

Solidifying the democratic role of journalism is essential in the EU's efforts to fight post-truth

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Executive Summary

Digital media and communication technologies, infrastructures and governance are changing rapidly. These changes shape the ways we share information and knowledge, form opinions, express our identities and assign legitimacy in contemporary democracies. Europe is facing risks of disinformation, fake news, intrusion into privacy, restrictions of freedom of speech and freedom of the press and enhanced conflicts over the core values of democracy. In response to these challenges, our aim has been to disentangle the complex relationship between democracy, journalism and truth. In addition, we have aimed to identify the various enabling and constraining factors of journalistic work and practices in relation to the EU's strategy against misinformation. The Covid-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst for more decisive action on the part of the European Commission. The Commission has unequivocally recognised the role of news media in democracy in relevant Communication (COMM) documents and has implemented concrete actions aiming to strengthen professional journalists' freedom of speech and quality of work. For the Commission policies to find success in the long-term, more concrete, binding actions are needed towards public broadcasters' autonomy, as well as towards transparency and anti-trust safeguards for media ownership in all member states.

Introduction

In the current debate on the phenomenon of post-truth politics that threatens democratic societies, the emphasis is often put on the need for ethical guidelines and legal solutions to regain control over 'unbound journalism' or to re-establish truth in the news media. We argue for a pragmatic understanding of the role of news media and journalism: Journalists are not truth keepers - individuals that are closer to facts or more devoted to truth than others. Rather, they are truth mediators – professional brokers in the search for truth, who facilitate fact-finding, information-seeking and public debate. This search for truth has no certain outcome. Standards and procedures of journalism cannot be applied in a way to detect absolute truths and defend these against falsehood, but to approach truth in the most reliable and acceptable way. The role of journalists is, therefore, to operate within a field of professional practices that help to establish the value of information in a trusted way that becomes acceptable and convincing for the majority. The truth value of information then becomes the (unstable) outcome of a democratically necessary procedure of critical debate facilitated by journalists.

Approach and results

The restoration of trust in democracy requires the restoration of trust in the democratic *procedures* of truth finding. When it comes to news media and journalism, this would mean the reinstalment of the procedures of truth finding that allow the establishment of

truth through argumentation in the public sphere. This process of establishing the truth requires consideration of different arguments in an open and critical exchange and is the pinnacle of democratic debate. Even if the journalistic output does not receive ultimate public agreement that the information is to be valued as truth, the public can still rely on the procedures of journalism to establish truth, and trust that any counterarguments will be found, checked, and published in a similar manner. Adherence to these democratic procedures requires non-partisan journalism, independent of financial and political influence, which is not to be confused with notions of neutrality, accuracy and detachment traditionally assigned to journalism ethics. Based on our conceptual premise that journalism would not be expected to produce an unquestionable truth, but an unstable and preliminary outcome of the journalistic procedures of fact-finding and fact-checking, we have looked at the counterstrategies for trust (re-) building from a top-down perspective, analyzing the following European Commission documents:

2018:

[Communication - Tackling Online Disinformation: A European Approach](#)

[Synopsis Report of the Public Consultation on Fake News and Online Disinformation](#)

[Action Plan against Disinformation, JOIN\(2018\), 36 final](#)

2020:

Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on a Single Market For Digital Services (Digital Services Act) and amending Directive 2000/31/EC, COM(2020), 825 final

On the European Democracy Action Plan, COM(2020), 790 final

Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation: Getting the Facts Right, JOIN(2020), 8 final

Europe's Media in the Digital Decade: An Action Plan to Support Recovery and Transformation, COM(2020), 784 final

2022:

The Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation 2022

We have found a clear signalling of the Commission's will to stem the disinformation trend across European public sphere and an equally clear recognition of the role of professional journalism in reinstating people's trust in democracy. What we have not seen as prominently, is detailed actions geared towards public broadcasters. These are a core journalism vehicle through which trust in the democratic process of truth finding can be restored – yet in the Commission's Action Plan to support recovery and transformation of Europe's media in the Digital age (COM(2020) 784 final), public news media are mentioned only once. The bulk of the provisions is geared towards private media and audiovisual content providers. However, as the Court of Auditors report on the failures of the Action plan against Disinformation shows, EU counterstrategies against the disruptive effects of fake news and disinformation that focus on privately-owned news and social media platforms are not enough.

Conclusion

That there is any regulatory action at EU level towards this direction, is in itself indication of resistance – albeit at elementary state – against the most democratically corrosive aspects of digitalisation. In terms of substance, the EU actions and regulations address relevant challenges of the digital public sphere in a manner that not only strongly denotes a liberal democratic normative outlook (privacy protection regulation, for instance), but also contains echoes of a (neo?) liberal economic ideology. The latter comes through in the voluntary nature, for instance, of the

counter misinformation actions initially proposed by the European Commission in the period 2018–2020. More recently, however, we see a shift both in terms of urgency and in the wording of EU regulation and actions, whereby the role of professional journalism is explicitly recognised as a pillar of democracy. The earlier voluntary character of proposed actions is also now turned mandatory for social media platforms and digital public sphere behemoths, such as Google and Apple.

Implications and recommendations

Implications

- The news media sector is unequivocally recognized as an important democratic institution in EU policy documents.
- The recognition of news media not only as commercial enterprises but also as a public good indicates a first step, albeit reluctant, away from the hyper-marketisation outlook that has defined the digital public sphere era thus far.

Recommendations

- To ensure resilience against post-truth politics, journalism needs to be re-instated as first and foremost a public-service oriented, democratic institution. Support is therefore needed also for public service journalism and broadcasting: relieved from exactly the profit-making pressures of privately owned news media, it should be strengthened – with policies and funding – to provide non-partisan journalism, independent of financial and political pressure and influence from national governments.
- News and social media ownership regulations need to be strengthened even more to move away from monopolies within and across member states that undermine pluralism and independent news reporting.