

## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

# (Last) call for quality journalism

Co-organised by the Council of Europe and the  
Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia

**28-29 November 2019, Ljubljana, Slovenia**

### CONCEPT NOTE

Lately journalism has once again become a “hot” topic, subject of research, media reporting, often divisive public discussions, and – mostly disgruntled – online comments, as well as an issue deserving serious consideration by the policy makers.

Questions are increasingly asked about the quality of information we consume, doubts raised about its provenance, and fingers pointed at the dark corners of the internet. Indeed, social media platforms, manipulative websites, and the proliferation of online content engineered to ignite anger or fear, have all impacted on human information and communication practices. Instead of generating a community of informed people, they have rather amplified the differences and polarisation. And while emotional messages easily occupy our attention and travel far through the maze of likes and shares, it appears that the more rational elements of our communication, such as regard for truth and accuracy, have taken a backseat.

We need quality information. We need it to form and express our opinions, to make informed choices about our life and society, to hold powers to account, and to have a meaningful public debate. Informed and active citizens sustain democracies, and quality journalism sustains informed citizenry. We need journalism that is committed to the pursuit of truth, fairness and accuracy, such that serves the public interest and promotes accountability in public life.

However, digital transformation and the “post-truth” era have brought a profound change to the media sector. Once privileged gatekeepers of news and information, media acquired numerous competitors for public attention in a democratised online world, where news and other journalistic content often appear next to content that is not subject to the same regulatory or ethical frameworks. Many media organisations responded to the competitive pressures by cutting production costs, decimating the ranks of professional journalists while reducing the diversity of sources and viewpoints. Some made good use of the potential offered by the digital technologies to engage directly with their audiences and find new sources of information, but that is not sufficient to sustain the entire sector.

Also media consumption habits changed, with people going online for their news, accessing them through social media, news aggregators and increasingly through closed messaging apps. In this complex and fragmented environment, people often chose their information sources based on pre-existing beliefs. Many are not able to distinguish between fact and opinion, between reliable and unreliable sources. Just as many are not aware of how social and search services operate and how technology can influence their media choices. As a result, the gap between the highly informed and the lesser informed is growing, requiring a decisive multi-stakeholder commitment to strengthen media and information literacy.

Perhaps the most far-reaching impact of the shift to a digital and social media environment has been on the financial sustainability of the media sector. Social media and other major online platforms have thoroughly disrupted the traditional, advertising-based media business model, and separated news production from distribution. Platforms now dictate what media content is displayed on their sites, and how prominently it is displayed. Just as importantly, they collect large amount of user data and use it for personalised recommendations and advertising, thereby generating unprecedented advertising profits.

Paradoxically, as social media use increases, there is evidence of a decline of trust in all media, but especially social media. However, there is as yet no evidence that media users are migrating to media they trust more.

Why is that so, and how are media to respond in a constructive way to get their audience back? How can self-regulation help sustain professional ethics and restore public confidence in journalism? What responsibilities should be borne by the major online platforms, now in many ways acting as publishers? How can people be empowered through media and information literacy to engage more actively with their information sources, to be selective and to trust – and pay for – their media sources? How are States to encourage and strengthen independent and quality journalism through their regulatory and institutional frameworks?

The Conference will explore these and similar questions in a critical and inclusive discussion. It aims to bring together journalists, editors, representatives of the media, self-regulatory bodies and regulators, academics and media lawyers, policymakers and civil society representatives to provide their views on what is our collective responsibility towards creating a favourable environment for quality journalism.