

Protecting Quality Journalism and Media Freedom

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Key takeaways

- The independence and freedom of the media must be safeguarded by protecting professional journalism from unrestrained market forces and negative state interference. The EU has a special role to play in securing this aim.
- The EU should provide funding opportunities for media that uphold high standards of reporting, professional practice and working conditions, for example through its Creative Europe programmes.
- The EU should launch a public service media initiative to uphold the independence of public service media, promote their role as news providers and formulate European standards, rules and mechanisms to strengthen the governance and editorial autonomy of such institutions.
- The EU should stand firm on its regulatory principles and their implementation and consider further regulations through inclusive, consultative processes.

RECLAIM summary

RECLAIM is a three-year research project (2022-2025) funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe program. Consisting of a consortium of researchers from thirteen partner universities around Europe, the RECLAIM project addresses the implications of the challenge of post-truth politics for the future of liberal democracy in Europe, in order to (a) produce theoretically and empirically robust visions for the future of liberal democratic institutions, (b) to reflect on the meaning of liberal democracy in the 21st century in Europe and, (c) to develop recommendations, toolkits, narratives and methodologies to reinstate the legitimacy and effectiveness of liberal democracies.

Analysis and findings

Despite the increasing prevalence of social media as a channel for news distribution, the main providers of news remain legacy media such as quality newspapers and television. Even in an era of post-truth, our survey of Norwegian, Italian and Polish citizens shows that the majority have very traditional demands for what journalism should do: They want journalism that is objective, accurate and that situates the day's events in

a wider context. Respondents who are given two versions of the same story, one written in a tabloid style and one written in a broadsheet style, are more likely to trust the version that adheres to the standards of professional journalism.

However, as our interviews with journalists working in seven countries (Norway, Iceland, Poland, Italy, Croatia, Bulgaria and Spain) show, journalists face significant challenges in the contemporary media landscape that often impede the production of high-quality journalism. These challenges include accelerated work rhythms, political polarisation, concentrated media ownership, and a reliance on the algorithms of unregulated digital platforms for news distribution. All of these factors combined contribute to the precarious state of media outlets.

Interestingly, most journalists saw these challenges as real concerns, even though they were working within very different media and political systems. However, the journalists we interviewed typically expressed strongly diverging views on what the EU could and should do to address the challenges of disinformation and fake news. However, these different views did not align with national differences. Instead, we found common themes across countries, as journalists' views differed mainly within, rather than across, countries. This understanding of an increasingly hectic news cycle also shapes how the journalists we interviewed understand the role of professional fact-checkers. Journalists believe that such fact-checkers can help deepen other journalists' knowledge of how to detect disinformation and fake news.

Policy proposals

Both the EU and member states should work to strengthen public funding mechanisms that support quality journalism. Such mechanisms are already in place in most member states, particularly in the Nordic countries, where media organisations are eligible for funding through centralised systems. However, it is imperative that eligibility criteria for accessing these funds are stringent and based on principles such as **evidence-based news coverage, investigative journalism, good working conditions, and editorial and journalistic independence from corporate interests**. This is essential to prevent, for instance, public authorities from making demands on the angle of the

journalistic product in exchange for public funding, and to avoid ownership affecting editorial decisions. Below we will outline policy proposals directed at both member states and European institutions.

National policy solutions

As a result, national ministries responsible for media policy should either **implement or strengthen national funding mechanisms targeted towards quality media sources**. This must follow a process where the ministries first hold hearings with media industry actors such as journalists' unions, media industry associations and other relevant professional bodies and affected government bodies. Then, in a second step, they must develop standards of eligibility for receiving this support. While the exact formulation of these standards may vary from one member state to another, the grants should abide by common principles: Support should be given to news media that are legally independent of the state and committed to fact-based journalism. This funding should also be available to media businesses operating according to alternative media models (being funded, for instance, through reader donations), and dedicated, for instance, to the advancement of particular goals that are considered politically important at the national level, such as the advancement of minority rights.

Several member states already have such mechanisms in place. One example is Sweden, which has both direct and indirect forms of media support. This particularly robust media support system strengthens both media diversity, as part of it is allocated to smaller newspapers, and independence from market constraints. Beyond this, several member states, such as Germany and Spain, also subsidize newspapers indirectly, through reduced VAT rates for newspapers and regional financial support mechanisms for media outlets. In addition, the sustainability of news organisations in some countries, especially in Central and Eastern European member states, has been guaranteed by contributions from private donors, often exposing these news outlets to accusations of being hired and biased. We believe it is imperative that member states make their private and public funding schemes and decisions transparent, with reference to common standards of news-making, and strengthen them to enable journalists to combat post-truth and disinformation. Available funding should come with requirements that make media houses invest in news production (e.g. hiring journalists) and not just in news distribution (e.g. printing support). In other words, funds should be used for the advancement of journalistic goals, such as the ability to do critical news reporting, instead of being used to solely strengthen the economics of the underlying media organization.

Using funding to advance the production of quality journalism is particularly crucial today, especially in light of the increased

use of AI to collect information and disseminate it as traditional journalism. Public funding for more time-intensive and contextualizing journalism should be prioritized, as this will contribute to filling a societally important need that is increasingly unmet by an ever-more profit-focused media sector.

European policy solutions

At the EU level, the Commission's competences to coordinate and shape media policy in the member states should be further developed in order to make independent media organisations sustainable in the common market and competitive in an increasingly digital world. We see three important ways in which the EU could contribute to the protection of quality journalism and media freedom

First, the EU should **provide initiatives and funding for media that uphold high standards of reporting, professional practice and working conditions**. The "News Initiatives" under the programme "Shaping the EU's Digital Future" should be strengthened. Like the member states, the EU should develop specific funding programmes to support independent journalism, especially in the form of cross-border collaborative projects and investigations. Such objectives could be achieved, for example, by strengthening the Creative Europe funding programmes so that they more explicitly support media complying with (i) member state standards and legal mechanisms designed to strengthen media independence or, where no such member state mechanism exists, (ii) relevant European legislation designed to do the same, such as the European Media Freedom Act. European funding mechanisms must explicitly link public funding eligibility to compliance with legislation that ensures media independence. This is the best way to ensure that public funding strengthens the kind of media that can act independently of public institutions and act as a critical corrective to elite narratives about important current events.

Second, our findings also point to the key role of public service media in safeguarding journalistic standards and providing evidence-based news. In light of this, the **EU should launch a public service media initiative** to uphold the independence of public service media, promote the role of media organizations as news providers, and formulate European standards, rules and mechanisms to strengthen the governance and editorial autonomy of such institutions. Such an initiative could, for instance, formulate best practice guidelines for upholding the independence of public service broadcasters.

Third, the **EU should stand firm on its regulatory principles and their implementation, and consider further regulations through inclusive, consultative processes**. The EU should

open consultations on the need for further regulations that can help find the right balance between key, enforceable principles of quality journalism on the one hand and market considerations on the other. A key aim of such consultations would be to identify areas where regulations may prove helpful, examples may include regulations on ownership, editorial control and checks on misinformation. Although developing universally accepted criteria for what constitutes journalistic quality can be a challenge, it is essential that regulatory and legislative efforts move in this direction. Any proposed criteria will be tested against the yardstick of whether they promote, rather than undermine, the diversity of fact-based quality journalism. Ultimately, implementing such measures constitutes an important long-term strategy for “Shaping the EU’s Digital Future”. Enhancing Europe’s competitiveness in global digital markets therefore goes hand in hand with addressing the challenges of post-truth discourse and promoting a healthy and democratic public sphere.



RECLAIM is a Research and Innovation Action funded by the EU's Horizon Europe programme under Grant Agreement no. 101061330. The views and opinions expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Union or the Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the Research Executive Agency can be held responsible for them.