Living Media Diversity: The Media Diversity Institute's Perspective on Deliberative Communication

Interview with Milica Pesic, Director of the Media Diversity Institute Global

Deliberative communication in practice requires the inclusion of multiple voices, which include academia, alongside other critical stakeholders, such as media actors, policymakers, non-governmental organisations and other forms of social organic collisions across cultures and experiences in the media workplace. It also requires a willingness to listen and respect differences of opinions and ideas. Within the Mediadelcom project, the role of promoting the project and the voices of European academics involved in it to the wider public was orchestrated by the Media Diversity Institute Global, our partner institution, led by Milica Pesic.

Below, we discuss how the Media Diversity Institute, which recently celebrated a major milestone, has been and continues to change concepts of media diversity as well as its contribution to European media deliberation – its visions and realities.

> **First, Milica, Happy Birthday to the Media Diversity Institute. 25 Years and Counting. Tell us how you celebrated?**

For us, it's been a significant celebration and we organised several major and important ways to mark it. We created a book featuring a collection of essays by academics, journalists, policymakers, and civil society actors we have worked with over the last 25 years. We asked them to use ethnographic methodology and tell us their stories about how they got involved in media diversity issues across the globe. As well as their insights, they also addressed how they see MDI in the next 25 years, which was wonderful to read and provides us with the inspiration to continue our important work. One of our goals – what we thought was very important in our 25th year – was to appeal to more younger people, which

is a challenge for many of us. We used our digital channels to address them and encourage them to get involved. We did that by posting short messages on TikTok, Instagram, X, and Facebook. Sometimes, when some inspiring examples of inclusive journalism were shared with our audience, we'd have up to 10% more likes on those platforms. We also hosted a hybrid anniversary celebration in London, with over 1,500 people listening to and watching the recording online.

> **Looking back over the years, there have been so many critical cultural and technological shifts, and more are to come. Tell us how the overall dynamics of socio-cultural contexts have changed your work – MDI visions, strategies, and impact.**

There have been dramatic changes over the last 25 years. If we talk politically, 25 years ago in Europe and globally, there was this understanding that 'someone' was missing in the media and public space. We are not made of one ethnic group, one religion, one gender, or one sexual orientation, but we weren't hearing often enough from people with different backgrounds. Back then, multiculturalism became a 'sexy' concept, so many countries and governments started thinking about how to deal with diversity and inclusion in the fast-changing media and culture environments.

And that's where MDI came in. In north America, the concept of diversity, a model called 'melting pot' had existed for centuries. Canada was the first country to introduce a concept of diversity in their constitution in 1974. They started insisting on what my Canadian colleague journalists would call a 'salad bowl': "Let's see who is out there. We are like a salad bowl, Vietnamese, Chinese, Canadians and others; they all contribute what they brought to our society". You can still recognise the ingredients but it's the dressing which changes the taste of the salad. The individual community identities are still recognisable but the whole society is changed thanks to the communities' contribution to it.

Looking at the time at what was happening in Britian and the rest of Europe, I would say there were different attempts to find the best ways to respond to a growing ethnic and religious diversity brought by either people coming from former British colonies in the case of Britain, or by a growing need to respond to *civic assimilation* brought by the principles of *égalité et fraternité* which was a model of diversity management in France. That provided MDI with an opportunity to question together with the media actors and academic researchers what models of diversity approaches were working, if any, in Europe, and what models were needed.

For us, it was an exciting time. We felt like we were pioneering something others are now trying to understand 25 years later.

I see our dynamic Media Diversity Institute history as an interplay between politics and technology. Today, media polarisation is everywhere in Europe, the

USA and elsewhere and we know how that affects all of us. On a technological level, when we started, there was only conventional, or what we now call legacy media. Then, social media was still relatively new, and we, like so many others, were optimistic that it would be a space for the marginalised, the vulnerable, and the excluded. But then reality set in and since then, a lot of our work has been tackling intolerance, hate speech and other divisive and unacceptable behaviour online. Of course, there is still this positive side of social media where everyone feels like a journalist or has something to say, but, as one of our academic advisors put it, there is no ear to hear them. The public space has become fragmented and marginalised. Vulnerable people, minority communities are different from the mainstream, and the MDI has been working with those communities, which have become more exposed to negative stereotypes and exclusion in particular in the online space.

Maintaining diversity nowadays is a challenge for MDI and other organisations; I can see that universities are struggling to get the students involved in different debates and are becoming the subject of cancel culture. "As you express your opinion and it's not like mine, I want to cancel you". We all know that the public space should be about inclusion and hearing different views, so basically, these are the challenges we are dealing with and looking for solutions via training, projects, and so on.

The multilayered concept of media diversity has changed a lot. So, what has been more challenging? Dealing with media, policymakers or the cultural space: media's cultural path-dependencies vs imaginative media futures?

Politicians are mainly those who make decisions on a high level and their hearts are the hardest to change; it's hard to get some of them to realise they need to change. I watch what's happening in UK politics. What we expect from politicians is for them to have values and a vision for the country and community, but they are either not articulating their vision or don't have one.

Let me give you an example. While everyone is discussing migration and whether Europe needs it, political parties are not necessarily addressing what we need from migrants and the value they bring to our countries. Would the British health system survive without migrant doctors and nurses? Would British agriculture or hospitality industry survive without migrant workers? What are the values migrants bring to British culture? That's something migrants could share through the media with the public, and this would increase constructive debate about migration and hopefully tackle the problem of hate speech and intolerance towards migrants who are often portrayed as invaders or a problem. That's why training journalists is so critical to MDI's work. We train and support journalists in producing content, hoping they will return to their newsrooms

and tell their editors: "I will try to do something a new way, our new Diversity and Inclusive way".

For instance, we bring journalists from the South Caucasus or the Middle East or North Africa to Amsterdam, Vienna or London to visit media organisations that have already embraced inclusion principles. These media outlets can explain why they do that and the benefits the inclusive approach bring to their organisations, content and audiences. They can explain the business case for diversity and what's at stake for Public Service Media (PSM) which per definition are supposed to be inclusive since they are funded by all taxpayers regardless of whether those taxpayers are of this or that ethnic, religious, gender or any other diversity background. I'm proud we've been able to connect journalists and media outlets across different continents to learn from each other to gain a better understanding of diversity and inclusion. As a result of this initiative, Public TV in Georgia adopted a completely new diversity policy by creating shows in 5 minority languages produced and anchored by minority journalists while at the same time people behind those new shows produced 10 minute news stories about minorities to be aired in primetime news bulletins. As a small group of activists, we have an uphill battle, but working together with like-minded groups we can push and say, "Guys, you have to learn to be leaders and listen".

✎ So, what have been the most successful Media Diversity Institute initiatives?

I'm proud to say in the past 25 years we've had a lot of successful initiatives, and we've had an impact by advocating for the media to give a voice to a diverse range of people. Let's hope we can keep that momentum going!

So, I would say one of our most significant achievements is that we listen and act with media actors, civil society organisations, and media scholars. We have worked with media academics from more than 80 countries across the globe, supporting them in developing and teaching Inclusive Journalism modules and courses. With the University of Westminster in the UK, we established a more practical Master's course in diversity and media for journalism students. We found these collaborative courses very useful, because even if students don't become journalists, they graduate with knowledge and practical experience in how to deal with media diversity and inclusion in general. A moment I consider a success is when I was presenting the MDI work at Columbia University Journalism School and the professor running the department said our work is unique not only for Europe, but globally. To be recognised for our work and its impact is always appreciated and encourages us to continue our efforts. Of course, I would like to add that all our programmes from training to monitoring hate speech have been important in the promotion of responsible media and diversity.

Nowadays, one of our goals is to be listened to by big tech companies, but so far, we think they haven't taken us seriously. With high technology, it is not a kind of friendship, but you would say it is a 'frenemy' situation. So, we are friends and enemies at the same time. We need them to be more inclusive of diversity, which is a daily struggle. But yes, when we go to them, I say you should close this account because this is very antisemitic or homophobic or anti-Muslim, the big techs do not react as much as we believe they should. For instance, some social media users keep questioning the existence of the Holocaust. With a group of likeminded organisations we approached Facebook and they decided to adopt a policy of removing the Holocaust deniers' accounts.

We know how important social media are, but our relationships are still far from being perfect. We are not powerful enough to change them dramatically. So, this is the direction we want to go further, particularly for those who set up and create artificial intelligence, because we realise that Generative AI can reproduce as many standard negative stereotypes, similar to humans who have them made. We hope to influence how algorithms are created and spread throughout multicultural societies to prevent hate speech, discrimination and negative stereotypes of different groups.

What's the next step in media diversity?

It's internet governance. We were one of the organisations trying to push for it. And we speak about internet governance, not government. This is where people and different media stakeholders must get together. The big tech companies are becoming so powerful, and there are policies to look ahead to. Look at what's happening in both Australia and Canada, where governments are insisting social media giants pay fees for news taken from legacy media. This happened in Australia in 2023 and in 2001. Facebook responded by temporarily closing firefighters and other government services' pages to demonstrate their power. In Canada in 2023, the government issued a law that the 'Big Six' have to compensate media outlets for the content they share and make a profit from. So, we are now looking to see what will happen, but these governments, together with the civil society sector, are fighting this robust sector called big tech or social media to protect their media companies.

Within the Mediadelcom project, the MDI has worked with several academic and research institutions. What is the value of the research we are producing? In other words, how does scholarly data contribute to media diversity? What have we learned collaborating together?

One of the reasons we joined the project was the concept of deliberative communication and its use in the media. We've been doing work and projects around societal polarisation, and the polarisation of public debate has been something we need to explore. So working on the Mediadelcom project provided us with an opportunity to work on something important to us. We have learned that we need to listen to each other more.

Working with Mediadelcom has been interesting as we work directly with journalists, media and civil society organisations. It's very different working with people in academia. Your priorities are very different to ours – and sometimes so too is your language, your 'lingo'. But in the end, we need to find the best way to work together to ensure your findings and recommendations can be applied in the media, civil sector and the wider communication landscape.

I think there's a real advantage for academics of studies like these to work with people and organisations outside academia – like us – as we bring a different experience and perspective. Academic findings mustn't end up on a shelf-journalists, media owners and other media decision-makers, organisations representing diverse communities and policy makers should understand those studies and the value they bring to their work. That means presenting it in a way that appeals to various target audiences. We all need to get out of our comfort zones.

For me, another important thing is ensuring the recommendations of studies like Mediadelcom respond to current challenges. A good example of this was when we worked together to organise an event in Warsaw for Mediadelcom called "Breaking Down the Walls". It brought together media and cultural figures to discuss how they could work together to promote social cohesion. That was a time when one-third of municipalities in Poland functioned under the so-called LGBT-free zones. So, we brought together people in a deliberate format to discuss issues relevant to them at a time when they mattered. What I also liked about that event is that we really encouraged young people to attend and get involved. It was inspiring! Working with a variety of people like artists and young people, also inspired me to explore new ideas, to innovate and collaborate.

So, back to your question on how the project can contribute to media diversity: I think the event in Warsaw is a prime example of how deliberative communication encourages listening to diverse voices. It takes the conversation away from polarisation and towards an inclusive and respectful dialogue on important issues.

We need a straightforward approach to tackling issues because of what's happening in the world. I mean, nativism, nationalism, and chauvinism need much stronger answers and that's where I think deliberative journalism communities can play a role. The MDI Global's view on deliberative journalism is that it *can* be an answer, and it's not complicated to introduce it to media outlets. The main challenge may be convincing audiences to turn away from fiery, entertaining polarised "fights" and listen to more deliberative discussions because these deliberative

debates could provide them with more information, a wider range of views, and therefore a better understanding of an issue.

We as researchers, mostly address our work to other academics, so what would your advice be to us when it comes to media, diversity and deliberation?

I mentioned it a little above, but I think you need to think about the language you use. Sometimes it is not understood or relevant to us working in the field. We need to understand each other and open up lines of communication. I would like to see that happen so we can all benefit from each other's work.

I'm sure you and your colleagues would like more journalists and organisations to adopt some of your recommendations, but first they have to understand in a very practical way how they can apply them. I think that is important and one of the key lessons from this project: the need to collaborate for greater impact. And it would be great for you to work with us – the media or other interested parties – from the project inception stage. I would like to see more of these projects have a real and lasting impact on how we operate – no matter what field we work in. Considered and serious research can help us all work better and create a better society.

If I think of a few Mediadelcom recommendations that we could work together on they would be media literacy, especially for youth, and strengthening public service media. I would love us to work together to make public service media more appealing to new generations and your students. I think we could do some really good work that brings a lot of positive results.

Milica Pesic is the President of Media Diversity Institute Global (MDIG). She has been working in Diversity and the Media field for more than 25 years designing and supervising multi-national, multi-annual programmes in Europe, NIS, MENA, South Asia, the Sahel, Sub-Sahara, West Africa, China and Cuba. She has co-designed an MA Course in Diversity and the Media which is jointly run by the MDI and University of Westminster. A Journalist by profession, she has reported for the BBC, Radio Free Europe, the Times HES, TV Serbia and other media.

Milica Pesic was interviewed by
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