The values we share: Towards an inclusive ethics of dialogic communication

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With the promise of fostering participation, digital media bring along numerous possibilities for democratic processes and the aim of *weaving people together*. At the same time, they may also prompt dysfunctional communication patterns (such as hate speech, trolling, or the spread of mis-/disinformation) and thus become a driver of social polarisation. While the debate about the ethics of journalism has increasingly tackled issues related to participation (e.g., Eberwein, 2022), it remains a challenge to define 'good communication conduct' outside professional environments, and to understand which norms and values are considered as indisputable across countries.

The paper addresses this gap with an *analysis of the role of dialogic communication in ethical codes and guidelines* – not just in the context of journalism, but for all kinds of public communication. Which role do different aspects related to dialogue and participation play in these documents? And which principles of an inclusive ethics of dialogic communication do they uphold? These questions are answered on the basis of a *comparative study involving research partners from eight European countries* within the framework of an ongoing Horizon Europe project.

The study draws on *conceptualisations of media accountability* to identify and categorise different instruments that can nourish an inclusive communication ethics. Following Bertrand (2000), media accountability instruments are understood as "any non-state means of making media responsible towards the public". As indicated by Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004), who differentiate varying frames of accountability, this does not only involve professional stakeholders (such as journalists), but also actors related to the political sphere, the market, and the public. Unlike most previous research on codes of communication, the study specifically focuses on processes of public accountability, which are linked to the media's assignment of maintaining more direct relationships with citizens, in addition to their relationship with the market and the state.

This understanding of inclusive accountability was used to guide a *systematic collection of relevant ethical codes and guidelines for public communication* in the eight countries participating in the project: Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Switzerland. Altogether, the research team was able to identify 435 documents, which formed the corpus for a *comparative content analysis*, combining quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches.

The evaluation shows that the professional and market-related frames of media accountability are clearly dominant in the analysed sample, whereas *the public frame remains marginal* in most of the countries studied. A majority of relevant codes is journalism-focused or targeted at public institutions; documents that are tailored to the particular needs of media users remain an exception. However, the study also makes it possible to identify *a few good-practice cases from different countries* that put aspects related to dialogic communication ethics at the centre. The paper uses these cases as a starting point for a reflection about principles of an inclusive ethics of dialogic communication that will not only enhance the academic discourse about communication and media ethics in the digital age, but also offer valuable suggestions for various communicative practices in democratic societies.

References

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