regulate with platforms, highlighting how the EU is responsive to corporations that view it not as a democratic institution but merely as a market with Germany and France as the driving forces, while also pointing out the enormous platform lobby in Brussels.





Panel 2: Journalism as a Public Good: Assessing Evolving Demands in European News Consumption

Speakers:

- Hans-Jörg Trenz (Professor of Sociology of Culture and Communication, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence)
- David Klimeš (CEO, Endowment Fund for Independent Journalism)
- Aneta Zachová (Editor-in-Chief, EURACTIV.cz)
- Martin Moland (Postdoctoral Fellow, ARENA Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo)
- Jacopo Custodi (Postdoctoral Researcher, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence)

Moderator: Mats Braun (Director, Institute of International Relations Prague)











The panel started with Dr Braun introducing the speakers, followed by a brief overview of the panel format and its objectives. The basis for the discussions was a novel survey experiment conducted by RECLAIM researchers in Norway, Italy, and Poland in 2023 which reveals a persistent belief in journalism as a vital public good, despite fluctuating trust toward traditional media outlets. Yet, distinguishing credible sources from fake news remains a challenge. The survey raised the following key questions for the panel discussion: How can journalists deliver quality news when resources are scarce? Can new technologies such as generative AI and social media enhance rather than undermine journalism? And how do we ensure that quality journalism remains a public good amidst contemporary challenges? Dr Braun kicked off the panel with the first question: What are the main challenges to trust in journalism and how does generative AI pose new threats to journalism?

First to respond was Professor Trenz, who expressed that fact-finding was the key responsibility of journalists, with their privilege of attending press conferences and being professionally trained in finding facts, thus generating trust. However, some readers don't want journalists to simply find facts, but to also critically approach them and present critical opinions so as to assist the readers in arriving at their own conclusions. Nevertheless, journalists often fail in both pursuits, as they lack in fact-finding while simultaneously overstating their opinion or biased reporting - thus contributing to the increased distrust.





Rather than repeating stories of Russian troll farms and the spread of disinformation, Professor Trenz stated that he considers meeting the apparent demand for high-quality journalism to be much more important. People continue to trust journalists, but people need to know and learn how to identify quality journalism amidst the noise. The prevailing high trust in evidence-based journalism juxtaposed with the skepticism toward social media underscores the crucial role journalists must play in meeting this demand. However, the role of journalists continues to be misunderstood; they are not mere fact finders but rather mediators of truth, who assist people in forming their own opinions. Fact-checking is not their main task, but an integral aspect of delivering quality journalism. Recognizing this reality presents an opportunity to address the heightened demand for trustworthy reporting.

Following Professor Trenz, Ms Zachová provided her view on the issue, claiming that his statements are important points which need to be preserved in writing so as to make them useful for journalists in navigating the situation. For her, building trust between readers and journalists is one of the most pressing challenges we face, and it might be addressed through an increased use of emerging technologies, which would enable journalists to engage readers and channel their attention. Such activities are not limited to social media but include novel concepts such as personalised newsletters and other tools for contacting readers. From her perspective as an employee of EURACTIV, it is impossible to produce quality journalism for the general public in its entirety, and thus it is important to define the target audience. Another challenging aspect is the financial prospects of journalism, but currently the focus is on addressing the correct audience.

Mr Klimeš then continued by agreeing with Ms Zachová and emphasised the importance of discussing these issues. He made an observation that there is currently a shift from truth to post-truth across multiple societies, underlining the significance of considering truth markets. The multitude of different markets can be dominated by different approaches, as evidenced in political communication. The shared aim of journalism should be to provide a sensible structure for the audience. While it may be easy to dominate in one niche market, journalists must try harder to establish a general framework that would facilitate democratic debate within a functioning democratic system. To him, journalists aren't gatekeepers but rather gate watchers. For journalists now, it is imperative to focus on commonalities instead of fixating on the fringes (e.g. Russian trolls) and to determine what's appropriate for journalists so that they can return to being gatekeepers.

Dr Moland then chimed in to agree and reiterate that while gate watching is important, there is a need for some form of gatekeeping. This is an important aspect for media all over Europe, especially social media, where comment sections necessitate a form of gatekeeping to uphold a standard in truth and factuality.

Dr Braun continued the panel by posing the second question: How can journalism be addressed as a public good? What is the role of states and regulatory agencies such as the EU in terms of regulations for journalists?

Professor Trenz was again the first to respond, expressing his opinion that if he were a journalist himself, he would be insisting on his role as a gatekeeper, a key role in journalism, as mere gate watching could be done by anyone. This gatekeeping, including filtering content and deciding what is acceptable content for readers, is the collective action of truth finding. He went on to express the need to protect independent journalism, as well as its quality. The current story is that these two ideas are in conflict and the protection of one is the censorship of the other, while independent journalism enables a cacophony of voices and





chaos. However, Professor Trenz claimed that this is an ideologized pseudo conflict. Rather than discussing the protection of journalism, we should discuss the promotion of journalism, and in turn evoking new state responsibilities not as interventions but as promotions of independent journalism. This again means investing and using tax money to allow independent journalism to grow. Redefining journalism as a public good necessitates its independence from market mechanisms and public funding, as has started already in part of the Nordic countries and the Italian regions.

Mr Klimeš continued by agreeing with the previous statements while raising the question of whether the Czech regulatory framework provides a tool to promote transparency and independence through public investment. He noted that one had to wait for the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). However, he emphasized that determining whether a practice is a good or bad is not the task of the state regulatory framework alone. While the EMFA is a good start, he stressed the necessity of a robust debate about self-regulation.

Ms Zachová agreed, highlighting the need for a platform to explore possible solutions or engage in lobbying efforts. She mentioned that the employees of EURACTIV in Brussels had established a foundation explicitly aimed at investing in media to find new solutions and had lobbied relevant institutions for this cause. However, whether this common platform will be created depends on its implementation in member states, which could be challenging, especially in Central Europe given the post-communist context.

Following these remarks, Dr Custodi added that there is an increased centralisation of media ownership in many European countries, quoting the current figure for the concentration of media ownership in Italy, which is 78%. This means that it is not a plurality situation anymore, and this has severe effects on journalism.

The third question posed by Dr Braun was as follows: How do citizens express their demand for quality news?

Dr Moland began by referring to the initial survey, showing that for the most part people actively seek out news on a daily basis, consuming it roughly 30-60 minutes per day through both traditional and social media, with social media becoming increasingly relevant. This, however, does not mean that the latter necessarily involves alternative media, as traditional media outlets also operate on social media platforms. While 60% of people were interested in national news, the audience for news about the EU was more selective. The results for demands on journalism showed a strong demand for traditional qualities, such as that journalism should be objective and provide context, rather than being necessarily relevant to the audience or providing a comment section. Another demand here is that quality journalism should provide a bigger picture for the audience. At the same time audiences were more sceptical towards sensationalist packaging and writing styles. Furthermore, the survey showed that EU sceptics were more susceptible to believing in fake news about the EU, which is a common aspect of the post-truth phenomenon.

Following up on these findings, Ms Zachová expressed that she was delighted by the demand for quality journalism but raised the question of willingness to pay for it. Whilst such funding is currently provided by the EU, such public financing comes with demands and strings attached, such as a video disclaimer whose length makes the video unattractive for possible audiences.





Dr Moland further reiterated that personalisation of newsfeeds was not necessary, as the survey proved people were satisfied with journalism not related to their life as long as it was of good quality and enabled them to enlarge their view. On the practical matter of the EU disclaimer that Ms Zachová raised, he stated that with it comes a perception issue for the content, as people perceive it differently after seeing that it has been sponsored by the EU, which raises concerns about editorial independence.

Finishing the panel, Dr Braun posed the last question: What are some good practices of journalism the study provided?

Dr Custodi was fast to respond, stating that the results are still preliminary and are to be taken as such. One issue was that disinformation does not have one coherent definition that is shared by all, and that there is a difference between intentional and unintentional disinformation. While intentional disinformation is spread with a clear goal, such as political gain, unintentional disinformation is based on human error, and can be a result of a journalistic work environment rewarding the first person to break a story. Additionally, there's also a difference between narrow and broad disinformation. While narrow disinformation can be categorised as fake news, broad disinformation concerns biased or incomplete news. Based on these different changes in perception, policy also changes. Emerging from the interviews is the realisation that there are no institutionalised anti-disinformation guidelines. Most of the interviewed journalists rather stressed informal practices such as informal (trans)national collaboration. Another issue is that the EU's combating of disinformation was poorly perceived, and national regulations and frameworks are perceived as prevalent in this area, thus leaving more room for the EU institutions to assist journalists in their work. Another problem is the role of social media in the reshaping of disinformation, although some journalists claim that simply pointing towards social media in this regard is misleading and seeks to absolve journalists from their responsibility. The last point concerned the demand for quality journalism: the competition for breaking new stories first creates a market for slower, better researched quality journalism, although with a limited audience.

Dr Braun then opened the discussion to allow for questions from the audience, leading Professor Bouza García to pose a question about what to do in terms of public funding and whether an initiative such as the culture voucher worth EUR 400 for 18-year-olds in Spain would be a feasible idea.

Ms Zachová gave an initial answer, expressing interest in the idea of such a bonus, but advised that the younger generation might not be too focused on traditional media, which would require media to adapt. With young people not wanting to spend money on traditional media, one has to seek alternative routes; for example, EURACTIV is currently considering streaming its content on twitch to reach this audience.

Mr Klimeš continued the discussion with a remark regarding the issue of disinformation. While each state needs some sort of disinformation policy, he would remain sceptical toward the idea of finding proper guidelines. The communication of central institutions about disinformation in the Czech Republic was often perceived as irrelevant, and thus creating better communication between them might be more important than providing disinformation guidelines.

Dr Moland then gave his view on the issue, stating that such a bonus program would be interesting, but the problem is not just young people turning away from traditional media. A class perspective has to be considered as well. He highlighted the fact that there is no silver bullet policy that the EU can enact regarding this problem, but these issues must be addressed by the media landscape itself. He stated that





the EU might be worried about overreaching and creating a backlash given its negative reception in some parts of the population and a tendency to blame Brussels.

Dr Custodi brought the conversation back to state intervention, claiming that the state policy on combatting disinformation should avoid blocking disinformation because it risks censorship. On the contrary, the solution should go in the direction of financing and subsidising best practices in independent journalism. Again, he also accentuated the need to enable plurality and prevent an oligopoly through state intervention. Ms Zachová concluded with the statement that media are not dying because of AI, but will adapt, and thus they need the institutions to create conditions for media to adapt and utilise new ideas. She said, 'Don't create any more barriers and burdens but allow journalists to do their job.'

Professor Trenz finished the panel, stating that he can only but agree with Ms Zachová, and that if we could agree on the demand for journalism, that would mean not redefining journalism, but redesigning it independently of markets. New investments in this regard are always welcome, but it is also a question of redistribution of existing funds, and the Spanish model proves there are creative ideas for such undertakings, which ultimately raises his spirits.

Closing Remarks

Speaker: Pia Hansson (Director of the Institute of International Affairs at the University of Iceland)

Director Hansson closed the day by stressing the importance of the project and the efforts of the EU in making it possible. She thanked all the participants, her team from the University of Iceland under the leadership of Professor Conrad, the IIR Prague for hosting the event, all the panellists, all the partners and the audience.





Pictures from the event:













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