

Online discussion on the impact of COVID-19 on media freedom

Concept:

Freedom of expression and access to news and information are crucial for the functioning of a truly democratic society but have assumed particular importance in the light of COVID-19 pandemic. There is an **intensified need for people to be able to consume news they can trust**, such that help them understand the current crisis in order to protect themselves and their communities, and that enables them to critically assess their governments' responses to the health crisis.

Media in times of crisis play an essential role and have a particular responsibility to provide accurate, reliable and prompt information to the public, abiding by the highest professional standards and ethics. It is imperative that they have the **freedom to gather and publish all relevant information**, and that they are ensured access to information in public interest.

Open communication and dialogue between national and international governmental and non-governmental organisations, media organisations, medical professionals and civil society on matters of public interest should be a priority. However, as journalists strive to adapt their activities to the health crisis, **new challenges are amplifying the pre-existing weaknesses** of the media sector and reinforcing concerns for media freedom.

Reporting on the pandemic is no easy task amidst **restrictions of access to information and public events** due to lockdown and longer deadlines for responding to information requests. Journalists are moreover facing public denigration by some politicians, as well as **threats and even physical violence** when reporting from the field. For their part, some media outlets have been observed to disclose personal data of infected individuals, pick up **exaggerated narratives** or **uncritically relay false information** about the crisis.

Furthermore, the long-term **fragile financial situation** of the media has been exacerbated by the crisis, affecting smaller and local outlets in particular. Further decline in advertising revenue, which threatens the sustainability of quality journalism, requires decisive action to provide **new funding opportunities**. The media industry may not be able to fend for itself: state support is necessary, but is it being implemented?

COVID-19 has proved difficult to contain, and so has the **spread of disinformation** and conspiracy theories surrounding the disease. While disinformation poses a serious threat to public health and warrants restrictive measures, some governments' **harsh responses** – ranging from blocking media websites, internet shutdowns to emergency laws introducing imprisonment sentences for spreading false information – raise serious concerns about their potential to suppress legitimate criticism and exert a **profound chilling effect** on free press.