

Limiting media freedom in democratic states

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8.6 Policy Impact Recommendations

This research gives rise to three policy recommendations, which aim to address key issues relevant to advancing news media freedom and curtailing efforts within democratic governments to limit it.

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- 1) International watchdog organizations should make identifying and counteracting the erosion of news media freedom in its early stages a priority.

Acting upon early detection of the gradual undermining of democratic freedoms is critical to stopping it from worsening. While some international watchdog organizations are monitoring news media freedom in free democracies, acting on those findings has been limited to producing reports and providing limited technical assistance. Most global efforts to address this issue primarily focus on countries where authoritarian and illiberal regimes have already progressed to jeopardizing the freedom and physical safety of journalists.

It is understandable why focus and resources of these efforts address more egregious government actions against the press, such as freeing a jailed journalist or denouncing the closure or hacking of a news outlet. However, subtle government pressure instruments, such as those described in this research, can also be detrimental to both press freedom and democracy and, if left unchallenged, can evolve into a greater erosion of press freedom and democracy that can become difficult to reverse (*Freedom House, 2020*). This is particularly true for young democracies. Even the European Union, which supports press freedom and includes it as a core value in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, did not take significant concrete action with

its own member states, as shown by the infringement on press freedom by the Hungarian government.¹⁶

All representatives of Latin American divisions in international media freedom watchdog organizations interviewed for this research express frustration at not being able to do more. They point to lack of funding for in-country programs and an inability to dedicate more human resources to these issues in free democracies, especially young ones. There is currently a need for more rigorous systematic monitoring; in-country programs that support critical, independent news media; and ongoing pressure on governments at the international level. Committing to robust early responses to press freedom infringements in free democracies could help prevent further erosion and democratic backsliding that, once established, is difficult to reverse.

2) Development agencies should provide financial support to nascent digital-only news media outlets in democracies.

One of the surprising findings of this research was the lack of widely read digital-only news media outlets that cover government affairs and can shape public opinion. Most leading digital news media outlets in democracies in the developing world are traditional news outlets that migrated their content

16. (European Federation of Journalists, 2019): “The Hungarian system of media control was deliberately designed to deter scrutiny and provide its rulers with superficial deniability. But this is not an excuse for the inaction of the European Union, whose procedures have failed to prevent a member state from openly and obviously undermining the media as a fully functioning element of democracy. Moreover, this lack of action has effectively given the Fidesz government an open door to export its illiberal media model throughout Central and Eastern Europe, endangering the independent press across the region. The message is that if Hungary can do away with independent media, others can, too, free from EU pressure.” <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2019/12/03/new-report-hungary-dismantles-media-freedom-and-pluralism/>

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to the internet. Many of these large media outlets are backed by conglomerates that include companies with business interests in other sectors, which helps finance their news operations. This economic structure enables these outlets to better deal with financial strains, but their owners' interest in other business sectors can potentially interfere with editorial independence.

With few exceptions, independent, digital-only news outlets that influence public opinion on political affairs are found in countries with authoritarian regimes or partly free democracies, because they receive funding from the international donor community to operate. Even then, they are small and limited in their reach, and they are overshadowed by digital versions of traditional outlets that tend to be the opinion leaders. This funding generally does not reach countries categorized as free democracies, even when media freedom is under threat. Experts questioned on this matter believe insufficient funding results from a perception that additional funds are not needed in countries where the situation is not yet precarious for journalists.

To this end, international donors should increase funding for news media freedom and strategically allocate part of it to democracies with declining levels of media freedom. The financial help can come in the form of start-up grants, bridge financing, or interest-free loans. Technological support also can be provided, including the technical equipment, hosting services on international servers and data protection tools that can safeguard information. Such assistance could help solidify news outlets in their initial stages of development, enabling them to focus on quality investigative journalism to build credibility until a sustainable long-term financing option

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can be arranged. Thus, international watchdog and civil society pressure groups can, with small investments, help stabilize endangered independent online media outlets, enabling them to grow to the point where they are less vulnerable to subtle government pressure. Domestic civil society organizations may themselves become subject to subtle but debilitating government pressure that can limit the effectiveness of their support.

- 3) Governments, parliaments, and international bodies should support legislation requiring internet platforms (i.e., Google, Facebook) to compensate news media outlets for their content.

The future of financing for news media outlets could be changed by political support for legislation that requires large internet platforms, such as Facebook and Google, to pay media outlets for their content, which the platforms monetize via advertising revenues. These companies currently use content produced by media to attract viewers, generating clicks that translate into profits for themselves. With few exceptions, the publications that developed the material never see any of the money generated by their original work. Online platforms have become the main distributors of information worldwide, a role formerly filled by non-digital media. This has made it more difficult for news outlets to access their former main source of revenue—advertising.

This issue should be addressed globally, as it is one of the biggest challenges to news media freedom in the digital era. News media outlets, especially small and medium independent ones, either go bankrupt, start relying on government funding, or are absorbed by conglomerates because they cannot

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pay their reporters. Paying for content developed by news outlets or independent journalists is not only fair but also will help digital news outlets realize financial independence and thus maintain their editorial independence.

This is not a zero-sum game. There is value for all involved. The tech giants can be part of the answer, but the way they operate today is part of the problem. Conducting good investigative journalism requires resources and time. If those who put in the time to do it cannot be fairly compensated for their own work, then they will continue to be vulnerable to economic pressure tools that impede their editorial independence. When independent journalism begins to expire, democracy starts to decay.