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VOICE

Visionary Outreach in Inclusive, Credible,
Ethical Journalism for Youth

**Policy recommendations for inclusive and
democratic media systems**





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Executive summary

Democratic media systems rely on the ability of all citizens to access information, be represented in public discourse, and participate meaningfully in shaping narratives that affect their lives. In the current digital media environment, these conditions are increasingly fragile. Rapid technological change, the spread of misinformation, and unequal access to media production and representation have widened existing gaps in participation—particularly for young people with disabilities and other marginalized groups.

The VOICE project (Visionary Outreach in Inclusive, Credible, Ethical Journalism for Youth) responds to these challenges by demonstrating that inclusive, ethical, and accessible journalism is not aspirational, but achievable. Implemented across multiple European contexts, VOICE combines youth work, non-formal education, accessible media design, and ethical journalism practices to strengthen democratic participation through media.

The evidence generated by VOICE shows that:

- Accessibility can be embedded into media practices as a standard, not an exception.
- Ethical and inclusive journalism can be operationalized through practical tools and training.
- Young people, including those with disabilities, can act as credible media creators when supported by appropriate structures.
- Media literacy is most effective when treated as a lifelong civic competence, supported beyond formal education.
- Accountability and participatory oversight mechanisms strengthen trust and democratic legitimacy.

Based on this evidence, the document proposes a concise set of policy recommendations structured around five interrelated pillars:

1. Accessibility as a standard in media governance
2. Ethical and inclusive journalism as a public-interest obligation
3. Youth participation and agency in media systems
4. Media literacy as a lifelong civic competence
5. Accountability, monitoring, and participatory oversight

The recommendations are designed for policy-makers, media regulators, public-service media, and other key stakeholders. They are presented in a clear, actionable format, prioritizing feasibility, scalability, and democratic impact.

Inclusive and ethical media are not peripheral concerns. They are foundational to democratic resilience, public trust, and social cohesion. By building on the evidence and tools developed through VOICE, decision-makers have a concrete opportunity to strengthen media systems that reflect societal diversity and uphold the democratic right of all individuals to be seen, heard, and represented.



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2. Why inclusive media governance is a democratic issue

2.1 The democratic role of media today

Media systems play a central role in democratic life. They shape public understanding, influence political participation, and determine which voices are visible or marginalized in public discourse. In the digital age, media reach has expanded dramatically, but this expansion has not translated into equal participation for all.

Algorithm-driven distribution, platform-based communication, and rapid content cycles increasingly privilege visibility, speed, and engagement over accuracy, inclusion, and accountability. As a result, democratic debate is often shaped by unequal access, distorted narratives, and limited representation of marginalized perspectives.

When media systems fail to ensure accessibility, ethical standards, and participation, exclusion from media becomes exclusion from democracy.

2.2 Who is excluded and how

Despite broader digital participation, structural barriers continue to exclude specific groups from meaningful media engagement, particularly:

- Young people with disabilities
- Youth facing intersecting forms of marginalization (social, economic, geographic)
- Young people positioned only as audiences, not contributors

Key exclusion mechanisms include:

- Inaccessible media content and platforms
- Limited representation of diverse lived experiences
- Lack of institutional pathways for youth participation in media creation
- Media literacy initiatives that do not address diverse learning needs

These barriers reduce visibility, agency, and trust, weakening democratic participation and social cohesion.

2.3 Why current policies fall short

Current policy frameworks often address:

- Accessibility
- Media literacy
- Youth participation

as **separate policy domains**, with limited coordination between them.

As a result:

- Accessibility is treated as a technical add-on rather than a governance standard
- Ethical journalism remains largely self-regulated, with weak accountability for exclusionary practices
- Youth participation is promoted rhetorically but rarely institutionalized within media systems

The lack of integrated approaches means that inclusion depends on individual projects or goodwill, rather than on sustainable policy structures.

2.4 What needs to change

To strengthen democratic resilience, media governance must:

- Treat accessibility as a democratic right
- Embed ethical and inclusive standards into public-interest obligations
- Recognize youth as active contributors to public discourse
- Support media literacy as a lifelong civic competence
- Establish transparent and participatory accountability mechanisms

The VOICE project provides concrete evidence that these shifts are feasible and effective when addressed together.

3. Policy relevance and alignment

3.1 Alignment with European and international frameworks

The VOICE policy recommendations align closely with existing European and international commitments, translating them into actionable guidance for media governance.

Framework	Core commitment	VOICE contribution
EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027	Youth participation in democratic life	Youth as media creators and agenda-setters
EU Disability Rights Strategy 2021–2030	Accessibility and participation	Accessible journalism and media platforms
Digital Education Action Plan	Digital and media competences	Non-formal, inclusive media literacy
UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Access to information and participation	Inclusive media governance mechanisms
SDG 10 – Reduced inequalities	Social and political inclusion	Media as a structural inclusion lever

VOICE does not introduce new policy obligations. It demonstrates how existing commitments can be implemented coherently within media systems.

3.2 Added value at European level

VOICE’s transnational implementation provides evidence that inclusive media practices are transferable across different national contexts. Despite differences in media regulation and governance models, the challenges of exclusion, misinformation, and limited participation are shared across Europe.

The tools and recommendations developed through VOICE offer:

- Scalable approaches adaptable to national and regional contexts
- Practical instruments for regulators and media organizations
- Policy-relevant evidence grounded in real-world implementation

This European added value supports coordinated action while respecting national specificities.

4. Evidence base – what VOICE demonstrates

The VOICE project provides concrete, practice-based evidence that inclusive, ethical, and accessible media systems can be developed and sustained when policy objectives are translated into operational tools and supported by appropriate governance frameworks. The evidence presented below is derived from project implementation across multiple European contexts and is directly relevant for policy formulation and media governance.

4.1 Evidence from integrated project design

VOICE was designed as an integrated intervention combining:

- Non-formal education and youth work
- Ethical journalism training
- Accessibility-focused media design
- Policy dialogue and stakeholder engagement

This integrated approach demonstrates that inclusion, ethics, and participation are most effective when addressed together rather than through isolated initiatives. Fragmented interventions risk reinforcing existing gaps, while integrated design enables systemic change.

Policy-relevant insight:

Inclusive media governance requires cross-cutting frameworks that connect accessibility, ethics, participation, and accountability, rather than treating them as separate policy areas.

4.2 Evidence from capacity building and youth participation

VOICE demonstrates that young people, including youth with disabilities, can meaningfully participate in media creation when provided with:

- Accessible tools and formats
- Structured mentorship and guidance
- Clear ethical frameworks

Through the New Youth Journalism Accelerator Programme and national piloting activities:

- Youth participants transitioned from media consumers to media creators
- Youth-produced content met ethical and quality standards when supported by appropriate training
- Participation increased confidence, civic awareness, and employability-related competences

Importantly, youth workers functioned as long-term multipliers, embedding inclusive media practices beyond the project lifecycle.

Policy-relevant insight:

Youth participation in media is limited not by capacity or motivation, but by structural barriers and lack of institutional support.

4.3 Evidence from accessible tools and methodologies

VOICE produced and tested a set of practical tools that function as policy instruments rather than standalone educational resources. These include:

- A structured methodology for inclusive media education
- Accessible multimedia resources
- An accessible digital platform for youth-created journalism

The project confirms that:

- Accessibility can be embedded by design without disproportionate cost
- Universal design principles enhance usability for all audiences, not only persons with disabilities
- Accessible media environments increase participation and quality of engagement

Policy-relevant insight:

Accessibility is most effective when embedded at system level, through standards and design requirements, rather than addressed through ad hoc accommodations.

4.4 Evidence from media monitoring and accountability practices

One of the most policy-relevant outputs of VOICE is the development and testing of structured media monitoring tools that translate ethical and inclusion principles into operational criteria.

The Media Monitoring Guidelines demonstrate that:

- Inclusivity and accessibility can be assessed using clear indicators
- Media professionals benefit from practical checklists rather than abstract ethical codes
- Monitoring tools increase transparency and accountability when applied consistently

These tools were positively received by youth workers, civil society actors, and media-adjacent stakeholders as feasible instruments for self-evaluation and oversight.

Policy-relevant insight:

Soft regulation tools, when practical and transparent, can meaningfully complement formal regulatory frameworks.

4.5 Evidence from stakeholder engagement and policy dialogue

VOICE facilitated dialogue between:

- Youth and youth workers
- Media professionals
- Civil society and disability organisations
- Policy-adjacent stakeholders

These engagements revealed:

- Broad recognition of policy gaps related to inclusive media governance
- Demand for clearer standards and guidance at national and European level
- Strong support for participatory oversight mechanisms involving affected communities

Stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of moving beyond voluntary commitments toward more structured and accountable approaches.

Policy-relevant insight:

Policy legitimacy and effectiveness increase when affected groups are directly involved in governance and oversight mechanisms.

4.6 Key conclusions from the evidence

The evidence generated by VOICE demonstrates that:

- Inclusive and ethical journalism can be systematically taught, practiced, and monitored
- Youth, including youth with disabilities, can act as credible contributors to public discourse
- Accessibility and inclusion are governance issues, not individual accommodations
- Practical tools increase policy uptake and implementation feasibility

5. Policy pillars and recommendations

This section translates the evidence generated by the VOICE project into a concise set of policy recommendations. Each pillar addresses a structural gap in current media governance and proposes actionable measures that can be implemented at national, regional, and European levels.

The pillars are interdependent and should be understood as a coherent policy package rather than standalone interventions.

Pillar 1: Accessibility as a standard in media governance

The problem

- Media accessibility is often treated as optional or technical, rather than as a democratic right.
- Inaccessible formats exclude young people with disabilities from public information and debate.
- Accessibility obligations are inconsistently applied across platforms and content types.

Evidence from VOICE

- Accessible design significantly increases engagement and participation for all users.
- Universal design principles improve overall media quality, not only accessibility.
- Youth with disabilities actively participate in media creation when barriers are removed.

Policy recommendations

- Establish accessibility as a mandatory standard for public-interest and publicly funded media.
- Integrate accessibility requirements into media regulation, licensing, and funding criteria.
- Promote universal design principles in digital journalism and platform development.
- Support capacity building for media professionals on accessible content production.

Expected impact

- Increased democratic participation
- Broader audience reach
- Reduced exclusion and inequality in access to information

Pillar 2: Ethical and inclusive journalism as a public-interest obligation

The problem

- Ethical journalism standards are often voluntary and weakly enforced.
- Inclusion is frequently addressed rhetorically, without operational criteria.
- Marginalised perspectives remain underrepresented or misrepresented.

Evidence from VOICE

- Ethical and inclusive journalism can be operationalised through practical tools.
- Clear criteria support journalists in applying ethical principles consistently.
- Youth-trained in ethical frameworks produce responsible and credible media content.

Policy recommendations

- Embed ethical and inclusive journalism standards into public-service media mandates.
- Link public funding and support schemes to compliance with ethical and inclusion criteria.
- Encourage the adoption of practical ethics checklists and self-assessment tools.
- Promote ongoing professional development on inclusion and representation.

Expected impact

- Improved public trust in media
- More accurate and diverse representation
- Stronger accountability for public-interest journalism

Pillar 3: Youth participation and agency in media systems

The problem

- Young people are primarily treated as media audiences, not contributors.
- Youth voices are underrepresented in mainstream and public-interest media.
- Participation opportunities are project-based and rarely institutionalised.

Evidence from VOICE

- Youth participation increases media relevance, credibility, and innovation.
- Young people, including those with disabilities, act as responsible media creators when supported.
- Youth workers function as effective intermediaries between youth and media institutions.

Policy recommendations

- Create institutional pathways for youth participation in public-interest media.
- Support youth-led and youth-inclusive media initiatives through sustainable funding.
- Recognise youth work and non-formal education as key partners in media policy.
- Encourage co-creation models between media organisations and youth groups.

Expected impact

- Increased civic engagement among young people
- More diverse narratives in public discourse
- Stronger intergenerational dialogue

Pillar 4: Media literacy as a lifelong civic competence

The problem

- Media literacy initiatives are often limited to formal education.
- Programmes rarely address accessibility and diverse learning needs.
- Media literacy is not consistently linked to democratic participation.

Evidence from VOICE

- Non-formal education effectively reaches diverse youth groups.
- Media literacy is most impactful when connected to real media production.
- Accessible learning environments increase participation and outcomes.

Policy recommendations

- Recognise media literacy as a lifelong civic competence.
- Support inclusive, non-formal media literacy programmes.
- Integrate ethical journalism, accessibility, and critical thinking into media literacy strategies.
- Ensure media literacy initiatives are accessible to learners with disabilities.

Expected impact

- Increased resilience to misinformation
- Stronger democratic participation
- Greater media awareness across generations

Pillar 5: Accountability, monitoring, and participatory oversight

The problem

- Media accountability mechanisms often lack transparency and public involvement.
- Marginalised groups rarely participate in media oversight structures.
- Trust in media institutions is declining

Evidence from VOICE

- Structured monitoring tools improve accountability and ethical practice.
 - Participatory approaches increase legitimacy and trust.
 - Stakeholders support stronger public oversight mechanisms.
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Flagship policy recommendation: audience councils in public-service media

Rationale

Public-service media are mandated to serve the interests of society as a whole. However, existing governance structures often fail to ensure meaningful representation of diverse audiences, particularly young people and marginalised groups.

Good practice example

A relevant model is the audience council of the public broadcaster in Austria, which strengthens public oversight and audience representation.

Recommended model

- Establish audience councils within public-service media organisations.
- Enable nominations by a wide range of actors, including:
 - Civil society organisations
 - Youth organisations
 - Disability and inclusion organisations
 - Informal groups and individual citizens
- Ensure balanced representation through category-based selection.
- Elect members through national or regional parliaments, depending on governance structures.
- Define clear mandates, transparency requirements, and accountability mechanisms.

Policy options to consider

- Individual self-nomination supported by citizen endorsements
- Separate representation quotas for specific social groups
- Regular public reporting by audience councils

Expected impact

- Strengthened democratic oversight of public-service media
- Increased public trust and legitimacy
- Greater responsiveness to societal diversity

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