

...for Journalism as a Public Good

by Renate Schröder,
Director of the European Federation
of Journalists

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STAND UP

ELECTIONS AND DISINFORMATION

In a year marked by many important elections including the upcoming European elections, independent journalism and access to accurate information are crucial for citizens to make a decision based on facts. However, throughout Europe and beyond, disinformation is on the rise. The fight against disinformation is vital to our fragile democracies, as disinformation is intended to increase distrust towards the political elites, towards academia and intellectual forces, towards minority groups, environmental campaigns etc. Foreign interference in election processes has become increasingly prevalent, exacerbated by new technologies, widespread social media use, and increased geopolitical rivalry. And threats from national actors, mostly from illiberal forces against EU values and fermenting the idea of a fraudulent election at EU level, succeed in convincing many eligible voters to either vote for anti-European parties or to not vote at all.

With the additional threat of deepfakes and generative AI-produced content, the amount of dis- and misinformation is threatening the fundamental values of our democracies. While populists and autocrats do everything to silence and smear independent journalists, the latter work under increasingly precarious and dangerous conditions. Yet, journalists' professional work is more important than ever.

It is in the DNA of journalists to debunk disinformation and hold the powerful to account, to report, analyse and conduct interviews with candidates for elections. Who else provides impartial information about them? But resources in the newsrooms are shrinking. Artificial intelligence is potentially a great tool, but only if all actors are trained and journalistic control is assured. And journalists are no longer

the gatekeepers of information and news. We are living in a fragile information ecosystem, in which the large online platforms, in short: Big Tech, have a dominant position and pursue their potent and pervasive attention-driven business model. People like to read content 'for free' and pay another high price instead: a huge data sale into a few hands and an increasingly poisoned social media in which facts do not matter. A much-cited study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) from 2018 found that social media is designed to spread lies six times faster than truth to keep users scrolling.

EROSION OF MEDIA FREEDOM AT EUROPEAN LEVEL

Many international human rights bodies, including the Council of Europe, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) are concerned that the erosion of protections for freedom of expression and media freedom is a key factor in the wider democratic backslide that Europe has witnessed in recent years. The recently published report "Press Freedom in Europe: Time to Turn the Tide", the annual assessment of press freedom in Europe by the partner organisations of the Council of Europe Platform for the Safety of Journalists, focuses on issues which may determine the freedom and integrity of electoral processes. Lack of independence and inadequate funding for public-service media and media regulators, media capture by political or private interests, state surveillance and SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public participation) all constrain journalists' freedom to report on matters of public interest.

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SPYWARE SURVEILLANCE

Journalists across Europe face threats, arrests, restrictive legislation, abusive lawsuits, and verbal attacks by politicians that may trigger violent acts. The unprecedented use of surveillance mechanisms, including spyware, intimidates journalists—as is its intent—and can deter them from investigating sensitive stories. The Pegasus scandal, exposed by a collaborative network of media outlets led by the international organisation **Forbidden Stories**, revealed in 2021 that nearly 200 journalists around the world had been targeted with the spyware of the same name, among others in Azerbaijan, France, Greece, Hungary, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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This was the main reason why the European Commission included an important article on protection of journalists' sources and restriction of the use of spyware in its proposal for a **European Media Freedom Act**. France fought to the very end for a 'national security' exemption in the act, demonstrating the lack of clear commitment by politicians to media freedom.

Thanks to intense advocacy by journalists, digital-rights, and other civil-society groups, however, this was not included in the final text adopted both by the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers. But the possibility of spyware being deployed against journalists will still need to be strictly monitored through transparency and judicial control.

PRECARIOUS CONDITIONS AND LOCAL NEWS DESERTS

While disinformation appears to be on the rise, the business model for independent journalism is withering, and the status of professional journalists has hit a low. Precarious working conditions, especially for freelancers, threaten the quality and independence of their work. According to the latest Media Pluralism Monitor from the European University Institute's Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF), only four European countries out of 32 analysed offer good working conditions for journalists: Denmark, Germany, Ireland and Sweden. This is not to say that everything is coming up roses for journalists in Germany, with self-censorship and attacks (online and offline) becoming mounting issues in recent years. According to a recent study by the European Center of Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), "Feindbild Journalisten", the number of physical attacks against journalists in Germany has increased in the last years. In 2023, there were 69 verified and registered incidents of physical attacks.

This precarious status is most apparent in local media. Although these outlets—especially local radio—are the most trusted and important when it comes to debunking disinformation and providing context to national and European news, a recent CMPF study highlights the increasing number of news deserts throughout the EU, where such media are no longer available, as well as the concomitant declining number of local journalists and the deterioration of their working conditions.

TRUST IN JOURNALISM

All this has a potentially devastating impact on trust in journalism, a crucial currency for the future of the profession. It suggests that all who defend democracy and the rule of law stand with professional journalists and support journalism in its entirety as a public good. Indeed, there may have never been a time when accurate reporting was more important.

We need a broad alliance of civil society—readers and listeners, students, media literacy experts, fact checkers, journalists' organisations and trade unions, journalism schools and academics, defenders of democracies and environmental groups—to sustain journalism and convince policymakers and politicians that, just as environmental protection is urgently needed to counter the climate crisis, protection of journalists and journalism is essential to resolving the information crisis. **Without citizens enjoying the right to know, without accountability and transparency—without ethical journalism, in other words—there is no democracy.**

The EU has done more than ever before to create a safer and more sustainable space for journalism, not least by pursuing the European Media Freedom Act. It has supported many projects linked to press freedom and journalistic self-regulation, media deserts, the safety of journalists, cross-border investigative journalism and freelancers, as well as social dialogue, skills, and training. Altogether, around €50 million per year has gone to media organisations under these rubrics. This is however not enough. Independent professional journalism, the best antidote to disinformation, is expensive. Audience engagement, new journalistic formats, support for media literacy and the right use of AI are crucial to make journalism a tool for citizens to connect, debate, learn and engage in public discourse in today's polarised societies. But that requires sustainable business models which guarantee decent working conditions and fair remuneration.

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The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), representing over 320.000 journalists in 45 countries, is calling upon EU policymakers and civil society to stand up for journalism and journalists in Europe. In the run-up to the European Parliament elections in June, the EFJ has drawn up an a manifesto to make journalism as a public good viable and safe, and to regulate AI.

The European Parliament elections will set the direction for the EU in the next term. We need a parliament and a commission resolved to work towards a fair Europe, respecting trade-union and human rights, the rule of law, media freedom and pluralism, and overseeing implementation of the crucial regulatory mechanisms accomplished in the last five years: the copyright directive, the Digital Services Act, the Artificial Intelligence Act, the anti-SLAPP directive and the European Media Freedom Act.

For facts to thrive, we need to join forces to build a healthy information ecosystem. And yes, we need all of you, students, young people to stand up for journalists and journalism, whether by showing solidarity when they are harassed or attacked by other citizens or politicians; or by simply paying for journalistic content. The premise is to understand what is behind journalistic work, how important it is to write investigative stories and to shed light on corruption and local, national and European governance but also on small or local projects that promote the good side of humanity—of which there is plenty!



→ The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)



→ The EFJ Manifesto for the 2024 Elections



→ Media Pluralism Monitor



→ Forbidden Stories, the Pegasus Project

