



Searching for Pluralism: Bringing Search Engine Research into conversation with Media Pluralism Monitoring.

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1. Abstract

Search engines are primary gatekeepers of news discovery, yet they remain a grey spot in systematic media pluralism monitoring. Existing media pluralism frameworks have been designed around the assumption of non-mediated media consumption, championing ownership and audience concentration measurements in traditional media. They do not account for the epistemic work search engines perform: by algorithmically ranking and filtering news content, search engines command exposure of sources, perspectives, and voices that reach audiences (Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000; Van Hoboken, 2015; Noble, 2018). Ultimately, with search engine providers' move into information synthesis and AI, this has direct implications for opinion formation in democratic societies (Harabam et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2023).

The presented research draws on a fellowship at the Digital Democracy Centre at Syddansk Universitet (Odense, Denmark) and outlines how search engine research (SER) and regulatory media monitoring have developed largely in parallel to the detriment of both. SER has produced distinct methodological approaches (Nguyen et al., 2014) and detailed empirical data on how search engines impact media consumption (D Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Unkel, 2019). As media monitoring research is looking for ways to address the digital challenges of news consumption (Schneiders & Stark, 2025), it makes the case for bringing these two fields into systematic conversation and identifies the conceptual and methodological moves required to do so.

The poster makes four contributions. First, it reviews overlapping debates between SER and media monitoring research. Second, it presents data on how regulatory media pluralism monitors have adapted metrics inspired by SER. Third, it adds a case study on exposure diversity by design (Helberger et al., 2015; Helberger et al., 2018) - a critical intervention inspired by SER and later adopted in media pluralism monitoring - showing the innovation potential between the disciplines as well as the limitations in adoption. Fourth, learning from the case, it puts forth *search-mediated opinion power* as a productive contribution, addressing a conceptual disconnect between the focus on legal ownership in media concentration regulation and how influence is distributed through algorithmic visibility and source selection of search. The concept is delineated against established concepts in SER, such as gatekeeping/gatewatching, agenda-setting, and epistemic power.

Throughout the poster, I reflect on why the disciplines should stay in conversation - acknowledging the challenges for monitoring practice posed by AI-generated overviews and Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG), and opportunities arising from the current regulatory moment. Instruments such as the European Media Freedom Act create new transparency obligations that monitoring frameworks leverage, to which SER is well positioned to contribute.

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The findings and reflections were developed in dialogue with practitioners from Global Media Registries' Media Ownership Monitor and in a workshop with Danish media transparency practitioners, grounding the conceptual argument in the practical constraints and opportunities of real-world monitoring efforts.

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