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Journalists and Audiences in Portugal: Dissonant Perceptions

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Abstract: Research in Portugal found dissonance between the perceptions of news producers and consumers regarding the integrity of journalism, and a zone of consonance: a free press is essential to democracy. Journalists perceive their work as observing professional standards and being compliant with the legal and regulatory

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environment. News consumers reveal skepticism and limited awareness of the legal and production processes of the media, leading to generalised distrust of all media.

Keywords: democracy, media, journalism, audiences, Portugal

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Journalistes et publics au Portugal: perceptions dissonantes

Résumé : Une étude menée au Portugal a révélé des divergences entre la perception des producteurs et des consommateurs de l'information quant à l'intégrité du journalisme, ainsi qu'un point de consonance: la liberté de la presse est essentielle à la démocratie. Les journalistes perçoivent leur travail comme respectueux des normes professionnelles, et des lois et réglementations. Les consommateurs manifestent scepticisme, angoisse numérique, et méconnaissance des processus légaux et de production des médias ce qui engendre méfiance envers l'ensemble des médias.
Mots-clés : démocratie, médias, journalisme, publics, portugal

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Introduction

Portugal is a small, resource-constrained media market facing global competitors. Its geographical location brings it to a so-called Southern European media system alongside Spain, Italy, and Greece. However, when evaluated independently of its geographical location, Portugal emerges as an outlier in the cluster because it deviates from the Polarised Pluralist model in some characteristics (Hallin & Mancini, 2012; Brüggemann et al., 2014). The country reached a relative balance of political views, moving away from "political clientelism" implied by the cluster. Potentially, due to its "smallness," which led mainstream media to adopt a catch-all strategy (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2023) representing the whole spectrum of political views, to minimise audience loss, and legal restrictions on political organisations from owning media outlets (except print). Journalism is a highly regulated profession, only accessible to accredited and trained journalists.

Portugal ranks highly on the Freedom of the Press Index, among the top ten countries (RSF). Several studies found that overall trust in the media is higher in Portugal than the EU average (Newman, 2025; European Parliament, 2023). As our research explored, Portuguese journalists deem their work professional, rigorous, deontological, balanced, and addressing citizens' democratic informational needs as best they can with scarce resources. However, contrasting with the consensual opinion that the rigorous regulatory framework is observed and the high evaluations found in trustworthiness, our focus groups and interviews reveal that citizens' opinions markedly differ. Our research found that many citizens are profoundly sceptical and untrusting of the media – all media – some to the point of nihilism. The inconsistency between both sets of findings is clearly apparent in the present study. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report confirms the growing dissonance between journalists

and their audiences: trust in the media declined by 12 percentage points from a 66% baseline in 2015 to 54% in 2025.

This paper stems from findings of research conducted in Portugal within the scope of Mapping Media for Future Democracies (MeDeMAP, Grant agreement ID: 101094984), a research project anchored in the broader scholarly debate that addresses the crisis of journalism, the erosion of trust, and the pressures of platformisation. The research consortium funded by Horizon Europe explores the relationship between media and democracy across ten European countries: Italy, Germany, Austria, France, Ireland, Slovenia, Portugal, Estonia, the Czech Republic, and Poland. The MeDeMAP research provides country-based and comparative results across the ten countries on media legal and self-regulatory frameworks, as well as on media supply and demand. The paper uses case study methodology to extract from the research in Portugal an exemplary case which may be compared to analogous findings from other MeDeMAP countries. The paper examines how journalists envision their professional and working conditions and the perceptions of their own work, alongside how citizens in Portugal perceive the media in their daily lives. The economic resources and regulatory conditions of possibility are examined, and the tension between journalists and citizens is explored. The consonant and dissonant perceptions of journalistic integrity, as conveyed to the researchers by purveyors of news and news consumers, are addressed in seven parts. The first part presents the theoretical foundation of MeDeMAP by Carpentier and Wimmer (2024) and Doudaki et al. (2025). Secondly, the methodologies used in the research process are explained. The third part provides a brief overview of the present media context in Portugal. The fourth is dedicated to journalists and their perceptions of the current national and international context, and of their professional and personal challenges. In fifth place, extracts from citizens' views on journalism and the media are examined. In sixth place, the views of both groups are discussed. The Conclusions and Practical Recommendations propose a European Media Act that encompasses and enlarges the existing legislation and regulation, including EU-wide journalism standards and practices.

1. Theory

The European media system, to varying degrees and with different national nuances, confronts a multitude of challenges that are a constant reality for the industry, particularly in journalism — platform dependency (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022), decline or stagnation of trust (Newman, 2025), lack of financial sustainability (Cagé, 2016; UNESCO, 2021), and political interventions. These challenges are transforming journalism. Portuguese journalism is not immune to these challenges.

The MeDeMAP theoretical framework was established by Carpentier and Wimmer (2024) and developed in "The Grounds of the European Democracy–Media Nexus: Four Conditions of Possibility" (Doudaki et al., 2025). The four conditions of possibility proposed by the authors are: communication technologies; economic

resources and stability; a democratic media culture; and the legitimacy of democratic regulation. This paper addresses two conditions: financial resources and regulatory conditions, to analyse the tension between journalists and citizens in the context of Portugal. Carpentier and Wimmer (2024) adopted the Kantian concept of "conditions of possibility," which refers to the conditions for knowledge of natural phenomena. The concept was applied to communication and media studies, as part of a theoretical model to study the democracy–media nexus.

The authors argue that the conditions of possibility of democracy are 'not to be seen as "pure," "original" or determining outsides, but as enabling assemblages, whose fluid existence remains nevertheless necessary for the democratic assemblage to exist. Zooming in on the democracy–media nexus, the conditions of possibility for democratic media can be understood as the enabling (discursive and material) processes located outside media themselves that are conducive to the existence and functioning of media's democratic roles.

In Europe, as in many other parts of the world, the media operate within a capitalist economic setting, often being (profit-oriented) companies, the authors argue. The media are 'embedded in economic logics, with their production and distribution costs, management and marketing efforts, and resource-generation requirements. This also means that within capitalist logic, stable economies and well-functioning markets are important conditions of possibility for media to perform their democratic roles.

Digital technologies have been celebrated for their potential to limit imbalances in media production and consumption. However, increased concentration in the 'traditional' media market, combined with the enhanced presence and increasing power of a few digital intermediaries, leads to structural imbalances and market dysfunction (Iosifidis, 2016; Cantero Gamito, 2021; Seipp, 2023). Troublesome endogenous and exogenous factors threaten the sustainability of the national media ecosystem and are a risk to media pluralism. While media companies depend on advertising revenue, legacy media revenue continues to erode, and digital advertising revenue increasingly flows to large technology companies like Google and Facebook, which can offer advertisers unduplicated reach, targeted advertising, and low rates. The economic hardships of media production have resulted in increasingly precarious labour conditions for journalists, disruption of stable employment (O'Donnell & Zion, 2019; Steiner & Chadha, 2021; Rick & Hanitzsch, 2023; Rick, 2024; Araujo, 2025) and a growing dependency on freelance work. Technological platforms disrupted the business models of media companies by accumulating the "gatekeeping" power. That power refers to both the supply and demand sides of media. Technological platforms comprised part of the advertising income previously obtained by the supply side and the personal data owned by the demand side.

While citizens, based on our findings, generally agree on the importance of media in fulfilling their democratic roles, the tensions between news-as-commercial-product and news-as-public-good, coupled with the public's reluctance to pay for news, remain unresolved.

Journalism has always been a paradoxical product. Journalism is non-rivalrous: one person's news consumption does not deplete it for others. It is also almost non-excludable: even if someone doesn't pay for it, there is almost always a way to consume it. These are the signs of a public good. Its economic model and survivability depend on controlling access and providing it to those who pay for it. Yet its civic function depends on wide distribution to inform life in a democracy. Raghu argues that journalism in 2025 is no longer a public good. There is still value in journalism, but the market to sustain it has failed (Raghu, 2025).

Artificial intelligence now poses new challenges to journalism. The effort, time, and resources that journalists put into adding a sensemaking layer to raw information are indistinguishable from grammatically correct internet chatter (Raghu, 2025).

The abundance of free content online discourages audiences from paying for news (Himma-Kadakas & Kõuts, 2015). Among Europeans who access news online, 70% use only free news content or news services online (European Parliament, 2022). This makes it difficult for a big part of the news media to deploy viable organisational and business models. Still, some legacy media organisations in large markets seem to be maintaining their leading positions, relying on paid subscriptions and offering a freemium model. This is different for most broadcasters and a considerable part of digital-born news media, which remain free for viewers and readers.

The involvement of the state or the EU in restraining monopolistic tendencies in media markets through regulation and its application is seen as enabling this condition of possibility for democratic media. Voices from the sector — in the EU, Australia (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2018, 2022), Canada (Government of Canada, 2023), California, and the UK — recognise that the media faces systemic challenges from large platforms and search engines that are imperilling democracy, as demonstrated in electoral campaigns and referendums.

Technologies reconfigured the formats, creating an old-new division between traditional and digital media, which is misleading nowadays. Although the imbalance has been noted, regulation remains fragmented and patchy. The current legislative framework imposes more regulation on the "traditional" media as it is hindered in establishing borders for "borderless" technologies. Yet, in conflict with pure liberalisation market logic, the public interest, as a pillar of the EU's social model, nudges the EU to undertake specific actions focused on co-regulatory practices and increased interventions.

Political anti-democratic shifts within EU countries could further trigger a supranational legislative framework to counter the misuse of power and limitations on press freedom, and to achieve overarching legitimacy. With the European Media and Freedom Act, the EU took measures to address media freedom. Notwithstanding the impressive legal and regulatory work in the eyes of journalists, media leaders, and academics, it seems insufficient to stem the outflow of advertising investment, content, trust, and users away from journalistic enterprises toward large platforms.

Yet the European Union's concrete actions to address the current power imbalances remain to be determined.

2. Methodology

MeDeMAP employed a multi-method research design combining data science, quantitative analysis, qualitative approaches, and participatory action research across ten EU countries. In Portugal, data on the supply side (news producers) were gathered through n=13 qualitative interviews with journalists and media managers across different media types. The data collection period spanned May to October 2024. Quantitative data were gathered through a nationwide online survey, which received 89 responses. The invitations to participate were primarily distributed through two prominent journalism institutions in Portugal. Both maintain extensive databases of journalists: the Accreditation Committee (Comissão da Carteira Profissional do Jornalista), with 4,276 accredited journalists and the Journalists' Union, with 1,731 members. The data collection process in Portugal for this stage proceeded from February to June 2025. Demand-side data (news consumers) comprised n=10 qualitative interviews and focus groups with a total of n=37 participants, categorised by age and level of interest in the news. The data collection period was from July to October 2024.

3. Context

The economic resources of the domestic news purveyors are cause for concern. Stability is not assured. Media concentration in Portugal at several levels influences financial stability and poses risks to pluralism. First, the concentration of online news by the digital gatekeepers that already control a sizable and growing share of the online advertising market. Second, concentration of ad-spend among a few domestic operators (Cádima, 2024), leading to decapitalisation and bankruptcies. Third, on the one hand, the dominance of the ad market by the broadcast, pay TV, and cable operators (PSM and private), and, on the other hand, by the EU-designated gatekeepers – very large platforms, social/video networks, news podcasts, and AI chatbots.

TV remains the news source of 67% of the audience (Pinto-Martinho et al., 2025) and absorbs almost a third (29,7% in 2023) of the domestic ad spend (Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social, 2024), still insufficient to prevent a precarious financial and economic situation of the two major private operators, which are close to bankruptcy.

The major media groups, which include the two major private TV operators, are adapting to digital and to the AI challenge. They are dependent on advertising revenue (Impresa Media Group: 65%; Media Capital: 66%) (Entidade Reguladora para a

Comunicação Social, 2024). The media press group Trust in News declared bankruptcy in 2025 due to substantial debts to Social Security (Expresso, 2025). Major Impresa groups epitomise this plight. Despite owning the profitable Expresso weekly newspaper, it also owns the loss-making SIC TV and cable channels. It closed 2024 with a loss of €66.2 million, with debt increasing 13% to €131 million (Impresa, 2024). A 10% cost-cutting plan was announced. This situation prompted the Italian Media for Europe (MFE) group to acquire a stake in Impresa (ECO, 2025).

The gatekeepers account for 69% of news consumption (Pinto-Martinho et al., 2025) and 58,2% of the digital ad market (Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social, 2024). Their online dominance reduces the online revenues of the legacy brands. Portugal's digital advertising market share controlled by Google/Alphabet and Facebook/Meta is estimated by Obercom at 70% of the total, equivalent to 19,4% of the total advertising market (OberCom, 2021, 2022). Other estimates dispute this figure, calling it too high. According to Statista (2025), Google alone has a significant share of the total advertising market, largely due to the dominance of search advertising, which is forecasted to reach over $545 million in 2025, a figure which is around 50% of the total ad expenditure of €900 million for the year estimated by MAGNA (Jornal de Negócios, 2024).

In a bid to support the media, the government's Action Plan for Social Communication (Governo de Portugal, 2024) includes 30 measures to enhance media literacy and empower citizens, including a system supporting 50% of media subscriptions to expand access to journalistic content.

Journalism in Portugal is a highly regulated profession. The Portuguese Constitution (Constituição da República Portuguesa, 1976) lays the foundation for numerous laws, some of them redundant and repetitive, that are relevant to journalism and emphasise accountability. Some laws, like the Press Act (Lei n.º 2/99, de 12 de janeiro — Lei de Imprensa, 1999), are outdated and have failed to address the rise of online media.

The Constitution guarantees the right to freely express thoughts and seek information. Freedom of expression must not be hindered by censorship. The Civil Code protects individuals' privacy and reputation. The Penal Code criminalises defamation and privacy violations. The Journalist's Statute defines journalists as those whose primary, paid role is to gather and disseminate news. The Journalists' Accreditation Committee issues the professional accreditation of journalists and enforces compliance with ethical and deontological standards. ERC, the media regulator (Entidade Reguladora da Comunicação Social), oversees journalistic rigour and public responsibility. Journalists must observe other legislation, including that concerning television, radio, public service, and electronic communications.

4. The Perception of Journalists

The MeDeMAP interviews and an online questionnaire with journalists reveal that most are primarily concerned with the financial and economic context in which they operate, rather than political pressure, which they do not consider a threat to freedom of expression. Censorship is absent. The legitimacy of democratic regulation is not a cause for concern.

– We do our journalism in peace. We're not bothered by political powers, and that gives you room to do your job. (PT-C.2-3)

– Many freedoms, rights and guarantees have been won, and I believe will remain firm in Portugal. (PT-J-2)

Indeed, Portugal is among the top ranks of the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index, on par with the Nordic countries. In 2025, the country ranked eighth among 180 countries. The report considers that "press freedom is robust in Portugal and journalists can report without restrictions," but that journalists face economic, legal, and security challenges (RSF, 2025).

The research confirms that journalism's primary concern is the dearth of personal and sectoral opportunities in a small market subject to competition from online extraterritorial operators and to the media sector's overall financial and economic fragility. The speed of information processing is now instantaneous and highly competitive, requiring a concentration of effort on the immediate. Journalism exists in a state of perpetual urgency, and many journalists are exhausted. Harsh working conditions prompt experienced professionals to leave due to financial insecurity and risks to mental health. Newsroom morale is affected by staff shortages, long working hours, low pay, dismissals, litigation, and burnout. Journalists hold their profession in high esteem and express great admiration and appreciation for their work, which they value as rigorous and professionally compliant.

– The fundamentals are the total rejection of sensationalism, the rigour of the information, the concern to listen to various sources, to contradict each other. (PT-C-5)

Rigour, credibility and factuality are widely invoked principles applied through different methods of fact-checking, in most cases conducted by individual journalists, and rarely, by a separate department or the editorial hierarchy.

– We try the primary sources of information. If they are documents, perfect. If they are people, we always try to have them on the record. (PT-C-3)

The financial instability of domestic legacy and digital brands affects content production. Time and funding constraints limit investigative journalism, exacerbated by newsroom downsizing and the speed of today's instantaneous information process.

— The immediacy has taken hold in journalism as a result of pressure from social networks. (PT-C-6)

Cheaper and faster political coverage often overshadows in-depth reporting. While international conflicts like those in Ukraine, Gaza, or Iran gain attention, many citizens struggle to see their relevance to their daily challenges, except when petrol prices rise. Original reporting is increasingly replaced by cheaper formats featuring specialists and commentators, leading to a perception that facts are mixed with opinions, ultimately diminishing trust in journalism and, by extension, its appeal and economic relevance. Investigative journalism is considered a milestone that can trigger important, even decisive, political, social, and judicial processes.

– Many stories are not exclusively based on leaks but start from there. Data and documents, sometimes provided through means that can be questioned, may include information protected by privileged confidentiality. We are sure that we are on the right side, defending public interest. There are many risks here. Whenever these strong stories prove wrong, which can happen sometimes, it's hard to deal with because those lines of investigation basically are coming from the prosecutors. (PT-J-3)

Journalists across all media regard journalism as the "backbone" of democracy, connecting public debate with citizens' political participation, which is often viewed as a service to democracy alongside the journalistic production chain. The online questionnaire corroborated these principled views: 53.9% of journalists say their medium allows the public to express opinions or comment on the published content. However, some journalists acknowledge that incentivising citizen involvement in serious debate is mostly a preserve of a few morning radio shows. This activity is most evident in the lead-up to and after elections. Journalists say they are paying more attention to and placing greater importance on national and local contexts (“very frequently” — 31.5% and 32.6%, respectively). At the same time, European politics and other forms of civil society activism are less covered, except for labour disputes.

The performative function of journalism is acknowledged as it can influence the political outcome of specific events. Journalism collects knowledge about the present and preserves memories of the past. The mediating function is stated. Journalists are responsible for providing context and nuance, conveying knowledge about complex issues in contemporary societies, and stimulating debate. The under-representation of large minority groups is recognised. Journalists should offer the public the opportunity to make more informed decisions.

– The purpose of the media is to understand where people come from, their context and the context behind complex issues, the nuances. (PT-J-4)

The quantitative survey revealed that direct interactions between journalists and the audience are relatively rare. Just over a quarter of respondents indicated that their

newsrooms occasionally organise debates involving audience members. This could partly be due to a lack of financial resources or a legislative framework that discourages interaction with the public. Additionally, public involvement in media production (scheduling, strategic planning, and content production) is infrequent. This suggests that journalists still perceive themselves more as gatekeepers and intermediaries rather than as facilitators of audience engagement in decision-making. Nonetheless, there is notable support for enhancing audience participation.

Many professionals believe journalism goes beyond factual reporting, as original reporting is overshadowed by cheaper formats and non-journalist commentators who often mix facts with opinion, undermining trust in journalism. Additionally, journalists now frequently express their personal opinions, positioning themselves as active participants rather than just intermediaries.

– *More people are commenting instead of doing journalism. They sometimes reveal their political point of view, and might lose their credibility. It's often a way of economising.* (PT-C-3)

Journalists feel powerless in the face of gatekeeper competition. The fragility of the business environment is the greatest risk to media pluralism. Sustainable financial models and managerial strategies are missing.

– *There's no real freedom for journalistic companies if they are not financially independent, stable, and profitable.* (PT-C-3)

– *We don't have enough resources and enough money to fund the journalism that is needed in a democratic society.* (PT-J-6)

Investment in up-to-date technology and human skills is considered fundamental to compete.

– *The technological condition is linked to the financial problem. It's impossible to be a major player without great technology. Not just A.I. but also the human skills to deliver.* (PT-C.2-3)

Many advocate different forms of State support of the media, while others also propose charitable contributions from corporations. Some voices fear governments will use state funding to influence the media and that citizens may be wary of trusting publicly financed media, despite public service TV being the most trusted news source, yet not the most watched. Community media often applies for national or EU grants to fund specific investigative projects.

– *People are not open to public funds because they think that the media will be connected to governments and will write only what the government wants, something that it's difficult to get out of people's minds.* (PT-J-4)

Journalists and media managers lay bare the inability of national regulators to enforce effective market-based solutions to the extra-territorial challenge posed by the very large online platforms. The government, business leaders and journalists' associations recognise that national measures are not enough to stem the decline. Only coordinated action at the EU level will be able to protect the media from gatekeeper dominance.

— We are dependent on Google and Meta in terms of web traffic. Every time they change the algorithm, our traffic goes up or down. They get the largest advertising investment. So they will probably kill journalism. (PT-C-3)

The public service interviewee (PT-C-1) argued that the media funding crisis in the EU should not be resolved with more public subsidies, but rather with EU-led negotiations with the digital platforms. The threat to media freedom and pluralism is evident in the power of technology and deregulation, as well as in the difficulty of regulating large transnational platforms. Europe has made some insufficient efforts that must be coordinated between the economic blocs.

– We are not the gatekeepers any longer; democracy is at stake. (PT-C.2-3)

5. The Consumers' View

The focus groups conveyed a unanimous perception: the free press is essential to democracy and is important to society. Participants actively advocated the ideal of democracy. The role of the media was considered pivotal to reinforcing essential democratic principles, such as freedom of speech and expression. A connection between the media, democratic governance, and civic engagement was acknowledged.

— All media sectors are crucial, even the other opinions, commentators, ratings, it's about knowing how to listen and, for us, the ones receiving the information, knowing what to do with it. (PT_FG4_P7)

However, journalism is not perceived as a beacon of trustworthiness. Most focus group participants reveal disorientation, insecurity, and distrust of the media. The discourse is often steeped in scepticism and suspicion, attributable to a multitude of factors.

— The big media, especially television, can no longer contribute much to democracy. They are all subject to market laws. (FG1_P7_PT).

There is widespread fear of being misled by fake news. Mobile phones are "filled with bad news". TV is full of "darkness". Scepticism shapes media consumption as audiences seek accurate and reliable information through personal reflection and cross-referencing sources. The quest for "truth" often leads to comparing free

headlines and leads from various sources. Enterprising individual citizens emulate a well-known fact-checking brand active online and on a popular broadcast TV show.

— *I don't trust any of them. I do my own research from other sources. The entire system is biased and far from credible.* (PT_Int2)

– *Whenever I want to know about a news story, I search multiple sources and do cross-checking.* (PT_FG4_P2)

The relationship that individuals maintain with the media can be characterised as predominantly unfavourable, primarily due to the often-sensitive nature of media content associated with conflicts and societal issues. The gap between the public's perception and journalists' self-assessment may stem in part from a lack of public recognition of journalism's deontology and ethical standards. Journalists' accountability to the law is not acknowledged. Journalists are accused of partiality, lack of independence, and personal bias, and are even described as "puppets" (PT_FG3_P10). Some argue that the journalists' financial dependence on employers challenges their independence:

— *They depend on whatever their boss asks of them.* (FG1_P3_PT)

The interviewees showed a clear understanding that a cataclysmic disruption was brought about by the capture of the news market by the digital gatekeepers and by other digital profiteers. Concerns are often discussed in relation to the algorithmic approach and the outcomes it brings, such as increased reporting speed and the polarising echo chambers it creates. Despite its enormous reach, the research indicates audiences have a high level of mistrust of online news, driven by concerns about political manipulation, misinformation, online scams, AI-generated fakes, and unreliable algorithms, leading to digital angst.

— *The algorithm is a disservice to democracy.* (PT_FG1_P1)

The significance and mission of the media and journalism are subject to scrutiny. Domestic factors contribute to the disconnect with the written word, including historically low newspaper readership, the dominance of TV, and the widespread rejection of subscriptions in favour of freely available content, albeit much of it disregarded as untrustworthy. The print press is still somehow associated with seriousness.

— *The fact that it's written makes it seem more credible; we don't see the [talking head], we don't hear the tone of voice. We read it in our heads.* (PT_FG4_P2)

Some media sources gained greater trustworthiness among citizens, such as the public service broadcaster RTP and Lusa (2024), the public service news agency majority-owned by the State. The fact that citizens directly support broadcast PSM through a tax included in the electricity bill may contribute to a sense of ownership.

More local news on national channels is demanded. Many complain that traditional media outlets lack representation of local and personal situations and problems, even though everyday events and issues at the national and local levels are adequately covered by television news, the tabloid press and some cable news channels. Others perceive the media as providing too little investigative journalism, others as "too much politics", and still others as too much foreign news.

— *We're bombarded with global news, and we're paralysed. We don't yet know how to solve it.* (PT_FG1_P6)

It was clear that audiences would like to reach reputable media, but that access is behind paywalls. Plenty of research has shown that most people would prefer not to have to pay for a subscription to any media (Groot Kormelink, 2023; Coddington & Lewis, 2023). Most focus group participants did not pay for subscriptions to reputable sources, digital or traditional. The advertising-supported, profit-oriented model is viewed with scepticism. It is argued that it may jeopardise media independence and the reliability of the news.

Although legacy media brands are seen as more reputable, content can sometimes be perceived as misleading, as it does not specifically address "reality", the "actual story", but works "only" as sensationalist clickbait to increase advertising revenue.

— *When you read the news, it has nothing to do with the headline, or it wasn't the same. They have this tendency to create sensationalist headlines.* (FG4_P10_PT)

Discomfort regarding the different programming typologies is apparent. One argued that political debates should not include commentary because that is not "information". But another criticised what is perceived as an absence of thought-provoking programmes. Political debates that allow discourteous behaviour, obscure discourse, and interruptions are perceived by viewers as a technique to create on-screen conflict to improve ratings. Debates that lack a clear purpose are ultimately perceived as diminishing the journalistic mission.

— *What is happening is a kind of entertainment journalism.* (PT_Int1)

— *They talk over each other. This way of debating bores me. It doesn't matter what the past is. I am interested in the future. How are we going to improve?* (PT_FG2_P9)

Some participants entrust the media with the mission of explaining the world and disseminating knowledge.

— *The promotion of motivation. The best path to motivation is knowledge. Instead of debates, explaining politics, taking the language down a notch and explaining things and ideas. A little simpler.* (PT_FG3_P7)

The low level of trust, or plain distrust, expressed by many participants does not align with the high level of trust in the news found by the Reuters Digital News Report. But the Report also reveals trust has been trending downward since 2022. Portugal descended to eighth place in a ranking of 47 countries.

Only a minority of focus group participants openly admit to watching broadcast television, but TV remains the main source of news for most, on par with online news. TV is often associated with conflict and sensationalism in its perceived pursuit of higher ratings. Participants argued that the picture that emerges from television is generally not positive, contaminated by the "bad news is good news" principle. Even when all TV channels present the same statistics and complex figures, as in the State budget, they are imagined as presenting different figures, when in fact, they are showing different analyses. The proliferation of news channels and political shows creates choice overload.

— *The debates are not conducted in a way that brings ideas to the fore, but are there rather to create an audience. Criticism that drives ratings.* (PT_FG3_P2)

6. Discussion

The analysis of perceptions on the supply and demand sides reveals three critical zones of dissonance in which journalists and citizens hold divergent views, and one zone of confluence between the producers and consumers of news. The suggested demarcation of the three zones helps us to better understand major issues between the two groups. Acknowledging and engaging in discourse about the dissonances can enhance awareness of significant perception gaps, facilitating the dissemination of salient knowledge about them.

The first zone of dissonance concerns journalists' positive perception of their work as rigorous, factual, and ethical. Journalists must be accredited by a legal body and employed by a registered medium to practice professionally, while "citizen journalists" lack legal recognition. Journalists report adherence to ethical standards that align with the audience's expectations of journalism. However, the observance of a robust legal framework and the self-perceived effort to respect deontology and be rigorous and truthful does not shield journalists from allegations of partiality and bias by the audience. Consumers reveal generalised scepticism and distrust of all media. Sentiment is not favourable to journalists and their reputation. Positive journalism is rarely praised. Mistrust nudges citizens to cross-check information from multiple sources through a cumbersome, fallible process to verify accuracy, even from reputable brands. Mistrust, however, can also be viewed through a positive lens: it fosters critical thinking and promotes media literacy.

A second zone of dissonance concerns the perception of the media as an enterprise operating in a competitive market. The laws of the market are not understood or dismissed as flawed in favour of profitability and power. To be profitable is seen as

tainting media independence. The advertising-supported business model is discarded because it is perceived as based on sensationalism to increase ratings and does not reflect "reality". The subscription-based model is discarded because it relies on the clickbait technique, which is perceived as pernicious. This mistrust happens at a critical moment. Journalists have been warning about the financial precarity of their industry, which is, in most cases, not profitable. The clash of perceptions is clear: the reality of news production requires explanation through relevant communication.

A third zone of dissonance addresses a distorted public understanding of what pluralism means, a probable result of chaotic and obscure debates that sometimes devolve into angry matches. The message and the purpose of the debate often remain unclear. Audience members articulated concerns regarding the significance of debating, the discussion of conflicting viewpoints, and the venting of criticism. Media coverage of competing perspectives contributes to a sense of disillusionment, rendering serious debates seemingly futile, boring or sensationalist.

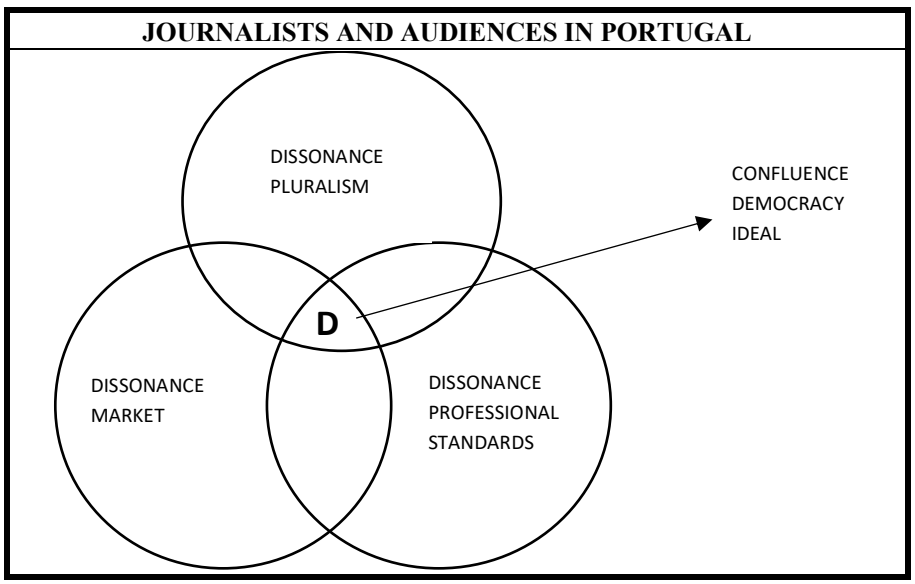


Figure 1. *Journalists and audiences in Portugal: three zones of dissonance, one zone of confluence* (Authors)

Journalists face many challenges, professional and personal. They are the intermediaries of mostly bad news. Debates led by journalists, mostly on TV and focused on niche audiences, do not promote the will of many to watch and do not favour understanding the virtues of democratic debate and the pluralism of ideas. Moreover, the global landscape and the negativity conveyed through media channels can exacerbate consumer frustration.

Citizens are sceptic, confused, feel powerless, and are at times nihilistic. This dynamic creates tension between journalists, who must illuminate the realities faced by citizens using the resources at their disposal, and the anxiety, the digital angst, experienced by the audiences. The audience seeks simple explanations of political life, to understand their daily environment and carry on, and to understand, in simple terms, the complexities of the contemporary world, which often encompasses negative and contentious elements. This phenomenon highlights the media's reluctance or incapacity to offer tangible solutions. Addressing this issue requires adopting a more solution-oriented approach to journalism and enhancing the media's explanatory role.

Conclusions and Practical Recommendations

The theoretical framework of this paper, as formulated by Carpentier and Wimmer (2024), defines four conditions of possibility for the European Democracy-Nexus: communication technologies; economic resources and stability; a democratic media culture; and the legitimacy of democratic regulation. The case study analysis is made from the perspective of two of the four conditions of possibility: economic resources and stability, and the legitimacy of democratic regulation. The analysis concludes that the condition of possibility formulated as economic sources and stability is not fully met in present-day Portugal. The condition of possibility formulated as the legitimacy of democratic regulation is fully met.

Regulatory conditions place Portugal within the top ten countries of the RSF World Press Freedom Index, an outlier in the context of the Southern European countries. Journalists consider that scarce financial resources are the main threat to democracy itself, and that can only be resolved within the context of the European Union. Journalists also call for the adoption of common standards and practices across the Union. While citizens generally agree that the media fulfils their democratic role, the tension between news-as-commercial-product and news-as-public-good, coupled with the public's reluctance to pay for news, is a serious obstacle to the dissemination of quality media. Freely available news bites – titles, headers – regardless of media or platform, are not trustworthy. "The algorithm", i.e. the power of the gatekeepers, is considered by journalists and citizens alike as a threat to democracy. The financial condition of possibility is considered to be crucial for the preservation and development of a media ecosystem that addresses the needs and aspirations of citizens, and enables and legitimises the democratic process.

In this context, we make two practical recommendations. The first deals with the technique and methods of journalism, and the second focuses on EU-wide media regulation. The recommendations are addressed to media organisations, journalists, and policymakers at the national and EU levels. But first, we recall the findings that sustain the recommendations.

The extensive legislative framework emerging from the Constitution protects solid press freedom. Journalists understand that they do not face political restrictions

and perceive their work as respectful and observant of professional standards, compliant with the legal and regulatory environment. The journalists' benign view of their work is met by news consumers with mistrust, calling into question the integrity of the journalism profession and the media, legacy or online. Journalists work in a fragile economic and financial environment. Resources and stability were found to be the determining factors influencing perceptions and practices. Bankruptcy or shutdown are latent possibilities, downsized newsrooms, low pay, and burnout are common. The research reflects professional dissatisfaction, and journalists fear for their personal and professional well-being, as well as for the future of democracy.

Citizens feel "digital angst". Audiences display marked nihilism and contradictory sentiments regarding the media. Many deem the media untrustworthy, manipulated by commercial, political, and malevolent actors of all stripes aligned with powerful political and economic interests. However, many are aware of the impact of digitisation on journalism, which they perceive as negative for the work of journalists, on the quality of news production, and on the misinterpretation it can enable and amplify by creating anarchic echo chambers and further polarisation. But unanimously and vigorously, audiences believe that a free press is essential for democracy.

The different perceptions between journalists and audiences suggest a media representational gap between journalists and the public: the public does not feel represented by the media. This gap broadly aligns with the political representational gap across all demographic groups between parliamentarians and citizens, as revealed by a Guenther (2024) study in 27 European countries, including Portugal.

First recommendation. To improve the relationship between journalists and audiences, to investigate the causes of the perception gap between journalism and audiences, to improve the role of journalism in citizen participation in the democratic process, and to design new journalism presentational techniques and methods.

Maximum attention, effort and means must be invested in investigating the underlying causes of the perception gap between news suppliers and consumers in the EU that corrodes trust and revenue. The tasks ahead are to learn from the digital disrupters, to innovate and adapt the techniques and methods of journalism to catch attention and engagement, to improve the professional relationship between journalists and audiences by addressing the complexity of societal challenges that demand a level of critical engagement, contextual comprehension and nuance that is not always reflected in media portrayals, leading to a chasm between audience expectations and the representations they encounter.

Media regulation is advocated. Authors like Carpentier and Wimmer (2024) argue that the internet taints the "multiplicity and diversity of media assemblages with suspicion", or Da Empoli (2025) who states that "public debate has turned into a jungle where anything goes, and the only rules are those of the internet platforms", while Applebaum says that the internet is captive and manipulated by advertisers,

leading to calls for internet regulation, but not of freedom of expression (DW News, 2025).

The views of the Portuguese government, journalists, and lawyers are strategic. The root causes of the supply-side financial malaise and the digital angst felt by consumers are two sides of the same coin: the uncompetitive practices by the extraterritorial large platforms that destroy the business models of domestic media across the EU, corroding trust and revenue.

Second recommendation: To establish the EU Media Union. A comprehensive new EU media act that addresses the current geopolitical and geoeconomic imbalances, encompassing and enlarging the existing legislative package, harmonising and defining cross-cutting rules for the media sector across the EU.

The fact that the EU presently assumes a supra-regulatory role does not yet fully resolve global challenges (Doudaki, 2024). A monitoring exercise by the EC, as the current legislation enshrines, is positive as a prerequisite for new legislative measures. But it falls short of what is needed to face today's challenges. The current EU legal framework focuses on rights and competitiveness. But EU companies cannot compete on a level playing field with the gatekeepers. Media managers do not demand more piecemeal subsidies, but an EU-wide act. Freeing up regulatory power over extraterritorial monopolies by imposing mandatory negotiations (bargaining), possibly through mandatory revenue-sharing models that also include AI scenarios, is advised. EU media need to recover value lost to gatekeepers. The EU regulatory power must face the challenge posed by the digital empires and lead negotiations on behalf of EU media organisations.

Is a Media Union possible? Are there other measures, besides subsidies to public services by state or private actors, that can mitigate the decline in trust in the media, plurality, freedom of expression, the essential components of European democracy and culture? The main legislative initiative would be the creation of a single market for media services, ensuring fair competition, promoting diversity and freedom of expression. Given the national prerogatives enshrined in the treaties, it is possible to enact a media law to operationalise and resolve disagreements between the various national regimes, as well as to address the impact of digital-driven globalisation and the consequent power of the gatekeepers, and other issues presently absent from, or external to, the existing legislation.

It is indeed possible, even desirable, to adopt a European Union (EU) act (directive or regulation?) governing the media (Bessa, 2024). Over time, the EU implemented several legislative frameworks governing the media. A new media EU law requires a formal legislative process involving EU institutions, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the European Union. The EU Treaties do not foresee limitations on the possibility of adopting EU-wide measures in the media sector. The law would address the current divergent regulatory solutions that lead to fragmentation of the internal market. Despite the sector's specificities, the fundamental freedoms of the Treaties apply to the media sector. There is shared

competence between the Union and the Member States in this matter. The media sector is fundamental to the development of the internal market; it is a liberalised sector open to competition. Thus, it will be possible to achieve greater harmonisation on this issue, creating greater stability and legal certainty, as was done in the audiovisual component. There may, however, be some national specificities, especially linked to the public service model and its financing. Still, these issues can be properly safeguarded, as is currently the case, in EU legislation, and therefore do not constitute a significant obstacle (Bessa, 2024).

A new European Media Act that encompasses and enlarges the existing legislation is needed and possible. Without interfering with existing rights, it should strive to promote and develop a sustainable media market economy via a common EU regulatory environment that fosters EU-wide competition.

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