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Position Paper: Strengthening Journalism and Information Integrity Under the European Democracy Shield

News Media Europe is the voice of the progressive news media industry in Europe, representing over 2,700 news brands in print, online, radio and TV, through national associations from sixteen countries. Together, we defend key principles which are vital to us: protecting the freedom of the press, championing the digital future of our industry, and ensuring that the value of content is properly protected.

Introduction

The digital age has profoundly reshaped how citizens access and engage with information. While social media platforms offer unprecedented connectivity, they have also become breeding grounds for disinformation, hate speech, and conspiracy theories. These challenges threaten democratic processes, polarize societies, and erode public trust. In contrast, professional editorial media—guided by rigorous ethical standards and a commitment to accuracy—remain as a beacon of credible and necessary antidote to the rampant disinformation proliferating on social media.

Recent developments, such as Meta’s decision to remove third-party fact-checking in the United States, and X’s policy to rely on “community notes” exacerbate this crisis. By deprioritizing fact-checking, platforms like Meta and X prioritize profits over truth and further destabilize the information ecosystem. This shift threatens not only journalism but also democracy itself. Against this backdrop, the European Union must adopt policies to ensure the sustainability of editorial media, recognizing their role as a cornerstone of democratic resilience, fostering transparency, lowering corruption, and facilitating democratic processes at large.

Moreover, news publishers contribute uniquely to the security of the EU by building information resilience that protects against foreign interference and manipulation. Supporting editorial media benefits society far beyond countering disinformation—it underpins the democratic fabric of the Union.

Amidst these developments, it is imperative that Europe develops an Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) taxonomy that recognizes the democratic value of investments in editorial media and the principle of responsible advertising, thereby supporting the sustainability of the free press. This move could significantly redirect advertising investments towards editorial media that support and uphold democratic values.

This position paper calls for the European Commission to implement policies that increase advertising revenues for news publishers, ensuring their financial sustainability and enabling them to fulfill their democratic mandate.

Journalism: A credible antidote to Disinformation

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Editorial media represent a vital pillar of democracy by providing accurate, fact-based information and fostering informed public debate. Unlike social media platforms, which often amplify sensationalism and falsehoods for profit, professional journalism adheres to strict ethical codes, transparency and independence. This commitment to truth equips editorial media to counter disinformation effectively, making them indispensable in preserving democratic integrity.

Social media platforms, despite their global reach, have proven incapable of moderating content responsibly. Meta's recent rollback of fact-checking highlights the inherent flaws of self-regulation in the tech sector. In contrast, newsrooms operate with accountability and professional rigor, offering a credible and transparent alternative to the misinformation-ridden digital landscape. However, declining revenues and the dominance of tech giants in the advertising market threaten the financial viability of independent journalism.

To address this imbalance, the European Union must recognize and support editorial media as essential public goods. EU policy promoting and supporting advertising revenue for editorial media will not only sustain independent journalism but also strengthen democratic resilience by providing citizens with reliable sources of information.

Policy Recommendations

1. Redirect advertising investments to editorial media

High-quality and independent journalism is expensive to produce. Advertising revenue is critical to the survival of independent journalism. The European Commission should establish policies that incentivize advertisers to allocate a greater share of their budgets to credible news publishers.

Supporting editorial media aligns with multiple of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals¹. The European Democracy Shield should incentivise advertisers to invest in editorial media by including relevant SDG objectives within their ESG commitments. Relevant SDGs include:

- SDG 4 (Quality Education): Media literacy initiatives empower citizens to critically evaluate digital content.
- SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure): Investments in media technology foster innovation and sustain journalism's digital transition.
- SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions): Strengthening independent journalism reinforces societal trust and democracy.

This could be achieved through, inter alia:

- Tax incentives: Offer tax breaks to advertisers who prioritize ethical media outlets.
- Subsidies: Create a European fund under the Democracy Shield to support editorial media, especially in underrepresented regions.

¹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

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- Public sector leadership: Commit EU and Member State advertising budgets to independent media outlets platforms that adhere to professional standards rather than unaccountable social media.

2. Further promote media literacy and public awareness

Educating citizens about the value of credible journalism is essential to reducing the influence of disinformation. The EU should launch widespread media literacy campaigns under SDGs 4 (Quality Education) and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). These campaigns should:

- Highlight the contrast between credible journalism and disinformation on social media.
- Equip citizens with the skills to critically evaluate information sources.
- Collaborate with educational systems and civil society organizations to create engaging, multilingual educational content.
- Consider tangible actions, such as financing news subscriptions for schools, to make credible journalism accessible to younger generations and foster media literacy.

3. Strengthen regulations on advertising transparency

Greater transparency in digital advertising should be encouraged. Key measures include:

- Require public and private advertisers to disclose advertising spend and their distribution among media outlets.
- Penalizing platforms that spread harmful content through advertising.
- Promote efforts to stimulate pluralism to ensure that advertising investments benefit local, regional and national media alike.

4. Foster multilateral cooperation to protect information integrity

The EU must collaborate with global partners to promote policies that prioritize credible journalism. This includes:

- Aligning efforts with the UN's Global Digital Compact to uphold information integrity world-wide.
- Building coalitions with OECD and G7 nations to combat foreign information manipulation.
- Encouraging cross-border support for independent media through multilateral agreements.

Implementing these policies will face resistance from powerful tech companies and require harmonization across Member States. However, the EU's rights-driven approach to digital governance provides a strong foundation for overcoming these obstacles. By adopting an all-of-society approach, the European Democracy Shield can ensure that these efforts are comprehensive and inclusive.

In an era dominated by disinformation, professional journalism stands as a beacon of truth and accountability. The European Commission has a unique opportunity to support this vital sector by implementing policies that increase advertising revenue for news publishers. By doing so, the EU can strengthen editorial media, counter the influence of disinformation, and safeguard democracy and security in the European Union.

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Good and sustainable journalism is essential to the security and functioning of democratic societies, providing citizens with the information they need to make informed decisions. The European Democracy Shield must prioritize the sustainability of editorial media, ensuring that they continue to fulfill their democratic mandate to the benefit and security of European citizens. This is not merely an economic issue but a moral imperative.

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