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How to deal with fake news

Supporting good journalism is the only solution to fake news that prevents despots from curbing freedom of expression

As the European Commission unveils today its plans to tackle the “fake news” phenomenon, the Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament has a different perspective on how to deal with “fake news” in a manner that avoids giving questionable powers to governments to regulate what is true and what is false.

For a long time we have been concerned about the increasing pressures faced by journalists all over Europe and the world. These pressures range from editorial biases, to commercial pressures, to insecure working conditions, mass surveillance and even to threats to the physical integrity of researchers and whistleblowers. And now we see opponents of freedom of expression using the “fake news” debate to muzzle criticism and shut down independent journalism. Or, we see others proposing strange “solutions” like making websites pay even just to link to news articles.

On the bright side, we repeatedly see how investigative journalism is capable of exposing corruption, holding power to account, and acting as the “fourth power” in our democracies. This is why journalism - and investigative journalism in particular - need to be strengthened, protected and cherished.

So, in a bid to understand how best to support those journalists taking the risk - both physical and financial - of undergoing lengthy and in-depth investigations, we commissioned a report from researchers at the University of Hamburg. The objective of the report is to assess the different types of funding models available to investigative journalists, and to propose some policy solutions that we can defend at both European and national level.

The report evaluates eight different types of funding models, ranging from the classical publishing house to publicly supported media and including cooperatives and entrepreneurial models. Each funding model is analysed according to six criteria: (1) Independence, (2) Quality, (3) Market Structure, (4) Processes, (5) Sustainability, and (6) Competitiveness.

It concludes that investigative journalism is best supported through a plurality of funding sources, in order to avoid the concentration of power towards one financier, and in order to better ensure long-term sustainability, since all models offer to a certain degree the option that investigative journalism is

influenced by financiers.

This said, although all the funding models assessed have their pros and cons, journalistic networks and not-for-profit or philanthropic models of funding came out on top when it comes to their ability to act as democracy's "fourth power".

Legislation to ensure the transparency of funding sources and of media ownership structures are also paramount. In addition, stronger efforts should be made to counter market concentration in the media sector, to prevent the domination of one company (or one politician!).

The report also highlights that journalists are less likely to conduct investigations when they fear potential monetary or non-monetary personal consequences such as law suits, imprisonment or death threats. Therefore, we believe that legislative frameworks that discourage freedom of expression - such as criminal defamation laws - should be reviewed. It of course goes without saying that impunity over the murder of journalists must be urgently prevented.

Linked to these dangers, the importance of transnational journalistic networks is highlighted as an extremely effective tool, not only to ease the burden of analysing floods of documents in various different languages, but also to spread the risks that could result from investigations that make those in positions of power feel uncomfortable. It also means that salary costs are spread across different outlets.

The report also concludes that the EU should support multiple types of media organisations in order to increase the likelihood that individuals and also firms or other for- and non-profit organizations would be willing to take the personal and financial risk to start the endeavour of investigative reporting. It calls on the EU to also finance journalism outside of Europe, particularly in countries with massive press restrictions, and it highlights the important role that the EU plays in terms of standard-setting for other regions.

However, care must be taken to ensure that public funding of investigative journalism does not influence the stories or crowd out private initiatives, according to the authors. Funding should ideally be channelled via independent organisations rather than through governments. Another option to reduce the fear of governmental influence could be the provision of indirect funding, for example through tax relief for media organisations or freelance journalists.

Turning to funders of media outlets, the report recommends collaboration between funding agencies in order to reduce the time it takes for journalists and outlets to receive - and to report - on grants, which can distract them from the actual investigative work.

Finally, many media outlets are beginning to do this, but the inclusion of citizens as participants and co-creators of news content is also a way of assessing public interest in a topic, and helps to detect blind spots of media coverage. It could foster a basic understanding in the sense and purpose of a free press and of investigative journalism in particular, and at the same time minimize the risk of unprofitable articles.

The power of the internet has allowed citizens - and journalists - to spread information and connect with people across borders. Freedom of expression has been democratised, but this has come with benefits and with risks. In order to foster independent, investigative journalism that holds power to account, we need to put in place additional finance models to incentivize research by journalists, and ensure that the regulatory frameworks that are in place are beneficial for, rather than a detriment to, the freedom of the press.

- [Read the report](#)

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