

IGF 2020 DC Main Session DC-Sustainability substantive paper

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Socio-economic recovery after the COVID-19 crisis: Dynamic Coalitions' role

This year has been extraordinarily difficult for the journalism and news media. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the fact that the role of journalists and the media has never been more vital, yet the impacts of the crisis have exacerbated existing challenges, particularly the demise of journalism's economic model.¹ Before the pandemic, the sector was already under enormous stress, leading to the evisceration of local news around the world. To give just a few examples:

- Almost 80% of small and independent journalism outlets around the world are reporting a significant drop in revenue – even while audience reach is up.²
- Two-thirds of staff and freelance journalists have suffered pay cuts, lost revenue, job losses, cancelled commissions, or worsening working conditions since the onset of COVID-19.³
- A large majority of journalists worldwide have faced psychological and emotional challenges while reporting on the pandemic, with many saying that their experience of online harassment was “much worse” during the pandemic.⁴

We need journalism to fight the “infodemic”

Such trends suggest that our ability to access information, specifically high-quality, independent, and fact-based news, is severely under threat just when people around the world are looking for reliable and fact-based information that can help them navigate one of the biggest shared challenges of our lifetime. The need for trustworthy journalism has never been greater and more urgent than during this pandemic since access to timely, high-quality information is imperative during a global health crisis. Such information is one of the key pillars required to slow the spread of this virus, mitigate its impacts, underpin collective societal responses, and fight what World Health Organisation (WHO) Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has labeled the “infodemic” that ultimately undermines public health and scientific efforts to control the virus.⁵

¹ <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/journalism-and-pandemic-survey>

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<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/few-winners-many-losers-covid-19-pandemics-dramatic-and-unequal-impact-independent-news-media>

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/journalism-and-pandemic-survey>

⁵ <https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099%2820%2930565-X/fulltext>

Additionally, public access to information and the free exchange of ideas are prerequisites for building peaceful, accountable and inclusive societies – the overarching aim of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16. Access to news and information – a critical component of SDG 16 – are imperative to enabling and realising the broader Sustainable Development Agenda, as freedom of information is essential for tracking and achieving progress in all 17 SDGs. Yet, the current global COVID-19 health crisis has only made this more apparent by intensifying many pre-existing challenges to achieving peace, justice, and inclusion, while disinformation jeopardises the SDGs’ objectives.⁶ In 2020, for instance, the COVID-19 pandemic heightened political and economic pressures on independent journalism in many countries, as documented in critical reports by international media groups as well as UN human rights officials.⁷

Journalism is the best antidote to fight the misinformation that is fuelling the pandemic, which is why support for journalism and news media around the world must be included in post-COVID socio-economic recovery schemes and policies. At this crucial moment, however, independent media are facing an unprecedented existential challenge. With the perfect storm of disinformation and misinformation, repression of critical voices in many countries, and the economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 crisis, the situation facing journalism and news media is dire.⁸ Revenues for these institutions are collapsing, media capture is on the rise,⁹ and funding is decreasing just when we need it most.¹⁰ Both the cause of and solutions to the crisis are inextricably linked to digital policies as well as the lack of effective market regulation, specifically as it relates to collapsing advertising revenue, profound changes in news distribution and consumption.¹¹

Collapse in revenues

Advertising revenue for newspapers globally has been in free fall since 2008, for instance, plunging from US\$103 billion to US\$49 billion in 2019.¹² And this figure is likely to decline by a further 25% in 2020 due to COVID-19. The pandemic has undoubtedly accelerated these trends, but the decoupling of advertising and journalism content is a result of two long-term processes. First, by taking advantage of high market concentration, large platforms and intermediaries have captured the digital advertising market¹³ and other critical digital business segments,¹⁴ while compromising market plurality¹⁵ and the quality of our information

⁶ <https://www.sdg16.org/blog/2020/11/10/launch-of-the-2020-sdg16-data-initiative-report.html>

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<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/few-winners-many-losers-covid-19-pandemics-dramatic-and-unequal-impact-independent-news-media>

⁸ <https://gfmf.info/emergency-appeal-for-journalism-and-media-support-2/>

⁹ <https://www.cima.ned.org/resources/media-capture/>

¹⁰ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/what-will-coronavirus-pandemic-mean-business-news>

¹¹

<https://medium.com/global-network-initiative-collection/threats-to-media-sustainability-and-freedom-of-expression-in-the-digital-era-by-michael-j-41fab4d8664a>

¹² <https://pressgazette.co.uk/report-predicts-five-years-of-steep-global-decline-for-newspaper-industry-revenue-print-and-online/>

¹³ <https://www.theverge.com/2020/2/3/21121207/youtube-google-alphabet-earnings-revenue-first-time-reveal-q4-2019>

¹⁴ <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/house-antitrust-report-on-big-tech/b2ec22cf340e1af1/full.pdf> and

<https://www.accc.gov.au/focus-areas/inquiries/digital-platforms-inquiry/final-report-executive-summary>

¹⁵ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3500919 and

https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ser-tp-2019d12_en.pdf

ecosystem(s).¹⁶ Second, firms that specialise in ad tech allow advertisers to block their ads¹⁷ from appearing next to anything a brand considers “controversial,”¹⁸ including journalism and news content.¹⁹ Compounding this is the fact that audiences are increasingly accessing news through their mobile devices, social media, and messaging platforms.²⁰

Users consider social media less trustworthy, impartial, and accurate than other major news platforms.²¹ However, due to availability, reach, and the current system of incentives and recommendations, often backed by complex and opaque algorithmic systems, quality content is relatively disadvantaged in the economies of scale model that platforms are pursuing. It is only further exacerbated by the amount of journalistic content that is either accidentally flagged or purposely flagged by malicious actors, as well as new content moderation practices that have emerged since the beginning of the pandemic that do not offer special treatment to independent, public-interest media.²²

How can we respond?

In response to the challenges faced in this extraordinarily difficult time, many members of the DC-Sustainability contributed to and signed a Joint Emergency Appeal for Journalism and Media Support that was launched on 3 May, World Press Freedom Day.²³ It offers an extensive list of policy recommendations and options for mutual advocacy going forward that cover a host of actors, including governments, advertisers, and technology, telecommunication companies, and Internet intermediaries. When considering how a post-COVID world will look, it will be important to draw on those recommendations to consider how societies can support robust, independent journalism going forward – including how digital policymaking and multi-stakeholder dialogue processes can help cut across stakeholder groups to enable more robust support for journalism and news media. Such recommendations include:

- **Respect fundamental and digital rights:** Guarantee and safeguard fundamental digital freedoms, including privacy, data protection, and cybersecurity, and do not engage in practices that undermine such freedoms – notably surveilling and monitoring journalists and their sources. Do everything you can to enable free, safe, and secure digital spaces for journalists, journalism organisations, and independent media.
- **Remodel algorithms and moderation practices:** Ensure your algorithms and moderators recognise credible information sources, including independent, trustworthy media and journalism organisations. Prevent automated takedowns of journalistic

¹⁶ <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/67828/MPM2020-PolicyReport.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y>

¹⁷ https://info.cheq.ai/hubs/Research/The_Economic_Costs_of_Keyword_Blacklists_for_Online_Publishers.pdf

¹⁸

https://wfanet.org//library/download/urn:uuid:7d484745-41cd-4cce-a1b9-a1b4e30928ea/garm+brand+safety+floor+suitability+framework+23+sept.pdf?format=save_to_disk&ext=.pdf

¹⁹ <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-pandemic-blacklist-advertising-news-digital-covid-19/a-53056149>

²⁰ <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/24/smartphones-72percent-of-people-will-use-only-mobile-for-internet-by-2025.html>

²¹ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/201316/news-consumption-2020-report.pdf

²² See: <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/public-investments-global-news> and

<https://shorensteincenter.org/developing-rules-internet-capitalism/>

²³ <https://gfmd.info/emergency-appeal-for-journalism-and-media-support-2/>

content related to COVID-19, particularly by algorithmic processes. Such takedowns erode the public's ability to access information, and harm journalism and media organisations who must then dedicate precious resources to resolving content-related disputes that could instead be directed towards reporting. Strengthen transparency and notice procedures as well as expedite appeal and remedy procedures.

- **Manage blacklist technology responsibly:** Work with advertisers to stop the use of blacklist technology to block ads from appearing next to credible journalism and news media stories that mention the COVID-19 pandemic and other critical health and social issues.
- **Advertise through trusted media:** Make it a policy to include as many quality journalism outlets, particularly at the local level, as possible in your digital advertising spend. Work with United for News,²⁴ the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI),²⁵ or local journalism associations in each market to add reputable, local news outlets to your advertising inclusion lists.²⁶ Ramp up existing direct advertising relationships with quality media, and review your programmatic “blocklists” to develop a more subtle approach to your brand safety concerns ensuring that you do not block news altogether. This is a time to support the media above and beyond commercial interests and imperatives.
- **Change how you measure and value engagement:** Build your long-term brand reputation by turning away from programmatic, click/view-based and/or cookie-driven targeted advertising. Journalism offers value to the brands beyond just the traffic and offers a safe environment for brand exposure and both commercial and societal impact.
- **Support journalism:** Where appropriate, initiate or increase funding of independent, public-interest journalism, fact-checking, and other measures to counter disinformation and misinformation, as well as expedite grants to prioritise news and information outlets working to address the global health crisis.
- **Reverse commercial incentives that discriminate against journalism:** Create mechanisms to verify credible actors online, and reverse existing incentives to allow media to monetise public-interest journalism and high-quality content. Consider fundamental policy changes such as investing more in identifying and demonetising malicious actors, and preventing malicious actors from utilising digital and programmatic ads to finance the spread of disinformation and misinformation.²⁷
- **Deliver Internet accessibility to all:** Prioritise maintaining Internet accessibility and connectivity, and promote the right to access information. As such, we urge telecommunication providers to lower the cost of Internet connectivity – especially in

²⁴ <https://www.unitedfornews.org/>

²⁵ <https://jti-rsf.org/en/>

²⁶ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/covid-19-is-devastating-local-news-heres-how-advertisers-can-help>

²⁷ For guidance on how to support an environment conducive to quality, ethical journalism see: <https://jti-rsf.org/en/>, <https://rm.coe.int/msi-joq-2018-rev7-e-draft-recommendation-on-quality-journalism-finalis/168098ab76>, and https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result_details.aspx?objectid=090000168092dd4d), as well as similar initiatives.

emerging and developing markets and low-income communities – to allow users to access news and information regardless of their economic status, as well as enable journalists to be able to work from home.