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Promotion of pluralism in new media

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Pluralism within the media is the hallmark of a healthy democracy. If too few voices are heard and too little meaningful information is circulated, it will be hard for a public debate to take place and for citizens to form their own opinions. Important information will never catch the public's eye.

I once asked the Ombudsman in one of the former Soviet states what reform he would consider as the most important for human rights protection in the country. His answer was: a truly independent TV channel!

Because pluralism in the media is so important, the European Court of Human Rights has confirmed, time and again, that member states have an obligation (under the European Convention on Human Rights) to protect and promote media pluralism.

But states do not always live up to this human rights obligation. During my country visits, I have been concerned by diminishing pluralism in the media.

Lack of genuine competition

In some countries, there is a lack of genuine competition: independent television and radio channels are denied licenses, critical newspapers have difficulties in buying print paper or with printing and distributing their papers.

Another problem can be that the government buys advertisement space only in the "loyal" media, signaling to business companies to follow their lead, with the consequence that independent media are in reality boycotted.

Concentration of media ownership is another problem. If the mass media is dominated by a few companies, the risk for media bias and interference with editorial independence increases. In Italy, for example, the Prime Minister is the biggest shareholder of by far the largest private television company (through Fininvest which owns nearly 39% of the shares of Mediaset). Its 'Canale 5' is among the two most watched television channels.

Even if there is competition and, as a result, a variety of media, this does not always mean that there is media pluralism. In many countries in the Balkans the number of private television channels is impressive. Still, complaints regarding the pluralism of content are often heard. Media, with a few exceptions, are regarded as partisan and biased.

Public service media

Here public service media could be an essential counter weight to the profit driven entertainment media. Public service media should be knowledge based, impartial and give a voice to all including to minorities and vulnerable groups.

However, public service media is questioned across Europe today – something which worries me greatly. There are examples where public funding is not secured or the need for a public service fee is called into question. In the wake of the economic crisis there have been budget cuts disproportionately affecting public service media. Some even argue that with the Internet, no public service media is needed.

There are examples of countries where the state-funded media serve as a mouthpiece of the government. The top management positions are filled by confidants of the President or Prime Minister.

Public service media can only exist if its public remit has been defined, its independence is ensured and respected, its financing is sustainable and if politicians rally public support.

Social media

But I have also seen some positive signs. When meeting with journalists and civil society during my travels, they often point out that in situations where no pluralism exists on television, in the radio and newspapers, the public relies more and more on online media.

Through social media many more people can impart information to a very large audience, very quickly. One does not need the expensive facilities of a broadcaster to be heard and seen by many.

The digital revolution has also caused a crisis in the print and broadcasting media. At least in the short run, this has meant less money for investigative reporting and quality news. This puts media pluralism at risk.

At the same time, traditional media have started to embrace social media.

Traditional media are expanding into digital media by producing digital versions of newspapers and magazines that can be bought online. Readers can comment on articles, podcasts and videos immediately after they are put online.

'Old' media co-operates with 'new' media: *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Der Spiegel* and *Le Monde* worked together with the whistle blowing website *WikiLeaks* on the diplomatic cables sent from U.S. missions to Washington.

Journalists find stories and sources on blogs, Facebook and by following Twitter feeds.

When no journalists were allowed to enter Libya after unrest broke out in the spring this year, it was films, pictures and messages sent from people's mobile phones which could be seen in the evening news.

"Traditional media still needed"

However, even if anyone who has access to the Internet can reach a very large audience, there is only so much information one can digest. The enormous amount of facts, rumors and opinions available on the Internet does not mean that it provides context and a complete or semi-complete picture of the world.

Though social media have created new possibilities for a more democratic dialogue on political matters, the mass media will continue to function as the main messenger of common interest news and as the key arena for public debate. The need to select information and present it in an understandable way remains. It is simply not enough to make the raw information available, as the example of Wikileaks has shown. The good news for media professionals is that we still need, maybe more than ever, journalists who explain a complex world.

Government control of the Internet

Governments increasingly try to control the Internet. As the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, has said, "[Participating] States increasingly feel the need to regulate the content on the Internet – not just the infrastructure of the network."

In Turkey the Telecommunications Communication Presidency (TIB) and courts have issued thousands of blocking orders for Internet sites. Even if it is legitimate to *remove* some content, such as child pornography and hate speech inciting to violence from the Internet, the *blocking* of Internet sites often results in the blocking of content which has nothing to do with child pornography or hate speech inciting to violence. In Turkey, the entire YouTube service was blocked from March 2007 until October 2010. YouTube now can be accessed again but many other websites with legitimate content are still blocked.

Surveillance and data protection

While social media have opened up new possibilities for journalists to find sources and information, surveillance and the collection of personal data has become much easier too. Today's technology allows security services to identify not only a single source but the complete network of sources of a journalist. From easily collected data a comprehensive personal profile of a disliked journalist can be put together with relative

ease. Such measures can be used to limit media freedom and, as a result, media pluralism.

Recommendations

What can be done to promote and protect media pluralism, both online and offline?

- A media policy and legislation which ensures genuine competition will go a long way to creating a pluralistic media environment.
- These rules also should apply to the online media market. Particular attention should be given to Internet Service Providers but also companies running search engines or social media.
- The allocation of frequencies is a real test if authorities are serious about media pluralism. With the switchover to digital broadcasting more frequencies have become available. This presents an opportunity to promote a more pluralistic media landscape.
- Online media should be excluded from registration requirements. Unlike broadcasting frequencies, online space is, in practical terms, an unlimited resource.
- The independence and impartiality of public service media ought to be protected through agreed guidelines and an appropriate procedure of appointing the senior management and the chief editor.
- Governments need to support public service *broadcasters* in their transformation to public service *media* by promoting their expansion into digital media and by providing them with the necessary finances. (BBC Online is one of the most prominent successful examples).
- The European Convention on Human Rights also applies online: legislators, judges, governments and officials have to make sure that any of their laws, decisions and practices aimed at controlling the Internet have a legal basis, need to pursue a legitimate aim and are necessary in a democratic society.

Conclusion

'New media', or social media, and public service media can be very useful for media pluralism. But what is also needed, is a strong commitment by authorities to the human rights obligation to promote and protect media pluralism, including on the Internet.