

## Editors' Introduction

As of early 2025, a cross-cultural debate continues over how science serves society. With daily news around the world reporting on the crises of democracy, misinformation, and socio-political polarisation—with all their accompanying toxicity—there is an urgent need to revisit socially driven research using adaptive methodologies and empirical approaches that can respond to rapidly changing contexts. Moreover, as traditional boundaries between the life sciences, humanities, and social sciences erode, we observe a growing integration of advanced technologies into our everyday lives. Since this transformation challenges the cultural foundations of media and society and reshapes how we perceive and engage with them, we — communications and media researchers — face not only new topics for exploration but also—perhaps more importantly—new tools for applied research and scholarly excellence. This further underscores the need to communicate our findings to citizens in pursuit of sustainability and future-savvy solutions, even if that means moving beyond our research communities and comfort zones.

Here at the *Central European Journal of Communication* (CEJC), we have witnessed rapid changes in the scope of communications and media studies since the first CEJC issue, which addressed media systems and media-political relationships in comparative and local contexts back in 2008. The unique blend of Central and Eastern European (CEE) media and societies offers fertile ground to readdress traditional and Western-oriented media conceptualisations. We can now see how far the socio-political structures coupled with highly personalised technologies are transforming towards new waves of populism, geopolitical reorientation and the toxicity of divided families, communities and nations.

On the surface, the profound shifts introduced by Generative Artificial Intelligence further extend the list of potentially relevant scholarly challenges to maintain quality, networks, and communication—the CEJC foundations of applied and socially relevant media research.

Overall, the 40th issue of the *Central European Journal of Communication* (Spring 2025) clearly mirrors the day-to-day struggle for democratic media in the CEE region, and beyond.

Firstly, Konrad Kiljan and Barbara Konat adopt a rhetorical approach to analyse the media's role in shaping public emotions in the pre-election campaigns. By looking at six European countries, the authors test and examine geographical distance vs. geographical proximity to war as significant variables in political communication and populist voices.

In a similar vein, Agnieszka Szymańska takes the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a contextual factor in the coverage of war through the social media channels of a selection of Poland's legacy media. Based on semi-structured interviews, her study provides empirical evidence of journalists' perceptions of the media's roles, alongside accuracy, authenticity, and accountability.

Continuing this thread, Andreea Stancea and Nicoleta Corbu investigate the roles of global social media platforms in shaping contemporary Romania's political preferences. To this end, the authors uncover the significance of civic literacies, conspiracy theories, and the digital news consumption among key factors responsible for media-political polarisation; in other words, the widening gap between far-right and far-left voters.

The multiple layers of the socio-political foundations of populism and its discourses are further examined by Tiago Gomes Lapa, who analyses the Facebook accounts of two far-right political parties: Chega in Portugal and Vox in Spain. His study employs a social constructionist perspective on the narrative of the so-called "people" versus "the elites," identifying the need for a deeper understanding of each country's unique socio-economic, cultural, and historical contextualisations.

Travelling back to the Baltic Sea region, Heike Graf and Jessica Gustafsson analyse German and Swedish podcasts dealing with post-migrant citizens as underrepresented communities. The holistic research addresses key frames, such as living conditions, diversity and representation, and the inclusion of marginalised voices by the mainstream legacy media in both countries compared.

The list of scholarly papers concludes with a regulatory and policy analysis of Poland's democratic monitoring mechanisms regarding access to information. Alicja Jaskiernia and Lucyna Szot offer an in-depth examination of national and European media law provisions, revealing potential mismatches within the regulatory framework and highlighting how these gaps can be vulnerable to political intervention and agendas.

Finally, instead of an Interview with an expert, practitioner, and scholar, we publish this time an executive extract of a Citizen-Driven Debate on media capture and social polarisation, organised on January 23, 2025, at the TVP (Telewizja Polska – Polish Television) headquarters in Warsaw. The transcribed voices of Marius Dragomir, Čedomir Markov, Jakub Wygnański, and Bissera Zankova serve as a timely reminder of citizens' power to shape both present and future democracies, as well as the critical need to preserve the human dimension in the age of AI and amid ongoing high-tech capture.

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