

CENTER FOR MEDIA, DATA AND SOCIETY (CMDS) STRATEGY 2017-2019

Policy Made Simple

OUR POSITION IN THE FIELD

Located in Budapest, at Central European University (CEU), CMDS is:

- a Central and Eastern European, **regional** center of excellence dedicated to public policy in support of a democratic media and media reform
- a **global** hub that convenes a wide range of actors interested in public policy issues related to media, technology, and communications and how they factor into governance, civic action, and social change
- a **local** institution that leverages international and regional relationships to support Hungarian democracy, including civil society organizations, journalists, and academics

CMDS' **local**, **regional** and **global** roles lend a significant vantage point in terms of influence and convening power to gather key actors from the media, journalism, civil society, academic and technology spaces, as well as government and corporate actors.

THE FOCUS

Much of how independent journalism and media perform their fundamental role in informing and enriching the democratic discourse is shaped by policy decisions, funders and owners, and the state of the public sphere. All form a power dynamic that shape and influence independent media and journalism. The extraordinary rise of populism in 2016, accompanied by waves of confusion, propaganda and fake news, is now part of this dynamic. The role of the media in society and politics is changing fundamentally. Now, more than ever, grasping the key shifts in these relationships is central to understanding and influencing the policy-making process, empowering civil society and improving the environment in which journalists work.

That is the premise of this strategy.

As a research and policy center, our contribution to bolstering media freedom, and independent journalism in particular, is through the study of those forces that control, shape and affect media and communications. The focus on power will be closely linked with questions of accountability and trust, concepts that we believe are central to independent journalism.

This strategic plan aims at initiating, conducting and disseminating research and knowledge to contribute to a more informed policy debate with the expectation that more progressive policies, less room for potential abuse by funders and owners and a freer and more plural public communications system will help improve media freedom.

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 associated with governing elites. Private companies, be they media providers, infrastructure operators, internet providers or technology firms, intentionally or unintentionally, participate in this capture.

Unaccountable Corporate Power

Corporations whose work revolves around or impacts media and communication (including telecoms, social media and technology companies) play a central role in the distribution of content produced and accessed by the public. These companies own and manipulate massive amounts of data about individuals' daily lives, habits and activities. They hold immense power and are increasingly engaging in functions traditionally held by governments and regulators, such as regulation of free speech or public surveillance. However, these companies lack accountability and sometimes operate in non-transparent ways which raise concerns.

Devaluation of Public Service Provision

The evolution of new technologies and the increasing digital environment has eclipsed traditional public service media. In the private sector, the public service provision of media is being stripped away. These events have led to new forms of control over the public sphere with negative consequences on independent journalism, in particular accountability journalism.

Shrinking Contestation Space, Growing Anti-Liberal Clout

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 of illiberal and authoritarian governments. In contrast, anti-liberal groups are increasingly successful in seizing opportunities to further their agendas. Online abuse and hate speech against journalists are on the rise.

Policy Disconnect

There is a widening disconnect between regulatory authorities, political bodies and society. Policy priorities are increasingly decoupled from the real problems that affect media and internet freedom, and independent journalism in particular.

OUR RESPONSE

We acknowledge that the challenges before us are enormous. It is our goal to address each of them through a combination of **applied research, knowledge sharing** and **policy engagement** and through partnerships with research and policy organizations.

Research: Untangling the Power Knots

Our research agenda will be driven by the study of power in media and journalism segmented into three categories: **regulation, financing** and **public sphere**. We strongly believe in the importance of comparative research.

In concrete terms, we plan 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 philanthropists on media financing: who decides to finance media and journalism and why, and what role does policy play in this process?
- The power elite in this 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
- The fragmented public sphere, with a focus on emerging influence groups and contestation practices

Knowledge Sharing: Making Research and Policy Accessible

Making research and media policy accessible will drive our knowledge sharing agenda. Many countries are understudied and underserved by researchers. Our work in this area will focus on creating a space for debate and innovative teaching and learning.

In concrete terms, we plan to:

- Reframe two key debates (“Media as a public sphere” and “Funding journalism as a policy issue”) by launching a speakers series on these topics at CEU and partner universities

- Reframe our annual summer program to be more focused on practical training and community building
- Develop 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
- Open access to education for practitioners through increased use of innovative, lower-cost, teaching platforms and techniques such as podcasts, visualization and online courses
- Increase cooperation in the education area with regional and international partners
- Teach applied media and policy courses at the CEU School of Public Policy (SPP)

Policy: Connecting the Dots, Closing the Gaps

Reframing debates on key issues relevant to media and journalism and bringing policy closer to those affected by it will drive our agenda. Our strategic plan is to use research to initiate solutions-driven debates between policy-makers, academics and industry players. In particular, we want to give civil society and journalists a more meaningful role in these debates.

In concrete terms, we plan to:

- Promote and initiate, where possible, solutions-driven policy debates and exchanges on media and power in universities, media outlets, regulatory bodies and companies
- Organize regular briefings and exchanges with policy-makers, civil society and industry players to discuss trends in media policy

STRATEGIC GOALS

By the end of this three-year period, CMDS aims to:

Research

- Create a methodology framework for the study of media power in the current context
- Initiate and produce a body of research on media power and journalism, including country reports, comparative studies and policy analysis
- Build a research partnership to create a Media Power Index to measure integrity and independence in the media and journalism

Knowledge Sharing

- Repurpose our speaker and lecture series in line with this strategic plan

- Reform our annual summer school into a practical workshop for mid-career professionals to develop specific policy and journalistic projects
- Develop and hold courses and practical workshops at CEU and elsewhere, including executive training, to foster collaborative and innovative ways of knowledge production and knowledge sharing
- Expand our existing network of academics, media professionals and civil society groups

Policy

- Create within the CMDS a clearing house of policy analysis and information: this will initially be a modest effort to bring experts to CEU and partner universities and organizations to advise on emerging media policy issues

INVESTMENTS

To achieve the goals outlined in this strategic plan, we need to increase our operating budget. We plan to boost our core funding, now coming entirely from CEU, through research grants, private donations, corporate partnerships and consultancy services for private clients.

OUTREACH

To achieve the goals set forth in this strategic plan, we plan to enhance our existing outreach efforts. We will continue to disseminate our research, knowledge sharing and policy initiatives through existing channels, including our website and social media accounts. In addition, we plan to do the following:

- Publish on the Mediapowermonitor.com platform (which hosts journalistic articles about media industry written by top experts) to bring more attention to the Center's website
- Launch accounts on new social media channels
- Repurpose the Center's newsletter to boost and diversify its audience
- Cater to a wider audience and the specific needs of various target groups by making research more accessible through audio and data visualization

OUR CORE CAPABILITIES

Academic Recognition

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 100 countries and a strong commitment to interdisciplinary studies and civic engagement. The Center is part of the School of Public Policy with a strong focus on the linkage between academic theory and policy practice.

International Comparative Research Experience

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 major conferences and workshops in nearly 100 countries. Prominent universities in Organizations ranging from think tanks to universities to foundations are steadily seeking expertise from CMDS.

Convening Power

The Center is a recognized focal point for an international network of acclaimed scholars, research institutions and activists making it an ideal venue for relevant debates, lectures, workshops and conferences. The geographic centrality of Budapest further strengthens the center's position as a meeting point for researchers and experts from East and West.

FOR WHOM WE WORK

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, policy-makers, journalists and activists while also more deeply engaging private media and technology companies.