The Media and Polarisation in Europe: Strategies for Local Practitioners to Address Problematic Reporting

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The media has undergone a dramatic transformation, buffeted by technological, economic, social and political forces. As the new millennium began, there was optimism about the potentially democratising changes in the media that granted users greater access and power. However, more than 20 years on, democracy's fourth pillar is suffering from disinformation, populism, fragmentation, distrust and consumer exhaustion. In the wake of successive crises, could the media be driving polarisation and extremism in Europe? This paper examines the role played by the media in fostering polarisation and extremism and considers how local practitioners can respond by incorporating a media-oriented strategy into their plans for preventing and countering violent extremism.

Introduction

The media, or news media, includes both "traditional media" – print, radio and television – and "new media" published online through webpages, mobile apps and social media. Whatever the form, the media is a critical part of the information environment, largely responsible for framing political and social issues and informing the public about key events, often shaping their understanding of key issues in the process. Therefore, where someone gets their information can significantly impact their understanding of events and their perception of their society. The media wields a great deal of influence, so as the media landscape becomes more fractured and disinformation more pervasive, there is a critical need to examine the role that the media may be playing in furthering polarisation, populism and extremism in Europe, and to consider what policymakers and practitioners can do about it.

Polarisation can be defined as a divergence of opinions to opposing ideological extremes, which can be discussed as both a state of being and a process over time.[1] It may also be understood as a behaviour, describing how members of a group converge around a specific action such as watching a particular news channel.[2] Polarisation leads people to approach complex social issues in "black and white" terms, and they contrast and clash sharply with those holding views different from their own. These clashes are different from and should not be confused with regular disagreements where people bring forward and advocate different points of view. Discourse on important issues is beneficial; however, the "othering" of groups that hold opposing views (a trend often seen in polarised settings) hinders meaningful debate in a democratic setting.

Polarisation sows stark divisions within society that can – although do not always – provide an enabling environment for the rise of extremist ideologies and movements.[3] Extremism feeds on polarisation because it seeks to propagate a system of beliefs based on superiority and a struggle between an identity-based "in-group" over an "out-group", framed as "us versus them".[4] In this struggle, the "other" is frequently dehumanised; this is coupled with condescending and hate-filled views and actions.[5]

Many people subscribing to extremist ideologies do not endorse the use of violence. Those that do, however, pose an immediate threat to the security and safety of communities, while those who don't can contribute to the further fracturing of social cohesion. So, while polarisation and (violent) extremism are separate phenomena, they are linked, and thus addressing polarisation should be a priority for practitioners working to improve security and re-affirm respect for human rights and democratic values.

The role that the media plays in this context is not entirely clear. There is a sense that Europe is becoming more polarised socially and politically, but is the media merely reflecting a more polarised world, or is it actively exacerbating this trend? By reporting on polarised politics and politicians, there is a risk that the media is contributing to a kind of **top-down polarisation**. Although **elite polarisation** – a polarised political environment characterised by a distancing of ideologies between parties and a heightening of homogeneity within parties – does not necessarily imply a polarised society, it has been shown to impact public opinion formation, or

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[1] See DiMaggio et al. (1996).
[2] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).
[3] See McNeil-Willson et al. (2019).
[4] See Berger (2018).
[5] See Berger (2018).

mass polarisation.[6] This means that by reporting on polarised politics or issues, the media can contribute to the spread and reinforcement of polarising positions.

Despite this potential to convert elite polarisation into mass polarisation, current research does **not** show that mainstream media is having a notable polarising impact. This does not necessarily mean that the media is having no effect; rather, it implies that research is lacking and that existing studies do not show a strong correlation, let alone any causation, for the media driving the spread of polarised beliefs. What appears to be of greater concern is the role that fringe alternative media platforms are playing in **bottom-up polarisation**, especially as mainstream media, a significant ally against polarisation, is at risk from changes in the media landscape and from crises of trust, financial viability and interest.

This report will consider aspects of the media that may contribute to polarisation, current dynamics of the news media consumption in Europe, trends affecting these dynamics, and approaches that practitioners could adopt to design effective responses.

Key findings

1. **There is little evidence that the media is driving polarisation among most consumers.** However, there is evidence that it may reinforce polarising ideologies amongst those already polarised, and that alternative media in particular could play a role in furthering one's radicalisation toward extremism.

2. **Populist alternative media plays a significant role in shaping discourses and fortifying polarised beliefs amongst its readership.** This type of media is particularly impactful in communities with existing populist stances and low trust in the media. Crucially, exposure to problematic alternative media content can increase populist attitudes in these communities. This is particularly worrying, as extreme alternative news media outlets are often tailored for people on the fridges of mainstream society.

3. **Conspiracy narratives make up a significant portion of problematic content on alternative media outlets**. This content can encourage people to hold hostile views, and incite them to advocate and even carry out attacks against other groups.

4. **Europeans have a complex relationship with the media.** While most believe the media has great value for the functioning of their society, trust is low across the continent and consumption is dropping. However, **the impact of the media is not homogeneous across Europe.** The media environment, readers' relationship with their media and the presence of polarising content varies across Europe, with stark regional differences. Therefore, it is vital to approach this issue locally, incorporating localised research.

5. **The role of social media is unclear.** It is neither the silver bullet nor the singular threat that many have described. For those already polarised, it presents opportunities to reinforce their world view; those who are not polarised can benefit from the range of options and exposure to cross-cutting content. There is some evidence, however, that it could be negatively impacting news consumption, especially among young people.

6. **The media ecosystem is complex and evolving**. Changes in production and consumption, including the way the media is funded, are creating opportunities for the diffusion of polarising forces into mainstream media and offering more space for harmful alternative media platforms.

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[6] See Druckman et al. (2013).

Context: The media and polarisation

As the media grows more dispersed, it is becoming increasingly difficult to define and identify. From across the spectrum, alternative media outlets have appeared in defiance of "mainstream media". Typically non-commercial and independent of government control, these outlets present an alternative – and at times radical – perspective that contrasts with perceived hegemonic policies and views. These outlets are often viewed as agents with significant power to polarise societies.

The polarising effect of mainstream media, however, is far less clear. Firstly, there is a dearth of research on the impact of the media on polarisation, especially in Europe. The US has a growing body of research that is relevant; however, the political situation there is unique, and experts warn against directly applying American findings to the European context.[7] Due to the limited research in the European context, though, this paper will draw from US-based research when necessary. Secondly, notwithstanding country variations, most Europeans either consume mainstream media where polarising content is low, or they consume no media at all (a worrying trend in its own right). And thirdly, existing research suggests that exposure to problematic media does not inspire polarisation, but rather has an exacerbating effect amongst a small minority of those already polarised.[8]

In fact, mainstream media is a key ally. Despite its partisanship (which can feel polarising), mainstream media is a valuable tool for counteracting polarisation, and as such, its erosion could prove disastrous. Mainstream media is an influential source of information, keeping the public informed and engaged in their local, national and international environments, and is also a necessary check on power. Without reliable media, countries could lose a critical pillar of their democracy and an important bulwark against disinformation and polarisation.

This section provides a brief overview of the media landscape, including the alternative media. It reviews the relationship European countries have with their media, and explores how certain changes in the media ecosystem may make providers and consumers more vulnerable to polarisation.

Alternative media

Alternative media is not a new phenomenon, but it has received growing attention as fringe digital-born outlets have increased across Europe, gaining prominence among some audiences.

Alternative media should not be associated solely with the production and dissemination of conspiracy narratives and disinformation. Historically, it developed as a result of dissatisfaction among working classes and marginalised groups over the (mis)reporting or omitting of issues and events by mainstream media.[9] For instance, trade unions were largely depicted from the position of pro-business politicians and company owners, while members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning (LGBTQ+) community were presented through prejudiced reporting.[10]

This bias and lack of representation led different groups to seek platforms for more inclusive and participatory "citizens' media" outside the commercial mainstream, to effectively challenge existing power structures.[11] Citizen journalism interacts symbiotically with mainstream news, and social media offers a fertile ground for it to thrive and mix with traditional media – and sometimes a hybrid between the two is formed.[12] Hence, alternative media should be seen as a self-perceived corrective of mainstream media.

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[7] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).
[8] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019) and also Heikkilä et al. (2022).
[9] See Atton and Hamilton (2018).
[10] See Atton (2002).
[11] See Atton (2003).
[12] See Ardèvol-Abreu and Zúñiga (2017).

Nonetheless, while alternative media has proven on many counts to be a force for positive social change, it can also be exploited for detrimental purposes, especially when co-opted by populist movements. **Populism** can be defined as a political approach centred on the will of the people to confront a corrupt elite. Populist communication is often based on three key elements: the identification as unprivileged and neglected, the struggle against a corrupt elite, and the identification and othering of an "out-group".[13] In line with the definitions of polarisation and extremism mentioned above, populist messaging and movements could pose an obstacle to social cohesion.

Although populism and alternative media are distinct phenomena, their pairing can take the form of a symbiotic relationship based on similar grievances and attitudes. Alternative media also holds an anti-hegemonic and anti-establishment position that often targets elites.[14] Just as populism has been utilised by political movements and parties, alternative media can be driven by a group with a concrete political agenda. This can be problematic, considering the alternative media's anti-hegemonic stance which tends to shift issues away from the political centre. For instance, on the political right, alternative media often drifts into the far-right fringes associated with anti-pluralist values such as xenophobia, racism, fascism and authoritarianism.[15]

The alternative news media has given rise to concern and alarm as new platforms have become more complex and emerged in different media environments across Europe and more broadly. For instance, the most well-known alternative right-wing news outlet that gained prominence during the 2016 US elections through its misleading coverage, *Breitbart News Network,* currently still operates in the US and some European countries. Across European countries, there are hundreds of similar right-wing media outlets, including *Politically Incorrect* (also known as *PI-NEWS*) and *Compact* in Germany, *Svegot* in Sweden and *Westmonster* in the UK. A study of 70 right-wing outlets from Austria, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, the UK and the US found that the ecosystem of alternative media is diverse and ranges in thematic tendencies, transparency and funding models.[16] These outlets develop based on each country's unique political context and media environment, reflecting both supply and demand side for right-wing news content.

Although far-right alternative media has been in the spotlight, alternative media does not reflect far-right ideologies alone. Far-left movements also feature in the populist alternative media landscape. Some of the better-known news outlets are the *Canary* and *Another Angry Voice* (*AAV*) in the United Kingdom, and *junge Welt* in Germany.[17] It is interesting to note that some far-right news outlets such as the German *Compact* and the British *spiked* have roots in extreme left-wing movements, but have shifted ideologically to the right.[18]

While there are numerous far-left media outlets, the far-right host the majority. One reason for this could be that far-right movements perceive mainstream media as leftist or liberal leaning, with biased reporting towards the far right. For instance, Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party have voiced concerns that politics and media in Germany turn a blind eye to left-wing extremism.[19] Another reason could be the relative success among extreme right-wing movements of capitalising on polarising political issues in their communities. Regardless of the reasons behind their greater presence, these alternative media platforms not only foster and sharpen divisions within the left-right dichotomy, but also advance the political fringes' use of populism to promote anti-authority narratives, particularly to an audience with relatively low trust in mainstream news outlets.[20] More research is necessary to fully understand the effect and dynamics of extreme alternative media outlets on polarisation. An important question here is whether these outlets and their extreme populist messaging

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[13] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).
[14] See Heft et al. (2020).
[15] See Heft et al. (2020).
[16] See Heft et al. (2020). For similar data on the Nordic far-right alternative media landscape see also Ihlebæk and Nygaard (2021).
[17] See Newman (2018).
[18] See Heft et al. (2020).
[19] See Chase (2018). https://www.dw.com/en/afd-says-german-state-media-favor-the-left-do-they/a-45632081
[20] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).

influence audiences or if they merely represent pre-existing views among the populations. It is likely that the answer lies somewhere in the middle.

There is some research that can help understand audience penetration of alternative news media. The 2019 *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* reveals that online news media labelled as partisan or alternative received relatively low readership across the general population.[21] In the UK, outlets like the *Canary*, *Westmonster*, and *Evolve Politics* had no more than 2 % audience usage while less than 16 % of the population were aware of the news platforms' existence. In Sweden, the numbers were a little higher: platforms such as *Fria Tider*, *Nyheter Idag* and *Samhällsnytt* had around 10 % readership and 38 % awareness.

The 2018 *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* showed similar data for alternative platforms in Spain, Germany and Czechia. Germany exhibited similar results to the UK, with relatively low usage and awareness of mostly far-right news outlets, while Spain was closer to Sweden.[22] Czechia's alternative media environment was dominated by the platform *ParlamentniListy.cz*, which was read by 17 % of online user respondents, with 46 % being aware of the website.

Although the 2022 *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* did not produce a dedicated alternative media consumption analysis, it showed that news consumers use alternative media outlets to stay informed on key societal and political issues. For example, 14 % of respondents reported using smaller or alternative news sources for climate change information, while 10 % of online respondents in the UK, Germany and Poland used non-mainstream sites for news on the Russian war in Ukraine.[23] Also, alternative far-right outlets in Denmark and Sweden saw a marginal increase in trust compared to 2021.[24]

Despite the differences in readership across countries and topic-based news consumption, these alternative media outlets have far fewer news consumers and are less trusted compared to the most prominent mainstream news media. Consequently, their impact on broader society is marginal.

Nonetheless, among the communities these outlets reach as a trusted news source, alternative media plays a significant role in shaping discourses and reinforcing polarised beliefs.[25] As mentioned above, personalisation and self-selection do not necessarily lead to greater polarisation; however, when coupled with exposure to hyper-partisan news, they can further entrench these positions.[26] These sensitive political positions could become anchored even further if people are exposed to cross-cutting content where they perceive that their viewpoint is unjustly attacked or minimised.

Another important factor in this regard is the populist leanings across consumers of alternative media content. While the 2018 Pew Research Centre report found that populist views reflected people's trust in media, it did not provide any further insight into the impact on media consumption.[27] Nonetheless, a study conducted by Mueller et al. (2017) on the influence of populist news on polarisation of attitudes in London, Paris, Berlin and Zurich found that in all regions apart from London, exposure to populist coverage increased populist attitudes among those already having strong populist stances.[28] This is a particularly worrying finding, considering that extreme alternative news media is often tailored to groups on the fringes of mainstream society.

The changing media landscape: Digitalisation and commercialism

Despite this rise in alternative media platforms, most Europeans continue to get their news from mainstream media sources, both from "traditional media" – print, radio and television – and "new media" published online through webpages, mobile apps and social media.

[21] Newman et al., 2019, pp. 23-24.
[22] Newman et al., 2018, pp. 20-21.
[23] Newman et al., 2019, pp. 35, 55.
[24] Newman et al., 2019, pp. 93,105.
[25] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).
[26] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).
[27] See Newman et al. (2018).
[28] See Müller et al. (2017).

Mainstream media does not have the same impact on polarisation as alternative platforms; however, changes in the media ecosystem have affected the ways it is produced and consumed that could create new vulnerabilities. This section considers some of these vulnerabilities.

The first major change is **digitalisation**, the shift to digital media. While some traditional media continues to draw consumers, Europeans are getting their news primarily from digital sources. This trend has been growing consistently over the past 20 years, but it became more absolute throughout the pandemic, as the print media was impacted by the physical and economic consequences of multiple lockdowns.[29] An overview of Europeans' preferred sources by region is shown in **Table 1** below.

Table 1: Where Europeans get their media in 2022 (average per region[30])[31]

Region	Internet	TV	Social media	Print
Central Europe	79.7 %	65.2 %	87.3 %	50.2 %
Northern Europe	85 %	63.3 %	44.3 %	25.3 %
Southern & south-eastern Europe	83.1 %	69.9 %	79 %	59.3 %
Western Europe	76.5 %	60.3 %	41.8 %	26.8 %

Digitalisation has had serious impacts on news production and consumption that can impact polarisation. Firstly, digitalisation created a space for new voices to influence news and opinion formation. These include the alternative platforms mentioned above as well as new mainstream outlets commonly referred to as **digital-born media** – companies that have appeared in the past 30 years and operate online only. To compete, major **legacy outlets** – those that predominated via traditional sources before the advent of digital platforms – have incorporated additional online elements such as websites, apps, podcasts and social media pages. In most places, legacy media and digital-born media continue to coexist, although the latter tends to be more popular in southern Europe compared to western or northern Europe, where legacy media is stronger.[32] While digital-born and legacy media have much in common, the former tends to have different editorial priorities, producing more niche reporting and taking a targeted approach to establish itself as a distinct voice catering to specific audiences, typical of online marketing trends and in defiance of the broad approachability that traditionally guided legacy media.

Moreover, digitalisation and the tools it offers have also prompted a broader liberalisation of information, ushering in a proliferation of influencers through online blogs, personal websites and social media. Termed the "fifth estate",[33] as its influence could rival that of traditional journalism, unprecedented citizen journalism and alternative media outlets have arisen across the spectrum. Moreover, in some cases, citizen journalism has blended with influencer culture, giving people significant power to relay and interpret news, especially on social media.

Reuters' 2021 *Digital News Report* examined where people get their online news and from whom. On Twitter, users reported getting their news chiefly from official sources; on YouTube and Facebook, however, users get news from official sources and others in their network. On the younger platforms like Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, mainstream sources have been eclipsed by internet personalities. For the majority of users, this news exposure is incidental – they were on the platform for a reason other than getting news – but it can still impact how they

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[29] See Müller et al. (2017).
[30] Based on available data from the 2022 Reuters *Digital Media Report,* regions include the following countries: **Central Europe:** Austria, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia; **Northern Europe:** Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden; **Southern/South-Eastern Europe:** Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Romania; **Western Europe:** the UK, Belgium, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Switzerland.
[31] Newman et al., 2022, pp. 62-109.
[32] See Nicholls et al. (2016).
[33] See Dutton (2009).

understand events, especially when it is their primary source for news, as is the case for so many young people.[34] This influencer presence can be compelling, as one American study showed. It found that social media affects perceptions of polarisation primarily through posts from influencers and social contacts' discussions of events and topics, rather than directly from media reporting. However, the study ultimately concluded that while social media users are polarised, the platforms are not necessarily causing polarisation.[35]

Secondly, the online impulse for personalisation is driving **fragmentation**. In an increasingly high-choice environment, news is being provided by more outlets, which are tailoring coverage to particular audiences and cater to specific viewpoints or interests.[36] The result is a high-choice media environment in which people are able to self-select news sources that match – and ultimately reinforce – their beliefs.[37] This trend has raised concerns about echo chambers, as bias-driven self-selection converges with the preselection of algorithms and aggregators online. However, research shows that this may not be as significant a threat as was feared. In fact, most people self-select mainstream news sources,[38] and time spent in online spaces – social media especially – actually increases their exposure to **cross-cutting content**, or content from another ideology or affiliation outside their own.[39]

While this high-choice environment is not driving polarisation, it may lead more people to avoid the news altogether. In a 2019 report for the EU Parliament, the authors warned that while the reach of media online is high, it does not always result in more engagement – and may, in fact, be having the opposite effect.[40] In an American study of online media usage using trace data over a 6-month period, participants only spent 2 % of their time engaging with current affairs.[41] Furthermore, those who access news online appear to spend less time on news sites consuming content, especially young people.[42]

It is also important to note that cross-cutting exposure – often the goal of anti-polarisation initiatives – can have mixed results. Cross-cutting content can intensify a person's current state, meaning that while it can expand the perspective of someone not yet polarised, it can also exacerbate already polarised sentiments. One American study found that over time, exposure to crosscutting content on social media heightened attitudinal polarisation.[43] Likewise, fact-checking, another common solution, is most common both among highly educated people and those with low trust in the media.[44] So, while it can lead some to a more nuanced position – and has done so in controlled testing environments[45] – it could lead others to seek alternative explanations outside the mainstream media, where conspiracy narratives are more prominent. For instance, the phrase "do your own research" has become a mantra for Covid-19 deniers.

Thirdly, digitalisation has seriously impacted **funding,** and both legacy and digital-born media are struggling to get by. A funding model that relies heavily on ad revenue, especially in a stratified news environment, will drive sources to compete for audience attention by catering to their specific interests or engaging in clickbait headlining or sensationalism, both of which could attract polarised viewpoints. The switch to online ad revenue is not the only big change in media financing. Over the past several decades, media has become more commercialised in many countries: the result is an environment in which news reporting is shaped by market forces. One potential advantage is that commercialisation may spur a rebalancing in the relationship between politicians and journalists, toward more independent and autonomous journalism.[46] However, commercialism may also spur the spread of populism.

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[34] See Newman et al. (2021).
[35] See Banks et al. (2021).
[36] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).
[37] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).
[38] See Wojcieszak et al. (2021) and Mitchell et al. (2018).
[39] See Flaxman et al. (2016).
[40] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).
[41] See Wojcieszak et al. (2021).
[42] See Thurman and Fletcher (2019).
[43] See Bail et al. (2018).
[44] See Hameleers and Van der Meer (2020).
[45] See Hameleers and Van der Meer (2020).
[46] See Hameleers and Van der Meer (2020).

Combined with the stratification of the media, commercialisation has led to intensified competition for viewers that slants reporting toward reader biases.[47] There are more news outlets fighting for a finite amount of funding and constantly jockeying to establish their distinct place in the ecosystem, leading some to a "profit maximising choice to cater to the preferences of consumers" and their desire for news to "not only inform, but also to explain, interpret, persuade and entertain".[48] One American study found this drives polarisation, as competing outlets "create or reinforce differences of opinion" in order to "divide the market and reap higher profits".[49]

In addition to online sensationalism and clickbait, this has led some outlets to conflate the popular and the populist, as extreme views and controversy draw viewers.[50] French outlet *BFMTV* is one example. It is a 24-hour rolling news channel that airs news constantly to over 10 million viewers a day in France, making it the most popular media outlet in the country. The political adaptation of the old adage "if it bleeds, it leads" has led to criticism that the outlet is de facto right wing, and may be contributing to insecurity with its continual coverage.[51] Wettstein et al. (2018) found this trend widespread in their comparative content analysis from 10 European countries. The authors concluded that news sources who drew audiences with popular coverage of populist figures and their politics were rarely actively endorsing these figures or their messages, but they were promulgating them.[52] At the same time, commercialisation is driving a consolidation of media outlets under fewer, larger owners.[53] This concentration of media ownership has been identified as a serious threat to Europe's media landscape, as it limits the diversity of information and perspectives.[54]

Funding does not impact only coverage though; it also threatens the media's viability. A study from the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education found that while digital revenues are rising, they are not yet offsetting losses from the shrinking print sector.[55] These economic hardships will likely lead more news sources to disappear behind subscriptions, which could impact already shrinking news consumer numbers and would restrict consumers to a more limited number of sources. Many news outlets have already closed their doors, while many more are at risk if they do not receive additional support. But this support may be hard to come by: in its 2021 *Digital News Report*, Reuters found that there was little will amongst most citizens to save news publications. With the exception of Portugal, very few Europeans were aware of the current threat to journalism, and even fewer supported government interventions to save it. Reuters also warned that at a time where there are so many competing priorities for government support – including health and education – it will be difficult for governments to garner the political will to protect journalism.[56]

Local media is particularly at risk. It is a critical source of information and representation, and plays a central role in local politics, providing material about local candidates and elections as well as holding local politicians to account.[57] And while some of its traditional functions have been taken over by online searches – such as seeking jobs and activities – it is still a go-to source for information about local incidents, including crime reporting.[58] Local news can also contribute to a sense of community identity among locals. It tends to include more soft reporting and be less critical, prioritising the support and promotion of the community and its citizens rather than their scrutiny.[59] In their 2021 *Digital News Report*, Reuters found a correlation between a sense of attachment to one's community and high readership of local news, as well as high levels of trust in local and regional news across much of Europe. Despite these

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[47] Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2005, p. 1 031.
[48] Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2005, p. 1 031.
[49] Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2005, p. 1043.
[50] See Schofield (2014).
[51] See Schofield (2014).
[52] See Wettstein et al. (2018).
[53] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).
[54] See Brogi et al. (2020).
[55] See Le Gall (2021).
[56] See Newman et al. (2021).
[57] See Taylor (2019).
[58] See Newman et al. (2021).
[59] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).

benefits, local news consumption is low across the continent[60] and many are threatened by digitalisation, economic hardship and consolidation.[61]

A potential bulwark against these commercial influences is **public service media** – broadcasters controlled by the public rather than commercial or state-owned interests. Public service media, or public broadcasting, is meant to operate free from political or commercial pressures and provide information that is universally accessible for the entire public.[62] It is designed to appeal to a wide, mixed audience and is shielded from some of the economic and political pressures that threaten commercial media outlets. This status as a public tool helps it avoid partisan, interpretive journalism that can polarise reporting, but only if its independence is protected and it is given the support needed to make the digital transition. While public broadcasters remain popular in western and northern Europe, their influence is waning in southern, central and south-eastern Europe, where access varies, even when trust in those outlets is high.[63] In these regions, public broadcasters have struggled to make the transition online, and in some cases, are facing political interference that threatens their independence.[64]

Digitalisation and commercialism have had a transformative effect on the media, but it is unlikely they are making it more polarising as a direct consequence. It does, however, give greater access to other forms of media that could be more polarising and could further the spread of problematic and sensitive content.

Problematic and sensitive content

Media can also cause further polarisation by actively spreading conspiracy narratives and disinformation. More commonly associated with alternative media platforms, these phenomena have also been found in mainstream media, either by accident or design. In mainstream media, their effects can be heightened due to the higher levels of trust, causing a fallout in consumers' perceptions of their accuracy and veracity. On alternative outlets, they can be weaponised under an ideological agenda and combined with othering hate speech that targets specific groups. When harnessed maliciously by alternative platforms, this harmful content is dangerous, not only because it can lead to greater polarised viewpoints, but also because it could be used for radicalisation, recruitment and mobilisation for extremist purposes – and could even encourage people to accept, advocate and use violence.

Some of this problematic content feeds on current affairs and politically sensitive events. Terrorist attacks, for example, are frequently exploited by malign alternative news platforms to advance their agenda. They are usually accompanied by a prevalence of conspiracy theories and disinformation that aim to sow further societal divisions by capitalising on the vulnerable state of many people following a terrorist incident. Moreover, media coverage (not only of alternative but also of mainstream media) has the potential to empower terrorists and contribute to their terror tactics and propaganda.[65] On the other hand, not reporting these politically significant events can undermine the credibility of news media, as well as spark distrust and foster narratives of undemocratic processes such as censorship.[66] This creates an ethical dilemma for journalists, who need to balance the framing of the terrorist incident with paying tribute to the victims and dealing with the terrorist group itself.

Conspiracy narratives[67]

Conspiracy narratives are particularly problematic. These narratives attempt to give meaning to distressing and complex events and phenomena that are perceived to be the result of the secret planning of a cabal of powerful people with malintent.[68] Usually, they provide simplistic

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[60] See Newman et al. (2021).
[61] See Taylor (2019).
[62] See Conseil mondial de la radiotélévision (2001).
[63] See Newman et al. (2021).
[64] See Brogi et al. (2020).
[65] Abubakar, 2020, pp. 278-279.
[66] Abubakar, 2020, p. 278.
[67] This paper adopts RAN's use of "conspiracy narrative"' in place of the popularised term "conspiracy theory" to deny it the legitimacy denoted by the term "theory". See the Radicalisation Awareness Network (2020) for more.
[68] Farinelli, 2021, p. 4.

explanations and binary "good versus evil" views that foster divisions between perceived in-groups and out-groups.[69] These divisions are further fuelled by a strong sense of victimisation of the in-group and "othering" or intolerance directed towards the out-group. Other components of conspiracy narratives that contribute to extremist dynamics include superiority of the in-group compared to the out-group, and the concept that the out-group poses an imminent and existential threat to the in-group.[70] While conspiracy narratives should be viewed as symptom of broader societal issues and grievances, they have the potential to significantly threaten peace and social cohesion. As mentioned above, this could include increasing the appeal of extremist agendas, eroding trust between different groups, and in democratic government, eroding respect for universal freedoms and human rights, spreading hate speech and mobilising violence against a specific group.[71]

European practitioners view conspiracy theories as key drivers for violence and extremism. At a 2021 Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) LOCAL online meeting on dealing with the changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism, nearly all participants agreed that a key development in the local landscape is the issues arising as a consequence of conspiracy narratives.[72] They viewed the Covid-19 pandemic as a catalyst for the spread of conspiracy narratives; after all, conspiracies thrive on complex and harmful events. Many of the violent anti-lockdown and anti-government protests in European cities were fuelled by conspiracy narratives.[73] What was most surprising for the RAN participating practitioners was the heterogeneity of the groups at the protests, which included government employees and families with children.[74]

Without diminishing the seriousness and impact of the violent anti-lockdown protests, conspiracy narratives can have even more devastating effects. Apocalyptic narratives among violent right-wing extremist groups inspired the 2011 Norway and 2019 Christchurch terrorist attacks. These attacks were largely inspired by the Great Replacement theory, which alleges that white European populations are being replaced by non-white people, through mass migration and due to demographic decline in white communities and growth in non-white communities.[75] In his manifesto, the perpetrator of the Christchurch terrorist attack claimed he was seeking revenge for the ongoing genocide of white Europeans.[76] His is an extreme case, showcasing how a conspiracy narrative incited the use of violence and the perpetration of a terrorist act, and this needs to be taken into consideration when designing responses. While many right-wing extremist groups in Europe do not resort to violence, their propaganda directly spreads hate speech, dehumanises out-groups and incites violence.[77] These groups equally need to be considered because of their direct and indirect threat to peace and security.

During the same 2021 RAN LOCAL meeting, practitioners also raised concerns about their ability to work online where vulnerable target groups congregate.[78] It is widely accepted that the internet, including social media and alternative news outlets, provides a platform for the spread of conspiracy narratives. While the internet increases the risk of falling down a conspiracy rabbit hole, due to the relatively easy access to data, the speed with which conspiracies can spread and difficulty to moderate content, one should not assume that people are more likely to believe conspiracy narratives now compared to the pre-internet era.[79] Also,

[69] Farinelli, 2021, p. 4.
[70] Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2020, p. 3.
[71] Farinelli, 2021, p. 4.
[72] See the Radicalisation Awareness Network's conclusion paper *The changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism*, p. 2 (https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/1a7a18b2-4f2d-44b7-bdfd-c088af86f327_en?filename=ran_local_changing_landscape_25-26_112021_en.pdf).
[73] See Schraer (2021). https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/59390968
[74] See the Radicalisation Awareness Network's conclusion paper *The changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism*, p. 2 (https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/1a7a18b2-4f2d-44b7-bdfd-c088af86f327_en?filename=ran_local_changing_landscape_25-26_112021_en.pdf).
[75] Davey and Ebner, 2019, p. 7.
[76] See Galineau (2019). https://apnews.com/article/immigration-shootings-ap-top-news-international-news-australia-1e19fefcb2e948a1bf7ce63429bc186e
[77] Farinelli, 2021, p. 11.
[78] See the Radicalisation Awareness Network's conclusion paper *The changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism,* p. 2 (https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/1a7a18b2-4f2d-44b7-bdfd-c088af86f327_en?filename=ran_local_changing_landscape_25-26_112021_en.pdf).
[79] Farinelli, 2021, p. 9.

conspiracy narratives do not spread indiscriminately across the internet, but are confined within communities, most often the political far-right and far-left fringes that already subscribe to them.[80] This is significant because these same groups usually get their news from the alternative media.

In a study mapping online extremism in Slovakia, alternative media outlets were found to spread hateful and conspiratorial content: at least 17 pages, accounts and channels across Facebook, Instagram and Telegram shared links to alternative media websites.[81] In terms of quantity, the alternative media in the Slovak case was only a small part of the broader far-right online ecosystem, based on the study's mapping.

Nonetheless, the number of alternative news media outlets does not necessarily reflect their impact on a particular community. It is also necessary to understand the content they share and their audience. An in-depth study of the Hungarian alternative far-right media platform *Kuruc.info* provides insight in this regard. *Kuruc.info* describes itself as a "patriotic Hungarian conservative, right-wing, nationalist, fact-finding news site that is independent of political parties."[82] It is a digital-born outlet registered in the US, and has been operating since 2006. Regardless of its self-portrayal, the media platform openly harbours Hungarian irredentist, antisemitic, anti-Roma and homophobic content, evident in the main news categories on the home page: Anti-Hungarianism, Gypsy Crime, Jewish Crime, LGBTQ+ and Political Crime.[83] The website heavily promotes the Zionist Occupational Government conspiracy theory claiming that Jews control major world governments including that of Hungary. The Hungarian government requested that the site be shut down due to its problematic content, to counter hate speech; however, the US government has allowed the platform to function, citing the protection of free speech.[84]

Another problematic issue with *Kuruc.info* was its affiliation to Hungary's far-right political party Jobbik, which recently re-defined itself as centre-right conservative. This change caused splintering within the party and the emergence of two far-right political parties: Force and Determination, and Our Homeland Movement. *Kuruc.info* was critical of Jobbik's reformation and it is currently considered to hold closer ties to Our Homeland Movement. Nevertheless, before Jobbik's move towards the centre of the political spectrum, *Kuruc.info* was considered a significant part of their online messaging, because they were underrepresented in mainstream media.[85] In 2018, when Jobbik won more than 1 million votes in the Hungarian elections, *Kuruc.info* was the 10th largest news site in Hungary, with around 10 % readership among the general population and around 23 % of Jobbik voters.[86] These numbers are significant, considering the results of a study measuring antisemitic sentiment in Hungary, which found that party preference and antisemitism have a strong relationship. Based on indicators to measure affective and cognitive antisemitism, the study indicated that 27 % of adults in Hungary hold extreme and 10 % moderate antisemitic views. On this same scale, 42 % of Jobbik supporters held extreme and 15 % moderate antisemitic views.[87] This data further demonstrates the popularity and reach of problematic alternative media outlets to people holding extreme and populist views.

Europe's relationship with the media

All the factors discussed so far have impacted Europeans' relationship with the media. It varies across the continent, but in most countries, citizens have low trust in the media and perceive many mainstream outlets as partisan and biased. This perception of the media is important, because not only does it determine which news source people seek out but it also influences

[80] Krouwel et al., 2017, pp. 434-437.
[81] Kuchta, 2021, pp.12-13.
[82] See Rákay (2008). https://kuruc.info/r/40/27066/.
[83] See Kuruc.info's homepage at https://kuruc.info/.
[84] See Origo (2012). https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20120703-amerikai-kepviseloktol-ker-segitseget-orban-az-internetes-gyuloletbeszed-megfekezesere.html
[85] Barna and Knap, 2019, p. 79.
[86] Barna and Knap, 2019, p. 78.
[87] Barna and Knap, 2019, p. 78.

their likelihood of consuming alternative media or avoiding news altogether, both of which may make them more vulnerable to conspiracies, disinformation and polarisation.

Trust in the media is low across the EU, although not uniformly. Studies from Pew[88] and Reuters[89] reveal stark regional differences.[90] Trust is higher in northern and western Europe than in south/south-eastern or central Europe, with a few notable outliers: the UK and France have much lower trust in the media than their western European neighbours, while trust in Portugal and Germany is much higher than commonly seen in their regions. These regional trends and their outliers are shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2: Europeans who trust the media, by region in 2022 (Reuters, 2022)

Region[91]	Overall trust	Country	Overall trust
Central Europe (without Germany)	34 %	Germany	50 %
Northern Europe	58.3 %	Portugal	78 %
Southern/south-eastern Europe (without Portugal)	33.3 %	France	29 %
Western Europe (without the UK or France)	51.3 %	UK	34 %

Reuters, who conduct this survey yearly, found that trust in the media had risen in 2022 compared to data collected before the pandemic, as had readership of mainstream news sources. This suggests that despite the surge in conspiracy narratives and disinformation around Covid-19, most Europeans will still turn to mainstream media during a crisis. Sadly, the small rebound has already begun to wane; by the time the 2022 report was released, trust in most European countries had fallen to pre-Covid-19 numbers.[92]

Pew (2018) found that respondents' trust in media did not correlate to their political leaning. Instead, populism was a more reliable predictor. In all eight countries surveyed, those with populist beliefs on the left and right were less likely to trust the media by a significant margin than those with non-populist or mixed views. Ideology had only a statistically significant impact in Spain, Germany and Sweden, although still far less than populism did in those countries. In Germany and Sweden, those with right-leaning ideologies were less likely to trust the media, while in Spain those on the left were the most sceptical.[93]

The perception of bias and fairness is a critical aspect of trust that directly impacts how people consume media.[94] Partisan reporting is commonplace in mainstream media, as reporting is influenced by the political leaning of the outlet.[95] This well-established trend has been reinforced by the fragmentation already described and the proliferation of interpretive journalism.[96] It can also be impacted by the relationship between politics and the media in a given country. **Political parallelism**[97] is the level of alignment between a country's news media

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[88] Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.
[89] See Newman et al. (2021).
[90] See Mitchell et al. (2018).
[91] Based on available data from the 2022 Reuters *Digital Media Report,* regions include the following countries: **Central Europe:** Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia; **Northern Europe:** Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden; **Southern/South-Eastern Europe:** Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Spain, Greece, Romania; **Western Europe:** Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Switzerland.
[92] Based on available data from the 2022 Reuters *Digital Media Report,* regions include the following countries: **Central Europe:** Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia; **Northern Europe:** Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden; **Southern/South-Eastern Europe:** Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Spain, Greece, Romania; **Western Europe:** Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Switzerland.
[93] See Mitchell et al. (2018).
[94] See Ardèvol-Abreu and Zúñiga (2017).
[95] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).
[96] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).
[97] According to Hallin and Mancini (2017), political parallelism can be understood through four phenomena: "structural ties between media and political organisations; political affiliations of journalists, owners and media managers; media content; and news consumption patterns".

and its political system.[98] Higher levels of parallelism tend to be associated with greater media bias – both in production and consumption – and with more limited representation in both topics and sources. Political parallelism is found more readily in southern European countries, most notably Italy, Spain and France, and is lower in northern and western European countries.[99]

But distinguishing between bias and the perception of bias is important. While the media frequently has some kind of slant, a person's perception is not an objective account of a source's content, but rather a reflection of how a source represents and aligns with their views.[100] For example, in 2018 Pew examined the partisan leanings of European news outlets' readership compared to people's perception of partisanship. They concluded that the readership was in fact much less partisan than those polled perceived it to be.[101] And while biased reporting can reinforce polarising positions on controversial issues, there is little evidence that it is driving affective, or even attitudinal polarisation.[102] The perception of bias, on the other hand, is having measurable effects. One American study found that perceived media bias has a detrimental impact on all news use (regardless of the outlet) and provokes news avoidance.[103] This could hasten the decline in news consumption, as accusations of bias have become weaponised both within mainstream media to harm competitors and from outside.

Despite its stigma, bias is not all bad news. While consumers are wary of slant, many are also critical of a total neutrality that could grant a platform and possible credibility to positions they view as harmful. France's *BFMTV* is one example of how media can create a sympathetic ear for populism under the banner of neutrality. As one political reporter for the outlet said: "Here at *BFMTV* the spirit is that we are not here to judge. We talk to everyone."[104] Also of concern are issues like climate change and vaccines, for which covering both sides of the issue equally could create a "false equivalence".[105] Reuters 2021 *Digital News Report* found that 17 % of participants globally thought weaker arguments should be given less time, while 24 % thought there were some issues that should not be approached neutrally. In both measures, younger respondents were more likely to take this latter view, especially on social justice issues.[106]

Trust was not the only thing on the decline; interest in the news is also falling. Globally, interest has fallen from 63 % in 2017 to 51 % in 2022, while selective avoidance has risen sharply, doubling in the UK in this period. People avoid news for several reasons, including distrust of the media, burn-out following sequential crises, difficulty understanding complex stories as well as general apathy and disinterest.[107] This news avoidance is a serious threat, because media helps citizens understand the world around them, exercise their democratic responsibilities and hold those in power to account.[108] Without reliable information and a consistent understanding of events, citizens could also be more vulnerable to disinformation and polarising influences.

Interestingly, despite negative trends in trust, perception and consumption, Europeans still place great value in the media. Sweden (95 %) and Germany (90 %) top the list for the total value they place in media for the functioning of their country's society. Spain is third, tied with the Netherlands with a total trust score of 88 %. Denmark (85 %), the UK (81 %), France (76 %) and Italy (75 %) round out the list, showing a relatively high appreciation for media across the continent.[109]

There is no single understanding for how people build their perceptions of the media. One American study found that trust was best explained by political ideology and a person's view

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[98] See Hallin and Mancini (2017).
[99] See Fletcher and Jenkins (2019).
[100] See Gunther (1992).
[101] See Mitchell et al. (2018).
[102] See Wojcieszak et al. (2021).
[103] See Ardèvol-Abreu and Zúñiga (2017).
[104] See Schofield (2014).
[105] See Newman et al. (2021).
[106] See Newman et al. (2021).
[107] See Newman et al. (2022).
[108] See Thurman and Fletcher (2019).
[109] See Newman et al. (2021).

of their government, fellow citizens and the economy.[110] But a Pew Study in Europe found that political ideology was not the best determinant; instead, a belief in populist ideas better predicted trust in the media.[111] These issues need further research, but what is clear is that perceptions of bias are impacting trust in mainstream media, which is hindering the function of the media as a core part of Europe's democracies.

Local approaches to address problematic media

The causal relationship between the media and polarisation is not clear. While it is prudent not to overstate this link, there are aspects of the media – both its production and its consumption – that can be addressed to help respond to polarisation and the spread of anti-authority sentiments. However, these aspects should not be analysed solely through the lens of the role of media on polarisation; rather, they should be incorporated into a broader understanding of the push and pull factors that drive people to hold polarised and extremist views in general. This approach allows practitioners to go beyond the debate of whether popular views shape media or vice versa, and to focus on individual and community-wide vulnerabilities to extremism. This section will introduce projects and approaches that have been deployed across Europe to address some of the critical supply and demand aspects of the media to promote social cohesion at local level. They offer important lessons and inspiration for practitioners to tackle this complex issue within the broader framework of countering extremism, hate and polarisation.

Enhancing critical thinking and (digital) media literacy

The first part of this brief provided an overview of the demand dynamics of people consuming mainstream and alternative media and how this content may affect them. In this regard, practitioners across Europe have made efforts to safeguard vulnerable groups against problematic narratives (including potentially polarising content in the media) by promoting and enhancing critical thinking skills and (digital) media literacy. Critical thinking skills are vital for people to independently assess information and form judgement. In support of this, media literacy is essential to improve people's ability to understand, analyse and engage with media messaging. While different audiences will respond to different approaches, critical thinking and media literacy are invaluable in "whole of society" strategies to create communities resilient to extremism.[112] This section includes an example of a critical thinking and media literacy programme.

Be Internet Citizens[113] is an example of an educational programme that aims to encourage and empower young people to navigate online spaces through media literacy, critical thinking and digital citizenship. Highly adaptable, it has been delivered in Bulgaria, France, Greece, Italy, North Macedonia, Romania, Sweden and the UK. The programme uses interactive exercises and activities to develop the capacities of teachers and educators outside formal education to raise awareness about the harms of disinformation, bias, bullying and polarising content online amongst teenagers and parents. The resources allow young people to interact with issues linked to problematic media directly and indirectly, asking them to identify and scrutinise biased and sensational reporting, disinformation and polarising content. In each case, young people are helped to understand the issue and identify different solutions.

> **Practitioner takeaways**
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> As a practice, Be Internet Citizens exemplifies the importance of working with both educators and young people to ensure sustainable application, the value of tapping into informal education, and the effectiveness of making learning immersive and fun through games and interactive activities. Both the resources themselves and the lessons they offer are good

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[110] See Lee (2010).
[111] See Mitchell et al. (2018).
[112] Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Working Group, Strategic Communications Initiative, 2017, p. 5.
[113] See https://internetcitizens.withyoutube.com/.

inspiration for practitioners seeking to teach teenagers about media literacy and problematic reporting.

Counter-narratives and strategic communications

At a time when trust in the media and readership are on the decline across Europe, practitioners should also consider how they can keep citizens interested and engaged with reliable media outlets. Communications campaigns and tailored news programmes can help educate people about the media, emphasise its importance, simplify complex stories and counteract potentially polarising exchanges and engagements with current affairs. It is especially critical for engaging young audiences, who overall are consuming the media less and in more restricted formats, so solutions should focus on youth-dominated spaces like social media. Local, national and international officials can contribute as well, by using strategic communication to get ahead of controversial and challenging issues likely to polarise news audiences. This section includes examples of communication campaigns that work to prevent and mitigate the consequences of declining and polarising media use.

Dare to be Grey[114] is a social media campaign launched and managed by young people in the Netherlands to address polarisation. Through a range of multimedia content and engagements, it leverages online data analysis, promotes a variety of ideas, and celebrates moderation, encouraging followers to identify a "grey" middle ground on divisive issues and to be wary of actions that could reinforce polarised, black-and-white positions. Projects like this are a key tool in prevention: they help people understand current news and navigate bias as a part of reporting, and utilise critical thinking to synthesise coverage into a more nuanced understanding. Dare to be Grey also offers resources to mobilise followers to help others do the same. As it is primarily based on social media and is run by young people, it is well placed to intersect with young users who are likely to encounter news passively or through the interpretation of others. The campaign is currently targeted specifically at a Dutch market: this enables them to tailor their approach to Dutch users and makes it a good model for localised interventions through social media that can build resilience among vulnerable users and mobilise a seemingly unaffected majority to become part of the solution.

Practitioner takeaways

While Dare to be Grey is specifically tailored to the Netherlands, it is a valuable model for practitioners across the EU. Its engaging content and youth authorship make it more appealing to younger audiences, while its use of social media makes it possible to scale within a given environment at a relatively low cost. It also shows the importance of tailoring content to particular environment and the need to keep such an approach up to date so it stays abreast of changing trends online and changing priorities. Dare to be Grey demonstrates the importance of campaigns that are truly youth-led; European practitioners should explore ways to support young people to create and manage other counter-narrative campaigns specifically for young audiences.

Satirical news programmes. Following from the popularity of *The Daily Show* in the United States, there has been a surge of satirical news programmes, largely aimed at young adults, to get them engaged in current events. As American programmes like *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver continue to pull international viewers, European shows have emerged following the same format, like those of Arjen Lubach in the Netherlands, who came to international fame after sparking the "America First" video campaign that swept Europe. There are also exclusively online versions like Australia's *Juice Media,* that enjoy a global audience and cover global affairs. The approach and tone are relatable to a younger audience while the format makes complex topics approachable and dynamic.

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[114] See https://www.daretobegrey.com/.

> **Practitioner takeaways**
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> These news programmes provide an important check on politicians and commercial actors by shedding light on specific issues that are often overlooked in mainstream reporting. However, it is worth noting that the satirical approach can be off-putting for those who disagree and could even have a polarising effect on audiences who strongly hold opposing populist opinions. Also, while satirical news programmes call out problematic figures across the spectrum, they generally tend to be left leaning, and this can contribute to the sense that popular media is partisan and biased. Even with these risks in mind, this blend of comedy and news is a replicable approach that could be incorporated into localised communications campaigns and media programmes. This approach also blends well with social media content and could be leveraged to bring news to video platforms like TikTok and Instagram. When doing so, practitioners should consider working with influencers to draw larger audiences.

Local municipal actors should also consider utilising broader strategic communications to minimise the polarising potential of reporting on sensitive or controversial topics.

The return of foreign terrorist fighters and their families is a sensitive and controversial topic which can generate substantial media attention and lead to polarisation in communities. This is due to (mistaken) assumptions, fear and anger towards people perceived as having been involved in some way in terrorism or terrorist groups. As a result, communication related to such returnees poses a dilemma and challenge within the broader rehabilitation and reintegration process. The media, whether mainstream or alternative, plays an important role in this regard. Challenges associated with communicating around returnees include the inability to share all data due to privacy rights, which contributes to stigmatisation, furthering fear and spreading misinformation.

> **Practitioner takeaways**
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> Practitioners discussed this issue at a May 2020 online RAN LOCAL meeting; they agreed on a list of good practices when engaging the media, to tackle or mitigate the effects of these challenges. One recommendation is to create a partnership with the media as soon as possible, ideally before the returnees arrive at their communities.[115] Another is to establish a common language for communication with the media, meaning that stakeholders need to be consistent and precise in their messaging, to ensure there is no miscommunication that could fuel tensions. In the same vein, practitioners should take care to delineate clear roles and responsibilities on handling the media, including a clear understanding of what data can and cannot be shared. The AG Kosti working group on local structures for the prevention of Islamism in Lower Saxony in Germany was mentioned as a good practice example of facilitating communication between all relevant parties.[116]

Supporting reliable journalism

Another aspect to be considered is news production: strategies must explore ways to protect and support reliable journalism, while identifying and responding to problematic reporting. Journalists are at the centre of this. All the strategies listed so far depend on the existence of quality journalism, which calls for well-trained journalists who have adequate and appropriate support to work effectively and in accordance with the values of open, pluralist societies.

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[115] See Wouterse & Gssime, 2020, pp. 4-8.
[116] More information is available at https://beraten-niedersachsen.de/.

The Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF)[117] is working to protect the media across Europe through four primary channels: research, debates, education and training, and the dissemination of results. Co-financed by the European Union, the CMPF offers a range of training programmes for journalists and practitioners, as well as a networked approach to providing crucial support, including legal expertise, information and tools, public forums and cross-border exchange, and awards. Through this work, they are empowering journalists at local level and across the continent to protect the future of European media.

> **Practitioner takeaways**
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> European practitioners do not have to address this challenge alone; they should seek all kinds of support from the European Union or neighbouring countries, including the sharing of advice, good practice and inspiration, as well as opportunities for more direct support like funding or resources.

RNTC Media[118] is a journalism training programme based in the Netherlands, managed by RMW Media. Unlike other training programmes, it welcomes citizen journalists as well as professionals and focuses on the use of journalism to promote social change. Their curriculum includes content creation and social media campaigning to empower trainees to leverage the media, as well as media literacy skills to help combat disinformation. The programme immerses participants in the creation process to help build their understanding of journalism through practice and help them build useful skills. This paper has discussed the role that citizen journalism can play (both positive and negative) and as digitalisation becomes more absolute, this trend is likely to continue. Therefore, it is important to include journalism training that can harness this trend to promote reliable reporting and help disseminate news through social media safely and effectively.

> **Practitioner takeaways**
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> RNTC Media offers an example of how media training can support responsible citizen journalism as well as professionals. Citizen journalism can be harmful, and as such, it can be tempting to discourage it altogether; however, its history in furthering human rights is significant, and this journalism will likely become more prominent in the digital age. European practitioners should learn from this successful programme and share critical knowledge and skills more broadly.

The EU "News Initiative"[119] was launched to build "existing and new actions to support the news media sector". Taking a holistic approach through a combination of policy approaches and funding, it endeavours to address the challenges the news media faces. This scheme will dedicate EUR 75 million partly to grants for projects that enable and support independent journalism, as well as grants for media literacy, fact-checking, online media and more.

> **Practitioner takeaways**
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> The programme is ongoing and interested European practitioners should monitor opportunities for support or collaboration. This initiative is also a good model for more localised approaches, through which national or local governments could organise their media strategies to make them more holistic and enable greater collaboration with other stakeholders, including civil society.

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[117] See https://cmpf.eui.eu/.
[118] See https://www.rnw.org/what-we-do/rntc/.
[119] See https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/funding-news-media-sector.

Media monitoring

Problematic and sensitive content in the news media is inevitable. Media monitoring is important for both practitioners and policymakers to understand the news media ecosystem, including the main hateful and polarising narratives and the networks of news media outlets that produce and disseminate problematic content. This understanding is essential to the design of evidence-based policy and programmes at local level that are tailored to the threat and risk posed by extreme content.

Media monitoring can be conducted manually through open-source intelligence, a particularly useful method when one is searching for specific data. Another monitoring method is the use of automated collection and analysis through artificial intelligence software. This approach is better suited to informing relevant stakeholders about public sentiment on a particular topic and mapping networks. When doing this work, the media monitors must follow rules on data and privacy rights to ensure due process is followed. This section includes an example of an effective media monitoring programme.

The Media Pluralism Monitor[120] is a tool developed by the EU for monitoring media pluralism, based on a set of 25 key indicators that assess basic protection, market plurality, political independence and social inclusiveness in public service, commercial and community media. Reports generated using the tool from 2018, 2019 and 2020 are available online.

> **Practitioner takeaways**
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> Tools like this, when utilised by an independent reviewer, can help local and national actors gain a better understanding of the media environment in their country and spot potential threats of polarising and problematic media, as well as trends that can compromise media pluralism.

Considerations for local practitioners

- All responses need to be evidence led, and currently there is too little research to truly inform effective and sustainable policies and programmes. While there is a growing body of research on this topic and its potential consequences, much of it is focused on the US, which is experiencing these challenges differently. EU practitioners should reference existing research, but should also undertake or support new research, including localised research focused on specific communities to informed targeted interventions.

- The relationship between the media and polarisation is still unclear. Practitioners should approach the challenge with commitment, while being mindful not to overstate the link or intensify negative perceptions of the media that can lead to further disengagement. While problems with the news media need to be addressed, it is also a critical ally and an integral part of a functioning democracy that must be protected.

- Lack of funding poses a serious threat for the future of the news media. Although commercialisation has helped media outlets gain more political independence, it has also created a greater dependence on market forces and is leading to outlets being consolidated into growing media empires. The ad revenue is not sufficient, and people are unaccustomed to paying for this media.[121] In this challenging environment, policy

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[120] See https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/monitoring-media-pluralism.
[121] Newman et al. 2022, pp. 62-109.

responses may be necessary to protect independent journalism. However, garnering citizen support will require an enormous effort.

- The development of technology has propelled the news media to the virtual space. The pandemic further catalysed this process, despite many audiences getting Covid-19-relevant information from TV broadcasts. As a result, disinformation, conspiracy narratives and hateful content, mostly present on alternative media, have spread like wildfire through the internet. Practitioners need to be better equipped to navigate online, engage audiences and design responses suited to the virtual space.

- Censorship has frequently been suggested as part of an effective response to polarising content on alternative media platforms. The outright removal of hateful and polarising content or banning of extreme platforms seems reasonable in the short term: if one removes the supply of problematic content, then readers will not be exposed to it. However, censorship is likely ineffective and even counter-productive in the mid to long term. First, censorship can be misused by governments to silence critical news media. Second, even if they are not misused, censored outlets can re-establish themselves in a different jurisdiction outside the reach of the law or under a different name. Third, in addition to navigating freedom of speech laws, censoring problematic media, including content from extremist groups, can reinforce the belief that media regulation is corrupt, engineered to hide the "truth". [122] This, in turn, could reinforce conspiracy narratives and strengthen extremist voices.

- Journalists are a vital component in the alternative populist news media. They serve as gatekeepers for populist actors and their narratives, interpreters who evaluate their messages and acts, or originators of populist messages. Therefore, it is important to work with journalists to raise their awareness of the risks associated with careless and unethical reporting. Moreover, journalists should be engaged to form an effective part of the solution to populist messaging through reliable journalism and by responding to problematic content.

- Public service media is a critical part of the media ecosystem and will need support to adapt to the changing environment that protects its unique role. Many public broadcasters across Europe are funded by taxes, but this model is only feasible as long as most citizens trust it as a news source and continue to see its value. Governments should pursue policies that protect public service media and secure its funding without impinging on its independence or impacting its credibility, while other practitioners will need to help secure its place in the hearts and minds of citizens.

- Fact-checking and cross-cutting content are useful strategies for prevention, but they are unlikely to have a strong positive effect on those who are already polarised or who hold populist beliefs. Some research shows that they could even have a negative effect. Both are common strategies against polarisation and disinformation, so practitioners must be mindful of an audience's particular needs when designing projects, to ensure they are employing a do-no-harm approach.

- Although growing understanding and attention is being dedicated to far-right extremism and conspiracy narratives, this needs to be backed by government funding commitments, to ensure relevant stakeholders have adequate resources and capacities to deal with the problem. At the same time, this does not mean that existing programmes focused on violent Islamist extremism should be deprioritised, because despite Daesh's territorial decline and the relatively smaller number of terrorist attacks in Europe, the threat posed by violent Islamist groups is omnipresent. In relation to the media and polarisation, this means that practitioners should continue to advocate and consult decision-makers on local threats to help guide policies in this regard. The role of the media in polarisation is a key pillar and should be adequately reflected as such in policy debates.

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[122] See Radicalisation Awareness Network (2019).

Recommendations

1. Pursue localised research to help inform local, national and Europe-wide strategies.

2. News avoidance is a serious concern. Practitioners should encourage people to show interest in the news, particularly academically disadvantaged and young people. Ways to do this include better civic education to help contextualise current affairs, campaigns to help people understand the importance of the media and debunk accusations of bias that undermine faith in the media, and initiatives to make news more relatable and easier to understand.

3. Include journalism and the media as topics in civic education, in both formal and informal education. This helps people consider and understand the importance of journalism, as well as the process and ethics that underpin the preparation and dissemination of news through the media.

4. Support programmes that promote critical thinking and media literacy, in order to safeguard vulnerable audiences. The programmes need to be tailored to different audiences spanning various ages, genders, ethnicities, religions and social groups. A key part of these programmes should support participants to independently discern facts from opinion, recognise bias in reporting and conspiracy narratives, corroborate and verify accuracy of news, and respond to problematic content and actors.

5. Work with news media outlets and journalists to address negative perceptions of mainstream media, so as to build trust, maintain readerships and counteract the appeal of alternative media. This includes enhancing the media industry's understanding and awareness of polarisation and populism, and of how their reporting can exacerbate these phenomena.

6. Support ethical and reliable journalism. Journalists face moral and legal dilemmas when reporting on problematic and polarising content. More needs to be done to raise awareness of their impact when covering sensitive political issues or events, and to equip them with methods to ensure balanced reporting.

7. Work closely with news media organisations on politically sensitive topics. Create a communication plan where the media is meaningfully engaged as a partner, so they can adequately report on the issue without spreading fear, stigmatising communities and disseminating misinformation.

8. Create structures and platforms which facilitate cross-collaboration between practitioners, researchers, policymakers, journalists, news outlet owners and technology companies. The media and polarisation are complex issues requiring a joint, coordinated response from all relevant stakeholders.

9. Apply censorship carefully, ensuring that freedom of speech is protected and that this measure is not abused. Since censorship has the potential to lead to strengthened convictions of conspiracy against already radicalised groups, plan responses that will mitigate such knock-on effects. In situations where the implications have potential to do more harm than good, assess whether censorship is the right approach.

10. Hold media outlets, their executives and staff that produce and disseminate content classified as hate speech to account for their actions. Their sanctioning should be proportional, to ensure that the profile of these outlets and people is not boosted. However, it is important to remember that sanctioning will not solve this problem. A broader engagement plan is needed to understand and respond to the factors that led them to produce and/or disseminate problematic content.

11. Monitor news media outlets and their impact. This can include dedicated open-source research teams and the creation of a platform to which users can refer problematic content. Moreover, use artificial intelligence software to detect extremist content and networks and understand the position and views of online news consumers.

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