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Exploring the Whole Picture: A Contemporary Perspective on Democracy, Societal Change, and Europe`s Information

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Maren BEAUFORT
MA, PhD, Austrian Academy of Sciences
AUSTRIA
e-mail: maren.beaufort@oeaw.ac.at

Abstract: Contemporary societal transformations are reshaping both the perception and practice of democracy, giving rise to distinct democratic cultures that correspond to different views of how a democratic public sphere should be constituted; accordingly, the roles assigned to information media vary. This article examines how democratic orientations emerge, coexist, and empirically shape political communication environments. Findings suggest that communication is more democratically functional where information supply aligns with citizens' perspectives, with implications for epistemic integrity, democratic resilience, and the quality of public spheres. Misalignment appears to be associated with news avoidance, declining trust, and structural inequalities, while broader value shifts reshape patterns of polarization. Nuanced, integrated analyses of democratic information ecosystems are essential for supporting a vital and resilient citizenry.

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Keywords : audience studies, new roles of news media, supply-demand-nexus of information, informed citizens or empowered and networked citizens, notions of democracy as determinants of participation behavior and information use

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Explorer l'ensemble du tableau : une perspective contemporaine sur la démocratie, les mutations de la société et l'information en Europe

Résumé : Les transformations sociétales contemporaines redéfinissent à la fois la perception et la pratique de la démocratie, donnant lieu à des cultures démocratiques distinctes qui correspondent à différentes conceptions de la manière dont une sphère publique démocratique doit être constituée ; en conséquence, les rôles attribués aux médias d'information varient. Cet article examine comment les orientations démocratiques émergent, coexistent et façonnent empiriquement les environnements de communication politique. Les résultats suggèrent que la communication est plus fonctionnelle d'un point de vue démocratique lorsque l'offre informationnelle s'aligne sur les perspectives des citoyens, avec des implications pour l'intégrité épistémique, la résilience démocratique et la qualité des sphères publiques. Les désajustements semblent être associés à l'évitement de l'information, à une diminution de la confiance et à des inégalités structurelles, tandis que des évolutions plus larges des valeurs reconfigurent les dynamiques de polarisation. Des analyses nuancées et intégrées des écosystèmes informationnels démocratiques sont essentielles pour soutenir une citoyenneté vivante et résiliente.

Mots-clés : études des publics, nouveaux rôles des médias d'information, nexus entre l'offre et la demande d'information, citoyen informé versus citoyen autonome et en réseau, conceptions de la démocratie comme déterminants des comportements de participation et des usages informationnels

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Introduction

Contemporary social transformations are reshaping the understanding and practice of democracy, giving rise to emerging democratic cultures that complement the status quo in most European democracies, while at the same time posing new and evolving challenges across all dimensions of their information ecosystems. Since different democratic cultures correspond to distinct perspectives on their respective public spheres, information media are ascribed specific roles, functions and expectations, grounded normatively in democratic theory and reflected empirically in actual information supply, its structural and regulatory frameworks, and demand-side patterns. This research explores the importance of aligning the manifestations of different democratic cultures across all dimensions of information environments—explicitly incorporating users' perspectives in their roles as citizens, including their expectations, information diets, and democratic practices—particularly under high-choice conditions.

1. Changing Notions of Democracy

The strength of democracy is deeply rooted in a healthy public sphere, largely supported by the media. This pro-democratic media function is upheld by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which underscores the media's key role in fostering democratic discourse. As contemporary societal transformations are driven by multifaceted processes of change that also affect the news media and information landscape—shaped in particular by technological and economic dynamics as well as cultural shifts in which traditional values give way to post-materialist or self-expression values—the entire European information environment is undergoing profound reconfiguration (Castells, 2018; Dahlgren, 2005; Ekström et al., 2022; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Inglehart, 2020; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Inglehart, 2018; Theocharis et al., 2023). An important trajectory of development is linked to evolving understandings and practices of democracy within European societies, which enhances the concept of liberal representative democracy—forming the basis of most contemporary European constitutions—by integrating democratic cultures that emphasize more inclusive and autonomous engagement in societal processes. Beyond authoritarian reinterpretations, notably participatory elements and forms strengthen individuality and support the articulation and networking of personal concerns, fostering continuous civic engagement from the bottom-up. This move transcends both the closure of debate through majority decision-making and the mere delegation of authority in selected spheres of governance, reflecting citizens' increasing desire to assume responsibility for shaping their social and material worlds (Bennett & Livingston, 2023; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Inglehart, 2020; Loader et al., 2016; Santos & Mercea, 2024; Zukin et al., 2006). Therefore, this research concentrates on the two orientations currently most widespread in European societies: the liberal-representative model—supported by an average of about two-thirds of citizens—and the participatory model, which constitutes the predominant orientation for about one-third (EVS/WVS, 2024). Even though numerous classifications and typologies exist—for instance, the European Social Survey (2023) distinguishes also social democracy, with its emphasis on equality, from populist democracy, with its emphasis on anti-elitism—the representative and participatory orientations, regarded since ancient Greece as democratic prototypes, account for a substantial share of existing models (Held, 2006; Davis, 2019), and the distinction between them has gained renewed salience amid ongoing dynamics of social change. While empirically the (more liberal) participatory approach does not stand in opposition to liberal-representative democracy or to the institutions safeguarding civil, social, and political rights—rather complementing them through autonomous participation and bottom-up civic engagement, especially at the local level and within specific regulatory fields—analytically contrasting the two allows for a nuanced assessment of how different notions of democracy are accompanied by distinct democratic logics of action; and in turn, entail different normative visions of democratic public spheres as well as different expectations regarding the roles of the media (Figure 1).

Notion of democracy	
Liberal-representative	Participatory
Who participates?	
Elite (Proportional to people's will expressed at the voting booth)	As many members of society as possible
... in what form of the public sphere?	
Monolithic/homogeneous public sphere	Diverse public sphere
... in what predominant social structure?	
Group-based society Connected by ideology (Strong tides)	Individualized society Connected by common ideas about specific issues (Weak ties)
... in which process?	
Marketplace of ideas Transparent debate on topics of general relevance, defined on a top-down basis	Inclusion Social networking of topics of generel relevance, defined on a bottom-up basis
... with what style of discussion?	
Objective, factual, and rational debate	Open, sometimes heated and emotional controversial discourse
... with what result?	
Majority rule (End of debate)	Continuous civic engagement (Even after the decision has been made)
... with what primary political action by members of society?	
Collective action Voting, party membership, formal activism (top-down), political involvement driven by interest in formal politics	Connective action Articulation, self-oranisation and networking of issues of personal importance, informal activism (bottom-up), civic engagement
... with what primary role?	
Informed citizen Who delegates decision-making power to political representatives and monitoring power to the media	Empowered and networked citizen Who participates in (networked) decision-making processes and monitoring mechanism
... by means of what primary intermediary units of communication?	
Political representatives Mass media	Civic initiatives Digital networks
... in which primary roles of the media?	
Monitor of society Disseminator Intermediary between representatives and citizens	Access provider Connector Mobiliser

Figure 1. *Different notions of democracy correspond to different roles of the media*

Note. Based on and further developed from Beaufort (2018, 2020, 2021, 2025a, 2025b).

2. Varied Roles of Media in Different Democratic Cultures

A classic definition of political participation within a representative understanding of democracy—rooted in the logic of collective action—is "activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action" (Verba et al., 1995, p. 38). This definition predominantly encompasses indirect activities—such as voting—that are aimed at sustaining the functioning of traditional political institutions, the ideologically unified group identities and interests and the top-down procedures through which they operate. Political involvement is understood to arise from an interest in formal political mechanisms, with majority decisions serving as the primary means of resolving ideological conflicts (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Ferree et al., 2002; Held, 2006). Collective dynamics in liberal-representative democracies are shaped by institutionalized forms of public communication (Olson, 1989; Yang & Vicari, 2021). Central to this model is the notion of the "informed citizen", coupled with the expectation that individuals are capable of making informed and rational choices in electoral processes (Schudson, 1998; Patterson & Seib, 2005). To do so, citizens must remain knowledgeable about pertinent societal issues, ideas, and opinions—whose public relevance is shaped by prevailing political power structures—as debated within the "marketplace of ideas." Within this framework, citizens predominantly assume a passive role as political subjects, while an elite transparently guides public debate. The fundamental function of information providers or news media is, consequently, to present a plurality of perspectives and to ensure that decision-making processes are transparent, fact-based, cognitively rigorous, and impartial. In this understanding, the media acts as an intermediary, informing the public by disseminating content of general relevance, monitoring society, and scrutinizing those in positions of power. The practical evolution of this paradigm has been comprehensively documented (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Navarria, 2019; Schudson, 1998, 2001, 2003).

Political participation within a participatory context is often defined as any "voluntary activity focused on problem-solving […] undertaken alone or in concert with others to effect change" (Zukin et al., 2006, p. 7) and shifts the focus of political action from supporting the performance of democracy to strengthening democracy itself. Civic engagement aligned with the latter is expressed through taking responsibility for shaping everyday societal environments and advancing individual life contexts and concerns via loosely organized, issue-specific networks that enable continuous bottom-up cooperation in a broad and inclusive social discourse (Bruns, 2018; Loader et al., 2016). Bennett and Segerberg (2013) introduce the term 'logic of connective action' to describe the processes that fundamentally structure modes of action within the participatory public sphere. It seeks to involve as many people as possible—particularly the so-called "silent majority" (Benhabib, 2004; Ferree et al., 2002; Macpherson, 1977; Pateman, 1975, 2012). Navarria (2019) introduces the concept of "networked citizens" to characterize citizens who interconnect their concerns via online social networks, typically in issue-specific and loosely organized ways. Ideally, this fosters continuous, active, and cooperative civic engagement, as participatory approaches promote ongoing public discourse while expanding

opportunities for broad-based "popular inclusion" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Ferree et al., 2002). Participatory approaches go beyond treating top-down referendums as the primary endpoint of citizen involvement, unlike direct democracy. They aim to cultivate "empowered citizens", enabling them to communicate as equals, to navigate and contextualize their world autonomously (Jenkins et al., 2009; Porto, 2007) and bridge the formal public and informal private spheres. Treating emotions as instruments of inclusion and cohesion requires respectful coexistence of diverse positions—including passion, vigorous contestation and advocacy, while preventing dysfunctions such as hate speech (Berg & Hofmann, 2021; Wessler, 2019; Benhabib, 2004; Gamson, 2014; Held, 2006; Pateman, 1975, 2012). With this, the participatory democratic model envisions a robust bottom-up flow of information. To enable this, the media—acting as access providers and mobilizers—motivate political and social engagement, integrate diverse voices into open and accessible public spaces, and offer practical means for individuals to articulate and contextualize their concerns. Informational content should facilitate networking, autonomous orientation, and equitable contributions to the empowered shaping of societal life, opening up interactive, interconnected forums of public communication that create interpretive spaces—broadly applicable, easily connectable, adaptable to varied life contexts, and responsive to contemporary diversity (Napoli, 1999; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Kaase, 1984; Gamson, 2014; Beaufort, 2018, 2020, 2021; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). In this role, media serve as institutional sites "where popular political will should take form and citizens should be able to constitute themselves as active agents in the political process" (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991).

Against this backdrop, different notions of democracy resonate across all dimensions of European public spheres (Beaufort, 2020, 2021, 2025a, 2025b): They manifest, on the one hand, in the expectations of information users in their capacity as citizens and in the corresponding patterns of news use and on the other hand on the supply side—both in the content, insofar as diverse functions are assigned to different media within democratic systems that require varying structures and journalistic styles (Curran, 2023), and in the regulatory frameworks in which these media functions are formalized through rules and standards derived from underlying democratic theories (Beaufort, 2025a; Beaufort & Seethaler, in press; Seethaler & Beaufort, 2017, 2019). How different democratic paradigms are embedded in both supply and demand side of information ecosystems—and the extent to which they shape the democratic quality and performance of informational content at the intersection of these perspectives—has emerged as a focus of contemporary empirical research (Figure 2).

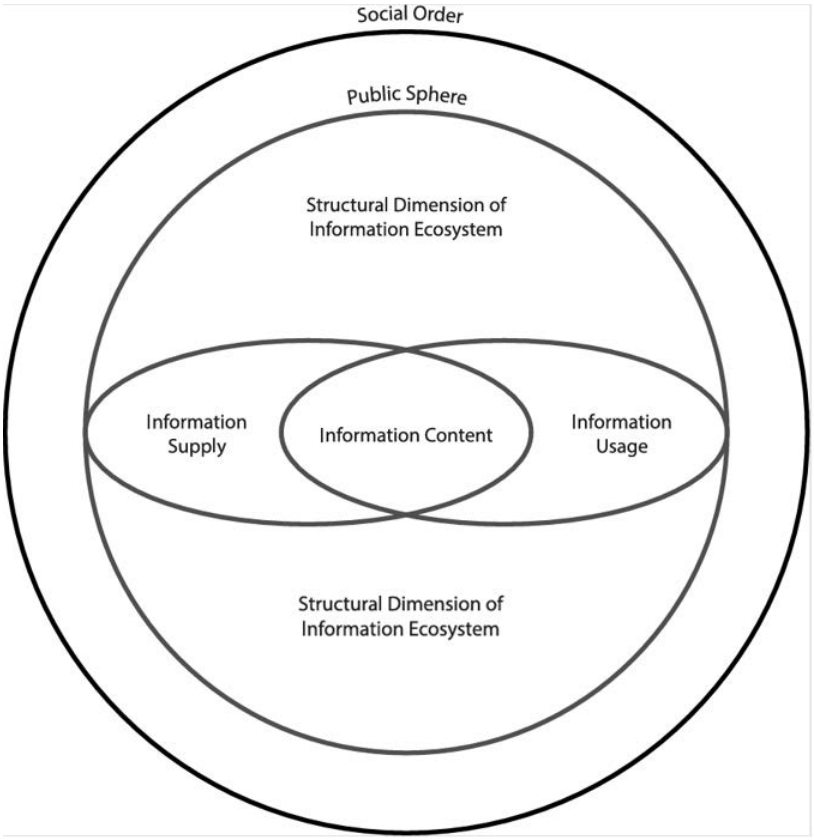

Figure 2. *Dimensions of political communication environments*

3. Empirical Perspectives on the Supply-Demand Nexus of Information in Europe`s Evolving Democracies

Among the key dimensions shaping democratic information systems, legal frameworks and funding logics delineate and influence the nature of information supply, thereby affecting its democratic functionality. Empirical studies across Europe have shown, for example, that legal frameworks for broadcasting typically uphold divergent democratic performance profiles: the programming mandates of television news within public service media (PSM) tend to align with a liberal-representative model, characterized by institutional focus, factual neutrality, and top-down communication that still presupposes a largely passive conception of information users. By contrast, the regulatory frameworks and funding logics governing community or non-profit media and genuine social media news formats in

several European countries correspond more closely to a participatory paradigm, providing ample space for inclusiveness, bottom-up engagement, and interactivity (Beaufort & Schulz-Tomancok, 2024; Gulyas et al., 2024; Seethaler & Beaufort, 2017, 2025; Beaufort & Seethaler, in press; Beaufort, in press). In this context, it must be noted that, since 2005, the ECHR has based its case law on a functional understanding of media freedom by granting journalistic privileges to civil society actors and "citizen journalists" if they impart matters of public interest and adhere to certain standards of conduct (Oster, 2017, p. 30). This expands the circle and diversity of actors in the information landscape and thus opens legally covered opportunities for participation in the production of media content and media management.

Platform logics are likewise understood to exert a considerable influence on the relationships between politics, information spaces, and members of societies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). While the advent of digital networks has significantly expanded the scope of content accessible to the public, their democratic role within information ecosystems is shaped by a broader set of characteristics. Schudson already noted in 2003 that "the Internet gives to ordinary citizens new tools for gathering information and expressing views" (p. 57), and Navarria (2019) elucidates this evolution, stating that "Schudson's monitorial citizen [as a version of the informed citizen] has evolved into a new type of citizen, whose principal characteristic is not to be monitorial, but networked" (p. 16). With this he echoes Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) account of the logic of connective action introduced earlier. These analytical perspectives already point to a democratic role of online social networks intrinsically tied to their organizational structure: Radically reduced communication costs and low-threshold, time- and location-independent access—together with diverse possibilities for interaction and interconnectivity—facilitate bottom-up articulation of personal concerns and create conditions for inclusive, flexibly issue-based networks, potentially enabling participatory modes of action, including civic engagement. Through the interweaving of weak and strong ties, the demarcations between formal public and informal private spheres blur, so that individuals encounter socially relevant content even incidentally through their everyday online activities, which reflects the fact that culture—including political culture—is always rooted in everyday meaning-making (Hepp 2011; Bimber et al., 2005; Weinstein, 2014; Boulianne, 2022; Loader & Mercea, 2012). Thus, the structural features of social online media shape patterns of resonance among information users with particular democratic orientations – beyond inflated expectations toward deliberative publics, whose realization in the normatively desired sense is already improbable given the democratically problematic power and legitimacy structures of today's online communication environments.

Findings from a quantitative longitudinal multilevel regression analysis, conducted in several waves since 2011 across all European countries, consistently revealed highly significant correlations between preferred information channels and citizens' underlying understandings of democracy as well as their democratic practices. While intensive users of traditional mass media for news are more likely to

hold a liberal-representative view of democracy and to engage in top-down, institutionally anchored forms of politics reinforcing collective action, individuals who rely primarily on information obtained via online social media tend to align with a more participatory notion of democracy, and are more actively involved in bottom-up forms of civic engagement in a connective sense (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Seethaler & Beaufort, 2021; Beaufort, 2020, 2021). When mediated interactions are perceived as opportunities to enhance self-efficacy, they are associated with higher levels of trust in intermediary actors as organizational units, which in turn appears to be linked to the corresponding democratic practices that emerge. For the democratic role of social online networks, this implies that when the perceived ability to form shared, bottom-up goals coincides with a greater willingness to pursue them, these networks extend far beyond mediating interaction: they function as organizational entities that provide connectivity, with trust in their organizational capacity correlating with corresponding forms of participatory action. Among intensive users of social media for informational purposes, this trust increasingly replaces the confidence in previously legitimized traditional political organizations as a driving force of participation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Coleman et al., 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Shirky, 2008). Social online networks are therefore not only an integral part of contemporary information repertoires but have also assumed communicative and organizational functions formerly associated with traditional mass media and other units of political organization—functions that strongly support democratic practices grounded in connective action and thus resonate in particular with individuals who hold participatory democratic orientations. Traditional mass media stimulate this form of resonance only to a limited extent, while still reinforcing collective action – confirming that the structural foundations of information usage inherently foster corresponding democratic practices. These patterns appear similarly across all European countries, despite the considerable importance the literature attributes to contextual differences arising from the divergent developments of political systems and cultural environments (Anduiza et al., 2012; Boulianne, 2022; Hasebrink et al., 2021b). Even the marked distinctions that still existed in 2011 between transitional and longer-established democracies had largely disappeared by the 2017 wave. Overall, the multilevel analyses of this longitudinal study reveal only limited variance explained at the country level, indicating that the explanatory patterns do not differ substantially across EU member states. By contrast, the individual level of information use contributes significantly to the explained variance in all estimated models (Seethaler & Beaufort, 2021). Empirical support for these findings comes from a large-scale quantitative and country-based analysis that explored the relationship between the information supply actually available on the market, citizens' democratic orientations, and their patterns of information use (Beaufort, 2020, 2021, 2025a, 2025b).

The first part of the analysis addressed the question: Which citizens—with which democratic orientations—use which information sources, and why? Multi-layered analyses of information repertoires, supported by a series of regression models, examined media diets at the analytical levels of genre, types of ownership, and

individual information sources, linking these comprehensive patterns to the democratic perspectives of information users in their capacity as citizens. By applying Latent Class Analysis (LCA) to data from the Reuters Digital News Report distinct user groups were identified; in Austria, the analysis revealed five clearly distinguishable groups, each characterized by a specific pattern of information use. These groups differed along several parameters, most notably in the breadth of their information diets, their socio-demographic characteristics, and their interest in news and politics. The subsequent regression analyses demonstrated that these information-user groups can be positioned along a continuum between pronounced liberal-representative and pronounced participatory democratic orientations, based on their information repertoires (Figure 3):

Heavy news users, who rely primarily on traditional mass media to satisfy their information needs, exhibited the strongest liberal-representative profile, whereas light news users and those predominantly using online and social media platforms as their primary sources of news aligned more closely with participatory orientations. The group of online news users was also characterized by a broad and intensive use of information sources, while the group(s) of light news users included most individuals who, based on their characteristics, could most appropriately be described as news avoiders.

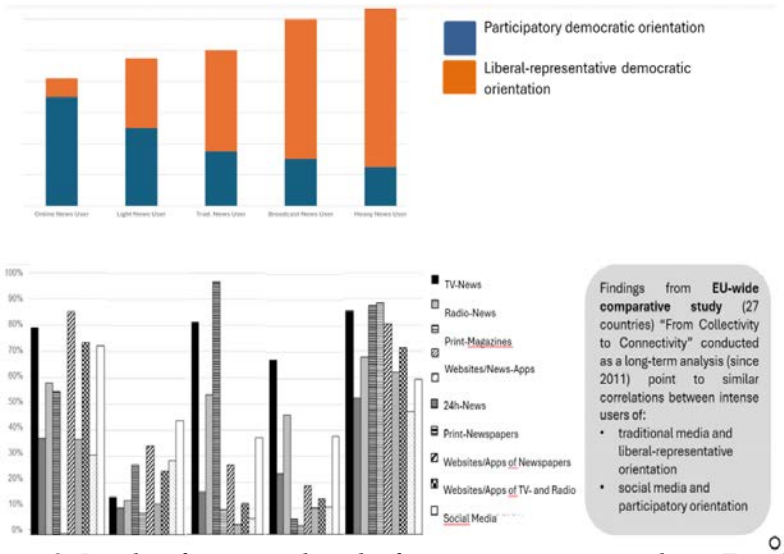

Figure 3. *Results of a country-based information repertoire analysis: Five distinct user groups and their information diets*

Note. Based on Reuters Digital News Report, Austria (Gadringer et al., 2020). The persistently high level of tv usage represents a specific feature of the country`s media landscape and differs from patterns observed in other countries. Despite, the results for online news users remain significant.

Building on these results, it became evident that users' expectations concerning the democratic functions and quality of information content, including the ways content is presented and delivered, correspond to their different interpretations of democracy in highly differentiated ways: Dominantly liberal-representative media users—the "informed citizens"—expect information relevant to society at a macro level, conveyed in a professional style that avoids sensationalism and reinforces the monitoring function of journalism. By contrast, a dominantly participatory-oriented user—the "empowered, networked citizen"—expects information that enables independent understanding and orientation, and fosters inclusive bottom-up responsibility and engagement, that is meaningfully resonant with personal concerns, and that creates opportunities for connection and networking (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Beaufort, 2020). Across all information users, regression analyses with trust as the dependent variable indicate that the fulfilment of these expectations—when matched by the available information supply—is associated with higher levels of trust in the respective information sources. Conversely, lower levels of trust are observed when the design, framing, presentation, or communicative expression of the information on offer fails to resonate with users' individual democratic orientations. For younger and more diverse audiences, this may, for example, include the presence of anchors from diverse backgrounds who reflect their lived realities, rather than traditional authoritative figures.

In the second part of the study a content analysis conducted at the interface with the actual supply of information available on the market revealed a pronounced mismatch between democratic user profiles and the prevailing information supply in the respective media markets: In particular, participatory-minded individuals often face a shortage of content that is adequately aligned with their expectations. The question guiding this part was therefore: Are information users in their capacity as citizens adequately provided with the kinds of informational offerings they would require engaging in accordance with their values, their ideas of social coexistence, and their democratic notions? (Beaufort 2020, 2025a, 2025b).

This content analysis, together with additional quantitative and qualitative analyses conducted at the interface with the demand side, was carried out to determine whether information supply across different democracies in Europe and in the US contain parameters that—beyond platform differences—reflect these democracy-model-specific, connectable characteristics (e.g., Hasebrink et al., 2021a; Beaufort, 2020, 2025a, 2025b; Beaufort & Seethaler, in press; Couldry & Markham, 2007; Weiß et al., 2020 alongside further analyses within the DACH project *Media Performance and Democracy*, Grant Agreement No: I3155, doi: 10.55776/I3155; as well as Beaufort & Stoeger, 2025). While all of these studies confirm the multidimensionality of information quality—showing that news media may fulfil communicative functions in different ways and thereby substantiate their informational performance—the authors referenced above provide evidence that different conceptions of democracy entail different criteria for assessing informational content, depending on how well information connects with publics holding different

democratic orientations. While Hasebrink et al. (2021a) examined these relationships within the German-speaking context—that is, for Germany, Austria, and Switzerland—Beaufort (2020, 2021, 2025a) and Beaufort and Stoeger (2025) show, through case studies from Europe and the United States, how these different quality criteria are taken into account and reflected in the actual information supply, specifically regarding their resonance among high-reach publics with different democratic orientations. Since contrasts in audience reach appeared far more pronounced than platform logics alone would have suggested, additional parameters related to content design, including substantive composition, framing, and modes of communication, were incorporated into the analysis. Comparing the main evening television newscasts—all long-standing news formats that address liberal-representative-oriented audiences and continue to enjoy high levels of trust—with the corresponding social-media news on TikTok and Instagram—which appeal to a participatory-oriented audience and are particularly popular among younger and more diverse publics who, in recent years, have no longer been reached by the traditional main newscast—the following picture emerges: television newscasts predominantly exhibit criteria that render their content connectable for audiences with liberal-representative interpretations of democracy, whereas social-media news are characterized by criteria that resonate more strongly with participatory-oriented publics (for a standardized operationalization: Beaufort 2020, 2025a, 2025b; Beaufort & Stoeger 2025). It is important to note that the social-media news in the case studies examined are not shortened versions of the television broadcasts. Rather, the content is produced by dedicated editorial teams and is fundamentally reworked into a fully adapted format: a young male–female hosting duo presents stories framed to connect with audiences' personal experiences and identification needs, featuring short, orientation-focused segments that encourage independent sense-making instead of embedding information within predefined cause-and-effect narratives. This means, if information media are to reach individuals with different understandings of democracy, the supply side must not only attend to features arising from platform logics but also provide a broader set of role-specific quality criteria for the content; criteria that concern substantive composition, framing, and modes of communication.

Complementing the extensive large-scale, long-term, and cross-country quantitative and qualitative research outlined above, an additional qualitative analytical framework was developed to uncover how different understandings of democracy are related to patterns of information usage and trust from the users' perspective, and to enable a more nuanced and in-depth exploration of their motivations, expectations, beliefs and attitudes.

As both a component of and an extension to the approaches and the research of the comprehensive Horizon Europe project *Mapping Media for Future Democracies* (MeDeMAP, Grant Agreement No. 101094984, www.medemap.eu; Beaufort & Seethaler, in press; Carpentier & Wimmer, 2024; Miconi et al., 2025; Klimkievicz et al. 2025; Seethaler & Beaufort, 2025), conducted in ten European countries, this framework integrates multiple methodological components, including cross-country

comparative focus group research, which is particularly suited to eliciting personal perspectives that are not immediately accessible but become articulable in relation to others, thereby deepening the aggregated data (Cardano & Gariglio, 2022). This research aimed to uncover how users perceive, understand, and relate their democratic orientations and practices—in their roles as citizens—to their high-choice information environment, along with their expectations of it and the trust they place in it. To address common limitations of focus group research, a three-stage design was implemented (stage 1: cross-national focus groups across ten European countries, n = 400; stages 2 and 3: a subset of countries—Germany, Austria, and Poland, n = 120), An initial open discussion of everyday media use and democratic practices was followed by a second stage that introduced differentiated concepts of democracy through targeted prompts and creative, experiment-like elements without explicitly foregrounding them, and a final reflective phase in which the underlying research rationale was disclosed and discussed with the participants. This design reduced social desirability bias—particularly through the non-disclosure of the differentiating research focus in stage 2, enabled a more transparent and iterative assessment of saturation, and strengthens intercultural comparability through the use of identical moderator teams (Germany and Austria), guiding questions, and analytical standards The insights were subsequently visualized and contextualized, thereby indicating how people themselves perceive a legitimate space of action that supports their individual democratic values. Taken together, the results corroborate all previous findings by showing, with additional interpretive depth, how democratic orientations correspond to distinct information repertoires; how motivations for using and choosing specific platforms, as well as expectations of news media, diverge systematically between liberal-representative "informed citizens" and participatory "empowered/networked citizens"; how trust is related to the perceived fulfilment of these specific democratic expectations; and how information practices are linked to participation and civic engagement—patterns evident across all countries included in the study, despite differing emphases (Beaufort et al. 2025).

The findings emerging from a body of empirical research conducted across diverse contexts in Europe and the US—covering all dimensions of political communication, particularly the interface between informational provision and uptake, and employing both quantitative and qualitative methods within a comparative framework across time and countries—highlight the relevance of ensuring that information supply, alongside theoretically grounded normative criteria, corresponds to those democracy-conception-specific features that likewise structure information demand. This alignment is relevant, as varying conceptions of democracy are reflected across all communicative dimensions of the public sphere, and both trust and democratically functional communication appear to be shaped by it. While causal relationships cannot be conclusively established, this pattern is consistently observed across the empirical analyses and coherently supported by the underlying theoretical framework.

Taken together, the findings underscore the need for systematic, comparative research across all democracies worldwide—including those in the Global South, which are

characterized by markedly different democratic conditions than the cases examined here—building on a standardized operationalization that is transferable across country contexts (Beaufort, 2020; Beaufort, 2025a; Beaufort & Stoeger, 2025). Further research is needed to test the causal directionality of the observed relationships and to refine the underlying mechanisms in diverse contexts. This is essential in order to understand how diverse democratic orientations, information practices, and media structures jointly shape communicative justice on a global scale, and how dominant epistemic frameworks may marginalize alternative democratic imaginaries (Couldry et al., 2016; de Sousa Santos, 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2004;).

4. Discussion

Drawing on democracy theory and comprehensive empirical evidence, this article provides a multilayered account of the dynamics through which different notions of democracy emerge, coexist, and interact across different democracies. It demonstrates how these notions are reflected in all dimensions of political communication environments and underscores the significance of the interrelations among them for the epistemic integrity and democratic resilience of contemporary societies. The analysis highlights that the degree of coherence—or its absence—between democratic orientations and the dynamics of information supply and demand exerts direct and consequential influence on the democratic quality of public spheres. In concrete terms, current societal transformations are reshaping democratic perceptions and practices, giving rise to emerging democratic cultures that complement established patterns across many democracies. Alongside authoritarian reinterpretations, these developments foreground participatory elements that emphasize more inclusive and autonomous modes of engagement in societal processes, strengthen individuality, enhance citizens' agency shaping one's human and material environment, enable people to voice and coordinate their interests from the bottom-up, thereby fostering related democratic practices, such as continuous civic engagement. Since different conceptual approaches to democracy are accompanied by distinct perspectives on how a democratic public sphere should be constituted, this carries profound implications for the normative roles of information media, each of which imposes specific challenges on their functional responsibilities: within liberal-representative dynamics, information providers are—among various other responsibilities—to support collective action and thus the "informed citizen", who delegates decision making to political representatives and entrusts the media with monitoring power, by acting as societal monitors, disseminators, and intermediaries. Within participatory dynamics, they are expected to support the "empowered" or "networked citizen" who takes part in decision-making processes in a more inclusive and direct manner articulating and linking personal concerns, with the media serving as access providers, connectors, and mobilizers.

A series of studies briefly introduced in this article indicate that these varying normative roles are empirically evident across all dimensions of political

communication ecosystems—particularly on both the supply and demand sides—suggesting that different democratic action logics coexist. On the supply side of information, this is reflected in distinct requirements for modes of communication and the ways in which content is shaped and structured. On the demand side, different democratic orientations are expressed in varying expectations regarding the functions of information, in specific needs relating to how content should be presented, in the prioritization of certain types of information over others and the trust placed in them, and, in turn, in diverse patterns of use aligned with corresponding democratic practices.

Against this backdrop, the question of alignment becomes critical. Importantly, alignment should not be understood as an adaptive adjustment of media content to user preferences, nor as a relativization of universal journalistic standards. Rather, it refers to the capacity of normatively grounded information to remain accessible and meaningful across diverse democratic orientations. The central challenge, therefore, lies in reconciling normative integrity with democratic diversity within societies, rather than privileging one conception at the expense of the other. In this sense, democratic relevance cannot be ensured by normative information supply quality alone: even the most carefully crafted article that rigorously adheres to theoretically grounded normative criteria remains democratically inconsequential if it is not connectable and, as a result, not taken up by citizens (Beaufort, 2020, 2025a; Beaufort & Stoeger, 2025). As Strömbäck et al. (2020) observe, "even a perfectly informative news media environment [is] of little democratic use if citizens by and large do not consume the news or if they do not trust the news (p. 139)." Democratic functionality, in this sense, appears to depend not only on the normative soundness of content design but likewise on whether the communicative offer resonates with users' diverse democtratic orientations, expectations, and practices. An information supply that is both normatively well-founded and sufficiently connectable corresponds to public trust and, in turn, underpins a democratic life capable of sustaining itself.

A central consequence of misalignment between democratic orientations, related needs, and information supply becomes evident at the behavioral level of information use. According to the annual Reuters Digital News Report, together with a substantial body of empirical research, news avoidance and declining trust are increasingly recognized as serious threats to the epistemic integrity and democratic resilience of information ecosystems in contemporary democracies. On average, survey data indicate that around 40% of respondents report often or sometimes avoiding the news—an incidence observed with roughly similar intensity across European countries and the United States. The Reuters Digital News Report (Newman et al. 2025) identifies several reasons for this development: 39% of respondents state that news has a negative effect on their mood; 31% feel worn out by the sheer volume of news; 29% perceive a too excessive focus on institutional politics; 20% report that they cannot connect with the information provided ("there is nothing they can do with it"); 18% consider the news irrelevant to their own lives; and 9% find it too difficult to understand. The information repertoire study presented in this article showed that

the group typically associated with news avoidance simultaneously includes a considerable proportion of participatorily oriented information users—namely, the group(s) of "light news users". At the same time, the study revealed that the expectations the latter derive from their own understanding of democracy are not sufficiently addressed by the media landscape in a way they experience as meaningful or connectable, even though they typically maintain broad repertoires and intensive patterns of information use once appropriate content is available—something that appears to be insufficiently the case in traditional mass media targeting liberal-representative users (Beaufort, 2020, 2025a; see also Livingstone et al., 2023). The findings therefore suggest that groups classified as "news avoiders" may not be disengaged from societal affairs (Couldry & Markham, 2007) but rather encounter an information supply that fails to correspond to their needs in their capacity as democratic citizens. The phenomenon of news avoidance may thus—at least in part—be linked to the mechanism outlined above, namely the alignment at the supply–demand nexus conditioned by individuals' democratic orientations, thereby indicating a potential avenue for targeted intervention.

Yet the consequences of misalignment reach far beyond individual information practices and extend to the structuring of democratic societies. Resonance mismatch contributes to structural inequalities when citizens are unequally equipped with the information needed to participate autonomously and competently in democratic life, owing to uneven opportunities for communicative participation and expression. Once such discrepancies extend across broad segments of the population, they are associated with systemic inequalities and with pronounced declines in trust in the political communication environment, contributing to communicative vacuums that can be exploited by dysfunctional systemic currents (Krzyżanowski & Ekström, 2022) and, in turn, corresponding to democratic disaffection at a societal level.

The observed resonance mismatch could therefore not only be interpreted as an individual-level phenomenon but also as a structurally consequential dynamic shaping contemporary media and information ecosystems. This dynamic is reflected in, and further reinforced by, the interplay of economic, algorithmic, and concentration logics that govern the production, distribution, and visibility of information. Economic incentives prioritize content that maximizes revenue rather than public value, systematically deprioritizing costly or low-yield content such as investigative journalism or minority-oriented information (van Dijck et al., 2018; Napoli, 2011). Algorithmic systems reinforce content that performs well in attention markets, thereby shaping rather than merely reflecting user preferences (Bucher, 2018). At the same time, media concentration consolidates control over distribution and monetization, narrowing the range of available content and centralizing gatekeeping power, particularly in platform environments (Noam, 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018). Together, these logics create a structural environment in which users' needs as citizens are systematically deprioritized, thereby contributing to and stabilizing the observed resonance mismatch.

The systemic dynamics also occur within broader patterns of societal polarization, with contemporary democratic diversity increasingly structured along a cultural–identity axis rather than the traditional left–right divide (Kriesi et al., 2008; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This shift is closely tied to the long-term transition from materialist to postmaterialist value orientations described by Inglehart and Welzel (2005) and Inglehart (2018), a transformation that has become gradually politicized and has shaped the emergence of distinct democratic understandings—most notably liberal-representative and participatory approaches—which position themselves differently along this cultural–identity spectrum. Against this backdrop, and in light of the empirical patterns presented in this article, information ecosystems may be understood as mediating structures that can—depending on how well information supply resonates with these value-based democratic orientations—either reinforce cultural–identity polarization or contribute to a more cohesive democratic sphere.

Taken together, these findings point to the need for a more refined understanding of how information ecosystems can sustain democratic life under conditions of shifting democratic paradigms and democratic diversity. What becomes clear is that the central question is not solely whether information supply meets theoretically grounded normative criteria, but that all dimensions of political communication environments—especially the perspective of those who use and rely on information—should be taken into account when the aim is to provide information that enables citizens to engage in ways that correspond to their values, conceptions of social coexistence, and democratic orientations. Information use that enables individuals to act in a democratically functional manner ultimately emerges from a complex interplay that includes democratic orientations and actual information practices. Whether citizens develop confidence in the information ecosystem depends on the extent to which the available information supply resonates with these orientations.

As structural inequalities in communication ecosystems intensify through epistemic, systemic, and discursive constraints that limit equal access to democratically functional information, research should consider how integrated analyses of democratic information ecosystems can illuminate both the changing expectations placed on information providers and their capacity to meet the needs of a diversely engaged, informed, empowered, and networked citizenry. Approaches that acknowledge democratic diversity and the relational nature of communication environments can contribute to building information ecosystems—and, ultimately, public spheres—that are more inclusive, more responsive, and more democratically functional.

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