

# **Unlocking the Media's Future and Fostering Social Harmony: The Power of Deliberative Communication**

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While working on the Mediadelcom project in 2023, a new conflict in the Middle East was once again forcing the media to grapple with how it both portrays the actors, and maintains balance and objectivity. This was just the latest event to force the media to self-reflect on how it operates and faces the challenges ahead.

Those challenges are plentiful and varied and involve assorted causes. Declining audiences and readership numbers and consequently reduced revenues and budgets are severe problems. Digital technologies have led to increasing hate speech, misinformation, disinformation, fake news, propaganda, lying politicians, falling trust in the media, and attacks on journalists. Local news outlets are either disappearing and creating 'news deserts' or being captured by politicians and political parties resulting in some cases in suppression of free speech and increasing political pressure on media professionals.

Some countries have addressed these issues by enacting policies and programs, including media literacy education and laws and regulations. Media organizations have introduced innovative forms of journalism such as slow, community and solutions-based to appeal to more people and present issues in novel ways. Fact-checking units and organizations have been set up to correct false and misleading information.

Yet despite these programs and initiatives, the problems persist.

One of the best examples of this comes from the United States. A Monmouth University Poll<sup>1</sup> in June 2023 that found 3 in 10 Americans still believe the false narrative that Joe Biden only won the presidency because of voter fraud. That's despite rigorous fact checking and numerous reports to the contrary.

So is another new approach needed?

Now that the Mediadelcom project has reached a conclusion (February 2024), the burning question is whether can it provide a deliberative option – communication or journalism – for the media to embrace that could help address these challenges?

Mediadelcom, an EU-funded three-year project, examined the risks and opportunities for deliberative communication in 14 EU countries.

The concept of deliberative communication is not widely known, especially in the EU. Whenever I mention this project, the first question I'm asked, even by experienced journalists, is 'what is deliberative communication?'

I have been trying to answer this question, as part of my work on the communications side of Mediadelcom by interviewing people across the globe for a podcast series. I've spoken to academics, journalists, editors and TV producers who have a view on the future of the media or are putting deliberation or something like it into practice.

So back to the definition of deliberative communication.

The Mediadelcom project states:

Deliberative communication implies communication in which different ideas are articulated and listened to. Decisions are made after reasonable discussion. News media can support the deliberative potential of society by providing truthful facts, and inducing dialogue and rational discussion between different groups in society.

As Ioana Avădani, the President of the Centre for Independent Journalism in Bucharest and a member of the Romania's Mediadelcom team summarizes: deliberative communication "is not only about talking and having a platform, but it also involves the right to be listened to and considered as part of problem solving".

If we take the definition further and apply it to the media, then what would deliberative journalism look like? The simple answer is quite different to what we often see now. Gone would be the polarized and combative debates and discussions. In their place, we would probably hear more diverse voices, and a more "reasoned" or in-depth look at issues. The discussion would move beyond

<sup>1</sup> Monmouth University Poll. June 20, 2023. *Most Say Fundamental Rights Under Threat*. [https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll\\_US\\_062023/](https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_US_062023/)

slogans and catch phrases and explore not only the problems but some of the solutions as well. Respect would be a key aspect.

Let's consider a few important issues – elections and migrants. What would a deliberative approach to them look like in terms of news coverage and discussions or debates?

I think basically all topics and issues would look different if you have a deliberative dimension of the public debate. And in the case of migration of course it would mean that some aspects that are today completely neglected, that are not newsworthy in one or another aspect, would be coming to light if you have a more deliberative process (Lars Nord, Professor in political communication at Mid-Sweden University and a Mediadelcom member).

Professor Nord's comment highlights a crucial aspect of our media landscape; the formation of consumption habits that revolve around whatever mainstream media labels as newsworthy.

Iveta Jansová, Assistant Professor at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism at MUNI and member of the Mediadelcom team in Czechia, agrees that a deliberative approach would make a big difference:

In the deliberative concept, you expect news media through providing different opinions, to spread diversity, transparency. And if media fulfill these obligations, it will really make a difference compared to elections without deliberative communication where some voices are not heard, some perspectives are not offered to the public.

So, can we safely presume that adopting a deliberative approach holds the key to fostering social cohesion? Could it serve as a means to mend the divides within our society, particularly in communities marked by deepening polarization or individuals who believe their voices go unheard?

A project in the United States is working to enhance local democracy, and perhaps heal some of those divisions, through deliberation. The Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) at Colorado State University aims to improve public communications and community problem solving by training its students to become facilitators so they assist local government, schools, and community organizations in problem-solving key issues.

Certainly, our assumption, and I think we certainly have evidence of this with different projects, is that if you elevate the quality of the discussion, then the decisions are going to be better. Not only will the decision be better,

but there's also more legitimacy to the decision. There's more support for it (Martin Carcasson, Director of the CPD).

The CPD is also trying to help improve local journalism. It works with the local newspaper, *The Coloradoan*, on a deliberative approach to engage residents on local issues.

As a way of reaching out to its community, the newspaper has abandoned its traditional opinion page, which has been replaced with a deliberative approach. Each week, in a section called *Coloradoan Conversations*, the newspaper poses a question or questions based on what's happening in the local news, inviting everyone – subscribers and non-subscribers – to send in their comments and feedback and engage in a conversation. The aim is to provide a platform for discussion and demonstrate that everyone's voice is valued and welcome. The CPD's role is to read through the conversations to identify value-based statements, as well as examples of good and bad deliberation to help the newspaper frame the conversation.

Eric Larsen, Editor of *The Coloradoan*, says:

Ultimately our goal is to work towards community solutions, whether it's just improving the amount of information that's available to decision makers. Distrust in media is also seen as distrust in our institutions and a lot of that comes from, especially in the pandemic era, people feeling not involved in the processes.

Mr Carcasson concurs, saying that working with the newspaper has sparked a deep conversation about local journalism.

So, we've deliberated about journalism, and then we're also trying to innovate on this idea of deliberative journalism. How is that different than other journalism? How do we build up the skills for journalists to also have that as part of their skillset to help their local community?

In Norway, public broadcaster NRK is also trying to spark better conversations and debates on key issues by breaking away from combative debates. In 2019, the NRK launched *Einig* (agree). Although the NRK does not consider the TV program, renamed in 2022 as *Ueinig* (disagree), as deliberative journalism, it shares many of the same values and objectives. The program presents issues in a more constructive and considered way.

Gro Engen, Editor of the TV program, says *Ueinig* is trying to engage and win back audiences, especially younger ones, who she says were tired of combative debates and found them boring. *Ueinig* tackles some of the country's major issues,

including freedom of expression, drugs, and electricity production problems, and invites politicians and non-politicians to leave their political lines, rehearsed speeches, and antagonism outside the studio to engage in discussions. Guests are encouraged to ask each other questions and to bring a “human dimension” to the discussion.

We saw the discussion got more interesting because they (the guests) left that typical political talk behind. They were using examples from their own lives, like talking about how they got involved in the issue or why they became a politician. It got more interesting because they were curious and they thought they could ask good questions to their opponents (Gro Engen, Editor of *Uenig*).

She says the reaction from guests has been positive. Following the first show, politicians got in touch with the program asking to participate and the show has also managed to bring together adversaries who usually do not debate with each other. What aspect is attracting them to the idea of debating differently? The absence of antagonism and ‘hardness’, according to Ms Engen.

There are, of course, challenges with changing a main political debate program into a more “considered” format. Ms Engen says they have been making changes to the show’s format to appeal to more audience members. She says, long-term support for developing new formats like hers is key to their success.

The projects in Colorado and Norway provide examples for others to follow, if that support, as Ms Engen notes, is there to provide the time to innovate on the idea of deliberative journalism.

Dr. Tobias Eberwein, a Senior Scientist at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and Mediadelcom team member, sees the need for deliberation in his country:

We see a lot of controversy in Austria at the moment, particularly in the aftermath of Covid 19 because there are many examples of polarization within society, there are fronts between different segments within society and people competing with very adversarial opinions and of course deliberation in such a climate would certainly help foster dialogue and actually foster something like understanding between those different factions within society.

Eberwein believes the Mediadelcom project could help develop best practices and role models for a deliberative approach.

So, if as Eberwein points out there is a need for a deliberative approach, what is needed other than the media to buy-in, to make it happen?

Deliberative communication, like the media in general, needs certain conditions to be met in order to thrive. The Mediadelcom project has examined

those conditions, which include everything from media laws and regulations, media literacy, free speech and freedom of information protections, to media accountability.

If we consider the project's findings as a snapshot of the state of the media in the EU, then it's not easy to give an overview of the situation. It's too complex. The differences, in some cases, are too big or the data is not comparable.

Let's take free speech and freedom of information protections as an example. According to Anna Kandyla, Research Fellow at ELIAMEP in Greece and Mediadelcom member, the picture in Europe is mixed. Even if laws and regulations exist, it doesn't mean they're implemented. So whether or not they are in place and adhered to poses either a risk or opportunity for deliberative communication.

If I could make a general remark, I would say implementation overall is problematic. We have countries where implementation of the laws addressing the media and in particular freedom of expression and freedom of information guarantees works well even though the laws are not really thick or detailed, like Sweden for instance. And then you have at the other extreme countries like Romania and Greece for instance, which have detailed laws that really touch on every little aspect of the media and the media market, yet no implementation whatsoever (Anna Kandyla, Research Fellow at ELIAMEP in Greece and Mediadelcom member).

Trust in media is also vital for a deliberative approach to succeed.

If we see the media as an infrastructure for public deliberation, like the nervous system of society that's trying to bring different views together, that's trying also to explain different views to other groups. If you don't trust that nervous system, if you feel disconnected from it, of course that's a high risk (Marcus Kreutler, Researcher at the Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism and member of the Mediadelcom team).

Lars Nord argues media literacy or media competency is also important:

I think media literacy is a cornerstone for having deliberative communication to work because the public needs to have the capacity and competencies to use different media to evaluate different messages. There is a need for media competency; it is a basic thing for deliberative communication to work.

The Mediadelcom project examined other factors that determine the risks and opportunities for deliberative communication. The aim is for their findings

to help the media and policy makers decide how to embrace or promote a deliberative approach.

But some media professionals and academics are warning the media does not have the luxury of time. It needs to change quickly if it wants to stay relevant.

One of them is Chris Anderson, a Professor of Media and Communication and co-author with Barbie Zelizer and Pablo J. Boczkowski of the *Journalism Manifesto* book. The co-authors argue that journalism is outdated and disconnected from everyone who matters. They say ‘journalism needs to revisit its engagement with society, rethink its priorities, rekindle relevancies gone dormant and question its default settings’. If it doesn’t they say, its future is at risk and time is running out to change.

Anderson concurs that deliberative journalism has a role in this transformation of the media, but warns there are risks.

I think deliberative journalism has a huge role to play and it has one problem. The opportunities are endless. It gets people involved in the conversation, it promotes new ways of thinking about politics, it creates ways of understanding politics that go beyond this binary ‘us versus them’ sort of agonistic attitude. It trains citizens and it trains journalists in thinking about democracy and about citizenship in new and different ways. It’s a training ground for certain types of political practices we would like to see more of. When paired with things like solutions journalism or other types of journalism that are out there, it can rethink what media is for and what the media is supposed to do.

The solitary problem that Anderson mentions is that not everyone wants to deliberate.

So what happens when we have a deliberate system that is forced to engage with partisan actors who are utterly uninterested in actually putting in the good faith effort to deliberate and that is something that all the institutions and organizations that have taken up the mantle of deliberate journalism need to wrestle with.

Even if the media adopts a deliberative approach and finds a way to address the issue of partisan actors, audiences still need to show an interest. If they do not want to listen, read or participate in deliberative journalism and other deliberative initiatives, can it thrive and survive?

“The reason people should be interested in deliberation is because their voices could be heard, they could be part of decision processes, they could be part of the way the world actually moves forward,” argues Ms Jansová.

Perhaps Marcus Kreutler best summarizes the choice the media faces when it comes to adopting deliberative communication:

Well, the question is what do you want from the public, do you just want to give people information to take a decision or do you want more? Do you want to make sure that everybody who's affected by decisions also has a say in how they come together? Do we want the best argument to be accepted, to shape the decision that is taken in the end? These are all things that are very much connected to the deliberative approach.

In an ever-evolving and challenging media landscape, the choice is clear: embrace deliberative communication as a path to more inclusive, informed, and cohesive societies, or risk missing out on the opportunity for a more vibrant and participatory future.

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## REFERENCES

Monmouth University Poll (2023). *Most Say Fundamental Rights Under Threat*. [https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll\\_US\\_062023/](https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_US_062023/)