

DIACOMET

„Fostering capacity building for civic resilience and participation: Dialogic communication ethics and accountability“

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Summary

This report, focusing on the case of Austria is one of eight country-specific studies in the Deliverable D3.3 presenting the results of focus group discussions conducted as part of Work Package 3 (WP3) of the Horizon Europe project *DIACOMET – Fostering Capacity Building for Civic Resilience and Participation: Dialogic Communication Ethics and Accountability*.

In total, 87 focus group discussions were held across Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Switzerland. Over 500 participants took part in these discussions, reflecting on the ethics of public communication and the media environment in their respective countries. The findings are presented in national reports, each prepared independently by the respective country team.

This report examines how civil society actors in Austria perceive and navigate the current communicative space. It starts with outlining Austria's contemporary media environment and public communication landscape, highlighting systemic challenges, ethical tensions and evolving public expectations. The empirical study draws from qualitative analysis of 11 focus group discussions conducted between April and December 2024.

In this study, the participants expressed concern over the dominance of crisis-driven, adversarial news reporting and the erosion of public trust in both legacy and digital media. The rise of attention-based content strategies, often driven by financial sustainability, was seen to compromise journalistic ethics and undermine the quality of public discourse.

It was argued in the focus groups that public communication in Austria is increasingly plagued by polarisation, misinformation and emotionalisation – particularly on social media platforms. They noted that algorithms amplify outrage and disinformation, while marginalised voices struggle for public visibility. With regard to public participation, ethical concerns pertained to the balance between desired public attention and harm prevention, especially in online spaces marked by hostility and hate speech.

The report also highlights tensions between inclusivity and accessibility, particularly in debates over gender-sensitive language and representation of minorities. While inclusivity was widely valued, some participants feared that the population would be disconnected from each other due to heavily politicised public communication, triggered by significantly hostile narratives against minorities from the extreme-right politics. Similarly, the vagueness of blending of professional roles – such as that of journalists and activists – raised questions about proper ethics in public communication.

Despite widespread disenchantment, participants expressed hope for more participatory, dialogical models of communication. Media literacy was seen as essential for bolstering democratic resilience, though current policy efforts were viewed as insufficient, as they seemed to serve poorly the older and marginalised population. Calls for dialogue-based communication formats, stronger regulation of digital platforms and greater transparency in algorithmic governance were proposed to enhance ethical oversight in an increasingly opaque media ecosystem.

In sum, the report reveals a media and communication environment under strain, where ethical responsibilities are contested and democratic ideals are challenged by structural inequalities, political interference and technological disruption.

Theoretical Background

A shared research framework was developed collaboratively by the Work Package leader Tampere University (TAU) and national research teams. It draws on research into the hybrid media environment (Chadwick 2017) and the attention economy (Davenport and Beck 2001; Webster 2014; Klinger and Svensson 2016). These approaches highlight that the pursuit and commodification of attention have become key logic to contemporary public communication, shaping the dynamics of information dissemination and participation in digital spaces.

In today's hybrid media environment, where public attention functions as a scarce and unequally distributed resource (Citton 2017), the competition for public visibility has markedly intensified. While some actors can convert attention into new forms of discursive influence and symbolic power, others encounter increasing limitations in their opportunities to participate in public debate or policymaking. The distribution of attention is therefore an ethical issue in itself (Bombaerts *et al.* 2024), calling for critical reflection on how different groups and their perspectives are represented in – or excluded from – public discourse.

Beyond redistributing power, the attention economy also impacts the quality of public discourse. Since visibility is often achieved through emotional intensity or disruption, actors may be incentivised to adopt extreme or performative strategies. These dynamics are further reinforced by algorithmic environments, which systematically amplify content that evokes strong emotional reactions (Papacharissi 2021; Phillips 2018; Phillips and Milner 2021). This often includes aggressive or hostile rhetoric, trolling, harassment and the spread of misinformation – all of which contribute to growing mistrust and cynicism in society (Persily and Tucker 2020; Rogers 2024). As a result, conditions for dialogic communication are eroded, weakening empathy and citizens' capacity for meaningful engagement.

While grounded in theory, the framework also had practical value for empirical research. The concept of attention capital (Franck 2011, 2019) enabled the identification of analytical actor categories operating on the periphery of journalism and professional communication (Eldridge 2018; Hanusch and Löhmann 2022), occupying different positions within the attention economy and possessing diverse resources, strategies, or means for public participation:

1. **Attention Magnets** – Individuals or groups with high public visibility (e.g. influencers, celebrities, politicians)
2. **Attention Workers** – Content creators competing for epistemic authority without institutional status. (e.g. podcasters, citizen journalists, journalism students)
3. **Attention Hackers** – Actors who strategically manipulate visibility, often from the fringes. (e.g. activists, counter-media outlets)
4. **Attention-Deprived** – Marginalised groups struggling to attain public attention. (e.g. ethnic minorities, young people, older people)

While seeking correspondence with analytical categories and real actors and social groups in each participating country, the research teams were encouraged to identify locally

relevant cases that had yielded public debate on communication ethics. This opened two strategies for the recruitment of participants in the focus groups. In the “intra-category” approach, focus groups discussions were held with participants from one actor category (for instance, “Attention Workers”). In the case approach, participants representing two or more actor categories were brought together in a single session to discuss an issue of shared interest.

A Method

Focus group discussions followed a qualitative research tradition, emphasising participants’ lived experiences and subjective perspectives. They were conducted using the dialogue method developed by the *Timeout Foundation*, either in person or online. Timeout is a non-profit organisation established by the *Finnish Innovation Fund (Sitra)*, with the aim of fostering constructive public dialogue. The method promotes respectful and inclusive conversation by encouraging listening, reflection and experience-sharing rather than argument or debate (Heikka 2018).

The analysis adopted an inductive approach and was carried out using thematic analysis, a widely used and flexible method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning in qualitative data. Thematic analysis is well suited for examining how participants perceive their environment, articulate their experiences and construct social meaning – making it an appropriate tool for addressing the open-ended and ethically nuanced questions such as those addressed in WP3. The process of meaning-making typically unfolded organically from *bottom-up*, with participants contributing to the development of analytical categories. In sociological terms, this represents *emic* approach (Alasuutari 2010), in contrast to *etic* approaches, in which analytical categories are predetermined and applied *top-down* to the data.

This shared methodological framework ensured overall coherence across country reports while still allowing teams to adapt it to national contexts. In section 2, each research team will explain their methodological strategies in more detail.

Analytical Focus and Structure of the Report

The analysis in WP3 is guided by a shared set of research questions designed to explore how non-professional or peripheral actors perceive communication ethics:

RQ1. How do participants describe and evaluate current hybrid media environment?

RQ2. How do they describe and assess the state of public communication in relation to the policies that matter to them?

RQ3. How do participants define and prioritise ethical principles in public communication and whom do they consider responsible for upholding or institutionalising these principles?

These questions reflect the project's interest in the ethical concerns, tensions and contradictions encountered by non-professional actors in today's communication environment. They aim to shed light on what the participants in the focus groups say about communication ethics and how they understand the contexts of their arguments, concerns and experiences. Some of the questions addressed in this Work Package and the DIACOMET project on the whole, go beyond the themes analysed in the country reports. For instance, these reports do not include comparative analysis across countries.

All national reports follow a shared structure. The Introduction section provides a brief overview of the national context. This is followed by a description of how the research team recruited participants, conducted focus group discussions and analysed the data produced in the discussions. The empirical findings are presented in three main sections: the first explores participants' views on *media environment*; the second focuses on their reflections of *public communication* and the third examines their perspectives to *ethical issues*, values and responsibilities. The conclusion summarises key ethical tensions and challenges identified in each national context. An annex at the end of the report provides information about the composition of the focus groups.

All quotations from the focus group discussions used in this report are pseudonymised. Pseudonymisation was carried out manually and deterministically to ensure confidentiality, with each pseudonym used consistently. A context-sensitive approach was adopted to preserve the cultural and social nuances of the data while maintaining narrative coherence.

1. Introduction to the Country Report on AUSTRIA

This report presents the findings from focus group discussions conducted in Austria as part of Work Package 3 (WP3) of the DIACOMET project. The primary objective is to reconstruct and critically assess current issues in communication ethics that underpin media-mediated and public communication in Austria.

WP3 aims to clarify the changing nature of public discourse in a hybrid media landscape that is marked by accessibility and engagement. This goal was systematically addressed by the focus group discussions, which specifically looked into how increased competition for public attention, alongside with the intensification of emotionally charged contents and the dissemination of unverified information has affected conceptions of what counts as ethically acceptable public discourse.

Examining the impact of non-institutional media actors in the public domain is another objective of WP3, as this aspect has historically gotten less analytical attention than professional journalists. The study aims at producing empirical insights that directly support the work package's goals of mapping and comprehending the ethical issues arising in today's diverse communication environment.

Key Aspects of the Austrian Political and Media Environment

Austria is a small, German-speaking country in Central Europe with a population of approximately 9.2 million as of January 2025, including two million residents in Vienna. The nation is marked by significant diversity, with 27% of its population having a migrant background – primarily from former Yugoslavia, followed by groups from Germany, Romania and Turkey (Statistik Austria 2024, 24f). Socioeconomic indicators reveal an average age slightly over 43 years, a mean gross annual income of €51,500 for full-time employees (2023), limited social mobility and a notably high gender pay gap of 18.3% compared to almost all other European Union countries (Eurostat 2025).

Politically, Austria is characterised as a mature liberal democracy historically dominated by the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). In recent decades, smaller parties such as the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), the Green Party and the liberal NEOs (The New Austria and Liberal Forum) have gained more prominence and disrupting traditional coalition dynamics in politics. Following the most recent National Council elections in 2024, a three-party coalition consisting of the ÖVP (26.3%), SPÖ (21.1%) and NEOS (9.1%) came to power and has governed since. Although the right-wing FPÖ gained the largest share of the vote with 28.8%, it was unable to secure a coalition partner. As a result, it forms the parliamentary opposition alongside the Green Party, which received 8.2%. Voter turnout stood at 77.7%.

The media landscape is predominantly shaped by the public service broadcaster ORF and the widely circulated newspaper 'Kronen Zeitung', with private commercial broadcasting emerging only after regulatory changes that followed a European Court of Human Rights

decision in 2001. Additionally, German public and private broadcasters play a major role in Austria's media landscape, collectively capturing around 43% of Austria's TV market share. Media ownership outside the capital city of Vienna is highly concentrated and civil society media initiatives have had limited influence on public deliberation (Grünangerl, Trappel and Tomaz 2021, 95f).

Austria's politically environment mirrors broader European trends of political polarisation and fragmentation. This dynamic, combined with concentrated media ownership and a limited influence of civil society media, provides a fertile ground for examining how current communication practices and techniques challenge conventional norms of public discourse. Ultimately, the Austrian case contributes to a deeper understanding of how regulatory frameworks, market pressures and political shifts interact to shape communication ethics in modern public communication.

The Scope of the Report

This report focuses on analysing communication ethics within the landscape of public communication by exploring the perspectives and experiences of professional and non-professional communication players through qualitative group discussions. Specifically, the study aims to uncover ethical challenges and dilemmas that arise in the mediation of public communication in Austria. The scope of the research is limited to discussions with both media professionals and non-professional participants who are actively engaged in the public discourse.

The focus group discussions were deliberately structured to examine the interplay between traditional media practices and emerging digital communication dynamics. Issues such as the spread of unverified information, boundary work, and defining appropriate role for self-regulation in communication were central to the discussions. It is important to note that while the study considers relevant theoretical frameworks and policy contexts, it does not attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of the entire Austrian media system or its regulatory evolution.

By focusing on group discussions, this report captures in-depth qualitative insights rather than statistical generalisations, contributing a nuanced understanding of how communication ethics are negotiated and contested in contemporary public communication.

2. Research Setting: Applying the Framework

The recruitment process was designed for assembling a diverse sample of participants capable of reflecting a wide range of perspectives on public communication, media discourse, and social representation. We aimed to conduct multiple focus group discussions with approximately 6–10 participants each, targeting a total of 50–70 participants overall. We specifically sought out voices that are typically underrepresented or marginalised in public discourse, including migrants, younger and older citizens with limited access to mainstream media and actors in precarious professional or political positions. At the same time, we also included participants from institutional as well as media backgrounds to encourage a multi-actor dialogue.

Our recruitment strategy employed a combined category-based and case-based approach. In the category-based strategy we first distinguished institutional actors, grassroots activists, communicators, and observers, and then assessed them against their public visibility (“attention capital”) and potential vulnerabilities – e.g., individuals whose voices are ignored, selectively heard, or actively suppressed.

The case-based approach was driven by topic-specific relevance. Over the course of several discussion rounds, we identified relevant public debates and selected those that provided relevant talking points to focus groups. These included topics such as labour, migration, and environment policies (for the specific topics see annex). This approach allowed for a targeted exploration of issues with significant public impact, ensuring both depth and relevance in the discussions.

Actors were then contacted for potential participation, contingent upon their relevance and availability. The recruitment process was often challenging, as contact information for institutional actors and NGOs was frequently limited to generic email addresses and contact forms, which made it difficult to reach potential participants in person. Repeated outreach attempts were often required. For those individuals interested in principle, the lack of monetary reward for the time spent engaging was another obstacle for participation. In some cases, participants declined to attend due to personal risks involved – e.g., one organisation monitoring right-wing extremism cited frequent threats as a reason to abstain from involvement, despite multiple reassurances about data protection and anonymity.

Such conditions, together with other impromptu cancellations due to illness or scheduling difficulties, were the reason why two discussions were held with a mere five participants and one even with no more than three. While these drawbacks may have limited the diversity of perspectives, they allowed for more in-depth talks and a deeper exploration of ethical concerns in the somewhat more intimate atmosphere.

Templates provided by the Finnish coordination team, including the “Research Note for Participants” and “Consent Form,” proved highly valuable in standardising communication and ensuring ethical compliance. The participants were not required to make any specific thematic preparations for the interviews.

Cultural Insights from Recruitment

The recruitment phase yielded valuable insights into societal attitudes towards public communication and academic research. While some individuals, particularly from established institutions in urban centres, expressed a high level of trust in the academic world and were eager to contribute, others – especially those from marginalised or precarious backgrounds – were more hesitant.

These hesitations often stemmed from previous experiences of exclusion or instrumentalisation. Several participants voiced concern that their input would be “collected” but not acted upon – reflecting a broader scepticism about academic projects' accessibility and societal impact. This underscores the importance of ongoing communication and relationship-building with communities whose participation in democratic discourse cannot be taken for granted.

Preliminary individual conversations via phone or email played an essential ethical role, particularly in identifying boundaries of personal disclosure and navigating sensitive background information that would not be appropriate for group settings.

The demographic analysis shows a concentration of participants with higher education and middle age, though efforts were made to also include younger adults, people with lower formal education and individuals from outside Vienna. Ethnic diversity was present, though detailed categorisation was not conducted to avoid unnecessary essentialisation.

Each group discussion commenced with a concise overview of the study's objectives, procedural framework and the pseudonymisation protocol to ensure participant confidentiality. Following this introduction, the conversation transitioned to the central topic, initiated by the opening prompt: “Tell me about events or experiences that have influenced how you think about the topic.”

Participants were given a few minutes to reflect individually before the first round of sharing began. During this initial round, contributions were made in a self-determined order, allowing participants to speak freely. Beyond this round, no formal speaking order was imposed. Instead, the moderator maintained an inclusive environment by actively encouraging contributions from individuals who appeared hesitant to speak.

The overarching aim was to foster a dynamic and participant-led dialogue, with minimal moderator intervention. Moderator involvement was limited to specific circumstances, such as resolving interpersonal tensions, redirecting discussions that had strayed significantly from the topic, or posing clarifying questions when necessary.

Guiding questions were drawn from a discussion handbook developed by the Finnish research team and were employed selectively to support the flow of conversation when appropriate.

Most participants demonstrated a strong interest in the subject matter and a clear willingness to reflect on issues of public discourse and communication. Following an initial session in which participants struggled to focus on communication rather than content, subsequent groups were briefed more explicitly. This significantly improved the quality and relevance of the discussions.

The overall atmosphere during the focus groups was constructive and respectful. The Timeout Foundation's training and facilitation guidelines proved useful for maintaining the focus and resolving occasional conflicts between participants. In the few cases where tensions arose – e.g., when an employment office representative and a small NGO activist clashed over the representation of migrant labour; or rather stressful disputes brought on by staff members of competing media companies – the moderators were able to steer the discussion toward constructive resolution. Remarks such as acknowledging the existence of a problem while clarifying that the focus group discussion was not the appropriate setting for resolving were sometimes necessary and effective.

Small groups with 6–8 participants were found to be optimal for deep discussion. Although one group had only three participants due to last-minute cancellations, the resulting conversation was particularly intimate and detailed. Homogeneous groups often led to deeper dialogue, while heterogeneous groups surfaced more ethical tensions on contested topics. Homogeneous groups tended to delve deeply into technical details. In such instances, targeted moderation on the part of the interviewers was necessary to redirect the focus toward the overarching objective of the dialogue.

Data Processing and Ethical Considerations

All focus groups were conducted online, which allowed for high-quality automatic transcription. The transcript editing and anonymisation process was smooth. Return rates for consent forms were moderate and sometimes required several follow-up questions for collection.

The empirical process of coding in this study was initiated with the identification and establishment of three core themes: “Media Environment”, “Public Communication” and “Ethics and Responsibilities”. These topics were chosen based on the focal areas prepared for the joint DIACOMET workshops, which were led by the Work Package leader team.

The coding process began with a clear framework, shaped by the discussions in the workshops. The corpus was distinguished into three thematic areas and analysed separately. In the course of coding process, new coding categories and subcodes were developed depending on the findings.

Given the qualitative nature of the study, it was essential to involve a collaborative and iterative process to maintain rigour and consistency in the analysis. As a result, the team of researchers, consisting of the three authors of the report, was responsible for coding different parts of the group discussions. The discussions were then divided among the team members, with each researcher assigned a subset of the material. This division of labour

allowed for a more efficient coding process while ensuring that diverse perspectives were considered in the analysis.

To uphold the integrity of the qualitative approach, the Austrian research team convened on a weekly basis to review and discuss the evolving coding process. These regular meetings played a critical role in ensuring consistency across the coding procedure, as they provided an opportunity for team members to compare and reconcile their individual coding results. During these meetings, potential ambiguities or disagreements were addressed and the codes were refined as necessary.

By revisiting and adapting the codes in response to new insights, the team was able to enhance the accuracy and relevance of the final coding scheme. This process also allowed for the incorporation of feedback and the refinement of subcodes, ensuring that the final coding system closely reflected the nuanced dynamics of the empirical data.

In summary, the empirical process of coding using MAXQDA was shaped by the foundational discussions from the DIACOMET workshops, which provided clear and focused themes for analysis. The team's collaborative and iterative approach ensured that the coding remained flexible and aligned with the research goals. Through regular discussions and code adjustments, the Austrian research team was able to refine the codes and enhance the depth of the qualitative analysis, ultimately providing a robust framework for understanding the complex interactions between media, communication and ethics.

3. Experiencing the Media Environment

The Austrian media system is marked by several significant challenges that collectively pose risks to democratic processes. One of the most pressing concerns is the high concentration of media ownership, with audience and ownership shares in various media sectors – television, radio and newspapers – ranging between 71% and 91%, indicating a dangerously centralised media market (Seethaler and Beaufort 2021, 21). This high concentration, particularly in family-owned enterprises, leads to a lack of media diversity and fosters tabloidisation, which is generally regarded detrimental to democratic ideals of a pluralistic media environment.

Additionally, Austria's small media market and linguistic proximity to Germany create a persistent risk of foreign takeovers, which could further erode domestic control over the media (Puppis 2009, 11). Despite legal protections for journalistic independence, ownership structures often limit actual press freedom (Grünangerl, Trappel and Tomaz 2021, 130). Furthermore, Austrian journalism has been found to be deficient in its promotion of deliberative discourse, as it frequently lacks substantive contextualisation and does not effectively encourage citizen engagement through the cultivation of constructive emotional expressions (Riedl 2024, 364).

The media regulatory environment is further complicated by a close and sometimes opaque ties between politicians and journalists. Political instrumentalisation, while rarely openly discussed by media professionals, has arguably intensified and manifests itself through politicians networking with ideologically aligned journalists, intimidation and strategic media manipulation (Maurer and Beiler 2018, 2036). These practices tend to compromise journalistic autonomy and contribute to a media climate where democratic norms are threatened (Kaltenbrunner 2021). According to Reporters Without Borders, persistent political attempts to influence media – ranging from inappropriate editorial visits to suspected misuse of public funds for favourable coverage – underscore the fragility of Austria's press freedom (RSF 2025).

In terms of media consumption, Austria exhibits a paradoxical blend of resilience and vulnerability. The consumption of traditional media, especially television and radio, remain high, due to the late deregulation of the broadcasting sector and the cultural prominence of daily newspapers and freesheets. Social media use is on the rise but still below international averages (Gadringer *et al.* 2025, 17; Kaltenbrunner *et al.* 2020, 43). While this stability helps to sustain the role of news journalism in Austria, it has delayed digitalisation of journalism rendering Austrian media organisations less responsive technological innovations and global changes.

Ethnic and alternative media have gained traction through digital platforms, allowing minority groups to publish and share contents more easily and widely than before. While public broadcaster ORF and community radio have long provided some space for minority voices, new technologies now offer greater visibility and access (Falböck and Schwarzenegger 2019). A range of 'alternative' media outlets classifies as right-wing extremist publications are present in Austria, although their overall reach remains limited (Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstands 2025, 119). Nonetheless, the existence of close personal connections with high-ranking members of the FPÖ (Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstands 2025, 121), is worth of noting.

Current debates in Austria's media landscape focus on deteriorating conditions for journalists. Political advertising, often unregulated and excessive, has become a tool for influence. Meanwhile, the number of journalists working independently is decreasing and hostile behaviour towards journalists – particularly by right-wing political actors – has intensified. These behaviours include verbal abuse, physical attacks at political events and restrictions on journalistic freedom at demonstrations (Vinatzer *et al.* 2024). Despite gains in education and gender parity, Austria's media environment remains under significant pressure, requiring urgent attention to protect journalistic independence and democratic integrity.

Austria's media landscape has faced growing scrutiny over political influence and press freedom, with the private media as well as PSM (ORF, 'Österreichischer Rundfunk', Austrian broadcasting), often accused of biased reporting and alleged editorial sway. The 2021 "Inseratenaffäre" scandal exposed how state-funded advertisements were used to secure favourable media coverage, raising concerns about journalistic integrity. In 2022, reports of

government exclusion of critical journalists from political events further fuelled fears of press suppression. The 2023 closure of the 1703 founded newspaper 'Wiener Zeitung' ended centuries-long print legacy and cut most of its staff, sparking criticism over media concentration and the future of state-supported journalism in Austria.

Participants' view on the Media Environment

This chapter examines how participants perceive and experience the contemporary media landscape, with a focus on both legacy and digital platforms. Their reflections reveal a media environment marked by fragmentation, economic pressure, and political influence. The analysis is structured around several key themes: diversity in voices and formats, the entanglement of journalism with political and economic interests and the shifting dynamics of visibility, power and participation. Participants consistently expressed concern about the declining quality of information, the erosion of trust in journalistic institutions and the growing influence of attention-based logics that prioritise financial gain over complexity.

In addition to criticisms of traditional media, the chapter also addresses perceptions of social media and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. These are seen as reshaping the boundaries of who can speak publicly, how content circulates and what counts as credible or ethical communication. Across these diverse discussions, a common thread emerges: the tension between democratic ideals of a well-informed, pluralistic public sphere and the structural conditions that increasingly undermine them. The chapter thus situates participants' insights within a broader reflection on the role of media in shaping public knowledge, discourse and societal cohesion. In the conclusion of the Media Environment chapter, the results are assessed with a specific focus on the actor categories.

What was said about the broad term 'The Media' in the group discussions can be roughly divided into the topics "Media Pluralism and Pluralism of Opinions" and "Economic and Political Dependencies". The predominantly negative portrayals of the media, which are deemed particularly pertinent due to their substantial social significance, are noteworthy.

Media Pluralism and Pluralism of Opinions

Participants highlighted a lack of diversity in voices and formats, reinforcing polarised discourse. Fragmented media landscapes, dominated by repetitive narratives and rising right-wing influence, hinder constructive dialogue and inclusive engagement, fostering competition over collaboration in public communication.

Efforts to reach audiences are limited by choices in media partnerships. The small and concentrated nature of Austria's media landscape hinders opportunities for collaboration,

as the range of media options is narrow, with only a few dominant organisations overseeing the production and dissemination of news. In certain situations, people can "choose to consume quality media, which reach fewer people, or with tabloids, which have a larger circulation" (Attention Magnet/Worker, media persona). However, the options are still restricted to a small number of the capital's media outlets.

One of the main concerns, however, is the notable lack of diversity, in terms of content, formats and voices. Established media outlets consistently invite the same individuals, contributing to a repetitive, monotone and narrow discourse and resulting in a hesitance to share information beyond the usual circle of people, to cooperate and the dominance of two polarised opinions, often contributing to a 'battle for attention' rather than meaningful exchange. Participants were concerned that media discourse is becoming increasingly fragmented and constrained, inhibiting constructive dialogue and limiting broader public engagement.

"It's very much a case of keeping to yourself and fighting for attention. Public service media [PSM] only invites PSM people. TV channels swim in their own pond and so that the fronts are hardening. And politics stays out of it. So, what I actually miss is constructive exchanges and discussions."
Attention Hacker, counter media outlet journalist

In discussions related to such issues, participants criticised the absence of constructive and creative formats in the media. What they observed instead was a dominant 'culture of dispute' that extends into comment sections, often polarising rather than fostering nuanced dialogue.

"There are many possible options for how two groups of people or groups with different beliefs might discuss together. I simply miss the media's creativity, which only would not focus on dispute but rather on solutions. News organisations provide role models for all the people. If they continue inciting this culture of dispute citizens will do the same on their computers at home."
Attention Hacker, gender/sexual minority activist

Another shared concern pertains to identifiable and expanding influence and growing number of right-wing media and editorial offices. The participants were concerned of that while operating independently in the media market, the right-wing channels may be able to attract permanent and loyal audiences.

"Right-wing media and right-wing performers have grown stronger, as they have acquired ownership of media outlets and organisations."
Attention Hacker, alternative media journalist

One such example is the television station 'Alternatives Unabhängiges Fernsehen' (AUF1), (Alternative Independent Television), which was founded in 2021 and has become one of the right-wing extremist media outlets with the widest audience reach in the German-speaking countries. The station is based in the city of Linz, the capital of the federal state Upper Austria.

"It's deeply concerning that the editor-in-chief of AUF1 was formerly a neo-Nazi and marched alongside neo-Nazis. Given that the outlet's reach is around 300,000 followers on Telegram, it becomes clear that this is far from

insignificant."

Attention Worker, journalism student

Criticism of such right-wing media platforms as well as formats focusing on dispute include their perpetuation of discriminatory views, often masked by the pretence of 'plurality of opinions', however, processes of contextualisation are lacking.

Economic and Political Dependencies

Dynamics that result in a paucity of diversity are often associated with economic pressures in the media sector. Due to constrained financial resources editorial offices tend to prioritise models that are attention-based or attention-oriented over those that aim at in-depth coverage of important social issues. This refers particularly to mainstream news media.

Participants noted that meaningful and in-depth content tends to attract fewer clicks. This arguably leads to a situation in which those media outlets that are dependent on advertising revenue prioritise sensational or polarising content to drive engagement. Participants were also sceptical about a focus on digital innovations in journalism, citing poorly thought-out innovative concepts as a marketing strategy that lowered rather than elevated journalistic standards.

Innovation is just a buzzword for marketing. The content component is lost – because at the end clicks and attention are more important to news organisations than a 'good story' Attention Worker, former journalist

Along with the financial justification for soliciting for attention from audiences political instrumentalisation was also noted here. The insecurity of funding highlights the risk of influence being exerted on journalism. Participants recalled, for instance, the statement made by Wolfgang Sobotka (ÖVP), President of the National Council, on political advertising in the media: "There is a counter-deal for every advertisement."

Despite that perfect solutions for ensuring economic sustainability of media while maintaining the autonomy of journalism were not proposed, the participants regarded the present circumstances as unsatisfactory. Given that market model is not democratic the question could be "*democratically backed financing for the media that would not mean state intervention*" (Attention Worker, expert).

Participants were also concerned about the role of political influence on media, through financing measures, in private media and public broadcasting. While recognising the need for public funding to sustain quality journalism, participants expressed unease about the potential for financial control to be used as a lever of influence.

„After all, financing ultimately shapes the media [...]. So, political or governmental influence has quite a lot of leverage here.“

Attention Magnet, media persona

Some suggested that the supposed independence of publicly funded media was a “type of self-deception”, especially in the face of possible future shifts toward right-wing governance.

“The relevance of the news media is dwindling daily and with it, its economic foundation. Meanwhile, the state has a grip of all media. Let's assume that we would have a right-wing government from the next autumn, in whatever constellation, then we will see what will happen. The so-called ‘independence from the state’ with having the state financing the media is a type of self-deception that we all like cultivating”

Attention Magnet, media persona

Nonetheless, a shortage of long-term funding for high-quality media was noted, the participants discussed an alternative that is opened through that state media finance for new media projects. Examples such as crowdsourcing, foundation money or direct sponsoring from individual users to podcasters were proposed. Even though the sustainability of such projects is unclear, an air of optimism was attached to them.

Legacy Media and Journalistic Work Practices

Journalistic working methods and observations on how journalistic contents have developed were discussed. Similarly to the chapter above, the participants' views on the subject were strikingly gloomy.

The discussion of journalistic practices highlighted significant concerns regarding fact-checking procedures within media organisations. Participants reported that such verification processes are frequently inadequate, presumably due to the limited resources available for journalists. Time constraints inherent in the news production were critically examined, revealing a shift towards what are referred to as “speed skills”-structures aimed at maximising rapid publication. This acceleration in news cycles, driven by competitive pressures to be the first to report breaking news, was associated with a measurable decline

in content quality and journalistic rigor. Due to the immense time pressure, verification methods are perceived as incompatible and unfeasible.

“You take a message and simply disseminate it. There is no time to check, double-check and triple-check – that just doesn't happen.”

Attention Worker, expert

This phenomenon is intricately intertwined with the increasingly precarious financial circumstances of journalists, a tendency that has been exacerbated by the global financial crisis that began in 2008, especially for the local press.

"I work for the local council. Before 2008, journalists used to do check-ups and ask us to confirm or clarify the facts. They also kept an eye on what the opposing side was doing. After the economic crisis in 2008 it stopped. They cut the regional papers. And to be honest with you, it's not uncommon for me to send a one-page press release to the local press with a photo and expect it to be printed exactly as it was. With no changes.

Attention Worker, local politician

In some local newsrooms, the absence of verification practices has become entrenched, raising serious concerns about the lack of systematic fact-checking.

"I work in public relations, or rather, in a marketing office to a town. That means I'm in touch with the regional media and local politics every day. But honestly, fact-checking newspaper reports by journalists, it's possible that it doesn't even happen anymore."

Attention Magnet, city manager

Before the media's financial situation became increasingly strained, journalistic practices were characterised by a more critical engagement with information sources, including the systematic incorporation of competing media perspectives into the journalistic process (Attention Worker, expert). Conversely, a retired journalist freelancer meanwhile involved in a small advocacy initiative underscores the paramount importance of meticulous fact-checking procedures:

"As journalist, this is an ethical and a moral question for me. I don't write just anything that I simply take from the internet, or find accidentally online, or that is passed on to me. I verify everything and if possible, directly through human contact."

Attention-Deprived, advocacy organisation

With regard to the scope of journalistic content, a key challenge lies in the limited online traction of long-form, in-depth reporting. While certain types of content achieve high click-through rates and perform well on algorithmic audience metrics systems, this does not necessarily correlate with investigative or substantively rich journalism. The visibility of content is highly contingent on algorithmic preferences, where specific narratives are amplified and recirculated. This often results in a significant divergence between content that holds public relevance – information that citizens arguably ought to know – and the contents that gains widespread attention i.e. "information that consumers want".

"I know from several other newspapers that stories about the Royalty generate extremely high click rates, whereas coverage of parliamentary investigative committees tends to attract significantly less attention. This leads me to ask, whether the former truly holds such democratic value for Austria – whether it really matters where Princess Kate is right now."

Attention Magnet, counter media outlet journalist

The strong dependence on clicks distorts journalistic practices in how topics are selected and presented. Journalists tend to focus on crafting clickbait headlines that pursue high click-through rates, often at the expense of quality content. This reflects a form of double standard at editorial offices.

"In an editorial meeting, someone might read out which story got the most clicks [...], then they always add: 'But clicks aren't that important for us,' – but we all know they surely are."

Attention Worker, former journalist

Journalistic Objectivity

One fundamental challenge in journalism was discussed in a controversial way: the tension between maintaining objectivity in reporting and expressing personal opinion. Even within the same category of actors, the issue of professional identity – namely, whether journalists are eligible to serve as activists – was raised. From one perspective, the sense of powerlessness experienced in society seemed to demand active public resistance. For some participants this mindset reflected a sense of political responsibility.

"We bear a significant political responsibility to remain resistant – to not get involved in the trivialisation of issues or in anticipatory obedience, which, as we know, does happen among some journalists."

Attention Hacker, alternative media journalist

This contrasts with the approach of strictly fact-based reporting, which supposedly does not allow for expressing opinions.

"It is about reporting facts and doing so based on science, not my own opinion." Attention Hacker, spokesperson

Furthermore, emotional detachment is deemed fundamentally unattainable when the identities of journalists and activists are merged, and this conflation is viewed as an impediment to public discourse.

"I understand the emotional desire to be an activist while also wanting to engage in journalism. However, I believe these two roles are incompatible and should not be conflated. There is a fundamental contradiction here. It undermines the integrity of the debate. No one, including myself, can report objectively on an issue while simultaneously being personally involved in it."

Attention Magnet, spokesperson

Journalistic Care

Finally, the discussion of journalistic working methods reveals the subject of journalistic care. Mainly the Attention Workers group experienced superficial to negligent reporting and encroaching journalistic inquiries, which can have serious consequences and becomes clear from the example of the anonymity of women who have experienced violence.

"We have clients whose stories are in the media. Some of them were anonymised but still identifiable to those who know them. And that is truly a horror experience for these women. I mean, their colleagues, family members, and friends, can recognise them in cases of sexual violence; 'Oh, you're the woman who was raped'. It's awful! The media always asks us to get in touch with those affected. I'd love to see the media stop asking that. Sometimes women want to speak to the media on their own. We'll go with them and help them out. But we do make it clear that it rarely ends well. But if a woman says yes anyway, you've got to respect her decision. If that happens, we'll get the media involved." Attention Worker/Attention-Deprived, NGO staff member

While tabloid outlets are frequently depicted as the primary culprit, a similar disregard for journalistic integrity has also been observed from more reputable media outlets. Participants stated that journalists either did not recognise or understand the problem, or they failed to deal with it sensitively.

The example of women's protection and the media's depiction of violent assaults in relation to racist reporting highlights the significant impact that legacy media and general media attention continue to play. For example, if offenders are not from Austria, their nationalities are nearly always disclosed. As a result, women who have been victims of abuse do not seek help because they assume the facilities are solely for women harmed by non-autochthonous men (Attention-Deprived, counselling centre). This implies that because the public discourse is so skewed, victimised women might not feel addressed even when journalists mention violence prevention initiatives. Journalistic practices,

without offering sufficient protection for victims, also prove to be a serious problem. It gives the impression that the focus is heavily on reach – especially in tabloid journalism.

"You can see in quality media that they handle femicides much more respectfully and also uphold the dignity of the women. They treat and consider them accordingly. But unfortunately, media outlets like Kronen Zeitung don't do so." Attention Worker/Deprived, spokesperson

In such cases, journalistic diligence also becomes an issue for the group of Attention-Deprived, who face even greater hurdles in entering the discourse.

Participants additionally observed power dynamics that shape journalistic reporting. Austrian men, particularly those with established public reputations and close relations to journalists can exert disproportionate influence over media coverage and institutional decision-making processes. By leveraging their social status and networks to gain public attention, they are able shape narratives and outcomes in their favour.

"These powerful men with good contacts wield power over the media. So, we also know of some institutions where conversations took place, where I thought to myself, this shouldn't be happening". "But – well – he's well-known [says sarcastically]"

Attention-Deprived, counselling centre

While journalists in general continue to uphold democratic values, broader structural reforms regarding political instrumentalisation are largely absent. It was asserted that even the political parties which had advocated reform-oriented had either failure to address these issues in a systematic manner, or for worse, contributed to media concentration and downsizing of newsrooms (Attention Magnet, media persona).

Social Media

In the focus groups, social media was described in a variety of ways. On the one hand, participants had a negative perception of platforms due to political instrumentalisation and algorithmic control, which in their view reinforce nasty, conspiratorial, and deceptive information. In the meantime, they perceived creative potential in content creation and characterised the affordances for interaction in social media platforms positive and quite entertaining.

Participants from NGOs specifically highlighted the benefits of social media. On the one hand, they appreciated the opportunities to network in private and technologically secure groups, for instance, in Facebook. In addition, platforms enable spreading contents effectively across the media environment. Furthermore, the accessibility of major social media platforms was frequently praised.

..

"From the perspective of a small NGO, I regard social media positively, since it just provides us with options that we did not have 20 years ago. Without these platforms we would much more dependent on traditional media. In the past you would have needed your own radio show or whatever but now you could simply produce a podcast or a video series with basic methods."

Attention Worker, environmental lobbyist

"[Social media is] very convenient, you don't need any know-how to participate."
Attention Hacker, alternative media journalist

Due to its low threshold of use, social media channels are often utilised by smaller initiatives for promotion and as internal communications channel. Participants from alternative media outlets with small target groups, did not shy away of saying that social media platforms served them as marketing tool (Attention Hacker, alternative media journalist).

Social media was seen as a space where individuals can present content independently, without institutional affiliations, allowing for personal expression. In the context of science communication, one participant described himself as a non-institutional actor, viewing his YouTube channel primarily as a hobby that *"improves quality of life"* (Attention Worker, social media producer). However, the extent to which the benefits of platforms extend to larger audiences or society in general remained uncertain. Instead of focusing on measurable societal impact, the emphasis is placed on the producers' personal enjoyment from sharing meaningful contents publicly.

A key drawback in social media communication noted by the participants was the widespread perception that content on social media is dictated by algorithms. Criticism was directed at the opacity regarding how platforms media render contents visible to particular users. From the user's viewpoint, the information feed fails to provide a broader context for individual pieces of information.

"There is no further critical contextualisation. For example, when images of forest fires or floods appear in the news feed a vital information is often missing. Namely, this is a global phenomenon."
Attention Hacker, activist

Emotionalisation and lack of coherent, thorough reports were frequently linked to algorithmic content sorting, which was said to magnify the input of negative news. Algorithmic control prioritises emotionally charged content and treats factual information as secondary.

"Social media algorithms appeal to our basest instincts, which is completely deliberate and intentional. Bad news spreads faster. Emotions come first; facts are secondary."
Attention Worker, media literacy initiative

It was also stated that the algorithms benefit persons and institutions that already have a large reach and thus do not contribute to diversified information. Instead, algorithms push organisations, individuals and content that have already attained more attention capital than other actors. Since gaining more attention is linked to financial gain, alternative platforms like Mastodon, that do not use algorithmic sorting, lose their appeal for a 'critical mass' of prominent users.

"Even if there are, technically speaking, alternative platforms to these (prominent social media platforms), they are only rarely accepted by those who benefit from algorithms. They are not so willing to switch to no-algorithm system because their income depends on algorithms."
Attention-Deprived, gender/sexual minority initiative

Algorithmic control in digital platforms is generally criticised of their lack of transparency. The usual argument underlying this criticism is economic. Given that algorithmic systems are designed and implemented by powerful internet companies, this is said to benefit the corporations at the expense of users. In Austria, the discussions in focus groups pointed out that algorithmic analysis of internet users' online behaviour are being used in politics, too. Platforms are regarded as instruments for political campaigning with their significance continuing to grow.

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence was one of the least discussed topics in the focus groups. Perceptions of working with AI in professional contexts were divided. On the one hand, there was a notable motivation among the participants to acquire AI competencies with an intention to integrate them into everyday work practices. On the other hand, segments of the population have expressed concerns about being replaced by AI technologies. Additionally, factors such as potential obligations to participate in further training may contribute to feelings of being overwhelmed, as noted by activists in the Attention Hacker category.

One participant noted that educators can no longer give traditional homework assignments to students. Instead, they must now invest considerable effort into verifying the authenticity of students' work.

"In the past, I could rely on students' work. You could give them homework and allow them to work online, no problem. Now I must do in-person exams, which takes time." Attention Magnet, lawyer

The available software tools designed to detect AI usage were described as *"not reliable enough"*, raising concerns about their effectiveness. In this regard, AI is perceived as *"a step backwards"* (Attention Magnet, lawyer) complicating the educational process rather than enhancing it.

Furthermore, the development of translation software in the context of artificial intelligence faces a fundamental challenge. It was pointed out that existing training datasets tend to contain discriminatory language. The participants emphasised that to enable gender-sensitive and discrimination-aware translations, it is essential to actively incorporate inclusive language forms – especially gender-inclusive language – into the design and training of such systems. This requires a deliberate provision of datasets that reflect marginalised perspectives and linguistic diversity.

A recurring critique in the focus groups was that developers of AI systems frequently fail to adequately consider these issues. The uncritical use of large, historically accumulated datasets – many of which embed discriminatory language on multiple levels – represents a structural problem that must be addressed more thoroughly in AI development (Attention-Deprived, Gender/sexual minority initiative).

Although AI profoundly shapes society, the power to define its development and risks remains in the hands of economic elites. This imbalance sidelines broader societal voices – such as activists, journalists, and civil society groups – whose perspectives were regarded as essential for ensuring inclusive and accountable AI governance.

“The most important stakeholders are regulatory authorities, academia and practitioners. And then, the economic sphere, but also the general public, as well as NGOs and advocacy groups should have their say.”
Attention Hacker, activist

According to participants, there is an imbalance of power in society regarding who has the authority or platform to speak about AI and whose perspectives are taken into account. This disparity is closely tied to financial interests, which often shape whose voices are amplified and whose concerns are prioritised in public. The unchecked commercialisation of AI, coupled with a lack of inclusive oversight, raised urgent concerns in the focus groups about misinformation and the erosion of truth, particularly in underreported regions with limited journalistic infrastructure.

“We are already seeing that photos are generated by AI. How are we supposed to find out what is real? Say, when something happens in Africa or Asia, for example, where we don't have too many correspondents. Given that some governments are authoritarian, we cannot rely on them either. How are we supposed to know what is fact and what is fiction? So, this is a very critical topic, and regulatory action should take place sooner rather than later.”
Attention Worker, journalism student

Conclusion

The Austrian media environment, as described by participants across diverse actor categories, is marked by fragmentation, economic, and political dependencies and a growing disconnection between journalistic ideals and everyday practices. Table 1 crystallises these

dynamics by mapping how different groups – Attention Magnets, Hackers, Workers and the Attention-Deprived – relate to and critique the media landscape.

Table 1. Actor categories relationship to Media Environment.

Actor Category	Relationship to Media Environment	Main Criticism
Attention Magnets (Politicians, experts)	News media are regarded as important, but their practices do not meet with journalistic values such as "neutrality" and "objectivity". Dubious of algorithmic control, as it encourages emotionally charged contents.	Due to risk of political influence through state funding, they lament the absence of independent funding for the media, and for local newspapers in particular.
Attention Hackers (Activists & artists)	Journalism is part of social system that calls for reforms aimed at increasing transparency and accountability. Social media is function for disseminating information but ill-suited for public dialogue.	Media formats fail to mediate the plurality of voices and nuanced dialogue between different opinions. Clickbait journalism sets emotions over facts.
Attention Workers (Influencers, podcasters, journalism students, citizen journalists)	Attention workers are critical of the media, but they also want to see their own content in it. Social media is individually gratifying but its public and social significance remains unclear.	The media logic does not allow for balanced reporting. The publication speed is too high for thorough research. A lack of journalistic due diligence is criticised.
Attention-Deprived (Ethnic minorities, rural inhabitants, young & older people)	Barely receive any media attention. Positive features of social media are highlighted, including basic networking options and semi-public groups that allow for safe discussions.	The media logic does not allow for balanced reporting. The publication speed is too high for thorough research. A lack of journalistic due diligence is criticised.

Each group's perspective reflects broader structural concerns. Attention Magnets, often in positions of influence, emphasise the erosion of journalistic neutrality and the dangers of political interference, particularly through state funding. Their critique aligns with broader anxieties about the weakening of independent journalism and the instrumentalisation of media for political gain.

Attention Hackers focus on the lack of pluralism and the dominance of binary, polarising formats. Their call for more nuanced, creative and solution-oriented media formats echoes their critique of a "culture of dispute" that stifles meaningful dialogue.

Similarly, Attention Workers express a dual desire for inclusion and scepticism. They are critical of legacy media's economic and political entanglements, while also seeking visibility within it. Their concerns about speed-driven journalism and the erosion of fact-checking practices highlight the systemic pressures undermining journalistic integrity.

Finally, the Attention-Deprived – those with the lowest attention capital and least access to media – underscore the exclusionary nature of current media practices. While they value the networking potential of social media, they remain largely invisible in mainstream discourse.

Their critique of the normalisation of far-right voices in editorial decisions points to a deeper failure of media responsibility and inclusivity.

Together, these perspectives reveal a media system under strain, where economic imperatives, political influence and algorithmic logics converge to limit diversity, suppress critical engagement, and marginalise vulnerable social groups. Structural inequalities in media access and public attention are experienced differently across social positions, reinforcing the need for systemic reform and a renewed commitment to democratic media values.

4. Engaging with Public Communication

The functioning and conditions of democratic public communication in Austria are shaped by both solid institutional foundations and significant challenges that impact transparency, inclusivity and trust. Austria's institutional and legal framework ensures basic democratic standards. Elections are broadly considered free and fair, with the country maintaining a high level of electoral integrity according to international assessments (Freedom House 2025), even though concerns have been raised regarding the spread of negative rhetoric and disinformation on social media platforms, as well as the potential risk of foreign interference (Garnett, James and Caal-Lam 2025, 14). The Democracy Report 2022 by the V-Dem Institute notes a "significant decline in the indicator for transparent laws and predictable enforcement," leading to Austria's downgrade from a liberal to an electoral democracy (Boese et al. 2022, 14; Eberwein et al. 2022, 5f).

Media freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, yet the legal landscape includes defamation protections for public officials, which have been actively used by politicians, particularly from the FPÖ. Media ownership is concentrated, especially in the provinces and state influence over the public broadcaster ORF remains strong. In 2023, Austria's Constitutional Court ruled that the government held excessive influence over ORF's supervisory boards, requiring reform by 2025. A recent law ties media subsidies to professional standards to support quality journalism, although past scandals – such as the 2017 case of politicians buying favourable media coverage – have damaged trust (Freedom House 2025).

Socioeconomic inequalities significantly affect political participation and representation. A 2023 democracy monitor report highlights that individuals with higher income, education and status are more satisfied with and better represented in the political system. Conversely, marginalised groups often feel disenfranchised and see participation as futile, deepening a "representation gap" in Austria's democracy (Zandonella 2024, 20).

While voter turnout remains relatively high (77.7% in the 2024 National Council election), engagement varies by context – only 56.3% voted in the European elections the same year. Ethnic minorities remain underrepresented and Austria's strict naturalisation laws contribute to the disenfranchisement of large population segments, especially in cities like Vienna, where over 30% of adults lack voting rights (Freedom House 2025; Vinatzer *et al.* 2024).

There is also a decline in trust in institutions. According to the Austrian Democracy Monitor 58% of the population believe the political system functions poorly or not at all and 90% perceive widespread corruption (Zandonella 2021; Eberwein *et al.* 2022, 5).

Austria has a pluralistic civil society with both large established organisations and numerous smaller initiatives. However, distinctions made in public discourse between 'good' and 'bad' NGOs – especially those focused on human rights or environmental issues – have hampered the work of the latter. In 2024, a well-known environmental group was forced to shut down, signalling pressure on critical civil society actors (Vinatzer *et al.* 2024). Although participatory policymaking is improving and NGOs generally operate freely, delays in high-level appointments and perceived favouritism continue to hinder democratic engagement (European Court of Auditors. 2025).

Finally, public communication in Austria is increasingly polarised. Public scepticism towards journalists has grown, largely driven by the right-wing FPÖ, which brands the media as dishonest. The ÖVP has also targeted journalists, accusing them of activism. This trend undermines the media's role as a democratic watchdog and contributes to a deteriorating public discourse (RSF 2025).

In summary, while Austria maintains a foundational framework for democratic public communication, socio-political inequalities, institutional pressures and declining trust challenge its legitimacy and effectiveness.

Recent Debates or Controversial Issues regarding Public Communication

The balance between media freedom and political influence in Austria remains contentious, particularly due to concerns over government interference in public broadcasting. The constant rise of the far right has intensified divisive public discourse through emotionally charged and manipulative communication strategies. Gender representation in media remains a hot-button issue, exemplified by a 2023 controversy in the federal state Lower Austria over banning gender-neutral language in official communication. In 2024 climate activists – particularly those from the group Last Generation – faced increasing legal and political pressure, including heavy fines, public condemnation, and court convictions, ultimately leading the group to end its protests, citing government inaction and societal hostility.

Public communication in Austria today is under significant strain, reflecting broader tensions in democratic engagement, media literacy and social cohesion. In the following chapter we investigate how individuals interpret and respond to these pressures, revealing that public communication is not merely about exchanging information but is a deeply social and contested practice. Group discussions highlight concerns about political polarisation, declining media trust and shifting norms of inclusion and authority, as well as everyday strategies for navigating misinformation and participation.

The analysis is organised around five thematic codes – Societal Change and Challenges, Political Dynamics and Legal Framework, Access and Inclusion, Tactics of Engagement,

Emotions and Mindsets – each offering a unique lens on the challenges of public discourse. Participants describe barriers to access, critique the politicisation of knowledge and express both emotional fatigue and cautious optimism, illustrating how communication is experienced as a complex interplay of power, identity and meaning-making in uncertain times.

Societal Change and Challenges

Public communication, as discussed by participants, is deeply embedded in broader societal structures that are currently undergoing significant transformations. Participants consistently portrayed society as unsettled – a space marked by generational tensions, information overload and widespread distrust.

A key concern raised were the increasing effects of disinformation and conspiracy theories. The widespread presence and spread of disinformation are concerning – not only due to ease with which it circulates, but also because of its harmful effects on society and the difficulty of correcting or reversing the damage it causes.

"We all know that fake news is produced, that lies are told to the point of vomiting. Fake news spreads, consolidates, and finally permeate the society, it is quite difficult to pull it out. Even if ten media outlets respond, 'No, that's not true'. That's a huge problem for democracy."

Attention Worker/Deprived, NGO staff member

Two factors were distinguished in the focus groups that reportedly contribute to the dissemination of false information: political power and financial gain. Notably conspiracy theorists operate websites and online shops, reflecting a broader trend of monetising ideological contents. In this context, a group of actors have a persistent interest in identifying topics capable of provoking public outrage to gain attention, COVID-19 being one of them. At the same time, for instance, in the health sector there is an interest in selling often unproven preparations such as food supplements and therapeutic therapies.

Financial incentives constitute one of the primary motivations for spreading disinformation and their significance is perceived as frequently overlooked. On the other hand, participants talked about the public's mistrust and lack of confidence in medical institutions. There is a strong argument that the sheer amount of uncategorised information confuses a significant portion of the population.

"There is no single moment when the society began slipping away. It's rather the steady stream of messages received from people who were extremely unsettled about unimaginable topics. I never thought that those could possibly unsettle anyone at all."

Attention Worker/Hacker, media literacy initiative

Another concern was voiced about individuals immersed in conspiracy theories. These were described as unreachable for rational debates. Participants noted that it is impossible to

respond to conspiracy theorists' actions by traditional fact-checking efforts. Therefore, they are capable of spreading uncertainty in society (Attention Worker/Hacker, media literacy initiative).

In this regard, participants reflected critically on the Austrian public debate during the 2024 election cycle. Public discourse was perceived as being increasingly dominated by disinformation and distortions. This condition is thought to damage trust and erode the possibilities to constructive dialogue (Attention-Deprived, advocacy organisation).

Several focus discussions reflected on the COVID-19 pandemic. It served as a case study for understanding difficulties many people face in distinguishing credible information from disinformation. This topic is tied to media and digital literacy. Participants described how individuals – particularly older generation – struggled with digital literacy, often seeking basic guidance on how to identify disinformation. One participant talked about how they engaged in conversations with visitors in festival for the media and digital arts, which was a part of their research project:

"We had a stand at an event where people could come to us and hear about our research project on conspiracy theories and threats to democracy on the internet. Some people said they just wanted a basic course on 'How do I recognise fake news?'. One of them told me that her sister, a woman probably around 60 years old, kept sending messages and she just didn't know 'How am I supposed to recognise it? Is it true or false?'"

Attention Worker, journalism student

Indeed, participants described science as holding a "*guiding function*" in our knowledge-based society, tasked with delivering definitive answers. Yet, the societal expectation for certainty often clashes with the inherent complexity of scientific statements, which are perceived as vague: "*it is one way or the other, or perhaps something completely different*" (Attention Worker, expert). This tension tended to have implications for public trust: science is expected to provide clarity, but when it fails to do so – or when its messages are perceived as ambiguous – it risks alienating sections of the public. This alienation is compounded by a broader societal atmosphere of crisis. Participants referred to a "*fundamental insecurity*" fuelled by multiple, overlapping crises, including economic, political and environmental challenges.

"There is an incredible insecurity in our society, which is caused by so many crises that are coming together at the same time."

Attention Worker, journalism student

In this context, the role of communication – especially scientific and institutional communication – is not simply seen as information transfer but as rebuilding trust in a fractured environment.

Crisis-Centred Reporting and the 'Culture of Dispute'

In the discussions, the media is portrayed as increasingly polarised and lacking in differentiated perspectives. A dominant 'culture of dispute', shaped by media formats and echoed in user comments, is described as a central issue. Participants linked such one-dimensional reporting to the risk of a poorly informed public and the spread of disinformation – affecting not only audiences but also content producers and journalists. Thus, participants highlighted that published contents tend to focus heavily on crises and disasters, prompting participants to call for more solution-oriented public communication.

"There is currently a lot of research into how we can use fewer resources and less materials. What does that mean for the economic sectors and how it would change our lives? Answers do exist already. They just need to be communicated. There is not just one solution, which makes the debate a bit more difficult. However, each problem addressed in public should include a description for its solution."

Attention Hacker, spokesperson

"The problem is systemic, and the population is frustrated feeling as if they have no voice – there is no-one listening to them."

Attention Worker, expert

People's dissatisfaction is mentioned as a factor that fuels conspiracy theories and the appeal of alternative and misleading narratives. It was acknowledged that this annoyance was not due to personal irrationality but rather to a generalised distrust of institutional actors and processes that the public perceive to be unresponsive or deceptive.

"I believe we've really reached a point where societal structures that used to work for a long time are slowly starting to fall apart. Like, where is the basic consensus? It just doesn't work anymore."

Attention Worker, media literacy initiative

In the focus groups, participants accused on of individual politicians, sometimes also companies, of short-sightedness. Due to egocentric and unilateral mode of thinking private interests are prioritised over collective good: *"What is best for me, is what is best."* (Attention Magnet, city manager). Despite a general awareness of the importance of addressing socially relevant issues, there is a noticeable cultural reluctance to actively engage in their resolution or accepting compromises. Given these complexities, it seems easier to place individual well-being above communal welfare.

The participants concluded that one consequence of simplified information and binary framing is a societal sense of being overwhelmed. It is not necessarily due to the actual pace of events but because the underlying complexity has been inadequately communicated. As a result, individuals may perceive developments as occurring more rapidly than they truly

are. This became evident, as participants discussed gender-sensitive language – a subject of public debate that has been extensively politicised in Austria. As one participant noted, *“I think society can't keep up with the pace”* (Attention Hacker, gender/sexual minority activist, referring to diverse and evolving ways of addressing LGBTQIA+ communities. A similar dynamic was surfaced in the focus groups in connection to climate change, where the complexity of scientific facts, limited public understanding, and high levels of political instrumentalisation contribute to confusion and disengagement.

Attention Workers emphasised that nuanced discussions seem possible only within specialised circles. However, when such discourse is translated for general audiences, the use of technical language and complex concepts may prompt misunderstanding or sense of overwhelm – ultimately hindering meaningful exchange. For the sake of mutual understanding, it would be therefore useful that the public has access to comprehensive, nuanced information and can easily obtain reliable and diverse news through low-threshold channels.

Political Dynamics and Legal Framework

Public communication is also shaped and constrained by political structures and dynamics. Participants discussed how democratic discourse is increasingly vulnerable to distortion through political rhetoric and media manipulation. Populist narratives were highlighted as particularly influential in this regard.

One recurring theme was the polarisation around topics of diversity and inclusion. Measures intended to foster equity, such as diversity checks in cultural institutions, were for example reinterpreted as censorship by political opponents. These accusations arguments were described as deliberate strategies to undermine trust in public institutions and redefining the boundaries of acceptable discourse.

“We also have inclusion checks. So, submissions are examined and reviewed against diversity criteria even though this would not be mandatory. We tend to be accused of censorship over and over again, and this really affects our work.”

Attention Hacker, expert

Populist criticism of DEI training and minority rights initiatives frames them as threats to the public. Such emotionally charged narratives were identified to amplify the dissemination of right-wing contents. Participants recognised that political narratives are constructed in a polarising manner, even if according to public opinion surveys, diversity programs are neither contentious nor widely prioritised issue. Thus, rather than voicing authentic disagreement, this cultural division seems to be deliberately manufactured with the intent to incite and normalise hostility and verbal aggression in the discussion environment.

“For me, this has taken on a strange direction, which is completely unnecessary. What makes it concerning is that it's accompanied by an idea

that it's okay to use violence against someone who doesn't share your political opinion."

Attention Worker, expert

This environment makes voicing sensitive topics challenging. Even when content producers or journalists aim for balanced reporting on sensitive or controversial issues, practical obstacles arise. In the case of abortion, gynaecologists in Austria refused to participate in media coverage out of fear of public backlash. Such conditions make it challenging for media producers to tackle such topics with depth and a sense of responsibility (Attention Worker/Hacker, NGO staff member; Attention Worker, former journalist).

Conservative and particularly right-wing political actors were frequently accused of intensifying public polarisation and employing inflammatory or hostile rhetoric in their communication strategies. Consequently, in most focus groups right-wing and far-right parties were spoken of cautiously and with restraint. As a token of this, vague and evasive phrases such as "*certain ministers*", "*some parties*" were frequently used as reference to right-wing populists. This mode of discussion corresponds to cases, where some potential participants for the study who have actively engaged in countering right-wing extremism withdrew from focus groups – citing concerns about their personal safety.

Participants argued that the decades-long communication strategies of right-wing populists has already changed the Austrian political culture, especially when it comes to topics that can be classified as racist or endorsing patriarchal power. Recently, the platform logic on social media that relies on emotionalisation has increased attacks against ethnic minorities and people with non-binary identities.

"Emotionalisation easily triggers reactions and this level of emotionalisation is what right-wing forces use quite deliberately. All they want is to move people on an emotional level, to convince them that something is being taken away from them. One of their central arguments is that the word 'woman' would disappear because of trans people. This isn't true, of course, but the argument stirs emotions and reactions."

Attention-Deprived, gender/sexual minority initiative

Another participant described the evolving nature of societal aversion and rejection towards gender debate and trans minorities over the years, as well as its strategic incorporation into right-wing populist agendas.

"I can't help but noticing how dramatically social communication about gender and diversity issues in general has altered over the last 20 years. I've been around a long time and in the early phases of social media, I was a feminist blogger and I remember how plain and simple the rejection was; just because I was a woman and a feminist. Then it progressed to the point where you realised that right-wing media and actors stated that 'gender ideology is the new enemy'. And now the hatred is focusing very aggressively

on trans people, so the new enemy is a tiny minority that is being treated as if they were world-dominating."

Attention Hacker, alternative media journalist

Democracy and Media Literacy

In the focus groups the participants were encouraged to explore their understandings of democracy in relation to public communication. A nuanced distinction emerged between democratic ideals and epistemic authority. This framework helped participants to criticise current political practices, whereby politicians were perceived as opinion-makers rather than decision-makers.

"Some politicians over the last century, some held opinions that they had carefully considered. Those hardly exist anymore. Politicians now just take their views from opinion-makers – you might call them lobbyists. Politicians just repeat what they are being told even though they know so little about the issue at hand. This doesn't even make them blush."

Attention Worker, expert

Facts are increasingly subject to strategic reinterpretation, as one participant noted with concern about the erosion of boundaries between freedom of expression and the relegation of scientific consensus as mere opinion. Unlike personal views, scientific knowledge is bound by rigorous methodological standards, which sets standards for how scientific findings can be discussed and criticised. Academic scrutiny is not an open to opinions in the same way as discussion in social media platforms. In this context, the assertion that *"science is not democratic"* (Attention Worker, expert) highlights an argument against misuse of science to undermine its authority.

The topic ties in closely with an overwhelmed society described above. Mainly discussants who had specialised areas of expertise perceived a knowledge gap resulting from a *"division of labour"*, prompting a situation wherein most *"discourses are specialised and thus restricted in scope"* (Attention Worker, media persona). Such specialised knowledge – including scientific and policy publications – is often inaccessible to the broader public or only fully understood by a specialist audience. This may be unproblematic in many areas of life but when it comes to systemic problems, such as the legitimacy of democratic institutions, it can impair public deliberation quite severely. Following this view, the participants argued that public communication should aim at bridging the gap between expert knowledge and lay understanding without reducing complexity to oversimplified binaries.

This divide is also reflected in antipathy toward alleged elites. The core issue lies in the perceived decision-making authority of so-called elites, including scientists, which is presumably exercised without the involvement or approval of the public.

"In many cases, people simply don't care about what scientists do. Still, they perceive us belonging to a group that takes decisions over their heads. Besides they assume that we have the luxury of doing work that we enjoy."

Attention Magnet/Worker, media persona

The participants reflected upon how to reach and educate citizens, and whether it is even possible to connect with a broad public and large audiences. This concern tended to be at the heart of several projects that involved professional and expert knowledge from participants.

*"How do we involve people who may have less expertise on the subject?
How do I establish trust and how am I supposed to get through my filter
bubble to presenting my results so that it would be acceptable to people."*
Attention Magnet, spokesperson

*Media literacy is basically a functional necessity
for how well a mass democracy works.
Attention Worker, expert*

At the same time, media literacy was widely acknowledged as a foundational requirement for democratic participation. Given that most people engage with politics and knowledge through mediated channels, participants stressed the importance of public understanding of media structures and practices. Media literacy was thus described not only as a personal skill but as a systemic necessity for functioning democracies.

Media Policy and Lack of Regulation

Discussions on public communication extended to media policies and regulation, especially in relation to digital technologies, platforms, and artificial intelligence. Regarding regulation of social media, the participants argued that failures have taken place. And for worse, problems resulting from the absence, or inadequacy of regulation seemed to be escalating.

*"I've followed digital policy processes for a long time. 15 years ago, there
were some efforts to do something, but then the issue was completely
neglected. In terms of regulation, it was a total political failure. Today there
are so few monopolies left that you can't do much about it politically – or
they don't want to."*
Attention Hacker, alternative media journalist

Self-regulation of social media platforms presented a dilemma for the participants. On the one hand, they acknowledged that platforms such as Facebook have economic incentives to promote emotionally charged content, which tends to increase user engagement and, consequently, advertising revenue. In addition, they believed that platforms face reputational risks associated with the spread of disinformation, even if such concerns may not have a significant impact in practice.

"I do believe that all platforms have the intention not to be perceived as the biggest source of fake news. However, in practice, relatively few of them take substantial action to address the issue."

Attention Worker, media literacy initiative

While participants acknowledged that regulation must keep pace with technological development, they also emphasised the need for democratic oversight. Media regulation, particularly regarding AI and digital communication, was seen as an area requiring urgent political and public attention – not merely to guard against misuse – but to uphold the foundational norms of transparency, accountability and fairness in public discourse. The lack of transparency was seen as conspicuous proof of the lack of regulatory measurements.

"Although these platforms play a significant role in shaping our daily lives, we still know far too little – if anything at all – about how algorithms are developed and trained. This clearly indicates a need for regulatory interventions in this area." Attention Worker, journalism student

On the other hand, participants debated the economic impact of large-scale European initiatives aimed at funding and governing AI development. While such projects signify a strong institutional commitment, they also raised questions about Europe's self-perception as a technological leader and its reliance on regulation as a competitive strategy (Attention Magnet, expert). The participants anticipated that the desire to impose ethical standards may be at odds with the realities of economic power.

Access and Inclusion

Discussions revealed a persistent imbalance in whose voices are heard and represented within the media and public discourse. Structural barriers, tied to privilege, resources and institutional practices, continue to marginalise minority groups, limiting their visibility and participation in shaping public narratives.

Across focus groups, the theme of exclusion emerged prominently. Specifically, Attention Workers and Attention-Deprived frequently spoke of systematic barriers that prevent marginalised groups – particularly ethnic minorities – from participating in public discourse. Public visibility was seen as conditional resource. For those lacking social, cultural or financial resources it reportedly becomes impossible to gain public attention and thus remain visible in the public sphere.

*"If you want to gain public attention, you have to be loud.
You need resources and perhaps also privileges for being
visible. It's not so easy to just be loud."*

Attention Worker, expert

Participants working with small initiatives discussed how they must choose between using their meagre financial resources either for marketing campaigns or for their core work. In any event, it was frequently stated that press and media work expenses are usually not covered by financial support like funding tracks.

"Nobody at funding services considers that you also need to advertise let alone work for being covered in the press. You must accomplish with so few resources that would actually demand quite enormously resources. There's so much you can't do. You can't establish a social media channel, publish there. I mean, what can you do in three hours? Nothing."

Attention-Deprived, counselling centre

According to the participants, power asymmetries pertained not only to who gets public visibility but also in who has an opportunity to speak. Legacy and social media were repeatedly criticised for inviting a narrow range of well-known voices, limiting democratic participation and failing to reflect the full diversity of public opinion (Attention Worker, counter media journalist. This repetitive news policy is particularly frustrating for initiatives that do their best to attract media attention. Even with the support of NGOs, which have been credited as "reliable sources", public visibility remains limited.

In essence, this means that *"the discourse right now is being driven or dominated by a few. Those who shout the loudest get the most attention."* (Attention Hacker, activist), or then journalists take the place of an interviewee:

"Perhaps it is a general pattern already that journalists communicate with journalists. In TV shows and newspapers, they are constantly inviting people from within their own organisation and then spreading those media appearances in Twitter."

Attention Magnet, media persona

The discussants asserted explicitly that prominent Austrian men can capitalise on their status, with their transgressions regularly remaining unreported (Attention-Deprived, counselling centre). The unequal representation of genders was seen as part of a broader power imbalance that shapes the discourse. In discussions surrounding abortion, for instance, it was observed that male voices and institutions, such as the Catholic Church, continue to dominate the narrative, marginalising the perspectives of those most directly affected by the issue – namely, women (Attention Hacker/Worker, NGO staff member).

Tactics of Engagement

Participants reflected on their communication strategies and how to navigate through a communication shaped by a complex interplay of facts, emotion, language and access to media platforms. In an increasingly polarised environment, they shared thoughtful approaches to fostering dialogue, navigating sensitivity and maintaining credibility – while also pushing back against toxic media dynamics and unequal access to discursive space.

Discussions revealed that some participants were deeply aware of the performative and emotional impact of language. For example, in polarising contexts such as abortion debates, respectful and careful choice of words were seen as vital for creating a productive dialogue. Some participants said that they consciously avoided terms like “*militant*” or “*radical*” due to their polarising potential (Attention Hacker/Worker, NGO staff member).

"Language has power. We see that over and over again. It's crucial for us to use respectful language."
Attention Hacker/Worker, NGO staff member

Participants who tend to engage in debates pertaining to gender identity and gender inequality said they encountered several challenges. In the highly politicised debate about ‘gender’ and supposed language censorship, mindfulness in dealing with language is particularly high. This involves balancing sensitivity and attention, for instance, when creating slogans, headlines, etc.

Participants said they need to consider the language they used within their own community with the need to remain linguistically accessible to a broader audience. The urge to approach people without putting up obstacles to their interaction with one another gives rise to ambiguity. A clear line is drawn here against “*hardcore right-wingers*”, who stir up controversy and unnerve people under the guise of wanting to have a conversation. However, concerns continue to exist inside their own community, where precise language can become an existential and identity-defining role.

Considerations of sensitive language extends to the field of new technologies. To combat gender-discriminatory language on social media, an AI-tool was mentioned that aims to address hate comments with humour. It is specifically designed for individuals who feel emotionally affected by negative comments but lack the appropriate words to respond. The tool is intended to help users remain verbally responsive and to foster a sense of self-empowerment in dealing with online hostility.

Emotional Engagement and Solution-based Formats

The idea of emotionalisation was not always referenced in a bad light. Drawing a parallel with political communication, it was argued that emotional engagement is often more effective than statistics alone.

"You have to work with emotions. Politicians also work with emotions. We should also understand this side, rather than just presenting statistics, because nobody outside of science cares about statistics."
Attention Worker, social media producer

According to this argument, social objections against vaccines, for instance, are rooted in emotion rather than reason. Acknowledging and addressing this emotional aspect was

considered crucial for producing compelling content, countering disinformation and engaging with segments of the public that are otherwise perceived as unreachable. Drawing from this perspective, emotions played a role, when it comes to social media tactics, since organisations and initiatives can leverage emotional appeal both to exert public pressure and to demonstrate creativity in their communication approaches.

According to the participants, emotionally divisive strategies were deliberately employed in activist settings, functioning as a means to attract public attention and revitalise discussions. In this context, even the term "polarisation," which is usually viewed negatively, was regarded as a potentially productive and constructive tool.

"From our perspective, societal division is a form of civil disobedience to which we are deeply committed. We are completely aware of that civil resistance leads to divisiveness. Accepting this polarisation is a critical step in moving the issue forward because it brings life."

Attention Hacker, climate activist

Strategic Withdrawal and Media Format Criticism

The communicative retreat from the social media proved to be widely used strategy among Attention Hackers and to some extent Attention Workers. This allowed actors with limited resources to allocated effectively and shielding themselves from encroaching disputes. Besides preserving mental health, some participants said they avoided social media platforms to maintain a more laid-back and optimistic view of the world.

"I don't view the world in such a pessimistic way at all. I believe it only appears pessimistic when one reads comments on social media – and I've stopped doing that."

Attention Worker, media persona

In response to polarising media formats, some participants adopted a refusal strategy. Notably, pro-choice groups declined to participate in debates that opposed them:

"We no longer sit down at the table with anti-abortion activists. If you structure the discussion format that way, then it won't take place."

Attention-Deprived, gender/sexual minority initiative

This decision proved successful and led to a rethinking of other program format by the broadcaster, demonstrating that communicators can sometimes push back against discursive imbalances – provided they have the standing to do so. This does not mean that this success would translate in permanent changes in production practices.

Given that attempts to initiate contact via social media were often characterised by hostility and failures in terms of fostering constructive dialogue, non-response strategy also aimed at de-escalation and boundary-setting.

"I don't even respond anymore; it's just pointless Since Musk took over Twitter, I've been bombarded with all kinds of messages and I'm not replying. By doing so I would basically encourage them to keep spouting bullshit."

Attention Magnet, journalist

The capacity to make such demands, however, was questioned. The issue was raised whether only already-visible actors or established and well-known organisations could afford to set such boundaries, highlighting unequal access to discursive power.

Promoting Media Literacy

A different approach for long-term communication resilience pertained to the promotion of media literacy. Fact-checking alone was considered insufficient; rather, citizens should be equipped with digital tools to be able to verify information independently. Participants saw this as a preventive strategy to counteract disinformation and as a necessary educational initiative, albeit currently underdeveloped in Austrian schools. Once the tools were rendered available, fact-checking would be a quick and straightforward process, some participants assumed.

"I can verify most fakes within a minute if I know how to use the right tools. For example, a reverse image search. That's now integrated into the Google search bar – I can use it with two clicks and then I immediately get to know when this image first appeared on the internet. Then I might realise that the photo sent to me is not from the flooding in Austria in 2024 but from Florida in 2013." Attention Worker, media literacy initiative

Equipping people with straightforward, accessible tools was seen as possibility to improve their ability to recognise false information and assess it critically. Rather than relying on experts or institutions, individuals could take an active role in verifying content themselves which is thought to strengthen public resilience against disinformation.

Emotions and Mindsets

In the focus groups, social media platforms were said to facilitate negative emotionalisation by amplifying societal resentment and fostering a space where debates often descend into hate-filled rhetoric. In the discussions, it was reported that the anonymity and lack of accountability on these platforms create an environment where harmful comments thrive, making dialogue difficult and triggering backlash on sensitive topics.

Negative emotionalisation is closely linked to a perception of the social media as a space where accumulated societal resentment is discharged. Debates on social media were

regarded as more hate-filled compared to those in traditional media. Beyond these generalisations the focus group attributed more detailed attention to contextual framing on social media platforms. The relative anonymity and lack of direct accountability of service providers triggered confusion, as users are not confronted with a clearly identifiable counterpart but rather interact with an abstract or impersonal audience.

"TikTok is full of hate and there's hardly any real dialogic exchange. All that the comments are doing is searching and blaming scapegoats. And somehow, everything is denied until someone is found to blame. I mean, no good, constructive debate can take place there at all."
Attention Hacker, activist

Additionally, it was observed that hateful comments tended to be linked to specific trigger themes such as 'gender', 'LGBTQAI+' that are particularly appealing to right-wing viewers such as names of politicians.

"The trigger points have simply increased. If you write an article about gender and you will get dozens of messages, it doesn't matter what you say. It's enough to mention gender in the headline and it's an instant hit for lots of reader reactions." Attention Magnet, media persona

Such topics were seen as triggering disproportionate public backlash and provoking immediate resistance, making communication difficult and limiting the space for discussion (Attention Hacker, gender/sexual minority activist). For content producers, whether online or offline, this compels to balance of how to remain open to justified comments and dialogue while protecting themselves from attacks. In particular, the exchange with the audience was deemed difficult, as the impression prevails that users do not read post thoroughly and that feedback is rarely positive, if not hostile.

"People rarely read entire articles, usually just the headlines – but they want to interact. That's a challenge, of course; you must consider when criticism is too much and where you must put up a wall. I would say it's very rarely that someone would write 'yes, keep it up', but rather that they want to shut us down."
Attention Magnet, counter media journalist

In some focus groups, participants from a variety of backgrounds and with an affinity for social media paid attention to amusing interaction in the social media platforms. Focusing specifically on TikTok, 'roasting' has been established as a prevalent form of communication, employed by popular accounts. The role of playful or unserious comments were received with ambiguity among the participants.

"Duolingo often sneaks into private TikTok accounts and starts insulting people. I think most users on the platform are aware of that."
Attention Magnet, counter media journalist

Companies are engaging in playful public disputes on TikTok. Rather than relying on traditional corporate messaging, companies and brands engage in performative conflict using humour and irony – a style often referred to as 'TikTok slang' – marking a shift in PR style, where corporate communication prioritises audience engagement over traditional professionalism, aligning with the platform's logic (Attention Magnet, local media journalist). Nonetheless, the flip side marked by heightened hostility, continues to be a persistent element in the social media communication.

"You have to pray that what you do is really funny, otherwise it just backfires. That's the challenge."
Attention Magnet, counter media journalist

Since even seemingly minor issues can quickly escalate into conflicting arguments, participants emphasised the importance of staying alert to potential triggers and approaching opportunities for dialogue with care, sensitivity and a clear understanding of the wider context in which these conversations take place.

Disenchantment and Resignation from Unchanging Narratives

There was a palpable sense of disillusionment with the state of public communication. On the one hand, it is noted that the numerous political scandals involving corruption and the illegitimate influence on the media have undermined trust in public communication. It is also noted that public knowledge of media economy was quite low. As a result, the public is unaware of, for instance, that the private media profit from "*riotous reporting*" and that disparaging or influencing PSM is politically motivated.

Participants described a cyclical media policy debate that produces little actual change, leading to a form of emotional resignation: people may express frustration, but rarely take action. This perceived stasis contributes to widespread disenchantment with public discourse more broadly.

"There is not just a lack of understanding, but more importantly, a lack of interest. We must confess that the media policy debates we've been having for decades has repeatedly focused on the same issues. And if there was a strong social interest in making a change, then there would be changes."
Attention Magnet, expert

Conclusion on Public Communication

The analysis of public communication in Austria reveals a deeply fragmented and emotionally charged landscape, shaped by disinformation, political polarisation and unequal access to public sphere. Across all actor categories, participants expressed concerns over the erosion of trust, the political instrumentalisation of media and the lack of inclusive, solution-

oriented public dialogue. Table 2 synthesises their perspectives by illustrating how each group experiences and critiques the media environment.

Table 2. Actor categories relationship to Public Communication.

Actor Category	Relationship to Political Communication	Main Criticism
Attention Magnets (Politicians, experts)	Find problems in addressing audiences and capturing their interest.	Political communication is undermined by self-centred strategies of public actors who pursue personal interests rather than public good.
Attention Hackers (Activists & activists)	Strongly motivated to engage in public dialogue but disappointed of the limited opportunities provided by the attention economy and platform logics.	Politics is smeared by right-wing populism that discourages public action of their its opponents.
Attention Workers (Influencers, podcasters, journalism students, citizen journalists)	Frustrated of the in-between position in the attention economy. Motivated in launching projects aimed at increasing public awareness but struggling with limited resources and incapable of resisting the flow of disinformation. .	Discontent with political institutions in sponsoring media literacy projects and regulation of social media platforms.
Attention-Deprived (Ethnic minorities, rural inhabitants, young & older people)	Disappointed in the limited opportunities to engage in public communication. Experiences of marginalisation and deliberate attempts to silencing, particularly by right-wing populism.	Criticising systemic negligence by politicians, mainstream media and hostility by populist right-wing.

Attention Magnets acknowledged their limitations and often attribute it to societal disengagement or structural constraints. Their criticism focused on self-serving communication strategies that prioritise personal or political gain over collective well-being. Attention Hackers demonstrated a strong commitment to responsible, fact-based communication, even when engaging with emotionally charged or politicised topics. Their main concern resided in the absence of political accountability, particularly in addressing right-wing ideological manipulation and hate-driven narratives.

Attention Workers were at the forefront of grassroots media literacy and public education efforts. However, they face overwhelming volumes of misinformation and express deep frustration over the lack of political will – both nationally and at the EU level – to implement meaningful reforms in digital media governance and education. Attention-Deprived largely felt excluded from public attention. Their voices are either ignored or politically instrumentalised and they lack the resources to challenge this systemic neglect.

Together, these perspectives underscore a shared demand for more equitable, transparent and dialogical forms of public communication. The findings highlight the urgent need for structural reforms that bridge the gap between expert knowledge and public understanding,

strengthen media literacy and ensure that all societal groups can participate meaningfully in democratic discourse.

5. Reflecting on Communication Ethics

This chapter provides an overview of key aspects of communication ethics in Austria, focusing on national laws, accountability instruments, regulation of harmful content, ethical standards for journalists and other actors and media literacy initiatives.

Austria has a solid legal framework for communication ethics, ensuring freedom of speech and the right to access information. The media regulator in Austria operates independently and the funding for the Press Council has been increased. The government also introduced a law in 2024 to support quality journalism, which provides funding for both print and online media. Despite these positive measures, there are concerns about the transparency of state advertising allocations and the potential influence of a newly funded state-run journalist school. Additionally, the Constitutional Court ruled that the management rules for the public service broadcaster were unconstitutional. A new 'Freedom of Information Act' was introduced in February 2024, offering greater access to official documents. Challenges regarding journalist safety, both online and offline, remain, prompting government plans for enhanced training and awareness.

The nation received favourable assessments of its media accountability infrastructure in comparison to other European countries. In the European Media Accountability Index, Austria shares the fourth rank with Germany, outperforming many other countries. However, national reports highlight several shortcomings, including ineffective self-regulation measures and limited impact press councils and ethics codes. Journalists in Austria have expressed that these instruments have less influence compared to other European nations. The Press Council, for example, has faced difficulties, including a period of dysfunction and the ethical codes remain poorly recognised by media professionals (Eberwein and Porlezza 2018). The lack of incentives for self-regulation and underdeveloped media accountability initiatives at the newsroom level further limit the effectiveness of accountability efforts in the country (Eberwein *et al.* 2022).

Austria's regulation of harmful content, including disinformation, hate speech and defamation, addresses several social issues but faces criticism from international organisations. While hate crime legislation prohibits incitement based on sexual orientation and has introduced reforms to penalise the use of Nazi symbols more harshly, there are gaps in addressing the challenges of misinformation and ensuring protections for whistleblowers. Strong rhetoric has been directed at refugees and migrants and LGBTQIA+ people continue to experience societal discrimination. Furthermore, Austria struggles with gender inequality, with a gender wage gap among the highest in the EU. Recent reforms have strengthened penalties for violating laws related to hate speech and Nazi symbolism (Freedom House 2024).

Ethical standards for journalism in Austria are primarily governed by the Austrian Press Council's code of honour, which provides guidelines for responsible journalistic practice. However, surveys indicate that these ethical standards are not widely known or adhered to by journalists, reflecting a gap in enforcement and professional engagement with the code (Eberwein *et al.* 2022). In addition to the Press Council's guidelines for traditional media, ethical standards are also applied to non-commercial community broadcasters and influencers. Austria's regulatory framework includes a mix of market-oriented, professional and public guidelines, with a significant focus on media users.

Media literacy efforts in Austria are embedded in the national education system, with programs available at all educational levels. These initiatives aim to improve media skills among students, employees and the unemployed. While there is a general availability of media literacy programs across different social classes and regions, there is insufficient information about the quality and effectiveness of these programs. Additionally, efforts to target older populations with media literacy training are limited and need further development.

While Austria's communication ethics are underpinned by a robust legal framework and various accountability mechanisms, challenges remain in terms of effective implementation, particularly concerning self-regulation, the protection of journalists and addressing harmful content online. Moreover, while media literacy programs are widely available, improvements are needed in ensuring quality education for all demographics.

In 2020 and 2021, some Austrian media channels faced backlash for promoting conspiracy theories, especially regarding COVID-19 and vaccinations. Some prominent figures in the media were accused of misleading the public by spreading false or unverified information. This included interviews and reports pushing anti-vaccine narratives or questioning the severity of the pandemic without evidence. In 2022, Matthias Schrom, the Head of TV News at Austria's public broadcaster ORF, resigned after leaked WhatsApp messages revealed his willingness to accommodate complaints from former Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache about unfavourable coverage. The incident highlighted concerns about political interference in public broadcasting and raised questions about ORF's editorial independence.

Empirical Analysis: Ethics and Responsibilities

In this chapter we explore the ethical dimensions and perceived responsibilities within contemporary public communication, as articulated by participants across a series of qualitative focus groups conducted in Austria. Drawing on interpretive coding, the findings are grouped into three thematic areas: "assessment of communication", "values and principles", and "institutional and personal responsibilities". These categories illuminate how participants grapple with complex moral questions surrounding misinformation, representation, public discourse and civic duty. Rather than prescribing normative solutions, the analysis reflects the lived ethical concerns of diverse individuals navigating highly polarised and emotionally charged communication landscapes. The chapter seeks to foreground these voices as a means of better understanding the shifting expectations placed

on communicators – journalists, scientists, activists and institutions alike – in a rapidly evolving media and social environment.

Main concerns listed from the focus group discussions were: (1) the narrowing of public discourse, in which dominant voices marginalise diverse perspectives and foster polarisation; (2) the impact of misinformation on trust in institutions and democracy, as well as the vulnerability of fact-based and empirical knowledge, particularly around queer identities, climate change and abortion; and (3) the impact of hate speech. Participants underline the importance of nuanced, fact-based and inclusive communication venues.

Narrowing and Inconsistency of the Public Discourse

Concerns were raised about the narrowness of public discourse. A few loud voices were seen as disproportionately shaping narratives, marginalising diverse perspectives and contributing to distorted images of societal reality. This was particularly noted in the media treatment of queer identities and minority groups, where anecdotal evidence, celebrities, comedians and sometimes attention-seeking journalists become default sources, even when they lack expertise.

Participants also identified a broader tendency towards binary or absolutist thinking, whereby nuanced public debate is displaced by polarised demands for clear stances. This shift was seen to restrict the possibility of open-ended, exploratory discussions. A related concern was the overestimation of digital communication's dominance. Although online platforms significantly influence public discourse, they are not the only relevant communicative space.

Moreover, inconsistent communication from politicians, particularly in response to critical questions – questioning political transparency – was mentioned. Participants reported inconsistent communication from politicians, particularly in response to critical questions. Notably, this inconsistency was not limited to any single party, suggesting a broader cultural tendency in how political actors engage with the public. While some politicians remained responsive, others avoided scrutiny entirely, further reinforcing public disillusionment.

The predictability of how political parties respond to media inquiries seems to be no longer assured. Whereas in the past, for example, the NEOS were considered highly responsive and the FPÖ tended to block requests. These patterns of behaviour are increasingly converging. This political disregard for journalistic claims is viewed as problematic and a shift in communication strategy.

"There are always politicians who block difficult inquiries, regardless of which party they belong to. In the past, you could always say 'alright, from the NEOS, there's always a lot coming back and from the FPÖ, there's nothing coming back. Now, they're all the same.'" Attention Worker, alternative media journalist

Disinformation and Trust

A recurring issue identified was the deliberate imitation of authoritative figures to spread misinformation in legacy media and online. One example mentioned was the commodification of academic titles, such as "doctors" who obtained their degrees under dubious circumstances abroad, undermining legitimate expertise and contributing to public confusion. A further challenge identified is the lack of objectivity and factual grounding in dialogue, particularly in the context of the climate debate. This issue is considered so severe that it is seen as posing a threat to democracy itself, due to the erosion of a shared foundational consensus.

"Any discussion that begins without a shared understanding in the climate issue – meaning the scientific facts – is pretty pointless. If it's just exchanging opinions, it would only lead to divisions, and then it's nearly impossible to find consensus or have a real dialogue. This is a serious threat to democracy.

Attention Hacker, activist

Moreover, emotionality was identified as a dominant force in decision-making processes, particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Scientific evidence was perceived to be sidelined in favour of politicised expressions of frustration, or instrumentalisation for political or financial gain. In addition, reluctance to engage in certain sensitive debates from within institutions was attributed to the intense polarisation of these topics. Participants noted internal divisions that hinder institutional statements or action.

Values and Principles

The focus group discussions highlighted the threat posed by hate speech and targeted attacks on individuals, particularly in polarised debates such as abortion. One participant recounted harassment including doxxing, showing how activism can provoke violent responses that limit safe participation in discourse.

"We have no institution to back us, no editors, nothing. So, whenever we face hate, it is always directed at us personally."

Attention Magnet, journalist

While corporations are confronted with hate messages as collective entities, influencers said that hostility strikes them directly as individuals without intermediary institutions to absorb or deflect it. It is up to them to decide how best to respond to hatred.

The importance of dialogue was repeatedly affirmed across discussions. *"We want to start a dialogue with each other. We're all here to talk, after all."* (Attention Hacker/Worker, NGO staff member.) Participants stressed the value of respectful engagement even amidst disagreement. While consensus was not expected, a possibility for maintaining conversation

in all circumstances was seen as ethically essential. This requires abilities and willingness for listening and acknowledging differences of opinions:

"I believe, there is a basic consensus among us today that we all want to have more dialogue: listening to one another, accepting that social issues are not often black or white but that grey areas exist."

Attention Worker, expert

Spaces that facilitate such an interaction were called for by the participants, for instance, discussion forums and other venues that resist divisive speech. Those tend to be missing at the moment.

"Talking brings people together. You can have an informed discussion, even if you don't always agree with others. The aim is not that we all end up holding hands. Currently, there are no forums where such discussions take place."

Attention Hacker, activist

There was a clear aspiration in the focus groups to have discursive and dialogical spaces established that would facilitate constructive and content-driven exchange. Participants' visions stood in contrast to formats that prioritise sensationalism or emotional appeal over substantive engagement, often catering to audience entertainment rather than fostering meaningful dialogue. They noted that many useful discussions take in small circles or exclusive space, such as people's homes or bars. Even if these discussions tend to be enjoyable and productive, they are not designed for getting public attention. This opens a challenge for how to anchor these discussions to the broader public sphere.

Ideas regarding the calibre of journalism surface against this backdrop. Journalists were held highly influential for bringing questions and ideas of social relevance to public attention. They also carry great responsibility in contextualisation of public issues as well as securing factual precision and representational fairness. Meeting these ethical obligations would require better resourcing and institutional safeguards for journalists (Attention Hacker, activist). It was evident that journalism is essential for comprehensive reporting, albeit there were differing opinions about, whether journalists can or should actively support a given social cause or expressing their personal viewpoints without losing credibility.

Constructive, solution-focused methods were viewed as a means of circumventing contentious and emotionally charged environments for debate. However, constructive reporting is difficult, and it requires a nuanced perspective, as well as extensive, in-depth research and involvement with a subject.

"We should, of course, discuss the problems, but we must also publish concrete solutions and talk about possible answers to our questions. This is difficult, as there already are so many choices."

Attention Worker, expert

The notion solutions-oriented journalism was referenced in the focus groups, but the participants reminded that such concepts may be used as empty buzzwords and a form of window dressing: *"So, that someone can come to public as a progressive and solutions-focused person"* (Attention Worker, former journalist).

Responsibility and Accountability

A strong emphasis in the focus group discussions was placed on media and journalistic responsibility. Fact-checking and thorough reporting were considered not merely as professional standards but also as moral imperatives. Ensuring information accuracy through direct verification was seen crucial for avoiding misinformation. For journalistic work ethics, it is also thought to be crucial to include a wide range of voices, institutions and actors. In this regard, the absence of organisational oversight on social media provides actors in those platforms a space free from accountability.

"On social media, there is no real editorial accountability. As a private individual, you may be held accountable for your actions, but since you can access the internet anonymously – you can just forget it."

Attention Worker, NGO staff member

Participants reflected upon the limitations of relying solely on individual or institutional agency to uphold media integrity. There was a shared concern that systemic issues are overlooked and that expecting journalists to bear the burden of responsibility without structural support is insufficient. The concern pointed to a lack of consistent political will to address foundational challenges in the media system, suggesting a need for more robust and sustained policy interventions.

"Media policy must address the root cause of the problem. You can't just rely on journalists' inner strength and sense of responsibility. Unfortunately, basic problems are rarely addressed consistently in Austria."

Attention Magnet, media persona

Another key concern calling for policy interventions pertained to the inadequate protection of journalists, particularly in the face of physical and verbal attacks during public demonstrations. Participants noted that the lack of political response to such incidents undermines press freedom and discourages independent journalism.

"Right-wing or right-wing extremist organisations have attacked journalists at demonstrations and there has been no intervention from politicians or politics itself to further safeguard press freedom."

Attention Hacker, activist

Finally, the discussions revealed a nuanced stance on regulation in the digital sphere. While there was support for stronger action against online hate speech, participants cautioned against excessive surveillance that could infringe on privacy rights, reflecting a demand for targeted, rights-respecting interventions that address harmful content without compromising civil liberties.

"We don't need more regulation when it comes to online surveillance, because people are posting their hate and incitement under their real names on Facebook and similar platforms. What we need isn't more screening in this regard, but simply more proactive measures against it. Regulation is necessary, but not at the expense of privacy protection, which is already often difficult to maintain." Attention-Deprived, gender/sexual minority initiative

Education and Media Literacy

Education was widely recognised as both an individual right and a structural necessity. It was portrayed as a safeguard against unemployment and social exclusion. Targeted investments in the education of marginalised populations, such as migrants, were seen as essential to long-term equity and social cohesion.

Participants also called for stronger integration of media literacy into school curricula, arguing that teachers themselves must be equipped with the relevant competencies. This was seen as a preventative strategy against misinformation and digital vulnerability (Attention Worker, journalism student). This requires an adaption of the pedagogical trainings.

"Teachers are supposed to teach [media literacy], but perhaps don't have the skills themselves [...]. I believe that pedagogical programs must also be designed [...] to pass this on to young people in a comprehensive way."
Attention Worker, journalism student

In the context of democratic societies, the role of the state in shaping media policy and public communication is a recurring theme. Focus group discussions revealed a strong expectation for that the state should actively foster media literacy and ensure transparency in media financing as part of its democratic mandate. These responsibilities are seen as foundational to initiating and sustaining public dialogue on media-related issues.

"Given that in representative democracy citizens delegate authority to elected representatives, they have a responsibility for creating proper designs and frameworks for media literacy programs. They are also obliged to discuss these matters with other stakeholders"
Attention Worker, counter media journalist

Finally, participants called for regulatory intervention regarding social media platforms and algorithmic transparency. According to participants, the European Commission consistently

expresses concern regarding technological advancements, yet its regulatory responses tend to lag those of other global regions. Australia's implementation of a social media ban for individuals under the age of 16 was cited as a commendable example of proactive policymaking. The early failure to regulate digital technologies was described as an ethical oversight with enduring consequences. The current rise of AI further amplifies this need, demanding proactive governance to mitigate societal risks. The EU AI Act is seen as one of many regulatory measures that are or would be “simply needed” (Attention Hacker, political literacy initiative), even if its content is not evaluated by the focus group.

6. Conclusion

This chapter aims to bring together key findings from the Austrian segment of a broader European study on public communication ethics that analyses on non-institutional actors' perspectives to media and communication ethics. The empirical analysis focuses on four actor categories distinguished by differences of their assumed attention capital. The findings shed light on a range of ethical challenges and value tensions that reveal both practical concerns (e.g. misinformation, online hostility, algorithmic visibility) and deeper contradictions in how communication norms, responsibilities and freedoms are understood and negotiated. In what follows, we theme that we find to be most important ones.

Disinformation and Trust

Across actor categories disinformation was cited as a key concern. Participants described it as a structural problem exacerbated by economic logics, political instrumentalization, and the emotional nature of digital discourse. The spreading and increasing influence of disinformation on public opinion was not seen as a byproduct of ignorance of citizens and users alone but as an outcome of deliberate tactical activities aimed at political or economic gain. Especially for the Attention-Deprived and Attention Workers, the overwhelming volume of uncategorised and uncontextualised information had led to growing disorientation from public communication and mistrust of experts and institutions. Meanwhile, even committed communicators said they are struggling to balance simplicity and accuracy in reaching lay audiences, highlighting the ethical tension between truthfulness and accessibility.

Hate Speech and Online Hostility

Hate speech was another pervasive issue, especially affecting the Attention-Deprived and Attention Hackers. These actors reported both verbal and physical attacks, often in response to advocacy for gender, minority, or environmental policies. Many participants criticised politics for their failure to act, while also resisting calls for excessive surveillance.

Right-Wing Threats and Political Manipulation

A particularly grave concern was the rise of right-wing and far-right political actors who actively manipulate public communication through hostile rhetoric attacks and strategic emotionalisation of their messages. These groups have increasingly captured media narratives and exploited platform logics to normalise exclusionary and anti-democratic discourses. Participants reported the chilling effects prompted by polarisation of public communication, leading to self-censorship and withdrawal from debate. At the level of political culture, right-wing populism has contributed to erosion of press freedom, attacks on journalists and repeated accusations of 'censorship' to delegitimise human rights advocacy were all cited as signs of democratic backsliding.

Media Logic and Structural Inequities

Participants across all categories voiced concerns about the growing prevalence of attention economy and its effects on the news media. The click-driven logic of digital and legacy media outlets was seen to reward emotional, polarising content at the expense of nuance, undermining journalistic standards such as verification, fairness, and inclusion. This systemic

issue creates deep asymmetries in public visibility. While Attention Magnets tend to benefit from institutional and algorithmic amplification, Attention Hackers and Attention-Deprived groups said they must actively fight to be heard. Even when invited into public forums, they are often subjected to instrumentalisation.

Accountability and Responsibility

Responsibility was a recurring theme, yet also a site of ambivalence. Journalists, platforms, activists and the democratic state were all seen as bearing responsibility for ethical communication. There was minimal consensus on where that line should be drawn. For example, while Attention Hackers emphasised the moral duty of journalists to take political stances, participants from the Attention Magnets argued this jeopardises objectivity. Similarly, while most agreed on the importance of fact-checking, Attention Workers revealed the impracticality of such ideals under the pressure of limited resources and tight deadlines.

Dialogical Ethics and Emotional Ambiguity

Participants expressed a desire for more dialogical, solution-oriented formats. Yet this ideal was not without disagreements. Attention Hackers, for example, would embrace polarisation as a strategic necessity in driving social change. Meanwhile, others worried that too much emotional appeal would distort rational debate. There was also concern that technical or academic language alienates the broader public, especially in debates around gender or climate. Such reflections expose ambiguities between fostering inclusive dialogue and maintaining clarity, accessibility and legitimacy.

Value Conflicts and Ethical Ambiguities

Throughout the discussions, several key ethical tensions became evident:

- **Exposure vs. Exploitation:** While participants acknowledged the importance of public visibility and broader reach for socially relevant issues – such as gender-based violence or minority rights – they also raised ethical concerns about the potential for retraumatisation, unwanted identification, and the exploitation of vulnerable individuals. This tension was especially evident in discussions about media coverage that exploit personal stories for attention or political messaging without adequate safeguards or consent. Participants also criticised the tendency of such reporting to focus on individual cases while neglecting the underlying systemic problems, thereby limiting public understanding of structural injustice.
- **Dialogue vs. Strategic Polarisation:** Participants expressed a widespread commitment to dialogue as democratic ideal, emphasising respectful communication across political and social divides. However, this was contrasted by perspectives – mainly among Attention Hackers – that defended polarisation as a legitimate tactic to challenge entrenched norms, provoke public awareness and catalyse change. However, there was a shared concern that polarising strategies by political actors might deepen social division and hinder mutual understanding.
- **Accuracy vs. Accessibility:** Communicating complex or contested issues – such as climate science, gender identity or vaccination – raised difficult questions about the proper uses of language. Participants working in education, science communication, and advocacy noted

the challenge of balancing linguistic precision (e.g. inclusive or technical terminology) with accessibility for general audiences. While ethical communication demands sensitivity to marginalised perspectives and evolving vocabularies, participants worried that overly specialised or academic language can alienate broader publics, leading to disengagement or misunderstanding.

- **Objectivity vs. Advocacy:** A recurring debate emerged around the ethical responsibilities of journalists and content producers in an increasingly polarised and politicised environment. Some participants, particularly from institutional or traditional media backgrounds, defended the principle of journalistic objectivity – valuing detachment, neutrality, and fact-based reporting. Others, particularly from activist or alternative media circles, argued that remaining neutral in the face of injustice or misinformation amounts to complicity. For them, reasoned advocacy was not only legitimate but an ethical imperative, even if it challenged conventional norms of professional journalism.
- **Public Interest vs. Financial Dependence:** Participants voiced deep concerns about the ethical implications of media financing structures – particularly the growing dependence of both public and private media on state funding and advertising revenue. While public support is seen as essential for sustaining quality journalism, many feared that such financial arrangements compromise editorial independence and enable political influence, especially from the right-wing populism. In private media, click-based advertising and sensational contents were perceived to erode journalistic standards and displacing coverage of less marketable but socially important topics. The tension between maintaining a financially viable media system and upholding its democratic role emerged as a core dilemma, with repeated calls for more transparent, accountable and independent funding mechanisms.

These tensions suggest that ethical communication is rarely about clear-cut universal rules but involves navigating competing principles in concrete, often in high-stakes contexts. Participants displayed remarkable reflexivity in this regard, frequently voicing their own uncertainty and disagreements about what responsible communication entails.

In sum, the findings invite a flexible, situated understanding of communication ethics as a lived and contested practice, rather than prescribing fixed norms. Efforts to improve the quality and fairness of public communication should therefore address not only individual behaviours but also the structural conditions – economic, political, technological – that shape what can be said, by whom and with what consequences.

A progressive communication environment in Austria would require pluralistic media structures, better regulation of platforms, improved institutional accountability and stronger protections for those most vulnerable to exclusion or harm. Yet it also demands recognition of the ethical labour already being done by non-professional actors – those navigating complexity, conflict and contradiction in an effort to speak, connect and be heard.

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Annex 1. Overview of Focus Group Discussions

	Involved actor categories	Description of the case/ discussion	Participants (n)/ Gender (M/F/X)	Session date
1.	Attention Magnets, Attention Hackers and Attention Workers	A discussion on climate communication and activism featuring activists and climate education specialists and representatives from car clubs, electromobility initiatives and local government.	8 6, 2, 0	Apr 2, 2024
2.	Attention-Deprived and/or Attention Workers	Women working in organisations, initiatives and institutions that support survivors of assault discuss their experiences with social media and news coverage, especially unethical reporting practices (e.g. sensationalism, bias) and the lack of accessible information for both victims and offenders.	6 0, 6, 0	Jun 26, 2024
3.	Attention Magnets, Attention Workers and/or Attention-Deprived	Professionals working with migrant workers discuss how marginalised ethnic groups are represented in public discourse and the media.	6 1, 5, 0	Jul 3, 2024
4.	Attention Hackers and Attention Workers	Environmental activists explore strategies for coping with online hate and misinformation, reflect their own communication ethics and discuss how politicians appropriate of their efforts.	3 1, 2, 0	Jul 29, 2024
5.	Attention Workers and/or Attention Magnets	Freelance journalists and editorial staff, particularly from alternative media , discuss the reasons behind and consequences of the lack of public communication on media policy issues.	8 6, 2, 0	Jul 31, 2024
6.	Attention Hackers and/or Attention Workers	A discussion on abortion , featuring participants with differing perspectives, addressing issues such as polarised reporting, information, personal attacks on social media, doxing, threats and a lack of support system for pregnant women.	8 1, 7, 0	Sep 5, 2024
7.	Attention Workers and/or Attention Hackers and Attention-Deprived	People seeking to clear up misinformation and conspiracies talk about knowledge gaps, media literacy, a lack of resources and political or economic influences.	6 5, 1, 0	Oct 29, 2024
8.	Attention Magnets and Attention Workers	A discussion on election coverage : online and traditional reporters/ commentator discuss online harassment, the role of inflammatory buzzwords (e.g., feminism, opposing right-wing politics), public engagement strategies and appreciation for their work in political reporting.	9 7, 2, 0	Oct 30, 2024
9.	Attention Hackers and Attention Magnets	A group of artificial intelligence professionals discuss the misleading public depiction of AI, the challenge of knowledge transfer and regulation and the question of who should talk about AI in public communication.	6 3, 3, 0	Dec 9, 2024
10.	Attention Workers and/or Attention Hackers and/or Attention-Deprived	Professionals working in departments and projects advocating for women and non-binary individuals talk about the problems with the media attention structures, ethical dilemmas in their own communication and institutional settings.	5 0, 5, 0	Jan 30, 2025
11.	Attention Workers and Attention Magnets	Academics discuss the public's scepticism towards science and talk about their own experiences in science communication.	5 3, 2, 0	March 5, 2025
TOTAL			70	