

Open letter on the state of the media and the need for immediate action

Brussels, 20 April 2020

Dear President von der Leyen,

Dear President Sassoli,

Dear President Michel,

Dear Vice-president Jourova,

Dear Commissioner Breton,

Dear Commissioner Gabriel,

As you will agree, free, independent and sufficiently funded media are instrumental for a functioning democracy and for ensuring that citizens are well informed throughout this crisis. Authoritative and reliable news sources and quality journalism is an antidote to disinformation. People are currently relying on trustworthy news media more than ever, as reflected by growing readership and audience numbers. Notwithstanding the economic consequences, many newspapers and online news portals have removed paywalls and made their COVID-19 related content free of charge for everyone, thus expressing their solidarity and showing responsibility towards citizens.

The news media sector is undeniably in deep crisis. Despite increased consumption, the sector's financial state is in dire straits. The abrupt loss of advertising revenue has dented the limited and, in many cases, already declining revenues. The situation is particularly grim in smaller countries and for regional media where readership numbers and the advertising revenues were limited well before the current outbreak.

Media pluralism and diversity were already decreasing before the COVID-19 outbreak. Many media outlets are still deeply scarred by the previous global financial crisis and have been too slow to recover. Their ecosystem is already fragile, especially due to the disruptive effects of online platforms including changes in media consumption habits. Furthermore, advertising is now primarily concentrating online, with US-based platforms taking the lion's share of the pie.

Unless we act immediately, the current COVID-19 fallout will lead to failures of entire news organisations, which, in turn, may result in disastrous consequences for entire societies. We are already witnessing wage cuts, layoffs of staff and we are receiving signals from the media sector about possible bankruptcies within months if not weeks. This is despite the fact that some of the media organisations are already receiving direct or indirect support from the Member States.

Failed quality news media cannot be easily restored and the vacuum left by them will partly be filled by less authoritative information and will pave the way for disinformation to spread more easily. We are at high risk of losing a crucial part of our democratic infrastructure.

It is the responsibility of the European Union and the Member States to address the situation without hesitation. We are facing a crisis on an unprecedented scale. Immediate direct financial support is required in order to preserve media plurality and quality journalism across the European Union. There is no time left to waste.

We propose these immediate actions:

- The Commission should launch an emergency fund for media and journalism — a NEWS grant programme in order to directly support news media and quality journalism. Special attention in all of the initiatives should be paid to local and regional media as well as for news media operating in small markets;
- To fund the above programme, the Commission should explore the viability of redirecting from the ongoing programmes some of the unused funding due to COVID-19 outbreak;
- The Commission should also consider other tailored support mechanisms such as providing young people with vouchers for subscriptions to news media, which would not only support the news media but also strengthen media literacy at the same time;
- The Commission and the European Parliament should redirect communication budgets to national news media instead of global online platforms;

- The European Parliament should explore possibilities for directing more support towards news media using pilot projects;
- We encourage governments of the Member States to provide direct and indirect support to media.

In the medium-term we need to be more ambitious. The support for media sector has to be scaled up significantly.¹ In addition, the role of media literacy (as well as AI and data literacy) in education has to be strengthened by putting it at the core of the Digital Education Action Plan.

Yours sincerely,

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¹ See also the recommendations from the report Towards European Media Sovereignty: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/gk_special_report-european_media_sovereignty.pdf