

**“A broad, critical understanding of the media should become a fundamental knowledge base for all people who want to take on social responsibility and stand up for freedom and democracy.”**

**Quote by Luis V. Teodoro**

Luis V. Teodoro (1941–2023), founding Chairperson of Altermidya—People’s Alternative Media Network—and former Dean of the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication, where he used to teach journalism. Learn more about his life and work on page 155.

# UNDER- STANDING MEDIA

**A new educational programme beyond media literacy for students of all disciplines**

**What you know about the world, you know through media. But do you really understand how the media work today? Do you know who influences them? Who owns them? Who regulates them? And under what conditions is the news you receive produced?**

**by Johannes Wiek & Max von Abendroth**

This quote from Luis V. Teodoro captures an essential educational need in today’s world, where media pervade nearly every aspect of our lives. As societal upheavals grow and threats to democracy mount, it becomes ever more critical to understand the role and impact of the fast-evolving media—and the associated changes in media-consumption habits.

Media possess the power to either repress or liberate, to promote or obstruct societal change. This is why we believe that every student, regardless of their field of study, should engage with the central questions of how media shape and influence our individual and collective consciousness, thinking, and decision-making—and to consider who holds this immense power.

In a world defined by rapid technological change, shifting global power dynamics, and increasing threats to democracy, the role of the media has become central. Media not only inform but can also manipulate, polarise, and either divide or unite societies.

As part of the next generation of responsible decision-makers, what do you need to know about the media? How deep must your understanding of media structures, processes, and effects be if you wish to make independent, reflective, and impactful decisions? What must you comprehend, see through, and be able to assess in order to preserve a democratic social order in a value-driven, self-determined, and responsible way?

The journey of UNDERSTANDING MEDIA began three years ago with a foundational seminar on journalism, led by UW/H alumnus Johannes Wiek, a seasoned journalist and media expert, as part of the Studium fundamentale at Witten/Herdecke University. The response from students was overwhelming. What became clear was how little young people knew about the radical and far-reaching changes happening behind the media and news systems they use daily. The focus of the course shifted from practical journalism to a deeper exploration of the media landscape itself.

Max von Abendroth, another UW/H alumnus and Senior Advisor at the Media Development Investment Fund, joined the initiative, bringing with him access to a network of leading international media experts. The development team continued to grow, with Katrin Kaufer, Co-Founder of the MIT Presencing Institute and also a UW/H alumna, and Lutz Kinkel, former Director of the Center for Press and Media Freedom in Leipzig. Their collective expertise, combined with the enthusiastic student response, underscored the need to scale up this educational effort into a comprehensive UNDERSTANDING MEDIA programme.

Based at the Witten Lab Studium fundamentale as its development hub, and with the cooperative support from the Deutsche Welle Academy, the programme aims to expand across Europe. Our goal is to offer students from universities across Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Central Europe the opportunity to participate in this innovative study programme. Accredited within various degree courses, this initiative will connect students with international media experts to discuss the most crucial developments and necessary actions in eight key areas.

## 8 PERSPECTIVES FOR UNDERSTANDING MEDIA

1. Media—What They Are and How They Work
2. Media Structures and Ownership
3. Media Manipulation, Information Selection, and Disinformation
4. Media Independence, Press Freedom, Investigative Journalism, and Data Journalism
5. Media Policy and the Influence of Media Regulation
6. Digitisation, Algorithms, and the Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Media
7. The Power of Images, Visual Journalism, and the Impact of AI on Image Manipulation
8. Media Detoxification and the Viability of Media Ecosystems

At the heart of the UNDERSTANDING MEDIA programme is a growing network of dedicated European and international media experts from academia and civil society. These experts are eager to share their knowledge and insights with students from diverse backgrounds and nationalities through an interdisciplinary approach.

The four-semester pilot programme, "Understanding Media = Understanding the World" (2022–2024), featured a remarkable line-up of participants, including:

## UNDERSTANDING MEDIA GUEST LECTURER

- **Lars Boering**  
Director of the European Journalism Centre and former Director of the World Press Photo Award [The Netherlands]
- **Charlie Beckett**  
Director of Polis and the Polis/LSE JournalismAI project at The London School of Economics and Political Science [UK]
- **Mar Cabra**  
Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist (Panama Papers) and Co-Founder of The Self-Investigation [Spain]
- **Mark Deuze**  
Professor of Journalism and Media Culture at the University of Amsterdam [Netherlands]
- **Marius Dragomir**  
Founding Director of the Media and Journalism Research Centre and former Director of the Center for Media, Data and Society at the Central European University in Budapest [Austria & Spain]
- **Paul F. Nemitz**  
Principal Advisor in the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers of the European Commission [Belgium]
- **Laura Moore**  
Head of Research and Evaluation at the Deutsche Welle Academy [Germany]
- **Javier Luque Martinez**  
Leader of the Decoding the Disinformation Playbook Initiative at the International Press Institute (IPI) [Austria]
- **Christian Mihr**  
former Managing Director of Reporters Without Borders and recent board member of Amnesty International [Germany]
- **Renate Schröder**  
Director of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) [Belgium]
- **Barbara Trionfi**  
Senior Adviser to the OSCE Representative on Media Freedom and former Executive Director of the International Press Institute (IPI) [Italy]

These distinguished experts bring a wealth of experience and knowledge, ensuring that students gain a comprehensive and critical understanding of the media landscape. By engaging with these leaders, students are empowered to explore the intricate connections between media, society, and democracy, equipping them with the tools to actively participate in and shape public discourse across Europe.

# Student voices from the seminar

"Simply a great course, thank you very much! I would go so far as to wish that this course would become a compulsory module so that we all understand, in our responsibility as future bearers of this democratic society, how important independent journalism and its safeguarding are—and how we all contribute to shaping this world with our media consumption."

**"THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR THE GREAT SEMINAR. I HAVE THE FEELING THAT I WILL DEAL MORE INTENSIVELY WITH MEDIA STUDIES IN THE FUTURE."**

**"I VERY MUCH HOPE THAT THE COURSE WILL BE OFFERED MANY MORE TIMES FOR FUTURE STUDENTS AS WELL."**

**"You can feel the lecturers' enthusiasm for their subject—it's infectious..."**

**"THIS ISSUE SHOULD BE DISCUSSED MORE WIDELY."**

"The input from external experts on various topics and the opportunity to exchange ideas with them and ask questions were particularly valuable for me."

**"THE MEDIA SEMINAR IS EXTREMELY VALUABLE FOR THE STUDIUM FUNDAMENTALE AND SHOULD BE CONTINUED."**

"It's a reality check on what it's like with media capture in real life and that such issues are actually happening. You might think that they can only be conspiracy theories, but when you think about Poland, for example, you realise how urgent it is."

**"THE DISCUSSION ROUNDS WITH MEDIA PROFESSIONALS OFTEN MADE ME THINK."**

"The course provided an in-depth understanding of the value that free and independent journalism should have in our democratic world. We must value and support it, and recognise that a great deal of responsibility lies with us consumers. We should always and repeatedly scrutinise what we are shown in the media and pass on this critical, yet so important, way of thinking. I think this course should be mandatory for every student at this university because in this course, you really learn and understand what democracy and its protection mean for all of us."

\*Extracts from anonymous evaluations by students attending recent seminars 2024/25



As a UW/H student, you can easily enrol in the UNDERSTANDING MEDIA seminar through [My UW/H \(meine-uw.de\)](https://www.meine-uw.de). Students from other universities interested in participating can reach out to [johannes.wiek@uni-wh.de](mailto:johannes.wiek@uni-wh.de). Interested in supporting the UNDERSTANDING MEDIA initiative? We'd love to hear from you! → Follow our UNDERSTANDING MEDIA seminar on Instagram for key insights and updates.

**“A broader understanding of the structures, influencing factors, and effects of media is often reserved for those studying media, journalism, or political science. Our approach is different: We believe that students from all fields should be equipped to critically analyse how media shape their perceptions and worldview. This idea is at the heart of the UNDERSTANDING MEDIA programme.”**

Quote from the Understanding Media Concept by Johannes Wiek and Max von Abendroth.

**Johannes Wiek**, Witten Alumnus, journalist, media- and communications expert, leads the strategic programme development and the implementation of this programme at Witten/Herdecke University. He oversees the curriculum development and leads the pilot programme, working closely with various faculties.

**Max von Abendroth**, a Witten alumnus and authority on European media and EU public affairs, plays a key role in co-designing and implementing pilot projects. He is also crafting a concept for an international visiting faculty. Von Abendroth is instrumental in cultivating a network of media scientists and experts across Europe, and in forging partnerships with sponsors and supporters to secure the project's long-term success.

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determine the  
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more than your  
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