

## Chapter 3

# Inequality, social trust and the media

## *Towards citizens' communication and information rights*

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We have entered times when increasing inequality feeds growing distrust in social and political institutions. Together, these two tendencies – diminishing equality and a lack of trust – create a challenge to liberal democracy. The media have a pivotal role in these developments. On the one hand, they are central to democracy; on the other, they are part of the process of normalizing inequality. In the media, the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots is the “new normal”. Our conclusion is that, as the legal and regulatory instruments on the nation state level can no longer guarantee citizens’ democratic rights to information and communications, this must be the task of the European Union. We propose a radical democratic reform of the EU’s media and communication policy that would take citizens’ democratic rights to information and communications as a starting point. We propose five policy areas that are pertinent to democratic rights to communications: access to information, the availability of information, media competence, dialogue and privacy.

It has become increasingly common for members of political and economic communities to warn about the dangers of increasing inequality and the threat that it poses to our societies. We hear these high-level warnings from, among others, the leaders of the World Economic Forum, the Munich Security Conference, the US National Intelligence Council and EU experts as well as from the Secretary General of the OECD (Bohemia, 2017; Munich Security Report (MCR), 2017; National Intelligence Council (NIC), 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2017; World Economic Forum (WEF), 2017, 2018a).

Their fear is that the growing gap between the richer groups and the general population, joined with diminishing public trust across the world, will lead to increasing social and political instability. Some recent warning signs in the form of social and political polarization include the most recent US presidential election, Britain’s Brexit process, the results of parliamentary elections in many European countries (Austria in 2017, France in 2017 and Italy in 2018) and political developments in EU member countries such as Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Instability is seen as

threatening the basic fabric of democratic society; as the US National Intelligence Council has stated, “At the national level, the gap between popular expectations and government performance will grow; indeed, democracy itself can no longer be taken for granted” (NIC, 2017: 7).

The reason for concern is quite clear. The main sources, as well as the main targets, of popular discontent are political and economic elites, who are seen as being responsible for the rising inequality and the general feeling of unfairness. However, distrust is targeted not just at the elites but at public institutions more generally. One of the main institutions in this respect is the legacy media, which are perceived to be part of the overall social and political elite formation (Braw, 2014; Edelman Trust Barometer (ETB), 2017; Ipsos, 2017; Swift, 2016). As stated in a recent report by the Reuters Institute, based on the influential Edelman report on the development of trust at the global scale:

Reduced trust in journalism, whether found in legacy or social media, matters because of its role in supporting the democratic process and informing citizens so that they can make choices at elections and referendums, but also in holding the rich and powerful to account. (Newman & Fletcher, 2017: 7; see ETB, 2017)

Growing numbers of people in developed countries feel that they have been abandoned by the elites as well as by the legacy media (Nicolau & Giles, 2017; Ipsos, 2017; Swift, 2016). A central dimension of this development is that distrust in institutions is prevalent not only among less advantaged groups but also, increasingly, among the educated middle classes (Chauvel & Hartung, 2016; ETB, 2017; NIC, 2017; WEF, 2018b: 15). The radicalization of the middle classes facing uncertain futures and downward social mobility has introduced a new element to traditional political populism. Distrust in the elites is not just expressed in traditional forms – through political passivity, abstaining from voting or voting in protest. Anti-elite protests are channelled into more organized forms, in new right-wing parties as well as in left-radical movements. These organizations have the potential to challenge seriously the “old” parties, which are perceived as protecting the privileged elites. This tendency can be seen all over Europe, from Greece and Italy to Sweden and Norway and from Hungary and Slovakia to Germany, France and Britain. What is perhaps different from the earlier forms of popular discontent is the recruitment of the middle classes to populist politics that can supply anti-elitist criticism with a stronger voice at a bigger volume. The leaders of the new right-wing parties are also increasingly well connected and well trained for public performance, and they often either own or have an influence over major media outlets.

As a result of the increasing influence of right-wing political movements, some media groups have joined the new anti-elitist surge. These groups exploit popular discontent, depicting the legacy media as servants of an elite conspiracy against the discontented masses. This is evident in the United States, where Fox News is challenging the major metropolitan media, especially *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and CNN, but also in the United Kingdom, where the *Daily Mail* has refreshed its role

in challenging the “liberal” media – *The Guardian* and the BBC – from an extreme right-wing position. Similar developments can be observed in many other countries, a classic example being Silvio Berlusconi and the Fininvest media company that he and his family control.

From the viewpoint of the future of European democracy, the question is how we see the role of the media when popular trust continues to erode. The basic logic – and our problem – is briefly presented as follows:

- With rising inequality, general trust in social and political institutions has declined. According to those affected by recent developments, politics and social institutions only benefit the governing elites. The legacy media are seen to be part of the elite formation, and journalists are distrusted to the same degree as politicians.
- However, a functioning democracy is based on an informed and active citizenship that relies on public information, equally available to all citizens, to make decisions. The main sources of public information are the legacy media and news journalism.
- If and when people’s trust in the legacy media declines – that is, when the media’s reliability and impartiality come into question – people will look to social media, in their many forms, for information. Even though people, in the main, do not trust these sources any more than they trust the legacy media, they accept them as being equally relevant (ETB, 2017).
- For a healthy democracy, the news media must enjoy public trust and should remain open to all. Moreover, the media must provide a voice to their constituencies; that is, people from all different social strata and groups. To achieve this, a radical change in the present media and communication policy based on the recognition of citizens’ information and communication rights is needed. For democratic participation, citizens need to have equal access to all relevant information and knowledge. Citizens should enjoy equal competence in using information and knowledge to meet their needs and obtain benefits. Citizens must also have the equal right to be heard and taken seriously, and their privacy must be protected equally. Social media do not serve these needs, as they do not provide for the required diversity and ubiquity of information.

In this chapter, we will use the Nordic countries as a case study to explore the relationship between inequality and the media in greater depth. The Nordic experience and the Nordic welfare state offer us a more general framework for analysing the recent developments in Europe and the US (Syvertsen et al., 2014). We will first offer some conceptual clarification and define the main terms used. After this, we will expand the picture that world political and economic leaders have painted about the potential social and political consequences of rising inequality and their view of the role of the media in these developments. Next, we will discuss the role that the media

have played in the construction of Northern European welfare societies. Based on these experiences, an elaboration of how the societal functions of the media have fundamentally transformed in the last few decades will follow. Lastly, we will discuss how the European Union's media and communications policy can be radicalized to promote democracy and equal social relations.

## Conceptual clarification

To clarify the approach taken to the relationship between inequality and the media in this chapter, we distinguish between four ways of analysing this connection. The first concerns the equality of social relations between people working in the media: how well are the genders or different minority groups represented in the professions of journalists, producers and media executives, and are they treated on equal terms to other groups (equality in profession)? The second approach asks how different social groups and strata are represented in and through the media: Do less-wealthy and marginalized groups receive fair and equal representation in the media compared with those in powerful positions (equality in representation)? The third way is to analyse the differences between social groups in relation to media access as well as their competence in using information for personal and common benefit (information gap). Finally, the fourth approach is based on the assumed role of the media in bringing us a daily account of what is real and "normal", including establishing the normality of inequality and social polarization. All these approaches should be applied when critically studying the relationship between inequality and the media. However, in this chapter, we will follow the fourth approach, asking how the media's role in the normalization of inequality is related to a recent contrary development – the growing popular distrust in the media.

Although the meaning of inequality might seem self-evident – it is the state of a lack of equality – there are a number of ways to define it in detail (Atkinson, 2015; Bourginon, 2015; Dorling, 2015; Holton, 2014; Novak, 2018; Stiglitz, 2012; Therborn, 2013). For the purpose of exploring the relationship between inequality and the media, it suffices to state that inequality refers to "differences in the circumstances, opportunities, life chances, and characteristics of populations or individuals" (Holton, 2014: 13) that are used to justify differences in the distribution of power. When speaking of inequality, we are usually engaged in an inherently normative discourse involving judgements about what is considered to be fair and just. In a democracy, equality is typically regarded as a cornerstone of what is considered to be fair and just, and policies are most often justified by their contribution to increasing equality and eradicating inequality (Christiano, 2002; Held, 2006; Keane, 2010).

It should be noted that our approach to inequality transcends concerns regarding differences in material relations, like wealth or income, alone. Following Holton (2014) and Therborn (2013), other forms of asymmetric relations in terms of gender, culture,

ethnic origins, sexual orientation, education, family background and religious or other convictions, among others, are sources of inequality that are as relevant. In practical terms, even in conditions of relatively low levels of material inequality, as in the Nordic countries, inequalities exist in relation to gender, ethnic origin, education, health and other areas of life. It is also worth emphasizing that ongoing processes of digitalization, encompassing all areas of society, are generating new forms and modalities of inequality that are often still overlooked (Robinson et al., 2015).

There is much academic debate on the relationship between inequality and social trust. The question is whether we can establish causality between them. For example, would policies aimed at increasing equality simultaneously bring about a higher level of social trust or vice versa? With higher social trust in society, are social relations more equal? There are different opinions about the answer and differing results from research (Barone & Mocetti, 2016; Bergh & Bjørnskov, 2011, 2013; Bjørnskov & Svendsen, 2012; Elgar, 2010; Gärtner & Prado, 2016; Jordahl, 2007; Nannestad, 2008). Most researchers seem to agree that societies with a high level of social trust have succeeded in designing policies to reduce inequality better than societies with a lower level of trust. However, this has not been followed by a parallel increase in social trust. This would mean that even successful social welfare policies do not automatically increase social trust among those benefitting from the policies (Bjørnskov & Svendsen, 2012; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005).

Nordic countries are traditionally countries with a high level of social trust as well as examples of well-functioning public welfare services. They are also countries with media systems that historically have strong roots in civil society and associational life and close relations to the political system, for example in the form of public subsidies and public service broadcasting (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Syvertsen et al., 2014). In our analysis, the media in these countries are inseparable parts of the mechanism producing a high level of social trust within the welfare state system. In this respect, we can say that the media are a central part of the building of the Nordic welfare model.

From this viewpoint, the question concerns what role the media have today, when – along with most European countries – the Nordic countries are experiencing increasing social inequality (Kvist et al., 2012; Nordic Economic Policy Review (NEPR), 2018). If the Nordic media system historically has been part of high trust relations aimed at sustaining consensual welfarist policies, what are its aims and functions today?

It is quite problematic to define what the media are today, because what we call “media” now once held a very different meaning. Media can be defined from different perspectives: as a technology, as a cultural institution or as an everyday practice of ordinary people. From the viewpoint of *technology*, contemporary media consist of all the traditional means of communication, including their different communicative modes – newspapers, magazines, radio, television, film, music records and so on. What is new is that, while all these “old” forms and technologies still exist, they now possess a second existence in digital form. They can be accessed through the internet,

although accessibility may be conditioned differently in the online world, for example through paywalls or subscription charges.

Additionally, the internet and digitalization have brought about a new form of mediated communication that is often called, somewhat misleadingly, “social media”, which constitute a collision between technical infrastructures and their social and cultural applications. One of the main differences here is that, while the services and content of the “old” media were always, by necessity, edited and curated at least to some degree – that is, the content was selected and “quality controlled” – social media are, assumedly and manifestly, non-edited and free of curation. This means that as *cultural institutions*, “old” and “new” media function on entirely different bases. Whereas the “old” media could present themselves as promoting some normative collective values – objectivity, pluralism, social responsibility and tolerance – social media, as a cultural institution, present themselves as being free from these normative allegiances.

From the user’s viewpoint, as *everyday practices*, what the media – in whatever technological form – have and continue to offer is rather practical. Clearly, people used media (newspapers, radio and television) in the 1950s and 1960s quite differently and for different purposes from today. For most European families, television became a living room fixture during the 1960s, but it only had one or two channels. For most, the print media and radio were the main sources of daily news and entertainment. The media structured people’s everyday lives in ways that are completely different from today, which is characterized by the media’s omnipresence.

It is also important to note that we speak of the media in very different contexts today. While the media – or the mass media, as they were once called – were at one time understood to be promoters of social integration, they are today divided into several branches with differing commitments. One branch – especially the news media (such as quality newspapers and the BBC) – still value their social responsibility role and the principles and practices of liberal democracy. Another segment mostly follows the market and the entertainment of its audiences. The third group capitalizes on the policies of anti-elitism and populism and subscribes to right-wing as well as to left-wing politics. Finally, there are social media, which not only include the three previous groups but, more importantly, give voice and access – presumedly, at least – to everybody.

## Concerns of the elites

To explore further the concern of global elites regarding the media, it would be helpful to review some recent facts. First, right-wing parties have increased in popularity and continue to challenge the traditional power of the “old” parties in the majority of European countries (for an overview, see New York Times (NYT), 2016). Furthermore, a recent survey of 28 countries found that more than 75 per cent of respondents agreed that “the system is biased against regular people and favours the rich and

powerful” (ETB, 2017: 2). According to the survey, the media “[are] distrusted in more than 80 per cent of the countries [...] to a level near government” (ETB, 2017: 3). The “old” media are continuing their downward spiral: in Britain, the circulation of daily newspapers fell from 10.5 million to 6 million copies between 2000 and 2015 (Wikipedia, 2017), and the development has been similar in other countries (for the Nordic developments, see Harrie, 2018). Simultaneously, social media have increased in importance: in the United States, the use of online social networking among adults rose from 7 to 64 per cent between 2005 and 2015 (Perrin, 2015). In 2016, 68 per cent of all Americans used Facebook (Greenwood et al., 2016), while the figure was over 75 per cent in the Nordic countries (AudienceProject, 2016). At the same time, inequality has continued to increase in all the developed countries, especially in the United States and Britain but also in all of the European Union (Cribb et al., 2017; Income Inequality, 2018; OECD, 2017; Social Europe, 2017; Stone et al., 2018), including the Nordic welfare states (Kvist et al., 2012; NEPR, 2018).

It is no wonder that, as stated in the opening paragraph of this chapter, the recognition of inequality and social and political polarization as major threats to liberal democracies has become part of the contemporary political mainstream. Such threats were among those identified by world economic and political leaders in their yearly Davos meeting in January 2017:

The combination of economic inequality and political polarisation tends to amplify global risks, fraying the social solidarity on which the legitimacy of our economic and political systems rests. New economic systems and policy paradigms are urgently needed to address the sources of popular disenchantment. (WEF, 2017: 13)

In many projections, these fears are combined with the emerging threat of “post-truth political debate” or profound changes in the way in which news and information are produced, distributed and shared (WEF, 2017: 24), referring to the debate over “fake news” and disinformation:

The main threat is that citizens’ trust in media and politicians might further erode, creating a vicious cycle that threatens liberal democracy. States must better protect their hardware; but cyber defence will not be enough. Democratic institutions can also support media literacy, strengthen their communication efforts, and educate their citizens. [...] Preventing a “post-truth” world, in which “nothing is true and everything is possible”, is a task for society as a whole. (Munich Security Report, 2017: 42)

While the interconnections between inequality and the media were not the main focus in either Davos or Munich, both reports recognized their historical contexts as being defined by developments in Britain, the United States and other developed countries – including the Nordic ones. The logic is rather simple and straightforward: increasing economic inequality and social polarization bring about resentment and distrust towards elites. The resulting disenchantment among not only lower-income and less-educated groups but also educated middle classes is politically exploited by

populists at both the right and the left end of the political spectrum; part of the media is harnessed by populist anti-elitist propaganda that spreads disinformation and “fake news”, and the subsequent political and social confusion is then exploited by anti-Western forces, such as Russia, China and terrorist groups, to undermine Western democracies and pursue their own purposes.

For the elites, the problem with the media is that they have not assisted in containing the tide of anti-elitism. For a large part of the European and US populations, the legacy media are identified with social and political elites, seen as presenting and promoting their particular interests. In many countries, we have witnessed a constant decline in trust in traditional news media, accompanied by a simultaneous increase in the use of more horizontal sources of information – the internet and peer groups, for instance. However, it is noteworthy that, although the use of social media has escalated, they are not highly trusted. In contrast, the trust in social media has decreased (EBU, 2018; Mitchell & Barthel, 2017; Swift, 2016). In other words, people are constantly searching for information and advice from sources other than the legacy media. As a parallel development, from the viewpoint of elites, people are disinformed and, as a consequence, behave irrationally and against their own interests (see Ashworth-Hayes & Schickes, 2016; Chakraborty, 2016; Parkinson, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2015).

Although the World Economic Forum’s analysis of the sources of discontent is based on serious academic research and factual evidence, its proposals for correcting the situation are less convincing. Instead of recognizing the main cause of the problem, which relates directly to structural, social and economic inequality, it places the responsibility on political, economic and social actors who have not carried out what is required:

It is critical that policy-makers and other stakeholders – across government, civil society, academia and the media – collaborate to create more agile and adaptive forms of local, national and global governance and risk management. (WEF, 2017: 15)

To make a critical interpretation of the two reports, the media are expected, together with politicians, to perform better in terms of persuading people to accept the status quo and with it to agree with increased inequality and social polarization. From this viewpoint, the right and left radical forces have captured the social media and used them for anti-democratic purposes by spreading “fake news” and “alternative truths”, and the legacy or traditional media have more or less betrayed the trust invested in them, failing to prevent this from happening (Blake, 2017; Swaine, 2017). This has created an opportunity for populist movements that utilize popular distrust of the elites to their advantage.

According to this analysis, the solution offered by the elites to solve the crisis of trust, echoed by the legacy media, is not to provide new measures that would radically tackle the real sources of inequality (Arrese & Vara, 2015). What they suggest are more or less already existing means and instruments; this time, however, they are intended to appear more convincing and capable. The key words pointing to policy



reforms, in both the market and the public institutions, include “responsible leadership”, “social inclusion”, “better governance” and “media literacy”; and addressing the global risks effectively requires “(...) responsive and responsible leadership with a deeper commitment to inclusive development and equitable growth, both nationally and globally” (WEF, 2017: 4). In sum, the cure offered is to appeal to the elites’ moral and ethical obligations instead of proposing the necessary reforms to the power-related structures that actively produce inequality and polarization.

## Media and the production of inequality: The loss of trust in ”old” media

It must be emphasized that one important dimension in the transformation from the “old” mass media to the “new” digital social media is the change in the media’s social and cultural function. What we today call *the media* have never been the only mediating institution – or institutionalized practice – connecting us to external reality. The media are one social and cultural institution among others that provide us with essential information and social competencies. The educational, religious, cultural and public institutions that together form our epistemic order and help us to understand better the world and our roles in it are perhaps even more important than the media to our cognitive and emotional connection to the world. The role of the media is merely to update and tune us cognitively and emotionally to various aspects of the world (Nieminen, 2014).

It seems clear that, at some stage in the 1980s and 1990s, a fundamental shift took place in the public life of Western democracies, changing the way in which a fair and just society was understood and defined. From the Second World War until then, a prevailing assumption was that the central goal of the reconstruction of Western societies was to provide a more equal society and to eradicate poverty. Major social reforms – a pension system, social welfare, health care and education – were tabled in all Western societies and aimed to diminish the gap between those with fewer resources and those with more (Crouch, 1999; Gamble, 2016; Streeck, 2014; Therborn, 2013).

The media were part of this process. Practically all major media outlets in Europe adopted allegiance to the ethical principle of social responsibility, which formed a normative basis for translating the traditional journalistic principles of objectivity, pluralism and truthfulness into the processes of daily journalistic practice. This is best illustrated by the ethical codes guiding journalists, which have been approved by journalist unions in different countries (Christians et al., 2009: 64-87). This ethical orientation permeated every function of the different forms of media.

A parallel development, taking place to some degree in many other countries in Western Europe but especially in Northern European countries (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland), was the process of social and political pacification and the softening of class conflict in the 1950s and 1960s. This was facilitated by material

rewards resulting from the reconstruction period after the Second World War: general life conditions improved, the standard of living increased and material affluence was more evenly spread among the population. The state took increasing responsibility over matters that were previously the responsibility of individual citizens and civil society actors, such as social security and health care (Barker & Lavalette, 2015).

As the role of the state grew in all sectors of society, the basic social and political dynamics changed fundamentally. From the 1950s to the 1970s, civil society actors – trade unions, voluntary associations, civic organizations and civic movements – were active in representing the needs and interests of their members and followers. The media of that time – newspapers, magazines, journals and leaflets – acted as a mediating channel, bringing the voices from below into the public domain to be negotiated between different interests. Although this might be characterized as a common Western European experience, it is clear that it has taken place in different forms and to different degrees in different parts of Europe, as analysed, for example, in Hallin and Mancini's (2004) seminal contribution from the early 2000s: *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*.

Especially in the Nordic countries, it can be seen that the progressive development of the social welfare state eventually captured the initiative from civil society and incorporated many social movements into its administrative and disciplinary logic. During the 1980s and 1990s, the historical conditions for social and political mobilization had already changed. Several central civil society organizations were either merged with the state apparatus (in the form of committees, councils or advisory groups or as active civil society advocates were recruited as politicians or appointed as experts) or declined in significance. As a result of decreasing social and political conflict, political parties began drifting towards the centre (Barker & Lavalette, 2015; Crouch, 2013; Mair, 2013; Tourain, 2014).

This development was also reflected in the realm of the media. The political press remained prominent and prolific until the late 1960s and early 1970s, catering to rich *external pluralism* in the social and political public spheres. All the main political and ideological voices had a platform of their own – so long as there was somebody to read or listen. However, as the process of social and political pacification progressed, ideological and political newspapers began to lose their readership and with this their financial basis. One by one, they closed down. The field was now left open to commercial newspapers, which, to gather as large a readership as possible, had to navigate politically and socially to the mainstream, seeking to placate the majority – that is, combining some of the left with some of the right (Curran & Seaton, 2010; Gustafsson & Rydén, 2010; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Nerone, 2015).

In the Nordic countries, this resulted in a form of *internal pluralism*: the main newspapers sought to cater simultaneously to all the different interests of their main audiences. This resulted in the loss of external pluralism and the exclusion of the voices of minorities and those marginalized from the public sphere: groups that did not see themselves as being represented in the legacy media (Barnhurst & Nerone,

2001). This experience of being excluded and marginalized was further echoed in the wake of the economic downturn in the early 1990s and especially in the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008 (Judis, 2016; Touraine, 2014).

Together with the changes in the media field in the late 1970s and 1980s, the political climate in Western countries was in flux. This was personified by two influential political leaders, Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States, both of whom drew their inspiration from the neoclassical economics of the Chicago school and its representatives, the most famous of whom were Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek (Margaret Thatcher Foundation (MTF), 2017). Their – and the political and economic forces that they represented – message was that the time of the social contract of the reconstruction period was finally over and that social and economic pacification in the form of the social welfare state was outdated. Instead of a universal right to social welfare for all members of society, justification for public policies was now established in the name of economic efficiency and competitiveness. This new neoliberal orthodoxy, derived from Hayek and Friedman, was based on the normative assumption of the primacy of the economy over social welfare. Public interest, previously defined in terms of democracy and universal rights, was reinterpreted and redefined in terms of economic efficiency and competitiveness (Crouch, 2004; Harvey, 2007; McChesney, 2014).

As this new orthodoxy eventually permeated all levels of policy making, it also started to be reflected in the media. Instead of speaking on behalf of the whole society and welfare for all, the legacy media adopted the rules of the “new normal” (Osberg, 2014), presenting the condition of increasing inequality and social polarization as a reality with no alternative (Coleman & Ross, 2010; Prior, 2007).

## The transformation of the media: Functions redefined

To explain the profound distrust of a growing part of society towards the legacy media, we must consider three parallel developments of the last two decades. The first one concerns the major changes in the social structures of societies. Due to transformations in all areas of social activity – production, education, demography, housing and so on – citizens’ need for information and communication has been profoundly altered, resulting in major changes in the role of the media in people’s everyday lives. There is less need for the mainstream “same-size-fits-all” types of services but an increased sense of urgency to address the specific needs of the new social strata – educated and faced with an entirely new work–life environment. This process of social and cultural differentiation is constant and places substantial demands on societal sub-systems, including education, sciences, public services, information and communication, and others (Juteau, 2003).

At the same time, in the sphere of production, incessant processes of automation and globalization are leading to the disappearance of an increasing number of tradi-

tional trades and professions, destroying not only traditional industrial communities but entire branches of industries (see Griswold, 2013; Valenduc & Vendramin, 2016). Several post-Second World War generations have grown up trusting the competence of the social welfare state to address their concerns and needs, yet now – especially after the financial and economic crisis of 2008-2009 – they face increasing future risks, including unemployment and a weaker safety net. For them, the legacy media represent the elites who have betrayed them (Calhoun, 2016; ETB, 2017).

Second, in a parallel development, digital technology has transformed the concept of the media into something previously unimaginable. Instead of the old distinction between one-way transmission and two-way communication – connected to the era of print media, radio broadcasting and telephony – the internet, with its applications, now fosters multidirectional communication. Instead of the time and space restrictions of the “old” media, the internet offers services “anywhere, anytime”, both online and offline, and, instead of the separation between print, electronic and recorded media created by the “old” technology, the internet brings all of them together (Castells, 2009; Kellerman, 2014).

This also means that, instead of the separate industries of the print media, broadcasting and telephony, we currently have one media/communication industry, defined in terms of digital technology. Whereas previously we had the problem of oligopolization within separate industrial branches, and later cross-ownership between print and electronic media, today we have the problem of the global oligopolization of the media/communication industry, exemplified by Google, Facebook and Microsoft. All these companies, by and large, are difficult or nearly impossible to regulate with the means available to national as well as international authorities (Berners-Lee, 2018; DeNardis, 2012; Drezner, 2004; Freedman, 2012; Tusikov, 2017).

The third factor, closely linked with the previous one, concerns the major transformation in the economics of the media. Advertising, traditionally the main funding source for the commercial media, has navigated with increasing speed from the sites of the legacy media (based mostly on local and national markets) to social media platforms (functioning on global markets), benefitting the global companies mentioned above. For most of the legacy media operators, the consequences have been dramatic: they have been obliged either to find new business models and sources of income or to close down their operations (Barthel, 2018; Picard, 2016; Trappel et al., 2015). The challenge has been especially difficult to the media in small countries, where the growing outflow of advertising money has meant fewer opportunities to fund the new investments and innovations that are urgently needed to operate in the new environment (see Picard et al., 2015). For example, in three Nordic countries, Norway, Denmark and Sweden, newspapers’ share of the total advertising revenue was ca. 50 per cent in 2005; by 2016, it had dropped to 20 per cent. In that period, several daily newspapers were forced to close down (Harrie, 2018). In Finland, the advertising revenue of daily newspapers dropped from 620 million euros in 2007 to 302 euros in 2017 (Ekman & Weckström, 2016; TNS-Gallup, 2018).

Taking these developments together, it is no wonder that the legacy media suffer from weakening authority. In trying to cater to all audiences, their ability to speak and give a voice to the ever more differentiated public has waned. As we pointed out earlier in this chapter, it is clear that people's ways of and purposes for using the media have changed fundamentally in the past 50 years. However, although many studies have described these changes, there has been little agreement among researchers about what these changes mean: for some, the digital revolution means more participation and more creativity (Jenkins, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2018); for others, digitalization means greater concentration of power and increasing surveillance (Fuchs, 2017; McChesney, 2013).

One of the central claims in this chapter is that a major shift has occurred in the functions that the media serve in people's everyday lives. There is ample literature on how the functions of the media should be defined (for a review published in the 1980s, see McQuail, 1987; for one published in the 2000s, see McQuail, 2010). One classical approach proposed classification into five functions or "needs" that the media serve: cognitive needs, affective needs, integrative needs, social needs and needs related to escape or tension release (Blumler, 1979; Bracken & Lombard, 2001; Katz et al., 1973; Lichtenstein & Rosenfeld, 1983; Ruggiero, 2000). Here, we slightly modify the classification by Katz and colleagues and propose that the media accommodate the following functions: information (re: cognitive needs), orientation (integrative needs), recreation (escape and tension release), social connection (social needs) and self-expression (affective needs) (Nieminen, 2016; Nieminen & Aslama Horowitz, 2016). All these media functions (or, from the users' viewpoint, modalities of use), once served exclusively by "old" or traditional media, are now, from the viewpoint of users, equally offered by social media – and most are more easily available without the constraints of time and space.

1. *Information* refers to the practical everyday knowledge that we need to step outside and complete our daily chores. The informative function of the traditional media relates to the delivery of fact-based material, including news, weather, calendrical events and classified advertisements. Such material is today increasingly aggregated by and available on "free" internet platforms, challenging the traditional economy of the legacy media. The legacy media's answer to this is to concentrate more on quality content, such as investigative and advocacy journalism. However, user statistics have shown that this material is consumed mostly by a relatively restricted, well-educated elite audience and fails to reach mass audiences (Newman & Fletcher, 2017). This "information gap" has fed much public debate over "fake news" and "alternative truths", which has unfortunately led to even further polarization in the public sphere.

From the viewpoint of democracy, the informative function of the media is crucial. The core of the concept of democratically defined public interest is based on the choices and decisions made by citizens who are equally provided

with the best information and knowledge available. To improve the media's function in providing relevant information, the solution cannot be left to market forces. Such practices and processes need to be consolidated to serve citizens' information and communication needs on an equal basis. A good example of these practices and processes is the institution of public service broadcasting (today, public service media).

2. *Orientation* refers to the guidance that we follow to make our value judgements: Whom should I vote for in the next municipal elections? What should I think about Brexit or Trump? Is nuclear energy good for the environment? With the desire to make themselves more interesting and relevant to mass audiences, legacy media outlets are increasingly applying an opinionated and argumentative style, often presented by celebrity columnists and branded journalists (see Holton & Molyneux, 2017; Hoyt, 2008). This has not, however, lessened the widespread distrust, as this type of reorientation is not felt to reflect properly people's experience of diminishing social security and uncertain future expectations.

From the viewpoint of offering citizens multiple, even contradictory, choices to form their own opinions freely, media pluralism is essential. To prevent a monopoly of opinions, citizens must have equal access to a plurality of information and knowledge sources. There are several ways to promote media plurality: the restriction of ownership concentration, operational licences and concessions, and critical media education and literacy. The danger is that, without a coherent public policy and democratic regulation, pluralism will easily lose out to commercial logic.

3. *Social connection* refers to media offerings that enhance the user's membership of a community; it pertains to social belonging and the need for an identity as a member of the wider society. Major changes have occurred in the ability of the media to offer social connectivity. During the period of the party press (until the 1960s), the "old" media (newspapers) offered basically class-based social connection and community-based experiences for different audience groups. With the emergence of the modern commercial press and the advance of television, this social connection was based, in principle, on the creation of the feeling of shared experiences among anonymous members of the (national) audience. Now, the internet and its applications (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Whatsapp) offer the potential for close social connectivity among, for example, the members of the app-based community.

There is a fear that the users of social media platforms are creating closed communities or "bubbles", separated from other similar communities and unable to communicate between and across these communities. This allegedly leads to the "echo chamber" effect, which reinforces the personal beliefs of the members and excludes alternative views (Garrett, 2009; see Flaxman et al., 2016). It seems that, to fight these developments, we need public initiatives aimed at

creating positive connections between the “bubbles” and at offering platforms for common action and shared collective experiences. By endorsing different forms of community and local media for collaboration and co-creation, public service media companies and other cultural and educational institutions can act – if properly resourced and governed – as facilitators for such initiatives.

4. *Recreation* refers to content consumed during free time and for educational activities. This includes issues relating to entertainment, culture, arts, sports and so on. In the areas of entertainment and education, the convergence of the legacy media with the internet is perhaps less conflictual. Audiences diverge significantly in terms of their needs, but different platforms and technologies – even when engaged in fierce competition – complement each other (e.g. BBC, Sky, Netflix and HBO). The main difference here concerns the media’s financial model: in the period of the European (semi-)monopoly of “free” public service broadcasting, there were only modest conflicts of interest within the European television industry – at least compared with today’s situation (Harrison & Woods, 2007; Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2011). Today, the recreational functions of commercial audio-visual media have expanded to all electronic platforms, and the function of the public service media has been relegated to a more or less complementary role for the commercial media industry.

Again – based on the experiences of the last two decades – when left exclusively to the commercial media market, the recreational function of the media will focus on products of mass entertainment: box office movies, game shows, drama and reality TV shows. Quality content, including educational and other challenging offerings, would be limited to consumption by an educated minority. The role of public service media is again crucial here, as are other potential forms of public subsidies for the production and dissemination of quality cultural and educational content.

5. *Self-expression* refers to the need to have one’s voice heard and face known, be it in the “letters to the editor”, in phone-ins or on the radio. This is the area in which digitalization has promoted the most effective change. Compared with the edited and curated “freedom of speech and expression” offered by the legacy/traditional media, the internet offers historically unparalleled freedom of individual expression. Anyone can now publicly present him- or herself and express his or her own views of the world without prior (obvious) editorial or curated intervention (although algorithms are today performing curation). This is facilitated by platforms such as Facebook, Youtube, Instagram and Twitter, to name a few. This development has opened pathways for enhancing democracy and a diversity of voices but also – as we well know – for pursuing purposes that are antagonistic to democracy (Berners-Lee, 2018).

The worsening problem concerns the downsides of free speech on the internet: hate speech, “alternative truths”, “fake news”, trolls, identity theft and so on.

As internet governance is based on voluntary regulation in some capacity by all the main stakeholders, it is difficult to create any consistent control system or even a common understanding of the purposes for regulating and controlling freedom of expression on the internet. The only solution would require negotiations within the framework of international organizations (the United Nations, UNESCO, Internet Corporation Assigned Names and Numbers, the EU, The International Telecommunication Union, etc.) aimed at establishing an effective global regulatory framework – the urgency of which has finally been recognized by the European Commission (European Commission, 2018).

### Policy implications:

#### A radical democratic media policy reform is needed

In light of the evidence offered above, it seems evident that the media has the potential to act as part of the unequal structures of our societies. At the same time, however, the media play a potentially elemental role in creating and disseminating critical information and knowledge to unpack those unequal societal relations.

The question posed to critical media scholars and media policy makers is the following: How much impact can media policy and media regulation have in undoing, or at least decreasing, inequality and the structures supporting it? One task that media policy and regulation can perform is to strengthen people's knowledge and understanding of both the present state and conditions of inequality and the ways in which to fight them. This is also a precondition for increasing trust in media and media-related information, which in turn is a prerequisite for the strengthening of democracy.

From this perspective, we bring citizens' communication and information rights to this discussion. The logic is simple. Democracy needs citizens who are equally informed; thus, they must be guaranteed equal access to all relevant information. This makes the case for citizens' communication and information rights. The basic elements of these can be derived from, among others, international treaties and conventions, such as the UN Declarations of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Nieminen & Aslama Horowitz, 2016). For a further look, we propose five areas of communication and information rights: rights to access and availability, the right to critical competence, the right to dialogue and the right to privacy. On their basis, we ask how the European Union has performed in their implementation.

Over the years, the European Union has adopted a number of policies related to European citizens' information and communication rights. However, they have not created any coherent entity but are dispersed among the regulation of different sectors of the media industry as well between the EU bodies – the Commission and its Directorates, the European Parliament and the European Court of Human Rights. For this reason, they have different forms and differing statuses: some are EU direc-



tives, some are EC regulations, some are EC communications and some are just the European Parliament's reports and ECHR rulings. To give examples in relation to the five areas of rights detailed above, the EU's policies can be illuminated through the following documents:

- *Right to access*: This includes ensuring that all citizens are guaranteed equal access to the media, following the model of universal service obligation applied to telephony, now extended to all media, including the internet. The main EU policy document is the Commission's *Communication on a digital single market strategy for Europe, from 2015* (COM (2015) 192 final), which was followed by, among other policy aims, a proposal for a directive establishing the European electronic communications code (recast) (COM (2016) 590).
- *Right to availability*: This requires that all citizens should be guaranteed equal availability of the best information and knowledge obtainable; that is, the cost to attain correct and relevant information and knowledge should be as low as possible and treat people equally. This is partly served by the EU's policy on public service broadcasting, which is still based on the EU's Protocol to the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997 (Official Journal C 340, 1997, November 10: 0109), partly on the EC's actions on media pluralism, among them establishing the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF) in 2011, and partly on the EC's recent efforts to deal with the questions of disinformation and fake news, as documented in the *Communication on tackling online disinformation: A European approach* (COM (2018) 236).
- *Right to competence*: This means that all citizens should have equal opportunities to gain the critical skills and education needed to use the media according to their best interests and needs and concerns education and training at all levels. The EU's most recent policy document in this area is the EC's *Communication on the digital education action plan* (COM (2018) 22).
- *Right to dialogue*: This includes the requirement that all citizens should have their voices equally heard and taken seriously; this means that freedom of speech and expression for some is not enough: it must apply equally to all. This is clearly an underdeveloped policy area and, judging by the EC's policy documents, one that seems to concern mostly the EU's relations with non-EU countries. References to dialogue lead to the Commission's "Europe for Citizens" programme, and references to freedom of expression lead to the pages of the Directorate International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO).
- *Right to privacy*: This requires that all citizens should have equal rights to control their own personal lives and individual information; private information should not be made public without the consent of the individual in question. This has been a clear emphasis area in the last couple of years, especially with the implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018.

How well do these EU policy areas, serving differing motives and being equipped with uneven competences, realistically serve European citizens' rights to information and communications? A proper answer would require a thorough analysis of all the documents and related material. For the purposes of this chapter, we have to settle for a general conclusion, which briefly reads as follows. In the conditions of today's media and communication environment, the EU's policies – both planned and implemented – are feeble and contradictory. As the recent developments in the Nordic countries teach us, we need stronger and more effective European policies if we want to protect democracy and aim to improve equality. What is urgently needed is a comprehensive and radical reform of the European Union's media and communication policy that guarantees communication and information rights to all European citizens.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that we have entered times when increasing inequality feeds growing distrust in social and political institutions. Together, these two tendencies – diminishing equality and lack of trust – create a challenge to European democracy. The media have a pivotal role in these developments. On the one hand, they are central to democracy; on the other, they are part of the process of normalizing inequality. In the media, the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots is the “new normal”.

We applied the Nordic welfare model as our normative point of departure. In this tradition, the media were, and to a great degree still are, seen as part of the integrative process of building the social welfare state, and the media follow the ethics of social responsibility. These principles formed the legal background to the whole media system, guaranteeing citizens' democratic rights to information and communications. We argued that today, even in the Nordic countries, the basic functions of the media have been fundamentally altered. This is mostly because of the alterations in the role and competence of the nation states in producing the kind of welfare and security that was still possible in the 1990s. Economic globalization and European integration have changed the basic conditions and reduced the sovereignty of small states in Europe. The ability of the media to construct “imagined communities”, based on trust in the competence of nation states to provide public goods, has given way to different kinds of media-related communities. A number of them challenge, both from the right and from the left, the present political and economic rule, bringing about inequality and social and cultural divisions.

Based on the documents from the World Economic Forum and the Munich Security Conference, the global elites appear to blame the media for their failure to bring about social and political stability while acknowledging the negative impact of inequality on social cohesion. In their analysis, the media have not performed well enough in

accommodating the public opinion to adapt to the conditions of the “new normal”: the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots. Our conclusion is that the national legal and regulatory instruments are no longer valid to guarantee citizens’ democratic rights to information and communications. As this is not within the interests of the media market players, we have to turn to more competent political actors, such as the European Union. Although only a regional power, the EU represents a major media and communication market globally and could have a significant influence on global politics in this role if it so willed.

As the EU has, at least potentially, control over the market forces, we propose a radical democratic reform of the EU’s media and communication policy that would take citizens’ democratic rights to information and communications as the starting point. We propose five policy areas that are pertinent to democratic communication rights: access to information, the availability of information, media competence, dialogue and privacy. A quick overview of the EU’s policies in these areas demonstrates that they are disparate, incoherent and sometimes incompatible. What is needed is a policy approach that addresses citizens’ rights to information and communications holistically and on a clear democratic–normative basis. Although we have learned that more equality does not automatically translate into more social trust, the recent years in Europe and in the US have proved that the opposite can be true – increasing inequality leads to increasing social distrust and growth of political extremism.

The new European regulatory framework based on citizens’ information and communication rights aims to create room for a critical European public sphere that could offer fresh platforms for transnational dialogue on common issues, bringing about shared experiences between Europeans from different parts of the continent (For abundant research literature on the European public sphere, see e.g. Benson, 2009; Bozzini & Bee, 2010; Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007; Fraser & Nash, 2014; Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Risse, 2015; Salovaara-Moring, 2009; Triandafyllidou et al., 2009). A new regulatory regime aimed both at increasing the openness of information and at giving voice to the now excluded minority interests and opinions could act as one step towards the much-needed democratization of European politics.

We believe that, where there is more open public debate and dialogue, there are possibilities for creating trust relations and consequently less room for antagonism and polarization. To use Chantal Mouffe’s (1999, 2018) terms, agonistic relations are always preferable to antagonism, as they reserve room for dialogue and compromises instead of antagonistic monologue and the quest for hegemony. It should be emphasized, however, that we do not expect the return of social trust in its “old” systemic form within the framework of nation states. What is needed is a new form of social trust on a higher transnational level. The new European regulatory framework for media and communications could offer one step towards this aim.

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