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Informed Citizenship, Journalistic Professionalism, and Democracy:

What Is Old, What Is New, and What Is Unresolved?

Journalistic performance in democracy varies depending on a number of factors. Changing governmental policies, economic crises and challenges imposed by new technologies are frequently listed among significant forces curtailing media freedom and affecting ideals of professional journalism. While most comparative analyses apply professionalism criteria defined and framed within Western experience and understanding, lesser attention is paid to the situation in the younger democracies of Central/Eastern Europe where not only contextual conditions are disruptive and rapidly changing, but ways of public access to media and participation in politics are taking novel turns. This essay seeks to fill this gap. It has several ambitions. It starts with a review of the two classical pillars of democracy, namely informed citizenship and journalistic professionalism. It also looks at the experiences of the younger European democracies (predominantly in Central/Eastern Europe) and exposes the main reasons working against the early visions of journalistic professionalisation and rapid democratisation in the region. Finally, it tackles a number of issues that journalism in the older European democracies is also required to address.

Key words: informed citizenship, journalistic professionalism, news environments, autonomy, hybrid media, democratic participation

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1. Introduction: Norms and practices of professional journalism

By focusing on the idea of journalistic professionalism, this essay indirectly joins the wide-spreading debate about the shifting social boundaries of journalism (Hermida 2015, Carlson 2015) and, hence, the fate of professional journalism (Starkman 2014, Alexander 2016) in the new age of individualism. Rather than supporting or opposing the various concerns voiced about the future of journalism, the argumentation presented here seeks to examine how ideals of (Western) journalistic professionalism aiming at the roles of critical analyst and scrutiniser have developed, and where the professional media's current uniqueness and specificity as a news provider lies. In other words, this discussion is built on two equally

noteworthy but also—to lesser or higher degrees—differing perspectives. On the one hand, it applies a normative approach which stresses that the professional standards of journalistic discourse such as the provision of truth and the service of the public are preconditions for journalism's professionalisation, and hence it refers to some cultural experiences (mostly from the tradition of Western countries' in the development of such ideals). On the other hand, it also brings examples of real life trends and concrete country cases (mostly from younger democracies such as those in Southern and in Central/Eastern Europe), asking the question of what happens when media professionals ignore, or are forced to overlook those standards (for instance, because of dominant governmental policies, uncertainty in business environments, increasing competition within the profession, or growing audience inputs and demands).

The essay starts with a brief overview of the ideals of (Western) journalism, and touches upon the essential elements of informed citizenship. By addressing the ideological foundations of those two pillars of democracy, it asks a number of questions: How is our understanding of professional journalism changing in a highly interconnected and uncontrolled news environment where different actors (including both professional and amateur ones) and interests (including both political and business ones) compete with each other? What is so specific about the contemporary news environment that dramatically challenges traditional understandings of journalistic professionalism? Are the classical concepts of 'informed citizenship' and 'professional journalism' still valid and appropriate for the current times and news environments, described as hybrid, fluctuating, and in a state of flux? How will professional journalism survive the challenges of the interactive epoch?

2. Theoretical setting

As commonly conceived, the media are a mirror of the world. They reflect all societal makeovers. They are an arena where all societal powers meet and compete, and where popular discourses evolve and representations take shape. As such, media form a very important link between polity, the economy, and citizens.

Studying the media—both its context and performance—indeed appears to be an enriching endeavour and even an eye-opening experience. As Peter Gross (2002: xi) suggests, "[media] should be studied as a window that allows us a glimpse both into a society's culture, politics and economic life and how and why they may be changing." Media are also envisioned as catalysts for democratic processes. An idealised view suggests that people have to make important political decisions on the basis of the information provided by the media. In a democracy, people are seen as citizens and motivated media users, and are perceived to be genuinely engaged in current affairs. This logic is at the centre of the social contract ideology of the

press (Sjovaag 2010), and forms the foundation of both visions: those of professional journalism and of informed citizenship.

Generally, the view of informed citizenship forms a core element of normative perspectives to democracy. The quality and intensity of public engagement and participation in political decisions making—such as voting in elections and referenda, taking part in political consultations and deliberation, or the formation of communities of interests—though dependent on complex causes (including the socio-economic status and income and class affiliations) are also indirectly determined by the qualitative features of information provided in the media. Hence such visions suggest that citizens should be curious to use media and to learn about their surrounding environments as well as about the bigger world. As engaged media users, they should also take part in knowledge production (Nieminen 2016), i.e., public discussions about civic issues, and should form an understanding about how to participate in democratic life. They must be active and must participate in politics, rather than only shallowly relating to information by forming spontaneous or arbitrary reactions.

This vision also shapes classical requirements for professional journalism, including standards on the provision of reliable, balanced and verified information. Subscribing to this mission, media should give voice to the voiceless and provide a forum for public criticism and comment. Journalists must carefully monitor those in power. They must analyse factual information in context and in a critical perspective. Also, the journalism community should be independent, responsible and professional. In general, these tasks are behind the vision suggesting that journalism is a truly societal and communal institution: journalism serves the public by providing information and by making clear distinctions between the entertaining and the empowering purposes of news, i.e., between sensational and 'proper' journalism.

As Waisbord (2013) defines, 'professionalism' applied as an adjective to characterise journalism appears to be a rather loosely defined concept. As an abstract occupational definition, professionalism refers to various characteristics of newsroom work (practices of information gathering, selection and editing, and presentation of news) as well as ethical issues. Hence, understandings of professionalism and professionalisation should also take into account additional characteristics such as media freedom and autonomy, distinct norms of professional lifestyle, norms of conscious professional identity, as well as public service orientation (Hallin & Mancini 2004).

As thoroughly reviewed by Hjarvard (2008), attaining the status of a societal institution was the first step in the (Western) media's move toward independence from other institutions such as politics and culture. So, the idea of 'autonomy' is at the core of any understanding of journalism as an independent institution of modern democracy. This understanding foresees adequate policies and legal measures supporting the free flow and exchange of information. As seen from the Western

experience and historical developments, media freedom and autonomy have been preserved and safeguarded by adequate policy decisions and legal means defending freedom of expression as well as media pluralism, promoting editorial accountability ideals, and supporting solidarity among professionals. However, in general, it is external factors such as political or commercial interests and pressures that are crucial for journalism to acknowledge and to form an oppositional relation (which indeed varies depending on cultural traditions of supporting watchdog or adversarial functions), internal influences are no less essential in defining journalists' self-perception of the profession. All in all, the understanding of autonomy (and hence of professionalism) implies that the processes of agenda setting inside the news media, as well as news framing and the selection of topics, sources, opinions, tone and genre, should remain in the hands of the newsroom staff without interference by actors or processes outside of the journalistic framework (Balčytienė et al. 2015).

In conclusion, throughout the second half of the 20th century, 'Western' media have turned into a truly societal institution with acceptable means and mechanisms supporting its legitimacy, autonomy and professional authenticity. Though variations were indeed detected in terms of adherence to the listed ideals, a number of visions about a higher integration and convergence of European media systems and journalism cultures towards the professional model have been listed at the turn of the century (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, Hallin 2006). Yet, a decade later, something has substantially shifted in today's news environments. Essentially, two fundamental trends have been recently identified. Contemporary societies have become increasingly mediatised and communications-centred with media linked and interwoven with other societal institutions (Hjarvard 2008, Hepp et al. 2015, Lundby 2014). Also, as a result of diversified media operations, definitions of professional journalism have become less self-evident and clear, with media industries and news organisations themselves gradually disregarding core values of professional uniqueness and authenticity (Carlson 2015, Singer 2015). In this context, the ideal of informed citizenship seems to be challenged as well. With increasing media availability and use, people prefer making individualised choices (through, for example, mobile gadgets) and intend to overstep mainstream media by using and distributing news that directly comes to their online accounts. As all mediums get faster, the information that circulates around also gets more expressive, emotional and, thus, less fact-based, less accurate and less balanced.

Still, it needs to be recognised that the core ideals of freedom and independence, the provision of verified information, and accountability that professional news journalism still appears to be measured against, are compatible with mainly Western professionalism values and understandings of journalism that evolved in politically stable and economically secure conditions. No matter how attractive these ideals are, the actual political and economic conditions for media to operate as well as the media-enhanced environments are rapidly changing. As

noted in various studies, media in Europe have been seriously challenged by the 2008 financial and economic crisis. Many of these companies have failed to find adequate business solutions and hence have gradually lost interest in the provision of 'proper' journalism. Though challenges of similar kinds were also detected in younger democracies, journalism in these countries seems to be fighting on several fronts simultaneously. In most of Central/Eastern Europe, the media still appear to be preoccupied with a yet unfinished obligation to the revolutions from the end of the last century. Concurrently, new trends such as relative de-democratisaton, have recently taken place in some of these countries—such as Hungary and Poland—where recent political shifts and changes in government policies and regulation have led to unfavourable outcomes with regard to media freedom and pluralism, whereas in other states—such as Romania and Bulgaria—the media appear to be tightly intervowen with prevailing corruptive practices and interests, and function as an arena where popular societal ideologies fight in an on-going struggle. In addition to these rather regular calls for attention in the sphere of journalism professionalisation, media to date are also challenged by new circumstances. News environments in all countries across Europe are becoming much more diffused, complex, and hybrid (Chadwick 2014) and thus considerably messier, with multiple logics maintained by both conventional media and social networks at the fore.

The following sections of this essay will attempt to summarise the reasons why the application of the previously outlined concepts of professionalism and professionalisation appears problematic in a rapidly changing and hybrid media environment, which is governed by multiple logics and new ideals of social connectedness (Heinrich 2009) and spreadable news (Jenkins et al. 2013).

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3. Changing environments and media reactions: Is it a real change or a mere modification?

As noted, the classical notion of 'professional journalism' refers to a situation whereby journalists determine their practices and norms without strong influence from outsiders (defined mainly as external actors, but also as internal ones, for example through editorial decision-making pressures). This perspective is rooted in the vision that by participating in a constant project of ideals identification, negotiation and professionalisation, and by reflecting on journalism's authority in stating the truth and defining the news, journalists continuously defend the demarcation of journalism's boundaries. How intense is this process of negotiation? What is professionalism and what are journalists for in changing times?

As observed from various cases in Europe, the political, economic and technological conditions necessary for the media to properly function have been significantly destabilised and weakened in recent years. In most countries, the media have

not been able to fully recover from the difficulties caused by the global economic crisis. As a result of unsteady economic conditions, economic thinking has taken over professionalism ideals in many newsrooms, and ideologies of 'managerialism' and entrepreneurialism (Singer 2015) have been gaining ground. As a result of the intensification of business-oriented thinking and of the ruling managerial discourse across European newsrooms, efficiency and profit have become the biggest focuses of organisational concern in contemporary news organisations (Wiik & Andersson 2013). Financial uncertainties and fluctuations have affected media operations and business models in weak and strong economies, in small and large markets, in European countries with long-standing traditions of professional journalism as well as in ones where professional journalism has been under greater political pressures such as the Southern and the Central/Eastern European states. Although in some Western countries where professional journalism remains geared towards the classical mission, the media enjoy higher levels of trust and popularity, journalism in many younger democracies have switched and now follow less formalised, less institutionally and professionally committed purposes and, hence, the public assessment of general conditions for media freedom and democracy in those countries appears to be more pessimistic (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Assessment of democracy and media freedom in a country, %
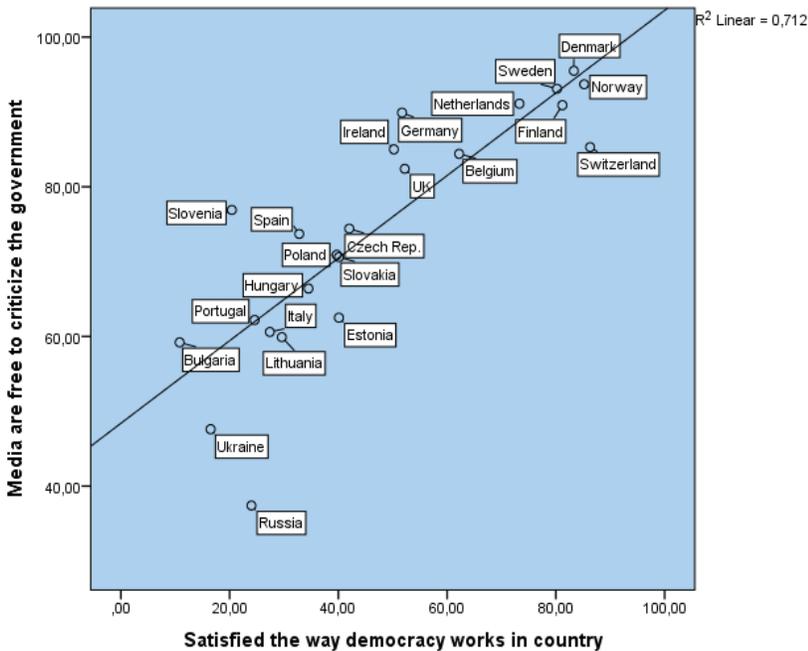
Source: ESS (2012)

In addition to the particularities of the local context (such as political or economic difficulties), journalists' ability to control their work in line with internal professional rules and practices appears to be dramatically challenged and destabilised. To date, audiences have interchanged conventional media with social networks, which, naturally, has brought new players and authorities to the fore. With the intensification of internet access and social media use, the classical occupational functions of journalism, predominantly those of meaningful agenda-setting and news-framing, have been greatly challenged or, in certain cases, taken away from professionals (Carlson 2015). All these shifts have resulted in two outcomes. First, journalism's authority and previously held reputation, power and social influence have been severely undermined. Second, such practices have hybridised the informational space in such a way that distinctions between journalism and non-journalism have turned almost impossible to see. Contemporary news environments appear to be pre-occupied with opinionated, falsified, propagandistic, biased and branded content, as well as product placements which package the messages of political or business stakeholders into journalistic style and genres.

Largely, it seems that the advent of societal transformations and the on-going media hybridisation have considerably diversified media ideologies and organisational policies regarding journalistic professionalism. As can be seen from experiences in older democracies (Wiik & Andersson 2013), changed economic conditions greatly affect adherence to professionalism ideals when journalists, uncertain about their future careers, become more loyal to the ideology of their employer rather than to their professional ideals. Transition societies and younger democracies, from the time of political shifts, in their own right, have had to address multiple challenges, including the establishment of democratic institutions and market structures and relevant professional ideologies at the same time. As noted, following the phase of an anticipated and relatively successful accession to the European Union, democracy and media freedom indicators in many Central/Eastern European countries have begun to deteriorate. Though multiple reasons for this might be identified (such as difficulties linked with the global economic crisis or the general societal tiredness), one thing is for sure. In countries where journalists' professional project appears to be weak, and predominantly in the younger democracies of both Southern and Central/Eastern Europe, it is overtly problematic to raise questions and discuss the social boundaries of journalism. Traditionally, in most of the Central/Eastern European countries, journalism has been continuously embedded in complex relationships with media owners, advertisers and governments (Stetka 2013, Bajomi-Lázár 2014), hence journalists' ability to withstand their own trends such as the hybridisation of journalism genres, beliefs and ideologies, appears to be problematic indeed.

All in all, the ongoing interest diversification in contemporary news environments, ranging from managerial imperatives from the media industry to manipulative and propagandistic ambitions coming from unknown producers and

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sources, makes it extremely difficult to maintain the classical vision and ideology of news journalism as well as its professional independence. Indeed, as generally conceived, there is neither one model of professional journalism (Hallin & Mancini 2004), nor one matching problem that news professionals across Europe must address: in some countries, the economic ideology appears to be taking over professional requirements, whereas governmental policy shifts are indicated in others. Hence a more general call for the refinement of professional norms appears to be the most consistent in conditions of contemporary European democracies. As one colourful description suggests, only when "a single paradigm dominates professional imaginations, can occupational groups effectively claim to be different from others and patrol boundaries" (Amado & Waisbord 2015: 52). As noted here, a critically important demand of the professionalisation perspective would be the requirement that members of the profession share a common feeling (such as solidarity or a more general 'sense of belonging') which functions as a connecting 'societal glue' that binds the actors and motivates them to distinguish themselves from others. Professionalism in this perspective means that journalists join forces in order to protect their performance from external actors such as advertisers and PR-specialists that have an interest in influencing their work by injecting totally different logics.

However, the journalism community to date does not seem to be qualified for or concerned about setting themselves apart from external actors and drawing internal boundaries. It also seems that professionals themselves are not particularly interested in the development of a clearer professional ideology and clearer social boundaries for journalism. This appears to be the practice in most of the younger democracies, but, as the discussion above shows, is not unknown in countries with longer traditions of professional journalism either.

All this discussion leads to the conclusion that—across many countries in Europe, but predominantly in the third-wave democracies —journalists are to date lacking (though to varying degrees) the essential conditions such as security and stability in media business, public acknowledgement and appreciation of journalism's significance, solidarity within the profession as well as a clearer understanding of the ideal of public good which would protect them from contemporary intrusions. In most countries, journalists are either too weak to resist pressures exerted by business and political sponsors, or unable to challenge their dependence on information and economic subsidies.
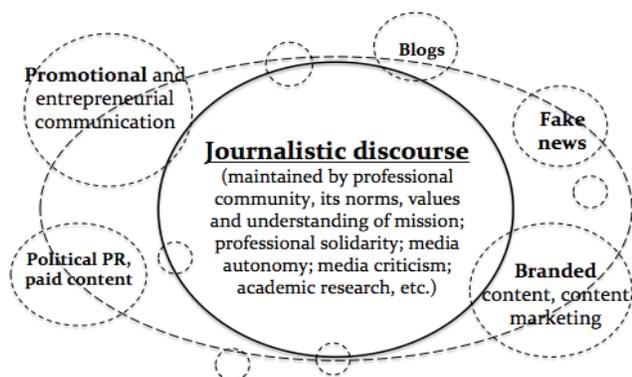
4. Is democracy in need of journalism to date?

Although media pluralism, generally, is highly appreciated in European policies, the growing stress and advancement of neo-liberal (or even neo-authoritarian, as in Hungary and Poland) ideals in governmental thinking has eventually produced

reversed results such as growing media concentration and new oligopolies in the European news markets. Media deregulation and various attempts of re-regulation through increasing state intervention have not actually improved diversity and pluralism; instead, mainstream views and mainstream audiences have taken over, whereas niche interests have been marginalised. As a reaction to the emerging dominant interests and popular views in conventional media, the rise of digital communications has generated new uses of media, which created far more diverse, fragmented and polycentric, but also more confusing, messier and even 'toxic' informational environments. Though social networks have contributed to a certain pluralisation of the news, these have resulted in severe outcomes in terms of the quality of distributed news and growing social and political polarisation, and even the radicalisation of certain populist views and beliefs in those countries that earlier were described as consensual—such as the Nordic ones.

European media policy makers have traditionally perceived and understood information users as citizens rather than news consumers. But is the ideal of informed, knowledgeable and, hence, rational citizen still appropriate for the present day? Where do contemporary news environments and journalism stand in the relationship between citizens and democracy?

As seen from recent experience, with increasing possibilities for individual media choice and preference selection, serious societal shifts are observed, including growing social and political polarisation, a decline of trust in democratic institutions, and reduced voter participation and community involvement. For the past century, (Western) journalism's power and professional logic mainly rested in the monopolistic position of news media as an information gatekeeper to decide news for large numbers of people (Waisbord 2013). Equally so, journalism used to maintain its distance from the political field by defining a form and style of political representation that fits its criteria (Kunelius & Ruusunoksa 2008). This is not a reality any more. In a communications environment that is increasingly shaped and fixed by hybrid media logics (Chadwick 2014) and audience loyalties and preferences, the journalistic discourse is much more diversified and is exploited for different purposes such as the attaining of promotional, brand-building, propagandistic, opinion-making or even plain falsehood-oriented goals. The outcome of these shifts is the variability and fluidity of journalism, which results in journalistic genre mixing, blurring boundaries between news and opinions, information and amusement, and fact and fiction (see Figure 2). It has also been observed (Mancini 2013) that the outcome of these shifts results in societal reconfigurations and regroupings turning into new forms of communalisation and identity formation through the use of alternative, semi-alternative, or niche media channels.

Figure 2
Classical ideals of journalism and its contemporary discursive variants

Journalistic discourse (maintained by professional community, its norms, values and understanding of mission; professional solidarity; media autonomy; media criticism; academic research, etc.)

Promotional and entrepreneurial communication

Blogs

Fake news

Political PR, paid content

Branded content, content marketing

Source: ESS (2012)

Politically engaged and informed citizens are vitally important for democracy. Yet, as seen from statistics, conventional media use and traditional news consumption have steadily declined, and the idea of citizenship and how it is met in modern democracies is changing towards much more networked, individualised, and emotionally-charged experiences (Deuze 2008). People tend to use media based on personal sentiments and passions (Grabe & Myrick 2016) rather than on public needs and long-term commitments, duties and loyalties (Schudson 1998). As a result, societies are becoming much more differentiated along their interests, diversified and polarised, and knowledge gaps between citizens have arisen, which endangers informed (and, hence, rationalised) democratic processes and participation.

It seems that today's audiences are longing for individualised, emotionally and personally meaningful, self-expressive, non-hierarchical and inclusive experiences (Grabe & Myrick 2016). Individual preferences for content also influence political behaviour. As confirmed by research studies with cable television programme choices, selective exposure to certain information increases interest and participation in politics. Similar results are revealed by studies on the online media, showing that partisan views are thriving there as well. As emphasised by the *reinforcing spirals theory,* the solidification of political beliefs is likely to bring a biased approach to political information, which in turn solidifies beliefs even further and adds to social and political divergence and polarisation.

People access, create, share and spread information themselves to date, hence the concepts of 'informed citizenship' and 'democratic participation' need to be reviewed in line with the new qualitative features of both: that of available media channels of their technological affordances as well as that of forms of communication. In other words, one should take into account the interactive and affective aspects of information presentation and engagement (Grabe & Myrick 2016).

It is reasonable to assume that these shifts in information production and access will also require the revision of the ideals of 'journalistic professionalism.' If professionalism once seemed to be concerned with the function and standards of information provision, today it is required to take additional factors into account, predominantly those that have to do with the informational, affective and entrepreneurial aspects of news making (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Hybrid media environment, and multiple (information,
affective, entrepreneurial) calls for journalism
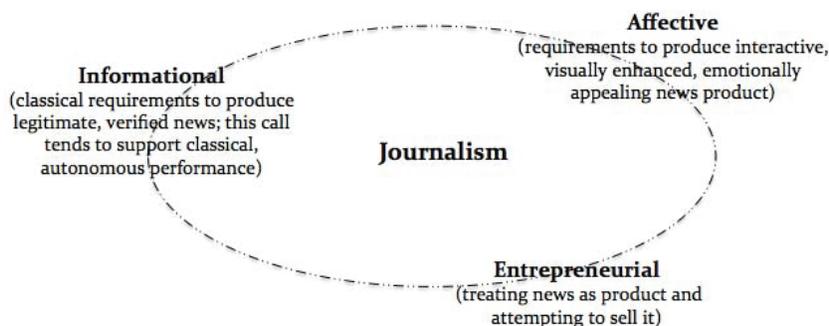
It seems that in hybrid media environments the production of 'newness' or—as suggested by Waisbord (2013)—'newsiness' rather than professional ideology and ethics and its standards such as serving social and public good sets the direction for news making in the media industry. Then it is of no surprise that under such conditions the journalistic discourse becomes increasingly hybridised and guided by various aspirations and serves various purposes.

All things considered, we are perhaps entering a new phase or, to paraphrase Daniel Hallin (2006), another moment of "not the end of journalism's history." Indeed, a shorter-term analysis allows us to identify those trends that have just recently begun or were named by scholars (such as journalism's hybridisation and shifts in its boundaries, and the like). In historical terms, journalism develops in cycles. Perhaps a much longer time-spanning analysis could also disclose the cycles and variations of journalistic professionalism. Journalism is a social phenomenon and its (mainly Western) history shows how journalism has been shifting between neutrality-seeking and partisan (or interests backing) practices. For example, as seen from the history of journalism in the United States, partisan journalism was more prevalent in times of uncertainty and crisis, and audiences were more polarised, whereas in periods of societal peace and progression, objectivity-seeking journalism was the main rule, and audience polarisation was on the decline. In the second half of the 20th century, Europe witnessed the rise of neo-liberal ideas, thus suggestions were made that (mainly Western) European media systems will

eventually move towards the commercial model of journalism (Hallin & Mancini 2004). As examined here, shifts are noticed towards increasing media framenation, audience segmentation and societal polarisation in all contemporary news environments.

5. Conclusion

This essay identified some of the trends and outcomes that transformations in contemporary news environments and journalism have produced with regard to the structure and the functioning of democracy in Europe. It addressed a number of potential controversies recently detected Europe-wide, including the pluralisation of societies through media diversification and access opportunities on the one hand, and increasing fragmentation and social polarisation, and even the rise of politisation and ideologisation, on the other.

The use of media has intensified and noticeably increased in all European countries. Yet, whether such practices are working in favour of informed citizenship and the quality of democracy appears to be questionable. As seen from public perceptions, there is an increase in general uncertainty of people's self-confidence in their own abilities to participate in politics. People also appear to be less certain about their own enthusiasm to take part in democratic processes. They also express doubts as to whether the information distributed and made widely accessible in networks should be trusted.

It generally seems that stimulated by active use of new media and social networks, contemporary societies are moving into a new phase of 'interest politics,' where each group is fighting for its own interest. As a result, the informational space turns into an arena of populist engagements and confrontations, which puts the idea of public good and common interest and hence the ideals of informed citizenship and of professional journalism in question.

A number of vitally important issues were addressed in this essay, but some new questions have also emerged. Is there an audience for professional journalism? Who needs journalism? Is the classical ideal of informed and educated citizen and rational choice still valid and appropriate in current times and for media environments defined as hybrid, fluctuating and in a state of flux? What replaces the idea of informed citizenship in hybrid media environments? What is new journalistic professionalism and how it needs to be defined?

It appears that we indeed live in times of change in terms of societal transformations and collective regrouping in societies. In hybrid media environments, new societal groups and arrangements tend to emerge and are forming under conditions when the atmosphere of neo-liberal trends, external pressures, the weakness of media tradition (specifically in younger European democracies), growing individualisation and group polarisation are present at the same time. Though it

is way too early to cast pessimism on the idea of informed and engaged citizens, if not addressed, the factors identified above might in the longer term greatly affect the quality and functioning of democracy within and across European states.

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include media policy, public service media, accountability, creativity, innovation culture and media governance.

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