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NEW SCHOOL OF MULTILATERALISM

Uniting for Democracy -

Supporting Free & Independent Media

2024 Appeal of Austrian Media Professionals & Academia

In the framework of Team Europe Democracy

Founded in September 2021, Team Europe Democracy (TED) Network propels research, networking and building a knowledge hub. Cooperation comprises the workstreams of accountability and rule of law; political participation and inclusion as well as media and digitalisation. The Network is built by 15 Member States and 75 Think-tanks and European CSOs.

OUR COMMON CONCERN 10 Challenges & Recommendations

to foster independent media & digital democracy

Deeply concerned about the threats to democracy,

The decline of trust in institutions and information reliability,

Standing for media sustainability, independence and diversity
as well as the mutually reinforcing pillars of democracy,

We call for targeted support for all who work in the media ecosystem,
journalists, bloggers, media professionals.

Topical support is urgently needed,

responsive to the digitalisation of the information ecosystem,
fake news and challenges of AI, and

strengthening the capacities and skills of media professionals to
perform their business.

The quest for independent information,

on which the functioning of any democratic institution relies,

is a mandate from the public in the interest of its own.

Quality journalism isn't just about having an opinion,

it is about strengthening democracy by enabling information ex-
change and true dialogue.

Vienna, February 2024

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 19

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

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Purpose of the Appeal

Information governance is changing. What we need is responding to new scenarios and threats to media freedom. Why?

We live in a new era of geopolitical shifts, multipolarity and the competition of world orders.[1] Polarisation is rising, open space closing, and what is more, human rights at large eroding.[2] As a matter of fact the governance map is being rewritten. 72 percent of the world's population already live in autocratic systems, compared to 46 percent a decade ago.[3]

Freedom of opinion and expression are essential for the full development not only of the human beings, but of democratic societies as well.[4] Therefore, the 1991 Windhoek Declaration, a now universal declaration calling for free, independent and pluralistic press, was enhanced by the Windhoek Declaration plus 30[5] stipulating information as a public good. In 2015, SDG 16 addresses the need to adopt and implement constitutional, statutory and/or policy for public access to information.[6] In 2022, Austria initiated a political declaration in the framework of the Vienna High Level Conference on the Safety of Journalist, which more than 50 countries have already ratified.

But the quest for full freedom of information meets new emerging threats to which free & independent media support must adapt. However, practice shows that media capture by political and business interests, shutdowns, relocation conditions, content moderation and platformatization at large, as well as targeting journalists' safety, worsen in many parts of the world. According to UNESCO, between 2006 and 2021, over 1.200 journalists were killed. 22 percent of Ukrainian media outlets lost their offices following the Russian invasion, and 46 percent of staff have been reduced.

How to safeguard healthy information ecosystems as the very pillar of democratic space?

By our appeal, we like to stimulate support for free and independent media including press freedom, which are essential for democracy. It is meant as an enabler for further prestigious work on the adoption of a new strategic framework and implementation plan in the field.[7]
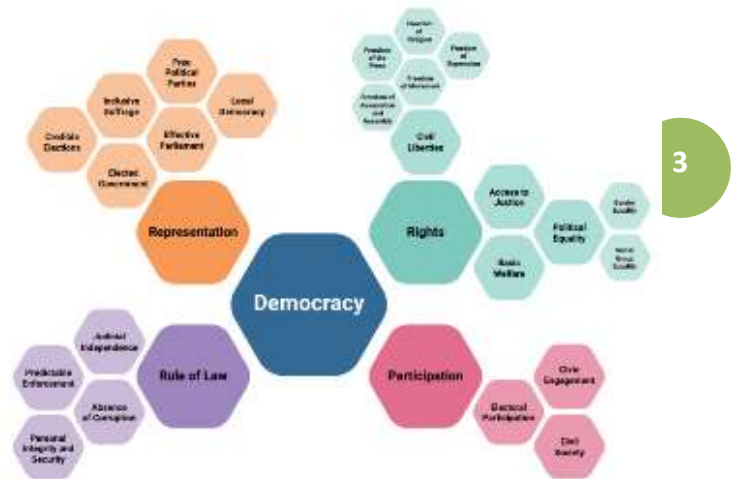
Independent media under pressure – State of play

Nexus media, development & democracy

Free media are the advocates of open society in the datafied age.

Defending media is defending the core of democratic societies, is the credo of *Teresa Ribeiro*, Representative on Freedom of the Media in her address before the Council of the OSCE on 23 November 2023 in Vienna.[8]

Building fair and just societies, ensuring meaningful and effective citizen engagement and promoting a peaceful balance of interests depend on accurate and impartial free media as diagnosed in the draft principles for independent media support, currently consulted between members and affiliates of the OECD Network on Governance.[9]

IDEA, State of Democracy 2023[1]

On democratic space

Democratic societies are stronger when they can rely on voices of reference, which actively disseminate information of public interest and contribute the informed decision-making. In performing that quest, free & independent media are essential cornerstones of democracy.[10]

To accompany dynamics of democracy, information systems, from data provenance, creation, exchange and flow to end-utilisation of information, must have the capacity to absorb change, adapt, and transform.[11] Media infrastructures, to be taken serious, have to prove reliability, handle plurality, act with objectivity, show transparency, secure provenance and authenticity as well as be protected from political interference. All factors will play a crucial role for democracies to survive.[12]

16 percent of world population fear a decline of press freedom, as the WEF Global Risks Report 2024 recently revealed.[13] Such decline has always correlated with democratic recession and the rollback in political freedom worldwide.[14] And again today, authoritarian regimes tend to expand censorship and media repression while embarking on more assertive, aggressive, and militarized foreign policies.

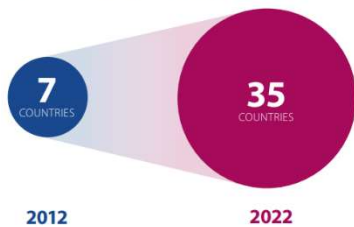## Growing threats to media freedom – The new environment

Today, integrity of independent media as democratic institutions, professional quality journalism and information as a public good are under threat by many disruptive causes:

- **Disruptive aspects of social media, and the collapse of traditional business models;**
- **Hypersonic spread of MDMs (mis/dis/malinformation) eliciting dwindling public trust;**
- **Crushing media capture by state authorities and big tech-media clusters;**
- **Threats to the safety of journalists in situations of emergency[15]; and**
- **The subtle "vessels of authoritarianism".**

Alarming megatrends

First: Shrinking space and loss of trust in information

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION DETERIORATING
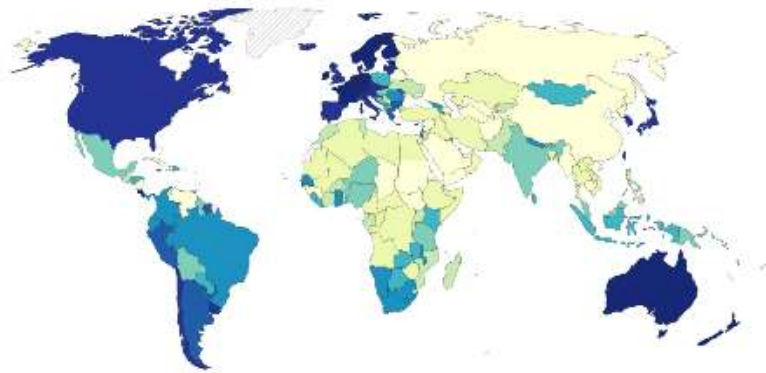
7 COUNTRIES — 2012
35 COUNTRIES — 2022

According to Reporters without Borders World Press Freedom Index, in only 52 of 180 countries, press freedom has been marked as 'good enough'.[16] In addition to this, there is a growing and alarming mistrust in media. With generative AI, disinformation actors have been given potent technologies with low production costs, making it easier to create high quality, convincing fakes - images, audio, video - at scale.[17]

V-Dem, Democracy Report 2023[18]

Second: Downward spiral of democratic information systems

Liberal democracy, 2022
Based on the expert assessments and index by V-Dem. It combines information on voting rights, the freedom and fairness of elections, freedoms of association and expression, civil liberties, and executive constraints. It ranges from 0 to 1 (most democratic).

Our World in Data

V-Dem, Democracy Report 2023

V-Dem Institute reporting documented that the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2022 has deteriorated to levels last seen in 1986.[19] Globally, half of all countries saw a decline in at least one indicator of democracy in the last five years. A steady rise in populist authoritarianism resulted finally in electoral autocracies as the most common regime type worldwide. Courts and independent, regulatory bodies have stepped in where executives and legislatures weakened over time. Countervailing institutions such as human rights organizations and electoral management bodies, as well as civil society networks, popular movements and *investigative journalists*, play an irreplaceable role in defending democracy.[20]

Third: Meaningful dialogue as a democratic pillar is in decline

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

SDG 16 is linked to the state of dialogue in societies. *Jürgen Habermas*, German philosopher, established four criteria of dialogue which are decisive for democratic structures, social cohesion and combating fragmentation: Understanding what the other says, acknowledgement as true, honest utterance, and morally reasonable implications. Successful dialogue diminishes silos, dismantles echo chambers, reduces news avoidance, and detects repression. All these phenomena work to the detriment of press freedom, and hence limit the performance of their democratic role.[21]

What we speak about

Media freedom and public interest. Today's media freedom crisis requires a systemic response that unites all cross-sectoral actors in a shared vision. This vision strives for information integrity and healthy information ecosystems and may be translated into reality by independent media.

Actors. Public interest represents a **powerful social norm** and media profession's social function is that of a 'trusted third party' for societies and individuals.[22] It is not only the highest professional ideal putting the right to free expression in the centre but has the potential to figure as the unifying vision for all cross-sectoral actors, to name a few:

- **Civil society advocacy**: Committee for the Protection of Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, International Press Institute, UN Safety of Journalists Focal Points, Summit for Democracy Media Freedom Cohort, Global Investigative Journalism Network, Legal Network for Journalists at Risk;
- **Media development community**: Media Freedom Coalition, Global Forum for Media Development, Center for International Media Assistance, bilateral donors;
- **Democratic governments**: diplomacy, humanitarian and security actors;
- **Big tech platforms**: meta, google, TicToc, X, as well as
- **Academia and research institutes**: IDEA Stockholm, V-Dem Gothenburg, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, Carnegie Endowment[23]

Public interest media

According to IFPIM[24], public interest media creating and distributing content…

- … exist to inform the public or help to ensure that power is held to account;
- provide fact-based information in a trustworthy manner;
- commit to the demonstrable pursuit of truth, for example through sourcing practices and the representation of the audiences it hopes to serve;
- are editorially independent;
- are transparent about processes, finances and policies used to produce it.[25]

Information ecosystem and information integrity: Information ecosystems consist of much more than fact reporting, comprising complex adaptive systems that include data infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators, and sharers.[26] In these contexts, media are classified as trustworthy when standards of editorial independence, journalistic methods, ethical rules and transparency are met (Journalism Trust Initiative), as stipulated in the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) of January 24, 2024.

Independent media, however, because of traditional business models and their public service-oriented mandate could easily disappear. The resulting news deserts will mean a less informed public, less accountable people in power, and less democratic governance (Courtney C. Radsch, 2023).

Top 10 Challenges

Democracy is underpinned by the pluralism of independent media. How to support this landscape appropriately? To get a full picture of challenges that will shape the future of independent media, different actors may be distinguished, or a timeline be drawn according to the degree of crisis escalation. Consider the following overview[27]:

Challenges, actorwise	
On the consumers side (UNMET DEMOCRATIC DEMAND) ➜ **Closing democratic space:** less and unreliable information created by threats to information as a global public good, information integrity and the overall functioning of the information ecosystem at large	**On the media outlets side (IMPACT ON MEDIA PROFESSIONALS)** ➜ **Physical safety, harassment & violence** ➜ **Digital safety, Censorship & Closing Space** by spyware (Pegasus), MDMs, and weaponization of information laws and privacy protection
On the producer side (ADAPTATION TO NEW BUSINESSES) ➜ **Changing business models** & **working conditions** by shift/loss of audiences, digitalisation, financing ➜ **Upholding standards & ethics** by self-regulation ("Press Councils"), labelling efforts to prove reliability	**On state and business structures (RESPONSIBILITY)** ➜ **Legislation regarding big tech platforms** "platformization", content moderation and **media capture** by political and business interests, ownership transparency ➜ **Fair value chain**: protect authors & make data provenance transparent / certification of reliable media
Challenges, by timeline	
Repression (GROWING AUTORITARIANISM) ➜ **Creeping bad practice of non-democratic regimes** with focus on game changers, foreign correspondents, and investigation, as well as **lack of preparedness of media**	**Crisis (FRAGILITY, CONFLICT, AND WAR)** ➜ **Living through emergency situations** such as takedown notices, shutdowns, surveillance, relocation and extinction, to be countered by e.g. backups, webhosting, relocation plans, HEFAT & PPE[28], visa and arrival information

A short glossary

Mis-/Dis-/Malinformation (MDM) stand for contemporary propaganda, disinformation by troll farms and others and online harassment campaigns leveraging the design of information communication technology platforms and the (AI-fuelled content moderation systems that undergird social media. **Platformatization** means increasing penetration of digital platforms like meta, google, TicToc and X and their economic, political, and infrastructural logic into the information ecosystem in ways that fundamentally affect the operations, business strategies, and editorial choices of the journalism field. It has opportunities and constraints. Content Moderation (COMO), specifically, is experienced by news media through content or account removals, (de-)prioritization, de-/promotion, shadow banning, and (de-)monetization.[29]

Top 10 Recommendations

To manage these challenges, our aim is twofold: First, we encourage increased ODA eligible funding for independent media in post-print, information-driven societies. Second, donors should seek to improve the quality of information ecosystems that empower media to stay independent, sustainable and resilient. Lessons identified comprise*:*

Practical suggestions and entry points

1. **Developing** sustainable fair business models and resiliency, protecting intellectual property
2. **Supporting** locally led, evidence-based, and demand-driven solutions
3. **Making fit** for the use of generative AI, and preventing unidentifiable information flows
4. **Providing** targeted support for female media professionals and local (niche) media
5. **Promoting** safety for women, community-based and investigative journalists
6. **Strengthening** legislation countering online harassment, propaganda, spyware and MDMs
7. **Combating** media capture through transparency regarding ownership and data provenance[30]
8. **Offering** legal support and providing low-threshold legal advice, including on SLAPPs
9. **Raising** awareness and trust by "Journalist Trust Initiative" & sensibilisation campaigns
10. **Enhancing** preparedness & emergency response, migratory solidarity and networking

What we need is a fresh toolbox for Independent Media Support.

Vienna, February 2024

Signees and Supporters

Austrian Press Club Concordia, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Austria, Story Institute, International Press Institute Austria (IPI), ERSTE Foundation, The Defence Horizon Journal (TDHJ Special Edition), Global Studies Master of the University of Graz, The New School of Multilateralism (NSM)

Maria Scholl, Editor-in-Chief Austria Presse Agentur, Doris Helmberger, Editor-in-Chief Die Furche, Martina Salomon, Editor-in-Chief Der Kurier, Christian Ultsch, Die Presse, Thomas Seifert, Journalist, Daniela Kraus, Press Club Concordia, Maribel Königer, Communications Director, ERSTE Foundation, Wolfgang Petritsch, President of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs, Prof. Manfred Nowak, Secretary General of the Global Campus of Human Rights, Amb. Dr. Georg Lennkh, Prof. Mag. DDr. Oliver Rathkolb, University of Vienna, Dr. Thomas Greminger, Ambassador, Exec. Director Geneva Center for Security Policy, Prof. Dr. Peter Hilpold, University of Innsbruck, Prof. Stephen Turner, University of South Florida, Michael Zinkanell, Director of the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES), Stefani Weiss, Bertelsmann Foundation, Thomas Goiser, Communication Strategy Consultant, Podcast Host (sicherheitsbewusst), Prof. Patrick Terry, University of Kehl, Beate Mayr-Kniescheck, Content Strategist, Philip Röhr MA.BA., Mag. Margarete Janisch, Almerie Collorado-Mannsfeld, Mag. Alexander Helpferer, Dr. Karla Krieger, EAD, Dr. Friedarike Santner, Elections and Development Consultant, Gunther Neumann, Herbert C. Kelman Institute, Dietmar Pichler, Disinformation Resilience Network, Mag. Rainer Newald, Secretary General of the Austro-American-Society, Prof. Dr. Michael Drmota, TU Wien, Matthias Wasinger, Ph.D., Austrian Armed Forces, Mag. Caroline Altenburger, Office UN Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, Assoz.-Prof. Dr. Peter Knees, TU Wien, Amy Brouilette and Marsela Pecanac, International Press Institute, Erhard Stackl, Journalist, Lukas Wank, Global Responsibility - Platform for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Prof. Mark Coeckelbergh, University of Vienna, Mag. Dr. Anna Graf-Steiner, MA, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Research on Consequences of War.

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Endnotes

1   Ursula Werther-Pietsch, The New School of Multilateralism, TDHJ 1/2024 (forthcoming).

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3   CIVICUS Monitor, Tracking Civic Space. https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2023/.

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6   https://sdg16.transparency.org/targets/16-10 (all sources accessed 12/23-1/24).

7   This text resonates experience of Austrian Journalists and civil society organisation and was consulted with Mira Milosevic of GFMD (see also her article: Silencing Independent Media In Crisis And Conflict: Challenges Faced By Journalists, TDHJ 4/23, 8-11), Justin Williams, DFCO, Marc de Tollenaere, OECD, Frane Maroevic and Amy Brouilette, IPI Austria, Thomas Seifert, Storyinstitute, and Erhard Stackl, Reporters without Borders. It will feed OECD principles and TED action on the ground, preparing possibly Council Conclusions in the field in the near future, coincides with further work of UNESCO Safety of Journalists Focal Points, the upcoming Global Democracy Coalition Forum and the Summit for the Future in New York in September 2024.

8   OSCE, Regular Report of the Representative on Freedom of the Media Teresa Ribeiro to the PC for the period from 05 to 11 2023, https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/558534.

9   OECD DCD/DAC/GOVNET (2023) 7 of 17 November 2023, by Marc de Tollenaere, Policy Analyst.

10   Joint Declaration on Media Freedom and Democracy, mandate holders, 2 May 2023.

11   Courtney C. Radsch, CDT Research, From Our Fellows: Envisioning a Healthy Information Ecosystem, June 2, 2023. Center for Democracy & Technology.

12   Ulrike Butschek, Austrian Ministry for European and International Affairs, Editorial, in TDHJ 4/23.

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14   Larry Diamond, Facing Up to the Democratic Recession, Journal of Democracy 26(1) (2015) 141-155.

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23   On the current media freedom conditions: Joel Simon, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/a-new-paradigm-for-global-journalism-press-freedom-and-public-interest.php; on information integrity: Alicia Wanless, https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/11/09/emergency-management-and-information-integrity-framework-for-crisis-response-pub-90959; https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf; on information ecosystem: Courtney Radsch, https://cdt.org/insights/from-our-fellows-envisioning-a-healthy-information-ecosystem/; and her URGENT report, https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/19Apr2023-URGENT-Report-Final.pdf.

24   https://ifpim.org/the-fund/; see also IFPIM Feasibility study https://ifpim.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/IFPIM-Feasibility-Study-Final-April-29.pdf.

25   See also UK Online Safety Act and EU Digital Services Act.

26   Internews, Mapping Information Ecosystems to Support Resilience, 2015.

27   The overview follows closely results of the study conducted by Cortney C. Radsch, see EN 23.

28   Hostile Environment and First Aid Training, Personal Protective Equipment.

29   Courtney C. Radsch, "URGENT: Understanding and Responding to Global Emerging News Threats." Internews, March 2023, 86, https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/19Apr2023-URGENT-Report-Final.pdf.

30   Media Development Investment Fund, https://www.mdif.org/; Pluralis, ERSTE Foundation, https://www.pluralis.media. See also European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) as of 19 January 2024, establishing a common framework for media services in the EU internal market and to safeguard media freedom, media pluralism and editorial independence, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5622-2024-INIT/en/pdf.