

What leading news media deliver to democracy – and where they fail

News media remain important for democracies. Digitalisation and digital platforms did not erode the democratic performance of leading news media over the last decade. But weaknesses remain. These are findings of the indicator-based comparative cross-country analysis of the performance of leading news media in serving mature democracies in 18 countries worldwide.

The Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) 2021 was conducted by communication scholars in 18 countries worldwide, under the supervision of the Euromedia Research Group and coordinated by the University of Salzburg. Researchers assessed the performance of leading news media along 30 theory-based indicators in order to enable learning from the best practices of others. For half of the countries, a long-term comparison is possible, as most of the indicators have also been applied ten years ago.

Going strong: High relevance of news and watchdog journalism

Despite digital platforms and all sorts of crises, news media have not lost their importance for citizens, and demand for news remains high. Leading news media continue to serve contemporary democracies well. The first general finding of this monitor is that the leading news media managed to cope with the digital challenge and found ways to maintain their performative strengths despite economic, political, and technical challenges.

Second, the indicator on journalists' self-perception as watchdogs figures among the top-3 highest-scoring indicators of the entire monitor. It appears that journalists identify themselves highly with their mission as investigative reporters and that this democratically crucially important norm is well established within the mission statements of newsrooms. Although less pronounced, resources necessary for investigative reporting are available in most cases and in most countries.

Third, compared with 2011, significant progress has been made by the nine countries participating in both editions, with regard to the respect for the national codes of journalistic ethics, possibilities for citizens to participate in the news process, and concerning rules and practices on internal pluralism.

Where leading news media fail: Gender representation and job security

By contrast, the most pronounced weaknesses and deficits among all indicators of the 2021 MDM concern gender equality in the media content. Not a single country reports full respect for gender parity and awareness, and two countries even report that gender equality, as well as fundamental rules on gender equality in reporting, are not respected at all. Furthermore, internal gender equality within newsrooms still constitutes a major problem for democratic norms and values. On average, only 59 per cent of all scores for this indicator have been reached, with only Sweden as a positive role model for other countries. Both findings constitute a clear and unambiguous call for newsrooms to review and reconsider their internal practices.

Second, the high level of media concentration, both at the national and the regional and local level, is critically challenging news diversity. At the national level, not a single country reports concentration levels below 0.40 (concentration ratio), and in about one-third of the countries, competition appears weak, with very few media conglomerates controlling the news media markets. Despite earlier hopes and the vested optimism by some media companies, digitalisation has not delivered much to balancing media ownership concentration at the regional and local level.

Third, and of great concern, journalists' job security is at stake throughout the sample. Less than 50 per cent of scores have been reached for this indicator. Not surprisingly, not a single country reports a high degree of professional security for journalists, but half of them observe frequent changes of employment and only occasional long-term contracts.

“Lighthouses for democracy”

In his overall assessment of the 2021 findings of the MDM, the coordinator, Josef Trappel, professor for media policy and media economics at the University of Salzburg (Austria), concludes: *“Leading news media have not lost their importance in the vast sea of digital applications. To the contrary: Leading news media remain lighthouses for democracy. But they are weak with regard to gender balance and ownership concentration. And they can no longer provide secure jobs for journalists”.*

Methodology briefly explained

Freedom, equality, and control are core values of democracy. In the MDM, these values translate into communication functions. The media's information function is derived from freedom; the interest mediation function allowing for public discussion of diverse ideas responds to equality; and the function to act as a watchdog over the use and abuse of all types of power echoes with the control value. These three media functions turned into MDM dimensions are then measured on 30 indicators.

Scholarly teams in each participating country applied these 30 common indicators to their countries, using all available data sources for their reports. Furthermore, interviews were undertaken with journalists and editors-in-chief of the selected leading news media in each country. In a joint workshop, country teams discussed all indicators and attached scores (points) to each one (maximum of three points per indicator = maximum of 90 MDM points). Results provided for four country clusters:

- Tier-one cluster (some 80% of maximum scores): Denmark, Sweden, United Kingdom
- Tier-two cluster (some 70%): Canada, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands
- Tier-three cluster (some 60%): Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Iceland, Italy, Portugal, South Korea, Switzerland
- Tier-four cluster (some 50%): Australia, Chile, Greece, Hong Kong

Book publication by Nordicom

Full results of the Media for Democracy Monitor 2021 will be published by Nordicom – *The Media for Democracy Monitor 2021: How Leading News Media Survive Digital Transformation* (edited by Josef Trappel and Tales Tomaz; Gothenburg 2021)

Indicator findings are available at: <http://www.euromediagroup.org/mdm>

The Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) 2021 is a longitudinal research project on the performance of the media with regard to democracy. In 2011, communication and political scientists from 10 countries delivered a state-of-the-art report, based on relevant indicators and researched by national experts. Results have been published by Nordicom ([free and Open Access book](#)) and on the [website of the Euromedia Research Group](#).

In this new edition, experts from 18 countries applied the MDM indicators to their national media landscape, providing insights on the development of the media performance with regard to democracy over the decade of media digitalisation (2011–2020). Full results are released in April 2021. The [Dutch Journalism Fund](#) supports the research project.

The Euromedia Research Group is the academic host of the MDM project, which is coordinated and managed by Josef Trappel, University of Salzburg, and Werner A. Meier, University of Zurich.

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