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## **(POST-)DIGITAL RUPTURE BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND MEDIA: THE CZECH MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND ITS THREATS**

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The Czech case presents a fascinating paradox: while it ranks well on some social and political indicators, there is a public perception that the political and media systems are dysfunctional. The relationship between democracy and media in the Czech Republic is therefore strong, important, and context-dependent. The diversity of media that constitutes the Czech media landscape plays a central role in contemporary democracy. It is a blend of traditional and digital platforms, with public broadcasters maintaining a strong presence alongside a competitive private sector. The influence of media ownership by powerful business figures with political ties remains a major challenge, shaping public trust and media independence (Štětka et al., 2024).

This study – part of the EU Horizon project MEDEMAP (<https://www.medemap.eu>) – is grounded in a discursive-material framework by Carpentier and Wimmer (2025), which enables us to pay attention to the material as well as the discursive dimensions of the current rupture in democracy and media. Empirically it focuses on threats to the media landscape from the perspectives of regulatory institutions, news media organizations, and citizens. To this end, twelve interviews with editors-in-chief and journalists from leading news media outlets (print, TV, radio, online, and community media) and four interviews with representatives of major national media authorities were conducted in the spring and summer of 2024. The interview guide for the experts consisted of nine main questions and 19 follow-up questions (focusing on media roles for democracy, conditions for media freedom and professional journalism, and the relationship between media and democracy, among other topics), with an average duration slightly under an hour. Additionally, four focus group discussions with citizens (n=38) from heterogeneous socio-demographic backgrounds were carried out. The citizens were selected according to the principle of “theoretical sampling” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The guide for the focus groups included four main topics and various follow-ups focusing on (1) media usage and political participation, (2) media attitudes, and (3) political trust. The analysis

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of interviews and focus groups was carried out in accordance with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

We identify five threats to news media and their possible implications for democracy from the *perspective of citizens*. These threats all have their discursive and material components. However, some threats – particularly lack of economic sustainability – have more pronounced material components, while others – such as disenchantment and lack of trust, the transformation of political knowledge, and increase of symbolic violence and polarisation – have primarily discursive components. In addition to specific materialist crises, like rising energy prices and inflation, which worry respondents the most, the findings highlight the more discursive (symbolic) and affective dimensions of the threats. For citizens, aspects of sustainability and the environment are clearly pushed into the background in times of the perceived polycrisis. The respondents are deeply preoccupied with the immediate threats, causing future challenges and potential solutions to recede from view.

Conversely, *journalists* identify additional threats, which they describe as manifestations of an ongoing crisis: the business-model fragility, media ownership concentration in the hands of a small group of investors, and populist attacks on public-service media. Many journalists feel trapped in self-referential media bubbles. This situation is fueled by the fact that, distinct from other journalism cultures, Czech journalists are reluctant to join professional associations, trade unions, or press councils. These contexts diminish collective capacities to adapt. The role of large online platforms in these threats is widely recognized as extremely important. However, one notable exception stands out: the Czech news aggregator *Seznam.cz*, which is the only platform that can stand up to Google in the country. Its dominant position in online advertising, regularly serving 90% of the Czech market, is seen negatively by all interviewed journalists, which, in their views, poses a significant threat to media freedom. The role of technology is seen by some (especially those in the online, local, and regional outlets) as very beneficial, as it supports innovation and enables better reporting. For example, one interviewee from a private radio organisation pointed to the potential of generative AI: “Speaking frankly, and on a personal note, thanks to tools like ChatGPT, I can get much more work done than I used to. It’s just about knowing how to use these tools to make your job easier and focus on more important things.”

*Media authorities* also point to the material resources of the media landscape, with a discussion about the role of technology and the organizational infrastructures that support them. A similar observation applies to the regulatory role of the state, where this group of respondents emphasised legitimacy, particularly in contrast to perceived situations in Hungary or Slovakia, highlighting a discursive component. The other major (former) threat of oligarchisation in the Czech media landscape seems to be pushed into the background as a result. They also point out the political struggles contextualising the current rupture in Czechia, e.g., the degree of media pluralism or media freedom.

The framework of Carpentier and Wimmer (2025) helps to explain how ruptures of the media landscape have both material and discursive elements and how these are interwoven, without forming a hierarchy, but instead remaining mutually entangled. Besides material aspects like the state of technology or a critical perspective on the

financing of editorial departments by companies, more discursive (symbolic) and affective dimensions of the current rupture can also be highlighted. Exemplarily, professional conflicts concerning journalistic orientations, observed by Volek (2010), are no longer evident, as all media respondents clearly see the importance of media for the audience as a priority, even though this is not fully acknowledged by the citizens we interviewed. For journalists, however, this does not translate into an aspiration toward journalistic excellence, but rather a challenging reorientation, also under post-digital conditions where digitisation has become commonplace in everyday journalism. In a recent study, Volek (2022: 100) postulates that "(...) the future of the Czech media thus depends on the intensity of two parallel processes – the commercialization of politics and the politicization of the media business." Building on our findings, we argue that the material and discursive implications of datafication – exemplified by the biggest Czech platform Seznam.cz and AI-driven workflows, not only intensify these two processes but have become crucial for understanding the rupture between media and democracy. Based on these findings, we draw the conclusion that strategies like promoting community, local or alternative social media like the *Fediverse* could break the deadlock felt by all actors and can serve as a condition of possibility to heal this form of rupture.

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