

Editors' Introduction

Communication research has long moved between two vantage points: the close-up view of a single institution, newsroom, or community, and the wider question of what such a case reveals about democracy, media systems, and public trust. The papers gathered in this issue sit deliberately at that intersection. Each begins from a bounded, closely observed setting - Czech journalists' perceptions of populism, a set of disinformation outlets in Slovakia, polarization trends in Croatia, a public broadcaster in Greece, a cluster of local newsrooms in north-eastern Poland, two competing television news formats in Croatia, a government office in the Basque Country, and Islamophobic hate speech on Spanish Twitter/X - and uses it as a lens onto problems that reach well beyond any single country or newsroom: populism through the media, the spread and normalization of disinformation, social and political polarization, the marginalization of regional voices, the changing habits of young news audiences, the institutionalization of listening in government communication, and hate speech in online media.

What unites these contributions methodologically is a commitment to the micro perspective as a way of making macro-level claims accountable to evidence. The authors rely on case studies, in-depth interviews, surveys, and systematic content analysis of hundreds of texts and broadcasts, rather than on abstract theorizing alone. This grounded approach allows each paper to speak with precision about a specific context while still illuminating general and pressing concerns for the field.

In particular, they address the following questions: to what extent journalists perceive populism as a threat to democracy; how disinformation media construct celebrity and shape public perception of controversial figures; how new media landscapes shape polarization; to what extent social media facilitate the rapid circulation of discriminatory discourse; how structural imbalances between center and periphery are reproduced on screen; how local journalists build resilience against disinformation from the ground up; how the aesthetics of news presentation reshape what younger viewers expect from journalism itself; and how listening can (or cannot) be institutionalized in government communication. Taken together, the issue offers a mosaic of contemporary European communication research, unified by its insistence that the biggest questions about media and democracy are best answered by looking closely at particular people, institutions, and practices.

The issue opens with Jan Křovák, whose study explores how early-career Czech journalists who entered the profession after 2011, when Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura

emerged as major populist actors, perceive populism. The findings suggest that younger Czech journalists view populism neutrally, as a pragmatic mainstream strategy, while partially confirming the heightened appeal of populism to journalists.

Hedviga Tkáčová turns to a different and more troubling dimension of public communication: the role of disinformation media in constructing celebrity. Focusing on Marian Kočner and coverage of him in the context of the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, the paper draws on a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 600 articles from five disinformation outlets. Tkáčová identifies six recurring narratives and shows that these outlets sustained largely neutral portrayals of Kočner long after mainstream media had turned decisively negative.

A paper by Željko Pavić, Boris Badurina, and Juraj Jurlina explores the relationship between media consumption and political polarization in Croatia, with a specific focus on the differential effects of traditional and internet-based media. Drawing on cultivation theory and the reinforcing spirals model, the paper examines how media use contributes to political polarization in this context. Croatia serves here as an example of a country characterized by a noticeable alignment of political orientation and ideological attitudes, as well as a relatively strong connection between political identification and other significant forms of social identity, such as religiosity.

Georgia Gioltzidou and Foteini Gioltzidou examine the visibility of regional politics on Greek public television, focusing on ERT3's evening news bulletins. Through content analysis of airtime allocation, thematic focus, and story placement, the authors document a persistent imbalance in favor of central political actors and a corresponding marginalization of local political affairs. Their findings speak to broader debates about media centralization and the structural constraints that regional broadcasters face in fulfilling their democratic role.

Marta Więckiewicz-Archacka investigates how local and hyperlocal media in Poland's Warmia and Mazury region confront disinformation in their everyday editorial work. Based on 20 semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2024 and April 2025, the study finds that journalists' close knowledge of the local context and their capacity for rapid verification make these outlets a reliable counterweight to anonymous claims circulating on local social media. The article makes a compelling case for the distinctive role that local and hyperlocal media can play in building societal resilience against disinformation. Branimir Felger and Andrian Curiš compare traditional and infotainment-based television news formats in Croatia — HRT's *Dnevnik 3* and RTL Direkt — to assess their impact on young viewers. Combining content analysis with a survey of youth audiences, the authors find that infotainment elements shape young people's preferences, with many respondents favoring more engaging, visually dynamic content over traditional reporting styles. The paper points to a broader tension in contemporary journalism, in which the manner of presenting news can influence audience engagement as powerfully as the information it conveys.

Ion Muñoa Errasti, Xabier Barandiarán Irastorza, María José Canel Crespo, and Jim Macnamara propose a novel link between organizational listening and collaborative governance. Drawing on an in-depth case study from the Basque Country, the authors show, through thematic analysis of qualitative data from policymakers, how structured listening practices reshape officials' understanding of and responsiveness to public feedback. Their study reframes government communication not as a one-way transmission of information but as a dynamic driver of democratic engagement, offering practical implications for practitioners seeking to embed listening at the heart of policy development.

Finally, the study by William González-Baquero and colleagues estimates the prevalence and temporal distribution of Islamophobic hate speech on Spanish Twitter/X and describes recurrent and overlapping discursive patterns within the hateful subset. At the same time, the design of the study makes it possible to compare human annotation with a general toxicity-scoring system and a target-specific multilingual BERT classifier. The central premise is that computational architecture should follow the construct being measured: if Islamophobic hostility can be explicit or frame-based, its detection requires more than generic toxicity scores.

Read together, these eight articles trace a shared concern with how communication practices — whether enacted by governments, disinformation networks, social media users, public broadcasters, journalists, local newsrooms, or television news formats — shape citizens' relationship to public life. We hope readers will find in their combination of careful, situated inquiry and broader relevance a fitting reflection of the Central European Journal of Communication's aims.

This issue also features an interview with Silvio Waisbord, conducted by Bartłomiej Łódzki, in which Waisbord reflects on the two challenges he sees as most decisive for journalism today: economic sustainability and social relevance. His argument that journalism's importance can no longer be assumed, but must instead be traced empirically — through the real-world conditions in which specific publics encounter, avoid, or disengage from news — speaks directly to the spirit of this issue. Waisbord calls for research that follows the actual lifespan of news and communication practices rather than studying them in the abstract, and the eight articles gathered here answer that call in their own ways. In this sense, the interview and the research articles converge on a common conviction — that the question of whether, and for whom, communication institutions still matter can only be answered by looking closely at how they work in practice.

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