



Conference of Ministers responsible for Media and Information Society

Artificial Intelligence – Intelligent Politics:
challenges and opportunities for media and democracy

Co-organised by the Council of Europe and the Government of the Republic of Cyprus

(10-11 June 2021, online)

Concept Note

Freedom of expression is one of the basic preconditions for progress in society and part and parcel of any democracy. The new wave of digital technologies and the surge in use of tools driven by artificial intelligence (AI) has created new opportunities for the exercise of this right, including by facilitating access to vast amounts of information and to endless platforms for the dissemination of one's opinions. Extensive collection and exploitation of user data, the possible amplification of users' bias and the risk of targeted persuasion and manipulation, however, constitute part of the reverse of the medal.

Search engines and social media platforms have largely taken over the role of traditional media in providing information and news, generating a structural shift in the information environment that puts the sustainability of the media market into question. Also, favouring audience engagement and "virality" rather than accuracy of facts, these major players contribute, among others, to an environment that constitutes fertile ground for the growing phenomenon of "information disorder", facilitates the spread of disinformation and brings significant challenges to political campaigning and the integrity of electoral processes.

Against this background, journalists, the main drivers of an informed society, are increasingly being targeted, attacked and even killed.

The COVID-19 outbreak has further amplified these challenges facing media, journalists and the communication space in general. It also has re-emphasised some long-standing issues, such as balancing freedom of expression against the protection of public health and other interests listed in Article 10-2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, thus bringing to the foreground the need to address them with urgency and commitment.

The importance of freedom of expression, online and offline, as a cornerstone of a democratic and pluralistic society, and the need to join efforts to reinforce its protection has been recalled at the 129th Session of the Committee of Ministers (Helsinki, 17 May 2019).

On 10 and 11 June 2021, Ministers responsible for Media and Information Society issues will meet to agree on action required to address the radical changes in the media and information environment brought on by massive digitalisation, with dramatic effects for the exercise of freedom of expression and substantial impact on other human rights and freedoms. Ministers will also turn their attention to the dangerous backsliding in the area of safety of journalists and take steps to ensure that the urgency of the situation is matched by a firm and immediate engagement at the political level. They will also discuss ways to reinforce the resilience of human rights protection frameworks for due respect of the cornerstone role of freedom of expression in democratic societies and for full engagement of its potential in times of crisis.

The Ministerial Conference will lead to the adoption of a final declaration and four resolutions that will address:

- The impacts of the growing range of AI-powered products and processes for the exercise of the right to freedom of expression and the need for further research and guidance in this area.
- Possible regulation to ensure more transparency in the dissemination of news and information to stave off targeted disinformation campaigns, especially in electoral periods, and possible review of electoral campaigns regulation, in light of the new media environment and with a view to protecting the integrity of elections and ensuring a level playing field for all political actors.
- Measures to halt and reverse the decline in the safety of journalists and other media actors, through a commitment to develop dedicated national action plans on the basis of Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)4 on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors.
- Ways to reinforce the resilience of freedom of expression protection frameworks in times of crisis and to mitigate the resulting challenges for the media and journalists.

These instruments will secure the political engagement of the Council of Europe and its member States for a number of priority actions and will contribute to the agenda of the Council of Europe's Steering Committee on Media and Information Society's (CDMSI) for standard setting activities and for the implementation of existing standards, for the years to come.

In addition, in a "world-café" format, Ministers will have an opportunity to receive a first-hand account from local and community media representatives on their media literacy related work and other projects that have contributed to enhancing access and the participation of marginalised communities in media and in public discourse and also helped mitigate the impact of the "infodemic" during the COVID-19 crisis.