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## Researching Media and Democracy Researchers: Monitoring Capabilities in Poland

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### Abstract

In this article, we look at the conditions of media and democracy discourses in Poland via the lenses of monitoring time-related capabilities. We are interested in how media–societal change in 2000–2020 has influenced the Polish researchers’ responses to deliver applied research and further foster hyper-knowledge sharing between policymakers, media industries, and academia. Through an in-depth investigation of Poland’s media researchers’ publications database ( $N = 1,000$ ), we aim to examine the crucial interest areas considering the critical cultural junctures in three highly related areas: technology, politics, and society. The critical junctures theory review follows the mapping of changes in related scholarly analyses to uncover three sides of Polish scholarship monitoring capabilities alongside cultural conditions of researchers’ impact on democracy and the media. The overall hypothesis is that examining media and democracy in Poland reflects technological and political change, with the cultural research path dependencies in analyzing broader social context (see, for instance, a young democracy, illiberal turns and social polarization conditions, and so on). This corresponds to related tensions between the Western media’s theories and practices concerning democracy.

### Keywords

critical cultural junctures; media and democracy; media monitoring; media researchers; monitoring capability; Poland

## 1. Introduction

Researchers and scholars are essential agents in discussing and impacting media and democracy. Their knowledge, wisdom, and expertise serve as a reference point for policymaking and advising media industries on communications change and future scenarios. The societal role of science also calls for the continuity of research and engagement in actions on the conditions and quality of democratic media in a wide range of spheres, including media freedom, diversity, and inclusion, as a basis of the professional media and journalism culture. While the overall potential of scholarly impact is high, examining the practical side of scholarly contributions is much more complex regarding media research cultural conditions. On the one hand, one of the challenges is how scholarly interests reflect the current media and democracy change, alongside the quality and application of empirical studies and policy advice. On the other hand, understanding scholarly impact requires further examination of the cultural side of media and democracy research, with media scholars living through societal and media change.

On the surface, the existing studies on media and democracy in Poland have widely illustrated the systemic conditions as a response to the recently coined notion of illiberal and authoritarian turns (Democracy Index, 2022; Dzięciołowski, 2017; Freedom House, 2022) or societal and media polarization (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019; Kopeć-Ziemczyk, 2021). Accompanying scholarly contributions to research and policy advice, the focus has been on technological and political agents of change, with scant interest in non-governmental and bottom-up civic engagement. Moreover, while there have been studies on the history of Polish media and communication studies (Mielczarek, 2021), researching conditions for applied research has not become a systemic subject of cultural investigation. Bearing in mind the complexity of media and democracy knowledge-share relationships (and the methodological challenge), one goal is to look at media researchers, their scholarly interests, media-societal change experiences, and their contributions. Through the concept of monitoring capability, we aim to look at media research conditions alongside responsiveness to the dynamics of change.

In this article, we are interested in how media-societal change in 2000–2020 has influenced the Polish researchers' responses to deliver applied research and further engage with policymakers, media industries, and non-governmental organizations. Firstly, through an in-depth investigation of Poland's media researchers' publications database ( $N = 1,000$ ) and their participation in research projects and policymaking, we examine the monitoring capabilities—crucial interest and scholarly response—in line with critical junctures in technology, politics, and society. The study conclusions also build on the critical cultural junctures theory to further investigate the cultural conditions of media scholarship, with the possible cultural path dependencies, as one of the critical conditions of scholarly impact, wisdom, and meaning (Greener, 2002; Neuberger et al., 2023; Page, 2006).

The overall hypothesis is that examining media and democracy in Poland reflects technological and political change, with the cultural research path dependencies in analyzing the broader societal contexts and related tensions between the Western media democratic theories and media and democracy practices. To this end, the critical cultural junctures of media theory adjusted to researchers' change to further explore the fabric of Polish scholarship via cultural conditions of researchers' impact on democracy and the media. Among the unvoiced questions are: How do researchers react to media and democracy change and critical cultural

junctures? In what ways do the media-societal turning points juxtapose with the existing conditions of democratic media research? What are the cultural conditions for impact and applied research?

## 2. Researching Media Researchers: Theory and Methodology

The Polish case study of scholarly engagement in media and democracy has foundations in the larger European research project entitled Critical Exploration of Media-Related Risks and Opportunities for Deliberative Communication: Development Scenarios of the European Media Landscape (Mediadelcom). The collaborative Mediadelcom (2021–2024) involves researchers from 14 European countries to look at risks and opportunities for deliberative communication with a wide range of media and democracy agents (policymakers, researchers, media industries, and non-governmental organizations), all producing and sharing wisdom and knowledge to support democratic media. The project uses the multilayered democracy agents modeling to explore the potential for checks and balances in four critical areas: media regulation and self-regulation, journalism culture, users' media experiences, and users' media literacy competencies. Looking at 2000–2020, Mediadelcom produced findings on the conditions of national scholarly expertise across various researchers' cultures, researching and experiencing media and democracy change over the last two decades.

Considering the broader research goals and cross-cultural contexts, this Polish study builds on selective Mediadelcom methodologies. It focuses on scholars and media research as stakeholders in the agent modeling theories (Harro-Loit, 2022). Examining researchers' expertise, followed by Polish research on cultural contexts' uses, the project's approach is one of monitoring capability, which is understood as:

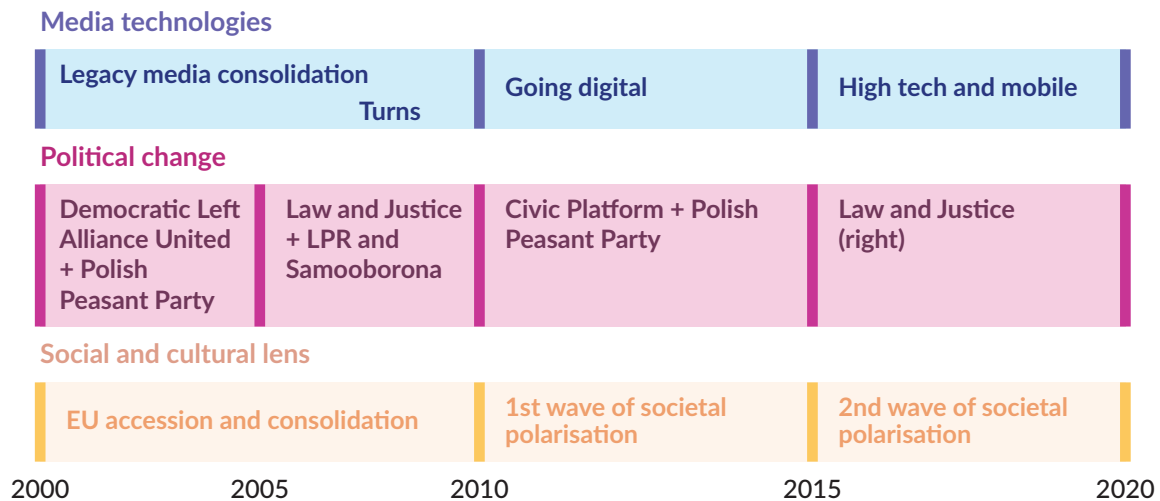
The ability, possibilities and motivation of various agents to observe and analyze the developments of the media and the changes in the society, emanating from the media transformations. (Harro-Loit & Lauk, 2022, p. vii)

The concept of monitoring capability offers a wide range of approaches to looking at people and institutions via national and local research systems. In this study, we take the time-related Mediadelcom criteria junctures understood as turning points that alter the course of societal transformations and change (Collier & Munck, 2017). The goal of uncovering the critical cultural junctures in 2000–2020 is to juxtapose researchers' interests with discussing the potential cultural path-dependencies of media and democracy in Poland. To this end, the findings presented in this article build on Mediadelcom's scholarly database of Poland's media and democracy research, with over 1,000 research items (such as academic journal articles, monographs, edited collections, and study reports) coupled with data on scholarly participation in national and international applied research and policy advice and making. The database ( $N = 1,000$ ) was created and coded following the projects' guidelines for the bibliographical database; the overall focus was not to conduct the content analysis but rather to group the overall scholarly work focuses in terms of subjects, but also data recency, quality, accessibility, and findability (Głowacki et al., 2022a, 2022b; Mediadelcom, 2023).

## 3. Poland's Media and Democracy: The Critical Cultural Junctures

The critical cultural junctures context is used in this article as an umbrella term for highly interwoven media-societal changes, as experienced over the last two decades. The term has been adopted from the

overall Mediadelcom methodology to analyze turning points that alter the course of the evolution of society, with a particular focus on cultural change; media researchers' culture included. Figure 1 illustrates the critical technological, political, and societal turning points of 2000–2020 as Poland evolved.



**Figure 1.** Critical junctures for media and democracy research in Poland. Source: Głowacki et al. (2022b, p. 401).

First, changes in technology, content production, and media management have widely reflected the global media trends and their implementation in Poland, starting with research on the dominant role of radio and TV broadcasters, which further evolved into adaptation strategies to digital and data-driven technologies (Johansson & Nożewski, 2018; Splendore et al., 2016; Szpunar, 2018):

- 2000–2010: The phase of media market consolidation with the critical role of broadcasting and the decline of the print press;
- 2010–2015: The phase of adaptation for production and digital content combined with the consolidation of online services and platforms;
- 2015–2020: The strong growth of the high-tech and data-driven industries with the simultaneous dominance of online media, digital apps, software, video on demand, and broadcaster video on demand (Głowacki et al., 2022b, p. 402).

On the side of media-political relationships, Polish media and journalism studies have exposed the practical side of systemic parallelism, evidencing the high level of media-political parallelism and media policies in change (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012; Jakubowicz, 2004; Połowska & Beckett, 2019). For instance, the critical cultural junctures in policy and politics have recently been studied as an effect of political elections and the clash of conservative and liberal values and leadership. Another example, since 2005 and the first government of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (The Law and Justice Party) national and international research turned into broadcasting law change, referencing the decline of press and journalism freedom. In line with this, the most recent media-political studies have reflected regulatory and cultural journalism changes in the aftermath of the Law and Justice government returning to power in 2015. Since then, the overall researchers and media policy-makers focus has been on public service media financing, biased reporting, and

management appointments, pictured as threats to the liberal and normative theories of media, democracy, and pluralism (Donders, 2021; Reporters Without Borders, 2022; Węglińska, 2021).

Finally, the critical cultural junctures relate to the broader social context with various stages of media and democracy transformations. Polish media and democracy research has widely focused on societal democratic shifts in the late 1980s and early 1990s to follow democratic standards of media regulation and self-regulation further, following comparative media and accountability systems studies via the existing Western democracy criteria and systemic political and societal parallelism (Jakubowicz, 2008; Zielonka, 2015). While Poland's accession to the EU united society for the 2003 EU accession referendum, the post-transformation discourse on the division between former socialists and democratic alliances has recently transformed into the division of conservative and liberal media policies and minds. Media and democracy studies have plentiful evidence of the ongoing social polarization, with the first wave of conservative vs liberal media divisions in the aftermath of Poland's presidential plane crash in Smolensk (Russia) in 2010. The second media polarization wave resulted in media tribes and the Law and Justice government taking over the public service media (Gajlewicz-Korab & Szurmiński, 2022). For media researchers, the ongoing societal polarization has been seen as a systemic and cultural effect of traditionally weak media accountability and the lack of a journalistic united front (Głowacki & Kuś, 2019); something of critical interest in assessing monitoring capabilities of potentially diverse researchers' communities.

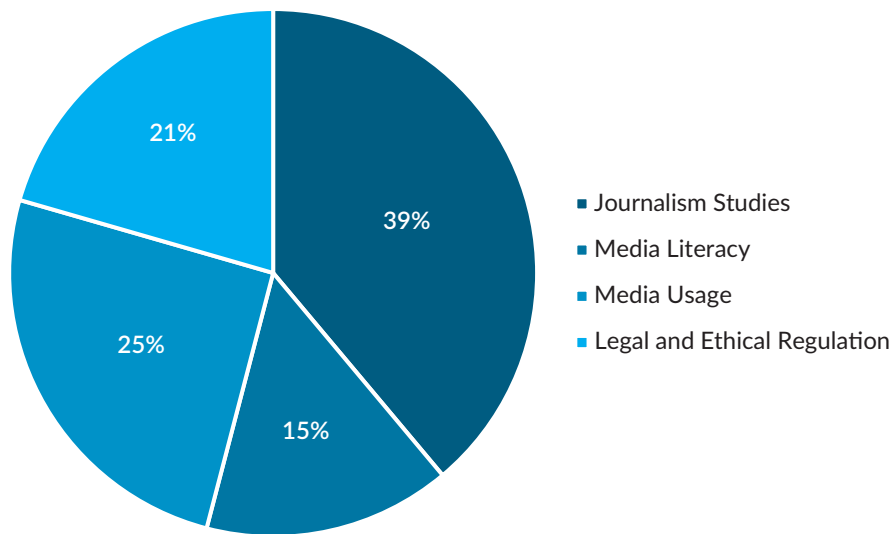
#### 4. Poland's Three Sides of Media Research Monitoring Capabilities

Considering the study goals and hypotheses, the following paragraphs look at Poland's media and democracy research monitoring capabilities, both regarding scholarly interests and expertise alongside research dynamics and a set of potential cultural path dependencies via impact and applied research dynamics. Following the article's goals and design, the overall goal is to adapt the three related critical cultural junctures into the associated media and democracy researchers' culture.

##### 4.1. Scholarly Interests in Media and Democracy

Figure 2 shows Polish research interests in academic publications in four of Mediadelcom's democratic checks and balances (2000–2020). On the surface, media and democracy research in the studied period focused on journalism, with a high level of interest in media-political and economic relationships. Beyond the quantitative estimations of the scholarly database, several international research projects have also contributed to the dominant role of journalism studies in exploring Poland's journalism culture. Among the subjects for empirical and comparative journalism quality evaluation have been ideal journalism roles, standards and practices as perceived by media professionals and researchers.

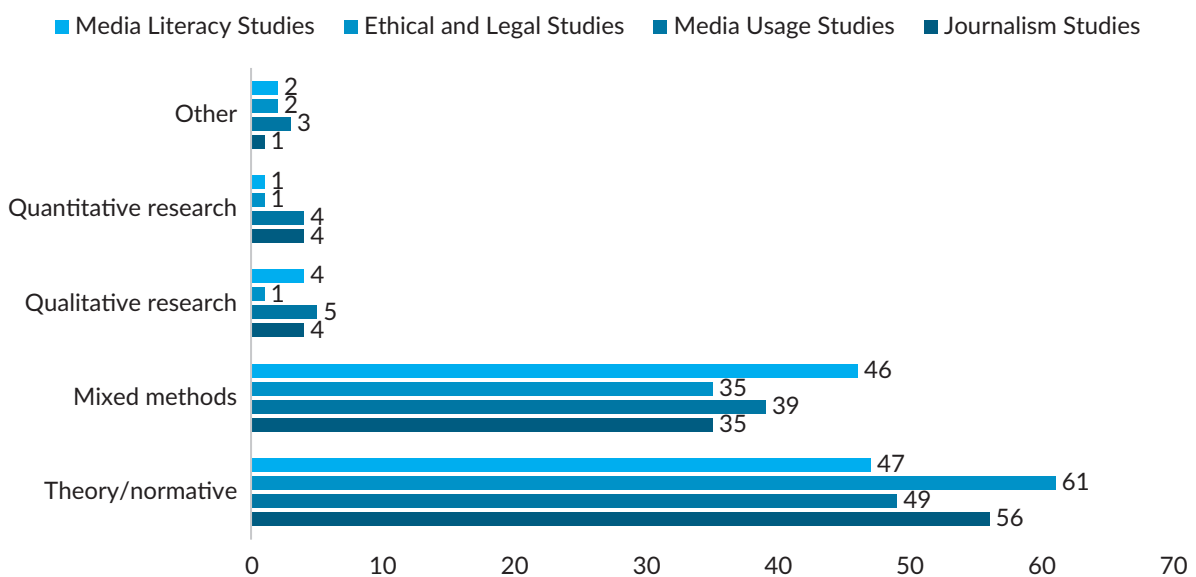
For instance, research publications and projects led by Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska (Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe, 2010–2013; Professional Journalistic Cultures in Russia, Poland and Sweden, 2011–2014) or Agnieszka Stępińska (The Global Journalist in the 21st Century, 2009; Journalism Students Around the Globe, 2012–2016; The Journalistic Role Performance, 2013–ongoing) have emphasized the mismatch between normative visions of media and democracy vs journalism practice in Polish newsrooms. While journalism visions, market conditions, and media's roles in society have become the central emphasis, there has been an evident research gap in qualitatively reflecting on organizational media conditions.



**Figure 2.** The scholarly interests of media and democracy researchers in percentage (N = 1,000). Source: Głowacki et al. (2022a, p. 366).

The Mediadelcom study has further noted that empirical validation of journalism conditions has focused on the holistic Polish media system, with only 6% of publications relating to journalists daily working conditions and 1% of scholarly publications on workforce diversity (e.g., gender, language, and social class; Głowacki et al., 2022a, p. 353).

Looking at the legal and self-regulation research interest, there is a focus on normative journalism standards, with the dominant theory and normative narrative, also across other checks and balances domains (Figure 3). The overall barrier to transforming scholarly expertise has been overcoming systemic theoretical challenges

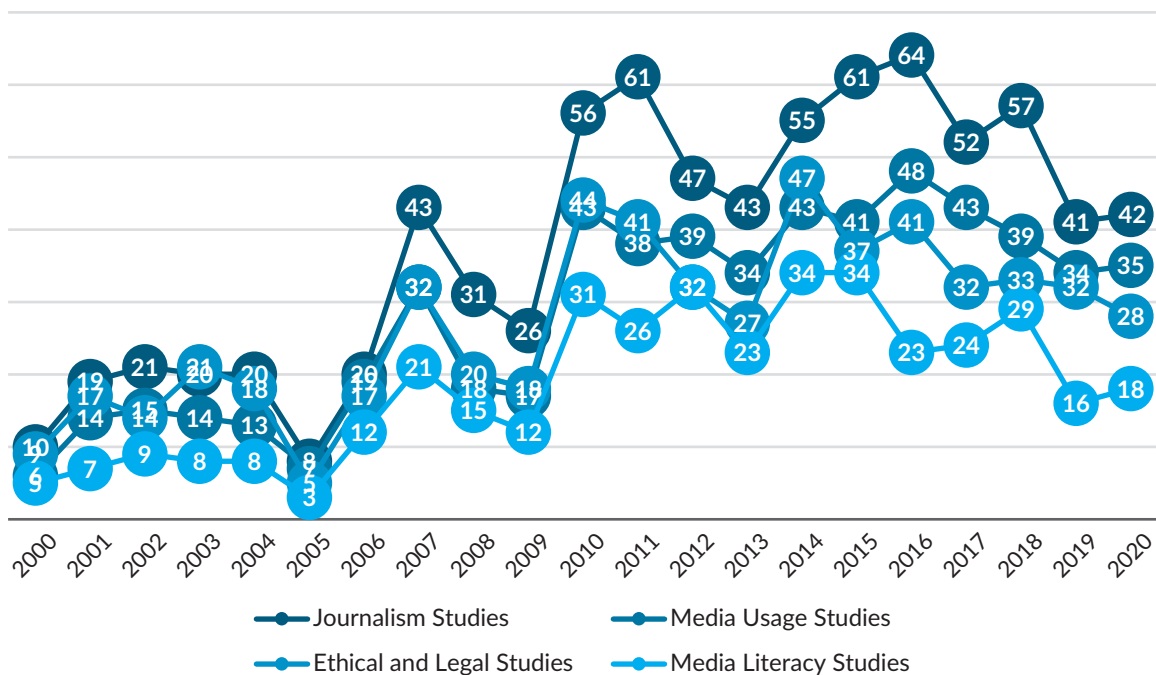


**Figure 3.** The scholarly orientations in percentage (N = 1,000). Source: Głowacki et al. (2022a, p. 369).

and engaging in qualitative methods research, which generates obstacles to accessing and understanding the factual newsroom processes. The scholarly database data identifies the importance of research and expertise beyond the intellectual work, with the highest number of applied research initiatives by researchers collaborating with regulatory bodies, public service media, and non-governmental knowledge/wisdom advice (Głowacki et al., 2022a, pp. 358–359). Scholarly advisors of critical policy advice include Karol Jakubowicz, Beata Klimkiewicz, Stanisław Jędrzejewski, Alicja Jaskiernia, Tadeusz Kowalski, and Jędrzej Skrzypczak.

#### 4.2. The Dynamics of Media and Democracy Research

There are at least two ways to monitor research capabilities and related junctures in the countries studied. One data set aims to illustrate changing researchers' patterns of interest concerning the critical cultural junctures in three highly related areas: technology, politics, and society. Nevertheless, there is also a call for a more in-depth analysis of critical cultural moments as monitoring capabilities adapt and change. Firstly, the scholarly database of 2000–2020 publications shows quantitative evidence of the continuity of media and democracy research. Figure 4 illustrates the number of studies relating to Mediadelcom's bibliographical dataset for Poland, with an observable rise of media and democracy research with potential turning points in the aftermath of 2010 and 2015 onwards. On the surface, the increase in journalism studies and media competencies and regulation areas via turning points have widely been acknowledged because of media technology's changes towards digital media and the erosion of traditional broadcasting and the press. The number of new theories and communications shifts toward more participatory and engaged media has become the center of researchers' interest from 2010 onwards (Hofman, 2016; Mielczarek, 2007). Another visible trend in the period studied



**Figure 4.** Dynamics and continuity of media and democracy research in Poland (N = 1,000). Source: Głowacki et al. (2022a, p. 370).



has been researchers' reactions to democratic media law and strong media-political relations, with studies reflecting insufficient public service media independence alongside regulatory and cultural threats to media pluralism and inclusion (Castro Herrero et al., 2017; Jaskiernia & Pokorna-Ignatowicz, 2017; Klimkiewicz, 2015; Węglińska, 2021).

While the critical cultural junctures in politics and society have explained communications and media trends, the overall contributions have been reactive. Only a few studies of applied research and policy recommendations are identified primarily in the journalism and media literacy domains. Journalism studies have focused mainly on market trends, changes in media competencies, and public service media conditions (Kononiuk, 2019; Kowalski, 2014; Szot, 2010), but there has been a research gap in exploring the historical divisions of the journalistic communities and the systemic qualitative investigation of media polarization and media's organizational culture (Donders, 2021; Mellado, 2021). Similarly, the dynamics of research interests in media accountability systems have shown the dominant role of normative views on journalism ethics and communications rights, constituting approximately 70% of Poland's database of scholarly publications. At the same time, there has been low scholarly engagement in establishing press councils, establishing media ombudsman-like institutions, and generating support for the online tools and practices of monitoring the media (Głowacki et al., 2022a, p. 353; Kurkovski & Sidyk-Furman, 2022).

### 4.3. The Living Cultural Path Dependencies

Looking at conditions for media and democracy research dynamics and interests, we argue that Mediadelcom's data needs further explanation from the side of critical junctures and cultural changes in media and democracy studies over the last two decades. To this end, the conditions of democratic media research go beyond the scholarly database with a potential set of cultural dimensions, for which we coin the phrase "the living cultural path dependencies" across Poland's research and monitoring communities.

On the surface, Poland's communications and media scholarship has gone through lengthy processes of fragmentation across various socio-political theories and methodologies, which are still in the theoretical and methodological stabilization stage (Jabłonowski & Jakubowski, 2014). Before the recognition of media and communications research as an autonomous discipline in 2011, there had been an observable integration of academic centers across the country which resulted in the creation of the Polish Communication Association with an English Scopus-based, open-access, biannual journal entitled *Central European Journal of Communication* (Głowacki et al., 2022). The Polish Communication Association activities have further contributed to research growth across a wide range of working and networking research sections and the rise of international meetings and conferences, such as the Central and Eastern European Media conferences and the Polish Communication Association congresses (2008 onwards) alongside several members becoming involved in the activities of the International Communication Association and the European Communication Research and Education Association.

In addition to recent autonomy and scholarly communities' integration, higher education policies and reforms have reflected on media and democracy research conditions alongside shifts in communications and media paradigms (Hofman, 2016). Looking at the last two decades, one can identify systemic reforms associated with the Ministry of Science and Higher Education to increase Polish researchers' competitiveness globally. The policies of the Civic Platform and the Polish People's Party political coalition

were discontinued after the political elections of 2015 with the new guidelines of research quality and excellence evaluation by the Science and Education ministers. The Law and Justice governments have established a new list for scholarly journals evaluation, with low support for media and communications journals, as compared to other social science disciplines such as political studies, linguistics sociology, and Catholic religion studies. In line with recent political change and societal liberal vs conservative polarization, uncovering these conditions for media and democracy research would require more in-depth systemic and content-based scholarly journal evaluation.

One of the most potentially critical cultural path dependencies in the periods and critical junctures studies has been the funding of media and democracy research. Regardless of the government's policies and liberal vs conservative orientations, the turns of the 2010s research internationalization and scholarly integration have resulted in Poland's participation in the first significant European study with a comparative, systemic, and technological change nature, funded by the European Commission. Since media and communications became autonomous, there has been an observable rise in the number of research funds by Narodowe Centrum Nauki (the National Science Center), Narodowy Program Rozwoju Humanistyki (the National Program for the Development of the Humanities), Narodowe Centrum Badań i Rozwoju (the National Center for Research and Development), and the Ministry of Education and Science, in the areas of digital and political communications, media policies, media and religion, alongside public service media technological transformations.

While the rise of research project experiences has on a large scale potentially influenced media scholars' skills and knowledge of new media research methodology, open-access policies have yet to become the dominant publishing practice. Scholarly journals are becoming available online free of charge; yet, most research outcomes in all four media and democracy research areas are functional as paid content: 67% of journalism studies, 62% of media users' studies, and 65% of academic publications in media literacies and regulation. On top of that, the analysis of scholarship across the critical junctures further addresses the ongoing trends in sharing academic works in scholarly publications rather than semi-academic reports for policymakers and the industry. While the evaluation of science excellence from 2015 onwards has resulted in a noticeable shift from academic book publications towards scholarly journals, most available national journals are not indexed in the international scholarly database, such as Scopus, the Web of Science, and the Social Science Citation Index. At the same time, the data shows a decline in scholarly expertise offered to—and funded by—the National Broadcasting Council (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji, 2023).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article aims to look at and critically overview the monitoring capabilities of media and democracy research in Poland. Looking at the monitoring capabilities concepts, the goal has been to position researchers as critical agents in deliberative communication's knowledge share, wisdom, and applied research (meaning). By applying the foundations of monitoring capability methodologies, we use time-related frames, understood as the critical junctures and potential cultural path-dependencies, in researching Polish media and democracy. On the surface, the methodology of Mediadelcom has offered ground for mapping the checks and balances measures concerning journalism studies, media regulation, accountability alongside users, and journalism competencies and literacies. This has revealed research gaps in studies of media literacies and qualitative studies of media organizations (daily work practices, the social

and local contexts, mindsets, and rituals). The database of publications ( $N = 1,000$ , from 2000 to 2020) provided quantitative findings on researchers' interests and changes experienced through technology, media-political relationships, and the cultural clash of Western values and methodologies.

The findings from Mediadecom's study of Poland have been grouped between the three sides of media and democracy research monitoring capabilities to address the quality criteria alongside the dynamics, adaptation, and practical (policymaking and advice) side of scholarly engagement. With most studies associated with the journalism studies approach, the dataset has proven the overall focus on ideal media standards and roles as perceived by scholars and journalists interviewed within national and comparative international studies (surveys and semi-structured interviews). At the same time, the potential of journalism culture understanding has focused on journalism theories concerning key relative characteristics of media systems rather than empirical studies of media organizations and organizational values and the newsrooms' daily strategies and cultures. Similarly, other normative democratic checks and balances have reflected the systemic external changes in media economics adaptation and the global shifts towards digital and data-driven practices and technologies. The rise of scholarly interests in line with critical technological junctures followed research interest evolution in examining communications patterns change and socio-political contexts. While Poland's Mediadecom data filtered via the critical junctures has shown a high number of academic publications as a response to the global media and technology change, there has been only limited evidence of scholarly resources responding with advice for online media accountability literacies as the online media and user-generated criticism practices evolved. The same challenge has been in the media regulation research domain, with the clash of regulatory and cultural implementation of media pluralism and public service media innovation and independence. The monitoring capability of media policy shifts in the aftermath of the 2015 political change has resulted in critical assessments of Poland's democracy decline. These have been highlighted by non-governmental international and national media freedom monitoring organizations, with rather reactive and normative researchers' response to technology and politics alongside the systemic decrease in scholarly media regulation and self-regulation applied research and expertise in the ongoing media and democracy debates.

While this article has explored the dynamics of media and democracy research across critical cultural junctures, the dataset has further called for a critical reexamination of Poland's media and communications research and science conditions. Among the potentially relevant cultural path dependencies have been the division and fragmentation of media and democracy theories and methodologies, typical for newly recognized communications and media research as a separate research discipline. Media and communications studies in Poland became autonomous in the corresponding shifts of legacy media going digital with rapid researchers' integration via the Polish Communication Association, the *Central European Journal of Communication*, and the professionalization of other scholarly journals. Observing new media and communications tendencies in the related critical junctures came during the initial large international research projects alongside the intellectual engagement in international conferences and associations, focusing on Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. While evaluating scholarly quality and excellence has become a subject of systemic policy change at the government level, scholarly publications on media and democracy are mostly academic sources with only a few emerging practices of open-access journals and indexation in international scholarly databases. The Polish case study has proved that there are key challenges to finding, accessing, and making the meaning of media and democratic discourse. The main two are the reactive nature of media and communications studies as a whole and cultural path dependencies, as

typified by limited academic engagement in the knowledge shared with other democratic stakeholders (policymakers, media managers, and non-governmental organizations).

Researching researchers via monitoring capabilities is critically important in countries where democratic discourses and traditions have been challenged by illiberal turns, socio-political polarization, and public service media's governmentalization. The multiplication of democratic discourses in Poland and the ongoing tensions between liberal values and conservative thinking create a complex research environment, with the researchers standing up actively for human, media, and democracy rights, and positioning themselves in evaluating the academic potential of wisdom and applied research. The analysis of critical cultural junctures and the view of researchers' cultural path dependencies call for more in-depth investigations of the fabric of media and democracy research. This is especially true considering the potential social and ideological polarization of scholarly communities in connection with the quality evaluation and funding of research projects at the national levels. There is also an interrelated ongoing call to fill in the research gaps, especially in the context of providing more findings that are based on empirical (quantitative, mixed) data, and more collaboration with media and related high-tech industries (in studying people in organizations, digital and data-driven strategies). Finally, the future's key challenge might be to look at scholarly communities and their own systemic and cultural adaptation, emphasizing researchers' mindsets and generational shifts in creating impact and the meaning of future media and democracy research.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in DataDOI at <https://doi.org/10.23673/re-392> and they are part of the EU financed project MEDIADCOM (<https://www.mediadelcom.eu>)

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