DIACOMET

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

Grant agreement no 101094816

Deliverable D3.3

Focus Group Country Report

SLOVENIA

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Summary

This report, focusing on the case of Slovenia 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.

The analysis of focus groups conducted in Slovenia reveals a communication landscape marked by declining trust, ethical concerns, and strategic, often defensive participation in public discourse. Focus group participants described the Slovenian media environment as fast-paced, fragmented, and polarized. Therein they noticed a shift from in-depth reporting toward click-driven journalism. They viewed social media as both necessary and harmful; while the use of such platforms may enhance public visibility, it can also amplify disinformation, hate speech and bias brought by algorithms.

Participants expressed frustration with the nature of public communication, viewing democratic engagement as symbolic and disconnected. Strategic silence and withdrawal were mentioned as coping mechanisms across attention categories. Ethical values such as integrity and transparency were emphasised, especially by actors with more attention capital, such as influencers and podcasters, who acknowledged their responsibility in shaping discourse and fostering accountability.

Theoretical Background

A shared research framework developed collaboratively between the WP3 lead (Tampere University and national research teams 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.

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In today´s hybrid media environment, where public attention functions as a scarce and unequally distributed resource (Citton 2017), the competition for 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—or excluded—in 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 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, we can see that conditions for dialogic communication are eroding, weakening empathy and citizens' capacity for meaningful engagement.

While grounded in theory, the framework also has practical value for empirical research**.** The concept of attention capital (Franck 2011, 2019) enables the identification of analytical actor categories operating occupying different positions within the attention economy and possessing diverse resources, strategies, or means for public participation. Rather than studying the field of professional journalism and the media, the focus in this study is set on civil society actors residing on the periphery of journalism and professional communication (Eldridge 2018; Hanusch and Löhmann 2022). Four categories were conceived to help locating them:

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 strategically manipulating visibility, often from the fringes. (e.g. activists, counter-media outlets)
4. **Attention-Deprived** – Marginalised groups struggling to attain public attention. (e.g. ethnic or cultural minorities, the youth, elderly 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

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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. Discussions 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 allowing teams to adapt it to national contexts. In the chapter 2, each research team will explain their methodological strategies in more detail.

Research Questions 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 peripherical 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?

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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 in general, go beyond the themes analysed in the country reports. For instance, these reports do not include comparative analysis across countries.

In what follows 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 the research setting: 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 one 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. The excerpts from the focus group discussions are translated in English. The translations aim to convey what the participants meant, which means. that they include researchers' interpretations.

1. Introduction to the Country Report on SLOVENIA

This report presents the findings of focus group discussions (N = 11) conducted in Slovenia between March and December 2024, as part of the DIACOMET project's WP3 package. It focuses on participants' views and experiences in three key themes: 1) media environment; 2) public communication; and 3) communication ethics and responsibilities.

Slovenia is a small European country with a population of 2.1 million (Statistični urad Republike Slovenije 2025), located between Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia. It operates

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as a parliamentary democracy with a multi-party system. The media market is also small, highly concentrated and characterised by complex media ownership structures (Milosavljević and Kerševan Smokvina 2022). The state of the Republic of Slovenia founded the public service broadcaster and state-owned press agency and provides various kinds of media support through state advertising and other tools. According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), majority of Slovenians primarily rely on traditional media for political and current affairs news. Media consumption patterns are evolving, however, particularly among younger audiences, where the proportion of those who use social media as a source of media contents has now exceeded those who rely on traditional outlets (OECD 2024).

This report covers focus group participants' attitudes to the media environment, public communication, and communication ethics and responsibilities. The first part of the report presents the summary, theoretical background, methods, and analytical focus. The second gives a general overview of Slovenia, followed by a description of the research setting and framework application. The empirical analysis follows, before the results are presented and organised according to the key themes. They are then further divided into specific sub-themes to cover a broad range of topical dimensions. The report concludes with key findings and outcomes.

2. Research Setting: Applying the Framework

The recruitment strategy was based on the actor categories defined in the WP3 framework, and the identification of groups involved in various aspects and spheres of public communication in the Slovenian context. These groups included influencers, podcasters, advertisers, representatives of the elderly, researchers of online youth violence, academics, NGO representatives, activists, and journalism students. The goal was to assemble diverse participants within each actor category and focus group.

Most discussions were held in intra-category settings, meaning that they included participants from the same or one other category. In some instances, categories overlapped (as shown in Table 1). Although politicians are generally categorised as attention magnets, the focus group included mayors from small municipalities impacted by floods – areas that typically receive little media coverage – making them, in this context, more representative of the attention hackers and workers categories.

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Table 1: Attention category, description of participants, and number of discussions

Actor category	Description of the participants	Number of discussions
Attention magnets	Influencers, podcasters, political activists	3
Attention hackers	NGO representatives dealing with hate speech, environmental activists, mayors of small municipalities, advertisers, political activists	5
Attention workers	Mayors of small municipalities, advertisers, podcasters, journalism students, advocates for sustainability	5
Attention deprived	Representatives of the elderly, researchers of online youth violence	2

The planning and recruitment phase began with the selection of topics and identification of potential participants based on their attention capital and relevance to the study, as determined by the research team. Once identified, potential participants were listed and contacted via email, phone, and occasionally through social media. Up to 30 people were approached per focus group to guard against cancellation, with the aim of confirming attendance of 7 to 8 participants per group.

The recruitment process proved time-consuming, as it required careful consideration of participants' attention capital, their suitability for the topic, and the availability of enough eligible individuals for each group. Challenges included low response rates from official organisational channels, and a general lack of time, staff, and motivation to participate in a voluntary, unpaid and non-public discussion. Recruitment was particularly difficult for focus groups that addressed highly publicised and divisive issues. An example of this was the focus group for the public debate surrounding the referendum on the right to assistance in voluntary end-of-life decisions. Many potential participants were hesitant or fearful to engage, and as a result, the topic was not included in the research.

All participants signed informed consent forms prior to sessions, in which their anonymity was guaranteed. The forms also notified participants that their participation was entirely voluntary, and that they could refuse to answer certain questions or terminate their participation at any time without consequences. In line with the mutual decision of the WP3 research group, participants in this report are identified only by their gender and the function that justified their inclusion in the selected focus group.

Before each focus group was conducted, the researchers explained the objectives and activities of the DIACOMET project and allowed time for questions. The first two focus groups were held in person, but it soon became clear that online focus groups allowed for greater participation. Both formats had their advantages and drawbacks. In-person sessions encouraged more active discussion and debate, and sometimes continued after the official

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session ended, but they also posed recruitment challenges due to higher demands on participants' time and constraints related to location, disability, or age. Online sessions, while more accessible in terms of logistics, made it easier for participants to disengage by leaving early or turning off their cameras.

In total, 11 focus groups were conducted between March and December 2024, with a combined total of 73 participants (see Table 2). The focus groups were conducted in Slovenian and lasted between 60 and 104 minutes.

Table 2: Total number of focus groups and participants

Total number of focus groups and participants	N
Total number of focus groups	11
Total number of participants	73

Participants were diverse, with an age that ranged from 18-24 to 75+. Gender was reasonably balanced: 56% of participants were female, and 44% male (see Table 3).

Table 3: Age group and gender of participants

Age and gender of the participants	Description
Age group	Ranging from 18-24 to 75+
Gender	Female, N = 41, 56% Male, N = 32, 44%

The discussions were audio and video recorded. Transcripts were generated automatically, and a detailed reading of each transcript was conducted before analysis, to correct any mistakes. After data collection was completed, personal data was pseudonymised to ensure focus group participants could not be identified based on their answers. All pseudonymised transcripts were translated from Slovenian to English before analysis.

Empirical Research Setting

The Slovenian research team coded the collected data using MAXQDA software. The content analysis took place in two key stages: managing the data and making sense of the evidence through description and explanation (Ritchie *et al.* 2003).

We used a pre-prepared coding system, which was guided by the research questions followed by three key themes: 1) *media environment* (with a closer look at how participants viewed the media landscape and changes, news and journalism, platforms, and other institutional and noninstitutional actors); 2) *public communication* (focusing on participants' interpretations on democracy, political culture, participation, and their personal strategies

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for engaging in public communication); and 3) *communication ethics and responsibilities* (with a focus on how participants defined communication problems and articulated their endorsed values; responsibilities with regard to regulation and self-regulation).

We coded the focus group transcripts in three steps: open coding, organisation and linking of the codes, and selective coding (Strauss 1987). In this way, we searched for patterns and relationships, generalised them appropriately, and identified broader trends and themes (Neuman 2013).

The subsequent sections present the main findings of the focus group discussions conducted in Slovenia. Each section begins with a brief overview of the national context to help readers understand the social and cultural conditions that shape participants' experiences and perspectives. It is then divided into main sub-themes, researched within the broader themes of the chapters.

3. Experiencing the Media Environment

Slovenia ranked 33rd in the 2025 Reporters Without Borders index, which noted the "legal framework protecting media freedom is generally solid, however the independence of the media and the safety of journalists remain fragile in practice" (Reporters Without Borders 2025). The umbrella media law – the Mass Media Act – is perceived outdated in certain aspects and is currently undergoing its first comprehensive overhaul in more than twenty years, taking into account the provisions of the European Media Freedom Act (Ministrstvo za kulturo 2024).

A recent Civil Liberties Union for Europe report highlights Slovenia alongside Croatia, France, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden as countries with the highest media ownership concentration. This means they risk "limiting the diversity of media voices and increasing the risk that reporting will not be unbiased" (Civil Liberties Union for Europe 2025). The report also notes the problematic use of state advertising funding – "either because of a lack of transparency over its allocation or the clear use of these funds to support only government-friendly media" – and describes hate speech, verbal and physical attacks against journalists, and the use of SLAPPs against Slovenian journalists and media outlets as serious ongoing issues (Civil Liberties Union for Europe 2025). Media owned by or affiliated with political parties are also problematic on both national and local levels (Balkan Free Media Initiative n.d.).

There are two media outlets that perform a public service role in the Slovenian media sector: Radio-Television (RTV) Slovenia, and the Slovenian Press Agency (STA) (Ministrstvo za kulturo 2022).

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There are no formal entry barriers to practicing journalism in Slovenia, and the presence of university-level journalism education, professional associations, and self-regulatory bodies play a key role in shaping and strengthening the professional standards of Slovenian journalism (Milosavljević and Biljak Gerjevič 2024).

The media landscape

Focus group participants discussed the media environment broadly and emphasised several themes. Descriptions of the media environment as "fast", "fragmented" and "polarised" were frequently shared across the attention categories. Some participants identified signs transformation in how the media operate – both in production and editorial value – mentioning shortened news cycles, diminished field reporting, and the newest guiding metric of "clickability". They also noted a structural shift in the digital media environment, where everyone is seemingly a potential broadcaster. Some participants, especially Attention Hackers and Attention Workers, noted this change has democratised content creation but also weakened public trust in mediated communication. These participants also described the wide gap between technical accessibility and actual contents in communication.

> *"I used to beg journalists to publish my writing. Now I just post it. But do people read it? That's another story."*
> Female, women's rights activist

> *"Now anyone with a Facebook profile can be an expert … people trust influencers more than university professors."*
> Male, sustainability advocate

Some participants spoke about a generational divide in media consumption. While younger people gravitate toward short-form, mobile content, older generations still rely on television, radio, and longer formats. They also described differences in how older and younger generations perceive online contents, although their assertions were not unanimous. For instance, some participants from the Attention Deprived category believed that younger generations did not understand some of the newer dangers on the internet, such as deepfakes, and were more inclined to believe online content, while others in the same category thought that older generations had more trust in digital contents and less understanding of digital dangers.

> *"I think we adults are a little behind. We for instance still think photographs are something that reflects reality."*
> Female, academic

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News and journalism

The focus group participants' descriptions of journalism reflect a complex and sometimes contradictory relationship with the news media. On the one hand, there is a strong belief, particularly among Attention Hackers and Attention-Deprived participants, in the power of traditional media to shape political discourse, set the public agenda, and reach wide audiences. Public service broadcasters, in particular, were identified as media actors with the most commitment (and a legal mandate) to serve the public interest.

Despite a general recognition of traditional media's institutional role, frustration over ethical breaches, sensationalism, and superficial reporting was widespread across all attention categories. A participant from the Attention Deprived category introduced a dichotomy within traditional news media, distinguishing between "serious" outlets that aim to inform ethically, and "clickbait" media outlets driven by engagement metrics. This distinction could also be seen in descriptions by participants in other attention categories

> *"Guidelines for media reporting on crisis events have existed for 15 years now. I believe that some progress has been made in this regard, particularly among the so-called serious media, who are receptive to them. Meanwhile, these stories usually start circulating in local and semi-professional media outlets, which chase clicks. The media are trying to find a balance here, I think. An ethical stance is important – but so is the pursuit of clicks and views."*
> Female, academic

Participants frequently criticised the Slovenian media's tendency to exploit human tragedy for short-term engagement. This approach, described by an Attention Magnet as "five minutes of entertainment", was perceived as lacking empathy and social responsibility. Participants made a connection between traditional media and social media contents, describing journalists as using others' content rather than producing their own. They also recognised the general complicity of traditional media in amplifying harmful or manipulative political discourse and described media outlets as echo chambers for hate speech.

> "*Extreme cases of violence are often brought to public attention, circulate widely, and suddenly everyone has an opinion on them. This is where the aspect of ethical reporting – or choosing not to report such events – is extremely important. In other words, the ethical stance of the media. Many times, these situations begin with a video or information – or even speculation about why something happened – spreading on social media, and then the news media simply picks it up. I keep asking myself how to handle this. Should we just let it go? What is the right approach?"*
> Male, political activist

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A recurring concern among Attention Magnets was the frequent violation of consent, particularly regarding the unauthorised use of private images found on social media. Awareness of such practices varied by professional background.

> *"What really upsets me is that journalists do not respect my wishes. For example, they ask me for a group photo, and I tell them no – because my husband doesn't want to be in the spotlight. And then they take the only photo where my husband appears, our wedding picture from Instagram. And that's the one they publish. I find that really appalling."*
> Female, influencer

Traditional media were seen as crucial in amplifying marginalised voices in times of crisis, and in putting pressure on decision-makers. In contrast, social media were often perceived as a source of disinformation in such times. Participants noted, however, that the spotlight from traditional media was often temporary and quickly faded.

> *"During the floods, the media became a very important tool for us to disseminate a lot of credible and appropriate information – information that adhered to all values and rules of communication, from transparency to accessibility of the data or information itself. This has recently become more complicated due to the plurality of sources and especially with the emergence of digital networks. It has become harder to know what to truly believe – which information is created to provoke, to hit a nerve where it shouldn't, and which information is actually relevant and essential for certain people at a given time."*
> Male, mayor of a small municipality

A further point of concern was the decline of local and investigative journalism, particularly the disappearance of regional correspondents from public service media, which was observed by participants living in rural areas of Slovenia. The lack of in-depth, investigative journalism was seen as a structural problem that reflected broader societal shifts toward shorter attention spans and infotainment-driven media practices.

> *"Well-prepared and in-depth coverage of topics – sometimes even a whole show dedicated to just one micro-aspect – could, if it ever happened, certainly generate pressure through journalists' questions. If that pressure were consistent, persistent, and driven by a genuine desire to seek answers, it could have a real impact. But to me, it sometimes feels like, as a society, we've collapsed into this mindset shaped by Instagram or TikTok – it is as if we can focus for 30 seconds, and then our attention drops."*
> Male, journalism student

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Platforms

Numerous civil society organisations, activist networks, and NGOs, representing all but the Attention Magnets category, characterised social media as a "necessary evil" – a tool they are compelled to use to meet their projects' demands or donor expectations, or simply in the absence of socially viable alternatives. They were sceptical of the algorithms governing visibility, and described the "algorithmic squeeze," which gives substantial visibility only to paid content. This dynamic disadvantages organisations without marketing budgets (in this case mostly Attention Hackers and Attention Workers) creating a digital landscape in which public visibility is increasingly commodified.

Participants with more attention capital frequently questioned the tangible impact of their social media efforts. While certain posts – such as protest announcements – were widely shared online, the same few individuals consistently attended protests in person. This disconnect between digital visibility and physical mobilisation was perceived as an illusion of engagement rather than meaningful participation. This observation was mostly shared by Attention Hackers.

Social media platforms were also widely described as sources of misinformation, particularly in times of crisis. Several local officials recalled instances where false warnings had incited panic, and municipal authorities had struggled to counter them through official channels. As a result, (mainly) Attention Magnets and Attention Hackers questioned the trustworthiness of information on social media especially during emergencies. In contrast others (mostly in the groups for Attention Workers and Attention Deprived) highlighted moments when personal communication on digital platforms was more immediate and reliable than information on traditional media.

> *"One event that is probably quite familiar to all of us is the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. What was interesting at the time is that we used every possible means – including our private social media channels, like WhatsApp and Viber. These were messages shared by colleagues who were out there on the ground, at the border, talking to people. These were reliable, verified information that wasn't sensationalised the way the media quickly started reporting it, turning it into a kind of spectacle."*
> Female, anti-hate speech NGO

Concerns about foreign jurisdiction and platform governance also surfaced. The lack of authority to intervene was seen as a dominant issue among Attention Hackers, Attention Workers and the Attention Deprived.

> *"We're mostly approached by desperate school principals asking for certain content to be taken down, and we simply can't remove something that's on Facebook. Then they ask: 'Who could do that?' And you have to explain –*

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> *literally – that no one can. These are matters beyond reach, with jurisdiction completely outside our control, and there's very little we can do. To some extent, yes, education and awareness can help. But at the end of the day, people understandably want concrete action – and sadly, that's extremely difficult. The resources available for us are very limited, and it all leads to this sense of hopelessness – that nothing can be done."*
> —Female, internet safety NGO

Other Institutional and Non-Institutional Actors

While institutional actors – political leaders, corporations, PR representatives and advertisers – have the means to shape dominant narratives, civil society groups prove to be underfunded, understaffed, and often forced to compromise between public visibility and ethical integrity. Several NGO representatives described how they carried the burden of credibility but lacked access to the same resources with institutional actors. These include well-financed campaigns, media partnerships, and strategic messaging, through which institutional actors dominate the public discourse, especially on politically or economically sensitive issues. In contrast, civil society groups struggle to gain attention in these spaces, often resorting to volunteer labour or single-person communication teams.

> *"There are topics such as nuclear energy, where there is what we might call an organised pressure from various actors. There's a huge number of sponsored PR articles, constant media and social media campaigns – where the struggle is truly ongoing relentlessly. It's practically impossible to respond to all of it in a consistent and well-articulated way. Even though our organisation is relatively large, tackling this issue properly would require truly extensive communication structures – or more people working specifically on this."*
> Male, environmental NGO

Another concern some participants discussed was the issue of greenwashing, where corporations utilised their financial and media power to promote misleadingly positive environmental narratives. While NGOs possess data and critical insight to challenge these claims, they lack the visibility, resources, and sustained communicative capacity to do so effectively.

Finally, participants drew attention to the oversaturation of the current information environment. In an age of abundant channels, content, and branding, capturing public attention has become increasingly difficult. Civil society actors, advertisers, influencers, and activists find themselves competing in an overloaded space where messages are easily overlooked or dismissed.

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> *"The number of media channels and target audiences has grown uncontrollably, alongside a surge in providers, brands, products, and services. I believe that this oversaturation of our environment – not only with information but also with brands, goods, and services – has become so overwhelming that people have started tuning out the messages we are trying to convey. This, I think, is the core issue: we are constantly searching for ways to avoid being ignored, to ensure that our messages are noticed rather than switched off."*
> Female, advertiser

The discourse around non-institutional media actors revolved mostly around influencers and revealed their ascendance from marginal figures towards becoming key actors within the digital media landscape. Once seen as fringe, influencers now occupy a relatively powerful position in shaping trends and norms, consumer behaviour, and even political sentiments. Participants from all attention categories (including influencers themselves) noticed this change and emphasised their growing power, while also observing a dependence on commercial platforms that ultimately mediate their reach and impact.

> *"This is where the power lies now – it's autonomous to some extent, even though it heavily depends on platforms. It's still a rented space; it's not quite like having your own television station, even if I often perceive it as a personal channel. But we all know that everything still depends on the platform – if the platform goes down, everything goes down with it."*
> Male, influencer

Several participants, especially those working in education and child safety, questioned the influence of such figures on younger audiences. They raised concerns about the values and representations they promoted.

> *"Influencers are extremely popular among young people and they are, in fact, role models for the youth. But then, if you start listening to and watching influencers, you notice how they talk. Their language is vulgar, and the ideas they promote are problematic. When I realised this for the first time I did this – several years ago – I was honestly shocked. But then a lot of things started to make sense. It became clear why young people are the way they are. Why boys, for example, internalise these stereotypical ideas about girls and women, about relationships between men and women. It's because they follow these kinds of influencers, and of course, also consume other similar contents that reinforce these ideas. […] And when putting all of this together, you realise that young people are – in my opinion – living in a kind of horrific world online. It's a violent world. A world full of lies and*

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> *all kinds of misinformation. It's certainly not easy for them. That much is clear."*
> Male, internet safety NGO

The term "influencer" itself generated ambivalence among this group of participants, which mostly comprised Attention Magnets and Attention Workers. While some influencers accepted it as a professional label, others rejected the term in favour of "content creator", as the latter encompasses a broader scope of work. Many saw themselves not only as entertainers or marketers, but also as educators. In this sense influencers (and also podcasters, who identified themselves as content creators) often discussed their accountability and the moral ambiguities that arose in their work.

> *"An entrepreneur featured on my podcast openly and harshly attacked a competitor using very derogatory language. Whether this was fair or not is not for me to judge. However, after the recording ended, we looked at each other and seriously questioned whether it was appropriate to publish that part or not."*
> Male, podcaster

Influencers also spoke about the emotional and psychological toll of their labour. They described the demand for constant content production, real-time interaction, and maintain relevance as exhausting, and explained that their work was often invisible to outsiders.

> *"Many influencers burn out. The real challenge is not to gain followers quickly – but to stay interesting over the years."*
> Female, influencer

4. Engaging with Public Communication

Slovenia is classified as a liberal democracy, where elections are formally free and fair. The Constitution enshrines civil liberties, notably freedom of speech (Article 39). Public participation operates through direct democracy tools like referendums, although civic engagement shows mixed levels of turnout in different types of elections. Political participation was characterised by low turnout in the 2024 European elections (43%) but saw significant surge in the 2022 national vote (71%). Thes shifts in the popular vote reflect fluctuating trust in politics (Državna volilna komisija 2025).

Public confidence in institutions remains modest, with only 28% of the population expressing high or moderate trust in the government, compared to the OECD average of 39% (OECD 2024b). Slovenians place more trust in other people (58%), the police (52%), and the judicial

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system (41%), while around a third of the population reports high or moderately high trust in the local government (38%) and the national civil service (30%). Political parties (14%) and news media (26%) are rank even lower and are thus reportedly the least trusted institutions (OECD 2024b).

Even though in quantitative terms the civic space is dynamic, with civic engagement spanning multiple grassroots initiatives and NGOs that address a range of topics, these organisations often operate under poor financial conditions and rely on personal commitment. The Slovenian civic space was therefore rated as "narrowed" by the national NGO umbrella network, which cited room for improvement in the areas of "cooperation, dialogue, and participation between civil society and government" (CNVOS 2024). In what follows the analysis on the focus group participants' views of public communication break into three sub-themes: 1) democracy and political culture; 2) participation; and 3) personal strategies.

Democracy and political culture

The participants' views revealed a shared disappointment over the "symbolic" nature of Slovenian democracy – many participants from all attention categories expressed it as something performed, but not truly practiced. Civil society representatives (mainly Attention Hackers) ascribed themselves a role in filling this democratic void but acknowledged that they often encountered political and cultural resistance.

The broader political culture was widely regarded as performative, childish, and aberrant from common sense. Rather than enabling thoughtful public participation, it rewards provocation and spectacle, thereby generating a climate of political alienation. Even statements by civically engaged citizens showed a low level of trust in political processes and actors. Several participants described the tone of Slovenian political discourse as emotionally immature, inappropriate and consequently harmful.

> *"Just look at Twitter – the leader of the opposition, or the Prime Minister's Instagram. It's clearly inappropriate and unserious, to say the least. I could go on, but the point is: why are they doing it? Because they've seen it happening elsewhere too. They're not the ones who came up with this approach—but it's still a bad look in public life."*
> Female, journalism student

Many observed that politicians carried negative communication patterns to the broader public, both through social media and traditional media outlets.

> *"I believe we have an issue at the societal level. We need to ask: How does communication between public figures work? I'm thinking mainly of politicians, and the kind of communication that ends up on television – like clips from parliament, where they always show the juiciest parts. Those get*

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> *mirrored by parents, and they end up talking and behaving in the same way. And of course, children, even when they're still in a stroller, are observing all of this. So, how can we expect children to be kind to each other if so many adults are verbally aggressive toward one another most of the time?"*
> Male, youth internet safety NGO

Participation

Participants across attention categories and NGOs described how they often had to operate with limited resources and heightened emotional labour. Their decisions about whether to participate in issues of public importance were therefore evaluated against the energy and team capacity available. The use of social media was commonly mentioned as a valuable but resource-draining activity, whose thoughtful participation called for serious prioritisation. This suggests a form of "strategic participation", where involvement depends on careful consideration over sustainability and personal well-being.

> *"When you're running on pure activist energy, you have to make decisions. You only have so much energy and only so many people, so you have to choose where are you going to dedicate your efforts to at any given moment. That's not to say that social media hasn't brought us a lot good. After all, many students have reached out to us via social media – even some who later went public contacted us through those channels, which enabled us to talk with them. So it is important to have that channel. But ultimately, you have to judge how much energy you really have for it."*
> —Female, women's rights activist

For some participants (especially from Attention Workers and Attention Deprived categories), withdrawal from public discourse had become a strategic choice. This is either because of fears of hostility and public attack, or a lack of organisational capacity.

> *"As silly as it may sound, as a future journalist, I have to be careful about what I'll say and what I'll post, because a discrediting moment can come up years down the line. You also have to be cautious in public, because you never know what might happen or what someone might dig up. I think we, as journalists, we need to be especially mindful of that."*
> Female, journalism student

At the institutional level, public participation is frequently limited by structural inefficiencies. Municipal leaders who dealt with the consequences of devastating floods described how political promises – often tied to media appearances – shifted responsibility to local governments, without the necessary support to follow through. They also described how state-level bureaucracy could act as a bottleneck, delaying implementation.

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> *"The sheer number of promises was overwhelming. Every time someone came around, especially when a photo opportunity was needed, there were promises – everything would be possible, everything would get done. But those promises were very quickly passed on to the municipality: 'The municipalities will take care of it; that's what they're there for'. And while they said, 'We will help them', that part of the quote somehow disappeared."*
> —Male, mayor of a small municipality

Personal strategies

The participants' personal strategies for engaging in public communication mostly related to managing hostile and hate speech online. Participants often shared their insights of when and how to respond to negative comments – when to let the communication stand on its own, when to engage into dialogue, and when to block commenting or specific profiles altogether. They offered a range of solutions that reflected specific cases.

> *"In the seven or eight years I've been at this association, we hadn't encountered any hate speech or even offensive remarks until about two years ago, when the [name of movement] appeared. That's when it started. We discussed at an internal meeting how to respond, and someone suggested: 'Let's delete them, block them!' But I said: 'Then they'll just go after us through other media platforms.' I suggested that we would leave all those comments up on our website, our Facebook page, and our Twitter account – but not to react. Let's not pour oil on the fire or try to extinguish it with gasoline. We did this, and it turned out to be very effective."*
> Male, NGO for elder rights

One of the most prominent themes across focus groups and attention categories was the rise of strategic silence and withdrawal, either generally or in connection to specific topics that the participants deemed divisive. The decision to refrain from commenting (either on specific issues or in general) was made to conserve energy or maintain mental health; to prevent burnout. IN the case of Attention Magnets and occasionally Attention Hackers, withdrawal was motivated by sustaining the audience of followers intact. Influencers and podcasters, in particular, often stated that they avoided political commentary in general. Those with more online influence and attention capital spoke of how to balance their private and professional lives when sharing information.

Participants with organisational background, or those presenting themselves as personified organisations aimed to manage their public appearances in online communication. Some of them said they deliberately adapted their tone in connection to distinct audiences, and were thoughtful in their messaging.

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On the organisational level, participants described protective strategies for engaging in public life – for instance, choosing fewer themes for commentary rather than constantly posting, reacting, and advocating. Participants across attention categories displayed an awareness of platform-specific communication tactics and adjusted their contents and tone to match the characteristics of specific platforms.

5. Communication Ethics

Communication ethics and freedom of expression in Slovenia are primarily governed by the Constitution (Article 39), the Mass Media Act, and self-regulatory bodies like the Journalists' Honour Court (Novinarsko častno razsodišče 2025), which handles complaints and upholds the journalistic Code of Ethics (Kodeks novinarjev Slovenije 2025).

Ethical guidelines for influencers and digital creators are still emerging. A relatively recent example is the Guidelines for Influencer Marketing, prepared in 2020 by the Slovenian Advertising Chamber (Slovenska oglaševalska zbornica 2020). Media literacy and civic education efforts include programs by national authorities, NGOs and educational initiatives that address online safety, misinformation, and hate speech.

In cooperation with the journalistic profession, civil society and the national authorities have developed numerous guidelines for ethical reporting on, for example, children, suicide, domestic violence, and violence against women (Novinarsko častno razsodišče et al. 2014; Društvo SOS telefon za ženske in otroke—žrtve nasilja and Društvo novinarjev Slovenije 2016; Nacionalni inštitut za javno zdravje 2025). The enforcement of such guidelines, however, largely depends on individual or editorial judgement.

Disinformation in the country often exploits public fears and social inequalities, converting them into mistrust and hostility toward marginalised groups for political or economic gain. It typically distorts real events or concerns through misleading contexts or outright falsehoods. Health and climate misinformation comes mainly from activist groups, while anti-migrant and human rights-related disinformation is primarily spread by right-wing politicians and their media networks (EU DisinfoLab 2025).

IN what follows participants' views on communication ethics will be described against four distinct sub-themes: 1) communication problems; 2) endorsed values; 3) responsibilities; and 4) regulation and self-regulation.

Communication problems

In participants' discussions about communication problems, they most often mentioned widespread hate speech and the rise of disinformation and raised questions of how to deal with these issues. One of the major communication challenges for civil society organisations

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is to address frequent and repetitive discrediting attacks, often circulated by politicians with a concrete political goal in mind.

> *"We face recurring accusations of being parasites living off public money. These usually involve listing how much funding we had received from the public budget, but without the context. That particular narrative has become so repetitive and worn out that we don't even respond to it anymore. In the meantime, we do try to respond when there's a legitimate concern behind the comment, and we feel that it might be something that bothers more people. In those cases, we believe that responding can help raise awareness, educate, and improve the quality of information people have."*
> Female, environmental NGO

Focus group participants from all attention categories described and compared tactics for engaging with, responding to, or ignoring such attacks. They highlighted that the decision (even in organisational environments) depended on individual judgement – sometimes they ignored or laughed off attacks; other times, they tried to seize them as educational opportunities.

> *"We have quite a bit of experience with this, but honestly, nothing is written down. Most of the time, it's entirely up to the person dealing with the situation at that moment. Sometimes attacks are ignored, sometimes we quietly make fun of it, and other times we actually respond – because it opens an opportunity to give public education. 'Okay, this one is worth replying to, as it might be helpful to someone. It helps to make this decision, when you can clearly see where that anger is coming from and whether there is a real and legitimate concern or doubt behind it."*
> Male, sustainability NGO

Many participants also highlighted the "false" nature of the online environment, where disinformation can spread with the help of traditional media outlets. Some noted that given that there is an over-saturation of fake news that erodes public trust in all information sources, there is also a need for more responsive and credible media channels and public service media to address this.

> *"The problem with fake news – if we can call it that – is that it undermines the credibility of all information, including that which isn't fake. Some people don't think twice before publishing a piece of news even if it later turns out to be false. When there's too much of this kind of content, it becomes impossible to determine which piece of news people should respond to. This leads us into a situation where everyone is simply confused. We no longer know what's true, what's correct, and whether we're causing*

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> *more panic, or people just start ignoring all the news completely. And that can be even worse than trying to filter through the information. What we really need is a media outlet that can promptly and accurately debunk such news – especially now, when disinformation spreads like wildfire across social media."*
> Male, mayor of a small municipality

A recurring ethical dilemma for educators and digital safety advocates is when and how to raise awareness about emerging risks – such as deepfakes – without enabling harmful behaviour. Focus group participants, mainly in the Attention Deprived category, described how communicating complex threats too early or without care can backfire, as that would lend tools for misuse rather than protection.

> *"One major ethical problem we face is when to start raising awareness about specific new risks or emerging issues. At the moment, it's artificial intelligence. When is the right time to start talking about deepfakes – explaining how to identify them and understand where they were created? How to talk about it without inadvertently giving people the very ideas from them to misuse? When do we cross the line from awareness-raising to unintentionally enabling harmful behavior?"*
> Male, online safety NGO

Endorsed values

Some participants highlighted integrity and transparency as fundamental ethical values in their communication practices. These were related to the use of artificial intelligence and upholding the norms of self-regulation (in cases of advertisers), or regarding the general nature of discourse in the public sphere (NGO representatives). Participants across attention categories emphasised the importance of consistency and honesty and reflected on how specific digital platforms supported or challenged these values.

> *"Professionalism can sometimes be quite a challenge in communication – especially on platforms like Twitter back when it had a strict character limit, and similar formats. The real question is: how much simplification or reduction of a message is acceptable, if our remit is to educate? Another basic ethical principle that I believe we all can apply is integrity. We are not supposed to lie when we communicate. Even if we change our positions, we can explain why we did so. We should be consistent, not saying one thing to this audience and something else to another. I think most of the moral or ethical principles we follow are kind of embedded in the background—we just don't consciously think about them all the time."*
> Male, environmental NGO

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For public-facing individuals with the most attention capital (like influencers and podcasters), accountability and awareness of impact emerged as key guiding principles. They described disclosing advertising partnerships as a basic condition for being an influencer or podcaster and reflected on how their influence might shape public behaviour, especially among younger audiences.

> *"I believe the basic precondition is that advertising partnerships must be disclosed – that's the foundational aspect for any kind of legitimacy, and for everything else that follows. And I think that in Slovenia, this is now being clearly emphasised. The second thing, as I've mentioned before, is that I spend a lot of time thinking about influence. I know I have an impact on how viewers behave, and I ask myself where that influence might lead."*
> —Male, influencer

Responsibilities

Those with the most attention capital emphasised a strong sense of personal responsibility in the management of their online spaces, but participants across sectors stated that ethical communication required self-awareness, accountability, and regard for consequences.

> *"I see my presence in the public space as a kind of shop window, and I'm out there shouting from it all day. The people who gather in front of that window – they're essentially in my responsibility. If a fight breaks out there, I'll be the one calling the police or stepping in to break it up. I no longer tolerate anything that even smells like hate speech – I don't engage, I just delete and block. I don't even reply to anything anymore."*
> Male, influencer

The expressed views denote an understanding their "responsibility to the public". This was particularly seen in influencers and podcasters, who explained how they chose guests and advertisers. Participants from these groups often described how they avoided showcasing overly extremist or even generally political ideas, mainly to avoid negative backlash.

> *"I don't like it when guests with somewhat extremist views are invited just to gain a bit more public attention. I try to avoid that and make sure that the guests would have some credibility, and that the things they say are not ethically questionable – also considering sponsorships. I make an effort to work with companies that reflect my values and that I can somehow connect with the podcast."*
> Female, podcaster

Many participants spoke of emotional and ethical self-awareness as an integral part of ethical communication (especially online) in the management of their own impulsive

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reactions; considered the public visibility of their statements; and reflected on their potential impact: i.e., consciously "thinking twice".

Journalists and editors were also seen to hold heightened responsibility because of their power to shape public perception. Some participants criticised the tendency of given media outlets to obscure responsibility behind editorial anonymity or sensationalism. Participants also discussed institutional responsibility and expected government bodies and public institutions to engage with citizens in a transparent, respectful, and responsive way.

Regulation and self-regulation

Many participants preferred flexible self-regulation over rigid formal procedures, especially in civil society and NGO contexts, and expressed the need for general ethical frameworks or guiding values to help navigate communication challenges as they arose. Some supported the idea of a simple, repeatable structure – such as a decision tree – for addressing frequently encountered issues related to online platforms and hate speech.

> *"What we'd need, if anything, are some guidelines. A general framework that defines the values we bring into these situations, because every case is different. They're rarely that similar or easy to categorise. Fortunately, these situations aren't as frequent as these discussions might suggest. But yes, generally speaking, we're NGOs, so we don't really have the time to predefine procedures or write rules for every little thing. By nature, we prefer fewer rules, and we respond as things come up. I'm not sure we'll ever actually get to the point of having everything formally written down."*
> Male, environmental NGO

The participants' experiences also revealed a perceived gap in systemic regulation and early education, particularly in preparing young people for responsible digital behaviour.

> *"In schools and academic environments, the focus is still very much on grades. Employers and society in general are increasingly encouraging teamwork, effective communication, and proper problem-solving, but are we actually teaching young people these things? When it comes to the online world, do young people even get any guidance when they receive their first phone? Do they learn what good online communication etiquette is about?"*
> Male, online safety advocate

Participants from spheres managed by some form of self-regulation (e.g., advertisers) spoke of the challenge of cross-border issues in digital society and noted that the speed of technological change required increasingly frequent modifications to their self-regulation.

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Conclusion

The views and experiences that focus group participants shared about the media environment, public communication, and communication ethics reflect trends of declining trust, growing ethical concerns, and a strategic approach to participation. The latter is shaped by limited resources, emotional strain, and challenges of navigating communication landscape that is at times toxic.

Participants described the Slovenian media environment as fast-paced, fragmented, and polarised, and noted a shift from in-depth journalism to click-driven reporting. Two registers were evident in their discussions about the media environment: on an empirical level they described their observations about how they and other people use the media, while on a normative level, they ruminated what the media should or should not do. In professional discourse, this sort of two layered analysis is often treated with suspicion of being inauthentic. The argument in audience studies is usually the opposite. Without an opportunity to combine empirical and normative perspectives to media, critical analysis aimed at clarifying and upgrading standards for communication were not possible at all.

Many thought that the digital transformation had enabled more people to become content creators, but that this had also weakened public trust and blurred the line between expertise and influence. They also expressed concerns about generational divides in media consumption and interpretation. Social media platforms were widely viewed as necessary but problematic, enabling visibility while fostering disinformation and limiting reach through algorithmic pressures. Participants with the most attention capital (such as influencers and podcasters) were recognised as influential new actors, though their role was viewed with both concern and ambivalence, especially regarding their impact on youth and the ethical dimensions of their work. Across all discussions and attention categories, participants emphasised the challenges of sustaining attention and credibility in an oversaturated media landscape.

Regarding public communication, participants generally shared a deep sense of frustration. They often viewed democracy as symbolic, and political discourse as emotionally immature, performative, and disconnected from citizens' real concerns. This has led to widespread distrust in political actors and institutions. Civil society actors and participants with less attention capital, while striving to fill the gaps left by institutional shortcomings, often face systemic resistance, and operate under conditions of emotional exhaustion and limited capacity. Participation in public debates – particularly on social media – is marked by careful prioritisation, with many adopting "strategic participation" to manage their limited resources and protect their well-being. Personal and organisational strategies to navigate public communication are often defensive or selective, and include managing tone, moderating audiences, and adapting content to specific platforms. A notable trend across focus groups was the use of strategic silence, i.e., opting out of divisive or resource-draining debates as a form of self-preservation.

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Participants identified hate speech, disinformation, and politically motivated attacks on civil society as key communication challenges, which resulted in visible consequences. Responses to such attacks varied and they often relied on individual judgement rather than formal protocols. Integrity, transparency, consistency, and honesty emerged as core ethical values across sectors and attention categories. Influencers, podcasters and other public-facing individuals with the most attention capital emphasised the importance of accountability, especially in disclosing partnerships and reflecting on their impact in society. These participants also showed the most awareness of their personal responsibility to shape public discourse, manage online communities, and choose content or guests with care.

It can be concluded that participants' views and experiences reveal a deep distrust in traditional media, social media, and political institutions. While digital platforms have enabled broader participation and visibility, they have also introduced new inequalities, commodified attention, and facilitated the spread of misinformation and hate speech, which influences participants' public communication strategies and tactics. Strategic silence and withdrawal are used as coping mechanisms across attention categories, either to protect personal well-being or to maintain credibility.

Participants cited stronger institutional frameworks, guidelines for specific online situations, ethical education, and responsive public service media as solutions that would support informed and respectful public discourse in this complex communication environment.

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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	Leading **Slovenian influencers** from various social media platforms, discussing their experiences and the ethical dilemmas they face in public communication.	N=6 3-3-0	Mar 14, 2024
2.	Attention hackers	Representatives of NGOs working to address and counter **(online) hate speech**, sharing their experiences and insights.	N=6 0-6-0	Mar 18, 2024
3.	Attention deprived	Representatives of organisations supporting **older people**, discussing ageism in media and public communication.	N=8 2-6-0	Apr 4, 2024
4.	Attention hackers	NGO representatives raising awareness about **environmental issues**, discussing their ethical dilemmas, communication challenges and strategies in public communication.	N=8 3-5-0	Apr 24, 2024
5.	Attention hackers and attention workers	**Mayors of small Slovenian municipalities** severely affected by the August 2023 floods, discussing post-flood media attention, communication with the press, government representatives and local residents about reconstruction.	N=7 4-3-0	May 20, 2024
6.	Attention deprived	Educators, psychologists, researchers and NGO representatives, discussing **youth online violence** and related communication challenges.	N=6 4-2-0	May 30, 2024
7.	Attention hackers and attention workers	**Advertisers, advertising agency representatives and members of the Advertisers' Tribunal** exploring ethical dilemmas related to different target groups, the use of AI tools and emerging communication channels.	N=6 4-2-0	Sep 3, 2024

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8.	Attention workers and attention magnets	**Slovenian podcasters** discussing ethical dilemmas when selecting topics and guests, audience engagement and their position in the broader media environment.	N=8 6-2-0	Sep 9, 2024
9.	Attention workers	**Journalism students** discussing their views on the media industry, working as young journalists, journalism and media studies in Slovenia, public communication, the role of social media, and their own ethical responsibilities	N=6 1-5-0	Dec 5, 2024
10.	Attention workers	**Advocates for sustainability** discussing their views on media coverage and public communication surrounding sustainability issues.	N=6 3-3-0	Dec 10, 2024
11.	Attention magnets and attention hackers	**Political activists and advocates for labour, minority and women's rights** discussing their experiences working with the media, communication strategies and ethical dilemmas in public advocacy.	N=6 2-4-0	Dec 16, 2024
TOTAL			N=73 32-41	