



Input from the University of Bergen to the European Commission's Call for Evidence for a European Democracy Shield

The Role of Research, Education and the Arts in Building Democratic Resilience



UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN

INTRODUCTION

The [University of Bergen](#) (UiB) welcomes the European Commission's initiative to develop a European Democracy Shield. We fully support the ambition to strengthen democratic resilience, safeguard fundamental rights, and build societal preparedness.

The initiative's focus on strengthening media literacy and rebuilding trust in democracy is both timely and highly relevant. However, the continued underrepresentation of the social sciences, humanities, and the arts (SSHA) in EU research and innovation policy remains a concern. These fields are essential to understanding and addressing the root causes of democratic erosion, polarisation, and disinformation.

In a time where a range of factors necessitates agility and preparedness for change at societal level, it is crucial to acknowledge that societal transformations and innovations cannot succeed without societal uptake. SSHA research can provide the knowledge needed to ensure that such transformations and innovations align with democratic principles, human needs, and ethical considerations, and that behavioural shifts are efficient and inclusive. Developing sustainably democratic and competitive societies in Europe crucially depends on the people of Europe. Therefore, the human perspective should permeate the research and innovation agenda, and dedicated support for SSHA to build societal resilience, foster democratic engagement, and strengthen Europe's cultural and economic foundation should be prioritized.

We urge the Commission to ensure that the upcoming Communication on the Democracy Shield highlights the strategic role of research, innovation and education in shaping democratic resilience and points to strategic use of programmes such as Horizon Europe and its successor, as well as Creative Europe and Erasmus+, to deliver long-term, knowledge-based capacity to build democratic resilience across Europe.

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

Universities are central to democracy. They are not only providers of research and research-based education, but also arenas for public debate, critical thinking and the dissemination of knowledge across society. They are culture-bearing institutions, serving as reservoirs of knowledge of the history and cultural heritage that have shaped our societies. Their central democratic role is demonstrated by the fact that universities are often among the first targets of restrictions and attacks in societies where democracy is under threat. To fully support the role of universities, the European Democracy Shield should safeguard academic freedom and institutional autonomy, ensure broad access to EU programmes across all disciplines, and promote cross-sectoral partnerships between academia, media, culture, and civil society. We recommend that the EU recognise and support non-traditional knowledge formats, including artistic, participatory, and practice-based research, which are vital for engaging diverse publics and fostering democratic dialogue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To support the objectives of the European Democracy Shield, and to enable universities to contribute meaningfully to democratic resilience, the University of Bergen has the following recommendations:

Overarching Recommendations

- **Recognise the role of autonomous universities** as key actors in sustaining democratic values through research, research-based education, and societal engagement.
- **Ensure broad and inclusive access** to EU funding instruments, such as Horizon Europe and its successor, as well as Creative Europe and Erasmus+, across all disciplines, including the social sciences, humanities and the arts (SSHA).
- **Promote cross-sectoral collaboration** between academia, civil society, cultural institutions and the media to address complex democratic challenges.
- **Affirm the importance of interdisciplinary and SSHA-led research** in analysing and addressing the root causes of democratic erosion, polarisation and disinformation.
- **Recognise and support diverse research outputs**, including artistic, participatory, and practice-based formats that engage wider and more diverse audiences.

Specific Priority Areas for Research and Innovation

- **Civic and democratic education:** Research on the development and evaluation of curricula and teaching that strengthen democratic values, media literacy and digital skills across all levels of education.
- **Cultural heritage and identity:** Studies on how cultural memory and heritage, artistic research and inclusive dialogue can foster democratic engagement and societal cohesion.
- **Digital public spheres:** Research on media ecosystems, algorithmic literacy, and citizens' interaction with digital information environments.
- **Journalism, AI and democracy:** Interdisciplinary studies on the intersection of journalism, artificial intelligence and ethics, with a focus on the role of local and independent media.
- **Legal and institutional safeguards:** Research on the rule of law, human and civil rights, and the resilience of democratic institutions, including governance of non-state actors and digital platforms.

STRENGTHEN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION FOR DEMOCRACY

MULTILEVEL APPROACHES TO DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Democratic resilience must be supported at multiple levels: **structural** (laws and regulations), **organisational** (public administration, private actors and civil society), and **individual** (citizens, including schoolchildren and youth). The EU should adopt a multilevel perspective and ensure space for diverse research contributions, including from disciplines such as psychology, education, pedagogy and health, including research focusing on individual-level factors.

At the individual level, developing digital and media literacy, democratic competence and civic engagement is crucial to fostering long-term preparedness. Research on how these are formed, taught, and supported should be prioritised.

Examples of how research at universities contributes to this agenda from the University of Bergen:

- The **research centre [SLATE](#)** (Science of Learning and Technology), which focuses on the development of digital literacy in education.
- The **EU-funded project [EU-ENGAGED](#)**, which explores how young people participate in local democracy and what conditions enable such engagement.

We encourage the EU to support initiatives and research that examine how education, learning environments, and local participation can strengthen democratic resilience from the ground up.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, ARTISTIC RESEARCH, AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Artistic expression, cultural heritage, and critical public discourse are often among the first areas to be restricted in times of democratic decline. Supporting the social sciences, humanities and the arts (SSHA), including dissemination and outreach activities in institutions such as museums and libraries, is therefore not only culturally important, but also politically urgent. These fields give crucial contributions to the continuous critical public debate that is an integral part of democratic societies and provide essential insights into the structural, cultural and psychological drivers of democratic vulnerability.

We also wish to emphasize the importance of knowledge of history and languages in democracies. European modern democracies and values as we know them today have developed in dialogue with European history and tradition over centuries. Critical discussion informed by knowledge of languages, history, and the rich multitude of cultural perspectives present in our societies is a central part of our democratic interaction. Such knowledge is needed to understand the background of societal institutions and structures, and of conflicts and the ways societies have sought to resolve them. Such knowledge is likewise necessary to have access to our broad cultural heritage and understand it in its context, and it can thereby also promote inclusion of the cultural heritage of minority groups.

Artistic research offers inclusive, practice-based methods for building civic trust and democratic engagement. Through exhibitions, performances, and community-based initiatives, it provides accessible and culturally grounded formats for public dialogue, including among groups in society less likely to engage through formal political channels. Closely linked to this is the role of cultural heritage and identity as foundations for democratic participation, critical reflection, and social cohesion.

These contributions underscore the need for research policies that foster interdisciplinary collaboration, inclusive formats, and broad societal engagement, as reflected in our overarching recommendations. SSHA research disciplines are particularly well-suited to interdisciplinary and socially embedded work. They strengthen our capacity to engage across sectors, disciplines, and communities.

JOURNALISM, AI AND THE INFORMATION SPACE

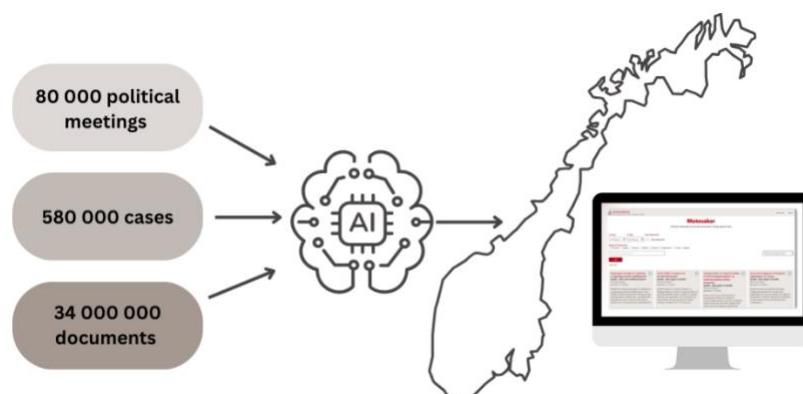
Journalism is a cornerstone of liberal democracy, through its multiple functions of informing the public, holding power to account, and fostering civic dialogue. Yet today, economic pressures and the digital transformation have undermined traditional media models, eroding trust, especially among younger audiences.

AI technologies, such as large language models, present both significant opportunities and serious risks. When used responsibly, AI can support overstretched newsrooms, improve access to information, and promote more inclusive coverage. However, these tools must be deployed with strong ethical safeguards to avoid amplifying bias and misinformation, and to maintain public trust in democratic institutions.

Local journalism is especially vulnerable. Despite enjoying higher levels of trust than national media, it faces declining revenues, reduced coverage, and the rise of “news deserts.” Local media are essential to citizen participation, informed communities, and democratic resilience at the grassroots level. Their role must be safeguarded and strengthened through targeted investment and research.

UiB plays a key academic role in the internationally recognized [Media City Bergen](#), which is Norway’s national hub for media innovation, journalism, and media technology development. As the primary research and education institution within this cross-sector cluster, UiB brings together media studies, technology, and societal research in close collaboration with major media outlets, tech companies, and startups. Media City Bergen provides a unique innovation environment where academic research is directly connected to practice, enabling UiB to lead on topics such as responsible media technology, algorithmic transparency, and the future of journalism. At our centres [MediaFutures](#) (Research Centre for Responsible Media Technology & Innovation) and [SUJO](#) (Centre for investigative journalism) UiB contributes to shaping the future media landscape.

A key example is the project ‘[Demokratibasen](#)’ (The Democracy Database), led by SUJO. The Democracy Database is a prototype AI tool that helps journalists summarise content, extract keywords, and flag newsworthy items from publicly available government documents. The project not only supports journalism, but also addresses critical ethical concerns around privacy, transparency, and the societal implications of automated decision-making.



Based on this experience, we encourage the Commission to consider targeted support for the development of non-profit, open-access tools tailored to the needs of small and independent newsrooms. At present, such solutions are largely developed by major media groups, which leaves smaller editorial teams at a disadvantage, both in terms of technological capacity and access to innovation. This gap risks widening inequalities in the media landscape and should be addressed as part of the efforts to strengthen local journalism and pluralistic public discourse.

To strengthen the democratic information space, the European Democracy Shield should recognise journalism, particularly local and independent journalism, as a critical democratic infrastructure. Journalism sits at the intersection of media technology, AI, regulation, and public trust, and deserves focused attention within the EU's research and innovation agenda. We encourage the Commission to enhance investment in media research, including studies on how evolving technologies and commercial models affect journalism's democratic functions. The EU should also explore the development of a European infrastructure or funding mechanism to support local journalism, drawing on lessons from innovation environments such as Media City Bergen, where the University of Bergen plays a key academic role in advancing responsible media technology and journalism innovation through initiatives like MediaFutures and the Democracy Database.

RULE OF LAW AND HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS

In a rapidly changing world, questions concerning laws and regulations and human and civil rights are central in several of the challenges we face that are relevant to discussions of democratic resilience, for example related to democratic participation, social transformations, climate change, inequality and inclusion, migrants and refugees, economics, and particularly digitalization.

Legal research plays a central role in the development and defence of resilient democracies, not only since law regulates democracy and democratic practices, but also because national constitutional law and the supranational European legal orders are primary safeguards against democratic backsliding. Legal research is, however, currently under-funded and lacking a central place in research policy. The EU (and EEA) and the ECHR are unique supranational legal orders on which research should be prioritized, given its importance for the development of rule of law in Europe. More emphasis is also needed on legal research on questions relating to governance of nonstate actors as well as their own governance initiatives in the light of human rights and sustainable development goals. Socio-legal research, e.g. related to contemporary forms of judicialization of politics and its consequences and the pressure on human rights and international law, should also be prioritized.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The University of Bergen stands ready to contribute to the aims of the European Democracy Shield through research, education and public engagement. We encourage the European Commission to ensure that the European Democracy Shield is grounded in a bold and inclusive research and innovation agenda that explicitly acknowledges and mobilises the critical and creative capacities of the social sciences, humanities, and artistic fields.