

# Editorial

**“Media have never been as pervasive as they are today. They flood the planet daily with billions of pieces of information, exerting a profound influence on the consciousness and thinking of billions of people. Because of this influence, a critical understanding and appreciation of the media is more important today than ever before. The reason is that the information we receive from the media is often shaped by factors other than the need to inform.”**

Luis V. Teodoro

## Nothing is simple when it comes to media...

The media landscape has undergone dramatic shifts over the last two decades. In our complex, fragile, and crisis-prone societies, the diversity, freedom, and independence of the media are increasingly under threat. The rise of social media and artificial intelligence has introduced new power dynamics, influencing not just the media itself but also the broader society in significant ways. At such a critical juncture, is it not more important than ever to understand the structures, influencing factors, and effects of the media that shape your worldview? And to imagine different ideals of tomorrow by identifying what kind of media we truly desire, taking ownership of our role in ensuring they offer the integrity and transparency needed for the democracies we wish to protect.

### MEDIA CRISIS MEETS DEMOCRACY CRISIS

The media have always been fiercely contested, but perhaps never as fiercely as they are today. Those striving to gain or maintain power in democratic systems inevitably seek to shape or dominate public opinion, and wage their battles in the media. Traditional news media and independent journalism have been severely weakened for these fights—their business models, newsrooms, correspondent networks, and resilience to influence eroded, along with public trust. Unfortunately, there is little good news for us to offer you on this issue. Media disruption will continue as changes in our media ecosystems are fundamental. The battle for your

opinion is now being fought mainly on new digital platforms, which operate under opaque and largely invisible rules. Meanwhile two thirds (63%) of young people aged 18 to 34 globally no longer trust most media most of the time.<sup>1</sup> Even worse, more and more people are losing interest in or avoid political news altogether. With the media faltering in their role as pillars of democracy, attempts to address this—whether through regulation, censorship, or other controls—are fraught with danger, as all such measures come with vested interests. And all this in a year when half the world's population faces crucial elections, where in many countries, the essence of democracy is at stake.

### DO YOU KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT THE MEDIA?

“Everything we know about the world, indeed about the society in which we live, we know through the mass media.” Reflecting on this statement by Niklas Luhmann, you must ask yourself: Do you know enough about the media? You are not present at the events that affect your life—you learn about them through the media. But how can you trust that they are acting in your best interests?

The truth is, most people know far too little about the media. Be honest—did you know the answers to the quiz at the beginning of this issue?

“We do not live with the media; we live in the media. Media has become to us what water is to fish,” as media scholar Mark Deuze says. Media surrounds you, usually imperceptibly, as you navigate through it—informing yourself, seeking entertainment, communicating with others—often without considering the media itself. Until the water becomes murky, polluted, or toxic. Then you are in serious trouble, especially if you cannot see the causes and effects of that pollution anymore.

### UNDERSTANDING MEDIA

What can you do? The key to addressing these critical issues lies in education: You must equip yourself with the skills to critically engage with the media ecosystem. What is happening in the media? What is changing? What is important? And what can you do to better understand the structures, connections, and vulnerabilities of the media systems in which we all live?

The UNDERSTANDING MEDIA alumni initiative—presenting itself at the end of this issue—has brought together a multitude of strong voices from the media world at the Witten Lab Studium fundamentale of Witten/Herdecke University—a unique learning space that allows young students of all disciplines to gain insights beyond their fields of study and reflect on urgent questions of our times. And which will open up its educational programme to strengthen a broader understanding of media and democratic capabilities to more and more students at European universities.

These are voices of people who, through their work, expertise and experience, constitute the vanguard of our European media reality: representatives of the majority of journalists in the EU, prominent figures in EU media politics, media scholars and experts in media innovation, representatives of NGOs advocating for press freedom and media diversity, and renowned journalists. This choir of voices is joined by artists who work at the interface of media and democracy, making things visible and tangible in their own unique ways, as well as by members of our university. They are united by the urgent need to provide young people with deep insights into the reality of our media ecosystem and to engage in discussions about it.

Recognising fake news is just not enough to preserve democracy. You need to delve deeper and explore the hidden structures of our media systems behind your screens.

### LEARN TO THINK LIKE A JOURNALIST!

If you want to learn to think critically about media systems, start by asking the same probing questions that good journalists would: Who owns the media? Who influences them? Who regulates them? What are the conditions journalists face? And what can we do to protect press freedom, support independent journalism, hold platforms to account and prevent governments and special interest groups from exerting hidden influence? Only by collectively embracing this approach can we ensure access to thorough, impartial, and diverse information about the world around us. This is a difficult task, no question about it. But no one ever said it would be easy to preserve democracy.

## Understanding media starts with you—they will not explain themselves.

We would like to thank all contributors, designers, and sponsors for making this issue possible, and we hope it provides you with insightful perspectives on the evolving world of media.

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**1 For more insights, read “The Changing News Habits and Attitudes of Younger Audiences” by Kirsten Eddy, based on data from the Oxford Reuters Institutes’ Digital News Report 2022.**