

## European Alliance for Media Integrity

At a time of increasing uncertainty, fearfulness and public anxiety among Europeans about the future there has never been a more important time for the promotion of informed, professional and pluralist media.

We, the undersigned, a coalition of concerned European media NGOs, professional organisations and other civil society groups believe strongly that to reinforce the values of European democracy, to meet the aspirations of the diverse communities within European borders and to confront the widespread crisis of confidence that has seen a growth of intolerance and political extremism, it is urgently necessary to strengthen the quality of media and journalism in Europe.

To do that requires political will and professional solidarity to meet the following challenges:

- the severe reduction of public service content in European media and the absence of concrete policy action to reverse this trend;
- an increasing commercialisation of the media, accompanied by a loss of commitment to public service values and journalistic mission;
- a lack of diversity within the media in general, and broadcasting in particular.

Today mergers and globalisation make it possible for certain media companies to strengthen their influence on public opinion and attitudes more than ever before. Often, these dominant media are failing to serve the public interest, for example, by promoting limited and biased images of women and minority groups.

The growth in new community media is welcome and should be more widely encouraged, but it is not an adequate substitute for the wider neglect of the public interest. That interest has to provide the framework for all media services at all levels.

A major challenge is the swiftness in the delivery of news and information. In the last few years 'breaking news', unfiltered from distant conflict zones, has been brought directly to our television and computer screens. This speed of delivery and decontextualisation of news has implications for national political debates concerning cultural diversity and integration, religion and asylum, with effects on the life of particular minority communities.

Mainstream audiences often see their opinions and prejudices reinforced by national media, which interpret events based on their own established and trusted cultural and often religious, perspectives and values. At the same time, minority communities form opinions based on information from different media and different cultural and religious perspectives.

This process, without the mediating influence of structural forms of dialogue between communities, may be a reason for intercultural misunderstandings and the eruption of heated, potentially explosive, debates over fundamental values and principles.

All these developments have led to a situation in which migrant and refugee communities increasingly engage via satellite and the internet with different home and workplace communities, on the street or at school. When they come home they often speak their own

language, eat their own food, watch their own television programmes and access trusted websites, making assimilation and integration more problematic than in the past.

Issues of cultural identity and the engagement of young people in society, of security and confidence in the future within the community at large and of deepening the commitment to principles of democratic pluralism figure large on the agenda of European politics. They should feature with equal seriousness in the programming and priorities of the news media.

*With all of these in mind, a number of actions are required by politicians and regulators to create the conditions for professionalism, independence and pluralism. In particular:*

### **1. Confronting the rapidly developing concentration of media markets**

Increasing concentration of media ownership in Europe, both nationally and regionally, puts diversity and plurality at serious risk. Ownership structures must be transparent to ensure compliance with existing monopoly laws. There is an urgent need for effective national legislation requiring such transparency, as well as increased monitoring to evaluate the impact of concentration.

Excessive commercialisation of media threatens the mission of journalism because it inevitably involves less investment in media training, investigative journalism and editorial activity. Increasing the focus on entertainment and the commercial value of information downgrades its value to the public and severely limits the capacity of media to play a constructive role in promoting positive social change.

### **2. Enhancing public service values and the public service content of European broadcasters in a new media environment**

Public service broadcasters in Europe are increasingly forced to go downmarket as they struggle to keep pace with commercial stations and changing circumstances that involve new sources of information, and new forms of delivery of information. In some cases, traditional differences between public service and commercial output are rapidly diminishing, while in others, they have vanished completely.

Public broadcasters in Europe's new democracies in particular, are chronically undercapitalised and need more professionalism. They are unable to compete with commercial rivals in the new digital media environment and there is a serious risk of weakening significant public interest programme strands, including programming for ethnic, linguistic and other minorities, as well as news and investigative reporting. Public service broadcasting in these areas is threatened with extinction as institutions are unable to offer an independent platform providing reliable and trusted information available and accessible to society as a whole. It is vital to enhance professional quality, to defend public service values, including the use and development of professional codes of ethics, and to respond effectively to this situation through positive measures to save public service content in European broadcasting and European media.

### **3. Reinforcing guarantees of independence for media professionals**

In many European countries media professionals, both at commercial and at public service broadcasters, work in vulnerable conditions often without guarantees of their professional and social rights. There is a gradual deterioration in employment standards as media professionals are increasingly forced into irregular forms of contractual arrangements. Many

work without contracts, and are unable to exercise their rights to collective bargaining, to non-discriminatory and equal opportunities between women and men, to non-discriminatory and adequate wages, and to minimal standards of social protection.

At the same time, they work without the professional status that allows them to apply appropriate codes of ethics, codes of practice, complaints procedures and other instruments of self-regulation, training and professional development. Legislative, regulatory and policy changes are urgently needed to address these gaps in protection.

Media responsibility to work according to ethical principles in order to fulfil their mission of informing, educating and entertaining the public can only be undertaken when the legal, social and professional conditions are such that journalists and other can work freely and without undue pressure.

#### **4. Raising awareness of the impact of media on relations between different groups in the national and local societies.**

##### **a) Giving the media audience the benefits of new information technologies**

Digitalisation and technological convergence are rapidly developing, but most of Europe is completely unprepared for them. While large conglomerates will take advantage of technological developments, the lack of preparation by ordinary viewers and policy makers may well result in many viewers being denied access to truly diverse information. In the digital information society there is a public requirement that all sections of society should benefit from and have access to new communication technologies. If not, there will be a 'digital divide' within our societies. Public service media have an important role in providing content that is free at the point of use and thus, in principle, accessible to all. Accordingly, public education campaigns and a vigorous and informed public debate on the implications of convergence and the impending switch to digital, as well as policies in favour of social inclusion are urgently needed.

##### **b) Strengthening the presence and the participation of women and diverse groups among media professionals**

In order to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding and intercultural communication, national media have an increasingly important role to serve as platforms for inclusive intercultural dialogue and as news and information providers trusted by all sections of multicultural society. To fulfil this role there needs to be diversity among programming staff and the establishment of recruitment policies that are more representative of the diversity of the society media serve. Diversity issues should also figure in training programmes and provide benchmarks for the judgement of newsroom and programming performance.

Women and minority groups are confronted with issues of access, power and portrayal in the media sector. Recent studies show that women are relatively invisible in the media and they are seriously under-represented in decision-making in the sector. There are many examples of good practice among public broadcasters of fair recruitment policies that are designed to ensure that women and minority groups are not discriminated against and are properly represented in the work place. Unfortunately, even the best models are flawed and require constant vigilance to ensure they are implemented. Media need to report professionally on gender equality issues, and the concerns of minority communities, in order to raise awareness of intolerance in society. There is a need to

have more dialogue between media professionals at all levels and civil society actors on these matters and for more efficient mechanisms of media monitoring on diversity issues.

**c) Enhance the participation of citizens in a more democratic media system**

Changing media technologies means more people, individually and collectively, are able to have their voice heard. The role of online media needs to be recognised and further developed. New media opportunities also strengthen the capacity of community media broadcasters who over the years have developed alternative platforms for topics, views and opinions that are not always present in traditional media. Community media broadcasters – not driven by the imperatives of commercial gain – reflect the diversity of society in their programming and they contribute significantly to the public service information space. They provide a viable alternative to media commercialisation. By combating the fragmentation of public participation they also promote a wider and inclusive civil dialog. This process needs to be further encouraged. Opening access to broadcast media to a wider public is an important step towards the development of a more inclusive and democratic communication system. It enhances the ability of people and their communities to act in their own interest. For strengthening the potential role of community media broadcasters in contributing to public service values they should be recognized at a European level as the third media sector.

**d) Improving standards of Media literacy**

In pursuit of these objectives media literacy at all levels of schooling is needed to help media users understand how and why certain media content is produced. Awareness of the techniques, languages and conventions used by media is crucial to understanding the media message. This encourages people to develop their own ways of making their voice heard. Media users who are confident and aware people are better able to identify, challenge and engage with media to combat misleading, offensive or harmful material and to participate effectively in the multicultural information society.

Educating the public about media and digital communication technologies is a guarantee of freedom and independence for the public in relation to the media. It is a key element of an inclusive information society that respects the dignity of others, particularly women, minorities and vulnerable people, and the promotion of human rights.

Media literacy should be also seen in the larger context of the active and productive participation of citizens in old and new media and communication platforms. Models of participatory community media should be subject to greater evaluation and integration in future policy for the promotion of media literacy.

Regrettably, there is often insufficient understanding of the concept of media and digital literacy and its relevance to today's Information Society. Even in countries where the concept seems to be understood and there are activities to promote and implement such literacy, the conditions for further development and implementation are not satisfactory. There is still lack of strategy and clearly articulated vision. This needs to be addressed urgently.

**5. The Role of Governments and Structures for Dialogue**

All of the issues set out here require a renewal and reinvigoration of public policy in the field of media, information and communications.

Governments and regulatory authorities have a key role to play in creating the enabling conditions for a legal and regulatory environment in which independent media can develop. Governments must do more to enhance public service values, to reinforce professionalism and to promote the engagement of all groups in European society in a media culture that respects democratic and pluralist values.

Raising awareness of the role media play in promoting better understanding of the complex issues that govern relations between and within communities in Europe requires practical initiatives to support dialogue within and between media, and media professional groups.

At all times, issues related to ethics and content of media are matters for media professionals alone, but governments should act, where they have jurisdiction, to support confidence-building structures for dialogue between media and communities and representative other groups in civil society. Inter-cultural dialogue is an antidote to the ignorance and prejudice that dominates much of the discourse between and within communities and sections of society.

Media professional and civil society groups committed to fundamental values of free expression, social justice and equality for all have no illusion about the challenging tasks ahead.

But little can be done unless political institutions, parties and governments, take their responsibility to place the protection and development of a democratic media culture at the heart of European policies. There is within the profession and within society at large, a growing sense that time is running out. It is time for action.

*We call on the governments of Europe, at national level, at the level of the European Community and the Council of Europe, to promote a serious debate on the urgent activities and concrete proposals needed to meet the demands and aspirations set out in this statement.*

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