



# RESILIENT MEDIA FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF A CHANGING  
JOURNALISM LANDSCAPE THROUGH FUNDING,  
EU REGULATION AND DIALOGUE

## Policy Workshop Report

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European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)  
February 2026

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**Design:** Juan Burgos EUvisual.com

**Publisher:** European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)

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International Press Centre, Residence Palace

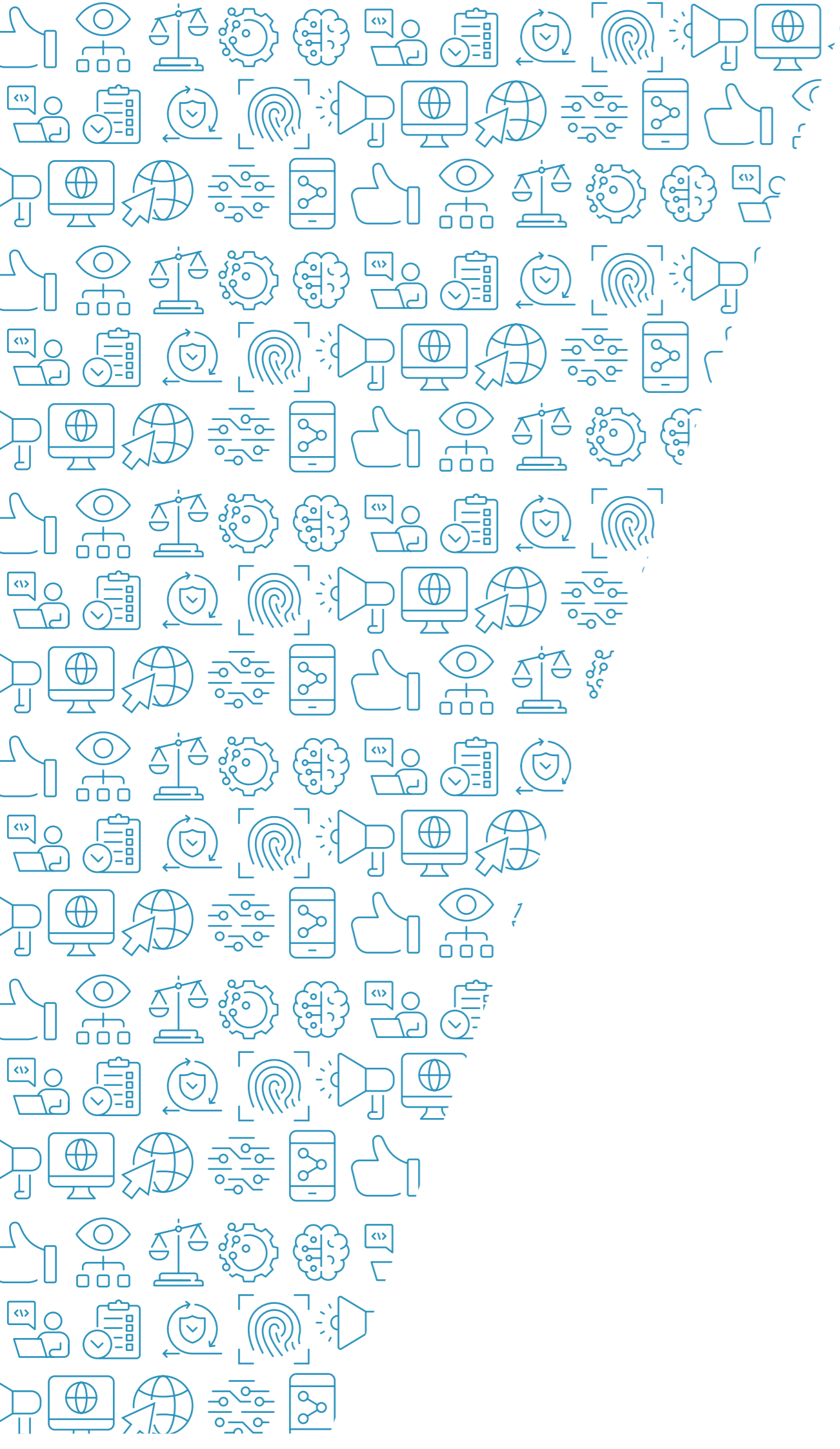
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This publication has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 101094742. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Horizon Europe. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



# INTRODUCTION

ReMeD, [Resilient Media for Democracy in the Digital Age](#), a consortium of 8 European universities and the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), held its final conference, on 12-13 February, at the Brussels Press Club. It was attended by media experts, policymakers, journalists' unions and leading academics in the field of media and democracy.

Opening on behalf of the ReMeD consortium, **Tales Tomaz** described ReMeD's focus on relations between policymakers, the media and the public and how to make content production, in the service of democracy, more resilient.

**Renate Schroeder**, EFJ Director, opened with a stark warning that the media today are facing an existential crisis buffeted by media capture, propaganda and disinformation on the one side, and a collapsing economic model driven by Big Tech dominance of the market and abuse of its gate-keeper powers to public information.

Journalism, she said, is a key-stone species on which our democratic institutions, norms and culture are dependent. Lose the key-stone species and the rest of the ecosystem it supports, will quickly follow. News influencers, content creators etc, may have large followings and influence, but they need to follow professional and ethical standards if they wish to be part of the broader journalists' community informing the public. Journalism is a public good, and when the market fails to supply it, the state must step in.



# PANEL ONE

## PUBLIC FUNDING FOR PUBLIC INTEREST JOURNALISM

- **Tales Tomaz**, Assistant Professor of Media Policy and Media Economics at the University of Salzburg
- **Ivana Bjelic Vucinic** is the Director of Policy and Insights at Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)
- **David Kardos**, Center for Sustainable Media
- **Moderator**: Renate Schroeder, EFJ Director

The fourth industrial revolution and the shift of revenues from media to online platforms have had catastrophic consequences for the sustainability of news media. AI licensing agreements, copyright enforcement, and fair algorithms that promote public interest media will not save the sector alone. Instead, we must look further at adapting market rules to support media through tax breaks and tax credits for investors and subscribers; applying digital taxes on the platforms, and using the revenue to subsidize public interest journalism.

The ReMeD [research](#) into the current economic challenges facing media reveals:

- Public Service Media are suffering from ever-diminishing budgets, with license fee models increasingly replaced by direct government funding, limiting resources and reducing political independence.
- Commercial media are adapting to the collapse in advertising income by developing mixed revenue

models combining subscription, events, consultancy and branded collaborations.

- Established brands and local media with a dominant or monopoly position are able to build subscription models and corner the best of the remaining advertising market.
- Nevertheless, revenues continue to shrink, leading to concentration, reduced pluralism and a need for increased public funds.
- The research warns that media retreating behind pay walls will create a two-tier information system with quality information for elite-paying audiences and algorithmic driven news for the rest; that the cross-subsidy model makes newsrooms more vulnerable to commercial influence; and that competition for survival is driving more radical and polarized content.
- Finally, mainstream journalism has been criticised for failing to address the concerns and issues faced by

disengaged communities who, as a result, have been attracted to parties on the political fringes.

**GFMD** advocates for sustainable media focusing on the needs of small independent operations in more fragile media systems, many of whom depend on public grants in their business model. The end of USAID funding in 2025 placed hundreds of media in highly precarious situations, desperate for public support that is long term and finances core costs. In Brazil and Indonesia, small outlets are working together to counter news deserts and develop local AI systems independent of Big Tech. Investigative media outlets have also formed the ['Journalism Cloud Alliance'](#) to negotiate costs and conditions and reduce dependence on Amazon and Google.

Public funds are part of the solution, but are governments able to deliver? The European Commission plans to double the budget for media in the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028-2034. **3.2 billion euros** over seven years has been allocated to the Agora Programme. However, since the budget is also shared with the film industry, the final proportion for media has not yet been determined. The case for support was strengthened by arguments that independent media are central to Europe's defence against foreign disinformation. The increase is welcome, however, clarity over how it would be spent and the rules for which media can benefit were lacking.

Participants were both concerned that EU funds should only go to deserving media, while also demanding that the decision-making process be rigorously impartial.

While there is an acceptance that public funding beyond public service media is an inevitable necessity if the sector is to survive, finding a robustly independent mechanism for distributing funds remains elusive.

Neutrality is easier to ensure through creating tax incentives, investing in infrastructure and EU tech sovereignty, and building an enabling environment through media support groups working on safety, legal rights and media literacy. The EU's competitiveness fund can also be deployed to boost innovation and private investment. Direct support to media is always more problematic and must be done through fully transparent processes, based on journalistic principles, with rigorous integrity.

Participants also pushed back against the suggestion that we should accept, as inevitable, the emerging model of shrinking pluralism and local markets dominated by one monopolistic brand surviving off a combination of subscription, advertising and government funds. This is already the model in several EU countries such as Croatia, Romania or Poland, where local media often survive at the price of political capture.

Moreover, the expansion of EU public funds must not come as an alternative to fixing the market. The EU must apply the Digital Markets Act (DMA) to end Big Tech's abuse of monopolistic power including, where necessary, through the forced break-up of monopolies. Only a level economic playing field designed to enable independent and pluralistic media to flourish can guarantee the survival of independent journalism.

## PANEL TWO

### INFORMING ON SOCIAL MEDIA: THE EMERGENCE OF NEW MEDIA ACTORS

- **Thomas Hanitzsch**, Chair and Professor of Communication, Department of Media and Communication at LMU Munich
- **Adeline Hulin**, Head of the Media and Information Literacy and Digital Competencies Unit at UNESCO
- **Thomas Bruning**, General Secretary of the Dutch journalists' trade union NVJ
- **Moderator**: Camille Petit, EFJ Senior Communications Officer

This session aimed to examine the growing role of new news creators from outside journalism, challenging the status quo and providing clues to the possible future of journalism. Should journalism reach out and embrace these new actors, and how should journalists' unions adapt to bring them in, and at what risk?

ReMeD researched the new media actors on the periphery of traditional journalism with large followings and whose influence on shaping public opinion increasingly outpaces legacy media. It [identified](#) different groups including fact-checkers, social media influencers, and alternative media. Fact checkers are now integrated into the media sector, while influencers act unbound by journalistic norms and rarely recognise their work as journalism.

Alternative media, usually operating at the political fringes, are often seen as disruptors, vehicles for dangerous political movements, and sometimes fronts for harmful disinformation. Many

working in this area, however, claim they provide an alternative angle on the news in response to the failings of corporate mainstream media.

UNESCO's report [Behind the Screens: insights from digital content creators; understanding their intentions, practices and challenges](#) shows how, while these new media actors often reject the label of journalist, the most successful and better-established ones increasingly adopt the practices of media and journalism even as they resist it. However they view themselves, they have a growing influence on the information sector while operating outside of it without accreditation, without rules of conduct and without accountability beyond the size of their audiences. They are often ignorant of the laws governing communications, including defamation, hate speech, privacy and freedom of expression norms. Unesco wants to help build their capacities, knowledge, and,

ultimately, a framework of principles to operate by, but the lack of any representative organisation hinders a coordinated approach. The results of the study also indicated a strong desire for training on international media freedom principles and ethical standards.

In the Netherlands, the NVJ opened its membership to the new actors two years ago. While some have controversial editorial positions, their role and influence cannot be ignored. The NVJ does not judge the political positions of journalists, but will protect their rights so long as they commit to the ethical rules. The question of independence is the NVJ's most important criteria. If journalists can demonstrate they are operating independently and are not fronts for hidden interests, the NVJ will bring them in. As a result, the union has substantially enhanced how it promotes ethical principles among its membership.

The NVJ has always insisted journalism must remain an open profession. It does not define journalists, nor judge their content, but assesses them on their audience, earnings, independence and adherence to ethical rules.

During the debate other categories were noted such as corporate journalism, net startups, NGOs producing journalism and, increasingly, established journalists who have gone freelance to set up their

own podcasts or Substack. While in some countries these 'upstarts' may be mostly at the political fringes, in other countries, such as Serbia, Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia, the upstarts are respected, independent journalists, who fled legacy media when they were taken over by politically aligned oligarchs.

How to treat alternative political media provoked the sharpest debate among participants. Should these actors be brought into the journalistic tent, or are they a Trojan horse that, given a chance, will bring down the profession from within? Many may consider themselves highly principled journalists giving voice to those ignored by the mainstream. Others, backed by hidden political interests, will abuse the openness of democracy to subvert democracy. Most participating unions agreed that these actors cannot be ignored and, without compromising on ethical standards, it is important to engage.

According to a recent [EFJ survey](#), journalists' organisations across Europe are adopting a mixed approach, and are divided on whether to recognise these emerging actors as part of the information landscape. The findings show that concerns over journalistic ethics and conflicts with organisational statutes remain the main barriers to their inclusion.

## PANEL THREE

### HOW EUROPEAN REGULATIONS CAN RESPOND TO TODAY'S JOURNALISM CHALLENGES

- **Vito Laterza**, Associate Professor at University of Agder, Norway (iUA)
- **Vanessa De Palma**, Senior Legal and Policy Manager, EMMA/ENPA
- **Tom Gibson**, Deputy Advocacy Director, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
- **Luca Bertuzzi**, journalist at MLex
- **Moderator:** Charlotte Michils, General Secretary of the Flemish Association of Journalists (VVJ)

2026 is a crunch year for EU regulation as the EU seeks to test out the new powers while under intense US pressure to give Big Tech a regulatory pass. The panel examined the prospects and debated how relevant the European regulations are to journalists, and how we can make the most of them.

The REMED [research](#) focused on the Digital Services Act (DSA) and, indirectly, the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) and the AI Act, highlighting the lack of public and journalistic awareness of the rules and the challenges around their implementation. Journalists are generally sceptical about this regulation and whether it is based on the protection of genuine journalistic principles or other institutional values. The DSA should be informed by the public interest.

Interviews with fact-checkers revealed key concerns over the arbitrary and uneven implementation of the DSA, the excessive preferential treatment of political actors

(by excluding political speech from moderation) and the continued lack of transparency over decisions, policies and algorithms employed by the platforms. The European Commission was also criticized for its lack of transparency over its response to risk assessment reports and negotiations with platforms.

Fact-checkers were particularly concerned by the blocking of content that they flagged, with TikTok cited as notably over-zealous at removing content. Fact-checkers are sensitive to the charge of censorship and insist on the need to maintain flagged content that provides the public with a fuller context to make their own judgments.

The DSA delegates too much enforcement power to private companies whose economic models depend on minimal enforcement. Moreover, the platforms are moderating journalistic content based on rules drawn up in Silicon Valley that ignore Europe's highly developed standards

for news production. Publishers insist that US platforms should never have the power to remove content produced by European media. The efforts to establish a media exemption through Article 18 of EMFA are not sufficient to convert the platforms' power over content removal.

The DSA does provide some useful tools for journalists. In particular, the Out-of-Court Dispute Settlement bodies (ODS) can be used to counter online threats to their work and reinstate journalistic content that may have been removed by the moderation.

The DSA also has significant power, through the Risk Assessments, to address the most harmful forms of content. But to make a difference, the Commission will need to do more than levy one-off fines.

Concern was raised about politicised decision-making by the EU. While the European Commission's use of EMFA to bring an infringement case against Hungary was welcomed, the failure to launch a similar investigation against Greece, where political capture of media, opacity of ownership, the misuse of public subsidies and spyware scandals have been widespread, raises questions about political bias.

A similar risk exists under the DSA, with the concern that the Commission's investigations are affected by the political climate over objective analysis.

Until now, the US appeared to be winning the battle for public opinion in portraying

the DSA as a dangerous form of state censorship. However, following the [scandal over Grok's AI tool](#) to undress and sexualize online images, the EU has an opportunity to win back public support by demonstrating how the DSA can protect the public from misogynistic harm.

There is also the risk of platforms over-moderating legal content as they automate processes. The cheapest and safest policy is to block anything flagged as borderline content, regardless of its legitimacy.

Participants also raised questions about media self-regulation and how it can, through Article 18 of EMFA, provide greater protection to journalists' content. There was a call for platforms to be made liable for the content on the grounds that their business models are based on curated content, the same way as media publishers are.

Journalists can use the DSA to counter online threats to them. But there is also a risk that the DSA, with its focus on 'harmful content' will be misused by public actors to remove important journalistic content. Journalism, at its best, particularly investigative journalism or journalism exploring divisive social issues, is often labelled 'harmful' by one interest group or interested party as a means to discredit it. The DSA, in its effort to remove the toxicity of the internet, must not inadvertently become an instrument for sanitizing the public space and silencing public interest journalism.

# CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Journalism is, and for now remains, a key-stone species, vital for the survival of our democratic way of life. Without urgent and radical action, Big Tech, AI and the fourth industrial revolution, may threaten a “mass extinction event”.

Today’s public square, the internet, is under the authoritarian governance of the world’s wealthiest men. Big Tech are the new gatekeepers to information, deciding what the public see, read and experience. They have the coercive power to control how we think, buy and vote. Their polarizing algorithms exist beyond democratic rules and accountability.

The European Union has the regulatory tools and the tech to counter this threat. It must grab this opportunity. It must regulate with confidence, with clarity and with neutrality. It must invest in European tech and it must fix the market for media. Where it provides public financing, it must be based on rigorously independent processes and journalistic principles.

Journalists and their representatives may engage with the new media actors, learn from them, and where possible, bring them into the tent on the condition that the principles of journalism are not up for negotiation. Change the principles and you change the journalists’ DNA. Change the DNA and you change the species.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## TO POLICYMAKERS AND REGULATORS

- Journalism is a public good. Where there is market failure, the state has a responsibility to guarantee the supply of that good. It can do it in two ways:
  - Reform the market to ensure a vibrant pluralist media sector;
  - Provide interim financial subsidies until the market is corrected.
- To reform the market, the EU should:
  - employ the Digital Markets Act to break up monopolies, end market abuse by platforms and ensure fair competition and media pluralism;
  - use other economic tools such as tax incentives for investors, subscribers and employers to invest in news media and innovation.
- To provide public funding, the EU should:
  - Invest in infrastructure to support the sector as a whole;
  - Where it provides direct financing, through grants or advertising, it should be done in full transparency, robustly independent of political interference and based on strict journalistic criteria.
- Policymakers should not settle for the emerging model of concentrated media and monopolistic local media surviving off their dominant positions with a combination of subscriber income and public advertising. Such a model leaves local media, particularly, vulnerable to political capture, as is already apparent in several EU member states.
- Policymakers should support engagement between media actors and peripheral content producers to identify common ground and, where appropriate, integrate new actors into the field of journalism.
- Policymakers should implement the EU’s toolbox of regulation over media and digital sectors, including the Digital Markets Act (DMA), Digital Services Act (DSA) and the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA).
  - It must do so robustly and rigorously, free of political decision-making, treating each platform and each member state equally.
  - It must ensure that media freedom and pluralism remain at the heart of all implementation and must not be compromised by other instruments designed to address harmful content that may be misused to silence critical journalism.

- The EU, national governments and organizations should therefore establish a public-facing digital portal that consolidates, contextualizes, and visualises information related to DSA and DMA implementation. This portal should operationalize existing legal transparency obligations by translating technical disclosures into user-oriented formats. A relevant model can be found in the ReMeD Observatory<sup>1</sup>, which focuses on providing AI-powered, human-verified information in eight domains of democratic decline for both users and large language models (ReMed Policy Brief Number Three).
- Ultimately, the EU must end the private governance of the internet by foreign Big Tech companies by asserting EU law and investing in EU-based tech infrastructure. The public's right to information cannot be held hostage to the whims of a handful of the world's wealthiest and most powerful individuals.

#### TO JOURNALISTS' ORGANISATIONS AND OTHER MEDIA ACTORS

- Journalists' organisations may take up the challenge posed by the new 'peripheral actors', engage with them and, where appropriate, bring them into the journalists' tent. Journalism must remain an open profession, but it must also never compromise on its core principles of truth and independence.
- Journalists' organisations, media organisations and other media actors should understand and engage with the new regulation (DMA, DSA, EMFA) and use it to protect the media sector. The tools have yet to be tested, and only by employing them will we understand their potential impact as well as hidden faults.

#### TO ACADEMICS AND RESEARCHERS

- Academics should continue to research the links, relations and interactions between media, policy and the public focused on the digital sector.
- They must continue to engage with media practitioners and innovators to assist new thinking rooted in democratic and journalistic principles; they should also continue to deepen collaborations so that media practitioners and innovators are involved from the start in the design of participatory research approaches and digital tools.



**JOURNALISM IS A PUBLIC GOOD**

