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Media freedom, polarization and democracy in post-communist Romania. Research notes

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Abstract. The paper aims to present the dynamics of the media freedom index in post-communist Romania. Using secondary statistical data regarding political, civic, and economic sectors, the paper indicates the complex interplay between democratic transition and media independence. As regards the “watchdog” and “agenda-setting” functions of mass media, the paper highlighted several statistical correlations that support the positive impact of participation and civil society in the field of media transparency and independence. The paper presents radiography of media freedom between 2002 and 2023, estimating the main variations of this index. Moreover, results confirm statistical differences between the two decades, highlighting that an increased level of media freedom was acquired after 2012. Political context, social dynamics, and economic conditions are several variables that are relevant for explaining the evolution of media freedom in Romanian society. Quantitative results show that political polarization is negatively related to media independence. Conversely, active citizens and civil society are key factors that could predict increased media freedom in Romanian post-communist society. The paper is useful for scholars and decision-makers interested in the complex interconnection between public information, media independence, and democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Media freedom, participatory democracy, civil society, civic accountability, political polarization, political culture

1. Political Culture, Media, and Democracy. Theoretical models and research hypotheses

In contemporary societies, mass media plays an important role in shaping political attitudes, and behaviors and setting the main guidelines of the political agenda. Because democracy relies on transparent public information, media is seen as the “fourth” power in democratic systems alongside legislative, executive, and judicial powers. In the political context, media is related to public information, dissemination, and “watchdog” activities, fostering public discourse and debates. Informed people are relevant for building democratic systems. In this regard, a well-informed citizen should be seen as an important request for democratic consolidation. This fact is related to the importance of free media in democratic societies. Free media and the transparency of public information create opportunities for free speech, public engagement, and civic accountability. By these arguments, this study aims to

create the link between media, political transparency, democratic order, and civic accountability, focusing on the Romanian democratic and transitional process. Using the mass-media theoretical perspectives that underline the bridge role played by media between citizens and policy-makers, the study creates opportunities for understanding the dynamics of media freedom in a post-communist society. To assess the impact of media freedom in the field of democratic order, we assume that media plays the role of a bridge between citizens and the political system, creating premises for civic participation and accountability.

As regards the theoretical perspectives related to media impact in democratic societies we aim to develop an analytical framework based on social capital theory (SCT), theory of democratic mobilization (DM), theory of ideological polarization (IPT), and information fragmentation perspectives (IF). Using the cross-theoretical approach regarding these normative perspectives, our approach aims to develop a comprehensive framework of the Romanian democratic process analyzed through the lens of media and civic information.

An important finding in the field of the theory of democracy, developed in the early 1960s is represented by the cultural and social bases of democratic societies. However, Almond and Verba stressed the fact that the attitudes and the cognitions of the individuals are relevant only in participatory cultures [1]. Defined in terms of implicit or explicit values, political culture is the most important variable for analyzing social and political dynamics in democratic societies [2]. Beyond institutions and judicial norms, political culture creates premises for developing social capital and civic accountability [3].

The link between political culture and social capital is a key focus in both political sciences and political sociology. It explores the pattern of governance that depends on the shared norms, values, and trust among citizens. Participative political culture is seen as the normative dimension within which social capital is cultivated and mobilized. In this regard, the link between participation and social capital consists of the network of relationships that facilitate trust and cooperation. Participatory political culture has to be based on social trust and has to generate, in practice, social cooperation among individuals. In accordance with this perspective, democratic order could be seen and analyzed in terms of social cooperation and stability [4]. A high level of civic education, common social or political norms and values, and good governance are the pillars that sustain democratic order. Using three types of political culture, Almond and Verba emphasized that participatory political culture is characterized by active citizens and social capital. In contrast, both parochial and subject culture could limit political action and opportunities for participatory democracy [5]. This kind of political culture could enable collective action and social cohesion. Therefore, scholars underlined that social capital is strongly related to participatory and civic culture. Bridging social capital is a key concept for understanding the role played by political participation and effective governance within democratic political systems. Regarding the historical perspectives of social capital, scholars have underlined the fact that social capital and participatory culture are relevant variables for developing social skills that are important for democratic governance. Moreover, the interplay between social capital and the participative cultural model could be analyzed using several directions such as: 1. participative culture is the main foundation of the social capital; 2. social capital could reinforce civic and participative culture; 3. social capital is a relevant variable in the field of civic and political education; 4. social capital might counteract political polarization [6].

As regards the role played by media in the interplay between political culture and social capital, we underline the “agenda-setting” function. Generally speaking, the media plays a crucial role in facilitating discussions or debates concerning political or public issues.

Political philosophers pointed out the importance of media in generating the optimal framework for public debates. Media contributes to the legitimacy of political decision-makers and institutions by providing a space for rational arguments and discussions. Taking into account these theoretical directions, we postulate the following research hypothesis:

H₁: An increased level of civic accountability is related to an increased level of media freedom.

Suppose the social capital theory of media and democracy stresses successfully the importance of participatory culture and citizens' involvement in public space. In that case, media as a mobilizing political agent presents the importance of media in shaping civic duties. Media encourage public participation in political affairs. Media has the power to encourage political participation by raising awareness about issues, providing channels for activism, and fostering a sense of civic duty. The conceptual framework of the theory of political mobilization through media presents several key concepts such as agenda-setting, framing, and political deliberation. Since the early 1950s, Lazarsfeld demonstrated the importance of media in shaping political behavior. Social channels and social networks play a crucial role in the dissemination of political information [7]. The sociological perspective of democratic mobilization highlights the importance of social interactions in shaping patterns of political attitudes and behaviors. Thus, media creates premises for a particular cognitive style and political behavior. Media exposure could interact with personal beliefs and could influence individuals' perceptions of the social, economic, or political dimensions. However, media consumption influences individuals' likelihood to participate in the public sphere. Both voter turnout and electoral preferences are deeply influenced by media consumption. In this framework, we can integrate the psychological direction developed by Zanjone in the field of social psychology that refers to the "mere exposure effect" [8, 9]. Political campaigns and public debates, assisted by traditional or new media, are significant situations that demonstrate the complex interplay between participation, political mobilization, democratic choices, and media consumption.

Regarding this theoretical model, we argue that the development of the global world and ICT plays an important role in political mobilization. In contrast to traditional media and societies, exposure to new media is characterized by rapid access to information, lower costs, and direct political engagement [10-13]. In this context, ensuring media freedom is crucial for democratic mobilization. The key directions for ensuring media freedom should be represented by: the protection of press freedom, combating censorship, and promoting transparency in media and information [14]. As regards the importance of media in democratic mobilization, we underline that governments must invest in technology that bridges the digital divide, ensuring that all communities have opportunities for democratic participation in public affairs [15]. By these normative assumptions, we postulate the following research hypothesis:

H₂: Higher levels of media freedom are positively associated with the prevalence and effectiveness of participatory democracy.

The global context and social networks negatively affect the interaction between information and citizens. In this context, we can identify several threats which could limit media freedom. Thus, social networks, within global society, amplify the spreading of misinformation and fake news. Viral fake news during elections is more likely to determine a particular manner of understanding the political world. In this regard, viral fake news could

influence electoral attitudes and behaviors. Another important threat is represented by the overloaded information [16]. Social media and other new media channels are characterized by an increased amount of information [17]. For citizens is very difficult to discern between real information and fake news. An important effect of these phenomena is represented by political mistrust in decision-makers and democratic institutions. Political mistrust is associated with political polarization and radical attitudes regarding social or political space. All these theoretical statements show that social networks and unfree media have significant effects on the interaction between information and citizens, undermining trust, credibility, and civic engagement.

An important social effect of the unfree media (deprived of freedom) is represented by the polarization of society [18-20]. In general terms, political polarization reflects the division between opposition political ideologies, where individuals adopt radical or extreme ideological positions. Political polarization reduces the possibility of political negotiations and compromise, fostering antagonism between political factions. Unfree media is more likely to amplify political polarization. Taking into consideration the new media, we agree on the fact that algorithms create echo chambers, where citizens are exposed only to information that reinforces their beliefs. Political polarization is related to subjective perceptions. Developed by Leon Festinger in terms of cognitive dissonance, subjective perception is seen as a form of cognitive bias. This cognitive bias consists of the fact that individuals are more likely to use and resonate with information that stresses or reinforces their cognitions and beliefs. Restricted or unfree media is associated with a high level of ideological division. This division reflects political polarization and radicalization of society as a whole. In the context of political polarization, citizens are exposed to narratives that present a single political agenda, marginalizing alternative viewpoints [21]. Limited media freedom fosters mistrust among groups that perceive their views as excluded, increasing the ideological divide. Also, polarized media increases the citizens' exposure to extreme narratives. In this context, polarized media creates premises for radical discourse, suppressing political moderation. Restricted and unfree media plays a pivotal role in shaping radical attitudes and behaviors. By shaping the ideological divide, restricted media contributes to the radicalization of society. Media freedom and democratic views are relevant for developing critical thinking and empowering citizens with the tools to navigate information landscapes critically. Using these normative assumptions regarding the nexus between restricted media and polarization we postulate the following research hypothesis:

H₃: An increased level of media control and censorship is strongly related to a higher level of political polarization and ideological divide within society.

Concluding, this section shows several theoretical directions which could cover the complex and dynamic relationship between media and democracy. Therefore, social capital perspectives highlighted the pivotal role played by citizens in shaping good practices of civic engagement and accountability. For stressing the relevance of the social community and capital is important to create the link between participative culture, and human capital. Education, social values, and networks could predict the strong partnership between media and democratic governance. Democratic mobilization by mass media could be seen as a catalyst for citizens to become more informed and engaged. The level of media freedom and accessibility predict the further level of political participation and accountability. Moreover, the main threat to media and society is represented by ideological divide and political polarization. Democratic societies should counteract fake news and any form of media control and censorship.

2. Research Design

Following the theoretical background, the study aims to cover several research directions concerning the impact of social and political variables in the field of free media. Using a comprehensive case study based on post-communist Romania, our paper has several research objectives such as O1: to analyze the dynamics of the free media index during two decades; O2: to identify the main variables that could predict variations in the field of media freedom index; O3: to estimate the magnitude of the media freedom in association with civic and political participation; O4: to analyze the correlation between censorship, media freedom and political polarization in post-communist Romania.

Quantitative data were collected from secondary sources provided by the V-Democracy Institute. Using a long-term statistical distribution from 2002 to 2024 the paper highlighted the interactions between civic participation, economic factors, polarization, online media, and media freedom. The study provides critical insights related to the importance of civic involvement in shaping a pattern of democratic political behavior and media transparency in sharing news and other relevant information about national and international politics.

Table 1. Research Variables.

Variable	Symbol	Units of Measurement	Data Sources
Media Freedom	MF	[0;100]	RSF- Reporters without Borders https://rsf.org/en/index
Political Polarization	PP	[1;4]	Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/
Liberal Democracy	LD	[0;1]	Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM)
Civil Society	CS	[0;1]	https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph
Participatory Democracy	PD	[0;1]	Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM)
Online Media Fractionalization	OMF	[1;4]	https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph
Education Level	EL	Years of schooling	Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM)
GDP/ Capita	GDP	\$	World Bank Data https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/romania/overview

To assess the relevant factors that influence the evolution of media freedom in post-communist Romania, we develop a multiple linear regression as follows:

$$MF = \alpha + \beta_0 \cdot PP + \beta_1 \cdot LD + \beta_2 \cdot CS + \beta_3 \cdot PD + \beta_4 \cdot OMF + \beta_5 \cdot EL + \beta_6 \cdot GDP + \varepsilon_{i,j},$$

where α – intercept, $\beta_{1,6}$ – regression coefficients and $\varepsilon_{i,j}$ – standardized residuals

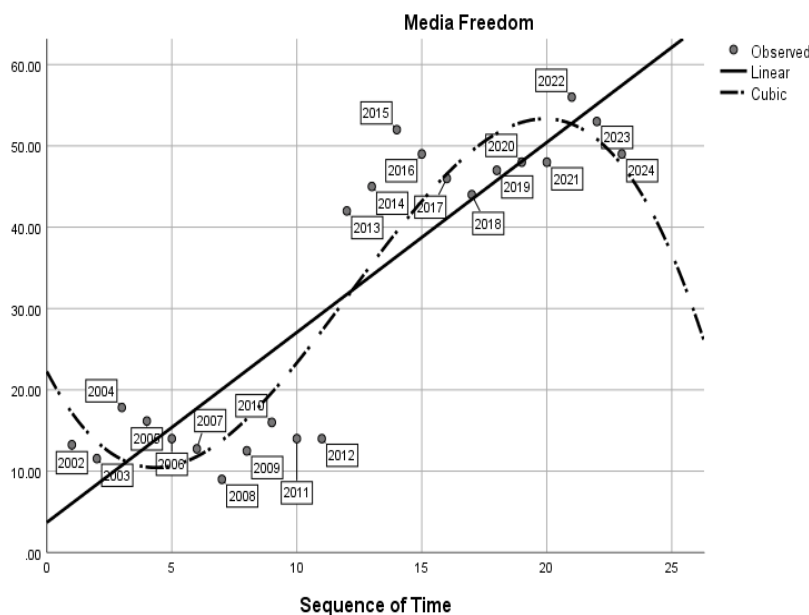
Statistical data are relevant for the Romanian democratic transition, taking into account the period from 2002 to 2023. Using post-communist Romania as a comprehensive

case study, we aim to understand how political or societal factors are relevant to media freedom. However, media freedom is an important issue in transitional democracies, characterized by political censorship and lack of information transparency. Moreover, the legacy of communist censorship is an important factor that limited further dynamics of media freedom. Free media is important for civic engagement, highlighting the role played by informed citizens in the field of public affairs. The relevance of media freedom in the field of civic accountability derives from the educational role played by media in democratic societies. Informed citizens are more likely to elect political actors that encourage and promote democratic parties or democratic leaders. The concentration of ownership, political corruption, and political interferences are relevant issues for understanding the media landscape in the Romanian democratic transition. In this regard, media freedom should be seen as an important statistical indicator for assessing the level of democratic consolidation in post-communist Romania. Together with political parties, institutional transparency, and economic reforms, media freedom leads to an increased level of social trust and the rule of law. Rule of law and political trust are key factors for having an informed and cohesive society.

3. Media freedom, political polarization and civil society. Empirical findings

This section provides insights regarding the factors that influenced media freedom in the last two decades in post-communist Romania. To evaluate the importance of media freedom in the Romanian political landscape we used a nonlinear model for stressing the dynamics of the media freedom index between 2002 and 2023. The figure below (Figure 1) presents the current dynamics of the indicator. The statistical model that fits the data is a cubic equation reflecting significant variations during 20 years.

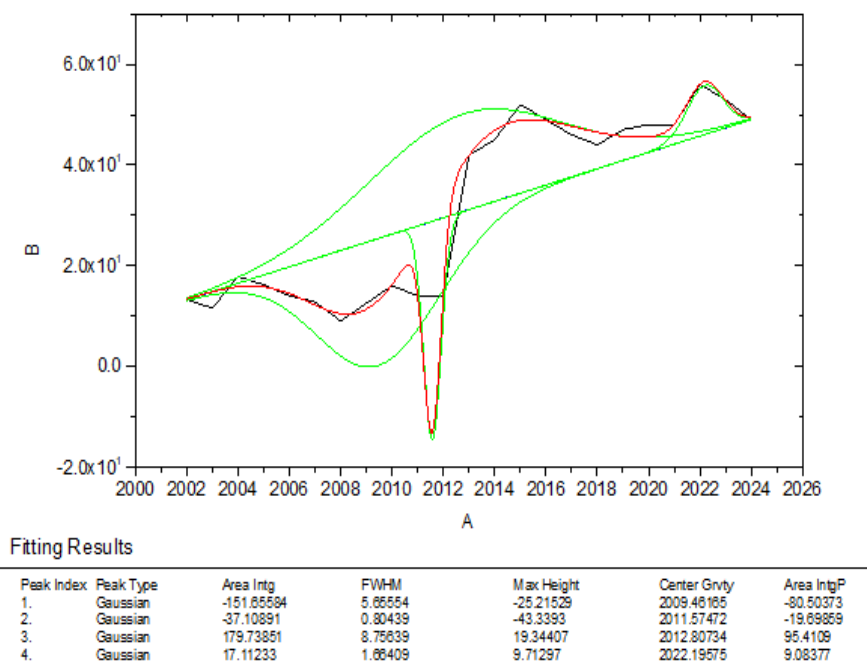
Figure 1. Media Freedom Index in post-communist Romania (2002-2023)



As regards the nonlinear trend of the media freedom index we used peak analysis for estimating the maximum values of the indicator in the statistical distribution. However, the

method focuses on the critical shifts that are specific to the Romanian mass-media landscape. In this study, we estimated four distinct peaks that suggest different evolutions in Romanian media freedom. Thus, these peaks are significant for stressing media activity, coverage of political events, public debates, or regulatory measures that limit media freedom. The peaks are relevant in 2009, 2011, 2012, and 2022. These findings might suggest the cyclic nature of the media freedom distribution and several critical moments in the dynamics of media freedom in Romanian society. To emphasize these perspectives, Figure 2 indicates the peak analysis of the media freedom index.

Figure 2. Peak Analysis of the Media Freedom Index in post-communist Romania (2002-2023)

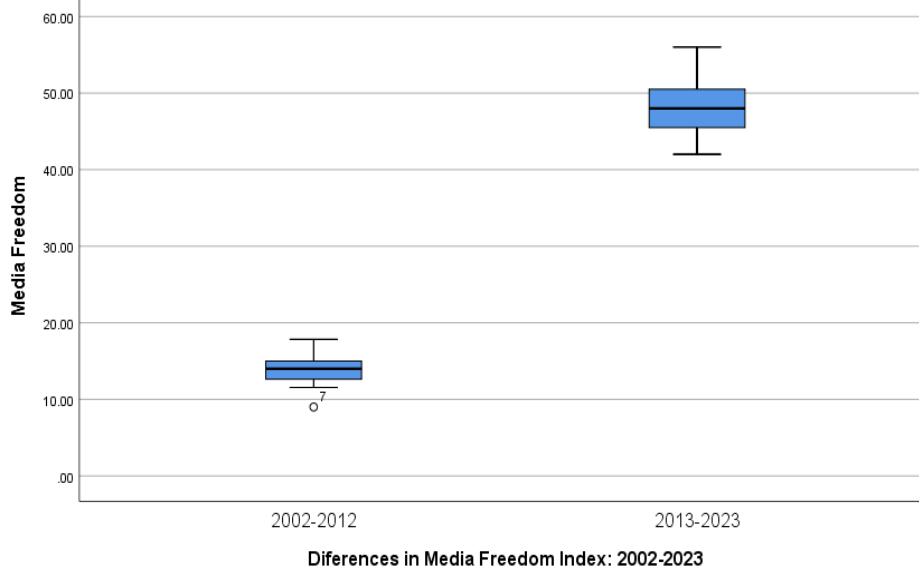


Results confirm that 2009, 2011, and 2012 registered significant negative variations in media freedom. Economic crisis and political reforms specific to the year 2009 are significant events that could argue the smallest values of the media freedom index. In 2009 the global financial crisis had an important impact in the field of political and economic journalism. The crisis might have an important impact on the ownership structures of the independent traditional or new media. Presidential elections and political tensions that are specific to 2011 and 2012 could be important political events that capture the decreased level of journalist's freedom of expression. Political instability, a public plebiscite for the Romanian President, and economic difficulties were associated with both limited media freedom and a flawed democratic regime. Pandemic times and the recent Ukrainian war are relevant events related to variations in the media freedom index in 2022. These peaks suggest that media institutions are sensitive to political or economic events, stressing their role in shaping social or political attitudes and behaviors.

To observe differences in the media freedom index we used two distinct decades: 2002-2012 and 2013-2023. The first decade of our analysis reflects a decreased level of media freedom in the Romanian social and political landscape with an average value of 13.73 and a

standard deviation of 2.40. The second decade, 2013-2023 is characterized by an increased level of media freedom index with an average value of 48.25 and a standard deviation of 3.95. The graph from Figure 3 presents the significant differences between these decades related to the dynamics of the media freedom index ($T=24.96$, $p< 0.001$).

Figure 3. Statistical differences in Media Freedom: 2002-2023



To explain these nonlinear dynamics of media freedom we developed a multiple linear regression using relevant predictors of societal, political, and economic variables. This multiple linear regression allows us to identify the impact of political polarization, liberal democracy, civil society, participatory democracy, media fractionalization, education, and GDP/ capita in the field of media freedom. The role of participatory democracy is relevant in our approach to stressing the media as the environment for public debates, and citizens' engagement in the public decision-making process. An increased level of political participation is relevant for explaining media freedom and independence. In accordance with participatory democracy, liberal democracy creates the political framework for political freedom and civil liberties. Despite the political and economic contexts, liberal democracy should remain the single legal framework that sustains and preserves freedom of opinion. As regards our theoretical background, participatory democracy and liberal politics are key variables for understanding the crucial role played by civil society and civic accountability in preserving media independence. Journalists' integrity and independence are relevant features of the "watchdog" function played by media in democratic societies. However, education level is an important marker of social capital and economic conditions are relevant for understanding the interplay between media institutions and economic welfare. Times characterized by economic development are more likely to be correlated with media independence. Conversely, bad economic times are more likely to be associated with limited and restricted mass media. Table 2 presents the main predictors that are significant for explaining the evolution of media freedom between 2002 and 2023.

Table 2. Regression Model. Dependent variable: Media Freedom

Model				Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1186.341	279.419		4.246	0.002
	Political Polarization	-68.029	29.239	-0.295	-2.327	0.040
	Liberal Democracy	-63.185	122.733	-0.221	-0.515	0.618
	Civil Society	256.144	89.706	0.724	2.855	0.010
	Participatory Democracy	-48.977	85.181	-0.136	-0.575	0.578
	Online Media Fractionalization	-68.477	47.999	-0.321	-1.427	0.184
	Education	-106.561	30.565	-1.017	-3.486	0.006
	GDP	8.538	1.514	1.722	5.638	0.000

Empirical findings show that significant predictors of the media freedom index are represented by political polarization ($\beta = -0.295, p = 0.04$) and civil society ($\beta = 0.724, p = 0.01$). Negative trends in the media freedom index are explained by an increased level of political polarization. Political polarization is related to ideological and partisan control and limited balanced journalism. However, an increased level of political polarization explains the lack of social and political trust in democratic institutions. Biased information and an increased level of media fragmentation create opportunities for media censorship and limited democratic transition.

Conversely, the positive and significant association that supports the positive trend in media freedom is represented by civil society. Active and informed citizens are more likely to create opportunities for civic accountability. Advocating for transparency and integrity, civil society supports both democratic order and freedom of expression. An important role played by civil society is to promote a balanced and transparent process of sharing public information. Following these assumptions civil society is important for supporting independent journalism.

As regards the research hypotheses we assessed the impact of participatory democracy and civil society (H_1 and H_2). Statistical results stressed that civic involvement and civil society are key predictors for explaining the positive evolutions of media freedom in the Romanian social and political landscape. As critical elements of democratic consolidation, participatory democracy, and civil society refer to practices that allow the active role played by citizens in elections. Public consultations, decision-making processes, and public information are crucial elements for free media and democratic order. By hypothesis H_3 we evaluated the negative impact of polarization in the field of media freedom. Polarized societies are more likely to support social conflict and restricted journalistic practices. Communist legacy is an important variable for explaining the lowest scores related to media freedom in the first decades after the collapse of the communist order. European integration and political interactions created premises and standards for open and free media.

4. Conclusions

The paper examines the key factors that are relevant to explaining the dynamics of the media freedom index in post-communist Romania. Historical legacies, political contexts, and economic factors are analyzed in a complex and dynamic interaction with media freedom. Political polarization, especially in the first decade after the collapse of communism, is negatively related to the independence of journalism and freedom of expression. Partisanship and ideological polarization explain the lowest scores associated with the media freedom index. The study reflects the importance of media balance and independence as crucial variables of democratic order. However, active civil society is a significant factor that is positively related to media freedom. Statistical data and results confirm the complex relationship between media and democracy. Media freedom is an important marker of democratic consolidation, reflecting transparency in public information, unbiased news, and civic accountability. To address these challenges Romania has to promote media independence. Both traditional and new media could be seen in terms of vectors and platforms for accountability, pluralism, and fair information.

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