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Journalism and Media Freedom in Europe: The fsQCA Approach

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Abstract: Media freedom is often seen as the main value against which the quality of media systems is judged. While the levels of media freedom in Europe are generally higher than the world average, there are yet significant variations in how certain European countries score on media freedom indices and scales. This paper uses comparative quantitative data and applies the fsQCA method to analyze how macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of journalism as a field relate to different levels of media freedom in Europe. The results suggest that media market structure, journalistic skills, and journalists adhering to the monitorial role of journalism constitute the "core" conditions for the implementation of media freedom.

Keywords: democracy; Europe; fsQCA; journalism; media freedom.

INTRODUCTION

Media freedom that McQuail (2010, p. 237) defines, as "the right to publish information without censorship and repercussions", generally implies the autonomy of the media from sources of influence and pressure. A free media environment is, thus, one in which journalists are free to question and criticize political and business elites at local, national, and international levels (van Belle, 2000). Free and unbiased media can play a vital role in exposing the corrupt and unethical

behavior of politicians and various interest groups (Bhattacharyya & Hodler, 2015; Mueller, 1992), which is why they are often considered the watchdogs of democracy and public interest.

Although the importance of media freedom for democracy is widely discussed and accepted, there are many conceptualizations of how it ought to be achieved, one of which is that the concept can be understood as both negative and positive (Karppinen, 2016). The negative version refers to 'freedom from', the absence of coercion, such as state censorship or other forms of infringements (Karppinen, 2016, p. 42). By contrast, the positive version would mean 'freedom to', or freedom conceptualized as having communicative rights or structural opportunities in exercising them (Karppinen, 2016, p. 42). In terms of media policy towards media freedom in across media systems, one can say that liberal ones with their reliance on the market, promote the negative form, while democratic-corporatist media systems, with their strong support for public media institutions, promote positive ones (Karppinen, 2016).

Media freedom is often seen as an interplay between politics and the media. Levels of media freedom differ between regime types (Stier, 2015). Variations of media freedom were rarely investigated in the context of Western media systems, as academia took for granted that they have high levels of media freedom (Humprecht et al., 2022, p. 7). Nonetheless, media freedom was shown to be important for comparative analysis of Central and Eastern European (CEE) media systems (Castro Herrero et al., 2017; Humprecht et al., 2022). Moreover, the increasing role of populist leaders, parties, and movements in Western democracies have a negative effect on media freedom (Kenny, 2020). Media freedom should not be taken for granted in Western media systems. Maniou (2023) argues the levels of media freedom in Western media systems are declining due self-censorship, harassment of journalists, law restrictions, and other factors.

In this paper, we investigate how journalism configures in the significant variations of media freedom across Europe. Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue that the journalism profession is one of the key dimensions in the comparative analyses of media systems and their model developed three ideal types of the way journalism as a profession was institutionalized in the Western media systems. The 'liberal model' (dominant in the US, UK, and Ireland), has journalism founded on the values of detached and objective reporting in the market-oriented media system. The 'democratic-corporatist model' (dominant in continental and northern Europe) is characterized by the important, but weakened role of political-media parallelism, and the growing importance of neutral reporting. The 'polarized-pluralist model' (dominant in Mediterranean Europe), has a journalism profession that is highly politicized, and the journalistic style is interpretative and polemical. The analysis of the models of journalism (Esser & Umbricht, 2013 confirmed the ideal types with quantitative data. However,

the models used for comparative media systems have been criticized by various scholars as neglecting certain dimensions in the analysis or being overly static and not explaining changes in media systems face, which was also acknowledged by the authors themselves (Hallin & Mancini, 2017). The model has also been challenged in the digital and hybrid media environments, which has provoked new conceptualizations and updated analyses (Humprecht et al., 2022; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018). For example, the digital environment has been shaping the journalism profession by changing working conditions, as well as professional journalistic standards and skills (Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018). Digital environments have created additional pressures on journalism autonomy, in the form of online attacks and harassment (Maniou, 2023).

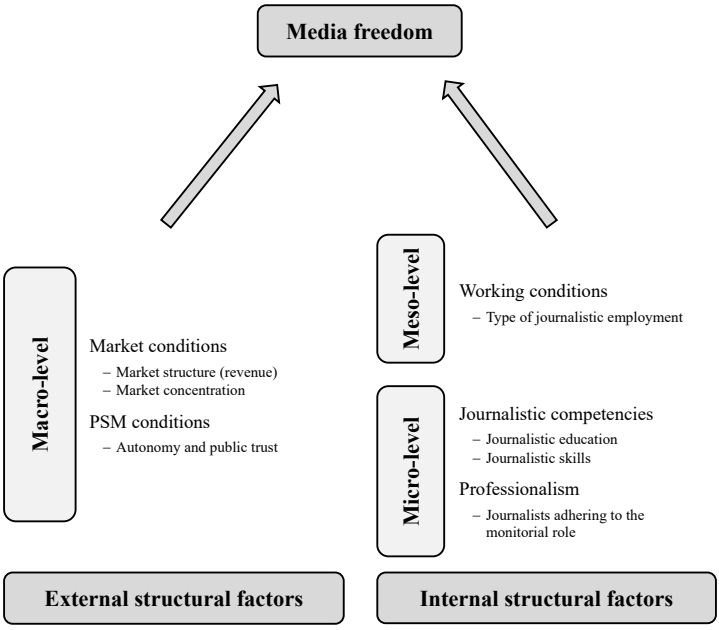
Here we focus on the dimension of journalism profession to assess its links to media freedom in the comparative media systems analysis. We are interested in how macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of the journalism field, as a form of production in a changing media environment, relate to varying levels of media freedom. Relevant secondary comparative quantitative data are analyzed with the fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) method to show how the combinations of qualities of the journalism field relate to the presence and absence of high levels of media freedom among European countries.

JOURNALISM AND MEDIA FREEDOM

To better understand how media freedom and the production of journalism are related, our point of departure is a theoretical model for analyzing the journalism field derived from the research project "Critical Exploration of Media Related Risks and Opportunities for Deliberative Communication: Development Scenarios of the European Media Landscape – Mediadelcom"[1]. This project relies on classic media system theory thinking (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012). The model is a useful framework for identifying external and internal structural factors on macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of media production that are required for media organizations to serve as generators of media freedom (see Figure 1).

[1] **Mediadelcom** was an international Horizon 2020 scientific research project, whose main goal was to develop a diagnostic tool for policy-makers, media institutions, media experts, and journalists, that would enable the holistic assessment of risks and opportunities concerning the deliberative communication and social cohesion in Europe. The project involved 14 countries from Central, Northern, Eastern, Southern, and South-Eastern Europe, coordinated by the University of Tartu (Estonia). For more information see: https://www.mediadelcom.eu/.

Figure 1. The *Mediadelcom* approach to understanding the journalism field in relation to media freedom[2]



Source: Authors

At the *macro-level*, it is essential to examine the economic environment in which journalism production takes place, i.e., market conditions such as media market revenue and concentration, as well as the conditions related to the functioning of public service media (PSM), such as autonomy and public trust. Over recent decades, the traditional media, particularly newspapers, have been losing both audiences and advertisers (Papathanassopoulos & Miconi, 2023). The universal trend of news consumption suddenly competing with omnipresent mobile access to an abundance of digital entertainment and other media distractions puts pressure on news producers to reduce costs and be more efficient. A broad effect of the declining resources is that weaker media firms are merged or acquired by national or international competitors, thereby increasing the ownership concentration in news media markets (Artero et al., 2020; Grassmuck & Thomass, 2023). Even though high market concentration is often considered to be a risk to media pluralism (Trappel & Meier, 2022), it can also enhance media's internal pluralism (Garz et al., 2023; Stühmeier, 2019) or moderate negative consequences

[2] Although this theoretical model was in the Mediadelcom project applied to analyze the relationship between the journalism field and deliberative communication, in this paper we apply it in relation to media freedom.

of audience fragmentation (van Aelst et al., 2017; Vozab et al., 2024). Finally, in today's media environment, PSM is still perceived as an agent with generally positive effects on media freedom. Public service media can promote public interest against commercial media's profit interests (Sehl et al., 2020; Sjøvaag et al., 2019), supply more news in the media environment and keep matters of public interest on the agenda (Esser et al., 2012), and facilitate public discussions (Debrett, 2015; Newton, 2016).

At the meso-level, we find factors such as journalists' working conditions. Besides its legal character, the media freedom also entails an important material dimension that concerns safety and resources required by journalists to practice quality, balanced, and independent reporting. One such indicator refers to the type of journalistic employment, i.e., the share of typical vs. atypical media workers. Mattoni and Ceccobelli (2018) contend the number of atypical journalistic employment contracts is on the rise, with ever more part-time, freelance, and temporarily employed journalists, which is coupled with the rise of the importance of ICT and changing nature of journalism profession.[3] These changes have been linked to trends which may not contribute to media freedom, such as less time and resources for investigative and quality journalism (Deuze, 2007).

At the micro-level, we focus on the concrete journalistic competencies (e.g., education and skills), as well as professionalism in terms of journalists adhering to the monitorial role. The journalistic professionalism is inextricably linked to journalism autonomy, as it helps in differentiating journalism from other social fields (e.g., politics) and guards it against instrumentalization (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), which should contribute to media freedom. The university education of journalists is where they learn professional values (Deuze, 2005), but there is a long-standing debate on whether the universities, with their stronger focus on theory, are the right place for acquiring professional competencies which are often equated with particular practical skills (Örnebring & Mellado, 2018).[4] Both journalistic education and practical skills are needed for journalists to practice professional culture. Digital environments put additional pressure on the need to develop journalistic skills (Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018). Strömbäck (2005) argues the normative requirements of journalism depend on the various models of democracy. Strömbäck (2005) suggests the monitorial role of journalists is the most important in the competitive model of democracy, where journalists scrutinize political elites so citizens can have the necessary knowledge and information for decision-making.

[3] According to Hanitzsch et al. (2019), the highest proportions of freelance journalists can be found in Western Europe.

[4] As explained by Hanitzsch et al. (2019, p. 93), in some European countries (e.g., in Austria, Germany, and Sweden) the university education of journalists is not perceived as required, and there is a stronger tradition of non-academic traineeships and courses.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Many international organizations, such as Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders, warn about the declining trends of democracy, media freedom, and autonomy of journalism. There is large corpus of research on how political and economic factors influence journalism in democracies (Calabrese & Sparks, 2003; Lăzăroiu, 2012; Napoli, 2003), however little is known about how the combinations of qualities of journalism are associated with the ways media freedom is implemented (Hackett, 2013). Therefore, this paper poses the following research questions:

- RQ1: Which journalism conditions (or combinations of conditions) are associated with the presence of high levels of media freedom?
- RQ2: Which journalism conditions (or combinations of conditions) are associated with the absence of high levels of media freedom?

To answer these questions, we apply the fsQCA, which is more than a method of analysis – it is also a research approach, but one which differs from the usual linear causal inference of the functionalist approach (Downey & Stanyer, 2010). Although this method is less common in comparative communication research and is yet to achieve its momentum, it has been recommended in relation to media systems research (Downey, 2020). The method determines those conditions (or combinations of conditions), which lead to a certain outcome. The necessary conditions are always present with the outcome, but do not guarantee that it will materialize, while sufficient conditions appear with the outcome in various combinations and configurations.

The three-level model for understanding the relation between the journalism domain and media freedom (see Figure 1) is the argument's point of departure. On the basis that the outcome is defined as media freedom, we examine the impact of: 1) The market structure for journalism (macro-level); 2) The TV market concentration (macro-level); 3) The autonomy of PSM (macro-level); 4) The share of full-time journalists (meso-level); 5) The share of journalists with university education (micro-level); 6) Journalistic skills (micro-level); and 7) Journalists' adherence to the monitorial role (micro-level).

The central point of the fsQCA is calibration, i.e., assigning cases to the sets based on theoretical assumptions (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). The calibration is performed through assigning set memberships in the interval between 0 (non-membership) and 1 (full membership), above or below the crossover point (0,5) (Ragin, 2008). For the calibration of conditions and the outcome, we used the available secondary comparative quantitative data (for the full list of raw data values, see Annex 1). Although some of the data were collected at differing points in time, following Pagliarin and Gerrits's (2020) advice, we ensured that

the data are consistent (uniform) in terms of measurement and calibration to maintain the integrity of the fuzzy-sets. The calibrations were adjusted to the EU context, i.e., the variability of data among the EU countries. The percentiles method (Pappas & Woodside, 2021) was used to define data thresholds and the analysis was performed in the fsQCA software 4.1 (Ragin & Davey, 2023). The following text describes the operationalization of conditions and the outcome (for the full list of calibrated values, see Table 1 at the end of this chapter).[5]

High media freedom (medfree) was operationalized with the Reporters Without Borders (2020) World Press Freedom Index, which is based on experts' assessments of six indicators[6]: 1) Pluralism (the degree to which different opinions are represented in the media); 2) Media independence (the degree to which the media are able to function independently of sources of political, governmental, business, and religious power and influence); 3) Environment and self-censorship (the environment in which news and information providers operate); 4) Legislative framework (the impact of the legislative framework governing news and information activities); 5) Transparency (the transparency of the institutions and procedures that affect the production of news and information); and 6) Infrastructure (the quality of the infrastructure that supports the production of news and information), supplemented by the quantitative data on the level of abuses and violence against journalists).[7] The thresholds for the calibration were based on those of media freedom defined by the Reporters Without Borders, but only taking into account the context of the EU[8]. An Index value of 85 was used as the threshold for full inclusion in the set, 70 for full exclusion from the set, and 77,5 as the crossover point.

Strong market structure for journalism (*marketstr*) was operationalized with the European Audiovisual Observatory (2020) data on the revenue for audiovisual media per capita (sum of public funding, TV and radio advertising, pay-TV revenues, on-demand revenues, cinema box office, and physical video),

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5 As most of the calibrations in this paper (all besides media freedom) were done as a part of the research in the Mediadelcom project, the descriptions of calibrations also appear in some other publications related to the project (e.g., in Vozab et al., 2024). However, in this paper the calibrations were calculated for a larger number of cases than in Vozab et al., 2024.

6 The methodology was used from 2013 to 2021 and somewhat altered in 2022.

7 Although there are several criticisms over their validity, analyses indicate a strong correlation between Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders media freedom indices (Martin et al., 2016). The intercorrelation with Media Pluralism Monitor is also observed, although it not as high as between the two media freedom measures (Brogi et al., 2021).

8 While media freedom globally varies from "very serious" (Index values 0–45; e.g., in the authoritarian systems such as China or Saudi Arabia) to "good" (Index values 85–100; e.g., in the Nordic countries), in the EU context the countries with the lowest media freedom are categorized as "problematic" (Index values 65–75; e.g., in Hungary and Poland). For details about the methodology and thresholds defined by Reporters Without Borders for belonging to certain categories of media freedom see: https://rsf.org/en/methodology-used-compiling-world-press-freedom-index-2024?year=2024&data_type=general.

and the advertising expenditures per capita (sum of newspapers, magazines, and Internet advertising), in combination with the Eurostat (2020) data on the number of employees in publishing activities and information services per capita. The original values were first standardized as z-scores;[9] after that, the sum of z-scores was calculated and the percentiles method was used to calibrate the values for the fsQCA.[10]

High TV market concentration (*marketcon*) was operationalized with the European Audiovisual Observatory (2020) data on the daily audience market share of four leading TV groups. When calibrating the values, we relied on the external criteria[11] to define the thresholds for inclusion – we used 70 % as the threshold for full inclusion in the set, 40 % for full exclusion from the set, and 55 % (in the middle of the 40–70 % range) as the crossover point.

High autonomy of PSM (*psmautonomy*) was operationalized with the European Media Systems Survey (EMSS, Popescu et al., 2017) data on the national experts' perception of public TV content as free from political interference, and the trust in public TV compared to private TV channels. After that, the average of these two measures was calculated and the percentiles were used to calibrate the values for the fsQCA.

High proportion of full-time journalists (*journfull*) was operationalized with the Worlds of Journalism Study (2016) second wave[12] data on the share of journalists with full-time employment contracts.[13] The assumption was that the higher the share of full-time contracts, there are less journalists in precarious working conditions. The percentiles were again used to calibrate the values for the fsQCA.

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9 Since it does not include only the media sector, the z-score of the number of employees in publishing activities and information services was weighted (by dividing it by 10).

10 In this study, most of the conditions were calibrated with the percentile method: "To find which values in our dataset correspond to the 0,95, 0,50, and 0,05, we use percentiles. The percentiles allow the calibration of any measure regardless of its original values" (Pappas & Woodside, 2021, p. 7). After the calibration, France had a value of 0,5 which was changed to 0,501, as its original value was higher than the EU average.

11 According to Trappel and Meier (2022, p. 153), "CR4 indicates the concentration ratio of the four largest companies in the industry, with 0–40 % representing low concentration, 40–70 % representing medium concentration, and anything above 70 % representing high concentration". Due to the lack of data, we included only concentration on the TV market as an indicator of media concentration.

12 Due to the lack of data from the second wave, the data for Slovakia were taken from the Worlds of Journalism Study (2023) third wave, and the data for Poland from Głowacki (2015).

13 After the calibration, France and Poland had values of 0,5 which were changed to 0,501 as their original values were higher than the EU average. This was done following a suggestion by Fiss (2011), to add a constant to 0,5 values in order to avoid dropping these cases from the analysis. In this analysis, we added a constant of 0,01 to those cases which after the calibration had the value of 0,5, if their raw value was higher than the EU average. Similarly, we subtracted the constant of 0,01 from cases which after the calibration had the value of 0,5, if their raw value was lower than the EU average.

High proportion of journalists with university education (*journedu*) was operationalized with the Worlds of Journalism Study (2016) second wave data on the share of journalists with university degree (sum of journalists with college / bachelor's degree or equivalent, master's degree or equivalent, or doctorate), and the share of journalists who specialized in journalism. The average values were then calculated and calibrated based on the percentiles.[14]

High journalistic skills (*journskill*) was operationalized with the EMSS (Popescu et al., 2017) data on the national experts' estimate of journalists' sufficient training to ensure that the basic professional norms (e.g., accuracy, relevance, completeness, balance, double-checking, and source confidentiality) are respected in the news-making process. After that, the percentiles were again used to calibrate the values for the fsQCA.

Strong monitorial role of journalists (*journmonit*) was operationalized with the Worlds of Journalism Study (2016) second wave[15] data on the journalists' perception of importance to monitor and scrutinize political leaders and businesses, motivate people to politically participate, and provide information that they need to make political decisions. Following Hanitzsch et al. (2019), the Monitorial Role Index was created based on the aforementioned items, and the thresholds for the calibration were again determined with the help of the percentiles.[16]

Table 1. fsQCA calibrated values of the conditions and the outcome

Conditions								**Outcome**
Country	***marketstr***	***marketcon***	***psmautonomy***	***journfull***	***journedu***	***journskill***	***journmonit***	***medfree***
Austria	0,96	0,97	0,81	0,46	0,05	0,56	0,52	0,94
Belgium	0,48	0,99	0,76	0,41	0,79	0,78	0,31	0,98
Bulgaria	0,11	0,97	0,43	0,74	0,72	0,10	0,64	0,01
Croatia	0,08	0,98	0,16	0,57	0,12	0,09	0,96	0,08
Cyprus	0,10	0,17	0,21	0,94	0,90	0,28	0,43	0,69
Czechia	0,24	1	0,88	0,80	0,14	0,45	0,17	0,39
Denmark	0,94	1	0,53	0,34	0,91	0,90	0,87	1
Estonia	0,12	0,42	0,96	0,96	0,53	0,74	0,48	0,98

[14] After the calibration, Netherlands had a value of 0,5 which was changed to 0,499 due to the lower share of journalists with university degree in journalism than the EU average. Although the country has a slightly above average share of journalists with university degree in general, we (theoretically) consider the degree in journalism as more important.

[15] Due to the lack of data from the second wave, the data for Poland were calculated as an average result of Greece and Spain (based on the power relation domain clustering in Mellado et al., 2017), and the data for Slovakia was taken from the Worlds of Journalism Study (2023) third wave.

[16] After the calibration, Latvia had a value of 0,5 which was changed to 0,499 as its original value was lower than the EU average.

Conditions								Outcome
Country	***marketstr***	***marketcon***	***psmautonomy***	***journfull***	***journedu***	***journskill***	***journmonit***	***medfree***
Finland	0,81	1	0,89	0,48	0,39	0,96	0,57	1
France	0,501	1	0,70	0,501	0,86	0,43	0,67	0,46
Germany	0,78	1	0,93	0,41	0,10	0,79	0,16	0,98
Greece	0,08	0,49	0,24	0,87	0,10	0,14	0,75	0,07
Hungary	0,11	0,26	0,04	0,19	0,07	0,04	0,21	0,03
Ireland	0,73	0,64	0,42	0,63	0,05	0,46	0,47	0,98
Italy	0,21	0,98	0,16	0,21	0,16	0,15	0,26	0,38
Latvia	0,06	0,32	0,84	0,85	0,54	0,65	0,499	0,83
Netherlands	0,64	0,99	0,86	0,04	0,499	0,81	0,04	0,99
Poland	0,09	1	0,06	0,501	0,63	0,17	0,84	0,08
Portugal	0,11	0,88	0,38	0,94	0,78	0,51	0,79	0,99
Romania	0,04	0,70	0,32	0,86	0,31	0,08	0,35	0,20
Slovakia	0,16	0,75	0,74	0,06	0,74	0,26	0,17	0,48
Spain	0,18	0,97	0,14	0,80	0,96	0,64	0,90	0,53
Sweden	0,90	1	0,95	0,41	0,29	0,90	0,88	1

Note: Due to the missing data for certain conditions, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, and Slovenia were not included in the analysis.

ANALYSIS AND THE RESULTS

The analysis starts with determining the necessary, and proceeds with the presentation of sufficient conditions, both for the presence and absence of high levels of media freedom as the outcome. Following the recommendations by Ragin (2008), in the analysis of necessity we used a 0,9 consistency threshold, and a 0,6 coverage threshold suggested by Schneider (2019). No necessary conditions were found for the presence of media freedom, however the analysis showed two necessary conditions for the absence of media freedom – weak market structure, and the lack of skilled journalists (see Table 2). This indicates that low levels of media freedom do not occur without weakly developed media market and journalistic skills.

Table 2. Analysis of necessary conditions

	Outcome			
	medfree		*~medfree*	
Conditions	**Consistency**	**Coverage**	**Consistency**	**Coverage**
marketstr	0,58	0,97	0,24	0,25
~marketstr	0,55	0,53	0,97*	0,60*
marketcon	0,86	0,65	0,84	0,41
~marketcon	0,22	0,69	0,28	0,55
psmautonomy	0,75	0,85	0,42	0,30
~psmautonomy	0,39	0,51	0,80	0,67
journfull	0,62	0,67	0,69	0,47
~journfull	0,52	0,72	0,52	0,47
journedu	0,56	0,74	0,49	0,41
~journedu	0,56	0,63	0,69	0,50
journskill	0,74	0,96	0,33	0,27
~journskill	0,44	0,51	0,95*	0,70*
journmonit	0,57	0,68	0,67	0,50
~journmonit	0,57	0,73	0,57	0,46

Note:
~ denotes the absence of condition (or the outcome);
* denotes the consistency and coverage values above the thresholds for the necessary conditions

In the standard analysis of sufficiency (for the presence of the outcome), for minimizing the truth table we used a 0,8 consistency threshold (a bit stricter than the minimum of 0,75 recommended by Ragin, 2008), and a 0,7 PRI consistency threshold suggested by Pappas and Woodside (2021). In the analysis of the absence of the outcome, we used minimal consistency (0,75) and PRI (0,5) thresholds suggested by Ragin (2008), to account for the lesser number of cases in the set of countries with the absence of high levels of media freedom.

In the analysis of sufficiency, the fsQCA produces the complex, parsimonious, and intermediate solutions. As Ragin (2008, p. 166) explains, "these different solutions are all supersets of the solution privileging complexity and subsets of the solution privileging parsimony". Since complex solutions are often difficult to interpret in theoretically meaningful manner (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012, p. 277), here we present the parsimonious and intermediate solutions. Table 3 shows the parsimonious solution, but following Ragin (2008), in the discussion chapter we put more emphasis on the interpretation of intermediate solution presented in Table 4, as it is "the most interpretable and strikes a balance between

parsimony and complexity, based on a substantive and theoretical knowledge of the researcher" (Ragin, 2008, p. 175).

Table 3. Journalism conditions contributing to the presence or absence of media freedom (parsimonious solution)

	Conditions							Outcome					
Solution	*marketstr*	*marketcon*	*psmautonomy*	*journfull*	*journedu*	*journskill*	*journmonit*	*medfree*	Cases	Raw cover.	Unique cover.	Consistency	Solution cover.	Solution consist.
P1	●							●	AU, DK, SE, FI, DE, IE, NL	0,58	0,06	0,97	0,80	0,95
P2						●		●	FI, DK, SE, NL, DE, BE, EE, LV, ES, AU, PT	0,74	0,22	0,96		
P3						●	●	●	HR, PL, GR, BG, FR	0,65	0,47	0,70	0,72	0,70
P4		●			●			●	HU	0,25	0	0,66		
P5		●		●				●	HU	0,19	0	0,80		

Note: Black circles indicate the presence of condition or the outcome, while grey circles indicate their absence. Cases are represented with country abbreviations: AU-Austria, BE-Belgium, BG-Bulgaria, DE-Germany, DK-Denmark, EE-Estonia, ES-Spain, FI-Finland, FR-France, GR-Greece, HR-Croatia, HU-Hungary, IE-Ireland, LV-Latvia, NL-Netherlands, PL-Poland, PT-Portugal, and SE-Sweden

The parsimonious solution identified two paths leading to the presence of the outcome, i.e., the high levels of media freedom. In the first (P1), the strong market structure alone is related to high levels of media freedom in Austria, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Ireland, and Netherlands. In the second (P2), covering Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Estonia, Latvia, Spain, Austria, and Portugal, high levels of media freedom appear with high journalistic skills.

On the other hand, three paths were discovered that lead to the absence of the outcome, i.e., the low levels of media freedom. In the first (P3), the lack of skilled journalists, in combination with journalists adhering to the monitorial role, are related to low levels of media freedom in Croatia, Poland, Greece, Bulgaria, and France. The second (P4), observed only in Hungary, consists of low market concentration and low shares of university-educated journalists. The final (P5), again observed in Hungary, combines low market concentration and low shares of full-time journalists.

Table 4. Journalism conditions contributing to the presence or absence of media freedom (intermediate solution)

	Conditions							Outcome						
Solution	*Marketstr*	*marketcon*	*psmautonomy*	*journfull*	*journedu*	*journskill*	*journmonit*	*medfree*	**Cases**	**Raw cover.**	**Unique cover.**	**Consistency**	**Solution cover.**	**Solution consist.**
I1	●	●		●				●	IE	0,36	0,02	0,95	0,67	0,95
I2	●	●	●			●		●	SE, FI, DE, NL, AU, DK	0,49	0,10	0,98		
I3		●	●		●	●		●	BE, DK	0,38	0,03	0,97		
I4			●	●	●	●		●	LV, EE	0,33	0,03	0,97		
I5		●		●	●	●	●	●	ES, PT	0,33	0,03	0,93		
I6	●		●		●	●	●	●	HR, GR	0,44	0,03	0,81	0,65	0,83
I7	●	●	●			●	●	●	HR, PL, BG	0,56	0,15	0,81		
I8	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	HU	0,19	0,07	0,84		

Note: Black circles indicate the presence of condition or the outcome, while grey circles indicate their absence. Cases are represented with country abbreviations: AU-Austria, BE-Belgium, BG-Bulgaria, DE-Germany, DK-Denmark, EE-Estonia, ES-Spain, FI-Finland, GR-Greece, HR-Croatia, HU-Hungary, IE-Ireland, LV-Latvia, NL-Netherlands, PL-Poland, PT-Portugal, and SE-Sweden

The intermediate solution identified five paths leading to the presence of high levels of media freedom. In the first (I1), strong market structure, high market concentration, and high shares of full-time journalists relate to high levels of media freedom in Ireland. In the second (I2), high levels of media freedom are associated with strong market structure, high market concentration, high autonomy of PSM, and high journalistic skills. This path covers Sweden, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Austria, and Denmark. The third (I3) is observed in Belgium and Denmark, and consists of high market concentration, high autonomy of PSM, high shares of university-educated journalists, and high journalistic skills. In the fourth path (I4), almost the same configuration of conditions from the third path (minus high market concentration, and plus high shares of full-time journalists) relates to high levels of media freedom in Latvia and Estonia. The final path (I5), observed in Spain and Portugal, combines high shares of full-time and university-educated journalists, high journalistic skills, and journalists adhering to the monitorial role.

Three paths were discovered that lead to the absence of the outcome. In the first one (I6), weak market structure, low autonomy of PSM, the lack of university-educated and skilled journalists, in combination with journalists adhering to the monitorial role, constitute a recipe for low levels of media freedom in Croatia

and Greece. In another path (I7), low levels of media freedom are associated with weak market structure, high market concentration, low autonomy of PSM, the lack of skilled journalists, and journalists adhering to the monitorial role. This path covers Croatia, Poland, and Bulgaria. Finally, weak market structure, low market concentration, low autonomy of PSM, and the lack of full-time, university-educated and skilled journalists lead to low levels of media freedom in Hungary (I8).

DISCUSSION

The aim of this analysis was to explore how macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of the journalism field, in a changing media environment, relate to various levels of media freedom. A strong media market structure, high journalistic skills, and journalists adhering to the monitorial role appear in both parsimonious and intermediate solutions, which indicates that they constitute the "core" conditions for media freedom (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). Furthermore, a weak market structure and the lack of skilled journalists appear as necessary conditions for the absence of the outcome, which additionally underpins their significance in relation to media freedom.

On the macro-level, strong media markets, with higher revenues for media organizations, should provide more resources for quality and investigative journalism. Loss of revenues during the economic crises caused a blow for the media autonomy by weakening working conditions for journalists, limiting the resources of newsrooms, and increasing the reliance on other sources of funding which might come with pressures on the autonomy (Price et al., 2023). In CEE, stronger media markets and higher advertising revenues attracted foreign media ownership, making them less dependent on local political influence compared to locally owned media organizations, which were more dominant in weaker media markets in the region (Salovaara & Juzefovics, 2012). There is the surprising role of media concentration in some paths explaining media freedom. Although media concentration is usually considered as having a negative association with media freedom, in this analysis in certain paths it appeared as positively associated. Previous research suggested a certain concentration in the media market could enhance media's internal pluralism (Garz et al., 2023; Stühmeier, 2019). This is especially the case if it refers to concentration of audience to PSM.

On the meso-level, working conditions, indicated by the share of the full-time employed journalists, appeared in some paths explaining media freedom. The higher share of full-time employed journalists appeared in three paths explaining

higher levels of media freedom, which points to the important role of working conditions in ensuring media freedom.[17]

On the micro-level, an important factor associated with media freedom concerns journalistic skills. However, it is interesting to note the interplay of journalistic education and skills, which mostly appear together in paths explaining the outcome. There is a long-standing debate on the theoretical vs. the practical approaches to journalistic education (Örnebring & Mellado, 2018). While journalistic skills appear as a sufficient condition in almost all paths explaining both the presence and absence of media freedom, the role of university education is slightly ambiguous. High shares of university-educated journalists do not appear in the path covering the democratic-corporatist media systems (see I2 in Table 4), which can be explained by a stronger tradition of non-academic journalistic education in some countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 93). While in most paths explaining the absence media freedom, the lower shares of university-educated journalists are usually followed by weaker journalistic skills. However, there are also exceptions. Some CEE countries have higher shares of university-educated journalists, but weakly developed journalistic skills. Although the university education seems to be associated with journalistic skills, the lack of education can be compensated with work experience when it comes to acquiring skills (and vice versa), as many journalistic skills are acquired with work experience (Willnat et al., 2013). On the other hand, weaker skills in countries with higher share of university-educated journalists might also mean that the working conditions may not be as supportive for the competencies acquired through formal education to develop in practice.

High shares of university-educated journalists do not appear consistently with journalists adhering to the monitorial role, which would be expected as journalism education is a place where "professional ideology" is acquired (Deuze, 2005). The monitorial role is the most accepted normative ideal for journalists around the world, strongly correlated with the level of democratization (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). In our analysis, the pronounced monitorial role appears only in the paths covered by the Mediterranean or CEE countries. This might seem contrary to the expectations of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) model, which implies that the democratic-corporatist countries exhibit a greater importance of the watchdog role, while polarized-pluralist countries have more pronounced interventionist journalism. Although some countries (e.g., Denmark and Sweden) exhibit high acceptance of the monitorial role, this is not the case for all democratic-corporatist countries. Some of them have their peculiarities, where

[17] However, it did not appear in paths covered by democratic-corporatist systems. Hanitzsch et al. (2019) discuss the shares of part-time and freelance journalists as being particularly high in some countries belonging to the democratic-corporatist model (e.g. The Netherlands).

a large share of journalists identifies with the role of educators (e.g. Germany, see Hanitzsch et al., 2019). These discrepancies could also be explained by types of watchdog roles, which can appear in either detached or interventionist form (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020). The detached watchdog role is more prevalent in journalistic cultures that value objectivity, while interventionist in polarized journalistic cultures or countries experiencing crises (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020). Therefore, the monitorial role appearing in paths covered by the Mediterranean or CEE countries might indicate the interventionist variant of the watchdog role. Another reason is that the acceptance of the monitorial role refers to the cognitive role and the way journalists perceive their profession ought to be performed (Hanitzsch et al., 2019), which can be different from practice, i.e., how journalists act in systems and institutions they are embedded in. Štětka and Örnebring (2013) point that investigative journalism in CEE fails to develop more strongly and serve the watchdog purpose due to weak media markets as well as the legal restrictions in some countries.

Although the fsQCA does not necessarily result in clustering of cases, the results imply that indicators from the journalism field and media freedom align the countries in clusters somewhat resembling the typology by Hallin and Mancini (2004). The liberal media system of Ireland stands out as a path of its own, consisting of a strong media market, high market concentration, and high share of full-time journalists. Countries like Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, and Sweden cover the same path which resembles the characteristics of the democratic-corporatist system – a strong media market, emphasized position of PSM, and developed journalistic skills. Portugal and Spain cover the path in which the strong market structure and the autonomy of PSM are absent, but where some elements of the journalism profession and culture are pronounced. In the polarized-pluralist media systems, with the later development of journalism profession, the university-educated journalists were more prevalent in the elite-oriented press (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Two Baltic countries (Estonia and Latvia) are the only post-socialist countries belonging to the set of countries with high media freedom and cover a path of their own – with high autonomy of PSM, high shares of full-time and university-educated journalists, and developed journalistic skills. In the previous analyses, Estonia (and in some cases Latvia) was placed in a hybrid (Humprecht et al., 2022), "mainstream" (Peruško et al., 2013), or the northern CEE model (Castro Herrero et al., 2017), sharing the characteristics of democratic-corporatist and polarized-pluralist model. The Baltic countries have been influenced by the "neighbor effect", i.e., the transfer of media policies, journalistic practices, and investment by the Scandinavian media systems (Balčytienė, 2009; Salovaara & Juzefovics, 2012). Greece, a polarized-pluralist country (according to Hallin & Mancini, 2004), seems to group with other post-socialist countries and newer

EU member states. Hungary appears alone in a solution path, with especially low levels of media freedom and unfavorable conditions from the journalism field. The initial expectation was that the new CEE democracies would all fit into the polarized-pluralist model due to being the most politically polarized and having the lowest levels of journalism professionalization (Peruško et al., 2021, p. 4). This analysis shows disparities among CEE media systems, with very distinct structures of the journalism field and levels of media freedom.

CONCLUSIONS

The results suggest that media freedom is most associated both with the macro-level elements from the journalism field (external structural factors, such as the development of the media market), and the micro-level, internal factors, such as the journalistic skills and the monitorial role of journalists. Based on the results, we can hypothesize about the role journalism as an institution has across media systems regarding media freedom. As macro-factors such as the strong media market are the core factor in explaining the relationship between journalism and media freedom, we assume that the structural environment in which journalism is practiced is crucial for media freedom to evolve. This can lead to expectation that media policies aiming at strengthening the economic position of journalism are also the ones aimed at enhancing media freedom (in its positive form, Karppinen, 2016).

Some unexpected or surprising results call for further research. For example, although the media concentration is usually considered as having a negative association with media freedom, in this analysis in certain paths it appeared as positively associated with media freedom. The higher monitorial role appearing in paths covering the CEE and Mediterranean countries calls for further research of the interplay of journalistic roles and media freedom. The results also point to the need for a nuanced analysis of the interplay between journalistic education, theoretical knowledge, and practical skills, and their contribution to journalism profession in future research. Finally, some path solutions resemble the typology of media systems described by Hallin and Mancini (2004), i.e., the clustering of the democratic-corporatist and polarized-pluralist countries, as well as the unique path of "liberal" Ireland. It also partly confirms some recent empirical analyses of media systems (cf. Castro Herrero et al., 2017; Humprecht et al., 2022; Peruško et al., 2013). This suggests that future theoretical models and empirical conceptualizations should address variables from the journalism field and media freedom in comparative analyses of media systems.

This study has several methodological and empirical limitations. The first is its reliance solely on quantitative data. Although the fsQCA combines qualitative

and quantitative approaches, we put more emphasis on quantitative data and less on the in-depth qualitative analysis of cases. There are also limitations concerning the data sources. As already mentioned, media freedom indices are sometimes criticized as being subjective. A similar critique could also be pointed out for the EMSS data (for the autonomy of PSM and journalistic skills), which are based on the evaluations of national experts. Since the fsQCA results are sensitive to study design, another potential limitation derives from our decisions when defining the thresholds for set membership. Although the fsQCA is often used to determine causal relationships, in this study we can speak only of associations. And finally, this study could also be critiqued that it focuses on the static point in time, hence not accounting for the media systems change.

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