Council of Europe: Recommendation to promote a favourable environment for quality journalism in the digital age

IRIS 2022-4:1/6

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On 17 March 2022, the Committee of Ministers adopted a Recommendation calling on States to promote a favourable environment for quality journalism in the digital age. The latter reflects, through a number of guidelines, the need to recognize and reward the value of quality journalism, shadowed by the advent of online platforms.

The media sector has undergone significant digitalization in recent years, which has been beneficial in many ways (e.g..: to facilitate cross-border communication) but has also seriously disrupted the news business. Today, traditional media organizations are in daily competition with online platforms and social media, and while the former are subject to strict legal and regulatory measures or ethical guidelines (such as journalists' codes of conduct), the latter are more likely to be commercially driven, to make decisions based on non-transparent algorithms and ultimately are not subject to the same standards.

Alongside this structural change, consumption habits have also evolved. As consumers are mainly attracted by sensationalist headlines, their interest in media organizations has decreased. Besides, the so-called disruption of the news business also lies in the fact that information overload makes it no longer so easy to trust or merely identify reliable, qualitative and independent sources of information, which reinforces the ongoing disinformation challenge. For all those reasons, quality journalism is under a serious threat.

It is in this context and with the desire to support and acknowledge the value of quality journalism for democracies, that the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)4. These legal, administrative, and practical guidelines shall be of interest to States and to all media stakeholders: traditional media organizations, digital-based or mixed, commercial media, public service media, community media and independent journalists, including internet intermediaries, civil society organizations, educational institutions, self- and co-regulation bodies, academics, and any other relevant actor which supports quality journalism.

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According to the guidelines, supporting quality journalism in a digital environment notably requires, among other things, building an enabling environment with appropriate funding, ethics and quality, and education.

States are encouraged to assess the need to take proactive or corrective measures and thus ensure financial stability to prevent precariousness in the field of journalism as much as possible. Financial support should be targeted at all media, but a strong emphasis is put on public service media - given their major role in society - and on community and local media, for which a range of funding schemes and instruments should be developed at local level.

In addition to the development of institutional and fiscal measures, which are rather general in scope, the guidelines also elaborate on State support schemes with direct actions to support quality and investigative journalism. The administration of such financial support should, for reasons of transparency and independence, be managed by functionally and operationally autonomous bodies, such as independent media regulatory authorities.

Secondly, supporting quality journalism also means preserving ethics and quality, and this implies restoring trust in media organizations. This could be achieved in different ways, including by increasing fact-checking (i.e. joint fact-checking projects between several newsrooms, universities, non-governmental organizations and online platforms, as well as between organizations from different States).

The guidelines also suggest the elaboration of a common code of good practice on transparency (between media organizations, national journalists' associations, trade unions and independent civil society organizations) containing trust criteria. Among them, the adherence to relevant self-regulatory structures and available in-house and external complaint mechanisms or the development of updated codes of professional ethics which would address issues related to the use of AI and algorithms in news research, production and distribution.

Finally, supporting quality journalism also requires the development of training opportunities for journalists and the promotion of media and information literacy (MIL), which plays an essential role in this digitization process. According to the Committee of Ministers, all actors should be prepared to fund media and information literacy projects in the long term, since helping its audience to "better understand how the online infrastructure and economy are operated and regulated and how technology can influence media choices" is a long and complex task. The guidelines also provide for the development of funding instruments for independent MIL initiatives.

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With the adoption of this Recommendation, the Committee of Ministers wishes to recognize the valuable role played by media organizations in democracies and, by giving the actors the keys, to bring quality, independent and reliable journalism back in the spotlight. It is hoped that a favourable environment for quality journalism – and more generally for freedom of expression, media freedom and pluralism, and for the protection of journalists – will contribute to public awareness and enable consumers to form independent opinions and make informed decisions.

Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on promoting a favourable environment for quality journalism in the digital age (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 17 March 2022 at the 1429th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies),

https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/council-of-europe-calls-on-states-to-support-quality-journalism-new-guidelines

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