

Media and Political Information Environment in the Netherlands

Lars Van Rooy

Faculty of Political Science

University of Zagreb

Introduction

In democratic societies, the media serve as an essential pillar for public discourse, political engagement, and the functioning of civil society. The media also plays a crucial role in informing citizens, facilitating public debate, and holding power to account. An open, diverse, and high-quality media system is essential to maintaining democratic legitimacy and ensuring that political participation is based on knowledge rather than manipulation (Dahlgren, 2001). The Netherlands, known for its longstanding tradition of press freedom, characterized by a mix of public and commercial broadcasters, has historically maintained a pluralistic and relatively high-quality media environment (Schapals & Pentzold, 2024). However, like many Western democracies, the Dutch media landscape is currently facing significant challenges and transformations due to technological shifts in the increase of internet and social media usage, and societal polarization. These developments have profound implications for the way information is produced, distributed, and consumed (Commissariaat van de Media, 2024)

The Dutch media system has been shaped by a unique historical structure known as *pillarization* (*verzuiling*), where different religious and ideological groups maintained their own newspapers, broadcasters, and cultural institutions (Hoogenboom, M., & Scholten, P., 2008). Although pillarization has largely diminished since the late 20th century, its legacy still influences media consumption patterns and institutional frameworks today. Moreover, the rise of digital platforms, social media, and global news flows has added new layers of complexity, disrupting traditional revenue models and changing the relationship between journalists and the public (Reuters, 2024).

Also, the emergence of alternative and sometimes radical voices have challenged traditional norms and practices. Concerns have grown about the amount and quality of political information reaching the public, the concentration of media ownership, the growing ideological fragmentation among audiences, and the erosion of trust in journalism. At the same time, misinformation and fake news have become more prominent, while existing inequalities in political knowledge are being deepened by unequal access to quality information (CvdM, 2024; Van Aelst, 2017).

At the heart of the contemporary media landscape are six interrelated concerns that highlight the tension between democratic ideals and media realities, as explained by Van Aelst et al. (2017). First is the *amount of political information* made available to citizens, raising questions about both abundance and selectivity in news coverage. Second is the *quality of*

news, a measure that involves accuracy, depth, objectivity, and independence. Third, the *increasing media concentration and declining diversity of news sources* poses a threat to pluralism and editorial autonomy. Fourth, the *fragmentation and polarization* of the media landscape challenge the idea of a shared public sphere. Fifth, the rise of *fake news, relativism, and misinformation* undermines trust in facts and institutions. Finally, there is a growing concern about the *inequality in political knowledge*, which reflects deeper societal divides and uneven access to credible information.

In this essay, we will explore these six dimensions with The Netherlands as our empirical case study by drawing on current research, conducting media analysis, and use real-world examples. In doing so, it aims to critically assess how well the Dutch media fulfills its democratic role and what risks and opportunities lie ahead in an increasingly complex and digital information ecosystem.

Amount of political information

The amount of political information available to the public is a foundational element of a well-functioning democracy. In the Netherlands, the availability of political news has been generally robust (Hameleers, 2022). However, the media environment has changed significantly in recent years, raising concerns about the quality and visibility of political content across different platforms (Hameleers, 2022).

Dutch public broadcasting, particularly via the Nederlandse Publieke Omroep (NPO), has long served as a reliable source of political news. This is the main public newsoutlet that is responsible for the organization of other (smaller) public broadcasters. Programs such as *Nieuwsuur*, *EenVandaag*, and *NOS Journaal* provide daily coverage of domestic and international political developments, often with analytical depth and a commitment to neutrality (NPO, 2025). NPO is mandated by law to offer content that is informative, educational, and diverse, which helps ensure that political issues receive regular attention. Newspapers like *NRC Handelsblad*, *de Volkskrant*, and *Trouw* have also traditionally contributed to a rich political discourse through investigative reporting, opinion pieces, and in-depth coverage of policy issues (Welbers et al., 2018).

Yet even within traditional media, there are signs of diminishing political coverage, especially in commercial outlets. Advertising-driven broadcasters and newspapers face economic pressure to prioritize entertainment, lifestyle, and sports content, which are topics that draw higher ratings or clicks. What Franck (2019) describes as the rise of the *attention economy*. News needs to generate quick engagement from users to maintain their platform and legitimacy. As a result, political reporting risks becoming marginalized or superficial, particularly outside election seasons or major crises.

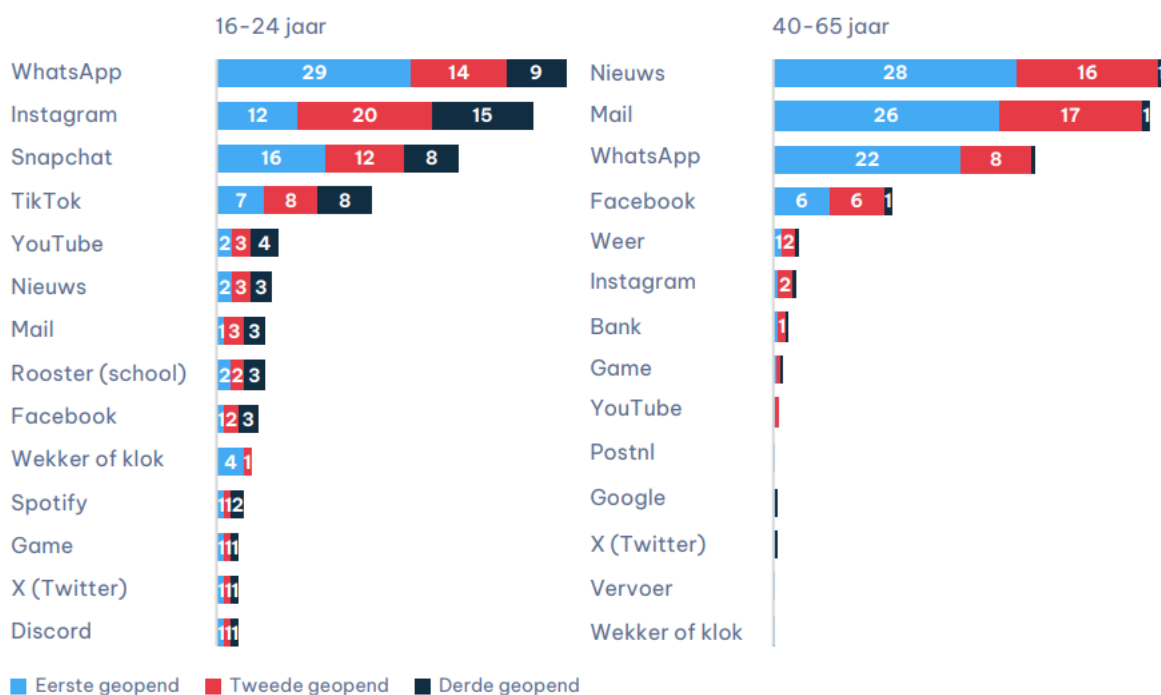
The shift to digital media has transformed how political information is produced, distributed, and consumed. Online news platforms and social media have increased the quantity of available content, but not necessarily its visibility. Algorithms on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube prioritize user engagement, often favoring emotionally charged or sensational content over nuanced and informative political reporting.

This algorithmic logic tends to downrank in-depth political information, especially for users who are not actively seeking it out. This platformisation of content creates a fragmented news environment (Poell & Nieborg & van Dijck ,2019).

Moreover, while major Dutch newspapers and broadcasters have invested in digital formats, they face competition from a wide array of alternative and non-journalistic content creators. In this fragmented online environment, political information competes for attention with memes, entertainment videos, and personal updates, which can crowd out substantive political engagement (Franck, 2019).

The amount of political information people consume also varies widely depending on age, education level, and media habits. Older and more educated citizens are more likely to read newspapers or watch current affairs programs regularly, while younger audiences often rely on social media, YouTube channels, or podcasts for news (CvdM, 2024). Platforms like NOS op 3, which translates political stories into short, youth-friendly formats, have emerged to bridge this gap, but their reach and depth are limited compared to traditional media. In Figure 1 below from the Commissariaat van de Media (2024), you can see which platforms people from different age groups use as their first app when they wake up.

Figuur 2.1 Aandeel apps die als eerste, tweede of derde worden geopend door jongeren en de oudere generatie (in procenten)



V2: Stel je een doordeweekse dag voor. Als je de eerste keer je mobiele telefoon pakt, bijvoorbeeld nadat je wakker wordt, bij het ontbijt, of op school/werk. Welke apps/websites open je dan? Het kan om van alles gaan. Allen 16-24 jaar: n = 2.010, allen 40-65 jaar: n = 497

Figure 1: What apps do different age groups mostly use in The Netherlands.

Low-income and less-educated individuals, meanwhile, often face barriers to accessing quality political news. These can include digital illiteracy, lack of time or motivation, or subscription paywalls for reputable outlets. As a result, these populations may encounter less

political content or rely on sources that provide only limited or biased information like the easy click on the Instagram app with its personalized filter bubble (Tichenor et al., 1970)

There are clear peaks in political information, particularly during national elections or major political events. In the run-up to elections, Dutch media tend to ramp up their political coverage significantly. Debates are broadcast nationally, news outlets offer detailed party comparisons, and voter guides (*stemwijzers*) become widely available. These periods often see a temporary surge in political engagement and public debate (CvdM, 2024).

At the margins of the mainstream, alternative media and niche platforms are attempting to fill gaps left by traditional outlets. Organizations like *Follow the Money*, *De Correspondent* (my personal favorite) and *De Groene Amsterdammer* provide investigative journalism and long-form analysis that often focuses on underreported political issues. These platforms appeal to highly engaged audiences but may lack mass reach (Reuters, 2024; CvdM, 2024)).

Conversely, ideologically driven platforms such as *Ongehoord Nederland* and *GeenStijl* provide politicized content that contributes to public discourse, but often with strong bias and reduced journalistic standards. These new platforms also show more political color on partisan lines. Where *De Correspondent* is more left-liberal leaning, *Ongehoord Nederland* caters to the far-right audience (CvdM, 2024).

In response to concerns about declining exposure to political information, several institutional efforts have been launched to promote civic awareness. Media literacy programs, public education campaigns, and initiatives like *Nieuws in de Klas* (News in the Classroom) aim to bring political news into schools and encourage critical engagement (Nieuws in de Klas, 2025).

In sum, while the Netherlands still maintains a relatively high level of political information compared to many countries, the media landscape is shifting in ways that may reduce the visibility and accessibility of such content. Digital changes, economic pressures, algorithmic filtering, and audience fragmentation all pose challenges to the availability of meaningful political information (CvdM, 2024).

Quality of news

The quality of news is central to the functioning of a democratic society. News that is accurate, balanced, and contextually rich helps citizens make informed decisions. In the Netherlands, where media institutions have historically upheld high journalistic standards, the quality of news remains relatively strong in international comparison (Reuters, 2023).

However, like we outlined in our previous chapter as well, digitalization and commercial competition are putting pressure on this quality. In the Dutch context, organizations like the *Raad voor de Journalistiek* (Press Council) and the *Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten* (Dutch Association of Journalists) serve as watchdogs and standard-setters, reinforcing the credibility, and therefore quality, of news outlets (Rossini, 2018).

One of the pillars of high-quality journalism in the Netherlands is the public broadcasting system. NPO's news and current affairs programs, including earlier mentioned NOS Journaal, Nieuwsuur, and EenVandaag, have a strong reputation for neutrality, factual reporting, and

professional standards. NPO operates under a legal mandate to provide balanced, fact-based reporting with a focus on public interest. These programs are publicly funded, which allows them to prioritize editorial integrity over market logic (CvdM, 2024).

Public trust is a useful indicator of perceived news quality. Public confidence in NPO remains relatively high. According to Reuters (2024) (figure 2) the Netherlands has one of the highest levels of trust in news in Europe, with around 55% of respondents expressing general trust in news media, well above the EU average. NPO, NOS, and commercial newspapers like NRC Handelsblad and De Volkskrant consistently score highest on perceived reliability.

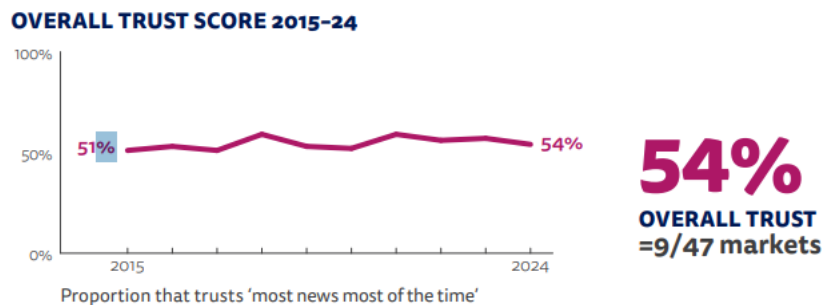


Figure 2: Trust in Dutch media

Commercial broadcasters and privately owned newspapers such as the named Volkskrant and NRC Handelsblad maintain rigorous editorial standards. These outlets continue to publish investigative reporting and in-depth political analysis, even as they face growing economic pressures. For example, NRC's long-form investigations and de Volkskrant's political dossiers are frequently cited in national debates and parliamentary discussions. Yet, the financial viability of such journalism is increasingly dependent on digital subscriptions and audience loyalty (Mediahuis, 2020).

The shift to digital platforms has had a profound impact on how news is produced and consumed. As noted before in this paper, news outlets now face the dual challenge of retaining editorial quality while competing for clicks, shares, and engagement (attention economy) This has given rise to "clickbait" headlines, shorter articles, and a preference for trending topics over investigative depth. Sensational headlines, celebrity news, and emotionally charged content have become more common (Poell & Nieborg & van Dijck, 2019 & Franck, 2019).

Speed is another quality-related concern. In a 24/7 news environment, misinformation is more likely to happen when journalists are under constant pressure to publish quickly. Corrections and clarifications often do not receive the same visibility as the initial (possibly inaccurate) story. This is particularly problematic on social media, where news spreads rapidly and often without context (Bennet & Livingston, 2018)

Despite these pressures, the Netherlands still hosts several strongholds of high-quality, independent investigative journalism. As noted earlier, platforms such as *Follow the Money* and *De Correspondent* focus on long-form, data-driven reporting. These outlets prioritize depth over speed, and are funded through memberships, grants, and reader contributions

rather than advertising (CvdM, 2024). However, their reach tends to be limited to highly educated, politically engaged audiences (like me). Moreover, the presence of influencers, pundits, and YouTubers as journalists complicates the landscape further. Figures like Arjen Lubach (*Zondag met Lubach*, *Avondshow met Lubach en Lubach*) have achieved widespread impact by using satire to highlight political issues (CvdM, 2024).

Concluding, While the Netherlands still maintains a relatively high standard of news quality supported by public funding, strong journalistic norms, and independent investigative platforms, it is not immune to the pressures of the digital age. Economic constraints, the demand for speed, and the influence of algorithm-driven platforms challenge the depth and diversity of coverage.

Media concentration and diversity of news

Media ownership in the Netherlands has become highly concentrated over the past two decades. Today, two major Belgian-owned conglomerates, *DPG Media* and *Mediahuis*, control a substantial share of the newspaper and magazine market. DPG Media owns outlets like *de Volkskrant*, *Trouw*, *AD*, and *Het Parool*, while Mediahuis controls *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Telegraaf* (CvdM, 2024). Also Talpa Network, owned by Dutch entrepreneur John de Mol, dominates commercial broadcasting through channels like SBS6, Veronica, and Net5, and owns radio stations such as Radio 538 and Sky Radio (CvdM, 2024).

While editorial teams maintain some independence, the risk is that corporate strategies, focused on profit and efficiency, may lead to content homogenization, media monopolization, cuts in investigative journalism, and less space for smaller voices, limiting pluralism (Noam, 2018).

As we talked about before, amid this consolidation, a number of independent and niche platforms are emerging that offer specialized content like *De Correspondent* and *Follow the Money*. These platforms enhance media diversity but tend to reach relatively small, highly educated audiences. Their financial models, often based on memberships or donations, limit scalability. Nonetheless, they play a critical role in covering topics neglected by larger players (CvdM, 2024).

On the internet, the theoretical diversity of news has increased, but algorithmic curation by tech platforms complicates the picture. Social media and news aggregators filter what users see based on past behavior, often reinforcing existing beliefs and preferences. As a result, users may be exposed to a narrow slice of the available news spectrum and end up in filter bubbles, even though more content is technically accessible than ever before. Moreover, these algorithms tend to favor engagement-driven content, clickbait, outrage, and sensationalism, over thoughtful, diverse journalism. This trend disproportionately affects smaller, high-quality outlets that struggle to gain visibility online without compromising their editorial standards (Moller, 2021; Franck, 2019).

The Dutch government, through the *Commissariaat voor de Media*, monitors media plurality and supports independent journalism through various grants and subsidies (CvdM, 2024). However, the tools available to curb concentration are limited, especially in a cross-border media market dominated by both national giants and global tech platforms (Poell, T. & Nieborg, D. & van Dijck, J., 2019). The *Commissariaat voor de Media* warned that while formal pluralism still exists in the Netherlands, the practical reality is one of shrinking editorial diversity, particularly in regions where only one or two newspaper titles remain active. The digital shift has exacerbated this, as online platforms tend to privilege viral or sensational content over diverse or niche reporting (CvdM, 2024).

While the Netherlands still enjoys a relatively pluralistic media system on paper, in practice, ownership concentration, shrinking local journalism, and algorithmic filtering are undermining content diversity.

Fragmentation and Polarization

Fragmentation and polarization are key concerns in the modern media landscape, both globally and within the Netherlands. Fueled by digital technology, personalized news consumption, and shifting political dynamics. While the Netherlands retains high levels of institutional trust, there is clear evidence of growing ideological echo chambers, selective exposure, and diminishing shared public spheres (CvdM, 2024).

Like noted before, Dutch society was historically structured along the pillarization that shaped not only political and religious life but also media consumption. In the post-pillarization era, this stable segmentation has given way to individualized fragmentation. The rise of commercial broadcasting in the 1990s and the explosion of online and social media platforms in the 2000s have diversified the media environment dramatically (Schapals, A.K., & Pentzold, C., 2024). Citizens now curate their own news diets, often selecting outlets and sources that align with their interests, lifestyles, or political leanings. This personalization contributes to fragmentation. For instance, younger users may follow influencers and alternative commentators on Instagram or TikTok, while older people may stick to traditional news websites or television. Simultaneously, individuals might cluster around platforms like *GeenStijl* or *Ongehoord Nederland*, which provide content tailored to populist or anti-establishment sentiments (CvdM, 2024).

Although the Netherlands has traditionally been seen as a consensus-oriented country, there is growing concern about ideological polarization in the media. This is visible both in content and in public opinion. Populist parties like the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) and Forum voor Democratie (FvD) have built loyal media followings and frequently accuse mainstream outlets of bias or censorship. They have also developed their own media channels, including YouTube streams, newsletters, and social media campaigns (Van Ham, C. T., & Fiselier, T. A. G., 2021). Such dynamics are reinforced by *confirmation bias*, where individuals seek out information that confirms their existing beliefs. This can create echo chambers and increase mistrust in journalism perceived as oppositional (Peters, 2022).

Despite these trends, it is important to note that the Netherlands has not reached the extreme levels of polarization seen in other countries. Public broadcasters, despite criticism, still provide platforms for multiple viewpoints and maintain relatively high trust among much of the population (Reuters, 2024).

Fragmentation and polarization in the Dutch media landscape reflect broader shifts in society, technology, and politics. While citizens have access to more information than ever before, they increasingly inhabit different informational worlds. The Netherlands has so far avoided the most extreme outcomes of polarization, but the trends are growing (CvdM, 2024).

Relativism, Fake News, and Misinformation

In this digital age, the traditional boundaries between fact, opinion, and fiction have increasingly blurred. This has led to the rise of relativism in news, the idea that all viewpoints are equally valid, regardless of their basis in evidence. That what is presented as fact is often dismissed as “just another opinion.” And a growing ecosystem of fake news and misinformation is prevalent (Compton, J. et al, 2021). In the Netherlands, although the media landscape remains relatively robust, these developments have created new challenges (CvdM, 2024).

One of the key symptoms of relativism in the media is the diminishing authority of journalistic standards and the idea of objective truth. In today’s fragmented information environment, many people no longer rely on established media outlets for credible information but instead construct their own sense of truth from a mix of traditional news, social media, podcasts and influencers (Reuters, 2024). Like noted before, this fragmentation of different ways to receive daily news gives citizens more options to be informed, but also increases the risk of the prevalence of mis- and disinformation (Moller, 2021).

This shift has been accelerated by a broader cultural trend toward distrust of institutions, including governments, academia, and mainstream journalism. For some citizens, particularly those who feel politically or culturally alienated, legacy media are seen as part of a “system” that cannot be trusted. As a result, they may reject fact-checked reporting in favor of personal narratives, alternative media, or conspiracy theories, reinforcing relativistic attitudes (Reuters, 2024; CvdM, 2024).

Fake news is not a new phenomenon, but it has become more pervasive and impactful due to the speed and scale of this digital era. In the Dutch context, fake news often appears around polarizing issues, such as immigration and the COVID-19 pandemic (CvdM, 2024).

The 2021 Dutch general election saw various conspiracy narratives circulating online, especially within forums associated with anti-government or anti-establishment groups. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, platforms like Telegram became hotspots for health misinformation, often mixing legitimate concerns with false claims about vaccines and lockdowns (CvdM, 2024).

In the Netherlands, platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and increasingly TikTok serve as major news sources for younger audiences. While these platforms provide

access to a broad range of voices, they also serve as unregulated environments where misleading content competes on equal footing with high-quality journalism (CvdM, 2024).

Attempts to moderate or fact-check content have sparked accusations of censorship, particularly from the political right. This dynamic contributes to a climate of distrust and strengthens the belief among some groups that there is a media "agenda" to suppress certain views (CvdM, 2024).

Traditional news outlets in the Netherlands are responding to this challenge in different ways. Some focus on transparency and explanatory journalism, making their editorial decisions and sourcing more visible to readers. Outlets like NOS, NRC, and de Volkskrant often include "fact-check" segments, data visualizations, and long-form pieces that dissect misinformation narratives (CvdM, 2024).

However, these efforts compete in an environment where attention spans are short and often override factual accuracy. Furthermore, there is debate within journalism about how to balance pluralism with responsibility. Should all viewpoints be given airtime, even if they are factually incorrect or harmful (Grbeša, M. & Nenadić, I., 2023)?

Various actors in the Netherlands are working to address misinformation and restore media literacy. Fact-checking organizations such as *Nieuwscheckers* (affiliated with Leiden University) and *AFP Fact Check NL* play a key role in debunking viral falsehoods (Hameleers, 2022; Nieuwscheckers, 2025).

Relativism, fake news, and misinformation are eroding the foundations of shared understanding in the Dutch media landscape. The increasing prevalence of alternative truths and viral falsehoods poses a threat (CvdM, 2024).

Degree of inequality in political knowledge

Education is the strongest predictor of political knowledge. The Dutch school system tracks students into vocational, general, or academic pathways from an early age, which influences their later exposure to civic education and political content. Students in academic tracks (like VWO) are more likely to study things like politics or economics, engage in debate, and consume traditional news media. In contrast, students in vocational education (MBO) often receive limited exposure to such content (CvdM, 2024).

Access to political information also varies by media consumption habits. Highly educated citizens tend to rely on comprehensive outlets like NRC, de Volkskrant, or public broadcaster NOS, which offer in-depth political analysis. In contrast, those with lower education levels or limited time often consume more entertainment-oriented media or depend on social media for information (CvdM, 2024). This creates a feedback loop: individuals who are less politically engaged receive less political content in their daily media diets, further reducing their exposure and interest. The rise of algorithmic news feeds on platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook deepens this divide by tailoring content to users' existing preferences, often excluding political information entirely.

Several initiatives aim to address these inequalities. Organizations like *ProDemos* provide civic education, while broadcasters such as *NOS op 3* use accessible formats to explain political issues. Schools increasingly emphasize media literacy and citizenship education. But the implementation of these curriculums seems to be a challenge (CvdM, 2024).

Conclusion

The Dutch media landscape presents a complex and evolving terrain in which democratic values, journalistic standards, and public engagement are constantly being negotiated. On the one hand, the Netherlands boasts a historically strong and pluralistic media system, supported by public broadcasters and a relatively high level of trust in journalism. On the other hand, the changing nature of media production and consumption has introduced new challenges that threaten the quality and accessibility of political information.

The amount of political information available to citizens is vast, yet access and exposure are increasingly shaped by digital behaviors and social media algorithms. While opportunities to stay informed have multiplied, not all citizens benefit equally. Similarly, the quality of news remains generally high, but it is under pressure from economic constraints, social media, and the demand for speed over depth in a competitive media market.

Concerns about media concentration and the diversity of voices reveal that although the Netherlands retains a reasonably diverse media ecology, ownership consolidation and the dominance of major platforms risk narrowing the range of perspectives. Meanwhile, fragmentation and polarization have intensified, as citizens consume information within filter bubbles and echo chambers, making public debate more segmented and emotionally charged.

The rise of relativism, fake news, and misinformation further complicates the picture, undermining trust in journalism and blurring the distinction between fact and opinion. Finally, there is a growing inequality in political knowledge, with education, media literacy, and digital access determining who is informed and who is left behind.

To maintain a healthy democracy, the Netherlands must continue investing in high-quality journalism, inclusive media education, and digital regulation. Only by addressing these structural concerns can it ensure that all citizens, not just a privileged few, are empowered to participate meaningfully in public life.

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