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Voices – European Festival of Journalism and Media Literacy

First edition – Florence, 14-16 March 2024

Key takeaways and recommendations

On 14-16 March 2024, the first edition of Voices, the European Festival of Journalism and Media Literacy, took place in Florence, Italy. Three days of an interactive setting with a mission of reshaping our relationship with information and a conviction that a more informed society is a freer one. With around 40 sessions, 70 speakers, and more than 1,300 visitors, Voices positioned not just as a festival, but as a movement that brings citizens, journalists, and media professionals closer to each other. From tackling journalism's evolution in a rapidly shifting media landscape to empowering citizens with the tools to navigate these changes, the discussions, exchanges, and workshops resulted in a set of key takeaways and recommendations towards a more informed future.

Journalism and media literacy essentials in an AI-driven world

The advancements in AI and especially the wide and easy use of generative AI technologies capable of generating human-like text, images, and narratives, is already impacting citizens' lives at scale. There are both benefits and risks related to capabilities and limits of such technologies, the models and sources from which they collect information, which shape the results they generate. Each new technology requires development of new skills and knowledge for both professionals and citizens to explore its potential and avoid the risks.

Takeaways

The emergence of generative AI systems requires certain adaptations by citizens, media organisations and journalists, as well as policy makers and regulators.

Speakers stressed the need for media organisations and journalists to embrace AI tools, including to remain competitive, and the importance of upskilling the workforce to prevent displacement in the sector. They also underlined the need for collaboration among media organisations in Europe to ensure the development of more diverse and pluralistic AI systems and to avoid monopolisation by a single entity. It was further mentioned that the use of credible editorial content by AI systems for their outputs could help avoid bias and misinformation. This calls, however, for a fair compensation model for media organisations contributing quality content. The capacity to innovate and implement journalistic AI systems in line with professional ethics and human rights can enhance the resilience of journalism in the digital age.

Speakers recognised the EU's AI Act and other international standards on AI as positive steps towards the regulation of AI but see the need for additional measures and comprehensive and coordinated regulatory enforcement. The remuneration of media organisations and journalists that invest heavily in quality content must be ensured. It was suggested that providers of generative AI

systems should give a proportion of their turnover to media organisations, i.e., through collective rights management organisations, as a reward.

Finally, speakers called for widespread media literacy initiatives. There is a need to train everyone in AI - and not just computer scientists or engineers. It was stressed that citizens must be made aware that AI generates synthetic content / creates artificial information. It was emphasised that experts should shift away from using misleading language that anthropomorphises AI systems.

Recommendations

We recommend **media organisations and journalists** to:

- not shy away from integrating AI tools in their work streams but remain vigilant that any use of such tools happens in accordance with high professional and ethical standards.
- invest in training / upskilling initiatives.
- cooperate more closely in AI and build more diverse and pluralistic AI systems together.
- form alliances between big and small media companies, involving journalists and their associations, in negotiating fair remuneration for the use of their editorial outputs as training data for generative AI models. Journalistic content is a crucial input to these models that makes their outputs more credible and less biased.

We call on **policymakers and regulators** to:

- regulate AI comprehensively, ensuring full respect of fundamental human rights, democracy and the rule of law.
- ensure remuneration of media organisations and journalists for the use of their editorial content by AI, if they allow it.
- Systematically invest in data, media and AI literacy as part of the education curriculum, supporting the continuous training of teachers and the involvement of professionals and journalists in media literacy training.

We encourage in general:

- widespread media literacy initiatives so that generative AI can be understood and used by everyone in a way that strengthens freedom of expression and democracy.
- the dehumanisation of AI technologies in public discourse – they may produce human-like outputs but there are still humans behind their design and use.
- follow the [Guidelines on the responsible implementation of artificial intelligence systems in journalism](#) of the Council of Europe.

Integrity of information and a shared reality in the age of AI

For citizens, it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate the information environment, finding news in noise and distinguishing accurate information from manipulated one. As news habits are changing and as algorithmic recommenders by major platforms overshadow architecture access to professional and accountable editorial content, the role of public policy becomes crucial in safeguarding media freedom and public's access to journalism. Such policies are detrimental also to

the economic sustainability of journalism. Research has long revealed the persuasive power of visuals -ranging from photographs, illustrations, infographics, to memes and videos- often surpassing the impact of textual communication. This very strength makes them vulnerable tools for disinformation and misinformation.

Recommendations

We recommend **media organisations and journalists** to:

- to continue their important work of producing credible information and fact-checked stories.
- to reverse the trend of news and information being reduced/simplified and provide as much context as possible to their stories / ensure that information is complete.

We call on **policymakers and regulators** to:

- acknowledge the role played by independent media organisations and journalists in fact-checking and producing credible information, including in policies addressing disinformation and online platform behaviour.
- ensure the independence of Public Service Media, including through proper funding, given their importance for driving quality / investigative journalism.

We call on specifically the **governments of EU members states** to:

- put into practice the recommendations of the recent OECD report “Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity”. This report is the first baseline assessment of how governments are upgrading their governance measures and institutional architecture to provide a supportive environment where reliable information can thrive, while ensuring the vigilant protection of fundamental freedoms. Among the priorities: to improve the transparency and accountability of online platforms, and to support a diverse, plural and independent media sector, with an emphasis on local journalism.

We call on the **EU** to:

- ensure strong enforcement of the Digital Services Act, especially on measures related to the systemic risk assessment and mitigation by Very Large Online Platforms and Very Large Online Search Engines. In particular, access to platform data for researchers is crucial in overseeing the practices and content policies by major technology companies and the impact those may have on the systemic risks related to information integrity, media pluralism and media freedom, elections, and democracy overall. The EU should also support the capacity building of researchers in countries and institutions that are less equipped and experienced in big data and platform research.

Safety of journalists: We are humans, hear our stories

Journalists and media workers have always been considered “high risk” workers because of the nature of their work. The reality shows that there is an inadequacy in both the awareness of safety

issues and the lack of protective measures and policy in place for journalists and media workers to do their work safely, and without fear. With the nature of the news industry where speed is the rule to break the news, there is barely time to carry out risk assessments for journalists. However, journalists face omnipresent risks to their health and safety, whether in the workplace, in the public arena, or in volatile environments.

The safety of journalists is a critical issue that affects not only the individuals involved but also the broader societal fabric of democracy, transparency, and freedom of expression. It can take different forms, from physical and legal threats to online harassment, political pressures, or censorship. The Media Freedom Rapid Response, a Europe-wide mechanism that tracks, monitors and reacts to press and media freedom violations in EU Member States, reported 1,115 alerts in 2023. The Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists reported 217, 199 of which are still active and 94 of which are still pending a reply from the Council of Europe Member States. It is therefore crucial to highlight the individual experiences of journalists who face threats, harassment, attacks, and even death, just for doing their work – and to call on the states to comply with their obligation of ensuring an enabling environment for journalists.

Takeaways

While national governments do not seem very committed to creating the necessary legal frameworks for media freedom and the safety of journalists, speakers underlined that the EU has done a respectable job in this area during this legislative mandate. The Anti-SLAPP Directive and the protection of journalists and their sources in the EMFA were mentioned as good examples, even though speakers seem to agree that the low penalties foreseen in the Anti-SLAPP Directive will likely have limited impact on preventing big corporations and individuals from launching SLAPPs against journalists and the media. Speakers further emphasised the good international standards set by the Council of Europe and the relevant case law of the European Court of Human Rights. Now, they see the need for political commitment to enforce these new legal instruments across the bloc.

The festival also addressed the other side of the coin of journalist safety. In two very practical workshops organised by EBU Academy, festival attendees had the opportunity to learn the basics of first aid and cybersecurity. The workshops provided participants with hands-on and easy-to-implement tips and tricks on how to stop catastrophic bleeding, assist casualties, and increase privacy and security of their digital devices. Practical advice included regular device reboots, monitoring battery life for irregularities, the use of VPNs and screen privacy protectors. Journalists working in sensitive situations should also consider using one-off devices. It was stressed that cybersecurity is becoming an increasing risk for journalists and their sources. According to the EY Global Cybersecurity Leadership Insights Study from 2023, the number of cyberattacks has increased by 75% in the last five years.

- journalists do not immediately think of their safety when going on an assignment. As we heard from Marc Marginedas, who was kidnapped by ISIS, he travelled to Syria despite warnings that this was not a good idea. Andrea Backhaus explained during the “Live Stories” session that she chose to live as close to the conflict region on which she was reporting. The journalists experienced painful experiences and burnout to eventually learn how to prioritise their well-being in their work.

- The assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia was not conceived by one malicious man with a single motive. She suffered years of attacks of all different kinds, some seemingly less harmful than others. The politicians in power, about whom she wrote, scapegoated her and the advent of social media served to destroy her image even worse than it had been hampered before the news moved online. It was considered acceptable for politicians, powerful businessmen and the general public to mock and threaten her. Her death was calculated by various malign actors and was enabled due to a political and societal environment that encouraged the ridicule of those who hold power to account.
- Even in a country considered as progressive as Germany, a well-respected TV reporter with decades of experience was subject to online threats and hate speech for her gender. Georgine Kellermann showed the audience how important it was for her to have a strong support system that goes through her Twitter account comments. She showed resilience against those who mock her. Maja Sever countered that by revealing that she very recently felt insecure about hateful comments she received. The reactions of journalists to online hate will always be complex and personal.

Recommendations

We recommend **media organisations and journalists** to:

- regularly organise / participate in training on safety issues. Employers should make sure that training is adequate and placed regularly. Also freelance journalists should be integrated into main training schemes, especially for hostile environments and safety at the workplace. These trainings should be updated according to technological, legal and medical developments.
- ensure specific support and training for female and freelance journalists.
- ensure training for editors on safety issues and raising their awareness. Editors and editors-in-chief should be the “gatekeepers” to ensure the safety of journalists.
- ensure psychological support and training in mental well-being for journalists.
- use tools such as the [OSCE RFoM Safety of Journalists Toolbox](#) that provides journalists from all the European countries with knowledge about national and international journalists' safety mechanisms in one place. In addition, a list of international mechanisms and organisations to contact in case of an attack.
- employers must make sure that risks are properly assessed before dangerous assignments.
- provide / use proper equipment when reporting from the field.
- use tools such as the [EFJ Safety Risk Assessment Platform](#). The European Federation of Journalists provides journalists' unions, media managers, editors and journalists with the Risk Assessment Platform, an online tool to help journalists and media workers assess and prepare for risks associated with their assignment. The platform was developed by safety experts who have experience in training journalists, media workers, media managers.

We call on **policymakers and regulators** to:

- show political commitment and adopt strong safeguards for media and journalists.

- enforce the new legal instruments, such as the Anti-SLAPP Directive and the European Media Freedom Act adequately and fully.
- implement the EU Recommendation on the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists.
- follow the recommendations in the annual report of the Council of Europe's [Safety of Journalists Platform](#).
- implement the [OSCE guidelines for monitoring online violence against female journalists](#).

We recommend the **EU institutions** to:

- follow-up the implementation of the [Recommendation on the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists with Member States](#).
- ensure comprehensive, sound, and independent monitoring of media pluralism and the internal market for media services, including risks to and progress in its functioning and resilience, as foreseen by the [European Media Freedom Act](#).
- fund initiatives that will offer further training and awareness on the protection and safety of journalists.

We encourage in general:

- stronger sensibilisation of the wider public of safety issues, in particular cybersecurity risks, and equipping them with the basics to reduce any vulnerabilities.
- Universities should include in their curriculum different practical training addressing various dimensions of journalists' safety (physical, digital, legal, emotional, etc.)

Is journalism dead? Long live journalism

News media and journalism are facing complex challenges in ensuring economic viability in the world where digital advertising is dominated by online platforms, where young people are increasingly departing from the traditional news brands, and where people in general are not motivated to pay for journalistic content. Technology companies and their business models and practices contribute to a significant drop in advertising and other income for newspapers and audiovisual services, leaving the media vulnerable to economic downturns, market fluctuations, and systemic shocks like a pandemic and wars. Navigating these challenges requires robust news media with sustainable and alternative business models to fulfil their democratic mission of scrutinising power and providing essential information to the public. At Voices we have especially explored how this shift and economic dynamics affect local and smaller media outlets.

Takeaways

Economic sustainability is essential for preserving a pluralistic media system and ensuring independent journalism. The disruption caused by digital platforms poses a significant threat to journalism's business model, particularly in the advertising market dominated by Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) and Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs). In particular, the willingness to pay for news has dramatically dropped. Insights from various speakers highlighted the necessity for media outlets to develop hybrid and diversified income streams to achieve sustainability. Alternative business models from advertising-reliant business models, such as subscriptions and

memberships, are perceived as potential alternatives in certain circumstances. These models offer financial sustainability when they are able to create communities of like-minded users and further encourage investments in quality journalism. Subscriptions create a direct relationship between the media organisation and its audience, reducing dependence on intermediaries and enhancing the company's ability to understand and cater to its subscribers' preferences. Membership models take the subscription concept further by fostering a sense of belonging and community among supporters. This engagement creates a loyal and invested audience base that values the quality and integrity of the journalism being produced. Memberships can also generate additional revenue through donations and voluntary contributions, further supporting the media organisation's financial health. From the experiences shared by the panellists, it looked also that the business model based on advertising is still working in some realities, including digital media. By prioritising quality over quantity, media organisations can differentiate themselves in a crowded market and build a reputation for excellence. This investment in quality journalism not only attracts and retains subscribers and members but also enhances the media organisation's credibility and trustworthiness.

Recommendations

We recommend **media organisations and journalists** to:

- prioritise quality over “clickbait journalism”. Media outlets can build credibility and attract a loyal audience base, ultimately contributing to a healthier media ecosystem.
- actively engage with their audience to foster a sense of community and belonging, for an audience that is willing to pay for quality information.
- diversify their revenue streams, relying on alternative funding than mere advertising revenues, as it provides media organisations with greater financial stability and resilience.
- follow the recommendations in the Study of the Council of Europe, on [Good practices for sustainable news media financing](#).

We recommend the **EU institutions and Member States** to:

- follow the recommendations in the Study of the Council of Europe on [Good practices for sustainable news media financing](#), in particular those that suggest implementing policy measures to support quality journalism, such as citizen's voucher programs, tax incentives to support news media sustainability, ensuring fair allocation of funds to support journalism and promote innovation. Establishing frameworks for supporting journalism employment are recommended; levying taxes on digital advertising and directing revenue to news organisations should be considered; support fair remuneration for copyrighted content distributed online.
- invest in media literacy programs to empower citizens with the skills to critically evaluate information sources and recognize the value of independent journalism. By promoting media literacy, governments can help cultivate a more informed and discerning public, which is essential for the long-term sustainability of pluralistic media systems.

The European Media Freedom Act: A groundbreaking EU law on media freedom

Media freedom and pluralism play a key role in ensuring that media and journalists can play their role as watchdogs to hold those that hold power to account and to empower people to become or remain informed and active citizens. Speakers agreed that these values are not to be taken for granted and welcomed the new EU Media Freedom Act as an important instrument to tackle threats to media independence. While some speakers spoke out in favour of even more ambitious provisions, speakers agreed that it was important to find an agreement around strong EU principles to ensure application and robust enforcement of the EMFA could start as soon as possible.

Recommendations

We recommend **media organisations and journalists** to:

- To continue to raise awareness about the concrete threats they face and use the alert systems to report them.
- To speak out together whenever threats are emerging and ensure the public knows about them.
- To raise awareness of journalists about the EU new mechanisms in place to protect journalist safety and security and media independence (e.g. anti SLAPP Directive, EMFA).

We call on **policymakers and regulators** to:

- secure robust application and enforcement of the EMFA.
- raise awareness and support implementation at national level.
- ensure adequate and independent monitoring at EU level.
- ensure transparent open dialogue between the new Board for media services and other stakeholders.
- secure training for journalists' organisations and civil society on how to ensure best implementation. EC should draft implementation guidelines.

Voices Organisers

Behind Voices stands a varied consortium of European organisations committed to enhance media freedom and media literacy as essential elements for the functioning of our democratic societies. These are the [Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom](#) (lead partner based at the European University Institute), the [European Federation of Journalists](#), the [AISBL EBU-UER](#), [The European Association for Viewers Interests](#), [Journalisme et Citoyenneté](#), [Lie Detectors](#) and [Savoir*Devenir](#). Voices is an EU funded project.

The concept of the Festival is to embark on a journey across different European cities to spotlight media freedom and media literacy as essential elements for the functioning of our societies. After its first edition in Florence in 2024, the Voices festival will go to Zagreb in 2025.

Voices – the European Festival of Journalism and Media Literacy is brought to you by



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