

2023 World Press Freedom Day

In 1993, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly declared 3 May World Press Freedom Day, acting on a recommendation adopted by UNESCO's General Conference in 1991. This year will mark the 30th anniversary of the day, with UNESCO and other international partners organising special events around the world.

State of play of media freedom: From 1993 to the present

The date of 3 May was chosen to be World Press Freedom Day to mark the anniversary of the [Declaration of Windhoek](#) promoting an independent and pluralistic African press. Adopted by the journalists participating in a seminar organised by UNESCO in Windhoek, Namibia, in spring 1991, the declaration highlighted the **essential link** between **democracy** and **independent, pluralistic and free media**, and called on the African countries and the international community to strengthen media freedom on the African continent. Although the declaration focused on the challenges faced by African countries in ensuring a free and pluralistic media landscape in the early 1990s, many of these challenges remain valid to this day in Africa and the rest of the world.

Examples of these challenges include: capture of media outlets by governmental, political or economic powers; establishment of media monopolies; exposure of journalists to all kinds of repression, from murder to unlawful detention; fragility of professional associations of journalists and editors unable to protect their members' interests and rights; and excessive administrative barriers obstructing the setting up of new media outlets.

Digital technologies have now taken the world by storm and changes in news consumption, often accelerated by the pandemic, have brought **new challenges**. Newspaper sales continue to plummet while the number of internet and social media users continues to rise. Readers and advertisers are increasingly choosing the internet as their source of information and the place to buy and sell products. All this is calling the economic viability of traditional media into question. Internet intermediaries are now the gatekeepers of freedom of expression and information, influencing critically the way we receive and impart information and sometimes acting as vectors or even accelerators of misinformation and disinformation. Governments around the world are resorting to internet shutdowns and other measures to silence online speech.

In light of these developments, the latest UNESCO [Global report](#) on world trends in freedom of expression and media development (2021/2022), with information from 144 countries, raised the alarm about the **decline in press freedom worldwide**. According to UNESCO, between 2016 and 2021, 85 % of the world's population suffered an erosion of press freedom in their country. The report also identified three major challenges inhibiting access to information: the safety of journalists; the regulation of online speech and the functioning of digital gatekeepers; and the economic viability of the media. The latest Reporters Without Borders ([2022](#), [2022](#)) and FreedomHouse ([2022](#), [2019](#)) reports concur, pointing at record numbers of journalists imprisoned or killed and a deterioration of media freedom around the world.

Media freedom as a fundamental right and journalism as a public good

Against this backdrop, 3 May reminds us that **freedom to seek, disseminate and receive information** on issues of public interest is a **public good** and vital to building a healthy and pluralistic civic space in which democratic institutions can flourish. Without free and pluralistic media acting as **public watchdogs**, citizens cannot access to the information they need to make sound political choices, and accountability is severely impaired. The media also offer citizens analysis of ongoing events, serve as a public forum in which different voices can be heard, and interact with and help citizens to understand an increasingly complex world.

The meaningful role played by the media in healthy democratic societies is recognised by the main **universal and regional treaties on human rights**, which entrench media freedom and pluralism in their provisions on freedom of expression and information. Already in 1948, the Preamble to the [Universal](#)



[Declaration of Human Rights](#) includes freedom of speech as one of four rights that represent 'the highest aspirations of the common people' (the remaining three being freedom of belief, freedom from fear and freedom from want). The declaration's Article 19 enshrines freedom of opinion and expression, including the right not only to hold opinions but also to seek, receive and impart information and ideas 'through any media and regardless of frontiers'. Freedom of information is also upheld in the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (Article 19), the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (Article 13) and the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (Article 21), as well as in the main regional treaties on human rights: the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) (Article 10), the [American Convention on Human Rights](#) (Article 13) and the [African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights](#) (Article 9).

Considering the international obligations assumed by countries around the world, 3 May acts as a reminder of their commitment to respecting media freedom. However, it is not only about commitments. As highlighted by [UNESCO](#) and the [UN](#), 3 May is also a day to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in pursuit of a story, to defend media from attacks on their independence, to assess the state of play of media freedom worldwide, and to reflect about issues relating to press freedom and professional ethics.

EU actions to protect media freedom and pluralism

Within the European Union, media freedom and pluralism are also codified as fundamental rights in [Article 11](#) of the **Charter of fundamental rights of the EU**. Moreover, the Court of Justice of the EU has systematically stressed the link between the safeguarding of those rights and the flourishing of a democratic and pluralistic society ([C-555/19](#); [C-719/18](#)). In this vein, EU institutions are increasingly dedicating attention and resources to monitoring the state of play of media freedom and pluralism in the EU and addressing the risks identified through their monitoring work.

The European Commission monitors risks to media freedom in the EU Member States in its **annual rule of law report** (with editions from [2020](#), [2021](#) and [2022](#)). Additionally, since 2014, the **Media Pluralism Monitor project**, co-funded by the EU, has been publishing reports assessing weaknesses in the EU Member States' and candidate countries' media systems that could hinder media pluralism. The 2022 editions of these reports show a negative shift as regards the journalistic profession, owing to an increase in the number of threats to journalists and strategic lawsuits filed against the media for providing information on issues of public interest (also known as [SLAPPs](#)). Both 2022 reports also highlight concerns about the high news media concentration in the EU, while also pointing to the need for further transparency of media ownership in many Member States and the need for stronger protection of the media (especially the public media) from political control.

The EU institutions have increasingly paid attention to the need to guarantee media freedom and pluralism within the EU. The **European Parliament** has been an outspoken advocate for freedom of information and the protection of journalists both within ([2021](#), [2020](#), [2017](#)) and outside ([2022](#), [2021](#), [2019](#)) the EU. The **Council** too has adopted conclusions on the protection and safety of journalists ([2022](#)) and on safeguarding a free and pluralistic media system ([2020](#)). In its **European democracy action plan (2020)** and its **action plan to support recovery and transformation of Europe's media (2020)**, the **Commission** has provided financial support for EU media companies to help them address their viability problems and face the twin digital and green transitions. It also focused on the safety of journalists in its **recommendation on the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists (2021)**, addressed to the EU Member States. The Commission's legislative [proposal](#) for an **anti-SLAPPs directive** meanwhile aims to protect not only journalists but anyone exercising their freedom of expression and information as regards issues of public interest, from abusive and manifestly unfounded lawsuits. The Commission has also addressed the phenomenon of disinformation, including by giving support to the drafting of the [2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation](#), recently strengthened ([2022](#)) by Commission [guidance](#).

The Commission recently put forward a legislative [proposal](#) for a **European media freedom act**. This far-reaching proposal includes measures to protect journalistic sources and media and journalists from the use of surveillance technologies; enhance media ownership transparency and editorial independence of media providers providing news; establish common rules for a transparent and non-discriminatory allocation of state advertising to media; ensure further independence of public media; and address a number of issues concerning the provision of media services in the digital environment.

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