

## Editorial

# „Critical Junctures“ in Democratic Media Systems: Concepts and Backgrounds

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### Why critical junctures?

When confronted with the concept of “critical junctures” for the first time, some historical researchers may raise a puzzled eyebrow. Initially, the term seems to indicate an occupation with isolated events rather than contextual embedding. But a closer look at the current theoretical discussion reveals a far more nuanced approach.

Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, p. 348) argue critical junctures are characterized as brief intervals of time during which there is a significantly increased likelihood that the decisions made by agents will impact the outcome. They stress that, while such an upheaval may be viewed as a starting and central point, it is always viewed in light of and in relation to earlier and later longer-term events. Examining these critical periods highlights the importance of paying attention to formative experiences and emphasizes how significant the past is for understanding the present (Donnelly & Hogan, 2012, p. 328).

This description encapsulates the idea that agents confront a wider than usual range of feasible options during a brief phase, and that their decisions about these possibilities are likely to have a significant impact on subsequent outcomes. Further, by emphasizing that the probability that actors’ choices will affect outcomes decreases after the critical juncture, this definition suggests that their choices during the critical juncture trigger a path-dependent process that constrains future possibilities. As such, the critical juncture constitutes a situation that is qualitatively different from the anticipated historical development of the institutional framework (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). This suggests that such critical turning points cause paths to alter because they allow for the expression and application of novel ideas that will effect change. Path dependency sets in and makes it challenging to reroute development after the effects of some important junctures are socially accepted. Historical determinism can be avoided, particularly by combining the ideas of “path dependency” and “critical junctures”, because they show that route-dependent behaviors can continue even after an apparent shift has occurred (Peruško et al., 2021, p. 20).

Thus, it is apparent that while institutional frameworks are integrated into the concept, the significance of individual and sometimes unpredictable behavior is not diminished. Critical junctures raise the possibility of subversive results dependent on the choices made by individual players, not just at levels of institutions but also at societal and ideational (Collier & Munck, 2017; Donnelly & Hogan,

2012). As Carlos E. Gallegos-Anda (2021, p. 108) succinctly phrases the argument: “The juncture is ‘critical,’ due to the unforeseen transformations experienced in the institutional, political, legal, and economic realms, which in time, produced a new legal framing that expanded or innovated approaches to economic, social and economic rights.” The particular outcome varies depending on the people involved, the specific historical context and follows a characteristic path for every instance.

Critical junctures, in any event, are periods of stress or crisis that cannot be adequately handled by the institutions and policies in place, or that are no longer appropriate. As a result, they put the current order to the test and create a lot of pressure for sudden, abrupt, and path-dependent adjustments (Roberts, 2015). When such tipping points occur, media systems in democratically structured states typically face difficulties (Lamuedra et al., 2019; McChesney, 2007; Price, 2021; Shepperd, 2021).

Within this framework, research on journalism generally focuses on changes in the news production process. Digitization is a prime example because it has drastically altered both the practices of journalism and the profession. The way that editors handle hate news, disinformation, misinformation, and threats, as well as interactions with recipients and audience members on social media, are all equally significant. Taking a more comprehensive approach, research on critical junctures also takes into account social, economic, or political settings. Therefore, approaches in communication studies can also focus on impacts that affect the media system. For instance, political system changes in Europe starting in the late 1980s offer a relevant field of research – such as Germany’s reunification and the fall of the Soviet Union – as well as feminist movements, particularly from the 1960s onwards, or the financial crisis of 2008/2009.

This special issue of *medien & zeit* focuses on such critical junctures from a communication studies perspective. The aim is to reflect on and discuss specific turning points at the level of actors as well as in institutional and structural settings, for individual states, supranational organizations, or in international contexts.

### Media-related risks and opportunities for deliberative communication – the Mediadelcom approach

The use of the critical junctures approach as a guiding framework for this special issue emerged from the Horizon 2020 project “Media-related risks and opportunities for deliberative communication: Development scenarios of the European media landscape” (Mediadelcom). This three-year research project (2021–2024), led by Halliki Harro-Loit from the University of Tartu (Estonia), brought together researchers from 14 EU countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Sweden). The project aimed to work out a methodology enabling the assessment and forecast of the

risks and opportunities for deliberative communication emerging in the process of media transformation between 2000 and 2020 (cf. Harro-Loit et al., 2024).

While current research on media transformations heavily focuses on structural crises – such as platform monopolies, declining journalism standards, and the spread of misinformation – there is a lack of a comprehensive approach to addressing media-related risks and opportunities. Mediadelcom aimed to fill this gap by providing a structured assessment of these risks and opportunities, developing a new holistic approach (cf. Oller Alonso et al., 2024) that examines the interplay between

- *legal and ethical regulation,*
- *journalism,*
- *media usage patterns, and*
- *media-related competencies.*

Legal and ethical regulations play a fundamental role in the context of risks and opportunities concerning data protection laws at the EU and national level, informational self-determination, freedom of information and expression, access to information, and media accountability.

Transformations in journalism and the news production process create risks and opportunities for journalistic professionalism, the job market for journalists, and the competitiveness of content producers in global, national, and hyperlocal news markets. These changes also impact the role and position of public service media.

The availability (or lack) of knowledge regarding shifts in media usage and citizen engagement with news affects the ability of decision-makers to make informed choices. The news media's success or failure in delivering reliable information and fact-based analysis impacts the electorate's ability to make informed decisions directly. Technological innovations allow media companies to collect various data online, such as visitor metrics. However, they often keep these data confidential for business reasons.

Media-related competencies of citizens as media users or news producers play a crucial role in journalism's sustainability and influence media consumption.

These four domains are also subject to change over time, so the concept of critical junctures is equally relevant here. Several interrelated factors have driven changes in media production, distribution, use, and professional practice. These include the exponential growth of social media since 2002, changes in the advertising and media economy as media ownership has globalized, the economic crisis of 2008/2009, the rapid proliferation of smartphones since 2007/2008 coupled with technological advances, and the introduction of new data protection regulations in Europe since 2018/2019. Although these technological and global aspects are transnational, changes within national media ecosystems should be viewed as contingent historical processes, where earlier phases influence the present and the present sets the conditions for future developments. From a historical comparative approach, this project examined the processes of change and continuity in media ecosystems

and the impact of these turning points concerning risks and opportunities for deliberative communication in specific countries. Thus, the core concept of Mediadelcom was based on a comprehensive analysis of the discourse on “media-related risks and opportunities” in the context of studies on media transformations and innovations (cf. Mediadelcom, n.d.). The overall goal of the project was to develop scenarios and recommendations for knowledge-based media governance.

### **Mediadelcom: Lessons learned after three years of research**

In view of the questions raised above, the research carried out for Mediadelcom – at least in relation to the recent development of European media systems – provides a variety of answers that complement the studies bundled in this special issue. These include insights from the theoretical and empirical research perspective as well as practical advice for media managers and policy makers.

### **The concept of media monitoring capabilities as a diagnostic tool for media systems under pressure**

From a theoretical perspective, the concept of media monitoring capabilities developed by Mediadelcom (cf. Harro-Loit et al., 2024) plays a pivotal role, as it not only enriches the scientific discourse, but also provides an important basis for the development of a diagnostic tool for media systems under pressure. The project defines the capabilities of media monitoring as

*the ability, possibilities and resources, and motivations of various agents to observe and analyze the developments of the media over space and time, and the changes in society emanating from the media transformations, as well as related risks and opportunities for deliberative communication. (Harro-Loit et al., 2024, p. 21)*

Put simply, the aim is to scrutinize the contribution of media and communication research to the development of media systems – and to assess its usefulness. Mediadelcom sees the ideal of deliberative communication (cf. Bächtiger et al., 2018) as the main goal of sustainable media development in democratic societies. The study intends to clarify which characteristics media systems must have in order to create the best possible conditions for deliberative communication and to what extent media and communication science research can contribute to achieving this goal. In the sense of the structure-agency approach (cf. Archer, 1995), both research-related infrastructures and individual monitoring actors as well as their relationships with one another need to be evaluated. An analytical differentiation between data, information, knowledge, and wisdom, as suggested by the DIKW model commonly used in information sciences (cf. e.g. Frické, 2018), is crucial for this endeavor.

The partners involved in Mediadecom used this theoretical model for a comparative study in the 14 European countries covered by the project. A systematic inventory of the research infrastructures and actors in all countries was carried out on the basis of literature reviews and database research. In addition, all country teams conducted in-depth interviews with up to 16 experts each (for further details, see Lauk et al., 2024).

The results show considerable discrepancies between the countries surveyed (for a summary, see Harro-Loit & Eberwein, 2024): For example, the North-Western European countries in the sample (Germany, Sweden and, to a limited extent, Austria) in particular have a lively tradition of problem-oriented communication and media research. In many Eastern European countries, on the other hand, there is still a need to catch up. Common problems and challenges for the capabilities of media monitoring in all European countries are (a) information fragmentation; (b) information overproduction; (c) lack of consistency in studies or interruption of repeated or longitudinal studies; (d) low or uneven information and knowledge quality; (e) missing research competencies; and (f) very little evidence that acquired wisdom is used for media governance. For Mediadecom countries with weak media monitoring capabilities, it is evident that these can become a critical juncture for media system development themselves – for example, when research findings are instrumentalized for political purposes.

### Risks and opportunities of media system transformations in Europe

In addition to the analysis of media monitoring capabilities, the evaluation of empirical studies on specific risks and opportunities of recent media system transformations in Europe was also an important concern of Mediadecom. To this end, the international research consortium evaluated more than 5,600 research publications on relevant issues alongside in-depth interviews with experts, focusing on selected research domains in which the discourse on the opportunities and risks of media change is currently particularly pronounced (see above). Two methods were used to interpret the diverse data: (1) a qualitative meta-analysis of the bibliographic findings and interview transcripts and (2) a comparative fuzzy set analysis of selected basic data (cf. Peruško et al., 2024a). The qualitative analysis reveals a considerable range of factors in all domains examined, which can become either an opportunity or a risk for media system development:

- In the area of media law, it became apparent that solid laws alone are insufficient to ensure freedom of expression and information as prerequisites for deliberative communication. Rather, freedom of expression depends on the implementation of these laws in the national context – a task that the countries examined fulfill to highly different degrees (cf. Psychogiopoulou et al., 2024).
- The study diagnosed a broad spectrum of infrastructures for media ethics discourses in the Mediadecom sample: Some countries – such as Sweden, Germany and Austria – can point to a long history of media self-regulation allowing central institutions such as the national press councils and their codes of ethics to enjoy a comparatively high reputation within the journalistic profession. By contrast, most of the newer EU member states lack this history – with corresponding consequences for media accountability (cf. Kreutler et al., 2024).
- For the research field of journalism, the project identifies common patterns across the countries studied as well as unique trends in particular countries. The general trends include current challenges for media organizations such as the gradual loss of both audiences/users and advertisers, in particular the financing of public media, but also a decreasing job satisfaction owing to changes in professional standards and a deepened commercialization/algorithmization logic and changes in production. In contrast, a large number of risk factors can be identified at the macro, meso and micro levels in the individual countries studied (cf. Berglez et al., 2024).
- The analysis revealed many influences on the quality of deliberative communication in Europe in terms of media usage. The first of the two most important overarching trends was the low willingness to pay for the news, resulting in the risk that quality journalism is accessible only for an increasingly small group of citizens. The second trend was an observed rise in distrust in the news across many studied countries, ascribed to the post-COVID-19 atmosphere, oligarchizing and politization of the media, as well as success of misinformation and disinformation connected to the rise of alternative media (cf. Jansová et al., 2024).
- In the area of media-related competencies, the study illustrates major differences between the 14 Mediadecom countries, both in terms of policies, agents, and evaluation. A fundamental problem is the lack of a generally accepted definition of media literacy, on the basis of which a uniform model for fostering media-related competencies could be developed. Instead, a one-sided focus on digital competencies dominates in most countries, which the study suggests poses a risk to deliberative communication, in that an overly narrow focus on technologies could quickly obscure the importance of media and journalism in democratic societies (cf. Gálik et al., 2024).

Mediadecom's detailed analysis enables researchers to identify significant turning points or critical junctures in the development of media systems for all research domains examined in the period between 2000 and 2020 – some of which depend on the respective country context, but some of which also have transnational relevance. The most important overarching trends include the digital

shift, the development of the Internet, and the proliferation of media platforms – as well as, most recently, the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, many other trends have influenced the countries in the Mediadelcom sample in highly differing ways. This applies, for example, to the major economic crisis of 2008/2009:

*in some of them, new media appeared and some old media perished, and the position of journalists became increasingly precarious. Moreover, the economic crisis had some political ramifications which influenced the situation in the media – the populist turn, particularly in Hungary and Poland. However, political change can also present opportunities, as in the latest turn of the parliamentary election in Poland, where we see (for the moment) a re-democratization with positive influences on the media. (Peruško et al., 2024b, p. 159)*

Such detailed findings were to be systematized with the help of a comparative fuzzy set analysis of selected basic data from all 14 Mediadelcom countries (cf. Vozab et al., 2024). The focus was on the questions of which countries in the sample have a healthy level of deliberative communication and the factors that can contribute to this positive state. The evaluation shows that a majority of the media systems under scrutiny cannot fulfill the goal of promoting deliberative communication. In addition to Sweden, Germany and Austria, only Estonia and Greece belong to the sample of countries in which the contextual factors support the development of deliberative communication. The study also makes it possible to identify specific conditions that enable a high degree of deliberative communication. These include: high democratic quality; strong economic development; the autonomy of public service media; the existence of journalistic codes of ethics; high journalistic skills; and a strong use of ‘legacy media’. However, the possible paths to reach this aim vary greatly from country to country: For example, the existence of a certain condition for deliberative communication can be an important parameter in one media system, but remain ineffective in another. Conversely, risk factors can also have diverse effects across countries. The Mediadelcom analysis thus illustrates once again the importance of taking into account country-specific contexts in comparative media system analysis – another lesson for research into critical junctures in media and communications.

### Scenario-building and recommendations for wisdom-based media governance

Mediadelcom also highlights the relevance of these questions for media managers and policy makers. To this end, the international research consortium has coined the concept of “wisdom-based media governance” (cf. Harro-Loit et al., 2024). According to this concept, only research data that is comprehensibly described, analyzed and applied can have a concrete and measurable social value.

Mediadelcom has illustrated this by translating key findings from the project into a range of scenarios for media system development in Europe (Matthews & Harro-Loit, 2024), which would enable the elaboration of recommendations for media governance in Europe and the participating member states (Mediadelcom, 2023). The project therefore illustrates once more that only those who observe the past can also make well-founded recommendations and forecasts for future trends. Naturally, implementation is the responsibility of actors outside the academic system.

### Concept and contents of the special issue

While the articles collected in this special issue of *medien & zeit* are not a direct result of the research conducted within Mediadelcom, they are related to the project in manifold ways. The issue presents three case studies from differing national contexts, each with its unique approach to examining critical junctures.

The first contribution considers the importance of the historical perspective in the context of media system analyses, which was repeatedly emphasized within Mediadelcom. In her paper “Critical Junctures of Ethnic Media in Austria”, **Yelizaveta Andakulova** provides a long-term analysis regarding the development of ethnic media in Austria during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Her study aims to identify those critical junctures that have significantly influenced the formation and course of ethnic media in Austria. The author describes five turning points that mostly coincide with political changes and, of course, with the digital transformation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In their paper “Elite Continuity and Media Transformations: An Asymmetrical Comparison of Elite Continuity in Albania and Myanmar,” **Melanie Radue** and **Jonila Godole** offer an exploratory look beyond European boundaries. Despite having distinct historical and cultural origins, both nations’ media landscapes have undergone similar transformations. Using Colin Sparks’ concept of ‘elite continuity’, this study examines and contrasts critical junctures in the post-authoritarian media systems of both nations. To investigate the intricate connections among political movements, corporate interests, and changing media landscapes, they combine qualitative research methods with historical contextualization. The authors are able to highlight the ways in which elite continuity manifests itself at pivotal points, shedding light on the long-lasting effects of deeply ingrained power structures. The study expands our understanding of the enduring effects of elites and path dependencies in dynamic media environments.

The authors **Markus Uhlmann**, **Jonathan Kropf**, **Viktoria Horn**, **Claude Draude** and **Jörn Lamla** dedicate their contribution „The Platformization of Media Structures as a Critical Juncture“ to the topic of media platformization. They see the crisis in digital journalism caused by platforms as a critical juncture and, in the spirit of Mediadelcom, advocate seeing not only the risks but also the opportunities of platformization, experimenting

with new possibilities, and reinventing journalism. In addition, the authors focus on the challenges of communicating different values that are relevant in the platformization of media structures, asking how values can be communicated based on 'prices', socio-technical 'design', and the 'cultivation' (promotion) of public negotiation and participation processes. By comparing two German online journalism start-ups and an established digital mainstream publisher, the results show that niche actors like the start-ups tend to be autonomous from the prevailing structural conditions. Although the strategies for conveying values can differ considerably, a shared commitment to values is apparent. In contrast, established actors feel subject to deterministic influences

that hinder the development of lasting value loyalties. Thus, the analysis also sheds light on the role of the socio-technical ecosystem in shaping value mediation and underlines the usefulness of co-validation approaches. In summary, both the Mediadelcom project and the contributions presented in this issue of *medien & zeit* demonstrate the wide range and relevance of questions dealing with critical junctures in the context of media change and its consequences. While many issues remain to be tackled, the collection showcases exemplary research findings from a range of subdisciplines of communication studies that can hopefully stimulate further research in this field. The temporal dimension will prove indispensable for this task.

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