Protecting press freedom during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 crisis has hit the media sector hard at a time when it plays a crucial role in providing accurate information and countering disinformation about the pandemic.

The sector is facing a massive drop in advertising revenues and Parliament fears the worsening financial situation could mean news organisations are no longer able to provide clear and factual information and counter disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic.

In a resolution adopted on 17 April, MEPs said that disinformation on Covid-19 is a major public health problem, that all people should have access to accurate and verified information and that a free independent and sufficiently funded media is necessary for democracy.

Freedom of expression, media freedom and pluralism are enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, as well as in the European Convention on Human Rights.
Emergency support fund for media

To address the critical situation faced by the media, the members of Parliament's culture committee have asked the European Commission to look into creating an emergency fund for the media and press.

Some measures have already been taken to support media freedom and protect journalists. In March 2020, the EU made €5.1 million available to fund projects aiming to identify and prevent violations of press freedom, detect risks to pluralism and support cross-border investigations.

Find out 10 things the EU is doing to fight the coronavirus

World Press Freedom Day
World Press Freedom Day is marked every year on 3 May. Reporters Without Borders has just published the 2020 edition of the World Press Freedom Index which also takes into account the threat to free and fair journalism from the coronavirus outbreak.

Europe confirmed as the safest place for journalists

According to the 2020 edition of the World Press Freedom Index, Europe remains the continent that most ensures freedom of the press. EU countries are mostly ranked as “good” or “fairly good”. Finland, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands continue to register the best scores.
Although the EU is the safest place for journalists, Reporters Without Borders warns that there have been cases of harassment and threats to journalists.
Risks increase for journalists around the world

The emergency measures taken by some governments in response to the Covid-19 outbreak have had an impact on the ranking of some countries such as China (ranked 177th), Iran (down three places at 173) and Iraq (down six places at 162).

The Middle East and North Africa continue to be the most dangerous regions in the world for journalists, while the Asia-Pacific region had the biggest increase in press freedom violations (up 1.7%).

Reporters Without Borders has reported 11 journalists killed so far in 2020. 2019 was the least deadly in 16 years with 49 cases of killed journalists across the world, due to the decrease in number of deaths in armed conflicts (44% less than the previous year).
Despite some positive figures, the general situation of media freedom across the world has worsened and hostility towards journalists has increased. The number of countries considered safe for journalists continues to decline, with only 24% percent of the 180 countries classified as “good” or “fairly good” in 2019 and 2020 compared to 26% in 2018 and 27% in 2017.
Some 361 journalists are currently detained, down from 389 cases at the end of 2019. Almost a third of them are in China. The rest are concentrated in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Vietnam, Iran, Bahrain and Yemen. The number of journalists held hostage remained stable in 2019. They are held in four countries: Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Ukraine. Figures for 2020 concerning hostages are not available yet.

The annual Index of Reporters Without Borders ranks 180 countries and regions according to the degree of press freedom. Countries are scored between 0 and 100 taking into account criteria such as pluralism, media independence, legislative framework, transparency and level of abuse against journalists. The lower the score, the higher the level of press freedom in the country.

**Find out more**
- Press release: Ministers of Culture and Media discussed measures aimed at assisting the cultural and creative sector
- Press release: EU must help safeguard media independence
- Murder of Ján Kuciak: MEPs urge action to protect journalists across the EU
- Council of Europe: Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists
- EU Agency for Fundamental Rights website
- Fact sheet: the protection of fundamental rights in the EU