

Debate

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On the impact of the Trump administration on media and media regulation in Europe

Abstract: Donald Trump's second term in office leads to profound changes in media and communications, platform regulation, and the political influence of Big Tech – also in Europe. In particular, the close ties between the Trump administration and wealthy business owners such as Elon Musk reinforce the oligarchization of US politics. One consequence is the strategic use of digital platforms for political purposes. At the same time, US technology and media policy could oppose European regulatory measures. These developments highlight the need for and strengthening of independent research and investigative journalism. This paper analyzes the global impact of power shifts in the United States and possible countermeasures.

Keywords: Trump-Administration, Media, Media Regulation, Big Tech, Europe

January 20, 2025, marked Donald Trump's return to the office of President of the United States. Four years earlier, his rhetoric had led to a violent attack on the Capitol, resulting in multiple casualties. Now, as Trump assumes government responsibility for the second time, the international community is closely monitoring developments in the United States, given the far-reaching consequences of its political dynamics on governments and societies worldwide.

This influence is also evident with regard to media and communications. Regardless of the extent to which journalistic content in Europe is directly funded by the US government (PHILIPPIN/CANDEA 2024), information from Trump and his administration play a central role in media reporting. Journalists across Europe rely on these sources, including content disseminated via the platform X. The platform's owner, Elon Musk, strategically leveraged its reach of over 200 million users for the US election campaign (TRÖGER 2024). Under Trump, Musk has now been appointed head of the newly created Department of Government Efficiency

(DOGE) within the White House. In this role, Musk recently gained access to the US Treasury's payment system, which contains sensitive personal data on millions of Americans receiving Social Security payments, tax refunds, and other government disbursements (STEIN 2025). This development exacerbates concerns about the influence of major tech corporations and their owners on information and communication infrastructures in both the United States and Europe.

On the one hand, dominant corporations such as Meta (Facebook) and Alphabet (Google) are headquartered in the United States but at the same time dominate the digital markets in Europe and compete with each other here. In Germany, they have invested in major publishing houses (DACHWITZ/FANTA 2020), as well as in journalistic initiatives such as the »Neue Deutsche Medienmacher« (New German Media Makers), which pushes for diversity in journalism. They also fund academic institutions, for example the Technical University of Munich where Facebook endowed an Ethics Institute for Artificial Intelligence (KAHN 2019). On the other hand, these corporations jointly lobby against stricter regulations on the tech and digital industries at both national and European levels (SEVIGNANI/THEINE/TRÖGER 2025). With Elon Musk as a representative of the technology industry within the Trump administration, it is likely that the interests of these corporations will receive even stronger political backing in US politics.

Simultaneously, Donald Trump continues his aggressive rhetoric against critical media professionals. He has repeatedly labeled the press that scrutinizes his policies as »the enemy of the people« (quoted in SAMUELS 2019). According to the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Kash Patel, a candidate for FBI Director under Trump, explicitly expressed his intention to target journalists (VINER 2024). These developments raise the question of the extent to which Trump's renewed presidency could have an impact on journalism and the regulation of media and communication in Europe.

The following analysis explores three interrelated aspects that highlight how the consequences of Trump's second term extend far beyond the borders of the United States. It not only influences political structures and media discourses but also raises fundamental questions about the future of the global information order.

Increasing pressure on the media – also in Europe

During his first term, Donald Trump was highly critical of established US media outlets. He declared their reporting to be false, deliberately undermining the credibility of journalists (MEEKS 2020; DOWNIE/SUGARS 2020: 10ff.). To spread his political agenda, Trump primarily used the platform Twitter, which ultimately

banned him in January 2021 for violating its policies, particularly regarding hate speech and incitement to violence (CONGER/ISAAC 2021). Trump's communications intensified societal debates about factuality, truth and consensus – for example on issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and criminal charges against him (SUMMER 2021). While similar debates existed before (HONIG 2018), they have since escalated into highly polarized media conflicts, also in various countries in Europe. Further, a report by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) from 2020 illustrates how the Trump administration at the time pursued legal actions against journalistic sources, influenced US media companies, and restricted journalists' ability to enter the country (DOWNIE/SUGARS 2020).

These events took place during Trump's first presidency, when his administration was often unprepared and faced internal resistance to some of his initiatives. However, conditions are fundamentally different in his second term. The so-called »Project 2025« (DANS/GROVES 2023), developed by around 400 conservative academics under the auspices of the conservative Heritage Foundation, outlines political priorities and strategic goals for Trump's second presidency in a nearly 900-page document. Although Trump has publicly distanced himself from the document, many contributors are well-connected within the Republican Party and are likely to hold key positions in the new administration. Trump's first administration already heavily relied on the Heritage Foundation's policy recommendations, implementing nearly two-thirds of its proposals within just one year in office (see *Trump Administration Embraces* 2018).

»Project 2025« contains proposals for foreign and domestic policy, as well as education, economic, and media policy. Regarding media and communications, the plan calls for a comprehensive reform of public broadcasting in the United States.¹ Specifically, it accuses the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) of political bias, arguing that they disadvantage conservative positions and fail to contribute to public education. As a result, »Project 2025« proposes cutting government funding, revoking their status as non-commercial educational broadcasters, and imposing high licensing fees (see MUESTER 2024).

Just two weeks after taking office, Brendan Carr launched an investigation into PBS, NPR, and their affiliate stations. Carr had previously been appointed by President Trump as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). His justification for the investigation was that non-commercial broadcasters might be violating national law by partially relying on commercial advertising

1 In the United States, a predominantly commercial broadcasting system has been established. NPR (National Public Radio) and PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) are the closest equivalents to the European public broadcasting models. They are primarily funded through donations and taxes and play only a marginal role in opinion formation in the United States (GRASSMUCK 2020: 10).

revenue (SWERDLOW 2025). Should the investigation lead to sanctions or new regulations, it could significantly reshape the US media landscape.

Beyond public broadcasting, »Project 2025« calls for a fundamental reassessment of the relationship between the government and the press. For instance, it suggests reviewing the extent to which journalists should continue to have access to the White House. Additionally, the concept includes proposals to facilitate the monitoring of journalistic activities, such as increased seizure of email and phone records (see MÜNSTER 2024). According to Kelly McBride, Senior Vice President at the Poynter Institute for Journalism, these measures pose a serious threat, particularly with regard to the protection of journalistic sources (JONES 2024). Weakening this protection would constitute a major assault on press freedom in the United States.

These developments will have both direct and indirect impacts on media and communications in Europe. On one hand, journalists from Europe will likely face stricter access restrictions at the White House, making coverage of US political decision-making more difficult. On the other hand, debates about the funding and political orientation of public broadcasting in the United States could serve as a reference point for similar discussions in Europe – for example in Germany. Here, right-wing and far-right parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) have long called not just for a reform, but for the abolition of public broadcasting. Their demands include eliminating broadcasting fees (Rundfunkbeiträge) and dissolving broadcasting councils (Rundfunkräte) (AfD Program 2021: 164ff.). Additionally, right-wing populist media platforms such as *Exxpress* and *Nius* are strengthened discursively, which enables them to further propagate their often entirely fact-free criticism of public service media (GÜRGEN 2023; GUTSCHI 2024). Developments in the United States could strengthen these lines of argument and generate political dynamics with long-term consequences for media and communications across Europe.

Regulating Big Tech at the European Level Under the Second Trump Administration

During his first term, Donald Trump maintained an ambivalent stance toward large corporations. His administration repeatedly criticized Big Tech and other conglomerates – though primarily when it was politically expedient. Examples include the attempt to block the merger between telecommunications giant AT&T and Time Warner (AGATHOKLIS MURINO/MCCORMACK/DRUMMONDS/HSU 2021), calls for higher shipping costs for Amazon through the US Postal Service (JOPSON/WATERS 2018), and early discussions about a potential ban on the video platform TikTok (CHANDER 2023). Despite these debates, no substantial

regulatory measures were taken. Media scholar Philip Napoli (2021) therefore argues that technology policy during Trump's first term was largely symbolic and did not lead to significant structural changes.

Since then, Trump's stance on Big Tech has fundamentally shifted. He is now closely connected with key players in the tech industry, as reflected in the funding of his re-election campaign. Trump received a total of USD 273.2 million in donations from the technology sector, including significant contributions from Elon Musk (USD 242.6 million), Marc Andreessen (USD 5.5 million), and Jan Koum (USD 5.1 million) (HERNANDEZ/ARATANI/CRAFT 2024). These close ties between Trump, his second administration and leading Big Tech players will undoubtedly have an impact on future technology and media policy. During the campaign, Elon Musk – the single largest individual donor to Trump's campaign – announced via his platform X that the chair of the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC), Lina Khan, would be dismissed immediately after Trump's election victory (BANK/DUFFY 2024). Furthermore, Andrew Ferguson, whom Trump appointed as the new FTC chairman, stated that he aims for minimal or no regulation of Big Tech and artificial intelligence (GODOY 2024).

At the same time, the future of the video platform TikTok in the United States remains highly controversial. During his first term, Trump attempted to ban the platform, citing national security concerns. Under the Biden administration, a corresponding ban was enacted, leading TikTok to go offline on January 18 and 19, 2025. Trump's assurances that he would delay the implementation of the ban have since allowed the platform to return, but its long-term future remains uncertain. Current legislation aims to separate TikTok from its Chinese parent company, ByteDance (MAHESHWARI 2025). However, Trump recently stated that he would no longer pursue the ban, likely because the platform is highly popular among Republican influencers (HUYNH 2024). A recent study also suggests that TikTok's recommendation algorithm, with over 170 million users in the United States, tends to favor Republican content (IBRAHIM/JANG/ALDAHOUL/KAUFMAN/RAHWAN/ZAKI 2025).

At the European level, Trump's second presidency is likely to significantly hinder or challenge the regulation of Big Tech. Even under the Biden administration, the United States threatened countries such as Austria, France, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom with tariffs after they introduced digital taxes that primarily affected US tech giants (see USA drohen Österreich [US threatens Austria] 2021). The European Digital Services Act (DSA), which came into force in February 2024, along with the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and the AI Act, will impose significant regulatory burdens on US-based platform and search engine operators. The DSA, in particular, enforces stricter regulations for very large online platforms and search engines (DSA 2025).

Given the significant lobbying power of Big Tech in the European Union (EU) (Lobbymacht der Digitalkonzerne [Lobbying power of digital corporations] 2023), there is a possibility that US conglomerates may leverage their close ties to the Trump administration to weaken or bypass EU regulations. A shift toward deregulation or the dilution of regulatory measures poses serious risks for the control of central digital infrastructures. This could further limit the European Union's ability to assert public interests against powerful transnational players. If global efforts to regulate these corporations continue to erode, the economic, political, and cultural power of US-based Big Tech will expand further, ultimately jeopardizing the sovereignty of democratic institutions in the digital sphere (SEVIGNANI/THEINE/TRÖGER 2025).

The Increasing Oligarchization of US Politics and Its Impact on Europe

Previously discussed ramifications of the second Trump administration on media and communications in Europe are closely linked to the increasing oligarchization of US politics. While wealthy individuals and the »ultra-rich« (Überreiche) (SCHÜRZ 2019) have long exerted significant influence over political decision-making – both in the United States and globally – Trump's second presidency is shaping up to further consolidate political power in the hands of a select few. These ultra-wealthy players are closely aligned with Trump, which is why sociologist Brooke Harrington (2024) describes this group as »Broligarchs« – a blend of »oligarch« and the colloquial term »bro.« The term refers to US billionaires who work together actively resisting taxation, regulation, and democratic oversight (HARRINGTON 2024).

In the Trump administration, these individuals assume de facto governmental functions – without having been officially elected or nominated for office. One example of this shift emerged already in November 2024, when it was revealed that Elon Musk, a central figure in Trump's inner circle and now a government official, had privately met with Iran's United Nation's ambassador. Such informal but high-level diplomatic activities suggest that the economic interests of certain tech billionaires are becoming increasingly intertwined with official US foreign policy. In response, *The Guardian* has referred to Musk as »Trump's shadow vice-president« (ROBINS-EARLY 2024), highlighting the tech billionaire's opaque power to control transnational communication regulations. This dynamic raises concerns that future US policy – such as NATO commitments – could be influenced by European regulatory actions against Musk's platform X. Republican politician J. D. Vance hinted during the election campaign that continued US

involvement in NATO might depend on the extent to which the EU imposes regulatory restrictions on X (SCHWARZ 2024).

This deepening oligarchization of US politics suggests that future EU regulatory efforts will not only face resistance from Big Tech but could also provoke retaliatory measures from the US government. A case in point is Meta: Mark Zuckerberg recently announced in a widely discussed video that Meta would eliminate its fact-checking teams in the United States (DAMPZ 2025). If Meta extends this measure to the European market, it would conflict with DSA requirements for content moderation and fact-checking. Given Zuckerberg's close ties to Trump, it is conceivable that the Trump administration might threaten to impose punitive tariffs on European imports if the EU requires Meta to continue conducting fact-checks.

Beyond economic and regulatory implications, the entanglement of business and politics directly affects political discourse and public opinion formation in Europe. Elon Musk, in particular, has leveraged his platform X as a strategic tool to mobilize right-wing players both nationally and transnationally. In late December 2024, Musk published a guest op-ed in the German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag*, explicitly endorsing the far-right AfD, calling the party »the last spark of hope« and rejecting its classification as an extremist party (DE RUITER 2024). In early January 2025, he intensified his involvement by inviting AfD leader Alice Weidel for a live discussion on X. Days later, Musk personally shared the livestream of the AfD party convention, amplifying its reach to millions of users (Musk verschafft AfD [Musk manages AfD] 2025).

These developments underscore that the increasing entanglement of economic and political interests in the United States cannot be viewed in isolation. Instead, they are directly shaping political discourse, and media and communications in Europe. The growing direct interference of corporate players in political processes and the expanding use of digital platforms to influence democratic elections will have lasting consequences for the balance of democratic structures in both the United States and across Europe.

The Growing Importance of Independent Media and Critical Research

The publication of Elon Musk's political statement in *Welt am Sonntag* sparked significant criticism from various organizations in Germany, including the German Journalists' Association (DJV). Critics particularly objected to the fact that Musk was given a platform to promote his political agenda and that of the AfD. At the same time, media professionals pointed out that not only *Welt am Sonntag* but numerous other German and European media outlets picked up on Musk's

statements, thereby amplifying his message and increasing its reach (SCHULTZ 2024). These developments raise fundamental questions about how media should cover the future US administration and its political strategy.

Against the backdrop of the growing oligarchization in US politics and the accompanying erosion of democracy, it is crucial to critically analyze, document, and contextualize these processes. This applies both to media coverage and to research. The influence of powerful economic players on political decisions and public discourse requires rigorous journalistic and academic scrutiny that sheds light on both the mechanisms of this influence and its social implications.

This includes detailed analyses of the interconnections between political and economic power, media concentration, and media regulation – across traditional media, social media, and digital platforms. The second Trump administration is no longer merely relying on the spread of misinformation and disinformation as a core strategic tool. Rather, it is already clear that a rigorous political disempowerment of democratic institutions is being legitimized with a communication strategy in which political, economic and media interests converge. It is no coincidence that the CEOs of all major digital corporations attended Trump's inauguration and made substantial financial contributions to his campaign. Their goal is to expand their political and economic influence, further underscoring the need for independent media and academic institutions to critically observe, fact-check, and make these developments accessible to the wider public. In addition, independent media and research must formulate structural reform proposals that point the way out of the crisis of democratic institutions and increasing oligarchization (TRÖGER/VAN DER ECKER 2023: 269).

Given these challenges, journalistic reporting and scientific research play an essential role. Public scrutiny and academic analysis of political and economic power structures are fundamental pillars of a functioning democracy. However, such analyses face significant limitations when researchers are financed and selected by Big Tech and granted only restricted access to selected corporate data (RYAN-MOSLEY 2023). This most certainly leads to distorted or incomplete research findings. Therefore, strengthening independent research and investigative journalism is crucial – potentially through reforms in public broadcasting systems. Only through fact-based reporting and research can political discourse in Europe be conducted on a solid, evidence-based foundation. This is essential to safeguarding, developing, and institutionalizing democratic principles in the long term.

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