



Bart Cammaerts

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The time has come for a new democratic media policy in Europe

Bart Cammaerts, Professor of Politics and Communication at the LSE, explains why he believes European governments need to develop a more interventionist approach to media policy.

The domino pieces keep falling against X. The Belgian quality broadsheet *DeMorgen* decided this week to quit the social network, thereby following newspapers such as *The Guardian* (UK), *La Vanguardia* (Spain) and *Dagens Nyheter* (Sweden). In Germany, more than 60 universities and colleges also announced last week that they will leave X after the company's owner Elon Musk actively campaigned for the neo-fascist party AfD. In their **joint statement** they stated that: "The current course of the platform is not compatible with the core values of the institutions involved: openness to the world, scientific integrity, transparency and democratic discourse". German trade unions, some football clubs and the German Federal Court of Justice did the same.

It is, however, all too easy to focus solely on the supervillain-in-chief Elon Musk and his cesspool platform X. A few days ago, Meta, which operates the platforms Facebook, Instagram and Threads, as well as messaging service WhatsApp, **announced** that they too will drastically reduce content moderation and fact-checking. CEO Mark Zuckerberg stated that Meta is doing this to protect freedom of expression, but the concrete outcome of this will be that more hate speech, more racism, more disinformation and more lies will circulate on the Meta platforms, and that adults and children who are active on those platforms will be less protected against the harmful influence of such platforms on social cohesion and democratic values.

To complete the picture, we can also refer to that other multi-billionaire, Jeff Bezos, owner of Amazon, amongst others, but also of the American quality newspaper *The Washington Post*. Bezos personally **intervened** last October to scupper the endorsement of the newspaper's journalists of Kamala Harris for president. This shattered the illusion of editorial independence of that newspaper. Furthermore, Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist Ann Telnaes **resigned** last week after a cartoon of hers that depicted all the multi-billionaire tech bosses kneeling in front of the altar of

Trump was censored. *The Washington Post* has the tagline 'democracy dies in darkness'; however, it is becoming clear that democracy is now bleeding to death 'in plain sight'.

This shows that the problem of the excessive power of the 'tech bros' is not limited to Musk and X. The business model of all online platforms is highly problematic. In this context, the American philosopher Shoshana Zuboff spoke of **surveillance capitalism**, which sees our right to privacy being damaged on a daily basis, but in addition, these platforms and their oligopolistic owners increasingly undermine our democracy and silence critical democratic legacy media that dare to question their excessive power.

All this shows the urgent need for a new and bold (social and legacy) media policy. For several years now, I have been **advocating** a root-and-branch rethinking of European media policy. In my view, this should be based on three pillars.

- First, European and national governments must stop online platforms, which are almost all based in the US, from trampling on European legal frameworks with regards to hate speech, anti-discrimination, privacy and competition policy.
- Second, the diversity and pluralism of the European media landscape must be strengthened, especially through supporting local and investigative journalism.
- Third, and most ambitiously, Europe must develop ethical and democratic online alternatives that are based on respect for democratic values, and which guarantee the privacy of their users. Just as we created independent public service broadcasters last century, it is high time to develop social media and search engines that are modelled on the same principles and serve public rather than private and capitalist interests.

As for this third pillar, when social media emerged in the early 2000s there existed some European platforms too, such as Hyves in the Netherlands, Tuenti in Spain, Nazca Klasa in Poland or Studi-VZ in Germany, but the commercial and 'winner-takes-all' logic of online platforms eventually killed all of these. Developing new European platforms that can not only compete with Silicon Valley but that also function as a public service and do not sell our online behaviour to advertisers or political actors, can in my view only be achieved by governments, and preferably at a European level.

*A **Dutch version** of this blogpost was published as an opinion piece in the Belgian newspaper **DeMorgen** on 15 January 2025. This post represents the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

About the author



Bart Cammaerts is Professor of Politics and Communication and former Head of Department in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. His current research focuses on the relationship between media, communication and resistance with particular emphasis on media strategies of activists, media representations of protest, alternative counter-cultures and broader issues relating to power, participation and public-ness.

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