EU participatory democracy and EU news media - between complementary policies and sectoral needs. A reality check

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Introduction

Supporting a resilient democracy and a healthier media sector are at the heart of the recent political debate regarding the future of Europe. Two Action Plans, launched by the European Commission (EC) at the end of 2020 - the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) and the European Media and Audiovisual Action Plan (EMAAP) – aim to reinvigorate European democracy and sustain the media sector. These two action plans are interrelated and complementary and reflect the EC's acknowledgement of the need to approach democracy and media holistically. Chiefly, the action plans focus on enabling citizens to participate in the electoral process, by making informed decisions and safeguarding the role of free media as a prerequisite for a pluralist public sphere and democratic debate.

This article aims to start a broad reflection, at a theoretical and empirical level, on the role of the European news media in the context of the participatory practices of the EU and the interplay between the European policies and actions of the media, and the specific sectoral needs.

In the scholarly literature of disciplines like communication, democracy and governance studies, the importance of free, independent, and sustainable media for informing citizens, fostering the public debate, and holding policy-makers accountable is widely accepted (Aalberg, Curran 2012; Mughan, Gunther 2000). The same goes for the role of meaningful political participation in a functioning democracy (Carpentier 2011; Michels, De Graaf 2010). The media as a vital element of democracy is a normative postulation in journalism studies (Christians *et al.* 2010). In the context of European studies, a plethora of studies address the impact of media on political participation, particularly concerning the media's effects on European elections (De Vreese, Boomgaarden 2016; Spanje, De Vreese 2014; Demetriou 2012). Limited literature addresses the distinct participatory model of the European Union (EU) and the role of media in it (see Zambelli, Morganti 2021). The recent adoption of the EDAP and EMAAP indicates that the vital role of media as part of the democratic infrastructure was acknowledged by the European regulators and placed at the core of the current Commission mandate.

Based on literature review, policy document analysis and survey inquiry, this article aims to start a broad reflection, by questioning whether the EU approach to link-

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ing the strengthening of the European news media sector to the quality of participatory democratic process in the EU is responding to sectoral needs. Specifically, 3 sub research questions (SRQs) helped to investigate the interplay between the EU news media sector and the distinct European model of participatory democracy.

The first SRQ addresses how the relationship between the European news media sector and the distinct model of European participatory democracy is framed in academic literature. Therefore, the article outsets with theoretical insights on the role of the news media sector in European participatory democracy.

The second RQ investigates how the relationship between the European news media sector and participatory democracy is presented in EU actions and policies. For this purpose, we analyse how the media's role in strengthening European democracy and its connection to political participation are presented in the two recent Action plans of the European Commission – the EDAP and EMAAP, as well as other policy programmes and actions currently in place.

Lastly, SRQ3 proposes to look directly into the needs of the European news media sector and how media companies engaged in innovative cross-border collaborations perceived the EU approach to support the European news media for strengthening EU democracy. To do this, we have questioned the representatives of 76 media companies from 22 European countries on their perceptions of the EU's role in supporting the media through a semi-structured online survey. The companies took part in the second edition of the pilot European cross-border programme fostering media innovation through cross-border collaboration—Stars4Media[1], implemented in 2021 - 2022. During four months, the selected companies worked in configurations of two or three partners, grouped around common initiatives that helped them gain skills, exchange best practices and improve their financial sustainability. The survey answers were gathered in January 2022, at the end of these collaborations. Based on these answers, we identify and present the perceptions of this group of European news media representatives. By doing this, the article contributes to a reality check on the European policy framework linking media empowerment to participatory democracy and a better understanding of how the needs and expectations of the media sector should be addressed.

1. Theoretical considerations of the role of news media in the European democracy

The main theoretical debates on the role of news media in European democracy are structured around representative and participatory democracy concepts. According to the classic democratic doctrine, free, independent media is an integral part of democracy due to its pivotal role in shaping public opinion, supporting citizens in making informed choices and keeping those in power under scrutiny. These functions are embedded in the normative theories of a free press and social responsibility

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[1] *Stars4Media* is an innovation exchange programme co-funded by the EU and implemented by VUB, Europe's MediaLab, EFJ and WAN-IFRA, aiming at facilitating cooperation between media professionals, to accelerate media innovation and cross-border cooperation. For details, see www.stars4media.eu

(Watson 2008). These theories define the roles of media as informing, educating, and entertaining, but also enabling citizens to scrutinize the government.

The role of news media in a democracy derives as well from the set of values and principles that define the journalistic profession. Particularly, fairness, impartiality, and autonomy dictate that news media should reflect reality without biases, in a way that no view is unduly favoured or discounted (Asp 2007). The two normative functions of news media in democracy, of informing citizens and surveilling those who govern, have been challenged in the last two decades by a series of challenges, which are largely described in the literature concerning the United States, but which are not foreign to the European news media either. Specifically, the increased competition in the market, the shrinking of advertising revenues and the digital shift fuelled the crisis in the media sector and fostered the search for new business models (Nielsen 2019; Franklin 2014; Gueskin *et al.* 2011). In parallel, this encouraged the media's predilection for shocking and sensational news, as well as the focus on personalities, and politics as a game or a soap opera, to become more attractive and interesting to audiences (Blumer, Coleman, 2015). The audiences, nonetheless, can nowadays choose their preferred information channels and consume selective content from the plethora of available news sources. This also implies that, even though politically relevant information is more accessible than before, it also is easier than in the past to avoid it if not specifically looking for it (Aalberg, Curan 2012). In 2020-2021, the European media sector registered an additional drop in revenues due to the COVID-19 pandemic (KEA 2021), which exacerbated the aforementioned trends. At the same time, the commercial, profit-driven business models can neither solve the structural crisis of the media nor support its democratic role (Pickard 2019). Democracy needs engaged citizens, capable of making informed decisions for the common good, thanks to a reliable and pluralist information system, not purely customers of media products (Neveu 2004).

A major stream of the literature reflects on the news media as an enabler of political opinion formation and the implications for direct participatory practices (Druckman, Parkin 2005). There is wide agreement that news media have an essential public role since citizens require reliable and up-to-date information about political affairs to be able to engage in politics and participate in the decision-making processes of their concerns (Carpini, Keeter 1996). This is supported by three specific media effects: cognitive, impacting the level of political knowledge, and attitudinal – with implications for political opinions formation and behavioural, affecting the elections turnout and voting patterns (Smetko 2004). The information that media provides allows citizens to obtain specific knowledge, can enable autonomous opinion formation and eventually, can empower them to exercise control over the government, through formal and informal political participation, such as voting in elections and public opinion contributions (Carpentier 2007).

A vast body of literature looks at the influence of the media on the European election results. This is analysed regarding three dimensions—media tone, visibility, and framing. There is substantial evidence that the more positive the media tone and

visibility of a political entity, the more likely the voters to support it (Thesen *et al.* 2020; Geiß, Schäfer 2017; Hopmann *et al.* 2010). Furthermore, a more positive media evaluation of the EU results in less likely support for Eurosceptic parties (Van Spanje, De Vreese 2014). On top of the impact of media discourses on political participation, growing research reflects on the role of visual communication, including media representations of politics and visual personalisation of political players in European elections. When debating the functions of visual images and symbols, political communication scholars highlight that these can support opinion formation and decision-making, by offering visual cues that simplify the cognitive process (Lilleker 2019; Schill 2012). Most research in this area focuses on social media representations, completing the studies on visibility in news media (Carlson, Hakansson 2022; Nahema *et al.* 2021; Heim, Jungblut 2020).

As the framing of the EU is filtered by the national media and national public spheres, these findings are connected to a second major stream of literature that addresses whether news media facilitate the creation of a European public sphere. The interest in the subject crystallized in the background of the discussions about the democratic deficit of the EU (Pfetsch, Heft 2014). The role of a strong, deliberative public sphere for participatory European democracy is widely acknowledged (Fishkin, Luskin, Siu 2014), but the role of media in building it, particularly in the European Union, has been overlooked (De Zúñiga 2012). It is largely agreed that in the specific context of the EU, news media can facilitate an open, multi-perspective discussion about political issues. Building on the classical Habermas' theory (Habermas 1989 [1962]), the media's contribution is analysed as an institution that both reflects and shapes public discourse.

Early studies focus on the media as a facilitator of public discussion about political issues and point out that European citizens are informed about European politics, institutions, and policies mainly through national media. The emergence of a transnational, European public sphere, in which the news media interconnects the local, regional, and national public spheres, and supports the discursive legitimation of the EU, by focusing more on issues that affect the entire Union, has been framed as a panacea to overcome the communication deficit of the Union (Heinderyckx 2015). A connected discussion focuses on the emergence of transnational European wide or pan-European mass media and their potential to organize a general, supranational communication space. While some authors support the idea that the main role in the functioning of a European public sphere belongs to a European-wide or pan-European mass media, which can increase transnational communication flows (Eriksen 2007; Pfetsch, Heft 2014), others challenge it. Koopmans and Statham (2010), for instance, see this approach as deficient because it equals the European public sphere to the replication of the unified national public spheres, while the multicultural, multi-linguistic context of the EU is much more complex. Therefore, Boomgaarden and De Vreese (2016: 20) suggest that when looking at the European public sphere, one should consider the "news convergence across Europe", meaning the shared focus of national media on the other Member States (MS) and European governance, as well as the EU presence in the news.

Historically, the EU coverage in national media has been limited and often linked to domestic politics, while the attempts to establish pan-European media have not been very successful, thus far. The few media that cover specifically the EU affairs, such as *Euronews, EURACTIV* or *Politico* are appealing to a rather specialised audience, who is familiar with the EU functioning and/or related in some way to the EU (Morganti, Van Audenhove 2012). Reporting on the EU is challenging for national media, due to the complexity of the subject. The intricate policymaking at the supranational level is difficult to convey to broad audiences in an easily understandable manner. Moreover, the public is only sporadically interested in European politics and institutions, while news editors consider European stories boring for the readership (Lloyd, Marconi 2014). Nevertheless, journalistic attention to European topics has grown over time, even in the absence of strong public demand for such coverage (Hurrelmann, Gora, Wagner 2012). Events such as the Eurozone crisis, refugee management and Brexit fuelled the interest in the politics of other Member States, and implicitly, towards different European policies (Sandbu 2022). Additionally, European elections are benefiting from increasing media coverage at a national level (Cremonesi *et al.* 2019; Boomgaarden, De Vreese 2016). Personalisation of European politics through processes such as the party nomination of candidates for the Commission presidency (*Spitzenkandidat)* leads to the personalisation of news and simultaneous coverage of the same topics, using similar frames and meaning structures across major European media outlets (Fotopoulos, Morganti 2022). These developments seem to mark, arguably, a new step towards the establishment of a European public sphere and, certainly, towards more Europeanised national public spheres.

To conclude these theoretical considerations, the amount of information published about the EU, meaning the EU's visibility in the national public spheres, also its overall tone, and its narrative and visual framing can affect the positive or negative perception of the EU institutions and policies, their legitimacy, and the overall level of satisfaction with EU democracy (Galpin, Trenz 2017; Desmet, Van Spanje, De Vreese 2015). Therefore, by acknowledging the importance of the quality of information for the electoral process and the European public sphere, the two European Action plans - EDAP and EMAAP - which link the empowerment of the European news media sector to improving democracy seem relevant and aligned with the academic literature.

The next section of this article dives deeper into this EU approach, by looking at how different EU actions and policies tackle the relationship between the European news media sector and participatory democracy.

2. The EU approach: Improving the quality of democracy by empowering the European news media sector

In the past decade, European democracy has been challenged by increased polarization, rising extremism, low electoral turnout, elections interference, popular disillusionment with representative politics and democratic institutions, as well as the spread of disinformation and threats against journalists (European Parliament 2020;

Nugent 2017). These developments mount up on the EU legitimacy crisis and democratic deficit debate (Schlesinger 1999), which marked the turn towards participatory EU policy-making in the early 2000s. Since then, numerous initiatives were taken at a European level to ensure a "deliberative democracy" (Blockmans, Russack 2020). Targeting different policy areas, they range from specific legislative and policy frameworks to projects, actions, and recommendations based on expert group consultations.

To address the popular dissatisfaction with the deficient communication and limited accountability of the institutions, multiple venues for stakeholders' political participation at a European level were created (for example, European Public Consultations, the European Citizens' Initiative, and the multiple venues for dialogue). These represent a set of direct and indirect participatory mechanisms, which allow citizens to contribute to supra-national politics. The White Paper on European Governance (European Commission 2001) is an early example of a policy document emphasizing the importance of participation in the legitimation of European governance and calling for a code of conduct for consultation with civil society and the public, strengthened rules for public access to EU information and dialogue between authorities in the Member States and the citizens. A particular emphasis on strengthening democratic participation in the EU is made in the Treaty of Lisbon, which frames direct participation as a citizen's right, and obliges the institutions to provide opportunities for civil dialogues and consultations (Lindner, Aichholzer 2020). Both the possibilities of political engagement through delegation of representational power (direct election of representatives), as well as public participation in discussing topics of public interest, became a norm in the EU political system. Stakeholders are nowadays involved directly in the policy-making process, through mechanisms such as European Public Consultations, citizens' dialogues, and debates. Citizens' opinions are consulted as well through surveys, such as Eurobarometer and there exists the possibility to submit petitions with proposals, as part of the European Citizens' initiative. These forms of political participation, based on the direct involvement of stakeholders in policy-making, together with the delegation of representational power through electoral choices, constitute the specific participatory model of the EU (Zambelli, Morganti 2021).

The criticism of the democratic deficit of the EU is connected to its communication deficit. The development of the professional communication capacities of the EU institutions came as a response to this criticism, in an attempt to better connect to the citizens. Currently, the amount of information published about and by the EU is vast, ranging from specialised websites and social media channels to up-to-date press briefings and interviews. Nevertheless, despite numerous attempts of the EU to create a deliberative, democratic space in which active European citizens express their views and contribute to policymaking, these efforts succeed rather in generating some specialised debate than in creating a vibrant European public sphere (Ivic 2017). Moreover, an increased quantity of EU-related news is not sufficient for the legitimation of the Union. The media discourse is also crucial (Kleinen-von Königslöw 2011), as European democracy is a dynamic communicative process, shaped by the media (Michailidou, de Wilde, Trenz 2014).

When looking at a series of EU measures that link the European democracy at large and the European news media sector, in particular, several areas of intervention can be noticed: (1) supporting media freedom, pluralism, and literacy; (2) countering fake news and disinformation; (3) providing financial support for competitive news media and audio-visual services and (4) regulating the single market. These areas of intervention were identified by reviewing the EU measures that interlace support for the media sector and democracy and which are currently in place. In each of these areas, different actions, at different levels, tackling connected goals can be noticed. For instance, for supporting media freedom, pluralism and literacy, various complementary measures can be highlighted. To identify potential risks to media pluralism across the MS, the Media Pluralism Monitor[2] project assesses media freedom and pluralism. The project evolved from a pilot supported by the EU. With a similar goal of supporting media freedom, another pilot—the Media Ownership Monitor—was launched in 2021 to ensure transparency on media ownership at the MS level. Additionally, there exists an expert group that monitors good practices concerning media literacy and aims to identify ways of aligning EU policies, programmes, and initiatives regarding media literacy. Pilot projects and monitoring entities are two of the non-binding instruments used by the EU, also in other areas of intervention. With regard to countering disinformation, for instance, the creation of the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News in 2017, to counter the spread of disinformation and the approval of the "Action Plan Against Disinformation" in 2018 can be mentioned. Additionally, non-legislative measures include funding schemes such as Creative Europe, aimed to support competitive news media and audio-visual services. Examples of legislative acts include the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) and the Copyright Directive. A detailed overview of the above-mentioned measures is presented in Annex 1 (not an exhaustive list).

To advance in attaining the goals of distinct, interconnected, previous actions and bridge the gap between them, the European Commission launched at the end of 2020, the Democracy Action Plan and the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan. The first - EDAP - aims broadly to strengthen the democratic institutions in the EU and "protect the European values" (Vice-President Věra Jourová in Carnegie Europe 2020). Specifically, it sets out legislative and non-legislative measures for three main pillars: protecting electoral integrity and democratic participation, reinforcing media freedom and pluralism, and countering disinformation (European Commission 2020a). There is no clear cut between the provisions of the EDAP aimed to empower the European news media sector and those to foster political participation. These goals are, directly or indirectly, targeted in a transversal manner, as intertwined, key elements of European democracy. A similar approach is observed in earlier measures. For example, with protecting the freedom of expression in mind, the Commission presented, in September 2019, a "Recommendation on ensuring the protection, safety, and empowerment of journalists and other media professionals in the EU". This reminds the MS that respecting media freedom and pluralism are fundamental rights of the EU. Even though the Recommendation focuses on the media sector, its rationale is that an enabling environment

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[2] For details: https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/

for free media allows citizens to form opinions based on multiple sources, scrutinise governments and exercise an informed right to vote (Commission Recommendation 2021/1534). Therefore, it is obvious that the EDAP reinforces the previous objectives of the Commission and that empowered, free media remains essential for direct political participation in the EU. On top of multiple non-binding targets, the EDAP envisions two specific legislative measures: The Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act aimed to ensure a safer digital space and a more open digital market.

The Media and Audiovisual Action Plan complements the EDAP and distinctly aims to contribute to nurturing a healthier European media sector, mainly affected by declining revenues and facing structural issues. It ambitions to accelerate the recovery, transformation, and innovation, as well as the resilience of the media sector, including both the news media and the audio-visual entertainment sectors (European Commission 2020b). The EMAAP is a premiere for the European market, striving to boost the European media industry's recovery after the COVID-19 crisis while maintaining its cultural and technological autonomy. Ten concrete actions are foreseen to facilitate and broaden the access to EU funding opportunities and transform the European media data space and media business models while also seeking to ensure a climate-neutral sector and foster European media talents (European Commission 2021a). Among them, the *NEWS* initiative bundles the actions and support for the media in a holistic approach, aimed at providing better access to finance, capacity building and collaborative transformation of the sector. Another relevant action for the scope of this article is focused on citizen empowerment by enhancing the public's awareness and media literacy. The EMAAP should safeguard the 'practical application' of the new media literacy provisions of the AVMSD, which is in place since 2010, in the form of a media literacy toolbox and guidelines for the Member States. These measures would support citizens to make informed choices and not only take full advantage of the new communication technologies, but also use the internet responsibly (Directive 2010/13/EU). At the crossroad between the EMAAP and EDAP, this action brings the citizens to the centre of the policy, as the transformation of the media ecosystem cannot be realised without considering the audiences. Additionally, a European Media Freedom Act was presented in 2022, to build upon the AVMSD and complement the legislative tools derived from EDAP and EMAAP, for stronger support for media freedom and pluralism (European Commission 2022).

Overall, both Plans contemplate strengthening the European news media sector as a panacea for enhancing the quality of democracy. The EMAAP brings an additional value to the EDAP, as one of the main objectives of the former, the economic recovery and competitiveness of the media sector, is a precondition for a healthy, independent, and pluralistic media environment, which in turn is fundamental for democracy (European Commission 2020a). Even though numerous measures with integrative goals were implemented previously by the European institutions, the EDAP and EMAAP represent the first comprehensive framework focused distinctly on the role of the media for democracy and its protection. Nevertheless, their success depends on the commitment of the Member States and their recognition of the ne-

cessity of transversal measures, aligned with the EU vision. The rise of right-wing nationalist parties in MS such as Poland and Hungary pose not only a challenge to the implementation of EU legislation at a national level but also threatens the media with an increasing amount of political pressure, journalists' attacks and limitations, and locally generated fake news (Rech 2018).

The next section of this article aims to understand whether the Action plans address the real needs of the European news media sector, based on a cross-sectional study.

3. Insights from the European news media sector: a reality check on sectoral needs and perceptions

One of the goals of this research was to understand whether the EU approach to media and democracy is the appropriate one, according to the media sector itself. To this end, a qualitative research method was applied. Specifically, an exploratory, semi-structured online survey was conducted among the beneficiaries of the 2021-2022 edition of the first, European cross-border collaboration programme fostering media innovation - Stars4Media. Co-funded by the EU, the programme started as a pilot action in 2019, to support the European media sector by enabling skills exchange and innovation through collaboration. For this study, primary data was collected from representatives of 76 media companies, based in 22 EU countries that participated in the second edition of Stars4Media. The profile of the companies varies largely from printed and digital national and local newspapers (13.2% of respondents) to digital news media/magazines (17.1% of respondents), start-ups (14.5%), content agencies (5.3%) and other types of entities. The size of the companies ranges, respectively, from small (10-50 employees) and micro (1-10 employees) to big (over 200 employees). Most of the respondents (75%) work for small and micro companies, while 15.8% for big companies. The list of participating companies is available on the Stars4Media website. Due to the nature of the co-funding schemes, these companies engaged to work together with partners with complementary skills and expertise, for four months, to implement initiatives (projects) revolving around editorial, technological, marketing, and other innovations. For most of them, it was the first time that they collaborated. At the end of the implementation of initiatives, in January 2022, one representative per company filled in an evaluation survey. Based on their responses, we aim to answer the SRQ3 of this paper, to outline how companies engaged in innovative cross-border collaborations perceive the EU approach to the media sector and democracy, and better understand their needs.

For most of the respondents (64.5%), it was the first time they participated in a European project. Approximately half of them (51.3%) are somewhat familiar with the EU's policy framework and programmes for supporting the European news media sector, such as the EMAAP, EDAP and others. However, 39.5% are not familiar with it at all. This finding implies that the EU is not very successful in its outreach to the media sector for providing support and is aligned with previous criticism of the communication deficit of the EU. Even though opportunities for the media sector exist and plenty of information is published by the EU, this does not fully reach relevant audiences.

Image 1. Survey results - "How familiar are you with the EU's policy framework and programmes for supporting the European news media sector, such as the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan, the Democracy Action Plan, and others?"
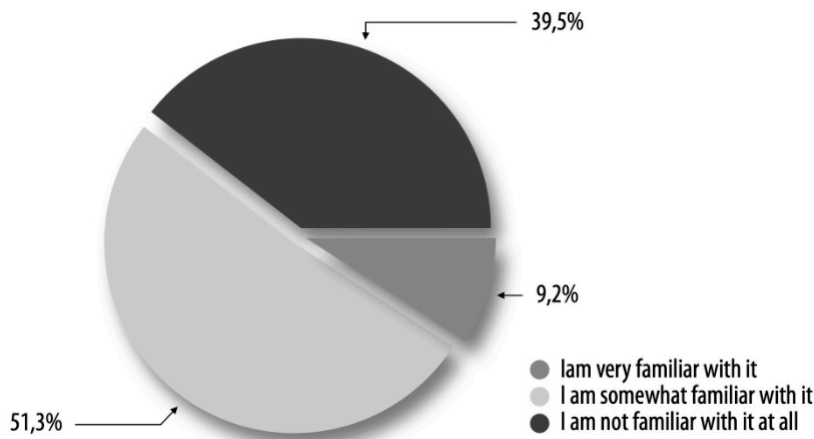
39.5% of the companies consider that "clearer and more accessible information about EU funding opportunities" would help them access EU funds, while a significant number (30.3%) would benefit from reduced bureaucratic requirements. According to one of the respondents, "something very necessary would be to simplify bureaucratic procedures. Although there is very good availability on the part of the administrators, it is no less true that so much bureaucracy can be a stumbling block, especially for small associations that do not have so many resources" (representative of *En Positivo* outlet, Spain). Another answer adds: Full coverage of the grant (no co-funding required) would be crucial too, especially for small media who cannot afford to employ a person extra for checking grant opportunities and for the administration, and the co-funding puts them out of the game anyway. The current EU-grant system helps just those biggest ones, however for them, it's not so crucial to get supported, and at the same time, big players don't fulfil the role of independent media in local communities anymore - at least in Central-Eastern Europe. (Novinářský Klub Jindřicha Oppera, Czechia).
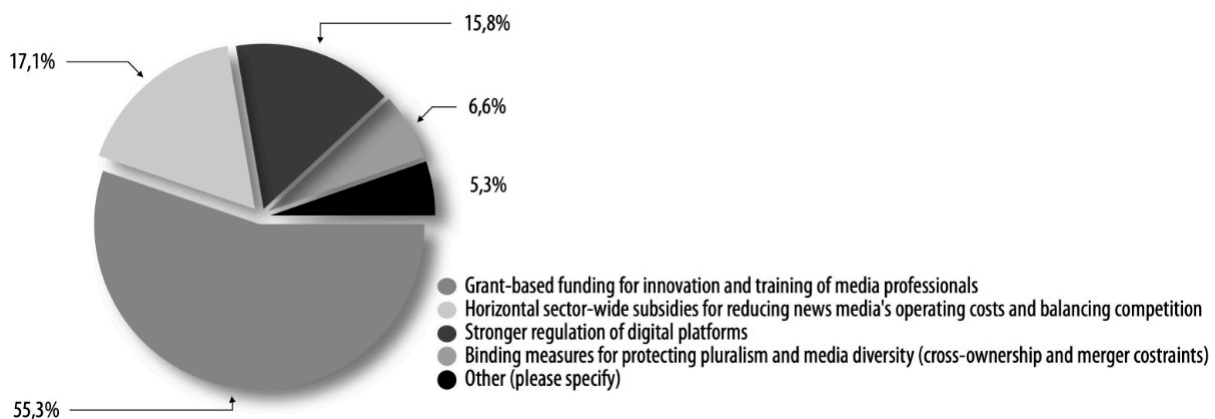
Image 2. Survey results - "What would best help you to access the EU support for the media sector?"
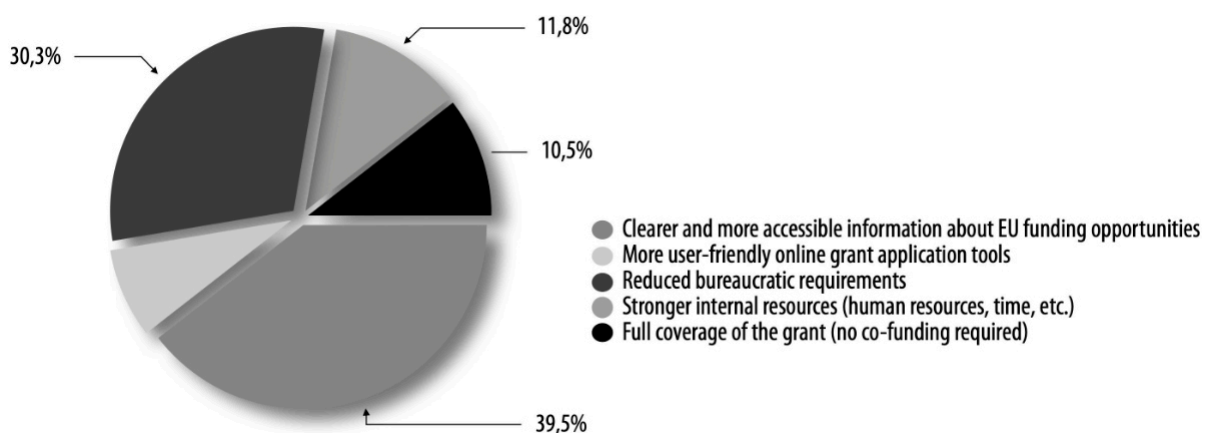
Grant-based funding for innovation and training of media professionals is considered by the respondents to be the most necessary, to support the democratic role

of media. This strong demand for funding, either in the form of EU grants or horizontal sector-wide subsidies, reflects that financial sustainability is the main challenge that news media face. The role of news media as democratic actors has been threatened for over a decade by the rise of digitalisation, technological changes, and economic hurdles. These caused not only an additional loss of advertising revenues but also paved the way for the proliferation of online misinformation and fake news, which negatively impacted the media's credibility (Esser, Neuberger 2019). The demand for news media content is, nonetheless, high, according to the Reuters Institute *Digital News Report* (Newman *et al.* 2021), and there is also a growing concern about the quality of information, on the background of the extensive COVID-19-related disinformation. The specific missions of the companies engaged in Stars4Media vary, but all are aligned with the normative functions of the media in a liberal democracy. When addressed with a multiple-choice question on their societal role, the majority perceives it as informing (76.3%), followed by connecting communities and different social groups (31.6%) and surveilling those who govern and/or exert power (26.3%). To succeed in these endeavours, need-based support is crucial.

Image 3. Survey results - "Which of the following measures do you consider the most necessary to support the democratic role of the media sector?"

- ● Grant-based funding for innovation and training of media professionals
- ● Horizontal sector-wide subsidies for reducing news media's operating costs and balancing competition
- ● Stronger regulation of digital platforms
- ● Binding measures for protecting pluralism and media diversity (cross-ownership and merger costraints)
- ● Other (please specify)

When it comes to specific areas of support, funding for R&D projects seems to be the most relevant for 42.1%, followed by funding for digital transformation (23.7%) and investigative journalism (22.4%). These findings are relevant for the implementation of both EDAP and EMAAP. For example, the EDAP devotes distinct attention to preventing foreign interference in elections and disinformation, while dealing with the threat of domestic disinformation campaigns, which is more difficult to assess and tackle, is delegated to the MS. Here, support for national media is crucial to help them achieve their mission. As one of the survey respondents phrased it, "funding for independent journalism acts as a vaccine against authoritarianism and disinformation" (EURACTIV Poland). Additionally, legislative measures are needed to enable the media to freely develop their work: "We need first to have a legal environment that limits abuses of dominant position in our market to be able to thrive in it", mentions the representative of the Spanish media group *Vocento*.

Image 4. Survey results - "What type of financial support would be the most appropriate for your media organisation?"
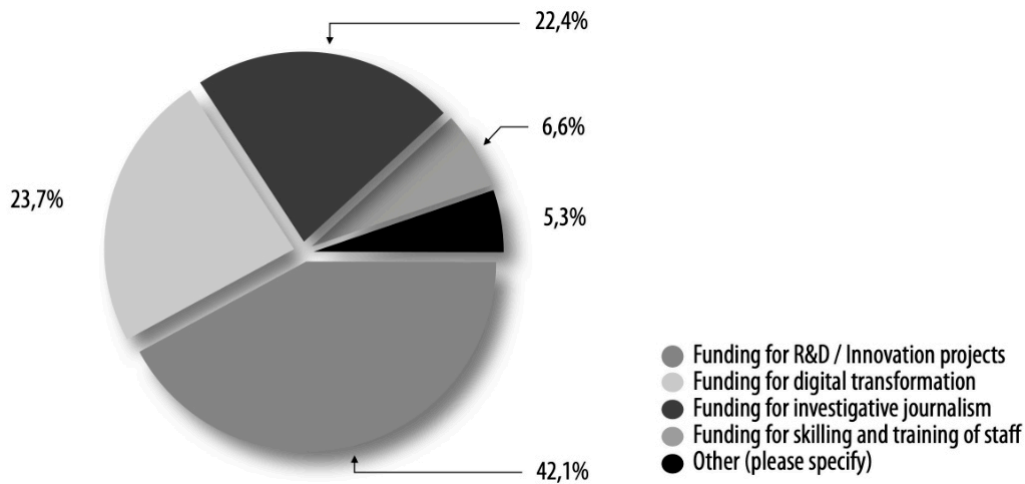
The insights provided by the survey respondents reveal that there is no doubt among the media professionals regarding the importance of strengthening the European news media sector for achieving a stronger European democracy. Even among beneficiaries of an EU funding scheme, however, the actions of the EU in this regard remain largely unknown. The final section of the article engages in a discussion of these findings.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to start a reflection on whether the EU approach to support the European news media sector for improving the quality of the participatory democratic process in the EU is appropriate, based on theoretical, policy and empirical considerations.

From the literature point of view, there is a consensus that the role of news media in the EU multi-level governance structure is vital for supporting a pluralist debate and enabling political participation. There is mounting evidence of the media's impact on voting patterns and the importance of media framing in democratic debate. The challenge consists in supporting this debate at a supra-national level, in European public space.

The EU approach to tackle this challenge, as well as, more broadly, to support the European media sector is reflected in a multitude of complementary legislative and non-legislative measures, scattered across areas of intervention, and driven by different entities. The European Democracy Action Plan and the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan were introduced, in late 2020, to reinforce and ensemble previous efforts. The overarching principle derived from these Actions is in line with the literature on media and democracy: by investing in a quality information landscape, both citizens and democracy win.

Nevertheless, several challenges to the success of the EU's ambitious Action Plans can be anticipated. First, there is an issue of limited legislative capacity. Except when

specifically foreseen, such as in the case of the Digital Service Act package, included in the EDAP, the EU Action plans are non-legislative. They generally set the level of ambition in specific, key areas and define strategic priorities. The challenge is that cooperation and coordination between the Member States and the supranational EU institutions are needed to translate these priorities and measures into reality.

Second, the EDAP builds upon the key idea that Europeans should have a leading and active role in setting EU priorities and highlights the importance of open democratic debate, in which empowered, informed citizens take part beyond elections. In this regard, the Commission calls on MS to make use of relevant EU structural and investment funds to support civil society. This should be stronger, complemented with tailored support to small-medium local and regional media. Despite the variety of EU measures compiled under EDAP and EMAAP, including financial schemes for the media sector, our empirical research shows that these remain largely unknown to European news media companies. Even if the measures respond to the needs and expectations of the media, which mostly revolve around funding necessities, they are not fully accessed due to hurdles such as the complexity of information, red tape, limited internal resources or the EU requirement for providing co-finance. There are also concerns among the respondents regarding the legal framework that would provide stronger regulation of competition and platforms. The EU addresses these aspects but, most likely, fails in communicating them to the media sector. As the literature suggests, the EU creates nowadays a plethora of information about its activities. The insights provided by the Stars4Media beneficiaries highlight the need for targeted communication and outreach efforts, geared toward national and local news media.

Lastly, as the Action Plans aim to counter multiple complex issues, joint efforts for cooperation between different actors and fields are required. This goes beyond cooperation between MS and the EU. To respond to the informational challenges that, implicitly, affect European democracy, cooperation between European media is essential. Half of the survey respondents engage in cross-border collaboration regularly, the rest are doing it only occasionally or not at all. The analysis of the EU approach to media and democracy reveals that creating a European public sphere is not a clearly expressed policy goal. This might derive from policy spill-overs but will not happen naturally while the media is divided into silos.

As this is a cross-sectional study, applied to a limited sample of European news media companies, further research is needed to understand whether similar perceptions, hurdles, and needs are perceived by other media organisations across the EU, including those not engaged in EU-funding schemes. Expert interviews, including stakeholders and policymakers, would help advance the reflection on whether the EU approach to support the news media sector for improving the quality of participatory democracy is relevant and effective.

While our study reflects the undoubtful agreement that a healthy news industry is necessary for quality democracy, the question of the EU's contribution effectiveness and actual response to the sectoral needs remains.

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Annex 1

List of EU measures concerning the role of the European news media sector for participatory democracy

Title	Type of action	Period of implementation	Goals
Area of intervention:			Media freedom, pluralism, and literacy
Media literacy expert group[3]	Expert group	2011 – Ongoing	- To monitor good practices concerning media literacy; - To identify ways of aligning EU policies, programmes, and initiatives regarding media literacy.
Media Pluralism Monitor[4]	Project/ programme	2016 – Ongoing	- To identify potential risks to media pluralism by monitoring media freedom and pluralism across the Member States; - To assess how digital developments impact media pluralism in the EU.
Media Ownership Monitor[5]	Project/ programme	2021 - Ongoing	- To provide EU support for a pilot project that safeguards media freedom and pluralism, by ensuring transparency on media ownership at the Member States level.
Area of intervention:			Countering fake news and disinformation
"Tackling online disinformation: a European approach" communication[6]	Communication	2018	- To present the views of the Commission on online disinformation and the specific measures foreseen to be taken for tackling the issue and raising public awareness.
Action Plan against Disinformation[7]	Policy	2018	- To improve detection, analysis and exposure of disinformation; - To ensure a coordinated response to disinformation through a Rapid Alert System between the EU institutions and Member States; - To mobilise online platforms to tackle disinformation; - To raise awareness and empower civil society to expose disinformation; - To support independent media and fact-checkers.
The Code of Practice on Disinformation[8]	Code of practice	2018	- To engage the online platforms (Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Mozilla, Twitter and TikTok) in monitoring and taking action against online disinformation. - As of 2021, the code became a co-regulatory instrument in line with the Digital Services Act.
European Digital Media Observatory[9]	Project/ programme	2020	- To bring together different stakeholders such as fact-checkers, researchers and the media to understand and analyse disinformation.
Area of intervention:			Competitive news media and audiovisual services
Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD)	Legislative Act	2010, revised in 2018	Presents a set of measures to enable the adaptation of the audiovisual sector to the digital context. Some specific goals are: - To promote cultural diversity in the content of the on-demand service - To strengthen the role of media literacy and encourage Member states and video-sharing platforms to raise awareness about media literacy - To support the availability of broadcasts of political news across the EU - To regulate television advertising and product placement
Creative Europe MEDIA and CROSS-SECTORAL strands[10]	Funding scheme	2021-2027	- To support the European film and audiovisual industries and improve their competitiveness; - To support the collaboration between different creative sectors; - To support the news media sector to promote media literacy, pluralism and media freedom, as well as innovation; - To enable cross-border collaboration among news media professionals for stimulating the exchange of best practices and business transformation.
Area of intervention:			Regulation of the Digital single market
The Copyright Directive[11]	Legislative Act	2019	- To modernise the copyright rules for the digital single market, to enhance cross-border access to online content, protect the authors and performers and improve access and use of copyrighted materials for education, research and cultural heritage purposes.
Digital Service Act Package Including the Digital Service Act and the Digital Markets Act[12] (part of EDAP)	Legislative Act	Proposed by the EC in 2020, in the process of adoption according to the ordinary legislative procedure	Sets out a detailed regulatory framework for the protection of user rights online. Specifically, it presents: - A new set of competition rules aimed at regulating and making digital markets more competitive; - A set of rules to ensure transparency and an accountability framework for the online platforms; - Measures to support innovation, growth and competitiveness within the single market.

Annex 2

Survey questions

1. - What term best defines the main societal role of your organisation? (multiple choices)
a. Informing
b. Entertaining
c. Surveilling those who govern
d. Connecting communities and different societal groups
e. Other (please specify)
- Please provide further details if you want to elaborate further on your choices (max 50 words):

2. What type of financial support would be the most appropriate for your media organisation? (single answer)
a. Funding for R&D/innovation projects
b. Funding for skilling and training of staff
c. Funding for investigative journalism
d. Funding for digital transformation
e. Other (please specify)
3. How familiar are you with the EU's policy framework and programmes for supporting the European news media sector, such as the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan, the Democracy Action Plan, and others?
a. I am very familiar with it

b. I am somewhat familiar with it
c. I am not familiar with it at all
4. Which of the following EU measures do you consider to be the most necessary in order to support the democratic role of the media sector? (single answer)
a. Grant-based funding for innovation and training of media professionals
b. Horizontal sector-wide subsidies for reducing news media's operating costs and balancing competition
c. Stronger regulation of digital platforms
d. Binding measures for protecting pluralism and media diversity (cross-ownership and mergers constraints)
e. Other (please specify)
 Please provide further details if you want to elaborate further on your choices (max 50 words):

5. - What would best help you to access the EU financial support for the media sector? (multiple answers)
a. Clearer and more accessible information about EU funding opportunities
b. More user-friendly online grant application tools
C. Reduced bureaucratic requirements
d. Stronger internal resources (human resources, time, etc.)
e. Full coverage of the grant (no co-funding required)
f. Other (please specify)
 - Please provide further details if you want to elaborate further on your choices (max 50 words):