CENTER FOR MEDIA, DATA AND SOCIETY | **CEU** SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY

STRATEGY
2020–2022

Center for Media, Data and Society

Center for Media Data and Society, School of Public Policy, Central European University

TABLE OF CONTENTS

0 2

FOCUS

Much of how independent journalism and media perform their role in informing and enriching the democratic discourse is shaped by policy decisions, companies and people who fund and own the media, and the character of the public sphere.

All form a power dynamic that shapes and influences independent media and journalism.

The extraordinary rise of populism after 2016, accompanied by waves of confusion, propaganda and misinformation, has become part of this dynamic. At the same time, technology has fundamentally changed the way people search, consume, interpret, and interact with information as well as the forms in which journalism is produced and consumed.

But breaking with the old way of doing things is difficult. While journalism principles must be protected and promoted, there is little from the journalism in the pre-internet era that can be preserved today. Then, journalism was about process and tools; today, it is about individuals and interaction. Then, the boundaries between journalists and the audience were clear; today, journalism is about collaboration with an audience actively engaged in newsgathering. Then, journalism was about planning; today, it is about reacting to change, and fast.

Understanding these shifts in journalism, but also the power dynamics surrounding it is critical as we embark on this century's third decade: that is the premise of this strategy, which largely builds on the work that Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) has been doing in the past three years.

03

As a research, policy and, as of this year, journalism center, we strive to contribute to bolstering media freedom and independent journalism through the study of those forces that control, shape and affect media and communications.

In the next strategy period:

- **The focus on power, closely linked with questions of accountability and trust, concepts that we believe are central to independent journalism, will remain unchanged.**

- **Research will also continue to be our core activity.**

- **As we believe that journalistic investigation, carried out in partnerships with local journalism outfits, can reinforce our research, make it more accessible to more people in more countries and, hence, boost its impact, journalism will become the second pillar of our work.**

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0 4

CHALLENGES

MEDIA CAPTURE

The rise of populism is engendering new, state censorship-driven forms of media policy that lead to media capture by political and business interests of the governing elites. In some countries, they find supporters among anti-human rights groups, including religious lobbies. A model of capture where regulatory powers, state-administered media, public subsidies for the media and private ownership are controlled by a group of powerful politicians and oligarchs is successfully replicated across borders and continents.

Today, media capture is arguably the biggest threat to quality journalism because it devalues investments in media, lessens the impact of media development and discourages innovation.

DISJOINTED POLICIES

Policies and regulations that affect media and journalism are more and more at odds with public interest. As public service media lost its centrality in the public sphere and the public service provision in the private media is being torn away, we see new forms of control over the public sphere with negative consequences on journalism, in particular accountability journalism.

Social media today play a central role in the information environment. They own and handle masses of data about people's lives, holding immense power and increasingly taking over functions such as regulation of speech or surveillance that were traditionally held by governments and regulators.

0 5

In spite of, or precisely because of, the prevalence of social media, civil society struggles to elevate a plurality of dissenting voices and to organize effective action against the weaknesses of capitalism and the threats posed by populist and authoritarian governments. In contrast, anti-liberal groups are increasingly successful in seizing opportunities to further their agendas by inundating the internet with false information, abusing or spreading hate speech against journalists online.

Under the guise of battling fake news, governments are embracing restrictive regulations that harm journalism and free speech. Tech companies often succumb to governments' requests; their policies are primarily driven by commercial logic and not by public interest.

DWINDLING TRUST IN THE MEDIA

As false and misleading content proliferates and populist politicians incessantly attack journalists, trust in news media is plumbing new depths. With technologies allowing journalists to gather data and information at a scale never seen before, journalistic output is growing at a spectacular pace. However, it oftentimes remains disconnected from many of the audiences it seeks to reach.

06

RESPONSE

Acknowledging that the challenges are huge, we plan to contribute to tackling them through a combination of **applied research** and **journalism**, a base on which we plan to build media **literacy** and **policy** programs.

RESEARCH & JOURNALISM: UNTANGLING THE POWER KNOTS

Our research agenda will continue to be driven by the study of power in media and journalism segmented into three categories: **regulation**, **financing** and **technology**. As we strongly believe in the impact of comparative research, most of our research work will be done comparatively, focused on local contexts and environments.

In concrete terms, we will **continue** to study:

- The mechanisms of control created by the specific conditions in which media and journalists operate, ranging from state censorship to media regulation to market-generated censorship;
- The impact of owners and ownership structures on editorial policies and journalists' behavior;
- The influence of governments, private funders and philanthropies on media financing: who decides to finance media and journalism and why, what the implications of different financing models are, and what role policy plays in this process;
- The power holders in the fast-changing media environment: how decisions are made and by whom, and how this impacts the free flow of quality, critical content;
- The link between owners and keepers of data, governments and journalists and the impact of algorithms on journalism, and on people's access to information;
- The fragmented public sphere, with a focus on emerging influence groups and contestation practices.

07

As **new** projects, we plan to launch:
- Political Power Brokers (a project tracking businesses and individuals engaged in electoral communications and their sources of financing)
- Datafication and Journalism (a research project that will explore the role of journalism in shaping debates about the datafied society and the changes in journalism brought about by datafication)

In the new strategy period, journalism projects will build on and complement our research efforts. Investigations will primarily cover topics related to our research agenda that can't be covered from the researcher's desktop. We will run journalistic projects in partnership with local media outlets, involving CEU students and other partnering academic and non-academic institutions.

LITERACY BOOST

Buoyed by the success of a few literacy projects that we have run in recent years, we plan to fold our knowledge sharing work into a more focused media literacy program whose main objectives will be to make research and media policy accessible to wider audiences, and to introduce media literacy to groups less exposed to such information.

We will focus on designing grassroots literacy projects for small groups of people who have the influence and followership to effectively spread the acquired knowledge across their communities. At the same time, in cooperation with our partners in the region, we will work on developing by the end of the strategy project an MA degree in investigative journalism that will fill a major gap in journalism education in Eastern Europe.

In concrete terms, we will **continue**:
* Our annual summer program in a format, tested in the past three years, focused on practical training and network building;
* Our cross-disciplinary training courses for academics, journalists, legal experts and practitioners on themes such as media, law and human rights; advocacy, power and journalism; new media technologies and journalism.

As **new** projects, we plan to:
* Design literacy projects focused on the needs of specific communities and groups (i.e. students from smaller, less developed and connected towns, NGOs and advocacy outfits, groups of activists, consumer associations);
* Create a curriculum on investigative journalism with the long-term goal of launching an MA degree in investigative journalism, at CEU or one of the region's universities.

POLICY 2030

The 2020s will be a watershed decade for communication policy. By 2030, journalism will change unrecognizably as an algorithm-anchored world is growing around us. By then, media and journalism, like many other fields, will most likely be shaped by the emerging global, regional and transnational data governance regimes.

As the disconnect between regulatory authorities, political bodies and society grows wider, policy work is increasingly decoupled from the real problems that affect media and internet freedom, and journalism in particular. Technology advances much faster than regulation. Hence, understanding the priorities of those who will sit in the regulatory driving seat during the next decade is of utmost importance for the field.

0 9

To that end, we plan to carry out research aimed at grasping these policy challenges as a way to inform our experts and partners engaged in policy debates.

In concrete terms, we plan as **new** projects to:
- Launch 2030, a research series identifying and analyzing the most relevant policy issues that are expected to affect media and journalism in the next decade;
- Create a database of detailed profiles of policymakers to help improve the outreach of our and our partners' policy papers and recommendations.

10

STRATEGIC GOALS

RESEARCH & JOURNALISM

In the previous strategy period, we created a methodology framework for the study of media power that has become the base of Media Influence Matrix, a body of comparative research that has expanded to date to more than 40 countries. The project has inspired several other research projects and is used as a resource for comparative papers on social media regulation, financing of journalism, journalism business models, trends in misinformation, databases of journalism start-ups and trends in public service media.

- **Building on this work, our goal in the next strategy period is to create an assessment tool to measure the state of journalism on a country-by-country basis.** More concretely, we will refine, grow, update and repurpose Media Influence Matrix as a permanent country-based project. Besides its main function to inform, the Matrix is expected to enable us and our partners to create a set of indicators that will result in the development of a Media Power Index, a ranking measuring the conduciveness of local environments to independent journalism, the "ease of doing journalism" type of index that is so much needed in the field.

- **By embarking on journalism, our goal in the next strategy period is to test a new model of journalism production where academic institutions and journalism outlets share resources, expertise and audience data to design investigations with greater societal impact.** More concretely, we want to initiate journalistic projects where our researchers, journalists and students engage with partnering media outlets in carrying out long-term investigative projects.

11

LITERACY

In the previous strategy period, we repurposed our speaker and lecture series, reformed our annual summer school into a practical workshop for mid-career professionals, and developed and held a series of courses and practical workshops.

- **Our goals in the next strategy period are: to test agile media literacy models targeted to groups less exposed to information; develop with partners a plan for an MA course in journalism to be launched with EU support at one of the region's universities.**

POLICY

In the previous strategy period, we created Media Policy Hub, a clearinghouse of policy analysis and information. Its work is expected to take shape once we launch a series of research projects on policy-related issues and policymaking players. While we expect to continue our policy engagements internationally and at EU-level, we also plan to use our research to engage with regulators and policy experts at national levels in countries where such opportunities appear.

- **Our goal in the next strategy period is to publish "2030: Media Policy Agenda", a forward-looking policy paper, written collaboratively and endorsed by civil society groups, journalism outlets and media development experts, to use in informing policy debates and agendas.**

12

RESOURCES

FUNDING

The center's funding strategy will continue to focus on EU schemes and private philanthropies. We will also continue to take corporate funding that doesn't jeopardize the integrity of our research. At the same time, the center's consultancy arm will continue to serve private clients as a way to generate more financing to fund our research. We will continue to fundraise mostly in consortia with partners.

PEOPLE

We operate with a small staff in Budapest, managed by a Director, with a Board advising on substantive issues. Much of our work, including our research projects, literacy initiatives and policy engagements, is carried out by the center's network of fellows and experts who live and work all over the world. We plan to preserve this organizational format as it ensures flexibility and efficiency thanks to low overhead expenses and strategic, demand-driven use of the expertise in our network.

STRENGTHS

The Center has built a strong reputation as a research hub attracting fellows and experts from all over the world. We also benefit from the prestige of CEU, which has a vibrant community of students, faculty and alumni from over a hundred countries, and a strong commitment to interdisciplinary studies and civic engagement. The center is part of the CEU School of Public Policy whose main strength is the bridge between theory and practice.

13

Our staff and fellows are highly reputable experts with deep experience in managing comparative research. Our work has been featured in universities, mainstream media and at hundreds of conferences and workshops internationally. Organizations ranging from think tanks to universities to foundations are steadily seeking expertise from the center.

The center is also recognized as a focal point for an international network of scholars, research institutions, journalists and activists.

RESEARCH EXCELLENCE

In the past three years, one of our priorities was building relations with technology NGOs, companies and centers that are working on improving, through AI-powered technologies, the methods used in media research. With them, we are now seizing the opportunities presented by such technologies, particularly those that, through automation, help reduce research time and improve accuracy of findings.

14

AUDIENCE

The center has traditionally worked through partnerships and larger research networks. To achieve the goals set out in this strategic plan, we aim to preserve this approach. Furthermore, we intend to continue to target academics, policymakers, journalists and activists while simultaneously reaching out to more private media and technology companies. At the same time, we will continue to make research more accessible to the general public through journalism, outreach and literacy programs.

We believe that the work envisaged by this strategy is particularly important for the following audiences:

- **Journalists**

While we already work with journalists and media outlets in various projects, the journalistic community is and will remain one of the key audiences for our research, literacy and policy work. In the next strategy period, we will increasingly work with unions and associations of journalists that work to build the conditions enabling journalists to do their jobs.

- **Students and scholars**

This has been one of the center's key audiences and will continue to remain so, particularly students whom we actively involve in our work, primarily in research and journalism.

- **Media development sector**

Much of the media development support is affected by the challenges described in this strategy. In highly captured environments, support for media outlets or individual journalists loses much of its value. The media development sector needs a new theory of change focused on identifying, through research and analysis, the right entry points where the sector's limited resources can achieve maximum impact.

- **Media investors**

Recognizing that the new realities in media and technology require a more nuanced due diligence approach, a few important actors in the investment community have been showing interest in our research, which helps them to identify areas of risks and opportunities as well as the media outlets that are most vulnerable to capture.

- **Regulators**

Due to the increased regulatory complexities brought about by technology and the new forms of control that are proliferating at a fast pace, methodologies used by regulators to assess markets and content need to be revamped. Our research takes stock of these latest developments, analyzing the impact of past and upcoming forms of regulation.

- **Advocates**

Evidence shows that, unsurprisingly, advocacy projects not anchored in solid data and research are, in most cases, failing. Bad strategic planning and unrealistic expectations have also been identified as important reasons for failure. We believe that the research we produce can serve both advocates working on media and technology and NGOs who need to understand and use media in their work.

16

OUR POSITION IN THE FIELD

CMDS is a center of excellence dedicated to public policy in support of a democratic media and media reform. The center's work stretches across the world with a focus on under-researched societies.

In the past three years, we have strengthened our international network through new partnerships and comparative projects in Southern Europe, Latin America, Southern Africa and Southeast Asia. We are particularly proud of a strong partnership with academia and civil society in Spain that we have developed in recent years.

Given the center's location in Budapest in the past 15 years, and its strong links in the region, Central and Eastern Europe has been prominently featured in our work.

In the next strategy period, we will increasingly focus on diversifying the global networks we have developed so far while retaining a focus on Central and Eastern Europe.

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