

Media Viability in Europe Amid Covid-19

*Initiatives to support media viability and pluralism in Europe amid the pandemics
(policy level and media industry)*

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EU INSTITUTIONS

European Commission

Amid Covid-19, the European Commission (EC) looks at media support and viability through the lenses of promoting democracy in Europe, and more specifically, fighting disinformation.

On 29 January, 2020, the European Commission had published its [new work programme](#) ‘A Union that strives for more’. The programme included six priorities, among which was its sixth priority: ‘New push for European Democracy’.

As part of the sixth priority of the work programme, the Commission announced its intention to launch a [European Democracy Action Plan](#). The action plan is intended to build on the lessons learnt from the Covid-19 crisis and include measures on electoral integrity, media freedom, media pluralism and disinformation.

On 10 June, 2020, the [joint communication](#) ‘Tackling COVID-19 disinformation - Getting the facts right’ underlined the immediate response and proposed concrete action of the EC that could be quickly set in motion.

- The communication stated that ‘The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the crucial role of free and independent media... However, the *crisis has also amplified the already difficult economic situation* of the sector due to a dramatic fall in advertising income, despite increased audiences.
- It further stressed: ‘The situation is particularly difficult for vulnerable *smaller players and local and regional media outlets*.
- The Commission proposed that ‘the recovery and repair package help address immediate liquidity needs through the solvency support and cohesion funding, while strengthening the digital investment and resilience of the sector *through InvestEU, Creative Europe, and Horizon Europe Programme.*’

In July - September 2020, the European Commission published a roadmap for feedback and ran a [public consultation](#) to gather the views of citizens on the Action Plan. The consultation focused on

three key aspects: (1) Integrity of elections and political advertising; (2) Strengthening media freedom and media pluralism; (3) tackling disinformation in the EU.

- The preliminary roadmap stated that ‘The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how this threat can be accompanied by a broader ‘infodemic’, where a flood of information about the virus, often false or inaccurate, create *a chaotic information landscape offering fertile ground for disinformation, misinformation and influence campaigns.*’
- Also, it reinstated that ‘media freedom and media pluralism were already deteriorating before the crisis and facing challenges from threats to the safety of journalists (including hate speech and abuse of defamation laws) to the transformation of the sector, with digital technologies and new players *threatening the established business model of advertising revenue.*’
- Overall, it concluded that ‘the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation, *from restrictive national legislation to critical loss of revenue.*’

The European Commission's website showed 38 [feedbacks](#) received from various organisations on the European Democracy Action Plan.

It is worth noting that within the same work programme but under a separate priority, the EC also showed commitment to A New [Digital Services Act](#). It is aimed at reinforcing the single market for digital services and helping to provide smaller businesses with the legal clarity and level playing field they need.

A second [consultation](#) ran from 02 June to 08 September 2020 on the Digital Services Act package, which also covered relevant elements in the context of the European Democracy Action Plan.

With regards to media viability, the Commission wants to increase funding and ensure long-term support for these types of projects under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which for the first time will have a dedicated envelope for media pluralism, journalism and media literacy of €61 million under Creative Europe.

Currently, there are 10 [ongoing projects](#) funded by the European Commission, representing nearly €7 million in EU funding. These projects aim to map violations of media freedom, monitor media pluralism and freedom, defend journalists under threat and support collaborative journalism, cooperation and exchange of best practices.

On 20 November 2020, the European Commission launched a [call for proposals](#) for projects aiming at supporting media freedom and investigative journalism in the EU, including projects responding to violations of press and media freedom in the EU. Deadline for submissions: 20 January 2021.

On 3rd of December 2020, the European Commission published [communication](#) on the European Democracy Action Plan. See full text and concrete priority actions suggested by the European Commission within the framework regarding media pluralism and viability in [Chapter 3](#).

Also on 3rd of December 2020, the Commission adopted [Europe's Media in the Digital Decade: An Action Plan to Support Recovery and Transformation](#). The Action Plan focuses on three areas of activity and 10 concrete actions, to help the media sector recover from the crisis by facilitating and broadening access to finance and other measures. Under recovery plans, the EC aims to support media viability, as follows:

- 1) Facilitate access to EU support via a dedicated tool for media companies to find all relevant EU funding opportunities for them. This will offer guidance on how to apply for relevant EU support, in the context of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, but also through national recovery and resilience plans;
- 2) Boost investment in the audiovisual industry via a new initiative MEDIA INVEST whose target is to leverage investments of €400 million over a 7-year period;
- 3) Launch a “NEWS” initiative to bundle actions and support for the news media sector. The initiative includes a pilot NEWS invest project with foundations and other private partners, access to loans to be backed by the InvestEU guarantee, grants, and a European News Media Forum with the sector. Particular attention will be paid to local media.

See the full [summary](#) of main initiatives of the Action Plan.

European Parliament

In a [resolution](#) adopted on 17 April 2020, MEPs said that disinformation on Covid-19 is a major public health problem, that all people should have access to accurate and verified information and that a free independent and sufficiently funded media is necessary for democracy. Additional EU action is needed to make sure EU help reaches the ravaged media and culture sectors. They underlined the following aspects:

- Support needed for media, with advertising revenues dropping as much as 80%
- Create an emergency fund for media, earmark structural funds for culture, and beef up the guarantee instrument

Following up, the European Parliament's [report](#) of 11 November 2020 on strengthening media freedom: the protection of journalists in Europe, hate speech, disinformation and the role of platforms analyzed the impact of Covid-19 on media in Europe and stressed the importance of various actions to support it.

Regarding media pluralism, the EP underlined and:

- Called on the Commission and the Member States to urgently introduce EU and national emergency recovery packages to protect the jobs and livelihoods of journalists and media workers, support companies and fund public service media through the COVID19 economic recovery plan, while fully respecting EU competition rules;
- reiterated in this context its call for the creation of a permanent European fund for journalists in the framework of the next MFF (2021-2027), as redrafted following the COVID-19 crisis, offering direct financial support for independent journalists and media outlets, freelancers and self-employed media workers;
- Called for an ambitious MFF with increased budget allocations for supporting the media and independent journalism, in particular investigative journalism;
- stressed the importance of innovation in journalism and news media, which could be fostered through EU funding;
- Strongly welcomed the allocation of EU funds to enable the launch of new projects, such as the Europe-wide rapid response mechanism for violations of press and media freedom and the cross-border investigative journalism fund, in order to strengthen media freedom and pluralism.

European Council

On 28 October 2020, the Committee of Ministers Statements, on behalf of the EU, made a [statement](#) regarding the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists. The following mechanisms were underlined:

- The [Platform](#) for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists, created in 2014 by the Council of Europe, important to foster early warning mechanisms and response capacity.
- The [2016 recommendation](#) of the Committee of Ministers on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors provides concrete guidelines to member States. [The Implementation Guide](#) to the recommendation has been launched recently, to serve as a common basis for national authorities in the development of measures and action plans.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

The Council of Europe promotes an enabling environment for freedom of expression, underpinned by legal guarantees for independence and diversity of media and safety of journalists and other media actors. Two committees are dedicated to work on media within the Council of Europe: 1) Committee of experts on quality journalism in the digital age (MSI-JOQ); 2) Committee of experts on Media Pluralism and Transparency of Media Ownership (MSI-MED).

Identifying risks: Through these committees, the CoE commissions a number of studies and reports on particular aspects related to media freedom. Latest [report](#) *Covid and Free Speech, The impact*

of COVID-19 and ensuing measures on freedom of expression in Council of Europe member states briefly touches upon the negative impact of the pandemic on the financial viability of media in Europe. See all other publications [here](#).

Enhancing standards: The Council of Europe has developed a consistent body of standards supporting media freedom, including topics such as hate speech, culture of tolerance, gender equality, public service media governance, safety of journalists etc. Relevant recommendations to media viability is stressed in the [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2018\)1](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on media pluralism and transparency of media ownership.

Building capacity: During this decade, the Council of Europe Information Society Programme has implemented over 20 projects in member states and partner countries promoting media freedom. See the ongoing projects [here](#).

The Council of Europe has touched upon the issue of media viability in times of Covid-19 in its several recent policy papers and reports.

On 6 July 2020, the Council of Europe [report](#) *The impact of the sanitary crisis on freedom of expression and media freedom* stated that while striving to meet growing demand for information during pandemic, media have been faced with difficulties, including a limited ability to generate revenue. It underlined that support funds are being implemented in some states, and more strategic after-crisis solutions such as introducing beneficial tax regimes and media development support must be considered.

This report also referred to the Council of Europe [Declaration](#) of February 2019 regarding the full overview of possible support measures on the financial sustainability of quality journalism in the digital age.

In the aforementioned declaration, the CoE reiterated member States' commitment to ensure stable, sustainable, transparent and adequate funding for public service media in line with the principles and standards of the Council of Europe, notably [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2018\)1](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member states on media pluralism and transparency of media ownership.

This declaration stresses the importance of:

- A. A beneficial tax regime for the production and distribution of journalistic content;
- B. Financial support schemes for media sectors besides public service media, in particular for regional, local, hyperlocal and not-for-profit community media, with accompanying safeguards for their independent administration and oversight and for equitable and non-discriminatory distribution of such support in line with the principles of transparency and accountability and with the standards of the Council of Europe;

- C. Media and journalism development measures financed through a variety of funding schemes including by private-public partnerships and aimed at (i) supporting investigative journalism, including cross-border journalism, and innovative journalistic projects, (ii) developing viable business models for hyperlocal journalism and freelance journalists, (iii) supporting the transition of printed publications to the digital environment, (iv) building a digital presence for small, particularly local media outlets, (v) developing journalistic skills and training and media literacy programmes for newsrooms, (vi) strengthening journalistic ethics and principles such as fact-checking or reflecting a plurality of views present in society, (vii) encouraging and promoting careers in journalism, (viii) developing business skills of media practitioners adapted to the digital economy, including skills for audience measurement and analysis, or (ix) supporting the development of new technologies for newsrooms, as well as funding and increased capacity building for the use of the existing technologies, based on the needs of individual newsrooms and those of their audiences;
- D. The possibility for media outlets to operate as not-for-profit organisations and be able to receive donations from local, national and international philanthropic programmes.

OSCE

Recent [Report](#) by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr. Harlem Désir, on 6 November 2020 included priorities of the organisation's future work. These included four major themes:

- ❖ Safety of Journalists
- ❖ Protection of Media Freedom
- ❖ Deterring disinformation
- ❖ Promote media pluralism
 - through the dissemination of best policy practices in the increasingly digital media landscape: public service broadcasters must remain financially sustainable and independent.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

The Commission called upon Member States to intensify efforts to ensure that journalists can work safely and to make the most of the EU's economic response and recovery package to support media heavily hit by the crisis, while respecting their independence.

The EU budget and the Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2021-2027 is still under discussion but many governments have taken urgent measures to contain the social and economic crisis of the media sector.

In response to the financial crisis in the news media, some member states have put together financial and fiscal support packages specifically for the media (over and above the support packages in place for all businesses).

For example, the Council of Europe [report](#) underlined that the United Kingdom reduced tax on news media to 0%; in Germany, an overarching state aid programme was announced for the culture sector and onerous and costly regulatory requirements were relaxed; and various other financial support schemes have been introduced in Latvia, Norway, Russian Federation, the Netherlands and Sweden (in Sweden, as an initiative by the Journalists Association).

With the help of its affiliates in 44 European countries, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) has [mapped](#) the different emergency packages, direct financial support and long-term measures for media in various European states.

MEDIA INDUSTRY

European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) [called](#) on the EU to support economically the media sector, as a vital sector for democracy. They said that the EU must get each of its member states to launch a media recovery plan without delay. According to them, instead of corporate tax cuts or social security cuts and stock buybacks, there is a need for targeted measures that will put more reporters on the ground. They also called on the national governments to increase funding for public media, provide direct financial support for daily and weekly newsrooms and include in their recovery plans EU and National News Innovation Funds.

Various representatives of the media industry in Europe also created emergency and relief funds to support the sector who sought negative economic consequences, strong drop in advertising revenue and follow up newsroom cuts. Some of them teamed up with various tech platforms to create such funding mechanisms.

European Journalism COVID-19 Support Fund

In April 2020, the European Journalism Centre (EJC) and the Facebook Journalism Project (FJP) launched a \$3m USD [fund](#) to support hundreds of community, local and regional European news organisations and journalists during the COVID-19 crisis. The purpose of the Fund is to provide core funding to support community engagement initiatives, address critical business needs, and facilitate innovative journalistic coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Wave 1, launched in April 2020, saw €1,530,000 awarded to 94 news organisations and freelancers from 28 countries across Europe. For Wave 2 of the Fund, there are two tracks. The emergency track addresses the immediate business needs for news organisations and journalists; the endurance track provides specific financial support to news organisations pivotal to their business model during Covid-19. Grants provided are ranging between €5,000 and €25,000.

Internews Rapid Response Fund

Global non-profit Internews launched a [rapid response fund](#) to help small, local news organisations worldwide survive in the face of COVID-19. It has dedicated \$100,000 to be made available immediately and is targeting \$1 million in donations to provide immediate support for media and journalists globally. The fund gives Internews' local media partners — such as community radio stations and online news outlets in more than 80 countries — access to emergency funding so they can continue to operate in increasingly dire economic conditions. The fund is part of Internews' global Information Saves Lives campaign to help media continue to operate through COVID pandemic.

National Geographic's Covid-19 Emergency Fund for Journalists

The National Geographic Society launched an [emergency fund for journalists](#) all over the world who wish to cover COVID-19 within their own communities. This fund places particular emphasis on delivering news to underserved populations, particularly where there is a dearth of evidence-based information getting to those who need it. This fund is designed to quickly deliver support so that both individual stories and longer series of content may be created and ranges from \$1,000–8,000 USD for local coverage of the preparation, response, and impact of this global pandemic as seen through evidence-based reporting. Beyond reporting on medical and physical health related to COVID-19, they especially encourage reporting that covers social, emotional, economic, and equity issues.

Democracy Reporting Coronavirus Story Grants

Reporting Democracy issued [Coronavirus Story Grants](#) for stories that reveal how the Covid-19 crisis is reshaping politics and society in Central, Eastern, and Southeast Europe. Successful proposals received a grant of between 500 and 2,500 euros. The call was open to freelance and staff journalists from the Visegrad Four countries of Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, as well as the Balkan countries of Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, and Greece. The form COVID-19 Story Grant Application is no longer accepting responses.

The International Women's Media Foundation's Journalism Relief Fund

The International Women's Media Foundation's [Journalism Relief Fund](#) with the initial support of Twitter, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and the Foundation for a Just Society, is open to woman-identifying journalists in dire straits during the Covid-19 pandemic – journalists who have faced significant financial hardship, lost work, were recently laid off, or who urgently need assistance to avoid severe, irreversible outcomes. This fund provides small grants of up to \$2,000 USD per request, though special consideration will be given on a case-by-case basis to those who may have greater financial needs.

Investigative Journalism for Europe Support Schemes

IJ4EU [supports](#) cross-border investigative journalism in Europe. In 2020, they provided €1 million in direct funding to collaborative projects through two funding schemes, one for new projects and one for ongoing projects. IJ4EU's Investigation Support scheme provides financial support to new investigative projects, including projects that have only recently begun or new phases of existing projects. Teams can apply for between €5,000 and €50,000. The Investigation Support scheme expects to provide €800,000 in grants in 2020. IJ4EU's Publication Support Scheme provides financial support of up to €10,000 for cross-border investigations that are already underway. These are projects that need additional, shorter-term support in order for journalists or news organisations to complete and publish their stories.

The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting Coronavirus News Collaboration Challenge

[The Pulitzer Center](#) on Crisis Reporting, a non-profit organization that supports independent global journalism, was seeking proposals that develop innovative approaches to reporting on the novel coronavirus crisis using collaboration among journalists and newsrooms across state lines or national borders. This opportunity was open to all newsrooms and independent journalists in the United States and abroad. Proposals from groups of freelance journalists working together and groups of newsrooms collaborating on a project were prioritized. They are still accepting proposals from freelance journalists and staff journalists who are seeking support for solo projects related to the Covid-19.

International Women's Media Foundation Howard G. Buffett Fund for Women Journalists

The Howard G. Buffett [Fund for Women Journalists](#), the first funding initiative of its kind, enables the IWMF to dramatically expand its support of women journalists. Established with a \$4 million gift from the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, the Fund supports projects including educational opportunities, investigative reporting and media development initiatives. Starting from January 2020, the Fund for Women Journalists accepts applications on a rolling basis from woman-identifying journalists from anywhere in the world.

TECH PLATFORMS

Google's Journalism Emergency Relief Fund

Google has launched a global Journalism [Emergency Relief Fund](#) through the Google News Initiative to support small and medium-sized news organizations producing original news for local communities. The Fund's aim is to support the production of original journalism for local communities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Operating globally, it will provide an easily-accessible route to financial assistance at this critical time.

The Facebook Journalism Project

[Facebook](#) is investing \$100 million to support the news industry during the COVID-19 pandemic in addition to a previous \$300 million commitment to serve journalists around the world through diverse and inclusive programs and partnerships. \$25 million will be provided in grant funding for local news through the Facebook Journalism Project, while the remaining \$75 million will come in the form of “additional marketing spend” to worldwide news organisations. In Europe, the Facebook Journalism Project and European Journalism Centre launched a \$3 million fund to support the local news industry during the coronavirus crisis. See information about Facebook’s funds in Europe mentioned above. More details about Facebook’s funding for journalism in the USA, Latin America, Asia, Australia, Middle East and North Africa and South Africa below.

Other platforms, such as Whatsapp and Twitter have also donated to media organisations, but mainly to those based in the USA.

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