

From professional mass media to dialogic communication: A focus group analysis on how non-institutional voices shape and evaluate the public discourse

Journalism traditionally holds a central role in shaping public discourse. In today's digital media environment, however, the dynamics have fundamentally shifted, creating a hybrid media system with a diverse array of new media actors and content creators shaping public communication (Chadwick, 2017). In addition to established media and professional journalists, these new actors, ranging from social media influencers and digital activists to vloggers and citizen journalists, now also compete for visibility and public attention. While these new voices can enhance democratic well-being, they can also pose a challenge when shaping information flows and intervening in public discourse. Although there is a general agreement on what good journalism is through professional ethical guidelines, there is no consensus on what good communication conduct is outside of professional journalism. In the increasing hybrid media sphere, scholars suggest developing dialogic communication ethics in which professional actors and other stakeholders agree on a good communication relationship (Browning, 2015).

To move from professional media ethics to dialogic communication ethics, we need to understand the communication between the various media actors, and which aspects provide perspective or are challenged. Therefore, in this qualitative study, we aim to explore by which actors, beyond the professional media, the public discourse is shaped and how this discourse is evaluated by the actors involved. Our study is part of the larger EU-funded research project Diacomet, aiming to develop Principles of Good Communication Conduct (PGC) and an inclusive model of accountability mechanisms in eight European countries: Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Switzerland.

In this study, focused on the Netherlands, we conducted eight focus groups with 7-11 participants, a total of 60 participants. We took the attention economy theory (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Webster, 2014) as a starting point to establish four analytical categories to create a diverse sample of non-professional media actors. Participants were selected on their ability to attract public attention: 1) *Attention Magnets*: Individuals who easily capture public attention in the news media and on social media platforms (e.g., celebrities and social media influencers). 2) *Attention Hackers*:

Individuals who use their media expertise and knowledge of algorithms to disrupt traditional media processes (e.g., activist groups and counter-media outlets. 3) *Attention Workers*: Individuals engaged in content creation who are distanced from professional journalism (e.g., citizen journalists, podcasters, and alternative media). 4) *Attention-Deprived*: Individuals whose interests receive minimal or no public attention and often feel excluded from public discourse. The focus group discussions were conducted around three specific cases in the Netherlands where issues arose in public communication: the decades of gas extraction in the Groningen region, the housing shortage in several neighborhoods of Rotterdam, and the consequences of the national student loan system.

Although the cases we examined are diverse, our preliminary results indicate that public discourse in the Netherlands involves a wide range of actors, with not only established institutional players (e.g., media outlets and government bodies) but increasingly new non-institutional voices (e.g., social media influencers and grassroots organizations) shaping public discourse. Our findings reveal that there is a disconnect between institutional actors and other stakeholders in the public discourse regarding ‘good communication’. The actors perceive a mutual distrust as a significant barrier to achieve equitable dialogue. Consequently, many actors take the initiative to create their own channels, such as grassroots organizations, social media groups, and civic initiatives, to stay informed and share information with the broader society. The public is developing its own methods to promote dialogue, however without clear ethical guidelines on what fosters dialogic communication.

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