European Media Policy

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Media industry

Pandemic hits media sector:
Calls on EU and governments for urgent help

Fears over the economic sustainability of the media industry have long been voiced – then the pandemic hits it like a bulldozer.

Thousands of journalists were furloughed or laid off and media outlets across the United States, Europe and elsewhere began to close down. In early April the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) called for "vital support".

"EU and national emergency recovery packages are urgently needed to protect the jobs and livelihoods of media workers, support companies and fund public service media through this crisis", said EFJ President Mogens Blicher Bjerregård.

Similar calls were made in an Open Letter to EU leaders from 42 Members of the European Parliament. "Unless we act immediately…we are at high risk of losing a crucial part of our democratic infrastructure", warned the MEPs.

A recently published EU Parliament study, *Safety of journalists and the fighting of corruption in the EU*, also stresses:

"There is a need, as the Parliament has already pointed out, for the creation of a permanent European fund for journalists in the framework of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (2021–2027), as redrafted following the COVID-19 crisis, offering direct financial support for independent journalists and media outlets, freelancers and self-employed media workers".

EU drums up support for ailing media industry

So what has the EU done so far to help the media in the crisis unleashed by COVID-19?

A number of European governments, for example the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden, have introduced relief packages specifically aimed at the media sector.

To complement and support actions undertaken by Member States, the EU Commission has taken a number of measures to tackle the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak on the cultural and creative sectors. Overview with links to details here. A few examples:

Special help for cinemas is foreseen in the MEDIA programme's support for the Europa Cinemas network. This is likely to take the form of a €5 million supplementary allocation of funds in the form of "vouchers" for cinemas most severely affected by the lockdown, says the Commission.

The media sector should also benefit from the €1 billion the Commission has unlocked from the European Fund for Strategic Investments to serve as guarantees to the European Investment Fund in incentivising local banks and other lenders to provide liquidity to at least 100,000 small and medium European enterprises.

The same goes for the special Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative and Support to Mitigate Unemployment Risks.

Announcing in June new EU actions to tackle disinformation, the Commission also called upon Member States to intensify efforts to ensure that journalists can work safely and to make the most of the EU's economic response and recovery package to support media heavily hit by the crisis.

During the spring and summer the EU Parliament's Culture Committee repeatedly pressed for more support for the media sector, especially for small businesses and individual actors. It has also been highly critical of the Commission's proposal to cut financing for the "Creative Europe" programme within the next long-term EU budget, the so-called MFF, Multiannual Financial Framework.

The new EU Presidency seems sympathetic to the Committee's concerns. At the Culture Committee's first meeting in September German Government Commissioner for Culture and Media Monika Grütters reassured Members that managing the COVID-19 consequences for culture was a priority for the EU in the coming months.

She expressed support for the Committee's request to "earmark" EU recovery funding, in order "to make it possible for 1–2% of EU expenditure to flow into culture and media measures".

Platforms' aid to news industry – a timely investment?

During the spring the ailing news industry was promptly offerred relief by others with deeper pockets and swifter decision-making.

At the end of March Facebook pledged $100 million in financing and advertising spending to support news organisations, including local publishers in the United States, reeling from pressure due to the coronavirus pandemic, reported Reuters.

Soon thereafter Google said it would waive for the next five months the fee it charges news publishers to decide which ads to show on their online properties. Later Google also offerred direct support through Google News Initiative Journalism Emergency Relief Fund.

At the end of May Google announced the first recipients of the fund, granting "funding ranging from $5,000–$30,000" to "more than 5,300 small and medium local newsrooms around the world".

After the windfall profits they have made during the COVID-19 crisis the digital giants can no doubt afford some outlay to polish their tarnished image.

At the end of July Reuters reported that Facebook's ad sales, which contribute nearly all of Facebook's revenue, rose 10 per cent to $18.3 billion in the second quarter as people under lockdown spent more time online and businesses rapidly pivoted to e-commerce.

This despite the ad boycott campaign in July, called "Stop Hate for Profit", that was started by several U.S. civil rights groups after the death of George Floyd, to pressure the company to act on hate speech and misinformation.

Facebook appears unscathed by the campaign, which drew the support of major advertisers including Unilever, Starbucks Corp and Coca-Cola. About 1,100 companies joined the boycott.

Rushing to help the media industry is no doubt seen as a smart PR investment by the digital czars, which have drawn a lot of flak lately on both sides of the Atlantic for abusing their dominant position in various ways.

For years, media outlets have complained that tech giants siphoned off advertising revenue and users' personal data in ways that hurt their bottom line. In Europe publishers have lobbied heavily to reduce the tech companies' perceived dominance over key industries like online advertising, points out Politico.

With the growing concern about coronavirus misinformation the importance of the survival of an independent media industry has become increasingly clear to policymakers in Brussels. New rules regarding online advertising is one of the areas that will be covered by the Digital Services Act (DSA) to be presented by the EU Commission at the end of this year. (More on this below.)

Media freedom

Measures to curb COVID-19 a threat to media freedom

Media freedom seems to be one of the many victims of the Coronavirus.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent governmental measures to contain the spread of the virus have had a negative impact on freedom of expression and media freedom, concludes a recent EU Parliament study, which examines the scale and details of how adopted measures have led to interference with or violations of the right to freedom of expression.

"It is alarming when emergency measures are exploited to legitimise excessive restrictions on press freedom. Disproportionate restrictions on disinformation, curbs on access to information and expansive surveillance measures which ostensibly contribute to the containment of the virus can have devastating long-term effects on media freedom", comment the authors.

In countries with authoritarian regimes the situation seems to be especially worrisome. According to the 2020 World Press Freedom Index there is "a clear correlation between suppression of media freedom in response to the coronavirus pandemic, and a country's ranking in the Index", writes Reporters Without Borders (RSF) in its analysis.

Both China and Iran, for example, censored their major coronavirus outbreaks extensively. Even in Europe, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary had a "coronavirus" law passed with penalties of up to five years in prison for false information, "a completely disproportionate and coercive measure", comments the RSF.

The European Parliament's Civil Liberties Committee (LIBE) has a Democracy, Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights Monitoring Group (DRFMG). At its meeting

on 2 April, the group decided that it will closely monitor the impact of emergency measures taken by member states.

So will the EU Commission. In a press release on new EU actions to tackle disinformation published in June the Commission says that it will continue monitoring the impact on EU law and values of emergency measures taken by Member States in the coronavirus context, adding:

"The crisis demonstrated the role of free and independent media as an essential service, providing citizens with reliable, fact-checked information, contributing to saving lives". Therefore the EU will "strengthen its support to independent media and journalists in the EU and around the world".

CoE:
How to deal with pandemic while respecting rule of law

Among those concerned about abuses of emergency laws during the pandemic is the Council of Europe, the continent's leading human rights organisation. In April the Secretary General of the Council issued an Information Document for member states on this issue.

The purpose of this document is to provide member states with a toolkit for dealing with the COVID-19 crisis in a way that respects the fundamental values of democracy, rule of law and human rights. Notably, the document contains important guidance relating to freedom of expression, media freedom, and public broadcasting, explains the IRIS newsletter

Here the document sets out some important principles. One of them is that freedom of expression is a "critical factor for the ability of the media to report on issues related to the pandemic".

It also reiterates that journalists, media, medical professionals, civil society activists and the public "must be able to criticise the authorities and scrutinise their response to the crisis".

Importantly, any (a) prior restrictions on certain topics, (b) closure of media outlets or (c) outright blocking of access to online communication platforms "call for the most careful scrutiny and are justified only in the most exceptional circumstances".

€5.1million to promote media freedom and pluralism

We should at least hand out a bit of money, the EU Commission may have thought when announcing in March that it had launched a €5.1million package designed to promote media freedom and pluralism in Europe.

As part of the new measures, a cross-border response mechanism designed to "detect, answer and prevent violations of press and media freedom" has been launched. This project is led by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF).

A second project to support cross-border investigative journalism in the EU will be led by the International Press Institute.

A series of smaller initiatives aim to help bolster media freedom across the EU too, including a project designed to increase the mobility of young media professionals in the EU.

"Democracy cannot work without free and independent media. Journalists should be able to report without fear or favour. Today's projects are only a start", said EU Commission Vice-President Věra Jourová.

The Commissioner also noted that the "key objective" of the Commission's upcoming European Democracy Action Plan – to be presented towards the end of this year – is to "strengthen media freedom and pluralism". (More on the Action Plan below.)

Hopefully the Plan will lead to some EU action which could improve the situation in Hungary, where concerns about media freedom again flared up this summer when the editor-in-chief of Hungary's leading independent media outlet, *Index*, was fired amid claims of political interference.

Disinformation

Self-regulation not enough?

It's been a tough six months for many of us – EU policymakers too. Among their numerous worries has been the massive wave of conspiracy theories, fake cures and sometimes life-threatening misinformation about COVID-19.

EU Commission Vice-President Vera Jourová has repeatedly urged social media companies do more to stop the dissemination of such material, pointing to the Code of Practice on Disinformation, a voluntary framework signed by platforms including Facebook, Google and Twitter, in which they agree to take measures to control the surge of disinformation online.

The platforms have not been idle, but is self-regulation really enough? Some believe not. "We need to think about regulation because for the moment we don't have the capacity to do more than just a voluntary approach", said EU Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders at a committee meeting in the European Parliament in April.

The same month a study produced for the Commission on the effectiveness of the Code of Practice criticised the self-regulatory nature of the framework, suggesting that "sanctions and redress mechanisms" should be put into place in order to ensure compliance with the rules.

Some of the EU member states are critical too. In a position paper seen by the news service Euractiv, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Slovakia call the self-regulatory framework currently in place "insufficient and unsuitable". In their opinion, it is "urgent" for the EU to develop regulation against disinformation across social media platforms.

Justice Ministers in other member states seem to want tougher measures too. "We need to continue to take steps toward enforcing clear responsibilities on the part of the platforms. Voluntary commitments and self-responsibility are not enough", explained the German minister presiding over their EU Council meeting on 6 July.

Commission calls for "calibrated" response

The EU Commission, for its part, still seems reluctant to propose hard legislation for disinformation, preferring a softer, more nuanced approach in order to respect freedom of expression and information.

In June the EU Commission and the High Representative – who coordinates the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy – published a [Joint Communication](#) assessing their steps to fight COVID-19 disinformation and proposing a way forward.

The paper calls for a "calibrated response" depending on whether the disinformation content is illegal, or harmful but not illegal; intentional or unintentional.

The Commission says it has closely monitored the actions of the online platforms under the Code of Practice and seems relatively satisfied. But there is a need for "additional efforts, increased transparency and greater accountability", it says.

Platforms should provide monthly reports that include more detailed data on how they promote authoritative content, improve users' awareness, and limit coronavirus disinformation and advertising related to it.

They should also step up their cooperation with fact-checkers and researchers, and be more transparent about implementation of their policies.

The Commission and the High Representative underline that ensuring freedom of expression is central to their disinformation response. They also highlight the role of free and independent media as "an essential service, providing citizens with reliable, fact-checked information, contributing to saving lives".

Preserving access to information and promoting citizens' media and information literacy are important for countering disinformation too, says the Communication.

These proposals will feed into future EU work on disinformation, notes the Commission, pointing to the European Democracy Action Plan and the Digital Services Act package (DSA). (More on these below.)

One [piece of legislation](#) in the DSA would "clarify a common set of responsibilities" for platforms – and the Commission must decide whether it wants the legislation to cover disinformation too.

European Democracy Action Plan part of answer

Disinformation is one of the challenges for democracy in Europe that the EU Commission wants to tackle with its upcoming European Democracy Action Plan, expected at the end of this year.

A political priority for the EU Commission, the Action Plan will also cover subjects such as external interference and manipulation in elections, as well as media freedom and pluralism.

In July the EU Commission launched a [public consultation](#) to gather views on these matters. European citizens, as well as election authorities, political parties, media, journalists and online platforms are invited to have their say until 15

September 2020.

The Commission wants to hear what Europeans think about the three main pillars of the European Democracy Action Plan:

Integrity of elections and political advertising, including a key issue such as the transparency of political advertising online.

Strengthening media freedom and media pluralism: how to improve the protection of journalists and their rights, as well as the issue of media independence and cross-border cooperation.

Tackling disinformation in the EU: questions focus on the definition of disinformation and what the platforms and other actors could do to tackle the phenomena of disinformation.

Some of the issues in the Democracy Action Plan are also covered in a public consultation on the Digital Services Act package. (More on this below.)

Risky to rely on private actors?

Digital rights organisations are wary of policymakers' focus on social media to stave off the wave of disinformation. This would only cement the digital platforms' already powerful gate-keeping role. Anyway, their filters make many errors, the critics point out.

"It is extremely risky for a democratic society to rely only on very few communications channels, owned by private actors of which the business model feeds itself from sensationalism and shock", stressed the European Digital Rights Organisation (EDRi) in its newsletter of 13 May.

EDRi describes how, as the COVID-19 crisis broke out, emergency health guidelines forced big social media companies to send their content moderators home. Facebook and the like promised to live up to expectations by basing daily content moderation on their so-called artificial intelligence. It only took a few hours to observe glitches in the system.

Their "anti-spam" system was striking down content from trustworthy sources as violations of the platforms' community guidelines. Sharing newspaper articles, links to official governmental websites or simply mentioning the term "coronavirus" in a post would result in the content being preemptively blocked.

This demonstrates why relying on automated processes can only be detrimental to freedom of expression and to freedom of receiving and imparting information, says EDRi: "Content filters show high margins of error and are prone to over-censoring".

EU-funded hub for disinformation research launched

On 1 June the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), which aims to become the European hub to fight online disinformation, was launched in Florence. Based within the European University Institute and funded by the EU, the observatory brings together researchers and experts in media literacy.

The EDMO will examine the reasons behind fake news, as well as the techniques and methods used in online disinformation, through targeted research.

"We will work to create secure access for researchers to research-relevant datasets", said Renaud Dehousse, the president of the European University Institute. Users will be able to access EDMO's secure platform to check facts and collaborate with other users, he added.

"We will also provide materials for media education professionals, teachers and citizens to raise awareness of online misinformation".

Platform regulation

New rulebook for digital services in the making

Many of the hot topics in today's digital policy discussions will be covered by the upcoming Digital Services Act package (DSA) which the EU Commission plans to present in December this year.

Much has changed since the year 2000 when the e-Commerce Directive – the present legal framework for regulating digital services – was adopted, explains the Commission.

Now it's time for a modern framework "to ensure the safety of users online and to allow innovative digital businesses to grow, while respecting the basic principles underpinning the current legal framework of the e-Commerce Directive".

"We want to propose clear rules before the end of the year to define the responsibilities of platforms in protecting our citizens and values, without making them liable for all content", explained Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton in a blog post.

The package would also propose ex ante rules covering large online platforms acting as gatekeepers, which now set the rules of the game for their users and their competitors. This should ensure that those platforms "behave fairly and can be challenged by new entrants and existing competitors".

In July EU Commissioner Margrethe Vestager, in charge of both digital and competition policy, gave some more clues about the Commission's thoughts:

"When we are saying that we need more effective action against illegal content, we are equally determined that perfectly legal content is not removed accidentally. This is very important when it comes to decisions that may affect our fundamental rights, our freedom of expression. At the moment, only the platforms themselves know what type of content is removed, and on what grounds. We need transparency and accountability for these decisions".

In June the Commission launched a public consultation on the Digital Services Act package in order to gather views, evidence and data to help it shape the future rulebook for digital services.

Responses to the consultation have been coming in thick and fast from various stakeholders, including Google, Apple and Facebook, reports Euractiv. Feedback

from the two public consultations can be read [here](#) and [here](#).

In the European Parliament the civil liberties, internal market and legal affairs committees are preparing their positions on the DSA. They will vote on their respective reports on 28 September; Parliament plenary votes in October.

DSA: Platforms to be more liable for content?

Many want social media to act more responsibly with regard to the content they host. But should they be made legally liable for the all information streaming through their platforms?

This is one of the central issues in the upcoming Digital Services Act package (DSA).

The e-commerce Directive, the present legal framework, introduced a "safe harbour" principle, under which online intermediaries who host or transmit content provided by a third party are exempt from liability unless they are aware of the illegality and are not acting adequately to stop it.

Furthermore, online intermediaries cannot be subject to a general obligation to monitor their users' online content. This in order to protect users' fundamental rights, such as privacy and freedom of expression.

Everybody is not convinced that extending the scope of the liability regime is a good idea.

The EU's Digital 9+ coalition, including Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden, released a [document](#) calling for the Digital Services Act package to abide by some of the central principles of the e-Commerce Directive, including the country-of-origin principle, the limited liability exemption, and the ban on a general monitoring obligation.

The exemption for intermediaries from liability for the content they store should be maintained, if they fulfil certain conditions, says the coalition. "It guarantees that the internet remains an open environment for everyone to use".

The European Digital Rights organisation (EDRi) couldn't agree more. One of its key [demands](#) regarding the DSA is: "Protect the limited liability regime of the E-Commerce Directive that has helped make the internet great".

EP study:
Hard to distinguish "illegal" from "harmful" content

In May the European Parliament's research service (EPRS) published an [in-depth analysis](#) of the reform of the EU liability regime, in which they delve into a tricky issue.

An extension of the scope of the EU legislation to encompass both "illegal" and "harmful" content has been proposed and the question of whether "online disinformation" and "online advertisements" should fall under the scope of the revised liability regime has been raised.

Here the researchers point out: "a difficult point is that this approach requires distinguishing what is 'illegal content' online from content which is 'harmful' but not illegal, while the concept of 'harmful' is subjective, depends greatly on context and can vary considerably between Member States".

Fundamental rights defenders argue that introducing rules to address online harmful content into EU law would have grave consequences for freedom of expression, freedom to seek information, and other fundamental rights and therefore seek to strictly limit the scope of the Digital Services Act to illegal content.

DSA: Regulating gatekeeper platforms a must

Speaking about the Digital Services Act, in July EU Commissioner Margrethe Vestager – in charge of competition as well as digital policy – pointed out how a small number of gatekeeper platforms act as private rule-makers for the markets they have created.

"They decide on who can enter their markets, who has to leave them, and on the conditions to be respected while selling on them".

The upcoming Digital Services Act will set limits as to what such platforms can – or cannot – do. "But it may not be sufficient either… So we are also consulting on a new competition tool", said the Commissioner.

"In a digital age, where the very structure of a market can create problems for competition, we need the power to do more than investigate individual cases. The new tool would let us investigate markets instead, to prevent them from tipping".

Earlier Vestager's collegue, the EU's Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton, highlighted two other areas that would be part of the EU's gatekeeper regulation: fair access to data for smaller businesses and data ownership.

While the Commissioner adopted a stringent approach on the importance of safeguarding personal data in line with EU data protection legislation on the data ownership point, he also noted that making the most of the EU's industrial data is a priority for the Commission, and allowing fair access to it is an area for the upcoming regulation to focus on.

U.S. legislators:
Big Tech giants have too much power

Policymakers on the other side of the Atlantic seem to have it in for the digital giants too.

In the United States lawmakers investigating Facebook, Amazon, Google and Apple have accused them of antitrust abuses.

A much-anticipated antitrust hearing in the U.S. House of Representatives in July subjected four of the tech industry's most powerful CEOs to hours of aggressive questioning by Republicans and Democrats alike.

Leading the inquiry, Antitrust Subcommittee Chairman David Cicilline framed the hearing across three fields: the gatekeeper role Big Tech giants play in the digital

economy, their ability to harvest and acquire user data en masse, and self-preferencing behaviour, [reports](#) Euractiv.

"Many of the practices used by these companies have harmful economic effects. They discourage entrepreneurship, destroy jobs, hike costs and degrade quality. Simply put, they have too much power", Cicilline said.

Ahead of the meeting, Euractiv [was informed](#) that the EU Commission would be "closely following" developments stateside, and that the ongoing probe by the House Judiciary Antitrust Subcommittee would "contribute to our own reflections on how to tackle the challenges for competition enforcement in digital markets in an effective and timely manner".

Worldwide jurisdictions and particularly the EU and the U.S. should formulate "common visions" on how best to regulate competition in the platform economy, [said](#) the Commission's digital chief Margrethe Vestager.

New EU legislation on child abuse in the pipeline

Among the fallouts of the corononavirus pandemic is an increase in child sexual abuse, demonstrably exacerbated by physical isolation and increased online activity.

"Child abuse and sexual abuse online is a repulsive crime", [said](#) EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson in July when announcing that the Commission will propose legislation later this year to require online platforms to detect and report sharing of such illegal content.

"We will also look into the possible creation of a new European centre to prevent and counter child sexual abuse so that Europe can continue to lead in fighting abuse".

The new [strategy](#) to fight child sexual abuse both offline and online aims to complement and improve existing EU [activities in this area](#), and to address new challenges such as unforeseen risks of end-to-end encryption.

Media Pluralism Monitor:
Online political advertising must be regulated

The EU must do more to reign in the unregulated environment of online political advertising, says a Media Pluralism Monitor [report](#) published in July.

"It is of utmost importance that measures are put in place to ensure transparency of the actors, techniques, contents, and amounts spent on political advertising online", stress the authors.

"While political advertising in the audiovisual media, especially public service media, is strongly regulated across Europe, the online sphere is almost totally unregulated", the report noted.

"In the majority of countries, serious issues were noted in the implementation of the Code of Practice on Disinformation as regards clearly labelling and registering political and issue-based advertising as such, and indicating who paid for it".

The findings of the Media Pluralism Monitor will feed into several frameworks to be presented by the Commission before the end of the year, including the EU's Democracy Action Plan and the Digital Services Act.

Media - general

Internet access crucial for all

In many walks of life the pandemic has affected people's way of thinking and the priorities they make. That goes for EU policymakers too.

In July European Parliament President David Sassoli wrote: "COVID-19 has made something which was already clear glaringly obvious: digitalisation will not wait. The issue is not whether it will happen, but whether it will happen for everyone".

"More than ever in these months of lockdown, many millions of people in Europe and around the world have been forced to rely on an internet connection to work, study, buy food and communicate with their loved ones. At the same time, lack of access to the internet, for geographical, economic or social reasons, has proved to be a major cause of marginalization", he said.

"The internet as we know it is based on the radical and profoundly democratic principle of net neutrality…. At present, the European Union is the main global player which safeguards by law this fundamental principle of our time".

"But this is not enough. If it is not to be a source of inequality, access to the internet must be based on rules which guarantee fairness", stressed the Parliament President.

Similar thoughts emerged when EU Telecom Ministers in June discussed what should be the EU's digital priorities in the post COVID-19 era.

Ministers agreed that further investments in the digital infrastructure are necessary in order to overcome a digital gap that still exists, and which may restrict to access of citizens to e-health, e-learning and to distant working.

They also stressed the importance of strengthening EU digital sovereignty and the development of digital skills.

(Formal Council Conclusions on shaping Europe's digital future adopted 9 June here.)

EU Commission:
Technology sovereignty vital

The European Commission seems to share some of the Telecom Ministers' views on digital priorities.

As part of a €750 billion recovery plan announced in May, the Commission said the goal was to achieve technology sovereignty in crucial areas after it emerges from the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, reports Reuters.

The crisis has shown how the 27-country bloc depends on others for key technologies and supplies of crucial materials.

The proposal includes more investment in 5G and 6G networks, with the main beneficiaries expected to be health, education, transport, logistics and media, but did not give any figures.

In early June Germany and France launched the Gaia-X cloud platform in a bid for digital sovereignty. A prototype is set to be released by the end of the year.

The idea behind the project is to convince firms to store their data with home-grown alternatives to U.S. and Chinese tech giants like Amazon Web Services and Alibaba, explains Politico.

EU Council:
Media literacy never more important

"Media literacy and our capacity to have a critical understanding of and interact responsibly with media have never been as important as in today's world affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, not only for the protection of public health, but also for ensuring the resilience of democratic societies and the enhancement of democratic participation", said   EU Culture Ministers in Conclusions adopted in May.

We must now intensify work on media literacy and critical thinking, said the Council and invited Member States to raise public awareness of the importance of this subject and support the development of media literacy policies and their implementation.

It is important, for example, to develop a lifelong-learning approach to media literacy for all ages and support the development and the sharing of media literacy teaching and training materials.

Furthermore, Member States should encourage all types of media organisations, especially public service media, to develop and promote media literacy initiatives and to take part in other stakeholders' initiatives and projects.

One should also make better use of the possibilities offered by EU funds and EU programmes to support media education and diverse media literacy projects and initiatives, for example support for the media through the Creative Europe programme, in particular the new action on support for the media.

Additional funding sources should be developed too, said the Council.

Privacy / Data Protection

Contact-tracing apps:
COVID-1984?

When plans to launch contact-tracing apps to help combat the COVID-19 pandemic were announced this spring, many journalists and other groups were appalled.

"From drones barking orders at park-goers to tracing people's movements through cellphones, Western governments are rushing to embrace sophisticated surveillance tools that would have been unthinkable just a few weeks ago", wrote the news service Politico, dismayed that this could happen even in the European Union, "home to the world's strictest privacy regime".

Also alarmed was the organisation Reporters Without Borders (RSF). In April it urged government leaders to ensure that such measures guarantee anonymity and respect for the confidentiality of journalist's sources.

In reaction to this debate the EU Commission published in April a toolbox and guidance to ensure data protection standards in the Member States' responses to the pandemic.

The documents recommend that mobile applications should not use location data in their contact tracing applications, and they should also be dismantled as soon as they are no longer needed, interoperable and cyber-secure, while also being voluntary and abide by EU privacy law, including the GDPR and the ePrivacy Directive.

The EU Commission's stance seems to have calmed some of the worries.

In its newsletter of 29 April the European Digital Rights organisation (EDRi) analysed the Commission's proposals and how they fit with civil society views on the subject.

Rather well, it seems. "If proven that technologies are indeed helpful to combat this crisis, technological solutions need to comply with very strong core principles. Many of these strong principles are already present in the Commission's two documents and in many of the civil society views in this ongoing debate", concludes EDRi.

Whether all EU member states will adhere to these principals and follow the Commission's "guidance" is however doubtful.

In a later newsletter (27 May) EDRi also warns: "Very real concerns about digital measures proposed as pandemic responses should not overshadow the broader context of mass-scale surveillance emerging before our eyes. Governments across Europe are increasingly rolling out measures to physically track the public, via telecommunications and other data".

"Surveillance measures and other threats to privacy have countless times been justified for the 'public good'", the digital rights organisation reminds us.

Soon thereafter Euractiv reported that a cross-section of EU human rights groups had pressed national authorities to provide more information on how citizens' data will be stored and processed as part of the rollout of coronavirus contact-tracing applications across the bloc.

"Human rights organisations need to make sure that European governments take their responsibility to prepare impact assessments seriously and no European government uses the pandemic as a pretext for normalising the expanded use of invasive digital surveillance technologies", explained a statement from the groups.

Tracing apps a digital Trojan horse?

There are other reasons to worry about the COVID-19 tracing applications, points out Pierre Pozzi Belforti, professor at Solvay Brussels Business School and at Sciences Politiques Paris*.*

Referring to the standard for the apps developed by Apple and Google, now used by many European countries, the professor muses:

"It is striking to see how technology giants, not least two of the very largest, have seized on the opportunity to offer, together, an application to the authorities. We have never before seen a co-development agreement between the two fiercest competitors arise so quickly".

"This willingness to cooperate might hint at motives that are much more worrying for our free democratic societies", writes the professor.

"Any tech entrepreneur and venture capital financier knows that the health sector offers some of the most lucrative income opportunities ahead for these companies. Investment bank Morgan Stanley estimates that the digital health businesses could generate annual revenues above $300 billion, just within the next seven years".

"We should not take this lightly. Medical data is the kind of data we want and need to protect the most".

European Media Policy

The Newsletter provides an update on policy developments at the European level. We concentrate on news from the European Union – current issues and trends in media policy, new proposals for legislation, debates in the European Parliament, recently taken or impending policy decisions and reactions among those concerned, new support programmes, EU studies in the field, etc. There will also be some coverage of policy developments in the Council of Europe and at the international level. The newsletter is published three times a year.