

MEDIATION

Biannual
publication
of Fondation
Hirondelle

UNDERSTANDING THROUGH INFORMATION AND DIALOGUE

The media and democracy

With several political and civic activities scheduled for the end of the year in the countries where we work, we are dedicating this issue to the role of the media in building participatory democracy. In the Central African Republic, a constitutional referendum is scheduled for this summer, in Switzerland legislative elections are planned for this autumn, Mali's constitutional referendum in June has opened a new electoral cycle, and the date for the Congolese (DRC) presidential elections has been set for the end of the year. But we believe democracy goes far beyond elections. Elections are certainly a test of democracy, but the exchange of ideas and opinions that takes place at election time is a process that should continue throughout the term of elected representatives. In our media, we therefore aim to provide people with reliable, diversified information, enabling them to take action in their daily lives as citizens. This is all the more important in contexts of conflict or undemocratic regimes. Through our dialogue programmes, we seek to untangle truth from falsehood, encourage local populations to participate in public debate, and create spaces in which everyone can express themselves. Working together to find compromise solutions to key challenges is the best expression of a healthy, functional democracy.

Caroline Vuillemin
General Director

Demonstration by journalists and civil society in Guatemala City, March 2023, in the run-up to June 25 elections. © Johan Ordonez / AFP

BATTERED MEDIA CANNOT BE GUARANTORS OF DEMOCRACY

Digital companies' capture of news media revenues and the proliferation of misinformation have shaken the historic link between journalism and democracy. How can this link be restored?

With the invention of the steam-powered rotary press in the early 19th century, journalism became one of the main guarantors of democracy. When thousands or even tens of thousands of copies of a newspaper could be printed and distributed daily in a single town, the deeds and actions of those in power could be reported to the entire population, who then - for the first time in history - had the possibility of holding their rulers to account. Throughout the twentieth century, the development of media production techniques and media, including radio and television, enabled the governed to keep an even closer watch on their rulers, by giving them access to sound and images, and by ensuring the instant dissemination of a wide range of information to a broad public.

The current century opened with the hope of even greater democratization thanks to the Internet, a technology that would make it easier for whistle-blowers to transmit sensitive

information to the media, and for everyone to publish whatever they wished within the limits of the law. Citizens did indeed take to the game, and the explosion of amateur online publications did indeed take place. Unfortunately, the revenues of professional media have been largely captured by GAFAMs and their platforms, through which information now transits: by 2023, according to the Reuters Institute, 55% of the world's Internet users access information primarily via search engines or social networks. The result has been a weakening of journalism, the closure of many local media, and the proliferation online of unverified, sometimes even misleading or propagandist content: today, over 10% of Internet traffic is false information, and 81 countries use it for massive disinformation campaigns. Since the mid-2010s, democracy has been on the retreat worldwide,¹ including on the American and European continents, cradles of the first democracies two and a half centuries ago.

For Fondation Hirondelle, which has been working in fragile contexts for almost 30 years, the stranglehold of digital companies on social media and the proliferation of online disinformation are cause for great concern. Indeed, in some countries, these platforms are now the only information channels available to people to express themselves and read diverse information.

This issue of *Mediation* explores a range of initiatives through which news media, alone or in collaboration with other players, are reinventing themselves and their work. ■

(1) According to the *Democracy Index* published each year by the Economist Intelligence Unit.

Interview



A PLATFORM FOR CONSTRUCTIVE EXCHANGE

The Die Republik editorial team at the windows of the emblematic Rothaus hotel in Langstrasse, Zurich.
© Anne Gabriel-Jürgens/Republik

© Nick Lobeck/Republik



Katharina Hemmer is co-director of Die Republik (republik.ch), a Swiss online magazine dedicated to politics, business, society and culture. Founded in 2018, it is funded exclusively by its readers.

Die Republik's motto is: "Without journalism, no democracy". What do you mean by that?

Katharina Hemmer: Without independent journalism, democracy cannot really function. Democracy relies, among other things, on people's ability to form informed opinions and make reasonable decisions. They can do this best if there is a varied and constructive public discourse - every outlet in the Swiss media market thus plays an important role in democracy. We offer our subscribers one to three in-depth analyses a day to help them form opinions and make decisions. People need independent information to make sensible decisions. Our business model, which relies exclusively on funding from our readership, ensures our total independence. Another important role of the media in a democracy is to criticize

those in power - to look closely, research carefully, expose abuses. This is what we have done time and again in our reporting in recent years, for example our series on the cartel scandal in Graubünden region, our investigation into the new Swiss fighter jet agreement, and our revelations on the tax loopholes still existing in our country.

This is an election year in Switzerland. Does that make the challenge greater?

Opinions aren't formed just before elections, but it is during elections that opinions are put forward. Unfortunately, there is less and less diversity in the Swiss media market, so our information is all the more important. We don't claim to do the best journalism, but we do want to offer citizens an alternative. We are regularly referred to as a left-wing media outlet. However, we want to move away from partisan political debates and focus on the long-term challenges facing our society. We aim to provide a platform for constructive exchange. Dialogue with and between our readers is central to our approach. The exchange with them, both online and offline, is continuous. In

our "Kimalabor" climate laboratory, we are currently working with our readers to find out how journalism can support climate action.

Every media outlet contributing to diversity in the market plays an important role in democracy

Die Republik was born of an ideal - is your business model sustainable?

In 2017, we managed to break the world record for media crowdfunding. We showed that people are willing to pay for quality journalism in a digitized world. The number of subscriptions now stands at over 29,000, which is respectable after five years given that the potential German-speaking Swiss readership is only 5 million. A model financed exclusively by the readership, however, implies constant renewal, as an average 25% of our readers leave every year. In recent years, we've been faced with financial difficulties on two occasions, but we're staying the course. Our aim is not to make a profit, but to show that independent media can exist.

Can such a model appeal to a wide audience?

We're convinced it can. Our annual subscription is CHF 240, but those who can't afford it can choose the one that suits them best. It's also possible to forward articles to third parties, who can then read them free of charge. So we reach a much wider audience than the 29,000 or so subscribers. At the moment, we mainly reach an urban and niche readership compared with the big media groups, but our ambition and long-term goal is to be useful to as many people as possible. ■

Dialogue with and between our readers is central to our approach

International Declaration on Information and Democracy: right of access to reliable information

On the sidelines of the 74th UN General Assembly in 2019, 50 countries signed the International Declaration on Information and Democracy, which states that “access to knowledge, particularly knowledge of reality, is a fundamental right”. In their view, this right is included in the “right to (...) receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”, guaranteed by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But how can this right of access to knowledge via information be implemented? While the “responsibility” of States and media owners is classically put forward, that of digital platforms for disseminating information, especially social networks, is equally important: “online mass disinformation” seriously threatens “the exercise of the right to knowledge”, continues the text of the Declaration. Platforms must therefore act to “promote media pluralism and favour serendipity” (random access to information), and above all “implement mechanisms that favour visibility of reliable information, (...) based on criteria of transparency, editorial independence, use of verification methods and compliance with journalistic ethics”. Implementation of the Declaration on Information and Democracy is monitored by a Forum of the same name grouping 11 NGOs working for the media, human rights, international dialogue and peace.

(see also our interview with Christophe Deloire, chairman of the Forum for Information and Democracy, on page 6)

DIVERSE, HIGH-QUALITY MEDIA ARE ESSENTIAL FOR A DIRECT DEMOCRACY

“Studies have shown that media diversity is an essential component of democracy. Participation in the political process and trust in government are lower among people who use little or no news media. It is important that these exist. The Swiss media landscape is characterized by a strong presence of both public and private media, but media concentration in Switzerland has increased sharply in recent years. Some peripheral regions no longer have any significant local media. This is particularly problematic in a system of direct democracy, where popular votes are held several times a year.

For the past ten years, the “Public Sphere and Society” research centre at the University of Zurich has been evaluating media coverage of federal elections. Private media play a decisive role in providing regional information. However, these media are struggling for economic survival and have been unable



© John Flury/obsquasi.ch

over the years to cover the political processes taking place in the federal capital Bern. The Südostschweiz media outlet in the Graubünden region had to close its national newsroom for economic reasons. As for the media in French-speaking Switzerland, they only provide national coverage via news agency dispatches. News agencies are not in the business of investigative journalism or in-depth information. Yet access to in-depth journalism is precisely what is needed to make informed political decisions. In 2022, the Swiss rejected a package of additional federal subsidies for the media, and the ball is now in the hands of the cantons. The measures envisaged are still at an early stage and it is not certain that they will become law.”

Dr Linards Udris, Deputy Head of Research at the “Public Sphere and Society” Research Center (University of Zurich)

“Algues vertes” by Inès Léraud: breaking the law of silence in Breton cafés

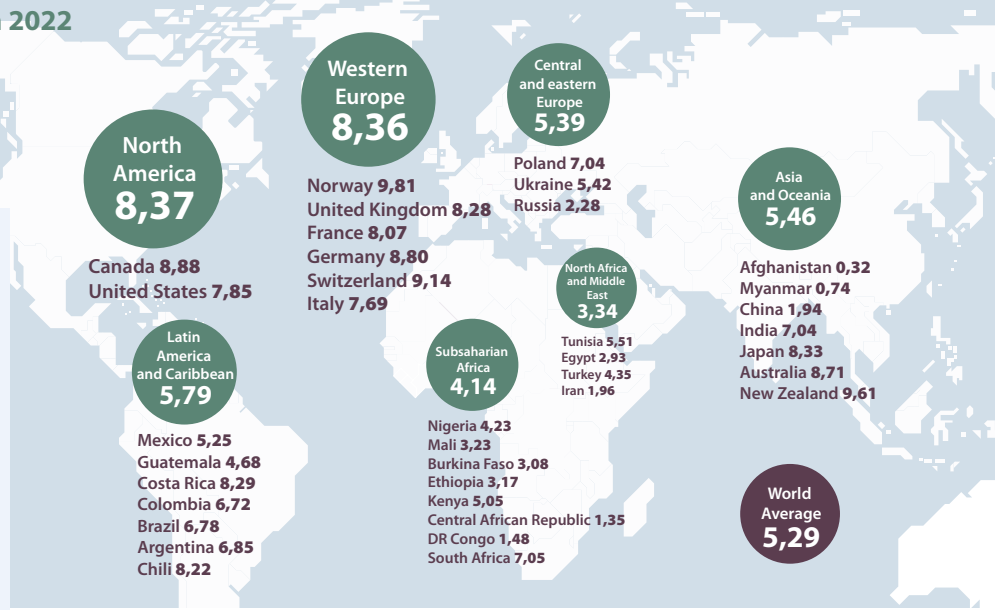
In her multi-issue graphic novel “Algues vertes, l’histoire interdite” (La Revue dessinée / Delcourt, 2019), co-written with Pierre Van Hove, freelance investigative journalist Inès Léraud explains how she moved to Brittany (the western tip of France) in 2015, first for a few months, then for three years, with a view to understanding the silence surrounding several health-related events in the region. “Moving to central Brittany completely transformed my way of working,” she recounts. “I discovered the Breton café, the ideal place to find people who had never knocked on the door of a union or association. In the cafés, you listen, glean phrases, names, mull them over to find words that have never been spoken, archives that have never been explored (...). The fact of living there dispelled mistrust (...). Little by little, dozens, hundreds of people began to talk.” Inès Léraud’s investigations brought to light the workings of the Breton agri-food lobby and the pressure it exerted on a whole range of players to stifle understanding of environmental illnesses in the region. Two years later, in Guingamp, she co-founded Splann! (“clear!” in Breton), the first investigative media based in Brittany.

Big Data

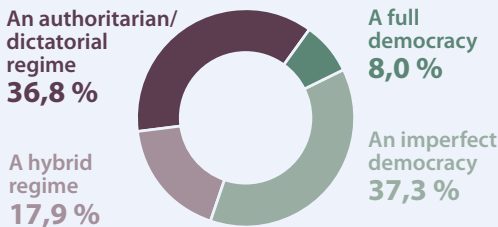
Democracy, a minority system

Democracy Index* by region / country in 2022

Source: Democracy Index 2022, Economist Intelligence Unit.
* The democracy index is established according to 5 criteria: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture and civil liberties.

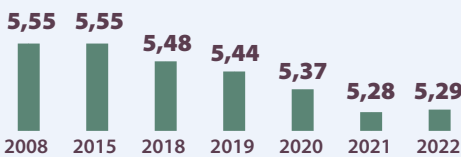


Share of the population living in... (2022)



Democracy, a system on the decline

Evolution of the democracy index* (global average)



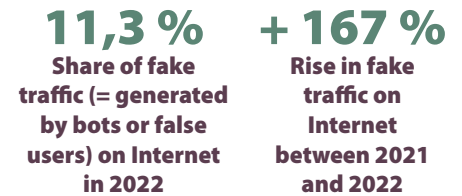
Source: Democracy Index 2022, Economist Intelligence Unit.
* The democracy index is established according to 5 criteria: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture and civil liberties.

Big rise in disinformation

Number of States resorting to online disinformation campaigns



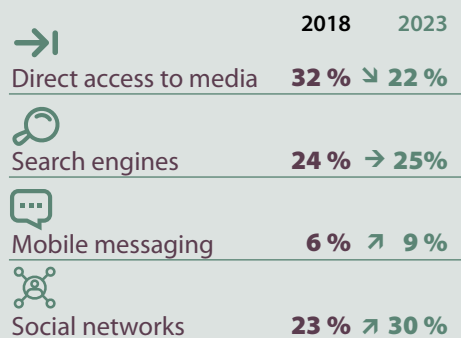
Source: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation, Oxford Internet Institute, January 2021



Source: The State of the Fake Traffic 2023, CHEQ, March 2023.

Rise in information access via indirect sources, including social networks

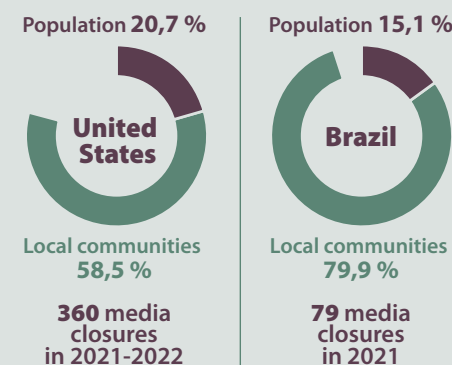
Share of Internet users worldwide accessing information via...



Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023.

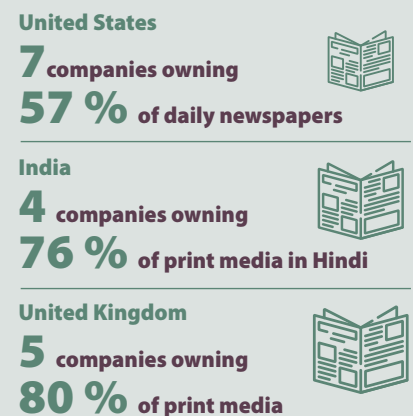
Spread of information deserts

Share of local communities / population situated in an information desert or semi-desert*



Source: MediaTrustLab 2022. * Territory with a maximum of one local information media outlet.

Independent media reduced



Sources: US Media Index, Harvard University, 2021 ; Media Ownership Monitor – Reporters sans frontières, 2022; Media Reform Coalition, University of London, 2021.

Our experience



CLOSE TO THE PEOPLE

Radio Ndeke Luka reporting in Bangui, March 2021. © Gwenn Dubourthoumieu / Fondation Hirondelle.

bloggers and influencers in CAR or West Africa, whose posts are actively relayed on Central African social networking accounts. Thirdly, it has become very dangerous for Central African journalists to counter this disinformation or take a close interest in security issues, as demonstrated by the sudden and unexplained death, in February 2022, of a Central African journalist who had been doing just that.

listeners a voice every evening and is broadcast by all our partner radio stations. Finally, in 2020 we set up a programme to combat misinformation and hate speech, #StopATènè, which has six dedicated journalists. The topics covered are published online, and broadcast on our airwaves to reach the widest possible audience.

Does this approach have an impact in terms of strengthening democracy?

It certainly does. According to our latest audience survey conducted at the end of 2022, 82% of listeners feel they better understand the Central African Republic and how it works, thanks to the programmes and debates broadcast by RNL. A survey of 550 people before and after installation of a new FM transmitter near the Cameroon border found over 84% saying they had complete trust in RNL's information. This level of trust is four times higher than for other local radios. Residents' confidence in their ability to discern truth from falsehood also increased: the proportion saying they would try to verify information before sharing it rose from 33% to 59%. Finally, the surveys revealed a significant increase in listeners' engagement in elections, and in their opposition to undemocratic practices. We are currently conducting a study of Radio Ndeke Luka's impact on the fight against disinformation and on the democratic and peace process in CAR, in partnership with Michigan State University. ■

In this context, what is Radio Ndeke Luka (RNL) doing to bring quality information to as many people as possible in CAR?

We have a three-pronged approach. First, we stay close to the people in the way we produce and broadcast, thanks to a network of 36 local correspondents, 13 transmitters and 20 community radio partners who relay our programmes throughout the country. This means people can hear us every day in the country's two official languages (Sango and French), and we are the leading radio station with a 72% penetration rate. Secondly, we have programmes dedicated to each category of the population: Family Magazine, Women's Magazine, Agropastoral Magazine, Mossékatitude for young people, "Tango ya Bawendo" for old-timers... and also a programme called "Lasso Na BêAfrika", exclusively in Sango, which gives our

The surveys showed a rise in listeners' engagement in elections



Ouboulè Abalo, Fondation Hirondelle's representative in the Central African Republic, explains Radio Ndeke Luka's approach to informing the widest possible audience and strengthening their civic commitment.

What is access to information like in the Central African Republic (CAR)?

Ouboulè Abalo: Central Africans' access to information has deteriorated for three reasons. Firstly, the security situation is not improving. Even though the rebel groups of the Coalition des Patriotes pour le Changement have been driven out of certain prefectures, their attacks continue on a daily basis, particularly in the northwest, southeast and centre, in the Bambari region. Access to all types of services in these regions is difficult, especially since the roads there are very bad. Secondly, over the past few years, the geopolitical context has favoured the development of mass disinformation by certain Central African media, as well as

Eyewitness

REGULATING NEW INFORMATION SPACES

Christophe Deloire, Secretary General of Reporters Sans Frontières, chairs the Forum on Information and Democracy, an initiative that brings together governments, civil society and researchers to develop democratic guarantees in the global information space.

Do you think that the way search engines and social networks currently operate (economically, algorithmically...) represents a threat to democracy?

Christophe Deloire: Over the history of democracy, building informational spaces - in other words, national fora where ideas, opinions and information are exchanged - has involved establishing rules for intermediaries, the media. This has taken the form of media regulation and journalists' self-regulation. These mechanisms may not have been perfect, but have helped ensure the integrity, independence and pluralism of information. With social networks, we now find ourselves in a new, ecosystem without mediation. So what we built before is at least inoperative, if not destroyed. News media now find themselves in direct competition with propaganda, sponsored (i.e. corrupt) content and rumours. There is also content with intellectual added value too. But to paraphrase a saying, bad information drives out good.

To improve this situation, do you think it's necessary to introduce accountability for digital platforms?

In a way, we could say that in the absence of regulation, digital platforms have replaced public fora. As the saying goes, custom is the law, and it's the platforms that dictate the laws of the new information space. They have also replaced the judiciary, since they apply them. In short, we should impose obligations on them, as we would on any service of general interest. Platform managers should not be able to make editorial decisions: did Covid-19 come from a Wuhan laboratory or not? Platforms should not encourage the propagation of one thesis or another. They should be politically neutral, transparent and, above all, promote the reliability of information. How can this be achieved? By taking

**Platforms
should take
reliability
of information
into account in
algorithmic
indexing**



Christophe Deloire © Manon Levet

reliability into account in algorithmic indexing. This is possible, thanks to the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI), for which we are cooperating with Fondation Hirondelle - a market mechanism that gives greater visibility to media that can demonstrate their processes comply with the principles of journalism.

In this context, how do you see the role of the Forum on Information and Democracy, which you chair?

It won't be enough for democracies to say that technology companies must apply old laws, because what they're doing is totally new, with Web 2.0, Web 3.0 and artificial intelligence. So we need to invent a new law for this new ecosystem. That's why we initiated the International Declaration on Information and Democracy, now endorsed by 50 States, which aims to do for information chaos what the international negotiation process (COP) is doing on climate change. We have also created the Forum on Information and Democracy, a civil society-led implementation body that has made hundreds of recommendations, dozens of which have inspired European law (Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act adopted by the European Council in October 2022). And we are in the process of creating the equivalent of the IPCC, the Observatory on Information and Democracy, bringing together scientists working on these subjects, in collaboration with the OECD. In short, this is a multilateral initiative that brings together intergovernmental and civil society bodies to regulate the new publication spaces for the benefit of quality information. ■

Fondation Hirondelle is a Swiss non-profit organization which provides information to populations faced with crisis, empowering them in their daily lives and as citizens. Through our work, millions of people in war-affected countries, post-conflict areas, humanitarian crisis and societies in democratic transition have access to media that speak to them and give them a voice.

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