

Festival opening report:

2nd edition of Voices

The importance of journalism and media literacy in challenging times

Voices – European Festival of Journalism and Media Literacy

Zagreb, 27 February-1 March 2025

The times we live in are challenging. We stand at multiple crossroads, including the climate crisis, the development of artificial intelligence, and democratic backsliding. The political choices we make as citizens, and the leaders we support today, will shape the world for generations to come. The quality of our information environment, as well as the accuracy of the information and analysis we are exposed to, play a crucial role in shaping our opinions and influencing the decisions we make.

Reliable journalism and trustworthy sources play a vital role in ensuring that we as citizens are well-informed, enabling us to make informed decisions and constructively participate in democratic society. However, journalism and traditional media are facing profound challenges, including audience disengagement. While some of these issues stem from within—such as the pressure to prioritise speed and business demands over professional standards—they are also largely driven by the widespread influence of big technology companies. Digital platforms and other technologies are reshaping the information sphere, deciding journalism's reach, affecting its economic sustainability, and facilitating the spread of disinformation through both the design and malicious use of various digital platforms.

Platforms are also driving creative disruption, enabling the development of new, more engaging forms of journalism that serve the public interest. Additionally, rapid advancements in artificial intelligence—particularly generative AI—are opening up new opportunities. To fully benefit from these opportunities, a collaborative approach is essential, ensuring that both emerging challenges and existing issues, which are now evolving in new dimensions with AI, are carefully considered and addressed.

This is especially difficult when those responsible for safeguarding media freedom and pluralism, as well as ensuring journalists' safety, often undermine both through their actions—or lack thereof. Around the world, media and journalists are increasingly under attack by leading politicians and powerful businesspeople. Now, more than ever, it is crucial for citizens and journalists to unite in defending the public interest against the private agendas of a powerful few.

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) has undergone drastic changes with the rise of information disorders (loss of public trust in media, disinformation, polarization...). The advent of AI driven media requires even more vigilance, especially as the social media platforms are resisting EU regulation (moderation, transparency, accountability...). This puts the onus of literacy, on the citizens, who are expected to exert their critical and ethical thinking on matters that are systemic and structural.

At Voices, the people, from young to seniors, have center-stage. MIL is not shown as a means of just coping with information disorders, it is shown as a way of updating the participants with the latest evolutions in digital wellbeing and in digital citizenship at large. It is providing them with mind-shaping experiences, as they witness first-hand how professionals construct MIL projects, disseminate MIL resources, train MIL practitioners. They can network across Europe and beyond, and build alliances with another active community, the journalists, in the true spirit of a multiplier event.

Voices emerge to bring citizens, journalists, and media professionals closer to each other. It isn't just another festival. It's a pioneering event to reshape our relationship with information. From tackling journalism's evolution in a rapidly shifting media landscape to empowering citizens with the tools to navigate these changes, the goal is to steer the conversation toward a more informed future.

A voice is an important opinion that someone expresses. Giving voice is also giving space to it, making it exist. In a way, this entails the role journalists play in society, it recalls participation and representation. The festival's name comes in plural (VOICES) because we won't provide a single view, nor journalism does it. The essence of the festival is bringing different people and audiences together. It should serve as a meeting ground for citizens, journalists, media professionals, students, and all curious people to learn from each other. We designed the Voices intending to ensure that the audience leaves the festival better informed and with new skills and competences, and that they also enjoy taking part.

Over three days, the second edition of this pioneering European Festival of Journalism and Media Literacy will explore crucial themes shaping our relationship with information and media. The programme is constructed through talks, interactive workshops, theatre play, screenings, experimental forms of expression and journalism, exhibitions, and networking opportunities. The sessions will tackle topics of artificial intelligence, local and environmental journalism, mental wellbeing in journalism and in the digital age more broadly, economic sustainability of journalism, support system for investigative reporting, digital parenting, new formats in journalism for young audiences, and the role of public service media, among others.

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. The festival is a truly European meeting point for journalists and their representative organizations, media organisations, civil society, media literacy professionals and teachers, academia, and citizens. The festival is European, but it also 'goes local', which means that for every edition and in each new city it takes place, there is also a strong representation of local/national topics, speakers, audiences, and the language. After its first edition in Florence in 2024, the second edition of Voices takes place in Zagreb in 2025, in close cooperation with our local partner, the Trade Union of Croatian Journalists. They have done an outstanding job of adding local context and engaging many students, journalists, and citizens from Croatia and beyond in this festival.

This report is aimed at providing an overview of what to expect at the second edition of Voices: the key topics that will be covered, various angles for approaching complex challenges, solutions for journalism and through journalism, and inspiring projects and individuals that may lead positive change.

Voices in Zagreb: A wide overview for the second edition

The second edition of Voices is bringing the European Festival of Journalism and Media Literacy to Zagreb, the capital of the EU's youngest member state and a neighbour to several EU candidate countries that share a similar language and an overlapping online information ecosystem.

Although each Western Balkans country has its own unique characteristics, they also face many shared challenges. Additionally, they are often overlooked or underrepresented in major Western conferences and events that focus on media and journalism. This edition of Voices presents an opportunity to explore the relationship between the centre and the periphery in the context of the challenges facing journalism and informed citizenship today, and across different themes of the festival.

Investigative Journalism in Croatia and in the Balkans

This session will bring together some of the best investigative reporters from Croatia and the Western Balkans region. In a direct conversation with festival visitors, they will showcase highlights from their most challenging and impactful investigations, discussing how their work has influenced systems and changed lives. Investigative journalism is the highest form of journalism—one that truly acts as a watchdog of power and safeguards the public interest. It requires time, resources, dedication, and persistence. However, investigative journalists often face legal, physical, financial, and other forms of threats and intimidation. When working on long-term or highly sensitive investigations, the mental toll can be high.

Do we, as citizens, recognise and value this work? Is there a support system within newsrooms and the broader media environment that provides legal protection and prioritises the mental well-being of journalists who risk their lives to uphold our rights? These are the questions that this session will address.

Artificial Intelligence: A double-edged sword for truth

Opening with a thought provoking presentation, this session will explore the many ways artificial intelligence can be both used and misused within our information ecosystem. By combining the insights of experienced, cautious voices with the fresh perspectives and open experimentation of young professionals, the discussion will offer a rich diversity of viewpoints on AI's potential impact. Topics will include its influence on the integrity of information spaces, as well as the essential skills and safeguards needed to ensure citizens are informed rather than manipulated.

Power and purpose: can Big Tech serve the common good?

Can Big Tech, as privately owned companies, truly act in the public's best interest? This critical question demands urgent attention. While digital skills are important, the conversation must go further — beyond the surface of technological proficiency — to uncover the deeper realities of how our data is collected, analysed, and used. Behind every click, search, or interaction lies a sophisticated system designed to influence our choices, behaviors, and even our perceptions of reality.

These practices don't just impact individuals; they have far-reaching consequences for survival of journalism and for society as a whole, shaping everything from democratic processes to cultural norms. As Big Tech's role in our daily lives continues to grow, the stakes have never been higher. It's time to dive deeper and ask tough questions.

Looking for harmony: digital well-being for the world and us

While the media may flood our digital spaces with distractions and disinformation, its impact goes far beyond what we see on our screens. The industry also contributes to resource extraction, waste, and energy consumption, raising urgent questions about its environmental footprint. How can digital technology and AI be harnessed to truly benefit the planet and its people? What shifts in mindset are needed to promote sustainable use? And what role can the media play in shaping public perception and encouraging behaviors that prioritise the well-being of both individuals and the environment?

This thought-provoking discussion will explore these pressing issues, imagining a future where our interconnected world leverages technology as a force for good—a tool that promotes sustainability, enhances well-being, and helps build a better future for all.

Raising digital natives: healthy habits for parents and kids

Did you know that, in Europe, children account for one in three internet users? In fact, half of them begin using the internet by the age of seven. As parents and teachers, supporting them in this digital landscape can feel overwhelming, but there are effective strategies to guide them.

For instance, maintaining open communication about their online experiences helps build trust and understanding. Setting healthy boundaries, such as limiting screen time for both parents and children can help fostering balanced habits, and collaboratively establishing clear rules for internet use gives kids a sense of responsibility and ownership. In this session, experts will dive deeper into practical tools and tips to empower parents in navigating their children's digital lives with confidence.

Safety of Journalists - Journalists in exile

The safety of journalists is not just a personal concern: it's a cornerstone of democracy, transparency, and freedom of expression. When journalists are silenced through threats, harassment, or violence, entire communities lose access to vital information and voices are stifled that would otherwise hold power to account.

This session delves into the multifaceted risks journalists face, ranging from physical and legal threats to online harassment, political pressure, and censorship. For many, these dangers are so severe that they are forced into exile, leaving behind their homes and communities to continue their critical work in safer environments.

We are Humans - Hear our Stories. As a follow-up to the Safety of Journalists stage conversation, Living Stories will invite the audience to continue the discussion in a cozy, living-room-style setting—allowing them to ask questions, hear personal stories, and connect with journalists on a deeper level.

Voices for the planet: activists, scientists and the media in the climate crisis

As the climate crisis worsens, raising awareness and informing citizens about environmental issues and their impact on our planet's future has never been more important. However, the complexity of environmental issues often leads to feelings of powerlessness and negativity, making them particularly susceptible to misinformation and disinformation.

Climate activists, scientists, and the media face a challenging task. This will be an engaging discussion on how to effectively inform on environmental issues and advocate for change, and the role of media, journalism, and comedy in this effort. The session will begin with a stand-up performance by climate comedian Stuart Goldsmith.

Local Media - Save local journalism

In communities large and small, the heartbeat of democracy thrives through local journalism. However, as traditional local outlets face unprecedented challenges, some communities face an information void or risk of encountering it soon. This emphasises the urgent need to revitalise sustainable models that ensure robust coverage and civic engagement.

Speakers from the region will focus on the case of Western Balkans. They won't only discuss the latest trends and challenges for local media, but also explore local independent 'alternative' media as open space in a captured legacy media environment. The conversation will also offer examples of the very powerful good investigations in local journalism.

Public Service Media for all - Nurturing new perspectives and cultivating inclusivity

Funded by the people and serving the people, public service media carry the critical mission to inform, educate, and entertain everyone, everywhere. But how can they evolve to ensure they remain inclusive, relevant, and representative of today's diverse societies?

In this engaging live talk-show, our guests will share insights into how public media organisations across the EU are rising to the challenge. From fostering inclusivity behind and in front of the camera or microphone, to connecting with younger audiences, and ensuring all segments of society feel represented, this session will showcase the innovative strategies being employed to make public media a true reflection of the communities they serve.

Engaging new audiences: innovative journalism and new formats

Audiences today are becoming increasingly fragmented, scattered across platforms, and harder to reach than ever. This is especially true for the elusive younger generation. How can the media capture their attention and win their trust? With an array of tools at their disposal — ranging from innovative formats and trending topics to fresh approaches to journalism — newsrooms have plenty of opportunities to adapt and thrive.

But it's not just about trying everything; it's about understanding what resonates with young audiences and building meaningful connections. Join us for an engaging session that explores how the media can attract the next generation of news consumers, cultivate their loyalty, and secure the future of journalism in an ever-evolving landscape.

Media Literacy Making off: what does it take to succeed against all odds?

This session will explore how Media Information Literacy (MIL) practitioners tackle challenges, seize unexpected opportunities, and drive innovation while designing and implementing impactful projects. MIL initiatives are inherently complex, requiring collaboration among diverse stakeholders, the delivery of ambitious outcomes, and the ability to connect with varied audiences. These audiences often include youth as a primary focus, parents as occasional participants, and seniors, who are frequently overlooked in such efforts.

This session highlights Civil Society Organisations from across Europe that have developed creative and accessible formats to engage these diverse groups. From low-tech solutions like exhibits to cutting-edge tools such as serious games, participants will discover strategies tailored to different audience needs—ranging from seniors and parents unfamiliar with MIL to new, emerging players like influencers.

Let's Protect Media Freedom in Europe: Three media experts will be interviewed by a journalism student on how the European Media Freedom Act, if rigorously implemented at

the national level, can protect journalists and independent media from undue political control and more.

Voices in Zagreb: Workshops, conversations, meeting-points

The second edition of Voices offers 12 workshops to the festival visitors, as well as experimental media experiences, and conversations.

Journalism professor Maja Šimunjak will lead a training on **Emotional well-being and resilience in journalism**. Journalists are regularly faced with emotional situations in which they need to manage their and others' emotions to be able to work effectively and safeguard their well-being and mental health. These include anxiety about approaching sources, nervousness before a broadcast, worry about posting content on social media due to perceived hostility of these spaces and many others. The aim of this workshop is to raise awareness of emotional challenges that media workers are likely to face and introduce some practical tools for managing these to enhance resilience.

Experienced project managers from the European University Institute will share their tips and tricks in a workshop on the **EU funding opportunities for journalism**. In this training, Elisabetta Airaghi and Claudio Mazzetti will focus on funding opportunities for journalists and media professionals from public and private sources. Participants will learn about the main EU funding programmes relevant for the news media sector, and how to present a project proposal.

Nico Schmidt will lead a workshop on **Investigative journalism - Beyond Borders: collaborative journalism from idea to publication**. Based on his rich experience, he will show how to collaborate across borders with colleagues from many countries -

from idea to publication. As an investigative journalist with Investigate Europe, Nico Schmidt works with colleagues from other European countries on complex stories that are relevant across Europe.

The European Media and Information Fund (EMIF) will provide a workshop on **Countering Foreign Interference** - discussing the harms that foreign interference pose for independent media and journalistic practice in the EU and its neighbourhood, with special attention to the Western Balkans. This session highlights some of the recently identified interference activities, what the EU and partners have done to counter these operations, and how journalism can contribute to countering these harms.

Lie Detectors is organising two workshops designed specifically for **teachers** (in Croatian and English). The aim of the workshop is to empower teachers to integrate relevant tools into classroom sessions for students aged 10 and up. The session is facilitated by Lie Detectors-trained journalists. Participants will work collaboratively in small groups, engaging with practical materials to develop the tools and resources necessary to address disinformation in the classroom effectively. In this dynamic session, educators delve into practical exercises facilitated by experienced journalists, gaining valuable insights to tackle disinformation.

The European Broadcasting Union will provide **A Beginners Guide to Using AI in Media Storytelling** with H el ene Rauby-Mattaa and Justin Kings. The workshop gives tips on good ways to start experimenting with AI tools and flags important ethical considerations. The session is led by two senior staff of EBU Academy which is supporting the AI literacy and upskilling of public service media in Europe with its own School of AI. This workshop at Voices draws on essential learnings from the school's evolving curriculum of trainings.

The workshop hosted by **Algowatch** project will focus on helping users aged 13 and above become familiar with Algo-AI competences, with a particular emphasis on disinformation. This will be achieved using resources developed by the AlgoWatch.eu project, including interactive quizzes, serious games, and icebreakers, which can be used independently or in collaboration with adults (teachers or parents).

The deliverables cover four key themes: online relationships, well-being, climate change, and democracy.

Two trainings are provided by the European Journalism Training Association (EJTA). An Interactive **media literacy workshop on resilience: Dox Yourself!**, with Anne Leppajarvi and Cristina Nistor-Beuran, will explore media literacy as a tool for resilience in two ways: first, by learning how to protect ourselves online through a "Dox Yourself" exercise, and secondly, by understanding the limits of how we process new information.

The workshop on polarisation: **A conversation across divides** with Tiko Tsomaia and Carien Touwen, will explore the roots, dynamics, and consequences of polarisation while equipping participants with strategies to foster constructive dialogue and build connections across divides. By creating a space for reflection, dialogue, and action, the workshop will help participants better navigate polarised environments.

IPI will provide **training for newsrooms: Building an effective response against online harassment**, with Javier Luque Martinez. Newsrooms are often the first line of defense against online harassment, smear campaigns, and abuse targeting journalists. To bolster newsrooms' ability to protect their staff, IPI and Faktograf have developed a hands-on training session for journalists, editors and newsroom managers. The session will present best practices for dealing with these attacks drawn from experts in more than 50 newsrooms across Europe. It aims to help news organisations establish an easy-to-follow

protocol to mitigate the emotional, professional and reputational toll online abuse can take on journalists in the face of smear campaigns.

YoCoJoin Project Workshop: Reimagining local news with youth, with Luc Steinberg and Ivana Jovanovic (Media Diversity Institute), Saša Petejan (Časoris, Slovenia), will explore the vital role of young journalists in revitalising local news. Local news is in crisis, facing challenges from declining advertising revenues, digital platforms, generative AI, disinformation and misinformation, compounded by eroding public trust. The consequences for communities are significant: reduced civic engagement and weakened

accountability and transparency of local authorities and businesses. Partners from the EU-funded YoCoJoin project will showcase how the initiative has trained young journalists and connected them with local media in seven European countries.

The Voices in Zagreb will also host a high level **Round Table discussion - Media Literacy and policy makers**. The discussion will highlight what needs to be done for public policy engagement at the national level. Ultimately, national education and culture ministries are responsible for ensuring that media literacy becomes the standard, not the exception. What's holding them back from taking action? What reasons do they give for their inaction? What support do they require from civil society organizations, the media, or the EU to step up?

There will also be a series of thought-provoking conversations, in some cases in experimental media formats.

Damian Tambini and Adrien Broche, moderated by Clothilde Le Coz, will discuss **Journalism Relevance**. 'If we want to rebuild trust with citizens, we will do so by showing our relevance as a quality news service provider.' Since 2016, the Agora for Journalism has published its 'Barometer on journalism relevance' with 4 media partners (today Radio France, France TV, France Medias Monde and Ouest-France) and the Viavoice Institute to address the term 'relevance' with that of 'trust' associated with journalism. This barometer measures journalism relevance and usefulness in society as well as the perception of journalism itself. It is the only barometer of its kind in Europe.

Barbara Matejic is staging a collective listening experience, an experimental journalistic format offering festival participants a chance to pause from the visual distractions that dominate daily life and impact our attention. Together, they will listen to a radio drama recounting human stories of individuals whose lives ended along migrant routes - **Cause of death: border**.

Can storytelling / storylistening help reduce social polarisation? Ilir Gashi

Answers this question in his **Tales of a hitchhiker**. Through this presentation, followed by a discussion, he will tell some of my hitchhiking experiences that taught him about the transformative power of conversation, and how storytelling can help better present and explain experiences and views, and reach out to those that otherwise would likely be left out.

In a conversation on **“What are the Mainstream Media? Should we trust them?”** Damian Tambini will discuss how the critique of the 'mainstream media' has become mainstream. This makes it difficult to reach political consensus on the urgent task of updating our structures of democratic communication. This talk unpacks the legal, economic and constitutional realities that lie behind the perception that legacy media are captured by powerful and obscure forces. It argues that in order to address the crisis and modernise democratic media systems we must first acknowledge the kernels of truth that underlie the critique of mainstream media. The notion that powerful media should be more transparent and should be held to account to reflect public interests is a good idea, which should be harnessed to ensure that all media operate independently both of the state and of private economic interests. These ideas of public interest media should also be applied to the new media including social media companies including X, as a condition of

operating in European media systems. The good news is that the building blocks for this programme of reform already exist in international law and in the European media's own approach to self-regulation. The talk closes with some practical steps to build sustainable media systems and reinvent the postwar idea of "responsible journalism".

Evening programme: theatre, pub quiz, movie screenings and more

The evening programme is designed as a way for the festival visitors to relax after a long day of learning and networking, but we also understood it as a chance to make the festival stand out and leave a lasting impression on the attendees.

The Voices brings to Zagreb the award-winning theatre play **They Blew Her Up** that tells the story of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia's brutal murder by a car bomb, through the point of view of different protagonists related to the event.

Pub Quizzes are widespread activity in Zagreb and Croatia. Voices bring to the scene the **Pub Quiz Extravaganza with Edna Sorgelsen**, the star of Drag Race Belgium, who will test knowledge from the world of journalism, films, and TV. It will be a complete show and compete for fantastic prizes.

Further to the theatre play and pub quiz, the festival's evening programme includes a screening of **The Click Trap** documentary that uncovers the alarming truths of the digital advertising economy, worth hundreds of billions, and its far-reaching effects on our lives online and off. Dominated by big tech, new ad technology has turned hate and disinformation into profit, exploited by global scammers. By revealing how this industry operates, who controls it, and who is fighting back, The Click Trap questions whether a safer, fairer, and more transparent digital ad future is possible.

Throughout the festival there will be a **speaker's corner: Connecting Voices**, an interactive forum where young professionals, including students, journalists, and media experts from across Europe, come together to exchange fresh ideas and insights. Designed as a modern speakers' corner, this space fosters open, dynamic discussions on the most pressing challenges shaping journalism today. From press freedom and newsroom independence to mental health, cross-border collaboration, the safety of women journalists, and the precarious conditions faced by freelancers, Connecting Voices amplifies diverse perspectives and encourages meaningful dialogue on the future of media.

Beyond words: visual storytelling at Voices

Sometimes, the most powerful stories are those left unspoken. Voices is proud to present five thought-provoking exhibitions that illuminate marginalised realities through the lens of young photographers and artists. These exhibitions offer an unfiltered glimpse into lives often overlooked and shed light on important issues, demonstrating the power of visual storytelling to inform, influence, and inspire action.

- **You Still Don't Know My Name** – Photojournalists Louise Herrche Serup and Sarah Hartvigsen Juncker visited 152 sex clinics to document the everyday lives, emotions, and dreams of 35 migrant sex workers and potential victims of human trafficking in Denmark.
- **Hidden Away** – Photojournalist Maria Høy Hansen exposes life inside Moldova's largest institution for people with mental and physical disabilities—a Soviet-era relic still awaiting modernization.
- **Generation Climate** – Photojournalist Christian Falck Wolff captures the passion of young activists in Germany fighting for the planet, from opposing a brown coal mine in Lützerath to protesting Tesla's factory expansion in Grünheide, which threatens local forests and water resources.
- **We Did What We Could, Remember Us** – A tribute by the Trade Union of Croatian Journalists to media workers killed during the genocide in Gaza. Between May 14 and July 18, 2024, they published a series of illustrations honouring reporters, editors, cameramen, and others who risked their lives for the truth.
- **From Reporting Chaos to Reporting House** – An immersive experience curated by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network and the award-winning team at Organizirano Oblikovanje. This installation explores the manipulation of narratives, blending historical propaganda with real journalistic reporting to reveal the struggle for truth and press freedom.

Voices awards

Voices is granting 10 awards for 1000 euros each to young journalists and media literacy advocates to participate in the festival's first edition. The Awards have a dual focus and will recognise five achievements in the field of Journalism, and five achievements in the realm of Media Literacy. Each comprises different categories dedicated to diverse themes described in the calls for entries. A special slot in the programme is dedicated to presenting and acknowledging their work.

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.

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



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