DIACOMET

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

Deliverable D3.3

Focus Group Country Report

SWITZERLAND

DIACOMET

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Summary

This report, focusing on the case of Switzerland 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 presents findings from ten focus group discussions conducted across Switzerland exploring how diverse civil society actors experience and reflect on communication ethics in the contemporary media landscape. Bringing together 49 participants from different regions (German, French, and Italian-speaking), social backgrounds, and communicative roles, the discussions shed light on the values, challenges, and tensions that shape public communication in a multilingual democratic society.

Participants identified a range of ethical concerns—most prominently hate speech, misinformation, superficial media coverage, and the opaque use of artificial intelligence in journalism. Many described the current media environment as increasingly fragmented and unstable, with emotional intensity and algorithmic visibility often taking precedence over dialogue, accuracy, and depth. The risk of public visibility, especially for actors engaged in gender, climate, or migration issues, emerged as a significant barrier to public participation, leading some to adopt self-censorship or strategic withdrawal.

While participants generally endorsed core ethical values such as transparency, justice, and inclusion, they also expressed ambivalence and disagreement about how these ideals should be implemented in practice. Key tensions pertained to the balance between transparency and protection, openness and safety, factual accuracy and emotional resonance, as well as institutional legitimacy and communicative autonomy.

Experiences and interpretations varied according to participants' professional roles, social positions, and linguistic or regional contexts. Institutional actors tended to frame communication ethics in terms of procedural standards and reputational risks, while grassroots communicators and marginalised voices emphasised emotional labour, structural exclusion, and the unequal distribution of attention. Across groups, there was a shared sense that ethical communication is not only about content, but about the conditions under which public expression occurs.

Overall, the findings point to a need to consider communication ethics as a situated, relational, and evolving practice. In an environment where communicative risks are unequally distributed and public attention is increasingly scarce, ethical reflection must account for structural inequalities, lived experiences, and the plural forms of agency through which public discourse is shaped.

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.

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 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?

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 SWITZERLAND

This report presents findings from focus group discussions conducted in Switzerland as part of Work Package 3 (WP3) of the Horizon Europe project *DIACOMET*. It focuses on how diverse civil society actors, perceive and evaluate public communication ethics, the contemporary media environment, and their own communicative agency in a hybrid and multilingual media landscape.

Drawing on a qualitative approach, the report is based on ten focus groups conducted between February and December 2024 by USI research team, encompassing Switzerland's three main language regions (German, French, and Italian). The discussions engaged 49 participants from a wide range of backgrounds, selected to reflect the diversity of communicative roles and civic engagements in the country. Guided by the theoretical and methodological framework shared across the DIACOMET consortium, the focus groups adopted the Timeout Foundation's dialogue method, emphasising inclusiveness, respect, and the value of lived experience.

This report thus offers a grounded and situated account of how ethical concerns are experienced and expressed in public communication by those often positioned on the periphery of institutionalised media and politics.

Switzerland: Political and Social Context

Switzerland is a multilingual and federal state located at the heart of Europe, with a population of 8.8 million people (Federal Statistical Office, 2024). It is officially composed of 26 cantons and four national languages—German, French, Italian, and Romansh— reflecting an embedded cultural and linguistic diversity. About 26% of the population are foreign nationals (Federal Statistical Office, 2024), and approximately 39% use two or more languages in professional or family settings (Federal Statistical Office, 2025). This demographic and linguistic composition is central to understanding the heterogeneity of communicative experiences and public discourse in the Swiss context.

Switzerland's political system is defined by its federalism and direct democracy. The seven-member Federal Council functions as the government and executive branch and ensures representation across linguistic and political groups. This model fosters political stability and consensus, with power distributed across the Confederation, cantons, and communes according to principle of subsidiarity. Citizens regularly participate in decision-making through regular referenda and initiatives, which influence policy. The political landscape in Switzerland is traditionally characterised by both stability and pluralism. However, while the institutional framework remains robust, emotional rifts and political polarisation between

political groups have grown, particularly among supporters of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) and the Social Democratic Party (SP) (Scherrer *et al*. 2025). The report also notes widespread distrust toward marginalised or activist groups, such as asylum seekers, climate campaigners, and pandemic skeptics, signalling a shift in the tone of political engagement and public discourse (ibid. 2025) Overall, the country is an example, if not a "model" (Stämpfli 2007), for the rise of populist political rhetoric, which is not only due to the rise of right-wing parties (Bernhard 2017), but also to direct democratic instruments such as popular initiatives, which provide ideal structure for populist political communication (Ernst, Engesser and Esse 2016).

Switzerland's media landscape is shaped by a complex interplay of structural constraints and sociopolitical particularities. As a small country, Switzerland has a limited media market. Its multilingualism further fragments the market into distinct linguistic regions, making it difficult for media outlets to operate at a national level. Moreover, Switzerland is strongly influenced by foreign media, especially from large neighbouring countries (Germany, France, and Italy) that share its official languages (Künzler 2013). The Swiss media landscape is also undergoing rapid digital transformation, particularly in the field of artificial intelligence. Several outlets have begun piloting AI tools within the framework of newly adopted editorial guidelines (Amigo and Porlezza 2024).

By 2025 Swiss news organisations face mounting economic pressures: private media companies are experiencing multiple rounds of layoffs, while the public broadcaster SRG SSR anticipates budget cuts ranging from 20% to 50% over the coming years (Udris and Eisenegger 2025). At the same time, audience engagement continues to decline, with nearly half of the population consuming only minimal amounts of news and overall trust in news standing at 46% (Udris and Eisenegger 2025).

Switzerland's relevance to the broader DIACOMET project lies in its distinctive combination of institutional stability, civic participation, linguistic plurality, and complex media ecology. The intersecting pressures mentioned above—technological disruption, economic fragility, linguistic segmentation, and public distrust—make the Swiss media ecosystem a revealing site for examining the ethical challenges and communicative dilemmas facing democratic societies today. The focus group data analysed in this report reflect how civil actors in Switzerland perceive and respond to these trends, and how they articulate the tensions between trust, participation, and technological transformation in public communication.

Scope of the Report

This report provides an in-depth, interpretive analysis of how various actors in Swiss civil society perceive ethical challenges in public communication. It focuses on three thematic areas: the experience of the media environment, engagement with public communication, and reflection on communication ethics. These findings are based exclusively on qualitative

data from focus group discussions and aim to illuminate the perspectives and reasoning of the participants.

While the report draws on relevant contextual information, it does not aim to offer a comprehensive media policy analysis or historical overview of Swiss political communication. Rather, it seeks to provide a situated understanding of how ethical concerns, values, and dilemmas are articulated by non-institutional actors engaged in public communication. The findings are specific to the Swiss context but resonate with broader challenges faced by democratic societies navigating the complexities of hybrid media ecosystems and participatory cultures.

More detailed contextualisation and interpretation of media and communication issues will follow in subsequent sections of the report.

2. Research Setting: Applying the Framework

This section details the research process underpinning the Swiss country report for Work Package 3 (WP3) of the DIACOMET project. In line with the shared framework developed by the work package leaders, the Swiss research team applied the concepts of the hybrid media ecosystem and the attention economy to explore how civil society actors experience and reflect upon ethical dimensions of public communication. The following paragraphs explain the practical steps of the research, from participant recruitment to focus group facilitation, and reflect on methodological considerations encountered throughout the study.

Team Members and Tasks

Dr Laura Amigo (postdoctoral researcher): Identification and synthesis of media cases; planning; identification and recruitment of focus group participants; focus group moderation (n=2); observation (n=4); review and correction of automatic transcriptions and translated content; pseudonymisation; empirical analysis; report writing; general coordination.

Valeria Cescato (student assistant): Identification of potential focus group participants; identification of media cases.

Martina Figini (student assistant): Identification of media cases; identification and recruitment of focus group participants; observation (n=1).

Vittoria Jaks (student assistant): Identification of potential focus group participants; identification of media cases.

Dr Colin Porlezza (associate professor): Planning; identification of potential focus group participants; focus group moderation (n=4); supervision.

MSc Laura Pranteddu (PhD student): Identification and recruitment of focus group participants; focus group moderation (n=4); observation (n=3); review and correction of automatic transcriptions and translated content.

Chiara Sozzi (student assistant): Review and correction of automatic transcriptions and translated content; pseudonymisation.

Recruitment Process

The recruitment phase aimed to convene a diverse sample of actors involved in the dynamics of public communication in Switzerland's multilingual and culturally plural society. Target diversity was defined both demographically and analytically, with efforts made to ensure representation across genders, age groups, linguistic regions (German, French, and Italian-speaking Switzerland), and professional profiles. Particular attention was paid to include individuals from different attention capital categories, as defined in the DIACOMET framework: attention magnets, attention workers, attention hackers, and attention-deprived actors.

To achieve this, the Swiss team opted for a combination of case-based and category-based recruitment strategies. Initially, researchers identified ethically salient media cases linked to key societal debates. A short summary of each case was prepared based on newspaper articles, social media posts, and statements from public administration and other organisations. It was then decided to focus on three media cases—specifically, gender equality and gender-based violence, climate change, and the ethical implications of AI in journalism.

These themes were selected to resonate across language regions and actor categories. From this starting point, a database of potential participants involved or interested in the chosen media cases topics was compiled using news articles, institutional documents, web and social media searches. Individuals were categorised according to their attention capital type, professional role (institutional media actors, information and communication technology (ICT) professionals, media literacy professionals, political activists, etc.), and linguistic region. Ultimately, ten focus groups comprising 49 participants were organised between February and December 2024.

The three selected cases (gender-based violence, climate change, and the use of artificial intelligence in the media) were chosen because they emerged as significant current issues in Switzerland's three main language regions at the time of data collection. Their geographical and linguistic transversality indicated that these were concerns shared at the national level, making them particularly relevant for examining ethical dilemmas in public communication. At the same time, these themes align with ongoing international debates, thus reinforcing their relevance not only for Switzerland but also for broader European democratic contexts. We also anticipated that these themes would facilitate the inclusion of participants from different attention capital categories, professional roles, and communicative positions, ensuring heterogeneity in perspectives.

Each theme raises specific tensions between public visibility and vulnerability, legitimacy and marginalisation, or technological innovation and social responsibility; tensions that are particularly revealing in a hybrid media environment.

The case on gender equality referenced recent statistics from the Federal Statistical Office and cantonal reports on gender-based violence, as well as participation in campaigns such as the "16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence" and the annual Swiss Women's Strike held in June, which calls for gender equality (e.g., equal pay) and an end to gender-based violence. Ethical considerations brought up by the case included representing women without reinforcing stereotypes, ensuring inclusivity such as proactively engaging male audiences in the conversation, and navigating ideological divides.

The case on climate change focused on various forms of advocacy for urgent climate action. Participants were invited to reflect on the ethical legitimacy of civil disobedience (e.g., roadblocks). Ethical considerations emerging from this case included the legitimacy of protest methods; balancing urgency with democratic discourse; and representing diverse voices within climate activism.

The case on the use of AI in public communication focused on the growing adoption of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT in news production. Switzerland's cautious policy stance and widespread public skepticism, documented in recent studies by the University of Zurich, framed the discussion. Ethical considerations prompted by this case included transparency in AI use; risks of bias and data misuse; and the erosion of trust in media content.

These cases were not intended as fixed scenarios but as stimulation for the discussions. However, as noted later in the report, they ultimately proved unnecessary as conversations flowed naturally.

To guide the discussions and ensure thematic consistency across focus groups, a series of open-ended questions was developed in connection with each media case. These questions were designed to elicit participants' lived experiences and perceptions regarding their engagement with public communication.

Specifically, the questions addressed the challenges and opportunities encountered when seeking to attract media attention to the focus group's thematic issue. They also explored how participants perceived their position and visibility within a digital-centered communication environment — for example, whether they felt they had received sufficient attention when attempting to bring an issue into the public arena.

Further questions invited participants to reflect on their perceived responsibilities, personal motivations, and the values they sought to defend when raising awareness around a specific topic. Questions also explored the risks and vulnerabilities associated with public exposure, as well as the structural barriers that may prevent certain voices from being heard in public

debate. Finally, space was left at the end of each session for participants to raise any additional concerns or reflections they considered important with regard to public communication.

Recruitment material, including e-mails, information sheets, and consent forms, were adapted from templates provided by the WP leaders. Documents were translated into French, Italian, and German. This allowed us to provide sufficient information when contacting potential participants. Primary recruitment was conducted via email, occasionally followed by phone conversations. Participants were not asked to prepare anything for the focus group discussions.

After the first focus groups, the Swiss team transitioned to requesting online consent form (obtaining ethical clearance from USI's ethics committee for this amendment). This made the collection of consent much easier since the participants could complete it online with much less transaction costs.

Challenges in Recruitment

Despite careful planning, recruitment proved time-consuming and intensive. Not offering financial compensation may have added to the challenges of the recruitment process. However, there was no available budget for such additional means. Approximately one-third of contacted individuals agreed to participate, and last-minute withdrawals occasionally affected group composition. These difficulties were particularly evident when contacting high-profile professionals or influencers, who were often constrained by time or uninterested in participating. Consequently, some focus groups did not reflect the ideal distribution of actor categories initially envisaged. Moreover, the professional networks in each language region were often small, leading to situations in which participants already knew each other – an unanticipated variable with both advantages and drawbacks for group dynamics.

Overall, only about one-third of contacted individuals agreed to participate, often requiring one or two follow-ups. Additionally, several times participants failed to attend without prior notice or explanation, reducing the total number of participants. On one occasion, this led to the cancellation of one focus group when four participants did not show up.

Contacting potential participants was also difficult because we would only have access to generic phone numbers or email addresses. Specific individuals were therefore difficult to reach. Moreover, scheduling meetings with several mid- or high-ranking professionals was particularly complex. Smaller organisations, despite their interest, often lacked the time or human resources to participate. Recruiting social media influencers in each language region was also challenging. The absence of financial compensation may have further discouraged some individuals.

Participants were contacted with the aim of having as many analytical categories as possible within a focus group, as well as achieving gender balance across all focus groups. Due to recruitment difficulties, the final composition of focus groups did not always align with what we had initially planned. This resulted in focus groups that were composed in ways that didn't represent the initial intended makeup (e.g., not having all categories represented in each focus group, or as time went by, we would aim to reach a wider audience).

Focus groups composition and theme distribution

Groups comprised five participants on average, which allowed all participants to express themselves several times (see tables below).

Socio-demographical composition of participants N=49

Age	
18-24	1
25-34	14
35-44	12
44-54	12
55-64	8
65-74	1
Over 75	1

Gender	
Female	28
Male	20
Other/Don't say	1

Educational level	
Highschool	2
Short-cycle higher education	1
Bachelor's degree or equivalent	10
Master's degree or equivalent	27
PhD or equivalent	9

Ten focus groups were distributed across the three cases as follows: *Gender-based violence and gender equality*: one focus group in each of the three main language regions (n = 3). *Climate change:* one focus group in each of the three main language regions (n = 3). *Artificial intelligence* in public communication: one focus group in each language region (n = 3), plus an additional session conducted in English with participants from across all language regions (n = 1). This fourth group was made possible due to a higher number of available and interested participants for this topic. This distribution ensured linguistic balance and allowed for the inclusion of diverse perspectives across Swiss main regions.

Across ten focus groups, participants represented a wide range of actor categories as conceptualised in the WP3 framework. All four attention capital categories (attention magnets, attention workers, attention hackers, and attention-deprived) were represented across the focus groups, though not evenly (for a detailed description see the annex).

"Attention workers" were present in all ten discussions, reflecting the prominent role of individuals who produce content or participate actively in public discourse without institutional backing, such as independent communicators and activists but also media and journalism educators. "Attention magnets"—figures with high visibility or professional prominence—participated in seven focus groups, notably in those addressing the ethics of AI. Profiles include parents of students with public roles, ICT or journalism experts.

"Attention-deprived" actors, often from marginalised or underrepresented segments, were included in six discussions, particularly those focused on gender-based violence and climate advocacy. Profiles included members of small NGOs or volunteer networks, youth climate campaigners. "Attention hackers," characterised by strategic interventions or alternative media practices, were included in three focus groups across different language regions. Profiles include circular economy advocates, members of grassroots or protest movements and organisers of civil disobedience or communication campaigns.

While not every group contained representatives from all four categories, most discussions included two or more categories, enabling a multiplicity of perspectives and fostering a dynamic exchange of experiences and positions.

Interaction and Atmosphere in the Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted online, with an average of five participants per session and an average duration of 77 minutes. Discussions were held in French, German, Italian and, in one instance, English. Focus groups were recorded using Teams which enabled the automatic transcription of discussions, later corrected manually for accuracy. Sessions began with a presentation of the DIACOMET project and a review of the Timeout Foundation's rules for

constructive discussions, which emphasised respectful dialogue, listening, and mutual understanding.

The atmosphere in the focus groups was constructive and collegial. During the focus groups, participants were asked to raise either their virtual hand (using the video conferencing platform's function) or their physical hand on camera when they wished to speak. The facilitator monitored these signals and gave participants the floor accordingly.

This method generally worked well to ensure orderly turn-taking and foster an inclusive atmosphere. Participants expressed their views in a moderate tone and often responded thoughtfully to the facilitator as well as to one another's contributions. However, some limitations were observed: In several cases, discussions leaned towards thematic consensus, and where they occurred, were rarely elaborated. This occasionally limited the depth of ethical reflection. One focus group experienced explicit tensions with a participant's questioning the relevance of the discussion topic. However, both the facilitator and peer intervention successfully managed the situation and maintained a constructive atmosphere.

Interestingly, while media cases had been prepared to guide the conversation, they were ultimately not needed: participants were familiar with the topics and steered the discussion towards communication issues of professional relevance. Facilitators consistently encouraged participants to speak from personal experience rather than institutional affiliation, a strategy that enriched the empirical material by foregrounding individual perspectives on public advocacy and vulnerability in communication.

Reflections on Methodological Validity

The focus group data provide valuable insights into how civil society actors in Switzerland interpret and experience ethical dilemmas in public communication. The multilingual setting, coupled with topic diversity, enabled the collection of rich, culturally embedded narratives. Nevertheless, the sample was skewed toward rather highly educated individuals, potentially limiting the generalisability of findings to broader population segments. The absence of data on participants' ethnicity or migration background also constitutes an analytical limitation in a country marked by significant cultural heterogeneity.

Despite these caveats, the dialogue-based format offered a meaningful platform for ethical reflection. In other words, the methodological approach proved well-suited to the study's aims. Focus groups captured the nuanced ways in which attention capital operates in Swiss public discourse, and how communicators navigate ethical tensions between visibility, responsibility, and credibility. The dialogue-based format offered a meaningful platform for ethical reflection. In sum, the Swiss implementation of the WP3 framework balanced theoretical coherence with pragmatic adaptation, offering a grounded, context-sensitive contribution to the broader objectives of the DIACOMET project.

Empirical Research Setting

The empirical analysis in this report follows a qualitative, inductive approach, aligned with the shared methodological framework developed for WP3 of the DIACOMET project. While grounded in the overall thematic structure proposed by the work package leaders, namely, participants' perspectives on the media environment, public communication, and communication ethics. The analysis aimed to remain sensitive to emerging nuances in participants' discourse, allowing patterns of meaning to arise organically from the data.

One researcher was in charge of coding the material. At the outset of the analysis, the researcher familiarised herself thoroughly with the data, which consisted of ten focus group transcripts collected across Switzerland's three main language regions. As previously mentioned, the focus group discussions were conducted in Switzerland's four working languages: German, French, Italian, and, in one instance, English. Transcripts were translated into English using ChatGPT to facilitate cross-national analysis. Each translation was subsequently reviewed and manually verified to ensure linguistic accuracy and contextual reliability, particularly given the multilingual and culturally nuanced nature of the discussions.

Using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, the researcher began by applying the three primary thematic codes provided by the WP leaders (media environment, public communication, and ethical issues). These were operationalised using the broad definitions discussed during consortium meetings and internal documents. This early phase of familiarisation and initial classification laid the groundwork for more granular inductive analysis.

As the coding progressed, the researcher created a series of thematic sub-codes to capture recurring ideas, contradictions, and contextual specificities within each category. These sub-codes were continuously refined through an iterative process of re-reading transcripts, recoding excerpts, and combining or splitting codes as new meanings emerged. The analytical procedure thus followed the core phases of thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2012) familiarisation with data, initial coding, theme development, and interpretation.

All coding was conducted individually, and the entire process was carried out in English, including the translation of segments originally in French, Italian, or German. The researcher's fluency in English, French and Italian facilitated accurate interpretation of expressions and idiomatic content. The transcripts of the German-language discussions were translated prior to analysis, and attention was paid to preserving cultural and linguistic nuances across regions. Memos were used systematically within MAXQDA to document analytical decisions, summarise the substance of each code, and reflect on emerging connections. Comments allowed to indicate specificities.

Although the analytic categories were initially informed by the WP3 framework, the analysis was further enriched through theoretical insights drawn from the researcher's background in digital journalism studies. This included familiarity with literature on hybrid media systems, media fragmentation, hate speech, and attention dynamics in participatory communication environments. Grey literature and recent Swiss media reports also provided context to participants' remarks and helped in identifying underlying patterns in how trust, vulnerability, or credibility were articulated.

While no disagreements occurred in the coding process—since the analysis was conducted by a single researcher—meetings with other national teams organised by WP leaders served as important spaces for methodological reflection. These discussions offered opportunities to share challenges, discuss coding first results, and clarify the scope of thematic categories, ensuring consistency and analytical coherence across the wider consortium.

The following sections present the main empirical findings from the focus group discussions conducted in Switzerland. Each section begins with a brief overview of the relevant national context to help readers to understand the social and cultural conditions that shape participants' experiences and perspectives.

3. Experiencing the Media Environment

Switzerland's media environment is undergoing profound transformations driven by both structural constraints and global technological developments. As a small, multilingual country situated at the crossroads of major European powers, Switzerland's media market is characterised by limited scale and high fragmentation. Its linguistic diversity—spanning German, French, Italian, and Romansh—divides the media landscape into distinct regional markets, complicating efforts to operate at the national level. This fragmentation, coupled with the limited advertising base and human resource pool, has long placed structural limits on media sustainability.

Additionally, Switzerland is strongly influenced by the so-called *next-door giants'* phenomenon whereby media and political developments from neighbouring countries—especially Germany, France, and Italy— shape both the media economy, regulation, and public discourse (Künzler 2013). Additionally, neighbouring countries are often more relevant in the editorial coverage, and decision making at the European level often have indirect regulatory implications for Swiss media, despite the country's non-membership in the EU.

According to Hallin and Mancini's work (2004), Switzerland exemplifies the democratic-corporatist model, where the press once held a vital role, with a robust public service media, and where a variety of journalistic formats exist, despite emerging political populism, while the level of polarisation remains quite low. Indeed, the Swiss media landscape is characterised by the existence of a strong public service media (SRG SSR) (Radu, 2018). In

recent years, Swiss media have faced increasing economic pressures, leading to greater market concentration and reductions in journalistic capacity, particularly in the press sector. The pending referendum on cutting the licence fee to 200 Swiss Francs poses a major challenge to SRG SSR's multilingual programming mandate. Even the government's counterproposal would lead to estimated cuts of 15% (Udris and Eisenegger 2024). Major players such as Tamedia, Ringier, and CH Media dominate much of the media market, raising questions about pluralism. Despite these concerns the 2023 Media Monitor Survey finds that no single media company holds a dominant position that would threaten opinion diversity. Moreover, even though the Swiss media sector has faced a decline in economic resources in recent years, "journalistic standards remain relatively high" (Eisenegger and Vogler 2022, 14).

Swiss audiences increasingly rely on smartphones and social media as their main access point to news, and podcasts have gained notable traction, particularly among younger demographics (Udris and Eisenegger 2024). At the same time, digital platforms and social media continue to reshape public attention, weakening the position of professional journalism in the public sphere and intensifying the struggle for epistemic authority (Carlson *et al.* 2021; Amigo *et al.*, 2023; Amigo and Porlezza 2025). This has contributed to growing news avoidance, disaffection, and distrust toward journalists and news institutions. According to recent findings, trust in news has dropped from 50% in 2016 to 41% in 2024 (Udris and Eisenegger 2024), confirming concerns about the fragility of the public information ecosystem (Eisenegger and Vogler 2022).

Moreover, the group of "news-deprived" individuals—those with very limited news repertoires—now makes up over 40% of the population, underscoring the challenges of public engagement (Fög, 2023). Nonetheless, Switzerland's media landscape is marked by high levels of trust in public service media. This does not always translate into a willingness to pay for information: only 17% of Swiss would be willing to pay for news online, a percentage in line with the average for other countries (Newman et al., 2023).

Switzerland ranks 9th globally in the 2024 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, reflecting its strong protections against censorship and interference (Udris and Eisenegger 2024). Legal protections for freedom of expression are enshrined in the Swiss Federal Constitution, and media regulation is overseen by the Federal Office of Communications (OFCOM). Ethical standards in journalism are monitored by the Swiss Press Council, which recently introduced new guidelines for the use of AI in news making (Swiss Press Council 2025). Despite this robust institutional framework, challenges such as media mistrust, declining advertising revenues, and the politicisation of public discourse remain salient.

The advent and rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence have further complicated this landscape. Following the global release of generative AI systems such as ChatGPT, debates about the societal impact of AI and its role in news production have intensified both internationally and in Switzerland (Porlezza 2024). Swiss news organisations, particularly the

larger publishers and the public service media, have increasingly integrated AI technologies into content selection, creation, and distribution processes, driven by cost-cutting imperatives and the pursuit of efficiency (Goldhammer *et al.* 2019). However, these developments have raised ethical concerns and fuelled public scepticism.

Research shows that Swiss audiences, much like their global counterparts, remain wary of AI-generated content, perceiving it as detrimental to news quality and credibility (Vogler *et al.* 2023). Indeed, a representative survey conducted at the University of Zurich found that only 29% of Swiss respondents are willing to read news generated entirely by AI, and fewer than 10% would pay for it (Eisenegger and Vogler 2023). This scepticism is most pronounced for political reporting, where trust is essential, and least for routine updates like weather or stock markets.

Notably, 61% believe AI-generated journalism could deteriorate the overall quality of reporting and increase the spread of fake news (Eisenegger and Vogler 2023). All things considered, while no empirical evidence confirms a measurable decline in the relevance of journalism in Switzerland, several studies highlight factors that challenge its perceived societal value (Amigo *et al.* 2023). These include growing public distrust, the impact of digital technologies such as AI and algorithms on editorial practices, and concerns about journalistic autonomy, transparency, and audience inclusion (Amigo *et al.* 2023).

Finally, current public debates on media policy revolve around three major topics: platform regulation (e.g., copyright compensation for link previews, user rights), the future of public service media in an increasingly fragmented information ecosystem (Udris and Eisenegger 2024), and the regulation of AI. These controversies reflect wider anxieties about the sustainability of independent journalism and the democratic need for reliable, diverse, and trusted sources of public information.

Fragmentation, Technological Disruption, and the Struggle for Meaning

In Switzerland's highly segmented and multilingual media ecosystem, civil society actors are navigating a media environment that is in constant transformation and feels therefore increasingly unstable. Across linguistic regions and attention capital categories, participants in the focus groups articulated their relationship with media through a vocabulary marked by ambivalence, fatigue, and urgency. While some welcomed technological innovation and emphasised the resilience of journalism, many expressed unease about diminishing trust, shrinking space for complexity, and the growing power of opaque infrastructures, going from platform algorithms to newsroom automation tools.

This chapter examines how these civil society actors in Switzerland perceive and interpret the current state of the media environment, with attention to the cultural, political, and institutional contexts that shape their experiences.

Four focus groups discussed the transformation of journalism through artificial intelligence, recognising both its potential benefits and its ethical risks. The most common view was that AI should remain a tool capable of improving efficiency, supporting data processing, or assisting with repetitive tasks, but not a substitute for human editorial judgment.

> *"Beyond quality, something that we in journalism have and that distinguishes us from the rest is critical thinking. This is the fundamental element in these times... At a certain point, we will find a limit and go back [...] to understand that in reality journalism is a profession that also involves blood, sweat, effort, but above all, experience."*
> Male, ICT expert in the public broadcaster

Another recurring theme was the rise of hate speech, particularly in reaction to public communication about gender, climate, and migration. Participants described a hostile online climate in which voicing dissenting views or speaking from marginalised positions often triggered personal attacks. This was experienced as both a form of psychological violence and a structural barrier to participation.

> *"There is the violence we experience when we post comments or publish something. Every attack on one person is an attack on all. Some people will read these aggressive comments and decide not to respond—to protect themselves. It's a way of shutting us up."* Female, union representative

While hate speech is a well-known phenomenon, what emerged from the focus groups was its everyday, normalised character. Several participants—particularly those categorised as attention-deprived—described changing their online behaviours to avoid being targeted. This includes self-censorship, reducing visibility, or withdrawing from social platforms altogether. Such strategies, while protective on an individual level, diminish pluralism in the public sphere and erode democratic discourse.

Some participants explicitly linked the rise of hate speech to broader societal polarisation and algorithmic amplification. They felt that the logic of platform engagement rewards outrage, thereby incentivising aggressive rhetoric over thoughtful dialogue. For participants in linguistic minority regions, this dynamic was exacerbated by limited moderation and lack of tailored safeguards for their language community.

This position reflects a tension that cuts across actor categories: while "attention magnets" with institutional affiliations often spoke in managerial terms highlighting AI's role in maintaining competitiveness, "attention workers" and "attention-deprived" participants frequently expressed concern about what would be lost if news production became overly automated. Their concerns were not limited to job displacement, but extended to questions of responsibility, creativity, and credibility.

Participants also raised concerns about the opacity of AI systems, both in terms of how they function and how their use is communicated to the public. A demand for transparency emerged clearly. Participants called for clearer disclosure when AI-generated content is used in journalism, as well as more accountability from technology developers about how decisions are made inside algorithmic "black boxes", also as a way not to deceit audiences.

> *"People should know if the article they're reading was written by a robot or a journalist in flesh and blood."* Male, journalism educator

Transparency was not merely presented as a technical matter, but as a democratic imperative. Without knowing how information is produced, participants argued, audiences cannot evaluate its reliability—or hold communicators to account. This lack of transparency was perceived as a significant threat to trust in media, especially in politically sensitive contexts.

A Crisis of Epistemic Trust

Concerns about disinformation and conspiracy theories were expressed across all language regions and actor categories. Participants described growing difficulty in distinguishing between legitimate news and misleading content, especially on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, or Telegram. Importantly, these concerns were not only directed at fringe content but also at what participants saw as failures in professional journalism to clearly separate fact from speculation.

> *"In public discourse, both opinions—human caused versus natural cycle— are always presented as if it were a 50/50 debate (...) Science is almost unanimous: Climate change is caused by human activity."* Female, climate researcher

Participants noted that disinformation does not spread only because of ignorance, but also because it exploits emotional and cognitive shortcuts. For example, stories that provide simple explanations for complex phenomena, such as climate change being part of a natural cycle, can be more appealing than those that require scientific understanding.

Some participants also warned against an over-reliance on AI as a fact-checking solution. While supportive of technological tools that support verification, they emphasised that AI cannot resolve the deeper issue: a weakened epistemic contract between journalists and the public. In other words, the problem lies not only in detecting falsehoods, but in rebuilding trust in legitimate knowledge production.

A particularly sharp critique emerged around the issue of journalistic framing. Participants highlighted how the way a story is told—what metaphors are used, what context is provided, what terms are chosen—can profoundly shape public understanding. This was especially evident in discussions of gender-based violence.

"What's problematic is that reporting on violence against women is often framed as a 'family drama', presented as isolated incidents, and marked by perpetrator-victim reversals". Female, institutional communicator on gender equality

Participants objected to media narratives that reduce structural issues to isolated incidents, or that humanise perpetrators at the expense of victims. Some saw this as unintentional, resulting from lack of awareness or training, while others viewed it as symptomatic of deeper cultural biases in newsroom cultures.

Beyond specific examples, the critiques also touched on the broader moral responsibility of journalists. Participants argued that the profession should not only "report facts" but also reflect critically on how those facts are selected, presented, and interpreted by audiences. They called for greater awareness of implicit bias and a more inclusive approach to narrative construction—one that brings in voices often overlooked or silenced.

Disconnected Institutions and the Challenges of Attention

A less visible but persistent theme was the lack of responsiveness from media institutions and public bodies. Participants described a communication ecosystem in which audiences are expected to listen but not heard in return. Letters to the editor go unanswered; feedback on news coverage is ignored; public complaints are acknowledged with form letters but rarely addressed substantively.

This experience of being ignored—particularly acute among activists and grassroots organisers—contributes to public cynicism. It undermines not only trust in media, but also a sense of belonging to the democratic conversation. Participants called for more dialogic formats, participatory mechanisms, and editorial cultures willing to open themselves to criticism.

The issue was not simply about public visibility, but about institutional legitimacy. Without meaningful responsiveness, media lose their claim to represent public interests and become perceived as detached or self-serving. This dynamic was especially evident in linguistic minority regions, where participants felt doubly marginalised: first by national institutions, and again by editorial decisions that fail to represent their lived realities.

Finally, participants expressed concern about the changing rhythms of attention in today's media ecosystem. News consumption is increasingly fragmented, mobile, and not actively sought. Participants worried that people no longer make time to engage with in-depth reporting or complex issues.

This "interstitial" media consumption was linked to the broader phenomenon of attention fatigue, where the sheer volume of content leads to disengagement. Participants also identified individualism and filter bubbles as challenges to collective dialogue. In a

personalised media environment, people are less likely to encounter perspectives that challenge their views or compel them to rethink their assumptions.

Social media was described as a double-edged sword: empowering for some but alienating for others. While it can offer platforms to underrepresented voices, it often reproduces existing hierarchies of visibility and leaves little room for nuance or ambivalence.

> *"The good thing about social media is that anyone can share something— but the downside is that the formats don't allow for much complexity. And the formats that do allow for more depth are often dominated by certain groups, making it hard to find a way in."* Female, gender equality advocate and coach

Fragmented Experiences

While several cross-cutting concerns emerged across the focus groups—such as declining trust, the ethical implications of AI, or frustrations with media responsiveness—participants' viewpoints diverged significantly depending on their professional background, attention capital, and sociolinguistic position. These variations are not incidental. Rather, they reflect how unequal access to visibility, resources, and recognition within Switzerland's hybrid media ecosystem shapes perceptions of legitimacy, authority, and ethical responsibility.

Professional role and institutional affiliation proved decisive in shaping attitudes toward media transformation. Participants embedded in established media institutions (often categorised as "attention magnets") tended to view change through a strategic or pragmatic lens. They focused on questions of resource management, technological integration, and maintaining journalistic credibility amid disruption. While some acknowledged ethical concerns, they generally presented innovation as necessary and framed their role as one of adaptation and stewardship.

> *"We have ethical committees, we have jurists, and we are taking AI very seriously."*
> Male, ICT expert in the public broadcaster

In contrast, "attention workers" (such as freelancers, citizen journalists, or young media creators) expressed more ambivalence. While many were technically literate and open to digital experimentation, they voiced concerns about precarious labour conditions, lack of recognition, and limited influence over editorial priorities. Their views often revealed a dual consciousness: on the one hand, enthusiasm for participation; and disillusionment with institutional inertia, on the other.

"Attention-deprived" actors, such as grassroots organizers, gender rights advocates, or educators, often described the media environment as structurally exclusionary. They emphasised the asymmetries of public attention that determine whose voices are heard,

whose expertise is validated, and whose experiences are reported. Many of these participants did not feel that the media "represents" them, either because of misrecognition (through biased framing) or erasure (through lack of coverage).

> "*It takes enormous effort to get the media to cover gender-based violence because it's so normalised. The media are looking for something new, yet what we have to say isn't new: every two weeks, a woman is killed in Switzerland simply because she is a woman. It requires not only a huge number of resources but also creativity, strategy, and facilitation of media work just to get minimal coverage*" Female, gender equality activist

Similarly, "attention hackers", often activists or alternative media actors, described their relationship with mainstream media as adversarial. They viewed the media ecosystem as complicit in sustaining dominant ideologies and sought to challenge its narratives through subversive or critical content. Their critiques were sharpest on issues such as climate justice, political framing, and editorial bias.

Regional differences were also visible. Participants from Italian- and French-speaking regions were more likely to describe feelings of marginalisation, not just from national political debates, but from technology development and media governance structures. Some worried that AI systems trained primarily on English- or German-language datasets could reinforce this imbalance, while others lamented the lack of tailored resources for their linguistic communities.

Generational divides further shaped viewpoints. Younger participants tended to approach social media and participatory formats with greater fluency and optimism but also highlighted the emotional toll of constant exposure to online hostility and the difficulty of distinguishing reliable sources. Older participants expressed nostalgia for more stable media hierarchies but also admitted that traditional formats were struggling to remain relevant.

Finally, social position and vulnerability shaped how risk and harm were understood. For some participants, ethical concerns centred on abstract issues like transparency or institutional credibility. For others—especially women, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ participants—media exposure was entangled with real threats to personal safety, reputational damage, or emotional wellbeing. These participants demanded not only fairer representation, but also stronger protection and more accountable editorial practices.

These contradictions in how the media environment is perceived reflect structural asymmetries in visibility, credibility, and communicative power. These differences must be understood not as noise, but as essential signals of how public communication is differentially experienced across Switzerland's fragmented media landscape.

4. Engaging with Public Communication

Switzerland is a federal state with a strong democratic tradition rooted in direct democracy and multilingualism. Its political system is based on federalism and subsidiarity, distributing power among the federal government, 26 cantons, and over 2,000 communes. Citizens have extensive participatory rights, including referenda and popular initiatives, which are constitutionally protected. The Swiss Constitution provides a robust legal foundation for public communication. Key rights include the following: Freedom of expression (Art. 16 of the Constitution; Art. 10 ECHR), Freedom of information (Art. 16.3), Freedom of the media (Art. 17), and Political participation and voting rights (Art. 34).

These rights are not only for individual protection, but they are also designed to secure a democratic public sphere. For instance, Freedom of expression does not only entail a negative understanding in terms of the absence of censorship, but it also has a positive interpretation that the state has an obligation to ensure conditions that enable a healthy media system as well as an inclusive and non-distorted public discourse, especially in the run-up to referenda and elections (OFCOM 2021, Report intermediaries).

Expression that is offensive or controversial is still protected under freedom of speech, unless it clearly violates the rights of others or public safety (OFCOM 2021 Report Intermediaries). At the same time, the increasing complexity of regulating hate speech and disinformation raises concerns about balancing freedom of expression with protection from digital harm.

The actors shaping public communication in Switzerland include political parties, federal and cantonal governments, public service media (SRG SSR), private media, civil society organisations, and increasingly, digital platforms. Concentrated in groups like TX Group, Ringier, CH Media, and NZZ Media, these actors dominate the commercial sector, often reducing newsroom diversity (Thommen *et al.* 2024). Digital platforms and intermediaries: Increasingly influential, but largely unregulated in Swiss law (Métille and Ackermann 2020).

Overall, Switzerland still enjoys high institutional trust. Citizens report strong trust in public broadcasting (SRG SSR), federal authorities, and the judiciary. However, trust in news media has declined, especially among younger and more digitally active demographics (Udris and Eisenegger 2024). Hence, traditional mass media are still major agenda-setters, but their role is being challenged by online intermediaries – platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter – that allow individuals and organisations to bypass journalistic gatekeepers (Federal Office of Communication 2021; Amigo *et al.* 2023).

This shift has led to the decentralisation and diversification of the public sphere. Intermediaries contribute to greater visibility for marginalised voices and foster cross-border communication. They have been instrumental in mobilising for causes such as the women's

strike (2019), the climate movement, and minority rights (Federal Office of Communication, 2021). However, algorithmic biases, filter bubbles, and misinformation remain threats to public communication. Research shows that digital platforms facilitate exposure to diverse viewpoints, but also incentivise clickbait, emotional content, and polarising narratives (Federal Office of Communication, 2021).

Political Culture and Participation

Switzerland is considered a liberal democracy. Its political culture is marked by a strong tradition of consensus, neutrality, and civic responsibility. The system of direct democracy (frequent referenda and citizen initiatives) offers a high level of civic engagement (although the levels of political participation are decreasing) and institutionalises public communication into policy-making processes.

Democratic participation is both institutionalised and culturally embedded. Formally, opportunities for civic participation are significant. Citizens can initiate referenda, launch popular initiatives, or participate in consultation procedures. Civil society actors (NGOs, advocacy groups, citizen movements) have access to policy debates, although their influence varies by issue and sector. The frequent use of referenda and initiatives shapes a civic culture of deliberation, albeit with relatively low voter turnout in federal elections (45–50% in 2019 and 2023) (Federal Statistic Office 2023).

The political culture values consensus, neutrality, and subsidiarity, with a political landscape characterised by a multi-party system and power-sharing in the Federal Council. However, recent years have seen increased polarisation—especially between supporters of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) and Social Democratic Party (SP)—and a rise in polarisation and populist rhetoric (Scherrer *et al.* 2025). Populist sentiments and affective polarisation are increasing, particularly around topics like pandemic measures, migration, and climate policies. Studies have shown that affective polarisation (dislike and distrust of ideological opponents) is growing, particularly between groups like COVID-sceptics and climate activists (Federal Office of Communication 2021, Although social cohesion remains strong in many areas, the digital environment can exacerbate divides.

Current Challenges in Public Communication

Switzerland faces several ongoing tensions in its public communication landscape. In the light of contemporary research and policy documents these include:

- *Hate speech and digital withdrawal*: Victims of hate speech often withdraw from public debate, reducing diversity and limiting civic engagement. Balancing freedom of speech with protection from harm is a critical issue (Federal Office of Communication 2021)

- *Transparency and accountability:* The algorithmic infrastructure of digital platforms remains opaque. Users are not always aware of how content is selected or filtered, and

![DIACOMET]

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Swiss regulatory capacity over foreign platforms is weak (Pranteddu *et al.* 2025; (Federal Office of Communication 2021)

- *AI governance*: The release of generative AI systems like ChatGPT fueled debates about AI's societal impact and the challenges it poses to journalists (Porlezza and Schapals 2020; Porlezza and Ferri 2022; Amigo and Porlezza 2025).

- *Journalism relevance and media economic pressure*: Traditional journalism suffers from declining advertising revenue and the need to adapt content to digital attention economies, potentially compromising quality and depth (Amigo *et al.* 2023; Federal Office of Communication 2021) and pushing news media to rethink their connection with audiences (Amigo and Pignard-Cheynel 2023; Pignard-Cheynel and Amigo 2023; Standaert *et al.* 2022).

- *News deprivation*: an increasing number of younger users no longer get in touch with news since they navigate primarily on social media platforms (Eisenegger and Vogler 2023).

In addition, scientific literature shows that in Switzerland, public communication faces three major types of challenges. Firstly, they pertain to organisations' internal challenges: Several studies (Fiordelli and Rubinelli 2023; Rubinelli *et al.* 2023; Ort and Rohrbach 2024) have reported that inflexible institutional structures limit the ability to adapt communication strategies, especially during crises. Resource shortages and lack of training are cited as common internal barriers, restricting innovation and responsiveness. During health emergencies such as COVID-19, these internal challenges were particularly acute, as institutions needed to balance routine operations with emergency response.

Secondly, organisations' public communication encounters difficulties due to external challenges. These stem from low levels of public trust, gaps in media and scientific literacy, as well as difficulties engaging audiences (Amigo *et al.* 2023; Fiordelli and Rubinelli 2023; Merminod and Benaroyo 2021). Thirdly, the overload of information (often compounded by misinformation) and linguistic barriers in a multilingual setting, complicate the delivery of clear messages at the national level (Amigo and Porlezza 2025; Felici and Griebel 2019).

Indeed, recent years have seen a surge in public debates around misinformation, hate speech, the governance of digital intermediaries as well as artificial intelligence. Civil society and the federal administration have expressed concerns about the lack of transparency, and polarising effects of algorithm-driven content on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (Federal Office of Communication 2021). Journalists have also expressed concern about the impact of AI on journalism's authority (Amigo and Porlezza 2025). As previously mentioned, the absence of specific Swiss regulation on digital intermediaries (unlike the EU's Digital Services Act) makes platform governance a legal grey area. The Swiss Federal Office of Communication (OFCOM) has called for public debate and better protection of user rights, particularly in response to hate speech and disinformation (Federal Office of Communication 2021).

Despite these challenges, the Swiss public communication system remains resilient. Institutional protections, civic traditions, and political culture provide strong foundations for public participation. Yet, the future of public communication depends on addressing emerging asymmetries in digital visibility, reinforcing trust, and ensuring that all voices continue to be heard in the democratic conversation.

Opportunities, Strategies and Tensions

Drawing on focus group discussions conducted across Switzerland, this chapter explores how diverse actors in Switzerland experience and articulate their relationship with the public communication environment. Participants expressed both trust and frustration towards the media, enthusiasm and scepticism toward digital innovations like artificial intelligence, and commitment yet caution in their own communication practices. These voices must be understood against the backdrop of Switzerland's democratic-corporatist media model, characterised by strong public service media, linguistic pluralism, and civic participation, but also affected by structural transformations, economic pressures, and rising polarisation.

One of the most pervasive concerns voiced across focus groups was the difficulty of gaining sustained public attention for issues deemed socially urgent such as gender-based violence, climate change, or the rights of marginalised communities. This was not simply framed as a media failure, but as a structural consequence of how attention is distributed in the Swiss public sphere. Participants working in civil society frequently noted that "media attention follows novelty," leading to a paradox: chronic issues lose newsworthiness because they are recurring too often. These dynamics were often described with a sense of exhaustion, particularly by actors who depend on visibility to influence public agendas but face a media logic that prioritises sensationalism, controversy, or immediacy over long-term engagement.

Differences in experience were evident across regions and roles. For instance, communicators in Italian-speaking Switzerland spoke more acutely about the invisibility of their region:

> *"So at least in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, the topic needs to have much more space."*
> Female, gender equality activist

Actors from federal offices or national media outlets were more focused on the constraints of journalistic formats, reduced newsroom capacity, and time pressures.

Social media emerged as a double-edged terrain. On the one hand, it offered visibility to causes, bypassing traditional gatekeeping. On the other, it intensified the risks of misunderstanding, backlash, and emotional exhaustion.

"We are too small, so when I do something personally, it is completely different than when the public broadcaster is the sender (...) But moderating [social media] calls for enormous amount of work."
Female, environmental activist

Many participants said they had done strategic decisions to avoid or limit their presence online, particularly when addressing sensitive or controversial issues like gender-based violence or climate activism. These decisions include restricting visibility by choosing to communicate within known or "safe" networks, such as trusted circles. For example, one participant stated:

"I feel somewhat protected, because I communicate within my own bubble (...) But the moment you start reaching a wider audience, having a public profile, the repercussions can be legal but also psychological, and they can be significant."
Female, environmental NGO member

Other participants reported refraining from posting or commenting publicly or not putting contact details online. This selective visibility emerges as an active form of ethical navigation. This tension between reach and risk was especially salient for women and minority activists, who reported high levels of hate speech, including threats and sexist or racist comments. Here, gendered and regional patterns of hostility suggest deeper currents of social resistance toward discourses that challenge dominant norms or hierarchies.

Artificial intelligence: a Double-edged Sword in Public Communication

AI technologies, particularly large language models and generative tools, were discussed as both opportunity and threat by professionals, especially those working in the news sector. Some journalists viewed AI as a "colleague" or tool for efficiency, aiding in tasks like summarising or transforming formats. Others insisted on maintaining human oversight as a condition for trust.

Transparency was frequently highlighted as an essential ethical principle, especially concerning the labelling of AI-generated content, the training of models, and the verification of information. Discussions highlighted the importance of clearly declaring AI-generated content, contrasting it with the practices of publishers who only disclose AI involvement when there is no human oversight. In contrast, some participants, expressed fundamental scepticism and worry about the use of AI in news making. One participant, a male journalist, reflected on the situation by highlighting the feeling of collective recklessness, noting that society is surrendering all that has been learned to machines, without proper oversight or control. These differing positions reflected not only individual disposition but also varying degrees of technological familiarity, organisational culture, and regional discourses about innovation and risk.

Across focus groups, participants described their relationship to public communication in both affective and strategic terms. Speaking out was often framed not as a right, but as a risk, particularly for those in vulnerable positions such as migrants, precariously employed individuals, or those addressing stigmatised issues like gender-based violence or climate justice.

> *"Victims already struggle to go to authorities. Going to the media is even harder, due to the risk of further harm."* Female, Female, institutional communicator on gender equality

These testimonies underline the emotional and reputational costs of public visibility, especially in a communicative environment where hate speech is widespread, media logics favour personalisation, and attention is often conditional on stylistic appeal or emotional labour. For many, the very act of entering public discourse meant exposing oneself to judgment, misinterpretation, or re-traumatisation.

In this context, actors frequently wrestled with the challenge of defining the right target audience. Should messages be tailored to convince sceptics, empower allies, or mobilise the disengaged majority? Several participants emphasised the difficulty of reaching beyond one's own "bubble" or avoiding confirmation bias:

> *"We are constantly talking to the same three people. Maybe only one is really listening."* Female, Political activist

Others highlighted the need to differentiate communication strategies based on audience profiles (age, education, emotional readiness, or political leanings), rejecting the idea of communication messages that fit all. These reflections reveal that communication is not only about crafting a message but also about navigating the sociopolitical terrain of reception—anticipating how different publics may respond, resist, or ignore the invitation to engage. This task is made more difficult by platform algorithms that filter and polarise content, as well as by the broader fragmentation of public discourse in Switzerland's multilingual and segmented media landscape.

In response, many participants described adaptive strategies for managing the tension between visibility and vulnerability. These included:

- Selective exposure: choosing when and where to appear;
- Emotion-based storytelling: appealing to shared values or feelings rather than abstract arguments;
- Use of concrete examples: local stories, lived experiences, practical advice;
- Alignment with "familiar messengers": trusted figures such as community leaders, professionals, or "people like us."

In some accounts, these strategies were not merely defensive but transformative. The participant described them as "engines for change" that helped to forge connection, mobilise communities, and reclaim discursive space in the face of dominant narratives.

> *"We focus on emotions because we know that facts alone don't help… Emotions are the engine for change."* Male, environmental educator and activist

This emotional labour is part of the communicative terrain, a form of agency, but also a burden unevenly distributed across social groups. Recognising this complexity is essential to understanding public communication not only as a matter of information flow, but as a site of struggle, strategy, and situated vulnerability.

Attention Asymmetries

While some concerns about the public communication environment in Switzerland appear widely shared such as the need for transparency, trustworthiness, and resilience in the face of hate speech, focus group data also reveal substantial divergences in perspectives and experiences. These are often shaped by participants' distinct social positions, professional roles, institutional affiliations, and regional contexts. These differences are not merely anecdotal; they offer critical insight into how communicative inequalities manifested in the Swiss democratic landscape.

Participants from federal institutions and public service media often described the communication landscape through the lens of procedural constraints (e.g., moderation capacity, legal responsibility, institutional tone), and their discourse reflected a higher degree of perceived legitimacy. In contrast, civil society actors, particularly those advocating on gender or environmental issues, emphasised the importance of personal engagement for visibility

> "*On social media turning off comments is not really an option, because comments actually improve the algorithm. The more comments a post has, the better it performs, and the more people see it. So, there, turning off comments would be very counterproductive.*" Female, environmental activist

These contrasting positions reveal how institutional status confers a degree of communicative protection and continuity luxuries not afforded to smaller, under-resourced actors.

Participants from Italian-speaking Switzerland articulated a sense of bring cast to periphery, as their region and its issues receive insufficient attention from national media, and that their efforts to gain public traction were frequently overlooked. It is worth noting that institutional actors are often concentrated in German-speaking Switzerland, which also benefits from a

denser media infrastructure. This was also reflected in the composition of our focus groups. Participants from this region were less likely to express concerns about marginalisation. By contrast, civil society actors from Italian-speaking Switzerland often reported limited access to national media platforms. In that sense, it seems that regional differences not only coexist but are also sometimes amplified or modulated by institutional asymmetries.

Those based in French-speaking Switzerland were often more explicit in discussing hate speech and overexposure tied to activism, while participants in German-speaking regions sometimes framed the challenges in terms of professional workload or technical solutions (e.g., moderation tools).

Journalists, public communicators, and activists all discussed the challenges of using digital tools and engaging with the public, but their thresholds for risk, access to attention, and expectations about their own role varied substantially. Journalists tended to emphasise verification and accountability, positioning themselves as gatekeepers of trust in the age of AI. Activists, by contrast, often focused on audience fatigue, strategic emotional appeal, or the limitations of performative visibility. Some public sector communicators described public communication as a technical craft constrained by resources, while others, particularly those working on climate, lamented discursive saturation: too many messages competing for attention, and not enough resonance.

Asymmetrical Risks of Visibility

Differences were also apparent in perceptions of risk. For example, female participants— particularly those in advocacy roles—reported a higher rate of incidences of hate speech, overexposure, and emotional exhaustion. Those from marginalised groups or addressing taboo topics (e.g. domestic violence, sexual harassment, asylum rights) noted that public speech could lead to backlash, surveillance, and retraumatisation.

> "Another aspect regarding inhibition is intimidation"
> Female, gender equality advocate and coach

By contrast, male journalists or technologists even when critical, appeared less personally vulnerable in their engagements. Their comments often focused on ethical frameworks or professional standards, rather than on bodily or emotional risk. Their concerns revolved around questions such as maintaining journalistic integrity, avoiding the spread of misinformation, or ensuring transparency when integrating AI into editorial workflows.

Conclusion: Rethinking Public Communication Ethics

Public communication in Switzerland is shaped by a series of overlapping tensions: between visibility and vulnerability, speed and substance, innovation and trust, activism and legitimacy. While participants shared many concerns—especially about hate speech, media

superficiality, and the ethical use of AI—their responses and strategies diverged based on social position, professional role, and regional context. Indeed, the analysis reveals a nuanced landscape marked by asymmetries of power as well as varying degrees of access and influence.

The testimonies gathered here suggest that the capacity to communicate publicly is unequally distributed not only in terms of access to platforms or audiences, but in terms of emotional and reputational costs. In this sense, public communication is not only about message dissemination but about negotiating one's position in an increasingly fragmented and algorithmically shaped public sphere.

Recognising these divergent experiences is crucial not only for understanding the present moment but for crafting inclusive, responsive, and ethically grounded communication practices. In a context where public attention is scarce and communicative risks are unevenly distributed, fostering solidarity across professional and social divides becomes a democratic imperative.

The chapter thus calls for a rethinking of communication ethics not only in terms of content or transparency, but also in terms of care, solidarity, and structural conditions that determine who gets to speak, and at what cost.

5. Reflecting on Communication Ethics

Switzerland's legal and institutional framework upholds a strong commitment to freedom of expression and media pluralism. The Swiss Federal Constitution enshrines fundamental rights related to communication ethics: freedom of speech (Art. 16), media freedom (Art. 17), and political rights (Art. 34). Independent oversight bodies such as the Swiss Press Council ensure ethical standards for journalism, while media education and digital literacy efforts—although decentralised—are supported through cantonal programs and civil society initiatives.

Oversight mechanisms such as the Swiss Press Council and recent AI directives (Swiss Press Council 2025) are designed to promote transparency, accountability, and professionalism in journalistic discourse. The Swiss media landscape is characterised by a high degree of press freedom, institutional safety for journalists, and relatively limited political interference – particularly within the domain of public service media. Structural safeguards ensure that governmental influence is curtailed. For instance, the state is permitted to appoint only a limited number of members to the board of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG SSR), thereby protecting editorial independence.

Media regulation in Switzerland is comparatively restrained (in particular, when it comes to the press) and primarily designed to provide structural coherence to the media system

rather than exert control. The regulatory approach privileges co- and self-regulation, although legal provisions concerning the media are embedded in the Federal Constitution. This model aligns with the democratic-corporatist media system, where the regulatory tradition is rooted in consensus-oriented governance and strong professionalisation of journalism (Hallin and Mancini 2004).

Journalistic culture in Switzerland exhibits distinctive features that differentiate it from neighbouring countries with shared linguistic heritage. Linguistic commonality, for instance with France or Italy, does not necessarily translate into alignment with professional journalistic values. Swiss journalism is predominantly shaped by a Northern European ethos, emphasising normative principles such as impartiality, factual accuracy, and public service (Porlezza 2017).

Empirical studies confirm that Swiss journalists demonstrate a strong commitment to core professional standards. According to Dingerkus *et al.* (2018), journalists in Switzerland prioritise roles such as detached observation, the analytical interpretation of current affairs, and the provision of politically relevant information. This reflects a normative commitment to the "watchdog" and "facilitator of public discourse" roles, which are prevalent in democratic-corporatist contexts. At the same time, Swiss journalism is not immune to commercial pressures: a significant share of practitioners also value audience appeal, striving to produce content that is engaging and accessible, a trend observable throughout Central and Northern Europe.

This professional orientation is institutionally reinforced by the Swiss Press Council, a central organ of journalistic self-regulation. Beyond the Swiss Press Council, Switzerland demonstrates several self-regulatory means that range from traditional means such as ombudsmen to digital instruments such as user comments (for instance through social media platforms).

In summary, Switzerland's media system exemplifies a hybrid model of professional autonomy, restrained regulation, and institutional trust, albeit with vulnerabilities in areas such as commercial pressure and fluctuating public confidence. Switzerland can often be considered a role model in media accountability, but it is not immune to tensions that characterise contemporary journalism across Europe (Porlezza 2018).

In this context, participants in the Swiss focus group articulated their ethical concerns in public communication. Building on the previous chapters, it offers a more explicit and in-depth analysis of how civil society actors perceive values, responsibilities, and dilemmas in communication.

What Motivates Ethical Communication?

The most frequently articulated values were solidarity and the need to make a change including for next generations and the transmission of a sense of social commitment. These values did not emerge as abstract ideals but were rooted in lived experiences and activist engagement. They were often expressed in affective, sometimes existential terms, highlighting the personal and emotional stakes involved in public communication.

> *"Every time I see my nieces and nephews, it breaks my heart to think what kind of world they will grow up in. I simply cannot accept doing nothing."*
> Female, climate campaigner

This sentiment illustrates values shaped by responsibility to others, especially younger generations. The affective nature of this value was central to many testimonies, particularly in the French- and Italian-speaking groups.

Likewise, the value of solidarity was expressed both through direct references to collective struggle and through narratives about community support, emotional resilience, and social cohesion. It was particularly prominent in discussions on gender justice and environmental advocacy.

> *"Resistance is an act of love… we work, we build tools, we create resilience— not for ourselves, but because we cannot accept that others are not free*."
> Female, gender equality campaigner

These accounts underscore that ethical communication is not reducible to norms of accuracy or fairness: it is also about relational commitment, mutual recognition, and emotional labor.

The value of justice, although less frequently coded, surfaced in moments of critique against how dominant narratives mask structural violence. This was evident, for instance, in feminist critiques of how femicide is framed as "domestic conflict" or "family tragedy" in mainstream media.

Ethical Responsibilities

Raising awareness on a specific topic and its implications was understood by participants as a transversal responsibility. Such topics (climate change, gender-based violence and inequality and ethical implications of AI use) were often described as suffering from a deficit of attention, in media coverage and in broader public discourse.

It applied to journalists, educators, NGOs members, and activists. Awareness-raising was seen as foundational to all other practices in public communication.

> *"The media should be explaining these topics to people who aren't familiar with AI. It's about helping them understand the variety of possibilities without creating fear, acting instead as educators"*
> Female, Communication officer

This pedagogical responsibility often included a strategic component: awareness-raising was framed not only as ethical obligation, but also as a necessary step toward social and political change. It was also presented as a form of empowerment, especially in relation to issues like climate justice, gender-based violence, and AI governance.

Closely linked to awareness-raising were calls for media and algorithmic literacy. Several participants expressed concern about the public's limited understanding of how digital technologies shape access to information. This was particularly the case for participants more closely related to the news sector and journalism education.

> *"Even among journalists, few people know that the national press agency is owned by an oil company. So imagine the general public."*
> Male, media literacy professional

While formal literacy programs were appreciated, many participants felt that they were not enough. Media education, they argued, must go beyond technical knowledge and cultivate critical thinking. This was seen as crucial in countering misinformation, emotional manipulation, and ideological framing. The idea that public communication includes the interpretive agency of audiences reflects a broader, dialogical conception of responsibility. It also shows that ethical concerns are not only directed "upward" toward institutions but "sideways" across society.

Several participants, in particular those addressing gender-based violence, migration, or environmental justice topics, highlighted the need for better regulation of digital spaces. This included not only platform moderation and legal reform, but also the institutionalisation of safer communication spaces.

> *"Moderation is better than shutting down comment sections completely. But I think that is difficult to manage due to time constraints."*
> Female, gender equality advocate and coach

These participants often described direct experiences of hostility, overexposure, and emotional exhaustion, which led them to underscore the protective function of safer spaces. Such spaces were not only seen as desirable but as necessary for public communication participation. Without them, vulnerable actors are pushed towards self-censorship or silence undermining the very notion of a pluralistic public sphere.

Participants in particular institutional actors (such as journalists and public communicators) expressed the need for moderation tools, clearer editorial standards, or responsible

platform governance. They also stressed that regulation must be transparent and accountable. For example, several noted the lack of oversight over how AI tools are integrated into journalism. For some, this gap created ethical confusion; for others, it was an opportunity to define new ethical frameworks. This reflects a shared recognition across professional roles of the importance of safeguarding public dialogue in an increasingly digital communication environment.

Ethical Tensions

Transparency vs. Protection: Many participants, especially journalists and civil servants, called for greater transparency, particularly regarding the use of AI in public communication. Transparency in this context, means labelling content produced with significant help of AI. Yet, this demand sometimes clashed with the need for protection in contexts of vulnerability. For instance, victims of violence or discrimination may require anonymity, even as they contribute to public debate. This points to a core ethical tension: the more transparent public communication becomes, the more exposed certain individuals feel, especially those already at risk.

Dialogue vs. Safety: Several participants valued open debate but acknowledged that certain speech environments (e.g. social media comment sections) can be harmful. This raises a dilemma: how can communication remain dialogic while also minimising harm? The solutions proposed—moderation, selective exposure—reflect an ethics of care more than the one of dialogue.

Emotionality vs. Accuracy: A tension emerged between truthfulness (especially among journalists) and emotional resonance (especially among activists and campaigners). Some participants, in particular journalists, prioritised verification, while others stressed that affect is what drives engagement and change. For instance, a climate campaigner stated:

"When I try to convince people about climate change using facts, figures, and logical arguments—it generally doesn't get through well. I feel that these things don't necessarily reach people. Numbers don't always speak to people; they can seem abstract. However, when I let people talk and I listen to them, they have an opportunity to open up about their own feelings regarding climate change. And when I also open up—purely on an emotional level, without trying to convince them—I generally have much better discussions. (...) Communication happens more through emotions, needs, and feelings, which seem to be more universal." Female, climate campaigner

While a union representative said:

> *"Speaking now as a user rather than someone who produces news, I think it's crucial to know whether something has been verified."*
> *Female, Union representative*

In line with this, a journalist mentioned:

> "*Verifying sources is always a basic and essential step. Whether the information comes from ChatGPT or from something I overheard on the street makes no difference in principle—the journalist's ethics and professional standards are there for a reason.*"
> Male, journalist

This suggests that different ethical traditions—truth-telling vs. storytelling—coexist and sometimes clash in the communicative field.

The way ethical concerns were articulated varied by region, professional role, and attention capital category. In general, French-speaking participants emphasised exposure and activism fatigue, especially in relation to gender and environmental issues. Italian-speaking participants focused more on public invisibility and being outcast to periphery, often feeling neglected by national media and political debates. German-speaking participants discussed procedural ethics and professional codes, especially in journalistic and institutional settings.

"Attention magnets" tended to approach public communication responsibilities and values through risk management and compliance, while "attention workers" emphasised autonomy, precariousness, and lack of support. "Attention-deprived" and "attention hackers" foregrounded questions of recognition, voice, and transformative politics.

Focus group discussions across Switzerland reveal that public communication ethics is not a fixed set of rules but a field of situated practices, tensions, and aspirations. Participants expressed strong ethical commitments—to transparency, justice, inclusivity—but also acknowledged the constraints under which they operate.

Ethical communication, in this context, is about more than just avoiding misinformation or disclosing AI use. It is about how responsibilities are shared, how risks are distributed, and how public discourse can remain meaningful under conditions of fragmentation, fatigue, and polarisation. What emerges is an ethics not of control but of care: care for truth, for others, and for the fragile ecosystems of dialogue that sustain democratic life.

Conclusion

The focus group discussions conducted across Switzerland for the DIACOMET project provide a rich and multifaceted account of how ethical concerns are experienced, contested, and negotiated by civil society actors in an increasingly complex and polarised communication environment. While participants brought diverse perspectives shaped by professional roles, regional identities, and social positions, several cross-cutting concerns and ethical tensions emerged. These not only point to specific communication-related problems—such as misinformation, hate speech, and lack of accountability—but also reveal deeper value conflicts, situational ambiguities, and contested expectations about ethical responsibility in a democratic society.

These dynamics reflect a series of overlapping tensions that characterise public communication in Switzerland today: tensions between visibility and vulnerability, speed and substance, innovation and trust, activism and legitimacy. Across all focus groups, participants expressed concern about the shrinking space for meaningful dialogue and the increasing emotional and reputational risks associated with public speech. Particularly, actors working on issues such as gender justice, environmental advocacy, or minority rights often encountered hostility, misrecognition, or erasure—experiences that not only deter participation but also reproduce structural inequalities in the public sphere.

Crucially, the testimonies gathered suggest that the capacity to communicate publicly is unequally distributed, not only in terms of access to platforms or audiences, but also in terms of the emotional and reputational costs of visibility. Public communication is not merely about disseminating messages; it is also about negotiating one's position in a fragmented, algorithmically mediated environment that privileges spectacle, controversy, and performativity. In this context, speaking out—especially from marginalised or precarious positions—entails navigating hostility, platform dynamics, and normative expectations that are not equally borne by all.

Amidst these challenges, participants articulated strong ethical commitments to transparency, justice, inclusivity, and dialogue, but also acknowledged the constraints under which they operate. Institutional actors emphasised legal and procedural safeguards; grassroots communicators underscored emotional labour, lack of support, and the strategic dilemmas of gaining attention. The result is a communication landscape marked by asymmetries of power, uneven access to legitimacy, and divergent thresholds of risk.

Key Ethical Tensions

Several ethical tensions emerged repeatedly across focus groups:

Transparency vs. Protection: While transparency—particularly around AI use, content moderation, and algorithmic systems—was seen as a democratic imperative, it sometimes conflicted with the need to protect vulnerable individuals from further harm. This tension was especially acute in discussions on gender-based violence and hate speech, where anonymity was both a shield and a constraint.

Dialogue vs. Safety: The ideal of open, inclusive debate was widely endorsed but it often clashed with the reality of online hostility. Participants called for more moderation, institutional safeguards, and communicative norms based on care rather than confrontation—highlighting a shift from dialogic idealism to pragmatic protection.

Truthfulness vs. Emotional Appeal: Journalists and media educators tended to emphasise factual accuracy, verification, and epistemic authority. In contrast, activists and educators underscored the necessity of emotional resonance and storytelling as tools for persuasion and mobilisation. These divergent ethical traditions—truth-telling and affective engagement—occasionally collided in strategies for reaching broader publics.

Autonomy vs. Institutional Legitimacy: Civil society actors often valorised autonomy, authenticity, and critical distance from institutions. Conversely, actors embedded in professional or public institutions highlighted reputational risks, procedural obligations, and strategic communications, reflecting contrasting understandings of ethical responsibility and accountability.

In several areas, participants expressed uncertainty or ambivalence. Artificial intelligence was a prominent example of this. While some viewed it as a promising tool to enhance efficiency, others saw it as a threat to editorial judgment, news quality, and democratic oversight. Even those cautiously optimistic about AI implementation demanded clear ethical frameworks and public accountability. Yet few felt such frameworks currently exist.

Accountability itself was another domain of ambiguity. While journalists were often positioned as primary gatekeepers of ethical communication, others argued that responsibility must be distributed, involving educators, digital platforms, civil society actors, and audiences themselves. In this view, ethical communication is not solely about what is produced, but also about how it is received, interpreted, and acted upon.

These tensions also played out in participants' diverging strategies for achieving public visibility. Some advocated for strategic adaptation to media and platform logics using emotional narratives, personalization, or simplicity to capture attention. Others resisted such adaptation, fearing it compromised ethical integrity or reinforced superficiality. This reflects a broader dilemma of public communication in attention-driven contexts: should one play by the rules, or try to change them?

Plural Perspectives

The focus group data reveal that participants' ethical outlooks and communicative strategies were deeply shaped by their professional roles, regional context, attention capital, and social positioning.

Professional roles influenced how participants understood communication ethics. Journalists emphasised standards, codes, and verification. Activists highlighted voice, framing, and transformative narratives. Public communicators balanced institutional mandates with responsiveness to public concerns.

Attention capital shaped communicative leverage and vulnerability. "Attention magnets" often managed risk through institutional infrastructure. "Attention workers" and "attention-deprived" actors navigated precarious exposure. "Attention hackers" operated critically at the margins, challenging mainstream narratives and distribution logics.

Regional differences mattered. Participants from Italian-speaking Switzerland expressed a strong sense of peripheralization, lamenting linguistic and geographic marginality. French-speaking participants foregrounded activism fatigue and online hostility. German-speaking participants focused more on institutional procedures, workload, and professional constraints.

Social position, particularly gender and minority status, shaped how risk, legitimacy, and harm were experienced. Women, LGBTQ+ persons, and migrant voices were seen as target of higher vulnerability to hate speech and reputational harm, often under conditions of structural exclusion or limited support.

These differences appear as analytical signals that show how communication ethics are lived, relational, and contingent. They underscore that public communication is not a level playing field, but a terrain structured by intersecting inequalities and asymmetries of visibility, authority, and power.

Communication ethics as a situated and relational practice

The findings from the focus groups conducted in Switzerland suggest that communication ethics may be better understood as a situated and relational practice, rather than a fixed set of norms. In a media environment marked by fragmentation, fatigue, and polarisation, participants did not frame ethical communication simply in terms of compliance with institutional codes or universal standards. Instead, they pointed to the everyday challenges of navigating fragile discursive spaces, managing uneven risks, and engaging in emotionally demanding forms of participation.

Across discussions, ethical reasoning often reflected the structural conditions under which communication takes place—conditions shaped by platform architectures, institutional hierarchies, and socio-political asymmetries. These reflections indicate that communication ethics is not only a matter of individual vigilance or professional integrity, but is embedded in broader dynamics of public visibility, legitimacy, and support. Calls for transparency or fairness were often intertwined with demands for responsiveness, recognition, and protection, particularly for actors positioned at the margins of public attention.

In this context, attention itself emerged as an ethical concern. The uneven distribution of public attention—and the associated costs of attaining it—was seen by many participants as a central challenge. Their experiences suggest that any meaningful reflection on communication ethics must take into account how attention is structured, filtered, and contested, as well as how it impacts different communicators in unequal ways.

What emerges from these discussions is not a single ethical framework, but rather a spectrum of perspectives informed by diverse positionalities and communicative constraints. While some participants emphasized principles of control, verification, and procedural fairness, others foregrounded care, vulnerability, and mutual support. These findings point to a plural and evolving ethical landscape, in which public communication is shaped by competing demands and situated judgments.

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Annex 1. Overview of Focus Group Discussions

	Capital attention category	Short description/ case	Participants / Gender M-F-X	Session date and place
1.	A. magnets A. workers A. deprived	Discussions on the opportunities and challenges of publicly addressing **gender-based violence and gender equality**.	N=6 1-5-0	Region: Italian-speaking Switzerland Date: March 20, 2024 Duration: 90 m
2.	A. workers A. hackers A. deprived	Discussions with various actors advocating to raise awareness about **climate change**, focusing on challenges, vulnerabilities, and opportunities.	N=5 2-3-0	Region: Italian-speaking Switzerland Date: May 7, 2024 Duration: 105 min
3.	A. magnets A. workers	Discussions on the ethical challenges posed by **AI use** in news media organizations and the difficulties in raising awareness about these issues.	N=5 4-1-0	Region: Italian-speaking Switzerland Date: October 29, 2024 Duration: 85 min
4.	A. magnets A. workers	Discussions on the ethical challenges posed by **AI use** in news media organizations and the difficulties in raising awareness about these issues.	N=6 4-2-0	Region: Italian-speaking Switzerland Date: November 5, 2024 Duration: 75 min
5.	A. magnets A. workers A. deprived	Discussions with various actors advocating to raise awareness about **climate change**, focusing on challenges, vulnerabilities, and opportunities.	N=3 0-3-0	Region: German-speaking Switzerland Date: October 29, 2024 Duration: 70 min
6.	A. magnets A. workers A. deprived	Discussions on the opportunities and challenges of publicly addressing **gender-based violence and gender equality**.	N=4 0-4-0	Region: German-speaking Switzerland Date: November 19, 2024 Duration: 73 min
7.	A. workers A. hackers A. deprived	Discussions on the opportunities and challenges of publicly addressing	N=5 0-5-0	Region: French-speaking Switzerland

		gender-based violence and gender equality.		Date: November 26, 2024 Duration: 75 min
8.	A. workers A. hackers A. deprived	Discussions with various actors advocating to raise awareness about **climate change**, focusing on challenges, vulnerabilities, and opportunities.	N= 6 3-3-0	Region: French-speaking Switzerland Date: December 18, 2024 Duration: 78 min
9.	A. magnets	Discussions on the ethical challenges posed by **AI use** in news media organizations and the difficulties in raising awareness about these issues.	N=5 2-2-1	Region: French-speaking Switzerland Date: December 13, 2024 Duration: 59 min
10.	A. magnets A. workers	Discussions on the ethical challenges posed by **AI use** in news media organizations and the difficulties in raising awareness about these issues.	N=4 4-0-0	Region: German-speaking Switzerland Date: December 16, 2024 Duration: 53
TOTAL			N= 49 20-28-1	