European Commission

Media & Democracy
EU research & innovation protecting media integrity

"Media are not only a key sector of the cultural and creative industries. Media, both traditional and digital, audiovisual and printed, news and social, are at the heart of a vibrant European public sphere. Alongside building a regulatory framework that ensures media pluralism, freedom of expression and transparency of ownership, the EU has dedicated under Horizon Europe €18 million to research on media for democracy and the impact of online social networks and new media on politics. In the path for democracy, we need media to be free."

Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth

Access to trustworthy and varied information is crucial to a healthy democracy

People form opinions through what they read, hear and see. **This is why independent, pluralistic and trustworthy media is one of the pillars of democracy.**

Yet, this pillar is facing serious challenges: Social media are now a primary source of news for most people, and user-generated content consumed at face value has proven a very fertile terrain for disinformation. An increasing lack of transparency in media ownership, threats to journalists' safety and foreign interference have also restricted the freedom, plurality and reliability of the news media. The European Union is acting to counter these worrying trends with concrete action plans, complemented by insights from innovative EU-funded research

Research and Innovation

What is the EU doing to foster a healthy media space?

- **The Media Freedom Act** will safeguard the pluralism and independence of the media in the EU internal market.

- **The Digital Services Act** and the proposal on Transparency Political Advertising aim to create a safer digital space where the fundamental rights of users are protected.

- The strengthened **Code of Practice on Disinformation** sets out extensive and precise commitments by platforms and industry to fight disinformation.

- **The European Democracy Action Plan** is designed to empower citizens and build more resilient democracies across the EU by promoting free and fair elections, strengthening media freedom and countering disinformation.

- The proposal for a **directive against abusive litigation (SLAPP) will protect journalists and rights defenders who are harassed for speaking up on issues of public interest.**

- The **Media and Audiovisual Action Plan** aims to boost European media and help maintain European cultural and technological autonomy in the Digital Decade.

EU research helps to understand how media affect opinions and values

While _television and radio are still important information sources_, media services are now mainly provided and accessed online. Media companies have faced fierce competition from large non-European platforms, and the subsequent loss of advertising revenue has impacted the quality and diversity of content on offer. In this context, the **_Media Pluralism Monitor_** reports growing risks to media pluralism in the digital environment.

> The EU has dedicated **over €23 million** to media issues in Horizon 2020. In addition,
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> **57** Horizon 2020 projects have been working on social media related R&I questions for a total of **€117.5 million**.

But what impact does digital media have on a deeper level, on people's opinions and values?

Consuming and sharing content on social media not only shapes our understanding of society, but our values: the project **_Digitalvalues_** is the first comprehensive study of values in social media, exploring questions such as how are values constructed through social media, and to what extent are social media platforms associated with the globalisation of values. As to the role of media platforms in **making European culture more European** (or in jeopardizing it), it is the main research focus of the **_EUMEPLAT project._**

Social media exacerbate polarisation through "echo chambers": the project **_REBOUND_** aims to reduce polarisation and bias in online media through the design of an innovative algorithmic framework.

Finally, the media are unavoidable for any politician and activist aiming to gain visibility. **_NEWNEWS_** investigates how **media shape new parties' public image** to better understand the openness of democratic systems and of their current renewal. On an EU scale, **_MEDIATIZED EU_** explores how media discourses are created to **promote or denounce the European project**, and how they resonate amongst the public.

> **More in the pipeline!**
> The 2022 Work Programme of Horizon Europe committed **€18 million** to research on media for democracy and the impact of online social networks and new media on politics.

The scourge of disinformation

Social networks have become an extremely effective and cheap tool for national or foreign actors to project their political interests by spreading **disinformation**. This is a new type of information warfare that purports not to convince or persuade, but to undermine. By eroding public trust in political institutions, disinformation campaigns increase social tensions and threaten national and regional security.

> Since 2016, **40** projects on disinformation have been funded under H2020 for a total of
> **€76.5 million**.
> Future calls in Horizon Europe will address the role of media in democracy, incl. issues pertaining to disinformation, foreign interference and information suppression.

Understanding how information spreads on social networks, and what sort of content becomes **viral**, is key: the Marie Sklodowska-Curie project *ION* is shedding light on this phenomenon by analysing the simultaneous diffusion of multiple pieces of information on (social) networks. **Messaging apps** are often overlooked, but they are also a vector to spread disinformation: *POLARCHATS* is looking into political misinformation on discussion apps in India and Brazil, yielding insights that can help understand what happens in Europe.

When it comes to foreign actors interfering in the media to sow division and to propagate conspiracy theories, pro-Russian and anti-West foreign information manipulation and interference, including disinformation have been a staple of the Internet for the past years. This has increased again significantly with the invasion of Ukraine. *Rusinform* is investigating how, and with what consequences, new Internet-based technologies contributed to the emergence of novel resources, tactics, techniques, and procedures by which the Kremlin and its vast disinformation ecosystem can manipulate media audiences abroad.

How to restore trust in the media?

Fact-checkers are already helping to counter disinformation by opposing fake news with evidence-based facts. **Artifical Intelligence (AI)** can also help: projects *BOTFIND* and *FANDANGO* used AI to build bot-detection tools that help curb the spread of disinformation on social media. *PROVENANCE* will develop an intermediary-free solution for digital content verification that gives greater control to users of social media, thanks to **blockchain** technology.

Also, **science journalism** is affected by the changes in the media landscape, business models and eroding public trust: as seen in the Covid-19 pandemic, science journalism, is key to foster citizens' trust in science and facilitate evidence-based policy-making. *TRESCA* investigates what drives public trust in social science communication, with the aim to increase the production, exchange and consumption of accurate scientific communication, specifically focusing on growing digitalisation processes. However, there are no recognised standards in science journalism and communication, nor principles or indicators of quality; the project *ENJOI* plans to co-create just that. The Commission will also set up a *European competence centre for science communication*.

Understanding the way citizens consume media and how it impacts our ways of thinking gives us better tools to tackle issues such as polarisation, disinformation, foreign interference and lack of transparency. In addition to fostering the independence, plurality and trustworthiness of the media, this will strengthen our democracies.

More information
EU research on democracy and governance

Horizon Europe funding opportunities under cluster 2

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