

Dossier



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Democracy in Question, Media in Doubt: Citizen Perceptions of Media Autonomy in Slovenia

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Abstract: The article examines how citizens in Slovenia understand the relationship between democracy and media autonomy, drawing on focus group discussions conducted in 2024. As a post-socialist state marked by institutional instability, low trust, and weak media policy, Slovenia provides a context in which citizens' interpretations of democratic processes and the role of the media reflect broader dynamics of democratic consolidation. The study is theoretically grounded in normative media theory, which conceives media autonomy as a multi-layered ideal shaped by structural conditions, professional practices, and civic expectations.

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Findings reveal a complex and often ambivalent picture. While citizens generally uphold the normative ideal of the media as a watchdog of democracy, they frequently question whether Slovenian media fulfil this role. Participants identify several structural and political constraints undermining media autonomy, including politicisation of media ownership, pressures from political and economic elites, and insufficient safeguards for journalistic independence. The findings suggest that in contexts of fragile democratic consolidation, media autonomy is not merely a professional or institutional issue but a deeply political concern for citizens.

Keywords: media autonomy, media freedom, citizens perceptions, democracy, Slovenia

La démocratie en question, les médias dans le doute : la perception citoyenne de l'autonomie des médias en Slovénie

Résumé : L'article examine comment les citoyen-ne-s en Slovénie comprennent la relation entre la démocratie et l'autonomie des médias, à partir de entretiens en groupes de discussion en 2024. En tant qu'État post-socialiste marqué par une instabilité institutionnelle, une faible confiance en médias et une politique médiatique fragile, la Slovénie constitue un milieu dans lequel les interprétations citoyennes des processus démocratiques et du rôle des médias reflètent des dynamiques de consolidation démocratique plus larges. L'étude s'appuie théoriquement sur la théorie normative des médias, qui conçoit l'autonomie des médias comme un idéal à plusieurs dimensions, formé par des conditions structurelles, des pratiques professionnelles et des attentes civiques. Les résultats révèlent une image complexe et souvent ambivalente. Bien que les citoyens soutiennent généralement l'idéal normatif des médias comme un garde-fou de la démocratie, ils et elles mettent fréquemment en doute la capacité des médias slovènes à remplir ce rôle. Les participants identifient plusieurs contraintes structurelles et politiques qui compromettent l'autonomie des médias, notamment la politisation de la propriété des médias, les pressions exercées par les élites politiques et économiques, ainsi que l'insuffisance des dispositifs de protection assurant l'indépendance journalistique. Les résultats suggèrent que, dans des contextes de consolidation démocratique fragile, l'autonomie des médias n'est pas seulement une question professionnelle ou institutionnelle, mais aussi une préoccupation profondément politique pour les citoyens.

Mots-clés: autonomie des médias, liberté des médias, perceptions citoyennes, démocratie, Slovénie

Introduction

Across contemporary European democracies, media autonomy stands as both a normative aspiration and a fragile reality. While journalism is expected to serve democratic functioning, citizens increasingly distrust the institutions responsible for

it, raising questions about the legitimacy and efficacy of their autonomy. This paradox prompts a critical question we aim to address in this article: How do citizens understand and evaluate media autonomy in contexts where both democracy and journalism appear fragile?

As Tambini (2021a, p. 137) notes, we are living through a period of normative confusion where legal traditions, policy frameworks, and public expectations collide without shared understanding of what media should be free from and free to do. Media autonomy is not simply a legal status, nor reducible to independence from state or market. It encompasses both structural protection but also professional and ethical capacity to act in the public interest (Karppinen & Moe, 2016; Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022; Gajardo & Mellado, 2024). This dual nature of autonomy, as both condition and ideal, echoes Isaiah Berlin's (1992) classic distinction between negative and positive liberty. While negative liberty refers to freedom from external restraint, positive liberty emphasizes the freedom or self-determination to act according to own goal (in terms of self-realisation and self-perfection, cf. Skinner, 2002, p. 239). Drawing on Berlin (1992), Örnebring and Karlsson (2022) emphasize that journalistic autonomy requires both: structural immunity from coercion and the institutional, professional, and ethical means to practice journalism meaningfully. Autonomy, in this view, is not merely defensive but enabling as it depends on conditions that allow journalism to fulfil its normative role in democratic society.

Debates on media autonomy have long been related to broader understandings of media freedom, from classical work of McQuail (1992), who argues that press freedom must balance freedom from external control with the positive requirement that media serve democratic, pluralistic and accountable communication, to more legalistic approaches such as Tambini's (2021a, 2021b). Tambini extends this dual framework into a theory of media freedom as a conditional, institutional right, grounded in a social contract of privileges and connected duties. Across these debates, media autonomy is increasingly understood as encompassing both protection from state and private control as well as the institutional empowerment and professional capacity to fulfil democratic roles such as truth-telling, pluralism, and enabling public deliberation (McQuail, 1992; Tambini, 2021a, 2021b).

These authors (McQuail, 1992; Tambini, 2021a, 2021b) particularly critique the limitations of a purely negative rights approach – i.e. freedom from –, arguing that it may hinder necessary reforms and allow market forces to dominate the media landscape, thereby undermining pluralism and journalistic professionalism. Tambini (2021a, 2021b) advocates for positive interventions, such as public funding, regulatory safeguards, and prominence rules, to ensure that media institutions can operate autonomously while remaining accountable to civil society and the public interest.

In this article we explore how citizens in Slovenia perceive media autonomy, drawing on focus group discussions and situating the analysis within a multi-dimensional theoretical framework. Discussing media autonomy from the perspective

of citizens is especially important, as it foregrounds the normative expectations placed on media institutions and highlights the democratic deficit that emerges when those expectations are unmet. In this sense, media autonomy becomes a key site of contestation and potential renewal, linking empirical insights with normative theory and policy reform.

While acknowledging the historical trajectories of Slovenia's post-socialist media development, the study integrates Slovenia into broader European debates on media systems, democratic conditions, and journalistic autonomy. The aim is to understand how citizens articulate concerns and expectations about media autonomy across structural, professional, and civic dimensions.

1. Theoretical Framework: Media Autonomy Across Structural, Professional, and Civic Layers

Normative theories of the media – that is, theories concerned with the democratic role the media ought to play –, particularly those by Christians et al. (2009), McQuail (1992), and Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011), offer essential conceptual grounding for understanding journalistic autonomy as both a democratic ideal and a contested practice. Christians et al. (2009) emphasize that journalism's professionalisation was historically developed to institutionalize responsibility through the development of ethical codes, formalized training, and the formation of a collective professional identity. This moral claim to autonomy, however, is not absolute, it is shaped by tensions between independence and accountability, especially when media institutions resist public scrutiny. McQuail (1992) complements this view by proposing media performance criteria – such as diversity, accountability, and public service – as benchmarks for evaluating journalism's democratic contribution. Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011) further argue that autonomy is not a fixed attribute, but a practice enacted through editorial decisions and journalistic routines, yet constrained by organisational hierarchies, commercial pressures and political influence. These normative perspectives emphasize that autonomy is not merely a legal status or an institutional arrangement, but a relational and multi-level concept embedded in professional culture and shaped by systemic conditions.

Conditions for media autonomy are closely connected to the functioning of democratic media, making it necessary to deepen the understanding of how they are shaped, sustained, and perceived. Building on insights from democratic communication theory (McQuail, 1992, 2010), media systems theory (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and critical political economy (McChesney, 1999, 2014; Golding & Murdock, 1997; Mosco, 2009; Wasko, 2005), we conceptualize media autonomy through three interrelated layers: a structural layer, which concerns the external political, economic, and regulatory forces shaping the media system; a professional layer, which focuses on journalistic practices, editorial routines, and internal newsroom dynamics; and a civic layer, which considers citizens' democratic

expectations, their sense of agency, and the role they envision for media in the public sphere.

Within this theoretical framework, the study is guided by a set of research questions that examine in the Slovenian context how citizens make sense of media autonomy across these dimensions. The research investigates how citizens perceive the external influences that condition the structural autonomy of media in Slovenia; how they evaluate journalistic practices, editorial decision-making, and internal news production dynamics; and how they articulate normative expectations about the democratic role of media, including how their civic ideals, everyday experiences, and democratic imagination shape their visions of autonomous media. Together, these questions provide the conceptual foundation for the layered analysis and guide our analytical approach to focus group discussions.

1.1. *Structural Layer: Autonomy as "Freedom From" Systemic Interference*

The structural layer reflects how citizens understand the external conditions – political, economic, regulatory – that shape media autonomy. Media systems theory, particularly Hallin and Mancini's (2004, p. 21-45) seminal framework, remains central to analysing these conditions. Their typology – political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, media-state relations, and media market structures – offers a lens for how systemic arrangements shape media autonomy, and democratic legitimacy more broadly. These dimensions extend beyond normative ideals and are not abstract: they are lived realities that inform citizens' perceptions of whether media operate independently or are vulnerable to capture.

However, scholarship on post-socialist media systems has demonstrated that Hallin and Mancini's model, while foundational, requires adaptation for Central and Eastern Europe. Research by Jakubowicz and Sükösd (2008), Dobek-Ostrowska (2019), Dobek-Ostrowska et al. (2010), and Peruško et al. (2021) emphasize that CEE media systems are shaped by hybrid combinations of politicization, market pressures, and institutional fragility. Persistent clientelism, ownership concentration, and weak regulatory enforcement create structurally vulnerable media environments (Toth et al., 2025). Citizens living in such systems are acutely aware of these pressures, interpreting media autonomy through experiences of political interference, opaque financing, and the instability of institutions.

Critical political economy further deepens this understanding by situating media institutions within broader capitalist structures. Scholars (McChesney, 1999, 2014; Golding & Murdock, 1997; Mosco, 2009; Wasko, 2005) argue that ownership concentration, profit imperatives, and market dependency systematically constrain autonomy. Citizens perceive these constraints in shrinking editorial resources, sensationalism driven by click-based advertising models, and the growing precarity of journalistic labour. From this perspective, autonomy is undermined when media institutions cannot resist commercial logics that subordinate democratic obligations to market imperatives.

In some post-socialist democracies, these dynamics have evolved into what Hrvatin and Petković (2022; Hrvatin, Petković & Hodžić, 2020, p. 10) describe as propaganda-oriented media systems, i.e. networks of structural corruption sustained by clientelist advertising, politically loyal outlets, and regulatory bodies that fail to uphold public-interest mandates. Such environments intensify citizens' distrust, not only in media but also in the democratic institutions with which they are entangled. The erosion of media legitimacy thus mirrors the erosion of democratic legitimacy more broadly.

1.2. Professional Layer: Autonomy as "Freedom To" Act According to Professional Norms

In our approach, the professional layer pertains to how citizens evaluate journalistic practices, editorial decision-making, and internal newsroom dynamics. McQuail (2010) has argued how autonomy is essential for enabling journalism to meet its public obligations, particularly ensuring accuracy, impartiality, and accountability. It is not merely an internal occupational value but a prerequisite for fulfilling journalism's broader social responsibility.

Hallin and Mancini's dimension of journalistic professionalism remains crucial here, emphasizing shared occupational ethics, role conceptions, and editorial independence. Yet in the CEE context, scholars have documented how political instrumentalization, market instability, and ownership capture have fragmented professional culture and eroded the coherence of journalistic norms (Peruško et al., 2021). Citizens perceive these tensions in accusations of bias, declining investigative rigor, and the routinization of sensationalism.

Critical political economy perspective draws attention to how labour conditions and newsroom hierarchies shape journalistic autonomy from within. Market-driven imperatives, such as cost-cutting, audience maximization, and advertiser influence limit journalists' "freedom to" uphold professional standards. McChesney (2014) argues that as journalism becomes economically unsustainable under neoliberal restructuring, editorial choices increasingly reflect the interests of owners and elites rather than the public. Citizens encountering superficial reporting, shrinking investigative units, or partisan editorial lines often translate these features into judgments about journalists' compromised autonomy.

Thus, the professional layer highlights how citizens interpret autonomy through the perceived ability of journalists to resist both external and internal pressures and to act in accordance with professional values such as accuracy, balance, and public responsibility.

1.3. Civic Layer: Autonomy as "Freedom To" Enable Participation and Democratic Imagination

The civic layer addresses citizens' normative expectations about the media's democratic role, i.e. representing diverse voices, enabling public debate, and supporting civic participation. Dahlgren's (2009, p. 124-125) concept of civic culture emphasizes that trust, engagement, and democratic belonging are mediated through communicative structures. When media fail to provide inclusive and deliberative spaces, citizens experience alienation not only from journalism but from democracy itself. The link between declining media trust and declining democratic trust is well established: as Held (2006) argues, liberal democracies struggle to deliver meaningful participation and equality, creating expectations that media systems often fail to meet.

Critical and participatory democratic theory allows us to extend this layer. Carpentier's (2011) theory of maximalist democracy foregrounds participation, inclusion, and power-sharing as essential democratic ideals. In recent work, Carpentier and Wimmer (2025) argue that participatory infrastructures – within media and beyond – are vital for restoring public legitimacy in contexts marked by structural exclusion. Through this lens, media autonomy is not only a shield against interference but a democratic stake: it enables the media to act as a civic institution that supports pluralism and facilitates participation.

Citizens' civic imagination – how media ought to function in a better democracy – thus becomes central. It goes beyond trust or dissatisfaction, expressing aspirations for media systems that are diverse, participatory, and accountable. The civic layer therefore captures the tension between democratic ideals and everyday disillusionment, showing how perceptions of media autonomy are inseparable from broader aspirations for democratic renewal.

By integrating media systems theory, critical political economy, and democratic communication theory, the three-layered framework demonstrates that citizens evaluate media autonomy not simply as a technical feature of media institutions, but as a democratic stake embedded in structures of power, labour, institutional trust, and civic aspiration.

2. Research Design and Methodology

Our empirical study employs a qualitative research design to capture citizens' lived experiences, perceptions, and normative reflections. Focus groups as a "socially situated communication" (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996) were selected as the primary method of data collection because they facilitate deliberative discussion and collective meaning-making. This format enables participants to articulate and negotiate their views on media autonomy in a social setting, revealing both individual and shared understandings.

Four focus groups were conducted between June and September 2024 in Ljubljana (2), Maribor (1), and Koper (1), involving a total of 31 participants (19 women, 12 men). Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on predefined

criteria related to age, gender, news media use, and level of political participation, in collaboration with Valicon, a Slovenian marketing and opinion research firm. A screening questionnaire was used to ensure diversity across generations and perspectives. The groups were designed to reflect four profiles: young active citizens (18-35, high news consumption and political participation), young passive citizens (18-35, low news consumption and political participation), older active citizens (35+, high news consumption and political participation), and older passive citizens (35+, low news consumption and political participation). Each session lasted approximately two hours and was moderated using a semi-structured guide exploring participants' perceptions and expectations of democracy and the media. All discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and carried out with informed consent.

The analysis followed a grounded theory methodology, combining open, axial, and selective coding phases, and was supported by NVivo to facilitate systematic data management, visualization of coding patterns, and the tracking of emerging conceptual categories. Particular attention was devoted to ensuring analytic validity and minimizing potential bias. To this end, the coding procedure involved a continuous, iterative process of interpretative triangulation, including several rounds of independent coding followed by collective discussions to refine category definitions.

3. Citizens' Perceptions of Media Autonomy: Findings from a Layered Analysis

The empirical analysis below examines how citizens in Slovenia perceive and interpret media autonomy, drawing on qualitative insights from focus group discussions. We first analyse democracy as a structural condition for media operation, as reflected by the participants' interpretations of the broader political and institutional environment in which the media function. Building on this foundation, the analysis is then guided by a three-layer analytical framework that distinguishes between structural, professional, and civic dimensions of media autonomy, each illuminating how citizens understand the conditions, practices, and democratic roles of the media.

3.1. Democracy As a Structural Condition

Focus group discussions reveal a complex and often ambivalent understanding of democracy, marked by a tension between normative ideals and structural disillusionment. These perceptions are not merely background context but are constitutive of the structural environment in which media operate.

Many participants described democracy as "great and fine on paper" (FG1, +35, high and FG2, 18-35, low) but expressed concern that "it is a long way to practical democracy" (FG2, 18-35, low), highlighting a perceived disconnection between formal democratic procedures and substantive democratic experience. Others framed democracy as inherently fragile:

"As long as a human controls it, democracy can never survive. So, there will always be a percentage of dictatorship, there will never be democracy." (FG2, 18-35, low)

These narrations reflect a structural ambivalence: citizens uphold democracy as an ideal but doubt its practical realization, suggesting that systemic flaws rather than isolated failures shape their experience of governance.

This disillusionment is rooted in perceptions of corruption, elite dominance, and the erosion of accountability:

"We all have lowered expectations of all these institutions, that you cannot even be disappointed ... I don't even remember ever trusting a whole institution, or a whole state, a democracy. Because you know it was always something. Something was being done under the table, something was being stolen." (FG2, 18-35, low)

Participants repeatedly questioned the rule of law and equality before the law, pointing to systemic privilege:

"We are not all equal. Parliamentarians have immunity." (FG4, +35, low)

"There is a lot that is unwritten, but people can see that something is not right. Politics is like 'there's nothing you can do to us'." (FG2, 18-35, low)

Citizens perceive legal frameworks as selectively enforced, reinforcing distrust in democratic institutions. This structural inequality is seen as incompatible with media autonomy, which they believe cannot thrive in a system where governance itself lacks impartiality.

Media are seen as structurally entangled with the same political and economic forces that undermine democratic legitimacy. As one participant put it:

"Politicians and journalists... I trust them the least." (FG1, +35, high)

Another participant observed that media are "somebody's voice" unless they "stand up against the system" (FG4, +35, low). The failure of media to function as inclusive, autonomous platforms is perceived as symptomatic of a broader democratic deficit.

Participants linked access to reliable information with democratic capacity:

"We consider ourselves a democratic society. I would argue that we are far from that. Because simply not all people have the same opportunities and influence on public opinion. And not everybody has access to objective information And until you have that, you can't even make your own decisions..." (FG1, +35, high)

Citizens frame media autonomy as foundational to informed citizenship. When media fail to provide objective information, democratic participation becomes distorted, reinforcing feelings of disempowerment. In this view, the erosion of media autonomy reflects and reinforces the structural conditions of a democracy in crisis, where citizens feel unheard, unrepresented, and disempowered.

Despite this disillusionment, citizens continue to expect that media governance should be insulated from partisan politics and entrusted to professional expertise.

"We shouldn't leave it to politicians to fix the media; we should leave it to the experts. Let the experts write the legislation, put the people where they need to be – editors, journalists ... to make things work." (FG1, +35, high)

The call for expert-led regulation reflects a structural critique: citizens perceive political interference as a systemic flaw that undermines both media autonomy and democratic integrity. Their vision of democratic media reform emphasizes technocratic competence over political bargaining, suggesting that autonomy is contingent on governance frameworks that prioritize professional norms over partisan interests.

Citizens' perceptions of democracy as a structural condition for media autonomy oscillate between idealistic aspirations and systemic distrust. They see media autonomy as inseparable from the functioning of democratic institutions: when democracy erodes through corruption, inequality, and elite dominance, media autonomy becomes unrealizable. In this sense, media autonomy emerges as both a reflection of and a prerequisite for a functioning democracy.

3.2. *Structural Layer: Freedom From External Interference*

Across all focus groups, participants expressed deep skepticism about the possibility of media autonomy under current structural conditions. The most frequently cited barrier was the media's financial dependency on advertising and ownership structures. Participants consistently linked economic models to compromised independence:

"As soon as you live on advertising, it means you have points of influence that are so big that you are no longer independent. This is a universal problem." (FG4, +35, low)

"You just need finances ..., financial independence ... That's not there." (FG1, +35, high)

Participants viewed financial independence as a prerequisite for autonomy, yet simultaneously believed that such independence is structurally unattainable:

"I mean, you can't have independent media." [Moderator: "So the answer, if I understand you, is that if there is some economic model for media that can be independent, then they will serve democracy?"] "But it cannot exist." (FG2, 18-35, low)

These statements reveal a structural pessimism: autonomy is imagined as an ideal but considered economically impossible under current market conditions. Citizens interpret advertising-based models as inherently compromising, reinforcing the belief that autonomy cannot coexist with commercial dependency.

Ownership and political influence were also seen as major constraints. Citizens pointed to media owners, political appointments, and funding mechanisms as sources of control:

"[Moderator: "Is there anything else that prevents the media from being objective and independent?"] Mostly the media companies, which are just the boss. Owner. Where does the funding come from. It all starts and ends with money." (FG2, 18-35, low)

"The media are somebody's property and that one has influence, whether you want it or not." (FG1, +35, high)

These views underly a perception that economic dependence is the root of compromised autonomy, with ownership and funding determining the limits of editorial freedom.

Citizens also linked ownership to ideological influence:

"If you have ownership, it is private, you know that that owner has certain convictions." (FG4, +35, low)

"The problem is how the media are paid. Who's the boss. And who pays. Exactly. Financier. And if the owner and boss are right-leaning, then the journalist cannot be left-leaning. Because he'll be kicked out." (FG1, +35, low)

Here, private ownership is seen as inseparable from political or ideological bias, suggesting that structural control translates into content alignment with the owner's worldview. It illustrates how financial and ideological pressures converge, creating a system where journalists' professional autonomy is contingent on political loyalty, reinforcing citizens' perception of media as structurally dependent on partisan interests.

Even public service media were not perceived as exempt from these pressures:

"They still have an owner. They are still financed. They are not powerful enough to support themselves. They are not strong enough to make enough capital throughout the year to be able to say that they are at positive zero. They still have a boss who likes one thing more than another. And the boss will be a little bit heavy-handed that they have to go in his direction." (FG2, 18-35, low)

Citizens also highlighted political appointments at public service media as systemic flaws:

"With every government, when it came, they were replaced [the bosses]. Of course, he [the one in power] is going to get someone he trusts, so he doesn't get a knife in his back." (FG2, 18-35, low)

This illustrates how institutional design enables partisan influence, reinforcing the perception that autonomy cannot be guaranteed without insulating governance from political cycles.

Focus group participants also referred to the historical legacy of political control, suggesting that Slovenia never fully transitioned to a democratic media system:

"Since Yugoslavia, RTV Slovenia has not become independent." (FG1, +35, high)

Citizens frame public media as vulnerable to political capture and financial fragility, undermining its democratic role. Historical references to Yugoslavia suggest that political parallelism and legacy structures persist, preventing full editorial independence, regardless of ownership model.

Financial independence is seen as essential. Citizens acknowledge that even public service media funded by license fees lack sufficient resources to guarantee autonomy. This led citizens to propose alternative funding models, such as philanthropic support, to protect media from political and commercial pressures:

"There should be a donor or a philanthropist... to set up an organisation that will really report objectively." (FG1, +35, high).

These reflections show that citizens conceptualize autonomy primarily as freedom from external interference, but also as structurally dependent on governance and financing models. Media autonomy is imagined as unattainable under current conditions of ownership concentration, political appointments, and advertising-driven economics. Citizens' normative vision points toward alternative, non-advertising-driven media funding structures and expert-led regulation, signalling a desire for systemic reform to insulate journalism from both market and political pressures.

3.3. *Professional Layer: Freedom To Act According To Journalistic Norms*

Focus group participants expressed concern about the internal constraints journalists face, particularly in private media. Precarious employment, editorial pressure, and fear of dismissal were seen as key factors limiting journalistic autonomy. These conditions were perceived as forcing journalists to comply with instructions rather than exercise independent judgment:

"The journalist is not independent. He is paid. They have their own instructions what they can and can't write." (FG2, 18-35, low)

"They're more instructed to, 'let's write this, let's write that'. 'That's the story I want you to write. And that's it'." (FG2, 18-35, low)

Citizens described journalists as vulnerable workers, often forced to comply with editorial demands and pressures from the owners to maintain their livelihoods:

"If your boss tells you to write something and you say no, I don't know if they can say no. You can, but it won't take long to write." (FG2, 18-35, low)

"Most journalists in private media are not even employed. They are self-employed entrepreneurs. And if something is not right with the owners or editors, they just say goodbye." (FG1, +35, high)

"A journalist is also a human being and, on a payroll, and is afraid, even more so in the case of private media, of being fired ... In the end, you have to pay the bills, and we all work for money." (FG1, +35, high)

"I think they are afraid for their jobs." (FG4, +35, low)

These accounts reveal a perception of journalism as a profession under economic duress. Citizens link financial insecurity to compliance with owners' and editors' directives, suggesting that autonomy is not only an ethical issue but also an economic one. Precarity fosters self-censorship and discourages resistance to managerial control.

Despite these concerns, when asked about the qualities the media should have to support democracy, citizens consistently affirmed the importance of professionalism and objectivity as core values for journalism:

"In my opinion, it is professionalism and objectivity." (FG1, +35, high)

"100% objectivity." (FG2, 18–35, low)

"Just stating the facts. And that's it. ... But all the facts." (FG2, 18–35, low)

"You can write and follow the sources that are in your favour, but it's not really fair. We should consider all sides." (FG2, 18-35, low)

"Stating facts, but not out of context. That is to say that they tell all from both sides." (FG2, 18-35, low)

"Like doctors who have an oath at the end that they will do no harm. They [journalists] should have an oath to give all the facts." (FG2, 18-35, low)

These statements reflect a normative expectation that journalists should adhere to ethical standards and fact-based, impartial and balanced reporting.

Participants also highlighted ethical responsibility and accountability, valuing signed reporting as a marker of credibility:

"The information, the objective reporting, is much more relevant in written form because you have the signature of the journalist underneath." (FG4, +35, low)

Transparency in authorship is seen as a safeguard against misinformation, reinforcing the principle that personal accountability underpins trust in journalism.

Commercial pressures and click-oriented newsroom strategies were perceived as eroding professional standards and investigative rigor:

"Don't be the first one, be the right one. Check it, study it, and get the truth out. But that's the problem, because they have to be first. Because it's the clicks that count. Because the ads are then rotated behind. And we're back to money again." (FG2, 18-35, low)

"You can write a news story in five pages, but you can write it in three words. And for a drama, you have to use 'killed' or 'murder' – that gets the most clicks." (FG3, 18-35, high)

Citizens criticise the dominance of speed and sensationalism over accuracy, linking these practices to advertising-driven revenue models. This reflects how market logic undermines ethical norms and the "freedom to" prioritise truth over virality.

Some participants express a clear preference for traditional and print media, which they associate with professional integrity and reliability.

"I trust the traditional media more because I know the journalists and I know their work. And because what they write is accurate. It has some weight, some sense, and an editor who can validate it." (FG1, +35, high)

"I prefer the print media. More print. I mean, I know journalists, I read comments ... But what bothers me the most is sensationalism." (FG1, +35, high)

Their trust is grounded in personal familiarity with journalists, editorial validation, and adherence to accuracy norms. This indicates that professional values such as verification, responsibility, and editorial oversight remain central to citizens' conceptions of trustworthy media, even as they critique deviations from these ideals.

Citizens distinguished between media institutions and individual journalists, expressing selective trust in those perceived as ethical or personally known:

"You take one journalist you like, and you trust him a little more." (FG1, +35, high)

This indicates a coping strategy in a low-trust media environment: when institutional trust is weak, personal trust in individual journalists persists, suggesting that credibility is relational rather than systemic.

The ideal of journalistic integrity remains valued among citizens, even if the system is seen as flawed.

"There should be a possibility for a journalist to write an article with an upright attitude and in a professional way." (FG1, +35, high)

This layer reveals a profound tension between normative ideals (objectivity, ethics) and perceived realities (control by owners and editors, precarity, commercial logic). Citizens uphold professional norms as essential to media's democratic role yet see them as rarely achievable under current conditions. Autonomy is imagined as an ideal rather than a lived reality, constrained by economic vulnerability and organisational hierarchies.

3.4. *Civic Layer: Freedom To Serve the Public and Enable Participation*

Focus group participants articulated a clear normative vision of what media autonomy should enable: informing the public, acting as a watchdog, and amplifying citizen voices:

"The media has to be good media. And if they are, then I think that's the greatest protection of democracy." (FG1, +35, high)

"As much reporting as possible. So that the nation knows what is going on; so that we can help each other." (FG3, 18-35, high)

"The general function and task of the media is to monitor the system ... They have to exist because they are an extension of the system. And also, of the people." (FG4, +35, low)

Citizens also emphasized the need for accessible, clear, and engaging content, especially for younger audiences:

"Serious topics could be written somehow to make them more interesting for people. To make them understandable, in the vernacular." (FG3, 18-35, high)

This highlights a civic demand for inclusive communication, where autonomy is not only about resisting external pressures but also about connecting with diverse audiences in ways that foster participation.

Citizens recognized their own role in supporting media autonomy, through subscriptions, donations, content contributions, or direct engagement with journalists:

"To be independent, the media has to be subscription-based." (FG4, +35, low)

"If there is an independent media, I don't think there is anything wrong with people who want to donate, to let them do it." (FG3, 18-35, high)

"Or you can also help them by writing something or contributing something. These small media are, at least in my experience, very happy if an outsider comes in." (FG4, +35, low)

"I would also go to a journalist in that case. Because you have a feeling that if you tell the journalist, it will go ahead." (FG1, +35, high)

These statements suggest a participatory vision of media, where citizens see themselves not only as consumers but as co-creators, financial supporters, and active contributors to independent journalism. This aligns with democratic ideals of shared responsibility for sustaining public-interest media.

However, the civic layer also revealed disillusionment. Citizens perceive media as both enablers and distorters of democratic participation, reflecting a deep ambivalence. While autonomy is valued, the presence of manipulation and bias is seen as reinforcing systemic inequalities and shaping public opinion in ways that undermine genuine engagement. As one participant explained:

"They [media] contribute [to democracy]. They actually create a lot. They do indeed sometimes manipulate public opinion. But it also creates certain opinions, certain views." (FG4, +35, low)

Another emphasized that media do more than inform:

"They don't just inform, they manipulate. That's the purpose." (FG4, +35, low)

This disillusionment can lead citizens to disengage from media entirely, relying instead on their own judgment:

"We then distance ourselves from the media because we stop believing. And then I only believe myself. In my opinion, you have to be informed about everything and then decide with your own head." (FG4, +35, low)

Together, these perspectives highlight a civic layer in which the desire for participation coexists with distrust.

Some participants expressed hope that democracy and media could be revitalized through institutional reform and civic engagement:

"I am of the opinion that if the government and all those who are above us start to listen more to the people, democracy still has a future." (FG3, 18-35, high)

These voices of optimism suggest that citizens still see media as a potential catalyst for democratic revitalization, provided it becomes more responsive and participatory.

The civic layer highlights the dual role of citizens as critics and potential co-creators of autonomous media, grounded in democratic ideals and civic responsibility. Citizens envision media autonomy as enabling pluralism, transparency, and engagement, but their lived experience often reflects manipulation and exclusion, reinforcing disillusionment. Yet, the persistence of hope indicates a space for reform and participatory models that reconnect media with its democratic role.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from the focus groups analysis reveal a layered understanding of media autonomy among Slovenian citizens, one that closely mirrors the three-layered conceptualisation developed in the theoretical framework. Citizens do not discuss autonomy as a technical or institutional variable; rather, they articulate it as a structurally conditioned, professionally constrained, and civically meaningful democratic value, echoing the relational character of autonomy emphasised in normative media theory (Christians et al., 2009; McQuail, 1992, 2010; Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011).

At the structural level, citizens' widespread skepticism about the possibility of media independence reflects the structural critiques advanced by critical political economy scholars. Citizens consistently linked advertising-based funding models, ownership instrumentalization, and political influence to the erosion of autonomy. These concerns echo McChesney's (2008) arguments that media systems embedded in capitalist logics are structurally incapable of sustaining autonomy. The perception that "it all starts and ends with money" (FG2, 18-35, low) aligns with the view that economic dependency is not a peripheral issue but a foundational constraint.

Citizens' reflections on democracy as "great on paper but distant in practice" (FG1, +35, high and FG2, 18-35, low) emphasize that media autonomy cannot be disentangled from the systemic functioning of democratic institutions. This resonates with Held's (2006) critique of formal democracy where institutional arrangements exist but fail to deliver substantive participation, and Brown's (2019) account of how neoliberal restructuring has eroded mechanisms of democratic accountability. Citizens' interpretations thus mirror the theoretical claim that structural autonomy is always nested within broader configurations of institutional trust and democratic legitimacy.

Generational differences sharpen this critique: older participants often framed structural flaws through historical continuity, invoking the legacy of Yugoslavia and persistent political parallelism as evidence that Slovenia never fully transitioned to democratic media governance. Younger participants, by contrast, expressed structural pessimism grounded in economic realities, emphasizing that "independent media cannot exist" (FG2, 18-35, low) under advertising-driven models. This divergence illustrates how structural autonomy is imagined differently across cohorts: older citizens interpret it through institutional memory, while younger citizens view it through market logic and systemic fragility.

The data also reveal subtle but significant differences between citizens with high and low levels of political engagement and media use. Highly engaged tend to frame autonomy as a reformable condition, linking it to pluralism, expert-led regulation, and participatory models such as donations or content contributions. In contrast, low-engagement groups express structural fatalism, often dismissing autonomy as "impossible" and perceiving media primarily as instruments of manipulation rather than democratic allies. While both groups share skepticism toward ownership and political influence, their normative horizons diverge: high-engagement citizens articulate proactive solutions and maintain residual hope for democratic renewal, whereas low-engagement citizens oscillate between resignation and withdrawal, reinforcing a sense of distance from both media and politics.

The critique of public service media as politically influenced, despite formal public ownership, resonates with the hybrid media system literature in CEE (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019; Peruško et al., 2021). Citizens' references to RTV Slovenia's historical legacy and political appointments suggest that post-socialist institutional inertia continues to shape perceptions of autonomy. However, rather than framing this as a uniquely post-socialist problem, participants' critiques reflect broader European concerns about the politicisation of public media.

Citizens' proposals for philanthropic funding and subscription-based models echo McChesney's (2014) call for alternative financing to counteract neoliberal restructuring. These suggestions reveal a civic imagination that seeks to reconfigure the political economy of media, moving beyond critique toward normative solutions. In this sense, autonomy is not only a defensive shield against interference but a

structural condition requiring proactive institutional design and resource redistribution.

At the professional level, citizens expressed concern about journalists' ability to act according to ethical and professional norms. The emphasis on precarious employment, editorial pressure driven by owners, and fear of dismissal reflects the erosion of individual and organizational autonomy. These findings align with Mellado's (2020) multi-level model of autonomy and Örnebring and Karlsson's (2022) argument that autonomy is relational and historically contingent.

Citizens' selective trust in individual journalists, rather than media institutions, point to the fragility of professional legitimacy. While professionalism and objectivity remain valued standards, they are perceived as increasingly difficult to uphold in a media environment shaped by commercial and political pressures. This tension between normative expectations and structural realities illustrates the gap between the ideal of journalistic autonomy and its practical limitations.

Importantly, selective trust in individual journalists rather than institutions suggests a shift from systemic to relational credibility, reinforcing Hanitzsch and Mellado's (2011) claim that autonomy is enacted through everyday practices rather than guaranteed by formal structures. This coping strategy – anchoring trust in personal familiarity – reveals how professional legitimacy is negotiated in a low-trust environment, where autonomy is imagined as an ethical stance rather than an institutional guarantee.

Generational differences deepen this picture. Older participants, historically grounded, often framed autonomy through the lens of legacy structures, expressing nostalgia for ethical norms and solidarity, while younger participants emphasized economic precarity and clickbait oriented editorial strategies as primary threats.

The civic layer reveals citizens' normative expectations of media as democratic institutions. Participants articulated a vision of media that informs, empowers, and enables participation, a vision grounded in normative theories of the media (Christians et al., 2009). Citizens expect media to act as watchdogs, amplify diverse voices, and foster civic engagement.

Tambini's (2021a, p. 148-149; 2021b, p. 137) conception of media freedom as a conditional and institutional right is particularly relevant here. Citizens' calls for media that are accountable, transparent, and responsive reflect the idea of a social contract between media and the public. The civic layer thus highlights the dual role of media autonomy: it must resist external control and fulfil democratic obligations.

Importantly, citizens do not see themselves as passive consumers but as potential co-creators of autonomous media. Citizens' aspirations for participatory media models align with Carpentier's (2011) theory of maximalist democracy, which emphasizes inclusion and power-sharing. Their willingness to support independent outlets through donations or content contributions suggests a shift toward co-creative autonomy, where media independence is sustained through civic engagement rather

than isolated institutional guarantees. This participatory vision challenges traditional autonomy frameworks by situating media freedom within a broader democratic ecology, echoing Dahlgren's (2009) concept of civic culture.

Yet, ambivalence persists. Citizens oscillate between framing media as manipulators and as potential catalysts for democratic renewal, reflecting Held's (2006) critique of liberal democracy's failure to deliver meaningful participation. The persistence of hope – "democracy still has a future if those above start to listen" (FG3, 18-35, high) positions autonomy as a shared civic project rather than a purely institutional attribute, reinforcing the theoretical claim that autonomy is ultimately tied to democratic imagination and participatory expectations.

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Ethical approval

The fieldwork protocols were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Peace Institute (approval KEMI-2024-002 on 21 May 2024), and all focus group participants signed an informed consent form.

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