



AUKSĖ BALČYTIENĖ

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**SUMMARY.** The institutional landscape in liberal democracies across Europe is undergoing transformation due to the wide-ranging adoption of digitalization measures, the expansion of neoliberal policies, and shifts in global geopolitical power arrangements. This transformation is reshaping the foundation of these societies and wields significant influence on the socio-psychological mindset of individuals, particularly in the realm of value-based and morally-driven choices. This article focuses on online information disruption and dysfunctional communication, exploring whether and how epistemic communities – primarily news media and educational organizations, as well as other branches of cultural industries such as libraries, museums, and media activism in general – should undergo “internal democratization” as a resilience strategy to combat these emerging problems. The objective is to become more attuned to and inclusive of citizens and their concerns, contributing to moral consciousness, thereby enhancing trust, fostering dialogue, and fortifying information integrity and societal cohesion.

**KEYWORDS:** information disruptions, dysfunctional communication, trust, dialogue, societal resilience, Central and Eastern Europe.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF TRANSFORMATIONS

The shift into the new millennium was filled with hopes and promises. Though a glimmer of uncertainty was evident at the time, and political and social institutions in Western Europe were undergoing various transformations, these were mostly attributed to globalization and the neoliberalist drive to expand economies and strive for efficiency in the areas of politics, business, and everyday life (see, for example, Grimmel 2018; Nieminen 2019). The new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe experienced the highest levels of democratic optimism and enthusiasm (Balčytienė 2015), following their great accession to the EU and NATO structures in 2004. Amidst these trends, digitalization and the use of innovative technologies were on the rise globally, and the revolutionary power of online civic activism was increasing (Dahlgren 2006, 2013, 2018). On the other hand, the increasing use of social media and the detrimental effects of platformization (see, for example, van Dijck et al. 2019) on societal structures had not yet been thoroughly recognized. While

ecological awareness about environmental threats, pollution, and climate change was becoming more evident during these years (Cote & Nightingale 2012), such risk-related issues were mainly on the agendas of activist groups and some progressive companies that utilized them for business differentiation and marketing purposes.

In the third decade of the new century, with the Covid-19 pandemic followed by Russian aggression and the war in Ukraine, everything changed. Information and communication accelerated, disinformation and information manipulation flooded in, and uncertainty reached its peak (Schmid et al. 2022; Veriter et al. 2020). Disinformation and fake narratives have spread quickly, amplifying deeply rooted social problems and leading to new forms of digital discrimination and political polarization (Bennett & Livingston 2020). Conventional news media and journalists were slow to provide comforting answers, and the widening epistemic gap on social networks was filled with accusations, instigations of conflict, and conspiracies. With the long-lasting pandemic situation and ongoing military aggression at the eastern borders of the European continent, democratic countries not only faced economic and geopolitical threats but also witnessed brutal informational attacks on the core values that they cherish, perpetrated through propaganda and online disinformation (Veriter et al. 2020). Liberal society's knowledge, beliefs, and understanding of the world were called into question; confidence in the accuracy and reliability of information started to weaken, and citizens' capacity to make informed decisions was challenged. This has been labelled as a time of **epistemic crisis and dysfunctional communication**.

How can the ethos of trust be recalled and the belief in the classical ideal of the potentiality of social contract and dialogic communication in Europe be restored? Can these skills be taught to help protect the sustainability of daily democratic life? In times of persistent and continuous uncertainty, what responsibilities should news media and universities, the traditional guardians of epistemic ideals – particularly the journalistic and scientific process of **responsible communication** and informed meaning formation – have?

I will begin my journey in search of answers by taking a broad view of the epistemic commons, a concept that intuitively refers to the news-media and educational institutions responsible for the shared knowledge and information resources necessary for the health, resilience, and sustainability of society.

The main argument proposed here is based on the idea of “informed citizenship” and responsible communication, which is seen as a long-term strategic response to a myriad of contemporary problems related to the growing dominance of dysfunctional online interactions. By taking into account the numerous local implications of challenges brought about by technological, environmental, health-related, and geopolitical transformations on a global and regional scale, I also invite scholars

and media educators to concentrate more on analyzing **people's responses** to these challenges. Such a strategy, it is hoped, will provide ideas for change within these knowledge organizations, namely, their greater inclusiveness and democratization.

Partially inspired by a recent trend in media and communication research, which can metaphorically be called a “human-centered” and rights-focused shift (Ala-Fossi et al. 2019), such an approach relies on “processual aspects,” namely the selectivity of information for fulfilling some specific needs and reaching gratification. In other words, such an approach delves deeper into analyzing individuals' subjective aspects of meaning-making when choosing information.

A few additional words about the significance of information selectivity and processing need to be added here. The process of “informed opinion” formation and meaning-making needs to be understood as a combination of cognitive, social, and cultural activities that utilize thoughts, feelings, and the selection of responses to action. Likewise, as representatives of various social disciplines, such as social psychology and interpersonal communication argue, information selections, thought management, and rationalization are among the core processes in everyone's life (see, for example, Bandura 2006). Such practices become especially significant during moments that can be defined as “turning points” in personal life and also in the history of society. Environmental disasters, health crises, and war threats are among the biggest risks for any individual, generating emotional responses rooted in heightened levels of uncertainty (Piko 2002). In such moments people are also highly susceptible to conspiratorial thinking, and emotions often take precedence over facts, undermining the authority of classical producers of knowledge (Pennycock & Rand 2021).

#### EXPLORING THE CAUSES AND MECHANISMS OF DYSFUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION

As will be proposed in the following sections of this essay, to overcome the ills in contemporary communication a closer focus on the public, namely the epistemic agency, is required, specifically on people's perceptions of societal changes expressed through alterations in individual and interpersonal trust, levels of satisfaction, and happiness with life. These issues will be given attention later. In this section, I would like to explore the observable consequences of the expansion of neoliberalism into epistemic commons in greater deal.

It seems that nowadays everybody is talking about the crisis, ongoing re-structuring, and the illiberal turn in European politics (Habermas 2022); this includes the rise of populism, the proliferation of radical views, and the destructive and dysfunctional nature of online communication – such as instigations of conflicts

and the increase of manipulation on social media channels. However, the shift in societal perspectives towards increased distrust in conventional politics and a general inclination towards political populism has not occurred as rapidly as it may initially seem. A growing number of scholars propose that all contemporary information disorders and expressions of dysfunctional communication should in fact be explored and treated as symptoms of some deeper rifts within societal structures – specifically, the unresolved issues (Bennett & Livingston 2020; Kreiss 2021). Upon further examination it becomes evident that these issues and social narratives are intricately intertwined with the cultural and contextual aspects unique to each country. Their formation is influenced by enduring and unresolved societal conflicts revolving around developmental histories, upheavals, losses, and cultural traditions specific to each geographic and socio-psychological context.

As an influx of populist politics proliferates on social media, there is a strong temptation to attribute the growing “political captures” and democratic backsliding in some countries solely to politically mediated instrumentalization. Though much can be explained by what is known as the media or technology hypothesis – as these tools not only accelerate political communication but also algorithmically manage it – the most essential knowledge on how developments in digital technologies impact people’s political perceptions and choices is generally absent. There have been too few scholarly analyses exploring public susceptibilities to politically framed manipulations and conspiracies in relation to the varying degrees of “social cohesion” in those countries. In short, it seems that political and social manipulation in contemporary Europe and also globally, as well as the rise of illiberalism in some of Europe’s younger democracies (for example, Hungary and Poland, also Slovakia), are contingent on variations in social and cultural factors of opinion formation in those countries. In smaller nations, like Lithuania, longitudinal studies unveil that concrete factors such as persistent feelings of voicelessness in governmental decisions and dashed hopes from the early 1990s contribute significantly to people’s inclination towards conspiratorial thinking and general distrust in institutions, including the media (Balčytienė 2021; Ramonaitė 2023).

In Western Europe, the transformation towards greater neoliberalist thinking and profit orientation has been observed since the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It began with the shift towards promoting cost-effective business models and productions that sell. In the media industries sector, a stronger emphasis on the so-called effectiveness has given rise to clickbait practices and created spaces for populist discourses to flourish in certain mass public-oriented media outlets. With the advent of digitalization and global economic restructuring, media businesses have sought to occupy market niches with new products, and, as a result, Europe’s overall informational landscape has gradually undergone transformation as well (Nieminen 2019).

Restructuring communication arenas has led to an increasing fragmentation of societies into interest groups which were quickly seized upon by populists. The polarization emerging on an informational level has created divisions within the social structures of societies, separating economic and political elites on one side from the disenfranchised and dissatisfied individuals on the other (Nieminen 2019). Consequently, feelings of frustration, a sense of unfair treatment, and discontent have emerged.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, people's dissatisfaction and unhappiness spilled over into massive protests. Not only have physical disturbances taken place in the cities across Europe, but the global rise of digital media platforms has also created entirely new spaces for the expression of discourses rooted in discontent and disappointment (Bjola & Papadakis 2021). Amidst mounting health risks and economic challenges, the emergence of these new social information gaps and inequalities has provided fertile ground for conspiracy narratives. Over time, these were further fueled and shaped by meticulously orchestrated disinformation attacks from foreign agents and enemies, like Russia.

It is evident that the impact of multiple pressures stemming from globalization, liberalization, and the influence of digital platforms has not only affected the business side of the news media institutions but also profoundly impacted all knowledge-producing sectors, including educational and cultural organizations. The overflow of digital information and the escalation of global crises have intensified these negative impacts even further. Although digital platforms produce spaces for self-expression and act as highly accessible communication intermediaries (Helberger 2020), they have also served to amplify fake narratives and false claims. This, in turn, has led to the incitement of political extremism, including attacks on professionals, such as journalists, scientists, health experts, and academics, who are accused of being elitist and detached from the daily lives and anxieties of ordinary people.

Briefly, digitally amplified dysfunctional and destructive communication does much more harm than simply spreading social confusion. The unsettling feelings of helplessness, suspicion, disbelief, and distrust damage and undermine the principles of an accountable, dialogic, rules-based, and rights-focused way of life. The worrisome nature of the trend is indicated by various international organizations, including UNESCO, which urge discussions about responsible communication.

#### DISCURSIVE STRENGTH AND TRUST RESPONSE

It goes without saying that a crisis of legitimacy of a rules-based order is occurring across Europe, which is also being challenged by continuing public dissatisfaction with how local economies function, how health issues are addressed, or how social

reforms are implemented in different countries. Within this context, younger European democracies appear to be particularly vulnerable to the framework of political and social developments and populist trends.

According to democratic theory, the resilience of democratic institutions is inseparable from public trust, active citizenship, and public commitments to democratic values. In Central and Eastern Europe, generally trust in democratic institutions still appears quite low, and the public's self-perception of themselves as democratic citizens is mixed (Balčytienė 2021). The political culture, too, is described as reliant on competitive and conflictual rather than consensual goals.

To begin with, for successful societal response to emerging threats, whether they are internally initiated by populists or conveyed by foreign enemies through massive and strategically managed propaganda and disinformation attacks, there must be social solidarity and mutual trust. It is essential for citizens to be ready and capable of working together to address emerging challenges and navigate arising political and cultural differences. Socio-economic transformations, demographic change, geopolitical upheavals, social inequalities, and a myriad of other risks pose major challenges to social cohesion in younger and older European democracies, making it more important than ever to strengthen societal resilience. In such contexts, relying solely on the analysis of institutional structures and the traditional mission of epistemic commons for information provision seems like a short-sighted approach.

Most importantly, we must acknowledge the dependency of communication on cultural and contextual traditions, as well as historic and cultural narratives (Carey 1989). Social trust-building and contestations of identity formation are ongoing processes. Therefore, as previously mentioned, it is crucial to acknowledge that the dissemination of online disinformation and populist manipulations is connected to profound and deep-seated social clashes and conflicts within specific countries or regions. In the face of manifold uncertainty and manipulation, a multitude of resources, including infrastructural conditions (e.g., professional news media and democratic institutions) and individual capacities (epistemic and moral agency), appear to be of critical significance. Therefore, nurturing societal resilience, as a structurally and individually supported development, should be perceived as a **discursive process** that is conversational, dialogic, and reflexive. Consequently, **responsible and accountable communication**, along with suitable arenas for its exercise, becomes essential.

Therefore, the scholarly analysis of modern communication should focus on the people's actions of access and sharing of online information, recognizing that such a process includes not only the sharing of content (knowledge and facts) but also the sharing of the epistemic formations embedded within these experiences. Hence, for contemporary analyses, it becomes critically important to learn how

this kind of epistemic tradition and culture becomes institutionalized (i.e., locally embedded), what qualitative communication principles, such as transparency and accountability, it acquires, and how it is accepted, maintained, and shared by people.

As noted, the qualities of togetherness and feelings of social solidarity are critical to sustaining democratic rule. However, in new transmedial communication environments, these qualities are predominantly being challenged by the increasing need of individuals and groups to proclaim their own identities, ideologies, and ways of life. The variations of subjective feelings and emotions that people assign to a changed reality are revealed in such moments (Steinert et al. 2022). As depicted in a few illustrations from the European Social Survey (ESS10 2020) analysis, country variations are also evident in broader societal trends and differences among countries. They are reflected in people's expressions of trust, perceptions, and satisfaction with how democracy functions (or does not meet subjective expectations) in different European states (see Figure 1).

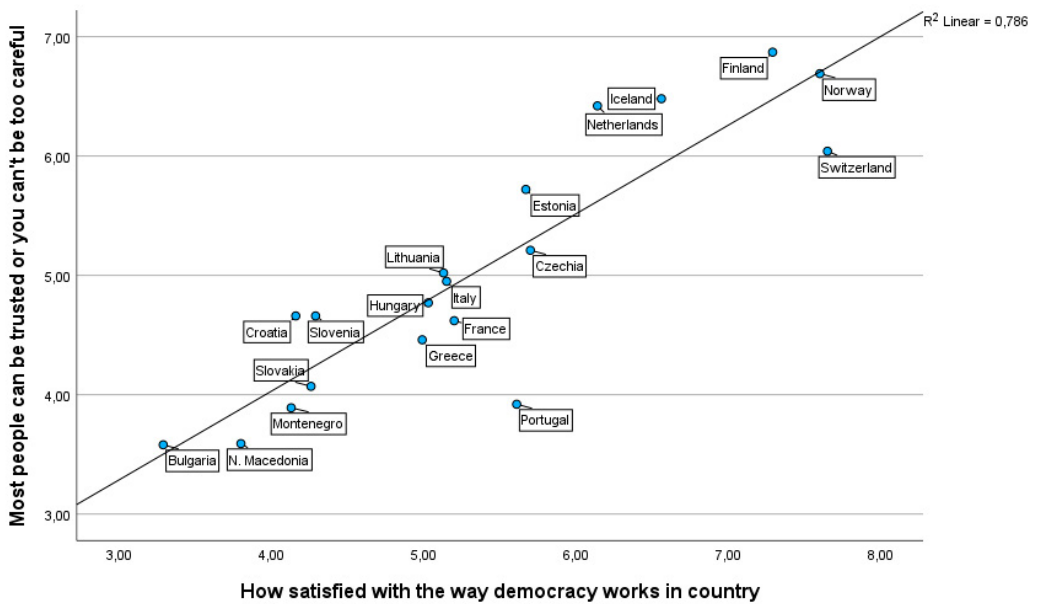


Figure 1. Perceptions of social trust by the assessment of satisfaction with democracy (ESS10 2020). Social trust was measured by the question “Would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” Responses were provided on a 10-point scale, where 0 refers to “you can’t be too careful” and 10 refers to “most people can be trusted”

Some of the younger democracies are seen in the middle cluster, such as Estonia, Czechia, and Lithuania. The highest ranking is shown for the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, known for their commitment to inclusiveness and universalism (Syvertsen et al. 2014; Henriksen 2018). All of this indicates that greater social trust, inclusive policies, and the sense of satisfaction with democracy are essential safeguards of a sustainable democratic way of life.

Another clear tendency regarding communication rights and media freedoms is depicted in Figure 2. Implicitly expressing the feeling of being informed and trusting the media institution’s freedom to fulfill its primary call, i.e., to be free to perform the watchdog function to criticize the government, this assessment directly correlates with the perceived individual level of satisfaction in how democracy works in a country.

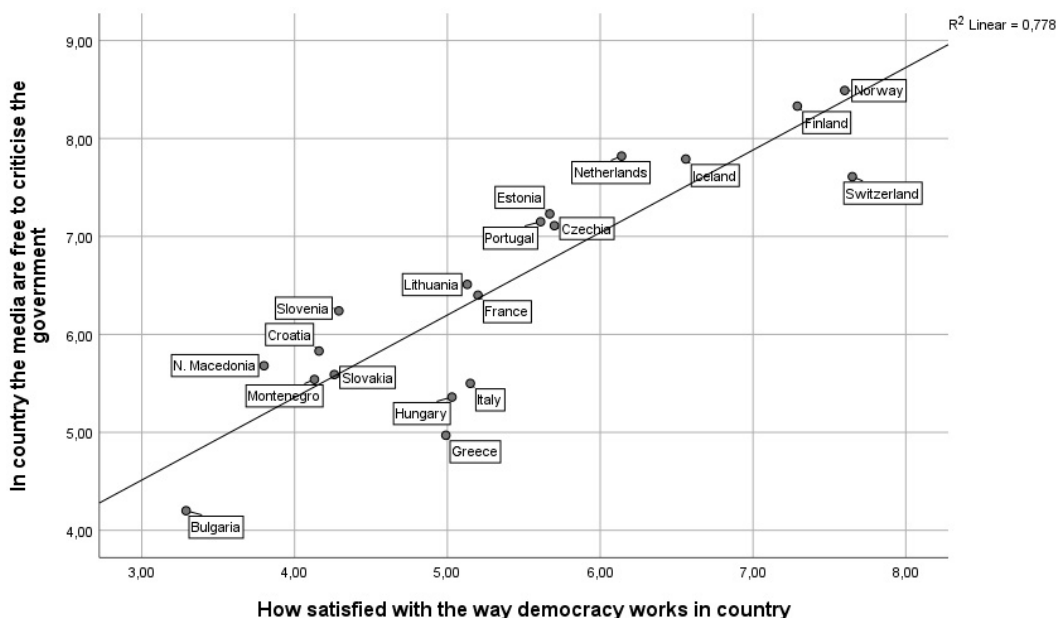


Figure 2. Assessment of media role by satisfaction with the way democracy works in the country (ESS10 2020). The indicator of media freedom was measured by the statement “The media in country are free to criticize the government.” Responses were provided on a 10-point scale, where 0 refers to “Does not apply at all” and 10 refers to “Applies completely”

On the other hand, the situation depicted in Figure 2 calls for greater attention to be placed on the role of media in democracy. While in most of the countries examined in this graphic, citizens’ perceptions of the media’s freedom to fulfill its



watchdog mission fall into several clusters, a clear trend in people's perceptions remains: the most important aspect of the media is to be trusted and responsive to people's needs. The depicted variations of feelings and expressions, indicating varying degrees of satisfaction with democracy in different countries, suggest that there is considerable potential for the media as an epistemic commons to become more inclusive and responsive by meeting people's daily needs and expectations. Namely, the media should strive to democratize its functions (Harambam 2021). This involves moving beyond the roles of mere information providers, agenda setters, fact-checkers and watchdogs, and embracing the role of "sense makers." Merely engaging in more fact-checking won't necessarily boost journalists' trust. Rather, developing an increased media awareness regarding the social exclusion faced by specific groups in society is crucial for nurturing media sensitivity and responsiveness.

Briefly, journalism should not only be socially inclusive in its contents by addressing issues of traditionally deprived groups such as minorities or women, but should also become more attentive, companionate, and empathetic to the perceptions and mindsets of various people (Wasserman 2015). Obviously, the change in media's performance will also require developing new systems for its quality assessment, for example, shifting from quantitative assessments of trust to qualitative analyses of its responsiveness, but these issues are outside the scope of this essay. All in all, with the above-outlined changes, which invite the media to be more attentive and empathetic, it will gradually become more inclusive, democratic, and a less distant and non-elitist enterprise. Likewise, it is reasonable to expect that the democratization of epistemic commons is essential for fostering societal communication that is both responsive and responsible.

To sum up, social feelings and perceptions of interpersonal and social trust are an important factor in determining the sense of individual satisfaction and "perceived quality" of daily democracy in a country. In its broadest sense, trust is an essential aspect of societal culture, which directly influences the characteristics of individual agency, namely the patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting in a society. The characteristics of interpersonal trust are likely to have implications for information processing and informed meaning-creation and opinion sharing on social media, for example. Still, from a news-media point of view, striking a balance between maintaining audience engagement and offering professionalism and news accuracy remains a serious challenge.

## DISCUSSION: BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPITAL

There seems to be no single answer to the question which appears to be among the most challenging for Europe in the future: How can we reclaim the power of dialogue and critical activism without succumbing to melancholy and nostalgia for what seems to be disappearing before our eyes?

What we know is that democracy is neither fireworks nor an action movie. Maintaining a discussion will not happen spontaneously. It requires ongoing positive action. Learning to listen and finding consensus requires skills, critical awareness, and moral standing, which are concrete competencies that can be taught, for example, in media education classes or digital media awareness training sessions. But aside from the need for trust and self-assurance, developing a responsible communication culture based on dialogue and universalist principles and ethics also requires time.

Crises are inevitable and will happen, and, unfortunately, online disinformation and the bad intentions of enemies will persevere. For us, the current momentum appears to be ripe to strategically rethink how to revitalize the epistemic and cultural institutions to inspire the recovery of the critical openness and trust, which has vanished.

The chosen perspective of “processual analysis,” which focuses on a variety of prerequisites of informed decision making, such as practical instruments in the form of verified facts as provided by the epistemic commons (such as news media and universities) and trust and systems of belief, which evolve as a result of the process of internal negotiations and dialogue, is the path towards the gradual building of principles of responsible communication.

Professional media newsrooms have their systems of professionalism and credibility, which work well during periods of settled cultural development and institutionalization of the profession. While crisis and uncertainty give rise to “unsettled cultures” (Swidler 1986), which are emblematic of its “fluidity,” shareholder engagement becomes imperative.

To be effective in creatively mobilizing epistemic expertise of multiple actors, a shift in perceptions is needed. Firstly, we must consider the very essence of uncertainty and social complexity. No single disciplinary perspective nor one-sided expertise can provide direct answers to problems of unsettled character; hence, in relation to contemporary information disorders, we should not solely focus on truth-seeking through increased fact-checking efforts, production of more explanations and information, and the like. Secondly, disciplining citizens with media literacy and the call to think critically are important, but it is not the only solution. It is important to take into account the fact that “information processing” goes

beyond being a mere cognitive process; instead, it necessitates developing awareness of one's "system of beliefs" (Harambam 2021; McDougal 2019). It is the epistemic commons that play a vital role in fostering such an awareness, primarily through strategies like information provision, teaching attentive listening, and applying responsive engagement with the citizens' needs.

Obviously, transformation of epistemologies requires an approach that balances the need for change and renewal with the sustainability of tradition. Hence, this essay indirectly examines whether and how the epistemic commons – namely, the media and educational institutions, as well as other types of cultural industries – can help restore trust and resilience, highlighting that these can be used to foster public engagement and collaboration in the development and exchange of reliable, trustworthy information resources. For such a purpose, an approach of governance and collaborative partnerships between different stakeholders (policymakers, journalists, researchers, educators, librarians, youth workers, IT activists, citizens) must be further explored to foster social change through both epistemic agency and resilience capacity development to sustain democratic commons and wellbeing in the Europe of today and the future.

As we know, the ideal of European modernity and democratization runs on openness to difference, consensus, and the public good. In Europe, there has always been a tradition of critical knowledge and activism to defend and safeguard the tradition of conversation and dialogue. Culture and knowledge-building institutions have always been a forefront institution for safeguarding ideals of openness, also on behalf of multiple underprivileged and vulnerable groups. Today, however, all those institutions are still restrained by neoliberalist dogmas drawing them away from their core missions in most countries. Conversely, in some other countries (Hungary), these institutions are increasingly molded to align with the prevailing political agenda. It is crucial to understand that the ongoing crisis in contemporary European democracy and the subsequent shift in the information order appear intricately connected to the altered and declining status of these historic and traditional centers of intellectualism, knowledge, and culture.

One last argument in favor of promoting inclusiveness, closer dialogic relations and a healthier discourse with local communities and stakeholders, as well as investing in the development of attentive and responsible communication principles, can be derived from the lessons learned during the not-so-distant history of the Covid-19 period. All global threats and health risks from environmental dangers and viruses transcend geographical boundaries and nation state borders. But as activist responses to pandemic health hazards have shown, solutions to global problems are often developed on a local scale through attentive and engaging initiatives and solidarity among local journalists, educators, businesses, and citizen groups.

Hence, to sustain the ambition of European integration, the idea of institutional and cultural integration must go hand in hand with moral integrity and attentive and responsible communication.

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EPISTEMINIŲ BENDRUOMENIŲ TRANSFORMAVIMAS SIEKIANT SVEIKESNIO DISKURSO  
ŠIUOLAIKINĖJE EUROPOJE

**SANTRAUKA.** Visa apimanti skaitmenizacija, neoliberalistinio pobūdžio inovacijos ir globalios geopolitinės galios svyravimai stipriai veikia institucinę sąrangą tiek Europoje, tiek globaliai. Šių veiksmų sužadintos transformacijos daro ženklią įtaką ir sociopsichologinei visuomenės sąmonei, t. y. vertybiniam ir moralinio pasirinkimo virsmams. Atskaitos tašku čia pasirinkta informacinių trikdžių ir komunikacinės disfunkcijos tema, aiškinantis, ar ir kaip episteminės bendruomenės – visų pirma žiniasklaida ir švietimo organizacijos, taip pat kitos kultūros industrijų šakos, tokios kaip bibliotekos, muziejai, ir medijų aktyvizmas apskritai – turėtų „demokratizuotis iš vidaus“. Tokio veiksmo siekinys – tapti įtraukesnėms, talkinti vertybiniam ir moraliniam susivokimui, galiausiai prisidėti prie pasitikėjimo stiprinimo, dialogo mezgimo, didesnės sanglaudos ir visuomenės informacinio integralumo bei atsparumo didinimo.

**RAKTAŽODŽIAI:** informacinė networka, disfunkcinė komunikacija, pasitikėjimas, dialogas, visuomenės atsparumas, Rytų ir Vidurio Europa.