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# COVID-19 and the global media sector

## Developments and ways forward

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COVID-19 has taken a heavy toll on freedom of expression, access to information, and media freedom. Amidst an ongoing global decline in democratic freedoms, the pandemic has severely affected the work of media outlets and independent journalists. Functioning media are, however, a precondition for reliable information, government accountability—and for an inclusive recovery from the repercussions of the global health crisis. What are the most pressing challenges the media have faced during the pandemic? And how can these challenges be addressed? What can governments, donors and civil society organizations do? This discussion paper highlights some of the most relevant problems and recommendations on how to tackle them.

Fragility, poverty, decline in democracy: The COVID-19 pandemic poses tremendous challenges for humanity. Global human development has deteriorated for the first time in three decades in the wake of the health crisis (UNDP, 2020). The ongoing tendency towards authoritarian governance in many parts of the world exacerbates this trend. Civic rights and spaces for civil society engagement are under pressure in many parts of the world (Alizada, 2020).

Media freedom is increasingly threatened, too. Beyond blunt repression by authoritarian governments, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a whole series of structural weaknesses within modern information ecosystems: economically unbalanced media outlets, a massive spread of disinformation, a lack of resources and skills among journalists, as well as insufficient media and information literacy on the part of audiences at large.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this discussion paper is to pinpoint the fields in which the media face the greatest COVID-19-related obstacles in putting the human rights to freedom of expression and access to information into practice. The recommendations are meant to serve as guidelines to governments, donors, development organizations and to everyone aiming to support the media in providing reliable information, and in holding governments to account—not least with regard to the pandemic and related policies.

We base our conclusions on the assumption that citizens must be able to inform themselves freely in order to make considered decisions involving their social concerns, and for no-one to be left behind. The pandemic has shown what can go wrong when people lack access to reliable news, when they are inundated with false information, cut off from crucial knowledge sources or are deprived of essential data and facts.

The COVID-19 pandemic shows how important, even existential, accurate information is for both individuals and society. In order for media to increase their resilience and the international community to emerge stronger from this crisis, it is important to take a holistic look at information ecosystems during the pandemic and to find ways of strengthening them.

## 1. Key challenges to freedom of expression

**Governments across the globe have used the pandemic as a pretext to restrict press freedom. The use of digital technology in the attempt to contain the coronavirus has violated fundamental rights in many places. Authoritarian rule and digital surveillance put the safety of media and journalists in jeopardy.**

The pandemic has aggravated the ongoing worrisome trend towards a decline of media freedom on a global scale, illustrated most drastically by the spike in cases of repression against journalists. This is happening in a context of rising digital authoritarianism in many countries around the world, with increasingly rigid fronts leading to strong polarization in the public sphere.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of attacks on journalists have been documented, including intimidation, arrests, and physical assaults (International Press Institute, 2020). In just the first six months of 2020, the press freedom organization Reporters Without Borders (RSF) registered violations of media freedom in 90 states (RSF, 2020a). Between mid-March and mid-May 2020, RSF listed three times more attacks on journalists in sub-Saharan Africa than in the same period of the previous year (RSF, 2021).

At the end of 2020, RSF reported that more than 130 journalists worldwide had been arbitrarily detained in connection with their coverage of the pandemic—most just for a few hours, but many for days or even weeks (RSF, 2020b).

Since the beginning of the pandemic, global Internet freedom has continuously declined. In at least 13 countries, governments resorted to Internet shutdowns or blocked individual online services (Freedom House, 2020). Ongoing Internet shutdowns were not lifted—despite urgent and repeated calls from human rights advocates (ARTICLE 19, 2020).

**“Journalists are playing an indispensable role in our response to this pandemic, but unlike the grave threats posed to other essential workers, the threats media workers face are entirely avoidable. Protecting journalists from harassment, threats, detention or censorship helps keep us all safe.**

Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN News, 2020)

Against the backdrop of the pandemic, many states have also stepped up their surveillance of citizens in the name of health protection. Governments have collected personal data to enforce quarantine regulations, travel restrictions, or distancing rules—often in disproportionate scope and insufficiently protected against unauthorized access (Freedom House, 2021). As a result of such measures, journalists have become more vulnerable to digital threats and attacks.

### Recommendations

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, millions of people around the globe have seen their right to freedom of opinion and expression impeded, if not seriously violated. To counter this trend, actors in international cooperation contexts, such as governments, donors, and civil society organizations, should:

- Encourage governments to stick to their commitments to guarantee freedom of expression, access to information, and the right to privacy, as laid out, for instance, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Covenant on Civil Liberties.
- Promote the achievement of Goal 16 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions—especially with regard to goal 16.10 (ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms).
- Support initiatives advocating the security of media workers and fighting impunity for crimes against journalists; for example the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists, and effective export restrictions of surveillance technology.
- Support media professionals in the use of digital technologies pertaining to aspects of personal safety, in line with a holistic security concept which includes not only digital security but also physical and psychosocial safety.

## 2. Professional journalism and media viability

**During the pandemic, professional journalists were under pressure to provide vital information to the public under difficult circumstances. Media houses suffered from the economic downturn and a severe slump in advertising markets.**

Despite growing audiences and increased demand for quality journalism, the pandemic has had a considerable negative impact on media professionals and media organizations worldwide. Journalists' work was impacted by restriction of movement, limited access to sources and official information, and the repercussions of the increasingly precarious economic situation of media outlets. As a result, journalists were challenged not only financially but also in their psychological well-being. They were also exposed to health risks by having to continue working under risky conditions for fear of losing their livelihoods (DW Akademie, 2021).

A global survey of journalists conducted between May and June 2020 by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) in 125 countries found that 70 percent of the respondents identified psychological impacts as the most challenging aspect of working under the strain of the pandemic. 30 percent said they were not provided with the recommended protective equipment when in the field. 20 percent felt that online hate attacks against them became markedly worse during the pandemic (ICFJ, 2020).

Women journalists often bear the greatest burden: In a survey conducted in June 2020 by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) among more than 500 women journalists, more than half of the respondents—55 percent—said gender inequality in their workplaces had increased, with serious consequences particularly in terms of balancing their work and private lives. Nearly 60 percent of the respondents said increased stress levels had affected their health (IFJ, 2020).

Difficulties also arise from the complexity of the health and related issues journalists have had to report on during the pandemic. Journalists' abilities to contextualize and interpret scientific data and facts, and break them down to make them comprehensible while not oversimplifying the issues at hand, were challenged (Wollnik, 2021).

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, companies around the world have slashed their advertising budgets (World Federation of Advertisers, 2020). Print newspapers and magazines have been particularly affected, with loss of sales exacerbating their loss of advertising revenue. International business consultancy PricewaterhouseCoopers estimates that circulation revenues for the sector fell by 14.3 percent in 2020 alone (PWC, 2020).

At the same time, global budgets for online marketing have remained the same as before the virus outbreak or even grown (Radcliffe, 2020). Marketing experts estimate that globally, spending on online ad markets in 2020 outstripped the outlay for traditional media advertising (Financial Times, 2020). The pandemic has thus intensified the ongoing disruption that digitization has spelled for traditional media business models.

During the early stages of the pandemic, media houses across the globe suffered from a decline in revenue. As a consequence, many outlets had to lay off staff. 89 percent of media professionals who took part in the aforementioned ICFJ survey said their news organization had implemented at least one pandemic-related austerity measure, whether dismissals, salary cuts or outlet closures (ICFJ, 2020).

Commercial news media, in particular ad-financed businesses, as well as newspapers and local radio stations found the financial impact of the health crisis crippling. Some of the smaller online news media and non-profit outlets, meanwhile, have so far managed to navigate through the crisis with relative stability, in part because they are less dependent on advertising as a source of income (Nielsen, Cherubini & Andi, 2020).

### Recommendations

To strengthen the economic viability of independent media, actors in international cooperation contexts, such as governments, donors, and civil society organizations, should:

- Promote business capabilities and audience engagement, particularly of small and medium-sized independent public interest media companies.
- Support the establishment of well-functioning, non-discriminatory media and advertising markets as well as a distribution infrastructure, and work towards greater transparency of media ownership.
- Support the creation and implementation of regulatory frameworks that effect algorithmic transparency of social media platforms, and a fair balance between content producers and social media platforms in the distribution of advertising revenues.
- Strengthen journalistic professionalism—including with regard to science journalism—by improving education and training structures and professional networks.

**“When freedom of expression is protected, civil society, journalists, experts and policy makers are able to present alternative viewpoints and challenge falsehoods and conspiracy theories.**

Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression (OHCHR, 2021)

### 3. Media and information literacy and digital inclusion

**More than half of the world’s population has access to the Internet. However, media and information literacy is needed in the face of increasing disinformation. The pandemic also threatens to exacerbate the divide between those who have access to digital spaces and those who do not.**

A worldwide increase in Internet access means that an unprecedented amount of information is now available to more people than ever before. But the navigation of this overabundance of often contradicting messages—partly reliable, partly inaccurate or manipulative—remains a challenge for many.

An international survey carried out on behalf of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation discovered that more than half of those surveyed found it hard to distinguish between genuine news reports and so-called ‘fake news’ or mis- and disinformation (Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung, 2020).

Over half of the respondents in the Edelman Trust Barometer survey for 2021 said they felt their own media competence to be insufficient—significantly more than before the pandemic. Only about a quarter of all respondents, according to the survey, had good ‘information hygiene’—in other words, they engaged with the news, avoided echo chambers, verified information, and didn’t share unverified information (Edelman, 2021).

In the face of what the WHO calls an ‘infodemic’, media and information literacy (MIL) is hence urgently needed. Experts estimate that mis- and disinformation has been circulated and repeated millions of times on Facebook alone (Maréchal, McKinnon, & Dheere, 2020). Studies looking at other platforms have come to similar conclusions (UNESCO, 2020). Facebook claimed to have flagged about 40 million posts as inaccurate during the month of March 2020, pointing out fabrications related to COVID-19 (Facebook, 2020).

Whoever produces dis- and misinformation and with what intention, the advertising-oriented business model of social

media companies must be seen as an important factor in the infodemic. In the relentless competition for the attention of users, the platforms depend on highly personalized, controversial messages to maximize consumer loyalty and retention (UNESCO, 2020).

## “ Social media companies must do more to root out hate and harmful assertions about COVID-19.

**Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General**  
(UN Secretary-General, 2020)

At the same time, the digital divide threatens those who lack access to digital communication tools, as they tend to be more at risk during the pandemic. More than one billion people globally live in countries where even middle income households cannot afford a 1 GB data plan (the international standard for affordable Internet). Among further factors that hamper Internet access are lack of infrastructure, low levels of education, lack of services in local languages, and gender-based inequalities. Women and girls will often be particularly affected. The result of these disparities is, for instance, illustrated by this figure: The number of men with access to mobile Internet services in developing and emerging economies exceeds that of women by 300 million (GSMA, 2020).

### Recommendations

To counteract the infodemic and to bridge the digital gap, actors in international cooperation contexts, such as governments, donors, and civil society organizations, should:

- Promote media and information literacy, especially in the digital sphere, so that disinformation is recognized and not unwittingly shared.
- Support initiatives that promote democratic and civil-rights-based content regulation on digital platforms, for example through the establishment of advisory councils composed of representatives of civil society.
- Further the provision of high-quality journalistic coverage, in particular in rural areas, by promoting community media, media reporting in minority languages or cross-border media, while taking new digital opportunities into account.
- Encourage universal access to the media and the Internet—for example by promoting investment in digital infrastructure.

## 4. Conclusion and outlook

**Strengthening the media is a prerequisite, not only for an effective distribution of vital information, but also for the reconstruction of societies stricken by the health crisis. Functional media ecosystems mobilize problem-solving capacities and empower citizens.**

The detrimental effects of censorship, over-regulation and oppression during the pandemic also highlight how urgently journalists need support in holding governments to account and in fostering inclusive development.

Donors and development organizations have reacted and re-aligned funding and implementation of projects to take the pandemic into account. In the media development sector, new approaches have been developed, professional networks and philanthropy have proven to be useful mainstays for independent journalism. Occasionally, governments have also implemented emergency aid measures, as have international donors, to try and ward off the worst effects of the crisis. A number of organizations—foundations, associations, corporate entities—set up some form of financial support to help media houses and journalists through the year of COVID-19: relief funds for freelancers, assistance for fact-checking operations, grants for community media (Global Forum for Media Development, 2020).

The pandemic has also turned out to be a driver for innovation and creativity in the media industry. Numerous media outlets in developing and threshold economies used the suspension of ‘normalcy’ to try out new formats, test new income sources, and adjust their conditions for advertisers. Being locally embedded frequently proved to be of advantage (MDIF, 2020).

Despite these silver linings, the media sector has been severely affected by the perfect storm that the pandemic has proved to be, as this paper has highlighted. A feasible roadmap out of the crisis requires considerable work to safeguard democracy and human rights, and to promote freedom of expression, access to information and media freedom.

At the policy level, the COVID pandemic has shown that international legal standards such as Article 19 of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights or internationally shared objectives like Sustainable Development Goal 16.10 need to be put into practice in order to create a favourable environment for media freedom.

Governments need infrastructural support, enabling citizens to access reliable sources of information online. This should go hand in hand with promotion of media and information literacy to enable citizens to inform themselves competently,

but also to make their voices heard and express their opinions. Media-literate users run less of a risk of being taken in by disinformation, or of sharing it.

At the organizational level, media organizations need digital and legal expertise. The digital challenges include issues of digital security, online journalism quality, and technical expertise. COVID-19 has also highlighted deficits regarding health journalism, and journalists need to be equipped with these skills to provide the public with reliable information.

And finally, new business models are needed by media outlets, perhaps with hybrid revenue streams made up of donations, memberships and advertising, in the context of sound conditions for competition and a media law framework that supports freedom of expression. Management strategies, cost structures and editorial processes need to be refined in order to successfully navigate the digital transformation. The media need to develop strategies to become more resilient in times of crisis and there needs to be a debate on how best to achieve this, taking different contexts into account.

“ There tend to be serious obstacles to progress when arguments and critical discussions are prohibited, and the interests of some people are persistently ignored.

**Amartya Sen, Development economist  
(Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, 2020)**

Censorship, surveillance, intimidation and violence remain obstacles on the path to universal access to information and freedom of expression. But the pandemic, whilst clearly a challenge, is also a chance for free media and independent journalists to regain lost trust. To this end, development actors such as governments, donors, and civil society organizations can render their support. The aforementioned recommendations sketch out such a pathway towards sustainable post-COVID information ecosystems.

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