Freedom of expression and information in times of crisis

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On 21 March 2020, the Council of Europe (COE) Committee of Experts on Media Environment and Reform (MSI-REF) issued a Statement on Freedom of expression and information in times of crisis, in light of the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The MSI-REF was established in March 2020, and under the supervision of the COE Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI), is currently preparing a draft recommendation to member states on guiding principles for media and communication governance; a draft recommendation to member states on election communication and media coverage of election campaigns; and a guidance note on the prioritisation of public interest content.

The MSI-REF's Statement begins by noting that the coronavirus pandemic is causing a public health emergency, and that during this time of great public concern, it is of particular importance for member states to recognise the crucial role of independent media. In this regard, there are three main issues covered in the Statement. First, the MSI-REF emphasises that "[n]ow, more than ever, we need reliable journalism, resting on the standards of professional ethics, to keep the public informed and to scrutinise the measures taken in response to the global health threat. We need accurate information, including in-depth research by science journalists, to counter rumours and disinformation that could lead to panic." Secondly, the MSI-REF references the COE Guidelines on protecting freedom of expression and information in times of crisis, adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 2007 (see IRIS 2007-10/1), and reiterates that a crisis situation should not be used as a pretext for restricting the public's access to information. Furthermore, states should not introduce any restrictions on media freedom beyond the limitations allowed by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Thirdly, member states and all media stakeholders should strive to ensure a favourable environment for quality journalism, in line with the standards set out in the upcoming Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States on promoting a favourable environment for quality journalism in the digital age. In particular, "special attention should be given to ensuring appropriate working conditions for journalists, including medical protection for any work-related coronavirus risks."

Finally, the MSI-REF states that freedom of expression, media independence and open deliberation, "rather than information control, are the core principles underlying European democracy which will allow us to surmount the great challenges facing our countries."

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Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Media Environment and Reform, "Freedom of expression and information in times of crisis", 21 March 2020

https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/statement-on-freedom-of-expression-and-information-in-times-of-crisis-by-the-council-of-europe-s-committee-of-experts-on-media-environment-and-reform-msi-ref-

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