Committee of Ministers: Financial sustainability of quality journalism in the digital age

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On 13 February 2019, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers adopted a Declaration on the financial sustainability of quality journalism in the digital age. The Declaration encourages the 47 Council of Europe member states to put in place a regulatory and policy framework that facilitates the operation of quality journalism in Europe, while not constraining media outlets' editorial and operational independence. The Declaration, which emphasises the importance of media in serving public interests and safeguarding core values and principles of democracy, recommends the implementation of a series of measures aimed at addressing the impact of the digital transition on the media landscape, as well as other ongoing challenges, in order to preserve a viable media ecosystem.

While it has certainly fostered freedom of expression, the diversity of opinions, and the flow circulation of information - as well as benefiting the tech industry and the whole economy - the digital transition has undeniably affected journalistic practices, news consumers' habits, and the "traditional" media industries, including television and newspapers.

In particular, the Declaration refers to the increasingly influential role played by online platforms in the media ecosystem and the notable shift in their business models and content-related activities, including content filtering, organisation and recommendation. The Committee of Ministers also highlights the decline of the news industry in terms of revenues, cut-backs, reduced news coverage and the deterioration of journalists' working conditions, as well as bad management leading to the prioritising of speed and volume over substance. Coincidentally, there is a growing scepticism towards traditional public institutions and established media outlets. In addition, law enforcement online and the lake of resources and effective tools favours the propagation of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech, particularly online.

Recommended measures to respond to these challenges include: a beneficial tax regime for the production and distribution of journalistic content; financial support schemes for public media services (both online and offline) and the possibility for media outlets to operate as not-for-profit organisations and to receive donations from philanthropic programmes; developing and strengthening public policy measures at all geographical levels in Europe (paying attention to media serving local and rural communities); and establishing regulatory and policy frameworks,

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while safeguarding editorial and ethical journalistic standards and media independence. With regard to online platforms, the Committee of Ministers expresses concern about the lack of transparency in the way they select and rank news. The Committee also stresses the need for those platforms to consider their responsibilities as main gateways for news dissemination and to adopt mechanisms and standards to ensure intermediaries' accountability and compliance with their obligation to tackle malicious and infringing content particularly while performing editorial-like activities and to ensure the transparency of their algorithm. Finally, the Declaration stresses the importance of ensuring a fair financial reward for the production of news and other media content; this may include the redistribution of revenues arising from the monetisation of news-related content for the benefit of news content providers. The Committee of Ministers insists on fostering dialogue and cooperation between the relevant stakeholders, including journalists and the digital industry, and on the need to involve them in international and national policy-making initiatives; It also highlights the importance of media literacy and user empowerment.

Declaration by the Committee of Ministers on the financial sustainability of quality journalism in the digital age, Decl(13/02/2019)2, 13 February 2019, Strasbourg

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